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Arabic Thought in the Illiberal Age

Sometimes–when read against the backdrop of a particular time and place–a book resonates beyond the immediate concerns of its author. As I picked up Peter Wienâs *Iraqi Arab Nationalism*, the periodic and rather predictable discussion as to whether Islam was compatible with the norms of contemporary European society was once again heating up in the Dutch-language Belgian media. This time around, however, the stakes had been raised. It was not just another debate about the headscarf. At issue was whether Muslims might be characterized as the agents of an intrinsically fascistic and totalitarian worldview. If so, argued those who instigated the debate, then the very foundations of multiculturalism–both as ideology and social reality–must be called into question. Disturbingly, a discourse once considered the territory of the far Right was now being taken over by a group of self-proclaimed liberal intellectuals who positioned themselves as defenders of the social and political freedoms for which they had fought only a generation ago. And, drawing on the wider polemic of Islamofascism, they were invoking a history of secular collaboration between Nazi Germany and Arab political and religious leaders to make their case.[1]

But just how historically grounded are the narratives to which this polemic refers? And what might an examination of these narratives reveal about contemporary politics in places as diverse as Iraq and Flanders? Wien promises straightforward answers to the first question. The second takes us beyond the immediate scope of his engagement. Nevertheless, there are few places in the world where ideologies of modernity and development, empirical articulations of state power, and state theory (i.e., the conventions through which the stateâs power is represented) have intertwined so violently as in twentieth-century Iraq. As such, Wienâs well-contextualized coverage of ideological debates in 1930s Iraq provides a rare opportunity to explore the âpractical illusionsâ that underpin the practice and theory of liberal statecraft, and to think about how these illusions continue to inform our understanding of Iraqâs political history as well as its current predicament.[2] These are, I think, crucial issues that deserve to be brought to

the surface of Wienâs study–hence, the length and detail of what follows.

In his acknowledgments, Wien notes that the book arose out of his participation in a project on âArab encounters with national socialismâ hosted by the Center of Modern Middle East Studies in Berlin. Work continued during a yearlong fellowship at St. Antonyâs College Oxford. Beyond an exhaustive review of the relevant secondary literature, Wien bases his account on extensive archival research in Britain, Syria, Israel, and Germany, and on the memoirs, diaries, and articles of actors who participated in the major events and movements of the period under study. Although the resulting book is short on context and somewhat narrow in both its empirical and analytical focus, one nevertheless gets a sense that Wien has a command of both his sources and the context of their production. He also engages critically with existing scholarship.

Two short introductory chapters (âIntroductionâ and âThe Historical Frameworkâ) position Wienâs study within wider efforts to ground the historiography of Arab nationalism on a âNew Narrative.â The âOld Narrative,â Wien writes, âuncritically stated that European thought had a common impactâ on the formation of Arab nationalist thought. By contrast, the âNew Narrativeâ holds that the Iraqi perception of Nazi Germany reflected âthe complex socio-political framework of groups from diverse social originsâ (p. 4). Wienâs concern is thus not so much with the perspective of leading theorists and political elites, but with a second tier of polemicists and political activists who were more immediately engaged in articulating the urban public sphere within which nationalist ideas were diffused, debated, and contested. While the biographies of his protagonists make clear that this was indeed a space open to participation by individuals of diverse ethnic, social, and regional backgrounds, Wien is careful to note that this public sphere was limited in scope. He makes no claims about the influence of these debates on Iraqi society as a whole. Their relevance, he argues, is that they were constitutive of Iraqi state institutions. This claim is both reasonable and consistent with the disciplined focus of his argument. Nevertheless, it gets clouded by Wienâs tendency to use âthe stateâ to refer to different things. At times it encompasses society, while at others it is used more narrowly to refer to statist institutions (and the particular forces contained and represented within them) that appear in opposition to the pluralist and centrifugal forces of Iraqi society. Wien also fails to elaborate on his understanding of public sphere theory and its relevance to the production of a âNew Narrative.â Similarly, his efforts to define “totalitarianism” and “authoritarianism” are confined to a brief paragraph on page 3, after which he notes that the terms did not appear in the Iraqi debate as such.

