

The National Socialist Courtship of the Arab World: 1938-1943

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INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this article is to explore how, and to what extent, the Arab world responded to National Socialist influence during the Second World War. This research provides a unique perspective- from the viewpoint of the British Colonial, and Foreign Offices- derived from primary records dating from the Second World War era, located in the British National Archives at Kew. This research offers an interesting perspective in the field of historical research focused on the Second World War era, more specifically focused on the relations between the Arab world and the National Socialist regime. Further, examining National Socialist and Arab relations through the lens of the British Colonial and Foreign Offices, provides a unique perspective; as from the perspective of the leading colonial power in the region, brings into question not only German intentions in the Middle East, but British intentions as well.

BACKGROUND/METHODS

This project interprets records retrieved from the British National Archives in Kew, and contextualizes them within the historical situation in the Middle East during the Second World War. British intelligence files detailing the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, as well as a series of memorandums exchanged from prominent player's in the region, such

as the Mufti of Jerusalem, Haj Amin el-Huseini, the Emir Abdullah of Trans-Jordan, and King Ibn Sa'ud of Saudi Arabia. Further, documents from a British Colonial Office file are examined, containing an exchange of telegrams and memorandums between Sir Winston Churchill, King Ibn Saud; as well as Arab, British, Zionist and American officials such as; President Roosevelt, Sir John Philby, U.S. Colonel Hoskins, Anthony Eden, Chaim Weizman, Ibn Sa'ud, and others. These archival sources are contextualized by the writings and explorations of historians such as Aaron Gillette, Jeffery Herff, Clive Leatherdale and others. This project strives to create a behind the scenes look at the situations developing in the Middle East during the Second World War, through the lens of one of the most meticulous bureaucracies in human history, that of the British Empire.

This specific article explains how relations between the Arab world and the National Socialist regime began to take shape, and the way in which questions of "race" and the definition of anti-Semitism aided in shaping such relations. It also provides an examination of how the fragmentation in the Arab world that resulted due to National Socialist influence; and how such relations affected the British, threatening their colonial power in the region. The factors that led to the opening of the forum between the

Arab world and the National Socialist regime were centered around notions of “race”, and as a result, the National Socialist regime was forced to implement a substantial reconceptualization of their racial ideology in order to not only appease their allies in the war; namely Fascist Italy, but also to sway the Arab world to their cause. Furthermore, tenets of this reconceptualization of National Socialist racial ideology were integrated into the Nazi propaganda campaign implemented in the Middle East during the Second World War; designed to establish a sense of racial equality between the “Aryan”, “Germanic” race, the Mediterranean “race”, and the Arab people.

RESULTS, DISCUSSION, AND IMPLICATIONS

With the triumph of Rommel’s Afrika Corpse against British forces in Egypt in 1942, the DNB (Deutsches Nachrichtenbüro) proclaimed: “The inspired Axis General, Rommel, deserves the title of honour which was once the attribute of Scipio: Rommel Africanus.”¹ This small drop in the sea of propaganda employed by the Nazi regime is peculiar when considering the nature of National Socialist ideology. Simply put, National Socialist ideology dictated that the “Aryan”, “Nordic” or “Germanic” race was superior in every way compared to all other “races”, and due to this superiority, merited the right to excessive self-assertion. This propaganda seems to be indicative of a major reconceptualization of National Socialist racial ideology,

characterized by a fundamental transition from pure biological racialism to a racialism fusing spiritual and psychological factors with biological factors. While German racialists were intent on pushing the concept of biological racialism, and “Aryan” superiority, many Italian racialists insisted on a spiritual racialism, which invoked the glorious past of Rome, and the spiritual and psychological nature, which defined the Mediterranean “race” as a product of that great and ancient civilization. Thus a rift developed between the two regimes, producing the need for a reconceptualization of National Socialist racial ideology.

It is true that throughout history, aspiring empires invoked the Roman past as an inspiration; and though this may be the case, it is also likely that this bit of propaganda is indicative of this reconceptualization of racial ideology, as well as German capitulation with Italian racialists. Whereas before, Nazi racial policy dictated that no other race was equal to the “Aryan” race, now the National Socialist regime had to capitulate with their Italian allies by way of establishing a sense of racial equality; hence the Germans invoking the memory of a great Roman figure in their propaganda as apposed to an “Aryan” one. The Germans not only needed to appease the Italians in terms of their racial ideology, but they also found that they had to redefine their ideology in order to placate the Arab world as well.

