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# Islam in Zion? Yosef Yo’el Rivlin’s Translation of the *Qur’an* and Its Place Within the New Hebrew Culture

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**Abstract:** This article addresses the Hebrew translation of the *Qur’an* – an exceptional philological and cultural project – in the context of the Hebrew culture of Mandatory Palestine. It examines this project through the figure of the translator, Yosef Yo’el Rivlin, and the various circles within which he operated: the “Jerusalemite Group” of native Jewish intellectuals, the milieu of Oriental Studies in Frankfurt, the Zionist “Kinnus Project,” and the recently-founded Hebrew University. The article scrutinizes the different cultural, social and political trends that lay at the core of this unique project as well as the political and cultural meanings it bore for Rivlin and his colleagues at the *Dvir* publishing house – first and foremost among them H.N. Bialik, who lent a hand in editing the translation. The article contributes to the understanding of Oriental research in Mandatory Palestine and abroad, and of the development of Jewish national culture in Mandatory Palestine.

**Keywords:** Rivlin, Yosef Yo’el, Qur’an Translations, Hebrew and Arabic, Kinnus Project, Bialik, Haim Nachman, Semitic Spirit

On April 17, 1922, *Dvir* publishing house, represented by Alter Druyanow, signed an agreement with Yosef Yo’el Rivlin, according to which Rivlin would deliver a full, punctuated Hebrew translation of the *Qur’an* by September of that year.<sup>1</sup> Rivlin’s Hebrew *Al-Qur’an* was published, but not until 1936, fourteen years after the original deadline.<sup>2</sup> Later in 1922 Rivlin left Palestine and moved to Germany, where he studied Muslim History in Frankfurt under the supervision of Professor Josef Horovitz, who later founded the School of Oriental Studies at the Hebrew

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1 *A memorandum between the Dvir publishing house and Yosef Yo’el Rivlin*, Central Zionist Archive, A486\351 (in Hebrew).

2 *Al-Qur’an* (vol. I), translated from the Arabic by Yosef Yo’el Rivlin (Tel Aviv: Dvir, 1936).

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University in 1926.<sup>3</sup> In 1927, Rivlin returned to Jerusalem and was appointed a research assistant precisely at the newly created School of Oriental Studies. Later he became a lecturer, and eventually a professor of Arabic.

This paper explores the cultural and political meaning of the production of a Hebrew translation of the sacred book of Islam under a distinctly Zionist venture in Berlin and Jerusalem during the British Mandate period. It will look at the figure of the translator, Rivlin, as well as others who played a role in the project. Specifically, this paper will examine the Hebrew Qur'an translation project in the context of three of the social milieus in which Rivlin himself operated: first, the local, native Jewish community in Mandatory Palestine; second, the German academy and the study of the Orient; and third, the Zionist movement and the aspirations for a revival of the Jewish culture in a modern, national character. The second part of the paper will consider the institutional aspects of the project and try to place it within the context of the Hebrew culture of the early twentieth century.

Yosef Yo'el Rivlin was born in 1889 in Jerusalem<sup>4</sup> to a distinguished Ashkenazi-Lithuanian family who settled there in 1840. He studied in the traditional "Etz-Chaim" *Talmud Torah* as well as in the modern culturally German-oriented *Lemel* school. Later he joined the local seminar for teachers – established by 'Ezra, the *Hilfsverein der Deutschen Juden*. Rivlin was also one of the few Jewish students of the independent Islamic school Rawdat al-Ma'arif, founded in Jerusalem in 1906.<sup>5</sup> In his memoir, Rivlin recalled that the principal of this school, Sheikh Muhammad Salah, "was to me like a father."<sup>6</sup> It was through this school that Rivlin also became acquainted with some members of the al-Husayni family. Writing in 1949, Rivlin noted that some members of this family with whom he had maintained good relations in the past, namely Jamal al-Husayni, "became a first-rate hater of Israel," while others, like Jamal's brother Hilmi, maintained a friendship with him "until recently."<sup>7</sup> It was not incidental that Rivlin chose to underline his close contacts with Arabs;

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<sup>3</sup> For more on Josef Horovitz, see Ruchama Johnston-Bloom, "Oriental Studies and Jewish Questions: German-Jewish Encounters with Muhammad, the Qur'an, and Islamic Modernities" (PhD dissertation: The University of Chicago, 2013), 85–173. See also in this volume Sabine Mangold-Will's article.

<sup>4</sup> For a concise biography of Rivlin, see Ruth Roded, "A Voice in the Wilderness? Rivlin's 1932 Hebrew *Life of Muhammad*," *Middle East Critique* 18,1 (2009), 39–59.

<sup>5</sup> On this school, see Ela Greenberg, "Majallat Rawdat al-Ma'arif: Constructing Identities within a Boys' School Journal in Mandatory Palestine," *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 35,1 (2008), 79–80, and the sources in notes 5–6 there.

<sup>6</sup> Yosef Yo'el Rivlin, "In Damascus," *Hed haMizrach*, December 23, 1949, 8 (Hebrew).

<sup>7</sup> Rivlin, "In Damascus," 8.

throughout his life he used the existence of these relationships to advance his cultural-political agenda, discussed later in this paper.

The quotes above should be taken as only a part of the picture of the al-Husaynis' attitudes toward the Jews in Palestine, however, at least during the late Mandate years. In his book about the Husaynis, Ilan Pappe writes that during the Arab revolt of 1936–1939, Jamal al-Husayni's brother, Hilmi, “acted as the liaison between Jamal and the rebels, even involving his wife in dangerous missions.”<sup>8</sup> Although this information does not necessarily contradict Rivlin's account, it does situate it within the context of a growing national conflict, which it seems Rivlin's memoirs tended frequently to obscure in favor of an idyllic picture of coexistence.

