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Arab Press Networks and Imperial Connectivities from Mediterranean Africa to France in the Late 19th Century

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Abstract

The press was an instrument of colonial governance. Yet newspapers and print also served to connect populations across borders and demonstrated how trans-imperial flows influenced empires. This article examines Arab print networks in North Africa and France. It argues that print networks assisted with processes of colonial expansion while also providing a forum for Muslim activists and Arab modernists to present their views to foreign audiences. This two-way channel illustrates how imperialism engendered new synergies that would influence political developments in both the French empire and the modern Middle East, suggesting that print networks were central to the entangled histories of empire in the modern period.

Keywords list (en): French North Africa, Imperialism, Islamic politics, print, transnational history

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¹ As a crossroads of European and Muslim culture, the Mediterranean region was characterized by an impressive internal diversity with ties to Europe, Africa, and Asia. It was also a theater for many of the leading European imperial contests of the nineteenth century¹. European imperial expansion generated points of political conflict and rivalry over the course of the century. Yet imperialism also served to connect nations such as France and Britain with Ottoman and Muslim communities in new and intricate ways. Newspapers and print played a significant role in this development. During the nineteenth century, European colonial authorities backed local

journalists in Africa and the Near East or employed translators from Beirut and Cairo to turn out colonial newspapers written in both European and vernacular languages for an Arab readership. Conversely, Ottoman and Arab journalists were resident in cities such as Paris, London, Geneva, and Brussels and frequently participated in public exchanges with elites in host countries². Journals circulated between metropolises and colonial peripheries, but they also traveled between empires as well, connecting a constellation of different localities outside the familiar metropole-periphery framework. Print networks linked imperial metropolises to multiple peripheral regions or transformed peripheries into connective hubs for imperial competitors. These details exhibit the entangled histories that shaped modern empires. They similarly illustrate how journalism and print assisted in constructing trans-imperial networks built upon exile, collaboration, and forms of imperial patronage. By charting the flow of newspapers and people across Europe and North Africa, we can obtain a more informed understanding of how print networks operated and, more specifically, how the movement of journals created alternative spaces of engagement beyond conventional national and imperial frameworks.

² Histories of print and journalism have traditionally been assessed through Habermas's concept of the "public sphere". Within this model, emphasis is laid upon the creation of an autonomous discursive space that encouraged rational debate, empowered bourgeois publics, and ultimately facilitated the development of a liberal civil society³. Recent appraisals have criticized the Eurocentric narrative implicit within Habermas's notion of the public sphere, arguing that it fails to consider vernacular forms of print culture and reading practices outside the West⁴. Applying Habermas's understanding of an autonomous public sphere within a colonial context is equally problematic. In the colonial public sphere, the state played a significant role as both a protagonist and antagonist while a "native" public sphere typically operated alongside the sphere of colonists and administrators, creating multiple points of authority and competing discourses that challenged just as much as contributed to the development of a liberal order⁵. Transnational and global histories of print have suggested the need for a critical reappraisal of the role print and newspapers played in the making of modernity⁶. The turn to imperial and global history entails rethinking the ways in which print media transmitted ideas across borders, how it influenced forms of adaptation and hybridity at the local level, and to what extent Western and vernacular public spheres intersected and influenced one another⁷.

³ In examining the Arab print networks that linked France and Mediterranean Africa, a more complex understanding of colonialism becomes evident. Colonial administrators engaged with a variety of groups, oftentimes encouraging movements linked to Arab and Islamic modernization even as they subjugated and surveilled local populations. As well, the practice of colonialism often embedded European powers like France within a nexus of trans-imperial entanglements that stretched across the British and Ottoman empires. Focusing exclusively on events and practices within one empire loses sight of the larger geographies in which imperial administrators and subjects operated. Taking note of the connective links that drove process of imperial consolidation and expansion opens a new horizon for the study of empire⁸. The press played a pivotal role in the "connected histories" which bound empires together. In reassessing how colonial, indigenous, and exile networks functioned, we can revise familiar imperial geographies and provide a more nuanced appraisal of the "circuits of movement and mixture" that shaped both European imperialism and Arab society in the nineteenth century⁹.

