

Nahda: the Arab project of enlightenment

Three pieces of writing capture the distance that Arab thought and culture crossed from the early nineteenth to the early twentieth century. The first text was written in 1832 by the Egyptian shaykh Rifa'a Rafi' al-Tahtawi (1801–73) upon his return from a five-year sojourn in Paris. The second was published in 1882 by 'Ali Mubarak (1823–93), an Egyptian bureaucrat, educator, and cabinet minister. The last was delivered in 1928 as a public lecture, a century after al-Tahtawi's book, by the Syrian-Egyptian Islamist Rashid Rida (1865–1935).

Rifa'a Rafi' al-Tahtawi (1832): One should note that the French have a natural propensity for the acquisition of learning and a craving for the knowledge of all things. This is why you see that all of them have a comprehensive knowledge of all things they have acquired. Nothing is alien to them, so that when you talk with one of them, he will talk to you in the words of a scholar, even though he is not one of them. For this reason, you can see ordinary French people examining and discussing a number of profound scientific questions. The same is true of their children; from a very early age they are proficient.¹

'Ali Mubarak Pasha (1882): The nation now sheds her false ideas, frees herself from worthless conceptions and gets used to the new institutions. Within a short time, all has changed: attitudes, habits, customs, and institutions. This is what happening in Egypt today. Anyone who saw Egypt fifty years ago, and who now sees it again today, will find nothing he knew from former times. He will realize that it has experienced a revolution.²

Rashid Rida (1928): In a time that is afflicted by ideological, intellectual, political, Communist and Bolshevik upheavals; in a time that is strained by religious, literary, and social chaos; in a time that is threatened by women's revolution, the violation of marital vows,

the disintegration of the family and the bonds of kinship; in a time in which heresy and unaffected promiscuity have erupted, as well as attacks on the nation's religion, language, and values, and its customs, dress, and origins, nothing remains stable [with which] to raise our youths [and] to teach them respect.³

Between these lines lies the story of the "Arab Renaissance," or *Nahda*, from curious cultural observation to optimistic implementation to skeptical retrospection and even regret. While in the Western academic tradition the *Nahda* is primarily a story of late nineteenth-century literary and linguistic renaissance, in the Arab intellectual tradition it is a key concept that accounts for the Arab experience of the Enlightenment. This essay approaches the *Nahda* from an expansive perspective that conceives of both modernity (*hadatha*) and Enlightenment (*tanwir*) as two complementary aspects of the same phenomenon.

The sections below discuss the early encounters with modern Europe, the emergence of an initial selective or defensive modernity focused on state building, and the crucial roles of Lebanon and Syria where a host of scholars experimented with cultural renewal and the translation of European knowledge. The focus then moves to Egypt, the *Nahda's* hub, and the establishment of the sociopolitical and economic infrastructure necessary for the emergence of the Arab Enlightenment, as well as the attempts to institute an Arab modernity by way of sociopolitical and legal reform. The discussion moves on to the response of Islamic modernism that sought synthesis and coexistence with the *Nahda*, and finally to the nationalization of the *Nahda* through competing political and ideological projects.

Early encounters with Europe and defensive enlightenment

Most accounts of the Arab Enlightenment consider the late eighteenth century as a period of significant developments. Already during this era, life in the Middle East was considerably challenged, enough to elicit two kinds of reactions: one reformist and the other revivalist.

The reformists, even in a remote province of the Ottoman Empire such as Yemen, struggled with how to instigate renewal and adapt to the changing global circumstances of greater economic integration and intercultural influences. Operating from within the conventions of Islamic culture, they responded to the changing times by rethinking the Islamic

legal tradition and its legal code (*shari'a*). Due to the centrality of legal thought and practice in daily Islamic life, all attempts at reform had to be conceived of and executed in legal terms, in other words, by answering the question “Does religious law permit this?” In contrast with this intellectual response, revivalists such as Muhammad ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhab (d. 1787) of the Hijaz (in modern-day Saudi Arabia), founder of Wahhabism, created a movement of moral reconstruction and self-purification that fought behaviors it defined as representative of cultural decline (such as the veneration of saints, music, drinking coffee, and smoking) and deviations from a strictly interpreted scriptural tradition. However different these responses were, they both emphasized cultural continuity and their legacies would have important roles to play during the twentieth century.

In addition to incremental cultural and economic changes there was at least one modern “big bang”: Napoleon’s invasion of Egypt in 1798. Later, in 1830, a second trauma occurred when the French invaded and colonized Algeria. Napoleon’s was the largest long-distance seaborne force the world had ever seen. Upon landing in Egypt, Napoleon – a self-declared Muslim – announced that he arrived as a “friend of Islam” in order to bring to it the values of the French Revolution (primarily liberty and citizens’ rights) as well as the culture of the Enlightenment. The French claimed that the Enlightenment and its humanist standards were of universal value.

In 1801, after encountering much resistance during their three-year stay, the French withdrew from Egypt. The legacy of their expedition varied greatly over time. Yet it left behind the possibility of pursuing a new kind of political power and a new form of state, and two such states rapidly emerged: Egypt and a reformed Ottoman Empire. In Egypt, following the departure of the French, Muhammad ‘Ali Pasha (r. 1805–48) established a powerful patrimonial regime which relied on skillful *ad hoc* application of modern power for its survival. The keyword for the institution of this power was “reform” and it came in all shapes and varieties: agricultural, economic, bureaucratic, and, first and foremost, military. By the 1830s, the Egyptian province was so powerful that it threatened the very existence of Ottoman rule. The common wisdom of this era was that, although modernity was a complete whole, it was the military and technological applications – its material aspects – that mattered most. This was the first Middle Eastern experience with selective, or defensive, modernity, in which aspects of modernity, especially those that were tied

to technology, were seen as independent of more difficult questions concerning morality and creed.

