Through the Looking Glass:

Themes in Narratives by Arabs, Americans, and Europeans from 1890 to 1960

As relations between the United States and the countries of the Middle East evolved from the arrival of Protestant missionaries in 19th-century Jerusalem to the imperialist presence of American oil companies in Saudi Arabia in the 1950s, travel narratives written about America and the Middle East also evolved. This article documents the changes and continuities over time that occur in these narratives while also taking into account similar narratives from European sources that provide context for these changes and continuities. From 1890 to 1960, travel narratives written by American and European authors grew to reflect more clearly the stark imbalance of power in favor of countries with imperialist ambitions in the Middle East. At the same time, travel narratives about America written by individuals from the Middle East increasingly tried to fight this imbalance through their depictions of East and West.

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In Muhammad Labib Al-Batanuni's description of his time in New York City in 1927, he noted, "One can view many things in a hurry and not know exactly which to write about and which to ignore."[1] His was one of a few pieces of travel writing which recognized the fact that one's experiences in place are hardly representative of the whole, given that there is a great deal that the observer did not see during the trip. In addition, he captured the idea that the subjects that the observer chooses to pay attention to during their travels are formative in the observer's perceptions and subsequent depiction of a place. In studying the nuances of travel narratives, including what subjects they focused on, the tone(s) in which they were written, and how they showed the author's method of understanding a place previously unbeknownst to them leads to a better understanding of the relationships between the observer and the observed.

From the late nineteenth century to the mid-twentieth century, travel narratives written by Arab and other visitors from the Middle East to America and other "western" countries such as Britain and France steadily used the concepts of "East" and "West" as well as "us" and "them" in order to either write a favorable or unfavorable account of the place they visited. In many instances, this was tied to a political agenda, especially if the account was to be published in a newspaper or magazine. However, separate narratives written in different eras by different authors showed change as a whole in the sense that they reflected a shift over time of attitudes towards America and other countries that are traditionally considered to make up the "West." American involvement in the Middle East shifted from independent missionary groups hoping to gain converts in the late nineteenth century to Woodrow Wilson's inadvertent endorsement in 1919 of self-determination efforts in countries that endured the colonization of Britain and France.[2] It then shifted again following World War II, as some scholars argue that America more or less adopted the colonial presence that Britain and France started to move away from.[3] Consequently, in the early years of Arab travel to America, many travel narratives portrayed it using the familiar rhetoric of a land where the oppressed and downtrodden could make a new, fulfilling life for themselves. With the "Wilsonian Moment" came travel narratives and letters describing travel that emphasized feelings of self-determination and Arab nationalism in their descriptions of America.[4] Following World War II, the most prominent accounts grew to emphasize the ambiguity of American society and often reflected some level of disillusionment with it. This was related to the growth over time of a substantial difference in power (and a subsequent change in the nature of the relationship) between the United States and the countries of the Middle East. The use of "East" and "West" in these narratives represented an opposition to what Wail Hassan identifies as the "European, and later the American, cultural, political, and military onslaught" in the Middle East.[5] This dichotomy was a way through which Arabs and other people in the Middle East not

only separated themselves from those with imperialist ambitions but also tried to combat the presence and influence of them in the Middle East.

From the time of missionaries to the undertaking of a neo-colonial presence in the region due to the explosion of the oil industry and American foreign policy objectives, American travel narratives in the Middle East also continuously employed the binaries of "East" and "West." The concept of the division between the two in writing served as a kind of distancing mechanism, thereby rendering the observer to be someone who existed apart from the peoples and places that they wrote about in order to establish themselves as belonging to the dominant power in the relationship. As time progressed, however, American, British, and French travel narratives in the Middle East increasingly made explicit comparisons of their surroundings while traveling to the conditions of their home countries as a sort of measuring stick for modernity in the Middle East. This phenomenon was undoubtedly a reflection of the greater power that the United States as a whole grew to possess and employ in pursuit of its own geopolitical and economic interests in the region. For British and French travellers, these comparisons served a similar function except for the fact that the colonial presences of these two nations had been established long before that of America.

Scholarship in the area of American and other "western" travel narratives to the Middle East and Arab depictions of the United States and the "West" tend to focus on either topic. Very few examine both in the same space, as Lisa Pollard does in *Nurturing the Nation: The Family Politics of Modernizing, Colonizing, and Liberating Egypt, 1805-1923.*[6] Yet the examination of both these strains of narratives within one analysis is important because it reveals much more than simple ideas about characterizing and compartmentalizing what one observed in one's travels. Through the examination of how these narratives changed and stayed constant throughout the given period, much is revealed about how individuals related to each other within the larger context of growing discrepancies in power between nations. The emphasis on comparisons of modernity between "western" home countries and "eastern" destinations in the Middle East did not only serve as a way to process one's travels for the consumption of others. Rather, the practice was a kind of distancing mechanism employed in order to establish and reinforce the position of greater power and control that the United States and its fellow imperialist nations grew to have over the countries of the Middle East. Consequently, Arab travel narratives written about America and Britain also reflected the growth of this power imbalance, as many changed throughout the period from mostly favorable accounts of the "West" to ambiguous, undecided, and even heavily dissatisfied ones. The hope for a land where one could be free of political turmoil and where one could pursue boundless opportunities was a prominent theme in the travel narratives written by Arabs and other travellers from the Middle East when they visited or immigrated to