⁴

North African Colonialism and the Written Word

Studies of French and British expansion into Africa and Asia have frequently examined the diplomatic contests that influenced the modern Middle East. Yet the Anglo-French rivalry was never solely confined to controlling geographic territory. Wars for territory were often played out as a "war of words", revealing the discursive strategies that accompanied acts of conquest and expansion¹⁰. Words and text were central to the exercise of imperial power, and producing texts depended upon broader regional connections and networks that fed into expansionists agendas. As

the chief imperial powers of Europe sparred off against one another for dominance in the Mediterranean, the press became an instrument of imperial consolidation and created conditions for cross-border exchange and collaboration with local intermediaries and actors.

5 Waging this “war of words” required effective organs of propaganda. Throughout much of the nineteenth century, the French took an active role in producing newspapers aimed at Arabic speaking audiences. During the Napoleonic invasion of Egypt, the military government had run Egyptian newspapers in an effort to win support among the local populations. The attempt failed miserably, but it did not prevent French policymakers from replicating these policies in the subsequent conquest of Algeria three decades later. From the start of the occupation, the military used bi-lingual publications to communicate with native elites and, it was hoped, encourage durable links with North African populations in the region¹¹. Pro-colonial and missionary circles engaged in similar enterprises over the years, seeking to influence an imagined North African readership. The short-lived *L’Aigle de Paris* run by the Abbé Bourgade and translated by the Tunisian notary Soliman al-Haraïri explained the objective behind these endeavours, remarking in 1860, “To change the ideas of a people it is necessary to speak with them”¹².

6 Whether the paper did, in fact, “speak” to Arabs was debatable. Most French-backed Arab language periodicals were short-lived. The exception was *El Mobacher (Al-Mubashir)*, an official organ launched by the Algerian administration in the 1840s which would become a staple for the colonial government and provide a channel for communicating with native elites supportive of the regime. For the most part, these official colonial papers did little to win favor and influence among Muslim subjects¹³. An alternative strategy to maintaining official organs was backing “independent” newspapers that could speak for France. There was certainly no shortage of applicants seeking to tap into official funds, and during the last two decades of the nineteenth century the French government worked through an array of local and émigré publicists to reach Arab and Muslim audiences. The Arab-language newspaper *Al-Bassir*, begun in 1881, was indicative of this relationship. Run by the Lebanese exile Khalil Ghanem and financed through French subsidies, the paper was intended to circulate in Tunisia and Egypt as a pro-French organ. Ghanem assured officials that the newspaper would “finally teach the Arabs to love France”, a promise that ultimately failed to materialize¹⁴. Most Arab elites saw through the paper’s pro-French sympathies. Within a year, it was struggling to attract readers and serving primarily as a channel for anti-British propaganda directed at Egyptian readers.

7 The following year, a group of publicists contacted the French government to solicit interest in a new bi-lingual journal established in Paris entitled *L’Astre d’Orient (Kawkab al-Mashriq)*. The editorial staff boasted a number of Arab journalists hailing from Beirut, Damascus, and Baghdad. As such, they offered a veneer of authenticity that official journals lacked. The owners themselves assured they were interested in “extending French influence in the Orient” and “protecting our interests vis-à-vis the Muslim or Christian native populations”. As the editors explained, they intended to maintain their “independence” and were not seeking subsidies “strictly speaking”. Nonetheless, it would be helpful if the French administration could guarantee a certain number of subscriptions in its North African colonies¹⁵. The proposal made sense to French officials, who saw the utility of backing an Arab journal that could reach an international Muslim audience.

8 The inaugural issue of *L’Astre d’Orient* set the tone, giving readers a balance sheet of France’s noble intentions toward Muslims. “For fifty-two years, France has recognized the religion of Islam in Algeria, assisted with pilgrimages, and honored the ‘*ulamā* which it has admitted into and called upon in its councils”¹⁶. Further issues highlighted the amiable relations that existed between priests and muftis in Algeria, challenged claims that colonialism was a new crusade, and insisted the mission of the paper was to “enlighten” all Muslims “that the will of God had placed under the direction of European powers”¹⁷. In tandem with this objective, articles supported a progressive brand of Islam that resisted “fanaticism” and obscurantism. As one Cairene contributor claimed, far from undermining progress and preaching intolerance, the Qur’an “was in agreement with European beliefs” and its teachings were able to fortify “the union of the great people of Islam with those of the West”¹⁸. According to Paul Brillouin, the nominal editor of *L’Astre d’Orient*, the

paper aimed to provide a “free tribune” where Muslims in Paris and elsewhere could discuss important issues of the day in a constructive and informative atmosphere¹⁹.

