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Exile as Liminality

Tracing Muslim Migrants in Fascist Europe

Abstract: The chapter is a case study of the success and failures of Muslim migrants to claim space for themselves in the Western world before and during the Second World War. Members of the Druze-Lebanese Hamada family tried to stabilise their lives under the precarious conditions of exile in light of their host societies' projections of Muslim foreignness and Arab exoticism, which they tried to exploit for their own benefit taking on roles and enacting personae to satisfy expectations between France, the United States, Switzerland, and Italy. Mussolini's pretentious showcasing as a "protector of Islam" opened up distinct possibilities for the Hamadas in an environment where tricksters and opportunists met attention seekers and careerists in the fascist system. In particular, this chapter shows how Nur Hamada went to great lengths to prove her authenticity as a representative of modern Muslim womanhood.

Coping with liminality

Around June 20, 1940, a man stepped into the offices of the Italian Embassy in Madrid to "pay a visit of courtesy." He said that his name was Amin Hamada. His nephew worked for the Italian-Arabic language propaganda radio station Radio Bari, and his grandnephew attended the renowned Convitto Nazionale boarding school in the city of Teramo, a two-hour drive from Rome. He also claimed to have good rapport with the Italian government. When asked about the reasons for his stay in Madrid, he said that he had been invited by Franco's Foreign Minister Juan Luis Beigbeder, whose competence in Arab questions and sympathy for the Arabs he praised. He was also going to visit Morocco, where he had already made contact with leaders in the Spanish and French zones. The Spanish, he said, were trying to foment trouble in the latter, to have a pretext for intervention. When reporting this encounter to Rome, the embassy called Hamada a "fuoruscito," a refugee or exile, and a "Syrian agitator."¹

1 Archives of the Ministero degli Affari Esteri, Rome [henceforth MAE Rome], AffPol, Siria, Busta 24: Ambasciata d'Italia, Telespresso N. 3925/1166, Indirizzato a R. Ministero degli Affari Esteri = Roma – A.E.M. Uff.- IIIo, e, per conoscenza: R. Consolato d'Italia = Tetuan, Oggetto:

Agitator, refugee, migrant, wanderer – Amin was a bit of all. Madrid was just one station of an odyssey he and his older sister Nur had been on for several years, starting from their home country Lebanon with stations in France, the United States, Switzerland, and Fascist Italy. This chapter traces their migrant and exile experiences with a particular focus on their Italian episode. Exile, migrant, refugee – the Arabic equivalents for these words stand for semantic nuances. Based on their verbal roots, the word *manfa* emphasises flight and the place one is evicted to, *mahjar* is a sanctuary, it denotes the place for which one leaves another place, and *ghurba* or *ightirab* stress the estrangement from one's own country, the experience of being a foreigner. The semantic differences contain different degrees of agency that also reflect different degrees of deliberateness in the denotation of absence. Migration can be forced, can bring relief, can be done with a purpose, but it always constitutes estrangement from both the place of origin and the destination. The terms are open ended, they depict more than journeys or travellers' sojourns. Also, migration into exile is not necessarily bipolar. Some exiles moved liberally, though not necessarily deliberately, across a multitude of borders, not just between two countries. This chapter investigates the refugee-migrants' agency. Nur Hamada, Amin's sister, plays a central role in this investigation due to her renown as a transnational activist on behalf of Muslim feminism. Her story highlights how a migrant could exploit a specific social and discursive location for personal interests. Being a Muslim woman in a western, non-Muslim context turned her into a mirror of stereotypes and expectations, which she in turn could bend and shape in an act of deliberate mimesis.

According to the social theorist Arpad Szakolczai, "mimesis," or "imitation," describes a kind of action that is available for a person in a "liminal" state.² "Liminality," to start with, is a concept used for the analysis of rites of passage in ethnographic research. The liminal phase denotes the period, or passage "betwixt and between," to use Victor Turner's classic phrase, between segregation and re-aggregation, when a person ritually leaves a stable status in society and, respectively, re-enters society moving into a new stable status. Rites of this sort are universal, as they accompany the entry of youth into adulthood, or marriage. Arguably, the person who is in a state of liminality is deprived of structure that would ordinarily offer orientation for decision making, which is why the individual resorts to mimesis as a course of action. In other

Amin Hamada, [dated:] Madrid, addi 22 giugno 1940 Anno XVIII, [signed: illegible]. The document falsely introduced the grandnephew in Teramo as Amin Hamada's son.

2 Szakolczai 2009, 154.

words, a person's agency in a transitory state is limited to the imitation of other people's actions or to responding to their expectations as he or she is still unfamiliar with the rules of the new game they are supposed to enter. Another possible synonym for mimesis is "simulation," which arguably leaves more room for individual decision-making when the person grows familiar with the rules of the game, yet is still in a volatile position on the playing field. Liminal situations can evoke a specific need for creative action, too, offering new answers to problems with a lasting, structural impact on a person, group, or entire society. Sociologists started to adopt the concept of liminality in the 1970s applying it to wider social contexts where not only individuals but entire social groups or societies, if not civilisations, enter liminal states. In the realm of literary criticism, Homi K. Bhabha has argued that the term applies to the positionality of migrants "gathering on the edge of 'foreign' cultures," and to the processes of nation formation in an imperialist context where metropolitan nationalism produces a permanent tension between the master text of the national narrative and the variety of the experiences of those who live within the national community, including migrants. According to Bhabha, the migrants mimic gestures in a "mere imitation of life and labour" but without a chance to escape "the life of the double," or stand-in. Migrants thus occupy a liminal space between absorption and rejection by the host society. Their position is not static, but they remain in a constant state of transitioning.³

