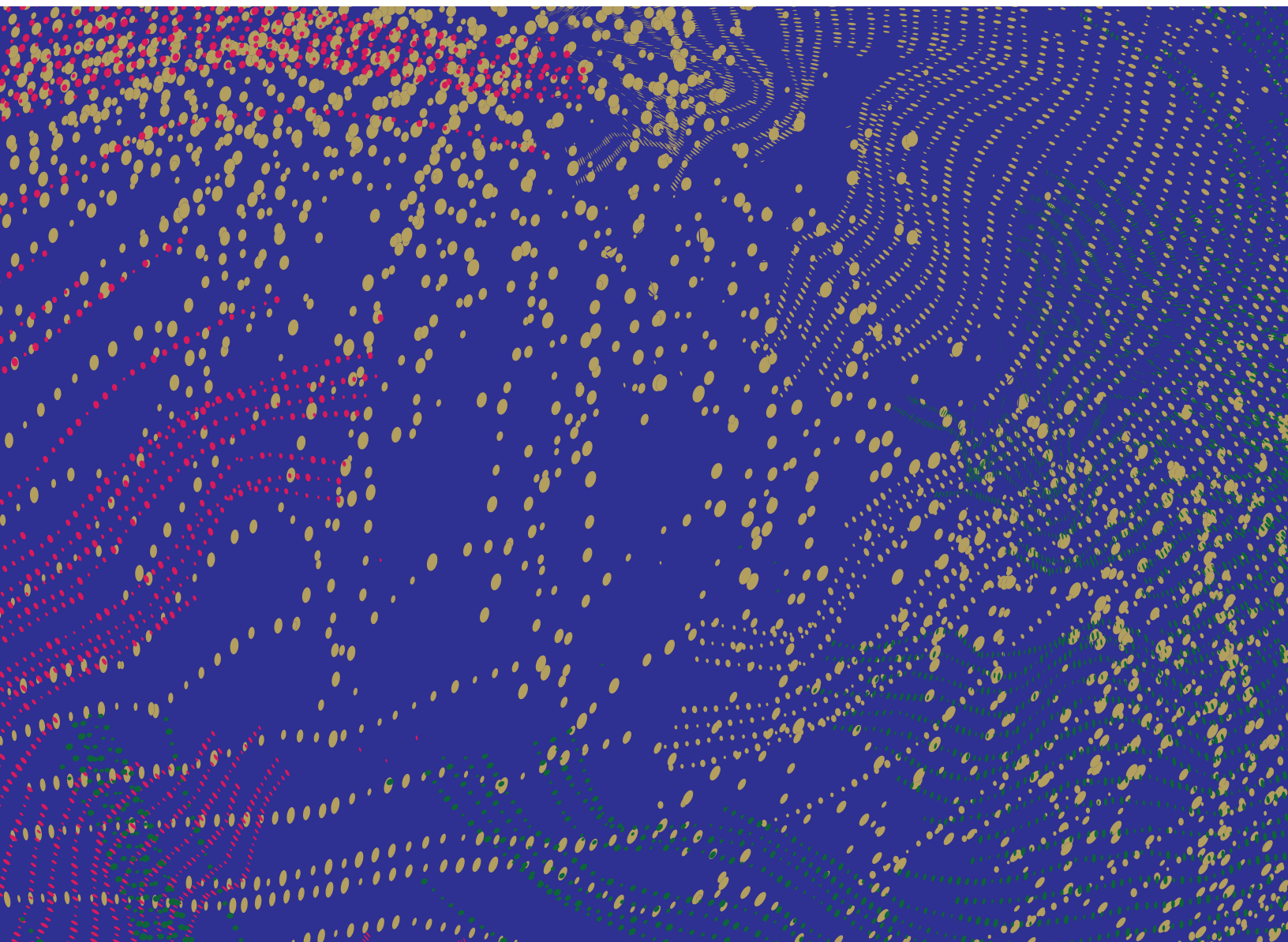


The World Humanities Report

Arab Archives and Asian Histories

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Arab Archives and Asian Histories

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It is impossible to adequately narrate the Arab world's past or theorize its present without attention to its historical and geographical location. The modern history of the Levant, North Africa, and the Persian Gulf is marked by sustained efforts of conquest, expulsion, and exploitation, conditions shared across the Global South. The activities of the European empires, their ancillaries, and their collaborators precipitated a major shift in the political dynamics and structures of feeling among Arabs and other inhabitants of the Arabic-speaking world in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. These transformations drew the peoples of the non-European world together even as they destroyed older forms of affiliation, communication, and trade across the Mediterranean, the Sahara, and the Indian Ocean. This past lends itself to comparison between regions, but it is also a connected history. Although some networks of trade and forms of knowledge were disappeared, new bonds of solidarity and cultures of contact were consequently forged.

