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Press/Journalism (Middle East)

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This article seeks to examine how World War I influenced the Arabic press. Whether under the Ottoman government in Greater Syria or the British authority in Egypt, Arabic press was subject to high levels of censorship, government surveillance, and harsh economic and political challenges. This article lays out the challenges and difficulties that the Arabic press faced during the war years, and gives a brief reference to how Arabic press survived the war and resumed its function as a political and educational tool.

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If I go back to Yıldız, I would put all newspapers editors in a furnace of Sulfur. Sultan Abdulhamid II, 1909

Arabic Press before WWI

The collective paranoia around printed material that characterized the Hamidian era (1876-1909) manifested itself in high levels of [censorship](#) and surveillance on journalists and printing houses throughout the empire.^[1] These conditions led many Syrian intellectuals in Greater Syria to relocate their journalistic activities to [Egypt](#), which had been de facto under British administration since 1882, where they enjoyed greater freedom of the press. Indeed, Egypt prior to WWI became the haven for Arab intellectuals who fled the oppressive [Ottoman government](#) and contributed to Egypt's journalistic and literary boom.

When the [Committee of Union and Progress \(CUP\)](#) came to power in 1908, they reinstated the constitution of 1876, promising freedom of expression by lifting government pre-publication censorship and abolishing the confiscation of personal letters and periodicals from the mail.^[2] Under the new constitution, it became significantly easier to obtain permission to launch new papers, which led to a proliferation of the press from 1908-1914 in a number of major Arab cities. Even papers from abroad or smuggled from Egypt became easily and legally accessible. Women, too, contributed to the Arab press with journalistic and educational articles; [Mari Ajami \(1888-1956\)](#) is one example of a feminist journalist and editor.

The joy over the promised freedom of the press did not last long. The Ottoman parliament drafted a new Press Law on 23 July 1909, based on the French Press Law, whose articles 2 and 8 particularly imposed severe restrictions on newspaper owners and editors. Article 2 specified that any citizen over the age of twenty-one who had not been convicted by civil laws for writing against the constitution government could serve as an editor. This article did not apply to former critics of the Abdulhamid regime. Article 8 demanded that two copies of any periodical or paper had to be signed by its editor and sent to the authorities, with a penalty of half an Ottoman gold fine for each copy if the newspaper failed to comply. Despite the restrictive nature of the 1909 Press Law, the CUP amended it no fewer than five times between 1912 and 1914 to curb journalistic political activism.^[3] Journalists were constantly arrested, prosecuted, and released again, after being physically harassed. Under these circumstances, newspapers between 1909 and 1913 opened, closed, and re-opened under different names and with different structures.

The Arabic Press during WWI: Challenges

Although the conditions for the pre-war press were already restrictive, wartime imposed a new set of challenges that led to a further deterioration in the press' content and form: heavy censorship, harsh economic conditions, and the emergence of a new, state-sponsored press.

High Levels of Censorship

As early as September 1914, CUP officials instructed their local authorities to observe their local press closely, prohibiting them from reporting the war.^[4] Noncompliance with government censorship was enough to criminalize journalists and result in their arrest and punishment. In Syria

under [Djemal Pasha \(1872-1922\)](#), journalists were forbidden to contact ministers, governors, or state employees to obtain information related to the war. Instead, they received war news from a newly established news bureau whose function was to filter out the news that was not supposed to be published.^[5]

Many Arab journalists in Greater Syria were Ottoman-educated civil servants who called for reforms in the Ottoman government. Distrustful of their political activism or suspicious of any contact or collaboration with Western officials, Djemal Pasha declared them dissenters and sentenced them to death. In 1915 and 1916, Beirut and Damascus witnessed the execution of a group of Arab intellectual reformers, many of whom were journalists, such as [Ahmad Hasan Tabarah \(1871-1916\)](#), founder of *al-Ittihad al-Uthmani* in 1908; [Shukri al-Asali \(1868-1916\)](#), founder and owner of *al-Qabas* with Kurd Ali; [Abdul Hamid al-Zahrawi \(1855-1916\)](#), editor of *al-Hadara*; and [Peter Powly \(1886-1916\)](#), editor of *al-Muraqeb*.^[6] [Abdul Ghani al-Uraysi](#), founder of the society Fata al-Arab in 1913 and the newspaper *al-Mufid* in 1909. Other journalists were either exiled, like the editor of *al-Hawadith*, [Lutf Allah Khallat \(1875-1965\)](#),^[7] or were tried in absentia and sentenced to death or long prison terms, such as Rashid Rida and [Rafiq al-Azm \(1865-1925\)](#).^[8] Djemal Pasha stated that this measure was necessary under the circumstances and was meant to suppress any further dissident movement.^[9]

