

the Literary R E V I E W

S U P P L E M E N T

THE ARAB CULTURAL SCENE



THE ARAB-SPEAKING INTELLECTUAL AND PARIS: An Historical Perspective by Percy Kemp

Samir Amin, Anouar Abdel Malek, Father Michel Hayek, Muhammad Arkoun, Jamal Bencheikh, Abdel Mou'ti Higazi, Mahmoud Amin al-Alam, Boutros al-Hallak, Father Youakim Moubarak, and many others, and before them, Najib Azuri, John Hesronita, Abraham Ecchellensis, Gabriel Sionita, to name but a few: for centuries now, Arab-speaking intellectuals have been attracted to Paris, have lived in it, and been inspired by it. Nowadays, technocrats and scientists from the Arab countries readily travel to the United States, England, Moscow, or Germany, in search of specialized knowledge and modern know-how. Yet for the intellectuals of the Arab world – thinkers, journalists, historians, idealists, poets and artists – only Paris makes exile worth living. This intimate relationship between the Arab-speaking intellectual and Paris is no *ex nihilo* creation: it was prepared – politically, culturally, institutionally and mentally – by centuries of hesitant, haphazard and adventurous contacts between Frenchmen and Arab-speaking individuals.

Through its close and often cordial relations with the Ottoman State French governments from François I onwards brought French diplomats, merchants and missionaries into intimate contact with the peoples of the Ottoman Empire, and particularly with the Arab-speaking populations. From this contact there emerged the first cultural and intellectual collaboration between French and Arab-speaking scholars which was to have important consequences in the field of Arabic printing, and in the field of translation from and into the Arabic language.

With the French Revolution there came a dramatic change into the relationships between France and the Arab East. In 1798 Napoleon Bonaparte invaded Egypt and took with him not only some of the most eminent 'Orientalists' of France but also a printing-press and a font of Arabic characters with which was printed the first newspaper, or rather bulletin, ever to be printed in Arabic.

French cultural and educational influence in Egypt took root even after the departure of Napoleon's armies. In the Levant French influence also took deeper root than that provided already by missionaries and was propagated through new schools teaching French language and literature, and through the

increasing flow of books and periodicals to the ever-growing French-speaking populations. In North Africa France entered into a direct relationship with the peoples of the territories it conquered or controlled. And at the end of the First World War France entered into a direct relationship with the peoples of Lebanon and Syria through the Mandate granted by the League of Nations.

It was against the Ottomans that the emergent nationalisms of the Arab peoples began to agitate at the beginning of the twentieth century; it was Paris which provided the main base for their activities, because in Paris they could publicize their views in freedom. In 1905 a seminal book by the Lebanese publicist Najib Azouri entitled *Le Reveil de la Nation Arabe*, followed by a monthly magazine *L'Indépendance Arabe* edited by Azouri, expressed the concept of a unified Arab nation seeking freedom first of all from Ottoman rule, but later, by implication, from French.

This new conception of a unified and independent Arab nation took on a new form after the instauration of the French Mandate in Lebanon and Syria. Paris the metropolis was now directly in control of five Arab countries: Algeria, Tunisia, Morocco, Lebanon and Syria. France was now perceived by many Arab-speaking intellectuals as an oppressive colonialist master, and these intellectuals became divided between fundamentalists and assimilationists (in the Maghreb), and between francophiles and francophobes (in the Levant). Still, between the twenties and the sixties of this century both pro- and anti-French Arabic-speaking intellectuals continued to flock to Paris, there to link up either with the 'establishment' or with leftist movements of opposition. Friend or foe, Paris remained the source of inspiration. As André Glucksman put it: 'the East was striving to free itself from colonialism through revolution: in other words, the East was seeking freedom from Europe through Europe'. Europe had fathered 'the Revolution': it had given birth to Marxism, and all the major movements of social, economic and political emancipation. In Paris, Arab-speaking intellectuals argued for their countries' independence from Europe in the name of French revolutionary ideals and European principles of justice and equality. The relationship between the Arab-speaking intellectual and Paris was, to say the least, ambiguous. It was a love-hate relationship. Never again, after the final collapse of the Ottoman Empire, were Arab-speaking intellectuals united in their approach and their perspective. By now, each Arab country was seeking its own original solution and course for the future: the intellectuals followed in the steps of the political elites ruling their respective countries. Even within each country, intellectuals were divided along ideological, religious, regional or



ethnic lines. The Arab intellectual had died: Arab-speaking intellectuals lived. Paris the centre of colonial power, Paris the metropolis, Paris the model and the ideal, Paris the muse, Paris had finally seduced the Arab-speaking intellectuals and managed to deal with each individual or group separately.

In the post-colonial era, things changed still more. Up till the 1960s, the Arab-speaking intellectual had perceived Paris in direct relationship to his identity: Paris was either a threat to his identity, or else a guarantee for it. The Arab-speaking intellectual of the 1960s differs from his predecessor. Paris no longer preoccupies him: his preoccupations lie at home. Paris is no longer a positive or negative power: power now rests with Arab indigenous elites, as well as with Washington and Moscow. The new Arab-speaking intellectual living in Paris is usually a self-exiled individual: dropped by his government, hounded by it, or simply disillusioned with it. With decolonization and independence came autocratic rule, censorship, purges, corruption, and a general climate of disappointment which took the Arab-speaking

intellectual back to Paris. Every tremor shaking the Arab countries brought a new wave of intellectuals to Paris: free-thinkers, idealists, men who suffocated in the parochial ideologies advocated by the Arab regimes, disillusioned revolutionaries, frustrated young people, displaced or disgraced *apparatchiks*, malcontents of all sorts. Finally, the latest tremor to date, the 1975 Lebanese war, closed the last haven of freedom in the Arab world: as intellectuals and journalists continued to fall, victims of assassins who struck with impunity, Paris and London replaced Beirut as centres of free Arab intellectual and cultural activity. And Paris holds an edge over London in this respect. France is a continental and a Mediterranean country and it enjoys a century-old cultural and linguistic affinity with the Maghreb and the Levant, and especially with Algeria and Lebanon. Paris also plays host to UNESCO, an important temple of international cultural activity, around which Third-World intellectuals gladly gravitate. From Paris, Arab-speaking intellectuals and technocrats have easy access to international platforms in Geneva, Vienna and Rome. Furthermore, in Paris, intellectuals and journalists enjoy a privileged status, a notoriety and a certain adulation unknown across the Channel. Finally, the open system which characterizes French university recruitment favours the steady influx of Arab students. A young Arab holding the *Baccalauréat* or an equivalent degree may register at the Sorbonne for a nominal fee of 200FF. In return, he is granted permission to reside in France, and he acquires the coveted student status. The *Centre d'Accueil aux Étudiants du Proche-Orient* is a pointer to the importance of the Arab student body in Paris. Many Arab and Arab-speaking students stay in Paris after having obtained their *Licence* or their *Maîtrise*. Those who do not find full-time work register as doctorate students in an attempt to extend their residence permit. An elite of Arab-speaking intellectuals – especially Algerians and Lebanese – now hold French nationality and partake fully in French intellectual and cultural life, as teachers, academics, journalists and researchers: Robert Abirachid, for example, from Lebanon, now holds the post of Director of Theatre under the Minister of Culture, and Cherif Khaznadar, from Syria, is the newly-appointed Director of the *Theatre du Monde* set up by the Ministry to provide a forum and a stage for performing artists from all over the world.

Thus Paris continues to attract the intellectuals of the Arab world who, for one reason or another, find there inspiration and challenge, opportunity and adventure, and the freedom of thought and expression without which all intellectual effort or cultural invention must wither.