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Celebrating Maimonides in Cairo (1935): Jewish historiography, Islamic philosophy and the *nahḍa*

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ABSTRACT

The year 1935 marked the 800th anniversary of the birth of the Jewish scholar Moses ben Maimon, better known as Maimonides. This article focuses on representations of Maimonides as a cultural hero during this anniversary year, taking as its central case the commemorations in Cairo. Specifically, the article examines Jewish historiography and discussions on the Jewish past in Egypt tied with debates on revival, commonly known as the *nahḍa*. It argues first of all that Egyptian Jewish and non-Jewish intellectuals dominantly embraced Maimonides as a philosopher, to be studied in the context of Arabic and Islamic thought. Second, these intellectuals stressed the critical role that Jews and Islamic thought at large had played in the transmission of knowledge to the West. Third, for the Jewish historians who organised the celebrations, Maimonides symbolised the rich heritage of Jewish intellectual culture in the Islamic world, which they perceived to be in current decline and stagnation. Lastly, the celebrations were entangled with discussions on heritage and ownership, as will be shown by the case of Jews in Egypt debating ownership of the Cairo Genizah.

KEYWORDS

Maimonides; Egypt; *nahḍa*; Jews; Cairo Genizah; Israel Wolfensohn (1899–1980)

During the 800th anniversary year of the birth of Maimonides in 1935, celebrations were held honouring his memory in various places worldwide.¹ Moses ben Maimon, better known as Maimonides or by the Hebrew acronym Rambam, was a legal scholar, philosopher, physician and Jewish communal leader. He was born in Cordoba, the political and cultural centre of al-Andalus and an important site of Jewish culture and learning. He left the city with his family after the Almohad invasion in 1148 and subsequent forced conversions of non-Muslims to Islam. During years of wandering in al-Andalus, Maimonides immersed himself in the sciences and a scholarly milieu of Muslim Aristotelians (Kraemer 2015, p. 14–15). A five-year stay in Fez followed, where he studied medicine and wrote his *Treatise on the Art of Logic*. He then voyaged to Acre, at the time under the rule of the Crusaders, before settling in late Fatimid Cairo-Fustat. Here, he became the communal leader of the Jews and served as physician at Saladin's court after the establishment of the Sunni Ayyubid dynasty. In Egypt he completed and wrote his masterworks: the *Commentary on the Mishnah* (*Kitāb al-Sirāj*) and *The Guide for the Perplexed* (*Dalālat al-Hā'irīn*), both written in Judeo-Arabic, and his monumental work on Jewish law, *Mishneh Torah*, written in Hebrew (Kraemer 2008). He died in Fustat in 1204.

The representations and nationalist appropriations during his anniversary year in 1935 jointly offer a window into the 'cultures of Maimonideanism'.² This article contributes to the lasting and

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diverse reception history of Maimonides, by focusing on what James Robinson (2009, p. vii) calls the area of cultural mentalities: ‘the way Maimonides emerged in various contexts as cultural hero or emblematic figure’. Focusing on the anniversary in Cairo, it asks: which Maimonides emerged in the context of the Cairo celebrations? How did the Jewish intellectuals who steered the events, as well as the Egyptian intellectual community at large, embrace him as a cultural hero? In other words: what did Maimonides represent and symbolise in the politically turbulent global 1930s and in the intellectual scene in Egypt? The article has a threefold purpose: (1) to examine the aims and ambitions of the Société d’Études Historiques Juives d’Égypte, which had organised the celebrations; (2) to analyse representations of Maimonides within the broader Egyptian intellectual scene and the press; and (3) to consider the views of Jewish *nahḍawi* intellectuals in Egypt on the circulation and collection of documents and manuscripts concerning Maimonides and their ownership, specifically with regards to the Cairo Genizah.

By highlighting the global dimension of Maimonides’ rich afterlife and the reception of his works, the article aims for a broader understanding of what Maimonides has represented in different cultural and national contexts – so far predominantly focused on Europe, the U.S and Israel (Robinson 2009, Dobbs-Weinstein *et al.* 2009, Robinson and Shemesh 2019). Furthermore, by examining Egyptian and Egyptian Jewish envisioning of the past in the context of the Maimonides celebrations, the article contributes to the recent scholarship on *nahḍa* historiography in the Middle East. In particular, it provides knowledge on how various ‘non-canonical’ and unstudied *nahḍa* intellectuals have envisioned the past, including its cultural heroes, and how they have used the past to express confessional, communal, national and regional belonging (Krimsti and Ghobrial 2021, pp. 271–272, 279). Analysing, as the present article does, how both Jewish and non-Jewish intellectuals in Egypt conceived of and studied Judaism and Jews, finally allows for a broader and more diverse understanding of the formation of Jewish studies as a field, and the inclusion of the endeavours of historians and intellectuals in the Middle East in the story of how Jewish studies evolved during the first half of the twentieth century (Albert *et al.* 2022, p. 1, 16–17).

The research for this article is based on a range of sources, both archival and published. First of all, I have consulted the archive of the Société d’Études Historiques Juives d’Égypte, responsible for the organisation of the celebrations in Cairo. This archive includes the society’s correspondences, administration, and minutes of meetings held by its members. Second, I have made an extensive survey of the coverage of the celebrations in Cairo in the Egyptian press, including leading Egyptian Arabic magazines and newspapers as well as French and Arabic Jewish newspapers. Lastly, the research is based on a close reading of an Arabic study on the life and works of Maimonides, written by the Jewish professor of Semitic languages in Cairo, Israel Wolfensohn, on the occasion of the 1935 celebrations in Cairo and published in 1936 (Wolfensohn 1936) (Figure 1).

The Cairo celebrations in 1935 and Egyptian Jewish historiography

The Société d’Études Historiques Juives d’Égypte was the driving force behind the Maimonides celebrations in Cairo in 1935. Before describing the festivities in more detail, a brief word on modern Egyptian historiography is needed to contextualise the aims and ambitions of this society. Yoav Di-Capua has argued that historicism became a new, normative system of thought in Egypt in the late nineteenth century. By the time of the Maimonides celebrations, historiography was no longer merely an elitist intellectual activity; it had become the ‘ubiquitous habit of the urban middle class’ (2009, p. 141). In the semi-colonial context following Egypt’s formal independence from Britain in 1922, Egyptian nationalist historiography was tied with the struggle for liberation and full independence (Gorman 2003, p. 112). The Egyptian monarchy, in response to the de-Ottomanisation trend within nationalist writing, launched an expansive project of dynastic historiography during the 1920s (Di-Capua 2009).

It is in the wake of King Fu’ād’s promotion of historiography that Egyptian Jews established the Société d’Études Historiques Juives d’Égypte in 1925, and that several Jewish middle- and upper-

