

## THE MAKING OF A FREE THINKER OF ISLAM (PART I) MUHAMMAD ASAD: THE PAKISTAN YEARS

*Muzaffar Iqbal*

Austria-born Leopold Weiss (1900-1992), known as Muhammad Asad since his conversion to Islam in 1926, gained world fame through his impressionistic *Road to Mecca* (1954), which encapsulates his conversion and sojourn in Arabia (1927-32). The publication of this quasi-autobiography also brought wider readership to his previous publications and notice of his involvement in Islamic revivalist movements. The publication of *The Message of the Qurʾān* (1980) further cemented his reputation as an Islamic scholar with a modernistic approach. More recently, he has been promoted as an ambassador of Islam, a bridge between Islam and the West, and a rationalist who truly understands the spirit of Islam. A master's thesis was written on his political thought at the University of McGill (1998); the entrance square to the UN Office in Vienna was named Muhammad Asad Platz (2008). Given his Jewish background, he is often described as builder of bridges between religious communities. *Homecoming of the Heart*, the sequel to *Road to Mecca*, jointly written by Asad and his fourth wife, Pola Hamida, was posthumously published in 2012.

Over the last half century, interest in the life and thought of Muhammad Asad has emerged and dissipated time and again. A biography (in German) has explored contours of his life up to his conversion, and a two-volume anthology has collected various writings about him, but no comprehensive study of the intellectual makeup of this remarkable Muslim has been undertaken to date.

The present article is Part I of an in-depth study of the intellectual and spiritual makeup of a unique Muslim within the broader twentieth-century social and political currents that produced a sea-change in the traditional lands of Islam. Asad was placed at the heart of this change, first in Arabia and then in the Indian

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Muzaffar Iqbal is the President of Center for Islamic Sciences. Email: [cis@cis-ca.org](mailto:cis@cis-ca.org).

Subcontinent, where he witnessed and participated in the freedom struggle for Pakistan, was granted Pakistani citizenship, worked at the Department of Islamic Reconstruction, and later in the foreign office. His resignation from foreign service in 1952 weakened his ties with Pakistan and he spent the remaining forty years of his life in Morocco and various European countries, before finally settling in an upscale district of Malaga, Spain, till his death.

**Keywords:** Muhammad Asad; Jewish converts to Islam; *Road to Mecca*; *Homecoming of the Heart*; Making of Saudi Arabia; Pakistan; twentieth century Islamic revivalist movements; *taqlid*; *ijtihad*; free thinkers of Islam; Qurʾān translators.

Many years later, while writing the first chapter of *Homecoming of the Heart*—the sequel to his famous *Road to Mecca*—Muhammad Asad was to recall that distant day of 1932 when he arrived at the Karachi Harbor aboard a pilgrim ship after performing his sixth Hajj.<sup>1</sup> Before leaving Jeddah, he had gone to

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1. Although Asad says “end of November,” the Hajj of 1932/1350 actually corresponds to April 17, 1932, so the date given may not be exact (pilgrims do not typically wait for months before returning home). Furthermore, in response to my query, Günther Windhager, author of a biography of Asad through 1927 (*Leopold Weiss alias Muhammad Asad: Von Galizien nach Arabien 1900-1927* [Wien: Böhlau, 2002]), confirmed an earlier date: “As can be seen from Asad’s newspaper article ‘Auf langer Fahrt’ (*Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, 6th November 1932), he left Arabia for India in the summer of 1932. Therefore, it seems quite possible that he arrived in Karachi on 17th June 1932, as it is noted in the ‘History sheet...’, which Martin Kramer has discovered” (personal communication, dated June 14, 2016). The “History Sheet”, however, does not refer to the date of Asad’s arrival in Karachi: see Martin Kramer, “The Road from Mecca: Muhammad Asad (born Leopold Weiss),” in *The Jewish Discovery of Islam: Studies in Honor of Bernard Lewis*, ed. Martin Kramer (Tel Aviv: The Moshe Dayan Center for Middle Eastern and African Studies, 1999), pp. 225-47, fn. 24, which reads: “History sheet of Herr Leopold Weiss alias Mohammad Asad Ullah Vyce. An Austrian Convert to Mohammadanism,” prepared by the Intelligence Bureau of the Government of India, included in letter from E.J.D. Colvin, Political Secretary, His Highness’ Government Jammu and Kashmir (Jammu) to Lieut.-Col. L.E. Lang, Resident in Kashmir (Sialkot), 30 January 1934, India Office Records, R/1/1/4670.” Kramer’s broad estimate of Asad’s “arrival in India at a later date than June” may not be correct because when Asad refers to resumption of his newspaper writing “after a few weeks of idleness and strolling about...I found it necessary, too, to concentrate for a while on writing of some long-delayed articles for the *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, after all, I was their special correspondent in this part of the

see the Saudi King in his palace and “kissed for the last time, according to Arabian custom, his nose-tip and forehead; whereupon he embraced me and said, “Thou must come back to us soon, O my son. Do not forget that this is thy land.””<sup>2</sup>

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world” (*Homecoming*, p. 33). Furthermore, when he goes to Kashmir, yellow “autumn flowers” were everywhere (*Homecoming*, p. 48 and *passim*).

2. Muhammad Asad and Pola Hamida Asad, *The Road to Mecca, Part 2: Homecoming of the Heart (1932-1992)* (Lahore: Truth Society, 2012), p. 25; hereafter *Homecoming*. This book has a somewhat checkered history. Shortly after the death of Muhammad Asad (February 23, 1992), Pola Hamida Asad wrote a short note in response to the obituary published in *Impact International* (10 April-7 May) by Mushtaq Parker, wherein she said that she had sent the manuscript of *Homecoming of the Heart* to the publisher and it would be available in autumn (*Impact International* [11 September-8 October, 1992], p. 39). In 2002 when I visited her in her home in Spain, she said, “Asad worked on *Homecoming of the Heart* for years, but left it unfinished. I am trying to finish it. I will send you the manuscript as soon as I am finished.” She did not elaborate on how much of the text had been written by Asad. Pola Hamida died on November 23, 2006, and apparently left all her worldly possessions, including the manuscript of *Homecoming* and other unpublished papers of Asad, with José Hidalgo, a Spaniard who was then around 45, and whom Asad had hired several years before as a driver. When she picked me up from Malaga in 2002 and took me to her residence in an upscale area not serviced by public transport, José Hidalgo was driving the car. He did not know much English, but seemed to know Pola’s habits and the household routines. I spent the better part of that day with Pola, and he drove me back to Malaga. Now he is considered to be “the legal heir of Muhammad Asad’s estate in Spain,” according to Georg Misch, the Austrian filmmaker who is making a documentary on Asad. Misch wrote in an email that “José Hidalgo cared very intensively for Pola Hamida for many years before her own death and because of that, she made him her sole heir of her [legally-binding] testament. It is unusual, I agree, but he did care for her as if she was his own family for nearly a decade as she had no one else” (personal communication, June 18, 2016).

