

Arthur John Byng Wavell



**A Self-Proclaimed
Modern Pilgrim in
Makkah and Madinah**



Spahic Omer

سيرة

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To my wife, children, parents and in-laws.

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Introduction

When Ludovico di Varthema (d. 1517)—an Italian traveller, adventurer and aristocrat, who was the first European non-Muslim to visit Makkah and Madinah and to record his journeys as well as impressions—secretly visited the Muslim holiest sites in 1503, little did he know that he initiated a culture. The culture was about non-Muslims in disguise visiting Makkah and Madinah—which is strictly off-limits to non-Muslims—while pretending to be Muslims. Some came as spies and even slaves accompanying their Muslim masters. The Muslim holy cities, on account of being consecrated, inaccessible, matchless and so, “more jealously guarded than the Holy Grail”,¹ greatly appealed to the daring explorers, trailblazers and mere adventure-seekers of the West, especially during the exhilarating age of discovery, or exploration, and the age of the enlightenment, which were taking Europe by storm from the 15th century onwards.

In 1909, Augustus Ralli published a book entitled “*Christians at Mecca*” in which he commemorated the legacies of first such European heroes. Their contributions to knowledge were

¹ Richard Francis Burton, *Personal Narrative of a Pilgrimage to Al-Madinah and Meccah*, (London: Tylston and Edwards, 1893), vol. 1 p. xvii.

invaluable concerning the ethnographic aspects of the population of Makkah, the condition of the city, the rites of the *hajj* pilgrimage, and the morphology of the city's holy mosque (*al-masjid al-haram*).²

Augustus Ralli divided the European visitors (“pilgrims”) into three groups: those representing “a cloud of light skirmishers”, those dubbed “the votaries of (nascent) science”, and “those impelled by love of adventure or curiosity”.³ The last traveller Augustus Ralli talked about was Gervais-Courtellemont, a French adventurer and photographer, who was in Makkah in 1894.

This particular time—that is, the end of the 19th century—could be seen, in general, as a conclusive transition from a traditional era to a modern one. It was an epoch that featured “the end of colonial invasion and global expansion” and was exemplified by the period subsequent to the onset of modern warfare, culminating in and simultaneously being typified by two world wars. What followed thereafter is normally understood as post-modernism.⁴

In particular, that was also a time denoting the end of the endeavours of traditional or old-fashioned Western visitors to Makkah and Madinah. Whoever came afterwards was to be styled a modern visitor or a pilgrim. Such was the end of a period and the commencement of a new one. Even Augustus Ralli himself hinted at this prospect. He concluded his book by briefly dwelling on the subject of the *Hijaz* railway. He said that in August 1908—the time he was preparing the book for publication—the news arrived that the railway from its starting point in Damascus had reached

² Augustus Ralli, *Christians at Mecca*, (London: William Heinemann, 1909), see the author's “Preface”, p. v.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 275.

⁴ Sharon L. Snyder, *Modernity*, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/modernity>, accessed on August 28, 2021.

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Madinah and that after additional two years it will reach Makkah as well. It was thus only a question of time before the snort of the locomotive was heard “within the precincts of the *Ka‘bah*,” concluded Augustus Ralli citing the highlighted phrase from *The Times* newspaper. Moreover, it was planned when the last section of the Baghdad railway, across the Taurus Mountains, was completed, it would be possible to take the train from Istanbul (Constantinople) directly to Makkah.⁵

The coming of the *Hijaz* railway was at once symbolic and practical. It was able to augment the arrival of pilgrims throughout the year and to facilitate the whole procedure of the pilgrimage (*hajj* and *‘umrah*), including the maintenance and protection of holy sites. This way, the holy cities of Makkah and Madinah were made more accessible and the *hajj* more viable. They likewise were rendered “closer” and more “beckoning”. A window of opportunities opened up for everybody. All of a sudden, the holy cities became not just nearer, but also more receptive to the world and to whatever valuable it had to offer, while much of the world, in turn and as a consequence, became a richer and more enthusiastic place.

