In the late 1990s, the taxi driver of a Tehran cab changed the cassette tape to the engaging sounds of the Hebrew song *Hava Nagilah* (‘Let us rejoice’), a Jewish favorite for festive occasions. Not quite knowing whether I was being provoked into anti- or pro-Israel sentiments, I somewhat cowardly indicated approval without asking for details. While the tape played on, the conversation was not pursued further, and I later asked some Iranian friends what they made of it. They laughed at my discomfort and told me Israeli music was quite popular in Tehran and easily procured at the bazaar. As long as politics were kept out of it, the culture of the archenemy was not a problem. It was only later that I learned about the thriving music culture in Iran and in the Arab Middle East of which Jews and Christians formed an intrinsic part. Especially in Iran, Jewish ensembles were popular among all classes of the population and *Hava Nagilah* was often performed at weddings, even after the majority of Jews left Iran in the years following the Islamic Revolution.

While the link between this earlier musical scene and the 1990s interest in Israeli music is perhaps an indirect one, both phenomena point to music as a locus of interaction and sharing even between communities that are antagonistic. Often, this thriving and thoroughly mixed music culture has been quoted as an example of how people of different religious communities in the Middle East could live and party well together, sharing a common local culture. The Tehran example indicates that this may have been too rosy a picture of how these societies functioned in the past and present, not only because shared cultural practices do not necessarily imply shared outlooks on society, but also because even seemingly innocent songs have political overtones that might not always be shared by those who pass them on, but which remain part of the song’s afterlife for those who want to see it.1 At the same time, cultural practices

---

1 The song *Hava nagila* (composed in Palestine, 1920s) has a nationalist ring, with the vocabulary of the refrain ‘*uru, ahim*,’ ‘Awake, brothers,’ echoing, among others, George Antonius’ title and motto on Arab nationalism (taken from a nineteenth-century poem by Ibrahim Yazeki,
such as these continue to be used and interpreted as my friends interpreted them, as a sign of communality over borders created by religion and politics. It is precisely this ambiguity, between the political and the ostensibly neutral, that provides space for the participation of those to whom politics proper would otherwise be closed off.

This volume discusses cultural practices that in different ways constituted common ground between the various groups that made up Middle Eastern, especially Arab Middle Eastern societies in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. It does so based on the premise that such cultural issues never constitute a separate domain apart from political and economic participation, but that they are part and parcel of patterns of interaction with all kinds of political implications. These cultural practices, therefore, address issues of power and presence of the so-called minorities in multiple ways. Thus, without dealing with the political participation of non-Muslims in Muslim dominated states as such, this volume aims to focus on the ways in which non-Muslims contributed to creating and developing spaces of encounter. These spaces of encounter sometimes took the form of actual political debates, but also took the form of literal spaces of encounter with public rituals or participation in language and educational reform. It is these types of common ground that constitute the main theme of this volume.

The contributors of this volume all participated in a conference that was organized in September 2013 by a Leiden research group based in the Institute for Religious Studies at the Faculty of Humanities, in cooperation with Lucis, the Leiden Centre for the Study of Islam and Society. This research group, funded by the Netherlands Organization for Scientific Research (NWO) works on a project entitled Arabic and its Alternatives: Religious Minorities in the Formative Years of the Modern Middle East (1920–1950). The project’s focus is mostly on the British mandate areas of Iraq and Palestine, and this is reflected in the fact that most contributions to the conference and in this volume have the same strong focus on these two emerging states. This introduction and some of the contributions make a start in contextualizing the ways in which non-Muslims in the British mandate areas acted and were acted upon against the background of the larger Arab Middle East, also in French Mandate