Rivlin's multilingual education had a significant influence on him as a young man. While he grew up in the Yiddish-speaking “old *Yishuv*” in Jerusalem, members and friends of his family – such as Yechiel Michel Pines, David Yellin and others – were involved in the development of Modern Hebrew. This education gave Rivlin an inside view of the local Arab elite combined with wide knowledge of Hebrew and German. This knowledge and experience became cultural assets for Rivlin, enabling him to socialize in various circles and milieus, something that had a significant impact on his later life.

In 1917, Rivlin was jailed by the Ottoman authorities and exiled to Damascus, along with many other Jews in Palestine at that stage of the war. After his release, Rivlin stayed in Damascus and worked as a principal at a girls' school. He also participated in the local Zionist activity, together with other activists from Palestine, such as David Yellin and his sons, Avi'ezer and Avinoam; Yehuda Burla; Israel Eitan; Shlomo Schiller; and Baruch Uzi'el.<sup>9</sup>

## Jerusalem between old and new elites

Like other urban centers in late Ottoman Palestine,<sup>10</sup> Jerusalem was a place of sharp social divisions. The Zionist immigrants who arrived in Palestine during the first decade of the twentieth century challenged the “old *Yishuv*” to which the Rivlin

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<sup>8</sup> Ilan Pappe, *The Rise and Fall of a Palestinian Dynasty: The Husaynis 1700–1948* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010), 292. Unfortunately, Pappe does not ground this in direct sources.

<sup>9</sup> For a discussion of Zionism in Damascus and Rivlin's part in it, see Yaron Har'el, *Zionism in Damascus: Ideology and Activity in the Jewish Community at the Beginning of the Twentieth Century* (London: Tauris, 2015).

<sup>10</sup> For a discussion of the complexities of the term ‘late Ottoman Palestine,’ see Jonathan Gribetz, *Defining Neighbors: Religion, Race and the Early Zionist-Arab Encounter* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014), 15–18.

family belonged. Many came from the Russian Empire and shared radical socialist convictions, which presented a threat to the existing social order.<sup>11</sup> The ideological differences between the new immigrants and the existing Jewish community in Palestine at the time were accompanied by different behavioral norms. These differences created tensions between the immigrants and the local Arabs and, ultimately, also between the latter and the local Jews who, although they themselves found some of the manners of the Russian Jews hard to accept, felt an obligation to defend them against the local Arabs. Quoting Mordechai Elkayam's description of the tensions and clashes between Arabs and Jews – both native Sephardi and Ashkenazi newcomers – in Jaffa at the time, the historian Hillel Cohen notes that tensions were generated by the “Russian” women's appearance.<sup>12</sup>

Rivlin, a Zionist Ashkenazi Jew who had much in common with the “Russians,” was involved in this conflict of elites – at least in the sphere of literature. A striking example is found in Rivlin's earliest publication: a satirical pamphlet from 1910, which he published under the pseudonym *Yevarer* – the Hebrew acronym of “Yosef son of Reu'ven Rivlin.” The pamphlet, titled *Megilat Russ* [“the scroll of Russ”], was a parody based on the biblical *Scroll of Ruth* that mocked the leaders of *Po'alei Zion* party and several other local activists of the “new *Yishuv*” and its institutions.<sup>13</sup> The opening verse of the scroll reads: “Now it came to pass in the days when the hooligans ruled,” a clear expression of the growing tensions between the native elite and the Russian radicals of the second Zionist wave of immigration.

This early writing is important for understanding Rivlin's situation. A keen Zionist throughout his life and an advocate of Hebrew over German during the so-called “War of Languages” of 1913, Rivlin never belonged to the growing elite of the Labor parties; politically he was closer to the right-wing Revisionist Movement. Socially, he belonged to the circles of the native elites, such as the families of Yellin, Eliashar, Meyuhas, Pines and Yahuda – the last being the family of his first wife, Rachel. As evidence of his personal connections with these individuals, Rivlin dedicated another early work – a

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<sup>11</sup> Although these sociocultural characteristics by no means fit all of the members of the “Second Aliyah,” the ideological elite of this immigration created the image of it. For a discussion of this, see Gur Elroy, “The Demographic Composition of the ‘Second Aliyah,’” *Israel 2* (2002), 33–55 (Hebrew).

<sup>12</sup> Hillel Cohen, *1929: Year Zero of the Jewish-Arab Conflict* (Jerusalem: Keter, 2013), 90–91 (Hebrew).

<sup>13</sup> Yosef (Son of Reuven) Rivlin, *Megilat Russ* (Jerusalem, 1910) (Hebrew). On this pamphlet, see Getzel Kressel, “Beyamei Shefut haHuliganim (In the days when the hooligans ruled), a satirical parody from 1910 regarding the conflict between the *old Yishuv* and the members of the *Second Aliyah*,” *Davar*, March 20, 1981, 15, 20 (Hebrew).

translation of the poetry of the sixth century Arab poet 'Antarah ibn Shaddād al 'Absī – to “my teacher David Yellin.”<sup>14</sup>

This work illustrates another complexity – this time regarding Rivlin's attitude toward Arab culture. In his introduction, Rivlin stressed the great importance of becoming acquainted with Arab poetry, which influenced the Jewish poets in Medieval Spain so deeply. “Anyone who reads two or three Arab poems prior to reading our poets,” he wrote, “will acknowledge that they both share spirit and origin.”<sup>15</sup> Arab poetry is praised here as the inspiration for the most elevated Jewish poetic creativity, and both Arab and Hebrew poetries are described as a manifestation of one and the same spirit. Rivlin's inclusive attitude was accompanied, however, by common “Orientalist” views. In his introduction, Rivlin adopted the now-infamous comparison between Arab and Greek literatures, echoing Ernst Renan while comparing the Greek mythology to the literature of the East:

Indeed, the monotonous East was not able to describe its hero [Antar] as a miraculous son of Gods, like the Greek heroes; however, he too was crowned with heroism and with countless victories. And the more the Arab developed and became removed from the time of his hero-poet, the more legends about him were told [...] legends which attribute all the virtuous characteristics of the Arab people to Antar: generosity and hospitality in times of peace, and cruelty on the battle field [...]<sup>16</sup>

Rivlin's terminology involved, typically, admiration and reservation at the same time. He described “the Arab” and his poetry by looking at them from the outside, and he judged Arab poetry according to European standards, as represented by Greek mythology. This common comparison between Eastern and Western poetry and literature was inherently in favor of the latter, describing it as superior to the former, “monotonous East.”

