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Cultural Relativism and Antisemitism: History, Encounters, and Consequences of Ethno-Religious Identity Politics in the Orient and the West

Right-wing populist identity politicians and left-liberal multiculturalists seem to agree on one thing: the chaos in the Middle East and religious-political struggles in Western migration societies are essentially a clash between static cultures. While the former see restrictions on Muslim immigration as a magic cure against Islamist terrorism, the latter define political Islam as the identity of all Muslims and the headscarf for women as its main and most important symbol. Since the revolution in Iran in 1979, political Islam has become a global political power factor. It was more successful than other ethno-religious movements—such as European fascism and National Socialism—in presenting itself as an authentic expression of the values of certain societies, their so-called “cultural difference.”

In this essay I argue that this relative “success” is not just a result of the victory of political Islam in Iran but that it is also related to the emergence of a new ideological trend in the West. I will outline the history of this development and its determinants—the interconnection between Western cultural relativism and its eastern counterparts: Islamism and its identitarian intellectual predecessors and fellow travelers.

Particularly interesting as a vanishing point is the transformation of traditional European antisemitism tabooed in the Cold War that took place in this development and the role played by anti-Zionism as a common denominator of cultural relativism and Islamism.

Finally, an outlook will shed light on the current constellation between the West and the Orient as well as Iran, Israel, and its Arab neighbors. This outlook will also allude to present and future conflict lines and possible alliances in the confrontation with Islamism and despotism.

“Islam Is Desirable ... for other People”

Cultural relativism is the antithesis to ethical, political, and sociological universalism. According to this concept, cultures are to be understood only from their own values and their own history. The eighteenth-century German philosopher

Johann Gottfried Herder could be seen as one of its founding fathers, opposing the universalism of the enlightenment by stressing the cultural particularities of every nation. Herder refused the evolving theories of races and their differences, but his approach served as a basis for conservative cultural theories.

After World War II, the cultural relativist approach was defined as opposed to German and European ethnocentrism and racism. In 1952, Claude Lévi-Strauss wrote the book *Race and History* for UNESCO. In this book he rejected the idea of different races but at the same time condemned the self-understanding of the European Enlightenment, which in his eyes looked down on other cultures:

Modern man [...] [attempts] to account for the diversity of cultures while seeking, at the same time, to eradicate what still shocks and offends him in that diversity.¹

Since then, cultural relativist theories have evolved mainly within the academic sphere of post-modern theories in cultural and gender studies and within the new social movements since the 1970s. Though opposed to biological determinism, cultural relativism tends to transform the discourse of race into a cultural determinism, legitimizing contested cultural practices like for example the Islamic burka as authentic expressions of the diversity of cultures.² Thinkers of the extreme right, like the French writer Alain de Benoist, have tried to capitalize on cultural relativism, coining the term “ethnopluralism” and legitimize ethno-religious segregation of different cultures with supposed equal rights.³

The political constellation which I try to depict here is unique and complex: While Islamists and other ethno-religious fundamentalists speak in their own name and that of their supposed culture, Western cultural relativists are speaking in the name of “the Other,” even if the “Others” protest against being subsumed under a certain culture or identity.

A controversy from the late 1970s can serve as an illustration of this constellation: In 1978 a polemic broke out between Michel Foucault and an Iranian writ-

1 C. Lévi-Strauss, *Race and History* (Paris: UNESCO, 1952), 13.

2 Judith Butler, for example, stated: “the burka can be a way of negotiating shame and sexuality in a public sphere, or preserving a woman’s honor, and even a way of resisting certain western modes of dress that signify a full encroachment of fashion and commodity dress that signifies the cultural efforts to efface Islamic practice.” J. Butler, “Feminism Should not Resign in the Face of such Instrumentalization,” interview by R. Solbach, *IABLIS: Jahrbuch für europäische Prozesse* 5 (2006): https://www.iablis.de/iablis_t/2006/butler06.html.

3 T. Bar-On, “Alain de Benoist: Neo-fascism with a Human Face?” conference paper, conference “Entgrenzter Rechtsextremismus? Internationale Perspektiven und Gegenstrategien,” Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung, Munich, February 9–10, 2015, https://m.bpb.de/system/files/dokument_pdf/Bar-On-DeBenoist-Fascismwithhumanface-2015.pdf.

er living in Paris—the first of many following controversies in which oriental free-thinkers were and are criticized by Western liberals or leftists for a supposed hatred of Islam. Foucault had just written a series of articles about the nascent revolution in Iran, in which he strongly favored the Islamist current of the revolutionaries. An Iranian woman with the pseudonym Atoussa H. wrote in response to Foucault’s enthusiasm for the perspective of a future Islamic government in Iran and life under Sharia law:

It seems that for the Western Left, which lacks humanism, Islam is desirable ... for other people. Many Iranians are, like me, distressed and desperate about the thought of an “Islamic” government. [...] The Western liberal Left needs to know that Islamic law can become a dead weight on societies hungering for change. The Left should not let itself be seduced by a cure that is perhaps worse than the disease.⁴

Foucault wrote in a short reply published in the magazine *Nouvel Observateur* a week later that the “intolerable” in Atoussa H.’s letter was that it “merges together all the aspects, all the forms, and all the potentialities of Islam within a single expression of contempt.” He concluded by lecturing Atoussa H. that “in order to approach it [Islam] with a minimum of intelligence, the first condition is not to begin by bringing in hatred.”⁵

Foucault’s arguments may seem familiar from the current debates on so-called Islamophobia and would hardly produce public outcry today. However, following the revolution in Iran, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini’s terror campaign against women, homosexuals, and political opponents in 1979 mobilized prominent figures such as Simone de Beauvoir against the new regime in Iran and brought harsh criticism from other leftist intellectuals against Foucault.

