In recent years, Nazi German history has attracted growing interest among Arab scholars and generally among a wider Arab public. Although attention is often paid to events related to the Second World War, the focus of interest increasingly includes National Socialist politics and ideology. Such attention to National Socialism among Arab audiences is not a new phenomenon. While discussions of Nazi German history were rare in most of the post-war period, the situation during the 1930s and 1940s was very different.

Events in National Socialist Germany were closely followed in Cairo, Beirut or Baghdad. In countless articles and commentaries, Arab observers wrote about the dissolution of the Reichstag, the persecution of Jews, the Nuremberg Laws and the militarist nature of German society under Hitler's rule. Numerous memoirs, autobiographies and letters by prominent politicians and intellectuals, which have become available over recent decades, expose the attention directed by contemporaries to Germany's domestic and international politics. Assessments of these developments were manifold - and often widely divergent. Many observers were fascinated by Hitler's rise to power and his presumed modernization of German society, economy and the army; others were repelled by totalitarian rule, the racial theories on which it was built and its revisionist policies towards its neighbours.

This article questions two paradigms which continue to characterize historical studies of Arab responses to Nazi Germany. The first reading of Arab-Nazi German encounters suggests that responses to Nazism were mainly characterized by collusion with National Socialist ideology and its representatives in the region. This assessment is often based on personalities like Hajj Amin al-Husayni and Rashid 'Ali al-Kaylani who are considered

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representative of major parts of Arab public opinion.²

It is interesting to note that this paradigm has long dominated research, despite the fact that strong evidence existed calling for a shift of perspectives. As early as 1980, Francis Nicosia questioned this narrative. Highlighting "ideological and strategic incompatibilities" (Nicosia 1980) between Arab nationalist actors and the German regime,³ he worked out contradictions and conflicts that prevented the creation of any major links between the two sides. Yet, even in more recent studies, the assumption of close, ideology-based cooperation between the two sides still shapes the historical narrative. In one of these studies, Klaus-Michael Mallmann and Martin Cüppers claim that in the 1940s Arab societies had great expectations of realizing their aspirations for independence "in alliance with the Nazis and under the perpetration of mass murder."⁴ According to their account, radical actors such as the Muslim Brotherhood, which is depicted here as an ally of National Socialist Germany, and Hajj Amin al-Husayni particularly dominated public opinion; other actors who could have challenged pro-German voices simply did not develop any relevant impact.⁵

The second paradigm acknowledges the existence of pro-German voices who engaged in cooperation with the Axis. Yet, while authors like Herf or Mallmann/Cüpper point to shared ideological visions and strategies as the basis of these contacts, authors like Basheer M. Nafi question the very existence of significant ideological reasoning underlying these relations: "Almost all the Arab leaders who became involved in the Arab-Axis imbroglio were men of practical politics, with little affinity for ideological complexities."⁶ Nafi’s conclusion that pro-German declarations were in fact expressions of Realpolitik rather than ideology obviously resonates with the saying that 'the enemy of my enemy is my friend' which continues to be alluded to in similar interpretations of Arab-German relations.


⁴ Mallmann / Cüppers: Halbmond und Hakenkreuz (see FN 2), 258.

⁵ Mallmann / Cüppers: Halbmond und Hakenkreuz (see FN 2), 9.

A number of recent studies have challenged these assessments. Reconstructing the multifaceted responses to National Socialism, these studies gave detailed insights into various approaches to Nazi politics and ideology that were adopted by political and social actors in the region. The spectrum of opinions ranged from outright refusal to fascination, with sympathy and scepticism often being voiced by one and the same person. Yet, even in some of these studies the relevance of ideology as one factor shaping pro-German approaches is questioned.

Taking up these findings, in a first step this article emphasizes the breadth of discussions about National Socialism that existed in the Arab world and places them in the context of local transformations and conflicts. A key argument made here is that the public interest for Nazism was not superficial, but was immediately shaped by local concerns and conditions. Arab responses to Nazism echoed a profound and often knowledgeable interest in events in Germany and stood for a growing quest for social and political change.

