

# Studies in Arab History

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**The Antonius Lectures, 1978–87**

Edited by

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## *The Arab Awakening* Forty Years After

GEORGE Antonius was born in 1891 of Lebanese Christian parents who had settled in Alexandria. He studied at Victoria College, the English school in Alexandria, and then at King's College, Cambridge, where he obtained first-class honours in the Mechanical Sciences Tripos. After working during World War I in the censorship department of the Egyptian Expeditionary Force, he served in the British Mandatory Administration in Palestine, in the Education Department, 1921-7 and the Secretariat, 1927-30. He then left official service and began a new career as Middle Eastern associate of the Institute of Current World Affairs, an American organisation of which the aim was to spread understanding of what was happening in the outside world by the circulation to subscribers of confidential newsletters; it had been founded by Charles Crane, a Chicago business man who had himself played some part in the Middle East as a member of the King-Crane Commission, sent to the region by President Wilson in 1919. In 1938 he published his only book, *The Arab Awakening: the Story of the Arab Nationalist Movement*, and dedicated it to Mr Crane. He died in 1942.<sup>1</sup>

Why, it may be asked, should a book published forty years ago, and dealing with an early phase in the history of a national movement which has taken more than one new direction since then be taken seriously enough for a study to be devoted to it? There must be some intrinsic merit or significance in it to make it still deserving of serious study and consideration. In answer to such a question, at least three claims may be made for the book without much fear of contradiction.

First of all, most readers would agree that *The Arab Awakening* has literary merit of a high order. It is written in an excellent narrative style, precise, vivid, highly coloured, at times moving, carrying the reader easily and swiftly from one episode to another, and compelling belief as he reads it, even if some doubts may come later; its explanations are clear even if not always profound or sufficient. There is no extended analysis of ideas, but there are sharply expressed depictions of human personalities. Here is what he says of Mark Sykes:

His mind was both perceptive and quick, and at the same time strangely inattentive and undiscerning; and, in his nature, he had something of the improvidence as well as all the warmth of the enthusiast. He knew a good deal about the Arabs at first hand, but his knowledge was as remarkable for its gaps as for its range, and his judgments alternated between perspicacity and incomprehension, as though his mental vision were patterned like a chess-board . . . This placed him at a disadvantage in the game of diplomatic bargaining . . .<sup>2</sup>

Here again is his memory of King Husayn in old age:

... ill at ease, in an armchair far too large for his small frame, shrunken with paralysis, his beautiful face blanched by the pallor of death, his eyes suddenly glowing from the vacancy of resignation to flashes of controlled passion ... his mind seemed less flexible and the mannerisms of expression which were a feature of his conversation obtruded themselves with greater frequency, as though habit had begun to steal upon reasoning. His old craving for justification had become an obsession.<sup>3</sup>

His judgement of T. E. Lawrence, once more, is perceptive:

... that very inconsistency which pervades his revelations and causes him to appear unreal, now as a man of vision and then as a victim of self-delusion, alternating between candour and affectation ... There are errors and misfits in [his book], which cannot be disposed of as mere lapses or defects of knowledge or memory and point rather to some constant psychological peculiarities. It seems as though Lawrence, with his aptitude to see life as a succession of images, had felt the need to connect and rationalise his experiences into a pattern; and in doing so had allowed sensations to impinge upon facts.<sup>4</sup>

This was indeed almost the first attempt to break away from the picture of Lawrence propagated by his friends on the basis of what he had himself told them, and at that time generally accepted almost as an article of faith. Antonius was taken to task by at least one of Lawrence's friends; since then, others have tried to answer the questions he posed—Richard Aldington, Sulayman Musa, John Mack<sup>5</sup>—but we still lack what Antonius suggested that we needed, a study of *Seven Pillars of Wisdom* as a work of the imagination in which events are transmuted into myths.

It cannot, secondly, be doubted that the book had a great impact at the time when it appeared. It came out near the end of 'Britain's moment in the Middle East',<sup>6</sup> that strange interlude in Middle Eastern history, when the region was not, as it had for so long been and was to become again, the point where the interests of all the Great Powers met in concert or in rivalry, but was under the effective domination of one of them. Russia, Germany and Austria-Hungary had collapsed or withdrawn at the end of World War I, the United States was not yet involved in more than a marginal way. France was, indeed, present in the Middle East, but as a nation weakened both politically and economically by the War and its aftermath. Final power over most of the area lay with Great Britain, but that power was now being challenged, by the growth of German and Italian influence, by the emergence of nationalist movements, in Egypt, Iran and the Arab countries of Asia, and by the posing of questions, inside England itself, about the legitimacy of rule over other nations. To these questions a certain answer was being given, that it was possible to respond to the challenge of

nationalism and give a moral basis to the retention of final power, by establishing a new relationship with the peoples ruled by Great Britain, and one which offered them the ultimate prospect of independence: Ireland had been given independence, within certain limits, in 1921; the Government of India Act of 1935 had provided for a certain transfer of responsibility from British to Indians; the Anglo-Iraqi Treaty of 1930, and the Anglo-Egyptian Treaty of 1936, had also led to such a transfer, although within limits imposed by a continuing British presence. On the other hand, there had now appeared another problem which could not easily be resolved in this way. Jewish immigration into Palestine, under the pressure of events in Europe, had aroused among Palestinian Arabs a mass reaction, of an order different from the political opposition to foreign rule in Syria or Iraq; Jews all over the world and Arabs in the countries surrounding Palestine were being drawn into the conflict, which threatened to have repercussions upon British interests and policies all over the world. The report of the Royal Commission, proposing the partition of Palestine, had been published, accepted in principle by the British government, and then virtually abandoned because of the difficulties of carrying it out, and Great Britain seemed to be moving towards another kind of solution.

It was in this context that Antonius's book appeared. It was written quickly and urgently, and was indeed a shortened and altered version of another book he had intended to write, a detailed historical study of the origins and early development of the Arab movement; and it was written for a particular audience at a particular moment in time. The readers to whom it was addressed were primarily British, politicians, diplomats, officials, journalists and scholars, members of the élite of a few thousand people who were seriously concerned about imperial policy and in a position to exercise some influence upon decisions. It provided them with historical information, and with an explanation of political attitudes; it gave the clearest exposition which had ever been given of the Arab fears in regard to Palestine (Antonius had given evidence to the Royal Commission when it was in Palestine in 1937, and had deeply impressed members of it). It strengthened the sense, which by now was widespread among British officials, that some serious errors of policy had been made, but at the same time appeased it by suggesting a way out.

