

ROSWITHA BADRY

**Iraqi Historiography in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century:  
Remarks on the Contribution of ‘Abbās al-‘Azzāwī (d. 1971)**

**Abstract**

This article will shed some light on the life and work of one of the most important Iraqi historians of the past century. Although a lawyer by profession, a so-called ‘amateur historian’, and, as most observers remark, a rather traditional one who followed earlier patterns of Islamic historiography, not new critical methodologies of ‘Western’ type, ‘Abbās al-‘Azzāwī has to be recognized as a crucial figure whose work helped pave the way for the emergence of modern, professional (‘academic’) Iraqi historiography. This paper will outline to what extent the scholar combined old and new forms of historical writing, and thereby seems to have inspired further research on political, social, cultural, and religious aspects of Iraqi history – not only in the ‘East’ but also in the ‘West’. Moreover, I suggest that his writings have to be (re-) assessed against the background of both his personal socialization and of the Iraqi nation-building process.

**Keywords:** Iraqi historiography, ‘Abbās al-‘Azzāwī, historians of a traditional phase, cultural history

**1. Initial Remarks**

A comprehensive study on the development of modern Arab historiography in 20<sup>th</sup> century Iraq still needs to be written. So far, there are only scattered preliminary works in both Arabic and Western languages, mostly articles, dealing with various aspects of modern Iraqi historiography. Any monograph on modern Arab historiography in Iraq would necessarily contain a chapter on ‘Abbās al-‘Azzāwī, the focus of this article. Although a lawyer by profession, a so-called ‘amateur’ or ‘hobby historian’, and a rather

traditional one, Al-ʿAzzāwī is considered one of the most important Iraqi historians of a transitional phase and is often mentioned together with the Shiʿites ʿAbd ar-Razzāq al-Ḥasanī (1903–1997)<sup>1</sup> and (the sociologist) ʿAlī al-Wardī (1913–1995).<sup>2</sup> This paper will shed some light on his life, work and contribution to Iraqi historiography. The major questions tackled are the following: First, to what extent the scholar combined old and new forms of historical writing? And, to what degree his works laid the foundation for further research in the ‘East’ and in the ‘West’? And second, bearing in mind that his publications coincided with the emergence of Iraq as a nation-state, what was his main intention in writing the history of Iraq in its various dimensions?

In comparison to Egypt or Lebanon, modern Iraqi historiography was rather a latecomer as regards the adoption of new, Western-inspired methodologies in writing history. Despite a long tradition of historical writing, so-called professional historiography in Iraq only emerged after the Second World War as a result of the establishment of modern educational institutions such as Baghdad University in the 1950s.<sup>3</sup> Professional Iraqi historiography is primarily connected with the name of ʿAbd al-ʿAzīz ad-Dūrī (1919–2010)<sup>4</sup> who for political reasons left Iraq in the 1960s to teach at the newly (1962) created Amman University. As in other Arab countries, in its initial phase historiography was practised by ‘amateur historians’ who were at the same time journalists, administrators, teachers, or lawyers.<sup>5</sup> Apart from Al-ʿAzzāwī, the Armenian Christian Yaʿqūb Naʿūm Sarkīs (1876–1959) comes to our mind as an Iraqi example. Both names, once well-known during the 1930s and 1950s/60s among Arab historians as well as abroad, had fallen into oblivion until recently. As-Sālim al-Alūsī’s re-edition of Al-ʿAzzāwī’s *Taʾrīḥ ʿilm al-falak fī al-ʿIrāq*<sup>6</sup> and the report of Hala Fattah<sup>7</sup> (both published in 2004) illustrate<sup>8</sup>, the two historians mentioned

<sup>1</sup> On him see remarks in Orit Bashkin, *The Other Iraq. Pluralism and Culture in Hashemite Iraq*, Stanford University Press, Stanford (California) 2009, pp. 129–131, and *passim*; or Eduard Gombár, *Pre-Revolutionary Iraq in the Light of the Contemporary Iraqi Historiography*, “Archív Orientální” 1990, 58, p. 152.

<sup>2</sup> On him see, for instance, Peter Heine, *Historikerstreit – Ali al-Wardī und seine Kritiker*, “Al-Rafidayn” 1991, 1, pp. 45–54; P.-J. Luizard, *ʿAlī al-Wardī (1913–1995) à la recherche de l’identité irakienne*, “Monde Arabe Maghreb Machrek” 1995, 150, pp. 120–126.

