

Arab, Unionist, Republican: The Case of Ma'rūf al-Ruṣāfī

Chris Hitchcock

This essay explores the works of the poet Ma'rūf al-Ruṣāfī to uncover political allegiances and identities during the late Ottoman period. By using literary sources for historical inquiry, this study contributes to literature critical on Ottoman historiography and reveals intersections and negotiations between seemingly contradictory political and national identities such as unionist and republican, and Ottoman and Arab.

The poet Ma'rūf al-Ruṣāfī¹ (1876-1945) is perhaps best remembered today as one of the defining influences in the cultural scene of the newly independent Hashemite Iraq. However, whilst much of his prodigious literary output was produced after the breakup of the Ottoman Empire, al-Ruṣāfī was born and raised an Ottoman, and some of his most famous poems were written in critique of late Ottoman despotism. Despite some Arabist sympathies, he remained a staunch Unionist until the Ottoman collapse, and his political career in Hashemite Iraq was effectively torpedoed as a result, leaving him isolated. As such, he cuts an unexpected figure against the background of a period generally understood as characterised by deep ethnic cleavages in political life. He also represents an even more unusual political trend: in some of his poems, al-Ruṣāfī advocates explicitly for a republican government, placing him on the radical fringe of Ottoman opposition.

There is a rich debate in the existing literature over the intellectual origins and social base of Arab nationalism in the late Ottoman Empire – and by extension its antithesis, Arab Ottomanism.² The historian Ernest Dawn was one of the first to critically examine the nationalist narrative, suggesting that the majority of Ottoman Arabs continued to be Ottomanists until the Empire was dismembered in the aftermath of the First World War.³ Hasan Kayalı's detailed study of relations between the late Ottoman state and its Arab subjects comes to a similar conclusion, asserting that Arabism did not develop into

¹ Transliteration of Arabic follows the Library of Congress standard. Transliteration of Turkish follows the established convention of using modern Turkish spelling. All translations are my own, unless otherwise stated.

² Ottomanism is defined briefly by Erik Zürcher as “a union of the [Empire's] different communities around the Ottoman throne,” the idea that “all subjects, irrespective of creed or language, would become loyal citizens with equal rights in the new [post-1908] constitutional state.” Through a framework of cosmopolitanism, it incorporated the existing and developing cultural nationalisms of the Empire into an umbrella nationalism focused on the imperial state. Erik Zürcher, *Turkey, A Modern History* (London: IB Tauris, 2003), 127-128.

³ Ernest Dawn, “The Formation of Pan-Arab Ideology in the Interwar Years,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 20, no. 1 (1988): 68.

territorial nationalism until 1918.⁴ Rashid Khalidi, contesting this revisionist position, has noted more recent work emphasising the strong Turkish nationalist position of the Committee of Union and Progress (CUP), and displays evidence from diplomatic correspondence that shows a strong nationalist bent.⁵

Regardless of the specific positions of these accounts on the relative numbers of Arabists and Ottomanists among the Arabic-speaking population of the late Ottoman Empire, none give us significant insight into the people behind the numbers. Although an intellectual history pinning down individuals who articulated their views in writing is a very different thing from a social history of late Arab Ottomanism, which would be a much more ambitious endeavour, an examination of some of the Arab ideologues of Ottomanism can provide us with some interesting insights. Al-Ruṣāfi is one such individual.

Late Ottoman Arabic poetry

Despite the prominent place that poetry has occupied in Arabic cultural and social life, the poetry of the post-medieval period, in general, has received relatively little historical attention. The post-classical section of one collection on Arabic poetry and history provides only literary readings of twentieth-century poems and no reference to the early modern period.⁶ The late Ottoman period has received some attention from literary historians, but they have generally been concerned with identifying schools and movements, and judging the quality of literary output rather than approaching texts as sources more broadly.⁷

The reasons for the paucity of historical work done on late Ottoman poetic production are numerous. Ottoman studies in particular have been very archive-heavy, although cultural history and other fields have seen a steady growth in more recent years. The problem of linguistic and cultural familiarity presented by any source is made considerably worse by the complications of poetry, which in Arabic and Ottoman is often characterised by obscure vocabulary and metaphors, and complex intertextual references to the classical canon.

More reprehensibly, the remarkable persistence of the civilisational “decline” narrative, which in its literary form generally dismisses the literature of the entire “post-classical” period (from the late *Abbāsīd* period onwards) until the “cultural renaissance” of the nineteenth century (*al-nahḍa*) as stagnant and unoriginal (*munḥaṭṭ*), has meant that the literature of the Ottoman period has been largely sidelined in literary historians’

⁴ Hasan Kayalı, *Arabs and Young Turks: Ottomanism, Arabism and Islamism in the Ottoman Empire 1908-1918* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 9-10.

⁵ Rashid Khalidi, “Ottomanism and Arabism in Syria Before 1914: A Reassessment,” in *The Origins of Arab Nationalism*, ed. Rashid Khalidi (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991).

⁶ Cf. Ramzi Baalbaki, *Poetry and History – The Value of Poetry in Reconstructing Arab History* (Beirut: American University of Beirut Press, 2011).

⁷ Cf. Muḥammad Muṣṭafā Badawī, *Modern Arabic Literature*, vol. 3 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992).

analysis.⁸ This period was the last to receive a comprehensive treatment in the *Cambridge History of Arabic Literature* series (2006).⁹

In the Ottoman period, as at other times, poetry was not simply an entertaining pastime, but a key political medium for addressing power.¹⁰ This continued to be the case in the nineteenth century, despite sweeping changes in political discourse. For example, Namık Kemal turned to the traditional Arabo-Persian *kaside* style when composing his *Freedom Poem* (*Hürriyet Kasidesi*).¹¹ Throughout the late Ottoman period, we continue to find a remarkable overlap between political thinkers and poets.

