When the Qur’an was America’s Weapon for Freedom in the Middle East: Muhammad Siblini and the Defeat of the Axis in North Africa

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My presentation discusses Muhammad Siblini, who is largely unknown today but who played a critical role in U.S. military operations and public diplomacy in the Arab world during World War II. A native of Lebanon, Siblini immigrated to New York City and became a U.S. citizen before the war. He accompanied the first major U.S. military operation of the war in the Middle East—“Operation Torch,” in which U.S. forces seized Morocco. Because of his command of Arabic and clear piety, Siblini became a critical U.S. intermediary to the Moroccans, who frequently invited him into their homes and gathered around him in large numbers whenever he prayed in Rabat’s mosques. Sultan Muhammad V invited him to recite passages from the Qur’an in his palace and on Moroccan radio. Siblini demonstrated great skill while reciting the holy text and picked passages that reflected American values and war aims—passages that criticized undemocratic action, promoted universal equality, and promised divine retribution against tyrants and the enemies of God. In the eyes of American officials, Siblini demonstrated that America was a haven for all peoples and faiths and, as a result, they took the unprecedented step of promoting him directly from the rank of private to second lieutenant. By contrast, Joseph Goebbels and French officials loathed Siblini: Goebbels believed that he turned Arabs against Germany, while the French blamed him for hastening the end of their North African empire. A French military officer even cited Siblini’s broadcasts to justify his decision to sell American intelligence secrets in the 1960s to the Soviet Union. Through the use of personal papers and government documents, my presentation aims to shed light on this story in which an Arab American used his nation’s values and Islam to simultaneously promote the interests of Americans and the Arab world.