There is no doubt that it had a great and immediate influence. Documents studied recently by Elie Kedourie bear witness to its influence among civil servants, although by no means all of them accepted its version of events. When the 'Round Table Conference' was held at St James's Palace in 1939, Antonius was chosen as Secretary-General of the Arab delegations, apparently at the suggestion of the British Government.<sup>7</sup> He played an important part in drafting documents submitted by the Arab delegations to the conference, and a dominant one in the committee set up to

consider the meaning of the various letters exchanged and agreements made during World War I; it was largely because of his advocacy that the British members of the committee admitted that there was more force to the Arab contentions than had appeared hitherto, an expression which came as near as any great government does to agreeing that it had been mistaken.<sup>8</sup> During World War II, before his early death, he continued to have some influence on British officials in the Middle East, and here again his persuasive tongue and pen seem to have helped incline them to the belief that some kind of Arab unity, and some concessions to the Arabs in regard to Palestine, would be in harmony with British interests.

Thirdly, there is no doubt that *The Arab Awakening* has had a great influence (although not everyone, as we shall see, would think it a good one) on academic studies of the modern Middle East, in both England and the United States. It stands in fact near the beginning of the development of these studies. Before Antonius and a few others of his generation wrote, those who wished to know about the modern history of the Middle East did not have much to rely on. There were books by travellers and memoirs of former officials, studies of the 'eastern question' and of colonial policy. The former tended to be superficial or partial, the latter might be more solid but had a certain limitation which by then was becoming apparent. Writers on the 'eastern question' studied the relations of the European Powers with each other, within a framework of generally accepted conventions about the ways in which those relations should be carried on, and in regard to the problems posed by the weakness of the great Islamic states of early modern times, Morocco, Iran and the Ottoman Empire. They tended to look on those states as passive bodies over which the Powers argued, quarrelled and agreed, not as active parties, however weak, in the process; it is only in recent years that such work as that of Thomas Naff and Allan Cunningham has begun to change this view.<sup>9</sup> Books on colonial policy tended to base themselves on the writings of officials or the archives of colonial governments, and to accept that what happened was what governments or officials thought was happening or wanted to happen. Once again, it is only in recent years that a view of British rule derived from Lord Cromer's apologia in his *Modern Egypt* has been modified by such work as that of Afaf Lutfi al-Sayyid, Alexander Schölch and Jacques Berque; the Egypt of the time can now be seen not as the matter on which Lord Cromer imposed form, but as one party in a relationship (even if it was one of unequal power) in which each party had its own motives and direction of change.<sup>10</sup>

Seen in retrospect, *The Arab Awakening* was one of two books published in the period between the two wars which played an important part in preparing the way for such changes of view. The other was Arnold Toynbee's *The Western Question in Greece and Turkey*,<sup>11</sup> a book less well-known than his later *Study of History*, but which contains in embryonic form some of

the ideas later expounded there, about contacts between civilisations, and in particular about the relationship of unequal strength between Great Powers and small states or nationalist movements, and the nature of conflicts between powers which are fought out not directly but by means of client states and movements:

... the illusions of local nationalities have been utilised by the Western diplomats in order to save something from the wreck of their schemes ... Greeks and Turks can be swayed and stampeded by visions of 'The City', 'Ionia', 'The Abode of Felicity' or the Holy Sepulchres of Edirné ... a kind of 'Juggernaut' national personality can be conjured into existence and induced, by offerings attractive to its divinity, to drive over its worshippers' bodies. On the international chess-board such pieces make excellent pawns ... [But] the trap in which the victims have been caught in order to be exploited was not cunningly hidden. They rushed into it because they could not resist the bait ... They did not suspect how quickly pawns in distress become an embarrassment, or how little the players care if they disappear from the board.<sup>12</sup>

Implicit in statements like this is an understanding of the tragic nature of such relationships. Great powers are primarily concerned with their relations with other great powers; their clients must fit into this framework, but often forget this, and in doing so may draw their patrons into conflicts they do not desire, or find too late that their patrons abandon them at the moment of crisis, in order to avoid a conflict. In an age when the 'shadow of the West' falls across the whole world, and takes the shape of nationalist movements, this process may end by the disruption of ancient communities and the dissolution of ancient ties of neighbourliness. The episode which Toynbee studied in this book ended with the destruction of the Greek communities of Asia Minor: Greeks and Turks, who had lived together in city and countryside for centuries, faced each other as strangers and enemies.

Although Toynbee and Antonius knew each other, there is no evidence that Antonius had read *The Western Question* or been influenced by it, but his book points much the same moral. At the heart of it there lies a detailed account of the dealings of one Great Power with one nationalist movement, and it ends with a fear that, under the shadow of British policy, what had happened between Greeks and Turks in Asia Minor might happen between Arabs and Jews in Palestine.

Since *The Arab Awakening* was published, interest in the Middle East has grown, and has moved in a direction to which it is relevant. It has had a major impact on later scholars, and one might say that it is the point from which many of them have started. It is still used by students, and liked by many of them, and still present in the minds of later writers on the same range of subjects, most of whom find it necessary to define their areas of

agreement and disagreement with it. Even if this were not true, it would still have played an important part in the growth of a certain field of study, and that is as much as can be said for most works of scholarship of a past generation. Since it *is* true, however, we must ask how far the book can be regarded as a permanent and valuable contribution to our knowledge of its subject. Some later writers have expressed serious doubts about this, and to some extent Antonius himself must be held responsible for this. His book is a slightly uneasy combination of two different kinds of writing. It is a work of historical narrative, but also of political advocacy. This is clear from the style, which moves from one register to another, and from the intrusion of moral judgements, sometimes strongly expressed. We are forced therefore at least to pose the question, to what extent his own political feelings and convictions determined his principles of selection and emphasis. Moreover, it is difficult to judge the depth and range of the documentation on which the book is based, because there is almost none of the apparatus of scholarship; there are few footnotes and no bibliography. This may be explained partly by the haste with which it was written, but also perhaps in another way: the book was not primarily addressed to scholars, but to the kind of reader who might have been put off by too great a display of learning. Antonius may have judged his readership well, for he was addressing himself to the kind of Englishman who, in that generation, might have had a certain cult of the amateur and a suspicion of anything which might appear to be 'showing off'.

