Homeward Bound: Ḥusayn Muruwwah's Integrative Quest for Authenticity

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Abstract

Ḥusayn Muruwwah was one of the most influential Arab intellectuals of the second half of the twentieth century. In the 1950s and 1960s he was critical in reinventing literary criticism and was at the vanguard of the postcolonial intelligentsia and its search for a new Arab culture. Before that he was cleric at Najaf, then a follower of Arab Liberalism, then a Marxist and, eventually a Communist. In the process of this intellectual metamorphosis Muruwwah moved from South Lebanon, to Najaf, Baghdad, Beirut, Damascus and Moscow. This article reconsiders the importance of Muruwwah's personal narrative of displacement, search and commitment to Arab postcoloniality. It argues that much of what has been written about Ḥusayn Muruwwah's life underscores a polarization of experience—as movement from the village to the city, from religion to secularism, from Liberalism to Communism. In contrast, this article suggests that Ḥusayn Muruwwah, and dozens of others like him, never really shifted between positions, or "converted." Instead, Muruwwah kept adding layer after layer to what became a complex and highly integrative intellectual identity that simultaneously drew on several seemingly contradictory traditions and intellectual genealogies, culminating in his methodology of critical Socialist Realism and the effort to re-read Islamic *turāth* along Marxist lines.

Keywords

Socialist Realism and literary criticism, intellectual transformation, authenticity, *turāth*, Arab postcoloniality

Ḥusayn Muruwwah (1910-1987) was one of the most versatile Arab intellectuals of the twentieth century. Destined since the age of eight to become a Shīʿī cleric he left the poor south Lebanese village of Ḥaddāthā to Najaf, Iraq. Obliged since childhood to study logic and law, his heart, however, was in poetry and prose. As a student he was accidentally exposed to the great Egyptian liberal texts of the 1920s and 1930s. Torn between Cairo's Enlight-

enment and Najaf's clerical legacy, and unsure which world to embrace, he had a nervous breakdown. After recovering, he left Najaf and flirted briefly with liberal Iraqi politics. Then he read Marx and Lenin and joined the cause of Iraqi communism. Deported from Iraq and settling in Beirut, in the 1950s and 1960s he was at the vanguard of the postcolonial intelligentsia and its search for a new Arab culture. He became an influential literary critic, the first to write a coherent manifesto of Socialist Realism and a true pioneer in the cultural quest for Islamic heritage, or *turāth*. Over the years, his critical voice earned him much respect but also scorn. In 1987, during the Lebanese Civil War, and as part of a systematic campaign to eliminate Communists, he was gunned down in Beirut. He was seventy-seven years old. How does the personal narrative of displacement, search and commitment inform the intellectual trajectory of the postcolonial generation? What does Muruwwah's journey tell us about the movement of individuals and ideas in the Arab world during the late colonial era and the early decades of postcoloniality? More specifically, how does his story intersect with the development of Arabic literary criticism?

On the surface, Ḥusayn Muruwwah's story is that of conversion from Shīʿīsm to Marxism and communism. In the annals of twentieth-century Arab thought, cultural, religious and intellectual conversions of thinkers from a so-called "religious" camp to a "secular" and liberal one, or from a socialist and Communist one back to religion are quite common. Muruwwah's intellectual life would seem to lend itself to such a reading. When thinking of such "conversions," the names of Egyptian Marxists-turned-Islamists Ṭāriq al-Bishrī (b. 1933), ʿĀdil Ḥusayn (1932-2001), Fahmī Huwaydī (b. 1937), ʿAbd al-Wahhāb al-Masīrī (1938-2008), and the Palestinian thinker and strategist Shafīq Munīr (b. 1934) come to mind.[1] Before them, perhaps most famous of all, was the foundational cultural transformation of Ṭāhā Ḥusayn, from al-Azhar to the Sorbonne—or, as it were, from Islamic knowledge to radical French Enlightenment.

Ṭāhā Ḥusayn left an emancipatory narrative of conversion and rebirth in which he condemned the solipsistic intellectual milieu of al-Azhar. He famously wrote of how a relative confronted his inward-looking religious education, exclaiming "what do you know about knowledge, anyway?"[2] Consequently, he reported on "inward feelings of withdrawal from al-Azhar, from its constricting ways and the boredom of its perpetual grooves and talk."[3] Comparing the modern university in which he enrolled to al-Azhar, he wrote that

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[1] For a typical account of conversion from Marxism to Islamism, see François Burgat, *Face to Face with Political Islam* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2003), 37-42.

[2] Taha Husayn, *The Days* (Cairo: AUC Press, 1997), 278.

[3] Ibid., 251.

"the university environment… afforded me a type of learning which itself generated a new temper of mind, not perpetually engrossed in grammar, *fiqh*, logic and *tawḥīd* but ranging into a diversity of schools of thought in literature and history, all undreamed of on my part until then."[4] Indeed, he credited his university professors for turning "my outlook round toward the future, to days ahead"[5] and, eventually, to the allegedly universal world of French Enlightenment. Setting a cultural precedent for what such cultural and intellectual conversions would entail, Ṭāhā Ḥusayn's intellectual model emphasized radical detachment from the past, an emphatic rejection of yesterday's world and, eventually, a certain sort of renaissance, or *nahḍah*.[6] Was Muruwwah such a convert?

Though Muruwwah is one of the most prolific and influential intellectuals of the second half of the twentieth century, his geo-intellectual odyssey from Ḥaddāthā to Najaf, Damascus, al-Nāṣirīyah and Baghdad, and from there to Moscow and back to Beirut, has thus far been treated under the narrow organizing theme of conversion to Communism and divestment from religion. Examining a group of Shīʿī intellectuals from respected clerical families such as Muḥammad Ṣāliḥ Baḥr al-ʿUlūm, Muḥammad Mahdī al-Jawāhirī, and Muruwwah himself, Sylvia Naef asks: "How do members of more or less prestigious religious families break with this sometimes ancient tradition and commit themselves to an ideological line of thought which is, or at least which appears to be, in total contradiction with this tradition?"[7] "Why did they not follow the path that opened almost naturally before them? Why did they refuse respectability and, in the end, the easy solution represented by a religious vocation, only to commit themselves to a more difficult course?"[8] These are important questions, but the idea that Ḥusayn Muruwwah "broke" with "an ancient tradition" and committed himself instead to a new "ideological line" is misguided.

In place of a rupture, I would argue, there is, in fact, a continuity that speaks volumes regarding the cultural choices that his generation had to reckon with.[9] Beyond a straightforward intellectual biography of Muruwwah, focusing

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[4] Ibid., 278.

[5] Ibid., 251, 282.

[6] His decision to write on Islamic subjects during the 1930s was by no means a reversal of his Enlightenment position but an attempt to apply it to several episodes in the Islamic past.

[7] Silvia Naef, "Shiʿi-Shuyuʿi: Or How to Become a Communist in a Holy City," in *The Twelver Shia in Modern Times: Religious Culture & Political Culture*, eds. Rainer Brunner and Werner Ende (Leiden: Boston: Brill, 2001), 255.

[8] Ibid., 259.

[9] According to Sylvia Naef, the central experience of this generation is rupture: "Muḥammad Ṣāliḥ Baḥr al-ʿUlūm's case represents the most radical rupture with family tradition, his rupture having been both intellectual and professional in nature." Ibid., 258.

mostly on the formative stages of his intellectual life (1930s-1960s), the main aim of this article is to show that instead of "conversion," Ḥusayn Muruwwah insisted on integrating multiple religious, cultural and ideological stances into a new postcolonial intellectual project, or as he called it: *Mashrūʿ al-ʿUmr* (the project of a generation or a lifetime).[10] The linchpin of this project was a relentless quest for cultural authenticity in times of modern rupture. By being attentive to movement, mobility and fluidity in the making of the postcolonial Arab subject (e.g. Muruwwah himself), this revaluation of Muruwwah's life seeks to reveal the micro-intellectual process through which ideas and cultural dispositions are embraced, imported, reformulated and reinvented anew.

Divided into four sections, the first two narrate Muruwwah's intellectual migration to Najaf and his uneasy encounter with the literary legacy of the *nahḍah* and the Arab tradition of Enlightenment. Rather than moving from one world to another and abandoning his clerical background, this section exposes his accumulative efforts to reconcile and unite these two worlds. Though in the process Muruwwah experienced several psychological, social and political setbacks, he carried on and insisted on somehow embracing both the Islamic legacy of Najaf and the canon of Arab Enlightenment. Shaped by the social, political and economic tragedies of his hometown and the crisis of social justice all around him, he added Marxist-Leninist thought to his already complicated mix of influences.

The third section of this essay explores what Muruwwah chose to do with Marxism and how he emerged as a critical pioneer in the field of Socialist Realism. As part of a classic postcolonial project of self-liberation, Muruwwah theorized the ways in which literary criticism can purge Arab letters of the influence of a generation that was an accomplice to Europe's cultural colonial legacy. The 1950s battle over Arab culture revolved around the purpose of art (art for art's sake, or art *engagé* for the sake of society?). As a Marxist, Muruwwah was radically committed to the position of Art for Society's sake and through "literary battles" participated in altering the relationship between writers, society and the text. Claiming culture as a revolutionary political space, he and his peers redefined the sources of intellectual authority and invested literary criticism with a new sense of purpose.

The final section of this article examines yet another cycle of integrated intellectual activity and shows how Socialist Realism led Muruwwah to rethink the place of Islamic heritage in contemporary Arab thought. This became a lifetime concern of his. In this phase, Muruwwah sought to reestablish *turāth* on integrative materialist grounds rather than fragmentary idealist foundations.

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[10] Ḥannā Mīnah, "Shayʾ min al-dhikrah wa shayʾ min al-damʿ," *Al-Ṭarīq* 47:2-3 (June 1980), 40.

Such a grand act of recalibration, he believed, would inevitably address the postcolonial problem of authenticity. Taken as a whole, this close synchronic reading, moving from one geo-intellectual locale to another, explains the unlikely workings of Marxist theory in the search for Islamic authenticity, thus resulting in a major contribution to the post-1967 Arab debates about *turāth*.

This integrative perspective aims to replace suggestive "narratives of conversion," which are blind to the intellectual complexities, ambiguities and paradoxes of postcolonial Arab intellectuals and repeatedly fail to account for the real choices that these individuals had to make. Granted, Muruwwah's generation was in constant search for development, social justice, physical liberation and, most importantly, an authentic cultural frame of reference. It was, by all means, a homeward-bound generation which longed for a secure and familiar place. As such, the geo-intellectual journey of Muruwwah in and outside the Middle East accentuates the choices, affiliations and dilemmas of the first postcolonial Arab generation in their quest to intellectually find and create a sense of belonging.

