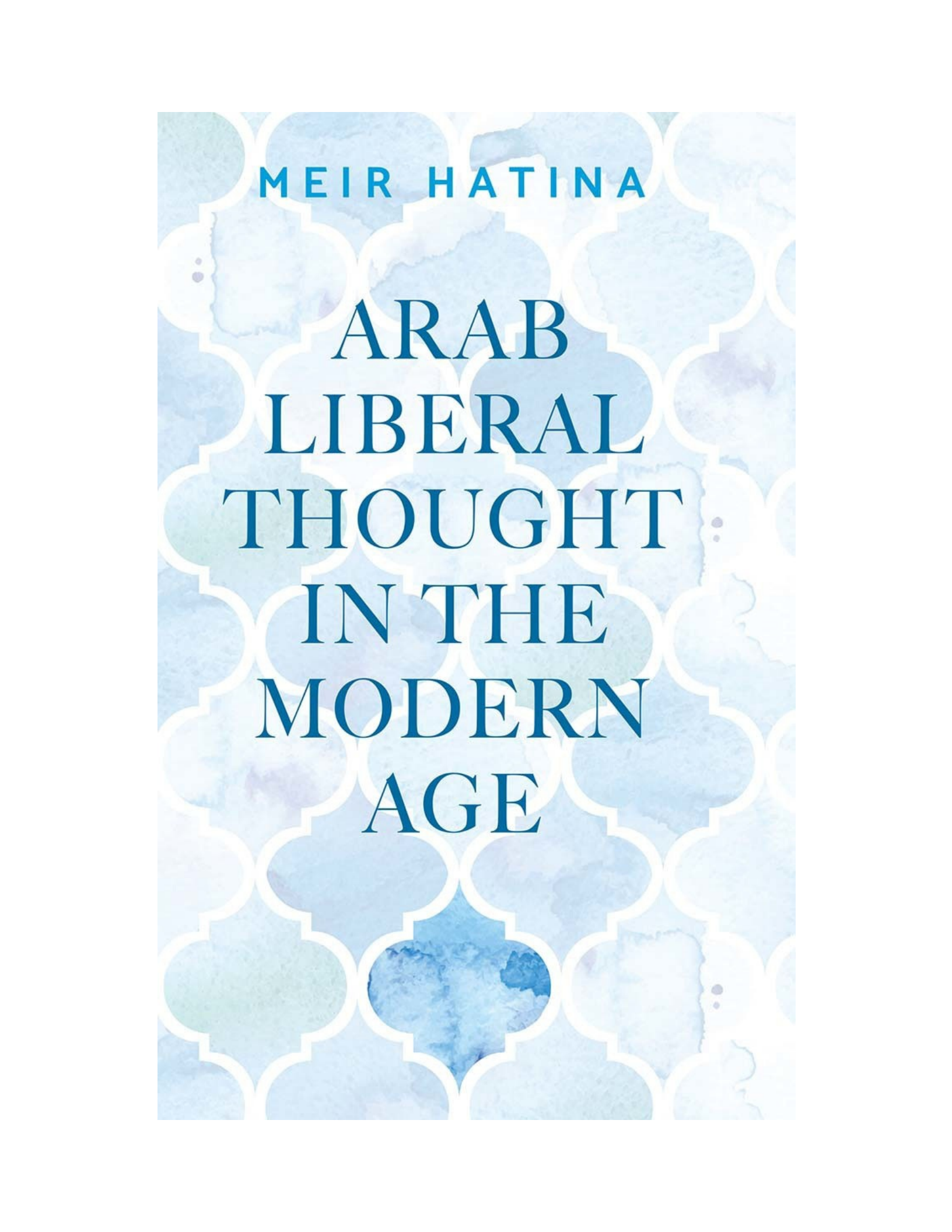
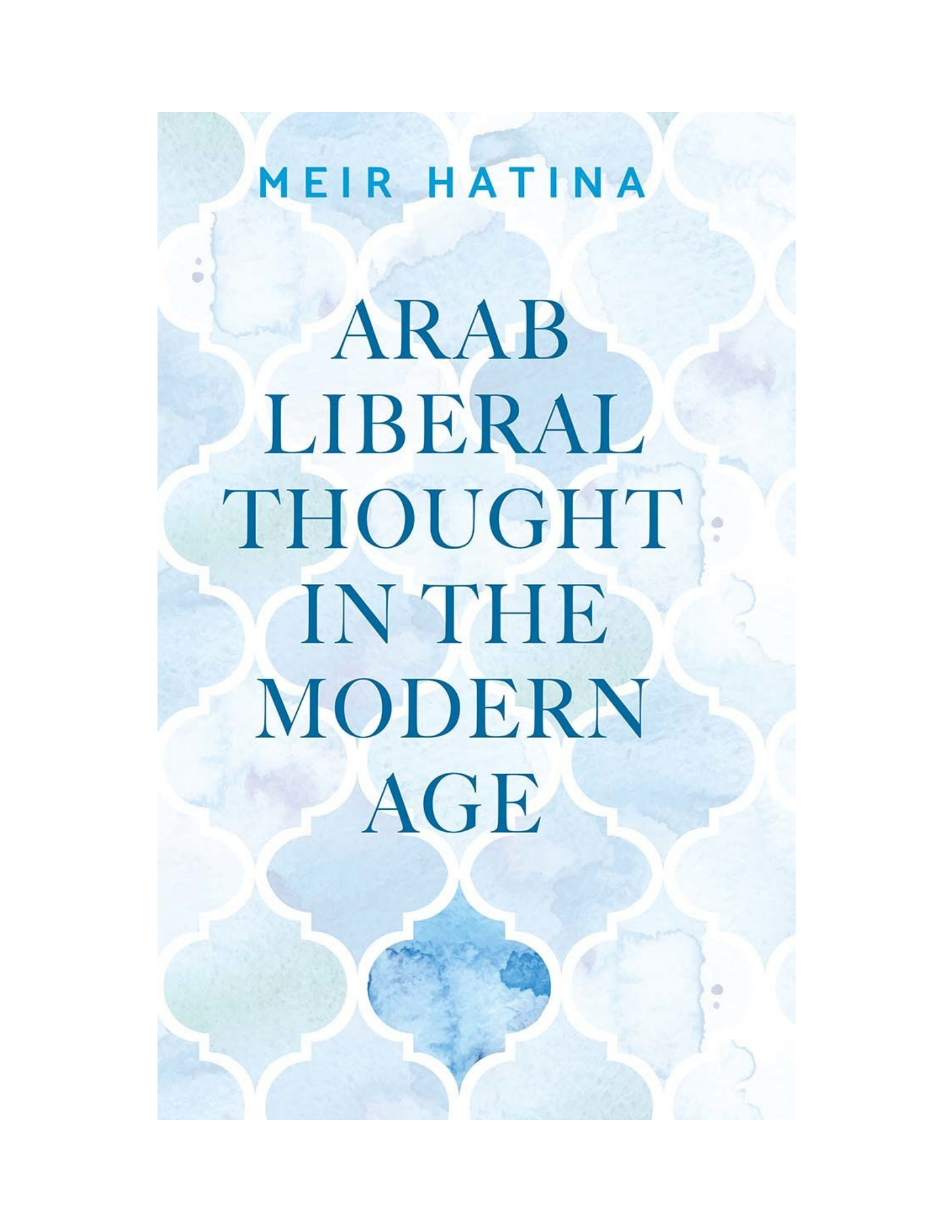




MEIR HATINA

ARAB
LIBERAL
THOUGHT
IN THE
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Arab liberal thought in the modern age

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To my son,

Ariel,

the light of my life

Intellectuals, regardless of their political affiliation, are the guardians of values and their protectors. Their permanent place is in the ranks of the opposition in its broadest sense.

—Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd, “Mashru‘ al-Nahda byna Talfiqiyyat al-Tabaqa wa’l-Turth al-Islami,” *al-Muhit al-Thaqafi* 5 (March 2002), p. 71.

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[A note on transliteration](#)

The English transliteration of Arabic words follows standard academic rules as stipulated by the International Journal of Middle East Studies. Arabic names and terms used in the English-language literature appear in their English version. However, I have at times used the North African transcription of names, such as Mohamed Talbi, Abdelmajid Charfi, Mohammed Abed al-Jabri, and Fatima Mernissi. This applies also to Persian transcriptions, such as Mohsen Kadivar, Seyyed Hossein Nasr, and Abdulkarim Soroush.

For the sake of convenience, and in order to make this volume more accessible to non-specialist readers, diacritical marks and macrons for long vowels have not been used in the main text. Arabic terms and names are italicized, except for those that recur often, such as ‘ulama’, mufti, fatwa, hadith, shari‘a, and jihad. The letter ayn is represented by ‘ and hamza by ’. Anglicized place and corporate names are given in their familiar form (Cairo, Baghdad, Tehran), and dates are given according to the Western calendar.

All translations of Qur’anic verses are those of M. A. S. Abdel Haleem, *The Qur’an: A New Translation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), with occasional, slight alterations. Verses are cited follow the numbering of the common Egyptian edition. Unless otherwise indicated, all other translations from Arabic are my own.

Acknowledgments

The research literature has tended to overlook Middle Eastern liberalism in favor of more powerful and assertive forces embodied by centralist regimes and Islamic movements. The present study, focusing on the post-1967 era, fleshes out a vivid and intriguing record of Arab liberalism, which, although lacking a compelling civic and political infrastructure or even organized knowledge bodies (such as publishing houses), nevertheless endured over time, remaining an active agent in the public sphere. Arab liberalism's contribution to a culture of political pluralism has been twofold: ratifying the right to dissent and questioning the Arab status quo.

I am indebted to a number of institutions, as well as to colleagues who assisted me in the process of preparing this volume. The research was made possible by a generous grant from the Israel Science Foundation (ISF). An earlier draft of the work was completed while I was a visiting scholar at St. Antony's College, University of Oxford in 2015. I remain deeply grateful to Professor Eugene Rogen, director of the Middle East Centre, for offering me a stimulating environment in which to pursue my research. Other Centre fellows, notably Walter Armbrust, Avi Shlaim, and Michael Willis, offered valuable and insightful observations.

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Meir Hatina

Introduction

Debating Arab liberalism

This research, focusing on post-1967 Arab liberal thought, has two purposes: to shed light on a relatively ignored ideology or narrative in the research literature and public discourse, and hence to do historical justice to its spokespersons. Indeed, while Arab liberal thought found it hard to gain momentum during this period, it nevertheless remained a constant part of the intellectual tradition in the Arab region. It continued to display ideological viability, contributed to the public debate on cultural, social, and political issues, triggered debates against its adversaries and recruited new adherents, especially among former leftists. New information technologies, mainly satellite communications and the Internet, clearly acted as facilitators, while also creating transnational spaces between the Arab world and the West. Shared experiences connected liberal writers from different regions in which key issues high on the Arab and Middle East agenda were discussed, questioning the Arab status quo and advocating alternative visions for local societies.

Arab liberal debates on freedom of religion, secularism, individualism, democracy, and human rights meant more than a mere rethinking of Islamic tradition and Arab political culture; it led to the formulation of a liberal enterprise, or even theology oriented toward action, seeking to enact an Arab enlightenment.

Defining liberalism

Liberalism and civic culture go hand in hand in modern political thought. They emerged as a reaction to absolute power, and intended to create the basis for a fair and just society. The liberal current was well integrated into the parliamentary nation-state that emerged in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Humankind's centrality in the universe and the liberty of human beings are sacred values in liberal thought. Its building blocks are individualism

(the individual and his or her needs are at its center), rationalism (utilitarian considerations as the basis for human decisions), personal and civic freedom, political pluralism, and universalism (equality of human life regardless of religion, race, or gender). On the spectrum of individual liberties, religious liberty and the separation of Church and state are central. The state is responsible for safeguarding religious freedom by means of a constitutional system founded on the principle of individual autonomy and the right to choose one's faith. From this perspective, respect for religious freedom is not respect for religion per se, but respect for the freedom of choice it represents, as part of the exercise of individual autonomy. Side by side with liberty is the principle of equality. Liberals speak of equality in two senses: equality before the law and equality that springs from being born equal, as members of the human race. However, liberalism has never waved the banner of economic equality, which conflicts with its belief in property rights and a free market, and its opposition to economic interventionism.

As an ideology, however, liberalism is methodologically flawed and remains controversial in Western society. Comprised of an array of currents, sometimes at odds with each other due to the reinterpretation of the term over time, liberalism veers between concern for individual, civil rights and the rule of law, free market (*laissez-faire*) policies and support for the welfare state (labeled "social liberalism"). All of these strands have come together under the rubric of "liberalism."¹

The rise of the neoliberal premise in the 1990s, mainly in Britain under Margaret Thatcher and the United States during the Reagan era, with its push for privatization, free trade, and sweeping capitalism free from government interference, cast a dark shadow over liberalism. "It is our job to glory in inequality and see that talents and abilities are given vent and expression for the benefit of us all," Thatcher declared in the name of competition. Neoliberalism, and liberalism along with it, came in for harsh criticism from those who saw the sanctification of competition as a recipe for deepening social rifts at home and for the imposition of Western hegemony on the rest of the world.²

In addition to inherent contradictions in the concept itself, there is a problematic tendency to equate liberalism with ideologies that are similar, though not necessarily overlapping—especially democracy—and to draw a simplistic contrast between liberalism and conservatism. Political philosophers associated with the liberal canon, among them John Locke, David Hume, Montesquieu, and

Adam Smith, did not view themselves as democrats, nor did they see individual liberty as extending into the political sphere. Only nineteenth-century philosophers, such as Alexis de Tocqueville and John Stuart Mill, brought the synthesis of liberalism and democracy as a political system into clearer relief, although linking the two has remained problematic.³ China and the former Eastern bloc, for example, defined themselves as popular democracies, yet were not liberal by any means. The same was true for Egypt under Jamal ‘Abd al-Nasser and Libya under Mu‘ammar Qaddafi. Both spoke about the sovereignty of the people but were essentially dictatorships. Some countries instated economic liberalism but without a democratic regime, such as the republics of Latin America and the Gulf States.⁴

While liberalism and democracy do not necessarily go together, liberalism and civil society do. A civil society that includes the “other,” and encourages individuals, organizations, and institutions to take an active part in matters of public and general interest, is essential for a liberal system.⁵

Although liberalism gained from the decline of communism in the late 1980s and the model of liberal democracy became more desirable, liberal ideology has continued to be harshly criticized due to its inherent contradictions. Critics contend that liberalism is guided by a moralistic utopian outlook that subordinates politics, with its arbitrariness and lust for power, to an abstract ideal of personal freedom, rule of law, and social harmony.⁶ Communitarians maintain that liberalism allows too much space for private aspirations and hedonistic behavior, and that its strong commitment to private ownership rends the social fabric, fostering egoism and arrogance.⁷ Postmodernists, such as Michel Foucault, identified the liberal system as a by-product of the Enlightenment, which created overdisciplined societies controlled by intrusive bureaucracies and ended up limiting the freedom of the individual and revealing their inhumanity in times of war and crisis.⁸

Other critics, such as the Scottish philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre, attacked liberalism for not developing a genuine moral consensus because of its utilitarian precept that frees the individual from hierarchy and teleology, and perceives him or her as sovereign in their moral authority.⁹ More contemporary critics have argued that liberalism has become an ambitious ideological project with little tolerance for true challengers. Vices are embraced as virtues; religion has become idiosyncratic, truth relative, and loneliness endemic.¹⁰

Besides being a contested ideology, liberalism has had to contend with the challenge of globalization. By bridging geographic and national boundaries, globalization questions the very relevance of territorial units—the main point of reference of liberal thinking. Moreover, as an evolving body of thought, Western liberalism lacks both a unified, coherent vision and an agreed-upon set of canonical writings, comparable, for example, to the Communist Manifesto.¹¹ The fact that it embraces a wide range of ideas and concepts is a methodological variable that must be included in any discussion of liberalism in the Arab Middle East.

The predicament of the Arab liberal

Historically, Arab liberalism, based on core values of rationalism, individualism, civic rights, constitutionalism, and cultural ecumenism, adopted a defensive position in the shadow of two transformational forces that swept twentieth-century Middle Eastern politics: centralist nationalism and the rise of Islamic fundamentalism. These forces found themselves locked in conflict with states striving for stability and legitimacy, while the Islamists jostled for political power through grassroots Islamization or armed violence.¹² Arab liberalism fell between the cracks: it was dismissed by local regimes as irrelevant, and shunned by Islamist movements as a plot to destroy the society's indigenous identity.

The rebuffing of liberalism in Islamist circles is partly due to their tendency to view believers as an integrative entity. Opening the door to liberal thinking would be tantamount to granting permission to relativist discourse, which might lead to questioning the validity of faith. In the eyes of the Islamists, liberals are not concerned with uplifting individuals and guiding them toward moral perfection, which constitutes the core of divine worship. Rather, according to them, liberalism offers a minimalist model of morality. It promotes a loosely bound society, deemphasizing solidarity and sanctifying individualism. Moreover, it is willing to compromise indigenous culture for the sake of a cosmopolitan vision.¹³

Islamist discourse on liberalism has not been uniform. Some Islamists have taken a more nuanced attitude, regarding liberals as potential dialogue partners.

In their view, most liberals or secularists calling for the separation of religion and politics may disagree over the implementation of shari‘a law, though they respect Islam and are prepared to defend it in the face of imperialist schemes. This makes them legitimate participants in shaping the image of Arab societies. In any case, Islamist spokesmen have pointed out that dialogue does not mean reaching a compromise with liberals, but rather correcting those who have “gone astray,” setting them on the right path.¹⁴ This moderate approach has not blunted the venomous criticism of other, more assertive Islamists.

Moreover, official ‘ulama’ (religious scholars) from Egypt, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and Bahrain have also denounced Arab liberals as secular (‘almaniyyun). Not satisfied with polemics, ‘ulama’ filed lawsuits against liberal writers for what they saw as insulting Islam.¹⁵ In a 1997 fatwa, Saudi Shaykh ‘Abd Allah b. Jibrin described the implications of a secular worldview and the fate of those who embraced it. His portrayal of secularism was very negative, leaving no gray areas:

Secularism is a new school of thought and a temporal movement that has decided to separate religion from state, to devote itself to the temporal world, to occupy itself with carnal lusts and pleasures, making these the only aims of life, thus forgetting the afterlife ... This description relates to anyone who denounces, either in word or in action, any of Islam’s commandments. Whoever introduces homemade laws and cancels religious laws is a non-believer. Whoever sanctions taboos, such as prostitution, intoxication, songs, and usury, and whoever believes that their prohibition harms the public and curbs principles that have spiritual value, is a non-believer. Whoever denounces or forbids carrying out the punishments (hudud) required by the Qur’an—e.g. executing murderers, stoning or flogging adulterers and drunkards, or severing the limbs of thieves—and claims that implementing them is overly strict and abominable, is included among the secularists. As to Islam’s judgment of them, God has asked: “So do you believe in some parts of the Scriptures and not in others? The punishment for those of you who do this will be nothing but disgrace in this life, and on the Day of Resurrection they will be condemned to the harshest torment. God is not unaware of what you do (Sura 2:85).”¹⁶

The ruling elites' reaction to the repudiation of the liberal discourse by Islamists and 'ulama' was rather lukewarm. They turned a cold shoulder to the liberals, conceivably because of political constraints: declaring allegiance to Islam was a way of neutralizing religious opposition. This is aptly illustrated by the case of the Egyptian scholar Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd (d. 2010), who was convicted of apostasy (murtadd) in 1995. He was forced to leave Egypt and eventually settled in Leiden, Holland.¹⁷ From there he wrote that "the lack of any public space in Egypt to exchange and debate ideas has resulted in a siege mentality. To offer new explanations or interpretations of religion becomes a blasphemous act," adding cynically that "the acceptance of an economic free market in Muslim societies does not include the acceptance of [a] free market of ideas."¹⁸ Egyptian jurist Sa'id al-'Ashmawi called the proceedings against Abu Zayd an "inquisition" (mihna). On trial here were ideas, he argued, and ideas had to be defended with the utmost vigilance.¹⁹

Arab regimes were also unhappy with liberal reformers who called for civil liberty and democratization. An illuminating case is that of Sa'id al-Din Ibrahim, director of the Ibn Khaldun Center for Development Studies in Cairo, an advocate of democracy and human rights. Ibrahim was arrested in 2000 and sentenced to seven years' imprisonment for allegedly using funds from foreign sources to undermine the security of the state. Three years later, in the wake of American pressure, he was cleared of all charges and went into voluntary exile in the United States. Some have compared him to the renowned North African historian Ibn Khaldun (d. 1406), the namesake of the center Ibrahim headed, drawing parallels between the two thinkers who were both chastised for their views and forced to wander from country to country.²⁰

While centralist states and Islamist movements contributed significantly to the weakness of liberalism in the Arab Middle East, these were not the only relevant factors. Liberal discourse itself was inherently flawed, with a heterogeneous and poorly organized following. Liberalism in the Arab world lacked a coherent school of thought. Its supporters were divided by religion, professional training, focus of interest, attitudes toward Islam, socioeconomic thinking, and their attitude to the West and Israel. The language of the liberals is too remote and too rationalist to appeal to the general public. Recognizing this problem and attempting to explain it, Abdelmajid Charfi, a lecturer at Manouba University in Tunisia, wrote:

It is the duty of the speakers of Arabic to subject the language to contemporary thinking to ensure that it does not ossify and turn into a dead weight. That is why I aspire to participate, from my own modest position, in a process that I regard as inevitable. It is in the process of “internalizing” modern concepts and at the same time avoiding the pitfalls of a false scientism, where science becomes a synonym for mystification, and the use of high-sounding jargon becomes a means to hide confused and unclear ideas. Without doubt, the balance is hard to maintain. For one feels that words betray one, especially when one attempts to express a new concept without resorting to outlandish terms or terms with unintended or unwelcome connotations.²¹

Aside from the difficulty of making modern concepts accessible to local audiences, Arab liberal thinkers have offered no concrete solutions for socioeconomic ills, beyond a call for ongoing educational and political reform.²² Moreover, their activism has suffered from a relative lack of organization. No effective network of civil associations has been established to back their cause. This was also true with regard to political parties. Two prominent exceptions were the Sudanese Republican Brothers (al-Ikhwan al-Jumhuriyyun), which was established by Mahmud Muhammad Taha in 1945 but was constantly suppressed by the state authorities, and the Egyptian Future (Mustaqbal) Party, established by Faraj Fuda in 1991, though not recognized by the government.²³ While the Arab uprisings in 2011 prodded reformers in Egypt, Tunisia, Morocco, and other countries into stepping up organizational efforts, the image of Arab liberalism as powerless in public and political life has not changed (see Chapter 5). This impotence was not lost on liberal Arab commentators. The Jordanian-American writer Shakir al-Nabulsi (d. 2015) noted critically that liberal discourse kept its distance from cheap populism and targeted intellectuals because they were perceived as “the ones who create history and not the loud crowds.”²⁴

Hani Nasira, an Egyptian writer and journalist, commented on the wide spectrum of views in the liberal camp with respect to priorities, economic freedom, and political liberty. He noted that Arab liberals remained deeply divided on whether reforms should be achieved through domestic initiatives or dictated by external forces such as diplomatic pressure or even occupation. In his view, “the liberal camp is so split, elitist and uncoordinated that it is unable to put its ideas into practice.”²⁵

The fluid reality of political upheavals and social schisms in the Arab world has further weakened the liberal endeavor and played into the hands of Islamic extremists, who see a close connection between abandoning one's faith and the ills of society. Their language is emotional, promoting myths of glory, power, and self-sacrifice that hark back to the golden age of the Prophet and the early caliphs; and they spread their message by exploiting the social networks and modes of communication at their disposal.

Historically, Arab liberals have been identified with Western civilization, whose colonial legacy was associated in the Arab mind with suppression, enslavement, and exploitation. Some liberal thinkers acquired their education in the West. In consequence, anyone sympathizing with a Western political or cultural agenda was accused of plotting to destroy the indigenous identity of the Arabs and constituting a fifth column.

Western historiography: a critical review

In addition to facing political persecution, ostracism and internal disunity, Arab liberals have also been criticized in Western academic discourse.

Disappointment with Arab liberalism is quite evident in the literature. Hamilton Gibb, Malcolm H. Kerr, Nadav Safran, and Leonard Binder, for example, expressed their frustration with a worldview that failed to meet their expectations. Discussing liberals in the Arab world in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Gibb (1947) claimed that their written work was riddled with doubts and lacked clarity. Their arguments tended to lead nowhere, and were characterized by a reluctance to address the principles of Islamic faith. Instead, they focused on specific precepts and institutions. Moreover, the discourse was tainted with apologetics, and often sought to delegitimize Christianity rather than criticize Islamic orthodoxy in an effort to prove that Islam was suited to the modern world. Gibb cited India, and to a lesser extent Turkey, as countries where modernists had begun to reexamine the foundations of Islamic faith.²⁶ A similar criticism was raised by Malcolm H. Kerr in 1966, who attributed the vague ideological attitudes of Muslim modernists toward Western civilization to an inherent dilemma: how to show that one's principles are no less advanced than those of Europe, but no less Islamic than those of the

established indigenous conservative tradition.²⁷

Safran devoted a lengthy chapter in his book *Egypt in Search of Political Community* (1962) to what he called a “crisis of orientation.” The book closely examined Egyptian liberal thought of the late 1930s. After the ascendancy of liberalism in the 1920s, loyalty to Islamic heritage resurged in Egypt against the backdrop of rising radical forces such as the Muslim Brotherhood. Thus what appeared to signify a “progressive era” dissolved and collapsed, paving the way for an era of crisis typified by nationalist reaction and dictatorship.²⁸

Binder (1988) lamented the failure of Middle East liberalism to put down roots in the absence of assertiveness and a solid ideological foundation for vigorous secularism in the local political, social, and cultural milieus. He concluded that “until the circumstances render the concept self-evidently meaningful to mass and elite alike, the prospects for Islamic liberalism will remain dim.” Binder held up the Protestant model, which had paved the way for a political liberalism in the West based on freedom and democracy.²⁹ Sami Zubaida (1999) followed suit by arguing that while some degree of liberalization has benefitted cultural production in Egypt in recent decades, these limited gains have been very insecure, especially due to the religious resurgence. “The main cultural flourishing of Middle Eastern cosmopolitanism,” he concluded, “now occurs in London and Paris.”³⁰ Another scholar, Joseph Massad (2007), went one step further by accusing those Arab Muslim thinkers who were identified as “liberals” of lacking a genuine worldview. Their writings, he argued, accepted or echoed Orientalist taxonomies and judgments of Islamic culture as decadent and advocated a Western-style secularization that would usher in democracy and liberal citizenship.³¹

Albert Hourani, in his 1962 book *Arabic Thought in the Liberal Age*, gave more credit to Arab liberalism, dwelling on its intellectual and political impact as part of his analysis of modern Arab thought from 1789 to 1939, a period he called the “liberal age.”³² Hourani created an impressive synthesis that spanned both numerous locations on the Beirut–Cairo axis and an array of Arab thinkers (Christian and Muslim). He surveyed the efforts of these thinkers to provide an intellectual compass for their communities in the shadow of European influence and socioeconomic transition. Yet for Hourani, as for Safran, the liberal age ended around 1939, in the wake of what he described as the loss of moral superiority of Europe on the eve of World War II and the radicalization of Arab political thought.³³

Hourani's classic book, though remaining an indispensable work of reference, ignited scholarly criticism in two ways. Some historians defied Hourani's periodization of modern Arabic thought from 1798 to 1939 as too rigid and argued that the liberal tradition of the Nahda (renaissance) project survived into the twentieth century and beyond. Still others questioned Hourani's very use of the term "liberal age," highlighting the fact that the period under discussion had witnessed despotic rulers and diverse ideologies, some of them radical and illiberal.³⁴

In the third edition of his book (1983), Hourani did indeed reassess his earlier use of the term "liberal age." He confessed that when he first wrote the book, he was concerned with the development of Arabic thought in the context of growing European influence and the spread of new political and social ideas. "It is to such ideas that I refer rather loosely when I use the word 'liberal' in the title," he wrote. "This was not the first title I chose for the book, and I am not quite satisfied with it ... For the [European] ideas that influenced Arab thought not only concerned democratic institutions or individual rights, but also national strength and unity and the power of governments."³⁵

Hourani's revised stance on formative Arab liberalism was reinforced by a more recent work of Abdeslam Maghraoui. In his book, *Liberalism without Democracy* (2006), Maghraoui showed that Egyptian liberals were not liberal in the current sense of the word: they expressed contempt for the Egyptian people, whom they considered unworthy, and called for the establishment of an authoritarian state that would lead Egypt toward modernity.³⁶ According to Maghraoui, "The Egyptian liberals held that in a culturally 'backward' society, the masses do not have the capacity to make meaningful choices, and therefore the exclusion of their voices needs no theoretical justification or political explanation ... The masses became the object of an arbitrary and authoritative discourse."³⁷

What "went wrong," to quote the title of Bernard Lewis's 2002 book, was that Arab and Muslim society ultimately failed to meet the challenges of modernity. As Lewis wrote:

In the course of the twentieth century it became abundantly clear in the Middle East and indeed all over the lands of Islam that things had indeed gone badly

wrong. Compared with its millennial rival, Christendom, the world of Islam had become poor, weak and ignorant ... Modernizers—by reform or revolution—concentrated their efforts in three main areas: military, economic, and political. The results achieved were, to say the least, disappointing ... Worst of all is the political result: The long quest for freedom has left a string of shabby tyrannies, ranging from traditional autocracies to new-style dictatorships, modern only in their apparatus of repression and indoctrination.³⁸

Other scholars, such as Elie Kedourie (1992) and Samuel Huntington (1996), questioned the compatibility of Islam and Western values altogether. According to Kedourie, there was nothing resembling the ideals of a representational and constitutional government in the political legacy of the Arab world.³⁹ Huntington saw Islam as a religion of the sword and mentioned the “bloody borders” between Muslims and non-Muslims as historic proof.⁴⁰

To some degree, Arab liberals were viewed as part of a broader group of Third World intellectuals who lacked the broad horizons and bold ideas needed to arouse their dormant societies and protest political injustice.⁴¹ Arab observers and scholars who argued that intellectualism and liberalism were, and still are, in a state of crisis (*hazma*) and impotence (*‘ajz*) have contributed to this negative scholarly view. ‘Abdallah Laroui (1976) and Issa Boullata (1990), for example, portrayed the Arab intellectual as a kind of spineless weakling, unable to detach himself from the legacy of the past and look ahead. At best, he was prepared to stand up for gradual reform, but with no clear direction in sight.⁴²

In a similar vein, ‘Abd al-Rahman Munif (d. 2004), a Saudi novelist and thinker, wrote that Arab intellectuals were far from playing the role once reserved for the intellectuals of enlightened Europe. Their response to the challenges of the day were pale and uninspiring, and Arab political culture, with its preference for the media, had disempowered them and cut opportunities for research, dialogue, and criticism. The opposition parties were also responsible in that they defined the role of intellectuals, forcing them to serve party goals. Their job was to obey, not to criticize. Intellectuals were turned into provocateurs, propagandists, and messengers, but were denied the freedom to express their own views. In a world where politics were dictated by self-interest and all activity was geared to achieving a party’s objectives, intellectual activity became marginal and nothing more than window dressing. Few were the intellectuals who exercised their right

to criticize and disagree with the politicians, said Munif, and those who did were harassed, sometimes to the point of having their citizenship revoked and their freedom of movement restricted.⁴³ Munif experienced this himself: he was expelled from Saudi Arabia for his criticism of the Saudi royal family, and spent his life roaming between Lebanon, Syria, and the United States.

S. Hussein Alatas (1977), an advocate of radical social and political transformation (not just renewal and reform), deplored the lack of an authentic, intellectual community motivated to fight wrongdoing. Instead, he said, one found mainly technocrats and civil servants who aspired to implement minor changes while supporting the existing order.⁴⁴ Hisham Sharabi (1988) and Ibrahim Abu Rabi' (1990, 2004) noted that a qualitative liberal discourse barely existed in the Arab world before 1967, and became even less visible thereafter. While Sharabi accused the secular liberals of being elitist and cut off from the masses, with no defined direction or vision, Abu Rabi' lamented the absence of an ongoing process of religious, political, and economic reform such as the one spearheaded by European liberals. In his words, "Arab liberalism is a poor version of European liberalism, a cheap imitation." Fouad Ajami (1992, 1999) underlined the sense of failure and distress felt by Arab liberals and observed that nothing happened after the Arab defeat in 1967 to improve the prospects for liberal thinking and politics. Now, he said, a younger generation for whom liberalism had become synonymous with Western colonialism was adopting a new outlook embodied by Islamic revolutionary models.⁴⁵

In 2005, Ramin Jahanbegloo, a professor of philosophy of Iranian descent, described the ideal Arab liberal intellectual:

An intellectual struggle in the Middle East is not only of a political nature, but also a permanent struggle against what Michel de Certeau calls, "an enforced belief." A public intellectual in the Middle East should act as a check on this enforced belief and bring forward a new tone of debate in the public sphere. This desire for a critical rather than an ideological discussion is exemplified by what Edward Said called "speaking truth to power." To do such a thing, intellectuals in the Middle East need to position themselves outside the masses and question in a radical way the very idea of the "public sphere" itself.⁴⁶

Coming to the defense of Arab liberalism, Shlomo Avineri, a professor of political science at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, argued that these flaws were detectable in other societies as well. The public influence of intellectuals depends on the nature of society: where civil society is weak, non-conformism is met with condemnation, and a lack of pluralism makes it difficult to guide society toward a more open climate. Nevertheless, Avineri did not conceal his disappointment with the indecisiveness of the Arab liberal camp, its opposition to normalization with Israel, and its defense of Saddam Hussein's oppressive regime during the 2003 American campaign to overthrow him. "There are too many Robespierres lurking in the shadows," he remarked sarcastically.⁴⁷

These critical and pessimistic views of Arab liberalism and its historical role convey impatience and frustration as well as a certain obsession with action and results. Moreover, they seem overly harsh. In fact, the Western ideal of intellectuals who speak truth to power—men of action who are deeply involved in politics and dissident activity—is exemplified in the Arab context by pan-Arabists and Islamists.⁴⁸ In 2001, John Esposito and John Voll confirmed this in their study of contemporary Islam. They described the Islamist-oriented intellectuals as the "real intellectuals" in terms of their general fields of interest and their work in defining concepts and symbols, but also as activists in that they were "directly involved in political and social affairs rather than standing aloof as intellectual critics."⁴⁹

Other scholars, mainly in the 2000s, highlighted positive aspects of liberal discourse in the Arab Middle East. Israel Gershoni and James Jankowski pointed out that Egyptian liberals played an important role in defending the democratic ethos against the encroachment of fascism and Nazism in the Egyptian arena in the 1920s and 1930s. This ethos, as both authors have shown, was also well framed, and crystallized via institutions and printed media.⁵⁰ Roel Meijer discussed the attempts of a group of Egyptian intellectuals to promote civil society and fight the radical challenges of the early 1940s, although they relied on state procedures to accomplish this.⁵¹

Peter Wien, Orit Bashkin, Peter Sluglett, and Christoph Schumann wrote that the liberal democratic values taking shape in the Eastern Mediterranean in the first half of the twentieth century had chalked up concrete achievements. Elections, constitutional rule, campaigning for the rights of the underprivileged, and protests against authoritarian/fascist rule began to take root despite political and socioeconomic upheavals, and spurred calls for a more open society under

colonial regimes such as Egypt, Syria, and Iraq.⁵²

The works of Gershoni, Jankowski, and Meijer, however, were confined to the geographical parameters of Egypt, and dealt mainly with the interwar period. Wien, Bashkin, Sluglett, and Schumann expanded the geographical scope to the Fertile Crescent, but did not go beyond the 1950s. Moreover, their findings did not significantly change the pessimistic assessment of Arab liberalism as indecisive, lacking in ideological resilience, and insufficiently proactive in protesting political injustice.

Paradoxically, while Meijer and Schumann sought to illuminate Arab liberal thought, they also narrowed it down as a historical and ideological phenomenon. In Meijer's view, liberalism and other ideologies do not exist in pure form in the Middle East. Though some individuals might be called liberals, he wrote, it was difficult to find pure liberalism in the region, or any other pure schools of thought for that matter. On the other hand, one cannot reach conclusions on the basis of individual thinkers. Thus the study of ideologies in the Middle East must focus on composites in which liberal, republican, and communitarian elements are combined.⁵³

Schumann held that there was no such thing as a liberal ideology in this part of the world, and certainly not a systematic one, although liberal ideas could be found in Arab nationalism, Islamic populism, and socialism.⁵⁴ Establishing the relevance of liberal thought was also difficult because it produced "mere paper trails." Dramatic public actions such as general strikes, armed struggles, and mass demonstrations are seldom a consequence of liberal thought, he declared, and "if we confine the study of Arab liberal thought to groups that are self-declared 'liberals,' the resulting story will be predictable, short and fragmentary."⁵⁵ Thus only the adoption of an eclectic approach that refrains from focusing on a single ideology can reveal liberal attitudes. Moreover, Schumann argued that debating Arabic liberal thinking should not be framed in the context of Western liberal theory and its influence on local thought, but rather in the context of the concrete experience with authoritarianism, which often leads to the adoption of liberal ideas.⁵⁶

Charles Kurzman found the term "liberalism" too rigid in the context of the Arab world, tainted by Orientalism and value judgments reflecting Western standards. In his view, "liberal Islam" was a better term, in that it acknowledged the intellectual variety of Islamic discourse and allowed for a more expansive view

of Islam—that is, not as a hotbed of religious fanaticism, but as nurturing a long line of thinkers with diverse opinions.⁵⁷ This rationale guided the work of Muhammad Abu Samra⁵⁸ and, to a lesser extent, of Michaelle Browsers and Shimon Shamir.⁵⁹

Such a heuristic approach, in my view, blurs ideological and political distinctions, delegitimizing the differences between intellectual schools and narratives and casting them as unworthy of analytical research. Aside from the need for workable conceptual categories to facilitate a better understanding of Arab thought, there are also justifiable reasons for using the term liberalism in the context of certain groups or ideological currents.

First, ideological ambiguity, diversity, and complexity can also be found in Western liberalism. John Rawls and the critical reception of his theory of justice is one example.⁶⁰ Likewise, one might cite the debate over whether the economy should be structured as a free marketplace or as based on price controls to promote a measure of social equality, or, more generally, the debate over the scope and intrusiveness of government. Another example is the lack of consensus on religion in a liberal democracy, with opinions ranging from exclusion to inclusion.⁶¹ Yet Western discourse does not nullify liberalism as an unworthy category of analysis or deny some of its fundamental tenets, such as individual development and social progress, the application of reason and scientific methods, and limited government regulated by constitutional rules.⁶² If Western liberalism, while not a fully fledged system of governance, is treated as distinct from socialist or communitarian thought, for instance, then why should the Arab case be an exception?

Second, credit should be given to the self-identification of Arab thinkers who define themselves as liberals, especially in light of contemporary scholarship, which ascribes importance to the self-perception of the individual/the group in historical analysis.⁶³

Third, the ideological and emotional affinity with the liberal legacy of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was nurtured by later liberal writers, who saw the 1940s–1960s as an era of radicalization, tyranny, and oppression. By contrast, Arab nationalists or leftists, who personally or collectively experienced authoritarianism during those years, became advocates of a civil model of polity but viewed the revolutionary era as a formative period in their ideological development. The Egyptian leftist Fu'ad Zakariyya criticized the

Nasserist regime, for example, but hailed the socialist enterprise it had embarked upon in 1961–65, attributing its failure to brevity and poor management on the part of those charged with its implementation.⁶⁴ Another Egyptian writer, Lutfi al-Khuli, spoke out in favor of freedom of expression within a democratic system and defied Nasser's individual style of rule in the 1960s, while continuing to embrace socialism as a solution to Egypt's problematic socioeconomic situation.⁶⁵ The same was true for post-Marxists in Lebanon and Syria in the 1990s. They proclaimed support for the rule of law and civil liberties, and conceded that liberalism was more suited to human nature than communism, but nevertheless continued to air non-liberal views and denounce anything they perceived as Western.⁶⁶

A fourth justification for using the term liberalism is that the spread of liberal thought in the Arab world, especially after 1967, did not obscure ideological differences or curtail the polemic between liberals and rival groups. The widespread perception of liberalism as rapacious and exploitative among the left, and secular and atheistic among the Islamists, only enhanced Arab liberalism as a distinct ideology, though not always coherent or consistent, allowing room for interaction with other ideologies, depending on time and place.

Attentiveness to Arab liberalism as a distinct body of thought has grown in Western scholarship in recent years, but most of the work to date has focused on specific individuals, countries, or ideological themes.⁶⁷ Some of these studies suffer from a methodological weakness in the identification of liberal discourse. A 2012 monograph by Wael Abu-Uqsa portrayed Arab liberalism as a total, separate, and unique ideology that has prevailed since the late nineteenth century. Like pan-Arabism and Islamism, the liberal model used similar basic concepts (nationalism, state, Islam, constitution, freedom, etc.), but advocated a different and conflicting interpretation of modernity. Abu-Uqsa's assertion seems too sweeping and leaves no room for flexibility, dynamism, or the interaction of rival ideologies.⁶⁸ A volume edited by the author of this book and Christoph Schumann in 2015 aimed at confronting the image of the Middle East as a region fraught with totalitarian ideologies—giving voice and space to more liberal and adaptive narratives. However, the book, as stated in the introduction, leaves open the issue of how to approach liberalism in the Middle East in terms of definitions and characters.⁶⁹

Another volume, edited by Jans Hanssen and Max Weiss in 2018, set forth to highlight the common denominators between Arab intellectuals of various

ideological camps (liberals, Marxists, communists, Ba‘thists, Islamists, conservatives) in resisting authoritarianism throughout the twentieth century and into the twenty-first. On the whole, the book treated liberal intellectuals as a distinct group, but dedicated only small sections to them, without systematically defining their characteristics or self-perception vis-à-vis other ideologies. Moreover, the volume contained a very strong coverage of Lebanon, Egypt, and the Ottoman center but neglected the Arab peripheries (such as North Africa and the Persian Gulf), which also harbored liberal tendencies and voices.⁷⁰

The present monograph aims to expand the horizons of Arab liberalism in terms of geographical scope and present a more encompassing, well-defined, and coherent discussion of Arab liberal thought, while challenging and revising prevailing notions in the extant scholarship.

Reframing Arab liberalism

Basically, the liberal embrace of core values, such as individual freedom, tolerance, civil rights, democracy, the depoliticization of Islam, and cultural acceptance of non-Muslims, was more deep-seated and intrinsic than in other political ideologies, where commitment to these values was only partial. The concept of liberty—and with it the notion of individualism (*fardiyya*) in Arab liberal discourse—was broad and encompassing. It corresponded in large measure to the classic liberalism of the nineteenth century, which was mainly preoccupied with the economic, political, and religious freedom of the individual, but expanded to include social sensitivity as the welfare state came into being in the early twentieth century. Arab liberals adhered to what José Ortega y Gasset defined as a “supreme form of generosity,” namely that of a majority which has the power on its side, concedes to weaker minorities the right to live on their own terms, and respects those who have a different view of society.⁷¹ The Syrian writer, Muhammad Shahrur wrote about this:

All creatures are the children of God—the believers, the infidels, the Muslims, the criminals, the monotheists, the polytheists, the oppressors and the gamblers. God created all of them from the dust as human beings (*‘ibad*), not as slaves

(‘abid). They obey Him of their own free will and disobey Him of their own free will. Everyone has the right to belong to any community and religion he wishes, to change his religious affiliation and to announce it in public, without fear of being murdered or persecuted. In any case he remains a human being, provided that he is committed to human social values by observing good deeds, such as not committing murder, giving false testimony, or deceiving and lying.⁷²

The Arab perception of liberty also meshed with Isaiah Berlin’s classic definition of negative (as opposed to positive) liberty, according to which humans are free as long as no one interferes with their actions.⁷³ This reading of liberty was not fully accepted by Arab leftists, as pointed out above, let alone by Islamists. Contemporary Islamists, who advocated a religious resistance to Western cultural invasion, appropriated and reshaped some of the key liberal terms and anchored them in an enlightened, progressive model of Islamic civilization. Thus, Palestinian thinker Munir Shafiq maintained that instilling values like pluralism, tolerance, freedom of expression and belief, civil society, and free elections would be impossible in Arab and Muslim countries unless Islam was recognized as a frame of reference.⁷⁴ The same rationale guided the Egyptian thinkers Muhammad Jalal Kishk and Muhammad ‘Imara with regard to Muslim women’s freedoms and rights, which, they argued, while ensured in Islam, had been distorted by secular liberalism in modern times.⁷⁵

Yet another example was provided by the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt and Jordan, which represented a significant move toward civic politics and democracy.⁷⁶ This development supported the argument of anthropologist Asef Bayat that sacred texts were open to reinterpretation and that it was human beings who defined their truthfulness. Social forces, and especially social movements, played a critical role in molding the “truth” of religious scripture to fit their needs and the prevailing circumstances. They were the intermediaries between the written word and the world, changing its meaning along the way. This also appeared to be the case with the Muslim Brotherhood as an activist social organization influenced by its surroundings and watching generations of young people growing up in its midst.⁷⁷ However, in the shift toward civil politics, the emphasis has been on institutional components such as rule of law, a constitution, and separation of powers rather than on individual freedoms.

The worldview of the Brotherhood was formulated largely in communal rather

than individual terms, whereas individuals constituted the heartland of a liberal democratic polity. Not surprisingly, the Brotherhood continued to waver on civil equality for women and religious minorities, freedom of conscience or belief, and intercultural dialogue. Personal status, family, and inheritance issues continued to be under the purview of Islamic law. Restrictions were imposed on economic initiative and free market practices were aligned with the movement's ideas of social justice, even though social classes or personal property rights were not abolished.⁷⁸ In this respect, the Brotherhood could be categorized as an agent of non-authoritarian political culture, albeit staunchly conservative in its approach to social morality and gender issues, which created an impediment to the meaningful embrace of liberal values. This was backed up by a manifesto published by the Brotherhood in Egypt in 2007, and by its election platform after the uprisings of 2011 and the new constitution drafted after its victory in the polls.⁷⁹

Part of the explanation for the Muslim Brotherhood's ambivalence toward liberal values is connected to its quest for cultural authenticity, preserving indigenous identity, and safeguarding morality in an era of sweeping globalization, free markets, and the blurring of boundaries between cultures. Even the Wasat (Center) parties in Egypt and Jordan, which broke away from the Brotherhood in the 1990s and sought to confine religion to the mosque in the interest of a civil political order, set limits on open discourse. Wasat spokespersons decried the harm inflicted on sanctified values in the name of freedom of opinion and belief, called for the protection of Arab and Islamic identity in the face of assimilation, and opposed political compromise with Israel—all with the aim of establishing clear boundaries between Islam and other cultures.⁸⁰

Resistance to cultural ties with the West or Israel was also widespread among disillusioned Arab nationalists and leftists, who went through a process of ideological divestment after the defeat of the Arabs in 1967, despite the fact that they sided with the liberals in advocating the depoliticization of religion. Some even became hard-line secularists. A prominent example was Hisham Sharabi (d. 2005), an educated Christian Arab of Palestinian descent. As a young man in the 1940s, he was an ardent supporter of Antoun Sa'adeh, leader of the Syrian Social Nationalist Party (SSNP), but underwent a change of heart over time. In the late 1960s, he became a vocal critic of Arab political culture, which he accused of neopatriarchalism, namely, the reinforcement and strengthening of the social order through the use of patriarchal structures and their bolstering by granting them a "modern" veneer.⁸¹

Sharabi also lashed out at the intellectual discourse in the Arab world, which he branded backward and uncritical. He called on the Arabs to turn their backs on the legacy of the past and adopt Western culture without compunction, with the aim of building a country based on secular, scientific, and rational principles.⁸² Like the liberals, he maintained that a non-modern society in the contemporary world would pay a crippling price for its backwardness. He, too, demanded cultural and political reform but, unlike the liberals, he supported a quick transformation, not a gradual one. In Sharabi's view, modernization is, by definition, a transitional process from a certain paradigm to a radically different structure.

Sharabi's call for a total transformation and a clean break from Arab culture also affected his perception of secularism, which was more radical and sweeping than that of his liberal counterparts, and left no room for religion in either the public or the political sphere. Moreover, he rejected the awakening or renaissance movement (Nahda), which emerged in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, mainly in Syria but also in Egypt. The Nahda became the mainstay of liberal discourse as a legacy of enlightenment, and of science and progress, providing moral and ideological justification for its existence in Arab political thought (see Chapter 1).⁸³

Sharabi's rejection of the Nahda was absolute and uncompromising. The Nahda did not herald a cultural split with the past in the European Renaissance sense, nor did it take a consistently critical stance toward the deeply rooted structures of thought and social organization in Arab society, which was primarily patriarchal. On the contrary, it strengthened these elements and incorporated them in a modern, neopatriarchal hybrid in which the traditional and the semirational existed side by side.

The Nahda, Sharabi explained, was a naïve, utopian philosophy that was superficial at the core and ambivalent in its approach to modernity. It was based on scientism, but epistemologically it remained patriarchal. While Japan weathered the European shock and valiantly took the leap toward progress, the Arab world stayed behind, Sharabi declared. He did, however, praise Christian proponents of Nahda, such as Farah Antun and Shibli Shumayyil. He saw them as "Westernizers," seeking a radical transformation of Arab society based on the European model. Muslim proponents of Nahda, whom he called "secularists," were portrayed as "imprisoned in ontological vagueness." "[They] kept the door open for modernizing influences," wrote Sharabi, "while at the same time

upholding the traditional heritage, representing a sort of synthesis in this polarized opposition.” They were chiefly concerned with adapting to the functional demands of the modern era and shied away from deep ideological debate. Due to the fact that the Christians in the Arab world were a minority, their impact on the Nahda was minimal.⁸⁴

While liberal writers who analyzed Arab political culture were influenced by Sharabi’s neopatriarchal theories, most of them were put off by his fierce secularism, which sharpened the ideological barriers between them.⁸⁵ A similar liberal stance was adopted toward another prominent Arab critic, the Moroccan Mohammed Abed al-Jabri (d. 2010), who in the early 1970s became one of the advocates of Arab authenticity (asala) along with the Egyptian Hasan Hanafi. Like the liberals, al-Jabri promoted a civic agenda of democracy, freedom of thought, the emancipation of women, the separation of religion from politics, and so forth. He saw these goals as part of the agenda of the nineteenth-century Nahda cultural renaissance. They did not materialize, however, and remained contentious issues throughout the twentieth century, mainly because of the dual reality of modernity vs tradition. To this duality was added a dual perception of the West, both as a model of development and progress and as an oppressor. The result was confusion and division.

Al-Jabri was known as a harsh critic of the Salafi paradigm, which gained momentum after the 1967 defeat, accusing its adherents of exalting the glory of the Islamic past as a mechanism for defying modernization, thus fostering an emotional and utopian mentality. Al-Jabri disregarded the Arab liberals as well, whom he accused of imitating Western modernity without taking into account the differences between East and West. The liberal discourse, al-Jabri argued, was false and idealistic. It ignored the fact that Western modernity was a long historical product that had developed in the fifteenth century, and any attempt to apply those of its values deemed worthy was doomed. The Arab reality, he continued, which had not yet undergone a stage of similar enlightenment, was paralyzed by prolonged ideological stagnation. The Arabs’ expectation of assimilation into European liberalism was tantamount to asking them to incorporate into their consciousness a foreign heritage that also served as a tool to suppress many aspects of Arab Islamic civilization. Thus, Arab liberalism deprived the Arab people of the shared past and moral vocabulary that had given meaning to their lives.⁸⁶

Al-Jabri’s solution to the Arab predicament was to identify, through scientific

and rational reading, the universal and enlightened aspects of the human legacy within the local tradition, not outside it.⁸⁷ While Arab liberals delved into Islamic civilization and deconstructed the scriptures with the aim of broadening humanistic values, their main point of reference was Western culture, in contrast to al-Jabri and other partisans of heritage (turath). They were riveted by cultural renewal (tajdid) rather than cultural authenticity (asala).⁸⁸

Indeed, Arab liberalism has proven fragile and beset by setbacks and obstacles.⁸⁹ Lacking substantive umbrella organizations with registered members, liberals constituted a loosely identified group, sharing core values and aspirations. Some liberals have expressed bitterness and frustration over the deterioration of ideological discourse, as unwillingness to accept criticism or engage in self-criticism has driven people to drop the pen in favor of stones, and turned every adversary into a devil, criminal, traitor, or spy.⁹⁰ Others have lamented their vulnerability as non-conformists and their lack of political power and public influence. There are also some who have reshaped the ideal to fit reality, toning down their liberal message on faith and religion, and repackaging it as more Islamic and less foreign to the Arab ear. One might see this as an updated version of Yahya Haqqi's story Qandil Umm Hashim (The lamp of Umm Hashim, 1944) about an ophthalmologist who tries to bring the modern medicine he studied in Germany to his Cairo neighborhood, but encounters fierce religious and social opposition. Just before he gives up, he decides to combine the old and the new, pouring the new medicine into a traditional receptacle, since holy oil was believed to have healing powers.⁹¹

Arab liberal discourse endured nonetheless. Notably, other ideological movements in the Middle East embraced components of liberalism such as democracy, free elections, and constitutional rule in the face of political persecution. Mid-twentieth-century Turkey is a good example. Although Turkish liberals suffered systematic repression, first under the Young Turks and then under Kemalism, their input on the importance of a free market, democracy, human rights, and civil society went on to play a significant role in the country's development. Indirectly, the liberals helped non-liberal politicians and parties with a large constituency neutralize political rivals and oppose contentious government policies.⁹²

In the 1970s, postrevolutionary regimes such as Egypt, Tunisia, and Algeria adopted certain features of democracy and declared their commitment to civil rights and liberties. This was an important step even if it was not backed by

sincere intentions or a full-fledged program and witnessed ups and downs. It bound the regime to the parameters of democratic discourse, created a sense of hope and demonstrated the power of conviction even in an unfavorable political climate. The history of liberal discourse in monarchies such as Morocco and Saudi Arabia is also of special interest. In the wake of the political liberalization instituted by King Hasan II of Morocco in the mid-1990s, the monarchy evolved into a regime combining authoritarian rule with a multiparty electoral system. This pluralistic political climate not only nourished the liberal milieu, but also affected the religious discourse of Islamic groups such as the Justice and Beneficence Movement and the Justice and Development Party.⁹³ The case of Saudi Arabia is even more intriguing. Puritanical religious codes were enforced in the realm of law and justice in a society that historically had had little contact with the West or rapid modernization. Yet the country was not immune to external influence. New ideas and perspectives seeped in, and the ruling powers did not succeed in sealing off the civil space hermetically. Religious extremism surfaced, but also a trend toward greater openness and demands for a more inclusive, pluralistic form of government.⁹⁴ Thus, contrary to Fareed Zakaria's assertion in 2004, the Arab world was not, in fact, a "political desert with few pathways for dissent."⁹⁵

Liberal thought has shown historical resilience, remaining a constant feature of the Arab landscape. Over the years, it maintained a continuous stream of committed followers who openly identified themselves as liberals, especially after 1967. New members, mostly leftists, joined the ranks, and were quickly incorporated into the liberal narrative in order to boost its public profile.⁹⁶ One of the most prominent of them, Jurj Tarabishi, testified that he and his contemporaries had been victims of theoretical fraud in the 1960s and 1970s. Democracy had been described to them as a distorted political and class regime created by advanced Western societies. The distortion, they were told, must be corrected by a popular revolution or through the transformation of the regime into genuine social democracy. Only the failure of revolutionary experiences in the Third World and the collapse of socialism with the fall of the Soviet bloc in the late 1980s, argued Tarabishi, showed that liberal democracy was in fact an advanced product of enlightened societies.⁹⁷

Arab liberals positioned themselves on the spectrum as intellectual dissidents, but also as freedom fighters. They were not isolationists, estranged from society, but active in the public sphere, working toward the universal ideals of individual liberty, pluralism, citizenship, democracy, and even feminism. Only a handful

identified these concepts within the framework of traditional Islam. Many others turned to sources outside of Islam, even admitting to their moral superiority over local traditions and precepts. They called upon the Arabs to learn the meaning of freedom and democracy straight from Western culture, thereby deepening the divide with the group Leonard Binder called “Islamic liberals.”⁹⁸ While they worked within the context of Islam, their worldview cut across cultural borders. Most of them were also members of what Karl Mannheim described as the “vocational intelligentsia,” for whom philosophy, writing, and public involvement were a lifelong career. Mannheim differentiated this group from those who were intellectuals in their “leisure time,” such as bureaucrats and technocrats, or those engaged in intellectual activity as a passing phase of life, for whom pondering existential questions was incidental—mainly young people or students before they settled down.⁹⁹

Prominent proponents of mid-twentieth-century Arab liberalism were Sa‘d al-Din Ibrahim, Khalil ‘Abd al-Karim, Faraj Fuda, Muhammad Sa‘id al-‘Ashmawi, Sayyid al-Qimni, Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd, Sa‘id al-Najjar, Hazim al-Biblawi, Amin al-Mahdi, Tariq Hijji, and Hala Mustafa in Egypt; Mahmud Muhammad Taha in Sudan; Muhammad Shahrur, Sayyid Mahmud, and Burhan Ghalyun in Syria; Radwan al-Sayyid and Nasif Nassar in Lebanon; ‘Abd al-Khaliq Husayn and Sayyar al-Jamil in Iraq; Abdelmajid Charfi and Mohamed Talbi in Tunisia; Fatima Mernissi, Lella ‘Abouzeid, and ‘Abduh Falali al-Ansari in Morocco; ‘Abd al-Hamid al-Ansari in Qatar; Ahmad al-Baghdadi in Kuwait; and Turki al-Hamad, Salah Ibrahim al-Tariqi, Khalid al-Dakhil, and ‘A’isha al-Hashar in Saudi Arabia. Colleagues living outside the region, such as Wafa’ Sultan, Hazim Saghiya, Salih Bashir, Jurj Tarabishi, Burhan Ghalyun, Shakir al-Nabulsi, and al-‘Afif al-Akhdar, introduced liberal Arab messages into Western discourse. All these writers produced original Arab scholarship that attracted considerable attention and ignited bitter polemics.

Arab liberals’ tireless pursuit of ideological and political viability also strengthened their commitment to what they saw as a social mission. They presented themselves as rebels against the wisdom of their time.¹⁰⁰ Being on the margins did not make them back down or break away from society. On the contrary, it pushed them to keep challenging public discourse in the hopes of influencing it. They sought a change in values but also a change on the institutional level. For a handful, marginality was a sign of ideological integrity and even offered a certain advantage. Despite the mental siege to which he and others were subjected, Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd wrote:

Frankly I take some comfort in being marginalized. I do not try to vote with the center because it is only from the margins that I feel I am able to threaten the center. If I were to be integrated into the center, I would not have much impact on the development of Islamic thought, and God knows, the Arab and Muslim world desperately needs to see the relevance of modern scholarship on individual lives and on societies.¹⁰¹

Abu Zayd admitted that in the atmosphere of fear gripping many Muslims, the weapon of liberal discourse—that is, reason—did not have sufficient power to defeat those who wielded the language of the battlefield. In the same breath, however, he made it clear that he would not curb his efforts to bring about change through writing. “My weapon is my critical scholarship,” he declared.¹⁰² Philosophy develops only when it dares to deviate from the safe domain to areas that are considered prohibited, he added.¹⁰³ For Abu Zayd, a true intellectual is the guardian and defender of values, and his permanent place is in the ranks of a vigorous opposition. In contrast, passive opposition of thought is one in which intellectuals merely respond to political reality. In this way, they depend on the actions of the government, even if they are part of the opposition.¹⁰⁴

In a similar vein, Husayn Ahmad Amin pointed out that those who embraced the “rule of human reason” (sultan al-‘aql) in the Arab world, which was the only way to separate truth from fiction and move forward, were a handful of intellectuals. Endowed with a “human conscience,” they had but one weapon in their arsenal—dialectic (al-jadal).¹⁰⁵

Amin, Abu Zayd, and others reinvigorated liberal thinking in the Arab world, positing alternative values and symbols, debating their opponents and recruiting adherents, especially among former Marxist socialists. On some issues, they found themselves aligned with the left, religious mystics, and other cultural agents who sought the deconstruction of past legacies. The debate and push for change was broad, encompassing religion, culture, society, and politics. Some liberals attempted to formulate ideological manifestos that included blueprints and practical guidelines for addressing pressing problems in their societies, striving to transform liberal thinking into a more coherent ideology with a critical, programmatic, and operational dimension aimed at altering reality.¹⁰⁶ In

the long run, these efforts did produce alternative visions for Arab society.

Liberal thinking was bolstered in the Arab world by the events of 2011. This uprising, carried out in the name of freedom, democracy, and social justice, ran counter to prevailing scholarly assumptions and attested to the political viability of the masses, especially young people, as well as the potential for civil society. In the wake of these events, key concepts became embedded in public discourse, creating a more suitable climate for a liberal agenda. The political gains of the Arab Spring were gleaned largely by the Islamist movements in Egypt, Tunisia, Yemen, and Syria, which displayed more experience and organizational skills. Yet the liberals' vitality and defiance during the 2011 events and their aftermath revealed a vibrant legacy, which still offered an alternative agenda for Arab peoples.

The structure of this book

In his 1962 masterpiece on Arabic thought, Albert Hourani warned of the danger of studying the history of ideas in terms of "schools of thought," blurring the differences between individual thinkers and imposing a false unity on their work. The alternative was to highlight a few individuals chosen as representatives of broader trends based on shared influences or circumstances. Here again, there was a risk of creating an impression of consistency and symmetry, or giving to these individuals more credit than they actually deserved. Despite these drawbacks, Hourani favored the second option because it offered an opportunity to establish links between the thinkers and build a chronological and thematic framework into which they could be incorporated. This insight has been of great relevance to the study of Arab liberal thought since 1967.¹⁰⁷

This book sets out to present a broader, more nuanced and positive picture of Arab liberalism, at the center of which stood the humanistic endeavor, and which even in the absence of mass appeal and a firm political underpinning demonstrated sustained viability over time.¹⁰⁸ The timeframe of our study is the second half of the twentieth century and the early twenty-first century, a period that has witnessed both continuity and change in liberal discourse. Like their predecessors, post-1967 Arab liberals have grappled with historic dilemmas,

social grievances, political instability, and cultural disorientation. However, they have also demonstrated a flair for rejuvenating Arab discourse and infusing liberal thought with new visions. They were outspoken intellectuals, who abruptly entered the public arena, espousing clear, mostly dissident, political positions with the aim of spearheading social change.¹⁰⁹ They were the architects of an alternative agenda for the Arab world, positing a new relationship between individual and state, religion and politics, and Islam and the West. Three defining characteristics of the liberal Arab writers were a skeptical attitude toward religious and political norms, a pluralistic outlook, and confidence in Arab enlightenment and progress.

The protagonists of Arab liberalism discussed in this volume are only part of a much longer list of liberals, who shared a corpus of values and a historical legacy that went back to the late nineteenth century. These liberals consisted of inspirational founders, disciples with passion and vision, and new recruits. They stood out for their depth of thinking and innovative argumentation and for maintaining cordial and close relations with one another. Together, they defined liberal thought, molding its image and setting it apart from the discourse of other groups, such as Arab nationalists, the Arab left, and Islamists. Ongoing rivalry, however, sometimes led to ostracism and even physical attacks against outspoken liberals, exacerbating the alienation between these groups.¹¹⁰ Yet there have also been points of convergence, dialogue, and even collaboration between liberal writers and other ideological currents without disguising their differences.¹¹¹

The study goes beyond a mere “history of ideas” framework and examines the social and linguistic contexts of the discussed liberals and their works.¹¹² In analyzing the liberals’ endeavor to mold public opinion and trigger social change, the study also applies Jürgen Habermas’s theory of the public sphere, in which issues of general interest were dealt with and debated through modern civic infrastructures of communication, first and foremost the mass media (printed and online).¹¹³

The following pages offer a historical perspective that traces lines of continuity and change in Arab liberalism, an integrative discussion of cross-sectional themes, and comparative notes touching on the West, on Turkey, and on Iran. In intertwining these dimensions—the historical, integrative, and comparative—the book fills a major gap in the research literature, which has tended to overlook Middle Eastern liberalism in favor of more powerful and assertive forces

embodied by centralist states and Islamic movements. Exploring the abiding link between ideas and politics, as well as the legacies of the past and their modern interpretation, which are used to advance competing narratives, key questions are raised. Who were the post-1967 Arab liberals and what was their social and ideological profile? How did they perceive the formative Arab liberalism of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries? How did they interpret, apply, and assimilate Western concepts such as secularism (*'almaniyya*), liberalism (*libiraliyya*), and freedom (*hurriyya*) into the local Arab context? How did they deconstruct the scriptures and formative ethos when advocating a humanistic vision of Islam? What were their methods and strategies? How did they encounter charged issues such as the role of Islam in the modern state, political authoritarianism, globalization, and the Arab–Israeli conflict?

In addressing these questions, the book makes use of a wide range of primary sources, such as books, essays, ideological manifestos, memoirs, newspapers, and periodicals, as well as secondary historical sources that shed light on the broader sociopolitical context in which liberal thought has evolved and been debated. Additionally, methodological and sociological research on the intellectual history of ideas and the role of intellectuals in society is also referred to. While Arab liberalism has also found its way into literature, poetry, songs, films, and the plastic arts, this aspect of liberal discourse is not dealt with in the book. Nevertheless, some of the intellectuals discussed here have written novels or served as literary critics, and these materials have been incorporated.¹¹⁴

The first chapter sketches a portrait of liberal writers after 1967, maps their sources of inspiration, and emphasizes their contribution to modern Arab thought. The chapter also places them in a historical context and identifies continuities and differences between them and the liberals of the early twentieth century in a geographical, social, and ideological cross-section. A discussion comparing late and early liberalism shows that the former exhibited more daring and a greater willingness to speak against religious taboos, such as the divine nature of the Qur'an and the glorified era of the Prophet. Nor did its spokesmen hesitate to criticize the Arab regimes as being in line with fascist and repressive regimes. There was also an effort by some post-1967 liberals to formulate manifestos and give greater coherence to the liberal cause, thus reinforcing its public appeal.

The second chapter shifts the discussion from history to ideology. It analyzes the attitude of liberal thinkers in relation to Islam, with an emphasis on the Qur'an

and the Prophet's era, the hard core of Muslim collective memory throughout the ages, while providing an alternative to and a dynamic interpretation of the sacred sources. Most of these writers refrained from defining themselves as secular and did not openly call for the separation of religion and state based on the French or the Turkish model. However, they were determined to promote a soft version of Islam as a spiritual creed rather than as a legal and binding code. They thus found common ground with Shi'i liberals, for whom the preoccupation with Islam was not only intellectual but also practical, since they were living in the shadow of a clerical regime. The desire to bring about a change in values in social and cultural life went hand in hand with the pursuit of institutional change in politics and government.

The third chapter reveals another dimension of the intellectual daring of Arab liberals after 1967, this time in sharp defiance of Arab political culture as fostering fascist tyranny and a "suppression industry," while offering only a formal democracy without real content. The liberal endeavor to reduce the power of the state was intertwined with intensive engagement with personal liberties and the empowerment of individualism in the Arab landscape, which was placed at the heart of the Arab Enlightenment project. The defining liberal discourse regarding Arab political culture also revealed internal tensions on such issues as the individual's relations with the collective, the features of the socioeconomic structure, or the inclusion of Islamists in the democratic process.

According to the liberal narrative, a genuine liberal democracy that ensures transparency and restraint of a sovereign's actions must be accompanied by openness to the surrounding world. The fourth chapter expands the scope of liberal discourse and points to a close connection between the advocacy of domestic reforms and a demonstration of openness toward non-Muslim cultures. The chapter deals with liberal writing about Western culture, perceived as a source of inspiration and not only as a reservoir of conspiracies; about globalization, which was defined as a lever for Arab economic modernism; and about peace and coexistence with Israel, presented as an essential component in the promotion of Arab humanism.

The Arab revolutions of 2011, which swept through the Arab world and removed established regimes in Tunisia, Egypt, Yemen, and Libya, were contrary to the prevailing assumptions in scholarly works regarding the existence of a vibrant civil society and the political maturity of the masses who demanded a genuine partnership in shaping their own fate. The role of liberal circles was also present

in these dramatic events as they embarked on demonstrations, public rallies, and political organization. The fifth and final chapter explores the euphoria and optimism that the events of 2011 spread among Arab liberals, whose long and stubborn struggle to expand their sphere of personal freedoms and democracy was not seen as pointless and unproductive. It also examines the disappointment and frustration in their ranks in light of the success of Islamic movements such as the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt and al-Nahda in Tunisia in harvesting the political capital generated by these events.

Notes

1On modern liberalism—definitions and intellectual and historical aspects—see, for example, Richard Bellamy (ed.), *Victorian Liberalism* (London: Routledge, 1990); Richard Bellamy, *Liberalism and Modern Society: A Historical Argument* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1992); Yael Tamir, *Liberal Nationalism* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993); Pierre Manent, *An Intellectual History of Liberalism*, new ed. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994); Ernest Gellner and Cesar Cansino (eds.), *Liberalism in Modern Times* (Budapest: Central European University Press, 1996); Edmund Fawcett, *Liberalism: The Life of an Idea* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2015).

2Susan George, “A Short Story of Neo-liberalism: Twenty Years of Elite Economics and Emerging Opportunities for Structural Change,” lecture delivered at the Conference on Economic Sovereignty in a Globalizing World, Bangkok, March 24–26, 1999. See also Alain Touraine, *Beyond Neoliberalism* (Cambridge: Polity, 2001); D. Harvey, *Brief History of Neo-Liberalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006).

3Aurelian Craiutu, *Liberalism Under Siege: The Political Thought of the French Doctrinaires* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2003), pp. 287–295.

4Christoph Schumann, “Liberalization and Democratization in the Arab World: A Conceptual Critique,” in Meir Hatina and Christoph Schumann (eds.), *Arab Liberal Thought after 1967: Old Dilemmas, New Perceptions* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), pp. 41–62.

5Simon Chambers and Will Kymlicka, *Alternative Conceptions of Civil Society* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2002).

6Michael J. Sandel, *Liberalism and the Limits of Justice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982); Kirk F. Koerner, “Introduction: Liberalism and the End of Ideology,” in Kirk F. Koerner (ed.), *Liberalism and its Critics* (London: Croom Helm, 1985), pp. 1–29, 245–309; Paul J. Kelly, *Liberalism* (Cambridge: Polity, 2005), pp. 1–16, 92–111, 132–157.

7Stephen Mulhall and Adam Swift, *Liberals and Communitarians* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996).

8Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Vintage, 1995).

9Alasdair C. MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981), chs. 5, 6.

10 Shadi Hamid, “Post-Liberalism, East and West,” *Foreign Affairs*, April 11, 2018, www.foreignaffairs.com/print/1122239 (accessed July 17, 2019).

11 The Brazilian philosopher J. G. Merquior listed nearly thirty sub-species of liberalism (with substantial overlap between them), such as old liberalism, conservative liberalism, neoliberalism, utilitarian liberalism and left liberalism. Merquior, *Liberalism: Old and New* (Boston, MA: Twayne Publishers, 1991).

12 The term “Islamism” throughout this volume refers to movements that are actively involved in the politics of dissent and adhere to a “greedy” ideology, i.e., seeking to apply Islamic precepts to all spheres of life. As such they are differentiated from other religious agents, for example state ‘ulama’ or Sufi shaykhs.

13 Meir Hatina, *Identity Politics in the Middle East: Liberal Thought and Islamic Challenge in Egypt* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2007), pp. 138–143; see also Michael Cook, *Ancient Religions, Modern Politics: The Islamic Case in Comparative Perspective* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2014), pp. 190–191.

14 See, for example, Muhammad ‘Imara discussed in Mona Abaza, *Debates on*

Islam and Knowledge in Malaysia and Egypt (London: Routledge, 2002), pp. 159–173; Fahmi Huwaydi in al-Ahram , July 22, 1986; and his book, al-Muftarun (Cairo: Dar al-Shuruq, 1991), pp. 6–7, 263–268.

15 Meir Hatina, “The Clerics’ Betrayal? Islamists, ‘Ulama’ and the Polity,” in Meir Hatina (ed.), Guardians of Faith in Modern Times: ‘Ulama’ in the Middle East (Leiden: Brill, 2008), pp. 252–258; Muhammad Abu Samra, “Liberal Critics, ‘Ulama’ and the Debate on Islam in the Contemporary Arab World,” in *ibid.*, pp. 265–289.

16 Abu Yusuf Taha b. Muhammad b. Ahmad ‘Abd al-Karim and Abu al-Fida’ Ahmad b. Badr al-Din (eds.), Fatawa Kibar ‘Ulama’ al-Umma (Cairo: al-Maktaba al-Islamiyya, 2005), pp. 43–44.

17 On the Abu Zayd affair and its repercussions, see Ami Ayalon, Egypt’s Quest for Cultural Orientation (Tel Aviv: The Moshe Dayan Center, 1999), pp. 19–36; see also Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd, al-Tafkir fi Zaman al-Takfir (Cairo: Sina’ li’l-Nashr, 1995); Nasr Abu Zaid with Esther R. Nelson, Voice of an Exile: Reflections on Islam (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2004), pp. 1–16.

