CHAPTER ONE

Arab Nationalism and British Promises of Independence During World War I

Intellectual and Political Developments Before 1914

At the end of the eighteenth century the greater part of the Middle East formed part of the Ottoman empire. The overwhelming majority of its inhabitants were Muslims who since the conquest of the area by the Ottomans in the sixteenth century had given their political allegiance to the Ottoman sultan. The sultan also laid claim to the caliphate, but by the questionable right of conquest rather than by the traditional right of inheritance by descent from the family, or tribe, of the prophet Muhammad. During the four centuries of Ottoman rule, Islam declined from the intellectual and cultural zenith it had reached in the Middle Ages. In the words of Bernard Lewis:

> The Ottoman Empire was the last and the most enduring of the great Islamic universal empires. . . . Within it, the basic loyalty of Muslims was to Islam, to the Islamic Empire that was its political embodiment, and to the dynasty, legitimized by time and acceptance, that ruled over it. . . . Until the impact of European political ideas, the Arab subjects of the Ottoman Em-

> pire, though well aware of their separate linguistic and cultural identity and of the historic memories attached to them, had no conception of a separate Arab state, and no serious desire to part from the Turks. Certainly, they did not question the fact that the Sultans happened to be Turkish. On the contrary, they would have found it odd had they been anything else. So alien was the idea of the territorial nation state that Arabic had no word for Arabia, while Turkish, until modern times, lacked a word for Turkey.[1]

The conquest of Egypt by Napoleon in 1798 (a "sideshow" in his revolutionary wars against Britain) sent out traumatic shock waves among the Muslims living in the Middle East. What was the secret behind the West's apparent superiority? What had been responsible for Islam's decline into apathetic indifference? Could Islam now digest the science, culture, and values of the West without fatally compromising its own divinely ordered world? Above all, how could Islam's self-image of preordained superiority be squared with the demonstrable superiority of the West? These were the questions that plagued intellectuals in the East, questions that had to be resolved before traditional Muslim society could ever agree that it had anything at all to learn from the West.

The meeting of Islamic traditional society with Western secular nationalism provoked spiritual and political tensions. It inaugurated an irreversible process, as described in the following passage written by Shafik Gorbal, one of Egypt's leading historians:

> The period of a hundred and fifty years which began with the French invasion of Egypt in 1213 (A.D. 1798)

1. Bernard Lewis, *The Middle East and the West* (Bloomington, Ind., 1964), pp. 72–73.

> witnessed the merging of our Islamic society into the world society of the present era. We, the members of the Islamic society, have not been fully aware of all the implications of the events of this period. . . . The influence has been so great that even when the Islamic people have regained their political independence they have found that a return to the traditional way of life was not possible—even if it were desirable. It needs to be emphasized that such a return is not deemed desirable even when lip-service is paid to the glorious traditions of the past.[2]

The peoples of the Middle East were not homogeneous. Only in the twentieth century, with the advent of indigenous nationalism, did they begin to take on the common identity of "Arabs." Even so, they were divided into an overwhelming majority of Muslims and a Christian minority. The Muslims themselves were divided into an orthodox Sunni majority and a Shia minority concentrated in Iraq and Persia. Muslim attitudes differed from Christian, Syrian from Egyptian.

A Muslim reform movement tried to bridge the gap between Islamic and Western culture by claiming the right to reinterpret Islamic doctrine in the spirit of true Islam as taught by the prophet Muhammad and the community of Elders (al-Salaf, the pious forerunners). Muhammad Abduh (1849–1905), the greatest of the Islamic reformers, claimed that there could be no intrinsic conflict between the Koran and modern science and that any apparent contradictions were the result of a misunderstanding of one or the other. Abduh tried to put his teachings into effect when he served as mufti of Egypt at the end of the nineteenth

2. Quoted in Kenneth W. Morgan, ed., *Islam: The Straight Path* (New York, 1958), p. 78.

century. For example, he overruled Islamic proscriptions of usury and allowed lending at interest, a prerequisite of modern capitalist investment.

But there were obvious dangers in opening up to modern interpretation the orthodox doctrines as laid down by the great theologians of the third and fourth Islamic centuries. Abduh himself was subject to fierce attack from conservatives, and when reform developed into secularism and agnosticism, Abduh's disciple, Rashid Rida (1865–1935), the last of the reformers, reverted back to a conservative, orthodox Islam.