The renowned Marxist orientalist Maxime Rodinson warned of Islamism as a kind of “archaic fascism” and compared Khomeini’s concept of an Islamic government with the Spanish Inquisition. Without mentioning Foucault, he spoke of “Europeans convinced of the vices of Europe and hoping to find elsewhere (why not in Islam?) the means of assuring a more or less radiant future.”⁶ Former Mao-

⁴ A. H., “An Iranian Woman Writes,” in *Foucault and the Iranian Revolution: Gender and the Seductions of Islamism*, ed. J. Afary and K. B. Anderson (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 209–10.

⁵ M. Foucault, “Foucault’s Response to Atoussa H.,” in *Foucault and the Iranian Revolution: Gender and the Seductions of Islamism*, ed. J. Afary and K. B. Anderson (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 210.

⁶ M. Rodinson, “Islam resurgent?,” in *Foucault and the Iranian Revolution: Gender and the Seductions of Islamism*, ed. J. Afary and K. B. Anderson (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 233, 236.

ists Jacques and Claudie Broyelle accused Foucault of honoring a murderous regime.⁷

During the remaining years of the Cold War and in part in the following decade, the attitude of many Western intellectuals toward Islamist terror and the Iranian regime remained critical. In 1989, the so-called Rushdie Affair—Khomeini's Death Fatwa against the British writer for his book *Satanic Verses*—sent shock waves through European capitals. This event marks a turning point. Initially, many liberal and leftist intellectuals showed their solidarity with Salman Rushdie, while mainstream media and institutions often hesitated and imposed state realpolitik over freedom of speech.⁸

But Khomeini's fatwa also challenged the leftist self-image. During the Cold War, the Western New Left had declared its solidarity even with the most regressive national liberation movements—but always in the name of universal values. The particular should only be the form of universalistic content. Now Khomeini formulated an attack on freedom of expression in the name of Islamic particularism: the form became the content. With the collapse of so-called “real socialism” in Eastern Europe, Islamism began its ideological expansion in the West, fusing a particularist ideology with the remnants of anti-imperialism: anti-Americanism and anti-Zionism.

From Oriental Cultural Relativism to Islamism as a Form of Antimodern Modernity

In many societies shaped by the religion of Islam, attempts were made in the first decades of the twentieth century to separate religion and state. Especially in Turkey and Iran, secularism was practiced as a state mission from above. In Iran after 1905, there had even been a liberal-bourgeois revolution that demanded the separation of religion and state.

7 Cf. C. and J. Broyelle, “What Are the Philosophers Dreaming About? Was Michel Foucault Mistaken about the Iranian Revolution?,” in *Foucault and the Iranian Revolution: Gender and the Seductions of Islamism*, ed. J. Afary and K. B. Anderson (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 247–49. For a defense of Foucault's writings on Iran, see T. Lemke, “Die verrückteste Form der Revolte’—Michel Foucault und die Iranische Revolution,” accessed August 25, 2018, <http://www.thomaslemkeweb.de/publikationen/Iran%20II.pdf>; and B. Bargu: “Foucault and Iran,” accessed August 25, 2018, <http://blogs.law.columbia.edu/uprising1313/banu-bargu-on-behrooz-ghamari-tabrizis-foucault-in-iran/>.

8 Cf. K. Malik, *From Fatwa to Jihad: The Rushdie Affair and Its Legacy* (London: Atlantic Books, 2009).

At that time, religious figures who resisted secularization were clearly in retreat. The Islamic clergy proved to be flexible in order to preserve its influence. The prominent Shiite cleric Ayatollah Abol-Ghasem Kashani first allied with the modernist monarch Reza Shah Pahlavi, was arrested by the British occupying forces in World War II as an enemy of the anti-Hitler coalition, briefly supported the reformist anti-imperialist Mohammad Mossadegh in the early 1950s, then forged an alliance with Reza Pahlavi's son Mohammed Reza to overthrow Mossadegh.⁹ His political foster son Ruhollah Khomeini only broke with Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi in the early 1960s, when the monarch introduced a land reform and women's suffrage.

Khomeini never shared the modernist goals of the Shah's liberal and left-wing opponents in Persia, but he eventually gained a reputation among the secular anti-imperialists who were frustrated with the failure of Mossadegh. These intellectuals had barely done a thorough and critical analysis of the role of religion in Iranian history and were thus vulnerable to the idea of an Islamic reformulation of their agenda.

Khomeini also introduced antisemitism and anti-Zionism as religious-political propaganda tools. In the 1960s and 70s, he did not endorse the propagandistic distinction later made by him and many Islamists, between Jews and Zionists.¹⁰ He speculated whether the Shah was a Jew because of the good relations between Iran and Israel. In the introduction to his most important work, *The Islamic State* from 1970, he presents the Jews as conspirators against Islam.¹¹

While Khomeini eventually became the charismatic leader of Islamism, two Iranian intellectuals built bridges for the transformation from secular to religious anti-imperialism and cultural relativism in the 1960s and 1970s: One of them was the ex-member of the Communist Tudeh Party Jalal Al-e Ahmad with his essay *Gharbzadegi* from 1962. *Gharbzadegi* has been translated as "Westoxification," "Occidentosis" or "Plague from the West."

In this essay, Jalal Al-e Ahmad condemns an alleged cultural colonization of Iranian society by Western capitalism, which he sees as the soulless culture of

⁹ Cf. M. Küntzel, *Die Deutschen und der Iran: Geschichte und Gegenwart einer verhängnisvollen Freundschaft* (Berlin: Wolf Jobst Siedler Jr., 2009), 106–9; A. Milani, *Eminent Persians: The Men and Women Who Made Modern Iran, 1941–1979* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2008), 343–49.

