

CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS



Arabic, the Arab Middle East, and the Definition of Muslim Identity in Twentieth Century India

Author(s): Muhammad Qasim Zaman

Source: *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, Third Series, Vol. 8, No. 1 (Apr., 1998), pp. 59-81

Published by: [Cambridge University Press](#) on behalf of the [Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25183466>

Accessed: 30/03/2011 20:20

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use, available at <http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp>. JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use provides, in part, that unless you have obtained prior permission, you may not download an entire issue of a journal or multiple copies of articles, and you may use content in the JSTOR archive only for your personal, non-commercial use.

Please contact the publisher regarding any further use of this work. Publisher contact information may be obtained at <http://www.jstor.org/action/showPublisher?publisherCode=cup>.

Each copy of any part of a JSTOR transmission must contain the same copyright notice that appears on the screen or printed page of such transmission.

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.



Cambridge University Press and Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland are collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*.

<http://www.jstor.org>

Arabic, the Arab Middle East, and the Definition of Muslim Identity in Twentieth Century India

MUHAMMAD QASIM ZAMAN

Introduction

The “foreignness” of Islam in India is a familiar theme in the rhetoric of contemporary Hindu fundamentalism. The numerical majority of Hindus in India is taken to mean that the nation-state ought to be founded on ideals and institutions defined as authentically “Hindu”, that India is the land of the Hindus, and that it must be ruled only by them. This ideology evidently leaves little room for non-Hindus, but especially so for Muslims, who ruled large parts of the Indian subcontinent for several centuries and who still constitute a sizeable minority in India.¹ It is argued, for instance, that as the ruling elite in India, Muslims not only exploited the Hindus, they never even thought of themselves as “really” Indian and should not consequently be considered as such.² For all the centrality of the Muslim Other to constructions of Hindu fundamentalism, the appeal and success of the latter is predicated on the systematic exclusion, if not the expulsion, of Muslims from the Hindu nation-state.

Muslims have responded to such views in a number of ways, and though there is much disagreement on what it means to be “Muslim” and whether Muslims ought to participate in the political processes of secular but Hindu-dominated India as a religiously defined communal entity, probably most would agree that being Indian is an inextricable part of their identity. Most Muslims of India are in fact the descendants not of people who came from outside the Indian subcontinent but of local converts; and Hindus and Muslims have not always or everywhere existed as distinct communities with well-defined and unchanging religious or cultural identities.

Yet, such notions are not just the imagination of religious nationalists. In some measure at least, they can be traced as well to ideologies of British imperialism. The British saw the Muslims, whose rule they had supplanted, not just as a distinct community but as foreign to India like themselves. What supposedly made the British different from their predecessors

¹ According to the Census of 1981, Muslims comprise 11.4% of the population of India. For a brief discussion of the Muslims of India, especially in relation to the rise of Hindu nationalism, see Paul R. Brass, *The Politics of India since Independence*, 2nd edn. (Cambridge, 1994), pp. 228ff.

² On Hindu nationalism, see Daniel Gold, “Organized Hinduisms: from Vedic truth to Hindu nation”, in Martin E. Marty and R. Scott Appleby, ed., *Fundamentalisms Observed* (Chicago, 1991), pp. 531–93; Peter van der Veer, *Religious Nationalism: Hindus and Muslims in India* (Berkeley, 1994); Mark Juergensmeyer, *The New Cold War? Religious Nationalism Confronts the Secular State* (Berkeley, 1993), pp. 81–90; Partha Chatterjee, “History and the nationalization of Hinduism”, *Social Research*, LIX (1992), pp. 111–49.

was not that they were foreigners, but rather that they were enlightened and rational rather than despotic and fanatical, concerned with the welfare of the subjects rather than being self-indulgent and oppressive.³ On the other hand, Hindu fundamentalist allegations and colonial constructions of the foreignness of Muslims are also rooted in ways the Muslims of India have viewed themselves, in their own definitions of identity. Many of the Muslim conquerors and rulers did after all originate outside India, as did numerous scholars, saints, and notables. More importantly, many Muslims have, indeed, thought of themselves all along as the descendants of people who came to India from outside, and they have sought prestige and local influence on the basis of claims to foreign descent. Memories and myths of historical contacts with, or origins in, the Arab Middle East, Iran, and Central Asia, signify efforts to convey or construct status *in* India. For many more, the sense that as Muslims, they are part of the greater Muslim world forms part of their communal identity in the present as it has done in the past.

In the eighteenth century, Shāh Walī Allāh of Delhi (d. 1762),⁴ one of the most influential of Muslim intellectuals and reformers of India, had expressed this sense of identity in a striking way as follows:

We are strangers in this land [of India]. Our fathers and grandfathers came to live here from abroad. For us Arab descent and the Arabic language are causes of pride, because these two things bring us nearer to the Lord of the First and the Last, the noblest of Prophets and Apostles . . . We must give thanks to God for his supreme grace by holding on as much as possible to the customs and traditions of the ancient Arabs, from whom the Prophet came and to whom he addressed himself, and by safeguarding ourselves from the penetration of Persian traditions and Indian habits.⁵

Memories or myths of origin somewhere in the Middle East were reinforced through other contacts. The *Hajj* was of course one form of these,⁶ as were travels in quest of learning. Walī Allāh had studied for some time in the Hijaz, and visits to the holy cities were starting points for major reform movements in nineteenth-century India. After the Mutiny of 1857, many prominent Muslim religious scholars of northern India went to settle in the Hijaz or elsewhere in the Middle East;⁷ and it was from scholars of the Hijaz that juristic opinions (*fatwās*) were often solicited in local theological and sectarian controversies in late nineteenth and early twentieth century India. Demands for the protection of the Muslim holy places in the aftermath of World War I and for the preservation of the Ottoman caliphate were the basis of the Khilafat Movement in India, one of the most dramatic instances of political mobilization during the colonial period.⁸

³ Thomas R. Metcalf, *Ideologies of the Raj* (Cambridge, 1994), pp. 138–44; cf. Mushirul Hasan, “The myth of unity: colonial and national narratives”, in David Ludden, ed., *Contesting the Nation: Religion, Community, and the Politics of Democracy in India* (Philadelphia, 1996), pp. 185–208.

⁴ All dates are A.D., unless indicated otherwise.

⁵ Shāh Walī Allāh, *al-Maqāla al-waḍiyya fi’l-naṣiḥa wa’l-waṣiyya* (Delhi, A.H. 1267). Cited in A. Bausani, “Note su Shah Waliullah di Delhi (1703–1762)”, *Annali dell’Istituto Universitario Orientale di Napoli*, new ser. X (1961), p. 99; translation as in Bernard Lewis, *The Shaping of the Modern Middle East* (New York, 1994), p. 102.

⁶ M. N. Pearson, *Pilgrimage to Mecca: The Indian Experience, 1500–1800* (Princeton, 1996).

⁷ Cf. Avril Powell, *Muslims and Missionaries in Pre-Mutiny India* (London, 1993), pp. 275, 292. On some of the Indian ‘ulamā’ who settled in the Hijāz in the 19th century, see ‘Abd al-Ḥayy ibn Fakhr al-Dīn al-Ḥasanī, *Nuzhat al-khawāṭir wa bahjat al-masāmi’ wa’l-nawāzīr*, VIII vols. (Haydarabad, 1947–70), VII, pp. 2, 9, 286–7, 296–7, 415, 449; *ibid.*, VIII, 70–2, 145–7.

⁸ Gail Minault, *The Khilafat Movement: Religious Symbolism and Political Mobilization in India* (New York, 1982).

The movement for the creation of a Muslim state, which culminated in the establishment of Pakistan in 1947, reaffirmed for many the sense of being part of the greater Muslim world. But even in post-independence India, and notwithstanding fears of raising the suspicions of their Hindu compatriots, actual or imagined links with the Arab and Islamic world have persisted.

This paper explores some aspects of the importance of the Arab Middle East in Muslim identity in modern India. Our study will focus on the career and thought of Sayyid Abu'l-Ḥasan 'Alī Nadwī (b. 1914), one of the most prominent of Muslim religious scholars in contemporary India. Nadwī's writings have exercised considerable influence on Islamist intellectual trends in the Arab world, and it is as an ideologue of Islamic resurgence, rather than as a major religious leader of Indian Muslims, that he is best known both among the Arabs and to students of radical Islamism.⁹ This study is not primarily concerned with Nadwī's contribution to Islamist discourse, however. I seek rather to show how a strong attachment to the Arab Middle East has shaped Nadwī's conception of Islam and of Muslim identity in India and, not least, his own position as one of Muslim India's principal leaders. Conversely, I propose also to draw attention to Nadwī's unceasing concern with demonstrating the contribution of Muslim India to the growth of Islamic civilization. This emphasis, I will argue, is as integral to Nadwī's revivalist thought in general as it is to his sense of Muslim identity in India. Both the attachment with the Middle East and a highly developed sense of India's cultural contribution to it are also characteristic of the Nadwat al-'Ulamā' (founded in 1894), an intellectual and reformist movement launched by prominent Indian 'ulamā' towards the end of the nineteenth century for the reform and rejuvenation of traditional Islamic education. Nadwī has had a life long association with (and now serves as the rector of) the Dār al-'Ulūm, the seminary of higher Islamic learning for which the Nadwat al-'Ulamā' is best known.¹⁰

This paper seeks to do more than illuminate Nadwī's thought or the Nadwat al-'Ulamā's intellectual milieu, however. The culture in which Nadwī's intellectual formation took place was shared by many Muslims of the early twentieth century British India, so that for all its distinctions his life illustrates some of the influences to which it was possible for members of the Muslim cultural elite to be exposed in the early part of this century. Issues of cultural "authenticity" and identity that his writings grapple with continue, moreover, to be important to many in India and Pakistan, no less than in the Arab world. For Nadwī and for many others who share similar convictions, the sense of being somehow related to the Arab Middle East, or to the Muslim world at large, is one of the principal means through which Muslim identity has been preserved in the past, and through which it continues to be nourished in the present. That such convictions must give further credence to the rhetoric of Hindu fundamentalism is nowhere recognized in Nadwī's writings, though it is unlikely to have eluded him.

⁹ Y. M. Choueiri, *Islamic Fundamentalism* (Boston, 1990), pp. 101, 104–5; E. Sivan, *Radical Islam* (New Haven, 1985), pp. 36–7, 40, 88–9.

