Robert Schuman Centre for Advanced Studies

Beyond Anti-Semitism: Egyptian Responses to German Nazism and Italian Fascism in the 1930s

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RSC No. 2001/32
Mediterranean Programme Series

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and Italian Fascism in the 1930s

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BADIA FIESOLANA, SAN DOMENICO (FI)
Mediterranean Programme

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The Mediterranean Programme has received generous financial support for Socio-Political Studies from three major institutions who have guaranteed their support for four years: ENI S.p.A, Ente Cassa di Risparmio di Firenze, and Mediocredito Centrale. The European Investment Bank, Compagnia di San Paolo and Monte dei Paschi di Siena have offered generous financial support for four years for studies in Political Economy which will be launched in Spring 2000. In addition, a number of grants and fellowships for nationals of the Southern and Eastern Mediterranean countries have been made available by the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (for doctoral students) and the City of Florence (Giorgio La Pira Fellowship for post-doctoral fellows).

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Principal Themes in the Egyptian pro-Fascist and pro-Nazi Narrative

I would like to open my presentation with the following quotation:

The pro-Axis sympathies of most Egyptians at this time were not based alone on the conviction that the Germans and Italians were going to win the war. Nor alone on the Arab proverb: 'He who is the enemy of my enemy is my friend'. The ideology of the two totalitarian powers was ready-made for a country like Egypt. It reassured the wealthy Pashas and Beys who were amassing fortunes out of the war and wanted to keep their money. But at the same time, the mumbo jumbo of the [national] "socialism" they dispensed fascinated the masses of the poor, the ignorant, and those easily taken in by slogans. There was something in it for every Egyptian. Military men such as young Lieutenant Nasser were impressed by the might of the Wehrmacht and the Luftwaffe, by the military genius that had so quickly brought about the fall of Warsaw, Copenhagen, Oslo, Brussels, Paris, Athens and Belgrade.

This quotation is taken from Robert St. John’s book The Boss.1 Published in 1960, the book is a biography of Jamal ċAbd al-Nasir, then President of the United Arab Republic and the charismatic leader of both Egypt and the Arab world. The Boss earned great popularity and was soon recognized as what amounted to an official biography of the July 1952 revolution in Egypt. Among other sources, it is based on St. John’s interviews with ċAbd al-Nasir himself. It is empathetic towards ċAbd al-Nasir and attempts to reflect other voices of the Free Officers movement that carried out the revolution and founded the new republic. In the first chapters of his book, St. John describes at length the historical and psychological roots of the revolution, based on the testimonies of the men who created it. He presents the 1930s and the World War II era as the major source of revolutionary motivation and of the consolidation of the revolutionary cadres. And in his story, which, as I mentioned, was based primarily on the revolutionary self-narrative, it was among the nationalistic youth of Egypt, during the 1930s, that the revolutionary moment was forged. These youth were profoundly influenced by Italian fascism and German Nazism. They greatly admired the Duce’s and the Führer’s ability to mobilize the masses and incite them to create social and cultural revolution in their societies; to establish a prosperous economy; to create vast military power; and to win international prestige. Prominent among these militant youth were the young army officers who worshipped Hitler, the power of the Third Reich and the Nazi army. Shortly after the outbreak of the war, these officers secretly set up an underground organization, collected intelligence information for the Axis forces, and hoped to prepare the ground for the Axis’ conquest of Egypt. Their motivation was obvious: The Young Officers were fired by their hatred of Britain, the colonial occupier of their country. They regarded this occupation, then six decades long, as a “national shame,” and they were determined to take any and every step necessary to liberate Egypt. They saw Rommel’s dramatic
military successes on the North African front and his rapid advance towards Egypt as a golden opportunity for Egypt to gain her independence.²

In the narrative of *The Boss*, the Free Officers’ actions are based on the premise of a general sympathy among the Egyptian public for Nazism, Hitler and Rommel. In fact, we are told, the entire Egyptian community was swept up by strong pro-Nazi sentiments. This sympathetic stance had, of course, both regional and global significance, since Egypt had become the central base of the Allied armies in their Middle East and North Africa campaign. Between the summer of 1940 and mid-1942 – following the fall of Syria and Lebanon to the Vichy regime; the pro-Nazi coup led by Rashid ʿAli al-Kaylani in Iraq; and the cooperation of the Palestinians, led by Hajj Amin al-Husayni, with the Nazis – Egypt took on critical importance. In 1941-42, Rommel’s advance towards Egypt and the penetration of his forces as far as El-Alamein (al-ʿAlamayn), about 100 miles west of Alexandria, created the danger that the front would collapse altogether and change the situation of the war decisively in Germany’s favor. There was a real possibility of the all-out defeat of the Allies in the Middle East, with potential catastrophic results and even their loss of the entire war.³

And, according to *The Boss*, at this fateful hour for the whole world, Egypt betrayed the Allies. Although she had been allied with Britain in a defense treaty since 1936, Egypt nevertheless plotted to collaborate with the Nazi enemy. In practical terms, the major nationalist forces, supported by strong public opinion, aspired to exploit the opportunity in order to launch an anti-British, pro-Nazi revolution. Egypt was saved from total collapse only by the aggressive steps taken by the British ambassador in Cairo, Sir Miles Lampson, in early-February 1942, against King Faruq and the pro-German nationalist forces. The culmination of this colonialist assault was the British imposition of a pro-British Wafd government, headed by Mustafa al-Nahhas, thus ensuring that the British war effort would not be disturbed from the rear. Later, it would also enable the Allies to concentrate on the military campaign and Montgomery’s repulse of Rommel. The young revolutionaries, temporarily suppressed, would have to wait another decade before carrying out their revolution. And indeed, the July 1952 revolution and the removal of the British colonial occupation in the mid-1950s would offer them sweet revenge for their foiled attempt during World War II.⁴

It is important to recognize that this story of betrayal was not invented by the author of *The Boss*. Robert St. John’s text faithfully reflected what can be called the conventional and hegemonic master-narrative developed in the writings of observers, journalists, and academic scholars. They invented it
against the background of the victory of the Egyptian revolution in the 1950s.\textsuperscript{5} Since then, almost all Egyptian historiography, written by both Egyptian and Western historians, has reproduced and canonized it and continues to do so to this very day. In the historians' attempt to reconstruct the origins of the revolution and explain its motivation and success, they promoted this master-narrative, which locates the roots of the revolution in World War II and places this narrative of betrayal at its center.\textsuperscript{6}

A more in-depth analysis of the master-narrative reveals that it embodies four elements. The quote from \textit{The Boss} that I cited at the opening of my presentation encapsulates all four of them, and they have since been produced and re-produced in the journalistic and scholarly literature of Egyptian historiography.