¹⁰ For this shift, see a speech held after the revolution and distributed by Iranian state broadcast PressTV, "Imam Khomeini on Jews and Zionists," filmed August 20, 2012, YouTube video, 0:28, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3fhF_UuiSq8.

¹¹ Cf. R. Khomeini, *Islam and Revolution: Writings and Declarations of Imam Khomeini*, trans. H. Algar (Berkeley: Mizan, 1981), 180, 27.

the machine. Islam is being introduced as a possible means of resisting this development, albeit less at a theological or spiritual level but rather instrumentally as part of a cultural empowerment for modernizing the East, in concert with other emerging eastern countries to counter Western capitalism. Cultural relativism serves here as a kind of metapolitical foundation of an oriental, anti-universalist anti-imperialism.

In the foreword of the book, he refers to the German nationalist revolutionary writer Ernst Jünger. Al-e Ahmad apparently saw the German pre-fascist writer as a soulmate for an oriental conservative revolution because of his anti-liberal and anti-Western writings.¹²

It may come as a surprise that Al-e Ahmad traveled to Israel in 1963 and wrote an enthusiastic report.¹³ The re-release of excerpts in the run-up to the nuclear deal with the Islamic Republic caused quite a stir.¹⁴ On the one hand, the work has been interpreted as the glimpse of a possible understanding between Iranian reformist Islamists and the State of Israel.¹⁵ Others saw in Al-e Ahmad's admiration of the State of Israel a symptom of Persian anti-Arab nationalism and evidence of the similarity of the Israeli state to the Iranian theocracy.¹⁶

But for Al-e Ahmad, Israel was above all an ideological projection surface for a supposed entry into modernity with no or reduced Western influence—a similar fantasy product as Islam as a vehicle for an autonomous development. Supposedly a religious guardian state and at the same time a socialist utopia: this was an image that the real State of Israel could never match. This is why Al-e Ahmad, after the Six-Day War of 1967, changed fronts in favor of the “Palestinian cause” with equal ease as many intellectuals in Western Germany. The travelogue was published in 1984 by Al-e Ahmad's brother Shams in the Islamic Republic of Iran. At the end of the report, there is an anonymous anti-Zionist ti-

12 Cf. J. Al-e Ahmad, *Occidentosis: A Plague from the West*, trans. R. Campbell (Berkeley: Mizan, 1983), 25.

13 Cf. J. Al-e Ahmad, *The Israeli Republic: An Iranian Revolutionary's Journey to the Jewish State* (New York: Restless Books, 2017).

14 See, for example, B. Avishai, “Among the Believers: What Jalal Al-e Ahmad Thought Iranian Islamism Could Learn From Zionism,” *Foreign Affairs*, March/April 2014, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/iran/2014-02-12/among-believers>.

15 Cf. E. Shuman, “The Israeli Republic of Iran: On a Book by a Persian Writer who Viewed the Jewish State as Entirely Harmonious with the Islamic Republic,” *The Times of Israel*, April 10, 2014, <http://blogs.timesofisrael.com/the-israeli-republic-of-iran/>.

16 Cf. A. Shams, “Next Year in Tehran: An Iranian Intellectual's Trip to Israel in the 1960s Revealed the Strange Appeal of Secular Republicanism to Religious Ethno-Supremacists,” *The New Enquiry*, February 20, 2014, <http://thenewinquiry.com/essays/next-year-in-tehran/>.

rade with antisemitic undertones from 1967, according to Shams a text by Jalal Al-e Ahmad.

Al-e Ahmad's quest for meaning is in some ways reminiscent of the tourism of revolutionaries by Western Leftists to Third World countries. The difference being that his writings were the forerunner of the Islamist future of Iranian society, not only a reflection of the "culture of the Other" enjoyed from a distance by Western intellectuals. The political price of ideological fantasies in Iran was much higher than in the West.

The sociologist Ali Shariati added anti-imperialist dynamic to the cultural critique of Jalal Al-e Ahmad. Shariati criticized the conservative, quietist tradition of Islam and offered a social-revolutionary reinterpretation of Islamic history. From his studies in Paris, he knew Jean-Paul Sartre's existentialism and the anti-colonial writings of Frantz Fanon. At the same time he was a fierce critic of Marxism, which he saw as the culmination of humanist "Western Fallacies."¹⁷ While Jalal Al-e Ahmad used Islam as a tool for the alleged return to oriental cultural heritage, Shariati, on the other hand, defined the desire for "authentic cultural values" as a bridge to Islam, which he saw as the only possible savior of these values.

His work *Hajj* defines sacrifice and martyrdom as central values of a revolutionary Islam that is opposed to the "alienation of mankind" through consumerism and worldly rationalist thinking.¹⁸ In his essay *Fatima is Fatima* from 1971, he criticizes the traditional role of women at home and hearth on the one hand, and feminist, individual, "Western" emancipation on the other hand. Instead, women should have the opportunity to be active members of society—but only if they are willing to do so as female soldiers of Islam and join the fight against an imagined Western cultural invasion.¹⁹

Khomeini had more specific problems as the practitioner of the Islamic Revolution, since he had to prove that an Islamic state based on the religious laws of the Koran was a possibility of the twentieth century. He mocked the idea of secular Iranians that Islamists are opposed to the technological achievements of modernity—on the contrary, they should rather be used for the establishment of Islamic theocracy.

