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Arab Fascism – Arabs and Fascism:
Empirical and Theoretical Perspectives

Abstract:

In this paper, I present preliminary results of an inquiry about the presence or absence of fascism in the Arab Middle East. My approach combines an inventory of the state of empirical research about pro-fascist trends in the region, primarily until 1945, with an attempt to locate fascism in the Arab world in a broader context of fascism as a phenomenon of non-European societies. This latter part of the paper is comparative and theory-driven.

The topic has an awkward currency today, after a surge in anti-Islamic rhetoric in public discourse in the post-9/11 period. Within this debate, the term "Islamofascism" plays a central role, and so does an historical argumentation about Arab relations with Nazi Germany and especially the imprint that Nazi anti-Semitism left on Arabs, Arab nationalist ideology, and political Islam. The debate often focuses on Amin al-Husseini's, the Mufti of Jerusalem's, exile in Germany from 1941 to 1945, and his deep involvement in anti-Semitic Nazi propaganda to the Middle East. For propagators of the "Islamofascism" paradigm, Hassan al-Banna, the founder of the Muslim Brotherhood, and his alleged admiration for the Mufti, serve as the missing link between Amin al-Husayni and the Muslim Brotherhood, and in extension modern Islamism. In turn, this argumentation establishes a relationship between the Mufti, Nazi totalitarianism, anti-Semitism and modern day Islamism, as well as Arab Nationalism. The topic therefore intertwines several sub-topics: Arab immediate "Encounters" with Fascism and Nazism (in occupied lands, as POWs, as exiles in Germany), Arab perceptions and reactions to the news of the Jewish Holocaust, before and after 1948, and the adoption and adaptation of fascist ideology in the Modern Middle East. While all these topics have to be part of an exploration of the dimensions of fascist trends in the Middle East, they are not necessarily interconnected: Positive views of Nazi state- and society organization in the late 1930s did not automatically entail an adoption of Nazi anti-Semitism, for instance.

There is also a chronological dimension of the differentiation work that needs to be done. Promoters of the Islamofascism paradigm often ignore, deliberately or not, the foundation of the State of Israel and the first Arab Israeli war as a paradigmatic change in an Arab "Geschichtsbewusstsein," or collective assessment and resulting awareness of history (in a more precise translation: the "historical consciousness") related to Jews, the Holocaust, and the Nazi state. To ignore an all important marker of historical consciousness – the Holocaust for Jews and the Nakba for the Palestinians – represents an epistemological disconnect that fuels populist and pseudo-scientific debates conflating the rules of public opinion-making with the historical record. This happens mutually and deliberately between the two parties in the Middle East conflict.

A differentiated approach, therefore, needs to be based on a distinction between pre- and post-1948 assessments because the occurrences of pro-totalitarian, pro-Fascist, and pro-Nazi trends and representations in the interwar Middle East require a different explanation than the examples of totalitarian state control and the widespread occurrences of anti-Semitic propaganda in the Arab Middle East since the end of the Second World War. Recent literature has shown, for instance, that it is fruitful to test the structures of Iraq's Saddamist state in the light of a totalitarian paradigm.\(^2\) Studies on anti-Semitism and Holocaust denial in the Middle East paint a rather gloomy picture of the reception of Nazi ideology and anti-Semitism in the post World War II Middle East. Yet, before 1948, the position that Arabs took vis-à-vis the Holocaust was most of the time one of empathy. After '48, however, a shift occurred towards allegations that the State of Israel was abusing the Holocaust for its national interest. Holocaust denial is, in contrast, a more recent phenomenon, whereas the usage of anti-Semitic stereotypes, based to a large extent on the Protocols of the Elders of Zion, gained in popularity immediately after 1948.\(^3\) On the other hand, research on the Arab press of the pre-World War II period has shown that there was a remarkable absence of racism and anti-Semitism, and a high degree of critical engagement with all forms of fascism and totalitarianism. These and other recent works represent the first two of three approaches to the topic of Nazism and Fascism in the Arab world that I would like to highlight on the following pages:\(^4\)


Approach A) Complication of the picture by way of counter examples,
Approach B) Contextualization and phenomenology,
Approach C) Typology/generic transnational fascism.

