RESEARCH CENTRE FOR ISLAMIC HISTORY, ART AND CULTURE
IRCICA

International Congress

on

LEARNING AND EDUCATION
IN THE OTTOMAN WORLD

Istanbul, 12-15 April 1999

Edited by
Ali Çaksu

Preface by
Ekmeleddin İhsanoğlu

Istanbul, 2001

FRAGMENTED LOYALTIES IN THE MODERN AGE:
JAMIL SIDQI AL-ZAHAWI ON WAHHABISM,
CONSTITUTIONALISM AND LANGUAGE

Dina Rizk Khoury

In 1896, Jamil Sidqi Efendi al-Zahawizadeh, a Baghdadi scholar, Ottoman provincial administrator, poet, philosopher, and social Darwinist published an article in the Egyptian journal *al-Muqtataf* calling for the adoption of a new Arabic script that can accommodate Turkish and Kurdish phonetic sounds. Never one to be deterred by the enormity of any task, al-Zahawi proceeded to create the new script concluding his *tour de force* with a call for its adoption.[1] Al-Zahawi's call was perhaps an early and extreme example of the enthusiasm with which a sector of the provincial Ottoman educated elites embraced "modernity" as they had assimilated it through the Arabic and Turkish renditions of the works of European philologists, scientists, and literary figures.[2] His work called for the creation of a new script mirrored, or perhaps preceded, the call of some Istanbulian reformers such as Hüseyin Cahit and Abdullah Cevdet for the Ottoman government to adopt the Latin alphabet.[3] It should be seen in the context of the call for language reform in Istanbul and in Egypt and is not incongruent with al-Zahawi's politics and intellectual commitments.

However, in 1905, al-Zahawi wrote a polemical tract defending sufi practices against the attack of the Wahhabis and upholding Abdülhamid's support of such practices.[4] This stand would not have presented us with a conundrum had al-Zahawi been one of the many ulama who were undertaking the preservation of sufi practices against the onslaught of the *salafis*, so well documented by David Commins for Damascus.[5] Al-Zahawi's political and intellectual persuasions seemed diametrically opposed to the views he expressed in what amounted to a piece of propaganda. He, by his own reckoning, was one of the earliest active supporters of the Committee of Union and Progress (İttihad ve Terakki). He angered Abdülhamid, who had appointed him to a number of

---

[1] Jamil Sidqi al-Zahawi, "al-Khatt al-jadid", in Abdul Hamid al-Rushudi, ed., *al-Zahawi: Dirasat wa Nusus*, (Beirut: Dar al-Hayat Press, 1966), pp. 69-90.

[2] On the influences of such works see al-Zahawi, "Rasa'il al-Zahawi", in al-Rushudi, *al-Zahawi*, pp. 25-45.

[3] Erik Zurcher, Turkey, *A Modern History*, (London: I.B. Tauris, 1997), p. 197.

[4] Jamil Sidqi al-Zahawi, *al-Fajr al-sadiq fi al-radd 'ala munkiri al-tawasul wa al-karamat wa al-khawariq*, (Istanbul: İhlas Vakfi, 1990), pp. 1-75.

[5] David Commins, *Islamic Reform: Politics and Social Change in Late Ottoman Syria*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990).

provincial posts, by reciting a poem in al-Sayyadi's salon attacking the Sultan's despotism. He had been and early convert to social Darwinism with its decidedly secular views, and was among the first to read Tawfiq Zaghlul's translation of Gustav Le Bon's work. His defense of what modernists viewed as "archaic, backward, and obscurantist religious practices", was quite puzzling.[6]

How can one reconcile these two al-Zahawis? My first inclination was to dismiss al-Zahawi's *volte face* as political opportunism. The 1902-1908 period was marked by the retrenchment of many Constitutionalists who either succumbed to the overtures of Abdülhamid or practiced dissimulation.[7] In Baghdad, even the long time *salafi* activist Shukri al-Alusi wrote a tract on Rifa'iyya rituals and doctrines that was adopted as the text for the Rifa'iyya schools in Baghdad. Later his *salafi* students felt compelled to say that al-Alusi was practicing *taqiyya* (a Shiite notion of dissimulation) to protect himself.[8] Al-Zahawi's stance may have been informed by this retreat on the part of the Constitutionalists and detractors of the regime in Istanbul. Furthermore, the tract was written in the midst of unsuccessful expeditions by the governor of Baghdad against the forces of Abdul al-Aziz bin Saud who had conquered Najd and expelled Ibn Rashid, the Ottoman client, from al-Qasim.[9] The moment seemed opportune for al-Zahawi to make amends with his Sultan by defending the legitimacy of the true Ottoman caliph against his Musaylima (or false prophet), an image al-Zahawi deployed to defend Abdülhamid.