¹⁰ In 1994, the Nadwat al-'Ulamā' had 2443 students in its Dār al-'Ulūm, in addition to another 2025 students studying in schools affiliated to the Nadwa. See *Muslim India* (New Delhi), no. 137 (May, 1994), 223. All graduates of the Dar al-'Ulūm carry the *nisba* "Nadwī". In this study, however, this *nisba* (when not accompanied by a scholar's full name) refers exclusively to Sayyid Abu'l-Ḥasan 'Alī Nadwī.

Arabic and the Middle East in Nadwī's intellectual formation

(i) Family influences

Sayyid Abu'l-Ḥasan 'Alī Nadwī was born in Rai Bareli, a town in northern India, in a prominent Sayyid family of the "ashrāf".¹¹ The *ashrāf*, or local Muslim notables, claimed origins from outside the Indian subcontinent, and among them the Sayyids were recognized to be especially privileged for their claims of kinship with the Prophet Muḥammad.¹² Nadwī's father, Sayyid 'Abd al-Ḥayy al-Ḥasanī (d. 1923), was a distinguished scholar who is best known for a monumental biographical dictionary of the Indian 'ulamā' in the Arabic language. The latter was also closely associated with the Nadwat al-'Ulamā'. From 1915 till his death in 1923, al-Ḥasanī served as the administrator (*nāẓim*) of the Nadwa's Dār al-'Ulūm.¹³

Undoubtedly the best known member of this family was Sayyid Aḥmad Barelawi (d. 1832), who, on his return from a visit to the Hijaz, had organized a movement of puritanical reform which had some affinities to the Wahhābī movement in Arabia; the movement was in fact labelled as "Wahhābī" by the British in India. Sayyid Aḥmad and his followers came into conflict with both the British and the Sikhs, and though he succeeded in forming a transitory principality among the tribes of the North-West Frontier of the Indian subcontinent, he was killed in 1832 in a military engagement with the Sikhs. But the movement continued for several decades after his death, and its religious and political impact lasted for much longer. For much of the nineteenth century, in fact, the threat of the Indian "Wahhābīs" loomed large in British perceptions of Islamic militancy on the frontiers of their empire; on the other hand, the reformist creed of Sayyid Aḥmad Barelawi has continued to exert powerful influence on segments of the Muslim communities of India and Pakistan.¹⁴

¹¹ The principal source on Nadwī's life and career is his autobiography, *Kārwān-i Zindagi* (hereafter *Kārwān*), 5 vols. (Lucknow and Karachi, 1938–94; my edition of vols. i–iii is published by the Majlis-i Nashriyyāt-i Islām, Karachi, and of vols. iv–v by the Maktaba-yi Islām, Lucknow). This autobiography has also been published in Arabic under the title *Fī masīrat al-ḥayāt* (Damascus and Jidda, 1987–).

¹² On the culture of the *ashrāf* in India, see David Lelyveld, *Aligarh's First Generation* (Princeton, 1978), pp. 35–101; Barbara D. Metcalf, *Islamic Revival in British India: Deoband, 1860–1900* (Princeton, 1982), pp. 238–60. Also see Nadwī, *Kārwān*, i, pp. 15–106 and passim, but especially p. 155 for Nadwī's emphatic equation between the culture of the *ashrāf* and the preservation of Islamic learning in India.

¹³ On the Nadwat al-'Ulamā', see *Tā'rikh-i Nadwat al-'Ulamā'*, 2 vols.: vol. i by Muhammad Ishāq Jalīs Nadwī, vol. ii by Shams Tabriz Khān (Lucknow, 1983–4 [hereafter *Tā'rikh-i Nadwa*]). This work, the "official" history of the Nadwa, contains extensive extracts from the proceedings of the Nadwat al-'Ulamā's annual meetings and much other primary source-material which is difficult of access. Also see Sayyid Sulaymān Nadwī, *Ḥayāt-i Shibli* (Azamgarh, n.d.), pp. 298–319, 386–400, 386–400, 412–505, 636–67, and passim; Sayyid Muḥammad al-Ḥasanī, *Sīrat-i Mawlāna Sayyid Muḥammad 'Alī Mongīrī, bānī-yi Nadwat al-'Ulamā'* (Lucknow, 1964 [hereafter *Sīrat*]); Nadwī, *Kārwān*, passim. The aforementioned accounts are all by scholars educated and associated with the Nadwa. For more critical treatments of the Nadwa and its place in the intellectual history of modern Muslim India, see Aziz Ahmad, *Islamic Modernism in India and Pakistan, 1857–1964* (London, 1967), pp. 109–13; S. M. Ikrām, *Yādgar-i Shibli* (Lahore, 1971), pp. 282–313, 346–75; B. Metcalf, *Islamic Revival*, pp. 335–47; Jamal Malik, "The making of a council: the Nadwat al-'Ulamā'", *Zeitschrift der deutschen morgenländischen Gesellschaft*, CXLIV (1994), pp. 60–90.

¹⁴ On the movement of the Sayyid Aḥmad, often designated in the scholarly literature as the "Mujāhidīn Movement", see Ghulām Rasūl Mihr, *Sarguzasht-i mujāhidīn* (Lahore, 1965); Abu'l-Ḥasan 'Alī Nadwī, *Sīrat-i Sayyid Aḥmad Shahīd* (Lucknow, 1977 [first published in 1938]); Aziz Ahmad, *Studies in Islamic Culture in the Indian Environment* (London, 1965), pp. 209–17; Farhan A. Nizami, "Madrasahs, Scholars and Saints: Muslim Response to the British Presence in Delhi and the Upper Doab 1803–1857", unpublished Ph.D. diss., University of Oxford, 1983, ch. 6. On British perceptions of Islamic militancy, see T. Metcalf, *Ideologies of the Raj*, pp. 138–48.

British fears of the “Wahhābī threat” had largely worn out by the beginnings of the twentieth century, and one’s alleged “Wahhābī” sympathies no longer carried the dire consequences they could earlier. As Nadwī notes in his autobiography, the relationship with Sayyid Aḥmad was a matter of great distinction for the family, and though without any militant aspirations of its own, the family saw itself as adhering to the reformist path charted by him. That meant, among other things, a firm disavowal of local and “popular” forms of Islamic belief and practice as well as of Shī‘ī influences, which were particularly strong in Shī‘a-dominated Lucknow where Nadwī’s family had come to settle.¹⁵ In fact, Nadwī speaks with some pride of the fact that the neighbourhood where his family lived in Lucknow was popularly known as “the *mahalla* of the Wahhābīs”, for “it was one of the few in the city which was inhabited by people of right belief”. It is scarcely fortuitous that Nadwī’s first major intellectual undertaking was a biography of Sayyid Aḥmad and his reformist movement, a theme to which he has frequently returned in his subsequent work.¹⁶

That “Wahhābī” sympathies did not carry the opprobrium for Nadwī’s family that they were perceived to do for many others in India draws attention to this family’s strong sense of attachment to a particular kind of Islamic reformism, but also, more generally, to Middle Eastern culture. This attachment to the Arab Middle East, which has remained a constant in Nadwī’s long career as writer and publicist, is strikingly illustrated by his early intellectual formation.

Nadwī’s exposure to the Arabic language and to aspects of Arab–Islamic culture began early in life. Though his father, a noted scholar of Arabic, died when Nadwī was still very young, Nadwī’s elder brother (who also succeeded his father as the Nāẓim of the Nadwat al-‘Ulamā’) continued to supervise his education in Arabic.¹⁷ The family’s commitment to what it regarded as authentically Islamic cultural traditions meant looking for modes and models of conduct to the Middle East. In his autobiography, Nadwī notes, for instance, that one of the elders of the family had translated the *Futūḥ al-Shām*, a history of the Islamic conquest of Syria wrongly attributed to the ninth century historian al-Wāqidi in verse, comprising 25,000 couplets. This poetic rendition, designated as *Ṣamṣām al-Islām*, used to be recited in the family on occasions of grief and tribulation. “The passionate and poignant descriptions of the battles would excite one’s sensibilities”, Nadwī recalls, “and the accounts of martyrdom were so moving as to make the listener restless to sacrifice his life for God. The tribulations of the Companions (*Ṣaḥāba*) and the [early] warriors for the faith made the listener forget his personal loss completely.”¹⁸ More importantly, as Nadwī notes

¹⁵ See *Kānwān*, i, pp. 58. On Lucknow, see Abdul Haleem Sharar, *Lucknow: The Last Phase of Oriental Culture*, tr. E. S. Harcourt and F. Hussain (London, 1975); Francis Robinson, *Separatism among Indian Muslims: The Politics of the United Provinces’ Muslims, 1860–1923* (Cambridge, 1974); J. R. I. Cole, *Roots of North Indian Shi’ism in Iran and Iraq: Religion and State in Awadh, 1722–1859* (Berkeley, 1988); Sandria B. Freitag, *Collective Action and Community: Public Arenas and the Emergence of Communalism in North India* (Berkeley, 1989), pp. 249–79.

¹⁶ Nadwī, *Sirat-i Sayyid Aḥmad Shahīd*. Incidentally, Sayyid Abu’l-‘Alā Mawdūdī (1903–79), the founder of the Jamā‘at-i Islāmī (established: 1941) is said to have been influenced in his revivalist thought by his reading of this work. See S. V. R. Nasr, *The Vanguard of the Islamic Revolution: The Jama‘at-i Islami of Pakistan* (Berkeley, 1994), p. 22. Nadwī was briefly a member of the Jamā‘at in the initial phase of the party’s existence.

