

The Making of an Egyptian Arab Nationalist: The Early Years of Azzam Pasha, 1893-1936

Ralph M. Cury. Reading, UK: Ithaca Press, 1998. 528 pages.

Thirty years in the making, this ambitious book covers the first forty-three years of the life of Abd al-Rahman Azzam Pasha, the political activist and writer who became the first secretary-general of the Arab League (1945-1952). Few biographies of public figures in the Arab world have treated their subjects in comparable depth and detail. *The Making of an Egyptian Arab Nationalist* is essential reading for anyone seriously interested in the complexities of evolving national and religious identities in 20th-century Egypt.

Cury sets out to refute interpretations elaborated by such scholars as Elie Kedourie, P. J. Vatikiotis, Nadav Safran, and Richard Mitchell thirty or forty years ago. He argues that their works, reflecting the influence of Orientalism, perpetuated false assumptions that Islam and Arab culture harbored essentialist and atomistic tendencies toward extremism, irrationality, and violence. He maintains that in treating 20th-century Egypt, they set up a false dichotomy between a rational, western-inspired territorial patriotism and irrational, artificial pan-Arab and Islamic movements. Ahmad Lutfi al-Sayyid's circle before World War I and the Wafd Party in the interwar period represented the first school who opposed British imperialism but were eager to borrow western rationalism, science, secular liberalism, and democracy. In the 1930s this moderate patriotism began to give way before pan-Arab and Islamic movements tainted with the extremism, terrorism, and irrationality which the West has long attributed to Islam.

Cury cites hopefully revisionist works by Rashid Khalidi, Philip Khoury, Ernest Dawn, and Hassan Kayali but is dismayed that other recent studies have perpetuated the old, hostile stereotypes. "Martin Kramer's *Arab Awakening and Islamic Revival* (1996)," he says, "reveals that even the old-fashioned Kedourie-style hysteria, compounded, as it sometimes is, by Zionist rage (Kramer refers to Edward Said as Columbia's 'part-time professor of Palestine') is still alive and well . . ."

Cury insists that Azzam's "Egyptian Arab nationalism" sprang from the perspectives, needs, and interests of an upper and middle bourgeoisie facing specific challenges. The rank and file following came from a lower

bourgeoisie. Coury admits the contradictions and flights of fancy in Azzam's nationalist writings, but he argues forcefully that Egyptian Arab nationalism on the whole reflected rational decisions by individuals and classes to specific challenges they faced. He emphasizes Azzam's role as a mediator, linking and balancing between the British and ordinary Egyptians, Egyptian political parties and factions, Libyan politicians and tribal factions, and Egyptians and other Arabs.

Skillfully interweaving biographical facts with Azzam's evolving ideas, Coury discusses Azzam's family background and childhood, his emerging political consciousness as a schoolboy and medical student, his seven years of military and political activism in Libya, and his political career back in Egypt up to his appointment in 1936 as minister plenipotentiary in Baghdad.

Coury interviewed his subject extensively in Beirut in 1969-71 and draws on unpublished memoirs, which Azzam supplied him, as well as on a different published version. Other sources include interviews with relatives and other politicians, extensive published Arabic works, and British Foreign Office documents.

Azzam was born in 1893 into a family of rural notables in the province of Giza. Although the family had Arabian tribal roots, Coury argues that they thought of themselves primarily as members of an indigenous rural elite (fellahin dhawati). Azzam's father was a bey, sat in Egypt's quasi-parliamentary bodies before 1914, and had a town house in Helwan. After studying in the village kuttab, Azzam persuaded his reluctant father to let him attend state primary and secondary schools rather than the venerable religious university of al-Azhar. His family was rich enough to send him in 1912 to London to study medicine. When World War I intervened, he briefly continued medical studies back in Cairo at Qasr al-Ayni.

He became an ardent supporter of Mustafa Kamil's National Party (al-Hizb al-Watani) in its struggle for independence from Britain. Azzam met Kamil's successor Muhammad Farid in London just before the war. Azzam spent the summer of 1913 roaming the Balkans, hoping somehow to serve the Ottoman Empire, which was reeling from the Balkan Wars. The outbreak of World War I caught him in Geneva at a conference of Egyptian nationalist students.