9 If on the surface *L’Astre d’Orient* appeared a routine organ of colonial propaganda, the circumstances surround its production hinted at the complex relations that colonial politics often engendered. Advertised as a forum for Muslim opinion, the paper was in actuality owned by Lebanese Christian émigrés, among them ‘Abd Allāh Marrāsh, an Arab publicist with a hand in various journalistic enterprises in France and England²⁰. That publicists like Ghanem and Marrāsh would have contacts in France was not surprising. Syrian Christians had an advantage when it came to liaising with the French government. They had a built-in support network and ties to elite circles in Paris through religious and commercial channels, and many had been educated in the Jesuit schools founded throughout the region during the nineteenth century. The Université Saint-Joseph in Beirut was particularly notable for turning out Francophone Arab elites in the Ottoman Levant committed to French “civilization”²¹. While these networks were a mainstay of France’s informal *présence* in the Near East, Syriac Maronites and Melchites benefit from these connections as well. For them, France was a valuable foreign protector that could champion reforms beneficial to Arab Christians living within the Ottoman Empire and intervene on their behalf when needed, as had occurred in 1860 when Napoleon III gave his support for Lebanese autonomy and assisted with the process of administrative reform that would underpin the “long peace” in the region that prevailed until the First World War²².

10 These confessional relationships were not simply an alliance of convenience, however. They were embedded within deeper cultural entanglements connecting France with the Ottoman Near East. Christian Arabs were at the forefront of the print revolution occurring in the eastern Mediterranean at mid-century. They ran some of the first independent newspaper and publishing houses in the region, transforming cities such as Beirut and Cairo into intellectual centers of the Arab world. At the same time, Christians were being exposed to ideas coming from the West through their ties with European merchant firms and missionaries²³. As Arab publishing houses were turning out a greater volume of printed materials, French Arabists working in Algeria were busy analyzing texts and codifying the Arabic language “in order that we might relate to the inhabitants of our colony”, as the linguist Auguste Cherbonneau stated in 1862²⁴. Arab literary production had many sources, but collectively these efforts fed into emergent ideas of an Arab revival or “awakening” (*al-Nahda*) as philologists recovered a “pure” Arabic language and Christian publishers churned out books and newspapers printed in Arabic. The *Nahda* and colonialism were twin currents that often converged and ran together²⁵. As they did so, it opened up a space for imagining an Arab cultural identity that would acquire a more pronounced nationalist focus in the years ahead.

11 Many of these ideas resonated in the pages of *L’Astre d’Orient*. The newspaper never hid the fact that its editorial staff in Paris was Syrian, or “Frenchmen of the Orient” as the paper put it. Nor did it shy away from promoting issues favorable to Ottoman Syria either. As an “Arab journal”, it called for the “awakening of Arab nationality”²⁶. Its intention was to “remind the Arabs of their past grandeur” and enlightening them, whether those “living under Muslims sovereigns” or those “who by the will of God” had been placed under European rule²⁷. Articles encouraging the adoption of modern agricultural and commerce were consistent with the modernizing and assimilationist designs of French colonialism, but they remained rooted in broader aspirations for Arab modernization that transcended imperial frontiers. The editors even warmed Muslims to the idea of European “protection” with assertions that “France has never been the enemy of Islam” and “everywhere its flag is raised religion is respected and protection accorded to all”, hinting at the strategic objectives of a Syrian émigré political community in France that might one day countenance a European protectorate over Ottoman rule²⁸. As *L’Astre d’Orient* revealed, Syrian reform movements could dovetail with French colonial objectives, and émigrés were not reluctant to exploit these convergences in pursuing broader goals across empires. While the French government used publications like *L’Astre d’Orient* to cultivate colonial loyalties and spread French influence in the eastern Mediterranean, Syrian publicists were using the very same medium to promote ideas of Arab autonomy applicable within Ottoman territories. Imperial rivalries engendered these types of

trans-imperial connections as they brought together diverse interests and agendas.