\textit{The first element} speaks of the Egyptian public's motivation for its treachery and collaboration with the Nazis. It grew out of a general feeling among Egyptians that "the enemy of my enemy is my friend and my ally." Its logic is that the struggle for national liberation from the British, which greatly intensified between the two World Wars, spurred the nationalist forces to search for an ally against British colonial rule. Fascism, and in particular Nazism, offered an option for such an ally. When Rommel threatened to overthrow the British occupation of Egypt, the entire Egyptian community rose in support of his campaign. The narrative identifies this motivation as a generally held sentiment that also took hold of national elites in Syria, Iraq, Lebanon and Palestine. All of them, under colonial subjugation to France and Britain, regarded fascism and Nazism as a liberating force that could redeem them from the colonialist yoke.\textsuperscript{7}

\textit{The second element} relates that the sympathy for fascism and Nazism was not only instrumental but also immanent; that is, it was built into the social and cultural fabric of Egypt as a Muslim-Arab community. The totalitarian ideologies and practices of fascism and Nazism were in tune with the "Egyptian Muslim mentality." They were well-suited to the economic and sociopolitical structure of Egypt. They contained the promise of making the wealthy elites richer and ensuring their continued political power. They provided the masses with a populist ideology that promised a total redemption from their harsh economic problems, social alienation and cultural predicaments. Moreover, they took by storm the imagination of the educated youth, who were seeking to identify with military power, charismatic leadership, and symbols of heroism, masculinity and national grandeur.\textsuperscript{8}
The third element tells the story of the "failure of the liberal experiment" in Egypt. It emphasizes the lack of an inherent correlation between liberalism and parliamentary democracy on the one hand, and Egyptian Muslim society on the other. The attempt in Egypt in the 1920s to establish liberal-democratic institutions based on a constitution collapsed in the 1930s. Autocratic and authoritarian forces concentrated around the Palace gained power in the political arena and became dominant towards the end of the 1930s. They represented a belief which found many supporters, namely that fascism and Nazism offered a form of authoritative political government and culture that was far more suitable to the local political culture. Western democracy, which had failed, was identified with the British and French colonial enemies, while the authoritarian regime, offered as an alternative, represented new, thriving totalitarian forces that were rising in Europe.9

The fourth element concerns the intellectual elite. It speaks of the "crisis of orientation" which the intellectual community was caught up in, in the 1930s. Prior to this crucial decade, Egypt’s leading intellectuals had advocated a modernist Western orientation. They aspired to instill secular European cultural values and political practices into Egyptian society and to make the local culture and polity open to progress, science, rationalism, liberalism and democracy. But throughout the 1930s and 1940s, these intellectuals were also swayed by reactionary, Islamic mass culture. They began to write about early Islamic society and to foster religious, irrational, nationalistic and fundamentalist orientations. In this context, they venerated fascism and Nazism and represented them as better alternatives to the declining modernist culture of Western Europe. This fourth element labels this intellectual shift the "betrayal of the intellectuals" ("trahison des clercs").10

Deconstructing the Hegemonic Narrative

My aim in this paper is to deconstruct this master-narrative and to show that its various components are either false or misleading. I argue that this master-narrative is based primarily on the political memory of the revolution that took shape in the 1950s after the 1952 revolution. The revolutionary leaders' motivations for the narration of such a story and the construction of a memory based on the pro-Nazifascist narrative appear to be obvious. Here, it is worthwhile to recall the most important one. Almost from its outset, the revolution was imbued with a strong anti-imperialist mood. In fact, throughout the 1950s, the revolutionary regime conducted what amounted to a war against British imperialism, and it tried to convince the Egyptian public that only the revolution would bring the seventy-year British occupation of Egypt to an end. The final withdrawal of British soldiers from the Nile valley (1954-1956) and,
most crucially, the Suez crisis, followed by the Suez War, only fueled this anti-imperialist struggle. The revolution's leaders made a great effort, throughout the decade of the 1950s, to present themselves as the sole, authentic, anti-colonial national movement, and the only one capable of bringing about complete independence, freedom and sovereignty to the Egyptian nation. Hence, they developed this self-narrative, which anchored their origins in the second World War, and described it in light of the anti-colonial struggle that would take place during the following decade. They projected their anti-British experience of the 1950s onto their nationalist activities of the early 1940s. They strived to create a collective remembrance, according to which, even in the most difficult conditions of the second World War, they had acted as an underground military movement against the British occupation; they portrayed their support of the Axis as an anti-British stand. Their collaboration with the Axis, which, at the time, was actually one entirely negligible and marginal episode, was over-magnified in the 1950s into what was described as a major national operation. The revolutionary leaders presented this "heroic" national moment as a counter-narrative to the "shame" and "betrayal" of the old nationalist movement led by the Wafd. In their counter-narrative, they stressed that the Wafd and the traditional national forces had collaborated with the British during the war, a process that culminated in the "black and shameful event" of 4 February 1942. This act on the part of the established national movement brought about the humiliation and crushing of Egyptian national pride and served, according to this counter-narrative, as proof for the Egyptians that they needed a new and genuine national force, such as which was embodied by the Free Officers revolutionary movement. Obviously, this sort of revolutionary memory was created to legitimize the new revolutionary regime in the eyes of the Egyptian public. Its fomenters presented themselves as the authentic, national redeeming force, the ones who actually realized the Egyptian nation's historical aspiration for total liberation and complete independence. Already in the 1970s, James Jankowski noted that the memoirs and texts written by revolutionary leaders in the 1950s "have been eager to stress their opposition to the British during the war."\textsuperscript{11}

Like the men who created the revolution, the observers and historians of the 1950s read the pre-revolutionary era as a kind of prelude to the revolution, as a period in which there already existed the nucleus of elements and forces that would bring it about. This was clearly a revolutionary retrospective reading of the 1920s and 1930s, one that over-emphasized pro-fascist and pro-Nazi tendencies and voices, although they had been marginal expressions at the time, located at the political and cultural peripheries of Egyptian society. If, however, we succeed in casting off the tyranny of the revolutionary memory and re-examine the 1930s and the war years according to Leopold von Ranke's
injunction that “each era should stand in immediate relation to God,” then an entirely different picture will emerge. And indeed, an “examination in real time” of Egyptian representations of fascism and Nazism during the interwar era shows that the overwhelming majority of Egyptian voices – in the political arena, in intellectual circles, among the professional, educated, urban middle classes and even in the literate popular culture – rejected fascism and Nazism both as an ideology and a practice, and as “an enemy of the enemy.”