<sup>3</sup> Eduard Gombár, *Modern Arab Historiography: Transition from Traditional to Professional Historiography*, in: *Studies in Arabic and Islam* (Proceedings of the 19<sup>th</sup> UEAI Congress), Peeters, Leuven 2002, p. 52.

<sup>4</sup> On him see, e.g. N.K. Singh, *Arab Historiography*, in: N.K. Singh, A. Samiuddin (eds.), *Encyclopaedic Historiography of the Muslim World*, Global Vision Publishing House, Delhi 2003, vol. I, p. 95, and also p. 236.

<sup>5</sup> Youssef M. Choueiri, *Modern Arab Historiography. Historical discourse and the nation-state*, Routledge Curzon, London and New York 2003 (rev. 1<sup>st</sup> ed. 1989), p. 202; Singh, *Arab Historiography*, p. 95; Gombár, *Modern Arab Historiography*, p. 52 and *passim*.

<sup>6</sup> Bayt al-Ḥikma, Baġdād 2004.

<sup>7</sup> *Two Historians of Another Era: Abbas al-Azzawi and Yaʿqub Sarkis*, Posted 08 July 2004, Viewed 20 January 2011 <<http://hnn.us/blog/entries/6066html>>.

<sup>8</sup> See also ʿAbd al-Ḥamīd ar-Rašūdi, *Muʿarriḥ al-ʿIrāq al-kabīr ʿAbbās al-ʿAzzāwī*, “Malāḥiq Ġarīdat al-Madā al-Yawmiyya”, 27 July 2011 <<http://www.almadasupplements.com/news.php?action=view&id=2668>>; Ḥamīd Rašīd, *Sāʿa maʿa muʿarriḥ al-ʿIrāq ʿAbbās al-ʿAzzāwī*, “Malāḥiq Ġarīdat al-Madā al-Yawmiyya”, 01 September 2013 (orig. “Maġallat al-Waqt” 14/Dec. 1957), (both) Viewed 06 May 2016 <<http://www.almadasupplements.net/news.php?action=view&id=8411>>. In the regional context, it is noteworthy that Saudi scholars have shown a keen

have been rediscovered to a certain extent in 21<sup>st</sup> century Iraq, and they are praised for their facility in languages, Al-‘Azzāwī in Persian-Farsi and Ottoman-Turkish, Sarkīs in Ancient Greek, Hebrew, Aramaic and Assyrian.

## 2. On the Life and Work of the Iraqi Scholar

The entries in Arabic standard bio-bibliographical dictionaries<sup>9</sup> and remarks in diverse articles<sup>10</sup> provide us with basic information on the Iraqi scholar’s life and work. Unfortunately, the data given is often contradictory and incomplete. Not even the autobiographical notes quoted in some publications<sup>11</sup> clarify things for us. This is why details as to year dates can only be approximately specified.

Al-‘Azzāwī was born circa 1307/1890 in the Diyālā district near to Baghdad in a rural Sunnite Bedouin milieu. As his name already suggests, he belonged to the ‘Azza tribe which is to be found in various regions of Iraq. After the early death of his father, the mother moved together with her two sons, ‘Abbās and his younger brother, to Baghdad to settle there in the paternal uncle’s house. ‘Abbās received his whole education in the Iraqi capital, first at the (traditional and Ottoman) elementary school, then at the

