One
The First Modern Arab Cultural Renaissance, or Nahda

From the Mid–Nineteenth Century to the Mid–Twentieth Century

The modern Arab debates on culture date back roughly to the mid–nineteenth century, a time when most Arab lands had been under Ottoman rule for three hundred years, since the sixteenth century. The waning Ottoman Empire had started to lose control over some of its territories to breakaway nationalist movements: Greece in the early 1820s and the Balkans in the 1870s. It had suffered military defeats at the hands of one of its major rivals, Russia, in consecutive battles in 1806–1812, 1828–1829, 1853–1856, and 1877–1878. It was also facing growing financial and economic difficulties. For many Ottoman officials, economic, administrative, technological, and even political modernization had become necessary for the empire's survival. The extent and modality of the needed changes gave rise to a wide range of discussions and the formation of various political currents advocating reform. The mounting challenges of the empire also invited a growing intervention by European powers who were

eager to benefit from the weakening Ottoman state. These trends resulted in the 1839–1876 Tanzimat reforms, a set of new laws that were to transform Ottoman subjects into equal citizens, irrespective of their religious and ethnic affiliation. It led to the establishment of a modern constitution and to the creation of a representative parliament in which Arab delegates were included. Provisions were also made to guarantee commercial privileges for Europeans. The principles of the reforms were declared in 1839 and 1856 in official statements known as the Gülhane decree and the Hatt-i-Humayun, respectively. These Tanzimat reforms were met with resistance by the sultans, who did not want to see their power being restricted by a fundamental law, as well as by the military and administrative classes, which had likewise much to lose. The new laws were eventually passed, but the Constitution was suspended in 1876 by Sultan Abdulhamid (ruled 1876–1909) soon after it was established, then reinstituted by the revolutionary Young Turks in 1908, and then suspended again in 1912.[1]

The empire's cosmopolitan center was not the only site of such momentous transformations. Their echoes and effects reached regional centers such as Tunis and Cairo. These places had to deal with their own local needs for change as well as with growing European interventions: the Napoleonic invasion of Egypt (1798–1801), the French colonial occupation of Algeria (1830–1962), the imposition of a French Protectorate over Tunis (1881–1956) and Morocco (1912–1956), and the British occupation of Egypt (1882–1952). Since then, the constant political players in most Arab lands have been the diverse local populations with their communal politics; the local rulers, sometimes foreigners imposed upon the people by outside forces; the regional power brokers; and the international interventionist powers. The actors working for change have constantly had to play these players against one another in making their way through a complex landscape of conflicting interests and agendas.[2]

Over the course of the nineteenth century, Cairo developed into a center of Arab modernization and eventually became the seat of what was to be called the Arab Renaissance, or the Nahda. Muhammad Ali Pasha, of Albanian origin, ruled Egypt for the Ottoman sultan from 1805 to 1849.[3] He was eager to modernize and strengthen Egypt, primarily the army and the administration, in order to maximize his autonomy vis-à-vis the Ottoman state. He initiated a number of economic projects and sent groups of young men to study abroad, mainly to Paris, creating a stimulating circulation of new ideas that eventually gave rise to unprecedented intellectual debates and movements. All these socioeconomic, administrative, military,

political, and cultural factors on the local, regional, and external levels contributed to the intensification of cultural and intellectual activities in the last decades of the nineteenth century and the early decades of the twentieth century. This intensification was expressed in literary and media productions, educational reforms, an important translation movement, the formation of intellectual salons and political secret societies, and the development of protonationalist and protofeminist movements.[4] The margin of freedom that Cairo enjoyed compared to other places in the empire, which came under the growing censorship of the Ottoman ruler, facilitated the proliferation of these activities. The fall of the Ottoman Empire in the aftermath of World War I pushed Arabs to redefine themselves outside of the Ottoman parameters and to articulate post-Ottoman visions for themselves. Pan-Arab, pan-Islamic, and more regional (Syrian, Lebanese, and so on) projects were elaborated and debated. The British and the French soon divided the area into spheres of influence among themselves, however, and imposed mandates on a fragmented Arab homeland. It took these newly created Arab entities a couple of decades to achieve at least formal independence. In the meantime, the struggle in Palestine was raging, and the founding of the state of Israel in 1948 was to become one of the most, if not the most, significant events of the century, engendering a whole set of political, military, socioeconomic, cultural, and human problems—all of which remain unsolved to our day. In sum, the Ottoman reform projects, the post-Ottoman political struggles, and the colonial encounters with Europe stimulated a range of debates within and about Arab societies that came to be known as the Nahda debates.

The consecutive defeats by Israel (1948, 1956, 1967) were followed by military coups in Egypt (1952), Iraq (1958), Syria (1963), and Libya (1969), with promises of a more successful vindication of national and Arab rights. These promises became the convenient pretext for the development of militarized and police states that repressed their populations without achieving any significant victory against Israel. These states prevented the democratic processes of intranational, political, ethnic, and religious conflict resolution. They disenfranchised people and suspended political life by perpetuating emergency laws. They cracked down on all forms of independent and oppositional voices, be they secular or religious. They monopolized power and put in place an elaborate system of corruption. They instituted harsh censorship, repressing freedom of thought and freedom of speech that eventually led to a deterioration of the whole educational system. It is against these repressive regimes that popular movements in recent

years have tried to revolt, demanding the cessation of emergency laws, the reinstitution of civil rights, and the reform of the state in Egypt, Syria, Morocco, and elsewhere. But these reform movements, like those of the preindependence period, have to navigate through the multiple agendas of regional and international forces that continue to influence the Arab world.

Despite these adverse and oppressive conditions and under the impact of the shock of the 1967 defeat, a critical intellectual movement emerged in the few remaining pockets of freedom. Some of its leaders, such as Moroccan historian Abdallah Laroui, called this movement the "second Nahda." The movement's efforts consisted of radicalizing critique and reexamining the past endeavors for enlightenment and liberation. The circumstances of this second Nahda were obviously more somber than those of the first: it was clouded by a century of disillusionments, disappointments, humiliations, and defeats; it had a narrower margin of freedom owing to the more established systems of state repression and rising religious oppression; it had to deal with a greater cultural defensiveness that developed in reaction to the growing aggressions and defeats; and, finally, it had to face a despair that the first Nahda had not known. The gap between the two periods and moods is perceived to be so large that many post-1967 critics wonder where the legacy of the first Nahda went and why its hopeful promises and liberal impulses were aborted. In fact, reclaiming that legacy and understanding the reasons for the discontinuity with it became one of the central preoccupations of the second Nahda.

Despite this discontinuity, many of the first Nahda themes reappeared in the second one. Their persistence preoccupied contemporary thinkers. Some found in this continuity of themes an additional reason for despair, seeing it as a sign of intellectual stagnation and a manifestation of an incapacity for cumulative learning, whereas others tried to understand the reasons for this persistence. Given this double concern with the continuity and discontinuity between the two Nahdas, it is important here to state briefly the first Nahda's major themes—briefly because a full rendering of the complex set of phenomena and trends is impossible here. Albert Hourani's *Arabic Thought in the Liberal Age, 1798–1939*, still remains the main reference on the subject.[5]

The major first Nahda figures had basically five main preoccupations:

1. *The rise and fall of civilizations.* Much of the Nahda writings turned around the causes of the rise and fall of civilizations, based on a comparative awareness of European and local Egyptian-Arab-Muslim realities

of the time. The intensifying contacts with Europe during the nineteenth century shaped a certain perception of this continent that accompanied analyses of the region. This perception changed as the type of contact changed, especially when European powers became colonial occupiers. On the whole, Nahda thinkers were eager to grasp the secrets of progress, to understand what lay behind Europe's advancement and superiority in the hope of adopting it to their own societies. For some, the interest was more focused on acquiring the means of power from Europe in order to use it against its colonial expansion. There was also the need to define oneself vis-à-vis this spreading culture and vis-à-vis the modernity that it brought with it. How was one to define Egyptian, Arab, or Muslim culture with respect to European culture? Were they related? Could one find some common origins, facets, constituents to them? Or were they incommensurable? The various answers emphasized political justice, science, religion, and gender in different ways.