The development of the political *kaside* (and political poetry more broadly) in Turkish was mirrored by similar developments in the Arabic-speaking world. Although the decline of patronage under the Ottomans led to a corresponding decrease in the production of *qaşidas*, which only ended with the rise of the neo-classicists in the late nineteenth century, other forms of less elite poetry, including poetry in colloquial spoken Arabic (*'āmmiyya*), continued to flourish during the Ottoman period. In the nineteenth century, these styles led the way in the development of political poetry, notably in the writings of Egyptian Satirist Ya'qūb Şannū'.¹² The neoclassicists took longer to move away from the prescribed traditional themes (*ağhrāḍ*) and genres in their *qaşidas*, but by the 1860s they were adapting the panegyric style to patriotic themes. This paved the way for the political poetry of the early twentieth century, which dealt with grand themes like liberty, despotism, revolution, and nationalism.¹³ Many of al-Ruṣāfi's poems fall into this category, including *Charm to Calm a Madman* (*Ruqyat aṣ-Şarī*). Also worthy of note are his commemoration of the 1908 Revolution, *July of Freedom* (*Tammūz al-Ḥurriyya*), and the Arabic lyrics to the 1908 National Anthem (*Nashīd Waṭanī*), also published in the *Dīwān*.

Not only was the Arabic poetry of this time often explicitly political, it was also in many cases deeply engaged with the social issues of the day. In fact, the topic of social poetry (*shi'r ijtimā'ī*) made more than one appearance in journals like *al-Muqtabas*.¹⁴ A brief survey of the *Dīwān* ar-Ruṣāfi's index finds many poems with social titles like *The Divorcee* (*al-Muṭallaqa*), *Poverty and Sickness* (*al-Fuqr wa-'s-Siqām*), and *The Orphan at Eid* (*al-Yatīm fī 'l-'Īd*). These poems typically appeared for the first time in dialogue with opinion pieces, debates, and articles dealing with the same subjects.¹⁵

⁸ For late Ottoman Turkish *kaside* poetry cf. Walter Andrews and Mehmed Kalpaklı, "Across Chasms of Change: The Kaside in Late Ottoman and Republican Times," in *Qaşida Poetry in Islamic Asia and Africa*, eds. Stefan Sperl and Christopher Shackle, vol. 1 (Beirut: Brill, 1996).

⁹ Muhammad Lutfi Al-Yousfi, "Poetic Creativity in the Sixteenth to Eighteenth Centuries," in *The Cambridge History of Arabic Literature in the Post-Classical Period*, ed. Roger Allen (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

¹⁰ Walter Andrews, "Speaking of Power: 'The Ottoman Kaside,'" in *Qaşida Poetry*, eds. Sperl and Shackle, 282.

¹¹ Andrews and Kalpaklı, "Chasms of Change," 309.

¹² *Ibid.*, 241-242.

¹³ Sasson Somekh, "The Neo-Classical Arabic Poets."

¹⁴ "Ash-Shi'r al-Ijtimā'ī," *al-Muqtabas* 24 (1908).

¹⁵ Fruma Zachs, *Gendering Culture in Greater Syria* (London: IB Tauris, 2014), 14

One compelling reason to look at the poetry of this particular period is that inasmuch as there was mass media in the early twentieth century, poetry was a key part of it. The journals in which poets made their names were typically printed outside the Ottoman Empire to avoid the notorious censorship of the Hamidian regime.¹⁶ Nonetheless, they had a wide readership in the Empire and abroad.¹⁷ In 1907, the Lebanese Na'üm al-Labakī – writing in his New York-based journal *al-Munāzir* – was able to engage in a long war of words with the Syrian Muḥammad Kurd 'Alī – writing in his own Cairo-based journal *al-Muqtabas* – on the subject of the Iraqi al-Ruṣāfi's poetry, submitted by post from faraway Baghdad.¹⁸ Although the government was willing to go to great lengths to keep out subversive material which might "bewilder" (*tesvîs-i ezhân*) its "persuadable" populace, journals continued to flow in through the porous Egyptian border or via foreign post offices.¹⁹ By the turn of the century, some newspapers had print runs of as many as 20,000 copies.²⁰ Readership was probably well beyond this: as historian of print media, Ami Ayalon, has noted, single copies of newspapers were passed around or read to crowds by literate customers in coffee shops known literally as "reading-houses" (*kıraathane*) in Turkish.²¹ As such, the reach and relevance of late Ottoman poetry should not be underestimated. It not only passively reflected contemporary opinion, but played a key role in shaping it.

The life and times of Ma'rûf al-Ruṣāfi

Ma'rûf al-Ruṣāfi was born in the neighbourhood of Qaraghöl in Baghdad during the first few months of the 1877-1878 Russo-Turkish War. His largely absent father was a soldier of Kurdish extraction who eventually rose to the rank of sergeant-major (*başçavuş*) in the Baghdadi gendarmerie.²² He was raised almost exclusively by his mother, a merchant's daughter. The family was of modest means, although wealthier than many of the urban poor with whom the young Ruṣāfi grew up.²³ As a child, he was educated first at the traditional Qur'an school (*kuttâb*) before being sent to the military high school (*rüşdiye*), the institution of choice for upwardly mobile children from less well-off backgrounds. Here, he managed to successfully pass two years before failing his third - according to him - because of his weakness in mathematics, due to his limited understanding of

¹⁶ Ami Ayalon, *The Press in the Arab Middle East* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995).

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Najda Fathî Şafwa, *Ma'rûf ar-Ruṣāfi* (Beirut: Riad el-Rayyes, 1988), 11. Al-Labakī refused to believe al-Ruṣāfi was not a pen name adopted to avoid scrutiny by the authorities, given the perceived "backwardness" of Iraq and the poet's clear radical bent.

¹⁹ İpek Yosmaoğlu, "Chasing the Printed Word: Press Censorship in the Ottoman Empire 1876-1913," *Turkish Studies Association Journal* 27, no. 1 (2003): 15-49.

²⁰ Malcolm Yapp, "Modernization and Literature in the Near and Middle East 1850-1914," in *Modern Literature in the Near and Middle East*, ed. Robin Ostle (London: Routledge, 2016).

²¹ Ami Ayalon, *The Arabic Print Revolution* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 184.

²² Yūsuf 'Izzeddîn, *ar-Ruṣāfi Yarwî Sîrat Ḥayâtîhi* (Beirut: Dâr al-Madâ li-ṭ-Ṭibâ'a wa-n-Nashr, 2004), 146. This is according to his own estimate.

²³ İbrâhîm al-Kilânî, *Ma'rûf ar-Ruṣāfi: Dirâsa Nafsiyya Adabiyya wa-İjtîmâ'iyya* (Baghdad: IKA, 1978), 15.

