“Judaism and Islam as Opposites”

a 1942 essay by Nazi convert to Islam, Johannes ‘Omar Amin’ von Leers, (d. 1965)

on Johannes “Omar Amin” von Leers. There is a reference in Leers’ 1942 essay, translated below, to Muhammad Sabri’s “Islam, Judentum, und Bolschewismus.” This 1938 work by Sabri included the 1937 “fatwa” on the Jews by Leers’ mentor, and eventual Muslim namesake, Hajj Amin el-Husseini, which I have analyzed at length (published here; and as a free pdf here).

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Johannes von Leers, “Judentum und Islam als Gegensatze,” Die Judenfrage in Politik, Recht, and Wirtschaft 6, no. 24 (December 24, 1942): 275–78; translated by Steven Rendall. Reproduced from my The Legacy of Islamic Antisemitism, 2008, pp. 619-625.

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It is of some interest to read Jewish historians from time to time, not because we can find truth in them, but in order to gain insight into the psychology of Jews. Here we are concerned with one such case that is highly unique—whenever the Jews happen to discuss Muhammad and Islam, they are exceptionally hostile, indeed hateful. For example, Simon Dubnow, in his General History of the Jewish People (Berlin, 3: 282 ff.) [1] describes Muhammad, but does not fail to note that he was not able to read, and then adds the following:

Thus in the mind of this half-Bedouin there ripened the idea of monotheism, which in him became a fiery passion that drove him to engage in a “holy war” in which any means was permissible. For Muhammad, the knowledge of God was in no way connected with the sublime ethical consciousness that makes the ethical monotheism of the biblical prophets and the one-sided evangelical doctrine of “not of this world” so attractive. The life of Muhammad reveals neither an enchanting personality nor an embodiment of the highest ethical principles capable, even more than the abstract idea, of captivating pious souls. The life of the “Emissary of Allah” and the Qur’an itself are full of examples of how the founder of a religion should not speak and behave. Behind the mask of a prophet we find only too often the eye of a half-savage; the Prophet’s inspiration is overshadowed by the crude passion of the Bedouin who ruthlessly murders in war and does not hesitate to carry off the wives or daughters of the men he murders in order to add them to his harem. All these character traits of Muhammad are particularly clear in his behavior with regard to Jews in Arabia.

This is not historical writing, but rather a campaign of hatred and libel. [2] First of all, Muhammad was neither a Bedouin nor a half-Bedouin; instead, he was a member of the old family of urban nobility in Mecca, the Quraysh, so the Jewish critic Dubnow obviously has not read the Qur’an, since he makes such an egregious error. But one thing this passage surely betrays—the Jews’ mortal hatred, fourteen hundred years later, for the man who gave birth to the most recent and, in many respects, the most successful of the world religions. The clash between Muhammad and Jewry is not well known, but is actually very interesting. Even before Emperor Titus’s destruction of Jerusalem (70 CE) there were already a few Jews in Arabia, and after the destruction of Jerusalem large groups emigrated to Arabia, settled in Arabian cities, and there carried on active agitation on behalf of Judaism. The three tribes, Banu Qaynuqa, Banu Nadir, and Banu Qurayza, took up residence especially in the city of Yathrib, while other Jews settled in Khaybar, Fadak, Taima, and Wadi-el-Kura—cities that were in fact fully under their control. There were also Jewish groups in southern Arabia, as far south as Aden. The Jews consciously pursued their mission; if many Jewish tribes had the same particularist spirit, the same tribal feuds, and the same customs of blood revenge as the Arabs, this was frequently not because the Jews were becoming Arabized, but on the contrary because in these Jewish tribes there were many converted Arabs. However, the headquarters of the area taken over by the Jews was Yathrib, from which emanated Jewish agitation; there, the three previously mentioned Jewish tribes had intervened in the conflicts between the two largest Arab tribes, the Aws and the Khazraj (sometimes referred to collectively as Banu Qayla), [3] which they incited against each other and in this way took control over the city. This penetration was achieved by means of economic activity, settlement, and trade, but above all by the Jews’ spiritual influence. To be sure, Christian influences from Byzantium and Abyssinia were also involved, but of the foreign religious creeds Judaism was the most widespread, active, and successful.