## Between Jerusalem and Frankfurt

These early examples of Rivlin's work situate him close to the so-called “Jerusalemite Group,” namely a group of Jewish scholars and writers who

<sup>14</sup> Yosef Y. Rivlin (translation and comments), *Mi'shrei Antar* [From Antar's Poems] (Jerusalem, 1915). In the preface Rivlin also referred to Yellin's article “Melitzat Yishma'el beSifrut Yisra'el” [Ismael's Phrase in Israel's Literature], *HaShiloah* 5 (1899), 302–310, 517–523.

<sup>15</sup> Rivlin, *Antar*, 5.

<sup>16</sup> Rivlin, *Antar*, 6. See also Ernest Renan, *Histoire générale et système comparé des langues sémitiques* (Paris: Imprimerie impériale, 1855), 16, 147 and passim.

were mostly, but not all, natives of Palestine and Sephardic by origin, and who sought to revive the Arab-Jewish “Semitic bond.”<sup>17</sup> In her article about Rivlin and his translation of *The Life of Muhammad*, Ruth Roded correctly affiliated Rivlin with this circle.<sup>18</sup> Rivlin was indeed influenced by this group and identified with its cultural, intellectual and social proximity to local Arab culture. However, this identification was not entirely unambivalent, and is not the only key to understanding Rivlin’s figure or his translation of the Qur’an. During the 1920s Rivlin tried to distance himself to a certain extent from his former background and to enter a different circle, namely, the German academy. Naturally, this new milieu to which Rivlin aspired had its own characteristics and norms, and it seems that he regarded it as superior to his former intellectual environment.

In a letter he wrote to his wife’s uncle, Professor Avraham Shalom Yahuda, in 1924, Rivlin, who was then a student of Josef Horovitz in Frankfurt University, described a visit of a former teacher of his, David Yellin, to Frankfurt:

About four weeks ago your cousin [Yellin] was here. He also visited our house. However, I myself could not be at home at the time he came, for “Torah learning is not cancelled even for the sake of building the Holy Temple” [Talmud Bavli, *Megillah* 16a].

Rivlin’s somewhat arrogant behavior toward his former teacher, who was twenty-five years his senior, is rather surprising. Rivlin continued to share his thoughts with Yahuda, revealing some spicy details behind the scenes of the founding of a School of Oriental Studies at the soon to be established Hebrew University:

Prof. Horovitz told me that Dr. Magnus [sic] from America visited him here, to talk about the university in Jerusalem. Horovitz said that he clarified to Magnus [sic] that a university cannot be based on people like your cousin. Indeed, he respects him. But he and professorship are two separate things. We had several conversations about the worth of the scholarship of R. David Yellin, and about his comprehension.<sup>19</sup>

Horovitz and Rivlin’s harsh judgment of David Yellin, and the fact that the latter chose to share it with Yahuda, explains Rivlin’s behavior toward Yellin. Apparently at that time, two years after he came to study in Frankfurt, Rivlin felt comfortable within the German academic milieu, and viewed Yellin, the

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<sup>17</sup> For a discussion of this circle of intellectuals and writers, see Galia Yardeni, *The Development of the Hebrew Press in Palestine 1863–1904* (Tel-Aviv: Tel-Aviv University, 1969), 320–323 (Hebrew); Yaffah Berlowitz, *Inventing a Land, Inventing a People* (Tel-Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuchad, 1996), 121–128 (Hebrew).

<sup>18</sup> Roded, “Voice in the Wilderness,” 52–53.

<sup>19</sup> Rivlin to A.S. Yahuda, July 31, 1924, NLI Ms. Var. Yah 38 01 2179.

non-academic intellectual from Jerusalem, rather critically. The model of scholarship for Rivlin in the mid-1920s was the German professor, not the Jerusalemite self-made scholar. Accordingly, he thought that professorships in the field of Oriental Studies should be granted to academic scholars with formal qualifications acquired in a Western institution and not to native, Oriental scholars, who have the knowledge but lack the methodology. Indeed, all the scholars chosen by Horovitz were educated in German-speaking universities (except for one, who studied in London and Cambridge), and all – except Rivlin – were natives of Europe.<sup>20</sup> Unsurprisingly, the institute was “German” in more than one respect.<sup>21</sup>

Yellin, who taught Hebrew and Arabic literature in 1925 at Stephen Wise's “Jewish Institute of Religion” in New York and at Columbia University, was appointed a lecturer of medieval Hebrew poetry at the Hebrew University in 1926, after his candidacy in the field of Hebrew language was not approved.<sup>22</sup> This testifies that Horovitz was probably not the only one who had reservations regarding Yellin's academic profile. It is likely that the field of Hebrew literature was considered less demanding or “scientific” than other fields, such as linguistics or history, and so Yellin was appointed to teach it, along with others whose candidacy in these fields was not approved. In the words of Joseph Klausner, another significant figure in the establishment of the Hebrew University whose appointment to teach the history of the Second Temple period was denied, and who was instead nominated to teach (modern) Hebrew literature:

Epstein and Büchler concluded: it is “dangerous” to nominate a man like Klausner to teach history. There is, however, a field insignificant in the eyes of scholars like Büchler [...] – that is, Modern Hebrew Literature. [...] what damage could he [Klausner] cause in this field, which is not a matter of real scholarship, of “pure science” anyway?<sup>23</sup>

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**20** Menachem Milson, “The Beginnings of Arabic and Islamic Studies at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem,” in: *The History of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem: Origins and Beginnings*, ed. Shaul Katz and Michael Heyd (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1997), 584.