The second example, in many ways more profound, was that of the Ottoman Empire itself. In 1839, due to direct European pressure, the Ottomans embarked on their own era of *Tanzimat* (literally, “reforms”). Unlike other selective reforms, the Ottoman ones had a significant political aspect, for they introduced the idea of citizenship and equality before the law. These measures reflected European liberal thinking and were thus dependent on the formation of a new elite for their success. In fact, both the Egyptian and Ottoman experiments saw a systematic state effort to train a new class of civil bureaucracy. These young conscripts of modernity studied in new schools, traveled to Europe in official state delegations, and were employed by new institutions such as the translation bureau, the medical school, the military academy, or the official *Gazette* upon their return. They identified the propagation of literacy and the expansion of a modern education system as crucial means for progress. Their rise, however, came at the expense of the religious elite and the clerics (*‘ulama*), whose dependency on the state grew while the need of the state for their services significantly diminished. Impoverished and weakened, the *‘ulama*’s role gradually shrank to that of guardians of values and morality. The general cultural attitude was that, whatever modern developments society would undergo, morality would remain a domain that was exclusively under clerical supervision. In other words, the first modern experiments in the Middle East envisioned a divided future in which the moral sphere would retain its authority and authenticity by remaining detached from the material sphere, the one governed by Islamic religious principles and the other by the modern secular state and its elites.

The previously cited al-Tahtawi is an exemplar of how some Egyptians became facilitators for, and at the same time were also products of, these defensive state projects. Al-Tahtawi was a member of the first Egyptian mission that Muhammad ‘Ali sent to France (1825–32). While in Paris, he learned French, read extensively, and produced a travelogue *Refinement of Pure Gold in the Summarizing of Paris (Takhlis al-ibriz fi talkhis Bariz)* that described in detail the cultural differences between the Ottoman-Egyptian and French worlds. This book, written in the Islamic tradition of *rihla*, or travel literature, can be read as a roadmap for his future career as an administrator and education reformer.

Al-Tahtawi was an astute and comprehensive observer who commented critically on issues such as ethics, customs and manners, education, political philosophy, status and structure of knowledge, women and society, language, and science. Al-Tahtawi framed his observations in terms of the rise of civilizations and their decline into barbarity, and his work displays a clear sense that Islamic civilization was somewhat behind.

As a chronicler of cultural difference, al-Tahtawi's observations, such as "clarity of language is a pre-condition for sound reasoning," caused him to wonder about the foundations of Islamic learning. While modern knowledge prioritized science, philosophy and history, the Arabo-Islamic scholarly tradition favored "Syntax, inflection, prosody and vocabulary. Then derivation, poetry and composition. [And then] ... semantics, rhetoric, calligraphy, rhyme and history."⁴ Interestingly enough, al-Tahtawi never considered these two hierarchies of knowledge to be mutually exclusive.

This position was more difficult to maintain when it came to science. Perhaps the only indication of a certain tension between scientific reasoning and divinity was al-Tahtawi's reluctance to discard Islamic cosmology (*'ilm al-kawn*), the theocentric nature of which was inseparable from the Qur'anic notion of God. Thus, he never really embraced the mechanized law-bound world of Newtonian physics, which was free of the forces of divine authority and open for rational investigation. At the same time, however, he argued for a complementary relationship between reason and revelation. This ambiguity aside, it did not inhibit the school of translation that al-Tahtawi supervised from producing more than 2,000 translations of a technical-scientific character. This practical ambiguity, in which philosophical contradictions and tensions were overcome by avoiding clarity, characterized the first generation of defensive modernizers.

The enlightenment in Greater Syria: 1840–1870

While in Egypt the appropriation of modernity was primarily the official business of the state and its bureaucrats, in Lebanon and Syria the Enlightenment project was in the hands of individuals. Heavily influenced by the presence of missionaries, the impact of the abovementioned state projects in Egypt, the political and diplomatic activities of Americans and Europeans, as well as global commercial exchange,

a circle of young Arab literati established modern institutions such as schools, libraries, daily and periodical presses, and theaters. By 1880, a hundred different schools belonging to a dozen Christian denominations operated in Syria, Lebanon, and Palestine. Jerusalem alone had forty such schools. Some of these institutions, such as the Maronite seminary of 'Ayn Waraqa and the Syrian Protestant College in Beirut (later, the American University of Beirut), functioned as advanced academic laboratories that, however selectively, celebrated and disseminated the achievements of the European Enlightenment, including the practice of educating girls. Distinguished by such novel habits of mind, this new educated class soon asserted its influence in public life.

The careers of several of the most significant figures of this period capture the scope of cultural reshuffling that took place during this era. The life of Faris al-Shidyaq (1804–87), born a Maronite but later a convert first to Protestantism and then to Islam (upon which he took the name Ahmad), revolved around the role of language in public life. He began his scholarly career in the ranks of American missionaries from whom he learned about translation (first and foremost that of the Bible) and publication. He also worked at the American Protestant press in Malta, traveled extensively in Europe, and was aware of the public impact of publishing. In subsequent years, numerous books on all manner of subjects from Homer's *Iliad* to poems by Victor Hugo were independently translated by members of his generation.

