

BOOK REVIEWS

Islam against the West: Shakib Arslan and the Campaign for Islamic Nationalism by William L. Cleveland. Austin: *University of Texas Press* (Modern Middle East Series, No. 10), 1985. Pp. xxii + 223.

As the author of this superb biography reminds us, Shakib Arslan, the 'Prince of Eloquence', was a master of self-promotion. As a publicist and self-publicist, Arslan kept his name in print by producing a journalistic and literary corpus of formidable proportions: Cleveland estimates that he wrote 20 books and 2,000 articles. His polemical periodical, *La Nation arabe*, had an avid readership in Europe, among sympathizers and critics alike. And so it is all the more striking that Arslan should have eluded thorough study in the West, which he made his battleground for Islamic independence. Cleveland points to one explanation for this neglect: the Islamic unity championed by Arslan was defeated by secular nationalism. His efforts were spent in vain, earning him posthumous obscurity. To this one must add the unwillingness of Arslan's family to permit access to his voluminous papers. Even Arslan's Arab biographers, who were competent but never critical, failed to win their full co-operation. So did Cleveland, who was told in 1974 by Mayy Junbalat, née Arslan, that her father's papers had been sent off to Morocco, where they languish in government custody. To write a subject's life without his papers is an enterprise fraught with danger. Yet Cleveland has met the documentary challenge with such resourcefulness that one doubts whether a radically different truth could ever emerge from Arslan's own papers. Their concealment has now become all the more pointless.

Shakib Arslan was a man of one vocation and many careers. Born in 1869 to a powerful Druze family in the Lebanese Shuf, he might have anticipated a long career as chief of a clan, defending the interests and honor of his kin and folk, and rallying them to arms whenever persuasion failed. This is precisely the role of Arslan's grandson, Walid Junbalat, who today guides the small Druze community of Lebanon in and out of confrontations with various militias, states, and world powers. Arslan did try his hand at chieftainship, mostly out of a sense of *noblesse oblige*. But his education, eloquence, and literary ability cultivated within him a sense of mission too ambitious ever to find satisfaction in the services of his sect. Arslan was touched at a precocious age by Afghani and Abduh, and drank from the literary fountains of Istanbul and Cairo while still a youth. In this heady world of ideas, he learned the dimensions of Islam's crisis, and fixed upon the Ottoman Empire as the last bulwark against the subjugation of Islamdom to an insatiable West. As the nineteenth century closed, Arslan chose as his vocation the defense of all Islam, becoming a fiercely patriotic Ottoman and a cosmopolitan pan-Islamist.

Cleveland adroitly sets the scene for that most fateful of Arslan's choices: his support for the Ottoman Empire's entry into a world war that would destroy it and send Arslan into permanent exile. Few Arabs rendered as many services to the Ottoman war party and its German ally as Arslan. His belligerent ardor was matched only by his contempt for those who plotted with the British to foment Arab revolt. A romantic intellectual without a dash of military judgement, Arslan adored the reckless Enver, whom he continued to serve after final defeat, during Enver's ill-fated exile in Berlin and Moscow. Enver's demise cut Arslan adrift. In the prime of his own life, Arslan saw his empire divided, his military idols smashed, his homeland occupied by a foreign

power. In his determined defense of Islam, he would have to draw up a new personal order of battle. While others continued the struggle on native soil, Arslan chose to pamphleteer on colonialism's doorstep, in Switzerland between the two world wars.

It is here that Cleveland's sources become rich and his narrative vivid. Arslan took it upon himself to represent the Arabs before the League of Nations, and especially before the League's Permanent Mandates Commission. He held his formal brief from the fractious Syro-Palestinian Congress, but actually answered to no one in his campaign against the French and British mandates. He soon became a tremendous nuisance. Arslan bombarded the Mandates Commission with petitions, attended meetings of assorted oppressed peoples, hosted known agitators in his home, and published his views in any journal which would print them. Police and intelligence files bearing his name grew thick with reports of his doings and his intercepted mail. Cleveland makes thorough use of this material, particularly the files of the Swiss, who were compelled by French pressure to keep a close watch on Arslan's activities. With Arslan's publication of *La Nation arabe*, beginning in 1930, his views found a regular and influential outlet, adding still more to his fame and notoriety.

