

World Citizens and Enlightened Patriots: The Arabs Studies Program at the American University of Beirut

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The Arab Studies Program (ASP) at the American University of Beirut (Lebanon) was founded in July 1949 with an initial grant of \$83,000 and supported by three additional Rockefeller Foundation grants that carried the program through 1963, totaling over \$500,000. Thereafter the ASP was supported by the university and various other local and international donors; it is now called the Center for Arab and Middle Eastern Studies. The ASP is noteworthy for a number of reasons, as will be noted below, not least because it was one of the first area studies programs devoted to the study of the Middle East established at an American university.

I had previously carried out research on the program at AUB, using various and sundry records of the program, university annual reports, published monographs and conference proceedings, memoirs, and local newspapers. Unfortunately, the files from the ASP are either gone or unavailable at AUB. With the loss of Rockefeller Foundation funding, there may have been little incentive to keep any of the records. The program also suffered from a lack of administrative continuity: the location of the administrative offices changed several times, the program name changed three times, and the main function of the program, to educate graduate students at the MA level, was suspended in the mid-eighties due to the ongoing Lebanese Civil War (1975-91) until admissions were reopened in 1998-1999. One of my goals at the Rockefeller Archive Center was to learn more about the circumstances behind the founding of the program and the relationship between Rockefeller Foundation officers and AUB faculty members in order to place the Arab Studies Program in the context of the development of Middle East studies programs at other American universities.

In some respects, the general trajectory of the ASP parallels that of the Middle East area studies programs established in North America, the first of which, Princeton's, was established in 1947. A few others were started in the late 1940s and early 1950s, and many more followed after the National Defense Education Act was passed in 1958. These programs were directed toward interdisciplinary scholarship, recognizing the importance of the social sciences, but also relying heavily on language study. The programs were aimed at training area studies

experts and “producing policy-relevant knowledge”¹—a key goal in the context of the Cold War.

AUB’s Arab Studies Program stands out among these area studies programs for several reasons. First—and most obvious—is its location in the Arab world. Since area studies programs are typically rooted in academic institutions outside of the regions they study, its situation was unique, and this factor also explains why AUB’s program has been overlooked in accounts of the development of area studies in American academia. Aside from its location, the university is American in terms of curriculum, language of instruction, and governance—it is chartered and accredited in the state of New York and offers a US-style American curriculum. While the university and its graduates have played a significant role in the political history of the region—most notably, in the emergence of Arab nationalism and in its graduates’ participation in national delegations to the founding of the United Nations—AUB is hardly in the mainstream of American academia.

The university’s local character played a role in the articulation of the ASP as well. Its founders, Constantine Zurayk and Nabih Amin Faris, chose to identify the program as “Arab” rather than “Near” or “Middle Eastern,” as programs in the West were designated—the latter two being problematic designations, of course, since the term begs the question: East of what?² By defining the program in local, rather than relational, terms, Zurayk and Faris endowed it with a definite political edge.

Finally, and this I came to appreciate from the material I read at the RAC, is that, in many respects, the program was the product of a collaboration between John Marshall and Nabih Amin Faris. Marshall, Associate Director in the Foundation’s Humanities Division, was responsible for the project until 1958, when he became the director of the Study and Conference Center in Bellagio, Italy, and Faris was the founding director of the ASP, retaining the position until his death in 1968. Marshall and Faris shared a humanistic vision of area studies.

In spite of their shared view and the friendship that grew over the years, it is important to add that they and their respective institutions also emphasized divergent approaches to the program's humanistic goals. While the concept of Area Studies emerged in response to the perceived needs of governments and foundations to produce regional expertise, the ASP also addressed local concerns and thus challenged an approach to area studies preoccupied with hegemonic interests to understand areas of strategic significance. In the course of the correspondence concerning the four grants that supported the program over nearly fifteen years, one can see that the program was the product of the tension between disparate goals—to form “world citizens” or “enlightened patriots.”