The Jews later sought to prove how much Islam had borrowed from Judaism. It is characteristic of Judaism’s vanity that it always sees itself as the origin of all new knowledge. In reality some external respects in which Islam and Judaism agree were borrowed not from Judaism but rather from ancient Oriental folk customs.

The prohibition on pork corresponds to very ancient hygienic experiences in the Orient, because in that region’s climate this fatty meat is not easily digestible; in addition there is the danger of trichinosis. If the Qur’an occasionally refers to Jewish matters, the reason for this is not that Muhammad learned from Judaism, but rather that energetic Jewish missionary work had introduced many Jewish legends and ideas among the Arabs. Had the development of this Jewish penetration continued undisturbed, large numbers of the Arab people might have become Judaized—just as they later adopted Islam. Judaism would thereby have gained an enormous increase in power. Jews would have been able to unleash to their own ends all the natural warlike and political forces of the Arab people. The swarms of horsemen that under ‘Umar later conquered Egypt and Persia, and pushed as far as Spain and India, would have entered the field on behalf of the Talmud. This would have resulted in a cruel catastrophe for the whole of cultured humanity.

The Arab peoples of the pre-Islamic era had little to oppose to the Jewish mission. The belief in their old local and nature gods was undermined and dissolved because it no longer corresponded to the sober, clear, comprehensible thought of the people. We hear about persons of that time who tried out various religions, “Hanifs” or meditative individuals who sought religious clarity. In the Arab world of that time there was certainly a search for religious truth, for a healthy, clear way of life in accord with God’s will. The people was in a religious crisis and was looking for a way out of it.

While still a child, Muhammad ibn Abdallah is supposed to have encountered a Christian monk who saw in him a future bearer of religious knowledge and warned his escort to protect him against the Jews, who would bedevil him all during his life. It is possible that the boy Muhammad at that time already said something about the Jews that revealed his quick-wittedness to the monk, who may have been well versed in psychology. But it was not until he reached forty, after a highly successful career as a businessman, that Muhammad was first deeply gripped and shaken by the religious question. Enlightenment came to him in the loneliness of the mountains above Mecca. The German scholar Müller [4] rightly says (in “Der Islam im Morgen- und Abendlande,”1: 57)—and this statement made by an objective German clearly contrasts with the hateful outburst of a man like Dubnow—“Those who mocked him called him mad, a dreamer, a swindler—but the consistent sureness of his behavior, the integrity of his whole being was never criticized, and still today emerges clearly from the Qur’an. . . .His perfect nobility in the Meccan period is still less subject to doubt. The conditions of despairing fear that emerged from the decisive vision, the truly admirable persistence with which this by no means courageous man continued his preaching for a decade under the most severe persecution, and finally under a serious threat to his life, without the slightest prospect of ultimate success, bears clear testimony to the overwhelming power of the idea that had taken hold of him and that brought him, independently of his own will, to the firm conviction that the inspiration that impressed itself on his thought was revealed by God himself. Thus we have the portrait of a true prophet.”