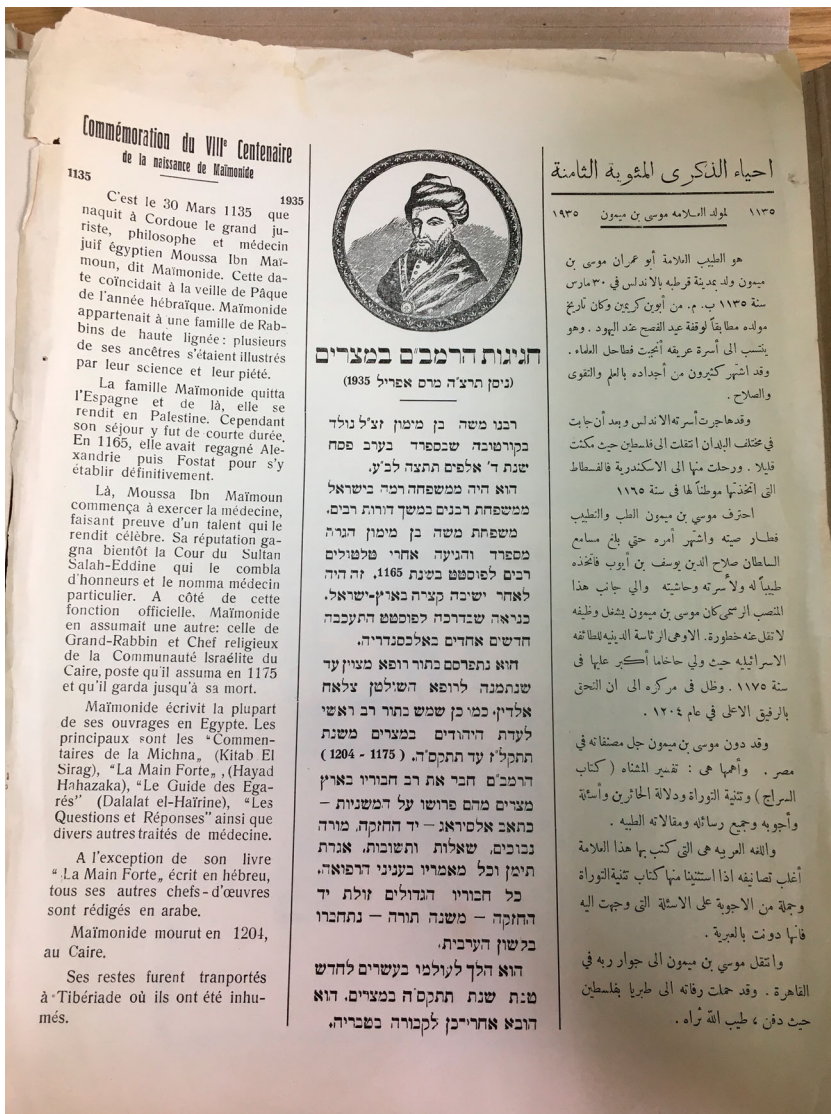


Figure 1. Tri-lingual announcement in French, Hebrew and Arabic of the Maimonides celebrations in 1935. CAHJP, ET 4 7123 G.

class writers began writing Jewish history into Egyptian national history (Miccoli 2012, p. 166). Jewish historiography in Egypt should also be seen in light of post-1922 opposition to the prolonged British military occupation of Egypt and undermining of parliamentary democracy. This period witnessed the trends of the Egyptianisation and Arabisation of modern culture in Egypt, which cast Egyptianised foreigners (the socio-cultural category of the *mutamaṣṣirūn*) increasingly as outsiders (Gorman 2003, pp. 174–175). This group included many Jews, as a large part of the Jewish population, numbering an estimated 75,000 during the 1930s, did not hold Egyptian nationality (Krämer 1989, p. 4, 32–33).³ The project of Jewish historiography in Egypt was thus partly externally motivated, as Jewish historians ultimately sought to validate – through their historiographical efforts – the presence of Jews in Egypt and the Arab world.

During the 1930s, the Pharaonic current of Egyptian territorial nationalism increasingly gave way to (Pan-)Arab and Islamic identifications as the basis for the Egyptian imagined community,

expressed by new movements such as the Muslim Brotherhood and Young Egypt, but also produced and debated by Egyptian intellectuals in the periodical press and nationalist historians (Gershoni 1992, Gershoni and Jankowski 1995). The intensifying conflict in Palestine became a topic of growing concern in the regional public sphere, especially after the start of the Palestinian uprising in 1936 (Jankowski 1980). Amidst the opposition to Zionism and the British mandate in the wake of the revolt, Jews in Egypt were pressured to denounce Zionism. The Zionist movement had little appeal amongst Jews in Egypt, and for some Egyptian Jews, sympathies for Zionism did not necessarily contradict expressions of Egyptian national belonging (Krämer 1989, pp. 168–172).

By studying the Jewish past, Jewish historians in Egypt looked towards the future and strove to revive Jewish culture in Egypt and the ‘East’, perceived to be in a state of decline. The Maimonides celebrations should hence also be viewed in the context of the *nahḍa*. Following Kassab, I conceptualise the *nahḍa* as a range of intellectual debates in the Arab world (Kassab 2010, p. 19). These debates centred on the notions of revival or awakening (*nahḍa*) and reform (*iṣlāḥ*), tied to conceptualisations of selfhood (Sheehi 2004). The multifocal *nahḍa* debates, cast in civilisational lexicon, were sparked by nineteenth-century Ottoman reform, the colonial encounter with Europe and, subsequently, the national and political reorientations after the end of the Ottoman Empire.

Various Jewish intellectuals took part in the *nahḍa* debates and its literary production and scholarship (Levy 2007, Behar and Benite 2013, p. xxix). The reformist aspirations and self-definitions of *nahḍa* intellectuals went in tandem with the exploration of past civilisations, languages and peoples of the (Ancient) ‘East’, and a fascination for the history of the Semitic peoples and languages (Bashkin 2021). As recent scholarship by Levy (2007, pp. 106–108, 127–138), Gribetz (2014, chapter 4) and Bashkin (2014, p. 320) shows, this included studying Jews and Judaism – both by Jews and non-Jews – as an important aspect of defining the self and community within the debates of the *nahḍa*.

Part of the Egyptian and regional *nahḍawi* interest in the Jewish past was an embracing of the history of Jews in the medieval Arab world and the Sephardic legacy of al-Andalus. Just as Wissenschaft des Judentums historians had studied this past as a model for contemporary European Jews, Sephardic and ‘Arab Jewish’ intellectuals in the region studied the Sephardic and Andalusian ‘Golden Age’ as a model for modern revival and integration in the Arab and Islamic world. The Palestinian Jewish orientalist scholar of Iraqi descent, Abraham Shalom Yahuda (1877–1951), combined the Zionist notion of a return to the East with the *nahḍawi* project of Arab and Eastern revival, studying pre-Islamic and medieval Jewish Arabic literature as inspiration for the future (Evri 2018, pp. 339–341, Behar and Evri 2019, Hussein 2019). Similarly, the Egyptian Karaite lawyer and intellectual Murād Farag (1867–1956), alongside works on the Semitic languages, published a study of Arab-Jewish poets in the pre-Islamic and early Islamic periods in 1929 (Farag 1929, Levy 2012).

The Société d’Études Historiques Juives d’Égypte hence also reflects a regional *nahḍawi* interest in the history of Judaism and Jews. Though the Société was Francophone, its members addressed Egyptian and Arab Jewish history and culture in their published works and in the society’s bulletin in French and Arabic.⁴ The society organised lectures on relations between Judaism and Islam, Arab and Jewish culture, the Semitic languages, and Jews in Ancient Egypt.⁵ Headed by the president of the Egyptian Jewish community and former Egyptian Minister of Finance, Joseph Aslan Cattau (Yūsuf Aşlan Qaṭṭāwī Bāsha, 1861–1942), the society included amongst its members mainly Jews from Egypt and elsewhere in the Middle East, such as Alexandrian-born Jewish Egyptologist Joseph Leibovitch (1898–1968), and the Jerusalem-based journalist and intellectual Avraham Elmaleh (1885–1967), but also a German scholar of Islamic medicine residing in Cairo, Max Meyerhoff (1874–1945).⁶

The preparations for the Maimonides celebrations had started in 1934 through the efforts of an organising committee consisting of members of the society (*The Jewish Daily Bulletin*, 16 August 1934).⁷ The year in which the celebrations took place requires explanation, as scholars now commonly accept the year 1138 as the date of Maimonides’ birth, rather than 1135. At the time of the global celebrations of Maimonides 800th anniversary in 1935, however, it was still generally accepted that 1135 was the year of his birth, based on an account by Maimonides’ grandson. The

year 1138 is based on Maimonides' own account that he completed his *Commentary on the Mishnah* when he was about thirty years old, in 1168 C.E. (Kraemer 2015, p. 10, footnote 1).

The festivities in Cairo in 1935 kicked off with celebrations on 30 March at the Maimonides synagogue in the old Jewish quarter of the city, where Rabbi Jacob Toledano and Chief Rabbi Haim Nahum, amongst others, gave speeches. The following day, a ceremony took place at a Jewish charity school in the Cairo district of al-ʿAbbāsiyya, where speeches were delivered in French, Italian, Hebrew and Arabic (*Israël*, 28 March 1935, p. 1).⁸ A group of Jewish teachers, authors and intellectuals from Palestine took part in the festivities. Israel Wolfensohn, a member of the society, who was born and raised in Jerusalem, had organised their visit with the aim of fostering cultural exchange between Palestine and Egypt (Jacobson and Naor 2016, p. 113). The Jewish community in Alexandria, led by the city's Chief Rabbi David Prato, organised separate celebrations in a community school in Alexandria in the presence of royal and political guests, including the Spanish consul, and published a booklet in French on the occasion (*Al-Risāla*, 10 February 1936, p. 237).

