

“To the Arab Hebrew”: On Possibilities and Impossibilities**JONATHAN MARC GRIBETZ**Department of Near Eastern Studies and Program in Judaic Studies, Princeton University, Princeton, N.J.; e-mail: gribetz@post.harvard.edu

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“To the Arab Hebrew [*la-‘ivriyah ha-‘arviyah*]! If you are a Hebrew, you are not an Arab. If an Arab, not a Hebrew. So, you are neither a Hebrew nor an Arab . . . C.Q.F.D.”¹ This paid announcement, published by an anonymous reader of the Jerusalem-based Hebrew newspaper *ha-Tsevi* on 27 November 1908, reminds us that the idea of an Arab Jew (or, in the parlance of Palestinian Hebrew in the early 20th century, an Arab Hebrew) has been at once present and contested from the early years of Zionist settlement in Palestine. Moreover, the contestation was (as it remains) often more emotional than logical (*ce qu’il fallait démontrer* notwithstanding). But the category of Arab Hebrew was not constructed simply to be attacked; for some, including another personal advertiser on the very same page of *ha-Tsevi*, Arab Hebrew was a self-proclaimed identity. “To M. M.,” he or she wrote, “I saw you, I knew you, I respected you. I will leave you, I will remember you, and I will not forget you.” This mysterious, otherwise anonymous, apparent break-up letter—a succinct, public tweet a century before Twitter—was signed by “Arab Hebrew [*‘ivri ‘arvi*].”²

Identity labels, whether self-assigned or ascribed by others, always and necessarily have political implications (and, like the identities they label, are historically contingent and culturally constructed). Wells of ink, real and now virtual, have been spilled by Jews in America, to take but one contemporary example, over whether they are more appropriately regarded as American Jews or Jewish Americans. Thus, in one sense, the Arab Jew label is no different from others. And yet, at least in the context of Jews, no hyphenated identity pushes people’s buttons these days more than does the term “Arab Jew.” When a colleague employed the term in her paper at an academic conference panel in which I participated a few years ago, members of the audience immediately pounced and would not let up; there went the entire “discussion.” And this was in an academic setting. Beyond the ivory tower, in the United States at least, the term is far rarer and, when employed, it is confusing and jarring.

What is it about this term that angers, confuses, and jars? The primary explanation for these reactions, one presumes, is precisely the reason scholars have, in recent years, chosen to employ the term. Arab and Jew, in worldviews shaped by the violent and persistent Zionist-Arab/Israeli-Palestinian conflict, are understood as tenacious enemies, not as components of a single identity. Asserting that the two—Arab and Jew—can be linked in one hybrid identity challenges a binary imagined to be at the heart of the conflict. But, as the anonymous note in *ha-Tsevi* to the “Arab Hebrew” demonstrates, the assertion of this particular hybrid identity engendered similar reactions more than a century ago, before the conflict began in earnest.³

So where does this leave the scholar of Arabic-speaking Jews? In my case, as I wrote my first book, *Defining Neighbors: Religion, Race and the Early Zionist-Arab Encounter*, I did not use the “Arab Jew” locution as a blanket term to describe the Arabic-speaking Jews I studied—and not only to prevent readers from getting mired

in the political-terminological thicket. Rather, I simply found that the term was not particularly common during the late Ottoman period. Given the book's focus on mutual perceptions, I preferred terms that, from what we are able to gather from the available evidence, were regularly used and generally understood by contemporaries.⁴

These contemporaries—including leading intellectuals of the fin de siècle *nahḍa*, such as Jurji Zaydan—were certainly curious about the origins of Jews in the Arab world.⁵ In a 1903 issue of his journal *al-Hilal*, for instance, Zaydan published an article “The Jews in the Lands of the Arabs” (*al-yahūd fī bilād al-‘arab*) in response to a reader's inquiry about “the Arab tribes who converted to Judaism before Islam.”⁶ Under the rubric of “Jews in the lands of the Arabs,” Zaydan included both people of biblical Israelite origin who immigrated to the Arabian peninsula and natives of these *bilād al-‘arab*, the “lands of the Arabs,” who converted to the Jewish religion. He explained that “Judaism is ancient in the Arabian peninsula, for Jews continued to immigrate to lands of the Arabs from their earliest period, whether fleeing violence or searching for livelihood.” This “earliest period” of Jewish history in Arabia may well have begun as early as the Pentateuchal period. “It is not unlikely,” Zaydan claimed, “that a group of them immigrated there during their wanderings in the wilderness at the time of Moses.” A Jewish presence in the “lands of the Arabs,” in other words, could be as ancient as the Israelite presence in the Holy Land, and Zaydan cites the views of Abu al-Faraj al-Isbahani (d. 967), Ibn Khaldun (d. 1406), and al-Maqrizi (d. 1442) to support his assessment.⁷

