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Caroline Kahlenberg

This essay traces the life and work of Ribhi Kamal (1912–79), a Palestinian Arab scholar of Semitic languages who dedicated much of his career to Hebrew-language research and teaching. Kamal grew up in Jerusalem under Ottoman and British rule, where he studied modern Hebrew and gained an intimate knowledge of Zionism. As a young scholar, Kamal lectured to Jewish audiences on Palestine’s Hebrew radio broadcast, translated Hebrew literature into Arabic, and called for cooperation between Jews and Arabs on the grounds that they were “Semitic brothers.” Kamal’s knowledge of Hebrew awed Jewish intellectuals in Palestine.

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During the 1948 War, Kamal was exiled to Damascus, Syria. While Zionist military campaigns uprooted most Palestinians from their homes, they did not erase Palestinian knowledge. After 1948, Kamal and other Palestinian refugees lent their knowledge of Hebrew and Zionism to Arab governments like Syria, Jordan, and Egypt. In turn, Arab governments relied on Palestinians’ knowledge in their propaganda campaigns and intelligence services. Beginning in 1952, Kamal worked as the host and director of Radio Damascus’s daily Hebrew-language broadcast, a program whose stated goal was to deliver the “truth” about the “Zionist state” to an Israeli Jewish audience. Kamal used his fluent Hebrew to counter Israeli propaganda and call on Jews to leave Israel and return to their “true” home countries. His weapon of choice was his voice.

Ribhi Kamal’s unique life story compels us to explore several questions about Palestinian Arab knowledge production on Zionism before and after 1948. Why did some Arab intellectuals like Kamal choose to study Hebrew in the early twentieth century, and how did they employ their knowledge in Palestine? How did Palestinian refugees later repurpose their pre-1948 knowledge in the service of Arab governments? And what parallels might we draw between the work of those Palestinian refugees and Mizrahi Jews who employed their Arabic in the service of the young Israeli state?

The Hebrew-language program that Kamal hosted on Radio Damascus was highly propagandistic. As such, it is generally dismissed in scholarly works and popular memory. But studying Kamal’s activity on Radio Damascus sheds light on several overlooked historical phenomena. First, it teaches us about Syrian and Palestinian discourses on Zionism in the 1950s. Kamal and his colleagues expressed particular sympathy toward Mizrahi Jews as victims of Zionism and criticized the Israeli state’s discriminatory policies toward them. Second, the presence of Jewish voices on

2. One Hebrew encyclopedia on the 1950s and 1960s describes Damascus Radio as “the funniest Arab radio, with broadcasters who had language mix ups and strong accents, which aroused a wave of merry imitations.” Amnon Danker and David Tartakover, Efḥ hayinu u-mah ‘asīnu: Otsar šenot ha-hamishim veha-shishim [Where were we and what did we do: A collection of the 1950s and 1960s] (Jerusalem, 1996), 178. See also Douglas A. Boyd, Broadcasting in the Arab World: A Survey of Radio and Television in the Middle East (Philadelphia, 1982), 96.
Radio Damascus’s Hebrew broadcast reveals the transgressive partnerships that developed between non-Zionist Jews and Palestinians outside of Israel. Third, tracing Radio Damascus’s reception within Israel reveals a channel of unofficial communication between Palestinian exiles and Israeli Jewish intellectuals in the 1950s. Fourth, this history compels us to consider parallels between Palestinian refugees like Kamal who employed their knowledge in the post-1948 Arab world, on the one hand, and Arabic-speaking Jews who worked in the Israeli intelligence apparatus upon their migration in the 1940s and 1950s, on the other. Finally, Kamal’s work for the Syrian government demonstrates the dynamic ways in which Palestinians produced knowledge on Zionism in the 1950s, a full decade prior to the founding of the Institute for Palestine Studies (1963) and Palestine Research Centre (1965), two institutions that have recently received scholarly attention.3

Radio, for its part, has long been understood as fundamental to nationalism and state building in the Middle East. Initially used by European colonial enterprises as a form of surveillance and control technology, anticolonial actors also adopted radio as a tool to unify their supporters. In his 1959 essay *A Dying Colonialism*, Frantz Fanon emphasized the effectiveness of radio as a platform for anticolonial nationalism in Algeria. Fanon wrote that the National Liberation Front’s clandestine radio show beginning in 1956 was “of capital importance in consolidating and unifying the people.” Listening to radio was “a means of entering into communication with the Revolution, of living with it.”4 Both sides of the Algerian War of


Independence believed that whoever controlled the radio would in turn control Algeria.\(^5\) Elsewhere, Arab leaders like Syria’s Adib al-Shishakli employed radio to consolidate power and foster a cult of personality.\(^6\) The Egyptian president Gamal Abdel Nasser promoted pan-Arab nationalism through the popular radio broadcast *Sawt al-Arab*. Zionists equally understood radio’s potential in their efforts to establish a national Hebrew culture in Palestine. The “veneration of the voice,” as Derek Penslar argues, “can be seen as an inherent component of Zionist ideology, an aspect of the social and psychological normalization for which the Zionist project strove.”\(^7\) Hebrew radio in Mandatory Palestine and in the state of Israel sought to unite Jews under a single Hebrew language and pronunciation.\(^8\)

Radio in the Eastern Mediterranean was also a tool of “psychological warfare” and trespass. Colonial and anticolonial powers alike attempted to use international, foreign-language broadcasting to target specific populations—often enemy populations—to change public opinion on the ground. During the Cold War, US and Soviet regimes funded widespread radio propaganda campaigns across the globe. The US programs in Eastern Bloc countries, like Radio Free Europe, offered a platform for Eastern European and Soviet exiles to discuss the “truth” about life in the West and the “evils” of communist regimes.\(^9\) Israeli state radio similarly dedi-


cated significant resources to its Arabic-language broadcasts in an attempt to change Arab public opinion. Radio Damascus’s Hebrew-language program was built on the same logic. Kamal and his colleagues worked to undermine Israel’s authority by convincing Israeli Jewish listeners of the dangers of Zionism and of the need to return to their “true” home countries.

This article pieces together archival traces of Ribhi Kamal and Radio Damascus using Hebrew, Arabic, and English newspapers, oral history interviews, Zionist organization records, and Kamal’s own scholarship. Active processes of archival silencing render many questions about Kamal’s life and Radio Damascus difficult to answer. Since 1946, Syria’s authoritarian regimes have closed the state’s postindependence archives to researchers, which leaves us with little data on Radio Damascus’s funding and its connection to the Syrian intelligence services. In this article, I rely largely on oral histories and newspapers, particularly Hebrew-language newspapers, as flawed yet valuable sources.

Two related analytical concepts are useful in thinking through Kamal’s dynamic relationship with Hebrew: linguistic territorialization and trespass. I define “territorialization” as the modern, exclusionary act of mapping a language onto a physical geography and ethnic culture. Territorialization is often a central feature of colonialism and nationalism. As Gil Z. Hochberg writes, language in national settings is treated like cultural territory: “as a well-defined terrain to which ‘one belongs,’ to which ‘one returns,’ and into which one does, or does not, allow others to enter.”


In the case of modern Hebrew, Jewish Haskalah (Enlightenment) scholars first began to “revive” Hebrew from a liturgical language to a modern literary language in the nineteenth century. From there, around the turn of the twentieth century, Zionist language activists transformed Hebrew into a modern, spoken language in Palestine. They sought to territorialize Hebrew as a Jewish national language tied to the Land of Israel (Palestine). For many Zionists, the establishment of the state of Israel in 1948 marked an important achievement in this territorialization process. But in light of the huge waves of Jewish migration to Israel from the Middle East and Europe in the 1950s and 1960s, the process was far from complete. Israeli leaders worked hard to spread, teach, and police the Hebrew language in the new state. Several questions arose: Would Hebrew be an exclusively Jewish language or a language of all of Israel’s citizens, including its sizeable Palestinian Arab population? And what happened when anti-Zionists used Hebrew to call for Israel’s destruction?

In pre-1948 Jerusalem, when Ribhi Kamal used his fluent Hebrew to call for “Semitic brotherhood,” many Jewish intellectuals, especially those involved in organizations that advocated Jewish-Arab cooperation, welcomed Kamal as a “trustful guest” invited to speak Hebrew. But after 1948 Kamal became, according to the logic of territorialization, an unwelcome intruder: Kamal was neither Jewish nor a resident of the new Israeli state, and he was no longer spreading a message of cooperation. Instead, Kamal “trespassed” onto Israeli territory by broadcasting his anti-Zionist message in fluent Hebrew on Radio Damascus.