The most important of the celebrations in Cairo took place on 1 April, at the Royal Opera House. As is evident from the list of notable guests and speakers, the historical society had succeeded in turning the celebrations into a national event, which was broadcast by radio to make sure that 'all Egyptians' would be able to listen to the speeches (*Israël*, 28 March 1935, p. 1).⁹ Amongst the speakers were the Egyptian Minister of Education Aḥmad Nagīb al-Hilālī, the rector of the Egyptian University ʿAlī Ibrāhīm Bāsha, professor of medical history at the Egyptian University Jurjī Ṣubḥī, professor of Islamic philosophy at the Egyptian University Muṣṭafā ʿAbd al-Rāziq, representative of the Institut d'Égypte and the Associations Médicales D'Égypte Aḥmad ʿĪsa Bey, and the Lebanese poet living in Egypt Khalīl Muṭrān, who recited a poem (*Israël*, 28 March 1935, p.1, *al-Risāla*, 1 April 1935, p. 515, *al-Ahrām*, 2 April 1935, p. 7, 4 April 1935, p. 7, 15).

To get a fuller picture of the celebrations and representations of Maimonides in Egypt, we must turn to coverage of the event in the Egyptian press, which published transcripts of the speeches and various articles on Maimonides. As the following discussion will show, for the Jewish community and the Jewish historians who organised the celebrations, Maimonides was not only a defining figure within their religious tradition but also a national symbol, an exemplary man who as a court physician had served Saladin in Egypt and had led the Egyptian Jewish community. The media coverage also reveals that the Maimonides celebrations were embedded in on-going debates on Egyptian national culture and its Arab and Islamic heritage, as Maimonides' place in Islamic civilisation was foregrounded and he was cast as 'Islamic philosopher'. Furthermore, Maimonides exemplifies, in *nahḍawi* fashion, the transportation of knowledge from East to West as well as the reconciliation of religion and science (Figure 2).

'A mediator between East and West': coverage of the celebrations in the Egyptian press

The organisers involved with the Société had actively promoted the event in the Egyptian daily and periodical press.¹⁰ Following the celebrations in Cairo, *L'Aurore*, a Jewish French-language Zionist newspaper published in Cairo by Lucien Sciuto (1858–1947), lauded the favourable coverage in the Egyptian Arabic press of the event, claiming that this resulted from the efforts of the organisers to bring 'Arabs and Jews' together (*L'Aurore*, 4 April 1935, p. 2). The newspaper's understanding of the event is not only noteworthy because of its appraisal of the positive coverage in the Egyptian press, but also because of the claim that 'Arabs and Jews' had come together during the celebrations. This statement, and its (colonial) opposition between 'Arabs' and 'Jews', suggests that the celebrations were conceived of as furthering the relations of the Jewish community in Cairo with the wider Egyptian and Arab public.

At the Royal Opera House, Maimonides had indeed been celebrated as a symbol of the strong relationship of Jews to Egypt, and of Egyptian religious tolerance. Aḥmad ʿĪsa Bey, the representative of the Institut d'Égypte,¹¹ had stressed Maimonides' connection to Egypt through his service as head

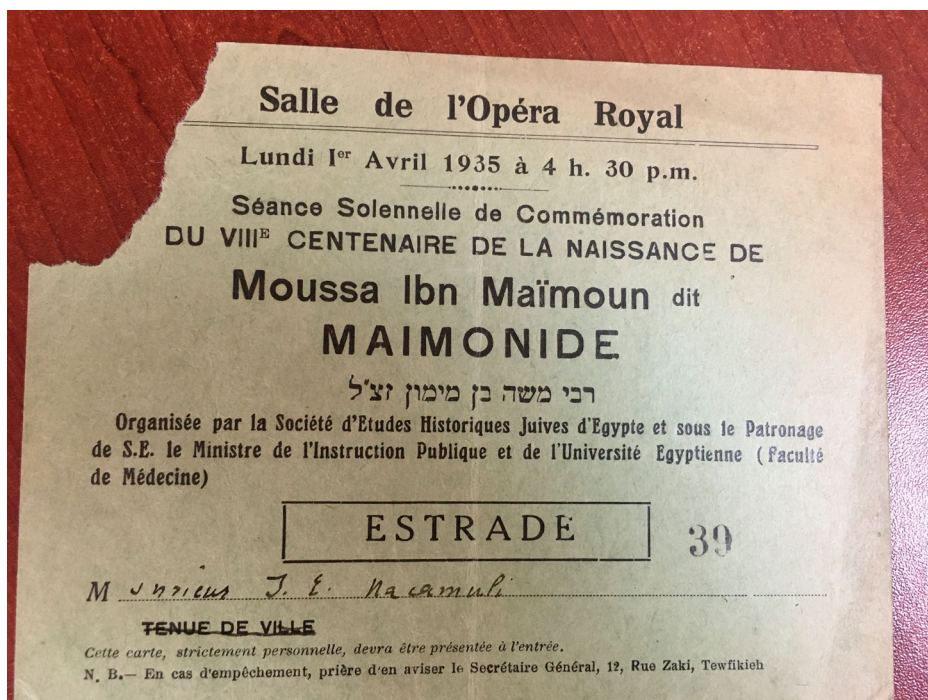


Figure 2. Entrance ticket for the Maimonides celebrations on 1 April 1935 at the Royal Opera House in Cairo. CAHJP, ET 4 7123 G.

of the Jewish community in Egypt and at the court of Saladin (*Al-Ahrām*, 4 April 1935, p. 7). At the time of the Maimonides celebrations, the Institut d'Égypte was headed by Maṣṣūr Fahmī Bey and published its annual bulletin under the supervision of the professor of Islamic Philosophy Muṣṣafā 'Abd al-Rāziq (Bulletin de l'Institut d'Égypte 1935-1936, p. 275).

'Alī Ibrāhīm Bāsha, the rector of the Egyptian University, had declared that the life of Maimonides exemplified that 'knowledge has no nation or religion', due to the fact that he had served as the personal physician of Saladin. The latter 'saw no harm in resorting to Maimonides' knowledge, even though he did not belong to his nation or religion'. The life of Maimonides, according to 'Alī Ibrāhīm, underlined the Egyptian habits of tolerance (*tasāmuḥ*) and respect for knowledge and scholars regardless of their faith or confession (*Al-Ahrām*, 2 April 1935, p. 7).¹²

Also present at the Opera House was the Sephardic Chief Rabbi Haim Nahum (Ḥayyim Nāḥūm, 1873–1960). Born in Ottoman Manisa, Nahum had studied law in Istanbul and subsequently moved to Paris to join the Rabbinical Seminary and to study Oriental languages, where he developed ties with exilic members of the Young Turk movement. He subsequently served as the Chief Rabbi of the Ottoman Empire and pursued diplomacy on behalf of the Ottoman government. A loyalist of the Alliance Israélite Universelle and its civilising mission who viewed Zionism with suspicion, he had been in conflict with Zionist activists in the Ottoman Empire (Benbassa 1995, pp. 1–38). In 1925, the Jewish community in Cairo appointed Nahum as Chief Rabbi of Egypt and the Sudan. In this post, he pursued strong relations with the Egyptian palace and promoted Egyptian patriotism and integration (Krämer 1989, pp. 96–98).

Standing in Maimonides' lineage as head of the Jewish community in Egypt, Nahum presented Maimonides in his speech as an exemplary loyal servant of the Egyptian 'king', Egypt, and the Arabic language: he had served the ruler Saladin, had treated patients for free in his spare evening hours, regardless of whether they were Muslim, Christian or Jew, and he had written the bulk of his works in the Arabic language. Nahum further stated that amidst the celebrations

worldwide, in which Jews were filled with joy, the joy of Egyptian Jews was twofold as Moses was born in the Nile valley, and the other Moses had resided on Egyptian soil (*Al-Ahrām*, 2 April 1935, p. 7).