2. *Political justice.* For a majority of Nahda thinkers, political justice was the basis of European advancement and the primary condition for the Arab Renaissance. The rule of law and the accountability of rulers were seen as necessary requirements for development. Criticism of despotism was a Nahda leitmotiv. Justice had always been a central notion in classical Islamic political thought. What is notable here is that it is identified as the cornerstone of progress in the perception of European civilization.

3. *Science.* Some regarded science as another cornerstone of European superiority. Some looked at it as a constitutive element of modern culture, rational thinking, and a new worldview. Others considered it mainly as an instrumental key to power that led to the production of technology and strategic know-how. The call for education was another dominant theme of the Nahda. The Arab press that was created and developed during this epoch disseminated nonreligious and modern knowledge, scientific discoveries, and world news. New schools were opened, and old ones were reorganized. Translations into Arabic were made, and students were sent abroad to acquire European training.

4. *Religion.* Religion was a major Nahda concern for many reasons. Comparisons with Europe raised questions about the link between religion and progress and about the difference in the links between Christianity-progress and Islam-progress. Was Christianity more conducive to progress, explaining the development of European civilization? Or was Europe's success due to the marginalization of religion? How did Christianity and Islam compare with respect to modernity?

5. *Gender.* Finally, gender behavior was a significant part of the comparative cultural evaluation and a domain in which the gaze of the colonial European Other played an important role. According to the colonial discourse, Islamic cultures were inferior to European culture and in need of colonial improvement because they advocated discriminatory treatment of women and tolerated male homosexuality. Feminist doctrines and conservative sexual ideas were used to justify colonial interference. Nahda thinkers, both men and women, had to react to these judgments and to define their positions regarding these questions. Modernity, feminism, sexual mores, colonialism, and civilizational worth were thus intricately entangled.

The first and most famous account of modern European civilization from this comparative perspective was Rifaʿa Rafiʿ al-Tahtawi's (1801–1873) Paris diary. Published in Cairo in Arabic (*Takhlis al-Ibriz fi Talkhis Bariz*) in 1834, it was quickly translated into Turkish to serve as a didactic introduction to European modernity.[6] It became the landmark publication of the early-nineteenth-century Nahda. Its author, a Sheikh trained at al-Azhar,[7] had been sent to Paris to supervise a group of students between 1826 and 1831. Al-Tahtawi wrote down his observations and experiences of the French capital and upon his return founded a school of languages, from which he launched an important movement of translation. He subsequently wrote a number of books promoting modern education for girls and boys alike and urging the clergy to integrate secular modern disciplines in the training of its members.[8] His Paris diary, recently translated into English,[9] shows a wide interest in the life of the Parisians, ranging from the social and cultural to the economic and political. It presents neither an unbiased nor an unapologetic view of Paris, but rather a relatively candid and uninhibited perception of a foreign culture.[10] The author seeks to grasp the secrets of that city's progress in the hope of adopting them for his homeland, which, in his opinion, clearly lagged behind on many levels. Most of the time he is fascinated by what he sees, without feeling threatened in his Islamic-Egyptian identity. He does present justifications here and there for seeking principles of progress in a non-Muslim country and in nonreligious achievements. He asserts that his faith encourages Muslims to seek knowledge and wisdom wherever they can be found, that this European civilization is not totally foreign to Muslims because it is based on Islamic sciences imported into Europe in the Middle Ages, and that the achievements to be learned from were the product of human effort and not the product of Christianity per se—justifications that have become

standard arguments in defense of foreign borrowing since then. However, on the whole, his tone is not defensive, and his general attitude is not judgmental. Al-Tahtawi writes with great curiosity about a wide range of aspects of Parisian life—social mores and customs, gender roles, the architecture and interior design of houses, the nature of indoor and outdoor entertainments; he describes shops, restaurants, coffee houses, ballrooms, theaters, and museums; he talks about the transportation system, the mail service, and taxes; he reports on hospitals, schools, and universities; he speaks about the press, economic institutions, and factories; and he gives a detailed account of the 1830 Paris uprising.

Among the things that impress him most are the general valorization of knowledge beyond the confines of religion as well as the spread of literacy, even among women. He is amazed by the passion for learning, whether through newspapers, journals, books, or traveling. He appreciates people's encouragement of change, innovation, and creativity, as well as their allegiance to their country. He notes the use of human reason as the ultimate criterion of judgment as well as the general attitude of religious tolerance. For al-Tahtawi, however, what constitutes the solid foundation of civilizational progress in Paris is political justice—that is, a system of government that is not arbitrary, but determined by a fundamental law that clearly sets the rights and duties of both the ruler and the ruled. He translates the French Constitution article by article, for even though, as he says, its contents do not come from revelation or the sacred tradition, they contain valuable human wisdom. He emphasizes the importance of holding the ruler accountable through representative bodies that decide on the laws of governance. Certainly, al-Tahtawi does not advocate the adoption of the French Constitution in Egypt, nor does he promote liberal democracy. His boss, Muhammad Ali, whom he praises for his support of learning and modernization, would not tolerate such proposals. But al-Tahtawi does emphatically assert that the abuse of power by and the ignorance of political and religious rulers are among the major causes of civilizational decline. Political justice is, for him, the necessary condition for subjects' well-being, for prosperity, and for the advancement of knowledge—in sum, the necessary condition for progress. He prefaces his translation of the French Constitution with the following statement: "We should like to include this book—even though most of what is in it cannot be found in the Book of the Almighty God, nor in the *sunna* of the Prophet—May God bless him and grant him salvation!—so that you may see how their intellect has decided that justice (*ʿadl*) and equity (*insaf*) are the causes for the

civilization of kingdoms, the well-being of subjects, and how rulers and their subjects were led by this, to the extent that their country has prospered, their knowledge increased, their wealth accumulated and their hearts satisfied."[11]

The centrality of political accountability, the rule of law, and the importance of political representation in Nahda thought is not acknowledged enough, yet these principles are among its leitmotivs. Indeed, the critique of despotism in general and in connection with questions of culture malaise in particular permeates much of the Nahda writings. This political critique runs throughout twentieth-century Arab thought, but at times it is overshadowed by a culturalist bent and becomes dominated by an obsessive concern with cultural authenticity, especially in the 1970s and 1980s, for a number of reasons that I explore later. This bent has given both contemporary Arabs and others the prevailing and false impression that Arab thinkers have always been predominantly preoccupied with the cultural and religious aspects of their civilizational and societal problems. The fact is that the critique of political despotism has been a consistent object of grievance in modern Arab thought, and a political understanding of cultural crises has persisted across generations of thinkers. The proposed remedies have differed from one thinker to another, ranging from religious repentance and piety to theocracy, populist nationalism, liberal or socialist nationalism, and full-fledged democracy. Al-Tahtawi's rendering of the secret of European civilizational progress is among the first expressions of this political critique. Subsequent landmark works that formulated this critique most pointedly are, as we will see, Abdel Rahman al-Kawakibi's description of the facets and effects of political despotism drawn from his experience with the Hamidian Ottoman rule toward the end of the nineteenth century, Saadallah Wannous's denunciation of the Syrian Baathist despotic regime since the late 1960s, and more recently the growing prison literature across the Arab world, reflecting on the dictatorships that govern so many of its states.[12]

According to al-Tahtawi, the principles on which European progress was based had their equivalents in Islamic culture: justice was a core value of Islam, French patriotism corresponded to Islamic solidarity, and reason used in Western science was applied even in the most traditional of Islamic disciplines—jurisprudence. He was clearly concerned with pushing for these principles, while giving them an indigenous character and even a universal character. He seems to have believed in the possible adoption of these principles in the near future; he must have considered change and

improvement to be possibilities within reach. The equivalences he established were conceptually and epistemologically questionable, to say the least, but the purpose behind them was clear and hopeful. Some late-twentieth-century critics found the lack of conceptual and epistemological sharpness to be one of the causes of this first Nahda's failure. I examine their claims later on.

