Azoury: A Further Episode

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Negib Azoury figures in nearly every account of nascent Arab nationalism and its attendant Turcophobia. The literary role of this Syrian Catholic in the spread of the Arab separatist idea is a famous one, and we now possess an illuminating account of his political activities.¹ These most often culminated in attempts to draw European powers into financial and logistical support for an Arab uprising against Ottoman authority, and to this end Azoury periodically wrote proposals for the consideration of the French government.

Among the several visionary schemes which Azoury put before French authorities, one comes to us only by allusion. Sometime in the spring of 1907, Azoury had ‘sollicité une mission de notre gouvernement’ — so wrote Chavandier de Valdrôme, French chargé d’affaires in Cairo, on 29 January 1908. In this communication, de Valdrôme referred his superiors to his fuller discussion of the proposed mission in an earlier dispatch of May 1907. But the documentary trail seemed to end here, for that earlier dispatch was missing from the relevant file in the Archives du Ministère des Affaires Étrangères in Paris. The nature of the solicited mission could not be ascertained.²

Fortunately, the original draft of the missing dispatch does survive, and so does a copy of a letter from Azoury to French foreign minister Stéphane Pichon, in which Azoury originally solicited the mission. Both are preserved in a file on Azoury in the diplomatic archives of the French Embassy in Giza, Cairo. These and other documents still held by the embassy shed further light on Azoury’s attempts to land a moneyed sponsor for his political activities and writings.

I

April 1907 found Azoury in Paris, preparing for the first publication of his monthly l’Indépendance arabe, and perhaps engaged as a correspondent for one or more Egyptian newspapers. These pursuits could not absorb his talents. On 4 April 1907, he addressed a letter to Foreign Minister Pichon, offering to place himself at the service of the French Republic.³ North Africa, Azoury warned M. Pichon, was gripped by a ‘fanatic and xenophobic agitation’, the work of pan-Islamic committees organized from Constantinople and Cairo. Azoury, who understood the workings of these committees, would disentangle the web for M. Pichon, if only the French government would provide him with the means for a voyage d’étude to North Africa. ‘On my return, I could present to Your Excellency a memorandum concerning pan-Islamic propaganda, and the means to combat and destroy its effects’.

But Azoury offered to perform more than reconnaissance on behalf of France. The Government of the Republic, Azoury advised, was mishandling its religious protectorate over the Catholics of the Levant. The administration of this protectorate was ‘incompatible with French institutions and with the
progress of ideas even in the Orient', for it had been promoted exclusively
through the sometimes egotistical and narrow medium of the clergy. ‘But if
Your Excellency would honor me with your high confidence, I could help you
gradually to replace the purely religious system now in force with a more
advantageous civil system, one that could extend morally to non-Catholic
Christians and even to Muslims’. The details of Azoury’s proposed
‘laicisation’ of the protectorate would appear as a special chapter in his report
on pan-Islamic propaganda.

Although eager to see service as an agent and consultant, Azoury was
primarily a publicist. ‘Our national committee has entrusted me with the
publication of a monthly review in Paris’, Azoury wrote in conclusion.
Unfortunately, funds for this purpose were short, and so he begged that the
French government, ‘in line with its traditional generosity’, provide a
subvention to aid in publication. The review was none other than the famous
l’Indépendance arabe, which first appeared later that month.

So concluded the solicitation. Remarkable in all this is the omission of any
plea for money to raise an Arab revolt against Ottoman authority in Syria, the
sort of proposal which figured so prominently in Azoury’s earlier and later
appeals to France. Why did Azoury omit this customary call to arms? Perhaps
he had decided to gain French confidence with proposals less fantastic and
costly than the financing of revolt. There were problems closer to French
hearts; he would first prove himself indispensable by addressing them. His
offer to set out for North Africa in order to crack a vague conspiracy against
French interests was just such an enticement. Azoury, it must be remembered,
did not include North Africa and Egypt in his visionary Arab empire, which
was to extend ‘from the Tigris and Euphrates to the Isthmus of Suez, and from
the Mediterranean to the Sea of Oman’. The seemingly arbitrary exclusion of
other Arabic-speaking peoples from his plans was intended to assure him the
favor of the French and British authorities which ruled them, a compromise of
the linguistic principle of nationality which his critics were quick to cite with
malice.

In any case, he had no apparent business of his own in the Maghrib,
and his unexpected claim to North African expertise was almost certainly
intended to magnify his importance at the Quai d’Orsay, where North
African interests loomed large.