This window of endless opportunities—involving such as pertained to the precarious political situation in the Ottoman Turkey, as the final torchbearer of the caliphate institution, and in the whole world of Islam—could not evade the attention of Augustus Ralli. He said that, inevitably, with the linking of Makkah and Madinah to the world’s foremost cultural and civilizational hubs, something of the former’s mystery “will be absorbed in the universal circulation. When the branch line is laid between Mecca and Jeddah, the entire journey will be practicable by steamer or train.”⁶ The caravans will disappear as a result and with them

⁵ Augustus Ralli, *Christians at Mecca*, p. 272.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 273.

myriads of established traditions. Hence, the arrival of the railway represented a conduit for the arrival of modern modes of living, rising over the horizons of the civilizational pristineness and purity of the *Hijaz*.

As a Western Christian, Augustus Ralli had a word concerning the future of the culture of Westerners secretly visiting the Muslim holiest cities, knowing all too well that doing so openly will never be possible irrespective of how much the region may become “inviting”, “near” and accessible. He stated that should the Christian again intrude during the novel age, “he will not be called upon to repeat such an experience as Burton’s wild journey from Medina to Mecca.”⁷ By this Augustus Ralli suggested that in the modernized future Western secret expeditions would correspondingly be easier, “safer” and more accomplishing.

Generally, the Western nations hoped that the railway spelled the beginning of a new chapter in relations between Arabia and the rest of particularly the Western world. The railway was expected to “facilitate the settlement of Arabia, and perhaps lead to the opening up of that country to Europeans.” A Western author at the beginning of the 20th century wrote, implying the arrival of contemporary life standards: “Now that the electric light burns over the tomb of the Prophet, we may hope someday to see with our own eyes the sacred cities of the Moslems.” Augustus Ralli commented on the forecast: “Let us, however, pray to see his prophecy fulfilled.”⁸

Arthur John Byng Wavell (1882-1916), a British military officer, Arabist and a fellow of the Royal Geographical Society, secretly visited Makkah and Madinah as a pilgrim in 1908-9. His undertaking was ground-breaking, in that he arrived in Madinah via the historic *Hijaz* railway that had just become operational. He

⁷ Ibid., p. 273.

⁸ Ibid., p. 274.

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was the first non-Muslim to do so. His visit illustrated, and his narrative vividly documented, the onset of modernity in the holy cities. Indeed, what Ludovico di Varthema was for the genesis of the general custom of Western Christians in disguise visiting the holy pilgrimage places, Wavell was for the initiation of the custom's new phase. Wavell was fully aware of his feat. Hence, the travelogue that resulted from his clandestine visit-*cum*-pilgrimage he titled "*A Modern Pilgrim in Mecca and a Siege in Sanaa*". The author explicitly used the adjective "modern" 24 times in a variety of contexts. Some of the noticeable expressions are "modern times", "modern civilization", "modern ideas", "modern traveller" and "modern Turks".

This book delves into the modernity disposition of Wavell's travel to Makkah and Madinah, using his above-mentioned travelogue as a primary reference. The discussion will place the author's experiences, as well as interpretations, of the modernity phenomenon in Makkah and Madinah against the backdrop of modernity as a comprehensive concept and ubiquitous trend. The book will focus on the following themes: modernity and modernism *versus* tradition; Arthur John Byng Wavell and his pilgrimage trip; Arthur John Byng Wavell's unprejudiced views on Islam; the *Hijaz* railway as a symbol of modernity; elements of modernity in Makkah and Madinah; Muslims and the challenge of modernity; Arthur John Byng Wavell's personal experiences and observations.

Conducting research on this topic, which involved several research visits to the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, and writing the book, would not have been possible without the substantial material and moral support of Mr. Anas Serafi, Vice Chairman of the Board, and Chairman of the Jeddah Division, the Saudi Umran Society.