America in the late nineteenth century, when American involvement in the region was minimal. However, by the 1950s, the United States had become increasingly involved in the oil market of the Middle East, and its foreign policy strategized in order to pursue economic and geopolitical goals at the expense of the countries in the region. By then, the difference in power between these countries and the United States had augmented into a colonial relationship, as was evident in the operations of Aramco, which systematically oppressed Saudi workers and intentionally employed segregationist policies in order to distinguish Americans, who belonged to the greater power, from Saudis, who were treated much like colonial subjects.[7] Thus, the examination of American, British, and French travel narratives in the Middle East while also examining those written by Arab and non-Arabs from the region who travelled to these "western" countries creates an intricate narrative of its own that discusses how the inequalities of power were brought to attention and reinforced through the way one communicated their experiences abroad in writing. In this way, how the observer and the observed related to one another is told through the medium of travel writing, and in light of the changing relationship between the United States and the nations of the Middle East, the ways in which one portrayed these relationships through writing conveys how views of the "other" changed and remained continuous throughout the period.

In some instances, there is a lack of American travel narratives available to examine. Therefore these gaps are filled by the sources that at the time were closest to American ways of thinking about the "other" in the Middle East, meaning the authors of these sources also employed the binaries of "East" and "West" in order to align themselves with the more powerful entity in the relationship and thus justify imperialist and colonialist objectives in the region. At times, British and French sources help fill these gaps in order to form a more complete representation of how travel narratives were written in relation to the observer and the observed. This is in no way meant to further entrench the binaries of "East" and "West" that Edward Said's *Orientalism* brought to scholars' attention, nor is it a display of the "us versus them" mentality that often accompanies these binaries and thus further entrenches the aggressions tied to stark differences in power.[8] Rather, grouping American sources with British and/or French sources is a reflection of how many travellers from these countries who visited the Middle East came to understand its many different people, cultures, and ways of life in the same way. To these travellers, the world was always very much divided according to "East" and "West." Certainly, American, British, and French individuals with the means to travel did not always see each other as belonging to such a united group. Yet when confronted with the realities of the many different cultures and societies of the Middle East, many clung to these notions of "us" and "them" in order to process their travels and identify themselves as belonging to the more powerful sphere. Due to the imbalance of power that became increasingly relevant to the relationship of the United States and the

nations of the Middle East, travel narratives over time became increasingly similar to their British and French counterparts, who had already established their presences in the region as colonizers, as the British had in Egypt.

Late Nineteenth Century American and European Accounts of the Middle East

At the beginning of the narrative of American involvement in the Middle East, the presence of the United States in the region consisted of zealous Protestant missionaries who hoped to make converts out of the followers of varying sects of Islam and other sects of Christianity.[9] Notably, there has been much debate surrounding whether or not American missionaries should be considered as greater instruments of imperial power structure. However, due to the fact that these missionaries never made great strides in their conversion efforts,[10] their presence in the Middle East remained an anomaly within the context of American non-involvement there. Yet these immigrants from the United States as well as other travellers were fascinated by the biblical significance of the Middle East—particularly that of Jerusalem. Bertha Spafford Vester's memoir, *Our Jerusalem*, conveyed the kinds of distinctions that authors of travel narratives often made between "East" and "West." Her inclusion of her cousin Robert Laurence's description of life in Jerusalem made a hard distinction between the two, as he recorded, "'I carry on a trade of all kinds indiscriminately, blacksmith, mason, carpenter, and literally astonish the natives with a slight exhibition of American go-ahead-ness.'"[11]

The observer was thereby instructed to distance him or herself from the observed in order to preserve long-held assumptions and perceptions of the foreign "other" as a weaker being who was beneath the observer.

In this narrative, the author expressed that the desirable qualities in question belonged to America, or the "West," and claimed that they were nonexistent to the largely Arab residents of Jerusalem, or the "East." Such distinctions rendered the "other" to be an entity that existed separately from the author, and it served the purpose of delineating where the "familiar" of one's world view ended and where the "foreign" began. Bertha Spafford's depiction of the clothes their servants wore also captured this phenomenon. The servant women "were like pictures of beautiful women in Bible days."[12] In accordance with her faith, Spafford's conception of the Middle East aligned with the characteristics of the Bible. Yet when the popular modes of dress for Palestinian women changed, she expressed her disappointment that "The bright colors they loved, so becoming in native costumes, looked cheap and dowdy when used in European clothing."[13] Thus, the narrative conveyed the traditional delineation in what constitutes "East" versus "West," and it revealed

that this practice enabled the author to better establish their distance in relation to the "other" while traveling or living abroad. This was indeed the embodiment of "Rudyard Kipling's doctrine that 'East is East and West is West, and never the twain shall meet.'"[14] As time passed, however, these distinctions between "East" and "West" and the distancing of oneself from the foreign "other" grew to be reinforcements of a greater difference in power between the United States and the Middle East.

