

Some Thoughts on Biography and the Historiography of the Twentieth-Century Arab World

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Article abstract

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Some Thoughts on Biography and the Historiography of the Twentieth-Century Arab World¹

LAILA PARSONS

Abstract

The number of English-language biographies of Arab subjects is tiny compared to the number of English-language biographies of North American and European subjects. I argue that this discrepancy is due to three main factors: the preponderance of historians of Europe and North America in history departments in the English-speaking world; the limited crossover market for serious biographies of Arab subjects; and difficulties arising from access to, and the style of, the Arabic sources. A fragment from the life-story of Fawzi al-Qawuqji, an early-20th-century Arab nationalist and soldier, is introduced as a way of pointing to the challenges of using Arabic memoirs to craft a biographical narrative in English.

Résumé

Le nombre de biographies en langue anglaise portant sur des sujets arabes est minuscule comparativement aux biographies en anglais de sujets nord-américains ou européens. À mon sens, cet écart est attribuable à trois facteurs principaux : la prépondérance des historiens de l'Europe et de l'Amérique du Nord dans les départements d'histoire du monde anglophone; le marché réduit pour la publication de biographies sérieuses sur des sujets arabes; la complexité de la consultation et du style des sources arabes. Un fragment de la biographie de Fawzi al-Qawuqji, nationaliste et soldat arabe du début du XX^e siècle, est présenté dans le but de faire ressortir la difficulté d'utiliser une autobiographie pour rédiger un exposé biographique en anglais.

In his introduction to the American Historical Association's forum on biography, David Nasaw, the prominent Americanist and biographer, describes the history of biography writing in the discipline. According to Nasaw, biography writing has been characterized as a "lesser form of history," or as the profession's "unloved step-child." He notes how some historians working on the lives

of individuals will go to great lengths to say that they are *not* writing a “usual” biography. Nasaw goes on to say that in spite of this attitude towards biography, biography writing continues to be a “vital genre” of history writing. As evidence he points out that five of the last eight presidents of the American Historical Association have written or edited biographical studies, and in American history in particular, the Bancroft Prize has been awarded to a biography three times in the past eight years. He also draws attention to the emerging consensus among the contributors to the forum that there is currently a “renewed vogue for scholarly historical biography.”²

On the face of it, my current book project on the life and times of the Arab nationalist soldier Fawzi al-Qawuqji (1886–1975) makes me a good candidate to contribute to this discussion of “a renewed vogue” for biography, at least from the vantage point of the historiography of the modern Arab Middle East. But, as is so often the case, the methodological agendas set by historians of North America and Europe resonate only faintly with those of us who work on the history of the Arab Middle East. In fact, relatively few scholarly historical biographies written in English are devoted to figures from the twentieth-century Arab Middle East. To give a sense of what I mean by “relatively few,” I did an informal count of biographies written about only British subjects in the last ten years. It is approximately 3,000. By contrast, approximately 100 biographies have been written in English about Arab subjects in the last ten years. Of that 100, I can estimate that about ten could be categorized as scholarly rather than popular. (It is difficult to estimate what percentage of the biographies about British subjects are scholarly, given the large number and the fact that British history is not my field).³

What are the main causes of this discrepancy? I will briefly survey a number of possible reasons, and then focus on one, namely, the way in which the availability and style of the sources in the field of modern Arab history make biography-writing difficult. A point of clarification: when I refer to scholarly biographies of the people of the twentieth-century Arab Middle East written in English, I am describing scholarly (not popular) biographies written in English by historians of the Middle East. I am not talking about books published in the Middle East in Arabic. This material is very important and deserves a book-length study of its own. I will refer to Arabic biographies in passing towards the end of this paper, but they are not the focus of my argument.

What explains this relative absence of scholarly biographies in my field? Most obvious is the overwhelming dominance of historians of Europe and North America in history departments in the English-speaking world. In the history department at McGill, where I teach, 32 out of the 42 full-time faculty members focus on Europe and North America. Of the ten faculty members who work on areas other than Europe and North America, one full-time position is

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dedicated to the Middle East, three to China, one to Japan, two to Africa/Indian Ocean World, two to Latin America, and one to the history of International Relations. In Yale's history department, where I used to teach, 75 faculty members work on Europe and North America and 14 work on what Yale's undergraduate program guide used to call "the rest of the world."⁴ Another factor is the sales potential of the crossover market for biographies of Western subjects. Many American readers, for example, will buy biographies of Truman, Martin Luther King, or even Evel Knievel, but there is no substantial crossover market for a serious biography of Shukri al-Quwwatli (one of the presidents of Syria), or Nuri Sa'id (an important Iraqi prime minister), or Um Kalthoum, (a hugely popular Egyptian singer). That I need to identify these names, but not Truman, King or Knievel, illustrates my point. Historians of the Arab Middle East do have a crossover market in English, but it is not the market for biographies of these figures I have just mentioned. Our crossover market in English is for books about "enemies," such as Saddam Husayn or Yasir Arafat.⁵ If I walk into most mainstream bookstores in English Canada and go to the biography section, I will find a couple of biographies of Arabs. But (on the whole) these are books written by people I have never heard of, who are not employed in the academic profession, and who do not read any of the languages of the Arab Middle East. Anne Alexander's recent biography of Nasser, published by the American University of Cairo Press, is just such a book. Fayza Hassan, reviewing Alexander in the well-respected Egyptian English-language paper *Al-Ahram Weekly*, put it like this:

Let us imagine for a moment that an Egyptian journalist offered Harvard University Press a manuscript for publication on the life and times of J.F. Kennedy. He/she has visited the U.S. on and off and compiled a slim volume out of mainly secondary sources, enhanced by a couple of interviews. Would Harvard University Press consider publishing the work? I think not.⁶

A book like Alexander's pales in comparison with, for example, H.W. Brands' biography of Roosevelt, David Hackett Fischer's biography of Champlain, Michael Scammel's biography of Koestler, and T.J. Stiles' biography of Cornelius Vanderbilt. Unlike Alexander's *Nasser*, these books are deeply researched by scholars with years of experience in their respective areas of expertise. When the people of the Middle East *are* represented, it is usually through popular memoirs often written by Arab and/or Muslim women. Represented most starkly by books such as Nawal al-Sa'adawi's *The Hidden Face of Eve*, Ayaan Hirsi Ali's *Infidel*, or Azar Nafisi's *Reading Lolita in Tehran*, these memoirs play to the seemingly insatiable market in the West for stories about "oppressed Muslim (and/or Arab) woman."⁷

Another factor that contributes to the relative absence of scholarly biographies is that historians of the modern Arab Middle East have grown

increasingly uncomfortable with narrative history. Compared to historians of Europe and North America, those working on the history of the early twentieth-century *Mashriq*, for example (what is today Syria, Jordan, Palestine, Lebanon, and Iraq), have produced relatively few micro-narratives whose protagonists are the people of the region. Where is the level of human detail found in such classics as Alan Taylor's *William Cooper's Town*, or Natalie Zemon Davis' *The Return of Martin Guerre*, or even — to take a non-Western example — Susan Mann's *The Talented Women of the Zhang Family*?⁸ I have written elsewhere in more depth about this absence of micro-narrative, but I will summarize my arguments here. I argue that this discomfort with narrative is due to several factors. First, most historians of the twentieth-century Arab Middle East writing in the last 20 years or so have devoted their energies to answering big historical questions about colonialism, nationalism, and modernity. This is partly due to the widespread influence of Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978), which led many historians to view the critique of colonialism as the proper aim of their historical projects.⁹

The second factor is that writing micro-narrative history requires the historian to deploy sources in a way that is very different from the method of those answering big historical questions such as: What was the nature of the French colonial state in Syria? Or, from where did Jordanian nationalism draw its authenticity? By contrast, a micro-narrative demands close description, compelling plot, fleshed-out protagonists, and gripping action. Without these elements, the micro-narrative loses its forward momentum and ceases to be a good story. Given that the historian is not a novelist, she must of course remain committed to what the sources say. This is what philosophers of narrative call "truth commitment" or "obligation to evidence." But constructing description, plot, protagonists, and action, inevitably involves manipulating the sources — distilling them, interpreting them, ordering them — in the larger effort to create something new. The sources serve as the building blocks of a novel story; they are not treated as texts, as units of discourse that the historian must analyze for markers of colonialism, nationalism, and modernity.¹⁰ The author of a micro-narrative needs to take command of the sources and marshal them as part of an original narrative strategy, and this requires that the (supposedly) post-Orientalist historian step away from discourse analysis and take up a more authoritative command of the sources. This might look, on the surface, like a return to the distant, cold-eyed gaze of the colonialist functionary or the Orientalist expert. Indeed, the superficially similar approaches of these two distinct projects — narrative history on the one hand, Colonialist and Orientalist discourse on the other — has, in my opinion, steered some younger scholars away from micro-narrative. Their worry, of course, is that they might be stripped of the much-desired label of *post*-Orientalist and branded instead with the currently circulating *neo*-Orientalist.¹¹

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Third is the issue of the availability and nature of the historian's sources. The richness of the colonial archives (British, French, and Israeli), and their traditions of relatively open access to government documents, have cast in shadow the small, under-funded state archives of Syria and Lebanon, for example. This stark difference in the quantity of accessible documents cannot be denied. Nor can it be circumvented by appealing to the many modern memoirs written in Arabic. Although these Arabic memoirs compete in terms of number with the corpus of colonial memoirs, they generally conform to the genre of public memoir and autobiography that emerges from anti-colonial nationalisms. In other words, many Arabic memoirs (from the colonial or immediate post-colonial period), like many analogous Indian memoirs, self-consciously play a role in constructing anti-colonial national narratives, instead of yielding up what Dipesh Chakrabarty calls "the endlessly interiorized subject" of modern Western memoirs and autobiographies. Chakrabarty states that you cannot write "French" social history with Indian sources. It is also difficult to write French social history with Syrian sources. I want to be clear here that when I talk about the absence of the endlessly interiorized subject in some Arabic memoirs, I am not making silly essentialist claims about "the absence of self" in "Arab culture." My argument here, in line with Chakrabarty, focuses specifically on differences between genres of texts.¹²

The difficulties with sources faced by those writing micro-narrative histories of the modern Arab Middle East also face those writing biographies. The bibliography and notes of a biography of a famous American subject, for example, show that the historian's narrative rests on the foundation of edited diaries and letters not only of the subject, but of the other people who inhabited his/her world. These diaries and letters are in addition to easily accessible and plentiful archival sources. In the history of the twentieth-century Arab Middle East, we have relatively few published diaries and even fewer books of edited letters. Letters do exist in small archives and private family collections (which is where much of the material for my own project comes from), but they can be hard to reach. As I have said above, the *mudhakkirat* literature (i.e., memoirs) is quite plentiful, but these are largely public rather than private works.¹³

