

The Colonized Semites and the Infectious Disease: Theorizing and Narrativizing Anti-Semitism in the Levant, 1870–1914

Orit Bashkin

Over the past three years, we have witnessed a new alliance between Jews and Muslims in an attempt to struggle against white supremacy and white nationalism. Since 1948, and especially since 1967, the Arab Israeli conflict has set apart Jews and Muslims over the question of Palestine and has likewise divided the American Left itself.¹ After the 2016 elections, this state of affairs changed dramatically. From Senator Chuck Schumer, who tearfully protested President Donald Trump’s travel ban on residents of several Muslim countries, to the rabbi of New York City’s Congregation Beit Simchat Torah, Sharon Kleinbaum, whose synagogue’s LGBTQ members appeared in Muslim Friday prayers in a show of solidarity, Jews evoked their own experiences as migrants and victims of racist persecution to protest American discrimination of Muslims.

Muslim activists and community leaders were likewise quick to show their support to Jewish victims of white nationalism, especially after the attacks on synagogues in Pittsburg and San Diego, comparing different victims of colonialism, anti-Semitism, and racism. This new Muslim-Jewish alliance was particularly noticeable during the 2019–2020 campaign of Senator Bernie Sanders for the leadership of the Democratic Party, which attracted Muslim and Arab voters across the nation. A son of Palestinian refugees, Amer Zahr wrote in *Haaretz* that he, and other Arab Americans,

Unless otherwise noted, all translations are my own

1. See Michael R. Fischbach, *The Movement and the Middle East How the Arab-Israeli Conflict Divided the American Left* (Stanford, Calif., 2020).

backed Sanders, “not in spite of his Jewishness, but *because* of it.” Sanders, Zahr explained, “has often spoke of how his family’s history of suffering in the Holocaust has informed his empathy for that of others, including . . . the unjust plight of Palestinians living under Israeli occupation.” His campaign, which emphasized solidarity and empathy, resonated “mantras we’ve been hearing from our Arab moms and dads for years. . . . He says these things because he is Jewish, and we hear them natively because we are Arabs.”²

Our celebration of the ways in which Muslims, Arabs, and Jews evoke and compare among their past and present traumas should not obscure the fact that these efforts have a long history and a unique intellectual genealogy. The understanding that racism—in its anti-Arab, anti-Muslim, and anti-Jewish forms—originated and grew in the same European (and later American) cesspool was prevalent in intellectual circles long before the presidency of Trump and the global rise of racist populism. This article, consequently, studies the ways in which Arab intellectuals, Christians, and Muslims alike, wrote about modern anti-Semitism and protested the persecution of Jews in Eastern and Western Europe during the four decades preceding the demise of the Ottoman Empire. I argue that these very pro-Jewish positions served to encourage a discussion about colonial hypocrisy and to promote ecumenical frameworks and equality before the law. The intellectuals I write about were leading public figures in the late Ottoman period; their books and journals were widely read and reached the educated publics in Beirut, Damascus, Cairo, Jerusalem, and Baghdad. Their pro-Jewish positions, however, did not receive much attention until very recently, because the Arab-Israeli conflict led to the identification of Judaism with Zionism amongst national elites in both Israel and the Arab Middle East. Nowadays, however, scholars are revisiting the major works of nineteenth-century Arab thinkers in order uncover Arab ideas about citizenship and pluralism. In my view, these pro-Jewish articulations are not only germane to Arab intellectual history but also to our contemporary understandings of criticism and race.

2. Amer Zahr, “We Arab Americans and Muslims Are Voting for Bernie. Because He’s Jewish,” *Haaretz*, 23 Feb. 2020, www.haaretz.com/jewish/.premium-we-arab-americans-and-muslims-are-voting-for-bernie-because-he-s-jewish-1.8560210

ORIT BASHKIN is a professor of modern Middle Eastern history in the Department of Near Eastern Languages and Civilizations at the University of Chicago. She is also a coeditor of *Critical Inquiry*.

A Saidian Moment

Over the past two decades, social scientists and literary critics have studied how the nineteenth century European “Jewish Question” had transformed into the contemporary “Muslim Question.” These scholars have underlined the common roots of, and structural similarities between, anti-Semitism and anti-Muslim racism. Both related to anti-immigration discourses that identified the migrant, Muslim and/or Jewish, as a peril to the West. Both emphasized the religious difference of Jews and Muslims from the so-called normative (read as white and Christian) society. The majority seemed to be troubled by the visual representations of the Other’s religion in public life, like the garb of Orthodox Jewish men and women, the hijab, as Joan Scott has shown, and the construction of synagogues and mosques in urban spaces; all seemed to have disrupted national and cultural traditions and values.³ In anti-Semitic and anti-Muslim discourses, Jews and Muslims have been perceived as importers of dangerous ideologies (Jews were long believed to be communists and anarchists, on the one hand, and abusive capitalists, on the other; Muslims were and are depicted as radicalized jihadists and terrorists). Most crucially, the religiosity of both Jews and Muslims related to their utter inability to absorb Western values, based on the assumption that their loyalty was framed by a different set of beliefs (Halachic laws, Shari’a), which was always antithetical to some feature of the West: secularism, modernity, or Christianity.⁴ Anti-Muslim, anti-Arab, and anti-Jewish racism, moreover, came into being in a colonial context, which shaped modern practices and discourses. Hannah Arendt, most notably, demonstrated how the bureaucratic management of colonized subjects, which cemented the belief in ability of Europeans to control others, and, in tandem, the growth of expansionist movements based on the belief of the racial superiority of their nations within Europe itself birthed the totalitarian horrors of the first half of the twentieth century.⁵

3. See Joan W. Scott, “Symptomatic Politics: The Banning of Islamic Head Scarves in French Public Schools,” *French Politics, Culture and Society* 23 (Winter 2005): 106–27.

4. See Matti Bunzl, “Between Anti-Semitism and Islamophobia: Some Thoughts on the New Europe,” *American Ethnologist* 32 (Nov. 2005): 499–508; Andre Gingrich, “Anthropological Analyses of Islamophobia and Anti-Semitism in Europe,” *American Ethnologist* 32 (Nov. 2005): 513–15; Jonathan Boyarin, “Discerning the Ghosts and the Interest of the Living,” *American Ethnologist* 32 (Nov. 2005): 516–18; Scott, “The Vexed Relationship of Emancipation and Equality,” *History of the Present* 2 (Fall 2012): 148–68; and Stephen Sheehi, *Islamophobia: The Ideological Campaign against Muslims* (Atlanta, Ga., 2011). In 2013, *Ethnic and Racial Studies* published an issue that located the study of anti-Semitism and Islamophobia within the fields of race and racism and highlighted the necessity to explore the racialization of Jews and Muslims as related to each other; see “Racialization and Religion: Race, Culture and Difference in the Study of Antisemitism and Islamophobia,” a special issue of *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 36, no. 3 (2013).

5. See Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York, 1976).

Critics like Aamir Mufti, Kader Konuk, and in particular Edward Said have analyzed the manners in which Arabs and Muslims offered an alternative model to European anti-Semitism, by highlighting the fact that it was in the Middle East that Jewish writers like Erich Auerbach found refuge from Nazi Germany and where they theorized about Western culture. They further commented on the ways in which homelessness, statelessness, and diasporic existence could inspire victims of racial displacement and ethnic cleansing to engage in criticism based on shared conversations and struggles.⁶ Connecting Jews and Palestinians, Said pointed to the similarities between Palestinian history and that of the victims of European anti-Semitism. He articulated it most lucidly in his famous interview to *Haaretz* in which he claimed: “I do not appreciate going back to the origin, to the pure. I believe the major political and intellectual disasters were caused by reductive movements that tried to simplify and purify.” When the reporter noted that Said sounded very Jewish, Said replied:

Of course. I’m the last Jewish intellectual. . . . All your other Jewish intellectuals are now suburban squires. From Amos Oz to all these people here in America. So I’m the last one. The only true follower of Adorno. Let me put it this way: I’m a Jewish-Palestinian.⁷

Said’s lifelong battle as a Palestinian to undo the racist correlation between citizenship, on the one hand, and ethnicity and religion, on the other, made him attentive to questions relating to minorities, memory, and inclusion.⁸ Said was not a nationalist; he emphasized the significance of defying national borders and categorizations. And, yet, he thought very deeply about the forms Palestinian nationhood and statehood might look like, within Pan-Arab and Mediterranean frameworks, by taking their inspiration from Arabic and Islamic multireligious empires, in which Jewish culture was part of the fabric of a larger Arab society. What is astonishing about the present historical moment, however, is that the comparisons between Jewish and Muslim sufferings, and the imagining of political frameworks in which Jews

6. See Aamir R. Mufti, “Auerbach in Istanbul: Edward Said, Secular Criticism, and the Question of Minority Culture,” *Critical Inquiry* 25 (Autumn 1998): 95–125; Kader Konuk, *East West Mimesis: Auerbach in Turkey* (Stanford, Calif., 2010); Moustafa Bayoumi and Sonia Dayan-Herzbrun, “Réconciliation sans contrainte: Said, Adorno et l’intellectuel autonome,” *Tumultes* 35 (Nov. 2010): 27–47; and Edward W. Said, *Representations of the Intellectual* (New York, 1994), pp. 47–95 and *Reflections on Exile and Other Essays* (Cambridge, Mass., 2000).