It was Georg Misch who gave a typeset manuscript copy of *Homecoming of the Heart* to M. Ikram Chaghatai, the editor of the only published edition, when he visited Lahore in connection with his documentary. I myself saw the manuscript in the same state in which it was handed to Chaghatai. In 2012, Chaghatai published the book with his own extensive annotations on places and persons mentioned in the text (Lahore: Truth Society, 2012).

*JIS* wanted to publish two chapters from this work in the present issue, because

Asad, then thirty-two, arrived in Karachi with his third wife,<sup>3</sup> Munīra bint Ḥusayn al-Shammārī (ca. 1915–1978) of the al-Shammār tribe of Hā'il, who was almost half his age, and their eight-month-old son, Ṭalāl. “My going to India was not a sudden decision,” he wrote, “it had slowly matured during the weeks of the recent *hajj* and my encounters with some Indian Muslims who had become my friends.”<sup>4</sup> It was not, however, only his recent encounter with some Indian Muslims that had persuaded Asad to come to India. He had actually met Dr. Abd al-Ghani, “the Teacher of Afghanistan”, at the royal palace five years prior, during the Hajj of 1927, just one year after his own arrival in Arabia, and they had immediately resonated with each other. Through Abd al-Ghani, he came to know “two elderly brothers who bore the eponym ‘Kasuri’ after the Punjabi town of Kasur from which they hailed.” The elder brother was none other than ‘Abd al-Qādir, the prominent leader of the Khilafat Movement (1919-22), with whom Asad immediately felt affinity:

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it is not readily available to the scholars in the West, but in the process of confirming copyrights, Georg Misch said the heir of the estate of Muhammad Asad does not give permission for publishing these two chapters and its publication by Ikram Chaghatai was “unauthorized”. It remains unclear who typeset the manuscript and who edited the text before it reached Chaghatai, for the transliteration scheme is non-standard and is not characteristic of Asad’s own work. Misch did not respond to this question, but just sent a copy of his email to Chaghatai, in which he states, among other things, “the heir of Muhammad Asad [namely the José Hidalgo mentioned above] is deeply saddened by this unfortunate situation and requests the immediate withdrawal of the publication from the market.” As fate would have it, a Spaniard who has no connection with Asad’s lifelong intellectual efforts has become heir to all his unpublished works and worldly possessions.

3. Asad’s first marriage was with Elsa Schiemann, when he was 26 and she was 40, a widow with a son (Heinrich Schiemann) from her previous marriage. Elsa died in June 1927 shortly after their arrival in Arabia and after performing the Hajj of 1345 (which fell on June 10, 1927). In 1929, he was tricked into marrying an eleven-year-old girl from the Muṭayr tribe, whose uncle arranged the marriage, telling Asad that she was fifteen and ready for marriage. On his wedding night, Asad found out that Ruqayya was but a child. He writes, “[I] divorced the girl, having left her in the same state as she had come to me” (*The Road to Mecca*, p. 157-58.) All references to *The Road to Mecca* are from the edition published by Asad’s own publishing company (Gibraltar: Dar al-Andalus Ltd. Fourth revised edition, 1980, second reprint 1985). He then married Munīra in 1930, whom he divorced in 1952 when he married Pola Hamida. Munīra died in 1978.

4. *Homecoming*, p. 26.

Ever since I had embraced Islam in the preceding year [1926], I had been convinced that a mere reliance on the teachings of the early exponents of Islamic thought, the so-called *imams*, was not the right way to a comprehension of the message of Muhammad. What was necessary was a direct, independent approach to the Two Sources of Islam—the Qur'an and the teachings of the Prophet, forthcoming from the authentic Traditions (*ahādith*) transmitted to posterity by his Companions. This line of thought, embodied in the Indian Ahl-e-Hadith persuasion, appealed to me greatly and made it easy for me henceforth to describe myself as belonging to the Ahl-e-Hadith whenever I was asked by my Arab friends as to which madhhab—that is, school of thought—I followed. In addition, the idea underlying the Ahl-e-Hadith concept was very close to—almost identical with—the thinking of the so-called 'Wahhabis', a school of thought adhered to by almost all the population of Central and Eastern Arabia, including the House of Ibn Saud. As a result, I could identify myself fully with the religious thinking prevalent in what was to become, and remain, my spiritual home, as well as with my new Indian friends.<sup>5</sup>

If one accepts it as true,<sup>6</sup> this statement means that Asad came to Islam *already convinced* that “mere reliance” on past authorities was insufficient. But how did he reach this conviction so quickly, without knowing what the “early exponents of Islamic thought” had actually written? After all, he was then a twenty-six-year-old university dropout, who had embarked upon his independent life six years ago, in the summer of 1920, when he boarded a train for Prague bearing only “a diamond ring which my mother, who had died a year earlier, had left me. This I sold through the good offices of a waiter in Prague’s main literary café... With this fortune in my pocket, I proceeded to Berlin, where some Viennese friends introduced me to the magic circle of *littérateurs* and artists at the old Café des Westens.”<sup>7</sup> A few weeks later, Asad received a letter from his father, who was angry and disappointed by his son’s abandonment of formal academics: “I can already see you ending one day as a tramp in a roadside ditch”; to which I replied: ‘No roadside ditch for me—I will come out on top.’”<sup>8</sup>

When he ran out of cash, this “young man with journalistic aspirations”

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5. *Homecoming*, p. 29.

6. It is hard to separate fact from fiction in the *Road to Mecca*, as Martin Kramer has pointed out: “The *Road to Mecca* cannot be read as a document of historical truth about Arabia, Ibn Saud, or even the author’s life. It is an impressionistic self-portrait that suggests more than it tells. The face of its subject is in half-shadow” (“The Road from Mecca,” p. 240).

7. *Road to Mecca*, p. 60.

8. *Ibid.*

went through a series of “humiliating interviews,” he “trampled over the pavements of Berlin,” experienced hunger and want, spent his time in the company of other post-World War I Bohemian “intellectual gypsies”—until “a lucky break came” and he was introduced to the rising film director F. W. Murnau, who took him as his assistant for his new movie; his self-confidence grew and “was certainly not diminished by the fact that the leading lady of the film—a well-known and very beautiful actress—did not prove averse to a flirtation with the director’s young assistant”. When this and another short-term job ended, the young man blew up all his savings “in lobster, caviar and French wines” in one sumptuous party he threw for his Bohemian friends in a fashionable restaurant in Berlin.<sup>9</sup> In the autumn of 1921, he finally became a reporter for United Telegraph after fetching a scoop interview with Madame Gorky, made possible through the assistance of a doorman of the hotel where she was staying and a fake press card.<sup>10</sup>

Asad’s first real encounter with Islam and Muslims, a turning point in his life, came in the spring of 1922 in the form of a letter from his maternal uncle Dorian Feigenbaum (1887–1937), his mother’s youngest brother, “one of the early pupils of Freud,” who was then head of a mental hospital in Jerusalem, and who “being unmarried, thought of his nephew as a likely companion in his solitude”.<sup>11</sup> It was this stay in Jerusalem, with short trips to neighboring cities, that provided experiences and impressions of Arab Muslims.