For years Muhammad sought in Mecca to succeed with his preaching that there was only one God, the sole, all-merciful king of Judgment Day. He opposed to the Christian Trinity the unity of God, rejected the Christian doctrine of original sin and salvation, and instead gave every believer as a guiding principle the complete fulfillment of the commands of the righteous, given by a compassionate and just God, before whom every individual person had to account for his acts. As a result of the close connection between the ruling class in Mecca and previous religious practices, he was able to find believers in his message only in a small contingent of his own family. Then he came into contact with men from Yathrib [Medina], Arabs who had moreover heard of the Jews’ promise of the Messiah. He brought these men together and converted them to Islam. Through very clever maneuvering, he was able to reconcile the two opposing Arab tribes, the Aws and the Khazraj, so that he had already created a political base for himself when on September 20, 622, he left Mecca for Medina, where he took up residence. Here he encountered the Jewish problem for the first time. He believed in the victorious power of good in the world, he was firmly convinced that the religion of the one and only God, with its easy, practical, reasonable, basic laws for human life, was nothing other than the original religion. He wanted to take humankind out of the current turmoil and lead it toward the original, clear vision of God. But since he had to deal with people who had been influenced by both Christianity and Judaism, he said that it was the religion in which Abraham (Ibrahim) had already believed, and which Christ and Moses had proclaimed, only each time it had been distorted by human beings. He said that this had been revealed anew to him by God. He wanted to make the path easy to follow for both Christians and Jews; thus at first he allowed his followers to pray facing toward Jerusalem. He repeatedly emphasized that he only wanted to purify the existing religions, to establish the restored, newly revealed faith. At the same time he was a skilled statesman. When the Arab tribes were unified, the Jews became a minority in Medina. Muhammad provided them with a kind of protectorate agreement: They were to retain their administration and their forms of worship, help the faithful defend the city, not ally themselves with Muhammad’s opponents, and contribute to the faithful’s wars. [5] The Jews could have been satisfied with this. But they began a general hate campaign against Islam, which proclaimed a pure conception of God and rejected the worldwide reign of Jehovah promised to the Jews. The Jews took pleasure in driving Muhammad into a corner with their mockery and underhanded questions, using the indecent and crafty methods of Talmudic dialectics in order to destroy the faith he proclaimed. They engaged in both open and secret subversive activities against him. Muhammad lost patience and complained: “Those to whom we gave the scripture rejoice in what is revealed unto thee. And of the clans there are who deny some of it” (Qur’an 13:36). Then he changed the direction of prayer toward Mecca, canceled fasting on days of atonement that coincided with the Jewish holiday of the same name and replaced it by the Ramadan fast, and to the shofar, the horn of the Jewish synagogue, opposed the muezzin’s call to prayer. When the people of Mecca attacked him and were defeated in the victorious Battle of Badr, at which the triumphant cry “There is no God but God!” rang out for the first time, the Jews showed their deep hostility to Islam. The Jew Ibn al Ashraf wrote a lament for the fallen Meccans and explained that he preferred the Arabs’ old idols to Muhammad’s religion. In an infamous satirical poem the Jew Abu Afak called upon the Arabs of Medina to drive Muhammad away. It had become very clear that the Jews were fighting to keep the Arabian peoples from being united through Islam. Then the Prophet struck back:

Lo! the worst of beasts in Allah’s sight are the ungrateful who will not believe; Those of them with whom thou madest a treaty, and then at every opportunity they break their treaty, and they keep not duty (to Allah). If thou comest on them in the wear, deal with them so as to strike fear in those who are behind them, that haply they may remember. And if thou fearest treachery from any folk, then throw back to them (their treaty) fairly. Lo! Allah loveth not the treacherous. (Qur’an 8:55–58).

When the Jewish tribe Banu Qaynuqa indecently assaulted an Islamic woman, he caused its neighborhood to be besieged and forced it to surrender. Only the support of the influential Abdullah ibn Ubayy saved the Jews from being punished. The Prophet granted them their lives and only forced them to leave the city, but on his deathbed he still said to Abdullah, “O,Abdullah, did I not warn you against your love for the Jews? But you would not listen to me.” However, the other Jewish tribes were no better. A Jewish versifier who wrote hate poems, Ka’b ibn Ashraf, was killed by a Muslim because he publicly abused Muhammad. The Banu Nadir tribe, with whom a new agreement had been concluded, immediately used the Muslims’ lack of success at the Battle of Uhud to renew its hostility. From that time, his Eminence the Great Mufti of Jerusalem, Haj Emin El-Husseini, reports (in Muhammad Sabri’s outstanding work “Islam, Judentum, und Bolschewismus”) the following authenticated tradition:

While Muhammad was engaged in friendly discussion with one group of Jews, another group was preparing an attack on his life. They persuaded a man that he should hurl a heavy block of stone at Muhammad’s head. Muhammad would have been lost had God not granted him a warning. An inner voice told him that he should leave the place, and thus the treacherous Jews were unable to carry out their plan. Muhammad sent one of his prosecutors to the Jews and to tell them that they had to leave the city within ten days. They had, he said, broken the agreement that they had concluded with him, since they had tried to kill him. Every Jew found to be still in the city after ten days would be put to death.

