

# 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 18<sup>th</sup> 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 18<sup>th</sup> 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 18<sup>th</sup> 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.