¹⁷ Nadwī received some early education in Persian, but his brother soon had that discontinued, “for he knew that the days of Persian were over in India, and those of Arabic were going to come soon”. *Kānwān*, i, pp. 87–8. Already in 1837, the British had replaced Persian with English as the language of administration in India.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, i, pp. 82–3.

later in his autobiography, the *Ṣamsām al-Islām* as well as other works about the early heroes of Islam serve to sustain an Islamic identity (*imānī wa madhhabī ghayrat/dīnī shu'ur/millī tashakhhkhus*).¹⁹ In contemporary India, when an increasingly aggressive Hindu majority and its influence on education and the media threatens the Muslims with “cultural and religious apostasy”, Muslim children ought to be systematically introduced to the teachings of Islam and its cultural heritage; one way to do this, he suggests, is to establish the tradition of reading works such as the *Ṣamsām al-Islām* which extol the heroic deeds of early Muslims, “in mosques, gatherings, and homes”.²⁰

If Nadwī's family was predisposed towards Arabic education and what it considered to be Arab culture, so too was the Nadwat al-'Ulamā', an institution with which Nadwī has been associated as student, teacher, and administrator for much of his life. A major theme of the Nadwa's reformist aspirations was to rejuvenate the position of the 'ulamā' in society. The revival of the Muslim community depended, in the view of the Nadwa's founders, on infusing the ranks of the 'ulamā' with fresh vigour and with broadening the scope of their abilities at a time when Muslims were no longer the rulers of India. To do all this, it was deemed imperative to reform the curriculum, for the traditional madrasas and their curricula were deemed to be lacking in intellectual creativity and to be as indifferent to changes in Muslim societies as to the challenges facing Muslims. Though the traditional seminaries of Islamic education, the madrasas, of India are typically characterized as “Arabic schools”, for they focus on the study of mostly medieval Islamic texts in the Arabic language, the teaching of Arabic in them is geared to the comprehension of those texts, not to imparting the ability to speak or write that language. In conscious opposition to this style, the reformers of the Nadwa wanted to focus on Arabic as a living, contemporary language. To them, knowledge of Arabic ought not only to make medieval texts accessible, but also to enable active intellectual and cultural exchange between scholars of India and of the Arab and Islamic world.²¹ An ability to converse in the Arabic language was also a mark of the authenticity of a religious scholar's learning, a test of cultural/religious authority: “The condition of today's 'ulamā' is such”, one of the Nadwa's founders had lamented in defining the objectives of the new Dār al-'Ulūm, “that if an Arab comes their way they would not be able to converse with him in Arabic for five or ten minutes.”²² This was one of the shortcomings of an “Islamic” education the Nadwa had set out to remedy.

At the Nadwa's Dār al-'Ulūm, the students were to be trained to debate in Arabic, and encouraged to read newspapers from the Arab world.²³ More strikingly, perhaps, the students of the Nadwa were to have “an Islamic dress, which would be modelled on the dress of respectable Arabs (*shurafā'-i 'Arab*)”.²⁴ The students were also to dine “in the

¹⁹ These are some of the terms Nadwī commonly uses for what has been rendered here as “Muslim identity”. See for example, *ibid.*, v, pp. 167, 176, 178 etc.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, v, p. 186; more generally, *ibid.*, v, pp. 175ff., on “the course of action for the Indian Muslims in the present circumstances”. The “present circumstances” refer here especially to the aftermath of the destruction of the Baburi Masjid in Ayodhya, a major symbol of Muslim identity in north India. For Nadwī's account of the Hindu agitation on the Baburi Masjid, see *Kāwān*, iv and v, *passim*. On the controversy over the Baburi Mosque and its eventual destruction in 1994, see van der Veer, *Religious Nationalism*.

²¹ Cf. *Ta'rikh-i Nadwa*, i, pp. 140ff. for the Nadwa's aspirations, as visualized by one of its founders.

²² *Ibid.*, i, pp. 148.

²³ *Ibid.*, i, pp. 148–9.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, i, p. 144.

manner of the Arabs".²⁵ Precisely what it meant to dress and dine like the Arabs is not specified further in the regulations governing the Dār al-'Ulūm. At various times in the Dār al-'Ulūm's early history, there were Arab teachers on the faculty, however, which may have facilitated defining and emulating the authentically "Arab" customs.²⁶

Two points seem worth making with regard to the Nadwa's emphasis on the Arabic language. First, this emphasis was not only a way of distinguishing the Nadwa's Dār al-'Ulūm from the other madrasas, it may partially also have been encouraged by British colonial ideas of cultural authenticity. Colonial officials saw Arabic as one of the "classical languages of India", for instance;²⁷ and W. D. Arnold, who in 1856 was appointed as the first Director of Public Instruction in the Punjab, thought that "Urdu is as offensive to a learned Arabic scholar as vernacular English in connection with English subjects would have been to a scholar of the age of Erasmus."²⁸ Yet English officials also complained that most Indian Muslim scholars lacked the ability to converse or properly write in the Arabic language.²⁹ The leaders of the Nadwa agreed and sought for their part to inculcate, and subsequently to parade, precisely this ability in its own students.

Second, the Nadwa's emphasis on the Arabic language as a source of religious authority and identity as "authentic" *'ulamā'* raises the question of the place of Urdu, the *lingua franca* of the Muslims of northern India. The language of the Mughal court and of Muslim culture until the second half of the nineteenth century was Persian; this was also the language of the British administration until 1835, when it was replaced by English and, in the provinces two years later, by provincial vernaculars (which, in northern India, meant Urdu). For educated Muslims, especially of northern India, the decline of Persian was accompanied by the increasing prominence of Urdu throughout the nineteenth century as the language of literary and religious expression. Urdu, rather than Persian, became the medium of instruction in madrasas, and it was principally in this language that Muslim scholars debated, wrote and published.³⁰ At the Nadwa itself, Urdu has remained the medium of instruction, though, as in many other madrasas, examinations for specialized higher degrees are conducted in Arabic.³¹ The Nadwa's emphasis on the Arabic language is thus not a way of disowning Urdu, which remains the primary language in which scholars of the Nadwa publish; this emphasis is, nevertheless, a powerful statement of the Nadwa's cultural orientation and a mark of its distinction from other madrasas of the Indian subcontinent. Yet, for this orientation to be meaningful, it was not enough to dress and dine like Arabs, or to speak better Arabic than most Indian *'ulamā'* could; the students of the Nadwa were also expected to be intimately acquainted with trends in the *contemporary*

²⁵ *Ibid.*, i, p. 144.

²⁶ On Arab teachers at the Dār al-'Ulūm, see *ibid.*, i, pp. 415–17; Nadwī, *Kārwan*, i, pp. 115–18.

²⁷ G. W. Leitner, *History of Indigenous Education in the Panjab since Annexation and in 1882* (Delhi, 1971; first published in 1883), pp. vi, vii. (Leitner was the first principal of the Lahore Government College [established in 1864] and the founder of the Anjuman-i Punjab.) That Arabic was regarded as the language of the Muslim religious elite, not just of the madrasa, is suggested by the fact that Leitner founded a weekly "Arabic journal for the Maulvis" just as he did one in Sanskrit "for the Pandits". *Ibid.*, i, p. vii.

²⁸ Education Commission, *Report by the Punjab Provincial Committee* (Calcutta, 1884), p. 4.

²⁹ S. K. Das, *Sahibs and Munshis: An Account of the College of Fort William* (Calcutta, 1978), pp. 37–40.

³⁰ B. Metcalf, *Islamic Revival*, pp. 198–234. On the cultural importance of Persian in India before its eclipse in the nineteenth century, see Francis Robinson, "Perso-Islamic culture in India from the seventeenth to the early twentieth century", in Robert L. Canfield, ed., *Turko-Persia in Historical Perspective* (Cambridge, 1991), pp. 104–31.

³¹ *Tārīkh-i Nadwa*, i, p. 150.

Arab and Islamic world – trends to which the Arab press provided the most complete introduction.

(ii) *The Arab press*

Nadwī mentions several Arab newspapers to which he was exposed in his early youth, largely at the Nadwat al-‘Ulamā’. These included the *Umm al-Qura*, published from Mecca by the Saudis, *Fatā al-‘Arab* published from Damascus, Muftī Amīn al-Ḥusaynī’s *al-Jāmi‘a al-Islāmiyya*, Rashīd Riḍā’s *al-Manār*, as well as such other newspapers as *al-Hilāl*, *al-Muqtataf*, *Majallat al-Zahrā*, *al-Majma‘ al-‘Ilmī*, *al-‘Irfān*, and *al-Fath*.³² As Ami Ayalon has noted, many of these journals were much concerned with issues of Arab and Islamic identity. Jurjī Zaydān’s *al-Hilāl* “focused on popularizing the Arabic and Islamic heritage”,³³ and in founding *al-Manār* Rashīd Riḍā’s “aim was to join the intellectual debate over the Islamic society’s cultural and political orientation. . . . *Al-Manār* became a voice for the movement that held that Islam, properly interpreted in the light of modern developments, was the only response to the challenges of the day . . .”³⁴ Arabic journals of the 1930s which Nadwī mentions as having had an impact on him included Aḥmad Amīn’s *al-Thaqāfa* (founded in 1939) and Aḥmad Ḥasan al-Zayyāt’s *al-Risāla* (founded in 1933).³⁵ Both advocated, according to Ayalon, “a more traditionalist view” compared to “a secularist ‘Egyptianist’ orientation” of other newspapers of the period from the end of the first world war to the end of the second (1918–45). A concern with “issues of national identity and culture” was, however, characteristic of them all.³⁶

Newspapers and books from the Middle East shaped Nadwī’s thinking about issues of Arab and Islamic identity, and about nationalism, secularism, and Islam, which were then being debated in Egypt and elsewhere in the Arab world.³⁷ They also gave Nadwī that intimate exposure to contemporary literary Arabic which he was later to turn to good account in directly addressing the Arabs in many of his writings. Through this literature, Nadwī and his colleagues became intimately acquainted with intellectual trends in the Arab world, an acquaintance which matched if it did not surpass, he says, that with the conditions in India.³⁸ Many of the activities at the Nadwa reflect the influence of Arab journalism in the 1930s. While literary societies of English schools in British India debated

³² *Kārwān*, i, pp. 125–6. On the Arab newspapers and journals of the 1920s and 1930s to which Nadwī and many of his contemporaries in India were exposed, see Ami Ayalon, *The Press in the Arab Middle East: A History* (Oxford, 1995), pp. 50–106, esp. 53ff.

³³ *Ibid.*, i, p. 54.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, i, p. 55.

³⁵ Nadwī, *Kārwān*, i, p. 148.

³⁶ Ayalon, *The Press*, p. 81.

³⁷ In 1932, an Arabic periodical, *al-Diā’* (1932–42), began to be published from the Nadwa (*Kārwān*, i, p. 137). Many journals from the Middle East were received at the Nadwa in exchange for *al-Diā’*, which was the only Arabic journal in India at that time (*ibid.*, i, p. 148); also, books published in the Middle East were frequently sent to this journal for review, which provided Nadwī, a regular contributor, with considerable further exposure to intellectual trends in the Arab world. Two Arabic journals later succeeded *al-Diā’* at the Nadwa: *al-Ba‘th al-Islāmi* (published since 1955) and *al-Rā‘id* (published since 1959). See *Tā’rikh-i Nadwa*, ii, pp. 424–6.