Ḥusayn Muruwwah inhabited many worlds and lived a somewhat inverted life, or as he put it in an interview with poet ʿAbbās Bayḍūn, "I was born an old man and I would die a child."[11] Muruwwah's eventual violent death at the hands of an assassin aside, the inverted trajectory of his life—from a young boy who is bound to think as an old man to an old man with a youthful and fearless mind—holds true. Before discussing the architecture of Muruwwah's unique intellectual project, let us take a quick look at his journey from the heart of Shīʿī clergy to the contentious and often violent circles of Marxist, and then Communist, activism.

Born in 1910 (or 1908) in the southern village of Ḥaddāthā, at the heart of the historic Shīʿī region of Jabal ʿĀmil in Lebanon, Ḥusayn Muruwwah was destined to clergy. Already at age eight he wore the full black garment, head to toe, of a religious scholar. As a devout Shīʿī child he was instructed never to swear, certainly not at the Sunni Ṣaḥābah.[12] This uptight appearance and strict manners, he tells us, immediately made him "a subject of great ridicule" as he was the only child around bearing the weight of a determined destiny; a destiny prescribed for him by his father ʿAlī Muruwwah, scion to a great family line of devout scholars.[13] As Muruwwah summarized this period: "my dream

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[11] *Al-Safīr* (September 18, 1985), 10.

[12] Years later when he moved to Baghdad his neighbors were happy to consider him Sunni. Ibid.

[13] Muḥammad Dakrūb, "ʿAn al-fatrah al-Irāqiyyah: min al-ḥirāsah fī-l-Najaf… ilā al-ḥizb al-shuyūʿī," *Al-Ṭarīq* 47: 2-3 (June 1980), 367.

was to become a distinguished Shaykh like my father… no sorry, actually… this was the dream of my father, and then my mother, our family, our extended family and all of Jabal ʿĀmil."[14] Muruwwah's own dream was yet to be dreamt and until then he received the customarily rigid religious training of Jabal ʿĀmil. Though economically provincial, intellectually speaking, Jabal ʿĀmil was intimately tied to the great religious center of Najaf, supplying it with a constant stream of promising young scholars. And so, already at a young age, Muruwwah's future, as that of his ancestors, pointed eastward toward Iraq.

Yet, unlike his forefathers, Ḥusayn Muruwwah grew up in an extraordinary time of collective difficulty. As historian Max Wise recently put it, during the late Ottoman era,

> Jabal ʿĀmil gradually devolved into the hinterland of second-tier port cities. Economic transformations that swept across the eastern Mediterranean in the late 19th century cascaded down from the imperial level to catapult a sliver of powerful landed families into new positions of political dominance and local fame. Amidst grinding poverty and diminishing economic horizons the peasantry in Jabal ʿĀmil on the eve of [French] Mandate rule scraped by through a combination of subsistence agriculture and sharecropping.[15]

Beyond social, economic and political oppression, drought brought wretched poverty and hunger, thus pushing a staggering portion of the population to seek a better future in the Americas. Since the Muruwwahs, like thousands of others, were not one of the powerful landed families, Ḥusayn's brother was forced to leave for Buenos Aires in search of a better future.

Cognizant of the harsh circumstances all around him, Muruwwah writes mournfully: "I had no childhood."[16] Already at this young age, Muruwwah deplored the socio-economic conditions of Shīʿīs in Jabal ʿĀmil and was very critical of the feudal and exploitative social structure which was based, among other things, on tax farming and forced conscription. However, neither he nor his social milieu had any political vocabulary to think of this state of affairs.[17] Even after the French mandate was put in place, a modern political language was very slow to emerge. "Growing up," Muruwwah writes, "we did not have any interest in politics. However, we supported the anti-colonial groups that

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[14] Ḥusayn Muruwwah, "Min al-Najaf dakhala ḥayātī Marx," *Al-Ṭarīq* 43:2-3 (June 1984), 172.

[15] Max Wise, *In the Shadow of Sectarianism: Law, Shiʿism and the Making of Modern Lebanon* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010), 56.

[16] *Al-Safīr* (September 18, 1985), 10.

[17] Ibid.

resisted the French mandate."[18] Thus, given the parochial realities of Jabal ʿĀmil, a future in the clergy would at least put some food on the table and guarantee a much-needed sense of belonging through membership in the exclusive intellectual world of Shīʿīsm.

Yet, the paradoxical combination of high quality religious training, dire poverty, and social oppression left its mark on him. When his father passed away in 1920, his situation became significantly worse.[19] With no direct patri-archal sponsorship, the chances of making the great leap of faith toward Najaf grew slimmer. Yet, against all odds, four years later, at the age of fourteen, Muruwwah left for Najaf in order to fulfill his father's dream. Shaykh ʿAbd al-Ḥuysan Sharrāf al-Dīn raised the money. "My goal," Muruwwah tells us, "was one: knowledge (*maʿrifah*) and learning (*ʿilm*) but not knowledge as a religious profession (*mihnah*)."[20] "In religious knowledge" Muruwwah con-cludes, "I saw truth not a profession."[21]

Unlike the tightly structured curriculum in al-Azhar, training in Najaf toward the degree of *mujtahid* was a disorganized and loosely structured pro-cess. Popularly known as "disorder in order," it was up to the students to decide what to learn and with whom. Since there were no exams to speak of, it was left to the students to monitor their own progress. If they could do that, all they had to do was to form a strong connection with one of the Shaykhs and choose from a list of standard topics such as *uṣūl al-fiqh* and logic (*manṭiq*), syntax (*naḥū*), inflection, prosody, composition, semantics, rhetoric (*balāghah*), rhyme, and even history and philosophy.[22] The young Muruwwah was up for the challenge and though he was attracted to the extracurricular topic of poetry, he recorded that "during my first year I was (still) an obedient son."[23] The lure of Najaf's used book market changed that.

Muruwwah's foray into "other" kinds of writing began with a poetry *dīwān*. His fellow colleagues immediately disapproved.[24] Then, during his second and third years, he was exposed to the Arab Enlightenment, or *nahḍah* canon of the *udabāʾ* who hailed from Cairo, "the great factory of modern Arab thought."[25] The risks were clear to him as this modern literature "was forbidden to us."[26]

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[18] Ibid.

[19] Muruwwah, "Min al-Najaf," 172.

[20] Ibid., 174.

[21] *Al-Safīr* (September 18, 1985), 10.

[22] Muḥammad Dakrūb, "Malāmiḥ min al-maṣīrah al-fikriyyah li-l-munāḍil," *Al-Ṭarīq* 47:2-3 (June 1980), 21; *Al-Safīr* (September 19, 1985), 10.

[23] Dakrūb, "ʿAn al-fatrah al-ʿIrāqiyyah," 368-9.

[24] *Al-Safīr*, (September 19, 1985), 10.

[25] *Al-Safīr*, (September 21, 1985), 10.

[26] Muruwwah, "Min al-Najaf," 176.

In Najaf's book market, back issues of the great cultural and political maga-
zines *Al-Hilāl, Al-Thaqāfah, Al-Risālah, Al-ʿUṣūr* and *Al-Siyāsah Al-Usbūʿiyyah*
were readily available, and so where the issues of the eye-opening scientific
journal *Al-Muqtaṭaf.*[27] Then there were books. Ṭāhā Ḥusayn's writings were
everywhere, but his critical treatment of Islamic *adab* left a particularly strong
impression on Muruwwah, thus introducing him to modern literary criticism
of the Islamic canon. Arab culture did not yet frame this field as *turāth* but, as
we shall see, once it will, Muruwwah would be at the forefront of this cultural
trend. Then there were the classic reformist works of the late 19th century by
Afghānī, ʿAbduh and Kawākibī, as well as works that critiqued them. Faraḥ
Anṭūn, for instance, debated ʿAbduh on the "state of Islam" and, along classic
Orientalist lines, argued that Islamic decline was triggered by the alleged clos-
ing of the Islamic mind since the death of Ibn Rushd. Others weighed in to
participate in this chronic debate. With the popular historical notions of rise,
decline and self-improvement in mind, Muruwwah read the works of Shiblī
Shumayyil and Salāmah Mūsā on Darwinism and Socialism. Years later he
recalled that "Ismāʿīl Maẓhar [editor of *Al-ʿUṣūr*] and Shiblī Shumayyil were
the two foundations of my profound intellectual transformation and method-
ological constitution … away from the nightmare of [Najaf's] knowledge as
profession" and toward knowledge for knowledge's sake.[28]

In addition, Muruwwah also read the more general liberal and reformist
writings of Aḥmad Luṭfī al-Sayyid which served as an introduction to the
liberal principles of political modernity. Niqūlā Ḥaddād's pioneering intro-
duction to the burgeoning social sciences surely presented the feudal realities
of Jabal ʿĀmil in a radically different light.[29] Muruwwah's first encounter with
Marx was in 1926 when he read Faraḥ Anṭūn's *Religion, Knowledge and Capital:
A Story about a Conflict of Three Cities* (1903), a story about class conflict and
social injustice.[30] Marx makes a brief appearance in these pages as the "work-
ers' philosopher." Yet, as Muruwwah later put it, it was "an un-Marxist Marx."[31]
The "true Marx," that of Lenin, was yet to be discovered and so was the "true
meaning" of socialism. This was because "quite often the meaning of socialism
in *nahḍawī* writing was mixed and convoluted with other concepts some of
which were contradictory," and therefore, Muruwwah writes, "class relations,

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[27] *Al-Safīr*, (September 19, 1985), 10.
[28] Muruwwah, "Min al-Najaf," 177.
[29] *Al-Safīr* (September 20, 1985), 10.
[30] The full Arabic title is: *al-Dīn wa-l-ʿilm wa-l-māl: al-mudun al-thalāth: dhikr madīnat al-dīn
wa-madīnat al-ʿilm wa-madīnat al-māl wa-mā jarā bayna sukkānihā min al-nizāʿ.*
[31] Muruwwah, "Min al-Najaf," 178-9.

the core issue of socialism, were often external to the issue at stake."[32] Until the real Marxism and socialism would appear, Muruwwah absorbed other intellectual elements which eventually would serve Marxist-Leninist thought such as "Historicism," the idea that an objective past existed and that a scientific method could expose it. As he put it: "I was infatuated with Aḥmad Amīn's work on Islamic history, especially his depth of research and his unbiased style."[33] This was probably one of Muruwwah's first encounters with the modern notion of "historical objectivity" which eventually opened the possibility of politicizing an "objective" and "scientific" view of the past as in Marxism.