The first indication Asad provides of any direct access to Islamic sources is his reading of the Qurʾān in French and German translations (his Arabic was yet too weak).<sup>12</sup> This happened in 1923, in French-controlled Damascus, where he had smuggled himself on fake papers. Since he could not understand the text on its own, he relied on “European orientalist works” and explanations by a Syrian friend.<sup>13</sup> Asad himself provides no clues as to which “European orientalist works” were available to him in Damascus in 1923, but the intellectual climate of post-World War I Europe was dominated by works of such figures as Abraham Geiger (1810-1874), Theodor Nöldeke (1836-1930), and Ignaz Goldziher (1850-1921). Before exploring this further, however, we must complete the arc of Asad’s life up to his conversion.

### **A Restless Soul**

Asad, then Leopold Weiss, returned to Berlin at the end of 1923 or early 1924,

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9. *Ibid.*, p. 62.

10. *Ibid.*, p. 65.

11. *Ibid.*, 74

12. *Ibid.*, p. 128.

13. *Ibid.*

published his first book, *Unromantisches Morgenland, aus dem Tagebuch einer Reise*,<sup>14</sup> and reconciled with his father (“by now he had got over his anger at my abandonment of my university studies and the unceremonious manner in which I had left his roof. After all, I was now a correspondent of the *Frankfurter Zeitung*—a name that people in Central Europe used to pronounce almost with awe in those days.”)<sup>15</sup> He wanted to go back to the Middle East immediately, but had to first produce the book which was originally contracted to him. Dr. Heinrich Simon (1880-1941), the editor-in-chief of the *Frankfurter Zeitung*—who was shocked to see the “boy” who had been sending the dispatches—asked him to join the editorial staff while he worked on the book so as “to acquire a thorough knowledge of the workings of a great newspaper.”<sup>16</sup> It was during this time that Asad met and fell in love with Elsa in Berlin, a widow some fifteen years older than him.<sup>17</sup>

In the spring of 1924, shortly after he submitted the manuscript of *Unromantisches Morgenland*, Asad was sent to the Middle East by the *Zeitung*. This time, he was not the penniless vagabond he had been on his earlier trip; rather, his “changed financial circumstances” allowed him “to live in Cairo in a style which would have been unthinkable a few months earlier. I no longer needed to count pennies.”<sup>18</sup> He arrived three days before the start of Ramadan 1342 (which that year started on April 6) to his first experience of Muslims fasting from dawn to dusk, yielding his first insights into the “outlines of Islam’s ethical outlook” (the twofold purpose of the month being “abstinence...in order to feel in one’s own body what the poor and hungry feel...and self-discipline”).<sup>19</sup>

It is at this stage of his life that Asad provides first clues of his intellectual and emotional perspective on Islam’s formidable intellectual tradition, through his comments on some well-known scholars. He describes Shaykh Mustafa al-Maraghi as “one of the most prominent Islamic scholars of the time,

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14. Frankfurt A.M. Frankfurter Societäts-Duckerei Abt. Buchverlag. 1924); English translation by Elma Ruth Harder as *The Unromantic Orient* (Sherwood Park: Al-Qalam, 2006).

15. *Road to Mecca*, p. 137.

16. *Ibid.*, p. 139.

17. Asad describes his first meeting with Elsa in *The Road to Mecca* (p. 142): “she descended from one of those old Holstein families which might be described as the North German equivalent of the English ‘yeomanry’...She was a widow and had a six-year-old son, to whom she was greatly devoted.”

18. *Ibid.*, p. 187.

19. *Ibid.*, p. 188.

and certainly the most brilliant among the *ulama* of Al-Azhar University,” who

in spite of his erudition and gravity,” never lost “his sense of humour...a pupil of the great Egyptian reformer Muhammad Abduh, and having associated in his youth with that inspiring firebrand, Jamal al-Din al-Afghani (1838-1897), Shaykh Al-Maraghi was himself a keen, critical thinker. He never failed to impress upon me that the Muslims of recent times had fallen very short indeed of the ideals of their faith, and that nothing could be more erroneous than to measure the potentialities of Muhammad’s message by the yardstick of present-day Muslim life and thought.”<sup>20</sup>

Abduh (1849-1905) and al-Maraghi (1881-1945) were both proponents of modernization, both championed a new type of *ijtihad* (independent legal reasoning), and both considered *taqlid* (legal fideism) to be the main cause of the downfall of Muslims. Al-Maraghi had encouraged Muhammad Husayn Haykal to write his modernist biography of the Prophet and supported him when the ‘ulāmā’ opposed his denial of miracles and other rationalist tendencies. While in Sudan, al-Maraghi was a loyal assistant to the British colonizers. After Asad left Egypt, al-Maraghi went to the Hijaz (September 1925) on a secret mission to support King Fu’ad’s ambition to become the new Caliph.<sup>21</sup>

As a European, Asad had no difficulty courting friendships in Cairo; he had easy access to influential people in Egypt and he befriended al-Maraghi, who informed him that al-Azhar’s scholars were like the sacred cows of India, “which, I am told, eat up all the printed paper they can find in the streets.” Strange as it may sound, Asad takes the metaphor used to describe the scholars of al-Azhar even further: “Yes, they gobble up all the printed pages from

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20. *Ibid.*, p. 188.

21. For a biography of al-Maraghi, see Anwar al-Jundi, *al-Imām al-Marāghī* (Cairo: Dār al-Ma’ārif, 1952). Elie Kedourie summarizes his public career: “Muhammad Mustafa al-Maraghi was Chief Qadi in the Sudan from 1908 to 1919; between 1919 and 1928 he was successively Chief Inspector of the Religious Courts in Egypt, President of the Religious Court of First Instance, Member and then President of the Religious High Court. From August 1928 to October 1929, and again from 1935 until his death in 1945 he was Rector of al-Azhar.” [Elie Kedourie, “Egypt and the Caliphate 1915-1946,” *The Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland* nos. 3-4 (October 1963), pp. 208-248.] For his reports and letters to General Reginald Wingate (1861-1953), who succeeded Lord Kitchener as Governor-General of the Sudan and *Sirdar* of the Egyptian Army, see “The Sudan Archive at Durham University,” <https://www.dur.ac.uk/library/asc/sudan>.

books that have been written centuries ago, but they do not digest them. They no longer think for themselves; they read and repeat, read and repeat—and the students who listen to them learn only to read and repeat, generation after generation.”<sup>22</sup> Al-Maraghi’s explanation revealed to the European traveler the deepest cause of the “cultural decay that stared one in the face everywhere in the Muslim world”. It was a simple matter for Asad to conclude that Muslims had a glorious past, which was due to Islam, but “as soon as their faith became habit and ceased to be a programme of life, to be consciously pursued, the creative impulse that underlay their civilization waned and gradually gave way to indolence, sterility and cultural decay.”<sup>23</sup>

### **The Muslim World in the 1920s**

Sterility, decay, stagnation, disgrace, and downfall were political catchphrases for Muslim intelligentsia in those early decades of the twentieth century. Shortly before Asad left Berlin in the spring of 1924, the caliphate had been constitutionally abolished (March 4, 1924). As a political institution, the caliphate of the late Ottoman empire was certainly different in structure and system from that established by the Companions of the Prophet, yet it had remained an effective symbol of the Islamic polity for 1300 years, withstanding the savagery of the Mongols and four changes of its dynastic seat (Madina to Damascus [662], to Baghdad [751], to Cairo [1262], and to Istanbul [1517]). This constitutional abolition of the political office was a seismic change in Muslim history so complex that it is difficult to map out the contours of the process that would divide the Muslim Umma into some fifty-seven nation states within the next twenty-five years.