Antonius's own correspondence makes it clear that the book was in fact based on wide reading. He had worked in the Public Record Office in London, at a time when the fifty years' rule was in force and documents were not available beyond the 1880s; he had been allowed to see some papers of the Foreign Office and the Committee of Imperial Defence; he had been given access to the private papers of D. G. Hogarth, Sir Gilbert Clayton and Sir Mark Sykes. In the United States he had seen documents in the State Department and some private papers, those of Colonel House and Professor Westermann.<sup>13</sup> The extent of his Arabic documentation is more difficult to judge. He certainly made use of newspapers, and of printed works containing documents, like Amin Sa'îd's *al-Thawra al-ʿarabiyya al-kubra*,<sup>14</sup> and he appears to have had access to documents in the possession of the Hashimite family, some of which seem to have disappeared since then.<sup>15</sup> Above all, the book is based on many conversations and interviews with those who had taken an active part in the Arab movement.

Since he wrote, many more documents have become available. In particular, those in the Public Record Office are now open for the whole period with which the book deals, and have been studied by a number of later writers. In the course of time, too, concerns and convictions have changed, and no writer today perhaps would place the emphasis exactly where Antonius did. We must therefore ask at least two questions: how far

have the documents now available shown that Antonius's narrative or interpretation is erroneous, and how far did his personal convictions lead him to distort the story, even within the limits of the materials which were available to him? These questions have clearly been present in the minds of such later writers as Elie Kedourie and Sylvia Haim, A. L. Tibawi, Z. N. Zeine and C. E. Dawn.<sup>16</sup> On the whole, they express considerable disagreement and disquiet. Some at least of these are justified, but it may be that certain parts of the book have greater and more lasting value than others.

The book falls into three parts, all rather different from each other in both matter and style. The first of them narrates the early development of the Arab nationalist movement down to the outbreak of war in 1914; the second studies in detail the relations between various Arab groups and the British government during the War and the subsequent period when questions raised during the War were being settled; and the third describes the development of the Arabian Peninsula, and of the successor states of the Ottoman Empire placed under British and French mandate, in the 1920s and 1930s.

Of these three parts, the first may have seemed to most readers to be the most valuable and original when it was first published. It provided information about some aspects of the modern history of the Middle East which, although not completely new, must have been unfamiliar to most English and American readers: for example, it was one of the first accounts in English of the Lebanese literary movement. In one respect at least it was almost wholly new: its description of the origins and nature of the Arab societies of the Young Turk period was based to a great extent on information given by former members of them, and it still appears to be substantially accurate so far as it goes, although Majid Khadduri and others have corrected it in detail.<sup>17</sup> When we pass from facts to explanations, however, a sharp criticism has been made, and with some reason, by Zeine, Dawn, Tibawi and others.

Such criticism is directed towards Antonius's view of the nature of Arab nationalism in that early period. It can best be approached by asking three kinds of question. First, who were the nationalists and why did they become nationalists? Antonius gives the impression that they were men of differing origins, Lebanese, Syrians and Iraqis, Muslims and Christians, who had one thing in common: they had been moved by the rediscovery of the Arabic language and its literature, and 'the contemplation of its beauty'<sup>18</sup> revived in them the consciousness of being Arabs, and gave birth to a resolve to recreate a society in which Arabs could live together and rule themselves. Once this seed had been planted, it had to grow in a certain way: a reform of the Ottoman Empire, of such a kind as to enable the Arabs to continue living in it, was impossible, for it was based on the idea of an 'unnatural alliance of Turks and Arabs'.<sup>19</sup>

Because the alliance of Turks and Arabs was in fact dissolved, we may easily assume that it had to be; but it was not so obvious at the time as Antonius implies. In fact, those who joined the societies before 1914, and who later emerged as members of the ruling élite of the Arab successor states of the Ottoman Empire, were men who on the whole came from a certain milieu, and who became nationalists gradually, reluctantly, and to some extent unconsciously. There were among them a few members of the new educated Christian class of Syria, Lebanon and Palestine, and a few members of the traditional Muslim learned class, in particular those who had been brought within the range of the ideas of 'Islamic modernism' put forward by Rashid Rida in his periodical *al-Manar*. For the most part, however, they were members in some sense of the Ottoman ruling élite; or, to be more precise, members of those great families in the cities of the Arab provinces who had a tradition of learning and social leadership, had always played a part in the Ottoman system of local government, and from the late nineteenth century were being drawn more fully into the Ottoman service as officers or civil servants.

C. E. Dawn has the credit of being the first scholar to draw attention to this fact. His thesis is that the rise of Arab nationalism in the years before 1914 can be explained in terms of an 'inter-élite conflict defined in terms of ideologies': the real conflict was not one of ideas, it was one of personal, family and factional rivalries, the purpose of which was to obtain or keep office or influence within the Ottoman system of government.<sup>20</sup> This is a good starting point, but it may be that Dawn's view needs to be further refined.

It is true, to begin with, that such families had always been linked with the Ottoman system of government. The failure to make this clear is indeed one of the most serious defects in Antonius's book. He missed the framework of institutions within which the Arab movement arose. At the time when he wrote, little work had been done in the Ottoman archives, and the dissolution of the Empire was still a recent memory, so that it was possible for Arabs, as for the peoples of the Balkans, to think of the Ottoman government as an alien despotism which had held its subject-peoples back until they broke away from it. It is common for nationalist movements to think of the immediate past with revulsion, and to appeal against it in the name of some more distant past, real or imagined. In the last generation, however, views have changed. Study of the Ottoman archives, both by western scholars and by the new school of Turkish historians, has thrown new light on the institutions of government; this has recently been described, so far as the classical period is concerned, in Halil Inalcik's book, *The Ottoman Empire: the Classical Age 1300-1600*.<sup>21</sup> More recently there have been some studies of the Arab provinces which take Ottoman documents into account, such as those of Raymond and Shaw for Egypt, and Rafeq, Cohen

and Barbir for the Syrian provinces.<sup>22</sup> Such work makes it possible to look at Ottoman rule in Syria in a light different from the familiar one. The eighteenth century, which is usually regarded as a period when Ottoman power was seized by local despots, was one in which that power was in fact reasserted in a new way, by 'Ottoman governors with local roots'.<sup>23</sup> It was at this time that certain notable families in cities like Aleppo and Damascus consolidated their social power by means of their links with the Ottoman government: they held local offices or in other ways had access to the rulers, and were sensible of the prestige of Ottoman culture, whether expressed in the literature of the ruling élite or in the Hanafi legal code which was the code officially recognised by the government. In the nineteenth century, during the earlier period of Ottoman reform, the balance of local power between Ottoman governors and local notables moved for a time in favour of the second, but towards the end of the century it moved back in the other direction: the Ottoman policy of administrative centralisation began to succeed, and some of the local families began to send their sons to the professional schools in Istanbul and from there into the Ottoman army or civil service.