The France that al-Tahtawi experienced in Paris became, together with Britain, an occupying power in the Arab region in the second half of the nineteenth century. This momentous change obviously impacted Arab perceptions of Europe, which was no longer seen primarily as the seat of civilizational progress, but as a concrete military, political, economic, social, and cultural threat. Its civilizational advantage continued to be acknowledged, but it was now perceived as a power advantage in a dangerous conflict. The search for the secrets of progress was transformed into a search for the means of power. Henceforth, the concern with power and the power struggle as well as with the perception of Europe as a threatening force would overshadow Arab reflections on culture, politics, and the West. There would be the technological Europe, the cultural Europe, and the political Europe: the first to be imitated for instrumental reasons, the second to be rejected for identity-preservation reasons, and the third to be resisted for sovereignty reasons. For some, such a differentiation misses the essential link between these facets, especially the first two—namely, the cognitive and the wider cultural, humanistic, and democratic facets—all the dialectics of Enlightenment and modernity notwithstanding. For them, the differentiation thwarts a truly empowering modernization and consequently perpetuates the status of backwardness and dependency. A coherent and constructive perception of the West through the complex prism of all these considerations obviously becomes increasingly difficult.

The weight of the European interferences was already present in the thought of Khaireddin al-Tunisi (1822–1890), the Tunisian politician and reformer born a generation after al-Tahtawi. With a similar exposure to European civilization during a stay in Paris, al-Tunisi, like al-Tahtawi, was convinced that the principles of progress and prosperity were freedom and justice, and, also like him, he tried to convince his compatriots that these principles were not Christian per se, but the modern equivalent of those found in the spirit of the shariʿa, the Islamic canon law. He articulated his ideas in a book he published in Tunis in 1867–1868, *Aqwam al-Masalik fi Maʿrifat Ahwal al-Mamalik* (The Straightest Path in Knowing the States of Kingdoms), and later reissued in Constantinople. In it, he refers to al-Tahtawi's

Parisian diary.[13] More than al-Tahtawi, al-Tunisi was actively involved in politics: he became minister and prime minister in Tunis and later grand vizier in Istanbul. In his political career, he tried to apply the principle of justice in both Tunis and Istanbul mainly by strengthening the ministers' power to limit the ruler's power—an effort that the rulers in question resented and defeated. At the end of his career, he was discouraged and disillusioned, realizing that reform and modernization necessitated willing rulers and understanding populations. He also realized that countries such as Tunis, which were the target of European (French, British, and Italian) ambitions, on the one hand, and of the Ottoman Empire's hegemonic influences, on the other, had a very difficult if not impossible balancing effort to make in order to survive and undertake the much-needed reforms, especially in the midst of severe financial problems. Such international, regional, and local constraints unfortunately still challenge reform endeavors in the region today.

The transformations in the perception of the West become even more pronounced in the writings of Jamal al-Din al-Afghani (1838–1897), another influential figure of the first Nahda, but of the latter half of the nineteenth century. He moved between India, Afghanistan, Istanbul, Cairo, Paris, and London, and worked as a thinker and political activist for the mobilization against the growing European imperialism.[14] For him, this resistance required power instruments on the one hand and solidarity among people on the other. The source of the first was science, and the foundation of the second was Islam. Hence, science was to be adopted no matter where it happened to be developed at the time, especially because, according to him, it was a universal good that had no cultural and national specificity. The Muslims had developed science in the past, and the Europeans were its leaders at the present. Moreover, Muslims had in the past creatively employed the principle upon which it was based, rationality, and simply needed to reactivate it in themselves. As to solidarity, no stronger bond than that of religion could provide a solid base for it. Al-Afghani did admit in his writings that the two requirements, science and religion, could work in contradictory ways—that Islam, like all religions, would inevitably impede the freedom of thought so necessary for science. He stated this reservation in his famous exchange with the French Orientalist Ernest Renan, who claimed that Islam was inherently inimical to rational and scientific thought. Al-Afghani retorted by saying that all religions, including Christianity, were inimical to free thinking.[15]

Al-Afghani was not much of a systematic intellectual, and conceptual coherence was not his priority. His aim was to mobilize and empower his

Muslim contemporaries against European imperialism. He was critical of Muslim political and religious leaders. For him, good leaders were those who were willing to be guided by his visions. Unfortunately, none of those he approached in the many countries where he stayed were ready to be persuaded or submit to his will. However, he did become vastly influential and inspired a number of thinkers who became prominent in their own right, among them the Islamic modernist Muhammad Abduh (1849–1905).

Whereas al-Tahtawi had sought to introduce some basic principles of modernity and civilizational progress into a relatively unshaken Islamic Egyptian world, Abduh strove to secure a place for Islam in that rapidly changing world. For this purpose, it was imperative to reconsider the outmoded aspects of Islamic theology and jurisprudence, and so to reopen the door for new doctrinal and legal interpretations that were more in tune with changing realities and demands. It is he who formulated most clearly the famous "conciliatory" or "middle" path of Islam: the path that conciliates the basic tenets of Islamic faith and jurisprudence with the fundamental principles of modernity—reason, science, and civilizational progress.[16] Abduh claimed that Islam, more than any other religion and certainly more than Christianity, was akin to modernity because it naturally incorporated reason, justice, equality, and freedom in its creed. In fact, he went so far as to claim that modern Europe was Muslim in its modernity without realizing it.

The "middle" path Abduh advocated was a constructive alternative to the blind imitation of a rigid and outmoded Islamic tradition as well as to the blind imitation of European civilization. He admired the achievements of European modernity, but he did not believe they could be transplanted into Islamic Egyptian society. In legal matters, people needed laws based on their own tradition, a tradition that needed reform and that contained in itself the principles of that reform. Among the principles he recalled were the Islamic medieval distinction between the fixed dogmas of the Islamic creed and the contingent aspects of practical applications, which needed to be adapted to ever-changing realities, and the idea of the general welfare of the community of believers according to which rules and sometimes doctrines could and needed to be adjusted. In the early centuries of Islam, knowledgeable and wise scholars had constantly undertaken such adaptations. However, this trend had slowed down and disappeared with time due to the general civilizational decline. The causes of this decline, according to Abduh, went back to ignorant and corrupt ulemas who had been neither willing nor capable of enlightening the people and to the despotic

Ottoman rulers who had encouraged and exploited the slavish acceptance of authority.

Against this obscurantist leadership, Abduh actively militated for a reform of the clergy, especially of its education. In 1899, he became mufti, or head of the religious-legal system, of Egypt. In this position, he was able to introduce some changes in the Azhar program and to unify, systematize, and modernize the religious law to some extent. Politically, he leaned toward a form of constitutional monarchy, and at times he favored the idea of a just despot who would lead the country into rapid necessary reforms. He was critical of the British occupation, but at the same time wary of Egyptians' unpreparedness to govern themselves, believing that a gradual emancipation through education and reform would be more secure. He was in general against arbitrary rule and thought that people should hold rulers accountable:

> *There is still another matter of which I have been an advocate. People in general are blind to it and far from understanding it, although it is the pillar of their social life, and weakness and humiliation would not have come upon them had they not neglected it. This is, the distinction between the obedience which the people owe the government, and the just dealing which the government owes the people. I was one of those who called the Egyptian nation to know their rights vis-à-vis their ruler, although this nation has never had an idea of it for more than twenty centuries. We summoned it to believe that the ruler, even it if owes him obedience, is still human, liable to err and to be overcome by passion, and nothing can divert him from error or resist the domination of his passions except the advice of the people in word and deed.[17]*

Muhammad Abduh remains a towering figure of the first Arab Nahda, associated with the middle-path strategy, premised on the possibility of combining Islam with modernity, but without distorting either of the two terms in any significant way. For many, this solution was ideal in that it promised the best of both traditions: it opened the way for the much-needed modernization of Islam *and* allowed for a critical appropriation of modernity not based on blind and superficial imitation. For some, however, this conciliation that conveniently shunned clear positions and avoided painful choices could not but twist each of the conciliation terms. In the final analysis, according to them, it failed to address the real and difficult questions of the lived present reality. Many critics during the second

Nahda would consider this prevailing middle strategy to be one of the major causes behind the first Nahda's failure, as discussed in chapter 5.