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Arthur John Byng Wavell

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I hereby would like to express my sincere appreciation to all the persons mentioned above for their munificent help, guidance, encouragement and continuous backing. I most sincerely pray to Almighty Allah to grant all of them and their families the best of this world and the Hereafter.

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Modernity and Modernism *versus* Tradition

Modernity is one of the most intriguing concepts in present-day scholarship. It means different things to different people. Its exact origins, trajectory and manifestations are often contested even among the members of a similar school of thought. In its broadest sense, modernity encompasses both a historical period, as part of man's overall cultural and civilizational evolution, and a worldview, as well as an ideology, that comprise the paradigms of human thought and behaviour.

Modernism, on the other hand, is a much narrower concept. Primarily—albeit not exclusively—it lays emphasis on the latter sense of modernity. Modernism is distinguished by the suffix “ism” which bestows upon the root word “modern” various ideological and philosophical undertones. Certainly, the two concepts are close to each other, but are by no means synonymous. Modernity is more comprehensive and more wide-ranging than modernism. Although there are many points at which the two converge and move on together, yet everything categorized as a part and feature of modernity is not necessarily a part and feature of modernism, and *vice versa*.

For example, Seyyed Hossein Nasr, who for the past fifty years or so was at the forefront of debates on the relations between Islam and Islamic tradition and the West and Western modernity, normally employs the word “modernism”, rather than “modernity”. In his book *“Traditional Islam in the Modern World”*, he repeatedly used the term “modernism”—more than a hundred times. Whereas the term “modernity” he did not use even once. The same is true with regard to the contents of his book *“Knowledge and the Sacred”*.

This is understandable, bearing in mind that Nasr’s main focus were the philosophical dimensions of the debates. However, if he felt that making a distinction was necessary, he resorted to employing the expression “the modern world”, in lieu of “modernity”. To him, it seems, the two expressions were rather identical. Occasionally he used the idiom “the modern world” and “modernism” at the same time, implying thereby the totality of an existential condition.¹

That there is a fine line between “modernity” and “modernism” testifies the fact that although Nasr employed “modernism”, and not “modernity”, Joseph E.B. Lumbard nevertheless wrote an article entitled “Seyyed Hossein Nasr on Tradition and Modernity”.² He used as primary references Nasr’s above-mentioned two books extensively. Lumbard’s article is part of an anthology of articles published as a book entitled *“Tradition and Modernity, Christian and Muslim Perspectives”*. While Nasr himself addressed modernism, he is customarily bracketed with discourses

¹ Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Knowledge and the Sacred*, (New York: State University of New York Press, 1989), p. 75.

² Joseph E. B. Lumbard, *Seyyed Hossein Nasr on Tradition and Modernity*, inside: “Tradition and Modernity, Christian and Muslim Perspectives”, edited by David Marshall, (Washington: Georgetown University Press, 2010), pp. 177-184.

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on modernity, which in fact is not wrong in that modernity is a broader concept and encompasses the former.

At any rate, the adjective “modern” is related both to modernity and modernism. It is universal, so to say, and although every now and then it is as much overused as misused, it can hardly be off the beam completely. “Modern” can signify either a result of the innate dynamics of history, or a result of ideological constructs as regards the evolution of history. However, most of the time, “modern” refers to things and ideas that are not just new, unique, innovative and fashionable—for there always existed original and groundbreaking things (inventions)—but are also opposed to, yet antagonistic towards, old systems and traditions.

The problem with the latest version of “modern developments”, which ushered mankind into the age of ideologized “modernity /modernism” and “modern civilization”, is that it led to violent ruptures with tradition. Traditional values and traditional ways of doing things were continuously assailed and prevented from evolution and necessary adaptation processes. The entire world of tradition was threatened thereby and its mere survival was at stake. The progress of modern civilization was keen on looking forward only, leaving no—or extremely little—of traditional importance in its wake.