The general absence of the endlessly interiorized subject in, for example, memoirs compiled by Arab nationalists who fought in the great anti-colonial rebellions of the early twentieth-century *Mashriq* presents a particularly complex problem for the biographer. Modern Western biography is a specific genre of history stemming from (among other things) the late eighteenth- and nineteenth-century emergence of a performative private that is found in diaries, memoirs, and letters. This is a superficially private discourse very often orientated towards a public.¹⁴ An example can be found in Trevor Royle's biography of Orde Wingate. Wingate provides an interesting comparison to Qawuqji, because, like Qawuqji, he was a soldier and an adventurer. Wingate served as

an officer in the British army and as a guerilla leader in Palestine and Ethiopia in the 1930s and 1940s. Royle is able to use Wingate's written memories of his frequent bouts of melancholia (while on active service in the Sudan) to convey a sense of the private:

To combat the morbid depression which accompanied his apprehensions he would take refuge in the conviction that he had been called into the world to do great things. The struggle was real enough and it led to frequent bouts of melancholia which were so acute that he was able to recall them in minute detail several years later when he was happily married: "It is impossible to describe the kind of horror that engulfed me at these times. It was not the horror of any particular fate or any one fear; nor was it concerned with general ideas of sin or suffering. It was much worse because it was without form or limit and it swallowed up the whole of existence."¹⁵

The memoirs I am using as a source to tell the story of Fawzi al-Qawuqji are almost entirely devoid of this kind of stylized self-reflection. Qawuqji's memoirs, and other Arab soldier/nationalist memoirs that I read, tend to be oriented not towards the performance of a particular kind of self but towards a broader story of anti-colonial struggle. Of course, the biographer's account of a certain moment in the subject's life reflects what is in the sources. By way of qualification I should be clear that I am not claiming that *all* English memoirs are full of private self-reflection, in contrast to *all* Arabic memoirs that are full of anti-colonial positioning. Self-reflection is found in some Arabic memoirs, just as some English memoirs contain little or no self-reflection. Nor am I claiming that the abundance of self-reflection in English memoirs is somehow the natural way to present one's life story. Rather I am making the point that (in general) the way in which English and Arabic memoirs speak publicly is different. One of these differences supports Chakrabarty's argument about the absence of "the endlessly interiorized subject" in Indian memoirs. And, certainly, in the case of memoirs compiled by Arab nationalists who fought in the great anti-colonial rebellions of the early twentieth-century *Mashriq*, the absence of the endlessly interiorized subject is quite stark.

Let me try to be more precise about what I mean by presenting a piece of my narrative of Qawuqji's experience of the final days of World War I. The section of his memoir that deals with this time in his life is the most important source for my account. Qawuqji was based for most of the war in Bir Sab'a (today the Israeli town of Beersheva), in the middle of the Naqab desert of Southern Palestine. Having graduated from the War College in Istanbul only a few years before in 1912, Qawuqji served as a young officer in the Ottoman army within a cavalry unit. The narrative below traces his experience of the retreat of his unit in the face of the relentless Entente advance through Palestine and Syria in 1917–1918.

Famine, Retreat, Mustafa Kemal, and Aerial Bombardment¹⁶

At the end of October 1917, following the final Entente attack on Bir Sab'a, Qawuqji's unit, pushed back by the British advance, began its long retreat across Palestine and Syria: first to Jerusalem (where he won the Iron Cross fighting at Nabi Samuel); then to Ramallah, to Beisan in the Galilee, to Dera'a, Kiswa, Damascus, al-Rabwa, Majd al-'Anjar, Rियाq, and finally to Hums. In Hums, he was given permission to leave the disintegrating Ottoman army and journey home across the Lebanese mountains to Tripoli. Qawuqji witnessed the devastation that four years of war had brought to the population:

Death had taken over every patch of land, so that the Arab lands had become a grave for the living, with no sound and no movement. The people were not interested in news of the war or who was winning but were focused on their next hour, let alone their next day. No one was able to find out about the necessities of life, which were usually brought to them by the harvest. And it wasn't much better at the front. Famine engulfed it entirely, and there was a shortage of clothes and supplies, which led to many instances of desertion.¹⁷

The near starvation of both the Ottoman army and the local population was made even more painful by the comparison with the British army, which was well supplied. British soldiers were well-fed and clothed, and wore leather shoes, unlike the bare feet and rags of the ordinary Ottoman soldiers. At dusk Qawuqji could see the British soldiers playing football far away in their camp, while soldiers in his camp were frantically digging trenches in an attempt to defend the towns through which they kept falling back.

