



From the Dreyfus Affair to Zionism in Palestine: Rashid Riḍā's Views of Jews in Relation to the 'Christian' Colonial West

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ABSTRACT The ideas of the well-known reformist Sheikh Muḥammad Rashīd Riḍā (1865–1935) in his journal *Al-Manār* (Lighthouse, 1898–1935) still inspire many academic researchers who are interested in the study of the Muslim world in the first decades of the twentieth century. As one of the most influential advocates of Arab nationalism and pan-Islamism, Riḍā's critiques of Zionism and Jewish expansion in Palestine were part of his anti-colonial activities against the 'Christian' west. The article discusses how Riḍā was frustrated that European powers let down the Arabs by supporting the Jews in establishing their homeland at the cost of the rights of its indigenous inhabitants. We shall argue that Riḍā's harsh views of Zionism should be understood as a mixture of religious rhetoric, nationalist ambitions, resistance to Turkish policies, and political frustration with Europe's 'unjust' colonial policies and special political privileges given to the Jews in Palestine. In the early years of the twentieth century, Riḍā anticipated the progress of the Jews in establishing a nation of their own in Palestine, but his concerns grew after the British Mandate in 1922. The article looks at how Riḍā, in his confrontations with Zionism and Judaism, combined these debates with other ideas on freemasonry, the authority of the Church, the crusades, and the role of Jesuits in curbing the asserted increasing Jewish power in Europe. The article highlights how Riḍā's Islamic national outlook against the Jews and Zionists in Palestine bears the character of religious and political ferment against the 'Christian' west.

KEYWORDS Muḥammad Rashīd Riḍā, *Al-Manār*, Europe, Zionism, Palestine, Judaism, Christianity, Jesuits, Freemasonry, pan-Islamism, pan-Arabism

In memoriam my *Doktorvater* Prof. Dr. P.S. van Koningsveld (1943–2021)

Introduction

The ideas of the well-known reformist Sheikh Muḥammad Rashīd Riḍā (1865–1935) still inspire many academic researchers who are interested in the study of the Muslim world in the [1]

first decades of the twentieth century (Zemmin 2018; Stolz 2018; Halevi 2019). His journal *Al-Manār* (The Lighthouse, 1898–1935) is an important historical window to Riḍā's time, since he published in that journal his own religious reflections on a wide range of topics, fatwas, Quranic exegesis, news on contemporary events, translations of western scientific, religious, and literary works, anti-colonial outlook, and endless polemics against Christianity and Christian missions (Ryad 2009).

In his study “Zionism as told by Rashīd Riḍā,” Uriya Shavit divided the attitudes of *Al-Manār* [2] into five milestones, in which Riḍā perceived this political movement as 1) a humanitarian resettlement plan (1898), 2) a political movement that aimed to take over Palestine (1902), 3) the ultimate ambition of the Jews to convert the al-Aqsa Mosque into a Jewish temple after the Young Turk revolution (1910–14), 4) the realization of Zionist ambitions, following the Balfour Declaration and the imposition of the British Mandate (1914–28), and finally 5) a religious war between the Jews, the British, and Islam (1928–35) (Shavit 2015; see Haim 1955; Mandel 1965, 1976). Shavit argues that “a reading of Riḍā's depictions of Jews as the embodiment of vices and the orchestrators of global-scale conspiracies is useful to the broader discussion on the proliferation of anti-Semitic ideas in the contemporary Arab world” (2015, 25). Further, it is argued that “the gap between philo-Semitism and anti-Semitism, both being essentialist views on Jews, is not wide, and much of what Riḍā admired about Jews, particularly their unity and talents for financial gain and political maneuvering, could be presented equally in positive and negative terms” (2015, 25). Shavit is actually the first systematic article about Riḍā's perspectives on Zionism. In his *Defining neighbors: religion, race, and the early Zionist-Arab Encounter*, Jonathan Marc Gribetz also studied Riḍā's views on Judaism and Zionism among other Arab intellectuals in the journals of *al-Hilāl* and *al-Muqataṭaf* with a focus on “ideas concerning race, and particularly the Jews' racial relationship with Arabs.” Gribetz admitted that “the focus on race, however, was certainly not to the exclusion of other means of categorization and interpretation of the Jews and Zionism; conceptions of the Jewish religion were crucial as well” (Gribetz 2014, 9, 149–69). In his recent article “Rashīd Riḍā, Jews, and Zionism,” Eliezer Tauber argued that Riḍā's attitudes evolved toward the Jewish settlement in Palestine and the Zionist movement from “appreciation if not admiration” to “attempts at cooperation” and ended with “anti-Semitic remarks and unequivocal religious rulings (*fatwās*) against the Zionist enterprise” (Tauber 2021, 405).

However, one should not look at Riḍā's views of Zionism only from the racial perspectives [3] of the Jews, but rather from the wider context of Riḍā's endless religious and political debates about European colonialism. It is important to remember Riḍā's anti-colonial sentiments were running high throughout the thirty-five years of the publication of his journal. Therefore, Riḍā's thoughts on Judaism and Zionism should also be read as a device for counterweight against what he saw as European ‘Christian’ powers. As one of the most influential advocates of Arab nationalism and pan-Islamism, we shall argue, Riḍā's critiques of Zionism and Jewish expansion in Palestine were part of his anti-colonial activities against the ‘Christian’ west. First of all, Riḍā was frustrated that the European powers let down the Arabs by supporting the Jews in establishing their homeland at the cost of the rights of its indigenous inhabitants. Riḍā's harsh views of Zionism should also be understood as a mixture of religious rhetoric, nationalist ambitions, resistance to Turkish policies, and political frustration with Europe's ‘unjust’ colonial policies and special political privileges given to the Jews in Palestine. In the early years of the twentieth century, Riḍā anticipated the progress of the Jews in establishing a nation of their own in Palestine, but his concerns grew after the British Mandate in 1922.

Whereas his prime focus lay in his confrontations with Zionism and Judaism, Riḍā combined these debates with other ideas on freemasonry, the authority of the Church, the crusades, and the role of Jesuits in curbing the asserted increasing Jewish power in Europe. In what follows, we shall highlight how Riḍā's Islamic national outlook and scripture-based arguments against the Jews and Zionists in Palestine bear the character of religious and political ferment against the 'Christian' west.