John Marshall was a newcomer to the Middle East when he first arrived in Beirut in 1948 to attend a UNESCO conference. His career is well known: having received his BA and MA in English literature at Harvard, he was hired in 1933 by David Stevens, the director of the Humanities Division, after holding a number of positions simultaneously: executive secretary of the Medieval Academy (1926-33), instructor at Harvard (1928-30), and editor of publications at the American Council of Learned Societies (1931-33). He started his Rockefeller Foundation career in Europe where he worked on the development of libraries, expanding his remit in the following years to radio and film. More importantly, Marshall did not regard his work as developing specific areas of technical expertise in the humanities. Rather, he saw work in these fields as the basis for creating a “transatlantic cultural community,” by cultivating closer relationships and fostering the possibility of cross-fertilization, among “non-commercial interests” in the US and Europe. With war looming at the end of the decade, his efforts took on an urgent and distinct internationalist quality in an attempt to foster an appreciation of diversity in Europe with projects in Switzerland and Germany.³

At the onset of World War II, since Marshall was unable to travel to Europe, Stevens suggested that he look into possibilities in Canada, which got him involved in what they called “regional” studies. They developed an interest in American language and cultural history: Marshall recounted in his oral history

that “we felt that the study of American culture might add something to what was already established. Culture was the term which in those days was coming to take on a highly specified meaning—that is, the anthropological meaning—and both Stevens and I were quite familiar with this more technical sense of the word.”⁴ A proposal from Montana State College meshed with their growing interest in regionalism and prompted them to establish a special fund for the initiative. Defining the notion of area studies, Marshall quoted from a memo dated January 1942 to the trustees of the foundation, “Regionalism in humanistic context implies good sources of artistic works, in words and materials that make men understand the nature and quality of their origins. This attachment to a particular background, through literature and art, has no relation to a nationalism or an Americanism. In fact, it may have much more to do with internationalism by making men of every race realize the special positions of individuals and groups by virtue of their regional origin.”⁵ The Foundation sponsored conferences on French Canada, the Canadian maritime provinces and New England, the Connecticut River Valley, the Great Plains (in response to the Montana proposal), and in 1944 a conference at Princeton University devoted to developing interdisciplinary studies of American civilization.⁶

With the end of the war, Marshall was able to resume his travels to Europe, and became involved in UNESCO as the Foundation’s observer at its meetings. A UNESCO meeting held in Beirut in 1948 brought about what he later said was a “turning point” in his career: “. . . after this visit to the Middle East, I realized how little of true psychological awareness one gains of other such areas till he has actually experienced them for himself. To sum up these more personal remarks, this trip, as will be seen, impressed me deeply with the importance of this physical and psychological experience of other sections of the world, for the work of officers of the Foundation. It is of perhaps special importance that they should be to a considerable degree world citizens in their outlook. In light of this experience, I somehow doubt that they will be able to achieve that point of view to a degree that makes it really operative in their thinking without travel of the kind that these visits afforded me.”⁷

While in Beirut he took the opportunity to acquaint himself with faculty members in the humanities at AUB. “I became particularly interested in its department of Arabic studies, which was almost entirely staffed by native Arabs, most of whom however had had their advanced graduate work in American or French universities.”⁸ Recognizing an opportunity to establish area studies in the Middle East, upon his return to New York he started a program of reading: “the history, the literature, the arts, music and anthropology of the area, with as much attention as I could give to its economics and sociology. I confess that I made no serious attempt to learn any of its major languages. No less a person than Sir Hamilton Gibb [the Oxford historian who founded the Harvard Middle East Center in 1955] had put my conscience to rest on that score. He said to me, ‘At your age you will never be able to learn Arabic really well. A practical aim for you would be to learn enough of it to be able to imagine what an original text was like when you read it as you should in translation’.”⁹

