GEORGE ANTONIUS: THE HISTORIAN AS LIBERATOR
Chandler Rosenberger

There are two kinds of historians, the wag once said: those with a philosophy of history, and those with a knowledge of it. We might add another distinction: historians who want to write history versus those who long to make it. For the latter, the modern age offers powerful tools—access to mass media, wide distribution of inexpensive books, and, most importantly, the idea that ordinary men and women can find dignity as members of a grand and venerable nation. For the historian who champions a “people,” honors and accolades await. The historian who spends years stitching together a history that extends back to shards of pottery and rumors of tribes can, in many parts of the world, expect to be welcomed, anachronistically, as one of the nation’s founding fathers. Central Europe’s ethnic nationalisms stand firmly atop such columns of historical myth, but it might be wrong to begrudge their authors a place in their nation’s pantheons. Did we ever really expect historical truth from Czech historian František Palacky or Slovak writer Ludovít Štúr? Given their deep involvement in politics, it sometimes seems that the only truth they ever promised was the truth of their own significance in their nation’s development. On that point, they were indisputably right.

This is how George Antonius wanted to be right. When Antonius wrote *The Arab Awakening* in the late 1930s, he had nothing more ardently on his mind than that the Arabs should be awakened exactly, as he imagined they had been. From a comfortable villa in Jerusalem’s Shykh Jarrah Quarter, Antonius wrote the history of the Arab world’s liberation from the Ottoman Empire twenty years previous as if there had been one united people to liberate; he told the tale of the Arab people’s betrayal at the hands of British and French as if there had been an Arab people, one people, who had been betrayed. Antonius never found his seat in the parliament of his people, as Palacky did; but like the Central Europeans who conjured maps from their own selective memories, Antonius enjoys a legacy of sorts in the fraught politics of Arab resentment. It may be true that there was no one Arab people to betray at the 20th century’s beginning. But, thanks in part to Antonius, an Arab people now exists that firmly believes it was betrayed at the moment of its birth.

Antonius was a Syrian of Greek Orthodox faith who studied mechanical engineering at the University of Cambridge before joining Great Britain’s war effort as a press censor, rising to deputy chief of the Egyptian office in 1917. In 1921 he was assigned to the Education Department of Palestine, rising to assistant director. His civil service posts gave him the chance to serve several powerful commissions. In 1925 and 1927 he accompanied Sir Gilbert Clayton’s missions to King Abdul Aziz ibn Saud to negotiate settlements between Saud and his neighbors. In an application for the fellowship that would allow him to write his history, Antonius claimed to have “helped in negotiations of all agreements concluded between Great Britain and Arabian leaders” from 1925 to 1930.

Antonius’s great opportunity as a historian came in the form of an open-ended fellowship from the Institute of Current World Affairs. Funded by Chicago industrialist Charles Crane, the Institute offered young men and women with unusual knowledge of issues of the day the chance to travel widely and write on what they had discovered. Frustrated with his failure to secure promotions in the British civil service, Antonius sought and won an Institute fellowship in 1930 and embarked immediately on “a systematic study of the recent history of the countries of the Near East, which I am dividing into two periods: (a) General, from 1800 to the present day, involving a comprehensive but in no sense a detailed view, and (b) Special, from 1914 to the present day, involving a study of detail.”

From the start, Antonius wrote his history of Arab nationalism with one eye firmly fixed on the events swirling around him. His first report to his patrons described an Arab delegation to Britain opposing Jewish immigration; a French plan to introduce a constitution in Syria; a breakdown in talks between Egyptians and the British over revisions to the 1922 agreement; and King Faisal’s attitude towards the Anglo-Iraqi Treaty. “I spend something like two to three hours a day scanning the press,” Antonius explained. “I take and read regularly five newspapers published in Palestine, two in Cairo, one in Syria and one in Mecca.” Lest his reading be considered excessive, Antonius explained that it was “a minimum for anyone who desires to keep in close touch with the views and tendencies not only of one particular class or creed or race or party, but of all those who matter.”

