During World War II Amin al-Husseini, the mufti of Jerusalem, who had been on the run from the British since 1937, made radio broadcasts to the Muslims of the Middle East on behalf of the Axis powers. The unembarrassed anti-Semitic content of his programming did not change when he was informed by his Nazi patrons that the Jewish problem was being taken care of in a hopefully definitive way. Even in his memoirs, written between 1967 and 1974, he was still invoking the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, an anti-Semitic forgery purporting to reveal a Jewish conspiracy to rule the world. After his death in 1974 the mufti disappeared from the public consciousness of his fellow Palestinians without a trace—no books or memorials, no streets or refugee camps named after him— but much of what he said about the Jews continues to pass for common knowledge in large portions of the Arab world.

For Israel’s hard-line supporters, the mufti and his opinions have been a propaganda godsend. (The article on him in the *Encyclopedia of the Holocaust* is longer than the articles on Himmler and Heydrich combined and exceeded in length only by the article on Hitler.) If Israel’s enemies can be associated with the category of Nazi sympathizers and Holocaust-deniers— the mufti at least had the grace not to deny the genocide he himself favored— then they are the functional equivalent of absolute evil, people who cannot and should not be reasoned with but must be simply kept at bay, like predatory animals. In taking up the topic of the Arabs and the Holocaust, Gilbert Achcar, a Lebanese leftist who teaches at the School of Oriental and Asian Studies in London, is therefore choosing to venture out from the pro-Palestinian lines just
at the point where all the Zionist guns are already aimed. His book admits the worst about his fellow Arabs and goes on as it can from there. It’s hard to tell whether the undertaking is very brave or very foolhardy.

For what it’s worth, the mufti too was defying considerable odds when he summoned the Arabs to embrace the fascist cause. Hitler in his early and most uninhibited writings had portrayed non-European peoples as sub-human. Mussolini had bombed Ethiopia into submission in 1936 and was still occupying Libya, conquered five years earlier. Why should the victims of one colonialism rally to another, which was even more explicit in its racism? You no sooner ask this question, however, than you notice that it cuts two ways. Why should the Allies have expected non-European peoples to take sides against the fascists? Consider the symmetrical radio programs that George Orwell prepared from August 1941 to November 1943 for the BBC’s Eastern Service. Aimed at English-speaking Indians, Orwell’s newscasts and commentaries were just as paradoxical as the mufti’s. Orwell wanted to persuade Indians, who knew little about fascism but were acquainted with British colonialism in intimate detail, that they should take up arms on behalf of their colonizers. The mufti had going for him at least “the enemy of my enemy is my friend” principle, which possibly explains such (minimal) success has his campaign had. Orwell didn’t. Though he himself had fought fascism in Spain, he was aware that to the victims of imperial domination, there was nothing self-evidently absurd about the idea of a “moral equivalence” between the Nazis and the Western imperial powers. In order to achieve a global anti-fascist front, he wrote in an after-hours essay during his BBC period, Britain would have to commit not only to giving up its empire, but to remedying the devastating inequality of resources to which the empire had of course contributed. The “first duty of a ‘good
anti-Fascist,’” he observed sardonically, was “to lie about” the disparity in income between England and India. He refused.

Before the Cold War turned him into something else entirely, Orwell tried to be a better anti-fascist, which is to say one who did not let that commitment blind him to other forms of solidarity, other dimensions of justice. In this sense Achcar is a worthy heir to Orwell—worthier than others who would locate themselves in Orwell’s lineage. Achcar too tries to sustain divergent but simultaneous political commitments. This means indignation at anti-Semitism of any sort but also at the moral simplifications so beloved by the purveyors of epithets like “Islamofascist.” The logic Achcar rejects will be familiar, having returned of late in debates over the Ground Zero mosque after a slightly shamed lull in reaction to US military failures in Iraq and Afghanistan. “They” are evil, we are told, and evil by its nature is inexplicable. “They” are evil, so we need not ask who “we” are. We need not inquire into what we may have done to cause or encourage the evil. We need not worry about the evil we may do in opposing it. No comparisons are necessary between “us” and “them,” between our violence and their violence, between their religious shrines and ours. At its most basic level Achcar’s book argues for the simple right to compare. He wants comparison that is both unrestricted—nothing is out of bounds—and scrupulous, which is to say accompanied by the ethical and historical accounting for differences that any serious comparison will always entail. In taking this position, Achcar gestures toward a question whose moment is perhaps coming though it was too large or too delicate for him to pose outright: how ought the singularity of the Holocaust to figure within a non-Eurocentric or genuinely planetary history? What would it look like from a comparative perspective that takes colonialism too with proper gravity?
Sven Lindqvist, in *A History of Bombing*, lists various ways in which the aerial bombardment of Germany by the Allies, which deliberately killed 500,000 to 600,000 civilians but apparently did not hasten the end of the war, does not resemble the murders in the Nazi extermination camps. Achcar too is unafraid to follow comparison wherever it may lead. “Of course,” he declares, “the Holocaust was incomparably crueler and bloodier than the Nakba.” This must be said, and he says it, though he adds very properly that this “in no way diminishes the tragedy of the Palestinians, particularly since they did not, as a people, bear any blame for the destruction of European Jewry.” His comparisons are never merely partisan and often inconvenient for him. In Algeria, he writes, “some two million ‘regrouped persons’ came under the direct control of the French colonial army: measured against its standards of brutality, the Israeli army pales. None of the massacres of Palestinians carried out by Israeli forces compares in scope to the one perpetrated by the French army in May 1945 in the Algerian cities of Sétif and Guelma.”