---

interest in the work of Al-‘Azzāwī. One reason may be the latter’s positive remark on the Āl Su‘ūd and his until recently unpublished book on (the Saudi provinces) Nağd and al-Aḥsā’ (cf. *Ašhar mu‘arriḥ ‘irāqī fī al-‘aṣr al-ḥadīṯ. Al-‘Azzāwī fī kitābihi al-maḥṭūṯ ‘an Nağd wa-al-Aḥsā’*: lam ta‘rif Nağd wa-al-Aḥsā’ wa-al-Ġazīra al-‘Arabīyya al-amn wa-al-quwwa wa-al-istiqrār illā ba‘da zuḥūr usrat Āl Su‘ūd, “Ar-Riyād”, 18 May 2007 <<http://www.alriyadh.com/250315>>, Viewed 06 May 2016.) However, his statement has to be related to his wish for a similar stability in Iraq (cf. below) which should not be confused with a pro-Wahhabi attitude. Cf. also for his teacher’s views (Hala Fattah, *‘Wahhabi’ Influences, Salafī Responses: Shaikh Mahmud Shukri and the Iraqi Salafī Movement, 1745–1930*, “Journal of Islamic Studies” 2003, 14, pp. 131, 136). For the most voluminous study on the Iraqi scholar cf. the Saudi publication by Asmā’ Sālim Aḥmad ‘Afīf, *Al-Mu‘arriḥ ‘Abbās al-‘Azzāwī wa-ḡuhūduhu fī dirāsāt ta‘rīḥ al-‘aqīda wa-l-firaq al-mu‘āšira bil-‘Irāq*, II vols. (991 p., originally a MA-thesis), Dār al-Tawḥīd, Ar-Riyād 2009 (not available to me until now). For a short description of its contents *Iṣḍārāt ḥadītha: al-mu‘arriḥ ‘Abbās al-‘Azzāwī wa-ḡuhūduhu fī dirāsāt ta‘rīḥ al-‘aqīda wa-al-firaq al-mu‘āšira fī al-‘Irāq*, “Ar-Riyād”, 07 August 2009 <<http://www.alriyadh.com/450397>>.

<sup>9</sup> ‘Umar Riḍā Kaḥḥāla, *‘Abbās al-‘Azzāwī (1890–1971)*, in: *Al-Mustadrak ‘alā mu‘ḡam al-mu‘allifīn*, Mu‘assasat ar-Risāla, Bayrūt 1985, pp. 321f.; Yūsuf As‘ad Dāğir, *Al-‘Azzāwī, ‘Abbās 1888–17/7/1971*, in: *Maṣādir ad-dirāsa al-adabīyya*, vol. III.1, Al-Maktaba aš-Šarqīyya, Bayrūt 1972, pp. 820–823; Kūrķīs ‘Awwād, *‘Abbās al-‘Azzāwī*, in: *Mu‘ḡam al-mu‘allifīn al-‘irāqīyyīn fī al-qarnayn at-tāsi’ ‘ašar wa-al-‘iṣhrīn 1800–1969*, Maṭba‘at al-Irṣād, Bağdād 1969, Vol. II, pp. 197–199.

<sup>10</sup> Witold Rajkowski, *‘Abbas Al-‘Azzawi, An Iraqi Historian*, “Islamic Culture” 1953, 23, pp. 37–41; Salīm al-Alūsī, Preface to *Ta‘rīḥ ‘ilm al-falak fī al-‘Irāq*, by ‘Abbās al-‘Azzāwī, Bayt al-Ḥikma, Bağdād 2004, pp. 14–29; Ibrāhīm Ḥalīl al-‘Allāf, *Al-Mu‘arriḥ ‘Abbās al-‘Azzāwī 1890–1971*, n.p. 2010, Viewed 06 May 2016, <<http://www.wallablogspotcom.blogspot.de/2010/01/1890-1971.html>> (= orig. in *Mawsū‘at al-mu‘arriḥīn al-‘irāqīyyīn al-mu‘āširīn* by Al-‘Allāf, in “Mağallat ‘Ulūm Insāniyya (al-iliktrūniyya)” – <[www.ulum.nl](http://www.ulum.nl)>).

<sup>11</sup> As in the obituary written by the Saudi journalist Ḥamd al-Ġāsir (in the magazine “Al-‘Arab” 1971), cited by Dorothee Schlüter, “‘Abbās al-‘Azzāwī (gest. 1971) und seine Sicht der Geschichte des Irak” (MA-thesis, University of Freiburg, 1998), pp. 3ff. See also Rašīd, *Sā‘a*, and Ar-Ruṣūdī, *Mu‘arriḥ*, and autobiographical notes in Al-‘Azzāwī’s works.