³⁸ *Kārwān*, i, pp. 126–7. In the 1930s, Nadwī’s Lucknow was the scene of much political and religious activity. This included activities sponsored by the Indian National Congress, the All-Indian Muslim League, the Muslim Parliamentary Board, and considerable sectarian (Shi‘ī–Sunni) agitation. Nadwī notes that he kept aloof from all of these – even from the Sunni movement to counter the influence and activities of the Shi‘ī majority of Lucknow. The only activity he took some part in at this time was, significantly, one which sought to create public awareness about the Palestine issue (*ibid.*, i, p. 227).

the relative merits of English classics,³⁹ the Nadwa's literary society, the *Anjuman al-Islāh*, was riveted to the Arab Middle East. A debate, sometime in the 1930s, on "who is the greatest man of the Muslim world" generated much enthusiasm. Significantly, it was Amīr Shakīb Arslān (d. 1946), a contemporary Arab pan-Islamist whose books and articles Nadwī and his colleagues had recently read, who was chosen for this honour.⁴⁰

Shakīb Arslān, "the greatest man of the Muslim world", was a close associate of Rashīd Riḍā (d. 1935) and, like the latter, was much influenced by the ideas of Muḥammad 'Abduh (d. 1905). For both Riḍā and Arslān the political revival of Islam, the establishment of an Islamic state, and pan-Islamism were compelling ideals. They were both wary of nationalism as subversive of the religious bond among Muslims, yet they were thoroughly convinced of the centrality of the Arabs, and of the Arabic language, to Islam and to the welfare of the Muslim community. As Albert Hourani has put it, "they believed that, because of the special place of the Arabs in the *umma*, Arab nationalism could be reconciled with Islamic unity in a way impossible for any other – even more, that a revival of the *umma* needed a revival of the Arabs."⁴¹ Ideas very similar to these were to be expressed by Nadwī in his own writings, as we shall see.

Though Arslān never visited India, nor is he known to have been in contact with the Nadwat al-'Ulamā', Rashīd Riḍā had come to India at the Nadwa's invitation in 1912. His arrival in Lucknow seems to have been quite a spectacle, with people thronging the streets through which his carriage passed, and at one stage, the Nadwa's students unharnessing the horses to pull the carriage themselves. As president of the annual session of the Nadwa that year, Riḍā had spoken of the importance of Arabic as a prerequisite for any serious understanding of Islam, insisting that to learn Arabic was in fact a religious obligation.⁴² Displays of the knowledge of Arabic were in fact already a common feature of the Nadwa's annual meetings: students of the Dār al-'Ulūm would be asked to demonstrate their mastery of the language by extempore speeches and difficult feats of translation.⁴³ In emphasizing the importance of Arabic, Riḍā may have been preaching to the converted, though his visit, signifying the Nadwa's recognition by Arab intellectuals, doubtless helped its public image in India.

(iii) Egyptian influence on the Nadwa's curriculum reform

The Nadwat al-'Ulamā' was receptive not only to the influence of Arabic newspapers and books, and hence to ideas of cultural orientation and authenticity much debated in the Arab world between the two world wars, but also to developments in the curriculum of

³⁹ Cf. Gauri Viswanathan, *Masks of Conquest: Literary Study and British Rule in India* (New York, 1989), pp. 160–1.

⁴⁰ Nadwī, *Kārwan*, i, p. 149; on Arslān, see William Cleveland, *Islam against the West: Shakib Arslan and the Campaign for Islamic Nationalism* (London, 1985). The *Hādīr al-'alam al-Islāmī*, which Nadwī mentions as having read at this time, is in fact Arslān's commentary on the Arabic translation (by 'Ajāj Nuwayhid) of Lothrop Stoddard's *The New World of Islam* (New York, 1922). As Cleveland remarks, the "commentaries are lengthier than the translation, and the work became Arslan's own." Cleveland, *Islam against the West*, p. 208. On Arslān's journalistic career, which, together with his books, made him "arguably the most widely read Arab writer of the interwar period", see *ibid.*, *passim*; the quotation is from p. xxi.

⁴¹ Albert Hourani, *Arabic Thought in the Liberal Age, 1789–1939* (Oxford, 1970), p. 299. On Arslān, also see *ibid.*, pp. 303–4, 306–7; Cleveland, *Islam against the West*.

⁴² *Ta'rikh-i Nadwa*, ii, pp. 93ff.

⁴³ *Ta'rikh-i Nadwa*, ii, pp. 59–61.

schools, especially those of Egypt. The Nadwa stood for a reformed curriculum, and looked to Egypt for a lead. Yet there also was considerable ambivalence in the Nadwa's receptivity to Egyptian influence. Some of the textbooks used in Egyptian schools were initially adopted, though not without some opposition,⁴⁴ for lack of a better alternative. Written according to "modern" methods of teaching the Arabic language, and emphasizing modern rather than classical Arabic, these books were incomparably superior to the medieval texts and manuals of the madrasas. But many of these Egyptian textbooks also had what Nadwī characterizes as a "secular" orientation, as did much of the literature coming out of Egypt in the 1930s and '40s. An effort to write new textbooks, modelled on the Egyptian primers but consciously expressive of an Islamic, as well as Indian, identity was therefore soon set in motion at the Nadwa, and 'Alī Nadwī was among those involved in this project.

On the model of the Egyptian Arabic reader called *al-Qirā'a al-Rashīda*⁴⁵ Nadwī wrote a text-book called *al-Qirā'a al-Rāshīda*, which unlike its prototype was suited, he says, to the Indian-Islamic environment and had a more pronounced religious content. Among Muslim rulers there were essays in it on the Umayyad caliph 'Umar b. 'Abd al-'Azīz (r. 717–20), the medieval Indian king Sher Shāh Sūrī (r. 1540–55), and the Mughal emperor Aurangzēb (r. 1658–1707), who were all taken to represent Muslim ideals of kingship. Among religious scholars, those discussed included the early Medinese jurist Mālik (d. 796), the great sufi and jurist al-Ghazālī (d. 1111), the puritanical Ḥanbalī reformer Ibn Taymiyya (d. 1328), the eighteenth century Indian scholar Mullā Nizām al-Dīn Farangī Maḥallī (d. 1748), to whom the systematization of the curriculum of Indian madrasas (the *Dars-i Nizāmī*) is attributed, and Shāh 'Abd al-Azīz (d. 1824), a major scholar of nineteenth century India. Among institutions of learning, there were essays in this collection on al-Azhar, Deoband, Mazāhir al-'Ulūm, and the Nadwat al-'Ulamā, all but the first being Indian institutions of relatively recent origins and all of them specializing in religious studies; predictably there was nothing on Aligarh Muslim University (formerly Muhammadan Anglo-Oriental College), which stood for promoting English education among the Muslims of India.⁴⁶ The Egyptian Kāmil Kaylānī's *Hikāyāt al-aḥfāl* which, Nadwī says, was well suited for children but was "completely devoid of a religious spirit and of moral teachings, with God or the Prophet not so much as being mentioned in it" also prompted him to write an explicitly "Islamic" book for children, the *Qiṣaṣ al-nabiyyīn li'l-aḥfāl*.⁴⁷

Later, Nadwī also compiled an anthology of Arabic prose for advanced students of the language. This work, *Mukhtārāt min adab al-'Arab*, was unconventional as an anthology of Arabic literary prose in that most of the selections came from works not traditionally recognized as works of *adab*. Nadwī's choice of individuals exhibits rather his self-conscious concern with creating an Islamic identity, and reveals his perception of who the "authentic" representatives of this identity are. The *Mukhtārāt* has selections from the

⁴⁴ Cf. Nadwī, *Kānwān*, i, pp. 203–4, 216.

⁴⁵ This Arabic primer was in use in Islamic schools throughout Indonesia too in the first half of the twentieth century (and perhaps subsequently as well): see John R. Bowen, *Muslim through Discourse: Religion and Ritual in Gayo Society* (Princeton, 1993), p. 64 n. 28.

⁴⁶ See Nadwī, *Kānwān*, i, pp. 146, 204, 214–15.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, i, p. 204. On the popularity this work came to enjoy even outside India (for instance, in Central Asia) see *ibid.*, iv, pp. 400, 402.

Qur'ān and the *Sira*, and from the writings of mostly classical and medieval religious scholars and saints. These include: traditionalists and jurists such as Ibn Ḥibbān al-Bustī (d. 965), Ibn al-Jawzī (d. 1200), Ibn Taymiyya, and Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya (d. 1350); mystics like al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī (d. 728), al-Ghazālī, and Ibn 'Arabī (d. 1240); a historian, Ibn Khaldūn (1406); and one of the most distinguished of Indian theologians, Shāh Wali Allāh (d. 1762).⁴⁸ Though all of these are extremely distinguished figures, they are not known primarily for their contribution to Arabic *belles-lettres*, which is what *adab* usually denotes. Nadwī regards them as great writers of Arabic prose, however, and argues against a view of “literature”, a view typical, he says, of the traditional madrasas, only as the domain of the *udabā'* (*belle-lettrists*). He is able thereby not only to greatly enlarge the sphere of Arabic literature, but also to introduce the notion of an “Islamic” *adab*.

If Nadwī's effort to foster an Islamic identity through textbooks and anthologies consciously designed for that purpose exhibits a search for an Islamic “authenticity”, that is not all there is to it. It should also be seen perhaps in the context of a wide ranging debate on the purpose and orientation of education in nineteenth century British India, on the place a religious education should have in the overall scheme of things, and on how the study of literature might help impart a religious, or at least a “moral” education.

