IN SONALLAH IBRAHIM’S 1981 NOVEL The Committee, an unnamed protagonist is tasked with writing a report on the greatest “Arab luminary.” After obtaining access to the archives of a national daily newspaper through a personal recommendation, the narrator receives a much-sought-after file and recounts: “I opened the folder, my fingers trembling from excitement. It revealed a white sheet of paper with a date from the early ’50s at the top and nothing else. I turned it over and saw a similar sheet of paper. Quickly, I examined the sheets of paper in the file and saw that they all lacked everything but a date.”1 Jotting down the dates listed, the protagonist then cross-references them with other, more publicly available information in an attempt to reconstruct a narrative of events—piecing together what an Egyptian historian once referred to as a “history without documents.”2

Ibrahim’s literary parable demonstrates two senses of the phrase “history without documents.” One references what Achille Mbembe calls the chronophagy of the state, the way it devours the past through either the material destruction of archives or the presentation of a history purified of antagonisms and embodied in empty commemorative accounts.3 The second sense refers to the history that we might seek to reconstruct because of, and despite, the absence of access to such documents. The archive thus functions as an “instituting imaginary” that seeks to reassemble and inter the traces of the deceased—always incomplete, always unknowable, and always, at least partially, the projection of our own desires.4

How, then, might we conceptualize the archives of decolonization in light of the problematic of “history without documents”? We might start by focusing on the two

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2 Ibrahim ’Abduh, Tarikh bila Watha’iq (Cairo, 1975).
3 See Achille Mbembe, “The Power of the Archive and Its Limits,” in Carolyn Hamilton, Verne Harris, Michèle Pickover, Graeme Reid, Razia Saleh, and Jane Taylor, eds., Refiguring the Archive (Dordrecht, 2002), 19–27, on the archive as both a modality of power and an imaginary.
senses of the term, first by exploring the material inaccessibility of particular post-colonial state archives, and second, and more importantly, by questioning the compositional logics of archival imaginaries, the “conditions that allow something to be archived and archivable.”5 As Ann Stoler remarks, the archive “may serve as a strong metaphor for any corpus of selective forgettings and collections.”6 In what ways, then, have historians remembered, forgotten, or appropriated the various intellectual traditions that belonged to the era of decolonization in the Middle East?7 What compositional logics enable certain individual thinkers to be archived as part of the history of decolonization and others not? The uses and abuses of both paper and what we might term non-documentary archives have led to “subjugated knowledges,” “excluded socialities,” and aporias, the implications of which we have yet to fully explore.8

As Jean Allman has noted, much of the literature on archives has focused on the colonial archive, even while scholars of the postcolonial world have grappled with the substantial limitations of state archives in formerly colonized regions and their methodological implications.9 Historians have become increasingly accustomed to openly discussing the very material difficulties of accessing archives, which are so intensified in postcolonial contexts—the tortuous security clearances, for example, or the impossibility of archival access in times of war or revolutionary upheaval.10

5 Elizabeth Povinelli, “The Woman on the Other Side of the Wall: Archiving the Otherwise in Postcolonial Digital Archives,” differences 22, no. 1 (2011): 146–171, quotation from 152. For Povinelli, such compositional practices contribute to or inhibit “the endurance of specific social formations” (152–153). On the postcolonial archive as less an empirical object than a hermeneutical maneuver and a form of cultural melancholia, see Sandhya Shetty and Elizabeth Jane Bellamy, “Postcolonialism’s Archive Fever,” Diacritics 30, no. 1 (2000): 25–48. See also Harvey Neptune’s contribution to this roundtable, which focuses on rethinking the archives of decolonization as a historiographical, rather than positivist, intellectual exercise.


7 I should point out that my focus is predominantly the Arab world and, to a lesser extent, Iran, areas that experienced either direct colonial rule or semicolonialism.

8 Povinelli, “The Woman on the Other Side of the Wall,” 151. As Jordanna Bailkin notes in her contribution to this roundtable, we need to question who counts as an “agent” in the histories of decolonization.


as scholars face the prospect of ever-diminishing access to archives and national libraries in the region in the wake of recent political convulsions.

Nothing has highlighted these difficulties more than the highly acrimonious debates surrounding the legality of the acquisition of Iraqi state documents pertaining to Saddam Hussein’s regime, which were seized by the U.S. in Baghdad after the 2003 invasion of Iraq and are held by a Media Processing Center and storage facility in Qatar and by the Hoover Institution at Stanford University. Archivists have debated the political, ethical, and legal repercussions of the seizure of Iraqi documents during the war, as well as the contrasting notions of cultural property embedded in different viewpoints regarding their repatriation. Yet, despite their vexed and tainted nature, the Iraqi Ba’th Party records, which contain millions of pages of documents, have already yielded invaluable studies of Ba’thist Iraq, exploring the architecture of the party apparatus, as well as the normalization of war in Iraq under the last twenty three-years of Ba’thist rule.