And of course, there was much about the historical connection to the Islamic heritage. Tawfīq al-Ḥakīm's 1933 play *Ahl al-kahf* (Cave Dwellers) made the Quranic story of an awakening after three hundred years of slumber culturally relevant as it spoke of the *nahḍah*'s brave new modern world. He read al-ʿAqqād for his ability to extensively treat complex ideas in a clear and accessible fashion.[34] In prose, Muruwwah read Ḥusayn Haykal's celebrated novel *Zaynab* (1913), which, like any good novel, articulated the inner emotional world of the individual. In poetry, he was exposed to the collective efforts of Arab writers in the Americas, or *udabāʾ al-mahjar*, many of whom were Lebanese. That literary corpus illustrated to him the versatility of modern Arab experience, a deep account of the human condition of exile. Finally, in Iraq he became familiar with the Najafi poet Muḥammad Mahdī al-Jawāhirī whose political and social criticism was written in a traditional style. Al-Jawāhirī, who was heavily involved in journalism, later employed Muruwwah as a writer in his Baghdadi newspaper *Al-Raʾī al-ʿĀmm*.[35]

Taken in its entirety, this literary corpus reflected the aspirations and concrete goals of at least two generations of writers preceding Muruwwah's. As far as he and several other students in Najaf were concerned, this corpus was the amazing literary canon to which the *nahḍah* gave birth.[36] While in Najaf, he soon encountered a circle of like-minded students of similar age and background who demanded that this corpus be taken seriously by Najaf's *ʿulamāʾ*. A disproportionate number of these students came from Jabal ʿĀmil.

Indeed, though very poor, since the late 19th century the entire region of Jabal ʿĀmil underwent a process of *nahḍawī* intellectual fermentation. Already in 1909 a circle of progressive intellectuals established in the south the journal *Al-ʿIfrān*, the first so-called "Shiʿī journal." *Al-ʿIfrān* expressed constant

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[32] Ibid., 177-8.
[33] *Al-Safīr* (September 22, 1985), 10.
[34] *Al-Safīr* (September 21, 1985), 10.
[35] On al-Jawāhirī and Najaf, see: Naef, "Shiʿi-Shuyuʿi," 255-568.
[36] Ibid.

admiration for the "progress of science," and, as historian Tarif Khalidi put it, to "The Nahḍah of Jabal ʿĀmil."[37] By virtue of its founders' clerical ties, it had very strong connections to Najaf. But after about a decade of activity an unavoidable gap emerged between *Al-ʿIfrān*'s community and the conservative scholarly realities of Najaf. Many ʿĀmilis wrote of an ossified academic atmosphere, an out-of-date curriculum, and alluded constantly to Najaf's decline (which is now well documented). And thus, to a certain extent, the call for educational reform in Najaf hailed from Jabal ʿĀmil.[38]

Though still quite young, Muruwwah was an avid reader of *Al-ʿIfrān*, fully engaging the intellectual concerns of this milieu. He was joined by a circle of classmates such as Muḥammad Ṣāliḥ Baḥr al-ʿUlūm, Hāshim al-Amīn, Muḥammad Jawād Mughnīyah, ʿAlī al-Zayn, Muḥammad Sharārah, Muḥsin Sharārah, Ṣāliḥ Jaʿfrī, ʿAlī al-Sharqī and Muḥammad ʿAlī Khumaynī.[39] This group included students from Jabal ʿĀmil and "in 1925 they were joined by Iraqis in an association called *al-Shabībah al-ʿĀmiliyyah al-Najafiyyah* (ʿĀmili-Najafi Youth)... these young clerics called for a renewal of literature and in general, professed modern ideas. Several among them would later on remove the turban and embrace Communism."[40] Over time, members of this debating society were collectively known as the "angry young Shaykhs."[41] By far, the most critical, uncompromising and "angry" voice was that of Muḥsin Sharārah, a fellow student from Jabal ʿĀmil. Sharārah's criticism of Najaf in *Al-ʿIfrān* focused on "the backwardness, passivity, and false piety of many *ʿulamāʾ*."[42] The scandal of his writings brought some clerics to declare Sharārah an apostate.[43] In this context, and within the expectation that a reformist—"a Shīʿī Muḥammad ʿAbduh"—would emerge in Najaf, Muruwwah joined the fray and published a courageous essay in *Al-ʿIfrān* in which he endorsed Muḥsin Sharārah's critique.[44]

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[37] Tarif Khalidi, "Shaykh Ahmad Arif al-Zayn and al-Ifran," in *Intellectual Life in the Arab East, 1890-1939*, ed. Marwan Buheiry (Beirut: Center for Arab and Middle East Studies, American University of Beirut, 1981): 124.

[38] Sabrina Mervin, "The Clerics of Jabal ʿAmil and the Reform of Religious Teaching in Najaf since the Beginning of the 20th Century," *The Twelver Shia*: 79-86.

[39] *Al-Safir* (September 18, 1985), 10.

[40] Mervin, "The Clerics of Jabal ʿAmil," 79-86.

[41] Miriam Younes, "Modernist Challenges for the *Hawza* of Najaf in the Early 20th Century," (Basel, Switzerland: Center for Academic Shiʿa Studies, unpublished paper, January 2012).

[42] Werner Ende, "From Revolt to Resignation: The Life of Shaykh Muḥsin Shararah," in *Humanism, Culture, and Language in the Near East: Studies in Honor of Georg Krotkoff*, eds. Asma Afsaruddin and Mathias Zahniser (Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 1997), 69.

[43] Mervin, "The Clerics of Jabal ʿAmil," 79-86.

[44] Ibid.; Younes, "Modernist Challenges."

"We are not content," Muruwwah wrote, "with the educational and moral state of Najaf and we expressed our dissatisfaction" publicly as well as privately to multiple senior individuals. Yet, "we could not have imagined that they would take issue with our complaints and blames us" for spreading disorder and dissent.[45] His main point was that modern Arab culture is not a threat to the moral well-being of the community: "It is about time, Gentlemen, that we demand of those who wish to protect religion and persuade the people in its truthfulness that they become men of culture; the culture of their compatriots and their contemporaries."[46] In other words, as a young man who internalized the vast modern literary canon of his time, he asked of Najaf's scholarly community to embrace the literary meaning of its modern book market rather than emphatically reject it. He described this state of rejection as extremely painful and expressed hope that the *ʿulamāʾ* would consider a more synthetic and conciliatory approach. Hence the title of his article: "Pains and Hopes."

For Muruwwah, these pains and hopes were very personal. To explain: "Given your background," he was once asked, "wasn't it impossible to accept the ideas of Ṭāhā Ḥusayn and Ismāʿīl Maẓhar"? "My religious education was oriented toward the finding of truth," Muruwwah answered.[47] And in (religious) truth he was accustomed to finding solace, security and certainty. In contrast, Enlightenment knowledge (*maʿrifah*) was an open-ended quest for further inquiry. This radically new platform, one which he never actually studied in any organized fashion, was now a destabilizing factor in his life.[48]

And though he could draw support form members of *al-Shabībah*, the rejection and censure of his teachers and most of his classmates was extremely painful and, not before long, brought him to the point of no return.[49] Should he leave Najaf's world and embrace another? Could he do it safely? In 1928, during his fourth year in Najaf, Ḥusayn Muruwwah's volatile encounter with Enlightenment resulted in a nervous breakdown.[50]

As his long time friend and colleague Muḥammad Dakrūb had observed, Muruwwah was so intellectually trapped that the next phase of his life was dominated by the need to reconcile "doubt with the certainty of belief."[51] That is, the doubt of Enlightenment and the certainty of religion and its community. Thus, instead of a well-bounded and integrated self, he experienced internal,

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[45] *Al-ʿIfrān* (November 1928), 411.

[46] *Al-ʿIfrān* (November 1928), 412.

[47] *Al-Safīr* (September 21, 1985), 10.

[48] Ibid.

[49] Ende, "From Revolt," 61-70. Dakrūb, "ʿAn al-fatrah al-ʿIrāqiyyah," 369.

[50] Ibid.; *Al-Safīr* (September 19, 1985), 10.

[51] Dakrūb, "Malāmiḥ min al-maṣīrah," 18-44.

as well as external, schisms and conflicts. His personal state of stability and the struggle to reconcile two different worlds while at the same time trying to maintain a sense of continuity and thus authenticity accurately mirrored the cultural schism of Najaf's youth as a whole. As he put it, "an internal struggle emerged inside me: should I stick (with Najaf) until the end, toward a new integrative and progressive religious position along the lines of ʿAbduh and Afghānī or should I desert the 'Najaf family' altogether?"[52] For the time being he chose the latter and returned home, to Lebanon. The year was 1928 and Muruwwah badly needed time to recover.

While it did not take Muruwwah a long time to regain his psychological balance, the issue of cultural schism and authenticity necessitated the intellectual investment of his remaining lifetime. As part of this process he ventured into Iraqi politics and began to think in pure ideological terms. On the personal level, he toiled to gain a better understanding of the cultural forces that brought him to the verge of total mental collapse. On the collective level, as post-World War I Baghdad emerged as a regional center of exiles, Muruwwah joined an intellectually booming environment.

Tired and probably quite anxious, months after his arrival to Lebanon a relative from Argentina (likely his brother) offered him unexpected financial assistance. Muruwwah used the money to enroll at Damascus University where he studied law and literature. While there he cultivated the two skills or professions that were available to educated middle class men (*effendis*) of his generation: journalism and teaching. Over the next six years, he taught and wrote in Damascus, Beirut, al-ʿAmārah and Baghdad. He got married, became a father, and organized his thoughts. Yet, quite persistently, the world he left refused to leave him, and the possibility of an easy conversion to the "secular" world of the *effendi* did not sit comfortably with him. An old acquaintance from the South, probably Shaykh ʿAbd al- Ḥuysan Sharrāf al-Dīn, who still fondly remembered the scholarly promise of Muruwwah the child, persuaded him to return to Najaf and offered sponsorship. Muruwwah accepted and in 1934 he returned to Najaf to complete his education. It was much easier this time around and by 1938, the incidental captive of Arab Enlightenment became a *mujtahid*. The many insights, questions, qualms, as well as the internal turmoil that the new literature triggered, were ready to be ideologized and put to the test of public politics.

Muruwwah was a member of the first generation of post-WWI Arab intellectuals who were heavily influenced by the politically liberal and Enlightenment-saturated texts of Egypt's *udabāʾ*. These old-guard intellectuals subscribed

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[52] Dakrūb, "ʿAn al-fatrah al-ʿIrāqiyyah," 370.

to the classic tale of the *nahḍah* as a progressive liberal march toward human betterment. It is a vision that Ṭāhā Ḥusayn re-coded in 1938 when he published *Mustaqbal al-thaqāfah fī Miṣr*, a seminal call for liberal cultural renewal. Yet, in contrast to this prescribed vision, Muruwwah's generation had "broad expectations" and little patience for Eurocentric liberal generalities.[53] They wanted immediate liberation from colonial rule, social justice and equality, political rights and a compatible culture to go with it. They thus sought to substantiate the general insights of Egyptian-inspired Arab liberalism about the nature of the individual, society, politics and science with more sophisticated ideologies.