I adopt this second concept of linguistic “trespass” from Anton Shammas and Lital Levy. Shammas (b. 1950), a Palestinian writer who grew up in Israel, described the need to adopt Hebrew as his “stepmother” tongue as a young adult: “Sometimes I feel that this was an act of cultural trespass, and that the day may come when I shall have to account for it.” Levy builds on this concept in her book Poetic Trespass, which focuses on contemporary writers (including Shammas) who subvert the linguistic social norms in

13. I borrow this concept from Hochberg, In Spite of Partition, 87–88.
Palestine/Israel that assign Hebrew to “Jews” and Arabic to “Arabs.” These writers “transgress the boundaries of language and identity inscribed in the sociopolitical codes of the state.”\textsuperscript{15} In the 1950s, Ribbi Kamal similarly transgressed the colonial-national linguistic boundaries of Palestine and Israel. But his trespass was neither literary nor poetic; it was immediate and strategic. Kamal leveraged his language skills in service of the state-funded Syrian radio broadcast to “trespass” onto Israeli territory at a time when the state’s borders were heavily guarded and when there were few paths for direct communication between exiled Palestinians and Israeli Jews.

In what follows, I first examine Kamal’s work in Mandatory Palestine and then turn to his activities in Damascus in the 1950s. I am interested in how Kamal repurposed what he learned in Zionist and British colonial institutions to challenge Israeli claims. I then explore Kamal’s work as a scholar in Syria, Lebanon, and Jordan. Through a chronological approach, we see how Kamal continued to leverage his knowledge of the Hebrew language after 1948 even as his ideology and resistance tactics shifted in exile.

PALESTINE AND EGYPT
Ribbi Tawfiq Kamāl was born in Jerusalem in 1912.\textsuperscript{16} He attended a school run by the French Jewish Alliance Israélite Universelle, where he likely studied Hebrew.\textsuperscript{17} It was not entirely unusual for elite Muslim and Christian


\textsuperscript{17} The Alliance Israélite Universelle was not a Zionist organization. However, beginning in the 1880s, the Jerusalem Alliance school used Hebrew as a language of instruction for pragmatic reasons. See Miryam Segal, A New Sound in Hebrew Poetry: Poetics, Politics, Accent (Bloomington, Ind., 2010), 38–39; Juburi, Mu’jam
students to attend the Alliance schools; they were sites of European education and integration. Other Palestinian intellectuals who studied at Jerusalem’s Alliance include Ruhi al-Khalidi and Sa‘id al-Husayni.

Following his schooling in Jerusalem, Kamal traveled to Cairo to study at Al-Azhar University and at Dar al-‘Ulum, a teacher-training institution. Kamal focused on Islamic and Arabic studies, including Semitic studies, a subject that was gaining traction in Egypt. As Mostafa Hussein has shown, Egyptian intellectuals believed that studying biblical Hebrew would allow them to better understand the origins of Semitic peoples. They also viewed it as a path to advance modern Arabic: scholars could use Hebrew to trace Arabic words with Hebrew or Aramaic origins as well as create a new Arabic lexicon. Kamal was likely attracted to the study of Hebrew for similar reasons. But for him, Hebrew was more than a biblical language that could enrich and build Arabic; it was also a modern, living language that he was familiar with from his relationships with Jews and Zionists in Jerusalem.

At Dar al-‘Ulum, Kamal established a relationship with his teacher Yisrael Wolfensohn (Ben-Zeev), a Jewish Jerusalemite who had received his doctorate in Arabic and Islam in Egypt under the supervision of Taha Hussein and Sheikh Mustafa Abd al-Raziq. Kamal studied Hebrew, al-udaba’, 369. According to the Hebrew newspaper Maariv, Kamal studied at the Herzliya Gymnasium. Maariv, June 5, 1970, 10.

20. Juburi, Mu’jam al-udaba’, 369. Dar al-‘Ulum was incorporated into Cairo University.
Syriac, and Semitic philology with Ben-Zeev. Kamal also translated several Hebrew texts into Arabic as a young student. In 1930, he published an Arabic translation of the Hebrew writer Chaim Nachman Bialik’s poem “Megilat ha-Esh” (The scroll of fire) in the literary supplement of al-Siyasa, an Egyptian newspaper that served as the organ of the Liberal Constitutional Party. In February 1933, Kamal published his Arabic translation of a short story by the Yiddish and Hebrew writer Isaac Leib Peretz in the same paper.

When Kamal returned to Palestine in the 1930s, he probably noticed the large increase in Jewish immigrants to the country, especially Central European Jews fleeing Nazi rule. He would also witness the three-year anticolonial Palestinian Revolt (1936–39). Kamal likely studied at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, a fact mentioned in both Zionist and Palestinian sources but absent from the Hebrew University archives. Kamal maintained his relationship with his mentor, Yisrael Ben-Zeev, who had also returned to Palestine and worked the inspector for Arabic in the Jewish National Council’s Department of Education beginning in 1938. Ben-Zeev recruited Kamal, along with several other Palestinian Arabs, to teach training seminars for Arabic teachers in Jewish schools.

Kamal taught courses on spoken Arabic, translation from Hebrew to Arabic, newspapers, and other subjects. He also translated several Hebrew texts into Arabic and published his work in various newspapers.

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25. Al-Siyasa, suppl. 3028, February 3, 1933, 26–27. Later that year, Kamal translated into Arabic the introduction of a Hebrew translation of Taha Hussein’s novelized autobiography, The Days. See al-Siyasa, suppl. 3260, November 1, 1933, 22; Do’ar Ha-Yom, November 17, 1933, 7.
26. See Maariv, January 23, 1956, 1; Ha-Olam Ha-Zeh, February 2, 1956, 8. It is possible that Kamal audited classes at the Hebrew University but did not formally enroll. It is also possible that his name was misrecorded in the university records.
27. Juburi writes that Kamal also taught Hebrew at government schools.

According to Haaretz, in 1943 Kamal was appointed as instructor of Arabic and Hebrew at Jerusalem’s Central Prison. Haaretz, February 2, 1943, 3.
and penmanship. When Ben-Zeev published his spoken Arabic textbook in 1947, he wrote that he drew his sources from the speech of three Palestinian Arabic teachers, one of whom was Kamal, a “veteran teacher” who represented “the Arabic accent of the progressive Muslim sector in the Land of Israel.”

Kamal became a well-established public intellectual in Palestine. He published several writings in Arabic on topics related to Arab history, education, and “Arab-Jewish cooperation” in Muslim Spain (al-Andalus). He also operated in Jewish intellectual spheres, particularly among intellectuals who, like Ben-Zeev, were deeply invested in Hebrew culture but often remained critical of the mainstream Zionist establishment. Kamal’s friends included many figures involved in Brit Shalom, an organization that promoted Jewish-Arab binationalism, like Judah Magnes, Ernst Simon, and David Werner Senator. He also spoke regularly in front of Jewish audiences. On May 16, 1941, Kamal lectured in Hebrew at an event organized by the (Hebrew) Journalists Association and hosted in Tel Aviv’s Mughrabi Hall. Ha-Boker reported that Kamal discussed Arab suffering during the Spanish Inquisition and noted the “crucial cooperation” in that era between the Arab and Jewish peoples. Kamal then recited the works of the poets Yehuda ha-Levy and David Frischmann in Hebrew “with much success” and with “impressive Hebrew,” according to press reports. The following month, Kamal spoke at a party of the League for Jewish-Arab Rapprochement and Cooperation, with about one hundred

30. See, e.g., Ribhi Kamal, “Turath al-Andalus al-fikri” (The intellectual legacy of al-Andalus), Huna al-Quds, April 15, 1942. Many Jewish intellectuals at the time, especially Sephardim, were also engaged in discussions about al-Andalus. See Yuval Evri, The Return to al-Andalus: Disputes over Sephardic Culture and Identity between Arabic and Hebrew (Hebrew; Jerusalem, 2020).
31. Ha-Boker, May 18, 1941, 4; Ha-Makshif, May 13, 1941; Ha-Makshif, May 15, 1941; Ha-Tsofeh, May 16, 1941, 4.
32. Haaretz, May 26, 1941, 2; Ha-Tsofeh, June 3, 1941, 4; Ha-Tsofeh, June 6, 1941, 7.
Jews and Arabs in attendance. This time, Kamal recited the Hebrew poetry of ha-Levy and Shaul Tchernichovsky, and even added his own Arabic translation.33

In the early 1940s, Kamal put his scholarship and activism to work on the radio, an increasingly popular colonial technology. He spoke on both Hebrew and Arabic programs of the Palestine Broadcasting Service (PBS), established in 1936.34 While British radio in Palestine, like European colonial radio in general, functioned as a “technological centerpiece of colonial modernity” and as a method of social control, it would be a mistake to dismiss the PBS as mere government propaganda.35 As Andrea Stanton argues, the PBS had a significant body of Jewish and Palestinian listeners; it became an “integral part of Levantine life.”36 At the same time, the PBS magnified the political conflict in Palestine by taking a separatist approach to Hebrew and Arabic programming.37 But Kamal’s participation in both the Hebrew and Arabic broadcasts challenged the attempted separatism.38