Turkish, the language of study. After abandoning the *rüşdiyye*, he returned to traditional education at the Ḥaydarkhāna Mosque.

At the Ḥaydarkhāna, al-Ruṣāfi studied under Maḥmūd Shukrī al-Ālūsī, one of the most prominent religious intellectuals in Baghdad, whose Salafist curriculum²⁴ and personal interest in the young Ma'rūf left him with a lifelong “drive to reform society and further the cause of Islamic unity (*al-jāmi'a al-islāmiyya*).”²⁵ It was also al-Ālūsī who introduced him to poetry, lending him collections of canonical verse (*shawāhid*) and the *dīwāns* of the *Abbāsīd* masters.²⁶ After his education in Baghdad, he worked as a teacher, at the same time submitting poetry to various journals, until a mutiny led by officers associated with the opposition, Committee of Union and Progress (*İttihad ve Terakki Cemiyeti*), led to the reinstatement of constitutional government in 1908 – events which became known as the Young Turk Revolution (*inkılap* in Turkish, *inqilāb* in Arabic).²⁷

The exact details of al-Ruṣāfi's activities immediately after the Revolution are somewhat unclear. In July 1908, he was working as an Arabic language teacher in a government school in Baghdad. At some point between July and December of 1908, he was invited to Istanbul by the journalist and public intellectual, Ahmet Cevdet, to serve as editor for an Arabic version of his journal *İkdam*. Al-Ruṣāfi left Baghdad with the Iraqi Deputies elected in 1908, probably in December of that year. When he arrived in the capital, however, he was unable to come to an agreement with Ahmet Cevdet and survived largely on the charity of other prominent Istanbul Arabs, in particular Nadhra Muṭrān and Zakī Mughāmis.²⁸ These two patrons convinced him to join an Arab Masonic lodge, the Ottoman Brotherhood (*Ikhwa 'Uthmāniyya*). After a brief return to Baghdad in late 1909 for want of money, his fortunes suddenly improved, perhaps thanks to the popularity of his *Dīwān*, which he published during a brief stopover in Beirut. In 1910, he became editor of the new Istanbul newspaper *al-'Arab*, and took up a series of prestigious teaching jobs before being nominated deputy (*meb'ūs*) in the Ottoman parliament, and stayed in Istanbul until 1919.²⁹

²⁴ Salafist here refers to the nineteenth - and early twentieth-century modernist or rationalist reform current spearheaded by the likes of Muḥammad 'Abduh, which is in some senses ancestral to modern Salafist currents but far from identical with them. For a discussion of this current see Albert Hourani, *Arabic Thought in the Liberal Age, 1798-1939* (London: Oxford University Press, 1970). I have been unable to identify a detailed study of al-Ālūsī's thought in English, but for a brief treatment in Arabic see Ibrāhīm as-Samarrā'i, *Mahmūd Shukrī al-Ālūsī wa-Bulūgh al-'Arab* (Beirut: al-Mu'assasa al-Jāmi'iyya li-d-Dirāsāt wa'n-Nashr wa't-Tawzī', 1992).

²⁵ Al-Kilānī, *ar-Ruṣāfi*, 21.

²⁶ 'Izzedīn, *ar-Ruṣāfi*, 225-229. *Shawāhid* (literally 'witnesses') are sections from the classical literary canon used to demonstrate points of literary Arabic grammar.

²⁷ In modern Arabic, *inqilāb* typically carries the negative connotations of “coup d'état” rather than “revolution,” but it was originally a calque of the latter word (from the root *q-l-b* connoting turning over/ revolving) and is the usual contemporary Arabic term for the 1908 Revolution.

²⁸ According to Şafwa, Ahmet Cevdet had published an article expressing sentiments which the Arabs of the capital found offensive and in the ensuing scandal declared his intention to begin publishing an Arabic journal as a goodwill gesture, perhaps without ever intending to follow through on his promise. Şafwa, *ar-Ruṣāfi*, 14.

²⁹ Şafwa, *ar-Ruṣāfi*, 20.

It seems that he had already attained some level of fame not only because of his poetry, but because of his activities as editor of the local CUP mouthpiece, *Baghdād*, first published in August 1908. Although he does not mention it himself in his interviews with journalist Yūsuf 'Izzeddīn, he was also chosen by a CUP delegation despatched to Baghdad later that year to prepare the ground for elections by delivering a prepared speech at the Wazīr Mosque to explain the constitution.³⁰

Politically, al-Ruṣāfi was clearly associated with the constitutionalist trend broadly - and the CUP more specifically. He was a personal acquaintance of the CUP-affiliated Interior Minister (*Dahiliye Nazırı*) Talat Paşa, even working briefly as his Arabic tutor, and was appointed as a member of a CUP committee on reform in the Arab provinces. It was also the CUP which engineered his election as Deputy for the Iraqi district of Muntafiq in the 1912 elections. In his interviews with Yūsuf 'Izzeddīn, he asserted that he was never more than a fellow traveller, often critical of CUP policy, and many of the events recounted above that attest to a close relationship with the Committee are conspicuously absent from his own account. This probably says more about the political atmosphere of Iraq after the victory of Arab nationalism than it does about al-Ruṣāfi's Ottoman-era political leanings. In any case, until the collapse of the Empire he remained a committed Ottomanist.³¹ Even later in life, he continued to defend the actions of the military governor of Syria, Cemal Paşa, in wartime Beirut. There, the Paşa had executed tens of notables affiliated with the Arabist current as traitors, in an event which became one of the foundational myths of Arab nationalism – on the grounds that the individuals targeted in the purges “drew their power from foreigners.”³²

Al-Ruṣāfi's politics

The sociologist Şerif Mardin observed in his study of the Young Ottomans that the intellectuals under consideration were “no giants of political theory but belong[ed] to the category of *hommes de lettres*, a euphemism used by the French for the intellectual jack-of-all-trades.”³³ If this somewhat ungenerous comment is true of the likes of Namık Kemal, who alongside his poems and plays had several essays and articles to his name, it is even truer of al-Ruṣāfi, who seems to have written almost no prose during the late Ottoman period and confined himself to poetry. Nonetheless, if the Young Ottomans' thought is – as Mardin contends – “the expression of the political beliefs of the earliest modern Turkish intelligentsia,” al-Ruṣāfi speaks in the language of the Ottomanist-Arab intelligentsia of the last days of the Empire, and as such, makes for an interesting study.

