Shakīb Arslān's Libyan Dilemma

Pro-Fascism through Anti-Colonialism in \textit{La Nation Arabe}?

1. Introduction

Shakīb Arslān is considered one of the Arab world’s most important anti-colonial propagandists of the inter-war period. At the same time, he belongs to the few activists from the Middle East who actually tried to gain support from the fascist powers in the years preceding World War II. Apart from al-Ḥājj Amīn al-Ḥusaynī, the mufti of Jerusalem, with whom he collaborated, and the Iraqi Arab nationalist Rashīd ‘Alī al-Kaylānī, Arslān perhaps came closest to proclaiming unequivocal sympathy towards Italy and Germany.\footnote{On Ḥusaynī and Kaylānī cf. Basheer M. Nafi: The Arabs and the Axis. 1933-1940, in: Arab Studies Quarterly 19, 2 (1997), 1-24, here: 4-7, 9-17; Francis Nicosia: Arab Nationalism and National Socialist Germany, 1933-1939. Ideological and Strategic Incompatibility, in: International Journal of Middle East Studies 12, 3 (1980), 351-372, here: 356-359, 361-365; Youssef M. Choueiri: Arab Nationalism. A History, Malden (MA) / Oxford / Carlton (Victoria) 2005, 97-98.} In this essay I will examine his views of Mussolini’s regime as expressed in the French-language journal \textit{La Nation Arabe} which Arslān published in Geneva from 1930 to 1938. Italy represents a particularly interesting case insofar as it could be seen as an ally against the colonialist western powers Britain and France in the Middle East, but was itself an imperialist regime that ruled an Arab country, Libya. I will shed light on how Arslān dealt with this dilemma in his articles. Although a comprehensive account of Arslān’s assessment of fascism certainly would have to include other works of this prolific writer, as well as his correspondence with politicians in Europe and the Islamic world, here I shall concentrate on \textit{La Nation Arabe} where he publicized his views for a larger audience, both western and Muslim.\footnote{For Arslān’s writings cf. William L. Cleveland: Islam against the West. Shakib Arslan and the Campaign for Islamic Nationalism (= Modern Middle East Series 10), Austin (Texas) 1985, VII-X; Friedhelm Hoffmann: Die Syro-Palästinensische Delegation am Völkerbund und Şakīb Arslān in Genf 1921-1936/46 (= Geschichte 83), Berlin 2007, 23-26; and the extensive biography Aḥmad al-Sharabāṣī: Amīr al-bayān Shakib Arslān, 2 vols., Cairo 1969 (1383).}

It is possible to distinguish two phases in his journalistic writings on Italy and Libya, one critical from 1930 to 1933 and one conciliatory, stretching from 1933 up to 1938.
2. Arslān and Libya³

Shakīb Arslān was born in Shuwayfāt in what is now Lebanon in 1869 into a family of Druze notables. Like many of his ancestors he began a career in the Ottoman provincial administration in his home region. When, in 1911, Italy declared war on the Ottoman Empire and invaded the North African province of Tripoli (what was to become Libya), Arslān launched one of his first large publicist campaigns in the Arab press and called for a determined defense of Africa’s last Muslim country not under European domination. In the spring of 1912, he volunteered himself for military service and spent a couple of months at the Libyan front, much like other future nationalist leaders from the Ottoman Empire did: not only Sulaymān al-Bārūnī, a central figure in the Tripoli Republic of 1918, but also Mustafa Kemal, the founder of modern Turkey, and Nūrī al-Saʿīd, the leading Iraqi politician from this state’s foundation in 1921 until the revolution of 1958, went to Libya to fight the Italian aggressors. Even though Arslān and others, who were truly committed to defending this last outpost of a Muslim empire against European imperialism, urged the government in Istanbul to continue the war, the Ottoman Empire signed a peace treaty with Italy in October 1912, as it was facing, with the Balkan Crisis, a new threat closer to its center.⁴