18 Abu Zaid with Nelson, Voice of an Exile , pp. 4, 179.

19 Al-‘Ashmawi, quoted in Ayalon, Egypt’s Quest for Cultural Orientation , p. 11.

20 On the Ibrahim affair, see Mukhtar Qasim, Muthaqqaf Tahta al-Hisar: Muhakamat Markaz Ibn Khaldun (Cairo: al-Matba‘a al-Dhahabiyya, 2001).

21 Abdelmadjid Charfi, Islam: Between Message and History (Budapest and New York: Central European University Press, 2005), p. 5; first published in Arabic as al-Islam bayna al-Risala wa’l-Ta’rikh , 2nd ed. (Beirut: Dar al-Tali‘a, 2001). All references in this book are based on the Arabic text.

22 See also Emmanuel Sivan, “The Clash within Islam,” Survival 45.1 (2003), pp. 34–41.

23 Paul J. Magnarella, “The Republican Brothers: A Reformist Movement in the Sudan,” The Muslim World 72.1 (1982), pp. 14–24; Hatina, Identity Politics , pp. 58–60, 225–240.

24 Al-Nabulsi, quoted in David Govrin, "Hala Mustafa and the Liberal Predicament," Middle East Quarterly 17.2 (2010), p. 42.

25 Hani Nasira, "al-Libiraliyyun al-‘Arab al-Judad fi Misr, Ishkaliyyat al-Khitab wa’l-Mumarasa," Malaff al-Ahram al-Istirataji 166 (August 2006), <http://ahram.org.eg/ahram/2001/1/1/SBOK49.HTM> (accessed February 13, 2014).

26 H. A. R. Gibb, Modern Trends in Islam (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1947), chs. 3, 4.

27 Malcolm H. Kerr, Islamic Reform (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1966), esp. pp. 1–18.

28 Nadav Safran, Egypt in Search of Political Community (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1961), ch. 6.

29 Leonard Binder, Islamic Liberalism (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), pp. 1–19, 128–158, 359. A similar adherence to the Protestant model can be found in Gibb’s Modern Trends in Islam , pp. 57–58.

30 Sami Zubaida, "Cosmopolitanism and the Middle East," in Roel Meijer (ed.), Cosmopolitanism, Identity and Authenticity in the Middle East (Richmond: Curzon, 1999), p. 33.

31 Joseph A. Massad, Desiring Arabs (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), esp. pp. 1–29; and his Islam in Liberalism (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015), esp. pp. 14–44.

32 Albert Hourani, Arabic Thought in the Liberal Age 1798–1939 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1962).

33 Ibid., pp. 341–373.

34 For a summary of such criticisms, see Wael Abu-‘Uqsa, Freedom in the Arab World (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2016), pp. 10–11; Jans Hanssen and Max Weiss, "Introduction: Language, Mind, Freedom and Time: The Modern Arab Intellectual Tradition in Four Words," in Jans Hanssen and Max Weiss (eds.), Arabic Thought Beyond the Liberal Age: Towards an Intellectual History of the Nahda (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), pp. 1–37;

Jans Hanssen and Max Weiss (eds.), Arabic Thought against the Authoritarian Age : Toward an Intellectual History of the Present (Cambridge University Press, 2018), esp. Part I.

35 Albert Hourani, Arabic Thought in the Liberal Age , 3rd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983), p. iv.

36 Abdeslam Maghraoui, Liberalism without Democracy: Nationhood and Citizenship in Egypt, 1922–1936 (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006), esp. chs. 3–4.

37 Ibid., p. 88.

38 Bernard Lewis, What Went Wrong? Western Impact and Middle Eastern Response (London: Phoenix, 2002), p. 168. See also Majid Khadduri, Political Trends in the Arab World (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1970), pp. 212–213; Sivan, “The Clash within Islam,” p. 41.

39 Elie Kedourie, Democracy and the Arab Political Culture (Washington, D.C.: The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 1992), esp. pp. 1–11, 83–105.

40 Samuel P. Huntington. The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1996), esp. pp. 209–218, 248–265.

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42 ‘Abdallah Laroui, The Crisis of the Arab Intellectual (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1976); Issa J. Boullata, Trends and Issues in Contemporary Arab Thought (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1990), pp. 1–10.

43 ‘Abd al-Rahman Munif, “al-Thaqafa wa’l-Muthaqqaf fi’l-Mujtama‘ al ‘Arabi,” in Ghassan Isma‘il ‘Abd al-Khaliq (ed.), al-‘Arab wa-Tahaddiyat al-Qarn al-Hadi wa’l-‘Ishrin: Hiwarat fi’l-Fikr al-‘Arabi al-Mu‘asir (Amman: Mu‘assasat ‘Abd al-Hamid Shuman, 2000), vol. 1, pp. 129–146; also Munif’s book, al-Dimuqratiyya Awwalan, al-Dimuqratiyya Da‘iman (Beirut: al-Mu‘assasa al-‘Arabiyya, 2001), pp. 13–19.

[44 S. Hussein Alatas, *Intellectuals in Developing Societies* \(London: Frank Cass, 1977\), pp. 48–69.](#)

[45 Hisham Sharabi, *Neopatriarchy: A Theory of Distorted Change in Arab Society* \(New York: Oxford University Press, 1988\), pp. 11–12; Ibrahim Abu Rabi', *Contemporary Arab Thought: Studies in post-1967 Arab Intellectual History* \(London: Pluto Press, 2004\), pp. 72–77; Fouad Ajami, *The Arab Predicament: Arab Political Thought and Practice after 1967* \(Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992\), pp. 30–31; and his *The Dream Palace of the Arabs* \(New York: Vintage, 1999\). See also Emmanuel Sivan, *Radical Islam: Medieval Theology and Modern Politics* \(New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1985\), p. 174.](#)

[46 Shlomo Avineri and Ramin Jahanbegloo, "Secularism, National Identity and the Role of the Intellectual," *Dialogue* , 2 \(May 2005\); also Ramin Jahanbegloo, "The Role of the Intellectuals," *Journal of Democracy* 11.4 \(2000\), pp. 135–138.](#)

[47 Avineri and Jahanbegloo, "Secularism."](#)

[48 See also Edward Said, *Representations of the Intellectual* \(New York: Vintage, 1996\), ch. 5; John L. Esposito and John O. Voll, *Makers of Contemporary Islam* \(Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001\), pp. 3–22; Olivier Roy, *Globalised Islam: The Search for a New Ummah* \(London: Hurst, 2002\), pp. 158–171.](#)

[49 Esposito and Voll, *Makers of Contemporary Islam* , p. 21.](#)

[50 Israel Gershoni and James Jankowski, *Confronting Fascism in Egypt: Dictatorship versus Democracy in the 1930s* \(Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2010\); Israel Gershoni, *Egypt and Fascism 1922 – 1937* \(Tel Aviv: Am Oved Publishers, 1999\), especially ch. 2 \(Heb.\); Gershoni, *Dame and Devil: Egypt and Nazism 1935 – 1940* \(Tel Aviv: Resling, 2012\), 2 vols. \(Heb.\).](#)

[51 Roel Meijer, *The Quest for Modernity: Secular Liberal and Left-Wing Political Thought in Egypt, 1945 – 1948* \(London: Routledge, 2002\).](#)

[52 Peter Wein, *Iraqi Arab Nationalism: Authoritarian, Totalitarian, and Pro-Fascist Inclinations 1932–1941* \(London: Routledge, 2006\); Orit Bashkin, *The Other Iraq: Pluralism and Culture in Hashemite Iraq* \(Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2009\); Orit Bashkin, *New Babylonians: Jews in Modern Iraq*](#)

(Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2012); Peter Sluglett, “The Mandate System: High Ideals, Illiberal Practices,” in Christoph Schumann (ed.), Liberal Thought in the Eastern Mediterranean (Leiden: Brill, 2008), pp. 29–50; Christoph Schumann (ed.), Nationalism and Liberal Thought in the Arab East: Ideology and Practice (London: Routledge, 2010). See also Israel Gershoni (ed.), Arab Responses to Fascism and Nazism: Attraction and Repulsion (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2015).

53 Roel Meijer, “Liberalism in the Middle East and the Issue of Citizenship Rights,” in Hatina and Schumann (eds.), Arab Liberal Thought after 1967 , pp. 65–66.

54 Christoph Schumann, “Introduction,” in Schumann (ed.), Liberal Thought in the Eastern Mediterranean , p. 3; Christoph Schumann, “The ‘Failure’ of Radical Nationalism and the ‘Silence’ of Liberal Thought in the Arab World,” in Schumann (ed.), Nationalism and Liberal Thought in the Arab East , pp. 173–189. See also Amatzia Baram, “The Other Iraq,” *Bustan: The Middle East Book Review* 2 (2011), pp. 65–83.

55 Schumann, “The Failure of Radical Nationalism,” p. 175.

56 Schumann, “Introduction,” pp. 3–4.

57 Charles Kurzman, “Introduction: Liberal Islam and its Context,” in Charles Kurzman (ed.), Liberal Islam: A Sourcebook (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), pp. 3–26; and his “Introduction: The Modernist Islamic Movement,” in Charles Kurzman (ed.), Modernist Islam 1840 – 1940: A Sourcebook (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), pp. 1–27.

58 Abu Samra defined liberalism as a lack of religious commitment and support for separation of religion and state, and included Arab Marxists and socialists. His argument was that despite the differences in their understanding of the political structure and social order, the attitude of the Arab left to religion and Islam was generally aligned more closely with that of the liberals. Muhammad Abu Samra, “The Qur’an in Contemporary Arab Thought,” Ph.D. thesis, University of Haifa, 2012 (Heb.), esp. pp. 11, 21–23, 31.

59 Although Browers tended to adopt a heuristic approach with regard to Arab liberalism, she was still cautious about denying the existence of ideological camps. In her view, liberals in Arab society belonged to a distinct group

influenced by the Western model that embraced a more democratic, tolerant ethos. They were committed to democratic governance as a bulwark against tyranny, and emphasized personal liberties. Browsers spoke of Arab liberalism as one speaks of French, German, or British liberalism. Regarding the Islamists, she pointed out that issues of religion and gender were still a matter of contention, hindering a meaningful embrace of liberal and democratic values. Shamir was less systematic in his approach to postrevolutionary Egyptian liberalism. He argued that many of the “liberals” he cited “concur with the liberal belief system only selectively and some even disassociate themselves from it altogether because of its secular or extraneous nature. Accordingly, this term [liberalism] will be used here merely as matter of convenience.” Michaelle Browsers, “Arab Liberalism: Translating Civil Society, Prioritizing Democracy,” *Critical Review of International Social and Political Philosophy* 7.1 (2004), pp. 52–53; Michaelle Browsers, *Political Ideology in the Arab World: Accommodation and Transformation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), esp. pp. 11–16; Shimon Shamir, “Acceptance of the Other: Liberal Interpretation of Islam and Judaism in Egypt and Israel,” *Future Islam*, futureislam.com/20050901/insight/shimon_shamir/acceptance_of_the_other_pn. (accessed September 8, 2012).

60 Sandel, *Liberalism and the Limits of Justice* , esp. pp. 1–14, 66–103, 184–218; Kelly, *Liberalism* , pp. 1–16, 92–111, 132–157; John Day, “John Rawls: A Theory of Justice,” in M. Forsyth and M. Keens-Soper (eds.), *The Political Classics: Green to Dworkin* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), pp. 219–240.

61 Thus, for example, Phillip Quinn argued that some political liberals thought that it was important to absorb religion into the liberal political system, rather than relinquish it. This, according to Quinn, proved that the liberal discourse was not concerned only with secular forces or those hostile to religion. Phillip L. Quinn, “Political Liberalisms and Their Exclusions of the Religious,” in Christian Miller (ed.), *Essays in Philosophy of Religion* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2006), pp. 165–186.

62 Koerner (ed.), *Liberalism and its Critics* ; Mulhall and Swift, *Liberals and Communitarians* ; Daniel H. Cole and Aurelian Craiutu, “The Many Deaths of Liberalism,” *AEON* (July 2018), <https://aeon.co/essays/reports-of-the-demise-of-liberalism-are-greatly-exaggerated> (accessed July 23, 2018).

63 L. Stone, “The Revival of the Narrative: Reflections on a New Old History,” Past and Present 85 (1979), pp. 3–24.

64 Zakariyya, in contrast to mainstream Arab liberalism, also advocated the separation of religion and the state. Fu’ad Zakariyya, al-Haqiqa wa’l-Wahm fi’l-Haraka al-Islamiyya al-Mu’asira , 3rd ed. (Cairo: Dar al-Fikr, 1988), pp. 14–20, 31–45, 115.

65 As part of his expanding post-1967 civic vision, al-Khuli also revised his stance toward Israel, and became one of the founders of the peace movement in the early 1990s. Still, as stated above, he did not relinquish his socialist orientation. This stands in contrast to Abu-‘Uksa’s assertion that al-Khuli, as well as Zakariyya, moved from leftism to liberalism. Wael Abu ‘Uksa, “Contemporary Arab Liberal Discourse: Theory and Practice,” Ph.D. thesis, The Hebrew University, Jerusalem, 2012, pp. 302–303. On al-Lutfi’s views, see Rami Ginat, Egypt’s Incomplete Revolution: Lutfi al-Khuli and Nasser’s Socialism in the 1960s (London: Frank Cass, 1997), chs. 11, 12.

66 Manfred Sing, “Arab Post-Marxists after Disillusionment: Between Liberal Newspeak and Revolution Reloaded,” in Hatina and Schumann (eds.), Arab Liberal Thought after 1967 , pp. 155–175; Sune Haugbølle, “Ziad al-Rahbani and the Liberal Subject,” in *ibid.*, pp. 177–194.

67 Stéphane Lacroix, “Between Islamists and Liberals: Saudi Arabia’s New Islamo-Liberal Reformist Trend,” Middle East Journal 58.3 (2004), pp. 345–365; Toby Matthiesen, “Diwaniyyas, Intellectual Salons, and the Limits of Civil Society,” in Middle East Institute Viewpoints: The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia 1979–2009: Evolution of a Pivotal State , October 14, 2009, pp. 13–15, <https://www.mei.edu/publications/diwaniyyas-intellectual-salons-and-limits-civil-society> (accessed August 10, 2019); David Govrin, The Journey to the Arab Spring: The Ideological Roots of the Middle East Upheaval in Arab Liberal Thought (Portland, OR: Vallentine Mitchell, 2014); Kelly al-Dakkak, “Religious Dialogue, Pluralism and Historical Interpretation: The Work of Mohamed Talbi,” Ph.D. thesis, St. Anthony’s College, Oxford, 2012; Makoto Mizutani, Liberalism in 20th Century Egyptian Thought: The Ideologies of Ahmad Amin and Husayn Amin (London: I.B. Tauris, 2014); Uriya Shavit and Ofir Winter, Zionism in Arab Discourses (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2016), esp. chs. 3, 4.

[68 Abu-‘Uksa, Contemporary Arab Liberal Discourse , esp. pp. 2, 21–34, 109–133.](#)

[69 Hatina and Schumann \(eds.\), Arab Liberal Thought after 1967 , esp. Parts I, III; also Hatina, “Introduction,” in ibid., pp. 1–20.](#)

[70 Hanssen and Weiss \(eds.\), Arabic Thought against the Authoritarian Age , esp. Part III; also Hanssen and Weiss, “Introduction: Arabic Intellectual History between the Postwar and the Post Colonial,” in ibid., pp. 20–26.](#)

[71 Though noble, Ortega y Gasset argued, liberalism is also a discipline that is too difficult and complex to take firm root on earth. José Ortega y Gasset, The Revolt of the Masses \(New York: New American Library, 1952\), p. 55.](#)

[72 Muhammad Shahrur, al-Din wa’l-Sulta: Qira’a Mu‘asira li’l-Hakimiyya \(Beirut: Dar al-Saqi, 2015\), p. 448.](#)

[73 Isaiah Berlin, “Two Concepts of Freedom,” in Four Essays on Liberty \(London: Oxford University Press, 1969\), pp. 118–172.](#)

[74 Munir Shafiq, “Secularism and the Arab–Muslim Condition,” in Azzam Tamimi and John L. Esposito \(eds.\), Islam and Secularism in the Middle East \(London: Hurst, 2000\), p. 150.](#)

[75 Ellen McLarney, “Reviving Qasim Amin, Redeeming Women’s Liberation,” in Hansen and Weiss \(eds.\), Arabic Thought against the Authoritarian Age , pp. 262–284.](#)

[76 Mona El-Ghobashy, “The Metamorphosis of the Egyptian Muslim Brothers,” International Journal of Middle East Studies 37 \(2005\), pp. 373–395; Jillian Schwedler, Faith in Moderation: Islamist Parties in Jordan and Yemen \(Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006\). Similar observation can also be applied to the Nahda movement in Tunisia in the late 1980s and the 1990s. Anne Wolf, Political Islam in Tunisia: The History of Enahda \(London; Hurst, 2017\), pp. 79–106, 189–197.](#)

[77 Asef Bayat, Making Islam Democratic: Social Movements and the Post-Islamist Turn \(Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2007\), esp. pp. 1–15; also Charles Tilly, Social Movements, 1768 – 2004 \(Boulder, CO: Paradigm Publishers, 2004\), ch. 7.](#)

78 Two important books that sanctified social justice and also influenced the Brotherhood's ideology were those of Sayyid Qutb, al-'Adala al-Ijtima'i-yya fi'l-Islam , new ed. (Beirut: Dar al-Shuruq, 1993); and Mustafa al-Siba'i, Ishtirakiyyat al-Islam , 2nd ed. (Damascus: Manshurat al-Matbu'at al-'Arabiyya, 1960).

79 See also Kriten Stilt, "Islam is the Solution: Constitutional Visions of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood," Texas International Law Journal 46 (2010), pp. 84–108; Mathias Rohe and Jakob Skovgaard-Petersen, "The Ambivalent Embrace of Liberalism: The Draft Program of the Freedom and Justice Party in Egypt," in Hatina and Schumann (eds.), Arab Liberal Thought after 1967 , pp. 195–214.

80 Meir Hatina, "The 'Other Islam': The Egyptian Wasat Party," Critique: Critical Middle Eastern Studies 14 (summer 2005), pp. 171–184; Carrie R. Wickham, The Muslim Brotherhood: Evolution of an Islamist Movement (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2013), ch. 4.

81 Sharabi, Neopatriarchy .

82 Ibid., pp. 3–14, 40–60, 155; Hisham Sharabi, Governments and Politics of the Middle East in the Twentieth Century (Princeton, NJ: D. Van Nostrand, 1962), pp. 7–10; also Ajami, The Dream Palace , pp. 268–271.

83 For literature on the Nahda , see Hourani, Arabic Thought ; Fruma Zachs, The Making of a Syrian Identity: Intellectuals and Merchants in Nineteenth Century Beirut (Leiden: Brill, 2005); Abdulrazzak Patel, The Arab Nahdah, The Making of the Intellectual and Humanist Movement (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2013); Fruma Zachs and Sharon Halevi, Gendering Culture in Greater Syria: Intellectual and Ideology in the Late Ottoman Empire (London: I.B. Tauris, 2015); Adel Beshara (ed.), Butrus al-Bustani: Spirit of the Age (Melbourne: Iphoenix Publishing, 2014); Peter Hill, "The First Arabic Translations of Enlightenment Literature: The Damietta Circle of the 1800s and 1810s," Intellectual History Review 25.2 (2015), pp. 209–233; Hanssen and Weiss (eds.), Arabic Thought Beyond the Liberal Age ; Tarek El-Ariss (ed.), The Arab Renaissance: A Bilingual Anthology of the Nahda (New York: Modern Language Association, 2018).

84 Sharabi, Neopatriarchy, pp. 4–7, 67–68, 97–103; also his Arab Intellectuals

and the West: The Formative Years, 1875 – 1914 (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1970), chs. 1, 4, 5, 6. Among the Muslim writers, it was mainly Qasim Amin (d. 1908) who was praised by Sharabi as one of few Muslims of his time who adopted critical approach toward Islamic culture and rightly confronted the ills of society by focusing on improving the status of women. Ibid., pp. 92–96.

85 Some of these liberals also defied Sharabi’s aggressive stance against peace with Israel, which he perceived as a betrayal of the Arab heritage and a surrender to Israeli-American dictates. Hisham Sharabi, Palestine and Israel: The Lethal Dilemma (New York: Pegasus, 1969); see Chapter 4 , below.

86 Mohammed Abed al-Jabri, al-Khitab al-‘Arabi al-Mu‘asir: Dirasa Tahliliyya Naqdiyya (Beirut: Dar al-Tali‘a, 1982), mainly the introduction. Al-Jabri made similar accusations against Arab Marxists. Al-Jabri, Takwin al-‘Aql al-‘Arabi (Beirut: Dar al-Tali‘a, 1984), esp. the introduction.

87 Al-Jabri, al-Khitab al-‘Arabi , pp. 182–183; also Michaelle Browsers, “From the New Partisans of the Heritage to Post-Secularism: Mohammed Abed al-Jabri and the Development of Arab Liberal Communitarian Thought in the 1980s,” in Hatina and Schumann (eds.), Arab Liberal Thought after 1967 , esp. pp. 140–146; Zaid Eyadat et al. (eds.), Islam, State, and Modernity: Mohammed Abed al-Jabri and the Future of the Arab World (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018). For literature on Arab intellectual debates of turath , see Armando Salvatore, “The Rational Authentication of Turath in Contemporary Arab Thought: Muhammad al-Jabiri and Hasan Hanafi,” The Muslim World 3.4 (1995), pp. 191–214; Elizabeth S. Kassab, Contemporary Arab Thought: Cultural Critique in Comparative Perspective (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009), ch. 3.

88 See also Jurj Tarabishi’s harsh criticism of al-Jabri’s premise in his Ishkaliyyat al-‘Aql al-‘Arabi: Naqd al-‘Aql al-‘Arabi (London: Dar al-Saqi, 1998).

89 Afaf Lutfi al-Sayyid Marsot, Egypt’s Liberal Experiment 1922 – 36 (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 1978); Philip S. Khoury, Syria and the French Mandate: The Politics of Arab Nationalism, 1920–1945 (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1987), pp. 397–433.

90 Husayn Ahmad Amin, *Fi Bayt Ahmad Amin* , 2nd ed. (Cairo: Maktabat Madbuli, 1989), pp. 410–419; Tariq Hijji, *al-Thaqafa Awwalan wa-Akhiran* (Cairo: Dar al-Ma‘arif, 2000), pp. 34–35.

91 Yahya Haqqi, *The Lamp of Umm Hashim and Other Stories* , trans. Denys Johnson-Davies (Cairo: The American University in Cairo Press, 2006).

92 Lutz Berger, “From Prince Sabahattin to the Second Republicans: Theory and Practice of Liberal Politics in Contemporary Turkey,” in Hatina and Schumann (eds.), *Arab Liberal Thought after 1967* , pp. 83–97.

93 Redefining itself as a civic party, the Justice and Development Party dropped the demand for shari‘a law from its ideological platform and stood in parliamentary elections. Henri Lauzière, “Post-Islamism and the Religious Discourse of ‘Abd al-Salam Yasin,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 37 (2005), pp. 241–261; Malika Zeghal, *Islamism in Morocco: Religion, Authoritarianism, and Electoral Politics* (Princeton, NJ: Markus Wiener, 2008). Notably, from the 2000s onward, the participation of women in the Moroccan liberal movement increased notably, spurred on by globalization and the information revolution. These women, mostly members of the urban intelligentsia active in the academic world, communications and culture, lobbied for change in the government’s gender policies and made inroads into the promotion of the social, legal, and political rights of women while invigorating public debate on these issues. In contrast to feminist Islamic discourse, which clung to Islamic law as a springboard for improving the welfare of women, the liberal and secular discourse portrayed Islam as ethical and universal if only gender inequality and patriarchy were excised. The events of 2011 in the Arab world, especially the uprisings in Tunisia and Egypt, begat a coalition of forces in Morocco that embraced liberal ideals such as civil rights, separation of powers, and an independent judiciary. As demonstrators took to the streets, demanding political, economic, and social change, the king was forced to announce constitutional reforms to sustain his image as a liberal reformer. Saloua Zerhouni, “How the Moroccan Regime Frames and Limits the Liberal Discourses of the Political Opposition” (unpublished paper); Driss Maghraoui, “Constitutional Reforms in Morocco: Between Consensus and Subaltern Politics,” in George Joffé (ed.), *North Africa’s Arab Spring* (London: Routledge, 2013), pp. 175–195.

94 An important manifestation of this newfound openness and cosmopolitanism

in Saudi society in recent years is the diwaniyya—a gathering of intellectuals in private homes that has become a forum for public debate and political activity. At these meetings, liberal voices have arisen, calling for judicial autonomy and civil spaces where citizens can exercise freedom of speech, expression, and association with the ultimate goal of establishing a constitutional monarchy with significant limits on the power of the executive branch. The linkage of religion and politics, and the monopoly of the ‘ulama’ on theological issues, have also been criticized, but there is no real institutional or political backing for such views, and some critics admit that the only way to advance reforms is from above, via a “benign dictator.” Nevertheless, this is a noteworthy cultural development in an authoritarian state steeped in shari‘a law. Richard Dekmejian, “The Liberal Impulse in Saudi Arabia,” *Middle East Journal* 57.3 (2003), pp. 400–414; Lacroix, “Between Islamists and Liberals,” pp. 355f; see also Stéphane Lacroix, “Islam-Liberal Politics in Saudi Arabia,” in Paul Aarts and Gerd Nonnemam (eds.), *Saudi Arabia in the Balance: Political Economy, Society, Foreign Affairs* (London: Hurst, 2005), pp. 35–56; and Matthiesen, “Diwaniyyas, Intellectual Salons, and the Limits of Civil Society.”

95 Fareed Zakaria, “Islam, Democracy and Constitutional Liberalism,” *Political Science Quarterly* 119.1 (2004), pp. 12–13.

96 See, for example, Shakir al-Nabulsi’s warm embrace of two former leftists, the Syrian Jurj Tarabishi and the Tunisian al-‘Afif al-Akhdar in al-Ta’ir al-Khashabi; *Shahadat fi Suqut al-Tarbiya wa’l-Ta’lim al-‘Arabi al-Mu‘asir* (Amman: Dar al-Shuruq, 1988), pp. 37, 40; *Muhami al-Shaytan: Dirasa fi Fikr al-‘Afif al-Akhdar* (Beirut: al-Mu‘assasa al-‘Arabiyya li’l-Dirasat wa’l-Nashr, 2005).

97 Jurj Tarabishi, “Ishkaliyyat al-Dimuqratiyya fi’l-Watan al-‘Arabi,” in ‘Abd al-Khaliq (ed.), *al-‘Arab wa-Tahaddiyat al-Qarn al-Hadi wa’l-‘Ishrin*, vol. 1, pp. 532–534; also his *Min al-Nahda ila al-Ridda: Tamazzuqat al-Thaqafa al-‘Arabiyya fi ‘Asr al-‘Awlama* (Beirut: Dar al-Saqi, 2000), pp. 7–8; Hazim Saghiya, *al-‘Arab bayna al-Hajar wa’l-Dharra: Fusukh fi Thaqafa Sa’ida* (Beirut: Dar al-Saqi, 1992), pp. 231–244.

98 Binder, *Islamic Liberalism*, pp. 4–5. See also Gudrun Krümer, “Islam and Pluralism,” in Rex Brynen, Bahgat Korany and Paul Noble (eds.), *Political Liberalization and Democratization in the Arab World: Theoretical Perspectives* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 1995), vol. 1, pp. 113–123.

99 Karl Mannheim, *Essays on the Sociology of Culture: Collected Works of Karl Mannheim* (London: Routledge, 2007), pp. 163–164.

100 Wafa Sultan, *A God Who Hates* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2009), pp. 1–4. The book is largely based on the life story of a young girl who grew up in Syria and lived under the thumb of what she described as a culture ruled by a god who hates women and all they represent.

101 Abu Zaid and Nelson, *Voice of an Exile* , p. 172.

102 Ibid., p. 197.

103 Abu Zayd's interview to al-Masry al-Yawm , December 28, 2008, <http://www.almasryalyoum.com/news/details/78981> (accessed May 12, 2014).

104 Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd, "Mashru' al-Nahda bayna Talfiqiyyat al-Tabaqa wa'l-Turath al-Islami," *al-Muhit al-Thaqafi* 5 (March 2002), p. 71.

105 Amin, *Fi Bayt Ahmad Amin* , pp. 416–419.

106 On the definition of "ideology," in contrast to the more general and fluid concept of "orientation," see Israel Gershoni and James Jankowski, *Redefining the Egyptian Nation, 1930 – 1945* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), pp. 35–37.

107 Hourani, *Arabic Thought* , p. v.

108 Notably, this book is a continuation of my sustained interest in Arab liberal thought. Hatina, *Identity Politics* ; Hatina, "Arab Liberal Discourse"; Hatina, "Arab Liberal Thought in Historical Perspective," in Hatina and Schumann (eds.), *Arab Liberal Thought after 1967* , pp. 23–40.

109 On dissident or public intellectuals, see John P. Nettl, "Ideas, Intellectuals and Structures of Dissent," in Philip Rieff (ed.), *On Intellectuals* (New York: Doubleday, 1969), pp. 53–122; Edward Shils, "The Intellectual and the Powers: Some Perspectives for Comparative Analysis," *Society and History* 1.1 (1958), pp. 5–22; Charles Kurzman and Lynn Owens, "The Sociology of Intellectuals," *Annual Review of Sociology* 28 (2002), pp. 67–68.

110 Hatina, "Arab Liberal Discourse," pp. 8–18.

111 Browsers, Political Ideology in the Arab World ; Rohe and Skovgaard-Petersen, “The Ambivalent Embrace of Liberalism”; Sing, “Arab Post-Marxists”; Haugbølle, “Ziad al-Rahbani.”

112 Quentin Skinner, “Meaning and Understanding in the History of Ideas,” History and Theory 8.1 (1969), pp. 3–53.

113 Jürgen Habermas, The Structured Transformation of the Public Sphere, trans. Thomas Burger (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1989).

114 Thus, for example, the works of ‘Ali Salim in Egypt, Shakir al-Nabulsi in Jordan, Jurj Tarabishi in Syria and Turki al-Hamad in Saudi Arabia.

Historical endurance, ideological fervor

Israel's military defeat of the Arabs in June 1967 opened a new chapter in the history of modern Arab thought. It set off a round of moral stocktaking in the Arab world, and sent Arab intellectuals searching for the underlying causes of what became known as the Naksa (setback). The crushing defeat to Israel became a wake-up call for political vision and concrete action. Nasserism and Arab nationalism, the ideological and political doctrines that had guided the Arabs on the eve of the 1967 war, were deemed the main culprits. As these doctrines largely exited the stage, competing narratives began to fill the void.

On the left, socialist thinkers turned the defeat into a sharp indictment of the legacy of the past with its sectarian biases. They claimed that the revolutionary regimes, rather than dismantling this legacy, had used it to advance their political goals. Their solution was a complete break with history and the past, and a revolt against Islamic tradition, as a prerequisite for a new culture based on secular principles.¹ At the other end of the spectrum, Islamist thinkers used the defeat as a lever for their demand for a return to authentic Islam. This was the sole path to victory, they declared, especially when facing a Zionist entity that drew its rationale and *raison d'être* from Jewish religion.²

Yet another narrative was that of the Arab liberals, who ruefully admitted that they had succumbed to the attraction of revolutionary rhetoric and let their intellectual guard down. One of the main exponents of Arab liberalism, the Egyptian Tawfiq al-Hakim (d. 1987), confessed that the liberal admiration for Nasserism was tantamount to "intellectual suicide."³

While liberal thinkers did not abandon their critical stance entirely, it was moderate and non-polarizing. Compared to Islamist revolutionaries—Sayyid Qutb in Egypt and Marwan Hadid in Syria come to mind—or avowed Marxist-socialists such as Ahmad Hamrush, Isma'il Sabri 'Abd Allah in Egypt, Khalid Baktash, Riyadh al-Turk in Syria, or Khayr al-Din Hasib in Iraq, the language of Arab liberalism was restrained. Liberals did not reject the value system of Arab

societies outright, but offered constructive, at times even blunt, criticism. Some emphasized their national affiliation—Egyptian, Sudanese, Syrian, Lebanese—and promoted a local agenda of social change and reform (islah) under the auspices of universal values, such as freedom, tolerance, citizenship, and democracy.⁴

In this respect, Arab liberals were nationalist liberals. They recognized the legitimacy of the nation-state, but aspired to upgrade its civic features and its tolerance of otherness—of women, religious minorities, and neighboring cultures. They did not demand total dissociation from Islam, as the left did, and refrained from bringing Islam into the political equation, as the Islamists did. In short, Arab liberals did not renounce religion, yet showed no particular sympathy for it.

The call by Arab liberals for restructuring the system of government, while evolutionary in approach, revitalized liberal discourse following a period of exclusion under the revolutionary regimes. To a large extent, liberal voices were able to resurface due to the political repercussions of the defeat in 1967, which led local rulers to adopt a more open, less repressive policy. The window of opportunity for liberal discourse opened even wider in the wake of a whole series of seminal events in both the international and the local arenas—the fall of communism and the Soviet bloc at the end of the 1980s; the World Trade Center attacks in the United States in 2001; and the Second Gulf War in 2003. These events, which triggered a heated debate in the Arab world on the cost of tyranny and religious extremism, provided liberal writers with the ammunition to challenge the legitimacy of their governments, fight for a more democratic polity, and push for better relations with the outside world.⁵

The activism of post-1967 liberal writers sprang from the awareness that while Arab society was in dire need of reform, this should be predicated on its own distinctive historical experience rather than the experience of the West. At the same time, these writers embraced modernity in all its forms—individualism, rationalism, representation, and secularism—as universal values that any society could adopt. In this way, liberal discourse sought to extricate itself from an innate contradiction: adopting Western culture while ignoring its repressive colonialist baggage. Proponents of this approach included Sa‘d al-Din Ibrahim, Faraj Fuda, Muhammad Sa‘id al-‘Ashmawi, Sayyid al-Qimni, Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd, Amin al-Mahdi, Tariq Hijji, Mahmud Muhammad Taha, Muhammad Shahrur, Nasif Nassar, Abdelmajid Charfi, Mohamed Talbi, Fatima Mernissi,

‘Abd al-Hamid al-Ansari, Ahmad al-Baghdadi, and Turki al-Hamad.

Through expatriates, among them Wafa’ Sultan, Shakir al-Nabulsi, Hazim Saghiya, Jurj Tarabishi, and al-‘Afif al-Akhdar, the Arab liberal cause reached Western audiences. Did authors living in the Arab world interpret liberal values differently and couch their views in language more in line with local traditions and norms than those living in the open, civic climate of the West? It is hard to say, although the expatriates do seem more frank and outspoken on religious and political matters. One way or another, it was a group that cut across geographical borders. In terms of academic and public profile, Sa’d al-Din Ibrahim in Egypt and Mohamed Talbi in Tunisia were no less notable than Shakir al-Nabulsi and Wafa’ Sultan in the United States. All were sought-after speakers at conferences in Europe, North America, and Latin America, taught at universities there, and were active in international human rights organizations. Their writings were translated into other languages and discussed in academic frameworks, and all responded to the challenges of the time, striving together to find solutions to the problems at hand.⁶

Among the post-1967 liberal writers were veteran intellectuals from the interwar and post-war periods, along with newcomers who burst onto the scene in the early 1980s. They were joined by writers from other ideological streams (mostly older people), such as former pan-Arabists, but mainly former members of the Arab left. So it is difficult to speak of a “historical generation” in Karl Mannheim’s sense of the term, that is, a generation that has shared formative, dramatic experiences in a specific timeframe and a similar environment, such as colonialism, world wars, or national struggles for independence.⁷

The liberals’ social background was also diverse: they hailed from wealthy and middle-class families, but also from the lower class, which makes defining Arab liberalism even more complex. As their educational-professional profile was high, an empirical and rational approach was a given, especially on religious matters. Shared fate was yet another component: surrounded by religious extremism and authoritarian politics, with the Arab–Israeli conflict and anti-globalism hovering in the background, Arab liberals shared a sense of urgency and a drive to tackle issues head-on. They formed a discourse community that can be defined as a specific interest group, not linked by religious creed, class, birth, or inherent characteristics, but rather by shared ideas and goals, which also distinguish its members from other groups.

Arab liberalism in comparative perspective

Any study of the post-1967 era would be incomplete without a comparative analysis of Arab liberal discourse that looks closely at the evolution of its human quotient, geographical span, media and civic institutions, ideological themes, and intellectual standing.

Human profile

Formative liberalism in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was the purview of educated professionals—mainly lawyers, journalists, newspaper editors, and scholars. Most Arab liberals were from elite families, especially landowners and the upper middle class. A few belonged to the *effendiyya*, an urbanized middle class partly comprised of rural families who had migrated to the city.⁸ This core group of free professionals remained steady over time, but it was gradually joined by university graduates in the fields of history, political science, and the exact sciences—evidence of the spread of higher education. The newcomers were now mostly from the middle class rather than the elite, as social mobility increased and the landowning class began to lose political and economic power under regimes that set their sights on modernization.

This academic orientation, along with proficiency in languages such as French and English, sometimes reinforced by doctoral studies or guest lectureships at foreign universities, led to the adoption of scientific methodology and concepts from the world of historical research, political philosophy, sociology, and political science. For Arab liberals, this cultural capital became a stepping stone to public activism, heralding the intersection of scholarship and sociopolitical activism in the Arab world.

During the formative period, that is, the early twentieth century, liberal writers included establishment or semi-establishment figures as well as independents. Some viewed their intellectual endeavors as a vocation; for others it was more of

a hobby. Some specialized in religious interpretation, politics, or economic issues; others were broader in their interests. A number of them wrote novels or literary criticism, which provided them with an additional platform for social and political criticism, and a vehicle for promoting their civil agenda.

From its earliest days, the liberal camp included both Muslim and Christian writers. Moreover, the number of women writers increased in the post-1967 era, reflecting their growing public presence—a development sometimes referred to as the “quiet revolution.” After 1967, the male voice was no longer the prominent one in Arab liberal discourse: women became active participants and ceased to rely on men to give voice to their emancipatory agenda.⁹ They radiated vision, determination, courage, and strength. They dealt not only with “women’s issues,” but also with other issues on the public agenda.

Geography

Geographically, the cradle of early liberalism was Egypt, with its vibrant public sphere, developed print culture, and British influence. The Syrian and Lebanese territories were also important: Their substantial Christian populations served as cultural brokers through their affinity with Western, in this case mainly French, culture.¹⁰ Later, liberal thought extended its geographical range to North Africa and the Persian Gulf, and eventually the Arab diasporas of Europe and North America. Early hubs of liberal discourse, such as Cairo, Damascus, Baghdad, and Beirut, were joined by Khartoum, Tunis, Rabat, Riyadh, London, Paris, New York, and Toronto. The geographical span, going beyond the Egyptian-Levantine orbit, also indicated a denser and more global liberal thought.

Media and civic institutions

Early liberalism relied primarily on print culture—books, newspapers, and periodicals—to disseminate its ideas and messages. A number of Arab liberals in Egypt and the Fertile Crescent had their own distribution channels, which gave

them more room to maneuver and freed them from dependence on newspaper editors and publishers. In Egypt, in particular, liberal messages gained a foothold through party newsletters. In later years, liberals continued to make use of the printed word, but usually without options for self-distribution or party-affiliated circulation. Amin al-Mahdi of Egypt was an exception to the rule as the owner of the publishing house al-Dar al-‘Arabiyya li’l-Nashr. This void was increasingly filled by new information technologies and by digital media. New mass media outlets, such as satellite communication and especially the Internet, had the power to cut across borders to propagate critical thinking and civic virtues. Through these technologies, the Arab world became aware of the universal norms of human and civil rights, and the possibility of reining in the power of authoritarian regimes.¹¹ Cable television channels, including global channels like al-Jazeera broadcasting from Qatar and al-Arabiya from Dubai, inaugurated much more popular and strong public debates than ever before, while providing a vital forum for liberal discourse, also through televised debates, mainly with Islamist opponents.¹² It was Wafa’ Sultan who admitted that the interviews she gave to al-Jazeera’s famous program al-Ittijah al-mu‘akis (the opposite direction), “introduce[d] me and my message to millions of people.” She was also careful to mention the Israeli Middle East Media Research Institute (MEMRI), which played a major role in spreading her mission, while accurately providing relevant information from the region.¹³

The Internet, introduced in the region in the mid-1990s, was perhaps the greatest force in reshaping and expanding the boundaries of the Arab public sphere. It was more accessible to the public and less open to control by the state than the print and electronic media. Additionally, the interaction between writer and reader was immediate and highly effective: the reader became part of the online dialogue by responding and adding personal commentary to messages with ideological content.¹⁴ According to recent studies, doubts arose as to whether the web was capable of setting in motion a democratic transformation that could become a political challenge to authoritarian rule,¹⁵ doubts that turned out to be problematic in view of the decisive role played by the social media in the uprisings of 2011 (see Chapter 5).

The new media became an important hub for minority ideologies in the Middle East, including liberal thought. The Lebanese writer Hazim Saghiya, by emphasizing its role in “empowering and emancipating the individual, who constitutes the cornerstone of the liberal ethos,” recognized the extent to which the information revolution contributed to the liberal agenda.¹⁶ Saghiya and other

liberals wrote for al-Hayat and Sharq al-Awsat—both newspapers were published in London and reached the Arab world in online editions—and for Abwab (1994–2003), and Kalamun (2010–11). From 2005, the London-based online newspaper Elaph provided another forum for liberal voices. Elaph defined itself as an independent journal, unaffiliated with any ideology, political party, or state, and with a global and cosmopolitan orientation. The journal’s goal, as stated by the editor ‘Uthman al-Amir, was to serve as a bridge for Arabs to join the modern world and leave behind their feelings of frustration, anger, and hostility.¹⁷ This credo was also true of the Beirut-based al-Daraj, which was first published in 2017 and raised the banner of free journalism and democracy in the Arab world.¹⁸ The websites al-Hiwar al-Mutamaddin and al-Awan, as well as the publishing house Dar al-Saqi, with branches in Beirut and London, also served as important outlets for liberal writing and the translation into Arabic of essays on democracy and civil liberty.¹⁹

Additionally, an array of civic organizations functioned as incubators and formulators of liberal thought in Arab countries, advancing programs to protect human rights and fighting religious and ethnic extremism. Notable among them were the Arab Human Rights Organization, Ibn Khaldun Center, Egyptian Association for Enlightenment, New Civic Forum and Arab Democracy Foundation in Cairo; the Syrian Human Rights Organization (Sawasiya) in Damascus; the Lebanese Human Rights Organization; the Tunisian League for Human Rights in Tunis; and the Arab Association for Human Rights in Limassol.²⁰ In the economic sphere, a prominent example was the Egyptian New Call Association (Jam‘iyyat al-Nida’ al-Jadid), headed by Sa‘id al-Najjar (d. 2004), which advocated privatization of the economy, while also touching on issues of democracy and human rights.²¹ Mention should also be made of the Arab Liberal Federation (ALF), which was established in 2008 as a network of liberal political parties, organizations, and activists from Arab countries. Its declared rationale was commitment to “the principles of freedom, responsibility, pluralism, tolerance, market economy, civil state and separation of religion from state affairs.”²²

Civic institutions and media helped to disseminate, frame, and network liberal ideas and views, allowing their exponents to be actively engaged in intellectual and political debates and to interact with the Arab public. Tapping into shared circumstances and experiences, liberal writers from different regions, including outlying areas of North Africa and the Persian Gulf, banded together to create a kind of ideological cosmopolis. Such cosmopolitan orientation, according to Ulf

Hannerz, preferred the universal to the closed and particularistic, and showed an openness to new meaning systems.²³

Ideological themes

Despite the fact that liberal writers shared core values and similar views of their distinctive intellectual mission in molding the collective image of Arab society, one sees differences in emphasis between the formative and post-1967 eras, reflecting historical circumstances. Formative liberalism in the interwar period focused mainly on nationalism and the framing of a constitution—two issues directly related to the primary concerns of the time, namely liberation from colonial rule and nation building. The thrust toward a “culture of law” was guided by the desire for a progressive legal framework that would assure freedom of thought and human rights.²⁴ It was also linked to efforts to further knowledge and education as an important tool in molding civic awareness. Post-1967 liberalism, which by then had broadened its agenda, placed more emphasis on individual liberties, citizenship, political reform, division of powers, accountability, judicial and social reform, and the depoliticization of religion.

The interest in judicial and social reform was largely driven by leftists who flocked to the liberal camp after the bankruptcy of communism in the late 1980s. Later, as Islam rose as a political force, and global jihad appeared on the scene, promoted by al-Qa‘ida and other Salafi-jihadi groups that defined Islam as a religion of the sword, the goal of depoliticizing religion gained ascendancy. Formative liberalism had mainly confronted the establishment Islam of the ‘ulama’, whose status significantly eroded when Muslim scholars became state functionaries and their monopoly over religious interpretation was challenged.²⁵ Early liberal discourse on religion and the state was relatively restrained, eschewing the radical call for the separation of state and religion, mainly by non-Muslims who praised the French and Kemalist models and argued that society could only flourish under secularism, with national unity transcending religious differences.²⁶ Caution was also adopted with respect to the Qur’an, which had always played a central role in Muslim consciousness. Mainstream liberals pushed for a broader reading of Islamic history and the life of the Prophet.²⁷

Post-1967 liberal discourse was daring, defiant, and prepared to break taboos. In contrast to earlier liberal writers, liberals after 1967 turned their back on Islamic tradition and called for the establishment of a dynamic civic polity in which the core of Muslim thought, the Qur'an, would serve more as a historical, humane, and ethical guide than as a god-given legal text.²⁸ Qur'anic verses were contextualized, downplayed, or simply ignored, paving the way for the individualization of religious belief and even secularization, yet with greater restraint than in the West. These writers were also deeply critical of local Arab regimes, accusing them of imitating Latin America and its fascist dictatorships. The Arab regimes were an "industry of oppression" that adopted the façade of democratic government, but only in form—not content.²⁹

Intellectual standing

In terms of hierarchy, it is difficult to point to a distinct core of intellectual luminaries or eminent leaders among later Arab liberals. One is hard pressed to name individuals who were creative ideological guides, broke with existing traditions, and led the way for minor or second-tier intellectuals.³⁰ Does this imply something about the quality of later liberal thought? It is hard to say, but there is no question that historical circumstances played a role of some importance. Early liberalism in the Arab world took root during the transition period between traditional society and the modern era, a time of cultural turbulence that necessitated new and creative ways of thinking. It was an embryonic stage, marked by enthusiasm, activism, a sense of mission, and even utopianism. The post-1967 era was characterized by sobriety and weariness after the defeat by Israel, disillusionment with the revolutionary dream and socioeconomic schisms. All these impacted negatively on liberal discourse and detracted from the influence of its spokespersons. Post-1967 liberals also seemed to be less organized as a group, with a much broader range of ages and socioeconomic backgrounds. They had no financial, public, or political resources, and relationships were not close. The diffuse nature of the group was heightened by the absence of a geographical hub. Liberal writers were no longer associated only with Cairo or Beirut. They could also be found in Damascus, Khartoum, Tunis, Rabat, Riyadh, and Kuwait, as well as London, Paris, and Washington. For the most part, post-1967 liberalism traced its great luminaries to

the formative period, from the mid-nineteenth century to the first half of the twentieth century, and some of its figures, mostly Egyptians like Taha Husayn, ‘Abbas Mahmud al-‘Aqqad, Tawfiq al-Hakim, Najib Mahfuz, and Khalid Muhammad Khalid.³¹

Although the internal ranking of liberal writers, from senior thinkers to minor pundits, was not clear, and the designated intellectual hubs were gone, still post-1967 liberal thought was bold, lively, and original, and expanded the boundaries of the liberal agenda. The liberals of this period were more outspoken and critical of religious and political power than their predecessors, perhaps in response to being branded non-conformists. They were far less apologetic, admitting to the strong impact of Western ideas and premises on modern Arabic thought.³² They were anxious to define themselves as “liberals,” using the Arabized term al-libiraliyyun as marking their distinct ideology.

Even when the regime embraced them and rewarded their intellectual pursuits with prestigious national awards, Arab liberals remained aloof. Thus in 2009, Sayyid al-Qimni won the Ja’izat al-Dawla al-Taqdiriyya, Egypt’s State Award of Merit in Social Sciences. In his acceptance speech, he emphasized that the prize did not attest to the democratic or secular nature of the Egyptian government and insisted that he had been chosen by the people, and not by the regime. He would not retract his call to repeal Article 2 of the Egyptian constitution, which designated Islam as the state religion and the principles of shari‘a as the main source of legislation, and stood by his demand that Egyptian identity cards drop the field for religion. He maintained that faith was a personal matter and that anyone who rejected this principle remained outside the perimeters of human society. Affirming his support of the liberal ethos and defying his opponents, he declared that he was dedicating the prize to the memory of Faraj Fuda, an Egyptian writer assassinated by Islamic extremists in 1992, whom he called a “martyr of free expression” (shahid al-kalima).³³

Ultimately, the contribution of the post-1967 liberal community to civic political culture was twofold: it lent credence to the right to dissent, and it challenged the Arab status quo. Some Arab liberals became bitter and frustrated with their image as dissidents, devoid of public support and political clout. Others were bold and assertive, unafraid to publish controversial analyses on a wide range of issues. They were willing to pay the price for defending the values they held

sacred—individual and civil rights, separation of powers, the rule of law, depoliticization of religion, and, no less importantly, cultural ecumenism—to open up the Arab world to modernity.

Arab liberals shared a commonality of purpose with Shi‘i liberals in revolutionary Iran, mostly university professors and lecturers, but also journalists, lawyers, and engineers. They, too, constituted an ideological minority in their country and were subject to harassment by the authorities. They viewed modernism as a dynamic process of change that allowed for the possibility of other paradigms and ways to interpret tradition without blindly imitating the culture of others. Iranian liberals held that every civilization had its own form of modernity, adapting traditional norms and values to fit the circumstances³⁴—an outlook very similar to sociologist Samuel Eisenstadt’s concept of “multiple modernities.”³⁵ Mohson, Kadivar, Abdolkarim Soroush, and Akhbar Ganti underlined the importance of critical thinking and openness for the survival of monotheistic religion. They believed that divine truth could only be discovered through criticism. They noted that the importance of criticism went beyond religion and ethics: it encouraged intellectual pluralism and constituted a driving force for national development and the establishment of a democratic civil society in which the individual became a citizen protected from the whims of the state. For Shi‘i intellectuals, the Iranian revolution was waged first and foremost to gain civil rights. Instead, the turban (the clerical regime) replaced the crown (the Pahlavi monarchy), creating a religious theocracy.³⁶ The emphasis in liberal Shi‘i discourse on the importance of critical rationalism and open society, which was also adopted by liberal Sunnis, pushed the individual to the forefront in the battle for modernization.³⁷

The Iranian case may be a digression, but it should not come as a surprise. Liberal discourse in Iran was not just the result of fading revolutionary fervor or chinks in the armor of post-Khomeini Shi‘i thinking. It also revealed the undercurrents of the vibrant civil society brought about by the modernizing policies of the Pahlavi dynasty. This atmosphere of social and ideological openness, which lasted throughout most of the twentieth century, was one that the clerical regime could not completely suppress. It reflected the lively intellectual scene in Iran, as well as the large number of women in the public sphere and labor force.

The struggle of Iranian intellectuals to widen the range of civil liberties under the clerical regime enjoyed the sympathy of their Arab counterparts, who used

the case of Iran to bolster their demand for the depoliticization of Islam.
According to Abu Zayd

the case of Iran is the most obvious example of the successful implementation of Islamism and the establishment of a theocratic state. Even so, at the height of their anti-Eastern political stance, Iranian intellectuals have been active in translating and publishing celebrated philosophical texts from the West, thereby paving the way for a strong and lively intellectual debate. The fact that Muslims in Iran have tasted Islamism enabled them to criticize their own experience and to fight for a democratic and liberal state where human rights can be preserved and protected.³⁸

Abu Zayd's approval was part of a broader campaign of solidarity with liberal writers (and other intellectuals) who were being defamed or persecuted in their home countries. Incidents involving them were widely discussed and their work was quoted in various publications.³⁹ New organizations waving the liberal banner began to surface and voice their views. All this contributed to a sense of strength and togetherness on the part of the liberal cause. For many liberal writers, belonging to an ideological, non-conformist minority only reinforced awareness of their own special destiny and social mission. They felt that they were part of a select group, a kind of vanguard.⁴⁰ This came through in the writing of human rights activist Sa'd al-Din Ibrahim, director of the Ibn Khaldun Center in Cairo, whose efforts to promote civil and minority rights in Egypt and beyond won global support but ended in his arrest and trial in 2000:

Near the end of my time in prison, I heard about Professor Hashem Aghajari in Iran, a fellow intellectual who was arrested, tried, and condemned to death for blasphemy because he dared to criticize the rule of the mullahs over his country and to tell his fellow Iranians that they should not be blind followers. I had never heard of him or read any of his writings—he is an historian who published in Persian—but I felt an instant bond with him and sensed that we had something deeply in common ... When I heard of Professor Aghajari and then of dissidents in Tunisia also languishing in jail, another picture popped into my head: The

romantic Silk Road of yesterday has in our time become a kind of Despots' Alley end-to-end on the map from Beijing right on through to North Africa.

But then I reflected some more and thought, in all these storied lands there are people who are working for the same things that I am working for. Whatever might happen—whether prison or even death might await us—we could all feel we were part of a larger freedom struggle whose values and significance humbled us even while they lifted us up.⁴¹

Sources of inspiration

Arab liberal writers acted as an intellectual compass for their community, offering an alternative interpretation of Islamic and Arabic heritage from a universal historical perspective. They drew their inspiration from Europe and the West, but also from the Far East, particularly Japan and South Korea, as well as Malaysia and Indonesia in Southeast Asia.⁴² Japan's successful transition from dictatorship to democracy and economic upswing were singled out for special praise. As Fatima Mernissi, a sociologist and women's rights activist from Morocco, observed, instead of frittering away precious resources on the large-scale importation of arms, as the Arab regimes did—foolishly in her opinion—Japan strove to build itself up through science and research.⁴³

Turkey was another source of inspiration. Its synthesis of Islam, democracy, and progressive thinking in the twentieth century provided the foundation for a dynamic society capable of integrating into the modern world. This synthesis was the product of a lengthy historical process, as reforms introduced in the Ottoman Empire over the course of the nineteenth century led to a relatively successful blend of tradition and Western modernism. Other factors included Turkey's geographical proximity to Europe; the absence of the type of colonial regime that prevailed in Arab countries after World War I; and the aggressive secularization policy of Mustafa Kemal. The transition to a multiparty system in the 1940s, the growth of private business and industry, and the moderating influence of Sufism on the Islamic parties further contributed to the rise of Turkish democracy.⁴⁴ Arab liberals, like their predecessors in the 1920s and 1930s, longingly eyed the Turkish model, even if not all were in agreement over

its secular bent.⁴⁵ Sa‘d al-Din Ibrahim hailed Turkey as the most politically open country in the Middle East, pointing to the victory of the “democratic Muslims” of the Justice and Development Party in the free elections of 2000.⁴⁶

Even so, Arab liberals were also inspired by indigenous Islamic Arab sources. They highlighted classical Islamic rationalist philosophies embodied by such towering figures as Ibn Rushd, al-Farabi or Ibn Sina, or the ninth-century Mu‘atiziles, who gave reason an elevated role in understanding the world (both material and spiritual) to be equal to revelation. Abu Hamid al-Ghazali (d. 1111) also featured in contemporary liberal writings as calling for the pursuit of knowledge, while downplaying his mystical Sufi inclinations and antiphilosophical polemics.⁴⁷ Another, later source of influence was the Arab Nahda—an intellectual-cultural renaissance in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The Nahda’s main bastions were developed mainly in Egypt and the Fertile Crescent and were mostly channeled and circulated through mass printing. Printed texts (books and newspapers) made the Nahda’s lofty ideas accessible to the wider public.⁴⁸ While both Muslims and Christians took part in the Nahda, the Christians played a role in assimilating European values and ideas that was disproportionate to their demographic and minority status. Proponents of the Nahda sought to join the modern world by invigorating Arab heritage and aligning it with scientific analysis, humanism, progress, and nationalism. Or, as Butrus al-Bustani (d. 1883) succinctly put it, “the wheels of the world spin on the tip of the pen.” He depicted the nineteenth century as a century of learning and enlightenment, of inventions and discoveries, of culture and knowledge, and of manufacturing and arts. Thus he urged his fellow Arabs to welcome and greet modern culture as “this old friend who is coming back to you after a long absence.”⁴⁹ The Nahadis drew much of their inspiration from the writings of European thinkers like Auguste Comte, Ernest Renan, Émile Durkheim, Herbert Spencer, and Anatole France.

The concept of hurriyya (freedom) was a key word in the Nahda lexicon, referring to individual liberty in a much broader sense than the inverse in Islam, which was limited to the treatment of slaves or the responsibility of a ruler not to oppress his people.⁵⁰ This was stated clearly by ‘Abd al-Rahman al-Kawakibi (d. 1902), who described man as “a world that stands on its own, eternal, as if he were a star who devotes himself to his own affairs, as if he were an angel whose task is to carry out the commands of God that inspire man’s conscience.”⁵¹ Dissatisfied with general references to the term “freedom,” al-Kawakibi moved to specify its components in order to highlight its broader scope and to reduce

uncertainty as to its essence.

Freedom means that a person has the right to speak and to act without any obstacle or without fearing oppression. The branches of freedom include equal rights, the supervision of rulers as representatives of the people, raising demands or being giving advice without fear. Freedom includes the freedom to teach, to preach and to publish, to do scientific research, and also to enjoy complete justice. No individual should fear an oppressor, an extorter, or a cunning traitor. Freedom encompasses the protection of one's beliefs and of the people, the preservation of honor, and of knowledge and its fruits. Freedom is the spirit of religion [...]. There is no doubt that, after life, freedom is a person's most precious possession, and that its loss leads to a loss of hope, a suspension of activity, the death of the soul and a disruption of laws and rules.⁵²

The shift in focus from the next to this world, highlighting utilitarian aspects of human life, was also reflected in al-Kawakibi's wide interpretation of the jihad motif. He argued that the Qur'anic term jihad in the cause of God (al-jihad fi sabil Allah) represents "every effort that benefits religion and this world. Even livelihood can be called jihad."⁵³

For Nahda intellectuals, liberty constituted equality before the law and religious freedom, but also the freedom to exert political influence and engage in political activity through the legislative system. What they sought was a greater say for citizens in determining the character of the government, implying popular sovereignty. This demand intensified toward the end of the century as nationalist sentiments began to surface in the Arab world. Liberty, justice (‘adl), and humanism were politicized and came to be seen as pillars of civilized society.

To a large extent the Nahda took its cue from the campaigns for government reforms and Westernization launched in Istanbul, Cairo, and Tunis, as well as the encounter with European economic and cultural norms spurred by the colonial presence in the region.⁵⁴ The emancipation of non-Muslims in Muslim countries from the traditional status of dhimmis (protected subjects) led to an upswing in intercommunity relations, in particular between Christians and Muslims, which acted as a further catalyst for enlightened Nahda discourse.⁵⁵ A towering figure

during this period, and a major source of inspiration for Arab liberals for generations to come, was the Egyptian Shaykh Muhammad ‘Abduh (d. 1905). Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd hailed ‘Abduh as the father of the Islamic reformation movement—the Islamic Martin Luther. According to Abu Zayd, ‘Abduh focused on the deconstruction of the Muslim exclusiveness mentality, and on the incorporation of Western ideas of progress and development into Arab society. He made a clear distinction between intellectual Europe and imperial Europe; between the colonizing aims of the West and the beneficial values the West offered.⁵⁶

The liberal age: politics of nostalgia

The published writings of post-1967 Arab liberals reveal a complex blend of admiration and nostalgia for the liberal legacy, and criticism of it. They used a variety of terms, sometimes even within the same text, to refer to this legacy—Nahda (cultural awakening), tanwir (enlightenment), ‘aqlaniyya (rationalism), and liberalism—but the idea was basically the same. Liberalism, which became the byword of post-1967 discourse, is the term used in this book.

The historical span of the liberal age as depicted in the work of these thinkers was quite broad, overlapping to a large extent with the period outlined by Albert Hourani in his seminal book, *Arabic Thought in the Liberal Age 1798–1939*.⁵⁷ By portraying the liberal age as a *longue durée* process, based on Fernand Braudel’s historical conception, liberal discourse was endowed with historical and ideological depth. Its modern-day exponents became an integral part of the Arab milieu rather than an alien transplant, drawing upon sources of inspiration that were ultimately indigenous. The search for liberal roots went back to Napoleon’s invasion of Egypt in July 1798, clearly implying that the primary trigger for liberal thinking was the West and Western cultural influence, although the demand for reform at home was also acknowledged.⁵⁸ Sa’d al-Din Ibrahim (b. 1938), a sociologist by training and head of the Ibn Khaldun Center in Cairo, portrayed the invasion as the Arab Middle East’s first head-on encounter with the West since the Crusades in the thirteenth century. While Egypt stagnated, clinging to a medieval lifestyle, Europe advanced scientifically and technologically, and instituted political and religious reforms. The French

brought with them print journalism, an appreciation of “liberty, equality, fraternity,” civil rights, and the concept of local government. It took Egyptian resistance forces, aided by the British, three years to drive them out. They departed from Egypt with their weapons and ammunition, but left behind newspapers and revolutionary ideas that changed Egyptian society.

Ibrahim argued that it was Muhammad ‘Ali, with his expansionist goals, who laid the foundations for modern civil society. He sent students to Europe and brought over generals, engineers, and doctors to train his countrymen. From this educated class sprang a new middle class that produced a cadre of liberal thinkers. They found a receptive ear in Isma‘il Pasha, the Ottoman viceroy of Egypt in the second half of the nineteenth century, who established courts and representative councils. Despite their limited power, these institutions heralded the first cycle in Egypt’s liberal quest. The Advisory Council of Representatives, a semi-democratic body inspired by the American Revolution battle cry “No taxation without representation,” demanded that Isma‘il’s son, Tawfiq Pasha, install a constitutional government, sparking the ‘Urabi Revolt (1881–82).

British occupation ended what Ibrahim saw as the country’s eighteen-year flirtation with democracy. But liberal ideas, such as the right to private property, free trade, and a free-market economy, survived, growing even stronger under British rule. As the landowners and financial bourgeoisie became more powerful, they spearheaded the struggle for independence and the establishment of a constitutional democracy, both of which became a reality in the wake of the 1919 revolution. In 1922, Egypt declared independence and the following year a constitution was promulgated by King Fu‘ad, inaugurating the second cycle of Egyptian liberalism. Liberals and reformers in countries such as Iraq, Syria, and Tunisia also began to lift their voices amid calls for independence. Ibrahim and other liberals depicted this period as a burgeoning era of civil institutions, liberal values, and journalistic freedom, as Arabs with a modern, Western education rose to the helm, fought for independence, and became the leaders of Arab nation-states. This era of liberalism ended when the Arabs lost to Israel in 1948 and the Arab world was overwhelmed by social and economic schisms. By the time the Free Officers Movement seized the reins in 1952, abolishing all pluralistic, democratic practices, “hardly any tears were shed.”⁵⁹

For the most part, the historical narrative sketched by Ibrahim and his counterparts aligned with the prevailing scholarship and cited the important scholars of the time, but with greater emphasis on liberalism over other aspects

of the historical record. They ignored the militaristic component of the 'Urabi Revolt, for example, and said nothing about the political exclusion of new social groups by the landed elites during the struggle for independence. In this case, however, historical accuracy is not the issue, but how liberalism was portrayed in post-1967 writing and used to assess political relevance.

In highlighting the historical depth of the liberal cause, later liberal writers tended to downplay the wide range of political ideologies subsumed under the "liberal age" rubric (pan-Arabism, left-wing socialism, and Islamism, for example).⁶⁰ The heterogeneity of early modern Arab thought was distilled into a single liberal legacy. The Nahda, to put it another way, was expropriated and liberalized. As a dominant paradigm, liberalism competed for primacy with Islamism. On Islam's encounter with the West in the wake of Napoleon's Egyptian campaign in 1798, Egyptian jurist Muhammad Sa'id al-'Ashmawi wrote:

Two types of liberation movements arose among Muslims in the occupied Middle East: (1) A liberal movement calling for the establishment of a new civilization based on humanistic culture, education, and freedom; and (2) an Islamic movement calling for the re-establishment of the Caliphate ... and a truly Islamic government.⁶¹

The liberal age was praised for its embrace of rationalism, tolerance, social harmony, and cultural ecumenism—all thanks to the determination and creativity of the liberal luminaries of the time. These figures were depicted as "pioneers of enlightenment" (*ruwwad al-tanwir*) and defenders of humanism, individualism, constitutionalism, democracy, and openness when such concepts were considered blasphemous and heretical. Guided by these values, they called for national unity, civic government, and the separation of religion and state. If they had submitted to what the majority perceived as the undisputed truth, their contribution would have been limited to their professional input as lawyers, journalists, or lecturers. However, they understood that only vocal assertiveness, daring, and resilience would give their plea for reforms in the public sector meaning and substance.⁶²

In this context, Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd was careful to document the public polemics ignited in Egypt by the writings of Taha Husayn, who questioned the authenticity of some of the stories in the Qur'an; of 'Ali 'Abd al-Raziq who defied the caliphate in Islamic history and called for the separation of religion and state; and of Muhammad Ahmad Khalaf Allah, who argued that the Qur'an should be approached as a literary text because of the fictional character of some of the stories in it. These figures, Abu Zayd noted bitterly, were punished with dismissal from their posts, but he proudly added that they had left a legacy and followers.⁶³

Some of the formative liberal luminaries earned posthumous tributes in the works of liberals who came after them. In a book published in 1985, Husayn Ahmad Amin, an Egyptian lawyer and diplomat (d. 2014), praised the rationalist, humanist thinking of his father, Ahmad Amin (d. 1954), a leading intellectual of the interwar period and editor of *al-Thaqafa* (Culture).⁶⁴ The introduction to the book, written by Jalal Amin, Husayn's brother, was entitled "Rule of Reason" (*sultan al-'aql*). This was their father's motto in both his private and public life, wrote Jalal, as he conducted himself with moderation and self-discipline. He believed that for the sake of the family and the nation, the number of one's children should not exceed three. When an American publishing house asked Ahmad Amin to coauthor a book with Egyptian and American writers in the late 1940s, he hesitated because the funding would come from a foreign source. Finally, he did decide to participate in the project thanks to the words of Ahmad Lutfi al-Sayyid: "I will cooperate with the devil to spread knowledge." It was the "rule of rationality" and the absence of capricious tendencies that kept Ahmad Amin from binding himself to high-level jobs and adhering to politicians, wrote Jalal. This gave him the moral courage he would have lacked had he been a member of the party.⁶⁵ In effect, this in-depth study of the character of Ahmad Amin turned a spotlight on Egypt's progressiveness in the interwar period between World Wars I and II, which contrasted sharply with the religious extremism and irrationality of the 1970s and 1980s.

In the book, Jalal Amin tells the story of how as a child he met the founder of the Muslim Brotherhood, Hasan al-Banna, at the home of a friend, presumably in the late 1940s. The conversation began with al-Banna praising Jalal's father, Ahmad Amin, as an important cultural figure. The encounter quickly turned sour when the son commented that his father thought that the Muslim Brotherhood had started out on the right foot, but had gone astray by getting involved in politics. He was adamant that religion and politics should not mix. In the

author's cynical retelling, al-Banna responded with shock and outrage. The union of religion and politics was divinely ordained and one of the pillars of faith, he said, and anyone who thought otherwise and did not join his movement to restore society to the path of righteousness was not a true Muslim. Moreover, al-Banna said defiantly, a true Muslim was the one who united efforts with the loyal people in order to establish a virtuous and moral society. Individual activity was futile. Prayer, fasting, and charity were not enough. Jihad for God was a duty that bound everyone. The story ends with the author alluding to the assassination of Prime Minister Mahmud Fahmi al-Nuqarashi in 1949, apparently ordered by al-Banna, thus establishing a clear link in the reader's mind between the leader's use of verbal and physical violence.⁶⁶

Portraying al-Banna in a negative light, as an intolerant extremist, was essentially a rhetorical device, delivering a coup de grâce to his contemporary followers. The rest of Husayn's book consisted of an anthology of articles dealing mainly with challenges presented by the Islamist camp. It was a perfect example of the politics of nostalgia, with its wistful yearning for the past.

Other liberal writers took a similar approach. In *Hiwar Hawla al-'Almaniyya* (Discourse on secularism), published in 1986, Faraj Fuda called Ahmad Lutfi al-Sayyid (d. 1963), whose democratic ideas struck roots in the 1920s and earned him a place of honor in modern Egyptian history, the "mentor of the generation" (*ustadh al-jil*). Two years later, Fuda dedicated his book *al-Irhab* (Terror) to Taha Husayn (d. 1973), an Egyptian novelist and towering figure in modern Arabic literature (*'amid al-adab al-'Arabi*), hailed as the embodiment of the liberal spirit.⁶⁷

Tariq Hijji's book *al-Thaqafa Awwalan wa-Akhiran* (Culture, first and foremost), published in 2000 by Dar al-Ma'arif, opened with a quote from Taha Husayn in praise of the editors of the *Iqra'* (Read!) series (of whom he was one in 1943) for their genuine desire to disseminate knowledge: "Their sole desire is for the Arab nations to read, reap the benefits [of education], become more knowledgeable and aspire to live a more lofty, rational and fruitful life than we live today."⁶⁸ In his seminal book *Mustaqbal al-Thaqafa fi Misr* (The future of culture in Egypt), which came out in 1938 at a time when discourse was growing more radicalized in Egypt, Taha Husayn sought to reconfirm the cultural orientation of the Nile Valley. Egypt had always been part of the Mediterranean, he said, with close ties to the European culture of Greece and Rome, the Near East and monotheistic religions.⁶⁹ Accentuating the organic link to European civilization and its

humanist-rational tradition went beyond cultural politics: it was an attempt to overturn the view of Western values as a threat leading to identity loss and dependency. Hijji, like Taha Husayn sixty-two years before him, sought to reconnect Egypt to the cradle of European culture, believing that the key to Egypt's future and prosperity lay there.

