

Breakfast with Voltaire and Kant? About Tunisian-French philosopher Abdelwahab Meddeb

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On September 12, 2013, in the leading German weekly *Die Zeit*, prize-winning Tunisian-French poet, philosopher and university professor in France, [Abdelwahab Meddeb](#) (born 1946 in Tunis) argued against Islamism. On the same page there is an article by co-editor of *Die Zeit*, Josef Joffe, on the Syrian crisis.

Meddeb is in favor of a possible “world government” following German philosopher Immanuel Kant, who in 1795 wrote his so-called political testament, “Perpetual Peace.” Meddeb writes about a “cosmopolitan world government,” and he is following mainstream liberal and academic discourse in North America, Europe, and even worldwide.

To be sure, Meddeb is an anti-Islamist, he really and honestly detests Salafi and Wahhabi Islamism, in particular, and religious fundamentalism in general. But there is a remarkable and truly (and sadly) future-oriented ideological trope in his thinking, which we can find in the entire post-colonial, and cosmopolitan debates around the globe, and in particular in Europe, the Middle East and North America. In his interview with *Die Zeit* he argues that a Syrian civil war could result in the emergence of several “micro-states” based on religion, ethnicity and language. He asks himself “Who has a *cui bono*,” or who would be the winner or who would profit in such a “scenario?” “Israel,” he answers himself, because Israel is based on a “religious, ethnic and language identity.” Israel “could live in harmony with such an environment of [Syrian] micro-states,” he claims.

Remember: You simply have to mention Kant, cosmopolitanism, and world government, to be up to date. In addition, mention Hannah Arendt, another German philosopher, and you are a super trendy scholar. If you have by birth a so-called hybrid identity, in the best case an Islamic legacy in your family and a European touch, too, your career is made from the very beginning. Europeans in particular embrace this kind of Arab-Muslim-European identity, which can only be matched by anti-Israel Jews. However, Meddeb presents such a wonderful bilingual French-Arab and religious (Islamic) identity and he mentions both Kant and Arendt in his short interview with *Die Zeit*. He is truly fashionable.

The core point of Meddeb's well chosen remark about Israel is his reference to Kant at the very end of that interview. Here you have the true European speaking to his fellow Kantian colleagues, journalists, and fans.

In June 2002, Meddeb gave a speech in Germany about 9/11. In it, he mourned the decline of Islam in recent centuries and decades. He is against terror, of course, but his main argument and interest is the history of Islam. Before, between October 19 and December 9, 2001, he wrote his book "La Maladie de l'Islam," "The Malady of Islam." In it he argues against Islamism and he was not at all happy on 9/11, contrary to his fellow Muslims and Arabs. He does not like them. But he tries, to some extent, to understand them or to put them in the broader picture.

Therefore, he also argues against the West, and, most prominently, against America and against some Jews, the 'bad ones,' the Zionists, while he quotes other Jews rather positively. A cosmopolitan against Zion, really? Yes, particularly because he is a secular, open-minded man, a cosmopolitan, Meddeb is promoting troubling tropes, I believe. Take his reference to famous French philosopher Voltaire from the 18th century. In his book "The Malady of Islam," he quotes

Voltaire who said that a “reasonable intolerance” would be intolerance towards the “Israelites” who try to go back home to Zion. Writing in the mid 18th century, Voltaire has ever since been infamous for his antisemitic tropes. But well-educated Abdelwahab Meddeb refers to Voltaire close to the end of his 250 pages book on 9/11 and “The Malady of Islam.” He is rationalizing the murder of 9/11 at least in part, for example when referring to Ariel Sharon as someone who was involved in “war crimes” (in 1982), when there is no connection between those accusations and 9/11 at all or to the ideology of Bin Laden, al Qaida and Islamism of the Muslim Brotherhood that was established in 1928 in Egypt by Hasan al-Banna. In many of his articles, like during the Gaza war in January 2009, both sides are equally horrible, cruel and disgusting: Hamas is as bad as Israel. At the end, Israel is even worse, of course, because it is Goliath, not David, in his view, and he argues that those rockets from the Gaza strip did not do much harm at all, killing just a very few Israelis, but the retaliation of Israel was horrible. German newspapers like the left-wing [*Frankfurter Rundschau*](#) and newspapers and online pages in other [languages](#) published and printed his anti-Hamas and anti-Israel article.