Two years before Asad’s arrival in Egypt, Sultan Fu’ad I had promulgated a decree (15 March 1922) whereby he enthroned himself as the King of Egypt, although the real power remained in the hands of the British, who were also busy carving smaller kingdoms out of the vast Ottoman Empire. The Treaty of Sèvres, signed on 10 August 1920, had forced the Ottomans to cede control of all non-Turkish territory, leading to the British Mandate of Palestine and the French Mandate of Syria. This humiliating treaty led to the rise of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk and the Turkish War of Independence, which, in turn, led to the Treaty of Lausanne (24 July 1923), which brought into being the modern-day republic of Turkey by delimiting the boundaries of Greece, Bulgaria, and Turkey, formally ceding all Turkish claims on the Dodecanese Islands, Cyprus, Egypt, Sudan, Syria and Iraq, but leaving the important territory of Hijaz open for further intrigues. The British had already coopted the Sharif of Makka, Hussein bin Ali in 1916, and he had declared himself King of Hijaz.

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22. *Road to Mecca*, p. 189.

23. *Ibid.*, 193.

In 1924, he was to assume the title of caliph as well.

The British, however, had an agreement with the French to give them the control of greater Syria (including today's Jordan, Lebanon, and the entire Palestine) and thus they discarded Hussein and favored another of their clients, Ibn Saud,<sup>24</sup> who signed a treaty with Percy Cox, British High Commissioner in Iraq, at Uqair in 1922. In 1925, Ibn Saud captured Makka by defeating Sharif Hussein, thus ending 700 years of Hashemite rule as well as his short-term caliphate. On 8 January 1926, the leading figures in Makka, Madina, and Jeddah proclaimed Ibn Saud the King of Hijaz. On 20 May 1927, the British government signed the Treaty of Jeddah, which abolished the Darin protection agreement and recognized the independence of the Hijaz and Najd with Ibn Saud as its ruler. Other battles followed, especially with Ibn Saud's one-time allies, the Ikhwan, but Ibn Saud was able to unite his dominions into the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and proclaimed himself its king on September 23, 1932,

It was amidst these sea-changes that Asad made his second appearance in the Muslim world. While in Egypt, he took lessons in Arabic from an Azhar student. He fell sick with malaria and was introduced to whirling dervishes, whose esoteric rituals "did not fit into the picture of Islam that was slowly forming in my mind. I requested my Azhari friend to bring me some orientalist works on the subject; and through them, my instinctive suspicion that esotericism of this kind had intruded the Muslim orbit from non-Islamic sources was confirmed."<sup>25</sup>

In the early summer of 1924, Asad "started out from Cairo on a long wandering which was to take the better part of two years"; he went to Transjordan, through Damascus, Beirut, Syrian Tripoli, Aleppo, and then on to the Dayr az-Zor-Baghdad route, which was the caravan route parallel to the Euphrates, so little known route that "only one car had travelled it before me some months back."<sup>26</sup> He was in Baghdad when the citizens rioted against Parliament's ratification of the Friendship Treaty with Great Britain on May 29, 1924. In Baghdad, he bought a horse for himself and a mule for Zayd, his travelling helper, they rode through the Kurdish region into Iran. He went to Afghanistan, and in 1926, toward the end of the winter, he left

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24. Abdulaziz ibn Abdul Rahman ibn Faisal ibn Turki ibn Abdullah ibn Muhammad Al Saud (1875-1953), who would declare himself king of Hijaz on January 8, 1926. His date of birth is not certain; it is sometimes given as 1880, but the generally accepted date is 1875. See Robert Lacey, *The Kingdom* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1981).

25. *Road to Mecca*, p. 197.

26. *Ibid.*, pp. 198-209.

Herat on the first stage of his long homeward journey, going through Marv in Russian Turkestan, to Samarkand, Bokhara, and Tashkent, and thence across the Turkoman steppes to the Urals and Moscow.<sup>27</sup> Wherever he went in the Muslim world, he was able to reach the top echelon of political and religious leadership. It was on his way from Herat to Kabul that a young district governor famously told him, “You are a Muslim, only you do not know it yourself.”<sup>28</sup>

Asad returned to Frankfurt and to his newspaper office. His articles had made him one of the most outstanding foreign correspondents of Central Europe. The abysmal state of knowledge about Islam and Muslims in Europe was such that the twenty-six year old newspaper correspondent was treated like a great scholar of Islam and Muslims and was invited to lecture at the Academy of Geopolitics in Berlin. He married Elsa, fell out with Dr. Simon and resigned from the *Frankfurter Zeitung*, and moved to Berlin, where he concluded agreements with three newspapers as a syndicated columnist.

It was in September 1926 in Berlin while travelling in the subway that he had his now-famous conversion experience. He went to the Jamī‘at al-Islāmiyya Berlin, an organization started by the Khairi brothers,<sup>29</sup> and pronounced the testimony of faith; Elsa followed a few days later.<sup>30</sup>

### **The Arabian Sojourn—Reassessed**

Asad provides no details of any formal study of Islamic sciences or texts with a scholar for his sojourn in Saudi Arabia, where he arrived in 1927; he performed his first Hajj in June of that year<sup>31</sup> and thereafter developed close contacts with the house of Ibn Saud. The ease and facility with which he had been previously able to approach the highest ranks of Muslim leadership in the Middle East during his two years of travels seemed to have been his style of interaction. Thus, even though there were intrigues against the newly-found kingdom and the house of Ibn Saud had to be extra-cautious about Westerners, Asad seems to have had no difficulty in establishing contacts with the King or those around him. In 1927, Hijaz was not yet a stable region and the contours of its future had just begun to emerge. There were several spies working for the British government, officially or semi-officially and the High Commission

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27. *Ibid.*, p. 299.

28. *Ibid.*, p. 298.

29. For Abdul Jabbar al-Khairi (1880-1958) and his younger brother Abdul Sattār al-Khairi (d. 1945), see M. Ikram Chaghatai, *Muhammad Asad: Europe's Gift to Islam*, 2 vols. (Lahore: Truth Society, 2006), 1: vi-vii; hereafter *Europe's Gift*. Also see Windhager, *Leopold Weiss Alias Muhammad Asad*.