Though many visitors to the Middle East in the late nineteenth century were missionaries hoping to claim misguided souls, there were also American and European travellers who similarly employed the binaries of "East" and "West" in order to distinguish themselves from the foreign "other." Karl Baedeker's prominent guidebook *Egypt and the Sudan: Handbook for Travellers* (1908) portrayed Egyptians as unintelligent and removed from the desirable qualities of the "West" when he cautioned,

> The average Oriental regards the European traveller as a Crœsus, and sometimes too as a madman, so unintelligible to him are the objects and pleasures of travelling. He therefore looks upon him as fair game, and feels justified in pressing upon him with a perpetual demand for *bakshish* which simply means 'a gift.'[15]

In this way, Europeans travelling to Egypt clearly distinguished themselves from Egyptians through the concept of greater wealth. The observer was thereby instructed to distance him or herself from the observed in order to preserve long-held assumptions and perceptions of the foreign "other" as a weaker being who was beneath the observer. This in turn further entrenched the use of imperialist power structures on the part of British and French in the Middle East. The British traveller was to see him or herself as a part of the power that the British imperialist mandate held over the Egyptians, and this was to be embodied in the way they were to treat local Egyptians. As Baedeker's guide also instructed, "intimate acquaintance with Orientals is to be avoided, disinterested friendship being still rarer in the East than anywhere."[16] The "East" was therefore a place that existed separately from the desirable "sphere" of the "West," and the former represented a negative, distrustful kind of exoticism and the unknown, while the latter was a place of both familiarity and superiority that the traveller belonged to. This kind of distancing also occurred in French travel narratives, as one author stated, "les domestiques arabes font généralement leur service presque aussi silencieusement que les Chinois ou les Japonais,"[17] or "the arab servants generally do their work almost as silently as do the Chinese or the Japanese." Thus the imperialist relationship between France, Britain, and the nations of the Middle East where they maintained a presence extended into these distancing terms, as delineating "East" versus "West" and "us" versus "them" allowed the powerful to justify their oppression and subjugation of the less powerful.

It is important to note that individuals living in the Middle East were not ambivalent to the American and European presences in the region. A passage in the book *A Period of Time* by Egyptian Muhammad al-Muwaylihi provided the vantage point of an Egyptian witnessing travellers from the "West" come to his country. He wrote, "They're tourists from Western countries . . . . They're used to civilized living and regard Oriental people with utter contempt . . . . Their activities are evil and their knowledge is pernicious."[18] Al-Muwaylihi's use of the binaries of "East" and "West" was a reactionary response to the colonialist presence of these "Western countries," as he claimed that these tourists "use their knowledge and ideas to occupy and control countries." For himself and other Arabs, separating "East" from "West" was important for different reasons than it was for their American, British, and French counterparts, who adopted the practice as a means of enforcing their own empirical power in the region. Rather, for Al-Muwaylihi and his contemporaries, clearly demarcating who and what belonged to each sphere of influence was a way to try and combat the presences of colonialist oppressors.[19] In this sense, al-Muwaylihi understood that these tourists from "western" countries perpetuated, while traveling abroad, the heavily stereotypical and racist themes that justified their oppression and subjugation of the people living in the area. For this reason, his dichotomization of "East" and "West" and his identification of the "other" was a crucial tactic employed to resist the very real threat of colonization and subsequent oppression.

Early Arab Accounts of the United States

The first Arab travellers to the United States also placed a heavy emphasis on the binaries of "East" and "West," however, they did so in order to better understand their own cultural identities. In the late nineteenth century, the United States received many Arab immigrants, primarily Syrian Christian people.[20] Some of which intended to make a life there, though many at the time hoped to stay only temporarily. Many of those who wrote accounts of their travels in America expressed favorable opinions of their experiences, though they still used comparisons between "East" and "West." The account "A Stranger In the West," written by Mikhail Asad Rustum and published in 1895, included a two-columned list of comparisons, which begins with "1. We are Easterners, 1. They are American Westerners." Some of the differences in the direct comparison list were factual, such as the fact that in Arabic, one writes from right to left, and vice versa in English. Others, however, were broad generalizations, such as the assertion that in the Middle East, "Women submit to their men," while in America, "Men submit to their ladies."[21] This intense focus on the differences between "East" and "West" was a way for the author to process his travels in America while being surrounded by a society whose opinions and understanding of Arabs were sometimes quite negative.[22] By compartmentalizing what belonged to America, or the "western" sphere with that which belonged to the "eastern" sphere,

immigrants and travellers to America could communicate what they had seen while also reinforcing what group they belonged to, as in Rustum's initial comparison when he used the terms "we" and "they."

Similarly, an article in the *New York Daily Tribune* from June 20, 1881 describing the experience of a Syrian family who immigrated to the United States expressed how early Arab immigrants and travellers used comparisons between America and their home countries in order to better understand their own relationship to the two. This early account of life in America conveyed the generally positive and hopeful outlook that many Arab immigrants who wrote about their experiences expressed. The newspaper reporter interviewed the patriarch of the Arbeely family, Yusif, who, through the translation of his son, stated,

> The change from Damascus, almost the oldest city in the world, to this the newest and most active civilization in the world, was very great. But I have not been disappointed. I left my relatives and friends behind because I desired freedom of speech and action and educational advantages for my children. In coming here I have escaped the disadvantages of a retrograding civilization and a tyrannical government . . . .[23]

In order to better understand the change from being immersed in what was familiar and known to being in a place that was foreign and unfamiliar (and sometimes hateful towards immigrants), many immigrants related their perceptions of America through comparison to their home country. In this case, the speaker's hopefulness for a future in America reflected the fact that American involvement in the Middle East was still very limited, and the two had not yet come to form a real relationship other than that of the few independent missionaries who were unsuccessful in their conversion efforts. It also was part of the larger trend of exclusion and pressured assimilation that the first Arab immigrants to the United States had to navigate if they wanted to survive in a place that tended to demonize minorities.[24] In this way, Arab immigrants tried to avoid being labelled as the "other" or the weaker player in the power dynamic through the comparison of "East" and "West" in relation to the concepts of "past" and "future."

