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The Language of the Nation: The Rise of Arabic among Jews and Christians (1900–1950)

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ABSTRACT
This essay explores the ways in which in the period following the First World War, non-Muslim communities participated in the establishment of Modern Standard Arabic as the foremost symbol of the new states that replaced the Arab provinces of the Ottoman Empire. A comparison of the sociolinguistic trajectories of Syriac Christians in North Iraq, Jews in Baghdad and Catholic Christians in Palestine suggests that Arabic’s function of undergirding the ‘Arab states’ thrived on earlier interpretations of Arabic as the language of interregional and interdenominational contacts and as the language of cultural, societal and political modernization rather than on exclusivist nationalist, ethnic or linguistic identifications. Put differently, the increased use of Arabic by those who also had other languages at their disposal resulted from the combination of pragmatism with commitment to societal modernization and inclusive nationalism. The linguistic trajectories of these three groups are analysed against the background of a rereading of George Antonius’ The Arab Awakening (1938) as a contemporary source for the rise of Arab nationalism among non-Muslim minorities.

Introduction

It gradually came to mean a citizen of that extensive Arab world—not any inhabitant of it, but that great majority whose racial descent, even when it was not of pure Arab lineage, had become submerged in the tide of arabisation; whose manners and traditions had been shaped in an Arab mould; and, most decisive of all, whose mother tongue is Arabic. The term applies to Christians as well as to Moslems, and to the off-shoots of each of those creeds, the criterion being not islamisation but the degree of arabisation.¹

This is how, in the first chapter of The Arab Awakening: The Story of the Arab National Movement, George Antonius defined who is an ‘Arab’. The work was written in the late 1930s when Arab resistance against the pending partition of Palestine culminated in the Great Revolt. Almost from the moment it was published, this work functioned, certainly among Western readers, as a kind of handbook on Arab nationalism. In recent decades, many of its assumptions and generalizations have been rejected or at least nuanced, but these revisionist readings of Antonius’ portrayal of the history of Arab nationalism merely highlight the importance of

the work as a primary source for understanding a Palestinian Christian’s involvement in the Arab nationalism of the Mandate period. In this contribution, Antonius’ work is taken as the starting point to discuss the involvement of non-Muslims in the emerging nationalism of the mandatory period, especially in the British-governed areas of Palestine and Iraq.

Antonius advocates a rather flexible definition of Arabness. Positively, his definition hinges on three characteristics: lineage, manners and traditions, and language. Of these, only language is defined in a binary way: either you are a mother tongue speaker, or you are not. The other two—the racial and cultural aspects—he sees as gradual: some peoples are more Arabized than others. The pure ones are those of the Hejaz, next come the Palestinians and the Jordanians, then the Syrians and Iraqis. This categorization, based on an elaborate essay by Louis Massignon that was published in 1924, is of course helpful in forwarding the Palestinian case as the Arab case par excellence, a matter close to Antonius’ heart.

Negatively, Islam is excluded from the definition: ‘islamisation’ is not at all important for considering oneself an ‘Arab’. This sounds easier than it was for Antonius: while he was one of the first to identify the roots of Arab nationalism in the cooperation of foreign missionaries with local Christians in mid-nineteenth-century Beirut, thus underlining the Christian impetus to the movement, the book as a whole is more nuanced—or perhaps, more troubled—than its often quoted opening sentence suggests. Many pages are devoted to describing the much larger Muslim contributions to Arab nationalism, stressing the importance of the House of Sa’ud in the Arabian Peninsula and the consistent cooperation of Muslims and Christians in the nationalist parties of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Antonius is careful to give full due to the whole spectrum of contributors.

The main question of this essay, however, is not so much about Antonius’ interpretation of the history of the Arab national movement, but about the way in which non-Muslim communities were included in or excluded from nation formation of the Mandate period. This question, however, is a topical one in relation to Antonius’ essay. How does Antonius, who himself belonged to one of these non-Muslim communities, use his rather flexible and inclusive definition of Arabness to delineate the boundaries of the Arab nation? Who is included and who is not? Indeed, while the book in itself appears to cast the net of Arabism as wide as possible, at the same time some groups are excluded completely, while others are pictured as on the fringe of Arab nationalism.


3Antonius, Arab Awakening, p. 17; Louis Massignon, ‘Éléments arabes et foyers d’arabisation : leur rôle dans le monde musulman actuel’, Revue du Monde Musulman 57 (1924), pp. 1–157. Massignon stresses the difference between ‘islamisation’ and ‘arabisation’, with further Arabization being dependent on ‘language’ (in a standardized form), not on ‘race’; in more ways than one, therefore, his essay supports Antonius’ depiction of Arab nationalism. Note that Massignon spends many pages on discussing the linguistic, religious and ‘racial’ situation in North Africa, a region Antonius practically ignores.

4Antonius, Arab Awakening, p. 13: ‘The story of the Arab national movement opens in Syria in 1847, with the foundation in Bâlût of a modest literary society under American patronage.’