Muhammad Abduh believed in and worked for modernization, but he conceived of it within religious parameters. His project was one of Islamic modernization. Some of the thinkers who came under his influence, such as Ahmad Lutfi al-Sayyid (1872–1963), Qasim Amin (1865–1908), and Ali Abdel Raziq (1888–1966), emphasized the modernization aspect of the project and were eager to give increasing importance to secular human experience. Others, such as Lebanese Islamic cleric and scholar Rashid Rida (1865–1935), leaned more than Abduh on the sacred tradition and on the early Islamic period as the model and inspiration for modernization and renewal.[18]

Among Abduh's followers was the Lebanese diplomat, writer, and translator Shakib Arslan (1869–1946). Arslan traveled widely in the West (Europe, the Americas, and the former Soviet Union) and defended the Arab cause as a delegate of the Syrian-Palestinian congress. At the League of Nations, he advocated the termination of the French and British mandates over Syria and Palestine. He was also a close collaborator of Rashid Rida, who had moved to Egypt to work for Abduh. Rida established a journal called *al-Manar* and dedicated it to the cause of Islamic reform and Islamic modernism. It is to this journal that an Islamic cleric from Java forwarded the following question: "Why did the Muslims fall behind? And why did others progress?"[19] Arslan obliged the questioner with an essay putting his question in the title. The journal published the essay in 1930 as the booklet *Limadha Ta'akhkhara al-Muslimun wa Limadha Taqaddama Ghayruhum?* (Why Did Muslims Fall Behind and Why Did Others Progress?)[20] It was widely distributed, and Muslims and Arabs received it with great interest at the time even though the French colonial authorities in Algeria banned it. Reprinted several times since then, it is still read and referred to today in the Arab world.

In this booklet, Arslan starts by agreeing with the questioner regarding Muslims' miserable state of weakness and decline and sets out to search for the causes of this downfall, comparing it on the one hand to earlier times of Islamic history and on the other to the prosperity and power of the modern Western (North American and European) and Japanese nations. For him, the factor that had propelled the Muslims into a glorious civilization beyond the confines of the Arab Peninsula was, without doubt, Islam. It is clear, then, that the explanation of their decline should start from the quality of contemporary Muslims' commitment to their faith. But the elaboration of

the explanation does not limit itself to an exhortation for religious revival or to a reflection on the adaptability of Islam to modernity. On the contrary, it contains a strong rejection of all forms of Islamic exceptionalism. Arslan clearly emphasizes that religion alone cannot be seen as the determining factor in the cultural rise and fall of any people: "I do not deny that religion has a relation to civilization and power over it. But it cannot be said that religion is always the final determinant of the tendencies of civilization, because the power and influence of religion over nations sometimes weakens, they slip out of its control. Degeneration then overtakes them and disintegration creeps into their social fabric. Degeneration of the national character is the true cause of a nation's decadence and religion cannot be held responsible for it."[21] Christian, Buddhist, pagan, and Islamic nations equally have known times of civilizational growth as well as times of civilizational collapse. He corroborates this point with examples from Greek, Roman, European, Japanese, and Arab histories.

This general trend proves for him that factors other than the religious—namely, the political, the economic, and the moral—are at work in the rise and fall of civilizations. It is on the moral civilizational virtues that he focuses his exhortation. The most important among them are self-confidence, seriousness in thought, thoroughness in knowledge, resolution in commitment, and readiness to sacrifice in the various domains of thought and action. He sees in defeatism and despair the biggest dangers to cultural and political empowerment. Thinking of foreign and in particular Western superiority—based on superior knowledge, superior wealth, and superior armament—as insuperable is doomed to be a self-fulfilling prophecy. For him, this superiority comes from a deep commitment to knowledge and to communal solidarity. Wealth, science, technology, and military power are the outcomes of such a commitment, not its premises. This relationship applies to all religious and national communities.

To blame Islam for Muslims' cultural, material, and political poverty is to misunderstand the nature of civilizational development and to misjudge the nature of Western modernity, Arslan argues. The West, in his opinion, is no less religious and no less attached to its traditions than the rest of the world. He enumerates a long list of European and other peoples, including the Zionists, who pride themselves on cultivating their traditions and customs. But curiously, he adds, it is the Muslims who are branded with the accusation of being "traditionalists." He then describes the Western powers' zeal in converting conquered and colonized peoples to Christianity—a zeal that is never characterized as fanatic, whereas Muslim piety constantly

is. So instead of discussing the Muslim cultural malaise in terms of some alleged Islamic exceptionalism, he attacks the double standards with which Islam is judged by others; and instead of calling for a defensive Islamic cultural purity, advocated by Muslim conservatives, he calls for a moral empowerment through resolve and serious striving. He criticizes the Muslim conservatives who through their dogmatism transform Islam into a hindrance to cultural progress. He also attacks the "superficial ultramoderns," as he calls them, who advocate the total banning of religion from the civilizational project, falsely assuming that the West has achieved progress mainly by discarding religion. Rather than rejecting their religion, Arslan says, Muslims need to develop their will and their resolve in overcoming their misery and to remember that their holy book professes those virtues. Contrary to widespread prejudices, he adds, the Qur'an does not condone fatalism and passivity. It exhorts Muslims to help themselves in improving their worldly and spiritual situation in order to deserve God's help and blessing. Arslan quotes numerous verses from the Qur'an to prove his point. In the final analysis, the keys to this improvement, he says, are resolve and serious striving, loyalty and willingness to pay the necessary price for the needed empowerment, as well as faith in one's self and in God. It is interesting to note that Arslan's diagnosis of and remedy for the civilizational retardation were secular—that is, independent of religion in its essence. However, he did not advocate secularism. In fact, he had pan-Islamist leanings.

A number of Arab Christians advocated more pronounced secularism. Indeed, Christian Lebanese thinkers from the mid–nineteenth century onward offered nonreligious, though not antireligious (but sometimes anticlerical) and certainly not anti-Islamic, views of progress and identity. Their early exposure to Western modernity through contacts with Europe and through missionary schools and their Christian sociocultural backgrounds gave them a specific position in this cultural problematic, one with particular advantages and distinct inconveniences. Among the advantages were the greater familiarity with Western ideas and languages and the greater ease in dealing with them, given the lesser need for religious defensiveness. Among the inconveniences for them were their minority status in a Muslim majority that set limits for possible critique and their being neither Eastern Muslims nor Western Christians, but Eastern Christians, aware of their native Christian identity and keen on their Eastern allegiance that distinguished them from the Western missionaries and the Western powers. Some of them translated their alienation from the

majority into a strong identification with Europe and a total estrangement from their own environment, whereas others denied all differences and their minority situation. Obviously, theirs was (and still is) a sensitive location, typical of all minorities.[22]

The early pioneers such as Nasif al-Yaziji (1800–1871), Ahmed Faris al-Shidyaq (1804–1887), and Butrus al-Bustani (1819–1883) advocated a vision of identity based on the Arabic literary heritage and common Arab history, as well as a solidarity around this identity across religious divisions, albeit within the Ottoman boundaries. They made significant contributions to the modernization of the Arabic language through translation (especially of the Bible under the auspices of the American missionaries) and creative writing, and to the compilation of modern knowledge, for instance through the Bustani encyclopaedia.[23] In 1870, al-Bustani founded *al-Jinan*, a periodical in which he advocated political justice as the basis for prosperity and civilizational progress. He insisted that political participation was necessary for good government, that politics had to be separated from religion and the judiciary from the executive, that taxation had to be properly assessed, and that education had to be compulsory. *Al-Jinan* was shut down in 1886 with the increasing Ottoman censorship. At about this same time, most of the emerging Arabic press relocated to Cairo, where the margin of freedom was larger. Among the most important periodicals were *al-Ahram*, *al-Muqtataf*, *al-Hilal*, *al-Jami'a*, *al-Jawa'ib*, *al-Muqattam*, *al-Jarida*, and *al-Fatah*, the first women's journal in the Arab world, founded by Syrian Hind Nawfal (1860–1920) in 1892 in Cairo. This next generation, including thinkers such as Francis Marrash (1836–1873), Shibli Shumayyil (1850–1917), Jurji Zaydan (1861–1914), and Farah Antun (1874–1922) played a leading role in establishing an Arab press, including both political newspapers and literary and scientific periodicals. Through this press and through their books, they disseminated modern knowledge and modern ideas in a refreshed Arabic. These thinkers' emphasis was on science, freedom, and political justice. They all criticized despotism. Shummayil introduced the ideas of Darwin as well as the ideas of socialism. He attacked theocracies of all sorts and rejected despotism. Antun argued for separating religion from politics and believed that modern society was to be based on science, not religion. This position led to a heated controversy with Muhammad Abduh, who regarded it as an attack on Islam.[24] There was clearly a limit to which Christian thinkers could express themselves without risking misunderstanding and suspicion on the part of the Muslim majority. But Muslim thinkers, too, were attacked when the ideas they propounded displeased

the majority's beliefs: for example, Qasim Amin's protofeminist views and Ali Abdel Raziq's secular political theory.[25]