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Figure 2: Wavell embarked on his adventures because of two reasons: out of curiosity, and to expand the frontiers of modern knowledge, in particular in the scientific fields of geography, geology, ethnography and biology.

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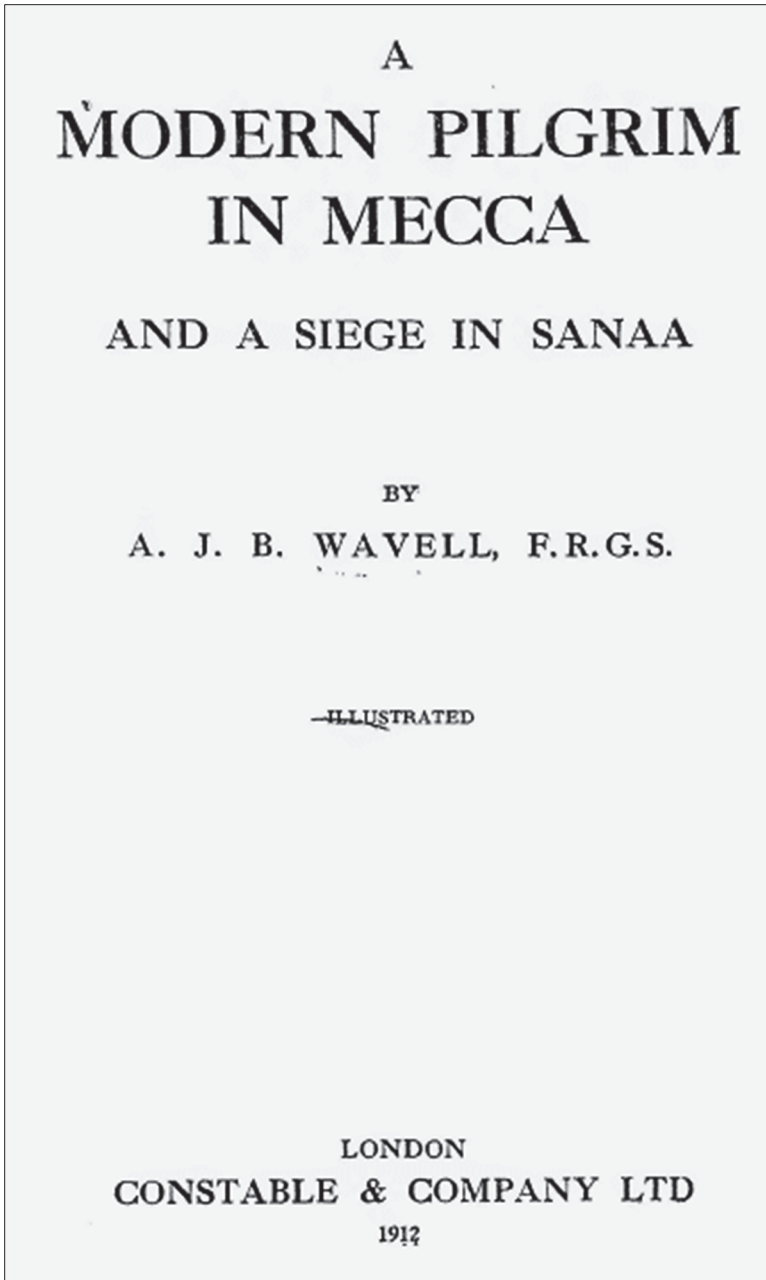


Figure 3: The travelogue that resulted from Wavell's secretive visit-cum-pilgrimage he titled "*A Modern Pilgrim in Mecca and a Siege in Sanaa*".