Indeed, the new ideologies of the late 1930s fiercely critiqued the insulated and compartmentalized spheres of liberal economy, law, politics, international affairs and society championed by *nahḍawīs* like Ṭāhā Ḥusayn, and merged them into coherent political platforms.[54] The issue of poverty, for example, could no longer appear as an isolated phenomenon, but rather had to be thought of in conjunction with new political categories such as public hygiene, distribution of wealth, class structure, division of labor, colonial economy and political representation. Though modern ideas in Arabic still arrived mainly from Cairo, Baghdad was the place where a young and energized generation experimented liberally with mixing knowledge and politics. In 1941, after a short teaching career in al-Nāṣirīyah, Muruwwah arrived to Baghdad to teach, write and do politics.[55]

It is now largely forgotten that in the late 1940s, Muruwwah was an Arabic language and literature teacher at the Jewish high school Shammash. His son Naẓīr studied there as well.[56] After he left Shammash, most probably in 1949, his compatriot and Najaf companion Muḥammad Sharārah took his place. Both left a remarkable impression. For Muruwwah's Jewish students, these were tumultuous and highly stressful times as the Iraqi Jewish community was on the verge of total collapse. As the conflict in Palestine escalated, there were increasing manifestations of anti-Jewish hostility and state-lead pressure to ask the Jews to "choose sides." According to Albert Khabbaza, Muruwwah rose above this fray:

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[53] On this generation see: Christoph Schumann, "The Generation of Broad Expectations: Nationalism, Education, and Autobiography in Syria and Lebanon, 1930-1958," *Die Welt des Islams* 41:2 (July 2001): 174-205.

[54] See for instance: Roel Meijer, *Secular Liberal and Left-Wing Political Thought in Egypt 1945-1958* (London: RouledgeCurzon, 2002); and Amy Johnson, *Reconstructing Rural Egypt: Ahmed Hussein and the History of Egyptian Development* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2004).

[55] Dakrūb, "'An al-fatrah al-ʿIrāqiyyah," 373.

[56] Sasson Somekh, *Baghdad Yesterday: The Making of an Arab Jew* (Jerusalem: Ibis Editions, 2007): 156-161.

> Hussein Muruwwah was a Muslim Arabic teacher and a progressive gentlemen. He showed no ethnic discrimination and was far from being anti-Semitic. He was, however, a nationalist who hated the influence of the British in Iraq and believed that the British were provoking Muslims against the Jews to cover their infiltration in Iraq... he favored me because I knew the Arabic language more than any other pupil, and he loved my Arabic style... He once asked us to write a composition of the subject 'How to eliminate legal prostitution by ways of social development... Hussein Muruwwah liked my composition so much that he clapped his hands in cheer and asked the students to do the same... After clapping of hands and cheers, my teacher gave me 100 (out of a 100) grade...[57]

Sasson Somekh also studied under Muruwwah but had a much stronger relationship with Muḥammad Sharārah: "When I try to describe the direct impact Muḥammad Sharārah had on me in the short term (that is, while I was still in Iraq) and in the long term (throughout the trajectory of my intellectual life), I hardly know where to begin..."[58] Notwithstanding the political and social mayhem all around him, inspired by his teachers, for Somekh, this was the beginning of a life-long infatuation with language and literature.

These were also critical times for Muruwwah whose attraction to questions such as prostitution and social justice brought him closer to the Iraqi Communist Party (ICP). This journey began a decade or so earlier, when Muruwwah befriended the Communist Shaykh Ḥusayn Muḥammad al-Shabībī, a Shīʿī from Najaf and a member of the Central Committee of the ICP. They met when Muruwwah was writing for the intellectually influential weekly *Al-Hātif*, and the two had much to talk about. Once, during a debate about a certain nationalist issue, al-Shabībī introduced Muruwwah to Leninism, which, in al-Shabībī's words, was "the only true, applicable and scientific version of Marxism."[59] This was Muruwwah's first encounter with scientific socialism and a non-*nahḍawī* Marx as in Faraḥ Antūn's work. Al-Shabībī also gave Muruwwah a copy of the *Communist Manifesto* and initiated him into the classics: Marx's *Capital* (translated in the 1940s by Rāshid al-Barrāwī), and Lenin's *State and Revolution* (which clandestinely circulated in Baghdad in an unpublished translation).[60]

During WWII, Muruwwah took more interest in "theoretical works" and thus began to think about the deep context of the war. It did not take him

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[57] Albert Khabbaza, *The Last Tango in Baghdad* (Bloomington, IN: Authorhouse, 2010): 102-105.

[58] Somekh, *Baghdad Yesterday*, 89.

[59] Muruwwah, "Min al-Najaf," 179.

[60] Ibid., 179-181.

long to conclude: "Given the nature of WWII there was no other option but Lenin" whose idea that colonialism is the highest stage of capitalism was a major insight that seemed to be vindicated by the British policy in Iraq.[61] By this time he had internalized the notion that Communism was the only ideology that can theoretically explain the dire economic conditions and political repression that he had experienced during his childhood and that were so prevalent in Iraq and elsewhere in the region. Not coincidentally, this was also one of the reasons for which many Shīʿīs in Iraq subscribed to Communism.[62]

Yet, for all his theoretical readings, Muruwwah was not yet a Communist and would never join the ICP. Still gravitating toward Egypt's liberal core, he seems to have subscribed to the mainstream liberal-nationalist and Pan-Arab perspective of the Iraqi Ḥizb al-Istiqlāl (Independence Party) and was a staunch pro-monarchist. His writing from the Iraq years (1941-1949) in venues such as *Al-Raʾī al-ʿĀmm* and *Al-Hātif* reveal a preoccupation with contemporary history and the future role of Arab nationalism, the common cultural denominator of the time. He also developed a lifetime commitment to Palestine.[63] It appears that his Marxist theoretical understanding was out of step with his actual political choices. The concrete material context of the late 1940s, namely an acute socioeconomic crisis, pushed him closer toward Communism.

During World War II, when Iraq was under direct British occupation, it experienced a remarkable 500% inflation rate which destabilized the social order, caused a 50% decline in purchasing power and a precipitous sevenfold rise in the cost of living. As far as land control was concerned, about 1% of landowners controlled 55% of all cultivable land, leaving the peasants to languish. Though mass migration to the city became common and the social structure was gradually transforming, class-wise Iraqi society was still highly stratified into urban notables, tribal leaders, *effendis*, peasants, workers and the urban poor. These groups had opposing agendas, which in turn fueled the political turmoil of the mid 1940s. Beyond the ubiquitous issue of British occupation and Iraqi and Pan Arab nationalism, the political exchange of which Muruwwah became part revolved around questions such as universal education, labor unions, agrarian reform, pro-*fallāḥ* legislation, the abolition of monopolies, progressive taxation, civic-military balance and sectarian

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[61] Ibid.,
[62] Naef, "Shiʿi-Shuyuʿi," 255-267.
[63] Dakrūb, "ʿAn al-fatrah al-ʿIrāqiyyah," 373. For Muruwwah and his Shīʿī intellectual environment see: Orit Bashkin, *The Other Iraq* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009): 141, 172.

relationships.[64] These issues were at the core of the new ideological sophistication of the burgeoning postcolonial generation.

As World War II came to a close, political opportunities became available all over the region. Thus, the Iraqi monarchy timidly supported the democratic reorganization of public life along the lines of a multi-party system, a new electoral law and a host of socio-economic improvements to social security and unemployment. Democracy and redistribution of wealth were on the agenda. Though Muruwwah's Ḥizb al-Istiqlāl generally spoke of economic reforms, its exclusive focus was securing British withdrawal and promoting the grand politics of Pan Arab nationalism in its quest for a broader political framework. The other major political force was the social-liberal Al-Ḥizb al-Waṭanī al-Dīmuqrātī (National Democratic Party), which also called for reforms yet focused its attention on Iraq proper. Conversely, the outlawed ICP emerged as the largest grassroots organization in the country. Politically divided, the British skillfully pitted Iraqi politicians against one another and they, in turn, failed to move forward on either reform or withdrawal. As a result the young took their concerns to the street.

Though during this period street politics such as strikes, sit-ins and demonstrations were common everywhere in the Arab world, in Iraq the situation was particularly explosive. Regardless of reform talk, the political activities of the ICP led the government to crack down on Communists: in 1947 the leadership of the ICP was arrested and executed. It was a gruesome act of state violence that deeply impacted Muruwwah, who witnessed the body of al-Shabībī, the man who introduced him to the "real Marx," being put on public display. Eventually, with no solution to the issues of freedom, social justice and political fairness, the situation metastasized into mass violence. Known as the *wathbah* (leap), this series of clashes in 1948 with the government were a popular reaction to an Anglo-Iraqi treaty (The Portsmouth Treaty) that was perceived as a treaty of national surrender. The *wathbah* was also the tipping point that pushed Muruwwah toward Communism.

During the *wathbah*, Muruwwah recalled, "I participated in the popular demonstrations and political struggles. I wrote daily in the press," but "I was not yet a Communist but a nationalist writer." Yet, the violence of the *wathbah*

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[64] For social and economic data and analysis see: Marion Farouk-Sluglett and Peter Sluglett, "The Transformation of Land Tenure and Rural Social Structure in Central and Southern Iraq, c. 1870-1958," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 15: 4 (Nov. 1983): 491-505; Hanna Batatu, *The Old Social Classes and the Revolutionary Movements of Iraq: A Study of Iraq's Old Landed and Commercial Classes and of Its Communists, Ba'thists, and Free Officers* (London: Saqi Books, 2004): 465-536; Phebe Marr, *The Modern History of Iraq* (Boulder, CO: Westview, 2004): 61-80.