5Tentatively, these hierarchies and distributions can be linked with his close contacts and cooperation in the late 1920s and 1930s with both Hussein and Faisal, and with Ibn Sa’ud (cf. especially Ch. 15). Note further the relative absence of Egypt and Egyptian nationalists in his discourse, despite his familial connections to Alexandria and Egypt.
This is certainly true for two of the three groups that have constituted the starting point of the larger research project that has inspired this paper: the Jews of Baghdad, the Syriac/Assyrian Christians of North Iraq, and the Catholic Christians of Jerusalem. Only the last group is seen as more or less unambiguously part of the Arab population and thus potentially participating, as Antonius himself, in the Arab movement. This, in his opinion, is not the case for the Jews, in Baghdad or anywhere else in the Middle East. It is also not the case for the Assyrian Christians, the only group of Syriac Christians which Antonius mentions explicitly.

As perhaps could be expected from a book born out of the struggle against the British and their support of a Jewish homeland, Antonius does not explicitly acknowledge the existence of ‘Arab Jews’. ‘Jews’ first and foremost are described as a foreign racial group, always contrasted with Arabs rather than with ‘Muslims’, thus putting them, time and again, explicitly outside his definition of Arabness. This fits his portrayal of the struggle in Palestine, but is also part of a wider picture in which the Jews of the Ottoman Empire are seen as one of the pillars of support of the Young Turks, and, in that capacity, also serve the case of the Jewish settlements in Palestine. The Jews of Syria, Egypt and Iraq, who may have been more sympathetic to his Arab ideals (even if only those of Iraq, to some extent, would have been willing to call themselves ‘Arab’), are never mentioned explicitly.

Concerning the Assyrians, there never seems to be any doubt as to their being positioned firmly outside the bounds of Arabness. Together with the Armenians, they are portrayed as complicit with colonial rule, the Armenians as troopers of the French in suppressing the rebellion against the French Mandate in Syria in 1925, the Assyrians as assisting the British in suppressing the Iraqi Arabs and as unable to adapt to the new situation after Iraq’s independence. While the facts as such may be correct, Antonius’ decision to exclude references to the forced expulsion of both groups from Eastern Turkey, as well as to ignore their historic links with groups which had Arabized to some degree (Armenian Catholics, Syriac Orthodox and Syriac Catholics, Chaldeans), does little to nuance the picture. In fact, Syriac Christians other than the Assyrians, in Iraq or Syria, play no role at all in his portrayal of Arab nationalism.

The most interesting groups, taking our cue from Antonius’ Arab universe, are the Maronites and the ‘Melchites’ (usually: Melkites, that is, Greek Catholics) of Lebanon. He stresses their contribution to the Arab revival of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries through their ongoing interest in Arab literature and support for publishing and education. Antonius identifies the sectarian clashes in Lebanon in the mid-nineteenth century as one of the driving forces towards a ‘secular’ nationalism to overcome such religious differences—again implying that Druses, Maronites and other Christians are part of the same Arab nation. Later he describes how, in his opinion, ‘Western education and clerical influence’

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4With one possible exception when speaking about ‘Abdul Rahman al-Kawakebi, a late-nineteenth-century Muslim activist who in his circle of friends in Cairo ‘included Christians and Jews as well as Moslems’ (Antonius, Arab Awakening, p. 96).

7Cf. Antonius, Arab Awakening, pp. 258–61, 263–9, 291 and 334; p. 101, as complicit with the Young Turks: ‘a medley of races and creeds in which Turks predominated and Jews came second’. The concept of ‘Arab Jews’ in Palestine has been taken up recently by Menachem Klein, Lives in Common: Arabs and Jews in Jerusalem, Jaffa and Hebron (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014). Klein persuasively argues (pp. 19–64) for an Arab-Jewish identity that developed in Mandatory Palestine, though with little evidence to support the assumption that the epithet ‘Arab Jews’ was used by those belonging to this group themselves, rather than by others, especially Arab Muslims and Christians.


made Maronites, Melkites, Druses, and Palestinian Christians move ‘away from the spirit of the Arab movement’.10 While he underlines that these that moved away constituted only a minority of the Christians (and certainly of the population at large), he later stresses the French-mindedness of the Maronites—placing them at the balance between support of the Arab movement and support of foreign, Western, domination.11 If ever there was a group yet to be convinced to join the Arab movement, it was the Maronites, who were seen as dodging and moving away, rather than moving closer. This also may have been his opinion on some of the Greek Catholics of Syria and Palestine, though he does not explicitly say so. Copts and Greek Orthodox Christians, on the other side, are never mentioned as a separate group—they, presumably, were believed to be firmly included within the Arab movement.