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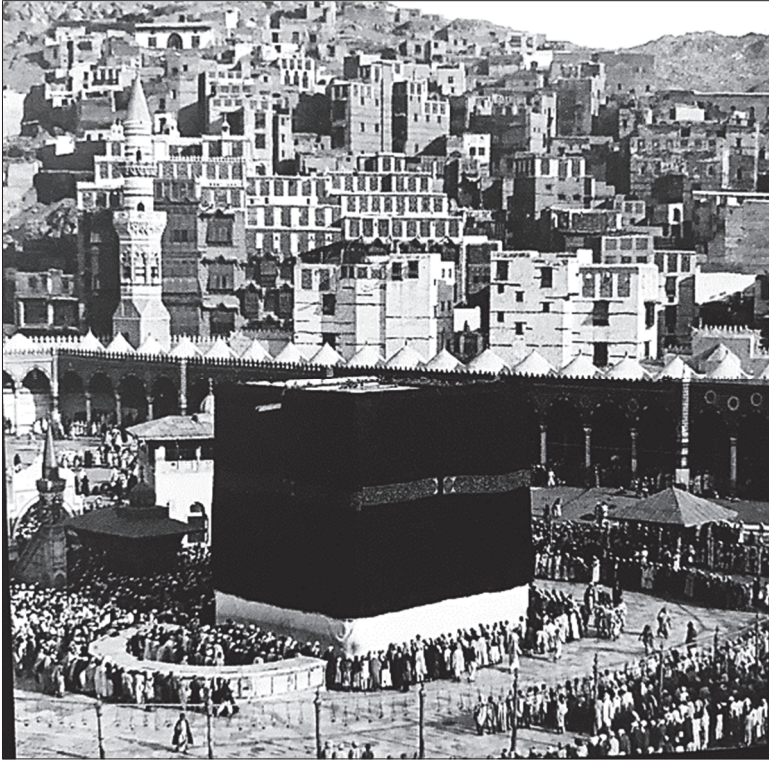


Figure 4: Makkah's holy mosque (*al-masjid al-haram*) in 1907-08, one year before Wavell's *hajj*. Picture was taken by Muhammad Afandi al-Sa'udi. (Farid Kioumgi and Robert Graham, *Musawwir fi al-Hajj*).



Figure 5: The atmosphere inside the holy mosque of Makkah (*al-masjid al-haram*) in 1907-08 during the *Jumu'ah* (Friday) prayer.

Picture was taken by Muhammad Afandi al-Sa'udi.
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Picture was taken by Muhammad Afandi al-Sa'udi.
(Farid Kioumgi and Robert Graham, *Musawwir fi al-Hajj*).



Figure 7: The courtyard of the Prophet's Mosque in Madinah in 1907-8.

Picture was taken by Muhammad Afandi al-Sa'udi.

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(Farid Kioumgi and Robert Graham, *Musawwir fi al-Hajj*).



Figure 8: The Prophet's Mosque in Madinah in 1907-8
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Picture was taken by Muhammad Afandi al-Sa'udi.
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Picture was taken by Muhammad Afandi al-Sa'udi.
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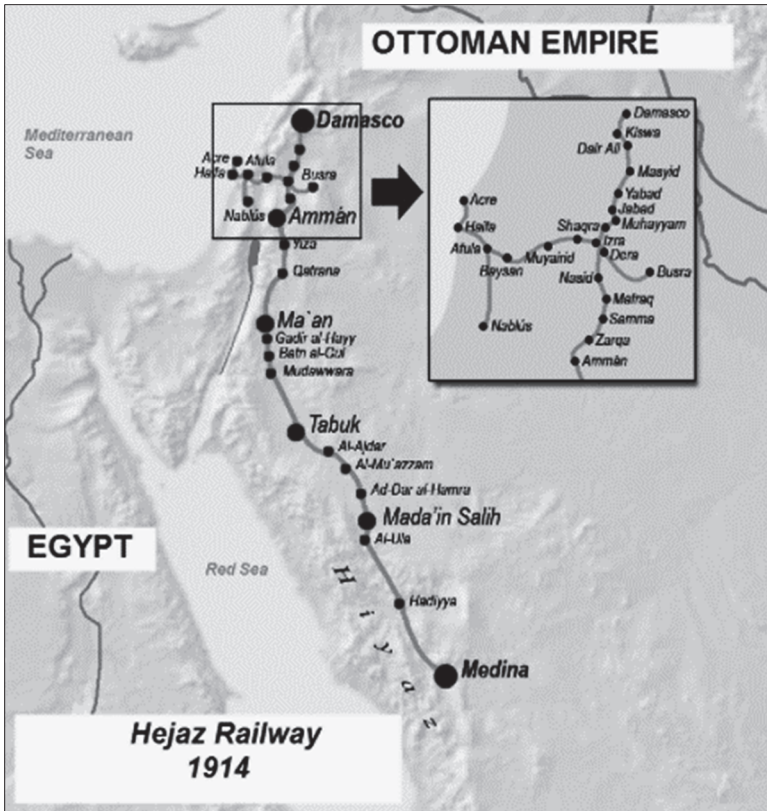