While the Nazis re-enacted the dynamics of capital as a social Darwinist racial war and antisemitic rage, Islamism at first sight seems to mean a total stagnation and rejection of history since the era of Muhammad. But with the concept

17 A. Shariati, *Marxism and Other Western Fallacies: An Islamic Critique*, trans. R. Campbell (Berkeley: Mizan, 1980).

18 Cf. A. Shariati, *Hajj (The Pilgrimage)* (Nottingham: Jubilee, 1993).

19 Cf. A. Shariati, *Fatima Is Fatima* (Tehran: The Shariati Foundation, 1971).

of Velayat-e faqih, the guardianship of the Islamic jurist, Khomeini introduced a major innovation: centrality shifts from sacred texts to religious leaders as mediators between God and the masses. In a Machiavellian turn, Khomeini said that in the event of a state of emergency, the religious leader could even suspend religious tradition and Sharia law.²⁰

Here Islam is less a term of a religious and more of political theology, reminiscent of the terms of the Crown Jurist of the Third Reich, Carl Schmitt. Schmitt had defined the political sphere as a distinction between friend and enemy and sovereign power as the authority that decides on the state of emergency.²¹ In the Islamic Republic, this is the religious leader commissioned by God. Even more important than the religious laws or the definition of the content of a particular religious orthodoxy is the identification of metaphysical enemies—on top of the list are Jews, Zionism, and the State of Israel.

Only a few months after taking power in the summer of 1979, Khomeini introduced the Quds / Jerusalem Day and declared:

Quds Day is an international day, it is not a day devoted to Quds alone. It is the day for the weak and oppressed to confront the arrogant powers, the day for those nations suffering under the pressure of American oppression and oppression by other powers to confront the superpowers; it is the day when the oppressed should arm themselves against the oppressors and rub their noses in the dirt; it is the day when the hypocrites will be distinguished from the true believers. For the true believers acknowledge this day as Quds Day and do what they must do. The hypocrites, however, those who are secretly affiliated

20 “In a letter to then president Khamenei, Khomeini stated, ‘the government has the right to unilaterally terminate its religious contracts with the people, if those contracts are against the interests of the country and Islam. The government has the right to prevent anything, whether related to religious rituals or not, as long as it is against the interests of Islam. The hajj [pilgrimage], which is one of the important religious tasks, can be prevented temporally by the government if it regards it against the expediency of the Islamic Republic.’ He emphasized that if a ruling jurist had to make decisions based only on Islamic law, the religious government and his absolute authority would be meaningless. Therefore, the ruling jurist is not necessarily the jurist who understands Islamic law better than others, but he is the jurist who has the ability and authority to understand the interests of Islam and the Islamic Republic beyond the sacred text of Islamic law.” M. Khalaji, *Apocalyptic Politics: On the Rationality of Iranian Policy*, Policy Focus 79 (Washington: Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 2008), 27–28, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/uploads/Documents/pubs/PolicyFocus79Final.pdf>.

21 Cf. C. Schmitt, *Der Begriff des Politischen: Text von 1932. Mit einem Vorwort und drei Corollarien* (Berlin: Duncker & Humblot, 1963), 26 ff.; and Schmitt, *Politische Theologie: Vier Kapitel zur Lehre von der Souveränität* (Berlin: Duncker & Humblot, 2004), 13.

with the superpowers and are friends of Israel, are either indifferent on this day or do not allow the people to hold demonstrations.²²

Khomeini tried to establish a global Muslim duty to gather against Israel and the West, merging anti-imperialist oppressor versus oppressed rhetoric with Islamist anti-Zionism. In this way, he wanted to create a clear-cut separation between the “true Muslims” who rise up against Israel and those who have been denounced as infidels and traitors in the Muslim world. Anti-Zionism has a similar importance as a guideline for the definition of friends and enemies in the foreign policy of the Islamic Republic as antisemitism had as guiding principle for the enemy of Nazi Germany against Western democracies and the Soviet Union.

Dynamics of Cultural Relativism and anti-Zionism during and after the End of the Cold War

In the 1960s, thinkers of anti-colonialism, such as Frantz Fanon, attempted to create a revolutionary culture of the oppressed against the colonial oppressors. In his essay *The Defeat of the Mind* in 1987, the French philosopher Alain Finkielkraut criticized Fanon, claiming that his attempt to escape European philosophy had failed and had only led him to German national romanticism, as advocated by Johann Gottfried Herder, who thought in closed, unchanging national-cultural units.²³

It is important to note that cultural relativist and anti-universalist postures remained controversial within the global left during the Cold War. Edward Said introduced the “linguistic turn” to anti-imperialism in 1978 with his book *Orientalism*.²⁴ When he condemned Marx’s writings on the Orient as part of Western imperialist “Orientalism,” he was, for example, criticized by the left-wing Syrian thinker Sadik al-Azm for an “Orientalism in Reverse.” Al-Azm accused Said of turning negative Western stereotypes about the Orient into an affirmed entity of “the Other.”²⁵

²² R. Khomeini, “Quds Day is the Day for the Weak and Oppressed to Confront the Oppressors,” issued August 7, 1979, accessed May 3, 2020, https://web.archive.org/web/20041204224048/http://www.irib.ir/worldservice/imam/palestin_E/10.htm.

²³ Cf. A. Finkielkraut, *The Defeat of the Mind* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995).

²⁴ Cf. E. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Random House, 1979).

²⁵ Cf. S. J. Al-Azm, “Orientalism and Orientalism in Reverse,” *Khamsin: Journal of Revolutionary Socialists of the Middle-East* 8 (1980): <https://libcom.org/library/orientalism-orientalism-reverse-sadik-jalal-al-%E2%80%9999azm>.

Since the attacks of 9/11, the panorama has changed: we are hardly talking anymore about a plurality of cultures seen as static entities but of a dualism—the West against Islam or Islamism. While it was possible to try to mix ethnology and Marxism in the anti-colonial and anti-imperialist movements during the Cold War, this was no more conceivable after 1989 and even less after 9/11.