In contrast, the Christian Arabs had maintained both religious and worldly (trade) contacts with the West since the Middle Ages. Being themselves highly vulnerable in a society predicated on Islamic hierarchy, the Christians were only too ready to adopt Western values such as liberalism and separation of church and state. It is therefore no coincidence that the center of the intellectual and cultural renaissance was in Lebanon, where Christians such as Butrus Bustani (1819–1883) embarked upon the translation of the great literary masterpieces of the West into Arabic. During the 1870s groups calling themselves the "Young Christians" worked clandestinely for Syrian territorial autonomy, with the goal of a secular society that would avert a repetition of the religious wars that had racked Lebanon in the 1860s. But the Muslims would not cooperate in working toward a Syrian secular state. The Ottoman regime persecuted and suppressed those working for constitutional reform of any kind. Many Christian intellectuals fled Lebanon for the more progressive clime of British-ruled Egypt. There they established the great publishing houses and newspapers that adorn Egypt to this day.

These intellectual stirrings were stifled and blocked

somewhat during the last quarter of the nineteenth century, when Western imperialism made its most pronounced military drive into the region. Tunisia, Egypt, Morocco, and Libya were conquered and occupied by France, Britain, and Italy at the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth centuries. Muslim conservatives asserted that Western reforms were but a trap, designed to lay Islam open to conquest by the imperialists. The conservatives warned that the attempt to adopt Western values would destroy the pristine purity of Islam, and with it the secret of Muslim superiority. Their course must be to return to Islam as conceived by the Prophet, under whom they had made their greatest advances.

Complementing this trend was the Pan-Islamic movement, whose political head was the sultan-caliph, who made political use of the ideology supplied by Jamal al-Din al-Afghani (1839–1897), a political agitator who had collaborated with Abduh to promote a local nationalist movement in Egypt earlier on. For al-Afghani the threat of Western imperialism was apparently more immediate than that of Ottoman backwardness. Muslims as far afield as India and Afghanistan were incited to rebel against the imperialist powers. For the Ottoman sultan the call to a united crusade against imperialism served to distract his subjects from their various ethnic struggles for greater local autonomy, which would inevitably have loosened the Ottoman grip on the peripheral provinces.

The Pan-Islamic movement, combined with a fair measure of suppression and persecution within the empire, served to maintain Arab fidelity to the sultan-caliph. At the turn of the nineteenth century a few intellectuals began to urge Arab secession from the empire, blaming the Ottomans for the trough in which Islam then found itself. They

pointed to the evident fact that Islam had achieved its greatest successes prior to the Ottoman conquest in the sixteenth century, and some went so far as to claim the existence of an Arab nation prior even to the advent of the Prophet. They claimed that Islam had been diluted with alien innovations and that only in the remote Arabian peninsula had something of the original pure religion been preserved.

The case of the Arabs against the Turks was put in a radical fashion by Abd al-Rahman al-Kawakibi (1849–1902), who left his native Aleppo for Egypt in 1898 in obscure circumstances and whose writings seem to have been unacknowledged cribs or adaptations of Western orientalists. He claimed that the current stagnation of Islam was the result both of Ottoman tyranny and of the absence of racial and linguistic bonds among Muslims. Partly for this reason, the Ottoman empire must be considered unfit to preserve Islam, whose regeneration should be the work of the Arabs. The latter should supply a caliph, who would be descended from the Prophet's own tribe, that of Quraysh. This caliph would reside at Mecca in Arabia and, contrary to traditional notions, would exercise no political power. He would be left with merely religious authority, like an Islamic pope, a symbol of Islamic unity. As the first to declare himself unambiguously against the Turks, al-Kawakibi may be considered the "first true intellectual precursor of modern secular Pan-Arabism." In addition, "by launching, in Arabic, the idea of a merely spiritual caliphate he took the first step toward a purely secular politics . . . an essential prerequisite of nationalism."[3]

3. Sylvia G. Haim, *Arab Nationalism: An Anthology* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1962), p. 27.

But nascent Arab nationalism at the beginning of the twentieth century was confined to a small group of intellectuals. The most significant claims on the loyalty of the masses were those of the family, village, and sultan-caliph. In 1908 the Ottoman sultan was deposed by the Committee of Union and Progress (CUP), a radical reform group composed mainly of intellectuals and officers, and replaced by a candidate of their own choice from the same dynasty. The CUP announced the dawn of a new liberal era and reopened the parliament, which had been adjourned indefinitely over thirty years before, after a brief life span of one year. But the CUP notion of constitutional reform did not coincide with that of its subject peoples. Internal and external crises buffeted the new regime. There was revolution and counter-revolution at home, and loss of territory abroad (most of Turkey's remaining European territory was surrendered during the Balkan Wars of 1912–1913, and Libya was ceded to the Italians in 1913). The consequence was a retreat from liberalism to conservative nationalism at home. In place of Pan-Islam the Turks adopted its antithesis, Pan-Turanism, an extreme form of Turkish nationalism that looked back to, and transformed into a cult, the Turks' legendary origins in Turan in eastern Asia.