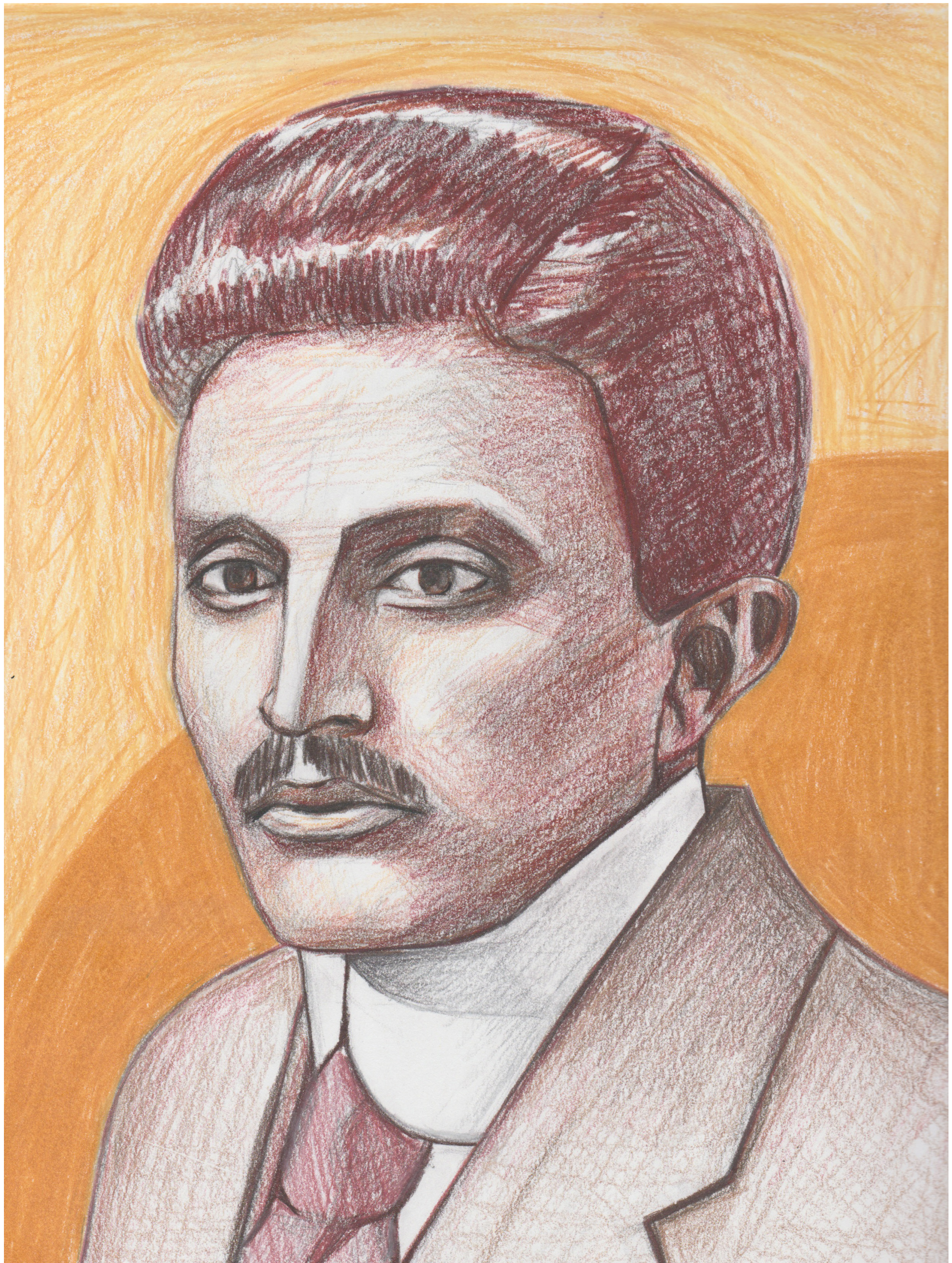
Arab Accounts of the United States in the Years Surrounding the "Wilsonian Moment"

The tumult of World War I had lasting implications for the way global politics would play out. One factor of this emerged when President Woodrow Wilson issued his famous Fourteen Points in 1918, which some scholars claim unintentionally endorsed anti-colonialist and self-determination movements in countries where Britain and France had staked imperial claims, such as in Egypt.[25] However, the question of whether or not Wilson should be accredited with this is under debate, considering the fact that Arab nationalism was a concept that

originated years beforehand.[26] Yet following Wilson's statement, those who advocated for Arab nationalism and sought the assistance of the United States in achieving self-determination against colonial rulers were sorely let down, and the Middle East continued to be divvied up by France and Great Britain.[27] Many of the most prominent travel narratives, letters, and publications written by Arabs visiting or immigrating to America reflected the hope and then disenchantment of these years. In addition, they stayed constant in their processing of the world as "East" and "West," though by this time the practice began to reflect the heightening difference in power between the United States and the countries of the Middle East. The letters of Ameen al-Rihani, the prominent Arab writer and proponent of Arab nationalism, communicated these sentiments. Al-Rihani's letters showed a strong belief in the assistance of America in the realization of self-determination efforts. In a letter written to Shoukry Bakhash on April 18, 1917, he claimed,

> I have no doubt that the small, oppressed nations will be liberated and live a new life after this war. How could this not be so while America today is their greatest supporter and ally, and in the peace conference tomorrow, America will raise its voice on their behalf calling for their independence?[28]