Two of the humanists Marshall met at AUB were Constantine Zurayk and Nabih Faris. Zurayk and Faris were both 1928 graduates of the university, both Christians, the former from Damascus and the latter from Nazareth, and both went on to the US for graduate studies where they received their doctorates in medieval Arab Islamic history under the guidance of Philip Hitti. Hitti, also an AUB alumnus, had received his PhD at Columbia, taught at AUB for a while, and then was hired by Princeton to set up a program in Near Eastern history. Zurayk returned to his alma mater in 1932 after completing his PhD in record time. As a young professor at AUB, he taught popular courses in Arab history and Islamic civilization and mentored generations of students in Arab nationalism—this was in the context of the French and British mandates imposed on Lebanon, Syria, Palestine, and Iraq after World War I. Although Zurayk actively published in his academic field, he was more well-known for his writings as a public intellectual rather than as a historian. In his collection of essays entitled *National Consciousness* (1939), he advocated nationalism as a means to achieve effective collective action. In the wake of the partition of Palestine and the establishment of the state of Israel in 1948, he published *The Meaning of the Disaster* in which

he called upon the intellectual elite of the Arab world to guide the Arabs to secular, scientific thought and its attendant moral values. By the time the Arab Studies Program was founded in 1949, Zurayk had achieved a formidable reputation as a public intellectual and he was appointed that year to serve as Rector of the Syrian University in Damascus, a position he held for two years, before returning to administrative work at AUB. Had he not gone to Damascus, no doubt he would have been the first director of the Arab Studies Program.

That role of director fell to Nabih Faris, whose career was quite different. Faris finished his PhD in 1935 and stayed on in Princeton to work, got married, and during World War II he worked in the Office of War Information in New York. It was not until after the end of the war that he joined his former classmate in the History department at AUB. Like Zurayk, Faris published scholarly works in his field and he also published articles on contemporary political affairs, although his latter writings could not compare in impact to Zurayk's. Nonetheless, both men were committed Arab nationalists who were resolutely liberal in their political outlook. Albert Hourani, the well-known Oxford University historian of the Middle East, later observed that Zurayk's *National Consciousness* was rooted in "Anglo-Saxon liberalism."¹⁰ Faris shared these values: "It is by freedom of thought only that the Arab lands can reach their goal: a free society, in a free world which contributes freely to history and creates a part of world civilization."¹¹ When John Marshall arrived in Beirut, Zurayk and Faris, among other colleagues at AUB, impressed him as like-minded and capable scholars who could build a program to study the region. Marshall introduced the possibility of an area studies program at AUB during his visit in 1948, although Zurayk and Faris would have been familiar with the concept since their mentor Hitti had founded, in 1947, the Near Eastern Studies MA program at Princeton.

The primary goal of the first ASP grant was to provide "interpretative studies of the modern Arab Middle East." The resolution added the comment: "It is possible that nowhere else exists a group of scholars better qualified to undertake a systematic interpretation of the thought and outlook of the modern Arab world.

To be sure, there is no member of the present faculty at the American University of Beirut with an established reputation comparable to that of Professor Philip K. Hitti at Princeton, H. A. R. Gibb at Oxford, or A. L. Massignon at the University of Paris. But for such work the group at Beirut has the evident advantages, first, of Arab origin and Western training; second, of actual location in the Arab world; and finally, of working as a group on the various aspects of this subject.”¹²

For some years before the ASP project, the ACLS had undertaken a Rockefeller-funded project to produce English translations of works in Arabic; however, in Marshall’s view, one shared by Zurayk, translation was inadequate. What was needed was “really new interpretative work by scholars native to the region.”¹³ At a conference in Princeton in 1951, in a talk entitled “The Near East as Viewed by American Education,” Marshall elaborated more fully on this view. He recognized that “the Near East is more alive, moves more, than is ordinarily portrayed in American education.” Marshall likened the American portrayal of the Near East to “a stalagmite,” with a tip that alters without change to the rest, an erroneous view that resulted, he argued, from American ignorance and neglect of the Middle East and a condescending attitude toward Near Eastern scholars and teachers. In Marshall’s view, these were people America needed.¹⁴ In his oral history, Marshall recalled that the faculty at AUB “were hard worked to offer the instruction in Arabic language, literature, and history which the students of the university demanded, and few of them had any time to devote themselves to research. With all of them fluent in English, they seemed to me to be ideally qualified to undertake studies which could appear in English and which would explain the life, thought and the recent history of the Arab world to the non-Arabs.”¹⁵