What of Azoury’s criticism of the Maronite clergy? In his published work,
Azoury unequivocally defended the intermediary role of Maronite clerics, and
faulted the French for failing to respect that role. In his Réveil de la nation
arabe, Azoury accused the French of spreading anti-clerical propaganda in
Jerusalem and the Lebanon, and disapprovingly cited several French insults
to Maronite ecclesiastics. Such free thinking anti-clericalism, wrote Azoury,
was not yet widespread even in civilized and enlightened France; how then
could the French hope to transplant it in a land ‘like the Orient’? In this light,
Azoury’s position in his letter to Pichon represented a volte-face. Azoury
evidently recognized the desire of the French to extend their protectorate
beyond the narrow confines of the Maronite community to a wider
constituency. Nor could he ignore the current of French anti-clericalism and
the growing clamour in France for ‘separation’ — of Church and State.
Azoury would accommodate these concerns. Perhaps he then cast himself in
the new role of civil intermediary in this laicised protectorate. Whatever his logic, his stratagem was clear: by exciting French fears over North Africa, and French ambitions toward the Levant, Azoury would secure the attention — and perhaps the 'traditional generosity' — of the French Republic.

II

These proposals were of sufficient interest to warrant an inquiry into Azoury's activities by the French foreign ministry. On 8 April 1907, the ministry enclosed a copy of Azoury's letter in a dispatch to de Valdrôme in Cairo, and asked for the chargé's reflections on Azoury's proposals. De Valdrôme, in turn, sought the impressions of F. Wiet who, as French consul-general in Jerusalem before Azoury's flight from Palestine to Egypt, perhaps knew something of Azoury's character. In an informal handwritten note, Wiet declared Azoury to be 'unintelligent' and a man of 'dubious morality' who, as "élève gouverneur" in Jerusalem, had counted for nothing. 'He went each day to the serail, wandered through the offices, and went home without having done anything but drag on cigarettes and sip small cups of coffee'. After describing Azoury's 'violent hatred' of the past mutasarrif of Jerusalem, Wiet concluded that Azoury was 'the kind of man who takes sides out of spite, without knowing the motives of his attitude. In sum, he is a bluffer and, I believe, broke'.

De Valdrôme was nevertheless reluctant to word his dispatch in the blunt terms employed by Wiet. His reply to the foreign ministry of 6 May 1907, and several other documents, address the question of Azoury's influence in careful terms. None offers any conclusive proof for the existence of an Arab comité national or a Ligue de la patrie arabe which Azoury invariably claimed to represent, but it seems that he was not without acquaintances who shared his convictions and prejudices. When Azoury was in Cairo, wrote de Valdrôme, he mixed with numerous Syrians on the editorial boards of indigenous newspapers, and among them he was said to enjoy a limited but appreciable influence [sic]. He pretended to have obtained adherents and they had promised him articles for his review. Mere illusions, opined de Valdrôme: 'The same persons whom he pretends to have won to his cause frequent the salon, or more often the dining room, of the Baron Oppenheim. Orientals are furthermore very suspicious, and there are those among them who ascribe to [Azoury's] propaganda the character of pure and simple blackmail against the Sultan'.

By 1910, however, Azoury could be linked to an identifiable political salon hostile to Ottoman aims: the Grand Loge Nationale d'Égypte, led by Idris Bey Raghib. He was proprietor of l'Égypte, a newspaper for which Azoury had acted as a correspondent. In some measure, the lodge was simply one more front for the circle which formed the obscure 'Young Egyptian' party. Idris Bey was president of that party, and Azoury was its 'Foreign Secretary'. But it was in a masonic guise that this same group sought to reach beyond Egypt. According to Sir Gerard Lowther, then British ambassador in Constantinople, Idris Bey 'was the founder of, and held supremacy over, a number of lodges in Egypt, Syria, Palestine, and the Lebanon, in which the
The curious phenomenon of large numbers of Roman Catholic Masons is to be met with,\(^1\) and as late as the 1920s, a number of Syrian and Lebanese lodges remained directly affiliated with the Grand Loge Nationale d'Égypte.\(^2\) The Egyptian lodge was also reputed to be a center of anti-Ottoman intrigue. Prince 'Aziz Hasan, who had split with his cousin the Khedive 'Abbas Hilmi II to cast his lot with the Young Turks, attacked the lodge in these words:

There is nothing personal between Idris and myself but, as everyone knows, the Grand Loge Nationale d'Égypte is most misused. Idris, who himself is innocent, is surrounded by brigands whom we cannot recognize as brethren. On their supreme council sits Neguib Azoury, who was condemned to death by freemasonry. Also on this council is the tyrant Izzet el Abed, who is detested from Basrah to Bosnia. All of you also know that Azoury and Izzet El Abed are working assiduously to topple the Young Turk empire, by stirring up Turks against Arabs and Arabs against Turks. How can you then wish that I, an Ottoman, consider these renegades as brethren?\(^3\)

Azoury’s possible link with ‘Izzat al-'Abid is of particular interest. ‘Izzat, a wealthy Damascene Arab, had served the Sultan Abdulhamit as a second secretary for some thirteen years.\(^4\) It was ‘Izzat al-'Abid who directed the construction of the Hijaz railway, and presumably for such acts against the Arab nation, Azoury once denounced ‘Izzat (and Abu al-Huda al-Sayyadi) as ‘plain and vulgar spies, themselves spied upon by the Tartars and Circassians who surround Abdul-Hamid'.\(^5\) But beneath the breast of the Hamidian servant, there beat an Arab heart, or so maintained Muhammad Kurd Ali: ‘Perhaps no other Arab among those who participated in government was so resented by the Turks ... I was told by one who mixed with him a great deal that [‘Izzat’s] love of nation (hubb gawmiyatih) was readily apparent, and he would avow his nationalism before those Turks most ardent in singing the praises of their own nationalism'.\(^6\) This was confirmed, after a fashion, by a British report, which related that the court Turks referred to him contemptuously as ‘Arab Izzet'.\(^7\)

With the deposition of Abdulhamit and the restoration of the constitution, ‘Izzat al-'Abid fled Istanbul, made a rough transition to Arabism, and so kept alive his political prospects. This he appears to have done by handing out favors, for he reputedly had put a great deal of money in European banks during his Istanbul tenure. Thus, in seeking to represent Damascus as elected representative to the reconstituted Ottoman parliament in 1908, ‘Izzat made an offer to Muhammad Kurd Ali and the intellectual circle around the Arab Academy. The would-be candidate proposed to construct two schools and two hospitals in the Maydan quarter of Damascus, and to send five Syrian youths for higher education in the West, in exchange for political support.\(^8\) This deal appears to have fallen through, and we soon find ‘Izzat in Cairo where, allegedly for the sum of 150 pounds, he was initiated into Idris Bey Raghib’s Grand Loge Nationale d'Égypte, to which Azoury was then secretary.\(^9\)

While in Cairo, ‘Izzat also appears to have endorsed the ambitions of the Khedive ‘Abbas Hilmi II. This was effected principally through Shaykh Ali
Yusuf, whom 'Izzat al-'Abid had known even before the latter’s rise to prominence. Once exiled, ‘Izzat became a minor shareholder in Ali Yusuf’s newspaper al-Mu’ayyad, virtually a Khedivial organ, and Shaykh Ali was forced to deny rumours that ‘Izzat had bought out the paper.20 On occasion, ‘Izzat passed advice to the Khedive through both Ahmad Shafiq and Shaykh Ali Yusuf,21 and a French agent reported that ‘Izzat and the Khedive even agreed to undertake ‘a campaign to detach Egypt and Arabia from Turkey, and create an Arab empire or caliphate, independent of the Porte’.22 Louis Sabunji, late in life a secretary to the Sultan Abdulhamit, also told Wilfrid Scawen Blunt ‘that there was an intrigue between Izzet Pasha and the Khedive Abbas for getting Abbas acknowledged Caliph, and that the English Government favoured it, intending to use the Khedive as a first step towards an Arabian Caliphate under English protectorate. This, of course, is the old idea which he (Sabunji) with many others, held in 1881, as shown in my ‘Future of Islam’.23 Allegedly linked to this effort was an organization called al-ittihad al-'arabi, of which ‘Izzat was said to be president. The group’s flag — a ‘Turkish’ banner emblazoned in green with the words al-ittihad al-'arabi — was seen by an informant in French employ at the home of a certain Muhammad ‘Urfi Pasha.24 Now ‘Urfi Pasha was an informant in the Khedive’s service, in which capacity he seems to have dealt in particular with manifestations of Arab separatism. It was ‘Urfi Pasha who, with transparent excitement, reported to the Khedive the initial appearance and content of Kawakibi’s Umm al-qura, and later provided the Khedive with a copy of the rare book.25 That Azoury found a niche in Cairo among like souls amounts almost to a certainty. Nor can there be much doubt that this salon answered directly or circuitously to the Khedive. One cannot say whether Idris Bey’s masonic lodges or al-ittihad al-'arabi constituted Azoury’s comité national. That he represented or imagined them to be his, seems not far fetched.