Amin's *Tahrir al-Mar'a* (The Liberation of Women) (1899) and *Al-Mar'a al-jadida* (The New Woman) (1900) are among the major publications of the first Nahda.[26] The first book gave rise to an important controversy and was attacked in conservative quarters, including the Azhar.[27] The second book came in response to these attacks and confirmed even more strongly the first book's theses. Amin was a prominent judge in Cairo, trained in Cairo and Montpellier (France). His social and professional standing lent a significant weight to his statements. In his writings, he pushed further al-Tahtawi and Abduh's progressive stands regarding the education and rights of women.[28]

A comparative awareness dominates Amin's thought: he sees, on the one hand, the backward, unhappy state of Egyptian society and, on the other, the advanced and happy state of European societies. He finds it important to identify with intellectual honesty the causes of each state and to work for the improvement of his own society by learning from others' successful experiences and by relying on historical evidence. The woman and family questions are for him at the core of the societal and civilizational problems, and they are, he admits, delicate and difficult questions that need to be addressed courageously. For him, it is obvious that women's situation in his society needs to be improved by allowing them to have more physical mobility and social contact, secluding them less, protecting them better with marriage and divorce laws, and giving them access to education. In *The Liberation of Women*, he says that his purpose is not to imitate the West blindly or to oppose shari'a, but to militate for the progress and happiness of his people. Although wanting to preserve the social structure of Egyptian society, he sees the need to address its negative aspects, and the oppression of women for him is certainly one of those aspects. Interestingly, he relates this oppression to the government's political oppression: political despotism creates, according to him, a whole system of injustice in which the strong oppress the weak, whether in the state, the society, or the family. Women are deliberately maintained in a state of weakness by being deprived of education, social contact, and active life. Contrary to the prevailing belief, he says, their weakness is not "natural," but the consequence of all those forms of deprivation, which produce ignorant mothers, inept companions to husbands, unhealthy families, and hence ailing societies. The prevailing belief stems from old and well-entrenched customs and mores that are based on habit and ignorance. Yet even running a household requires

a certain know-how, he adds. Some form of education is necessary, even if limited only to elementary education.

In addition to these rather instrumentalist justifications, Amin states that women should be able to have an understanding of their own and a will of their own, and that for this purpose freedom and education are indispensable. They are also indispensable for women's mental and physical well-being. For him, the liberation of women is good for the family and for the nation, but it is also good for them as persons: it is life affirming. It enhances life and happiness (Europe, for him, is the evidence of this assertion), provided women are prepared for it through a wide education that is not limited to book learning. Contrary to what many believe, he affirms, their education and liberation will not jeopardize their chastity, for freedom is the basis of virtue, responsibility, and self-respect. Rather, it is despotism, whether in the state or in the family, that corrupts morals and destroys virtue. Moreover, he thinks that real chastity should be more internal and autonomous than external and heteronomous, forced upon women by the control of their movement and clothing. Besides, it should also be men's burden and involve their own behavior and inner virtue. Hence, strict veiling and seclusion cannot be the right measures for ensuring virtue and chastity in society.

Like most thinkers of the Nahda, Amin needed to account for the causes of decline in his society, manifested in this case in the oppression of women, and to explain the causes of progress in Europe. Islam is clearly not the cause of decline for him, although he sees decline spreading throughout the Muslim lands in different ways. On the contrary, he thinks that Islam recognizes women as having rights and being equal to men. Moreover, it never justifies conformism and traditionalism. It offers an important impulse toward progress and civilization. Human customs and mores, ignorance and despotism, thwarted this impulse and dragged Islamic societies into a state of backwardness and traditionalism. European societies, in contrast, offer a credible model of success that challenges and threatens Eastern societies. This challenge and threat have to be met with the determination to change and improve Eastern societies in the direction of that success, instead of sinking deeper into weakness and passively suffering the Europeans' judgmental gaze.

In *The New Woman*, Amin praises the success of the European model more emphatically and criticizes the shortcomings of Islamic civilization even more severely, even though he had defended the exact opposite view a few years earlier in a polemical piece responding to the negative depiction of Egyptians by the Duc d'Harcourt.[29] In his new book, he says that it is

not the admission of inferiority that has harmed Islamic societies, but the inferiority itself. To the claim that attempts at changing gender traditions constitutes a foreign plot against Islamic societies, he responds that the greatest plot would be to leave them as they are. He strongly argues against idealizing the Islamic civilization of the past and against attributing to it the character of unmatchable perfection. Perfection, he insists, lies in the future, not in the past. It is surely not achievable in this world, not even by the Europeans, but one ought to aspire to it by understanding the nature of civilizational rise and decline. It is true, he says, that Islam as a religion united the Arab tribes and provided the basis for a unified rule that eventually led to an important Islamic civilization. This rise was made possible by the incorporation of numerous achievements of other civilizations, but religion remained the dominant factor in Islamic civilization because at the time science had not been developed enough to prevail in it, as it has in the European civilization.[30] Moreover, unlike Greek and Roman civilizations, this old Islamic civilization never knew real political representation. As to the views concerning women, they were transmitted to Islam by the Arab warrior-tribal culture, based on war spoils and patriarchal values. None of these aspects, he asserts, made this past civilization a model for our future. Our common sense of general welfare should help us discern those elements that we need to reject and those that we need to preserve. By contrast, modern European civilization shows scientific and moral virtues, for the two are related: morality benefits from cognitive progress. The claim about the East's moral superiority versus the West's material superiority is a poor compensatory pretense reinforced by a superficial knowledge of the West. Finally, Amin emphasizes again the link between state and family despotism. The same pretext given to justify the repression of political liberties, he concludes, is given for the repression of women's personal liberties (leaving out for the time being a discussion of women's public liberties)—namely, the possibility that these liberties will be abused.

Two years after the publication of Amin's books, a number of articles on despotism and Arab reform appeared in the journal *al-Manar* and other Egyptian periodicals, written by Syrian thinker Abdel Rahman al-Kawakibi (1848–1902). The author collected them in two booklets that became landmark publications of the Nahda: *Umm al-Qura* (literally "The Mother of Villages," which was one of the designations of Mecca) and *Tabai' al-Istibdad wa Masari' al-Isti'bad* (The Characteristics of Despotism and the Deaths of Enslavement).[31] Al-Kawakibi was a Syrian official and journalist as well as a strong opponent of Sultan Abdulhamid, one of the most tyrannical rulers of the Ottoman Empire. In the 1870s, he founded

and edited a number of Arabic newspapers in Aleppo, his hometown, in which he criticized oppression and called for reform and freedom. The Ottoman authorities closed down his newspapers and arrested him. He eventually left Aleppo, traveled through North Africa, Arabia, and India, and settled in Cairo in 1898, where he frequented the circle of Muhammad Abduh. He died there a few years later in 1902, allegedly poisoned by Ottoman agents.