My argument here relates principally to the hegemonic groups and dominant forces within the cultural field and political arena. Elsewhere, I have attempted to show in detail that certain pro-fascist and pro-Nazi voices were indeed heard in Egypt’s socio-cultural arena. In the 1930s, Salama Musa and the monthly *al-Majalla al-Jadida* he owned and edited were prominent in this camp. While they fiercely criticized Mussolini and "Italian fascist imperialism" (which found a brutal expression in Mussolini’s war on and occupation of Ethiopia), they admired German "national socialism" and viewed Hitler's reformist agenda, especially in regards to domestic affairs, as an ideal socialist agenda appropriate for imitation and adaptation. Young Egypt (*Misr al-Fatah*) was another organization which, towards the end of the 1930s, expressed admiration for Hitler and Nazi Germany. The leader of the organization, Ahmad Husayn, called for the adaptation of Hitler's dictatorial methods in Egypt. In addition, the writings of a leading journalist, Karim Thabit, who published especially in the daily *al-Muqattam*, provide a further example of the growing admiration for fascism and Nazism, and, more personally, for the "exemplary leadership" of Mussolini and Hitler.

As was noted earlier, though, these forces and voices, throughout the whole era under discussion, were located in the political and cultural peripheries. Moreover, towards the outbreak of the second World War, in the summer of 1939, when the "irredentist, imperialist nature" of Hitler became clear to Salama Musa and Ahmad Husayn, they fundamentally changed their attitude towards fascism and Nazism and began to level harsh criticism against Hitler. They called on Nazi Germany to stop inciting war, to cease its imperialistic assault on "weak and small nations", and to relinquish the Nazi strategy of *lebensraum*. It was Salama Musa in particular who, when it became clear to him that Hitler and the Nazi regime were clinging to an expansionist, militarist policy, publicly declared his support for Western democracies and the Allies.12

This conclusion, which I present here briefly, is based on more than a decade of study which I conducted in Egypt, and its archives and libraries. My efforts are an attempt to extricate and recover what I term the “repressed...
democratic discourse" shaped by a broad system of producers and agents of the print culture of the period. In my research, I systematically examined scores of contemporary newspapers and periodicals, articles and editorials, as well as photojournalism and political cartoons and hundreds of books and texts of various types, including books of social and political thought, biographies, historical writing, textbooks and memoirs. I also found this democratic discourse expressed in works of fiction, literary criticism, plays, poetry, paintings, and photographs, as well as radio broadcasts. My argument tries to show that a broad and hegemonic community of discourse in the cultural field supported parliamentary democracy both as the preferred form of political government and as a basis for Egypt's national culture.13

Before moving on to present the various attitudes towards fascism and Nazism that were expressed in this public discourse (deconstructing the first and second elements I presented earlier), I would like to relate briefly to the political and intellectual history of the time. Here, I would like to take apart the third and fourth elements of the master narrative. In contrast to one of the prevalent claims in the conventional historical narrative, the “crisis of the liberal experiment” did not eliminate parliamentary government in Egypt; it was still in full operation in the 1930s. The 1923 constitution, despite severe attacks upon it, remained in force, ensuring a multi-party political culture, general elections, civil rights, a free press, and ideological and political pluralism. More importantly, the central national force of the political arena, the Wafd party, continued to be the dominant force in Egyptian politics. It was also the central democratic power; each time that the parliamentary system operated in full, and general elections were held, the Wafd won them by a large majority. It therefore held the majority of seats in parliament and was the party that formed the government. As such, the Wafd became the watchdog of Egyptian democracy and the basis for the formation of a strong democratic camp. The Wafd also halted the attempts of conservative authoritarian forces to take over the government, the society and the culture. It also gave political and moral backing to the mainstream intellectual elites, who in the main were opposed to fascism and Nazism and supported democracy and freedom of expression. Hence, the commonly held historiographic claim that the Egyptian system of parliamentary democracy was in a state of “crisis”, or “decline”, is based on inconclusive evidence; it merely recycles the revolutionary notion about the “dwindling” and “failure” of the pre-revolutionary ancien regime.14

The narration of the intellectual history of the era also fell into the “revolutionary trap.” According to this narrative, the constructivist evolution of the intellectual discourse was gripped in the 1930s by a grave crisis which led to intellectual disorientation, "intellectual anarchy", and severe cultural
disarray. The intellectuals cast aside the entire modernist project and took up an emotional and irrational Islamicist discourse, and “worse yet”, it was both anti-Western and anti-Enlightenment. In fact, the intellectuals in the 1930s lost their distinctive identity and were swallowed up in the turbid wave of populist fundamentalism (“the ideology and mentality of Mahdism”, in the words of Safran) that inundated the entire field of cultural production. Consequently, the autonomous intellectual voice of the 1920s, which had been a progressive and rationalistic voice promoting scientific culture and challenging Islamic tradition, vanished in the 1930s and 1940s. Moreover, this narrative finds that as a result of their disillusionment with Western culture, the intellectuals also tended to believe that Western democracy and parliamentarianism had disappointed or failed them. They came to believe that a parliamentary constitutional government was incompatible with Islamic society and local political culture, and this engendered their growing admiration for the authoritarian regimes in Italy and Germany and helped to develop the attitude that these regimes were better suited to the local political culture.