Disputes similarly exist over the Nasir era in Egypt, during which the regime attempted to coopt historians, who were cast as participants freed from a monarchial and colonial past in a national struggle toward postcolonial revolutionary sovereignty. The archives of the period—many of which are reported to be in the personal possession of Nasir’s close associates, and some of which are widely dispersed across various personal, governmental, and archival locations—have been contentious sites of dispute. As historians have demonstrated, the question of archival compilation, management, and availability has been a perennial feature in the Egyptian press, particularly since the reorganization of the Egyptian state archives in 1954. It was the dire nature of this situation that prompted Egyptian historian Ibrahim ‘Abduh’s cynical use of the phrase “history without documents” to refer to the attempt to write the history of the Nasir period. Such disputes about the nature


15 ‘Abduh, Tarikh bila Watha’iq; Gorman, Historians, State and Politics in Twentieth Century Egypt, 76.
of state archival collections and scholarly access have come into sharp relief in the wake of Egypt’s 2011 revolutionary uprising, as historians have argued the need for easier access to the Egyptian National Archives, admittance to which requires a time-consuming and labyrinthine security clearance, and as they have critiqued the powerful local and international heritage industry interests invested in the Library of Alexandria project.16

While, to borrow Joanna Sassoon’s phrasing, “chasing phantoms in the archives” may provide “an opportunity to write histories of the absence of evidence in the archival records,” the consequences of such obstructed access have been manifold.17 Within Middle East historiography, it has led to the resourceful use of oral histories and interviews, family holdings and private collections, published memoirs and letters, press reports, and foreign archives.18 In many instances, then, the historian’s ability to forge relationships with individuals with genealogical connections and generational bonds to historical personages has replaced the oft-fetishized “allure of the archives” and the tactile nature of brittle documents.19 It has even led to the creation of counterfactual or fictitious archives, as in the work of Walid Raad, a contemporary visual artist born in Lebanon, and the Atlas Group, an artistic project created by him that challenges the “boundary between historical and fictional narration,” while it grapples with the reconstruction of the Lebanese Civil War in the near-complete absence of documents.20 And yet, one could argue that the obstruction of post-independence official state archives has tended to make the workings of the colonial


state far more visible than the operations of the national states that succeeded colonial rule. In other words, the archive has functioned as a dense locus of post-colonial power, and its impermeability has often masked the precise nature of the political and social debates that went into the consolidation of regimes in the aftermath of decolonization.

If the material inaccessibility of state archives in places such as Baghdad, Beirut, Cairo, and Damascus has rendered the decolonizing state less discernible, so too has an imaginary that has archived the era in terms of received narratives that occluded key elements of the history of decolonization from our view. Among these has been what Samah Selim terms the \textit{nahda}/naksa (awakening/catastrophe) narrative, which conceptualized Arab cultural history in terms of a fin-de-siècle cultural renaissance partly inspired by contact with Europeans, and a tragic post-1967 decline brought on by the Arab defeat in the June 1967 war with Israel. The murky and nonlinear process of decolonization, so often overshadowed by the troubled history of the present as well as increased U.S. military intervention in the region, began to appear to many as simply reversible. Decolonization in the Middle East, one might be led to think, was a tragic enterprise that, in Abdallah Laroui’s words, failed to bring “finally to a close the long winter of the Arabs” and instantiated a “melancholic historicism.” A second, and perhaps related, narrative has been the assumption of an


\textsuperscript{22} To be sure, there is a distinction to be drawn between academic historians, on the one hand, and militant Arab intellectuals writing in the post-1967 period who oftentimes deployed a language of political despair, on the other. This distinction is at times complicated by the fact that these categories may overlap, as is the case with Abdallah Laroui, himself both an academic historian and an engaged intellectual. On the \textit{nahda}/naksa narrative, see Samah Selim, “Literature and Revolution,” \textit{International Journal of Middle East Studies} 43, no. 3 (August 2011): 385–386. For representative examples of the declensionist narrative, see Abdallah Laroui, \textit{The Crisis of the Arab Intellectual: Traditionalism or Historicism?}, trans. Diarmid Cammall (Berkeley, Calif., 1976); Ibrahim M. Abu-Rabi’, \textit{Contemporary Arab Thought: Studies in Post-1967 Arab Intellectual History} (London, 2004); Elizabeth Suzanne Kassab, \textit{Contemporary Arab Political Thought: Cultural Critique in Comparative Perspective} (New York, 2009); Adeeed Dawisha, \textit{Arab Nationalism in the Twentieth Century: From Triumph to Despair} (Princeton, N.J., 2003); Fouad Ajami, \textit{The Arab Predicament: Arab Political Thought and Practice since 1967}, revised ed. (Cambridge, 1992).