Like Amin, al-Kawakibi believed that pervasive despotism was the main cause of decline, but unlike Amin he thought that the Arab component of Islamic societies was the depository of an important potential of reform. The Bedouin characteristics of pride, solidarity, and freedom were for him solid defenses against despotism. Moreover, the special linguistic, cultural, and historical association of Arabs with Islam conferred upon them the natural responsibility of taking charge of its religious affairs, which were in need of much reform in his opinion. For the Ottomans, he contended, Islam was mainly a means for power. Their interest in it was instrumental, so they could not be a nurturing force; under their leadership Islam could not but become a stagnation factor leading to a generalized deterioration in matters of doctrine, jurisprudence, and practice. Political power, he thought, was to remain in the hands of the Ottomans, but the caliphate as a primarily religious function with some limited local temporal power had to be reclaimed by the Arabs, and its seat had to be relocated to Mecca for a number of considerations: it was geographically at the center of the Islamic world between Africa and the Far East, it was far from foreign hegemony, it had a unique historical and symbolic significance, and it was the home of an old Arab population.[32] For al-Kawakibi, such a caliphate would launch an Islamic renewal; it would also rekindle Arab awareness of a special linguistic, cultural, and historical bond, a common heritage, and a glorious past upon which a common and promising future could be built. In this regard, he is considered to be one of the early proponents of a pan-Arabism stemming from a pan-Islamism.[33] Different senses of collective identity were already emerging among the different ethnic and religious groups of the Ottoman Empire, but they gained importance after its collapse as visions of alternative political entities based on alternative definitions of identities became urgent. Various definitions, from the pan-Islamic to the pan-Arab and the more regional (Lebanese, Syrian, Egyptian, etc.), competed to offer new national and political conceptions of the region. Questions were raised about the compatibility and legitimacy of each definition. In response, theories were elaborated about the history, the destiny, and the making of the region. Some were modeled after

European conceptions of nationalism and were affected by the experiences of European colonialism in the mandate period. At the time, Al-Kawakibi did not advocate a full-fledged Arab nationalism that would imply a total separation of the Arab lands from the Ottoman Empire. He wanted to affirm an Arab specificity within the empire, characterized by the roles and values mentioned earlier. He believed that the actualization of those roles and values would open the way to reform and progress in the East. The sine qua non for any move forward, however, was for him the abolishment of despotism.

Al-Kawakibi addresses his booklet to Easterners in general and to the youth in particular so that they will understand the nature and effects of despotism and before it is too late—that is, before despotism annihilates the last remnants of vitality in them—mobilize their forces against it instead of blaming fate, Islam, or others. The health that the East lacks, he declares, is that of political freedom. He starts his introduction with the cautionary remark that his observations are not drawn from a particular government or a particular ruler, but from the nature of the phenomenon in general—probably to protect himself from direct reprisals.

The question of government is, he says, the oldest and most important problem of humanity. It entails a whole set of related questions such as, What should be the functions of government? What should be the mechanisms of controlling them? What should be the extent of governmental intervention in religious, cultural, and educational matters? What role should the government play in supporting learning? Should it have the right to control people's acts and ideas? Or do people have basic liberties that the government should respect as long as they do not disturb the social order? What are personal rights, and what are public rights? Finally, does governing mean possessing power and its benefits or being entrusted with public interests? For al-Kawakibi, one thing is clear: good governance is indispensable for progress and prosperity—the same unambiguous conclusion that al-Tahtawi had reached more than half a century earlier and that critical Arab thinkers a century after al-Kawakibi would reach after the painful experiences of the despotic postcolonial Arab regimes.

Al-Kawakibi starts his reflections on despotism with some definitions and moves on to discuss it in connection with religion, science, glory, wealth, morality, education, and progress. Despotism, he says, is unaccountable, unlimited, arbitrary, self-serving, and exclusive rule. It is served by the coercive military power of the ruler and the incapacitating ignorance of the ruled. Many, he adds, blame Islam for it. Their accusation is understandable given the corrupt behavior of many Muslims who project onto

rulers the awe they are expected to have for God and hence find themselves incapable and unwilling to hold their rulers accountable; it is also understandable given the Muslim rulers who have claimed to rule in the name of God. Such abuses, according to him, have taken place in both the East and the West. The Protestant Reformation was a revolt against them. It might be believed, he adds, that reforming religion is easier than reforming politics. The ancient Greeks and Romans, for instance, used polytheism to legitimize political pluralism, but this allowed anyone to claim divine attributes; moreover, polytheism, being wrong in principle, could not serve as a real solution to the problem of power. In Christianity, the clergy was given divine rights and attributes. Islam and the early rule of the four Rightly Guided Caliphs established a just rule (al-Kawakibi, like many others, obviously idealized this early period). Islam, he says, advocated justice, equality, and a governance based on consultation. It denied absolute authority over matters outside religion. But despotic rulers distorted this message, and their tyranny emasculated the people's faculty to question the self and the Other, including the ruler; it damaged their sense of right and wrong and killed all courage in them, which in turn reinforced the rulers' tyranny. Despotic rulers also suppressed the light of knowledge, whether in science or in the holy book, especially the fact that the latter teaches not to worship anyone but God. The Qur'an, says al-Kawakibi, contains the fundamentals of the scientific knowledge later gained by Western scientists, thus further validating the value of the sacred book—a thesis that still has currency today, but that is also strongly contested by many critical Arab thinkers. The people's ignorance, he says, feeds into their fear and submissiveness to the point that they find their enslavement to be normal and even good. The same mechanisms apply to the lesser despots, big and small clergymen, ignorant fathers, stupid husbands, and heads of associations.

Despotism, for al-Kawakibi, is the source of all corruption: it corrupts the mind, religion, education, science, and morals. It is the source of injustice, humiliation, ignorance, poverty, unemployment, and ruin. Some claim that despotism softens the character, teaches obedience, trains people to have respect for leaders, diminishes depravity, and decreases crime. In reality, he rejoins, people become "soft" as a result of losing their pride rather than their brutality; they become obedient out of cowardice and fear, not by choice; they become respectful of the strong out of hatred, not out of love; depravity diminishes due to incapacity, not due to moral purity or faith; and crime diminishes in the sense that it is hidden rather than prevented. Morality, he asserts, requires freedom of thought and expres-

sion. The wise have agreed that it is extremely difficult to cure nations of moral corruption. Prophets have tried to save nations from it by liberating their minds from worshipping anyone other than God, by strengthening their faith, by encouraging them to reown their will and to think and to act freely, and finally by introducing them to humane laws (a process that sounds much like that of the modern Enlightenment). Ancient wise men, according to him, followed the prophets in this path of liberation, from religion to the liberation of the conscience and to reasonable education. The Western modernizers opted for another path, moving out of the sphere of religion and into the sphere of natural education, believing that religion and despotism were associated. But Easterners are different from Westerners, who are inclined to be materialistic. Arab Muslims have shown that knowledge and religion can go together. What Easterners need is a religious renewal combined with a general reform, especially in education, which, he says, prepares the mind for discernment, for sound reasoning and understanding, as well as for perseverance and good habit formation. The absence of such an education is the East's greatest calamity, and it cannot be remedied under despotism. Sadly, this is exactly what present Arab thinkers have to say about the reality they find themselves in a hundred years after al-Kawakibi. Their foremost concern is the destruction of education and society caused by the despotic regimes of the postcolonial era.[34]

In order to liberate the East from the calamity of despotism, al-Kawakibi calls upon Muslims to heed their Prophet and their enlightening religion; he calls upon non-Muslim Arabs to step over the wounds and grievances that they might have suffered at the hands of their Muslim brothers, to go beyond religious and confessional divisions, and to let religion deal with the afterlife but human brotherhood with this world; he even calls on Westerners to help Easterners get rid of the shackles of enslavement. Resistance to despotism, he thinks, should be gradual and gentle. An alternative to despotic rule must be created, which requires long-term preparation through mass education that aims at reaching clarity of purpose rather than a will to revenge. Otherwise, he says, the change will lead to replacing one despotism with another. The co-opted clergy and the forces of terrorism, money, and habituation are all powerful instruments of despotism that cannot be challenged by an occasional outburst, but only by a gradual popular transformation. Interestingly, survivors of the late-twentieth-century Arab tyrannies propound this same kind of resistance. For many of them, the first necessary task is to reconstruct the nation's social fabric and to rehabilitate the basic human capacities with modest, piecemeal societal goals rather than with the quick and frontal defiance of total revolutions.[35]

The question of government was raised anew some two decades after al-Kawakibi, this time in connection with the abolishment of the caliphate by Kemal Atatürk in 1924. This act gave rise to a heated discussion about the necessity for the Arabs to reclaim the caliphate and relocate it to Arab territory. Ali Abdel Raziq, an Egyptian thinker trained at the Azhar and Oxford, entered the fray in 1925 with the book *Al-Islam wa Usul al-Hukm* (Islam and the Principles of Governing), in which he argues that Islam does not advocate a specific form of government and that it is up to Muslims to decide on the best form that will suit their needs in the present age, on the basis of human experience in various parts of the world: "There is nothing in religion which prohibits Muslims from rivalling other nations in all the political and social sciences. Muslims are free to demolish this worn-out system (of the caliphate) before which they have debased and humiliated themselves. They are free to establish the bases of their kingdom and the organization of their state according to more recent conceptions of the human spirit and according to the principles of government whose excellence and firmness have been consecrated by the experience of the nations."[36]