The Arabs in the Ottoman empire had helped the CUP into power (as indeed had the Jews), believing that the CUP's promises of reform would include greater civil rights and autonomy for them, too. But where Pan-Islam had united all Islam under a single banner, Pan-Turanism threatened to arouse provincial nationalisms by attempting to impose Turkish culture down to the local level.

In the Arab provinces, especially in Egypt and in Syria, small groups began to organize, with programs demanding greater local autonomy. One group based in Cairo actually called itself the Ottoman Decentralization party, and even

enjoyed the support of some Turkish liberals. Other groups, such as al-ʿAhd (the Covenant Society, formed primarily by army officers in 1914) and al-Fatah (The Young Arab, formed by students in 1911), had to meet in secret, and tried, not always with success, to keep one step ahead of the Turkish secret police. As its name indicates, the Ottoman Decentralization party asked for greater use of Arabic and more jobs for Arabs in the Arabic provinces. The secret societies conceived a political solution modeled on the Austro-Hungarian empire, a model soon to suffer its final demise in World War I. These Arabs proposed a Turco-Arab dual monarchy that, while permitting the expression of Arab national rights, would preserve central Turkish control over such "federal" matters as communications, the army, and foreign affairs.

The final initiative of these groups was the convening of a conference in Paris in July 1913 to publicize their demands in the West and, it was hoped, mobilize diplomatic pressure to force the Turks to accede to them. After failing to stop the conference, the Turks beat a tactical retreat and agreed to negotiate the Arabs' demands. But having once secured the safe adjournment of the Paris conference, the Turks made symbolic concessions that were a hollow mockery of Arab demands. The secret societies were now convinced that no constitutional progress was to be hoped for from the autocratic Turkish regime.

Thus on the eve of World War I the initial stirrings of the Arab national movement had come to a halt. Frustrated in its efforts to wring even minor concessions from the Turks, a small minority of articulate intellectuals and army officers was moving gradually toward the idea of complete secession. However, this small group was hardly ready or able to challenge the Turkish regime, at least not without a

foreign patron, which as yet it lacked. The vast majority of the Arab world adhered to the new Turkish regime, which had had the political sagacity to retain the institution of the caliphate as a symbol of Muslim unity. For this overwhelming majority of the faithful the very concept of an Arab alliance with an alien, Christian nation against the Muslim caliph would raise acute problems of religious identity.

Husayn and the Arab National Movement

In 1914, as the clouds of World War I gathered on the horizon, little movement was visible on the surface in the Middle East, where it seemed that Turkish rule might hold sway indefinitely. Although Zionist settlement in the Holy Land had aroused some Arab opposition, there was as yet no territorial unit by the name of Palestine and no Palestinian problem, and, as we shall see, the Zionist movement itself was in political limbo. For both Arabs and Jews World War I would offer unique political opportunities. Each movement had run into insuperable difficulties with the Turks, but by the close of the Great War Britain would replace Turkey as the political suzerain of the Middle East.

The sharif Husayn was a scion of the Hashemite family, descended from the Prophet and traditional guardians of Islam's most holy sites, Mecca and Medina, in the Arabian province of Hijaz. Husayn had been detained under house arrest in Constantinople for many years by the last sultan, Abdülhamid II, who had feared a movement to promote Husayn as Arab caliph. In 1908 the CUP had allowed Husayn to return to the Hijaz, hoping that he would rally the peninsular Arabs to the new regime.

But Husayn harbored his own dynastic ambitions in the Hijaz and did not settle down to the role of quiescent vas-

sal. The Hashemites had played no part in the intellectual and national renaissance of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, but in 1914, with the Arab secret societies at a dead end, the Hashemites, albeit with their own local interests at heart, would forge the vital link between the Arabs and the West, a link that would provide the key to the fulfillment of Arab aspirations.