**Arabic and its Alternatives**

What remains implicit in Antonius’ portrayal of the different minorities of the Arab world is that language is indeed a crucial factor in the overall picture. Obviously, his reference to Arabic as ‘most decisive of all’ when thinking about who is an Arab, implies that he is well aware of this. However, he does not address the difficulties that ensue when prioritizing language in this way. These concern both the question as to what kind of Arabic he has in mind (does the reference to the ‘mother tongue’ imply the local colloquial(s) or can only the standardized language function as the basis for Arab nationalism?), and to what extent all that choose to speak the language (rather than mother tongue speakers proper?) can be considered as part of the Arab nation.12

I would like to suggest that exactly this lack of clarity is the basis for Antonius’ nationalism, and as such these built-in ambiguities are worth exploring in more detail. I will take my examples mostly from the three case studies that currently are being studied in our Leiden project ‘Arabic and its Alternatives’: the Jews of Baghdad, the Catholic Christians of Palestine, and the Syriac Christians, including the Assyrians, of North Iraq. For each of these groups, the Mandate period was a crucial period of change and transformation, with different outcomes for each, with different relationships to majority cultural and political trends (including the ‘Arab Movement’) and with different discussions within the larger group. Each of these three, when seen from Antonius’ definitions of Arabness, is positioned either outside or on the borders of it. Their use or rejection of Arabic, therefore, might set us on the track of understanding the role of Arabism in the changing Middle East.

11Antonius, *Arab Awakening*, p. 368: ‘Their [the Arabs’] experience of European political activity in Syria before the War had caused them to believe that France’s support of the Catholic missions and her artisanship with the Maronites had an ulterior motive, and that, in any case, it had revived the flames of sectarian dissension [p. 369] which both the Christian and the Moslem leaders in the Movement were genuinely bent on extinguishing.’ For an overview of the various articulations of ‘non-Arab’ identity in Lebanon, see Asher Kaufman, *Reviving Phoenicia: The Search for Identity in Lebanon* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2004/2014).
In the Jewish community of Baghdad, a variety of schools, sponsored by external (like the school of the Alliance Israélite) and internal parties (the Shammas school and many others), offered primary and secondary education to a large number of pupils. The most important change of the early twentieth century, therefore, was the rapidly growing availability of education for a wide range of children, male as well as female. In these modern schools, replacing to some extent the earlier communal religious education, Modern Standard Arabic (MSA) was increasingly used, additional to but also replacing the traditional knowledge of Judeo Arabic of Babylonian Jewry. Ottoman Turkish was losing ground, especially after the First World War, Hebrew and Aramaic continued to be taught, whereas the greatest runners-up as to language teaching were Western languages, with French in the Alliance schools and English in the Shammas school that was sponsored by the local community. During the Mandate period, French started to lose ground vis-à-vis English (also in the Alliance schools), and Hebrew, in the modernized form that was used by the immigrant Jewish community in Palestine, was taught more widely. As is suggested by yet unpublished research by Sasha Goldstein, notable differences between the various schools remained, even when governmental regulations homogenized the demands of the curriculum. All schools appear to have taught at least three languages—Standard Arabic, Hebrew, and French or English, but with notable differences as to hours of training of and in the various languages. Interestingly enough, in some girls’ schools, French retained an important position, not instead of English, but instead of Arabic, which was considered more useful to men than to women. A multilingual community thus emerged, with different primary and secondary languages within different subgroups, depending on social class, gender and the type of internal and external connections of the family.

The linguistic situation for the Catholic Christians (both ‘Latin’ Christians and Greek Catholics) in Palestine was somewhat less complex, with Arabic, in its local vernacular variety and in the modern standard form, as the preferred language of the community. However, like the other non-Muslim communities in Lebanon and Syria, Jerusalem’s Catholic Christians had been exposed to an educational system with a strong emphasis on Western languages for quite some time. The actual language depended on which missionary religious community provided it: French in French-Catholic circles, German in German and Austrian-Catholic circles. English at first was mostly confined to Protestant circles, but due to government regulations became part of the curricula of Catholic schools during the Mandate period. This strong trend towards Western languages was countered, from the 1930s onwards, by increasing pressure from within and outside the community to use and teach Arabic in the

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Christian schools.\textsuperscript{15} Nevertheless, Antonius’ remarks on the connection between missionaries and ‘French-mindedness’ certainly had some ground in very real linguistic and communal affinities of Christians in Palestine and Lebanon. In the latter country, this took the form of a hesitation to identify as ‘Arab’, even if, like in Palestine, Arabic was the mother tongue of a large part of the population, with French only the preferred language of a small, Western-educated part. The case of Lebanon’s ‘non-Arabs’ underlines the fact that among factors deciding on Arab or non-Arab identification mother tongue is one but certainly not the only determining factor.\textsuperscript{16}