As we shall see, this narrative is inaccurate. Beyond the fact that it is a captive of the revolutionary construction, its major flaw is that its producers, observers and historians have concentrated on only one type of intellectual writing from the period, namely, the Islamiyyat literature, which dealt with the Prophet Muhammad, the four great orthodox caliphs (al-Khulafa’ al-Rashidun), and other classical Islamic heroes. It is an Orientalist and essentialist reading of the post-1930 intellectual evolution. Other scholars have already shown that a more systematic, contextualist reading of Islamiyyat literature clearly proves that the intellectuals remained faithful to modernist principles and values such as reason, science, free inquiry, freedom of individual expression and, in the political sphere, parliamentary government. My argument is that only by putting aside the Islamiyyat literature and considering other textual corpuses produced by intellectuals in the 1930s in the context of the democratic discourse, can one demonstrate that in their worldview and in their attitude towards their society, the intellectuals remained modernist, liberal and democratic, and that the majority of them also preserved a distinctly secular Western orientation. In other words, to gain a better understanding of the attitude of prominent intellectual luminaries such as Taha Husayn, 'Abbas Mahmud al-'Aqqad, Muhammad Husayn Haykal, Ahmad Amin and Tawfiq al-Hakim towards the “liberal experiment” in Egypt and the Middle East, we cannot rely solely on a reading of the Islamic texts they produced or of the Islamic subjects that preoccupied them. These by no means exhaust their work and interests as intellectuals. If, on the other hand, we examine their liberal writings directly and in the historical context of the time – namely, the stances they took towards the struggle between dictatorship and democracy in their
country and in Europe, and specifically their attitudes towards fascism and Nazism — then it is easy to show that they remained liberals. In a broader sense, they were not enmeshed in a “crisis of orientation,” but continued to advocate an Enlightenment’s Weltanschauung, reason, progress, science, liberty, civil rights, democracy and alongside these, constitutional parliamentary government.\textsuperscript{18}

**Intellectual Responses to Fascism and Nazism**

Now, as I move on to specifically discuss the attitudes of Egyptians towards fascism and Nazism, I must again stress that I am not dealing here only with well-known politicians or “high”, luminary intellectuals. My purpose is to uncover the attitude of an entire public discourse, which I call “the democratic discourse.” It represents, as I said before, an entire cultural field of public opinion that can be reconstructed from scores of newspapers, hundreds of books, works of art and radio broadcasts. In this sense, when I say “Egyptian responses,” I am including the hundreds of voices of major producers and forces in the 1930s’ print-culture. I must also stress that the “democratic discourse” addressed the issue of fascism and Nazism in a clearly domestic context: the political and ideological struggle over Egyptian democracy and the authoritarian alternatives which challenged it. There was a clear-cut link between the defense of the parliamentary democracies in Egypt and in the Middle East, the rejection of fascism and Nazism outside the region, in Europe, and the attack on manifestations of sympathy for these regimes in the region.\textsuperscript{19}

The Egyptian public’s attitude towards fascism and Nazism was expressed principally through three types of representation. The first, \textit{imperialistic representation}, viewed fascism and Nazism as imperialist forces; the second, \textit{totalitarian representation}, perceived the Third Reich and the fascist regime in Italy as extreme forms of modern totalitarianism. And the third, \textit{racist representation}, scathingly denounced the ideology of Nazism and its racist theories and practices.

As far back as the early 1930s, the Egyptians themselves refuted the paradigmatic claim that Egyptian sympathy for fascism and Nazism was based on hostility towards their British occupiers and on the concept of “my enemy’s enemy is my friend.” From the first, they regarded fascism as an arch-imperialistic phenomenon. Mussolini’s statements that the Mediterranean is “our sea” (\textit{mare nostrum}), together with fascist Italy’s rule over Libya and the threat that it would occupy Ethiopia, led many Egyptian intellectuals to view Mussolini and Italy as Ahmad Hasan al-Zayyat defined them: an “imperialistic force thirsting for wars and conquest, worse and more dangerous than the old
imperialism of England and France.”20 The war Mussolini waged against Ethiopia was defined in the Egyptian press as a “wicked, imperialistic war”.21 In fact, from the fall of 1935 to the spring of 1936, that war aroused an anti-fascist storm in the Egyptian press; and Mussolini, according to al-Risala’s characterization, was “a racist imperialist the likes of which humanity has never known before.”22 The use of mustard-gas bombs to kill hundreds of thousands of Ethiopian civilians, the destruction of hundreds of villages, and the annexation of Ethiopia to the “Italian empire” were described by Muhammad Lutfi Jum’a as “genocide”. In his book, Bayna al-Asad al-Afriqi wa-al-Namir al-Italy (Between the African Lion and The Italian Tiger), published in Cairo in 1935, Jum’a systematically and comprehensively developed his thesis that Italian fascism “launched an imperialist occupying war on Ethiopia”. The war, he wrote, caused unprecedented destruction and killings of Ethiopian civilian populations. Jum’a described how the repeated use of mustard-gas bombs, cannons, tanks and other modern weaponry had created a new type of genocidal war. He painted an ugly, demonic portrayal of the “Italian tiger”: the fascist imperialistic regime which ignored international law and mocked the League of Nations, annihilated one of the League’s first founding members, the independent and free nation of Ethiopia, “which enjoyed 3,000 years of liberty and independence... while Italy enjoyed independence only 60 years”. What motivated Italy, Jum’a warned, was “an ambition for imperialist expansion” which was imbued with “white racism”. This fascist racism viewed black Ethiopia as “a barbaric nation” which Italy, as a “civilized nation”, had the duty to occupy and civilize. For Jum’a, such policy was a dangerous expression of the imperialist mentality of “the white man’s burden”, which took on a new, violent, militaristic, and racist form in the Italian fascist imperialism. In this sense, Jum’a was convinced that Italian fascism was a much more dangerous, destructive, and chauvinist form of imperialism than the traditional imperialism of Britain and France. Jum’a called on the human conscience of the world to speak out against the infliction of Italian fascism on the Ethiopian people. He beseeched the enlightened European public to recognize the "barbaric and beastly nature of the fascist occupying army", which imposed an unjustified war on the weak and miserable Ethiopia. While Jum’a condemned fascist Italy for its “barbaric invasion” of Ethiopia, dressed in a civilizing cloak, he admired the Ethiopians for their noble and self-defensive war against imperialism. "The tiger” was shrewd, imperialistic, hyper-nationalistic and irredentist; “the lion” was a noble, pure soul, desperately fighting to preserve its honor, freedom and independence.23

Other Egyptian intellectuals were also shocked by the silence of the Western world and the weak-kneed stance of the League of Nations. They took a stand in line with Jum’a’s, in face of what they also referred to as “Mussolini’s
war crimes against Ethiopia, a member of the League of Nations.” According to their analyses, the next aim of “fascist imperialism” was Egypt itself, and Sudan as an integral part of it. Mussolini had occupied Ethiopia and annexed it to Italy’s African empire, which also included Somalia, Eritrea and Libya. The Nile Valley, and in particular Egypt, was thought to be the next step in his plan. Even Ahmad Husayn, who showed some sympathy towards the domestic reforms which fascism had brought about in Italy, accused Mussolini of plotting and planning the conquest of Egypt.