Kamal was the first Palestinian Arab guest to appear on the PBS’s Hebrew-language broadcast, or “Hebrew Hour.” Beginning in early 1940, he gave a series of talks on Arab culture and education, titled Light in the Orient.39 On the broadcast, Kamal once again highlighted the collaboration between Jews and Arabs in al-Andalus, a topic that he would return to in his later scholarship. The Palestine Post praised Kamal’s first talk as

33. “‘Alon le-haverim” [Pamphlet for members], League for Jewish-Arab Rapprochement and Cooperation, no. 1 (September 1, 1941): 12.
34. On the PBS, see Andrea Stanton, “This Is Jerusalem Calling”: State Radio in Mandate Palestine (Austin, Tex., 2013). On earlier Zionist attempts to establish radio broadcasting in Palestine, see Penslar, “Transmitting Jewish Culture,” 5.
38. Kamal lectured on the PBS Arabic broadcast on a wide variety of literary, historical, and linguistic subjects, including “the language of the Syriacs,” “Georgi Zeidan,” and “A. R. Jabarti—the historian.” Palestine Post, April 10, 1938, 4.
“remarkable” and his Hebrew as “faultless.” The following year, Kamal gave a talk on Nazi doctrines and Islam in which he discussed the potential consequences for the Muslim world if the Axis powers were to win the ongoing world war. Kamal reportedly “called upon Jews and Arabs to forget all past differences and unite against a common foe.” He encouraged the “two Semitic peoples in the country” to “work for the benefit of the shared homeland.” Some Jewish listeners were deeply moved by Kamal’s language and ideas. As one woman from Haifa wrote to the editor of the *Palestine Post* in praise of Kamal:

Sir.—I should like [. . .] to express my thanks as a Jewish woman to Ribhi eff. Kamal for his recent address in Hebrew over the PBS. I wish there were many more people like him [. . .] I hope that [Kamal] may spread his ideas and guide the young people of his own race in the same lines and thus help to bring about happier conditions of life in this country.

Some Jewish listeners also suggested that Kamal’s clear Hebrew pronunciation should serve as a model for Palestine’s Jews. In 1942, one writer for *Haaretz* described the pleasure of listening to Hebrew speakers who clearly distinguished between each letter of the alphabet. This included the late David Yellin, Yosef Meyuhas, Yitzhak Epstein, and “one Arab, Ribhi Kamal,” who the writer had heard on the PBS Hebrew radio program. All these intellectuals, the writer argued, pronounce all twenty-two letters of the Hebrew alphabet, unlike most Ashkenazim, who do not distinguish between letters like *aleph* and ‘*ayn*, *khaf* and *het*, *kaf* and *kuf*, and *tet* and *tav*.

Kamal’s political message of “Jewish-Arab cooperation” in Palestine echoed within his personal life. In February 1945, the Hebrew newspaper *Haaretz* published an announcement about Kamal’s wedding, noting that those in attendance included the Hebrew translator and Zionist activist

42. *Omer*, January 21, 1941, 1.
43. *Palestine Post*, January 30, 1941. 4. The writer signed her name as “A Jewish woman, Haifa.”
Immanuel Olsvanger and “the artist Steinhardt” (likely the German Jewish artist Jacob Steinhardt), among others.\footnote{Haaretz, February 25, 1945. 4.} In 1952, the popular Israeli antiestablishment newspaper \textit{Ha-‘Olam Ha-Zeh} featured a profile on Kamal: “Ribhi’s apartment in Sheikh Jarrah, which he moved into after his marriage, was a regular meeting place for Jews and Arabs.” A Jerusalemite named Esther Nahmias praised \textit{Ha-‘Olam Ha-Zeh’s} report and detailed her own personal connection to Kamal: “I was his neighbor in Sheikh Jarrah. We lived in the same building [. . .] I was at his wedding, and among the invitees who attended were the best authors and teachers from the Hebrew University.”\footnote{\textit{Ha-‘Olam Ha-Zeh}, December 18, 1952, 2.}

These relationships ended abruptly with the outbreak of the 1948 Palestine War, which resulted in the establishment of the state of Israel and the uprooting of more than 720,000 Palestinians from their homes. By the summer of 1949, Israel had violently conquered Arab cities, towns, and villages; it now controlled 78 percent of the territory of Mandatory Palestine.\footnote{Rashid Khalidi, \textit{The Hundred Year’s War on Palestine: A History of Settler Colonialism and Resistance, 1917–2017} (New York, 2020), 58.}

Kamal was a victim of Jewish violence early in the war. In December 1947, according to \textit{Davar}, “irresponsible people” (that they were Jews is implied) attacked Kamal, “the young Arab who has many friends among the Jews,” in Jerusalem’s Zion Square. The article states that members of the Haganah saved Kamal from the attackers.\footnote{Davar, December 15, 1947, 1.} \textit{Ha-‘Olam Ha-Zeh’s} 1952 profile on Kamal called this incident a “lynch[ing],” in which “enraged masses” on Jaffa Road shouted, “Arab, Arab,” and, “Catch him! Catch him! An Arab spy.” According to the article, Kamal called out, “I am a friend of the Jews!” But no one paid attention to his protests. To Kamal’s luck, according to the article, some of his Jewish acquaintances were at the scene, and they saved him from the hands of the attackers. A few hours later, “Kamal was over the border in the Old City. Since then he has disappeared from the eyes of his Jewish friends”—until his voice was heard five years later on Radio Damascus.
During the Nakba, Kamal and his family became refugees in Damascus, and his collaboration with Jewish intellectuals in Palestine ended. But Kamal did not lose his expertise in Hebrew. Instead, he leveraged his Hebrew knowledge in this new setting. Like Jews from the Arabic-speaking world who migrated to the young state of Israel and employed their linguistic knowledge in the service of the Israeli intelligence apparatus, so too did Kamal repurpose his Hebrew knowledge to gain employment in the Syrian government. Beginning in 1948, Kamal taught Hebrew for the Syrian Ministry of Defense, and he later became an instructor of Hebrew, Syriac, and Aramaic at Damascus University. Kamal became a host of Radio Damascus’s Hebrew broadcast in 1952. On air, he no longer called for Semitic brotherhood in the “shared homeland,” as he had done on Palestine’s Hebrew Hour. Now he had quite a different message: he sought to convince Israeli Jews of the dangers of the Israeli state and of their obligation to return to their true “homelands”—the countries from which they migrated to Israel. On the radio, Kamal challenged Israel’s territorialization of Hebrew and began his trespass.

The beginnings of Hebrew radio in Damascus
Radio broadcasting in postindependence Syria began in 1946 with the establishment of the Syrian Broadcasting Organization. In the early 1950s, Syria had four medium-wave transmitters operating from Aleppo and...
Damascus. State-run radio programs broadcast in Arabic as well as in English, French, and Turkish. Colonel Adib al-Shishakli, who effectively ruled Syria as a dictator from 1949 to 1954 (in an era of political coups in the country), recognized radio’s potential as a mass medium for consolidating his own popular support. When he came to power, he invested major resources in the centralization and expansion of radio technologies. Following al-Shishakli’s rule, in the period from 1954 to 1958 (sometimes referred to as Syria’s “democratic years”) there was an expansion of press freedom and further growth of mass media. These technological expansions occurred alongside, and in conjunction with, the rising hegemony of the Syrian military intelligence and the “normalization of that institution’s brutal practices.”

In 1952, the Syrian government decided to fund another foreign-language broadcast—this time, in the language of its Israeli enemy: modern Hebrew. While the history of the Hebrew broadcast’s funding and technological capacity remain unclear, its stated aim was well defined: to “bring to the knowledge of Jews in Israel the truth about what is happening in Syria.” In theory, broadcasting in Hebrew allowed Radio Damascus to access all of Israel’s Jewish population. In reality, however, although much of the veteran Jewish population communicated in modern Hebrew, many of the new Jewish immigrants to Israel were not proficient in the language upon arrival. One Israeli newspaper even suggested that Radio Damascus’s Hebrew broadcast could be a way for new immigrants to learn Hebrew. Perhaps in acknowledgment of this linguistic reality, the hosts of Radio Damascus played hymns on air in several additional languages, including Arabic and German.

Ribhi Kamal cohosted the daily broadcast with another Palestinian, Muhammad ‘Atiyah, who had worked as a Hebrew translator for Jaffa’s Arabic newspapers until 1948. Like Kamal, ‘Atiyah put his pre-1948

52. Boyd, Broadcasting in the Arab World, 78.
55. Ha-Boker, June 5, 1952, 1.
Hebrew expertise to work in Damascus following the Nakba. By broadcasting in Hebrew, Kamal and his colleagues challenged the territorialization of Hebrew as the exclusive language of Jews in Israel. The hosts used their Hebrew knowledge to reject the political project of uniting Jews or bringing them “back home,” which was a central goal of the Hebrew revernacularization movement. Kamal and his colleagues called for their reverse migration.