The competition is no more between two secular, universalist alliances competing around the worldly terms of the French Revolution: freedom on the one hand, equality on the other. There is no alternative economic system like the former Eastern Bloc but only remaining oil rent states like Iran, Russia, and Venezuela challenging Europe and the United States. The focus of political competition between the Great Powers has shifted away from Latin America and Asia to the Middle East. In the past, it was the Soviet Union which supported nationalist or religious anti-Western movements in the Third World on a tactical basis. Venezuela's "Socialism of the 21st century," on the contrary, is maintained with counter-insurgency assistance by Iranian revolutionary guards, not the other way round.²⁶

Within this political-ideological dynamic, anti-Zionism gets to the center of the stage. An anti-Zionist attitude was not always prevalent in the Left. Socialist Labor Zionism once was the strongest current within the Jewish national movement. Lenin and the Bolsheviks saw the Zionists initially as competitors within the orbit of the workers movement.²⁷ In 1947, the Soviet Union was even very supportive of the creation of a Jewish state,²⁸ hoping it would form an alliance with the USSR.²⁹

That attitude changed dramatically once Stalin's hopes to gain a new satellite state in the Middle East proved futile. Soviet anti-Zionist agitation now adopted a paranoid, antisemitic tone. Zionism was no more seen as a political adversary but as an international Jewish conspiracy against the "Socialist camp"—with deadly consequences for the victims, who were persecuted in show trials in communist

26 Cf. J. Humire, "Iran Propping up Venezuela's Repressive Militias," *The Washington Times*, March 17, 2014, <http://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2014/mar/17/humire-irans-basij-props-up-venezuelas-repressive-/?page=all#pagebreak>.

27 Cf. L. Poliakov, *Vom Antizionismus zum Antisemitismus* (Freiburg: Ca ira, 1992).

28 Cf. A. Gromyko, "Remarks by Soviet Foreign Minister Andrei Gromyko to the UN Special Committee on Palestine (14 May 1947)," United Nations, General Assembly, issued May 14, 1947, accessed April 13, 2020, <https://israeled.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/05/19475.14-Gromyko-Speech.pdf>.

29 Cf. M. Kramer, "Who Saved Israel in 1947?" *Mosaic Magazine*, November 6, 2017, <https://mosaicmagazine.com/essay/israel-zionism/2017/11/who-saved-israel-in-1947/>.

Eastern Europe in the 1950s.³⁰ The Soviet Union flooded the Middle East and other countries with anti-Zionist propaganda, this attitude did not change until its dissolution in 1991.³¹

In contrast, among the post-war Western New Left there were intense feelings of solidarity for the Jewish state, whose creation was seen in the context of the struggle against Nazism, and this Left “regarded Great Britain and the feudal Arab monarchies as the imperialists and the reactionaries of the Middle East.”³²

Especially in Western Germany, initially there were strong sympathies among leftist students for the Jewish state, which was seen as a consequence of the Nazi past. That changed with the Six-Day War in 1967, when Western leftists discovered the Palestinians as part of the international anti-Imperialist struggle in the framework of their opposition to the Vietnam War.³³

A deep hostility toward Israel was the least consequence, leftist terrorist groups like the “Tupamaros West Berlin,”³⁴ the “Revolutionary Cells” but also the Japanese “Red Army Faction”³⁵ even perpetrated deadly attacks against Israeli and Jewish targets on their own or alongside Palestinian armed groups.³⁶

After the end of the Soviet Bloc 1989/91, for a significant part of the global radical left, anti-Zionism is a kind of surrogate of the former global contention between Western capitalism and so-called real socialism. For liberal multi-culturalists, the conflict between Israel and Palestine embodies all the perceived in-

30 Cf. M. Palomino, “‘Soviet Union’: The Doctors’ Plot 1953—Stalin’s Last Purge Plan,” *Encyclopedia Judaica*, vol. 6 (1971), http://www.geschichteinchronologie.com/SU/EncJudaica_doktorverschwoerung-1953-ENGL.html.

31 Cf. I. Tabarovsky, “Understanding the Real Origin of that New York Times Cartoon: How anti-Semitic Soviet Propaganda Informs Contemporary Left anti-Zionism,” *The Tablet Magazine*, June 6, 2019, <https://www.tabletmag.com/jewish-arts-and-culture/285781/soviet-anti-semitic-cartoons>.

32 S. Linfield, “Zionism and the Left: An Interview with Susie Linfield,” interview by A. Johnson, *Fathom Journal*, June 2019, <http://fathomjournal.org/zionism-and-the-left-an-interview-with-susie-linfield/>.

33 Cf. M. W. Kloke, *Israel und die deutsche Linke: Zur Geschichte eines schwierigen Verhältnisses* (Hanau: Haag & Herchen, 1990).

34 T. Fichter, “The anti-Semitism of the 68ers. Philipp Gessler and Stefan Reinecke talk with Tilman Fichter about the bomb planted in Berlin’s Jewish Community Centre in 1969,” <http://www.signandsight.com/features/434.html>; original in T. Fichter, “‘Wir haben das nicht ernst genommen,’” interview by P. Gessler and S. Reinecke, *taz*, October 25, 2005, <https://taz.de/!527391/>.

35 “Wanted Japanese Red Army Member Maintains 1972 Airport Attack Wasn’t Terrorism,” *The Mainichi*, May 31, 2017, <https://mainichi.jp/english/articles/20170531/p2a/00m/Ona/011000c>.