12 The only problem, however, was that independent papers like *L'Astre d'Orient* failed to appeal to their intended Muslim readership. Its claims to represent Muslim opinion were open to criticism, and its evident pro-French sympathies undermined the paper's supposed independent position. Within a year, *L'Astre d'Orient* had ceased publication²⁹. While Christian Arabs could turn out Arab copy for the French government, their ability to connect with Muslims in North Africa and the Near East was questionable. Journals run by locals stood a better chance of success, and colonial administrators were not blind to this reality. They paid close attention to the journals that circulated through the Maghreb and Near East and instruct local officials to keep an eye out for potential collaborators. In 1889, the Resident General in Tunisia, Justin Massicault, took an interest in Ali Bouchoucha, a former interpreter for the regime and a student at the Sadiqi College in Tunis who ran a newspaper entitled *Al-Hadhira*. Given Bouchoucha's previous cooperation with the administration and his standing in the local community, Massicault believed he could prove a reliable ally in the Regency. He hoped to transform *Al-Hadhira* into "a semi-official organ of the government", noting that Bouchoucha and his writers were the type of publicists needed by the colonial regime. They were natives who were "resolute partisans of the Franco-Tunisian regime" while also "attached to their religion and traditions"³⁰.

13 Local support was needed as France consolidated its hold over Tunisia, but there was also the British in Egypt to consider. Egyptian periodicals and books passed through Tunisia on a regular basis, making them a potential source of British infiltration and subversion³¹. France worried that its longstanding ties to Egypt might be severed as the British government consolidated its hold on the country. France had customarily employed a mix of diplomatic support and soft power to court Egyptian rulers and win over local elites since the dawn of the nineteenth century. Under British rule, these channels were fast evaporating. From the beginning of the occupation, therefore, the government placed an emphasis on sustaining the *présence française* in Egypt through the use of the press. In addition to supporting newspapers run by French publicists, officials doled out sums of money to trustworthy native publicists in Cairo and Alexandria³². As the foreign minister Charles de Freycient explained in 1885, it was imperative for the government to provide financial support to Egyptian journals "which show themselves favorable to our policy in the Orient and particularly in Tunisia"³³. Over the next decade, France ran a secret press war in Egypt intended to subvert British influence and defend its newly won protectorate from British attacks. "It was evident that the Egyptian press was free only in its legal formalities", the deputy Lucien Hubert recalled, looking back on the period. "The pens of its editors were servants of others"³⁴.

14 Due to its proximity to Egypt, Tunisia played a central role in this strategy. Officials were charged with seeking out Egyptian publicists and distributing payments to editors who would publish pro-French articles. The administration saw a potential advantage to this approach, expecting that the Egyptian papers would circulate back into Algeria and Tunisia and reach their own colonial populations, thereby concealing the hand of French officialdom in their production³⁵. Demand for these journals was typically low, prompting the government to pay select Tunisian journalists to import and distribute them in the protectorate. In 1889, the editor Muhammad Basis received money to purchase pro-French Egyptian newspapers and make them available to readers in Tunis. To compensate his efforts, the administration took out a sizeable number of subscriptions to his own journal, *El Djouaïl*, that guaranteed the paper for at least six months³⁶. In this wheeling and dealing, policymakers occasionally found they had to juggle between colonial concerns and broader regional objectives. The two did not always align as neatly as hoped. In 1890, for example, Massicault expressed misgivings about providing support to the paper *Al-Ahram*, a publication founded in Alexandria by two Maronite Christian brothers from Beirut. As he saw it, the paper generally contained "no information of interest" to Tunisian Muslim readers. On the other hand, the journal was popular in Syria and its pro-French articles could be of service in the Levant³⁷. As French colonial and diplomatic officials came to realize, working through the press required a careful balancing act between immediate interests and long-term goals, between colonial objectives relevant to French North Africa and France's broader regional strategies.