30. *Road to Mecca*, p. 311.

31. The Day of ‘Arafa for the Hajj of 1345 was June 10, 1927.

in Jeddah had an active system of receiving reports. It was relatively easy for these intelligence agents to keep track of important events in the pyramid-like structure of Arabian society and the British had considerable experience in recruiting undercover scouts who could hover around the highest level of the pyramid and keep an eye on the overall flow of events through this strategic infiltration. One of the British informers, an Iraqi by the name of Abdallah Damhiji, had actually become an adviser to King Ibn Saud. In late 1928, he submitted a report to the British on “Bolshevik and Soviet penetration” of the Hijaz in which he presents Asad in the following manner:

Before concluding, I must bring attention to the person known as Asadullah von Weiss, formerly an Austrian Jew, now a Muslim, who resides presently near the holy shrine in Mecca. This Austrian Leopold von Weiss came to the Hijaz two years ago, claiming he had become a Muslim out of love for this religion and in pure belief in it. I do not know why, but his words were accepted without opposition, and he entered Mecca without impediment. He did so at a time when no one like him was allowed to do the same, the Hijaz government having recently passed a law providing that those like him must wait two years under surveillance, so that the government can be certain of their Islam before their entry into Mecca. Since that time, Leopold von Weiss has remained in Mecca, wandering the country and mixing with people of every class and with government persons. He then traveled to Medina, and stayed there and in its environs for several months. Then he was able—I have no idea how—to travel to Riyadh with King Ibn Saud last year, and he stayed in Riyadh for five months, seeing and hearing all that happened, mingling with the people and speaking with persons of the government. He does not seem to me to be a learned or professional man. His apparent purpose is to obtain news from the King, and especially from Shaykh Yūsuf Yasin, secretary to the King [and editor of the official newspaper *Umm al-Qura*]. Asadullah uses this news to produce articles for some German and Austrian newspapers, in reply to the distasteful things written by some European newspapers on the Hijazi-Najdi court. This is the occupation of the Austrian Jew Leopold von Weiss, now Haj Asadullah the Muslim. What is the real mission which makes him endure the greatest discomforts and the worst conditions of life? On what basis rests the close intimacy between him and Shaykh Yūsuf Yasin? Is there some connection between von Weiss and the Bolshevik consulate in Jidda? These are mysteries about which it is difficult to know the truth.<sup>32</sup>

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32. Kramer, “The Road from Mecca,” p. 232, provides the following reference for this report: “Arabic report (with translation) by Dr. Abdullah Damhiji, no date, included in despatch from Political Secretary of

The same pyramid structure of Arabian society allowed the British intelligence service to track the movement of persons of interest across the globe; thus when Asad arrived in Karachi, he was already on the radar of the secret police, even though he was one among hundreds of pilgrims returning home. His immigration and customs procedures were fast-tracked: “the passport officer, who was sitting in the office was extremely polite. He barely glanced at my passport, stamped it and said smilingly, ‘Welcome to India, sir! Where will you be staying?’”<sup>33</sup>

Asad had arrived in Arabia in 1927, a year and a half after Ibn Saud had declared himself the King of Hijaz (on 10 January 1926). He had arrived with Elsa and her son, Heinrich Schiemann, from Egypt on a pilgrims’ boat, reverberating with the ancient chant, *Labbayk, Allahumma labbayk, Here I am, O Allah, here I am*. He knew just enough Arabic to carry on a conversation. Elsa died nine days after the Hajj.<sup>34</sup> Heinrich was sent back to Elsa’s parents after some time and Asad was to stay in Arabia until his departure for India in June 1933. What did he do during these five years? What shaped his worldview, his ideas about Islamic tradition? Who were his teachers, if any? Did he take formal lessons in any branch of Islamic learning? How did he support himself?

There are few external resources to find answers to these questions. The only readily available source is Asad himself, namely the factually unreliable *Road to Mecca* and his dispatches for European newspapers. The Arabia of those years was an intellectual wasteland. Except for a few local and resident scholars from other countries, who gave lessons to small groups in the two sanctified Mosques, there was no intelligentsia, no publishing houses of note, no journals, no political activity of the kind Asad had witnessed in Syria, Lebanon, and Egypt. There were no newspapers like those in the Levant or in the Indian subcontinent, where Asad would arrive during what can be said to be the golden age of pre-Partition journalism. The transport and communication systems were rudimentary. All we know about these Arabian years is what Asad himself relates, being vague, sometimes self-contradictory, and often mixed with poetic and romanticized self-portrayals. Nevertheless, one can say that shortly after his arrival, Asad somehow gained the favor of Ibn Saud, who was then fifty-two; he also had a special relationship with Ibn Saud’s son Faisal (1906-1975), who was then a young man, and with some others who were loyal and close to Ibn Saud. He had already experienced “white privilege” and honed ways to approach ruling elites as a European correspondent (a trait

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High Commissioner for Iraq (Baghdad) to Consul (Jiddah), 18 December 1928, Public Records Office (London), FO967/22. Damluji had left Ibn Saud’s service in September 1928 and returned to Iraq.”

33. *Homecoming*, p. 30-31.

34. *Road to Mecca*, p. 370.

evident even in his early scoop interview with Madame Gorky), and his being a European Muslim could only have cast him in a more favorable light.

Asad's reluctance to disclose the names of the teachers with whom he studied, assuming there were some, his total silence about the circles (other than the royal court) in which he moved, and the lack of information about what he read during these years makes it almost impossible to evaluate his competence, knowledge, and understanding of the vast ocean of knowledge related to the Qurʾān, Hadith, and fiqh to which generations of Muslim scholars have contributed over centuries and which he had sweepingly rejected at the time of his entrance to the fold of Islam. In the preface to his translation of the first book of *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī* (1935), he writes, "the idea of translating this work occurred to me during my five years' sojourn at Al-Madīnah, where I was studying Traditions in the Prophet's Mosque."<sup>35</sup> But with whom? Assuming his Arabic had by then reached the level of *studying* the *Ṣaḥīḥ*, and not just reading or listening to it, we have no information about who gave these lessons.

Likewise, it is difficult to assess his true assessment of Ibn Saud and his quick rise to power. Soon after his arrival in Arabia, Asad had already started to draw material benefit from his association with the house of Ibn Saud, something that would multiply manifold in the years after the *Road to Mecca*, and would extend even posthumously through the 2006 death of his fourth wife, Pola Hamida Asad. Yet he could easily flip his razor-sharp words about Ibn Saud: he "like Julius Caesar possesses to a high degree the capacity to pursue several trains of thought at one and the same time, without in the least curtailing the intensity with which he attacks each individual problem"; he wrote further, the "acuteness of his perception is often uncanny. He has an almost unfailing instinctive insight into the motives of the people with whom he was to deal. Not infrequently—as I myself have had opportunity to witness—he is able to read men's thoughts before they are spoken, and seems to sense a man's attitude toward him at the very moment of that man's entering the room." Yet, in the same book, he was far less adulatory, and when, after the publication of the first edition of *Road to Mecca*, material benefits were threatened, he excised such passages with care to maintain the original pagination:

In short, Ibn Saud seems to possess many of the qualities which could make a man great, but he has never made a real attempt to achieve greatness. Not being introspective by temperament, he has tremendous talent for rationalization, for persuading himself of his own righteousness in the face of the most glaring lapses, and easily evades all self-examination. Those who surround him—his courtiers and the innumerable hangers-on

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35. *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī, Translated from the Arabic with Explanatory Notes and Index*, Volume 1—Part I (Srinagar: The Arafat Publications, 1935), p. 8.

who live off his bounty—certainly do nothing to counteract this unfortunate tendency.