Cleveland argues convincingly against the claim of Arslan's Arab biographers that Arslan embraced Arab nationalism during this period, and narrowed the aim of his campaign to Arab independence. In fact, there is overwhelming evidence for a deepening of Arslan's interest and involvement in the wider struggle of all Muslims against foreign rule. Arslan never made the full passage to Arabism, but formulated an all-embracing Islamic nationalism, which included but transcended the Arab cause. *La Nation arabe* was misleadingly titled, for it carried dozens of articles on subjects remote from Arab concerns then and now.

It must remain an open question whether this unwillingness to give some focus to his struggle enhanced or diminished its effect. Arslan came to exercise a vast influence in North Africa, and tirelessly sought support in the wider Muslim world for the defense of Islam's western flank. This campaign reached its apex with his famous agitation against the Berber *dahir*, and much of Arslan's later reputation he owed to his success in exciting the Arab East over this dire threat to Islam in Morocco. On the other hand, he sank nearly as much effort into the cause of the Balkan Muslim minorities, whose plight failed to fire the imagination of wider Islam. But for Cleveland, this Islamic nationalism is important as evidence for the underlying continuity of Arslan's values and beliefs, which made him a man of unvarying principle and integrity. He was no precursor, but he did reformulate the familiar message of Islamic solidarity in a rich language that many Muslims found inspiring.

Still, Arslan did not attempt to reformulate Islam itself, a point which Cleveland rightly underlines. Why this hesitation, in a man whose outspoken opinion knew no other limits? Cleveland suggests that Arslan lacked an interest in theology. But to this one must add Arslan's own awareness that his very standing as a believer was not beyond question. It is not clear whether Arslan remained in any sense a Druze, having declared quite early that he regarded himself a Muslim like all Muslims. Even so, he was schooled in a climate of religious relativism, and was deeply influenced by radical reformers and freethinkers. Cleveland makes allowance for these influences in describing how Arslan presented Islam to others, but is too wary of his evidence to ask whether Arslan genuinely believed in Islam as religious logic. Did Arslan need the crutch of personal belief? In a chapter on Arslan's view of tradition, Cleveland seems poised to answer, but he chooses not to leap into the void, and one is left to draw the conclusion that Arslan was satisfied with his claim that modernity and belief could be reconciled. But if evidence for religious doubt ever comes to light, as it did when Afghani and his papers became the object of critical scrutiny by scholars, the careful reader of this biography will not be surprised. Cleveland has warned us that Arslan preferred to leave the defense

of Islam as a theological system to others. When Arslan wrote of Islam, he meant to evoke a sense of group solidarity which could inspire mass resistance to foreign encroachment. Religion was useful since it strengthened that solidarity, and infused it with power. This is a position which has been reconciled as often with agnosticism as with belief, and it is interesting that Cleveland offers no comment on the degree of Arslan's personal piety. From this account, it would seem that political integrity, not religious piety, was Arslan's strong suit.

Yet how did he maintain this integrity when faced with the need to raise funds for his work? Subsidies kept Arslan afloat during these years, and he became indebted to many patrons. All of them had political aspirations, regarded him as a good investment, and expected a return on their money. Cleveland is quite right in determining that Arslan could not be bought by such subsidies. But Arslan became expert in misleading his patrons to believe that he could.