Yet what if we thought of decolonization as an ongoing process and series of struggles rather than a finite event, as regional as well as national, intellectual and cultural as well as political, and religious as well as secular? We might then 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. How, then, might we reimagine the archives of decolonization?

Thomas Osborne notes that the heuristic value of the concept of the archive lay precisely in its elasticity, oscillating between literalist and idealist notions. Beyond their figuration as literal places—centers of storage and libraries—archives, he argues, can be viewed as centers of interpretation that require epistemological and ethical credibility. In other words, archives are sites “for particular kinds of knowledge, particular styles of reasoning.” If, as Foucault argues, the archive constitutes the limits and forms of the sayable, as well as its memory and appropriation, then what currents of thought and intellectual traditions belong to the archives of decolonization? How have individual thinkers been archived or appropriated within historiographical debates and public thought in ways that reinforce a melancholy historicism that pits Islamic thought against liberal or revolutionary secular ideals?

In “The Body and the Archive,” the late Allan Sekula spoke of a shadow archive that contains subordinate, territorialized archives: archives whose semantic interdependence is normally obscured by the ‘coherence’ and ‘mutual exclusivity’ of the social groups registered within each.” Sekula’s musings on the semantic interdependence of our archival categories are productive for rethinking the categories of decolonization. To date, scholarship on the Middle East has not sufficiently placed secular and religious thought within “a single analytic field”; nor has the heuristic value of these ideologically charged categories, perhaps themselves the product of the colonial encounter, been sufficiently questioned. Take, for instance, Egypt’s

26 Allan Sekula, “The Body and the Archive,” October 39 (1986): 3–64, quotation from 10, emphasis in the original. Although Sekula is referencing the material archive of nineteenth-century photography, his insights can, I believe, be fruitfully applied to the idealist archive of the historiography of decolonization.
Sayyid Qutb (1906–1966), who has generally been viewed through the prism of Islamism, that is, as the progenitor of radical Islamic thought concerned with reshaping both polity and society. Scholars have thus referred to him as “the most significant thinker of Islamic resurgence in the modern Arab world,” and “by far the greatest ideologue and thinker of the Muslim Brothers’ movement,” whose global influence rivaled or surpassed that of Ayatollah Khomeini—a “martyr” whose “text-icon” has swayed multiple radical Islamist groups in regions as far-flung as Chechnya and Pakistan. Qutb’s prolific and erudite body of writing, which includes poetry, autobiography, journal articles, full-length books, and multi-volume Qur’anic commentaries, has led scholars to focus, virtually in isolation, on his writings, debating the provenance of his ideas and their orthodox, heterodox, or “fundamentalist” tendencies in an effort to corroborate or refute his influence over radical jihadist groups.

To be fair, some scholars have acknowledged the anticolonial tenor of Qutb’s corpus, his critique of “intellectual and spiritual colonialism,” and have even noted resonances between his thought and that of revolutionary anticolonial thinkers such as Frantz Fanon. In some instances, they have argued that Qutb is best understood as a theorist or theologian of freedom, in contrast to Western media representations of him as “the philosopher of Islamic terror.” While such accounts have immeasurably enriched our understanding of Qutb’s work and demonstrated his thought as the complex product of local social and political forces as well as biographical experiences, they have not situated him within a sufficiently complex and symbiotic local ideological landscape. In particular, they have assumed the mutual exclusivity of Islamic and secular social groups.

Qutb’s complex oeuvre, however, did not delineate a new discursive field, but rather shared the same discursive terrain as those of his so-called secular colleagues. In short, he too belongs to the archives of decolonization, archives that cannot be conceptualized merely as a Manichean battle between secular nationalism and Islamism. Indeed, our historical evidence belies the “mutual exclusivity” of these social groups. In many instances, intellectuals writing between the 1940s and 1960s, such as Qutb and the “secular” sociologist Sayyid ‘Uways (1913–1989), were struc-
turally homologous figures, whether in terms of social class or in terms of their oblique and antagonistic relationship to political power, figures who took their societies as an “object of knowledge and horizon of reform.” They were “the ‘men,’ until yesterday the ‘object’ of study, and, henceforth, sovereign ‘subjects,’” hailed as the new agents of decolonization in Anouar Abdel-Malek’s groundbreaking 1963 critique of Orientalism. Significantly, they sought to construct a just society in the aftermath of a brutal and essentially European war, arguing, as did Sayyid Qutb, that capitalism embodied the universal negative of Western modernity.

