Early Arabic printing: A catalogue of attitudes
by Michael W. Albin

It is not too much to say that the Islamic printed book has received scant attention from cultural historians or even from what used to be called Orientalists. The focus of book research has been on the manuscript, and scholars and even bibliographers have expended their energies on study of the text rather than the context of books. As far as early printed books are concerned, there has been virtually no scholarly discussion of the social, economic or literary impact of printing on the Islamic world. General histories of Islam written in the West have, of course, mentioned in passing the importance of eighteenth century printing in Turkey and nineteenth century printing in Egypt. Some Mideastern historians have fleshed out these spectral allusions with books and bibliographies. Nevertheless, the full social impact of the printing press on the societies of Islam is a subject that awaits its historian.

In an attempt to help supply this history as well as to inject some humanity into a subject which until now has been devoid of reference to the men who pioneered the printing of books in the Islamic world, I have chosen to concentrate on the life and thought of four key figures in the years of early print. By concentrating on personalities I think I can highlight the complexity of responses to print technology. The traditional question directed at Islamic printing is why did Muslims delay so long in making use of the printing press? Let us turn that question inside out to ask: Why, once opposition to the press was overcome, did Muslims and others in the Muslim world print the books they did? Discussion of the first question leads us down the arid path traveled by Thomas Carter in his *The Invention of Printing in China and Its Spread Westward* wherein he says, 'Though Arab culture, which profoundly influenced reawakened Europe, knew of Chinese printing, the refusal of its literary men to profit by the art made Islam on the whole a barrier rather than a bridge for the transmission of block printing to Europe.' I do not intend to deal with this topic in this paper. It is toward a response to the second question that I would like to suggest some answers drawn from the biographies of the men who introduced printing to the East.

Today's list of men includes two well-known names, one name known only dimly by scholars and one innovator who to this day remains anonymous (although we have a pretty good idea who he is). To give a comparative perspective and to emphasize the cosmopolitan nature of 18th and 19th century Islam, I have chosen to study two Muslims, one Christian Arab, and one khawaja, i.e. European.

Among the secular saints of modernization in the Islamic world Ibrahim Müteferrika (1670-1754) occupies an archangelic throne. It was he, a Muslim not by birth but by conversion, who Islamicized the printing press, thereby guaranteeing for himself a place in the hagiocracy of reform. Historians have often marvelled at the lateness of the press's arrival East of Suez. As recently as 1983, Daniel Boorstin pointed out that Islam stood as an obstacle to printing by means of metal type, standing athwart the transfer of the invention in ninth century China and the fifteenth century breakthrough of Gutenberg of Mainz. I refer to the views of Carter and Boorstin on the resistance of Islam to print technology only to highlight the accomplishment of Ibrahim Müteferrika. No simple task his of convincing the authorities to abandon the traditional arguments against the press and reverse course toward some unknown destination, thus upsetting the powerful religious class and undermining delicate social balances. In the end however his major achievement lay not as a printer but in the deployment of his gifts as politician and polemicist.

He was no stranger to controversy. By 1729, when his first book came off the press, he had witnessed and participated in the Reformation in his native Transylvania. Biographical details of his early life are hopelessly garbled. Legend, supplemented by meager historical documentation, recounts that he had taken part in the Unitarian protest against Habsburg Catholicism in Transylvania. Ibrahim, whose Christian name we do not know, is said to have converted to Islam around 1692 when he was taken prisoner by an Ottoman army detachment. He began a successful career as a quartermaster of the Turkish army, but ordinary success did not satisfy him. By the time of the accession of Ahmet III in 1703 new winds were blowing through the serai, winds that came from the West. Ibrahim had come to the notice of powerful court figures, chief among them Sait Mehmet Paşa, a young


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man of restless intellect who, no less than his father, Yirmisekiz Çelebi-zade Mehmet Efendi, had blazed trails that led westward to Europe and especially to France. Ahmet’s reign was marked by indifferent military success and he felt the time was right for peace and change within the Ottoman state. This change came in the form of what might be called the reform of Damat Ibrahim. Young Müteferrika smelled the new breezes and sensed it would be possible to further the cause of cultural and technical openness while advancing his own career.

