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On Noble and Inherited Virtues: Discussions of the Semitic Race in the Levant and Egypt, 1876–1918

Orit Bashkin

The Department of Near Eastern Languages and Civilizations, The University of Chicago, 5828 S University Ave, Chicago, IL 60637, USA; oritb@uchicago.edu

Abstract: This article examines new notions about race, ethnicity and language current in modern movements of Arabic literary and cultural revival. I argue that the Arab print market before World War I adopted the racial category of the Semite as highly relevant to Arab ethnicity and language, but the philological and literary significations of the term subverted the negative constructions affiliated with the Semitic races in Western race theories. Combining elements from the study of linguistics, religion, and political philosophy, Arabic journals, books, and works of historical fiction, created a Semitic and Arab universe, populated by grand historical figures and mesmerizing literary and cultural artifacts. Such publications advanced the notion that the Arab races belonged to Semitic cultures and civilizations whose achievements should be a source of pride and rejuvenation. These printed products also conveyed the idea that the Arabic language and Arab ethnicity can create ecumenical and pluralistic conversations. Motivated by the desire to find a rational explanation to phenomena they identified with cultural and literary decline, Arab authors also hoped to reconstruct the modes with which their Semitic and Arab ancestors dealt with questions relating to community and civilization. By publishing scientific articles on philology, literature, and linguistics, the print media illustrated that Arabic itself was a language capable of expressing complex scientific concepts and arguments.



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1. Introduction

In 1917, *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland* featured an article on “The Physical Characters of the Arabs” by Charles Gabriel Seligman (1873–1940), a British physician and ethnologist who taught at the London School of Economics and whose students included such noted anthropologists as Malinowski and Evans-Pritchard. Having published about the Hamite and Semite features of the Africans, he provided the following notes on the Arabs:

Probably there is no country in the world of equal area with Arabia, certainly there is none approaching it in historic interest, of whose inhabitants we are so profoundly ignorant. This applies not only to the natives of the Peninsula, but also to the Arabs of the Sudan, and to the Beduin of Western Asia and the Egyptian Desert. In fact, there is not a single family of the great Arab stock that has been adequately examined. (Seligman 1917, p. 214)

Seligman then proceeded to examine skulls from Arabia found in the Museum of the Royal College of Surgeons (one brought from Midian by famous British Orientalist Sir Richard Burton) to confirm some observations on Arab physiognomy.

What Seligman did not know, however, is that during the same period, Arab writers, thinkers, and novelists endeavored to write the history of their ethnicity and race. They relied less on physical anthropology and more on philological and literary studies, as they explored the features of “the great Arab stock”. In this article, I argue that the Arab writers who discussed their linguistic, ethnic, and racial identities challenged European racial

categories and produced fluid and inclusive models of community and ethnicity (Bashkin 2010a, 2021; Furas 2020; Dawn 1993).

While the constructions of concepts such as “Arab” and “Semite” by Arab writers corresponded to deliberations conducted in the fields of Semitic, Near Eastern, and Islamic Studies in the European academia, these discourses nonetheless subverted key elements regarding Semitic cultures current at the time in Western media and culture. European anti-Semites who advocated “scientific” race theories maintained that the mixed racial composition of the Semitic people, which included the features of both black and white peoples, led to the development of negative characteristics within the Semitic racial group and to its inability to integrate into Aryan European cultures. Arab thinkers, however, claimed the exact opposite. They argued that speakers of Semitic languages interacted with other cultures and that this mixing and mutual fertilization were in fact extremely beneficial to the Arabs in particular and to global civilization more generally; the Semites, in fact, contributed significantly to global progress and to world religions.

Arab writers and scholars of Arabic literature describe the period from the mid-19th century to World War I as the period of the Arab cultural revival, signified by the Arabic word, *al-Nahda*. The *Nahda* entailed the renewal of Arabic literature and culture, manifested especially in projects of translation of European works into Arabic and the adoption of new literary genres, such as the newspaper article and the novel, as vehicles of literary and cultural expression. The print culture of this period addressed educated audiences in the public spheres of Beirut, Damascus, Cairo, Baghdad, and Jerusalem (Starkey 1998; Tageldin 2011; Hanssen and Weiss 2016; Bashkin 2021; El-Ariss 2018b). The *Nahda*, as Eve Troutt Powell (2003, 2012) has shown, internalized European ideas of racial and racist differences between blacks and whites but, at the same time, produced discourses that challenged these very same divisions.

Race was, and is, a constructed category that historically served the political and socioeconomic interests of empires and states and justified their othering, colonizing, and enslaving of vast communities. As Edward Said (1978) has demonstrated, Western studies of Arab culture, language, and ethnicity supported Western colonial and imperial projects in the Middle East. Arabic-speaking intellectuals of various religions and ethnicities, nevertheless, reclaimed elements from Western Orientalism, such as Semitic philology, and engaged in the production of encyclopedias, historical novels, and literary journals that undid European systems of classification and categorization. Scholars such as Yasmeen Hanoosh (2019) and Alda Benjamin (2015) have convincingly illustrated how members of Middle Eastern religious and ethnic groups came to terms with the Arabization efforts of nation states in the period after the First World War. Conversely, the cultural and literary efforts I explore underscore the ways in which writers, intellectuals, novelists, and poets in imperial frameworks adopt, adapt, and recreate anew concepts and ideas about Arab ethnicity itself, the Arabic language, and the cultures it shaped.

This article focuses on the later stages of the *Nahda*. My starting point is the year 1876. In this year, Lebanese intellectual Butrus al-Bustani (1819–1883) published the initial volume of the first modern Arabic-language encyclopedia in Beirut, *Da'irat al-ma'arif* (*The Compass of Knowledge*, 1876–1900), which included items on global history and geography and on the Arab and the Mediterranean world (Bustani 2019; Sheehi 2000; Abu-Manneh 1980). The year 1876 also saw the publication of the first cultural scientific magazine, *al-Muqtataf*, in Beirut (Glaß 2004). In this year, the first parliament in the Ottoman Empire was established, a step that inspired new debates on the rights of ethnic communities with respect to political representation. From this year until World War I, the Arabic print media popularized narratives concerning the cultural, historical, and racial features of the Arabs and their categorization as Semites. Coalescing romanticism, historicism, popular science, and pulp fiction, these literary and cultural publications endowed their modern Arabic readers with temporal, epistemological, and spatial dimensions of their identity (Hafez 2017; Ayalon 1995; Khuri-Makdisi 2010).

These reflections in the print media assumed political importance as Arabs demanded cultural and linguistic rights in the Ottoman Empire. While most did not want to part from the Empire, Arab thinkers felt that as members of a group whose distinct cultural and linguistic characteristics gave birth to the Islamic faith the Ottoman Empire claimed to have been defending and preserving, they deserved a say in imperial politics and in shaping the lives of the provinces in which they lived. The British occupation of Egypt, which started in 1882, generated further conversations on Arab, Egyptian, and Islamic cultures in response to British colonization and Orientalism. In the 1880s, moreover, Syrian and Lebanese writers migrated to Egypt, in part because of the harsh Ottoman censorship in their place of birth. A minority of Arab activists and writers went as far as suggesting rebellion against their Ottoman oppressors. Regardless of the political futures they envisioned for Arab communities, however, these writers constructed their self-image as men seeking innovative ways to assure that the Arabic language and Arab culture were awakened anew from years of long slumber into new beginnings (Patel 2013).