"shook me to the core and I was especially shocked by the killing of Commu-
nist student Jaʿfar al-Jawāhirī," the brother of the famous poet and the editor
of his journal.[65] Eulogizing his slain brother, in a memorable public appear-
ance, al-Jawāhirī wrote the famous poem "Akhī Jaʿfar" in which he set the tone
for an ongoing revolutionary struggle: "Do you not know that victims' wounds
are but a mouth?" the poet asked.[66]

    With close to one hundred people dead and many more wounded, it became
clear to Muruwwah that the Communists were the only political camp that
held to its principles and did not compromise with the British. Eighteen
months after the *wathbah*, when Muruwwah was finally ready to become an
official member of the ICP, the archetypical dishonest politician of the monar-
chial era, Nurī al-Saʿīd, came once again to power. A week later, in response to
a critical piece by Muruwwah, the Iraqi government stripped him of his citi-
zenship and sent him back to Lebanon. His time in Iraq came to an abrupt
end but it did make him a Communist. Once in Beirut he quickly joined the
Lebanese Communist Party (LCP). Officially, he was now a Red *mujtahid*
who was at once proud of the cultural heritage of Islam and politically com-
mitted to the cause of social justice, political freedom and emancipation from
foreign domination along Communist lines. During the next twenty years, he
tried to bring all of his complex and cultural commitments closer together. He
began this journey as a self-made Soviet-style literary critic and an Arab pio-
neer of Socialist Realism.

    In his capacity as a budding Communist intellectual, during the 1950s
Muruwwah emerged as an aggressive literary critique who, theoretically as
well as methodologically, ventured into Socialist Realism. Alongside critics
such as Raʿīf Khūrī and ʿUmar Fākhūrī, he was considered a co-founder of this
Arab literary trend. His ambition, and that of the Arab Socialist Realist move-
ment as a whole, was to transform literary criticism and through it change the
course of national culture, thought and, more broadly, their relation to politics
and society. As part as this ambitious endeavor the movement publicly con-
tested the cultural hegemony of the Egyptian *udabāʾ*, such as Ṭāhā Ḥusayn
and their notion of "art for art's sake." In place of such art, they campaigned
for Marxist-infused cultural renewal. Muruwwah's theoretical contribution
was crucial for the success of this effort, written as it was against the message
he had absorbed in Najaf's book market.

    The beginning of Muruwwah's involvement with this literary movement was
quite incidental. In 1954 his comrades at the LCP chose him as a representative

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[65] Muruwwah, "Min al-Najaf," 182-183.
[66] http://www.jwahri.net/#top—for the emotional public commemoration ceremony and the
recitation of the poem see: Bashkin, *The Other Iraq*, 116.

to the Second Congress of Soviet Writers. His short sojourn in Moscow completely changed his existing understanding of literature; that is, of the relationship between the writer, the text, society and the critic. Thanks to a little over a week in Moscow, multiple topics that waited throughout the 1940s to be meaningfully connected were finally seen as parts of an integrated whole. Muruwwah was by no means the only Arab intellectual who began to rethink the relationship between art and society.

Traveling for the first time outside the familiar parameters of the Arab world, Moscow appeared to Muruwwah as a larger-than-life human experiment. His travelogue is glowing with admiration for Moscow's sheer size, beauty and authority. Standing in front of the Kremlin (Russian for fortress), the huge gates opened to

> Welcome the delegations of Soviet writers from the golden wheat fields of Ukraine to the barren ice fields of Siberia… as well as from the thirty-nine nations that comprise the Soviet Union. Here we are now, behind the walls of the Kremlin inside the formidable fortress… entering the big hall where the Supreme Soviet Council holds its sessions. This space is now at the disposal of Soviet writers as they open the great Second Congress of Soviet Writers. In their capacity as the people's intellectuals they are its rightful representatives.[67]

As Muruwwah made his way in to the hall, he spotted Marshal Zhukov, the legendary Soviet general who, only nine years earlier, conquered Nazi Berlin. He was in awe:

> **Muruwwah**: What do military personnel have to do with this celebration of writers and writing?
> **Translator** (laughing): Here writers and soldiers are part of the same people. There are no barriers and boundaries. Marshal Zhukov attends this meeting not as a military man, but in his capacity as a writer and a friend of writers.
> **Muruwwah**: And who are the people with the decorations on their chests?
> **Translator**: These are also Soviet writers, ten of which carry the Stalin Medal and four of them are war heroes.[68]

Thus, in a few brief pages, Muruwwah is welcomed, and, in turn, introduces the reader to the wonders of Soviet utopia: an egalitarian classless society or the real "City on the Hill" where writers play a concrete social role and are admired and celebrated in return.

With his critical guard down, over the next ten days, Muruwwah received a crash course in Socialist Realism, the Congress' topic of choice. His first critical

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[67] Ḥusayn Muruwwah, *Qaḍāyā Adabiyyah* (Cairo: Dār al-Fikr, 1956), 66-67.
[68] Ibid., 70.

impression was that because Soviet writers have a definitive social mission they fundamentally differed from their Arab counterparts. In Maxim Gorky—the man who convened the First Congress of Soviet Writers (1934) and was responsible for the elaboration and proliferation of Socialist Realism—Muruwwah, as well as everybody else, saw the ultimate role model for what a writer should be: a literary Stakhanov of sorts. Taking their cues directly from Stalin's industrial metaphors, which imagined writers as "engineers of human souls," the Congress' discussion revolved around the writer's role in forging a new society and a new Soviet Man/Woman.[69] With this mission in mind, Soviet cultural architects conveyed the sense of a mystical relationship between writers, literature and reality. Muruwwah was smitten. "In the USSR," he writes, "literature is strongly tied to the life of the people,"[70] and hence can serve a progressive social purpose. Muruwwah ascribed the success of Soviet writers to Socialist Realism. Though he did not yet properly understand the tenets of this method, ten days in Moscow where enough for him to conclude that "the marvelous interaction between the life of the people and literature is unprecedented in human history… we have seen this wondrous phenomenon throughout the Congress."[71]

Fascinated by how Socialist Realism administered this neat relationship, Muruwwah tells us that "the conferrers treated the problem of Socialist Realism candidly and submitted their discussion to the principle of self-criticism; one of the major reasons for (Soviet) power and a force for progress in the application of Socialism."[72] If the main business of the writer is to apply Socialist Realism, the function of self-criticism was to identify and purge "mistakes" in the application process.[73] As one delegate put it: "Gorky became Gorky… only because Lenin corrected his mistakes."[74] Needless to say, for Muruwwah, as well as for most Arab writers of the time, the concept of "literary mistake" was a novelty, and it made sense only if one thinks of art in pure Marxist terms, as a carefully structured scientific process that aims to transform the human condition. In other words, the practice of Socialist Realism made philosophical sense only within the framework of Marxism-Leninism.

As the official Marxist-Leninist standpoint on art, Socialist Realism did not stop with the internal quest for purifying art from its "mistakes." Since it was

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[69] Ibid., 72-73.
[70] Ibid., 73.
[71] Ibid., 74.
[72] Ibid., 78.
[73] In Muruwwah's words, "Soviet writers found mistakes in the application of Socialist Realism which they duly discussed." Ibid., 79-80.
[74] Ibid., 98.

locked in a fateful battle with capitalism, the cosmology of the writer was a black-and-white adversarial world-view in which 'good' writers fought against 'bad' ones and 'progressive' literature was pitted against 'reactionary' literature. As co-founder and chairman of the Union of Soviet Writers Alexander Alexandrovich Fadeyev put it, if "the role of realist literature is to fight capitalism," then Socialist Realism could be easily distinguished from capitalist literature, which is nothing but cosmopolitan "art for art's sake."[75]

During the Congress Muruwwah was exposed to the elementary tenets of Socialist Realism, namely that literature should resonate with Marxism-Leninism, convey class consciousness and personify class heritage, adhere to Party-mindedness [*partynost*] and endorse the interests and viewpoint of the people [*Narodnost*].[76] In addition, as his later writing revealed, Muruwwah understood this doctrine in light of the philosophical proximity of the Soviet writer to reality. This aspect was first articulated in the First Congress of Soviet Writers when Andrei Zhdanov (Stalin's cultural Tsar) decreed that, as the official style of Soviet culture, the art of Socialist Realism should "depict reality in its revolutionary development."[77] The Congress, then, taught Muruwwah how and why to contrast Socialist Realism with the corrupt capitalist form of "art for art's sake": this reactionary capitalist art was divorced from social reality and lacked the historical momentum of revolutionary development. As such, it should be destroyed.

Thus started Muruwwah's quest to bring Socialist Realism to Arabic literature with greater consistency and theoretical coherence than his colleagues Ra'īf Khūrī and ʿUmar Fākhūrī had thus far provided.[78] Though Muruwwah was a committed believer, he was not dogmatic. Returning from Moscow, Muruwwah argued that "there is no intention to simply 'import' the meaning of Socialist Realism to Arabic literature." Instead, the idea is to learn how Soviet peoples "scientifically applied Socialist Realism."[79] He now had a transnational *madhhab* (denomination) and a local mission.[80]

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[75] Ibid., 81, 85.

[76] Cynthia Ruder, "Socialist Realism," in *Encyclopedia of Russian History*, ed. James Millar (New York: Macmillan, 2004), Vol. IV, 1415-1419.

[77] For the Zhdanov speech see: http://www.marxists.org/subject/art/lit_crit/sovietwritercongress/zhdanov.htm (accessed on June 15th 2012).

[78] On their contribution see: ʿAbbud Ḥannā, *al-Madrasah al-wāqiʿiyyah fī-l-naqd al-ʿArabī al-ḥadīth* (Damascus: Wizārat al-Thaqāfah wa-l-Irshād al-Qawmī, 1978): 77-155.

[79] After all, much of the discussion in Moscow dealt with the USSR's own cultural diversity and how to adjust Socialist Realism to the cultural specificity of each of the Soviet nations. Muruwwah, *Qaḍāyā adabiyyah*, 87, 102.

[80] Ibid., 8.

Naturally, early experiments with Arab Socialist Realism took place in *Al-Thaqāfah al-Waṭaniyyah* and *Al-Ṭarīq*, the mouthpiece of the LCP and the literary home of the Marxist community. The most significant regional break-through occurred, however, when Muruwwah met the exiled Egyptian math-ematician and Marxist literary critic ʿAbd al-ʿAẓīm Anīs. Purged in September 1954 from his university job by Nasser, Anīs took a job in Beirut where he was exposed to a new cadre of Marxist intellectuals with ties in Iraq and Syria. Anīs came to Beirut with disdain toward Egypt's so-called Ivory Tower intel-lectuals and met Muruwwah who had just returned from Moscow fully ener-gized and committed to take on big cultural issues. The long-term result of their meeting was a triple collaboration between Muruwwah, Anīs, and Marxist phi-losopher and emerging literary critic Maḥmūd Amīn al-ʿĀlim (who was also fired from his university position under Nasser). Already before they met Muruwwah, al-ʿĀlim and Anīs took issue with Ṭāhā Ḥusayn's method of liter-ary criticism.[81] The meeting of the minds in Beirut (and the support of the LCP) lead the Lebanese to invite al-ʿĀlim and Anīs to publish their essays as a book. The intellectual openness of Beirut at the time made it a better place to undertake such an enterprise than Cairo and its growing statist dogmatism. The two Egyptian thinkers asked Muruwwah, now an emerging theorist of Socialist Realism, to write the preface to *Fī-l-thaqāfah al-Miṣriyyah*.[82] They were both very pleased with how he brought their work in to focus and fur-thered their agenda.[83]

Muruwwah's preface set the tone for much of what was about to happen in Arab letters during the tumultuous years of the mid-1950s. He wrote of a new postcolonial Arab situation. According to him, this situation neces-sitated a new culture and a new iconoclastic generation that would be willing to destroy the "old" culture. He saw much promise in a book that called for a

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[81] In February 1954 Ṭāhā Ḥusayn published "Ṣūrat al-adab," an article which triggered a strong reaction from al-ʿAẓīm and al-ʿĀlim in which they argued that "form" could not be sepa-rated from "content" and that this separation is a cultural mistake. "Ṣūrat al-adab," the original *Al-Jumhuriyah* article, was republished in Ṭāhā Ḥusayn, *Khiṣām wa-naqd* (Beirut: Dar al-ʿIlm li-l-Malayīn, 1977): 72-89.