Were “Jews in the lands of the Arabs,” in Zaydan's view, “Arab Jews”? Throughout most of the brief article, this term does not appear. However, something like it is indeed found at the end of the presentation of Ibn Khaldun's perspective; the article closes with a list of four tribes that are “the most famous of the Jews of the Arabs [*wa-ashhar yahūd al-‘arab*].”⁸ On the one hand, this historic description in the article's presentation of Ibn Khaldun suggests that the author did not regard Jew and Arab as mutually exclusive categories. On the other hand, these were historic—not contemporary—groups, and, in particular, they were groups rooted in the Arabian peninsula. Might Zaydan and others in his fin de siècle milieu have used this term also to refer to Arabic-speaking Jewish contemporaries whose origins lay outside the peninsula? Perhaps, but recall that, like Arab Jew, the term Arab itself is historically contingent and, in early 20th-century Egypt, to which Zaydan had migrated from Syria, many Muslim and Christian natives did not regard *themselves* as Arabs.⁹ In any case, regarding Jews, much more common were phrases like the one with which *al-Hilal* titled the article, namely “Jews in the lands of the Arabs.” In my own writing about how such Jews were perceived in this period, therefore, I did not see a sufficiently compelling reason to employ the Arab Jew label.

The terminological question is connected to a move in recent years to look toward the “Jews in the lands of the Arabs” (as Zaydan had it) as the squandered key to amity between Arabs and Jews in Palestine. Were it not for the cultural tone-deafness, linguistic ignorance, political separatism, and violent militancy of European Jews, so the counterfactual logic goes, Arab Jews (or “Sephardi Zionists” as they are often identified in this context—more on this in a moment) could have helped to create within Palestine a society based on equality and respect, whether in an Ottoman or some other political framework. As with all counterfactuals: maybe.

But there is cause to avoid imagining a stark contrast between Ashkenazi and Sephardi Zionists. Consider, for instance, *ha-Herut*, the late Ottoman Sephardi-edited, Jerusalem-based Hebrew newspaper generally adduced as evidence of the unique perspective of Arab Jews toward their non-Jewish neighbors. As Abigail Jacobson has persuasively argued, *ha-Herut*'s articles "reflected hopes for coexistence and cooperation between the Jewish and Arab community in Palestine."¹⁰ It is important to recognize, however, that *ha-Herut*'s editors expressed no interest in a mutual exchange of ideas concerning Zionist settlement or the future of Palestine. On the contrary, *ha-Herut* derisively labeled as "the enemies" (*ha-tsorerim*) and "the libelers" (*ha-malshinim*) any who saw Zionism—as they understood it—as a threat. *Ha-Herut* viewed any sign of opposition to Zionism as a "Great Danger" (the catch-phrase consistently attached to its reports on the anti-Zionist Arabic press) that demanded a strong, countervailing response. While *ha-Herut*'s editors may have desired peaceful relations with their non-Jewish neighbors in Palestine, they appear to have desired such relations only on their own terms, leaving no room for critical attitudes toward Zionism, its methods, or its goals. If the non-Jewish residents of Palestine were willing uncritically to accept Zionist immigration to the country and the prevalence of Jewish national symbols in their developing culture and institutions, only then, it would seem, would *ha-Herut* advocate cooperation. This perspective is not, as far as I can discern, radically different from that of many of their Ashkenazi Zionist contemporaries.

