HITLER'S REAL RELIGIOUS ADVISOR

By: William Doino, Jr.

***Icon of Evil: Hitler's Mufti and the Rise of Radical Islam* by David G. Dalin and John F. Rothmann (Random House)**

Two years ago, Pope Benedict XVI delivered an address in Regensburg, Germany on the relationship between faith and reason. That speech, which challenged elements of the Islamic world, created a firestorm of controversy, subjecting the pope to insults, abuse and even threats. But a considerable number of people—and not just Catholics—rose to the pontiff's defense. When the dust settled, even some who had rushed to criticize Benedict realized that he had actually done something important—and brave—opening up a long-overdue debate.

What the pope did, at Regensburg, was spark a public dialogue on a very touchy, even taboo subject: what happens to a religion—in this case, Islam—when it detaches itself from reason, and succumbs to intolerance and violence.

Since 9/11, the danger of a militant, irrational, hyper-politicized Islam has taken center stage; but the history of that radical ideology remains largely unknown. Lawrence Wright's *The Looming Tower* is an excellent primer; but there have been subsequent, more focused studies on the people who brought this plague into the modern world. Among the best is *Icon of Evil: Hitler's Mufti and the Rise of Radical Islam*. Written by Rabbi David Dalin (author of the bestselling book *The Myth of Hitler's Pope*) and John Rothmann, a teacher and political commentator in San Francisco, it is a powerful and unforgettable portrait of Haj Amin al-Husseini.

Though unknown to many, al-Husseini was one of the most influential Arab figures of the twentieth century—and not for the good. Born in 1895, he grew up in Jerusalem and Egypt, where he attended the prestigious Al-Azhar University before dropping out. Though undereducated, he was a skilled self-promoter, cultivating an image of himself as a leading spiritual thinker. Dalin and Rothmann write:

"Al-Husseini never completed his academic studies at Al-Azhar University, a fact that would remain a source of controversy for his Muslim critics over the years. Since he'd dropped out of Al-Azhar without completing a degree, or the course of study necessary for ordination for a Muslim cleric and legal scholar, his Muslim opponents were able to belittle his academic credentials and maintain that he did not have sufficient accreditation to hold the position of mufti and spiritual leader in the Muslim religious community. Throughout his public career, al-Husseini tended to reinvent his own autobiography, claiming credentials and professional experience that he did not in fact possess."

It is to the credit of the Muslim intellectual community that they were the first to recognize al-Husseini as a con man. Alas, before any of this criticism could take hold, geopolitical events intervened. World War I broke out, and al-Husseini became an officer in the Turkish army, enabling him to build up his thin resume, then parlay that into an ambitious political career. After the war, he returned to his native Jerusalem and began agitating against the British Empire (which then controlled Palestine), developing an intense brand of Arab nationalism.

"A charismatic and spellbinding orator," write Dalin and Rothmann, "he [al-Husseini] mesmerized crowds on the street corners and outside the mosques of his native city and soon attracted a significant political following." A frequent contributor to influential Arab journals, he developed a hostility toward Englishmen and Jews—the former, because he

thought them imperialists; the latter, because of their desire for a Jewish state in Palestine. Al-Husseini was not the only Arab leader who held such views, but he was certainly among the most militant: unlike moderate nationalists, who were ready to accept a Jewish state, al-Husseini rejected all such compromise, and maintained that "any cooperation with the Jews was out of the question."

Despite his reputation for militancy, the British appointed al-Husseini the new mufti of Jerusalem, in hopes of appeasing Palestinian activists. It was a move they would come to regret.

In the interwar years, the mufti, far from serving the interests of the Middle East, fanned the flames of hatred against anyone who opposed his militant designs. His rhetoric became Hitlerian. The Jewish community was the mufti's prime target—he even sponsored pogroms against them—but he didn't hesitate to persecute mainstream Muslims if they got in his path, either. By the late 1930's, al-Husseini had become such an incendiary figure that the British moved to quarantine him, but he fled, eventually ending up in Nazi Germany, where he embraced Adolf Hitler.

The heart of this book concerns the mufti's relations with the Third Reich, and how he helped lay the groundwork for the toxic ideologies that still haunt the Arab world. Dalin and Rothmann argue that al-Husseini not only fell under the spell of Nazism, but influenced it as well. When al-Husseini finally met Hitler in person, in late 1941, all differences between the two were put aside for a common cause: the elimination of the Jewish race. The details that emerged from that fateful meeting, as documented in this book, are chilling. The authors observe that the two unlikely allies eventually became "partners in genocide."