According to Abdel Raziq, the belief that Islam advocates the caliphate as a legal and political commandment is based on a confused perception of the Prophet's early succession. The Prophet, he claims, passed away without specifying a form of government that the community of believers would have to follow after him because he understood his mission to be primarily spiritual, not political. The fact that the first rulers to head the community after his death were both pious and responsible for its worldly affairs gave the impression that the community's leadership was to be, as a matter of principle and doctrine, both religious and political, thus creating the phenomenon and the notion of the caliphate. Later rulers manipulated the established tradition for their mundane self-interests and prevented the development of independent political thought: "Such was the crime that kings in their tyranny committed against Muslims. They concealed aspects of the truth from them and made them swerve from the right path. In the name of religion they barred their way from the paths of light, treated them arbitrarily, humiliated them and prohibited them from studying political science. Also, in the name of religion they betrayed them and snuffed out their intelligence in such a way that they could find no recourse other than religion even in questions of simple administration and pure politics."[37]

The book was fiercely attacked and its author prevented from holding any public office. He was accused of introducing an alien, Christian distinction between the spiritual and the political. It was argued that Islam,

contrary to Christianity, was not only a spiritual message, but also a law, the application of which required political power. Denying this aspect of Islam amounted therefore to the emasculation of its power to the benefit of the West. Moreover, Abdel Raziq's individual reasoning deviated from the consensus of past and present scholars, who had solidly founded the notion of the caliphate on the sacred book and the sacred tradition. According to Abdel Raziq, this Islamic caliphate was to be understood as being democratic and free, based on consultation, deriving its legitimacy from the community of believers and not from God independently from this community. It is interesting to note here how the idea of democracy, obviously drawn from the West, had become the criterion of evaluation, even for those claiming to distinguish themselves and Islam from this West. It is also interesting to note this explicit concern with power in connection with Islam as a religion, a legacy, and a political foundation. Abdel Raziq was a student of Muhammad Abduh, and his views on the caliphate and on the existence of a concrete governmental doctrine in Islam as a creed were based on the latter's reformist impulses. Ironically, these views were in total opposition to those of another of Abduh's devoted students, Rashid Rida, who, based on the same reformist impulses, advocated the caliphate as an Islamic commandment and necessity.[38] Rida obviously opted for the Salafi orientation in Islamic reform. These two orientations illustrate the opposite potentials of Abduh's reconciliatory strategy for reform and modernization.

A year after Abdel Raziq's book came out, another book published in Cairo attracted the conservative establishment's wrath: Taha Husayn's (1889–1973) book on pre-Islamic poetry, *Fi al-Shi'r al-Jahili* (On Jahili Poetry).[39] In it, Husayn raises questions about the existence of pre-Islamic poetry as it was traditionally presented, even in the Qur'an. His aim, as he puts it, is not to question the credibility of the holy book, but to examine the claims made about pre-Islamic poetry, using the Cartesian method of doubt. He concludes that pre-Islamic poetry was constructed a posteriori in order to serve as a precedent to Islamic literature and in order to demarcate the Islamic from the pre-Islamic. He was accused of casting doubt on traditional and religious beliefs, and the book was banned. He was dismissed from his position as dean of the Faculty of Arts at Cairo University, but was later rehabilitated under the next, more sympathetic government. However, the book remained censored until 1995, when its full version appeared in Arabic for the first time.[40]

Throughout the first half of the twentieth century, debates about identity, progress, and liberation continued and proliferated. In 1936, as the

Anglo-Egyptian treaty was signed, ending the official British presence in Egypt, Taha Husayn wrote his famous *Mustaqbal al-Thaqafa fi Misr* (*The Future of Culture in Egypt*); it was first published in 1938.[41] He addressed it to Egypt's university youth and presented in it his views on culture and education for the newly independent Egypt. He was later to implement some of his ideas as an advisor to the Ministry of Education from 1942 to 1944 and then as the minister of education from 1950 to 1952.

Husayn's main purpose in the book is to present the guiding principles for the cultural and educational policies that are to buttress Egypt's independence on the economic, political, and cultural levels. He bases these principles on a certain understanding of the cultural identity of Egypt. They consist in a wide-reaching Europeanization of the country through the adoption of European knowledge and politics:

> *In order to become equal partners in civilization with the Europeans, we must literally and forthrightly do everything that they do; we must share with them the present civilization, with all its pleasant and unpleasant sides, and not content ourselves with words or mere gestures. Whoever advises any other course of action is either a deceiver or is himself deceived. Strangely enough we imitate the West in our everyday lives, yet hypocritically deny the fact in our words. If we really detest European life, what is to hinder us from rejecting it completely? And if we genuinely respect the Europeans, as we certainly seem to do by our wholesale adoption of their practices, why do we not reconcile our words with our actions? Hypocrisy ill becomes those who are proud and anxious to overcome their defects.*[42]

Only science and democracy, he believes, can empower the newly independent nation. Such an extensive borrowing from Europe cannot, according to him, endanger the nation's personality because Europe and Egypt are not really foreign to one another. Their religions, Christianity and Islam, have common roots in the Near East, and their intellectual traditions have been formed by these religions' encounter with the same Greek philosophical legacy. Much of European thought, he adds, is grounded in medieval Islamic philosophy. In the past, Islamic culture itself had developed by incorporating many foreign cultural elements. Moreover, having no clergy, Islam, in contrast to European Christian culture, does not need to go through the process of secularization and can directly appropriate the fruits of that secularization. Husayn refutes the stereotypical conceptions of Europe as

being material and evil and of Islam as being spiritual and good. Islam, he adds, could not have radically changed ancient Egypt, just as Christianity could not have thoroughly changed Europe. Future Egypt needs to be rooted in that ancient Egypt, which maintained from very early times close ties with the European continent across the Mediterranean through trade, conquest, and culture. Alexandria, he reminds the reader, was a center of Greek and Hellenic culture for a long time. The present gap between Egypt and Europe is due to contingent historical factors, the most important of which is the long and detrimental Ottoman dominion over Egypt.

Given all these commonalities, Husayn suggests that Egypt be viewed more as a Western, European cultural nation rather than as an Eastern one. However, in spite of wanting to blur the Europe/Islam binary, he builds his arguments on an essentialist view of the West and the East, beginning his essay with the questions, "Is Egypt from the West or the East?" and "Is the Egyptian mind Western or Eastern?" (the East referring here to China, Japan, and India, and the West referring mainly to Europe and the United States): "At the outset we must answer this fundamental question: Is Egypt of the East or of the West? Naturally, I mean East or West in the cultural, not the geographical sense. It seems to me that there are two distinctly different and bitterly antagonistic cultures on the earth. Both have existed since time immemorial, the one in Europe, the other in the Far East." And he answers firmly: "We Egyptians must not assume the existence of intellectual differences, weak or strong, between the Europeans and ourselves or infer that the East mentioned by Kipling in his famous verse 'East is East and West is West, and never the twain shall meet' applies to us or our country . . . since our country has always been a part of Europe as far as intellectual and cultural life is concerned, in all its forms and branches."[43]

If Japan, in his opinion, could succeed in adopting European science and technology while keeping its cultural heritage, Egypt should surely be able do so as well, especially because Egypt has always had much closer ties with Europe. It is interesting to note that this construction and definition of Egypt's cultural identity aimed at providing a basis for the set of policies that Husayn wanted to advocate, especially in education. For him, it was the state's responsibility to ensure universal literacy by building a wide network of schools across the country and to strengthen the learning of the Arabic language in order to allow people to have access to Western modern knowledge, which would have to be made available through massive translation. Moreover, religious instruction, both Islamic and Coptic, had to be supervised by and subordinated to the state.