In addition to the idea of Egyptian religious tolerance, what stands out in the coverage of the Maimonides celebrations in the Egyptian daily and periodical press are the East–West dialectics of the *nahḍa* debates. Prior to the celebrations, an announcement of the event at the Royal Opera House in the journal *al-Risāla* (The Message) cast Maimonides as a ‘mediator between the Eastern and Western civilisations’ (*Al-Risāla*, 1 April 1935, p. 515). In 1936, *al-Majalla al-Jadīda* (The New Magazine), a leftist, progressive magazine owned and published by the intellectual Salāma Mūsā (1887–1958), published the article ‘Maimonides’ life: its meaning for us’ by an orientalist scholar residing in Egypt, Catharine Henry.¹³ According to Henry, Maimonides’ life and scholarship exemplified the unprecedented exchange of knowledge between the three ‘nations’ (*ajnās*): Muslims, Jews, and Christians (the latter used interchangeably with Europeans).¹⁴ During the ‘Golden Age of al-Andalus’, exemplified by Maimonides, Jews, Muslims and Christians had lived in justice, equality and tolerance. Maimonides’ works not only reached an audience of Arabic speakers and Jews, but also spread in the ‘Latin world’; his works hence had an impact on all three ‘nations’ (*Al-Majalla al-Jadīda*, 1 January 1936, p. 66).

In *nahḍawi* fashion, Henry wrote that Arab civilisation (*al-ḥaḍāra al-‘arabiyya*) had been transmitted (*naql*) to ‘Christian Europe’. Like Jewish *nahḍa* writers in Egypt, she presented Jews as the critical link in this transportation of knowledge due to their extensive travelling, scattered existence as people (*jins*), and resulting knowledge of multiple languages. As such, Jews served as promoters of mutual understanding between the ‘nations’ (*Al-Majalla al-Jadīda*, 1 January 1936, p. 68). Henry’s celebration of Maimonides as symbol of a Golden Age of religious tolerance, cultural production and cross-fertilisation serves, like to contemporary representations of Maimonides in Europe, as a mirror image of exclusivist nationalism and racism.¹⁵ The meaning of Maimonides for the present lay, for Henry, in the supposed universality of his thought and impact, in opposition to narrow and exclusivist nationalism and hostility against ‘foreign’ elements in society. Maimonides simultaneously represents universality and the celebration of cultural difference, as exemplified by the Golden Age of al-Andalus.

In addition to the idea of religious tolerance and the notion of knowledge transportation, Egyptian intellectuals discussed Maimonides’ legacy as part of debates on the relationship between religion, science and philosophy. In his speech at the Royal Opera House, Haim Nahum had stated:

Maimonides wanted to prove that religion and science are not contradictory, and that there is no conflict between faith and wisdom. On the contrary, science and religion are in harmony, faith and wisdom are in harmony. They suck from the same breast, and no antagonism can possibly emerge between the two. (*Al-Ahrām*, 2 April 1935, p. 7)

Nahum put Maimonides on equal footing with Muslim philosophers: ‘He was charged in the same way as his contemporaries amongst the Islamic philosophers. They agitated him, as they agitated them, showering them with objections’ (*Al-Ahrām*, 2 April 1935, p. 7).

Nahum’s representation of Maimonides should be seen in the context of longstanding *nahḍawi* debates about the relationship between religion, science and philosophy. He linked Maimonides’ thought and legacy to French intellectual debates on the relationship between religion and science, and particularly the thought of French orientalist Ernest Renan (1823–1892). Nahum considered Maimonides a counterexample to Renan’s claim that Islam and science are irreconcilable. He refers to Renan’s famous lecture at the Sorbonne on the relation between Islam and science, in which the latter had proclaimed – in Nahum’s paraphrasing – that: ‘the Islamic religion forms an obstacle to the progress of science, due to fanaticism’ (*Al-Ahrām*, 2 April 1935, p. 7). By referring to Renan, Nahum places Maimonides squarely within the *nahḍa* debates on the relationship between religion and science, and stands in line with the critical responses to Renan of his *nahḍawi* predecessors and contemporaries. Nahum does so explicitly, as he refers to the well-known critical written response to Renan’s lecture by Jamāl al-Dīn al-Afghānī (1838/1839–1897)

(Sheehi 2004, pp. 138–142, 143–149, Jung 2011, p. 24). According to Nahum, al-Afghānī had demonstrated that Islam and science were not contradictory, that ‘religion and fanaticism are archenemies’, and that ‘those responsible for fanaticism are those who misinterpret religion’ (*Al-Ahrām*, 2 April 1935, p. 7).

In the historical debate on religion, rationalism and philosophy amongst intellectuals in Egypt and elsewhere in the Middle East, the philosopher Ibn Rushd or Averroes (1126–1198) had taken a central role. Ernest Renan had cast the persecution of Ibn Rushd as the end of the philosophical tradition in the Islamic world. The thought of Ibn Rushd had continued in Europe in its transported and translated form as ‘Averroism’ and as such laid the basis for modern civilisation. For *nahḍawi* intellectuals, Renan’s work, including his study on Ibn Rushd, was a common source of reference. Some adhered to the idea of decline and decadence following the ‘end’ of the Islamic rationalist tradition and the need for awakening (Wild 1996, p. 386). Others formulated explicit critiques of Renan’s ideas (Sheehi 2004, pp. 138–142, 143–149, Jung 2011, Bashkin 2014, p. 322). The debate on Ibn Rushd is exemplified by the exchange between Faraḥ Anṭūn (1874–1922), a Lebanese intellectual with a Christian background, and the Muslim reformist intellectual and mufti of Egypt Muḥammad ‘Abduh (1849–1905). This debate essentially revolved around the question of whether Christianity and Islam tolerated science and philosophy (Hourani 2011, pp. 148–149, Kateman 2019, pp. 253–257).

In the Egyptian daily and periodical press, Maimonides was not only celebrated for his reconciliation of Judaism and rationality, but was also explicitly situated in the canon of Islamic rationalist thought. In the journal *al-Risāla*, the Egyptian scholar of Islamic philosophy Ibrāhīm Madkūr discussed the contributions of Maimonides to Islamic and modern Western philosophy (*Al-Risāla*, 1 April 1935, p. 495–496). *Al-Risāla*, founded in 1933 and owned and edited by Aḥmad Ḥasan al-Zayyāt (1885–1968), was one of the most prominent Egyptian journals at the time, circulating in the main cities of the Arab world. The journal had a liberal and modernist outlook and was devoted to Arabist and Islamic themes and senses of identity (Gershoni 1999, p. 555). Madkūr’s article was part of a series he wrote for *al-Risāla* during this period on the study of Islamic philosophy. Madkūr, who had written a dissertation on Aristotle in Islamic thought at the Sorbonne (Gordiani 2021, pp. 130–131), as well as his senior colleague at the Egyptian University, Muṣṭafā ‘Abd al-Rāziq (discussed below), responded to Renan’s idea that Arabic philosophy was only Arabic in language, and in terms of content simply replicated the Greek and Sassanid traditions. Both scholars were part of what Gordiani has called ‘the Islamic philosophy revival’, made by ‘*falsafa* revivers’ in colonial-national Egypt dedicated to asserting the place of philosophy in Islam and to advance the study of Islamic philosophy at the Egyptian University as a distinct field of inquiry, and in doing so countered negative orientalist assumptions (Gordiani 2021).

Madkūr argued in *al-Risāla* that Islamic philosophy constituted a distinct philosophical tradition, all the while carrying the profound influence of Greek thought. Remarkably, while Madkūr uses the term ‘Jewish philosophy’, he simultaneously claims that the Jewish philosophical tradition is merely an extension of Islamic philosophy (*imtidād li-l-falsafa al-islāmiyya*), notwithstanding his counterclaims to Renan on this point of originality with regards Islamic philosophy (*Al-Risāla*, 9 November 1936, p. 1858, 1 April 1935, p. 495). Hence, Madkūr sees Maimonides as part of a unique and original tradition of Islamic philosophical thought that deserves to be studied – in Egypt and in the West – in its own right.