Taking the Syriac churches, thirdly, as one group, is something of a stretch considering the important differences between them, as to rite and as to their regional histories. Before the war, the Syriac Orthodox had their demographic and ecclesiastical centre in Southeast Turkey (Tur Abdin, Mardin), with important further concentrations in Iraq, mostly in and around Mosul. In the same period, the (Assyrian) Church of the East had its major centre in Eastern Turkish Hakkari (Kurdistan), with important further communities in northwest Iran around Urmia and in numerous villages in the Nineveh plains. The two Catholic churches that split off from these two churches, the Syriac Catholics and the Chaldean Church, had their centres roughly in the same regions as their mother churches (Mardin and Mosul, respectively), but with relatively stronger presence in the cities. After the war, the communities in Southeast Turkey had suffered great losses as the result of the genocide on the Armenian Christians, which in many locations also affected Syriac (including Chaldean and Assyrian) Christians. Whereas the Tur Abdin region saw some of its communities, though much reduced, survive, the Hakkari region was completely emptied of the Assyrians of the Church of the East. Those who survived attacks and the hardships of flight ended up mostly in refugee camps in Iraq. Despite these somewhat diverging trajectories, which also included different degrees of assimilation to Western forms of religion, these four churches shared the ancient heritage of the Classical Syriac language for ritual and ecclesiastical purposes, complemented with, for the majority of its adherents, an Aramaic (‘modern Syriac’) vernacular.\textsuperscript{17} These Aramaic vernaculars, though different from place to place, formed a dialect continuum that made


\textsuperscript{16}In addition to Kaufman, Reviving Phoenicia, see also Franck Salameh, Language, Memory, and Identity in the Middle East: The Case for Lebanon (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2010).

\textsuperscript{17}Whereas until recently most historical writings on these different churches would treat the ‘East’ - (‘Nestorian’ and ‘Chaldean’) and ‘West’-Syriac (Syriac Orthodox and Syriac Catholic) traditions separately, recently the communalities between these distinct traditions have been stressed, usually under the name of ‘Syriac’, though some authors have used ‘Assyrian’ (such as Donabed’s Reforging a Forgotten History, see note 32) for this group as a whole. On the Church of the East and its Catholic offshoots, see Herman Teule, Les Assyro-Chaldéens: Chrétiens d’Irak, d’Iran et de Turquie (Fils d’Abraham; Turnhout: Brepols, 2008); Wilhelm Baum and Dietmar W. Winkler, The Church of the East: A Concise History (London/New York: Routledge Curzon, 2003); Christoph Baumner, The Church of the East: An Illustrated History of Assyrian Christianity (London/New York: I.B. Tauris, 2006); on the Syriac Orthodox and Catholics, see Claude Sélis, Les Syriens orthodoxes et catholiques (Fils d’Abraham; Turnhout: Editions Brepols, 1988); and Sebastian Brock and David Taylor, The Hidden Pearl: The Heirs of the Ancient Aramaic Heritage (Rome: Trans World Film Italia, 2001); on the traditions together, see Sebastian Brock and others (eds.), Gorgias Encyclopedic Dictionary of the Syriac Heritage (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press, 2011); H.L. Murre-van den Berg, ‘The Syriac Churches’, in Ken Parry (ed.), The Blackwell Companion to Eastern Christianity (Oxford: Blackwell, 2007), pp. 249–68; and idem, ‘Classical Syriac and the Syriac Churches: A Twentieth-Century History’, in M. Doerfler, E. Fiano, and K. Smith (eds.), Syriac Encounters: Papers from the Sixth North American Syriac Symposium, Duke University, 26-29 June 2011 (Eastern Christian Studies 20; Peeters: Louvain, 2015), pp. 119–47.
them mostly mutually intelligible over quite some distances as well as over the borders of denominations.\(^{18}\)

Thus, different from most Baghdadi Jews and Palestinian Christians, the majority of Syriac Christians considered Aramaic rather than Arabic to be their mother tongue. While Arabic, both as a written and a spoken language, had something of a history among Syriac Christians in towns like Mosul and Mardin,\(^{19}\) Arabic’s position among Syriac Christians was strengthened by the displacement of the community after the First World War, when Christians of the two major Syriac churches found themselves in Arabic-(rather than Kurdish- or Turkish-) speaking areas: the Syriac Orthodox from Tur Abdin in Syria and Lebanon and the Assyrian Christians from Hakkari in North Iraq and later in Northeast Syria. From then on, Arabic in its modern standard form started to become the preferred language of the educated elites, clerical as well as secular. Notably, this rather public move to Arabic was accompanied by a growing use of Classical Syriac as a modern literary language, especially among the Syriac Orthodox. Among the Assyrians of the Church of the East, the further expansion in literature and education used mostly the vernacular in its standardized form (building upon nineteenth-century efforts that had started in Iran).\(^{20}\) In addition, like among Baghdadi Jews and Palestinian Christians, Catholic and Protestant missionary schools promoted French and English as part of the linguistic repertoire of those with some education.\(^{21}\)

This brief overview indicates that the basic developments in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries are very similar for the three groups: an increase of education in general and of linguistic and literary training in particular, the introduction or further development of teaching in and of MSA, and the introduction of Western languages, most prominently French and English. More specific are the changing interpretations of the communal languages Aramaic/Syriac and Hebrew in the Syriac and Jewish groups, respectively. These appear not to distract from teaching either Arabic or French/English, but to constitute a third area of language teaching. While each of the three groups of languages, the communal languages Hebrew and Aramaic, the ‘Western’ French and English, and Arabic, would require a separate discussion about why and how these languages became important, for the remainder of this paper I will focus on the role of Arabic, because this is the language that can be considered indicative of these groups’ relation to the wider societies and national states to which they belonged.