Publications of the Arab Studies faculty members sought to achieve the goal of interpretation. Nabih Faris co-authored with his colleague Mohammed Tawfik Husayn *The Crescent in Crisis: An Interpretive Study of the Modern Arab World*, described in the introduction as an “attempt at self-examination and self-criticism, and the first comprehensive interpretation of the living Arabs.”¹⁶ Their

colleague Ishak Musa Husaini published *The Moslem Brethren: The Greatest of Modern Islamic Movements*, which sought, as stated in the introduction to the second edition of 1955, to provide “a purely scientific historical survey of the movement from its birth to the present day.” Husaini recognized that the subject related to a broader question: “How to acquire the elements of modern civilization without losing sight of religious principles?” To which he, in part, answered that “freedom of thought is the torch lighting people upon their course; without it no nation can come out of darkness nor see its way to good, truth, and progress.”¹⁷ After reading the book, Marshall wrote to Husaini: “I must take this occasion to say with what pleasure and profit I read in Beirut the English translation of your book on the Muslem [sic] Brotherhood. It struck me as a model for studies of that kind. This is just the sort of thing we need: a really authentic presentation of phenomena in Islam by Muslem [sic] scholars able to tell us what is really what. But more of this when we meet.”¹⁸

In a letter to Nabih Faris, Marshall commented that the real aim of the program should be “to lift the language curtain”—that is, to enable the interpretation of the region to the West.¹⁹ Faris shared this goal. In a review of book called *Muhammad’s People*, he complimented the author, stating that “The language curtain which has hitherto hid Arab life from non-Arabic-speaking people has been in part raised.”²⁰ However, Faris and his colleagues were also determined to engage their compatriots about the region. Both *The Crescent in Crisis* and *The Moslem Brethren* were first published in Arabic and thus their primary readership was in the Arab world, presenting a message of freedom of thought together with an exercise in self-examination and self-criticism. The ASP’s view of its mission is clearly manifest in their annual conferences. Well before the days of mandated outreach programs in area studies programs, the ASP hosted annual forums for public discussion on the region. Starting in 1951 and lasting until 1967, the ASP held fourteen conferences (annually for the first ten years, when the program received Rockefeller Foundation funds) on various topics, some academic, but most of immediate relevance to the general public. These were conducted in Arabic and were published in Arabic, something no area

studies program in the West could do. Speakers included AUB faculty members and other academics, but most were intellectuals from the Arab world.

The topics ranged from academic to policy-oriented topics, although they were clearly directed towards guiding public debate in Lebanon and in the Arab world. The Arab Studies conferences received considerable attention in the press. For example, for the years running through 1959, every conference was covered by the major Lebanese dailies, reflecting considerable public interest in especially those topics that dealt with issues of modernization and Arab society and culture. A headline covering the initial address of Ahmad Zaki, the director of Egypt's National Council for Research, expressed the prevailing values of the program: "Science, Democracy, Equality Defended by the Arabs."²¹ The 1955 visit of Taha Hussein, the Cairo University professor known across the Arab world as "The Dean of Arabic literature" and Egyptian Minister of Education, for the conference on the role of the university received front-page attention. The venue was moved from the lecture room in West Hall to the more capacious Assembly Hall, where loudspeakers were set up outside to accommodate the overflowing crowds.²²

It is important to emphasize that many in the crowds were students—young people who were passionately interested in Arab affairs but not in Arab studies. This lack of academic interest was an abiding concern to Zurayk and Faris. Zurayk expressed this concern in a letter to Faris: "Another point that has to be clarified is whether our program is to be directed primarily at students from this area or at those who come from outside. To me, the former group is the more important and the development in them of strict scientific discipline and love of research is one of the primary needs of our part of [the] world. To these the area concept is not as important as to the foreign students."²³ In the mid-1950s, the number of local students in the ASP slowly increased, but they never formed the majority. In fact, up through the sixties, many of the students were not only foreign, but members of the US military, who received graduate training as area experts. This came as a surprise to Charles Burton Fahs, the director of the Humanities Division, who visited in May, 1953, pointing out that "the graduate

tuition appears to be 750 Lebanese pounds a year, well below the cost to the University, so that the University is, in effect, subsidizing the U.S. Army, which sends students from Monterey here, the Ford Foundation, etc., or wants to.”²⁴