Take one example: in the middle of the nineteenth century, across Asia, from Mount Lebanon to the Purple Mountain in Nanjing, a series of crises precipitated a major shift in social relations and a new era of empire. Best known to students of the Middle East are the events of 1860 in Mount Lebanon, the European intervention they triggered, and the sectarian system that emerged afterward.¹ Only a few years earlier, events in South Asia had similarly transformative effects. After 1857, the year of the great rebellion in the nationalist idiom and the mutiny in the colonial one, the administration of India changed irrevocably. First it moved from the hands of the East India Company to the English sovereign, and with that shift came new forms of rhetoric and new practices of rule. Muslims were systematically excluded from various posts and offices in the imperial administration. As historian Peter Hardy put it, “for most

¹ In 1860, an unprecedented intercommunal war between Christian and Druze villages in Mount Lebanon precipitated new political boundaries and inaugurated new forms of European intervention in the Ottoman Empire. On this, see Ussama Makdisi, *The Culture of Sectarianism: Community, History, and Violence in Nineteenth-Century Ottoman Lebanon* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), and Ussama Makdisi, “Diminished Sovereignty and the Impossibility of ‘Civil War’ in the Modern Middle East,” *American Historical Review* 120, no. 5 (2015): 1739–52.

British observers in 1857, a Muslim meant a rebel.”² After the rebellion, Muslims emerged as a problem. Infamous works such as William Wilson Hunter’s *The Indian Muslims: Are They Bound in Conscience to Rebel against the Queen* (1871), testified to these anxieties and policies.

Further east from Delhi, from 1850 to 1864, the Taiping Rebellion raged against China’s Qing dynasty. Led by a charismatic and millenarian leader who claimed to be the brother of Jesus Christ, the rebellion almost succeeded in ending the 200-year-old dynasty. But British intervention—and some Indian troops—suppressed the rebels in exchange for considerable financial concessions, conditions Rebecca Karl has described as “China’s forced entry into a new phase of the formation of a capitalist world system.”³ The unequal treaties signed after the rebellion and the concurrent Opium Wars bear a great deal of resemblance to those signed with the Ottoman Empire. The new imperial academies, which produced the reformist intelligentsia of the decades that followed, parallel those of the Ottomans as well.⁴ These synchronic events transformed landscapes, economies, and societies. The resulting conditions indelibly marked the content of thought, from Mirza Ghalib’s elegiac memories of Hindustan after 1857 to Butrus al-Bustani’s broadside against sectarian war—*Naffir Suriyya*, or *The Clarion of Syria*—in 1860.

The specific lessons of this past can best be understood by attending to the sources and archives, the sites and platforms, where Arab links with the world were performed, enacted, and examined. What frameworks of thought, beyond those offered by imperial geographies, have been proposed by Arab thinkers? When positioned outside the silos of area studies, what pasts become clearer? By drawing on the often neglected work of intellectuals who labored assiduously under the moons of anticolonialism, nationalism, and nonalignment, we can better understand how projects of historical retrieval and reconstruction were imagined and implemented alongside new social and political formations. I draw specifically on the efforts made by Indian and Arab intellectuals in the twentieth century to write about and preserve the past in which they were entangled together. I highlight these links to capture their richness and make a

² Peter Hardy, *The Muslims of British India* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1972), 62.

³ Rebecca Karl, *Staging the World: Chinese Nationalism at the Turn of the Twentieth Century* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002), 12. B. R. Deepak notes that some Indian soldiers joined the Taiping rebels after 1857; see “The 1857 Rebellion and Indian Involvement in the Taiping Uprising in China,” in *India and China in the Colonial World*, ed. Madhavi Thampi (New York: Routledge, 2017), 140.