**21** Shaul Katz, “‘Pure Science’ in a National University: the Einstein Institute of Mathematics and Other Research Institutes at the Hebrew University during its Formative Years,” in Katz and Heyd, *The History of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem: Origins and Beginnings*, 436.

**22** Assaf Zeltzer, *The History of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem: Who's Who Prior to Statehood – Founders, Designers, Pioneers* (Jerusalem: Magnes, 2015), 269.

**23** Joseph Klausner, *Darki Likrat haTehiyah we-haGeullah* [My Path to Resurrection and Redemption] (autobiography) (Tel-Aviv and Jerusalem: Masada, 1946), 242. See Shmuel Werses, “Joseph Klausner and the Beginnings of Teaching Modern Hebrew Literature at the Hebrew University,” in: Katz and Heyd, *The History of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem: Origins and Beginnings*, 497. See also D.N. Myers, *Re-Inventing the Jewish Past* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 94–95.

It is clear that Rivlin was aware of the doubts that “the German professors” raised about his former teacher, despite his involvement in the establishment of the Hebrew University in Jerusalem, and the fact that he belonged to the local intellectual elite. Thus, his avoidance of meeting Yellin in Frankfurt may be explained as an attempt to distinguish himself from what the latter represented in the eyes of Horovitz.

Rivlin’s diverse intellectual influences were reflected a dozen years later in his translation of the Qur’an. In the introduction to his Hebrew translation, Rivlin mentioned the various elements of his formation as a scholar:

When I started this project twenty years ago I was aware of the burden of responsibility, but I did it out of inner impetus. To this end I followed the advice of my father in law, my teacher and my rabbi, the sage Rabbi Yitzhak Yehezkel Yahudah, one of the greatest Jewish scholars in the field of Arab literature, and traveled to Europe to study this wisdom with my teacher prof. Josef Horovitz [...] after I studied the Qur’an with Arab sages, according to their own spirit.<sup>24</sup>

In other words, the translation and its author combine both the “spirit” of Arab sages as well as the “wisdom” (*Torah*) of Arab literature, as taught in Europe. At this point, Rivlin, a lecturer at the Hebrew University, was less eager to find fault with his background and diverse intellectual influences; hence, the reference to both the Jewish and the Arab influences. This tendency is further evident in his generous attribution to Yitzhak Yehezkel Yahudah, the father of his late wife, who, unlike his younger brother, Avraham Shalom, bore no academic title and, like his cousin Yellin, was a prominent figure of the local, non-academic intelligentsia.<sup>25</sup>

## The Qur’an: A “Semitic” book?

As we just saw, Rivlin’s introduction to his translation of the Qur’an has an autobiographical tone. It reflects his intellectual development and his intimate acquaintance with two perspectives on Arab culture – that of the local Muslims and an academic, external view. In Rivlin’s eyes, being a Jew who is native to

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<sup>24</sup> Rivlin, *Al-Qur’an*, vi.

<sup>25</sup> For a discussion of Yitzhak Yehezkel Yahudah and his research, see Amos Noy, “The Emergence of Ethnographic Practices within the Sephardic and Mizrahi Intelligentsia in Late-Ottoman Early-Mandatory Jerusalem” (PhD dissertation: The Hebrew University of Jerusalem, 2014), 62–95. Noy’s enlightening analysis of Yahudah and other local Jewish intellectuals also helps to situate Rivlin’s work.



the East but at the same time at home in German culture and oriental research made him an appropriate candidate for the onerous task of translating the holy book of Islam. Still, it is not clear why Rivlin wanted to take on such a complicated project. What lay behind the “inner impetus” to which he referred in his introduction?

In the opening of his introduction, Rivlin referred to the importance of the project. After relating to the sanctity of the *Qur'an* for Muslims as well as to its tremendous political influence in Asia and Africa, he turned to its meaning for the Jewish people during the time of their national revival:

For us Jews, the *Qur'an* has a special value, for it is one of the most charming manifestations of the Semitic spirit. It is filled with the prophetic pathos that is unique to the sons of Shem, and it has the rhythm of our earliest compositions. All originated from the tents of Shem. The *Qur'an* echoes the monotheistic desire for the one sublime and Almighty God. [...] Now, when the Jewish people is awakening to return to the East, to its spirit and to its life, [now] is the right time to translate this book into Hebrew.<sup>26</sup>

According to Rivlin the *Qur'an* is not only a Muslim book; it is also, as a manifestation of the Semitic spirit, an important book “for us Jews.” It is not foreign to the Jews; on the contrary – similar to the Bible, it is a prominent part of the Semitic, Arab-Hebrew corpus – just like ancient Arab poetry, as Rivlin noted in his preface to Antar's poetry. In the spirit of J.G. Herder's *Vom Geist der Håbråischen Poesie*, it is not the *religious* aspect that Rivlin chose to emphasize, but rather the *poetic* one.<sup>27</sup> Moreover, it was actually not the national aspect, but rather the racial aspect that so appealed to Rivlin. The Arabic *Qur'an*, similar to the Hebrew Bible, manifests the “Semitic spirit,” common to both peoples.