**Interregional Denominationalism**

As I have argued elsewhere (see note 19), the use of Arabic among Middle Eastern Christians was strongly stimulated by the emerging Catholic community in the seventeenth and

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\(^{21}\)Murre-van den Berg, ‘Classical Syriac and the Syriac Churches’; unpublished PhD research by Tijmen Baarda (Leiden).
eighteenth centuries. When, from the sixteenth century onwards, Catholic missionaries started to lure Orthodox Christians into the Catholic fold, a plethora of languages were used: the local languages of the Christians, Greek, Armenian, Syriac and Arabic, as well as Western languages, French, Italian and Latin. Gradually, Arabic surfaced as the most important language within Catholic circles, in correspondence with Rome, but more importantly within the Catholic Middle East. There are two interconnected reasons for this.

The first is that the success of Catholicism in the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries follows a distinct pattern, such that those local Christians who spoke or were educated in Arabic became interested in Catholicism at an earlier date than those with firmer attachments to traditional languages such as Syriac, Armenian and Greek. These Arabic-language Christians lived in an arch formed by the Levantine provinces of Syria, in what today is Palestine, Lebanon and the western parts of Syria (notably, Aleppo more than Damascus), then moving north-eastwards, tipping on the southern parts of Anatolia in Diyarbakir and Mardin, and ending, to the far east, in Mosul and Baghdad. In many of these places, but not everywhere, a variety of Arabic constituted the spoken vernacular of the community, and in these cases often the liturgy would have been translated partly or wholly into Arabic. Following the arch of the crescent moon, Arabic-speaking Christian communities, especially in the northeast and east, would be urban rather than rural. While definitely not all Arabic-speaking Christians became Catholics, the vast majority of Catholic Christians would have been at home in Arabic, and also when they had not lost their Aramaic vernaculars.

Secondly, once these discontinuous clusters of Arabic-using Catholics were formed, Arabic quickly became the preferred language for interregional denominational, Catholic, correspondence. Missionaries and Middle Eastern clergy alike needed Arabic for their long-distance communication, most importantly as an intermediary language between Western languages on the one hand, and the Middle Eastern languages on the other. This becomes particularly clear from the trajectory of Western religious works that started to be used in the Middle East: many of these were translated from Latin, Spanish, Italian and French into Arabic. These were read and transmitted in that language, but also further translated into Syriac and Armenian, for the use of those within these communities that had not (yet) become part of this new universe in which religious modernization had become linked with educational modernization as well as with linguistic unification and standardization.

This pattern was copied by the much smaller Protestant communities that emerged from the middle of the nineteenth century onwards, both in its linkage of religious and linguistic modernization, and in its interregional dependence on Arabic. This trend was only partially

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countered by the Protestant emphasis on the literarization of vernaculars (most successfully so for Aramaic, somewhat similar also with regard to Armenian) and by the increased literacy in English and French that then could also function as interregional denominational languages. Nevertheless, Arabic, not least because of the widely used Bible translation that was published in the 1860s (the so-called Van Dyke translation), became a Protestant language almost as much as it was and remained a Catholic language.24

Among Middle Eastern Jews, Arabic’s role was somewhat different. From mediaeval times, Arabic in its Judeo Arabic variety had been in use for interregional communication, in tandem with Hebrew in its pre-modern forms—the availability of Hebrew making for an important difference with the Christian communities which did not have a common interregional or transnational language other than Arabic. Parallel to the developments in Catholic and Protestant circles, the nineteenth century brought modern forms of education in Western style, most importantly in the Alliance schools. As referred to above, these schools, alongside Arabic and Hebrew, introduced French and then English as interregional and transnational languages for the Jewish communities. Although more research is needed, it seems that MSA, different from its usage in Christian circles, never really acquired much of a position for interregional Jewish contacts, other than, to a limited extent, for internal Baghdadi Jewish contacts, especially when some of them ended up elsewhere in the Arabic world or in Eastern Asia. Judeo Arabic in Jewish contexts thus was not replaced by MSA, but by Hebrew, French and English.

