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Harun Yahya's Dark Arts

One-on-one with the Turkish creationist who uses bad science and bizarre art to spread his vision of a troubled world.

by [NATHAN SCHNEIDER](#) • Posted December 10, 2008 02:32 PM

Having written about American creationism in the past, I received an email several months ago inviting me to interview Harun Yahya in Istanbul. Harun Yahya is a pen name for Adnan Oktar, the leader of a small but well-financed religious community that's based there. After years of refusing to grant interviews, Oktar has begun welcoming Western journalists to meet with him. The BBC, *Le Monde*, *Der Spiegel*, and many others have taken him up on his offer. In mid-October, I made the journey.



Adnan Oktar (aka Harun Yahya), left, with the author, right, and a translator. Image courtesy of the author.

To many scientists, Oktar and his books are a running joke. His 17-inch tall, 850-page book called *The Atlas of Creation*, which began appearing in mailboxes of scientists across Europe and the United States two years ago, aims to debunk Darwinian evolution with brilliant color, sensational photo-collages, and Qur'anic exegesis. It presents hundreds of fossils, pictured alongside modern flora and fauna, as evidence that all species were created separately by God millions of years ago and have undergone no modification at all. The *Atlas* goes on to blame Darwinist theories for a whole roster of worldly ills, including fascism, terrorism, and even the Columbine shooting.

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ScienceBlogger PZ Myers recently commented on the apparent compromising of a news site that published an unfavorable article on Harun Yahya.
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Adnan Oktar pairs out-of-context quotes with Photoshopped images to support many of his arguments against evolution. (Click to see entire page.) Image from *The Atlas of Creation* courtesy of harunyahya.com.

The *Atlas's* claims about genetics, zoology, and paleontology are full of error. Like many creationists, Yahya mistakes ongoing debates about the mechanics of evolution as evidence that the theory as a whole is in crisis. He grossly exaggerates the age of fossils of modern animals, labeling a snow leopard skull as 80 million years old, while the oldest remains known to scientists are far more recent. One blogger even discovered that some of

the creatures pictured in the *Atlas* are photos of realistic fishing lures, with

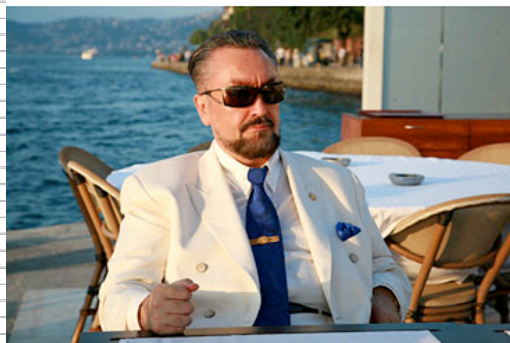
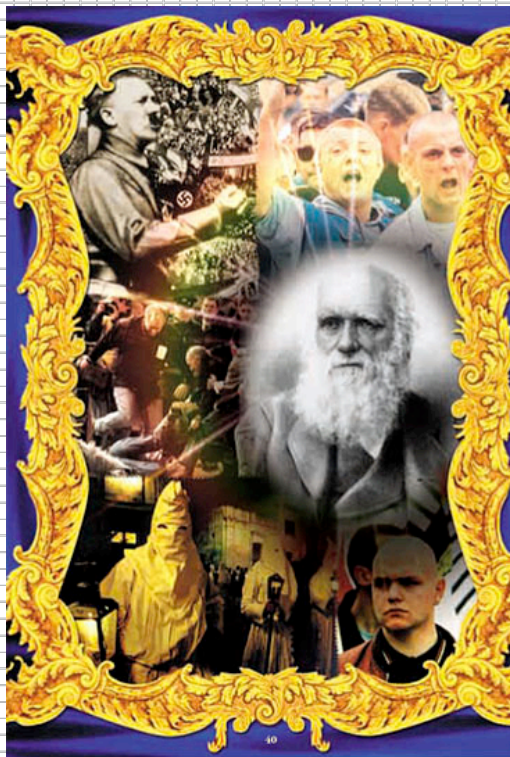


sedan, Calikoglu was talking on an iPhone as ambient electronic music played quietly on the stereo. We drove through the city and over the enormous suspension bridge that spans the Bosphorus to Istanbul's Asian side. Our destination was an elegant house behind a gate on a quiet street, owned by another Oktar "friend."