On another level, the study of Riḍā's condemnation of western support for Jewish and Zionist expansion in Palestine may emphasize Cemil Ayden's argument that pan-Islamic anti-colonial attitudes were part anti-Westernism internationalism. The anti-Western critiques uttered by Riḍā and his pan-Islamic peers were not only a natural response to Western colonialism, but also to Western discourses that coupled progress and civilization with Christianity or the white race. "It is thus necessary," Ayden writes, "to examine historically how various religious traditions and the experience of European colonialism interacted with peculiar Muslim or non-Muslim discontent with globalization, the international order, and modernization to produce shared anti-Western discourses in the twentieth century" (Aydin 2019, 1:13). We shall see that the formation of Riḍā's attitudes against Jews and Zionists were part of his anti-Western stance against what he saw as 'unfair and unconditional' international support of Zionists against the Arab political and historical rights in the Holy Lands. [4]

The Dreyfus Affair between 'Christian' Europe and Islam

In 1898, Riḍā expressed his sympathy for the injustice inflicted upon the Jews in France during the Dreyfus affair (1894–1906), which was one of the most notable examples of antisemitism in Europe of that time. For Riḍā, through this affair the French Republican principles of freedom collapsed, and intolerance prevailed instead. The cause of the persecution of Jews in France was not based on religious sentiments, since the French nation had weakened its own religion anyhow. It was rather based on the sentiments of "racial fanaticism" and "vicious envy" against the Jews, which were provoked by the anti-Jewish French press (*Al-Manār* 1/2: 54). Riḍā also maintained that if such "ugly" incidents were to happen among the Easterners, the European press campaign regarding what they saw as "oriental" intolerance would have intensified (*Al-Manār* 1/2: 54). He bemoaned that some Egyptian newspapers imitated this "ailment" of the French press by harshly taking on the Jews and defaming their skills in financial gain and methods of profit in a negative way. However, true civilization and justice should demand absolute equality among all humans, and that earning money by legitimate means is a social virtue. Riḍā appreciated the balanced response of some French fair-minded intellectuals against this anti-Jewish campaign who considered it a "temporary" disease which would be erased by mean of the progress of civilization and general ethics. A model to be followed by his oriental fellow-citizens, especially Muslims (*Al-Manār* 1/2: 54–55). [5]

Riḍā was of the view that European secularization did not mean a full disconnection of Europeans with their religious feelings (*Al-Manār* 1/26: 483–493). The Dreyfus affair was, in his view, a significant marker for French "blind indiscretion and fanaticism" by which they falsely and baselessly convicted the Jews. In his view, despite the diminishing role of Christianity in Europe, European political ambitions were still tinged with reprehensible religious fanaticism. Nationality and patriotism were in constant conflict with religion among western nations (*Al-Manār* 1/26: 489–490). In their colonized territories, Europeans exploited religious missionary societies to establish discord among the nations and Christians and Muslims [6]

in the Ottoman regions, in particular (Ryad 2009). He mentioned, as another example, some French citizens who encouraged equality and freedom in their country but objected to travel with Muslims in Tunisia and Alegria as travel-fellows in the same train (*Al-Manār* 1/26: 489). For Riḍā, the call among Muslims to separate religion and the state by following the European model was unfounded, since Islam is both a spiritual and mundane religion promoting equality and justice from its beginning. The prejudice against Dreyfus represented a difference between Muslims at the beginning of their religion, who deal with religious minorities with equality, and the Europeans at the end of their civilization, who still persecute the Jews among them (*Al-Manār* 2/23: 359).

Under the title “Al-Islām wā al-Taraqqī [Islam and Progress]”, Riḍā moreover argued that Islam annulled the authority of spiritual leaders and restricted the absolute authority of kings and rulers by the rules of the Sharia, which *Al-Manār* defended as “law based on the principles of true freedom, justice and equality,” which Europe had actually borrowed from Islam and made to prevail in their lands (*Al-Manār* 1/46: 885). For him, Islam also erased any reprehensible fanaticism by replacing it with justice. He compared the situation of the Jews in Europe with a narrative in which Caliph ‘Umar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb was said to judge in favour of a Jew in a dispute with ‘Alī ibn Abī Ṭālib by concluding: “The French, the imams of European civilization, whose flag refers to justice, freedom and equality, still persecute the Jews today through associations that established newspapers and composed tracts to incite against the Jews” (*Al-Manār* 1/46: 886). [7]

Zionism in Palestine between the ‘Shade’ of the Sultan, Young Turks, and the British ‘Christian’ Protection

In the late nineteenth century, and amidst the debate about the Dreyfus affair, Egyptian newspapers circulated news about increasing Zionist political and economic activities in Germany, Austria, England, and the USA with the aim of establishing settlements for persecuted Jews in Russia, Bulgaria, Romania, Persia, and Morocco. In the early years of *Al-Manār*, Riḍā was relatively positive about the Jewish settlement in Palestine. In his comment on this news, Riḍā said that the Jews wanted to migrate to the Supreme Porte because there was no excessive fanaticism against them in the Ottoman Empire as compared to the injustice and oppression under which they suffered in such countries as Russia and Bulgaria (*Al-Manār* 1/6: 107). Riḍā was herewith aware of the worsening of the situation of the Jews in the Russian Empire and the rise of nationalism among them in various regions. After the assassination of Tsar Alexander II in 1881, the notorious “May Laws” were hardened against the Jews, heightening the levels of economic, physical, and intellectual discrimination against the Jews (Klier 2011). In Riḍā’s opinion, the preference of the Jews for Palestine as a sacred place was definitely for religious reasons, but security and comfort were also a reason for this choice. In addition, he hoped that Arabs would become zealous in achieving happiness by means of knowledge, just as European newspapers and politicians who encouraged poor Jews to settle, reconstruct, disseminate knowledge, and expand their trade and industry in Palestine. The tying bond among the Jews, despite their dispersion all over the world, should be taken an example for Muslims and Arabs to unite themselves in their work (*Al-Manār* 1/6: 107). [8]

A few months after the first Zionist Congress in Basel (1897), a reader in Frankfurt approached the Arab Christian journal *al-Muqataṭaf*, which was founded in Cairo by the well-known Christian Arab thinkers Yaq‘ūb Ṣarrūf (1852–1927) and Fāris Nimr (1856–1951), ask- [9]

ing the editors about what the Arabic press had thought about Zionism and its recent congress (*Al-Muqataṭaf* 4: 310–311). The answer of *al-Muqataṭaf* reflected on the previous decennia of Zionist interests and the expansion of colonies in Palestine as well as Ottoman reluctance and regulations. They replied that the Arabic press had merely mentioned the congress with no special attention to its contents or consequences. For them, the Jews were rather keen on trade and commerce in Palestine, as they were not experienced peasants. The editors of *al-Muqataṭaf* also expressed their anxiety that if the numbers of Jews increased in the region, they would dominate business there. At this moment, *al-Muqataṭaf* did not believe in any quick success for the Zionists in Palestine. For them, the resistance of Ottoman Porte to interfere with the Great Powers and their protection of Jewish immigrants under the Capitulations was a major obstacle in the way of the Zionist Movement (Mandel 1976, 44–45). Riḍā reprinted their reply in *al-Manār*, but differed with the editors of *al-Muqataṭaf* in expressing how he was vexed by the nationalist revival of the Jews but wished that it would inspire his fellow-citizens (*ahl bilādina*) (*Al-Manār* 1/6: 107). In his comments, Riḍā called the Arabs to think, examine and discuss how “the penniless of the weakest of peoples [the Jews], whom all governments are expelling, have so much knowledge and understanding of civilisation and its ways that they can take possession of your country, establish colonies in it, and reduce its masters to hired labourers and its rich to poor men” (*Al-Manār* 1/6: 108, translated in Mandel 1976, 45).

