

## The Arab Quest for Freedom and Dignity: Have Arab Thinkers Been Part of It?

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The recent Arab uprisings have been an unprecedented time of dramatic social and political movement. It has also been an intense time of debate between participants and witnesses of these historic events. Among the many questions raised in the debates is that of the role of the intellectuals, or the lack thereof, in predicting, contributing to, and participating in these momentous changes. Have Arab thinkers, and particularly the critical thinkers among them, been in tune with these movements? Or have they been totally disconnected from what has been brewing in their own societies for many years, if not decades? What connections, if any, could be noted between contemporary Arab intellectual critique and contemporary Arab protestation?<sup>1</sup>

### Where Are the Arab Intellectuals?

Since the end of 2010, Arab thinkers, artists, and journalists have been commenting and analyzing the recent Arab sociopolitical movements, addressing a whole range of issues—among them the question of the place, or the lack thereof, of intellectuals in these movements.

This question stems from two phenomena: Firstly, the fact that Arab intellectuals failed to predict these upheavals; and secondly, the absence of intellectual leaders in the unfolding events. Indeed, the element of surprise has been one of the dominant aspects of the recent events, while the absence of central leadership has been another. The first aspect, in my opinion, is due to the very nature of the events themselves, namely as an outburst

of anger and revolt against accumulated injustice and suffering; and the second can be explained through the withering-away of the avant-garde role of the intellectuals over the past decades. But if such momentous events were not and could not be predicted nor led by intellectuals, what are intellectuals for? What have they been doing? And what is their role supposed to be, in any case?

The question of the role and position of intellectuals has in the last few decades been a major topic of discussion in contemporary Arab writings, mostly in connection with the relation of intellectuals to power—be it political or financial—relating to their institutional work conditions, their access to knowledge, the means available to them for disseminating their work, their margins of freedom; as well as in teaching, researching, publishing and expressing their views in general. Questions of cooptation, censorship, pauperization, and marginalization—but also of pontification, cultural and intellectual colonization and decolonization, “authentic” local knowledge production and alienation—have been central to these discussions.<sup>2</sup> To these questions are now added that of their place in the upheavals: both cognitive and politico-moral. What knowledge—or more disturbingly, lack thereof—did they have of the deep movements in their

societies? And what political and moral stand are they taking vis-à-vis these movements today?

The genuine phenomenon of surprise and the factual absence of intellectual leadership in the traditional sense might confirm a seeming disconnect between Arab intellectuals and the socio-political movements of their countries.

However, some knowledge of contemporary Arab thought sheds a different light on the intellectual and political histories of the modern Arab world. In fact, contemporary Arab critical thought shows a number of similarities with what we have been witnessing on the streets of Arab cities, towns, and rural provinces. These parallels, between developments in contemporary Arab critical thought and the characteristics of the current Arab uprisings show that intellectuals were very much in tune with the deep transformations of their societies, and that their critical writings expressed on an intellectual level what the protestors are voicing today at the political level. That there was an element of surprise, an element of unpredictability, is itself no surprise, rather part of the very nature of such overwhelming outbursts of anger and protest after long periods of repression and accumulated suffering. I contend that intellectual critical thinking will never be enough to start

revolutions. These will have to come from some other quarters of human agency, namely from the basic human revolt against injustice and humiliation. There might not be a simple linear causal connection between the two levels of expression and action, but there certainly is a connection and a comparable reaction to commonly lived realities. On both levels, what we find is the quest for an empowered sense of self that involves searching for self-reflective thought of one's own, and the search for a fair and democratic government of one's own. But if the latter quest has become visible on the streets of the Arab world, the former has not been adequately acknowledged, not even by Arabs themselves.

In what follows, I elaborate on at least four ways in which the two levels echo one another, including some reflections on the significance of intellectual work in the post-independence era before, during, and after the current uprisings.