Indeed, Hijji, Taha Husayn, and other Egyptian writers, such as Ahmad Lutfi al-Sayyid, Ahmad Amin, 'Abbas Mahmud al-'Aqqad, Tawfiq al-Hakim, and Najib Mahfuz, conveyed the message that rationality and creativity had neither nationality nor geographical boundaries, and that one should move forward with modern science and progress. Like the previous generations, Hijji continued, so too can the current generation be deeply rooted Egyptians, while at the same time, and without detracting from their Egyptian cultural identity, acknowledging the achievements of humanity. Taha Husayn's familiarity with ancient Greek philosophy and French culture did not prevent him from studying Arab literature and history.⁷⁰ Sayyid al-Qimni's intellectual endeavors followed a similar course.⁷¹

Writers outside Egypt, too, looked up to Taha Husayn, attesting to his cross-cultural appeal. He was applauded, for instance, by the Syrian thinker Jurj Tarabishi for understanding that the crisis of the Arab intelligentsia was rooted in its relationship with the modern world, and for urging his countrymen to march toward it smiling rather than mired in gloom.⁷² The Moroccan feminist writer Fatima Mernissi crowned Husayn "one of the epoch's great defenders of the rationalist tradition." She saw the harassment to which he was subjected during his lifetime and the condemnation of his ideas even after his death as a reflection of the intolerance and the prejudice against free thought in the Arab world. As in Taha Husayn's time, Mernissi asserted, freedom of thought continued to be demonized and identified with Kharijite rebellion and turmoil.⁷³ Husayn occupied a place of honor in the 2005 anthology *al-Libiraliyyun al-Judad* (The new liberals), edited by the Jordanian-born liberal and literary critic Shakir al-Nabulsi.⁷⁴ Al-Nabulsi praised 'Abbas Mahmud al-'Aqqad (d. 1964), who demanded that free officers return to the barracks and hand over power to the citizens after the success of the revolution in 1952. He also opposed the measures of agrarian reform and nationalization. In response, the Nasser regime humiliated him and condemned him to a life of poverty until his death. However, as al-Nabulsi pointed out, while intellectuals who supported the revolution evaporated, "al-'Aqqad remains eternal."⁷⁵ The same was true with regard to Khalid Muhammad Khalid (d. 1996), who consistently championed the cause of

freedom and was depicted by al-Nabulsi as the most courageous thinker under Nasser's authoritarian regime. Al-Nabulsi dedicated an entire book to him, praising his innovative thinking.⁷⁶

The literary output of Taha Husayn and his contemporaries was scoured by later liberal writers in search of liberal messages applicable to their own times. The younger generation responded directly to the ideas of their predecessors, sometimes incorporating supportive messages from members of the older generation. In 1983, for example, Egyptian jurist Muhammad Sa'id al-'Ashmawi appended to his book on the fundamentals of Islamic law a letter sent to him by Tawfiq al-Hakim (d. 1987), who had read the manuscript. The letter praised al-'Ashmawi for his presentation of a dynamic, evolutionary view of shari'a law, showing that the true aim of shar'ia was to lead the individual and the community forward, not to "stand in place and freeze all creative forces."⁷⁷

Another liberal icon, Najib Mahfuz (d. 2008), winner of the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1988, survived an attempt on his life by an Islamic extremist in 1994 and continued to serve as an ideological guide and attract young followers who were drawn to his intellectual salons. The political significance of his work and his tone of sociocultural critique did not diminish over time. His image of the ideal intellectual, in touch with the spirit of the times and prepared to take a clear and positive stance even when threatened with physical harm, exile, or poverty, became a role model for his successors.⁷⁸

The reissue of classic texts from the liberal age, particularly in Egypt in the interwar period, was a widespread commemorative trend.⁷⁹ Documenting the genealogy of the founding fathers of the liberal age also became an invaluable guide for the next generation. The most comprehensive "genealogical tree" appeared in Shakir al-Nabulsi's liberal manifesto, published in 2004,⁸⁰ which traced four generations of Arab liberals from the nineteenth century onward, and examined how each generation of writers incorporated the guiding principles of its liberal predecessors, adding principles of its own. In drawing up this lineage of liberal thinking, al-Nabulsi seems to have taken his cue from Hourani's *Arabic Thought in the Liberal Age*, which testified to its impact on the Arab milieu, and not just the West.⁸¹ Like Hourani, al-Nabulsi sought to place liberal writers within a historical and conceptual framework. While they both traced four generations of liberal writers, al-Nabulsi reorganized them in terms of chronology and subperiods. In the final analysis, al-Nabulsi was not committed to historical methodology in the same way that Hourani was, and his motives

were not merely scholarly.⁸²

In al-Nabulsi's genealogy, the first tier of liberals, who appeared on the scene in the late nineteenth century, were Rifa'a Rafi' al-Tahtawi, Khayr al-Din Pasha, Jamal al-Din al-Afghani, Muhammad 'Abduh, Rashid Rida, Mustafa Kamil, Ahmad Lutfi al-Sayyid, 'Abd al-Rahman al-Kawakibi, Shibli Shumayyil, and Farah Antun. They called for unfettered freedom of thought, political pluralism, the emancipation of women, and cultural and educational reform.⁸³ Some of them, such as al-Afghani, 'Abduh, Rida, Kawakibi, Shumayyil, and Antun, did not really fit the liberal premise, and were more associated with Islamic reformism, pan-Islamism, socialism, and other schools of thought that developed under the conceptual umbrella of the Nahda.⁸⁴ Yet this did not deter al-Nabulsi from grouping them with the founding generation of Arab liberalism. In his view, their written corpus fit the heritage of the early twentieth-century, second-generation liberals, namely Taha Husayn, 'Ali 'Abd al-Raziq, Qasim Amin, Ahmad Hasan al-Zayyat, Tawfiq al-Hakim, and Muhammad Husayn Haykal, who added the separation of religion and state and democracy to their demands. Notably, in a later book al-Nabulsi elaborated on this second generation of liberals, mainly Egyptians, with other writers from North Africa and the Arab Peninsula, such as Tahir al-Haddad and Tahir b. 'Ashur in Tunisia, or Muhammad Hasan 'Awwad and Muhammad Surur al-Sabban in Saudi Arabia.⁸⁵ Al-Nabulsi traced the third generation of liberals back to the second half of the twentieth century. They targeted the military and tribal dictatorships, which they blamed for the sociopolitical upheaval that followed the Arab liberation from colonial rule.

The last tier in al-Nabulsi's narrative was the generation of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, mainly goaded into action by the rise of global jihad and the 9/11 attacks by al-Qa'ida. The "new liberals," as they were called, contributed to liberal discourse in a less defined way.⁸⁶ They did not belong to a specific political party, organization, or cultural club, were not affiliated with an official newspaper, did not hold key positions in the public service, nor did they have any foothold in the military. In terms of their views, they were not a cohesive group. Some regarded the chronicle of events in Iraq in 2003 as an American invasion and occupation, while others saw it as the ousting of a dictatorship and inauguration of a democratic regime. Some believed that reform could be attained at home while others put their faith in outside intervention. Some said that rejecting the legacy of the past was the quickest route to modernity while others claimed that embracing the Arab heritage was a road to

progress. Despite this internal diversity, al-Nabulsi assured his readers, not without a measure of pride and satisfaction, that he was talking about an ideological movement with a shared corpus of beliefs based on the principles of freedom of thought and religion, freedom for women with respect to rights and duties toward men, political pluralism, educational and political reform, separation of religion and state, and the subjection of religious and cultural heritage to scientific scrutiny. This corpus of beliefs not only differentiated the new liberals from other ideologues, but also established continuity with an early liberal discourse in the Arab world.⁸⁷

To further validate this claim, al-Nabulsi took pains to add to the collection of essays he edited in 2005 a generous selection of articles by his ideological rivals—members of the left, Islamists—despite their censure of liberals as an insignificant, elitist minority devoid of awareness or sensitivity toward Arab and Muslim heritage, and a kind of “hallucinatory voice in the wilderness.”⁸⁸ Including their essays served al-Nabulsi in three ways: it helped to hone the distinctive identity of the Arab liberal school; it attested to the presence of liberals in the Arab world and the challenges they faced; and it highlighted al-Nabulsi’s tolerance for other viewpoints, with none of the boycotting, excommunication, and physical violence often employed by his rivals.

The very existence of an ideological debate between liberals and their opponents, however fraught, was portrayed by liberal writers as a valuable asset in their campaign for public awareness. It helped to clarify and sharpen the problems on the Arab agenda and made it impossible to ignore issues like the ruler/ruled relationship, religious tolerance, political pluralism, freedom of conscience, battling extremism, and ties to the West.⁸⁹ It also reinforced the standing of liberals as the only democratic force in the Arab world. When attacking the Arab left, Syrian writer Muhammad Shahrur emphasized that only in a liberal democracy could citizenship, liberty, and human rights flourish, while in the communist model of popular democracy, citizenship became a form of slavery and the people turned into a flock of sheep instead of citizens with full rights and duties.⁹⁰ Pointing an accusing finger at the Islamists, Kuwaiti political scientist Ahmad al-Baghdadi summed up the elevated status of the liberal ethos:

The liberals in the Arab world are the only ones who embrace democracy not just as a regime but as a way of life. They alone defend human rights and

freedom of thought, respect others as human beings regardless of religious belief, seek to affirm the political rights of women and fight for civil liberties ... Liberals are against terror, discrimination against women, banning of books and music lessons, and gender separation in schools. They support a constitution, democracy, and human rights without prejudice. Liberals are indebted to those who treat them fairly and respectfully, and do not harm, murder, or betray them. The latter are secure in the country of the liberals.⁹¹

Sa'd al-Din Ibrahim adopted a similar line, portraying both the unique features of Arab liberalism and its openness to other points of view. From its inception, he wrote, the Ibn Khaldun Center for Development Studies, which he headed, was liberal in outlook and drew upon the principles of freedom and democracy, but without invalidating other ideologies that waved the banner of Arab unity, social justice, and the revival of Arab heritage. This was true so long as their struggle to achieve these goals was conducted democratically, with respect for basic civil liberties and human rights. Ibrahim depicted the Ibn Khaldun Center as a pioneer in advancing civic norms and minority rights in the Arab world, and as the continuation of Egypt's illustrious liberal heritage which featured non-governmental civic institutions (NGOs) from the start of the nineteenth century, including a university and one of the earliest women's liberation movements in the world. In this way, he accentuated the importance of Egypt in Arab liberal tradition.⁹²

Indeed, within the genealogy of Arab liberalism, the subgenealogy of Egyptian liberalism occupied a central niche. In 2006, Egyptian writer Hani Nasira elaborated on this, quite possibly with al-Nabulsi's book in mind. His narrative closely followed the historical chronicle of Arab liberalism, but with certain emphases, and the addition or subtraction of names, to play up the unique contribution of Egypt. Nasira documented three surges of Egyptian liberalism since the early twentieth century. The first began with the return of students who had been sent to Europe, such as Ahmad Lutfi al-Sayyid, Qasim Amin, 'Ali 'Abd al-Raziq, and Taha Husayn. The principles they fought for were civil liberties, national independence, the rule of law, civic government, women's rights, and civil education.

The second wave commenced after the 1952 revolution and gathered strength in the wake of the open-door policy adopted by Anwar Sadat in the 1970s, which

reached a peak in the 1980s under Husni Mubarak. Among its representatives were Khalid Muhammad Khalid, Muhammad Mandur, Yusuf Idris, and Saʿid al-Najjar. The emphasis of this group was on economic and political freedom. The third wave, which began with Iraq's invasion of Kuwait in 1990 and intensified after the 9/11 attacks, called for a free economy and joining the globalization trend, alongside democratization and fighting fundamentalist terror.⁹³ Al-Najjar was lauded as a major figure of this period by Nasira, and by others such as his loyal student, Majdi Khalil. In an obituary for al-Najjar in 2004, Khalil described him as the “true father of neo-liberalism in the Arab world,” and the founder of the New Civic Forum in 1991, an Egyptian think-tank promoting political and economic freedom. Saʿd al-Din Ibrahim also hailed the new organization as a “shining sun of liberty and enlightened thinking,” without detracting, of course, from the importance of his own institute.⁹⁴

Additional causes over which Egyptian liberalism claimed “first ownership” were opposition to conspiracy theories and a desire to resolve the Arab–Israeli conflict peacefully.⁹⁵ Besides drawing up a separate genealogy, Nasira sought to distinguish between Egyptian liberalism and the Arab liberalism of Shakir al-Nabulsi by analyzing their priorities. From his perspective, Egyptian liberalism focused on economic liberty in an attempt to free the Egyptian marketplace from the stranglehold of government bureaucracy and allow private enterprise to flourish—a condition for the growth of enlightenment.⁹⁶ Arab liberalism, by contrast, largely ignored economic issues and devoted itself to the cultural aspects of enlightenment, scientific thinking, and democracy. Nasira also wrote about the difference in outlook toward Islam: Egyptian discourse favored compromise and harmony with religious doctrine, whereas Arab discourse was more aggressive and pro-secular.⁹⁷ In fact, the term “secular” was extremely rare in the lexicon of Egyptian liberals. In any case, the priorities of Egyptian liberalism and its positive attitude toward Islam were more in line with Nasira's own views. There were other Egyptian intellectuals who assigned more weight to the combined economic-political agenda, and were less averse to airing strong opinions on the subject of religion and state and debating their Islamist rivals.⁹⁸

Recording the genealogy of Arab (and Egyptian) liberalism created a kind of silsila, a chain of transmission in Sufi culture in which esoteric knowledge is passed from master to disciple and which can be traced back to the Prophet. Belonging to a silsila endowed a Sufi shaykh with the authority to transmit sacred knowledge and a clear spiritual path. In a similar vein, when post-1967 Arab liberals were identified as part of a prestigious historical movement, they

sought to acquire a place of honor and relevance in the “ideological marketplace,” to borrow Clifford Geertz’s phrase.⁹⁹ Having an Arab liberal silsila was a means of reinforcing the liberal credo and differentiating it from other ideologies. It was a retrospective narrative, which created a consistent and unifying picture of liberal thought and objectives. Abu Zayd felt privileged to be affiliated with the liberal legacy, and declared that “the Islamic reformation movement in the nineteenth century began a forward thrust. We need to pick up where that left off.”¹⁰⁰ A similar sense of pride and of having a clear goal was expressed by Sa‘d al-Din Ibrahim:

When we founded the Ibn Khaldun Center, and as we guided its work throughout the late 1980s and 1990s, we had the Liberal Age very much in mind. We saw ourselves not as builders from scratch, but as revivers of a great (but not perfect) tradition that had existed not only in our country [Egypt] but also in Syria, Iraq, Morocco, and elsewhere. We were and we remain determined that this liberal tradition ... will not be forgotten. We believe that if these ideas receive the exposure they deserve, the memory of this tradition and, more importantly, the still-living relevance of its core teachings on rights, freedom, transparency, and justice can play a large role in showing that democracy does indeed have a reasonable chance of putting down roots and growing in the Middle East ... Our attempted retrieval of the achievements and aspirations of the Liberal Age is something done for the sake of the future. It gives us, and all the freedom-loving people who want to join us, something to build on and something to fight for—in spite of censorship, police repression, and extremism. Our determination is high and I for one think that our chances are good.¹⁰¹

Lebanese intellectuals Nasif Nassar and Hazim Saghiya, and Iraqi-born historian and researcher Sayyar al-Jamil, also shared the belief that up until the mid-twentieth century Arab liberalism had progressed with giant steps, and that liberals—both ideologues and statesmen—were the ones who had brought independence to Arab countries, established pioneering parties, and pushed for electoral legislation, even if the elections were rigged. These liberal developments were trampled by the revolutionary military regimes, with the rise of the Muslim Brotherhood and the Arab–Israeli conflict generating a climate of radicalization.¹⁰² According to Saghiya, the liberal experiment continued beyond

the 1950s, following a rocky road. He pointed to the democracy-supporting nationalists of Iraq in the 1940s and 1950s, who succeeded in turning themselves into a tenacious, respected minority; the parliamentary experiment in Lebanon, which worked well until the civil war in 1975; and the presidency of Habib Bourguiba (1957–87) in Tunisia, who despite being an authoritarian leader introduced social reforms and did much to improve women's rights.¹⁰³ Praise for the Tunisian experience was also uttered by Shakir al-Nabulsi and by al-ʿAfif al-Akhdar, a Tunisian leftist living in Paris who had joined the liberal camp after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Both noted that after the establishment of independence in 1956, Tunisia began reforming Islam, displaying political courage and long-term vision.¹⁰⁴

The intellectual effort to push out the boundaries of Arab liberalism, add more content, and establish an inextricable link with the Nahda showed how fervently liberal authors wished for a historical and empirical anchor for their ideology. In their minds, liberalism was a historical process that had been disrupted, not severed, and had chalked up many accomplishments. Now it was the task of the Arabs to complete the process. With particular reference to the Lebanese case, Nassar praised the struggle led by people such as Butrus al-Bustani (d. 1883), Shibli Shumayyil (d. 1917), and Farah Antun (d. 1922) against sectarianism and for the liberation of human beings from the bonds of religion. For him, “their path must be completed, and their opinions not merely publicized.”¹⁰⁵

Revival (Nahda), renewal (tahdith), and liberation (tahrir) was the motto of Arab liberalism, not creating a culture from scratch. Ibrahim wrote about how the “return of liberalism” would move Arab society forward. He was a believer in the power of history: “It is often said that for Middle Easterners, history never dies, but merely fades away temporarily, to come back full circle.”¹⁰⁶

Nevertheless, Ibrahim, followed by Nasira, offered empirical explanations for the survival of liberal thought. They cited the bankruptcy of rival utopian ideologies such as pan-Arabism and the Arab left, which adopted the call for democratization and human rights, if not full-blown liberalism. As the use of liberal terminology became more widespread in the Arab world, they said, so did the demand for reform. According to Nasira, with economic liberalism and integration in the global marketplace already a given, the battle was now over political liberalism and the campaign for political reform and constitutionalism. At the time these principles, associated with liberal thought, remained in the public domain—even those once considered revolutionary, Nasira noted with pride. Liberalism had become the measuring rod in Arab discourse, although he

admitted that liberals themselves were still politically weak due to their elitist views, lack of cohesiveness, and the absence of social and political frameworks.¹⁰⁷

Side by side with the emphasis on historical continuity, which conveyed dedication to the cause and a general sense of optimism, Arab liberals of the late twentieth century sought to highlight their own contribution to liberal discourse and to produce a contemporary canon of liberal writers. This is particularly evident in the work of al-Nabulsi, who coined the term “new Arab liberals” (al-libiraliyyun al-‘Arab al-judad) and established himself as the spokesman of the group. The choice of this term was deliberate: it fused the liberal legacy of the past with the distinctive role of contemporary liberals, with their remarkable courage in the face of a hostile reality.¹⁰⁸ These new liberals, said al-Nabulsi, “raise all the questions that our predecessors of the nineteenth and early twentieth century—from al-Afghani to Taha Husayn—never asked, scrutinizing and breaking taboos.”¹⁰⁹ Implicit in this statement is criticism of the writers of the early liberal age for their aloofness from society and for not going far enough in challenging prevailing norms and bolstering the liberal idea with civic and political infrastructure.

Thus, for example, al-Nabulsi noted the concept of “the just tyrant” (al-mustabidd al-‘adil; largely equivalent to “enlightened absolutism” in Europe) as advocated by al-Afghani and ‘Abduh. The second Caliph, ‘Umar b. al-Khattab, had served as inspiration for both thinkers. They sought to apply this concept as a role model for rulers of their time: the Ottoman Sultan ‘Abd al-Hamid II and the Egyptian Khedive Tawfiq. However, as al-Nabulsi remarked cynically, the two rulers continued their tyranny but without the “just.” The idea of a “just tyrant” has remained hard to realize and quite rare throughout human history. In an era when the concepts of humanism and human rights flourished, al-Nabulsi stated, democracy was the only viable option available to nations. Other early liberals, such as Taha Husayn and Khalid Muhammad Khalid, were even criticized for retreating from their position on the separation of religion and state for personal motives or because of the rise of the Islamic current.¹¹⁰ Now it was up to the new liberals to complete their successors’ task, al-Nabulsi concluded.¹¹¹

Nasif Nassar was critical of the early liberals for not developing a more comprehensive philosophy of freedom and for not reaching out to the urban and rural masses. Barricading themselves behind their European education and elitism, their writing was permeated by self-justification, which weakened the

liberal trend in comparison to other political philosophies.¹¹² Nassar's argument was echoed by Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd and Ahmad al-Baghdadi. Abu Zayd criticized the modernist rationale for the merger (tawfiq) between European culture and Islamic heritage and sought in Islam the justification for receiving the intellectual, social, and political products of the West. According to Abu Zayd this resulted in a syncretism that nevertheless managed to preserve the uniqueness of Islam. Thus, for example, Muhammad 'Abduh refuted miracles and legends related to God's revelation and emphasized its rational character, but continued to adhere to the concept of the eternity of God's word, thus minimizing the importance of human free will.¹¹³

Al-Baghdadi, too, criticized the apologetic line adopted to prove that liberal values had existed in Islam from the outset, as in the claim that democracy was an outgrowth of the principle of consultation (shura). According to al-Baghdadi, who thought that liberalism should be promoted on its own terms, these were two separate concepts. Democracy was a clear-cut ideology that required institutions and a structured, organized framework with a significant role played by the people, whereas the shura was an abstract idea without institutions or authority in which the people were assigned no role at all.¹¹⁴

Faraj Fuda expressed an understanding of the constraints faced by the early liberals: "Dealing with Eastern sensitivity requires a great deal of caution in what we say," he wrote. "We must be courageous but not suicidal."¹¹⁵ Fuda thereby shifted the discussion to the historical circumstances in which these writers had operated. A similar argument was adopted by Fuda's colleague, Hala Mustafa of the Aharm Center for Political and Strategic Studies. Mustafa, editor-in-chief of the periodical al-Dimuqratiyya (Democracy), pointed out that Egypt's liberal experience had not produced a strong bourgeois class as it had in Europe. The country's political structure was weak and liberals lacked the social backing to spread their ideas. Moreover, the emergence of the Muslim Brotherhood had destroyed the bridge between Islam and modernity that earlier reformers had built.¹¹⁶

Despite its flaws, the liberal age continued to serve as a source of inspiration for post-1967 Arab liberals. Only a handful of intellectuals dismissed it as a remote epoch that could not be revived in view of the grim reality of the Middle East, where liberals were nothing more than "a bunch of dissidents writing on water."¹¹⁷ Many others saw the liberal legacy as the basis for their own legitimacy and proof that liberalism was an option in contemporary Arab society.

Although criticizing the forefathers of Arab liberalism, Nasif Nassar was adamant that his call for a second Nahda in response to the age of confusion and crisis sparked by the 1967 defeat was a continuation of the modernization project of the first Nahda. The new Nahda would not downplay the achievements of the earlier one, but rather reinforce and underline its values, in particular *tawfiq*, that is, reconciling heritage and modernity, promoting civil liberties, and establishing a liberal democratic order. The realization of the second Nahda, Nassar asserted, involved a huge historical process. Its three pillars were a desire for change based on a philosophical approach that gives free rein to human logic and imagination; the rebuilding of regimes and institutions, customs and traditions, or their destruction if need be, and the establishment of new ones in their place; and positive and creative interactions with modernity, so as not to be left behind.¹¹⁸ Nassar's call for a second Nahda was followed by another Lebanese writer Elias Khoury's call for a third Nahda. According to Khoury, the second Nahda came after the catastrophe of the 1948 defeat, and was based on an alliance between army officers and middle-class intellectuals, who advocated vigorous nationalist beliefs and social reforms. However, the second Nahda turned into repression and collapsed with the 1967 defeat and the rise of Islamic fundamentalism. There was hence a vital need for a third Nahda. It must be built on three foundations: democracy, abandoning the old terminology used by dictatorial regimes to suppress the people, and the fall of militarocracy.¹¹⁹

Ultimately, the memory of the liberal age provided a backwind for later writers in their renewed thrust to gain acceptance in the Arab public sphere and achieve political viability. It gave them the historic depth to portray themselves as members of a movement that was integral to Arab political culture, not foreign to it.

Revisiting the past did not, however, always serve them well. Liberal thinkers in the Arab world continued to be fiercely condemned, and some, such as Faraj Fuda in Egypt and Mahmud Muhammad Taha in Sudan, paid for their outspoken views with their lives. Many others suffered intimidation, mainly from Islamist circles, yet continued to challenge public norms. They also worked to differentiate liberal discourse from competing ideologies, such as Islamism, pan-Arabism, and a leftist, communist doctrine, which employed some of the same terminology (political reform, democracy, constitutionality, the rule of law).

Some of the core beliefs of Arab liberalism were put down on paper at this time: aligning the human agenda with rationalism and opening up past traditions to

critical scrutiny; establishing a law-abiding state based on civil rather than religious authority that did not discriminate against women, minorities, and weaker populations; the creation of an open society founded on trust as an unshakable moral value based on interaction between individuals and institutions; instituting economic freedoms that gave free rein to private enterprise; and finally, debunking the logic of war with Israel, international conspiracy theories, and antiglobalization politics in favor of self-criticism, political realism, and openness to the Other. The liberal platform did not dismiss the importance of loyalty to the existing nation-states, thereby revealing its nationalist colors, but maintained that national culture must be combined with humanist culture, which would necessitate far-reaching reforms in the spheres of education and language.¹²⁰

Whereas the Arab liberals sought less state involvement in both politics and the economy, and greater cultural openness and a peaceful solution to the Arab–Israeli conflict, those who had joined the Islamist, pan-Arab, and leftist camps pushed for state hegemony and isolation from the West and cultivated a battle mentality toward Israel. Amin al-Mahdi, an Egyptian engineer who had been a Nasserist in his younger days, accused his intellectual opponents of over-ambitiousness and opportunism. Instead of acting as a social conscience, demanding that society look inward and beg forgiveness for its sins and transgressions, they served as window dressing for dictatorial regimes, winning legitimacy and imposing compliance. In so doing, they betrayed their role as a moral compass. “I believe that defining the role of intellectuals in isolation from the bywords that are inseparable from their very being, such as critical thinking, liberty and truth,” wrote al-Mahdi, “will lead to there being no intellectuals or culture or homeland. There will be only executioners.”¹²¹ Al-Mahdi was referring to the cultural figures in Egypt who attempted to paint the Nasserist regime as a revolution in the public mind when it was really a military coup by a gang of fascists who crushed all civil liberties. However, it is clear that his words reflected a more sweeping condemnation of his opponents across the spectrum.¹²²

The idea of intellectuals being recruited to endorse the cultural legitimacy of the regime sounds very much like the cultural hegemony theory of the Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci in the 1920s. Gramsci emphasized the role of intellectuals in spreading the ideology of the ruling party and turning it into an organic and consensual component in the thinking of the subordinate class as a way of ensuring its continued exploitation.¹²³

In besmirching the intellectuals around them with accusations of selling out and cooperating with the regime, Arab liberals created a separate niche for themselves and invested their own writing with moral validity and public influence. They saw the chief role of the intellectual (mufakkir, muthaqqaf) as analyzing social reality and continually examining the potential for change through broadmindedness and vision. Intellectuals had to be involved in society and practical when addressing its burning issues. They could not be deterred by the government or buckle in the face of opponents and challenges. Some liberal thinkers aimed high, using examples from Muslim history, such as Ibn Khaldun (d. 1406), as a model for the socially involved intellectual. Sa'd al-Din Ibrahim wrote that Ibn Khaldun, after whom his center in Cairo was named, was not an ascetic mystic, but a thinker who was well-informed about all matters of this world. He was active in public life and served as a qadi and an advisor to the rulers of his time.¹²⁴ Post-1967 liberals, like their predecessors in the early twentieth century, highlighted Ibn Khaldun's rationalist humanist philosophy, which stipulated that the aim of human life was civilization, which means the control of nature and life by reason.¹²⁵

At the top of the emancipatory agenda ascribed to intellectuals was precluding their societies from fixating on the past and urging them to look to the future. It was the intellectuals' job to promote the establishment of a modern, open society that cultivated the value of the individual rather than the collective, in which leaders were guided by reason and realism instead of emotion and illusion.¹²⁶

The guardians of tradition, or conformists, were one type of intellectuals against whom the liberal writers came out and from whom they dissociated themselves. Another type was dissidents or reactionaries, primarily from the Islamist camp. Tariq Hijji explained the situation well, setting up a clear dichotomy tinged with historical determinism:

There is a herd of dinosaurs on the verge of extinction preaching the glories of the past which will only thrust our society into the depths of the Middle Ages ... and a group that is calling for a better tomorrow, beginning with self-criticism and continuing with self-acceptance and then acceptance of the other and the entire world, which aligns itself with the course of human progress (democracy, science, modernity, civil liberties, human rights, etc.). To the first group I say with full confidence that just as the dinosaurs became extinct in the Cretaceous

era, it, too, is doomed to extinction. As for the other group, tomorrow is theirs.¹²⁷

Intellectuals who cited Islamic heritage almost mechanically as a means to inculcate progressive Western-style ideas were also criticized by the liberals. Hasan Hanafi, a former Egyptian leftist and one of the founders of the Islamic left, was accused by Jurj Tarabishi (a former leftist who turned to liberalism) of disseminating a doctrine so riddled with internal contradictions that it bordered on schizophrenia. Apart from veneration of the past, wrote Tarabishi, Hanafi's ideas were useless in solving the ills of Arab society.¹²⁸

Munir Shafiq, another former Marxist and contemporary Islamist who called on the Arabs to embrace Islam as a way of life and as a guarantee of the reemergence of Arab world power, was also criticized by Tarabishi. Tarabishi, by virtue of his use of psychoanalytic theories, compared Shafiq and his like to underprivileged minors who, due to a lack of self-confidence, turned to Islam as to an adult who would provide them with safety and comfort, and free them from having to face reality. Because of their refusal to connect with the modern world and discuss the present and the future on the basis of the enlightened legacy of the nineteenth-century Nahda, he accused Arab discourse of indulging in past traditions and adhering to a discourse of disengagement and retreat. In the words of Tarabishi, this discourse glorified early religious fanatics such as Ibn Hanbal (d. 855) and Ibn Taymiyya (d. 1328), placing them above later, enlightened scholars such as 'Abd al-Rahman al-Kawakibi, Muhammad 'Abduh, and Taha Husayn. Even if some Arab writers recognized the value of the Nahda movement, they nevertheless preferred the Salafi al-Afghani over the liberal al-Afghani.¹²⁹

Building up an image of the moral, non-conformist, cosmopolitan liberal thinker was one way of creating distance from the "sycophantic, reactionary and morally ambivalent" ideological milieu. Another was drawing up liberal manifestos. Liberal writers displayed a special passion for formalizing and canonizing Arab liberal thought in manifestos that brought together liberal themes in a single document. Liberal thinking was thus endowed with a conceptual framework and ideological coherence aiming at making it more appealing to the Arab public.

Liberal manifestos

Already in 1955, just before Sudan won its independence, Mahmud Muhammad Taha formulated a draft constitution for a presidential, federal, and democratic republic, which also became the credo of his Republican Party. The document's detailed operative nature had clearly defined objectives and methods of action. It covered all aspects of life, from the character of the central government, municipalities, and villages, through separation of powers, sovereignty of the people, individual and civil rights, economics, and education. The constitution incorporated idealism alongside political realism. It spoke of the establishment of a presidential system that "will show determination and reach decisions quickly on various matters," but would also serve as a temporary regime until the people were ready for a more democratic regime, that is, a parliamentary one. Maintaining the power of the presidential regime while preventing its slipping into tyranny would be effected by a federal system that merged the preservation of national unity and of local autonomy and shared out the executive powers between the central authority and the governments of the provinces. Only a constitution that established the sovereignty of the people could spur them to expand their education, develop their abilities, and turn them into involved citizens. "Without such a people's sovereignty, the personality of the people will not stand out, and a strong and enlightened public opinion will not be formulated."¹³⁰

Taha admitted that this was an ambitious project and expressed the hope that it would eventually be implemented.¹³¹ In practice, it became a position paper and a declaration of intentions. Sudan was swept toward a military regime and Islamization that also exacerbated the rifts between the Muslim North and the Christian South. The Republican Party continued to act legally, preaching its principles, but was constantly subject to persecution and repression. Its leader Taha was executed in 1985 for apostasy and for undermining public order.

A later manifesto by Faraj Fuda in neighboring Egypt became the platform of the al-Mustaqbal (Future) Party, which he founded in the early 1990s. The party was never granted a permit and Fuda was assassinated by Muslim radicals in June 1992. However, the document, which was over fifty pages long, illuminated a wide range of liberal values, from equality before the law, regardless of religion or gender, to freedom of speech, belief, and conscience, and the right to form

political parties, organize strikes, and demonstrate. It called for the separation of religion and politics, and the national unity of Muslims and Copts under the slogan “Religion is for God and the homeland is for all.” A large portion of the manifesto was devoted to constitution and law, which were assigned a central role in an enlightened democratic state. Fuda also pushed for economic and industrial development, encouragement of the private sector and foreign investment, as well as for full normalization with Israel, which he viewed as a gateway to democracy and nation building.¹³²

Promoting peace with Israel was also the motto of a working paper drawn up in 1998 by Amin al-Mahdi. The paper, appended to his 1999 book *al-Sira' al-'Arabi al-Isra'ili: 'Azmat al-Dimuqratiyya wa'l-Salam* (The Arab–Israeli conflict: the crisis of democracy and peace) was entitled, “Proposal for establishing a democratic parliament for peace.” In it, al-Mahdi assigned an important role to an independent civic organization with international backing that would bring together all supporters of peace and progressive thinking in the Middle East. This body would work to develop a shared cultural heritage and spread the idea of coexistence through public action, information campaigns, and research. It would also serve as a human rights watchdog and protest against violations of democratic principles. Al-Mahdi thereby broadened the concept of peace, combining support for peace with the desire for liberty, and coexistence between nations with freedom for all human beings. While the naivety, even the utopianism, of al-Mahdi’s approach is hard to ignore, he was clearly seeking a tangible expression of liberal ideas.¹³³

A more concise text by Shakir al-Nabulsi, first published in June 2004 by the liberal Arab website Elaph, appeared in a book he edited the following year.¹³⁴ Listing twenty-five principles, it touched on the core issues confronting Arab society and offered a program of collective action in clear, logical steps that would enable the Arabs to join the community of enlightened nations. The wording of the text was forceful and straightforward, employing such terms as transformation (*taghyir shamil*), liberation (*tahrir*), renewal (*tahdith*), creation (*khalq*), rejuvenation (*takwin*), and building (*bina'*). In his manifesto, al-Nabulsi traced the roots of evil to 1) religion, with its worship of the past and enslavement to Islamic heritage (*turath*), which blocked critical thought, ecumenical attitudes, and genuine reform; and 2) politics, with the virus of despotism and dictatorship destroying any possibility for genuine democracy in the Arab world. While calling for introspection and educational reforms to address the failure of religion,¹³⁵ he also looked toward the West for assistance in

overcoming the scourge of political tyranny.¹³⁶

The march toward true democracy based on a civil contract that guaranteed transparency and curbed the arbitrariness of government had to be accompanied by openness toward the outside world, argued al-Nabulsi. Globalization (‘awlama) was not a plot to eradicate Arab identity: it was another step in an international cultural process that had been developing gradually over a thousand years. Its objective was to forge ties between the peoples of the world, and it offered one possible path toward modernizing the Arab economy.¹³⁷ No less important were relations with the neighboring countries and peace with Israel. The sweeping approach advocated by al-Nabulsi included not only political and diplomatic normalization, but even more significantly, normalization of the relations between peoples and cultures as the only hope for a lasting peace in the Middle East.¹³⁸

Al-Nabulsi’s colleague, the Egyptian Coptic writer Kamal Ghurbal, wrote that drafting a liberal manifesto was a way of clearing up some of the confusion in contemporary Arab thought. In part, this confusion was due to the fact that the concept of liberalism remained somewhat vague. Mostly, however, it was a product of the radicalism of antiliberal groups, such as pan-Arabists and Islamists, who kept their anachronistic ideologies alive by the power of the sword. In Ghurbal’s view, the liberal manifesto was an invitation to partnership, open to all who cherished the future of liberal thought. Liberalism was no longer in its gestation period, he wrote. It was a full-fledged ideological movement that had put down roots, assisted by globalization and the attention trained on the greater Middle East, with the Arab world at its center, after 9/11.¹³⁹

The efforts of Taha, Fuda, al-Mahdi, al-Nabulsi, and Ghurbal to provide a coherent explanation and carve out a public niche for liberal discourse were continued by the Tunisian writer al-‘Afif al-Akhdar. In a two-part document entitled “The Rationalist Covenant” (al-Mithaq al-‘Aqlani) written in 2007, al-Akhdar substituted the term “Arab rationalists” (al-‘aqlaniyyun al-‘Arab) for “new liberals,” stressing the importance of rationality in human advancement.¹⁴⁰ The peak of critical thinking for al-Akhdar was human reasoning based on scientific, empirical knowledge. It was the task of human reason to challenge anything presenting itself as absolute truth. “Absolute truths” were merely hypotheses that required proof backed up by experimentation, so that every hypothesis could be contradicted by a newer hypothesis. Furthermore, human reason was a universal resource and accessible to all. Therefore there was

nothing wrong with using the scientific, technological, or cultural rationale of the West. On the contrary, it was essential for progress. It was only by emulating the West that nations like Japan, South Korea, China, and India were able to develop scientifically and economically to the point where they could compete on an equal footing with Britain and the United States. Al-Akhdar likened these countries to a child who learns by imitating his parents and teachers until he reaches the stage where he is no longer reliant upon them and may eventually even surpass them. Science and technology could not exist under a regime of terror that sanctified the Qur'an and portrayed it as an encyclopedia of scientific knowledge which encompassed all branches of science and obviated the need to "graze in foreign pastures," warned al-Akhdar. Those who banned imitating the West were leading to a brain drain of scholars and scientists, ultimately pronouncing a death sentence on Arab society, while the rest of the world stood at the cusp of the Third Industrial Revolution with its focus on information technology and global economic cooperation.¹⁴¹ In al-Akhdar's clear-cut perception

the West today is the West of science, technology, and perpetual cultural revolution; of education and arts; of a dynamic economy; of a professional spreading of information; of human rights and democracy. The West represents civilization in a world threatened by barbarity. It could help us emerge victorious from the crisis of modernism that we are facing.¹⁴²

Al-Akhdar's manifesto was not just an intellectual exercise; it became the basis for the platform of the Association of Arab Rationalists (Rabitat al-'Aqlaniyyin), which was formally established in Paris in November 2007. The founders included Sadiq Jalal al-'Azm, Jurj Tarabishi, Raja b. Salama, 'Aziz al-'Azama, and Muhammad 'Abd al-Muttalib al-Huni. Al-Huni, a Libyan businessman, also launched and financed the Internet site al-Awan (The Times), which became the official organ of the association.¹⁴³ Its self-declared objective was restoring the "culture of criticism" (al-thaqafa al-naqdiyya) to Arab discourse and promoting "secularism, civil society, law-based governance, and civil rights."¹⁴⁴ In contrast to the al-Nabulsi manifesto, the association had no qualms about openly embracing secularism as an ideology and basis for political activism, mainly because a certain proportion of its members were former leftists. Nonetheless, it

hastened to clarify its views:

Secularism should not be perceived in terms of a dichotomy of faith and atheism, nor does it claim to be a self-standing ideology. This is because secularism is a progressive social process that aims to create autonomous individuals who are capable of thinking, and a free, democratic society based on a social contract between free individuals. Hence the association calls for the realm of religion to be separate from the realm of state, politics and law. Furthermore, we advocate freedom of conscience, which encompasses freedom of belief and unbelief, freedom of opinion and speech, and adherence to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights of the United Nations. Religion occupies a space of its own, and human beings have the right to choose their approach to it. Politics, law, academic disciplines, literature and art all have their own autonomous space, wholly detached from religious ideology.¹⁴⁵

Another document, published in 2014 by Muhammad Shahrur, a professor emeritus of civil engineering at Damascus University, added another, valuable layer to the coalescence of Arab liberal thought and its differentiation from other ideologies. The memorandum, entitled “The Citizenship Charter” (Mithaq al-Muwatana), defined citizenship as a political principle that regulates disagreements and power struggles in society through a system of checks and balances, primarily the welfare of the homeland and its national unity, based on respect for the diversity of all its inhabitants. The concept of citizenship, Shahrur argued, can only be achieved in a liberal democratic state that guarantees equal social, political, and economic opportunities, equality of rights and obligations, and personal freedom for every individual. The state is committed not to remove, marginalize, or discriminate against citizens based on their faith, nationality, race, or political outlook. In other words, “the state is an institution that embraces all its citizens and represents the entirety of their will,” and “there is no democracy without opposition, a multiparty system and freedom to express opinions and counter-opinions.”¹⁴⁶

The defense of liberalism and secularism, as distinct from atheism, ran through all the above-mentioned documents: Taha’s draft manifesto for a democratic republic, Fuda’s platform for the Mustaqbal Party, the manifestos of al-Nabulsi

and al-Akhdar, the declaration of principles of the Association of Arab Rationalists, and Shahrur's convention.¹⁴⁷ This was perhaps a sign of political vulnerability and an attempt to avoid accusations of heresy, but it did not diminish the intellectual courage of these authors in their demand for fundamental changes in the Arab landscape. These and other liberal thinkers fearlessly published their dissident views on a wide range of topics, convinced of the historical inevitability of boarding the "chariot of progress and enlightenment."¹⁴⁸ They were willing to pay the price for standing up for what they believed to be sacred values—civil rights, separation of powers, the rule of law, transparency, and the depoliticization of religion as a means of facilitating integration into the modern world.

This fierce determination comes through clearly in the words of Sa'd al-Din Ibrahim, who was tried and imprisoned by the Egyptian authorities before going into exile: "Whatever might happen—whether prison or even death might await us—we could all feel that we were part of a larger freedom struggle whose value and significance humbled us even while they lifted us up." Muhammad Shahrur of Syria, who endured personal attacks and the confiscation of his books on the Qur'an in Arab and Muslim countries, expressed similar sentiments: "I had to choose to invest my personal time in defending myself or in writing further and developing my ideas. I chose the second option."¹⁴⁹

Allies in an unwritten pact

The liberals were not alone in their defiance. They shared a certain affinity with the Arab left, Islamic mystics, and other proponents of deconstructing the past. When socialist ideology collapsed, many members of the left turned to the Islamist option in the belief that it offered an alternative route to social change.¹⁵⁰ However, proponents of the socialist ethos were not silenced entirely. Some displayed ideological resilience, issuing warnings against the Islamist menace, taking a clear stand against political suppression and persecution, advocating for the emancipation of women, and defying sectarian strife.¹⁵¹

They showed confidence in the idea that the rational and scientific approach would prevail, and that total or partial secularization, including of one's personal

status, would eliminate ethnic divisions and redeem the Arab world from its distress. The Marxist vision they promoted was characterized by revolutionary realism and self-criticism. They had analyzed the obstacles to the modernization of Arab society objectively and had ceased to regard it as a preordained imperialistic conspiracy, but as class reality that, they argued, was not only economic, but also ideological and political. They also gave more breathing space to the individual and his liberties. In the words of the Syrian Yasin al-Hafiz (d. 1978), the founder of the Arab Revolutionary Workers Party (Hizb al-‘Ummal al-Thawri al-‘Arabi),¹⁵² Westerners enjoyed more power because their countries had ceased to be lands of fear. On the other hand, the lives of individuals in the Arab world were shrouded in fear of the extended family, religious faith, tradition, society, educational institutions, and, quite often, dictatorial rule. “Where humanism, individualism, democracy, the rule of law, nationalism, citizenship, and rationalism become a reality of life, as in the West, they create a better world,” concluded al-Hafiz.¹⁵³

The works of al-Hafiz and other writers, such as the Syrian philosopher Sadiq Jalal al-‘Azm (d. 2016) and the Saudi novelist ‘Abd al-Rahman Munif (d. 2004), created a common ground between leftists and liberals in promoting self-criticism, scientific thinking, humanism, and a more open polity.¹⁵⁴ Some of their followers, like Nasif Nassar, Hazim Saghiya, Jurj Tarabishi, and al-‘Afif al-Akhdar, joined the liberal camp.

A partial, unwritten alliance also took shape between liberals and Islamic mystics. Sufi fraternities in large metropolitan centers in the Middle East managed to survive socioeconomic and cultural changes and even breathe new life into their organizations. This is particularly noteworthy in light of the fact that modernization was not a linear process predicted by Western observers, but rather a process of political and social upheaval that caused many to long for past traditions. While modernity accelerated secularization processes in Muslim societies, it did not entirely exclude religion from the public sphere.

Against this backdrop, Sufism offered the masses comfort and refuge from the hardships of the day. The figure of the shaykh-leader, who was credited with esoteric knowledge and special attributes as a descendant of saints, and his close relationship with a circle of followers contributed to the preservation of the power of Sufi fraternities. The religious and community services they provided to the faithful, along with public ceremonies (especially during Muslim holidays), increased their standing in the public arena. This was aided even

further by the initiative taken by some of the fraternities to refresh mystical thinking and adopt modern media and patterns of organization to disseminate their message and to rebut rivals. Even local regimes fostered Islamic mysticism as a counterweight to religious fanaticism, although they tended to impart to public rituals a more restrained and proper character than they had in the past.

Several fraternities continued to demonstrate a public presence, and even reached new audiences. Many of them advocated cultural openness, emphasizing the peace-seeking faces of Islam and countering religious zealotry. This was the legacy of Muhyi al-Din Ibn 'Arabi (d. 1240), who preached religious tolerance, and whose very presence in Spain and India was a symbol of the encounter between East and West and between Muslims and non-Muslims. The Naqshbandiyya, named after Baha' al-Din Naqshband (d. 1389), was particularly adapted to modernity. Ironically, the Naqshbandiyya, historically the closest fraternity to orthodoxy, which underscored the centrality of shari'a and opposed Sufi rituals of music and dance, produced strong modernist trends. Thus in the last third of the twentieth century, several branches of Naqshbandiyya in Turkey laid the foundation for a new Islamic discourse. They were deeply involved in the business and communications sectors, which underwent privatization. In their perception, Islam had become a culture of economic entrepreneurship and a lever for the establishment of a vibrant civil society.¹⁵⁵

Active Sufi enrollment in the public sphere did not skip fraternities in the Arabian Peninsula and North Africa. In Yemen, for instance, Sufi circles made extensive use of new media and modern educational methods and expanded their social activities in the framework of the struggle against radical groups, which were depicted as shallow and lacking historical depth. A similar contest over the image of Islam took place in Morocco, where the Budshisiyya, which was founded by Abu Madyn al-Bushish in the early 1940s, was quite active.¹⁵⁶ The banners of humanism and multiculturalism were also raised by the Halwatiyya and Qadiriyya offshoots in Israel, for instance in Nazareth, Sakhnin, Umm al-Fahm, Acre, Baqa al-Gharbiya, and the Old City of Jerusalem.¹⁵⁷

Sufi culture even gained a foothold in the West, exploiting the advantages of globalization to raise money, disseminate information, and attract adherents around the world. In this way, Sufi shaykhs—and not only Muslim radicals—were able to influence audiences that had once been beyond their reach. During the last quarter of the twentieth century, Sufism proved to be especially captivating to European intellectuals who felt an aversion to the materialism of

modern civilization.¹⁵⁸ Some became adherents of the traditionalist school of thought established in the 1930s that sought to restore the spiritual dimension to human experience, which had been largely shunted aside by Western enlightenment.¹⁵⁹

The process of marketing Sufism to Western society led to new interpretations, sometimes antithetical to the original doctrine, which transformed it into a universal spiritual discipline. Some branches admitted Christians and Buddhists, while some were headed by women. However, Sufism as a whole, and especially its Naqshbandi branches, positioned itself as a bridge between Islam and the West, and as an agent of mediation between the two worlds. Sufi discourse emphasized the pacifist nature of Islam, promoting spiritual jihad to combat man's lustful impulses over military jihad.¹⁶⁰

A prominent spokesman in this ecumenical discourse was Seyyed Hossein Nasr, an Iranian professor who went into exile in the U.S. following the Islamic Revolution.¹⁶¹ In a book he wrote in 2002 in the wake of the 9/11 attacks, he criticized Western observers who described God in Islam as representing only degrees of justice and as lacking values of compassion, mercy, forgiveness, and love. On the contrary, Nasr argued, the Qur'an is permeated with lofty ideals directed at every human society.¹⁶²

In this critical moment of human history both Muslims and Westerns, and in fact all human beings, must seek to live an ethical life, based on mutual respect and greater knowledge of each other. Turning more particularly to Islam and the West, it must be emphasized that whether we are Muslims, Jews, Christians, or even secularists, whether we live in the Islamic world or the West, we are in need of meaning in our lives, of ethical norms to guide our actions, of a vision that would allow us to live at peace with each other and with the rest of God's creation. It is in the achievement of this task that both the formal aspect and the inner message of Islam as well as those of other religions can come to our aid as can nothing else in this world. Of equal importance is the inner message, for this message is none other than the universal truth that was placed by God in the hearts of all human beings and that stands at the center of all heavenly revelations.¹⁶³

In Nasr's view, there was no ideological current in Islam that expressed the inner message of Islam more than Sufism, which he called "the heart of Islam," embodying harmony, brotherhood, compassion, and tolerance of non-Muslim cultures.¹⁶⁴

In the Arab Muslim world, and even more so in Western countries, various branches of Sufism thus contributed to the pluralism of modern Islamic thought and joined the conciliatory liberal voices in Arab civil discourse. The Sufis' conduct and internal rules were not necessarily liberal, especially in terms of individual freedom, and required absolute obedience to the shaykh and the fraternity; nevertheless, their cultural openness situated them as agents of civil society.

Liberal thought also benefitted from the ideological and political fissures in the Islamist camp, especially toward the end of the 1990s, against the backdrop of intergenerational conflict and frustration over the Islamist failure to achieve major political gains in the face of the repressive power of the state. Greater openness began to seep into modern Islamic discourse, represented by centrist parties such as al-Wasat (The Center) in Egypt and Jordan.¹⁶⁵ With a membership made up chiefly of young intellectuals and professionals who had held key positions in civic trade unions and academic organizations, these parties defined themselves as civil rather than religious and called for tolerance toward women, religious minorities, and the Other.¹⁶⁶ They sought an active role in national politics in order to effect change from the established center.

The Wasatiyya infused the modern Sunni discourse with innovative, critical thinking. It supported ideological and political pluralism, believing that every political or social force has the right, and even the duty, to make its presence felt in the public arena. Wasatiyya spokesmen declared loyalty to the national interest and denounced violence as a deviation from Islam. They sought to present the spheres of political and socioeconomic activity as secular and open to the general public. They also rejected vague slogans such as the implementation of the shari'a or the establishment of an Islamic state, laying down a detailed platform in a variety of fields, including art, tourism, and relations with the West, instead. These spokesmen also expressed their willingness to join up with national forces or with leftist circles, and to open their gates to every citizen, all of whom were viewed as full partners in Arab Muslim civilization—Muslim women or men, and even Christians.

Wasatiyya followers depicted it as a renewal school of thought (tadjid), which faithfully brought to the fore the straight path between the Qur'anic sacred word and human wisdom, and outlined the middle path every nation ought to follow. The path aspired to was midway between seclusion and openness, between fanaticism and Westernization and secularization. The ideological point of departure for Wasatiyya was the verse: "We have made you [believers] into a just community, so that the Messenger may bear witness [to the truth] before others" (Sura 2:143).

The civil discourse of the Wasat parties has been linked to the idea of civil society in the West, that is, institutional and ideological pluralism, in which the state is responsible for maintaining public order and mediating between different interests. However, the model presented by the Wasatiyya differed from the Western one in three essential aspects: first, restricting personal liberty so that freedom would not lead to anarchy and harm the nation, while nurturing social altruism; second, setting boundaries to intellectual discourse in matters of faith in order not to harm the feelings of believers; and third, rejecting a cross-border cultural melting pot. As Rafiq Habib, one of the founders of the Egyptian Wasat party, stated, "You can exchange opinions, but you can not exchange values."¹⁶⁷

In spite of these differences, the emergence of the Wasatiyya did empower ideological alternatives in modern Islamic thought. It embodied a broader phenomenon that made its appearance in the late 1990s, and was called "the post-Islamist era" by researchers, an era characterized by the growing absorption of democratic values, pluralism, women's rights, and concern for young people.¹⁶⁸ The Wasat parties, however, did not gain political momentum. Strong opposition from adversaries on the Islamic spectrum, and sometimes even reservations and suspicion on the part of the regime, which did not see them as a legitimate partner in shaping the image of the polity, left them at the margins of public activity. However, the parties' civic agenda, with its emphasis on human rights, democratization, and the strengthening of the foundations of civil society, helped entrench these concepts in Arab public discourse and advance the liberal cause.

Notes

1This radical outlook signaled the rise of a new, young generation of Arab Marxists who were less concerned with religious sensitivities and confronted Islam. Ajami, *The Arab Predicament* , pp. 23–76. See also Yoav Di-Capua, “Changing the Arab Intellectual Guard: On the Fall of the udaba’ , 1940–1960,” in Hanssen and Weiss (eds.), *Arabic Thought against the Authoritarian Age* , pp. 41–61.

2Ajami, *The Arab Predicament* , pp. 23–76.

3Tawfiq al-Hakim, *‘Awdat al-Wa’y* (Cairo: Dar al-Shuruq, 1975).

4See, for example, Mahmud Muhamamd Taha and his party, *al-Ikhwan al-Jumhuriyyun, al-Musalaha al-Wataniyya* (Omdurman: Jumhuri publication, n.d.); Shahrur, *al-Din wa’l-Sulta* , pp. 454–455; Nasif Nassar, *Nahwa Mujtama’ Jadid: Muqaddimat Asasiyya fi Naqd al-Mujtama’ al-Ta’ifi* , 2nd ed. (Beirut: Dar al-Nahar, 1970), pp. 13–49.

5Govrin, *The New Liberal Discourse on Reforms and Democratization* ; Larbi Sadiki, *The Search for Arab Democracy: Discourses and Counter-Discourses* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004).

6One may cite, for example, the Egyptians Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd, who after being forced to flee Egypt in 1995, taught at Leiden University, Holland, and Sa’d al-Din Ibrahim, who had American citizenship and was a visiting scholar in various universities in United States; the Lebanese Nasif Nassar, a philosopher and graduate of the Sorbonne, who was also a visiting scholar in Louvain University, Belgium; the Tunisian Mohamed Talbi (d. 2017), one of the founders of the modern Tunisian university, the first Dean of the School of Letters and Human Sciences, and the president of the Tunisian National Academy of Sciences, Letters and Arts; and ‘Abdelmadjid Charfi. The latter was invited in 1999 by UNESCO to serve as the chair of the cathedra of comparative religion, established by the organization at the University of Manouba, Tunisia. The writings of these and other figures gained wide exposure and appreciation in Western academia, as can be inferred, for instance, from Nazih N. Ayubi, *Political Islam: Religion and Politics in the Arab World* (London: Routledge, 1993), which relies heavily on Nassar’s work with regard to the concept of umma and body-politics; and from Mohamed Ben-Madani (ed.), *The Religion of the Other: In Honor of Mohamed Talbi* (London: Maghreb Publications, 2013), in which prominent European scholars contributed essays relating to Talbi’s

various fields of research.

7Karl Mannheim, *Essays on the Sociology of Knowledge* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1972), pp. 276–320.

8For a sketch of the effendiyya , see Michael Eppel, “Note About the Term Effendiyya in the History of the Middle East,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 41 (2009), pp. 535–539; Haggai Erlich, *Students and University in 20th Century Egyptian Politics* (London: Frank Cass, 1989), pp. 58–62; Lucie Ryzova, *The Age of the Effendiyya: Passages to Modernity in National-Colonial Egypt* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), pp. 1–31.

9The historical roots of Arab women’s revolting against patriarchy, taking part in sociocultural and political developments, and promoting civic liberal values can be traced already in the early nineteenth century. See, for example, Beth Baron, *The Women’s Awakening in Egypt: Culture, Society, and the Press* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1994); Zachs and Halevi, *Gendering Culture in Greater Syria* . For later developments, see Fatima Sadiqi and Moha Ennaji (eds.), *Women in the Middle East and North Africa: Agents of Change* (New York: Routledge, 2010); *Arab Human Development Report 2005: Towards the Rise of Women in the Arab World* (New York: United Nations Development Program, 2006); also www.arab-hdr.org/publications/other/ahdr/ahdr2005e.pdf (accessed May 5, 2014). Two interesting perspectives are provided by the Tunisian and Moroccan cases; see Mounira M. Charrad, “Tunisia at the Forefront of the Arab World: Two Waves of Gender Legislation,” in Sadiqi and Ennaji (eds.), *Women in the Middle East and North Africa* , pp. 105–113; Fatima Sadiqi, *Moroccan Feminist Discourses* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), ch. 4.

[10 Hourani, *Arabic Thought* , pp. 245–259; Zachs, *The Making of a Syrian Identity* , chs. 4–5.](#)

[11 On the impact of new media on the Arab discourse, see, for example, Dale Eickelman and Jon W. Anderson \(eds.\), *New Media in the Muslim World: The Emerging Public Sphere* \(Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1999\); Augustus R. Norton, “The New Media, Civic Pluralism, and the Slowly Retreating State,” in Eickelman and Anderson \(eds.\), *New Media in the Muslim World* , pp. 19–28; Naomi Sakr, *Satellite Realms: Transnational Television, Globalization and the Middle East* \(London: I.B. Tauris, 2001\); Naomi Sakr](#)

(ed.), *Arab Media and Political Renewal* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2007); Albrecht Hofheinz, "Arab Internet Use: Popular Trends and Public Impact," in Sakr (ed.), *Arab Media and Political Renewal*, pp. 56–79; also Franck Mermier, *Le Livre et la ville: Beyrouth et l'édition arabe* (Arles: Actes Sud/Sindbad, 2005), chs. 4, 5; Deborah L. Wheeler, *Digital Resistance in the Middle East: New Media Activism in Everyday Life* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2017). The Arab awareness of the communication revolution and its impact on the Arab media's structure and discourse resulted in a 2005 conference in Abu Dhabi. The conference proceedings were published in a comprehensive volume, *Arab Media in the Information Age* (Abu Dhabi: The Emirates Center for Strategic Studies and Research, 2006).

12 www.aljazeera.net ; www.alarabiya.net .

13 Sultan, *A God who Hates*, pp. ix–x. See also Shakir al-Nanbulsi, *al-Fikr al-'Arabi fi'l-Qarn al-'Ishrin 1950 – 2000* (Beirut: al-Mu'assasa al-'Arabiyya, 2001), vol. 1, pp. 9–10.

14 D. M. Boyd and B. N. Ellison, "Social Network Sites: Definitions, History and Scholarship," *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication* 13.1 (2008), pp. 210–230. An example of the online dialogue between liberal writers and readers can be found in the case of Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd, Sayyid al-Qimni and Sa'd al-Din Ibrahim, *Almasry alyoum* (English version), 1846 (July 2009), <http://www.almasry-alyoum.com/articleID=217540&IssueID=1455> (accessed January 10, 2013); *Almasry alyoum* (English version), 2036 (May 24, 2011), <http://www.almasry-alyoum.com/article2.aspx?ArticleID=297844&IssueID=2145> (accessed January 10, 2013).

15 Naomi Sakr, "Approaches to Exploring Media-Politics Connections in the Arab World," in Sakr (ed.), *Arab Media and Political Renewal*, pp. 3–5.

16 Hazim Saghie, "Introduction," in H. Saghie (ed.), *The Predicament of the Individual in the Middle East* (London: Saqi Books, 2001), pp. 8–9.

17 www.elaph.com ; <https://elaph.com/publishermessage.html> (accessed July 17, 2019).

18 <http://daraj.com> ; also <http://www.democracy.eu/ar/news/feature-daraj-a-new-step-for-arab-media> . Other media forums that serve the liberal cause are www.islam-democracy.org and www.eicds.org

19 <http://www.ahewar.org> ; <http://www.alwan.org> ; <http://www.daralsaqi.com> .

20 See also Suzan E. Waltz, *Human Rights and Reform: Changing the Face of North Africa* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1995), pp. 135–139; Abu-‘Uksa, *Contemporary Arab Liberal Discourse* , pp. 295–296, 303–305.

21 Usama al-Ghazali Harb, “al-Quwwa al-Libiriliyya Ghayr al-Hizbiyya fi’l ‘Alam al-‘Arabi: Namudhaj Jam‘iyyat al-Nida’ al-Jadid bi-Misr,” in Nazli Mu‘awwad Ahmad (ed.), *al-Liberiraliyya al-Jadida: A‘mal al-Nadwa al-Misriyya al-Faransiyya al-Sadisa 18–20 Mayu 1995* (Cairo: Markaz al-Buhuth wa’l-Dirasat al-Siyasiyya, 2000), pp. 231–235.

22 www.arabliberals.org . Another body was the Free Thought Forum (Muntada al-Fikr al-Hurr), which was established following the 2011 uprisings and included secular writers, bloggers, and artists in the Middle East. www.facebook.com/Free-Arabs-543160379051116 .

23 Ulf Hannerz, “Cosmopolitans and Locals in World Culture,” *Theory, Culture & Society* 7 (1990), pp. 237–251.

24 See also Ziyad Fahmy, *Ordinary Egyptians: Creating the Modern Nation Through Popular Culture* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2011), chs. 1, 2.

25 Muhammad Qasim Zaman, *The Ulama in Contemporary Islam* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2002); Meir Hatina, ‘Ulama’, *Politics and the Public Sphere* (Salt Lake City, UT: University of Utah Press, 2010).

26 In this context, one can cite Shibli Shumayyil and Farah Antun in the *Fertile Crescent* and ‘Ali ‘Abd al-Raziq and Khalid Muhammad Khalid in *Egypt*. Hatina, *Identity Politics* , pp. 14–28; Hourani, *Arabic Thought* , pp. 245–259.

27 See also Gershoni and Jankowski, *Redefining the Egyptian Nation* , pp. 54–78.

28 Abu Zaid and Nelson, *Voice of an Exile* , pp. 165–208; Mohamed Mahmoud, “Mahmud Muhammad Taha’s Second Message of Islam and his Modernist Project,” in J. Cooper, J. Nettler, and M. Mahmoud (eds.), *Islam and Modernity* (London: I.B. Tauris, 1998), pp. 105–128; Muhammad Shahrour, “The Divine Text and Pluralism in Muslim Societies,” in Mehran Kamrava (ed.), *The New*

[Voices of Islam: Reforming Politics and Modernity \(London: I.B. Tauris, 2006\), pp. 143–152; Muhammad Shahrouh, *The Qur'an, Morality and Critical Reason*, trans. and ed. Andreas Christmann \(Leiden: Brill, 2009\), chs. 1–3. See also M. Abu Samra, “Liberal Critics, ‘Ulama’ and the Debate on Islam in the Contemporary Arab World,” in Hatina \(ed.\), *Guardians of Faith in Modern Times*, pp. 265–289; Suha Taji-Farouki, “Introduction,” in Suha Taji-Farouki \(ed.\), *Modern Muslim Intellectuals and the Qur'an* \(Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004\), pp. 1–36.](#)

[29 Muhammad Talbi, “Arabs and Democracy: A Record of Failure,” *Journal of Democracy* 11 \(2001\), pp. 58–68; Sayyid al-Qimni, *al-Fashiyyun wa'l-Watan* \(Cairo: al-Markaz al-Misri li-Buhuth al-Hadara, 1999\).](#)

[30 For this typology, see also Gershoni and Jankowski, *Redefining the Egyptian Nation*, pp. 89–90.](#)

[31 It should be noted that in the 1950s and 1960s these figures were exposed to fierce polemics from a young generation of writers who, under the processes of decolonization and Third Worldism, adopted a more assertive stance against the West and called for cultural purging. Di-Capua, “Changing the Arab Intellectual Guard,” pp. 41–61.](#)

[32 Al-Nabulsi, *al-Fikr al-'Arabi*, vol. 1, pp. 9–10.](#)

[33 Al-Qimni, quoted in al-Masry al-Youm \(English edition\), 1846 \(July 2009\): <http://www.almasry-alyoum.com/articleID=217540&IssueID=1455> \(accessed January 10, 2013\). Four years prior to his winning the prize, al-Qimni was exposed to threats to his life following his passionate polemics against al-Qa'ida. Although he announced that he had stopped writing, he returned to it two years later.](#)

[34 Mehran Kamrava, *Iran's Intellectual Revolution* \(Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008\), ch. 6.](#)

[35 S. N. Eisenstadt, “Multiple Modernities,” *Daedalus* 129.1 \(2000\), pp. 1–29.](#)

[36 Kamrava, *Iran's Intellectual Revolution*, ch. 6; Abdokarim Soroush, “Reason, Freedom, and Democracy in Islam,” in Kamrava \(ed.\), *The New Voices of Islam*, pp. 243–262; Mohsen Kadivar, “Freedom of Religion and Belief in Islam,” in *ibid.*, pp. 119–142.](#)

37 Valla Vakili, “Abdolkarim Soroush and Critical Discourses in Iran,” in James L. Esposito and John O. Voll (eds.), *Makers of Contemporary Islam* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), pp. 150–176.

38 Nasr Abu Zayd, *Reformation of Islamic Thought: A Critical Historical Analysis* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2006), p. 78.

39 Ibid., pp. 64–79. One can mention the 1985 execution of Mahmud Muhammad Taha for blasphemy in Sudan; the assassination of Faraj Fuda in 1992, and the failed attempt to kill Najib Mahfuz in 1994 in Egypt; the trial of Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd in 1995; the arrest and trial of Sa’d al-Din Ibrahim in 2000; the trial of Ahmad al-Baghdadi in 2005 on the charge of defaming Islam, for which he was sentenced to one year in prison in Kuwait; the polemics against Muhammad Shahrur in Syria; and the rejection of Mohamed Talbi in Tunisia. See Hijji, *al-Thaqafa Awwalan wa-Akhiran*, p. 35; Qasim, *Muthaqqaf Tahta al-Hisar*; Shakir al-Nabulsi, “al-Libiraliyyun al-Suriyyun al-Judad Yanhadun,” in Shakir al-Nabulsi (ed.), *al-Libiraliyyun al-Judad: Jadal Fikri* (Cologne: Manshurat al-Jamal, 2005), pp. 37–42; Ahmad al-Baghdadi, *Ahadith al-Din wa’l-Dunya* (Beirut: al-Intishar al-‘Arabi, 2005), p. 13.

40 Saad Eddin Ibrahim, “Reviving Middle Eastern Liberalism,” *Journal of Democracy* 14 (October 2003), p. 8; Hazim Saghiya, “Nazra ila Masa’ib an Yakun al-Mar’ Libiraliyyan fi’l-‘Alam al-‘Arabi,” *al-Hayat*, May 16, 2003; Shakir al-Nabulsi, *Zawayya Harija fi’l-Siyasa wa’l-Thaqafa* (Beirut: al-Mu’assasa al-‘Arabiyya li’l-Dirasat wa’l-Nashr, 2004), pp. 71–77, 183–190.

41 Ibrahim, “Reviving Middle Eastern Liberalism,” p. 8.

42 Saghie, “Introduction,” pp. 7–8, 12; Talbi, “Arabs and Democracy,” p. 58; Muhammad al-Ramihi, quoted in *al-Quds* (East Jerusalem), January 8, 2004; Tariq Hijji, *Culture, Civilization and Humanity* (London: Frank Cass, 2003), pp. 9–41, 56–64, 134–151, 205–220.

43 Fatima Mernissi, *Islam and Democracy: Fear of the Modern World* (London: Addison-Wesley, 1992), pp. 44–45, 49–50.

44 Hakan Yavuz’s books: *Islamic Political Identity in Turkey* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003); *Secularism and Muslim Democracy in Turkey* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009); *Toward an Islamic Enlightenment: The Gülan Movement* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013); Binnaz Toprak,

[“A Secular Democracy in the Muslim World: The Turkish Model,” in Shireen T. Hunter and Huma Malik \(eds.\), Modernization, Democracy, and Islam \(Westport, CT: Praeger, 2005\), pp. 277–292.](#)

[45 Reservations about the Kemalist secularist policy had already been expressed by liberals in the 1920s and 1930s, as it was too radical and harsh in their view. Hatina, Identity Politics , pp. 13–19.](#)

[46 Jurj Tarabishi, Hartaqaṭ: ‘an al-Dimuqratiyya wa’l-’Almaniyya wa’l-Hadatha wa’l-Mumana‘a al-’Arabiya \(London: Dar al-Saqi, 2006\), pp. 219–229; Ibrahim, “Reviving Middle Eastern Liberalism,” p. 7. Notably, Ibrahim was one of the liberal figures who sided with the integration of moderate Islamists, such as the Muslim Brotherhood, in official politics as a means of fostering moderation. He undoubtedly had the Turkish model in mind. His approach was criticized by some of his liberal colleagues, illustrating the existence of varied streams in Arab liberalism. Under Erdogan’s regime, there has been notable regression in Turkey in the area of political and civil rights, hand in hand with the development of authoritative governmental policies.](#)

[47 Al-Nabulsi even dedicated an entire book to al-Ghazali, depicting him as the ultimate educationer. In it al-Nabulsi attacked the prevailing educational system in the Arab world and modes of instruction that nurtured narrow-minded students and dogmatic, intolerant perceptions, including on the issues of enlightenment, modernity, and individualism. Al-Nabulsi, al-Ta’ir al-Khashabi. The dedication to al-Ghazali is on p. 7.](#)

[48 On the Nahda and Arab printing, see Ami Ayalon, The Arabic Print Revolution: Cultural Production and Mass Readership \(Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016\), ch. 2.](#)

[49 Al-Bustani, quoted in El-Ariss, The Arab Renaissance , p. 11.](#)

[50 On freedom in Islamic tradition and its modern evolution, see Bernard Lewis, The Arabs in History \(New York: Harper and Row, 1966\), ch. 19. It was Rifa‘a Rafi‘ al-Tahtawi \(d. 1873\) who first used the term freedom \(hurriyya \), after his stay in France as the imam of one of the Egyptian student delegations that were being coached for the modernization project of Muhammad ‘Ali. However, the meaning he gave to the concept of freedom was still limited and within the logical framework of traditional perception, namely that the ruler must treat his](#)

subjects with justice and fairness (al-‘adl wa’l-insaf). In his later essays, he further elaborated on the moral duties incumbent on the ruler vis-à-vis the ruled, similar to the mercy and compassion with which a parent treats his or her children. Rifa‘a Rafi‘ al-Tahtawi, *An Imam in Paris: Account of a Stay in France by an Egyptian Cleric (1826 – 1831)* , trans. Daniel Newman (London: Dar al-Saqi, 2011), pp. 93, 199 (n. 2), 208–209; al-Tahtawi, *al-Murshid al-Amin* , new ed. (Cairo: Dar al-Kutub al-Misri, 2012), esp. pp. 207–228; Ami Ayalon, *Language and Change in the Arab Middle East: The Evolution of Modern Political Discourse* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), pp. 46–47. See also Ibrahim Abu-Lughod, *The Arab Rediscovery of Europe: A Study of Cultural Encounters* , new ed. (London: Dar al-Saqi, 2011), esp. ch. 5; Ellen McLarney, “Freedom, Justice, and the Power of Adab,” *International Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 48 (2016), pp. 25–46; Abu-‘Uqsa, *Freedom in the Arab World* , pp. 18–49.

51 ‘Abd al-Rahman al-Kawakibi, *Taba’i‘ al-Istibdad* (Beirut: Dar al-Sharq al-‘Arabi, 1991), p. 159. On Kawakibi’s defiance of tyranny, see *ibid.*, pp. 143–159.

52 Al-Kawakibi, *Umm al-Qura* (Cairo: al-Maktaba al-Tijariyya al-Kubra, 1931), pp. 28–29.

53 *Ibid.*, p. 214.

54 A key factor in the emergence of the Nahda movement, mainly in Lebanon and Syria, was the activities of missionaries. Hourani, *Arabic Thought* , esp. chs. 4, 10; Ayalon, *Language and Change* , pp. 3–15; Ayalon, *The Arabic Print Revolution* , pp. 25–29; Zachs, *The Making of a Syrian Identity* , esp. chs. 4–5; Hill, “The First Arabic Translations of Enlightenment Literature.”

55 On the sectarian divide, see Bruce Masters, *Christians and Jews in the Ottoman Arab East: The Roots of Sectarianism* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001), esp. chs. 5, 6.

56 Abu Zaid and Nelson, *Voice of an Exile* , pp. 184–185, 188; Ibrahim, “Reviving Middle Eastern Liberalism,” pp. 9–10; Saad Eddin Ibrahim, “Arab Liberal Legacies Full Circle,” in Shireen T. Hunter and Huma Malik (eds.), *Modernization, Democracy, and Islam* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2005), pp. 205–213; Shakir al-Nabulsi, “Man hum al-Libiraliyyun al-‘Arab al-Judad wa-ma

[huwa Khitabuhum,” in al-Nabulsi \(ed.\), al-Libiraliyyun al-Judad , pp. 19–28; Turki al-Hamad, Min Huna Yabda’ al-Taghyir, 3rd ed. \(London: Dar al-Saqi, 2012\), pp. 183–188.](#)

[57 Ibrahim, “Arab Liberal Legacies Full Circle,” pp. 205–213; al-Nabulsi, “Man hum al-libiraliyyun al-‘Arab al-judad,” pp. 19–21. Another book by Hourani, The History of Arab Peoples \(1991\), was also quoted and praised as a good primer on the cultural and political developments in that period. Ibrahim, “Reviving Middle Eastern Liberalism,” p. 9.](#)

[58 Jurj Tarabishi, al-Muthaqqafun al-‘Arab wa’l-Turath: al-Tahlil al-Nafsi li-‘Usab Jama‘i \(London: Riyad al-Rayyis li’l-Kutub wa’l-Nashr, 1991\), p. 11.](#)

[59 Ibrahim, “Arab Liberal Legacies Full Circle,” pp. 205–211; see also his “The Socio-Economic Requisites of Democracy,” in H. A. Dessouki \(ed.\), Democracy in Egypt: Problems and Prospects \(Cairo: The American University in Cairo Press, 1978\), pp. 54–70.](#)

[60 Ilham Khuri-Makdisi, “Inscribing Socialism into the Nahda,” in Dayala Hamzah \(ed.\), The Making of the Arab Intellectual: Empire, Public Sphere and the Colonial Coordination of Selfhood \(London: Routledge, 2013\), pp. 62–89; Ilham Khuri-Makdisi, The Eastern Mediterranean and the Making of Global Radicalism, 1860–1914 \(Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2010\); Dyala Hamzah, “From ‘Ilm to Sihafa or the Politics of the Public Interest \(Maslaha\): Muhammad Rashid Rida and his Journal al-Manar \(1898–1935\),” in Hamzah \(ed.\), The Making of the Arab Intellectual , pp. 91–127; Orit Bashkin, “The Iraqi Afghanis and ‘Abduhs: Debate over Reform among Shi‘ite and Sunni ‘Ulama’ in Interwar Iraq,” in Hatina \(ed.\), Guardians of Faith in Modern Times , pp. 141–169.](#)

[61 Carolyn Fluehr-Lobban \(ed.\), Against Islamic Extremism: The Writings of Muhammad Sa‘id al-‘Ashmawi \(Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 1998\), p. 81.](#)

[62 Faraj Fuda, al-Irhab \(Cairo: Dar Misr al-Jadida, 1988\), pp. 6–9; and his Nakun aw la Nakun \(Cairo: Dar Misr al-Jadida, 1990\), pp. 6–7; Rif‘at al-Sa‘id, ‘Ama’im Libiraliyya fi Sahat al-‘Aql wa’l-Hurriyya \(Dimashq: al-Mada, 2002\); Abu Zaid and Nelson, Voice of an Exile , pp. 31–32, 49–54, 199–200; Abu Zayd, Reformation of Islamic Thought , chs. 3, 4.](#)

63 Abu Zayd, Reformation of Islamic Thought , pp. 53–59; Abu Zaid and Nelson, Voice of an Exile , pp. 49–54. On these affairs, see Hatina, Identity Politics , pp. 16–18; Gibb, Modern Trends in Islam , pp. 54–55.