As early as 1902, Riḍā considered Zionism as the vital impulse by which the Jews gave to their nation a new “life” after its “death” (*Al-Manār* 4/21: 801–809). In a discussion with Riyāḍ Pasha (1835 or 1836–1911), a former Prime Minister of Egypt, Riḍā maintained that the Zionist Organisation had attempted to re-establish the kingdom to the People of Israel. Riyāḍ Pasha told Riḍā that he had recently read a book written by an anti-Jewish European author (with no further information) in which he despised the Jews magnifying the idea of their control of the financial bank system in France. An Egyptian friend of Riyāḍ Pasha suggested to translate the book, not “to aggravate the Israelites, but to give admonition to Muslims” (*Al-Manār* 4/21: 801). In response, Riḍā also bemoaned the situation of Muslims, urging them to take the Jews as an example. He ascribed the misery of Muslims to the despotism of their rulers and to the intervention of colonial powers in their affairs. He wished that Muslims would follow Jews as a model in their Jewish boasting to their descendancy in the line of Prophets depending on the “blessings” of the Torah and the assuming of the “magnified” title as the Chosen People of God (*Al-Manār* 4/21: 802). The Jews, despite their dispersion among the nations, followed God’s *sunan* (plans in creation) in preserving their language and religious unity and in being skilled in all useful sciences and crafts as well as in collecting money, which is the basis of power and dignity, in Riḍā’s views. The Israelites, he further said, follow this “natural” path in retrieving their “lost” dignity to the extent that “the one Jew is more dignified than a king in the East; and any European nation could threaten the greatest Eastern authority orally and practically forcing it to humiliate itself. However, it was disastrous for France when it tried to humiliate a Jewish man. Internal wars were about to erupt, but [France] finally rectified it: namely the Dreyfus affair has not been forgotten by those who knew it” (*Al-Manār* 4/21: 802).

This article was published shortly after the fifth Zionist Congress at Basel (1901), at which Herzl reported of his meeting with Sultan Abdul Hamid II of Turkey and of the progress of the Jewish Colonial Trust (Mandel 1974; Oke 1982; Nusairat 2019). Riḍā introduced to his readers a short historical account of the development of this organization and its activities in Austria, Germany, England and America, and how Zionists changed their energy from helping

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the persecuted Jews to safely settle in Palestine under the ‘shade’ of the Sultan to seeking a kingdom of their own there. Riḍā mentioned in particular the prominent British Zionist, writer, and activist Israel Zangwill (1864–1923), founder of the Jewish Territorial Organization, who earnestly aimed at securing land for Jewish refugees in Palestine from the British government (Faris 1975; Rochelson 2010). He quoted Zangwill’s address to the Fifth Zionist Congress, in which he said that the Jews will return to their ancient kingdom in Palestine and will change it into a “paradise” with a well-organized state on the mountain of Zion (*Al-Manār* 4/21: 804). Because they were persecuted by Christians and heathens throughout history, Jews strengthened their unity by living close to each other and by not mixing with other nations (Zangwill 1896). By quoting an address given during a meeting of the branch of the Zionist Organisation in Alexandria, Riḍā urged Muslims to take the Zionist Organisation that collected a lot of money to purchase colonies in Palestine as a model in forming philanthropic associations with the aim of establishing similar social projects or a university in Egypt, at least (*Al-Manār* 4/21: 804).

After the 1908 Young Turks Revolution, Riḍā claimed that Zionists became aware that their good relations with the Turks would enable them to fulfill their plans in Palestine. Their alliance with the Turks was not appreciated by Arab nationalists in the Decentralization Party, of which Riḍā was a significant founding member. After his one-year visit to Istanbul (1910), Riḍā claimed to have observed an increase of Jewish influence on Ottoman politics. He referred in particular to the then influential minister of finance (between 1909–1912 and again between 1917–1918) and Freemason Mehmet Cavid (1875–1926), former Feyziye principal, and instructor and director of a Dönme commerce school. Riḍā claimed that Cavid, belonging to the Dönme group of Jewish origin, was keen on appointing many other Jews in his ministry, which indicated their increasing impact on the empire, ending with fulfilling their “well-known aims” in Jerusalem and Palestine (*Al-Manār* 14/2: 159). Riḍā followed the same anti-Dönme rhetoric in Istanbul in 1909–1911, in which Mehmet Cavid was accused by his Muslim opponents in the Ottoman Parliament of being “a Salonikan Dönme in league with Jewish banks” (Baer 2010, 103). It is ironic that British officials, especially ambassadors, in their official correspondence between 1909 and 1916, explicitly referred to a total Jewish influence in the empire by describing the Turkish Committee of Union and Progress (CUP) “as a cabal of Jews and Freemasons, calling it the ‘Jew Committee of Union and Progress,’ and to Mehmet Cavid as a ‘crypto-Jew’ and ‘apex of Freemasonry’ in the empire” (Baer 2010, 102). [12]

At that time, many of Riḍā’s Muslim and non-Muslim “sincere friends” (*aṣḍiqā’unā al-mukhlisūn*), including a few Jews in Egypt, criticized him in the press for his accusation of the Zionist control of the CUP (*Al-Manār* 14/9: 714). However, he was convinced that his journal was among the first to warn against the Zionist expansion in Palestine. In order to sustain his argument, Riḍā referred to the statements made by Ibrahim Hakki Pasha (1862–1918), an Ottoman statesman and Grand Vizier of the Ottoman Empire between 1910–1911, when he declared in Parliament that the Jews were building their future in the empire (*Al-Manār* 14/9: 714). In that period, Hakki had fierce debates with his political rivals on that point. For example, he “claimed that the four French banks with which Cavid Bey had opened negotiations for a loan in 1910 were all Zionist organs, and that the Deutsche Bank, which had agreed to make the loan later in 1910, had done so at Zionist instigation through Jacques Menasche of Constantinople” (Mandel 1965, 98). [13]