15 Yet it was also evident that the press brought together a constellation of actors with

distinct and often divergent aims. Colonialism intersected with the aspirations of Arab autonomists and Muslim reformers, both of whom saw the French as patrons capable of furthering their respective cause. Ideas regarding Arab cultural identity and Islamic modernization did not run counter or even parallel to the practices of colonialism. They were intimately bound up with them.

16

Émigrés, Exiles, and Islamic Modernization

The Arab press networks established in conjunction with colonial regimes were only one side of the equation. While French administrators were busy attempting to influence Muslim populations in North Africa and the Near East, Arab journalists were also reaching out to European audiences. By the 1870s and 1880s, a flow of political exiles coming from the Arab world found their way to Paris. They retained connections with their home communities and sought to contract political alliances that would further political causes back home. Journalists and translators like Khalil Ghanem may have assisted with running colonial newspapers, but they also engaged with a larger community of Syrians in Paris committed to Ottoman constitutional reform and Syrian autonomy³⁸. Despite his initial setback as editor for *Al-Bassir* in the early 1880s, Ghanem went on to have a long career as a journalist and newspaper editor in France. He was a regular contributor to the *Journal des Débats* and published articles in leading periodicals like the *Fortnightly Review* as an expert on New Eastern affairs. Through his connections to French political society, he attempted to strengthen the traditional Franco-Syrian partnership and garnered support among French elites.

17 Ghanem was in many respects a pioneer of the new Arab diaspora, but he remained one among others. The radical Jamāl al-Dīn al-Afghānī was another such figure active in Paris at this time. Following his exile from Egypt in the late 1870s, Afghānī continued his political activities from the French capital. Joined there by Muhammad ‘Abduh, he organized a secret society—*The Strongest Bond*—committed to Pan-Islamic reform and revolution. It ran an Arabic newspaper of the same name and established an associated branch in French Tunisia.³⁹ Together, Afghānī and ‘Abduh planned to work on what they called “the Egyptian question”, linking the struggle for national independence to broader aspirations of Muslim unity and emancipation⁴⁰. Although his Parisian exile was relatively short, he would set a precedent for future expatriates similarly committed to the cause of Egyptian liberty and emancipation. As Afghānī’s brief stay in Paris revealed, Paris could be a place where exiles pursued revolutionary goals and continued the struggle. Running newspapers and writing for the European press, they endeavored to convince French readers of the viability of their political projects. As an exilic hub, Paris was an ideal space in which to build trans-imperial networks and influence events from abroad.

18 With the suppression of the nationalist revolt in 1882, Egyptian activists found it more opportune to seek out other shores. They arrived in Paris at a crucial juncture. France had just secured its hold over Tunisia and the Anglo-French imperial rivalry in Africa was heating up. A notable Anglophobia surged in the French press and diplomatic circles during the 1880s and 1890s. These circumstances provided a new context and environment for exiles to navigate. Prevented from voicing their opposition to British oversight at home, they could work as intermediaries and influence events from afar. This objective required winning French favor and, as Afghānī and ‘Abduh had already hinted, transforming the Egyptian national cause into an international one.

19 Arriving in Paris at roughly the same time as Afghānī, Ya’qūb Sanū quickly carved out a niche for himself in the French capital. Hailing from a Cairene family of Jews, Sanū had run a popular playhouse and satirical magazine in Egypt, both of which were shut down by the government during the 1870s due to their political orientation. He relocated to Paris in 1877 to continue printing his magazine *Abu-Naddara Zarqa*, which was regularly smuggled back to Egypt through the European post. The move proved permanent. Sanū would remain in France until his death in 1912⁴¹. He made a living as a journalist and actor, mixing theatrics and politics in equal measure. A critic of the Khedive and British administration, he sought to enlist French publicists in the cause of Egyptian national liberation. He crafted a persona as an expert on the Orient by giving lectures on Egyptian history and Islam. To regale audiences, he billed himself under the name