Notwithstanding these reservations about al-Zahawi's motivation, his fluctuating and fragmented allegiances and intellectual commitments were manifestations of the often confused attempts on the part of provincial intellectuals to define and shape the debates on what constitutes modern forms of authority and scientific knowledge. The apparent inconsistency of al-Zahawi's politics had much to do with his place as a Kurd within a provincial and imperial oppositional political culture increasingly polarized around ethnicity.

Two approaches to al-Zahawi's work allow us to place it within the context of late Ottoman provincial history: the first is to analyze the ways in which al-Zahawi's corpus engaged itself in the creation of a new modern intellectual and national (Ottoman) order in a fragmented, sectarian, and diverse

---

[6] Al-Zahawi, "Hayati", in al-Rushudi, *al-Zahawi*.

[7] Hasan Kayalı, *Arabs and Young Turks: Ottomanism, Arabism, and Islamism in the Ottoman Empire, 1908-1918*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), p. 43.

[8] Ali al-Wardi, *Lamahat Ijtima'iyya min Tarikh al-'Iraq al-Hadith*, vol. 1 (Baghdad: n.d.), p. 69.

[9] Ibid, p. 45.

society such as the one that existed in Baghdad; the second is to explain his allegiances and his intellectual endeavors as a product of his ambivalence about his place as a Kurd in the new order, a predicament that continued to dog assimilated Iraqi Kurds into the monarchical period.

Al-Zahawi's view on language provides us with a window into the debates among late Ottoman intellectuals about the creation of an Ottoman identity and an Ottoman nation in which allegiance to the state becomes of primary importance. His proposal for a new script that is neither Latin nor Arabic seems to have been his solution to the tension in his identity, teetering as he was between, on the one hand, a multi-lingual elite culture that was so much part of the old order in which ethnicity was marginal to one's definition of self, and on the other, the drive to forge homogeneity in an increasingly rigid print culture in which Arabic and Turkish were becoming markers of ethnicity.

Al-Zahawi was born in Baghdad to a Kurdish father descended from the Baban family. His father was the Hanafid mufti of Baghdad and he was the only tutor and teacher that al-Zahawi ever had. Equally versed and comfortable in Persian, Turkish, Kurdish as well as Arabic, young al-Zahawi began writing poetry in Arabic and Persian at the age of twelve. His father inculcated in him a love of the Persian poetry of Ferdowsi and Khayyam, and introduced him to Shiite philosophy and sufism. His knowledge of Turkish was acquired when he was young as part of his education and he was active in debating the literary merits of Turkish poetry. Arabic remained the language he was most comfortable with for writing poetry and prose and he soon became known as the earliest Iraqi innovator in modern Arabic poetry and language.[10] His education took place outside the provincial school system and was done in the "traditional" manner that gave primacy to reading, analysis, and disputation of texts. In such an environment, the meaning of words was firmly bound to the manner of reading and the particular interpretation of the scholars. Arabic, with its absence of vowels, the heavy reliance on the contextual reading of words for meaning, made it particularly difficult to adapt to the print.

It was this concern with the adaptability to print that ostensibly drove al-Zahawi to propose a new script. He had been appointed by Abdülhamid, first, as a member of the education council of Baghdad, then as Arabic editor of the

---

[10] Abd al-Razzaq al-Hilali, *al-Zahawi, al-sha'ir al-faylasuf wa al-katib al-mufakkir*, (Cairo: al-Hay'a al-masriyya al-'amma li al-kitab, 1976), pp. 17-50, and al-Zahawi, "Rasa'il al-Zahawi" cited earlier. All information about al-Zahawi's life was derived from these two sources.

official gazette, *al-Zawra'*. Later he became head of the government printing office in Baghdad and a member of the Court of Appeals in the city. In all of these capacities, al-Zahawi had to grapple with issues of transforming what was essentially a language in which meaning was embedded in the connection between words, to a standardized set of words the meaning of which was to represent the order of things in the world. Al-Zahawi himself elaborated a justification for his new script along these lines.