After the Young Turk revolution of 1908, new conflicts began to appear within such families, and in particular among those members of them who had taken service in army or administration, but it would be best not to take Dawn's view to extremes and think of these conflicts as being simply struggles for position or power, nor to accept Antonius's distinction between those who became Arab nationalists by passion and conviction (the 'suffering idealists',<sup>24</sup> as he calls them) and those who clung to the 'unnatural alliance between Turks and Arabs'. Intermingled with the struggles for position, there were genuine differences of opinion and conviction, but for the most part these were local forms of certain differences which existed throughout the Empire, and concerned the problem of what should be done if the Empire was to survive: there was a difference between those who wished it to remain an Islamic autocracy within the bounds of the *shari'a*, and those who wanted it to be a constitutional state on the western European model, and also between those who supported the Young Turk policy of centralisation and those who wanted a greater measure of decentralisation. A few individuals apart, the idea that the Arabs should break away from the Empire scarcely arose until two events brought it to the surface: the entry of the Empire into the War in 1914, at a moment when Arab-Turkish relations were strained; and the collapse of the Empire in 1918, which faced everyone, and in particular the members of the ruling élite, with an inescapable choice.

The second kind of question we need to ask concerns the ideas in terms of which these differences of opinion were expressed. In so far as they were expressed in 'Arab' terms, what exactly were they and where did they come

from? Here again there is no doubt that Antonius gave too simple an answer. The Lebanese Christian literary movement was not a major factor. No strong line of descent can be traced from Nasif al-Yaziji and Butrus al-Bustani to the nationalists of the next generation; curiously enough, Antonius does not mention the one writer of this kind who can in some ways be considered a precursor, Ahmad Faris al-Shidyaaq. Two other lines of thought were more important. One was a certain development of the 'Islamic modernism' of the Salafi school. Re-interpreting Islamic law in the light of what the 'pious elders' were believed to have done and said, it naturally laid more emphasis on the period of Arab domination in Islamic history. At some point the Islamic community had taken a wrong turning; this was connected with the ascendancy first of Persians and then of Turks in the Muslim world, and the conclusion was drawn that the centre of gravity must move back to the Arabs—the advocacy of an Arab caliphate was one aspect of this. Secondly, and perhaps more important, there were ideas picked up by Arab students in the professional schools of Istanbul or by officers and officials in Ottoman service: ideas which were the commonplaces of the Ottoman ruling élite, drawn from French books or German military instructors, and which were restated in an 'Arab' idiom by some students, officers and officials, perhaps under the stress of a sense of exclusion from the inner circle of the élite, which remained largely Turkish. (In the same way, at much the same time, Jews, Armenians and Turks in the Russian Empire, who had gone far enough on the road of assimilation to have absorbed the ideas of the Russian intelligentsia, had restated these ideas in their own idiom as Zionism, Armenian nationalism and Pan-Turanism.)

Why was it, thirdly, that such ideas in their Arab form began to attract members of the ruling élite, and what difference did they make to their actions? Here once more it would be best to take a middle path between the explanation suggested by Antonius and a contrary opinion. Antonius seems to be saying that certain Arabs experienced a kind of sudden conversion, moved as they were by the beauty of their language and the memory of their ancestors. On the other hand, it is sometimes suggested that Arab nationalism was little more than a form of words, which indicated at most some changing fashion of the imagination, but did not serve as a guide to action: the reality behind it was either the desire of individuals to secure power and office, or the desire for political domination which, according to such formulations, is intrinsic to Islam, at least in its Sunni form.

A change of words and images must, however, be significant of something beyond itself. In all communities, there is a kind of rhetoric which is used at moments of high tension, as a spur to action. In stable communities it tends to express ancestral pieties; an example of this has been given by the sociologist Robert Bellah in his essay on 'The civil religion of America', in which he analyses the language used by Presidents in their inaugural

addresses.<sup>25</sup> If this language changes, if it expresses the past in some different way or turns away from the past towards an imagined future, this may be a sign of some other kind of change: some fundamental, rapid and unexpected change in the social order, of such a kind that old beliefs, symbols and rituals can no longer serve as guides to social action. The point has been well expressed by Clifford Geertz:

In politics firmly embedded in Edmund Burke's golden assemblage of 'ancient opinions and rules of life', the role of ideology is marginal. In such truly traditional political systems the participants act as . . . men of untaught feelings . . . which do not leave them 'hesitating in the moment of decision, sceptical, puzzled and unresolved' . . . But when . . . those hallowed opinions and rules of life come into question, the search for systematic ideological formulations flourishes. The function of ideology is to make an autonomous politics possible by providing the authoritative concepts that render it meaningful.<sup>26</sup>

Such changes were indeed taking place in Ottoman society in the late nineteenth century, and by the end of the century were having a deep effect on the life of the provinces and the minds of the educated class. Ottomans, whether Turkish or Arabic-speaking, found themselves living under a different system of administration and law; their wealth and social position were affected by changes in patterns of production and trade; faster communications gave them a different relationship with other parts of the Empire and with the outside world; new media of expression made it possible for ideas and news to be spread and discussed widely; and the shadow of European power lay over all of them. It is in this context that we should try to understand the significance of the new ideology of 'Arabism'. It had by no means driven out other ideologies, those of Ottomanism and Pan-Islamism, nor had it replaced, throughout society, something far older, the acceptance of the rule of a just Muslim sultan. That it was emerging and spreading at this time, however, indicates that for some at least of the Arabic-speaking Ottomans neither the traditional idea of authority nor the other ideologies could provide a guide to social action. The analysis of 'Arabism' as an ideology, with all that this implies, is missing from *The Arab Awakening*, but it is also missing from the work of most of its critics.

We come now to the second part of the book, which deals with World War I and the peace settlement after it. There is evidence here of wide reading of documents not generally available at the time it was written, and of information drawn from personal contacts. Antonius gives us a clear description of Arab participation in the Arabian and Syrian campaigns, and one of special interest to Middle Eastern historians because they can see in it almost the last example of a recurrent process in the history of the region, before modern technology changed the world. He shows us how a



new dynasty emerged, springing as usual from an urban initiative. An urban family, that of the Hashimite Sharifs of Mecca, created around itself a combination of forces, partly by the formation of a small regular army but even more so by making alliances with rural leaders, and it was able to do this by providing both a leadership which could be regarded as standing above the different groups in the alliance, and an aim which could persuade them to rise above their divisions. The combined forces moved along a line of communications linking a chain of oasis-settlements and market towns, towards a great city; but—and here is the difference from the traditional process—it fails at the moment of victory to establish its control over the city by allying its interests with those of the urban population, because circumstances have changed, the strength it has been using is not its own but borrowed from a more powerful patron which in the end has abandoned it.