64 Amin, Fi Bayt Ahmad Amin . On the intellectual profile of the father and his son, see Mizutani, Liberalism in 20th Century Egyptian Thought .

65 Amin, Fi Bayt Ahmad Amin , pp. 5–13.

66 Ibid., pp. 175–185.

67 Fuda, al-Irhab , p. 3; and his Hiwar Hawla al-‘Almaniyya (Cairo: Dar al-Mahrusa li’l-Nashr, 1986), pp. 13–14.

68 Hijji, al-Thaqafa Awwalan wa-Akhiran , p. 4.

69 On Taha Husayn’s book, see Gershoni and Jankowski, Redefining the Egyptian Nation , pp. 51–52; Abderashid Mahmoudi, Taha Husain’s Education: From the Azhar to the Sorbonne (Richmond: Curzon, 1998), pp. 202–209.

70 Hijji, al-Thaqafa Awwalan wa-Akhiran , pp. 59–70.

71 Al-Qimni, Ahl al-Din wa’l-Dimuqratiyya (Cairo: Dar Misr al-Mahrusa, 2005), pp. 196–227; also Jabir ‘Asfur, “Shurut al-Taqaddum,” al-Muhit al-Thaqafi 5 (March 2002), pp. 48–49.

72 Tarabishi, al-Muthaqafun al-‘Arab wa’l-Turath , p. 11.

73 Mernissi, Islam and Democracy , pp. 48–49.

74 Shakir al-Nabulsi (ed.), al-Libiraliyyun al-Judad ; also his al-Nizam al-‘Arabi al-Jadid: Awraq fi’l-Thawrat al-‘Arabiyya (Beirut: al-Mu’assasa al-‘Arabiyya li’l-Dirasat wa’l-Nashr, 2012), pp. 21–24; al-‘Arab bayna al-Libiraliyya wa’l-Usuliyya al-Diniyya (Beirut: al-Mu’assasa al-‘Arabiyya li’l-Dirasat wa’l-Nashr, 2010), pp. 81–83.

75 Al-Nabulsi, Zawaya Harija , pp. 175–178.

76 Al-Nabulsi, al-Fikr al-‘Arabi , vol. 2, p. 162; and his Thawrat al-Turath: Dirasa fi Fikr Khalid Muhammad Khalid (Cairo: al-‘Asr al-Hadith li’l-Nashr,

1991).

77 Sa‘id al-‘Ashmawi, Usul al-Shari‘a , 4th ed. (Cairo: Maktabat Madbuli al-Saghir, 1996), p. 5.

78 Najib Mahfuz and Fathi al-‘Asri, Hawla al-Taharrur wa’l-Taqaddum (Cairo: al-Dar al-Misriyya al-Lubnaniyya, 1996), pp. 121–122.

79 See, for example, Turath Ahmad Lutfi al-Sayyid (Cairo: Dar al-Kutub, 2008), 2 vols.

80 The manifesto appeared in al-Nabulsi’s “Man hum al-Libiraliyyun al-‘Arab al-Judad,” pp. 21–25.

81 Hourani, Arabic Thought [1983 edition], pp. vi–vii.

82 Al-Nabulsi discussed the first two generations in Hourani’s genealogy, 1830–70 and 1870–90, as one period: the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century, which included most of the writers mentioned by his predecessor. The third generation of Hourani, 1900–39, became the second in al-Nabulsi’s narrative with a strong emphasis on Egyptian writers. The fourth and final generation outlined by Hourani, which began with World War II, appears in al-Nabulsi’s as the third and extends throughout the second half of the twentieth century. This generation was replaced, in al-Nabulsi’s perception, by a contemporary generation at the end of the twentieth century and the beginning of the twenty-first century.

83 Al-Nabulsi, “Man hum al-Libiraliyyun al-‘Arab al-Judad,” pp. 19–20.

84 Al-Afghani, a key figure in the Nahda movement, was at the center of a heated debate against the backdrop of religious extremism in Egypt in the 1980s. What prompted the debate was a treatise by the liberal writer Louis ‘Awad in which he minimized al-Afghani’s important contribution to the heritage of modern Arab discourse when he argued that the struggle against imperialism and oppression in the nineteenth century was not equivalent to the more important struggle for democracy and freedom. ‘Awad, a member of the Coptic minority, sought to denounce the Islamic awakening as a danger to Egyptian and Arab enlightenment.

85 Shakir al-Nabulsi, al-Libiraliyya al-Su‘udiyya bayna al-Wahm wa’l-Haqiqa

[\(Beirut: al-Mu'assasa al-'Arabiyya li'l-Dirasat wa'l-Nashr, 2010\), pp. 47–53.](#)

[86 Al-Nabulsi, “Man hum al-Libiraliyyun al-'Arab al-Judad,” pp. 19–21. See also Nasira, “al-Libiraliyyun al-'Arab al-Judad fi Misr.”](#)

[87 Al-Nabulsi's introduction to his volume, al-Libiraliyyun al-Judad , pp. 14–16.](#)

[88 Al-Nabulsi assembled antiliberal critical essays, totaling 110 pages \(almost half of the volume\), under the title “Min al-Khitab al-Mudhad” \(the counternarrative\). Al-Nabulsi \(ed.\), al-Libiraliyyun al-Judad , pp. 119–207. To this he added short polemics by other thinkers who had turned against the liberal discourse, including Hasan Hanafi, Salah Mukhtar, and Muhammad Sa'id Talib. Ibid., pp. 117–223. See also Musfir b. Ali al-Qahtani, “al-Libiraliyyun al-Judad fi Hiqbat ma Tahta al-Hadatha,” in al-Nabulsi \(ed.\), al-Libiraliyyun al-Judad , pp. 153–160.](#)

[89 Hashim Salih, “Azmat al-Muhafizin al-Judad fi'l-'Alam al-'Arabi,” in al-Nabulsi \(ed.\), al-Libiraliyyun al-Judad , pp. 95, 97; al-Nabulsi, al-'Arab bayna al-Libiraliyya wa'l-Usuliyya , pp. 9–13.](#)

[90 Shahrur, al-Din wa'l-Sulta , p. 454.](#)

[91 Ahmad al-Baghdadi, “Na'am al-Libiraliyyun Wahdahum hum al-Dimuqratiyyun,” in al-Nabulsi \(ed.\), al-Libiraliyyun al-Judad , pp. 113–116.](#)

[92 Hani Nasira, “al-Libiraliyyun al-'Arab al-Judad fi Misr”; Majdi Khalil in al-Hayat , April 18, 2004; also Majdi Khalil, “al-Libiraliyya al-'Arabiyya al-Jadida, Khalfiyya 'Amma,” al-Hiwar al-Mutamddin , May 7, 2006; <http://www.ahewar.org/debate/show.art.asp?aid=64112> \(accessed February 10, 2014\); Ibrahim, quoted in Qasim, Muthaqqaf Tahta al-Hisar , pp. 24–27. Sa'id al-Najjar himself, when referring to the establishment of Jam'iyyat al-Nida', argued that its goals were twofold: developing liberal thinking in Egypt with an emphasis on democracy and human rights; and fostering constructive dialogue between different ideological streams and respecting other people's opinions. On the perception of Egypt's as the richest liberal tradition, see also Hala Mustafa, senior researcher in the Center for Political and Strategic Research at al-Ahram, quoted in Govrin, “Hala Mustafa and the Liberal Predicament,” pp. 44–45.](#)

[93 Nasira, “al-Libiraliyyun al-'Arab al-Judad fi Misr.”](#)

94 Majdi Khalil in al-Hayat , April 18, 2004; Khalil, “al-Libiraliyya al-‘Arabiyya al-Jadida”; Ibrahim, quoted in Qasim, Muthaqqaf Tahta al-Hisar , pp. 24–42; see also his book published in 1992 on minorities in the Arab world, which ignited fierce public debate, al-Milal wa’l-Nihal wa’l-A‘araq fi’l-Watan al-‘Arabi (Cairo: Markaz Ibn Khaldun, 1992).

95 Nasira, “al-Libiraliyyun al-‘Arab al-Judad fi Misr.”

96 Nasira was referring to the thesis that Max Weber developed in his book The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism (1905) (London: Allen and Unwin, 1976).

97 Nasira, “al-Libiraliyyun al-‘Arab al-Judad fi Misr.”

98 Ibid.

99 Clifford Geertz, The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays (New York: Basic Books, 1973), p. 205.

100 Abu Zaid and Nelson, Voice of an Exile , pp. 185, 197.

101 Ibrahim, “Reviving Middle Eastern Liberalism,” pp. 9–10.

102 Nasif Nassar, “al-Nahda al-‘Arabiyya al-Thaniya wa-Tahaddi al-Hurriyya,” in ‘Abd al-Khaliq (ed.), Hiwarat fi’l-Fikr al-‘Arabi , vol. 2, pp. 155, 160; Saghiya, “Nazra ila Masa‘ib”; Sayyar al-Jamil, “al-Libiraliyya al-Jadida: al-Madi wa’l-Hadir wa’l-Mustaqbal,” in al-Nabulsi (ed.), al-Libiraliyyun al-Judad, pp. 52–51; al-Jamil, “al-Libiraliyya al-‘Arabiyya al-Jadida: Mafahim ‘Asr Rahin,” in ibid., p. 59.

103 Saghiya, “Nazra ila Masa‘ib.” A similar line was adopted by Ibrahim, “Arab Liberal Legacies Full Circle,” pp. 213–218.

104 Al-‘Afif al-Akhdar, quoted in Elaph , April 16, 2003; al-Nabulsi, “Man hum al-Libiraliyyun al-‘Arab al-Judad,” pp. 23, 25; al-Nabulsi, al-‘Arab bayna al-Libiraliyya wa’l-Usuliyya , pp. 56–57; also his al-Nizam al-‘Arabi al-Jadid , pp. 144–146. Al-Nabulsi dedicated his book on the thought of al-‘Afif al-Akhdar to Bourguiba: Muhami al-Shaytan , p. 5.

105 Nassar, Nahwa Mujtama‘ Jadid , pp. 11, 13–49.

106 Ibrahim, “Arab Liberal Legacies Full Circle,” p. 218.

107 Ibid., pp. 214–218; Nasira, “al-Libiraliyyun al-‘Arab al-Judad fi Misr.”

108 Al-Nabulsi, “Man hum al-Libiraliyyun al-‘Arab al-Judad.”

109 Ibid., p. 23; also al-Nabulsi, al-Fikr al-‘Arabi , vol. 3. pp. 63–64.

110 Al-Nabulsi, Zawaya Harija, pp. 11–13; al-Nabulsi, al-Ta’ir al-Khashabi , p. 42.

111 Al-Nabulsi, al-Fikr al-‘Arabi , vol. 3. pp. 67–78; and his al-Nizam al-‘Arabi al-Jadid , pp. 151–152.

112 Nasif Nassar, Tariq al-Istiqlal al-Falsafi (Beirut: Dar al-Tali’a 2009), p. 82.

113 Abu Zayd, “Mashru‘ al-Nahda,” pp. 64–70.

114 Al-Baghdadi, Tajdid al-Fikr al-Islami , pp. 445–452.

115 Fuda, quoted in Adab wa-Naqd (July 1992), p. 25.

116 Hala Mustafa, “Our Secular Legacy,” al-Ahram Weekly , 673 (January 15–21, 2004).

117 Phrase coined by the Egyptian writer Husayn Ahmad Amin. See Sivan, “The Clash within Islam,” p. 39. See also Elizabeth S. Kassab’s exploration of the stance of contemporary Arab thinkers on the legacy of the first Nahda and its perceived failure. Kassab, Contemporary Arab Thought , pp. 18–115, 347–363.

118 Nassar, “al-Nahda al-‘Arabiyya al-Thaniya,” pp. 137–146.

119 Elias Khoury, “For a Third Nahda,” in Hanssen and Weiss (ed.), Arabic Thought against the Authoritarian Age , pp. 357–284.

120 Sariya, “Nazra ila Masa’ib.”

121 Amin al-Mahdi, al-Sira‘ al-‘Arabi al-Isra’ili: ‘Azmat al-Dimuqratiyya wa’l-Salam (Cairo: al-Dar al-‘Arabiyya, 1999), pp. 47–48; also Nasira, “al-Libiraliyyun al-‘Arab al-Judad fi Misr.”

122 Al-Mahdi, al-Sira' al-'Arabi al-Isra'ili , pp. 63–69.

123 Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell-Smith (eds.), Selections from the Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 2003), esp. pp. 5–23.

124 Ibrahim, quoted in Qasim, Muthaqqaf Tahta al-Hisar , p. 27; see also his book al-Mufakkir wa'l-Sulta (Cairo: Dar Quba', 2000). On Ibn Khaldun, see Robert Irwin, Ibn Khaldun: An Intellectual Biography (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2018).

125 Nassif Nassar, La Pensée réaliste d'Ibn Khaldun (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1967); Mohamed Talbi, Ibn Khaldun: sa vie—son oeuvre (Tunis: Maison Tunisienne de l'Édition, 1973). Among the earliest liberals, Taha Husayn's work on Ibn Khaldun, based on his Ph.D. dissertation at the Sorbonne, was of the utmost importance. Husayn, while praising Ibn Khaldun's universal thought and modern innovations in the spheres of education and sociology, criticized some aspects of the medieval historian's study of history and his focus on politics. Mahmoudi, Taha Husain's Education, pp. 191–209.

126 Al-Nabulsi's introduction to his volume, al-Libiraliyyun al-Judad , pp. 2–3.

127 Hijji, al-Thaqafa Awwalan wa-Akhiran , p. 5.

128 Tarabishi, al-Muthaqqafun al-'Arab wa'l-Turath .

129 Ibid., pp. 21, 27, 61–68.

130 Taha, Usus Dustur al-Sudan , 2nd ed. (Omdurman: Jumhiri publication, 1968 [1955]).

131 Ibid., p. 63.

132 For selected sections of the platform, see Hatina, Identity Politics , pp. 225–240.

133 Al-Mahdi, al-Sira' al-'Arabi al-Isra'ili , pp. 253–258.

134 Al-Nabulsi, “Man hum al-Libiraliyyun al-'Arab al-Judad,” pp. 21–25.

135 Ibid., p. 24.

136 Ibid., p. 27.

137 Ibid., p. 25. On Islam and globalization, see, for example, Johan Meuleman (ed.), Islam in the Era of Globalization: Muslim Attitudes towards Modernity and Identity (New York: Routledge, 2002); Birgit Schaebler and Leif Stenberg (eds.), Globalization and the Muslim World: Culture, Religion and Modernity (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2004). See also Fauzi Najjar, "The Arabs, Islam and Globalization," Middle East Policy 12 (fall 2005), pp. 91–106.

138 Al-Nabulsi, "Man hum al-Libiraliyyun al-‘Arab al-Judad," pp. 24–25.

139 Kamal Ghabrial, "al-Libiraliyya al-Jadida wa-Fada' Yatashakkal," in al-Nabulsi (ed.), al-Libiraliyyun al-Judad , pp. 63–64, 77; also Kamal Ghabriyal, "Ila ayna Tattajihu Misr," Elaph , November 1, 2009, <http://www.elaph.com/Web/opinionElpah> (accessed October 12, 2014).

140 Al-‘Afif al-Akhdar, al-Mithaq al-‘Aqlani , parts 1–2, www.elaph.com/ElaphWeb/ElaphWriter/2007/11/281513.htm ; <https://elaph.com/ElaphWeb/ElaphWriter/2007/11/282289.html> (accessed October 13, 2014).

141 Ibid.

142 Ibid.

143 On the association and its ideological platform, see www.alawan.org .

144 Ibid.

145 Ibid.

146 The charter appeared in Shahrur, al-Din wa'l-Sulta , pp. 453–459.

147 See also Tarabishi, Hartaqat , pp. 19–35.

148 Talbi, "Arabs and Democracy," p. 59; Saghie, "Introduction," in his The Predicament of the Individual , pp. 10–11.

149 Ibrahim, "Reviving Middle Eastern Liberalism," p. 9; Shahrour, "The Divine Text," p. 150.

150 Most prominent was Hasan Hanafi in Egypt who established the Islamic left.

151 Sivan, Radical Islam , ch. 6; Schumann, "The Failure of Radical Nationalism"; Sing, "Arab Post-Marxists after Disillusionment"; also Muhammad 'Ali Muqallid, "al-Yasar bayna al-Anqad wa'l-Intiqad: Qira'a Naqdiyya min Ajl Tajdid al-Yasar," www.ahewar.org/debat/show.art.asp?aid=%2028945 , June 1, 2005 (accessed November 11, 2014).

152 The party was founded by al-Hafiz in 1966 as a Marxist splinter group from the Ba'th Party. It advocated scientific socialism (as opposed to utopian socialism). This means that its theories are held to empirical observations, which are essential to its development, which can result in modifications of some elements of the theory.

153 Yasin al-Hafiz, al-Hazima wa'l-Idiulujyya al-Mahzuma (Beirut: Ma'had al-Inma' al'Arabi wa'l-Hay'a al-Qawmiyya li'l-Baith al-'Ilmi, 1990), pp. 17–35. See also Samer Frangie, "Historicism, Socialism and Liberalism after the Defeat: On the Political Thought of Yasin al-Hafiz," *Modern Intellectual History* 12.2 (2015), pp. 325–352.

154 See especially Sadiq Jalal al-'Azm, al-Naqd al-Dhati b'ada al-Hazima (Beirut: Dar al-Tali'a, 1969), and Munif, al-Dimuqratiyya . In his foreword to the English edition of the book published in 2014, al-'Azm highlighted the works of such liberal thinkers as Egypt's Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd and Syria's Muhammad Shahrur, "[who] share the critical spirit of my book, often writing from within Islam, and who represent glimmers of vitality and hope within the dominant narrative of regression and despair." Al-'Azm, *Critique of Religious Thought* (Berlin: Gerlach Press, 2015), pp. 6–7. It was Shakir al-Nabulsi who praised al-'Azm's critical writings, which exposed the impotence of Islamic ideology; as a result he was dismissed from his post as lecturer at the American University of Beirut and denounced in Arabic circles as apostate, while gaining wide support in the West. Al-Nabulsi, *al-Nizam al-'Arabi al-Jadid* , pp. 45–48. As to al-Hafiz's and Munif's impact on liberal thought, one can mention Tarabishi, who depicted al-Hafiz as a liberal and democrat in Marxist garb in his book *Min al-Nahda ila al-Ridda* , pp. 113–121; and Shakir al-Nabulsi, who

dedicated an entire book to Munif's work, Madar al-Sahra': Dirasa fi Adab ' Abd al-Rahman Munif (Amman: al-Mu'assasa al-'Arabiyya li'l-Dirasat wa'l-Nashr, 1991). See also Nabulis's discussion on the theme of freedom in Munif's novels in his Mabahij al-Hurriyya fi'l-Riwaya al-'Arabiyya (Beirut: al-Mu'assasa al-'Arabiyya li'l-Dirasat wa'l-Nashr, 1992), pp. 61–92. Al-Nabulsi stated that Munif's main focus was on political freedom, which he perceived as the key factor in achieving other liberties, such as freedom of thought, social freedom, and economic freedom.

155 Hakan Yavuz, "The Matrix of Modern Turkish Islamic Movements: The Naqshbandi Sufi Order," in Elisabeth Özdalga (ed.), Naqshbandis in Western and Central Asia: Change and Continuity (Istanbul: Swedish Research Institute, 1999), pp. 129–146; L. Stenberg, "Naqshbandiyya in Damascus: Strategies to Establish and Strengthen the Order in a Changing Society," in *ibid.*, pp. 101–116; Itzhak Weismann, The Naqshbandiyya: Orthodoxy and Activism in a Worldwide Sufi Tradition (London: Routledge, 2007).

156 Mark Sedgwick, "In Search of a Counter-Reformation: Anti-Sufi Stereotypes and the Budshishiyya's Response," in M. Browsers and C. Kurzman (eds.), An Islamic Reformation? (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2004), pp. 133–141.

157 Itzhak Weismann, "Sufi Brotherhoods in Syria and Israel: A Contemporary Overview," History of Religions 43 (2004), pp. 303–318; Daphna Ephrat, Spiritual Wayfarers, Leaders in Piety: Sufis and the Dissemination of Islam in Medieval Palestine (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008), pp. 195–201; also <http://www.qsm.ac.il/Eng/main.aspx?did=21&pid=4593> (accessed February 13, 2018).

158 Jamal Malik and John Hinnells (eds.), Sufism in the West (London: Routledge, 2006); Markuz Dressler, Ron Geaves, and Gritt Klinkhammer (eds.), Sufis in Western Society: Global Network and Locality (London: Routledge, 2009).

159 Mark Sedgwick, Against the Modern World (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004); Meir Hatina, "Where East Meets West: Sufism, Cultural Rapprochement and Politics," International Journal of Middle East Studies 39 (August 2007), pp. 389–409.

160 Malik and Hinnells (eds.), *Sufism in the West* ; Elizabeth Sirriyeh, "Sufi Thought and its Reconstruction," in Shua Taji-Farouki and Bashir M. Nafi (eds.), *Islamic Thought in the Twentieth Century* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2004), pp. 104–127; Chen Bram and Meir Hatina, "Cultural Exchange and Cosmopolitan Vision: Murat Yagan and the Teaching of Kebzeh," *Journal of Sufi Studies* 3 (2014), pp. 67–92. In some places, as in Britain, the resilience of Sufi tradition was achieved through reconnection with orthodox theology, and adherence to one of the four schools of Sunni law and social engagement via the infrastructure of educational centers, magazines, journals, websites, charities, etc. Sadek Hamid, *Sufis, Salafis and Islamists: The Contested Ground of British Islamic Activism* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2016), esp. ch. 4.

161 For a comprehensive account of Nasr's thought, see Lewis E. Hahn et al. (eds.), *The Philosophy of Seyyed Hossein Nasr* (Chicago: The Library of Living Philosophies, 2001).

162 Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *The Heart of Islam: Enduring Values for Humanity* (New York: HarperCollins, 2002), pp. 203–236.

163 Ibid., pp. 313–314.

164 Ibid., pp. 314–315.

165 These parties were inspired by prominent writers, especially in Egypt, such as Yusuf al-Qaradawi, Salim al-ʿAwwa, Muhammad ʿImara and Fahmi Huwaydi. These writers emphasized the need for openness and dialogue within modern environments, by virtue of the principle of the common good (*maslaha*). They emphasized the duty of the ruler to realize justice and advocated the idea of consultation (*shura*) as the nucleus of any political regime. Another thinker, Jamal al-Banna, went even further, presenting a humanistic approach to Islam, including opposition to the implementation of the shariʿa, installing a democratic regime, and guaranteeing equal rights for women and minorities. Hatina, *Identity Politics* , ch. 8; Browsers, *Political Ideology in the Arab World* , ch. 2; also Jamal al-Banna, *al-Islam Din wa-Umma wa-laysa Dinan wa-Dawla* (Cairo: Dar al-Fikr al-Islami, 2003); and his *Daʿwat al-Ihyaʾ al-Islami* (Cairo: Dar al-Fikr al-Islami, 2005).

166 Hatina, *Identity Politics* , ch. 9; Rafiq Habib, *Awraq Hizb al-Wasat* (Cairo: n.p., 1996).

167 Meir Hatina, "In Search of Authenticity: A Coptic Perception," Middle Eastern Studies 42 (January 2006), pp. 49–66.

168 Jillian Schwedler, Faith in Moderation: Islamist Parties in Jordan and Yemen (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006); Bayat, Making Islam Democratic , pp. 1–15; also McLarney, "Reviving Qasim Amin, Redeeming Women's Liberation," pp. 262–284.

[Revisiting Islam: toward an ethical vision](#)

Secularism: tackling a demonized concept

In their call for the depoliticization of Islam, Arab liberals spoke out in favor of secularization. But what did they mean by this term? Western scholars such as Charles Taylor and Bryan Wilson defined secularization as a process that changed a society in three ways: it freed the state and public space from the dictates of religion and shifted power from the religious establishment to the political system; it signified a decline in belief and religious practice, and an embrace of humanism and compassion; and it broadened empirical knowledge by means of scientific tools, thus paving the way for a modern society guided by the principles of rationalism.¹ Secularism put an end to the naive acknowledgment of transcendent or higher beings like Gods or spirits, and placed faith in the hands of human beings. Belief in God was no longer axiomatic: there were alternative options. Over time, the West moved toward secularization, although it never adopted secularism in any absolute or consistent way.

In the Western context, secularism, which was nurtured by the Enlightenment, empowered the individual and placed the keys of salvation and happiness in human hands. In other words, the Enlightenment generated a process of individualization, which was, according to Immanuel Kant, “man’s emergence from his self-imposed nonage. Nonage is the inability to use one own’s understanding without another’s guidance.”² Sapere aude (dare to know) was the motto of the Enlightenment, encouraging the believer to use his reason freely and to stand alone in the presence of God, so that the religious leadership would lose its status of sanctity. The Church was no longer the sole arbiter in religious matters, nor was it given leave to interfere in state affairs; the state was expected to allow for and safeguard religious freedom. Secularism signaled the loss of social consensus over public manifestations of religion and the status of the

clergy. It redefined the relationship between this world and the next. Nevertheless, Western civilization did not witness a boost in atheism. Despite laxity in the realm of ritual and prayer, public spaces continued to preserve their Christian character, whether Catholic or Protestant: blasphemy laws remained, established Churches lingered, and holy days were preserved. If there was any antireligious sentiment, it was limited to small groups, mostly of intellectuals. Encyclopedic definitions of secularism were non-critical, identifying it with modernist (primarily Protestant) attempts to align science, humanism, and religious tradition. Nietzsche's defiant declaration that God was dead ultimately turned out to be a hyperbole in the Western context. Religion, which was perceived as a vanished model, remained a major factor in modern human life, characterized by innovation and adaptation.³

Comparatively speaking, however, secularization struck deeper roots in Christianity than in Judaism and Islam, and was already anchored in early Christianity. The New Testament made a clear distinction between God and Caesar, which was reinforced by the historical fact of being a new religion born into a civilization that had established sociopolitical and judicial institutions, namely the Roman Empire. Christianity carved out a place for itself within the existing reality, rather than trying to reshape it. It established a spiritual empire within a secular empire and stressed that between the pure and the evil there was a third space, namely the profane, which was legitimate and could be mobilized to combat evil. By contrast, the evolution of Judaism and Islam was different. Both faiths emerged in a desert, in a physical and cultural sense, and both regarded the surrounding world as pagan—a culture that was to be eradicated, not respected. Thus, one can speak of holistic systems harboring a dichotomous conception of good and evil that set the stage for monotheistic politics, that is, politics in the service of God. It was an organic model of religion and politics that, albeit not always preserved in Judaism and Islam, remained an ethos well into modern times and was widely adopted by revivalist movements. These movements aimed at the deprivatization of religion.

This reality also left its mark on secularization processes in the Middle East. From a linguistic perspective, a perusal of Arabic dictionaries, such as *Muhit al-muhit* or *al-Munjid*, which was published in the nineteenth century, shows that 'almaniyya, which derives from 'alam, meaning "world," was the commonplace word for secularism. A synonymous term was *dunyawiyya*, from *dunya*, which also means world. 'Almani or *dunyawi* was defined as an ordinary person, a civilian (*madani*) who was not a cleric.⁴ Translations in bilingual dictionaries of

the time were “layman and secular” (Arabic/English) and “laïque, et terrestre” (Arabic/French). A secular person was someone who engaged in worldly affairs (al-ihtimam bi-umur al-dunya).⁵ This sense of the word ‘almaniyya continued into the twentieth century. In al-Nahda Dictionary, Isma‘il Mazhar defined ‘almaniyya as a madhhab, a school of thought that saw science as a tool for human enlightenment (ruqiyy al-insan). It was only later that the term became explicitly associated with laxity in religious observance.⁶

Moving from linguistics to the political realm, secularism established a foothold in government, society, and culture. However, it was a “soft” form of secularism, in which the state did not adopt an antireligious perspective, but minimized religious discourse in public life while allowing it to continue as a source of cultural and personal meaning. This should be distinguished from “hard” secularism, which considered religious propositions to be illegitimate and fallacious, warranted by neither reason nor experience, and rejected all transcendent or supernatural dimensions of human existence.⁷

The continued importance of religion was reflected in the state’s co-option of religious values and institutions in order to further its political and anticolonial goals. In this case, one can speak of a strategy of transvaluation, namely the embrace of certain facets of religion, which were molded to fit the state policy and agenda. It was similar to what Donald E. Smith defined in 1974 as “polity-expansion secularization,”⁸ in which the polity extends its jurisdiction into areas of social and economic life formerly regulated by religious bodies. Unlike Israel, which defined itself as both a Jewish and a democratic state, Islam was recognized as the state religion in most Arab countries, though few accepted shari‘a law as a source of legislation.

“Soft” secularism was also a feature of Arab liberal discourse. Only a handful of Arab intellectuals, most of them Christian, championed “hard” secularism, which rejected all notions of divinity and religious faith. The vast majority had a positive attitude toward religion and ritual, although they disliked religious institutions and institutional norms. Their quest was to promote Islam as a cosmopolitan ethical code, while the polity would be run in accordance with rational, secular norms and civic liberties. In their view, the attainment of absolute truth was impossible and therefore skepticism and tolerance should prevail in any discussion about science and religion.⁹ This flies in the face of Muhammad Abu Samra’s claim that liberals were devoid of religious commitment and advocated separation of religion and state.¹⁰ Not everyone who

called themselves a liberal in the Arab world was antireligious or called for separation of religion and state, following the French or Kemalist Turkish models. Some cultivated a certain connection with tradition as part of their humanistic, pluralistic, and secularist outlook, and took pains to remind their readers of the dark days of Christianity in the Middle Ages.¹¹ Others were indifferent or alienated from tradition.

In his book *Modern Trends in Islam*, published in 1947, Hamilton Gibb rightly distinguished between secular Arabs, a small group that rejected the religious claims of Islam altogether, and modernist liberals, a larger group which did care, sometimes deeply, about religion, but which recoiled from traditional dogmas and from the sanctification of traditional social institutions in the Muslim world.¹² The secularists were mainly Christians and included only a handful of Muslims. The Egyptian Shaykh ‘Ali ‘Abd al-Raziq (d. 1966) was the first Muslim scholar to openly call for the separation of religion and state. His appeal, in the 1920s, was rejected by his liberal colleagues inside and outside Egypt, who also dissociated themselves from the aggressive secularist policies in Turkey under Ataturk. The calls of Shaykh Khalid Muhammad Khalid, another Azhari scholar, in the early 1950s, met a similar fate. Liberal writers after 1967 also distanced themselves from any association with explicit demands for the separation of religion and state. Those who did make this demand made it clear that they were not against religion or God, but against their manipulative use by the state and its political opponents. Keeping religion and politics separate was a way of safeguarding the purity and integrity of religion. Only a tiny minority approved of Mustafa Kemal’s model, although they admitted it was failing because of the difficult transition from an imperial regime founded on religion to a modern nation-state based on the sovereignty of the people, civil rights, and separation of powers.¹³ Others favored the French model, but a larger number looked toward the American system.

A chief endorser of the French model was an Egyptian writer, Hala Mustafa, who defended President Jacques Chirac’s decision to pass a law banning conspicuous religious symbols—Islamic headscarves, large crosses, and the Jewish skullcap—in French public schools. Chirac explained that the ban was designed to protect secularism, a policy that was indisputable and irreversible. The initiative of the French president infuriated the Muslims, who saw it as racist and directed against Islam and its adherents. For Mustafa, however, it was a justified move intended to bolster France’s long-standing battle for liberty, equality, and fraternity.¹⁴

Was secularism against religion? According to Mustafa, the answer was no. In her view, the separation of Church and state in Europe was not targeting religious faith. On the contrary, it was an attempt to prevent tyranny in the name of religion. At the end of a lengthy struggle and after many lives lost in the intellectual and artistic community, secularism spread throughout Europe and the United States and, from there, to other parts of the world. In view of the tendency of the Arab world to regard anything from the outside as a threat and a conspiracy, Mustafa noted sadly, secularism was perceived as antagonistic to religion, all the more so against the backdrop of the revolutionary ideologies of the nineteenth century, especially atheistic Marxism.¹⁵

But was secularism in the Arab world really a foreign intrusion? Here again Mustafa said no. Muslim societies supported the concept of a nation-state. They adopted constitutions that provided for civil rights and positive legislation. The Muslim world in general was not in favor of mixing religion and politics, although sometimes the line between them was blurred. Going back into history, Mustafa even found secularist roots in Islamic tradition: the Prophet Muhammad did not leave behind a clear-cut model of government or appoint an heir, as attested to by the transition from caliphate to monarchy. Only general principles of government were laid down. Muslim thinkers—al-Afghani and ‘Abd al-Rahman al-Kawakibi in the nineteenth century, ‘Ali ‘Abd al-Raziq in the early twentieth century, and Muhammad Ahmad Khalaf Allah and Muhammad ‘Imara in the last quarter of the twentieth century—were guided by the same ideology. In this context, ‘Imara’s name is surprising, as he had started out as a Marxist, only to become an Islamist and spokesman of the Wasatiyya school in the 1980s. Mustafa quoted from his book *al-Islam wa’l-‘Uruba’ wa’l-‘Almaniyya* (Islam, Arabism and secularism) (1981), where ‘Imara argued that, like European secularism, Islamic secularism had a utilitarian side.¹⁶ Clearly, ‘Imara was not an advocate of the separation of religion and state, and even accused secular intellectuals of being extremists in their interpretation of religion (*ghulat*),¹⁷ but this did not stop Mustafa from including him in her genealogy of secular discourse: first, because it strengthened her claim that secularism was part of the regional heritage; and second, to show that Islamist discourse was not hewn from a single block and that there were those who showed an interest in secularism and adopted some of its values. In general, Mustafa concluded that

secularism, a Western legacy, has served the cause of freedom, democracy and

individual rights. Islamic legacy, meanwhile, has never been absent from the course of human advancement. We have gone through times of freedom and creativity, and others of repression and backwardness, and we have the right to disagree. Only, no one has the right to confiscate knowledge or stifle objectivity.¹⁸

While Hala Mustafa embraced the French paradigm as an inspiration for Islamic secularism, other liberal writers homed in on American secularism, which they saw as more conciliatory and evolutionary. Fatima Mernissi called it “secular humanism.” According to Mernissi, this model of secularism, which was incorporated in the American public school system, placed the emphasis on individual, personal autonomy, and personal feelings and needs. American secular humanism was developed not so much against God as against government officialdom and its use of state funds and institutions to propagate religion—any religion. The success of American secular humanism, with its call for tolerance and freedom of thought, was borne out by the fact that the United States remained one of the world’s most religious countries. Not only did Churches still exist, but they were multiplying. The religious pluralism was impressive: Protestants, Catholics, Mormons, Jews, Muslims, Buddhists, and more lived side by side.¹⁹ Mernissi’s words of praise were echoed by Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd, who suffered personally from the marriage of religion and politics: due to his non-conformist views on the Qur’an, an Egyptian court found him guilty of heresy.²⁰

In addition, Abu Zayd singled out Protestant Christians as a source of inspiration. Unlike Islam, the Protestants had crossed the Rubicon and shown open-mindedness with respect to the Enlightenment, thereby becoming part of it. Religious reform was one of the main factors behind the giant steps taken by Europe and the United States over the last three centuries, he wrote. In the nineteenth century, the Arab world embarked on a similar reformation in response to its encounter with modernity under Muhammad ‘Abduh, who attempted to breathe new life into Islamic heritage through critical thinking, the assimilation of Western ideas of progress and receptivity, and the promotion of intercultural dialogue with the West. The Islamic reformation had only limited success, but left behind a legacy that Abu Zayd saw himself as continuing.²¹

Western-style Protestantism also appealed to other liberal writers, but they

tended to hold back and spoke more about the profanation of Islam, either out of caution or out of an inner awareness that Islam constituted an important component of their identity. Over time, this approach seeped into their terminology. Secularism was referred to as 'ilmaniyya, from the root 'ilm (science, knowledge), and equated with 'aqlaniyya, or rationalism, whereas the other meaning, 'almaniyya, which is derived from the root 'alam (wordliness or materialism as unrelated to religion), was set aside.

In the Arab liberal discourse, Marxists and communists, along with a handful of Arab nationalists, were seen as the proponents of the separation of religion and state. They were accused of perceiving religion and secularity as polar opposites, and rejecting Islamic heritage in its entirety because of their perception of religion as the opium of the people. Viewing materialism as the foundation of human existence, liberal writers claimed, has transformed human beings into soulless, statistical units. Even worse, rejecting the divine message did not help promote the modernization of Arab societies and only led to secular countries proclaiming a monopoly over truth and silencing any expression of pluralism. In the Syrian Muhammad Shahrur's view, such interpretation distorted the true essence of secularism, which does not endow any regime with a monopoly over the truth.²² He and his colleagues insisted that the goal was separating religion from politics, not from the state. Muhammad Sa'id al-'Ashmawi summarized this premise as follows:

The principle of separating politics from religion, that is, civic rule, so-called secularism, is needed. Politics should be practiced unfettered by religion but on the basis of civil code. At the same time religion needs to be protected from political distortion or corruption and unimpeded by earthly disputes or conflicts of power. When religion is meshed with politics it becomes an ideology, not a religion, and its followers become politicians or party members. To succeed, religion must recognize that it is a faith of profound power instilled in mankind's conscience to connect the individual with his family, society, humanity and the cosmos at large ... Under no circumstances should rulers be allowed to exploit religion to justify their actions or decisions. Every action whatever its source—be it that of a president, minister, clergy, scholar or layperson—should be considered a civil, not a religious, action, even if based on a religious command. Since human action is the product of a human hand, it may be fallible and subject to the standards of right or wrong. Where such a distinction between

religion and politics is understood, religion cannot be exploited.²³

Distinguishing between religion and politics as opposed to religion and the state did not save liberal writers, including al-‘Ashmawi, from being accused of atheism (ilhad). The Islamic resurgence in the Arab world only made the situation more complex. After voicing their criticism—and sometimes even before they did so—they were forced to declare themselves to be faithful Muslims, in addition to declaring their allegiance to the state.

Liberal efforts to depoliticize Islam focused first and foremost on the core of Muslim consciousness—the Qur’an.

Deconstructing the scriptures

The Qur’an is viewed as the nucleus and pillar of Muslim religious heritage, the “originating paradigm,” in the words of Douglas Pratt, on which the ideology and structures of the Islamic theocracy were based.²⁴ Some communities produce texts, but in the case of Islam, the Qur’an has produced the community. Its status exceeds even that of the Prophet Muhammad, a mortal like Moses or Jesus, whose role was to receive and transmit the Qur’anic message, faithfully preserving its language and content. The Qur’an itself is perceived as an eternal miracle (mu‘jiza) that descended from the “preserved tablet” (al-lawh al-mahfuz).²⁵ It differs from hadith and Sunna, whose texts were the subject of diverse interpretations by religious scholars throughout the ages. To engage in textual criticism of the Qur’an is thus an act of intellectual daring, and a challenge to highly sensitive and deeply entrenched religious perceptions in Muslim society.

Liberal Arab thinkers were adamant that no one had the right to claim that one interpretation of Islam was better than any other. Islam, they said, was an appeal to human beings to realize their humanity in the best possible way, each in keeping with his or her personal circumstances. The mission of the liberals was to persuade believers to reexamine accepted truths and what were perceived as fundamental religious principles. In this way they would be freed from dogmatic

positions that shut out the world, so that barriers between groups and individuals could be broken down.²⁶

While Islamists, and all the more so literalists, saw the Qur'an as an anchor and a stepping stone to stronger religious faith, liberals approached it as a text to be probed and dissected to achieve a truer understanding of the essence of the Prophet's mission. Not surprisingly, some liberals were targeted for assassination or hauled into court for the sin of apostasy. In fact, the liberals used the same argument as their Islamist opponents: both called for a return to authentic Muslim heritage (ʿasl, turath), but the liberals were referring to a cultural openness that they claimed had existed in earlier times. Ultimately, the battle between liberals and Islamists over the formative narrative of Islam was a battle over Muslim memory, an integral part of identity politics.

Liberal writers did not function in a vacuum; they viewed themselves as part of a continuum of progressive modernists of the mid-nineteenth and early twentieth centuries who strove for religious reform. Since this process did not take root for a variety of reasons, the new generation undertook to rejuvenate it and furnish it with new contents.²⁷ Using semantic and philological analysis and following Muhammad ʿAbduh, the Egyptian jurist Muhammad Saʿid al-ʿAshmawi traced civic concepts such as parliament (shura) and elections (bayʿa—literally an oath of allegiance) in the Qur'an, as well as evidence of openness toward other cultures. Accordingly, he argued, democracy does not mean atheism, nor does liberalism imply imperialism, and the fact that these terms do not exist in Arabic does not nullify their Islamic content or essence. Al-ʿAshmawi also delved into the concept of shariʿa, claiming that the original meaning of the term was not Islamic law, as modern Islamists claimed, but rather the path (minhaj) that the Prophet laid out for believers. The two main principles were faith in God and ethical behavior.²⁸

Other liberals rejected this modernist-apologetic approach, insisting on rational discourse and secular norms. Textual criticism and history were their main devices and argumentative tools. Thus, while al-ʿAshmawi identified the shura with democracy,²⁹ Abdelmajid Charfi and Ahmad al-Baghdadi asserted that historically the Muslims had never applied such a principle, and that Islamic rulers had always been absolute monarchs. The fact that in recent times the shura has been portrayed as a parallel to democracy is entirely a product of modern conscience, which resists absolute rule and wishes for the influence of the rulers to end and to be supervised by democratic institutions.³⁰ Charfi and al-

Baghdadi's senior colleague, Mohamed Talbi, a history professor at the University of Tunis, followed suit and published much on the pluralistic dimension of Islam, actively promoting interreligious dialogue. He contended that while desirable in itself, shura is rooted in a time and place that had no conception of democracy as we know it. Neither Islam nor earlier Western civilization could have been familiar with a concept that was born in modern times. For Talbi, democracy meant the voice of the people determining who rules and how they rule, with the associated notions of universal human rights, religious pluralism, and equality before the law.³¹

Liberal discourse highlighted the fact that all shura councils in the Arab states have failed to prove their political effectiveness, compared to the success of parliaments in the West and the relative success of some parliaments in the East and in the Third World. The root of the problem was made clear by al-Baghdadi and al-Nabusli—namely that most Muslims were not familiar with the philosophical basis of Western democracy. They mistakenly believed that it entails a constitution, parliament, elections, and majority vote. However, these are merely tools for realizing the humanist principle underlying democracy, that is, ensuring the rights and well-being of the individual and accepting the Other as an equal, regardless of his or her origin, color, religion, or ideology.³²

The disqualification of the shura as equivocal in the context of democracy allowed al-Baghdadi to criticize “enlightened” Islamist writers such as the Egyptian Fahmi Huwaydi, who promoted the concept of “cultural Islam” (Islam thaqafi) as distinct from “religious Islam” (Islam dini). In their view, while religious Islam is narrow and focuses on the connection between believers and God and on the world to come, “cultural Islam” is broad and deals with the connection between the individual and his fellow man, and between this world and the next. It is intended to serve as a solution to the crisis of the Muslim position in the modern era and to enable the assimilation of modern values and institutions, such as liberty and democracy, which are anchored in Western thought.

Al-Baghdadi hastened to eulogize this trend, thereby bolstering the uniqueness of the liberal discourse as a true solution to the cultural crisis. In his view, it would be difficult for Muslims to adapt themselves to a “cultural Islam” premise since, unlike other religions, Islam resides deep in the heart of Muslims even if they are not devout believers. Nor would it be easy for them to accept the idea of personal freedom, whether political or religious, since obedience and

subordination to the ruler are rooted in Muslim mentality. For this very reason, rebellion was considered to be indecent, and conversion was seen as apostasy. It would hence take considerable time and effort to promote moderation and tolerance. When a person adopts a certain religion, it is difficult for him or her to live in peace side by side with another religion. Religions, like cultures and nationalities, can exist and flourish only when in a constant state of conflict. Therefore, al-Baghdadi argued, “religious Islam” is stronger than “cultural Islam,” and will prevail until society decides to discard the religious idea. This process, which has already occurred in parts of the Western world, is not in sight in the Muslim world, and if it should happen it would involve great suffering and anguish.³³ The operative conclusion was formulated explicitly by al-‘Afif al-Akhdar, who held that modernity meant separation: separation of powers, separation of public and private domains, and the separation of religion and state. Such separation was the very basis of a healthy society.³⁴

Al-Baghdadi, al-Akhdar, Charfi, Talbi, and other liberal writers went beyond the cautious line of the early modernists. They cast doubt on the celestial validity of the Qur’ān, and urged Muslims to read it in the context of historic, environmental, cultural, and social influences. In their view, the full significance of Muhammad’s revelation could not be understood from the text alone. To decipher this deeper message, they turned to modern research methodologies—to philology, phenomenology, linguistics, anthropology, textual criticism, hermeneutical theories, comparative religion, sociology, anthropology, and psychology—hoping to revive a rational and scholarly approach to religious discourse.³⁵ In their view, religious phenomena, like other aspects of human life, were to be understood and analyzed in the light of patterns of historical causation and evolution. Adopting a rationalist-scientific approach, liberals sought to de-idealize Islamic tradition and formulate it on an empirical and historical basis. A scientific approach to religion would allow for a trend toward neutrality, objectivity, and a shift away from tendencies to glorify Islamic heritage, and to deny or attack other beliefs or religions. This was also the declared goal of Charfi, who in 1999 assumed the UNESCO Chair for Comparative Religions at the University of Manouba, Tunisia. For Charfi, “the cathedra was meant to be an open hall for believers of all faiths, to give up any form of missionary activity or preaching, and encourage all types of believers and non-believers to engage in dialogues and carry out joint scientific research.”³⁶

Charfi further quoted the towering fourteenth-century historian Ibn Khaldun on

the attributes of the historian. To write history required multiple sources, Ibn Khaldun wrote—varied knowledge, a good speculative mind, and thoroughness. These qualities would lead to truthful research. Yet if historians put their trust in information in its plain transmitted form and without examining the sources or their reliability, and without being familiar with the political, cultural, and social milieu in which they were written, their accounts would most likely be deviant and misleading.³⁷

Indeed, liberal writers viewed themselves as historians whose role was to enrich the body of knowledge about the Muslim past with an emphasis on the formative seventh century. Using their critical faculties, they sought to root out flaws that clung to religious thought and to eliminate them in order to deal more effectively with the challenges of modern life. Increasing knowledge, while ridding Muslims of their false hopes, narrow-mindedness, and the fear that new ideas might undermine the foundations of society, would pave the way for the growth of a new Islamic consciousness that would enable Muslims to move forward with self-confidence and optimism.³⁸ Islam's survival in modern times relied more on knowledge than on fighting and holy war, observed Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd, while admitting that Muslims were indebted to the European Enlightenment for much of this knowledge.³⁹ Charfi, too, asserted that the West was the primary source of modern knowledge, especially scientific. Moreover, he attributed the growth of militant Islam, which drew its justification from the Qur'an and hadith, considered to be its only valid sources, to flawed teaching in traditional religious centers that lagged far behind in their comprehension of modern advances grounded in the scientific achievements of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.⁴⁰

This deconstruction of the past was coupled with the repudiation of the authority of the 'ulama' and Islamists as spokesmen of Islam. The 'ulama' were accused of anachronism, of clinging to a judicial system that might have been appropriate to the past, but was certainly not relevant to the present; they portrayed themselves as the defenders of religion, while in fact protecting personal and partisan interests. The Islamists were accused of utopianism since they were turning the Qur'an into an ahistorical text and preaching a return to the ways of the pious forefathers (al-salaf al-salih).⁴¹

The Prophetic messages, liberal writers claimed, were systematically perverted under the influence of sociohistorical developments and the institutionalization of religion, which was transformed into a dogmatic system of beliefs. Only by

dispensing with intermediaries between human beings and the Divine and ending their dependence on supernatural powers would human beings be able to fully exercise their freedom and shoulder their responsibilities, which constitute the two fundamentals of democracy.⁴²

Liberal writers did not delude themselves as to the negative responses their revisionist approach to the Qur'an was bound to evoke in traditionalist and fundamentalist circles, which they saw as suffering from a "lack of free market ideas."⁴³ Some liberals insisted that before a human being can change, the God he or she worships must be molded and changed from a puritan God to one who is merciful, patient, and forbearing.⁴⁴ Their alternative narratives for understanding the revelation and mission of the Prophet were presented as having already gained currency in the past, but having failed to find wide acceptance. Muhammad Shahrur, a Syrian liberal whose essays on the Qur'an were banned in the Arab world, wrote:

The way I have chosen is very difficult. By training I am a civil engineer, and I know it is easier to build a skyscraper or a tunnel under the sea than to teach people how to read the book of the Lord with their own eyes. They have been used to reading this book with borrowed eyes for hundreds of years.⁴⁵

A worse fate awaited Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd of Egypt. In 1995, he was found guilty of apostasy by the Cairo Court of Appeals, a verdict upheld by the High Court in 1996. Exiled from his homeland, he took up residence in Holland and became a lecturer in Arabic and Islamic studies at Leiden University. In its decision, the court accused Abu Zayd of turning the Qur'an into a cultural product, thereby denying its pre-existence in the Preserved Tablet and calling for emancipation from its authority as a religious text.⁴⁶ Abu Zayd, responding to the prosecutor, said:

Never do I want to give the impression that I am against Islam. Far from it. Nor do I want to give the impression that I am a new Salman Rushdie. I am not. One of my worst fears is that Westerners will consider me only as a critic of Islam. That is not the whole picture at all. I am a teacher, a scholar, an intellectual and a

researcher. I see my role as a producer of concepts ... I identify myself as a Muslim. I was born a Muslim. I was raised a Muslim, and I live as a Muslim. God willing I will die a Muslim.⁴⁷

Abu Zayd's aspiration to be viewed as a scholar and not just a critic of Islamic tradition was never fully achieved, since he continued to be identified as one of the "ringleaders" of the deconstruction of classical Islam.

A review of the work of Abu Zayd, Shahrur, and others reveals a dynamic picture of the formative period of Islam in the Arabian Peninsula and the role of the sacred in the modern Muslim context. As Abdelmajid Charfi observed:

Muhammad's preaching concerns what was good and evil at the moment of Revelation. The orientations provided are the basic elements from which Muslims will deduce the criteria of good and sound morals and conduct. This does not imply a slavishly literal observation of the text, but rather a search for its essence and purpose. God alone will be worshipped, and each individual's conscience will be the first and final arbitrator in determining their response to God's initiative.⁴⁸

In Charfi's view, Muhammad's designation as the Seal of Prophecy was intended neither to freeze humanity at some specific stage of development, nor to force humankind to accept God's commandments. On the contrary, human beings were granted a wide array of choices and carried full responsibility for the rituals they performed and the way they conducted their lives; human beings were free, with only their conscience to oversee and guide them. People hence no longer required a "seal" of approval from the outside, since they did not need anyone to direct them or take charge of their every move. In Charfi's view, the individual, whether man or woman, was no longer a prisoner, but able to roam the vast land of God.⁴⁹

Over time, Charfi continued, commentaries were added to the lofty message of the Prophet, shifting away from the original meaning, the upshot of sociohistorical circumstances and sectarian interests. Believers, he said, took into

account the opinions of the clerics instead of the words of God, thus forgetting the flexibility that distinguished the Prophet Muhammad. The jurists created strict laws regarding acts that the Prophet had treated with leniency. For example, the Prophet beat people who drank alcohol gently (with the sleeve of his garment or a shoe) in order to educate them, while judicial authorities ruled that drinking alcohol was a crime that called for severe punishment. In short, the Prophet showed leniency and flexibility, while the 'ulama' demonstrated rigidity.⁵⁰

Muhammad Shahrur's criticism was harsher. He rejected the obligatory nature of hadith literature, which, in his opinion, became a source of legislation equal to the Qur'an, and in many cases even revoked the latter's validity. The industry of hadiths and sira literature (i.e. biographies of the Prophet), argued Shahrur, became the tool of religious scholars, distorting Islam and the image of the Prophet. They sanctified Muhammad's message and his rules for governing society as a model that Muslims should adhere to at all times, while in fact it was a historical phenomenon in which the Prophet exercised *ijtihad* (legal reasoning), but which was relevant only for his time. In fine, the 'ulama' thus decreed that the Muslim nation would remain on the margins of history, suffering from enduring backwardness and the inability to achieve a rapprochement with other cultures.⁵¹

As an example, Shahrur cited the Prophet's instruction that a woman who takes a three-day trip must be accompanied by a male family member. The purpose of the hadith was to ensure that women were protected and that there would be someone who would help them to cope with travel difficulties. Today, a woman who travels by plane, train, or boat does not need protection or assistance. Moreover, Shahrur ruled that only hadiths that are consistent with the Qur'an are authentic. As an example, Shahrur mentioned three hadiths regarding tyrants: 1) the Prophet said that the lord of martyrs is Hamza b. 'Abd al-Muttalib, as well as any person who defies a tyrant, and is then executed by him; 2) the Prophet said that the best jihad is to speak justice to a tyrant; and 3) the tyrant must be obeyed even if he crushes a man's back and robs his property. The third hadith, Shahrur noted, contradicts the first two, for it preaches blind obedience while the first two preach defiance. The content of the first and second hadith is consistent with the Qur'an, which advocates that the best jihad for God is jihad for people's freedom of choice.⁵²

In the face of religious dogmatism and political suppression, Shahrur lamented,

Muslims had become childlike, unable to function on their own, and in constant need of mentors who see themselves as imbued with divine inspiration.⁵³ Yet leaving it up to the believer to decide whether or not to obey God's commands was a firm statement of support for the autonomy of the individual, as well as about the rightful place of faith in the private space. "Freedom is the only form by which one's faith in God is realized ... and not rituals such as prayer and fasting," Shahrur affirmed.⁵⁴ Freedom of belief was positioned by Shahrur as a prime parameter of society's advancement and humanism.⁵⁵

The renunciation of the obligatory character of the hadith and the Sunna or of the fiqh (judicial literature), on the grounds that it was a human creation that was stained with personal interests and a lust for power, meant redefining the sources of authority in Islam, which was mainly based on the Qur'an. The Qur'an was depicted as the ultimate moral authority.⁵⁶ However, Arab liberals did not stop there. They also sought to deconstruct the script itself. In this regard, they employed two main arguments in their approach to the Qur'an: contextualization and rationalization.

The contextualization of the Qur'an

The contextual approach presented the Qur'an as a historical document that was shaped in the context of pre-Islamic Arab culture, which had been in close touch with Judaism, Christianity, and early Eastern beliefs. Some examples, cited by liberals, of the Qur'anic dialogue between the Prophet and non-Muslim cultures are the consultation of Muhammad and his wife Khadija with a Christian Arab priest; the first migration of persecuted Muslims to Christian Ethiopia, whose emperor protected them; repeated references to Jesus and his gospel; and the treaty with the Jewish tribes of Medina, which attested to the large measure of equality enjoyed by all individuals, regardless of their religion.⁵⁷

The Qur'an's evolution was thus quite eclectic. Islam engaged in a most fruitful dialogue with neighboring cultures, which would, however, be blotted out by the dissension and polemics that developed later on. This led Arab liberals to an important insight that was as relevant to the modern age as to the distant past: the world, for better or for worse, was a village where closed cultures could not

thrive. Cultures had to negotiate, to engage in give-and-take, to borrow, and to influence others. Moreover, various trends in the Muslim world itself evoked litigation regarding the significance of the Qur'an as early as the eighth century, so that Muslims anywhere could play an active role in shaping life in the world in which they lived. Liberals concluded that there was no basis for the obsessive efforts of traditional 'ulama' and modern Islamists to create such a wide disparity and dichotomy between the Qur'an and pre-Islamic and monotheistic cultures. Nor was there any basis for the claim that the Qur'an was transmitted orally to the Prophet in its entirety, and was later written down during his lifetime or shortly thereafter.⁵⁸ Using these arguments, Arab liberals sought to create historical depth and legitimacy for the cumulative nature of the Qur'an. In their mind, contextual commentary was intended to dwarf the literalism that was based on the written word, whether in its hard or soft version, and to expand the active space of contemporary Muslims.⁵⁹

The historicization of the Qur'an by liberal writers focused on key issues that shaped the image of Islam in modern times. One example was the Islamic prohibition on usury, which was meant to prevent the exploitation of the poor by wealthy merchants lending them money at exorbitant rates of interest. In fact, opposition to loans was in keeping with the Qur'an, which urged Muslims to give charity and care for orphans and the needy. Those who acted accordingly were assured that they would be duly rewarded by God. To back the claim of empathy in the Qur'an toward the exploited and the weak, Abu Zayd held up the early biography of the Prophet, who as a poor young orphan was forced to go out to work. Muslim jurists, however, ignored the context of the prohibition and turned it into a sweeping ban that made no distinction between types of loans, and ended up hampering the introduction of modern banking.⁶⁰

An even more sensitive topic was the status of women in Islam. Liberal writers argued that God established in the Qur'an that man is both male and female. As far as God is concerned, the only difference between people is their fear of God. Besides, there is absolute equality between all humans, men and women. The common feature of both sexes, humanity, is the basis for the eternal equality between them. The difference in biological function does not confer an advantage on either of the two sexes over the other.⁶¹

Equipped with such a rationale, liberal writers entered into in-depth discussions of specific issues, mainly polygamy and male supremacy. The main method used was the historicization of the sacred text. They emphasized that the practice of

polygamy began long before the birth of Islam and was not exclusive to Muslims. While these intellectuals admitted that the Qur'an sanctioned polygamy, they explained that it was for a justified purpose: to take care of those who had lost fathers in the battle of Uhud in 625. When more than seventy Muslim warriors were killed in the fighting, many women and girls were left without guardianship. The historical context, combined with textual analysis, showed that the verse referred to marrying widows or orphan girls to ensure their welfare in a society where orphans and widows did not have inheritance rights.

Abu Zayd referred his readers to Sura 4:3, which reads as follows: "If you fear that you will not deal fairly with orphan girls, you may marry whichever [other] women seem good to you, two, three, or four. If you fear that you will not be equitable [to them], then marry only one, or your slave(s)." In Abu Zayd's interpretation, the goal was to bring justice and equity, and in this case the way to achieve it was polygamy. Polygamy, which stemmed from a pre-Islamic practice, was deemed permissible for a worthy cause. In the seventh century, the Arabs of the Arabian Peninsula persecuted orphans and deprived them of their rights, as stealing their inheritance and turning them into slaves was a common and profitable business. The Qur'an introduced an entirely different behavioral system, through the introduction of polygamous marriage. Here was a concrete answer to a pressing problem in the seventh century—discrimination against orphans. Although it was a known practice, not a Qur'anic law, it did offer a way out. In fact, the primary issues here were justice and the inheritance rights of women. The Qur'an states that "Concerning your children, God commends you that a son should have the equivalent share of two daughters" (Sura 4:11). From this one may infer that the Qur'an limited the man's share of an inheritance, as compared to the state of affairs before Islam when a woman could not inherit at all. So even if there was no absolute justice here, it was a step in the right direction, considering that society was patriarchal and viewed the world through a male-centered prism.⁶²

In fact, Abu Zayd displayed intellectual honesty. Without actually saying that the Qur'an opposed polygamy, he stressed that it was not encouraged. Citing the verse "You will never be able to treat your wives with equal fairness, however much you may desire to do so" (Sura 4:129), Abu Zayd, like earlier modernist jurists such as Muhammad 'Abduh, found the required loophole to set limits on the practice, which was seen as degrading to women and emotionally hurtful to their children.⁶³

He further addressed the concept of male supremacy, based on an analysis of the term *qawwamun* (Sura 4:34). In some English texts the word is translated as “protectors.” For Muslims the connotation is “one of superiority,” in the sense that men are financially responsible for maintaining their families. Abu Zayd’s starting point is that the word of God systematically emphasizes the equality between women and men. There was no difference between the sexes in performing religious duties, in punishment for sins, or in reaping the rewards of the next world. If equality existed on the spiritual level, why would God sanction social inequality? In his view, the Qur’an was referring to male superiority in the sense of man being the breadwinner and source of financial support—without belittling the intrinsic worth of women. In a patriarchal society—a well-established social system at the time when the Qur’an came into existence—men, as providers, had more power than women. Superiority meant responsibility, but Abu Zayd did not deny that with responsibility came power and authority. In modern times, with changing social structures and the growing number of educated women working in the public sphere, women, too, could be considered *qawwamun*. In cases where the woman was the primary source of income in the family, she did indeed assume a position of superiority. Through textual analysis, Abu Zayd showed that the Qur’an considered some people superior, and that this could apply to both women and men.⁶⁴

Abu Zayd thus sought to purge Islam of its negative attitude toward women, not through polemics or apologetics, but by historicizing the holy text. Historicization was also a key in Abdelmajid Charfi’s thinking. He urged readers to remember that some of the laws in the Qur’an were remnants from the days of the Prophet and harked back to the needs of Hijaz’s primitive society. The intent of the commandments and of some interpretations of the Qur’an had to be examined in this light. One example was the prohibition on pictures and statues, which was adopted in response to the pagan civilization in the Arabian Peninsula, but was no longer meaningful in the age of photography.⁶⁵

Through historicization, Abu Zayd and Charfi presented the Qur’an as a dynamic text and a cultural product with a dual nature, partly divine and partly human. Though it established a dialogue between God and humankind, the human component was open to change and permitted exegeses that took into account circumstances of time and place. Such an approach also helped answer the troubling question of how to be a “good Muslim” in a changing world.⁶⁶

The rationalization of the Qur'an

In addition to downplaying the divinity of the Qur'an and anchoring it in a historical context, Arab liberals adopted another strategy: the rationalization of the Qur'an. They de-emphasized divine intervention and accentuated the human factor. The Prophet was portrayed not as a passive receiver and transmitter of revelation, but as someone who intervened, translated, and transformed the divine message into a textual product over the course of twenty years—as did Muhammad's companions (sahaba) and other members of the community, who commented on certain parts of the revelation or called for the record to be corrected. In this way, they inserted a human element into the Qur'an, muting its divine language and bringing it closer to that of humans.

If the revelation was no longer delivered by an angel—and, at the end of the day, it was a human being, Muhammad, who reported the words of God—the Qur'an could become a space for the combination of divine and human communication.⁶⁷ Liberal writers found backing for this approach in two legal mechanisms of Qur'anic exegesis: the causes or circumstances in which Qur'anic passages were revealed (asbab al-nuzul) and abrogation of early Qur'anic verses in favor of later ones (al-nasikh wa'l-mansukh).⁶⁸ Both mechanisms were viewed as valuable for the historicization of the Qur'an because they emphasized the interaction between Islamic revelation and its adherents, and dwelled on historical events and incidents that molded the Qur'anic text.⁶⁹ Nevertheless, liberal writers were cautious when citing the principle of abrogation as testimony of the evolution of the Qur'an because it often conflicted with the liberal agenda, excluding some of the Qur'an's more humanistic early verses. Thus, for example, Abu Zayd argued that abrogation obscured the evolutionary nature of the revelation in that it designated the later message as final and binding. As an example, he quoted the following verse:

When the [four] forbidden months are over, wherever you encounter the idolaters, kill them, seize them, besiege them, wait for them at every lookout post; but if they turn [to God], maintain the prayer, and pay the prescribed alms, let them go on their way, for God is most forgiving and merciful (Sura 9:5).

This violent passage, Abu Zayd argued, replaced over one hundred verses that preceded it and were more ecumenical and conciliatory in nature toward non-believers. Another example was intermarriage. While Sura 5:5 permitted Muslims to marry non-Muslim women, thereby promoting individual liberty and social justice, Sura 2:221 forbade this practice, thus restricting the freedom of the individual and imposing significant cultural barriers. Based on the idea of abrogation, hostility and segregation became universal values in Islamic discourse, instead of brotherhood.⁷⁰

In the context of efforts to humanize the Qur'an, 'Umar b. al-Khattab, the second Caliph (634–44), also known by the epithet al-Faruq (i.e. the one who distinguishes true faith from infidelity and unbelief), was of particular note.⁷¹ The revelation adopted many of 'Umar's views, such as his position on the status of prisoners, the prohibition on reciting the funeral prayer for hypocrites (munafiqun), the ban on drinking wine, and so forth.⁷² 'Umar, "the jewel of the Rashidun" (rightly guided caliphs, 632–61) as one liberal writer called him,⁷³ was a leading figure in the Muslim world, revered for his wisdom, military prowess, and statesmanship. To Arab liberals, both formative and contemporary, he embodied the image of the ideal leader, responsive to the spirit of the times.⁷⁴

In view of this interactive nature of the Qur'an, Abu Zayd concluded that it should be approached as a discourse (khitab) rather than a rigid text (nass). Treating the Qur'an as a discourse preserved it as a living phenomenon, whereas viewing it as a text diminished it and sanctified its literal meaning, turning it into an authoritative commentary that claimed monopoly over absolute truth. A striking example was the slogan "no decision but God's" (la hukma illa li-Llah), which was brandished during the Battle of Siffin (657), a campaign waged by Mu'awiya, the governor of Syria, against the fourth Caliph, 'Ali. Dissidents in 'Ali's camp, the Kharijites, opposed a compromise worked out by flesh-and-blood arbitrators on the grounds that "judgment belongs to God alone." Islamic political movements in modern times have adopted the same line.

As long as the Qur'an was seen as a text, argued Abu Zayd, manipulation would continue so that the possibility that other interpretations could account for changing circumstances would be blocked. He believed that the time had come for a total recontextualization of the Qur'an. It was not enough to reinterpret a handful of verses or engage in apologetics, as the early modernists and liberals

did in an effort to combat literalism and fanaticism. New thinking about the Qur'an as an exchange of ideas would free religious thinking from political manipulation and enhance its relevance to modern life. It would teach Muslims that the consolidation of the Qur'an was the result of dialogue and debate, negotiation and disputation, not only of non-Muslim norms and practices, but also of earlier attitudes and suppositions in Islam.⁷⁵

Abu Zayd offered two examples of the Qur'an as a conversation: Islamic punishments (hudud) and slavery. A glance at the hudud (for example stoning to punish adultery, amputation of the hand for theft, the death penalty for renouncing Islam) reveals practices that preceded the Qur'an or were instituted after the revelation. The Qur'an did not create them: it adopted pre-Islamic norms to gain the loyalty of the local population in the Arabian Peninsula. While punishment for a crime was a Qur'anic principle, the form of punishment, derived from a non-Qur'anic source, was not Qur'anic and therefore not binding. According to Abu Zayd, it was the right—and even the duty—of contemporary society to seek penalties that were more humane. This was not a violation of the word of God. By the same token, slavery was based on a socioeconomic system that was mentioned in the Qur'an, but it reflected a historic reality outside the Muslim world, so that Muslims were not bound by it. Moreover, slavery was now no longer tolerated in most parts of the world.⁷⁶

Abu Zayd's views were backed by Mohamed Talbi, his Tunisian colleague. In Talbi's view, examination of religion by historic parameters was not a criticism of faith. On the contrary, it empowered faith and ensured its vitality. He felt the same about the Qur'an. The problematic status of women in Islam, which was frequently mentioned in the Qur'an, was rooted in history: during the lifetime of the Prophet, and even before that, feminist and antifeminist forces were raging throughout the Arab world. The Prophet sought to prevent chaos in the Muslim home by choosing the lesser of two evils, that is, by lowering the status of women. In context, it became clear that the antifeminist content in the Qur'an reflected a specific historical reality. It was not part of the revelation. Therefore there was no reason not to replace it with a more positive approach.⁷⁷

Fatima Mernissi of Morocco was another believer in historical contextualization. She maintained that freedom of the individual, man or woman, was at the heart of Islamic humanism, but had been severely restricted by the sword, political tyranny, or the force of Muslim law. She painted the patriarchal laws of Islam in dark colors, especially under the Abassids, who viewed women as unbridled

sexual beings who distract men and keep them from fulfilling their religious and social duties. This led to an obsession with safeguarding male superiority—for society's sake. Strategies for maintaining control were polygamy; repudiation (unilateral divorce in which a man could end his marriage at any time without having to justify his decision); and separation of the sexes, symbolized by the obligatory headwear for women. These practices became tools of intimidation and degradation that marginalized women and limited their freedom.⁷⁸ Mernissi's Syrian-born, American psychiatrist Wafa' Sultan likened the confinement of women in Islam to "a prison narrower than the eye of a needle."⁷⁹

Charfi, Mernissi, and Sultan acknowledged that women in the West also suffered from inequality, but argued that there was no rigorous system of oversight driven by the idea that women were an intrinsic threat to society. While Western women had control over their own bodies, and pregnancy was a personal choice, the Muslim woman was held captive. This legal and social reality challenged the image of the Qur'an as ethical and egalitarian.⁸⁰

Charfi, adopting a comparative religious approach, noted that the Qur'an made no mention of the stories in the Book of Genesis about woman's creation from the rib of man, or her responsibility for man's first sin, resulting in their expulsion from the Garden of Eden—a narrative that laid the foundation for the perceived inferiority of women in Judaism. According to the Qur'an, God created Eve from the soul of Adam, and it was not she who tempted Adam, but Satan. God eventually forgave them for their sin. Yet instead of adopting the Qur'anic narrative and becoming the first to recognize the equality of men and women, the early Muslims relied on Isra'iliyyat (traditions from various early Hebrew sources that were incorporated into Islam). They thereby erased the essential differences between Islam, as envisaged by Muhammad, and other religions in the region, turning Islam into a synonym for misogyny.⁸¹

The Egyptian writer Tariq Hijji was no less critical. He maintained that the culture of male dominance in Arab society, which discriminated against women and kept them down, reflected a lack of self-confidence and a pathological fear of women. Bayt al-ta'a was a judicial, courtsanctioned procedure that enabled a man to forcibly confine his wife to the house. Hijji condemned it as a backward practice derived from the Bedouin culture of the Arabian Peninsula, in which women were seen solely as vehicles for pleasure and procreation. Islam, by contrast, emphasized the humanity of women and the fact that neither sex was

superior to the other. Hijji cited the partnership of the Prophet and his wife Khadija, who was an independent businesswoman, and the fact that Muhammad did not take another wife until after she died.⁸²

While viewing the Qur'an as a dialogue points to its vitality and stimulates thought and commentary, liberal writers maintained that viewing it as a historical document narrowed down its relevance for everyday Muslim life.⁸³ From a historical perspective, the problem of what constituted the true Qur'an arose during the era of the third Caliph, 'Uthman (ruled 644–56), who canonized it and turned it into a binding text (mushaf). This launched the transition from the oral reading of the Qur'an to a written text, which lost its freshness and vitality and, for political reasons, its tolerance of a wide range of opinions. Whereas the Qur'an can be seen as a living phenomenon, the recited discourse, the mushaf, can be viewed as a "closed corpus" or scripture.⁸⁴ Furthermore, the fact that the Qur'an was in Arabic made it Arab, and its consolidation under 'Uthman, who belonged to the Quraysh tribe, which was also the tribe of Muhammad, added a sectoral dimension to the text.⁸⁵

Instead of reading the Qur'an literally, which would have enhanced it as a purveyor of factual information, Arab liberals now sought to place it within a cultural context that, like the fields of economics, social events, and politics, was susceptible to change. Some played down the holiness of the text by distinguishing between the prophecy and the message. Prophecy was objective and confined to only a few religious beliefs, above all faith in God and the belief that all people were destined to die and be resurrected. The message was subjective and addressed moral and social issues. It entailed the ability to discern between right and wrong, as well as awareness of the changing nature of politics and economics. Prophecy was eternal and reflected the will of God, while the message itself was evolving and reliant on human input. The Prophet himself was a mortal being who lived in a certain era and society. The ethical principles, laws, and rituals he handed down were thus more of a general framework. The believer could hence select those that were suitable for his time, without, however, deviating from the divine message. Murderers needed to be punished, for example, but they could be sentenced to life imprisonment rather than death. The principle of the shura, which in the era of the Prophet meant consultation with his companions, could come to signify pluralism and democracy in modern times, and a parliament viewed as a replacement for clerics and religious institutions.