Arslān, who in 1914 was elected to the parliament in Istanbul, was always loyal to the Ottoman state. During World War I, he became closely associated with the Young Turks' Committee of Union and Progress (CUP; Ittihad ve Terakki Cemiyeti) that had taken power in the imperial capital in 1913. In fact, it seems that he contributed to the secret organization Teşkilat-i Mahsusa, set up by the War Minister, Enver Pasha, to continue warfare in Libya, among other tasks. Arslān's contacts to diplomatic circles in Germany, the Ottomans' ally in the war, date back to this period as well. Like his friend Enver, he resided in Berlin for some time after the war, hoping for the restoration of the Ottoman Empire.⁵

³ Regarding Arslān’s life I am basically following Cleveland: Islam (see FN 2); see also Sharabāṣī: Amīr (see FN 2), 63-129; for a critical assessment of Cleveland see Hoffmann: Delegation (see FN 2), 177-186.


Though not dissociating himself from pro-Ottoman convictions, Arslān entered Arab nationalist circles after World War I. In 1921 he served as secretary-general to the Syro-Palestinian Congress in Geneva and subsequently became the de facto leader of the permanent Syro-Palestinian delegation to the League of Nations in that city. From 1925 on, he lived permanently in Switzerland. The delegation’s aim (actually, the aim of all Middle Eastern nationalists of that period) was the abolishment of the mandate system in the former Ottoman Arab territories which the victorious western powers had established after the war. Formally conceived as a sort of European assistance program for newly created states, in fact "the mandate system was little more than nineteenth-century imperialism repackaged to give the appearance of self-determination." While the French controlled Syria and Lebanon, Britain ruled Iraq, Transjordan, and Palestine – all countries were put into existence completely anew. The nationalists assembled in Geneva demanded independence for a unified bilād al-shām (Greater Syria, i.e. all the states mentioned except Iraq) and an end to Zionist settlement in Palestine.

At the time the mandate system was instituted in the Fertile Crescent, the Italians in Libya started their policy of total control, by completing the military conquest, which after the war of 1911-12 had been only superficial. After the fascists had taken power in Rome in 1922, every compromise with local notables was terminated; under the command of General Rodolfo Graziani the so-called riconquista of the North African colony was brought to an end in 1931-2 with the capture and execution of the resistance leader Shaykh ʿUmar al-Mukhtār. The fascist administration of Governor Pietro Badoglio (the Italian Royal Army's chief of staff) employed a scorched-earth strategy and built concentration camps for the civilian population, resulting in a very high death toll in the eastern region of Cyrenaica. Italy's colonial policy changed again, when Italo Balbo, a leading figure of fascism and a popular aviation hero, became governor of Libya in 1934. The concentration camps were dissolved and the regime committed itself to an administration open to the demands of indigenous Arabs. This approach culminated in Mussolini's proclamation as the protector of Islam during his 1937 visit to the colony, even though Italy's 'pro-Muslim policy' was again called into question the next year when the fascist racial laws were promulgated. Apart from that, at the end of the 1930s, mass settler colonization started in Libya, which according to propaganda should become

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6 Cleveland: History (see FN 5), 161.
Italy's 'Fourth Shore'. Hence, for the local population the rebuilding of mosques was counteracted by the creation of exclusively Italian villages in Tripolitania and Cyrenaica and the growing racial segregation. In 1939, colonial rule was further affirmed, as the northern parts of the country were incorporated into the Kingdom of Italy as new metropolitan provinces.8

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As we shall see, Shakīb Arslān was quite positive about the developments in Libya from 1933 on. His activities in the inter-war period were not limited to Greater Syria, in any case. His main objective was certainly to rid his home country from French and British mandate rule. But while he was at times at odds with other nationalist leaders in the Arab East – where political organization was already relatively elaborated –,9 Arslān served as a kind of role model and mentor to the emerging independence movements in the Maghrib. He influenced the Moroccan ‘Allāl al-Fāṣi, who came from an Islamic-modernist background, as well as the more leftist or secular nationalists Messali Hadj (Maṣālī al-Hājj) from Algeria and Habib Bourguiba (al-Ḥabīb Bū-Ruqayba) from Tunisia – all united in their struggle against French domination.10