In a second step, the article goes on to highlight important parallels linking debates in the Arab public with similar debates in Europe. The interwar years were crucial for Europe, but no less so for the Eastern Mediterranean. These years were characterized by heated debates over the future of society, mirrored in intellectual and organizational pluralism that allowed for new social and political players to emerge. This intense struggle over the "postcolonial civic order", as Elizabeth Thompson has described the public debates and conflicts in French mandated Lebanon and Syria, implied the formulation and reformulation of intellectual concepts, patterns of identity and strategies for change. In this sense, intellectual traditions and political trends emerging in other cultural and religious contexts were reflected in Arab cultural and political circles. Kemalism in Turkey, the politics of Gandhi in India, Bolshevism in Russia, the New Deal in the US and the

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authoritarian modernization of Iran were among the points of reference that were frequently evoked in local discourses; the same was the case for the politics and ideological visions of the Nazi regime in Germany. Allusions in ideology and style to these contemporary movements were thus no superficial imports which remained foreign to local cultural and political conditions. On the contrary, these references, both apologetic and critical, reflected genuine interest in and concern with the concepts and messages alluded to.

Encounters with Nazism: lessons to be drawn upon

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For many Arab observers, Germany’s situation after the First World War very much resembled their own. As victims of the peace negotiations after the First World War, Arab societies found themselves betrayed by European powers. To a certain extent, they considered themselves victims of Versailles. The rise to power and success of Adolf Hitler – the "resurrection of the German nation", as stated in some newspaper commentaries, gave reason to reflect upon possible lessons that could be drawn from the German experience.

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A case in point is the example of the Lebanese Arab nationalist daily al-Nida’ that frequently covered developments in Europe to scrutinize them for potential signposts on the way to national revival and political reform. Kazim al-Sulh, the newspaper’s editor, thus explicitly explained his decision to publish a serial translation of Adolf Hitler’s Mein Kampf with lessons to be potentially drawn from the German society’s turn towards National Socialist rule. While refuting the racial concepts implied in the book, Sulh insisted on a supposed message that could be derived from Hitler’s thoughts. In the light of Germany's post-war history and Hitler's personal life, Sulh declared that:

"'Mein Kampf' is the plan of a man and a nation that resemble the life of our youth and our nation at their beginnings. My intention was that our youth and our nation will become acquainted with the renaissance of this man and this nation, so that they will learn from their examples in the next phase of their life." (al-Nida’, May 22nd, 1934).

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This approach was not dissimilar to reports covering other developments abroad. One frequent topic discussed in reference to other countries was women’s place in society. In one of several articles published in al-Nida’ – as in other newspapers and magazines in Lebanon, Syria, Palestine, Iraq or Egypt – that were trying to define the status of women,
Sulh here again referred to lessons local readers could draw from the study of foreign societies. Nazi Germany again figured among the countries referred to:

"While we are at the outset of a nationalist life, which we are trying to build on the basis of modern science and modern civilization, we should take care not to commit the mistakes of the civilized nations, only to regret them later and to retract. We should instead directly take up only those things that were adopted by young nations that arose in recent times, such as Czechoslovakia, Germany, and Italy." (al-Nida', Mar. 11th, 1934)

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Similar arguments were formulated with regard to German politics towards the youth. For many observers, the paramilitary organization of the Hitler Youth stood for a promising model that could be implemented in local societies as well. Syrian, Lebanese, Iraqi and Egyptian newspapers explicitly referred to the strict and disciplined formations of the Hitler Youth as the vanguard of the German national revival. In this vein, in May 1934 the Egyptian publicist Karim Thabit reported on youth organizations in Germany and Italy and called on a commission set up by King Fu'ad to study the prospects of physical education in Egypt and to consider these countries' experiences. Thabit praised the physical and mental strength of German and Italian youngsters that would enable this generation to serve their nations. For him, a militarized youth strengthened by discipline and spirit "would be capable to protect the independence of the country." (al-Ahram, May 25, 1934)

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These references to Nazism did not necessarily imply an appropriation of National Socialist concepts and visions; it is interesting to note that Nazism often only figured as one among different experiences which local observers considered valuable. Yet, considering the topicality of these questions concerning society and politics, contemporary encounters with Nazism served as catalysts for discussions about the future political order.