#### *a) The Comeback of the Political After a Long Wave of Culturalism*

Over the past decades, one could see the comeback of the political reading of a century-and-a-half-old Arab malaise. As is well known, Arabs have long been preoccupied with the question of civilizational malaise, at least ever since the Napole-

onic invasion of Egypt, as the common narrative goes. Questions of civilizational decline, renewal, and identity have been major preoccupations in their writings and debates. Analyses of and remedies to the position of weakness in which Arabs found themselves in the face of the modern Western invaders proliferated throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Until the 1940s and '50s, these analyses and remedies were to a great extent political, in the sense that the cause of the backwardness as well as the secret of progress were seen in terms of political justice, i.e. in a system in which rulers are held accountable on the basis of constitutional laws. By the mid-twentieth century and with a wave of independence in the Arab world, this preeminence of the political gave way to a more culturalist approach to the malaise—a malaise that lingered on despite the euphoria of independence and state- and nation-building—or perhaps because of this. The old-new malaise arose primarily from what the post-independence states turned out to be. Endless debates and writings tried to understand the post-independence discontent by revisiting cultural heritage and by dwelling on issues of authenticity and modernization. Early critical voices, however, instead emphasized the political ailments of the post-independence

era and denounced the disenfranchisement of the people by these states. But still, the dominating and growing current was preoccupied with “what was wrong in Arab culture,” and numerous works were written on tradition, to find in it the causes of the present predicament, or on the contrary, the promises of the yearned-for recovery. It is only in the last two decades of the twentieth century that the political understanding of the contemporary Arab predicament returned to the fore, and refocused attention on the workings and failures of the post-independent state. It is precisely this focus that we find on the streets of Arab cities today.

In fact, the 1967 trauma had triggered two opposite reactions: on the one hand it pushed forward the search for a salvational native ideology that could embody a culturally and morally more genuine and faithful promise for a better future, namely Islamism; and on the other hand, it made the need for a radicalization of critique ever more pressing, occurring in the midst of desperate salvational yearnings, culturalist circular reasoning, and ideological fervor. From these critical quarters came a renewed emphasis on politics. Soon after the 1967 defeat, Syrian writer and playwright Saadallah Wannous (1941-1997) unambiguously defined the malaise as being primarily political: Arab societies

were defeated because people were disenfranchised and prevented from political participation, because people had lost the freedom to use their critical faculties, because people were abused by corrupt and repressive regimes. This political reading of the malaise was to grow louder toward the end of the century, in conferences, interviews, publications, and including in a growing body of prison literature, which offered sharp diagnoses of the workings of the police state. Political participation and democracy became pressing demands. If good political governance during the time of the *nahḍa* primarily required constitutional rule, focused on the curbing of the power of a ruler by fundamental law, after 1967 it chiefly meant the affirmation of people's power and people's rights. Moreover, compared to those earlier *nahḍa* days, the need for good political governance became more pressing, more vital, often literally to preserve life, given the widespread violations of human rights. It was no longer a question of an optional proposal to borrow good governance ideas from foreign cultures and societies, but rather, a real need to secure some level of physical and moral integrity in the face of pervasive abuse. People took to the streets because they no longer wanted to be arrested and jailed arbitrarily; to be

tortured, raped, and killed; to be robbed, to be deprived of a future; to be humiliated, to be lied to, to be impoverished; to be denied education, free expression, political participation; in a word, to be incapacitated and reduced to insignificance. The repressive regimes had incapacitated their people, and what the people demanded—even at the price of risking their lives—was empowerment, freedom, and dignity. The very concrete incapability of people to change anything about their reality because of the forbidden avenues of action in politics and society had been articulated in writings of the years preceding the uprisings. Indeed, the Arabic word for impotence, *ʿajz*, was one of the most ubiquitous terms one finds in these writings, whether in fiction, newspaper articles, scholarly essays, books, or interviews. It expressed the bitter frustration of being unable to change a state of affairs that ruined the present and blocked the future, along with conveying the deep despair that went with it. It is this *ʿajz* that people wanted to overcome by breaking the barriers of fear and storming the public scene, pushed by exacerbated despair, humiliation, and outrage. Only such a concrete political act on the part of the people, demonstrating publicly the will to force a change, could bring about the change that critical intellectuals could ad-

vocate for and recognize as an indispensable step out of the predicament, but could not undertake through their intellectual work alone.