In a work on “literary study and British rule in India”, Gauri Viswanathan has thrown new light on some aspects of this debate. She argues that though the professed British policy of religious neutrality in India precluded them from teaching religion in school, the study of English literature in India came to fulfil some of what was intended from a formal religious education in Britain. Frequently imbued with Christian themes and values, the study of classics of English literature became a part of liberal education in India long before it was institutionalized as an academic discipline in Britain. An English literary education thus served as a substitute in India for an explicitly Christian education, a vehicle for imparting what the British regarded as “moral” training in Indian schools.⁴⁹

Though the use of literary anthologies for the promotion of an “orthodoxy” goes all the way back to such classical figures of Arabic literature as al-Jāhīz (d. 868) and Ibn Qutayba (d. 889), and even though Nadwī's textbooks and literary anthologies were scarcely devised to substitute for an Islamic education, the emphasis on enlisting *adab* in the service of fostering an Islamic identity, and in the process defining an “Islamic” *adab*, has parallels with the role English literature played as the medium of moral, even Christian instruction in British India.⁵⁰ The very conception of an explicitly “Islamic” literature suggests neat and firm boundaries between the “religious” and the “secular”, boundaries which were ubiquitous in British educational and administrative policies in India and have remained important, in principle at least, in post-independence “secular” India as well. In any case,

⁴⁸ Abu'l-Ḥasan 'Alī al-Ḥasanī al-Nadwī, *Mukhtārāt min adab al-'Arab*, 2nd edn. (Beirut, 1965). Also see *Kārwān*, i, p. 210, and generally pp. 205ff. There is an interesting juxtaposition of Ḥanbalīs – Ibn al-Jawzī, Ibn Taymiyya, and Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya – who are often thought to have been critical of sufi practices, and of sufis.

⁴⁹ Viswanathan, *Masks of Conquest*.

⁵⁰ Nadwī's *Mukhtārāt* failed to penetrate the traditional madrasas of the Indian subcontinent, where Arabic literature has continued to be taught through certain medieval classics of long established literary authority. But this anthology did enter the curricula of Arabic studies in Indian as well as certain Arab universities, which means that its self-consciously Islamic contents could, in certain institutions of Western education, conceivably exercise an influence which is not dissimilar to that of the English classics in Indian schools. Cf. *Kārwān*, i, pp. 212–13, 218–19.

the effort to create or promote an “Islamic literature” now also has an institutional basis. In April 1981, an international seminar was organized by the Nadwat al-‘Ulamā’ on “the search for Islamic elements in Arabic and other literatures”.⁵¹ This led to the establishment, in 1984, of the League of Islamic Literature (*Rābiṭat al-Adab al-Islāmī*), of which Nadwī is the president. It is an adjunct of the Muslim World League (*Rābiṭat al-‘Ālam al-Islāmī*) and is based in Riyadh, the capital of Saudi Arabia.⁵²

Islam, Arabs, and India

With his intellectual background, it is hardly surprising that the Arab Middle East is central to Nadwī’s thought and to what he sees as his revivalist mission. Repeatedly in his writings and speeches, Nadwī addresses himself to the “Arabs”, the “Arab world”, and, for all his opposition to Arab nationalism, even to individual Arab states personified.⁵³ *Mādhā khasira’l-‘ālam bi’l-inḥiṭāt al-muslimin?* [What has the world lost with the decline of the Muslims?], one of Nadwī’s best known and most influential books, is, for example, at once an extended indictment of western “materialism” and a fervent appeal to the Muslims, but above all to the Arabs, to renew their commitment to Islam.⁵⁴ The contrast between a materialistic “West” and an “East” inspired and enriched by an enduring “religious consciousness” is a familiar motif in Nadwī’s writings, but it is nowhere more starkly drawn than in this book.⁵⁵ Incidentally, this contrast reminds one of nineteenth century Orientalist conceptions of a spiritual and exotic “East” against which the rational and enlightened “West” was defined. Nadwī turns the sense of moral superiority implicit in such Orientalist constructions on its head, but the dichotomy persists.⁵⁶ On the other hand, as Gershoni and Jankowski have shown, Egyptian literary circles in the 1930s were also much enamoured of contrasts between the “West” and an idealized and spiritual “East”.⁵⁷ With Nadwī’s exposure to Egyptian journalism of this period, it is likely that some of the inspiration for his ideas in this regard also came from Egypt.

Only Islam, Nadwī says, assures that ideal balance between the spiritual and the material,

⁵¹ For the proceedings of this conference, see *al-Adab al-Islāmī – fikratuhu wa manāhijuhu* (Lucknow, 1981).

⁵² Nadwī, *Kārwān*, ii, pp. 330–3.

⁵³ For his appeal to Arab states personified, see his lectures entitled, for example, “Listen, O Egypt!”, “Listen, O Syria!”, “Listen, O Flower of the Desert [Kuwait]”. These lectures, and others addressing the Arabs, delivered between 1950 and 1962, are collected in Abu’l-Ḥasan ‘Alī Nadwī, *al-‘Arab wa’l-Islām* (Beirut, n.d.).

⁵⁴ Abu’l-Ḥasan ‘Alī Nadwī, *Mādhā khasira’l-‘ālam bi’l-inḥiṭāt al-muslimin*. The book had been reprinted about fifteen times by 1982, besides being translated into Urdu, English, Persian, and Turkish. The English translation (by M. A. Kidwai) is entitled *Islam and the West*. All subsequent references are to the revised and enlarged Urdu translation, *Insānī duniyā par Musalmānon key ‘urūj wa zawāl kā athar* 5th edn. (Lucknow, 1966). For the publication history of this work, see *Kārwān*, i, pp. 256–70, esp. p. 265n. For a critical review of this book, see G. E. von Grunebaum, “Fall and rise of Islam: a self-view”, in *id.*, *Modern Islam: The Search for Cultural Identity* (New York, 1964), pp. 244–57.

⁵⁵ Cf. Nadwī, *Kārwān*, pp. 336.

⁵⁶ This dichotomy also recalls numerous complaints by officials and missionaries in nineteenth and early twentieth century British India that the British policy of pursuing and enforcing religious neutrality fostered the impression of British godlessness, and “the prevalent assumption in India that the West is material and the East spiritual.” See, for instance, Arthur Mayhew, *The Education of India* (London, 1926), p. 48; also see *ibid.*, pp. 49, 211. Mayhew had served as the Director of Public Instruction in the Central Provinces of British India.

⁵⁷ Israel Gershoni and James P. Jankowski, *Redefining the Egyptian Nation, 1930–1945* (Cambridge, 1995), pp. 35–53.

the other worldly and the mundane, in which all human perfection lies.⁵⁸ Through Islam alone can Muslims regain their universal leadership, and the world what it has lost with their decline; and it is the Arabs – with their special, divinely ordained relationship with the Prophet and Islam, and as the inhabitants of lands which are not only the cradle of Islamic civilization but now also the repository of great material wealth – who must lead the way.⁵⁹ But the Arabs of the twentieth century, far from leading the way to an Islamic revival, have found a new religion in nationalism.⁶⁰ Though in part a reaction to Arab grievances against Ottoman rule, nationalism for Nadwī is ultimately a Western plot to divide the Muslims and to blunt the force of their “Islamic consciousness” (*al-shu‘ūr al-Islāmī*). Whatever the Arab nationalists might think, this consciousness is the only real basis of Arab identity, the sole guarantee of their future.⁶¹

The Arabs’ lack of commitment to Islam, of which Arab nationalism is the most dangerous and destructive form, amounts, for Nadwī, to a modern-day “Jāhiliyya”, a highly charged concept in the Islamic religious tradition which Nadwī has helped to make part of the modern fundamentalist discourse.⁶² “Jāhiliyya” is the Islamic theological characterization for the world before Islam; it connotes not merely the worship of deities other than the one, true God, but, like Islam, and in competition with it, a complete way of life and conduct, even a “civilization”.⁶³ But it is a way of life defined by the absence or distortion of all standards of moral valuation:

[Before Islam] everything in the Jāhili man’s ways of thinking was in disarray. . . . Absolute and certain knowledge had become doubtful to him, and matters of doubt absolute certainty. . . . People were entirely preoccupied with the material and this-worldly, and everything was in the wrong shape or at the wrong place. . . . Criminals were happy and fortunate in that society and the virtuous miserable. There was no greater foolishness than to be virtuous in that society, and nothing was more admired than the lack of all manners and morals.⁶⁴

Islam and the Jāhiliyya are mirror images, and Nadwī’s reified rendering of the two squarely defines the one in terms of what the other is not. The yardstick of the right and wrong, of the right shape or the wrong place of things, of certainty and doubt, and of sin and virtue here is a reified, utopian Islam, which is taken to be the very essence of a moral order. Any deviation from this moral order is for Muslims a slippage back into the Jāhiliyya, which is the more reprehensible for signifying not just an ignorance of Islam but its renunciation.⁶⁵

⁵⁸ *Insānī dunyā*, pp. 163ff. and *passim*.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 428ff.

⁶⁰ Nadwī, *al-‘Arab wa’l-Islām*, esp. pp. 9ff. On nationalism as religion, and the religious opposition to nationalism, cf. Juergensmeyer, *The New Cold War?*, pp. 11–25 and *passim*.

⁶¹ Nadwī, *al-‘Arab wa’l-Islām*, pp. 3–16, and *passim*; *id.*, *Insānī dunyā*, pp. 408ff.

⁶² Sivan credits Mawdūdī with developing the theory of a “modern Jāhiliyya”, and Nadwī with introducing it into the Arab world (*Radical Islam*, 22–3). The theory has had many formulations, some with explicit revolutionary implications – as in the writings of the Egyptian revivalist Sayyid Quṭb (1906–66). *Ibid.*, pp. 21ff. Nadwī met Quṭb when he visited Egypt after the publication of *Mādḥā khasira’l-‘ālam*, and Quṭb wrote the foreword to the second edition of this book. Quṭb’s foreword has remained part of all subsequent editions of this work. Despite the contribution of both Mawdūdī and Nadwī to the notion of a “modern Jāhiliyya”, however, it is noteworthy that (unlike Quṭb) neither advocated any politically subversive form of opposition to the state. For Mawdūdī’s position in this regard, cf. S. V. R. Nasr, *Mawdūdī and the Making of Islamic Revivalism* (New York, 1996), p. 75.

⁶³ Cf. Nadwī, *Insānī dunyā*, pp. 102–3, 109–10, and 37–99, *passim*.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 102–3.

⁶⁵ By the same token, Nadwī also speaks on a “new *Ridda*”, or apostasy, a term used in Islamic historiography

Nadwī's polemic against Arab nationalism, especially during its heyday in the 1950s and 1960s, accorded well with the opposition to it by Islamist groups in the Middle East and especially by Saudi Arabia. The latter in particular was threatened by the Nasirist ideology of social revolution and by Egypt's challenge for the leadership of the Arabs. The emotional ties of ancestral origin (Nadwī's ancestor had come to India from Arabia) and of creed (his family's affinity with the Wahhābīs) were reinforced by a common opposition to Nasirist nationalism.⁶⁶ From its inception, Nadwī has been associated with the Rābiṭat al-ʿĀlam al-Islāmī, a pan-Islamic organization sponsored by Saudi Arabia to counteract Nasirism,⁶⁷ and his ties with the Saudi religious and political elite seems also to have earned much financial assistance for the Nadwat al-ʿUlamā'.⁶⁸ But though his thought has undoubtedly tended to support some of the Islamist concerns of Saudi foreign policy, Nadwī's opposition to Arab nationalism, his appeal for a revival of Islamic zeal among the Arabs, is rooted in a strong sense of Muslim identity in India.