[82] For the Lebanese involvement in the publication process see: Maḥmūd Amīn al-ʿĀlim and ʿAbd al-ʿAẓīm Anīs, *Fī-l-thaqāfah al-Miṣriyyah* (Cairo: Dār al-Thaqāfah al-Jadīdah, 1989): 15-34.

[83] See a letter from Maḥmūd Amīn al-ʿĀlim to Muḥammad Dakrūb thanking Muruwwah and others for their critical contribution: Muḥammad Dakrūb, "Kalimāt ʿan Ḥusayn Muruwwah wa-ʿan al-farḥ bi-jadīd al-ākharīn," in N.A., *Ḥusayn Muruwwah shahādāt fī fikrihi wa-nidālihi* (Beirut: Dār al-Fārabī, 1981): 153-4. Maḥmūd Amīn al-ʿĀlim met Muruwwah for the first time only in 1956 during the inaugural meeting of the Arab Writers Association in Blūdān, Syria. Maḥmūd Amīn al-ʿĀlim, "Ḥusayn Muruwwah fī riḥlatihi al-thalāth," in N.A., *Ḥusayn Muruw-wah fī masīratihi al-nidāliyyah fikran wa-mumārasatan* (Beirut: Dār al-Fārabī, 1997): 38.

new relationship between writers and reality. He expected that writers would become actively involved not only in the "accurate" depiction of this reality but would also commit themselves to its political transformation. He believed that *Fī-l-thaqāfah al-Miṣriyyah* was the first step in launching an objective scientific process of cultural change.[84] In communicating the book's importance to Arab writers, Muruwwah's preface also situated him as an important critic capable of identifying and supporting a pioneering agenda.

Undoubtedly, *Fī-l-thaqāfah al-Miṣriyyah* was a pioneering book with a classic postcolonial agenda. It was the first publication of its kind to address the negative cultural impact of colonialism and implicate the intellectual class of the *udabāʾ* with subscribing to the alleged universality of colonial culture. The book's remedy for Egypt's cultural state of affairs was Realism.[85] What were the theoretical parameters of this Realism and how exactly one would go about applying them remained an open question. For the time being, the authors garnered enough cultural interest and formed the first line of attack against the established *udabāʾ*, who from this point onwards started their slow and defensive retreat. Yet, influential as this book was in singling out individuals and literary problems, intellectually speaking, its narrow Egyptian focus and its incoherent method of Realism limited its impact.[86] The task of elaborating a more systematic introduction to Realism along credible Socialist lines fell to Muruwwah.

Rising to the challenge, Muruwwah's 1956 book *Qaḍāyā adabiyyah* was a careful blueprint of why and how to apply Socialist Realism in the Arab world. A decade later he published another, more complete literary agenda: *Dirāsāt naqdiyyah fī ḍawʾ al-manhaj al-wāqiʿī* (1965). Both books established him as a major literary critic and the most systematic thinker of Socialist Realism. He now talked about his approach to literature in terms of a methodology (*manhaj*) of total critique, a form of philosophy for life that illuminates "the most important issues of the era… whether they were intellectual, social or political."[87] Quite tellingly, though by this time Nikita Khrushchev had already delivered his dramatic condemning speech in which he exposed the horrific crimes of Stalinism, Muruwwah was silent about these recent discoveries and had nothing to say of Stalin's horrific atrocities, ossified bureaucracy, corruption and profound injustices. Clearly, though in light of Khrushchev's revelations

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[84] Maḥmūd Amīn al-ʿĀlim and ʿAbd al-ʿAẓīm Anīs, *Fī-l-thaqāfah al-Miṣriyyah* (Rabat: Dār al-Īmān, 1988 (2nd edition)): 5-15.

[85] See for instance al-ʿĀlim and al-ʿAẓīm, *Fī-l-thaqāfah al-Miṣriyyah* (1988): 17-22.

[86] In his preface Muruwwah alluded to both of these problems. Al-ʿĀlim and al-ʿAẓīm, *Fī-l-thaqāfah al-Miṣriyyah* (1988): 5-15.

[87] Ḥusayn Muruwwah, *Dirāsāt naqdiyyah fī ḍawʾ al-manhaj al-wāqiʿī* (Beirut: Maktabat al-Maʿārif, 1965): 5.

both the First and Second Congresses of Soviet Writers appeared as nothing but a big lie, Muruwwah was willfully blind about the complacency of most Soviet writers with Stalin's murderous order. He was also silent as to what this complacency could possibly mean for Socialist Realism. Instead of critical moral engagement, Muruwwah constructively distilled from the Soviet method a cultural agenda with which he, Maḥmūd Amīn al-ʿĀlim and others hoped to transform Arab culture.

Taking his statement of purpose in *Fī-l-thaqāfah al-Miṣriyyah* to the next theoretical level, Muruwwah began his new book along more explicitly polarizing lines: "It is the nature of the 'new' to wish, from deep inside, to eliminate 'old' ideas, values and meaning which belong to an era whose social progressive moment is gone. And it is in the nature of the 'old' not to leave the field to the 'new' without firm resistance."[88] The necessity to define, locate and then eliminate the "old" is derived from Muruwwah's dissatisfaction with how cultural and political power had been divided. In search of a political and cultural revolution, the elimination of the "old" would inevitably make space for "new social groups" which would then usher in a better phase of historical development.[89] In other words, for Muruwwah, literature was the linchpin of an ongoing effort to claim culture as a revolutionary political space. The means of doing so was to propagate the notion of *iltizām* (commitment) and propose a classic question: What do we write, why and for whom?[90]

While the old-guard *udabāʾ*, like Ṭāhā Ḥusayn, Tawfīq al-Ḥakīm and al-ʿAqqād insisted that "politics corrupt literature" and hence called for a separation of writers, literature, "and arts as a whole from the general affairs of life," the Socialist Realist generation insisted on the exact opposite.[91] Though at some point they met to discuss these differences, essentially, such differences were not a subject for negotiation.[92] Instead, Muruwwah and his colleagues thought of settling them through struggle. Thereafter, the notion of *literary battles* (*maʿārik adabiyyah*) became extremely popular in Arabic letters.[93] In fact, for Muruwwah,

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[88] Ḥusayn Muruwwah, *Qaḍāyā adabiyyah*, 5.

[89] Ibid.,

[90] On the history of *iltizām* see: Yoav Di-Capua, "Arab Existentialism: A Lost Chapter in the Intellectual History of Decolonization," *American Historical Review* 17:4 (October 2012): 1061-1091.

[91] Muruwwah, *Qaḍāyā adabiyyah*, 6-7.

[92] In December 1954, Suhayl Idrīs invited Ṭāhā Ḥusayn to publicly debate these questions in Beirut. *Awrāq Ṭāhā Ḥusayn wa-murāsalātuhu*, eds. Muḥammad Ṣabr ʿArab and Aḥmad Zakarīyā al-Shilāq (Cairo: Dār al-Kutub wa-l-Wathaʾīq al-Qawmiyyah, 2007), Vol. I, 266.

[93] See for instance: Maḥmūd Amīn al-ʿĀlim, *Maʿārik fikriyyah* (Cairo: Dār al-Hilāl, 1970); Muḥammad ʿAbd al- Ḥalīm ʿAbd Allāh, *Qaḍāyā wa-maʿārik adabiyyah* (Cairo: Dār al-Shaʿb, 1974); Ḥusayn Muruwwah, *Qaḍāyā adabiyyah*, 6-7.

the notion of "battle" had also a more concrete side: that of physically taking arms. It might be a bit difficult to imagine the forty-year old Muruwwah undergoing military training and taking part in armed night patrols in the streets of Beirut, yet this is precisely what he did. As his friend put it, "he wrote as if going to the frontline" and he went to the frontline just as he wrote.[94]

In Muruwwah's mind the distinction between "progressive" and "reactionary" writers was first and foremost philosophical. "Reactionary" writers—the enemies at the frontline—draw on an idealist philosophy in which individual reason and consciousness constitute the first line of existence from which everything else is derived. That which is external to the individual, including society and economy, is relegated to a marginal level with minimal historical agency.[95] On the other side of this philosophical divide are the materialists. According to them, individual actions and thoughts are projected unto the world, which, in turn, renders them meaningful (makes them be). The material world, therefore, enables the thoughts of the self and should thus be the focus of all intellectual efforts.[96] The division of reality into material entities (the economy) versus idealist entities (mental forces, i.e. minds and their states) and the question of the relationship between them is a fundamental problem in the philosophy of metaphysics which, for his own reasons, Muruwwah followed selectively.[97]

Addressing these differences through confrontation, Muruwwah focused solely on the practical partisan level. By insisting that writers "define the social position of literary works" he drew a clear line between "progressive" and "reactionary" writers.[98] Thus, "artistic schools such as symbolism and Surrealism, function within the idealist matrix of 'Art for Art's Sake,'" and with the growing popularity of a non-Marxist existentialism in the Arab world, Muruwwah stated that "one can say that existentialism, as philosophy, literature, and a way of conduct, originated from the same (idealist) environment" that Marxists rejected.[99] With a clear line separating the two camps, Muruwwah maintained that the inevitable outcome of idealist inspired art was self-referential

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[94] Muḥammad Dakrūb, "Tawhīj al-munāḍil/Tawhīj al-kitābah," *Adab wa-naqd* (September 1997), 114.

[95] Muruwwah, *Qaḍāyā adabiyyah*, 17-18.

[96] Ibid., 18-19.

[97] Sticking with the classic Marxist view of materialism as a mechanistic historical process which is forged by human activity (praxis) within determinate material circumstances, Muruwwah had no interest in the proposition that Dualism (the dialectical combination of Materialism and Idealism) might point to a convergence between the "reactionary" "Art for Art's Sake" and the "progressive" "Art for Society."