7. Said, “Edward Said Interviewed by Ari Shavit for *Ha’aretz*,” lists.h-net.org/cgi-bin/logbrowse.pl?trx=vx&list=h-radhist&month=0008&week=e&msg=nY%2B/t%2BkE9pOqjTxZIFSnsw&user=&pw=

8. See Mufti, “Auerbach in Istanbul,” and Gil Z. Hochberg, “Edward Said: ‘The Last Jewish Intellectual’: On Identity, Alterity, and the Politics of Memory,” *Social Text* 24 (Summer 2006): 47–65.

and Muslims can battle together the long colonial and racist heritage of the West, appear not only in learned explorations of the works of Auerbach or Adorno, or in radical leftist circles but rather on social media, in the mainstream press, and in electoral campaigns.

Contemporary theorizing of the intersectional history of anti-Semitism, colonialism, and racism, however, is still rooted in European and Eurocentric discourses, as the key theoreticians rely mostly on texts produced in the West and written in Western languages. The Middle East, in this framework, is seen as a domain influenced by racist ideologies and structures. Furthermore, Western scholars often pay heed to the voices of the colonized when they write in the languages of the metropole. Nonetheless, as Eve Troutt Powell, Max Weiss, Jens Hanssen, and Ziad Fahmy have illustrated, Arab thinkers had a lot to offer to debates about race, colony, and empire. Middle Easterners who lived in a colonized world felt the gap between the European language of enlightenment, liberalism, and modernity and their own experiences. Modern Arab thinkers spoke the imperial languages and knew well European thought and literature. Many resided in European capitals: they studied, conducted diplomatic relations, or lived as exiled activists and thinkers in Europe. They conversed with their audiences at home, in Arabic, Persian, Hebrew, and Ottoman Turkish and, at the same time, studied and engaged in intellectual debates with European thinkers such as Ernest Renan and Émile Durkheim.⁹

As Gayatri Spivak reminds us, regional studies have much to offer here in terms of theory. Often regarded as the bastion of dated philological studies, at best, and Orientalism, at worse, regional studies today, in part because of their interdisciplinary nature, and in part because of the training they provide their students in non-Western languages, can help us rethink literary, philosophical, and theoretical canons.¹⁰ They provide us with new works and new forms of expression and, politically, with a critique of the West by individuals who were both in and outside of European spheres of influence.

Arab Modernity and the Jewish Question

The period between the mid-nineteenth and early twentieth centuries is often described as the period of the Arab revival or, in Arabic, the *Nahda*;

9. See Eve M. Troutt Powell, *A Different Shade of Colonialism: Egypt, Great Britain, and the Mastery of the Sudan* (Berkeley, 2003); Jens Hanssen and Max Weiss, "Language, Mind, Freedom and Time: The Modern Arab Intellectual Tradition in Four Words," in *Arabic Thought beyond the Liberal Age: Towards an Intellectual History of the Nahda*, ed. Hanssen and Weiss (Cambridge, 2016), pp. 1–39; and Ziad Fahmy, "Francophone Egyptian Nationalists, Anti-British Discourse, and European Public Opinion 1885–1910: The Case of Mustafa Kamil and Ya'qub Sannu'," *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 28, no. 1 (2008): 170–83.

10. See Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *Death of a Discipline* (New York, 2003).

it refers to an era when Arab thinkers and writers showed great interest in the Arabic language, Islamic history, and Arab culture and consumed European literary and philosophical works. The emergence of multiple Arabic public spheres in Cairo, Beirut, and Damascus enabled the circulation of innovative ideas regarding Islam, politics, nationhood, and gender.¹¹ Recent insightful works on modern Arab literature and culture examined the many ways in which the *Nahda* created a new language about time, space, and modernity itself and how its translation projects, novels, and print cultures generated new conversations about ethnicity, language, and race.¹²

Scholars like Sha'ul Sehayyek, Lital Levy, and Jonathan Gribetz have convincingly demonstrated that Arab intellectuals during the *Nahda* were interested in Jewish culture and history as well as in the history of various peoples categorized as Semites. Leading Arab journals reported on pogroms and anti-Jewish activities, especially in Russia and the Balkans, and Arab intellectuals supported Jewish emancipation in Europe.¹³ As David Nirenberg has shown, the writing about Jews is not always connected to, and is often detached from, the actual presence of Jews in one particular location. Often such a conversation about Jews was the point of entry for the expression of views about the European, Western, and Christian self, as it studies and depicts the Jewish Other; these conversations, then, are often a way of expressing various ideological, theological, and political goals.¹⁴ Nirenberg's insights can elucidate the imagery of Jews during the *Nahda*, where the Jew has often served as a metaphor in inter-Islamic and inter-Arab discussions to describe the Muslim and Arab self.

More specifically, the writing about Jews and anti-Semitism was connected to several conversations. The signification of the concept of the Arab—racially,

11. See Paul Starkey "Nahda," in *Encyclopedia of Arab Literature*, 2 vols. (New York, 1998), 2:573–74; Albert Hourani, *Arabic Thought in the Liberal Age, 1798–1939* (Cambridge, 2014); and H. A. R. Gibb, *Arabic Literature: An Introduction* (1926; New York, 1962), pp. 158–62.

12. See *Arabic Thought beyond the Liberal Age*; Sheehi, *Foundations of Modern Arab Identity* (Gainesville, Fla., 2004); Tarek El-Ariss, *Trials of Arab Modernity: Literary Affects and the New Political* (New York, 2013); Samah Selim, *Popular Fiction, Translation and the Nahda in Egypt* (Cham, 2019); Ilham Khuri-Makdisi, *The Eastern Mediterranean and the Making of Global Radicalism, 1860–1914* (Berkeley, 2010); Marilyn Booth, *May Her Likes Be Multiplied: Biography and Gender Politics in Egypt* (Berkeley, 2001); Shaden M. Tageldin, *Disarming Words: Empire and the Seductions of Translation in Egypt* (Oakland, Calif., 2011); and Peter Hill, *Utopia and Civilisation in the Arab Nahda* (New York, 2020).

13. See Sha'ul Sehayyek, "Demut ha-yehudi be-re'i ha-'itonut ha-'aravit ben ha-shanim 1858–1908" (PhD diss., Hebrew University, Jerusalem, 1991); Lital Levy, "Jewish Writers in the Arab East: Literature, History, and the Politics of Enlightenment, 1863–1914," (PhD diss., University of California, Berkeley, 2007) and "Historicizing the Concept of Arab Jews in the *Mashriq*," *Jewish Quarterly Review* 98 (Fall 2008): 452–69; and Jonathan Marc Gribetz, *Defining Neighbors: Religion, Race, and the Early Zionist-Arab Encounter* (Princeton, N.J., 2014).

14. See David Nirenberg, *Anti-Judaism: The Western Tradition* (New York, 2013).

historically, and intellectually—was one. Since the Arabs were categorized as Semites, the meanings ascribed to the term were of utmost importance to writers. The second discourse engaged with scientific inquiries: as anti-Semitism seemed to have reflected a remnant from the medieval past, Arab writers wondered why this phenomenon prevailed in modern and scientific Europe. The third was Pan-Islamic and anti-colonial conversation, aiming to expose European doublespeak, as intellectuals showed that Europe, whose intellectuals and politicians critiqued the persecution of Christians in the Ottoman Empire, was treating its minorities in a horrific fashion. Another discourse related to the rights of ethnic, religious, and linguistic minorities in multiethnic empires and in modern states, especially during 1876–1914, a time when Arab thinkers demanded linguistic and cultural rights within the Ottoman Empire (which controlled the Arab Middle East since 1516). Arab Christians in particular played a role in framing these discussions. Finally, the need to curb the powers of tyrannical rulers was yet another concern of writers. The interest in constitutionalism in Arab intellectual circles since the mid-nineteenth century, and the shift to an electoral political structure, which followed an Ottoman constitutional revolution in 1908, inspired discourses about tyranny and freedom.¹⁵ In all these discourses the image of a Jew as the Semite, as the perpetual minority member, and as the person oppressed by intolerant tyrants, played a very important role.

The discussions about Jews took shape in what Ussama Makdisi has termed the Levantine “ecumenical frame.”¹⁶ This frame signified a culture of coexistence developed, experienced, and sustained by Muslims, Christians of various denominations, and Jews in the late Ottoman period. This ecumenical frame meant that, while individuals were highly cognizant of their religious affiliations and the unique histories and cultures of their religious communities, they nonetheless searched for ways of overcoming religious differences and condemned religious fanaticism and extremism. Ecumenicalism, Makdisi explained, was an Arab response to attempts of both the colonial powers and the Ottoman state to represent themselves as the defenders of various Christians and Jews, arguing that Arab communities can develop, and have developed, their own cultures of coexistence within the Ottoman Empire. The *Nahda* thinkers—men who often perceived their coreligionists and compatriots as unenlightened and ignorant—

15. On how the ideology of Ottoman civic equality, known as Ottomanism, attracted various Jews, Muslims, and Christians, see Michelle U. Campos, *Ottoman Brothers: Muslims, Christians, and Jews in Early Twentieth-Century Palestine* (Stanford, Calif., 2011).

16. See Ussama Makdisi, *Age of Coexistence: The Ecumenical Frame and the Making of the Modern Arab World* (Oakland, Calif., 2019).

thus valorized the roles of teachers, writers, and local politicians, such as themselves, in curing society from the ills of sectarianism and leading it towards progress and civilization. They told their communities—in newspaper articles, novels, history books, and encyclopedias—useful tales from the past and the present about existence and coexistence, religious tolerance and violent persecution, in the hope that their readers would fathom the ecumenical messages of these political allegories.