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In the following, I focus on three topics of particular interest to Arab audiences. These provided the background for references to similar debates in Europe in general, and in Germany in particular. Firstly, I examine the question of political stability and the requirements of reform and modernization; secondly, I consider the concepts of nation, "Volk" and race, which National Socialist doctrine was based on. Thirdly, I turn to the place of anti-Semitism and anti-Jewish persecutions influencing Arab reactions to Nazism.
Stability and the Threats of Anarchy - authoritarianism as a guarantor of public order?

In the turmoil of the interwar years, the longing for independence, reform and modernization stood in an ambivalent relationship to the longing for stability and order. While the struggle against colonial rule necessarily implied a profound restructuring of society based on national needs and interests, many observers were concerned about the threats from social anarchy and political instability. In the 1920s, this ambivalence had already become explicit in positions adopted by conservative liberals such as Muhammad Husayn Haykal. As a prominent representative of the Egyptian Liberal-Constitutionalist Party, Haykal was a vocal critic of the monarchy and its repressive politics. Yet, despite his defence of political rights and liberalism, Haykal was concerned about the threats from mass politics as symbolized by the nationalist-populist Wafd.

In the 1920s and 1930s, such ambivalence found its expression in various articles in which Haykal turned to the experience of Fascist Italy as an example for an authoritarian modernization of society. Warning against the threats of a "tyranny of anarchy" (al-Siyasa, Jan. 7th 1929) in a society that was not yet prepared for democratic rule, Haykal considered the temporary establishment of authoritarian rule as appropriate.

Such understanding was also echoed in many reactions to Hitler's rise to power. The Syrian nationalist daily al-Qabas, for one, explicitly described Hitler's authoritarian rule as being in line with the interests of the people. Munir al-'Ajlani, a prominent member of the Syrian Nationalist Bloc, was among those voices who pointed on various occasions to Hitler's successful stabilization of society. Speaking about the regime's brutal reaction to the Röhm affair in June/July 1934, which implied the execution of internal critics of the movement, 'Ajlani defended this suppression as a necessary step to guarantee order:

Hitler "did his duty towards Germany by killing a gang of people, saving his country from bloody revolts that might have led to tens of thousand of victims. It might have weakened the belief of the Germans and threatened their firm will. The result could have been that all of Germany would have been thrown into the claws of anarchy." (al-Qabas, July 16th, 1934)

Here again, the assessment of the political regime in Germany was closely linked to the question of stability.

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The Egyptian intellectual and activist Salama Musa was most explicit in his references to Nazism. As a long-time supporter of socialist ideas, Musa had become known for his modernist approaches towards society. Drawing on notions of Fabian socialism, Musa supported the idea of technocratic elites leading the nation through processes of social, economic and political reform. While he had long remained critical of Fascism due to its repressive character and the brutality of the Italian regime, in the mid-1930s he showed an increasing willingness to defend authoritarian rule as a necessary requirement to implement political reforms. In 1934, he had become convinced that democracy had failed to fulfill the promises it had sparked in the period following the end of the First World War. For him, public opinion in different countries increasingly acknowledged the need for an authoritarian leader who would rule the country until the ground was prepared for a more representative model of rule. In several articles, he outlined his vision for an "enlightened dictatorship" that would implement crucial and thus possibly unpopular reforms that would be impossible to impose in a democratic system. (See for instance al-Majalla al-Jadida, June 1st, 1934) Central to his vision was the conviction that the state played an essential role in defining and defending the interest of the community. The model of an authoritarian state thus appeared promising – while once again the Nazi regime was only one point of reference. In his articles, Musa showed no less favourable views about the Kemalist state of Turkey.

