

Arab encounters with Nazism: A reply to Adel Beshara

Goetz Nordbruch

The Australian historian Adel Beshara has published a critical review of Goetz Nordbruch's study *Nazism in Syria and Lebanon. The ambivalence of the German option, 1933-1945* (London 2009). Beshara questions Nordbruch's discussion of the radical nationalist Syrian Nationalist Party. In his reply, Nordbruch answers Beshara reading of his study.

Arab responses to Nazism were manifold. They ranged from fascination and excitement to outright rejection and uncompromising critique. In Lebanon and Syria, the situation was no different. I have attempted to demonstrate this in my study, *Nazism in Syria and Lebanon. The ambivalence of the German option, 1933-1945*¹, which Adel Beshara reviewed in the last edition of *al-Mashriq*. (see Beshara's review [here](#), published in *Al-Mashriq*, Vol. 8, No. 31, Dec. 2009, pp. 63-74)

Beshara restricted his remarks to a discussion of my chapters on Antun Sa'adeh and the *Hizb al-Suri al-Qawmi* – and disagreed with the majority of my conclusions. As an author of various studies on Sa'adeh and his party, his criticism is particularly valuable and merits further consideration. However, central aspects of his analysis in many ways suggest a misreading of my study and the premises on which it is based.

Beshara interpreted my study as an attempt to “remould Sa'adeh into a Nazi”. This assertion does not match my intention, nor does it appropriately describe my findings. (In fact, I carefully observed that no proof exists of any substantial links between Sa'adeh and the German regime, and that Sa'adeh emphasized – both in party meetings and in public – how he did not consider the SNP as inspired by Nazi Germany.²) Instead, my aim was to situate echoes of National Socialist politics and ideology in the broader context of contemporary Lebanese and Syrian political culture. This approach is based on my assumption that an ideology or pattern of political thought only resonates in those societies that share some key socio-economic features. Interest in Hitler in Beirut in the 1930s – or, for that matter, in Karl Marx or André Gide – was not only a question of individual taste and personal conviction, but it was primarily a reflection of those social conditions that made

¹ Goetz Nordbruch, *Nazism in Syria and Lebanon. The ambivalence of the German option, 1933-45* (London 2009).

² I would like to take the opportunity to correct an inaccurate finding in my book: Sa'adeh's visit to Berlin in late 1938 coincided with the first anniversary of the formation of a Berlin-based cell of the SNP – and not with the sixth, as I incorrectly stated. Sa'adeh visited Berlin on his way to Brazil. During his stay, he also met with German officials.

Hitler's thought "thinkable" in the particular setting of Lebanese society at that time.

Marx and Gide attracted considerable attention in the interwar years in the Middle East, while 40 years earlier (in the late 19th century) their concepts and reasoning would largely have remained incomprehensible to local audiences. Only during the 1920s did these ideas gradually evolve as potential intellectual signposts promising orientation *vis-à-vis* the contemporary transformation and modernization processes. At that time, they offered a way of making sense of society, history and the outside world.

Such influences were in no sense a one-way street. Indeed, the growing interest in the "romantic Orient" or Sufism in Europe in the late 19th and early 20th century could be explained in a quite similar way. The concepts and visions implied in such intellectual approaches to society now catered to contemporary desires and prevailing expectations in Berlin, Paris and Vienna that were fostered by the upheavals of the time.

Interest in the developments in Nazi Germany similarly echoed the transformations that had characterized Lebanese and Syrian societies under French mandate rule. Such interest was not limited to Nazism, and affirmation was merely one option among many. Interest in the outside world also extended to the Russian Revolution of 1917, Kemalist reforms in Turkey, anti-colonial struggles in India or Ireland – to name but a few of the political projects and visions discussed in the numerous newspapers and political circles. Concepts such as "class struggle", "secularism", or "democracy" now became intellectually accessible, adding to the hermeneutical approaches that existed in local traditions and social settings. The emergence of "nation" and "nationality" as one way of defining a particular communal identity was in no sense a coincidental import from Europe; rather, it mirrored the reformation of social relations facilitating identification with a collective that was at once larger (compared to the family or clan) and narrower (compared to the Caliphate or the Islamic umma) than the existing patterns of communal loyalty and belonging. The intellectual pluralism of these years, resounding in the growing diversity of such concepts, was a direct reflection of the ongoing socio-economic changes.