This approach was close to that of his early teacher, Yellin, and several other representatives of the “Jerusalemite Group” as well as other local intellectuals who underlined the proximity of the Arab and Hebrew poetries and languages.<sup>28</sup> Rivlin's statement about the *Qur'an* echoing the “monotheistic desire,” and his conclusions regarding the national significance of translating it into Hebrew, suggest that, in his eyes, acquaintance with the *Qur'an* could contribute to Zionism and Judaism in general by strengthening the Jews' connection to their Eastern origins. Thus, according to Rivlin, the *Qur'an* does not “belong” only to Muslims; to a degree, it also belongs to Jews.

Emphasizing the shared “Semitic” (hence, racial) poetics of the Arabic *Qur'an* and the Hebrew Bible over the religious differences between Judaism

<sup>26</sup> Rivlin, *Al-Qur'an*, v.

<sup>27</sup> Johann Gottfried Herder, *Vom Geist der Håbråischen Poesie* (1782–1783).

<sup>28</sup> See Noy, “The Emergence of Ethnographic Practices,” 66.

and Islam had further, more radical implications. It implied a secularization of these sacred texts in favor of a political-cultural agenda that is concerned with the text as a cornerstone of the modern national culture more than as the word of God. Such secularization was not uncommon among Zionist thinkers.<sup>29</sup> However, while the common Zionist secularization, or rather re-interpretation of the sacred text was concerned solely with the Bible and Jewish nationalism, here, in Rivlin's introduction to his Hebrew Qur'an, it took a step further toward the Arabs (not exclusively Muslims) and "their" sacred text.

Rivlin's translation sought to link the Jewish national culture to the wider sphere of the Arab world, thereby creating a common Arab-Jewish cultural sphere. This goal was also manifest in other of Rivlin's works, such as his translation of *Thousand and One Nights* and his biography of Muhammad, which expressed the hope for Arab-Jewish rapprochement.<sup>30</sup> For Rivlin, "Semitism" was a way to bridge the gap between Jews and Arabs.<sup>31</sup> Nevertheless, the biblical style of the translation, as well as the use of the word "Parasha" (the term traditionally used for portions of the Pentateuch) to refer to the qur'anic "Surah," indicate that Rivlin sought to domesticate the Qur'an within Hebrew culture. Rivlin himself referred to this in his introduction: "[...] some chapters in the Qur'an fit the biblical style, while that of the *Aggadah* and early Medieval times might better fit others [...] I decided to translate it all in the style of the Bible while shaping it in the style of our classic medieval Literature."<sup>32</sup>

This statement illustrates how, according to André Lefevere, the translated text is re-written and adapted into the cultural system of the target language, with its ideological constraints. By making the Qur'an accessible to Hebrew readers, presenting it as a part of a shared Semitic heritage and trying to canonize it within the target language (Hebrew) and its culture, Rivlin also claimed a shared ownership of the secularized sacred text. This could, arguably, be viewed as an act of cultural colonialism, or appropriation: after undermining the religious nature of the Qur'an comes a blurring of its "Arabness" in favor of an abstract "Semitic" poetics to which Jews, and not only Arabs, can also relate.

This ambiguity within Rivlin's attitude towards the Qur'an illustrates the fundamental complexities that existed within many Zionists' aspirations to

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<sup>29</sup> See Anita Shapira, *The Bible and Israeli Identity* (Jerusalem: Magnes, 2005); Amnon Raz-Krakotzkin, "There Is No God But He Promised Us the Land," *Mita'am* 3 (2005), 71–76 (Hebrew). Available online at <http://mitaam.co.il/mit3nono.htm> (Last access 19/07/2016).

<sup>30</sup> See Roded, "Voice in the Wilderness."

<sup>31</sup> See, for example, Y.Y. Rivlin, "Faisal," *Mozna'im* 1, 1 (1934), 134–136. On Zionist 'pan-Semitism,' see Hanan Harif, "The 'Revival of the East'. Pan-Semitism and Pan-Asianism within Zionist Discourse" (PhD dissertation, The Hebrew University of Jerusalem, 2013).

<sup>32</sup> Rivlin, *Al-Qur'an*, viii.

integrate into the East and to bridge the divide between the Hebrew and Arab cultures – and thus, between Jews and Arabs in Palestine. These acts of cultural bridging and rapprochement can also be understood as expropriation of the “other’s” cultural assets in favor of one’s own national project. In fact, sometimes it is hard to draw a clear distinction between these two tendencies, and it is for the beholder to decide which one is more apparent. Rivlin’s work, which was aimed at the *Jewish* public and at mediating the Qur’an for potential Hebrew readers, seems to have straddled both tendencies.

## The Qur’an and the Kinnus project

Up to this point, this article has focused on Rivlin’s biographical and academic motivations and on the potential political implications of his work. Concentrating exclusively on Rivlin, however, does not sufficiently capture the cultural dimensions of the venture of producing a Hebrew translation of the Qur’an, since it was far from being a one-man project. The *Dvir* publishing house, the “Public National” Press as it was defined in a brochure from 1922, was also central to the project.<sup>33</sup> At the center of this institute was the poet Hayyim Nachman Bialik who, together with his partners Yehoshua Khone Ravnizky, Alter Druyanow, Shemaryahu Levin and several others, undertook the enormous task of reviving the “Jewish national spirit” by collecting, editing and publishing virtually all the prominent works written throughout Jewish history. The goal of the *Kinnus* project – *Kinnus* meaning, literally, “ingathering” or “assembling” – as described by Israel Bartal, was “the collection, editing and preservation of the nation’s cultural creative assets.”<sup>34</sup> According to Bialik, the *Kinnus* included the search for collection of texts, classification, scientific editing and, most importantly in the context of this article, translation, interpretation, publication and dissemination of texts among the Jewish readership in Palestine. The project was conceived as a means of reviving the nation’s culture, and the scholars who were engaged in the project were “to adopt the national-culture perspective that underlines the very idea of *kinnus*.”<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> *Dvir: Hotza’at Sefarim Le’umit Tziburit* (Public National Publishing House), 1922.