Pro-Israel zealots have always claimed the right to sling the Nazi analogy at pretty much anyone they didn’t like. Achcar quotes Abba Eban: “With Mr. Begin and his cohorts, every foe becomes a ‘Nazi,’ every blow becomes an ‘Auschwitz.’” It seems strange, therefore, that Zionists accuse comparers of trivializing the Holocaust. “On what grounds,” he asks, “can Israeli writers criticize their Arab counterparts (the great majority of whom are poorly informed about the Holocaust) for comparing Zionism to Nazism, when Israeli media and Israeli political leaders (who know a great deal about it) have never hesitated and still do not hesitate to compare Arab political forces . . . to Nazism?” When he makes his case for comparison, Achcar is championing (and for that matter also embodying) the unfashionable Enlightenment virtue of
universalism as against self-serving double standards that might be called “tribal,” though that term no doubt insults local populations it doesn’t intend to. But how else to describe what Meir Litvak and Esther Webman do when they identify comparison as such with Holocaust denial? In *From Empathy to Denial: Arab Responses to the Holocaust*, one of the mainstream texts he takes on,

Achcar finds the following reasoning: “Any comparison involving Nazism and the Holocaust calls the uniqueness of the Holocaust into question; 2) calling the uniqueness of the Holocaust into question is tantamount to denying it; therefore 3) any Arab who compares Zionism to Nazism, or the suffering inflicted on the Palestinians to the Holocaust, is a Holocaust denier (and, consequently, an anti-Semite).” Here the only standard seems to be “what’s good for the Jews.” Except that it isn’t.

Zionist Internet sites offer “an inventory of all the inanities about the Holocaust that have been uttered, written, or, most frequently, simply translated from other languages in the Arab world” since 1948. Achcar concedes “the alarmingly high proportion of ignorance and mindlessness among those who make public statements in the Arab world—a world governed, to its detriment, by regimes that generate just such ignorance and mindlessness.” What he wants to show, especially in his detailed chapters on the period before 1948, is that this is a product of the history *since* 1948 and not a deep racial or religious prejudice, like anti-Semitism in Europe. The central argument of the book is that Zionists have offered a false analogy between European anti-Semitism, which was entirely unaffected by anything that actual Jews did or did not do, and anti-Semitism in the Middle East, which has risen in rough proportion to the dispossession of the Palestinians and Israel’s continuing acts of aggression against Egypt and Lebanon as well as its
own population. “One cannot equate the anti-Semitism called forth by an occupying army that declares its allegiance to a ‘Jewish state’ and has perpetrated war crimes in Palestine and Lebanon with the anti-Semitism based, for example, on the notion that ‘the Yids’ were to blame for the German or French defeats with which Judaism had absolutely nothing to do.” When I imagine the anti-Semitism my children are most likely to run into, I think Achcar is probably right: the people to thank for it are in Tel Aviv and Washington.