Qutb, along with some of the religious scholars he drew on, conceptualized the Islamic program as a bulwark against imperialism. In so doing, they often shared “the same conceptual field” or “problem-space” with other secular thinkers who were equally concerned with the place of the committed intellectual activist, the rethinking of the assumptions of progress and the temporal framework of the West, the reevaluation of the nahda as a cultural and intellectual project, and the re-imagining and reform of the postcolonial polity. The decolonization of the Arab intellectual heritage for Qutb, much like the decolonization of Iranian society for the intellectual and activist ‘Ali Shari’ati (1933–1977), was thus inextricably linked to harnessing the “catalytic power of religious imagination” toward the revolutionary ends of decolonization. Indeed, Qutb and Shari’ati would come to share a view of Islam as an ideological totality, a dialectical inversion of the Marxist totality.

Qutb’s shift from a romantic idea of the Qur’an as an expressive aesthetic experience capable of

\[34 \text{Roussillon, “Trajectoires réformistes,” 95. Indeed, the categorization of thinkers as either religious or secular is itself oftentimes problematic, but is retained here to signal their figuration within the wider literature.}


\[36 \text{Sayyid Qutb, Ma rakat al-Islam wa-l-Ra’smaliyya (Cairo, 1951); Mustafa al-Siba’i, Ishirakiiyyat al-Islam (Cairo, 1960); Roussillon, “Trajectoires réformistes,” 116. As Aimé Césaire famously framed it in the aftermath of the Second World War, “‘Europe’ is morally, spiritually indefensible”; Césaire, Discourse on Colonialism, trans. Joan Pinkham (1972; repr., New York, 2000), 32.}

\[37 \text{Muhammad al-Bahi, al-Fikr al-Islami al-Hadith wa-Silatuhu bi-l-Isti’mar al-Gharbi (Cairo, 1960). Al-Bahi’s text—which formed the basis of much of Sayyid Qutb’s Khasa’is al-Tasawwur al-Islami wa-Maqawimatuhu (Cairo, 1965)—can easily be read as a polemic against the West and an attempt to purify the cultural realm of “Western” elements. Nevertheless, its argument mobilizes the very concept of ideology that it sought to critique and distinguish itself from; al-Bahi, al-Fikr al-Islami al-Hadith wa-Silatuhu bi-l-Isti’mar al-Gharbi, iii.}

\[38 \text{David Scott defines a “problem-space” not only as a discursive context, but also as “an ensemble of questions and answers around which a horizon of identifiable stakes (conceptual as well as ideological-political stakes) hangs.” What defines the problem-space, therefore, are “the particular questions that seem worth asking and the kinds of answers that seem worth having . . . a problem-space is very much a context of dispute, a context of rival views, a context . . . of knowledge and power.” Scott, Conscripts of Modernity: The Tragedy of Colonial Enlightenment (Durham, N.C., 2004), 4; on the conceptual field and the discursive formation, see Foucault, The Archaeology of Knowledge, 126–131. Despite this, as Zvi Ben-Dor Benite points out, historians continue to “struggle with the place of religious Muslim intellectuals and clergy in debates about modernity in Islamic societies”; Benite, “Modernity: The Sphinx and the Historian,” American Historical Review 116, no. 3 (June 2011): 638–652, quotation from 649.}

sought to refashion Islam as an ideological contender within the modern postcolonial polity. Both mobilized language that resonated with Marxism: an activist organic vanguard, as well as the language of dynamism, realism, revolution, and freedom from servitude.41

It would be a mistake, then, to view these figures differently from some of their literary counterparts. They, too, belonged to an intelligentsia who had launched a war of position in the 1940s and 1950s against intellectuals of the previous generation—those who, to their younger peers, symbolized the all too eager appropriation of the West. Such debates can be tracked in the short-lived literary journal al-Fajr al-Jadid, founded in Egypt in 1945, and in the journal al-Adab, founded in Lebanon in 1953, which in its inaugural manifesto called for the “imperative for every citizen . . . to mobilize all his efforts for the express object of liberating the homeland, raising its political, social and intellectual level.”42 Scholars have explored the question of commitment (iltizam) in the Arab literary scene as part of “the larger literary iconoclasm and political radicalism that swept the Arab world,” leading to the creation of “new narrative languages adequate to the experience of the contemporary subject”—an agenda, one might argue, that was not entirely dissimilar from that of Qutb, and later Shari’ati.43 I am not suggesting, of course, that Qutb’s or Shari’ati’s oeuvre be thought of as merely epiphenomenal to the political context or objective of decolonization. They were, to be sure, rooted in a longstanding Islamic discursive tradition.44 At the same time, we can no longer afford to think of decolonization as a purely secular affair.