In this context, Musa's vocal support for eugenics as a means to control and direct the reproduction of the community was important. The idea of population planning based on state intervention had developed in several European and North American states since the late 19th century. These policies clearly echoed an understanding of the state as the guardian and agency to improve the biological foundations of the nation.

These positions that called for strong leadership and a state did not go unchallenged. In Egypt, in particular, since the early 1920s intellectuals such as 'Abbas Mahmud al-'Aqqad and Taha Husayn called for a democratic parliamentarian system that would guarantee individual rights and liberties. In 1929, 'Aqqad's book Al-hukm al-mutlaq fi l-qarn al-

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11 Egger: Salamah Musa (see FN 9), 40-45; Gershoni / Nordbruch: Sympathie und Schrecken (see FN 9), 236-240.
'ishrin (Absolute rule in the 20th century) provided a detailed critique of authoritarian rule. In numerous commentaries published in the 1920s and 1930s in - among others - the popular magazines al-Hilal and al-Risala, he warned against the influence of Fascism and Nazism and insisted on the need to promote democracy as the most appropriate political order. In a similar vein, throughout these years Taha Husayn pointed to the decline of culture under the authoritarian regimes in Germany and Italy; for him, it was only in a democratic society with established liberties and rights that culture and arts, but also science and thought could develop and contribute to the good of society. (See al-Hilal, Sep. 1, 1937: 363) In the late 1930s, these views found further expressions in the writings of Tawfiq al-Hakim. His collections and novels, among them 'Usfur min al-sharq ("A Sparrow from the East", 1938) and Taht shams al-fikr ("Under the sun of thought", 1938) further popularized support for democratic values and humanism as a precondition for human progress.

Nation, 'Volk', and Race - communal ideologies on both sides of the Mediterranean

Concern about the foundations of nationhood was central to the public debates in Europe, and it was no less central in the Eastern Mediterranean. This aspect is the second element considered here in the context of Arab responses to National Socialist politics and ideology. With the collapse of the Ottoman Empire after the First World War, the quest for new communal identities was at the centre of public debates. This question was not only debated in political circles, but also in literature, art and the social sciences. The quest for a collective identity was particularly urgent throughout the social and cultural upheavals of the 1920s and 1930s. In this context, the German ethnocultural concept of nationhood offered a potential starting point. But it was far from being the only one.

From the outset, Arab nationalism was an ambivalent phenomenon comprising emancipatory and reactionary elements. In an early study published in 1943, Albert Hourani tellingly described Arab nationalist ideologies as "a symptom of the disease which it attempts to cure. In other words, while in one of its aspects it is a movement with a definite and rational purpose, in the other it is a purposeless upsurge of grievances,
obsessions and emotions." In this respect, Arab nationalism hardly differed from most other forms of nationalism that have emerged in different parts of the world; it longed for liberation from foreign domination, but at the same time tended to subjugate the individual to the interests of the community. The interests of the nation had to be defended against its internal and external enemies, leading to strict notions of belonging and loyalty.

In alluding to Bismarck, Husri hoped for an "Arab 1871" which would unite the territorially divided nation. The founders of the Ba‘th Party, the party that shaped Syrian and Iraqi history over the last four decades, did not restrict their influences to German nationalist thinkers of the late 18th and early 19th century. They also took note of the Nazi intellectual Alfred Rosenberg and other racial theorists. Sami al-Jundi, an early member of the organization, recounted in the late 1960s the group members' fascination with some of the core texts of racial theories and chauvinist nationalist thought. Writing about these years, Jundi stated:

"We were racialists [‘irqiyyin], admiring Nazism, reading its books and the sources of its thought, particularly Nietzsche's Thus spoke Zarathustra, Fichte's Addresses to the German Nation, H.A. [sic] Chamberlain's The Foundations of the Nineteenth Century, and Darré's The Race. We were the first to think about translating [Hitler's] Mein Kampf. Anyone who had lived through this period in Damascus can assess the inclination of the Arab people towards Nazism."