There is, however, a point of weakness in the narrative. Antonius tends to ascribe to this fragile combination of forces around the leadership of the Hashimites a unity and solidity which it did not possess. The rural leaders, in particular those of pastoral groups, could not be subjected to discipline beyond a certain point, and, what was more important, there were differences of conception and purpose between the two forces which composed the 'Arab movement' at that time: the nationalist societies, formed mainly of Syrians, with their centres of activity in Damascus and Cairo, and the Hashimite family whose power was rooted in the Hejaz. The relationship between them, and between each of them and the British authorities in Cairo and Khartoum, was shifting and unstable. It passed through at least three different stages. In the first year or so of the War, there was a concentration of Arab elements in the Ottoman army in Syria, and the British were thinking of a possible landing on the Syrian coast at Alexandretta; this explains the rather mysterious negotiations with the Arab Ottoman officer al-Faruqi, who claimed to speak on behalf of the nationalist societies but had also some contact with the Sharif Husayn, and the sense of urgency with which they were conducted by the British. Then, after the end of the Dardanelles campaign, there seemed to be a possibility of a Turco-German advance from Syria, westwards against the Suez Canal and southwards in western Arabia; in these circumstances, an agreement with the ruler of Mecca became more important for the British, and he for his part was afraid that such an advance would mean an extension of direct Ottoman control in the Hejaz. Finally, in 1917 and 1918, there came the successful British advance from Egypt into Palestine and Syria. The British needed to make decisions about the future of the conquered territory, and to achieve some kind of balance in their relations with all parties concerned, Hashimites, Syrians, Zionists and French; and tensions between Syrians and Hashimites, and even within the Hashimite family itself, began to come to the surface. Antonius must have been aware of all this, given his unusual

contacts with all parties, but he tended to obscure it, partly because his main information came from the Hashimites, and partly perhaps because, throughout the book, his main emphasis was on the underlying unity of the Arab movement. A reader may be conscious here of some confusion between historical explanation and political advocacy. It should be said, however, that apart from C. E. Dawn,<sup>27</sup> other writers too have tended to underrate the importance and independence of the Syrian nationalists.

Together with the description of the campaign there went an analysis of the network of discussions and agreements which surrounded it. This shows a political sense which is rare among historians. Much modern history is written on the level of the higher civil service; Antonius himself had been a civil servant, but by temperament he was more of a politician, and understood how politicians think and make decisions. Although, for example, in the last part of the book he drew a contrast between what he regarded as the failure of French policy in Syria and the success of British policy in Iraq, he had a complete understanding of the reasons why French policy was as it was: the overriding concern to do nothing in the Middle East which might affect the French position in North Africa, and the sense of weakness which Frenchmen in the Middle East felt *vis à vis* the British, so that French policy was really a sequence of tactical replies to what appeared to be British threats to French interests.<sup>28</sup>

To take an even more striking example, Antonius gave perhaps the first cogent explanation of the reasons for which the British Government issued the Balfour Declaration of support for the establishment of a Jewish National Home in Palestine. It was issued, he suggests, primarily because the British Government and the Zionists found they had a common interest: the British wished to prevent any potential rival acquiring a position of power in Palestine, so close to the Suez Canal, while the Zionists wanted a powerful patron. They were thus able to reach an agreement, by which Great Britain would support the Zionist idea and the Zionists would ask for British protection.<sup>29</sup> Antonius's suggestion must have been more than a guess, it was surely based on documents to which he had access, interpreted by his fine sense of the way in which political negotiations take place. It has been in general confirmed by the most careful and judicious study made since the opening of the relevant British archives, that of Mayir Vereté in his article on 'The Balfour Declaration and its makers'.<sup>30</sup>

In other ways, however, his treatment of the war-time agreements has been exposed to much criticism. It is inevitable that much of what he says should be out-dated. He first provided some of the essential documents in an easily accessible form, but in the last decade or so many more have become available and been studied: by Sulayman Musa and A. L. Tibawi, by I. Friedman, J. Nevakivi and R. Adelson, and most recently by Elie Kedourie in his *In the Anglo-Arab Labyrinth*.<sup>31</sup> A vast construction of scholarship and

argument now exists, and no attempt will be made to add to it. It is necessary, however, to ask where Antonius stands on the main points at issue, and whether his stand is a tenable one.

Antonius was concerned to make three essential points: in the Husayn-McMahon correspondence of 1914-15, the British Government gave certain undertakings to the Arab nationalists in order to induce them to revolt against the Ottoman government; in the Sykes-Picot Agreement of 1916, the British made concessions to the French which were incompatible with the undertakings given to the Arabs; in the Balfour Declaration of 1917, the British gave an undertaking to the Zionists which was no less incompatible with those given to the Arab nationalists.

Some later writers have denied all these claims. Elie Kedourie maintains that no undertakings were given to the Arabs, and that such hopes as they might have conceived on the basis of badly drafted letters were not incompatible with the precise undertakings given to France, undertakings which were in any case explained to the Sharif Husayn.<sup>32</sup> I. Friedman for his part claims that Palestine was never included in whatever pledges were given to the Arabs, and the Balfour Declaration was therefore compatible with those pledges.<sup>33</sup>

The evidence which they and others have produced, however, can be regarded as pointing in the direction of conclusions different from theirs. There seems no doubt that in the letters sent by McMahon, expressions were used which Husayn could legitimately regard as constituting pledges, and they were so used not because of bad draftsmanship, since in fact they were drafted by an official of high intelligence, Gilbert Clayton, and approved at every stage by the Foreign Office, but because they expressed British policy and intentions at that time. Once they were used, they were regarded by the British government as constituting binding engagements. Very few of those who studied the documents at that time had any doubt of this: that is true not only of comparatively junior officials like Arnold Toynbee and Harold Nicolson, but of the Foreign Secretary, Sir Edward Grey. It was stated forcefully by a later Foreign Secretary, Arthur Balfour, in his famous memorandum of August 1919, and by the Prime Minister, Lloyd George, in a conversation with Husayn's son Faysal in September of that year.<sup>34</sup>

If George Antonius is right on this, however, he appears to be on less safe ground when he maintains that the pledges given to the Arabs were incompatible with those given to the French. It seems clear now that the intention of the British government, when it made the Sykes-Picot agreement, was to reconcile the interests of France with the pledges given to the Sharif Husayn, and the agreement can be regarded as having reconciled them, if it is interpreted in a certain way, but not if it is interpreted in another. Once more, there is no question of inept draftsmanship; if the agreement was ambiguous, it was not because it was badly expressed, but

because it was a war-time agreement. Such agreements were made in a hurry and under stress, and for an immediate purpose: not to decide what should happen once the War was ended, but to achieve the minimum of agreement without which campaigns could not be fought in common. In a difficult negotiation, when there is an urgent need to reach agreement, it is natural and legitimate to try to devise a formula which can be interpreted in more than one way, and to leave the question of which interpretation should prevail to be decided by the balance of strength when the war was over.

