



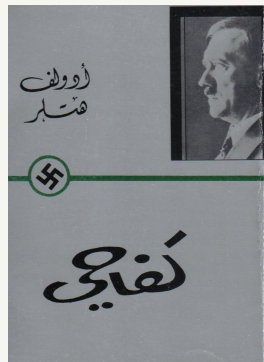
## Hitler in the Levant

### *How Arabs Reacted to the Third Reich in Syria and Lebanon*

**Nazism in Syria and Lebanon. The Ambivalence of the German Option, 1933-1945**  
by Götz Nordbruch, Routledge, 2009, 209 pp.

*Reviewed by Wolfgang G. Schwanitz*

The whole Arab youth is enthused by Adolf Hitler, wrote Kamil Muruwwa, the young editor of the Beirut paper *An-Nida'*, to the German Foreign Minister in Berlin. The year after Hitler came to power, Muruwwa translated *Mein Kampf* from English into Arabic and published it in daily installments in *An-Nida'*. Now he wants to edit the series as a book. But for this, he explains in his letter, he needs an additional 600 Marks. Therefore he is asking the German government for financial support in this endeavor.



Hitler's *Kifahi*, 7<sup>th</sup> ed. 1999, translated by Luis al-Hajj, Mustafa Tlass Books, Syria

Thus Götz Nordbruch catches the spirit of the time in his book about Nazism in Syria and Lebanon. Since both countries were under French occupation, the Berlin-based Islamic scholar has investigated French, Israeli, and Arab sources. He has found root causes as to why youth movements similar to the *Hitler Youth* sprouted in those Arabs regions, and why the Arab *Ba'th* party learned a lot from Hitler's National Socialist Party. For the first time we have a solidly researched and comparative study on the Nazi influences in Syria and Lebanon and on the attitude of their populace toward the rising German power in the Middle East.

The above mentioned example shows that from the beginning there were points of mutual interest between the Arab region and Nazi Germany. In 1934, *Mein Kampf* appeared daily for four months "in the francophobe paper of the German friendly Sulh clan." Although the translator Muruwwa worked without permission of the Munich Eher publishing house, a German officer went on to explain, the translation is good. For the purpose of propaganda, an Arabic version of Hitler's book would be desirable. Thus, he recommended that the money Muruwwa had requested should be granted. Indeed, it was the second translation of this book into Arabic. Yunus as-Sabawi of Bagdad, a Nazi follower, had completed the first in 1933 and published it in the Iraqi paper *Al-Alam Al-Arabi*, known for its hatred toward Jews.

Nordbruch presents such developments as nationalistic reactions to National Socialism. As Muruwwa explains in his foreword, *Mein Kampf* reveals the secret of how Hitler gained influence over millions of educated people, how he rose from soldier to dictator, from a friend of the Jews to their strongest enemy. The reader may easily grasp the parallels between the German and Arab situations: both were losers in the First World War; they were allied with each other via the Ottoman Empire; and both were frustrated by the terms which the winners of the war dictated at Versailles. There, the Germans paid a heavy price: they lost large chunks of their homeland, African and other colonies, and parts of their domestic sovereignty - limits on armament and military were imposed on them.



Forged *Protocols Elders Of Zion*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., II, transl. by Ajaj Nuwaihid, 1990, Tlass Books

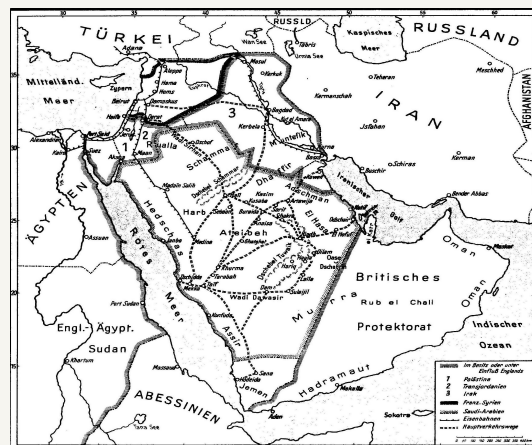
After 1918, the Arabs, for their part, were also left unreconciled. Although some Arab nations did soon gain statehood in Iraq, Transjordan, and Syria - as promised as compensation for the revolt in the desert - the League of Nations placed other areas, namely Southern Syria or Palestine, under the Mandatory regime which strengthened British and French power in the region. Subsequently, the Arab nationalists were expected to accept the reconstitution of a Jewish homeland in Palestine. The German and Arab cases were placed under the tutelage of the same democracies against which Hitler proclaimed war in his "Germanic dictatorship." When Hitler painted his picture of a larger European unity and his clear hostility toward a Jewish home in Palestine, his views resonated with those of Arab thinkers who were looking for greater unity in a Greater Arab Empire.