Al-Shidyaq was particularly interested in linguistic change. This is because he and his colleagues realized that they had been translating and writing in an antiquated form of the Arabic language that drew heavily on classical forms of communication characterized by elaborate rhymed prose (*saj'*). Beautiful as it was, Classical Arabic stylistics, from a modern perspective, undermined the communicative capability of printed language and was often lacking in appropriate vocabulary. Equipped with the necessary publishing skill that he had acquired in Malta, al-Shidyaq founded *al-Jawa'ib*, one of the first independent newspapers in the Middle East. Through this newspaper al-Shidyaq and his peers revolutionized the usage of written language by expanding its vocabulary, as well as widening its expressive and syntactic scope. In doing so, he and others set in place the foundation stone for the subsequent creation of a new journalistic language that was precise, clear, and free from the complexities of Classical Arabic.

The working assumption of these individuals was that clarity in language is a pre-condition for clarity of thought. After all, despite its complicated Classical Arabic-style title, this was one of the elementary observations of al-Tahtawi's travelogue. The Christian Butrus al-Bustani (1819–93), a contemporary of al-Shidyaq, had a similar career with American evangelists yet his work took a secular route that the American missionaries could not have anticipated. A man of multiple talents, Bustani left a rich cultural inheritance that touched upon many aspects of Lebanese culture. Perhaps his most enduring legacy was in the field of lexicography, as he concluded that, in its present form, the Arabic language fell short of accounting for the dramatic transformation of the contemporary world. As a revivalist who believed in the possibility of bridging gaps between civilizations, al-Bustani composed one of the first modern Arabic dictionaries (*al-Muḥit*, 1867–70). In doing so he coined numerous new Arabic words and legitimized linguistic experimentation.

Beyond language, al-Bustani's quest for new forms of knowledge brought him to compose the first modern Arabic encyclopedia (*Da'irat al-ma'arif*, 1876–82). The western encyclopedia, a classic product of the Enlightenment's "Republic of Letters," was premised on the universality and objectivity of European knowledge as well as on the ability of all individuals to master it rationally. In the introduction to this work, al-Bustani wrote that his goal was to expand the knowledge of the "East" as a pre-condition for bringing the Arabs up to the level of European civilization.⁵

Unlike the earlier generation of al-Tahtawi, which did not view European culture in relativistic or competitive terms, al-Bustani's call for an awakening was conditioned by the understanding that Arab civilization should measure up to that of Europe. Put another way, cultural difference and the ways to abolish it became a major contemporary concern. Many, if not most, cultural entrepreneurs shared a similar view as they toiled to master new cultural practices. The joint careers of Yaquub Saruf (1852–1927) and Faris Nimr (1856–1951), two teachers from the influential Syrian Protestant College, marked a zenith in Lebanese journalism. Indeed, the two men capitalized on the linguistic and cultural achievements of previous generations and published *al-Muqtataf*, a scientific periodical that exposed a new generation of educated youth to the marvels of modern science and to its derivative social implications. *Al-Muqtataf* was read all over the Arab East but in 1884, in part due to the

publishers' belief in Darwinism and its rejection by their home academic institution, they left for Egypt. By this point, other Lebanese cultural entrepreneurs, such as al-Bustani's former students the brothers Bishra (1852–1901) and Salim (1849–92) Taqla, had already moved to Egypt where they published the influential political weekly *al-Ahram* (still in print today). Other pioneers such as Jurji Zaydan (1861–1914), author, editor, and publisher of the groundbreaking literary journal *al-Hilal* (still in print today), also moved to Egypt, further contributing to Egypt's dramatic emergence as the region's cultural hub.

With hardly any cultural opposition – a reality that would change during the 1880s – the emerging Syrian and Lebanese intelligentsia bypassed existing modes of indigenous knowledge such as biography, travel literature, and other classic genres. In their place, these writers experimented with European genres such as drama, the novel, the short story, as well as literary, political, and scientific journalism. Though influential, this cultural activity was not yet conceived of as a movement and hence did not have a name. They spoke of progress (*taqaddum*), civilization (*tamad-dun*), fear of barbarity (*tawahhush*), and, metaphorically, about “entering the city.” Yet, since the term *Nahda* appeared only later (see below), these modernistic developments remain nameless.

Whatever we might choose to call this yet nameless *Nahda* front, it was clearly committed to four fundamental traits of mid-nineteenth-century European thought: first, a belief in the idea of progress and its dependence on scientific and technological mindedness; second, an unflinching belief in the power of rationality and its positivist and empirical mindset; third, the adoption of a historicist habit of mind, or the realization that objects become intelligible only by grasping them as part of a causal process of development; and, fourth, acceptance of the notion that “civilization” exists in two fundamental states: rise or decline. Like Europeans, they distinguished between European civilization on the one hand and Eastern, Arab, and Islamic civilization on the other (all used interchangeably), and investigated the necessary conditions that might facilitate Arab progress. All four traits conjoined in the need to profoundly reform Arab civilization, which was now considered to be “lagging behind” Europe.