Belying the tremendous promise of his younger years, when he appeared to be a dreamer of stirring dreams, he has broken—perhaps without realizing it himself—the spirit of a high-strung nation that had been wont to look up to him as to God-sent leader. They had expected too much of him to bear the disappointment of their expectations with equanimity; and some of the best among the people of Najd now speak in bitter terms of what they consider a betrayal of their trust.

I shall never forget the look of misery and hopelessness in the face of a Najdi friend—a man who had once been a most ardent believer in Ibn Saud's leadership and had followed him through thick and thin in the most difficult years of his royal career—when speaking of the King, he told me one day:

'When we rode with Ibn Saud against Ibn Rashid in those early days and when we rode with him under banners inscribed *La ilaha ill'Allah*—There is no God but God—against that traitor to Islam, Sharif Husayn, we thought that Ibn Saud was a new Moses, destined to lead his people out of the bondage of ignorance and decay into the promised land of Islam. But when he settled down to his newly won comforts and luxuries, forgetting his people and their future, we found to our horror that he was Pharaoh...'

My friend was, of course, far too harsh and even unjust in his condemnation of Ibn Saud: for he is no Pharaoh, no oppressor; he is a kind man and I have no doubt that he loves his people. But he is no Moses, either. His failure lies rather in his having failed to be as great as the people had thought him to be—and as, perhaps, he could have been had he followed the trumpet call of his youth. He is an eagle who never really took wing. He simply remained a benevolent tribal chieftain on an immensely enlarged scale.<sup>36</sup>

The footnote to this paragraph was also deleted in subsequent editions: "A short time after completion of this book (1953), King Ibn Saud died at the age of seventy-three; and with his passing an epoch of Arabian history came to a

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36. See page 180 of the subsequent editions, where the original paragraph quoted here is replaced with "In short, beduin (*sic*) life as it has manifested itself..." and the entire text on the next page until section 3. Kramer attributes these skillful alterations to the text of the *Road to Mecca* to Asad's attempts to regain Saudi patronage ("The Road from Mecca," p. 241 and footnote 50).

close. When I saw him last in the autumn of 1951 (on the occasion of an official visit to Saudi Arabia on behalf of the Government of Pakistan), it seemed to me that he had at last become aware of the tragic waste of his life. His face, once so strong and lively, was bitter and withdrawn; when he spoke of himself, he seemed to be speaking of something that was already dead and buried and beyond recall.”<sup>37</sup>

### India—A Sea-Change

Asad’s arrival in India produced a sea-change in his life that has yet to be fully explored. For the first time, he was now in a non-Arab country outside of Europe. Unlike the Arabia of his sojourn, India in the first decades of the twentieth century was not an intellectual wasteland; it had a well-established scholarly tradition in all branches of knowledge, religious as well as secular.

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37. *Road to Mecca*, pp. 180-81. Kramer suggests that Asad “had fallen from favor”. He writes that “his last marriage proved his undoing; members of his wife’s family were suspected of intrigues against Ibn Saud. Others pointed to his Jewish origins as a growing liability after 1929, when Arab-Jewish tensions in Palestine exploded in violence” (“The Road from Mecca,” pp. 233-34). These seem to be unfounded assertions. Ibn Saud trusted Asad enough in 1931 to let him go to Cyrenaica on a secret mission on behalf of the Grand Samusi, Sayyid Aḥmad, who was then in exile in Arabia. Pola Hamida herself names several Saudis, including Aḥmad Zaki Yamani (b. 1930—), Saudi Minister of Oil and Mineral Resources from 1962 to 1986, who continued to support Asad throughout his life, even when his revisionist translation of the Qur’ān was rejected by the leading scholars who examined the first sample submitted by Asad. Yet, it was “after the publication of his unequalled translation and commentary on the Holy Qur’an” that Asad became rich “through the instrumentality of our greatest friend, Shaikh Zaki Yamani, that this came about and left me a relatively wealthy widow...wealthy in memories and financially.” (*Homecoming*, p. 292; and other references to Yamani, 272-75; 282-85; 293; also see references to: Amir, later King Faysal, p. 237; Amir Nawwaf bin Abd al-Aziz al-Saud, 235-36; the Saudi Arabian Consul-General Prince Salman, who “insisted that he personally be responsible for all the costs of my husband’s very modest funeral. The Saudi Arabian royal family have always looked after their own...and Asad had always loved the descendants of the great Abd al-Aziz ibn Saud, the royal friend of his youth.” p. 238). There is also no available evidence that whatever Munira’s family may have done had any impact on the relationship of Asad with the house of Ibn Saud, his Jewish origins had nothing to do with any reassessment of his sincerity of faith, and finally, it is unclear what “liability” the 1929 uprising in Palestine would have been to someone who had lived among the Saudis for so long.

In fact, some of the most important scholars of Hadith in the previous two centuries were Indian; significant Indian contributions to Islamic sciences can be traced back at least to Shāh Walī Allāh of Delhi (1703-62). India in 1932 had fairly well-developed transport and postal systems; journalism was flourishing and political activity was in a feverish state, for Gandhi's non-cooperation movement and the Khilafat Movement (both *circa* 1920-22) had produced mass popular mobilizations. Even though Gandhi was imprisoned for two years (1922-24), his imprisonment only accelerated the emergence of a younger generation of leadership in the Indian National Congress.<sup>38</sup> When Asad arrived in Karachi, the draft of a new constitution for India, prepared by Motilal Nehru (1861-1931) who was given this task by the all-party conference held at Bombay in May 1928, had produced a deadline (December 1929) for granting dominion status to India; this deadline set by the Calcutta session of the Indian National Congress had expired and this had led to a call by the Congress leadership for complete self-rule and an end to British rule. Two Roundtable Conferences had been held in London (1930 and 1931), and—most importantly, for Asad's passionate desire to see a revival of the Muslim world and for his future endeavors—Muhammad Iqbal had already laid down the fundamental basis for the establishment of an Islamic state in the Indian subcontinent in his famous 1930 Presidential Address, given to the 25th Session of the All-India Muslim League held at Allahabad on 29 December 1930.<sup>39</sup> Asad was to quickly establish contact with Iqbal and later elaborate on many ideas which Iqbal articulated in this address.

