

# The swastika and the crescent

To the end, Hitler rued the Third Reich's failure in rousing Muslims en masse to his cause

By Tibor Krausz

**MOST GERMANS** saw Adolf Hitler as the savior of the Aryan race, but he was an equally epochal figure for Iranian Muslims. That's because the Führer was the "Hidden Imam," the Mahdi, a long-awaited Islamic messiah expected by Iran's Twelver Shi'ites to usher in an era of universal justice on earth. Or so Nazi propagandists would have Iranians believe. Let no one say the Nazis weren't creative: if turning Muslims against the Allies required a bit of religious legerdemain, so be it.

Or rather, make that a lot of sleight of hand. In their zeal to draw on Islamic sources and traditions for their outreach to Muslims during the war, Nazi propagandists weren't above producing their own textual readings of the Koran and the *hadiths*. They identified Jews as the Masih ad-Dajjal, a sinister false messiah who is the Mahdi's arch enemy in Islamic eschatological tradition and was now out to subjugate Muslims worldwide. Only Hitler could save the faithful from this supreme evil.

Muslim reactions to such creative religious commentaries were mixed – especially as the Allies, too, were peddling their own Koran-thumping spiels, from North Africa to India, to counter German propaganda. Rhetorical tit-for-tats could lead to peculiar scenarios. On radio airwaves and in print, Nazi and Allied propagandists frequently wound up in spirited tussles of Koranic exegesis, duly quoting apposite *surahs* to convince Muslims of their expository conclusions on which warring side enjoyed Allah's favors.

Such wartime peccadillos come to us courtesy of Cambridge historian David Motadel's "Islam and Nazi Germany's War," which won

the Fraenkel Prize in Contemporary History for 2014 and follows another recently published tome on the Nazis' dalliance with the Islamic world, "Nazis, Islamists and the Making of the Modern Middle East," by the late American-Israeli scholar Barry Rubin and his German-American co-author Wolfgang G. Schwanitz.

HITLER CONSIDERED ARABS, TURKS AND IRANIANS TO BE RACIALLY INFERIOR, YET THEY WERE REBRANDED 'HONORARY ARYANS'

Most historians of World War II have tended to see the Muslim world as peripheral to the life-or-death battles of wills between Western liberalism and Soviet communism, on the one hand, and Nazism and fascism, on the other. The resurgence of militant Islamism, however, has now refocused attention on the role Islam and Muslims played during the war, if only in the imagination of warring Europeans. Motadel's goal, in his informative and scrupulously researched if somewhat stolid account, is to "put Islam on the political and strategic map of the Second World War."

In that he succeeds. From the late 19th century onward, German agitators tried hard to co-opt Islamic beliefs to undermine British and French power. Decades later, Motadel shows, a new generation of German propagandists – mentored by the old guard – were still at it, seeking to rally Muslims against the Allies.

In the Nazis' alliance with Muslims, pragmatism trumped ideology. Hitler considered Arabs, Turks and Iranians to be racially inferior, yet thanks to an ideological sleight of hand they were rebranded "honorary Aryans" to avoid damaging relations with sympathetic Muslim states. Arabs may have been "Semites" like Jews, but to the Nazis they were good Semites. The Third Reich even stopped using the term "anti-Semitic" (*Antisemitische*) in its propaganda in favor of "anti-Jewish" (*Antijüdische*).

Joseph Goebbels's Ministry of Propaganda instructed German newspapers to depict Islam positively, portray Muslims as the victims of scheming Jews and Allied imperialists, and emphasize the affinity between Nazi ideology and Islamic theology. Bosnian and other southeastern European Muslims were redesignated "racially valuable peoples" and allowed into the ethnically pure ranks of the *Waffen-SS*, where some of them acquitted themselves by murdering Jews with zeal.

In private, both Hitler, who entertained romantic penny dreadful-style notions of Arab culture, and SS chief Heinrich Himmler, a lapsed Catholic who admired Mohammed, repeatedly extolled the virtues of Islam, which they viewed as a suitably virile religion with a warrior's creed, unlike effete turn-the-other-cheek Christianity, which they despised



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as the feeble, emasculating product of malignant Jewish influence.

As it becomes clear from Motadel’s account, however, the Nazi leadership’s attempts to woo Muslims and mobilize them en masse remained largely ineffective. Throughout the 1930s, Hitler viewed North Africa and the Middle East as marginal to Germany’s territorial interests. The Führer did engage in military offensives in North Africa from early 1941, but his purpose was less to conquer new territories for Germany – let alone “liberate” local Muslims from the French and British – than to try and undo a strategic debacle the Italian dictator Benito Mussolini had created with his disastrous military challenge to Britain’s regional hegemony.

