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Opponent's review of Oleg Aleksandrovich Sokolov's dissertation

**“The Crusades in Arab Social Thought, Politics and Culture (Second Half of the 19th –
First Half of the 20th Centuries)”**

I read this dissertation with great interest and pleasure. Oleg A. Sokolov's thesis provides a very systematic overview of how Arab intellectuals, writers/artists and politicians made references to the Crusades in the period 1859 to 1948. The general argument is that lots of references can be found, for various purposes, so that we should not continue to assume that the ‘anti-crusader rhetoric’ only developed after the emergence of the state of Israel. As there are indeed very few studies on pre-1948 uses of the Crusades in Arab literature and ideological writing, I am convinced that this is a very valid result of this thesis, and that this thesis therefore has high value as a pioneering inquiry.

The thesis impresses by its very clear structure; the chapters deal with particular periods and genres, in some cases furthermore broken down by regions of origin. On the whole the approach is author-centered: We see how the crusades are being referenced and interpreted by Maronite historians, Pan-Ottomanist intellectuals, Pan-Islamists, Pan-Arabists, political and military leaders, as well as by poets and authors of novels. Each individual case is preceded by a brief historical introduction and accompanied by a succinct contextualization of the given statements. The methodology is sound, and the treatment of sources is highly professional. I



was pleased to see Anna Dolinina and Mikhail Rodionov prominently used among the guiding secondary literature, which otherwise is of course mostly Anglophone and of global scope, with Carole Hillenbrand having authored the most relevant books about the Muslim reception of the Crusades.

Given the thesis builds on a wealth of documentation and individual cases, each case is kept very brief. This is beneficial for the straightforwardness of the major argument but perhaps also the major limitation of the present thesis: for the sake of a systematic argument about the existence of varied discourses on the Crusades before 1948, the dissertation's core text is kept to a mere 130 pages. The result is that we jump from case to case, and from context to context. Would going into more depth with some cases have made the argument more complicated, or stronger? Would an alternative thematic design have demonstrated more links and innovations in the Crusader discourse than the one that was chosen, and that is largely linked to the individual biographies of the writers? In what follows I will raise a number of questions and suggestions that came up while reading the thesis.

While Sokolov does his best to trace the origins of a given statement (from whom might the author have received the information, or the interpretation?), there is not much said about the assumed genealogies of "crusade-referencing"; the exceptions are the impact of Shawqi's poetry (hard to miss!), the reception of Maronite literature (Nicholas Murad and Istifan Duwayhi on others, with a line also including Amin al-Rayhani, for instance), and a proposed genealogy of anti-crusader rhetoric from Rida to Banna and Qutb (here the novelty being that already Rida and Qutb are emphasized; so far historians accentuated only the role of Sayyid Qutb for designing the typical "Zionist-Crusader" rhetoric). These prominent personalities appear as pioneers of the (anti-) crusader discourse, with little in-between them.

At the same time Sokolov accentuates that already in the mid-nineteenth century, the Arab public must have had a significant memory of the Crusades, since otherwise they would not have understood the individual references of those authors, for the references are usually short without telling much about the actual historical background of the Crusades they refer to. This is an argument "ex negativo" based, naturally, on a certain speculation; you could also argue that a given Arab author has little to say about the historical crusades because he is not interested in the historical evidence, or had no access to the relevant books, or does not think his public needs to know the actual history to experience the emotive power of the parallel he draws. Sokolov's argument (in the sense of "these authors did not find it necessary to explain who Saladdin was, so we can conclude the public must have had a living memory of the



Crusades”) is also countered by Rashid Rida (al-Manar Sept 1932, page 594), who explicitly states that the public (*jumhur*) does not know much about Salah a-Din and Hittin.

The thesis furthermore suggests that the Arab memory of the Crusades survived independently of modern European influences; this argument is less coherently formulated, and in fact, the thesis also provides evidence for the powerful influence of European historical novels (Sir Walter Scott’s *The Talisman* was translated and adapted several times by Arab authors, poets, and film-makers), of European politicians (even Rashid Rida refers positively to Kaiser Wilhelm’s 1899 *ziyarat* to Saladdin’s tomb in Damascus), and European military figures who allegedly made the mistake of announcing that their actions in the Middle East should be seen as a final victory of the Crusades (incl. the British Allenby in Damascus, and the French Gouraud in Jerusalem). These factors at least triggered the use of anti-crusader rhetoric/crusade memory, and perhaps even shaped it. I miss a clear reflection on this entanglement in the conclusion of this thesis.