The rejection of Israel as a Jewish state is the core of the problem. We are facing two huge movements: on the one hand, we have Islamism, including Shia-style terror from Hezbollah and of course the Iranian threat, Sunni-style Islamism by the Muslim Brotherhood or by Turkey, or Saudi-style antisemitism, and of course Qatar-style mainstreaming of Islamism via public relations.

On the other hand, we have European-style cosmopolitanism Kantian-style, promoted by almost the entire liberal or left-wing and mainstream academia on every single campus in Europe, in EU institutions, in trans-national governments, and by philosophers like Abdelwahab Meddeb, who oppose Saudi-style Islamism, the language of hatred of the Muslim Brotherhood or

of Yusuf al-Qaradawi while embracing the more tender aspects of Islamic history in their view. They are obsessed with portraying Islamic history as nice without ignoring the more troubling aspects. But they are perhaps even more obsessed with Immanuel Kant or Voltaire and the rejection of Jewish re-settling in Zion, the land of King David.

Meddeb has been published by leading German papers like the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, *Die Zeit*, he has been interviewed by leading radio stations in Germany and his books and talks have been reviewed very positively. Kantian Muslims are heroes in Europe. And they are an almost completely overlooked danger to the Jewish state of Israel.

This is also the reason why another German philosopher, Hannah Arendt, is so famous and extremely trendy. Today you are an outsider at EU universities and at European colloques on contemporary political thinking or on political philosophy if you are not a full-bearded hipster and if you are not always referring to Arendt, or Kant, or their followers like Judith Butler from Berkeley and Seyla Benhabib from Yale, the latter having just been awarded prestigious prizes in Germany last year. Being a student today is simple. You do not need researching many years with thousands of books on your bookshelves at home. Today, at EU or North American campuses you need essentially four things to succeed: an Apple MacBook, an I-phone, a book by Kant, and one by Arendt ...

We have to emphasize the close connection between Zionism and free thinking. It is not cool to quote Kant and Arendt all day long or to refer positively and with a smile to Voltaire's prejudice and "intolerance" towards Zion. It's vice versa: it is cool to be a Zionist.

The really dramatic story goes like this: we have to start thinking that some of our allies in the fight against Islamism and Jihad are our enemies when it comes to defending Israel as a *Jewish state*. If we fail and just focus on fighting Islamism

and have night-long vibrant debates about the importance (and, yes, it is important!) of the Western world, of free thinking and writing, of being nice and friendly to everyone everywhere (call it “hospitality”) we might wake up and have breakfast with a happily secular fellow who quotes Voltaire’s “reasonable intolerance” towards Zionism from the 18th century.

And this seems to be the story of philosopher Abdelwahab Meddeb. The cultural and scholarly elite in Germany and Europe is eager to embrace him. And there is a French and a German reason for that. Voltaire. Kant.

The Obsession to fight the Jewish state – The binational option, from Martin Buber and Hannah Arendt to Micha Brumlik and Judith Butler

[The Times of Israel](#), September 3, 2013

On September 9 and 10, 2013, the Center for Research on Antisemitism (ZfA) at Berlin’s Technical University, together with the huge German Foundation on “Remembrance, Responsibility, and Future”, which spends up to seven million Euros a year for events (and spent over 70 million Euros since its inception in the year 2000), the group “Berlin-Kreuzberg Initiative against Antisemitism (Kiga)” and several other organizations as well as a German ministry of the Federal

Government, will held a conference in Nuremberg on the Middle East conflict and its perception among immigrants in Germany.

The ZfA and its former head Wolfgang Benz have been criticized in recent years for promoting research on "Islamophobia" instead of Muslim antisemitism. In addition, Benz has been questioned about his silence about the Nazi legacy of his PhD advisor Karl Bosl, who awarded Benz a doctorate in 1968. In 1964, Bosl had compared the Holocaust to the expulsion of Germans from the East, and during Nazi Germany Bosl was on the payroll of the SS, an active historian in Nazi circles, and a member of the Nazi party NSDAP. Wolfgang Benz even collaborated with hardcore Islamist activists from the German online project Muslim Market and gave those pro-Iranian antisemites a very friendly interview in November 2010. Muslim Market is among those groups that organize the pro-Iran, pro-Hezbollah and anti-Israel al-Quds rallies every year at the end of the Muslim month of Ramadan. On their homepage Muslim Market promotes the boycott of Israel with a scratched-out Star of David. Is this an appropriate place for the best known German scholar on antisemitism to be interviewed?