In spite of the continued funding for the program, even as late as March 1960, Fahs expressed surprise when he learned that university administrators at AUB thought the Foundation wanted to train Americans.²⁵ Although Zurayk and Faris were concerned with the meager interest of Arab students in Arab studies, it would seem that they saw the enrollment of military and diplomatic personnel as an opportunity to have an affect on US foreign policy. As for the political climate on campus, the 1950s was marked by the growth of the Arab Nationalists’ Movement, which led to the formation of various Palestinian liberation movements. The political formation of activists like AUB alums George Habash and Wadi‘ Haddad has been associated with Zurayk, but it may well be that the students came to believe that the liberal nationalism advocated by their professors would lead them nowhere.²⁶

Nabih Faris wrote in his introduction to the first volume of conference lectures that the goal of the Arab Studies Group in sponsoring these events was to fulfill their duty to study “the political, economic, social, and intellectual difficulties” facing the Arab World and to discuss solutions “scientifically in an atmosphere pure of political traditions.” In brief, Arab Studies at the University addressed the region’s needs as Arab intellectuals saw fit, guided by the principles of secularism, liberalism, and Arab nationalism. In *Crescent in Crisis*, Faris and Husayn defined the challenge the Arab world faced: “the problem of liberating most of its countries from foreign rule and domination, or delivering Palestine from Zionism, and of achieving economic, social, and intellectual progress throughout its lands. . . . This can only be achieved by a people educated to realize itself, its problems, and the way for their solution. And between those in power, who strive to keep the Arab public illiterate and ignorant, and enlightened patriots, who labor to lead the people to liberty, light, and happiness, is a constant and fateful struggle.”²⁷

While John Marshall looked to a future in which cultural barriers would fall away to allow the nurturing of “world citizens,” expanding his vision of a transatlantic community to include also the Middle East, Nabih Faris and his colleagues sought to cultivate locally “enlightened patriots,” who would reconcile their traditions and customs with modernity, but on their own terms. Notwithstanding their shared vision, on the AUB side, Faris and his colleagues recognized that the ASP was uniquely positioned to have an impact on US foreign policy as well as Arab public opinion. They used the program to address the needs of a region that was struggling with the process of decolonization. While Marshall and Faris agreed on the liberal values that citizen and patriot should hold dear, they never did see eye-to-eye on the issue of Israel. This difference, however, did not prevent the growth of their friendship.

Given that influential scholarship on the foundations and area studies (e.g., for the former, Robert Arnove, Edward Berman, Inderjeet Parmar; for the latter, Zachary Lockman, Edward Said, David Szanton, Judith Tucker) has focused on their hegemonic character, particularly in the context of the Cold War and decolonization, I hope this case study will add some nuance to that perspective. The Rockefeller Foundation wanted the Arab Studies Program to provide an indigenous interpretation of the region to the West and they also hoped that the program would train local students. The ASP faculty members, working at cross-purposes to the Foundation’s goals, invested their effort in forging public dialogue about local concerns across the Arab world but were unable to attract regional students who were determined to pursue their own intellectual and political agendas. However, in spite of their inability to attract students, the ASP seems to have subverted, at least for a while, these hegemonic tools and employed them to promote a platform for their own intellectual and political agenda. To be sure, from its inception in 1949 until the 1960s, the Arab Studies Program promoted Arab nationalism and was remarkably active in pursuing an agenda to engage the Arab public in the great political issues of the day. At AUB, Area Studies as part of Arab world was seen as a means to achieve anti-imperialist, nationalist goals of social change and development.

¹ Zachary Lockman, *Contending Visions of the Middle East: The History and Politics of Orientalism* (2nd ed.), (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), p. 123; for the pre-WWII roots of this phenomenon and the social sciences, see Timothy Mitchell, "The Middle East in the Past and Future of Social Science," in *The Politics of Knowledge: Area Studies and the Disciplines*, ed. David Szanton (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), esp. p. 76.

² Georgetown University's Center for Contemporary Arab Studies was founded in 1975. McGill University's Institute for Islamic Studies was founded in 1953. Other programs in the Anglophone West were or are identified as Near or Middle Eastern, the subjects of which were all east of all those people doing Middle East studies.