36 Cf. J. Herf, *Undeclared Wars with Israel: East Germany and the West German Far Left, 1967–1989* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016).

justices committed by the West against the oriental “Other.” A closer look makes it possible to identify a history within the history dating back to before the Cold War and beyond the orbit of the left. The solidarity with the Palestinian struggle in Western European societies is formulated in relation to the colonial or fascist past of the respective countries.

While in France and in Britain, anti-Zionism rose in the realm of anti-imperialist and post-colonial concepts, in Germany and Austria it has been regularly associated with the German past: To overcome the Nazi past is seen as an obligation—not for solidarity with the Jewish state but with the Palestinian anti-Zionism³⁷ of the alleged “victims of the victims.”³⁸

The British conservative historian Arnold J. Toynbee got to the heart of these attitudes, when he accused the Jews of perpetrating political sins that the Europeans supposedly had left behind them after 1945. He claimed that acts of violence committed by Zionists in the Israeli War of Independence resembled Nazi crimes³⁹ and that the

East European Zionists have been practising Colonialism in Palestine [...] at the very time when the West European peoples have been renouncing their temporary rule over non-European peoples.⁴⁰

37 Austrian scholar Claudia Brunner has written a very emotional account of her reworking of the genocidal Nazi past of her grand uncle Alois Brunner. In the end she tries to explain the shift of her academic interest toward suicide bombers in the Middle East as a logical continuation of her interest in the history of Nazism and her “close relationship with the family phantom [Alois Brunner], but just under different conditions.” “In the course of research on the resistance of the Palestinians against the Israeli policy, I finally get back on a personal, emotional level to the dimension of the European / German / Austrian responsibility for the situation in the Middle East, a responsibility I cannot and want not to oversee within a historical perspective.” C. Brunner and U. von Seltmann, *Schweigen die Täter reden die Enkel* (Frankfurt/Main: Fischer, 2011), 82f.

38 J. Joffe, “Wir Wiedergutgewordenen,” *Zeit Online*, August 22, 2018, <https://www.zeit.de/2018/35/gute-deutsche-josef-joffe-israel/komplettansicht>.

39 Cf. Y. Rosenberg, “When an Israeli Ambassador Debated a British Historian on Israel’s Legitimacy—and Won,” *The Table Magazine*, January 31, 2014, <https://www.tabletmag.com/sections/news/articles/herzog-toynbee-1961>.

40 A. J. Toynbee, *Experiences* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969), 266.

The Transformation of the Role of Antisemitism in Europe and the Middle East

It seems easy to refute the absurdity of the anti-colonialist, anti-racist, and anti-fascist attitudes of academics or politicians who are trying to whitewash Islamism and anti-Zionism. In fact, the godfather of Palestinian anti-Zionism, the Mufti of Jerusalem, was not a classic anti-colonialist, much less an antifascist. Amin al-Husseini was first appointed by the British Mandate for Palestine, and later on, he lived in Nazi Germany, where he was a fanatic supporter of Nazi antisemitism. After 1945 there was Western cooperation with Islamists in the Cold War.⁴¹ But these facts, suppressed by post-fascist and post-colonial anti-Zionism, lead to another question: what has changed in antisemitic articulations since the pre-Nazi era and why?

Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno in the *Dialectic of the Enlightenment* analyzed antisemitism as a blind and murderous ritual of the masses, a psychological compensation for the deprivations suffered by the underprivileged in a class society and as a tool of cynical manipulation in the interest of the ruler.⁴² But the genocide committed by the Nazi national community transcends the traditional political and class boundaries. After Auschwitz, antisemitism in the West had lost its “good reputation.” At the same time however, the political panorama that had formed in the Dreyfus Affair—the dichotomy of right-wing extremist antisemites and liberal and left-wing enemies of antisemitism—was put into question.

After 1945, when it became clear that antisemitism was a destructive force without borders, it became a taboo at least in Western Europe and the US to affirm eliminationist antisemitism. A complicated political-ideological division of labor emerged. Anti-Jewish Western intellectuals and politicians expressed understanding of genocidal ideologies as expressions of Palestinian or Muslim victims. Such an approach poses a much smaller political risk to its protagonists than if they had presented these ideologies and the inherent antisemitism in their own name. For decades, the idea that Israel-Palestine is the mother of all conflicts has been so engrained, that the bloodbath of Assad and his backers

⁴¹ Cf. D. Motadel, *Islam and Nazi Germany's War* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2017); K. Gensicke, *Der Mufti von Jerusalem und die Nationalsozialisten: Eine politische Biographie Amin El-Husseinis* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 2007).

⁴² Cf. M. Horkheimer and T. W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), 137–72.

in Syria from 2011 on and the ascent of the “Islamic State” came as a surprise to many.

Barack Obama’s Cairo speech of June 2009,⁴³ can serve as the culmination of a cultural relativism, that under his presidency became a state program. In this speech, he lamented headscarf bans but not the compulsion to wear the headscarf; he emphasized the freedom of religion but nowhere the right to be left in peace by religion. In addition, he defined American interventions and Israeli settlements as the main problems of the so-called Islamic world.

It is therefore logical that Obama’s dialogue with the Islamic world during his presidency narrowed to one with the Islamic Republic of Iran—to the profound horror of almost all of their neighbors. The Iranian regime is the only relevant state actor that ideologically accelerates as well as violently enforces anti-civilizational resentment, antisemitism, and religious community terror on a global level as state doctrine. In modern times, the Islamic World that Obama wanted to see acknowledged in its supposed cultural essence had never been unified beyond some shared anti-Western resentments, which today are enshrined in Teheran’s slogans against the US and Israel.