Shaykh Abu-Naddara, appearing in a turban and traditional *gallabiyah*. Sanū also knew when to drop the Orientalist self-fashioning and pose as the quintessential “modern Arab” as well to win favor with Parisian elites. He was joined in his efforts by the young Mustafa Kamil who, although perhaps less theatrical than Sanū, was more passionate when it came to winning over French opinion to the Egyptian cause. As a law student in Toulouse, Kamil made the acquaintance of the republican *salonnière* and author Juliette Adam whom he impressed with his patriotism and rhetorical flourishes. Adam subsequently introduced Kamil to various republican luminaries and journalists, paving the way for articles in leading periodicals like *Le Figaro* and the *Journal des Débats*. Accessing a broad French readership, Kamil never missed an opportunity to point out the injustices suffered by the Egyptian *fellahin* under British administration or to promote the cause of Egyptian nationalism with vigor⁴².

20 Despite their distinctive approaches and running in different social circles, Sanū and Kamil both served the Egyptian cause abroad in their own ways. They cultivated relationships with influential backers and ingratiated themselves with French elites. “I have praised France, which I have celebrated and gloried for fourteen years by proclaiming all that this magnificent and generous nation has done for the advancement, progress, and civilization of the people of Africa and Asia”, Sanū declared in 1899⁴³. French admirers were taken by Sanū’s fluent French, wit, and charming demeanor, with one journalist insisting “[he is] in effect nearly one of us”⁴⁴. Kamil was no less flattering, recalling in speeches the profound debt Egypt owed to French culture and evoking memories of the Napoleonic Egyptian campaign. He underscored the threat British occupation posed to the traditional Franco-Egyptian relationship and spoke at length on France’s current “duty” to “intervene and save us”⁴⁵. For good measure, he also appealed to diplomatic and colonial circles, giving a hard-nosed assessment of what a British dominated Egypt meant for French interest in the Mediterranean. To abandon Egypt would mean “the complete vassalage of Islam to English power”, he warned, playing upon French colonial anxieties and its self-professed status as a “Muslim power” in the world⁴⁶. These overtures proved effective in garnering moral support and publicizing Egypt’s struggle against France’s erstwhile imperial rival.

21 Although actively seeking to win over French opinion, neither presented themselves solely as lobbyists for the Egyptian national cause. They acted as journalists and critics, running Arabic newspapers like *Abu-Naddara Zaqā’* and Kamil’s *Al-Liwa* that spoke to key issues of the day. If they manipulated imperial rivalries and capitalized on Anglophobic sentiments in France for national ends, they also positioned themselves as reformers invested in the larger struggles agitating the Muslim world. When the British marshalled familiar arguments of Muslim fanaticism and backwardness to legitimate their administrative hold over Egypt, exiles pushed back. Sanū insisted that Egyptians were “pious Muslims and sincere patriots” capable of self-rule⁴⁷. In 1907, he founded the journal *L’Universe Musulman*, a publication exclusively in French aimed at correcting European stereotypes of Islam⁴⁸. Mustafa Kamil, himself a Muslim, was more forthcoming. In the salons hosted by Juliette Adam and in the pages of the French press, Kamil maintained that Islamic principles were consistent with the social progress of the modern world and could accommodate female emancipation just as much as a liberal political order. “Does not Islam ordain the love of the fatherland, justice and equality, struggle, activity, concord and union, generosity and tolerance?” he asked in 1898⁴⁹. Egyptians sought to progress in line with their own cultural and historical character, “resting upon Islam while taking what is good and useful from the West”, as he argued⁵⁰. “In the name of everything that is sacred on this earth, I affirm that religious fanaticism does not exist in Egypt. Islam is dominant there since it is the religion of the great majority. But *Islam in no way implies fanaticism*”⁵¹. In speech after speech, Kamil associated the striving for Egyptian independence with the sentiments of Islamic modernization, making the case that “the cause of Egypt is the cause of Islam”⁵². Writing in *Le Figaro* in 1906 upon the occasion of Britain’s controversial sentencing of Egyptian peasants at Denshawai, Kamil expanded his criticism of colonial injustice to reiterate this central message to a European readership, declaring, “The people of Islam can improve their condition through an Islamic renaissance drawing its strength from science and liberal thought”⁵³.