In Egypt, periodicals had better luck than newspapers. Rashid Rida's periodical *al-Manar*, *al-Hilal* by Zeidan's son Emil, and Sarrouf's journal *al-Muqtataf* were among the periodicals that were able to survive after implementing material and contextual adjustments. Obligated to represent [British propaganda](#), these periodicals focused on [Ottoman losses](#) during the war rather than their achievements. Some periodicals took a sharp turn in their coverage of the Ottoman Empire: *Al-Hilal* barely referred to the [Ottoman Empire](#) and rarely reported either on Ottoman achievements or British defeats. *Al-Manar* was critical of the CUP leaders and their policies towards the Arabs, especially after Djemal Pasha's execution of Arab reformers. It is noteworthy that *al-Manar* was among the first magazines to report the Arab revolt of 1916 by Sharif Hussein and to publish his declaration of independence from the Ottoman Empire.

Harsh Economic Conditions

Newspapers and periodicals that did not meet their demise due to the death or exile of their owners had to struggle under harsh economic conditions. A concentration on the manufacturing of war-related items directed capital and labor power away from industries in other economic sectors, including the production of paper and printing material. The shortage of printing supplies led to a sharp increase in their prices, and the wages of those who worked in the press skyrocketed. In Damascus, Kurd Ali reported that during the early months of the war, the army mobilized the city's human resources, children and women, and aggregated its factories, workshops, and machines from various cities in Damascus to produce military clothing and gear, conserved food and bread,

cotton for hospitals, and other items for the soldiers.^[10] Kurd Ali himself would have been forced to close his paper *al-Muqtabas* had he not been approached by Djamal Pasha, who subsidized his publication and provided him with the printing material he needed to continue producing it.^[11]

In general, papers and periodicals were forced to shut down during war years due to material shortages and high costs. Papers that did well enough to stay afloat had to economize with the printing material, negatively affecting the readability of the papers. In Egypt, shortages of both locally manufactured and imported paper made newspaper prices rise four- to tenfold. Daily newspapers decreased the size of their letters, reduced the number of pages and the quality of paper, and refused to accept advertisements due to lack of space, which further reduced financial resources.^[12] The logistic blockade between Greater Syria and Egypt obstructed access to subscription fee and paper delivery.^[13]

The Emergence of the Official Press

The Ottoman and [British governments](#) resorted to the press to influence public opinion and to promote support, solidarity, and internal unity among various Ottoman groups. In Damascus, officials strove to counter propaganda disseminated by the clandestine Syrian press and smuggled papers from Egypt. Djamal Pasha sponsored the *al-Sharq* newspaper in April 1916 and *al-ittihad al-Islami* in January 1915, edited by Muhammed al-Tuhami Shattah. He dedicated a team of prominent literary figures, such as Khalil al-Ayubi al-Ansari and [Muhammad Taj Eddin al-Husni \(1885-1943\)](#), Muhammad Kurd Ali and [Shakib Arslan \(1869-1946\)](#), who was *al-Sharq's* editor in chief. In Beirut, the poet [Shibli Mallat \(1876-1961\)](#), famous for his support of the CUP officials and his adulation particularly of Anwer Pasha and Djamal Pasha during their visit to Beirut in February 1916,^[14] established the pro-government *al-Watan* newspaper in July 1915. These newspapers emphasized on the Islamic identity of the Ottoman Empire, seeking to consolidate Ottoman unity among non-Muslims and to combat any conflict planted by foreign forces to create turmoil within the Ottoman State.^[15] Aleppo was left without a press entirely.^[16]

The Egyptian press under the British authority did not experience different circumstances during WWI: The British authority restricted freedom of the press, and many journals and papers were closed or suspended. When Britain declared Egypt its protectorate, only pro-British, or at least anti-Ottoman, newspapers were allowed. *Al-Kawkab*, established in 1917 by Muhammad al-Qalqili^[17], who was famous for his opposition to the Ottoman government, is one example; *al-Wataniyya* in 1915 by Ayuub Sabri is another.