In spite of Egyptian intellectuals’ traditional animosity towards British and French imperialism, they clearly preferred it to the new imperialism of fascist Italy. Hafiz Mahmud asserted that, “A known and satisfied imperialism [Britain and France] is preferable to a hungry and unknown imperialism,” and Abbas Mahmud al-Aqqad claimed that “anyone suffering from a nose cold [British rule] does not need to be cured by injecting TB [fascism] into his body.” Al-Aqqad, relating to “Nazi militaristic imperialism” at the beginning of World War II, asserted that the “imperialism of democratic countries like England and France, on Eastern Arab peoples” was incomparable to “the oppression and tyranny of the Nazi rule on the Poles, Czechs, Austrians, Dutch and the Scandanavian people”, and he explained:

“The huge difference between the two is that one totally and fundamentally rejects freedom, while the other embodies it, even though it postpones or defers from you the means to value democracy and to practice it. There is not any hope for freedom [and independence] or prosperity under Nazi rule, but there is no reason to give up the chance to achieve freedom [and independence] and prosperity as long as democracy exists.”

We see then, that according to the Egyptian perception, the “enemy’s enemy” did not, in reality, represent an option for an alliance or friendship, since it, in fact, represented a danger, more demonic and imperialistic than the enemy himself. Hence, all the tremendous historiographical effort to explain the Egyptians’ ostensible sympathy for Nazism and fascism, and their “collaboration” with the Axis during the war, both apparently based on the principle of support for anti-British forces (since Britain was the traditional enemy of Egyptian nationalism), is inaccurate and misleading. Egyptian national proponents consistently demonstrated that, in spite of the Egyptians’ traditional animosity towards Britain’s colonial rule, they clearly understood that Nazi and fascist imperialisms were significantly more oppressive and destructive and therefore could not, in any way, represent “friend” nor “ally”.

13

Both the intellectuals and the press were harshly critical of what they defined as "fascist totalitarianism". Egyptian intellectuals demonstrated a keen awareness of what was taking place in the Nazi and fascist regimes of Germany and Italy. They anxiously followed the unfolding developments and processes – the elimination of democratic institutions, the strict censorship imposed on what had been a free press, the nullification of individual liberties and civil rights, the persecution of writers, artists and intellectuals, and the introduction of a “reign of terror” and general intimidation.\(^{28}\) It is worthwhile to note that Egyptian intellectuals' criticism of fascist "totalitarianism" or "dictatorship" had already begun in the middle of the 1920s, after Mussolini had consolidated his power in Italy. It was especially Wafdist spokesmen and intellectuals close to the party who expressed their opposition to the fascist authoritarianism. \(^{c}\)Abbas Mahmud al-\(^{c}\)Aqqad was prominent in his systematic critiques of Italian fascism, and the "new sort of dictatorship exemplified by Mussolini" in particular. Already at this early juncture, al-\(^{c}\)Aqqad looked upon the "totalitarian modes" through which Mussolini manipulated the Italian masses as unprecedented in the history of despotisms, absolutisms, and dictatorships.\(^{29}\) After 1933, however, the major Egyptian critique of totalitarianism was directed against German Nazi totalitarian measures and policies. Although criticism of Mussolini and fascist Italy continued, it came to be overshadowed by their aversion to Nazi totalitarianism, since the Egyptians, quite understandably, saw in the German totalitarian model a clearer example against which to level their anti-totalitarian critique.

In the 1930s, particularly after Hitler's rise to power, Muhammad \(^{c}\)Abdallah \(^{c}\)Inan became an outspoken voice condemning Nazi totalitarianism. In the strongest of terms, he wrote about the destruction of democracy in Germany and termed the official attacks on the public and private press and on individual journalists as the “murder of the free press”.\(^{30}\) \(^{c}\)Inan noted the political terror and the mass murder of opponents of the regime and vehemently criticized the collective cult of the Führer. He revealed the demonic, chauvinistic and populistic elements in Hitler's rhetoric, which, he wrote, "hypnotize an enlightened nation", turning it into a “herd submitting to Hitler's incitement."\(^{31}\) Egyptian intellectuals leveled a scathing attack on "the 'fascistization' of culture and art" under the Third Reich. Joseph Goebbels, the Nazi minister of propaganda, was the main target of their attacks. They accused him of brutally politicizing the aesthetic and turning the great German culture into a barbaric and chauvinist one. In their eyes, the Nazi Minister of Propaganda turned the creative artist into a soldier who would create only after receiving an order from a superior, just as soldiers fire only upon their commander's orders. In the Nazi regime, the artist-soldier was recruited to serve nationalistic goals alone: “The artist is obligated to bring to the nation the
tidings of power and joy.” Thus, they asserted, Goebbels suppressed individual creativeness based on freedom of the individual and the absolute autonomy of the creator, and, further, he devastated the artistic genius of Germany, subjugating it to the morbid urges of racist chauvinism.\(^3\) This vehement criticism was accompanied by expressions of sympathy for Hitler’s and Goebbels’ “totalitarian victims.” Albert Einstein, Thomas Mann, Heinrich Mann and later Sigmund Freud, as well as scores of other scientists, musicians, artists, academicians and other intellectuals persecuted by the Nazi regime and expelled from Germany became cultural heroes in Egyptian democratic discourse. They were lauded as icons of the values that Nazism was trampling on: humanism, universalism and freedom.\(^3\)

Two prominent and important voices, Taha Husayn and Abbas Mahmoud al-Aqqad, were outspoken in their harsh criticism of fascist totalitarianism in Italy and Germany. One can see that both were particularly concerned about the destruction of intellectual pluralism and cultural heterogeneity by this new totalitarianism, which replaced them with a “totalitarian fascist culture” that spoke with only one voice and was completely submissive to the will of the state, or, more accurately, to that of the Duce and the Führer. The writings of Taha Husayn, who already at the time was considered “the Doyen of Arab literature” and “the intellectual leader” of Egypt and the Arabic print culture, carried special weight. In an extended essay he published in February 1937 in al-Hilal, perhaps the most prestigious and respected intellectual magazine of Egypt and the Arab world, Husayn established a clear-cut division between “the camp of cultural destruction”, which had developed under the shadow of the fascist apparati (of Germany, Italy, and Communist Russia as well), and “the democratic camp”, which promoted an environment friendly to democratic, pluralistic culture and produced the genuine intellectual and artistic creations of mankind. Husayn’s thesis was clear: Only in a “democratic environment” could an individual creator find the freedom and independence necessary to defend his individual autonomy of thought and creation, and only in this environment would he be free to produce original and ingenious intellectual artifacts. In a “fascist environment”, on the contrary, creators and thinkers were programmed to create, think and work exclusively for the collective ideals and goals of the state or nation, “goals” which were considered “divine”. Mussolini in Italy and Hitler in Germany, together with their cultural agents, were the only judges of artistic, literary, and cultural test and quality. It was they alone who directed the cultural producers and writers to create their “artistic creations”, and these were obligated to be in the image of the will of the all-powerful leader. In practical terms, individual creators in these totalitarian regimes lost their own individual artistic personalities and were absorbed by the impersonal, national collective. They lost their independence and identity; hence, intellectuals and artists, if not