At the outset of his essay on the new script, al-Zahawi sets up a clear distinction between the Arabic and Western scripts in an attempt to find the strengths and weaknesses of each.[11] From the beginning on the bipolar view of "tradition" and "modernity" is created, in which one will eventually be presented as "decay" and the other as "progress". Al-Zahawi then moves to a comparison between the Western and Arabic scripts. The Western script has a number of vowels that allow for a precise first reading of the words, it is easy to teach because of its relatively simple construction, and easy to print. By contrast, Arabic words are very short, lack vowels, and require a reader to be quite familiar with the language before he can determine the exact rendition of the word without the help of diacritical marks. Furthermore, the Arabic script is not useful for the Turkish, Persian, and Kurdish languages as it is incapable of rendering a number of sounds needed in their grammars.

From here al-Zahawi goes on to a topic that was much on the minds of modernizers of the Arabic language and those engaged in turning the commoners *('amma)* into an educated public *(jumhur)*, active citizens in a state. He says that the old language is limited in its use because commoners do not speak it at all. If we are to introduce educational reforms we ought not teach the commoners the old language as it is divorced from their daily lives. What we, as reformers, need to do is to create a language closer to the spoken vernacular of the people. This was something the Italians and the Greeks had done in forging a national language, and it behooves us to do the same.

The new script envisioned by al-Zahawi would be more responsive to printing, could assimilate the vowels of the spoken Arabic, Turkish, as well as Kurdish, and will be easier to teach to commoners because it does not require a long period of immersion in Arabic grammar to learn. Furthermore, it can be written from right to left as well as left to right. Al-Zahawi was dismissive of those who might raise objections to the introduction of such script. Against those

---

[11] Al-Zahawi, "al-Khatt al-jadid" in al-Rushudi, *al-Zahawi*, cited earlier.

338

who argued that the adoption of such a script is contrary to religion because the Quran was written in Arabic script, al-Zahawi argued that the original Quran had been written in *Kufic* script, the script of *jahiliyya* and its idolators, and was later inscribed in *Naskh* without generating any debates among the ulama. Furthermore, the old script could remain in the domain of religious studies, while the new script will gradually replace the old in other areas. As for those who might reason that the adoption of the new script will dissociate a new generation from its cultural and scientific heritage, al-Zahawi could only offer lame assurances. The script will be introduced gradually to allow for a period of transition at the end of which those words of the old canon that are useful will be transcribed into the new script and those that are not will be mercifully forgotten.

Al-Zahawi's tract on language can be read at several levels: as a statement about modernity, as a program for creating a homogenous provincial Ottoman public, and as a genuine if ultimately futile call for the creation of an Ottoman language not defined by a dominant ethnic group.

Al-Zahawi was product of a culture of learning in which education was predicated on the assimilation of texts through personal attachment to a teacher whose guidance in interpreting, analyzing, and proper memorization of words was essential. He himself retained elements of this tradition in his writing on science despite his espousal of all forms of Western rationality. He chose poetry, the most metaphorical of literary forms, as the medium to disseminate such scientific views on gravity, cosmology, and evolution. In his discursive tracts and commentaries on Newton and later Einstein, his method of analysis was grounded in the rationality of the Mu'tazilites, whom he openly admired. He presented a proposition, then sought to refute or modify it through the exercise of Aristotelian logic with little reference to the empirical or disciplinary underpinnings of modern science.[12] Yet he was aware that the linguistic apparatus with which he was working made it difficult to represent the cosmos as an object of inquiry separate from the words and syllogisms of the scholastics.

Al-Zahawi accepted the Orientalists' articulation of the relationship of language to culture. Despite his ignorance of any European languages, he had assimilated the views of social Darwinists and Orientalists through Arabic and Turkish translations of these texts. He seems to have accepted the Orientalist

---

[12] Jamil Sidqi al-Zahawi, "al-Daf' al-'am wa al-dhawahir al-tabi'iyya wa al-falakiyya", in *al-Muqtataf*, 1912, reproduced in al-Rushudi, *al-Zahawi*, pp. 127-152. His views on social Darwinism were penned in verse, see for example his poem in al-Rushudi, *al-Zahawi*, p. 68.

view that language reflected the cultural memory and abilities of a people and that the Arabic language as it had survived was incapable of representing science or creating scientific thinking.[13] Its form had to change and its content modernized to give fixity to its words and their objects. Despite the innocuous nature of his proposition, for he was merely changing the script not the language, what al-Zahawi was hoping to do was to create a "modern" language that will eventually marginalize and change the "traditional" mentality of the Ottoman public.