⁴ Peter Zarrow, *Educating China: Knowledge, Society and Textbooks in a Modernizing World, 1902–1937* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 12–15.

case for their continued relevance, in spite of and indeed because of the continued dominance of the Western academy on Asian and African practices and institutions of scholarship and learning.

The Map

On his final day in Bombay, Louis Cheikho connected with one Sheik Shirazi, “the biggest bookdealer in India . . . the King of the Booksellers,” from whom he purchased more than a hundred Arabic and Persian books and manuscripts.⁵ The encounter was a lucky one, as until that time Cheikho had been unable to obtain many books on a trip whose intent was just that. Cheikho described his disappointment at the state of Arabic letters in the city: “We were most interested in getting a sense of the literary movement among the Muslims in Bombay, but we did not witness what we had hoped.” Cheikho’s Indian interlocutors told him he would have better luck in Calcutta, where projects had long been under way to collect and publish the texts he sought. Goa, with all its Catholics and churches, was another destination Cheikho desired to see. But after only a week in Bombay, and his quick deal with Sheik Shirazi, Cheikho set off from India back toward his home, Beirut.

Born in 1859 in the town of Mardin as Rizqallah (he took the name Louis during his seminary years in France), Cheikho (officially Father Cheikho) was perhaps the most prominent Catholic intellectual of the *nahda*, or Arabic renaissance of the nineteenth century. His journal, *al-Mashriq*, was a key antagonist in Beirut’s culture wars at the turn of the century. It competed with more prominent secular journals like *al-Muqtataf* and *al-Hilal*.⁶ Cheikho was a bibliophile and trained philologist, and his journal reflected those interests. He worked at the Bibliothèque Orientale at Beirut’s Université Saint-Joseph. More accurately, he built the library, which by

The printed matter of the modern Arab or Indian or Chinese mind was simply the bearer of sedition and rebellion or a vehicle for propaganda and profit, never an arena of theory or thinking. Therefore, to write a new history of these ideas, a new archive must be raised. How to raise this new archive . . . is the task before us.

⁵ Louis Cheikho, “Min Bayrut ila al-Hind,” *al-Mashriq* 16 (April 1913): 265.

⁶ Marwa Elshakry, *Reading Darwin in Arabic, 1860–1950* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013), 63.

the time of his death contained some 30,000 books, most acquired by Cheikho himself. He is best known for his well-produced volumes of classical Arabic literature, many of them the first of their kind. On visiting him at his library, Soviet orientalist Ignaty Krachkovsky observed that Cheikho was “a heavy but active man . . . constantly absorbed in the proofs of his journal, [and] saturated with Arabic literature like a sponge.”⁷

Min Bayrut il al-Hind (*From Beirut to India*) is the title of Cheikho’s travelogue published in twelve installments between February 1912 and May 1913 in *al-Mashriq*. It is an account of a trip taken much earlier, beginning in the summer of 1895. The travelogue begins with Cheikho’s return to his hometown of Mardin. From there, his group floated down the Tigris in *kalaks*, a stretch Cheikho described as his favorite part of the whole trip. In Baghdad, Cheikho hopped onto a British steamer, the first of several. He arrived in South Asia at Karachi via Muscat. After two days in the Sindhi city, he set off to his final destination of Bombay. Cheikho’s travelogue reveals a particular space across which modern Arab history was made. The map published with the first installment of the travelogue is of a rare perspective (figure 1). At its center



Figure 1. Map of Cheikho’s 1895 trip to India (*al-Mashriq*, February 1912).

⁷ Ignaty Krachkovsky, *Among Arabic Manuscripts: Memories of Libraries and Men*, trans. Tatiana Minorsky (Leiden: Brill, 1953), 15.

lies the Tigris and the Euphrates Rivers, Persia (al-‘Ajam), and Yemen. In the northwest corner, Alexandria in Egypt; at the southeast corner, Bombay. This space—deserts, mountains, rivers, seas, and gulfs between the Mediterranean and the Indian Ocean—was the scene of assaults on sovereignty and profound shifts in the patronage and production of knowledge.