Ottoman *rüşdiyye*<sup>12</sup> and various *madrasas*<sup>13</sup>, finally at the Law Faculty (1919–1921). His acquaintance with members of the famous Al-Alūsī family of Baghdad<sup>14</sup> was to have a long-lasting effect on Al-‘Azzāwī. In particular Maḥmūd Šukrī al-Alūsī (1857–1924), one of his teachers and one of the principal figures of early 20<sup>th</sup> century Iraqi *Nahḍa* and Arab *Salafī* reform movement, greatly influenced him. Maḥmūd Šukrī had close contacts to the Carmelite father Anastase (d. 1947), the driving force behind the periodical “Luġat al-‘Arab”, in which Al-‘Azzāwī would publish his first articles on history. In addition, the scholar had good connections to the Damascene scholar Muḥammad Kurd ‘Alī (1876–1953), the founder and president of the Arab Academy in Damascus (1918–1953).<sup>15</sup> Maḥmūd Šukrī, who himself had authored books on history, seems to have awakened Al-‘Azzāwī’s interest in historical subjects. ‘Alā’ ad-Dīn, his other teacher of the Al-Alūsī family, was chief *qāḍī* of Baghdad from 1917 until his death in 1921 and helped Al-‘Azzāwī to get an employment at the Šarī‘a-Court. Another important incident in his life which is mentioned by Sālīm al-Alūsī and dated in the mid-1920s apparently attracted Al-‘Azzāwī’s attention to collecting rare manuscripts: He was entrusted by the *Awqāf* ministry with the cataloguing of the manuscripts scattered in many Baghdad’s mosques and *madāris*. Directly after his studies at the Law Faculty or at the beginning of the 1930s Al-‘Azzāwī quitted public service<sup>16</sup> to work as a private lawyer until his retirement in 1962/63.

At the same time this indefatigable scholar was preoccupied with collecting material on the history and culture of the Arab Middle East, Iraq in particular, as well as with writing, editing, and translating. As a result, he left not only an impressive number of published and unpublished studies<sup>17</sup>, but also a huge private library with about 15,000 volumes<sup>18</sup>, among them more than 6,000 manuscripts, some of them rare copies, as well as several material documents.<sup>19</sup> His wish, expressed in his will, that this library which was frequently used by foreign researchers, should be kept together, was in the end not realized. In the 1990s it was scattered in all directions.<sup>20</sup> Al-‘Azzāwī’s writings cover a wide range of topics, including political, social, cultural (religious, literary)<sup>21</sup>, artistic<sup>22</sup>,

<sup>12</sup> On the Ottoman school system introduced during the Tanzimat, see M. Winter, *Ma‘ārif*, in: *The Encyclopaedia of Islam, second edition* (= *EI<sup>2</sup>*), V (1984), p. 904, cf. also p. 911 (for Arab countries).

<sup>13</sup> Among them the *Mirgāniyya*; on this college for higher Islamic studies see Fattah, ‘*Wahhabi*’ Influences, p. 139.

<sup>14</sup> Edouard Méténier, *al-Alūsī family*, in: *Encyclopaedia of Islam, THREE* (= *EI3*), Brill Online 2016 <[http://referenceworks.brillonline.com/entries/encyclopaedia-of-islam-3/al-alusi.family-COM\\_22713](http://referenceworks.brillonline.com/entries/encyclopaedia-of-islam-3/al-alusi-family-COM_22713)>.

<sup>15</sup> On him, who was originally from the Kurdish region of Iraq, see Ch. Pellat, *Kurd ‘Alī*, in: *EI<sup>2</sup>*, V (1981), pp. 437f.

<sup>16</sup> He also worked as a teacher after receiving the *igāza* (teaching license) from ‘Alā’ ad-Dīn (1908–1917).

<sup>17</sup> Among them are his travelogues to Istanbul, Syria, Egypt, and the Maghreb.

<sup>18</sup> Rašīd, *Sā‘a*, even speaks of 20,000 volumes.

<sup>19</sup> Among them were coins, seals, calligraphies, pictures, and stone inscriptions.

<sup>20</sup> S. al-Alūsī, Preface, p. 20.

<sup>21</sup> See his studies on Iraqi literature.

<sup>22</sup> Cf. his work on Iraqi music.

and scientific) and financial, economic aspects of history. Most of his works are devoted to Iraqi history between the 13<sup>th</sup> century and the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and use written sources (texts in Arabic, Persian, Ottoman, including manuscripts) and material (e.g. coins, inscriptions, archaeological artefacts, photos) historical documents as well. His fame as a great historian is above all based on two monumental works which contain abundant, informative and valuable details: *Ta'riḥ al-'Irāq bayna iḥtilālayn* ("History of Iraq between the two Occupations", i.e. between the Mongol invasion in 1258 and the British occupation in 1917<sup>23</sup>), and *'Aṣṣā'ir al-'Irāq* ("The Tribes of Iraq").<sup>24</sup> Al-'Azzāwī had his most productive and prolific period between the 1930s and the 1950s. In the 1960s far fewer publications are mentioned. One may speculate if this was due to his advanced age, to poor health, to political reasons, or if it were the result of his not being nominated as an active member of the Iraqi Academy of Science after its reshuffle in 1963.<sup>25</sup> Be that as it may, it is striking that somebody who had once initiated and even headed the Academy's forerunners (*Nādī al-Qalam al-'Arabī*, and, in particular, *Laḡnat at-Ta'līf wa-at-Tarḡama wa-an-Naṣr*)<sup>26</sup>, only became an active member ten years after the latter's foundation in 1947, whereas at the same time he was corresponding member of the Damascus Academy (headed by Kurd 'Alī) from 1943 until his death and of other Academies in Egypt and Turkey.