Complication of the picture by way of counter examples

Research that follows this line of argumentation highlights the sometimes very critical perceptions that Arabs had of National Socialism and Fascism. Thus, this literature counters the widespread assumption that Arabs had general affinity towards Nazism, which ignores the strength of socialist and communist, even explicitly anti-fascist movements in the Middle East. In a recent book on Iraq, Orit Bashkin paints a vivid picture of political pluralism in Iraq during the interwar period, with a particular regard to social democracy. Goetz Nordbruch and René Wildangel have recorded the dissonance of voices that emerged from Syria and Palestine, and I have presented that even staunch Arab nationalists in Iraq were highly eclectic in their perception and adaptation of European thought. Their admiration for totalitarian state-organization coincided with a deep skepticism about anything that came from the West. Israel Gershoni and James Jankowski's work highlights the critical Egyptian discourse about Fascism and Nazism in intellectual journals that were authoritative as shapers of intellectual standpoints throughout the Arabic speaking world. They also present how intellectuals like the Egyptian Salama Musa transited from supporters of Nazism in the early 1930s to fierce opponents under the impression of the Abyssinian war, and they highlight the remarkably outspoken stance of the founder of the Muslim Brotherhood Hassan al-Banna against Nazism. At the same time they also highlight many instances of support of Nazism in the 1930s, such as in the movement and party "Young Egypt."

It remains astonishing, however, how Arabs, including intellectuals and political leaders, moved almost seamlessly from the critical stance of the pre-war years to one of sympathy for Nazi racist politics that has been a mainstay of Arab public discourse since the end of World War II.9

How was it possible that the language of Nazi anti-Semitism was so quickly adopted after World War II? Arabs were avid consumers of news media in the 1930s, and they were well aware of what was going on in Europe during the 1930s and the World War, as analysis of the Arab press has shown in recent years.10 Anti-Semitic topoi and imagery were also known in the Arab world and some had adopted them in the propagandistic confrontations of the violent second half of the 1930s during the Palestine revolt.11 The propaganda speeches of Amin al-Husaini received some attention, even if they probably sounded quite alien in their fierceness to many listeners in the Arab world during a time when the Palestine conflict lay dormant because of the war.12 The paradigmatic change of the war of 1948, however, opened the doors to a repertory of images that could be used to denigrate and vilify the opponent, but, arguably in a psychological sense, to overcome the collective trauma of defeat and humiliation at the hands of the Zionists. Conspiracy theories came in handy for that.

**Contextualization and phenomenology**

To establish a - what I call - "phenomenology" of pro-totalitarian and pro-fascist trends in the interwar period seems to do more justice to these trends than mere allegations of fascism. According to this reading, they are indeed manifestations of broader trends, but have to be seen in the light of the immediate contexts of their occurrence. It is important


11 Wildangel: Zwischen Achse und Mandatsmacht (see FN 7).

12 In Jidda, Saudi Arabia, the American Legation of the United States assessed that public opinion of Germany was high during World War II as long as there were reports about German victories. As soon as they receded, the regard for Germany did so, too. See National Archives and Record Administration, College Park, RG 84 Records of the Foreign Service Posts of the Department of State, Egypt, U.S. Embassy and Legation, Cairo, Classified and Unclassified General records, 1936-1955, Box 78, 1942: 820.02 Jidda, Saudi Arabia, to the Department of State (copy to American Legation, Cairo), October 17, 1942: Materials supplied by the Office of War Information for Distribution in Saudi Arabia, 2-3.
to note, however, that my usage of the term "phenomenology" does not build on the positions of the German historian Ernst Nolte in the so called German "Historikerstreit" of the mid-1980s. Nolte's thesis that German Nazism and Soviet Stalinism were only two phenomenologically different manifestations of the same fascist type was fiercely rejected by many of his colleagues as apologetic of Nazi crimes, especially his assertion that the Holocaust was a mere reaction to chronologically earlier Stalinist crimes.  

The historian Zeev Sternhell rejects a premise that is derived from totalitarianism theory and implied in Nolte's phenomenology. It says that any comparison of communist and fascist regimes has to contrast them in terms of their actions because of the lack of ideological rigidity in fascism. Nolte's alignment of Nazism with Stalinism rests on this premise. Sternhell, however, demands that fascism should be taken seriously as an ideology, not least because of the massive output of - in a broad sense - proto- or proto-fascist literature since the late 19th century. My argument is, however, that the term phenomenology has a great deal to offer in a debate about fascism in the Arab world. While Nolte's terminology has been described as vague or even ill-defined, its usefulness for the present debate is, however, that it offers a greater analytical flexibility than a rigid typology that tries to establish a set of broadly shared characteristics of non-European authoritarian regimes that would justify to put them into the fold of transnational or international fascism. Rather than that, a phenomenology analyzes local peculiarities of individual cases of seemingly fascist, or fascistic movements in the Arab (or, for that matter, non-European) world, and avoids highlighting larger trends with a broad brush.