It is surely the place most often called the “Middle East,” but with what lies east of it better accounted for. The phrases “Middle East” and “Near East” reflect Europe’s colonial gaze, as is now well known.⁸ George Antonius rehearsed this perspective in his famous 1938 book *The Arab Awakening*, when he called the Arab world “the highway to the East.” “That is to say,” he clarified, “on England’s route to India.”⁹ Certainly for many centuries and by virtue of proximity, India was indelibly linked to the Middle East. But in the era when the Indian Ocean was transformed into a “British Lake,” that proximity took on new meanings. In 1902, British imperial historian and strategist Valentine Chirol described the Middle East quite simply as “those regions of Asia which extend to the borders of India or command the approaches to India, and which are consequently bound up with the problems of Indian political as well as military defence.”¹⁰ The centrality of British India in imperial imaginings of Arab space cannot be understated, but other geographical notions must also be considered to adequately understand the place of Arabs in the world. For many Arab and Indian thinkers, their Middle East and their India are enmeshed in histories of movement and layers of language that predate the British Empire. For some, as I show later, this was an important reason to rethink the terms and spaces of colonial rule. One Indian parliamentarian stated his reasoning plainly in May 1948 when he announced that “the term Middle East should be dropped. Middle East is the term of Europeans because it is middle to them. Let us have ‘West Asia’ as the term for ourselves. For in this country ‘Middle East’ is West Asia.”¹¹

⁸ See Rashid Khalidi, “The ‘Middle East’ as a Framework for Analysis: Re-mapping a Region in an Era of Globalization,” *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 18, no. 2 (1998): 1–9, and Osamah Khalil, “The Crossroads of the World: U.S. and British Foreign Policy Doctrines and the Construct of the Middle East, 1902–2007,” *Diplomatic History* 38, no. 2 (2014): 299–344.

⁹ George Antonius, *The Arab Awakening: The Story of the Arab National Movement* (London: Hamish Hamilton, [1938] 1945), 25.

¹⁰ Valentine Chirol, *The Middle Eastern Question: Or, Some Political Problems of Indian Defence* (London: John Murray, 1903), 5.

¹¹ Quoted in Chotirat Komaradat, “Friends Fall Apart: The Wax and Wane of Indo-Egyptian Relations, 1947–1970” (PhD diss., Harvard University, 2010), 10.

Locating an Archive

Anticolonial Indians and Arabs would often lament the disappearance of their entanglements in the accounts of European imperial historians. Memories of and monuments to their interaction—in the literary, philosophical, or archeological record—were occluded in modern histories premised on European superiority and Asian isolation or decline. This represented both a political and archival challenge for scholars in the colonized world. “The archive of much of modern Arab history,” Edward Said once said, “resides unmetaphorically, has been deposited in, has been physically imprisoned by, Europe.”¹² Today “transnational,” “global,” and “international” histories often rest exclusively on these archives of empire. But we may ask, What is left behind? Where do the reading practices and scholarly institutions of philologists and archivists outside of Europe fit into theories and critiques of “world literature” and “world history”? What, for example, do we make of Khuda Bakhsh’s library? In the late nineteenth century, Bakhsh, a barrister in the provincial northern Indian city of Patna, had on his payroll an Arab by the name of Muhammad Maqi.¹³ Paid fifty rupees a month plus commission, Maqi traveled across West Asia collecting manuscripts for his patron. “The reminiscences of this Arab seeker after books,” one enchanted colonial observer suggested about Maqi, “had they been written with fidelity, might now be reckoned amongst the most lively and entertaining of personal memoirs.”¹⁴ Today, the Khuda Bakhsh Oriental Library is a treasure trove of rare manuscripts. Bengali historian Jadunath Sarkar, whose own controversial accounts of the Mughal Empire relied largely on documents and manuscripts in India, wrote that Bakhsh “was one of the greatest authorities on Islamic bibliography.” In our accounts of collection and preservation, room must be made for histories that depart from the purportedly scientific and the perennially European. “One night,” Khuda Baksh recounted:

I dreamt that the lane near the Library was filled with a dense crowd of people. When I came out of my house they cried out, “The Prophet is on a visit to your library, and you are not there to show him round.” I hastened to the manuscript room and found him gone. But there were two manuscripts of the Hadis, lying open upon the table. These, the people said, had been read by The Prophet.¹⁵

¹² Edward Said, “Interview with Diacritics,” *Diacritics* 6, no. 3 (1976): 43.