The Middle Eastern Jewish community was an important element in this ecumenical framework. The Jews were a relatively small minority in the Arab Middle East; most of the religious minorities in the Ottoman Empire were Christians or non-Sunni Muslims. And yet, a number of Iraqi, Palestinian, Egyptian, and Levantine Jewish intellectuals played a role in the *Nahda* as writers and publishers. Furthermore, Middle Eastern Jews knew a great deal about anti-Semitism in the modern world because many attended French Jewish schools in the Middle East and because many read journals produced in the German, Austro-Hungarian, and Russian empires, which were identified with the Jewish Enlightenment movement, the *Haskala*. As my and Levy's studies have shown, Jewish readers and writers from the Middle East regularly published in these journals. Jewish newspapers published by Middle Eastern Jews, like the ones published by Baghdadi Jews in India, also reported about Jewish communities in Europe and the European colonies.¹⁷ Jewish editors and writers thus felt that in both the Middle East and Europe, minorities struggled for emancipation and freedom before the law and compared these struggles as related to the question of anti-Semitism.

Finally, Arab intellectuals were familiar with European Jews who held very positive opinions about Muslims and shared their anticolonial agenda. Simon Wolf, a Jew who served as the American consul general in Egypt wrote favorably about anticolonial movements in Egypt. Both Jews and Muslims responded to Ernest Renan's essays on the negative features of Semitic cultures from 1884. Jewish professors taught at institutions of higher education in both Cairo and Istanbul. Ignaz Goldziher, one of the most important scholars of Islamic theology and law at the time, and an Orthodox Hungarian Jew, met anticolonial Muslim activists and intellectuals in the Middle East and spoke at Islamic al-Azhar University in Cairo against the epidemic of European domination. These actions led to the belief that Jews

17. See Orit Bashkin, "Why Did Baghdadi Jews Stop Writing to Their Brethren in Mainz?—Some Comments about the Reading Practices of Iraqi Jews in the Nineteenth Century," *Journal of Semitic Studies*, supplement, 15 (2004): 95–111, and Levy, "Historicizing the Concept of Arab Jews in the *Mashriq*."

were on the side of the Muslims in their major battle against colonialism and oppression.¹⁸

An Attack on Reason

The *Nahda* writers were interested in science, and the theories of positivism and materialism were discussed in Arabic journals, whose authors provided partial translations of works exploring scientific method and the philosophy of science. Arab intellectuals engaged with the writings of several Western thinkers—from Eduard Buchner to Auguste Comte to Charles Darwin—and commented on the meanings of recent scientific discoveries. Not all Arab intellectuals called for the blind adoption of scientific principles as the only measure through which Arab and Muslim society should achieve progress, but the need to combine faith and science, the discussions about the nature of scientific education in the Arab world, and the celebration of medieval Islam as inspiring scientific inquiry appeared in the print media.

As Marwa El Shakry has shown, American Protestant missionaries, especially in Lebanon, played a major role in promoting scientific theories, which were eagerly adopted by Arab students of medicine and by Arab translators. In fact, the Arab students were much more interested in Darwin than their American teachers.¹⁹ At the same time, Catholic missionaries brought with them another kind of Western knowledge, namely anti-Semitic writings and conspiracy theories, which were translated by Arab Christians into Arabic. Two works discussing blood libel appeared in Beirut in 1870 and in Cairo in 1890. The most dangerous title appeared in Cairo during 1893; it was written by a correspondent of *The Levant Herald*, Najib al-Hajj, and titled *In Clandestine Corners or Uncovering the Secrets of the Jews (Fi'l-zawaya al-khabaya aw kashf asrar al-yahud)*. The text was an adaptation of Georges Corneilhan's *Juifs et opportunistes: Le judaïsme en Egypte et en Syrie* (1889), which portrayed Jews as a threat to global civilization. The solution to the "Jewish Problem" was to exile all Jews from France. The Arabic book also introduced a short story titled "The Tale of the Revengeful Jew," an abridged adaptation of *The Merchant of Venice*.²⁰

18. See Bashkin, "My Sister Esther: Reflections on Judaism, Ottomanism and Empire in the Works of Farah Antun," in *The Long 1890s in Egypt: Colonial Quiescence, Subterranean Resistance*, ed. Marilyn Booth and Anthony Gorman (Edinburgh, 2014), pp. 315–20, and David H. Panitz and Esther L. Panitz "Simon Wolf as United States Consul to Egypt," *Publications of the Jewish Historical Society* 47 (Dec. 1957): 76–100.

19. See Marwa Elshakry, *Reading Darwin in Arabic, 1860–1950* (Chicago, 2013).

20. See Mohammed Bakir Alwan, "Jews in Arabic Literature, 1830–1914," *Al-'Arabiyya* 11, no. 1/2 (1978): 50–52, and Sylvia G. Haim, "Arabic Antisemitic Literature: Some Preliminary Notes," *Jewish Social Studies* 17 (Oct. 1955): 307–12.

Arab intellectuals immediately condemned these publications, arguing that such a position stood in contrast to human reason and science and reflected a dated Christian thought. When the Ottoman governor heard of the circulation of the 1870 anti-Semitic text, he ordered the confiscation of the remaining copies, and a highly regarded publication by Salim al-Bustani, the translator of the Greek classics into Arabic, printed a denunciation of modern blood libels. Al-Hajj's claims about the dangerous nature of the Jews were refuted not only by Salim al-Bustani but also by the major publishers of the important scientific and literary journals, Ya'qub Sarruf and Faris Nimr. As historian Sylvia Haim explained, "From all evidence, Najib al-Hājī's publication does not seem to have made any impression in the Arab countries."²¹

A similar condemnation of Russian anti-Semitism and European blood libels, this time in Russia, emerged during the trial of Menahem Mendel Beilis, a Ukrainian Jewish man accused of murdering a boy for ritual purposes, who was put on trial in Kiev between 25 September and 28 October 1913 and was found not guilty. Emanuel Beška studied the reception of the affair in *Filastin* (Palestine), a Palestinian national newspaper edited by two Arab Christian intellectuals: 'Issa al-'Issa and Yusuf al-'Issa. Beška convincingly argued that *Filastin's* converge reflected the position that this matter negated the scientific spirit of the *Nahda*. Moreover, its editors persistently argued that this modern blood libel was an abomination and a disgrace to the twentieth century.²² While the paper was staunchly anti-Zionist, its editors felt that "God does not allow us to sacrifice the truth on the altar of purpose or to pass in silence over the rebuttal of falsehood and slander even if it concerns our adversary."²³ *Filastin* also ran an interview with Beilis, in which the reporter informed the latter that "progressive Palestinian youth, whichever religious creed they belong to, were touched by what happened to you and did not believe what you had been accused of."²⁴

Denouncing European anti-Semitism in these contexts often functioned as a venue for critiquing European colonialism. Anticolonial Arab intellectuals underlined the fact that Europe mistreated both Muslims and Jews. Muslim intellectuals resented the persecution of Muslims who resided in Tsarist Russia as well as in portions of the Balkans and Eastern Europe, which were gaining independence from Ottoman rule. It was critical for

21. Haim, "Arabic Antisemitic Literature: Some Preliminary Notes," p. 307. See also Alwan, "Jews in Arabic Literature, 1830–1914," pp. 50–52.

22. See Emanuel Beška, "The Disgrace of the Twentieth Century': The Beilis Affair in *Filastin* Newspaper," *Jerusalem Quarterly* 66 (Summer 2016): 99–109.

23. Quoted in *ibid.*, p. 102.

24. Quoted in *ibid.*, p. 105.

these thinkers to construct an image of a just Ottoman and Muslim policy in pointed contrast to that of Russia, the independent Balkan states, and the colonizing empires in Europe that persecuted their minorities. Many Muslim writers consequently celebrated the harmony between Muslims, Jews, and Christians under medieval Islamic rule as a counterimage to European xenophobia, zealotry, and chauvinism. Moreover, these thinkers, unlike many more secularized ones, were highly suspicious of the idea of ethnicity as a basis for nationalism and decried those who sanctified the new race theories coming from Europe, arguing that ethics and faith rather than ethnicity were the factors that distinguished one human being from the other. They often commented on the ills of secular nationalism, which consistently proved itself unable to emancipate and provide human dignity to non-Christian subjects and emphasized the political need to achieve Muslim unity in order to combat colonialism and imperialism. Their views often circulated in the transnational and transregional journal *al-Manar* (The Lighthouse), which was established by the Syrian intellectual Rashid Rida.²⁵

These Muslim thinkers showed great interest in the the prosecution, indictment, and life imprisonment of the French Jewish Captain Alfred Dreyfus, who was accused of delivering military secrets to the Germans. Because of its global significance, major newspapers in the Middle East, in Arabic, Ottoman Turkish, and Hebrew reported on the Dreyfus affair.²⁶ Two books (one in Arabic and other in Ottoman Turkish) detailed the campaigns to prove Dreyfus's innocence and Zola's role in it. The public knew well about the Dreyfusards and anti-Dreyfusards from newspaper accounts and reports. Unlike in North Africa, the absence of actual French settler colonizers with their anti-Semitic networks resulted in an overwhelming support of the Jewish officer. With the noted exception of the missionary Catholic journal *al-Bashir*, most leading Arab writers—Christian, Muslim, and Jewish alike—came to Dreyfus's defense.²⁷

Rida published his views on the Dreyfus affair, the Zola affair, and “the humiliation, persecution and discrimination” of French Jews in *al-Manar*. This persecution, according to Rida, was not the outcome of religious

25. See Hourani, *Arabic Thought in the Liberal Age*, pp. 222–45, and Malcolm H. Kerr, *Islamic Reform: The Political and Legal Theories of Muḥammad ‘Abduh and Rashīd Riḍā* (Berkeley, 1966).