22 Such pronouncements were consonant with growing calls for Muslim unity echoing across

Africa and Asia at the turn of the century. “The first principle that Islam teaches is the union between all Muslims”, Kamil claimed, and this unity could be both national and universal in his opinion⁵⁴. Although these sentiments were not unique to exiles residing in Paris, the experience of exile was important in shaping articulations of Muslim identity and modernity. In their quest to elicit public sympathy and recruit influential supporters abroad, Egyptian publicists found utility in associating their cause with broader transformations occurring in the Muslim world, a world which an imperial Europe certainly had a stake in. They spoke of Muslim unity and emancipation, using the British as a foil for more general anti-colonial critiques. They espoused a universalist rhetoric that elaborated core themes of Islamic revival and liberalism, centering Egypt at the heart of these longings. In packaging their demands for foreign audiences and building relationships abroad, exiles formulated programs in universal and democratic terms, reconciling Islam with themes of national sovereignty and emancipation that resonated with European liberals.

23 The Arab exile community was a mixed group. It comprised Syrians and Egyptians from varying confessional backgrounds. Despite this diversity, however, exiles collectively appealed to France’s own sense of imperial mission and attempted to direct it toward political projects in British Egypt and the Ottoman Empire. French publicists took the bait, typically using it as an occasion for self-congratulatory praise. “Is it not curious”, remarked the writer Georges-André Vayssière in 1890, “that ideas of progress, independence, and justice radiate from Paris to the tents of the desert and the roofs of the *fellah*, and that the center of this liberal movement, this Arab renaissance is two steps from the boulevards, beside the frivolous joys and gallant festivities where the Folies-Bergères meet each evening”⁵⁵. Vayssière’s comments clearly recognized that a phenomenon was underway in Paris. Arab publicists were using their time in the French capital to good effect as they exploited imperial rivalries and coaxed support from European elites. Imperialism may have been perceived as a threat, but it could also be pressed into service as exiles and émigré worked across empires to achieve their own emancipatory goals.

24

Conclusion

It was evident that press networks cut both ways during the 1880s. French officials sought to use the press as an instrument of colonialism, employing “independent” Arab journalists and editors to reinforce French rule in North Africa and combat British influence in Egypt. Yet these very same channels offered Arab reformers and Islamic modernists a means of communicating with European audiences and garnering support for their own causes. Whether by running newspapers with the support of colonial administrations or pressing their cause directly in Paris, Arab journalists were coming to shape their own political agendas. Colonialism was never a one-way channel. Violent and oppressive in its practices, colonialism also offered new possibilities for others who sought to exploit imperial rivalries and reshape anti-colonial and reform platforms. Press networks revealed the entanglements that connected the French, British, and Ottoman empires, creating tensions but also points of synergy that opened spaces for political and social engagement. Tracing these links between Mediterranean Africa and metropolitan France provides a new context for understanding the contests as well as the connections that shaped imperial interactions in the nineteenth century. Yet it also provides a different perspective when considering the intellectual and political currents that characterized the Muslim Mediterranean world and which would ultimately come to play an important role in the shaping of the modern Middle East.

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Arab Press Networks and Imperial Connectivities from Mediterranean Africa to France in the Late 19th Century

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Аннотация

Пресса выступала в качестве инструмента колониального управления. Вместе с тем, газеты и другие печатные издания обеспечивали связь между жителями разных регионов и служили наглядным доказательством того, что общеимперские потоки информации способны влиять на жизнь самих империй. В этой статье исследуются сети распространения арабской печатной продукции в Северной Африке и во Франции. Автор показывает, что возникновение таких сетей содействовало колониальной экспансии, но в то же время давало мусульманским активистам и арабским модернистам трибуну для ознакомления иностранной аудитории с их взглядами. История этого канала двусторонней связи показывает, как империализм пробуждал новые синергии, которые в Новое время оказывали влияние на политическое развитие как Франции, так Ближнего Востока, позволяя предположить, что сети распространения печатной продукции играли ключевую роль в противоречивой истории империи данного периода.

Ключевые слова: Французская Северная Африка, империализм, исламская политика, печатная продукция, история межнациональных отношений

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