# Three Syrian intellectuals, a French Jewish Officer, and the Question of Late Ottoman Pluralism

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When members of various religious communities in colonized Egypt and the Ottoman Empire demanded rights for religious groups, they did so as global subjects, as critics of European secularism and ethnic nationalism, and as individuals seeking equality and justice.

A key event in this context was the Dreyfus Affair. In December 1894, French Jewish Captain Alfred Dreyfus was sentenced to life imprisonment for giving French military secrets to the Germans. Dreyfus was innocent, yet the French military continued his persecution for years. The affair divided France between royalists and military men, on the one hand, and progressive powers, who supported Dreyfus, on the other. A letter by intellectual Emile Zola, *J'accuse!,* published in a Paris newspaper in January 1898, framed the campaign for Dreyfus's release and immortalized Zola's image as an intellectual willing to risk his livelihood to speak truth to power. After several strenuous legal battles, Dreyfus was exonerated in 1906.

The affair brought to the fore the problem of French and global anti-Semitism, and was covered extensively in the Middle Eastern press, with some very sympathetic accounts in support of Dreyfus. My current research project deals with the ways in which commentary on the affair was a platform for Middle Eastern intellectuals to reflect on minority rights, pluralism, and freedom. The reception of the affair represents a moment when Francophile Middle Eastern intellectuals questioned France's loyalty to republican ideals; when the reflections of Middle Eastern thinkers were no less insightful than the ones published in Europe; and when members of groups seeking religious, cultural, and linguistic rights in the Ottoman Empire projected their hopes and anxieties onto the affair. Indeed, major journals, such as *al-Muqattam,* printed pro-Dreyfus accounts, especially after evidence showed that the officer was innocent. Middle Eastern Jews were outraged, with Lebanese Jews sending a golden medal thanking Emile Zola, and with intellectual Esther Moyal writing his Arabic biography.[1] The Middle Eastern press produced its own versions of *J'accuse!,* namely, essays written in defense of Dreyfus. Many intellectuals took part in this effort: from the Iraqi thinker İsmail Hakkı Babanzade (b.1876) and Ottoman historian Ali Reşat (b. 1877), each of whom authored a pro-Dreyfus book; to Syrian journalist Louis Sabunji (b. 1838), who compared the wrongs done to Dreyfus to those inflicted on reformers in the Ottoman Empire; to Salonican journalist Sam Levy (b. 1870), whose Ladino journal published fervent pro-Dreyfus articles.[2]

Three letters written in colonized Egypt shed light on some of the features of this pro-Dreyfus discourse. The most prominent Salafi thinker, Rashid Rida (b. 1865), published in his journal *al-Manar* ("The Lighthouse") his views on the Dreyfus Affair, the Zola Affair, and "the humiliation, persecution and discrimination" of French Jews.[3]

This persecution, to Rida, was the outcome not of religious extremism (*taʿassub dīnī*), as France was a secular nation, but rather of ethnic extremism (*taʿassub jinsī*). This ethnic chauvinism was enhanced by an anti-Jewish smearing campaign in the French press. If an affair like this happened in the East, wrote Rida, the cries of Europeans would reach the high heavens. Rida, then, voiced his opinion that "the disease" of the French press, by which he meant anti-Semitism, now reached the Egyptian press. While he did not specify the journals' names, he criticized their aping of the French portrayal of Jews as greedy, noting that Jews were simply trying to improve their economic condition. True civilization (*tamaddun*) and true justice, he concluded, necessitate complete freedom between all human beings for the general good. Thus, Rida noticed, the men of reason in the French nation object to the persecution of Jews, and therefore he hoped that this sickness would disappear as civilization moved forward. Eastern society, he concluded, certainly does not need anti-Semitism added to the divisions already existing in its midst.[4]

A few months later, a Sephardi intellectual by the name of David Silvera, who was born in Aleppo (1861) and later moved to Alexandria, voiced similar ideas. In a French pamphlet he circulated in Alexandria he bemoaned the fact that for three years horrible events were happening; these were not crimes committed by Kurds against Ottoman Armenians, but rather crimes committed by Frenchmen in France, against Jews. Charlatans in the press promoted injustice and intolerance; the French state returned to the medieval days of the inquisition; and the politicians and the general public remained indifferent in the face of this horrid case of prejudice. The revolutionary concepts of liberty, equality, and brotherhood lost all meaning in France after the Dreyfus Affair. Silvera hoped, however, that the camp of Zola, and other intellectuals, would triumph in this battle.[5]

Also in Alexandria, Christian Orthodox intellectual Farah Antun (b. 1874) published an article on the affair in his journal *al-Jamiʿa* (The Community). Antun wrote that the trial concerned religious affairs, as Dreyfus was a French Jewish officer (*isrāʾīlī*) who was blamed unjustly for betraying his homeland. Antun portrayed the battle on behalf of Dreyfus as hopeless at first, because the French military was against the innocent officer, and the French people, as well as their government, were known for their support of the military. Zola's essay, in Antun's opinion, marked a turning point, although Zola was harshly persecuted for attacking his nation's mighty institutions, because it created a great deal of interest in the affair among the reading public and consequently many French scientists and intellectuals (*rijāl al-ʿilm wa-l-falsafa*) protested this case of discrimination. The danger, Antun wrote, was not over yet as the enemies of Dreyfus—the royalists, the conservatives, the military, and the enemies of the Jews— still yearned for the demise of the republic. And yet, whether the republic survived the Dreyfus Affair or was destroyed by it, he went on, the relative victory of the pro-Dreyfus camp showed a clear commitment to justice and truth.[6]