\(^{15}\)
exiled or persecuted and jailed, were forced "to live a life of insect society, to behave like ants in an ant hill or bees in a hive". In other words, for Husayn, totalitarianism effaced individualism and the autonomy of the artist, which, for him, were the oxygen of any true human artistic creation. Husayn viewed the totalitarian regimes in Italy and Germany as anti-humanistic and indeed, anti-cultural, and at "total war" with human civilization as it developed from the Enlightenment onwards. For him, they posed a real threat to human culture's very existence. Taha Husayn called upon enlightened humanity, and democracy as its only possible government (Britian and its democratic culture were, for him, a model for inspiration and emulation), to mobilize all their might to fight against totalitarian fascism. He saw democracy as the only adequate shelter for the individual artist and the creative, liberal intellectual. Therefore, the struggle for the preservation of the integrity of democracy, in his mind, was the fight of all liberal writers and intellectuals who wanted to keep their integrity and independence, and to create genuine culture, literature, and art.34

'Abbas Mahmud al-'Aqqad's stance vis-à-vis fascist totalitarianism was only slightly different from that of Taha Husayn. German Nazism was, for him, the ultimate demonic embodiment of it. Writing several months after the outbreak of the Second World War, al-'Aqqad's outlook was shaped at a time when the Nazi threat on the democratic world was real and immediate. At this critical moment for human civilization, he revealed himself as an ardent admirer and supporter of democracy and the Allies. He declared that the cause of man today is the total and final defeat of Hitler's Germany, without the hope for [its] recovery. This is because any triumph for Germany is a triumph for its evil goals, which Germany strives for, and a triumph for its principles, which Germany believes in. Its real aims, which Germany does not hide, are to exploit other peoples and to rob them [of their material and spiritual life]. And its true principles, for which Germany propagates, is its rule of power over the other countries, and the rule of the regime of power over its own subjects. Could anyone expect from the German government a freedom which is bigger and wider than the freedom that Germany allows German sons themselves? By no means! And this is because freedom cannot exist in a world which is totally subjected to sacred, infallible individuals [Hitler] who demand from the people something which even the great God himself does not demand from them, complete and total obedience.

Al-'Aqqad argued that all Nazi principles were built upon "complete totalitarianism", which aspired to power for its own sake, and needed to use that power obsessively and repeatedly. He saw this as a new sort of tyranny, "which erases the individual" and destroys all the autonomies and civil liberties which are the basic rights of all peoples. For al-'Aqqad, Nazi totalitarianism "is
encapsulated within one aspiration, to absorb the individual human being into the national collective or the state”. Terror, fear, persecution, incarceration and political assassinations were the methods Nazism introduced into German society, in order to impose its own will on Germans and those in the countries occupied by the Nazi forces. Al-Åqâd was convinced: “I don’t see any reasonable human being who would want to see the establishment of a fascist, Nazi regime in Egypt.” He judged that only democracy, “which rejects the absorption of the individual into the state,” could redeem humankind, including the Egyptian people. For him, “democracy invests human beings with the maximum rights”, and its principal role is the defense of freedom, “based on its awareness that the most supreme goal of human progress is individual freedom.” From this point al-Åqâd reached the conclusion that a modern, enlightened, progressive nation, “is a nation in which the individual enjoys the maximum of liberal civil rights.” He believed that Egypt should be such a nation, free and sovereign, liberated from domestic oppression as well as the oppression of foreign rule. And “this is because we aspire to be free vis-à-vis any rule, be it national or foreign”. Al-Åqâd called on Egypt to support democracies and the Allies in the war against “the Nazi evil” and against the totalitarianism which “annihilated the liberty of man and his honor”. It was in the context in which the war appeared in Egypt’s own backyard that al-Åqâd demonstrated his complete support for the Allies. His commitment to democracy and to the liberty of man was indeed total.  

Needless to say, given the clear-cut anti-totalitarian positions held by these two luminary voices, one can see that the argument made in The Boss that Egyptians were fascinated by fascist totalitarianism because it supposedly suited “their collective mentality”, is groundless. The crude, Orientalist cliché applied by St. John, that totalitarianism “was ready-made for a country like Egypt”, is entirely unsupported by the evidence provided by contemporary Egyptian perceptions and representations of German Nazism and Italian fascism.

A key element of the Egyptian critique of fascist totalitarianism was its systematic condemnation of the racism inherent in its ideology and practices. Obviously, this criticism was leveled primarily against Nazi ideology and policies. Although Italian fascism was less frequently labeled a racist regime, Egyptian spokesmen did underline the racist nature of Italian imperialism, particularly as it was expressed through the Ethiopian war conducted against "the inferior, black Ethiopian race." Additionally, after 1938, when Mussolini implemented racist Nazi laws and norms in Italy, Egyptian intellectuals utterly rejected it.
The Egyptian multi-vocal attack on Hitler's racism and the racist policies of the Nazi regime began with Mein Kampf and the theory of race set forth therein. Here too, we find that the various spokesmen knew their subject well. They mapped the intellectual sources of the theory of race in nineteenth-century European thought. Arthur de Gobineau’s theories were of special interest to them. They analyzed Mein Kampf in depth and noted the way in which Hitler had appropriated earlier racist theories, using them to create an ethnocentric "political racism." Their main purpose was to refute the Nazi theory of the purity of the Aryan race and to prove that it was devoid of any empirical, scientific basis. Race, they argued, is an elusive, obscure entity without biological, ethnological, or anthropological hard proof of its existence. From a scientific point of view, they posited, it is inconceivable to attribute specific racial attributes to a human group. Just as it is impossible to isolate "pure blood", so it is impossible to isolate a "pure race"; all human communities are composed of inseparable blends of races and ethnic mixtures. Nationalism is a product of human consciousness and imagination, and of a shared history, language and territory, but never, they argued, of shared blood. Thus, the Nazi racist theory could only be false.

