Translation Movements in History:

Science and Civilization in Nineteenth Century Histories of Islam and Europe

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One could imagine the various versions of the ‘Abbasid Caliph al-Mam’un’s (b. 786, r. 813-833) dream of Aristotle fitting nicely in Borges’s “Library of Babel,” itself a meditation on the vast finitude of variations involved in the act of writing or recording. In the story, a librarian wanders through the hexagonal rooms and corridors of this endless, if not infinite, library, before arriving at its fundamental principles: “in the vast Library there are no two identical books.”¹ At least two versions of the dream point to this trickery of transmission or naql.² ‘In ‘Abdallah

¹ This is how Borges introduces the “librarian of genius”: “Five hundred years ago, the chief of an upper hexagon came upon a book as confusing as the others, but which had nearly two pages of homogeneous lines. He showed his find to a wandering decoder who told him the lines were written in Portuguese; others said they were Yiddish. Within a century, the language was established: a Samoyedic Lithuanian dialect of Guarani, with classical Arabian inflections. The content was also deciphered: some notions of combinative analysis, illustrated with examples of variation with unlimited repetition. These examples made it possible for a librarian of genius to discover the fundamental law of the Library. This thinker observed that all the books, no matter how diverse they might be, are made up of the same elements: the space, the period, the comma, the twenty-two letters of the alphabet. He also alleged a fact that travelers have confirmed: in the vast Library there are no two identical books. From these two incontrovertible premises he deduced that the Library is total and that its shelves register all the possible combinations of the twenty-odd orthographical symbols... Everything: the minutely detailed history of the future; the archangels’ autobiographies, the faithful catalogue of the Library, the demonstration of the fallacy of the those catalogues... and the true catalogue ... the true story of your death, the translation of every book in all languages, the interpolations of every book in all books.” Jorge Luis Borges, Labyrinths: Selected Stories and Other Writings (New York, 1964), 54.

² See Dimitri Gutas, Greek Thought, Arabic Culture (London, 1998), 95-104; Muhammad ‘Abid al-Jabiri also discusses this episode in his Nahnu wa-al-turath. For more on the Caliph and his times, see Michael Cooperson, Al-Mam’un.
ibn Tahir’s (824/5-867) account, al-Ma’mun is quoted as having recalled it as follows: “I saw in my dream a man seated in the assembly of the philosophers.’ I said, ‘O philosophers, what is the best speech? He replied, ‘Whatever is correct according to personal judgment (ra’y).’ I said, ‘Then what?’ He replied, ‘Whatever the person who hears it finds to be good.’ I said, ‘Then what?’ He replied, ‘Everything else is the same as a donkey’s bray’.”3 A century later, Yahya ibn ‘Adi records the dream as follows: “Al-Ma’mun dreamt that he saw a man of reddish-white complexion with a high forehead, bushy eyebrows, bald head, dark blue eyes and handsome features, sitting on his chair. Al-Ma’mun said: ‘I saw in my dream that I was standing in front of him, filled with awe. I asked, ‘Who are you?’ He replied, ‘I am Aristotle.’ I was delighted to be with him and asked, ‘O philosopher may I ask you?’ He replied, ‘Ask.’ I said: ‘What is the good?’ He replied: ‘Whatever is good accords with the intellect [’aql].’ I asked: ‘Then what?’ He replied: ‘Whatever is good accords with religious law [shari’a].’ I asked: ‘Then what?’ He replied, ‘Whatever is good in the opinion of the masses.’ I asked: ‘Then what?’ And he replied: ‘Then there is no more “then”’.”4

Both versions speak to the power of veridical dreams in Muslim discourses.5 The use of oneiric images to recall a future anterior also formed a long-standing rhetorical technique of Arabic historians. But the differences between them are also significant. In the first version, Aristotle was merely one among a circle of other philosophers, and the question of the good was bound up with ra’y, or personal judgment. Lost too is reference to the foolish braying of those who do not follow

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3 ‘Abdallah ibn Tahir also adds: “Had Aristotle been alive, he would not have added anything else to what he said here, since he collected and refrained.” Quoted from Dimitri Gutas, Greek Thought, Arab Culture: The Graeco-Arabic Translation Movement in Baghdad and Early ‘Abbasid Society (2nd-4th & 8th-10th C.), 97. Gutas adds the following notations to this final line: “Had Aristotle been alive, he would not have added anything else to what he said here, since in [this statement] he collected [everything that needed to be said] and refrained [from saying anything superfluous].” Italics added.

4 Both versions quoted from Gutas, Greek Thought, Arab Culture, ibid.

their own inner authority. By the mid-10th century, a new emphasis on reason or the intellect, 'aql, emerged instead, however, alongside the need to sanction the equity of divine law and consensus with reason and the good. Yahya ibn ‘Adi’s account would also shape those of others after him, including Ibn al-Nadim (d. 998) who, in his Fihrist, places a similar emphasis on the combination of intellect, revelation and consensus. What these later accounts were trying to underscore, in other words – especially at a time when there was a plurality of claims over the true “knowledge of the Ancients,” including Platonic, neo-Platonic, Sabi’an, Hermetic and alchemical traditions, among others – was a certain primacy of Aristotelian logic, and of dialectical critique and syllogistic reasoning in particular. The importance of the specifically Greek translations made under al-Ma’mun was thus deliberately given priority. At the same time, the specifically legal implications of this translation and its search for equivalencies between the ancient Greek conception of the good and an orthodox Muslim one were also highlighted.6

Many later Arabic histories of the ‘Abbasids would similarly refer to al-Ma’mun’s dream of Aristotle when underscoring the importance of the transmission, or naql, of ancient Greek philosophical corpus. But the idea that this formed a coherent “translation movement” would emerge nearly a millennium later. The term “translation movement” was originally used to refer to processes of conversion in electronic circuitry. It first appears in historical works, particularly in relation to the Arabic translation of Greek texts, in the early 1900s. These were first done by missionaries abroad writing potted histories for would be proselytes and their converts, who collectively translated or offered digests of local (and often recovered, or long-forgotten) histories, typically with the assistance of “native tutors.” But it was only by the 1920s and 1930s that the idea really gained ground.