When we arrived, lights and cameras were already set up to record the interview for the Harun Yahya [websites](#). I was asked to take off my shoes at the doorstep. Oktar, who arrived a few minutes after us, was the only one in the room wearing shoes. They were black leather, worn with black slacks and a blazer over a black Versace t-shirt. His presence was impressive, and he didn't linger for small talk, either before or after the interview.

Harun Yahya's books are just as polished as he is. They often come printed in full color on glossy paper, full of photographs and graphics. In one of his several books condemning violence, *Only Love Can Defeat Terrorism*, an ornamental gold border frames every page. The text is punctuated by Photoshop collages, including one of children frolicking in a grassy garden amidst Roman temples and another of dolphins jumping from a pool in the floor of a baroque palace.

Oktar oversees the design of all Harun Yahya products, assisted by 20 to 30 aides. According to Calikoglu, it is Oktar himself who insists on the extravagant and expensive look. "In the initial stages we were unable to understand the necessity of it," Calikoglu told me, but they were convinced when the approach caught on. Global Publishing, which



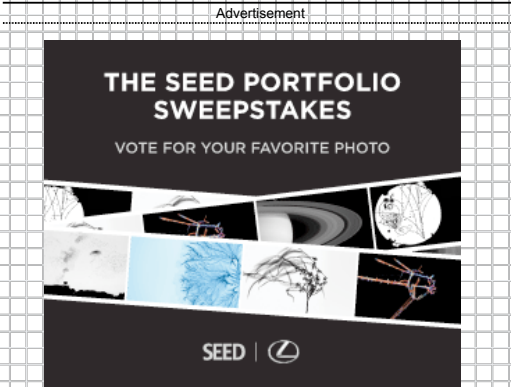
A collage connecting Darwin to Hitler from Harun Yahya's *The Atlas of Creation*.

top: Adnan Oktar, bottom. Images courtesy harunyahya.com

produces and distributes Harun Yahya media, claims to churn out 18 million books per year, produces documentary films based on them, and maintains dozens of websites. According to Hakan Korkmaz, director of sales in Turkey for Global Publishing, over a million Harun Yahya books have been sold in the country in the last four years. And Korkmaz's office, located in a building on the northwest end of Istanbul, houses a call center with a staff of 30.

In Islamic bookstores from Istanbul to Chicago, I've seen rows of Harun Yahya books prominently on display. Booksellers tell me that they are popular among customers, and it's no wonder. Yaha books are relatively inexpensive — perhaps sold below production cost — and their colorful, textured covers outshine all the other pious volumes on the shelves. At a store in Turkey, a boy who had just bought some Yahya books told me that he didn't read them himself, but he planned to resell them for a higher price.

Although Oktar rhapsodizes for pages about the intricate complexity that science reveals in the atom or the eye, he is not a scientist. He studied at Istanbul's Mimar Sinan University of Fine Arts in the late 1970s. According to Calikoglu, Oktar bases his writings about evolution on a file of notes and clippings he started accumulating as a



student. "The main aim of science itself is to help art," Oktar told me. It is "a tool which we use to make our world more beautiful every day." This combination of vivid piety with superficial science draws on a tradition of Turkish religious literature that dates to Bediüzzaman Said Nursi in the early 20th century. For both Nursi and Oktar, science can be wielded like a paintbrush, revealing the divine orchestration everywhere in nature. And Darwinism represents a failure to see the world as a work of art created by an Artist.

Judging the *Atlas* on its scientific content alone misses the point. Its power, for those who aren't scientifically literate, lies in its vision of redemption. Oktar speaks from a country torn by political upheaval and from a Muslim world struggling to regain its religion and culture after colonial domination. He also speaks to a wider world bombarded by technological innovations and endless cycles of violence. His books, which combine beatific imagery with an attack on the supposed source of all our troubles, offer a glimpse of the world redeemed. Refuting evolution is a means to that end.

"In ten years time, Jesus Christ will possibly come to this earth," Oktar proclaimed to me. By then, he continued, "all of these bloody ideologies and nonsensical ways of thinking about creation will be eradicated."

Since the *Atlas of Creation* began circulating, Oktar claims that great swaths of people have renounced evolutionist ideology and embraced his message. "Darwinism has been annihilated and demolished across the whole world," declares one Yahya press release. Soon after this article becomes available, a reference to it will likely appear on HarunYahyaImpact.com, a Global Publishing site that tracks mentions of Yahya in the international press, along with favorable quotations taken out of context. Simply by writing about Oktar, I reinforce his vision. Anything critical I've written here will be overlooked as the

decrepit volleys of Darwinism in retreat.

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