Clearly, critical thinkers such as Saadallah Wannous, Abdallah Laroui, Sadiq Jalal al-‘Azm, Constantin Zureiq, Fouad Zakariyya, Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd, Hisham Sharabi, Abdelkebir Khatibi, and many others were not the only ones to sense and express this profound discontent—but they were the ones who articulated it in the most sober, lucid, and humanist way, drawing attention to the fundamental human values of freedom and dignity, seeing in individual and civil liberties the only source of hope and change. They warned against totalizing ideologies—whether religious or secular—resisted intellectual terrorism practiced in the name of “Truths,” and criticized the un-reflected cult of authenticity. They did engage in cultural critique, yet without giving in to the culturalism centered around issues of authenticity and identity that prevailed in the post-1967 era. Indeed, the 1980s and ‘90s were dominated by a concern with tradition and authenticity. Numerous works were produced in revisiting the classical heritage (*turāth* in Arabic), either to show that the malaise was due to some elements in it and/or to find in it remedies for said malaise. In all cases, this malaise

was understood to be inherently cultural, due to, and/or dealing with, some aspect of the cultural givens of the Arabs. But there was an increasing challenge to this approach by thinkers who realized that what was wrong with their societies was not the cultural per se, but that culture, like so much else, suffered from mismanagement of, if not the forbidding of, the political. Eventually, when people took to the streets, it was not cultural authenticity or a specific style of life that they demanded, but rather, political rights—and they demanded them from their own governments. Their protestation, their criticism, their indignation were directed not at external powers, but at their own rulers, their own states, their own political realities—not because they no longer perceived harm from external powers, but because their grievance priorities had become very clear. By clamoring on the streets and squares of their cities, the protestors expanded the clarity of these priorities and complemented the clarity achieved by the intellectuals.

#### *b) The Gaze Turned Inward*

Both in contemporary intellectual work and in current political contestation, the gaze is turned inwards, i.e., toward one’s own modes of thinking, acting, ruling, and managing of intellectual and polit-

ical affairs. Not so much because external harm—whether military, political, economic or cultural—has disappeared, but rather because of the need for radical self-reflection and radical internal protest against domestic problems, such as ideological mystification and indoctrination; the lure of salvational doctrines; the deadlocks of a mystified “authenticity”; of a mystified *Volksgeist* found in language, religion and/or tradition; essentialist views of identity; censorship, oppression, misappropriation of public wealth; the destruction of educational and cultural institutions; pauperization and socio-economic polarization; as well as police brutality and absence of the rule of law.

As mentioned earlier, the shifting of critique from external targets to internal ones occurred on the intellectual level after independence, once sovereign states became established and were later appropriated by long-lasting regimes run by individuals or families. It was deepened by the defeat of 1967 and the growing malaise of the subsequent decades. This is what I call the “critical turn” in post-independence Arab thought. Interestingly, it is a turn that we witness in other debates about cultural and political malaise in other parts of the ex-colonized world, for instance in Africa and Latin America. In the modern intellectual history of these

regions, we find a moment when past approaches to cultural and political decolonization are reassessed and reconsidered, when past struggles of intellectual and political liberation are revisited and revalued. In this turn, the focus of attention has shifted from the external other, the colonizer—on whom one had been fixated, in the effort to compare oneself to it, emulate it, fight it, and free oneself from it—to what one has been doing with oneself in the process. Then, internal liberation policies are reexamined and emancipation concepts are rethought.

It is interesting to note that in the critical turn one finds in all three regions a shift of emphasis from essence to agency, from identity to democracy, and from ideology to critique. The first shift happens with the discovery of the deadlocks of a deterministic view of identity, in which characteristics of the self (primarily the cultural collective self) are set and fixed outside history, constituting a solid image of the self that is firm and invulnerable, but which leaves no room for people's actions, choices, and responsibilities. Contrary to this view, critical thinkers defend a non-deterministic view of identity in which human agency is central, and in which identity remains in the making. The second shift occurs with the rising concern for personal and civil liberties, with

the growing demand for accountability in the exercise of power, and the pressing need for rule of law. Identity as a sense of empowered self remains relevant, but this sense is sought in the practice of critical faculties and in political participation rather than in a set of fixed features. Finally, the third shift comes with the demise of pre-set views about reality and change, and the discrediting of concepts such as socialism, Arabism, and even Islamism, which had been claimed by post-independent states and had wreaked havoc in Arab countries. The echo of this shift is seen on the Arab streets, where the people who took to the streets did not express ideological demands: they did not voice claims for socialism, Arabism, Islamism, liberalism, or communism; but rather for justice, dignity, rule of law, and political participation. Furthermore, the shift from ideology to critique is also due to a growing need in the post-independence era to relate ideas to concrete realities, to critically appropriate ideas by contextualizing and historicizing them. This shift can also be seen as a move from a “thought of authenticity,” seeking a firm affirmation of a solid self, to “authentic thinking,” understood to be indispensable for a true sense of self—thus making critique the major pillar of authenticity.