Possessing no useful pedigree of his own he was dependent for the advancement of his ideas on patrons. These came in the form of the Çelebis, who had returned from France, their heads full of ideas for what has come to be called ‘reform.’ They had the full support of Damat Ibrahim, prime minister to Ahmet III. From the hazy documentary evidence we learn that Ibrahim Paşa became convinced that Ottoman stagnation was as much a matter of cultural purblindness as stagnation in military armament or tactics. Ibrahim Müteferrika was ready. In his memorandum dated 1726 to the grand vezir and the religious leaders he argued that the printing press offered numerous advantages, to wit: it would preserve books from destruction such as occurred during Mongol invasions; it would place Muslims on a par with Christians and Jews in preservation of their sacred texts; it would make books invulnerable to mistakes by copists; it would extend learning among Muslims; it would spread the ability to read, since books would become affordable to everyone; it would remove Christians from the business of printing Islamic books; and it would make the Turks the leaders of Islamic learning.

His arguments found their mark. The memorandum had the support of the Sadrazam and reached the Sultan. Opposition though was not long in surfacing taking the form, according to traditional accounts, of the book guilds protesting the sacrilege of using a machine in producing the word of God and in allowing the use of brushes made of pig bristles in inking the platen. Riots and civil unrest ensued, according to historians of the period, and Ahmet was forced to delay permission for the project until agreement was reached that no religious works would be defiled by the new techniques and tools of the innovator. How the press was at last imported and set into operation, how pressmen were trained, how books were distributed through the schools of Ahmet III’s successor Mahmut I (r. 1730-1754) are beyond the scope of this paper and in any case must be subjects for future research and analysis. There is little doubt that Ibrahim Müteferrika, by the time his first book, the Van Kulu dictionary, was printed had found his métier.

From 1729 until 1754 the quantity of books and maps printed did not produce the widespread accep-
tance of printing for which he had hoped. Nor did the quality of books lead to a cultural revolution that would have brought the Ottomans abreast of the Europe of Priestley, Montesquieu, Voltaire, Goethe or Bentham. Ibrahim wrote and printed only seventeen books in the years between publication of Van Kulu to his death in 1754. Analysis of subjects shows an emphasis on history and the sciences. Tied as it was to the tenuous reforms of the moment, printing suffered the fate of the other innovations of the early eighteenth century, and stopped entirely after Müteferrika’s death. It was as if what Niazi Berkes has called the first invention disappeared without a trace. Ibrahim’s glory rests not on his prowess as a printer and publisher, although he was an adept craftsman whose books can still be admired as masterpieces of design, but rather in having argued his case masterfully in the councils of the Sultan. Never again would Muslim reformers have to grapple with the problem of reconciling this western invention with Islamic sensibilities regarding the handmade book. Thanks to him the debate over the printing book left the realms of theology to those of literacy, economics and aesthetics.

II

A turn of the barrel of the kaleidoscope reveals another innovator, whose life story is as well documented as Müteferrika’s was the contrary. Ali Mubarak (1823-1893), father of what we might call the mass produced book in Egypt, was born of a shaykhly family in the Egyptian delta. His early years show that he could have chosen the easy and established path of his fathers who had been kuttab instructors and imams in the local mosques. Mubarak tells us in his memoirs that this was not the life for him, and that he actually ran away from home to avoid this fate. If I were to write Mubarak’s biography I would entitle it ‘Ali Mubarak: An Egyptian Huckleberry Finn.’ His early years were a series of restless school leavings, desultory employments as clerk for minor provincial officials, and even a stint in jail for stealing his salary from a miserly employer, a local surveyor.

Despite these inauspicious beginnings Mubarak had ambition and a vision. He saw that great changes were taking place in Egypt. By 1839, at the age of 16, he had begun to attach his fortunes to the technocracy. He was admitted to the Engineering School in that year and from there moved progressively through the schools and on to the highest levels of the Egyptian administration.

It is as an educator that Mubarak’s impact on printing history is revealed. He himself was the product of Muhammad Ali’s newfangled Kasr al-Ayni school in which ‘they taught handwriting, mathematics, and Turkish among other things.’ He entered Kasr al-Ayni, in which he was very unhappy, in 1835,
whence he proceeded to the Engineering School (Muhandiskhâna). At this stage we can remark two important influences on the teenage lad. The professors who made the greatest impact on him at the Engineering School were Egyptians, and, second, he and his classmates were obliged to copy their lessons 'each to his own abilities in following what the teachers were lecturing on.' He was such a successful student that he was selected for a study mission to France in 1846. When Abbas come to the throne in 1849, Mubarak joined his staff as an engineering inspector with direct access to the Khedive on matters that related to projects and the technical personnel responsible for carrying them out. In effect, he was the Khedive's auditor general for engineering works.