Syrian government officials adopted European, US, and Soviet models for using radio technology and language expertise as a mode of “psychological warfare.” European colonial powers had long used foreign-language radio broadcasting in propaganda campaigns, especially in war. The British broadcast in ten languages on the eve of World War II; by the end of 1943, they broadcast in forty-five languages. Radio also stood at the forefront of the US Cold War propaganda campaign against the Soviet Union and its allies. The objective of the American broadcast called Radio in the American Sector (RIAS), for example, was to counter communist media in East Germany by producing factual reporting and entertainment programs for listeners there. RIAS was effective in undermining the East German government and shaping political attitudes of listeners in the country. Communist officials could even link acts of civil disobedience in East Germany to information spread by RIAS broadcasts. The United States operated foreign-language stations around the world with a similar goal, from the Voice of Liberation in Guatemala to the Free Voice of Iran. The Soviet Union also sponsored clandestine radio programs during the Cold War, including the Voice of the Turkish Communist Party and the National Voice of Iran.

Employing language expertise, radio technologies, and local actors for the purpose of propaganda was not new in the context of Palestine and Israel. Zionist actors in the early twentieth century produced extensive knowledge of Arab culture and language in order to advocate the merits

58. Hochberg, In Spite of Partition, 77.
60. Nicholas J. Schlosser, Cold War on the Airwaves: The Radio Propaganda War against East Germany (Urbana, Ill., 2015), 3.
of Zionism to Arab populations. In late Ottoman Palestine, for example, Sephardi Zionist editors of the journal *Herut* tried to “conquer” the new platform of the Arabic press through a mass propaganda campaign in Arabic newspapers. In the late 1940s, the Haganah began a clandestine radio service with daily Arabic broadcasts. The broadcasts claimed to provide “inside information” from “behind the Arab lines,” which, one scholar concluded, were “highly effective” and led local Palestinians to suspect one another of spying. Yaakov Shimoni, who served as secretary of the Arab Section of the Jewish Agency at the time, remembered traveling to Tel Aviv to establish the illegal Arabic broadcast in that city: “I think this, the kind of psychological warfare, what we did, played a role in the war of independence.”

The Israeli state radio, Kol Yisrael, also produced Arabic broadcasts aimed at Arab listeners both within Israel and in neighboring states. The broadcasts served as a propaganda tool for nurturing “Arab Israeli” political identity and countering anti-Israeli propaganda abroad. By 1957, 18.5 percent of Kol Yisrael’s total broadcasting was conducted through the

64. During the 1948 War, the Haganah also broadcast English-language propaganda aimed at the British military in Haifa. Derek Penslar, “Radio and the Shaping of Modern Israel, 1936–1973,” in *Nationalism, Zionism and Ethnic Mobilization of the Jews in 1900 and Beyond*, ed. M. Berkowitz (Leiden, 2004), 65.
66. Interview with Yaakov Shimoni (August 19, 1974), Oral History Division 91-9, Hebrew University.
67. See Amal Jamal, *The Public Sphere in Israel: Media Space and Cultural Resistance* (Bloomington, Ind., 2009), 108. Even though it was aimed at a Palestinian Arab audience, Arabic-speaking Jews also listened to this broadcast. Penslar, “Broadcast Orientalism,” 188; Penslar, “Transmitting Jewish Culture,” 10–11.
Arabic Service. The radio hosts were often Arabic-speaking Jews who had recently migrated to Israel. Programs included a Women’s Corner, edited by the Iraqi-born Nuzha Darwish, and Lies and Truth, which fact-checked direct quotes from other Arab radio stations and newspapers. The Arabic Service was, as Penslar writes, “the [Israeli] government’s ears, listening in on Arab broadcasts from abroad.” Israeli intelligence services and radio broadcasters collaborated to trace listener responses to Kol Yisrael’s Arabic Service, which they found to be very positive. In one article that the Israeli officials collected from the Lebanese newspaper al-‘Amal, the author complained about the ubiquity of Kol Yisrael in Syria. The author quoted a friend, who recalled:

I was on my way to Damascus [. . .] when, lo and behold, immediately the clock struck quarter past two in the afternoon, the driver switched on the radio and forth there bellowed from the radio the signal of Kol Israel, followed by the voice of the Jewish announcer who presented the news. I looked into the faces of the other passengers trying to detect on them signs of disapproval or even signs of astonishment, but in vain. On the contrary, I saw them listening to the broadcast in great silence as if they were engaged in an occupation to which they had been accustomed for a very long time.

The author’s friend added that in Damascus, “most, if not all of the houses, are in the habit of listening to Kol [Y]israel.” Geoffrey Wigoder, who served as director of Kol Yisrael’s Overseas Service, considered Israel’s Arabic program to be “the country’s greatest radio achievement and [. . .] a potent factor in the Middle East’s War of the Ether.” He argued that Israel’s Arabic Service took the same “tone of restraint” that the BBC took during World War II, and that it appealed to “educated, intelligent listeners rather than the illiterate masses.” Not all listeners felt this way. Avraham Hason, a Jewish man born in Damascus and who immigrated to Israel in

1962, recalled that in Damascus, his father would turn on Kol Yisrael for news. However, Hason’s father did not trust Kol Yisrael’s Arabic Service because he regarded it as propaganda intended for the Arab world; instead, Hason’s father turned on Kol Yisrael in Hebrew, which is how Avraham Hason began to understand the language before immigrating to Israel.73

Radio Damascus likely established its Hebrew broadcast as a response to Kol Yisrael’s Arabic program. Both programs can be understood within the context of Cold War broadcasting, and both were connected to the government. Syrian officials probably understood the important role that radio played in the early Israeli state. Already in 1948, there was one receiver for every four Israelis.74 Syrian officials were also aware of the new Israeli state’s fragility, its disparate immigrant communities, and the Israeli government’s use of radio as a tool to unify these communities. If, as Penslar writes, Israeli radio’s main goal in the 1950s was to integrate its Jewish immigrants, then the goal of Radio Damascus was the opposite.75 It directly appealed to those same immigrants to undermine the Israeli state, highlight the state’s discrimination against Mizrahi (Eastern) Jews, and dismantle the notion of Jewish nationhood.

Radio Damascus’s first Hebrew broadcast took place on September 6, 1952, at 4:15 p.m. According to reports in Israeli Hebrew newspapers, the host (likely Kamal) opened the broadcast by declaring in his “Mizrahi” accent, “Listen to the Voice of Damascus. Listen to the broadcast station of the Syrian Republic in Hebrew for the Jews of Palestine.” The forty-five-minute broadcast had three sections: classical music, a news bulletin, and a “review of problems of the East and Arab countries, and the status of the Jews in Palestine.” At the end of the broadcast, the host called on Jews residing in Palestine—Poles, Germans, Austrians, English, French, and “Jews of the East”—to listen to the broadcast, “the first Arab radio station that speaks in Hebrew and is aimed at Jews.” The host explicitly laid out the broadcast’s two goals: (i) “to consistently explain the true facts to the Jewish diaspora communities [galuyot yehudiyot] in Palestine, and to provide them with knowledge of some details that the evil propaganda tries to
hide and cover up”; and (2) “to provide an opportunity to those of the Jewish community [bne ha-‘edah ha-yehudit] to become fully familiar with the Arab people who support ideas of progress.”

On the second day of the broadcast, the host appealed to the Jewish audience using a curious approach. He attacked the tool that he himself used—the Hebrew language—as evidence that the Jews did not comprise a “nation.” He declared that Hebrew is “not a language of enlightenment [haskalah] and does not contain international value.” It was the Israeli Histadrut (national trade union) that “forces children of the [Jewish] diaspora communities to learn it.” The irony was that the host used this language of “no international value” to communicate with populations across national borders. A few days later, Kamal once again attacked the modern Hebrew language, proclaiming that “there is not one Jew of a thousand who speaks correct and pure Hebrew.” Pure Hebrew, according to Kamal, was that of the “golden age of Hebrew in Spain under Islamic rule.”

Here, Kamal returned to one of his preferred topics—the Hebrew of al-Andalus—which he had discussed on the PBS Hebrew Hour and explored in his Arabic scholarship as well. On Radio Damascus, Kamal lectured on the correct pronunciation of Hebrew letters that Israeli Jews, he believed, mispronounced (ḥet versus khaf, tet versus tav, kuf versus kaf); on grammatical matters (like the dagesh kal and dagesh ḥazak); and on the accents of German Jewish immigrants to Palestine/Israel. According to Kamal, the fact that Israeli Jews, especially European immigrants, did not speak “true” Hebrew and were forced to learn it by the “government of Tel Aviv” invalidated Zionism: “The language is the nation” (ha-safah hi’ ha-‘umah), he declared, and “if there is no language [Hebrew], there is no nation.”