Ambiguous agreements secretly arrived at can cause difficulties for historians fifty years on, but still more at the time, for they do not end the discussion, they provide a new basis for it to be carried on. Each party sets himself to ensure that his interpretation should prevail, either by argument or by trying to obtain a position of power. It was not only British, French and Arabs who could interpret pledges and agreements in different ways. British officials seem to have given different interpretations when talking to the other parties, and such differences of interpretation may have reflected different views of policy. When talking to Husayn or the Syrian nationalists, there seems no doubt that British officials did all they could to persuade them that their government accepted the Arab interpretation. When Sir Mark Sykes met Husayn in May 1917, Professor Kedourie maintains that he gave Husayn full information about the Sykes-Picot Agreement; but the evidence he produces appears to show that Husayn may only have been told of 'the principle of the agreement as regards an Arab confederation or state', and that he may have been encouraged to believe that even on the Syrian coast, where France was to be free, according to the Agreement, to set up any administration she wanted, she would in fact act as favourably to Arab aspirations as the British had recently proclaimed they would act in that part of Iraq where they too would be free to do as they wanted.<sup>35</sup> Similarly, in June 1918, the British High Commissioner in Egypt, Sir Reginald Wingate, told Husayn's agent in Cairo that the Sykes-Picot Agreement was 'merely a record of old conversations and of a provisional understanding'.<sup>36</sup> A little later, in November 1918, an Anglo-French declaration gave the most unequivocal support for Arab independence, and Antonius is surely right to lay stress upon it.<sup>37</sup> It is difficult, therefore, to blame the Arab nationalists for having been encouraged to believe that the Sykes-Picot Agreement meant one thing, only to discover after the War that the French meant by it something else. (In the same way, Sykes tried to reassure the Zionist leaders when he met them in February 1917; they seem to have had some kind of information about the recent Anglo-French Agreement and asked him whether the British Government had given any pledge to its allies in regard to Palestine. The Agreement in fact provided for an international administration of Palestine, but Sykes assured them that 'with

great difficulty the British Government had managed to keep the question of Palestine open'.<sup>38</sup>)

As for the third question, that of whether Palestine was excluded from the area in which the Arabs were given hopes of independence, the balance of the evidence seems to be that, at the time of the Husayn-McMahon letters, the British probably did intend to exclude Palestine, not for the absurd reason later advanced that it could be regarded as part of the area lying to the west of Damascus, Homs, Hama and Aleppo which could not be regarded as being wholly Arab, but on the ground that it was part of the area within which Britain was not 'free to act without detriment to the interests of her ally France'. That phrase was intended to apply specifically to the region west of the four Syrian cities, but it might have been intended to apply generally to Palestine as well.<sup>39</sup> It was a vague phrase of uncertain extension, and Husayn was willing to leave it as such, because he was aware of the complexity of international interests in Palestine, and because he needed British support against the French in Syria, and was willing as the price of such support to leave aside the question of Palestine, or to recognise Britain's special position there. The question of Zionism had not yet arisen, and his acquiescence in possible British claims did not imply acceptance of Zionist claims. When the Balfour Declaration was made, the Syrian nationalists soon reacted against it, but Professor Kedourie may well be right in saying that the Hashimites did not oppose it strongly until after Britain withdrew its support for Faysal in Syria.<sup>40</sup>

The argument about the interpretation of these agreements is one which is impossible to end, because they were intended to bear more than one interpretation. If later historians have tried to end it by supporting one or other of the possible interpretations, it is partly because those interpretations have a significance beyond themselves, as symbols of certain attitudes or policies, and historians, whether or not they know it, are carrying on the political discussion which began the agreements. This is true of Antonius himself, writing as he did at a time when the question of French policy in Syria and the implications of the Jewish National Home were burning political issues about which he had strong convictions; it is equally true of more recent writers, since the end of 'Britain's moment in the Middle East' is recent enough to generate controversy about the success or failure of British policy, and the question of Palestine is still with us.

About the last part of the book there is less to say. It gives a clear account of events from the peace settlement to the time when it was written, and makes certain suggestions about British policy in Palestine and French in Syria. It is important for another reason than its explicit content, however. A text can be read for what it tells us about the author and his times, and from these pages there emerges an image of the colonial relationship in the penultimate phase of British and French domination of the world. It was a

relationship of unequal strength, and in such situations the weaker party, being unable to compel the stronger to change its policy, must try to use arguments, and persuade it of an identity of real interests between the two. In pages such as those of Antonius there is no idea of revolutionary change, of a victorious liberation which creates another kind of human being, but rather of a peaceful resolution of conflict by agreement between men of reason and goodwill, searching for points of common interest and smoothing the transition to independent rule. In such a process of persuasion, the production of documents and the attempt to interpret them precisely has a special place.

The relationship is also one of cultural dependence. The weaker party tries to assure the stronger that its essential interests will be safe even if its power is surrendered, and does so by demonstrating its own mastery of the culture and values of the stronger, and showing therefore that the transition to independence can take place without shock, and will not appear as a radical change. The experience of the last thirty years, indeed, has shown that the first phase of independent rule, in many countries, has been almost like a continuation of the last phase of colonial rule; the real shock of change has come later.