Al-Ruṣāfi's early forays into the world of poetry took place almost exclusively in the pages of the cultural-literary journal al-Muqtabas, published by the prominent Syrian

³⁰ This event apparently triggered a wave of Muslim riots in Baghdad because of the public smoking of the CUP-aligned *mektupçu*, the large Jewish presence at the reception event, and rumours that al-Ruṣāfi himself had stopped a Qur'an reciter in order to give his speech. Ibid., 11.

³¹ Şafwa, *ar-Ruṣāfi*, 11-12.

³² Ibid., 18.

³³ Şerif Mardin, *The Genesis of Young Ottoman Thought: A Study in the Modernization of Turkish Political Ideas* (New York: Syracuse University Press, 2000), 9.

intellectual Muhammad Kurd 'Alī. His loyalty to this journal and his personal friendship with Kurd 'Alī were, in fact, so strong that he was apparently occasionally referred to as “*the al-Muqtabas poet*” (*shā'ir al-muqtabas*).³⁴ By far the most comprehensive collection of his poetry from the Ottoman era, however, is his 1910 *Dīwān*.³⁵ It is also here that we find the most explicit articulation of his political ideas.

Perhaps al-Ruṣāfi's most prominent political concern is the contrast between the achievements of the European states on the one hand and the position of a sometimes underspecified “us” on the other, often juxtaposed with the glories of a lost golden age. This civilisational narrative of decline (*inhiṭāt*) was perhaps the pre-eminent problem debated by Muslim and Arab intellectuals of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Although, as a historiographical approach, the decline theory has been thoroughly debunked and cast into the dustbin of academic history, in the late-nineteenth century a simultaneous “rediscovery” of past glories, dialogue with western Orientalists, and the colonial supremacy of Europe meant that the question of how to secure a return to a lost golden age was of much interest to political thinkers and activists in places like the Ottoman Empire. Al-Ruṣāfi's poetry is full of appeals to halcyon days, as in these lines addressed to the city of Baghdad:

Tatāba'at il-khuṭūbu 'alayki tatrā / wa-baddala minki ḥulwa l-'ayshi murrā
 Beset by troubles one after another which took from you the sweet things in life and made them bitter

Fa-hallā tunjibīna fatan 'agharrā / 'arāki 'aqumti lā talidīna ḥurrā!
 Will you not bring forth an honourable youth? / You seem to have become barren, no longer giving birth to free men

Wa-kunti li-mithlihi 'azkā walūdi!
 Although you once bore many of their like!

'Aqma'a l-juhlu fiki lahu shuhūdā / wa-sāmaki bi-l-huwāni lahu l-jusūdā
 Ignorance has set up its signs in you / and

Matā tubdīna minki lahu juḥūdā / fa-hallā 'idti dhākiran 'uhūdā
 When will you resist / have you not considered the memory of a time

Bihinna rashadti 'ayyāma r-Rashīdi?
 When you followed the right course, the days of [Hārūn] ar-Rashīd?

³⁴ *Al-Muqtabas* 45 (1908).

³⁵ Although according to an advertisement for the *Dīwān* published in Issue 45 of *al-Muqtabas* “more than three quarters” of its content had already been published in the journal, I have been unable to identify more than a handful of *qaṣīdas* which had previously appeared in print. Ibid.

Or this couplet:

Abkā 'alā 'ummatin dāra z-zamānu lahā / qablan wa-dāra 'alayhā ba'du li-l-ghayri
I weep for a nation whose time came / before, and went thereafter to another

Kam khallada d-dahru min 'ayyāmihim khabaran / zāna ṭ-ṭurūsa wa-laysa
l-khubru ka-l-khabari

The epoch has immortalised so many stories of their days / adorning pages – but experience (khubr) is not like stories (khabar)

Although the first example is unambiguous, the term *umma* here perhaps suggests that al-Ruṣāfi is talking about the totality of the Muslim community. We should not leap too eagerly to this conclusion, however, since *umma* (and its Turkish form *ümmet*) was also used in the nineteenth century as equivalents of the European “nation.”³⁶ Whether he intended *umma* and *'urub* to be identified with one another, this frequent under-specification of whom exactly al-Ruṣāfi represents is a general problem in his politics. In line with the general post-Ottoman climate in which it has been analysed, his poetry has been read as Arab-nationalist in character – to the extent that the Jordanian government makes use of two uncredited lines from al-Ruṣāfi's Arabic lyrics of the post-1908 Ottoman anthem on one official web page describing the Great Arab Revolt.³⁷ And it is true that a number of al-Ruṣāfi's poems explicitly call for an Arab “awakening,” often literally in those terms. In one of his poems, *Awakening the Sleepers (Īqāz ar-Raqūd)*, we find the following stanza:

Lahfī 'alā l-'urubi amsat min jumūdihim / ḥattā l-jamādātu tashkū wa-hiya fī dajri
Woe to the Arabs, of whose immobility (jumūd) / even immobile objects (jamādāt)
complain despairingly

Qawmu humu sh-shamsa kānū wa-l-warā qamrun / wa-lā karāmata lawlā sh-
shamsa li-l-qamri

A people who were the sun and all mankind the moon / and the moon has no
dignity without the sun

Rāhū waqad 'aqabū min ba'dihim 'aqiban / nāmū 'an il-amri tafwīdan ilā l-qadri
Who went, having produced many progeny / and neglected (“slept away from”)
everything, trusting in fate

³⁶ This meaning is exemplified by the Arabic name for the United Nations, *al-Umam al-Muttaḥida*. For an example of Turkish usage see Mardin, *The Genesis* (1962), 328-329.

³⁷ “Fī Mi'yawīyyat ath-Thawra al-'Arabiyya al-Kubrā,” Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan, accessed 24 January 2018, <http://www.gsd.gov.jo/DetailsPage/NewsDetails.aspx?NewsID=36>. The lines in question are: *naḥnu khawwādū ghumāra l-mawti kashshāfū l-miḥani / mā linā ghayru ktisā'i l-majdi aw libsi l-kafani* (We are those who plunge into the perils of death, explorers of tribulations / for us there is nothing but glory or a shroud).