This article does not so much offer an etiology as a rough genealogy of the idea itself. It focuses on the different meanings ascribed to the idea of a translation of ideas

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6 Dimitris Gutas, Greek Thought, Arabic Culture, ibid.
across “civilizations” (a nineteenth-century neologism in many respects) and follows how this took shape in the new universal histories of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, particularly those of the inter- and post-war years. It looks, in other words, at how this view of a “translation movement” emphasized the role of translation as a “mover” of historical change, often epochal-making change. After all, behind the very invention of the concept lay the idea that the Graeco-Arabic translation movement formed part of our collective “medieval” transition from the Ancients to the Moderns. The rise of new histories of civilization – like the later histories of science they gave rise to – formed a critical part of this story of the rise of the idea of a translation movement in history. The very concept was bound up therefore, with both science and civilization – terms that were also being redefined, in both meaning and scope, at just this time; yet by the mid-twentieth century, the history of one was often synonymous with the other. This paper seeks to trace part of this story while tracing the rise of a new interest in translation as a critical feature of humanity’s temporal (or progressive) movement through history.

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The history of the translation of Greek works into Arabic does not figure much in early, Renaissance histories of the Arabs: George Sale, for instance, only alludes to this briefly in his History of the Arabs. Yet by the mid-twentieth century one could scarcely find a “History of the Arabs” that did not include some reference to the idea of a “translation movement.” How did this happen? This paper tries to answer this question by showing two things. Firstly, it investigates the rise of a new genre of universal history fashioned by popular and professional historians and orientalists, in the late nineteenth century that focused on the genre of the “history of civilizations.” Looking at the role assigned to science in these, it shows, secondly, how these histories formed a critical backbone for the rise of the history of science as a discipline. And, more importantly for this story, it shows how this emphasis on the Graeco-Arabic translation movement proved critical for those seeking to write the history of science as a universal history of humanity.
I begin with a brief discussion of some of the earliest histories written on the Arabs and on Islam as a “civilization.” It is true that Ibn Khaldun offered some version of this at least 500 years earlier; in fact, one can even trace the impact of this on the nineteenth century rise of discussions of civilization following the various translations of the *Muqaddima* in Europe itself, beginning with Silvestre de Sacy’s partial translations in 1810. Yet Ibn Khaldun’s discussion of civilization, and barbarism and savagery, were defined in somewhat different terms from later accounts. For Ibn Khaldun, the fact of “civilization” (‘umran, meaning a cultivated and dwelt or “civilized” life, or, at times, *al-hadar*, emphasizing the life of “town-dwellers” or “urbanites”) was defined through the construction of urban civitas. He also devotes considerable attention to the “various sciences” fostered by these, and hence to some extent we can see why he was later seen as prefiguring the nineteenth century interest in tracing the progress of the arts and sciences as a kind of tracer for the progress of mind or humanity itself. Yet Ibn Khaldun’s conception of civilization was in broader than the one implied by later, nineteenth-century ones in that it also included a marked moral dimension. When the question of civilization and the good appears, for instance, he often reverses the usual hierarchy. For him, the *barabra*, or berbers or “barbarians,” like the original tribal Arabs, were often the more virtuous communities: they were “closer to being good” as he put it, than their “civilized” counterparts. (Exceptions were made for the original Arab civilizations whose leaders often underwent a process of religious transformation and therefore were able to justly guide, as he saw it, the expansion of the empire of God.)

Nineteenth century discussions of “civilization” in Europe treated the question of moral progress in very different terms on the whole, though not always consistently as we will see.

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8 For more on the nineteenth century invention of civilization in Europe, see, Emile Benveniste “Civilisation: A Contribution to the History of the Word,” in Mary Elizabeth Meek (trans.) *Problems in General Linguistics* (Coral Gables, FL: University of Miami Press, 1971); Brett Bowden, Brett, *The Empire of Civilization: The Evolution of an Imperial Idea* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009); Jean Starobinski,
Yet if Ibn Khaldun influenced discussions in Europe and abroad, so too did these discussions in turn make their way into Arabic ones. The new histories of "Arab civilization" were especially appealing. One of the most important writers in this regard was the work of the French sociologist, racial anthropologist and popular physicist, Gustave Le Bon, particularly his *Civilisation des Arabes*. Echoes of many of Le Bon's ideas can be found in the works of the popular historian and popular science writer Jurji Zaidan, for instance. Zaidan’s multi-volume histories of the Arab and Islamic civilization were hugely influential, and like Le Bon, he saw the role of the Arabs and of Islam in history as critical both for the modern transmission of science and for what we might call the translation of civilizations across history itself.

The paper ends by turning to another pairing: the works of George Sarton, the first chair of history of science in the United States and a leading member of a new international (and internationalist) network of historians of science world-wide, and his one-time Arabic translator, Isma’il Mazhar (Mazhar translated Sarton’s *History of Science as the New Humanism* in 1962.). Sarton is presented here, as indeed he saw himself, as both an orientalist and a universal historian, which his commitment to internationalism and the history of science as the “new humanism” show well. Perhaps for these reasons, the appeal of his works among Arabic readers was considerable. Indeed, Mazhar’s own shared commitment to an internationalist and humanist program for the history of science, and his own interest in the translation of Greek science into Arabic, show how a twentieth-century concern with translation was placed back in history, and points to the ways in which translation, the history of science and universalism formed part of a series of interconnected histories.