### c) *The Shift Away from Ideology*

The intellectual scene witnessed, particularly in the more critically inclined part of it, a shift away from nationalism, Islamism, Marxism, and Baathism, toward critique, democracy, and fundamental human and citizen rights—in other words, to what is demanded by Arabs on Arab streets today.

From today's vantage point, it is difficult to imagine that once upon a time, in the 1950s and '60s, Marxist ideas and organizations were the most popular ones in the Arab world, and that Marxist parties in Sudan, Iraq, Syria and Egypt attracted large numbers of Arabs who invested their sincere beliefs and commitments into the causes of justice, equality, liberation, and progress. These ideas and organizations did not wither away naturally, but were systematically annihilated by post-independence regimes which recognized in them one of the most—if not the most—powerful oppositional forces. Marxist party members and sympathizers were persecuted, intimidated, arrested, jailed for years, tortured, forced to disavow their beliefs, executed, and exiled. These regimes also repressed the other major oppositional force, namely the Islamist one, however in a more Machiavellian way: not only by using force to silence it, but also by instrumentalizing it

to further crush the left. Indeed, they allowed Islamists to overpower leftists in various social organizations, and in the process led to the Islamicization of society in the name of faith and authenticity. Inevitably, this gave the Islamists increasing popular legitimacy and made them into an even more formidable challenge to the regimes. By the early '80s, the Arab left had become a shadow of itself, totally marginalized and disempowered. Not only did the regimes succeed in crushing this once vigorous movement, but they also discredited many of its principles by claiming to rule in its name. Indeed, the Iraqi and Syrian Baath parties were supposed to be socialist, secularist, and progressive parties dedicated to justice, equality, and unity. Moreover, such aspirations to justice and liberation kept motivating those who now housed them in another movement and another ideology—that of Islamism, as in the case of Hezbollah in Lebanon. Some have found this migration between such different and even opposite political currents to be a totally bewildering aberration. But it can make sense when one keeps in mind the basic vested aspirations in each commitment. Furthermore, the final blow to the Arab left, like to other leftist movements around the world, came with the demise of the Soviet Union in the late twentieth

century. Whether and how the current uprisings will reinvigorate the Arab Left remains to be seen. What is certain is that these uprisings were not led by leftist ideologies and organizations as such.

Another ideology that was popular mid-twentieth-century was that of pan-Arabism. This expressed the yearning for might and progress through the unification of an Arab world that was, according to this view, fragmented and divided by Western powers. It represented an affirmation of cultural identity and the quest for a political expression of that identity. Unfortunately, all attempts at unification failed, and Arab unity remains an unfulfilled aspiration. This failure had been regularly lamented by politicians, thinkers, and people in general, but with time the project lost much of its attraction. On the one hand, it felt too remote to be credible, and on the other hand the realities of existing states absorbed too much of the people's thoughts and efforts for them to be concerned with some fictive state to come. Again, it is certainly not a call for pan-Arabism that moved Arab demonstrators in the various Arab countries to take to the streets since late 2010. But for numerous Arabs, the uprisings made the bond between different Arab countries real for the first time. People identified spontaneously with each other,

empathizing with causes and struggles that apparently had so much in common due to the common ills of so many of these Arab states. Arab satellite television broadcasters had since the mid-'90s created a common space of news, entertainment, and debate, and this played a major role in connecting people during the uprisings. Before that period of media globalization, Arabs were confined to their official state media, in an Arab world where the circulation of ideas, people, and goods was strictly controlled and limited. But if the satellite broadcasters succeeded, it is because these people shared so much: linguistically, culturally, and politically. Whereas pan-Arabism had presented this commonness in an authoritarian, undemocratic manner, this more recent connectedness and empathy was natural, spontaneous, and free. Following news of the uprisings introduced people to the geography of their environment, as well as to its various ethnic, religious, and regional components. The pan-Arab idea of the Arab world was moreover a homogenizing one that recognized only the Arab language, Arab ethnicity, and Islam as “the” constituents of this world, excluding the Amazigh, Kurdish, Christian, and other minorities that populate it. The '90s had started to witness a revision of this exclusive understanding of Arabism. The

recent uprisings certainly brought about unprecedented, vivid pan-Arab awareness. It will be interesting to see whether and how this will affect pan-Arabism, and what place it will give non-Arab elements and minorities.