A number of other poems in the “History” section of the *Dīwān* also explicitly bewail the decline of the Arabs and their subjugation by other peoples, as in the following couplet from the “historical” poem *Hulagu and al-Mustaʿsim* (*Hūlākō waʿl-Mustaʿsim*):

'Adāla min al-'urubi l-'a'ājimu ba'da mā 'adāla Banī l-'Abbāsi min Banī Ḥarbi
 Foreigners overcame the Arabs after the children of 'Abbās overcame the children of Harb

Wa-lam 'ara li-l-'ayyāmi 'ashna'a subbatan li-'umrika min mulki l-'ulūji 'alā l-'arabi
 I have seen no day more disgraceful, I swear, than when barbarians³⁸ hold power over the Arabs

Nonetheless, we should avoid the instinctive characterisation of al-Ruṣāfi as an Arab nationalist simply from these lines. As mentioned previously, the poet became closely associated with the CUP during his time in Istanbul, and whilst still in Baghdad, he edited the local CUP organ. His poems include a number of paeans in support of the CUP and the new constitutional regime, including *The General Assembly* (*al-Majlis al-'Umūmī*), *July of Freedom* (*Tammūz al-Hurriyya*, commemorating the 1908 Revolution), and *In Salonica* (*Fi Salānīk*). The latter, a paean to the forces of the Action Army (*Hareket Ordusu*) who suppressed the counterrevolution of March 1909,³⁹ includes a number of references to unity (*ittihād*) – perhaps the single word most identified with the Unionists:

laqad sami 'ū min al-waṭani 'l-anīna / fa-ḍajjū bi'l-bikā'i lahu ḥanīnā
 They heard the fatherland's cry / and out of affection wept for it

wa-'anba'ahu bi-ṣārimihī l-yaqīna / jamī'an li'd-difā'i musallaḥīna
 And informed it with firm certainty / together, to arms, to defence!

wa-thārū min marābiḍihim 'usūdan / bi-ṣawti l-ittihādi muzamjirīna
 They came out from their lairs, lions / roaring with the voice of unity!

The following couplets point to the absence of unity keeping fire from burning, and highlight the role that the “unity of two elements” (*ittihād al-'unṣurayn*) plays in

³⁸ *'ulūj* connotes “strongmen, thugs, toughs,” but also may imply “non-Muslim” here.

³⁹ Al-Ruṣāfi was personally present for the events of the so-called 31 March Incident (31 Mart Vakası), the suppression of the Ottoman counterrevolution. According to an interview conducted by Yūsuf 'Izzeddīn, he had gone to visit his countryman and family friend Mahmud Şevket Paşa (head of the Third Army in Salonica) in the hope of securing a job or at least some money to live on. The timing of his visit coincided with the counter coup in Istanbul, and although he returned to the city with the army, he was unable to see the Paşa and was even harassed by some soldiers because of his clerical garb, leading to his adoption of the two sartorial symbols of the Ottoman intelligentsia, the fez (*tarbūsh*) and suit (*badla*). 'Izzeddīn, *ar-Ruṣāfi*, 236.

keeping a fire alive. There is perhaps an allusion here to the Turks and the Arabs – “element” (*‘unşur*) was used in late Ottoman terminology to refer to the different ethnic communities making up the empire.

wa-mā ttaqadat nāru l-hamiyyati minkumu
Yet the fire of fury has not risen from you

li-faqdi ttiḥādīn fa-staṭāla khumūduhā
Because of a lack of unity, its silence has gone on long

wa-lawlā ttiḥāda l-‘unşurayni la-mā ghadā
If it were not for the unity of the two elements then

min an-nāri yadhkū...
Nothing of fire would burn

These poems also often touch more explicitly on Ottomanist themes like the unity of different religious groups under the banner of a cosmopolitan nationalism. In the following lines – taken again from *In Salonica* – al-Ruṣāfī celebrates the presence of Jews, Christians, and Muslims in the Action Army, “unified in determination, although not unified in religion,” brought together by the fatherland:

laqad jama’ū l-jumū’a fa-min naşārā / wa-min hūdin hunāka wa-muslimīna
They brought together all sorts, Christians / and Jews were there, and Muslims

fa-kānū l-jaysha alfun min junūdin / mujannadatin, wa min mutaṭawwa’īna
An army of a thousand enlisted / and volunteer soldiers

tarāhum fihi muttaḥidīna ‘azman / wa-mā hum fihi muttaḥidīna dīnā
Unified in determination / although not unified in religion

wa-ḥiya l-‘awṭānu taj’alu fi baynihim / akhā’an fi maḥabbatihim raşīna
The fatherland creating between them / a staunch brotherhood of love

In another poem which is in many ways typical of his social poetry, *The Orphan’s Mother* (*Umm al-Yatīm*), al-Ruṣāfī paints a heart-rending picture of the grief of an Armenian woman whose husband was killed for “walking as an Armenian” (*mashā ‘armaniyyan*) in the city during the Adana riots of 1908 before attempting a (perhaps somewhat misplaced) attempt at defence of Islam against intercommunal strife:⁴⁰

⁴⁰ This comes with a footnote in the original saying “He alludes here to the Adana unrest which flared up because of the foolish among the Armenians and the ignorant among the Muslims.”

A-Maryamu 'inna llāha lā shakka nāqimūn / min al-qawmi fī qatli n-nufūsi l-muḥarrami
O Maryam, God is most certainly enraged / At the people for killing, which is forbidden

A-Maryamu fīmā taḥkumīna tabaṣṣarī / fa-'in 'anti 'adrakti l-ḥaqīqata fa-ḥkumī
O Maryam, ponder on your judgement / For when you know the truth, then judge

Fa-laysa bi-dīnin kulla mā yaf' alūnahu / wa-lākinnahu juhlun wa-saw'u tafahhumi
None of what they do is religion / it is rather ignorance and misunderstanding

Although the simultaneous presence of Arabist and apparent Ottomanist themes may seem contradictory, particularly in poems that seem to call for an Arab “awakening,” there is no great contradiction – it is only if we identify Ottomanism with Turkish nationalism, rather than understanding the thoroughly cosmopolitan character that many minorities gave it, that an Arab cultural and even political revival necessarily runs contrary to Ottoman or even official CUP discourse. In fact, for many Ottoman citizens of non-Turcophone background, and perhaps many Turks as well, Ottomanism meant harnessing the simultaneous national-cultural awakenings of all the Empire’s distinct ethnic groups and the inevitable leaps forward that these awakenings would bring about to strengthen both those groups individually and the Empire as a whole. There may also be something of a progression here from a greater concern with Arab and Baghdadi issues (many of the poems have a particularly regional focus) to a reinvigorated passion for the Empire brought about by the exciting victory of the constitutionalists in 1908. But even if this is the case, al-Ruṣāfī’s easy transition from one to the other, and his ability to publish poems of both colours in the same collection, bring us back to the same point.