The anti-fascist democratic discourse devoted special attention to the Nazi claim of the superiority of the Nordic-Aryan race. Egyptian intellectuals and journalists exposed for their readers what they defined as the "absurd rite of the deification of the German Aryan race by the Nazi regime." They regarded the veneration of racial superiority as a "barbaric chauvinist myth" which was a dominant trait of Nazism (al-naziyya). They analyzed the archaic and irrational origins of Nazi self-glorification and the supposedly superior biological and physiological traits particular to the Aryan race. They depicted it as tribalist, anti-humane, anti-modernist and an anti-progressive racist project. Moreover, they deplored the political-imperialistic nature of the Nazi-fostered idea of racial superiority, with its aim of the forcible takeover by the German race of a wide Lebensraum, in which all the "inferior races" would be oppressed or liquidated. Here, Egyptian proponents applied liberal and universal criteria to undermine and shatter the Nazi pretension of nurturing racial superiority: The Aryan race could not be superior to all other human races, because all ethnic groups and national communities are, by their very nature, equal. Further, they put forth, the equality between human societies is universal and eternal, stemming from traditional monotheistic religious creeds but also anchored in the modern human system of the family of nations enjoying equal rights. They identified the myth of Aryan racial superiority as an attempt to subvert the sacrosanct principle of overall equality of all human beings and peoples and saw it as a political program of racial purification and racial liquidation.
attempting to ensure a “cleansed area” for the egocentric existence of one superior race.\textsuperscript{43}

Nazi racism, as defined by \textsuperscript{44}Abdallah \textsuperscript{Inan}, was a “cosmic enemy” of all humankind, whose chief victims were the races and cultures of the Semitic East. Egyptian spokesmen depicted Nazi anti-Semitism as the most extreme and brutal manifestation of the “white racism” that motivated the European imperialistic crusade of the modern age. The imperialism of the “white man’s burden” was transformed into Nazi racist imperialism turned directly against the Semitic peoples. Its aim was to legitimate the occupation, oppression, and even the liquidation of the Semitic peoples of Asia and Africa by the Aryan peoples of Northern Europe.\textsuperscript{45} Consequently, the anti-Semitic policy of the Nazi regime was not only anti-Jewish; it was anti-Arab and anti-Muslim to the same extent. Some intellectuals emphasized the danger anti-Semitism posed to Egypt, since the Arab-Muslim identity of the Egyptian nation rendered it “an inferior, Semitic nation.” It therefore laid within the broad \textit{lebensraum} of Nazi fascist-imperialistic aspirations of conquest and control, which longed for hegemony in the Middle East.\textsuperscript{46}

For \textsuperscript{47}Abbas Mahmud al-\textsuperscript{Aqqad}, who, as we said, wrote his book just a few months after the outbreak of World War II, Egypt and the other Arab countries needed to make a clear-cut decision to massively support the Allies and totally reject the Axis, especially Nazi Germany. What was on the agenda of the Arab world, al-\textsuperscript{Aqqad} emphasized, was an historical and fateful decision, one that could no longer be ignored nor postponed. On one side, he explained, were the democratic allies, “who are subject [to universal and international] law and justice, and work for their implementation”. On the other, “the Nazis, who reject any law and justice...and view the Semites in particular as an [inferior] human group which should be subjected to Aryan rule and domination without any hope for redemption and salvation, or to change their condition, unless the races themselves would be changed [that is, the Semites would “become” Aryan], but this is an impossible, totally untenable option.” The fateful choice, he expounded, is then between Nazism, which al-\textsuperscript{Aqqad} considered to be based on “a belief in an inhuman, bestial law of power” that assumed the superiority of the Aryan race and threatened to dominate and annihilate the Semitic race; and parliamentary, liberal democracy based on the universal recognition of human pluralism and multi-national heterogeneity, free of any racial identity. Democracy, he continued, is based on “the belief in human rules [rights, and obligations] of life which are not the bestial law of power: this is the rule of justice, equality, fairness and hope in human progress, towards a social order which regulates the relations between nations and
individuals, an order which is purely human, above and beyond the laws of
caves and forests”.

Al-Aqqad indeed believed that a Nazi triumph anywhere in the world,
one which would lead to a Nazi occupation and colonial rule, would leave no
hope for the Eastern, Arab nations, including Egypt. For, due to its very racist,
solipsistic nature, Nazism threatened to culturally and physically annihilate the
Semitic, modern Arab nations. Only “the way of democracy” could provide
hope of an independent and sovereign existence for the modern Arab peoples in
the post-war world. Al-Aqqad therefore concluded that Egyptian support for
the Allies’ democratic camp was indispensable. The real issue at stake, for him,
was not only whether Egypt wanted to exist as an independent and sovereign
nation; rather, its very existence was being threatened.47

Finally, the Egyptian intellectuals’ critique of Nazism did not deny that
the Jews and Judaism were at the center of the racist, anti-Semitic ideology of
Nazism. The intellectuals drew for their readers a very detailed picture of the
persecution of Jews in the Third Reich, their dismissals from their jobs, their
expulsion from the learned professions, and the denial of their civil rights. The
expulsion of Jewish intellectuals, writers, artists, and musicians from Nazi
Germany was met with vehement criticism on the part of Egyptian intellectuals.
They identified explicitly with the fate of the Jews, whom they considered a
loyal minority persecuted because of its race.48 Nazi efforts to purge Germany
of its Jews were described as “self-destructive” and the cultural ruin of the
Jewish-German intellectual heritage. “The destruction of German Jewry,” cInan
wrote, “was from the outset the basic aim of Nazism, inscribed on the platform
of the Nazi party from the day it was founded.”49 The Egyptian press
systematically rejected the anti-Semitic repertoire ascribed to the Jews: their
characterization as parasites motivated by financial greed, cosmopolitans, crafty
intriguers disloyal to their German homeland. In the press these
characterizations were portrayed as violent, racist incitement to prepare the
ground for the purging and/or liquidation of the Jews.50 The Jew, several
intellectuals warned, served as a metaphor for every Semite; if the racist
persecution of Jews in Germany was not stopped, all Arab Semites might also
suffer a similar fate. If the Jewish race were to be annihilated and Nazism were
to triumph, there would be a real danger of the annihilation of the entire Semitic
race.51
Conclusion