In my own work on Iraq, I contextualized the occurrences of pro-totalitarian and pro-fascist thought in the Iraqi public discourse during the interwar period. I described this discourse in the Iraqi nationalist press as a field that moved rather freely between pro-totalitarian, pro-Fascist, and pro-Nazi references without a clear commitment to any of these positions. Intellectuals and publicists borrowed freely, in a highly eclectic manner, and did not worry too much about consistency. They re-worked what they adopted and adapted it to a particular local debate overshadowed by the demands of decolonization. Second, I used the term "fascist imagery" to explain the usage of fascist symbols in the political public (the fascist salute, the wearing of uniforms, ...) and the establishment of...

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14 Zeev Sternhell: How to Think about Fascism and its Ideology, in: Constellations 15, no. 3 (2008), 280-290.

15 For a critique of the lack of rigidity in Nolte's terminology see Martin Kitchen: Ernst Nolte and the Phenomenology of Fascism, in: Science & Society 38, no. 2 (July 1, 1974), 131-148.
youth organizations that so much resembled the European fascist youth. I refrained from calling these organizations "fascist" because there are many characteristics that they do not share with either their Italian or German counterparts. Iraq's Futuwwa Youth organization was not attached to any party, but was established as a state organization during Yasin al-Hashimi's term as Prime Minister from 1935 to 1936. It was endorsed by a broad coalition of the political establishment, including the British who regarded it as an offshoot of the Boy Scout movement rather than a fascist organization that could threaten the hegemony of a pro-monarchical elite over the state. Originally, the Futuwwa was ethnically and religiously inclusive. Iraqi Jews participated enthusiastically in al-Futuwwa's sporting and hiking activities and singing of national hymns.\textsuperscript{16}

In other Arab countries, youth organizations were mostly strike forces of political parties, and thus not an unambiguous representation of a fascist trend. In some cases, they represented particular interest (such as the Christian White Badges in Aleppo) instead of a nationalist agenda. The uniforms of the Damascene (and Aleppine) Iron Shirts concealed that these were groups of urban rough that rather represented the clientele politics of the bourgeois National Bloc party and its control over traditional networks in the city than the spirit and desires of young nationalist extremists.\textsuperscript{17} Some examples stand out, however, such as the Syrian Socialist Nationalist Party that Antun Sa'ada founded in the 1930s. The mere adoption of the name and the party symbol "al-zawba'a," which is reminiscent of a swastika, are probably the closest mimicry of Nazi symbols of all Middle Eastern parties we know, but Sa'ada's explicit rejection of ethnic purity in his vision of the Syrian nation points into a different direction. German historian and political scientist Christoph Schumann has pointed out that ideology only played a minor role in the young followers' adherence to their leader: They cared less about contents of books and treatises, but enjoyed the feeling of communal activism and the display of strength.\textsuperscript{18} This was rather "showing off" than pressing a point. Differentiation and contextualization are therefore, once more, of paramount importance.


Looking at individual youth movements and the context they emerged from, at the usage of fascist imagery, and the manifestations of a pro-totalitarian discourse in the media of the time is an approach that highlights them as distinctive, singular phenomena that have to be understood within the more or less narrow contexts of local grievances and the various political or social agendas. In the case of Middle Eastern countries of the interwar period, the demands of decolonization loomed large, but also the necessity for elite politicians to adopt what they perceived as a modern outlook that concealed their paternalistic vision of a disciplined society. A fascist self-fashioning of parties or their leaders thus provided a bridge between different generations of political activists in order to prevent the upheaval of a younger generation against the bourgeois nationalists of Syria and Iraq. This older generation had grown into an elite, unwilling to let go of power and privilege, but at the same time tainted by cooperation with the colonial power, such as, for instance, in the case of the Syrian National Bloc. This bridging of the generations happened at the expense of the younger and no doubt contributed to their radicalization, and their openness for totalitarian ideas. According to a "phenomenology of fascism" in the Middle East, the adoption of fascist principles was very superficial, however, because it happened precisely out of a defensive position, and out of a concern for "Being Modern" in a way that would challenge the comparatively liberal nationalist leanings of an older generation.

**Typology/generic transnational fascism**

How do these statements hold up in the light of a transnational typology, looking for commonalities in the ways how Fascist Imagery and discourse were used in non-European, and especially decolonizing societies? Is it fruitful to establish a "type" of global fascism as part of a global typology of generic fascism? Or would the claim that such a type exists simply be a representation of Euro-centrism, in that it would reflect a general disregard for the specificities of non-European societies? In other words, is there generic non-European fascism, or maybe even colonial fascism?