Al-Ruṣāfī, then, was an Ottomanist and an Arabist, and both tendencies can be detected in his work. He sees a problem of decline and decay in the various communities with which he identifies, and contrasts the glorious past with the sad state of affairs in his own time. This is an issue that needs to be addressed. Al-Ruṣāfī also has a sharply articulated and powerful idea, albeit vague, of how the state should operate.

In many ways, al-Ruṣāfī’s ideas here reflect the influence of the group of nineteenth-century reformist intellectuals, known as the Young Ottomans - or other Islamic Modernists active at the same time, than they do the positivism of the CUP opposition.⁴¹ Al-Ruṣāfī himself produced an Arabic translation of Namik Kemal’s constitutionalist tract *Dream (Rüyâ)* advertised in the back matter of the *Dīwān*, and was, as previously mentioned, a pupil of the modernist intellectual Muhammad Shukrī al-Ālūsī, as well as being a beneficiary of a broadly traditional religious education. Such ideas reflect a broader intellectual climate in which the vague positivism of the CUP’s founding members was unusual and, for many, unappealing.⁴²

⁴¹ Cf. Mardin, *The Genesis*, 81.

⁴² Hanioglu notes the much greater popularity of the Islamic-modernist *Mizan* as compared to the more conventional CUP *Meşveret* in his discussion of the Ottoman opposition. See Şükrü Hanioglu, *Young Turks in Opposition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 81.

One of the key accusations against the Sultan is that he is irreligious, disqualifying his claim to the title of Caliph. In the couplet given below, al-Ruṣāfi juxtaposes traditional Islamic-Ottoman monarchist political concepts like the Shadow of God on Earth (*ẓilla 'llāhi*) with the reality of the Sultan. This was also an argument made by other members of the religious opposition as early as the 1890s.⁴³ Given Sultan Abdülhamid II's (r. 1876-1908) famous foregrounding of the religious legitimacy of his office during his reign and his dependence on pan-Islamic symbolism,⁴⁴ these lines take on an additional nuance:

A-yakūnu ẓilla 'llāhi tārīku ḥukmihi 'l- / maṣṣūṣi fī āyi 'l-kitābi 'l-munzali?

Can one who has abandoned His laws / as laid out in the Holy Book, be the Shadow of God?

Am hal yakūnu khalīfatan li-rasūlihi / man ḥāda 'an hadhyi 'n-nabiyyi 'l-mursali?

Should the Successor (*khalīfa*) of its Messenger / be one who deviates from the Prophet's divine guidance?

In the same poem the term “Abode of the Caliphate” (*Dār al-Khilāfa*), the religious epithet of Istanbul, is contrasted with the reality of government corruption:

Aḍḥat manāṣibuhā tubā'u wa-tushtarā / fa-ghadat tafūḍu li-l-ghanī 'l-ajhali

Its positions are bought and sold / granted to the ignorant rich man

Tu'tā mu'ajjalatan li-man yabtā'uhā / wa-matā 'nqaraḍa 'l-ajlu 'l-musammā ya'zuli

They are given for the term to he who buys them / and when the appointed term finishes, he is discharged

Fa-yarūḥu yashrī thāniyan wa-bi-mā 'rtashā / qad 'āda min 'ahli 'th-thirā'i 'l-'ajzali

And buys another, having become by the / bribes he has taken, tremendously wealthy

Fa-yazullu fī Dāri 'l-Khilāfati rāshīyan / ḥattā ya'ūdu bi-manṣibi ka-'l-awwali

So he stays in the House of the Caliphate bribing / until he gets another position like the first

Sūqun tubā'u bihā 'l-marātibu summiyat / Dāra 'l-Khilāfati 'inda man lam ya'quli!

A market where positions are sold / called “House of the Caliphate” by those who do not understand!

⁴³ Hanioglu, *Young Turks*, 51.

⁴⁴ Cf. Kemal Karpat, *The Politicization of Islam: Reconstructing Identity, State, Faith, and Community in the Late Ottoman State* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001).

In frequent references to justice ('*adl*'), al-Ruṣāfi evokes the “circle of justice” (*adâlet dairesi*) of traditional Ottoman theory and the importance of just rule/the provision of justice to understanding of the state’s function and purpose. Indeed, justice was famously a common and uniquely Ottoman addition to the otherwise stereotyped revolutionary slogan *Hürriyet, Uhuvvet, Müsavât* (Liberty, Fraternity, Equality). It also serves to underline the hypocrisy of the Hamidian government, which continued to emphasise the symbolism of *adâlet*.⁴⁵

Fî 'l-mulki taf'alu min fażā'i'i jawrihā / mā lam taqul, wa-taqūlu mā lam taf'ali

In its rule it carries out in acts of terrible oppression / What it has not said, and says what it has not done

Mala'at qarāṭisa 'z-zamāni kitābatan / li-l-'adli wa-hiya bi-ḥukmihā lam ta'dili

It has filled the pages of time with writing / About justice, yet in its rule it is not just

The Islamic-modernist climate is also visible in the emphasis on ignorance (*juhl*). Ignorance is one of the poet’s favourite subjects, and the “ignorant” – especially those who do not realise their own ignorance, particularly among the religious elite – are the target of all of his lampoons (*hijā'*) in the *Dīwān*. Although al-Ruṣāfi’s particular fixation on ignorance is perhaps slightly unusual, the contrast of ignorance and rationality ('*aql*') was common in the intellectual discourse of the time, which identified the former simultaneously as the symptom and cause of the perceived backwardness of Islamic civilisation.⁴⁶ In this three-line lampoon, for example, he skewers an appointee to the branch of the Education Ministry in Baghdad:

Ma'ārifu Baghdāda qad jā'ahā / mudīrun min at-tayshi fī masraḥi

A director came to the Education Ministry / in Baghdad, in a scene of heedlessness

Ḥimārun walākinnaḥu nāṭiqun / wa-ṭiflun walākinnaḥu multaḥi

A donkey,⁴⁷ yet he talks / a child, yet he is bearded

Fa-yā 'ayyuhā l-'ilmu 'anhā rtaḥil / wa-yā 'ayyuhā l-juḥlu fihā slaḥi

O knowledge, flee from there! / And o ignorance, drop your dung there!