<sup>34</sup> Israel Bartal, “The Kinnus Project: Wissenschaft des Judentums and the Fashioning of a ‘National Culture’ in Palestine,” in: *Transmitting Jewish Traditions: Orality, Textuality and Cultural Diffusion*, ed. Yaakov Elman and Israel Gershoni (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), 311.

<sup>35</sup> Bartal, “The Kinnus Project,” 317.

The aforementioned 1922 agreement between Rivlin and Druyanow (on behalf of Dvir Publishing House) indicates that the translation of the Qur'an was a part of this Zionist endeavor. The surviving correspondence between the branches of the *Dvir* publishing company in Berlin and *Dvir's* offices in Jerusalem proves that Rivlin's translation of the Qur'an was on *Dvir's* agenda between 1922–1924, despite various difficulties that resulted in delays. The fact that Bialik, the most prominent figure of cultural Zionism in terms of creativity and cultural initiative, was so deeply involved in the project, is illuminating in itself.

This raises again the question: what did it mean to translate the Qur'an as part of an essentially cultural, Zionist endeavor? How did these cultural entrepreneurs understand the Qur'an as a part of their larger project? Unfortunately, few clear answers to this question are available. *Dvir's* archives were not preserved, and several other archives that preserve parts of the relevant papers give no clear answers.<sup>36</sup> Other published materials are also of little help. Thus, in Bialik's description of the circumstances that brought him to establish *Dvir* – and the *Kinnus* project in general – the Qur'an is not mentioned (nor are many other *Dvir* publications).<sup>37</sup> This description was published in 1926, a few years after Bialik met Rivlin and undertook to edit the translation in cooperation with him. Indeed, according to Rivlin's account, he and Bialik cooperated for six months until the latter left Germany and immigrated to Palestine in March 1924.<sup>38</sup>

There is some indirect information that might help to understand Bialik's attitude towards the Qur'an and Arab literature in general. In a newspaper interview from 1924, shortly after his move to Palestine, Bialik was asked by the writer and journalist Yosef Castel (1899–1968) for his opinion about the need for a “new direction in the field of book-publishing, a turn toward the Arab literature, toward the East, our origin.” “We talk much,” Castel continued, “about the [Jewish] people's return to the East and about the need to produce Hebrew literature in the spirit of the East, but so far no significant step has been taken in this direction by the publishing companies.”<sup>39</sup> Castel was a native of Jerusalem and a descendant of a dignified Sephardic family that had immigrated

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<sup>36</sup> Regarding the Dvir Archive, see Dani Schrire, “Collecting the Pieces of Exile: A Critical View of Folklore Research in Israel in the 1940s–1950s” (PhD dissertation: The Hebrew University of Jerusalem, 2011), 218.

<sup>37</sup> Hayyim Nahman Bialik, *Dvir and Moria: A Short Survey of Their Growth and Development* (New York: publisher not mentioned, 1926).

<sup>38</sup> Rivlin, *Al-Qur'an*, vi–viii.

<sup>39</sup> Yosef Castel, “A conversation with Bialik,” *Ha'arets*, April 4, 1924, 4.

to Palestine from Spain and settled in Gaza four and a half centuries earlier. He was a Zionist activist and cultural entrepreneur, whose biography affiliates him with the “Jerusalemite Group” in general, and with figures like Rivlin in particular. In his question, Castel – who shortly thereafter became Bialik’s secretary on the *Dvir* editorial board – made a clear statement regarding the importance and relevance of Arab literature to Hebrew Culture in Mandatory Palestine. In his answer, Bialik is quoted as saying:

We intend to pay special attention to the field of Arab literature. I already met with a distinguished scholar of Oriental matters, a native of Jerusalem, who is currently abroad, and he will be in charge of it. We envisage a comprehensive program in the field of Arab historical and research literature, prose etc. [...] I have my own thoughts regarding this important question, but this is not the time to go into details.

The “distinguished scholar” to whom Bialik referred is most likely Rivlin, with whom Bialik spent many hours while working on the Hebrew text of the Qur’an before moving to Palestine. Although it is impossible to determine what thoughts Bialik did not share with the interviewer and the readers, we can conclude that Bialik perceived “Arab literature,” including the Qur’an, as relevant and important for the new Jewish culture in Palestine. As such, it had a place within the *Kinnus* project.

However, the work on the Hebrew translation of the Qur’an did not satisfy Bialik. In 1922, Zvi Voyslavsky wrote from Berlin to Alter Druyanow in Tel-Aviv saying that “[Bialik] thinks that the book requires a fundamental editing [...]. This translation is so accurate and precise that it gives no idea about the Qur’an.”<sup>40</sup> Two years later, Rivlin complained about Bialik in a letter to A.S. Yahuda: “Bialik causes me much grief. He is a great poet, but a very bad merchant,” but did not provide further details.<sup>41</sup> Although Rivlin did not mention the actual project, his complaint reveals something about the feeling between him and Bialik. Eight years later, in a letter to Ravnizky dated September 25, 1932, Bialik complained bitterly about Rivlin and his work, calling the latter a “scholar” (putting the word in quotation marks) and condemning his poor literary style.<sup>42</sup> In a short note to Rivlin himself, probably around the same time, Bialik scolded him for changes that he

<sup>40</sup> Zvi Voyslavsky to Alter Druyanow, November 29, 1922. Central Zionist Archive A10/21. See Zafrira Shualy, “The Struggle of the *Dvir* Hebrew Publishing Company 1921–1924, Part Two: Documents” (MA Thesis: Tel-Aviv University, 1990), 82.