Mussolini, too, sought to curry Islamist support for his cause and at a public ceremony in 1937 the Duce declared himself a protector of Muslims, while brandishing an ornamented “Sword of Allah” and professing his desire to respect “the laws of the Prophet.” He stopped well short of converting to Islam, but Nazi propagandists gladly assisted him in stoking religious resentment against the Allies, which they portrayed as desecrators of Muslim shrines and accomplices of “parasitic” Jews.

Abetting the Nazis in their propaganda blitzkriegs was a motley crew of Muslims. There was Alimjan Idris, an imam of Tartar origins from Central Asia who headed an SS school for

Islamic preachers in Dresden and labeled Jews “the most despicable, repulsive and corrupting people on earth.” (Several of his protégés would become pillars of West Germany’s postwar Muslim community.) There was Iraqi journalist Yunus Bahri, a mercurial agitator who hosted an incendiary Arab-language program on Radio Berlin.

**AND THERE** was, of course, the vile Arab nationalist Amin al-Husseini, the grand mufti of Jerusalem, an unscrupulous provocateur and indefatigable schemer with delusions of grandeur who spent much of the war in Berlin, from where he positioned himself as a pan-Arab leader and kept inciting vociferously against the Jews of Palestine while seeking Hitler’s help for their extermination.

The mufti is credited by Rubin and Schwanzitz with helping instigate the Final Solution “directly and from the start” by pushing Hitler toward a more radical solution to the “Jewish question”: mass murder instead of mass expulsion. In early 1941, before the Holocaust was launched in earnest, al-Husseini’s insistence that a German-Muslim alliance would be jeopardized if European Jewish refugees were allowed to flee to Palestine convinced Hitler, the authors argue, that the mass murder of Jews remained the only option.

It’s a tantalizing thesis but one based largely

Amin al-Husseini, the mufti of Jerusalem, meets German Foreign Minister Joachim von Ribbentrop in Berlin, November 20, 1941

on circumstantial evidence. The scholars establish credibly that al-Husseini knew and approved of the Germans’ efforts to exterminate European Jewry (despite his postwar denials), and that he lobbied the Nazis and their fascist allies relentlessly to murder Jews rather than let them immigrate.

**YET RUBIN** and Schwanzitz may well overstate the mufti’s contribution to a hardening of Nazi attitudes toward Jews: chronological correlation doesn’t equal proof of causation. According to Motadel himself, the mufti’s greatest achievement in Berlin (which was nonetheless no mean feat) lay in stopping Jewish immigration from the Balkans, which led to the death of numerous Jews.

Yet it wasn’t for want of trying that al-Husseini didn’t succeed in getting more Jews killed. In his Arab-language radio broadcasts, the mufti exhorted his coreligionists across the Middle East to “Kill Jews wherever you find them, for the love of Allah.” Some Muslims responded to such calls. In June 1941, rioters in Baghdad, incited by Radio Berlin broadcasts, murdered some 180 Jews in the Farhud massacre.

## Books

“It’s wrong to see [al-Husseini] and his fellow radicals as merely importing European anti-Semitism,” Rubin and Schwanitz stress. Nazis, fascists, Arab nationalists and Islamists, they argue, “came together on the basis of both common interests and similar worldviews,” the latter of which included the centrality of Jews as “the villains of all history, the eternal enemy without whose extinction salvation and a proper world were impossible.” They point to the ideological inspiration that modern Islamist movements, such as the Muslim Brotherhood (whose founder Hassan al-Banna admired Hitler), and Ba’ath Party nationalists alike would draw from National Socialist ideas and propaganda.

**THAT SAID**, a comprehensive German policy for winning Muslims over, Motadel explains, began to fall into place only in 1943, when the tide of war had turned irreversibly against the Third Reich. In some regions the Nazis’ outreach did produce tangible results. In the Caucasus, Muslim villagers gave the German invaders a hero’s welcome, cheering “Hitler Effendi” as their liberator from the depredations of Stalinism. The Germans allowed them to reopen their mosques and resume their religious festivals with Islamic and Nazi symbols displayed side by side.