In 1849, the Frenchman Lambert suggested that certain of the schools that were closed after Muhammad Ali's death be reopened. Abbas agreed and appointed Mubarak to supervise this. It was at this point that he made his mark on printing history. He recounts his tenure as school administrator (nâzîr): 'I took charge of the administration of the engineering schools (sic) and their associated affairs. I took charge of appointing selected teachers, adjusted the curriculum, and selected the necessary books. All that was accomplished, and during my tenure as nâzîr I set out to write textbooks myself along with some of the teachers. I created a letterpress and a lithographic press which printed around 60,000 copies of various books for the War Schools (Madâris Harbiyâh) and the military units (al-Alîyat al-Jihâdiyâh). This was in addition to the books in every discipline that were printed on the lithographic press for the Muhandis-khâna and the supplemental printing such as atlases, technical drawings and other things the like of which had never been printed before. I used only students to draw the atlases and the illustrations.' He follows this description of his accomplishments as textbook author and printer with the statement that these duties did not distract him from attending to the feeding, clothing and proper housing of the students and watching carefully over every aspect of their course of study.

Mubarak graduated, as it were, from the Muhandis-khâna in 1853, moving on to more responsible posts. His remarkable achievement was to mass produce books for the new schools that were allowed to operate under Abbas and his successor Muhammad Sa'îd. Although Mubarak's tenure as nâzîr of the Muhandis-khâna was short, his contribution was critical in keeping the printing of books alive in Egypt during a period when the school system was in eclipse. Furthermore, he contributed much to the introduction of modern technical education in Egypt in the mid-nine-teenth century. Under Abbas the school system established by Muhammad Ali earlier in the century was beset from two directions. One was the Islamic puritanism of the Khedive himself, who immured himself from bureaucratic and technical reform. Second was the Khedive's parsimony. His administration was ruled by his dictum 'yanfa' wa-lâ-yanfa?" Is it worth it or not? If the institution in question did not measure up, it was closed. Muhammad Sa'îd, for his part, was a profligate spender and puppet field marshal. Mubarak was able to tie his advancement to the idiosyncrasies of these two very different potentates and Egypt owes him much for preserving the technical and educational enterprise that had been cut adrift after most of Muhammad Ali's schools were closed. To Mubarak and a few other printer-educators such as Husayn Husnî and 'Ali Jawâd at the Bulaq Press goes the credit for keeping the printed book alive until the florescence of culture in the reign of Khedive Isma'il.

III

If Müteferrika was barred from printing religious books under the terms of his license and Mubarak was interested only in producing technical works, who was printing religious texts? Well, the Christians of the Ottoman Empire for one. It is not my intention here to recount the beginnings of Islamic publishing in Istanbul in the late eighteenth century by Müteferrika's successors, nor do I want to list the religious works published in Egypt during the reign of Muhammad Ali. A careful study of the record of Khedives Abbas and Muhammad Sa'îd will reveal I think that religious works came to the fore during these reigns (1849-1863). For instance attempts were made to print the Qur'an; the Mathnavî of Rûmi was published in Turkish and fourteen works by the 9th century Sufi Abû al-Mawâhib al-Sha'rá'înî were published during their reigns. Rather, my intention has been to provide an appreciation for the complexities, social, ethnic, and geographic of the early years of printing. For this reason, let us turn to the life of an Iraqi Catholic priest, Yûsûf Da'ûd, without reference to whose energy and prodigious output of books our consideration of mid-nineteenth century Arabic printing would be incomplete.