26. On the global dimensions of the Dreyfus affair, see Michael Burns, “‘A Himalaya of Texts’: Dreyfus in Review,” *Historical Reflections / Réflexions Historiques* 31 (Fall 2005): 323–34.

27. See Bashkin, “Three Syrian Intellectuals, a French Jewish Officer, and the Question of Late Ottoman Pluralism,” *International Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 50 (Nov. 2018): 765–68; ‘Ali Reşat and İsmail Hakki, *Dreyfus Meselesi ve Esbab-ı Hafiyesi* (Istanbul, 1899); Shaul Sehayek, “The Dreyfus Affair in the Arab Press,” *Michael: On the History of the Jews in the Diaspora* 14 (1997): 184–214 (in Hebrew); and Özgür Türesay, “L’Affaire Dreyfus vue par les intellectuels ottomans,” *Turcica* 47 (2016): 235–56.

extremism, as France boasted of its secularism. Rather, the affair was the unfortunate outcome of ethnic extremism. This dangerous form of chauvinism was enhanced by an anti-Jewish smear campaign in the French press. If an affair like this had happened in the East, Rida commented cynically, the cries of Europeans would have reached the high heavens. Most importantly, Rida wanted to caution his Muslim and Arab readers not to follow Europe in this inhumane path. He summed up his position, arguing that:

True civilization and true justice necessitate complete freedom between all human beings for the general good. . . . For this reason, you do not see any reasonable man in the French nation satisfied with the persecution the Jews faced, in old and in new times. This was named by some of the great philosophers as a contagious sickness, and they hope it disappears as civilization and civility progress.²⁸

Rida, nonetheless, bemoaned the fact that this “persecution” now contaminated the Egyptian press as well. He ended his article airing his hopes that Eastern society, already plagued by internal divisions, would not play a role in fomenting further divisions.

For Rida, anti-Semitism was a disease inflicted on the Arabs by those whose own society was split between civilized men and anti-Semites. Rida also pointed out that anti-Semitism marked the Jew as an ethnic Other. His critique of French secularism, in which ethnic nationalism gained supremacy, was well placed within his general view disparaging of nationality based on ethnicity alone. Later in his career, he would publish hurtful comments about Jews, especially as the Zionist-Palestinian conflict escalated in Ottoman and mandatory Palestine. But in this moment he was moved by the fear that what had happened in France would have devastating outcomes in Egypt as well.

The same line of thought was continued in the journal *Thamarat al-Funun* (Fruits of the Art) published by Muslim reformer ‘Abd al-Qadir al-Qabbani. The journal informed its readers about the trial, Zola’s defense of Dreyfus, and the shocking demonstrations against Zola all over French cities, where chants “death to Zola,” and “death to the Jews” were repeatedly heard. The paper’s opening lines left no doubt as to the failure of republican values in contemporary France:

We would have never thought that the Dreyfus affair would achieve the degree of notoriety and significance that it has today, exposing

28. Rashid Rida, “Al-Yahud fi Faransa wa Misr [The Jews in France and Egypt]” *al-Manar*, 1, no. 4 (1898): 52–55. On Rida and the Jewish question, see Haim, “Arabic Antisemitic Literature: Some Preliminary Notes,” pp. 307–12, and Gribetz, *Defining Neighbors*, pp. 149–82.

the French people's religious fanaticism despite their claim that they have erased all traces of it through a unifying sense of citizenship. The French are in fact drowning the very bigotry of which they unjustly accuse others.²⁹

When Qabbani wrote that the French were unjustly blaming "others" for bigotry, he meant Arabs and Muslims. Unlike Rida, however, for Qabbani the failure of modern French politics was attributed not to its secular republican nature but rather to its inability to commit to just ideals of citizenship and in its placement of politics to the unthinking mobs.

Jewish and Christian writers also expressed these positions, arguing that France had returned to the days of the Spanish inquisition; that its republican project has failed; and that Zola should be hailed as a moral compass in a country that claims to bring a civilizing mission to the world while returning to days of barbarism. From the Christian anticolonial writer Farah Antun, who wrote about the trial in his paper in Alexandria, to the major daily Egyptian newspaper *al-Ahram*, which covered the trial, to Jewish intellectual Esther Moyal, who authored a book dedicated to the life of Emile Zola, to physician and intellectual Shibly Shumayl, many writers wondered what this trial said about the crisis of Europe and the abandonment of republican values in favor of grotesque violence. The actors in the Arab public sphere, then, studied the trial as a failed project of citizenship and discussed the Affair's ramifications for Arabs and Muslims who live, or might live, under European colonial rule.³⁰

As in the analyses of blood libels, the Arab writings about the affair conveyed the notion that anti-Semitism was unmodern and unscientific and represented uncivilized intolerance. Contrasting with the Russian case studies, nonetheless, France was the country that gave the world republican ideas. Jews and Christians attended French schools in the Middle East and in Europe. Paris hosted many Arab intellectuals, and those in the Middle East commented on French works in theory and criticism. And France was also the state that opened the wave of European colonization of the Middle East, with Napoleon's occupation of Egypt in 1798 and the gradual colonization of North Africa during the nineteenth century. The Dreyfus affair pulled

29. "On the Dreyfus Affair," in "*Thamarat al-Funun* (1898)," trans. El-Ariss, in *The Arab Renaissance: A Bilingual Anthology of the Nahda*, ed. El-Ariss (New York, 2018), p. 154.

30. See Sehayek, "The Dreyfus Affair in the Arab Press"; Bashkin, "Three Syrian Intellectuals"; Yaron Harel, "In the Wake of the Dreyfus Affair: An Alexandrian Jewish Intellectual Reconsiders His Admiration for France," *Revue des Études Juives* 166, nos. 3–4 (2007): 473–91; and Levy, "Partitioned Pasts: Arab Jewish Intellectuals and the Case of Esther Azharī Moyal (1873–1948)," in *The Making of the Arab Intellectual: Empire, Public Sphere and The Colonial Coordinates of Selfhood*, ed. Dyala Hamzah (New York, 2012), pp. 128–63.

together different sentiments and anxieties about France's future and, with it, that of the Middle East.

The Arabic print media paid significant heed to the behavior of the French mobs during the trial. As Samah Selim has shown, Egyptian intellectuals turned to Gustave Le Bon's *Les Lois psychologiques de l'évolution des peuples* (The Psychological Laws of the Evolution of Peoples, 1894) in order to explore modes of social reform, modernization, and control of mob behavior.³¹ The coverage of demonstrations in France, in which the chants "death to the Jews" were heard, conveyed Arab anxieties that mob behavior could easily lead to communal violence. During times of sectarian violence in the Middle East, Ottoman officials bitterly complained about the inability of the uneducated Arab mobs to contain their instinctive violence.³² The Dreyfus affair globalized ideas concerning the mob's fanaticism, shifted them away from the context of the Middle East, and reminded readers how easily people turn on their neighbors and compatriots.

Positions similar to those of the Arab thinkers were echoed half a century later, in Hannah Arendt's powerful essay on the Dreyfus affair. Written in 1942, Arendt, like Arab intellectuals, both contextualized and decontextualized the affair. To her, it was both a particular moment in French history and a key moment in the long history of anti-Semitism; Adolf Hitler's propaganda in France, she remarked, spoke in a language long familiar and never quite forgotten. Like Arab intellectuals, Arendt was interested in the transformation from politics into mob behavior, and she depicted how the cry "Death to the Jews" swept across French cities in anti-Semitic riots and rallies, as the mob became the agent of nationalism. To her, and to Nahdawi thinkers, violence, persecution of minorities, and rioting were the antithesis of proper politics. Furthermore, Arendt, like the Muslim reformers, underscored the connection between anti-Semitism and colonial order. She explained that French xenophobia resulted in part from the Anglophobia in the ranks of the French colonial administration following the British occupation of Egypt. Arendt also noted that pogroms against Jews in Algeria were carried out not, as it was claimed, by "backward Arabs" but by "thoroughly sophisticated officers of the French colonial administration" and by the mayor of Algiers, Max Régis.³³

31. See Selim, "Languages of Civilization: Nation, Translation and the Politics of Race in Colonial Egypt," *The Translator* 15 (Jan. 2009): 139–56.

32. See Ussama Makdisi, "Ottoman Orientalism," *The American Historical Review* 107 (June 2002): 768–96.

33. Arendt, "From the Dreyfus Affair to France Today," *Jewish Social Studies* 4 (July 1942): 201. See also Michael R. Marrus, "Hannah Arendt and the Dreyfus Affair," *New German Critique* 66 (Autumn 1995): 147–63.