¹³ Jadunath Sarkar, “Khuda Bakhsh, the Indian Bodley,” *Modern Review* 4, no. 3 (1908): 249.

¹⁴ V. C. Scott O’Conner, *An Eastern Library* (Glasgow: Robert Maclehose, 1920), 7.

¹⁵ Sarkar, “Khuda Bakhsh,” 247.

Today, according to Sarkar, these volumes contain a note that they are never to be removed from the library. It is necessary to acknowledge that Europe's Arabists and Indologists would not have been able to do their work without the work of scholars like Bakhsh or Cheikho. Mohamad Tavakoli-Targhi has described the elision of this labor in modern intellectual history as "Orientalism's genesis amnesia."¹⁶

Archives and libraries in the Global South are essential sites for studying intellectual life and culture. In Beirut, the fruits of Cheikho's scholarship remain on display at the Université Saint-Joseph. On the other side of the city, the library

of the American University of Beirut constitutes one of the most important collections of modern Arab thought. By virtue of its place and age (founded as Syrian Protestant College in 1866), this library was a subscriber to many of the Arab world's most important periodicals since they began publication (moreover, their editors and

Arab states now pay limited attention to the social sciences and humanities, recalling them only to raise shallow nationalist myths. Reams of hagiography . . . are no replacement for institutions committed to the production and distribution of sound statistics, empathetic histories, or innovative theories.

contributors were often alumni of the school). None of the above-mentioned institutions emerged out of state patronage and their collections—like those of London, Paris, and Washington, DC—are clearly part of a global history of ideas. If we follow the making of these collections closely and survey their content, an intellectual history is revealed that is not readily encountered in Europe's storehouses of conquest, plunder, and theft. For the West, the East—or South—was not a place of living ideas. Its intellectual history, if it had one at all, was confined to the ancient past. The printed matter of the modern Arab or Indian or Chinese mind was simply the bearer of sedition and rebellion or a vehicle for propaganda and profit, never an arena of theory or thinking. To write a new history of these ideas, a new archive must be raised. How to raise this new archive, much of it now decaying in Third World libraries that are crumbling under the conditions of structural readjustment or withering away thanks to a growing chauvinist disregard for particular pasts, is the task before

¹⁶ Mohammad Tavakoli-Targhi, *Refashioning Iran: Orientalism, Occidentalism and Historiography* (New York: Palgrave, 2001), 18–34.

us.¹⁷ Indeed, it has been the project of many Arab and Indian intellectuals for decades now.

A New History

New archives and new histories necessitated new institutions. Decolonizing intellectuals eager to break with the Orientalist knowledge that had come to structure their past established new sites and idioms for the elaboration and distribution of this history. When the Indian Council for Cultural Relations organized a conference on India and the Arab world in 1965, they invited dozens of local scholars and Arab visitors to present and discuss the history of West and South Asia and their approach to it. Among them was the Lebanese socialist Clovis Maksoud, who was appointed the Arab League's ambassador to India in 1961. Maksoud was a committed Arab nationalist, and his contributions to the meeting pointed to how nationalist, anticolonial struggles were produced through movement and conversation far beyond the nation. As he relayed to those meeting in Delhi, intellectual attachments to Europe on the one hand and nostalgia for a shared Islamic past on the other only obscured the necessary work of building a new society after colonialism. The ideas under which Arabs and Indians could unite, he concluded, were socialism, secularism, and nonalignment.¹⁸ For Maksoud and other Asian intellectuals of his generation, these ideas constituted not only global political principles, but the basis upon which a new scholarly agenda could be elaborated.

Indeed, there was great enthusiasm for decentering Europe in contemporary affairs and historical narration. K. M. Panikkar, a historian who served as India's ambassador to Cairo from 1952 until 1954, thought transnational approaches to India's history were imperative. In his presidential address to the Indian History Congress in 1955, he implored the assembled to think about the Indian past in relation to developments across Asia. Panikkar admonished universities in India for not focusing attention and resources on studying Asian history, while devoting considerable time to studying Europe. He called for the establishment of centers for Central and Southeast Asian studies.¹⁹ Panikkar was one of many

¹⁷ For an important reflection on this state of affairs, see Sheldon Pollock, "Future Philology? The Fate of a Soft Science in a Hard World," *Critical Inquiry* 35, no. 4 (2009): 931–61.