Consider Arslan's relationship with the ex-Khedive Abbas Hilmi II, one of Arslan's most important patrons between 1922 and 1931. There can be no doubt that Abbas wanted to use Arslan to build support for his bid for the throne of an independent Syria. Arslan knew it. But Cleveland maintains that it was Abbas who deceived Arslan, by concealing his true ambitions for close to a decade. Here Cleveland has relied upon Arslan's own published apologia, which, like all of Arslan's accounts of his ties to patrons, smacks of self-justification. No added credibility is lent to this account by its appearance in Arslan's letters to Rashid Rida (released years ago for publication not by Arslan's family but by Rida's heirs). Truth in these letters is twisted by the fact that Arslan dreaded Rida's moral judgement even more than public ridicule. Theirs was not simply the intimate friendship described by Cleveland, but a relationship infused with moral and religious tension, and worthy of deep analysis.

For an accurate impression of Arslan's relationship with Abbas, one must turn elsewhere, to file 118 of the Abbas Hilmi Papers in Durham University Library. This file, which somehow eluded Cleveland, contains some 300 pages of Arslan's letters to Abbas, and here the picture becomes clear. Arslan encouraged the ex-Khedive's vain ambition in a masterful way, leading his patron to believe that Arslan would declare himself for Abbas – when the right moment came. When Abbas finally made his bid in 1931, and Arslan was called upon to return interest on Abbas's investment, he naturally defaulted. The relationship ended. Abbas could never have owned Arslan, but Arslan intentionally led him into thinking he could, an Arslanian ruse which the 'Prince of Eloquence' would employ whenever it suited him.

Abd al-Aziz Ibn Saud also extended his patronage to Arslan, and Cleveland accurately describes the many ways in which Arslan exalted the new king, by publishing praise of Ibn Saud's regime at every turn. Cleveland tends to regard Arslan's attachment to Ibn Saud as a complete devotion, inspired by the Arabian monarch's Islamic fervor and martial prowess. Arslan was so enamored of his hero, claims Cleveland, that Arslan favored Ibn Saud as head of a possible confederation of Syria, Iraq, and Arabia, and Cleveland quotes a letter to Rida in 1931 in which Arslan declared that 'I prefer no one over Ibn Saud, not even Faysal'.

Not even Faysal? Arslan's declaration to Rida that he preferred Ibn Saud came in a letter written to persuade Rida that *Faysal* should have the throne; it was a rhetorical flourish, meant to disarm Rida's objections. In fact, Arslan's well-known flirtation with Faysal in the early 1930s led Ibn Saud to cut off Arslan completely. This Arslan revealed in a letter which he wrote some years later to Hajj Amin al-Husayni (preserved in a collection described below). When Arslan visited Faysal during the latter's stay in Berne in 1931, Arslan urged him to unify Syria and Iraq under one throne, on which Faysal would sit. 'You needn't promote yourself', Arslan told Faysal. 'We will handle the promotion'. When Ibn Saud got wind of Arslan's role in a scheme which would

have greatly strengthened his rival, 'I lost all my standing with him', wrote Arslan, 'and he cut off relations with me. I had received heavy subventions from him because, the truth be told, he was generous to an extreme. And all this was lost because I called for the unification of Syria and Iraq; that is, I put general Arab interests before my personal interests'. Khaldun S. Husry has published the gist of a remarkable letter by Arslan, in which he actually tried to convince Ibn Saud that Faysal's occupancy of a combined Syrian-Iraqi throne was in Ibn Saud's best interest! Ibn Saud understandably could not follow this sort of logic, and shut off the money supply. With the failure of the confederation plan, Ibn Saud relented, but Arslan admitted that he never again enjoyed the same standing with Ibn Saud as before.

The episode confirmed how little personal devotion Arslan felt, even to his most generous patron. To advance his sacred cause, he needed the support of more powerful men, and brilliantly led them to believe they could guarantee his loyalty through their patronage. They inevitably felt cheated in the end. Much more remains to be done in exploring Arslan's alliances with Muslim rulers, for they resemble Afghani's in their complexity and volatility.

Cleveland has worked from a more substantial dossier in reconstructing Arslan's most dangerous liaisons, with Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy. If the British and French were to be ousted from Muslim lands, popular resistance would never suffice. Arslan had seen popular revolts put down time and again. On his own initiative, he sought an alliance with great but disinterested European powers, who would guarantee Arab and Muslim independence in return for Arab and Muslim support in the event of a general war. Cleveland has drawn upon official German and Italian archives to follow the diplomatic dance which produced the understanding between Arslan and the Axis powers.