Seen in the light of his voracious appetite for news from every quarter, Antonius’s preference for telling a simplified story of one Arab nation makes sense. He could recount hundreds of events in the history of one Arab people, a narrative much more easily told than one that might stop and start among dozens of characters and movements. Believing in the unity of his subject gave Antonius a story line on which to hang a hundred subplots. It also fixed his own transient life to something more tangible than the distant Institute and an amorphous, overwhelming project.

What was the character of the nation Antonius imagined? To transcend the manifest disputes of the Arab tribes, the Arab nation of Antonius’s mind had to be more than merely a political compact. It could not be a mere association of conscious and voluntary members, since only a few audacious kings and ambitious writers even believed such a nation existed. Antonius was bound, then, to describe the Arab nation as an ethnic entity, a mixture of racial and cultural characteristics that marked a man as a member even if he had made no conscious decision to declare himself as such. Nationalism would thus be a flame that leapt up from smoldering embers, but the embers did not need to ignite themselves to be swept up in the blaze.

These embers of Arab nationalism, Antonius wrote, were racial and cultural. The “Arab stock” had filled Palestine and Transjordan, mingled with the peoples of Syria and Iraq, and dribbled into Egypt; the Arabic language had spread more evenly, as had common manners and traditions (Antonius, *The Arab Awakening* [Putnam, 1946], 13-18; henceforth AA). Despite these
commonalities, Antonius noted, the flame of nationalism had trouble catching. Mehemed-Ali, an Arab Ottoman general and governor of Egypt, might have united his people when he occupied Medina and Mecca in 1811, and his son Ibrahim might have managed it when he seized Syria in 1832. But both were undone by "the lack of anything approaching national solidarity in the Arab world." In a foreshadow of grievances to come, Antonius also blamed the British, especially Lord Palmerston. "This was the first occasion in modern times on which the idea of an Arab empire had presented itself as a problem of world politics," Antonius wrote, "and on that occasion, at any rate, England's hand was against it" (AA, 33).

When Antonius did discover the first flickers of Arab nationalism, the characters involved were, to his mind, surprisingly—even inhumanly—pure. The historian willing to ascribe base motives to British diplomats, French civil servants, and Turkish nationalists found nothing but selfless motives in the literary men of mid-19th-century Beirut. Upon discovering classical Arabic texts, Antonius reported, the poet Nasif Yazeli was mesmerized into a life of service: "The beauty of the buried literature," Antonius wrote, "awakened the Arab in him and bound him by a spell" (AA, 46). Secret societies such as the Decentralization Party were manifestations of a movement "born slowly towards its destiny on the wings of a renascent literature" (AA, 60). Middle East historian Efrain Karsh has noted that Antonius's account "mistakes a rather localized literary movement not only for a general cultural 'awakening' but also for a popular national movement." But to Antonius's Romantic mind, the Arab nation was a slumbering unity. Twitches on the Syrian finger might not move toes in the Hejaz, but they were still signs of life in the body that bound toe and finger together.

This eerie, unconscious unity of an awakening people gave Antonius his narrative of chronic betrayal. In the throes of the First World War, British diplomats—Antonius's former colleagues—worked to bring in the Arabs as allies in their battles against the Ottomans. They promised individual Arab chiefs, especially Sharif Husain, king of the Hejaz, more than they could be sure of securing in a postwar settlement. But when Antonius considered the correspondence between Husain and Sir Henry McMahon, he did not see negotiations between an opportunistic wartime power and one of several Arab leaders, but rather promises made to the Arab nation as a whole. Antonius assured his readers that he copied out the correspondence in the presence of the exiled King Husain, but his own interpretation runs against the grain of the texts he provides. McMahon wrote that Britain is "prepared to recognize and uphold the independence of the Arabs in all the regions lying within the frontiers" (AA, 170) that Husain had proposed. To Antonius, this was proof of Britain's commitment to a single independent "future Arab state." But McMahon was deliberately evasive on the question of whether such a state would ever exist or, on an especially controversial point, whether the sharif of Mecca would have the legitimacy in the eyes of his fellow Arabs to govern it. A historian writing without the blinding of nationalism would have recognized that McMahon was treading gingerly between what he thought he could promise and what he believed were his interlocutor's delusions. But Antonius had seen the Arab nation in his mind's eye; to him, betrayal of a part of it was a betrayal of the primordial whole.