By assigning these tasks to the state, Husayn voiced the demand for centralization and homogenization that postindependence states were expected to undertake in the modernization process. This definition of Egypt's cultural identity became quickly controversial, but the need for modern education and science remained, and many states did build comprehensive school systems, which raised levels of literacy. These systems, however, suffered from the mismanagement and vicissitudes common among postindependence and postcolonial states. Moreover, the voluntaristic intent of such a state project was to lead to a coercive statism and an emasculation of various associative social forces so typical of these states. Finally, Husayn envisioned a leading role for such a modernized and educated Egypt in the cultural and political life of the Arab world and suggested various kinds of cultural and educational services Egypt could offer. This leadership role would become an object of severe contention in the power struggle among Arab countries in the problematic attempts to establish Arab unity. The founding of the state of Israel and its defeat of the Arab armies in 1948 brought the charismatic Egyptian leader Gamal Abdel Nasser (1918–1970) to power in Egypt. Abdel Nasser metamorphosed into an Arab and even a Third World leader, for a while galvanizing high hopes for a united and victorious Arab nation-state with principles of equality, justice, and socialism. However, he developed into an authoritarian ruler who did not tolerate dissent and critique. Taha Husayn was marginalized, and so were the proponents of the liberal school. But it was the Islamists who were the target of the fiercest repression, among them Sayyid Qutb (1906–1966), one of the main theoreticians of the Muslim Brotherhood.

Like Taha Husayn, Qutb served at the Egyptian Ministry of Education in the mid-1940s, but quickly found himself drawn to the Islamic opposition. Critical of the monarchy and opposed to the prevailing feudal system in the country, Qutb became increasingly convinced that Islam was the way to genuine social justice and to moral and political virtue. When the ministry sponsored him to go to the United States for studies in education, he earned a master's degree from the University of Northern Colorado, but decided to return to Egypt before starting a doctorate program. During this time, between 1948 and 1951, important events took place in the region: the establishment of the state of Israel, its defeat of the Arab armed forces, and the assassination in 1949 of Hassan al-Banna (1906–1949), who founded the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt in 1928.[44] In 1952, the monarchy was overthrown in a coup led by army officers (the Free Officers coup) who held

the monarchy responsible for the 1948 debacle in Palestine and for collaboration with the former colonial powers. For a short period after the coup, the Muslim Brotherhood cooperated with the officers' government. Soon, however, disagreements surfaced when the government tried to co-opt the Brotherhood, but refused to implement their Islamic policies in the country. A fierce struggle for power ensued from this tension. In 1954, Qutb became the editor-in-chief of the Brotherhood's official journal, *al-Ikhwan al-Muslimun*, which was soon banned. The Brotherhood strongly criticized the 1954 treaty signed by Egypt and Great Britain that gave the latter certain military and economic privileges in the former. Many members were jailed, among them Qutb. He was to remain in jail until his death in 1966, when he was hanged by order of Abdel Nasser on charges of conspiracy against the state. These alternating government policies of cooperation, co-optation, and repression toward the Muslim activists were to become typical of most postindependence Arab states.

It is under such circumstances that Sayyid Qutb developed and published his ideas, which were to become increasingly radicalized. They provided the Muslim Brotherhood and other Islamists with the ideological framework for their activism.[45] For Qutb, Islam needed a cultural renewal that was to satisfy the needs of the times, but that was to be founded on the fundamentals of Islam, which he saw as an integral way of life. The renewal involved two tasks: first, the establishment of a just social system based on the principles of Islam and, second, the nurturing of the inner beliefs and convictions that would support such a social system. The latter required the strengthening of religious faith and the formation of a new Islamic culture on the basis of a total and reformed educational vision. The problem for Qutb was that many of the leading methods for educational reform had been founded in Western culture, a culture that he thought was inimical to Islam and suffered from many weaknesses, primarily materialism. Isolationism was not an option for him, however, because influences across cultures were, he thought, an undeniable and unavoidable reality. So the renewal in question necessitated an extremely cautious and critical selective borrowing:

Islam, then, enunciates for men a complete theory of life. . . .

No renaissance of Islamic life can be effected purely by law or statute, or by the establishment of a social system on the basis of the Islamic philosophy. Such a step is only one of the two pillars on which Islam

must always stand in its construction of life. The other is the produc-
tion of a state of mind imbued with the Islamic theory of life, to act as
an inner motivation for establishing this form of life and to give coher-
ence to all the social, religious, and civil legislation. . . .

But how can we possibly induce Islamic theory by a culture, educa-
tional methods, and modes of thought that are essentially Western and
essentially inimical to the Islamic philosophy itself; first, because they
stand on materialistic basis, which is contrary to the Islamic theory of
life; and second, because opposition to Islam is a fundamental part of
their nature, no matter whether such opposition is manifest or con-
cealed in various forms?

As we have already maintained, we shall proclaim our defeat in the
first round whenever we adopt a Western theory of life as the means
for reviving our Islamic theory. So, primarily, we must rid ourselves of
the ways of the Western thought and choose the ways of native Islamic
thought in order to ensure pure results, rather than hybrid.[46]

According to Qutb, all domains of knowledge, including the natural
and applied sciences, are rooted in the worldviews of the cultures in which
they were developed, so no borrowing can be safe. Natural sciences as well
as pedagogy, psychology, and education were marked by the pragmatism
that dominated Western culture. He referred to these disciplines in the
United States and to the work of pragmatists such as Charles Peirce and
John Dewey. This pragmatism focused on the technical aspects of things,
discouraged theoretical thinking, and served the materialist approach to
human issues. History, he believed, should be written and taught in a way
that did not privilege the West as its center. Similarly, students should be
made acquainted with their own literature before reading those of others.
In philosophy, Western thinkers might be introduced to students only after
they had mastered Islamic thought. Islamic thought itself needed a new defi-
nition, different from the one used by the Azhar University: thinkers such as
Ibn Sina (980–1037) and Ibn Rush (1126–1198), for instance, who developed
their philosophies with the use of Greek philosophy, could not be regarded
as Islamic thinkers, according to Qutb. Curricula had to ensure that students
were trained in their own traditions before they were cautiously exposed to
other, primarily Western, bodies of knowledge and belief. Only this kind of
education could give Muslims an empowered and renewed sense of their

own religious, moral, and cognitive self. Clearly, his was a pronounced cul-
tural protectionist position that was to become more appealing to a growing
number of people in the second half of the twentieth century.

This quick survey of ideas presented and discussed by Arab thinkers from
the mid-nineteenth century to the mid-twentieth century offers a general
view of the concerns that preoccupied them. The importance of these ideas
does not lie primarily in their depth, originality, or consistency, but in
their place in the Arab public debates of the time, whether in the daily
press, the periodicals, the pamphlets, or the books. Some of them led to
heated controversies, some provoked public condemnations, and some
others inspired great enthusiasm. A number of their proponents occupied
prominent official positions and managed to apply them in public policies.
These thinkers—despite the diversity of their inclinations, ranging from
the liberal to the conservative, secular, religious, conciliatory, protection-
ist, and Salafist—were concerned with the core cultural and political issues
mentioned in this chapter: identity (perceptions of the self and the other),
religion, education, women, and government. Mid-twentieth-century
events—the establishment of the postcolonial Arab states, the founding of
the state of Israel, and the consolidation of the Cold War power struggle in
the region—exacerbated the urgency of these issues. The consecutive de-
feats by Israel, the hardening of state repression, the rise of Islamic funda-
mentalism, the effects of oil politics and economy, as well as the increase of
Western intervention in the last decades of the twentieth century aggra-
vated the conditions of the debate. Compared to the oppressive atmosphere
of the present, the first Nahda seems to many contemporary Arab thinkers
to have been a much more hopeful time, more confident in its liberating
impulses and more optimistic in its reform projects. It also seems a very
distant time, a remote epoch from which the present is disconnected and
estranged. What caused this severance? What happened to the first Nahda
legacy? Was any renewal, any liberation, any reform really attained? If yes,
where were the effects of those achievements? If not, what prevented their
realization? Moreover, how could Arabs be raising the same questions for
more than fifteen decades, but start from scratch every time, with nothing
to build upon? Were all the efforts of the past two centuries a sad Sisyphean
exercise? These anguished questions regarding the first Nahda are, as we
will see in chapter 2, an integral part of the second Nahda's concerns.