For if a new Jāhiliyya, complete with its false gods, has all but overwhelmed the Arabs, then the consequences are not limited to the Arabs alone. Repeatedly in his writings, Nadwī has dwelt on the theme that the faltering of the Arab commitment to Islam means their betrayal of Muslims everywhere. If, as Shakīb Arslān had said, all Muslims are "the pupils of the Arabs"⁶⁹ – a sentiment with which Nadwī seems entirely to concur – then it is surely unsettling that the erstwhile teachers should have themselves lost the religious zeal one not only associated with, but had originally derived from them. That the Arabs had begun to look for what united them as a nation to the exclusion of all other peoples meant a weakening of ties between Arab and non-Arab Muslims even as it strengthened those between Muslim and non-Muslim Arabs. But as people like Nadwī have insisted, the Arab cultural heritage is not only meaningless without, and really inseparable from, Islam, it is also the shared heritage of all Muslims. The Muslims of India have contributed no less than any other people, no less than the Arabs themselves, to the growth and richness of Islamic civilization. Yet only those Arabs who are aware of their Islamic roots can really appreciate the role and significance of India in the history of Islam. A secular Arab nationalism threatens not only to sever the links between Muslim India and the Arab world, but also to rob India of recognition for its contribution to Islamic civilization. It is an abiding concern of Nadwī's work to acquaint both the Arabs and the Indian Muslims with that contribution. (He is also concerned, as we shall see later, to bring out the Muslim contribution to India itself, and this in self-consciously addressing himself to his Hindu compatriots.) The concern with highlighting this contribution is at once an invitation to the Arabs to renew

to denote Arab tribal movements which threw off allegiance to the Islamic state of Medina, and even to Islam itself, in the wake of the Prophet Muḥammad's death. On the "new *Ridda*" cf. Nadwī, *Kārwān*, i, 452–3.

⁶⁶ On Nasirism, see *ibid.*, ii, pp. 64–83.

⁶⁷ On the Rābiṭat al-ʿĀlam al-Islāmī, see Reinhard Schulze, *Islamischer Internationalismus im 20. Jahrhundert: Untersuchungen zur Geschichte der islamischen Weltliga* (Leiden, 1990).

⁶⁸ For an early instance of Saudi financial assistance for the Nadwa, see *Ta'rikh-i Nadwa*, ii, p. 438. The Saudi government seems, moreover, to have subsidized or bought large quantities of Nadwī's publications. For instance, of a print run of 100,000 copies of the 1982 edition of his *Mādḥā khasira'l-ʿālam*, published from Kuwait, the Saudi Ministry of Education immediately bought 80,000 copies! See Nadwī, *Kārwān*, i, p. 265.

⁶⁹ Shakīb Arslān, *Limādḥā ta'akḥḥar al-muslimūn* (Cairo, 1939–40), pp. 10ff. quoted in Hourani, *Arabic Thought*, p. 299.

their Islamic commitments – which Muslim India is shown to have preserved all along – and an affirmation of Islamic identity and its Middle Eastern roots in India.

Though Nadwī dates the intellectual and cultural decline of the Muslim world to the ninth century of the Hijra (fifteenth century A.D.), his version of this story is not one of unrelieved decadence. The decline of Muslims is only one aspect of the history of Islam as he sees it; another, which he is much concerned to highlight in a series of biographies, is the continuous tradition of Islamic reform and renewal. The tradition is uninterrupted, he insists, and if we fail to see the continuity, that is only because Muslim historians have not done much to bring it out.⁷⁰ This reformist tradition extends, in Nadwī's work, from the pious Umayyad caliph 'Umar ibn 'Abd al-'Aziz to religious scholars and saints of Nadwī's own time. One of the most striking features of this hagiographical historiography is that the later middle ages, the period from the ninth/fifteenth century onwards (in which Nadwī locates Muslim decline), are almost entirely dominated by Muslim India. Those singled out as exceptions to the effects of an otherwise widespread decline are all Indian: Shaykh Aḥmad Sirhindī (d. 1624), Shāh alī Allāh, Shāh Rafī' al-Dīn, Shāh Ismā'īl Dihlawī (d. 1832), and, to a lesser extent, the 'ulamā' of the Farangī Maḥall in Lucknow.⁷¹

Even under British colonial rule, Muslim intellectuals have remained prolific in their writings on Islam. An extended paper on "Islam and the Orientalists", presented by Nadwī to a conference he had organized on this subject in 1982, is primarily occupied, for instance, with highlighting the Indian Muslim contribution to meeting the challenges of Orientalism. Though Muslims of India were, unlike many Muslim societies elsewhere, directly exposed to western influences, were subject to the most powerful and culturally vibrant of the western colonial states, and had the best of their youth drawn to westernizing institutions such as the Aligarh University, they retained, he says, "a much sharper religious consciousness, a purer Islamic zeal, and a stronger commitment to Islam than did Muslims of other countries".⁷² What Muslims of India have done in keeping their religious zeal alive in the face of the British colonial challenge is not enough, but it is much more than what Muslims anywhere else have achieved.⁷³

Though Nadwī grudgingly acknowledges the importance of "modernist" writers like Sayyid Aḥmad Khān (d. 1898) and Sayyid 'Amīr 'Alī (d. 1928) in responding to the Orientalist challenge, his real heroes are scholars and saints of a much more conservative bent, of more certain "Islamic" credentials. It is men like Raḥmat Allāh Kairānawī (d. 1891), who engaged in religious disputations with Christian missionaries in late nineteenth century India,⁷⁴ Sayyid Sulaymān Nadwī (d. 1953), one of the most distinguished of Muslim scholars of twentieth century India,⁷⁵ and 'Abd al-Ḥayy al-Ḥasanī ('Alī Nadwī's father), who, for him, epitomize the kind of people who have kept the Islamic zeal "pure" even in the trying times of British colonialism. It is not accidental that these scholars, like Nadwī himself, had all been much concerned with exploring the links of Muslim India

⁷⁰ See Nadwī, *Ta'riikh-i da'wat wa 'azīmat*, i (Azamgarh, 1955); *id.*, *Kārwan*, i, pp. 411–17.

⁷¹ *Insānī dunyā*, pp. 224–5, and cf. *ibid.*, pp. 342–52; great Muslim rulers of later Middle Ages are likewise all Indian: see *ibid.*, pp. 368–81.

⁷² Sayyid Abu'l-Ḥasan 'Alī Nadwī, *al-Islām wa'l-mustashriqūn* (Lucknow, n.d. [ca. 1983]), pp. 33–5.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, p. 36.

⁷⁴ On him, see Powell, *Muslims and Missionaries*, pp. 219ff.

⁷⁵ See *Encyclopedia of Islam*, 2nd edition, s.v. "Sayyid Sulaymān Nadwī".

with the Arab world, and with describing the contribution of Muslim India to Islamic civilization. A brief excursus should illustrate this.

One of ‘Abd al-Ḥayy al-Ḥasanī’s (d. 1923) books, *al-Thaqāfa al-Islāmiyya fi’l-Hind*, is, as the title suggests, a study of Islamic culture in India. Written in Arabic, it begins by describing the evolution of Muslim systems of education in India, and goes on to survey the writings of Indian Muslim scholars in the fields of linguistics, literature, history, law and legal theory, Hadith, Qur’anic exegesis, sufism, theology, logic and philosophy, mathematics, and medicine.⁷⁶ “Islamic culture” in India as presented here is no more than the sum of the literary output of the Muslims of India. Except for a brief account of translations from Sanskrit into Persian, and of some Muslim poets who wrote in Hindi, there is a resolute if implicit denial that there is anything Indian about Islamic culture in India. This is an account of what Muslim intellectuals living in India have contributed to the Islamic sciences, not of how the Indian environment may have shaped the development of Islamic culture in the subcontinent.

A similar concern pervades al-Ḥasanī’s *Nuzhat al-khawāṭir wa bahjat al-masāmi‘ wa’l-nawāzīr* [The Entertainment of the Minds and the Delight of the Ears and the Eyes], a biographical dictionary of ‘ulamā’ and notables of India, including those who came there from elsewhere in the Muslim world.⁷⁷ This book comprises more than four thousand five hundred biographical entries and has been posthumously published in eight volumes. The temporal scope extends from the first century of Islam down to the author’s own time; and ‘Abu’l-Ḥasan ‘Alī Nadwī has subsequently added, in the eighth volume, biographies of Indian ‘ulamā’ of his own generation too. The structure and style of the work is similar to that of medieval Islamic biographical dictionaries, and like many of them the primary focus here is on the ‘ulamā’, though “notables” (conquerors, kings, local rulers) are not ignored.⁷⁸

What distinguishes the *Nuzhat al-khawāṭir* from other works of its genre in the Arabic language is, as Nadwī notes in his introduction to this work, its emphasis on the Indian ‘ulamā’. That the latter have not received much attention in medieval Arabic biographical dictionaries is due, according to Nadwī, to the ignorance about Muslim India among Middle Eastern scholars. In fact the only Indian scholars who figure in Arabic biographical dictionaries are those who had settled in the Middle East, and they did not necessarily represent the best of Indian scholarship. The *Nuzhat al-khawāṭir* seeks primarily to document the intellectual achievement of Islam in India, but there evidently is more to it than that. Given that this massive biographical dictionary is written in the Arabic language, the purpose also (perhaps even primarily) is to make Arabs aware of the Indian Muslim contribution to Islamic civilization. Conversely, the choice of Arabic for this work may perhaps also be seen as an assertion that even in early twentieth century British India, it is in Arabic rather than Urdu or even Persian that the intellectual heritage of Indian Islam ought

⁷⁶ ‘Abd al-Ḥayy al-Ḥasanī, *al-Thaqāfa al-Islāmiyya fi’l-Hind*, 2nd edn. (Damascus, 1983).

⁷⁷ See note 7, above.