The first major point on which al-Ruṣāfi differs from the Young Ottomans, however, is his target. Mardin notes that the Young Ottomans generally avoided direct criticism of the monarchy and of then Sultan Abdūlaziz (r. 1861-1867).⁴⁸ For them, in fact, a strong

⁴⁵ Selim Deringil, “The Invention of Tradition as Public Image in the Late Ottoman Empire,” in *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 35, no. 1 (1993): 3-29.

⁴⁶ Cf. “Muḥammad 'Abduh” in Hourani, *Arabic Thought in the Liberal Age*.

⁴⁷ *Ḥimār*’s double meaning of “idiot” and “donkey” makes the insult even more explicit in Arabic than in English.

⁴⁸ Mardin, *The Genesis of Young Ottoman Thought*, 9.

monarch represented a possible escape from the tyranny of the real enemy: political overreach by a small class of self-satisfied high-ranking bureaucrats, the so-called “men of the *Tanzimat*.” Al-Ruṣāfī, on the other hand, grew up under a very different system – one in which the strings of government were all pulled by Sultan Abdülhamid II from the Yıldız Palace. Taking aim at bad counsel and coterie of advisors in the Hamidian period would have been not only dated and toothless but practically meaningless. Instead al-Ruṣāfī attacks despotism (*istibdād*) and the concept of a government which cannot be held responsible for its actions. To some extent his opposition to autocracy mirrors that which had long been espoused by Young Turk figures like Ahmet Rıza, not least in communications with the British embassy:⁴⁹

'Abat as-siyāsatu 'an tadūma ḥukūmatu / khaṣṣat bi-ra'yin muqaddasin lam yu'sali
 Good rulership⁵⁰ rejects that a government / Given over to a sacred unquestioned opinion

Mithla 'l-ḥukūmati tastabiddu bi-ḥukmihā / mithla 'l-binā'i 'alā naqan mutahayyili
 A government which is despotic in its rule / Is like a house built on sand!

Many poems feature a personified figure of freedom or justice, often addressed in a kind of romantic supplication. Sometimes there is an emphasis on “freedoms” plural – as here for example the freedom of the press – rooted in the liberal tradition:

Ayyā ḥurriyyata ṣ-ṣaḥāfi rḥamīnā / fa-'innā lam nazil laki 'āshiqīna
 O freedom of the press, have mercy – for we are still in love with you

Matā taṣīlīna kaymā tualliḡīnā / 'addīnā fī wiṣāliki wa-mṭulīnā
 When will you come to release us? Put off our reunion, delay us

Fa-'innā minki naqna'u bi'l-wu'ūdi
 We are still satisfied with your promises!

The liberal influence is also visible in another critique al-Ruṣāfī makes, this time of the passivity of his fellow citizens in the face of the state. He identifies the source of the state's financial and coercive power as the very same citizenry which it oppresses, alluding perhaps to social contract theory whilst simultaneously denying the state any inherent legitimacy to take from its subjects and implying a specific method of resistance:

'ajabtu li-qawmin yakhḡa 'ūna li-dawlatin
 I am amazed by a people who serve a state

⁴⁹ Haniöglü, *Young Turks*, 129.

⁵⁰ *Siyāsa* here is in the classical sense of “good governance” or “statecraft” and not in its generic modern sense of “politics.” See Frank Vogel, “*Siyāsa*,” in *Encyclopaedia of Islam* 2, ed. P. Bearman et al (Leiden: Brill, 1960-2007).

yasūmuhum bi-l-mawbiqāti 'amīduhā
Whose chief imposes such great wrongs on them

wa-'a'jabu min dhā 'annahum yarhabūnahā
Even more amazing is that they fear it

wa-'amwālahā minhum wa minhum junūduhā!
When its money is from them, and its soldiers from among them!

Elsewhere al-Ruṣāfi explicitly links the weakness of the state and military defeats of the Empire to its despotic system of rule:

Ḥukūmatu sha'binā jārat wa-ṣārat / 'alaynā tastabiddu bimā 'ashārat
The government of our people has been unjust and has become despotic in its commands

Fa-lā 'aḥadan da'athu wa-lā stahārat / wa-kullu ḥukūmatin ḡalamat wa-jārat
It has appealed to nobody and sought nobody's opinion, and every government has been oppressive and unjust

Fa-bashshirhā bi-tamzīqi l-ḥudūdi
Warn them their borders will be broken!

He departs even more radically from the precedents set by the Young Ottomans and even by his contemporaries in the CUP. Although the 1908 Revolution did involve some popular mobilisation – albeit very carefully choreographed by the Committee's representatives – it had taken years to convince the largely elitist Paris-based émigrés, who formed the core of the Ottoman opposition, of the advisability of any kind of violent action not involving foreign intervention in their favour, or of a largely bloodless palace coup. If these poems were written prior to the 1908 Revolution, such activist sentiments as expressed in these lines would have placed al-Ruṣāfi in a small minority of an opposition generally wary of any kind of popular action:

Hattāma nabqā lu'batan li-ḥukūmatin / dāmat tujarri'unā naqī'a 'l-ḥanzali
How long will we remain the plaything of a government / which makes us drink from this bitter cup?

Tanḥū binā ṭuruqa 'l-bawāri taḥayyufan / wa-tasūmunā saw'a 'l-'adhābi 'l-'ahwali
Which takes us down the roads of ruin arbitrarily / and forces us into the worst of tortures?

Wa-hādhā wa-naḥnu mujdilūna tijāha-hā / ka-'l-fāri murta'idan tijāha 'l-khayṭali
While we prostrate ourselves before it / like a mouse transfixed by fear before a cat

Mā bālunā minhā nakhāfu l-qatla in / qumnā? A-mā sa-namūtu in lam nuqtali?
Why are we so afraid of killing if / we rise? Will we not die, if we are not killed?