In mid-September 1918, Qawuqji's unit was ordered to retreat from Beisan — where they were still resisting Allenby's advance — to Dera'a, in a last-ditch effort to defend Damascus. Qawuqji's commander received orders not to attack the enemy and to proceed to Dera'a as quickly as possible. While they were camped on the East side of the Jordan River, just south of Beisan, Qawuqji heard about a small group of Turkish officers of the Ottoman VIIth Army, who had been cut off by the British advance and were in danger of being taken prisoner. Commanding the VIIth Army was Mustafa Kemal, hero of Gallipoli and later to be known as Atatürk, the founder of the modern Republic of Turkey. Qawuqji rushed to the officer commanding his unit, requesting permission to rescue the group. Because the unit had clear orders to proceed to Dera'a as quickly as possible and not to engage the enemy, Qawuqji's request was turned down. He then went straight to the commander of the infantry, who agreed to shell the British while Qawuqji sent two small companies across the Jordan River to rescue the besieged officers. When one of the companies returned with the officers, it emerged that Mustafa Kemal was among them. Hearing of Qawuqji's role, Mustafa Kemal went to thank him. Qawuqji recorded his words

in his memoirs: “You have not only saved the leaders of the Ottoman army but you have saved the honour of the army. In fact your actions should be a model for all officers.”¹⁸ Mustafa Kemal went on after the war to fight the Turkish War of Independence against the British, French, and the Greeks in Anatolia. The war did not really end for Mustafa Kemal until the signing of the Treaty of Lausanne on 24 July 1923, after which the new Republic of Turkey was recognized as the successor state of the defunct Ottoman Empire.

Qawuqji’s unit reached Damascus at the end of September 1918 just hours before the arrival of the British and their allies from the Arab Revolt in the Hijaz. Jamal Pasha, Mustafa Kemal, and some German officers commandeered the Victoria Hotel, which lay just to the west of the Hijaz railway station, as their headquarters. Qawuqji was billeted in a smaller hotel nearby. Walking around the city for the first time in many years he was shocked by its state:

I was wandering around the city that years of war had cut me off from, and I felt something unnatural in its spirit. People were full of anxiety and the streets were clogged with soldiers who didn’t know anything about the fate of their units or what lay ahead. Anarchy ruled everywhere.¹⁹

Shortly after arriving, Qawuqji went to the *hammam* or public bath to clean up and have a shave. While he was there he heard shooting and people shouting. Rushing back to his hotel, Qawuqji saw soldiers frantically tearing off their military uniforms and racing towards the railway station. The British and the Emir Faysal’s Arab Army were on the outskirts of Damascus. Qawuqji went down to the railway station but it was so packed with soldiers trying to leave Damascus that the station looked, in his words, “like a slice of watermelon in the desert covered with flies.”²⁰ Realizing that it was hopeless to try leaving by rail, he headed towards the barracks of al-Marja. In al-Marja Square he watched the flag of the pro-British Arab Revolt raised as speakers called on the people of Damascus to welcome the Arab Army as the new leaders of Syria. Qawuqji then walked northwards with a view to joining one of the Ottoman columns retreating towards Aleppo. Qawuqji ended up in Majd al-‘Anjar, a town in the eastern Biqa’ Valley northwest of Damascus. Majd al-‘Anjar was full of Ottoman soldiers trying to get home. German and Ottoman officers blocked them, insisting on the defense of the town against the British advance. Some had camped in the pass at the entrance to Majd al-‘Anjar. Qawuqji tried to warn one of the German officers that the British were very close and that the troops should be allowed to disperse, but it was too late. British planes flew low over the troops and fired on them with machine guns. Aerial attacks such as this would become quite common, during the period of British and French colonial rule, but in the last days of World War I they were still quite new. Qawuqji had never seen an aerial attack of this intensity before and he was horrified by the devastation it wrought; he never forgot the image of soldiers running to hide in

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the trees of a nearby orchard, and being mowed down from the air, and the orchard filling with dead and wounded men.

Qawuqji ran northwards away from the orchard and with the surviving troops he staggered into the small town of Riyaq. Riyaq was in chaos. The townspeople, desperate after years of famine, were stealing from the army's own scant supplies. Qawuqji sat amidst the mayhem on a crate of champagne that had been abandoned by some German officers. In his memoirs he says that he felt as if he were sitting on one of the last pillars of the crumbling Ottoman Empire. He wondered what the future held for the Arabs. Would the British make good on their promise to give the Arabs independence in return for the support they had shown against the Turks in the Arab Revolt? Qawuqji dug into the crate of champagne and drank down a whole bottle, banishing thoughts of the future from his mind. A few days later he was in Hums, where Mustafa Kemal was headquartered in the railway station, organizing the retreat of the Ottoman army:

I went to him and restlessness and pain showed in his face and in his movements and he said: "So it is over. Our fate is in the hands of our enemies. Each man must do what he can to save what he can. I hope one day that the Arabs achieve a free state in which they can play a new role, and if you hear one day of things going on in Anatolia and you are not doing anything important in your country, come to us."²¹

A few days later Mustafa Kemal went north to Aleppo, which is where he remained while the treaty of Mudros was signed on 30 October 1918. The signatories agreed that hostilities would end at noon the following day. The Ottoman Empire was required to open the Dardanelles and the Bosphorus to Entente warships, and its forts to military occupation. It was also required to demobilize its army, release all prisoners of war, and evacuate its Arab provinces, the majority of which were already under British and French control. Qawuqji left Hums and went west, homewards to Tripoli. He arrived just in time to see British mounted troops ride in and take over his birthplace.