Al-Zahawi was interested in creating a homogenous Ottoman provincial public. Both printed and read Arabic required in depth study of grammatical structure for the general public to be able to read without the help of diacritical marks. But if one wanted to make education the domain of the 'amma, to turn them into a jumhur, one needed to develop a language that was not as difficult to assimilate in all its complexities, and could be learned in a short period. In other words, one needed a language that could be taught in the modern educational system, within a classroom, with standardized texts in which the teacher followed a set curriculum and which left no doubt about interpretation. Whereas the old system left much to the individual interaction of student and teacher, to interpretation and disputation, the new system would be a regulated show of the authority of the state and of its functionary in the school, that is, the teacher.

Al-Zahawi's call to make language closer to the vernacular made knowledge and the authority derived from that knowledge, the monopoly of a new class of educators who consciously set out to delimit and define the vernacular and make it the locus of the new Ottoman public identity. Al-Zahawi was a modernizer of Arabic and a propagandist for a form of poetry that elevated "truth" and "feeling" over elaborate formal verse. Public readings of his poetry, whether in large venues or popular coffeehouses, generated controversy precisely because it was short, concise, close to the spoken Arabic, and hence easily remembered.[14] In his official capacity as policy maker in the provincial educational hierarchy, he was quite aware that an Ottoman public can only be created if the kind of education he himself had received was marginalized.

Al-Zahawi published different articles on language reform in two issues of al-Muqtataf (1896 and 1910), one of the most widely read pseudo-scientific journals in the Arab world. His proposal was directed at his counterparts in

---

[13] See Timothy Mitchell, *Colonizing Egypt*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), pp. 131-150.
[14] On the many controversies his poetry generated see, al-Hilali, *al-Zahawi, al-sha'ir al-faylasuf.*

Istanbul and Egypt. For the Egyptians he presented the new script as a solution to what was becoming a problem of major proportions. Latin alphabets and European words were creeping into the writing of educational texts at an alarming rate. Those concerned with preserving a semblance of authority for Arabic as a language of learning seem to have welcomed his proposal. In a subsequent issue, the editor of *al-Muqtataf* informed his readers that al-Zahawi's script was now available in book form and could be purchased by educational institutions.[15] Furthermore, a copy of his essay was published in the newspaper *Iqdam* in Istanbul (issues 474 and 481) and was sent as a proposal to the Ministry of Education (*Nezâret-i Maârif*). However, al-Zahawi's intent was also political. His call for a new script that accommodates the particularities of Turkish and Kurdish was an attempt to circumvent the proposals of young Constitutionalists to make Ottoman closer to Turkish vernacular and employ the Latin alphabet instead of the Arabic script. As a loyal supporter of the idea of non-ethnic Ottomanism, al-Zahawi's proposal for a script that is neither Arabic nor Latin was a solution to his predicament as a Kurd writing in Arabic who was alarmed at the prominence of a discourse on ethnicity, specifically Turkish ethnicity, among Constitutionalist thinkers. He was a modern Ottoman but his loyalties were to a non-ethnic constitutional state.

Al-Zahawi appears to have wavered in his commitment to Constitutionalism, and his attack on Wahhabism that was accompanied by a defense of Abdülhamid is quite perplexing in light of his political beliefs. In the mid-1890s al-Zahawi was invited to Istanbul to the Islamic Congress where he was anxious to meet with such luminaries as Riza Tevfik whose work on Abu al-'Ala' al-Ma'arri, the agnostic 10th century Arab poet, al-Zahawi greatly admired. He also met with a number of Ottomans whose translations in French sociology he had read. He soon fell in with the Constitutionalists and Abdülhamid banished him to Yemen for nine months to run the preachers' program.[16]

By 1896 al-Zahawi had made his opposition to Abdülhamid public and he was imprisoned after he came out from a secret meeting with the Committee of Union and Progress (CUP) and eventually banished to Baghdad with a small stipend. The Young Turk revolution was welcomed by al-Zahawi and he was a founding member of the Baghdad branch of the CUP, despite his failure to win a parliamentary seat in the first election. He was soon asked by the CUP to teach Islamic philosophy at the Mülkiye school in Istanbul and Arabic language in Dar

---

[15] Al-Rushudi, *al-Zahawi*, pp. 89-90.
[16] Al-Zahawi, "Tarjamat hayati mulakhkhasa", in al-Rushudi, *al-Zahawi*, pp. 46-68.