As Nordbruch shows, it was on this congruence that Nazis on both parts of the German-Arab divide capitalized. Both sides viewed the French, the British, and the Jews as their

enemies. When France fell, in mid-1940, the danger so increased that the Allies preemptively occupied the French Mandatory areas in Syria and Lebanon. This development mobilized Nazis on both sides. One example that the author gives is the establishment of espionage networks. Only as a result of defeat in Stalingrad, North Africa, and Normandy did the German option for the region - including a Middle Eastern Holocaust - recede.

At the same time, there were some reactions on the left and Islamist sides against the advancing Nazis. In April of 1933, leftist activists seized the Nazi flag of the German Consulate in Beirut and chanted anti-Hitler slogans. There, as in Syria, a high profile Communist movement developed. However, it was badly led by Stalinist directives. Although Communists participated at the first 1939 Syro-Lebanese meeting against Fascism in Beirut, organized by the activist Raif Khuri, the whole movement was soon paralyzed by the pact between Stalin and Hitler in the middle of the same year. The question remains as to whether or not the Communists acted on the national level more as dividers than unifiers of the forces opposed to Nazism. There were two totalitarian movements at work.

Did Arabs realize their kinship? Antun Sa'ada, the Lebanese Christian who founded the Syrian Popular Nationalist Party to keep a Greater Syria in Beirut in 1932, modeled it on the Nazi party and adopted a reversed swastika as its symbol. However, he did state that there was a collision between the totalitarian and the democratic camp.

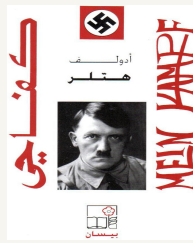


A 1942 German area map shows *French Syria* including Lebanon and Northern Palestine

Islamists also devised a response to Nazism which was much more rooted in their own traditions than those chosen by home grown Arab Nationalists, Nazis, Democrats, and Communists. The Islamists took support from their faith. But sooner rather than later, there emerged mediators such as the Grand Mufti of Jerusalem. Amin al-Husaini tried to synthesize Nazism and Islamism. The Germans quickly discovered this and early on used him to transform Arabs from observers into participants in the conflict. The Islamist answer to Nazism created a new ideology that combined traditional Islamic hostility toward Jews with the Nazis' racial hatred of Jews.

All this and much more can be gleaned from Götz Nordbruch's seminal study. However, two questions deserve more attention. First, the problems of identity in the region which Europeans used to call the Levant. Basically, only Mount Lebanon had a clear historical identity. Not so Syria and Palestine as parts of *Bilad Ash-Sham*, the Ottoman province of Sham with Damascus at its center. There, inhabitants called themselves Northern or Southern Syrians, the latter mostly after 1900 more and more using the name Palestinians (the Grand Mufti used the name Palestine in his title - *Al-Mufti Al-Akbar Min Filastin* or "the Grand Mufti of Palestine"). These still shifting identities should have been more explored.

Second, the author devoted too little attention to the Grand Mufti's great influence in the region. He did not make sufficient use of the Mufti's memoirs which were published in Damascus in 1999, in which there are topical insights and major disclosures. For example, Heinrich Himmler, one of the Holocaust's chief architects, told the Grand Mufti in mid-1943 that Germany thus far had eliminated some three million Jews. Therewith Amin al-Husaini, in his own words, ended decades of disputes concerning what he might have known about the Holocaust. This admission shows that he was becoming an accomplice of the Jewish mass murder, continuing to work for the Nazis until the very end. In his memoirs, Amin al-Husaini also exposed his role as an instigator in Syria and Lebanon, and his power base there, even though he was living in Berlin in exile during the war. Not having worked sufficiently with those and other primary sources directly related to the Grand Mufti represents a serious omission.



Hitler's *Kifahi*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. 1995, translated by Luis al-Hajj, Bisan Publisher, Westbank

All in all, however, Götz Nordbruch's work presents a most valuable contribution to our knowledge about the Nazi option in the Greater Syrian parts of the Middle East. With this contribution we can understand why there remains some attraction for that evil regime which brought so much misery to so many people in this world, especially to the Jews of Europe and of the Middle East. Ridding oneself of any illusions about the Nazis' nature is obviously a never-ending task, even a necessary self-immunization against all kinds of old and new dictatorships. If one sees the anti-Jewish and anti-Israeli threats of the Iranian regime and their offspring in Hizbullah and Hamas, one can easily recognize the importance of Götz Nordbruch's book.

WOLFGANG G. SCHWANITZ is a historian of the Middle East and German Middle East policy. He is the author of four books and the editor of ten others, including Germany and the Middle East, 1871-1945.