2. Creating a Terminology

Beginning in the 1830s, Arab writers, such as Nasif al-Yaziji (1800–1871), Ibrahim al-Yaziji (1847–1906), Butrus al-Bustani, and Ahmad Faris al-Shidyaq (1805/1806–1887), spearheaded new understandings of language and race. The civil war of 1860–1861 in Ottoman Lebanon and Syria, during which over 20,000 people, mainly Christians, lost their lives, inflicted much trauma on the people of the Levant (Makdisi 2000). On the other hand, the establishment of the Syrian Protestant College in Lebanon in 1866 opened up cultural and educational opportunities to Arab Christians, and these venues of social mobility led to new imaginings of community and society (Arnold 2014; Anderson 2011). More broadly, both trauma and anti-sectarian modes of mobility provoked a new set of questions relating to language and identity: What are the relationships between language, religion, and race? Could a language such as Arabic be a bridge between people of different faiths? How did the Arab language change over time and was it in need of reform or simplification?

The Nahdawi writers lived and breathed the Arabic language: They produced dictionaries and encyclopedias; they engaged in translating the Bible into Arabic with missionaries in Lebanon and in academic institutions in Europe; they quarreled with one another about the connections between language, religion, and civilization; they wrote works of poetry about language; and they established newspapers to discuss these themes. These Arab writers were likewise preoccupied with the region's past (Di-Capua 2009). They imagined themselves as belonging to, and reviving the works of, a long line of medieval and early modern Arab commentators who discussed the history of Arabic, with its forms and meanings and the social, historical, and political contexts that shaped it. At the same time, however, they associated their interests in semantics, morphology, syntax, and phonology with new academic disciplines that emerged in the West. As men who produced grammar books in Arabic and English and as educators who sought to simplify Arabic and composed Arabic textbooks for their students, they conceived of themselves as reformers who fashioned the present, and especially the future, of the language (Booth 2019; Hourani 1983; Makdisi 2009; Somekh 1991).

As Peter Hill noted, these debates about language and civilization led their articulators to believe that the people of the Levant and Egypt were part of a shared ethnic collectivity. During the first two decades of the 19th century, a group of Christian Syrian intellectuals in Egypt called the Damietta Circle evoked the term “Arab race” (*al-jins al-‘Arabi*) to describe their identity. While this term also appeared in the writings of the great Arab philosopher Ibn Khaldun (1332–1406), Hill suggested that Greek nationalism and Philhellenism might have inspired this perception of race. Members of the same race were thus people who spoke the same language (or languages that belonged to the same language family) (Hill 2015, 2020). In this context, Butrus al-Bustani (1862) used in his Arabic writings the term mother-tongue (*lughat umm*) to describe the relationship between Arabic and its speakers in the Levant.

The attempts to study the language of the Arab people undid notions of purity and a racial essence. As Rana Issa demonstrated, in his exploration of Arab civilization, Butrus al-Bustani distanced Arabo-Islamic civilization from Arabia. He was interested in the Syriac, Hebrew, and other Levantine language families that shaped Arabic and looked at the Bible, rather than the Quran, as an important textual source of his lexicographical projects, believing that Arabic, Hebrew, and Syriac were all sacred tongues (Issa 2017, p. 62). Others, such as Ahmad Faris al-Shidyaq, engaged in studying Syriac and Hebrew to understand Arabic morphology and grammar. Shidyaq's English grammar of Arabic said that Arabic belonged to the Eastern languages and pointed to the differences between its written form and "vulgar Arabic" (Shidyaq 1856, pp. 14, 21–22). This interest in Arabic and its relationship to other languages framed the discussions of the next generation of Nahdawis.

Tarek El-Ariss (2018a) insightfully suggested that Orientalist scholarship on Arabic language and literature fascinated many Nahdawis. Egyptian scholar Rifa'a al-Tahtawi (1801–1873) admired French Orientalist Silvestre de Sacy (1758–1838) for his knowledge of Arabic, and Tahtawi's translation projects from French to Arabic aided the comparative study of French and Arabic literary traditions (Tageldin 2010). During the years 1908–1952, European orientalists populated Cairo University and contributed to the formation of new linguistic and literary methodologies (Reid 1987). However, as El-Ariss (2018a), as well as Heschel and Ryad (2018) illustrated, Arab scholars also criticized Western Orientalism for its representation of the Arabo-Islamic ethos. Muslim and Jewish scholars challenged French political theorist and Semitic philologist Ernest Renan (1823–1892), who proposed that Semitic cultures were deficient in terms of their scientific advancement and the scope of their imagination. From Islamic reformer Jamal al-Din al-Afghani (1838/1839–1897) to Jewish scholar of Islamic law and theology Ignaz Goldziher (1850–1921), Arabs and Jews pointed to the ability of Semitic culture to produce fruitful and fascinating cultural models within the Jewish and Muslim faiths. El-Ariss further demonstrated that Ahmad Faris al-Shidyaq's encounters with Orientalists in England and France in the 1840s and 1850s led to both his critique of Orientalism and his reimagining of Arab culture's literary genres. The dual move of critique and appropriation formed ideas about the Semitic world, in other words.

The man who provided the *Nahda* with its key linguistic and cultural concepts was novelist, historian, and translator Jurji Zaydan (Philipp 1979). His writings advocated various modes of analyzing Arab cultures, races, and languages. Zaydan's *The History of Arabic Literatures* (Ta'rikh adab al-lugha al-'Arabiyya, serialized 1894–1895, published between 1910 and 1913) reflected the notion that languages and literatures, although possessing a certain national and racial essence, changed over time and influenced one another (Allan 2012). Zaydan saw himself as a contemporary to European political and social theoreticians and referenced in his book studies by Darwin and Le-Bon. Concurrently, however, he suggested that interests such as his in the histories of languages and cultures existed in medieval and early modern Arabic and Ottoman societies. While European scholars began to engage seriously with local languages only during the Renaissance, medieval Arab scholars documented the manuscripts found in libraries and chronicled the development of the languages and literatures of their times. Such scholars viewed language and literature as indicative of their people's mentality (*'uqul*), and subsequently, the study of language and literature existed in continuous fashion in the Arab world. Similar to German philosophers Johann Gottfried Herder (1744–1803), Johann Gottlieb Fichte (1762–1814), and Ernst Moritz Arndt (1769–1860), who held that language, history, and culture were the parameters that determined the individual's link to the national community, Zaydan too proposed that people's languages, literatures, and cultures are specific to their traits as nations. Language, he wrote, evidenced the ethics of a nation (*al-lugha dalil akhlaq al-umma*) (Zaydan 1957, p. 35).

The history of the Arabic language, however, was relational and only made sense if compared to other regional languages. The first chapters of the books set the background

to the rise of Arabic in the world of Semitic languages. Arabic's "Semitic sisters" (ibid., p. 26), such as Hebrew, Ge'ez, and various dialects of Aramaic, shaped the etymologies of Arabic words and concepts (ibid., p. 42). Zaydan opened his discussions with an analysis of the Semitic cultures in Mesopotamia, informing readers about cuneiform tablets whose contents conveyed linguistic developments in Assyria and Babylon. In addition to providing the available data on the history of Acadian, Zaydan used this information to construct the image of the Semites as a creative force that contributed to the development of global civilization. The Semites were interested in poetry and created great poetic works, and their orderly tendencies found their expression in legal works, as exemplified by the Hammurabi Code. Moving to the late antique period, Zaydan presented the history of what he viewed as the Arabic cultures of the Nabateans, again a Semitic culture that was responsible for the formation of a great empire.

Examining the Arabian Peninsula, Zaydan looked at different dialects of Arabic, which existed parallel to the dialect of Prophet Muhammad's tribe, the Quraysh. The period that immediately preceded the rise of Islam was of great importance to him because he felt that pre-Islamic (*Jahili*) poetry reflected the complexity and richness of Arabic and its ability to convey composite ideas, even though it was spoken amongst tribal and mostly illiterate communities. The complicated features of Arabic, in this sense, indicated that language was one measure by which to examine the complexity of societies; the Arab people were about to produce a great religion and develop new politics under the leadership of the Prophet Muhammad, and their language signposted the fact that a historical transformation was about to happen.