In the same period, a proposal was made by a certain Dr. Najīb al-Aṣfar to buy Ottoman [14]

state lands, which was thought to be supported by the Zionists. Known as “*Mashrū‘ al-Aṣfar* (al-Aṣfar’s project),” it triggered a huge debate in the Arab press. In the beginning, Riḍā was not much concerned about the project; but because the debate heavily intensified, he decided to participate in the discussion by demonstrating the positive and negative aspects of the project. First of all, no project of construction of lands would be accomplished except by collaborating with the Zionists, as such projects depended much on European money and the Jews controlled its financial bank sectors. This is why the CUP was keen on collaborating with them. As an anecdote, Riḍā said that once a man wanted to buy a watch, but when he discovered that the seller was a Jew, he said “I am not keen on helping a Jew make money;” the seller ironically answered: “You will never buy anything in that case” (*Al-Manār* 14/9: 715). Secondly, Syrians and Ottomans had to collaborate with Europeans, since they had no capacity to erect such huge agricultural, industrial, or commercial projects on their own; not only because of their lack of money, but also because of their ignorance of sciences, crafts of engineering, or mechanical works. For Riḍā, the danger of Zionists is centered on one thing, namely their possession of the Holy Land and that the people and the state would “drown” themselves in debts imposed by foreign Jews who would definitely try to retrieve their money by controlling the land in return (*Al-Manār* 14/9: 716).

In 1914 and before the outbreak of World War I, Riḍā published various articles in order to inform his readers about Zionism and its plans in the Holy Land (*Al-Manār* 17/4: 319–320; *Al-Manār* 17/5: 385–390). One of these articles was an Arabic translation of an article by the Russian-born Zionist leader and head of the Jewish National Fund Menachem Ussishkin (1863–1941), which appeared in the Palestinian press in that time (*Al-Manār* 17/9: 697–708, Beška 2014). In Riḍā’s view, the Zionists knew very well that the European powers would not allow other nations to take control of the Holy Land, which was still under Ottoman control, because it is the cradle of the divine revelation and origin of the religions of Moses and Jesus. Therefore, the Zionists eagerly desired to satisfy these European powers by convincing them that the Jews should have power in this “kingdom” as the solution of this conflict among “Christian nations” (*Al-Manār*, 17/4: 320). The same held true for their alleged desire to convince the CUP to support them in order to block the road to the Arabs in Palestine. Riḍā advised Arab leaders to either settle an agreement with the Zionist leaders for the sake of the common interests of both groups, or to collect their forces to counter against the Zionists in all forms of struggle, beginning with forming associations and companies and ending with creating military guerillas to combat them by force if necessary. Riḍā concluded by saying that the last option was the most severe, but in accordance with the Arabic expression *al-kay ākhir al-‘ilāj* (lit. cauterization is the last cure; meaning ‘desperate diseases must have desperate remedies’) (*Al-Manār* 17/4: 320).

In the last months of World War I, Riḍā changed his mind regarding the Arab-Zionist collaboration. In his unpublished diaries of April/May 1918, Riḍā expressed his disappointment in the activities of Syrian nationalists propagating an Arab-Jewish collaboration. For example, Rafīq al-‘Azm (1867–1927), Mukhtār al-Ṣulḥ, and Sulaymān Naṣīf travelled to Jerusalem in the company of British delegates in order to convince Muslims to agree with the Jews on specific terms: namely that Jews were not allowed to purchase lands during the wartime, the government should remain Arab, and that Jewish banks should lend other non-Jews money with the same interest they offered their Jewish fellows (Riḍā’s diaries April-May, 1918). It is worth noting that Rafīq al-‘Azm and Mukhtār al-Ṣulḥ were members of the “Declaration to the Seven,” by which the British had pronounced to the Arabs the principle of national

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self-determination for the first time (Friedman 2000). In the last years of World War I, Syrian delegates regularly met with British and French high officials to negotiate the political future of their region, including Palestine (Friedman 1973, 206–7). Riḍā was certain that there was no guarantee that these terms would be taken into consideration after the Jews took control of everything, even by the British themselves. He sarcastically described Rafīq al-ʿAẓm as a “lazy” person who had now travelled to Jerusalem, while he was initially not keen on politics out of fear of the Ottomans or the Egyptians (Riḍā’s diaries April-May, 1918). He wrote: “It is odd that Rafīq Bik al-ʿAẓm, who thinks that he is the most knowledgeable person of politics on earth, and that he is the most difficult one to be deceived, is now accepting to be a ‘tool’ by which the English want to demonstrate that the Arab leaders, Christians and Muslims, accept Palestine as a political homeland for the Jews” (Riḍā’s diaries April-May, 1918).¹

After the German defeat in World War I, Riḍā argued that the end of the war was a result of a political game between “learned and wise” and “ignorant and fool” nations (Ryad 2016, 322). The British were able to convince the Americans to come and rescue them and the Allies from the possible military “hell” that was supposed to be caused by Germany by using two “amulets” in order to get the American “serpent” out of its hole, namely their promise and lip service to free the colonized nations, and the cunning of the Jews and their financial authority in that country in return for a promise to return their Kingdom of Israel and the Holy Land as a reward against the rights of the Arabs, Christians, or Muslims (Ryad 2016, 322).

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Jews, Freemasons, Jesuits and the Authority of the Church

Throughout his journal, Riḍā made a clear link between the Jews and freemasons in Europe and in the East. In fact, freemason lodges became widespread in Egypt throughout the nineteenth century under the jurisdiction of a variety of Rites including French, English, Scottish, Italian, German, and Greek. Freemasons claimed that they “worked toward the promotion of brotherhood, philanthropy and charitable institutions” (Kudsi-Zadeh 1972, 26). These lodges included members of the Egyptian Jewish, Christian, and Muslim intelligentsia, elite, and aristocracy, including Christian and Muslim clergymen. The well-known Muslim reformers Jamāl al-Dīn al-Afghānī (1838–1879) and his student Muḥammad ʿAbduh (1849–1905) were active freemason members for many years, but they withdrew. Riḍā, basing his story on information from ʿAbduh, maintained that “the initial cause for the withdrawal of Afghānī and ʿAbduh from Freemasonry” was an incident which took place during a visit to Egypt by the English Grand Master, the Prince of Wales (Kudsi-Zadeh 1972, 28). The Masonic lodges honored the visitor lavishly; and when one of the leading members addressed him as Crown Prince, Afghānī objected that it was not permissible to address any member as such “even though he was the heir to the British Empire” (Kudsi-Zadeh 1972, 34). Furthermore, the British government had not conferred any favours upon the fraternity. Some of the leaders, however, repudiated these statements, and after a debate Afghānī withdrew (Kudsi-Zadeh 1972, 28).