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There have been some uncertainties as to how Arslān should be labeled: can he be termed an Arab nationalist? Until after World War I, he was certainly an Ottoman patriot who even supported the CUP with its Turkish nationalist tendencies. Like many of his contemporaries, he then adopted an anti-colonial nationalism, which was, first of all, Syrian, but he never lost track of the Arab world as a whole (as his contacts to North Africa show). The paper he published in Geneva together with Ihsan El-Djabri (Iḥsān al-Jābirī) claimed to be the official mouthpiece of the Syro-Palestinian delegation until its dissolution in 1936. Nevertheless, it was not only concerned with events in the Mashriq and not even only with the Arab world, as the title La Nation Arabe would suggest, but with problems that mattered to Muslims worldwide. In contrast to other former Ottomanists from Syria, such as Sāṭi‘ al-Ḥuṣrī, Arslān never became entirely a pan-Arab nationalist.11 He remained much more embedded in the Islamic reformist tradition

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8 Cf. Wright: History (see FN 3), 131-168; Baldinetti: Emergence (see FN 4), 45-52; Nir Arielli: Fascist Italy and the Middle East, 1933-40, Basingstoke / New York 2010, 26-29, 96-103, 150-152.

9 Cf. Cleveland: Islam (see FN 2), 66-89; Khoury: Syria (see FN 7), 221-242; Michael Provence: The Great Syrian Revolt and the Rise of Arab Nationalism (= Modern Middle East Series 22), Austin (Texas) 2005, 143-145.


11 Cf. Choueiri: Nationalism (see FN 1), 56-100, 103; on the transition from Ottomanism to Arab nationalism see C. Ernest Dawn: From Ottomanism to Arabism. Essays on the Origins of Arab Nationalism, Urbana / Chicago / London 1973, 122-147; Keith David Watenpaugh: Being Modern in
established by Jamāl al-Dīn al-Afghānī and Muḥammad ʿAbduh – whom he had known – and continued by his close friend Rashīd Riḍā. Like them, Arslān was more a pan-Islamic, anti-colonial activist than a secular Arabist. His biographer William Cleveland calls his activities a "campaign for Islamic nationalism" and Albert Hourani considers them "a blend of Islamic reformism and Arab nationalism". Arslān's ideal was Islamic unity; although himself a Druze, he became a champion of Sunni Islam and even politically supportive of Ibn Saʿūd's Wahhabi movement.

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After the delegation to the League of Nations had split up in 1936, Arslān continued his publicist activity in Europe on his own. In 1938, he was offered the presidency of the Arab Academy in Damascus and decided to stop the publication of La Nation Arabe for the time being. The French mandate authorities prevented him from entering Syria, so he finally returned to Switzerland where he stayed until after World War II. Shortly after his return to Lebanon, which had just become independent, Shakīb Arslān died in Beirut in November 1946.
3. The Libyan Dilemma

3.1 The Critical Phase

Between 1930 and 1938, 44 articles on Italy and/or Libya were published in La Nation Arabe, almost all written by Arslān, their length ranging from a few lines up to 13 pages. Until 1933, the tone was always very critical if not accusing. The war of invasion in 1911-12 is depicted as an unprecedented crime, echoing earlier assessments in his autobiography as well as in his analysis of Muslim decline, Li-mādhā taʾakhkhara al-muslimūn wa-li-mādhā taqaddama ghayruhum? (Why have Muslims fallen behind while others progressed?) Arslān reproaches the Italians with the planning of genocide: "On voit bien que ce que fait le régime fasciste en Libye, c’est l’extermination de la race musulmane ni plus ni moins." He condemns the ruthless policy of conquest and dismisses pro-Arab statements as mere propaganda.