The rise of Islam, however, distanced Arabic from its Semitic surroundings. Islam introduced not only a religion whose scripture was in Arabic, but also a political system and a state. The new political structure changed Arabic. Sanskrit, Greek and Persian influenced Arabic even before the rise of Islam and the new Arab-Islamic state was successful in Arabizing the populations it conquered, but, Zaydan explained, the expansion of the geographic boundaries of the Muslim Empire brought with them new interactions with languages such as Turkish and Persian.

The History of Arabic Literatures underscored the dynamic nature of languages and their relationship to politics, religions, and cultural exchange. Contemporary linguists, as well as scholars of Semitic philology and comparative Semitics, will find many inaccuracies in the book, especially in its perception of many Semitic languages as proto-Arabic languages or early variants of this language and the subjection of their rich linguistic history to a narrative that celebrates the rise of Arabic. Its essentialist elements notwithstanding, the book presented its readers with sociolinguistic insights about the fact that languages changed based on time, space, and interactions between groups and classes; specifically, the book highlighted the fact that a diversity of religions and Semitic languages was part of the genealogies that formed the Arabic language and literatures its readers spoke and consumed. Literary critic Michael Allan therefore considers this work a monumental literary history for its scope and systematic periodization and the ways it shifts between poetics, philosophy, and linguistics within an innovative historical framework. This framing, Allan suggested, shaped the modern study of Arabic literature and introduced the scholarship of Orientalists from India, England, Italy, Spain, and France into the Arabic literary field. Zaydan included scholars such as Joseph von Hammer-Purgstall, Clément Huart, Carl Brockelmann, and R.A. Nicholson, although it is unclear whether he read the German sources himself (Allan 2012, pp. 184–86).

A less dynamic and, at times, racist model of the Arabic Language and the Arabic peoples appeared in Zaydan (1912) *The Layers of Nations* (*Tabaqat al-umam*). While noting that medieval Arabic works of geography inspired his book, Zaydan confessed that he aimed at producing a modern work of ethnography and anthropology grounded in the natural sciences. Zaydan's sources were mostly British and American, such as George Thomas Bettany's (1850–1891) *The World's Inhabitants or Mankind, Animals, and Plants* (1888), and Anthropology (1881) by Edward Burnett Tylor (1832–1917). Tylor was a proponent of

cultural evolutionism, and his theories explicated how groups advanced from savagery to barbarism to civilization. *The Layers of Nations* opened with a survey of global geology, moved to an exploration of the development of the species based on the models outlined by Darwin, and then provided a brief overview of the life of men during the prehistoric era (Zaydan 1912; Bashkin 2021, pp. 209–11).

With the rise of civilized societies, Zaydan divided the world's peoples into races, such as Caucasian, Mongol, Black, and Native American. The next chapters were dedicated to each of these racial groups and their sub-branches. The Semites appeared as a subgroup of the Caucasians; the Arabs were part of the Semites and included southern (the peoples of Himyar and Ethiopia) and northern peoples. Other Semites were the Assyrians, Aramaic-speaking people, and Canaanites, and their languages were quite close to one another. Numerically, Arabs were the largest Semitic group. Zaydan scrutinized the Arabs as he did with respect to other groups, using the tools of cultural and especially physical anthropology available during his day, paying great heed to their physiognomy and noting, for example, that they have white faces and black hair. He compared the Semites to the Aryans, suggesting that while the Semitic group was less diverse linguistically than the Aryans, its cultural features were quite remarkable, having given the world its three monotheistic religions, its first conceptualizations of ethics, and grand civilizations. Within the Arabs, however, he suggested that the Arabo-Semitic cultures of the people of Syria differed from those of Arabia, as this culture also absorbed Chaldean, Syriac, and Phoenician influences. A section on the Jews noted that their exilic location led to mixed cultural features (Zaydan 1912, pp. 233–36).

While celebrating the cultural diversity of the Semitic people, *The Layers of Nations* situated Semitic histories and languages within the confines of social Darwinist and evolutionary parameters. In that, Zaydan subjected the history of the Arabs (as well as the history of peoples of Africa and the Americas in other chapters) to a European racist gaze. The narrative presented in the book still subverted European racial division between Aryan and Semites and emphasized the great contributions of the Semites to world's civilization, and yet, the focus of his writings shifted to the biological features of the Arabs, such as the shape and sizes of their skulls, bones, and noses and the color of their skin.

The most fluid ethnic signification of the Arab peoples is found in Zaydan's novels. He authored 22 historical novels, which he serialized in his journal *al-Hilal* and which earned tremendous commercial success. The novels presented Islamic history from pre-Islamic Arabia to the present. Zaydan's construction of spaces and human bodies in these novels aimed at teaching his readers the history of the Arabic and Islam and at informing them about current scientific and anthropological research. Thus, his highly detailed descriptions of such spaces as Caliphal palaces or of streets and buildings in medieval Arab cities offered Arab readers information on architecture in medieval Baghdad and Cairo. Zaydan often depicted the physical features of certain Asian, Arab, Turkish, Jewish, and Black characters and of slaves and mercenaries of different ethnicities in accordance with the current anthropological and ethnographic studies of black and brown bodies. Finally, Zaydan was interested in political theory, and his novels called for putting an end to the oppression of religious and ethnic minorities, ridding humanity of the subjugation of tyrannical rulers, abolishing slavery, and granting greater rights for women (Tasdelen 2014; Bashkin 2010b; Sheehi 1999).

These highly conflicting elements produced very fluid racial significations of the Arab characters in his novels, which shifted from novel to novel according to the aims Zaydan set for each of them. His novels about the Islamic conquests featured Muslim Arabs as just rulers who respect religious minorities. Other novels, especially about the civil wars that plagued the early Islamic state after the death of the Prophet Muhammad presented ethics as superior to a rule based on tribal and ethnic affiliations; the fact that the Umayyad dynasty (661–750) comprised Arabs and sponsored Arab culture did not prevent their representation as villains (Zaydan 1911a). In novels about the 8th and 9th centuries, the Arabs were the unjust oppressors of the Persian people and of all non-Arab converts to

Islam, ousted from political centers of power because they did not belong to the ruling race (Zaydan 1911b). In the novel *al-'Abbasa, Sister of al-Rashid* (*al-'Abbasa ukht al-Rashid*), for example, the Caliph Harun al-Rashid, the novel's autocratic and paranoid protagonist, prevents the marriage of his sister to a man who is not an Arab (Zaydan 1906).

Despite the detail with which Zaydan constructed his Arab historical characters, the racial features of the Arabs were impossible to pin down. The Arabs could be honorable and reprehensible, chivalrous nomads and decrepit political rulers, saviors and enslavers, depending on the novel's pedagogical aims and the political allegory it narrated. The novels, then, did not only subscribe to European racial theories in their description of the physical features of heroes and antiheroes, but also challenged these very same racist stereotypes by showing that human behavior changed according to time and space and that the Arabs did not have essential biological features that predetermined their ethical conduct.

Zaydan's constant shifts between racism and cultural pluralism colored other works of his, with the latter trend being far more dominant. He paid tribute to the thriving pluralistic cultures of Islamic societies in his monumental *History of Islamic Civilization* (*Ta'rikh al-tamaddun al-Islami*, 1901–1906) and in a series of articles he published in *al-Hilal* on the history of world religions and on archeological and historical debates. His oeuvre generated the notion that similar ideas about races, languages, and histories, and the relationship between the three, could be conveyed in Arabic print culture using different genres, in both fiction and nonfiction narrative form; readers could discover new facts about Arab history in a lengthy academic book, in a newspaper article, and in a historical novel. This amalgamation of genres would color the efforts of other intellectuals and the scientific and literary journals they published.

3. Modern Semites and Modern Semitics

Cultural, scientific, and literary journals disseminated and shaped ideas about political theory, linguistics, human behavior, anthropology, archaeology, law, literature, philosophy, religion, the arts, economics, education, geography, psychology, and sociology in the Arabic language. Although edited and owned by individuals of diverse political and ideological leanings, these journals fostered shared conversations between members of different faiths and ethnicities, who consumed the products of the Arabic print market, as Ussama Makdisi (2019) has shown.