Following The Nuremburg Race Laws of 1935 the fire was set for the intercourse that took place between the Arab world and the National Socialist regime. The Nazi regime

¹ FO188, “Summary and Comments on German Propaganda to Germany”, 1941-44.

observed that diplomats from Arab nations expressed no antagonism for the anti-Semitism expressed by the Nazi regime, as long as it was directed exclusively at Jews.² The Arab world was aware of Germany's obsession with anti-Semitism, and naturally the question arose of whether or not this vehement hatred for Semites, also applied to non-Jewish Semites such as themselves. Hitler had made it perfectly clear in his renowned book, *Mein Kampf*, what he felt not only about non-"Aryans" but also what he felt about the Arab people; which simply put was, disdain.³ In order for the National Socialist regime to reach their goal of destroying the British Empire, it was imperative that they court the Arab world to their cause; and thus the redefinition of racial ideology attached to notions of Arab radical nationalism, were prescribed to the Arab world by the Nazi propaganda machine. This National Socialist courtship of the Arab world would take the form of a massive propaganda campaign, incorporating elements of both biological and spiritual/psychological racialism, as indicative of the fundamental reconceptualization of National Socialist racial ideology respectively.

Furthermore, with the institution of the 1935 Nuremberg Race Laws, the definition of Aryan and the implications upon those who did not constitute as a member of the Aryan race began to emerge further into concrete reality from the dark depths of a perverted ideological delusion. Following the institution of the racial

laws, in 1935, there was a case concerning Johannes Ruppert, the son of a Turkish officer and a German woman who was ejected from the Hitler youth due to his Turkish ancestry. According to German citizenship law at the time, "A citizen of the Reich is only that subject, who is of German or kindred blood and who, through his conduct, shows that he is both desirous and fit to serve faithfully the German people and the Reich." As a result of the Ruppert case, the Turkish embassy demanded an explanation from the National Socialist regime, and German-Turkish relations were threatened; as according to historian Jeffrey Herf, "In the international context of 1935," "placing a cloud" over Germany's relations with Turkey," would be a "likely development if the Turks were to be characterized as non-Aryan."⁴ This incident also opened up the forum between Germany and other Arab and Muslim states including Iran and India, all of whom demanded an explanation of the National Socialist conception of racialism and the meaning of German "anti-Semitism". The next question, and possibly the most important in need of answering, is the question of the definition of anti-Semitism.

Contained in the first wave of Nazi broadcasts between 1939-41⁵, the Nazis attempted to reassure the Arabs of North Africa that they were well informed about Islam and the political scene in the region, and they went as far as to extend their profound respect of the Islamic cultural and religious

² Herf, *Nazi Propaganda for the Arab World*, 15.

³ Adolf Hitler, *Mein Kampf*, trans, Ralph Mannheim, 658-59.

⁴ Herf, *Nazi Propaganda for the Arab World*, 17-18.

⁵ Herf, *Nazi Propaganda for the Arab World*, 36.

practices; not overlooking the opportunity to claim that “there were parallels and welcome affinities between National Socialism and Arab radical nationalism and the religion of Islam as the Nazis chose to interpret it.”⁶ Essentially, despite the fact that the Arab “race” was in fact a member of the “Semitic” “race”, the Nazis speak of the “Arab nation” united as one with “clean blood.”⁷ This notion of racial purity, and “clean blood” is indicative of this fusion of biological racialism and spiritual/psychological racialism, as on the one hand, the Nazis stressed the biological purity of the Arab people, and on the other hand, invoking a perception of equality between the Arab civilization and National Socialism. Thus the National Socialist propaganda machine utilized the element of anti-Semitism as leverage to sway Arab leaders to their cause, as they differentiated the Jews and the Arabs—both Semitic peoples—though excluding the Arab people from the category of Semite, as it related to the National Socialist conception of anti-Semitism.

With the issue of redefining race and anti-Semitism to accommodate the Arab world more or less solved, the Arab world became fragmented with supporters of both the National Socialist regime and the Allies. Thus a rift began to form in the Arab World between fundamentalist Arab nationalism as prescribed by the National Socialist regime, within its newly defined racial paradigm, and Arab leaders who retained their trust

in the Allies. Further, Arab nationalism was beginning to spread throughout the Middle East, and the Nazi propaganda machine wasted no time antagonizing the British colonizer, and promising the Arab nation that freedom would be achieved if Arab leaders sided with Germany. Furthermore, the situation in the British mandate of Palestine, which was the strategic center of British Imperial control in the Middle East, was the focal point for many of the situations arising in the region at British expense, as a result of National Socialist influence in the Arab world.