‘An Islamic philosopher’: Israel Wolfensohn’s study of Maimonides

In 1936, Israel Wolfensohn, a member of the Société and one of the organisers of the celebrations, published the Arabic book *Mūsā bin Maymūn. Ḥayātuhi wa-Muṣannafātuhi* (‘Moses Maimonides. His Life and Works’) as part of his ongoing research on the history of Jews in the Arab and Islamic world. Wolfensohn (1899–1980) was a Jewish intellectual and scholar who served in Cairo as a professor of Semitic languages at the Dār al-‘Ulūm teachers’ college and the Egyptian University. Born in Jerusalem, he had been educated in the city at a Talmud-Torah school, the Lämelschule founded by the Hilfsvereins der deutschen Juden (Relief Organisation of German Jews), and the Arabic institute Dār al-Mu‘allimīn,

where he was the only Jewish student (Wolfensohn 1933, p. 95, Abd El Gawad 2016, p. 290). In the 1920s, Wolfensohn studied at the Egyptian University, where the Egyptian intellectual and professor of Arabic literature Ṭahā Ḥusayn became his mentor and friend (Wolfensohn 1933, p. 95). Wolfensohn completed a dissertation on the history of the Jews on the Arabian Peninsula prior to and after the rise of Islam, published in 1927, with a foreword written by Ḥusayn (Wolfensohn 1927). He then obtained a second doctorate from the Goethe-Universität in Frankfurt (Wolfensohn 1933, p. 95). Shortly after the Nazis took power in Germany, Wolfensohn returned to Egypt to teach at the Egyptian University and Dār al-‘Ulūm (Wolfensohn 1933, p. 95, Abd El Gawad 2016, p. 292). Amongst the Dār al-‘Ulūm graduates was Sayyid Quṭb, who, after attending a lecture by Wolfensohn on Maimonides in Cairo, praised Wolfensohn’s scholarship as ‘rigorous and balanced’ and ‘far removed from religious or intellectual fanaticism’ in a report in *al-Ahrām* (4 March 1934, p. 10).

Wolfensohn returned to Palestine in the late 1930s and, now known under his Hebrew name Israel Ben Ze’ev, was appointed supervisor of Arabic in Jewish schools in 1940 (Derri 2021, p. 262). In 1944, he published a manual for the teaching of Arabic, *Al-Fuṣūl al-Mukhtāra min al-Adab al-‘Arabī* (Selected Works from Arab Literature), aimed at Jewish students of Arabic in secondary Hebrew schools in Palestine, which included the literary writings of his former mentor and friend in Cairo, Ṭahā Ḥusayn. Wolfensohn was dedicated to teaching Arabic as a living and practical language as well as integrating spoken Arabic in the curriculum, as opposed to the focus on classical Arabic at the Hebrew University (Mendel 2014, pp. 29–40, Derri 2021, p. 262).

The aim of Wolfensohn’s study of Maimonides from 1936, we read in the preface, was to make Maimonides’ life and works known to Arabic readers. Wolfensohn claimed that Maimonides remained largely unknown amongst the Arabic reading public because studying his works required a thorough knowledge of Hebrew sources and the ability to read Judeo-Arabic (Wolfensohn 1936, p. k).¹⁶ His remarks on the inclusion of footnotes throughout his book, as well as his complaint that most scholarly works in Arabic still refrained from doing so, is illustrative of the growing dominance of modern academic methods in Egypt during this period. His footnotes show that he relied on previous works on Maimonides by, amongst others, Solomon Zeitlin, Abraham Geiger and Moritz Steinschneider, and extensively used Hebrew and Arabic sources. Wolfensohn was indeed a suitable scholar to provide an Arabic work on Maimonides, operating, as he did, at the crossroads between Egyptian academia and the German orientalist and philological tradition, and mastering Arabic, Hebrew, Judeo-Arabic and other relevant languages.

Wolfensohn writes about his initial doubts on whether he could add something to the extensive scholarship on Maimonides. Yet he soon discovered that the relation of Maimonides to Islamic philosophy was understudied and needed further discovery and clarification (1936, p. k-l). He hoped to serve an ‘enlightened Arab public’ interested not only in Jewish thought, but also the importance of ‘Arabic philosophy’ in the ‘Islamic, Christian and Jewish worlds’ (1936, p. n). For Wolfensohn, Maimonides was clearly not just an outstanding figure within the tradition of Jewish thought. The broader, albeit implicit, goal of his work was to demonstrate the important place of Jewish thought in Egyptian and Islamic history and civilisation.

In the introduction to the book, Muṣṭafā ‘Abd al-Rāziq (1885–1947), a professor of Islamic philosophy at the Egyptian University, stated that the Jews were owed ‘the greatest credit for introducing Islamic philosophy to the Christians during the Middle Ages’ (1936). ‘Abd al-Rāziq emphasised the role of Jews during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries C.E. as mediators (*sufarā’*) between the ‘Arabs of al-Andalus’ and ‘the Westerners’, as they translated numerous Arabic works into Hebrew which were then translated into Latin (1936, p. w). This mediation through Jewish translational efforts showed, according to ‘Abd al-Rāziq, the strong ties between Jewish and Islamic philosophy during the medieval period. He underlined that the study of Jewish philosophers and their thought hence required knowledge of the historical context of Islamic philosophy. Maimonides in particular deserved to be studied not only because he was the greatest Jewish thinker, but also because he had studied the great Andalusian philosophers Ibn Ṭufayl and Ibn Rushd, and criticised Islamic philosophers in some of his works.

At the Royal Opera House the year before, ‘Abd al-Rāziq had proclaimed that Maimonides was to be considered an Islamic philosopher. In his introduction, he repeated this statement, and added that the scope of Islamic philosophy was not restricted to Muslims but also included non-Muslims living under Islamic rule, where most philosophical works had been written in Arabic. Hence, Maimonides was to be considered both an Arab and an Islamic philosopher (1936, p. r). Due to the Arabic and Islamic intellectual context in which Maimonides operated, it was all the more remarkable that neither his books, nor studies on his life and thought, had yet been published in the Arabic language. ‘Abd al-Rāziq’s understanding of Maimonides as an Islamic philosopher corresponds to discussions in the Egyptian periodical press which, as we have seen, foregrounded Maimonides’ place in Islamic thought and civilisation. The representation of Maimonides as Islamic philosopher during the celebrations exemplifies the *nahḍawi* trend of casting Islam as civilisation (Hourani 2011, pp. 114–115), thereby including non-Muslims as part of its rich heritage.

Maimonides the philosopher: Wolfensohn on *The Guide for the Perplexed*

Wolfensohn’s study of Maimonides consisted of four parts. The first (1) contained a biographical narrative on Maimonides’ life and wanderings. In the second (2), Wolfensohn discussed Maimonides’ ‘religious works’, focusing on his *Commentary on the Mishnah (Kitab al-Sirāj)* and the *Mishneh Torah*. The third (3) and most extensive part focused on Maimonides’ philosophy and included Wolfensohn’s summary of *The Guide for the Perplexed (Dalālat al-Ḥā’irīn)*, as well as an extensive discussion of the reception and translation history of the *Guide*. Wolfensohn discusses the common scholarly view that Maimonides wrote this work in Judeo-Arabic to prevent Muslim scholars from consulting it, as it contained critical discussion on the positions of the schools of thought of the Ashā’ira, the Mu’tazila and the Kalām theologians. As a result, ‘Muslim scholars did not pay any attention to the work’ (Wolfensohn 1936, p. 73). Later on in the book, however, Wolfensohn presents a more nuanced view on this point, as he notes that the *Guide* did not create the hostile response in Muslim intellectual circles that Maimonides had feared, in contrast to Jewish scholarly circles, thereby acknowledging that the book had a Muslim readership (1936, p. 132).

The fourth (4) and last chapter was dedicated to Maimonides’ medical works. ‘Abd al-Rāziq remarked in his preface that Wolfensohn’s focus on the religious, philosophical and medical domains had left out politics, perhaps because the author had wanted to avoid touching upon political themes (1936, p. ḥ). The good relations between Maimonides, Saladin and the latter’s vizier, ‘Abd al-Rāziq suggested, could not only be attributed to the former’s philosophical and medical knowledge, but also to his political skills (1936, p. ḥ-t).