Seeking to exploit the militarism in Islamic theology, Hitler instructed his generals that “pure Mohammedans” from occupied territories were the most desirable non-German recruits for the Wehrmacht, and hundreds of thousands of Muslims – Tartars, Azeris, Chechens, Turkestanis, Uzbeks, Khazaks, Bosnians, Herzegovinians – were promptly conscripted into Islamic auxiliary units, Ostlegionen (Eastern Legions) battalions, and a 20,000-strong Bosnian SS division. Muslim recruits from the Soviet Union, many of them released from POW camps, received religious indoctrination in the hope they would serve as the vanguard of a homegrown Islamist rebellion against the “godless Soviet regime.” “Only Germany can save the world, and she will also save you and your religion from subjugation under the red flag,” they were told by a mass-produced German leaflet, which cited Koranic verses that instruct the faithful to fight unbelievers.

“Thousands of Muslims fought in Hitler’s armies and became involved in gruesome atrocities and massacres. [But] others fought against the German regime [on the Allied side],” Motadel notes, cautioning against generalizations. Likewise, he adds, whereas some Muslims eagerly aided the Nazis in the mass murder of Jews, others, including several Albanian Muslims, helped save their Jewish neighbors. In Sarajevo, Fehim Spaho, the elderly head of the local *ulama*, assisted local Jews in converting to Islam to try and help them, often unsuccessfully, to avoid being deported and killed by the Germans and

their fascist Croatian allies.

In the end, despite Hitler’s best efforts, a grand Nazi-Islamic alliance wasn’t to be, not least because the Germans had underestimated the deep-seated ethnic and tribal differences among Muslims by mistaking them to be a homogenous group with a unified agenda. To the end, Hitler rued the Third Reich’s failure in rousing Muslims to his cause in plaintive laments to his private secretary Martin Bormann.

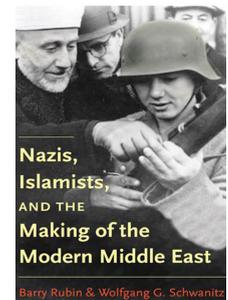
Yet the Nazis did succeed in one thing: poisoning the mind of many a Muslim against Jews. Anti-Semitic tropes propagated by the Third Reich, from medieval Christian blood libels to virulent conspiracy theories, have been grafted seamlessly onto old Islamic anti-Jewish prejudices, thereby gaining a new lease on life in the Muslim world. That’s why it’s not only the Nazis’ wartime dalliance with Islam that should hold our interest but also numerous surviving Nazi stalwarts’ symbiotic postwar relationships with Middle Eastern regimes, under whose shelter they sought refuge from being held to account for war crimes.

**ARAB STATES** welcomed Nazi war criminals, some 4,000 of them, with open arms. “No Arab country ever expelled any of them,” Rubin and Schwanitz point out, “but instead shielded [them] from prosecution” and employed them as military advisors, intelligence operatives and propagandists.

Erstwhile Nazis like the rabidly anti-Jewish SS major Johann von Leers, who relocated to Cairo, converted to Islam and reinvented himself as Omar Amir von Leers, and Adolf Eichmann’s right-hand man Alois Brunner, who found a new home in Damascus, proved themselves useful as avidly virulent anti-Zionist propagandists for their hosts. Others like Brunner’s former boss, who was hiding out in Argentina, acted as cheerleaders for a united Arab offensive against Israel. With a book he was writing before his capture by the Mossad in 1960, Eichmann planned to lend succor to the ongoing demonization of the nascent Jewish state, as it has recently been revealed.

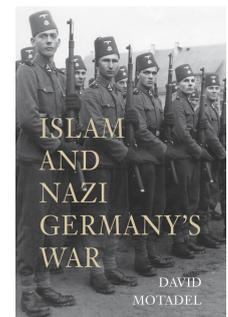
“Israeli bayonets are now overrunning the Egyptian people... Israeli air squadrons are bombing peaceful Egyptian villages and towns,” Eichmann opined in the unpublished manuscript in 1956 apropos the Suez Canal war that year. “Who are the aggressors here? Who are the war criminals? The victims are Egyptians, Arabs, Mohammedans... [The Jews] are the main aggressor and perpetrator against humanity in the Middle East.”

That assessment has long since turned from a fringe opinion into a mainstream view on the Israeli-Arab conflict. If not for his genocidal record, Eichmann might well now be hailed by many self-styled “anti-Zionists” in the West as a prophetic voice on the Middle East. He may yet be hailed as such in spite of it. ■



### Nazis, Islamists, and the Making of the Modern Middle East

Barry Rubin and  
Wolfgang G. Schwanitz  
Yale University Press  
360 pages; \$35



### Islam and Nazi Germany's War

David Motadel  
Belknap Press  
512 pages; \$35