The journal that pioneered such efforts was *al-Muqtataf*, established in 1876 by the Arab Protestants Ya'qub Sarruf (1852–1927) and Faris Nimr (1856–1951), who studied and worked at the Syrian Protestant College. The journal was highly popular and circulated in the Middle East, Europe, and the Americas. After 1884, it moved to Cairo and was produced in a printing press owned by Shahin Makariyus (1853–1910). The journal popularized the interest in the Semitic origins of the Arabs, printing essays and stories on the history of the Arabs, on Semitic civilizations, on the history of Arabic and other Semitic languages, and on archeological excavations conducted in Syria, Palestine, Lebanon, and Arabia that exposed the ancient cultures of the Middle East (Glaß 2004; Bashkin 2010a; Farag 1972).

The first issue introduced an essay on the history of the Himyaritic language, a Semitic language spoken in ancient Yemen. Readers learned about its relationship to Arabic and about the history of the Arabic language itself. The article discussed the connections between Semitic languages spoken from West Asia to Ethiopia, although it doubted the usefulness of using the biblical genealogies attributed to the sons of Noah when deliberating such matters. In its exploration of the language's history, the article addressed the Semitic languages spoken by the Elamites and the Assyrians and then identified Aramaic, Hebrew, and Arabic as the three main Semitic languages; the article then examined the affiliations within specific Semitic sub-branches, such as the relations between Aramaic, Chaldean, and Syriac and between Hebrew, Canaanite, Phoenician, and Samaritan. Finally, the piece presented Arabic and its history, a discussion in which the investigation of Himyaritic was contextualized. Readers learned about the phonetical and morphological similarities

between Arabic and Himyaritic, about the differences between the Himyaritic writing system and those of the other Semitic languages, and about the information provided about the Himyaritic kingdom by medieval Arab scholars such as Ibn Khaldun and Abu Faraj al-Isfahani and from archeological excavations in Yemen. The story also indicated that archeological findings, inscriptions in particular, facilitated the comparative study of Himyaritic, Hebrew, and Phoenician scripts and allowed scholars to understand better the development of such languages (Bashkin 2010a, p. 98).

The inclusion of this piece in the first issue of *al-Muqtataf* was indicative of the editors' efforts to underscore linguistic and ethnic continuities between the ancient, late antique, and Islamic periods, pointing to the fact that medieval Arabic texts include much information about the cultures of South Arabia before Islam. Sciences, such as archeology and Semitic philology, complemented and enriched, rather than competed with, knowledge provided by the Arabic sources. Readers could consequently take pride in their language, Arabic, and in the modern tools that allowed them to know more about their culture.

The journal that contributed to the rise of Semitic philology and comparative Semitics in the most decisive fashion was *al-Mashriq* (The East). The journal featured articles on a variety of Semitic languages, printed annotated commentaries of recently published manuscripts, and ran stories on archeological excavations, especially in the Levant. It often printed translated articles on Semitics from Western languages alongside articles by Jesuits who resided in Beirut. Its editor was Louis Cheikho (1859–1927), a Jesuit scholar of Oriental languages and religions—born in Mardin to a Chaldean Catholic father and an Armenian mother—who taught Arabic Literature at the Jesuit Saint Joseph College in Beirut (Lammens 1929; Campbell 1972).

Unlike Zaydan and Bustani, whose writings turned Islam into a civilization with which Arab Christians and Jews could identify, *al-Mashriq*'s writers focused on Arab and Eastern Christianity. In this context, Arabic was not accorded the central role within Semitic Studies. There is no doubt that *al-Mashriq* played a decisive role in promoting the professional study of the language, and it even featured Arabic novels by Henri Lammens (1862–1937), an Orientalist historian and Jesuit from Belgium who also published academic papers and books on the history of the early Islamic state. Arabic, nonetheless, was only one, of many, Semitic languages, spoken by the region's Assyrian, Chaldean, and, at times, Jewish communities, which were equally important.

Semitic languages, indeed, were important to the study of the history of the region and its archeology. Whether commenting on Christian antiquities in the city of Gaza or on the history of the ancient Near East, authors cited biblical texts, inscriptions in Semitic languages discovered in Syria and Palestine, and chronicles written in Hebrew and Aramaic and addressed the cultures of the Phoenicians, Assyrians, and Canaanites (Musil 1898). The concentration on these languages, however, was key for the study of Arabic itself and the cultures of the Muslims in the late antique period.

An article on the prevalent languages in Syria in the pre-Islamic era exemplified the importance of considering Arabic in multiple linguistic contexts, criticizing scholars who pointed to loanwords in Arabic from the Greek or spoke of Arabo-Greek connections while ignoring the major contribution of Syriac to Arabic. This was particularly true for the Syrian colloquial dialect (*'Arabiyyat al-'amma*), which, unlike the Egyptian dialect, included many Syriac words. This type of interaction between Syriac and Arabic was unique to Syria and differed from the Jerusalemite case, in which Greek gained more significance because of the Greek presence in the city (Da'ud 1898). Different types of Arabic, then, evoked different regional histories, even within an exclusively Christian Levantine context. This line of thinking made sense to *al-Mashriq*'s community of readers and writers, who resided in the Levant and Iraq and were used to hearing, learned in church about, or spoke themselves as a native tongue, a dialect of Aramaic.

Syrian Arabic was not a unique case; in fact, *al-Mashriq* devoted much space to the region's Arabic dialects. It published an article by German Orientalist Martin Hartmann (1898) (1851–1918) on the importance of collecting data on the features of regional Arabic

dialects (*al-kalam al-darij*). Languages, he argued, changed according to geographical and historical circumstances. Hartmann explained that the study of Arabic dialectology became prevalent in the European academy, pointing, for example, to the studies by Wilhelm Spitta (1880) and Hans Bernhard Stumme (1864–1936), a German Africanist who studied Arabic and Ge'ez. The article included comparisons between classical Arabic (*fasiḥ*) and the dialects spoken in Beirut, Cairo, and Tunisia to reflect on the changes that occur in languages. *Al-Mashriq*'s also printed articles on the pronunciation of the consonant *jim* (ج), the fifth letter of the Arabic alphabet in various dialects. The topic was of interest to famous Arabists such as Henri Lammens and Ukrainian Ahatanhel Krymsky (1871–1942), as it provided a fertile ground to compare its pronunciation in other Semitic languages, in its Quranic readings, and in accordance with information provided on its pronunciation by medieval grammarians such as Sibawayhi (760–796). Krymsky's essay looked at several pronunciations amongst different speakers of Oriental languages, from speakers of Persian to Egyptians to Palestinians (Lammens 1898; Krymsky 1898).

While Nahdawi scholars at the time were interested in classical Arabic as a language unifying Arabs from different communities, the print culture also studied dialectology, recognizing the fact that the field gained much importance in the European academy. Not only Arabic, but also its different dialects, had interacted with other local languages, and this diversity was celebrated rather than critiqued. For Arab philologists who examined language families and the shared etymological legacies of Semitic languages, it seemed only logical to study the diversity of Arabic itself. This trend continued in other journals, such as the journal *Lughat al-'Arab* (The Arabic Language, established 1911), edited by Anastas Mari al-Karmali (Père Anastase-Marie de Saint-Élie, 1866–1947), a Lebanese Carmelite priest and linguist. Al-Karmali investigated Arabic's relation to Greek, as well as to other Semitic languages, in his journal, and authored publications, which documented local dialects, as well as proverbs from Baghdad, Mosul, and Basra (Nahar 2018).

Dialects were important within discourses regarding races and ethnicities. At the time, other visions of regional identity competed with the notion that the Arabic language and cultural heritage united the region's peoples and created a shared ethnicity. Using historical and philological research, Lebanese Maronite intellectuals, many affiliated with Saint Joseph University, assumed a Phoenician identity and distanced themselves from the Arab ethnicity. Egypt was another domain in which the intersection of dialectology and nationalism produced new identities.