For the thirty-two-year-old Asad, India was a vast uncharted land, which awoke and honed his instinctive survival skills: on the first day of his arrival in Karachi, he was learning Urdu words; within two days of his stay in Karachi, he had some new clothes made and was ready to take the train to Lahore.<sup>40</sup> He had never previously written in English, but he had a natural penchant for languages and one can see how quickly he picked up “Indian English” in the first letters he wrote.<sup>41</sup>

Asad had the advantage of being European in the Arab world during his first two trips; when he arrived in Arabia, he had added to that the advantage of being a Muslim, and his arrival among the Muslims of India gave him

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38. C. Rajagopalachari, Jawaharlal Nehru, Vallabhbhai Patel, Subhas Chandra Bose, and others.

39. Latif Ahmed Sherwani (ed.), *Speeches, Writings, and Statements of Iqbal* (Lahore: Iqbal Academy, 1977 [1944], 2nd ed., revised and enlarged), pp. 3-26.

40. *Homecoming*, p. 31.

41. See his unpublished letters in this issue of *JIS*.

three more advantages for social mobility and acceptance: he was a European Muslim coming to India after spending five years in the vicinity of the two sanctified cities; he spoke Arabic; and he had an Arabian wife. For Indian Muslims, with their proverbial love of the Prophet and his city, there could be nothing more amenable than a man who combined all of these and who was now haltingly speaking their own language and who could write in English, the language of the Indian elite.

These advantages were to play a significant role in the initial reception Asad received in India. He was a gifted socializer and although he had come to the vast Subcontinent with only a few personal contacts, within weeks of his arrival he had built a network of friends, which included the leading figures of Muslim India of the time. Asad's descriptions of his travels from Lahore to Sialkot and Kashmir, his stay at *dak* bungalow as "the guest of the government," and the ease with which he moved in Lahore—all demonstrate his exceptional talents as an experienced traveler. Although written almost half a century later, the style and the dramatic movement of the first chapters of *Homecoming of the Heart*, reminiscent of the *Road to Mecca*, are proof enough that these chapters were composed by Asad himself:

The house of our host, Maulana Abd Allah Kasuri, was situated just outside the Old City, opposite the Sheranwalah Gate—the 'Gate of the Lions'—one of the few that still remained intact after the ancient city-walls had all but disappeared.

How different was the appearance of Lahore from that of Karachi! Here everything was movement and life and colour. The people were sturdier than those of Sind, the men as a rule taller, and the women far better-looking: in fact, nowhere else in the world had I seen so many beautiful women. As I learned with the passing of time, most of them were non-Muslims, for the majority of Muslim women were, unfortunately, covered from head to toe by a white over-garment called a *burqah* which made them appear like walking tents; but here and there one could see a young one who had freed herself of that abominable garb and moved about openly in the Punjabi *kurta* (tunic) and *shalwar*. And there were the Sikh women who, of course, had never worn a *burqah*—black-eyed, with long tresses hanging down over their backs; and their tall, bearded and turbaned men of very virile appearance. And there were Pathans from the frontier areas, closed of face and aloof in their bearing, dressed in long shirts and *shalwars*—strangers in this city and yet visibly at home within themselves—strolling about in small groups and congregating in one particular *chai-khanah*, a tea-house of which in time, I, too, became a frequent visitor, to drink very strong, very sweet tea with plenty of milk.

Slowly, gradually, I began to understand and haltingly to speak

Urdu, the language of Muslim India which, because of its affinity with Persian (with which I was familiar since my early years in Iran and Afghanistan) was not difficult for me to 'pick up'. I began to explore the ancient, strangely attractive Old City of Lahore, entering it through the Delhi Gate and wandering on through narrow lanes. On my right and on my left I saw lines of tiny shops, no more than niches about one metre above street-level, the dealers sitting cross-legged in the midst of their goods, as in so many other cities of the East. I saw and felt the bustling masses of people flowing past me in both directions, pressing, pushing, shouting; heavily-laden porters, oxcarts, two-wheeled *tongas*, ever-changing dresses and faces and colours, men and women and children and bicycles and donkeys, a chaos of colour, sound and form—like a multitude of most vivid paints haphazardly mixed together on a careless painter's palette, so that in the end all becomes an ungraspable mass of grey: and this, as I came to know with the passing years, was the true face of India.

Through an arched gateway which vaulted over the bazaar street I had a glimpse of the old Wazir Khan Mosque which a fortunate minister, richly endowed by his king, had built some three hundred years earlier: a truly splendid monument, graced by a flowing-together of colours, of glazed tiles united in a mosaic—an entire great façade of coloured tiles brought together in perfect rhythm.<sup>42</sup>

### **In the Indian Muslim Milieu**

At the time of Asad's arrival in India, it had been a British colony for almost seventy-four years (1858-1932).<sup>43</sup> During this time, Muslims had somewhat

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42. *Homecoming*, pp. 31-32.

43. English control of certain parts of India, however, goes back to 1757, when Robert Clive defeated Nawab Sirāj al-Dawlah in the Battle of Plassey in 1757 and the East India Company gained control of Bengal, Bihar, and Midnapore district in Odisha. Between 1757 and 1857, Mughal power continued to dwindle and in many ways, the final blow in 1857 was merely the proverbial last straw that broke the back of the Mughal empire and India became the British Raj. The last Mughal emperor Bahadur Shah was, ironically, tried for treason by a military commission and exiled to Rangoon where he died in 1862, bringing the Mughal empire established by Zāhīr-ud-Dīn Muḥammad Babur (1483-1530) to an end after the reign of twenty-one emperors. In August 1858, the East India Company was formally dissolved through the Government of India Act 1858 and its ruling powers over India were transferred to the British Crown. For India, the change was, however, merely a change of rulers, because essentially the entire administrative and bureaucratic machinery of the East India

recovered from the state of utter despair that had followed the demise of the Mughal empire established by Zahir-ud-Din Muhammad Babur (1483-1530). The early-twentieth century Indian Muslim milieu was complex and dynamic—a shattered glass in which one could see the reflections of a turbulent awakening after three centuries of siesta. Many mutually conflicting currents of thought interacted with each other in this turbid water. Almost all of them were being stirred by the Muslim encounter with modernity through European invasions, the same external force that was stirring similar currents in the emergent Turkish Republic and the self-declared and British-occupied (or at times supported) kingdom of Egypt, which were the other two centers of intellectual activity in the post-World War I Muslim world.<sup>44</sup> These three centers of early twentieth-century Muslim intellectual activity had distinct local histories but were all undergoing the same centripetal pressures.

In India, as elsewhere, Muslim scholars of the period reacted to their situation in three broad ways: one segment became totally submissive to European thought, viewed its own past through the lens of European Orientalists, and looked down upon its own tradition, which may have been great at one time but which had remained stagnant for long centuries; a second reaction was to enclose itself in the shell of safety provided by a retreat to the centuries-old educational system; and the third reaction was a cautious modernism. The Turkish Republic strove to ban Islam from the public square; its enforced modernism attempted a vast realignment of the state and its people at a grand scale; Egypt and British-occupied Muslim India were divided and

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Company were transferred to the British Crown.