De Valdrome knew nothing of this circle, then perhaps still in gestation, but to him, Azoury’s Christianity represented an abiding constraint and, try as Azoury might, he could not conceal the blemish. De Valdrome knew that Azoury had tried to indoctrinate several ‘intellectuals of Islam’ who had fled the Turks in Syria to find refuge in Egypt. And Azoury had worked to broaden his appeal through his book, a work ‘without any documentary value and, I might add, without sincerity, as he told me himself that he introduced certain developments only to gain the confidence of Muslims. But the confidence of Muslims is not gained so easily’, de Valdrome concluded, adding that only with difficulty would Azoury persuade all those who knew the Orient that a Christian could exercise any political influence over the Arabs.26 Furthermore, de Valdrome had it personally from Azoury that Le Réveil was a misleading account. ‘More than once, [Azoury] has told me that his book is a tableau idéal which he hopes to realize, more than a real description of an existing situation, and in this regard, he laments the slight echo which his writings have found in the Muslim world’.27

III

Azoury’s various shortcomings were therefore apparent to the French
representative in Cairo, and de Valdrôme’s view of Azoury’s proposed mission was correspondingly skeptical. The North African voyage was, ‘in our opinion, rather dangerous’, and might compromise France. As a Christian, Azoury would wield no influence over the Muslims of North Africa, and was himself too well known to pass for a Muslim.

But support for Azoury’s review was another matter. While Paris awaited de Valdrôme’s reply, the first issue of *l’Indépendance arabe* went to press, apparently without a French subsidy, and was assessed critically by the foreign ministry’s press service. On the one hand, noted the service, the Arab nationalist aspirations advanced in the review might provoke a movement of opinion within North Africa hostile to French domination. Then again, Azoury’s journal might deflate spreading ‘neo-Turc’ tendencies in North Africa, and ‘slightly attenuate the ill effects of Turkish pan-Islamic propaganda directed by the Arabic press against ourselves and the English’. Yet again, *l’Indépendance arabe* might meet with no response at all: ‘Unfortunately M. Azoury, who is a Christian, will be suspect in Muslim circles. Furthermore his review, which appears in French, will have only a very limited number of Muslim readers’. Presented with these considerations, de Valdrôme was again pressed for his opinion on a possible subvention.28

And at this point, de Valdrôme detected some merit in Azoury after all. ‘M. Azouri frequents the foreign legations rather more often than our own. He keeps no secrets and seems to be informed, and I must say that through him I have been able to obtain rather useful indicators on the intrigues of our rivals’. The principal rival was Great Britain, then suspect in French diplomatic circles for harbouring ambitions toward the traditional French preserve of Syria:29 de Valdrôme reported that Azoury was susceptible to British influence, and was allegedly a recipient of British largesse. According to another source, the Anglo-Turkish confrontation over the Sinai in 1906 led the Intelligence Office to attach Azoury to Admiral Lampson, as chief interpreter for British naval forces concentrated at Port Said and Suez.30 De Valdrôme wrote that he wished to see Azoury’s relations with France prevail, and thought ‘to prevent his collaboration with our rivals’.31 ‘Encouragements’ given to Azoury’s review might render an important service: ‘We could, it seems to me, assure ourselves of his information without danger, and verify its value’.32

On this intriguing note, de Valdrôme closed his recommendations. Was *l’Indépendance arabe* finally sustained by French money? On this question, the Cairo dossiers are silent.

NOTES

3. Archives diplomatiques, l’ambassade de France au Cairo [hereafter: AFC], carton 74, file 14/1, Azoury (Paris) to Pichon, 4 April 1907.
4. Egypt he excluded 'because the Egyptians do not belong to the Arab race; they are of the African Berber family, and the language which they spoke before Islam bore no resemblance to Arabic'. Negib Azoury, Le Réveil de la nation arabe (Paris 1905), 245-6.