How does my narrative of Qawuqji's experience of the last days of the war reflect the tone of his memoirs? I am not able to reveal to the reader a private voice that opens up an interior world of anxiety about, for example, his professional future. The Ottoman army was collapsing in the face of an invasion by foreigners. Qawuqji had trained, since his childhood, to serve as a career officer in the Ottoman army. Yet we know nothing about his fears about his professional future, or his concern for the safety of his family and friends in Tripoli. Rather, as he sits on the crate of champagne with chaos all around him, his thoughts are directed towards the national independence of the Arabs. Thus he constructs this moment as the beginning of an Arab anti-colonial struggle. Many of the Arab soldiers' memoirs about the period, during and immediately

after World War I, were compiled in the 1960s and 1970s (Qawuqji's memoirs were first published in 1975), when the anti-colonial struggle in the Arab Middle East was in some way perceived as ongoing. So for these old soldiers compiling their memoirs, connecting their lives with this continuing anti-colonial struggle was more important than the performance of a private self. Of course Qawuqji worried about his professional future and the safety of his family, it is just not the story that he chose to tell.²²

Qawuqji's account of saving Mustafa Kemal's life and of his conversation with Mustafa Kemal in Hums, are also a part of this anti-colonial framing. They follow vivid descriptions of the collapse of the Ottoman infrastructure. Qawuqji likens his experience of these months to being trapped under the rubble of a tumbledown building. The image of Qawuqji and Mustafa Kemal in Hums presents these two men of action poised to save the Arab and Turkish nations respectively. Qawuqji seems, in fact, to be casting himself as a nascent Arab Atatürk.²³ This story about 1918, told by Qawuqji in the 1970s, is part of an account of himself that is primarily concerned with projecting an image of a public anti-colonial rebel. There is no place for the kind of performative private that we find in the writings of Orde Wingate. World War I was a time of terrible human suffering in the Arab Middle East. It also marked the beginning of a British and French colonial occupation that (in most areas) was to last until the late 1940s. In addition, Israel's existence today is a direct consequence of the British occupation of Palestine in 1917. The performative private has no place in a public Arabic account of a historical moment that is associated with a collective political trauma that is still unresolved.

As I mentioned earlier, biographies written in Arabic are not the focus of this paper. However, a quick survey of scholarly (as opposed to popular) biographies published in the Middle East, shows that these works often reflect the public rhetoric of Arabic memoirs. I can tentatively argue that these Arabic biographies conform to the memoirists' literary style, which privileges the public over the private. Examples include: Zahir al-Hasnawi, *Shakib Arslan wa dawruhu al-siyasi fi harakat al-nahdah al-'arabiya al-haditha, 1869–1946* [*Shakib Arslan and his Political Role in the Modern Arab Renaissance, 1869–1946*];²⁴ Bayan Nuwayhid al-Hut, *Al-Shaykh al-Mujahid 'Izz al-Din al-Qassam fi tarikh Filastin* [*The Freedom Fighter Shaykh Izz al-Din al-Qassam in the History of Palestine*];²⁵ Latifa Muhammad Salim, *Faruq wa suqut al-malakiyya fi Misr* [*Faruq and the Fall of The Monarchy in Egypt*];²⁶ and 'Abd al-Rahman al-Rafi'i, *Mustafa Kamil*.²⁷ There are exceptions of course. One example is Musa Sabry's fascinating biography of Sadat, *Al-Sadat*.²⁸ Sabry was an important journalist and editor of *al-Akhbar* newspaper. He was close to Sadat and after the president's assassination in 1981, Sabry received special access to Sadat's archive. He draws on this archive, in addition to his own experiences with Sadat, and interviews with those around him, to construct a

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narrative that is driven by the dynamics of Sadat's inner world, such as Sadat's relationships with the men whom he worked with most closely. It also includes a section entitled "Sadat's personality ... from the inside."²⁹

As an historian writing the life story of Fawzi al-Qawuqji in English, it is difficult to conform to the literary conventions expected by readers of biographies of Western subjects. My challenge is to write a compelling narrative that evokes the details of a single life without recourse to sentences that begin: "That night in his diary he recorded his fears of facing the next day," or "As he later recounted in his memoirs, he had always doubted his ability to lead his troops." I started to think about this problem because I found myself searching the sources for text that would allow me to narrate in this way. In a previous paper, a section of which deals with Qawuqji's fraught relationship with Haj Amin al-Husayni, the leader of the Palestinians in the 1948 Arab-Israeli War, I was able to provide this private voice through the use of hand-written comments that Qawuqji had later scribbled onto official documents. He had written these comments on documents in his own archive just a few years before he died. The context of these jottings is as follows: Muhsin Barazi, the then foreign minister of Syria had negotiated a quasi-truce between the Mufti and Qawuqji in May 1948. The Mufti then wrote a letter contained in Qawuqji's private papers, which praises Qawuqji and compliments him on his nationalism and his commitment to the struggle against colonialism. Qawuqji's thoughts were later jotted on the letter:

His eminence [Haj Amin al-Husayni] accuses me of spying on behalf of the English and the French, and colluding with the Jews. Then he comes to me in this letter saying all this stuff about what I have accomplished by way of great deeds and struggle and defense of the land and that my name will be mentioned with appreciation, blah, blah blah ... where is the truth in all of this? Is it in the spying or in the great national deeds? He is not truthful. There is hypocrisy in his letter.³⁰

This handwritten comment does provide a glimpse *behind* the subject that conventional Western biographies rely on so heavily. I should also say that Qawuqji's private archive contains some letters. Many of these letters, which I am reading as I get deeper into the project, are personal rather than official and they will make good sources for being able to narrate a more detailed interior world. Of course, these letters belong to their own genre, which deserves its own analysis. But as far as the argument in this paper is concerned — that many Arabic memoirs express a public narration of nation — the private letters offer a stark contrast to the genre of memoir. Instead these letters give the same glimpse into Qawuqji's thought world that his jottings on his own archive provide. But I have much less of this epistolary material at hand than someone writing a biography of a similar kind of Western subject. Historians of the Arab