Kamal’s claims, rooted in European Enlightenment ideas that each “nation” had its own language, echoed concerns that Zionist Hebrew revivers had themselves voiced about the inability of Ashkenazim to pronounce “pure” Hebrew sounds and about the failure to create a monolingual Hebrew society. In 1918, Ze’ev Jabotinsky appealed to Hebrew speakers to adopt proper pronunciation of the dagesh (like in Arabic) or the shva na,

76. Ha-Boker, September 7, 1952, 1; Maariv, September 7, 1952, 3; Haaretz, September 8, 1952, 1.

77. Davar, September 8, 1952, 1.

78. Davar, September 15, 1952, 1.
writing, “I don’t believe there are ten tzaddikim in all of the New Yishuv—including the teachers—that are strict with [yakpidu] the dagesh and the shva na.”

News of Radio Damascus’s Hebrew broadcast quickly reached Israeli media. Initially, Kol Yisrael’s Arabic broadcast welcomed the Syrian government’s decision to broadcast in Hebrew, expressing hope that the broadcasts might bring a rapprochement between Syria and Israel. In this sense, Zionists once again invited Kamal as a “trustful guest” to speak Hebrew. But after the first broadcast, Israeli newspapers quickly began to dismiss Kamal’s work as propaganda and as incapable of reaching its desired audience in Israel. An article in Ha-Boker questioned the Syrian government’s decision to broadcast in Hebrew on a practical level, since many veteran Jews in Israel, as well as the new Jewish immigrants arriving from the Arab world, already knew Arabic. Another commentator compared the broadcast to a “children’s corner,” given the host’s childish understanding of reality. Although the existence of a Hebrew broadcast in one of the Arab capitals should be celebrated, the writer continued, it only highlighted “how far our neighbors are from understanding the reality.” Rather than providing serious news coverage, Radio Damascus’s Hebrew program could be part of Kol Yisrael’s “entertainment series.”

Even as Israeli journalists cast doubt on whether the Damascus Hebrew broadcast had any audience, the Israeli press itself provided detailed coverage of the program, thus indirectly supplying it with one. Indeed, it is primarily from the Israeli newspaper archive that we can trace the message and reception of Radio Damascus’s Hebrew broadcast. Some Israeli journalists used Radio Damascus as a news source on events in the Arab world. Israelis even quoted the opinions stated on Radio Damascus to bolster their complaints about their own government. Others called on Israel to adopt Syrian propaganda methods: one writer for Herut acknowledged

80. Ha-Boker, June 5, 1952, 1.
82. Davar, September 15, 1952, 1.
83. See, e.g., letter to the editor, Haaretz, April 27, 1958, 2.
that one could easily poke fun at Radio Damascus’s Hebrew broadcast but pointed to Syria’s active radio propaganda across the world as something that Israel should imitate, asking, “Where is our propaganda?” For the families of Jews who fled from Israel to Syria (who will be discussed below), Radio Damascus was at times the only way to learn of their relatives’ fate. The same was true for the families of Israeli soldiers captured in Syria. Radio Damascus, for its part, claimed early success in attracting an audience. In November 1952, just two months after the broadcast began, the hosts announced that the program would be extended from forty-five minutes to a full hour. They attributed this change to the “fondness and affection” for the broadcast of “the listeners from Palestine,” though it is not clear how this supposed affection was measured.

Broadcasting Jewish voices
Like US Cold War radio programs that provided a platform for Eastern European exiles to tell their former compatriots the “truth” about life in the West, Radio Damascus’s Hebrew program broadcast Jewish voices on the air. In theory, such voices would lend legitimacy to the broadcasts’ messages about Israel’s repression of religion, discrimination against Mizrahi Jews, and lack of true “nationhood.” The broadcast hosted two types of Jewish guests: (1) Jewish emigrants and prisoners from Israel and (2) Syrian Jews. As for the former, while Israeli Jewish emigration to Syria was not a common phenomenon, Radio Damascus tried to capitalize on the small number of Israelis who did cross the border. These “transgressive migrations,” as Bryan Roby writes, threatened the purpose of the Jewish state: to offer a refuge and homeland for the Jewish people. Israeli emigrants (Hebrew: yordim, lit. “those who descend [from the heights of Zion]”) came

85. See also *Herut*, December 18, 1958, 4.
from both European and Middle Eastern backgrounds. According to Radio Damascus, they found Syria to be a sympathetic refuge on their way back to their “home countries.” The emigrants’ stated motivations for leaving Israel varied. Some cited Israel’s poor economy and its religious oppression. Others cited the state’s discrimination against Mizrahi Jews, and still others appear to have been escaping prison sentences and tax burdens in Israel. In 1954, Radio Damascus hosted a group of Israeli emigrants that reportedly consisted of “tens of people” who spoke German, French, and Arabic. In 1956, several young Jews of Moroccan origin who fled Israel and found “shelter” in Syria also appeared on Radio Damascus. S. Levy called on his “Moroccan brothers” to follow him and return to “the land of their birth.” Meir Amzalak, originally from Casablanca, testified about the Ashkenazi discrimination against immigrants from Eastern countries and called on his friends to “escape the claws of Zionism.” Haim Biton further attacked “the Zionist state” and complained about discrimination in Israel. Biton sent regards to his brother Yaakov over the radio waves and stated that he was currently in the “free state of Syria,” from which he could travel home to his Muslim brothers in Morocco.

To be sure, these testimonies on air cannot be removed from the Syrian intelligence context. Some Jews likely spoke on Radio Damascus out of choice, but others certainly did so under duress. Israeli prisoners in Syrian jails recalled that the Radio Damascus broadcasters, along with Syrian intelligence officers, came to the prisons and forced them to record radio messages—which the broadcasters had themselves dictated—about the “intercommunity persecution” in Israel and how the prisoners had “sought refuge” in Syria. Morris Haqqaq, an Iraqi Jew who immigrated to Israel in 1951 and served in the Israel Defense Forces, presents a mysterious case

88. The Hebrew press often referred to these individuals as “deserters” (’arikim) and “escapees” (borḥim).
89. Ha-Boker, November 15, 1954, 1.
91. ‘Al Ha-Mishmar, February 12, 1956, 1.
of someone who testified on Radio Damascus on more than one occasion, perhaps both voluntarily and involuntarily. In one of his testimonies, Haqqaq reached out directly to Mizrahi Jews: “My brothers, Jews of the East! The Zionist criminals lied to you. They promised you wealth and goodness, only when you come to Palestine. Stop listening to the Zionist propaganda! Here [in Syria] it is like the Garden of Eden [. . .] The Syrian government will give you the money you need.” However, according to the Israeli newspaper ‘Al Ha-Mishmar, following his testimony, Haqqaq was not taken to a hotel, as purported, but rather back to the prison where he was being held.94 A similar case involves a man named Shlomo Ben-Meir Yifrah, who fled from Israel to Syria and gave an interview on Radio Damascus in 1955 in which he vilified Israel and thanked the Syrian government for hosting him. In fluent Hebrew, followed by Arabic, he stated:

I am Shlomo Yifrah from Tiberias, and with this opportunity I send regards to my parents, my family, and my friends in Tiberias. I fled from the Zionist hell because the General Office [ha-lishkah ha-klalit] refused to give me work and rejected me day after day. The Ashkenazim receive work before us, the Sephardim. Most of the country’s residents are hungry for bread [. . .] And the economic situation is difficult. In addition to these troubles, the government of Israel disrespects religion, and because of this I decided to flee from that hell. Finally, thanks to the Syrian authorities for the hospitality and their good treatment.95

According to Ha-‘Olam Ha-Zeh, Yifrah was not an innocent man; he was a criminal who had escaped his prison sentence before fleeing Israel, and upon his arrival to Syria, he was sent immediately to al-Mizzah prison.96

Other Israeli reports conceded that some Jewish emigrants left Israel and testified on Radio Damascus voluntarily. But these reports still characterized them in a negative light. Ha-‘Olam Ha-Zeh portrayed six

94. ‘Al Ha-Mishmar, January 12, 1956, 1; She’arim, January 6, 1954, 1; Ha-Boker, January 6, 1954, 1; Herut, January 5, 1956; Herut, January 12, 1956, 4. Haqqaq was suspected and tried in Syria for spying for Israel, although it was not clear whether he was actually an Israeli spy. For an in-depth account of Haqqaq’s time in Syrian prison and eventual execution, see Hameiri and Liebes, Prisoners of Hate.