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Tafsīr Al-Manār was a collaborative work by ʿAbduh and his disciple Riḍā. In their exegesis of the Qurʾanic verse (Al-Nisā, 4:44) “Have you not seen those who were given a portion of the Scriptures yet trade it for misguidance and wish to see you deviate from the Right Path?”, they maintained that the Jews were as hostile to Muslims as infidels in the Hijaz in the early period of Islam. However, they supported the conquest of Muslims to Syria and Palestine, and later in Spain, so that they could escape the oppression of the Christians after having been

[19]

1 All translation of passages are made by the author unless indicated otherwise.

persecuted by other nations in all parts of the world. In their pursuit of the demolition of the “tyranny of popes and kings” who had enslaved them in Europe in Christian regions, the Jews exerted their efforts to replace the rule of the Church in Europe with civilian governments. However, the Jews were still maltreated in Russia and Spain due to the power of the Church, which the Jews had allegedly plotted to destroy in the name of freedom and civilization as well as by means of freemasonry, as they did in the case of France. The editors of *Tafsir Al-Manār* maintained that although France was the “pristine daughter of church” (*bint al-kanisa al-bikr*), the Jews were able to dismantle the authority of its Church, just as they enticed the French on injustice in Algeria (‘Abduh & Riḍā 1910, vol. 5, 139–140). “If this had been schemed in the French state despite its peak of science and civil, politics, wealth, and power,” the editor of *Tafsir Al-Manār* wrote, “what about the Ottoman Empire with its ignorance and weakness and the need for money?!” (‘Abduh & Riḍā 1910, vol. 5, 139–140). According to *Tafsir Al-Manār*, the Jews resisted all forms of religious authority standing in their face for the establishment of their own religious authority. The same holds true for an asserted ‘Jewish’ hand in the Ottoman revolution in 1908, despite their protection by the Ottoman Empire in contrast to the injustice and oppression inflicted upon them in other regions. By this, allegedly, they schemed to possess Jerusalem and its neighbouring regions to establish their Kingdom of Israel and turn it into the Temple of Solomon, against the desire of Christians and Muslims (‘Abduh and Riḍā [1328] 1910, V:139–140).

The assertion of a Jewish conspiracy through freemasonry raised brows in nationalist and freemason circles in Egypt. According to Riḍā, three years after the publication of the above-mentioned interpretation by ‘Abduh, the Ottoman press quoted it in its campaign against the Jews (*Al-Manār* 6/5: 196–200, see Öke 1982). An anonymous young Egyptian nationalist (most probably Muṣṭafā Kāmil) and a few Jewish freemasons launched a campaign against ‘Abduh by sending petitions to the Khedive, the prime-minister, Lord Cromer, and daily newspapers to inhibit ‘Abduh from writing on that topic. According to Riḍā, Idris Rāghib Pasha (1889–1922), Grand Master of the Grand Orient National d’Egypte, objected to the petition because it was against the general rules of the lodge. Riḍā, moreover, reproached the Egyptian nationalist for his “hatred” against Syrian immigrants in Egypt, who shared the Ottoman nationality with Egyptians, and many of them shared with them the same religion as well (‘Abduh and Riḍā [1328] 1910, V:139–140). In Riḍā’s mind, the Syrians in Egypt had fewer equal rights as compared to the Jews and other European immigrants; and they also earned less profit and wealth as compared to the Jews, Armenians, Greeks, and all European peoples. Many of these Europeans also “spoiled the country with alcohol,” whereas no Egyptian newspaper uttered any critique of such deeds as they did about the Syrians, who served knowledge and literatures in Egypt ([1328] 1910, 139–40).

Riḍā confirmed that freemasonry was a secret political association that had been formed by Jews and Christians in Europe to resist the tyranny of political (kings and princes) and religious leaders (popes and priests) enslaving and depriving their peoples of the ‘light’ of knowledge and freedom. In their common work, the Jews and Christians used the Bible to extract their symbols and rites, revolving themselves around the construction of the Holy Temple of Solomon, which is the Al-Aqsa Mosque. For Riḍā, when Europeans colonized the East and recognized the powerful mood of Muslim unity, they made use of freemason lodges to weaken this pan-Islamic mood by encouraging Jewish, Christian, and Muslim elites in Egypt to join as members (*Al-Manār* 6/5: 196–197). In Riḍā’s view, Afghānī quickly saw that masonic lodges were dragging Muslim countries, especially Egypt, towards Europe with hidden

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political strings so that they consequently would become toys in the hands of Europeans. Afghānī, on the other hand, joined freemasonry in order to teach his students what he had learnt in such a secret society for the sake of preserving their country and themselves (‘Abduh and Riḍā [1328] 1910, V:139–140).

In 1911 a certain ‘Abd Al-Zāhir Muḥammad, a teacher at Al-Jam‘iyya al-Khayriyya School in Mahalla (Northern Egypt), raised a question to Riḍā regarding the ‘truth’ of freemasonry, and why it is hidden if it ideally were to gather peoples of different religions, national groups, and beliefs, which is far-fetched in the eyes of this questioner. He also wondered how one could combine freemasonry with Judaism, Christianity, or Islam (*Al-Manār* 14/3, 178–181). In his answer, Riḍā summarized the above-mentioned argument that freemasonry was established to remove political and religious tyranny in Europe. Freemasons had great roles in political uprisings in Europe, such as the French Revolution. The active members of freemasonry were Christians and Jews, but the Jews became influential leaders in order to resist injustice and oppression which they had endured throughout history. Such revolutions were therefore more beneficial to the Jews in Europe. Riḍā maintained that they were to achieve the same thing in the Ottoman Empire if the political situation did not change. The Russian government, on the other hand, attempted to thwart such “Jewish schemes,” which made them suffer persecution in that country (*Al-Manār* 14/3: 180). Freemason groups in eastern countries, such as Egypt or Syria, claimed that their lodges did not work for politics or religion, but for literary and social purposes. However, this does not mean that they were completely detached from religion and politics. Riḍā compared the Jesuits to Muslim religious jurists and Sufis. As religious men, the Jesuits were able to fight against freemasonry for their political aims, whereas Muslim religious jurists and Sufis were ignorant of the world’s political affairs of that kind (*Al-Manār* 14/3: 180–181).