In such situations, there is a need for intermediaries who can explain each party to the others, and find and express their points of common interest. George Antonius was exceptionally good at such work, and his career in fact contained a series of successful mediations. Thus in 1925 he helped Sir Gilbert Clayton on his official mission to negotiate with 'Abd al-'Aziz Ibn Sa'ud about recognition and frontiers. His role was to talk persuasively to the king's officials and advisers, and he was very successful in this: 'I am quite convinced I could not have succeeded without him', Clayton declared.<sup>41</sup> In 1926 he went with Clayton on a similar mission to Yemen, and in 1928 on a second one to Ibn Sa'ud. In 1927, while on vacation in Egypt, he helped the Egyptian Government and the British High Commissioner, Lord Lloyd, to resolve a crisis which had arisen in regard to the Egyptian army, by finding a formula which both could accept. In 1929, during the crisis over the Wailing Wall in Jerusalem, he was the member of the Secretariat who maintained liaison with the Arab political leaders. After 1930, when he left the government's service, he was free to undertake a wider range of activities. In 1932 his correspondence shows him to have been engaged almost at the same time in at least half a dozen negotiations. He was involved in the controversy within the Orthodox Christian community over the Patriarchal election, and discussing it with the different candidates, the Greek consul-general, the Fraternity of the Holy Sepulchre and leaders of the laity. He was talking to leaders of the Islamic conference recently held in Jerusalem about the future of Islam, and to Nallino and other orientologists about a project for a new Arab lexicon. He was discussing

with the Prime Minister of Egypt, Sidqi Pasha, the vexed question of tariffs on Palestinian oranges, and with Chauvel, the *chef de cabinet* of the French High Commissioner for Syria and Lebanon, the more difficult question of Syrian nationalism; and all the time he was talking to the British High Commissioner in Palestine about British policy there.<sup>42</sup>

Anyone who reads *The Arab Awakening* now may end it with a certain feeling of sadness. This is partly a reflection of the anxiety which the author himself felt and expressed. Already by 1938 a shadow of what was to come had fallen across his pages: a new age of mass-politics, when issues would be determined otherwise than by delicate negotiations between men who understood and trusted one another. In his final section on the problem of Palestine, he makes clear that what is at issue is not simply the question of who should have sovereignty, but that of physical possession of the land. He records the beginning of mass action: the Palestine revolt continuing as he wrote was not, he insisted, inspired or manipulated by urban politicians but a genuine rural upheaval. Once more, recent research by T. Bowden has confirmed his view.<sup>43</sup>

There is another cause of sadness, however. Contemplation of the life of George Antonius will reveal how difficult is the path of the intermediary; he may so easily fall into the chasm he is trying to bridge. His official career showed that he was too large and complex for the kind of intermediate position which was all that was available to an Arab in the mandatory administration; he was squeezed out of the Education Department in a way which reflected little credit on his colleagues. There was, at that time, no other government or institution to which he could give all his talents and devotion. His personal tragedy was that of someone who could not fit easily into any of the moulds available to him at a time when, with the disintegration of ancient societies and systems of government, and the rise of nationalism, men were being forced to define their identities in new and narrower terms. In the last analysis, he belonged to an earlier world: he was a citizen of Alexandria in the last phase of Franco-Ottoman civilisation, the city where all men could be at home, all could be more than one thing, and all matters could be resolved by delicate compromise. He belonged to a world lost and irrecoverable, but embalmed for ever in the poems of Cavafy—in such a poem as that which portrays a Syrian eager to serve his country:

I am young and in excellent health.  
I have a wonderful mastery of Greek

(Aristotle, Plato, I know them forwards and backwards:  
And orators, and poets, and anything you mention).

Of military matters I have a notion,  
And I have friendships with leaders of the mercenaries,  
I have plenty of entries to administrative things too . . .

Wherefore I believe that I fill the bill,  
Marked out to be of service to this country,  
My own dear land of Syria.

Whatever work they put me to I will endeavour  
To be of use to the country. That is my purpose.  
If on the other hand they hinder me . . .  
it isn't my fault . . .

The almighty gods ought to have seen about  
Creating a fourth man and an honest one.  
I should have been delighted to work with him.<sup>44</sup>

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Some biographical details in Bernard Wasserstein, *The British in Palestine: the Mandatory Government and the Arab-Jewish Conflict 1917-1929* (London, 1978) p. 182 f.

<sup>2</sup> George Antonius, *The Arab Awakening* (London, 1938) p. 250.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 182-183.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 321-2.

<sup>5</sup> Richard Aldington, *Lawrence of Arabia, a Biographical Inquiry* (London, 1955); John E. Mack, *A Prince of our Disorder: the Life of T. E. Lawrence* (Boston, 1976).

<sup>6</sup> Elizabeth Monroe, *Britain's Moment in the Middle East 1914-1956* (London, 1963).

<sup>7</sup> Antonius Papers (Middle East Centre, St. Antony's College, Oxford): Antonius to W. S. Rogers, 15 February 1939.

<sup>8</sup> Great Britain, Cmnd. 5974, *Report of a Committee set up to consider certain Correspondence between Sir Henry McMahon . . . and the Sharif of Mecca in 1915 and 1916* (London, 1939) p. 10.

<sup>9</sup> Thomas Naff, 'Reform and the conduct of Ottoman diplomacy in the reign of Selim III, 1789-1807' in *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, 83 (1963) p. 295; Allan Cunningham, 'Stratford Canning and the Tanzimat' in W. R. Polk and R. L. Chambers (eds.), *Beginnings of Modernization in the Middle East: the Nineteenth Century* (Chicago, 1968) p. 245.

<sup>10</sup> Lord Cromer, *Modern Egypt* (London, 1908); Afaf Lutfi al-Sayyid, *Egypt and Cromer* (London, 1968); Alexander Schölch, *Ägypten den Ägyptern! Die politische und gesellschaftliche Krise der Jahre 1878-1882 in Ägypten* (Zurich, 1972); Jacques Berque, *L'Égypte, impérialisme et révolution* (Paris, 1967).

<sup>11</sup> Arnold J. Toynbee, *The Western Question in Greece and Turkey: a Study in the Contact of Civilizations* (London, 1922).

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 61, 100.

<sup>13</sup> Antonius Papers: Annual Report to the Institute of Current World Affairs, 1933-4 and 1934-5.

<sup>14</sup> Amīn Sa'īd, *al-Thawra al-ʿarabiyya al-kubrā*, 3 vols (Cairo, 1934).

<sup>15</sup> Antonius Papers: Antonius to W. S. Rogers 18 April 1933 and 16 May 1933.