Muhammad Shahrur saw shura as a key component of Islam, on a par with prayer, and tried to build up a consensus for its centrality in Arab political thought. He also accentuated the principle of justice (‘adl), which he claimed was deeply ingrained in Islam and reflected its humanistic approach. On the other hand, he de-emphasized jihad, which he felt should only be pursued in the event of external aggression or the struggle for freedom (hurriyya). Thus, turning jihad against a Muslim community was unjust since its members, too, accepted the moral imperatives of God. It was also immoral in the case of non-Muslims because Islam could be recognized in Jewish or Christian belief in God, the world to come, and good deeds. War waged to force others to convert was forbidden by the Qur’an, which recognized that the bulk of humanity would not follow the Prophet Muhammad.⁸⁶

The prophecy and the message—the objective and the subjective—were both part of al-tanzil, the original revelation, wrote Shahrur, but the boundaries between them had been blurred by commentary over the centuries, and fundamentalists continued to glorify the entire text as binding and holy. Thus it became a dogma that people had to accept and apply literally. “They [fundamentalists] did not differentiate between the distinctive parts of al-tanzil. They concentrated on the beauty of the language, but ignored the brilliance of the divine logic.”⁸⁷

Islam: a voluntary creed

Arab liberals did not seek to introduce a new Islamic exegesis (tafsir), but to deconstruct tanzil in such a way that it was freed from all historical additions tacked on arbitrarily by Islamic rulers and sultans. Through purification and restoration of the authentic message of Islam, much of the distress and psychological pressure created by the tension between modernity and religious law would be alleviated.⁸⁸ This deconstruction would also clarify that belief in the Prophet did not cancel or invalidate human beings’ free will, so that people could lead their lives as they saw fit. Shahrur, Talbi, Mernissi, Abu Zayd, and Charfi sought to convey that religious faith was a gift bestowed on humankind. It could be accepted or rejected, and people should be able to do so without fear of social ostracism or judicial sanctions.⁸⁹ This viewpoint reflected that of the

Murji'ites, who saw every Muslim as a believer and held that the judgment of a person was in the hands of God alone, whose verdict would be delivered in the next world. Murji'ite theology remained controversial throughout Muslim history, but continued to emerge in debates over the significance of faith and true belief, gaining popularity in modern times.⁹⁰

In essence, the stance of Arab liberals on freedom of the individual extended to the Five Pillars of Islam (arkan al-Islam), that is, declaration of faith, prayer, charity, fasting, and pilgrimage, but without saying so explicitly. Charfi was the only one who addressed the topic directly, stretching the boundaries of liberal discourse even further. The importance and ramifications of this issue merit further discussion.

Charfi's starting point was that the basic commandments in the Qur'an were more flexible and lenient than the religious code compiled by Islamic jurists in later generations, whose rulings Muslim believers were reluctant to dispute or question. There is no mention in the Qur'an, for example, of how many times a day one must pray, and how these prayers should be conducted. Nothing is said about ablutions (wudu'); the recital of the Fatiha; kneeling and prostration; the number of raka'at; or the differences between individual and collective prayers, such as the Friday prayers in the presence of a prayer leader (imam).

Charfi emphasized that the Prophet prayed in a certain way, and that Muslims of his own generation imitated him. However, this did not mean that Muslims everywhere should follow this specific model of worship forever. Aware of the gravity of such a statement, Charfi was quick to add that he was not questioning the divine injunction to pray, nor was he disavowing the dictum regarding prayer five times a day, on Fridays, and during the Ramadan fast. However, prayer served two types of people: those with unswerving faith, and those whose circumstances made it possible for them to dedicate themselves to prayer. In contrast, other people did not feel connected to prayer, or had difficulty aligning modern living with a religious way of life. Did they not have the right to be true to themselves and practice their faith without being forced to do exactly what their forebears did? Charfi brought a similar argument with regard to the alms tax: the Qur'an did not state a precise sum, nor did it explain how the tax should be paid, or what end it should serve. The principle remained valid—the importance of showing solidarity with the poor—but the specifics of the charitable act were tailored to the days of the Prophet. Modern social-action organizations could acquire more assets and had better ways of collecting and

distributing charity. They treated the needy with respect and could provide them with services to which they had not been entitled in ancient times, such as basic rights in the fields of education, housing, or medical care.⁹¹

Charfi continued to challenge Islamic norms on fasting and pilgrimage. In his view, the Qur'an encouraged Muslims to fast on various occasions (Sura 2:184–185), but left the door open to the possibility of giving charity instead. This was an acceptable practice during the time of the Prophet, but was abandoned after his death. In modern times, many ignorant people did one of two things: they pretended to fast in order to appear religious, or they sought an exemption on some grounds. In addition, certain rituals in the pilgrimage commandments were a throwback to cultic practices from the pre-Islamic period, such as stoning effigies of Satan (rajm) or sacrificial offerings (hady). Perhaps these were social conventions or symbolic ways of venting violence, but why should a Muslim who felt repugnance toward such rituals and found them meaningless be forced to perform them? Shouldn't he have the right to say so and refrain from participating?⁹²

It was the right of the believer to freely express his feelings on such matters, in keeping with the spirit of the times, declared Charfi, invoking the hallowed principle of individual autonomy. To back up this position, he cited al-Ghazali (d. 1111), who coined the expression “consult your heart” (istafti qalbak). Charfi urged Muslims to adopt this position in order to bridge the gap between religion and life and stop the blind imitation of past rulings that have no judicial evidence.⁹³

Again, aware of the sensitivity of his comments, Charfi made it clear that it was not his intention to be provocative or to hurt anyone's feelings. Whoever was convinced of the value of prayer or the rituals of the pilgrimage established by the early jurists, he said, should continue to carry them out. However, those who were not convinced, or found it hard to reconcile these religious ideals with their daily lives, and whose numbers were growing, were entitled to follow their hearts and express themselves without fear of being ostracized or harmed. Yet this right was not self-evident. It could only be exercised in a climate of freedom, of which freedom of religion was part.⁹⁴

By acknowledging the rationale of the religious imperatives and struggling with their observance, yet leaving the final decision up to the believer, Islam became a voluntary religion and a matter of conscience. In this way, Charfi took the

individualization of faith to a new level.⁹⁵ To some degree, his defiance was colored by the intellectual impact of Tunisian liberalism, with its geographical and cultural connection to the West and its embrace of modernization and secularization, especially under the rule of Habib Bourguiba. Bourguiba went so far as to propose abolishing the Ramadan fast, claiming that it harmed national productivity. Charfi did not support such a move, which he said would be impossible to implement, but he did regard fasting as voluntary, along with the other pillars of Islamic faith.⁹⁶

Religious freedom was the cornerstone of Arab liberal discourse. It was seen as a core element of the humanism enshrined in the Qur'an, which distinguished human beings from all other living creatures by the spirit breathed into them by God and the mission he placed in their hands as his representatives on earth. When freedom was denied in the name of religion or religious commandments, humankind lost everything that was good—imagination, creativity, conscience, and the courage to stand up against despotism. Liberal writers thus reached two conclusions: 1) that people of all religions, whether monotheistic or not, were equal and deserving of respect; and 2) that human rights and religious freedom were part and parcel of the Qur'an, which clearly states: "There is no compulsion in religion" (Sura 2:256). The task of the Prophet was limited to guidance. It was this absence of coercion that set the Qur'an apart from the holy writings of Judaism and Christianity, and testified to the virtue of the Islamic message. Commentaries by a handful of theologians led to a deviation in the spirit of the Qur'an, alleged Charfi and Talbi, citing a military jihad and institutionalized slavery (*'ubudiyya*), conducted for the sake of land and resources, the humiliating treatment of non-Muslim populations (*dhimmi*) during the Middle Ages, and the persecution of those accused of apostasy (*ridda*). The Qur'an, Charfi stated, said nothing about the death penalty for apostates (*murtadd*, pl. *murtaddun*) since their punishment would come in the next world. Sentencing a *murtadd* to death relied on a weak hadith, "whoever changes his religion—kill him," which was probably forged, as did Abu Bakr's military campaigns against the apostates (632–34). Another form of punishment Charfi sought to nullify in line with the rationale of the Prophet's humanistic message was the corporal punishment of murderers and thieves (decapitation and amputation of the hand, respectively), which he argued had no place in modern times and could both be substituted by imprisonment.⁹⁷

Speaking in the name of religious freedom and interfaith dialogue, Arab liberals asserted that every enlightened Muslim who defended religious liberty and

rejected the concept of apostasy was critical for reinforcing liberal thinking and staving off accusations of blasphemy and treason.⁹⁸ Abu Zayd condemned the “tribal code of discourse” in the Arab world, which was intolerant of other opinions and quick to whip out accusations of apostasy, as in the case of Abu Zayd himself.⁹⁹

Unlike liberal writers, Islamist thinkers did not see individualism as a supreme value. They rejected the concept of “negative liberty,” to use Isaiah Berlin’s phrasing, which stipulated that individual liberty was the ultimate goal of human life and that none should be deprived of it. This negative sense of liberty was defamed as nurturing egoism, bolstering devotion to materialism, and casting off moral commitment to God and society. In contrast, Islamist writers leaned more toward “positive liberty,” defined by Berlin as the wish of the individual to be his own master, moved by reason and a conscious purpose. While accepting the individual’s freedom of choice, they argued that it does not mean social chaos and should not violate God’s explicit commandments.¹⁰⁰ Thus, individual creativity and action were encouraged by Islamist thinkers of both Sunna and Shi’a schools, but they were essentially geared toward achieving collective goals and advocating social solidarity. As the Egyptian writer Muhammad ‘Imara put it, “Man is the master in the universe, and God is the master of the universe. Man’s primary role is to carry out God’s commandments and keep mankind on the right road.”¹⁰¹

Liberal writers had reservations about negative, egoistic freedom, but were more wary of absolute devotion to the metaphysical goals of “repairing the world” and preparing for eternal life. In this respect, they were guided by the Protestant work ethic, which revoked the Catholic Church’s promise of salvation to individuals who submit to clerical authority, and dignified even the most mundane professions as adding to the common good and thus being blessed by God. Accordingly, worldly success was perceived as a religious aim, proving that the individual had made good use of God-given resources and signaled that he or she had found eternal salvation.¹⁰²

For Shahrur, Talbi, Mernissi, Abu Zayd, and other liberal thinkers, the key to resolving Muslim predicaments in modern times was human reason, the forced rejection of which was the main cause for the rigidity that dominated Islamic discourse. Rational thought must be brought to the forefront again, in order to bring about a better understanding of the various meanings of the Qur’an (ma‘ani al-Qur’an).¹⁰³

Another tool, used mainly by Abu Zayd, was allegorical interpretation (ta'wil), namely a metaphorical understanding of a text, rather than a literal one. According to Abu Zayd, this kind of commentary was not alien to early Muslim exegesis and commentaries, most prominently that of Muhammad b. Jarir al-Tabari (d. 923), who adopted it without any reservations, thus clarifying the obscure language of many parts of the Qur'an. Ta'wil acquired a negative image in Sunni thought only in the wake of an early Shi'i exegesis, which sought to discover in the Qur'an (mainly by esoteric interpretations) expressions that referred to the supernatural powers of the Shi'i imams, the believer's loyalty to them (walaya), and their being immune from sin and error ('isma).¹⁰⁴

The Mu'tazila movement, which emerged during the Umayyad Caliphate in the eighth century and reached a peak during the Abbasid Dynasty in the ninth century, was cited by Abu Zayd as a source of inspiration. Influenced by Greek and Hellenistic philosophy, the Mu'tazilites upheld the rationalism of God's ways, used metaphors to explain the anthropomorphic descriptions of God in the Qur'an (for instance, God's hand, God's laughter, or God's sitting on the heavenly throne), and devoted much thought to understanding the physical world. They sought to base Islam on reason ('aql) and emphasized the principle of free choice. Above all, they argued that the Qur'an was created, rather than eternal, and that God's injunctions were accessible to reason. The movement was only active for two decades, before being suppressed by methods similar to those used during the Inquisition in Christian Europe.¹⁰⁵ However, according to Abu Zayd, its doctrines "remained alive and have been carried down through the generations,"¹⁰⁶ much like the Islamic reformism of Muhammad 'Abduh in the mid-nineteenth century. On a psychological level, Abu Zayd and his liberal colleagues viewed the Mu'tazila and the systematic efforts to purge it from the pages of early Islamic history as mirroring their own fragile position as an ideological minority in contemporary Islamic discourse. Mernissi, for her part, lamented the suppression of the rationalist humanistic tradition, which began with the Mu'tazilites and continued well into the postcolonial period after World War II, when despotic politicians banned the philosophy of the Enlightenment as foreign, and maligned intellectuals who studied it as traitors. Still, the humanist tradition endured. "Having an arm amputated is not the same as being born with an arm missing. Studies of amputees show that the amputated member remains present in the person's mind. The more our rational faculty is suppressed, the more obsessed we are by it."¹⁰⁷

In his essay "The Philosophy of Commentary" (Falsafat al-Ta'wil) Abu Zayd

turned to another inspiring figure: Muhyi al-Din Ibn 'Arabi (d. 1240),¹⁰⁸ whose philosophical and mystical approach to the Qur'an was attacked viciously by the Muslim orthodoxy. In Abu Zayd's perception, Ibn 'Arabi constructed an alternate spiritual world in which the mercy of God embraced all of humanity, Muslims and non-Muslims, believers and heretics. As his teachings spread through the Islamic world, Spain, and India, they strengthened the connection between East and West, and the path of moderation. Rather than sanctifying the text and the written word, Ibn 'Arabi sanctified love, universal faith, and peace. This was also the essence of the Qur'an, which conveyed universal divine compassion.¹⁰⁹ In highlighting Ibn 'Arabi's ecumenical approach, Abu Zayd also referred to the famous poem in which he described his heart as a receptacle for all faiths: "It is a pasture for gazelles and a convent for Christian monks, and a temple for idols and the pilgrim's Ka'ba and the tables of the Tora and the book of the Koran. I follow the religion of Love: whatever way Love's camels take, that is my religion and my faith."¹¹⁰ Human wisdom and emotional or mystical experiences were thus bound together in Abu Zayd's writings, which aimed to emphasize the richness and breadth of the Qur'anic text, and thus remove it from the literal reading which he perceived as a distortion of the true face of Islam.

Islamic mysticism played an even greater role in the philosophy of the Sudanese thinker Mahmud Muhammad Taha, but was rejected by other liberal writers who held up intellect as the sole guide to understanding the Qur'an. Ultimately, the incorporation of Mu'tazila and mystic thought in the Qur'anic discourse of Arab liberals was intended to show that the Qur'an was far from being a normative text, sacred to only one uniform community of believers. Over the centuries, it served as a springboard for fierce intellectual and political struggle, as the battle continued into modern times, with the liberals of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries taking the place of the Mu'tazilites of the ninth century.

Ethicizing the Qur'an did not minimize the importance or role of its sacred core, the liberals wrote. On the contrary, it elevated the Qur'an beyond its opportunistic exploitation by groups with utilitarian objectives (wearing the guise of religion), who claimed to be acting in the name of God. Theirs was the cry of Islamist movements that aspired to state power, oppressed women, and persecuted religious minorities.¹¹¹ Religion needed protection from politics and corruption, so as not to be polluted by earthly disputes and power conflicts, wrote Muhammad Sa'id al-'Ashmawi. When religion was mixed with politics, it became an ideology and ceased to be a religion, and its followers became politicians and party members.¹¹²

The Prophet's status: Mahmud Muhammad Taha's unique contribution

The liberals' primary objective was to portray the Qur'an as a historical, humane, and ethical document. Thus, alongside grounding the Qur'an in the specific context of the seventh century, liberal writers extracted from it universal ethical values. In their view, values such as justice, kindness, and mercy were the Qur'an's hallmark and ultimate goal, as it was filled with ethical commandments to do good and shun evil: To protect the poor, usury was forbidden; to provide for orphans and the weak, charity was encouraged. Such values were deeply ingrained in Islam and applied to societies everywhere.¹¹³ Moving from text to context, they showed that the idea of separation of religion and politics had prevailed from the very beginning of Islam and was included in the Prophet's biography. 'Abd al-Rahman al-Kawakibi elaborated on this point already in the late nineteenth century. 'Ali 'Abd al-Raziq and Khalid Muhammad Khalid followed suit in the mid-1920s and the late 1940s, respectively.¹¹⁴

Yet post-1967 liberals, in contrast to al-Kawakibi, 'Abd al-Raziq, and Khalid, were careful not to conclude that the Prophet was solely a spiritual leader, and not a statesman or a military leader. Thus, Husayn Ahmad Amin and Shakir al-Nabulsi argued that studies of the Prophet's activities showed that there was no basis for 'Abd al-Raziq's claim that the Prophet was only a messenger. 'Abd al-Raziq relied on Qur'anic verses from the time of Mecca when solely the option of peaceful preaching, such as "there is no compulsion in religion" (Sura 2:256), was at the Prophet's disposal. With the emigration of the Prophet to Medina and the triumph of the Muslims in the Battle of Badr (624), there was a change in circumstances and new Qur'anic verses were published, advancing a clear governmental and legislative agenda, the main consideration of which was fighting the infidels and consolidating a cohesive nation. Thus, for example:

Those who wage war against God and His Messenger and strive to spread corruption in the land should be punished by death, crucifixion, the amputation of an alternate hand and foot, or banishment from the land: a disgrace for them in this world, and then a terrible punishment in the Hereafter (Sura 5:33).¹¹⁵

This was the Prophet's legacy to the first four caliphs, who did not build a state from scratch but found existing foundations before them. In the same breath, Amin, al-Nabulsi, and others, like Faraj Fuda, stressed that a state is not a pillar of Islam. It was the conquests that required its establishment. The connection between religion and politics is not an organic connection, but a link of conflict. For religion is thought and belief, and the state is politics and interests. Moreover, with the establishment of the Muslim empire there was a *de facto* separation between religion and state, even in early Islam—in a manner consistent with the interests of the state. Thus, for example, during droughts (*'am al-ramada*), the second Caliph, 'Umar b. al-Khattab (634–44), suspended punishment for theft (Sura 5:38) and stopped the giving of alms and gifts to those who had been persuaded to convert to Islam (*al-mu'allafa qulubhum*) (Sura 9:60). In both cases, 'Umar acted contrary to explicit orders in the Qur'an and in accordance with the public interest.¹¹⁶

Indeed, post-1967 liberal accounts did not deny the Prophet's acts as a ruler, which they claimed were beyond the province of historical judgment owing to divine inspiration and since he was the "face of God." However, they argued that this was not the case for the Prophet's era, which should be viewed from a historical perspective, and not as a binding model for the implementation of Islamic law, exempting Muslims today from imitating its norms, such as attire, medical practices, or the use of torture.¹¹⁷

The Egyptian jurist Muhammad Sa'id al-'Ashmawi adopted a more ambivalent approach when he acknowledged in some of his writings that the Prophet had spread the message of Islam by establishing state institutions and practices, while in other writings he pointed out that the Prophet was more of a messenger and arbitrator, guiding people who came to him willingly rather than by force of law.¹¹⁸ The Sudanese writer Mahmud Muhammad Taha, who was already active on the liberal front in the 1950s, went a step further. Sudan was in many respects the outer edge of the Islamic world and Taha represented the geographical periphery of Arab liberal thought. Yet his ideology, especially after his execution in 1985 by the Ja'far al-Numayri regime—under pressure from the Muslim Brotherhood and the 'ulama' establishment on charges of sedition and apostasy (*ridda*)—spread beyond Sudan's borders and trickled down into liberal discourse. It provided further evidence of Arab liberalism as a lively discourse community that crossed geographical and political borders.

Taha was born in 1909 or 1911 in the small Sudanese town of Rufa'a, which at the time was under British rule. He studied engineering at Gordon Memorial College, where he specialized in irrigation. During his studies he read the works of Marx, Lenin, Russell, and Shaw extensively, and was thus exposed to the modern political and social ideas that would later be found in his ideological doctrines. After graduating in 1936, he worked for about a decade in his profession until 1945, when he founded the Republican Brothers (al-Ikhwan al-Jumhuriyyun), a small reformist party that opposed the British colonial authorities and advocated the establishment of a democratic federal government. After Sudan's independence in 1954, the Republican Brothers frequently challenged both the ruling party and the Muslim Brotherhood, which had begun to attract followers. The name of Taha's movement, which was open to both Muslims and Christians, was probably chosen to play up the formidable differences between the two and accentuate the fact that, unlike the Republican Brothers, the Muslim Brotherhood was a party for Muslims only. Taha faced growing religious and political antagonism, which led to a series of arrests, imprisonment, and finally execution in 1985.¹¹⁹

The last straw was a leaflet published in 1984 on Christmas Day in which Taha protested the government's strict interpretation of shari'a law, also in Sudan's Christian south:

It is futile for anyone to claim that a Christian person is not adversely affected by the implementation of shari'a. It is not enough for a citizen today merely to enjoy freedom of worship. He is entitled to the full rights of a citizen in total equality with all other [Muslim] citizens ... The rights of southern citizens are not provided for in shari'a but rather in Islam at the level of fundamental Qur'anic revelation.¹²⁰

Taha's opposition to the implementation of the shari'a and his advocacy of the abolition of the shari'a courts in favor of civic courts was combined with an openly antisectarian approach (ta'ifiyya) and support for national reconciliation (al-musalaha al-wataniyya), underlining his radical ideology.¹²¹ Taha perceived sectarianism as a devastating force that exploited the deeply rooted religious feelings of the masses of Sudanese people. Freeing the people from sectarianism

would increase their creative potential for economic growth and their political maturity. “While sectarianism is based on blind obedience,” he argued, “democracy is based on responsibility and freedom of thought, speech and action.”¹²² Adhering to its inclusive nationalist outlook, the Republican Brothers dedicated one of its manifestos to “all the peoples of the Sudan, on the threshold of a cultural revolution, in anticipation of the rebirth of our nation, and the prosperity of our land.”¹²³

Taha remained unrepentant to the end, even when in January 1985 he was led to the courtyard of a prison in northern Khartoum before a crowd of jeering onlookers. A warder who accompanied him to the gallows reported that Taha strode to his death with his head held high. Judith Miller, then a reporter for *The New York Times*, was present at the execution, and wrote that when he was being blindfolded “his eyes were defiant; his mouth firm. He showed no hint of fear.”¹²⁴ “In death, Taha became something rare in contemporary Islam: a moderate martyr,” George Packer wrote in an article in *The New Yorker*.¹²⁵

In later years, young Sudanese students who had not known Taha personally admired his defiance, seeing him as part of the rejection of religious fanaticism and political despotism in their day. Amir Ahmad Nasr, a liberal blogger who was active in the 2011 Arab Spring, wrote that he found some of Taha’s ideas awkward, yet his message full of humanity, setting him far apart from “the ruthless dictator [President Numayri] and power-hungry Islamists who murdered him.” Nasr called Taha the “Gandhi of Sudan,” if not in appearance then in temperament and conduct. Taha wielded only a pen, yet posed such a threat to Sudanese Islamists that he was executed and buried in a secret location. “What made this thinker so dangerous?” Nasr asked.¹²⁶

The answer to that question can be found in Taha’s writings. Taha introduced a new element into liberal discourse, namely Sufism and the spiritual dimension of Islam. Arab liberals from the late nineteenth century onward were not enamored with Sufi culture. With its emphasis on inner experience, mortification of the body, and worship of holy men, Sufism was viewed as a cult that encouraged ignorance and passivity, stunting the ability of Muslims to promote their well-being in the modern world and ultimately degrading Islam. Taha himself expressed aversion toward the organizational aspect of Sufism as a fraternity (tariqa) typified by obeisance to the shaykh and rigid opposition to change. Yet he adopted some of its notions and values, which he gleaned from Sufi texts—tazkiya or safa’ (self-purification) and ihsan (social altruism)—and turned them

into synonyms for moral virtues: social solidarity, humanism, and compassion for the other, especially women and minorities.¹²⁷ These sociaethical values were prominent in his writings and his search for the true message of Islam, which he pursued with daring and boldness.

Taha's focus was the individual and the optimal way of achieving a reciprocal and harmonious relationship between individuals and the community. His two basic principles were freedom and social equality, with the aim of combining democracy and socialism. The need for this kind of society, he stated, was indeed a global one. Despite his use of Western terms, Taha made it clear that he was not a fan of the West. On the contrary, he criticized Western civilization for its confused values, pointing out that despite its great progress in science and technology, the West was plagued by a low level of human ethics, world wars, and materialism that turned people into slaves to the machine. The great scientific advances, he warned, had put at the disposal of humankind huge deadly forces, which, if unleashed, were capable not only of "wiping out all traces of human civilization, but of exterminating the human race." The predicament of modern humans was a crisis of moral values, Taha argued. If human beings did not conduct themselves in an ethical and wise way, they would lead all humankind to destruction.¹²⁸ The age-old dream of the human caravan, Taha wrote, was not to send astronauts on a journey to outer space. It was to send its individuals, every single one, on a journey of self-realization. It was high time that this dream was thus reinterpreted. It was also the sacred duty of every man and woman to help to intelligently reorient human endeavors toward the culmination of this pilgrimage.¹²⁹

The solution to the moral crisis was to be found in Islam, Taha emphasized, in response to those who accused him of being a traitor and a "fifth columnist" in the heart of the Muslim nation. Elaborating his approach, his followers claimed that Turkish-style secularism was self-defeating. It was an illusion to think that constitutionalism and democratization could be sustained without addressing its Islamic foundation. If secular intellectuals abandoned religion in favor of humanism and democracy, they were playing into the hands of their opponents, the Islamists. Invoking Islam as the highest authority for universal rights and establishing its moral superiority over other, materialistic ideologies, such as capitalism and communism, was not just a matter of belief or conviction, however. It allowed Taha and his movement to "remain in the game" and thus attract public exposure and followers.¹³⁰

Criticizing Western civilization was the first step, and a seemingly necessary one, if Taha was to present an alternative narrative for the era of the Prophet and Islam in general. The second step, which was also essential in light of Taha's in absentia conviction for heresy in 1968,¹³¹ was a declaration of loyalty to Islam and to the Prophet, God's revelation to whom was anchored in the Qur'an, "the last of the revealed Scriptures."¹³² Only by building on these tenets could Taha begin the work of deconstructing Islam and the Qur'an by means of his original and far-reaching commentary. The idea was to consolidate an inclusive religious ideology that crossed all boundaries of faith, gender, and race, liberating humankind from the distress and decadence of modern times and paving the way for freedom, self-fulfillment, and happiness.¹³³ Accordingly, his movement, the Republican Brothers, was renamed the "New Islamic Mission." As part of his cosmopolitan approach, Taha called upon the Arabs to recognize the right of the Jews to a Jewish state and to negotiate peace and normalization with it (see Chapter 4).¹³⁴

In Taha's view, the authority of the Qur'an and hadith was not open to question. It was only their correct understanding that was in dispute. Based on this premise, Taha came up with a new ethical framework for Islam, in which all were equal—men and women, Muslims and non-Muslims. In his writings, he explored Islam on two levels: Islam as part of an evolutionary process; and Islam that focused less on the binding nature of religious law and more on educating people and bringing them to the gates of paradise voluntarily and without coercion. Taha held that Islam constituted a loftier stage of monotheistic development than the two religions that preceded it—Judaism and Christianity. The Islam of Mecca, before the Prophet's migration to Medina in 622, was the source (asl) and the coveted model he sought to renew, while the Islam of Medina was the branch (far') and the warped model that should be abolished.¹³⁵

In Taha's view, the Meccan period (612–22) represented the authentic formative spirit of Islam when it was an ethical creed advocating universal values such as justice, freedom, equality, and peace, and was spread through persuasion and willing acceptance. In joining or not joining Islam, believers exercised the right of freedom that had been given to human beings, thereby validating the Qur'anic principle of "no compulsion in religion" (Sura 2:256) and hence the voluntary, humane character of the Islamic message. According to this approach, the verses in the Meccan Qur'an addressed humankind in general, without discrimination of race, gender, or social class. Slaves and other oppressed groups were welcome to join the community, and the distinction between women and men was

removed.¹³⁶ The status of women in Islam and an eagerness to develop a modern marital code that would reflect a new reality in which women were independent and visible in the public sphere, serving as judges, engineers, physicians, and ministers, came to occupy a central place in Taha's discourse. He argued that the Meccan texts dignified women and lifted them to an equal status with men in all fields, especially in marital law. The Meccan texts redefined marriage on the legal plane as a contract between two equal partners entered of their own free will, with equal rights and duties for both, and dissolved, should the need arise, by mutual agreement.¹³⁷

A humane, idealistic philosophy, argued Taha, was aimed at empowering individuals and guiding them on how to rebuild and remold their character in order to develop a total personality.¹³⁸ This was rejected by Mecca's notables, who feared it might impact negatively on the social and economic order in the city. Over a period of thirteen years, Muhammad and his followers were scorned, ostracized, and persecuted. Some members of the group were tortured and executed when they refused to relinquish their humanistic beliefs. Throughout this trying period, however, the Prophet responded with patience and restraint, adhering to the Qur'anic sayings: "Repel evil with good—We are well aware of what they attribute to Us" (Sura 23:96); "[Prophet], call [people] to the way of your Lord with wisdom and good teaching. Argue with them in the most courteous way, for your Lord knows best who has strayed from His way and who is rightly guided" (Sura 16:125).

In Mecca, Islam was clearly pacifist in nature. It was only when life in that city became intolerable and the Prophet was forced to flee to Medina with his small band of followers that this progressive and enlightened approach was abandoned, Taha observed with sorrow.¹³⁹ The migration to Medina, which marked the start of the Muslim calendar, ushered in a period of heightened influence under the leadership of the Prophet. But the move to Medina (622–32) wrought a great change in Islam: it became a religion of coercion, punishment, and threats, inundated with rules. Al-nasikh wa'l-mansukh—the abrogation of early Qur'anic verses in favor of later ones—was a widely used exegetical device by which Islamic jurists declared that the conciliatory verses of the Meccan period were superseded by the militant verses of the Medina period. The guiding principle for nasikh was found in Sura 16:101: "When we substitute one revelation for another—and God knows best what He reveals—they say 'You are just making it up,' but most of them have no knowledge." In this way, an early verse sanctioning only self-defense was replaced by an order to fight for the

spread of Islam and conversion by the sword. “When the [four] forbidden months are over, wherever you encounter the idolaters, kill them, seize them, besiege them, wait for them at every lookout post; but if they turn [to God], maintain the prayer, and pay the prescribed alms, let them go on their way, for God is most forgiving and merciful” (Sura 9:5). On a social level, the Qur’anic verses from Medina condoned slavery (Sura 47:4); men were declared superior to women (Sura 4:34), allowing a husband to marry up to four wives, with the provision that he should be equally just to each of them (Sura 3:4); and a man’s testimony in court was equivalent to the testimony of two women (Sura 2:282).¹⁴⁰

This development was followed by the formation of governmental, legislative, judicial, and punitive enforcement systems. The Prophet himself, Taha emphasized, brought significant improvements to the harsh living conditions in the Arab society of his time, such as ending the widespread practice of female infanticide, promoting charity as a religious duty, and improving the status of women compared to pre-Islamic times. Moreover, throughout the Prophet’s lifetime, he continued to pray five times a day in keeping with the ritual established in Mecca, practicing a way of life that built character and mental balance. This served him as a source of consolation, as the new Islamic regime, which he headed as the leader of the community, failed to provide the basic freedoms and equal rights before the law that had been envisaged in the Meccan era.¹⁴¹

The sharp division of the Qur’an into Meccan versus Medinan interpretations also meant dividing Islam into two distinct parts: an earlier and a later. The former was exalted, progressive, egalitarian, and relevant to modern life; and those who embraced it via persuasion were Muslims in the true sense of the word. The latter was backward, intolerant, and anachronistic; and those who joined in under compulsion of the sword only reached an initial, imperfect stage of Islam. Thus, Taha went to the extreme of Islamic scholarship of the Qur’an when he asserted that the Meccan and Medinan texts differed, not solely in terms of the time and place of their revelation, but essentially in terms of religious and moral quality.¹⁴²

Taha sought to soften his critical judgment of the Prophet’s role in the shaping of Islam in Medina. He argued that the city was in a state of anarchy when Muhammad arrived and needed a leader to unify the community, guide it, and protect it from external, hostile forces. The laws incorporated in the Medina

verses provided such guidance. First, permission was granted to fight one's oppressors: "Those who have been attacked are permitted to take up arms because they have been wronged—God has the power to help them" (Sura 22:39). Second, self-defense was proclaimed a duty, but subject to rules and restrictions: "Fight in God's cause against those who fight you, but do not overstep the limits" (Sura 2:190). Lastly, as hostility between Mecca and Medina increased, waging all-out war became a religious duty: "Fighting is ordained for you, though you dislike it," and "They ask you [the Prophet] about fighting in the sacred month. Say, 'Fighting in that month is a great offense, but to bar others from God's path, to disbelieve in Him, prevent access to the Sacred Mosque, and expel its people, are still greater offenses in God's eyes, persecution is worse than killing'" (Sura 2:216–217).¹⁴³

The political turmoil in Medina eventually dictated a drift toward aggressive policies that sharply contrasted with the Prophet's leadership style, although he was identified with it as the leader of the community. Taha's efforts to soften judgment regarding the role of the Prophet in shaping the image of Medina Islam was largely doomed given the sharp divide he perceived between the authentic Islam in Mecca and the false one in Medina. Divine revelation and the life of the Prophet have always been anchored in Muslim consciousness as an integral whole. Taha himself was fully aware of the controversial nature of his claim: "This division of Qur'anic texts into Meccan and Medinese is based on the most radical statement in the history of Islamic thought, namely that the Islam revealed in the Qur'an carries not one, but two messages."¹⁴⁴

Taha was not the first to praise the Prophet's humanity and rationality, and hold him up as a model of wisdom and virtue. This was also true of the early liberals, especially in Egypt. Indeed, their agenda was very similar to that of Taha, although the problems had become even more acute in his time. They were anxious to stop the tide of young people streaming toward religious fundamentalism under the banner of the Muslim Brotherhood, and to present Islam as a progressive creed reflected in the figure of the Prophet. However, these early writers differed from Taha in a fundamental way: they treated the life of the Prophet as a continuum, making no distinction between Mecca and Medina, or between ethical, universal Islam and judicial, sectarian Islam, as did Taha.¹⁴⁵

Morally, Taha observed, Medinan Islam was inferior to that of Mecca. It was an offshoot of Islam, albeit without its roots, and created a community of believers

whose lives were based on shari‘a laws that were developed and consolidated by Islamic jurists in subsequent generations. The Medinan verses were acclaimed as the first message of Islam, but Taha saw this as distorted and as blocking out the original message—an authentic and humanistic one, embodied in the Meccan verses that catered for fundamental freedoms and treated men and women as equal before the law and in all matters of life. Yet, according to Taha, the original message was never abolished; it was merely deferred until humankind reached a level of development that could sustain its lofty vision. Taha believed that the world had finally reached this stage in the twentieth century. However, while people around the globe strove to build an enlightened society, conservative Muslims created numerous impediments and deadlocks.¹⁴⁶

Was Islam doomed? Taha’s answer was no. The first message of Islam, he wrote, was a transitional and temporary phase. It was imperative to revive the Meccan Islamic virtues, as only they had the power to create a just society and to provide for the needs of modern humans in their pursuit of genuine freedom.¹⁴⁷ The freedom of the individual was the essence of liberalism in Taha’s eyes.

Individuality is really the central axis about which new understanding of Islam presented by the New Islamic Mission revolves. This fact is what makes this new understanding of Islam relevant to contemporary humanity ... Our present civilization of collectivism and impersonal bigness is giving way to an age of small things—the individual, the-man-in-the-street. Every individual is, authentically, an end in himself. He is not a means to any other end. He—even if he is an imbecile—is a “God” in the making, and must be given the full opportunity to develop as such.¹⁴⁸

Defending the freedom of women was perceived by Taha and the Republican Brothers as an essential component of individual freedom and driven by the duty to stand by the oppressed. When addressing men he assured them that promoting women’s rights was “not against men, but against ignorance, backward and inherited extortion,” and helped women awaken and take on equal responsibility. Love rather than condescension and exploitation, Taha told men, was the key when approaching their wives. As to women, he advised them to understand that beauty was not in the perfection of their bodies, but in the perfection of their

minds and souls.¹⁴⁹ Taha's emancipatory rationale linked the freedom of women with the progress of society. He argued that the affinity of women with the nation and the homeland is like the affinity of the heart for the body. If women are exposed to discrimination then the nation is severely damaged. Correcting the material laws creates both healthy families and a healthy society.¹⁵⁰ Taha dedicated his manifesto "Women Rights" (1977), to

both women and men.

To women the Qur'an says:

Until when will you sit back and not demand your rights

For a free and dignified life,

Even though the gates of the earth and the gates of heaven are already there

Were they opened wide to grant you what you deserve?

Stand up, for your sleep has already been [too] long!

To men the Qur'an says:

Today the ropes of the earth are joining together

With the walls of heaven to build consensus

That woman must be respected and released!

So when will you fulfill your duty

To yourselves, to your wives

And to your children?

Don't you know that the honor of the woman is the honor of the man!¹⁵¹

Taha's radical transformation of women's status in Islam, anchored in numerous writings, was a far-reaching and full-fledged program, positioning him as the ultimate attorney of women's rights in the modern liberal spectrum. Yet it was the less vigorous and more utilitarian legacy of the Egyptian Qasim Amin (d. 1902) which continued to champion women's causes in liberal and feminist circles throughout the Arab world.¹⁵² Taha's own legacy remained largely marginal and obscure. Here again his boldness and sharp pen had a deterrent effect on Arab political culture.

In Taha's view, individual freedom means that a person thinks as they will, says what they think, and does what they say, with the proviso that they not infringe upon the freedom of others. If they do, they should bear the consequences of their actions, lest freedom degenerate into anarchy. Any infringement upon the freedom of others is to be dealt with by constitutional law.¹⁵³ It was thus the duty of Islam to adapt to the modern era, just as Judaism and Christianity had pledged to do. The accessibility of knowledge had turned the world into a global village. People were seeking justice and clarity. They rejected religious obscurity and refused to blindly obey commandments that seemed meaningless. The challenges facing religion in modern times were rational thinking and modern knowledge.¹⁵⁴ People demanded clear answers and scientific explanations. Embracing modernity would allow Islam to become an active intermediary in the human experience, setting limits if and when science and progress harmed humankind. The goal was for people to take control of their lives and be more than a mere cog in society: that is, to serve as social actors, as agents. This could only happen if Islamic legislation was responsive to the authentic spirit of Islam, including the reenactment of the legal mechanism of abrogation. In the seventh century abrogation had negative implications for the Meccan humanist message, but in the twentieth century its effect was beneficial. Taha saw it as a hermeneutical way out of the modern crisis of Islam, which would allow Muslims to reaffirm their faith without having to live by an inhumane interpretation of Islamic law (fiqh)—a far cry from the universal, tolerant doctrines preached in Mecca.¹⁵⁵ In 1967, Taha dedicated his book, *The Second Message of Islam*, "to humanity."¹⁵⁶ By calling for a return to the spiritual and benevolent Islam of Mecca, Taha sought to depoliticize Islam and promote it as a universal creed.

In daring to reject part of the Prophet's biography—namely his time in Medina—Taha went much further than other liberals of his and earlier times. Ignoring the Islam of Medina, from which Muslim civilization had developed over the

centuries, meant disassociating oneself from 1,400 years of religious and judicial tradition. It signified a total transformation of Islam and, according to some, the invention of a utopian Islam.

Taha's execution in January 1985 was a direct consequence of his radical commentary.¹⁵⁷ While his followers crowned him as a renovator (mujadid), his Islamic rivals (mainly the Muslim Brotherhood) accused him of being an apostate (murtadd). More open-minded Sudanese writers and politicians spoke respectfully of Taha, but criticized his radical Islamic reform. Sadiq al-Mahdi, the leader of the Umma Party who served twice as prime minister, considered Taha's arguments to be illegitimate. Comparison between Taha and Sayyid Qutb, he argued, revealed that while the first jumped into the future, the latter jumped into the past. Both went to extremes.¹⁵⁸

The legacy that Taha left behind was a synthesis of Sufism, democracy, and socialism, which, in his view, represented the ideal amalgamation of ethics, freedom, and equality. His affinity with Sufism and spiritualism should not obscure his substantive contribution to liberal Arab discourse: the evolving nature of the Qur'an (tatwir al-Qur'an); the individualization of religious faith; the consolidation of Islam as an ethical system; and a cosmopolitan vision of fellowship among people and openness to the modern world without ignoring its flaws.

Taha belonged to a group of Arab liberals that included Khalid Muhammad Khalid, Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd, Khalil 'Abd al-Karim, Muhammad Sa'id al-'Ashmawi, Sayyid al-Qimni, and Muhammad Shahrur—all of whom produced original Islamic scholarship that attracted considerable attention. In his comprehensive documentation of modern Arab thought, Shakir al-Nabulsi singled out Taha as a major contributor to the spread of secular thought. Like Faraj Fuda, he paid with his life for his demand for a secular state.¹⁵⁹ Yet in contrast to the work of other liberal writers, Taha's religious commentary went much further as he rejected part of the Prophet's mission—his time in Medina—which he himself regarded as nothing less than a "cultural revolution" (thawra thaqafiyya).¹⁶⁰ His execution triggered a public outcry and was seen as a grave threat to freedom of thought and expression. Yet his teaching did not win much support in liberal circles, nor did it spark serious discussion.

Many liberals disagreed with Taha. While he praised Taha's approach as a bold attempt to lift Muslims out of their backward state, Abdelmajid Charfi noted the

absence of a strong theoretical basis that would make Taha's arguments convincing.¹⁶¹ Charfi wrote that it was unacceptable to divide the Prophet's mission into Meccan and Medinan stages, as advocated by Taha. The correct approach, according to Charfi, was to capture the spirit of the text and its compatibility with the message of Islam, which at its core was humanistic and freedom-loving.¹⁶² In Charfi's view, the message was the enduring parameter, not the text.

While Taha's radical approach failed to gain approval in liberal discourse, the principle of deconstructing Islam and challenging the validity of certain imperatives did seep into liberal ideology. Rather than rejecting the unity of the Qur'an, however, other liberal spokespersons explored the validity of Qur'anic verses in the modern era by analyzing their morality and historic rationale. Criticism of the Prophet's life, especially his period in Medina, remained taboo, with the focus shifting to the interpretation of Islam by those who came after him.

Other critics of the Prophet

Only a handful of liberal writers adopted a critical approach, which aimed at narrowing the sacred dimension of the Prophet's era. Exceptions were the Moroccan writer Fatima Mernissi and the Syrian Wafa' Sultan, who also provided a feminist angle to the criticism of the Prophet. They presented him as a passionate man with a weakness for beautiful women. Mernissi pointed out that when the Prophet married Khadija he was monogamous, with a marriage that lasted twenty-five years until her death in 620. It was only then that the Prophet started a new marital life, and in span of twelve years (620–32) he married twelve women.¹⁶³

The Prophet's many marriages were motivated by religious and political considerations, such as the need for tribal alliances, but in some cases a woman's beauty was the sole and decisive factor. For example, his marriage to a Jewish woman named Safiyya Bint Huyay was not motivated by political considerations, since he had already defeated the Jews. According to one account, the Prophet, having heard about Safiyya's "incomparable beauty," paid

her price to a soldier who had won her as part of the booty during the war against her people.¹⁶⁴

According to another story, Maria the Copt, a famous beauty, was given a gift from Egypt to the Prophet. His passion for her was so strong that he violated one of his loftiest ideals: namely that a man was required to do justice to his wives and not have intercourse with a wife, even if he so desired, if it was not her day. Indeed Hafsa, one of the Prophet's wives, caught him having intercourse with Maria in Safiyya's room and on Safiyya's day. She rebuked him for it and the Prophet promised—because he was afraid of the anger of his other wives, especially that of his beloved 'A'isha—not to touch Maria again, a promise he did not keep. In the Prophet's interactions with women, Mernissi revealed a contradiction between the ideals he preached as a model for Muslim believers when dealing with women and the way he actually dealt with them himself. His actual behavior toward the women he loved became “the basis of many legal features of the Muslim family structure,” such as the perception of women as targets for sexual satisfaction within the framework of marriage.¹⁶⁵

While citing the same stories about the Prophet's wives,¹⁶⁶ Wafa' Sultan offered a harsher critique, intertwining excerpts of her own autobiographical account as a child and young woman in Syria and later on as American citizen. Though she stated that criticizing some of these stories was not an affront to Muhammad or his wives, it helped to explain Muslim men's attitude toward women and their treatment of them, given that Muhammad is their ideal. Whereas Mernissi briefly discussed some of these marriages as proof of the Prophet's irresistible attraction to women, Sultan dealt with them at length, pointing to the trauma caused to Muhammad's wives and his immoral conduct, which was legalized by the religious authorities.

The first story referred to the Prophet's marriage with 'A'isha when she was six years old and he was fifty. The marriage was consummated when she was nine. According to Sultan, in modern terms “this is a crime, pure and simple.” 'A'isha's fate led Sultan to the conclusion that Islamic custom attaches no value to childhood. In the Muslim world children have no rights. They are merely a piece of property, not a responsibility. 'A'isha's childhood was irreparably violated, and when the action acquired religious legitimacy, it became a way of life for fourteen centuries. In reinforcing the horrifying effect of this marriage, Sultan noted the fact that Muhammad pounced upon the nine-year-old 'A'isha the moment her mother placed her in his arms on a bed in her own home. Since

then Islam has denied women the right to reach the stage of physical, intellectual, and emotional maturity at which they are mature enough to marry. “This is something that basic laws of morality cannot accept.”¹⁶⁷

Of all Muhammad’s marriages, Sultan commented, his marriage to the Jewish Safiyya Bint Huyay was “the most horrific.” Safiyya was taken prisoner in the course of a raid on the Khaybar tribe by one of Muhammad’s men, a man named Sahm. Muhammad took Safiyya from him, gave him seven female prisoners as compensation, and married Safiyya the same day he killed her husband, brother, and father.¹⁶⁸

By discussing the Prophet’s marriages, Sultan created a clear bond between Muhammad’s cavalier attitude toward women during his lifetime and the ongoing, worsening position of women in the Muslim world. She compared the women to fields, and men to farmers who sowed their seed into them. “The whole operation takes place under the man’s control and is carried out in accordance with his wishes. Can dirt protest?” Sultan attributed Islam’s attitude to women to the desert. “Islam was born in an environment that sanctioned the capture and rape of women [...]. For fourteen centuries Muslim men were unable to free themselves from the dominion of their Prophet, and Muslim women did not do better than his wives.”¹⁶⁹ The suppression of women in Muslim countries led Sultan to another psychological observation, namely that a subservient woman cannot give birth to an emotionally and mentally well-balanced man. “The invisible Muslim woman has been and continues to be the hen that incubates the eggs of terrorism.”¹⁷⁰ Eventually, Sultan perceived the oppressed status of women as a key symptom of a despotic relationship between society and the individual in Islam. The individual has no freedom within his or her society, and no privacy.¹⁷¹

Not content with discussing gender issues, Sultan criticized additional aspects of the Prophet’s biography. She argued that the main objective of the Prophet’s raiding expeditions was the seizure and division of booty, rather than death in God’s cause. Raiding, she explained, was the only means of survival in the seventh-century Arabian Peninsula and was legalized and justified by an Islamic edict. Sultan also commented cynically that when the Prophet wanted to ensure that his followers would not be angry about his claim to a fifth of the spoils, he attributed this right to God’s words (Sura 8:41). According to Sultan’s humanist outlook, seizing booty was tantamount to aggression and theft against the will of the property’s rightful owners.¹⁷² Motivated by a humanistic vision, Sultan

concluded that the biography of the Prophet was devoid of any moral code or compass shared by all nations at all times, to enable people with the rational ability to distinguish between right and wrong.¹⁷³

Another critical voice on the Prophet's life was provided by the Egyptian writer and sociologist of religion, Sayyid al-Qimni, who can be seen as Mahmud Muhammad Taha's direct successor. When examining the Prophet's life and the lives of his followers, al-Qimni noted the harsh treatment that idol worshippers and Jews were subjected to. The cruel behavior of the Prophet and of others who acted on his command negatively affected the image of the Qur'an and Islam. The establishment of the first Islamic state in Medina, he further argued, went hand in hand with power struggles and oppression, which became the hallmark of the caliphs. In fact, the Islamic conquests were colonialist: they trampled the authentic heritage of the nations of the East, including Egypt, and branded it heresy. Al-Qimni's aim was to broaden the boundaries of indigenous identity and include the Mediterranean cultures that existed prior to the appearance of Islam. He sought to incorporate the ancient history of the Nile Valley and the Mediterranean, that is, Pharaonic, Greek, and Roman history, which constituted the nucleus of European civilization.¹⁷⁴ In this way, he hoped to delegitimize the ideological basis of the adversaries of Arab liberalism and their call for a return to religious identity (Islamists) or ethnic identity (Arab nationalists)—both viewed by al-Qimni as formulas for oppression and cultural isolation.

Al-Qimni's cosmopolitan view of Mediterraneanism, which gained ratification from Muhammad Sa'id al-Ashmawi and Tariq Hijji,¹⁷⁵ was a key component in the thought of earlier liberals, most prominently Taha Husayn, who perceived it as a bridge for harmony and coexistence between different cultural and religious heritages.

Dismantling the shari'a

By painting early Islamic history as aggressive and tyrannical, and as a distortion of God's message, liberal writers strove to strengthen the call to depoliticize Islam and present the Qur'an as an ethical, historical text rather than a codex of laws. Their central argument was that since the legal component of the Qur'an

was minor and extremely general, it was up to the community to devise laws that would be relevant to the time and place. The same held true for systems of governance: in the absence of clear-cut Qur'anic guidelines, it was believed that government policies should be based on the needs of the people and the spirit of the age, but in keeping with Islamic ethics.¹⁷⁶

Since Islam is flexible and adapts itself to changing circumstances, liberal thinkers emphasized, there was no basis for insisting on the establishment of an Islamic regime. A state must be based on social foundations and the religious customs of the majority of its subjects, Muhammad Sa'id al-'Ashmawi held, but these elements pertained to the moral rather than the political level. He even provided etymological proof: the term *hukm* appears in the Qur'an and Sunna, referring to the judiciary, and implying judgment and guidance, not governance and politics, for which the correct term is *amr*. The distinction between exerting political authority and administering justice was significant because the verses in the Qur'an referring to the latter were erroneously applied to the former. Justice was the essence of true Islamic government, which was meant to be run by the people and for the good of the people. This kind of government would be inclusive, excluding no one. Such a regime would uphold Islam as a religion of mercy and humanity, not of the sword; as a dialogue, not a source of estrangement; as respectful, not dismissive and disdainful. Islam could hence be presented to the world as a progressive and tolerant religion.¹⁷⁷ Based on these arguments, the liberals sought to undermine the number one pillar of Islamist discourse: the organic unity of religion and politics.

Next, they set their sights on the second pillar of Islamist discourse—the demand for the implementation of *shari'a* law. In their view, *shari'a* had been shaped during a period of historical depravity, cruelty, and bloodshed under the caliphate. Literally, the caliph was a Muslim ruler who came after the Prophet's successor, wrote al-'Ashmawi. But the term caliph took on new meaning: The caliphs became the “heirs of the prophet” in every way. They saw themselves as infallible, as invested with both religious and political power. As Islam had neither religious institutions nor clergy, this development sowed discord among Islamic scholars, many of whom served the ruler and preferred to sidestep the issue of the rights and duties of the caliph and his treatment of his subjects. Instead, Islamic jurisprudence focused on social relations in the private and public domain.¹⁷⁸

Opposition to the caliphate did not skip over the Rashidun era (632–61). On the

contrary, the Rashidun caliphs were seen as the crux of the problem, and not those who came after them. These later dynasties—the Umayyads, Abbasids, and medieval Turkish dynasties—were accused by the Islamists of corrupting the spirit of Islam and its ability to stand up to its enemies, whereas the Rashidun period was hailed as the Golden Age of Islam and an inspirational model for the establishment of an Islamic regime in the present. The liberal preoccupation with this period is thus easy to understand. While the early twentieth-century liberals glorified the Rashidun and gleaned examples from them of rationalism and progressive thinking, later liberals downplayed them and dwelled on their negative features.

The one exception was ‘Umar, who was highly praised as just, enlightened, and non-partisan, and who separated the religious from the political function of his rule, as opposed to Abu Bakr, ‘Uthman, and ‘Ali. ‘Umar provided the liberal narrative with a ray of light after the gloom of fourteen centuries of Islamic history. He was chosen for his central role in Islamic historiography and his consistent portrayal of Islamic lore as rational and open-minded.¹⁷⁹

Challenging the view that the Rashidun era was a Golden Age, al ‘Ashmawi, Faraj Fuda, and Mernissi emphasized that twenty-eight years was too short a period to impact the history of Islam. It was also plagued by power struggles, factionalization, bloodshed, political terrorism, and assassinations, becoming an oppressive, inhumane, and unethical regime merely one generation after the death of the Prophet. The Islamic state became an empire and the caliphate a den of nepotism, which revived the negative norms of the pre-Islamic period: tribal fanaticism, egoism, and materialism. The goal was not to spread Islam, but to amass power, territory, and resources. In other words, the wars waged by the caliphs—de facto emperors—were fought under the banner of religion, although their agenda was secular. Islamic schools of thought contributed to this by dividing the world into the “abode of Islam” (dar al-Islam) and the “abode of war” (dar al-harb). This provided religious approval of the caliphs’ expansionist policies.¹⁸⁰

Disqualifying the Rashidun period as an ethical guide for Muslims in the present was a way of severing the umbilical cord of continuity from the days of the Prophet to his direct successors, thereby creating a clear distinction between the reign of Muhammad, based on revelation, and the reign of those who came after him—regimes tainted by human weaknesses and urges, and thus subject to historical criticism. In addition to casting aspersions on the shari‘a as a legal

codex in response to the repressive climate that prevailed, liberal thinkers argued that it was not an infallible expression of divine law, but a compendium of laws assembled by human beings, and that, as such, it was not impervious to change.¹⁸¹

At the end of the day, wrote Fuda, shari‘a was anachronistic and had very little relevance for the modern era. Laws were meant to reflect the current needs of society, and it was doubtful that shari‘a could satisfy these needs, as borne out by the dismal record of Islamic regimes in Pakistan (1977–88), Sudan (1989–2000), and Iran (since 1979).¹⁸² The case of Iran was singled out by liberals for its long-standing clerical regime, a target of domestic criticism and protest as well as international sanctions. It provided these writers with an opportunity to present a problematic record of political tyranny, economic collapse, and regional unrest in the name of religion. While Islamist groups, which also recognized the Iranian record as problematic, attributed it to a perverted Shi‘i doctrine, liberal thinkers downplayed or completely ignored this dimension. They portrayed Iran as the prototype of a corrupt Islamic government that was not the province of a certain creed, or specific to time or place.

Some liberals linked shari‘a law to harassment and persecution of ideological dissidents. Others emphasized haziness or gray areas that lent themselves to a more progressive interpretation.¹⁸³ For these writers, the Islamic past seemed to have been more of a burden than an asset. Rejecting shari‘a as a mandatory code for Muslim conduct in the modern era, they promoted historical relativism and greater receptivity to other cultures, fostering a civic style of polity. Clause 8 of Shakir al-Nabulsi’s liberal manifesto makes this explicit:

The present cannot be forged by the history of the past, but only by contemporary history. So, too, the future. Conditions for overcoming the past can be found only in the present, not in the past, especially in reference to our own past and cultural heritage. It consciously destroyed itself; attacked philosophy—led by Ibn Taymiyya, al-Suyuti, Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya, and others—and cast out rationalism; persecuted Mu‘atazilas [who posited reason as the final arbiter in distinguishing right from wrong]; closed the gates of ijtihad; forbade the science of kalam [which advocated the primacy of human reason]; expelled the scholars of logic; formulated counterfeit religious texts that do battle with philosophy, wisdom, and the use of the mind; abolished the natural

sciences and medicine, calling them “alienating sciences,” replacing them with the religious and medical sciences of the Prophet—until he became more celebrated and expert than the father of medicine, Hippocrates; and forbade music, singing, sculpture, drawing, poetry, and all the sublime arts produced by the human hand. How is it possible, then, to depend on this past to move us from the present to the future?¹⁸⁴

Metaphorically, perhaps, but even more to the point than al-Nabulsi, Coptic writer Kamal Ghabriyal declared: “A proper view of the past is one which does not turn the present into a prisoner of the past, but rather the opposite: An effort must be made to cast off the chains of the past in order to breathe clean, fresh air—the air of tomorrow.”¹⁸⁵

For Arab liberals, Western culture was a source of inspiration, and not a cesspool of anti-Muslim prejudice and conspiracy, as the Islamic world so often portrayed it. They did not conceal their disappointment with the stagnation of Islam. While Christianity embarked on a new path after the Protestant Reformation in the fifteenth century and it became possible for the layman to freely study religious texts without hindrance from religious scholars and clerics, Islam remained behind, with neither the ability nor the desire to sever itself from the benighted thinking of the Middle Ages. Contributors to this sad state were Islamic icons like the Sufi mystic al-Ghazali (d. 1111) and the philosopher Averroes (d. 1298). Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd accused the two of elitism: they claimed that true knowledge, mystical or rational, was in the hands of a select minority, inaccessible to the ordinary person. This perception of a gap between the educated elite and the ignorant masses stymied both the development of a broad-based, enlightened Islam and the emergence of an open society. This dovetailed with the existing political barrier between rulers and ruled, producing repressive societies and an ideological, psychological, and cultural milieu in which humanistic values like freedom of thought and individual liberty were attacked and demonized.¹⁸⁶

Employing modern research methodologies, such as philology, anthropology, textual criticism, hermeneutical theories, and comparative study, Arab liberals hoped to instill a rational, scholarly approach to religious discourse.¹⁸⁷ By adopting a “scientific” approach, they sought to de-idealize Islamic tradition and reposition it on an empirical and historical basis. The key was to enrich

Muslims' knowledge about their past and hone their critical ability to see the flaws in religious thinking and the need to distance themselves from it in order to face the challenges of the modern era. The battle for Muslim survival was contingent on knowledge, wrote Abu Zayd, not on religious posturing and violence.¹⁸⁸ Dismantling the authority of the past was intertwined with defying the authority of the 'ulama' and the Islamists who claimed to speak for Islam.

A Shi'i angel

The onset of the Islamic Revolution in Iran was one of the formative events of the twentieth century. Some say that historically it was no less dramatic than the French or the Russian Revolution. Put to the test, Iran revealed its weakness when addressing the complex reality at home and beyond its borders. Its menacing image as a revolutionary and subversive state led to its regional isolation and soured its relations with the international community. At home, revolutionary zeal began to cool as the country dealt on a day-to-day basis with economic and social hardship. The revolution did not succeed in instating strict shari'a law. Neither did it produce the ideal believer. The young people, upon whom the clerical regime had pinned its hopes, were the first to turn their backs on the puritanical message, expressing a thirst for the pleasures of life and demanding personal liberties. Due to their statistical weight in society, as they made up close to 60 percent of a population of over 70 million, the regime was forced to adopt a policy of flexibility and to maneuver between lofty Islamic ideas and social reality, between an ideal state and an actual one. Khomeini's political vision of blazing a third path, which was neither East nor West, came up for public debate and became a hotbutton issue in Iranian society.

Iran's revolutionary camp was eager to put the idea of an ethical society into practice, after a long period in which Islam had been denigrated while it remained in opposition. This led it to miscalculate Iranian civil society's readiness for a drastic change in lifestyle. In the midst of this decline in revolutionary zeal, liberal discourse came to the fore with its talk of freedom and democracy. For Iranian liberals, in contrast to their Sunni colleagues, this was not a theoretical discussion about the dangers of establishing an Islamic regime, but a concrete bid for change in a country ruled by clerics for nearly forty years.

Personal liberties became a catchword in public discourse, and a rallying point for postrevolutionary liberals and their call for the separation of religion and politics.

Two of the most prominent voices were Mohsen Kadivar (b. 1959), an Islamic scholar and lecturer in Islamic philosophy at Tehran University, who was arrested repeatedly for his censure of the religious establishment, and Abdolkarim Soroush (b. 1945), who taught at the same university, but had pursued a Western education course in the history and philosophy of science, and served as guest lecturer at some of the most respected universities in Europe and the United States. Like Kadivar, Soroush was threatened and harassed by the authorities and forced to leave Iran for several years.

Both Kadivar and Soroush were compelling and prolific thinkers who wrote at length about civil liberties, espousing the liberal principle that human beings were entitled to exercise their freedom, as long as they did not impinge on the freedom of others, disturb the peace, or disrupt public order.¹⁸⁹ While free societies are more humanistic, totalitarian societies abide neither by divine nor by human law. “All that remains is ruthlessness and brutishness.”¹⁹⁰ Both philosophers expressed aversion to the concept of juristic guardianship, which upholds the exclusive right of jurists to run society, while supporting democracy as the most suitable approach to modern political management. The fact that democracy was first promoted in the West does not negate its value in other cultures, Kadivar noted.¹⁹¹

Kadivar and Soroush invested much effort in promoting the excising of religion from political life, while admitting its important place in the national and cultural identity. They argued that no one possessed a monopoly over religion: the interpretation of religion was dynamic and evolved over time. They protested the ideologization of Islam, which stifled creative interpretation, and rejected the idea of a state based on shar‘ia on the grounds that it was a corpus of law, not a political system. In this context, Soroush argued that the interpretation of the text is social by nature and depends on the community of experts. Like all learned activities, it will be an independent dynamic entity, containing right and wrong and dubious ideas. The science of religion, he concluded, is relative and constitutes “a branch of knowledge, no less, no more,” thereby producing “an ocean of interpretations.”¹⁹² The only essential and unchangeable tenets, Soroush added, were belief in the unity of God and belief in the prophethood of Muhammad. A person who endorsed these while questioning or even rejecting

religious rituals and practices would still be considered a perfect Muslim.¹⁹³

By viewing faith (iman), not religious law (fiqh), as the main pillar of Islam, Soroush condemned fiqh-based regimes as neither religious nor democratic. Accordingly, while a clerical government wishes to implement the shari‘a strictly and supervise people’s social conduct, democracy—the preferred form of government—wishes to accomplish the true mission of revelation, namely the promotion of human well-being, and to lay down ethical guidelines. Freeing politics from the dictates of the ‘ulama’ and religious institutions, Soroush and Kadivar stressed, would benefit both a political system that ought to work in accordance with changing needs and circumstances, and an Islam that ought to rise above the mundane world of politics.¹⁹⁴

Kadivar’s and Soroush’s vision for Muslim society was based on two important building blocks, namely critical thinking and reason, which, when combined, would pave the way for the ultimate outcome—openness. In their view, critical thinking was essential for all societies. In the modern age, they said, a critical look at religion should not only be tolerated, but could also help believers hone their faith, thereby achieving a purer form of belief. If criticism of religion was banned or kept out of print, religion would cease to be a product of conscious choice. Hence it was foolish to impose limits on criticism. A community that wanted its members to accept its ideas based on logical arguments could not deny them freedom of thought and belief, Kadivar stipulated.

To support their position, Kadivar and Soroush added utilitarian arguments. In an era of advanced technology and mass communications, it was not possible to close a society to outside ideas. Ideological diversity was inevitable. Restricting freedom would actually lead to deception and hypocrisy, which would destroy faith in the end and turn it into something artificial. Those who followed the commandments would do so out of coercion and not out of personal and authentic conviction. In the long run, society and religion would wither. By opening the articles of faith to criticism, they argued, the vitality and dynamism of Islam would be preserved. Both rejected the idea that the evil urge was engrained in humans early on, and insisted that only religious freedom would produce a strong, ethical society.¹⁹⁵ “No blessing is more precious of mankind than the free choice of the way of the prophets. Nothing is better for humanity than submission based on free will,” asserted Soroush.¹⁹⁶ These lofty ideas could be realized only by the principles of democracy, he continued: “In democratic societies, the path of examined religiosity is more open and inviting ... Those

who appreciate the value and sanctity of religion and the glory of investigation will never doubt that a single examined faith is nobler than a thousand imitated, shaky and weak beliefs.”¹⁹⁷ Critical thinking and reason were seen as inextricably linked. Soroush pointed out that using reason made people better able to identify the true intentions of God and the Prophet as articulated in the sacred texts. Without reason, it was not possible to seek the truth, let alone attain it. There were only an exceptional few who did not need reason, Soroush commented drily, referring to the great Persian mystic poets Jalal al-Din Rumi and Hafez, who reached the highest rungs of spirituality and divine truth. Most of the faithful were not blessed with this lofty and divine gift, and thus needed rationalism and a rational discourse.¹⁹⁸

Furthermore, without reason one would miss out on the human dimension of the Qur’an, in which the Prophet was so central. In passing down revelation to the faithful, he employed the language, style, and imagery of his human and cultural milieu, namely the Hijaz. In other words, the Prophet Muhammad adapted revelation to his surroundings, so that it was influenced by his personal biography. Muhammad operated in a specific historical time and place, and many of the directives in the Qur’an must be seen in this context. Soroush the Shi‘i, like Abu Zayd the Sunni, saw revelation as a dialogue with reality. It had to align itself with reality, they said, because it was meant for this world. This was a revolutionary approach, which set off a hail of protest among supporters of textualism who claimed that the Prophet played no part whatsoever in shaping the revelation.¹⁹⁹

However, like Sunni liberals, Soroush and Kadivar were adamant that personal liberty and empowerment were not synonymous with irresponsibility and anarchy. In this respect they were equally critical of Western modernism, which they felt had abandoned the internal struggle with human urges and desires, focusing instead on the fight to cast off external bonds—kings, churches, the aristocracy—in the spirit of the motto of the French Revolution, *liberté, égalité, fraternité*. The battle for freedom, wrote Soroush, who like Taha was greatly influenced by Islamic mysticism, had to be two-pronged: the fight against injustice in the outside world and the fight within oneself, against personal urges and whims. This would preserve the necessary balance between the needs of the individual and those of the collective, and ensure that elevating the status of the individual would not be achieved at the expense of others.²⁰⁰

The dream of the Shi‘i liberals was liberal democracy,²⁰¹ but they were realistic

enough to recognize that ideological fervor was not enough in the face of a powerful clerical regime seated in Tehran. The alternative they proposed was the demand that any regime calling itself religious must also adopt a set of humanistic values, such as justice and liberty, founded on the principle that all human beings are equals. At the same time, this regime would cultivate the set of religious values that are intended to encourage human spiritual elevation, such as giving charity and abstaining from alcohol, but without heavy-handed policing or strict enforcement, which would infringe on the first set of humanistic values.²⁰²

Notes

1Charles Taylor, “Modes of Secularism,” in Bhargava Rajeev (ed.), *Secularism and its Critics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), pp. 31–53; Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007), pp. 19–21; Bryan Wilson, “The Secularization Thesis: Criticisms and Rebuttals,” in R. Laermans et al. (eds.), *Secularization and Social Integration* (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 1998), pp. 45–65 .

2Peter Gay, *The Enlightenment: A Comprehensive Anthology* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1985), p. 384.

3On secularism in modern times, see Michael Warner, Jonathan VanAntwerpen, and Craig Calhoun (eds.), *Varieties of Secularism in a Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010). The anthropologist Talal Asad reinforced the encounter between secularism and religion. For him, the secular was not the antithesis of the sacred, nor its successor. On the contrary, religion contributed to the establishment of secularism, which focused on the distinction between the spiritual and the temporal. Thus, for example, sacraments and rituals allocated to only part of the life cycle (birth, marriage, death) a status of holiness and subordination to supernatural authority. Furthermore, religion became an integral part of modern politics. It had a say in public fields like economics, education, and science, thereby making it difficult to limit it to a clear and well-defined sphere in the life of modern nations. State law hence needed to redefine, again and again, the nature of genuine religion, and the proper positioning of its

boundaries. Talal Asad, *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003); see also Hussein Ali Agrama, *Questioning Secularism: Islam, Sovereignty, and the Rule of Law in Modern Egypt* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012); and Naser Ghobadzadeb, *Religious Secularity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015).

4Butrus al-Bustani, *Muhit al-Muhit* (Beirut: Maktabat Lubnan Nashirun, 1993), p. 628; al-Munjid fi'l-Lugha wa'l-A'lam, 28th ed. (Beirut: Dar al-Mashriq, 1986), p. 527.

5Elias A. Elias, *Modern Dictionary Arabic-English* (Cairo: al-Matba'a al-'Asriyya, 1968), p. 370; Elias A. Elias, *Modern Dictionary English-Arabic* (Cairo: al-Matba'a al-'Asriyya, 1968), pp. 645–646; Reinhart Dozy, *Supplément aux dictionnaires arabes* (Leiden: Brill, 1881), vol 2, pp. 164–165; J. G. Hava, *al-Fara'id Arabic-English Dictionary*, 5th ed. (Beirut: Dar al-Mashriq, 1982 [1889]), p. 496. Notably, in the pre-1870s literature of Muslims temporarily living in Europe (mainly in France) such as Rifa'a Rafi' al-Tahtawi of Egypt and Khayr al-Din of Tunisia, the term secularism was not used, since it might imply that these travelers and writers, argued Ibrahim Abu Lughod, “were aware of secularism as a concept with implications for political life.” This was in contrast to those who followed them during the nineteenth century, including Arab nationalists. The term was also absent from Ami Ayalon's discussion of terms and concepts that penetrated the discourse in the Arab Middle East in the nineteenth century. There were, of course, Arab references to the status of Christianity in the life of European society, but these were often descriptive, focusing on the status of the clergy. Abu-Lughod, *The Arab Rediscovery of Europe*. pp. 136–140; Ayalon, *Language and Change*, esp. pp. 16–28.

6Isma'il Mazhar, *al-Nahda Dictionary* (Cairo: The Renaissance Bookshop, n.d.), pp. 1935–1936; Rohi Baalbaki, *al-Mawrid: A Modern Arabic-English Dictionary*, 21st ed. (Beirut: Dar al-'Ilm li'l-Malayin, 2007), p. 778.

7Barry A. Kosmin, “Hard and Soft Secularists and Hard and Soft Secularism: An Intellectual and Research Challenge,” lecture delivered at the Society for the Scientific Study of Religion Annual Conference, October 19–21, 2006, Portland, Oregon, https://web.archive.org/web/20090327023704/http://www.trincoll.edu/NR/rdonlyres/9614BC42-9E4C-42BF-A7F4-0B5EE1009462/0/Kosmin_paper.pdf (accessed February 18, 2018); see also Taylor, *A Secular Age*, pp. 185–196, 423–437.

8Donald Eugene Smith, *Religion and Political Modernization* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1974), p. 8.

9Sa‘id al-‘Ashmawi’s stance in C. Fluehr-Lobban (ed.), *Against Islamic Extremism: The Writings of Muhammad Sa‘id al-Ashmawi* (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 1998), p. 71; Ahmad al-Baghdadi’s articles in *al-Siyasa* (Kuwait), November, 14, 16–17, 2004; al-Jamil, “al-Libiraliyya al-Jadida,” pp. 46–49; al-Hamad, *Min Huna Yabda’ al-Taghyir*, pp. 286–290; Shahrur, *al-Din wa’l-Sulta*, pp. 433–436; al-Nabulsi, *al-‘Arab bayna al-Libiraliyya wa’l-Usuliyya*, pp. 32, 103–111.

[10 Abu Samra, *The Qur’an in Contemporary Arab Thought*, pp. 21–23, 31.](#)

[11 Charfi, “Islam and Democracy,” pp. 67–71.](#)

[12 Gibb, *Modern Trends in Islam*, pp. 52–53.](#)

[13 Charfi, *al-Islam*, p. 76.](#)

[14 Mustafa, “Our Secular Legacy”; also al-Nabulsi, *Zawaya Harija*, p. 28.](#)

[15 Mustafa, “Our Secular Legacy”; also al-Jamil, “al-Libiraliyya al-Jadida,” p. 47.](#)

[16 Mustafa, “Our Secular Legacy”; Muhammad ‘Imara, *al-Islam wa’l-‘Uruba wa’l-‘Almaniyya* \(Beirut: Dar al-Wahda, 1981\).](#)

[17 On ‘Imara’s thought, see Hatina, *Identity Politics*, ch. 8. Notably, ‘Imara wrote an entire book on al-Kawakibi entitled: “Was al-Kawakibi secular?” Muhammad ‘Imara, *al-Shaykh ‘Abd al-Rahman al-Kawakibi: Hal Kana ‘Almaniyyan?* \(Giza: Nahdat Misr li’l-Tiba‘a wa’l-Nashr wa’l-Tawzi‘, 2006\).](#)

[18 Mustafa, “Our Secular Legacy.”](#)

[19 Mernissi, *Islam and Democracy*, pp. 42–50. In using the term secular humanism, Mernissi relied on the American sociologist James Davison Hunter, *On Secular Humanism: Dialogue* \(Washington, D.C.: U.S. Information Agency, 1991\); also his “America’s Fourth Faith: A Sociological Perspective on Secular Humanism,” *This World*, 19 \(1987\), pp. 101–110.](#)

20 Abu Zayd and Nelson, Voice of an Exile , pp. 182–183.

21 Ibid., 184–185, 188, 191.

22 Shahrour, “The Divine Text,” p. 146; see also his al-Din wa’l Sulta , p. 404.

23 Fluehr-Lobban (ed.), Against Islamic Extremism , p. 71.

24 Douglas Pratt, “Muslim–Jewish Relations: Some Islamic Paradigms,” Islam and Christian–Muslim Relations 21.1 (2010), p. 12.