Then, in 2012, the new Center head since summer 2011, historian Stefanie Schüler-Springorum, appointed Edward Said follower and anti-Zionist Islamic studies scholar Achim Rohde. I analyzed the problematic tropes of Rohde's scholarly approach and he left (or had to leave) the ZfA in 2013. Schüler-Springorum, though, is far from being an expert on research on antisemitism, let alone Israel, the Middle East, or the history of anti-Zionism. She has not published a single book on antisemitism so far, which is remarkable for the head of the leading European institute for research on that topic.

A speaker at the event in Nuremberg will be Islamic studies scholar and journalist Alexandra Senfft. In November 2012 she interviewed Wolfgang Benz and welcomed his new book on "How fear of Muslims threatens our democracies" – a strange topic for a scholar on antisemitism who is silent on jihadism and

Islamist Jew-hatred. Senfft even mentioned that Benz frequently is interviewed by Muslims and Muslim journals in Germany but she had no problem and did not mention Benz' interview with the hardcore Islamist and antisemitic Muslim Market. Senfft argues against critics of antisemitism like Holocaust survivor Ralph Giordano and journalist Henryk M. Broder because they are critics of "Islam," in fact they are critics of Islamist antisemitism in particular and Islamism in general.

One of the best known speakers at the September 9 event, invited by Schüler-Springorum and her allies, is Professor Micha Brumlik, a pedagogue by profession. Brumlik has been known in recent decades as a critic of some forms of antisemitism in Germany. But he is even better known today for his kosher stamps for antisemitic agitators like Judith Butler who received the very prestigious Adorno-Prize of the city of Frankfurt in 2012. Butler calls Israel an apartheid state, she supports the anti-Jewish Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) movement and she is in favor of German-Jewish philosophers Hannah Arendt (1906–1975) and Martin Buber (1878–1965). Both Arendt and Buber agitated against a Jewish state of Israel and favored a binational Israel.

In the July issue of the leading left-wing German monthly, Konkret, Brumlik promoted a "Plan B." In his article he argued against Israel as a Jewish state and followed Buber's plans for a binational Israel. Konkret and Brumlik went so far as to say that Jews may not have a principled right of return to Zion – rather humanitarian and economic aspects should regulate immigration to Israel/Palestine.

Brumlik and Konkret are not stupid, they are not pro-Hamas or pro-Hezbollah, they are rather critics of Islamist antisemitism and the Iranian threat. Konkret is even known as one of the very few self-declared pro-Israel journals in Germany. If it is pro-Israel to plead for a binational state – then you can imagine the anti-Zionist climate in Germany.

A few days after Brumlik's piece was published by Konkret, I wrote a critique of this anti-Israel article. I said that this approach for a binational Israel, coming from a well-known Jewish professor and a self-declared pro-Israel monthly, is perhaps more dangerous than anti-Israel hatred coming from all kinds of hardcore right-wing or left-wing circles. I said that Brumlik and Konkret are perhaps more dangerous thanks to their distinguished style, their clear and calm strategy for this "Plan B" aiming at a binational Israel and rejecting Jews' principled right of return.

Konkret became rather angry about my critique and attacked my person in a nasty and completely unprofessional way in the following editorial. Such attacks against pro-Israel scholars are normal when it comes to typical extreme right-wing or left-wing hate mongers, but Konkret always pretended to be pro-Israel. But well, Martin Buber was pro-Israel, too. He was a Zionist and this is the problem we are facing: what is Zionism?

This is a strategic question, going beyond the actual debates and conflicts.

There is the political Zionism of Theodor Herzl (1860–1904) and his followers. Herzl was not religious but desperate for a Jewish state. Others, like Achad Ha'am (1856–1927) preferred a cultural Zionism, urging Jews to become more Jewish in an inner, philosophical or religious and cultural way. This awakening of being Jewish was also a main element of Martin Buber's approach in the early 20th century. Buber was a strong Zionist but did not want a Jewish state at all. Like Arendt, who was much younger than him and less religious, he was in favor of a homeland for Jews, but not a Jewish state. Sounds strange to today's ears? This convoluted logic is behind today's proposals for a binational state. And this is what we have to struggle with, in the next years and decades.