“The Word Civilization” in Jean Starobinski, *Blessings in Disguise; or, the Morality of Evil* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993), 1-35
By the mid-nineteenth century, among the works of orientalists, Arabists and others, one could find a new kind of histories of the Arabs and of Islam. Louis-Pierre-Eugène Sédillot’s *Histoire des arabes* (first published in 1854) was among the first to focus so specifically on the scientific and philosophical corpus of the Arabs. Sédillot had a long-standing interest in Arabic and Persian astronomical works, and he published extensively on the subject, including a number of critical bibliographic catalogues (a common pursuit among orientalists of the time.) He organized the

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9 Many of these early histories also focused on the “Life of Mahomet”: among the new biographies which appeared at this time were Washington Irving’s *Mahomet and his Successors* (1850) and Sir William Muir’s *Life of Mahomet* (1861). In some ways these biographies followed earlier histories, and they often relied on early Arabic historical sources (but not their general presentation or interpretation). Irving and Muir’s biographies present Muhammad as inconsistent and fanatical in his pursuit of a simultaneously spiritual and a temporal dominion. That this began from within a tribe in Arabia, and that it soon spread through the four corners of the world, was also presented as needing some sort of explanation. The view of “conversion by the sword” was also a long-standing trope in these exposé histories. Yet how to explain the success of this “sword of Islam,” and of their subsequent empires? For Irving, the key to this story could be found from within Muhammad’s own “wonderful career of fanatical conquest”; for Muir, to tell the story of the life of Muhammad was to show how, in the course of Muhammad’s own pursuit of conquest, “intolerance quickly took the place of freedom; force, of persuasion.” (vol. 4, p. 319.)

10 Other works by Sédillot include: *Manuel de la Bourse, contenant des notions exactes sur les effets publics français et étrangers, avec l’état de leur cours respectif depuis l’origine ; sur les affaires qui se traitent à la Bourse de Paris, 1829; Traité des instruments astronomiques des Arabes composé au treizième siècle par Aboul Hhassan Ali, de Maroc, intitulé Collection des commencements et des fins, traduit de l’arabe sur le manuscrit 1147 de la Bibliothèque royale par J.-J. Sédillot, et publié par L.-Am. Sédillot, 2 volumes, 1834–1835; Manuel classique de chronologie, 2 volumes, 1834–1850; Mémoire sur les instruments astronomiques des Arabes, 1841; Mémoire sur les systèmes géographiques des Grecs et des Arabes, 1842; Supplément au Traité des instruments astronomiques des Arabes, 1844; Matériaux pour servir à l’histoire
history around a grand rise and fall account, or the “grandeur et décadence des arabes en Orient.” Much of this concerned the rise and fall of the ‘Abbasids to the invasion of the Seljuks. Another section on the “grandeur et décadence des arabes en Orient” followed the dynasties in Spain and the Maghreb. The second volume offered a “tableau” account of Arab civilization: beginning with the Baghdad school, and emphasizing, arts and letters and “inventions.” The categories themselves are revealing: along with the usual interest in the expansion of their dynastic realms, the history of the Arabs was also recorded in a duly positivist order, emphasizing the progress of knowledge, particularly those branches which made their way into the Latin corpus subsequently. Hence, he emphasizes astronomy over astrology. Much of his history of philosophy concerns (and begins with) the early translations of Aristotelianism. Yet he also spends time discussing the mu'tazila and the mutakallimun, or the ‘rationalist theologians’ before delving into a brief discussion of jurisprudence. But his discussion of the latter is very brief, and he does not connect the philosophers with the question of jurisprudence itself.\textsuperscript{11}

The line drawn between the progress of knowledge, through the history of the Arabs, was clearly drawn however. This was a presentation that was beginning to organize many such histories of the Arabs. A prize-essay, for the Bombay Education Society’s press, on “The Reciprocal Influence of “European and Muhammadan Civilization” and published in 1871, makes the point even more explicitly: “[T]he epoch which goes in Europe by the name of the Dark Ages, and which was really an epoch of ignorance and servitude, embraces the most brilliant period of the history

\textit{comparée des sciences mathématiques chez les Grecs et les Orientaux,} 2 volumes, 1845–1849; \textit{Prolégomènes des tables astronomiques d'Oloug-Beg, publiés avec notes et variantes et précédés d'une introduction,} 1847.

of the Arabs.”12 It was not until the twelfth-century that “many Arabic books were translated into Latin, which facilitated the progress of science.” As he put it, “When two or more nations come into long and close contact with each other, it is a natural consequence that they will, to a certain extent, influence each other in many things; the stronger and more cultivated will not only bestow its civilization and science, but will from its language engraft many words, and even whole locutions, on the weaker nation.”13 This question of “reciprocal influence” would, in later universal histories, be presented as the story of translation itself.

From the point of view of reciprocal translations, the book that had the greatest impact on Arabic histories of the nineteenth century and after, however, was Gustave Le Bon’s 1871 La Civilisation des Arabes. Le Bon was a racial anthropologist and physicist, author of several well-known, and internationally-circulated works such as on The Study of Races, The Psychology of Peoples, The Psychology of Socialism, The Evolution of Matter and The Evolution of Force. He also authored the hugely popular study of crowd psychology, La Psychologie des Foules (1895), which was published in English the following year as The Crowd: A Study of the Popular Mind (1896) and in Arabic in 1909.14 Le Bon’s history of Arab Civilization formed part of his “civilization” series and it was among the first of its kind to organize its history of the Arabs in terms of civilization. The term was fast becoming a marker

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12 Edward Rehatsek, Prize Essay on the Reciprocal Influence of European and Muhammadan Civilization: During the Period of the Khalifs and at the Present Time (Bombay: Education Society’s Press).
13 Ibid., 66 and
14 See Timothy Mitchell, Colonising Egypt (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988) for more on Le Bon’s Arabic readers. His publications included the following: L’Homme et les Sociétés (1881); La Civilisation des Arabes (1884); Applications of Psychology to the Classification of Races (1886); Les Lois Psychologiques de l’Évolution des Peuples (1894); La Psychologie des Foules (1895); Psychologie du Socialisme (1896); The Psychology of Socialism (1899); L’Évolution de la Matière (1905); L’Évolution des Forces (1907); La Révolution Française et la Psychologie des Révolutions (1912); Enseignements Psychologiques de la Guerre Européenne (1915), published as The Psychology of the Great War (1916); Psychologie des Temps Nouveaux (1920); The World in Revolt (1921); and Le Déséquilibre du Monde (1923), published as The World Unbalanced (1924).
for historical studies in Europe of peoples worldwide.\textsuperscript{15} For Le Bon, the category was also refracted through the concept of “race” another typology he helped to popularize, just around the time it was gaining new institutional and intellectual form.