95. Herut, November 11, 1955, 8.

96. Ha-‘Olam Ha-Zeh, February 2, 1956, 8.
Israeli emigrants who appeared on Radio Damascus (including Yifrah) as misfits unable to integrate into Israeli society, as criminals fleeing prison sentences and debts, and as mentally unstable individuals. One of these figures, Yitzhak ‘Aziza, had searched for his place in Israel for five years and could not find it, so he went to find his place in Syria. Shimon Mizrahi and Shimon Haziri, natives of Morocco, reportedly became filled with paranoia (tasbih redifah, literally, a “persecution complex”), and they “grumbled everywhere that ‘the blacks are being ruined [dofkim et ha-shehorim]!’”97 While historians have increasingly documented Israel’s institutionalized social and political discrimination against Mizrahi Jews in its early decades—in line with the Jewish emigrants’ claims on Radio Damascus—Israeli government actors at the time tended to deny or justify the inequalities as a necessary process for “modernization” of Mizrahi Jewry.98 Moreover, Jewish emigration from Israel, or at least the desire to emigrate, was likely more common than Israeli government officials would have liked to admit. As Shay Hazkani writes, Moroccan Jews who fought for Israel in the 1948 War often grew disenchanted with the state. According to statistics collected by the postal censorship bureau, over 70 percent of Moroccan soldiers wanted to return to Morocco because of Ashkenazi discrimination against them.99

For the family members of Israeli Jewish emigrants and soldiers taken captive in Syria, Radio Damascus was at times the first medium through which they heard from their relatives. This was the case in early 1956, when Leah Hirsch, an IDF soldier, fled Israel. No one knew where Hirsch had gone until they heard her voice on Radio Damascus. On air, she explained that she left Israel because of the poor conditions there.100 Moreover, in December 1954, Syria captured five Israeli soldiers in the Golan Heights who were subsequently held in a Damascus jail. One of them, the nineteen-year-old Uri Ilan, died by suicide while in prison, which prompted a flurry

97. Ha-‘Olam Ha-Zeh, February 2, 1956, 8.
100. Kol Ha-‘Am, February 2, 1956, 4.
of disputed claims in the two countries. Kamal and his colleagues visited and interviewed the four remaining soldiers in jail—perhaps indicating Radio Damascus’s relationship with the Syrian intelligence services—and then broadcast the interviews on Radio Damascus. On air, the soldiers sent regards to their relatives in Israel, requested Hebrew books and cigarettes, and assured listeners that they were healthy.

Kamal and his colleagues also broadcast messages from the local Syrian Jewish community, which had decreased from almost thirty thousand in 1943 to less than seven thousand in 1950–51. In the aftermath of the 1948 War, Syria’s Jewish communities faced violence, arrests, property confiscations, and anti-Jewish incitement in the Arabic press. Many Jews immigrated to Israel through coordinated, clandestine passage via Lebanon. Most Jews remaining in the country suffered from poor economic conditions. The authors of the 1952 American Jewish Year Book predicted that “few [Jews], if any, may be expected to remain in Syria.”

Radio Damascus portrayed a very different Syrian Jewish community on air: one with religious freedom and an active anti-Zionist stance. On Yom Kippur in September 1952, Radio Damascus broadcast the Ne’ilah prayer from a Damascus synagogue hall. Kamal took the occasion of the holiday to criticize the state of religion in Israel, quoting one Israeli rabbi who cited Israel’s “hostile relationship to religion” and another who lamented the lack of religious learning in Israeli schools. David Ben-Gurion, Kamal declared, wanted to “uproot religion” from Israel. Questioning both the Israeli government’s treatment of religion and the notion of Jewish nationhood, Kamal asked, Isn’t religion what brings Jews together from Burma to Poland? Kamal concluded by reciting a passage from the Hebrew Bible and then turned the broadcast over to his co-host ‘Atiyyah, who intro-

101. The circumstances surrounding the suicide were disputed at the time, and were widely reported in the Israeli and Syrian press, as well as on Radio Damascus. See al-Jundi, January 20, 1955, 6; Davar, January 16, 1955, 1; Ha-Boker, January 16, 1955, 1; ‘Al Ha-Mishmar, January 17, 1955, 1.

102. She’arim, January 16, 1955, 4.

duced the Ne’ilah prayer. Two years later, the hosts once again marked Yom Kippur by broadcasting prayer from a Damascus synagogue. This time, they appealed specifically to “Arab Jewish listeners” (ha-ma’azinim ha-yehudim ha-’aravim) by speaking in Arabic on the broadcast. They played traditional Yom Kippur melodies (pizmonim) and the Ne’ilah prayer so that listeners could remember the freedom of religion that Jews had enjoyed in their “home country” (moledet). The host reassured listeners in Arabic that these prayers had been recorded prior to Yom Kippur, and not on the day itself, so as to “avoid desecrating the holiness.” The host then wished the listeners holiday blessings but emphasized that the blessings were intended only for Jews and “not for Zionists.”

Radio Damascus hosts also interviewed leaders of the Syrian Jewish community, though it is not clear whether these interviews were conducted by choice or force. On air, the Syrian Jewish leaders emphasized a clear distinction between Judaism and Zionism. In 1956, according to Herut, the director of a Damascus Talmud Torah school read a speech attributed to the chief rabbi of Syria on Radio Damascus’s Hebrew broadcast in both Hebrew and Arabic. The speech was intended for “the Mizrahi communities in occupied Palestine”: “We fight against heretical Zionism [ha-tzionut ha-koferet . . .] that always displayed its strong hatred toward the Mizrahi communities [’edot ha-mizraḥ]. It is incumbent upon the Mizrahi communities to fight against the aggressive Zionists in order to protect their religion, their faith, and their doctrine.” The following year, the words of Syria’s chief rabbi were once again heard on Damascus’s Hebrew broadcast, this time condemning Israel’s conscription of women and appealing to Israeli Jews “not to send their daughters to the military.” Such voices supported Kamal and his colleagues’ claim that Zionists not only stole Palestinian land but also oppressed Judaism. This strategy of separating Zionism from Judaism, commonly used by Arab states in the 1950s,

105. Perhaps they were aware that Israel’s own radio service did little to reach out to Mizrahi listeners in the 1950s. See Penslar, “Broadcast Orientalism,” 183.
106. Davar, October 8, 1954, 8.
107. Herut, November 11, 1956, 3.
later became a fundamental part of the PLO’s intellectual resistance to the Israeli state.\textsuperscript{109}

To be sure, Radio Damascus’s news coverage and criticism of Zionism was not always well informed. At times it was viciously propagandistic and antisemitic. For example, in 1953, according to the Israeli newspaper \textit{Davar}, a host of Radio Damascus declared that “Zionist propaganda is what invented the legend of the murder of six million Jews by Hitler and consequently succeeded in establishing a Jewish state.” It was the Jews, according to the host, who were interested in maintaining antisemitism.\textsuperscript{110}

\textit{Israeli media responses}

Did Radio Damascus’s Hebrew broadcast make any inroads into Israeli society? Tracing Israeli media responses offers one way to study its impact on the ground in the absence of listener data. In general, the Israeli press tended to mock, condemn, or dismiss the broadcast. Unlike Radio Free Europe or RAIS, Radio Damascus did not gain a large-scale audience or become a reliable source of information for local listeners. But its Hebrew program nevertheless became a familiar reference in Israeli public discourse. Even if poor radio technology did not always allow the broadcast to reach Israeli listeners, the Israeli press itself provided readers with coverage of the program’s content.

Israeli newspaper coverage of Radio Damascus explicitly referenced Kamal as its host. Many remembered him as a public intellectual and Hebrew scholar in Mandatory Palestine. As one Israeli journalist wrote, “By the way, didn’t the ‘Hebrew’ host of Radio Damascus once recite for us in Tel Aviv the poem ‘Tsion ha-lo tish’ali li-shlom asirayikh’ [‘Ode to Zion,’ a poem of Jewish longing for the Holy Land by Yehuda Halevi]. Yesterday we were suddenly reminded of his recitation in the ‘Mughrabi’ Hall ten years ago.”\textsuperscript{111} Another writer for \textit{Ha-Boker} cynically commented that Kamal had once been associated with Brit Shalom; now, as host of Radio Damascus, Kamal was continuing the same work in the tradition of “peace

\textsuperscript{109} See Gribetz, “The PLO’s Rabbi.”

\textsuperscript{110} \textit{Davar}, February 1, 1953, 1. The hosts made this comment in a discussion of the antisemitic campaign in the Soviet Union that came to be known as the “doctors’ plot.”

\textsuperscript{111} \textit{Maariv}, September 30, 1952, 2.
peace, when there is no peace” (“shalom shalom, ve-en shalom,” a quotation from the book of Jeremiah). Kamal, for his part, also referenced former personal relationships on air. In 1958, ‘Al Ha-Mishmar reported on the “private war” that Kamal waged over the radio against his former mentor, Yisrael Ben-Zeev. According to the article, Kamal publicly attacked Ben-Zeev on Radio Damascus as a “heretic” (kofer) and desecrator of the Sabbath.