This optimism in the belief that Wilson's statement meant that America would help overthrow colonial oppressors turned into disappointment after these dreams did not manifest. Though he was known for his belief in "the marriage of East and West,"[29] following the disenchantment of assistance in self-determination efforts, Ameen al-Rihani's letters conveyed ideas of being caught between the two. He also portrayed his life in America as though he was compelled to denounce either "East" or "West" in order to fully belong to the other, and he frequently compared America to places in the Middle East. Now that America had failed to assist Arab nationalization goals, the heightened difference in power between the United States and the Middle East became thornily evident. In a letter from February 20, 1920, al-Rihani penned, "I feel baffled and perplexed as I hesitate between my doubts in the New World and my certainty about the Old World . . . .Today I am a prisoner to both and a hostage to each one. I am far away from my people, my hopes and aspirations . . . ."[30] The idea of being caught between two worlds, one "East" and the other "West," reflected the confusion and pain associated with the realization that America's power could and would be used in order to maintain oppressive, imperial power structures in the Middle East. For al-Rihani, following the disappointment of the "Wilsonian Moment" it was painfully evident that there was no chance of emerging the most powerful and resistant if he aligned with the "East." Yet he also knew that aligning himself with the "West" meant giving in to an ever-expanding leviathan of power at the expense of his own people. Such was the difficulty of this binary for those who did not stand to gain from its employ.



Portrait of al-Rihani

Maggie Yuan (2019)

Other Arab accounts of travelling in America during the 1920s reflected both the continuity of using comparisons between "East" and "West" as well as the change in what these meant in terms of the growing difference in power that characterized the relationship between America and the Middle East. In one account in which an Egyptian tourist was pleased to see American tobacco growing in Ireland, he lamented, "As for our own unfortunate country, it is still prevented from growing this profitable crop in spite of the fact that our soil and climate are particularly suited to it."[31] Ireland, he said, was much like America in the sense that its productivity and propensity for enterprise were much more alive than back home in Egypt. Similarly, in Philip K. Hitti's account of his experiences in America for the *al-Hilal* magazine in 1924, he wrote that America was a place of "tremendous energy," and he characterized American society as a kind of ruthless jungle where "No neighbor will aid you, and no relative will have pity on you. If you don't work, you will simply perish."[32] Interwoven with Hitti's descriptions of America were comparisons which began with, "in our East," and, "the ideal thing for an Easterner." His narrative exemplified the kind of weighing and measuring that many Arab intellectuals did in regards to the differing cultural and political characteristics of the "East" and "West," which also represented an attempt to contend with the gross discrepancy in power between America and the Middle East.[33] For though America was represented as the place where skyscrapers bloomed and work was prioritized, Hitti's narrative combatted the idea that these characteristics deemed America to be wholly better than the societies of the Middle East. In fact, he took it one step further through the claim that "the Easterner has become the world's teacher of literature (or good manners) and its spiritual master" while "the American . . . has become the master of the world's land and the commander of the seas."[34] Another description of travel in America in 1926 similarly claimed that America and the Middle East were at odds because the former used tradition to grow and endeavour in the future while the latter followed tradition and values the past.[35] Authors of accounts such as these employed the binaries of the roles of "East" and "West" in order to reconcile the fact that American foreign policy did not follow through on the "'adjustment of all colonial claims'" of imperial Britain and France. They even went so far as to formally recognize the British protectorate or occupation of Egypt, thus highlighting this power difference that loomed over the self-determination efforts of the countries of the Middle East.[36]

American and European Accounts of the Middle East Pre-World War II

As tourism to the Middle East became more stylish in the 1920s and 30s, American and other "western" travel narratives about the Middle East continued to describe the world in terms of "East" and "West" in order to position themselves amongst the greater disparity in power in terms of "colonizer" and "colonized." In addition, travel narratives to the Middle East began to increasingly incorporate

comparisons between the culture and way of life of the familiar “home country” that belonged to the “modern” West and those of the “primitive” places travelled to in the Middle East. In this way, the concept of measuring modernity through a “western” lens was a way through which authors of travel narratives further entrenched the ever-expanding gap in power between their home country and those that they travelled to. When one inquisitive traveller visiting Tel Aviv in the early 1930s asked his British guide about the conflict between Jews and Arabs, the response was “‘If the country is to be developed, the Arabs must suffer, because they don’t like development,’” and the author agreed.[37] Representing the “other” as resistant to “western” ideals of modernization was a way in which those who identified with imperial power could both justify and reinforce the staggering imbalance of power between countries with colonial presences in the Middle East and the people there. In this particular instance, the use of the resistant “other” to what was deemed societal progress served to justify the creation of a Jewish homeland in Palestine, which in turn meant the exclusion and suppression of the Palestinian people.

Many travel narratives written by “western” authors during the period exemplified the burgeoning use of “western” conceptions of modernity in order to identify the “other” as the more inferior, weaker party in the power dynamic. While describing the previous attempts to map the Rub’ al Khali desert through the use of planes, British author Bertram Thomas claimed that it would not be feasible, and in addition, that “also there seems something indelicate in the intrusion of Western machines into these virgin silences . . . . The camel-back and the long marches go to make the magic of Arabia.”[38] In this instance, the alignment of technology with the “West” and the subsequent rejection of its application in the Middle East was an exercise in power. Here, the observer was aware of his own ability to disturb the environment of the observed, and he prided himself on more or less *allowing* the foreign “other” to remain undisturbed, thereby declaring the “other” to have no agency. In traveling within the Middle East, therefore, Thomas not only comprehended that he belonged to the nation that possessed the power in the relationship, but he reinforced this by employing his conception of modernity as a way to portray the “other” as less powerful in relation to himself. Another travel narrative accomplished this through a description of Egyptian women who “have entirely discarded the veil, and move about as freely as if they were in England.”[39] Within the context of Britain’s colonial presence in the Middle East, this way of describing what those travellers saw and interacted with abroad showed how the pre-existing power structure of imperial mandates in the region also affected the way that those travelling there expressed themselves in relation to the “other.”