Le Bon begins his analysis of Arab civilization with a discussion of “milieu” and “race.” As with many nineteenth century discussions of the latter, race was often, initially, indistinguishable from a more organicist view of the term, encompassing a more broadly climactic and geographical conception while also carrying over various moral meanings. Hence, for Le Bon, this included various “psychological factors in the classification of race,” and helped to shed light on the origin of the Arabs and their diversity.\textsuperscript{16} This was in fact how Ibn Khaldun himself describes the various tribes, berbers or “barbarians” and Arab “civitas” that his book details. Hence, for him, the barabara were in fact morally superior to their Arab civilizers: they lost their ‘asabiya, or what we might term a kind of collective thymic or ‘spirited’ consciousness, in the process of gaining greater knowledge of the civilized sciences, arts and crafts, and in the formation of new urban, political collectivities.

It was in the very process of translating these ideas that the idea of a unified Arab “race” or (racial) “civilization” emerged in orientalist writings. Le Bon was writing at the start of the composition of this new universal language for history in Europe. He was as interested in the various conquests, dynasties and empires, but also in manners and customs. His sections on the rise and fall of the Arab civilization dealt primarily with the “origin of their knowledge and educational methods,” which included sections on mathematics, astronomy, geography, the physical sciences, natural and physical sciences, philosophy, the visual and industrial arts as well as architecture and commerce. In this respect he follows his immediate predecessors

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\textsuperscript{15} For more on emerging nineteenth century conceptions of civilization, see \textsuperscript{16} See Book One.}

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writing on Arab civilization, citing Sédillot when crediting the Baghdad school with
the invention of “the experimental method” for example.\textsuperscript{17}

The categories of knowledge also matched the disciplines that were recognized as
such in Europe at the time. Gone however were the other arts and sciences that
previous Arabic authors, including Ibn Khaldun, had dealt with: not much attention
is granted to the prophetic traditions and the various sciences used to determine
their veracity; nor is there any discussion of alchemy, dream interpretation, sorcery
and talismans, all subjects Ibn Khaldun discussed under the classification of the
Arabic sciences. At the same time, Le Bon located the decline of Arab civilization in
the “current state” of Islam, a subject he takes up briefly in the last few pages of the
book.

Le Bon’s work gathered attention among Arabic authors not so much for these
categories as for the essential message of his text: “Au point de vue de la civilisation,
bien peu de peuples ont dépassé les Arabes et l’on n’en citerait pas qui ait réalisée
des progress si grands dans un temps si court. Au point de vue religieux, ils ont
fondé une des plus puissantes religions qui aient régné sur le monde, plus
puissantes religions qui aient régné sur le monde, une de celles dont l’influence est
la plus vivante encore. Au point de vue politique, ils ont créé un des plus
gigantesques empires qu’aient connus l’histoire. Au point de vue intellectual et
moral ils ont civilisé l’Europe. Plus de races se sont élevées plus haut, mais peu de
races sont descendues plus bas. Aucune ne présente d’exemple plus frappant de
l’influence des facteurs qui président à la naissance des empires, à leur grandeur et à
leur decadence.”\textsuperscript{18} At a time when imperial rule in Egypt was increasingly couched
in the language of civilization, it is hardly surprising that Arabic readers of the time
found Le Bon’s reverse formulation so appealing.

\textsuperscript{17} He also cites Delambre’s \textit{Histoire de l’astronomie} on the same page.

\textsuperscript{18} 565-6.
At the same time, the translation of ideas worked in both directions. Le Bon’s work was particularly influential in terms of the discussion of the “decadence” of the current state of Islam, a formulation that would make its way into the writings of a number of prominent Muslim intellectuals at the time, particularly those who had contact with orientalists in Europe or who spent time there, like Jamal al-Din al-Afghani and Muhammad ‘Abduh. They also borrowed the idea that the world was heading in a dangerous direction thanks to the state of modern civilization as emerging from Europe itself: “The poets speak of a happy, golden age or an era of universal brotherhood that had reigned among men. It is doubtful that such an age ever existed. Its dream has certainly forever fainted... Humanity is about to enter an Iron Age, where anything weak must inevitably perish.” According to Le Bon, when the Arabs conquered the East, they could not harm their subjects because they were fellow “orientals” – meaning they shared a common moral tie. But “anyone who has penetrated the East knows that the last of Europeans believes everything is permitted.” In particular, it was “commercial deceptions made with a lack of modesty” that betrayed how “our civilized veneer of men is low” as he put it.

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Translation figured somewhat in Le Bon’s work: the translation of Greek science and philosophy was a key theme for him, as it was for most orientalists of the time. A number of Arabic scholars quickly followed suit. Jurji Zaidan was perhaps the single most important figure to focus on this issue.\(^\text{19}\) Zaidan’s early writings were concerned with a subject he would return to time and time again: language, and relevance to the future of Arabic. At the age of twenty-four, in 1885, he composed

\(^\text{19}\) Much of the following discussion on Zaidan is taken from previous work; for more, see my “Between Enlightenment and Evolution: The Arab Golden Ages of Jurji Zaydan” in Thomas Philipp (ed.), Jurji Zaidan: His Contributions to Modern Arab Thought and Literature (2013).
his first book on *Arabic Expressions and the Philosophy of Language.* Borrowing from European comparative philology, he argued the then common view that all language stemmed from a common origin. The influence of an evolutionary worldview on this question was apparent in this work. Yet in arguing about the rise of “civilization” in Mesopotamia and then the subsequent development of the Semitic languages, Zaidan also tied his view of language groups to a new concern with “civilization.” As a result he participated increasingly in the rhetoric of “contributions” that is so characteristic of civilizational discourse.

Viewing the Arabs (and Arabic) as descending from Hammurabian Babylonia and their linguistic and legal codes, he argued that they had contributed to the very idea of a code of law, thus marking a new step in the world of civilizations. Under the influence of Renan and others, he argued ambiguously for the civilizational importance of the Quran: on the one hand, it had standardized the language and given it greater specificity and scope to the Arabs; but on the other, standardization had produced linguistic stasis and ultimately civilizational stagnation. In thus arguing for the importance of linguistic borrowings and constant translation, Zaidan highlighted the role of Islam in the formation of a common Arabic language, even as he replaced the view of its sacral origins, centered around an umma or community of believers, with an evolutionary, linguistic one, centered around the community of language or ummat al-lugha.