Middle East working with letters as sources often obtain these letters through private channels, or find them in the colonial archives. Much work needs to be done so that we can build up a critical mass of edited letters, in addition to trying to ensure that archives of letters are accessible to all.³¹

My paper has tried to explain the reasons for the relatively small number of scholarly biographies, written in English, of figures from the twentieth-century Arab Middle East. I argue that this paucity is caused by three factors: the overwhelming dominance of the historiography of Europe and North America in Western history departments; the lack of a crossover market in English for serious scholarly biographies of Arab subjects; and the availability and style of the Arabic sources. It is difficult for historians of the Arab Middle East to talk about the practice of biography writing with colleagues who work on Europe or North America, given that the trajectories of the respective fields are so different. How can we talk about “the renewed vogue for scholarly historical biography,” or what the JCHA panels upon which this collection of papers is based called “the biographical return,” when we do not have an old vogue to renew or return to? This is not to say that historians of the Arab Middle East must progress through a series of stages towards historiographical perfection, or that we need to have “old biographies” before we have “new biographies.” Instead, I am just trying to explain how different the intellectual terrain looks on an issue like this, when your centre of gravity is the bookstores and archives of Damascus or Beirut, rather than those of London, Paris, New York, or Toronto.

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Endnotes:

- 1 My thanks to the three anonymous external reviewers for their detailed and helpful comments, as well as to my students Hussam Eldin Ahmed and Emrah Sahin for their excellent work helping me research sections of this paper. In addition, I would like to thank Brian Lewis, my colleague at McGill, for inviting me to be on the JCHA panel on biography in the summer of 2010.
- 2 David Nasaw, “Historians and biography: Introduction,” *American Historical Review* 114, no. 3 (June 2009): 573–79.

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- 3 This approximate number, 3,000, comes from a tailored search of the Library of Congress catalogue. As I say above, a search of the LOC catalogue for biographies of Arabs shows about 100, but most of these are popular biographies. Scholarly biographies of Arabs written in the last ten years include: Patrick Seale, *The Struggle for Arab Independence: Riad el-Solh and the Makers of the Modern Middle East* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010); Avi Shlaim, *Lion of Jordan: the Life of King Hussein in War and Peace* (New York: Alfred A Knopf, 2008); Adnan A. Musallam, *From Secularism to Jihad: Sayyid Qutb and the Foundations of Radical Islamism* (Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers, 2005); and Adina Hoffman, *My Happiness Bears no Relation to Happiness: A Poet's Life in the Palestinian Century* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2009). This latter is one of the very few biographies of an Arab poet ever published in English. Joel Gordon's, *Nasser: Hero of the Arab Nation* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2006) is an excellent introduction to Nasser's life for undergraduates. The Oneworld series of biographies, "Makers of the Muslim World," of which Gordon's biography of Nasser is one, focuses mainly on the pre-twentieth-century period, but its existence is an indication that there are people working to fill this gap. In addition, Edmund Burke and David N Yaghoubian, eds., *Struggle and Survival in the Modern Middle East* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006) is a series of biographical sketches, which is widely used in the classroom. Philip Khoury notes this general absence of biography in a recent article on the political career of 'Abd al-Rahman Shahbandar: "There is surprisingly little systematic scholarship on the political careers of the leaders of Syria's national independence movement." Philip Khoury, "'Abd al-Rahman Shahbandar: an independence leader of Interwar Syria,'" in *Transformed Landscapes: Essays on Palestine and the Middle East in Honor of Walid Khalidi*, eds. Camille Mansour and Leila Fawaz (Cairo: American University Press, 2009), 31.
- 4 A check of the current undergraduate program requirements on Yale's history department website shows that the "rest of the world" designation has been changed to the much better "Africa, Asia, Latin America, and the Middle East."
- 5 There are, of course, some exceptions: Patrick Seale's recent biography of Riyadh al-Sulh and Avi Shlaim's recent biography of King Hussein, for example, are generally well regarded in the field of modern Middle East history. They are books that one could normally find on the shelves of a mainstream bookstore today.
- 6 Anne Alexander, *Nasser: His Life and Times* (Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, 2005). Review by Fayza Hassan, "Not quite Nasser," *al-Ahram Weekly* (September 2005), <<http://weekly.ahram.org.eg/2005/760/bo7.htm>>, (viewed March 28, 2011).
- 7 H.W. Brands, *Traitor to his Class: The Privileged Life and Radical Presidency of Franklin Roosevelt* (New York: Anchor Books, 2009); David Hackett Fischer, *Champlain's Dream: The Visionary Adventurer who made a New World in Canada* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2008); T.J. Stiles, *The First Tycoon: The Epic Life of Cornelius Vanderbilt* (New York: Alfred A Knopf, 2009). Ayaan Hirsi Ali, *Infidel: Ayaan Hirsi Ali, My Life* (New York: Free Press, 2007); Azar Nafisi, *Reading Lolita in Tehran* (New York: Random House, 2003); and Nawal al-Sa'adawi, *The Hidden Face of Eve* (London: Zed Books, 1980). Feminist scholars who work on the Middle East have done some interesting critical work on these texts. For example, see Amal Amireh, "Framing Nawal El-Saadawi: Arab feminism in a transnational world," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 26, no. 1 (2000): 215-49; Rokhsana Bahramitash, "The war on terror, feminist Orientalism and Orientalist feminism: case studies of two North American bestsellers," *Critical Middle Eastern Studies* 14, no. 2 (Summer 2005): 223-7. Michelle Hartman, my colleague at McGill, has also done research and given papers on this topic. For example, "Strategies of writing Muslim women: race, gender, and paperback Islam," paper delivered at Williams College, 7 October 2004. There are a few memoirs that do not play to the Western obsession with "oppressed Muslim woman." Examples would be Jean Said Makdisi, *Mother Teta and Me* (New York: Norton, 2006); and Leila Ahmed, *Border*