Ultimately, however, Wienâs focus is not the formation of this limited public sphere. Nor does he demonstrate its impact on the subsequent formation of authoritarian or totalitarian regime institutions (or the legacy of these institutions within society). Rather, his primary task is to evaluate claims about the affinity of Iraqi Arab nationalism in the 1930s to fascism in general, and German national socialism in particular. Wien argues persuasively that British observers of the 1930s and 1940s too easily interpreted events in Iraq against the backdrop of developments in Europe. Accordingly, they failed to âdifferentiate between several strains of pro-German sentiment as if all of them were only a prelude to the short-lived German-Iraqi allianceâ of May 1941, and the Farhud that followed its collapse (p. 2). Wienâs main thesis is that the conflation of these different strains masks an underlying generational conflict between the officer-based Sherifian elite installed by the British in 1920-21, and Young Effendiyya who came of age and into political power in the 1930s. It was the stakes and particular circumstances of this conflict, he argues, that âproduced an inclination to authoritarian, totalitarian, and even fascist models of society organization [*sic*] among the intellectuals who belonged to the Young Effendiyyaâ (p. 11). In short, Wien argues that the radicalism of the Effendiyya did not result from an encounter with European fascism. Rather, it arose out of political debates that extended back into the late Ottoman period, and in disappointment over the performance, and continued British domination, of the governing institutions inherited with independence.

The central thesis of chapter 3 (âGenerational Conflictâ) is that the Young Effendiyya represented a âgenerational unitâ (a term Wien borrows from Karl Mannheim) distinct from that of the Sherifian elite. In other words, they shared a âspace of experienceâ and âhorizon of expectationâ distinct from that of the founding generation (p. 15). To be sure, the radicalism of the Effendiyya stood in marked contrast to the Germanophilia of the Sherifians. Drawing on the memoirs of Ali Jaudat, Naji Shaukat, and Jaâafar al-Askari, Wien shows that the latter retained an affinity for the values and worldview of the German officers who had been mentors and colleagues during their time in Ottoman service. Influenced by German thought, the Sherifians saw themselves as Arab nationalists, an identity that had been molded through participation in the secret societies that flourished during the last

years of the empire, and–not least–through their participation in the Arab Revolt itself. They also shared a sense that the Iraqi military might bring forth âthe Prussians of the Arabsâ (p. 24). But their appreciation for Germany did not extend so far as to lead to serious questioning of their own strategic alliance with the British. In sum, they were conservative modernists: for them, nationalism represented an âenlightened movementâ that, while pedagogical in tone, was not linked to a project of rapid social transformation (p. 19).

The nationalism of the Young Effendiyya, by contrast, arose as a call to order. It was a response to the corruption and ineffectiveness that the Effendiyya saw as resulting from the founding generationâs entanglement with, and subservience to, British interests. For the Effendiyya, already inclined toward radicalization by experience, Germany was but one of several countries that could be held up as a model of national mobilization and recovery. Indeed–contrary to the impression provided by British sources–Wienâs research suggests that Germany was far from the most important source of inspiration. Turkey, Iran, and even Japan were explicitly preferred to Germany and Italy as models of modernization from above. Fascist imagery, as manifested in the presence of a strong leader capable of capturing the imagination of the masses (particularly the youth) and mobilizing their energies, was more salient than any real commitment to fascist ideology, Wien argues. Furthermore, apart from suggesting an antidote to the weak and corrupted state institutions inherited from the Mandate, Germany appeared as the only state capable of providing a challenge to the stifling hegemony of British imperialism on the world stage.

Wien introduces readers to the Effendiyya through a series of brief, encyclopedia-like biographical entries. The protagonists include Mahmud al-Durra, âAbd-al-Amir âAlawi, Muhammad Mahdi Kubba, âAli Mahmud al-Shaikh âAli, Talib Mushtaq, and Rufaâil Butti. Wien briefly outlines the sources and events that shaped their generational worldview, and then shows how–through their participation in the press, political organizations, and debating societies–they went on to play a generative role in the emergence of an urban public sphere. Wien presents their sympathies for European fascist projects as complex and conditional. He writes that for Yunus Sabâawi–typically considered one of the more clear-cut Nazi sympathizers among the Effendiyya–Adolf âHitlerâs Nazism was about individual leadership and modernism, about personal courage and adventure. Sabâawi wanted Iraq to belong to the âadvanced peoples,â as he called them.... The racist and expansionist implications of [Hitlerâs] ideology were apparently of little concern as far as we can conclude from the material at our handsâ (p. 40). Similarly, Wien relates an exchange between Mushtaq and Alec Kirkbride (drawn from Mushtaqâs memoirs) to suggest that the British were mistaken to conflate âresistance to the allies with Iraqi sympathy for Nazism.â According to Mushtaq, â'the colonial powers overstated these tendencies in order to cover up the history of their own broken promises'â (p. 42).