### 3. On the Particular Features of Al-'Azzāwī's Historical Writings and His Assumed Intentions

Coming to our first question on the combination of traditional and modern modes of writing history in Al-'Azzāwī's publications: Occasional comments on the work of the Iraqi scholar reflect an ambivalent assessment. On the one hand his efforts are appreciated, and his merits are acknowledged, such as his discovery and partial editing of valuable new material, or supplying of useful information on the social and cultural history, in particular of various tribes and on the beliefs of religious sects. On the other hand, apart from noting minor errors, the reviewers of his books either directly or indirectly point to what seems to be the major objection to his work: the outdated narrative and mode of presenting historical events in an annalistic and biographical form. As W. Rajkowski states, his publications present "a painstaking compilation" of admittedly well-chosen and "consciously arranged material" rather than offering general conclusions and applying

<sup>23</sup> VIII vols., Maṭba'at al-Maḡma' al-'Ilmī al-Iraqī, Bagdād 1935–1956 (in parts now available online).

<sup>24</sup> IV vols., Trading & Printing Co., Baghdad 1937–1946 (also partially now available online).

<sup>25</sup> Also in this case the reason is not clear: maybe, because he had no doctoral degree? Nonetheless, he could have been nominated as an honorable member.

<sup>26</sup> On the history of Arab Scientific Academies see J.D.J. Waardenburg, *Madjma' 'ilmī*, in: *EP*, V (1985), pp. 1090–1094, (on Iraq) pp. 1093f.

methods of historical criticism.<sup>27</sup> A. Hourani is even harsher in his critique; for him Al-‘Azzāwī’s *Ta’rīḥ* and Kurd ‘Alī’s *Hiṭaṭ aš-Šām* belong to the biographical dictionaries of an old-fashioned kind.<sup>28</sup> As regards Kurd ‘Alī, U. Freitag has already more accurately situated him in a transitional period – between traditional and modern Arab historiography in Syria.<sup>29</sup> With respect to Al-‘Azzāwī a starting point for reaching a more balanced view can be found in reviews written by W. Caskel, a co-researcher of Max von Oppenheim’s monumental work on the Bedouins<sup>30</sup>: in commenting on the first four volumes of the *Ta’rīḥ*, Caskel observes several features by which the author distinguishes himself from mere traditional historiography. He admits that the Iraqi scholar clearly seems to follow the traditional annalistic form. However, within this old-fashioned frame he notices a modern conception of historiography. As clear indications of new approaches to history, Caskel mentions Al-‘Azzāwī’s tireless search for new material, his precise description of the sources and their cautious valuation<sup>31</sup>, his inclusion of coins, inscriptions, and other archaeological data, his interest in tribal and social conditions and in fiscal<sup>32</sup> and governmental systems.<sup>33</sup> In his review of the first two volumes of the *‘Ašā’ir*, Caskel rejects the view that Al-‘Azzāwī’s approach is not modern, and asserts that it is only his aim that is different from Oppenheim’s. According to the German orientalist, Al-‘Azzāwī delved into the problems of genealogy in order to strengthen the solidarity of the tribes. In all, Caskel weighs up the pros and cons of Al-‘Azzāwī’s publications in a neutral manner.<sup>34</sup> However, to come closer to an appropriate assessment of the work of the Iraqi historian, it is necessary to have a look at the full list of his writings. In addition, a cursory reading of his publications against the background of the socio-political context and in comparison to other Arab historians who represent a transitional phase might help to place him more accurately.