Though this generation understood that a European-style cultural revival necessitated direct political change, they rarely ventured into politics. Most of them, as members of Christian minorities who identified themselves as secular-minded Arabs, approached the question

of modernity exclusively from this ethnic perspective. Not to be confused with nationalism, they called this perspective “patriotism” (*hubb al-watan*, lit. love of homeland) and yet it was remarkably apolitical. In the last quarter of the nineteenth century, when political conditions in Greater Syria proved hostile to their project, they initiated one of the most remarkable intellectual migrations in Middle East history and left for Egypt.

The state of culture: Egypt, 1860–1880

Khedive Isma'il (r. 1863–79) had a simple motto: “Egypt is no longer part of Africa; it has become part of Europe.” He built railways, telegraph lines, roads, ports, bridges, irrigation canals, dams, hospitals, palaces, and the Suez Canal. He hoped to “enlighten” black Africa. Isma'il's great project of “becoming European” was premised on the modernistic understanding that the machine is a civilizing force and that an influx of technology could dramatically elevate living conditions and release Egyptians from poverty and their alleged cultural backwardness. Yet, by that time the limitations of material/technological modernization were widely acknowledged and Isma'il therefore also invested heavily in cultural institutions such as professional societies, schools (including education for girls), higher training colleges, libraries, a museum, theaters, an opera house, and a printing press. He generously patronized the arts and the journalistic scene and increased the number of student delegations to Europe. This was the background for 'Ali Mubarak's sweeping statement quoted at the beginning of this essay about profound changes in urban life.⁶ In other words, in place of the limited project of defensive modernity, Isma'il envisioned a more holistic cultural process.

The magnitude of Isma'il's enterprises created a wave of migration during which people from all over the Mediterranean flocked to Egypt in search of economic opportunity and a better life. By the turn of the century there were 260,000 Italian, French, Maltese, Armenians, Ottoman Jews, British, and Greeks living in Egypt. The successful reception of these minorities created a new reality in which, by 1907, about a quarter of the inhabitants of urban centers like Port Said and Alexandria were foreigners. Thus, urban life and so-called cosmopolitan culture became an integral part of the birth of Arab modernism.

Isma'il's actions provided the fundamental sociopolitical and economic infrastructure for the emergence of a viable Arab project of

enlightenment; a skeleton that was soon to be fleshed out with the secular outlook, literary sensitivity, and intellectual resourcefulness of the Syrians. This development also acquired a name: the *Nahda*. The term *Nahda* signifies “to rise,” “to stand up,” and has the connotation of “to be fit” and “to be ready for.” It was most likely coined by Shaykh Husayn al-Marsafi (1815–90), an educator in the progressive school of Dar al-‘Ulum (established 1872), which was founded by his friend and patron ‘Ali Mubarak.⁷

In 1879 Isma‘il’s bid for making Egypt part of Europe ended with dramatic bankruptcy. From the outset, his project was heavily financed by European credit and, when Egypt defaulted on its loans, the Europeans collaborated in deposing him and taking over the country. In 1882, the British occupied Egypt, and, in one form or another, this occupation lasted until 1956. This was a far cry from the kind of cultural synthesis with Europe and the project of “closing gaps” to which Isma‘il had aspired. Thereafter, whatever came from Europe also came with direct military and political domination to the degree that the next generation of culture makers was decidedly less naive and more political.

Putting enlightenment to work: the critical years, 1882–1900

In the last two decades of the nineteenth century a sustainable modern Arab culture emerged. It was inhabited by only a tiny fraction of the population, most likely under 10 percent, but was still influential enough to transform the wider cultural life. Since initially the British rulers of Egypt safeguarded the elementary political freedoms of association and expression, Egypt continued to function as the hub of this experimental new sphere. It was centered in Cairo, Alexandria, Port Said, and several other provincial cities, and from there it radiated as far as Basra in Iraq and Fez in Morocco, Greater Syria, and Palestine. Reading and writing were the necessary skills for participation. But what exactly was the nature of this sphere?

The structural transformation gave birth to a modern professional class of doctors, technicians, teachers, lawyers, journalists, state bureaucrats, and engineers, which formed an embryonic professional middle class, or, in Arabic, *effendiyya*. It was heavily dependent on the *effendiyya*’s experience of metropolitan Europe. Because they read, wrote, and formed opinions, sometimes in several languages, this class evinced

greater willingness to translate its understanding of the world into action. With both collective and individualized reading on the rise, the new habits of mind with which the Syrian–Lebanese intelligentsia experimented achieved unprecedented presence.

At the heart of this sphere stood the modern Arab intellectual, a new type of activist-thinker who replaced the religious scholar and bureaucrat-scholar of previous generations. These intellectuals spoke in the new journalistic language of “public Arabic.” Their business was to influence the public and hence their work had a built-in political aspect to it.

Intellectuals could do so only because by this point in time, as Shaykh Husayn al-Marsafi observed in his essay *A Treatise on Eight Crucial Words* (*Risalat al-kalim al-thaman*), this new form of the Arabic language, “Public Arabic,” also stood for political modernity. An expert on giving names to abstractions, Marsafi elaborated on the new meaning which eight powerful words – indeed political concepts – had acquired since the 1870s. A review of these words – nation (*umma*), homeland (*watan*), government (*hukuma*), justice (*‘adl*), oppression (*zulm*), politics (*siyasa*), freedom (*hurriyya*), and education (*tarbiya*) – illustrates that the *Nahda* was not merely a literary phenomenon but a fully fledged political force whose interest was the public good.