Modernization

Arabic as the language of religious modernization and interregional contacts paved the way for another interpretation of Arabic, as that of the language intricately connected to the wider modernizing trends of the mid-nineteenth century. Antonius’ much-contested opening sentence, putting the birth of the Arab national movement in the context of the literary societies of mid-century Beirut born out of the encounter of local Christians and American missionaries, alerts us to the important function of Arabic within the modernizing circles of this place and period. Here, however, the issue was not the choice of one language over another, but the foregrounding and intensifying of a type of language that for a long time already had been the one and only (in various forms) written language of most of those involved.25

What interests us here, is the way in which Jews and Christians participated in this revival of Arabic as a fundamental part of the modernizing movement of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Arabic was implicated in this in different ways, in the ways in which a common language in this modernizing society was expected to take up new roles: as the medium of expression in an emerging middle-class society, as the instrument for further general education, as a key factor in the emerging Arab self-consciousness vis-à-vis Ottoman

and Turkish ‘imperialism’, and, as a necessary prerequisite, as a modernized language to suit all these new functions. As Antonius suggests in his opening chapter, Christians played an important role in exploring the possibilities of using Arabic as a key instrument of societal modernization, through the cultural hub that was created in Beirut in the cooperation of American missionaries and Syrian Christians. In this new context, Christians perhaps were less inhibited by the repeated accusations that they (like Jews and other non-Muslims) were not really using ‘good’ Arabic, and thus were able to fully explore the possibilities of a standardized form of Arabic for their educational and religious ends. The advantages of this approach were then easily recognized, and the circle of active users of the language soon widened, until, later in the nineteenth century, the majority of those active in literary and journalistic circles were Muslim rather than Christian or Druze.

This re-appropriation of Arabic by Muslim elites, however, did not dissuade non-Muslims from using the language. On the contrary: the evidence so far suggests a clear tendency towards an increasing use of Arabic, in its ‘standard’ form (in the Arabic, rather than Syriac or Hebrew script) from the early twentieth century onwards. This increased use of Arabic had two aspects, both related to the modernizing and Westernizing trends of the period. The first of these was that of the gradual emergence of a public space in the Syrian and Iraqi provinces of the Ottoman Empire in which Arabic was the main medium of expression. These public debates, whether real-time debates or exchanges of written essays and articles in journals, were inter-communal affairs, taking place in material or virtual spaces whose boundaries were drawn by class, region and the level of urbanization and education, rather than by religion. The more well-off and the more urban Christians and Jews were, the more likely that they would participate in these debates.26 Young Jewish men in Baghdad, as exemplified by Nissim Rejwan, joined reading groups where translations from English, French, German and Russian literature were read together, and where pieces of their own in the modern languages were read and commented upon.27 The same was true for new generations of literate Christians, especially those living in Mosul or in Baghdad, who had moved there in search of education and jobs. To a limited extent, even Jews in Palestine started to take up reading and writing in Arabic, as a way to join in this modernizing movement.28

Secondly, this use of Arabic in the public sphere was coupled by its increased use within the Christian communities. This was particularly true among the Syriac Orthodox and Chaldean communities of Eastern Syria and North Iraq. In these groups, a basic knowledge of Arabic was already present, and with the increased importance of this language in the newly emerging states, its use in these Christian circles became more common. Garshuni (Arabic in Syriac script, often with Christian ‘dialectal’ traits) was replaced by standard Arabic in Arabic script, as the preferred language of writing both ‘secular’ and ‘religious’ texts—to such an extent that religious leaders found it necessary to warn clerics to keep using Syriac for religious purposes.29 While in the Levantine provinces, in British Palestine and French Lebanon and Syria, English and French sometimes were preferred by these modernizing elites, in general Arabic profited from its association with modernization, education and inter-sectarian relations.

26 Watenpaugh, Being Modern in the Middle East, pp. 47–54, 70–94.
In the second half of the nineteenth century, therefore, a movement emerged in which Christians had a relatively large role but which was decidedly non-sectarian and which later on more evenly reflected society as a whole. This helped to position MSA as the language of the emerging middle class that was literate, politically and culturally involved, and non-sectarian. Gradually, it also opposed itself to the dominance of Turkish in the cultural and political spheres. In this process, MSA was foregrounded at the expense of the (already limited) literate use of the regional vernaculars, even if in some domains English and French constituted important competitors.

Nationalism, Internationalism and Transnationalism

In the preceding sections, I have tried to stay away from the interpretation of Arabic as a ‘national’ or ‘nationalist’ language. When seen from the perspective of Jewish and Christian users of the language, one wonders whether there ever was a time when an undeniable link between the usage of Arabic and the adherence to Arab nationalism was present.

To some extent, the use of Arabic in the newly emerging public space of the major urban centres supported a kind of regional, inter-communal solidarity that could be put to use in confrontations with the Ottoman state. However, for much of the period up to the First World War, Ottoman Turkish and the accompanying Ottoman identity found a positive reception in many Christian circles. The question thus is when exactly the use of Arabic, in circles of the communities discussed so far, takes on a nationalist perspective. While the origins of this may lie in the years leading up to the First World War, it seems likely that the fundamental changes took place during the Mandates and, for Iraq, the period immediately following independence in 1932.