The same applies to this triptych:

qad istahwadhat yā li-l-khisāri 'alaykum
And yet, human devils have seized control, o woe

shayāfīnu 'insun šāla minkum mirrīduhā
Over you, whose leader has stolen from you

wa-mā ttaqadat nāru l-hamiyyati minkumu
Yet the fire of fury has not risen from you

There is evidence, however, that the opposition within the Empire was generally much more radical than those in exile abroad. The merger with the Ottoman Freedom Society (*Osmanlı Hürriyet Cemiyeti*) in the interior partly led the Unionist émigrés to accept the idea of some kind of popular revolutionary action. This was in opposition to the palace coup or foreign intervention they had previously sought as the most appropriate means of changing the government.⁵¹ Al-Ruṣāfi's poetry might be considered further evidence of this trend.

Perhaps the most dramatic departure from both the conventional Young Ottoman and Islamic Modernist position is an extraordinary section of one poem, *Charm to Calm a Madman* (*Ruqyat aṣ-Ṣarī*), which goes so far as to advocate actual republicanism:

In lam yakun dhallu 'l-'ulūfu li-wāḥidin / ḥumqan, fa-hal min ṣaḥīhi 't-ta'aqquli
If the degradation of thousands for one / Is not foolish, then is it reasonable

Anna 'l-hukūmata wa-hiya jumhūriyyatun / kashafat 'amāyata qalbi kulli muḍallili
That governments,⁵² which are republics / Have uncovered the folly in the heart of every misguider

Sārat ilā nujḥi 'l-'ubbādi bi-sīratin / abdat lahum ḥumqa zamāni 'l-awwali
Have worked for the success of the subjects in a way / Which has made clear to them the foolishness of the time before

⁵¹ This is questioned by Sohrabi - among others - who claims that the change in orientation preceded the merger and was led by the activist faction already present within the CUP. Nonetheless, the reorganisation of the CUP and the rise of the activists was led by Bahaeddin Şakir, a latecomer to the exiled CUP in Paris who was involved in political activities in the interior before fleeing as late as 1905. Cf. Nader Sohrabi, *Revolution and Constitutionalism in the Ottoman Empire and Iran* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 89; and Şükrü Haniöglü, *Preparation for a Revolution* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001).

⁵² The most syntactically straightforward reading of *al-ḥukūma* here is “the government,” but the intended meaning seems to be a definite singular generic “governments” given the context.

Fa-samaw ilā 'awji 'l-'alā'i wa-naḥnu lam / nabruḥ nasūkhū 'l-ḥaḍīḍi 'l-asfali
And have risen to the heights of glory, while we / remained here, at the lowest nadir

Ḥattā 'staqallū ka'l-kawākibi fawqanā / tajlū 'z-zīlāma bi-nawrihā 'l-mutahallili
Until they ascended like planets above us / piercing the darkness with their shining light

Wa-'alū bi-ḥaythu idhā shakhaṣnā naḥwahum / min taḥtihim, ḍaḥakū 'alaynā min 'ali
They have risen so high that if we go up towards them / from below, they laugh at us from on high

Labisū thiyāba fikhārihim mawshiyatan / bi-'l-'izzi wa-hiya mina 'ṭ-ṭarāzi 'l-akmali
They have put on their robes of pride, decorated / with glory, the most perfect type

Nālū wiṣāla munā 'n-nufūsi wa-'innahā / ḥurriyyatu 'l-'ayshi 'r-rahīdi 'l-mukhḍili
They have achieved the communion of souls' desires, which are / the freedom of a life of plenty

Ḥattā 'uqīma mujassaman timthāluhā / bayna 'sh-shu'ūbi 'alā banā'i haykali
Until [freedom's] statue has been raised / On a plinth among the nations

Timthālun nā'imatu 'l-shamā'ili wijhuhā / tazdādu nawran minhu 'aynu 'l-mujtali
A statue of fine qualities, whose face / lights up the eye of the beholder

'A-fa-ba'da hādhā yā surāta mawāṭini / narḍā wa-nuqna'u bi'l-ma'āshi 'l-ardhali?
And after this, noble people of my homeland / Will we be satisfied with the contemptible life?

In advocating for a republic, al-Ruṣāfi was ahead of his contemporaries and far from the Young Ottomans, even if his language reflected their views. Namik Kemal, for example, mentioned the idea of a republican government for the Ottoman Empire only in order to dismiss it. Even the radical activists of al-Ruṣāfi's contemporaries, the CUP, did not espouse republicanism. In fact, according to Şükrü Hanioglu's survey of the Ottoman opposition, "no significant group" proposed a republican government.⁵³ Al-Ruṣāfi's writings might be taken, however, as evidence of such a trend of thought, at least among some of the younger members of the intelligentsia.

Conclusion

On first glance, al-Ruṣāfi represents something of a mystery for our conventional image of late Ottoman politics. An Iraqi Arab intellectual from the city which would later become the jewel in the Hashemite crown, educated in a traditional religious school,

⁵³ Hanioglu, *Preparation*, 298.

proved to be an ardent supporter of the CUP and an opponent of Arab independence. Even many years later, he defended the actions of Cemal Paşa – by that point elevated from bloody tragedy to pivotal moment in the founding of Arabism – and looked back fondly on the Ottoman Empire. And in a period in which we are accustomed to look for a relatively dry state-strengthening constitutionalism generally averse to popular uprisings and unable to consider the prospect of an Empire without an Emperor, al-Ruṣāfi espoused republicanism.

We should be wary, however, of assuming that al-Ruṣāfi's ideas were as unrepresentative as has so far been assumed. The fact that he held these political opinions and that he was able to express them publicly – in the popular and broadly read *Dīwān*, – suggest that they were at least understandable and consumable by the educated Arabic-speaking readership for which he wrote. The positions of Arab Ottomanists who remained invested in the survival of the Empire have not been adequately researched, and it may be that al-Ruṣāfi's views were not so unusual despite all.

Although we should not draw too many conclusions from the work of one individual, al-Ruṣāfi's writings are certainly significant in their own right. They also point to a broader intellectual world expressed primarily through late Ottoman Arabic literature. Whilst this written production has received some treatment by academics concerned particularly with literary history *per se*, it has remained underused, as a source in the debates on the intellectual climate of the late Ottoman-Arab world. Ottoman-Arab intellectuals were, as shown by the case of al-Ruṣāfi, in constant dialogue with their Ottoman-Turkish counterparts, and a full picture of the late Empire should also take this into account.