Egyptian responses to fascism and Nazism were neither monolithic nor homogeneous. A more extensive and comprehensive inquiry into the Egyptian system of representations of and positions on Nazism and fascism would show much more heterogeneity and variation, as well as a greater multitude of voices. It would demonstrate, among other things, that pro-fascist and pro-Nazi voices and stances also mushroomed within this system. These voices admired the fascist regime in Italy and the Nazi regime in Germany and viewed their ideas, institutions and practices as models for emulation in the local society, culture and polity of Egypt and other Arab Middle Eastern countries. Throughout the 1930s, however, these voices and positions remained peripheral, a small minority located at the margins of the journalistic and intellectual fields of cultural production. Only in the distorted and anachronistic pro-Nazi and pro-fascist narrative, which was shaped out of the interests and materials of the 1950s’ political memory of the revolution, did these voices become dominant and central, ostensibly representing most of the 1930s’ public opinion-makers and intellectual communities. As I have tried to demonstrate, though, this narrative is fundamentally inaccurate. A more historical and realistic inquiry into the complex system of Egyptian representations and attitudes toward fascism and Nazism, as it emerged in the 1930s and early 1940s, shows that in contrast to these peripheral expressions, this system of representations and positions was mainly shaped by a wide spectrum of anti-fascist and anti-Nazi hegemonic voices and trends which developed within a large-scale intellectual community of discourse. This hegemonic, multi-vocal system expressed a decisive rejection and avoidance, sometimes repulsion, of fascism and Nazism. The anti-fascist and anti-Nazi sentiment also resounded in the political sphere, among political agents, politicians, political organizations, and parties. German and Italian totalitarianisms were rejected not only as political doctrines, but also as philosophies, and as systems of cultural and social symbols and practices as well. Most often, this rejection was channeled directly towards the authoritarian personalities of Hitler and Mussolini themselves.52

The Egyptian rejection of fascism and Nazism is clearly seen in all three intellectual spheres discussed in the paper. To begin with, fascism and Nazism were rejected as oppressive, totalitarian systems, machines of power that attempted to obliterate any expression of individual voice or action. They were accused of destroying individual civil rights, freedom of expression, and freedom of organization. Beyond the individual level, they were seen as regimes annihilating civil society and undermining parliamentary, constitutional government. In spite of criticism leveled by Egyptian intellectuals against their own parliamentary system, they firmly stood by a parliamentary system as the
exclusive basis of their political government and political culture; hence, their continual defense of the 1923 constitution which served, for them, as a tangible guarantee of such a parliamentary order. Additionally, since they assumed that parliamentary government was indispensable for democratic life in Egypt and the Middle East, their support for the democratic camp in Europe was a logical, almost natural, step.

Secondly, fascism and Nazism were represented as radical, extreme, imperialistic regimes. Their imperialism was portrayed as a thirst for military occupations and the acquisition and domination of new colonies. The war in Ethiopia in the mid-1930s, and the arbitrary military and political actions taken by fascist Italy – through its annexation of Ethiopia; the eventual German Anschluss in Austria, and Germany’s annexation of part of Czechoslovakia – were all viewed as characteristic modus operandi of this new, irredentist imperialism. With the outbreak of the war and the German occupation of Poland and other European countries, no doubt was left in the eyes of the Egyptians concerning the imperialist ambitions of Italy and Germany. This new fascist imperialism was thought to be considerably more threatening and destructive than the traditional, “satisfied imperialism” of England and France. Hence, in the difficult choice between these two kinds of “European imperialisms”, the lesser evil – British- and French-style imperialism – was overwhelmingly preferred.

Thirdly, the proponents of this hegemonic, democratic discourse clearly and forcefully rejected the Nazi racist idea of Aryan purity and its consequential claim of superiority over the Semitic race. To their disavowal of the biological “rationale” of racial superiority was added another accusation, against Nazi “destructive and aggressive racism”, which aspired to impose Aryan hegemony in Europe and the world via a systematic policy of physical and spiritual annihilation of the “inferior” Semitic race. Egyptian spokesmen presented the Arab Middle East as a real target of Nazi expansionism, and Nazism, therefore, was seen as a danger in Egypt’s own backyard. This engendered the perception of a need to fight it by all means available, leading to the conviction that Egypt should support the Allies morally, ideologically, and politically. Even those within Egypt’s democratic camp who hoped that the country would remain neutral in a war which was not hers, and who aspired to safeguard Egypt’s “integrity” from the damages of the war, never viewed their strategy of neutralism as a policy which was supposed to promote the triumph of the Axis. On the contrary, they viewed Egyptian neutrality as an integral part of the democratic camp’s effort to win the war against fascism and Nazism.

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Endnotes

Author’s note: I would like to express my gratitude to an anonymous reviewer for EUI Working Papers whose insightful comments greatly helped me improve earlier drafts of this article.


3 St. John, pp. 36-57.

4 Ibid., pp. 40-48, and more broadly, pp. 4-130.


7 See, for example, St. John, p. 40; Beeri, pp. 39-47, 63-77; Warburg, pp. 26-31; Lewis, pp. 144-163; Ramadan, II, part 1, pp. 175-277, and II, part 2, pp. 6-218; Al-Sayyid Marsot, *A Short History*, pp. 98-100.


13 Ibid., throughout the book.


15 Safran, pp. 165-244.

16 Ibid., p. 192.


19 The following footnotes, which cite expressions of the intellectuals’ positions, are taken primarily from articles, reviews and essays which appeared during the 1930s in the most important intellectual forum of that decade, the weekly *al-Risala*. Due to space limitations, I have made use in this paper of only a small, representative sample of articles from Egyptian dailies of the time, and from other periodicals. I have tried to balance this with use of Gershoni, *Light in the Shade*, which examines a much larger variety of sources and evidence that were published in leading dailies such as *al-Ahram, al-Balagh,* and *al-Muqattam; the weeklies al-Sarkha, al-Risala,* and *al-Thaqafa; the monthlies, al-Hilal and al-Majalla al-Jadida; and the illustrated weeklies, Ruz al-Yusuf, al-Musawwar,* and *al-Ithnayn wa-al-Dunya* (partial list).


26 Personal interviews with Hafiz Mahmud, 18 and 19 July 1980, Cairo.
36 For an extensive treatment of Egyptian representations of Italian imperialist racism, see Gershoni, *Light in the Shade*, pp. 189-329.
37 Ibid., pp. 341-359.
38 For details see Ibid., pp. 138-166.
39 Ibid., pp. 143-166, 299-329.
45 For details, see Gershoni, *Light in the Shade*, pp. 138-166.


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