⁷⁸ On medieval biographical dictionaries, see H. A. R. Gibb, “Islamic Biographical Literature”, in B. Lewis and P. M. Holt eds., *Historians of the Middle East* (London, 1962), pp. 54–8; M. J. L. Young, “Arabic Biographical Writing”, in M. J. L. Young et al., eds., *Cambridge History of Arabic Literature: Religion, Learning and Science in the ‘Abbāsīd period* (Cambridge, 1990), pp. 168–87; Tarif Khalidi, *Arabic Historical Thought in the Classical Period* (Cambridge, 1994), pp. 204–10.

most appropriately to be preserved.⁷⁹ Despite the growing importance of Urdu in the nineteenth century, Arabic was a mark of cultural authenticity for many among the religious elite. As noted earlier, this perception of Arabic was also shared by many British officials, which may in turn have reinforced its cultural appeal for some Muslims. There were good grounds then for a celebration of Muslim learning and the learned in the Arabic language.

The *Nuzhat al-khawātir* is a remarkable demonstration not only of cultural authenticity, however, but also of the continuity of tradition: from the first century of Islam down to the thirteenth (scil. till the early twentieth century), scholars and saints are shown carrying on similar pursuits in different parts of India, teaching and transmitting the religious sciences from one generation (*tabaqa*) to another, from one region to another. Since many of these scholars came from the Middle East, Iran, and Central Asia, the links and continuities this book demonstrates are not only between generations of Indian scholars, but also between India and the greater Muslim world. Such links have continued to be explored in various directions by several other scholars too, not all of them associated with the Nadwat al-‘Ulamā.⁸⁰

If there ever was a question whether Muslim India had lived up to its commitment to Islam, a work such as ‘Abd al-Ḥayy al-Ḥasanī’s *Nuzhat al-khawātir* may be deemed to have conclusively answered it. In his own writings, Abu’l-Ḥasan ‘Alī Nadwī speaks of Islam as a “trust” whose obligations Muslim India had all along fulfilled. The ultimate obligation that the “trust” imposes on Muslim India is to “return” to the Arabs what they had brought to India,⁸¹ that is, to rekindle in them the Islamic zeal that India has preserved all along. This is the essence of Nadwī’s calling as he sees it, a proselytizing and revivalist mission. His mission to bring the Arabs back to Islam remains deeply rooted in an Indian Muslim identity: not only has Muslim India always persevered in its commitment to Islam, the revival of an Islamic zeal among the Arabs is as important for the Muslims of India as it is for the Arabs themselves.

If Indian Muslims look up to the Arabs for leadership and identity, *because* they have traditionally thought of the latter as the first bearers of Islam, then the Arabs’ forsaking an Islamic for an Arab national identity cannot but be profoundly disquieting. In addressing the Arabs against the backdrop of the nationalistic fervour of the 1950s, and drawing attention to the predicament of the Indian Muslims in a secular, Hindu-dominated India, Nadwī skilfully juxtaposes three varieties of Jāhiliyya: the pre-Islamic, the modern Arab nationalistic, and, in India, the Jāhiliyya of Hindu polytheism and idolatry as well as of attachment to locality and local customs, against which, Nadwī says, the Muslims have continued to struggle till the present. Arab nationalism is a reversion to Jāhiliyya not only because the nation rather than Islam becomes the object of devotion, but also, and by the same token, because the pre-Islamic Arab past, the historical Jāhiliyya which Islam ought to

⁷⁹ Cf. Nadwī’s remarks on the importance of the Arabic language to Muslim India in his *al-‘Arab wa’l-Islām*, pp. 68–70.

⁸⁰ One of the best known works on this subject is Sayyid Sulaymān Nadwī, *‘Arab wa Hind key ta’alūqāt* [The Relations between Arabia and India] (A’zamgarh, 1979). This book comprises lectures first given at the Indian Academy of Allahabad in 1929.

⁸¹ The image of one’s goods or merchandise being returned, together with what it was meant to buy, is Qur’anic: see Qur’ān, XII:65; and cf. Nadwī, *Kārwān*, i, pp. 326, 369.

have completely obliterated, becomes sacrosanct in competition with Islam itself. Even more grievously, so far as Indian Muslims are concerned, the modern Arab Jāhiliyya also gives justification to attacks on Muslim efforts to preserve a distinct identity in India: for if the Arabs can return to their non-Islamic past, why must the Muslims of India not do the same?⁸² This question poses a greater challenge to Muslim identity in India, Nadwī says, than have many a conspiracy against Islam in the past; and ironically, it is the conduct of the Arabs that provides the inspiration for this challenge.⁸³

This sense of betrayal by the Arabs is accompanied by a stern and vigorous declaration of the continuing Indian Muslim commitment to Islam:

“If the entire world were to abandon Islam, our determination would not be weakened. Even if the Turks returned to their ‘Turani’ nationhood (*qawmiyya*) and to the customs, beliefs, and glories of their first Jāhiliyya, the Iranians to their Sasanian nationhood, seeking honour in their ancestors Rustam and Suhrab, Egypt to its Pharaonicism (*fir‘awniyyatiha*), and the people of Arabia – may God not will this – to their Jāhiliyya and its heroes [let it be known that] we have not bound our future to any community or nation. We have associated our future and its course with the will of God and His religion. That the entire mankind becomes infidel can be no excuse for us to do the same . . . We have pledged to God that we will persevere in His religion and continue to cling to it. And God has vouched for the permanence of His religion and for the continued existence of a group in the community which will hold on to it.”⁸⁴

A similar sentiment was voiced by Nadwī in his inaugural address to the eighty-fifth anniversary of the founding of the Nadwat al-‘Ulamā’, celebrated with great fervour (and with a large number of delegates from the Arab world) in 1975.⁸⁵

By the grace of God, the Muslims of India are to a large extent autonomous as regards Islam. They draw guidance from the earliest and most authoritative sources of Islam – the Qur’ān and the Sunna and from the lives of Islam’s earliest representatives. . . . Their faith and their life is tied to the radiance of Islam, not to the ephemeral glimmerings of Muslim nations or Arab states . . .⁸⁶

That Indian Islam is “autonomous” is a remarkable statement. It is meant not to deny that Muslims of India are part of the Muslim world, or that they are affected by developments elsewhere, but to assert that their religious commitment does not presuppose or depend on that of Muslims elsewhere. This assertion may have been meant as a statement of fact, but it also has a clearly rhetorical motive: if Muslims of India can hold on to Islam even in the face of a non-Muslim majority that threatens to obscure their religious identity, why cannot Muslims elsewhere, and especially the Arabs, do at least that much? The Arabs are doubly culpable for their loss of faith: it has led to their decline in the world, and though others will continue to persevere in their devotion to Islam, the Arabs have nevertheless let them down.

The autonomy of Indian Islam also puts one in mind of works such as al-Ḥasani’s

⁸² Nadwī, *al-‘Arab wa’l-Islām*, pp. 98–100.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, p. 100.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 100–1.

⁸⁵ For the proceedings of the conference and an account of other celebrations on this occasion, see Muḥammad al-Ḥasani, *Rūdād-i chaman: Nadwat al-‘Ulamā’ key pachchāsi sāla jashn-i ta’līmī ki mufassal rūdād* (Lucknow, 1976). Also see Nadwī, *Kārwān*, ii, pp. 171–95.

⁸⁶ Abu’l-Hasan ‘Ali Nadwī, Inaugural Address, in Muḥammad al-Ḥasani, *Rūdād-i chaman*, p. 117; Nadwī, *Kārwān*, ii, p. 188.

Nuzhat al-khawāṭir or his *al-Thaqāfa al-Islāmiyya fi'l-Hind*: Islamic intellectual and religious traditions are shown in both works to have continued uninterrupted from the very first century of Islam down to the present. In his own writings, *Mādḥā khasira'l-‘ālam bi'l-inḥitāt al muslimīn* for instance, Nadwī showed likewise that it was in India rather than anywhere else in the Muslim world that intellectual and reformist activities had continued throughout the later middle ages, a period otherwise characterized by pervasive cultural decline. Yet, for all the autonomy of Islam in India, the Arabs do matter, and it is significant that this autonomy is invoked precisely in addressing them. But it is only the ideologically committed Arabs who matter, as Nadwī makes clear in stirring rhetoric such as the following, which is calculated to strike a receptive emotional chord among those dissatisfied with nationalist or secularist panaceas in the Arab world:

“If you want, O Arabs, to help us in any way or to wish any success to us, know that it is not any material or monetary assistance that we need. We only ask one thing of you: that you be an example of steadfastness in faith, and act as you did in the past – as the bearers of the eternal message of God, driving away all those who adhere to anyone but Allāh or to any religion but Islam. If you did this, you would have given us all the help [we need].”⁸⁷

Despite its “autonomy”, then, Islam in India is anything but immune to how it fares elsewhere, especially among the Arabs. Nadwī’s ambivalence in defining this autonomy is brought out most clearly when he sets out to elucidate Islam, and Islamic culture in India, not to the Arabs or even Indian Muslims, but to his Hindu compatriots. Nadwī has written introductory books on Islam and Muslim culture for a non-Muslim, primarily Hindu, audience to remove misunderstanding and minimize the communal conflict endemic in India.⁸⁸ As Partha Chatterjee has argued in a recent study of Hindu nationalist constructions of Indian history, “Islam here is either the history of foreign conquest or a domesticated element of everyday popular life. The classical heritage of Islam remains external to Indian history”.⁸⁹ It is such views of Islam that Nadwī seeks to counteract. In contrast to works analyzed earlier, where the contribution of Muslim India to Islam and the Muslim world was at issue, the concern in these works is to describe what Muslims have historically contributed to society and culture in India, and, in more recent times, to the struggle for India’s freedom from colonial rule. Nadwī also proposes to show in these writings that Muslims are as much a part of, and loyal to, India as are the Hindus:

“Their culture, which has taken centuries to evolve, is a combination of both Islamic and Indian influences. This two-fold aspect has, on the one hand, endowed it with a beauty and a richness which is characteristically its own and, on the other, it holds forth the assurance that this culture will operate here not like an alien or a traveller but as a natural, permanent citizen who has built his home in the light of his peculiar needs and circumstances . . .”⁹⁰

⁸⁷ Nadwī, *al-‘Arab wa’l-Islām*, p. 101.