It seems that Arslān, during this period, regarded himself as somewhat of a spokesperson for the Libyans, in his position as an anti-colonial Arab lobbyist at the League of Nations. Nationalist movements west of Egypt were not yet as well organized around 1930, although Libya had produced the first republican regime in the Arab world with the short-lived Tripoli Republic after World War I and exiled Tripolitanian independentists were in contact with Arabist circles in Cairo, Beirut, or Damascus. In one of the first issues La Nation Arabe published an open letter to Mussolini by the Tripolitanian nationalist leader Bashīr al-Saʿdāwī; but in general Arslān seems more sympathetic to the Sanūsiyya brotherhood, the reformist Islamic order that sustained the resistance in Cyrenaica with


ʿUmar al-Mukhtar at its head. He uses derogatory terms when talking about fascism, which he describes as a kind of medieval barbarism, and says the rule of Mussolini's clique is not the same as Italy, because fascism is "une violence faite à l'Italie" as well. At the end of 1932, Arslân was still assuring his readers that Italian atrocities in Libya would never be forgotten throughout the Islamic world: "Mais cette acte odieux de l'Italie restera dans l'histoire universelle une souillure [...] et ne quittera jamais la mémoire des 400 millions de Musulmans [...]."

3.2 The Conciliatory Phase

 Later on, we can find an article, which directly contradicts the statement quoted above: "Les adversaires arabes de l'Italie ne veulent pas entendre ces vérités. Comme des hallucinés, ils ne font que répéter le nombre des Arabes tués par les Italiens en Tripolitaine, mentionnant à cette occasion Omar El-Mohktar [sic], et ils proclament sans cesse le devoir de combattre cette puissance, ceci sans aucune utilité politique et seulement par esprit de parti et de vengeance. Ils oublient que les actes de l'Italie sont entrés dans l'histoire." The moment when Arslân changed his tone from critical to conciliatory can be easily identified: in the spring of 1933, he claims to have heard that the Italian government wants to meet Arab demands in Libya. It is not really clear, whether there had been contacts between Arslân and the Italian government prior to this moment (apart from a meeting with Mussolini in 1922). But at the end of the year, the amir traveled to Rome to attend the Muslim Students' Congress held there. In February 1934, he met again the leader of fascism in the Italian capital: this time, "Arslan added Mussolini to his public list of personal friends".

Immediately after that, Arslân speaks about "la modération exemplaire [...] dans la


24 Arslan: Omar Moukhthar (see FN 18), 2; see also Arslan: Lybie (see FN 18), 1., 4; Chékib Arslan: Les faux démentis fascistes, in: La Nation Arabe 7-8 (juillet-août 1931), 23-25, here: 23.


politique italienne". He praises Mussolini for having listened to the grievances of Libya's Muslims and even depicts a prosperous future for the North African country when writing in true colonialist diction about "cette colonisation italienne qui mettra en valeur les forces naturelles de la Libye au profit de tous." When Italy attacked Ethiopia in 1935, public opinion in the Arab world was mainly on the side of one of the few independent states in Africa and against the latest instance of European imperialism. Even at this point, despite his reputation as a fierce anti-colonialist – Arslân did not turn against Mussolini's regime. Contrasting discriminations against Muslims in the Christian Ethiopian empire with the new pro-Islamic policy of fascism, he refused to condemn the Italian colonial war. He actually seems to adopt the Italian propaganda view of the western powers – which had imposed sanctions on Italy through the League of Nations - being only anxious to guard their own colonial possessions against a new rival: "Lorsque l'Italie veut poursuivre son expansion coloniale on lui dit: Halte-là! Mais, dès qu'il s'agit de l'Egypte, de la Palestine, de la Tunisie, du Maroc, de l'Algérie, etc., personne n'a le droit de souffler mot!"