25 Sura 85:22 states: “This is truly a glorious Qur’an [written] on a preserved Tablet.” According to the Muslim perception, the Qur’an is the word of God given to Muhammad in the Arabian Peninsula (first in Mecca and then in Medina) in the first trimester of the seventh century. The contents of the Qur’an were transmitted to Muhammad orally over a period of twenty years. Muhammad recited the texts he had received and his scribes wrote them down. Opinions differ as to the Prophet’s share in the book’s compilation, but there is agreement that by the time of the third Caliph, ‘Uthman b. ‘Affan (r. 654–656), the basic text had already crystallized into its canonical form. For selected literature on the Qur’an, its evolution and contents, see Ignaz Goldziher, Schools of Koranic Commentators (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2006); Theodor Nöldeke et al., The History of the Qur’ān (Leiden: Brill, 2013); Michael Cook, The Koran: A Very Short Introduction (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), and his Islam and its Past: Jahiliyya, Late Antiquity, and the Qur’an (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017); Neal Robinson, Discovering the Qur’an: A Contemporary Approach to a Veiled Text (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2003); Andrew Rippin and Jawid Mojaddedi (eds.), The Blackwell Companion to the Qur’an (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009); Nicolai Sinai, “The Qur’ān as Process,” in Angelika Neuwirth et al. (eds.), The Qur’ān in Context: Historical and Literary Investigations into the Qur’ānic Milieu (Leiden: Brill, 2010), pp. 407–439.

26 Charfi , al-Islam , pp. 14–15.

27 Abu Zaid and Nelson, Voice of an Exile , p. 179.

28 Sa’id al-‘Ashmawi’s books: Jawhar al-Islam , 4th ed. (Cairo: Maktabat Madbuli al-Saghir, 1996), pp. 35–36, 40–44; al-Islam al-Siyasi , 4th ed. (Cairo: Maktabat Madbuli al-Saghir, 1996), pp. 74–76, 88–91, 212–215; Usul al-Shari’a

, pp. 159–162; also Shimon Shamir, “Liberalism: from Monarchy to Postrevolution,” in Shimon Shamir (ed.), *Egypt from Monarchy to Republic* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1995), pp. 195–212.

29 Al-‘Ashmawi, *al-Islam al-Siyasi*, p. 85; and his *Ma‘alim al-Islam* (Cairo: Sina’ li’l-Nashr, 1989), p. 283.

30 Charfi, *al-Islam*, pp. 90–91, 104–106; Ahmad al-Baghdadi, *Tajdid al-Fikr al-Dini*; *Da‘wa li-Istikhdam al-‘Aql*, 2nd ed. (Beirut: Mu‘assasat al-‘Arabi, 2008), pp. 43–44.

31 Mohamed Talbi, *Iyal Allah* (Tunis: Ceres Editions, 1992), pp. 73–74; Talbi, *Plaidoyer pour un Islam moderne* (Tunis: Cérés Editions, 1998); *al-Islam Hurriyya wa-Hiwar* (Beirut: Dar al-Nahar, 1999). See also al-Dakkak, “Religious Dialogue, Pluralism, and Historical Interpretation,” pp. 99–108.

32 Al-Baghdadi, *Tajdid al-Fikr al-Dini*, pp. 44–45, 50; al-Nabulsi, *al-Nizam al-‘Arabi al-Jadid*, pp. 21–26.

33 Al-Baghdadi, *Tajdid al-Fikr al-Dini*, pp. 33–42.

34 ‘Afif al-Akhdar, *al-Mithaq al-‘Aqlani*, part 2.

35 Abu Zaid and Nelson, *Voice of an Exile*, p. 4; also Charfi, *al-Islam*, pp. 6–10, 12–15; al-Akhdar, *al-Mithaq al-‘Aqlani*, part 2.

36 See Charfi’s introduction to his edited volume: *Fi’l-Sha’n al-Dini* (Tunis: Dar Sahar, 2008), pp. 5–6.

37 Charfi, *al-Islam*, pp. 134–135. The quote from Ibn Khaldun is taken from *The Muqaddimah: An Introduction to History*, trans. Franz Rosenthal (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2015), p. 11. Ibn Khaldun, in his historical insight or method, addressed mainly Qur’anic commentators and leading transmitters of hadiths, whom he accused of committing frequent errors in the stories and events they reported. Ibn Khaldun, *The Muqaddimah*, pp. 11–32.

38 Charfi, *al-Islam*, pp. 6–10, 198; Amin, *Fi Bayt Ahmad Amin*, pp. 410–419.

39 Abu Zaid and Nelson, *Voice of an Exile*, pp. 185, 198.

40 Abdelmajid Charfi, “Islam and Democracy: Are They Compatible?,” Palestine-Israel Journal 12.2–3 (2005), pp. 69–71; Charfi (ed.), Fi’l-Sha’n al-Dini , pp. 5–8.

41 Charfi, al-Islam , pp. 56–57; Muhammad Shahrur, al-Sunna al-Rasuliyya wa’l-Sunna al-Nabawiyya (Beirut: Dar al-Saqi, 2012), pp. 29–46, 83–88.

42 Charfi, “Islam and Democracy,” pp. 70–71.

43 Abu Zaid and Nelson, Voice of an Exile , p. 166; Sultan, A God who Hates , ch. 10.

44 Sultan, A God Who Hates , p. 10.

45 Shahrour, “The Divine Text,” p. 150.

46 The court’s decision is quoted in Abu Zaid and Nelson, Voice of an Exile , pp. 9–10.

47 Ibid., p. 11.

48 Charfi, al-Islam , pp. 60–61.

49 Ibid., pp. 87, 93, 200.

50 Ibid., pp. 80–81.

51 Shahrur, al-Sunna al-Rasuliyya , pp. 83–99; Shahrur, al-Din wa’l-Sulta , pp. 435–436, 447–448, 450–451. The three hadiths are cited in Abu ‘Abd Allah al-Hakim Muhammad b. ‘Abd Allah b. Muhammad b. Hamdawayhi Ibn al-Bay‘, al-Mustadrak ‘ala al-Sahihayn , ed. Mustafa ‘Abd al-Qadir ‘Ata (Beirut: Dar al-Kutub al-‘Ilmiyya, 1990), vol. 3, p. 215, vol. 4, pp. 479, 547; Sulayman b. al-Ash‘ath Abu Dawud, Sunan Abi Dawud , ed. Muhammad Muhyi al-Din ‘Abd al-Hamid (Sidon-Beirut: al-Maktaba al-‘Asriyya, n.d.), vol. 4, p. 124.

52 Shahrur, al-Sunna al-Rasuliyya , pp. 162–178, 191–202; also Shahrur, al-Din wa’l-Sulta , pp. 431–435.

53 Charfi, al-Islam , pp. 86–96.

[54 Shahrur, al-Din wa'l-Sulta, p. 449.](#)

[55 Ibid., p. 432.](#)

[56 Ibid., pp. 447–448.](#)

[57 Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd, “Rethinking the Qur’an: Towards a Humanistic Hermeneutics,” in Stefan Reichmuth, Jörrn Rüsen, and Aladdin Sarhan \(eds.\), Humanism and Muslim Culture: Historical Heritage and Contemporary Challenges \(Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2012\), pp. 39–42, 50–59.](#)

[58 Ibid.](#)

[59 On the emergence of contextualist approaches to the Qur’an, see Abdullah Saeed, Reading the Qur’an in the Twenty-first Century \(London: Routledge, 2014\), esp. Part 1.](#)

[60 Abu Zaid and Nelson, Voice of an Exile , pp. 168–169.](#)

[61 Al-Hamad, Min Huna Yabda’ al-Taghyir , pp. 47–53.](#)

[62 Abu Zaid and Nelson, Voice of an Exile , pp. 172–174.](#)

[63 Ibid., pp. 174–175; on ‘Abduh’s stance, see Rashid Rida, Tafsir al-Manar \(Cairo: Dar al-Manar, 1937\), vol. 4, pp. 348–351.](#)

[64 Abu Zaid and Nelson, Voice of an Exile , pp. 174–177.](#)

[65 Charfi, al-Islam , pp. 66–67.](#)

[66 Abu Zaid and Nelson, Voice of an Exile , pp. 174–175.](#)

[67 Ibid., pp. 95–101; Abu Zayd, “Rethinking the Qur’an,” pp. 47–60.](#)

[68 Notably, the principle of abrogation is referred to in several verses in the Qur’an itself, mainly: “Any revelation We cause to be superseded or forgotten, We replace with something better or similar” \(Sura 2:106\). See also Andrew Rippin, “The Function Asbāb a-Nuzūl in Qur’ānic Exegesis,” Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies 51 \(1988\), pp. 1–20; John Burton, Islamic Theories of Abrogation \(Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1990\);](#)

Wael B. Hallaq, *Sharī'a: Theory, Practice, Transformations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), pp. 96–97.

69 As'ad Abukalil, "Against the Taboos of Islam: Anti-Conformist Tendencies in Contemporary Arab/Islamic Thought," in Charles E. Butterworth and I. L. Zartman (eds.), *Between the State and Islam* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000), pp. 110–132; Abu Zaid and Nelson, *Voice of an Exile*, pp. 165–208; Mahmoud, "Mahmud Muhammad Taha's Second Message of Islam," pp. 105–128; Mohamed Talbi, *Universalite du Coran* (Arles: Actes Sud, 2002); also Ronald L. Nettler's essays, "Mohamed Talbi's Ideas on Islam and Politics: A Conception of Islam for the Modern World," in Cooper, Nettler, and Mahmoud (eds.), *Islam and Modernity*, pp. 129–155; "Mohamed Talbi on Understanding the Qur'an," in Taji-Farouki (ed.), *Modern Muslim Intellectuals and the Qur'an*, pp. 225–240; Muhammad Shahrur, *al-Kitab wa'l-Qur'an: Qira'a Mu'asira* (Damascus: al-Ahali, 1992); Shahrour, "The Divine Text," pp. 143–152.

70 Abu Zayd, "Rethinking the Qur'an," pp. 46–47, 51–53, 56. With regard to marriage with non-Muslim women, Abu Zayd did not mention that there are Qur'anic commentators who exclude Jewish and Christian women from this prohibition.

71 The study of Sulayman Bashir shows that the title al-Faruq was not unique to 'Umar, as Western scholars have even compared it to St. Paul, the second most important figure in Christianity after Jesus. According to Bashir, there are Islamic traditions that ignored this description of 'Umar while other traditions attributed it to other caliphs such as 'Ali b. Abi Talib. Suliman Bashear, "The Title 'Faruq' and Its Association with 'Umar I," *Studia Islamica* 72 (1990), pp. 47–70.

72 Saeed, *Reading the Qur'an*, pp. 26–37.

73 Faraj Fuda, *al-Haqiqa al-Gha'iba* (Cairo: Dar al-Fikr, 1986), pp. 45–46, 75–77, 89.

74 See, for example, Muhammad Husayn Haykal, *al-Faruq 'Umar*, 5th ed. (Cairo: Dar al-Ma'arif, 1972), 2 vols.; 'Abbas Mahmud al-'Aqqad, *'Abqariyyat 'Umar* (Cairo: Dar al-Thaqafa al-'Arabiyya, 1963); Khalid Muhammad Khalid, *Bayna Yaday 'Umar* (Cairo: Maktabat Wahba, 1969); al-Nabulsi, *Zawayat Harija*, pp. 22, 35.

- [75 Abu Zayd, “Rethinking the Qur’an,” pp. 39–60.](#)
- [76 Abu Zaid and Nelson, Voice of an Exile , pp. 166–167.](#)
- [77 Nettler, “Mohamed Talbi’s Ideas on Islam and Politics,” p. 132.](#)
- [78 Mernissi’s books: Islam and Democracy , pp. 13–20, 42–50; Beyond the Veil : Male – Female Dynamics in Muslim Society \(London: Saqi Books, 2011\), ch. 1; Women and Islam \(Oxford: Blackwell, 1991\).](#)
- [79 Sultan, A God Who Hates , pp. 8, 143–148.](#)
- [80 Mernissi, Islam and Democracy , pp. 149–150, 153–157; Charfi, al-Islam , pp. 107–108.](#)
- [81 Charfi, al-Islam , pp. 107–108.](#)
- [82 Hijji, quoted in al-Ahram , August 15, 2003; Ghabrial, “al-Libiraliyya al-Jadida.”](#)
- [83 Abu Zaid and Nelson, Voice of an Exile , pp. 165–169.](#)
- [84 Ibid., pp. 2–3; Abu Zayd, “Rethinking the Qur’an,” pp. 40–44 .](#)
- [85 Abu Zaid and Nelson, Voice of an Exile , pp. 2–3.](#)
- [86 Shahrour, “The Divine Text,” pp. 149–150.](#)
- [87 Ibid., p. 146.](#)
- [88 Ibid., p. 147; see also Yasin al-Hajj Salih, “Tahlil Din Muhammad,” Kalamun 1 \(autumn 2010\), pp. 129–146.](#)
- [89 Mohamed Talbi, “Religious Liberty: A Muslim Perspective,” in Kamrava \(ed.\), The New Voices of Islam , esp. pp. 107–108.](#)
- [90 On the Murj’ite doctrine and its modern relevance, see Wilfred Madelung, Religious Trends in Early Islamic Iran \(Albany, NY: Bibliotheca Persica, 1988\); Daniel Lav, Radical Islam and the Revival of Medieval Theology \(Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012\).](#)

91 Charfi, al-Islam , pp. 61–66.

92 Ibid., p. 65.

93 Ibid., p. 66. The reference to al-Ghazali is taken from his Ihya' 'Ulum al-Din (Beirut: Dar al-Ma'rifa, n.d.), vol. 1, pp. 19, 224; vol. 2, pp. 103, 113.

94 Charfi, al-Islam , pp. 65–66.

95 Ibid., p. 196.

96 Charfi, al-Islam , pp. 64–66.

97 Ibid., pp. 67–71; Talbi, “Religious Liberty,” pp. 108–117, and his al-Islam Hurriyya wa-Hiwar, pp. 77–121; see also Mernissi, Islam and Democracy, pp. 68–70, 85–87.

98 Charfi (ed.), Fi'l-Sha'n al-Dini , p. 5.

99 Abu Zaid and Nelson, Voice of an Exile , pp. 169–171.

100 Berlin, “Two Concepts of Freedom.”

101 Muhammad 'Imara, Hal al-Islam Huwa al-Hall? (Cairo: Dar al-Shuruq, 1995), pp. 43–46, 131–134. On the tension in the Islamic discourse between the creativity of the individual and his commitment to political movement, a tension that exists also in the Jacobin and Communist movements, see Shmuel N. Eisenstadt, Fundamentalism, Sectarianism, and Revolution: The Jacobin Dimension of Modernity (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), pp. 85–86.

102 Gianfranco Poggi, Calvinism and the Capitalist Spirit: Max Weber's Protestant Ethic (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 1983).

103 Abu Zaid and Nelson, Voice of an Exile , pp. 4–5, 54–55; Sultan, A God Who Hates , pp. 180–181.

104 Abu Zayd, “Rethinking the Qur'an,” pp. 44–46; Abu Zaid and Nelson, Voice of an Exile , pp. 56–57; Charfi , al-Islam , p. 61. On the early Shi'i Qur'an exegesis, see Meir M. Bar Asher, Scripture and Exegesis in Early Imami Shiism

(Leiden: Brill, 1999), esp. ch. 3.

105 On the Mu‘tazila, see S. Schmidtke, “The Mu‘tazilite Movement (III): The Scholastic Phase,” in S. Schmidtke (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Islamic Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), pp. 159–180. On the issue of anthropomorphism (tashbih), which stood at the heart of many theological debates, see Livnat Holtzman, *Anthropomorphism in Islam: The Challenge of Traditionalism, 700–1350* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2018).

106 Abu Zaid and Nelson, *Voice of an Exile*, p. 4; Abu Zayd, “Rethinking the Qur’an,” pp. 44–45; Abu Zayd, *al-Ittijah al-‘Aqli fi’l-Tafsir: Dirasa fi Qadiyyat al-Majaz fi’l-Qur’an ‘inda al-Mu‘tazila* (Beirut: Dar al-Tanwir li’l-Thaqafa wa’l-Nashr, 1982).

107 Mernissi, *Islam and Democracy*, pp. 26–27, 42–43.

108 Ibn ‘Arabi was an Andalusian Muslim scholar, mystic, poet, and philosopher. Known as Muhyi al-Din (reviver of religion) and surnamed al-Shaykh al-Akbar (the greatest shaykh), he was a prolific writer who composed about 400 works. His magnum opus was *al-Futuhāt al-Makkiyya* (The Meccan revelations), in which he expounded his Sufi doctrine. M. Chodkiewicz, *The Spiritual Writings of Amir ‘Abd al-Kader* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1995).

109 Abu Zaid and Nelson, *Voice of an Exile*, p. 58; Abu Zayd, *Falsafat al-Ta’wil: Dirasa fi Ta’wil al-Qur’an ‘inda Muhyi al-Din Ibn ‘Arabi* (Beirut: Dar al-Tanwir, 1993). In response, a member of the Islamist cause accused Abu Zayd not of presenting new interpretations of the Qur’an, but rather of creating a new one. Abu Zayd, quoted in www.almasry-alyoum.com/printerfriendly.aspx?ArticleID=192132 (accessed December 28, 2008).

110 Mu yī al-Dīn Ibn al-‘Arabī, *Tarjumān al-Ashwāq: a Collection of Mystical Odes*, ed. and trans. R. A. Nicholson (London: Royal Asiatic Society, 1911), pp. 19, 67.

111 Fluehr-Lobban (ed.), *Against Islamic Extremism*, pp. 70–79.

112 Ibid., p. 71.

113 Abu Zaid and Nelson, *Voice of an Exile*, pp. 168–169; Abu Zayd,

[“Rethinking the Qur’an,” pp. 44–47; al-‘Ashmawi, Jawhar al-Islam , pp. 27–35; Nettler, “Mohamed Talbi’s Ideas on Islam and Politics,” pp. 135–136, 147.](#)

[114 Al-Kawakibi, Umm al-Qura , esp. pp. 207–210; Hatina, Identity Politics , pp. 13–29. Another of these writers was ‘Abd Allah Khalaf Allah, author of al-Nazariyyat fi’l-Islam \(Cairo: n.p., 1984\).](#)

[115 Husayn Ahmad Amin’s books: Hawla al-Da‘wa ila Tatbiq al-Shari‘a , 2nd ed. \(Cairo: Maktabat Madbuli, 1987\), pp. 282–291; al-Islam fi ‘Alam Mutaghayyir , 3rd ed. \(Cairo: Maktabat Madbuli, 1988\), pp. 227–236.](#)

[116 Al-Nabulsi, al-Fikr al-‘Arabi , vol. 3, pp. 24–27. With regard to the punishment of theft, Sura 5:38 states: “Cut of the hands of the thieves, whether they are man or woman, as punishment for what they have done—a deterrent from God.” The term al-mu‘allafa qulubhum as cited in Sura 9:60 refers to influential individuals among the Bedouin whom the Prophet had commanded in the Qur’an to bring closer by gifts—money or camels. The goal was to attract them to convert to Islam and to entice them not to join the camps of the Prophet’s opponents. Following the Battle of Hanun, the Prophet gave them dozens of camels.](#)

[117 Shahrour, “The Divine Text,” p. 149; Fuda’s books: al-Haqiqa al-Gha‘iba , pp. 66–68; al-Irhab , p. 58.](#)

[118 Al-‘Ashmawi’s books: al-Islam al-Siyasi , pp. 17–20, 110–112; al-Khilafa al-Islamiyya , 3rd ed. \(Cairo: Maktabat Madbuli al-Saghir, 1996\), pp. 135–150.](#)

[119 For an elaborate biography on Taha, see Edward Thomas, Islam’s Perfect Stranger: The Life of Mahmud Muhammad Taha: Muslim Reformer in Sudan \(London: I.B. Tauris. 2009\). For his prolific writing, see \[www.alfikra.org\]\(http://www.alfikra.org\).](#)

[120 The leaflet is quoted in George Packer, “The Moderate Martyr: A Radically Peaceful Vision of Islam,” The New Yorker , September 11, 2006, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2006/09/11/the-moderate-martyr> \(accessed August 10, 2019\).](#)

[121 Al-Ikhwan al-Jumhuriyyun, Safwat Qudat Daway’ir al-Ahwal al-Shakhsiyya \(Omdurman: Jumhuri publication, 1976\), pp. 9–10, 28.](#)

[122 Al-Ikhwan al-Jumhuriyyun’s compositions: al-Musalaha al-Wataniyya](#)

(Omdurman: Jumhuri publication, 1977); al-Ta'ifiyya Tata'amar 'ala al-Sha'b., 3rd. ed. (Omdurman: Jumhuri publication, 1975).

123 Al-Ikhwan al-Jumhuriyyun, al-Musalaha al-Wataniyya , cover page.

124 Thomas, Islam's Perfect Stranger , p. 219; Judith Miller, God Has Ninetynine Names: Reporting from a Militant Middle East (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996), pp. 12–13, 138–140.

125 Packer, “The Moderate Martyr.”

126 Amir Ahmad Nasr, My Isl@m: How Fundamentalism Stole My Mind—and Doubt Freed My Soul (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2013).

127 See, for example, al-Ikhwan al-Jumhuriyyun's manifestos: al-Gharaba fi'l-Da'wa al-Islamiyya al-Jadida (Omdurman: al-Sudani, 1977), pp. 21–23; al-Talaq laysa Aslan fi'l-Islam, 2nd. ed. (Omdurman: Jumhuri publication, 1977); Huquq al-Mar'a fi'l-Din, al-Shari'a, al-Fiqh, 2nd ed. (Omdurman: Jumhuri publication, 1977); al-Musalaha al-Wataniya. These and other manifestos cited below, handwritten, are located in the Middle East Center Library, St. Antony's College, Oxford.

128 The Republican Brothers, An Introduction to the Second Message of Islam (Omdurman: Jumhuri publication, 1976), pp. 5–10.

129 Ibid., p. 3; also al-Ikhwan al-Jumhuriyyun, al-Ta'lim , 2nd ed. (Omdurman: al-Sudani, 1977), pp. 23–25.

130 Taha, Tatwir Shari'at al-Ahwal al-Shakhsiyya , 2nd ed. (Omdurman: Jumhuri publication, 1979), pp. 49–50; also Packer, “The Moderate Martyr.”

131 During the 1968 trial the court imposed a death sentence on Taha; it also ruled that his wife be divorced from him and that his property be confiscated. However, the sentence was not implemented and with the power seizure of Numairi in 1969 it remained dormant for a decade-and-a-half, until 1985. On the trial and the reaction of the Republican Brothers and the intellectual community in Sudan, see al-Ikhwan al-Jumhuriyyun's manifestos: Laysu 'Ulama' al-Sudan wa-Innama 'Ulama' 'Akhir al-Zaman (Omdurman: al-Sudani, 1976); Mahzalāt Mahkamat al-Ridda, Makida Siyasiyya (Omdurman: al-Sudani, 1976); also Sami 'Awad al-Dhib Abu Sahiliyya, Mahmud Muhammad Taha: Hayat wa-Fikr

[Muslih Haqiqi li'l-Qur'an \(Ochettaz: Markaz al-Qanun al-'Arabi wa'l-Islami, 2017\), pp. 121–139.](#)

[132 The Republican Brothers, An Introduction , pp. 10–11.](#)

[133 Ibid., pp. 5–6, 11–12.](#)

[134 Mahmud Muhammad Taha, Mushkilat al-Sharq al-Awsat: Tahlil Siyasi, Istiqra' Ta'rikhi, Hall 'Ilmi \(Omdurman: al-Sudani, 1967; repr. Cairo: al-Sharika al-'Alamiyya li'l-Tiba'a wa'l-Nashr, 2009\), esp. ch. 6.](#)

[135 Taha's revolutionary ideas were expressed in his seminal work, al-Risala al-Thaniya min al-Islam , new ed. \(Beirut: al-Markaz al-Thaqafi al-'Arabi, 2007\). For the English version \(which will be used here\), see Mahmoud Mohamed Taha, The Second Message of Islam , trans. Abdullahi Ahmed An-Na'im \(Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1987\). See also al-Ikhwan al-Jumhuriyyun's maifestos: al-Gharaba fi'l-Da'wa al-Islamiyya al-Jadida , pp. 9–11; Liqa' Idha'i ma'a al-Ustadh Mahmud Muhammad Taha \(Omdurman: al-Sudani, 1977\), pp. 15–18.](#)

[136 The Republican Brothers, An Introduction , pp. 12–14, 23–28.](#)

[137 Ibid., pp. 23–28; also Huquq al-Mar'a , esp. pp. 1–20.](#)

[138 The Republican Brothers, An Introduction , p. 28.](#)

[139 Ibid., pp. 12–14; Taha, The Second Message of Islam , pp. 146–164.](#)

[140 The Republican Brothers, An Introduction , pp. 25–26; also Huquq al-Mar'a , pp. 6–10.](#)

[141 The Republican Brothers, An Introduction , pp. 20–21.](#)

[142 Taha, The Second Message of Islam , pp. 124–126.](#)

[143 Al-Ikhwan al-Jumhuriyyun, Liqa' , pp. 16–17; Taha, The Second Message of Islam , pp. 132–137.](#)

[144 The Republican Brothers, An Introduction , pp. 14–17; also Liqa' , pp. 4–5, 15–17; al-Gharaba fi'l-Da'wa , pp. 12–14. In another manifesto, the party sought](#)

[to rebuff Taha's accusations of the degradation of the Prophet by arguing that Taha in fact perceived Muhammad as the seal of the prophecy and that those who emulated his life would be able to understand the secrets of the Qur'an: Laysu 'Ulama' al-Sudan , pp. 13–18.](#)

[145 On the biographical genre of Muhammad and its aims in Egyptian liberal discourse in the late 1930s and early 1940s, see Gershoni and Jankowski, Redefining the Egyptian Nation , pp. 54–61.](#)

[146 The Republican Brothers, An Introduction , pp. 16–17, 20–41; and Liqa' , pp. 15–17; al-Gharaba fi'l-Da'wa , pp. 9–12. See also Mahmoud, "Mahmud Muhammad Taha's Second Message of Islam," pp. 105–128.](#)

[147 The Republican Brothers, An Introduction , pp. 16–19, 44–45.](#)

[148 Ibid., pp. 6–7.](#)

[149 Taha, Tatwir Shari'at al-Ahwal al-Shakhsiyya , pp. 90–95.](#)

[150 Ibid.; al-Ikhwan al-Jumhuriyyun, Qanun wa-Qudat al-Ahwal al-Shakhsiyya \(Omdurman: Jumhuri publication, 1975\), esp. pp. 4–5.](#)

[151 Al-Ikhwan al-Jumhuriyyun, Huquq al-Mar'a , p. 1.](#)

[152 On Amin's biography and thought, see Noëlle Baladi, L'émancipation de la femme en Egypte \(Nantes: Editions Amalthée, 2005\).](#)

[153 Al-Ikhwan al-Jumhuriyyun, Huquq al-Mar'a , p. 31.](#)

[154 Al-Ikhwan al-Jumhuriyyun's manifestos: al-Ta'lim ; Liqa' Idha'i , p. 5.](#)

[155 Taha, The Second Message of Islam , pp. 36–42; al-Ikhwan al-Jumhuriyyun's pamphlets, al-Gharaba fi'l-Da'wa , pp. 11–12, 14–15, 36–38; Liqa , pp. 5, 9, 16–18; Huquq al-Mar'a , pp. 10–13.](#)

[156 Taha, The Second Message of Islam , opening page.](#)

[157 On the polemic against Taha and his trial, see Abu Sahiliyya, Mahmud Muhammad Taha , pp. 130–175.](#)

158 Al-Mahdi, quoted in Packer, “The Moderate Martyr.”

159 Al-Nanbulsi, al-Fikr al-‘Arabi , vol. 1, p. 467; vol. 2, p. 341; vol. 3, pp. 81, 112, 135.

160 Taha, al-Thawra al-Thaqafiyya (Arbaji: n.p., 1972); The Republican Brothers, An Introduction , pp. 16–17.

161 Charfi, al-Islam , pp. 57–58.

162 Ibid., pp. 58–59, 60–61.

163 Mernissi, Beyond the Veil , p. 62. In quoting the stories of Muhammad’s wives Mernissi relied on early Muslim works, mainly those of Ibn Sa‘d (d. 845) and al-Tirmidhi (d. 892).

164 Ibid., pp. 65–69. In this context she relied on the famous Muslim chronicle by Muhammad b. Sa‘d, Kitab al-Tabaqat al-Kubra (Beirut: Dar al-Kutub al-‘Ilmiyya, 1990), vol. 8, pp. 42–103.

165 Mernissi, Beyond the Veil, pp. 65–67. Still, Mernissi noted that the Prophet did not treat women aggressively, nor did he use brute force against them. On the contrary, he was humane, and hence vulnerable, and admitted to it. Ibid., p. 69. Ibn Sa‘d, Kitab al-Tabaqat , pp. 129, 212–213.

166 Notably, in contrast to Mernissi, Sultan did not refer the reader to specific Muslim sources.

167 Sultan, A God Who Hates , pp. 62–65.

168 Ibid., p. 127.

169 Ibid., pp. 127–135.

170 Ibid., pp. 133–134.

171 Ibid., pp. 155–156.

172 Ibid., pp. 62–65.

173 Ibid., pp. 207–210.

174 Sayyid al-Qimni's books: al-Hizb al-Hashimi wa-Ta'asis al-Dawla al-Islamiyya (Cairo: Sina' li'l-Nashr, 1990); Hurub Dawlat al-Rasul (Cairo: Sina' li'l-Nashr, 1993); al-Ustura wa'l-Turath (Cairo: al-Markaz al-Misri li-Buhuth al-Hadara, 1999). See also Wael Abu-'Uksa, "Liberal Renewal of the Turath: Constructing the Egyptian Past in Sayyid al-Qimni's Works," in Hatina and Schumann (eds.), Arab Liberal Thought after 1967 , pp. 104–108.

175 Fluehr-Lobban (ed.), Against Islamic Extremism , pp. 68–69; Hijji, al-Taqaifa Awwalan wa-Akhiran , pp. 13–14, 20–21.

176 Hatina, Identity Politics , pp. 71–96, 119–138; Fluehr-Lobban (ed.), Against Islamic Extremism , pp. 67–90; Charfi, al-Islam , pp. 70–71, 93–94.

177 Fluehr-Lobban (ed.), Against Islamic Extremism , pp. 78–80, 87–90; Abu Zaid and Nelson, Voice of an Exile , pp. 182–183.

178 Fluehr-Lobban (ed.), Against Islamic Extremism , pp. 73–74.

179 Ibid., pp. 73–79; al-'Ashmawi, al-Islam al-Siyasi , pp. 1–4, 7–27; Fuda, al-Haqiqa al-Gha'iba , pp. 45–46, 89; Mernissi, Islam and Democracy , p. 29; Hatina, Identity Politics , pp. 74–75. The extolled image of 'Umar followed the line of early, mainly Egyptian, liberals in the first half of the twentieth century; see, for example, Muhammad Husayn Haykal, 'Abbas Mahmud al-'Aqqad and Khalid Muhammad Khalid. These writers sought to neutralize the Muslim sense of inferiority in modern times and stimulate greater social activism. Haykal further argued that the greatness of 'Umar was no less than, and even exceeded, that of other world figures who left their mark on human history, such as Julius Caesar, Alexander the Great, Genghis Khan, and Napoleon. Haykal, al-Faruq 'Umar , vol. 1; al-'Aqqad, 'Abqariyyat 'Umar ; Khalid, Bayna Yaday 'Umar .

180 Al-'Ashmawi, al-Islam al-Siyasi , pp. 17–20, 110–112; and his al-Khilafa al-Islamiyya , pp. 17–40, 135–150; Fuda, al-Haqiqa al-Gha'iba , pp. 11–15, 22–25, 41–45, 75–89, 91–114, 124–128, 132–134; Mernissi, Islam and Democracy , pp. 29–30.

181 Fuda, al-Haqiqa al-Gha'iba .

182 On Fuda's critical discussion of the shari'a, see Hatina, Identity Politics , ch. 4.

183 Fluehr-Lobban (ed.), *Against Islamic Extremism* , pp. 70–71, 87–88.

184 Al-Nabulsi, “Man hum al-Libiraliyyun al- ‘Arab al-Judad,” p. 22.

185 Ghabriyal, “al-Libiraliyya al-Jadida,” p. 70

186 Mernissi, *Islam and Democracy* , pp. 85–103; Abu Zayd, “Rethinking the Qur’an,” p. 59; Abu Zayd and Nelson, *Voice of an Exile* , p. 205.

187 Abu Zayd and Nelson, *Voice of an Exile* , p. 4; also Charfi, *al-Islam* , pp. 6–10.

188 Abu Zayd and Nelson, *Voice of an Exile* , p. 198.

189 On Kadivar’s and Soroush’s works, see Yasuyuki Matsunaga, “Mohsen Kadivar, an Advocate of Postrevivalist Islam in Iran,” in Lloyd Ridgeon (ed.), *Iranian Intellectuals: 1997–2007* (London: Routledge, 2008), pp. 57–69; Mahmoud Sadri and Ahmad Sadri (eds.), *Reason, Freedom and Democracy: The Essential Writings of Abdolkarim Soroush* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000). For Soroush’s lengthy discussion of freedom, see ‘Abd al-Karim Surush and Ahmad Qubani, *al-Siyasa wa’l-Tadayyun: Daqa’iq Nazariyya wa-Ma’aziq ‘Amaliyya* (Beirut: al-Intishar al- ‘Arabi, 2009), pp. 140–170.

190 Soroush, “Reason, Freedom, and Democracy in Islam,” pp. 259–260.

191 Mohsen Kadivar, “Wilayat al-faqih and Democracy,” in Asma Afsaruddin (ed.), *Islam, the State, and Political Authority: Medieval Issues and Modern Concerns* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), pp. 207–224.

192 Abdul-Karim Soroush, “The Evolution and Devolution of Religious Knowledge,” in Kurzman (ed.), *Liberal Islam* , pp. 244–251; and his “The Changeable and the Unchangeable,” in Kari Voegtli, Lena Larsen, and Christian Moe (eds.), *New Directions in Islamic Thought* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2009), pp. 9–15.

193 Soroush, “The Changeable and the Unchangeable.”

194 Kamrava, *Iran’s Intellectual Revolution* , pp. 173–174, 205–209; Forough Jahanbakhsh, *Islam, Democracy and Religious Modernism (1953 – 2000) from Bazargan to Soroush* (Leiden: Brill, 2001), esp. ch. 5; Tabriz-Behrooz, *Islam and*

Dissent in Post-revolutionary Iran: Abdolkarim Soroush, Religious Politics and Democratic Reform (London: I.B. Tauris, 2008); and Soroush, al-Siyasa wa'l-Tadayyun , pp. 90–137, 171–199.

195 Soroush, “Reason, Freedom, and Democracy in Islam,” esp. pp. 244–248; Kadivar, “Freedom of Religion and Belief in Islam,” pp. 127–132.

196 Soroush, “Reason, Freedom, and Democracy in Islam,” p. 259.

197 Kadivar, quoted in Ali M. Ansari, The Politics of Nationalism in Modern Iran (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), p. 245.

198 Soroush, “Reasons, Freedom, and Democracy in Islam,” p. 249.

199 Abdolkarim Soroush, The Expansion of Prophetic Experience: Essays on Historicity, Contingency and Plurality in Religion (Leiden: Brill, 2009); Saeed, Reading the Qur'an , pp. 54–56.

200 Soroush, “Reasons, Freedom, and Democracy,” pp. 260–261.

201 Kadivar, “Wilayat al-faqih and Democracy,” pp. 221–222.

202 Jahanbakhsh, Islam , pp. 153–162.

Arab politics: oriental despotism

Lack of civic culture

The religious daring of the Arab liberals went hand in hand with a defiance of Arab political culture. For liberal writers, the quality of political life was a key issue and a cornerstone for the renaissance of modern Arab society. The constitution, judiciary, and democracy triad was envisioned as an integral and inseparable part of the modernization package. An accusing finger was thus pointed at local regimes that focused their attention on industrialization, urbanization, and education, but neglected civic culture. In liberal discourse, the latter was seen as a vehicle for promoting tolerance and a vibrant civil society, characterized by institutional and ideological pluralism. The state played a vital role in maintaining public order and mediating between different interests, but it did not have a monopoly over power and truth. The assumption was that it would respect the constitution and the multiparty system, and implement laws for the common good, regardless of a person's religion, race, or nation. All are equal before the law in rights and duties. Respect for the law should be the only criterion by which a person is judged and treated, and no one is above the law. National loyalty is thus forged among its citizens, who should strive for the community's stability and security and mobilize to protect it from internal or external aggressors.¹

An incisive look at the Arab world revealed a gloomy picture that contrasted sharply with liberal ideals. What the liberals saw was a repressive political culture where rulers treated their people as shepherds rule sheep with the help of dogs and sticks (the executive branch and security services), and deprived them of all their rights and freedoms.² Such a tyrannical climate, they argued, was steeped in a deeply rooted tradition of "Oriental despotism" that operated in keeping with its own ruthlessness and drew its inspiration from the fascist Latin American model of leader worship. Indeed, Muhammad al-Shahrur, Ahmad al-

Baghdadi, Sayyid al-Qimni, and Tariq Hijji chalked up this personality cult to fascist influence.³ Shakir al-Nabulsi, however, saw in it vestiges of pre-Islamic jahiliyya (lit. ignorance), calling Saddam Hussein the “Hubal of Iraq,” after the chief god of the Arab tribes in the jahiliyya period.⁴ He also drew parallels with the adulation of Lenin and Stalin in the Communist bloc, a style assiduously cultivated by Nasser in Egypt.

In al-Nabulsi’s view, tyrants who built statues to glorify themselves or surrounded themselves with a godlike aura ruled by “the logic of power, not the logic of reason and thought; the logic of coercion, oppression, and death, not the logic of choice and freedom ... the logic of one person, not the logic of individuals who share power.”⁵ Arab rulers, Hazim Saghiya argued, have provided a rather pale profile of leadership in comparison with those who led other struggles for national independence, such as Gandhi in India, Mandela in South Africa, and Ben-Gurion in Palestine. These leaders not only sought national liberation, but also laid solid foundations for liberal democracy. In the Arab region it was only Habib Bourguiba in Tunisia who set goals beyond that of independence when he preserved French values in the country and fought for women’s rights and a ban on polygamy. On the other hand, Nasser in Egypt focused mainly on resisting imperialism, while imposing political tyranny and demagogically using Islam to fortify his hold on society. “While Nasser sought to lead the Arab nation and lead flocks in the Arab streets, Bourguiba sought to reform the Arab nation and restore its human rationalism after having been ensnared by witchcraft, charlatanism and blind popular religion.”⁶ The rise of a young generation of leaders, who came to power in several Arab countries including Syria, Jordan, and Morocco in the early 2000s, also failed the liberal narrative. Economic reforms were partial, democratization was in its infancy, and the search for freedom continued.

Making no attempt to conceal his dismay over the behavior of the masses in the face of autocratic regimes, al-Nabulsi wrote:

Do not the rulers of Greater Syria, Iraq, Sudan, Egypt, North West Africa, and the Gulf become the holy gods on earth—beyond all accountability and all punishment? Do not many civilians plant a kiss on their hands and necks, and are they not blessed by them? Can these rulers not find someone who will volunteer to burn incense and recite incantations [to keep them safe] in their

places of worship, as faithful servants in the sanctuary?⁷

The Arabs, al-Nabulsi noted, not only worship the dictator during his lifetime, but also after his death, as if he were a great reformer and a just ruler. They mourn his death as they mourn the death of their parents. This was the case with Nasser (d. 1970) and Saddam Hussein (d. 2003).⁸ In a comparative look at reality in Europe, al-Nabulsi observed:

Tyrants are the product of a society dominated by fear. There is no room for tyrants in the society of the brave. Germany, Italy, and Romania were ruled by fear and cowards created tyrants—Hitler, Mussolini, Ceaușescu. When cowardly societies became courageous societies, they ousted tyrants, even with the help of external forces (as in Germany and Italy).⁹

Fear is not the only factor that explains why no velvet revolutions broke out in the Arab world. Al-Nabulsi provided a long list of additional explanations, accusing Arab society of neglecting chronic problems that required a complete social transformation: the Arab political heritage that prevented demonstrations against rulers through numerous forged hadiths that preached obedience to the ruler, even an oppressive one; an Arab society that was dependent and believed in supreme forces; a close connection between religion and politics, which prevented equality before the law and solidarity between Shi'is and Sunnis, and between Muslims and Christians; the Arab mind, which was still in an early stage of emotional development; and the Arab political opposition, including the liberal one, which appeared as corrupt and dictatorial as the rulers. Opposition leaders stepped down only when they were dying, grew old, or suffered from dementia and were no longer fit to lead. Opposition parties in the Arab world are “paper tigers.” Thus the situation of the Arabs today is similar to that of the Ottoman Empire in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, like that of a sick man (al-rajul al-marid). Creating parallels between the Ottomans and the Arabs aimed to highlight the prolonged and deep crisis of the East.¹⁰

Al-Nabulsi's exemplary model of an opposition with developed consciousness, knowledge, and organization was provided by the Kharijites in the seventh

century. They opposed injustice, tyranny, and corruption, and represented a democratic party with a clear platform. The caliph had to be elected by free choice, and black slaves or women could also serve in office. In his historical reading, al-Nabulsi did not ignore the religious fanaticism and violence that clung to the Kharijites, but he believed that these flaws were only later associated with them under the Umayyads. As far as he was concerned, the Kharijites represented a lofty example of involved public intellectuals such as is not visible on the Arab street today.

Where power and tyranny were glorified there was bound to be fraud and corruption, al-Nabulsi continued. He accused modern Arab rulers of instating a pseudo-democratic form of governance (*tashkil dimuqrati*). The people in control were those who ran the intelligence agencies and the police. As far as the general population was concerned, taking to the streets was a surefire recipe for martyrdom. With luck, one might merely find oneself in detention or jail.¹¹

As Tunisian writer Mohamed Talbi observed, democracy in the Arab world was no more than a theatrical production. Rulers were not replaced at the polling booths, but through violent, or occasionally even natural, death. As long as a leader remained at the helm, he spent his days amassing property and riches, and operating like George Orwell's Big Brother, running "an industry of repression ranging from disinformation to the use of poison gas." This was the classic scenario in Arab countries, wrote Talbi. The existence of a constitution, a judiciary, and elections turned into a bad joke, as the people became puppets whose vote overwhelmingly ended up as a vote of confidence in the reigning leader and his party.¹² The democratic farce, in which there was no real confrontation between people or political principles, was quietly accepted by most intellectuals, and those who continued to protest were forcibly silenced by censorship and surveillance. Trapped between political repression and religious and social conservatism, Arabs never became citizens.¹³

The Arabs have never been citizens. They have neither the time nor the opportunity. Subjected to corrupt, perverted, and crumbling powers, they became colonized natives, and they now find themselves subjects again, even if they are pompously called citizens to create an illusion of modernity. They are still led by the *asa al-ta'a* (the stick of obedience).¹⁴

In Talbi's arguments one could hear echoes of Khalid Muhammad Khalid's *Muwatinun la Ra'aya* (Citizens, not subjects), which caused a great stir in the Arab world when it appeared in 1950. In his book, Khalid decried the unending persecution of the local population, first under the Ottomans, then under the British and French mandates, and again in his own day under the nationalists, who chiefly represented the notables. This was the very opposite of "the era of the nations" (*'asr al-shu'ub*), wrote Khalid. He equated life with liberty, quoting U.S. President Thomas Jefferson's dictum that "God who gave us life gave us liberty." Liberty was the spirit of life, without which there was no human existence. The goal of life was to use all the marvelous abilities God granted human beings in order to build up the world. "God made humans His successors (khalifa) on the earth," Khalid continued, referring to Suras 2:30 and 6:165.¹⁵ It was humanity's job to build and develop human civilization through contemplation, imitation, and creativity. None of this was possible without liberty. Hence liberty was a divine power, a gift from God, and not on the same footing as tolerance (*al-tasamuh*), which relied on goodwill and was subject to change. Liberty was an eternal and enshrined right. In the same way that life was indivisible, it was impossible to divide liberty. One could not separate freedom of expression from the freedom to criticize, freedom of the press, or political freedom. They were all part of a single entity.¹⁶

The 1952 revolution reinforced Khalid's insights on liberty. In defending his views, Khalid emerged as a stern critic of the Nasserist regime from its earliest days. In his book *Azmat al-Hurriyya fi 'Alamina* (The crisis of liberty in our world), published in 1964, he wrote in general terms about the crisis facing the modern world, as governments exploited liberty to advance their own narrow interests instead of helping their people. It was clear, however, that he was speaking first and foremost about Egypt under Nasser. In contrast to his previous book, in which he dealt with liberty in the broadest sense, Khalid focused now mainly on political liberty, which he defined as a "dynamic field" that nourished other liberties, which had been suppressed or squashed by the 1952 revolution. What did political liberty mean? Democracy, Khalid replied simply: that is, the sovereignty of the people and the harnessing of all economic, political, and social resources for the good of people and the promotion of human welfare. Egypt's turn toward democracy would light the way for the whole of the Arab world.¹⁷ Khalid's call for personal freedom as a cornerstone for social order and democratic polity in the 1950s and early 1960s remained an important

component of the post-1967 liberal discourse.

In the 1980s, Khalid toned down his demand for the separation of religion and state, stating that: “Islam is religion and state, truth and power, culture and civilization.” However, he continued to pledge his allegiance to liberal ideas in the belief that Islam and democracy could coexist. He argued that democracy as a political system based on a social contract between ruler and subject upholds liberty and justice, is consistent with Islam, and is compatible with the Islamic institution of consultation (shura).¹⁸

Khalid’s legacy on the subject of liberty continued to guide liberal thinking. Al-Nabulsi, for example, began his three-volume treatise on modern Arab thought with Khalid’s indictment of Arab leadership: “Your problem with liberty is not finding it, but using it.”¹⁹ Elaborating this argument, al-Nabulsi noted that the Arabs are among the few nations that produced a vast literature on the concept of freedom, but did little to implement it on the ground. As a result, the Arab remained subjected and enslaved.²⁰ Although al-Nabulsi and other Arab liberals continued to dwell on the concept of liberty, the attempt to anchor it in Islamic sources lessened over time and was eventually relinquished altogether. They stated clearly that Islam had freed human beings from idolatry, but there was no reference to freedom in the intellectual, political, or social sense in the Qur’an or hadith. This expansionary significance developed only in the nineteenth century with the encounter with the West, and was carried by Arab Christian intellectuals, who translated the philosophical ideas of the French Revolution, and by heads of Christian missions, who reached Greater Syria at the time and established schools, institutes, and universities.²¹

Other writers commented in a general way that liberty was rooted in God’s word and the Prophet’s revelation and should be re-embraced as a norm in the Muslim community. A prominent example was Abdelmajid Charfi:

For Muslims, modernity is alien, though its impact is universal. One of the major values it upholds and which in fact was already embodied in the Muhammedan mission is considering man as a free and responsible individual, and not just as member of a group. An existence worthy of being called human must differ from that of animals, no matter how high their level of instinctual organization may be.²²

Freedom, according to Charfi, was intertwined with two other concepts: rationality and autonomy.

True liberty cannot be delegated, but [can only be achieved] if each individual bears responsibility for choices consciously made. Being free to think means having an intimate bond with truth, not imposed on an individual by others, but attained through intuition and the dictate of internal motivations, free from any form of external pressure.²³

When negating freedom, Charfi continued, human beings lose everything that represents a free personality and differentiates them from animals. Hence, as long as the individual does not occupy a central position in human existence as a free and responsible person beyond the patronage of religious authorities that has lasted for hundreds of years, there is no chance of a fundamental change in the lives of Muslims and no way out of the crisis of modernity.²⁴

Charfi did not rule out the possibility that complete freedom could lead to immorality or the end of morality, as in the Christian West, but he hastened to assure his readers that belief in God was deeply engrained in the Muslim community and was a light that guided them in their daily lives. Thus even if immorality wormed its way into the Muslim world it would cause less harm than in Western societies. While a breakdown in morals was not likely, he insisted, rethinking the rights and duties of Islam remained important.²⁵

The Islamic sciences form a complete system created in response to the requirements and values of ancient societies. This system must be reconstructed on the basis of new principles if it is to be fit for the conditions and values of our own age. Probably, the most important principle is to consider Muslims, like any other individuals, as possessing rights that cannot be compromised or trifled with, and that were asserted by the Universal Declaration of Rights, and all international conventions that confirmed them.

These rights are accompanied by certain duties, which cannot be denied either. Some duties are valid for everybody, while others apply specifically to Muslims. This reverses the traditional view of the Muslim as primarily bound by duties, with rights coming only in second place. There is less emphasis on the rights than on the obligations, and the obligations themselves are of the old discriminating kind that favors the elite over the general public, and men over women. However, the reversal of the traditional view required a comprehensive awareness of the modern view of the human being and new methods of education, which will break away from what has been handed down, steer clear of the obsolete, and back the future and people's legitimate aspirations to more freedom, equality, justice and dignity.²⁶

Charfi concluded that the destiny of the Muslims depended on the center of gravity shifting from the collective to the individual and respecting the wishes of the individual. The focus needed to be on personal, private faith rather than on public, institutional manifestations of religion.²⁷

This position was also shared by Muhammad Shahrur, Turki al-Hamad, and al-'Afif al-Akhdar. Shahrur and al-Hamad stressed that religion had no meaning without freedom, and that what distinguished human beings from the rest of creation was love of freedom and free choice. Even if freedom could eventually lead to destruction and bloodshed, in the end the free individual was responsible for his or her actions, including if these actions were wrong.²⁸ But al-Hamad quickly calmed his readers. A look at modern Western history, he argued, showed that freedom had produced a tide of abominations and permissiveness, but that only few people were enticed by them. If many people had behaved horrendously, as some claimed, then they could not have achieved scientific and industrial hegemony in the world today. One may deduce from this, al-Hamad went on, that freedom is an asset rather than an outlet. Inventions that changed the face of the world were products of an open mind, the ability to identify something new, to be unaffected by the bonds of public opinion, and to doubt so-called truths. Freedom is at the heart of progress and renewal. Without it, money would impede progress, technology would not solve the problem of backwardness, and there would be no liberation from the burden of imperialism. People cannot make progress if beliefs are imposed on them because differences of opinion are the essence of creativity, and creativity is the essence of progress.²⁹ The polity aspired to was sketched by al-Hamad through the prism of

Hisham, the hero in his novel *Adama* (1998), who looked at the world of Saudi dissent and was himself caught up in a struggle for change in a repressive and closed society.

He [Hisham] became filled with a new spirit, eager to transform this world into an earthly paradise where everyone would live free from tyranny and prejudice, in complete fairness, equality and justice. The entire planet had become his new country, while his city was now a mere speck in the sea and his country simply one part of the great mass of mankind to which every true human being had to belong.³⁰

Al-Akhdar went further with the issue of freedom. While his colleagues Charfi, Shahrur, and al-Hamad decreed that the principle of freedom is enshrined in religion and the word of God, al-Akhdar elevated this principle to the status of a religion in its own right (*din huquq al-insan*)—universal and including all people, regardless of their gender, language, and creed. The “religion of human rights,” al-Akhdar argued, was a product of the era of Enlightenment in Europe, which considered human dignity and liberty as a supreme value. It is fundamentally different from other religions because it is humane. While other religions promise personal salvation of the soul after death, the religion of human rights seeks to save the body and preserve the person’s rights in this world. Other religions are based on rituals and harsh laws, some of which are cruel, such as circumcision of males in Judaism and Islam and female circumcision in Islam, or corporal punishment (*hudud*), including death for the abandonment of faith (*rida*). On the other hand, the religion of human rights calls for values common to all human beings so as to make their lives less miserable. It strives to remove the concept of holiness from any individual or social activity, setting the liberty and preeminence of the individual as its main goal. While condemning Judaism and Islam, al-Akhdar praised the Catholic Church for adopting the historic turning point of the Enlightenment and incorporating the existence of a new player in history—namely, the individual. It no longer intervenes in or rejects individual choices, al-Akhdar said. The Christian individual views his religious duties as dishes in a restaurant, to pick and choose at will.³¹

The crisis of individualism

Several liberal spokesmen devoted much of their writings to the crisis of individualism in the Middle East. The Moroccan feminist and sociologist Fatima Mernissi claimed that freedom had always had an ambiguous status in Muslim civilization and had never become a positive concept. Politically, the individual was not expected to exercise any free choice as to how he or she wished to be governed. She attributed the demonization of the image of freedom to its identification with Kharijite rebellion and disorder.³² For the Lebanese philosopher Nasif Nassar, author of *fi'l-Tarbiya wa'l-Siyasa: Mata Yasiru al-Fard fi'l-Duwal al-'Arabiyya Muwatinan?* (Education and politics: When will individuals become citizens in Arab countries?),³³ the principle of personal liberty constituted the cornerstone of liberal government. Like Charfi and al-Akhdar, he pushed for a redefinition of the individual's relationship to the group. The group could be free only if it was made up of free individuals. Individuals were not obligated to sacrifice their private lives and personal interests for the common good or for the group in which they lived. Nevertheless, they had to act sensibly and manage their relational dialectics in a socially acceptable and open manner, in a way that was considerate of others and took into account the goals, means, and consequences of other people's actions. Rational thinking was the safety net that prevented the misuse of freedom. This was not to say that individuals bore no responsibility for public affairs or the indirect consequences of their actions, or that the government had no say in social matters. Autonomy of the individual, combined with social responsibility, would ensure that liberty did not flourish at the expense of justice or become a synonym for social divisions and exploitation. Thus, contrary to the customary perceptions of liberalism, a fundamental clash between personal freedom and social justice was not a given, and it was up to the political regime to maintain a balance between the two.³⁴

Sudanese thinker Mahmud Muhammad Taha had already raised the issue of reconciling the individual's need for absolute freedom with the community's need for social justice in the 1960s.³⁵ Socialism, according to Taha, who used the Arabic term *ishtirakiyya*, meant equal access to all the material riches human endeavor could create. In his eyes, only when "socialism and democracy

complement one another, could a humane and equitable society emerge.” He likened their intertwining to two wings of a bird: just as a bird cannot fly with one wing, so a civilized society—one in which free human beings flourish—can only grow with two wings, one democracy and the other socialism.³⁶

Nassar, by contrast, did not mention or discuss equality. The society he envisaged was characterized by social gaps with fair-minded economic divisions between rich and poor. He did not uphold economic equality. Yet at the same time, he was disdainful of the competitive and laissez-faire philosophy of capitalistic liberalism as in Adam Smith’s concept of the “invisible hand” or Jeremy Bentham’s utilitarianism, which strove for minimal state intervention in economic affairs on the grounds that it interfered with the freedom of individuals to do business as they wished. While this type of liberalism was not anarchist in approach, it promoted liberties that aligned with the aspirations and appetites of the powerful and the rich. Since market forces eventually wear down the weak, one of the tasks of the political system is to establish mechanisms that allow for the exercise of freedom without flagrant violation of the principle of justice.

Nassar called the form of liberal democracy that Arab societies needed to adopt to revitalize themselves a “mutually responsible liberalism” (al-libiraliyya al-takafuliyya). It was reminiscent of the social liberalism of the political theorist and sociologist Leonard Hobhouse (d. 1929), which was embraced by Britain in the early twentieth century. In his famous book *Liberalism* (1911), Hobhouse held that the wealth of individuals has a social dimension; it is a collective product, which means that those who own property owe some of their success to society and thus have some obligation to others. Hobhouse thus justified a level of redistribution provided by the new state pensions.³⁷

While expressing sympathy for conservative European liberalism, which set limits to rampant capitalism and sought to narrow disparities between rich and poor, Nassar expressed a clear aversion to American liberalism, which he described as extreme and as aiming to turn the world into a single market where people act only according to their own interests and capital. Although he turned his gaze to Western experience, Nassar made it clear that non-Western societies were allowed to develop liberal versions of their own, and take into account the cultural trends prevalent in their society.³⁸

Nassar’s model of “mutually responsible liberalism” carved out a middle path between Western society, with its anxiously safeguarded principles of liberty,

and Arab society, which feared liberalism's negative social repercussions. One of the arguments against civil liberty was the specter of family breakdown, as women left the home to study and work, and children, taught to become initiators and assume responsibility while applying original and critical thinking, would stop obeying their parents. Socialist and military regimes in the mid-twentieth century further argued that personal freedom would weaken the struggle for national liberation from imperialism, and sabotage efforts to free the working class from the yoke of feudalism and bourgeois ideology. Sanctifying the cause of collective freedom pushed personal freedom to the sidelines. These regimes collapsed in the wake of the Arab military defeat in 1967. However, the notion of collective liberty and social justice, along with a long-standing tradition of patriarchal conservatism, continued to serve as a cover for dictatorship and repression, wrote Nassar, lamenting the sad fate of the culture of freedom (*thaqafat al-hurriyya*) in the Arab world.³⁹

Nassar's gloomy conclusion was shared by al-Nabulsi, who concluded that

the Arab land is a bad land with a high salinity. It consists of legends, myths, emotions, illiteracy, poverty, humiliation, and enslavement to the sultan. Such land is not worthy of carrying the seeds of freedom. The first condition for freedom is life, and life means a society that believes in the achievements of the intellect and entrusts it with its reins.⁴⁰

Al-Nabulsi even turned to fictional Arabic literature in the hope of finding novels that explored the pleasures of freedom. Instead, he found only oppression, persecution, and humiliation that "turned the Arab individual from man to rabbit, and people into herds."⁴¹

In 2011, Hazim Saghiya, another Lebanese writer and journalist, published *The Predicament of the Individual in the Middle East*. In the introduction, Saghiya observed that cultivating individualism—granting citizens the right to choose in matters of life and death, love and hatred, politics and culture—was essential for a nation's progress. Yet in the Arab world, individualism remained a dispensable value due to "old loyalties," that is, kinship and ethnic, local, and religious ties. Those who rose up and demanded freedom were branded self-seekers and

accused of antisocial behavior.⁴²

Saghiya pointed an accusing finger at pre-Islamic tribal traditions, with their collective orientation, which continued to rule in the Arab world. Instead of being phased out, he wrote, these traditions were coopted. Jihadi ideology further sharpened the Muslims' collective identity and antagonism toward non-Muslims and outsiders. The overlapping of religion and politics was another factor: it led to the politicization of almost every sphere of life and kept the regime from viewing subjects as citizens and individuals. The multiple ethnicities in the Middle East, which split people into groups such as Muslims and non-Muslims, or Arabs and Turks, also worked against individualism and fostered group solidarity ('asabiyya). Inculcating a tradition of individualism into Muslim culture was difficult, Saghiya continued, and shifting attitudes toward modernism only added new obstacles to the modern predicament of the individual. The partial modernization adopted by local regimes, for example, extended to structural and economic affairs, but hardly touched the ethical, social, religious, or cultural status quo. The anticolonial struggle and Arab-Israeli conflict intensified the dichotomy between East and West, and perpetuated anti-Western rhetoric, while the revolutionary regimes of the mid-twentieth century crushed what remained of the "Arab individual." As the state became the new patriarch, the establishment of a civil society in which individuals lived and worked as free people became an increasingly remote possibility, with the call for democracy emphasizing majority rule rather than safeguarding individuals and minorities.⁴³

For Saghiya, individualism was a kind of lever that would lift the Arabs out of their entrenched beliefs and traditions, and pave the way for progress. His model was the Christian West, where the Protestant Reformation had inspired individuals to challenge restrictive social frameworks, like family, Church and state, and engage in creative and scientific innovation that culminated in an industrialized, capitalistic society. Whereas the West delegitimized arbitrary authority, be it clerical or political, and gravitated toward universal values, the Arab world remained imprisoned in a web of loyalties and traditional identities. Suppressed, the population became meek and passive.⁴⁴

The same general conclusions were reached by Husayn Ahmad Amin with respect to Egypt, Khalid Mustafa with respect to Sudan, and Salih Bashir with respect to North Africa.⁴⁵ Bashir wryly remarked that almost the only context in which the individual was acknowledged was when he became a hero or a martyr;

even then it was usually for the sake of the collective.⁴⁶ However, unlike Saghiya, Husayn, and Mustafa, Bashir could see the positive aspects of the history of individualism in North Africa, mainly in the mid-twentieth century, thanks to nationalist movements in Tunisia, Algeria, and Morocco, who in their fight against imperialism portrayed their compatriots as individuals rather than as members of tribes or sectoral groups. After independence and increasing political centralization, this spotlight on the individual regressed, but in Morocco the multiparty system that replaced the monarchy was preserved, enabling the development of a dynamic civil society in which the individual's prospects of becoming a social agent for change were more promising.⁴⁷

The disappointment in liberal circles over the absence of an individualist culture in the Middle East and the continued dominance of collectivism in which the rights of the individual were subsumed by those of the group did not dim the bright spots that Bashir discerned in North Africa. As the democratic approach had become a hollow vessel and nothing more than a theory, the concept of liberty, with its emphasis on freedom of belief and freedom of expression, became equated with disorder.⁴⁸

Liberal thinkers identified and empathized with the plight of individuals trapped in politically and culturally repressive societies. At the same time, they lamented the lack of individual assertiveness in Arab society, where individuals failed to challenge their milieu, accepted many of its values without argument, and put their full trust in what they were told by others. It was not violent resistance they sought, but the transformation of individuals into active social agents able to think for themselves and demand respect, liberty, and rights, thereby serving the greater liberal cause.⁴⁹

Nevertheless, Saghiya remained confident that the old loyalties would disappear. Therefore, instead of mounting a frontal attack that would only create instability and elicit a forceful response from dictatorial regimes, he proposed a *modus vivendi* that combined criticism with tolerance and understanding. As a former socialist, he believed this was the best way to achieve harmony and social solidarity.⁵⁰ In his writings, there was both a sense of urgency and a plea for caution and gradual, evolutionary change. He urged the Arabs to jump on the bandwagon of progress before they found themselves in a rut and relegated to a historical footnote. But in the same breath, he stressed the need for adaptation and long-term strategies that would make the ride toward a secular future based on the will of the people, merit, and rationality, much less bumpy.

Saghiya was a believer in historical relativism. In non-European societies, as in the Middle East, he wrote, promoting individualism did not have to go hand in hand with a French revolutionary-style Jacobean secularism or a radical transformation of the social structure, which only increased instability. In his mind, a more cautious and balanced approach was exemplified by India, which maintained a democratic system without drastically undermining the social order. He was particularly ambivalent about the economic implications of individualism. In the developed world, Adam Smith's theory of the "invisible hand" and minimal intervention in economic life might be feasible, but this was not so in developing countries, where boundaries and supervision were needed. In this world, in which poverty was a fixed parameter, giving free rein to private enterprise would only strengthen collective loyalties and prevent the development of modern support networks under the aegis of the state. In this way, Saghiya, like Nassar before him with his "liberalism of mutual responsibility" model, exposed internal conflicts in the liberal discourse with respect to the economy: it preached political liberalization on the one hand, but shied away from economic Darwinism lest the social system collapse, and strove for some measure of social equality.⁵¹

While enshrining the free market economy, liberal writers sought to fence it around with administrative and moral barriers, thus giving the state greater involvement as a regulator and as a balancing factor between the individual's interests and those of the collective. The Egyptian economist Hazim al-Biblawi expressed this well:

Liberal thought is a concept of society, not a concept of the individual detached from society. Liberalism is based on individualism in the sense of protecting individual rights and liberties, and is the best guarantee for the progress of society. Its goal is always the good of the collective.⁵²

In al-Biblawi's view, the liberal idea acknowledges two truths about economic life that must be taken into consideration: first, the need to ensure proper and responsible use of the scarce natural resources available to most human societies; secondly, the need to regulate areas of specialization and training so that not every individual will produce everything but will instead specialize in a

particular field of production, thereby contributing to an increase in national product. Therefore, there is a need for a mechanism of coordination and cooperation which is the responsibility of the state.⁵³ In the background was the desire to purge the liberal perception of any negative connotation of an egoistic capitalism that deepens the social divide between rich and poor.

Another concept that reflected the same concern was “social peace,” which Sa‘d al-Din Ibrahim discussed at length in the context of Egypt. Ibrahim’s point of departure was that no society was free of class conflict and that those who claimed otherwise, such as the communists, were naïve and deluding themselves. A society without conflicts was a fossilized society. At the same time, a society overly steeped in discord was doomed to extinction. The correct balance could be achieved through social peace, in which every group had the right to express itself and defend its interests, but within a constitutional and legal framework where conflicts of interest would be resolved without coercion and violence.⁵⁴

In many respects, ideological models of mutual responsibility and social peace revealed the lack of agreement in liberal circles over what kind of economic structure was best. Adding fuel to the flames was the appearance of the social welfare state in the 1920s. This paradigm was based on the notion that it was the duty of the state to aid weak sectors, reduce social gaps, and create equal opportunity in education and the workplace, but without equality in income and assets.⁵⁵ In the Arab world, this form of social justice and the rejection of social Darwinism became more widespread after former leftists, among them Saghiya, Jurj Tarabishi, and al-‘Afif al-Akhdar, joined the liberal camp in the 1980s.

A sizeable middle class or bourgeoisie and the guarantee of social justice were seen as important conditions, albeit not the only ones, for the establishment of a liberal democracy, including a realistic opportunity for regime changes. Other socioeconomic conditions, enumerated by Ibrahim, a sociologist by training, were social mobility, which created an open class system; economic growth founded on a fair distribution of income; democratization of social institutions, first and foremost the toning down of patriarchal dominance in families and the promotion of women’s liberation as an adjunct to democratizing national politics; ethnic pluralism, achieved through equal rights, obligations, and opportunities for religious and ethnic minorities (including the Copts in Egypt); and finally, a proliferation of free organizations, such as labor unions and professional associations, that would pressure the government and lobby for

policies that advanced the interests of their members. For Ibrahim, these were not preconditions that had to be solidified before the introduction of democracy. It was, however, clear to him that without these developing civic structures the road would be that much longer and more difficult.⁵⁶

Still other thinkers highlighted the importance of education when forming liberal-democratic governments following regime changes. Shakir al-Nabulsi viewed the role of knowledge and technology as no less important than that of natural resources in driving national development and progress, as illustrated by the experience of Japan and West Germany. He mourned the neglect of human capital and condemned the outdated pedagogical thinking that dominated the Arab educational system (*tarbiya*). This thinking, he charged, nurtured the acquisition of knowledge as a mere passing of tests or receiving high average scores in order to get a steady job, rather than as a means of establishing a new culture more suited to the demands of modernity. The contents of the curriculum were also narrow minded and highlighted education in Islamic history, rather than looking ahead and developing the student's critical personality, which would lead to change and renewal.⁵⁷ In this context, al-Nabulsi quoted the renowned jurist and philosopher al-Ghazali, who equated knowledge with prayer in purifying the soul.⁵⁸ Politics rather than culture, al-Nabulsi summed up sadly, became the main field of struggle and thus guaranteed that Arab society would degenerate intellectually.⁵⁹

Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd held a similar stance. He believed that only a system of education that fosters freedom of thought and discussion without restrictions or preconditions can maximize individual abilities and broaden a person's horizons. Changing the curriculum, renovating buildings, and bringing computers into classrooms would change nothing if the teacher did not recognize the value of freedom and the principle of free discussion. Only a genuine climate of pluralism would uproot the use of Islam as a "political fuel" that blocks society from its ecumenical essence, and would entrench the true meaning of secularism, which liberates human beings from the burdens of religious authorities. Religion itself cannot achieve this. Abu Zayd focused mainly on higher education.

It is the state's duty and in its best interest, Abu Zayd argued, to sanction a free university education system that would allow for open discussions and dialogue, and unrestricted research. Such an educational system would serve as a bastion of enlightenment, freedom, and creativity, and would propagate these, promoting general prosperity and well-being. It must be understood that a student passing

through the university's doors means that he or she is intellectually competent to form and hold opinions and to discuss them without knee-jerk reactions. It was difficult to justify authorities, even universities, intervening to prohibit the study of economic or scientific theories or literary texts on so-called religious or moral grounds. In fact, this would mean that the university had become a school and the student a passive receptor.⁶⁰ Such an autocratic environment, Abu Zayd claimed, led to the restriction of lecturers' creativity and open-mindedness, turning them into robots who recited ready-made study material or textbook writers. All this was done on the pretext of preserving the values and foundations of society. As a result, certain principles are perceived in the collective memory as sacred, and knowledge becomes a mere reiteration of what has already been said and memorized.⁶¹ Abu Zayd's lengthy discussion of higher education as a key to the enhancement of Arab enlightenment and pluralism reflected his traumatic personal experience, as he was excluded and dismissed from Cairo University where he was teaching; ultimately, he was tried for heresy.

A similar rationale was also adopted by Mahmud Muhammad Taha in Sudan. As part of his envisioned "cultural revolution," Taha urged the Sudanese government to establish free platforms in universities, to allow student associations freedom of expression (through booklets, circulars, lectures, debates, or exhibitions), and to let them propagate their ideology freely, provided they did so in a scientific manner. Achieving this end, Taha pointed out, would turn campuses into sound foundations for responsible and constructive political behavior.⁶²

Approaching democracy

Liberal discourse did not deny that bringing democracy to the Arab Middle East would be tough, but it was not seen as impossible as long as vision and determination were at hand. History supplied ample proof that obstacles could be overcome. Many scholars and experts discredited Germany, Japan, the Slavic republics, and even the Catholic world, declaring they would never be democratic. There was an ingrained assumption that these cultures were inherently hostile to democracy and democratic values. However, these assumptions, as well as arguments concerning the prospects for democracy, were

proven wrong with regard to the Middle East and the Arab world. Some genuine progress had already been made in the direction of greater political openness. Turkey, where power had shifted to a democratic Islamic party in the wake of free elections, was a case in point, wrote Ibrahim. Less dramatic examples were Morocco, Bahrain, Jordan, and Kuwait. Ibrahim put his faith in the growing public in the Arab world that shared his interest in democracy and the possibilities it opened up for liberty and true partnership in shaping the face of the nation.⁶³ In an emotional appeal to the citizens of veteran democratic societies, he noted that the struggle for liberty was not just the struggle of Egypt, the Arab peoples or the Middle East, but a global struggle.