Wien concludes chapter 3 by reviewing the memoirs of three prominent Jewish Iraqis who were active in the political life of the 1930s: Anwar Shaâul, Meneshi Zaârur, and Abraham Elkabir. Wienâs point here is twofold. First, he shows that while Jews were concerned with the increasingly radical tone of nationalist discourse through the 1930s, they nevertheless embraced an Arab and Iraqi identity and sought to influence the discourse of Iraqi Arab nationalism from within. Second, he uses these memoirs to suggest that anti-Jewish suspicions were motivated more by developments in Palestine than by âracism of the Nazi kindâ (p. 47). Although political anti-Zionism and anti-Semitism began to conflate over time, these Jewish Iraqi writers tended to attribute the introduction of anti-Semitic tendencies to Western–primarily British–influences.[3] This connection to Western influences foreshadows a theme that Wien visits regularly in chapter 4: by making superficial comparisons between the political landscapes in Iraq and Nazi Germany in the 1930s and early 1940s, both the British observers of the day and subsequent scholarly accounts elide the degree to which attitudes and rhetoric that we today associate with fascism were commonplace in liberal Europe and North America during the 1930s. For example, while the nationalist youth movement al-Futuwa is often compared to the Hitler Youth, Wien shows that it, in fact, arose from the British scouting tradition of Robert Baden-Powell. Indeed, the British originally encouraged al-Futuwa, viewing it as a âdisciplining institutionâ (pp. 104-105).

Chapter 4 investigates âThe Debate of the Iraqi Press.â Wien writes that âthe newspapers of the 1930s reflect a lively debate on nationalist issues,â and that âthe press was a genuine local voice, different from colonial records, which echo imperial interestsâ (pp. 52-53). As such, they allow Wien to âreconstruct certain discursive structures that bear significance for the questions at stake in this studyâ (p. 55). After a brief discussion of the emergence and increasing significance of print media over the 1920s and 1930s, Wien adds a couple more biographies

to the cast of protagonists and then begins discussing the formation of these discursive structures against the backdrop of movements and events during the latter decade.

For the most part, this discussion elaborates and adds nuance to the themes introduced in the previous chapters. Wienâs most salient argument is that the authoritarian tendencies of the Effendiyya were grounded in a rejection of the social fragmentation that nationalists saw as both responsible for, and a consequence of, foreign domination and underdevelopment. This critique was, in turn, based on a plausible, even if somewhat superficial, analysis of the state of liberal democracy around the world in the 1930s. Writers focused not on attributes of fascism as such, but on the âimage of a supposedly modern, state-centered organization of societyâ (p. 61). Even ostensibly pro-German newspapers expressed âthe unease that Iraqis felt when they learned about the Nazi race laws of 1935â (p. 62). In short, Wienâs review of the press seems to confirm that Iraqi support of Nazi Germany was overwhelmingly pragmatic in character.

In addition to the image of the strong state and leader, Wien explores other salient discursive structures, including masculinity, the reification of a mythical past, and youth. A casual survey of the world around them suggested to Iraqi polemicists that successful countries were those that found exemplary models of national character and sources of strength in their own national myths; thus, âa reference to Japan was not a reference to an authoritarian and pro-fascist country,â writes Wien, âbut rather to a successful defense of inherited customsâ within a modernizing project (p. 94). As such, fascist states provided a model of modernity that âallowed for a much more tangible symbolism, for a focused and more concentrated image of the nation, and for an easily imaginable identity linked back to a mythical past. This code of references was welcome in Iraq: the origin of the Arab nation was dated back to the times of Mohammad, who was reinterpreted as the historical arch-leader of the Arab nation. Thus, the youth won a clear-cut and masculine model of endurance and devotion: the warriors of the early Islamic conquestsâ (p. 99).

Wien is also attuned to the ways in which colonial institutions were themselves responsible for advancing particular models of masculinity as both criteria of modernity and symbols of national character. And these models of masculinity were eventually transformed into models for the assertion of national independence. âColonial disciplining institutions,â Wien writes, âequipped the colonized to set up anti-colonial institutions. In Iraq, the Futuwa movement was such an anti-colonial project. It was not, as has often been assumed, a product of fascist propaganda and influence but rather a result of the wider colonial discourseâ (p. 93). Colonial discourse equated modernity and national character with discipline and technical and military prowess. These were seen as quintessentially masculine characteristics, and the development of the nation would be achieved through manly pursuits and the cultivation of masculine characteristics: self-discipline, love of sport, an attitude of chivalry, short and straight hair, martial appearance, etc. The gendered discourse of nationalism also championed the education and modernization of women, but primarily as managers of the modern household and nurturers of a nationalist youth.