Placing the religious and the secular within a single discursive field is not merely subjective transformation (an Islamic sublime) to a view of Islam as an ideological totality or conception (tasawwur) was thus in a sense comparable to Shari’ati’s shifting mobilization of Islam in the Iranian context. Sayyid Qutb, al-Taswir al-Fanni fi al-Qur’an (Cairo, 1963); Qutb, Khasa’s is al-Tasawwur al-Islami wa-Mugawwimatuhu; ‘Ali Shari’ati, On the Sociology of Islam: Lectures, trans. Hamid Algar (Berkeley, Calif., 1979); Shari’ati, Marxism and Other Western Fallacies: An Islamic Critique, trans. Richard Campbell (Oneonta, N.Y., 1980); Arash Davari, “A Return to Which Self? ‘Ali Shari’ati and Frantz Fanon on the Political Ethics of Insurrectionary Violence,” Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East 34, no. 1 (2014): 86–105.


42 As cited by Samah Selim, The Novel and the Rural Imaginary in Egypt, 1885–1985 (London, 2004), 138. Selim discusses the generation that came of age during the Second World War as a new intelligentsia who rejected the liberal models of intellectual engagement of “founational intellectuals (jil al-ruwwad)” (130–139). Although occupying an earlier generational space, Qutb similarly partook in the struggle against the old guard.


an intellectual exercise in denaturalizing our conceptual categories. Rather, it may be the very condition of possibility for a postcolonial politics, as the bloody events of Egypt in the summer of 2013 and the subsequent violent attempts to excise Islamists from the body politic have shown. Perhaps, as Anouar Abdel-Malek suggested, the central task of decolonization lay in the innovative synthesis “between these radical and convergent wings of the two great tendencies of contemporary Arab thought.”

ARGUABLY, THE TWENTIETH-CENTURY INTELLECTUAL most widely associated with the archives of decolonization in the Middle East is Frantz Fanon, who remains the paradigmatic archetype of the decolonizing intellectual, even when he is deeply problematized. Yet he may not have had as illustrious a career in the Middle East as elsewhere. Fanon’s book The Wretched of the Earth was translated into Arabic as Mu’adhddhabu al-Ard by Sami al-Durubi and Jamal al-Atasi shortly after its publication in French and was republished in 1967–1968 in Damascus, Syria, under ministerial auspices. We know very little of the original context of its translation in the Arab East, for instance; nor do we know much about its reception in the wider Arab world, other than that its impact was marginal, and that the text was read by some members of the Left. In fact, the preface to the Arabic edition registers disagreements with Fanon’s conceptualization of the “national question,” arguing that the book was written first and foremost for Africa, albeit with wide-ranging resonances for the colonized Third World intellectual in search of the end of colonialism through violence and the pursuit of freedom and dignity.

Yet there were at least two exceptions to this lukewarm reception of Fanon in the Middle East. Perhaps unsurprisingly, Fanon’s notion of the salvific and liberatory effects of violence resonated strongly with Fatah, the Palestinian liberation organ-

45 For an insightful discussion of political identity (secular and Islamist), sovereignty, and contemporary events in Egypt, see Talal Asad, “Thinking about Tradition, Religion, and Politics in Egypt Today,” Critical Inquiry, http://criticalinquiry.uchicago.edu/thinking_about_tradition_religion_and_politics_in_egypt_today/.