Arendt referred here to Régis, a French writer and politician who was at the forefront of the anti-Semitic campaign in Algeria in the 1890s and became the mayor of Algiers in 1898 for a brief period. Although he was removed quickly from his position, and eventually jailed, his anti-Semitic views were widespread in colonial Algeria during the late nineteenth century, a period that witnessed violent attacks against Jews during the 1880s and 1890s, especially in response to the Dreyfus affair: the riots in January 1898 led to the burning of Jewish shops and synagogues, several Jewish fatalities, and the pillaging of the Jewish quarter. Anti-Semitism appealed to wide groups of settlers, including the *Pied Noir*, Italian and Spanish settlers, and workers. The Algerian *Ligue Antijuive* organized anti-Jewish demonstrations and called for boycotting Jewish businesses and expelling them from Algeria.³⁴ While the effects of the Dreyfus affair on Algeria are beyond the scope of this article, it is important to note that Arendt and Arab writers connected European anti-Semitism to Western hypocrisy, particularly the tendency to blame Arabs for the sectarianism and the fanaticism that were fueled in Europe and then imported to the Middle East.³⁵

Fictional Tyrannies and Jewish Subjects

The failures and successes of Jewish emancipation in Europe mattered a great deal to Arab writers. During the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century, Arab thinkers contended that their language and cultural rights should be protected under Ottoman rule. The rights of ethnic, religious, and linguistic minorities in other multiethnic empires thus generated interests in Jewish emancipation. Moreover, the broader Arab and Muslim interests in constitutionalism since the mid-nineteenth century, the conversations in the public sphere about the ways in which the absolute power of leaders—especially, although not exclusively, the Ottoman Sultan—should be curbed by public participation and consultation, and the expansion of discourses about the ills of tyranny and the virtues of freedom informed the discussions of the manners in which Jews were perpetually persecuted as a minority in Europe in the past and in the present.

The Arabic discourses about and against anti-Semitism occurred in a Middle East where the memory of the massacre of hundreds of Christians in Ottoman Lebanon in 1860 (which spilled over to Damascus in 1861)

34. See Lizabeth Zack, "Who Fought the Algerian War? Political Identity and Conflict in French-Ruled Algeria," *International Journal of Politics, Culture, and Society* 16 (Fall 2002): 55–97.

35. For Ethan B. Katz's writing on how in Algeria both anti-Semitism and Islamophobia were defined by colonialism, which enabled the transformation of European racism to and from the Middle East, see Ethan B. Katz, "An Imperial Entanglement: Anti-Semitism, Islamophobia, and Colonialism," *The American Historical Review* 123 (Oct. 2018): 1190–209.

traumatized many. Similarly, the ongoing massacres of Armenians in the Ottoman Empire (especially in 1894–1896) were widely reported in the Arabic and global press. As a response, many Jewish and Christian intellectuals championed citizenship rights within the Ottoman Empire, which were not based on religion, as a solution to communal violence. While the Ottoman Empire adopted measures aimed at giving citizenship rights to Jews and Christians since the 1830s and the development of a civic loyalty to the Empire, the late Ottoman period indicated that attaining emancipation for all subjects in the Empire would be a long and complicated process. The critique of the mistreatment of the Jews outside the Ottoman Empire thus dovetailed with the Arab campaigns within the Ottoman realm. These discussions were more relevant to the Levant, as Egypt was colonized by Britain in 1882; but because many Arabs moved from the Levant to Egypt in the late nineteenth century, the conversation was transregional in nature.

Within this context, historical novels published in Egypt and Lebanon discussed the issues of minority rights extensively and critically. The genre not only formed among its readers similar notions of time and space but was also a useful a medium to explore political theory.³⁶ Arabic novels functioned both as national allegories projecting a political dimension onto narratives of private individuals, as Fredric Jameson had suggested, and as tools of glocalization, introducing global ideas (like constitutionalism, socialism, and race theories), while also exploring Arab and Muslim history and culture.³⁷ Written mostly by Arab Christians, these novels introduced veiled and unveiled discussions of minority rights.

Writer Jurji Zaydan—a Lebanese Christian historian, publisher, and journalist, through whose publications the *Nahda* ideas circulated—mastered this new genre. He authored twenty-two historical novels, which were instant bestsellers in Egypt and the Levant. An important theme that unites most of Zaydan’s novels is the idea that persecution of religious and ethnic minorities destroys societies and states. Esra Tasdelen has demonstrated that Zaydan promoted his ideas by constructing historical narratives about societies ruled by intolerant tyrants and the ethical forces that strove to overcome tyranny.³⁸ A key narrative in many of his novels involves a member of a minority community seeking to overthrow the current government

36. See Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities, Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (New York, 1991), pp. 33–36.

37. See Fredric Jameson, “Third-World Literature at the Era of Multinational Capitalism,” *Social Text* 15 (Autumn 1986): 65–88.

38. See Esra Tasdelen, “Literature as a Mirror of History: A Comparative Study Of The Historical Fiction of Ahmet Hikmet Müftüoğlu (1870–1927) and Jurji Zaydan (1861–1914),” (PhD diss., University of Chicago, 2014).

because of the oppression of his people. The novels also feature discourses about racial theories, Arabness and the relations among Arabs, Semites, Europeans, and black people.³⁹

Zaydan's *The Conquest of al-Andalus* (*Fath al-Andalus*, 1903) popularized these new ideas about politics.⁴⁰ The novel takes place during the Muslim conquest of Spain, as the novel's ethical Christian protagonists choose to side with the Muslims. One of the characters of the novel is a short, dark man with a prominent nose, Ya'qub, who refuses to shave his beard. Readers later discover that Ya'qub is a Jew and a member of a secret Jewish society. He sees himself, and his people, as oppressed and patiently enduring tyranny and religious oppression (see *F*, pp. 25–26, 38, 94–95). The Jews, readers learn, have all been exiled, killed, or forced to convert due to Christian persecution, and yet Jews like Ya'qub manage to keep their religion secret, hoping for a better day. As the plot unfolds, Ya'qub and his fellow Jews attempt to facilitate the Muslim conquest of Spain. Another Jewish character, Salman, contends that Jews should support the Arab Muslims because the Muslims provide Jews and Christians with security and protection. Salman comments that Jews and Christians are given religious freedom in exchange for a small tax, and “in addition, the Jews are ethnically closer [*aqrab nasaban*] to the Arabs because they came from a shared father, Abraham” (*F*, p. 169). The last lines of the novel are: “As for Tariq [Ziyad, the commander who led the Muslim conquest of Spain]—when he saw that the city of Toledo had been emptied of its inhabitants, he added to its inhabitants the Jews and left friends of his with them. He then continued with the conquest, as history books have told us” (*F*, p. 198). The Jews who were once ousted and exiled by tyrannical Christian rulers are now called to return and populate the Spanish state under Islam. A new, just era had begun.

A less generous reading of the novel might emphasize the treacherous nature of Jews, who place their own interests above those of their kingdom. A more generous reading, however, might see the Jews as symbols of a people fighting oppression. The Jews, in their quest for freedom and equality, assume the same role that other oppressed groups, such as Shiite Muslims or women oppressed by the harem system, occupy in other novels written by Zaydan. A Christian, he nonetheless constructed the image of Muslim rulers as just men who respected the Jewish faith, while Christianity offered nothing but oppression and forced conversation. *The Conquest of al-Andalus*, moreover, shifts between the past and the present. When Zaydan was writing

39. See Tomas Philipp, *Ġurġī Zaidān: His Life and Thought* (Beirut, 1979).

40. See Jurji Zaydan, *Fath al-Andalus, riwaya ta'rikhiyya ghuramiyya* (Cairo, 1920); hereafter abbreviated *F*.

the novel, radical Arabs seeking independence from Ottoman rule, constitutional movements whose members sought to limit the power of the Ottoman Sultan, Free Masons, and many other dissidents formed secret groups and secret societies. The Jews of Spain, in establishing a secret society against tyrannical state, thus joined a political practice that was current in the period and that was associated not with sedition but rather with constitutionalism, radicalism, and reform.

The plot also evokes other historical narratives outside of the time of the novel. The fact that readers knew that Muslim Spain grew to be a multicultural heaven of sorts, a theme widely discussed in Zaydan's journal *al-Hilal* (The Crescent), indicated to them that Salman and Ya'qub made the right decision. The contemporary Arab press likewise discussed the demise of Muslim Spain, and thus readers were familiar with the fate of Muslims and Jews once Spain became Christian again. The Reconquista (the Christian conquest of Spain) was a long process, which began in the eleventh century with the fall of Toledo. Zaydan, importantly, ends his novel with the return of the Jews to Toledo and their settlement in the new Muslim polity. Most crucially, readers knew that once the Reconquista was completed, Jews and Muslims faced forced conversion, explosion, and death in the new Christian State.

The temporal dimensions of the novel's plot, contrasted against the early modern history of the Spanish Empire and the modern present, created new associations between Jews and Muslims. Ella Shohat—writing about 1492 as a period that marked the modern campaign against Muslims and Jews, heretics and witches, and the people of the Americas—proposes that these shared historical brutalities make possible a radical imagining of new solidarities.⁴¹ Zaydan had achieved this goal through his exploration of al-Andalus as well. Curiously, when Shohat and Mizrahi (Middle Eastern) Jews met illegally with Palestinian PLO activists and with writers and poets like Mahmoud Darwish for a series of discussions titled a “Judíos orientales y palestinos: Un diálogo para la paz árabe-israelí” (Jews of the Orient and Palestinians: A Dialogue for Arab-Israeli Peace), they met in the city of Toledo.⁴²

Zaydan's fellow Christian-Orthodox intellectual, Farah Antun, articulated similar ideas in Lebanon, Egypt, and the United States, three public spheres in which he was active and where he published literary and philosophical works. Based on modern and medieval sources, especially *La Vie de Jésus* (Life of Jesus, 1863) by Ernest Renan (whose translation into Arabic

41. See Ella Shohat, “Rethinking Jews and Muslims: Quincentennial Reflections,” *Middle East Report* 178 (Sept.–Oct. 1992): 25–29.