One should not detach these ideas from the dilemmas of a young Syrian émigré intellectual in a precarious epoch of competing nationalisms in the shadow of colonialism. The struggle with the British occupiers was reaching its climax in the years he was writing. For Zaidan, tracing the long gestation of Arabic beyond and including the Quran were tied to his desire to create a new Arab historical

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21 See Thomas Philipp, *Jurji Zaidan’s Secular Analysis of History and Language as the Foundations of Arab Nationalism,* (manuscript cited with permission of author), 75.
22 Philipp, *Jurji Zaidan’s Secular Analysis of History and Language,* 79.
consciousness that was bound up with the rise of Arab nationalism. Yet as with many other colonial-era intellectuals in Egypt, this did not preclude his participation in the colonial state. In British-occupied Egypt, Zaidan had earlier offered his services to the British officials, and with his friend Jabr Dumit, who also wrote on the philosophy of language, he joined the British army as a translator during the Wolseley expedition to the Sudan. Then and afterward, Zaidan remained a translator and translation was key to his career and thought.

After his brief stint with the British army, Zaidan managed al-Muqtataf for two years, and later began publication of al-Hilal. The two shared an evolutionist line that reflected the proprietors’ common Syrian Protestant College training and sensibilities. Yet, Zaidan had a greater sensitivity to history, and from the start, al-Hilal featured numerous articles on the history and philosophy of language and writing—a subject that Zaidan would return to throughout his life. Of special interest for him was the idea that the values of the ancient Mesopotamian and fertile crescent civilizations might be preserved linguistically through the last great descendant of the “Semitic” philological line: Arabic.

In many of his writings on language in al-Hilal and in later works on the subject, Zaidan also seized upon a key motif in his philosophy of language: the value of translation. He emphasized the way Arabic, especially the Meccan dialect (of the

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23 Dumit, like Zaidan, also published extensively on the need for language reform and simplification. Indeed, many of Dumit’s essays on the evolution of language were first published in al-Hilal and al-Muqtataf between 1888 and 1928. These included such studies as “The Evolution of the Arabic Language,” “Arabic: What It Took and What It Gave,” “Origins of the Semitic Peoples,” and “America and American” (a study of deriving adjectives from assimilated words). Dumit was also interested in the genesis and historical development of Arabic as evidence of its ability to adapt to the times. These articles were published by the Muqtataf Press in Cairo as Falsafat al-lugha al-‘Arabiya wa-tatawwu’ruha (The Philosophy of Arabic and Its Evolution) in 1929.


25 See for instance his al-Lugha al-‘Arabiya (Cairo 1904).
Quran) had taken shape through a series of linguistic borrowings. Hence, while Zaidan saw Arabic as the key vehicle of Arab social and spiritual expression and as the basis of an Arab unity that was critically shaped by Islam, its progress and evolution over time was nevertheless inseparable from a series of translation movements.

This emphasis on acculturation was clearly linked to his general views on language and literary production but had profound historiographical implications. It was through his interest in comparative philology that he came to present a radically alternative vision of Arabo-Islamic history, one which sat at odds both with that posed by some of his own contemporary reformers and with the historical schemata of many European orientalists.26 Borrowing both from the latter and from the works of classical Arabic authors like Ibn Khaldun who saw social solidarity, or ‘asabiya, as the key to the rise and fall of peoples, Zaidan fashioned a new universal narrative and chronology for Arab history.

Zaidan’s interest in orientalism had developed early: in Beirut in the 1880s, his involvement in various literary and scientific societies (al-Majma’ al-‘ilmi al-Sharqi and Shams al-Birr) as well in Freemasonry led him to an interest in the deep antiquity of the Orient, and it was during his Beirut years that he took up the study of both Hebrew and Syriac. Shortly after Carl Brockelmann published his Geschichte der Arabischen Literatur he decided to teach himself German and thereafter began to rely heavily on German Orientalist journals and works. He also corresponded regularly with a number of noted Orientalists – among them the Dutch Jan de Goeje, the French Hartwig Derenbourg, the Russian Ignaty Krachkovsky, the Hungarian Orientalist Ignaz Goldziher and David Margoulith, professor of Arabic at Oxford.27

26 See below for more.
27 For more on this, see Anne-Laure Dupont, “The Impact of European Orientalism on Jurji Zaidan’s Work.”
From his reading notes (now held in the American University of Beirut archives) we see the extent of this reliance, and the depth of his engagement. Over many years, in a neat hand, annotated in German and French as well as Arabic, Zaidan tracked the latest scholarship, plotted language change over time, and began to outline the structure of his later writings. Above all, the notebooks offer a fascinating glimpse into how he organized his notes on the chronologies and periods for both an Arab and a universal historical timeline.  

In this way, Zaidan borrowed from the bibliographic resources of a rapidly growing global network of Orientalist and Arabist scholars. In the list of sources he offers in his *Tarikh al-‘Arab qabl al-Islam* it is striking how relatively few canonical Arabic sources (compared with his reliance on the Orientalist literature) he utilized. He relies only scantily on the *ahadith* and *zikr* literature that had traditionally served as the basis for histories of the *jahiliya* and the early Muslim empires. Indeed, many of the Arabic sources he did use were the same ones that were then being extensively discussed by contemporary European and American scholarship – al-Mas’udi, al-Suyuti, and Ibn Khaldun.

Like many orientalists of the time, Zaidan emphasized the role of translation in the formation of the Arabic literary canon. In particular, and like the orientalists he was borrowing from, he stressed the importation of Greek thought in particular. But his conception of the Arabic “sciences” was broader than those of the orientalists he followed. In his *Tarikh al-adab al-‘Arabiya* (History of Arabic Literature), for instance, he begins with a brief overview of first Greek and then Arabic literature, stressing the continuity between the two. His discussion of the various branches of

28 American University in Beirut, Jaffet Library Archives, Jurji Zaidan Collection AA:6.2.26.1; notebooks, see especially the file labeled “small notebooks. For a model of how to analyze such material, see Jean-Francois Bert, *L’atelier de Marcel Mauss* (Paris, 2012).

arts and sciences were also more broadly defined. These were typically organized around biographies of figures and classed as falling under either the “Islamic” or the “imported” sciences. The history of science and the history of translation were once again critically wedded together.