Wien concludes chapter 4 by comparing the youth movements of 1930s Iraq–primarily al-Futuwa–with their contemporaries in Europe, whereby he finds striking similarities. In both Iraq and Germany, young people were mobilized around the conscious rejection of a legacy of social fragmentation. Not yet socialized into the factionalism and contradictions of the world around them, they could imagine themselves as agents of an alternative political reality, one constructed on the blueprint of a distant, mythical past that transcended the contradictions and infighting of the present and recent past. And their disciplined vitality and idealistic willingness to sacrifice embodied the masculine virtue of the nation. The Effendiyya generation had participated in and sought to mobilize the energy and idealism of youth. However, with the rapid rise and fall of the alliance of May 1941, political leaders began to lose control. Segments of organized youth broke off into more radical and militarized groupings and took to the streets, stoking tensions that erupted in the Farhud.

Wienâs concise concluding chapter effectively summarizes his main arguments. He suggests that while his protagonists were âflirting with fascist imagery,â they were not engaged in the conscious, âdirect adaptation of fascist thoughtâ (p. 115). Yet, though Wienâs study provides a corrective to widely held assumptions regarding fascist inclinations within Iraqi Arab nationalism, I cannot help but think that this conclusion is reached too easily. Wienâs reading of the sources suggests that the Effendiyya rejected the racial beliefs and military expansionism of the Nazi project. However, it seems clear that–in spite of significant Shiâite, Christian, and even some Jewish participation–Wienâs main characters had little problem imagining the violent repression of non-assimilating minorities. And while Wien is almost cer-

tainly right to suggest that Turkey provided a more immediate model for most Iraqi Arab nationalists of the 1930s than did Nazi Germany, he fails to acknowledge the degree to which notions of Turkish ethnic superiority increasingly took hold within the ruling institutions of the Turkish state during the 1930s.[4] He too easily conflates fascism with anti-Semitism (ignoring, for example, the extent to which the founders of revisionist Zionism themselves openly embraced the fascism in the 1920s and early 1930s).[5] There are also significant gaps in Wienâs narrative: the Shiâite intellectuals of Najaf–at least one of whom participated in the 1931 Jerusalem Pan-Islamic Congress organized by Hajj Amin al-Husseini–are left completely out of the narrative, as is the politically active class in Basra, which had been quite active in debates about nationalism as early as the 1910s.

Ultimately, it is Wienâs failure to engage his protagonistsâ responses to the suppression of the Assyrian uprising and tribal revolts of the mid-1930s that is most striking.[6] Indeed, his study remains strangely uneventful until it arrives at the Farhud. By limiting the scope of inquiry to the question of Iraqi Arab nationalismâs affinity for German fascism, Wien avoids difficult but potentially more productive questions about the violence that has played such a salient role in Iraqâs political history. The real issue, it seems to me, is a much deeper one than that of Nazi influence on Iraqi Arab nationalism in the 1930s. It regards what this particular chapter in Iraqâs history–tucked as it is between, inter alia, the gassing of Kurdish villages by the British in 1921 and the 2003 Anglo-American invasion and ongoing occupation–reveals about the authoritarian underbelly of liberal modernity itself. Rather than trying to contextualize and add nuance to the nationalist polemic produced in 1930s Iraq, we might do better to explore the violence of Iraqâs political history as evidence of an enduring tension between the demands of sovereignty and the biopolitical production of the objects of state power. Just like the self-styled, progressive European liberals mentioned above, the radical nationalists of 1930s Iraq insisted on particularistic modalities of performance in the name of supposedly universal principles. Both reduce (i.e., essentialize) and totalize their experiences of modernity in single, sweeping rhetorical movements. Here, ideology reveals itself as a discursive symptom of an underlying incongruity between the liberal theory of the state, on the one hand, and actual state practices, on the other. Ideology internalizes the exceptions that justify and naturalize the violence deployed in the making and maintenance of a political order. It does not cause that violence.[7]