As soon as he had repelled the Meccans’ attack, Muhammad immediately moved against them and forced them to emigrate. Despite their strong fortifications, the Jews had to leave. In the fifty-ninth sura Muhammad recalls this event: “All that is in the heavens and all that is in the earth glorifieth Allah, and he is the Mighty, the Wise./He it is who hath caused those of the People of the Scripture who disbelieved to go forth from their homes unto the first exile. Ye deemed not that they would go forth, while they deemed that their strongholds would protect them from Allah. But Allah reached them from a place whereof they wrecked not, and cast terror in their hearts so that they ruined their houses with their own hands and the hands of the believers. . . . On the likeness of those (who suffered) a short time before them, they taste the ill effects of their conduct, and theirs is painful punishment” (Qur’an 59:1–2, 15). But even the last Jewish tribe, the Banu Quyraza, broke its word and agreement. When a large army of Muhammad’s enemies approached, they contacted the chieftain of the exiled Banu Nadir, the Jew Choniben Akhtab, and asked him to hand the city over to them. However, through an extremely clever ploy—he had a deep ditch dug that hindered the enemy’s cavalry’s attack—Muhammad was able to force the besieging army to withdraw. Then he acted against the Banu Qurayza, surrounded their neighborhood and forced them to surrender. The Jews probably thought that they too would just be forced to emigrate, but Muhammad entrusted the decision regarding their fate to the sheikh of the Aws tribe, who had been wounded by them, and he demanded that the Jews be executed. This was the only mass execution that the lenient Muhammad ever allowed to take place, and it was entirely permissible according to the law of war, because the Jews had committed treason by bearing arms as allies of the enemy. The Banu Qurayza tribe was therefore annihilated, but remnants of it fled to Khaybar.

Muhammad besieged this city. He forced it to surrender in 628. An old Islamic legend reports that after the very lenient terms of the city’s capitulation were agreed upon, the Jewess Zainab invited Muhammad to dinner. She set before him spicy roast meat. Muhammad‘s weapons bearer, Beshr-ibn al Baraa, rashly ate a piece of it, but Muhammad did not swallow his first bite because it seemed to him to have a strangely bad taste, and he immediately said that the meat had been poisoned. The weapons bearer subsequently died of poisoning. However, Muhammad is supposed to have been ailing ever after.

It is little known that the Jews still scornfully boast that they poisoned Muhammad. Dubnow [6] (3: 403) writes with unconcealed joy:

A courageous Jewess was found who tried to take revenge on the enemy of her people for all the sufferings inflicted on the Jews. The young Zainab, the wife of a hero who fell at Khaybar, prepared his favorite meal for Muhammad, roast mutton, and set it before him. However, she had previously poisoned the meat, so that one of the men dining with the Prophet who had eaten of the roast died. However, Muhammad spit the poisoned morsel out and thus escaped certain death. When he asked Zainab why she had done this, she said: “You have inflicted unspeakable sufferings on my people, and now I thought: if you are only an ordinary conqueror, then by poisoning you I will give my people peace; but if you are a prophet, then God will warn you of my intention, and you will remain unharmed.” Muhammad immediately decided that she would die. For a long time afterward he felt the effects of the poison and on his deathbed believed that even his mortal illness should be attributed to this poisoning.