The fact that Wolfensohn devoted much of his work to the *Guide* is telling, as it not only reveals his own interest in Maimonides’ work, but also his assumption that his Arabic readership would be most interested in Maimonides’ relation to (Islamic) philosophy (1936, p. m).¹⁷ Maimonides’ philosophy showed, Wolfensohn wrote, not only ‘what he took from Muslim philosophers’ but also exposed the philosophical and religious issues that ‘all the great thinkers and scholars’ pondered during the medieval period (1936, p. m). At the same time, Wolfensohn describes the *Guide* as the ‘climax of Jewish philosophical thought’ during the medieval period (1936, p. 58). The knowledge that Maimonides possessed of Arabic philosophy was unprecedented amongst Jewish thinkers during the Middle Ages (1936, p. 63). The primary goal of the *Guide* was to reconcile religion and philosophy (‘Moses and Aristotle’); to examine religion via logic and ratio (1936, p. 66).

Despite Wolfensohn’s foregrounding of the *Guide* and philosophy in his work, Ibrāhīm Madkūr asserted in a review of the book in *al-Risāla* that Wolfensohn excelled in his discussion of Maimonides’ ‘religious works’, enlightening his audience with information about the Jewish religious tradition. He viewed the other parts of the book as mere summaries of previous studies, lacking a clear stance in the debate, and argued that Wolfensohn’s discussion of the *Guide* was superficial and lacked precision (*Al-Risāla*, 9 November 1936, 495–496).

For his summary and discussion of the *Guide*, and his extensive quotations from the work, Wolfensohn had relied on the three-volume edition of Salomon Munk (1803–1867), which, he argued in his footnotes, was not entirely free of distortion and obscurities.¹⁸ Wolfensohn was not explicit on whether he consulted the *Guide* using Munk's French edition, or the original Judeo-Arabic text that accompanied it, though he likely consulted both. Wolfensohn noted that he himself translated texts and phrases from the Talmud into Arabic, serving his Arabic readership not familiar with Hebrew and the Jewish religious tradition. He further expressed the hope that a full corrected and edited Arabic version of the *Guide* would be published soon that would please the 'learned Arabic reader' (1936, p. m).

Munk's translation, published between 1856 and 1866, had marked a return to the original Judeo-Arabic text as the source for translations of the *Guide* in the modern period. His translation into French, *Le guide des égarés*, was accompanied by the original Judeo-Arabic text and included extensive notes and comparisons with previous translations, including the major Hebrew translations of Ibn Tibbon and al-Ḥarīzi (Fenton 2019, p. 194). Munk's motivation to publish the translation has been explained by Paul Fenton (2019, p. 183) as a response to the dominant Hegelian conception of the history of philosophy that bypassed Arabic and Jewish philosophy. Returning to the original Judeo-Arabic *Guide*, Munk would have aimed for a better understanding of Arabic and Judeo-Arabic philosophy and its contributions to Western thought. In contrast to most of his Jewish contemporaries who championed Maimonides, Munk viewed the *Guide* primarily as a philosophical, not a theological work (2019, p. 185). His underlying ideological motivation, according to Fenton, was to invite his Christian readers to consult Jewish philosophical works to reach a better understanding of the development of Christian thought influenced by the combined forces of Jewish and Islamic thought (2019, p. 205).

As we have seen, Maimonides was discussed in the Egyptian press as part of a *nahḍawi* civilisational narrative about knowledge transportation, and the contributions of scholars and philosophers in the Islamic world, including Jews, to Western thought. In addition, the Islamic intellectual context in which Maimonides operated was foregrounded, hence the labelling of Maimonides as 'Islamic philosopher'. Although the *Guide* epitomised the reconciliation of religion and rationalism, the work was first and foremost regarded as philosophical. The same appears from Wolfensohn's discussion of the *Guide* in a chapter titled 'Maimonides' philosophy'. Wolfensohn invites his Arabic readership to learn about Maimonides and the *Guide* to reach a better understanding of Islamic philosophy and its contributions to Christian thought, in which Jews had played a vital role.

Two central features of the *nahḍa* debates stand out in Wolfensohn's discussion of the *Guide*: translation and knowledge transmission. The preoccupations of *nahḍawi* intellectuals with periodisation of knowledge and translation are, of course, intimately interrelated, as it was largely through translation that knowledge had been transferred in the past from one region to another, and from one 'people' or 'nation' to another. Translation was also the vehicle for civilisation in the present day: it was through the contemporary translation of scientific, philosophical and literary works, theorising about translation, and correcting translation, that intellectuals sought to modernise and revive their societies (Elshakry 2008, 2013, p. 11, Johnson 2021, pp. 27–28).

Wolfensohn's work, and the discussions on Maimonides in the press more generally, reveal the interest in Maimonides' life and work as part of a larger narrative on the translation and transmission (*naql*) of knowledge and the role of Christians, Jews and Muslims in the process of civilisation. The idea of the latter's communal and collective contributions – Wolfensohn uses the expression 'We Jews, Christians, and Muslims' (Wolfensohn 1936, p. 78) – is tied with Hegelian *nahḍawi* narratives of contributions to the progress of thought by different confessional groups in the modern Arab world.

Wolfensohn's extensive discussion of Maimonides' use of language in the *Guide* and the translation history of the work reveals a preoccupation with translation as a key to civilisation. Wolfensohn notes that the *Guide* was composed in a style of writing closely resembling Arabic works written by Muslims on ethics, philosophy and law. He also notes Maimonides' rich Arabic vocabulary, use of

Quranic phrases and formulations derived from *fiqh* (1936, p. 121). Yet much like his Jewish contemporaries, Maimonides showed little dedication to the Arabic grammatical rules of *ʿirāb* (1936, p. 122). In his overview of the translations of the *Guide* up until the modern period, Wolfensohn discusses the correspondence between Samuel Ibn Tibbon, who translated the *Guide* into Hebrew, and Maimonides, in which the former had asked the latter for translational advice. Wolfensohn includes in a footnote a citation from Maimonides' famous letter to Ibn Tibbon in which he had expressed his views on translation, favouring clarity over literal translation (1936, p. 125).

In his discussion of the other famous Hebrew translation that appeared during the same period as the Tibbon translation, that by al-Ḥarīzī, Wolfensohn follows the (contested) scholarly conception that the al-Ḥarīzī translation was less accurate, as the translator was a poet whose approach did not match the logical and legislative topics covered in the *Guide* (1936, p. 126). As a result of the critique on al-Ḥarīzī's 'distortions' and 'corruptions', his translation was 'forgotten' until a new edition of it was published in the second half of the nineteenth century (1936, p. 127). Wolfensohn contended that as a result of the Tibbon translation, and subsequent Latin translations, the *Guide* circulated amongst Christian scholars in the West unlike any other work from the East. Wolfensohn does not mention here that it was by means of al-Ḥarīzī's translations that Maimonides' works reached the Christian world (Kraemer 2008, p. 365).

Wolfensohn viewed the Munk edition as the greatest contribution to the *Guide*, returning as it did to the oldest Arabic copies extant in European libraries, and publishing the French translation accompanied by the Arabic text. The Arabic origin of the work had long been neglected, due to the lack of interest amongst Jews in the East in philosophy, and the lack of knowledge of Arabic amongst Jews in the West (Wolfensohn 1936, p. 140). This statement by Wolfensohn on the lack of interest amongst the Jews in the East suggests an agenda of reconnecting present day Jews in the East to the Jewish medieval heritage and reviving this heritage to overcome cultural ignorance, reminiscent of how German Jews in the nineteenth century had embraced the medieval past of Jews in al-Andalus, epitomised by Maimonides, as part of their emancipationist aspirations (Fenton 2019, p. 185) (Figure 3).