Official circles in Britain and France "labeled Arslan as the sponsor of hostilities which Palestinians (or Syrians, or Moroccans, or Algerians) would not, by themselves, initiate. Himself manipulated by sinister forces in Rome, he must have been the agent through which discontent was fomented and rebellion sustained." But even in the Islamic world, this pro-Italian stance led to rumors that Arslân was in fact not a committed fighter for Arab independence, but a paid agent and propagandist for the fascist government. With Italian propaganda activities intensifying, following Count Galeazzo Ciano's (Mussolini's son-in-law) taking office as foreign minister in 1936, Arslân was indeed considered one of the most important contacts for the fascist government in the Middle East. He received funds from Italy – as well as from Germany –, but Cleveland believes that he never used this money for personal gain. Instead, he put it towards his political activities, which he

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30 Cf. Arslan: Erythrée (see FN 29).
33 Cleveland: Islam (see FN 2), 150; cf. Khoury: Syria (see FN 7), 513-514.
tried to finance by all means possible. The former Druze feudal lord in Switzerland was always in a precarious situation. On the other hand, Rome was certainly more interested in creating alliances with independent rulers like Imam Yaḥyā of Yemen or King Ibn Saʿūd (actually, ‘Abd al-ʿAzīz b. ‘Abd al-Raḥmān) of Arabia than with individual publicists. Consequently, money grants to Geneva were limited.34 Arslān defended himself against such accusations, most emphatically in the context of the so-called forged-letter incident in 1935: a Palestinian newspaper, opposed to him, and especially to his friend Amīn al-Ḥusaynī (the mufti of Jerusalem), had published a letter, containing evidence of Italian payments to both Arslān and al-Ḥusaynī in exchange for pro-fascist propaganda in the Middle East. Arslān claimed the letter to be a forgery (which it most probably was) and explained that he had sought Italian support only to win an ally in his struggle to rid Muslims of British and French colonial rule.35

4. Pro-Fascism in La Nation Arabe?

4.1 Italy as an Ally

In his defense against the forged letter, Arslān stated quite clearly why he wanted to be on good terms with the Italian government: "Comme, depuis quelque temps, les mesures de modération que son Exc. M. Mussolini a commencé à prendre à l’égard des musulmans de Libye nous ont réconcilié avec l’Italie, dans l’espoir que cette politique de rapprochement italo-arabe continuera pour le bien des deux nations, et comme l’Italie, en sa qualité de grande puissance mondiale, pouvait s’opposer à la judaïsation de la Palestine et exiger aussi l’exécution des promesses concernant l’indépendance intégrale de la Syrie, nous avons donc suivi [...] la politique positive qu’exigent les intérêts de la nation arabe. L’Italie ayant joué un rôle très obligeant dans la question de l’indépendance de l’Irak, elle pouvait aussi nous aider en Syrie et en Palestine par une politique pro-arabe."36 The nationalists in the Fertile Crescent were generally opposed to the League of Nations that had set up the mandate system and was perceived as a tool for the colonial and foreign policy of France and the United Kingdom.37 A similar view was put forward by the future Axis powers Italy, Germany, and Japan during the 1930s. In La Nation Arabe many articles can be found that are critical of the world organization based in Geneva and supportive of Italian or German positions towards it.38

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34 Cf. Cleveland: Islam (see FN 2), 144-154; Arielli: Italy (see FN 8), 79, 110-112.
36 Arslan: Perfidie (see FN 35), 278-279; cf. Arslan: Monde (see FN 27), 24-25.
37 Nevertheless, admission to the League of Nations was seen as an important expression of sovereignty as in Iraq (in 1932) and Egypt (in 1936) after the respective treaties with Britain.
38 Cf. for example Chékib Arslan: Le Plébiscite de la Sarre. Victoire éclatante pour
Beside the mandate system, in general, it was particularly British support for Zionist plans in Palestine, which Arslān and his fellow Arab nationalists opposed. The fear of Palestine becoming an entirely Jewish country and losing its Arab and Muslim character is very present throughout the issues of *La Nation Arabe*. Exactly those misgivings were exploited by Italian and German propaganda efforts, at least from 1936 onwards when the fascist regimes came into conflict with Britain and the Palestinian Arab Revolt erupted.\(^{39}\) Hence, a rapprochement between Syrian nationalists and fascist Italy (and Germany) was a logical alliance of forces that wanted to overthrow the post-World War I international order. Arslān's attempts to gain European supporters for anti-Zionism and Arab independence in Italy is exactly what Basheer M. Nafi has described as "the Arab nationalist vision of a West against the West".\(^{40}\)