Under the title “King of the Jews, their Temple, their Messiah and the True Messiah,” Riḍā stated that the Jews arrogantly disobeyed their prophets, who regularly warned them against God’s punishment if they abandoned His commandments (*Al-Manār* 30/7: 546–556). These prophets foretold the coming of a king messiah, who would unite them, as well as the coming of a prophet from among their “brothers,” the Arabs; and who would renew the divine message of Abraham and guarantee victory to monotheism above unbelief (*Al-Manār* 30/7: 551–552). For Riḍā, after the Jews became materialists, they rejected the message of Jesus Christ because they had recognized that he was no king of the kind they had expected. After centuries of persecution and murder, they had fled Jerusalem and dispersed around the world. The Christians believed that all the good tidings of the prophet of the Children of Israel had ended after Jesus, and that the Jews would have neither a kingdom nor a temple to erect their abrogated religion (*Al-Manār* 30/7: 552–553). But Islam came confirming the messages of Moses, Jesus, and other prophets. One of Islam’s greatest manifestations, according to Riḍā, was the confirmation of glad tidings of Jesus as a prophet of God and not his son. In this reading, God entitled Muslims to inherit the Holy Land and to build the Al-Aqsa Mosque in the place of the destroyed temple in order to establish the worship of God alone. Riḍā repeated the traditional Muslim view that God placed those who believe in Jesus above the unbelievers (Qur’an Āl ‘Imrān 3:55), but that He had struck the Jews with humiliation by making them lose their kingdom until the Day of Resurrection. The Jews, Riḍā said, would follow the Antichrist as their assumed king fighting under his banner in the Holy Land, but Muslims would finally achieve victory upon them and kill them, and the true Messiah would appear and reveal the truth by destroying the Antichrist (*Al-Manār* 30/7: 554).

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Riḍā stated that Zionist Jews and their supporters arrogantly tried to denounce the beliefs of Muslims and Christians by denying the divine missions of Jesus and Muhammad, whereas the two religious communities constituted about one half of humanity on earth in the East and the West. The support of the great Christian powers, especially Great Britain, was one of the greatest reasons for Jewish vanity, according to him: The British made use of the Jews to weaken the Arabs by creating an enemy in the latter's lands so that they would strike the people against each other in that conflict. In other words, the British tactics was to turn the Arabs' resistance away from the British colonization of their lands to their fight against the Jews. Riḍā was astonished that other Christian nations were silent on "harbor[ing] the enemies of Christ back in his land, which requires the denial of his promise [as the Messiah]" (*Al-Manār* 30/7: 555). In his own words: [24]

It was astonishing that the intrigues of the Jews seduced many of the Christians of Europe and America by convincing them that believing in the Bible requires helping them to return to Palestine and the possession of Jerusalem ... etc., as a confirmation to the prophets and a realization of the appearance of Jesus regarding whose person and deeds the two groups [Jewish and Christian] differed [in their interpretation]. The Jews refer to their Messiah as the earthly king who will come to restore the kingdom of Solomon, whereas the Christians refer to Jesus, son of Mary, who will return in His kingdom to judge the world. (*Al-Manār* 30/7: 555) [25]

Riḍā reached this above-mentioned conclusion on what he called the "obsession" of the International Bible Students Association and its publication of a booklet under the title *Millions Now Living Will Never Die* (1920) by the American lawyer and active member of the Jehovah's Witness, Joseph Franklin Rutherford (1869–1942) (Rogerson [1920] 1969). Riḍā had access to the booklet through its Arabic translation in the same year.² The author of that booklet maintained that the year 1914 of the Great War "marked the beginning of the end of the world, for Jesus plainly said 'These are the beginning of sorrows'" (Rogerson [1920] 1969, 18). The booklet also foretold the fulfillment of the prophecies in the Old Testament in the year 1925, which included among others the resurrection of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and other faithful men of Israel from the condition of death, and foretold that they would live forever to re-establish the Zionist teaching in Palestine. However, Riḍā ridiculed these prophecies by saying that five years passed and nothing of such Christian "obsessions" took place, but he insisted on warning the Arabs against Jewish "intrigues and religious illusions," as well as informing the British people that their government "opened the door to worldly and religious strife, the consequences of which will be evil upon them and humanity in general" (*Al-Manār* 30/7: 555). [26]

Riḍā's ideas about the connection between the Zionists and freemasonry became more crystallized in the wake of the Palestine 1929 revolt, when he published a detailed article about what he saw as "causes and consequences" of that revolt (*Al-Manār* 30/5: 385–393). In his opinion, the Jewish people are among the most resolute and firmest in unity. They share with other people their homelands and compete with them for its material and moral benefits but are insoluble or do not easily merge into any other human group. Similarly, as a community they do not accept others merging with them. In Riḍā's thinking, when they occupied Palestine, they kept fighting its people until they overpowered them; and they would [27]

2 Arabic translation: *Malayīn min al-ladhīn hum ahyā' lan yamūtū abadan* (New York: International Bible Students Association 1920).

continue fighting against their neighbors around it. Riḍā repeated the above-mentioned classical Muslim views of the Jews as “rebellious” against Moses disobeying God’s commands (*Al-Manār* 30/5, 385–386). Riḍā argued that Muslims saved the Jews from persecution and the oppression and enslavement by other nations by giving them “equal” rights to attend the same learning circles at schools or mosques in Baghdad or Andalusia (*Al-Manār* 30/5: 386). In contrast, the authority of the Catholic Church in Europe persecuted the Jews in Europe. Riḍā asserted that the Jews, who were educated in various sciences in Andalusia (especially among the students of the Muslim philosopher Averroes), transferred these sciences to Europe (Stern 2003). Due to their “solidarity” and “plotting,” the Jews were able to take revenge for themselves and their Arab “teachers” from the authority of the Catholic Church that had persecuted them and Arabs for many years. This was motivated by the zeal of the Jews for sciences and freedom of thought, to which the Church was hostile in Europe; and which consequently stirred the fight against the Church “overthrowing her throne and undermining her political authority from the world” (*Al-Manār* 30/5: 386).

On another level, Riḍā believed that it is a hidden, but proven, fact that the undermining of religious governments in Europe, the Ottoman Empire, and Russia was also caused by freemasons and plotted by Jews. Having the greatest authority in freemason societies, the Jews wanted to fulfill their final political purpose by establishing a religious Jewish state in Palestine on Mount Zion through their secretive activities in these societies. In addition, he argued that the Jews established the world financial bank system, which is the centerpiece of the western civilization in the “old and new worlds” (*Al-Manār* 30/5: 387). As a result, they acquired the highest influence in all “capitalist” countries and nations. However, they hid their religious identity in “the kingdom of money in such a way that others could neither rob their wealth, nor hit them out of religious or national fanaticism” (*Al-Manār* 30/5: 387). [28]