[98] Ibid., 31.

[99] Ibid., 18.

art. Divorced from reality, this art emerged exclusively from within the self, reflecting mere individual experiences and, ultimately, was directed back at the selfish concern of the individual at the expense of the social body as a whole.[100]

With this philosophical division in mind, Muruwwah proposed to rethink the position of the literary critic vis-à-vis literature. Unlike the literary criticism of the time, which was politically free-floating and lacked clear methodology, Muruwwah called upon the critic to become a revolutionary fighter (*munāḍil*) enrolled in the ranks of the avant-garde. As his friend and colleague ʿĀmil Mahdī argued, "a critic without a (political) position (*mawqiʿ*) is a critic without methodology," and hence without social utility.[101] Practically speaking, the task of the "progressive" literary critic is then to comb through the text and determine the degree to which materiality and the social position are articulated in a satisfactory fashion.

By this time there was already an acknowledged international pool of progressive writers who could serve as role models, such as Pablo Neruda, Federico García Lorca, Louis Aragon, and Nazim Hikmet.[102] Once the position of the writer and the critic was redefined, the *udabāʾ* surely emerged as detached "ivory tower" writers and so were some of their youngest followers such as Nagīb Maḥfūẓ.[103] Though outside the purview of this work, the first two Congresses of Arab Writers (1954, 1956), marked a generational revolt against the *udabāʾ*, a shifting of the literary center from Cairo to Beirut and the emergence of a committed form of literary criticism.[104] And so, two decades after Egypt's intellectual luminaries guided Muruwwah to Enlightenment through the intricate world of the *nahḍah*, he came around to dismantle their cultural underpinnings. In his words: "we call to fight the (reactionary) black *adab* which propagates desperation and pessimism. This literature, which aspires to rule over people by promising a better tomorrow, turned its oppression and pessimism into a 'philosophy' and the future into a sealed enclosure."[105]

In polarizing the literary field, one problem that Muruwwah and his allies faced was the fact that out of hundreds of writers only a handful could be considered "progressive," and of these only two or three were truly Socialist

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[100] Ibid., 17-18.

[101] Mahdī ʿĀmil, "Ḥusayn Muruwwah: al-Mawqif wa-l-fikr," *Al-Ṭarīq* 47:2-3 (June 1988), 14-15.

[102] Muruwwah, *Qaḍāyā adabiyyah*, 35.

[103] Ibid., 37.

[104] Ḥannā Mīnah, "Shayʾ min al-dhikrah," 45-60. While the full history of Arab literary criticism is yet to be written, the following describe some of the aesthetics and personal shifts during the 1950s: David Simah, *Four Egyptian Literary Critics* (Leiden: Brill, 1974); and Pierre Cachia, "The Critics," in *The Cambridge History of Arabic Literature*, ed. M. M. Badawi (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992): 417-442.

[105] Muruwwah, *Qaḍāyā adabiyyah*, 40.

Realist. Furthermore, since most writers are potentially "reactionary," Muruwwah seems to suggest that the entire modern canon is at fault. A host of uneasy questions followed from that: Does culture in the postcolonial era need to start from scratch? Should it reject the *nahḍah* altogether? If not, how to incorporate the existing canon, and along which lines to do so? Muruwwah was cognizant of this cultural challenge, yet rather than theorizing it, he eclectically assigned progressive values to some writers but not to others. One such progressive writer was his former employer, the Iraqi poet al-Jawāhirī. As mentioned above, many in Baghdad, including Muruwwah himself, were deeply moved by al-Jawāhirī's poem "Akhī Jaʿfar." Though written in the outdated classical form, Muruwwah now laid it before his readers as a fine example of progressive content.[106] Alongside such classical writers, Muruwwah hailed the few truly progressive and Socialist Realist writers, such as ʿUmar Fākhūrī, ʿAbd al-Rahmān Sharqāwī, ʿAbd al-Wahhāb al-Bayātī, Yusūf Idrīs, and the young Ḥannā Mīnah. During the 1950s, these writers emerged as the rank and file of Muruwwah's *Adab Muwajjih*, the real progressive literature. Everyone else, including Adonis and his magazine *Shiʿr*, which subscribed to the notion of "Art for Art's sake," were branded enemies.[107] Muruwwah's mission was clear and simple: "We wanted to strengthen the connection between arts and politics."[108]

Moving forward to address practical issues in the application of Socialist Realism, Muruwwah identified the linguistic schism between colloquial and literary Arabic as a critical postcolonial concern that distinguished Arab reality from that of the Soviet Union. This schism raised serious artistic issues such as which kind of language should writers use? Does the linguistic choice that determines artistic form (*shakl*) affect the content (*maḍmūn*)? Can, for example, a working class hero address the reader in high literary language? What does it do to his or her authenticity?[109]

Like many intellectuals before him, Muruwwah was concerned with the linguistic duality of spoken colloquial and written literary Arabic. In contrast with Stalin who saw language as a "national phenomenon," Muruwwah argued that the Arab linguistic division was a pure social phenomenon that organized itself along clear-cut class lines. He explained that historically speaking the Arab elite always had access to written literary Arabic and thus benefited from high-culture, science and political power. On the other hand, the lower classes

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[106] Ibid., 9, 32.
[107] Fawzī Maʿrūf, "Al-Naqd ʿinda al-Muruwwah: Ruʾiyah minhajiyyah," *Al-Ṭarīq* 47:2-3 (June 1988): 274-283.
[108] *Al-Safīr* (September 24, 1985), 10.
[109] Ibid., 50-52.

had access only to spoken colloquial, which lead to their practical exclusion from high culture and political power.[110] Thus, writes Muruwwah, "The split between the popular masses and science and knowledge lead to the consequential spread of ignorance among them and lead Arabs all over the region to be gradually cut off from written literary Arabic."[111] Seen in this light, the marginal position of the Arab masses was not simply a social phenomenon but also, and perhaps primarily, a linguistic one. From Ottoman times to the colonial era, the foreigners that ruled over the Arabs through a thin sliver of the local elite perpetuated this linguistic schism.[112] As a Communist, Muruwwah believed that during the current revolutionary phase "most of the people would become educated and not only a small and happy colonially affiliated upper class. These new educated people would harness the written language in order to articulate the new (experiences) of the masses," thus resolving the linguistic schism that hurdled Arab progress.[113]

Yet Muruwwah's newly acquired Marxist-Leninist orientation did not come at the expense of his former Najafi self. As passionate as Muruwwah was about Socialist Realism and the socio-political future of the Arab world, he saw in it simply a way to address the realities of ordinary people and the need to repair existing cultural schisms and thereby regain a measure of authenticity. His parallel activity in the field of *turāth* is a case in point.

As the brainchild of a Communist milieu, upon his return from Moscow, Muruwwah identified a Marxist theoretical justification for the project of "locating progressive elements in *turāth*."[114] Similar to the USSR, which encouraged the many Soviet nationalities to connect to their heritage, Muruwwah identified *turāth* as the strategic depository of Socialist Realism and, by extension, of a new revolutionary culture.[115]

As mentioned above, the breakup between the Arab masses and the literary Arabic language had schismatic cultural consequences which were further exacerbated by Ottoman and colonial rule. As the collective cultural reservoir of Arab Muslims, *turāth* was a victim of this split, causing the people to live as if they had no past experience to draw upon and hence no present authentic existence. In a postcolonial era, maintained Muruwwah, "the (broken) relation between the present Arab generation and its old intellectual/religious tradition" should be

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[110] Ibid., 42, 45-46.
[111] Ibid., 43.
[112] Ibid., 45-46.
[113] Ibid., 41, 49.
[114] *Al-Safīr* (September 24, 1985), 10.
[115] Muruwwah, *Qaḍāyā adabiyyah*, 24-5, 87-8.

repaired so that cultural authenticity could be reclaimed.[116] Thus, beyond literacy campaigns, Muruwwah suggested a systematic re-reading, rediscovery and then reinvention of Islamic tradition. Fully engaged, in 1954 he declared this effort the ultimate "Project of Our Lifetime" (*Mashruʿ al-ʿUmr*).[117]

Muruwwah's interest in *turāth* culminated in 1978 with the publication of his *magnum opus*, *al-Nazaʿāt al-māddiyyah fī-l-falsafah al-ʿArabiyyah al-Islamiyyah* (Materialist Trends in Arabo-Islamic Philosophy). However, the intellectual beginnings of this project were rather modest. As part of the post-WWII reorganization of Arab cultural life, in 1952 Muruwwah, Muḥammad Dakrūb and others started the publication of *Al-Thaqāfah al-Waṭaniyyah.* In contrast with the leading Egyptian magazines of the time such as *Al-Risālah* and *Al-Thaqāfah* in Egypt and *Al-Adīb* in Lebanon, their journal promised to be ideologically involved. Similar to Suhayl Idrīs' *Al-Ādāb*, the idea was to reexamine Arab realities in light of committed politics. Though a strong commitment to Arab nationalism was a standard feature of most writings during this time, in all other respects, their cultural agenda differed markedly. Thus, in addition to the expected engagements with Socialist Realism and Sartrean existentialism (especially the notion of *iltizām*), *al-Thaqāfah al-Waṭaniyyah*'s interest in *turāth* clearly distinguished it from other new magazines. As the editors put it:

> The mission of our journal is … to treat the connection between the present Arab generation and his ancient heritage (*turāth*). In light of the new understanding of historical progression, perhaps this treatment would serve as a modest sign to the abundant life catalysts that the vast tradition holds … [and so would point] to the place of the Arab masses in the making of history.[118]

The decision of the editorial board to single out *turāth* as a field of special interest stems from their understanding that the modern colonial experience brought about a systematic erasure, distortion and marginalization of Islamic knowledge and that Marxist culture could help fix that.[119] Though this was standard postcolonial insight of the kind one could find in similar colonial circumstances—for example, in India, China and Indonesia—their commitment to addressing it was pioneering.[120] Before it was replaced by *Al-Ṭarīq* in 1957,

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[116] Dakrūb, "Malāmiḥ min al-maṣīrah," 36.

[117] Mīnah, "Shayʾ min al-dhikrah," 50; Muruwwah, *Qaḍāyā adabiyyah*, 48.

[118] "Marḥalatunā al-jadīdah," *Al-Thaqāfah al-Waṭaniyyah* (April 10, 1954), 2.

[119] For a critical literary analysis of this cultural gap see: Muhsin al-Musawi, *Islam on the Street: Religion in Modern Arabic literature* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2009).