This great revolution in political expression was not simply a matter of quantity in writing. The most important aspect of this tide was the continuous acculturation of new disciplines and genres such as modern history, geography, the short story, the op-ed essay, and the historical novel. Jurji Zaydan, a Lebanese Greek Orthodox émigré to Egypt was a senior member in a circle of like-minded intellectuals, such as compatriot Greek Orthodox Farah Antun (1874–1922) and Shibli Shumayyil (1850–1917). Antun was a journalist, historical novelist, and playwright, and the first Arab translator of Nietzsche. Shumayyil was a physician and scientist who also wrote stories, poetry, and political criticism. He ultimately became a precursor of socialism.

Zaydan, the most prolific and versatile writer in this group, wrote twenty-three historical novels and the first modern history book on Islamic civilization. His extremely popular historical novels taught his readers how to “think with history,” and were therefore important propagators of historical consciousness. Influenced by European Orientalist scholarship, Zaydan was the first Arab to treat the history of Islamic

civilization as a secular rather than a divine story. His ambition in this field was bitterly opposed by mainstream Islamic scholars.

While the work of this generation of pioneers was hostile to popular culture (fiction, colloquial Arabic, and mass Islamic culture in general) it was particularly disruptive for the Islamic notion of what constitutes proper knowledge. This is why they were sometimes called “intruders.” Thereafter, the disciplinary hierarchy that Tahtawi had elaborated existed no more. Science, philosophy, and history, three fields which had been at the bottom of the Islamic intellectual structure, were now at the top. All three preached secular reason. But, more importantly, all three conjoined to deliver a much more profound message. As Albert Hourani, the most integrative historian of this tradition, succinctly put it, the new knowledge propagated the realization that “from the discoveries of science there could be inferred a system of social morality which was the secret of social strength.”⁸

The idea that the public good was backed by a force of moral, political, and social truth engendered a growing urban expectation to rationalize authority and the overall management of society. Positivism and multiple other ideologies of social betterment that relied on social Darwinism were readily available in Arabic. The ideas of Auguste Comte, Herbert Spencer, Henri Bergson, and Gustave Le Bon were understood within the specific social and historical context of the Arab World. Once intellectuals forged a connection between the scientific, the philosophical, and the political, the ground was conceptually ready for a new notion of political community. Thereafter, groups such as the confessional communities of culturally autonomous minorities, or rural communities, began their transformation into a unified territorial linguistic whole and the vague sentiment of patriotism that earlier generations had invoked began to be forged in terms of nationalism.

By then the experience of the Enlightenment touched upon so many aspects of Arab life that it was no longer possible to restrict it to one specific realm. The most noteworthy indication of this state of affairs was that morality and family structure – perhaps the most intimate aspects of Islamic life, which up until that point were the exclusive sphere of the clerics – became contested issues. The agents of this reformist attempt were a group of mostly Muslim women who, in clear, plain-spoken terms, demanded emancipation. In a move that was retrospectively dubbed the “Women’s Renaissance,” two generations of upper-class women joined

hands to rethink the status of women in Arab society. Like the phenomenon of the *Nahda*, women's self-awareness and activism began with a high-culture literary and artistic sensibility. Polyglot literacy and the mingling with a growing number of European women in Egypt eventually brought Isma'il's niece, Princess Nazli Fazil (1840–1913), to establish the first multilingual salon. It was attended by women who made a point of lifting their veils, thus challenging an elementary gender division of the time. That fact did not inhibit powerful men from socializing with them on a regular basis.

Supported by the salon, a wave of female writers such as Maryam al-Nahhas (1856–88), Zaynab Fawwaz (1860–1914) and 'Aisha al-Taymuriyya (1840–1902) began publishing critical writing, poetry, correspondence, and even, beginning in 1892, newspapers and magazines. 'Aisha's daughter, Hind Nawfal (1860–1920), launched the women's press with *al-Fatat* (Young Woman), a newspaper that declared that its "sole principle is to defend the rights of the deprived and draw attention to the obligations due ... we ask the gracious and learned ladies to consider *al-Fatat* their newspaper in the East."⁹

The main issues that these women sought to address were the patriarchic and polygamist structure of society, and the culture of the harem, or family compound, along with its intended consequences, namely, systematic isolation and discrimination. Thinking of gendered spaces in concrete physical terms, 'Aisha al-Taymuriyya wrote of her suffering in the harem ("this cave of isolation").¹⁰ By focusing on patriarchy and male honor, an early feminist circle inevitably advanced the cause of the modern alternative: the nuclear family. Quite specific about the cause of women's problems, they argued that the contemporary interpretation of Islamic law was to blame. In Fawwaz's words:

We have not seen in any of the divinely-ordered system of religious law [Islam] ... a ruling that [woman] is to be prohibited from involvement in the occupation of men. Nature has nothing to do with this ... woman is a human being as man is, with complete mental faculties and acumen, and equivalent parts, capable of performing according to her own abilities.¹¹

By criticizing modern interpretations of religious law, these women crossed a moral Rubicon and showed that the *Nahda* claimed a moral sphere and could not be limited to the abstract principle of progress and sophisticated science-talk. At the same time, much of their discussion

focused on everyday concerns such as marital relations, hygiene, child rearing, and breastfeeding.