The speech from Cairo was put to the test just a week later, when an uprising in Iran started against the rulers of the Islamic Republic, the defenders of the compulsory hijab. The American president had equated the Iranian people and the leaders of the Islamic Republic. A conflict of life and death between the two was not foreseen. Against this background, both the US government and the governments of the European Union denied any substantial political or even moral support for the democratic protest movement in Iran, which brought millions to the streets. It appeared as a threat to the envisioned nuclear deal with the mullahs.⁴⁴

In the Middle East, modernist political movements after World War II and Israel’s War of Independence almost immediately had shown a hybrid character that crossed left-wing anti-imperialism with an antisemitism, which was formerly associated with the extreme Right. Anti-Zionism and antisemitism became the common denominator and power instrument for Oriental despotisms of all kinds. The destruction of Israel was a central success parameter of pan-Arabism and other post-colonial movements in the region. When this goal was not achieved, the rise of the Islamists was logical: they accused even the most inade-

⁴³ Cf. B. Obama, “Text: Obama’s Speech in Cairo,” *The New York Times*, June 4, 2009, <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/06/04/us/politics/04obama.text.html>.

⁴⁴ Cf. E. Lake, “Why Obama Let Iran’s Green Revolution Fail: The President Wanted a Nuclear Deal, Not Regime Change,” *Bloomberg*, August 24, 2016, <https://www.bloomberg.com/view/articles/2016-08-24/why-obama-let-iran-s-green-revolution-fail>.

quate and poorly organized advocacy of secular revolutionaries for social progress as a distraction from the war against the Jews and the West. The result was the preservation of the backwardness and devastation of the whole region.⁴⁵

But this constellation has become precarious. For years, the most explicit and loudest critics of Islamism have been intellectuals in the Middle East or immigrants with an oriental family background who had first-hand experience of Islamism. On the other hand, Islamism, which fused Islamic history with Western technology and elements of the anti-modern modernity of fascism and Nazism, has made the passage to Europe. There is no geographical separation between what is politically associated with the Orient and what is associated with the West anymore. The “War of Ideas” no longer runs along but on both sides of the borders.⁴⁶

The catastrophic consequences of Western collaboration with the Iranian regime in recent years, the war in Syria, and the rise of the “Islamic State” have led to a new situation. Abandoned by the West, things are not looking good for Democrats and real moderates in the region, to say the least. However, this situation has increased enormously the pressure to challenge old dogmas on those who do not share the goals of the Islamists. While in the past anti-Zionism was treated as a regional folklore independent of all other political differences, its centrality is now clearly linked to the Iranian regime and its Sunni-Islamist counterparts. Unfortunately, they have enough economic and military resources to continue their expansion. But their ideological hegemony over the region under the flag of a Muslim-Arab struggle against Israel has been put into question.

To understand this, we must bear in mind: In order to preserve the reign of the “Axis of Resistance” against Israel between Iran, Iraq, Lebanon, and Syria, half a million Syrians had to die, and millions have been displaced. In the Middle East, therefore, there are even moments in which the self-destructive character of anti-Zionism comes to consciousness. Be it among Syrian or Iraqi Opposition figures, Middle Eastern free thinkers or even within the leadership of Saudi-

⁴⁵ Hisham Melhem, Washington bureau chief of *Al Arabiya News* writes: “My generation of Arabs was told by both the Arab nationalists and the Islamists that we should man the proverbial ramparts to defend the ‘Arab World’ against the numerous barbarians (imperialists, Zionists, Soviets) massing at the gates. Little did we know that the barbarians were already inside the gates, that they spoke our language and were already very well entrenched in the city.” H. Melhem, “The Barbarians Within Our Gates: Arab Civilization Has Collapsed. It Won’t Recover in My Lifetime,” *Politico Magazine*, September 18, 2014, https://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2014/09/the-barbarians-within-our-gates-111116_full.html.

⁴⁶ Cf. S. Harris, “Winning the War of Ideas,” Real Time with Bill Maher (HBO), filmed February 3, 2017, YouTube video, 12:48, <https://www.youtube.com/shared?ci=FpNwlcePwug>.

Arabia. As an Iraqi TV presenter put it in a furious exchange with a Shiite militiaman: “Palestine is not the cause of the Iraqis, we don’t want that Iranian rhetoric.”⁴⁷

Today one must decide whether one wants to help the Islamists to accomplish their work of destruction in the Middle East or whether one wants to preserve what remains of the civilizational remnants of the societies in the region. Making Israel responsible for upheavals, with which the Jewish state obviously has nothing to do, is more difficult now than ever before.

This development has culminated in the recent uprisings in Iran since New Year’s Eve 2017/2018: Its slogans against all the currents of the regime have been much more radical than in 2009. While at that time apologists of the regime claimed that the Iranian countryside is with the rulers, the protest against the regime’s terrorist expansion has now been all over with chants like “No to Gaza, no to Lebanon, my life only for Iran”⁴⁸ or “Let go of Syria, think of us.”⁴⁹ The religious cities of Mashhad and Qom⁵⁰ became the focus of demonstrations against the Islamic Republic. Even the most holy slogans of the Iranian theocracy against the United States and Israel have been countered in the protests.⁵¹ In 2019, the protests in Iran were echoed by huge and enduring demonstrations in Lebanon and Iraq against the corruption of the ruling elite and the influence of the Islamic Republic on these societies.⁵²

In summary, the political frontlines have become much clearer in the last five to ten years, and what Marx and Engels once described as a result of the his-

47 “Sunni and Shiite Commentators Clash on TV over Military Campaign in Tikrit,” MEMRI TV, issued March 13, 2015, video, 14:15, <https://www.memri.org/tv/sunni-and-shiite-commentators-clash-tv-over-military-campaign-tikrit>.