What motivated Al-‘Azzāwī to explore Iraq’s history and culture? His autobiographical remarks and introductions to the *Tārīḥ*-volumes give us an impression of his conceptions of history and may offer a first indication of his intention. These statements resemble those of the German historian Leopold von Ranke (1795–1886) or the Egyptian Rifā’a

<sup>27</sup> Rajkowski, *Iraqi Historian*, p. 38. Al-‘Azzāwī was also criticized for his dry and extremely concise style (cf. S. al-Alūsī, Preface, p. 17: “telegram style” – maybe due to his juristic education?). Cf. his reticent, discrete, or cautious responses in the interview quoted by Rašīd, *Sā’a*.

<sup>28</sup> Albert Hourani, *Europe and the Middle East*, Macmillan, London 1980, p. 164.

<sup>29</sup> Ulrike Freitag, *Geschichtsschreibung in Syrien 1920–1990. Zwischen Wissenschaft und Ideologie*, Dt. Orient-Institut, Hamburg 1991, p. 144ff, especially p. 154.

<sup>30</sup> *Die Beduinen*, IV vols., Harrassowitz, Leipzig/Wiesbaden 1939–1968.

<sup>31</sup> This is usually done at the very beginning of his works, after a short introduction to the topic and after explaining his intentions.

<sup>32</sup> Cf. his publications on the Iraqi tax system and Iraqi coins.

<sup>33</sup> Werner Caskel, Review of *Ta’rīḥ al-‘irāq bain iḥtilālāin*, vol. IV, by ‘Abbās al-‘Azzāwī, “Oriens” 1953, Vol. 6, No. 2, p. 407.

<sup>34</sup> Werner Caskel, Review of *‘Ašā’ir al-‘Irāq*, vol. I and II, by ‘Abbās al-‘Azzāwī, “Oriens” 1949, Vol. 2, No. 2, pp. 350–352.

Rāfi' at-Taḥṭāwī (1801–1871)<sup>35</sup> and other Arab historians of the 19<sup>th</sup> and beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. As life is short, Al-ʿAzzāwī tells us, it should be filled with doing something beneficial. He is convinced, he goes to say, that remembering and knowing one's own (national) history and its long-lasting impact on politics, culture and society is of great benefit to the people and essential for social (national) cohesion. He wished to present a plausible and valuable narrative based on various different historical sources that could serve as an instructive story and document to guide the Iraqi people, although he was aware of the fact that history required rewriting, through expansion of knowledge, correction of errors and filling of gaps as an ongoing process.<sup>36</sup>

From the list of his works we may discern at least two features: Al-ʿAzzāwī focused mainly on the political and cultural history of Iraq as a newly created nation-state. In contrast to other politically-ideologically inspired historians<sup>37</sup>, however, his emphasis was not on past glories or on the idealization of a specific period.<sup>38</sup> Instead he concentrated on the “dark ages” following the Mongol invasion, an era that had at that time hardly been explored. To concentrate on the story of invasions, political and economic decay, bloodshed, fragmentation, and rivalries comes close to the Haldūnian attempt of elucidating the reasons for the rise and fall of kingdoms and civilizations. At the same time Al-ʿAzzāwī paid great attention to social and economic questions which were later elaborated by Al-Wardī and ad-Dūrī for instance, who made use of his publications. In all his historical accounts, Al-ʿAzzāwī tried to be neutral and impartial and to highlight commonalities instead of pointing to essential differences among Iraqis. As V. Minorsky writes, in his review of Al-ʿAzzāwī's book on the Kākā'iyya, the author sees the origins of the various secret and syncretic religious communities (some of them calling themselves *Ahl-i ḥaqq*, “people of the truth”)<sup>39</sup> in the *futuwwa* organization<sup>40</sup>; he takes them as closely affiliated and differing only in their leadership, and repeatedly insists on the basic unity of the Kakai and the Sarli, the Qizilbash, the Shabak, Suhrawardiyya, etc. On the whole, Minorsky appreciates the author's impartial attitude towards these “peaceful and innocuous communities of Iraq” and highlights that unlike other scholars Al-ʿAzzāwī avoided repeating the (centuries-old) “crude accusations of debauchery”.<sup>41</sup> In the same conciliatory and open-minded attitude

<sup>35</sup> Cf. Choueiri, *Modern Arab Historiography*, pp. 17ff.

<sup>36</sup> Cf. Al-ʿAzzāwī, *Ta'riḥ* I, pp. 3–5; Schlüter, “Abbās al-ʿAzzāwī”, pp. 8f (quoting Al-Ġāsir's article of 1971); Bashkin, *Other Iraq*, p. 129.