Though a critique of patriarchy and Islamic law became the issues that galvanized Arab feminism and female activism, men with Western legal training also stepped into the same territory. In 1894, Murqus Fahmi published the play, *Woman in the East (al-Mar'a fi al-sharq)*, that equated patriarchy with downright oppression. In 1899, following an invitation from Princess Nazli to attend her salon to discuss the condition of women with reformer Muhammad 'Abduh (see below), Muslim judge Qasim Amin published *The Liberation of Women (Tahrir al-mar'a)*. A year later, he published his influential *The New Woman (al-Mar'a al-jadida)*. He too attacked patriarchy and the abuses of divorce and polygamy. Because Amin chose to address the predicament of women from the delicate perspective of Islamic law, and because his goal was to advance the state of the nation as a whole rather than that of individual rights, over time his work was canonized as the official proclamation on these matters and entirely overshadowed the original female contributions to late-nineteenth-century feminism.

In sum, during this era Arabs established a space between the individual and the colonial state. Within this space, public opinion was formed and processed into civic action. By practice, if not by name, it was a secular sphere. This crucial development raised the question of what, precisely, should be the cultural role of thirteen centuries of Islamic erudition?

Islamic quest for synthesis: 1880–1900

Islam, as a cultural and religious practice, was glaringly absent from the Arab Enlightenment. A few individuals and a rapidly growing circle of devotees set out to change this reality by calling for religious reform. Their attempt to link Islam to the *Nahda* in a meaningful and deeply philosophical fashion gave birth to Islamic modernism. Since Islamic modernism is an enormous topic that lies outside the scope of this discussion, only its origins and early attitudes toward the *Nahda* are dealt with here.

Arab Islamic modernism developed in two consecutive stages under the leadership of two eccentric individuals. The first person was the political activist and imperial troublemaker Sayyid Jamal al-Din al-Afghani (1838–97), who arrived in Egypt in 1871. Al-Afghani was an Iranian Shi'ite who, out of consideration for public opinion, took the identity

of the Sunni majority. While traveling and living in India, Iran, and the Ottoman lands, he realized that the Islamic “gunpowder empires” were dying and came to think of this reality in the familiar terms of decline. To European imperialism – the well-known cause of this problem – al-Afghani ascribed a false unity of Christian purpose, thus describing imperialism as inherently Christian. As an antidote to Europe’s allegedly religious imperialism he devised the doctrine of Pan-Islamic solidarity.

Though he came to the Arab World with Pan-Islamist action in mind, his primary impact was in the field of cultural self-reflection and action. Al-Afghani briefly taught philosophy at Al-Azhar University, the highest Islamic academy, but later quit and opened a salon/secret society/Masonic lodge of which journalist Adib Ishaq, satirist Yaqub Sanu (neither of whom was Muslim), as well as religious scholar Muhammad ‘Abduh (1849–1905) were members. His activist ethos and nuanced understanding of global affairs were extremely compelling and he was an excellent oral communicator who preached in public as well as in the privacy of his close circle of coffee drinkers. But he wrote little. Like many other intellectuals of the time, he also tried to understand the causes and the possible remedy for Islamic inferiority vis-à-vis Europe. This is how his circle came to think more seriously of religious reform.

During the mid 1880s, al-Afghani was in exile in Paris where he and Muhammad ‘Abduh published an experimental reformist journal. While there he entered into a famous debate with French philosopher and amateur observer of the Orient, Ernest Renan (1823–92). Renan argued that Islam was incompatible with scientific rational thought. This was an emphatic argument that meant that Islamic civilization was condemnably unreformable. Particularly disconcerting was the fact that Renan’s argument was supported at home by some key *Nahda* figures, such as Christian Lebanese writer Farah Antun. In response to Renan, al-Afghani argued that the reason for the poverty of scientific thought was not religion itself but the historical circumstances that surround all religions. He believed that if properly reformed, Islam would “catch up.” Until its debunking by Islamic fundamentalists in the late 1940s, this “catching up” thesis formed the basis for the optimism of Islamic modernism.

But what did religious reform mean? How exactly should such reform be implemented and by whom? Though it was clear that the *shari‘a* was the object of reform, al-Afghani never delved into specifics. In 1897, he died in Istanbul of either cancer or poisoning and left this gigantic task to

Muhammad ‘Abduh, whose reformist project soon reverberated all over the Islamic world.

As an Islamic scholar who also participated in the modern intellectual world, ‘Abduh understood that Islamic legal theory and methodology had become too entrenched to allow for social change. His idea, therefore, was to reform the legal code in a fashion that would make it compatible with the moral and philosophical standards of modernity. ‘Abduh’s process of rethinking Islamic law was based on a return to the unadulterated *sunna*, or “way of life,” of the Prophet and his original community. Later termed the *salafiyya*, a movement that violently departed from ‘Abduh’s original notion, this philosophy maintained that in subsequent centuries the original *sunna* was corrupted and then subjected to centuries of blind and distorting legal imitation (*taqlid*). According to ‘Abduh, this was the central cause for the present state of decline and he prescribed independent rational investigation, or *ijtihad*, as a cure.

Striving toward the development of a rational method, as the linchpin of *ijtihad*, ‘Abduh sought to make more “room,” so to speak, for rational inquiry by opening a discussion about the essence of faith and its metaphysical aspects. In his 1897 *A Treatise on the Oneness of God (Risalat al-tawhid)*, he sought to redefine Islamic characteristics in modern times and thus create a brand of Islam that could be both authentic – that is, truthful to the original spirit of the faith – and modern. This theoretical and methodological formulation made ‘Abduh the architect of Islamic modernism.