Those who are carrying it out in countries and regions such as mine need the help of citizens in mature democracies. Reach out to us, engage us in dialogue, give us a hand if and when you can, and let our message be heard in the West so our culture and our religion will not be unjustly condemned as intrinsically against freedom and democracy, because they are not.⁶⁴

The democratization process in the Arab world had already begun, Ibrahim wrote, citing the protests in Egypt and Lebanon, and the democratic elections in Palestine and Iraq. It was a trend that needed to be strengthened by outside pressure, mainly through diplomatic and economic measures.⁶⁵ Other writers were less patient, arguing that time was running out. Unwillingness to embark on a path of enlightenment and democracy, and to follow in the footsteps of India, Japan, South Korea, Malaysia, Indonesia, and the former republics of the Soviet Union, was dooming Arab civilization to extinction. Some boldly pinned their hopes on salvation from the outside and welcoming foreign, including military, intervention to promote democracy in the region.⁶⁶

Both 'Umran Salam, editor of the liberal website Aafaq, and Shakir al-Nabulsi called for the active assistance of Western governments. They were clearly pessimistic about the willingness of Arab rulers to embrace democracy and the ability of the opposition to apply effective pressure. Salam argued that democracy was a human and universal value, and it was the right of the Arab peoples to seek the backing of the West in achieving it, as was the case in Eastern Europe, South America, and Asia.⁶⁷ Foreign support in the fight against

the “virus” of despotism was not new, wrote al-Nabulsi. The United States had come to the aid of Europe in World War II to fight the Nazis, Italian fascism, and Japanese militarism. He viewed Western military intervention in the Middle East in a positive light, citing the liberation of Kuwait in 1991 and Iraq in 2003. He looked forward to reform in whatever shape it came—“whether on an Arab camel or a British tank, an American destroyer or a French submarine.”⁶⁸ Nevertheless, he did not believe in unconditional intervention, and recommended that reform take the form of dialogue, negotiations and, if possible, economic sanctions. The two defining symbols of the Cold War and communist dictatorship, the Iron Curtain and the Berlin Wall, fell “without one drop of blood being shed or one bullet fired,” he reminded his Arab audiences.⁶⁹

Al-Nabulsi also urged the United States and Europe to encourage the Arab states to implement political reforms with a view to establishing a Democratic Union of the Third World, and to set strict conditions for joining and receiving aid from the European Union. This union would be parallel to the EU, with conditions that were binding on the countries that wished to join it. As examples of countries that submitted to EU dictates and made political and social reforms in order to join the EU, al-Nabulsi cited former Eastern European states and Greece.⁷⁰ Al-Nabulsi’s call to the West, and especially to the United States—both of which stipulated that any economic and military assistance to the Arab countries was dependent on the implementation of internal reforms—included a demand for a more substantial investment of resources in education and culture, such as the establishment of universities, support for Arab research institutions, and opening the doors to Arab students.⁷¹ Other supporters of active foreign intervention in Arab affairs were al-‘Afif al-Akhdar, who urged that the United Nations enforce the introduction of human and citizens’ rights conventions into the educational curriculum in the Arab world, and Wafa’ Sultan, who called for the enlistment of Western behavioral science experts to help Muslim people rid themselves of their ogres.⁷²

The theme of “soft power” served liberal writers as a tool for avoiding identification with people clamoring for foreign intervention in Arab internal affairs,⁷³ especially after the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003 and the Arab street’s censure of the policies of the Bush administration in the global war on terrorism. An assertive voice in this respect was that of Sa’d al-Din Ibrahim, who denounced the U.S. presence in Iraq in 2007 and made it clear that national resistance, at times armed, was unavoidable, just as it had been in Vietnam and Algeria: “Numerous experiences have made clear that a foreign occupation,

whatever its causes and justifications, must inevitably give rise to national resistance, even if the occupiers are angels.”⁷⁴

Opposition to military intervention in the region was also designed to assuage the liberal conscience and clarify that “firepower,” or the seduction of having it, was not in their tool kit as they embarked on a campaign for internal reform. Ibrahim based himself on the approach of Fareed Zakaria, who said that the West and the United States had to understand that they could not impose democracy in the Middle East; nor could they force its leaders to hold elections right away, at least not for the time being. Democracy was not a form of government, but a way of life. It did not materialize simply by giving citizens the right to vote. First of all, the proper liberal infrastructure had to be laid, by prodding and pressuring the local regimes to cultivate a civic culture of economic and religious liberty, and allowing civil society organizations a broad range of activities. Like Montesquieu and James Madison in the eighteenth century, supporters of constitutional liberalism thought it had to be based on checks and balances. This would keep power from being vested in a single group and allow a smooth transition from dictatorship to democracy.⁷⁵

A similar stance was adopted by Sa’d al-Din Ibrahim and Hala Mustafa, who were convinced that establishing a parliament and passing laws was not enough. They had to be infused with liberal and secular values that would give them content and meaning. Ibrahim argued that, aside from elections, additional things were required, especially respect for the individual’s rights and for the rule of law. Mustafa felt it was imperative for the United States to pressure the Egyptian government into adopting a more liberal political climate and free press: “The essence of democracy depends on whether the prevalent culture is favorable to, or antagonistic to freedom, tolerance and equality,” wrote Mustafa. “All of these concepts are at the heart of civil rights and liberties.”⁷⁶

Mustafa looked to European history to back up her views, pointing out that it had taken centuries for democracy to take root. Three major milestones were the Magna Carta in England in 1215, a legal document that enshrined the concept of citizenship; the U.S. Declaration of Independence in 1776, followed by the U.S. Constitution in 1788 which guaranteed civil liberties; and of course the French Revolution in 1789 with its motto of *liberté, égalité, fraternité*, which was incorporated in the United Nations’ Universal Declaration of Human Rights, adopted in 1948. The very first article proclaimed that “all human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights.” For Mustafa, Ibrahim, and Zakariyya,

and for others like Abu Zayd and Tarabishi, a strong liberal infrastructure, which prized civil liberty above all, provided the basis for a high-quality democracy. There was no room for shortcuts. They drew their inspiration from the track record of the West: European democracy evolved gradually on foundations that had been taking shape since the start of the Enlightenment in the sixteenth century, continuing throughout the nineteenth century with the advent of the liberal era.⁷⁷

This stance sharpened the conceptual distinction between liberalism and democracy, a distinction that was frequently discussed in the West, and of which the Arab liberals were also aware. While liberalism was perceived as a broader and more important category, on which democracy was built, democracy itself was not seen as a self-standing value, but as a by-product of values such as liberty and pluralism. Without freedom, Hazim Saghiya emphasized, establishing elections and parliaments was like building sandcastles.⁷⁸ The Egyptian Coptic writer Kamal Ghabriyal added that democracy was merely a decision-making apparatus that took into account the views of as many people as possible. He distinguished between two types of democracy. One was authentic liberal democracy in which the majority view prevailed, though the rights of individuals and minorities were also protected. The other was totalitarian democracy, perverted and demagogic, such as the single-party system in Nazi Germany, the Soviet Union, Ba‘thist Syria, and Nasser’s Egypt, or the patriarchal approach in Arabian Peninsula and Persian Gulf monarchies. “Our hope and dream is for liberalism with all that it entails,” Ghabriyal wrote. “A democratic and secular government, a civil society, pluralism in all its different forms and sublime humanist values that will change the face of our East, which is still locked up in the caves of eras that are long gone.”⁷⁹

The same line was adopted by the Lebanese Nassir Nassar, who condemned the sectarian structure of Lebanese politics, which was the basis for representation in parliament and government and denied citizens the sacred rights of freedom of belief and the freedom for members of different ethnic groups to contract a marriage. For Nassar, sectarianism perpetuated the stagnation of the sociopolitical fabric and the corruption of the civil service with regard to political and job appointments. The abolition of sectarianism and of the personal status that went with it would remove the divisions between citizens and the barrier between them and the state. This would move Lebanon toward national unity, and serve the general interest of the population and of true democracy.⁸⁰

Beyond ideological persuasion, emphasizing the superiority of liberalism over democracy and supporting the model of liberal democracy was also a practical matter. First and foremost there was a powerful desire to differentiate the liberal school from rival schools that also waved the banner of democracy. According to the Kuwaiti Ahmad al-Baghdadi and the Egyptians Hani Nasira and Hazim al-Biblawi, liberals were clearly the only true democrats: they were the only ones calling for an end to political and religious tyranny, for the protection of human rights and the recognition of human equality, regardless of gender, and devoting themselves to constructive legislation. It was liberalism that championed the cause of individualism and personal freedom as the driving force of society and the mainstay of the economy. Liberal principles helped draft constitutions, enacted positive laws, and “saved humanity from the hell of the clergy.” Without it, the world would perish, and all of humanity paid a tribute to it, except for Muslims who believed that they were right in adhering to the popular saying, “If you are different, you will be singled out by others.”⁸¹

Yet the liberal writers’ eagerness to distinguish between liberalism and democracy also stemmed from a genuine concern that too abrupt a transition to democracy, without adequate preparation, could jolt society and precipitate the rise to power of the Islamic movements, which might translate their influence in the community into a victory at the polls, using democratization as a lever. The Arab liberals were not blind to such trends, which could be seen, for example in the elections in Jordan in 1989, Algeria in 1990–91 and Egypt in 2005. Cultural and educational groundwork to inculcate liberal values was perceived as a way of drying up the sources of Islamist power. A gradual approach would also benefit liberal discourse in that it would not be misconstrued as a Western agent attempting to take over the region. For semi-establishment writers, such an approach solved the dilemma of directly confronting a regime of which they themselves were very much a part.

The economic and political pressure exerted on local regimes to promote civic culture was one side of the “soft power” equation. The other side was diplomatic pressure to resolve the Arab–Israeli conflict, with an emphasis on the Palestinian problem. In a public appeal to the United States, Saghiya declared that it was not enough to bring down undemocratic regimes such as Iraq and Afghanistan. It was up to the American leadership to find a just solution for the Palestinians and adopt an even-handed policy in dealing with both parties to the conflict, Israelis and Palestinians. He saw the conflict as a key factor in the Arab world’s relations with the United States. Resolving it would impact positively on the Arabs and

bring about greater openness and receptivity to democracy. Toward this end, he called on Washington to step up its diplomatic coordination with Europe and work with the United Nations in an effort to establish peace in the Middle East and improve the welfare of Arab citizens. At the same time, he was openly critical of predatory American capitalism and neoliberalism that had become selfish and exploitative in the shadow of globalization, enriching the West and increasing inequality and poverty in the Third World. “America is the jewel in the crown of liberty and private enterprise,” he asserted. “It is cultural pluralism in action. But that does not mean liberals must support everything the American administration does. This is not anti-Americanism; it is liberalism!”⁸²

Like al-Nabulsi and Saghiya, Kamal Ghabriyal lamented the bitter fate of the East and the centuries of stagnation and malaise that crossed geographical and historical boundaries. He urged the liberal avant-garde to continue to embrace liberal thought and further the liberal cause through intensive fieldwork and the support of non-governmental organizations. Ghabriyal, too, put his trust in foreign support to make the “required cultural leap,” but went further than his colleagues, calling for Western intervention.⁸³

The debate over Western intervention in Arab politics revolved around the question of whether democracy could be imposed from the outside and whether all means were legitimate, but no one doubted for a moment that democracy itself was vital for Arab progress.

Debating Islamists and democracy

While urging their countrymen to adopt democracy in the fullest sense, Arab liberals also pondered how to involve the Islamic movements in the process. It was a controversial topic that sparked much debate in the liberal camp. The heads of the Islamic movements were mainly modern scholars who sought to establish an alternative political and social order devoted to “repairing the body” through the creation of a just society, but also to “repairing the soul” by addressing the spiritual needs of the individual and attaining ethical perfection. Endowed with rhetorical, organizational, and communication skills, they plucked religion out of mosques and religious institutions and brought it to the streets,

marketplaces, schools, university campuses, factories, graffiti walls, and news outlets, setting themselves up as a substitute to the existing regimes, both monarchies and revolutionary governments. It was a battle for identity, public presence, and participation, as well as a redefining of the collective identity. Although this activity was partly an outreach in the communal and cultural sense, a kind of grassroots Islamization, it also incorporated aspects of political violence.

Internal discord in the ranks of the Islamist camp, based on ideological and political disagreement, alongside a disturbing record set by Islamic regimes such as Iran, Pakistan, and Sudan, especially in the 1980s and 1990s, eroded the attractiveness of the Islamic message, but did not push its spokesmen out of the public spotlight in many Arab and Muslim countries. This presented a challenge to liberal discourse, forcing liberal thinkers to channel much of their energy into analyzing the phenomenon of Islamic resurgence and addressing the oft-debated issues of religion and the state. Just looking at the liberal manifestos discussed in Chapter 1 shows how religion virtually commandeered these discussions.

Some liberals saw the Islamic camp as a single entity, making no distinction between moderates and radicals, pragmatists and revolutionaries. Islamists were perceived as having one goal: replacing the secular, national government with an authoritarian religious regime. Hence they had to be fought with purpose and resolve, even if it meant giving governments the nod to block or crack down on Islamic movements. Other liberal thinkers differentiated between moderates and radicals, and between those with whom one could engage in constructive dialogue and those with whom one could not. It was thought that speaking to the latter and including them in the political process might temper their views. Here one sees further proof of the fragmentation in the liberal camp, whose spokespersons regarded Islamists as ideological and political rivals, but disagreed on what to do about it.

Fodder for the debate was supplied by Egypt, in particular, with the Muslim Brotherhood playing an important role in parliamentary politics from the 1970s onwards, via electoral agreements with existing parties or via independent lists. Liberal writers like Muhammad Sa'īd al-ʿAshmawī, Faraj Fuda, and Sayyid al-Qimnī took a hawkish stance on Islamism. It was a fiction, they said, to distinguish between the traditionalist school, represented by the Muslim Brotherhood, which sought to join the existing system, and the revolutionary groups that advocated political violence. In the long run they acted jointly,

ignoring disagreements until they seized power, thereby canceling out all traces of democracy. For al-‘Ashmawi, the Islamist movements were populist movements that mouthed hollow slogans about instituting shari‘a law and Islam as the state religion or divine authority (hakimiyya) without, however, giving serious consideration to the ethical values and justice that lay at the core of Islam.⁸⁴ Faraj Fuda supported the inclusion of Islamist forces in parliamentary politics, but only as a means of exposing their ideological barrenness to one and all. Apart from slogans like “Islam is the solution,” he charged, they had no ready answers to the problems of the hour.⁸⁵

Al-Nabulsi, who divided his time between the West (mainly the United States) and Jordan, adopted a more general criticism of the Islamists, albeit just as caustic as Fuda. He accused the Islamist camp of hijacking and distorting Islam, helping to transform it into a violent and murderous ideology. Their electoral victory would only lead to the reign of barbarism and demagoguery, and would brand the Arabs as a bloodthirsty society. It was thus necessary to wage a determined fight against these people and not be satisfied with refuting the myths they cultivated. “We must hunt them down in every nook and cranny,” al-Nabulsi wrote.⁸⁶

Muhammad Shahrur of Syria was somewhat more restrained in his criticism. Nevertheless, in the wake of the violent clashes between the Brotherhood and the Syrian regime in the 1970s and early 1980s, which reached a peak in Hama in 1982, Shahrur did not hide his aversion to the Islamic movement (and the religious establishment along with it). The Islamists clung fiercely to a literal interpretation of Islamic tradition, and regarded it as the absolute truth. Hence what was right for the Muslims in the days of the Prophet was right for believers for all times. There was no room for human rights or civil liberties in this scheme of things. Elections and parliaments were heresy, and the caliphate constituted the only legitimate regime.⁸⁷ At the same time, Shahrur observed, violent repression of Islamic fundamentalism was useless, since its perceptions were deeply rooted in the consciousness of many people. Even Judaism and Christianity retained elements of fundamentalism. Moreover, it was a cultural problem and not one that could be solved by force. Shahrur looked forward with anticipation to the declining influence of fundamentalist thinking and the rise of a peaceful, pluralistic society. Modernity was not a new dogma replacing an older one or turning its back on tradition. Instead, it was a rejection of fanaticism and offered pluralism to all members of society.⁸⁸

Sa'd al-Din Ibrahim held a more inclusive approach. Unlike the others, he did not write at length about religion and the state or reinterpret Islamic scripture. He defined himself as a civil society advocate. His main ideological and public activism (as founder of the Ibn Khaldun Center for Development Studies) revolved around civil and human rights, democratizing the Arab world and promoting a civil society, mainly in response to the religious-sectarian divisions in his country. This was the broad context that largely dictated his stance on Islamist involvement in the political process. The immediate context was the success of the Muslim Brotherhood, which won 88 seats in parliament in the 2005 Egyptian elections. It lent additional weight to Ibrahim's dialogue with Islamist leaders.

Ibrahim saw a strong link between Islamist political participation and the creation of a genuine civic and democratic society. His considerations were not only ideological, but also pragmatic. In his view, dialogue with people with differing opinions and interests was a sacred principle that needed to be encouraged for the sake of mutual understanding. Therein lay the importance of a vigorous civic society, the hallmarks of which were voluntary organizations like trade unions, pressure groups, and political parties. Such organizations empowered the individual: they enabled citizens to exercise their social and political rights, and served as their representatives vis-à-vis the public and the authorities.⁸⁹

The coexistence of all political ideologies, Ibrahim argued, was also a basic premise of liberal democracy. To deny the legitimacy of other viewpoints was to remove oneself from the circle of liberal discourse. Members of the Muslim Brotherhood were of the same nationality and religion, and belonged to the same community. Therefore, their right to official party representation had to be safeguarded, in the same way that the Christian parties established in Europe after World War II took part in the democratic process of their countries without hindrance. Brotherhood members had gone through many ideological changes over the years, in some cases after spending time in jail, and the movement's approach had become more democratic. Ibrahim was being pragmatic here: once the movement's activities were guided into legitimate channels, its spokesmen would be forced to focus on worldly affairs and the needs of the hour. And what if they won the elections and assumed leadership of the state? They would only become more moderate, Ibrahim wrote, quickly reassuring his readership:

They will discover the world is not black and white, that they too can be pressured, and they too will have to compromise. I'm not worried about that. I am worried when the West swallows uncritically what the autocrats say. The real antidote to the symbiotic relationship between autocracy and theocracy is a politics of inclusion and democratic governance. When Muslims join the third wave of democracy that started in Portugal in 1974, al-Qaeda will join al-Hashashin in the dustbin of history.⁹⁰

As long as the Muslim Brotherhood was excluded from the political arena and did not receive due respect, its popularity as an alternative to the existing regime would persist and the voice of armed militants would continue to be heard, warned Ibrahim.⁹¹ Extremism, he noted, could not be quelled by prisons and security devices alone. The way forward was to establish a democratic process, genuine respect for individual rights, and a participatory public space for all citizens. Modern history showed that when the Islamists were given an electoral opportunity they did not violate the democratic code. In Indonesia, Malaysia, Bangladesh, Senegal, Nigeria, and Turkey, "Islamists who came to power through the ballot box left power through the ballot box." The Turkish Justice and Development Party (AKP), which rose to power at the end of 2002, served as a model for Ibrahim's call for rapprochement with the Muslim Brotherhood. The AKP did not alter the democratic process that had already been in place in Turkey for several decades, and even chalked up successes where the secular parties had failed for a quarter of a century: helping to resolve the conflict in Cyprus, addressing the problem of the Kurdish minority, and improving Turkey's European and global standing in the wake of its commitment to human rights, and the advancement of women and minorities. The case of Turkey "gave the dialogue credence and reminded me that Islamists are not metaphysical abstractions but human beings in time and space. Historical forces are subject to change like everybody else. They are not beyond change or reform."⁹²

With this Ibrahim set out to defy the Western presumption of Muslim exceptionalism, namely that something within Muslim or Arab culture would make it incapable of concurring with democratic values. The lack of progress toward democracy in Arab societies, he observed, did not result from a distorted mentality, but from objective historical imperatives. In this context one could mention European colonialism and occupation in the last quarter of the nineteenth century, the founding of the state of Israel, and the 1948 defeat. "The

return home of the defeated Arab armies opened the current era of Middle Eastern history. It has been a time dominated by military dictatorships and illiberal regimes.”⁹³

Ibrahim’s politics of inclusion, which presented the Brotherhood as “Muslim democrats,” set off an intense debate in the liberal camp. Some declared themselves shocked by Ibrahim’s words. While Sayyid al-Qimni and Tariq Hijji conceded that Ibrahim’s intentions were good, they judged his approach naïve, foolhardy, and detrimental to the liberal cause. The Brotherhood was still a captive of the ideology that had ruled Egypt since the Islamic conquests in the seventh century, wrote al-Qimni. It was an ideology that had destroyed the country and its culture, and offered no answer or insight into the reforms that were needed. Shari‘a law, which the Islamists demanded, ran contrary to the values and rights of a democratic society. The Islamist camp devoted itself more to recruiting supporters and promoting Islamic practices than improving public welfare. For the Islamists, democracy was only relevant on Election Day; the rest of the time, they rejected the institutions and conventions that defended it. Their rise to power thus signified the establishment of an ethnic theocracy and visions of a future Islamic caliphate. Hence, al-Qimni stated, the Brotherhood was not the same as the Christian parties in the West, as Ibrahim had argued. They did not go through the experiences that had transformed Christian Europe, and that led to the adoption of important democratic values such as enlightenment, tolerance, and secularization (in the sense of separation of Church and state). The Brotherhood was also not the same as the Turkish AKP, which Ibrahim singled out as proof that Islamists did not abolish democracy when taking over the helm. The leaders of the Brotherhood themselves rejected the Turkish model on the grounds that Turkey was a secular European country, not an Islamic republic.⁹⁴

Al-Qimni quoted the renowned Islamic thinker Yusuf al-Qaradawi, who pointed out that in the case of Christianity, separating religion and state did not spell the end of the Church because the Church was an autonomous entity with its own institutions. This was not possible for Islam, which did not have the same kind of religious establishment. Introducing such separation would leave Islam without a government to back it up and would thereby lead to its demise. As a confidence-building measure, al-Qimni urged the Brotherhood to clearly renounce its terrorist past and provide a written guarantee that it accepted the principles of democracy, such as recognizing positive (that is, human) law (as opposed to divine law) and supporting equality between men and women, and between

Muslims and non-Muslims.⁹⁵

Al-Qimni criticized Ibrahim's inclusive approach toward the Islamists, depicting it as "suicidal." However, he added a personal note of censure: having been persecuted by the regime and imprisoned together with members of the Muslim Brotherhood, Ibrahim abandoned the liberal idiom in favor of Salafi and Wahhabi rhetoric and took a stand against important religious figures, among them the patriarch of the Coptic Catholic Church, who was shunned in Egypt, and the Shi'i leader in Iraq, 'Ali al-Sistani. Ibrahim had also voiced support for the confrontation in Iraq and declared that the victory of Hamas in the Palestinian elections in 2006 was part of a wave of democratic Islam. In response, al-Qimni demanded that all Arab liberals clearly dissociate themselves from Ibrahim's thinking.⁹⁶ His colleague, Hijji, called for the urgent establishment of an action committee of all the ideological groups threatened by the Muslim Brotherhood. Hijji also called for the drying up of the Muslim Brotherhood's resources, which stemmed mainly from a difficult socioeconomic reality, and urged the state to provide social services, which would leave fundamentalism as the province of very few people. With the fundamentalists, Hijji ruled, there was no chance of establishing a civil society, not to mention ensuring freedom, democracy, and the rights of others.⁹⁷

Ibrahim was quick to respond to his critics. He pointed out that he did not pretend to be a mind reader. All he had to go on were the writings, manifestos, and activities of the Brotherhood, which attested to the fact that the organization had renounced violence back in the early 1970s and changed its stance on democracy. A comparison of Islamic movements in the Muslim Arab world that had taken part in the democratic process via elections revealed that all had remained loyal to the democratic system. This was so for Indonesia, Bangladesh, Malaysia, Turkey, Morocco, and other countries with Muslim majorities that had previously suffered under undemocratic regimes. Islamic parties had run in the elections and none of the frightening scenarios had come to pass. To those who played up the examples of Afghanistan, Iran, and Sudan, with their Islamic regimes and shari'a law, Ibrahim had this to say: first of all, the forces that came to power in these countries did not get there by democratic means; and secondly, they never declared a commitment to democracy. The classic example of electoral democracy that ended in the rise of an undemocratic regime came not from any Muslim country, but from Germany, where Hitler and the Nazis won a plurality and were invited to form a government in 1933, from which position they proceeded to create their totalitarian and genocidal Third Reich.⁹⁸

Fear of the Muslim Brotherhood only numbed the brain and crippled the political system, Ibrahim went on. As a sociologist, he was convinced that mistrust of the other hampered the ability of human beings, religions, or cultures to change. History had shown this to be true for Christianity, and it was the same for Islam. The exclusion of moderate Islamists gave autocratic rulers an excuse to deny democracy to other political groups, dupe Western governments, and perpetuate political tyranny. Indeed, for Ibrahim, the local regimes were the adversary, not the Islamists. The question was not whether Egypt and the other Arab countries were ready for democracy, but whether the ruling elite was prepared for the involvement of the people.

Ibrahim represented a minority opinion in the liberal discourse. Most liberal writers doubted that there were moderate Islamists who could be engaged in dialogue on the subject of civil liberties and democratic procedure, all the more so while sitting in power. It was seen as hypocritical to preach in favor of basic freedoms and democracy while these rights were denied to other significant and legitimate sectors of society. Calls to include the Islamists in national politics thus revealed a serious schism in the liberal camp.

The problem did not start with post-1967 liberals. In 1953, Khalid Muhammad Khalid criticized Nasser for not reining in the activity of the Muslim Brotherhood (and the communist parties), which he saw as opponents of freedom of thought and opinion.⁹⁹ The Brotherhood in Egypt had renounced violence, and, in the atmosphere of tolerance introduced by Sadat in the 1970s, was gradually moving toward civil politics. However, these developments did not allay the fears of the liberals. Memories of the past were still fresh, and accusations that the establishment of the Brotherhood in the 1930s had contributed greatly to the decline of the liberal era served as a psychological barrier to accepting them as worthy partners in the Arab enlightenment project.

Yet conflicting views on Western intervention in Arab politics and the inclusion of the Islamists in the democratic process did not mar a basic point of consensus among Arab liberals, namely the imperative that the march toward genuine democracy, backed by a civil contract guaranteeing transparency, should go hand in hand with openness to the outside world.

Notes

1Shahrur, al-Din wa'l-Sulta , esp. pp. 345–422, 426–433, 445–448, 450–451, 453–459.

2Ibid., p. 436.

3Ibid., pp. 437–438; Talbi, “Arabs and Democracy,” pp. 58–68; Hijji, al-Thaqafa Awwalan wa-Akhiran , p. 56; al-Qimni, al-Fashiyyun wa'l-Watan .

4Al-Nabulsi, “al-Liberaliyyun al-Suriyyun al-Judad Yunahidun,” p. 38.

5Al-Nabulsi, al-Nizam al-‘Arabi al-Jadid , pp. 103–110; and see also his essay “Min al-Zaytuna ila al-Azhar, wa-min Bab al-‘Aziziyya ila Dar‘a,” http://www.tellskuf.com/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=15759 (accessed October 10, 2012).

6Saghiya, al-Inhiyar al-Madid: al-Khalfiyya al-Ta'rikhiyya l'Intifadat al-Sharq al-Awsat al-‘Arabi (Beirut: Dar al-Saqi, 2013), pp. 23–24, 298–299; al-Nabulsi, al-Nizam al-‘Arabi al-Jadid , pp. 144–147; also his al-‘Arab bayna al-Libiraliyya wa'l-Usuliyya , pp. 56–57, 69–71.

7Al-Nabulsi, “Min al-Zaytuna ila al-Azhar”; see also his Zawaya Harija , pp. 11–23.

8Al-Nabulsi, Zawaya Harija, pp. 68–70.

9Ibid., p. 16.

10 Ibid., pp. 30–25, 41–45; al-Nabulsi, al-Nizam al-‘Arabi al-Jadid , pp. 173–174; see also Charfi, al-Islam, p. 73.

11 Al-Nabulsi, Zawaya Harija, pp. 35–40; see also his al-Fikr al-‘Arabi , vol. 3, p. 54.

12 Talbi, “Arabs and Democracy,” pp. 58–68; also Hijji, Culture , pp. 9–41, 56–64, 134–151, 205–220.

13 Talbi, “Arabs and Democracy,” pp. 60, 66–67; see also al-Qimni, al-Fashiyyun wa'l-Watan , pp. 158–170.

14 Talbi, “Arabs and Democracy,” p. 67.

15 According to Abdel Haleem, the term khalifa is normally translated as “vicegerent” or “deputy”. While this is one meaning of the term, its basic meaning is “successor”—the Qur’an often talks about generations and individuals who are successors to each other or a trustee to whom a responsibility is temporarily given. M. A. S. Abdel Haleem, The Qur’an: A New Translation (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), p. 7, note a.

16 Khalid Muhammad Khalid, Muwatinun la Ra’aya , 4th ed. (Cairo: Maktabat Wahba, 1951).

17 Khalid Muhammad Khalid, Azmat al-Hurriyya fi ‘Alamina (Cairo: Maktabat Wahba, 1964); see also his Lillah wa’l-Hurriya (Cairo: Maktabat Wahaba, 1958).

18 Khalid’s books: al-Dawla fi’l-Islam (Cairo: Dar al-Thabit, 1981); Difa‘ ‘an al-Dimuqratiyya (Cairo: Dar al-Thabit, 1985); al-Dimuqratiyya Abadan (Cairo: Maktabat Wahba, 1985); Qissati ma’a al-Hayat (Cairo: Dar Akhbar al-Yawm, 1993), pp. 265–277, 486–492.

19 Al-Nabulsi, al-Fikr al-‘Arabi , vol. 2.

20 Ibid., pp. 145–155; for al-Nabulsi’s elaborated discussion of freedom, see pp. 139–193.

21 Ibid., pp. 185–186.

22 Charfi, al-Islam, p. 199; see also the introduction to his edited book, al-Muslim fi’l-Ta’rikh (Casablanca: Matba‘at al-Najah al-Jadida, 1999), p. 6.

23 Charfi, al-Islam , p. 199.

24 Ibid., p. 92; Charfi, “al-Taqrir al-khitami,” in his al-Muslim fi’l-Ta’rikh , p. 215.

25 Charfi, al-Islam , pp. 199–200.

26 Ibid., pp. 200–201.

27 Ibid., pp. 196, 200.

28 Shahrur, al-Din wa'l-Sulta , pp. 265–271, 449–450; al-Hamad, Min Huna Yabda' al-Taghyir , pp. 59–71, 344–350.

29 Al-Hamad, Min huna yabda' al-Taghyir , pp. 67, 344–350.

30 Turki al-Hamad, Adama (London: Dar al-Saqi, 2003), p. 13. Adama , the first book of al-Hamad's coming-of-age trilogy and the first of his novels to be translated into English, was officially banned in Saudi Arabia and other countries throughout the Middle East. The other two volumes of the trilogy, which deal with the adult Hisham's life in the Saudi Arabian capital Riyadh, are al-Shumaysi (Abu Dhabi: Dar Madarik, 2012), which was also translated into English as Shumais (London: Dar al-Saqi, 2005); and Karadib: Atyaf al-Aziqqa al-Mahjura (Abu Dhabi: Dar Madarik, 2012). Explaining the motive behind the trilogy, al-Hamad stated: "Where I live there are three taboos: religion, politics, and sex. It is forbidden to speak about these. I wrote this trilogy to get things moving." Al-Hamad, Shumais , cover page.

31 Al-'Afif al-Akhdar, "Ma Masir Huquq al-Insan fi Tunis al-Islamiyya?", <http://www.ahewar.org/debat/show.art.asp?aid=285103> (accessed July 20, 2015); al-Akhdar, al-Mithaq al-'Aqlani , part 2.

32 Mernissi, Islam and Democracy , pp. 47, 85–93.

33 Nasif Nassar, Fi'l-Tarbiya wa'l-Siyasa: Mata Yasiru al-Fard fi'l-Duwal al-'Arabiyya Muwatanin? (London: Dar al-Saqi, 1970); see also his essay, "al-Nahda al-'Arabiyya al-Thaniya," pp. 151–167. On citizenship and its evolution in the Arab world, see Meijer, "Liberalism in the Middle East," pp. 63–81.

34 Nassar, "al-Nahda al-'Arabiyya al-Thaniya," pp. 155–159.

35 Taha, Tatwir Shari'at al-Ahwal al-Shakhsiyya , pp. 49–50; The Republican Brothers, An Introduction , pp. 6–7.

36 Taha, Tatwir Shari'at al-Ahwal al-Shakhsiyya , p. 50.

37 Leonard Hobhouse , Liberalism (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1964); also Michael Freedman, "J. A. Hobson and Welfare Liberalism," Political Quarterly 69.4 (1998), pp. 441–450.

38 Nassar, "al-Nahda al-'Arabiyya al-Thaniya," pp. 154–155.

39 Ibid., pp. 148–167; also Hala Mustafa, quoted in Govrin, “Hala Mustafa and the Liberal Predicament,” p. 45.

40 Al-Nabulsi, al-Fikr al-‘Arabi , vol. 1, p. 193.

41 Shakir al-Nabulsi, Mabahij al-Hurriyya fi’l-Riwaya al-‘Arabiyya (Beirut: al-Mu’assasa al-‘Arabiyya li’l-Dirasat wa’l-Nashr, 1992).

42 Saghiya, “Introduction,” pp. 7–14.

43 Hazim Saghie, “Individualism in the Arab Middle East: An Overview,” in Saghie (ed.), The Predicament of the Individual , pp. 51–56.

44 Saghiya, “Introduction,” p. 10; also Mernissi, Islam and Democracy , pp. 46–47. On individualism in modern Western discourse, see Lorenzo Infantino, Individualism in Modern Thought from Adam Smith to Hayek (London: Routledge, 1998).

45 Husayn Ahmad Amin, “The Crisis of the Individual in Egypt,” in Saghie (ed.), The Predicament of the Individual , pp. 60–80; Khalid Mustafa, “Individualism and Politics in Sudan,” in *ibid.*, pp. 93–102; Saleh Bechir, “Individualism in the Arab Maghreb,” in *ibid.*, pp. 81–92.

46 Bechir, “Individualism in the Arab Maghreb,” pp. 81–82.

47 Ibid., pp. 87–90.

48 Mernissi, Islam and Democracy , pp. 49–50. The status of the individual is also discussed in the Arab literature, which is not included in this study, providing an intriguing prism of the mechanisms at work. Thus, for example, Egyptian novels during the Nasserite and post-Nasserite periods under Sadat and Mubarak dealt quite a bit with the individual’s ability to withstand the harm inflicted by the political elite. These present a challenging picture in which direct confrontation over injustice or acts of corruption—whether by ordinary citizens, intellectuals, or public figures—with people in power at times leads to their submission, at times to victory, and even to the toppling of a tyrannical regime. The message that emerges from the discussed novels is the belief in the power of the individual to act as an agent of defiance, striving to change the order of society and government. Even if they fall victim to imprisonment, exile, or execution, and their family is threatened, their spirit does not break and they

remain a source of inspiration to others. Empathy toward these individuals and their suffering is accompanied by revulsion and anger at the deeds of those in power, thus increasing the dichotomy between the forces of truth and the forces of deception. At the same time, one should not ignore the fact that this could be mere wishful thinking in the face of a problematic reality in which the power gaps between the individual and authority remain unequivocal. Yona Sheffer, *The Individual and the Authority Figure in Egyptian Prose Literature* (London: Routledge, 2018).

49 Amin, *Fi Bayt Ahmad Amin* , pp. 41–42.

50 Saghiya, “Introduction,” pp. 11–12.

51 Ibid., pp. 11–13; also al-Jamil, “al-Libiraliyya al-Jadida,” p. 49; Hazim al-Biblawi, ‘*An al-Dimuqratiyya al-Libiraliyya: Qadaya wa-Mashakil* (Cairo: Dar al-Shuruq, 1993), pp. 31–37, 61–88.

52 Al-Biblawi, ‘*An al-Dimuqratiyya al-Libiraliyya* , p. 61.

53 Ibid., pp. 61–63.

54 Ibrahim, “The Socio-Economic Requisites of Democracy,” pp. 54–70. Ensuring the rights and inclusion of Copts occupied a central place in Ibrahim’s civic activities. See, for example, his *The Copts of Egypt* (London: Minority Rights Group. 1996).

55 Michael Tanner, “Welfare State,” in Ronald Hamowy (ed.), *The Encyclopedia of Libertarianism* (Los Angeles: Cato Institute, 2008), pp. 540–542; Stein Kuhnle, *The Survival of the European Welfare State* (London: Routledge, 2000).

56 Ibrahim, “The Socio-Economic Requisites of Democracy,” pp. 54–70.

57 Al-Nabulsi, *al-Ta’ir al-Khashabi* .

58 Ibid., p. 74. The reference to al-Ghazali is from his *Ihya’ ‘Ulum al-Din* , vol. 1, p. 48.

59 Al-Nabulsi, *al-Ta’ir al-Khashabi* , pp. 60–63.

60 See, for example, Abu Zayd, *al-Tafkir fi Zaman al-Takfir* , pp. 26–30, 38–40,

91–92; see also his “The Modernization of Islam or the Islamization of Modernity,” in Roel Meijer (ed.), Cosmopolitanism, Identity and Authenticity in the Middle East (Richmond: Curzon, 1999), pp. 71–85.

61 Abu Zayd, al-Tafkir fi Zaman al-Takfir , pp. 28–29; Abu Zayd, “Mashru‘ al-Nahda,” p. 76.

62 Al-Ikhwan al-Jumhuriyyun, al-Musalaha al-Wataniyya , pp. 13–17.

63 Ibrahim, “Reviving Middle Eastern Liberalism,” pp. 7–8.

64 Ibid., pp. 9–10.

65 Nasira, “al-Libiraliyyun al-‘Arab al-Judad fi Misr”; Charfi, “Islam and Democracy,” p. 72.

66 Al-Nabulsi, “Man hum al-Libiraliyyun al-‘Arab al-Judad,” pp. 24–25; Mernissi, Islam and Democracy , pp. 44–45.

67 Al-Nabulsi, “Man hum al-Libiraliyyun al-‘Arab al-Judad,” p. 24; Salam, quoted in www.aafaq.org , December 21, 2008 (accessed July 12, 2015).

68 Al-Nabulsi, “ Man hum al-Libiraliyyun al-‘Arab al-Judad,” p. 27.

69 Ibid.

70 Al-Nabulsi, Zawaya Harija , pp. 71–77.

71 Ibid., pp. 98–127.

72 Al-‘Afif al-Akhdar, quoted in al-Nabulsi, Muhami al-Shaytan , pp. 250–251; Sultan, A God Who Hates , pp. 164–165.

73 The terms “soft power” and “hard power,” coined by Joseph Nye, are taken from the realm of national security and relate to the ways in which a country operates in the fields of foreign policy, security, and economics, either by diplomatic or by forceful means. Joseph Nye, Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics (New York: Public Affairs, 2004).

74 Ibrahim, quoted in al-Masri al-Yawm , October 27, 2007. Ibrahim’s defiant

stance was criticized by Iraqi liberal writers, who made it clear that the United States had not conquered Iraq but liberated it, and that support for a national and even armed struggle against it ignored the internal killings that this struggle had engendered among Shi'is and Kurds with the encouragement and orchestration of radical Islamic groups, especially al-Qa'ida. Thus, Ibrahim was accused of having left the fight for human rights, individual freedom, and democracy behind and become a defender of criminal actions against the Iraqi people. See al-Ra'y (Doha), November 3, 2007; Shakir al-Nabulsi, Sujun bila Qudban (Beirut: al-Mu'assasa al-'Arabiyya li'l-Dirasat wa'l-Nashr, 2007), pp. 168–180.

75 Fareed Zakaria, The Future of Freedom: Illiberal Democracy at Home and Abroad (New York: W.W. Norton, 2003), esp. pp. 150–159.

76 Saad Eddin Ibrahim, "Toward Muslim Democracies," Journal of Democracy, 18.2 (2007), pp. 12–13; Mustafa, "Our Secular Legacy."

77 Ibrahim, "Arab Liberal Legacies Full Circle," p. 206; Zakaria, The Future of Freedom ; see also his "Islam, Democracy and Constitutional Liberalism," pp. 15–20; Abu Zayd, al-Tafkir fi Zaman al-Takfir, pp. 26–27; Tarabishi, "Ishkaliyyat al-Dimuqratiyya," pp. 534–544.

78 Saghiya, al-Inhiyar al-Madid , pp. 13–14.

79 Ghabriyal, "al-Libiraliyya al-Jadida," pp. 85–90.

80 Nassar, Nahwa Mujtama' Jadid , pp. 13–49, 101, 129, 131–151. A similar stance was adopted by Jurj Tarabishi, "Ishkaliyyat al-Dimuqratiyya," pp. 541–542.

81 Al-Baghdadi, "Na'am al-Libiraliyyun Wahdahum hum al-Dimuqratiyyun," pp. 113–116; Nasira, "al-Libiraliyyun al-'Arab al-Judad fi Misr"; al-Biblawi, 'An al-Dimuqratiyya al-Libiraliyya , pp. 15–29, 39–60, 89–98; Shahrur, al-Din wa'l-Sulta , p. 437; al-Nabulsi, al-Nizam al-'Arabi al-Jadid , pp. 21–26.

82 Saghiya, "Nazra ila Masa'ib."

83 Ghabriyal, "al-Libiraliyya al-Jadida," pp. 63–64, 77.

84 Al-'Ashmawi, al-Islam al-Siyasi , pp. 39, 85, 112–115; and his Usul al-Shari'a , pp. 154–155.

85 Fuda's books: al-Irhab , pp. 45–53, 75–78, 122–123; al-Nadhir (Cairo: Dar Misr al-Jadida, 1989), pp. 31–34.

86 Al-Nabulsi, “Man hum al-Libiraliyyun al-‘Arab al-Judad,” pp. 21, 23–24.

87 Shahrour, “The Divine Text,” pp. 144–145; see also his al-Din wa’l-Sulta , pp. 21–96, 131–206.

88 Shahrour, “The Divine Text,” p. 151.

89 Saad Eddin Ibrahim, “Civil Society and Prospects of Democratization in the Arab World,” in Augustus Norton (ed.), Civil Society in the Middle East (Leiden: Brill, 1995), vol. 1, pp. 30–32.

90 “From the Democratiya Archives: An Interview with Saad Eddin Ibrahim,” Dissent: A Quarterly of Politics and Culture , January 27, 2011, <http://dissentmagazine.org/blog/from-the-democratiya-archives-an-interview-with-saad-eddin-ibrahim> (accessed June 13, 2013). The third wave of democracy was preceded by a first wave in the early nineteenth century, when suffrage was granted to the majority of white males in the United States, and a second wave following the Allied victory in World War II.

91 Sa‘d al-Din Ibrahim’s essays, “Dimuqratiyyat al-Najat. al-Ikhwan al-Muslimun wa-Harkatuhum fi’l-Hayat al-Siyasiyya al-Misriyya,” al-Hayat , October 7, 2004; “Revisiting Egypt, Islam and Democracy: A Note from Prison,” in his Egypt, Islam and Democracy: Twelve Critical Essays with a New Postscripts (Cairo: American University in Cairo, 2004), pp. 267–269.

92 “From the Democratiya Archives.”

93 Ibrahim, “Toward Muslim Democracies,” pp. 7–9.

94 Sayyid al-Qimni, “Sihr al-Dimuqratiyya,” Ruz al-Yusuf , July 17, 2004; al-Qimni, quoted in <http://www.ahewar.org/debat/show/art/asp?aid:92929> (accessed June 26, 2013); and his Ahl al-Din wa’l-Dimuqratiyya , pp. 179–220.

95 Al-Qimni, Ahl al-Din wa’l-Dimuqratiyya , pp. 221–225.

96 Ibid., pp. 211–217.

97 Hijji, al-Thaqafa Awwalan wa-Akhiran , pp. 111–115.

98 Ibrahim, “Toward Muslim Democracies,” pp. 11–12; and his “Dimuqratiyyat al-Najat.”

99 Khalid, quoted in Menachem Klein, “The Intellectuals in Nasser’s Egypt,” Ph.D. thesis, The Hebrew University, Jerusalem, 1982, p. 130.

The West and Israel: an inspiring model

The emancipation of the Arabs from the stranglehold of religious dogmatism and political tyranny was uppermost on the agenda of many Arab liberals, so much so that global and regional politics, and even the Arab–Israeli conflict, took a back seat. Others took a broad, integrative approach in which affairs outside the Arab world, specifically relations with the West and Israel, were also seen as critical. But this preoccupation with Western civilization and Israel created dilemmas for the liberal community. Colonial rule and Israeli occupation had left deep scars in the Arab psyche and served as a constant reminder of political and national impotence. Hence the call to adopt Western values and coexist with Israel touched a sensitive nerve and became a useful battering ram for the political opponents of Arab liberals. However, here, too, the liberal discourse was resilient, a further indication of its ideological viability.

The devastating military defeat in 1967 opened the door to a “culture of criticism” (al-thaqafa al-naqdiyya) that spanned the entire ideological spectrum and did not skip over the liberal camp. Sadat’s peace initiative in 1977, followed by the Camp David Accords two years later and the collapse of the Soviet Union in the late 1980s, only intensified the debate over the Arabs’ attitude toward the West and Israel.

Western modernity: compromise and integration

The main thrust of the Arab liberal argument was that there was more to Western culture than colonialism and conspiracy against Islam and the Arabs. Arab liberals were convinced that the West could be a role model and source of inspiration to the Arabs, so that openness to the outside world did not automatically entail a loss of indigenous identity. Japan, South Korea, and

Malaysia were presented as illustrations of non-Western countries that had entered the modern era without losing their cultural identity. These countries had extensive connections with the more advanced, richer Western culture and adopted many of its patterns in industry, community services, and commerce. Nevertheless, they had retained their cultural uniqueness and even enlisted many of the West's positive elements to gain advantages and assert their superiority in the extensive contacts with Europeans and Americans. A look at India also shows that indigenous cultural uniqueness was not erased by British culture despite the fact that the latter prevailed for 400 years.¹

However, in their search for elements of liberalism in Arab history, liberal writers differed somewhat in their conclusions. Some insisted that the concept had no roots whatsoever in Arab or Muslim culture, and saw it as a product of Western culture that had evolved over hundreds of years, from the Lutheran Reformation in the sixteenth century, to the French Revolution and Enlightenment in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, and finally the technology revolution from the twentieth century onward.² A clear-cut, dichotomous assertion was provided by the Tunisian-born al-Akhdar who argued that while the Muslim world was dominated by hatred, racism, and irrationality, the West was the beacon of science, civilization, and human rights. In a similar vein, the Syrian-born Wafa' Sultan argued that while Muslim society had been a slave society since it came into being and had remained so ever since, America was the land of freedom.³

Despite its cosmopolitan outlook, Arab liberal thought retained a certain allegiance to Arab indigenous identity. Several writers made a point of emphasizing that Arab modernism, rather than Western modernism, should be the inspiration for reform in the Arab world, since "each people has its own modernism." In his call for equal rights and opportunities in education and employment for both men and women, Shakir al-Nabulsi took the 1956 Tunisian Personal Status Code as his model. Al-Nabulsi called the Tunisian Code the "Arab ideal of emancipation of the Arab woman," and saw it as a welcome alternative to the Western concept of liberation, which was characterized by permissiveness and indulgence.⁴ The Code, presented as a reflection of *ijtihad* rather than a departure from Islam, abolished polygamy and repudiation or divorce (*talaq*), requiring that divorce take place in court, and that marriage contracts be based on mutual consent. Al-Nabulsi's manifesto concluded with the argument, also set out earlier in his work, that liberty, democracy, and a free market were not the exclusive domain of a particular people or nation.⁵

Other writers burrowed into Islamic tradition and canonical sources in their search for liberal values. Sa‘d al-Din Ibrahim, a passionate believer in civil society, traced the roots of liberalism back to the city of Medina, where the Prophet settled in the seventh century and established liberal social institutions “600 years before the Magna Carta.” For Ibrahim, seventh-century Medina was the ideal model of an early civil society. He saw the roots of democratic values, such as government by the people and parliamentary law, in the concepts of community (umma) and consultation (shura).⁶

The Egyptian writer Hani Nasira used these views in his defense of the Arab liberal camp, which had been accused of welcoming outside—even military—intervention, which some feared would compromise national sovereignty and sabotage the state while lining the pockets of the rich. According to Nasira, this was a superficial charge that ignored the differences of opinion among Arab liberals, which he saw as evidence of the dynamic and dialectical thinking in this camp. Egyptian liberals, for example, differed from the rest of the Arab liberal camp in that they rejected secularism and ranked economic freedom above political freedom. The same was true for outside intervention: While some liberals welcomed it, others advocated gradual reform from within. This was borne out by the responses of the intellectual elite to the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003 and Bush’s democratization agenda in the Middle East. Nasira also emphasized that the new Arab liberals were not related ideologically or politically to the American neoconservatives, though they saw eye to eye with them with regard to the ousting of dictatorships, the introduction of political reform, and the importance of a market economy. These were universal principles that constituted the basis of an open, democratic society and no single party could claim a monopoly over them, he wrote.⁷

At the same time, liberal thinkers believed that cultural compromise and new values were part of the modernization package. The Lebanese intellectual Hazim Saghiya pointed out that Asian societies, such as Japan, South Korea, Malaysia, or India, had adapted their communal and cultural values to keep in step with the rapidly changing economic and technological environment, and had done so with great success. But in the Arab world and in Third World countries a stubborn battle was still under way to integrate liberal values. To some, it was like “forcing the land to accept transplanted organs.”

Saghiya attributed this resistance to the region’s colonial past, which had left the Arab psyche battered and scarred. In consequence, “few of us Arabs believed

that these values were our admission ticket to the modern era and a better future. The majority regarded them as an instrument of subjugation and annexation.” Other writers accentuated the dissonance between Islam and the West, dwelling on the Orient’s obsessive fear of the Occident. The West and its culture were seen as the embodiment of *gharib*, the unknown and unfamiliar. Using her professional skills as a psychiatrist, Wafa’ Sultan depicted Islam as “a captive in a prison whose doors have remained closed for fourteen centuries. It is exactly like a man living in a hut in the middle of a wood. The hut is Islam and the wood is the unknown.” Furthermore, Sultan argued, the Muslims’ fear of the outside world reflected the Bedouin’s fear of the desert that surrounds him. In their lives and decision taking, Muslims are still, in the twentyfirst century, guided by the Bedouin philosophy of raids. They fear they may be attacked by others and live every moment of their lives preparing to launch raids against someone else.⁸

Yet Fatima Mernissi of Morocco claimed that the Arab public was tired of living in constant fear. It was eager for contact with the West and possessed the required tools, since millions of Arabs spoke the languages of the West and were familiar with its ideas, values, and dreams. Its secret power was open for all to see—democracy and individual liberties, which could be achieved through enlightenment and by turning away from the darkness of medieval tyranny toward the light of human progress.⁹

In the liberal narrative, even if there are things in Western culture that Islam does not accept, such as women’s freedom to dance with men or to be in their midst, these are trivial things compared with the achievement of educating a woman, allowing her to go out to work like a man and share the responsibility for the household expenses. This is in addition to laws that create equality between people on the basis of liberty and brotherhood, and all the more so in terms of cleanliness, concern for the general health of citizens, etc.¹⁰

Integration, even if it incurred a cultural cost, was also the motto of the Kuwaiti columnist Muhammad al-Rumayhi, who probed Japan’s successful letting go of many of its old values and adoption of new political and social models. He based himself on a book in Arabic by Japanese scholar Nobuaki Notohara, *al-‘Arab min wujhat nazar yabaniyya* (The Arabs from a Japanese perspective), published in Germany in 2004, in which the author stressed the importance of self-criticism. The Japanese, who had lived through the bitter experience of being ruled by warmongering admirals, recognized their mistakes and resolved to purge the government of all military influence, Notohara argued. They

persistently rebuilt what had been destroyed through military oppression, reversing the damage done to the country's national resources and ending the murder of innocents. As to the question that many of his Arab friends asked—namely, “The U.S. destroyed you by dropping two nuclear bombs on your cities. Why don't you hate America?”—Notohara replied: “We must admit our mistakes. We were imperialists and we conquered peoples and destroyed many lands ... We must criticize ourselves and then correct our mistakes. As to feelings, this is a limited personal matter that does not build any future.” According to Notohara, the Japanese did perceive the connection between the atomic bombs and their own conduct, and understood that they had paid a price for their actions. Although feelings of sadness and bitterness persisted, they realized that awareness of a problem was the only possible way forward. For Ramayhi, the ability of the Japanese people to pick up the pieces, learn from their mistakes, and connect with the modern era was a lesson and a moral compass for anyone in the Arab world interested in reform. “The Arab value system contains many flaws that do not comply with the progress for which the Arabs yearn,” he wrote. “I think that we all need to read this book with open eyes and hearts.”¹¹

A related issue was globalization (‘awlama), which the liberals insisted presented no threat to Arab identity or sovereignty and which was part of a process of cultural internationalization that had been ongoing for centuries.¹² Globalization, they wrote, was an inevitable historical phenomenon heralding an age of modernity, science, and advanced technology into which Arabs would eventually have to integrate.¹³ This was supported by the Arab Human Development report compiled by Arab scholars and published by the United Nations in 2002. Globalization and the benefits of an advanced technology opened the door to endless possibilities, wrote the authors of the report, but they also introduced a new danger: the risk of being left behind.¹⁴

The Arabs rejected globalization as a threat to indigenous culture, without considering the implications or taking a moment to decide whether anything might be worth adopting, the liberals argued. It boiled down to a chronic relationship problem with modernity (hadatha), which the Arabs approached as outside observers, without creativity or imagination. They turned it down stubbornly and blindly. Those who did enter into a dialogue with modernity did so with resignation, as if it were not a matter of choice but an imposition.¹⁵ It was true that predatory colonialism had left the Arabs with a nagging sense of discrimination and resentment that was equated with the West, and these feelings

were exacerbated by the policies of U.S. leaders who strove to promote their own strategic and economic interests with little regard for the welfare and democratic rights of the people in the region. It is also true that globalization is one of the regenerative strategies of the global capitalist system, through which Third World countries will be integrated into global economic activity.¹⁶

Nevertheless, the liberals felt that the Arabs had squandered a historic opportunity by obsessing over even the faintest trace of Western culture in modernist Arab ideology and refusing to adopt any of its three political underpinnings. The first was the establishment of a nation-state. In preference to this, the Arabs cultivated an ideology of pan-Arabism that would never be implemented. The second was democracy. With the exception of a short period in the early twentieth century, the Arabs eschewed democratic institutions, all the more so after the rise of the military regimes and Islamism. And the third was secularism, which fared even more poorly than the others. Apart from some limited success in Bourguiba's Tunisia (mainly in the realm of personal status) and multi-ethnic Lebanon, it was rejected out of hand. Modernism achieved no inroads in the Arab world—neither in its radical French version, nor the moderate Anglo-Saxon version. Modernism, like imperialism and ethnic-religious minorities, engendered animosity and opposition throughout the Muslim world. Instead of joining the march of progress, the Arabs found themselves entangled in a disastrous race for power.¹⁷

Moreover, Ahmad al-Baghdadi argued, in the wake of the 1967 war the Arab public sphere and the increasing influence of Islamic circles came to be dominated by a closed language that used absolute terms, rejected dialogue with the other, and presented the Muslim as a model of superiority and perfection. For al-Baghdadi, this was a language that was subsiding and becoming detached from a reality that still echoed in conservative religious rulings, such as the prohibition against shaking hands with infidels, the prohibition on using satellite dishes, and forbidding women to work outside the home.¹⁸

Turning their back on modernism or selectively choosing bits of it, mainly its material and technological aspects, left the Arabs outside the modern world and its dynamism, without civil liberties or a developed economy, but beset by military coups and chaos.¹⁹ Hazim Saghiya and Salih Bashir described the war on modernism as a war on oneself and a form of suicide. It was a war that placed the Arabs in an untenable position of either belonging to an entity that denied the existence of the world outside it, or to a world that clashed with Arab identity

and could not be reconciled with it.²⁰

Abdelmajid Charfi went even further. He insisted that only full modernization of Arab society in the spheres of science, technology, politics, and culture would place it on a footing with Western society and earn it respect and admiration. “It is time for us to forget about positions based on emotion and become more efficient in our societies,” he wrote.²¹ In this, he was referring to the so-called cartoon crisis that erupted in 2005 after the publication of a caricature of the Prophet Muhammad in a Danish newspaper. Charfi argued that freedom of expression in Denmark should not be understood as an attack against Arab beliefs. He condemned the use of religious beliefs to justify barbaric actions that do not reflect Islamic values of tolerance. The author then went on to detail the actual differences between the West and the Muslim world, concluding:

if we want to change our relations with the West from confrontation to dialogue, we have to modernize our societies in order to talk to the West on equal footing. In such a state of scientific, technological, political and cultural underdevelopment, we cannot really expect the West to respect us.²²

Referring once more to the modernist ideology of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Arab liberals found an explanation for the backwardness of Arab society, adding warnings to the Arab world not to make another historic mistake by rejecting globalism. Globalization completed the process of modernization and unification of the human race, they wrote, and by joining the globalization movement, which had changed the face of civilization, the Arabs would be brought into a broad partnership. Fighting against it was doomed to failure and would only bring the Arabs back to square one. “The Arabs will continue to join the band of beggars that trail after civilization and cultured people, like an appendage,” warned Egyptian liberal Kamal Ghabriyal.²³

Sa‘d al-Din Ibrahim portrayed globalization as a “raging river whose banks could overflow any second.”²⁴ Despite the claims of the revolutionary regimes in the mid-twentieth century and the fundamentalist zealots of today, wrote Nasif Nassar and Shakir al-Nabulsi, the Arabs did not have the power to stop globalization. The world changed completely with the fall of the Soviet Union

and moved toward one global civilization encompassing all humanity. This did not mean that the capitalist structure would necessarily eliminate all differences between various cultural regions, but that these regions could not stay aloof if they wanted to develop. It was therefore necessary to look for ways of interacting with it positively and creatively so as to preserve an Arab sense of honor and enable the Arabs to take part in shaping the destiny of humanity.²⁵

In other words, liberals positioned globalization as opening up opportunities for the weak to exert an influence they could not have brought to bear before. Globalization meant that everyone could influence everyone. Only those who chose to be weak remained weak. Thus, Nassar explained, a positive correlation between evolving Arab societies and the process of globalization—hand in hand with constructive criticism, imagination, initiative, and innovation—would not necessarily lead to subordination, servitude, oppression, or backwardness. On the contrary, they would lead to freedom and revival. Only free people could build, face challenges, and resist subordination, Nassar declared. He envisioned globalization as a path to a second Nahda, which would bring the project of Arab liberation and modernization to a successful conclusion after passing through the stages of revival, revolution, and crisis (brought on by the Arab defeat of 1967).²⁶

For Arab liberals, globalization was crucial for the evolution of human civilization. They strove to present it as a universal cultural phenomenon, isolated from its breeding ground in the West, with roots traceable to Europe in the fifteenth century. This was expressed very clearly by Tariq Hijji, who argued that creativity, whether in the field of technology, thought, or literature, has no nationality or borders. It reflects human genius without traces of chauvinism and without fear of the unhealthy expression of Western cultural invasion that became prevalent in the late 1960s and early 1970s.²⁷ In doing this, liberals sought to neutralize the discord and resentment that globalization elicited, and to make it easier for the Arabs to accept. Through the process of globalization, the nations of the world would move into a new cultural configuration with the goal of becoming a universal civilization encompassing all of humanity and all its cultures. The idea was for everyone to influence everyone else, as the weak would influence the strong and vice versa. Hence globalization was not a synonym for the hegemony of one bloc, and participating in it did not mean erasing oneself or being subjugated to others.

Globalization, Hijji further stressed, did not seek to erase the achievements of

the working class and the middle class or the release of market forces from their bonds. Nor did it aspire to dissolve the sovereignty of the state. The progress of Israel was a striking example of the fact that globalization did not necessarily lead to the abolition of national borders, cultural blurring, or the reduction of social services to the weak in society. A similar picture could be traced in some Third World countries, from East Asia to Latin America. Arab nations could hence turn globalization into a trigger for renaissance and renewed momentum. In identifying globalization as a civilizing force from which the Arabs could reap benefits, the medieval historian Ibn Khaldun became a source of inspiration as an antithesis to isolationism (ighlaq) and an advocate of historical evolution.²⁸ He was praised for having viewed history globally and for perceiving societies as living organisms whose development and progress are highly affected by environmental causes.²⁹

Cultural diversity in the world would not be discouraged, the liberals assured their readers, just as diversity of opinions on globalization and capitalism would continue to exist in Western discourse. They compared exploitative American liberalism, which they saw as motivated by capitalism and private interests, with conservative European liberalism, which was concerned with the widening gap between rich and poor that undermined the social order. This multiplicity of views in the West also created greater flexibility for the Arabs and more options for global integration. Compared to other nations the Arabs were in a very good position for this, wrote Nassar. Geopolitically, strategically, and culturally, the Arab world was centrally located; it was perhaps also the richest in cultural memory. Moreover, the Arabs had experienced liberalism before it was rudely trampled underfoot by revolutionary regimes in the mid-twentieth century.³⁰

Despite these attempts at reassurance, liberal writers pointed out that globalization, with its amalgamation of economics, technology, and culture, summoned up challenges to the Arab value system that could not be avoided if the Arabs did not want to be left on the margins of history. At the top of the list was liberty. In the same way that globalization could not be broken down, so too liberty was a complete and indivisible entity, and a prerequisite for all human activity. Freedom of thought was not possible without political and economic freedom, or without freedom of the press. The history of attempted reforms by the Ottoman Empire at the end of the nineteenth century showed that freedom was indeed on the agenda in the Arab world in one form or another. While it was not a new issue, globalization shone a very concentrated spotlight on it, leaving no room for evasion.³¹

The emphasis on liberty meant enshrining it as the cornerstone of a capitalistic democratic system that was perceived as the sole route to advancement.³² The fact that the human race had entered the twenty-first century equipped with new technologies that allowed easy shipment of goods, efficient communication between countries, and the breakdown of barriers between peoples and cultures, also paved the way for much broader political, economic, and cultural ties, wrote Tariq Hijji. Thus it was natural for the principle of acceptance of the Other (qubul al-'akhar) to become more deeply entrenched. From the standpoint of gender, race, culture, religion, skin color, customs, and views on politics, economics, and social affairs, there was an inherent connection between globalization and accepting people who were different. Thus globalization contained the promise of pluralism in the broadest sense, and society would only be enriched by it. For Hijji, acceptance of the Other created an auspicious basis for cooperation and development, whereas rejecting this principle was a foolproof recipe for continued strife and conflict. Europe during World War II, as opposed to Europe today, was the perfect example, he wrote. Such a comparison showed the long way that Europe had come in accepting the Other.³³

By portraying globalization not as a Western invention, but as a universal phenomenon, the liberals thought it would become psychologically easier for the Arabs to accept. To their dismay, however, this was not the case. The Arabs remained set in their conspiracy mentality, aggravated by constant defeats and crises, which only perpetuated the cycle of stagnation, defeatist thinking, and frustration, and carried over to their confrontation with Israel.³⁴ Some liberals, such as 'Abd al-Hamid al-Ansari in Qatar and Wafa' Sultan in Syria, traced the roots of an inherent Muslim suspiciousness to the early days of Islam, when Qur'anic verses and hadiths drew an arbitrary profile of the surrounding world as hostile to Islam, as seen in the many references to the treachery of the Jews against the Prophet Muhammad.³⁵

In such a dissonant climate, when the blame was always pinned on others, self-criticism was nearly impossible, as was taking responsibility for one's own actions. According to Hazim Saghiya, conspiracy theories took over Arab rationality. These portrayed the Arabs as people who could not determine their own fate, which others set for them by means of conspiracies. This perception was self-defeating, since it made no sense to accuse Freemasons of conspiring against two hundred million Arabs, or to fear that Crusaders would be resurrected and defeat the Arabs.³⁶ While the conspiracy was imaginary, the danger that the Muslims would remain at the margins of history was very real,

Charfi warned.³⁷

In a similar attempt to separate globalization from its Western umbilical cord, Iranian liberal discourse portrayed it as a positive economic, scientific, and political trend on a universal scale and linked it to democratic political culture.³⁸ In both Arab and Shi'i circles, globalization was perceived as a universal cultural value and a valuable tool for enhancing local awareness of human and civil rights while curbing the power of the state. Authoritarian regimes could thus be inclined to open up their political arena.

Reconciliation with Israel

Arab liberals also embraced an alternative view of the Arab–Israeli conflict. Making peace with Israel was perceived as a cultural and humanistic mission, as well as being integral to a value system founded on democracy, human rights, civic society, and tolerance. A few even wrote openly of their great admiration for Zionism as the only modern ideology that had managed to achieve its aims and pursue its agenda almost fully. It was also the only modern ideology that had not collapsed, as socialism and fascism had. Zionism accomplished what it had set out to do and established a national homeland for the Jews. It succeeded not only in ensuring the survival of the Jewish people and becoming the legitimate voice of world Jewry, but founded a vigorous country and society, and a flourishing economy. This combination became the source of its strength. The liberals stood even more in awe of Zionism in view of the difficulties that it was facing, being based on the massive endeavor of bringing in people from distant corners of the globe and settling them in the heart of a hostile region.

Salih Bashir's interesting explanation of the Zionist enterprise was that Diaspora Jews who believed in Zionism broke away completely from the history of the countries they had left behind (e.g. Russia and Poland) and immediately plunged into a new history centered in Palestine, where the ancient kingdom of the Israelites was to be reconstructed. For those who settled in Palestine, the reality of life in the Diaspora was thereby totally erased. In other words, while ideologies like the communism of Lenin and his supporters were implemented in a concrete, fertile environment where they were subject to outside influences and

insider opponents who blocked or impaired their outcome, the Zionist enterprise was carried out under laboratory conditions, with the neutralization of the Diaspora serving as a catalyst that contributed to the success of the experiment. However, success would not have been complete without the civil and democratic culture that Israel embraced with open arms, the antithesis of Arab close-mindedness and adherence to authoritarian traditions.³⁹

Bashir's colleague, Hazim Saghiya, explained the success of the Zionist project differently. According to his analysis, the Zionist leaders, from Herzl to Weizmann and Ben-Gurion, painstakingly developed a political vision of a homeland and a state for the Jewish people, and formed close ties with international actors in order to realize it in practice. As a result, the United States and the Soviet Union both supported the partition plan of Palestine in 1947 despite the abyss between them that was exacerbated by the Cold War. On the other hand, Arab and Palestinian leaders spoke only of jihad and resistance and did not develop a concept of the state as something beyond loyalty to a religious group.⁴⁰

For Arab liberals, Israel ought to serve as a model to the Arab world—with its qualitative democracy and political pluralism that allowed for freedom of information, self-expression, and transparency, and where every person was duty-bound to obey the law, including the leaders of the state. In this sense, conciliation with yesterday's enemies was a lifeline for Arab society that would enable it to join the community of enlightened nations.⁴¹

While Arab leaders argued that the conflict with Israel was crucial for Arab identity, the liberals dismissed such claims as mere rhetoric aiming to justify the suppression of democracy and civic society. They condemned the oft-repeated “sooner or later” (*ishkaliyyat al-‘ajil wa’l-‘ajil*) school of thought, according to which there was an order of priorities in the Arab world, and domestic issues could not be tackled as long as Israel occupied Palestinian land and oppressed the Palestinian people. By advocating peace with Israel, Arab liberals strove to defuse the war mentality in the Arab world and divest its rulers of one of their pet strategies for obstructing the democratization of the Arab polity.⁴² Some of them pointed out that once peace was achieved, resources could be rechanneled into social and economic development, thereby demonstrating the critical link between peace, national growth, and democracy.⁴³

While Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd was a vocal critic of Israeli military rule, he

attributed the setback in Islamic reformation to the radicalism that permeated Arab discourse when the Arab–Israeli war broke out in 1948. He saw a direct correlation between a resolution of the conflict and the advancement of Arab politics, democracy, human rights, and religious reform, hence advocating a rapprochement between Islam and the West.⁴⁴ Sa‘d al-Din Ibrahim and Tariq Hijji also addressed this “Gordian knot.” Peace and democracy were two sides of the same coin, they wrote, but genuine democracy was not possible in wartime when countries were in a state of emergency. Peace and democracy thus went hand in hand.⁴⁵ There were already signs of such an approach in the late 1960s, against the backdrop of the 1967 war. An interesting voice that has flown under the scholarship radar was that of Mahmud Muhammad Taha of Sudan, whose country was not actively warring with Israel.

Taha did not confine himself solely to the deconstruction of Islam (see Chapter 2), but also sought to dismantle the Arab militant paradigm regarding the conflict with Israel and to advocate an alternative discourse. As part of his cosmopolitan approach, he called upon the Arabs to recognize the right of the Jews to a nation-state. Here, too, as in the religious sphere, Taha’s goal to remodel Arab collective memory was bold and original. He was in fact one of the formulators of the culture of self-criticism (*thaqafat al-naqd al-dhati*) after the 1967 war, and among the first Arab writers to preach peace with Israel. Shortly after the end of the war, he published a book entitled *Mushkilat al-Sharq al-Awsat* (The problem of the Middle East),⁴⁶ which has been largely overlooked in the scholarly literature.⁴⁷ In this intriguing book, consisting of seven chapters, Taha analyzed the reasons behind the Arabs’ heavy defeat in 1967 and outlined the solution to their problems through recognizing Israel and signing peace agreements with it.

For Taha, the 1967 defeat was unprecedented in the long history of the Arabs. In its aftermath, enemies came to despise the Arabs and friends to pity them. Somewhere between contempt and pity the Arabs lost their honor. He blamed the Arab rulers for demonstrating political and intellectual immaturity in dealing with Israel, and above all for their deviation from the path of Islam, which carries a message of peace and brotherhood and has the sole power to relieve the distress of the Arabs in particular and of humanity in general. While their ancestors in the seventh century entered the pages of history as Muslims, in the twentieth century Arabs insisted on being recorded as Arabs and sought victory over Israel without relying on God, so that they were eventually defeated. This was also the explanation for the earlier defeats of 1948 and 1956, warning signs

of the approaching catastrophe, which the Arab statesmen ignored.⁴⁸ In Taha's view, turning to God would not only enable the Arabs to better cope with the challenges of modernity, but would also reestablish their mission of conveying the supreme message of Islam—that is, peace—to the world. This is a message that is much needed if men are to live as human beings and not as animals in the shadow of war and bloodshed.

Instead of viewing the Arab defeat of 1967 as a tragedy and the State of Israel as a curse, Taha perceived them as a gift from heaven—a divine wake-up call from God to the Arabs to mend their ways and move away from an exclusive ethnic identity, which he renounced as racism ('unsuriyya). Victory in battle would only have prolonged their problems, leaving them ignorant and distracting them from the real enemy—their own people. Hence, Israel was a friend in enemy garb, a tool in the hands of God to reform the Arab milieu, a rectification that needed to begin first and foremost with the expansion of human liberties and the empowerment of individuals through the establishment of a democratic system.⁴⁹ Israel served as a mirror for the Arabs, highlighting their faults, so that it was crucial to reach out for peace with it. Peace was essential both for the humanism inherent in Islam, and by virtue of the geopolitical and international reality that was working in Israel's favor. On the other hand, war was an impractical option, and those who supported it committed a sin and deceived their people. Neither side to the conflict could force their own agenda on the other; the only real way forward was to sit around the negotiating table (al-mufawadat al-mubashira).⁵⁰ The normative language the world, including Israel, used in the context of peace and diplomatic solutions to conflicts was “the language of the era.” The Arab leaders' obstinate refusal to adhere to a liberal agenda only led to their perception by rivals and allies as no more than impulsive adolescent teenagers, unable to display courage and secure a better future for their societies.⁵¹

Taha's call for the recognition of Israel encompassed a humanistic liberal approach according to which people needed to sit and talk to each other. However, it also contained some element of political realism. Recognizing Israel's right to exist and direct negotiations with it under the sponsorship of the United Nations would weaken Israel's international standing and force it to comply with Arab demands: in particular retreat from the Occupied Territories, the establishment of a Palestinian state based on the partition resolution of 1947, and the return of Palestinian refugees to their homes.⁵² Taha made clear his belief that a political solution to the Arab-Israeli conflict would lay the foundation for the next phase of Arab redemption. It would provide an exit from their current

crisis and enable them to enter the modern era, nurturing science and technology and encouraging the individual to develop and flourish. Taha presented a comprehensive vision for Arab societies, which intertwined peace and reconciliation with Israel, respect for individualism, and a better interaction with modernity, thus narrowing the gap with the West and allowing Islam to reinvigorate its civilized mission in the world. This, according to Taha, was the second and authentic message of Islam, and had to be revived and placed at the forefront of Arab thought and conduct.⁵³

Taha reaffirmed his call for peace and normalization with Israel in later writings in the late 1970s. He regarded the 1973 war as another clear proof of the futility of military action, but also as a turning point in the Arab perception of the recognition of Israel and direct negotiations with it, as reflected in the armistice agreements of 1974, Sadat's peace initiative of 1977, and the Camp David Accords, signed a year later between Egypt and Israel. "Diplomacy and nonviolence" was his motto for Arab and Palestinian statesmanship.⁵⁴

Taha's voice became more visible in the liberal discourse of the 1970s and early 1980s, and corresponded with that of old-time liberals, like Tawfiq al-Hakim and Najib Mahfuz in Egypt. Al-Hakim called for a redefinition of Egypt's role in the region and for its transformation from that of a leader of war and conflict into a nation that devoted itself to solving its domestic problems and becoming a cultural lodestone for the Arabs and the entire world. He described Egypt as a "global museum" and an international asset that needed to be safeguarded.⁵⁵ Mahfuz adopted a similar line, declaring regional peace to be the "ignition switch" of liberty, development, and progress in the Arab world.⁵⁶ After the 1973 war, Mahfouz surmised that peace would turn the Arab East into a civilization with huge factories, colleges, and research centers. On the other hand, he said, a prolonged military confrontation would not help and could last for many generations. It would impoverish material and human resources, and increase the danger that the Arab East would slide back to the era of farming and hunting and would continue to be perceived as backward. In one interview in December 1975, he even declared that peace was important and that Palestinian territories ought to be given up to achieve it.⁵⁷ To some extent, these views were reinforced by the January 1997 conference of the Copenhagen Group—International Alliance for Arab-Israeli Peace, at which Arab and Israeli intellectuals from across the spectrum emphasized both the costliness of peace and the horror of war, and pledged to do their utmost to influence their governments and public opinion.⁵⁸

These early sentiments became the guide for the next generation of liberals who demanded a peaceful resolution to the Arab–Israeli dispute and drew up a global comparison that clearly showed a correlation between democracy and a lower incidence of conflict. Scandinavia, the EU countries, and North America were cited as examples. This also extended to economic growth, which contributed to both social peace and the consolidation of a modern middle class, and created a lively civil society in which public opinion, the media, and intellectuals played a vital role in protesting war and advocating peace. These parameters of economic development, a substantial middle class, and civil society were missing from the Arab world, where conflict was the norm and peace an aberration. Civil agents, such as professional unions, the press, and intellectuals, who were supposed to be the intermediaries between the individual and politics, were non-existent or undemocratic. Sometimes they served as tools in the hands of dictatorial regimes.⁵⁹

Writers like Saghiya and Bashir did not ignore the negative aspects of the Zionist-Israeli entity, in particular the Arab perception of Israel as a colonialist state subjugating another people whose existence it refused to recognize and which was excluded from the democratic system. Nor did they hide their view of what they saw as paranoia over security, which kept Israel from taking risks even when it was protected by international guarantees. They found this all the more strange in view of Israel's military, technological, and economic superiority, and the fact that it was the only country in the region with nuclear capability. On the other hand, they did to some extent understand the Jewish sense of victimhood after the Holocaust, and Israel's sense of being a minority in a hostile sea of Arabs that wanted it to disappear. In fact, both writers blamed the Arabs for not providing the Israelis with an incentive that would get them actively engaged in a peace process and allay their security concerns. As a further deterrent, they mentioned the absence of a democratic culture in Arab society. Thus, they concluded, the Arab region frightens the Israelis, and at the same time does not inspire them to integrate or even cooperate.