For this chapter's period of inquiry, Paris has received particular scholarly attention as a node for international migration, and as an incubator of globalism and radical anti-colonialist activism among migrants, who formed a discourse community despite their diverse origins. Michael Goebel's work draws attention to the wanderers between the colonial realm and the metropolis and the crucial role they played in the formulation of anti-imperialist nationalist ideology.⁴ Other places like London, Geneva, and New York City come to mind as hubs for migrant and exile activism. However, it remains an open question how deep the ideological convictions gained in exile went. When the precarious existence and specific unreal in-between-ness of life in the exile community gave way to the concrete issues that were at stake after the migrants' return home, the convictions gained abroad had to be re-inserted into the thicket of a

³ Szakolczai 2009, 154, Turner 1967, 93–111; Thomassen 2009, esp. 14–20, Horváth, Thomassen, and Wydra 2015, 1–8, Bhabha 1990, 291–322, esp. 303, quotes on 291, 316. An example for the application of the liminality paradigm on contemporary migration can be found in Kirk, Bal, and Janssen 2017, 2771–87.

⁴ Goebel 2015, *passim*; for "wanderlust" see 15.

local context, after leaving un-structured liminality. This is a particularly pertinent question when the focus shifts to fascist metropolises like Berlin or Rome as migrant spaces. They raise questions about ideological “contamination” or the “culpability of exile,” and the extent to which Arab and Muslim exiles and migrants in Nazi Germany, voluntary or involuntary, became implicated in the deeds and ideology of the host country when the liminality of the migrant existence created conditions where the migrant was forced to cosy up, adapt, and subject him or herself to the standards of the host community. The arguments of this chapter build on more than two decades of research at the ZMO about such Muslim encounters with Nazi and fascist ideology, politics, and society. The knowledge gained in this effort carries the question about migrant experiences into a dark place where ideological and practical contingencies interact. How do migrants behave in highly ideologised societies, how are they received in places such as Nazi Germany, Fascist Italy, Spain under Franco, or France under Pétain, and what do these encounters have to contribute to an inquiry about the rise of postcolonial nationalism?⁵

For the creative potentials of liminality to have a lasting impact, the liminal state cannot last indefinitely. A reconstruction of society needs to follow its deconstruction that initially opened the liminal phase, such as during a revolutionary period, or for the duration of a devastating war. If the in-between-ness of the liminal status persists, people resort to narrow-minded imitation as they are trying to cope with instability and disorientation. According to Szokolczai, this is when they turn to tricksters and demagogues for leadership and emulation, who are experienced with life on the margins. In a status of permanent revolution, the trickster politicises and institutionalises his position and becomes a dictator skilfully perpetuating the liminal situation.⁶ This chapter makes use of the trickster as a trope, but in a slightly different way, arguing that migrants could use liminality to enter into a role-play themselves responding, as alluded before, to stereotypes of their host societies and playing to the expectations of their audiences. They did this to achieve a semblance of stability in their lives. As tricksters and jesters, or, to reiterate Bhabha’s words, as “doubles,” they tried to claim back some of their agency. The traces they left in the archives offer

⁵ I have conceptualised the dilemma in Wien 2011, 332–58. The article investigates the involvement of Arab exiles and students in the German propaganda apparatus before and during the Second World War. It presents this involvement in the light of the pressures they were exposed to in a racialised society where those had to make a living for whom returning home was not an option because they were political exiles, had family in Germany, or opted to finish university degrees.

⁶ Thomassen 2009, 21–24, Szokolczai 2009, 154–59.

images of resilience, despair, shrewdness, convergence, and ingratiation. The Hamada family offers a particularly dazzling example for such shrewd survivalism paired with the brazenness of impostors. They got involved with members of the political establishment in their host countries who considered them as potentially useful or exotic enough to attract attention. Thus, they moved astonishingly close to the centres of power, while they remained economically marginalised at the same time, and with little recourse. Nur Hamada developed an intricate persona as a representative of Muslim womanhood in a cross-over between an oriental princess and a proponent of a limited version of women's rights. In this she, together with her brother, tried to act as the kind of “ethno-political entrepreneur” that Goebel identified in the Parisian interwar context, shaping and labelling migrant communities inwards and outwards.⁷ Arguably, Nur Hamada's story therefore offers a glimpse at the image-making dynamics of the Western encounter with Muslim migrants in general.

The following presentation of the travels and travails of the Hamada family is based on a reading of archival records in Italy and information available in a handful of secondary sources. The chapter, however, offers only a partial answer to the broad question of the long-lasting impact of migrant experiences, beyond the migrants' re-insertion into their home societies. A comprehensive rendering of the Hamada story, including the time after their return to Lebanon, will have to rely on further materials in Syrian, Lebanese, French, and US archives.

A transnational feminist and undocumented migrant

When Amin Hamada presented himself to the Italian embassy in Madrid, he did not disclose that he was only tagging along with his sister, Nur Hamada, who was without a doubt the more interesting of the Hamada exiles. She had a name in Arab Muslim reformist circles as a champion of women's rights and Arab nationalist affairs. Nur was born between 1887 and 1898, the daughter of Shaykh Muhammad Ibn Qasim ibn Husayn, who according to “family materials” was “the first Sheikh of a united Druze community.” She attended university in Beirut and spoke several languages. Her older brother Shaykh Husayn Hamada succeeded his father in his position, and she had a close relationship

⁷ Goebel 2015, 58; his usage of the concept is based on Brubaker 2002, 166–68.

with her younger brother “with whom she shared an interest in the promotion of Arabic language and literature.” She was married without children to a distant Hamada family member, who served as a military officer in the Syrian Mandate army. By 1932, she was a widow and received a military pension. Her husband had apparently supported her unveiling.⁸