If Antonius saw the outline of an Arab nation in the light of Britain's promises, he saw a full-fledged nation in the reflection of the Great Powers' perfidy. In the spring of 1916, the Entente Powers of Britain, France, and Russia began secret negotiations to square their competing obligations and interests in the Middle East. The Sykes-Picot Agreement, named for its British and French negotiators, did in fact divide the Arab world into anticipated spheres of influence. France planned to maintain its interests in Lebanon and Syria and take new influence over what is now southern Turkey. Britain planned to capture southern territories that conform roughly to what is now Jordan and Iraq.

It is, of course, an unsettling reminder of the callousness of imperial ambition to read agreements made over the heads of native peoples; as Antonius wrote, the Sykes-Picot Agreement is a "shocking document" (AA, 248). But even as they ignored the wishes of individual kingdoms, rulers, and ordinary women and men, the French and British need not have been betraying a unified Arab people. They could not be accused of dividing something that had never been unified. This, however, is exactly what Antonius accused them of doing. To Antonius, the betrayal was not of individuals, but of the Arab nation at the moment of its awakening. The Sykes-Picot Agreement, Antonius wrote, cut up the Arab Rectangle in such a manner as to place artificial obstacles in the way of unity. That may have been the deliberate intention of its authors—an unconscious echo perhaps of Palmerston's hostility to the idea of a stable Arab state planting itself across the overland route to India; but it was none the less retrograde and in conflict with the natural forces at work. An awakening had taken place since Palmerston's days, and the national movement was now a force with the plank of Arab unity as well as independence in the forefront of its aims (AA, 248-49).

Antonius's assessment of the Balfour Declaration and Britain's subsequent reassurances are also tinged with assumptions of unity that were not borne out in fact. The Balfour Declaration famously promised "the establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people" so long as such a home did not "prejudice the civil and religious rights of existing non-Jewish communities in Palestine." As such, the Declaration made no promises to defend the unity of the Arab people or even to acknowledge that there was any reason to believe one Arab government would be formed that might see a Jewish homeland as a threat to its sovereignty. Antonius, however, claiming to be privy to insider information, asserts that British diplomat Commander David George Hogarth made a further promise to King Husain orally and in person—that a Jewish homeland "would be allowed in so far as would be consistent with the political and economic freedom of the Arab population" (AA, 268).
The distinction between the two promises absorbed Antonius for several pages of his book, for good reason. As a fervent believer in the incipient unity of the Arab people, Antonius could picture a Jewish homeland in the warm embrace of a larger, tolerant Arab Empire. Husain himself even wrote an article in an official journal on Araps in Palestine to “bear in mind that their sacred books and their traditions enjoined upon them the duties of hospitality and tolerance, and exhorting them to welcome the Jews as brethren” (AA, 269). But such a welcome was predicated on the idea that the Jews posed no threat to Arab unity and sovereignty over Arab lands. By promising only to defend the civil and religious rights of Arabs, and not their political and economic freedom as well, the official text of the Balfour Declaration left open the possibility that the roles would be reversed—that Arabs would be a protected minority under Jewish sovereignty. “In that difference,” Antonius wrote, “lay the difference between a peaceful and willing Arab-Jew cooperation in Palestine and the abominable duel of the last twenty years” (AA, 268).

In seeing only two possible readings of the competing texts, Antonius betrays his deeply held conviction that a united Arab nation lay in wait of its birthright only to have it snatched away, this time by the founding of a Jewish homeland. There was no room in Antonius’s mind for the possibility that several Arab states might leave a suitable gap between their borders, or that even a united Arab nation had no inherent right to a territory that may or may not have been promised to one Arab king in the heat of a world war. In Antonius’s mind, promises to King Husain were promises to an entire Arab nation that was slouching toward Bethlehem, waiting to be born.