Whose Maimonides? The *nahḍa*, heritage and the Cairo Geniza

The Maimonides celebrations in Cairo show that Jews in Egypt were at the centre of debates on Egyptian national culture and Islamic civilisation, as they studied the place of Jews and Jewish thought within them. A small group of Egyptian Jewish patriots, who were also active in the historical society, called upon Jews in Egypt to speak Arabic, to participate in Egyptian intellectual culture, and to wear the *ṭarbūsh*, a red fez. Critical of the Western, particularly French, orientation of many Jews in Egypt, they sought to contribute to the regional revival of Arab culture and literature, partly through the (re)discovery and revival of Jewish religious, cultural and intellectual heritage in the 'East'. Various Jewish intellectuals in Egypt were part of the regional cultural reform debates of the *nahḍa*, and its quest for a revival of the past golden ages¹⁹ of Arabic thought and Arab and Islamic civilisation.²⁰

The Maimonides celebrations in Cairo were intertwined with attempts amongst Jewish historians and intellectuals in Egypt to preserve, reclaim and revive Jewish heritage in Egypt and the Arab and Islamic world in a broader sense. The aim of reviving Jewish (medieval) heritage was intimately tied with the notion that the Jews in the 'East' were in a state of ignorance about the richness of their cultural and religious history, and needed to be once again connected to the past in order to accomplish revival. These ambitions also included a quest for manuscripts and documents about the Jewish past, and attempts to establish a communal library in Cairo at the initiative of the historical society.²¹ In light of the commitment of the society to maintaining documents pertaining the Jewish past in Cairo, it is an ironic or perhaps tragic fact that the archive of the society itself has been stored in the Central Archives for the History of the Jewish People in Jerusalem (CAHJP), most likely brought there by Israel Wolfensohn, following the deadlock of the society and the establishment of the state of Israel in 1948.



Figure 3. The Maimonides synagogue in the old Jewish Quarter in Cairo. CAHJP, ET CA 2.

The issue of access to, and ownership of, Jewish heritage is also manifest in the context of the Maimonides celebrations, as reflected in the correspondences of the historical society. The world-wide Maimonides celebrations in 1935 were not just simultaneous, yet disparate, celebrations; organisers in various places were also in contact with one another and requested materials to be used for the celebrations and publications on Maimonides. For example, *The Jewish Weekly* reported in November 1934 that the organisers of the celebrations in Austria would establish contact with the 'Central Maimonides Committee in Cairo' to forward a special publication on Maimonides (*The Jewish Weekly*, 30 November 1934, p. 9). In the run-up to the celebrations in Cairo, the historical society

received requests for materials from foreign scholars and Jewish communal leaders who had learned that the society was organising celebrations, assuming that the Jewish community in Cairo would be in the possession of relevant materials on Maimonides.²² Alfred Yallouz, the secretary of the society, wrote in a response: 'the up to date literature about Maimonides in Egypt is yet insufficient for a serious work'.²³ He advised seekers to contact the Hebrew University in Jerusalem, which was in possession of 'a complete bibliography of Maimonides'.²⁴ The Hebrew University, on the other hand, had approached the society and Wolfensohn in particular in order to involve Egyptian intellectuals in the Maimonides celebrations in Jerusalem, which coincided with the ten-year anniversary of the university. In a letter, Hebrew University professor Ernst Akiba Simon inquired if Wolfensohn could arrange for Ṭahā Husayn and other prominent Egyptian intellectuals to deliver lectures during the ceremony.²⁵

Despite – and also partly motivated by – the lack of works by and on Maimonides in Egypt, Wolfensohn's book on Maimonides did come to fruition. The first page of Wolfensohn's book contained an image of a fragment of the *Guide* in Maimonides' handwriting, derived from the Cairo Genizah and kept in the private library of the late Jacques Mosseri (1884–1934), an Egyptian Jew whose own Genizah collection numbered several thousand pieces.²⁶ Mosseri was an Egyptian Jewish businessman who, until his untimely death in 1934, had advocated that the Genizah manuscripts be kept in the hands of Egypt's Jewish community and had pushed for the establishment of a Jewish library in Cairo.²⁷

Following Mosseri's death, the Genizah continued to be debated in the Jewish communal Arabic press devoted to the idea of revival. The newspaper *al-Shams* (The Sun), edited by the journalist and former schoolteacher Sa'd Malki, aimed to provide a platform for a 'Jewish *nahḍa*' and combined Egyptian nationalist and Zionist outlooks. In 1944, Malki published a summary of an article that had appeared in the Hebrew magazine *Ha-Gilgal* on the Cairo Genizah. The original (anonymous) author of the article had commented on the sharp contrast between the richness of Jewish life during the medieval period in Egypt and its current state of neglect. The author lamented the 'discovery' and subsequent 'removal' of the bulk of the Genizah documents at the hands of Solomon Schechter and their dispersal amongst libraries worldwide, and criticised Lord Cromer, Britain's Agent and Consul-General at the time, for persuading the Egyptian Chief Rabbi to allow the documents to be transported abroad. 'It is a pity', the article stated, 'that our scholars in Jerusalem cannot enjoy these treasures, and that they neglected them until they were taken to libraries abroad' (*Al-Shams*, 15 September 1944, p. 3).

The primary context for the original Hebrew article is the pursuit of collecting Jewish manuscripts globally and the attempts to revive Jewish learning centred at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem. The opinions of its writer, however, aligned closely with the wish of *al-Shams*' editor that a Jewish library be founded in Cairo and his hopes that there would be a revival and reclaiming of Egyptian Jewish intellectual and cultural heritage. The editor Malki also seems to have aspired, as his newspaper articles testify, to continue Mosseri's project devoted to keeping the Genizah documents in Cairo, as well as the latter's efforts towards the establishment of a Jewish library in the city (*Al-Shams*, 16 March 1942, p. 2, 15 September 1944, p. 3, 7 November 1947, p. 3).

The Cairo Genizah and its plethora of pieces, which were evidence of a thriving Jewish community in Egypt and the Mediterranean, was discussed by Malki in relation to the trend of Egyptianisation and the notion of revival. The articles on the Genizah can be taken, from our contemporary perspective, as critiquing the colonialist collection of manuscripts in the Middle East and their dispersal amongst European and American libraries. Yet in *al-Shams* the blame is put elsewhere, namely on the Jews of the East who are lacking in cultural refinement and are now unable to appreciate their own heritage, so much of which has come to be held by Jews in the West. Hence, the roots of the asymmetry lay in the ignorance (*jahl*) pervading the Jewish communities in Egypt and the East. Malki held the opinion that a Jewish library in Cairo was of vital importance if the Jews were to reclaim the place in Egypt they had once occupied in the past. This library, to be overseen by a special cultural committee of the Jewish community council, was to be located in Cairo's Maimonides synagogue (*Al-Shams*, 7 November 1947, p. 3).

Conclusion

The global celebrations of Maimonides in the anniversary year of 1935 comprise a dynamic chapter in the long reception history of Maimonides at a critical juncture in Jewish history. This article has contributed to a more expansive understanding of Maimonides' reception by studying his legacy through the lens of the Maimonides celebrations in Cairo. Steered by the *Société d'Études Historiques Juives d'Égypte*, the case study points to a vibrant Jewish intellectual and cultural life in Egypt during the 1930s, and the role of Jewish intellectuals in Egypt in cultural debates pertaining the nation and the region's past, present and future.

What did Maimonides represent in Cairo in 1935? For Egyptian Jewish intellectuals dedicated to the idea of revival specifically, Maimonides symbolised the rich heritage of Jewish intellectual culture in the Islamic world. Jewish historians in Egypt involved in the *Société* embraced the Jewish intellectual past in Egypt and the Arab and Islamic world to which Maimonides had belonged, and aimed to revive this past by studying it. The reception of Maimonides in the Egyptian public sphere was explicitly embedded in popular *nahḍa* debates on rationalism in the Islamic world and cast in a civilisational lexicon. The trajectories of Maimonides' life and works showed the importance of intellectuals and translators in the Islamic world in the transportation of Greek and Arabic thought to Europe and its modern civilisation. Furthermore, Maimonides became embedded in contemporary debates about the demarcations of modern scholarly disciplines, specifically the question of the definition and boundaries of Islamic philosophy.