<sup>37</sup> Cf. for the interwar period the historians mentioned by Reeva Simon, *The Teaching of History in Iraq before the Rashid Ali Coup of 1941*, “Middle Eastern Studies” 1986, 22, pp. 37–51.

<sup>38</sup> Cf. examples mentioned in Singh, *Arab Historiography*, pp. 97f.

<sup>39</sup> There are far more studies on the Iranian Ahl-e ḥaqq (*Yaresan*) than on the Iraqi subgroups (*Kakai*). Cf. Martin van Bruinessen, *Ahl-i Ḥaqq*, in *EP*<sup>3</sup>, Brill Online 2013.

<sup>40</sup> This identification is not completely unfounded if we take the later connections of the “associations of young men” to mysticism and Sufi brotherhoods into account. Cf. Fr. Taeschner and Cl. Cahen, *Futuwwa*, in *EP*<sup>2</sup>, and Matti Moosa, *Extremist Shiites. The Ghulat Sects*, Syracuse Univ. Press, Syracuse (New York) 1988, pp. 170f. (who often refers to Al-ʿAzzāwī, cf. in this context pp. 179ff.).

<sup>41</sup> V. Minorsky, Review of *Al-Kākā'iyya fil-ta'riḥ*, by ʿAbbās al-ʿAzzāwī, “Oriens” 1953, Vol. 6, No. 2, pp. 410 and 408 for the preceding remarks.

the Iraqi historian wrote on the Yazidis and edited a treatise on Ismaili doctrines.<sup>42</sup> Rajkowski describes the scholar as “a modest and un-assuming person, who does not seek publicity or propaganda” and “likes to call himself a Darwish”.<sup>43</sup> This impression of his personality is confirmed by other contemporaries who were acquainted with him, interviewed him, or worked for him: Al-‘Azzāwī never interfered in daily politics, and claimed to have “no opinion on political parties”<sup>44</sup>. He was not an Arab nationalist, more a patriot interested in the survival of Iraq as an entity as against its breaking apart again along political, ethnic, religious and tribal lines. Another example of his call for cooperation and reconciliation is given in his volumes on Iraqi tribes. When describing their customs and habits he always tried to balance their good and bad traits and to emphasize that they are part of the nation with the same rights as citizens. Allegedly against better knowledge he did not attest to any major differences between *‘urf* and *šarī‘a*, between the Arab and Kurdish tribes, between Shi’ites and Sunnites. At the end of the first volume he proposes a gradual reform that would provide practical help and try to convince without coercion or violence. In contrast to the tendencies of previous governmental policies he pleads for the tribes not to be turned against one another.<sup>45</sup>

#### 4. Concluding Remarks – A Preliminary Assessment of Al-‘Azzāwī’s Significance

His tribal background and education imbued Al-‘Azzāwī with a spirit of humanity and solidarity on the one hand, and with a commitment to the concepts of *Nahḍa* and *Iṣlāḥ* on the other. His works can be read as a plea to build a nation on the basis of common political and cultural heritage without ignoring the differences or allowing there to be no room for pluralism and autonomy. Thus, he attempted to foster a sense of collective Iraqi national identity beyond tribal, religious, and ethnic particularities and differences. Next to a basic national consensus the Iraqi scholar regarded mutual respect and tolerance and collective efforts as necessary foundations for the stability of a nation, whose social cohesion had been threatened since its independence by various conflicting interests, power struggles, and external intervention. With his ambitious comprehensive approach to cultural history he hoped to promote knowledge and awareness of a common heritage in order to prevent the detrimental effects of the divide-and-rule strategies experienced over the past centuries. From this perspective it comes as no surprise that his writings gained new relevance for at least some Iraqis in the aftermath of 2003.

---

<sup>42</sup> This objective presentation clearly differs from the anti-Shi’ite polemics written by several of his colleagues and teachers.

<sup>43</sup> Rajkowski, *Iraqi Historian*, p. 40. In this context it seems noteworthy that he corresponded with the French orientalist Louis Massignon and with the German Hellmut Ritter, who both were authorities on Islamic mysticism (cf. Rašūḍī, *Mu‘arriḥ*).

<sup>44</sup> See Rašūḍī, *Sā‘a*.

<sup>45</sup> Al-‘Azzāwī, *‘Ašā‘ir* I, pp. 434ff. See also Bashkin, *Other Iraq*, pp. 205, 207, 210f.