<sup>16</sup> Elie Kedourie, *England and the Middle East: the Destruction of the Ottoman Empire 1914-1921* (Cambridge, 1956) and *In the Anglo-Arab Labyrinth: the McMahon-Husayn Correspondence and its Interpretations 1914-1939* (Cambridge, 1976); Sylvia G. Haim, 'The Arab Awakening—a source for the historian?' in *Welt des Islams*, new series 2 (1953) p. 236; A. L. Tibawi, *A Modern History of Syria* (London, 1969) and *Anglo-Arab Relations and*

*the Question of Palestine 1914-1922* (London, 1977); Z. N. Zeine, *The Emergence of Arab Nationalism* (Beirut, 1966); C. E. Dawn, *From Ottomanism to Arabism: Essays on the Origins of Arab Nationalism* (Urbana, 1973); R. I. Khalidi, *British Policy towards Syria and Palestine 1906-1914* (London, 1980).

<sup>17</sup> Majid Khadduri, 'Aziz 'Ali al-Maṣrī and the Arab nationalist movement' in A. Hourani (ed), *Saint Antony's Papers 17, Middle Eastern Affairs 4* (London, 1965) p. 140.

<sup>18</sup> Antonius, *The Arab Awakening*, p. 60.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 103.

<sup>20</sup> C. E. Dawn, 'The Rise of Arabism in Syria' in *From Ottomanism to Arabism*, p. 148.

<sup>21</sup> London, 1973.

<sup>22</sup> André Raymond, *Artisans et commerçants au Caire au XVIIIe siècle*, 2 vols (Damascus, 1973-4); S. J. Shaw, *The Financial and Administrative Organization and Development of Ottoman Egypt: 1517-1798* (Princeton, N.J., 1962); Abdel-Karim Rafiq, *The Province of Damascus 1723-1783* (Beirut, 1966); Karl Barbir, *Ottoman Rule in Damascus 1708-1758* (Princeton, N.J., 1962).

<sup>23</sup> Barbir, ch. 1.

<sup>24</sup> Antonius, *The Arab Awakening*, p. 13.

<sup>25</sup> Robert N. Bellah, 'Civil religion in America' in *Beyond Belief: Essays on Religion in a Post-Traditional World* (New York, 1970).

<sup>26</sup> Clifford Geertz, 'Ideology as a cultural system' in *The Interpretation of Cultures* (London, 1975) p. 218.

<sup>27</sup> C. E. Dawn, 'The Amir of Mecca al-Ḥusayn ibn-'Ali and the origin of the Arab Revolt' in *From Ottomanism to Arabism*, p. 1.

<sup>28</sup> Antonius, *The Arab Awakening*, pp. 355-6.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 260-2.

<sup>30</sup> Mayir Verité, 'The Balfour Declaration and its makers' in *Middle Eastern Studies*, 6 (1970) p. 48.

<sup>31</sup> Sulaymān Mūsā, *al-Haraka al-'arabiyya* (Beirut, 1970); Isaiah Friedman, *The Question of Palestine 1914-1918: British-Jewish-Arab Relations* (London, 1973); Jukka Nevakivi, *Britain, France and the Arab Middle East 1914-1920* (London, 1969); Roger Adelson, *Mark Sykes: Portrait of an Amateur* (London, 1975); for Tibawi and Kedourie, see note 16.

<sup>32</sup> Kedourie, *In the Anglo-Arab Labyrinth*, *passim*.

<sup>33</sup> Friedman, *The Question of Palestine*, *passim*.

<sup>34</sup> References to Nicolson, Toynbee and Grey in Kedourie, *In the Anglo-Arab Labyrinth*, pp. 207f, 209f, and 230f; references to Balfour and Lloyd George in review of Friedman's book in *Times Literary Supplement*, 2 November 1973.

<sup>35</sup> Kedourie, *In the Anglo-Arab Labyrinth*, p. 163f.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 197.

<sup>37</sup> Antonius, *The Arab Awakening*, pp. 274-5, 435-6.

<sup>38</sup> 'Memorandum of a conference held on the 7 February 1917', p. 11, in Samuel Papers (Middle East Centre, St Antony's College, Oxford).

<sup>39</sup> Kedourie, *In the Anglo-Arab Labyrinth*, p. 84.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 233f.

<sup>41</sup> Gilbert Falkingham Clayton, *An Arabian Diary* (Berkeley, 1969) p. 120.

<sup>42</sup> Antonius Papers: Antonius to W. S. Rogers, 12 February 1932, 9 April 1932, 23 April 1932, 13 May 1932, Annual Report to the Institute of Current World Affairs 1931-32.

<sup>43</sup> Tom Bowden, 'The Politics of the Arab rebellion in Palestine 1936-39' in *Middle Eastern Studies*, 11 (1975) p. 147.

<sup>44</sup> 'They ought to have thought' in *The Poems of C. P. Cavafy*, English trans. John Mavrogordato (London, 1952), p. 190.

## The Ottoman Conquest and the Development of the Great Arab Towns

THE period of the Ottoman domination over the Arab provinces is still looked upon as characterized by a decline uninterrupted up to the nineteenth century. Therefore, historians feel entitled to condemn it wholly, or to ignore it. Such an attitude is in itself worth study: if one were to try to explain it briefly, one would have to take into account the perhaps natural tendency to paint the entire Ottoman period with the dark colours of the recent decline and collapse and the violence of the closing period of the Empire, that is to say, the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century. One would also need to allow for the fact that Arab historians feel reluctant to study a phase of their past which they tend, by analogy with a more recent period of their history, to consider as colonial. The general obscurity which still overshadows the Ottoman era must account for the rest of its lack of credit in the eyes of modern historians. It is, however, a somewhat incomprehensible obscurity, as sources exist for that period, more numerous, more abundant, and more varied than for any other period of Moslem history, especially in the field of archival documentation. This biased view of the Ottoman era has facilitated the falsifying of the modern history of Arab countries for the purpose of justifying European colonization. This is particularly the case for the Maghreb countries, where the intrusion of the colonists was represented as the unavoidable (and happy) conclusion to an era of poverty and barbarity.

This prejudice against the Ottomans becomes particularly conspicuous in the histories of the towns. Urban history has been, for a long time, the province of art historians, who describe the towns through their monuments and who, consciously or not, tend to equate artistic splendour with urban prosperity and growth, and vice versa. The tendency to write the history of the towns as a chapter of a general history of the fine arts proved particularly damaging to the reputation of the Ottoman era, whose architectural achievements in the Arab provinces did not match the size and originality of those of the preceding period. These art historians are guilty of an exaggerated worship of antiquity, finding it difficult to conceive of the existence of an urban organization which would not follow the ancient patterns (or, at the other extreme, those of Western modern urbanism).

Any study of Arab towns from the sixteenth century to the eighteenth century ought to consider towns as coherent ensembles, organized according to their particular rules, in which monuments are urban tokens of that