Conclusion

The end of the Ottoman rule in the Arab Lands and the entry of [Faysal I, King of Iraq \(1885-1933\)](#) to Damascus in October 1918 was met with a great popular optimism. This optimistic sentiment was

reflected by the outbreak of journalistic activities that resembled the 1908 press outburst. In October 1918, [Ma'rif al-Arna'ut \(1892-1948\)](#) launched his newspaper *al-Istiqlal al-Arabi*, followed by forty-two additional newspapers and thirteen periodicals by July 1920.^[18] Faysal launched the biweekly paper *al-Asima* and called on Muhammad Kurd Ali to come back from his self-imposed exile in Istanbul to resume his famous paper *al-Muqtabas*.^[19]

The change from Ottoman to Arab rule did not mean a rupture with the existing social and political structures that dominated public life in Syria's urban centers. Major intellectuals, former government bureaucrats, and notable families with strong ties and interests to local associations and the press remained in place. They organized in various political parties, clubs, and associations, and each launched its own newspaper to disseminate its propagandas and advocate its views, with the common goal of a united, independent Syria.^[20] Papers and periodicals became the site of an active discussion among various political views over visions of an Arab state, as well as the question of Syrian and Arab identity. This diversity came to an end when the French defeated the Arabs in Maysalun in 1920. Many of these political societies went under along with their publications, and those that managed to remain intact struggled to deal with a new set of restrictions and censorship measures under the new ruler, France.

Egypt experienced the zenith of its journalistic activities during the inter-war period.^[21] Despite its official status of a British mandate until 1922, Egypt boasted a strong press. After independence, and similar to the post-war political activism in Syria, Egypt enjoyed a pluralistic political milieu that was critical of the British presence, the constitutional monarchy, and various political parties. Unlike Syria, the press in Egypt evolved as a more stable space to discuss political, economic, and social issues.

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Notes

1. ↑ Yosmaoglu, Ipek K: Chasing the Printed Word. Press Censorship in the Ottoman Empire, 1876-1913, in: *The Turkish Studies Association Journal* 27/2 (2003), pp. 15-49.
2. ↑ Sohrabi, Nader: *Revolution and Constitutionalism in the Ottoman Empire and Iran*, New York 2011, p. 138.
3. ↑ Aylon, Ami: *The Press in the Arab Middle East. A History*, New York 1994, p. 68.
4. ↑ Akhbar Al-Harb, in *al-Masarrah*, 9 September 1914, p. 320.
5. ↑ Arīsyān, Nūrā: *Aṣḍā' Al-Ibādah Al-Armaniyyah Fī Al-Ṣiḥāfah Al-Sūriyah, 1877-1930* [The Echoes of the Armenian Genocide in the Syrian Press, 1877-1930], Beirut 2004.

6. † Tarrāzī, Fīlīb: Tārīkh Al-Şiḥāfah Al-‘Arabīyah. Yaḥṭawī ‘alā Akhbār Kull Jarīdah Wa-Majallah ‘Arabīyah Ḍaharat Fī Al-‘ālam Sharqīyan Wa-Gharbīyan Ma‘a Rusūm Aşḥābihā [The History of Arab Press. Includes Information about every Arab Paper or Journal in the Eastern or Western Media with Illustrations], Beirut 1933.
7. † Kallat, Lutf-Allah: Al-Ahel Wa Al-Madina [The People and the City], issued by Al-Markaz al-thaqafi lil-hwar wa addirasat [The Cultural Center for Dialogue and Studies], 2009, online: <http://tourathtripoli.info/index.php/2009-10-19-07-02-4131/37-2009-11-13-07-01-53?showall=&start=2> (retrieved: 23 October 2017).
8. † Aylon, The Press in the Arab Middle East 1994, p. 71.
9. † Pasha Ahmed Djamal: Memories of a Turkish Statesman, 1913-1919, London 1922.
10. † *Al-Muqtabas* 8 (1914), pp. 760-770.
11. † Mudhakarāt Mohammed Kurd Ali in Rifā‘ī, Shams: Tārīkh Al-Şiḥāfah Al-Sūrīyah [The History of Syrian Press], Mişr 1969.
12. † Ubadah, Abdul Fattah: Al-Majmaa al-Lughawi al-Masri [The Egyptian Linguistic Academy], in: Al-hilal 25 (1917-1918), p. 801.
13. † Al-manar 18/10 (1915), p. 800.
14. † Mallat’s complete speech and greeting poem for Anwer Pasha is reported in Kurd, Alī M. Al-riḥlat Al-Anwariyyat Ilā Al-Aşqā’ Al-Ḥiğāziyyat Wa-Al-Şāmiyyat [The Envarian Trip to the Hijaz and the Levant]. Beirut (1916), p. 28.
15. † Rifā‘ī, Tārīkh Al-Şiḥāfah Al-Sūrīyah [The History of Syrian Press] 1969, p. 260.
16. † Ibid., p. 12.
17. † Gelvin, James L.: Divided Loyalties. Nationalism and Mass Politics in Syria at the Close of Empire, Berkeley 1998, p. 68.
18. † Aylon, The Press in the Arab Middle East 1994, p. 82.
19. † Ibid.
20. † Tauber, Eliezer: The Formation of Modern Iraq and Syria, London and New York 2013, pp. 55-67.
21. † Aylon, The Press in the Arab Middle East 1994, p. 75.

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