Following the example set by Muhammad Ali in Egypt, Husayn sought to establish the Hashemite dynasty as independent sovereigns in the Hijaz. After Husayn's return in 1908, relations with the local Turkish governor (*wali*) deteriorated rapidly. When the Turks sent a new, young, and vigorous governor, Husayn feared they intended to tighten their grip, if not actually to depose him. Expecting an imminent clash, Husayn dispatched his son ʿAbdallah (later to be the ruler of Transjordan, 1921–1952) on a mission to Cairo.

At Cairo ʿAbdallah asked the British representative, Lord Kitchener, if the British would adopt a sympathetic attitude to the Hashemites if they rebelled against the Turks. The British were interested in the stability of the Hijaz, the site of the annual Islamic pilgrimage, which many of Britain's Muslim subjects made. The Hijaz was also of great strategic importance, lying near the egress of the Suez Canal. But in early 1914 the British still adhered rigidly to their "Eastern Policy," which since the 1840s had propped up the ailing Ottoman empire against foreign (mainly Russian) encroachment. Britain had as yet no incentive for supporting one of the Turks' vassals in a conflict with his sovereign.

ʿAbdallah continued by sea from Cairo to Constantinople, where he paid homage to his Turkish overlord. Upon his return to Cairo in April 1914 he again pressed the Brit-

ish. This time he was received by the oriental secretary, Ronald Storrs, who was destined to play a central role in the correspondence with the sharif. Storrs again made it quite clear that the British could give no aid whatever to the Hashemites should they become involved in a conflict with the Turks. The British as yet attributed little significance to the Arab national movement, for which, moreover, they had little political use. Further, it must be emphasized again that ʿAbdallah was not making any demands on behalf of the Arabs in general, but specifically on behalf of his family's interest in the Hijaz.

The British attitude toward the Arabs would change as Britain's military fortunes in the Near East deteriorated during the course of 1915. Once the Turks entered the war on the German side in late October 1914, Lord Kitchener (transferred from Cairo to London in 1914 to become secretary of state for war) perceived that the Hashemites might help the British war effort. Kitchener had served for many years with the British army in India, and he was now anxious about the continued loyalty of India's Muslims in Britain's impending conflict with the Turks. India provided the bulk of Britain's land armies.[4] How would Muslim soldiers react if the Turkish caliph called for a jihad (holy war) against the Allies? If Britain could promote the transfer of the caliphate to an Arab candidate beholden to them, obvious advantages would accrue, not only in India but also in the Middle East itself, soon to become a major theater of war.

On 31 October 1914 Kitchener asked Storrs to convey to Husayn a message intimating that if the Arabs helped

4. See John Darwin, *Britain, Egypt, and the Middle East: Imperial Policy in the Aftermath of War, 1918–1922* (London, 1981), p. 12.

the Allied cause in the war, then perhaps "an Arab of the true race will assume the Caliphate at Mecca or Medina." Some commentators have claimed that Kitchener did not fully grasp the significance of his offer, that he understood the caliphate to be something akin to an Islamic papacy—that is to say, with spiritual authority only.[5] As we have seen, there were some, such as al-Kawakibi, who indeed wanted to return the caliphate to the Hijaz and restrict the caliph's temporal authority to that province alone. Whatever the case, Husayn himself interpreted Kitchener's hint about the caliphate to imply its full military and political connotations as well. In this way Kitchener's initiative was instrumental in transforming Husayn's limited political ambition in the Hijaz into a wider dream of Hashemite suzerainty over the far greater regions of the Arab-populated Middle East.

But Husayn was still not quite ready to commit himself to the Allied cause, fearing Turkish reprisals, against which the British were as yet unable to shield him. Further, apart from his own desert tribesmen, mounted on camels, Husayn had no military forces to offer the Allies or to use in making good his territorial claims. His next step was to establish contact with the Arab secret societies, who had both a political program and the trained officers who might provide a military option.

In March 1915 Husayn's third son, Faysal, set off to pay homage in Constantinople, taking the overland route via Damascus, cradle of the Arab nationalist movement. There he met with and joined the secret societies al-Fatah and al-ʿAhd. Faysal was greatly impressed with the organiza-

5. Elie Kedourie, *England and the Middle East* (London, 1956), pp. 52–53.

tion of al-ʿAhd, whose leaders claimed they were able to provoke a revolt of the Arab divisions in the Turkish army at will. The Ottoman divisions then stationed in Syria were overwhelmingly Arab, and many of their officers were members of al-ʿAhd.