Sa'adeh was a child of this time. He drew on the concepts and frameworks available in his personal and social environment. The same was true of his party. Indeed, it was only in the context of the early 1930s – and only in the urban centres – that the SNP could emerge and establish itself as a relevant political actor. The party's blending of avant-gardism, modernism and mass politics and its paramilitary appearance suited local political culture in Beirut and other cities of the region. Twenty years earlier, or 150km further to the East, in the Syrian countryside, the party's political vision and symbolism would have appeared exotic.

These considerations form the basis of Beshara's disagreement with my findings. For Beshara, any attempt to place Sa'adeh in the maelstrom of broader intellectual discourses risks blurring the "authenticity of his national ideology". Yet, the claim of 'authenticity' has no place in a history of ideas. For instance, Nietzsche could not be considered 'authentically' German, nor was this the case for Nazism or Karl Marx. While the National Socialist movement emerged in Germany, National Socialist ideology was no ideology set apart; it was no world-view so closely tied to a distinct German "national character" (Beshara) as to make similar patterns of thought and politics inconceivable in other social or geographical contexts. The same goes for Syrian nationalist thought; insisting on its 'authenticity' would place Sa'adeh and the related circles outside history.

Ideologies – and neither Syrian nationalism nor Nazism is an exception – do not emerge in an ideological void. It is impossible to draw clear-cut lines between Nazism on the one hand and non-National Socialist ideologies on the other. While core elements of National Socialist thought can be identified, such elements both evolved over time and – to a certain extent – were disputed among proponents of National Socialist thought. The conflict between Hitler and Gregor Strasser in the 1920s is one illustration here. The academic debate about the similarities and differences between Nazism and Fascism is another. Obvious similarities existed between Nazism and Fascism, though important differences are traceable as well. In this sense, Nazism was no clearly delimited set of ideas and principles; rather, it can be understood as a discursive field that was part of a larger whole, and neither completely detached from other discourses of the time nor in itself homogeneous.

Lebanese and Syrian responses to Nazism confirm this assessment. For many actors, Nazism was no distinct phenomenon in its own right. While it exhibited characteristic features, it was identified as belonging to modern European intellectual traditions. A striking figure in this context is the Arab nationalist thinker, Edmond Rabbath. Notwithstanding his strong attachment to French intellectual traditions, he did not refrain from drawing on Adolf Hitler's *Mein Kampf* to substantiate his nationalist reasoning. For him, Hitler and French nationalist thinkers were not two polar opposites occupying two different positions at either end of the nationalist spectrum. Another example is Kazim al-Sulh, the editor of the Beirut daily *al-Nida*. In spring 1934, the newspaper published one of the first Arabic translations of *Mein Kampf*. The publication was meant to allow the reader to choose "the best and the most suitable"³ from Hitler's thought, as Kamil Muruwa stated in his introduction to the translation. Yet despite such explicit reverence to Hitler, the editor added an explanatory note distancing himself from National Socialist racial theories. The idea of racial superiority, for instance, contradicted Sulh's broader nationalist outlook, while he had no difficulties accepting other aspects of Hitler's writings.