Thus still today the Jews rejoice in this crime! Even in Medina they sought again to divide the local Arab tribes and to turn them away from Islam. They sang again the tribes’ old battle and camp songs from the time when the tribes were fighting each other, and Muhammad had to travel to Medina himself and put things in order again. In accord with his plan, while he was in his thirties Muhammad fought the Jews, drove them out of Taima and Wadi-el-Kura or at most allowed them to remain in certain places if they paid a poll tax. The Qur’an is full of warnings about the Jews, who are bluntly called “Satans.” [7] Muhammad also observed how many people were constantly being turned away again from right knowledge. “And when they fall in with those who believe, they say: ‘We believe; but when they go apart to their devils they declare: Lo! we are with you; verily we did but mock’” (Qur’an 2:14). Ibn Huraira even communicates to us the following assertion of the great man of God: “Judgment Day will come only when the Muslims have inflicted an annihilating defeat on the Jews, when every stone and every tree behind which a Jew has hidden says to believers: ‘Behind me stands a Jew, smite him.’” [8] On his deathbed Muhammad is supposed to have said: “There must not be two religions in Arabia.” [9] One of his successors, the caliph ‘Umar, resolutely drove the Jews out of Arabia. They were subjected to a very restrictive and oppressive special regulation that completely crippled Jewish activities. All reporters of the time when the Islamic lands still completely obeyed their own laws agree that the Jews were particularly despised. On the other hand, the Jews hated Islam to the depths of their hearts. We may note here that Jewish agitation played a not insignificant role in launching the Crusades, since the “refutation” of Islam written by the baptized Jew Petrus Alfonsus was literally the single literary source of agitation [10] for the First Crusade of 1096–1099. The wicked distortion of Muhammad’s teaching and the criticism of his personality hatched by this Jew were taken over in ecclesiastical writings against Islam and are found in the monks Petrus Reverendus and Gualterus de Sens, in Guibert de Nogent-sous-Coucy, in Bishop Hildebert of Le Mans, and in other, mostly French writers who through a planned distortion of Islam that was nonetheless always based on the poisonous work of the Jew Petrus Alfonsus, unleashed the crusading fever in Europe.

Muhammad’s opposition to the Jews undoubtedly had an effect—Oriental Jewry was completely paralyzed by Islam. Its back was broken. Oriental Jewry has played almost no role in Judaism’s massive rise to power over the last two centuries. Scorned, the Jews vegetated in the dirty alleys of the Mellah, and were subject to a special regulation that did not allow them to profiteer, as they did in Europe, or even to receive stolen goods, but instead kept them fearful and under pressure. Had the rest of the world adopted a similar method, today we would have no Jewish question—and here we must absolutely note that there were also Islamic rulers, among them especially the Spanish caliphs of the House of Mu’awiya, who did not adhere to Islam’s traditional hostility to Jews—to their own disadvantage. However, as a religion Islam has performed the immortal service of preventing the Jews from carrying out their threatened conquest of Arabia and of defeating the dreadful doctrine of Jehovah through a pure faith that opened the way to higher culture for many peoples and gave them an education and humane training, so that still today a Muslim who takes his religion seriously is one of the most worthy phenomena in this world in turmoil.

NOTES

[1] “Dubnow, SimonMarkovich.” Encyclopædia Britannica, 2007, <http://www.britannica.com/biography/Simon-Markovich-Dubnow> Simon-Markovich–Dubnow. Simon Markovich Dubnow (1860–1941) was a Russian Jewish historian born in what is now Belarus. Dubnow is credited with introducing a sociological emphasis into the study of Jewish history, particularly that of eastern Europe. He was one of the initial scholars to subject Hasidism to systematic and unbiased study based upon laboriously collected source materials from both the Hasidim and their sundry opponents. Dubnow’s historical magnum opus was the monumental Istoriia evreiskogo naroda na Vostovka (History of the Jews), which was translated into several languages. According to the Encyclopaedia Britannica entry, “The work is notable for its scholarship, impartiality, and cognizance of social and economic currents in Jewish history. According to Dubnow, the Jews not only are a religious community but also possess the distinctive characteristics of a cultural nationality and as such create their own forms of autonomous social and cultural life. He viewed the history of the Jews as a succession of large autonomous communities, or centers.” As a cultural nationalist Dubnow rejected Jewish assimilation but at the same time believed that political Zionism was messianic and unrealistic. He left Russia in 1922 because of his hatred for Bolshevism and settled in Berlin. In 1933 he fled Germany because of the anti-Jewish policies of the Nazi government, seeking refuge in Riga, Latvia. Dubnow was murdered by the Nazis during the deportation of most of Riga’s Jewish population to extermination camps.