Most theories of fascism are ambiguous and hardly withstand critical case by case testing. They extend from a Marxist critique of fascism as "capitalism in crisis" to theories that are so vaguely formulated that every occurrence requires the opening of a new

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19 On the elite co-opting the youth see Wien: Iraqi Arab Nationalism (see FN 4), 33. See also Rashid Khalidi: Arab Nationalism: Historical Problems in the Literature, in: American Historical Review 96, no. 5 (1991), 1364f.

20 As in Watenpaugh: Being Modern (see FN 17).
category. Many theories point to anti-communism and anti-liberalism, mass following and mass party organization, the cult of violence and the Fuehrer-principle, and radical nationalism as common traits of fascism, often combined with racism and a specific fascist style of politics. For some, the problem to pinpoint fascism is that there is no single foundational text for all its colors: There is no Fascist Manifesto. It would be remiss, though, to draw the conclusion that fascism as a *phenomenon* was void of ideology.

The British historian and political theorist Roger Griffin sees fascism largely as a product of late 19th century anti-enlightenment trends. For Griffin, fascism evolves out of a mythical understanding of the world at a breaking point offering "palingenesis," or a re-birth of the individual into a meaningful national community, leaving behind the fragmented and allegedly overly scientistic world of the early twentieth century that imploded during World War I. For Griffin, as for many other theorists of fascism, the World War I frontline experience was instrumental in bringing about fascist movements of like-minded seekers of new meaning that were channeled by the communitarianism and "festival culture" of the fascist movements.

Roger Eatwell adds that fascist ideology claimed to offer a "radical third way" based on the creation of an integrative (and exclusive as well as totalitarian) national community. In this model, the Fascist style (of the shirt movements), the obsession with action over theory, the cult of violence, and the demonization of the "other" are only accidental matters of appearance. So are "negatives" of other definitions of fascism (anti-communism, anti-liberalism). They were part of Fascism's propaganda but not its substance. This definition provides as added value a platform for an assessment of post-1945 movements in the Arab world, such as Ba'thism and Nasserism and the regimes that drew on them, because it avoids the rather simplistic focus on the slogans and uniforms of fascist self-fashioning.

Similar to Griffin, Ze'ev Sternhell insists that fascism was not just a function of the disruption that World War I caused. Fascism has a core of ideas, and cannot be reduced to a reaction to the destruction of 19th century society, and to the emergence of Leninist and Stalinist systems – as Nolte's phenomenology would suggest. Sternhell, instead, points to

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the revolutionary roots of fascist thought and its hatred of the Enlightenment.\textsuperscript{22}

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Was there comparable anti-Enlightenment reasoning in the Middle East? During the interwar period, admirers of Fascism such as Salama Musa (only in the early 1930s) or the young enthusiasts of Iraq and Syria saw themselves in the tradition of the modernizing forces of the Enlightenment, to free or make better use of the potentials of the individual.\textsuperscript{23} The authoritarianism of the interwar and immediate post-World War II Arab states was rather based on paternalistic authoritarian traditions of the late Ottoman polity than on the adoption of totalitarian ideas.\textsuperscript{24}

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Theory offers a way to contextualize the term "Islamofascism," too. When we accept the high level of abstraction that theorists like Griffin, Eatwell and Sternhell apply in their pursuit of the ideological core of fascism, we should use the same level of abstraction for the evaluation of arguments that modern Islamist movements reflect the fascist negation of humanist reasoning\textsuperscript{25} as the buzz word "Islamofascism" suggests. If we then endorse the assertion that the essence of fascism is the rejection of the Enlightenment, we should consider that debate about Islamic reform of the 19\textsuperscript{th} century is the root of modern Islamism, including its aberrant militant, radical and murderous forms. Reformers such as Rifa’a al-Tahtawi, Khayr al-Din al-Tunisi, Muhammad Abduh, but also twentieth century figures such as Rashid Rida and 'Abd al-Hamid Ben Badis, tried to reconcile the very achievements of the European age of reason with the Islamic heritage.