The Manifestation of "East" and "West" through European Travel Guides

Similarly, the application of the binaries of "East" and "West" through the terminology of modernization was manipulated in travel guides and other publications in order to show would-be travellers to the Middle East that they could see the region however they wished to. Often, this was phrased so that popular destinations for travel such as Cairo and Jerusalem would be appealing regardless of whether the traveller hoped to see antiquities and exoticized images of local life or enjoy a luxury hotel with state-of-the art facilities, or even both. One tourist guide from 1937 asked the potential traveller,

> 'Which Egypt is that you wish to visit? . . . Is it the Egypt of ancient lore, the oldest country in the world? . . . Or, it may be, you delight in contrast and wish to see, in its age-old setting, the new-born Egypt of today. Here, for you to behold, is a nation advancing by leaps and bounds in the path of modern progress.'[40]

Once again, the concept of modernity was employed as a kind of measuring stick in order to reaffirm Egypt's place as the less powerful foreign "other." Thus the relationship between the powerful imperial overlord and the subjects of this power was reestablished through the implicit claim that "Western" standards and conceptions of modernization were superior and that the less powerful entities in the relationship were to be encouraged to emulate as such, which in turn served as a kind of justification for an intrusive, imperialistic presence in the Middle East.

Post World War II American and European Accounts of the Middle East

Post-1945, the relationship between America and the countries of the Middle East took on an even greater disparity in power in the sense that Great Britain passed the torch of imperial orientalism to the American political arena.[41] The role that oil production came to play in American foreign policy during this era as well as clashes centered around the establishment of Israel, among others, were areas in which a true American imperialism came to emerge. To further complicate the increasingly wary economic strategizing between Britain and America in regards to oil in the Middle East, the onset of the Cold War with the Soviet Union emphasized the role of the commodity in foreign policy.[42] During the Cold War, proponents of American foreign policy in the Middle East employed modernization rhetoric in order to present the "American Western" version of society as the ideal goal for perceived "underdeveloped" and "Third World" countries to strive for.[43] Yet this was a reflection of the growth of a kind of American imperial presence in the Middle East. Authors of travel narratives to the Middle East during this time used the rhetoric of modernization in order to identify themselves as belonging to the desirable "West" as they travelled through a "backward" area of the world. Modernization rhetoric,

therefore, reflected how deeply entrenched the self-serving strategies of American foreign policy were. Politicians and oil companies claimed that the countries of the Middle East were places that desperately needed to be set on the path of American development, yet this was in fact a justification for an American presence in the region that in many ways adopted colonialist practices. Post-1945, more and more authors of travel narratives portrayed the Middle East through these terms, which reflected the growth of American imperialism.

Which Egypt is that you wish to visit? . . . Is it the Egypt of ancient lore, the oldest country in the world? . . . Or, it may be, you delight in contrast and wish to see, in its age-old setting, the new-born Egypt of today.

The imbalance of power between the United States and the countries of the Middle East was even more evident in the travel narratives written about the latter in the 1940s and 50s than in prior decades. The binaries of "East" and "West" as well as "modern" and "ancient" represented perceptions of the "other" in terms of basic power strategizing. This was also reinforced by popular publications such as *National Geographic,* which presented Arabs in the Middle East as lesser beings who qualified as colonial subjects along with simple justifications such as "there are many peoples who are not yet ready for independence on the lines of Western democracy."[44] Much like these publications, travel narratives reinforced these ideas of "East" and "West" being divided into "modern" and "primitive." One British account stated that boys in Iraq are "as eager to be circumcised as boys to buy sweets at the counter of a school shop in England," thus presenting the foreign "other" as belonging to a savage, primitive world.[45] And in one letter written from Jerusalem in 1956, an American noted, "the contrast between an energetically determined Israel and a stubborn, colorful and slowly progressing Jordan . . .One side is willing and capable of doing the job. The other is still almost feudal, clannish and with a 'baksheesh' (personal charity approaching graft) mentality."[46] In this case, Israel, a growing power in the region, was not grouped with the other Arab countries in the "East." This marked a stark change from the time of missionaries, when Jerusalem was considered part of the "East." In addition to the growing power of Israel, throughout the 1950s and 60s the Israeli lobby grew in power and influence within the politics of the United States, while Arab states in the Middle East had nowhere near the kind of influence or representation.[47] Thus, the incorporation of Israel into the "West" resulted in the reinforcement of the great disparity in power between the United States and the "eastern" countries of the Middle East. Though Jerusalem was in no way quite as "western" as the continental United States, it was one degree removed from the "backwards," "unmodern" Arab "other" who American foreign policy routinely minimized in order to achieve its goals.