A contemporary English translation from the Russian by Moshe Spiegel (which includes volumes 3 and 4 of the German edition cited by von Leers), History of the Jews—From the Roman Empire to the Early Medieval Period (New York, 1968), states, on pp. 312–13,

Thus the elementary idea of monotheism matured in the soul of this semi-Bedouin, and was transformed into a flaming passion that impelled him toward savage, barbaric holy wars. The knowledge of God did not harmonize in Muhammad’s mind with the higher ethical conscience, which adds such charm to the ethical monotheism of the biblical prophets, and even to the one-sided evangelical teaching (“not of this world”). The biography of “Allah’s Messenger” and the Qur’an itself are replete with examples of what a teacher of religion must not say or do. The semibarbarian hero frequently peeps out of the mask of the clairvoyant prophet. The ecstasy of the clairvoyant is stigmatized by the brutal passion of the Bedouin, who kills his enemy and forthwith takes the latter’s wife or daughter into his harem. These features of Muhammad’s character manifested themselves particularly in his relations with the Arabian Jews.

[2] Von Leers adopts uncritically the pious, apologetic Muslim narrative of Muhammad’s career perhaps auguring his later conversion to Islam. His very favorable disposition toward Islam on the one hand, and inveterate Jew hatred on the other, causes von Leers to take great umbrage at Dubnow’s negative characterization of the Muslim prophet. For a balanced early twentieth-century perspective on Muhammad, which eschews apologetics, it is useful to compare the assessment of the great scholar of Islam’s origins (and devout Christian), David S. Margoliouth (1858–1940). Margoliouth’s biography (Muhammad and the Rise of Islam [London, 1905; reprinted, New Delhi, 1985], preface, vi–vii) recognized Muhammad as “a great man, who solved a political problem of appalling difficulty—the construction of a state and empire out of the Arab tribes.” Dr. Margoliouth recounted this accomplishment without “apology,” or “indictment.” Summarizing faithfully (in “Muhammad,” Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics [1908–1927], 8: 878) the full picture of Muhammad that emerges in Ibn Ishaq’s biography, Margoliouth also observes:

In order to gain his ends he recoils from no expedient, and he approves of similar unscrupulousness on the part of his adherents, when exercised in his interest. He profits to the utmost from the chivalry of the Meccans, but rarely requites it with the like. He organizes assassinations and wholesale massacres. His career as tyrant of Medina is that of a robber chief, whose political economy consists in securing and dividing plunder. . . He is himself an unbridled libertine and encourages the same passion in his followers. For whatever he does he is prepared to plead the express authorization of the deity. It is, however, impossible to find any doctrine which he is not prepared to abandon in order to secure a political end. . . This is a disagreeable picture for the founder of a religion, and it cannot be pleaded that it is a picture drawn by an enemy.

Thus in accord with what has been described at great length earlier (i.e., in my The Legacy of Islamic Antisemitism, “Antisemitism in the Hadith and Early Muslim Biographies of Muhammad,” pp. 63–91), notwithstanding von Leers’s recapitulation of the standard Muslim apologetic characterization of the actual contents of the hadith and sira, in particular Ibn Ishaq’s biography of Muhammad, Dubnow offers this accurate assessment (p. 317, from the Siegel translation History of the Jews—From the Roman Empire to the Early Medieval Period):