Obviously, Arslan's services were needed more by Italy than Germany, since Italy, colonizer of Libya, hardly had the image of a disinterested power in Muslim eyes. Arslan's campaign to cast Italy in a favorable light (for which the Italians showed their appreciation by occasional donations) opened Arslan to severe criticism, even by his admirers. But Arslan would not relent. Through his dealings with Mussolini, he had concluded that Italy's Mediterranean ambitions could help to rid the region of the British and French. Once that end had been achieved, Germany could be relied upon to check the Italian colonial impulse. With this in mind, Arslan assiduously cultivated old friends in the German Foreign Office, who thought it useful to hear him out from time to time. Those of his coreligionists who could not fathom the genius of this scheme, and so accused Arslan of selling himself for a few lire, became his worst enemies. Under the hail of their criticism, Arslan became obsessed with the defense of his personal integrity. Cleveland treats this most compromising of Arslan's liaisons with admirable insight and sensitivity, concluding that Arslan again acted on principles, which he again followed straight into disaster.

It was Arslan's last shred of sound judgement which kept his feet firmly on neutral Swiss soil during the war. Failing health and force of habit also made a move to Berlin or Rome unthinkable. But the Swiss authorities had become strict with him. They banned publication of *La Nation arabe*, and informed Arslan that he would not be readmitted if he left the country. Cleveland shows us an ailing and frustrated old man, sliding into debt and bereft of real influence.

It may prove possible to modify this assessment on the basis of a source which was beyond Cleveland's ken and reach when he conducted his research: the complete collection of Arslan's wartime correspondence to Hajj Amin al-Husayni in Berlin exile. The Americans found these letters with the Mufti's other papers in Austria, where he had abandoned them during his flight from fallen Germany. The Israeli Foreign Ministry had the papers microfilmed in their entirety many years ago, and the materials

were finally deposited in the Israel State Archives in 1984. The collection contains 370 pages of correspondence from Arslan to the Mufti, conveyed via the German diplomatic pouch.

Here we have Arslan's running commentary on the course of the war, and his tireless admonitions to the Mufti to pursue this or that line of political action. Arslan exercised an elderly mentor's influence over the Mufti, who kept Arslan going with occasional subventions. These letters also provide evidence, which Cleveland found lacking, for the wartime appearance of *La Nation arabe*. By 1943, four issues had been published in co-operation with the German Foreign Office. After an interruption, the journal reappeared in 1944 in Budapest, the product of the same collaboration. According to Arslan, the periodical carried many articles on such subjects as Muslim co-operation with the Axis powers and the 'plots of the Jews'. If a set of the wartime *La Nation arabe* could be located, this would represent a major contribution to understanding Arslan's self-appointed role as an Axis propagandist. Cleveland's conclusion that Arslan published very little during the war must already be revised. Arslan's letters relate that one of the journal's wartime issues ran to 100 pages, and that he wrote ceaselessly, despite his doctor's advice against such mental exertions.

In concluding this balanced and elegant portrait of a controversial life, Cleveland chooses to regard Arslan's last few years until his death in 1946 as tragic. Arslan was 'impoverished, ill, and ignored', and Swiss police reports 'revealed an aging man living apart from his wife and son in a residence hotel, passing the days in tearooms with his newspapers, seeing few visitors other than his son, and spending an inordinate amount of time frequenting his bank'. So he appeared from a distance, to those assigned to tail him. But in a letter to the Mufti, we learn of an inner reflection which gave Arslan satisfaction during his last years. His enemies had 'died in my lifetime ... I take no malicious joy in death, for I will die as they did. But God made allowance for me, that I might witness the deaths of those who incited aggression and made slander against me'. A strange thought in which to find tranquility, and a stranger one to commit to writing; but perhaps not, for a Druze chieftain.