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Their agenda was to protect the Islamic community against superstition and to re-claim science and reason for an alternative, Islamic modernity.\textsuperscript{26} In the late 1930s, Hassan al-Banna, the Muslim Brotherhood's founder, rejected fascism explicitly, as well as the nationalism and racism raging in Europe, including the persecution of the Jews by the Nazis. This statement should be taken seriously as it stands for a self-perception that the Muslims of his organization were not only on a par with Europeans, but even morally

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{22} Sternhell: How to Think about Fascism (see FN 14), 280-290.
\item \textsuperscript{23} I. Gershoni / Jankowski: Confronting Fascism (see FN 4); Bashkin: The Other Iraq (see FN 6); Nordbruch: Nazism in Syria and Lebanon (see FN 7); Wien: Iraqi Arab Nationalism (see FN 4).
\item \textsuperscript{24} Elizabeth Thompson: Colonial Citizens: Republican Rights, Paternal Privilege, and Gender in French Syria and Lebanon, New York 2000, 19-57.
\item \textsuperscript{25} Not of reasoning altogether, though. Fascism was "anti-rational," not "irrational." Eatwell: Universal Fascism (see FN 21), 27.
\item \textsuperscript{26} See Sami Zubaida: Islam and Nationalism: Continuities and Contradictions, in: Nations and Nationalism 10, no. 4 (2004), 409.
\end{itemize}
superior.\footnote{I. Gershoni / Jankowski: Confronting Fascism (see FN 4), 214-218.} If mass organization, fascist style and the cult of violence are accidental to fascism, then the same should apply to the extreme manifestations of political Islam – in violence and rhetoric. By extension, fascism and Islamism would be essentially different if reduced to their respective cores because the former rejects, and the latter endorses reason.

\footnote{Robert O. Paxton: The Five Stages of Fascism, in: Journal of Modern History 70 (March 1998), 14-21.}

In turn, a phenomenology of Middle Eastern "fascistic" movements suggests that it is more fruitful to locate them on a map of social conflicts specific to their environment than giving them too much ideological weight. In addition, Robert Paxton, a further leading theoretician of fascism, puts a lot of emphasis on governmental action in distinguishing between the fascist or authoritarian character of movements. Only when in power, mere propaganda and stylistic motifs could be separated from underlying agendas in dealing with existing elite structures, or with economic prerogatives that could hamper the revolutionary agenda.\footnote{Robert O. Paxton: The Five Stages of Fascism, in: Journal of Modern History 70 (March 1998), 14-21.} This criterion makes it difficult to put any of the respective organizations and movements of the Middle East during the interwar period into the Fascist fold. But even when extreme nationalist parties entered Middle Eastern government in the second half of the twentieth century, the disconnect between their rhetoric and the actual elite and leadership structures of regimes such as in Ba'thist Iraq or Syria shows that ideology was only a means to an end in corporate states, where power had been usurped by cliques.

Hence, Middle Eastern "fascistic" movements merely mimicked fascist style (discipline, uniform, a discourse of violence) but did not meet the core criterion of fascism to be based on revolutionary expectations and a radical rejection of the Enlightenment – at least during the interwar period, if not beyond. The state run al-Futuwwa movement of Iraq, or the militias of the bourgeois Wafd party in Egypt or the Syrian National Bloc, while at times violent, did not represent a radical agenda. There was no clear cut anti-communism or strong emphasis on racial distinctiveness in these movements. The SSNP in Lebanon and Syria and Young Egypt are arguably the most explicit manifestations of this fascistic trend, but obviously they did not build on a World War I trench experience and the ensuing mindset. Socially, their members were too close to the elites. They did not demand revolutionary change and rebirth, but vied for recognition and generational change. The nascent Ba'th party of the 1940s might provide an example of a palingenetic worldview. Both Sa'ada and the founders of the Ba'th parties put "feeling" over "thoughts"
in the propagation of political will, which is an aspect of Griffin's theory. But how do we deal with an ideologue like Antun Sa'ada, who did adopt elements that some consider part of generic fascism, most prominently the leadership principle and the communitarian vision of society, but who at the same time explicitly denounced that his party was in any way fascist or pro-Nazi and even warned his followers not to believe Italian and German propaganda?\textsuperscript{29} This statement is similar to Hassan al-Banna's aforementioned anti-fascist stance, in that it represents a genuine desire to differ from European models.

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At the end of the day, an enquiry should each of these movements and their respective spokesmen in their particular local and regional contexts. This position gains in strength, however, when informed by a transnational comparison with other political trends based on sound theoretical considerations. The conversation about generic transnational fascism and fascism outside Europe is therefore only at the beginning stage.

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\textsuperscript{29} Akram Fouad Khater (ed.): Antun Sa'adeh Declares His Vision of 'Greater Syria' or Regional Nationalism, June 1, 1935, in: Sources in the History of the Modern Middle East, 2nd ed., Boston 2011, 128-130.