Faysal proceeded on to Constantinople, where he was treated with unusual deference and consideration. The Turks stated that the remedy to the situation in the Hijaz lay in Husayn's own hands. If only he would declare himself openly in favor of the jihad, he might count on the satisfaction of his demands.

Faysal stopped off once more in Damascus at the end of May on his way back home. In his absence the leaders of al-Fatah and al-ʿAhd had drawn up a protocol defining the conditions under which the Arab leaders would be prepared to cooperate with Britain against Turkey. The program, now called the Damascus Protocol, asked for British recognition of Arab independence within borders that included the countries known today as Lebanon, Syria, Jordan, Iraq, Saudi Arabia, and Israel. The protocol, which offered a defensive alliance between Britain and the future independent Arab state, was taken by Faysal to Mecca, where it was adopted as the program of the Hashemites. Faysal himself was profoundly suspicious of the Allies' intentions, and he expressed doubts as to the prospects of their accepting the Arabs' conditions. But he agreed that the protocol was a minimum on which a call to revolt might be justified and undertook to secure his father's approval. Six of the secret society leaders thereupon pledged themselves to recognize the sharif as spokesman of the Arab race and promised that in the event the Hashemites secured an agreement with Great Britain on the basis of the Damascus Protocol, the Arab divisions in Syria would rise

to a man.[6] The Damascus Protocol formed the basis of Husayn's first letter in what became known as the Husayn-McMahon correspondence, an exchange since described as "at once deliberately vague and unwittingly obscure."

The Husayn-McMahon Correspondence, July 1915–January 1916

On 14 July 1915, shortly after Faysal's return to Mecca, Husayn sent off his first letter to the new British high commissioner for Egypt, Sir Henry McMahon. As noted above, the letter included the territorial demands of the Damascus Protocol and sought British agreement to the proclamation of an Arab caliphate for Islam. The latter demand was highly irregular; no caliph had ever sought or required the sanction of a Western, Christian power. Husayn was evidently reminding the British of Kitchener's hint of the previous October, perhaps as a test of British seriousness.

When the Middle East became a theater of war, Cairo became the nerve center of the British civilian and military administrations in the region. In July 1915, with an Indian army advancing into Mesopotamia and the fate of the Dardanelles expedition still in the balance, the Cairo officials did not regard the time as ripe for such far-reaching concessions to the Arabs, who had as yet to demonstrate their concrete value to the Allied cause. On the contrary, the fact that Arab soldiers were at that juncture fighting with the Turks against the British side in Mesopotamia made Husayn's demands seem downright pretentious. Thus Husayn's overture was rebuffed as being premature and a waste of time, all the more so "as a party of Arabs inhabiting those very regions have, to our amazement and sorrow, over-

6. George Antonius, *The Arab Awakening* (London, 1938), p. 158.

looked and neglected this invaluable and incomparable opportunity; and, instead of coming to our aid, have lent their assistance to the Germans and the Turks."

The Arabs had perhaps hoped for too much from Kitchener. He was a legendary figure in the East, and the Arabs did not then appreciate the limits of an individual minister's authority in a constitutional democracy. McMahon's rebuff was thus all the more difficult to digest. In his next letter Husayn stressed that he was pursuing not merely his own personal ambition but also the aspirations of the entire Arab nation, whose representative he was.

The British were not impressed by Husayn's rhetoric. But the deteriorating fortunes of the British war effort in the Near East, particularly in the Dardanelles campaign, provided the critical catalyst that brought about a change of heart in Cairo.

As the war on the Western Front bogged down in the trenches, a fierce debate ensued between those who called themselves "Easterners" (mainly politicians) and the "Westerners" (the military). The "Easterners" claimed that trench warfare was achieving nothing but the attrition of the flower of British youth; what was needed, they asserted, was a flanking campaign in the East that would take the Turks out of the war and open up further alternatives for getting at the Germans. The "Westerners" retorted with orthodox military doctrine that all forces must be concentrated and thrown against the main concentration of German military might, that only in this way could they hope to break the enemy. Winston Churchill, first lord of the Admiralty at the beginning of the war, was the forceful leader of the "Easterners" and convinced the cabinet to attempt to force the Dardanelles and capture Constantinople.

Kitchener, who himself favored landings in the Alexan-