Riḍā believed that the Jesuits, as a Catholic group yielding to the religious authority in Rome, were among the early groups to perceive the “cunning” of the Jews resisting them (*Al-Manār* 30/5: 387–389, Budnitskii 2012). The reason behind their confrontation with the Jews was the latter’s scheme to dismantle the authority of the Church by means of freemasonry, to which “millions” of Christians around the world were affiliated without knowing this plot. The Jesuits exerted much effort to uncover their secrets, spending much money to dissuade Christians to join freemasonry. In addition, according to Riḍā, the Jews also had impact on Russian “atheists” who also weakened the authority of the Orthodox Church in the Russian assembly of the Duma, consequently forming Bolshevism (*Al-Manār* 30/5: 387–389, Budnitskii 2012). Riḍā saw a parallel in what he thought of as Jewish influence on Turkish “atheists” of the CUP, which consequently led to the destruction of the Sharia in the Turkish kingdom by turning its government “atheist,” exerting its efforts in erasing Islam from among the Turkish peoples and other non-Arab Muslims who were part of the empire, such as Albanians and Bosnians or Iranians and Afghan peoples (*Al-Manār* 30/5, 388). [29]

Riḍā turned to compare the question of messianism between Islam and Christianity, on the one hand, and how the Jews see the same doctrine, on the other. For him, the Jews aspired to establish a civil-religious kingdom in Palestine while waiting for the Messiah, just as Christians and Muslims are expecting the “true” Messiah, Jesus son of Mary. According to Islamic traditions, this Messiah will return before the end of the world in order to kill the Jewish *dajjāl* (anti-Christ). Riḍā argued that all three religions differ on that doctrine, but Christians and Muslims agree that the Jews are “unbelievers” for their denial of Jesus as the “true” Messiah (*Al-Manār* 30/5: 388). Riḍā concluded that it is not his intention to entice [30]

Christians and Muslims against the Jews, but it was obvious for him that the Jews “made use of the nations of the Christians that supported them against Muslims” (*Al-Manār* 30/5: 392–293). Riḍā considered the Belfour declaration as the best example for this collaboration between the Jews and Christian Europe. He considered it as “the stirring factor of sedition, the kindling of the fire of revolution, and the awakening of the Arab nation and Islamic peoples from their slumber” (*Al-Manār* 30/5: 390).

In contrast to Muslims, Riḍā claimed, Christians had persecuted the Jews throughout history, sending them out of the “city of the true Messiah” (*Al-Manār* 30/5: 390). In his opinion, Muslims did not persecute the Jews but treated them with justice and mercy. He observed that the Jews started to permit each other to reside in Jerusalem around the western side of the wall of the Al-Aqsa Mosque (Al-Buraq), performing the rituals and sacrifices against the will of Muslims and Christians in the world. They had strong hope to multiply their numbers to own the Holy City and the rest of Palestine in preparation for the appearance of the Messiah again as the King of Israel (*Al-Manār* 30/5: 391). Riḍā mentioned that he had communication with the Zionist leader Chaim Weizmann (1874–1952) before World War I, and the latter wanted to visit him in Egypt before the war to discuss the Jewish relations with the Arabs. According to Riḍā, Weizmann told him that “the accord between the Arabs and their Hebrew ‘cousins’ is possible and not unimaginable only on the condition that it should be accepted by Arab princes and their ‘independent’ rulers” (*Al-Manār* 30/5: 392). Their communication was terminated due to the dependence of Zionists on the British power to re-establish the kingdom of Israel, but “each one of them [the Jews and the British] is deceiving the other” (*Al-Manār* 30/5: 392).

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In sum, Riḍā concluded that the Jews are amongst the greatest human nations. They are distinguished in their “knowledge, work, economy, unity, solidarity, cooperation, firmness and determination” (*Al-Manār* 30/5: 392). They have their special ways in “the work of righteousness, goodness, cunning, patience, steadfastness, endurance of adversity” (*Al-Manār* 30/5, 392). In Riḍā’s thought, their religious unity (*al-jāmi‘a al-milliyya*) is different in being assimilated in any other unities of human national or linguistic bonds. They share with other nations their homelands and compete with them for material and moral benefits, but they remain Jewish. They never despair in enduring hardships to achieve their highest goal, namely kingship. For Riḍā, the Jews are “the guardians of the temple of the greatest idol” of nations and great powers, namely money, and have influence on newspapers and the ability to disseminate propaganda that “overturns the facts, and wears the truth with falsehood” (*Al-Manār* 30/5: 392–393).

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In Riḍā’s mind, because the Jews lacked any military force, and were “most eager to have life” (Qur’an—Al-Baqara: 96), they made use of British power to protect them and to support them in establishing a national homeland in Palestine. As they were not skilled in agriculture, they depended on the exploitation of its Arab people in the reconstruction after they “robbed” them from their lands. Riḍā was informed that ten thousand American youths had requested permission from their government to go to Palestine to fight the Arabs. The reason behind this “dare” was their confidence in the “shadow” of the British state, not in the “shadow” of the Jewish state and the Zionist “banner” (*Al-Manār* 30/5: 393).

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In 1933, the Russian Muslim of Tatar origin Alimjan Idris or Idrisi (1887–after 1945), a co-founder of the Society of Islamic Worship in Berlin and a later Nazi collaborator and asserted Soviet agent, sent a question to Riḍā about the latter’s views on the reason why God had chosen the Jews, whom he described as “the most despicable, repulsive and corrupting nation

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on earth” (*Al-Manār* 33/5: 347–352, van Koningsveld 2008, 333–68; Motadel 2014, 44). In Idris’ view, if all immoral, economic, and political corruption were ascribed to the Jews, how could one combine the Quranic verse indicating that God had favoured them above all nations (Quran; 2:47) with another verse pointing out that they were the strongest people in hostility against the Muslims (Quran; 5:82) (*Al-Manār* 33/5: 347)?

In his answer, Riḍā repeated most of his above-mentioned arguments. He added that due to disobedience of their prophets, God punished Jews to be dispersed on earth, stripped from their kingdom. Again it was Islam that lifted this injustice, inflicted upon them by other nations throughout history. For Riḍā, the preference of the Jews had shifted to the Arabs, as the other genealogical line of Abraham, by the divine mission of Muhammad as the seal of prophets. Alimjan denounced the Jewish “corruption” in the world, especially in Russia and Germany. Riḍā interpreted this claim as “God’s wisdom” to take revenge from Europeans, who were, in his view, the most “ferocious” peoples on earth in wars and in humiliation of other nations (*ashadd al-nās ḍarāwa bi-l-ḥurūb wa istidhlāl al-shu‘ūb*). For him, Europeans use the religion of Christ, which in contradiction contains “asceticism, humility and altruism” as well as the financial authority and secret “cunning” (*al-kayd al-sirri*) of the Jews through freemasonry (*Al-Manār* 33/5: 349). In Riḍā’s words:

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Had it not been for the plots of the Jews in demolishing the throne of this worldly religious authority in Europe, the fanaticism of the Crusade would have erased the sign of Islam from the East, just as it had erased it from most of Europe, and it would have extinguished its light. And this [European] civilization based on the foundations of science, the arts, and freedom only existed after Islam had ‘breathed’ its spirit, breathed in it in Andalusia and the East; then it had moved to Italy, France, and other parts of the West. (*Al-Manār* 33/5: 350).