After Muhammad had defeated the pagans of Mecca at the battle of Badr (624), he intensified his campaign against the Jews. He had already begun to propagate his religion by means of the “sword of Allah” and he resolved to apply this also toward the recalcitrant “possessors of the Scriptures,” who refused to sanctify Islam with their authority. Since the behavior of the Jews remained belligerent after the victory of the Muslims, Muhammad desired vengeance upon them. Ka’ab Ibn Ashraf, the Jewish poet, had composed an elegy to the memory of the heroes of Mecca—the Qurayrshites who fell in battle at Badr. Asma the poetess, also of Jewish descent, composed a satire about the false messiah, for which she paid with her life. In the circle of his associates (ansars) Muhammad expressed a wish “to be rid of that woman,” and on the following night a fanatical Muslim entered her bedroom and killed her while she suckled her infant. In the same manner perished the venerated Jewish elder, Abu Afak, who in a letter to the inhabitants of Medina reproached them for heeding the alien Muhammad. Some time later, Ibn Ashraf met the same fate. Before long, the vindictive prophet passed on from individual acts of revenge to mass murder.

And Richard Bell (The Origin of Islam in its Christian Environment [London, 1926], pp. 134–35, 151, 159 ff.) summarized Muhammad’s final interactions with the Christians of northern Arabia, which were comparable to his campaigns to subjugate the Jews. He noted that “Muhammad complains (Qur’an 2:113–114) that neither Jews nor Christians will be satisfied with him until he follows their milla or type of religion. It was just as impossible for him to make concessions. . . Thus the relationship with the Christians ended as that with the Jews ended—in war.” Bell’s analyses, based upon the sacred Muslim texts and authoritative Qur’anic commentaries, conclude:

[B]efore the end of his life Muhammad was in conflict with Christian populations in the north of Arabia, and even within the confines of the Roman [Byzantine] Empire. What would have happened if he had lived we do not know. But probably the policy which Abu Bakr [the first caliph, who “succeeded” Muhammad] carried on was the policy of Muhammad himself. There could have been no real compromise. He regarded himself as vicegerent of God upon earth. The true religion could only be Islam as he laid it down, and acceptance of it meant acceptance of his divinely inspired authority. . . The Hijra and the execution of the Divine vengeance upon the unbelievers of Mecca had given the immediate occasion for the organization of such a warlike community. The victory of Badr confirmed it. This is what it had grown to, a menace to whatever came in its way. Muhammad could bide his time, but he was not the man to depart from a project which had once taken hold of his mind as involved in his prophetic mission and authority. He might look with favor upon much in Christianity, but unless Christians were prepared to accept his dictation as to what the true religion was, conflict was inevitable, and there could have been no real peace while he lived.

[3] W. Montgomery Watt, “Al Ansar,” Encyclopedia of Islam.

[4] Müller, (Friedrich)August, 1848–1892.Müller who was successively a professor at Konigsberg and Halle, is best known for his writings on Hebrew grammar (1878), and the work cited by von Leers, Der Islam im Morgenund Abendland (Berlin, 1885).

[5] Von Leers does not refer to serious scholarship available to him on this so-called Constitution of Medina, i.e., the German scholar Julius Wellhausen’s (1844-1918) Muhammads Gemeindeordnung von Medina (published in 1889) and Mohammed en de Joden te Medina (published in 1908) by the Dutch scholar Jan Arent Wensinck (1882–1939). [See notes 292 and 294, from my The Legacy of Islamic Antisemitism.]

I doubt that there was indeed a written agreement of which both parties had a copy. The Jews never referred to their document. . . In any case, there cannot have been a general agreement with the Jews, but only special arrangements with individual clans, for the Jews were no political unit, rather each of their clans formed a confederation with the neighboring Arab clan . . . the constitution as transmitted by Ibn Ishaq . . . did not represent an agreement with the Jews. . . . [Islamic] Traditionhas a simple explanation why Muhammad’s relation with the Jews was so little affected by the agreement: Every hostile act of Muhammad was precipitated by the Jews and justified by planned or accomplished treachery, even though they had no intention openly to break the agreement. . . . We, however, will find that it was Muhammad who committed the perfidy. He gladly used every chance to punish the Jews, and contrived to create reasons if there were none. (Wellhausen)