Jundi explicitly denied that the Ba‘th party had adapted National Socialist thought; for him, Ba‘thism in fact was a "different school". Yet his statement confirms the considerable interest sparked by the intellectual and scientific debates in Europe and the US about the biological origins of the nation.

18 Jundi: al-Bath (see FN 17), 29.
However, it would be wrong to reduce this line of thinking to racial concepts. For most contemporary observers, German "völkisch" nationalism and French republican nationalism were not necessarily contradictory. It was quite possible to refer to Alfred Rosenberg and to the French revolution at the same time. A good example here is the pan-Arab nationalist intellectual Edmond Rabbath whose theories about the origin of the Arab nation have been strongly influenced by French intellectual traditions. Yet, in the preface to his widely read book on the history of the Arab nation published in 1937, he introduced a chapter of his book with a line attributed to Hitler – "People with the same blood belong to the same fatherland" – to underline the urgency of his call to unify the national homeland of the Arab nation.\(^\text{19}\) Despite his Francophile socialization and his admiration of French intellectual history, it did not appear contradictory to him to refer to Hitler's racial theories. Rabbath's position is exemplary for the diverse influences reflected in these debates.

In striking contrast to these approaches, liberal and socialist inspired intellectuals vehemently challenged biological or culturalist notions of the nation. In a direct response to Constantin Zurayq, who in 1939 had published *al-Wa‘i al-Qawmi* (National consciousness), one of the classic texts of Arab nationalist thought, in 1941 Ra‘if Khuri contributed a vehement critique of any claim of Arab exceptionality. Referring to Zurayq, who was one of his teachers at the American University of Beirut, the Marxist inspired intellectual ridiculed the insistence on a distinct Arab culture and society:

"The Arabs don't want to have railways, because there are so many railways in America. If they would [also] use railways, their civilisation would not be 'distinctly Arab nationalist'."\(^\text{20}\)

This critique of culturalist or biological claims of authenticity became even more explicit in a lecture given by Khuri at a function of the League against Nazism and Fascism in Syria and Lebanon on July 11\(^{th}\) 1942 in Damascus. As a popular network that voiced concern about the echoes of Fascist and National Socialist thought among local political actors, the League stood for a significant voice that publicly challenged possible rapprochements to the Axis. In his speech, Khuri thus explicitly drew the image of a universal struggle against oppression and for individual and collective liberties:

\(^{19}\) Edmond Rabbath: *Unité syrienne et devenir arabe*, Paris 1937, 33.  
\(^{20}\) Ra‘if Khuri: *Ma‘alim al-wa‘i al-qawmi*, Beirut 1941, 12.
"Our particular secret, the particular secret of the Arabs, is the love of freedom and the fight against ignorance, humiliation, and the opposition against the oppressors. This secret, however, is neither a secret, nor is it in any way particular. If this is a source of pride and hope, the Arabs share these principles with all the peoples of the world – principles that mark the glory and the pride of the peoples. The Arabs share with these peoples the general goal which human kind is longing and striving for – and they will be victorious."21

For him, idealistic nationalism and the assumption of an authentic and unhistorical nation risked blurring the lines between past and present as well as encounters between the different societies. Objecting to mainstream Arab nationalist views, Khuri rejected any notion of nationally specific philosophy and thought. If we speak, for example, of a German, French, or Arab philosophy, he argued, this means nothing more than that this respective philosophical current is most widespread amongst German, French or Arab thinkers.