There is little further information about Nur Hamada’s life in the existing historiography. It presents her as a pioneer of women’s organization in Syria and the broader Arab world. According to Elizabeth Thompson, Nur was already a leading young voice of Syrian and Lebanese feminism when she gave a speech at the first conference of the Lebanese Women’s Union in 1928. She played a crucial role in the organisation of the two Eastern Women’s Congresses of 1930 in Damascus and 1932 in Damascus, Baghdad and Tehran. However, other than the first generation of Syrian feminists of the early 1920s, who had advocated for women’s suffrage, her form of feminist activism stood for a shift away from a primacy of political equality to one of social equality in marriage and inheritance rights as well as equal pay with an emphasis on the values of “patriotic motherhood.”⁹

Nur Hamada elaborated on her role in the organisation of the first women’s congresses in the Middle East in a speech that she gave to the Tehran session of the Second Eastern Women’s Congress in 1932. As a founder and board member of various women’s charities in Lebanon she had been instrumental in forming Muslim and inter-religious Arab women’s associations active in Lebanon and Syria. With the support of the famed Egyptian women’s activist Huda Sha’rawi she had organised the two Eastern Women’s Congresses, personally convincing the French High Commissioner to give his consent, and with the endorsement of the London based International Alliance of Women, of which she was a member, and of the League of Nations.¹⁰ Most of this information about Nur Hamada’s life up until 1933 is also confirmed in Nova Robinson’s recent doctoral dissertation on the transnational activism of Syrian and Lebanese feminists in the first half of the 20th century.¹¹

Nur Hamada’s ambitions went beyond mere local community activism. Probably, regional contacts with fellow Muslim women’s activists and with members of European sister organisations awakened her desire to develop her potentials

⁸ DuBois and Emrani 2008, 107.

⁹ Thompson 2000, 141–51.

¹⁰ The speech is published verbatim in DuBois and Emrani 2008, 113–21.

¹¹ Robinson 2015. A relevant part is available in print in Robinson 2020, 121–37, and Robinson 2021, 168–84.

as a figurehead, outside the boundaries of the patriarchal society of notables she lived in.¹² In 1933, she embarked on a grand tour of the Western hemisphere to propagate herself as a proponent of ‘Oriental feminism.’ In October, she gave an interview to Maria Vérone, President of the French League for the Rights of Women (Ligue Française pour le Droit des Femmes) while passing through Paris. Vérone bemoaned the scarcity of knowledge about the women’s liberation movement in the Orient. In a patronising manner typical for the relationship between a Western and an ‘Oriental’ activist, Vérone remained fixated on questions of the veil. Nur showed her photos from the women’s congresses she had organised, but her French counterpart only noticed the different degrees of unveiling on the group pictures, from face veils in 1928, to headscarves in 1930, to a group of women in 1932 who were “completely liberated from the veil, symbol of ancient serfdom (symbole de l’antique servage). (...) An immense progress has been achieved.” When asked about the outcomes of the conferences, Nur outlined a vision of patriotic motherhood, which apparently did not satisfy Vérone, who noted dismissively that her demands were appropriate for “Islam or the countries with a purely oriental civilization.” Nur found out that it was difficult for a Muslim feminist to prevail even in the eyes of a Western combatant.¹³

The interview, which took place shortly before Nur Hamada’s departure for North America, gave her a taste of the objectification that she and her brother would be exposed to, and that was partially of their own making. It foreshadowed the formation of an Oriental Muslim persona. In November 1933, the *New York Times* noted the arrival of the 36-year-old “Mme Nour Hamade” as a notable passenger disembarking the Ocean steamer *Berengaria*. She was “recognised as the foremost feminine leader in Syria,” who had been a delegate to the “International Women’s Alliance at Geneva” and was now traveling “to attend the meetings of the International Committee for Peace,” to be followed by a half year stay and lecture tour. Upon arrival, she told the *New York Times* about women’s progress under the French mandate which could not have happened under “Turkish rule.”¹⁴

Hamada arrived in New York with high hopes and great credentials, but she miscalculated and consequently entered the liminal zone of an exile existence.

¹² For the deconstruction and reconstruction of the paternal order in Syria and Lebanon during World War II and the French Mandate period, see Thompson 2000, 15–90.

¹³ *L’Oeuvre*, October 28, 1933, 5: “L’Oeuvre des femmes: Le Féminisme en Orient.” Compare Robinson 2021, 174–275, Weber 2001, 125–57.

¹⁴ *New York Times*, November 8, 1933, 32: “Mme. Nour Hamade here. Sister of Grand Sheik of Druses to attend Peace Meeting.” This reference is also in DuBois and Emrani 2008, 107, see fn 1.

This is probably where she joined her brother Amin, even though his activities in the United States are difficult to determine. The only trace that is available so far is his involvement with a certain Colonel Don Rockwell, who had some local fame in New York City as an Orientalising romantic poet and convert to Islam.¹⁵ Short reports and classifieds in the *New York Times* listed some publications and speaking engagements that Rockwell had at gatherings of local women's societies, suggesting that he was active in a milieu that provided a fitting context for interactions with the Hamada siblings.¹⁶ The immediate link between Rockwell and Amin Hamada is a book of poetry, the *Bazaar of Dreams*, that Rockwell published in 1934, full with Orientalising clichés, but also with references to current topics such as Arab nationalism and Islamic unity, as well as with dedications of poems to leading contemporary men of politics and culture in the Arab world. One poem, "The Rise of Islam's Star," is dedicated to the "Grand Sheikh Amin Hamada Bey," who also provided Arabic translations of a selection of the poems, which are printed at the end of the book. There is also a biographical sketch in Arabic of "al-sha'ir al-amirki al-Kulunil Muhammad Faisal Dun Rukwal" that has been the only identifiable source of information with some data about Rockwell's life. Born in the US in 1895 he stemmed from a family that, Hamada assured, went back to William the Conqueror. After college, he worked as a publicist and undertook extended international travels, but it was a trip to the Muslim East and the Arab lands in 1925 that influenced him to convert to Islam. Aside from that, Hamada did not even offer an explanation on what basis Rockwell used the title Colonel. The claim of a royal lineage can be read, however, as an indicator for the role that imaginary ancestries may have played in the Hamadas' US circles.¹⁷ For Rockwell, as for many a European or North American bourgeois, conversion was just one step in the fulfilment of an exoticising Orientalist dream, which was in itself a liminal manoeuvre. The Hamada siblings seemed to be the perfect foil for such desires.¹⁸