As such, the appearance of fascistic tendencies in Iraqâs political life during the 1930s should not be read as an episode presaging the eventual rise of an omnipotent, totalitarian Iraqi state, but rather as the symptom of an equally terrifying weakness. And this insight–clouded by the enduring tendency to read Iraqâs political history in comparison to European fascism (with its corresponding image of an all-pervasive state)–could usefully serve as the basis for rethinking Iraqâs present as well as its past. Wienâs focused and compelling account hints at a similar intuition. But his analysis ultimately wanders into a bottomless casuistry of comparison with Nazi Germany. He leaves us with a relatively banal distinction between fascist and fascistic tendencies, as if the latter characterization is somehow easier to excuse. A more eventful account–one that explored the wider topology of violence to reveal both the sources of the stateâs agency and its limits–might have enabled Wien to make connections beyond the narrow timeframe of his case, and provide insight into Iraqâs current predicament.

Notes

[1]. The Flemish debate was sparked by an editorial entitled âMessage to politically correct leftistsâ (âBericht aan wel-denkend links,â *De Standaard*, February 2, 2008), in which journalist Benno Barnard and novelist Geert van Istendael wrote, âcontemporary Islamism is profoundly conditioned by Nazism, not least via the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood, a movement directly influenced by Mein Kampf.â The piece suggested that while Anglo-European liberalism (and, by extension, âJudeo-Christian civilizationâ) had triumphed over Nazism, Muslims had yet to confront the legacy of their own encounter with fascism, a failure reflected in a pathological rejection of Israel and post-1968 European social mores.

[2]. The phrase âpractical illusionsâ comes from Karl Marx, who wrote that the âetatist formation constitutes itself into an actual power and becomes its own material content, it is [thus] obvious that the âbureaucracyâ is a web of practical illusions, or the illusions of the state.... Since bureaucracy everywhere converts its formal purposes into its content, it everywhere comes into conflict with real purposes.â âThe Kreuznach Manuscripts: Critique of Hegelâs Theory of Right,â in *The Portable Karl Marx*, ed. Eugene Kaminka (New York: Penguin, 1982), 90-91.

[3]. Supporting this conclusion is the fact that it was the pro-British Nuri al-Said who stripped Jews of their Iraqi nationality, which was restored by âAbd al-Karim

al-Qassem after the revolution of 1958.

[4]. Consider the case of Mahmut Esat Bozkurt–the Swiss-educated father of Turkeyâs justice system and longtime minister of justice–who declared in 1930 that âThe Turk is the only (unique) owner, master of this country. Those who are not from pure Turkish ancestry (blood), have only one right: the right to be a servant, the right to be a slaveâ (*Milliyet*, September 19, 1930). This was by most accounts a rather extreme statement in Turkey at the time, but it–taken together with other trends in Turkey of the 1930s–casts doubt on Wienâs implicit claim that Turkey provided a clearly nonracialist (and hence non-fascist) model of nationalist mobilization for Iraqis. I would like to thank Ahmet Akkaya and Mesut Yegen for answering my questions about trends in Turkish nationalism during the 1930s.

[5]. Vladimir Jabotinski, Menachem Begin, and Abba Achimeir–the founding fathers of revisionist Zionism–were open admirers of Benito Mussolini. Achimeir even had a regular newspaper column entitled âDiary of a Fascist.â

[6]. This elision becomes all the more puzzling when one considers that the coup of 1936 brought Bakr al-Sidqi (an Iraqist-nationalist Kurd) and Hikmet Sulaiman (a Turkoman) into the positions of president and prime minister respectively. Consistent with his Iraqist nationalist bent, al-Sidqi had played a prominent role in suppressing the revolts of the 1930s.

[7]. Put differently, this means exploring the tensions between efforts to localize state power, on the one hand, and efforts to order the political world in ways that facilitate and naturalize its exercise, on the other. Hanna Arendt wrote that âevents, by definition, are occurrences that interrupt routine processes and routine proceduresâ (*On Violence* [Orlando: Harcourt, 1970], 7). Building on a similar intuition regarding the imperative of developing an eventful understanding of the political world, Giorgio Agamben argues that if we want to get at the underpinnings of bio-political modernity, it is necessary to examine the eventful moments in space and time at which the link between localization and ordering breaks down. The rule, he argues, cannot be deduced from the apparently normal functioning of a political order, but from moments of exception. It is here where one might recognize the ârelations of exceptionâ through which âthe sovereign âcreates and guarantees the situationâ that the law needs for its own validity.â The exception–Muslims in Europe, Saddamist Iraq, the Gaza Strip–is thus constituent of political order as a whole. See Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), 17-18.