Obviously the dominant ideology of the last few decades has been Islamism—yet curiously it, too, was absent from the uprising banners. Interestingly, it did win free elections in Egypt and Tunisia, proving to be a serious popular movement, but not the unquestionable ideology of the absolute majority. This movement will now be practicing politics, after it was banned from it for decades. Its discourses and its social organizations will have to be confronted with the political realities of its countries and regions, and engage with youth that is no longer receptive to authoritarianism and autocracy. What this new phase will do to the movement itself—to the discourses, promises, and societies in which people have become open political actors—remains to be seen. Some analysts have been talking of post-Islamism in the region—be it in Iran, Turkey or other parts of the Arab world—a post-Islamism that is neither anti-Islamism nor non-Islamism, but a transformed Islamism that is seriously concerned with democracy.<sup>3</sup>

So on the one hand these ideologies—

namely communism and socialism, Arab nationalism, and Islamism to some extent—lost their energy, credibility, and popularity over the course of the last five decades. On the other hand they also lost their relevance to critical thinking, which was keener on claiming liberties and re-appropriating critical faculties than on seeking ready-made holistic worldviews. It is those liberties and faculties that people ended up claiming in their demonstrations, rather than any of the holistic doctrines of salvation.

#### d) *Vanguard Leadership*

By the end of the twentieth century, critical Arab thinkers had abandoned the claim of an avant-garde role for themselves, rather seeing the importance of engaging the people as the main actors for much-needed change—people who manifested themselves indeed as the main actor and guarantor of change in the current uprisings.

Already before the current uprisings, many critical Arab thinkers had relinquished a leadership role vis-à-vis their societies. In a series of interviews conducted by the pan-Arab daily *al-Hayat* in 2006 and 2007, Arab thinkers were asked about their understanding of their role and responsibility in dealing with the many challenges of their countries. Many of the interviewees,

including Samir Amin, Tahar Labib, Wajih Kawtharani, Burhan Ghalioun, Turki Hamad, ‘Abdallah Ghadhdhami, Nawal el-Saadawi, and ‘Ali Harb called upon thinkers to focus on their scholarly work and produce serious knowledge in a region that suffered severely from weak production of rigorous scholarly knowledge, both on itself and about the rest of the world. They deplored the poor conditions of knowledge production in the Arab world, and also the phenomenon of mediocre scholars turned into media “experts,” lured by fame and money offered to them. Most of them saw the absence of freedom and multiple obstacles to the free circulation of ideas, publications, and people as among the most serious impediments to their work. Kuwaiti sociologist Muhammad al-Rumaihi ironically stated that the biggest “cultural” institution that grew after 1967 was that of censorship. Another major predicament they saw in knowledge production and dissemination was illiteracy and the disastrous deterioration of education. Also despair and nihilism due to economic crises, developmental failures, and unresolved conflicts in the region were difficult challenges for their attempts at creating meaning and validating norms. The violence that engulfed the region made the defense of life-affirming ideas and

values a difficult task. It also made people more attracted to salvational doctrines than sobering critique. Many left-leaning thinkers, such as Georges Tarabichi, said they found themselves alienated from their societies, having failed to communicate with them, unlike Islamists who succeeded in holding a discourse that culturally and psychologically speaks to the people. The lesson to be drawn for them was to abandon the avant-garde leadership conception of their role, and to engage people in their concerns and activities, without however giving in to populism. The mood clearly was no longer of pontification, paternalization, and illumination, rather of modest listening and engaging in a common struggle for liberty and democracy. This new positioning of intellectuals was already present in some of the movements preceding the current uprisings, such as the Egyptian *Kifaya* movement against the passing of power from Mubarak father to Mubarak son, in which a number of intellectuals were involved but no “star intellectual” postured as the main inspirer or leader of the movement. Similarly, in the Tunisian, Egyptian, and Syrian uprisings, numerous intellectuals were involved in the demonstrations and multi-faceted advocacy activities, without standing as “leading” figures of the movements.