After the Ottomans joined Germany in the war, Britain severed Egypt's nominal Ottoman tie, installed a more docile khedive, and decreed martial law. Azzam fled across the desert with a bedouin guide to join an Ottoman

force in Cyrenaica (Libya) which, along with the tribesmen under the banner of the Senoussi religious order, was trying to push back Italian colonizers and invade British-occupied Egypt.

Coury's two lengthy and insightful chapters on Azzam's seven years in Libya are almost a monograph by themselves. A map of Libya showing the place names mentioned in the text would have been a valuable addition here. Hitherto, Azzam had thought of himself primarily as an Egyptian nationalist and a Muslim. In supporting the Ottomans he was assisting the last major Muslim power and fighting the British, who occupied his Egyptian homeland. Azzam's fluent Arabic and affinity for the bedouin made him indispensable to the Ottoman commander, Nuri Pasha. Nuri was the brother of Enver Pasha, one of the Young Turk triumvirate then ruling in Istanbul.

An abrasive interview with Jamal Pasha, a second member of the Young Turk triumvirate and the nemesis of Arab nationalists in greater Syria, gave Azzam some second thoughts about how far an Arab should identify with the Ottomans. When the empire's collapse in 1918 ended the Ottoman option for Arabs, Azzam's Arab nationalism came to the fore. He stayed on to help form the National Reform Party in Tripoli, spread an Arab nationalist message in its newspaper, and mediate among tribal supporters in the hinterland.

In 1921 and 1922, an interval of Italian flexibility in Libya gave way to all-out military conquest and colonization. Azzam advised the Tripolitarians in a last desperate move to unite Libya by recognizing Sayyid Idris, the amir of Cyrenaica and head of the Sanussi order, as their amir as well. Knowing the Italians would not agree, Idris accepted the offer but then slipped away to exile in Egypt in January 1923 with Azzam in his train.

Azzam scarcely missed a beat in reentering Egyptian politics after seven years away. Britain had declared Egypt independent (albeit with critical restrictions), with a new constitution and parliamentary elections in the works. In 1924 Azzam won a seat in Egypt's new parliament, joined the victorious Wafd Party, and made friends with its leader Sa'd Zaghlul. He wrote often for the Wafdist press, but in 1932 he and a dissident faction left the party. An independent thereafter, he cultivated ties with the palace-oriented Ali Mahir, who would become prime minister in 1936 and 1939. Mahir appointed Azzam minister plenipotentiary to Iraq and Iran in 1936 and in 1939-40 minister of awqaf and social affairs.

Azzam was the most persistent of the old regime politicians articulating what Coury usefully labels "Egyptian Arab nationalism." He cultivated contacts both within the political establishment and with the extra-parliamentary radicals of Young Egypt and the Muslim Brothers. On the wider Arab scene, Azzam used correspondence, visits by Arab leaders to Egypt, and trips abroad to develop ties to such men as Shakib Arslan, Rashid Rida (a Syrian long resident in Egypt), Hajj Amin al-Husayni ("the Mufti"), and King Abd al-Aziz Ibn Saud.

Coury proves conclusively that images of Azzam as an intransigent anti-British extremist are wide of the mark. Azzam advocated an Anglo-Egyptian military alliance long before the 1936 treaty. Top British representatives in Egypt from General Allenby through Lord Lloyd to Sir Miles Lampson (later Lord Killeran) all recorded favorable impressions of him, partly because he reflected the general conservatism typical of his social class. In 1945 he would become secretary-general of an Arab League that had been brought into being under British auspices.

Coury's long concluding chapter recapitulates the theoretical framework from the introduction and reviews the main themes of Azzam's Egyptian Arab nationalism. The 1936 cut-off of the book leaves the reader wondering. Major chapters in Azzam's life still lay ahead: his Baghdad years, his advisory role at the London Conference on Palestine in 1939, his cabinet service, and above all his seven years as secretary-general to the Arab League. He resigned the secretary-generalship following the Free Officer's takeover in 1952, left Egypt, and did not return until after Nasser's death. He represented Saudi Arabia in its border dispute with Britain over Buraymi, and in 1960 his daughter married a son of King Faysal ibn Abd al-Aziz.

To cover Azzam's later years on a scale comparable to this first installment would probably take more than one additional volume. Coury gives no hint that a sequel might be in the works. In any case, *The Making of an Egyptian Arab Nationalist* already stands as a substantial achievement in coming to grips with nationalism in 20th-century Egypt and the Arab world.

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