In the Ottoman Empire at mid-century was there a region more remote from the concerns of the geopolitical hurly-burly than the province of Mosul in northern Iraq? The city of Mosul, center of the wilayah, had been governed by a series of at best lackluster governors for a century. It was home to ratatouille of Jews, Sunni Muslims, Yazidis, Kurds, Turkomans, and Christians of divers sects, some uniate, some not. Into this unprepossessing milieu to minister to the needs of the uniate Christians and win over to Rome other denominations came the Capuchins in the seventeenth century, then, in 1750, the Dominicans to open a mission school. Here too, in the village of al-'Ama-diyâh, was born in 1829 a young man who would make a contribution not only to his church but to education and Arabic culture in his native region and
Yûsuf Da‘ûd was not himself a printer. After he had completed his training at the Propaganda in Rome he returned to Mosul for pastoral and teaching duties. As the list of his interests clearly shows, he supplied a steady stream of manuscripts and revisions to the press of the Dominicans in Mosul, with whom he worked as author, translator and corrector. It is fair to say that Fr. Yûsuf was the principal supplier of texts to the press. The Dominican press was established by Fr. Hyacynth Besson in 1856-57 and continued under the direction of Dominican clerics for nearly sixty years. The first books to come from the press were composed (saff al-hurûf) and typeset (tanzîm). One founder (sânî) and a workman take care of the workers, and in the bindery one Dominican brother was assisted by one workman. In mid-1872 they accomplished two printings of the New Testament with comments or explanations, one in octavo and the other in a smaller size. This was the first stage of the project as directed and financed by the Cardinal. The translation had been done by Yûsuf Da‘ûd with the help of Behnam Benni (1831-1897), who later became Catholic bishop of Mosul. Correspondence from Fr. Duval in Mosul to Paris in 1875 gives the following details concerning press administration. “Two Dominicans devote all their efforts to the press as their primary mission. One is in charge of hand workmen and the other of technical workmen. A Dominican brother is occupied with bûriz printing (relief printing or engraving). There is one translator at the press, a copyist and a corrector.” There is one supervisor of the workers. Three workers do the composing (saff al-hurûf) and typesetting (tanzîm). One founder (sânî) and a workman take care of the press. At the bindery there are one Dominican priest and two workers. The annual wages of the workers come to FR 4,500.”

Little or no attention has been paid to this vital...
activity, neither to the contributions of Yusuf Da‘ūd to Arabic letters nor to the technical contributions of the Dominicans in bringing the press to the northern regions of Iraq on the River Tigris. Yusuf Da‘ūd had his Iraqi colleagues Ignatius Ifram Rahmani, Jirjis ‘Abd al-Yashu‘ Khayyat and Behnem Benni, all of whom became prelates of the Church before the century ended, were the first modern patriarchs of their country. They were, first of all, writing for print and this implied a literate laity. For the first time in the history of the Church in the East it was expected that the rank-in-file could read the Scripture and devotional books. The press made these works available in the quotidian language of most Iraqi Catholics: Arabic. Promulgating these texts as Fr. Yusuf did demystified both the books themselves and liturgical events for uniate Christians and helped beat the Protestants at their own game -- making the faith accessible to the faithful. This was the intention of Cardinal Bonaparte in making the Bible available in Arabic, this was the purpose of Fr. Yusuf and his Iraqi and French companions at the Dominican school and the other schools
in Mosul. Moreover, Yūsuf Da'ūd and the French Dominicans used the press to increase the accessibility of Iraqi Christians to secular or useful knowledge: mathematics, the sciences, history, geography and literature. Here too the printing press played a key role as mediator between the new subjects and the new pupils, boys and girls, being developed in the schools. These pupils were the first Iraqis to receive a modern education. As for Mosul itself, the government took but minimal responsibility for education. Through the 1880s there remained only one school at primary level (ibtīdā'), and one for older boys (rusūd) whose books were imported either from Istanbul or Baghdad or, in the non-religious subjects, probably purchased from the Dominicans. Thus the impact of the writings and example of Yūsuf Da'ūd went far beyond the Catholic community of Mosul and its surrounding villages. By 1879, when he left Mosul to become bishop of Damascus, he left an impression on his native town that could have been possible only with the printing press. Yūsuf Da'ūd died in 1890; the Dominican press survived until property and equipment were taken by the government in 1914.

IV

The year is 1856, the year in which Fr. Besson arrived in Mosul and determined that the Dominicans needed a printing press to carry out their mission in Iraq, but the place is Tunis, at the other end of the Arab world from Mosul. In that year Luigi Calligaris (1808-1871), an Italian military officer living in retirement from a career as a dignified soldier of fortune, wrote an anonymous memorandum to the Tunisian authorities proposing that the government lift its ban on the printing of books. It is pretty certain that Calligaris had himself in mind for director of the enterprise.

Luigi Calligaris had begun his Mideastern peregrinations as an officer and orientalist at the age of 21 in Istanbul in 1829. Before coming to reside in Tunis, he had lived in Syria, where he began his study of Arabic, a language he mastered well enough to translate L'Histoire des Guerres de Napoléon (Paris: Imprimerie impériale, 1856) and end his career as professor of Arabic at the University of Turin.

The letter in question was discovered in the Tunisian Archives and casts certain useful light on the culture of Tunisia at mid-century. The anonymous Arabic document is entitled ‘Letter on the Utility of Establishing a Press for Arabic Books in Tunis’ ( رسالة في منفعة Aqwa'm al-Masālīk fi Ma'rifat Ahwal al-Mamālik). To sense the difference in tone between the foreigner’s view and the insider’s. Our anonymous correspondent felt no need for such a testament. He had merely to pique the sense of shame in government officials that Christian countries of Europe saw fit to print Arabic classics such as the Maqāmāt of al-Harīrī and advertise their availability to the Arab reader from booksellers in Paris!