¹⁵ The internet still references him as an exemplary convert. See for example <https://www.islamreligion.com/articles/107/colonel-donald-s-rockwell-poet-and-critic-usa>, accessed February 14, 2020.

¹⁶ *New York Times*, November 24, 1935, BR14: "Books and Authors;" February 4, 1937, 19: "Events Today;" April 11, 1937, A16: "Books and Authors;" March 31, 1940, 54: "Activities Among Women's Clubs Scheduled for This Week in the Metropolitan Area;" April 28, 1940, 46: "Week's Activities Scheduled by Women's Clubs in the Metropolitan Area."

¹⁷ Rockwell and Hamada 1934, 117; 167.

¹⁸ Compare the remarks about the literary figure of the "Gentleman" in Bhabha 1990, 296. For a particularly intriguing example for conversion and liminality see the recent Baer 2020, passim.

Signposts of Nur Hamada's remarkable American travel history appear in the files of the United States Immigration and Naturalization Service (USINS) as documented by Ellen Carol DuBois and Haleh Emrani, as well as in articles of the journal *Equal Rights*, which they cite. Hamada had received a US visa in 1933. Her brother had been in the country since 1929, and Nur had contacts in the American women's movement. In November 1933, she participated in the Ninth Annual Conference of the Committee on the Cause and Cure of War in DC and became an affiliate of the National Women's Party to learn about organizing. She decided to stay in the US and live with relatives in Detroit for a couple of years to learn English and teach Arabic, and to be with her brother who wrote for the Arabic newspaper *al-Bayan* in New York City. Apparently, she never took care to secure a residency permit and therefore started to be actively prosecuted for deportation in 1935. She fought back for two years with the support of the National Women's Party and some of her Detroit Arabic students who sent petitions to the USINS. When she was eventually detained for deportation in February 1936, a US citizen of Syrian background visited her and claimed to be her fiancé, but the immigration officials believed that it was a hoax. The Syrian community of Detroit came to her rescue once more and bailed her out, but after overstaying the grace period that had been granted to her, she lost that support as well and was even accused of fraud. Nur and her brother escaped in June 1937, embarking on a ship bound for France as proper refugees with merely 20 Dollars in their pockets. According to the USINS files, the ship's captain let her on board when she assured that family members would cover the rest of their third-class passage upon arrival, but when the ship arrived in France, neither the Hamadas nor their family could be found.¹⁹

Nur Hamada surfaced again in Geneva in 1938. Robinson's dissertation offers a detailed and somewhat distressing account of her sojourn in the Swiss metropole. It coincided with the creation of the Committee of Experts on the Legal Status of Women at the League of Nations as a nod to women's rights issues in response to lobbying by international women's groups. Robinson documents how the League of Nations archives recorded Nur Hamada's efforts to use the committee's foundation as an opportunity to reinsert herself into international women's activism. In more negative terms, she exploited the situation in an attempt to secure an elevated position and a sizable income to finance her life style. This drive may be understandable in the light of the humiliations she

¹⁹ DuBois and Emrani 2008, 108–10.

had suffered in America, but the means she used make her look not only like a trickster, but like a charlatan.²⁰

Hamada's outward concern was respectable. Eight members constituted the committee, half of whom were men, and all of whom veered from either Europe or North America. Their selection was based on nominations by League of Nations member states, which excluded states under colonial or Mandate rule per definition. International women's organisations, primarily from Latin America, lobbied the League to accept additional, non-European women experts. In January 1938, the Secretariat of the League of Nations received letters from several women's organisations that claimed to be active in Beirut and Damascus, but also from a so-called Orient-Occident League in New York City, nominating Nur Hamada as a representative for Eastern women. Later in the month Nur appeared at the League of Nations offices in person. Over the course of the year until January 1939, she led a campaign to secure a seat at the table for herself. She used a Geneva hotel as headquarters, claiming that a Lebanese-Syrian women's organisation had named her President for Life, and that she was speaking for the Geneva mission of the Orient-Occident League. She did not know that the Secretariat had requested information about her in the meantime, with disastrous results. An anonymous report, prepared by a Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA) associate in Beirut, conveyed that her law degree was fake, and that people in Beirut had not heard of the organisations that had recommended her. One letter had been sent from a relative's address in Beirut, a signature on another letter had been provided by a woman of allegedly questionable reputation. The condescending and orientalist tone of the report notwithstanding, it argued rather convincingly that Nur Hamada was a trickster. According to the damning remarks of a Druze shaykh residing in Beirut, she habitually sought pretexts to get her travels financed. No one had heard of her since she had left Beirut for America five years earlier.