48 See Ilyas Murqus, al-Marksiyya wa-l-Masa’la al-Qawmiyya (Beirut, 1970), 245. Murqus mentions the disputes about the accuracy and completeness of the translation. Tareq Y. Ismael notes that The Wretched of the Earth resonated with small sections of the Arab left; see his The Communist Movement in the Arab World (London, 2005), 103. Jurj Tarabishi discusses Fanon in the preface to his translation of Herbert Marcuse’s One-Dimensional Man, al-Insan dhu al-Bu’d al-Wahid, trans. Jurj Tarabishi (Beirut, 1988). See also Bardawil on Fanon and the militants of Socialist Lebanon in “Dreams of a Dual Birth.”
nization formed in the late 1950s that centered on revolutionary armed struggle. Similarly, in the early 1960s, the Iranian intellectual ‘Ali Shari’ati, then pursuing his doctoral studies in Paris, became enamored with The Wretched of the Earth, which he translated into Persian along with two of his colleagues. Although Shari’ati’s engagement with Fanon left an indelible mark on his lectures and influenced his view of the insurgent events in 1960s and 1970s Iran as part and parcel of Third World struggles, he remained acutely critical of Fanon’s view of religion as an atavistic remnant that should play little substantive part in decolonization struggles.

Writing in 1967, the Moroccan theorist and historian Abdallah Laroui critiqued the assumption among Western intellectuals that Fanon’s ideas were universally applicable to the Third World, arguing that they did not address the specificity of the Maghreb and Arab world. Indeed, while Fanon’s writings have been viewed as exemplary of an internationalist call to revolutionary decolonization, the relationship between national liberation, social inequalities, and regional or internationalist agendas had been widely addressed by local scholars in the Middle East, but was little discussed in Western writings. An erudite and woefully understudied figure, a Marxist scholar from Latakia, Syria, named Ilyas Murqus (1929–1991), is part of a crucial chapter in what we might term the lost archive of Arab Marxism. Murqus, despite a prolific and wholly original corpus of writings centered on the comparative history of Marxism-Leninism, the history of the Communist parties in the Arab world, and the critique of nationalist thought, has yet to be translated into English, which may account for his neglect in the Anglophone literature. The few Western scholars who have addressed Murqus have tended to focus on his encyclopedic cataloguing of

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Arab Communist parties and movements more than on the substance of his thought or his own contribution to the broader history of Marxism and decolonization. Even while acknowledging the “great impact” of his writings on “the new Arab Left,” in other words, they have treated Murqus as symptomatic of larger geo-historical trends in the era of decolonization, whether as a response to a postcolonial “malaise” of the Arabs or a reaction to local neopatriarchy. As such, he has been folded into a declensionist narrative of Arab modernism’s failure to address decolonization, rather than viewed, like Fanon, as simultaneously an actor and an original theorist of an ongoing project of decolonization.

Of principal significance is Murqus’s casting of decolonization as a world-historical process through a rethinking of Lenin’s classic formulation in his 1917 pamphlet *Imperialism, the Highest Stage of Capitalism*. Despite the scholarly impulse to represent Arab Marxism and Arab socialism as derivative incarnations of a purportedly pure Marxism of European provenance, Murqus was no mere ideologue, but an innovative theoretician and practitioner in his own right. Having left the Syrian Communist Party, he remained an independent Marxist for much of his life, without party affiliations of his own even as he defended the role of political parties in the anti-imperialist struggle. Like other Marxists before him, Murqus theorized the significance of colonialism for any understanding of revolutionary struggle, arguing that unification was “part of the Arab national democratic-socialist revolution as it evolved and transformed into the struggle against imperialism . . . [S]ocialism is not the logical, historical, and strategic precondition for Arab unification; rather, it is unification that is the logical, historical, and strategic precondition for socialism and communism.” The rethinking of revolutionary struggle, therefore, necessitated a reconsideration of the role of national struggle, not as a series of parochial nationalisms, but rather as a project of Arab unification. While many Arab Communists had viewed pan-Arabism with a high degree of skepticism, Murqus viewed it as the antithesis of European imperialism, even as he critiqued what he perceived to be the naïve pan-Arabism of towering figures such as Sati’ al-Husri. The alleged universality of the national question, carried on the shoulders of the proletariat, would not replicate the Prussian or French models but would be specific to the contemporary


57 Skepticism toward pan-Arabism among Communists was related to the subscription to the Stalinist doctrine of revolution by stages, wherein the socialist revolution needed to be preceded by a bourgeois nationalist revolution (one that should focus on a national alliance with the bourgeoisie to achieve decolonization, rather than a regional coalition), as well as a belief that both Nasirism and Ba’thism were fueled by anti-Communist interests.
colonial reality of the Arabs; it would function simultaneously as a strike against empire and a path toward revolution and international class struggle.\textsuperscript{58}