Icon of Evil is not the first work to expose the Nazi-al-Husseini connection, but it is the most accessible and

convincing. Over the years, a number of commentators have tried to cast doubt about the closeness of the mufti's relationship with Hitler, and/or his involvement in the Holocaust. But the evidence laid out in *Icon of Evil*—shocking wartime photographs, al-Husseini's correspondence with leading Nazis, and newly released archives—prove he was hardly a passing acquaintance. Al-Husseini was more deeply involved with the Third Reich's war crimes than any comparable non-German figure. And the evidence of his guilt continues to mount.

In 2006, for example, two German scholars published a study revealing a Nazi plan to slaughter half a million Jews living in wartime Palestine—a project that was to be carried out with the enthusiastic cooperation of al-Husseini: "The grand mufti of Jerusalem," concluded the study, "was the most important collaborator with the Nazis on the Arab side and an uncompromising anti-Semite." Only the military successes of the Allies prevented the Holocaust from moving to the Holy Land. But al-Husseini's evil succeeded elsewhere. At the invitation of Nazi henchman Heinrich Himmler, al-Husseini actually helped establish a Muslim Waffen SS unit that slaughtered 90 percent of Bosnian Jewry; and it was the mufti who, advising the Germans, nixed a 1943 plan that could have transferred 4,000 Jewish children to safety.

How, you might ask, could a spiritual leader, one supposedly devoted to a religion of peace, possibly collaborate with mass-murderers? He did it with an ease that frightens. Al-Husseini simply twisted his faith and read into it everything he wanted, much like the politically-driven jihadists do today, distorting Islam.

Despite his collaboration with Nazi war crimes, al-Husseini escaped justice after World War II, and continued to influence other Arab leaders—among them the Islamist Sayyid Qutb (a forerunner of Osama bin Laden); Yasser Arafat, the leader of the PLO; and Iraq's General Khairallah Talfah, an uncle of

Saddam Hussein. In one of the book's most gripping sections, Dalin and Rothmann show how Talfah conveyed the mufti's teachings and techniques to his nephew, poisoning the future Iraqi dictator with Nazi-like tendencies, which he made extensive use of later on.

By the time he died in 1974, al-Husseini had left behind a legacy of prejudice and bloodshed like few others. His life and writings continue to motivate the leaders of Hamas, Hezbollah and al-Qaeda, and his followers continue to read and reprint two of al-Husseini's favorite books: Hitler's *Mein Kampf*, and the notorious anti-Semitic fabrication, *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*. That his modern followers often deny the reality of the Holocaust—which al-Husseini actually participated in—is another irony to the mufti's dark story.

The book's conclusion is striking and direct: "As the founding father of radical Islamic anti-Semitism in the twentieth century, al-Husseini remains the inextricable and enduring link between the old anti-Semitism of pre-Holocaust Europe and the Jew hatred and Holocaust denial that now permeates the Muslim world."

Icon of Evil will doubtlessly be assailed by the "politically correct" community for bringing this story to light. Some will say its conclusions are too sweeping and harsh. But such accusations will be unfair—as misguided as those launched against Benedict's Regensburg address. Dalin and Rothmann abhor prejudice of every kind; and are careful about focusing exclusively on al-Husseini and those who share his militant mindset: in no way do they seek to impugn all Muslims, many of whom reject Islamic radicalism—and often fall victim to it. In fact, properly understood, *Icon of Evil* is a plea to reject fanatical ideologies of *every* sort—not just those which pervert Islam—and as such, is very much in harmony with Pope Benedict's efforts to unite the world's religions against evil.

“In a world threatened by sinister and indiscriminate forms of violence,” said the pope recently, speaking to an Islamic group, “the unified voice of religious people urges nations and communities to resolve conflict through peaceful means and with full regard for human dignity.” In response, Sheik Mohamadu Saleem, executive member of the Australian National Imams Council, replied: “Muslims should become more inclusive and universal in their understanding of their religions. At the same time, significant segments of the Christian and other religious communities should overcome their misconceptions and prejudices of Islam and Muslims. If Muslims, Christians and other faith communities reach out to one another and build bridges rather than erect barriers, the whole of humanity will rejoice forever.”

I am sure the authors of this important book would wholeheartedly agree.

William Doino, Jr. prepared the “Annotated Bibliography of Works on Pope Pius XII, the Second World War and the Holocaust” that appears in The Pius War: Response to the Critics of Pius XII*, edited by Joseph Bottum and David Dalin. He is also a contributing editor to* Inside the Vatican*.*