
The history of Arab-Nazi German relations has been covered in several recent studies. While the focus of earlier works often laid on the German side of these encounters, interest has increasingly shifted towards the involved Arab states. Although previous studies provided much information about key Arab players, it is only through recent research that popular perceptions of Nazi Germany as expressed in the broader Arab public have attracted some attention. Methodologically, the emphasis on the German side often echoed in a lack of Arab sources that were used to reconstruct mutual contacts and their underlying interests and ideological premises; reports of German, French and British officials served as the sole material on which assessments of Arab public opinion were based. As a consequence, many of these studies tended to interpret the politics of prominent Arab figures such as Palestinian Mufti Amin al-Husayni and Iraqi Prime Minister Rashid Ali Kaylani as representing a broad consensus in the Arab public. Recent studies allowed nuancing these interpretations and added multiple voices from the local press, literature and politics that contrast to the image of an all-out collaborationist mood.

The study “Halbmond and Hakenkreuz. Das Dritte Reich, die Araber und Palästina” is promoted by its editor as the “first comprehensive description of the relations between National Socialist Germany and the Arab Middle East”; yet instead of providing an overview over the various facets of this encounter and to analyze their complex ideological and strategic setting, Klaus-Michael Mallmann and Martin Cüppers restrict their analysis to the “shared hatred for the Yishuv” (7), which is depicted here as a catalyst of Arab-German relations. While this focus falls short of meeting the expectations raised by the announcement of the book, it offers additional insight and important information about one particular aspect of Nazi Germany’s Middle Eastern policies: its plans for the treatment of Jews in the Arab Middle East. However, with regard to other facets of the history of Arab-Nazi German encounters, the results of this study are less convincing.

The core assumption of an anti-Jewish enmity that was guiding both German and Arab politics is reflected in the structure of the study. Already in the first chapter—titled “Jihad: The Arab struggle against the Jews of Palestine”—the basic argument is developed: by the late 1920s, antisemitism was a driving force of Palestinian politics.


Echoing in an antisemitic agitation of the Palestinian mufti that was matching with “the ‘highest’ European standards” (20); the Palestinian revolt of 1936 was essentially an anti-Jewish one, and only over the path of time also turned against British interests (25); and by 1939, “an eliminatory antisemitism” had affected the Muslim population of Palestine that “did not lack behind the German hatred for the Jews” (55). Based on reports of the German embassies and consulates in the Middle East, the authors highlight various declarations in support of the Nazi regime and point to sympathies that were voiced by relevant political actors.

On the German side, such “brown affinities” (41) were not immediately met with support. Given the continuing efforts to encourage the emigration of German Jews, the Nazi regime was reluctant to strengthen Arab activities that risked obstructing Jewish immigration to Palestine. In addition, support for Arab nationalist organisations conflicted with the persisting hope for a German-British alliance; it took until early 1938 that the German leadership agreed to draw in the Arab nationalist movement and to take position in the Arab-British conflict. The German attack on Poland in September 1939 ultimately ended all restraints with regard to British positions in the Mediterranean, and in the light of the failure of the Italian campaign in the Southern Mediterranean, Germany soon took the lead in the Axis’ regional war efforts. By early 1941, German financial and material support reached the Arab Middle East on an increasing scale, coming to a height with the envoy of German planes in May 1941 to strengthen the Iraqi revolt against Britain.

The failure of the Iraqi rebellion and the occupation of Lebanon and Syria by Allied forces in summer 1941 did not put an end to German ambitions in the region. On June 11, 1941, while the Axis was under mounting pressure in Syria and Lebanon, the leadership of the German Wehrmacht described the Mediterranean and Western Asia as the major war theatre once the planned offensive against the Soviet Union would have come to an end. In the light of these expectations, German attempts to draw Arabs and Muslims into the German war efforts intensified. Based on sources of the OKW and the Auswärtige Amt, Mallmann/Cüppers trace the role of the Sonderstab F in the establishment of a network of the German Abwehr in the region; as it is shown by the authors, in a parallel development, the Reichssicherheitshauptamt built up its activities in the Middle East.

It is with regard to these activities of the Reichssicherheitshauptamt that the study provides important new information. In the light of the German advance in North Africa, the Reichssicherheitshauptamt was ordered on July 13, 1942 to establish a SS-commando to follow the Wehrmacht in its move towards Egypt. According to this order, the commando was “permitted in the context of its mission [im Rahmen seines Auftrages] to implement under its own authority executive measures [Exekutivmaßnahmen] against the civilian population” (138)—a similar phrasing was used in a previous order that served as the basis for the extermination policies against Jews in Eastern Europe, suggesting that similar plans had been elaborated for Middle Eastern Jewry as well.

The mission was headed by SS-Obersturmbannführer Walther Rauff, who had previously been responsible for the technical supply of the SS-Einsatzgruppen in the