- Passage* (New York: Penguin, 2000). These last two books are often assigned by scholars teaching Middle East Studies in universities in North America.
- 8 Alan Taylor *William Cooper's Town: Power and Persuasion on the Frontier of the Early American Republic* (New York: Vintage Books, 1995); Susan Mann, *The Talented Women of the Zhang Family* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007); Natalie Zemon Davis, *The Return of Martin Guerre* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1983). In his influential essay on the revival of narrative, Peter Burke calls this kind of history "micro-narrative," and "the telling of a story about ordinary people in their local setting." Peter Burke, "History of events and the revival of narrative" in *New Perspectives on Historical Writing*, ed. Peter Burke (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2001), 292. In the field of the history of the early twentieth-century *Mashriq*, we have few micro-narratives, whether of ordinary people or important people.
 - 9 Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1978). Examples of histories that deal mainly with the themes of colonialism, nationalism, and modernity are: Elizabeth Thompson, *Colonial Citizens: Republican Rights, Paternal Privilege, and Gender in French Syria and Lebanon* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000); Toby Dodge, *Inventing Iraq: The Failure of Nation Building and a History Denied* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003); Joseph Massad, *Colonial Effects: The Making of National Identity in Jordan* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001); Keith Watenpaugh, *Being Modern in the Middle East: Revolution, Nationalism, Colonialism, and the Arab Middle Class* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006); Rashid Khalidi, *Palestinian Identity: The Construction of Modern National Consciousness* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997); Martin Bunton, *Colonial Land Policies in Palestine, 1917–1936* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007); Ellen Fleischmann, *The Nation and its "New" Women: The Palestine Women's Movement, 1920–1948* (Berkeley: University of California, 2003); Jim Gelvin, *Divided Loyalties: Nationalism and Mass Politics in Syria at the Close of Empire* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998). When I say that there are few detailed narrative histories of the early twentieth-century *Mashriq*, I am describing a general trend. There are, of course, exceptions: Michael Provence, *The Great Syrian Revolt and the Rise of Arab Nationalism* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2005) is a narrative history of this event. In addition, there are some valuable social histories of the early twentieth-century *Mashriq*, which contain detailed narratives of individual lives. One classic example (re-published by Saqi Books in 2004) is Hanna Batatu's *The Old Social Classes and the Revolutionary Movements of Iraq: a Study of Iraq's Old Landed and Commercial Classes and of its Communists Ba'athists, and Free Officers* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1978). Recently published broader narrative histories, such as Eugene Rogan, *The Arabs: A History* (Philadelphia: Basic Books, 2009); and Patrick Seale, *The Struggle for Arab Independence*, contain sections of detailed narratives of the people of the early twentieth-century *Mashriq*.
 - 10 The literature on narrative is vast. For a succinct explanation of the difference between fictional narrative and historical narrative, see Louis Mink, "History and Fiction as Modes of Comprehension," *New Literary History* 1, no. 3 (Spring 1970): 541–58. Mink says: "A historical narrative does not demonstrate the necessity of events but makes them intelligible by unfolding the story which connects their significance. History does not as such differ from fiction, therefore, insofar as it essentially depends on and develops our skill and subtlety in following stories. History does of course differ from fiction insofar as it is obligated to rest upon evidence of the occurrence in real space and time of what it describes and insofar as it must grow out of a critical assessment of the received materials of history, including the analyses and interpretations of other historians," 545.
 - 11 I develop this argument about the relative absence of narrative history at length in an article in *History Compass* 9 no. 1 (2011), entitled "Micro-narrative and the historiography of the modern Middle East."