44. For a first-hand account of European arrival and occupation of Egypt, see 'Abd al-Rahmān al-Jabartī, *ʿAjāʾib al-Āthār fī'l-Tarājīm wa-l-Akhhbār* ("The Marvelous Compositions of Biographies and Chronicles"), 4 vols., ed. 'Abd al-Rahīm 'Abd al-Rahmān (Cairo: Maṭba' Dār al-kutub bi-l-miṣriyya, 1998). This text remains an important primary source for the history of Egypt, covering the period from 1776 until his death in 1825. First published in 1879-80, a partial English translation, composed of excerpts and brief contextual commentaries, covering the French occupation of Egypt (1798-1801) and its re-occupation by Ottoman forces, was published by a team supervised by Thomas Philipp and Moshe Perlmann (Princeton: Franz Steiner Verlag; Stuttgart: Markus Wiener, 1994). For a brief history of British influence and control of Egypt, see James Onley, *The Arabian Frontier of the British Raj: Merchants, Rulers, and the British in the Nineteenth-Century Gulf* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008); for an insightful view of the British policies toward Egypt, see Roger Owen, *Lord Cromer: Victorian Imperialist, Edwardian Proconsul* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).

splintered between fidelity to their past and modernism. The Egyptian and Indian masses were utterly confused. While Mustafa Kemal was busy serving a final blow to the Caliphate, they took him as their hero—the liberator of Turkey, who had driven out the occupiers and who was now attempting to establish a strong state. Many saw Sayyid Ahmad Khan as the champion of Islamic revival, while others looked at him as a traitor and a British lackey. In Egypt, Muslim loyalties were likewise divided between the traditional ‘ulamā’ and the new political and intellectual elite that had emerged as a result of educational policies of Muhammad Ali and through the direct encounter of some intellectuals with European civilization. There Egyptian modernists like Qasim Amin (1863-1908), Muhammad Husayn Haykal (1888-1956), and Taha Hussein (1889-1973) attempted to implant European ideals in Egyptian institutions.<sup>45</sup>

Three institutions represented the spectrum of responses of the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century Indian Muslims: (i) Dārul ‘Ulūm of Deoband, established in 1866 by Muhammad Qasim Nanotvi (1833-1880) and others, which taught a modified version of the Dars-e Nizami curriculum; Nadwatul ‘Ulamā’, founded at Kanpur in 1894 by a group of scholars including Muhammad Ali Mungeri (1846-1927) (its first president), Ashraf Ali Thanwi (1863-1943), Mahmud-ul-Hasan (1851-1920), and Shibli Nomani (1857-1914), with the express desire to provide old and new knowledge to its students, with a special emphasis on Arabic language;<sup>46</sup> and Madrasatul ‘Ulūm Musalmanan-e-Hind, established by Syed Ahmad Khan (1817-1898) in Aligarh in 1875. This last madrasa, which soon became a college and then university in 1920, was heavily influenced by the British agenda. Khan himself wrote that “the natives of India, high and low, merchants and petty shopkeepers, educated and illiterate, when contrasted with the English in education, manners, and uprightness, are like a dirty animal is to an able and handsome man.”<sup>47</sup> By 1932, Khan’s educational efforts had been taken over by a new generation of

45. See Samira Haj, *Reconfiguring Islamic Tradition: Reform, Rationality, and Modernity* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2008).

46. For a broad, albeit opinionated survey of Muslim institutions and scholars, see the three volume work by Shaikh Muhammad Ikram: the first volume, *Aab-e Kawthar*, covers the pre-Mughal era (5<sup>th</sup> ed. 2002); the second volume, *Rawd-e Kawthar*, the Mughal era (4<sup>th</sup> ed. 2005), and the third volume, *Mawj-e Kawthar*, the period 1800-1947 (22<sup>nd</sup> ed., 2003) (Lahore: Idara Siqafat-e Islamia).

47. Shaikh Muhammad Isma‘il Pānipati (ed. 1961), *Musafiran-i London*, Majlis Taraqi-e Adab, Lahore, p. 184. Khan was awarded the title of the Companion of the Star of India by none other than the Queen herself and he called himself Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan Bahadur, C.S.I. He went to England to receive the title.

enthusiastic Muslims and the institution he started had become a hub of the struggle for freedom.<sup>48</sup>

Asad's preferred *ahl al-ḥadīth* strand of Muslim revivalism had emerged in India through the efforts of Syed Nazeer Husain (1805-1902) and Siddiq Hasan Khan (1832-1890); by 1932, it had gone through half a century of bitter disputes with other religious movements, especially the Barelvi movement of Ahmad Raza Khan (1856-1921) and the Deoband scholars. At the beginning of his life as a Muslim, Muhammad Asad had already made up his mind to adhere to the then-widespread "return to the Qur'ān and Hadith" approach, with a vociferous rejection of *taqlīd* (legal fideism) and *taṣawwuf* (sufism). Later, he would discover and form intellectual affinities of various strengths with similar approaches in previous centuries, especially with the Ṣāḥirī school of law,<sup>49</sup> the Mu'tazilīs, and the nineteenth-century free thinkers of different hues, who attempted a reconstruction of Islamic tradition.

Asad's years in the Subcontinent can be neatly divided into three periods: 1932-39: that is, from his arrival in Karachi until September 1939, when he was interned in a camp for enemy aliens by the British; 1945-47: that is, from his release on August 14, 1945 until the Partition; and 1947-1952, that is, from his life as a Pakistani citizen, first in Lahore and Karachi, and then in New York, where he was Minister Plenipotentiary, until he resigned from the Pakistan Foreign Office. During these years, Asad published his first book in English, *Islam at the Crossroads* (1934); five installments of his English translation of *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, with explanatory notes (1935-1938); edited six issues of *Islamic Culture* (Hyderabad, Deccan, January 1937-October 1938); and published ten issues of *Arafat: A Monthly Critique of Muslim Thought* (1946-1947). In addition, he gave numerous radio talks, worked as the Director of the Department of Islamic Reconstruction (West Punjab) and later as Deputy Secretary in charge of the Middle East Division, Federal Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Karachi). It is his intellectual output of these years that concerns us in this study, and to which the next installment will be devoted.

(To be continued)

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48. Through the Aligarh Muslim University Act of 1920. In 1927, a school for the blind was established and, the following year, a medical school was attached to the university. By the end of the 1930s, the university had developed an Engineering faculty. Aligarh University played a prominent role in the establishment of Pakistan and its students were on the forefront of the Freedom Movement.

49. Founded by Dāwūd b. 'Alī b. Khalaf al-Ṣāḥirī (ca. 200/815–270/883/4). For an Orientalist account of the Ṣāḥirīs, see Ignaz Goldziher, *The Ṣāḥirīs: Their Doctrine and their History: A Contribution to the History of Islamic Theology*, trans. and ed. Wolfgang Behn (Leiden: Brill, 2008).