Sa'adeh's thought and the SNP echo a similar approach. While Sa'adeh reproduced key arguments of essentialist nationalist traditions, he distinguished his theories from National Socialist racial ideology. For him, nations were the products of historical developments, reflecting the influences of geography, social changes and migration. Yet, in the case of the Syrian nation, Sa'adeh described this evolution as a thing of the past. According to him, the Syrian nation had acquired its distinct traits that characterized its message and its mission. This narrative of the Syrian nation is best reflected in Sa'adeh's vehement objection to contemporary 'foreign' influences. Such influences had in the past contributed to the formation of the nation's distinct character; now – once the nation had taken its rightful form – they were destructive, corruptive, and undermined the national community. Sa'adeh's warning against Jewish influences was based on this essentialist fixation of the Syrian nation: the duty of the party was the protection of the nation from

³ Kamil Muruwa, Introduction to Adolf Hitler, "Kifahi", *al-Nida* Jan. 20, 1934.

possible changes and transformations, with Jews and Judaism standing for the negation of the very essence of the Syrian nation.

Such a narrative does not rest easily with an ideal-typical pattern of German *völkisch* nationalism on the one hand and French Republican nationalism on the other. Unsurprisingly, scholarly assessments of Sa'adeh's nationalist theory are often widely diverse. Several scholars, including Bassam Tibi and Hazem Saghiyeh, have highlighted the similarities with National Socialist nationalist thoughts. Then again, others have stressed the differences. Christoph Schumann, for one, has singled out Sa'adeh's aim of creating a Syrian nation state as representing an essential difference from Nazism and Fascism. For Schumann, Sa'adeh's thought was characterized only by "symbolical appropriations" of Fascism, while Tibi describes Sa'adeh's nationalist narratives as reflecting a "biological definition of the nation that was prevalent during the Third Reich".

I regard my contribution to this debate as an attempt to offer an additional perspective. Contemporary ideologies were not necessarily pro- or contra National Socialism on the one hand, or liberal democracy and socialism on the other. My reading of Sa'adeh's views – and of other contemporary players – suggests that these can more accurately be understood in the broader discursive field of contemporary nationalist thought, both echoing and rephrasing various intellectual traditions that had influenced communal ideologies of the late 19th and early 20th century.

This approach implies a shift of attention away from individual personalities, both as thinkers and as activists, to focus on the wider political and intellectual milieus. In one of his specific objections against my findings, Beshara stressed the fact that not all expressions made in the name of the SNP could be attributed to Sa'adeh. Strictly speaking, this is correct (for instance, Sa'adeh was not directly responsible for some of the most explicit appropriations from National Socialist agitation, that were published in *Suriyya al-Jadida*). At the same time, it is less obviously the case if we consider Syrian nationalist ideology as a discursive field shaped by various voices. Sa'adeh indeed criticized the editor of *Suriyya al-Jadida* for the newspaper's editorial line, as Beshara appropriately highlighted in his review, and as I have documented in my book thanks to a lengthy translation of the respective directive sent by Sa'adeh to the editors. Yet, despite such disagreements and ruptures,

the positions voiced in the newspaper did not necessarily contradict the views and visions entertained in those milieus fascinated by Sa'adeh and the party. Secret French reports dating from late 1939 and early 1940 highlight the existence of an explicitly pro-German stance among members and sympathizers of the party. On the eve of war, even some leading representatives of the SNP in Lebanon expressed their hope for a timely arrival of the *Wehrmacht* to put an end to French rule. While Sa'adeh distanced himself from similar expectations, not all of his supporters shared his positions.

In summary, the expressions of such expectations and hopes do not necessarily turn the respective voices into admirers of Hitler and his regime. What they point to, however, is that echoes of National Socialist ideology were discernable in local political discourses. That said scholarly interest does not lie in the depiction of Sa'adeh or his party in the black and white terms as "Nazi" or "un-Nazi" (Beshara); it rather lies in reconstructing his thoughts as an expression of the prevailing local political culture of the 1930s. The aim is neither to attribute blame nor suggest praise. The intention is to promote a deeper understanding of the respective voices as mirroring and shaping the various political strategies and ideologies of the time.

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