With European forthrightness the epistolist proceeds to appeal to the cupidity of his correspondent. Setting up a press, he says, ‘would be a great boon to the state for it would increase revenues by a million rials per year, or perhaps more, and a large group of people would make their living from it.’ Rare books could be printed and sold in all the cities of Islam and in Europe as well. He reckons that the press could sell 1,000 to 2,000 copies of each title for at least 30 rials the volume, while the cost to produce the books would be ten rials or less. Then he turns from the financial aspects to the economics of publishing, saying, ‘The reason a copy need cost about ten rials is that in printing books we have already set the type of a single kind and can then print 100,000 copies of it [the book].’ He refers to his own translation into Arabic of Tabīb Nafsu (sic) ‘Self-Doctoring’, which if it were properly distributed would sell thousands of copies in the Islamic countries and he even estimates a sale of 4,000 copies in Europe, ‘not because of its own merit ... but for use as a means of learning Arabic by comparison with the original, which they [the students] have in their own languages.’

On the cultural contributions the press can make he has this to say, ‘All the valuable books of which not a single copy is found in a given city [might be printed].
For example, there are the history books and numberless other books. People would buy them at a low price and benefit from their having been brought to life again and from their wide distribution. Knowledge would spread in the world. We could translate into Arabic certain of the Christians’ books which treat science and industry so that Islam could profit from them.

As to the famous objection to the printing press that it would put calligraphers out of work, our writer
states flatly that the press would employ more people than the manuscript industry does at present. He estimates that there are fifty to sixty copyists in Tunis. These could easily be absorbed into a busy press, where the work would be more healthy ‘for there would be more movement of the body, which is the opposite of their current occupation.’

The writer touches on a few other points before concluding that the government should establish a press and send him to Paris to buy machinery and equipment and to order types cut especially for a Tunisian press. In any case, the type faces would have to be oriental in design because ‘books written in maghribi are not read in the lands of the East, not in Turkey or Iran, because their inhabitants are not familiar with them [the characters].’

This is the proposal that, but for leaving aside the theological arguments, could have been composed by Müteferrika in the 1720s. Did the letter have the desired impact? Inasmuch as Calligaris was never hired for the press when it was established in 1860, the answer must be no. It is unlikely that it had any immediate impact on the government’s decision of 1860 to move away from dependency on the lithographic press and open a typographic plant23. At that time the press was given as a concession to another

foreigner, the Englishman Richard Holt, who was licensed to print the newspaper al-Ra‘id al-Tunisi. But Calligaris’s arguments may have given one or the other of the reformers further reasons to favor the typographic press. Certainly typographic printing was high on the reformers’ agenda. Ten years after the anonymous letter was written, Khayr al-Din would write: ‘Then in the middle of the fifteenth century ... Gutenberg from Mainz in Germany invented the printing of books thus increasing, so obviously as to need no demonstration, the materials of the sciences and hastening their dissemination in all countries ... Then civilization began to flourish in paths of the sciences and the crafts’24.

In conclusion I should repeat that I have not set out to prove a thesis about this or that fact regarding the story of the earliest printing in the Islamic world. The history of printing is filled with such Guinness Book of Records data. Instead, I have tried to give the flavor of the life and times of some of the pioneers of printing, because the men I have mentioned are those who introduced the modern, Western world into the very heart to the Muslim East. Their attitudes are critical in the changes that have shaken the Islamic world in the past 200 years. I hope I have in some measure succeeded in presenting what I promised in the title: a catalogue of attitudes.


Niyazi Berkes in *The Development of Secularism in Turkey* (Montreal: McGill Univ. Pr., 1964) credits Müteferrika with ‘the first innovation’, that is, the introduction of the press which launched the reform movement under Mahmut II. The discussion in Stanford J. Shaw’s *History of the Ottoman Empire and Modern Turkey* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Pr., 1976) is also useful for treatment in English of this important personality, whose work Shaw terms ‘perhaps the most outstanding legacy of the Tulip Period.’


This account comes from the Arabic translation of the documents as found in Qasa ‘Maṭba‘at ...’ op. cit. p. 60f.

Catalogue des Livres Imprimés chez les Pères Dominicains de Mossoul, n.p., 1885.


According to Chenoufi (op. cit., p. 93) a governmental lithographic press began operation in 1847.