In 1888, he was finally admitted back to Egypt and a year later became the Grand Mufti (jurisconsult) of Egypt. He won the support of, and had close personal ties with, Lord Cromer, Egypt’s de facto British ruler, who was impressed with ‘Abduh’s reformist agenda. But he also encountered bitter and personal opposition to his designs. Already in his lifetime it became clear that his agenda for reform was not a task for one gifted individual but a collective task that would require an extraordinary long-term commitment on behalf of several generations.

Initially, it seemed that a generation of intellectual leaders was responding to the challenge. ‘Abduh’s work legitimated experiments in legal reform in Syria, Iraq, and North Africa, and a close circle of devotees had emerged. Even prominent figures in the secularist *Nahda* joined, such as Ahmed Lutfi al-Sayyid (1872–1963). The general understanding was that if ‘Abduh’s project were to succeed, the barriers between the secularist modernizers and clerics would be removed. The

young Syrian scholar Rashid Rida (1865–1935) came to Egypt in 1897 and became ‘Abduh’s most devoted disciple. Against all odds, he carried on this tradition until his death, when the relative failure of this platform was widely acknowledged. Indeed, ‘Abduh’s reformist platform disintegrated after his death. Because they were backed by emerging state institutions that were internationally recognizable, the devotees of the *Nahda* took the secular nationalist path to modernity while the clerics fell back on tradition and on politically defending Islam against imperialism, Christianity, and collaborating minorities at home. Hence, Islamic modernism fell between these two poles. A few Islamic reformers carried on, but, though intellectually important, their public weight was negligible.

The nationalization of the *Nahda*: 1900–1945

With the collapse of the Ottoman Empire in 1919, the *Nahda* became the business of the national movement, the *effendiyya* professional middle class, and the state. By this point, all the leading intellectuals of the first generation of the *Nahda* had already passed away and the ground was prepared for a new intellectual guard to take over. During this new stage, the *effendiyya* associated the *Nahda* with the ideological mechanism of nationalism and forged distinctive and exclusive national cultures (Iraqi, Lebanese, Syrian, Egyptian, Tunisian, and later Algerian, Palestinian, Jordanian, and so on). With the nationalization of culture and state building also came institutionalization, bureaucratization, disciplinization, and professionalization. Intellectuals began talking about national literature and national economy as two sides of the same coin. New universities and professional associations were established. Degrees were offered and academic specialties fortified their public status. The once private small enterprise of the printing press became a commercial publishing house and set a viable print market into operation. Concomitantly, the professional *effendiyya* class grew in number and ambition. They viewed intellectuals as cultural heroes and were proud of their free market of ideas and the culture of the mind. Self-satisfied with their achievements, members of the *effendiyya* positioned themselves as the guardians of liberal democratic rights and progress for all. Though Iraqi intellectuals chronically complained that they were not as productive and influential as their colleagues in the east, they too forged, despite sectarian differences, a pluralist middle-class *Nahda* culture which was

alive in institutions such as the Iraqi Reform Club (Basra) and Scientific Club (Baghdad).

However, the intellectual leadership of the Arab East remained in Cairo. Taha Hussein (1889–1973), the so-called Dean of Arab Letters, embodied both the ideals and the promise of this era. Blind since childhood, Hussein first pursued a standard Islamic education but later revolted against it. He moved from his village to Cairo and from there to Paris. In 1919, he graduated from the Sorbonne. He was now a Francophone and a relentless promoter of European culture who held important university posts and even served as the Egyptian Minister of Education. Early in his career his research methods called into question the authenticity of the entire body of pre-Islamic poetry, which had been used by early scholars to interpret the language of the Qur'an. A cultural scandal ensued. At about the same time, Shaykh 'Ali 'Abd al-Raziq (1888–1966), an Al-Azhar graduate, published a book which questioned the historical validity of the Islamic polity, thus practically calling for the separation of church and state. Another scandal broke out. With the abolition of the Islamic Caliphate in 1924, it seemed to individuals like Rashid Rida that the *Nahda* was out to defeat religion. This perception triggered Islamic fundamentalism and explains Rida's somber words quoted in the introduction to this essay.

Ironically, as the *Nahda* and the state became more closely intertwined, its limitations and paradoxes became more apparent and, by the mid 1930s, the entire project began to unravel. First, new grassroots movements such as the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt criticized the *Nahda* as an inauthentic secular formulation that thrived at the expense of popular Islamic culture. Second, from the Iraqi prism of Marxism-Leninism, the *Nahda* was seen as derivative of colonial culture and hence could offer only second-rate mimicry of the West and the continuation of economic and political submission to it. Rooted in colonial modernity, the proprietors of the *Nahda* assumed that the masses lacked the elementary conditions for citizenship (literacy, erudition, hygiene, political maturity, familial structure). Accepting the notion that the lower classes were primitive, "traditional," and simply inadequate, the institutions of the *Nahda* – for example, the educational and political systems – offered only paternalistic liberalism which was devoid of true democratic participation. As a national culture that was closely associated with the state, it suffered the failure of the Arab liberal state to liberate its population from colonial rule, provide social mobility and justice, and secure adequate economic

conditions for growth. Above all, however, the *Nahda* fell short of realizing its initial promise: the emergence of an authentic Arab subject. By 1945, the Arab World was ready to experiment with something else.