[120] Ḥusayn Muruwwah, *Turāthunā kayfa naʿrifuhu* (Beirut: Muʾasasat al-abḥath al-ʿArabiyyah, 1986): 9-15; Dakrūb, "Tawhīj al-munāḍil," 110-111.

Al-Thaqāfah al-Waṭaniyyah had a solid circulation of about a 1,000 copies printed in Cairo, and several thousand others elsewhere in the Arab world.[121] As such, its *turāthī* agenda proliferated quite widely in Leftist circles.[122]

Between 1952 and 1968 Muruwwah published a weekly and later a monthly essay on *turāth*. Addressing the need for "national culture" in the era of self-liberation during the 1950s, Muruwwah sought to capture the continuous sense of culture in Arab life: "Culture," he wrote, "has a humanistic quality to it that could not be divided and apportioned as it is a body of heritage (*turāth*) that extends from the past, through an industrious effort in the present for the purpose of making a new heritage in the future."[123] But how exactly can one capture this lost sense of continuity? According to Muruwwah, the linchpin of this cultural and intellectual effort was to subject *turāth* to the analytical power of dialectical and historical materialism. Such a grand act of recalibration, he believed, would inevitably address the problem of continuity and hence, of authenticity.

Yet notwithstanding the theory behind the project, the actual essays that Muruwwah published were quite eclectic. For instance, he wrote of class struggle in the 10th century, the organic relation of medieval Muslims to knowledge, and the "The Struggle of Old and New in ʿAbbāsid Literature."[124] Writing in the context of the 1,000th Hijri anniversary of the death of medieval polymath Ibn Sīnā (d. 1037), Muruwwah wondered if his contribution to multiple fields like medicine, philosophy, astronomy, psychology, music, poetry, law, theology and even politics would be possible today. The genius of Ibn Sīnā aside, Muruwwah ascribed his remarkable achievements to the historic conditions of linguistic and cultural unity in medieval Islam. Such achievements, he maintained, are impossible today, a time in which Arabs suffer from "a crisis of expression" and a bifurcated language. This crisis is not simply linguistic, but indicative of a general "crisis of life."[125] In search of a common thread through which to present his articles, he sought to historicize *turāth* and read into it the ethic and communitarian priorities of the present age, albeit from a Marxist perspective. His writings did not, however, reframe *turāth* socially, as it continued to exist as a depository of abstract ideas.

After fifteen years of such writings and in the wake of the 1967 defeat, the LCP as well as Muruwwah himself acknowledged the need to compose a more coherent scholarly and methodological statement about the relation of the

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[121] *Al-Safīr* (September 24, 1985), 10.
[122] After 1957 Muruwwah also wrote on *turāth* for *Al-Ṭarīq*.
[123] "Marḥalatunā al-jadīdah," 2.
[124] Muruwwah, *Turāthunā*, 194-5, 219-225, 246-7.
[125] Ibid., 35.

present to *turāth*. In the tumultuous post-67 years multiple cultural agendas circulated in Arab thought and the LCP urgently needed to assert itself as an equal contributor to the new cultural phase. Hence, once again, it sent Muruwwah to Moscow.[126] This time he stayed for a whole year during which he perfected his application of historical materialism to *turāth*. A decade or so later, *Materialist Trends in Arabo-Islamic Philosophy* was ready. With its two volumes, holding together 1802 pages, this work was the most systematic and original statement on the relation between medieval Arabo-Islamic knowledge and the present state of Arab culture. Mostly, however, the project was strongly influenced by the rise of fundamentalism during the 1970s. Over the years, it was admired, imitated, hated, condemned, but mostly revered as the most elaborated contribution of the Marxist-Islamist school (a school whose very existence Muruwwah denied).[127]

In a lengthy introduction to *Materialist Trends in Arabo-Islamic Philosophy*, Muruwwah argued that since the beginning of modern Arab writing during the *nahḍah*, *turāth* has been subjected to two dominant tendencies: fundamentalist metaphysics and liberal idealism. These two tendencies

> failed to expose the realist, objective and indirect connection between the scientific internal laws of Arabo-Islamic thought and social change. Hence, the history of Arabo-Islamic thought remained subjective, ahistorical and fundamentally divorced from its social roots, that is, from its real and objective history. Only the method of historical materialism is capable of discovering this connection … toward a [new] historical outlook on *turāth*.[128]

Therefore, he claimed that the generational task is to salvage *turāth* from such ahistorical readings as they only perpetuate the colonial schism with the present and do little to address it. In light of this problematic, the progressive scholar must "expose the relations between Arab thought in its contemporary social structure and previous thought and its social structure."[129] Given the Arab postcolonial context, Marxism promised a new form of historically grounded objectivity from which *turāth* could be re-engaged.[130]

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[126] Dakrūb, "Malāmiḥ min al-maṣīrah," 39-42.

[127] Peter Gran, "Islamic Marxism in Comparative History: The Cause of Lebanon, Reflections on the Recent Book by Husayn Muruwah," in *The Islamic Impulse*, ed. Barbara Stowasser (London: Croom Helom, 1987): 106-120; Steve Tamari, "Reclaiming the Islamic Heritage: Marxism and Islam in the Thought of Husayn Muruwah," *Arab Studies Journal* 3:1 (Spring 1995): 121-129.

[128] Muruwwah, *al-Nazaʿāt al-māddiyyah*, 6.

[129] Ibid.

[130] Muḥammad al-Miṣbāḥī, "Muttaṣil min ajl munfaṣil," *Al-Ṭarīq* 47:2-3 (June 1988), 110.

Read from the progressive standpoint of historical materialism, Muruwwah envisioned a "revolutionary knowing" of *turāth* that would socially connect it to the present.[131] According to Steve Tamari: "For Muruwah, the main reason for studying *turāth* is to uncover indigenous sources of radicalism to more firmly root the Arab liberation movement in a cultural context of its own."[132] Then, "in order to shape reality and become part of it, *turāth* itself needs to change."[133] How exactly Muruwwah implemented this agenda, and to what degree he was successful is outside the scope of this paper. However, it is clear that Muruwwah's task was not simply to rekindle interest in the Islamic past and desacralize it along Orientalist or *nahḍawī* lines. That is, to simply make it digestible to young readers as a "secular" story with "lessons for our age."[134] Far more ambitious than that, while his intellectual project reclaimed some of the lost religious mystique of the past, it also sought to emancipate this past, thus reinventing and rendering it culturally usable in the present. In doing so, even before he went to Moscow to conceive *Materialist Trends in Arabo-Islamic Philosophy*, he had already anticipated the post-1967 cultural crisis and the Arab collective drive to reclaim *turāth*, mostly, as it were, along idealist or fundamentalist lines.[135]

So what was Muruwwah searching for all of these years? A place to call home and in which he could reclaim a measure of authenticity that would, in turn, be experienced as a cultural peace of mind; in short, a solid post-colonial identity. This existential search for a home (or as Dakrūb called it, "certainty") launched Muruwwah on a three-decade journey to intellectually reclaim and reinvent this lost space. Interesting as it is as a personal odyssey, Muruwwah's journey is also a powerful metaphor for tracing and locating the journeys and metamorphoses of ideas and people in the postcolonial Arab world. Rather than approaching intellectual history in the abstract (nationalism, Islamism, secularism, etc.), Muruwah's story grounds the reception and transformation of ideas (notably those of Enlightenment, Leninism and Socialist Realism) through a dramatic personal narrative of separation (Jabal ʿĀmil), breakdown (Najaf), recovery (Damascus), experimentation (Baghdad), infatuation (Moscow), commitment (Beirut) and, consequently, the

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[131] Muruwwah, *al-Nazaʿāt al-māddiyyah*, 16, 26.

[132] Tamari, "Reclaiming the Islamic Heritage," 123.

[133] Al-Misbāhī, 106.

[134] In its classic late 19th century form Orientalism influenced Arab intellectuals like Jūrjī Zaydān to read Islamic legacy as a secular story. On this era see: Robert Irwin, *Dangerous Knowledge: Orientalism and Its Discontents* (Woodstock, NY: Overlook Press, 2006).

[135] For a discussion of post-1967 Islamic thought and debates over *turāth* see: Elizabeth Suzanne Kassab, *Contemporary Arab Thought: Cultural Critique in Comparative Perspective* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009).

solace of authentic homecoming. In each of these geographical locations we find bits and pieces of intellectual reception and regeneration toward a more complete cultural meaning. Such a personal account defies the notion of a single, straightforward intellectual translation of ideas such as Socialist Realist (or in the same period, existentialist), from one milieu (Moscow (or Paris)) to another, exposing a modest episode in the transnational history of one man and his thoughts.[136] Grounding ideas in specific and properly historicized geographical locations thus illustrates the complex interplay between the spatial and the intellectual.

Within the greater scheme of Arab thought it is important to note that Muruwwah's geo-intellectual journey ends in Beirut which he claimed as a home for his wandering self as well as for his generational intellectual project. It is in Beirut, after a second sojourn in Moscow, where the mechanics of *turāthī* synthesis take place in a fashion that brings to a final dialectical end an era of travel, wandering, displacement and return. The strong parallels between geography and thought also signal a certain homecoming for Arab thought as a whole as, with the fall of its *udabāʾ*, Cairo gradually lost its intellectual hegemony to Beirut. Yet, this shift happened indirectly, thorough the Baghdad of the 1950s: a restless city of intellectual exiles and a hub for literary and ideological experimentation. When political options in Baghdad slowly came to a close, Beirut emerged as a real and safe alternative. There, in pre-civil war Beirut, not only publishing proliferated but also brave intellectual experimentation, which gradually overshadowed the thought of Cairo and other firmly nationalist Arab capitals.

To a large degree, the critical thought of the 1980s that ushered in a new, post-1967 intellectual cycle centered on *turāth*, can find some of its origins in Muruwwah's own journey. And so, the Red Mujtahid was not a deserter of "religion" and an embracer of "secularism" or Communism. If anything, his life renders such categories completely obsolete. As a postcolonial thinker *par excellence*, the slow education of Muruwwah and its unexpected geographical spread led him (and his generation) to discover the power of synthetic literary and cultural criticism as a vehicle for the renewal of Arab intellectual life toward the making of an authentic Arab subject.[137]

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[136] On the creative reception of existentialism in the Arab world see: Di-Capua, "Arab Existentialism," 1061-1091.

[137] For a like-minded intellectual project, see the career and life of his life-long friend Mahdī ʿĀmil: Samer Frangie, "Theorizing from the Periphery: The Intellectual Project of Mahdī ʿĀmil," *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, 44 (2012): 465-482. For border thinking see: Walter Mignolo, *Local Histories/Global Designs: Coloniality, Subaltern Knowledges, and Border Thinking* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2000), Chapter 1.