Achcar notes that “liberal Westernist anticolonialism, the vehicle of the Enlightenment in the Arab world, has attracted so much less attention than the most reactionary Arab currents.” Why isn’t more said here about the Palestinian national poet Mahmoud Darwish, who declared (apropos of fascism) “No Arab has the right to feel that his enemy’s enemy is his friend”? This book is also a plea for recognition on behalf of the secular, pro-Enlightenment intellectuals of the Arab world, like Achcar himself and Edward Said, who loudly denounced anti-Semitism wherever he found it and refused to pass over in silence unpalatable truths about his fellow Arabs. Of course the absence of racism is always a tricky thing to show. Contemplating Nasser’s 1965 statement that “the Arabs’ hostility to Israel was not racist,” many will assume in advance that denial accomplishes nothing at all, or is even evidence against itself. Achcar says other things about Nasser that do make one wonder. But on the whole he makes his case—minimally, that a distinction between Zionists and Jews has always been respected by the secular Arab left and now seems to be spreading. From the beginning many Arab intellectuals found it perfectly possible to denounce both the Nazis and the Zionist enterprise, as for example was the case for the influential Egyptian weekly Al-Risala. In Palestine, Filastin was already “reacting vigorously to Zionist accusations of pro-Nazism” in 1934. On September 9, 1939, a week after
the outbreak of World War II, Filastin’s editorial wrote as follows: “War has placed us in a new situation with regard to our relations with Britain. We are connected to it today in a matter that is more universal than our private cause. We are not calling on Arabs to sacrifice their cause, but we are asserting that the present conflict between the democratic forces and dictatorial forces has dictated that we take sides with one or the other.” As Achcar adds, this “is very remote from the currently prevailing image of a Palestinian people that supposedly responded to Mufti Amin al-Husseini’s exhortations by chanting hallelujah in unison.”

It’s a bit late in the day to be surprised by the pervasiveness of shoddy, second-hand scholarship in this discursive arena (the name Alan Dershowitz comes to mind). Achcar does not pretend to be impartial, but he at least makes careful distinctions. He notes that the Lebanese Phalange, which really was fascist, was less influenced by Hitler than by Franco’s Spain (to which its name refers). Concerned to protect Christians against Muslims, this clerical fascism “cannot be accused” of anti-Semitism, he observes, and indeed allied itself directly with Israel after 1948. But it can be accused of other things, like the massacres in Sabra and Shatila. It does not reflect well on the Zionist side of the debate that Israel’s cosy relations with the Phalange tend to be hushed up. When actual card-carrying fascists who happen to be Israel’s allies go unmentioned, one can only conclude that the writers are not after all so concerned with fascism, only with defending Israel by any rhetorical means available.

Much of what has been worst in the Islamic resistance of the past twenty-odd years, Achcar argues, is a product of US support for Islamic fundamentalists during the Cold War combined with US and Israeli rejection of the liberal, secular form of the Palestinian independence movement and, of course, Israel’s military actions. Hezbollah, which took up the
classic themes of Holocaust denial, was created in 1985 in response to the Israeli invasion of Lebanon. “Israeli repression of the intifada catalyzed the creation, starting from December 1987, of the Palestinian Sunni Movement of Islamic Resistance, better known by its acronym, Hamas.” Hamas’s original charter of 1988 is full of what Achcar calls “Islamized anti-Semitic ravings.” This is bad, but it’s more a result of recent and ongoing US and Israeli policies than of ancient hatreds. Achcar is emphatic in his disgust for the anti-Semitism. Still, at this point he would probably agree that there is no choice but to engage with Islamist groups like Hezbollah and Hamas despite their religious and sometimes crazy rhetoric. We should not assume they are absolute evil even if they, like their Zionist antagonists, are ready to use the language of absolute evil. Perhaps a bit wishfully, Achcar emphasizes “tangible signs that the [Hamas] charter may eventually be amended.” Political engagement makes for pragmatism. Hamas “has evolved on [anti-Semitism] and can evolve still further.” Unspoken is the major pre-condition that lies within the power of the West: a willingness not to demonize them. For example, by comparing them to the Nazis.

After Auschwitz, Adorno might have said, no Auschwitz comparisons. Should there be a moratorium on analogies with the Nazis? Stephen Howe has proposed a rule of political argument according to which the first person to invoke them would immediately lose. It’s an attractive thought. I suppose I could reluctantly give up even on quotations like this one from Moshe Zimmerman of Hebrew University, which I find genuinely edifying: “Look at the children of the Jewish Hebron settlers: they are exactly like the Hitler Youth. From infancy they are pumped with ideas that all Arabs are bad, of how every Gentile is against us. They are turned into paranoids, they think [of] themselves as a master race, they are exactly like the Hitler Youth.” The strongest argument against censoring such comparisons is not the Arab-Israeli war of narratives, where we could perhaps do without them, but how productive they have been in getting people to see the history of the rest of the world with fresh eyes. Psychologically speaking, to put the Holocaust off limits to comparison was to invite comparison with various other moments of overlooked suffering. That is of course what has happened, and it’s not a bad thing. As Michael Rothberg writes in his recent book *Multidirectional Memory: Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonization*: “the emergence of Holocaust memory on a global scale has contributed to the articulation of other histories—some of them predating the Nazi
genocide, such as slavery, and others taking place later, such as the Algerian War of Independence (1965-62) or the genocide in Bosnia during the 1990s.” If you are going to live or at least think and feel and remember on a global scale— and Achcar’s seductive cosmopolitanism makes you want to— then the comparisons have to keep flowing.