### Intellectuals and the Arab Uprisings

My claim here is that in the dark decades following independence, Arab critical thinkers were very much in tune with their societies. Their work reflected on the deep discontent that they shared with their people, and articulated conceptually the ills they all suffered from: state repression, arbitrary rule, corruption, injustice, pauperization, social polarization, poor health, mediocre education, political disenfranchisement, and the absence of liberties and rights. They named and denounced these ills with sobriety, honesty, and consistency, in times of great despair and ideological disarray. They manifested intellectual lucidity and moral courage despite the prevailing helplessness and resignation. Their merit was to engender clarity where fear, state propaganda, and big money presses had filled the space with misleading discourses. They continued their quiet and meticulous work of self-reflection from the margins to which the powers-to-be had confined them, in environments of growing illiteracy and poverty. They continued to write, publish, and speak in the pockets of freedom that were left open to them; they managed to smuggle some of their forbidden films to eager audiences, to have their plays put on stages when censorship got occasionally distracted, to have some newspaper

supplements publish their articles (in the Lebanese dailies *al-Nahar* and *al-Safir*, and the London-based pan-Arab papers *al-Hayat* and *al-Quds al-‘Arabi* to name a few), and to have some presses publish their books. Clearly, the dissemination of their ideas was severely hampered by all these restrictions. Moreover, the nature of their work made it not destined for a mass readership, and they themselves were not mass-media figures—although they were not obscure figures either. Many of them were prominent men and women of academia, the arts, and the press—but none of them could mobilize masses. One has to add here the work of popular poets such as Nizar Qabbani (1923-1998) and Mahmud Darwish (1941-2008), who through their political poetry resonated with millions of Arabs, and that of popular cartoonists who expressed (and still do) most sharply the bitterly lived realities of the people, namely the work of Palestinian cartoonist Najji al-‘Ali (born 1938, assassinated in London 1987) and the work of Syrian caricaturist ‘Ali Farzat (born in Syria 1951, recently beaten by Syrian regime forces).

Given the overwhelming ‘ajz of this dark fin de siècle, nothing could foretell the outburst of such a popular capacity to rise and force change. No one could suspect the explosion of the accumulated ‘ajz in

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an irrepressible determination to break free from the status quo. This was certainly not caused by those critical writings mentioned above. Ideas alone could not bring about this kind of defiance. The *élan* had to come from other quarters of human reaction, namely from the intolerable pains of suffering injustice and brutality over a long period of time. So one cannot speak of a causal connection between the work of the critical thinkers and the recent popular revolts. My thesis is that the demands expressed in the uprisings were conceptualized over the years by those thinkers.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> This essay is based on my study of contemporary Arab thought: Kassab, Elizabeth Suzanne. *Contemporary Arab Thought: Cultural Critique in Comparative Perspective*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2010 (Print). For bibliographical references I will refer the reader to the extensive notes and bibliography of the book.

<sup>2</sup> See for instance the two collective author volumes on the topic: Şāyigh, Anīs. *Al-Muthaqqaf al-'arabī: humūmuḥu wa-'aṭā'uh*. Beirut: Markaz Dirāsāt al-Waḥda al-'Arabiyya, 2001 (Print), and Labīb, Ṭāhir. *Al-Thaqāfa wa-al-muthaqqaf fī al-waṭan al-'Arabī*. Beirut: Markaz Dirāsāt al-Waḥda al-'Arabiyya, 2002 (Print).

<sup>3</sup> See for instance: Bayat, Asef. "Islam and Democracy: What is the Real Question?" *ISIM paper* 8. Leiden: Amsterdam University Press, 2007 (Web. 6 Feb. 2013). For some seminal thoughts on ideology in the aftermath of the Arab spring, see: Haugbolle, Sune. "Reflections on Ideology after the Arab Uprisings." *Jadaliyya*, 21 Mar. 2012. Web. 6 Feb. 2013.