### 4.2 Ideological Affinities

The question remains, whether there was more to Arslān's sympathy for Italy than international *realpolitik*. One of his main concerns is Jewish immigration into Palestine, and he accuses the Zionists of controlling the western democracies' foreign policy and plotting against the Arabs (not least by means of the famous forged letter!).\(^{41}\) Although Mussolini's fascism was not as fanatically anti-Semitic from the beginning as German National Socialism, there existed strong anti-Jewish tendencies in it that led to the promulgation of racial laws in 1938, modeled after the German precedent. Thus, anti-Semitism could be a possible point of converging ideologies. Possessing a colonial African empire in contrast to Hitler’s regime, though, in fascist Italy not only Jews but also Arabs and other inhabitants of North and East Africa were immediately targeted.\(^{42}\) These consequences were, of course, very unpopular in the Middle East; the racial ideology of fascism had no appeal for the Arabs, which were considered themselves Semites according to such theories.\(^{43}\) From the pages of *La Nation Arabe* nothing beyond a strict

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\(^{39}\) On the Palestine problem cf. Cleveland: History (see FN 5), 233-264; Gelvin: Middle East (see FN 7), 206-215; Arielli: Italy (see FN 8), 104-107, 109-130; Nicosia: Nationalism (see FN 1), 356-361.

\(^{40}\) Nafi: Arabs (see FN 1), 8.

\(^{41}\) Cf. Arslan: *Perfidie* (see FN 35), 277.

\(^{42}\) On the racial laws cf. Arielli: Italy (see FN 8), 150-152.

anti-Zionism can be detected – as for Jews in general, Arslân's thought stayed basically within the framework of the traditional Islamic institution of *dhimmia*. The closest he gets to anti-Semitic views can be found in an article on discriminatory laws in different European countries: "Les Juifs, d'après leur loi, ne connaissent ni la tolérance, ni l’égalité vis-à-vis des autres peuples. Alors, en Allemagne, en Pologne, en Roumanie et en Hongrie, on les paie de la même monnaie [...]".44 In the same article, however, he dismisses racism as contrary to Islam. And, despite his uncompromising rejection of a Jewish national home in Palestine, he met with Zionist leader David Ben-Gurion (who was to become the first prime minister of the State of Israel) in his house in Geneva in 1934.45

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In another passage, dealing with Libya again, he adopts European racist rhetoric to argue that Arabs and Berbers, among others, are too civilized to be dominated by colonial powers: "Ce n’est pas à des peuples pareils qu’on peut témoigner du mépris et manifester l’opinion européenne qu’ils n’ont pas droit à l’égalité!"46 This seems to imply that there are other ethnic groups, which could be legitimately subjected by more advanced peoples. Nevertheless, at a time when some sort of racism was common sense even in the most liberal democratic societies of the west, this cannot be seen as an actual expression of pro-fascist leanings.

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In fact, it seems that Arslân – who had become politically active as a Druze notable in the Ottoman Empire – shared more of the conservative features of fascism. As Keith David Watenpaugh has shown for Syria, the modern and revolutionary characteristics of Hitler’s or Mussolini’s mass movements appealed much more to an emerging nationalist middle class that wanted to overcome the elitist, Ottoman-style politics of notables, typical for Arslân’s generation and social class.47 Despite a visit to Soviet Russia at the beginning of the 1920s, where his former associate Enver Pasha lived in exile, he was later firmly opposed to Communism, which he did not even consider as a possible ally against western imperialism, as other anti-colonialists did.48 In this context, he reports mostly positive about a proclamation, issued by Spain’s nationalist government during the civil