The independent, antiestablishment Israeli newspaper Ha-‘Olam Ha-Zeh provided the most extensive coverage of Kamal and his work on Radio Damascus. In the 1950s, Ha-‘Olam Ha-Zeh was a private weekly owned by Uri Avneri and Shalom Cohen, and it was Israel’s only popular opposition newspaper. It criticized government policy and recognized the right of Palestinian refugees to return to the state of Israel’s jurisdiction. Within a month of Radio Damascus’s first Hebrew broadcast, the editors at Ha-‘Olam Ha-Zeh entered into a dialogue with Ribhi Kamal. Kamal had taken the first step in this dialogue when, on air, he quoted from an article by Uri Avneri that called for a coup against Israel’s corrupt government. Kamal also quoted readers of Ha-‘Olam Ha-Zeh who asked who would be “the Israeli Naguib” (referring to a leader in the Egyptian Revolution of 1952, Muhammed Naguib). In another broadcast, Kamal dedicated the full program to a discussion of Ha-‘Olam Ha-Zeh and Uri Avneri. In response, Ha-‘Olam Ha-Zeh’s editors reached out to Kamal through the newspapers’ pages. While the editors expressed sympathy toward Kamal as an individual, they were less sympathetic to his messages on Radio Damascus.

In October 1952, Shalom Cohen dedicated a section of his editorial remarks to “only one reader, who I have no possibility of reaching any other way”: Ribhi Kamal. Referring to Kamal as “Ribhi, my friend,” Cohen initially thanked him for quoting from Ha-‘Olam Ha-Zeh on Radio Damascus. Kamal appears to be a “loyal reader” of the paper, Cohen remarked, and he has every right to quote from it. But Cohen took issue with Kamal’s selective choice of content, arguing that there were more suitable

112. Ha-Boker, October 31, 1955, 2.
parts of the newspaper for Kamal to quote from, including the dozens of articles “dedicated to investigating the possibilities of peace between our two peoples.” Cohen writes, “You read our newspaper, and you know that a large portion of the Hebrew people want true peace. You know also that there is no real contradiction between the interests of our two peoples; on the contrary, the one is in need of the other. Thus, how does your conscience permit you to serve a dark and oppressive regime?” Cohen did not treat Kamal as an abstract or distant figure but rather as someone with whom he shared mutual friends: “I heard from mutual acquaintances that you are an intelligent man. When I listen to the things you say about ‘the Jews of Palestine’ and on ‘the immigrants from the Polish exile,’ I am forced to doubt you.” Cohen suggested that Kamal was acting as a prostitute for the Syrian government and asked, “Do you not believe that for a young Arab there are, in the year 1371 since the Prophet’s migration, more effective professions for his people and for the region?”

In December 1952, Ha-‘Olam Ha-Zeh published a long profile on Kamal, titled “Ribhi Kamal: A Disappointed Zionist.” The article described Kamal’s life before 1948, including his education, marriage, social life, and political involvement. In his editorial remarks to this edition, Uri Avneri described his “unusual sympathy” for Kamal. He recognized that this was a dangerous position to take, since other Israeli newspapers had already grown suspicious of Ha-‘Olam Ha-Zeh, and noted the paper’s frequent appearance on Radio Damascus. Avneri framed Kamal as a tragic figure and victim of exclusionary Zionism. He described Kamal as an Arab with national consciousness, who did all that mortal beings can do in order to integrate into the Hebrew society. He translated Hebrew poetry to his mother tongue. He worked toward political reconciliation. And all that he requested was for the Hebrew society, in which he found all that was missing for him in the Arab society, to treat him as a person with equal rights and equal status.

Avneri blamed Zionism for missing the opportunity to create a shared, Semitic brotherhood: “The Hebrew society rejected him, made

115. Ha-‘Olam Ha-Zeh, October 16, 1952, 2.
him feel that he is nothing but a ‘native,’ a savage from the desert.” What would have happened if the Hebrew society had not been so closed off? Most likely, Avneri reasoned, a young Arab intelligentsia who appreciated Hebrew nationalism’s liberating aspect would have developed, instead of a separatist, chauvinistic Arab nationalism. To be sure, Avneri did not agree with or defend Kamal’s claims on Radio Damascus; he doubted whether Kamal himself believed them.117

Some *Ha-‘Olam Ha-Zeh* readers expressed sympathy for Kamal. Alexander Ginsberg from Hadera wrote, “It’s a pity that someone like Ribhi Kamal, who made an effort to enter the Hebrew society, is lost to us.”118 Others considered the newspaper’s coverage of Kamal to be a waste of space. A. Federman argued that *Ha-‘Olam Ha-Zeh* should focus not on acquiring the friendship of Ribhi Kamal but rather on the far more practical and local task of bridging the divides between Israel’s Sephardi, Yemeni, and Ashkenazi Jewish youth. Yet others invoked Radio Damascus to debate “proper” Hebrew pronunciation. Writing in *Ha-‘Olam Ha-Zeh*, Yitzhak Sharabani praised Kamal’s Hebrew: “The announcers of Kol Yisrael can learn a lot from Ribhi Kamal. They swallow half of the words and their Hebrew is not comprehensible.”119

A reader named Natan Riboh from Rehovot wrote of his personal memories of Kamal: “I knew Ribhi Kamal in the period that we worked together for the Mandate government. He showed considerable skill in teaching Arabic and Hebrew. He tried to bring together the two peoples in the same period.” Riboh proposed several possible explanations for the apparent contradictions between Kamal’s pre- and post-1948 opinions: Perhaps Kamal suffered from the pressure of his current social environment, perhaps he had lost any hope for peace, or perhaps his intention was never sincere and in reality he had always been an Arab chauvinistic nationalist (‘aravi le’umani). In any case, Riboh writes, “it’s not worth dedicating serious attention to him.”120 Riboh’s comment raises an important question:

118. *Ha-‘Olam Ha-Zeh*, December 18, 1952, 2.
119. *Ha-‘Olam Ha-Zeh*, December 18, 1952, 2. Tuvia Shahar of Jerusalem disagreed, stating that while he had not yet listened to Kamal’s broadcast, he saw no flaws in the speech of Kol Yisrael’s hosts. *Ha-‘Olam Ha-Zeh*, January 1, 1953, 2.
120. *Ha-‘Olam Ha-Zeh*, January 1, 1953, 2.
Did Kamal actually agree with his statements on Radio Damascus? Or did he simply take the job without necessarily adhering to the broadcast’s message? Although it is not clear who wrote the scripts and we cannot know what lay in Kamal’s heart, some ideas that he voiced on air would reappear in his later scholarship.

*Ha-‘Olam Ha-Zeh*’s transmedia dialogue with Ribhi Kamal provoked criticism from mainstream Israeli outlets. In June 1953, Avneri wrote, “Our friend Ribhi Kamal, the man of Radio Damascus, causes us again, it seems, troubles.” According to the journal *Be-Terem*, an organ of activists in the ruling political party Mapai, Kamal had read a front-page article from *Ha-‘Olam Ha-Zeh* on Radio Damascus about Israeli foreign minister Moshe Sharett. Kamal had praised *Ha-‘Olam Ha-Zeh* and its editors as daring writers in “occupied Palestine.” Kamal’s reference, according to *Be-Terem*, was proof that *Ha-‘Olam Ha-Zeh* was harmful to Israeli national interests.121

Mapai activists also invoked Radio Damascus, as a symbol of the generic Arab enemy, in the 1955 election. Mapai ran a vicious campaign poster that quoted Radio Damascus support for a rival party—the Sephardim and Oriental Communities (SOC) party—in an attempt to convince the Israeli electorate against voting for it. The poster portrays an Arab broadcaster in a *thawb*, *kuftiyah*, ‘*ikal*, and long beard, sitting cross-legged on a cushion smoking *nargileh* with one hand and recording his broadcast with the other, expressing his support for the SOC party (evidently from a June 1955 broadcast). The poster reads: “Of course Israel-haters support those [. . .] who cultivate an ethnic regime that divides the nation [*‘am*]. But it’s not Radio Damascus, but rather the free nation in Zion, who determines its representatives.”122 By showcasing its endorsement of the SOC

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121. *Ha-‘Olam Ha-Zeh*, June 11, 1953, 2. *Ha-‘Olam Ha-Zeh* was not a stranger to criticism or even harassment from within Israel: the IDF boycotted the paper, the General Security Service tapped its phone lines, and in a few instances, bombs were even found in the newspaper’s offices. Oren Soffer, *Mass Communication in Israel: Nationalism, Globalization, and Segmentation*, trans. J. Yalon (New York, 2014), 55.

party, which may itself have been a deliberate act of interference, Mapai employed Radio Damascus as shorthand for the Arab “enemy.”

In May 1953, Radio Cairo followed Syria’s lead and began broadcasting in Hebrew. Once again, Palestinians initially worked as hosts of the new program. According to Davar, however, the Hebrew spoken on this broadcast was “deficient in style and pronunciation”—unlike Kamal’s Hebrew. In the following decades, Radio Cairo’s Hebrew broadcast began to attract more attention even as Israeli commentators continued to mock the hosts’ Hebrew language and poor translations. While Israeli officials tended to dismiss these broadcasts, they were well aware of the potential competition that Arab radio stations posed. If Kol Yisrael’s programming was not entertaining, wrote Geoffrey Wigoder, Israeli listeners would switch over to foreign Middle Eastern stations that could be picked up easily in Israel, including those that broadcast in Hebrew.