**German anti-Jewish policies and local conflicts**

The anti-Jewish policies in Germany were another issue that Arab discussions about the events in Germany frequently addressed. This is the third argument to be dealt with here. Until the late 1920s, the situation of Jews in Egypt, Syria, Lebanon or Iraq did not differ significantly from other religious minorities living in these societies.22 (See for instance Krämer 1989: 128–139, Schulze 2001: 34, Bashkin 2009: 185-190) However, anti-Jewish prejudices existed. Anti-Jewish attitudes that were closely linked to Christian religious traditions were common among Arab Christians in particular. From the mid-1930s onwards, Muslims echoed these resentments in which Jews were framed as the enemies of the community. Such resentments were not only built on the intensifying conflict over Palestine, but were increasingly based on allegations that Jews were responsible for the diverse problems faced by Arab societies. Such reasoning became best visible in the context of the Bludan congress that was held in the Syrian summer resort in September 1937 about the events in Palestine. While the conference was primarily directed against Britain and the Zionist movement, the protests often evoked explicit resentments against Jews. In a pamphlet published by the Arab Higher Committee that was meant to warn against Jewish immigration to Lebanon, Jews were explicitly depicted as a threat to the social and political order:


"The Jews have embraced the destructive movements [of today’s world] and are bringing them with them to wherever they go. The Jews are trading in them, their aim is always to import and export them, but they do not consume them themselves. These movements are instruments in their hands to destroy society and to prepare the ground for themselves so that they can erect their own structures above its remains.”23

This growing reservation against Jews influenced Arab perceptions of Nazi Germany from the beginning. In this regard, Arab observers were facing a dilemma: while many newspaper commentaries expressed "Schadenfreude" over the plight of the Jews in Germany, many were well aware that the persecution of German Jews would foster immigration to Palestine.24

In Lebanon as well as Egypt, the local context clearly impacted on reactions to the anti-Jewish policies implemented in Germany. The multi-ethnic and multi-religious setting of these societies made members of these minorities particularly sensitive to the threats implied in biologist and culturalist definitions of the nation. In June 1933, the Maronite Patriarch sharply condemned the anti-Jewish persecutions in Germany in a pastoral letter and expressed his sympathy for German Jews; similarly, several Egyptian newspapers that were owned or edited by Syrian or Lebanese immigrants in Egypt voiced concerns over the mounting repressions in Germany. In March 1933, the popular Egyptian newspaper al-Muqattam already published a critique of these excesses:

"The supporters of justice and humanism hope that Hitler will limit his struggle to communists, and that he will ensure the Jews that they are protected by the laws of their home-country [...]. The Jews could be a strong element that could support the regime, similar to their brethrens who rally behind the governments of England and France." (al-Muqattam, Mar. 15th, 1933)

For other observers, the impact of anti-Jewish policies in Germany on Zionist immigration to Palestine was a central concern. This reasoning led the prominent Syrian Nationalist ‘Adil Arslan, a brother of Shakib Arslan, to express harsh criticism of the violent persecutions of Jews in Germany; he was worried about the consequences for Palestine. This criticism is reflected in his diary in which he himself expressed anti-Jewish attitudes repeatedly. Yet, in an entry on the occasion of the "Reichspogromnacht" in November

23 Arab Higher Committee: Bayan wa dhikra, Beirut 1937, 15.

24 Krämer: Jews in Modern Egypt (see FN 22), 128-139; Wildangel: Zwischen Achse und Mandatsmacht (see FN 7), 143-157; Nordbruch: Nazism in Syria and Lebanon (see FN 7), 21-24.
1938, he strongly objected to the German policy: "It is this brutality in Germany that creates support for Jews all over the world – even among those classes that had entertained hatred for the Jews." Arslan then added an observation that reflected the ambiguity of his relationship to Nazism: "A reasonable enemy is better than an ignorant friend." In August 1937, Arslan already expressed a similar opinion in a letter that was addressed to an official of the Orient department of the German Foreign Ministry. In this letter, Arslan addressed the recommendations of the Peel Commission of summer 1937 that had suggested the creation of a Jewish and an Arab state in Palestine. As a detailed argument formulated by a highly knowledgeable activist of pan-Arab affiliation, the letter exemplified the ideological reasoning that was guiding many Arab nationalists in their approaches to Germany. According to this view, the question of the Jewish state made Germany a potential ally of the Arab nationalist movement. Writing in August 1937, Arslan explained:

"The question of an independent Jewish state in Palestine should be considered as the most alarming challenge of our time, as an event whose consequences are unpredictable. [...] The real revenge of the Jews against Germany will only take place once most of the German Jews have already left your country. Today, Jewry is anxious about them. If you were to let these precious hostages go, the rancour entertained by this race would then manifest its effect. [...] I am sure that – for German interests – it would be better to keep your Jews, and to keep them under surveillance. The intrigue is vast and well organized. [...] I do not have to tell you that our common interests oblige us to pursue a strict policy; both sides, the German as well as the Arab one, must collaborate in a serious manner in an attempt to foil the project of a Jewish state in Palestine. [...] I would therefore ask you to undertake the necessary steps so that his Excellency, your minister, will be aware of our concerns and that the government of the Reich knows that all Arabs and Muslims consider this question of greatest importance. All their sympathies will naturally be with the power that will have assisted them." (Arslan in a letter to the German Foreign Ministry, Aug. 18\textsuperscript{th}, 1937, Private papers Gerhard Höpp, Zentrum Moderner Orient, Berlin).

Although reservations about the Jews gained a growing presence among the Arab public, many observers explicitly expressed their opposition to the persecution of the Jews – not only due to repercussions for Palestine, but also based on humanistic convictions. These voices came from very different social spheres: Christians, who saw Jews as a potential ally against Muslims; Muslims who, felt that racial persecution was against their religious values; liberal nationalists, who felt disgusted by racial theories; and Marxists, who committed themselves to the fight for universal political and social rights. These positions

\textsuperscript{25} Arslan: Mudhakkirat al-amir (see FN 1), 188.
did not imply a willingness to receive Jewish refugees from Europe; even those who had demonstrated sympathy with the persecuted German Jews repeatedly stressed that it would be unacceptable for Arab countries to open their doors to Jewish refugees while European countries closed their borders.

Reading *Mein Kampf* - or Marx - in Cairo, Beirut or Baghdad

These reflections and critiques of Nazism have to be seen in the context of the search for political and ideological signposts that marked Arab societies since the late 19th century. The rise of National Socialism provided new starting points for the ongoing controversies over the future social and political order. Far from being limited to abstract elaborations about specific aspects of National Socialist ideology, most contributors reflected an immediate political and educational intention; they considered their statements as an active intervention in the political and ideological struggles of that time.

For many observers, Arab societies appeared to be endangered by the rise of radical nationalist and authoritarian ideologies, mirroring similar developments in Europe in general, and in Germany in particular. From this perspective, Nazism was perceived as a challenge not only for Germany, but also for the modern world as such. Nazism was considered a threat deriving from specific ambivalences implied in modernization and social and economic development. In this sense, local responses to Nazism - both apologetic and critical - were profoundly rooted in the local political and intellectual context. They mirrored the very concrete challenges and questions confronting the local populations in the urban centres. In many ways, these were the same challenges with which Germans, French or British populations were confronted in the early decades of the 20th century. These challenges included the quest for answers about the issue of religion and the state; the individual's place in society; the legitimacy of rule; the definition of community and belonging; the definition of a just social and economic order; the role of women in society; the role of the youth. Hence, local responses to National Socialism were not superficial and instrumental, but reflected a close familiarity with its intellectual concepts.

