Int. J. Middle East Stud. **51** (2019), 305–308

Left Out: Notes from the Struggle over Middle East Intellectual History

Max Weiss
Departments of History and Near Eastern Studies, Princeton University, Princeton, N.J.; e-mail: maxweiss@princeton.edu
doi:10.1017/S0020743819000072

The global turn has captivated the attention of scholars of the Middle East as well as those concerned with other regions and various time periods. Modern intellectual historians have long struggled to adequately understand and historicize the relationship between intellectual history and other forces that shaped the making of the modern Middle East. The driving intellectual currents in postcolonial Middle East intellectual history may appear to be reasonably well-established: nationalism, Communism, socialism, anarchism, fascism, Islamism. But blind spots remain, especially in terms of the study of Baʿthism, in Syria and Iraq, in particular, which is my particular interest in this short piece, and in my current research.

One reason why the histories of postcolonial Syria and Iraq remain so understudied, in general, and consequently misunderstood, unfortunately, is at once structural and archival. Both countries were under the thumb of authoritarian, censorious, and even paranoid regimes from the 1960s, rendering historical research there difficult, dangerous, and, sometimes, downright impossible. But intellectual historians willing to employ creative methods may yet find alternative routes to unanticipated insights regarding historical and contemporary Baʿthism, among other underappreciated aspects of Syrian and Iraqi history, which would be an essential element of a broader collective re-writing of modern Syrian and Iraqi history. In this regard I follow the brilliant lead of Omnia El Shakry, who encourages historians, anthropologists, and other scholars to "shift our attention away from dominant and declensionist narratives of decolonization as a state-driven and secular political process, to include members of the intelligentsia, social scientists, and religious thinkers who were bypassed in or excised from traditional archives."[1] The fractured archive for historians of the postcolonial Arab world, El Shakry teaches us, is often as difficult to *imagine* as it has been to access.

Situating the Baʿth and Baʿthism within a more critical history of ideas, intellectuals, and ideology—undoubtedly a project that remains unachieved—my intention is to think about the history of Baʿthism in Syria in terms of what I would call a discontinuous narrative, one whose complicated evolution eventually produced a veritable belief system while also spawning a variety of political, institutional, and cultural forms. This approach, then, would gesture towards my proposed deconstruction of inadequate, impoverished, and even nefarious common-sense understandings regarding the nature of Baʿthism. One of my main points of focus in this connection is Michel ʿAflaq himself, "founding father" of the Baʿth and cocreator of the Arab Socialist Baʿth Party (along with Salah al-Din al-Bitar, Zaki al-Arsuzi, and Akram al-Hawrani), a person whom the field of Middle East studies, to say nothing of the blathering public intellectuals in the United

© *Cambridge University Press 2019 0020-7438/19*

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020743819000072 Published online by Cambridge University Press

States and Western Europe, have presumed to understand or know "well enough" for far too long.[2] The profound misunderstanding and mystification of ʿAflaq's life and thought —of ʿAflaqism (*al-ʿAflaqiyya*), which I stress needs to be contrasted to Baʿthism in its later guises—is often mirrored by the evolving field of Middle East intellectual history, which, with a handful of exceptional works on the history of Nazism and fascism in the Arabic-speaking world, expends the better part of its energy on studying and debating the Left, broadly defined.[3] There are various reasons that explain this preponderance of interest in the Left: personal political sympathies; the sheer volume of written material produced by leftists; commitments to historical redress in light of the fact that the Arab Left had fought a losing battle throughout the 20th and early 21st centuries. There are other factors involved, to be sure, but suffice it to say here that the salutary turn in historical scholarship towards excavating and even recuperating the history of "the Arab Left" needs to be held up to the mirror of critique in turn; one way of accomplishing this would be to consider those other individuals, social movements, and intellectual currents that have been left behind, those which have been left out.

Part of the problem with reconstructing the thought of Michel ʿAflaq, in particular, of establishing his intellectual coordinates within the firmament of postcolonial Syrian history and modern Arabic intellectual history, has to do with the elusiveness of the man himself, his thought—if it is even to be understood as one unified thing—and the various effects he and his thought have had in and on the world. My current research elucidates the distinct yet overlapping genealogies of modern Syrian thought, with particular attention to the role of Personalism in the elaboration of Michel ʿAflaq's thinking about self, society, and history. More concretely, the missing link in explaining the philosophical orientation of Michel ʿAflaq and ʿAflaqiyya, I argue, is the Left-Personalism personifed by Emmanuel Mounier and the Esprit Group in Paris during the interwar period. Personalism has attracted almost no attention from Middle Easternists, with very rare exceptions. The term is generally translated into Arabic as *al-shakṣāniyya*—although even this word is relatively unknown and unused in the Arabic lexicon when compared to the more prosaic *al-shakhṣiyya*, or, personality—and most often refers to the French Catholic nationalist Jacques Maritain, less frequently to Mounier.[4] My argument is that a critical genealogical account of Baʿthism as an intellectual force and ideology as well as a political project, social movement, and form of state power have all yet to be written.