At any event, Sokolov is correct in stating that the major interpretations and uses of the Crusades as we find them in the speeches and texts of Arab political figures of the second half of the 20th century, from Mufti al-Husayni and Sayyid Qutb over Saddam Husayn to Osama bin Laden, have already been developed and formulated by Arab intellectuals, artists and politicians in the preceding century. This is certainly the major achievement of this dissertation, and it is explained with sufficient evidence.

Of course, many of the cases discussed in this thesis invite for discussion. Did the various authors perceive the Crusades, and the resistance against the Crusaders, as “religious wars”? In some cases Sokolov makes that clear (in general, Christian “Arab nationalist” authors downplay the religious factor, to avoid reanimating tensions between Arab Christians and Arab Muslims), in others not.

Interesting is whether the crusades were compared to jihads; Sokolov accentuates that Kawakibi stated that the time of jihad was long gone, but the period under consideration – the peak of the colonial era -- saw the transformation of the jihad concept into popular anti-colonial resistance. The jihad of the Mahdi of the 1880s would be one example, and is indeed mentioned in the thesis via a statement by Jamal ad-Din al-Afghani; did the jihadists (or Arab historians of the Mahdi war, or of the Algerian resistance under ‘Abdalqadir al-Jaza’iri for that matter, or the Arabophone Daghestani historiographers of Shamil in the North Caucasus) refer to the Crusades in their propaganda statements? Such questions could problematize the

argument that jihadi rhetoric using the crusade parallel only came up with Rida and the Muslim Brothers in Egypt. Furthermore, they would challenge the author's decision to take the year 1859 as his starting point (which is justified by the first appearance of the calque *al-hurub al-salibiyya* in an Arabic text, but difficult to sustain as this term might already have been in circulation before, in manuscripts that have not come down to us, as Sokolov mentions).

Equally worthy of discussion are the categories of "Pan-Islamism", "Pan-Arabism" and "Pan-Ottomanism" that appear here as clear-cut camps in the political debate, in order to classify the individuals that Sokolov identified as contributors to the Arab (anti-)crusader discourse.

The central personality of almost all references to the Crusades is the Kurdish Sultan Saladdin (Salah al-Din al-Ayyubi), who is often presented as an Arab in those statements under consideration here; in fact, many of the authors mix ethnic, national and religious topoi in their reworkings of the anti-Crusader theme. One of the examples given in the thesis is Rashid Rida. I would like to add that in 1932, Rida depicts Saladdin not only as a great military leader of the Arabs but in the first place as a pious man of high morality; he also emphasizes the tolerance towards Christians under his rule.

Sokolov argues that Rida did not accentuate the positive influence that the Muslims' victory eventually had on Europe, in the way Muhammad 'Abduh did (page 93 of the dissertation's English version). This is perhaps misleading. Sokolov refers to Rida's *al-Manar* article of 1932 commemorating the Battle of Hittin. I looked it up; in that piece Rida says (page 595):

"That [the Europeans] were beaten in battles prompted their ambitions, and it impacted their thinking and led them to a reform (*islah*) of their politics and of their religion, and [of all things] necessary for the independence of reason and freedom of science, so they withdrew from waging jihad on us and started to wage jihad against their own souls. "

This is a clear hint at Reformation and Enlightenment in Europe, presented here as an outcome of the "ennobling" European encounter with tolerant and free Islamic societies that 'Abduh already postulated. Before the above-mentioned quote Rida emphasized that Islam lacks the stifling ecclesiastic hierarchy and the institution of a Pope. With other words, Sokolov's presentation of Rida's position is not convincing since Rida indeed followed 'Abduh in this point, exploiting the Crusade memory for praising the great influence of Islam on Europe at that time. This excerpt is also remarkable because it highlights Rida's view that the Christian Crusades (and the religious wars following the Reformation) were a kind of jihad.



To sum up, I highly recommend this thesis for defense, and I am looking forward to having a good exchange of opinions with the author.

The dissertation meets the basic requirements established by the order “On the Procedure for Awarding Academic Degrees at Saint Petersburg State University,” candidate Oleg Sokolov deserves the award of the scientific degree of Candidate of Historical Science in the speciality 07.00.03 - General History. Clause 11 of the aforementioned Order is not violated by the author of the thesis.

With kind regards,

Micha Kemper