The argument proposed here is based on the assumption that an ideology or a pattern of

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political thought only resonates in those societies that share some basic socio-economic features. Interest in and objections to Hitler's book *Mein Kampf* – or, for that matter, to Marx, Nietzsche or Charles Darwin – were not only a question of individual taste and personal conviction. This was also a reflection of the social and economic conditions that made such thoughts "thinkable" and intellectually accessible in the particular setting of society at that time. It is thus not surprising that during the mid-1930s youngsters shared an interest in the paramilitary style and glorification of youth and masculinity. Yet, while stylistic affinities with contemporary youth movements in Europe are all too evident, several studies explain these parallels as superficial adaptations of a European phenomenon devoid of any grounding in local thought or conditions. For instance, these movements are characterized as 'flirting with Fascist Imagery', implicitly assuming that their symbolism remained restricted to an outer appearance. Contrary to these interpretations, organizations such as the Green Shirts in Egypt, the Grey Shirts or the White Badge in Syria, the Futuwwa in Iraq or the Phalanges in Lebanon shared the ideal of an active youth as the vanguard of society, which had provided the ideological basis for the emergence of the various youth organizations in other parts of the world. The creation of paramilitary youth organizations in the mid-1930s coincided with the rise of an educated urban middle-class, the new effendiyya, and a nationalist notion of youth as the protector of the community; the growing political weight of the youth was matched by an intellectual redefinition of political agency and national leadership. While local notables and religious authorities have long dominated political and social life in many Arab societies, the rise of mass politics in the early 20th century facilitated the emergence of the urban youth as a key political player.


28 Wien: Arab Iraqi Nationalism (see FN 7), 118.

This is not to deny that important differences existed between societies in the Middle East and in Europe. Middle Eastern states in many respects differed from those in Europe, and the colonial context was a marked feature of the situation in the Eastern Mediterranean. Yet, socio-economic conditions in certain intellectual and political milieus in Beirut, Damascus or Cairo were not dissimilar from European milieus. The thoughts and political visions of Marx and Nietzsche, for instance, attracted considerable attention during the interwar years in urban centres of the Middle East, while a few decades earlier their concepts and reasoning would have remained incomprehensible to local audiences. Some urban milieus thus admired these thoughts, whereas they remained incomprehensible in other parts of those countries that had yet to be drawn into the transformation and modernization processes of the time.

This also applies to modernizing visions of authoritarian regimes and movements. It is thus not surprising that the modernist-authoritarian Syrian Nationalist Party or Young Egypt had a considerable appeal for certain urban intellectual milieus, while it found hardly any resonance in other parts of society. Only during the 1920s and 1930s, and in certain milieus, did these ideas gradually evolve as potential intellectual signposts that promised orientation during the ongoing transformations. During the 1930s, they increasingly provided potential options to make sense of society, history and the developments in the world outside.

This argument also holds true for antifascist attitudes and convictions. The emergence of the antifascist League in Syria and Lebanon, whose origins dated back to 1935, was not primarily due to strategic or opportunistic considerations, or to financial support from international communist networks. Instead, it reflected a profound and ideologically reasoned concern for the future of the Lebanese and the Syrian society. Its activities were thus not only related to the developments in Europe, but also addressed local repercussions of Nazism and Fascism. Nazism in Europe and the authoritarian and anti-liberal thought at home were perceived as the challenge during the late 1930s. The critique of Nazism thus reflected the immediate concerns of these activists about local political culture.

Conclusion

These controversial disputes profoundly characterized Arab public debates during the
1930s and 1940s. This episode of German-Arab relations can neither be reduced to a period of outright collaboration, nor does it stand for merely superficial encounters with essentially foreign ideas and visions. Instead, Arab responses to Nazism can be placed in the broader political and intellectual context that shaped Arab societies during these years. These responses stood for a growing variety of intellectual options that claimed to provide answers to the challenges of a modern society in transformation. Arab societies thus shared many of the concerns and challenges that formed the basis of public debates in Europe. In Europe and Germany in particular, questions about the legitimacy of political rule, national identity and the place of ethnic and religious minorities were central to the debates that aimed to define the path towards modernization and revival. These debates included authoritarian and radical-nationalist visions – but they also provided alternative options that were deeply rooted in local Islamic traditions, humanist thought and in the long and bloody struggles for national independence and political rights and liberties.

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