ül-Fünûn. The years 1910-1913 saw the emergence of political parties who contested the CUP program on issues of centralization, representation, and Turkification. While a large number of the Arab educated elite organized themselves into the Entente or other parties, al-Zahawi remained faithful to the principles of the CUP. He won for the CUP as a Baghdad delegate in the 1913 election and remained in Istanbul until the outbreak of the war and the conquest of Iraq by the British.

How then can one explain al-Zahawi's defense of Abdülhamid? Three factors seem to shed light on his position. Provincial oppositional politics in Baghdad was increasingly dominated by the *salafis* who were headed by Mahmud Shukri al-Alusi. Al-Zahawi's espousal of secular social Darwinism was in clear contradiction with their Islamist modernist agenda. Moreover, his ethnicity made the Arabist tinge in *salafi* politics problematic. Finally, al-Zahawi found the principle of *takfir* (apostasy) in Wahhabism threatening to the Ottoman state to which he owed allegiance despite his opposition to Abdülhamid's despotism.

Iraq was the battleground for contending Islamic ideologies between the 1880s and 1905 when al-Zahawi wrote his polemical tract. Social Darwinist and secularists were in the minority and mostly drawn from the Turkish and Kurdish administrative elite. The political discourse of the period was dominated by the *salafis*, populist Islam, Shi'ism and constitutionalism, and the fractious debates between Usûlî and Bâbî Shi'ism.[17] Abdülhamid's government was well aware of that, and Selim Deringil's work has shown that the state made a concerted effort to combat this Shiite conversion through preaching. Shiites were declared "traitors of religion", an interesting and emblematic shift from their characterization as apostates (*rafadah*).[18] Salafis organized themselves around al-Alusi and became increasingly disenchanted with Abdülhamid's provincial policy despite their sympathies to his brand of pan-Islamism. The conquest of Riyadh by Ibn Saud in 1902 created a space for contesting Abdülhamid's brand of Islamic government.

Wahhabism had come to have a host of meanings in the context of the Hamidian era. Within Iraq, it implied sympathies to *salafism* and perhaps support for an Arab caliphate. It polarized the politically active population between those

---

[17] For a good description of how these political tendencies were discussed in Baghdad see Ali al-Wardi, *Lamahat Ijtima'iyya*, vol. 3, pp. 49-105.

[18] Selim Deringil, "Legitimacy Structures in the Ottoman State: The Reign of Abdülhamid II (1876-1909)", *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, XXIII (3), 345-359.

who supported Hamidian policies and those who were opposed to them. Wahhabism was a coded message through which a large number of issues and attitudes were played out. In 1904, the debates in Baghdad were infused with added possibilities when Rashid Rida visited the city to covertly test the support for the idea of an Arab caliphate. So threatened did Abdülhamid's government feel by such a visit, that it felt compelled to exile Rida's host, Mahmud Shukri al-Alusi, to Anatolia.[19]

It is within the context of this threat to the Ottoman state and the prospects of an Arab caliphate as an alternative that al-Zahawi's response to the Wahhabis should be understood.[20] He was a Kurdish Ottoman intellectual who found the prospects of an Arab caliphate with its nationalistic coloring unacceptable. Furthermore, he seems to have been hostile to the more literal interpretations of the Quran and the *sunna* proposed by sectors of the *salafi* movement. He found their continuous appeal to the early Islamic community as a model of political and social praxis "retrograde". His allegiance was to the Mu'tazilite heritage of the early Islamic community, not its legalistic and moralistic heritage. Despite these caveats, al-Zahawi did not hesitate to use the language and logic of political theologians in his tract against the Wahhabis. He likened Muhammad Abdul Wahhab to Musaylima, the false prophet, and insisted that rebellion against the caliph Abdülhamid was illegitimate because obedience to the ruler was something prescribed by Islamic law.