Returning again to terminology, what are we to call these Arabic-speaking Jews who participated actively in Zionism? If we speak of Ashkenazi Jews who were Zionists as Ashkenazi Zionists, should Arab Jews who were Zionists be regarded as Arab Zionists? As Arab Jewish Zionists? It seems that most scholars, even those who comfortably employ the term Arab Jew and apply it to these very same individuals in other contexts, eschew writing of Arab Zionism or Arab Jewish Zionism (preferring instead Sephardi Zionism). Just as it is valuable for those with certain sensibilities to reflect on what is disturbing about the term Arab Jew, it is worthwhile for others to consider what about the terms Arab Zionism or Arab Jewish Zionism is unsettling. Perhaps Arab Zionism is avoided because it would confuse readers and Arab Jewish Zionism foregone because it is overly cumbersome (though, of course, the term Arab Jew is chosen for precisely these reasons, namely to confuse and destabilize what is presumed to be a natural binary). More likely, though, the Zionism of individuals otherwise regarded as Arab Jews is not denoted as Arab Zionism or Arab Jewish Zionism because linking Zionism with Arab Jews would upset the political inclination that Emily Gottreich identifies as being at the heart of academic discourse on the Arab Jew, namely "Jewish solidarity with Palestinians." I wonder, though, whether Palestinians or any other group are well served by our projecting current political interests onto a culturally, religiously, and ideologically diverse historic community.

The question of whether an Arab Jew can, by definition, be a Zionist (and, if so, how he or she should be labelled) leads us to the broader question of what about an Arab Jew is Arab. Is the Arab Jew's Arabness linguistic, geographic, ethnic, cultural, national, ideological, or something else? If Muslims and Christians can be regarded as Arabs regardless of ideology, what does it mean if Jews qualify as Arabs only if or when they subscribe to particular political views? Relatedly, Arab Jews are typically juxtaposed to "Arabs" (i.e., non-Jewish Arabs, who require no qualifier). Perhaps the benchmark of the

success of the Arab Jew politico-scholarly project—normalizing the notion of Jews as Arabs, breaking down the perceived dichotomous boundary between the two—would be when Arab Jews could be regarded as Arabs in the same unqualified sense as Christians and Muslims are. Paradoxically, however, the very terminology employed by this project perpetually reminds us of the assumed distance between Arab and Jew.

NOTES

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¹*Ha-Tsevi* 25, no. 42 (27 November 1908), Supplement, 2. C.Q.F.D. stands for *ce qu'il fallait démontrer*, the French equivalent of the Latin initials QED, used at the conclusion of a mathematical proof.

²*Ibid.*

³For differing views on when the conflict as such began, see, for example, Eliezer Be'eri, *Reishit ha-Sikhsukh Yisra'el-'Arav, 1882–1911* (Tel Aviv: Sifriyat Po'alim, 1985); and Hillel Cohen, *Tarpat: Shenat ha-Efes ba-Sikhsukh ha-Yehudi-'Arvi* (Jerusalem: Keter, 2013).

⁴See Jonathan Gribetz, *Defining Neighbors: Religion, Race, and the Early Zionist-Arab Encounter* (Princeton University Press, forthcoming); idem, "'Their Blood is Eastern': Shahin Makaryus and Fin de Siècle Arab Pride in the Jewish 'Race,'" *Middle Eastern Studies* 49 (2013): 143–61.

⁵On Zaydan and his role in the *nahda*, see, most recently, George C. Zaidan and Thomas Philipp, eds., *Jurji Zaidan: Contributions to Modern Arab Thought and Literature* (Bethesda, Md.: The Zaidan Foundation, 2013).

⁶For reference to this article, see Lital Levy's expansive and thoughtful essay, "Mihu Yehudi-'Aravi? 'Iyun Mashveh be-Toldot ha-She'elah, 1880–2010,'" *Te'oriyah u-Vikoret* 38–39 (2011): 114, n. 32.

⁷Cf. Gordon D. Newby, *A History of the Jews of Arabia: From Ancient Times to Their Eclipse under Islam* (Columbia, S.C.: University of South Carolina Press, 1988).

⁸Perhaps there is some significance in the article's labeling them *yahūd al-'arab* (Jews of the Arabs) rather than *al-yahūd al-'arab* (Arab Jews), but if so the implication is not obvious.

⁹On Egyptian identity in this period, see Israel Gershoni and James P. Jankowski, *Egypt, Islam, and the Arabs: The Search for Egyptian Nationhood, 1900–1930* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987).

¹⁰Abigail Jacobson, "Sephardim, Ashkenazim and the 'Arab Question' in pre-First World War Palestine: A Reading of Three Zionist Newspapers," *Middle Eastern Studies* 39 (2003): 124.