As the National Socialist regime began to threaten British interests in the Middle East, the British were forced to devote valuable attention to dealing with developments in the Middle East, in addition to the rapidly unfolding situation in Europe. Furthermore, Palestine afforded the most strategic significance in the region for the British; and the British were in no way planning on relinquishing such an important component of their Empire. An Italian broadcast in Arabic, for instance, proclaimed that, “the Arabs have one leader and he despises the British and defies the threats of the British forces—he is the Mufti,”⁸

Mufti Haj Amin el-Husseini was utilized by the Third Reich as a titular figure to rouse anti-British and anti-Zionist sentiment throughout the Middle East in the context of pan-Arab nationalism as prescribed by the National Socialist regime. The only problem with investing so much power and support into one individual

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Herf, *Nazi Propaganda for the Arab World*, 108.

⁸ Herf, *Nazi Propaganda for the Arab World*, 104.

is that that individual may not remain loyal to his patrons of support, in this case, the National Socialist regime. Further, the Mufti is the quintessential exemplification of an Arab leader who at certain points, willingly acquiesced to National Socialist influence. Not only was he pronounced leader of the Arab people on Italian and German Arabic broadcasts, but also German aid in the form of weapons and funds, were funneled into Palestine via the southern boarder.

Contained in a British intelligence file from the Colonial Office, dated August 8th 1938, it is stated, "Early in November a Palestine Arab source...reported that consignments of ammunition had recently arrived in the South, and that a ship containing arms and ammunition was shortly expected near Gaza. This source had also heard that a certain amount of war material, including explosives and cartridge filling machines, had recently been received from Germany..." Furthermore, "A very reliable source in Cairo has reported that Jamal el Hussaini, when he was in Cairo in October, said that Ahmed Hussein, the Egyptian Green Shirt leader, had offered to recruit a number of young volunteers into Egypt and send them in small parties to Palestine to fight against the British."⁹ The Green Shirt party was an Egyptian political party, which modeled and emulated its political organization based on other Fascist regimes including the National Socialist regime; thus it is clear from the British intelligence files that not only was Germany supporting the Mufti monetarily and militarily, but

⁹ PF NE, 932/V1 (Haj) Amin file, KV2/2084

also an Egyptian fifth column allegedly offered the rebels support as a result of National Socialist influence in the region.

Further, according to a British intelligence file detailing the Muslim Brotherhood, the founder of the organization, Hassan el Banna, "made a careful study of the Nazi and Fascist organizations. Using them as a model, he formed within the Ikhwan (The Brotherhood) the Gawwala and Katai'b, specially trained and trusted men who correspond respectively to the Brown Shirts and Black Shirts of the late Adolf Hitler's party troops."¹⁰ Thus these Colonial Office files demonstrate how the Mufti was favored, perhaps exclusively, by the National Socialist regime, and how he was designated as a champion of the radical Islamic nationalist movement spreading throughout the Arab world; hence support from the Muslim Brotherhood.

Within a British Colonial Office file dated September 13th 1939, the Mufti allegedly made a pro-British proclamation, stating "that he was willing to sign a proclamation ordering the rebels in Palestine to lay down their arms and declaring the British cause to be just." A side note in the same file also indicates that the Mufti had made no "mention of any conditions upon which the Mufti might wish to make issuing of the proclamation depend."¹¹ Thus it seems as though the Mufti was caught between devoting himself to the Nazis

¹⁰ Political Intelligence Center Middle East, "P.I.C. Paper No. 49, *The Ikhwan El Muslemin*," Cairo (February 25, 1944), NA, FO 371/41329.

¹¹ PF NE, 932/V1 (Haj) Amin file, KV2/2084

or the Allies, and both sides could sense his irresolute position.

Furthermore, a British Colonial Office file dated the 31st of August 1939, questioned the Mufti's alleged pro-British proclamation, but it also reported German anxieties over the Mufti's allegiance to them: "Local D.N.B. (Deutsches Nachrichtenburo) representatives were becoming increasingly dissatisfied with the Mufti's leadership. In their view his lack of decision at the present juncture was the worst feature: he was merely "sitting tight", yet at the same time showing signs of holding out an olive branch to the British in order to secure his own position in the future. The Germans were beginning to feel that they had put all their eggs in one basket by backing the Mufti exclusively, and that it would have been better to support also other Arab leaders who, although keen nationalists, were not blind followers of the Mufti."¹²

From this document it is clear that via German anxiety, the British were aware of the weakness of National Socialist influence in the Middle East, and as a result, the British were more inclined to stand their ground in regards to the "Palestine problem"; their policy being the strict adherence to the stipulations outlined in the 1939 White Paper, as well as the obstinate refusal to acquiesce either Arab or Jewish demands in Palestine. The British knew well that developments in Palestine would have serious consequences in the broader Middle East; threatening their colonial holdings in the region, and they were not willing to back away from their

holdings as a result of National Socialist influence. Further, as previously mentioned, other Arab leaders sided with the allies, mainly to secure their own demands of independence in the future, but also due to positive experiences with Britain in the past.