It is in al-Zahawi's discussion of the Wahhabi practice of *takfir* and in its rejection of the principles of analogy (*qiyas*) and consensus (*ijma'*), that we can glimpse his motives for writing this polemic. *Takfir* was the practice by which Wahhabis branded as apostates those who did not subscribe to their interpretation of true Islam. Those who engaged in the visitation to tombs and in other *sufi* practices were viewed as practitioners of *shirk* (polytheism) and declared apostates. As this was the brand of Islam that Abdülhamid had chosen to bolster his legitimacy, he himself was practicing *shirk*. He was not leading his subjects along the true path. They were apostates and war against them was sanctioned as was rebellion against their leader. Furthermore, al-Zahawi found even more troubling the call of the Wahhabis to go back to the Quran and the *sunna* for guidelines for governance and social practice. The complete abandonment by the Wahhabis of the consensus of the scholarly community and their rejection of the

---

[19] Al-Wardi, *Lamahat Ijtima'iyya*, pp. 66-70. al-Alusi reached Mosul when the order was rescinded and he was allowed to return to Baghdad.

[20] This section is based on al-Zahawi's, *al-Fajr al-Sadiq*, cited earlier.

principle of analogy in legal practice jeopardized the endeavors of scholars like Ahmet Cevdet and of al-Zahawi, his admirer, to reinterpret the *shari'a* and homogenize the practice of Hanafite law. "We need," wrote al-Zahawi, " a group of scholars who have a deep knowledge of the texts to be able to reach a consensus on whether certain developments in science are acceptable as *shar'* (legal)".[21]

Al-Zahawi's defense of Abdülhamid might have been opportunistic, an accusation which many of his detractors in monarchical Iraq leveled against him. However, it should be viewed within the context of the debates about Wahhabism in Iraq. He did not subscribe to a *salafi* rendition of revivalist Islam, was afraid of the end of the non-ethnic Ottoman state, and was clearly hostile to populist tendencies of a doctrine that allowed ordinary Muslims to have direct control over the interpretation of doctrine. He was after all a great admirer of Gustav Le Bon, and the puritanism of the Wahhabis did not appeal to his elitist views.

I would like to conclude by situating the views of a provincial intellectual like al-Zahawi within the increasingly polarized world of the late Ottomans: Al-Zahawi was ambivalent about his place in the Constitutional order he had believed so fervently in. He had hoped that his intellectual and administrative contributions to the modern order as well as his avowed loyalty to the CUP would lead to his appointment in Istanbul to a high administrative post commensurate with his talents. When such a position did come his way in 1909, it was a disappointment. He was appointed as teacher of Islamic philosophy in the *mulkiye* school and as instructor of Arabic literature in *Dar-ül Fünûn*. His position was to preserve and teach subjects that were now relegated to the realm of "culture" and "heritage", not a responsibility he felt was commensurate with his talents. He was, after all, one of the major admirers of Western philosophy. So unhappy was he at this assignment that he spent most of his lectures on Islamic philosophy comparing it unfavorably with Western philosophy. In 1910, claiming ill health, he resigned his position and went to Baghdad to teach law in its Law School.

Al-Zahawi's ethnicity, although at all times submerged in his writings, can offer some explanation for his political attitudes. Kurdish Iraqi intellectuals had been at the forefront of a movement of religious reform and renewal in the nineteenth century that had at times been openly oppositional in its stance

[21] Al-Zahawi, *al-Fajr al-Sadiq*, pp. 31-39.

towards imperial policies. Al-Zahawi's own father was sympathetic to these trends and must have inculcated in his son a spirit of questioning dogma. Al-Zahawi's intellectual inclinations were to shift his call for reform from the realm of religion to that of "science" and "secular education". He must have been involved in the discussion circles of the Kurdish and Turkish provincial administrators and it was there that his constitutionalism and his secularism were born. As Abdülhamid's policies became progressively more sympathetic to Arabs, and as the *salafis* of Baghdad came to ally themselves with the Arabist camp, he found himself sympathetic to the Ottoman/Turkish administrative elite. Yet his ethnic and linguistic loyalties were grounded in a non-ethnic Baghdadi literary culture in which Arabic was the preferred language of belles-lettres, but the sensibilities were Ottoman. He was bewildered as well as hostile to the polarization of the political discourse between Arab and Turk. He, and another Kurdish/Iraqi innovator of Arabic poetry, Ma'ruf al-Rasafi, fought for the survival for this non-ethnic vision of the state well into the World War I. While al-Rasafi, soon became an Iraqi and Arab nationalist, al-Zahawi became marginalized in monarchical Iraq. His life, however, does give us a window into the alternatives to the emergent nation-states that existed at the end of Empire.