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Riḍā concluded his answers to Alimjan by saying that “Latin” and Germanic peoples became alerted to take revenge on the Jews, unlike the Anglo-Saxons, who were still supportive of them because of their financial influence. Riḍā anticipated that it is the British who would finally cause the elimination of the Jews after helping them to establish the Jewish kingdom in Palestine in return for their severe injustice and terrible oppression of the Arabs. He expected that this combination of British “oppression” and Jewish “greed” would end England’s influence in the East by causing the reawakening of the Arab nation. (*Al-Manār* 33/5: 351)

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A few months before Riḍā’s death, the Egyptian historian and religious scholar ‘Abd al-Wahhāb al-Najjār (1862–1941) gave a lecture at Jam‘iyyat al-Shubbān al-Muslimīn (Association of Young Muslim Men) in which he maintained that the Jewish Zionist presence in Palestine was to be like a short “summer cloud” that would clear up soon after a great shock, followed by the defeat of the Jews after the restoration of the kingdom of David and the appearance of the Messiah (*Al-Manār* 34/8: 607–612). Al-Najjār built his views on the apocalyptic Prophetic traditions about the fight between Jews and Muslims and the victory of Muslims over them by the end of time (*Al-Manār* 34/8: 607). After the lecture, Riḍā stood up and disagreed with al-Najjār in his arguments. Instead of following this apocalyptic way of thinking, Riḍā requested Arabs and Muslims to “take admonition in the Jewish Zionist *nakba* (catastrophe) by means of the worldly affairs and social natural laws” (*Al-Manār* 34/8: 608). By this he urged his Muslim readers not to see the Jewish success on the basis of their religious zeal but due to their work to achieve their political goals. In his view, the Jews would prepare the road to their future kingdom by “cosmic sciences” and the help of the British. For

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him, the increasing political power of the Jews in Palestine and the world was primarily reinforced by Christian Europe. According to him, the Jews brought modern arms and advanced weapons from Europe, while the British disarmed the Arabs in Palestine. The Jews, who had for centuries believed in biblical apocalypticism and the miraculous return of their Messiah, now turned to achieve their firm doctrines, not only on “illusions”, but on “the basis of scientific and financial power as well as the unification of their nation on one common word” (*Al-Manār* 34/8: 609). The Jews held their conferences and unions in Europe and America in order to sustain their Zionist goals and to gather Jews worldwide around them. “The Jews,” he wrote, “are a nation of strong determination, strongly-armed by great trickery” (*Al-Manār* 34/8: 610). For him, the Jews were opponents to Muslims and Christians alike in their shared countries and Christian and Muslim doctrines. He called upon Arab Christians and Arab Muslims, supported by other Muslims in the world, to get the benefit of uniting themselves against the growing power of the Jews. In his own words:

The doctrine of the Jews in restoring the King of Israel by means of the Messiah is a denial of the religion of Islam and a clear rejection of Christ Jesus, Son of Mary, may blessings and peace be upon him. It was, however, Christ with whom their prophets had preached, but they had denied him. It was also him who warned them against the ruin of their Temple of Solomon so that there would not remain any stone of it. But they insist to return it by making him [Christ] a liar. Among the wonders of their determination and ploy is that they harness Christian lands for their own moral support, [especially] ‘Christian’ Britain for establishing this kingdom by its [British] political and military power; which is contrary to its Christian and moral traditions. So look at the high degree of their plot and strengthen yourselves. (*Al-Manār* 34/8: 611)

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Conclusion

We have attempted to read Riḍā’s ideas about Zionism and Judaism from his perspectives on Europe and its political and colonial incursions in the Muslim world. We have seen that Riḍā was less aware of Zionist aims in the early years of his journal, probably partly due to other urgent political and religious questions in his mind. He completely changed after the Turkish revolution and during and after World War I, especially when he discovered that the ‘Christian’ West fueled the conflict by means of the Balfour Declaration issued by the British Government in 1917. Although Riḍā knew well that Europe was on its secularisation path in the modern age, he did not appreciate the colonial paradox which supported the establishment of a religious Jewish state while criticizing Muslim religious and Arab nationalism.

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His views of the Jews were not entirely based on European anti-Semitic racial ideologies. He was generally positive about the Jews as a community because of their unity and their skillfulness in sciences and crafts. However, he was influenced by European Christian conspiracy theorists who believed in the close connection between the Jews and freemasons. Riḍā stressed what he saw as the ‘cunning’ and ‘secretive’ role of the Jews in freemasonry, which also ‘quivered’ religious governments in Europe, the Ottoman Empire and Russia. This trend emerged in the late eighteenth century for the first time with the German officer Ernst August Anton Göchhausen. In the 1890s Reverend Johann Gabriel Léon Louis Meurin, Titular Archbishop of Nisibis and Bishop of Port-Louis (Mauritius), also claimed that “everything in

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freemasonry is fundamentally Jewish, exclusively Jewish, enthusiastically Jewish, from the beginning to the end” (van Pelt 2014, 188).

The same holds true for the financial world bank system, which the Jews also secretly dominated, according to Riḍā. For him, the Jesuits were the first Christian order that knew the core of this Jewish ‘trickery’ because of their firm Catholic faith in the political and religious authority of the Church in Rome. Riḍā defended the idea that the Jesuits knew well that the Jews were behind the decline of the authority of the church through their activities in freemason lodges, to which millions of Christians were connected as members. Therefore, the Jesuits tried their best to divulge the secrets of freemasonry, prohibiting Catholic believers to join them. In a similar vein, the Jews were behind the decline of the Orthodox Church in Russia by their support of Russian ‘atheists’ and Bolshevism, as well as their support for Turkish ‘atheists’ who were behind the collapse of the Ottoman Caliphate. Like many of his Arab nationalist peers, Riḍā resented what he saw as Zionist reliance on the Turks. Riḍā’s harsh critique of Zionism came clearly to the surface after the Young Turks. His criticism of Zionism actually had anti-Turkish undertones of frustration as a pan-Arabist. Throughout his debates, Riḍā frowned particularly on Britain as a ‘Christian’ power in their support of the Jews to establish a religious-civil kingdom in Palestine against the desire of Arabs. However, for him, it was the Jews who exploited the Christian nations for their own interests against Muslims.

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