As the twentieth century progressed, the rhetoric of modernization appeared in travel narratives very frequently in the depiction of the comparative American and Arab roles in the oil industry. It also related to the traveller's understanding of identity in the sense that the traveller used the comparative measuring tools of modernity in order to reestablish the relative positions of themself and the "other" as unequal. John Eddy described, in a letter, the amenities for American Aramco workers on a developing railroad in Saudi Arabia to have had "repair cars and shops; a couple of sleepers, a dining car and kitchen-car," while stating that there was machinery "operated by dust-covered Saudi drivers, who, we were assured, are just as good as Americans, with less nerves."[48] The explicit identification of the Saudi workers as inherently different from Americans in the sense that they could allegedly perform more strenuous tasks was, in reality, a way to recognize and reinforce the role of the United States as the powerful member/partner of the relationship. Taking into account the oppressive and segregationist track record of Aramco during this time period, continuing the distinction of the "other" in terms of modernization created a kind of justification of America's dominant role in power dynamics.[49]

Post-World War II Arab Accounts of the United States

While the American presence in the Middle East began to grow rapidly through oil companies and other means, Arab travel narratives in the United States as a whole conveyed a general confusion in terms of how to process and portray America. Some showed a great feeling of distrust of and disillusionment with America, while others seemed to view it with ambivalence. Writing about their travels through the concept of separate roles for the "East" and the "West" in terms of contributions to the world advanced these sentiments. In Mahmud Taymur's account *The Flying Sphinx*, following a comparison of American monuments to those of Egypt, he wrote that skyscrapers in America

> . . . are eloquent in expressing the inherent inferiority complex in the American psyche, which prompts this young rising nation that has been blessed with resources, knowledge, and an undisputed position among nations, to cry out to the world: 'Look at me, I am the greatest one of all!'[50]

This negative account directly compared America to Egypt through the recognition that the power dynamic between the two was in no way equal. The presentation of Egyptian culture as more valuable played into the division of the separate roles of "East" and "West," and it was a way through which one could try to push back against the growing influence and presence of America in the Middle East.[51] Though Sayyid Qutb's work is considered radical, he wrote about his travels to America in a similar fashion, though more intensely negative, stating, "All that requires mind power and muscle are where American genius shines, and all that requires spirit and emotion are where American naivete and primitiveness become

apparent."[52] [53] Following this, Qutb warned against emulating America for fear of losing a sense of morality, which he claimed America was devoid of. His separation of the roles of "East" and "West" and the subsequent antagonism of America as lacking in morality was also an attempt to resist the presence and overbearing influence of America in the Middle East post-1945.

It is important to note that not all depictions of America were negative during this period, as some Arab authors of travel narratives recognized and praised America's cultural, economic, and political power in order to make the claim that Middle Eastern states should emulate it. One visitor to America in 1955 noted that making comparisons between America and Egypt is "unfair, for I am comparing one of the richest nations on earth with a nation that is among the world's poorest."[54] However, he continued on in the narrative to compare American productivity and ways of life with those of Egypt, through which he combated what he considered to be the common perception of Americans by Egyptians as devoid of morality and spirituality. But the power of the United States on the geopolitical stage was evident in his statement that "it is more important for newspapers here to fill their pages with pictures of brides that got engaged or married than to publish even the slightest news of the revolution in Egypt."[55] Thus the admiration of the cultural and economic achievements of the United States was tempered by the reminder that American politics and media were powerful enough to keep other states in a status of lesser importance. One similarly positive account exaggerated the equality of social conditions in America in order to antagonize conditions in Europe, as it claimed that many fellow Arabs disliked America based on information provided by European sources. Yet despite this positive depiction of America, the author admitted in the end that the American propensity to work after retirement lacked consideration that "the body and the soul have needs and these needs ought to be met in the right stage in one's life."[56] Though it was a subtle example, this narrative also showed the practice of compartmentalizing America and the Middle East into separate roles in the world. Despite the fact that America represented the height of wealth, production, and power on the geopolitical stage, it was not the master of spiritual affairs. For many Arab authors of travel narratives, this dichotomy was a way in which to reconcile the great difference in power between the United States and the countries of the Middle East. Yet even this distinction could not shake the entrenched presence of American geopolitical strategizing initiatives in the region, and the United States continued to pursue its own interests at the expense of those who sought control of their respective homelands.

The changes and continuities of American and Arab travel narratives to the Middle East and the United States closely followed the story of the change in the relationship power dynamics between the two. From the time of limited involvement in the form of evangelical missionaries to the growth post-World

War II in imperialist foreign policy in the Middle East, the identifiers of "East" and "West" remained constant in both American and Arab travel narratives, albeit for different reasons. For the Americans who hailed from the more powerful member of the relationship, these terms as well as the rhetoric of modernization were used in order to establish distance from (and, therefore, justify their power over) the people and cultures they saw and interacted with while travelling. Yet for Arabs visiting the United States, the binaries of "East" and "West" were increasingly used as attempts through which they could push back against the growing influence and presence of the United States in the region.

In addition, the examination of travel narratives within the greater context of geopolitical power is important in the sense that it reveals how people who travelled came to understand and process the "other" as well as themselves. As was the case with the Middle East, America, and Europe, this understanding was rooted within the broader context of vast discrepancies in power, with those who belonged to the more powerful entity exercising stark binaries in order to justify their position as ruler, and with those who found themselves at risk of subjugation fighting through these binaries to identify their oppressors.