48 A. Nader (@AlirezaNader), “‘No Gaza, No Lebanon, my life is for Iran.’ Shiraz, #Iran,” Twitter, August 2, 2018, <https://twitter.com/AlirezaNader/status/1025017775331442689>.

49 A. Nader (@AlirezaNader), “Cell phone merchants protest in #Tehran and shout ‘Let go of Syria, think of us.’,” Twitter, June 24, 2018, <https://twitter.com/AlirezaNader/status/1010893744944701440>.

50 H. Dagres (@hdagres), “Chants in the holy city of Qom tonight, the spiritual center of #Iran: ‘We don’t want an Islamic Republic!’,” Twitter, December 29, 2017, <https://twitter.com/hdagres/status/946824612238823424>.

51 H. Alavi (@HeshmatAlavi), “April 20 – Kazerun, southern #Iran Protesters turn Friday prayer into a major anti-regime rally. ‘Our enemy is right here, they always say its America.’,” Twitter, April 20, 2018, <https://twitter.com/heshmatalavi/status/986213693980643328>; “Protesters In Tehran, Iran Shout ‘Death To Palestine’ In Anti-Government Rally,” filmed June 25, 2018, YouTube video, 0:13, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ukhrobSFnUA&feature=youtu.be>.

52 Cf. J. Spyer, “Behind the Lines: Revolt against Iran’s ‘System’ in Iraq and Lebanon,” *The Jerusalem Post*, October 31, 2019. <https://www.jpost.com/middle-east/behind-the-lines-revolt-against-irans-system-in-iraq-and-lebanon-606497>.

torical-ideological triumph of the European bourgeoisie now applies to a very different, dramatic context—the disillusionment created by the chaos in the Middle East: “All that is solid melts into air, all that is holy is profaned, and man is at last compelled to face with sober senses his real conditions of life, and his relations with his kind.”⁵³ Thus the category of interest as a heroic driving force of the theory of revolution of Marx and Engels has been transformed into something else—a categorical imperative to prevent the worst.

In the Middle East, the abyss between Islamists and other political forces is growing, but resources are lacking to successfully fight the Islamists. The paradoxical complement is the constellation in Germany, Europe, and to a certain degree also in the USA. The technologically most advanced societies of the Western world seem unable or unwilling to consider their own situation and their relationship with their southern neighbors soberly.

It is increasingly difficult for Europeans to maintain the phantasm of the centrality of the Israel-Palestine conflict. But there is still no significant awareness of the fatal consequences to democracy and security in Europe of the creation of an oriental fantasy world for the purpose of delegating antisemitic resentment.

From the European Civil War to the Betrayal of Solidarity and Enlightenment in the Name of the Other—Conflict Lines and Possible Alliances

Between 1922 and 1945 bourgeois liberalism, socialism/communism, and fascism/Nazism constituted three political currents in changing mutual alliance constellations, which, however, ideologically represented only themselves. The identitarian self-image of the right-wing extremists to represent Europe’s cultural heritage was only put forward by themselves. Attempts to forge alliances with them from the left and from the political center were easily identifiable as political opportunism.

But the transformation of the Cold War confrontation into the masquerade ball of identities of recent decades has fundamentally changed traditional ideological constellations. While tough anti-imperialists defend Islamists as long as they serve their own anti-American and anti-Zionist needs, the academic left

53 K. Marx and F. Engels, *Manifesto of the Communist Party*, accessed August 25, 2018, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1848/communist-manifesto/ch01.htm#007>.

in particular has devised huge theoretical constructs in order to prove what the radical right also claims to know: it is the cultural fate of the Muslim “Other” to feel offended by the West and to sympathize with the Islamists. Anyone from a Muslim family background who thinks differently, even vehemently opposes Islamic fascism, is seen as a traitor to his or her culture—not only by Islamists but also by the advocates of identity politics in the West.

Such positions are represented by intellectuals who themselves do not live under Sharia law or want to wear the headscarf. They do not even receive praise from the Islamists for their ideological advocacy. Western advertising for religious coercion appears as a free gift to the Jihadists. When Judith Butler honored Hamas and Hezbollah in 2006 as part of the progressive left,⁵⁴ there was no jubilation to be heard in Gaza or Beirut. Of course Hamas and Hezbollah are happy about any propagandistic support, but the one who loves the betrayal, does not necessarily love the traitor.

For the societies of the Middle East from Tel Aviv to Tehran, between Tunis and Islamabad, the appropriate political positioning today means a matter of life and death, at least on this many people in the region would certainly agree. Nobody can afford a policy “in the name of the other,” as it is advanced by Western cultural relativism.

Western democracies in the twentieth century have only once relatively spontaneously formed an alliance in a joint ideological opposition: in the dispute with the Soviet Union about the heritage of secular enlightenment. Hitler, on the other hand, forced the West into an anti-fascist alliance, which Europe would have liked to avoid as it does today concerning a confrontation with Islamism.

The biggest question marks lay therefore today in Europe. In case a reversal of the so-called cultural dialogue and collaboration with Islamism would be possible, the question of alliances is almost self-evident: it is not about a struggle between ethno-religiously defined cultures but about a confrontation with identity politics. And that is why the first and most-experienced partners of any willing political forces in the West for an alliance against barbarism are not politicians who want to contain Islamism only within its supposedly ancestral region. Instead, any meaningful and enduring partnership for a better future in the Middle East and the West should be built with the dissidents of Islamist

⁵⁴ Cf. “Judith Butler on Hamas, Hezbollah & the Israel Lobby (2006),” issued March 28, 2010, accessed August 25, 2018, <https://radicalarchives.org/2010/03/28/jbutler-on-hamas-hezbollah-israel-lobby/>.

identity politics on the one hand, and the Jews and Israelis affected by their antisemitic consequences on the other hand.

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