The flip side of Antonius’s romantic Arab nationalism was apparent in his attitude toward Jewish immigration into Palestine. Antonius dismissed the notion that an Arab might be free to sell his own property to whomever he wanted. Nothing of the sort could be allowed when the very integrity of the Arab nation was at stake. And although he condemned conspiracy theories of Jewish influence over the Great Powers in Arab Awakening, he was not above such speculation in private. In a 1934 report to the Institute he recalled a dinner with the British high commissioner at which Antonius had demanded limits on Jewish immigration to Palestine. The high commissioner had noted that the British cabinet found such immigration acceptable. Antonius followed up: “I asked H.E. [His Excellency] whether it did not strike him as curious that the general consensus of opinion in the Cabinet should so closely tally with the views expressed in Jewish circles.”

However unmoving Antonius’s belief in a united ethnic Arab nation, his choice of King Husain as its primary representative is, at first glance, simply puzzling. Husain had been clever enough to take up the British on their offer of support—even to solicit that support long before it was offered. During the First World War, he was also the principal recipient of such support and was carefully courted by the British. But he was hardly the only Arab leader and was hardly the only leader to whom the British had close ties. As Karsh has noted, Husain’s relations with the British were distinguished from other ties by their ambiguity. The British had signed explicit treaties with Sheik Mubarak of Kuwait (1899), Abd al-Aziz Ibn Saud of Najd (1915), and Muhammed al-Idrisi of Asir (1915). And yet it was Husain’s correspondence with McMahon that was to take precedence in the Arab mind over even the formal treaties signed with other Arab leaders. As Karsh writes, “this inconclusive according was to assume an air of finality, which Britain had never intended, and to sow seeds of future grievances and recrimination.”

Arab Awakening is unusual in how narrowly it focuses on King Husain as an object of British attention and betrayal. By concentrating on Britain’s speculations about the possible shape of the Arab state that Husain longed to lead, the book gives the mistaken impression that the British took seriously the idea of an Arab nation united under one government. Why did Antonius single out Husain at the expense of historical accuracy? It doesn’t seem a stretch to suggest that Husain, upon meeting a historian with connections to the American government, saw that a little flattery might go a long way. Reporting back to the Institute at the beginning of his fellowship, Antonius describes at length his first official meeting with Husain. The king noted that he had “heard in Baghdad of my resignation,” Antonius reported, “and his opening remark was a friendly rebuke for my having left Government Service.” Over the course of the next ten years, Husain would become Antonius’s chief historical source, meeting with him frequently and confiding in him his concerns about the Middle East, especially his own position vis-à-vis the House of Saud. In his relationship with Husain, Antonius found the perfect means by which to combine his interests in both making history and recording it.

Antonius’s recklessness in writing history by the light of his own ambitions offers us a cautionary tale. Historians such as Elie Kedourie and Karsh have largely discredited Antonius’s analysis of British promises and Arab nationalism, but Arab Awakening lives on in other disciplines, especially Palestinian studies. It is surely a concern of historians that flawed material claiming the authority of history not migrate into other fields without challenge—especially when those academic disciplines are often as prone to the seduction of making history as was George Antonius himself.

Chandler Rosenberger is a lecturer in international relations at Boston University and an assistant to University President Emeritus John Silber. He is working on a biography of Vaclav Havel.

1 George Antonius to Walter Rogers, June 2, 1930. George Antonius Correspondence, Archives of The Institute of Current World Affairs.
2 Ibid.
5 Karsh, Empires of the Sand, 215.
6 Antonius to W.S. Rogers, July 6, 1930. Husain was especially eager that the United States recognize the independent kingdom of the Hejaz. See Antonius’s letter to W.S. Rogers of May 11, 1931. George Antonius Correspondence, Archives of the Institute of Current World Affairs.