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In fact, as Arabic scholars adapted, appropriated, or rejected the work of universal histories of knowledge that they and the orientalists created, the history of science itself was also drawing from the vision of universal history that these works presented. Though we do not often think of it this way, the early disciplinary history of science, and historians of science writing between the World Wars and after, had more than a few affinities with orientalists and their historiographies. Orientalism created a global network of scholarship and correspondence that caught the early historians of science in its web. Consider the correspondence of Jurji Zaidan, who, it is clear was well acquainted with English, French, German, Russian, and Arab scholars of the ancient and medieval Arab East. Follow the chain of correspondents and one comes to the Russian orientalist Ignaty Krachkovsky, and through him, George Sarton, the noted Belgian scholar and the first to hold a chair in history of science in the United States. Sarton was in many ways the key figure in the founding of the new discipline of history of science, and he was as much an

30 See Anne-Laure Dupont, “Zaidan and the Orientalists.”
31 Ignaty Krachkovsky met Zaidan while a young doctoral student visiting Cairo from Moscow. Zaidan helped him gain entry to private libraries that contained numerous unpublished Arabic manuscripts, and wrote him letters of introduction as well. Kratchovskv would later become a well-known Soviet Arabist, and later wrote of his experiences (in Among Arabic Manuscripts, which won him the Stalin Prize for Literature in 1952). Ignaty Krachkovsky, Among Arabic Manuscripts, introduction; Dupont, “Orientalism and the Arabs,” 4. In fact Zaidan was merely one of the many Arab “Arabists” that he corresponded with (see for instance Rebecca Gould, “Ignaty Krachkovsky’s Encounters with Arabic Literary Modernity through Amīn al-Riḥānī, 1910-1922” forthcoming.) Krachkovsky also later became known as an expert in modern (and not just classical) Arabic literature, and he too helped promote the idea of a contemporary Arabic literary and intellectual “renaissance.”
orientalist as a historian of science, as he himself admitted later in life. Founder of the journals *Isis* and *Osiris*, his choice of titles bespoke these affinities.32

Sarton’s impact upon the fledgling discipline was enormous: he launched *Isis* shortly after the First World War, and he held a deep commitment to an ecumenical history of science as the vehicle for a “new humanism.” Like many historians of science who formed part of an emerging international network of history of science, Sarton’s vision of humanism and the history of science formed part of his commitment to universalism and internationalism. Heir to a tradition of Belgian internationalism, Sarton was among the first to articulate a program for this all-encompassing vision. His narrative of the world history of science reflected these concerns, and more than anyone else in the first half of the twentieth century, he helped to popularize a timeline that stretched from ancient Mesopotamia to Modern Europe. He connected ancient and medieval with modern histories and saw their development as taking place between a series of translation movements and cross-cultural, intellectual and practical, contacts between the “East,” the original home and seat of ancient knowledge and civilization itself, and the “West,” the synthesis and apex of this narrative.

Sarton was also an Arabist: he corresponded regularly with orientalists and Arabists and scholars from the region, often in Arabic.33 The network of these affiliations has not been studied; yet his work is unimaginable without them. They included book dealers, teachers, and translators as well as fellow-scholars and ‘ulama. He drew

32 Thinking retrospectively about why he titled his journal *Isis*, Sarton wrote in 1953: “At that time, say around 1911–1913, I was deeply enamored with mathematical and physical knowledge—the perfection of knowledge— and cared little about the humanities, least of all oriental humanities. If somebody had told me then that I would become a medievalist and an orientalist, such a statement would have seemed preposterous to me.” George Sarton, “Why *Isis*?” *Isis*, 1953, 44: 232–242, on 245.

33 Among the correspondence found in Sarton’s papers with key orientalists, including H.R. Gibb and Louis Massignon. He also corresponded with Louis Sarkis, and several other scholars from the region. The Harvard Archives, which hold his papers, also list some 92 Arabic letters that are still uncatalogued. See also Thomas Glick, “George Sarton and the Spanish Arabists,” *Isis* 76 (1985): 487-99.
upon the work of contemporary orientalists and Arabists to highlight the contributions of medieval Muslims to the new universal history of science he hoped to popularize. He saw them, and particularly the ‘Abbasids, as providing a crucial link in the evolution of science from ancient Mesopotamia to the modern West and in preserving the spirit of Greek rationalism to which they were heir. In this way, the old question of the relation of the Orient to the Occident was rearticulated, and thinking across the borders of East and West structured his periodization.\footnote{He outlined four phases of history as follows: first, the discovery of empiricism among the ancient Mesopotamians, second the development of rationalism among the Greeks then a period of “groping” in the middle ages, and finally modern science itself. See George Sarton, \textit{The History of Science and the New Humanism} (New York, 1931), chapter two, “East and West” in particular. Sarton’s periodization for the history of science thus hinged critically on marking the border between Eastern and Western civilizations.}

Sarton’s view of the relation between Islam and Europe was also influenced by another Belgian internationalist of the time, Henri Pirenne. For Pirenne, whose views have been termed the ‘Pirenne theisis,’ Islam itself gave birth to Europe by encapsulating it after Charlemagne.\footnote{Henri Pirenne, \textit{Mohammed et Charlemagne} (1935).} For Sarton, it was the “translation movement” under the ‘Abbasids that did the converse: it helped to revive Europe, and became the very source of its own Renaissance. Here once again, translation became a prime mover for the universal history of civilizations, while the rise and fall of Muslim civilization itself both encapsulates and then liberates Europe.