<sup>41</sup> Rivlin to Yahuda, A.S. Yahuda Archive, NLI Ms. Var. Yah 38 01 2179.

<sup>42</sup> The letter is kept in Beit Bialik Archive and was quoted by Joseph Sadan in his review of Uri Rubin’s translation of the Qur’an, *Ha’aretz*, 31 August 2005. I would like to thank Shemu’el Avneri for sending me a copy of it.

made to the translation after they had already edited it together. These changes, wrote Bialik, could fit “a vocabulic reading with students, but from a literary perspective they are nothing but a spoilage.”<sup>43</sup> The use of the uncommon word “vocabulic” (from “vocabulary”) indicates that while Rivlin made great efforts to produce the most precise translation of the qur’anic verses, Bialik was more interested in the literary aspects of the text. Indeed, in Bialik’s writings, one finds many examples of the view that verbal precision was less important than the final literary product – especially in the case of the Hebrew language.<sup>44</sup>

Although both Rivlin and Bialik were interested in the Qur’an as literature, Rivlin, who worked hard to provide a learned translation of the text, hesitated before accepting Bialik’s edits to his translation. Bialik aspired to create a Hebrew Qur’an that would enrich Hebrew literature. The target language and its culture were the focus of his efforts, and this work was likely intended to advance the “Eastern style” Hebrew literature to which Castel referred in the above mentioned interview.<sup>45</sup>

Nonetheless, it seems that the disagreements between Bialik and Rivlin were not about the essence of the project but rather about how to perform it. Eventually the editing was left to Rivlin alone. In his introduction to the published version from 1936, two years after Bialik’s death, Rivlin elaborated on the disagreements between them, but – unlike Bialik in his letter to Ravnizky – he treated the dead poet with great respect and admiration. Rivlin attributed to Bialik, “this Giant” in his words, a semi-divine intuition. When it comes to translation, however, such great spiritual creativity might be a disadvantage. Indeed, according to Rivlin, Bialik was forcing his personality on the Qur’an and subordinating it to his own poetics. Here, again, the fundamental tension that exists within the work of the translator – between subordination of the text and submission to it – is apparent.

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<sup>43</sup> Bialik to Rivlin, Central Zionist Archive A486\351-3t (undated).

<sup>44</sup> Interestingly, Bialik’s statement echoes Walter Benjamin’s famous “The task of the translator” from 1923, in which he writes: “What can fidelity really do for the rendering of meaning? Fidelity in the translation of individual words can almost never fully reproduce the sense they have in the original [...]. A literal rendering of the syntax casts the reproduction of meaning entirely to the winds and threatens to lead directly to incomprehensibility.” See Walter Benjamin, *Selected Writings. Volume I (1913–1926)*, ed. M. Bullock and M.W. Jennings, translated by Harry Zohn (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 2004), 259–260.

<sup>45</sup> A similar example can be found in a letter from Elisha Ravnizky (Yehoshua Ravnizky’s son) to Rivlin from August 26th (year not indicated) regarding his father’s work on Rivlin’s text: “The translator should make an effort to ensure that the reader understands the Hebrew text just as Mr. Rivlin understands the Arabic.” Y.Y. Rivlin’s private Archive, Jerusalem Municipal Archive.

Rivlin's *Al-Qur'an* appeared in the first section, titled *Sifrei 'Am*, namely, popular books, of the 1939 *Dvir* catalogue.<sup>46</sup> The title of the section can be understood both as referring to the expected readership of the books in the section and also to their origin, following Herder's concepts about the creativity of "the people." The section contained collections and anthologies (except for Rivlin's *Al-Qur'an*), including some prominent cultural Zionist initiatives such as *Sefer haAggadah* (The Book of Legend), Bialik and Ravnizky's classic compilation of legends from the Talmud and Midrash; Alter Druyanow's book of Jewish Humor; Yosef Meyuhas' book of Oriental Jewish tales; and Micha Joseph Berdichevsky's *Mimekor Yisra'el*, a collection of classical Jewish folktales. The list includes also "thematic" anthologies such as *Sefer haShabbat* (The Book of Shabbat); *Sefer haHarets* (The Book of the Land [of Israel]); and *Sefer haZiyonut* (The Book of Zionism).

These anthologies played a significant role in the *Kinnus* project. In the words of Israel Bartal: "they stood at the center of the Zionist cultural activity in its endeavor to re-create a nation, a land, and a calendar from the Materials of the past."<sup>47</sup> Tellingly, Rivlin's *Al-Qur'an*, not being an anthology, was the only exception. As a matter of fact, out of hundreds of volumes in this catalogue, the *Qur'an* was also one of the few *non-Jewish* books, together with Bialik's translations of Schiller's *Wilhelm Tell* and of Cervantes' *Don Quixote*; David Frischmann's translation of Hans Christian Andersen's legends; Yehosh'a Ben-Zion's of Goethe's *Hermann und Dorothea*; Avraham Almaleh's of *Kalila wa-Dimna* (to which Rivlin wrote an introduction); and some others.<sup>48</sup> All of these translations appeared under the titles of "Fine Literature" and "Literature for Youth," while only *Al-Qur'an* appeared under *Sifrei 'Am*.

The placement of *Al-Qur'an* within the 1939 *Dvir* catalogue suggests that the translation was directed at the general Hebrew-reading public, a book *for* the people. At the same time, it might also indicate that the *Qur'an* was perceived as an expression of the literature of the (Arab) people, the *Volkspoesie* of the Arabs. I would like to suggest that for Bialik and the *Dvir* publishing company, it was exactly this Herderian concept that operated as a driving force for the translation.<sup>49</sup> Rivlin himself gave explicit expression to this idea in his introduction,

<sup>46</sup> *Reshimat Sefarim Meforetet* (A Detailed List of Books), July 1939, 4.