³ William J. Buxton, "John Marshall and the Humanities in Europe: Shifting Patterns of Rockefeller Foundation Support," *Minerva* 41:2 (2003): 133-153, quotes from 147 and 149.

⁴ John Marshall, oral history, RG11.13, Box 1A, folder 4, p. 250, Rockefeller Foundation records, Rockefeller Archive Center.

⁵ John Marshall, oral history, RG11.13, Box 1A, folder 4, p. 268, Rockefeller Foundation records, Rockefeller Archive Center.

⁶ John Marshall, oral history, RG11.13, Box 1A, folder 4, pp. 268-73, Rockefeller Foundation records, Rockefeller Archive Center.

⁷ John Marshall, oral history, RG11.13, Box 1A, folder 7, p. 519, Rockefeller Foundation records, Rockefeller Archive Center.

⁸ John Marshall, oral history, RG11.13, Box 1A, folder 4, p. 248, Rockefeller Foundation records, Rockefeller Archive Center.

⁹ John Marshall, oral history, RG11.13, Box 1A, folder 8, pp. 600-01, Rockefeller Foundation records, Rockefeller Archive Center.

¹⁰ Albert Hourani, *Arabic Thought in the Liberal Age, 1798-1939* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 311.

¹¹ Nabih Faris, preface to *al-Adab al-'Arabi fi Athar al-Darisin* (Beirut: Dar al-'Ilm lil-Malayin, 1961), unnumbered second page.

¹² Resolution for award RF 49071, May 20, 1949, Folder 50, Box 7, Series 833, RG1.1, Rockefeller Foundation records, Rockefeller Archive Center.

¹³ John Marshall, diary of trip to Near East, March 2 and April 22, 1950, RG 2, 1947-1951, Subseries 1950/804R, Rockefeller Foundation records, Rockefeller Archive Center.

¹⁴ John Marshall, "The Near East as Viewed by American Education," Folder 3415, Box 510, Series 100, RG2-1951, Rockefeller Foundation records, Rockefeller Archive Center.

¹⁵ John Marshall, oral history, RG11.13, Box 1A, folder 4, p. 248, Rockefeller Foundation records, Rockefeller Archive Center.

¹⁶ Faris, preface to *The Crescent in Crisis* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 1955).

¹⁷ Ishak Musa Husaini, *The Moslem Brethren* (Beirut: Khayat's, 1956), pp. v, vii.

¹⁸ Marshall to Husaini, May 1, 1953, Folder 53, Box 7, Series 833, RG 1.1, Rockefeller Foundation records, Rockefeller Archive Center.

¹⁹ Marshall to Faris, May 7, 1954, Folder 54, Box 8, Series 833, RG 1.1, Rockefeller Foundation records, Rockefeller Archive Center.

²⁰ Nabih Faris, Review of Eric Schroder, *Muhammad's People* (Portland, Maine: Wheelwright, 1955), in the AUB magazine, *al-Kulliyah* (1955): 34-35.

²¹ *Al-Hayat* (Beirut), May 9, 1951, p. 4.

²² *Al-Hayat* (Beirut), April, 27, 1955, p. 1; Jabbur, *Min Ayyam al-'Umr* (Beirut: Jami'iyat Asdiqa' al-Katib wa-al-Kitab, 1991), 189.

²³ Zurayk to Faris, November 23, 1953, AUB Archives: AA:2.5.03 (6-7), Personnel Department, 1924-2005, Box 7, File 4.

²⁴ Excerpts from Charles Burton Fahs diary, May 31, June 1, 1953, Folder 53, Box 7, Series 833, RG 1.1, Rockefeller Foundation records, Rockefeller Archive Center.

²⁵ Fahs to Leonard, March 3, 1960, Folder 57, Box 8, Series 833, RG 1.1, Rockefeller Foundation records, Rockefeller Archive Center.

²⁶ Walid Kazzuha, *Revolutionary Transformation in the Arab World: Habash and his Comrades from Nationalism to Marxism* (London: Charles Knight and Co., 1975), 11.

²⁷ Faris and Husayn, *The Crescent in Crisis*, p. 174.