Nur Hamada seemed desperate, but she had staying power. She sent out invitations to a conference on women's rights that she said she was organising, and got a newspaper to report on an event, where, however, all attendants but herself and an acquaintance were corresponding participants only. It is hard to avoid the impression that Nur Hamada was very eager to perform an act of simulation to become a female counterpart to Shakib Arslan, the well-respected representative for Arab-Muslim affairs at the League of Nations, who was also a fellow Druze from Mount Lebanon. Arslan was the scion of an aristocratic Druze

20 The assessment of Nur Hamada's motives for her actions in Geneva are the author's. They are not a direct reference to Robinson's analysis.

family and had a career as an Ottoman administrator, Muslim intellectual and poet, and as a delegate in the Ottoman Parliament before World War I. He became an exile after the war due to his continuing support for Ottoman sovereignty, taking up a liminal existence until shortly before the end of his life when he returned to Lebanon. He resided in Geneva from 1921 to 1946, detached from the intricacies of local politics in the Arab lands, but at the same time, in contrast to the Hamadas, he remained deeply connected through a closely-knit international network of contacts and supporters. He therefore retained considerable influence, though largely on a discursive level. It is more than likely that Nur Hamada met Arslan in Geneva, but he did not mention her in the contemporaneous issues of his largely self-authored journal *La Nation Arabe*.²¹

In Mussolini's Rome

When Nur Hamada travelled to Italy in late 1939, her reputation had been shattered twice, once in America, and once during her failed bid for leadership in Muslim women's international affairs. She was clearly hungry for recognition, worried about her increasing marginalisation, and probably also financially strained. While direct references to Islam had not been prominent in her statements in Geneva, the way she was inserted, or inserted herself into Rome's Middle Eastern exile community after the Geneva episode clearly marked her as a signifier in the Oriental Arab-Muslim imaginary of her fascist hosts. The following report about her and her brother Amin's engagement with Fascist Italy should not be read as a judgment over her morality and the sincerity of her feminist commitment, however. Rather, it illustrates in a remarkable way how the Hamadas' liminality as exiles created the conditions for their brief career as Fascist collaborators. This particular kind of migrant mimesis thus framed their culpability.

The Hamada siblings' journey to Italy had a pragmatic reason, too. Their nephew Mahmud Hamada had been living there since August 1939 when he and his wife undertook a trip to visit their children who were attending school in Italy. His Italophile and, supposedly, pro-fascist leanings were notorious in Beirut, so that he was barred from returning to Lebanon after the outbreak of

²¹ Robinson 2015, 248–321. See also Robinson 2020 and 2021, esp. 178–80, which, however, do not reference the critical Beirut report. On Arslan, see Cleveland 1985. For *La Nation Arabe* see Adal 2002.

World War II in September. His fascist connections probably helped him find employment with the Ministero della Cultura popolare (MinCulPop) and Radio Bari as a translator and propagandist.²² He may well have been the one to invite his aunt and uncle to his personal fascist paradise.

Whatever Amin's and Nur's actual commitment was, they lost no time and inserted themselves into the Arab exile community in Rome and its bonds with the fascist state. Nur Hamada gave a radio speech on the occasion of the end of Ramadan in November 1939. She addressed the "[s]ons of my country and my nation..." on the occasion of the feast "in our beloved language, the language of the letter *dâd*, the language of the great prophet and of the gracious Qur'an, from the Bari station, from Rome, the great city of the arts." Aside from greetings and well-wishes the speech was free from ideological allusions. However, it was exceptional that an Arab woman spoke on a station where women were otherwise largely absent, not as objects of deliberations, but as subjects with agency. To give her time on the air was probably a decision of opportunity, in line with the improvisational character of Radio Bari's programming altogether. Usually, the speakers were male Arab students who, like Nur Hamada, happened to be around, without experience or specific capacities.²³ The monthly Arabic magazine *Radio Bari* ("Radyu Bari"), published by MinCulPop, introduced Hamada as an "Arab women's leader" ("al-za'ima al-niswiyya al-'arabiyya"), President of the "International Women's Society Orient Occident" ("ra'isat al-jam'iyya al-nisa'iyya al-duwaliyya al-Sharq wa-l-Gharb"), in the name of which she also extended her greetings in the speech. Apparently, she did not shy away from promoting the same persona that had crumbled so quickly in Geneva.²⁴

22 MAE Rome, AffPol, Siria, Busta 25, Folder: 1941, AEM 3°, Amin Bey Hamada e sorella – Sitt Nur Bey – Stessa posizione 1940, Siria 1/1: Ministero degli Affari Esteri, Gabinetto, 1/04806, Appunto per la Direzione Generale A.E.M.-III, [dated:] Roma, 25 November 1941 XX, [signed:] Il Capo di Gabinetto [illegible]. Transmits the following, enclosed letter by Mahmud Hamada, living in Rome at Piazza Adriana 12, with a request to examine and give notice. [attached:] (handwritten letter, three pages) [dated:] Roma 27 Ottobre 1941 XIX, [signed:] Lo Sceicco Mahmud Hamada (Piazza Adriana 12), All'Eccellenza il Comm. De Cesare, Segretario Particolare del Duce, Roma. See also Marzano 2015, 91; 135.

23 Marzano 2015, 90; 199–201.

24 *Radyu Bari*, January 1940, 18–19: [Section] "Mir'at al-Sayyidat [Mirror of Ladies]: Al-Amira Nur Hamada, ra'isat al-jam'iyya al-nisa'iyya al-duwaliyya al-Sharq wa-l-Gharb."

Fig. 1: Nur Hamada speaking on Radio Bari. The picture appeared in the magazine *Radyu Bari*, January 1940, 18.