42. See Shohat, “A Voyage To Toledo: Twenty-Five Years After the ‘Jews of the Orient and the Palestinians’ Meeting,” *Jadaliyya*, 30 Sept. 2014, www.jadaliyya.com/Details/31283

was conducted by Antun), his historical novel, *The New Jerusalem* (*Urshalim al-Jadida*, 1904), takes place during the Arab conquest of Jerusalem. It focuses on Iliya, a devout Christian living in Jerusalem, who falls in love with Esther, a Jewish woman who comes to Jerusalem from Alexandria, sensing that a new political order is about to emerge with immense consequences for the Jewish community. Iliya saves Esther when a Christian mob discovers her religious identity. He is nonetheless forced to leave her and unites with her again on her deathbed, only after the Muslim armies capture Jerusalem.⁴³

The novel's depictions of the Byzantine state's ill-treatment of its Jewish subjects conveyed the perception that religious persecution is not motivated by questions of dogma or faith but rather by ignorance and the most debased human instincts. In contrast, the Arab Muslim state was represented in the novel, in idealized terms, as the guardian of a political order under which minorities are respected and tolerated. Antun's condemnation of persecution based on religious identity is fully articulated in the first pages of the novel, where he depicts the mob searching for Jews who dared entering the city of Bethlehem. Iliya hears people shouting "A Jew! A Jew" and rushes to the street where the incited masses are looking for Jewish victims. When Iliya tries to convince the mob of the futility of their search, he is accused of being a Jew himself: "In a blink of an eye a mass of people gathered around Iliya and grabbed his clothes, his arms and his neck. One of them hit his shoulders; another pushed his chest . . . and all shouting from the depths of their throats: we got him! We got him! A Jew! A Jew!"⁴⁴ Iliya was rescued only after a woman testified that she knew he was a Christian.

In the opening pages of the novel, Antun thus provides a close description of a mob mentality, which, as we have seen, was a much-discussed theme in the Arab public sphere during the Dreyfus affair. To Antun, the lynching mob is characterized by religious zealotry and hatred of Jews. The actions of these mobs, however, eventually led to the demise of the Byzantine Empire itself and to the rise of the just Islamic polity. In his journalistic essays, Antun championed socialist ideas about just distribution of property and brotherhood. He was troubled, very much like Zaydan, by the treatment of minorities in the Ottoman Empire and suggested, in his nonfictional writings, that the Ottoman imperial framework ought to

43. See Farah Antun, *Urshalim al-Jadida*, in *al-Mu'allafat al-riwa'iyyat* (Beirut, 1981); Bashkin, "My Sister Esther"; Donald Reid, *The Odyssey of Farah Antun: A Syrian Christian's Quest for Secularism* (Minneapolis, 1975); and Shimon Ballas, "La Nouvelle Jérusalem" ou la république utopique de Farah Antün, *Arabica* 32, no. 1 (1985): 1–24.

44. Antun, *Urshalim al-Jadida*, p. 61. See also Bashkin, "My Sister Esther."

ensure equality for their subjects; in *The New Jerusalem*, he projected these visions onto the medieval Muslim past.

Zaydan and Antun employed the genre of the historical novel to depict Jews as a religious group tormented by tyrannical rulers and violent mobs in Christian societies. Arab readers, living in the Ottoman Empire, were thus able to take pride in their Arabo-Islamic past (which was positioned in contrast to the decadent Christian kingdoms) and, at the same time, to consider new ideas about citizenship rights which were not dependent on religion and which were relevant to their Ottoman present. Moreover, if the Dreyfus affair represented Europe's present crisis, the novels demonstrated that this crisis had a long history. Zaydan and Antun held different political views. Zaydan was critical of Sultan Abdul Hamid II, who terrorized intellectuals, and was in power when horrific massacres against the Armenians took place; he resented the Sultan's authoritarian and Pan-Islamic politics and yearned for his demise. Antun, conversely, supported the Sultan's Pan-Islamism as a counter for colonialism and felt that Ottoman imperial citizens needed to cement bonds of brotherhood connecting them in their shared struggle for equality and social justice.⁴⁵ However, both believed that the religious and ethnic groups making up the Ottoman Empire should be given full linguistic, cultural, and constitutional rights; these beliefs were intertwined into their view of the Jewish-Islamic past. Furthermore, these views, which informed the writings of Arab thinkers when discussing blood libels and the Dreyfus affair, were now evoked in order to call for a better future for the Arab and Christian subjects in the Ottoman Empire and for the Jewish subjects of Europe.

A Semitic Universe

Racial discourses played a role within the *Nahda*, in particular in the contexts of debates regarding blackness and slavery, as Powell has demonstrated.⁴⁶ Ghenwa Hayek has further suggested that Lebanese migration to Africa and the creation of diasporic Arab communities there changed racial perceptions within Lebanon itself.⁴⁷ Christian and Muslim thinkers therefore attempted to position the Arabs on racial and civilizational scales, which were developed and discussed in Europe. The divisions of races between Semites and Aryans, and between black, yellow, and white races,

45. See Reid, *The Odyssey of Farah Antun*.

46. See Powell, *Tell This in My Memory: Stories of Enslavement from Egypt, Sudan, and the Ottoman Empire* (Stanford, Calif., 2012) and *A Different Shade of Colonialism*.

47. See Ghenwa Hayek, "Carrying Africa, Becoming Lebanese: Diasporic Middleness in Lebanese Fiction," in *Diaspora, Memory and Intimacy*, vol. 2 of *Diasporas and Cultures of Mobilities, "Race,"* ed. Sarah Barbour et al. (Montpellier, 2015), pp. 99–114.

based on European models, which seemingly were grounded in novel scientific, anthropological, and medical forms of knowledge, became a source of great concern to Arab writers.⁴⁸

These discourses were of particular importance to groups of intellectuals who championed the idea that the Arabic language, Arab history, and Arab culture were the markers that united the Arab peoples. These writers were very interested in Semitic cultures and Semitic linguistics, and, to deepen their understanding of their own cultural heritage, they sought to learn more about the Jews, ancient Israel, and the connections among Semitic cultures. Moreover, the Arabic print media of the time completely transformed the negativity associated with the Semites in the European racist discourses. In essays published on Semitic linguistics and ancient history in Arabic journals, the Semites—that is, the Arabs as well as many ancient nations of the Near East—came to represent an ethnic group whose formidable cultures formed the foundation for civilization, whose glorious leaders had ruled great empires like Assyria and Babylonia and whose spirituality had given rise to Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. These themes were introduced in prestigious journals, which popularized the term *The Semitic Nation* (*al-umma al-samiyya*) and published stories on Semitic languages, Semitic histories, and the various migrations of Semitic nations within the Near East.⁴⁹

As Semitism was celebrated as a cultural and civilization marker of the Arabs, anti-Semitism could not be contained. Shahin Makarius, a leading Arab journalist, took this discourse a step further, publishing a book on Jewish history in which he showed that both Jews and Arabs belonged to the same racial group. Jonathan Gribetz further clarified that Makarius's ideas about Arabs and Jews as Semites were intertwined with discourses about Darwinism, blackness, and whiteness. According to Gribetz, while in Europe such racial theories served mainly to divide Jews categorically from their neighbors, in the Arab world, the notion of a common Semitic race linked the Jews with their Arab neighbors.⁵⁰

Perhaps the most important champion of the Semitic racial discourses was Zaydan. Besides his work as a novelist, Zaydan popularized ethnic

48. See Bashkin, "The Arab Revival, Archaeology, and Ancient Middle Eastern History," in *Pioneers to the Past: American Archeologists in the Middle East, 1919–1920*, ed. Geoff Emberling (exhibition catalog, The Oriental Institute, Chicago, 12 Jan.–29 Aug. 2010), pp. 91–100, and Hourani, *Arabic Thought in the Liberal Age*, pp. 245–460.

49. See Bashkin, "The Arab Revival, Archaeology, and Ancient Middle Eastern History," pp. 91–101, and Levy, "Jewish Writers in the Arab East," pp. 107–13, 127–31.