47 Cf. Watenpaugh: Being Modern (see FN 11), 255-278; Provence: Revolt (see FN 9), 65-70; on mass movements modeled on Fascism cf. Wild: National Socialism (see FN 43), 131-137.

war to the Muslims of Spanish Morocco, which emphasizes the similarities in anti-bolshevist spirituality between General Franco’s movement and traditional Islam. Still, Arslān adds a skeptical note, stating that in the end the internal nature of European governments does not matter, as long as they are friendly toward the Muslim world. The amīr certainly agreed with the importance given to the militarist conception of national honor inherent in fascism. For instance, at one time he congratulated Mussolini on appointing Marshal Balbo to the governorship of Libya: “La meilleure chose que le Duce ait faite à ce sujet, c’est le choix, on ne peut plus heureux, du Maréchal Balbo, pour l’administration de la Libye. C’est un soldat conscient de l’honneur militaire et du sentiment du devoir nécessaire à un vrai patriote, qui veut réellement servir son pays.” But even this quote is arguably more in keeping with his aristocratic view of politics than with a fundamental propensity towards fascism.

4.3 Admiration for Mussolini

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In line with these elitist political convictions is Arslān’s admiration for Benito Mussolini as a strong national leader. The question of the caliphate, officially abolished by the national assembly of the new Kemalist Republic of Turkey in 1924, played an important role in Arab nationalist and Islamic circles at that time. As a former supporter of the Ottoman sultan, as well as of the CUP’s military regime, Arslān always hoped for an Arab-Islamic political revival under the leadership of a determined ruler, such as the Hashemite Fayṣal (who, in 1921, became the first king of Iraq) or his rival, the king of Saudi Arabia. For some time, he was also friends with ‘Abbās Ḥilmī II, whom the British had deposed as khedive of Egypt because of his pro-Ottoman tendencies. He probably even preferred a monarchical regime for an independent Syria over the parliamentary republic set up under the French mandate. It is possible that Mussolini’s gesture as self-proclaimed protector of Islam appealed to Arslān to a certain extent. The Italian regime, in this instance, tried to depict itself as a benign colonial power, closer to the ancient Roman Empire than to the ‘plutocratic’ imperialism of materialist western democracies.

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52 Cf. Khoury: Syria (see FN 7), 355-359; Kramer: Awakening (see FN 15), 106-108.
proponent of the pre-World War I imperial order, who had always favored the sultan in Istanbul as an ecumenical Islamic ruler instead of ethnic nationalism, Arslân maybe really believed in Italian colonialism as being different from French and British colonialism.

The same can be said about Arslân's connection to the other fascist power. When the German emperor, Wilhelm II, visited the Ottoman Empire in 1898, including Syria and Jerusalem, and proclaimed himself a friend of the Muslims, the Druze notable accompanied him during his stay in Damascus. Arslân's amicable ties to Germany dated back to this period. In 1935, he published a lengthy defense of Wilhelm's policies in *La Nation Arabe*. In fact, during the Hitler regime, his contacts with the aristocratic Prussian diplomats from the foreign office in Berlin persisted, who had started their careers during the Kaiser's reign. He never met with any high-ranking figures of the actual National Socialist hierarchy.

Mussolini fitted seemingly well into Arslân's conception of a vigorous leader. In his articles, he showed a tendency to attribute everything deplorable in Libya to subaltern officials, while excluding the head of the regime completely from his critical statements: "Mais, malheureusement, il n'y a pas plusieurs Mussolini en Italie et il n'est pas au pouvoir du Duce de transformer tout le personnel de son ministère des Colonies, ni tous ses représentants en Afrique, en génies dont la hauteur d'intelligence et l'élévation de sentiment seraient capables de faire disparaître tout malentendu entre Italiens et musulmans." For him personally, the leader of fascism had never done anything wrong with regard to the Muslim world; the blame was on the administration – a motif not uncommon in dictatorships.