⁸⁸ Abu’l-Ḥasan ‘Alī Nadwī, *Muslims in India*, tr. from the Urdu by M. A. Kidwai (Lucknow, n.d. [1960]). Note, however, that a substantial part of this book originated as talks in Arabic on All India Radio in 1951. The original audience therefore was the Arab Middle East, though the book under discussion here is primarily intended, Nadwī says, for non-Muslim audiences in India. See *ibid.*, pp. 4–5. Also *id.*, *The Musalman*, tr. from the Urdu by M. Ahmad (Lucknow, 1972). The term “musulmān” is the standard rendition of the Arabic “Muslim” in Urdu.

⁸⁹ Chatterjee, “Nationalization of Hinduism”, p. 149.

⁹⁰ Nadwī, *Muslims in India*, p. 65; translation modified slightly.

Yet when it comes to actually describing what is *Indian* about Islam in India, Nadwī adopts a tone which seems laden with some strikingly negative overtones. “Indian Muslims have adopted numerous rites and customs of the soil which are not to be found among Muslims elsewhere”, he says.⁹¹ These include rites of marriage, public fairs and festivities, social distinctions based on caste and profession, all of which he regards as unfortunate borrowings from the Hindus. Ironically, then, even as he writes to foster mutual understanding between Hindus and Muslims, what is “Indian” about Muslim culture turns out for the most part not to be “Islamic” at all. The “Indian influences” on this culture are acknowledged – largely, perhaps, for the sake of Nadwī’s putative Hindu audience – but when not derided, they remain unexplored. An acknowledgement of their existence does serve, however, to sharpen the sense of an immutable Islamic essence, which the Muslims have preserved and cultivated, and which ultimately remains pure and distinct from any such influences.⁹² Nadwī is also at pains to emphasize the loyalty and devotion of India’s Muslims to the nation-state (and that despite all his strictures against *Arab* nationalism, or his discomfort with the Muslim nationalism which led to the creation of Pakistan) and to emphasize as well the need for communal harmony between Muslims and Hindus.⁹³ But this harmony is predicated not on similarities between the two communities, still less on a religious and cultural symbiosis; it is based rather on a recognition of their distinct, immutable identities. And there is no question that, for Muslims, the sources of this identity lie not in the historical experience of Islam in India, but in their being part of the greater Muslim world and in their awareness of being such.

This awareness has other functions too. As he states in his autobiography, the fact that a large number of dignitaries from the Arab world (including the Shaykh al-Azhar) attended the elaborate celebrations marking the eighty-fifth anniversary of the Nadwat al-‘Ulamā’ in 1975 demonstrated to the government of India as well as to the majority (Hindu) community that Muslims constitute an international community and that Muslim leaders of India are respected in the Muslim world.⁹⁴ The same message was equally vital, he says, for the “self-assurance” of Muslims in India.⁹⁵

Though Nadwī is less than candid on this account, recognition in and by the Arab and Muslim world also has an immediate and particular bearing on the status of the Nadwat al-‘Ulamā’, the institution he represents. As mentioned earlier, the Nadwa had begun as a movement to “reform” the curriculum of the madrasas so as to better prepare religious scholars to lead the Muslim community in changed conditions of life. But not only did the ‘*ulamā*’ of most madrasas refuse to accept the Nadwa’s lead or the changes in curriculum it had proposed, there was an unwillingness even to acknowledge the graduates of the Nadwa’s Dār al-‘Ulūm as “real” ‘*ulamā*’. This marginalization of the Nadwa, the nemesis of presuming to reform madrasas, was never thoroughgoing, and Nadwī for one enjoys

⁹¹ Nadwī, *The Musalman*, p. 25; cf. *id.*, *Muslims in India*, pp. 73–5.

⁹² Cf. Nadwī, *The Musulman*, p. 6: “... Islam is a universal religion rooted in the Qur’ān and the *Sunnah*, and, therefore, there is hardly any difference in the basic tenets and religious observances of the Muslims of other countries. Indian Muslims have, on the other hand, adopted numerous customs and usages of the land which have been pointed out where necessary in order to identify their indigenous origin”.

⁹³ Cf. Sayyid Abu’l-Ḥasan ‘Alī Nadwī, *Reconstruction of Indian Society: What Muslims Can Do* (Lucknow, 1972).

⁹⁴ Nadwī, *Kārwan*, ii, pp. 173–4.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, ii, p. 174.

greater prestige and influence in India than most other 'ulamā'. Nevertheless, the sense that the 'ulamā' of other madrasas are sometimes reluctant to regard the products of the Nadwa as one of themselves has meant that the latter have often had to look for alternate sources of influence: association with the Tablighī Jamā'at (a proselytizing movement of Indian origin which now has an influential worldwide network), sufism, and, perhaps most distinctively, recognition in the Arab world. Contacts and recognition in the Arab world also serve, in short, to define the Nadwa's own standing in India. That 'Ali Nadwi is one of the most respected of Indian Muslim scholars and leaders likewise owes not a little to the perception of his influence abroad.

Conclusion

This essay has sought to examine the significance of the Arab Middle East in conceptions of Muslim identity in modern India. Our basic point of reference here has been the life and writings of Sayyid Abu'l-Ḥasan 'Ali Nadwi and the cultural milieu and orientation of the Nadwat al-'Ulamā'. Perhaps no other Indian Muslim scholar has enjoyed greater recognition in the Arab world than has Nadwi, but many other, if less prominent, instances of a strong attachment to the Arabs can easily be adduced. Yet it would be misleading to suggest that the Arab Middle East enjoys a comparable importance for all Muslims. The emphasis on the Arabic language is, for instance, seen as retrogressive by many modernizing and English-educated Muslims. Already in 1904, influential former students of the Muhammadan Anglo-Oriental College at Aligarh, in northern India, which had been established for the promotion of English education among Indian Muslims, were able to force the resignation of the institution's English principal after he had proposed setting up a programme for Arabic studies at the College.⁹⁶ More importantly, many leaders of Muslim opinion in contemporary India advocate an explicitly secular identity, a commitment to the secular Indian state, and a stress on the Indian-ness of Muslim culture and community.⁹⁷ On this view, attachment to other Muslim countries or historic memories of contact with them only highlight the "foreignness" of Islam and the Muslims and thus reinforce Hindu fundamentalist views of Muslims as a fifth column in India. Even those who insist on the preservation of a sense of communal Islamic identity, which participation in the institutions and life of a secular state should do nothing to erode, differ in how they view the Muslim world and their position in it, and, specifically, the Arab Middle East and Muslim India's relations with it. All would not, for instance, privilege the Arab Middle East over, say, Iran or Central Asia.⁹⁸

Nevertheless, India's historic links with the Arabs, Indian Muslim contribution to Islamic civilization, and the assurance that Muslim India and the Arab Middle East can each continue to contribute to the religious identity of the other does carry conviction with

⁹⁶ Lelyveld, *Aligarh's First Generation*, p. 330.

⁹⁷ On the range of approaches to questions of Muslim communal identity and the role of Muslims in India, see Christian W. Troll, "Sharing Islamically in the pluralistic nation-state of India: the views of some contemporary Indian Muslim leaders and thinkers", in Yvonne Y. Haddad and Wadi Z. Haddad, *Christian-Muslim Encounters* (Gainesville, 1995), pp. 245–62; also cf. Hasan, "The myth of unity".

⁹⁸ On the importance of Central Asian and Iranian cultural traditions for Muslim India, cf. Robinson, "Perso-Islamic culture in India".

many people. That prominent Arabs and other Muslims from abroad can gather to celebrate the anniversary of an Indian institution, that an Indian Muslim leader is honoured and influential in the Arab world, that not only the contribution of India to Islam in the past but even the Islamic commitment of Indian Muslims in the present can be presented to the Arabs as a model to be emulated, can all be very reassuring in a country where Muslims, despite large numbers, are a minority confronted and challenged by an increasingly hostile Hindu fundamentalism. 'Ali Nadwi's career typifies this sense of reassurance; and the influence he enjoys in India suggests that the themes he has articulated have a wide resonance.

In concluding this study, I should also like to make a more general point about the attachment of Muslims in India to the Arab Middle East. As suggested by Shāh Wali Allāh's comment cited at the beginning of this paper, this attachment has deep roots in India. Yet there are many indications, some of which I have alluded to in this study, that the ways in which the Arab world is perceived, or India's relationship with it is defined, are also subject to constant reformulation and change. Though warnings against the influence of Western ideas and institutions have remained a familiar motif in Nadwi's writings – warnings addressed equally to Arabs and to the Muslims of India – at least some of the ways in which many Muslims have perceived the Middle East in twentieth century India seem deeply indebted to the impact of colonial rule itself. The importance of the Arabic language for the Nadwa is a case in point. As we have seen, it was one of the major concerns of the Nadwa's founders to not just teach medieval Arabic juristic and theological texts – as all Indian madrasas had done for centuries – but also, uniquely, to train their students to *speak and write* in Arabic, the Islamic language *par excellence* and one of the “classical languages of India”. That the Nadwa's founders were thereby trying to appeal to notions of cultural authenticity and religious authority, notions which the British colonial officials had encouraged among the Muslim religious elite – is scarcely far-fetched. The emphasis on literature as a medium of imparting moral values at the Nadwa reflects, among other things, the influence of nineteenth century controversies over education in British India, as noted earlier; and the very conception of an “Islamic” literature recognizes, and in fact presupposes, a basic dichotomy between the sacred and the secular, which government schools as well as various policies of the colonial government had done much to encourage. The Nadwa's Arabic text-books, self-consciously infused with an “Islamic” spirit, were meant as a response to “secular” texts coming out of Egypt, but at least some of the sensitivity to whatever was seen as “secular” was doubtless imbibed in British India. Moreover, though Nadwi denounces the materialistic “West” in uncompromising terms, the essentialist contrast between the “West” and the spiritual “East” probably owes more to nineteenth and early twentieth century Orientalist notions than he seems to recognize. The experience of colonial rule not only contributed to the creation or sharpening (as the case may be) of communal boundaries between the peoples of India, in some ways that experience may also have strengthened the sense of importance that putative links with the Arab world had for many Muslims in India.

Author's note: An earlier version of this article was presented at the Carolina Seminar in Comparative Islamic History, National Humanities Center, Research Triangle Park, North Carolina, in April 1996. I am grateful to Professors Carl W. Ernst, David Gilmartin, Bruce B. Lawrence, and Seyyed Vali R. Nasr for their comments.

Editorial note: An earlier version of this article was published, without the author's knowledge or permission, in *The Muslim World*, 87/3-4 (July-October 1997).