50. See Gribetz, "'Their Blood is Eastern': Shahin Makaryus and *Fin deSiècle* Arab Pride in the Jewish 'Race,'" *Middle Eastern Studies* 49, no. 2 (2013): 143–61.

and racial taxonomies; he was interested, for example, in the first homeland of the Semites and reviewed the writings of specialists in Semitic philology. His anthropological work, *Tabaqat al-Umam* (“The Types of Nations”) gestured towards a medieval Spanish work written by Ibn Sa’id al-Andalusi, which had mentioned Jews as a nation committed to ideas of science and inquiry.⁵¹ In the book, Zaydan explored the histories and cultures of various ethnic groups like black people, Native Americans, Chinese, Aryans, and Semites (with each group divided into subgroups). While the book did not attribute moral features to either Semites or Aryans, Zaydan did mention a variety of Semitic peoples, including the Arabs, the Canaanites, the Israelites, the people of Judea, and the Moabites. These racial depictions influenced his novels as well, especially in the discussion of Jewish and black characters and of slaves in the Harem system.⁵²

Zaydan’s view of culture, history, and society, however, was not that of a purist or a racist. On the contrary, he believed that civilizations, cultures, religions, and ideas are the result of constant interactions and mutual exchange. Zaydan’s writings on Jewish history emphasize this multicultural viewpoint. In his *History of Islamic Civilization (Ta’rikh al-Tamaddun al-Islami)* Zaydan underscores the influence of Judaism on the formation of Arabo-Islamic culture in the Hijaz. The Jews of Pre-Islamic Arabia influenced early Muslim ritual and law, as did other nations like the Chaldeans and the Ethiopians.⁵³ Zaydan advanced the very same ideas in *al-Hilal*, which dedicated a long series of articles to the history of various religions (monotheistic and others).⁵⁴ At times, Zaydan connected the kingdoms of Judea and Israel to global civilization; the ancient Israelites, he wrote, mixed with other civilized nations, such as the Egyptians, the Phoenicians, and the Greeks. He similarly underlined the theme of cultural reciprocity in his discussions of the cultures of Jews in Muslim Spain where Jewish medicine, philosophy, grammar, and poetry flourished. The Jews, in his opinion, were

51. See Sa’id bin Ahmad bin Sa’id al-Andalusi, *Tabaqat al-umam* (Beirut, 1985).

52. See Zaydan, *Tabaqat al-umam aw al-salasil al-bashariyya* (Beirut, 1968). Jonathan Gribetz notes that among the scholars Zaydan integrates into his book was A. H. Keane, who argued that Jews constitute a race and not a religion. Following Keane, Zaydan depicted the physical features of Jews, such as a hooked nose and curly hair. He also opined that Jews in the Maghreb and Palestine were more beautiful because they kept their ancient features; see Gribetz, *Defining Neighbors*, pp. 142–49. On Zaydan’s historical novels and race, see Tasdelen, “Literature as a Mirror of History.”

53. See Zaydan, *Ta’rikh al-tamaddun al-islami*, 5 vols. (Cairo, 1922), 1:12–27, and Bashkin, “My Sister Esther.” Zaydan was interested in the Talmud and contributed to its Arabic translation; see Gribetz, “An Arabic-Zionist Talmud: Shimon Moyal’s *At-Talmud*,” *Jewish Social Studies* 17 (Fall 2010): 1–30, and Levy, “Jewish Writers in the Arab East,” pp. 110–11.

54. See Zaydan, “Aryan al-umam” in *Mu’allafat Jurji Zaydan al-Kamila*, 21 vols. (Beirut, 1981–1983), 19:48–49.

instrumental after 1492 in the transmission of Muslim and Greek civilizations to Europe.⁵⁵

Ideas about cultural reciprocity were also present in Zaydan's *History of Literatures of the Arabic Language (Ta'rikh Adab al-Lughah al-'Arabiyya)*, in which he proposed that Arabic was a sister language of Hebrew, Syriac, and Ethiopic (Gə'əz). He observed that many words in Arabic, especially those pertaining to religion, have come from Hebrew. Zaydan discussed pre-Islamic Jewish poets, especially al-Samaw'al ibn 'Adiya, a Jewish bard whose works are part of the Arabic literary pantheon, although Zaydan confessed that the stories about al-Samaw'al's excessive loyalty might have been mythical.⁵⁶ The interest in Judaism in all these publications serves to push forward the argument that cultures and religions were not pure but rather created through mutual symbiosis—and that all the peoples of the region contributed, in one way or another, to the creation of Islamic civilization (rather than the Islamic religion), with which many Arabs, of different faiths, could identify.

The interest in race and ethnicity impacted Muslims and Christian scholars who used the debates about Semitics and Semite cultures to explore the religious self. In this context, Muhibb al-Din al-Khatib—a Syrian Muslim reformer who was also very much committed to defending Arab culture within the Ottoman Empire and published in both the Levant and Egypt—helped popularize the Semitic Wave Theory (also known as the Winkler-Caetani theory), as Nimrod Horwitz has illustrated. According to the theory, Arabia was the first center of a thriving Semitic community whose members had to migrate because of climatic changes in Arabia to the Fertile Crescent.⁵⁷ Al-Khatib discussed the existence of a proto-Semitic language (*al-lughah al-samiyya al-ula*), and his book includes chapters on the speakers of each of its sublanguages, as well as words that appear in multiple Semitic languages, including Hebrew. Although many of the articulators of this racial debate were very hostile towards the movement of Islamic reform, al-Khatib tried to look at Arab, Semitic, and Jewish antiquities in order to commemorate the Arab contribution to world civilization and imagine a pre-Islamic proto-Arab antiquity. He did so by linking the Arabs to ancient empires and to the history of the Hebrews. Significantly, as an Islamic modernist, he tried to harmonize scientific theories relating to race and language with Biblical and Islamic sources.

55. See Zaydan, "Al-yahud wa'l ta'rikh," in *Mu'allafat Jurji Zaydan al-Kamila*, 19:124–40.

56. See Zaydan, *Ta'rikh Adab al-lughah al-'arabiyya*, 4 vols. (Cairo, 1936), 1:37–39, 144.

57. See Nimrod Hurvitz, "Muhibb ad-Din al-Khatib's Semitic Wave Theory and Pan-Arabism," *Middle Eastern Studies* 29 (Jan. 1993): 118–34.

The Semitic discourse, in its philological and racial terms, was of immense importance to Arab Christian thinkers. The interest in Hebrew and in translating the Bible into Arabic originated from debates within the Arab-Christian scholarly community, whose members worked as translators for Protestant and Catholic missionary projects producing Arabic bibles.⁵⁸ These translation projects created a generation of Arab Christian scholars, who were very much interested in Hebrew, Greek, and Aramaic. One notable Christian proponent of Semitic philology was Louis Cheikho, a Jesuit priest who taught Arabic at the Jesuit Saint Joseph College in Beirut. Cheikho founded *al-Mashriq*, which served as scientific and literary platform for thinking about Christian Arab identities in the modern era. *Al-Mashriq* is filled with items dealing with biblical archaeology and the history of Jews, written by Christian readers, including Cheikho himself. In fact, the journal often published lines from Hebrew sources in Hebrew orthography and provided transliterations and translations of Hebrew words. The journal functioned as a platform for Arab Hebraists; it reported about publications of ancient and medieval manuscripts in Hebrew and various dialects of Aramaic (a language spoken by some Jews and Christians at the time) and about manuscripts that authors felt should be published. All of these forms of modern knowledge, the editors suggested, could teach modern Eastern Christians about their faith and their history. Cheikho, moreover, firmly believed that archaeology and Semitic philology were useful venues for scientifically authenticating the stories of the Bible.⁵⁹

Oftentimes Cheikho privileged Semitic philology over questions of dogma. A case in point is an essay by Cheikho about the Hebrew word *Elohim*. The word appears in the plural form (ending with the Hebrew letters *yod* and *mem*), and Cheikho suggested different interpretations of the plural form. He drew attention to the fact that that the word, although in the plural, was often understood as a singular noun, by analyzing verses from the Hebrew Bible, printed in Hebrew, in which the verb complementing the noun was singular. In further reviewing the question, he consulted

58. The first translation of the Bible into Arabic during the nineteenth century owed its existence to the efforts of Protestant missionaries who felt the need for a text in Arabic that was understandable to modern Arabs. After the appearance of the Protestant Arabic Bible, the Jesuits in Beirut felt the need to produce their own translation (a four-year project completed in 1880); see Sasson Somekh, "Vestiges of Saadiah's *Tafsir* in Modern Arabic Bibles," in *Judaism and Islam: Boundaries, Communication and Interaction: Essays in Honor of William M. Brinner*, ed. Benjamin H. Hary, John L. Hayes, and Fred Astren (Leiden, 2000), pp. 227–36, and Levy, "Jewish Writers in the Arab East," pp. 133–38. On the Protestants, see Ussama Makdisi, *Artillery of Heavens: American Missionaries and the Failed Conversion of the Middle East* (Ithaca, N.Y., 2008).

59. See Camille Hechaïmé, *Louis Cheikho et son livre le christianisme et la littérature chrétienne en Arabie avant l'Islam; étude critique* (Beirut, 1967).

works of Semitic philologists and compared Hebrew and Akkadian nouns for the word *god*, based on contemporary publications of cuneiform tablets. He concluded the article with two suggestions: the first adhered more to traditional Christian interpretations and suggested that the plural form referred to the Trinity. The second was more interesting—Cheikho proposed more strongly that the plural form originated from the fact that other perceptions prevalent amongst Near Eastern polytheistic nations have affected the Hebrew text and that other Semitic peoples referred to their deities in the plural.⁶⁰ Hebrew, Akkadian, and other Semitic cultures were thus vital not only to understanding the racial origins of the Arabs but also to coming to terms with the pillars of their faiths and the religious terminology they used.

Cheikho's essay reflects his mastery of Near Eastern history and Semitic philology, including Jewish history and Hebrew. Both Cheikho and al-Khatib attempted to expose fellow Arab readers to the variety of philological and academic tools that scholars of Christianity and Islam could, and should, use as modern subjects. In doing so, they normalized Hebrew; Hebrew speakers were once indigenous people in the Middle East, whose language was crucial to Arabic's own history and whose culture shaped Christianity and Islam in positive manners. Hebrew speakers shared much in common with other speakers of Semitic languages, and it was incumbent on the scholars of the religions and languages of the Arabs to learn more about Hebrew and ancient Jewish and Israelite history.