NOTES

1 Muhammad Labib al-Batanuni, "The Trip to America," in *America in an Arab Mirror: Images of America in Arabic Travel Literature, 1668 to 9/11 and Beyond*, eds. Mouna El Kahla and Kamal Abdel-Malek (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2000), 59.
2 Erez Manela, "The Wilsonian Moment and the Rise of Anti-Colonial Nationalism: The Case of Egypt," *Diplomacy & Statecraft* 12 (December 2001), 99.
3 Robert Vitalis, "Black Gold, White Crude: An Essay on American Exceptionalism, Hierarchy, and Hegemony in the Gulf," *Diplomatic History* 26, no. 2 (2002), 199-200.
4 Manela, "The Wilsonian Moment and the Rise of Anti-Colonial Nationalism," 100.
5 Waïl S. Hassan, *Immigrant Narratives: Orientalism and Cultural Translation in Arab American and Arab British Literature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 13.
6 Lisa Pollard, *Nurturing the Nation* (Berkeley, California: University of California Press, 2005).
7 Vitalis, "Black Gold, White Crude," 200-204.
8 Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 2003), 2-3.
9 Marwa Elshakry, "The Gospel of Science and American Evangelism in Late Ottoman Beirut," in *American Missionaries and the Middle East: Foundational Encounters,* ed. Mehmet Ali Doğan and Heather J. Sharkey. (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 2011), 167-168.
10 Elshakry, 167-168.
11 Bertha Spafford Vester, *Our Jerusalem: An American Family in the Holy City, 1881-1949* (Garden City, New York: The Country Life Press, 1950), 66.
12 Spafford Vester, *Our Jerusalem*, 71.
13 Spafford Vester, *Our Jerusalem,* 71.
14 Waïl S. Hassan, *Immigrant Narratives: Orientalism and Cultural Translation in Arab American and Arab British Literature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 9.
15 Karl Baedeker, *Egypt and the Sudan: Handbook for Travellers*, *Sixth Remodelled Edition* (Leipzig: Karl Baedeker Publishers, 1908), xxiii-xxiv, 120.
16 Baedeker, *Egypt and the Sudan,* 120.
17 A.B. De Guerville, *La Nouvelle Égypte: Ce qu'on dit, ce qu'on voit du Caire à Fashoda* (Paris: Librairie Universelle, 1905), 19. There are other French sources from the same time period that I examined which are included in the bibliography. All translations unless otherwise noted are mine.
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19 Hassan, *Immigrant Narratives*, 13.
20 Lisa Suhair Majaj, "Arab-American Literature: Origins and Developments," *American Studies Journal* 52 (2008), 1.
21 Mikhail Asad Rustum, "A Stranger in the West: The Trip of Mikhail Asad Rustum to America, 1885-1895," in *America in an Arab Mirror,* 3.
22 Hassan, *Immigrant Narratives*, 6.
23 Beverlee Turner Mehdi, *The Arabs in America, 1492-1977: A Chronology and Fact Book* (Dobbs Ferry, New York: Oceana Publications, 1978), 70.
24 Hassan, *Immigrant Narratives,* 20-21.
25 Manela, "The Wilsonian Moment and the Rise of Anti-Colonial Nationalism," 103.
26 Ussama Makdisi, *Faith Misplaced: The Broken Promise of U.S.-Arab Relations: 1820-2001* (New York, New York: PublicAffairs, 2010), 62.
27 Makdisi, *Faith Misplaced*, 147-155.

28 George Nicholas El-Hage, ed., *Selected Letters of Ameen Al-Rihani* (Unknown place of publication: Unknown publisher, 2016), 82.
29 El-Hage, *Selected Letters*, 34.
30 El-Hage, *Selected Letters*, 98.
31 Ibrahim Rashad, *An Egyptian in Ireland* (No place of publication: Privately Printed for Author, 1920), 10.
32 Philip K. Hitti, "America in the Eyes of an Easterner, Or Eight Years in the United States," in A*merica in an Arab Mirror,* 49.
33 Hassan, *Immigrant Narratives*, 42.
34 Hitti, "America in the Eyes of an Easterner," in *America in an Arab Mirror*, 54.
35 Amir Boqtor, "The World in America," in *America in an Arab Mirror,* 56.
36 Manela, "The Wilsonian Moment and the Rise of Anti-Colonial Nationalism," 103.
37 Robert Byron, *The Road to Oxiana* (London: Macmillan and Co., 1937), 23.
38 Bertram Thomas, Arabia Felix: A*cross the Empty Quarter of Arabia* (London: Jonathan Cape Ltd., 1932), xxvi.
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41 Douglas Little, *American Orientalism: The United States and the Middle East since 1945* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2008), 11.
42 Little, *American Orientalism*, 51-52.
43 Begum Adalet, *Hotels and Highways: The Construction of Modernization Theory in Cold War Turkey* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2018), 2.
44 Linda Steet, *Veils and Daggers: A Century of National Geographic's Representation of the Arab World* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2000), 99.
45 Wilfred Theisinger, *Arabian Sands* (New York: Dutton, 1959), 90.
46 Kai Bird, *Crossing Mandelbaum Gate: Coming of Age Between the Arabs and Israelis, 1956-1978* (New York: Scribner, 2010,) 3.
47 Doug Rossinow, "Edge of the Abyss: The Origins of the Israel Lobby, 1949-1954," *Modern American History* 1 (March 2018): 23-24.
48 William Alfred Eddy Papers; 1859-1978, Public Policy Papers, Department of Rare Books and Special Collections, Princeton University Library.
49 Vitalis, "Black Gold, White Crude," 200-205.
50 Mahmud Taymur, "The Flying Sphinx [in America]," in *America in an Arab Mirror*, 62.
51 Hassan, *Immigrant Narratives*, 13.
52 Little, *American Orientalism*, 315.
53 Sayyid Qutb, "The America I have Seen," in *America in an Arab Mirror*, 26.
54 Zaki Najib Mahmud, "My Days in America," in *America in an Arab Mirror*, 73.
55 Mahmud, "My Days in America," in *America in an Arab Mirror,* 78-79.
56 Zaki Khalid, "America Under the Microscope," in *America in an Arab Mirror*, 64-65.

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