For the Jewish community of Baghdad, this is most obviously the case. While during the years of the Mandate and the early years of the Iraqi state there was still considerable support for the Iraqi state with Arabic as its national language, the years leading up to the Second World War gradually eroded this broad support, even if official support from the Jewish community and its leadership remained in place until after the creation of the state of Israel. However, the community was not immune from the threats of rising Nazism in Europe and its influence on Iraqi policies in the years of prime minister Rashid Ali al-Gaylani’s second term in office (1940–41), while also increasing numbers of Iraqi Jews had contacts with the Jewish community in British Mandate Palestine. While initially many of the Iraqi Jews were opposed to the creation of a Jewish state and to some extent were identifying with the Iraqi nationalist project, including the adoption of MSA in education, administration and commerce, the combination of anti-Jewish tendencies in some political parties, economic rivalries in the city of Baghdad and the positive pull of the Zionist project caused Jews more and more to distance themselves—even if official commitment remained intact and some segments continued their integration into mainstream ‘Arab’ culture. Only a minority of the Iraqi Jews, therefore, might have seen themselves as ‘Arab Jews’, although perhaps not one Jewish community in the Middle East was as close to that as were the Jews of Baghdad.30 Perhaps even more so than in other communities (where the group using MSA was also small compared to the community as a whole), unpublished research suggests that the support

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for and usage of standardized Arabic might have been restricted to a rather small group of men who were politically, literarily or commercially involved.\textsuperscript{31}

Within the Syriac communities in the north, the range of positions vis-à-vis Arab nationalism perhaps was even bigger. The Catholic Chaldeans, the Syriac Orthodox and the Syriac Catholics were largely inclined to support the project, even if few of them would have considered themselves ethnic Arabs. To a large extent they integrated themselves into Iraqi society, first mostly in the north, and after independence also by increased migration to Baghdad and the south. The Assyrians, however, especially those that had arrived as refugees from Hakkari after the First World War, became increasingly estranged from Iraqi society, though they too conformed to the educational demands of the new Iraqi state. Their association with the British army (Assyrian Levies/RAF) and their insistence on regional and communal independence in the north made it easy to construe these somewhat naïve demands as an essential threat to the emerging Iraqi state. Against the background of the need for Iraqi unity in the face of the much bigger threat of Sunni–Shia discordance, it was easy to scapegoat the Hakkari Assyrians when, in the first half of 1933, they were not willing to concord with plans for demilitarization and resettlement. This led to wide-scale fighting and looting, with numbers of victims difficult to establish with certainty. One of the best documented events is the August massacre in the village of Semele, where at least 300 unarmed men were killed by the Iraqi army. The train of events that followed hastened the departure of a considerable part of the community to French Mandate Syria and the expulsion of the patriarch and his family. Most of the Assyrians whose home villages were within the boundaries of the new state remained in the country, but this violent episode further estranged many of them from wider Iraqi society, causing a rift that has not healed until the present day.\textsuperscript{32}

The Palestinian case brings us back to Antonius’ construction of a linguistically based Arab nationalism. Antonius, as a member of the Palestinian Christian community, explicitly argues for an Arab nationalism based on the combination of lineage, tradition and language. With the Assyrians and the Jews for various reasons firmly put outside the bounds of Arab identity, it is the groups that he himself is connected to, that are yet to be convinced. In his opinion, the Christians of the Levant—be they Catholic or Protestant, Maronite or Orthodox—hesitate between their Arab and Western (especially French) connections. They, therefore, are the ones to be convinced and lured into the Arab fold. This was a battle that still could be won, and which, in the case of most Palestinian Christians, was indeed won. In the crucible of the years in which the state of Israel was formed, most of them attached themselves firmly to the Arab cause, even if perhaps some would have hesitated to call themselves Arab, and while continuing to cherish their links with the Catholic-minded Francophonie.\textsuperscript{33}

\textsuperscript{31}PhD research by Sasha Goldstein-Sabah at Leiden University.


The battles, however, were fought not only with respect to the question about who could, by linguistic and cultural identification, be included in the new Arabness. *The Arab Awakening*, written in English, points us to a public that is international and transnational rather than national. One aspect, of course, is that of the new international world order, in which the future of the Arabs was intimately linked to the concerns and policies of the League of Nations, as well as with the concerns of Great Britain and France. Their stakes in the region, both economically and ideologically, deeply influenced the course of the Arab politics——even if these went in different, often opposing directions.\(^3\) What is perhaps less often noted is the fact that Antonius, as much as most other local key players in the discussions about Arabism, nationalism and religious minorities, was thoroughly implicated in the transnational playing field of the time, if only by his family’s origins in today’s Lebanon, his cosmopolitan upbringing in Alexandria (Egypt) and his elite education in Oxford. Similarly, Jews from Baghdad with their extensive contacts in Hong Kong, Shanghai, India and London, Christians from Palestine with friends and families in North and South America as well as Catholic connections in France, Syriac Christians from Iraq with their patriarch in Chicago, their co-religionists in Syria and Lebanon and sympathizers in England, were all part of well-kept and world-spanning networks that traded ideas and ideologies as much as people and goods.

These international and transnational connections, however, do not necessarily distract from what is local and national. Many Arabic-speaking Christians and Jews, as well as quite a number of Christians that acquired Arabic in the Mandate years, were eager to participate in the nation-building of the newly created Arab states, regardless of whether they saw themselves as Arabs or not. Arab nationalism’s inclinations to a non-sectarian secular state formed as good a basis for a new state as most Christians and Jews would have wished for. If, however, the entrance ticket was to be the wholesale acceptance of an imposed ‘Arabness’, for quite a few this was one step too many, be they Jewish, Assyrian, Armenian or Maronite.