<sup>47</sup> Israel Bartal, "The Ingathering of Traditions: Zionism's Anthology Project," *Prooftexts* 17,1 (1997), 93.

<sup>48</sup> Y.Y. Rivlin, *Kalila wa-Dimna* (Jerusalem: Defus HaPoalim, 1928). It is noteworthy that Bialik sternly criticized also this translation in a letter to Ravnizky from 1926. See the latter's archive at the NLI Archives Department, 4\* 1185 3 119.

<sup>49</sup> On Bialik and the Herderian Model, see Schrire, "Collecting the Pieces of Exile," 21.

where he referred, as we already saw, to the “Semitic,” Arab-Jewish spirit of the sacred book of Islam. Although his attitude to the actual translation was more academic or conservative than Bialik’s, he believed in the “Semitic spirit” that is common to the Qur’an and the Bible. Therefore, for Rivlin it was only natural to place *Al-Qur’an* in the first section of the catalogue, together with the other *Sifrei ‘Am* – an expression of the Jewish and Arab peoples’ spirit.

## Conclusion

On November 19, 1969, the Israeli newspaper *Ma’ariv* described a visit of the eighty year-old Rivlin to a Bible conference marking the sixtieth anniversary of the foundation of the *HaShomer* para-military organization. The title of this journalistic report, as well as its content, provided no information about the conference or about Rivlin’s contribution to it. Instead, it offered a detailed and colorful description of an incident that took place on the way from Jerusalem to the Galilee, when Rivlin and his companions, who traveled via the West Bank, stopped for a break in ‘Ayn Fāra, nearby Nablus:

They sat down to rest in an Arab hut that serves as a type of primitive café for wayfarers to sip a steaming cup of coffee. Professor Rivlin, who translated the Qur’an from its original Arabic into the Hebrew language, asked the young Arab man who served the coffee: “Sūratak?”, meaning – which is your chapter in the Qur’an, the one which you learned?

The young man became embarrassed and mumbled something. It emerged that his knowledge of Qur’an was less than limited. Several elderly Arabs heard this, and sat down around the professor, who engaged them in conversation about various topics in the Qur’an. When they realized the breadth of Professor Rivlin’s knowledge in the Qur’an and his extensive citations from that text, they applauded him with open admiration and unanimously pronounced him “ālim kabir” (a great scholar).

Prof. Rivlin sighed and said to the Arab town elders: “I see that your young generation is not knowledgeable in the Muslim religion. The children of Israel sharpen each others’ minds with Bible quizzes, in order to know the history of their people. You should create Qur’an quizzes for your children, to return them to your sources.”<sup>50</sup>

The idea of conducting Qur’an quizzes was not altogether new – the “Arab Department” of the Israeli radio conducted them in 1967.<sup>51</sup> Rivlin’s suggestion to the Arab “town elders” in the “primitive café for wayfarers,” as well as his

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<sup>50</sup> “Prof. Rivlin proposes that a ‘Qur’an Contest’ be held among Arab children,” *Ma’ariv*, November 19, 1969, 10.

<sup>51</sup> See, for instance, *Davar*, January 8, 1967, 5.



designation by them as “*ālim kabīr*,” however, all depict Rivlin as a dual figure: on one hand, he was a professor at the Hebrew University, a translator and an academic expert in the fields of Qur'an and Arab culture; on the other, he was a traditional, Eastern-style sage who engaged freely with local elders and won their candid appreciation.

Another aspect of Rivlin's figure – the veteran Zionist – is exhibited in this vignette. Rivlin was in fact on his way to an event dedicated to one of the prominent Zionist Second Aliyah symbols – the HaShomer organization – an event that took place in Kadoorie agricultural school, a site closely associated with the Zionist Labor Movement. Surprisingly, these facts were pushed to the margins, while the “Arab hut” in 'Ayn Fāra was brought to the center. Similarly, the Bible was also somewhat marginalized – the report says nothing about the conference itself – while the Qur'an gained all the attention. Still, Rivlin is said to have used the example of the Bible quizzes, a prominent Zionist-statist endeavor, as a model for the (Muslim) Arabs, and a means to return *their* children to their sources.

This symbolic move – from Kadoorie and HaShomer to 'Ayn Fāra and the local Arab elders – has some relevance for understanding Rivlin's figure. He was a native of Ottoman Palestine who developed his cultural and political views in an Arab-German-Hebrew and Yiddish linguistic atmosphere and had initially been antagonistic toward the “Russian” newcomers of the second Aliyah, who eventually assumed a leading role in the Zionist movement, leaving the old elites behind. Rivlin's unmediated contact with the elders of 'Ayn Fāra is thus an expression of his early-life experience. His comments to them regarding the importance of teaching the Qur'an to the young generation reminds us of his early reference to his own studies with “Arab sages.”

However, thirty-three years after the publication of his translation, Rivlin no longer referred to a “Semitic spirit.” The Hebrew Bible and the Arab Qur'an, by that time, seemed less a manifestation of the same “prophetic pathos,” or as having originated from the same source, and more the holy scriptures of two hostile peoples. Following the dramatic historical changes in the country, the aspirations of cultural inclusivism and of a common “Semitic” poetic heritage gave way to a benevolent concern for the future of the Arab-Muslim's own religious heritage. And yet, this late episode also indicates that for Rivlin, the Hebrew Bible and the Arab Qur'an were complementary, and that he had not given up hope for Arab-Jewish dialogue and rapprochement.

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