Egyptian intellectual Hifni Naṣīf (1888) scrutinized these topics in a paper he delivered at the seventh congress of the Orientalist Studies in Vienna in 1888. When a person speaks, his dialect adds layers of meanings to the listeners. When he hears a person saying, "the moon has not come out yet" (*ma al-badar tali'an*), he gathers information not only about the physical phenomenon depicted in the sentence, but also, from hearing the dialect and from the structure of the sentence, about the speaker's location in Egypt. Egypt was blessed with many dialects, not unlike the French state; each of these dialects has a history, from the ways in which particular Arab tribes spoke the language upon the Arab conquest of Egypt to its many dialects in different Egyptian settings. As a scholar, he faced the challenge of reconstructing the features (*mumayyizāt*) of dialects; such an endeavor would also be vital to the Egyptian nation (*al-umma al-Misriyya*) and its communities.

Nasif's contemplations on the history of Egyptian dialects echoed similar ideas current in *al-Mashriq* concerning the need to reconstruct the social and historical environments that generated the development of the Arabic language itself by relying on Western Orientalist knowledge, Arabic chronicles, and actual fieldwork. In the late 1920s, Egyptian intellectual Salama Musa (1887–1958) would use racialized such observations about the distinctiveness of Egyptian dialects to deny the Arabness of the Egyptians, focusing on them being a part of Greek, Roman, and European civilizations and noting that their physiognomy was different from that of the Arabs (Musa 1927). Musa's solution was to abandon the Arabic language as a written language and replace it with Egyptian dialects, on the one hand, and with European languages, on the other. Nasif's publications, in contrast, emphasized the

connections between Arabia and Egypt and paralleled the publications at *al-Mashriq* that recognized the unique linguistic and cultural features of Syria, Egypt, and North Africa, which could not be simply subsumed under the broad rubrics of “Arab” or “Semitic”.

In addition to language, the region’s history fascinated the authors of *al-Mashriq*, which printed many articles and essays about biblical and ancient history. Narrated in similar ways to other *Nahda* publications, these histories provided readers with lessons about magnificent Semitic empires, underscoring their impact on global civilization and dismantling the myths on the racial inferiority of the Semites. *Al-Mashriq* ran a long story titled “Zaynab, the Queen of Tadmor” (*Zaynab malikat Tadmur*), covering the life and achievements of the Queen of Palmyra (Tadmor, Tadmur), Septimia Zenobia (c.240–c.274) or al-Zabba’ in Arabic sources. Zenobia reigned over the Palmyrene kingdom centered in Syria. Challenging Roman rule, her kingdom stretched from Central Anatolia to southern Egypt. Although the Romans ultimately defeated the Palmyrene kingdom, Zenobia became a symbol for the power of women and inspired writers and artists across the globe. In *al-Mashriq*, Zaynab became a Semitic queen. Using inscriptions and archeological evidence from Palmyra, the articles presented the context that produced this great monarch. Various sources were consulted to establish her position in the region and the historical setting that shaped the cultures of Palmyra, from the Bible to the chronicles of Josephus Flavius to the studies of Ignaz Goldziher; Zaynab, it was suggested, was a queen who altered the history of the world ([Ranzaqal 1898](#)).

Zenobia was a prominent figure in the *Nahda*, and articles about her circulated in major journals. The historical novel *Zanubya, Queen of Tadmor* (*Zanubya malikat Tadmur*) (1870–1871) by Lebanese author Salim al-Bustani (1846–1884) was published in the journal *al-Jinan*, established by Salim’s father Butrus al-Bustani. As Robbert A. F. L. [Woltering \(2014\)](#) noted, Zenobia becomes in Bustani’s novel a model for other women to follow, connoting beauty, justice, knowledge, bravery, and morality. Marylyn Booth showed that Lebanese intellectual Zaynab Fawwaz (1860–1914), who authored a biographical dictionary of great women, included Zenobia in her investigations of the ancient Semitic civilizations of the Middle East. Zenobia’s character was thus studied alongside other Semitic queens such as the Bilqis (the Queen of Sheba) and female biblical heroines such as Esther, Elizabeth, Ruth, Delilah, Rahab, Rachel, Rebecca, Sarah, and Susannah, as well as ancient Persian, Egyptian, and Egyptian-Greek great women. Fawwaz engaged with both medieval Arabic sources and contemporary studies to reconstruct Zenobia’s biography. Fawwaz’s biography of “Zaynab of Palmyra” likewise presented her as a symbol of beauty, a marvelous monarch, and a fearless conqueror ([Booth 2015](#), pp. 24–45, 141, 150, 189, 285). The essay in *al-Mashriq* corresponded to this broader network of literary works, in both fiction and nonfiction, which placed Palmyra at the core of global and Semitic civilizations and romanticized the historical image of its courageous leader.

Journals such as *al-Mashriq* and *al-Muqtataf* worked with and against racial categories. On the one hand, the relationship between language and ethnicity foregrounded their deliberations about peoples and nations. At the same time, however, the recognition that Black people, such as Ethiopians, spoke Semitic languages connected to Arabic and that Arabic dialectology pointed to the constant interactions of Arabic with other peoples and languages worked against essentialism and racism. The press created a Semitic multiverse, with fascinating narratives about ancient queens and biblical heroes that signaled out to Arab readers that Western knowledge in the fields of archeology, philology, and history could be used to bolster their pride in their culture rather than belittle it based on Orientalist models.

4. Islamicizing Arabic and Arabizing Islam

Other intellectual circles that embraced Arabic Studies were Islamic modernists. In the 19th century, Muslim religious reformers and writers were engaged in conceptualizing the relationship between Islam and modernity. They called to harmonize Islamic and scientific knowledge, arguing that Islamic cultures fostered learning and free inquiry,

especially during medieval times when Europe was plagued with religious fanaticism and sectarianism, and they championed new projects of exegesis in order to modify the faith to the needs of the modern period. Initially, members of modernist-Islamist intellectual circles were extremely suspicious of the emphasis on race. They maintained that Islam offered a universal message that appealed to all peoples, regardless of their race and color. Najafi intellectual Hibbat al-Din al-Sharastani cautioned the readers of his journal *al-'Ilm* (Knowledge) that racial divisions between Arabs, Persians, and Turks might curtail Islamic unity, which was sorely needed in an era of European dominance and colonial expansion (Bashkin 2019). Rashid Rida, one of the key intellectuals in this movement, claimed that secular France engaged in the most unjust campaign against Alfred Dreyfus, motivated by these ethnic and chauvinistic notions of nationalism (Bashkin 2018).

Yet, members of these groups were deeply committed to the study of the Arabic language and Arab culture. As Ahmad El Shamsy (2020) demonstrated, Muslim scholars were concerned that Europeans collected and printed the manuscripts of Arabo-Islamic culture and thus invested much effort in reviving Islamic tradition through the modern print industry. They therefore used tools from Semitic philology, comparative Semitics, and Oriental studies to reclaim and revive Islamic culture. Similar to their Christian colleagues, scholars such as Muhammad 'Abduh championed reform of the Arabic language, but also called to accord Arabic a central role in the education system, rather than using English or French.

Most importantly, despite their pan-Islamic ideology, Arab proponents of Islamic reform connected ethnicity to religion. In their view, Arabic was the language of the Quran; Islam originated in Arabia; medieval Muslim scholars wrote in Arabic; and Arabo-Islamic civilization gave the Ottoman Empire its faith and the justification for its existence. Some Islamic modernists even went as far as blaming non-Arabs, such as the Mongols, the Tatars, and other groups, for the decline of Islamic civilization. These intellectuals used print culture and scientific and literary magazines in order to mediate their ideas about Arabic, its history, and its relationship to the Islamic faith (Hourani 1983, pp. 222–45; Kerr 1966; Kurzman 2002).