Nur received a more prominent platform on January 20, 1940, when the *Partito nazionale fascista* invited her to give a speech on the occasion of the celebrations of 'Id al-Adha, organised by the *Gruppi universitari fascisti* as an event for foreign students. As this was apparently the first occasion of its kind in Italy, diplomatic representatives of "Muslim Oriental states" such as the Iraqi ambassador, as well as Italian students of Oriental studies and Roman orientalists gathered in the Palazzo Braschi, a significant fascist landmark in Rome.²⁵ Nur, who introduced herself once more as president of the Orient-Occident League ("Lega Oriente-Occidente"), clearly intended to massage the vanities of her audience. First, she laid out her commitment to interreligious and international partnership that had been so important for her projections in Geneva. Rome was the seat of the vicar of Christ, "salute su di Lui," she said, using what was probably in Arabic the Muslim honorific "peace be upon him." The beautiful feast of sacrifice was a tangible proof for a union between the Crescent and the Cross, a prelude to peace, unity, and brotherhood among all descendants of humankind, she said. "From this foundation, a gigantic and flourishing civilization will arise

²⁵ Today, it houses the Museum of Rome: http://www.museodiroma.it/en/sede/palazzo_braschi, accessed February 12, 2020. At times, during Fascist rule, a large rendering of Mussolini's face famously adorned its façade: https://it.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Palazzo_braschi_1934.jpg, accessed February 12, 2020.

that will collect from the beauties of the Orient and the Occident the fruits of a mature civilization, infusing in the hearts of the children of these two worlds truth, justice, and virtue.”

She explained that during the feast, millions of Muslims commemorated the day when God told Abraham not to sacrifice his son Isaac: “Oh, how beautiful is this anniversary, which today arrives twice as solemnly, that is twice as much because of the honor that you bestow through your participation,” she told her audience. Her speech, which had been quite innocuous so far, now turned into flattery: “We pray to the Lord on high that he may make all your days as festive, and that you could always be happy under the shield of the great emperor Vittorio Emanuele III, and protected by His government, on top of which is the Duce, whose wisdom equals that of Solomon. Certainly, all of you will join me in exclaiming: ‘Long live the great king and the head of his government, the Duce, long live the noble Italian nation! Long live the Arab and Muslim monarchs, along with their monarchies and all Arab and oriental populations, and also, long live all nations whose motto is *Truth, justice, and peace!*’.”

She concluded, addressing the students in the audience to “[c]lose your ranks, raise your heads, and renew your glory, oh children of the Arabs!”²⁶

Nur’s speech was certainly not a political statement, nor was it meant as propaganda for the Arab students. Arguably, it was mostly self-serving in that it was a verbal prostration in front of the men who embodied Fascist Italy’s statehood. It was a praise of monarchism, because Italy was a monarchy, and it closed with a reference to nationalist youthfulness and discipline, which Nur Hamada may have picked up as core elements of Fascist self-fashioning. The reference to “Truth, Justice, and Peace,” on the other hand, sounds more like an atavism from her League of Nations episode. It did not fit in a time when Italy was quite unpopular in the Middle East for its cruel imperialist policy in Libya and the conquest of Ethiopia.²⁷ Just months earlier, Mussolini had ordered the occupation of Albania, and only a few months later he would try to reap the benefits of the Axis alliance with Germany invading southern France in June.

In a more subtle way, Nur’s appearance at the celebration illustrates how the liminality of her situation made her mimic the stereotypes of an orientalist

²⁶ MAE Rome, AffPol, Siria, Busta 24: Ministero della Cultura Popolare, Direzione generale per il servizio della stampa estera, *Telespresso* N. 532/43, Indirizzato a R. Ministero degli affari esteri, e per con.: Direzione Generale della Propaganda Sede, (Oggetto) Sitt Nur Bey Hamadah, Roma 26 Gen. 1940 Anno XVIII. (signed: [illegible]), (contains a cover letter and a translation of the speech); Marzano 2015, 200.

²⁷ Gershoni and Jankowski 2010, 16–17 et al., Erlich 2014, 271–88.

romance between East and West, Islam and Christianity, that had been haunting her and her brother since the days in America. It was the religious holiday that secured her a spot in the limelight. Moreover, the topos of motherly care for the sons of the country was typical for the Muslim feminist discourse in Arab lands at the time, but also sat well with her fascist hosts.²⁸ A report on the gathering in Radio Bari's magazine sheds light on the channels that Nur Hamada likely used to ingratiate herself with the authorities. Among the people in the audience were two leading women's rights proponents with close connections to the Fascist regime, Contessa Daisy di Robilant and Maria Castellani. The former was an advocate for mothers' and children's rights and held leading positions in national and international women's organisations, who, however, had grown more distant from Mussolini in the second half of the 1930s, yet remained a well-known public figure. Castellani, in turn, was a prominent US-educated mathematician, who headed an important Fascist women's professional organisation. As both women had no obvious connection to the Arab community in Rome, their presence must have been due to former links with Nur Hamada from international women's organisation circles, but they also confirm that Nur tried to establish herself as a tool of Fascist propaganda.²⁹

The Hamadas had an obsession with status. Nur's kowtowing to Italian and Arab royalty was an effort to pull herself out of the twilight of insignificance. In Italy, they presented themselves as members of the Druze upper nobility. Radio Bari called her "Princess Nur Hamada," a business card her nephew used introduced him as "Le Cheikh Mahmoud Hamada: fils du Grand Cheikh des Druzes."³⁰ Nur Hamada had referenced family connection to her brother, Mahmud's father, when she arrived in the United States already ("sister of the Grand Sheik of the Druses of Labanano and Mount Hermon in Syria").³¹ The same honorific titles appear in the Italian foreign policy documents, except for one, in which the Italian Consul in Damascus, Castellani, replied to Rome's

²⁸ On the topos, see for example Pollard 2005, 139–49; 152–63.

²⁹ *Radyu Bari*, March 1940, 64–65: "Ahamm Akhbar al-'Uruba: Al-Ihtifal bi-'Id al-Adha al-mubarak fi Ruma." On di Robilant and Castellani see De Grazia 1992, 91; 178; 184–85; 241–42; 258–59; 280. See also the biographical entry on the Robilant on <https://www.encyclopedia.com/women/encyclopedias-almanacs-transcripts-and-maps/di-robilant-daisy-countess-fl-1922-1933>, accessed February 12, 2020.

