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July 24, 2008
Volume 224 Issue 17

Jewish EXPONENT

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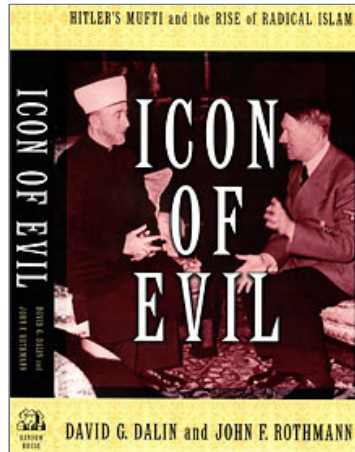
Skeleton in the Palestinian Closet

The Mufti of Jerusalem's Nazi ideology lives on among contemporary Islamists
July 17, 2008 - Jonathan S. Tobin, Executive Editor

It is axiomatic that a knowledge of history is a prerequisite for understanding the present. But the question is: How much weight should we give to controversial figures from the past when deciding how to think about current conflicts?

According to the authors of a new book about Haj Amin al-Husseini (1893-1974), the grand mufti of Jerusalem, who played a key role in fomenting and exacerbating the struggle between Jews and Arabs during much of the 20th century, the answer is quite a lot.

The book, *Icon of Evil: Hitler's Mufti and the Rise of Radical Islam*, by David G. Dalin and John F. Rothman, makes the case that you can draw a direct line from al-Husseini to not only the Palestine Liberation Organization and Hamas -- groups that took up his battle against Zionism -- but to Iran, Al Qaeda and the 9/11 conspirators.



That's a searing indictment that both supporters of Israel and its foes ought to examine closely. And if this book fails to deliver the definitive account of the Mufti's life in English that students of this period of history have been waiting for, it nevertheless shines a spotlight on a figure who deserves far greater attention than he has received in recent decades.

Appointed by a Jew

Husseini was a member of an elite landed-clan of Palestinian Arabs who retain their status to this day (Yasser Arafat was a cousin). In the aftermath of World War I, he rose to prominence as a fanatical opponent of both the British and the Jews.

Ironically, it was a British Jew, Sir Herbert Samuel, who appointed Husseini to the post of mufti, the putative Muslim religious leader of Jerusalem.

Samuel became the first high commissioner of the territory in 1920. Palestine had been given to Britain as a mandate by the League of Nations in order for them to make good on their 1917 Balfour Declaration promise to create a Jewish national home in the country.

While many in the British government were openly hostile to Zionism, Samuels was not. But he was concerned about being seen as evenhanded between Jews and Arabs. So when there was a vacancy in the office of mufti, Samuels appointed the hard-line Husseini.

This was a decision the Jews would rue for decades as Husseini used his post as a platform to promote hatred against the Zionists, who were transforming the country from a barren backwater into what would become the modern State of Israel. Husseini incited

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the riots of 1929 in which hundreds of Jews were slaughtered by Muslim pogromists and did his best to better that record during the Arab Revolt of 1936-39.

Though the Mufti's gangs were defeated, his work paid dividends in 1939 when the British, as eager to appease Arabs and Muslims on the eve of World War II as they were the Germans, issued a White Paper that placed severe limits on Jewish immigration and land sales, effectively closing the door to a Jewish state.

But Hussein did not seize this opening and instead continued his Anglophobic campaign after the war began. Eventually, he wound up in wartime Berlin where he was received by Adolf Hitler and housed in luxury by the Nazi state as an honored collaborator of its elite killers. Hussein made propaganda broadcasts for the Germans and recruited Bosnians to serve in a special Muslim SS brigade that was responsible for the murder of more than 12,000 Bosnian Jews. As such, he played a personal role in the Holocaust.

After the war, Hussein evaded prosecution as a war criminal and, as the birth of the Jewish state loomed, he sought to take command of the Arab drive to destroy it. In that he failed, as Palestinians loyal to the Mufti were routed by the Jews. When the Arab states invaded the country on May 15, 1948, the Mufti was left on the sidelines of the conflict where he fumed impotently for the rest of his life in exile in Damascus and Cairo.

Unfortunately, Dalin and Rothman's book is hampered by a lack of original research, leaving the authors to make sometimes uninformed guesses about the Mufti's inner life that leave us with more questions about his personality than answers. Instead, at times, they rely on egregious speculation that adds little of value to the existing literature on the subject.

In this vein, they go overboard in a chapter devoted to a "what if" scenario in which their protagonist fantasizes about the mass slaughter of Palestinian Jewry had Hitler prioritized the conquest of the Middle East rather than that of Russia. Counterfactual fantasy history can be amusing, but it has no place in what promised to be a serious biography. It is especially annoying when, as in this case, the authors spin tales about what could not have happened as opposed to what might have occurred.

In this case, the notion that Hitler would have passed on invading Russia requires us to ignore everything we know about this mass murderer's most important goals: the destruction of communism and lebensraum for German colonists in the East. Their tale of the Wehrmacht being transferred en masse to North Africa instead of to Russia, also requires the British Navy, whose control of the Mediterranean restricted Hitler's ability to reinforce Manfred Rommel's Afrika Korps, to disappear.

While there's no doubt that everything we know about the Mufti shows us that he would have liked to preside over a Palestinian Auschwitz, such speculation about this nightmare obscures more important issues that require no digression into fantasy.

What is important about the Mufti is that he is a human bridge between early stages of a Palestinian nationalism, and the Muslim Brotherhood movement and its current Islamist identity in the form of Hamas, Al Qaeda and Iranian-backed Hezbollah. The authors rightly see his kinsman's Arafat's career in terrorism and rejection of peace as being inspired by the Mufti's example. And though some observers like to pretend that Islamism is a recent aberration in Palestinian culture and politics, Hussein's life is a testament to the fact that religious fanaticism has always been integral to its character.

First Islamo-Fascist

Despite its flaws, Dalin and Rothman's book is on target when it concludes that Hussein was a seminal figure not only in the history of the Arab-Israeli conflict, but in the culture of the Muslim world.

Though contemporary Palestinian Arabs bear no guilt for the crimes of the Nazis because the Mufti was one, it is both fair and reasonable to assess the influence that his philosophy had on the movement he spawned. Fatah, Hamas and the Palestinian media, as well as that of the rest of the region, show that the Mufti's bloodthirsty Nazi-like hate for Jews is alive and well today not only in Gaza and Ramallah, but throughout the Islamic sphere.

Although some deprecate the use of the term "Islamofascist," a study of the life of the

Mufti shows that the combination of these disparate ideas into one ideology of hate is no Western invention. Amin al-Husseini, Nazi collaborator and Palestinian religious and political leader, may have been among the first Islamo-Fascists. The tragedy of the Middle East and the Palestinians is that he was far from the last.

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