The *Société* and its transregional network and output can be studied within the national confines of Egypt with consequences for both the international allure of Jewish studies in the first half of the twentieth century as well as our understanding of the aims, practices and scope of historiography in the modern Middle East. The Maimonides celebrations in Cairo illuminate the interest amongst intellectuals in the Middle East in the history of Jews and Judaism in an Islamic context and beyond. Hence, it is through the lens of the Maimonides celebrations in 1935 that a relational and transregional history of modern historiography on Jews and Judaism becomes visible.

Notes

1. Celebrations took place in, amongst others, the cities where Maimonides had resided: Cordoba, Fez, Tiberias, and Cairo. Other notable celebrations were held in New York, Berlin, London and Paris. The global celebrations will be the subject of a subsequent publication.
2. This phrase is derived from the title of (Robinson 2009).
3. According to the Egyptian census of 1937, the Jewish population in Egypt numbered 62,953. The census does not list stateless persons, only Egyptians and foreign nationals. According to Krämer (1989), it might have been the case that stateless Jews were listed as 'Egyptians' on the basis of their eligibility for Egyptian citizenship or their non-foreignness.
4. See the Arabic version of the 1947 edition of the bulletin published by the Institut Français d'Archéologie Orientale: *Majallat Tārikh al-Isrā'īliyyin fī Miṣr*. Jama'iyyat al-Abḥāth al-Isrā'īliyya al-Miṣriyya (Maṭba'at al-Ma'had al-'Ilmī al-Faransī li-l-Athār al-Sharqiyya 1947).
5. See for overviews of lectures organized by the society between May 1926 and May 1928, and in the 1930s: CAHJP, ET 4 inv 7123 1e; ET 4 inv 7123 1 G.
6. See for a list of its executive committee and members as of 1925: (Farhi).
7. These were: the president of the historical society Joseph Aslan Cattau, the Sephardic Chief Rabbi Haim Nahum Effendi, Max Meyerhoff, professor of Semitic languages at the Egyptian University Israel Wolfensohn, secretary of the society and translator Alfred Yallouz, and the secretary of Nahum, Moise Sanua.
8. The Sephardic Chief Rabbi Haim Nahum, Rabbi David Prato, Israel Wolfensohn, and Alfred Yallouz gave speeches at the school. In an announcement of the program published in *al-Ahrām*, Wolfensohn writes that the historical society intended to publish the speeches held during the celebrations as a book: *Al-Ahrām*, 18 March 1935.
9. The archive of the society does contain some of the printed speeches with pen corrections, suggesting that the society was indeed preparing a publication. Wolfensohn's bibliography (1936, p. 176) contains a title that likely concerns this publication: *Société d'Études Historiques Juives D'Égypte. Le Cairo: Cérémonie Commémorative du VIII^{me} Centenaire de la naissance de Maimonide. Le Caire, 1936*.
9. The article does not specify which radio station broadcast the celebrations. It was likely Radio Cairo, which had been established in 1934 by the British-owned Egyptian State Broadcasting (ESB). The royal family was also

- invited to the ceremony at the Opera House, but no mention is made in reports on the festivities that the King and his entourage attended: *L'Aurore*, 28 March 1935, 4.
10. Letter from the society to the editor of *al-Ahrām*: CAHJP, ET-4 7123 1 A.
 11. Established by the French in the wake of the invasion of Egypt in 1798, the Institut d'Égypte had closed its doors in 1801 when the French were evacuated. In 1869, the Institut égyptien was established in Alexandria and moved to Cairo in 1918, readopting the Napoleonic name Institut d'Égypte. The scholarship of the Institut spanned all modern scientific areas in relation to Egypt (Ellul 1952).
 12. On the career of 'Alī Ibrāhīm, see: (Reid 1990, p. 134).
 13. I have not been able to find information about this author, except the title of a book by her hand in the catalogue of the Library of the Dominican Institute for Oriental Studies in Cairo: Catherine Henry, *Al-Tārīkh fī al-Kitāb* (Cairo: Dār al-Ta' līf wa-l-Nashr li-l-Kinīsa al-Asqafīyya, Date unknown).
 14. The term 'jins' can be translated as 'sort', 'species', 'nation' or 'race'. I have opted for 'nation' as the most appropriate term denoting a religious community, though I am aware of the ambivalent and shifting meanings of the term 'jins' during this period in Arabic intellectual and journalistic discourse. See: (El Shakry 2007, pp. 55–61, Gribetz 2014, pp. 24–29).
 15. This was the case, for example, during the celebrations in Cordoba, as appears from reports in the *B'nai B'rith Messenger* of 29 March 1935 and 12 April 1935.
 16. As the preface and introduction do not contain page numbers, but Arabic letters, I refer here to the corresponding Arabic letters in transliteration.
 17. Wolfensohn writes in his introduction that the reason for such a concise second chapter on Maimonides' 'Hebrew and religious' works was to serve his readers who were not well versed in Jewish culture and did not possess a sufficient understanding of Jewish law, and hence to ensure that they would not be 'bored': (1936, m).
 18. By the time Wolfensohn was researching and publishing the book on Maimonides, a new edition of Munk's translation had appeared in Jerusalem in 1930/31, published by Issachar Joel. I have not been able to establish whether Wolfensohn used this edition, though I assume that he must have been aware of it due to his intellectual upbringing and extensive contacts in Palestine. The bibliography of Wolfensohn's book (1936) does not contain a reference to the consulted edition(s) of the *Guide*, including Munk's edition.
 19. Following Elshakry, I use 'golden ages' in the plural here, as the golden age topos of *nahḍa* intellectuals did not constitute a uniform idea. The era of the Abbasid Caliphate in Baghdad and the period of Umayyad rule of al-Andalus were commonly referred to as a 'golden age' in Egyptian Jewish *nahḍawi* narratives. Jurjī Zaydān, a key *nahḍa* figure, reckoned three golden ages: the rise of Islam, the translation movement of the Abbasids, and the contemporary *nahḍa* of his time: (Elshakry 2020, pp. 91–92).
 20. The recently expanding literature on Jews and the *nahḍa* includes: (Levy 2007, 2013, Schlaepfer 2011, Snir 2019).
 21. On the efforts of the society to establish a communal library, see: CAHJP, ET-4 7123 1 E.
 22. See for example the letters addressed to the society by rabbi Pinchas Katz, dated 6 November 1934, and dr. M. Ravdin, dated 20 December 1934: CAHJP, ET-4 7123 1 C. The society also received letters by individual scholars who wished to inform the society about their published works on Maimonides. J. Münz, writing from Tel Aviv, recommended his *Maimonides, Sein Leben und Seine Werke* (Frankfurt: Kauffmann, 1912). S. Meisele, writing from Vienna, recommended a new edition of his popular work *Mose ben Maimon. Ein Porträt* (Publisher and date unknown). See: CAHJP, ET-4 7123 1 A.
 23. CAHJP, ET-4 7123 1 C.
 24. CAHJP, ET-4 7123 1 C. Yallouz had also received a letter from a certain Naftali Wikler from Germany in response to the announcement of the celebrations organized by the society, who wished to inform the society about his donation of a manuscript of Maimonides' medical work (he did not mention the title) to the National Library in Jerusalem. See: CAHJP, ET-4 7123 1 A.
 25. Jerusalem City Archives (AIY), personal papers of Israel Ben Zeev, 1074.
 26. The fragment contained Book I, ch. 17 to ch. 21. See: (Hopkins 1987, p. 465). According to Wolfensohn, the fragment was important because it showed Maimonides' handwriting: he had removed and cut some words, and the text contains grammatical errors. Wolfensohn referred to an article written by David Yellin (then professor of literature at the Hebrew University) in Hebrew about the fragment: D. Yellin, 1929–1930. Two Pages of the Autograph of Maimonides' Guide for the Perplexed. (In Hebrew) *Tarbiz*, 1, 93. I have derived the reference to Yellin's article from (Sirat 2014, p. 19, footnote 39).
 27. The Jacques Mosseri collection was given to the Cambridge University Library as part of a long-term loan agreement with the Mosseri family in 2006. It contains more than 7,000 documents. On the issue of where the collection should go after the end of the loan, see (Shaker and Ballout 2021).

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