³⁰ Contained in MAE Rome, AffPol, Siria, Busta 25, Folder: 1941, AEM 3°, Amin Bey Hamada e sorella – Sitt Nur Bey – Stessa posizione 1940, Siria 1/1: Ministero degli Affari Esteri, Gabinetto, 1/04806, Appunto per la Direzione Generale A.E.M.-III, [dated:] Roma, 25 November 1941 XX, [signed:] Il Capo di Gabinetto [illegible].

³¹ *New York Times*, "Mme. Nour Hamade here...", see fn. 4.

request for information about the dazzling couple. Castellani wrote that the Hamadas indeed belonged to the Druze of Lebanon. Amin, however, was hardly known in Damascus in spite of several sojourns. His name was known in the Druze mountains, but he could not be counted among the most influential leaders. Castellani also questioned Amin's assertion that he had fought in the 1925 Syrian Revolt as a combatant. It contradicted another of his claims, that he had left Syria because of allegations that involved him in an attempt on General Gouraud, the French High Commissioner's life. This attempt took place on June 24, 1921, long before the start of the revolt.³²

In the meantime, the Hamadas tried to build channels to the highest echelons of Italian politics and society. The French embassy seems to have been particularly suspicious of these activities. Correspondence with Paris mentions that the Hamadas had been received by the Pope – an information that could not be verified separately – and might be received by the Duce and the King. The diplomats also reported that Nur Hamada propagated the opening of an Islamic Centre in Rome, divided into sections for politics, culture, and religion, containing a mosque and a lecture hall, comparable to the mosque in Paris. She also suggested that MinCulPop should open an Arab information centre, similar to the ones in other European capitals, to promote Italian and Arab collaboration. With the help of Italian orientalists, it should make information for the press available to confirm that a new civilisation had emerged between Italy and the Arab world. Nur even requested a meeting with CulPop Minister Alessandro Pavolini, who passed the request on to another official to discuss the plans. It seems that, as in Geneva, she did not succeed in securing any appointments.³³ The same is true for her attempts to meet with royalty. In December 1939 and January 1940, the foreign ministry advised the royal family's ceremonial office against granting the Hamadas audiences with the King and Queen. The report mentioned that Nur Hamada posed as a champion of femi-

³² Castellani's report in MAE Rome, AffPol, Siria, Busta 24: R. Consolato d'Italia, Telespresso No. 113/28, Indirizzato a R. Ministero Degli Affari Esteri, A.E.M. = Uff. IIIo Roma, (Posizione) Ind., (Oggetto) Amin bey e sorella Sitt Nur Bey Hamadah, (Riferimento) Teles di V.E. 25 Dicembre u.sc. No. 13/244988/C., Damasco, addi 16 Gennaio 1940 Anno XVIIIo. (signed: Castellani); the claim about the Revolt is in an undated note in *ibid.*: Ministero degli Affari Esteri, A.E.M. IIIo, Appunto per la Direzione Gen. Affari Generali IVo, [no date, unsigned]. On the attempt on Gouraud's life see *Le Figaro*, June 25, 1921, p1: "Un attentat contre le général Gouraud," and Khoury 1987, 154.

³³ Marzano 2015, 200, see references on 246.

nism in the Orient and quoted the aforementioned less than complimentary information by the Damascus consulate.³⁴

The Hamadas' conspicuous consumption patterns did not help to mitigate unfavourable impressions either. When they arrived in Rome they chose representative accommodation in hotels near the Villa Borghese. Already in March 1940, Amin Hamada was in financial distress and notorious for frequenting luxury establishments. The "Direzione Generale di P.S." (Pubblica Sicurezza, the Directorate of Police in the Ministry of the Interior) had developed an interest in Amin, so that the foreign ministry felt compelled to inquire and confirm that there were reasons to support his residency and work permit in Italy, certainly in reference to work at MinCulPop. The ministry even asked how much it might cost to bail the Hamadas out financially.³⁵

Financial instability was a leitmotif of the relationship the Hamadas maintained with the Fascist state. In January 1940, Nur Hamada received an invitation from several Moroccan Muslim dignitaries, including the nationalist leader Makki al-Nasiri, to visit the Spanish zone in the country's north and consult them on the organisation of elementary school education for girls. The Spanish authorities had given their consent, and later it was confirmed that Amin would accompany his sister on the trip. How she secured this invitation remains unclear, but the Italians did not question her qualifications as an Islamic educationist. Apparently, everyone was happy to accept her role play for reality. Some did express concerns about her brother Amin, though, who had lived a precarious life in Paris and New York before coming to Italy, whose financial situation was desperate since he had squandered his fortune, yet who was still a spendthrift, who did not know to use ordinary resources, and whose affairs were no reason for confidence, as the documents in the archives spell out.³⁶

34 MAE Rome, AffPol, Siria, Busta 24: Ministero degli Affari Esteri, A.E.M.III, 00698/L3, Appunto per il cerimoniale, [dated:] Roma, li 7 Gennaio 1940.XVIII, [signed:] Guarnaschelli.

35 MAE Rome, AffPol, Siria, Busta 24: Ministero degli Affari Esteri, A.G.IVo, 34/R 03816/279, Appunto per la Dir. Gen. A.E.M. Uff.IIIo, [dated:] Roma, li 12 Mar 1940 Anno XVIII, [signed:] illegible].