Emir Abdullah, the pro-British leader of Trans-Jordan, replies to a message sent to him by Mufti Haj Amin el-Husseini through one of his delegates, asserting, "although he does not deny that his Eminence (Haj Amin) is a most loyal leader of the "Cause" and is convinced that his obstinacy is due to his intense devotion to the "Cause", yet he feels that greater success would be obtained by the use of more diplomatic means. At the same time he realizes that all leaders deal with their problems in their own way, but feels that with greater political experience His Eminence would have adopted other methods."¹³ From this source it is clear that certain Arab leaders such as Emir Abdullah understood that extreme devotion to the "Cause", meaning the goal of Islamist, Arab-Nationalists, as prescribed by National Socialist propaganda- namely the destruction of the British Empire- is not the way in which to position oneself to insure that one's "bread is buttered." Also, according to Herf, "The key point was that the outcome of the battles was a decisive factor in the effectiveness of propaganda efforts of all the warring powers. An Axis victory at El Almein might have set off an Arab and Muslim revolt against the Allies all over the Middle

¹² PF NE, 932/V1 (Haj) Amin file, KV2/2084

¹³ PF NE, 932/V1 (Haj) Amin file, KV2/2084

East.”¹⁴ Thus, as demonstrated by the British archival sources above, as well as Herf, Arab leaders seem to be acting out of self-interest when determining which side to support in the war effort. For Haj Amin, Germany seemed the greater side to align with, perhaps due to the immense power Hitler placed in the Mufti’s hands; for Emir Abdullah, the British had a history of meeting his demands as he was appointed leader of a British protectorate, which later became Trans-Jordan, so naturally he would place his faith in the British.

It is obvious why Arab leaders would align themselves with the victorious side in the war, and come 1943, the odds were against Germany; though victory meant different things for different leaders throughout the Middle East. Haj Amin el-Husseini was willing to negotiate with the British, “but only on condition that he should be the head of the Arab negotiating body;” though it was unlikely that this condition would ever be accepted by the British;¹⁵ but perhaps it would be part of the package if he were to side with Germany. As pointed out by the Emir Abdullah through his delegate, Haj Amin’s “obstinacy” to refuse negotiations with the British, demanding what was clearly impossible, demonstrates Haj Amin’s acquiescence to National Socialist courtship; though at the same time, Germany was becoming disenchanted with their titular leader in the region, as he seemed to be handing the British an “olive branch”.

Haj Amin was proclaimed the leader of the Arab world in German and Italian propaganda, and his relationship with the Third Reich demonstrates the incredible amount of power and responsibility the Nazi regime placed in his hands. The Emir Abdullah on the other hand, was deemed by the Nazi propaganda machine as “‘Rabbi’ Abdullah, the buffoon of Transjordan;” and as one of the “Mohammedans willing to sell themselves to Britain and, by so doing,” proving “false to Islam.”¹⁶ Thus despite this increase of anti-colonial fervor as prescribed to the Arab world by the National Socialist regime, the British still viewed themselves as residing in an advantageous position in the Middle East; as they could offer what the Arabs wanted; independence, and as long as they had this to offer; they had no reason to abandon their colonial policies in the Middle East. Germany on the other hand was not a colonial power, and though this situation aided them in their relations with the Arabs in the past; Germany could not undoubtedly claim that they could offer any Arab leader independence.

Lastly, this project covers a wide range of original sources located at the British National Archives in Kew, and this specific article demonstrates how National Socialist relations with the Arab world developed as a result of a fundamental reconceptualization of National Socialist racial ideology, and how these relations affected developments in the Middle East, through the lens of the British Foreign and Colonial Offices. This article also

¹⁴ Herf, *Nazi Propaganda for the Arab World*, 225.

¹⁵ PF NE, 932/V1 (Haj) Amin file, KV2/2084

¹⁶ Herf, *Nazi Propaganda for the Arab World*, 98.

demonstrates the existence of the rift between Arab leaders created as a result of National Socialist influence during the war. Finally, the further implications of this research endeavor are contingent on the execution of further archival research at the British National Archives, or elsewhere. These implications include the possible contribution to this particular field of inquiry, specifically National Socialist and Arab relations through the lens of the British Empire during the Second World War.

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