Illustrating such interests in philology, Semitic studies, and Islamic culture is a journal called *al-Muqtabas*, established in 1906 in Cairo. Its editor was Muhammad Kurd 'Ali (1876–1953), a Syrian scholar who wrote extensively on Islamic and Arabic civilizations in Syria and Muslim Spain, in particular. *Al-Muqtabas* featured articles by Muslim intellectuals attentive to the Arabic language, Arab ethnicity, and religion, such as Muhibb al-Din al-Khatib. The paper devoted much space to philology, the efforts to preserve Arabic manuscripts, and the treasures of Islamic knowledge and Oriental and Arabic studies (Ezzerelli 2018).

Kurd 'Ali's perception of what constituted Arabo-Islamic culture was inclusive and included non-Muslims. *Al-Muqtabas* reported on the publication of the critical edition of *The Guidance to the Duties of the Heart* (*al-Hidaya ila fara'id al-qulub*) by Andalusian Jewish scholar Bahya ibn Paquda (1050–1120), a Jewish philosopher and rabbi from Zaragoza, Spain, whose *Duties* is considered to be the first systematic work of Jewish ethics. The scholar who published the edition was Abraham Shalom Yahuda (1877–1951, identified in the piece as "Ibrahim Salim al-Muqaddisi"), a Jerusalemite scholar of Baghdadi origins, who published the critical edition as part of his dissertation in German on ibn Paquda (Yahuda 1904). The article elucidated that ibn Paquda's *Duties* exposed the ways in which Jews learned from Islamic philosophy and Arab culture. Ibn Paquda, in fact, was not alone in this endeavor, because such luminaries as Maimonides and Sulayman (Solomon) ibn Gabriol also authored works that synthesized concepts from Islamic philosophy and that are yet to be published in European languages. The author aired his hopes that more works of this nature would appear in the near future (Y.D. 1907).

Ibn Paquda wrote in Judeo-Arabic, and yet, being part of Semitic and Arab culture, Kurd 'Ali felt it was imperative for his readers to familiarize themselves with Judeo-Spanish culture, which was also their own. *Al-Muqtabas* advanced the opinion that the expansion of

Oriental studies in Europe was a positive development, in that it produced critical editions and publications of Arabo-Islamic culture and discussed them in a scholarly fashion in newly established academic journals; Yahuda's (1904) edition served to exemplify this point. The authors who published in *al-Muqtabas*, however, also identified the racist and anti-Muslim tendencies in European publications and wished to propose a different platform for Islamic studies articulated by Arabs and Muslims.

The fact that pre-Islamic Arabia was perceived as a space in which Judaism and Christianity competed with one another and with polytheistic practices and faiths prompted interesting debates about religion in this period. In this context, *al-Muqtabas* published an essay by an unidentified Baghdadi reader on the pre-Islamic poet al-Samaw'al ibn 'Adiya, a legendary Arab Jewish poet from the 6th century, famed for his loyalty (Bauer 2012). Written in response to claims made by Louis Cheikho (1890) that al-Samaw'al (Samuel) converted to Christianity at the end of his days, the essay presented a lengthy refutation of Cheikho's claims. Based on medieval Arabic sources discussing the history of Yemen and the Arabian Peninsula, the author proposed that there was no textual evidence that such a conversion ever took place. The author also contended that many religions existed in pre-Islamic Arabia, including the worship of idols, Judaism, Christianity, and a type of monotheism that is referenced in the medieval sources and could not be pinned down to a particular faith. In this context, trying to enforce an overwhelmingly Christian identity on the region's historical subjects yielded very little scientific merit (Anonymous 1907).

The article illustrated that pre-Islamic Arabia was so significant to contemporary Arab thinkers that both Jews and Christians competed for their share in this Arab culture. Lital Levy (2008), Mostafa Hussein (2019), Jonathan Gribetz (2014), and Yuval Evri (2020) have pointed out that Middle Eastern Jews embraced Semitic history and philology to prove their indigeneity to the region and contribution to Arab culture. A few assumed an Arab identity and called themselves Arab Hebrews or Arab Jews. They published in the *Nahda* journals, and Arab colleagues of different faiths favorably received their participation in the *Nahda*; the publication of the article in *al-Muqtabas* is certainly part of this trend. Kurd 'Ali admired Jewish Orientalists such as Goldziher, but here his aim was different—it was to give voice to the region's Arab-Jewish culture (Escovitz 1983).

It is interesting to note similarities between the essay published in *al-Muqtabas* and a similar essay on al-Samaw'al by Palestinian Jewish author David Yellin (1864–1941), written in Hebrew a few years prior. Yellin was born in Jerusalem to a father who immigrated to Ottoman Palestine from Poland and a mother of Iraqi descent. Yellin wrote extensively on the similarities between Hebrew and Arabic, on Semitic philology, and on the history of the Jews of the Muslim world and composed Arabic-Hebrew dictionaries. His 1891 piece on al-Samaw'al situated the poet's biography as related to the history of Jewish tribes in Arabia, where Jewish tribes resided in Medina. In a highly romantic depiction of al-Samaw'al as a valiant warrior, Yellin compared al-Samaw'al and another bard, also named after the Jewish prophet Samuel, Samuel ibn Naghrilla (Shemuel Ha-Nagid, 993–1056), a Jewish Spanish scholar, general, and politician. To Yellin, both were Jewish heroes whose poetics mirrored the harsh life of the battlefield. Al-Samaw'al's poetry and the legends about him further conveyed chivalrous Arab nomadic values such as hospitality and generosity. The sources that the article consulted were medieval Arabic chronicles on pre-Islamic Arabia, its poetry, and nomadic ideals; Assyrian tablets; and the poetry of the biblical prophetess, Deborah, whose verses, similar to al-Samaw'al's, reflected the joy of Jewish tribal warriors at their victory (Yellin 1891).

Although written in Hebrew, the article bears striking resemblance to the narratives put forward by Zaydan and authors in *al-Muqtataf* and *al-Muqtabas*. For Yellin, as well as for these Arab writers, the Semitic and Arab space stretched from Arabia to Muslim Spain, and Hebrew and Arabic were both indigenous languages that helped scholars reconstruct the culture of the Arab peoples, including the Jews, who had a seminal role in its formation. Temporally, this Arabo-Semitic universe united biblical times, the Assyrian Empire, pre-Islamic Arabia, and medieval Muslim Spain as locales in which Semitic peoples existed and

engaged in politics and whose writings, especially poetry, in a variety of Semitic languages, conveyed local ethics and lofty ideals. In this context, Arab notions of Semitism were the antithesis to European Antisemitism.

Al-Muqtabas, however, did not only celebrate Arabic's past, but also articulated anxieties about its present and, especially, its future. The *Nahda* writers had to fend off criticisms of Arabic as being incapable of communicating complex scientific ideas. Multiple *Nahda* writers assured their readers that Arabic was more than capable of conveying modern scientific concerns and therefore should be the language of instruction in schools and institutions of higher learning. *Al-Muqtabas* took part in this debate, arguing that Arabs should learn in their own tongue. Arabic became a regional, and even global, language, under the Umayyad and the Abbasid empires, which defeated the Persians and Byzantines and allowed Arabic to take the place of Persian and Greek as the dominant regional language. Languages reflected culturally specific ideas about knowledge, political power, history, and law and instill in people the love of their nation. European Orientalists recognized the significance of Arabic, and there was no reason why its speakers should question its abilities. The scholarly explorations of Arabic's pedagogical potentialities insinuated to readers that instruction in Arabic would foster the recognition amongst its speakers that they belonged to one nation.