Even in writings after 1967, therefore, Murqus saw no antagonism between pan-Arabism and the simultaneously national and international struggle of decolonization, once it was properly understood within a world-historical framework. His oeuvre represents a nuanced non-mechanistic, non-economistic, contingent dialectical materialism whereby material conditions set limits and allow possibilities but do not dictate outcomes. A figure critical of the Fichtean view of bourgeois nationalism, of the ideology of the Ba‘th Party as representative of narrow class interests, of the Stalinist line of local Communists, and of the empty slogans of pseudo-Marxist intellectuals surely has much to teach us about the critical and complex positions and political disagreements on Nasirism, Ba‘thism, and Communism that existed within decolonizing states.\textsuperscript{59}

At the same time, Murqus’s lifework invites us to examine the very material conditions of the decolonizing state itself, conditions that historians have yet to sufficiently explore in depth.\textsuperscript{60} For Murqus and other members of the intelligentsia, such as Sayyid Qutb and the activist and Syrian Muslim Brother Mustafa al-Siba‘i (author of the widely read 1960 text \textit{Islamic Socialism}), the question of decolonization could not be separated from the question of capitalism.\textsuperscript{61} Nevertheless, historians have barely grazed the surface of the history of economic thought and the attendant political economy of postcolonial state formation.\textsuperscript{62} Further exploration of these

\textsuperscript{58} Murqus, \textit{al-Marksiya wa-l-Mas‘ala al-Qawmiyya}, 175–185. One would need to add to this complex picture the political positionality of the Kurds and other ethnic and religious minorities. The Kurds represented an “interstate colony” that, while sympathetic to overcoming imperialist national borders, could not but oppose the ethnocentrism of pan-Arabism. See Haj, \textit{The Making of Iraq}, 119; on Kurdistan as an “interstate colony” see Ismail Beşikçi, \textit{Kurdistan: An Interstate Colony} (Sydney, 1988). I thank Caroline McKusick for bringing this source to my attention. Due to limitations of space, I cannot adequately address the minority question in the Middle East and its relationship to the archives of decolonization, but see Sarah Stein’s essay in this roundtable; Saba Mahmood, “Religious Freedom, the Minority Question, and Geopolitics in the Middle East,” \textit{Comparative Studies in Society and History} 54, no. 2 (2012): 418–446; Ussama Makdisi, “The Sectarianism of Coexistence: Mythologizing Religion in the Middle East,” \textit{Comparative Studies in Society and History} 54, no. 3 (2012): 421–443; Sherene Seikaly, \textit{When Capitalists Collide: Business Conflict and the End of Empire in Egypt} (Berkeley, Calif., 1995); Robert L. Tignor, \textit{Capitalism and Nationalism at the End of Empire: The Making of Iraq}, 119; on Kurdistan \textit{al-Marksiyya wa-l-Mas‘ala al-Qawmiyya}, 381–386. It was for this reason that Murqus supported Egypt’s union with Syria; see \textit{Nazarīyat al-Hiżb ‘ind Linīn wa-l-Mawqif al-‘Arabī al-Rahīn}, 381–386.


\textsuperscript{60} Indeed, Murqus urged his colleagues to pay attention to the specific economic realities of the Arab states, arguing that Arab Marxists had focused too much attention on global economic flows between former colonial powers and colonized states, rather than on intra-Arab trade and economic relations that could lead to an integrated regional economy. See Murqus, \textit{al-Marksiya fi ‘Astīn}, 348–361. It was for this reason that Murqus supported Egypt’s union with Syria; see \textit{Nazarīyat al-Hiżb ‘ind Linīn wa-l-Mawqif al-‘Arabī al-Rahīn}, 381–386.


themes has the potential to contribute to debates about the history of non-Western economies, economic disagreements regarding the 1958 union between Egypt and Syria and splits between Ba’thists and Communists, disputes between Iraq’s ‘Abd al-Karim Qasim and Nasir, the history of the Sino-Soviet split in the Arab world, and the intensely contested nature of five-year plans. In short, we know very little of this history, which might reveal the decolonizing state as the site of immense contestation and struggle rather than the locus of developmentalist platitudes. Tracing, in historically specific ways, the new modes of governance, expertise, and social knowledge that defined the era of decolonization may allow for a deeper and less reconciled understanding of the fraught nature of the postcolonial polity.