Influential German historian Dan Diner from Leipzig and Tel

Aviv Universities argued for a binational Israel in his super PhD (habilitation) in 1980, too. I am not sure if this is still his point of view, but I fear it is. Historian Siegbert Wolf, known for books on Buber or anarchist and friend of Buber, Gustav Landauer (who was killed by sadistic, antisemitic, nationalistic and anti-socialist pre-Nazi German soldiers in 1919), argued for a binational Israel as well and referred to Diner. Like Diner, Konkret or Brumlik, Wolf is not stupid at all. He is aware of the Nazi collaboration of the leading Arab and Muslim politician at the time, Grand Mufti of Jerusalem Amin al-Husseini, and refers to pro-Israel and anti-Islamist critics of the Mufti like political scientist Matthias Küntzel, and historians Klaus-Michael Mallmann and Martin Cüppers. Despite these facts, Wolf supports antisemitic and so called post-Orientalist superstar Edward Said (1935–2003) and his plea for a binational Israel. Wolf's pro-Buber article was published by the official German Martin-Buber-Society in 2011.

Butler likes the idea of a binational Israel, and therefore she refers to Arendt and Buber. For Butler, though, in her anti-Israel book from 2012, "Parting Ways. Jewishness and the Critique of Zionism," Buber was still a problem, because he was in favor of Jewish "settler colonialism" and Jewish immigration to Palestine (prior to 1948). In fact, Buber wanted limited immigration even after the Shoah. In 1947, together with the co-founder and later President of Hebrew University, Judah Magnes (1877–1948), he wrote a pamphlet "Arab-Jewish Unity," a "Testimony before the Anglo-American Inquiry Commission for the Ihud (Union) Association." In it, they argued against a Jewish state of Israel and wanted a limited immigration of 100,000 Jews a year, in order to not disturb the Arabs.

In 1958, Martin Buber wrote that the "philosophy of violence" of the "national socialist evil" kept on "having an effect" "in a part of our people," the Jewish people. This

(antisemitic) comparison of Jews to Nazis was remembered, quoted and not at all criticized in 1961 in an afterword to a big study by Hans Cohn on Buber, written by the Brit Shalom member (1925–1933), co-founder of the Leo Baeck Institute and first editor of its Yearbook (1956–1978), Israeli journalist Robert Weltsch (1891–1982). Cohn's book with Weltsch's afterword appeared in a second printing in 1979, published by the Leo Baeck Institute New York, with a foreword by German historian Julius H. Schoeps, today head of the 1992 founded Moses Mendelssohn Center for European-Jewish Studies (MMZ) in Potsdam.

As historians and co-editors of the "New Essays on Zionism" in 2006, David Hazony, Yoram Hazony, and Michael B. Oren, observed, there is a need to justify Zionism in our times after the Cold War, an era that for Israel was relatively harmless, predictable, and largely free of today's jihadist threat. Thanks to "European ideology," they wrote, the "future of mankind" is seen "in the dissolution of state sovereignty." Therefore Zionism, political Zionism and not spiritual or cultural Zionism, to be sure, needs philosophical, historical, political and religious justification.

We have to confront European and German ideology of Immanuel Kant and the end of the nation-state in the late 18th century. Kant is still very influential in philosophy and politics alike, take Yale's Seyla Benhabib as an example. In 2012 she was awarded a prize in Germany, despite her outspoken anti-Zionist articles in recent years and her friendship with Judith Butler. Even pro-Israel young scholars embrace Benhabib and are unwilling or unable to decode the dangerous ideology of Kant, and his followers in the anti-nation-state tent.

Israel is a Jewish state and has to be a Jewish state and has to be accepted as a Jewish state. Israel as a Jewish state with unlimited immigration could have saved hundreds of thousand Jews, if not millions. Jews have by far the longest

and most intense relationship to Zion and the territory of Israel. Jerusalem is of minor importance to Islam, just take the Quran as an example. Finally, no one in the humanities and social sciences is questioning the Muslim character of almost all Arab states, or of Iran.

Martin Buber and Hannah Arendt, perhaps today the two most influential Jewish anti-Israel-as-a-Jewish-state celebrities in the humanities and social sciences from the 20th century, did a bad job. They attacked and defamed the very idea of Israel as a Jewish state in the 1940s, take the time frame from 1942 until 1948, when the Holocaust happened and the Biltmore conference in May 1942 in New York City argued in favor of a Jewish state of Israel.

The question is not only if someone is pro-Israel, but also what kind of Israel. What do people refer to when they are in favor of Israel – a cultural Zionist or spiritual Judaistic Israel with no Jewish majority, a binational Israel? Or, a political Zionist Israel, the Jewish state of Israel?

It is a scandal that proponents of a binational Israel and authors who attack critics of antisemitism and Muslim antisemitism are invited to that conference to be held in Nuremberg, September 9, 2013.

Finally, even among self-declared friends of Israel there is a huge gap of knowledge about the history of Zionism and Israel as a Jewish state. There is much work to be done for serious scholarship.