The meticulous histories the Arabic press printed on the richness of Arabic and other Semitic languages and the role of the Semites and the Arabs in cultivating the sciences thus contributed to contemporary debates about nationalism, pedagogy, and ethnicity. Sephardi intellectual Esther Azhari Moyal (1874–1948) summarized this position in another journal:

Our scientists and writers can then write architectural, moral, artistic, and scientific books, so that there will be nothing that cannot be set down in writing in their Arabic language, full of meanings and expressions, and that is not less important than the other powerful and well-known languages in expressing philosophic thinking. Hence, we can establish an Eastern Arab civilization based on noble inherited virtues and a love for work and achievement, and thereby take a prominent and unfringeable place among other civilized countries. (Moyal 2013)

Later in his career, Kurd 'Ali would continue his philological efforts in the Syrian Language Academy he helped establish. However, his journal indicated how he framed his ideas about language, ethnicity, and race in the first decade of the 20th century. *Al-Muqtabas*'s publications pointed out that Arabic and Semitic philology was vital to modern Arabs and Muslims and nurtured ecumenical conversations between scholars and peoples seeking to claim Arabic literature and culture as their own. In this universe of printed materials, a Beirut Jewish woman, a Jewish scholar editing Judeo-Arabic manuscripts, and Kurd 'Ali himself could all agree on Arabic's vitality as a key to past Islamic civilizations and as a language to be used to address the pedagogical, cultural, and national challenges of the modern world.

5. On Honorable Pedigree: Politicizing Arabic

The late 19th century saw the rise of proto-nationalist and nationalist movements identified with Arabism (*'uruba*), which were profoundly committed to Arabic literary and cultural renewal. Members of these movements differed, however, as to their perception of Ottoman imperial politics. Calls for greater participation of the empire's subjects in Ottoman politics led to the formation of an Ottoman parliament in 1876, which was repressed shortly after its establishment by a new Sultan, Abdulhamid II (1842–1918; reigned 1876–1909). Hamidian pan-Islamic politics benefited Arab Muslim intellectuals in the empire, and yet, the new Sultan's anti-constitutional and anti-parliamentarian tendencies and his stifling of free speech angered and oppressed others. A 1908 constitutional revolution put an end to the Sultan's authoritarian rule and gave rise to the hope that the new regime would enshrine constitutional, linguistic, and cultural rights. The lifting of severe censorship regulations after 1908 and the participation of male Arab subjects in two Ottoman parliamentary elections afterwards animated Arab public spheres. However,

soon after the revolution, the military junta at its head began emphasizing more Turkish language and culture, which Arabs were to adopt as part of imperial civilizational efforts. Turkish intellectuals, backed with their own racial theories about the significance of the Turkish people, now clashed with Arab writers who had spent the last decades writing about and studying Arab culture and ethnicity (Der Matossian 2014; Bozarslan 2016; Dawn 1973).

The responses of Arab subjects to these realities differed; most preferred staying in the Ottoman Empire but gaining greater constitutional and cultural rights; they greatly feared European colonialism and favored changing the political framework they knew from within rather than replacing it with a perilous colonial alternative. A small faction actually called for separation from the Ottoman Empire and the establishment of an Arab state. During the years of World War I, most intellectuals supported the Ottoman Empire, and yet, having to face the burden of conscription, ecological disasters such as diseases and hunger, and political corruption brought about by the War, they gradually turned their back on Ottoman rule. Furthermore, a family of notables from Mecca, led by Sharif Husayn of the House of Hashim, whose members traced their lineage back to the Prophet Muhammad, rebelled against the Ottomans with heavy British backing. Sharif Husayn's sons, Faysal and 'Abdallah, commanded Arab armies in support of their father's claim that he was the King of Arabs (although Husayn did not challenge the authority of the Ottoman Sultan as Caliph). To suppress the Arabist movement, under orders from the powerful Ottoman governor of Syria, Jamal Pasha, the Ottoman state put to death on 6 May 1916 Arab intellectuals and politicians in Damascus and Beirut (Antonius 1946; Khalidi 1991; Kayali 1997).

In this period, movements affiliated with Arabism emphasized not only the role of Arabic language and culture as a cornerstone of Arab identity, but also demanded rights for Arab subjects based on their ethnic origin and race. While scholars debated the success and spread of Arabist movements, an examination of the Arabic literary materials from the period reveals that pride in Arab culture and ethnicity was prevalent both in the camp that supported the Ottoman Empire and amongst those who sought Arab independence. Even within those who remained loyal to the empire, in other words, notion of race, pedigree, and origin were ostensible, especially in anticolonial publications.

Not all discourses centered on racial divisions. As C. Ceyhun Arslan (2019) noted, scholars such as Jurji Zaydan drew comparisons between Arabic and Turkish literatures in their writings from the late Ottoman period. Although Zaydan championed Arab cultures, he never called for secession from the Ottoman Empire and believed that an Ottoman imperial frame could maintain Arabism. Zaydan wrote on modern Turkish literature and compared the history of Turkish literature (*ta'rikh adab al-lugha al-Turkiyya*) to the Arabic literary tradition. Paying special heed to the works of Turkish intellectual Namık Kemal (1840–1888), Arab writers such as Ruhi al-Khalidi (1864–1913) and Ma'ruf al-Rusafi (1875–1945) looked at Kemal as a pioneer of a modern "Turkish nahda". These similarities, Arslan concluded, strengthened the perception that Arabic and Turkish literatures mirrored one another and influenced each other and inspired debates on cultural and literary heritage in Arabic writings. Some intellectuals held to these ideas even during the horrible years of the War.

Other discourses, however, underscored more the ethnic features of the Arabs, who were fearless warriors in the service of the Ottoman Empire. The romanticized perception of Arab ethnicity, marveling at the exceptional qualities of the Arabs of late antique Arabia, appeared in the Arabic neoclassical poetry written during the Ottoman War against the Italian occupation of Libya (September 1911–October 1912) and the Ottoman Balkan Wars (October 1912–July 1913). Arab poets wrote about the need of the East, the Arab peoples, and the Ottoman Empire to battle against the savage Christian invaders (Ginio 2005). Poets such as Egyptians Ahmad Shawqi (1868–1932) and Hafiz Ibrahim (1872–1932) underlined the importance of Islamic unity and Arab heroism. Iraqi poets in particular transformed the

noble, romanticized image of the Bedouin warrior into present-day Arab soldiers, fighting colonialism in the name of Islam.

Iraqi poet 'Abd al-Muttalib al-Hilli (1865–1920) conveyed his pan-Islamic tendencies in a poem he wrote to encourage the Arabs and the Ottomans in their war against Italy. The poet contrasted the qualities of the virtuous Arabs with the callous Westerners: “You are ignorant of the fact that we are Arabs, since birth// to whom no injustice can be done” The Arabs, the speaker affirmed, using the first-person plural, were a nation (*qawm*) committed to their fathers and ready to combat the Italians courageously and relentlessly. He pledged that the Arabs would avenge the blood of the innocent women and their unborn children killed in the torturous campaign; it was the burning need of the Arabs, warriors equal to lions, to scare off the dogs of Rome (Khaqani 1951).

While supporting the Ottomans, al-Hilli posited clear notions of Arab ethnicity. His poem interlaced many of the conventions typical of the *Hamasa* genre in medieval Arabic poetry, a genre that depicted the Arabs in battle, especially in the pre-Islamic era. *Hamasa* poetry described the Arabs' ability to endure calamity, their persistence and determination, as well as their willingness to avenge the blood of those killed. In al-Hilli's poem, the noble Muslim Arab fighter was the opposite of cowardly Italians, who did not hesitate to target civilians. While these notions did not entail a reconstruction of an ancient Semitic past, they still framed Arab participation in the anticolonial struggle in terms of the ethnicity of its people.