Hebrew broadcasts in Syria and Egypt continued well into the next decades, and they remained important platforms for counterintelligence and psychological warfare. In the 1973 War, both countries’ Hebrew-language radio programs broadcast the testimonies of Israeli prisoners of war, who confirmed for Israeli audiences that they were still alive. At the time, the Palestinian poet, writer, and translator Rashid Hussein, who had been a frequent contributor to Ha-Olam Ha-Zeh, wrote dispatches for Radio Damascus’s Hebrew program. Hebrew-language radio in the Arab

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Party, see Orit Bashkin, Impossible Exodus: Iraqi Jews in Israel (Stanford, Calif., 2017), 137–41. It is not stated whether the original quote from Radio Damascus came from its Hebrew or Arabic broadcast.


126. Yaakov Yacobi, one of the Israeli soldiers taken captive in Syria, recalled his experience speaking on Radio Damascus’s Hebrew broadcast in Bita’on Heil Ha-‘Avir [Organ of the air force], 119.220 (February 1, 1998).

127. Kamal Boullata and Mirene Ghossein, eds., The World of Rashid Hussein, a Palestinian Poet in Exile (Detroit, 1979), 42.
world—as well as Hebrew television—continues today, albeit under different technological circumstances.\textsuperscript{128} In 2011, for example, Syrian satellite television reportedly began a short daily news broadcast in Hebrew. The broadcast’s central goal echoed the initial aim of Radio Damascus’s Hebrew program nearly sixty years earlier: “to reveal the truth to Israelis.”\textsuperscript{129}

**Ribhi Kamal’s Scholarship**

Beyond his work for Radio Damascus, Kamal sought to educate Arabs, many of whom had no direct contact with Israel, about the Hebrew language, Zionism, and Jewish history. He taught at Damascus University, published Hebrew textbooks for Arabic speakers, and penned articles in Syrian journals. In the 1950s, Kamal wrote about Zionism for the mass-circulation Syrian Defense Ministry journal *al-Jundi* (The soldier).\textsuperscript{130} In a special edition on Zionism and Judaism, Kamal refuted the “historical right” that Zionists claimed over Palestine, in which he referenced the antisemitic myth of the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*: he wrote that the “Congress of the Elders of Zion” was convened in 1845, where secret decisions were said to have been made for spreading “Jewish control over the world.”\textsuperscript{131} As a whole, *al-Jundi’s* special edition, dedicating to “knowing your enemy,” adopted classic antisemitic stereotypes about Jews controlling the world. The introduction warned, “In order to be able to defeat the poisonous octopus squatting in the heart of your country, you have to know it well.” Article titles included “Israel Is a ‘Country’ That Will Not Live,” “The Zionist Danger,” “Who Are the Jews?,” and “The Supposed Historical Right.”\textsuperscript{132} Kamal also repeated some of his claims on Radio Damascus

\textsuperscript{128} Boyd, *Broadcasting in the Arab World*, 89, 92, 96.

\textsuperscript{129} “Ha-televisiyah ha-surit he-helah be-shidure hadashot be-‘ivrit—‘legalot et ha-emet le-yisra’elim,” *Haaretz*, August 17, 2011. https://www.haaretz.co.il/misc/1.799282.

\textsuperscript{130} In *al-Jundi*, Kamal also wrote about scholarly topics unrelated to Palestine, like “taste and beauty” (*al-Jundi*, August 1, 1954); “faith and science” (*al-Jundi*, December 9, 1954, 24); and “language and literature” (*al-Jundi*, June 1, 1954, 15). On *al-Jundi*, see Martin, *Syria’s Democratic Years*, 6, 62.

\textsuperscript{131} *Al-Jundi*, March 16, 1954, 2, 15.

\textsuperscript{132} In 1955, Kamal continued to write articles for *al-Jundi* about internal discord in Israel. E.g., *al-Jundi*, January 20, 1955, 10; *al-Jundi*, January 1, 1955.
in his scholarship. In his 1958 Hebrew textbook, *Hebrew Language Lessons*, Kamal criticized Jews who failed to pronounce Hebrew letters properly and stated that modern Hebrew writers did not use “pure” Hebrew. He wrote that the “government of Tel Aviv’s” decision to make Hebrew the state’s official language, and to force all Jewish immigrants to learn Hebrew, was like “requesting a Pakistani or Chinese Muslim, or any non-Arab Muslim, to learn Arabic and use it instead of his own language.”133 For Kamal, Jews comprised a religious group, but Zionism was incorrectly forcing them into a nation.

Even as Kamal criticized the Israeli state and its use of Hebrew as a unifying national language, Kamal remained committed to teaching the language to Arab students. One reason that Arabs should learn Hebrew, he writes, was to know the enemy. In his book *Hebrew without a Teacher* (1968), Kamal included a list of Hebrew military terms that “the Arab citizen, whether a soldier or a civilian, must know.”134 Kamal also cited an altogether different motive: in the same textbook, Kamal referenced the prophet Muhammad’s injunction to his scribe Zayd ibn Thabit to “learn the language of the Jews.”135 Meanwhile, Kamal wrote in his Hebrew-Arabic dictionary (1975) that it was the duty of Arab intellectuals who studied the Arabic language in depth to learn Hebrew or one of its “Semitic sisters.” Kamal reasoned that the intellectual will then discover that Arabic is the most beautiful, closest to its Semitic origin, and superior to all of its sister languages. Arabic has a “glorious legacy that we take pride in generation after generation.”136 For Kamal, learning Hebrew would allow Arabs to be proud of their linguistic superiority; it was an important component of being an Arab intellectual.

Kamal passed on his views about Israel, Zionism, and the Hebrew language to his students. In 1955, the Israeli journalist Amnon Kapeliouk met one of Kamal’s students from Damascus University at a festival in Warsaw. The student said that he was “a friend of the Jews and I want...

peace between Israel and Syria.” He had studied ancient Israelite history, Hebrew grammar, and poems of the medieval period (including those of Yehuda Halevi and Ibn Ezra). The student’s other claims about Hebrew did not please Kapeliouk: he echoed Kamal’s repeated argument that there cannot be one Jewish “nation” because every Jewish community (’edah) speaks its own language.

In the decades following the 1950s, Kamal continued to publish Hebrew textbooks and scholarship on Semitic languages. He taught at universities in Damascus, Beirut, and Amman. Kamal’s prolific scholarly career gained him membership in the Syrian branch of the General Union of Palestinian Writers and Journalists (Al-Ttihad Al-‘Amm Lil-kuttab Wa-l-Sahafiyyin Al-Filastiniyyin Far’ Suriya).

In recent histories of Kamal’s life, conflicting narratives remain about several basic facts. For example, the Palestinian Jerusalemite Misbah al-Budeiri recalled in an oral history interview that Ribhi Kamal taught Hebrew at Hebrew University in Mandatory Jerusalem, and that his students were Jewish immigrants from Europe who did not know Hebrew.137 The historian Kamil Salman Juburi also records that Kamal taught Hebrew at the Hebrew University until 1946: he “mastered Hebrew better than the Jews,” and he was especially skilled in reciting the Torah and Psalms. In fact, Juburi writes, “[The Zionists] tried to seduce [Kamal] to work with them and he refused.” However, as we saw above, Hebrew-language references do not indicate that Kamal taught at the Hebrew University, nor does such information appear in the Hebrew University archives. One Israeli newspaper even claimed that Kamal worked for the intelligence arm of the Zionist paramilitary organization, the Haganah, called Shai (Sherut Yediot).138

According to Juburi, Kamal received his doctorate at the age of sixty from the University of Madrid.139 In January 1979, Kamal died in Amman at the age of sixty-six.140 His legacy continued through his scholarship on

Semitic languages and Hebrew textbooks for Arabic speakers, which still circulate in university libraries across the Middle East.

In his youth, Ribhi Kamal became absorbed with biblical and modern Hebrew. When he was exiled from Palestine in the 1948 War, Kamal had to confront his relationship with the language. Could he employ his Hebrew beyond Palestine? Could Hebrew serve as both an enemy language and a sister language to his native Arabic? Kamal answered both questions with a resounding yes. Beginning in 1952, Israeli Jewish listeners heard Kamal’s Hebrew voice across the radio waves from Damascus. For Kamal and his colleagues, radio offered a mode of resistance and even warfare. As the Egyptian newspaper *Akhir Sa’ah* described in 1954, “The battle does not occur on land or in the sea; rather, its wide domain is the ether.”

By reaching out to Israeli Jewish listeners over Radio Damascus, Kamal worked to trespass on Israeli territory in two ways: on its physical territory through the radio technology and on its cultural territory through his perfect Hebrew voice. The medium of the Hebrew language not only bolstered Kamal’s communication; the medium was integral to his message.

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