### 4.4 Distance from Fascism

In spite of all those positive assessments of various elements of fascism, Arslân at times explicitly distanced himself from it. As has been already mentioned, while he expressed

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55 Cf. Adal: Arslan (see FN 15), 177-180; Cleveland: Islam (see FN 2), 139-144; Wild: National Socialism (see FN 42), 127-130, 137-138.

56 Arslan: Plaintes (see FN 45), 1086; cf. Arslan: Restitution (see FN 49).

57 Cf. Arslan: Ondes (see FN 32), 879; Arslan: Problème (see FN 32), 514.
some understanding for anti-Semitic legislation in Europe, he saw such government action as contrary to Islamic principles – on whose universality, regardless of race, he insisted. He was opposed to European racism, directed, in his view, as much against Arabs and other colonized peoples as it was against Jews. In one article he criticizes in harsh words the racial theories of Alfred Rosenberg, the most prominent Nazi ideologue after Hitler. Furthermore, his collaborator al-Jābirī claimed that oriental nationalisms were fundamentally different from their aggressive European counterparts. In an open letter to a French socialist politician Arslān even declared himself a liberal, opposed to any form of dictatorship: "Pour les socialistes, il faut absolument se dresser contre Mussolini. Je le comprends très bien, et comme socialiste on a parfaitement raison. Moi-même, je n’aime pas la dictature. Je suis pour la Constitution. [...] Nous ne sommes pas fascistes, nous sommes pour le régime libéral partout."  

5. Conclusions

Shakīb Arslān's main objective, throughout his life, was to free Greater Syria from European domination and to prevent the establishment of a Jewish state in Palestine. To achieve this, he was constantly looking for allies, and Italy was one possibility. This possible understanding between Syrian Arab nationalism and fascist Italy led him to even tolerate Italian colonialism in Libya, which he once had so fervently opposed. It is possible that Arslān was actually hoping for a new kind of colonialism, more susceptible to Muslim needs, which Mussolini’s regime would introduce in the 1930s. It does not seem likely that his change of mind in 1933 was triggered by direct (financial) Italian influence: "It seems highly probable, that Arslān spontaneously endorsed the fascist policy; it was only later that the Italian authorities saw in Arslān a potential ally [...]" Even though Tripolitanian and Cyrenaican anti-colonialists at the time were quite resentful about one of the most prominent Islamic activists defending foreign rule in their country, a Libyan work, published after independence, shows some understanding for those maneuvers in search for a European ally on the international scene.


59 Arslan: Problème (see FN 32), 516.

60 Baldinetti: Emergence (see FN 4), 100.

While there is general agreement on the fact that Arslān was attracted to the fascist powers mainly as to potential allies against France and Britain (or the League of Nations), there were certainly some ideological elements in fascism which appealed to him. Nevertheless, these were only the nationalist-conservative, authoritarian features as opposed to the new political style of violent, revolutionary right-wing mass movements, brought about by fascism. Arslān "was more a nostalgic cosmopolite than a social reformer, more concerned with cultural integrity than with the reasons for rural poverty." It was only after "the multiple deaths of the Ottoman citizen", i.e. in the generation after the Druze amīr, that Arab nationalist movements emerged, which did not look at an Islamic past but at the present of European fascism. Arslān was a conservative, who hoped for a revival of the Islamic world as a force in international politics and who certainly admired strong, authoritarian leadership, but he was no fascist, not even "the most ideologically-oriented" among Arab leaders in the inter-war period. He was a pragmatic activist, hoping to liberate the Middle East from European rule by aligning himself with a European power.

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63 Cleveland: Islam (see FN 2), 162.
64 Watenpaugh: Being Modern (see FN 11), 95.
65 See FN 46; on Arab nationalism cf. Hourani: Thought (see FN 10), 291-323; Dawn: Ottomanism (see FN 11), 148-179.
66 Nafi: Arabs (see FN 1), 18.
67 I would like to thank my friend Arne Plum for his help.