Figure 10: One of the most interesting developments in the latter political, economic and religious history of the Ottomans was the *Hijaz* railway project. This map details the railway route and stations in 1914. (*Hejaz Railway*, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hejaz_railway#Construction, accessed on November 22, 2021).

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Figure 11: The *Hijaz* railway was conceived by Sultan Abdul Hamid II in 1900. This picture depicts passengers on board a *Hijaz* railway train. (*The Ottomans Built a Railway Which Linked Istanbul to Madinah*, <https://ilmfeed.com/the-ottomans-built-a-railway-which-linked-istanbul-to-madinah>, accessed on November 22, 2021).



Figure 12: Arthur John Byng Wavell arrived in Madinah via the historic *Hijaz* railway that had just become operational.

He was the first non-Muslim to do so. His visit illustrated, and his narrative vividly documented, the onset of modernity in the holy cities. This picture shows some pilgrims preparing tea on the back of a carriage. (*The Ottomans Built a Railway Which Linked Istanbul to Madinah*, <https://ilmfeed.com/the-ottomans-built-a-railway-which-linked-istanbul-to-madinah>, accessed on November 22, 2021).

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Figure 13: To the right is the railway station in Madinah, and to the left is the Anbariyyah Mosque which was part of the station complex. This picture was taken during the opening of the railway station in Madinah.

(The Ottomans Built a Railway Which Linked Istanbul to Madinah, <https://ilmfeed.com/the-ottomans-built-a-railway-which-linked-istanbul-to-madinah>, accessed on November 22, 2021).



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"Arthur John Byng Wavell (1882-1916), a British military officer, Arabist and a fellow of the Royal Geographical Society, secretly in 1908-9 visited Makkah and Madinah as a "pilgrim." His undertaking was ground-breaking, in that he arrived in Madinah via the historic Hijaz railway that had just become operational. He was the first non-Muslim to do so. His visit illustrated, and his narrative vividly documented, the onset of modernity in the holy cities. Indeed, what Ludovico di Varthema was for the genesis of the general custom of Western Christians in disguise visiting the holy pilgrimage places, Wavell was for the initiation of the custom's new phase. Wavell was fully aware of his feat. Hence, the travelogue that resulted from his clandestine visit-cum-pilgrimage he titled "A Modern Pilgrim in Mecca and a Siege in Sanaa". This book delves into the modernity disposition of Wavell's travel to Makkah and Madinah, using his above-mentioned travelogue as a primary reference. The discussion will place the author's experiences, as well as interpretations, of the modernity phenomenon in Makkah and Madinah against the backdrop of modernity as a comprehensive concept and ubiquitous trend. The book will focus on the following themes: modernity and modernism versus tradition; Wavell and his pilgrimage trip; Wavell's unprejudiced views on Islam; the Hijaz railway as a symbol of modernity; elements of modernity in Makkah and Madinah; Muslims and the challenge of modernity; Wavell's personal experiences and observations."

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