As he put it, “the progress of science is naturally an accelerated one (hence if we look backwards the acceleration is negative.)” This progressive development from ancient to medieval science worked through the passing on of “traditions” that were oral, written, or manual,” the last one of which he described as “an underground river which remains hidden for long stretches, yet we can be reasonable certainty that the river emerging from the earth at point B is the same as disappeared at another point A many miles distant.” In his 1952 \textit{Guide to the History of Science} he provides two diagrams for this story of visible and invisible influences as follows:
Adding the following description:

“We might attempt a graphical representation of these views. The tradition of each single idea or fact might be symbolized by a line, more or less regular, with ups and downs. Some of these lines are interrupted because the tradition has ceased for a time to be visible. Sometimes the lines cross and their intersections may be indifferent or they may correspond to a knot or a new discovery. (Fig 1)”

Figure 2 he explained as follows:

“Should we wish to represent the whole tradition, not only the development of single ideas or inventions, but the scientific pattern in its totality, the graph would be very different, something like this (Fig 2). The roots of western science, the graph reminds us, are Egyptian, Mesopotamian, and to a much smaller amount, Iranian and Hindu. The central line represents the Arabic transmission which was for a time, say, from the ninth to the eleventh century, the outstanding stream, and
remained so until the fourteenth century one of the largest streams of medieval thought.”\textsuperscript{36}

It was precisely this emphasis on translation that made for Sarton’s particular, ecumenical vision of the history of science. As he explains, the diagram demonstrates both how “the Arabic tradition was a continuation and revivification not only of Greek science but also of Iranian and Hindu ideas,” though this transmission – or translation of civilizations – was now only imperfectly known.\textsuperscript{37}

The Arabic translation movement provided the critical medieval bridge between the Far and Near East and the West. Hence, it was viewing the history of science through translation that gave rise to this universal vision: “That network, the Oriental-Greek-Arabic, is our network.” Indeed, for Sarton, the Arabic translation movement provided the critical medieval bridge between the Far and Near East and the West. He added: “The neglect of Arabic science and the corresponding misunderstanding of our own medieval traditions was partly due to the fact that Arabic studies were considered a part of Oriental studies. The Arabists we left alone.” And whereas “much in the field of orientalism is definitely exotic as far as we are concerned” he stressed how both “the religious Hebrew traditions and the scientific Arabic ones are not exotic.” Indeed, “they are an integral part of our network today.” Hence this “network” was as much scientific as spiritual; as he put it: “they are part and parcel of our spiritual existence.”

Indeed, for Sarton (as indeed for Pirenne), this view of the mutual making and unmaking of Europe and Islam was part of a broader, internationalist program. Writing in the aftermath of the Second World War, he wrote: “Arabic culture is of a singular interest to the student of human traditions in general, to those whose greatest task it seems to them is the rebuilding of human integrity in the face of national and international disasters, because it was, and to some extent still is, a bridge, the main bridge between East and West.”

\textsuperscript{36} George Sarton, \textit{The Guide to the History of Science} (1952), 26-27.
\textsuperscript{37} \textit{Ibid.}
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This concern with translation as a bridge between East and West, and between the Ancients and the Moderns concerned Arabic authors of the time as much as it did war-time internationalists like Pirenne and the internationalist historians of science like Sarton. East and West emerged as new, inter-war categories for Arabic authors too. Isma’il Mazhar, the first to offer a partial translation of Origin of Species in 1918, at the age of 27, was among the first to popularize the idea through translation. A prolific translator, editor of a literary and popular scientific journal in the 1930s, his own choice of translation also reflected this interest in Eastern and Western literary traditions.

Mazhar was an independent writer and came from a family of some means: his paternal grandfather was a chief engineer under Muhammad ‘Ali and among the first to travel to Paris as part of the new state’s “educational missions,” where he studied with Auguste Comte among others at the Ecole Polytechnique. His maternal grandfather was the first Minister of Education in Egypt, and like him, Mazhar shared an interest in pedagogy, using the press as a means of promoting self-education. His family also owned a farm outside Cairo to which he would regularly retreat.

After his translation of the Origin, he contributed to a number of other literary and popular science journals of the day, including the first of its kind, Al-Muqtatatf. Among his early articles in Al-Muqtatatf were those on “The History of Arabic Thought,” which was in fact a summary translation of De Lacy O’Leary’s 1922 Arabic Thought and Its Place in History. In the series, which he later republished and expanded upon, he details the persistence of the “Greek spirit” in the lands of the

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38 For more on Mazhar, see my Reading Darwin in Arabic, 1860-1950 (Chicago, 2013), chapter 7, which the discussion here draws from.
Arabs and Persians through their role as translators of Greek texts. Among the figures he focused on, following O’Leary, was Jabir Ibn Hayyin, or “Geber,” the eighth-century Muslim alchemist, whose alchemical and laboratory experiments were presented as a precursor to the modern “scientific method.”

Even in his introduction to the translation of the Origin, it was clear that saw that translation might offer a means to overcome the intellectual, political and perhaps even metaphysical divides between these civilizational and epochal divides. Much of the introduction, for instance, concentrates on the role of Arabic precursors to Darwin. This emphasis on a shared genealogy of ideas offered a means for him to cast modern evolutionary narratives in more familiar or local, albeit somewhat forgotten, historical ones. While the emphasis on the transmission and translation of ideas through translation itself – another concern of the introduction – offered another way to think about how to bridge an indigenous medieval Arabic tradition of thought with a modern European one. His later interest in the history of science as the new universal history of humanity also reflected this; shortly before his death, he translated Sarton’s History of Science as the New Humanism under the U.S. state-funded Franklin Book Program.

In his second, 1928 introduction to the Origin, Mazhar presented his translation, like all translations, as an important means of expanding, reviving, and developing both the Arabic language and the modes of thought possible in it: translation thus introduced new technical terms, refined the language’s conceptual vocabulary, expanded its cultural connections, and allowed the development of a modern and yet indigenous scientific discourse. Always ready to construct genealogies of

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legitimation, Mazhar was also among the first Arab authors to stress the explicit importance of the “translation movement” (al-haraka al-tarjamiya) for the classical golden age of Arabic thought. Through translations such as these, he argued, another, contemporary renaissance of Arabic thought, or Nahda, would emerge. This was the idea of a translatio studii once more, with the added hint of a reversed translatio imperii: by transferring the seat of learning in the “West”—or “Western science”—one could also point the way toward transferring its political might and returning the “East” to its former glory. In this way, the primacy of translation in the movement for political and cultural regeneration that had been under way for a century was reaffirmed. Mazhar’s harkening back to the original Arabic translation movement added another perhaps more ambiguous dimension in his case: the idea that the political legitimacy that would be conferred in this process would be that of the early Islamic empires. He would return to this later, but for much of the interwar period Mazhar was concerned with issues of translation and language more specifically.