**Conclusions**

This all too brief overview of how some important non-Muslim communities dealt with the increasing importance of Arabic in the Mandatory period can perhaps be summarized in two succinctly phrased conclusions. The first of these is that linguistic Arabization is not identical to cultural Arabization in the way Antonius seems to have envisaged. Secondly, in understanding processes of Arabization and acceptance of Arabism, religion is a factor but certainly not the only one.

As discussed above, in the years between 1920 and 1950, Jews in Baghdad, Syriac Christians in North Iraq and Catholics in Jerusalem increasingly used Arabic, mostly in its standardized form. If only to participate in the emerging public space in which newspapers and political parties started to play an important role, Arabic was a necessary tool. In addition, as a result of internal changes and pressure from the (Mandate) governments, Arabic became part of school curricula, in more extensive and thorough ways than was the case

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earlier in communal schools. Notably, though, the level of Arabic reached by the students differed not only between these communities, but also within these communities, between social classes and between men and women. Therefore, some level of linguistic Arabization took place in all communities, apace with the increasing importance of Arabic in the public sphere of the new states.

Nevertheless, despite the strong convictions of George Antonius and his fellow nationalists, merely the acceptance of Arabic as an important language of the period was not enough to foster what I call cultural Arabization, even if, true enough, for some of the region’s Christians and Jews the acceptance of Arabic formed part of a larger identification with the Arab nation, rather than merely with a particular Arab state. In Iraq, where Arabism as such was already a much more contested concept for the building of the Iraqi state due to its considerable Kurdish and Turkmen minorities, most of the Syriac communities, both in the north and in Baghdad, were inclined to support the Arabist underpinnings of the Iraqi state. Most of the Assyrians, however, little trusted the Iraqi state. The Jews of Baghdad, whose mother tongue usually was Arabic and some of which participated in the Arabic cultural and political revival of the Mandate period, in the post-independence period became increasingly removed from the Iraqi state. For the Catholics of Jerusalem the movement was the other way. In response to the increased pressure to take sides in the conflict between Zionists, Palestinian nationalists and the British Mandatory Government, their increased usage of Arabic went hand in hand with a growing identification with the Palestinian national movement.

As we have seen, it was important for Antonius to suggest that religion was not of importance in these processes of Arabization and identification with Arabism. At first sight, our overview supports his view. Clearly, the three groups of non-Muslims that were discussed in this paper all took different trajectories, none of which were solely predicated on religion. That being said, religion played a role at least at two levels. Perhaps the most surprising is that Catholicism seems to have eased the way of Christians into the Arabic fold. Though there certainly are exceptions (especially with regard to Lebanon, concerning the Maronites and the other Catholics), in general those Middle Eastern Christians who in earlier phases had attached themselves to Catholicism, were more inclined to put their stakes on Arabism than on the separate nationalisms that developed in the communities from which they originated. Whether this is a matter of distinguishing oneself from one’s origins and rival communities, or constitutes the logical result from the more ecumenical and less nationalistic outlook espoused by Catholics, is something that needs further investigation. Notably, a similar tendency to assimilation to the larger Arab movement can be discerned among the region’s Protestants.

At a less tangible level, Antonius’ insistence on the religiously inclusive nature of Arabism, in combination with his barely veiled irritation with those Christians who speak Arabic but do not support the Arab movement (such as some of the Christians of Lebanon), suggests that more is at stake here. Whether or not Antonius wants to admit it, the inclusion of Christians and Jews into Arab nationalism is not a given, and thus needs to be stated over and over again. It is that uncertainty, about the full inclusion of Arabic-speaking Christians into the Arab fold, that (in addition to the Palestinian cause) drives much of Antonius’ well-written apology for Arab nationalism. To counter that uncertainty, many Christians and some Jews in the Mandate period identified wholeheartedly with the Arab cause, seeing themselves as Arab Christians and Arab Jews and working with Muslims in developing an inclusive
Arab nationalism. It is that same lingering uncertainty, however, that supported the case of those in the Jewish and Christian communities that espoused separate identities, based on linguistic, ethnic, regional or religious difference between them and what they saw as the majority, as in the case of some of the Armenians, Assyrians, Maronites and Jews.

For most of these ‘fragments’, to speak with Sami Zubaida, these non-Arab identifications and loyalties did not hinder their ‘imagining the nation’ and their willingness to participate in the Arab states, their administrations, educational programmes and public spheres. As such, Jews and Christians for many years, both during the British and French Mandates and after independence, fruitfully contributed to the further development of the Arab nation states. However, the fluid and gradual boundaries between those who belonged to the nation and who did not, also allowed for exclusion and separation, for scapegoating and expulsion, as happened so visibly first to the Hakkari Assyrians and then to the Jews of Iraq and other Middle Eastern countries.

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