The constitution was no treaty concluded between muhajirun ansar, and the Jews. It was an edict defining the relation of the three parties; above them was Allah, i.e., Muhammad. It was evidence of his great authority that, after a short stay in Medina, he, the stranger, could lay down the law for all segments of the population. In religious matters the break with the Jews was irreconcilable. Muhammad did not express his annoyance over this. For the time being, he needed the Jews and included them in the ummah. His first plan failed; he had come to Medina hoping the town would soon be a religious unity as a theocratic monarchy under his leadership. If the Jews would have recognized him, this hope might have been realized. . . But the Jews showed no such inclination. What to do? They could not be attacked openly because Muhammad’s position was still insufficiently established. All he could do was to use them in his plans, or in any case, neutralize them. (Wensinck)

And Moshe Gil’s contemporary assessment from 1974 [see The Legacy of Islamic Antisemitism, note 295] concurs with the previous judgments of Wellhausen and Wensinck:

The document is better understood as an act of preparation for war, and not as its result. Through his alliance with the Arab tribes of Medina the Prophet gained enough strength to achieve a gradual anti-Jewish policy, despite the reluctance of his Medinese allies, who had formerly been those of the Jews. . . . It is therefore an obvious alibi that Muslim sources have developed a tradition about a treaty between Muhammad and the Jews, be it this document or a lost one, as presumed by some modern scholars. . . The document therefore, was not a covenant with the Jews. On the contrary, it was a formal statement of intent to disengage the Arab clans of Medina from the Jewish neighbors they had been allied with up to that time.

[6] Von Leers omits Dubnow’s accurate characterization (from the Siegel translation History of the Jews, p. 321) of the events which just transpired right before Muhammad’s poisoning by the Khaybar Jewess Zainab, in the paragraph immediately prior to the one he quotes:

Having occupied the city [i.e., Khaybar], the victors took to plundering. Muhammad ordered the Jews to hand over all their personal property. In order to force him to reveal the hideout of the treasures, Kinana, the Jewish leader, was at first tortured, and then killed. This execution was carried out to gratify Muhammad, who became infatuated with Safiyya, the beautiful wife of the Jewish military leader. After the execution of her husband, Muhammad took her into his harem. This time the leader of the Muslims did not slay all the vanquished. He permitted the Jews to remain in Khaybar and obligated them to till their plantations, and to give half their crop to the Muslim rulers. The defeated inhabitants of the neighboring Jewish settlements, Fadak, and Wadi-el-Kura, were subject to the same harsh taxes. Even the community of the remote Taima had to accept the same conditions. (628)

[7] i.e., the Jews being associated with Satan, and consigned to hell (see Qur’an 4:60, 4:55, 58:14–19, and 98:6).

[8] Sahih Muslim, bk. 41, no. 6985; Sahih Bukhari, vol. 4, bk. 52, no. 177.

[9] Sahih Muslim, bk. 10, no. 3763; Sahih Bukhari, vol. 3, bk. 39, no. 531.

[10] Petrus Alfonsus, born Moses Sephardi at Huesca, Aragon, in 1062, was a physician to King Alfonso VI of Castile, who died in 1110 at the age of forty-eight. He apostatized from Judaism and embraced Christianity at age forty-four, being baptized at Huesca on St. Peter’s Day, June 29, 1106. In honor of the saint and of his royal patron and godfather, he took the name of Petrus Alfonsus (Alfonso’s Peter). Despite von Leers’s unsupported statement that Petrus Alfonsus, “was literally the single literary source of agitation for the first Crusade of 1096–1099,” this bizarre claim ignores the fact that Alfonsus, like all the apostates from Judaism of his time, sought to show his zeal for the new faith by attacking first and foremost Judaism, and defending the truths of the Christian faith. Alfonsus composed a series of twelve dialogues against the Jews, the supposed disputants being Mose and Pedro (= Moses Sephardi and Petrus Alfonsi, i.e., himself before and after conversion). According to the rabbi and scholar George Alexander Kohut (1874–1933), [Jewish Encyclopedia.com, “Alfonsi, Petrus”], “the work is . . . little known today; and . . . fully merits the oblivion into which it has fallen.”