If the broad biographical outline of ʿAflaq's life is well known, his thought has only been considered by a handful of scholars, primarily within the framework of anticolonial Arab nationalism, and to a lesser extent in relation to European Romantic nationalism and French social thought. But as Pheng Cheah teaches us in his groundbreaking work, there is not necessarily an inevitable genealogical line connecting Kant, Hegel, and Fichte to Heidegger and, by extension, Goebbels and Hitler in the constitution of postcolonial nationalist thought.[5] Indeed, the multiple genealogies of Baʿthist thought suggest that there is a much more complicated and much more interesting set of overlapping and divergent pathways through which Baʿthist thought traveled over the course of the 20th century, and into the 21st. The assemblage of Baʿthist thought needs to be understood as having been as complex and as difficult to parse for modern intellectual historians as Arab nationalist thought, Communist thought, and existentialist thought. Especially given the complexity of the archival and methodological questions at stake in its historical

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020743819000072 Published online by Cambridge University Press

reconstruction, Baʿthism needs to be taken as seriously as any other philosophy, social force, or state ideology in the modern Middle East.

It should go without saying that Baʿthism has had an unmistakable impact on the making of the modern and contemporary Middle East, in Syria and Iraq, most importantly, but also in less remarked upon ways beyond those two countries. Rereading ʿAflaq in conversation and conflict with his contemporaries and his heirs, therefore, may enable not only a reinterpretation of Baʿthism in Syria—as both intellectual and political project—but also a reconsideration of Arab/ic intellectual history during the mid-20th century, between nationalism and liberalism, the religious and the secular. After the improbable uprising that broke out in Syria in March 2011 and the comparably dispiriting devolution of the country into a state of unimaginably atrocious war, which has been replaced by human suffering, displacement, and radical uncertainty, there is no longer any excuse for the sort of ignorance and invective that had long been hurled at the question of Baʿthism. It might be claimed that there has never been such an urgent need for a reconsideration and rewriting of postcolonial Syrian history, never a better opportunity to wrestle with some of the fundamental questions concerning the making of modern Syria. Now more than ever, cooler heads should prevail in the discourse on Syrian Baʿthism, lest we see an even more cynical manipulation of the public conversation around Syria, at best, and perhaps the return of those who "masterminded" de-Baʿthification in Iraq, to imagine one of the worst possible outcomes. Otherwise, instead of empirically grounded historical and critical scholarship, we will be left with thin analysis, at best, and gloating and warmongering rhetoric, at worst, as was the case with neoconservative and liberal intellectuals alike in the time of the 2003 Iraq War.[6]

Perhaps as important as these burning political exigencies, though, is the deeper problem of how to persuade people to think and talk rationally about Baʿthism at a time when even the proposition that Baʿthism was an ideology, a social force, or a form of politics that was not only legible and coherent in various ways but even meant something to some people at various points in time, is perceived and misrepresented as apologetic or even an abdication of scholarly responsibilty. The argument here should precisely *not* be misconstrued as an apologia for Baʿthism itself, but, rather, as a plea for academic rigor and human decency at a moment in which many would prefer to shred even the possibility of a higher purpose for intellectual inquiry: understanding. Indeed, reconstructing the intellectual, political, and cultural history of Baʿthism, although far less appealing or inspiring than the study of the Arab Left, to be sure, might eventually stand as one essential step along the way towards piecing together the history of modern and contemporary Syria, of stitching back together a country torn asunder by decades of instability, dictatorship, war, and unimaginable human suffering.

NOTES

[1]Omnia El Shakry, "'History without Documents': The Vexed Archives of Decolonization in the Middle East," *American Historical Review* 120 (2015): 925–34.

[2]I take up this question in greater detail in my article, "Genealogies of Syrian Baʿthism: Michel ʿAflaq between Personalism and Arabic Nationalism," *Modern Intellectual History* (forthcoming).

[3]Exceptions to this overly broad generalization includes, among others, Peter Wien, *Iraqi Arab Nationalism: Authoritarian, Totalitarian, and Pro-Fascist Inclinations, 1932–1941* (London: Routledge, 2006); Götz Nordbruch, *Nazism in Syria and Lebanon: The Ambivalence of the German Option, 1933–1945* (London:

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020743819000072 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Routledge, 2009); Gilbert Achcar, *The Arabs and the Holocaust: The Arab–Israeli War of Narratives* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2010); Israel Gershoni and James P. Jankowski, *Confronting Fascism in Egypt: Dictatorship Versus Democracy in the 1930s* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2010); "Islamofascism," special issue, *Die Welt des Islams* 52 (2012); Israel Gershoni, ed., *Arab Responses to Fascism and Nazism: Attraction and Repulsion* (Austin, Tex.: University of Texas Press, 2014). With the exception of Achcar, however, none of these works are particularly interested in the Baʿth or Baʿthists.

[4]The only book-length translation into Arabic of one of these two men that I have found thus far is Jacques Maritain (Jak Martan), *Jadwa al-Falsafah: Thalath Maqalat*, trans. Riyad Najib al-Rayyis (Beirut: al-Muʾassasa al-Wataniyya li-l-Tibaʿa wa-l-Nashr, 1963).

[5]Pheng Cheah, *Spectral Nationality: Passages of Freedom From Kant to Postcolonial Literatures of Liberation* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003).

[6]I am thinking specifically of the work of Paul Berman, for example. See, first, his *Terror and Liberalism* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2004), esp. 54–60; and, later,"Baathism: An Obituary," *The New Republic*, 24 September 2012.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020743819000072 Published online by Cambridge University Press