36 MAE Rome, AffPol, Siria, Busta 24: Ministero degli Affari Esteri, Riservato, Telespresso N. 13/03981, Indirizzato a R. Consolato Tetuan, e per conoscenza R. Ambasciata Madrid, RR. Consolati Gen. Tangeri, Rabat, R. Consolato Casablanca, Posizione Siria 1/1, (Oggetto) Sitt Nur Bey Hamadah, Roma adde 30 Gen 1940 Anno XVIII. (signed: Butt [?]); Consolato di S.M. il Re d'Italia, Riservato, Telespresso N. 16 PR/48, Indirizzato a R. Ministero Affari Esteri Roma, e p.c. R. Ambasciata d'Italia Madrid, Oggetto: Sitt Nur Bey Hamadah, Riferimento: Telespresso ministeriale n.13/03981 del 30 gennaio u.s., Tetuan, Addi 12 marzo 1940 Anno XVIII [signed: illegible]; Ministero degli Affari Esteri, A.E.M. IIIo, Riservato – Personale, Appunto per il Comm. Leonini, [dated:] Roma, li 1 Maggio 1940 XVIII [unsigned].

It is not clear on the basis of the Italian documents if Nur Hamada ever made it to Spanish Morocco. Amin, however, did not get further than Madrid, where we met him first, walking into the Italian embassy claiming that he was on an official mission from the Spanish government. More than two weeks after this visit, in early July, Amin was still in Madrid and expressed his desire to the embassy to return to Italy by airplane. No one in Rome seems to have been too keen on having him back, though. When the embassy inquired whether to give him a visa despite the fact that he had a French passport from his earlier exile in the country, Rome replied that on principle, persons with French passports were not given access. After all, Italy had declared war on France in June. The foreign ministry recommended to treat Amin Hamada with politeness, while maintaining careful circumspection.³⁷ The last trace of Amin Hamada is a telegram the Italian ambassador sent to Rome less than a week later to report that the Spanish foreign ministry had asked if Amin Hamada should not be accompanied across the Pyrenees, given the circumstance that the propaganda activity, for which he had claimed he was in Spain, was called off. Otherwise, it might become prohibitively expensive to extend his stay at the Ritz in Madrid. Neither the Italian nor the Spanish fascist authorities seemed to be in the light about Amin Hamada's plans, but nevertheless he had been able to convince them to cover his bill for luxury accommodation. Now they were debating who would pick up the scraps and see to his departure from the country.³⁸

37 MAE Rome, AffPol, Siria, Busta 24: Ministero degli Affari Esteri, Uff. AEM III, 19748, Telegramma in Partenza N. 1944688/308 [?] (Filo-Cifra), Indirizzato a R. Ambasciata Madrid, [dated:] Roma, li 10/7 1940 ore 19.45, Spedito da Veschiol. [?], [signed:] Guarnaschelli [?], (Testo) Vostro 325; [attached:] Telegramma in Arrivo, Decifrato da BG/Freschi, Cifra N23861 PR., (initials) Il Capo dell'Ufficio Cifra, Mittente: R. Ambasciata Madrid, [dated:] Madrid 8.7.40 XVIII ore 15.-, Roma, li idem ore 19.30, Assegnazione: A.E.M., Oggetto: Hamada Arnin [sic] – Siriano, [signed:] Zoppi. 325 – Per Ufficio III Dir. Gen. Europa Mediterraneo.

38 MAE Rome, AffPol, Siria, Busta 24: R. Ambasciata d'Italia, Telespresso N. 4494/1317, Indirizzato a 1) R.Ministero degli Affari Esteri = Roma, A.E.M. Ufficio IIlo, e, p.c.: 2) R.Consolato d'Italia = Tetuan, 3) Missione Militare Italiana in Spagna, Madrid, Posizione: Marocco.-, Oggetto: Amin Hamada, Referimento: 1) Telespresso ministeriale n.13/19673/C -Pos.Siria 1/1 – dell'11us. [July 11], 2) Telespresso di quest'Ambasciata n. 3926 del 22 giugno u.s., [dated:] Madrid, addi 16 luglio 1940 Anno XVIII, [signed: illegible].

Conclusion

At this point, the traces of Amin and Nur Hamada disappear, though future research might make it possible to tell a more complete version of their story. According to “family history” as relayed in DuBois and Amrani’s article, Nur later returned to Lebanon to live with her brothers. She died in Lebanon in 1962.³⁹ Apparently, the family tradition was silent about the Italian sojourn. The only author who has made a passing reference to it so far is Arturo Marzano in his history of Fascist Italian radio propaganda.⁴⁰

Until today, migrants, refugees, and exiled people like the Hamadas live under precarious circumstances at the margins of one, sometimes several societies. They show up in unexpected places, in localities where they should not be. Yet despite, or maybe because of the liminality of their existence, they leave traces in the archives. Like Nur and Amin Hamada, they are exploited, get in trouble with the authorities, become desperate for money and therefore have to enter alliances they otherwise would not have chosen. For the Hamadas this meant that they relied on their charms and the receptiveness of their audience for orientalist allure to gain attention and secure financial support. In an act of simulation, they created doubles of their hosts’ expectations. After her experience in the US, Nur was willing to go the extra mile to avoid a recurrence of the humiliation she had experienced, without being all too particular about her choice of partners, whether they were the League of Nations or Fascist Italy, which had derided and left the League in 1937.

The Hamadas’ experiences as exiles have been at the centre of this chapter as they were filtered through the archives of their host countries. Other archival researchers have certainly had similar chance encounters with individuals who stand out from the rest, not least because the document-generating authorities had a hard time categorising them and administering them away as Muslims, refugees, spendthrifts, or troublemakers. Many of these cases are tragic, yet some of them are not devoid of charm and humour. Nur and Amin Hamada’s story belongs in the latter category, and while it represents a pronounced case of opportunism, it is also a remarkable document of resilience and staying power in difficult times, coping with being stuck, betwixt and between.

³⁹ DuBois and Emrani 2008, 110.

⁴⁰ Marzano 2015.

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