5. 'Why does the illustrious revolutionary not travel to several other countries — Egypt, Algeria, Morocco, etc. — where the Arabic language is spoken, in order to preach the general uprising of the Arab nation and race against their respective governments?' Farid Kassab, Le nouvel empire arabe: la Curie Romaine et le prétexte du péril juif universel: Réponse à M. N. Azoury bey (Paris 1906), 29.


7. AFC, carton 74, file 14/1, Ministry to de Valdrôme, 8 April 1907.

8. Ibid., F. Wit (Beirut) to 'mon cher ami' [de Valdrôme?], 1 May 1907.

9. Ibid., de Valdrôme's draft dispatch of 6 May 1907.


13. AFC, carton 65, file 12/5, an unsigned report of an informant present at a session of the rival Grand Orient Ottoman, dated 6 December 1910.


15. From the text of a proclamation by the 'Higher Committee' of the Ligue de la patrie arabe, published by Eugène Jung, Les puissances, 27.


17. FO371/345, Annual Report for Turkey for the year 1906, enclosure in G. Barclay's no. 43, 18 January 1907. He was also ostracized, if one is to believe Walial-Din Yegen, al-Ma'lum wa'1-majhul. I (Cairo 1909), 177-82.


19. Louis Cheikho, al-Sirral-masunfi'shat al-farmasun, pamphlet 6 (Beirut 1911), 38-9. Father Cheikho cites at length an extract from the newspaper al-Thabat, issue 758, which relates that one consequence of 'Izzat al-'Abid's initiation was the publication by Yusuf Sakakini, representative in Egypt of the rival Grand Orient Ottoman, of a leaflet (manshur) against Idris Bey and Azoury. Idris and Azoury then complained about Sakakini to the French consular courts. For a contemporary attack upon Idris Bey and his lodge, see Yusuf Sakakini Bey, Rapport concernant l'irrégularité de la Gr."L" et d'Égypte ([Istanbul?] June 1910). This pamphlet, however, mentions neither Azoury nor 'Izzat al-'Abid. Sakakini denied responsibility for a more scurrilous and apparently unsigned attack on Idris and Azoury, instead blaming Prince 'Aziz Hasan. Sakakini was nonetheless convicted of libel by a French consular court. See Sakakini (Cibuلك) to Khedive 'Abbas Hilmi, 12 June 1911, in the Abbas Hilmi Papers, Durham University Library [hereafter: AHP], 70: 145.

24. See the item cited in note 22. Identical to the Mahomed Orfi Pasha mentioned in Lowther's dispatch (see note 11 above) as 'the founder of some lodges in Egypt, Jerusalem, and Southern Syria'.

25. For his first report on the appearance of the book, see Muhammad ‘Urfi to Khedive ‘Abbas Hilmi, 4 October 1900, in AHP, 32: 7. In a subsequent undated letter, which obviously accompanied a copy of the book, he summarized Umm al-qura’s contents. See AHP, 32: 72–3. ‘Urfi, in reporting an encounter with Kawakibi, knew to identify him as ‘one of the authors of Umm al-qura’, in a letter to the Khedive of 11 March 1901, AHP, 32: 38, 41. The first two of these letters give every indication that ‘Urfi, like many of his contemporaries, thought the Society of Umm al-qura to be genuine. He continued to work as an informant for the Khedive in later years, although his field of operations became Paris. The Egyptian nationalist Muhammad Farid described ‘Urfi as ‘one of the servants of the Khedive who spies for him. He makes his living by gambling on behalf of wealthy Egyptian players, for which he receives a salary’. Muhammad Farid, Awraq Muhammad Farid, II: Mudhakkirati ba’da al-hijra (1904–1919) (Cairo 1978), 112.

26. The first draft spoke of influence over the Muslims.

27. AFC, carton 74, file 14/1, de Valdrôme’s draft dispatch of 6 May 1907.

28. Ibid., press service inquiry to de Valdrôme, 1 May 1907.


30. AFC, carton 74, file 14/1, Ministry Chief of Protocol’s no. 37 to de Valdrôme, 4 September 1908. The letter asks de Valdrôme’s opinion of Azoury’s nomination, by a certain Senator Pauliat, for the Croix de Chevalier de la Légion d’Honneur. De Valdrôme’s reply is not in the file. Azoury’s French publicist does much to glorify Azoury’s role in the Anglo-Ottoman crisis of 1906. See Eugène Jung, La révolte arabe (Paris 1924), I, 17.

31. A phrase deleted from the final draft.

32. AFC, carton 74, file 14/1, de Valdrôme’s draft dispatch of 6 May 1907.