Although Silvera's publication was unknown until very recently, when it was discovered by historian Yaron Harel, while *al-Manar* was one of the most popular global Islamic publications at the time, all three writers have much in common. All were individuals from Bilad al-Sham who tried to make a living in colonized Egypt; all were troubled by the Dreyfus Affair; all saw it as a mark of the decline of France; and all mirrored ideas about freedom and justice circulating in the Egyptian and Ottoman public spheres.

There are, moreover, a few methodological lessons to be learned from this case regarding religion and pluralism. First, despite belonging to different religious communities,

these intellectuals partook in the same conversation denouncing anti-Semitism. When writing intellectual history of particular historical moments, then, we should reconstruct broader conversations between members of different religious groups rather than assume that members of the same religious communities share homogeneous and secluded worldviews.

Second, Rida's critique of French secularism, in which ethnic nationalism replaces old mores, fits well with more contemporary critiques voiced by the late Saba Mahmood, as well as by Talal Asad and Joan Scott, concerning French secularity and the ways it is evoked for antidemocratic and Islamophobic causes. Rida, too, suggested that adopting French secular ideology in the Muslim world would not cause the ideals of Enlightenment to flourish in the region, but rather bring about the oppression of religious minorities in the name of secular nationalism. It is interesting to note, however, that Silvera still believed revolutionary ideas held much merit; he felt, however, that France had forsaken them. Most importantly, what all three intellectuals wished for was freedom, equality before the law, and justice; these ideas were likewise articulated by salafis such as ʿAbd al-Rahman al-Kawakibi, and by various members of minority religious groups. The affair, then, teaches us to differentiate between critiques of secularism and republicanism, on the one hand, and loyalty to these ideals alongside a critique of *how* colonizing and anti-Semitic Europeans turned their back on them, on the other.

Third, these articles show how global was the *nahḍa*, the revival movement of Arab culture. Making their interventions in the global scene, the three authors speak not only as Jews, Christians, and Muslims, but also as *nahḍawī*s, as thinkers engaging in a global conversation about political theory and justice. In this case, these intellectuals underlined the fact that France, supposedly a beacon of revolutionary republicanism and democracy, treats its Jewish minorities in an appalling fashion. Critiquing European anti-Semitism was a way for a Christian intellectual and a Jewish writer to suggest that citizenship rights should not be based on religion, and a way for a Muslim reformer to highlight the perils of secular, ethnic nationalism.

While the Dreyfus Affair was one of the events that pushed Theodor Herzl to believe in the necessity of a Jewish state in order to counter anti-Semitism, his was only one response. In the Middle East, thinkers drew other lessons from the affair, especially regarding the perils of sectarianism and racism. Predictably, we know much more about the success of Herzl's movement than about this pluralistic conversation.

## NOTES

[1]Shaul Sehayek, "Parashat Dreyfus ba-ʿItonot ha-ʿAravit," *Michael: On the History of the Jews in the Diaspora* 14 (1997): 184–214; Özgür Türesay, "L'Affaire Dreyfus vue par les intellectuels ottomans," *Turcica: Revue d'études turques* 47 (2016): 237–58.

[2]Olga Borovaya, "Jews of Three Colors: The Path to Modernity in the Ladino Press at the Turn of the Twentieth Century," *Jewish Social Studies* 15 (2008): 110–30; Ali Reşat and İsmail Hakkı, *Dreyfüs Meselesi ve Esbab-ı Hafiyesi* (Istanbul: A. Asaduryan, 1315 [1899]).

[3]Albert Hourani, *Arabic Thought in the Liberal Age* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1962), 222–45; Malcolm Kerr, *Islamic Reform: The Political and Legal Theories of Muhammad Abduh and Rashid Rida* (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California University Press, 1966). On Rida and the Jewish question, see Sylvia G. Haim, "Arabic Antisemitic Literature: Some Preliminary Notes," *Jewish Social Studies* 17 (1955): 307–12; and Jonathan Marc Gribetz, *Defining Neighbors: Religion, Race, and the Early Zionist-Arab Encounter* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2014), 149–82.

[4]*Al-Manar*, March 1898.

[5]Yaron Harel, "In the Wake of the Dreyfus Affair," *Revue des Études Juives* 166 (2007): 473–91.

[6]*Al-Jamiʿa*, 1 July 1899; Orit Bashkin, "My Sister Esther: Reflections on Judaism, Ottomanism, and the Empire of Egypt in the Works of Farah Antun," in *The Long 1890s in Egypt: Colonial Quiescence, Subterranean Resistance,* ed. Marilyn Booth and Anthony Gorman (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014).