By the time of Mazhar’s 1928 edition of Origin, a fierce debate was well under way in the Arabic press over the language question in general and over translation strategies in particular. Indeed, Mazhar was a key participant in this and had already worked out his own philosophy of translation. He highlighted the positive contributions made by the medieval translation movement and attributed the stagnation of Arabic thought in the present to its abandonment. Genealogy and evolution formed the dual motifs of his approach. Translations, he argued, demonstrate that language is flexible and subject to the laws of change; without them, the language would simply become a “dead and immobile form.” Language had a life of its own, which the expansion of meanings preserved and helped to evolve.40

These were, to be sure, not new ideas: the organicist conception of language as

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40 See also his later collection of essays on this subject, Isma’il Mazhar, Tajdid al-‘Arabiya [The revival of Arabic] (Cairo: Maktabat al- Nahda al-Misriya, 1950).
subject to the laws of evolution had been propounded by language reformers and particularly science translators for some time. Jurji Zaidan, for instance, had published his *Tarikh al-lugha al-ʿArabiya kaʿin hay* (History of the Arabic language as a living entity) in 1904. But Mazhar tied this idea to his Socratic commitment to freedom of thought: “independent thought” only came with “independent language.” The present was thus in his hopeful reading “an age of translation,” analogous to an earlier time when translators had facilitated the transmission of ideas, first during the ‘Abbasid era, from west to east and then, during the European Renaissance, in the reverse direction. The intellectual revival of Arab thought meant restoring this mobility of knowledge and helping to eliminate “unstable Eastern thinking.” Words such as “agnosticism” (*al-laʾadr*), “the unconscious” (*al-lashaʿuri*), and “infinity” (*al-lanahaya*)—all new or revived compound terms in Arabic—acquired new and specific, philosophical meanings whose introduction into the Arabic literary vocabulary, he believed, might open up whole new areas of modern thought to their readers.

The older generation had also, of course, been believers in the value of translation and shared Mazhar’s optimistic attitude toward linguistic change. But where they and Mazhar differed was in their translation strategies and in their attitude toward neologism in particular. At that time, there were various lexical strategies for constructing these. First, there was the derivation of words (*ishtiqaq*) through analogic reasoning (*qiyyas*), such as deriving new words through the extension of trilateral root forms (*al-ishtiqaq al-saghir*), the figurative semantic extension of existing words (*al-wadāʾ bi al-majaz*), the use of older vocabulary to express new meanings (*gharib al- lughah*), and the use of descriptive paraphrases (*al-ishtiqaq al-maʿnawi*). Second, there was the formation of compound words (*naht*); and, finally,

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the assimilation of foreign words, or Arabicization (taʿrib). It was this last, in particular, or the use of Arabicizations, that increasingly came under harsh and sustained criticism. For many, particularly in an era of growing anticolonialism, this represented a corruption of the proper rules of Arabic and, worse still, a sign of Arab political weakness and the dangers of excessive Western importation.

Geopolitics clearly shaped this debate. Al-Muqtataf’s long-held view was that there was “no shame in borrowing from the West.” Reviewing the various scientific advances its editors had publicized in their first fourteen years, for example, they had reminded their readers in 1890 that “borrowing from the West does not impede the advance of knowledge in the East.” Science offered benefits to all: “There is no need to be hindered by our pride,” for science belongs to everybody. “The West has borrowed from us when we were once great, and now it is our turn to take from the West.” The real shame would be if one were to insist on starting from where Europe did two hundred years ago: “That would be like one who abandons a steam engine for a simple tool.”

Not everyone was persuaded at the time he was writing however. One reader had even written in to Al-Muqtataf as early as 1891 complaining about the editors’ excessive use of “foreign words” (al-kalimat al-a’jamiya). This was despite the fact, he thought, that “the noble Arabic language” was one of the “most comprehensive languages” in its ability to grasp a whole host of meanings and expressions. The editors pointed out that the majority of the foreign words used in the journal, like al-uksujin (oxygen) and al-haydrujin (hydrogen), had no synonyms in Arabic. And even where there were such synonyms, often the imported term was still generally better known—like the archaic al-murqashiya versus al-bismuth. They also reminded their readers that generations of Arabic scholars, like Ibn Sina and al-Razi, had engaged in this process.44

After the First World War, and the Egyptian Revolution of 1919 in particular, the

politics of this issue became even more contentious. Mazhar himself clearly preferred the use of simple derivations or descriptive paraphrases and the resuscitation of archaic terms, and he was much more served than Al-Muqtatatf in his use of transliteration. Only in cases where he may have felt the foreign term was either too technical or particularly novel—for example, Acrasieae or amoeba (al-aqrasiya, al-amibia)—did he resort to these. Even when he used an Arabicized term, he usually added an alternative description in common Arabic: in this way, he tried to balance novelty with familiarity. For instance, “raccoon” was al-raqun aw dub amriki (literally “raqun, or an American bear”) and “bulldog” was al-bulduj aw al-kalb al-ʿajla (“bulduj, or the speedy dog”). At other times he translated a word twice, using an Arabicized term alongside an archaic synonym, such as his translation of “hybrid” as hybrid together with the resuscitated al-anghal, or “dandelion” as both al-dandiliun and al-handiba (a kind of wild chicory). He saw the necessity for Arabicization but, as he admitted later, felt that it was the “laziest” of strategies.45

Pairing Orientalists and Arab Arabists, as well as internationalist historians of science and Arabic science translators and popular historians, shows the often sideways transmission – or trans-latio (carrying across) – of ideas that the process and metaphor of translation offered, both as an intellectual and political strategy and as a means of marking the movement of ideas and the progress of humanity across civilizational and epochal boundaries. This paper has tried to offer some sense of how this process of constructing interconnected histories took place through both the work of and the very meditation upon translation itself. This, it suggests, was precisely what the idea of a translation movement through the history of science and civilization offered both for the reconceptualization of Europe and the Arabs (or Islam’s) sense of their own past, present and future.

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45 Mazhar, Tajdid al-ʿArabiya, 10–13.