Ilyas Murqus and Sayyid Qutb were part of a group of thinkers and activists who conceptualized decolonization as simultaneously a question of political revolution (regional sovereignty and self-determination) and social revolution (eradicating social inequalities exacerbated by the intersection of colonialism and capitalism). Both imagined decolonization as part of “projects that were explicitly anti-imperial yet neither reducible nor opposed to nationalism”; both thus imagined post-independence as a regional, rather than merely national, affair; and both actively engaged debates on violence and guerrilla warfare. Both placed the question of Palestine, as an ever-present reminder of the incomplete nature of decolonization in the region, at the heart of decolonization—a question significant to all of the postcolonial Arab struggles to varying degrees. They thus occupied the same discursive terrain or


63 Oral histories conducted by the Economic and Business History Research Center with Egyptian economists such as Fawzi Mansur, Ibrahim al-'Issawi, and Samir Amin are highly instructive with respect to political economic disputes over decolonization; for example, Fawzi Mansur, oral history conducted by Malak Labib (FM 1-2), March 2008, Economic and Business History Research Center, American University in Cairo. I owe special thanks to Randa Kaldas for providing me with access to these materials.

64 Whether these two revolutions should occur simultaneously or be staged in succession was a dilemma faced by many anticolonial nationalists and was widely discussed at the Second Congress of the Communist International. See Vladimir Lenin, “Preliminary Draft Theses on the National and the Colonial Questions for the Second Congress of the Communist International,” in V. I. Lenin, Collected Works, 4th English ed., vol. 31: April–December 1920 (Moscow, 1966), 144–151. Jamal 'Abd al-Nasir explicitly referred to the political revolution and the social revolution (al-thawra al-siyasiyya wa-l-thawra al-iijima'iya) in Falsafat al-Thawra (Cairo, 1953).

65 Manu Goswami, “Imaginary Futures and Colonial Internationalisms,” American Historical Review 117, no. 5 (December 2012): 1461–1485, quotation from 1461–1462; Goswami is referring here to colonial interwar internationalism, while critiquing the “depiction of decolonization as a linear transition from empire to nation” (1462). Thus, Sayyid Qutb noted that there was no contradiction between Arab nationalism and pan-Islamism; “Mabadi al-'Alam al-Hurr,” al-Risalah 21 (1953): 14–16; Murqus, al-Marksiyiya wa-l-Mus'alat al-Qawmiyya. On violence, see Syed Qutb, Milestones, trans. S. Badrul Hasan (Karachi, 1981); Ilyas Murqus, 'Afwiyat al-Nazariyya fi al-'Amal al-Fida'i (Beirut, 1970).

66 Calvert, Sayyid Qutb and the Origins of Radical Islamism, 99–101, 120–122; Ilyas Murqus, al-Mugawama al-Filastiniyya wa-l-Mawqif al-Rahin (Beirut, 1971). See also Edward W. Said, The Question of Palestine (1979; repr., New York, 1992); on Palestine as a model for political and aesthetic revolution in the postcolonial Maghreb, see Olivia C. Harrison, “Cross-Colonial Poetics: Souffles-Anfas and the Figure of Palestine,” PMLA 128, no. 2 (2013): 353–369. Yet, as Yezid Sayigh has shown, political commitments to Palestine were belied by the realities of regional interstate rivalries and the desire to avoid
problem-space, namely the rejection of a centrist and reformist anticolonial nationalism in favor of a revolutionary mode of decolonization. To archive them separately would be to reify the distinction between Islamic and secular thought, and therefore to miss the opportunity to address the question of decolonization from the perspective of ostensibly vastly differing ideological positions.

In exploring the promise and possibility of a “history without documents,” we are reminded that the archive exists in both material and ideational iterations. While scholarly attention must remain focused on the continued destruction of archives in the Middle East amidst political and historical paroxysms, so too must attention be paid to our archival imaginaries—the ways in which the intellectual traditions of the era of decolonization have been appropriated, remembered, or forgotten. Thus I underscore the need to denaturalize the dominant categories and dystopic narratives of Middle Eastern social and cultural history, narratives of awakening followed by catastrophe or triumph followed by despair. Rather than search for the root causes of a present postcolonial melancholia, as tempting as that might be, we might be better served by the reconstruction of the disparate “horizons of expectation” and “indeterminate futures” that decolonization, as a complex series of both historical experiences and ongoing events, offers up.67 This will require that we attend to archives both shadow and real, and conditions both intellectual and material, as we look to the textured local debates, endogenous forces, and minor literatures of the period of decolonization.

confrontation with Israel. With the collapse of the United Arab Republic in 1961 and along with it the anticipation of Arab unification as a pathway to Palestinian liberation, and the success of the Algerian liberation movement, a guerrilla Third World resistance ideology centered on a belief in armed struggle emerged within the Palestinian movement. Sayigh, Armed Struggle and the Search for State, pt. I, especially chaps. 4–5. Palestine, one could argue, formed the limit zone between an ideological commitment to a decolonizing internationalism and the pragmatic realities of national liberation.


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