During the interwar period, however, the discourses about Jews in the Arab world changed and came to be grounded more dramatically in the realities of the Zionist-Palestinian conflict. After the actual and intensified Jewish migration into Palestine, the Balfour Declaration, and the British mandate in Palestine, some Arab thinkers felt that celebrating the multiculturalism of Arab and Muslim empires and, more broadly, deploying the image of the Jew as a metaphor for a host of Arab concerns were no longer that important or even possible. The discourse about Semites and Arab antiquity did continue with much vigor, but it was split into two conversations: one which tended to ignore Jews and another which included them.

The exclusion of Jews from these Semitic narratives was in part a response to contemporary Zionist thinkers and writers who appropriated Semitic history and philology for the needs of their national project. Yoni Furas, in fact, has convincingly shown that both Palestinian nationalism and Zionism used hegemonic Western racial discourse about the Semites as a chronotope to consolidate their struggles for independence and to

60. See Louis Cheikho, *al-Mashriq*, 15 Dec. 1907, pp. 700–05.

imagine Canaanite and Hebrew antiquities to be revived anew through liberation from British colonialism.⁶¹ Palestinian thinkers thus developed their own narratives of authenticity and nativism based on Canaanite antiquity. Palestinian intellectual Tawfiq Canaan, as Salim Tamari has illustrated, believed that biblical archaeology and anthropological surveys of Palestinian peasantry demonstrated the continuity among the Bible, the ancient peoples of Palestine, and the modern Palestinians.⁶² Other Palestinian thinkers celebrated the Semitic origins of the entire Arab region in a way that undid Zionist claims for their own unique and unparalleled connection with the Land of Israel. According to Ernest C. Dawn, such thinkers wrote about the movement of Arabs and proto-Arab Semitic peoples. Their books circulated in the Levant and were an important for Iraqi, Syrian and Palestinian thinkers and for teachers and students who used their texts. These books, however, devoted much less attention to Jews or Hebrews within their discussions of Semitic cultures.⁶³

Nonetheless, even in the interwar period, stories still circulated in the print culture about Semitic people, the history of the Arabs, and ancient Near Eastern archaeology, in which the Jews were depicted in very positive ways. The Syrian Arabic Language Academy and its journal, *Majallat al-Aajma' al-Imi al-'Arabi* (The Journal of the Arabic Language Academy), promoted these very same ideas. As with *al-Mashriq's* articles, readers could still learn about the publication of Syriac and Hebrew manuscripts, about the ways in which medieval Islamic thinkers conceptualized the relationships between Hebrew and Arabic, about the manners in which Arabic absorbed Semitic words from Hebrew, and, about the usefulness of archaeology in reconstructing the religions of ancient Semitic peoples, from Baal in the Levant, to the gods of Arabia.⁶⁴

During the interwar period, these discourses about Arabs and Jews as Semites had very important political implications because they allowed Arab leaders to claim that Middle Eastern Jews were ethnically closer to the Arabs and that not all Jews were Zionists. King Faysal I of Iraq suggested that Jews could remain in Palestine as part of a larger Pan-Arab and Pan-Semitic entity. Jews who supported Arab nationalism, especially Jews in

61. See Yoni Furas, "We the Semites: Reading Ancient History in Mandate Palestine," *Contemporary Levant* 5, no. 1 (2020): 33–43.

62. See Salim Tamari, "Lepers, Lunatics, and Saints: The Nativist Ethnography of Tawfiq Canaan and His Circle," in *Mountain against the Sea: Essays on Palestinian Society and Culture* (Berkeley, 2009), pp. 93–112.

63. Ernest C. Dawn, "The Formation of Pan-Arab Ideology in the Interwar Years," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 20 (Feb. 1988): 67–91. See, in particular, Izzat Darwaza, *Ta'rikh al-'Arab wa'l Islam* (Cairo, 1925), and Furas, "We the Semites."

64. See Bashkin, "The Arab Revival, Archaeology, and Ancient Middle Eastern History."

Iraq, likewise emphasized this shared Semitic culture.⁶⁵ The tolerance of al-Andalus, in which Jews, Christians, and Muslims lived together and cultivated the sciences and the arts, was a narrative very much cherished by various intellectuals all throughout the interwar period. Furthermore, during this period, and well into the 1940s and 1950s, Jews, Christians, and Muslims searched for different ideologies in order to challenge colonialism, racism, and anti-Semitism. They turned to liberalism, communism, socialism, social democracy, and forms of local patriotism (arguing that they were Egyptian patriots, Lebanese patriots, and so on) in order to advance frameworks in which citizens of different faiths can attain equality and justice. They attempted to keep the *Nahda* discourse alive, while generating new inclusionary ideas. For example, in this period the concept of the Arab-Jew, a Jew whose culture is Arab but whose faith is Jewish, became prevalent in Arab national and radical circles. Israeli Middle Eastern Jewish intellectuals and activists, who fought against their discrimination in the state of Israel by European Jews, later adopted this concept, as Ella Shohat and Levy have demonstrated; they, too, turned to the *Nahda* and the interwar past in order to radicalize the present.⁶⁶

W. J. T. Mitchell has highlighted the many ways in which the Jew and the Moore, the Arab and the Muslim, and the Semite and the Oriental, were lumped together in Western discourse in order to invigorate various racist projects. The Semitic race was thus constructed in fluid manners and encompassed diverse populations. To Mitchell, the construction of the Semite served as a historical lesson regarding the fabricated nature of racial categories and their subsequent naturalization as scientific racism and ethnonationalism take root.⁶⁷ Arab thinkers were likewise aware that the categories of the Arab, the Semite, and the Jew were highly unstable. They tried to modify the European discourse according to their own understanding, and, at times, the very same amalgamation of Arab, Semite, and Jew pushed for new ideas of brotherhood and common fate.

Beyond the Semites: Some Concluding Remarks

I tried to show in this article how the conversations about Jews during the *Nahda* allowed Arab intellectuals to express a variety of ideas about the

65. These discourses also had a Jewish counterpart; see Bashkin, *New Babylonians: A History of Jews in Modern Iraq* (Stanford, Calif., 2012), pp. 38, 103, and Faysal ibn al-Husayn, *Faysal ibn al-Husayn, fi khutubihī wa aqwalihī* (Baghdad, 1946), pp. 247–49.

66. See Levy, “Historicizing the Concept of Arab Jews in the *Mashriq*,” and Shohat, *On the Arab Jew, Palestine, and Other Displacements: Selected Writings* (London, 2017).

67. See W. J. T. Mitchell, *Seeing through Race* (Cambridge, Mass., 2012), pp. 65–90. See also Gil Anidjar, *Semites: Race, Religion, Literature* (Stanford, Calif., 2008), and Ammiel Alcalay, *After Jews and Arabs: Remaking Levantine Culture* (Minneapolis, 1993).

Arab self before the Arab-Israeli conflict. These discourses encompassed reformist, egalitarian, and national elements, as Arab thinkers attempted to conceptualize their own ethnicity and rights in response to European racial and colonial categorizations. Most often, the oppression of the Jews was used as a metaphor to deplore the oppression of religious and ethnic minorities in the Ottoman Empire and elaborate upon ideas about tyranny, liberty, and mob mentality.

In writing about anti-Semitism in Europe, Arab writers were interested in the failures of Europe and specifically in failed projects of emancipation. Likewise, Zionist thinkers at the time accentuated the failure of European emancipation, but, for them, the solution to Europe's inability to provide equality to its Jewish subjects was to create a Jewish state in Palestine. Arab writers addressed this failure differently. They wondered what the origins of this failure were (be it return to medieval norms, ethno-national chauvinism, or mob mentality), and they believed that this European problem should be solved in Europe itself. Moreover, these Arab Christian and Muslim thinkers highlighted the fact that Europe had no moral grounds for its colonial Middle Eastern project. If Orientalism and colonialism were projects in which the colonizers represented their mission as liberating those who could not liberate themselves, Arab writers wondered how Europeans, who conducted their own affairs so badly, were now to reform and modernize others. At the same time, however, as Arab thinkers in the Levant experimented in constitutionalism and electoral politics, what happened in Europe mattered a great deal at home.

I opened this article with references to Said, introducing a quote in which he, the Palestinian refugee, articulated his connection to Theodor Adorno, the Jewish refugee. Both writers commented on how being stateless, homeless, and residing among states, cultures, and homelands could produce ideal criticism.⁶⁸ Late-nineteenth-century Arab intellectuals were likewise never quite at home, moving between continents and ideas. In many ways, they were European: they lived under British and French rule in Algeria and in Egypt; they read European works of political theory in the Ottoman Empire; they responded to global affairs; and they explored how Western theories like European race studies or philology could fit into their own universe. But these writers were also outside of Europe: they spoke a different language, related to different historical narratives, and, ultimately, were Europe's victims. This state of in-betweenness made them, however, highly perceptive

68. See Theodor Adorno, *Minima Moralia: Reflections from Damaged Life*, trans. E. F. N. Jephcott (New York, 1999); Said, *Representations of the Intellectual*, pp. 45–47; Mufti, “Auerbach in Istanbul”; and Said, *Reflections on Exile and Other Essays*.

critics, and tied them, in many fashions, to Europe's perpetual Other, the Jews. Years of the Arab-Israeli conflict have erased these entangled discourses and histories. But perhaps now, as purist and anti-Semitic discourses reawaken in the US and in Europe, we might consider looking into Arab criticism as an effective cure to this old European infectious disease, an idea formulated by Rida during the Dreyfus affair.