¹⁸ "Session I: The Discussion," in *India and the Arab World: Proceedings of the Seminar on India and the Arab World*, ed. S. Maqbul Ahmad (New Delhi: Indian Council for Cultural Relations, 1969), 39, 40.

¹⁹ K. M. Panikkar, "Presidential Address," *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress* 18 (1955): 20–21.

intellectuals who argued that new institutions independent of Europe were necessary for scholarship in the non-European world to remain a viable venture. At the 1951 Congress of Orientalists in Istanbul, Muhammad Nizamuddin, director of the translation bureau at Hyderabad's Osmania University, called for the establishment of "an Oriental UNESCO." While expressing awe over Istanbul's libraries—"the centre of the Arabic, Persian, and Turkish manuscript literature Elysium . . . the cynosure of the Oriental world . . . *Firdaws al-Mahtutat* [Paradise of manuscripts]"—Nizamuddin requested "cooperation to all the needy institutions in the world [to] arrange for a prompt and easy supply of microfilms from the various unique treasures you have been fortunate to possess."²⁰ Time and again, scholars in the Global South demanded a reappraisal of the unequal political geography that determined the location of research materials and limited the horizons intellectuals could approach in their thought.

It is clear that the era of decolonization, however titular it turned out to be, was marked by profound changes in how Arabs and Indians interacted. The colonial frame, which had served as their primary linkage for at least two hundred years, was broken. What was left had to create itself anew. In a specific geography, particular idioms, texts, and pasts could be summoned for use in a project oriented toward the future. In the end, it was a failed project. Alternatives, like the global Islam cultivated and nourished between the cracks of nations, regions, and minds, have proved to be far more resilient. But this Indo-Arab project—which has received so little attention—still offers valuable lessons. It is clear that Europe and its ancillaries can offer only limited support for any critical practice of research and study in the non-European world. This is both a material and an epistemological problem, as I have related already, neither of which can be confronted easily or alone. But we have not yet reached a moment of total despair. The conditions for serious scholarship remain. There is no shortage of curiosity among what is still a highly literate population in the Arab world. Great art and literature have been produced in the midst of disaster and dislocation, with little support or patronage. Moreover, there is no absence of tradition. A global Arabic corpus of philological, historical, and geographical knowledge offers a remarkable foundation on which to build new methods and institutions. The Arab world need not genuflect to the Anglocentrism of mono-

²⁰ M. Nizamuddin, "Need for the Collaboration of Eastern and Western Scholars in the Scheme of Editing and Publishing Rare and Important Classical Works in Arabic, Persian, Turkish, and Other Languages," in *Proceedings of the Twenty Second Congress of Orientalists, Held in Istanbul September 15th to 22nd, 1951*, ed. Zeki Velidi Togan (Istanbul: Osman Yalcin Matbaasi, 1953), 1:68, 71.

lingual social science. With concentrated and collaborative effort, a great deal can be done from the present ground.

Of course, the situation today is even more dire than that of the fragile, fragmented past I related. Even those young, barely sovereign states molded by the winds of nonalignment were committed—however poorly—to establishing scholarly institutions and cultivating global thought. Arab states now pay limited attention to the social sciences and humanities, recalling them only to raise shallow nationalist myths. Reams of hagiography and occasional archeological spectacles are no replacement for institutions committed to producing and distributing sound statistics, empathetic histories, or innovative theories. Future efforts to cultivate and promote the humanities in the Arab world must be independently minded. They must be free from the designs of the inhumane capital, which encloses the spaces and sources of critical thinking in the region, and free from the barricaded avenues of European thought and archives. If prudent, Arab intellectuals would set their sights across the Indian Ocean and beyond, to those regions and peoples with whom we share a complementary recent past, to build new Asian and African centers of thought. The deadly crossing of the Mediterranean cannot be the Arab world's only portal to the future. For centuries, Arab archives readily moved south and east, and there is no reason that such movement cannot nurture Arab thought again.

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