Applauding Arab tribes was not new. Butrus al-Bustani romanticized Bedouin life in his introduction to his book about chivalry and pre-Islamic poetry, which analyzed the character of the nomads who gave birth to Islamic civilization and whose poetry paid homage to the nomads' egalitarianism and audacity. Islamic reformer Rashid Rida hailed the tribal power of the Wahhabis as an important anticolonial energy and an attestation to the power of Islam. (Bashkin 2015) David Yellin used the same motifs writing about Jews in Arabia. Al-Hilli, and other poets, however, used these images to support Ottoman anticolonial campaigns.

In a context of growing disagreements with the Ottoman government, then, romantic discourses about ancient Arab nomads took on new meanings. A secret society al-Qahtaniyya (established near the end of 1909) called for the establishment of an Arab kingdom within the Ottoman Empire, taking its inspiration from Qahtan, a mythical Arab figure whose sons were supposedly the ancestors of southern Arabian tribes. In 1914, a manifesto of Arab nationalists printed in Cairo addressed the descendants of Qahtan and 'Adnan (the legendary father of the Arabs who inhabited west and northern Arabia) and called them to rebel against the Ottomans, who disrespected their honorable race. The pamphlet contended that the Ottoman persecution of the Armenians was a clear indication of their abhorrent rule. It likewise reminded Arab Jews and Christians of the values of Islamic tolerance and that the great civilizations that originated from the medieval mosques of Baghdad tied them as brethren in Arab culture (Haim 1962, p. 83–89).

Islamic reformer and political theorist 'Abd al-Rahman al-Kawakibi took these discourses a step further. As Joseph G. Rahme (1999) argued, Kawakibi articulated a version of Islamic Arabism in which the image of the Turk functioned as a Muslim other. Seemingly, Kawakibi (2014) rejected racist terminology by suggesting that the present Arab predicament originated from the adoption of superstitions that corrupted the Islamic faith from within and from a deeply fraudulent imperial administration. Arabic was also an acquired language; all throughout history, capable non-Arab Muslim rulers adopted the cultural norms of the Arab societies they governed. Kawakibi maintained that the desire to resemble the West motivated the Turks to adopt a racist view of the Arabs, referring to them as dirty and rude; so deep was their racism that the word Arab (*arap*) itself signified slaves and black animals. Although the Arabs also used derogatory terms for Turks (Kawakibi himself referred to the Ottomans as “Mongol Turks”), they never reached such levels of racism. Kawakibi's own praise of the Arabs, however, certainly included essentialist ideas. To him, the Arabian Peninsula protected its Arab peoples from racial, religious,

and sectarian mixing, and these Arabs were thus committed to ethics and religion and fostered civilization. As Rahme observed, these musings related to contemporary politics; because Kawakibi objected to Ottoman centralization policies and tyrannical government, he applauded the Arabs' inherent propensity for liberty, freedom, equality, consultation, and respecting the security of life and property.

Christian Intellectual Najib 'Azuri (1905) conveyed similar notions in his writings in French, championing the establishment of an Arab Caliphate that would grant constitutional freedoms for all its Arabic-speaking subjects. The kingdom was limited to the Arabs of the Levant, Iraq, and Arabia and excluded Egypt, because the Egyptians, according to 'Azuri, mixed with Berber races.

During the Arab Revolt against the Ottoman Empire June 1916–October 1918, the Hashemites ran a propaganda campaign through their journal *al-Qibla*, edited by Fu'ad al-Khatib. As Peter Wien (2020) noted, al-Khatib's own scholarship and writings shifted into a more ethnocentric direction during the War years. Before the War, he celebrated Arabic's role as the greatest of the Semitic languages, which created bonds across the region, replacing the cultures of the Romans and Persians, and he took pride in his knowledge of the classical lexicon, his poetics skills, and his knowledge of neologisms and loanwords. During the War, however, he adopted chauvinistic approaches, especially towards Jews.

Articles in *al-Qibla* highlighted the connections between Arabism and the Muslim faith in order to justify a rebellion against a Muslim government at the time of war. Stories and items presented the Hashemites as the protectors of Islam against a callous Turkish government whose secular members sought to belittle Islam and the Muslims and whose ethnic nationalism led to the prosecution of Christians, whom Islam ordered to be protected. The Hashemites were located in Mecca, the birthplace of Islam, whereas the Ottoman regime disrespected the Quran (Dawn 1960; Çiçek 2014).

Because Arabism and Islam were tied to a new Arabist political project, poets and writers affiliated with the Hashemites commemorated this ethno-religious affiliation in their verse. Iraqi poet Muhammad Mahdi al-Basir showered lavish praise on Husayn as a ruler who fought at the second battle of Badr (624 CE; a victorious battle of the Prophet Muhammad and his supporters against the Meccan polytheists), who came from the land of Yathrib (Medina) and had been sent to the Arab nation to rid them of the errant Turks (Başir 1977, p. 32). Although the pro-Ottoman and Arabist discourses were far from monolithic, they inspired serious deliberations about political and cultural representation and the geographical and social boundaries of the Arab community. Al-Basir's poetry indicated a deeper commitment to a national project based on a new set of values. This commitment became highly relevant after the occupation of the Levant and Iraq by Britain and France, whose colonial administrators had their views concerning the virtues, and faults, of the Arab races. Other Arab thinkers and writers continued promoting an inclusive form of Arabism, both geographically and religiously, and saw their involvement in Ottoman War efforts as reflecting their anticolonial agenda. Some simply continued engaging in scholarship during the War as an exercise in escapism. Exiled from Jerusalem to Damascus by the orders of Ottoman governor Jamal Pasha, David Yellin (1917) wrote to his wife in 1917 that he spent his time reading Ernest Renan's work on Semitic languages. Scholarship on the Semitic peoples seemed an odd, yet somewhat comforting, way out of everyday life during the War.

6. Conclusions

New notions about race, ethnicity, and language shaped the discourses analyzed in this essay. Combining elements from the study of linguistics, religion, and political philosophy, journals, books, and works of historical fiction created a Semitic and Arab universe, populated by grand historical figures and mesmerizing literary and cultural artifacts. A contemporary Arab reader could thus read about Zenobia, Queen Esther, or the history of Jerusalem in an article printed in *al-Hilal* or *al-Mashriq*, in a historical novel, or in a modern lexicon. Moreover, all of these publications suggested to their Arab readers

that they belonged to a culture and a civilization whose achievements should be a source of pride and rejuvenation.

These printed products conveyed the idea that Arab cultures, the Arabic language, and Arab ethnicity can create ecumenical and pluralistic conversations in which the speakers of the same language, regardless of their creed, revive ancient Arab and Islamic cultures. These discourses confirmed their authors' confidence in sciences that evaluated the development of language and explored the relationship between different Semitic languages. Motivated by the desire to find a rational explanation to phenomena they identified with cultural and literary decline, Arab authors hoped to reconstruct the modes with which their Arab ancestors dealt with questions relating to community and civilization.

Within this context, Arabic journals printed many stories about the history of the Arabic language itself, with its different dialects and different relationships to other Semitic languages and literatures. By publishing scientific articles on philology, literature, and linguistics, the print media illustrated that Arabic itself was a language capable of expressing complex scientific concepts and arguments, which proved helpful as many of the journals' editors called to use Arabic as a language of instruction in institutions of higher learning. The Arab print market adopted the racial category of the Semite as highly relevant to Arab ethnicity and language, but their philological and literary significations of the term subverted its negative constructions in Western race theories.

For many of those who believed in Arabic revival, Arabic and Arab cultures were also acquired qualities; as long as individuals were willing to learn the Arabic language, study its history, and read its literature, they were part of the community, regardless of their faith or place of birth. At the same time, these discourses had a darker, more sinister, side, which often originated from European race theories and assumed that peoples had fixed and unchanging racial characteristics. Despite the manipulation of this racist discourse by Arab authoritarian rulers and the destruction of the concept of Arab Jewishness following the Arab-Israeli conflict, the former, more fluid, and inclusive discourse about the ecumenicalism and inclusiveness of Arab and Semitic cultures still leaves much hope for creative imaginings of community and society in the Arab world at present times and in the future.

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