Conclusion: the *Nahda's* bifurcated modernity

As the defining Arab intellectual enterprise in recent centuries, the *Nahda* grew from a defensive and selective experiment to a fully fledged project that embraced the basic traits of modernity: autonomous and rational subjectivity, psychologism and self-reflectivity, dominance of secularism, nationalism with all its attendant socioeconomic structures and formulations, scientific and technological mindedness, urbanism and industrialism. As a new and highly integrated way of life, it also claimed a normative and moral space. A useful way of thinking about some aspects of this era is by considering them in terms of the German idea of *Bildung*: namely, a deep social transformation that collapses together several tendencies, such as the liberation of the mind from what was considered by the historical actors as “tradition and superstition,” a journey of self-realization, rejection of pre-modern political systems, and, most importantly, the positivist realization that knowledge is gained only from experience.

As in the case of other “unfulfilled enlightenments” (Indian, Asian, Latin American, and even Russian), the *Nahda* was trapped in the paradoxes of colonial modernity.¹² Thus, while accepting the divided realities of East/West, rational/spiritual, Europe/Islam, rise/decline, and civilized/barbarian, it insisted that a harmonious singular and authentic Arab reality was indeed emerging. This bifurcated condition, indeed a deep cultural schism, shaped the *Nahda* and with it the lives of millions of Arab citizens. However, by the late 1940s, a sense of cultural strangeness caused a new generation of intellectuals to argue that Arab subjectivity was in a schizophrenic state of being. In this state of affairs, the Arab subject was alienated from her or his link to authentic Islamic culture as well as from their very own selves. This crisis of the Arab self was the vantage point for a new postcolonial stage in Arab culture. A long list of doubts circulated: Is there modernity without colonialism? How could Arabs liberate themselves as they go about imitating the culture of their oppressors? Could there be a *Nahda* without foreigners, minorities, and cosmopolitanism? Why was the *Nahda* a world of privilege closed to the majority of Arab citizens? Was the *Nahda* a Christian project? To what

degree was the *Nahda* a project of historic continuity? Did the *Nahda* compromise the cultural authenticity of the Arab East? Was the *Nahda* responsible for Islamic reformism or was reformism intrinsic to Islam? Did it trigger a violent brand of Islamic radicalism?

Pondering these questions, philosopher Muhammad 'Abid al-Jabiri recently wondered, "Are we still not free from the ambiguities of nineteenth-century thought?"¹³ Indeed the *Nahda* is still relevant. After the spectacular failure of the *Nahda*'s alternatives – authentic Arab Socialism (Ba'athism and Nasserism) and Islamism – the *Nahda*'s troubled legacy is once again up for reconsideration. The "Arab Spring" of 2011 gave a huge push for a renewed engagement and even revitalization of the *Nahda*. As summarized recently by a contemporary scholar of Arab thought, there is an acute need to comprehend, "Why did the first *Nahda*, and with it Enlightenment as a whole, disintegrate to the point of marginality and what is the right path for a second Arab *Nahda*?"¹⁴

Notes

- 1 Rifa'a Rafi' al-Tahtawi, *An Imam in Paris: Account of a Stay in France by an Egyptian Cleric, 1826–1831* (London: Saqi Books, 2004), pp. 253–54.
- 2 Quoted in Sabry Hafiz, *The Genesis of Arabic Narrative Discourse: A Study In The Sociology of Modern Arabic Literature* (London: Saqi Books, 1993), p. 62
- 3 Rashid Rida, "Renewal, Renewing, and Renewers," in Charles Kurzman (ed.), *Modernist Islam 1840–1940: A Sourcebook* (Oxford University Press, 2002), p. 78.
- 4 Al-Tahtawi, *An Imam in Paris*, p. 183.
- 5 Butrus al-Bustani, *Kitab Dairat al-Ma'arif* (Beirut: n.p., 1876), p. 3.
- 6 Though Egypt was an important hub of these developments, they were not restricted to Egypt alone. Thus, by the mid 1880s, printing and publishing in the Arab World was quite established: presses were founded in Jerusalem (1847), Damascus (1855), Mosul (1856), Tunis (1860), Baghdad (1863), Sana'a (1877), Khartoum (1881), Mecca (1883), and Medina (1885). See "Publishing," in *Encyclopedia of Arabic Literature* (New York: Routledge, 1998), vol. II, p. 614.
- 7 G. Delanoue, "al-Marsafī, al-Husayn," in *Encyclopaedia of Islam* (Second Edition). [Available online from <http://referenceworks.brillonline.com>.]
- 8 Albert Hourani, *Arabic Thought in the Liberal Age, 1798–1939* (Cambridge University Press, 1989), p. 247.
- 9 Margot Badran, *Feminists, Islam, and Nation: Gender and the Making of Modern Egypt* (Princeton University Press, 1995), p. 15.
- 10 Badran, *Feminists, Islam, and Nation*, p. 14.
- 11 Badran, *Feminists, Islam, and Nation*, p. 15.
- 12 Brenda Deen Schildgen, Gang Zhou, Sander L. Gilman (eds.), *Other Renaissances: A New Approach to World Literature* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006).
- 13 Muhammad 'Abid al-Jabiri, *Ishkalīyat al-Fikr al-Arabi al-mu'asir* (Beirut: Markaz Dirasat al-Wahda al-Arabiyya, 2005), p. 101.

- 14 Sharif Maher, *Rihanat al-Nahda fi-l-fikr al-'arabi* (Damascus: Dar al-Mada li-l-Thaqafa wa-l-Nashr, 2000), p. 23.

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