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- 12 Dipesh Chakrabarty, "Chapter 1: Postcoloniality and the artifice of history: Who speaks for 'Indian' pasts?," in Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000), 27–46, 35. Yoav Di-Capua also clearly lays out the way in which historicism is part of the national project in chapters 1 and 2 of his book *Gatekeepers of the Arab Past: Historians and History Writing in Twentieth-Century Egypt* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009). For a good critique of the discourse about "absence of self" in Arab culture, see Dwight Reynolds, ed., *Interpreting the Self: Autobiography in the Arabic Literary Tradition* (Berkeley: University of California, 2001), 17–35.
- 13 There was excitement in the field of modern Middle East history recently when Abigail Jacobson and Salim Tamari discovered the diary of an Arab Ottoman soldier from World War I, the first World War I Arabic diary to be found. See Salim Tamari, "The short life of Private Ihsan, Jerusalem, 1915," *Jerusalem Quarterly* 30 (Spring 2007). The Institute for Palestine Studies has been involved in the publication of a few interesting edited diaries in the last few years. Examples include: Akram Musallam, ed., *Yawmiyyat Khalil al-Sakakini [The Diaries of Khalil Sakakini]*, vols. 1–5 (Jerusalem: The Institute for Jerusalem Studies, 2003–2005); and Thomas Ricks, ed., *Turbulent Times in Palestine: The Diaries of Khalil Totah, 1886–1955* (Washington, DC: Institute for Palestine Studies, 2009). We also have some military diaries, for example, the fascinating diaries of Taha al-Hashimi. Sati' al-Husri, ed., *Mudhakkirat Taha al-Hashimi [The Diaries of Taha al-Hashimi]* (Beirut, 1978). In addition, we have an excellent edition of the edited letters of Muhammad Farid published by the Center for the Documents and History of Contemporary Egypt: *Awraq Muhammad Farid* (Cairo: al-Hila al-Misriyya al-'Amma li-al-Kitab, 1978).
- 14 Reynolds, *Interpretation of the Self*, 245. Reynolds draws on Habermas and Chakrabarty for his argument about the way in which the Western private is orientated towards the public.
- 15 Trevor Royle, *Orde Wingate: Irregular Soldier* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1995), 56.
- 16 I drew on the following sources for the account of Qawuqji's journey through the last days of the war: Khayriyya Qasimiyya, ed., *Mudhakkirat Fawzi al-Qawuqji [The Memoirs of Fawzi al-Qawuqji]* (Damascus: Dar al-Namir, 1995), 51–71; Munir al-Rayyis, *Al-Kitab al-dhahabi li-al-thawra al-wataniyya fi-al-Mashriq al-'Arabi: al-Thawra al-Suriyya al-kubra [The Golden Book of Revolts in the Eastern Arab Mashriq: The Great Syrian Revolt]* (Beirut: Dar al-Tali'a li-al-Taba'a wa al-Nashr, 1969), 91–3; Liman Von Sanders, *Five Years in Turkey* (Annapolis, MD: The United States Naval Institute, 1927), 198–254; Subhi al-'Umari, *al-Ma'arik al-'ula: al-Tariq ila Dimashq [The First Battles: The Road to Damascus]* (London: Riad al-Rayyes Books, 1991), 288–99; Andrew Mango, *Ataturk* (London: John Murray, 1999), 179–82; David R. Woodward, *Hell in the Holy Land: World War I in the Middle East* (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 2006), 138–206; in addition to documents relating to Qawuqji's Iron Cross in the Center for Historical Documents, Damascus, Private Papers/Fawzi al-Qawuqji.
- 17 *Mudhakkirat Fawzi al-Qawuqji*, 51.
- 18 *Ibid.*, 64.
- 19 *Ibid.*, 68.
- 20 *Ibid.*
- 21 *Ibid.*, 71.
- 22 The fact that he dictated his memoirs to his editor (Khayriyya Qasimiyya) adds another layer to this. In her introduction, she does not discuss the degree of editorial intervention in the text.
- 23 This retrospective self-characterization is echoed in contemporaneous accounts throughout the 1920s and particularly in the 1930s, as the cult of Ataturk spread and solidified in Turkey. A good example is a newspaper article written in 1937 in Iraq, right after Qawuqji was sent into exile to Kirkuk by the then pro-British Iraqi government. The article is entitled "Fawzi al-Qawuqji: Where is he from? Who is he? What is he?" It is an account of Qawuqji's heroic

exploits against the French and the British up until 1936. The article explicitly links him to Mustafa Kemal, even claiming that he resembled Mustafa Kemal physically. It ends by referring to the life-saving incident in World War I: "This is the savior of Mustafa Kemal in the Great War, this is the rebel and the defender, the politician and the orator." Qawuqji's Private Papers (family collection), newspaper clipping by unnamed author, 1937. This linking of Qawuqji and Mustafa Kemal was not simply self-aggrandizement on the part of Qawuqji. He and others like him really looked north to the war of independence in Anatolia in the early 1920s as an example of what it could be like for them in Syria. These links are explored in depth in Laila Parsons, "An Ottoman Arab soldier between 'Syria' and 'Turkey' 1918-1927," paper delivered at the Middle East Studies Association conference, November 2009.

- 24 (Beirut: Riyad al-Rayyis, 2002).
- 25 (Beirut: Dar al-Istiqlal, 1987).
- 26 (Cairo: Madbuli Press, 1989).
- 27 (Cairo: Maktaba al-Nahda al-Misriyya, 1950). 'Abd al-Rahman al-Rafi'i was a famous historian and biographer. This biography of the Egyptian nationalist leader Mustafa Kamil is one of his earliest works.
- 28 (Cairo: al-Maktab al-Misri al-Hadith, 1985).
- 29 A list of the 100 or so scholarly biographies that have been published in the last 30 years in Arabic shows that the majority of works are about literary figures, which probably reflects the fact that in many universities in the Arab Middle East, Arabic literature is the most prestigious and well-funded sector of the humanities. History departments on the other hand are less well supported and many histories published in Arabic are not written by professional historians.
- 30 Laila Parsons, "Soldiering for Arab nationalism: Fawzi al-Qawuqji in Palestine," *Journal of Palestine Studies* 36, no. 4 (Summer 2007): 33-48. Qawuqji Private Papers (family collection), letter from Husayni to Qawuqji, 1948 (exact date unclear).
- 31 The Center for Historical Documents in Damascus is one example of an archive that contains a collection of letters (found in the private papers of Syrian nationalists). This archive is sadly underused.