In Saghiya's and Bashir's view, it was up to the Arabs to initiate a peace process and promote normalization, intertwined with democratization at home, thereby invalidating Israel's security concerns. If not, the Arabs would remain in limbo, caught between their inability to make peace and their inability to defeat Israel on the battlefield. For the Palestinians, plagued by the absence of a firm political tradition, it was time to stop waiting for miracles and free themselves from the myths of the past, which were like "inherited landmines strapped to their legs."⁶⁰

Tariq Hijji took a similar stance, warning against blind acceptance of conspiracy theories: “Anything that happens to us and upsets us is someone else’s handiwork (or plot). We waste no time even considering the possibility that we ourselves might be to blame.”⁶¹ As a result there was no cultural climate for self-criticism or the nurturing of concerned citizens capable of confronting society’s inadequacies and taking action for change. Only a domestic front with well-documented economic growth, ingrained democratic life, science-based education and an expanded modern middle class offered the kind of solid basis needed to grapple with external disputes like the Arab–Israeli conflict. Hijji did not deny the Arabs’ unequivocal right to the return of the Occupied Territories, but it was a goal that had to be promoted in a language understood by the developed world, namely through diplomacy and negotiations, as Sadat had done when distancing the Arabs from the “path of screaming” and guiding them toward the “path of rationality.” In so doing, he assigned an important role to the intellectuals in Arab society: that of taking a firm stand against internal pressures and at the same time responding to present-day crises, as the Germans and French did after World War II, yet without hanging their heads in shame or trying to erase history.⁶²

Violence, al-‘Afif al-Akhdar added, when referring to the Palestinian armed struggle, is symptomatic of a more general scourge in an Arab political culture of lack of constructive self-criticism in light of a changing reality. Dogmatic thought and the pursuit of illusions prevented the Arabs from moving from tradition to modernity, from backwardness to progress, and from despair to realism, he said. This violence, which cultivated death and caused much harm to civilians, also contravened human logic, international law, and the values of world culture sanctifying peace. It was unethical and hopeless.⁶³ Indeed, liberal writers turned against the Arab inclination to think in terms of resistance and war, which they perceived as an expression of nihilism and a glorification of violence, and as fostering a negative self-identity, inextricably linked with the fight against external enemies.⁶⁴

The call for historical conciliation proved to be a difficult task given the antagonistic narrative in Arab historiography that had been built up over decades. The liberals offered a counternarrative to the dogmatic ideologies of Islamists, Nasserists, or Ba’athists, all of whom rejected the legitimacy of peace with Israel and the official position of the Arab regimes, including Egypt and Jordan, which had both signed peace treaties with Israel, allegedly furthering strategic Arab interests. So even when these countries agreed to security

arrangements with Israel, they continued to oppose normalization and Israeli economic and cultural integration into the region. Unsurprisingly, Israeli statesman Shimon Peres's vision of a "new Middle East" with vibrant markets, open borders, and blooming deserts was anathema to the Arab regimes.⁶⁵ Normalization (al-tatbi') remained the ultimate taboo. In his book *The Dream Palace of the Arabs* (1998), Fouad Ajami pessimistically referred to the outcome of these agreements as an "orphaned peace."⁶⁶

Nevertheless, liberal voices' support of peace and normalization continued to be heard. In 2000, Hazim Saghiya published *Difa' 'an al-Salam* (In favor of peace) in which he argued that the deep animosity toward Israel represented a form of madness that was difficult to explain in rational terms. Contemporary Arab politics kept the conflict going by insisting on absolute justice ('adl mutlaq) for the Palestinians and leveling anachronistic accusations of imperialism and conspiracy against Israel. Authoritarian policies were thus perpetuated although it became increasingly clear that Israel was the sole beneficiary of this fossilized thinking.⁶⁷ Jurj Tarabishi of Syria, Ahmad al-Baghdadi of Kuwait, Salih Bashir and 'Afif al-Akhdar of Tunisia, and the two Egyptian liberals, Tariq Hijji and Amin al-Mahdi, wrote in a similar vein.⁶⁸

In his 1999 book *al-Sira' al-Arabi al-Isra'ili, Azmat al-Dimuqratiyya wa'l-Salam* (The Arab-Israeli conflict: the crisis of democracy and peace), al-Mahdi embraced the "other view" (al-ra'y al-'akhar), which favored a political solution and dialogue with Israel and whose roots he traced back to the 1940s. Highlighting the legacy of peace in early Arab discourse was tantamount to acknowledging the legitimacy of those who continued it well into the twenty-first century. Al-Mahdi also looked to the distant past to defend cultural relations between Jews and Arabs. As a result of this relationship, he wrote, Arabic was quite often written in Hebrew characters, and vice versa, adding that it was the Jews who were the preservers of the Arab heritage in Andalusia, through the translation of Averroes into Hebrew and Latin. Moving from ancient history to modern times, al-Mahdi pointed out that the Jews of Egypt had taken part in the country's national and anticolonialist struggles, and contributed to the development of the local film and music industries. So, when they immigrated to Israel, they also took with them the riches and treasures of Arabic culture. Al-Mahdi admitted that supporters of this alternative view had not drawn up a clear plan of action or established ties with their Israeli counterparts, but they had provided a different perspective and shown that there were other ways to handle the conflict.

Like Saghiya and other liberals, al-Mahdi believed that the Arabs should strive for a partial justice that was realistic and attainable. After all, he wrote cynically, military victory was not in the cards, and waiting for the Arab nation to become great again or an enlightened dictator to come along and do the impossible was just a pipe dream.⁶⁹ The pursuit of a relative justice (‘adl nisbi) that was constructive, as opposed to an absolute justice (‘adl mutlaq) that was utopian and destructive, he added, was the right path for the Arabs to follow. He also committed himself to enlightening his Arab readers about Israeli society, thereby helping to change their conservative thinking and misconceptions. He pointed out that Israel was a society of immigrants and a mosaic of ethnicities that bred cultural and political pluralism. The unifying factor was the establishment of a flourishing state and the success of the Zionist enterprise, but beyond that, the spectrum of opinions was very broad and sensitivity to Arab grievances could also be found. In other words, Israeli society, contrary to widespread belief in the Arab world, was not monolithic. Many issues were under debate and there were also forces working for peace.⁷⁰ In keeping with his approach to revealing Israeli society to the Egyptian and Arab public, al-Mahdi initiated, via the publishing house he owned, Arabic translations of works by the best Israeli writers, such as Amos Oz, David Grossman, and Sami Michael.

The Egyptian playwright ‘Ali Salim (d. 2015) undertook a similar mission. He wrote a book, *Rihla ila Isra’il* (A drive to Israel) about his three-week-long road trip across the country in 1994. He embarked on the journey out of a desire to know and to break down the walls of hostility against Israel in the Arab world.⁷¹ In his encounters with Israelis, he found them activists who did not assume that the government must do everything for them, and who did not feel aversion to prosecuting public figures who stumbled. Administrative and political corruption for them was not only a source of disgust, but also caused fear for the destruction of their country, which was still young and in the initial stages of development. This is why they treated state officials, who paid a higher price than any other citizens, harshly. The Israelis, as Salim expressed with admiration, recognized and respected the right of people to hold different opinions and beliefs without causing violence or hostility and aggression.⁷²

In Salim’s perception, freedom of opinion was a fundamental component of a pluralistic society that respected the rights of the individual. On the other hand, in the Arab world the individual disappeared completely and the collectivist machine turned the Arabs into a single entity “gathering in the public squares to hear the leader’s speech.” It was a destructive mechanism, led by single rulers,

and leading nations to the threshold of hell.

For Salim, political freedom and human rights constituted supreme values, as there was nothing more sacred than human life. Hence his aversion to the killings and suffering caused by wars, and his vision of peace as a deep-seated human need. History was a stumbling block for the Arabs, he declared. Its pages were full of painful and even shameful episodes, including defeats against Israel. One could not change history, but one could learn from it and look into the future. For Salim, “both human dignity and interests require we read and write brilliant pages, those that have not yet been written ... We must immediately desist from serving as slaves to history. Instead, history should serve us and fulfill our will.”⁷³ Salim’s trip infuriated the Egyptian Writers’ Association, which expelled him from its ranks, but it also set off an incisive debate in Egypt over the country’s stance on Israel.

Shakir al-Nabulsi of Jordan and ‘Arif ‘Alwan of Iraq argued that peace with Israel was a prerequisite for modernity and an open society. “The aversion of the Arab intelligentsia ... to normalization will not prevent the certainty of peace in the region,” wrote al-Nabulsi. “Peace is the path to comprehensive change,” and its intertwining with freedom is unbroken.⁷⁴ ‘Alwan, an author and journalist who lived in London, minced no words: the Jews had historic rights in Palestine due to the fact that they had lived there prior to the Arab conquests in the seventh century, he wrote, and it was the Arab League, which refused to recognize the UN partition plan in 1947, that was responsible for the catastrophe (Nakba) in 1948. As far as he was concerned, the “Nakba mentality” and the denial of the rights of the Other had been ingrained in Islamic and Arab thinking since the days of the early caliphs, and led to the rise of dictators and radical clerics. This mentality also impacted on the Arab treatment of ethnic and religious minorities, such as the Kurds in Iraq, the Copts in Egypt, and the Christians in Lebanon. Recognizing Israel’s rights in Palestine aligned with historical truth, and was the only way to stop the violence and pave the way for Arab progress.⁷⁵

The appeal for a genuine and comprehensive truce that would generate peace between peoples, and not just governments, also touched on the sensitive issue of the Holocaust. The Arabs faced a dilemma in this regard. Recognizing the suffering and victimhood of the Jews during World War II might be interpreted as acknowledging a moral basis for the establishment of the state in 1948 in the sense that Israel was an answer to the persecution of the Jewish people. Various

ideological schools in the Arab world hence engaged in Holocaust denial or diminished it by claiming that the number of victims was much lower than six million. Some sought to play down the Jewish aspect by portraying the war as an era of suffering, hardship, and death for many people, not just the Jews. As Meir Litvak and Esther Webman demonstrated in their book in 2009, Holocaust denial and the Arab–Israeli conflict were closely correlated, all the more so after the 1967 war, in response to the loss of Arab land and subjugation of the Palestinians.⁷⁶ Holocaust denial seems to have been part of an Arab strategy of turning the spotlight away from Jewish suffering while highlighting that of the other side, the Palestinians. It also served the Arabs’ pragmatic need to find an excuse for Israel’s strength, which they attributed to international support. The Holocaust was seen as a lever used by the Israeli leadership to reap political dividends and a source of moral support for Israel in its stubborn refusal to give up the Occupied Territories. The dominant Arab narrative, which denied the existence of the Holocaust or pared down its dimensions, was countered by a dissident liberal narrative that bore little weight in the Arab world, but stirred up passions and shattered taboos.

Liberal discourse took a humane view of the Holocaust, but pragmatic considerations were not missing. In a 1997 article in the London-based Arabic newspaper *al-Hayat*,⁷⁷ Saghiya and Bashir pointed out that half a century after World War II, commemoration and talk about the Holocaust had only increased. France had admitted responsibility for the fate of its Jews after years of blaming the German occupier, and the Catholic Church had published an official apology for its silence during the Holocaust. In Germany, a furor had erupted around the publication of Daniel Goldhagen’s book *Hitler’s Willing Executioners*, in which he collectively blamed the German people. Even in countries that had remained neutral during the war and earned praise for it, such as Switzerland, the Holocaust was a much-debated topic. In other words, instead of rubbing out the past and starting over, the West insisted on keeping the Holocaust on the agenda, pursuing those who were involved and bringing them to trial. Saghiya and Bashir did not attribute this to Zionist propaganda that foisted Holocaust remembrance on the world to disguise the crimes committed against the Palestinians. Neither was it self-punishment and cultural narcissism on the part of the West, frustrated at having brought the message of enlightenment to the world only to have such a horrendous crime take place on its soil. Their rationale had more to do with value systems. The approach of the West was a testament to the moral superiority of Western democracies, which considered the preservation of the memory of the Holocaust to be a vehicle for the promotion of tolerance

and humanism and a warning against racism and xenophobia.⁷⁸

While the West took pains to keep memories of the Holocaust alive, the Arabs and Palestinians continued to deny that it had ever happened. Very few knew anything about the history and scope of the Holocaust, or recognized the historical fact that for many European Jews in the 1930s and 1940s, Mandate Palestine was the only refuge. Most other options spelled almost certain death. Rather than acknowledging the Holocaust and its impact on modern consciousness, many Arabs embraced the views of problematic and controversial characters like David Irving and Roger Garaudy, to prove that the Jewish narrative was false or exaggerated. Others felt that the Holocaust had nothing to do with them, and that they had been turned into the victims of a history that was not theirs and forced to bear the consequences of this heinous crime. Saghiya and Bashir argued that both attitudes were mistaken and morally corrupt. Recognition of the Holocaust and empathy for the Jewish victims would signify that Arabs had finally joined the community of enlightened nations. In their view, “It is not impossible for the victim to transcend himself in order to understand a tragedy that is not his. In this case in particular, this may be a measure of a high level of humanity and a sign of moral superiority without, however, detracting from the rights of the Arabs.” By rising above their own tragedy and feeling for others, Arabs would be better able to counter racism and fundamentalism at home and ensure that horrors of this kind were never repeated. Learning from the history of others meant leaving revenge behind and looking ahead, toward collaboration between peoples.⁷⁹ Al-Mahdi, too, adopted this line. The complexity of the conflict went far beyond the geopolitical realm, he wrote, and genuine peace could not be achieved without awareness of historical-cultural nuances and compassion for the pain of others.⁸⁰

Apart from the humanistic value of such an attitude, there were pragmatic considerations: Arab recognition of the Holocaust would force Israel to pay more heed to the plight of the Palestinians. Remembering the crimes of the Nazis amplified criticism of Israeli policy, and the view that Israel was morally responsible for the Palestinians in its midst. The Jews, who had managed to survive the ugliest crime in history, were now treating another people in a shameful manner, wrote al-Mahdi. Following this reasoning, if the Arabs acknowledged the Holocaust, the Jewish state would be in an even worse position internationally. The Holocaust would become the test case for universal human suffering and the Jewish monopoly over it would be broken. In this way, the suffering of other peoples could come to the fore, especially that of the

Palestinians.⁸¹

According to Litvak and Webman, the new approach among liberal Arab intellectuals calling for recognition of the Holocaust as a trauma for the Jewish people was instrumental and served a clear purpose:

The persecution of the Jews is acknowledged, but at the same time is linked to the Palestinian tragedy and its acknowledgment by Israel and the West. The comparison between the two, either directly or by inference, involves by definition the minimization and relativization of the Holocaust. The recognition of the Holocaust is a basis for reconciliation and a means for the realization of Palestinian national aspirations.⁸²

This, in my view, is quite a sweeping statement. The same is true for Uriya Shavit and Ofir Winter's argument that the discourse of peace, concessions, and coexistence in the liberal Arab camp emanated from the weak stance of the Arabs and the unfavorable international climate, or that peace was perceived as a tool for cultivating regional democracy.⁸³

The post-1967 writings of Taha, al-Hakim, Mahfuz, Saghiya, Bashir, al-Mahdi, 'Abd al-Mun'im Sa'id, Charfi, and al-Akhdar were indeed imbued with pragmatic considerations regarding peace with Israel. After all, these writers shared in the Arab dilemmas and aspirations. They did not write off the Arab and Palestinian cause but saw themselves as its spokespersons, portraying Israel as a captive of the extreme right. Peace with Israel remained contingent on withdrawal from the Occupied Territories.⁸⁴ Nonetheless, their advocacy of a reconciliation with the State of Israel also incorporated an ethical component, an intrinsic part of the broad humanistic and cosmopolitan outlook they adopted to shake up the Arab conceptual world. Al-Mahdi drew a link between rejecting the Other in the outside world, that is, Israel, and rejecting the Other at home, that is, political pluralism. It was a dual rejection that attested to intellectual and spiritual shallowness, and constituted a "tragedy that plunges the Arabs into delusion, schizophrenia and isolation, and ultimately leads to conquest and destruction." The way out of this morass, wrote al-Mahdi, was to embrace a culture of peace (thaqfat al-salam).⁸⁵ This required, according to al-Akhdar,

empowering Arab civil society and encouraging the concept of active citizenship and genuine participation in national politics.⁸⁶

Cultural ecumenism was viewed by Arab liberals as essential for the very existence of Arab society and as a gateway to modernity and enlightenment. For progress to gain a foothold, they wrote, the Arabs would have to overcome their animosity and the distrust they harbored toward the enemies of the past. Encouragement was derived from the rewriting of Israeli history by the so-called new historians who challenged the core myths of the Zionist movement and the State of Israel by exposing massacres and the forced expulsion of Palestinian villagers from their ancestral lands. While revisionist scholarship opened the door to the Arab narrative, Salih Bashir emphasized the importance of self-criticism, which would enable a courageous collaborative rewriting of regional history. Israel would no longer be the focus, but just one component of this history, and the emphasis in Arab dialogue would shift from the legitimacy of Israel's existence to its integration in the region and participation in joint endeavors. The door would thus open to mutual reconciliation and social justice. If not, both sides would lose out and be caught up in a web of tragic pessimism and the mythicizing of history. The Israeli view of 1948 and the establishment of the State of Israel had been that of a renewed connection with history following the destruction of the Second Temple, while the existence of the Palestinian people was ignored. The Arab view of 1948 and its aftermath had been that of a tragic end or a moment of stagnation, with a return to life to be realized only after the liberation of Palestine is achieved.⁸⁷

For Arab liberals, Palestine's painful and difficult days were over and done with. Now the time had arrived for the Arabs to write a new and glorious chapter in their history. Egyptian playwright 'Ali Salim expressed this clearly in the travelogue he wrote about his visit to Israel:

While we cannot change historical events, we can always understand them better in light of human nature, using them to guide us on the road to rationalization and safely reaching the last stop. We all belong to the family of human beings. We cannot rewrite or redo what has happened. History has already written itself. It is past. It is also difficult to interpret history in a way different from that of our predecessors. But human dignity, as well as our own interests, require that we read and write the glorious pages of history—those that have not yet been

written. I would be misguided if I said that we are not responsible for the pages not yet written. For not a soul on earth can write them besides us. And when we write them, we must not allow history to go back to its old, nasty habit of recreational butchering. We must stop being the slaves of history. History must worship us and do our bidding.⁸⁸

Their new reading of the Arab–Israeli conflict illustrated the intellectual daring of the liberal writers, but like their approach to Islam, it cast them in the eye of storm. They were denounced as representatives of a “culture of surrender” that bordered on treason. The Lebanese poet Nizar Qabbani played a major role in shaping the rationale for opposing peace with Israel and castigating those in favor of it in the Arab community. In his poem *al-Muharwilun* (“Those who are in a rush”), published in *al-Hayat* in October 1995 after the Oslo Accords, Qabbani spoke out against those who yearned for peace and set himself up as the voice of conscience and defender of Arab heritage, standing tall against those who exploited and dishonored it:

The last wall of embarrassment has fallen

We were delighted

and we danced

and we blessed ourselves

for signing the peace of the cowards

Nothing frightens us anymore

Nothing shames us anymore

The vein of pride in us has dried up

We stood in columns

like sheep before slaughter

we ran, breathless

We scrambled to kiss

the shoes of the killers...

After this secret romance in Oslo

we came out barren.

They gave us a homeland

smaller than a single grain of wheat

a homeland to swallow without water

like aspirin pills

Oh, we dreamed of a green peace and a white crescent

and a blue sea.

Now we find ourselves

on a dung-heap.⁸⁹

“The culture of surrender” to Israel was portrayed by critics of liberalism as diametrically opposed to the culture idealized in the Arab world—the culture of resistance (muqawama) and steadfastness (sumud). Their defiance was nourished by the ongoing demonization of the Zionist enemy in modern Arab historiography, at the same time denouncing liberals accused of submissiveness and kowtowing to Israel.

Notes

1Hijji, al-Thaqafa Awwalan wa-Akhiran , pp. 139–142, 146.

2al-Akhdar, al-Mithaq al-‘Aqlani , parts 1–2.

3Ibid., part 2; Sultan, A God Who Hates , pp. 143–148, 155–164, 234–237.

4Al-Nabulsi, “Man hum al-Libiraliyyun al-‘Arab al-Judad,” pp. 23, 25.

5Ibid., p. 26. On the Tunisian Personal Status Code, see Mournira M. Charrad, States and Women’s Rights: The Making of Postcolonial Tunisia, Algeria and Morocco (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2001), ch. 9.

6Sa‘d al-Din Ibrahim, al-Mujtma‘ al-Madani wa’l-Tahawwul al-Dimuqrati fi Misr (Cairo: Dar Quba’, 2000).

7Nasira, “al-Libiraliyyun al-‘Arab al-Judad fi Misr.”

8Sultan, A God Who Hates , pp. 57–66. The quote is on p. 57.

9Saghiya’s writings: “Introduction,” pp. 7–8; “Nazra ila Masa‘ib”; al-Inhiyar al-Madid , pp. 35–36; Mernissi, Islam and Democracy , esp. chs. 1, 3.

[10 Abu Zayd, “Mashru‘ al-Nahda,” pp. 64–65.](#)

[11 Muhammad al-Rumayhi, quoted in al-Quds \(East Jerusalem\), January 8, 2004; Nobuaki Notohara, al-Arab min Wujhat Nazar Yabaniyya \(Cologne: Manshurat al-Jamal, 2003\), esp. pp. 11–13. On Notohara’s book, see Zeina Chams, “Arabs from a Japanese Perspective: Cultural Representation and Translation,” M.A. thesis, American University of Sharjah, 2015.](#)

[12 Al-Nabulsi, “Man hum al-Libiraliyyun al-‘Arab al-Judad,” p. 24. On Islam and globalization, see Johan Meuleman \(ed.\), Islam in the Era of Globalization \(New York: Routledge, 2002\); Birgit Schaebler and Leif Stenberg \(eds.\), Globalization and the Muslim World \(Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press,](#)

2004).

13 Fauzi Najjar, "The Arabs, Islam and Globalization," *Middle East Policy* 12 (fall 2005), pp. 91–106.

14 Arab Human Development Report 2000 (New York: United Nations Publications, 2002), esp. pp. iii–viii; see also Bakir al-Najjar, "al-Arab wa'l-‘Awlama: al-Makhawif wa-Tahaddiyat," *Abwab* 26 (autumn 2000), pp. 9–24.

15 Al-Najjar, "al-Arab wa'l-‘Awlama," p. 9; Tarabishi, *Min al-Nahda ila al-Ridda*, pp. 161–192.

16 See, for example, Charfi's sharp indictment against the United States' antagonistic attitude toward the Muslim world and support of autocratic regimes. Charfi, "Islam and Democracy."

17 Hazim Saghiya and Salih Bashir, *Tasaddu' al-Mashriq al-‘Arabi: al-Salam al-Dami fi'l-Iraq wa-Filastin* (Beirut: Riyad al-Rayyis, 2004), pp. 97–117; Ahmad al-Baghdadi, "al-Insan al-Muslim wa-‘Asr al-‘Awlama," in Abdelmajid Charfi (ed.), *al-Muslim fi'l-ta'rikh* (Casablanca: Matba'at al-Najah al-Jadida, 1999), pp. 9–25.

18 Al-Baghdadi, "al-Insan al-Muslim wa-‘Asr al-‘Awlama," pp. 15–23.

19 Saghiya and Bashir, *Tasaddu' al-Mashriq al-‘Arabi*, pp. 97–117.

20 Ibid., p. 117.

21 Charfi's interview in *al-Sabah*, February 22, 2006; this interview was later reprinted in its entirety in the French-language daily *Le Temps*. See also https://www.wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/06TUNIS540_a.html (accessed May 31, 2014).

22 Charfi's interview in *al-Sabah*, February 22, 2006.

23 Ghabriyal, "Ila ayna Tattajih Misr."

24 Ibrahim, quoted in Qasim, *Muthaqqaf Tahta al-Hisar*, p. 40.

25 Nassar, "al-Nahda al-‘Arabiyya al-Thaniya," pp. 145–151; al-Nabulsi,

Muhami al-Shaytan , pp. 129–144.

26 Nassar, “al-Nahda al- ‘Arabiyya al-Thaniya,” pp. 145–151.

27 Hijji, al-Thaqafa Awwalan wa-Akhiran , pp. 67–70.

28 Ibid., pp. 145–148; al-Najjar, “al- ‘Arab wa’l- ‘Awlama,” pp. 12–15; Ibrahim, quoted in Qasim, Muthaqqaf Tahta al-Hisar , p. 40.

29 Nassar, La Pensée réaliste d’Ibn Khaldun ; Talbi, Ibn Khaldun .

30 Nassar, “al-Nahda al- ‘Arabiyya al-Thaniya,” p. 155; Saghiya, “Nazra ila Masa’ib.”

31 Nassar, “al-Nahda al- ‘Arabiyya al-Thaniya,” pp. 145–153; Hijji, al-Thaqafa Awwalan wa-Akhiran , pp. 79–84. See also ‘Afif al-Akhdar’s similar stance as discussed in al-Nabulsi, Muhami al-Shaytan , pp. 144–169.

32 Nassar, “al-Nahda al- ‘Arabiyya al-Thaniya,” pp. 149–150.

33 Hijji, al-Thaqafa Awwalan wa-Akhiran , pp. 31–33.

34 Ibid., pp. 99–106; Saghiya, al- ‘Arab bayna al-Hajar wa’l-Dharra , pp. 203–210.

35 ‘Abd al-Hamid al-Ansari, quoted in the Qatar newspaper al-Ru’ya , September 20, 2004; Sultan, A God Who Hates , pp. 191–194.

36 Saghiya, al- ‘Arab bayna al-Hajar wa’l-Dharra , p. 203; see also pp. 213–214.

37 Charfi , al-Islam, p. 197; see also al-Akhdar, quoted in al-Nabulsi, Muhami al-Shaytan , pp. 159–168.

38 Kamrava, Iran’s Intellectual Revolution , pp. 209–211.

39 Saghiya and Bashir, Tasaddu’ al-Mashriq al- ‘Arabi , pp. 47–59.

40 Ibid., pp. 72–76.

41 Al-Mahdi, al-Sira’ al- ‘Arabi al-Isra’ili , pp. 40–41, 229; Hazim Saghiya, Difa’an ‘an al-Salam (Beirut: Dar al-Nahar, 1997). See also Sultan, A God Who

Hates , pp. 192–195; al-‘Afif al-Akhdar, quoted in al- Hayat , July 24, 1999.

42 Al-Mahdi, al-Sira‘ al-Arabi al-Isra‘ili , pp. 57–118.

43 Ibrahim, “Reviving Middle Eastern Liberalism,” pp. 5–6; Ibrahim, quoted in Qasim, Muthaqqaf Tahta al-Hisar , pp. 37–40.

44 Abu Zaid with Esther R. Nelson, Voice of an Exile , pp. 187–190.

45 Ibrahim, quoted in <http://www.january-25.org/post.aspx?k=4724> (accessed February 12, 2012); Hijji, al-Taqaqa Awwalan wa-Akhiran , pp. 134–136.

46 Taha, Mushkilat al-Sharq al-Awsat .

47 See, for example, the works by Thomas, Islam’s Perfect Stranger ; Mahmoud, “Mahmud Muhammad Taha’s Second Message of Islam”; and his Quest for Divinity: A Critical Examination of the Thought of Mahmud Muhammad Taha (New York: Syracuse University Press, 2007).

48 Taha, Mushkilat al-Sharq al-Awsat , pp. 3–8, 30–42, 54–77.

49 Ibid., pp. 6–8.

50 Ibid., pp. 149–157, 169–182.

51 Ibid., pp. 170–171.

52 Ibid., pp. 180–183.

53 Ibid., pp. 183–191.

54 Taha’s books: Istalihu ma‘a Isra‘il (Omdurman: Jumhuri publication, 1978), and Ittafaqiyyat al-Salam didda Maslahat al-Shuyu‘iyya al-Dawliyya wa-fi Maslahat al-‘Arab , 4th ed. (Omdurman: Jumhuri publication, 1979).

55 Tawfiq al-Hakim, “al-Hiyad,” al-Ahram , March 3, 1978.

56 Mahfuz, Hawla al-Taharrur wa’l-Taqaqum , pp. 175–176.

57 Mahfuz’s interview in the Kuwati al-Qabas , December 31, 1975.

58 The Copenhagen conference sparked a storm in the Arab street and its Arab participants were accused of being collaborators or fools in encouraging normalization with Israel. Ajami, The Dream Palace , pp. 308–309.

59 Hijji, al-Taqaifa Awwalan wa-Akhiran , pp. 135–136.

60 Saghiya and Bashir, Tasaddu‘ al-Mashriq al-‘Arabi , pp. 11–21, 56–58, 91–92.

61 Hijji, al-Thaqafa Awwalan wa-Akhiran , p. 34.

62 Ibid., pp. 136–137.

63 Al-Akhdar referred mainly to Palestinian violence during the al-Aqsa Intifada (2000–05), which saw a wave of suicide bombings. However, as early as the 1960s, when he was still a member of the leftist camp and was in contact with the Palestinian leftist fronts, he expressed his reservations about a blind armed struggle that was not structured around a political paradigm and a proper reading of the balance of forces. Al-Akhdar, quoted in al-Nabulsi, Muhami al-Shaytan , pp. 173–196.

64 Saghiya in al-Hayat , June 21, 2007.

65 Shimon Peres (with Arye Naor), The New Middle East (New York: Henry Holt, 1993).

66 Ajami, The Dream Palace of the Arabs , ch. 5.

67 Saghiya, Difa‘an ‘an al-Salam .

68 Al-Baghdadi, quoted in al-Siyasa , January 1, 2014; al-Akhdar, quoted in al-Nabulsi, Muhami al-Shaytan , pp. 256–239.

69 Al-Mahdi, al-Sira‘ al-‘Arabi al-Isra’ili , pp. 23–36.

70 Ibid., pp. 37–41, 229–251.

71 ‘Ali Salim, Rihla ila Isra’il (Cairo: al-Madbuli al-Saghir, 1994).

72 Ibid., pp. 148–150, 41–42, 148–151.

73 Ibid., pp. 223–224.

74 Al-Nabulsi, “Man hum al-Libiraliyyun al-‘Arab al-Judad,” p. 25; and his Muhami al-Shaytan , p. 241.

75 ‘Alwan’s essay in www.ahewar.org , December 7, 2007 (accessed April 12, 2013).

76 Meir Litvak and Esther Webman, From Empathy to Denial: Arab Responses to the Holocaust (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009).

77 The article was later included in Saghiya and Bashir’s joint book, Tasaddu‘ al-Mashriq al-‘Arabi, pp. 23–36.

78 Ibid., pp. 23–29.

79 Ibid., pp. 28–29, 82.

80 Al-Mahdi, al-Sira‘ al-‘Arabi al-Isra’ili , pp. 24, 254.

81 Ibid; see also Saghiya and Bashir, Tasaddu‘ al-Mashriq al-‘Arabi , pp. 29–36.

82 Litvak and Webman, From Empathy to Denial , p. 373.

83 Shavit and Winter, Zionism in Arab Discourses , esp. pp. 121–134.

84 Taha, Istaslihu ma‘a Isra’il , pp. 9–11, 29–30; Charfi, “Islam and Democracy,” p. 69; al-Akhdar, quoted in al-Nabulsi, Muhami al-Shaytan , pp. 246–247.

85 Al-Mahdi, al-Sira‘ al-‘Arabi al-Isra’ili , pp. 24, 59.

86 Al-Akhdar, quoted in al-Nabulsi, Muhami al-Shaytan , pp. 245–246, 251–252.

87 Saghiya and Bashir, Tasaddu‘ al-Mashriq al-‘Arabi , pp. 37–47.

88 Salim, Rihla ila Isra’il , pp. 223–224.

89 The poem was translated into English by Fouad Ajami, The Dream Palace of the Arabs , pp. 256–258 (the quote is on pp. 256–257).

The 2011 revolutions

The 2011 Arab uprisings, in which old, established regimes were swept off the map in Tunisia, Egypt, Yemen, and Libya, overturned entrenched research paradigms about the endurance of authoritarian regimes in the Middle East. The uprisings, dubbed the “Arab Spring,” testified to the political maturity of the masses, especially young people, who demanded genuine partnership in shaping their own fate. They were also evidence of the potential for civil society in the Arab world, which had gone under the scholarly radar until then. The dramatic events attested to the Middle East as an integral part of the global village in terms of its exposure to modern technology, communication networks, and Western ideas.

The young generation, which had known only revolutionary-centrist regimes in the second half of the twentieth century, emerged as a social actor in the 2011 events. Many angry young people protested against restrictions on individual liberties and political manipulation and expressed frustration over the severe economic distress of the population. In the boulevards and public squares, of which al-Tahrir (Freedom) Square in Cairo was a microcosm, demands were heard to expand the democratic process and reform the political order, not necessarily in order to establish states based on the shari‘a. Freedom and democracy had become key words in the contemporary public discourse.¹

The terms “liberalism” (libiraliyya) and “freedom” (hurriyya) became more widespread and ingrained in public discourse. They were included in the names of civilian bodies such as the Arab Liberal Federation and Free Thought Forum (Muntada al-Fikr al-Hurr).² New liberal parties came into being, like Free Egypt (Misr al-Hurriyya) and the Democratic Generation (Hizb al-Jil al-Dimuqrati) in Egypt; or the Democratic Youth (al-Shabab al-Dimuqrati), the Tunisian Liberals (al-Ahrar al-Tunisi), and the Development and Democratic Movement (Harakat al-Dimuqratiyya wa’l-Tanmiyya) in Tunisia.³ These developments raised questions as to the depth and impact of religiosity or the Islamization process in the Arab Middle East since the early 1970s. In the context of Islam in Israel, for

instance, an increase in the number of mosques and welfare associations is clearly not a sufficient indication of the strength of the Islamic movement and the degree of Islamization of the Arab street. Public polls conducted in recent years among Muslims in Israel show that only 20 percent of the respondents indicated that religion should play an active role in the public sphere. The rest perceived it as a moral and cultural code. Moreover, field studies conducted in mixed localities in which Muslims and Christians live, such as Haifa, Nazareth, and Kafr Qana, show cordial interethnic relations based on interpersonal and family acquaintance, joint activities in local institutions, and common interests related to their position as minority groups vis-à-vis state authorities.⁴

If we turn our gaze outward toward the Middle Eastern environment, we will discover a similar picture of Islamization as a relative process, for example with regard to the veil or head covering, which stems from a social, not only a religious, impulse that allows women to move freely in the public sphere. In addition, opinion polls and interviews conducted in various Arab countries from the 2000s onward showed that a significant percentage of the respondents, mainly young people, expressed a desire for the protection of personal freedoms and the establishment of a democratic regime. Some of them even showed indifference and skepticism toward religion or atheism.⁵ These indicators, together with the existence of different approaches and ideologies regarding the place of religion in the polity, were signs of religious diversity. They also give more credibility to the idea that the liberal ethos has become an integral component of Arab political culture, a notion also backed by the 2011 revolutions. Perhaps it is, after all, not surprising that these revolutions did not erupt on religious grounds or from demands for the implementation of the shari‘a, but against the background of national and secular issues, such as individual and civil rights, social justice, and democratization.

One of the most remarkable results of these revolutions was the emergence or reawakening of the citizen (muwatin) as an individual with rights and claims against state authorities. The Arab public space changed its face and historical role: it was no longer a background against which rulers projected their authority in public speeches, processions, or official festivals, while the masses played a submissive role, cheering and granting them legitimacy.⁶ Gone were the days when steam was released in cultural salons and media forums. The demonstrators, led by educated and embittered youths, went out to the squares and turned them into an arena of open defiance against the regime, expressing a clear demand for change. They stormed the symbols of sovereignty of the Arab

state and clashed with its forces, creating new modes of collective action, or “a new Arab street,” to quote the anthropologist Asef Bayat, while enforcing their presence in the political arena.⁷ A decisive role in the uprisings was played by the information revolution and new media.

Social networks served as a platform for creating an organized online protest with tens of thousands of users. They disseminated information in real time, raised awareness, and created solidarity for change. Facebook, Twitter, and blogs contributed to the social and political struggle and became effective weapons in the hands of the weak against authoritarian regimes. The organization of additional demonstrations and the arrests and repressive measures that followed fueled the culture of resistance and laid the foundations for the next wave of activism against torture, poverty, corruption, and unemployment. “We are all Khalid Sa‘id,” was the name of an Egyptian Facebook group that was established after the death of a young man who was beaten to death by police on the outskirts of Alexandria in June 2010, an event that served as a trigger for mass riots. This was also the case a few months later in Tunisia, following the death of an unemployed young man, Mohamed Bouaziz, who set himself on fire in the town of Sidi Bou Zayd in protest against the authorities preventing him from running a vegetable stall.⁸

Local regimes failed to understand the essence and power of new media in the empowerment of citizens: the more they lost the virtual war, the more they resorted to force in order to subdue a growing civil revolt. Every new wave of casualties added to the list of martyrs and further fueled the demonstrations. One of the bloggers who helped kindle the raging online debate over freedom and democracy said it well: “Blogging and the Internet have forever altered yesterday’s dictatorial politics of ignorance and ushered in a new politics of knowledge that helped trigger and facilitate the so-called Arab Spring.”⁹ However, physical networks of defiance were also required, and these were provided by the tens of thousands who went out into the streets and squares and clashed with the state authorities. Local observers who documented the events day after day emphasized the daring of the young people who went out to protest, willing to die on the altar of freedom.

The renowned Syrian thinker Sadiq Jalal al-‘Azm noted that the youthfulness of the protesters broke radically with a deep-rooted Arab tradition that required the emergence of a charismatic leadership, which the revolutionary masses followed.

This time the charisma of the revolutionary moment has shifted from the usual fixation on a single or unrivaled leader, to the flow and diffusion of the assembled masses in many Tahrir Squares across the Arab world, making their assembly the true charismatic locus of revolution and change. This important development is certainly new for us Arabs and for our modern socio-political history.¹⁰

Other, less well-known writers painted the uprisings in more romantic colors. Thus, the Egyptian Nawaf al-Qadimi spoke of people who left families, wives, children, and workplaces to claim their lost honor. The spontaneity of the revolution did not prevent al-Qadimi and other observers from describing it as a historical process resulting from an accumulation of anger and bitterness at suppression, enslavement, and humiliation of the Egyptian people. Locating the protests in historical perspective was also the battle cry of liberal writers.¹¹

Liberals were clearly visible in the drama that played itself out in the streets of the Arab world, taking an active part in the demonstrations, public rallies, and political organizations. In the liberal perception, the dramatic events demonstrated that the long-standing battle to expand the spectrum of personal liberties and democracy had not been fought in vain.¹² Political parties began to form, in a move toward implementing their liberal agenda.¹³

Liberals were quick to appropriate the 2011 events and to present them as a natural outcome of their sustained efforts throughout the years. Muhammad Shahrur and Shakir al-Nabulsi perceived the 2011 uprisings as proof of the victory of civil society, which was now tasked with guarding the rights of the people vis-à-vis the state. Arab rulers were previously seen as God on earth and above the law, and many citizens were careful to show them respect and pray for their safety. However, with the events of 2011 their sanctified image slowly dissolved and citizens ceased to be afraid. They became the “revolting liberals” (al-thuwwar al-ahrar). The road to a new Arab order (nizam ‘Arabi jadid), al-Nabulsi declared, was opened and the task was now to lay the building blocks for a pluralistic and democratic polity based on human rights and citizenship.¹⁴

In liberal circles, the Arab revolutions reintroduced the concepts of citizenship

(muwatana) and people (sha‘b), and again dealt with the question of power as a social contract, one aspect of which was the notion that people constitute the source of political authority, and the other that the state ought to be committed to realizing the individual’s human, political, and economic rights. After the fall of the Berlin Wall, as the winds of freedom were blowing all over the world, Arab countries were described as poles apart from the prevailing mood and outside of the circle of democracy. Their only contribution was thought to be the export of fundamentalism and terrorism. The events of 2011 proved that the Arab peoples had become an integral part of a worldwide political process.¹⁵

Jurj Tarabishi celebrated the uprisings as the “third wave in the history of democratic revolutions,” after the European Spring of Nations in 1848 and the fall of the Communist bloc in 1989–91.¹⁶ He described the third wave in the Arab world as wildfire in countries ruled by various types of regimes (monarchical, republican, civil, military, semireligious, or semisecular), but their common denominator was the rulers’ stubborn adherence to keeping the Arab world outside the scope of a democratic process that had gained worldwide momentum due to the communications revolution and the Internet. Tarabishi admitted to being surprised by the intensity of the revolutionary wave. He had predicted that the wave would come, but not in his life or his generation. He always felt that the Arabs were caught in a state of missed opportunities, and he did not expect the emergence of a new kind of revolution, sparked by the Internet, in Tunisia and then in Egypt.¹⁷

Hazim Saghiya, ‘Abd al-Hamid al-Ansari, and al-‘Afif al-Akhdar, too, heaped praise on the newly minted revolution. Saghiya praised the courage and heroism of the masses in Tunis and Cairo, who set out to demonstrate in the squares demanding to join the global circle of freedom and democracy seekers. In so doing, they broke down three barriers that had prevented them from entering the gates of the present era: the fear of patriarchal and absolute rule; hostility toward the West, which the rulers encouraged; and, finally, the conflict with Israel, which was used to divert attention from demands for internal change. The uprisings showed that there are also inside forces in Arab countries that deal with politics, economics, education, and health, and that go beyond the conflict with the enemy, real or imagined.¹⁸

Al-Ansari expressed the hope that the Arab revolutions would not be satisfied

with politics and the replacement of regimes, but would alter the cultural bias that produces tyranny and Arab backwardness.¹⁹ Al-Akhdar, for his part, crowned the Arab revolutions as a manifestation of the emergence of a new mentality and new social covenant that released the younger generation from the illusion of the liberation of Palestine, and called for the liberation of Arab lands from internal “occupation” by long-standing rulers. He found evidence thereof in the absence of inflammatory slogans against imperialism, Zionism, and external conspiracies, and in a profusion of slogans in favor of freedom, democracy, and openness.²⁰ He elaborated these themes along liberal lines, thus aiming to empower the liberal image of the 2011 events.

We no longer want to be ruled by a closed society that is in conflict with a global community turned into a glasshouse by the information revolution.

We no longer want a legal system that rules on the basis of police reports rather than on rational, positive law.

We no longer want media communications whose chief editors are censors. We no longer want you to denigrate our honor by treating us as a negligible mass, as waste, devoid of rights and respect.

We no longer want to pay bribes for every service, including hospitalization. We no longer want to live without a future: without work, without housing, without a family.

We no longer want huge gaps between classes, regions, communities, and tribes.

We no longer want to get a job by virtue of nepotism, but through certificates and skills.

We no longer want a society based on status and belonging to parties, communities, or tribes, but want to move on to a modern society based on merit. It is the only society that will ensure that the employment requirements of millions of university graduates are met.

We no longer want a society of prohibitions but a forgiving society that will not stop us or flog us as a punishment for singing and dancing in public.

We no longer want the social contract signed by our parents, who have given up their freedoms in exchange for security and economic prosperity. From now on, we want a new social contract that will give us security, prosperity, rights and freedoms, as promised to us by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.²¹

The realization of these demands, al-Akhdar clarified, was contingent on the fulfillment of three conditions:

1. Resolving the Arab–Israeli conflict in order to move from war on the battlefield to war against pollution, disease, poverty, illiteracy, poor education, and population explosion.
2. The formulation of an international Marshall Plan for the development of the Middle East, which would include reforming Islam within the framework of religious studies; the launching of a pedagogic program based on modern curricula and scientific methods; legislation of personal status laws in all Arab countries, inspired by the 1956 Tunisian Personal Status Code; substituting religious laws with rational, positive laws that protect individual liberties.
3. Providing regional and international assistance to the civil uprising in Iran, which has been going on since 2009 and aims to bring down the Islamic right in favor of a reformist regime.

Only then, al-Akhdar argued, “can the Islamic world be integrated into the world in which we live and share its common values without reservations, complexes or feelings of wrongdoing.”²²

The Egyptian revolution of January 25, 2011 was widely praised in the liberal discourse. It was depicted as a revolution from which citizens emerged more united than ever. It reduced the level of tension between Muslims and Copts, as well as that of intolerance and civil violence. A confident and determined younger generation, which was not taken aback by the regime’s demagogic claims that the riots resulted from a plot by foreign elements to undermine stability in the country, served as its spearhead. The regime, Mansura ‘Izz al-Din

wrote in the journal *Kalamun*, did not understand that the youth, unlike their parents, no longer treated the homeland as an idol that demands the sacrifice of freedom and a dignified life. Egypt was not just a territory consisting of history and antiquities. First and foremost, it embodied the people and their aspirations for a modern, democratic state that respects its citizens.²³ Writers of Lebanese origin raised the hope that Lebanon would also draw lessons from the revolutions in Egypt and Tunisia, and put an end to internal strife, choosing the path leading to democracy, freedom, and dignity.²⁴

The euphoria of liberal writers was mixed with fears that the revolutions might not achieve the goals they set out to achieve, and that it would take time for a clearer picture to emerge until the transition from revolution to stability was complete.²⁵ Their eyes were also turned to the prolonged civil wars and state disintegration that erupted in Yemen, Libya, and Syria and required international interference.²⁶ Hazim Saghiya spoke of a transitional and bloody phase that could head in different directions, since regime change is not a cosmetic exercise, but may lead to an earthquake that could seep through into society. This could result in international intervention, as happened in Libya. Moreover, he argued, the achievement of liberty is not sufficient. To safeguard freedom it is necessary to build democracy and establish a nation which depended greatly on the existence of a middle class, modern education, and a high level of open-mindedness.²⁷

Tarabishi was looking forward when he stressed that the Arab world was not one-dimensional, so that the unique characteristics of each Arab country would shape its revolutionary wave. It could spread within weeks, or last for months or even years. It could come at a low or a high price in human life. Perhaps the highest price in the form of civil war would be paid by nations in multi-ethnic countries. Tarabishi entertained the hope that the political and social reality would eventually allay his fears.

Leaving no escape for the existing regimes, he pointed out that it was “self-abolishment” that would pave the way for the restoration of states that they had confiscated for their own personal benefit.²⁸ His Tunisian colleague, al-‘Afif al-Akhdar, was less decisive. He called for the establishment of a broad coalition government in Tunisia, which would represent all the elites along the political and social spectrum, both those who collaborated with the regime and those who were expelled from it, thereby ensuring national reconciliation and stability. As to the al-Nahda party, a distinction ought to be made between the radical wing

under the leadership of Rashid al-Ghanushi, who should be seen as a “destructive force,” and the modernist wing, which should be nurtured in order to achieve a necessary reconciliation of Islam with freedom, democracy, and secularism, as was proved by the Justice and Development Party in Turkey. On the other hand, al-Akhdar cautioned against the total destruction of the authoritarian regime, which would only lead to anarchy, as had happened in France after the French Revolution, and in Russia after the Communist revolution.²⁹

In other words, al-Akhdar advocated a gradual approach to the revolutions of 2011, not ruling out the creation of a hybrid regime that contained authoritarian tendencies alongside democratic ones—a necessary stage in the creation of a true democracy. He even called upon his enlightened colleagues to support such a regime, which could also serve as a barrier to radical Islam. As sources of inspiration, he mentioned England in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and countries in Latin America and Southeast Asia in the second half of the twentieth century, as well as Turkey under Ataturk (1920–35) and Tunisia under Bourguiba (1957–87). Ataturk led an aggressive secularization policy, which was to create the infrastructure necessary for the establishment of modern democracy and which also influenced the discourse and conduct of the Islamic parties. Bourguiba, with his authoritarian measures regarding personal status, modern education, and religion–state relations, led to an improvement in the status of women, the bridging of social gaps, and the promotion of a secular culture.³⁰ As far as al-Akhdar was concerned, promoting secularism even under the patronage of an authoritarian-oriented regime would better prepare the ground for the establishment of a true democracy. “Without secularism, there is no democracy. It is impossible to maintain democracy in a country that discriminates against women and against non-Muslims.”³¹

The fascination of Arab liberals with optimistic and semi-optimistic scenarios of the Arab revolutions indicated a desire to “seize the moment” and become an active agent in reshaping Arab history and channeling it into liberal democracy. Their main focus was on young people as the target audience for recruitment and support. Liberal writers described the Egyptian revolution as a home and thoroughly studied its “rooms.” Entering the “house of revolution” were many highly educated and enthusiastic young people. They participated in demonstrations and expressed themselves on Facebook and Twitter. Inside the home were the families of these young people—their mothers, brothers, sisters, uncles, and aunts. In the first room are those who worry about their livelihood.

These were lazy individuals and were difficult to understand. They were not real revolutionaries, and only sought equal opportunities and professional training in order to secure a better future for themselves. In the next room were people not fundamentally different from those in the first room, though they expressed themselves differently. They were the victims of the culture and slogans of the 1960s, and expected the state to take care of them. They demanded that the government give them free education and then register them (not employ them) in institutions where they would receive a “proper salary,” sufficient for a wedding, expensive food, and cigarettes.³²

In the liberal narrative, this typology of tenants in a house of revolution was in fact a sketch of a social hierarchy headed by young people as agents of change, imbued with a mission, and both committed and altruistic. Sa‘d al-Din Ibrahim put the reins of Egypt’s leadership in their hands. He demanded that Egypt should have a young president in his thirties or forties, and that young people should hold 40 percent of all parliamentary seats. For Ibrahim, these young people were warriors fighting for the success of the revolution and democracy; it was hence their right and duty to lead the country. At the same time, he called for the restoration of the 1923 constitution, which guaranteed liberal liberties, albeit without the clauses relating to the monarchy.³³

However, disappointment soon set in as the liberals realized that the political gains were being reaped mainly by Islamic movements such as the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt and al-Nahda in Tunisia. Some liberal writers felt that the revolution had been “stolen” from them. Sa‘d al-Din Ibrahim lamented the impotence of the liberal camp in Egypt in the wake of Mubarak’s suppression of dissidents, its lack of organizational skills, and the absence of educational and welfare infrastructure. It was this kind of infrastructure set up by the Muslim Brotherhood and the Salafis that enabled them to achieve political standing, he argued.³⁴ Al-Nabulsi also highlighted the inferior position of both liberal and leftist bodies, a consequence of their constant suppression. But he also did not hesitate to criticize the liberals for not being sufficiently attentive to the distress of the Arab masses and for not getting sufficiently involved. Even worse, he charged, liberal spokespersons did not demonstrate an assertive presence in the Islamic arena. They did not revive the legacy of “classical liberals” such as al-Farabi, al-Qundi, al-Razi, Ibn Sina, and Ibn Rushd (Averroists). They believed that the Islamic spectrum was backward, waving empty and utopian slogans. These flaws left the Islamic legacy in the hands of Islamic movements that arbitrarily misused it. Al-Nabulsi estimated that Arab society would need at least

a century to become a civil society, not only by virtue of a constitution and parliament, but also by an educational endeavor to promote a civic mindset.³⁵

For al-Nabulsi, the lofty ideas of the 2011 revolutions proved to be only illusions and dreams (awham wa-ahlam) and he reinstated his earlier support of determined Western intervention.³⁶

There is nothing like the joy of an oppressed people—robbed of the treasures of their homeland, ruled by an iron fist for decades, and whose sons did not find work opportunities—when a revolution is going well in their country. This 2011 revolution is accompanied by slogans that proclaim good deeds, the establishment of justice, the creation of work opportunities for young people who are loitering on pavements and in cafés, reform in education, the establishment of civil society, the expansion of general freedoms, respect for democracy and the independence of the judicial system. However, a few days or months after the outbreak of the 2011 revolution and the fall of the old regime, people were surprised to find that the revolution had brought with it only stagnation, economic regression, and administrative and security anarchy. The government managing the affairs of state during the transition period was not experienced, all demanded a raise when the state was unable to pay previous salaries, and everyone credited themselves with igniting the revolution ... In reality, no individual plays any role in any revolution, and the collective mind and collective action are what motivate the affairs of the state.³⁷

Al-Nabulsi's pessimistic observation was shared by other liberals, who lamented the fact that the Arab Middle East appeared to have reached the final stage on the way to a continuous collapse now that all the miracles were apparently failing. "The present collapses and the future does not look promising."³⁸

A less critical and more sober tone was adopted by Muhammad Shahrur in Syria. For him, the shift of the Islamic movements to the center of the political arena stemmed from the fact that they raised the slogan "Islam is the solution" (al-Islam huwa al-hall), which was a vague catchphrase that appealed solely to emotions and therefore attracted many people. "Since Islam is the culture of society and every extremist or moderate Islamic slogan has been a product of

Arab culture throughout history, no external slogan has had any impact.” In the same breath, Shahrur made it clear that with success came responsibility. The electoral success of the Islamic movements in Egypt and Tunisia emphasized their tremendous responsibility because, just as they attributed their successes to Islam, they knew that their failure would be perceived as a failure of Islam. He expressed the hope that both these movements would become part of civil society, as witnessed in the historical records of the Christian democratic parties in Europe.³⁹

Other writers, like al-Nabulsi, were more severe. He demanded that “moderate Islamists” should ensure human rights and respect international conventions, and present a concrete program for solving social and economic distress, bearing in mind that this was the twenty-first century, not the seventh, an era of revolutions of knowledge and communication, and not the eighteenth century, the era of industrial revolution. Al-Nabulsi also elaborated on the challenges facing President-elect Muhammad Mursi, calling him a president without a magic wand. It is clear that al-Nabulsi was skeptical and even cynical about the establishment of a democratic representative regime under Islamic leadership. For him the Islamists’ failure to run a country was guaranteed, which would of course play into the hands of the liberals.⁴⁰ However, this did not lessen his frustration at the loss of a historic opportunity to advance the liberal ethos.⁴¹

In view of the lack of a historical perspective, it is difficult to assess whether or not this liberal sense of failure, which was also asserted by local and foreign commentators,⁴² was justified. A deeper investigation of the liberal camp’s unique contribution to paving the way for the Arab uprisings is necessary. Nevertheless, one can say that the 2011 uprisings have dampened the enthusiasm of Arab politicians for authoritarian models of governance. Islamic movements like the Muslim Brotherhood had already internalized this after their intense interaction with democracy and parliamentary politics in the early 1970s. “Islam is the solution” has ceased to be the showcase motto of the Brotherhood. Moving from opposition to the political helm, as Muhammad Shahrur also anticipated above, has forced the Islamists to become more attuned to the desires of their electorate in advancing civil liberties, democratization, and social welfare. In Egypt, the Muslim Brotherhood failed to do this.

The Brotherhood, headed by President Muhammad Mursi, proclaimed the principle of freedom alongside social justice in their election campaign, but they hastened to demonstrate a rampant lack of political restraint, expropriating

powers from parliament and from the Supreme Court in order to fortify the institution of the presidency. Lust for power was the Brotherhood's Achilles heel. Its leaders did not grasp the momentousness of the events or the expectations of the masses. They believed that the Egyptian masses who voted for them were devout Muslims and that they would continue to support the movement and express their faith in it as an authentic representative of Islam.⁴³ The Brotherhood was wrong. The masses returned to the squares, demonstrating against political tyranny and confronting the symbols of the regime, as they had under Mubarak's regime. Mursi's fate was the same as Mubarak's. Parallels were even drawn between him and Nasser because of his authoritarian politics. The public outcry and the intervention of the military in June 2013 put an end to the Brotherhood's rule. The movement's ascendancy was short-lived. The reputation that it had diligently built over a period of over eighty years as a moral movement and a political alternative collapsed overnight. The echo of the collapse was also heard in neighboring Arab countries and, with the backing of the authorities, raised questions about the Brotherhood's pretensions of serving as a counter-elite and the validity of the slogan they had chanted for years, "Islam is the solution." There were also heated internal debates within Brotherhood's ranks. What went wrong? Where are we heading?

In contrast to the abuse of power by the Egyptian Brotherhood, al-Nahda in Tunisia, which achieved considerable success in the 2011 elections, demonstrated restraint in its relations with other, essentially secular, political forces, some of which were part of the old regime of Zine al-Abidine. It even affiliated with them in the government's coalition after the 2011 and 2014 elections. Since its founding in the 1970s, the movement has been characterized by its moderate political tradition. It adopted a democratic discourse, supported the improvement of the status of women and achieved a broad public consensus about its activities. This was the result of Tunisian civil society's struggle for the promotion of a more open political environment. In this context, the wider historical background of the reform and secularization policies of President Habib Bourguiba, who also went by the name "father of the nation" in the 1960s and 1970s, should not be ignored, as they left their mark on molding the consciousness of many young people. The legacy of Bourguiba's secularization, which sought to turn Tunisia into a Western country, did not compare with that of Mustafa Kemal in Turkey, but it was certainly far-reaching in Arab terms.

Al-Nahda's synthesis of an Islamic modernity and democracy was more qualitative than that of the Muslim Brotherhood, and in many respects closer to

the model of the Justice and Development Party in Turkey.⁴⁴ The leaders of al-Nahda even went a step further. In 2014, the movement was involved in the drafting of a new constitution in which Tunisia, unlike Egypt in the post-Mubarak era, was defined as a civil state. Moreover, in May 2016 al-Nahda held a general conference proclaiming itself as a non-ideological party and calling for the separation of Church and state.⁴⁵

Freedom, individualism, and democracy became flagship issues in the Arab world, and hence a source of consolation and moral support for Arab liberals. Although we cannot predict whether democratization will be successful, it seems clear that no serious voice in the Arab world today is calling for the reinstatement of authoritarian regimes. On the contrary, the right to freedom, dignity, and social justice has become the liberal rallying cry.

Notes

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9Nasr, *My Isl@m* , p. 4.

[10 Sadik J. al-Azm , *Is Islam Secularizable? Challenging Political and Religious Taboos* \(Berlin: Gerlach Press, 2014\), pp. 196–197.](#)

11 Nawaf al-Qadimi, Yawmiyyat al-Thawra (Beirut: al-Shabaka al-‘Arabiyya li’l- Abhath wa’l-Nashr, 2012), pp. 17–18, 63–65.

12 Al-Nabulsi, al-Nizam al-‘Arabi al-Jadid , pp. 17, 129.

13 See note 3 in this chapter.

14 Al-Nabulsi, al-Nizam al-‘Arabi al-Jadid , esp. pp. 15–17, 35–36, 117; <http://elaph.com/Web/opinion/2011/10/687940.html> (accessed January 11, 2017); Shahrur, al-Din wa’l-Sulta , pp. 454–455.

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31 Ibid.

32 Kamal Ghabriyal, “Ruh al-Thawra al-Misriyya,” <http://elaph.com/Web/opinion/2012/1/707537.html> (accessed January 15, 2017).

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35 Al-Nabulsi, al-Nizam al-‘Arabi al-Jadid , pp. 83–84.

36 Ibid., pp. 127–133, 141–142. See also notes 66–67 in Chapter 3 of this book.

37 Al-Nabulsi, al-Nizam al-‘Arabi , pp. 128–129.

38 Saghiya, al-Inhiyar al-Madid , p. 313.

39 Shahrur, al-Sunna al-Rasuliyya , pp. 9; see also his al-Din wa’l-Sulta , p. 454.

40 Al-Nabulsi, al-Nizam al-‘Arabi al-Jadid , pp. 26–30, 84–85, 95–100; see also his al-‘Arab bayna al-Libiraliyya wa’l-Usuliyya , pp. 19–20.

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45 Katerina Dalacoura, Islam, Liberalism and Human Rights (London: I.B. Tauris, 2007); Duncan Pickard, “Challenges to Legitimate Governance in Postrevolution Tunisia,” in Joffé (ed.), North Africa’s Arab Spring , pp. 133–148.

Conclusion

In 1985, the exiled Saudi novelist ‘Abd al-Rahman Munif published an “ethical testament” (wasaya akhlaqiyya) in which he outlined a path for the Arab intellectual in modern times. While recognizing the constraints on intellectuals in the Arab world, he refused to compromise on ideological integrity:

Let us not assume that the intellectual is the Hercules of the new era and capable of performing miracles or being a lone voice in standing up to challenges and finding solutions to them. If we impose such a mission on the intellectual, we are liable to err and even deceive ourselves. However, we can assume that the intellectual, possessing awareness, conscience, and internal conviction, as well as the means to form connections with others and build dialogue with them, will be loyal and faithful to the principles he preaches. Further, he must abstain from being the whipping post for intellectuals who disagree with him or becoming a tool in the hands of others—the state, institutions or tradition. He must not bear false witness or approve what is forbidden or should be destroyed. He must not beautify the ugly or change its meaning ... He must act from the power of his moral worldview to confront past traditions and future vision. He has duties and responsibilities that overshadow suffering and opposition. He must bear witness to his era.¹

Does this ideal of the intellectual exist in the Arab world? Do Arab intellectuals really serve as the consciences or spokespersons of the oppressed and ostracized who have no voice? Munif answers in the negative. In his view, “silence and gloom” (al-samt wa’l-sawad) reign supreme.²

This book has presented a more nuanced and positive picture of the Arab liberal discourse, which even without organized parties or powerful civic movements demonstrates ideological viability through multiple forms of new media and transnational space. Some of its heroes have died in recent years: Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd (d. 2010), Muhammad Sa‘id al-‘Ashmawi (d. 2013), Husayn Ahmad Amin (d. 2014), Shakir al-Nabulsi (d. 2014), Jurj Tarabishi (d. 2016), and

Mohamed Talbi (d. 2017). But their rich intellectual writings have provided a blueprint for an Arab liberal tradition.

These and other writers discussed in this book present a clear profile of public intellectuals imbued with an ideological, nearly missionary zeal to eradicate injustice, corruption, and tyranny, and daring to deviate from the safety zone to zones that were taboo. They were eager to speak truth to power and were aware of the risks. In their perception, truth could only thrive within a free public debate. It was hence the task of the intellectuals to create such a space in the Arabic-speaking world.

This intellectual profile was in line with the self-image of liberal writers as representatives of the conscience of a nation and the pillars of its culture, and as the true critics of society's woes. In the liberal narrative, they were the real intellectuals, who removed from the face of society falsehoods and contradictions without attaching any importance or significance to praise or condemnation. Thus, al-Nabulsi sketched the mission of the liberal intellectual:

The role of the liberal intellectual is to protect truth against onslaught by the masses, rational thinking against tradition, new notions against accusations of heresy, the innovative against the outdated, modernity against traditionalism, self-criticism against narcissism, being part of the global village against seclusion within local identities, and culture against a descent into barbarity.³

On the other hand, against the liberal narrative stood the false intellectuals, held captive by ideologies that were detached from reality and boasting that they possessed a complete and systematic program for reshaping society and government.⁴

Liberal writers also provided an alternative agenda for relations between individual and state, religion and politics, Islam and the West, and pursued the goals of Arab progress by employing five main features: 1) intellectual skepticism, which embodied the Kantian concept of the development of personal wisdom, rather than reliance on a given authority, for the creation of a qualitative basis for rational public debate; 2) human compassion or empathy, regardless of religion, race, and gender; 3) historical relativism, which stated that Arab-

Islamic culture proved to be flexible and developed over time, in accordance with changing circumstances; 4) a perception of Western modernity and Israel as sources of inspiration and not only as hotbeds of conspiracy; and 5) the depoliticization of Islam, since Islam had little to offer in terms of political thought, thus allowing Muslims to adopt a liberal, Western democracy. Arab liberals pointed out that the West made very little progress, at least until politics were separated from religion. Eventually, Muslim communities and Arab-Muslim countries would have to follow suit. The liberal writers regarded Islam and its rituals simply as cultural standards of morality. Other liberals, however, relegated Islam to the sidelines. In their perception, debating democracy, human rights, freedom of religion, secularism, and individualism meant more than a mere rethinking of Islamic tradition; it was, in effect a reformulation of “liberal theology.”⁵

Arab liberals demonstrated self-confidence in their chosen path, which served as an additional, psychological means of strengthening a liberal ethos in an unsupportive milieu in which liberalism was sidelined. Some argued that from the seeds of oppression the flowers of freedom would sprout and that the Arabs needed to navigate a contemporary cultural maze that would eventually lead to enlightenment. Others praised the growing number of liberal adherents, including women, with a vocal presence even in such perceived conservative societies as in the Arab Peninsula and the Gulf.⁶ They emphasized that liberal thought had already earned a public platform, with rich and prolific writings accessible to all via the new media channels, while nearly every ideological or political school embraced its values and had adopted them, in whole or in part. They found proof of this trend in worldwide developments after the fall of the Communist bloc and globalization. Liberalism had become the byword and dream of the masses yearning for change and a way out of the life of hardship that bowed so many. Francis Fukuyama’s prediction of the end of history and the triumph of liberal democracy was actually materializing in the Arab world, wrote Hani Nasira.⁷

Other writers, such as Sayyar al-Jamil of Iraq, Hashim Salih of Syria, Sa’d al-Din Ibrahim of Egypt, Abdelmajid Charfi of Tunisia, and Turki al-Hamad of Saudi Arabia, argued that despite attempts to hold history back, the Arab world was moving forward, toward freedom, liberal democracy, and respect for the law. In Charfi’s perception, the future was optimistic, and the path to it open. “All we need to do is relinquish our illusions and sense of detachment, and adopt a self-confident, positive attitude, and high work ethics,” Charfi clarified.⁸

Fatima Mernissi also expressed her optimism with regard to the liberation of Arab women from patriarchal and religious restrictions and the achievement of full equality with men. In her words, despite rising religious fanaticism, “Women have already taken flight. Pale and grave, they are performing the pilgrimage that their grandmothers dreamed of for so long: to dance without a mask, with eyes riveted on a limitless horizon.”⁹

Al-Hamad elaborated further on the promising future of a liberal, humanistic tradition in the Arab world. The revival of the liberal ethos was his motto. His premise was that, since the emergence of the Enlightenment had been a slow process lasting hundreds of years in Europe and the West, one could not expect it to happen overnight in the Arab world. Al-Hamad believed that, although it was still not sufficiently noticeable, an Arab enlightened movement did indeed exist and was attempting to hold a central place in contemporary Arab culture. In each library, he argued, there are works of literature and philosophical writings that raise burning questions and provide answers unlike those familiar to the Arab reader, which are mostly easy answers and quick-fix solutions. Other signs of an enlightened discourse al-Hamad found in intellectual salons, which allowed for absolute freedom of thought.

Al-Hamad did not ignore the fact that these phenomena were not new in modern times. They characterized both the “liberal moment” (*al-lahza al-libiraliyya*), mainly in Egypt, from the cancellation of the Ottoman caliphate in 1924 to the Nakba of 1948 and the establishment of the State of Israel; and the “moment of self-criticism” (*lahzat al-naqd al-dhati*), from the Arab defeat in 1967 until the crossing of the Suez Canal in 1973. These two “moments,” continued al-Hamad, reflected a quest for rejuvenation and enlightenment. Their impact, however, was limited: the Egyptian “liberal moment” was not far-reaching and since it remained limited to the socioeconomic elites, it did not permeate the social strata that suffered from socioeconomic and political oppression. The Arab “moment of self-criticism” did not add momentum to the discourse of enlightenment, as Egypt had suffered a shock caused by the sudden transition from strong feelings of national confidence prior to the 1967 war to total humiliation. As a result, demagogues took advantage of the situation to offer quick and easy solutions to the masses, tricking them into escapism from the feelings of doom that followed the defeat. In such an atmosphere there was little likelihood of critical essays gaining a foothold, especially since they were based on honest criticism and scientific thinking when exposing weaknesses and flaws. The Arabs have now reached a third moment of enlightenment and chances are that it will be more

constructive than the previous ones, mainly because the general atmosphere is more receptive to objective critical discourse. Such discourse may find a sympathetic ear not only among intellectuals, but also among the common people.

Another reason for optimism referred to by al-Hamad was the change in the pattern of legitimacy in the Arab world. Emotional and ideological terms like “nation,” “the glory of the nation,” and “fighting the enemies of the nation” began to give way to concepts such as “standard of living,” “citizenship,” and “human rights,” which addressed people’s everyday lives. The growing importance that regimes attributed to society was an important development in Arab political culture and provided cautious optimism about the future, al-Hamid concluded.¹⁰

In the long run, Arab liberals argued, their stubborn ideological battle against narrow-minded conservatives and Salafis would end in a clear victory for humanism. Then the historic reconciliation between Arab heritage and modernity, initiated by the early liberals and curtailed in the mid-twentieth century, would finally come to fruition.¹¹ The return of the liberal age, declared al-Nabulsi, was at the threshold of the twenty-first century. Yet he urged his colleagues to reach out more to the common people and enlighten them, using a more simple language, on the liberal virtues as corresponding with the spirit of Islam. A more restrained position was adopted by Sa‘d al-Din Ibrahim.¹² Quoting Seymour Martin Lipset, an influential social scientist (d. 2006), as an inspiration for both scholarship and public activism, Ibrahim commented, “we are not tough, we are not rough, but we are ‘sure determined,’ to fight the battle for the future, to fight for democracy.”¹³

The confidence of the liberals in the rightness of their path and their declarations of victory did not eliminate the question marks about whether the Arab people in the present day were more ready for enlightenment than before. There were still lessons to be learned from the experience of the past, liberal writers noted, considering that liberal thought had not, after all, struck roots. It was necessary to examine whether Arabic had the linguistic capacity to convey liberal terminology based on rationalism and individualism, and to ensure that the terms employed were able to win people over emotionally and on a public scale. Indeed, how to capture the souls and minds of the masses was an issue often debated in liberal circles. A no less important question was whether the Arabs were in fact capable of adapting to the present, which would require an internal

overhaul. Did they have the tools they needed to board the train to modernity?¹⁴

When outlining the difficulties facing liberals, Hazim Saghiya summarized the modern history of the Arab world as a continuous struggle for assimilation of the Western “isms” into the local context. “It was a constant and hard struggle to force Arab lands to absorb transplanted organs,” he admitted, adding that important influences did not necessarily go hand in hand with serious thought or meaningful societal transformations.¹⁵ Saghiya’s metaphor was more indicative of a predicament than of the triumph of the liberal cause. However, this distress did not urge liberal writers to declare that Muslim-Arab culture had gone bankrupt and to build a new culture on its ruins, which suited the spirit and demands of modern times, as the Egyptian-German writer Hamed ‘Abd al-Samad had argued.¹⁶ Arab liberals, as presented in this book, still hoped for internal renewal and continued to search for Arab enlightenment.

It is our task as historians and observers to lend an ear to liberal voices that have emerged in Arab political thought, which, despite internal flaws and a challenging environment, continue to empower alternative visions for their communities. These voices were actively involved in public debates about the image of Islam and the polity in modern times, having at their disposal not only pen and paper, but also civic and political platforms. To borrow from the words of French historian Fernand Braudel: “The West cannot listen only to voices that are familiar in the Mediterranean musical performance. Other voices will always be heard, and piano keys require the use of both hands.”¹⁷

Notes

1Munif, *al-Dimuqratiyya* , p. 19.

2Ibid., p. 19; Munif, “*al-Thaqafa wa’l-Muthaqqaf*,” pp. 129–146.

3Al-Nabulsi, *al-‘Arab bayna al-Libiraliyya wa’l-Usuliyya* , pp. 128–129.

4Al-Hamad, *Min Huna Yabda’ al-Taghyir*, pp. 338–343; al-Baghdadi, *Tajdid al-Fikr al-Dini* , p. 44.

5Abu Zayd, Reformation of Islamic Thought , p. 79.

6Al-Nabulsi's books: al-Fikr al- 'Arabi , vol. 1, p. 10; Mabahij al-Hurriyya , p. 9; al- 'Arab bayna al-Libiraliyya wa'l-Usuliyya, pp. 9–13, 22, 73–78. Al-Nabulsi dedicated an entire book to documenting and highlighting the liberal legacy in Saudi Arabia going back to the early twentieth century, inter alia by focusing on the writings of Muhammad Hasan 'Awwad (d. 1980) and his intellectual impact. Al-Nabulsi, al-Libiraliyya al-Su'udiyya .

7Al-Nabulsi, al- 'Arab bayna al-Libiraliyya wa'l-Usuliyya , pp. 75–78; and his al-Fikr al- 'Arabi , vol. 1, pp. 9–10; Nasira, "al-Libiraliyyun al- 'Arab al-Judad fi Misr."

8Charfi, al-Islam, p. 201; also Sultan, A God Who Hates , p. 7; Shahrur, al-Din wa'l-Sulta , p. 455.

9Mernissi, Islam and Democracy , pp. 149–152. The quote is on p. 151.

[10 Al-Hamad, Min Huna Yabda' al-Taghyir , pp. 177–182.](#)

[11 Al-Jamil, "al-Libiraliyya al-Jadida," pp. 57–61; Salih, "Azmat al-Muhafizin al-Judad," pp. 95, 97–98; al-Nabulsi, al- 'Arab bayna al-Libiraliyya wa'l-Usuliyya , pp. 57–63, 75–78.](#)

[12 Al-Nabulsi, al- 'Arab bayna al-Libiraliyya wa'l-Usuliyya , pp. 73–78, 89.](#)

[13 Ibrahim, "Toward Muslim Democracies," p. 13.](#)

[14 Ghabrial, "al-Libiraliun al-Jadida," pp. 81–84; Nasira, "al-Libiraliyyun al- 'Arab al-Judad fi Misr," p. 110; al-Nabulsi, al- 'Arab bayna al-Libiraliyya wa'l-Usuliyya , pp. 57–63, 79–83, 89–91.](#)

[15 See also Saghiya, "The Arab Press and Various Sources of Repression," in Arab Media in the Information Age \(Abu Dhabi: Emirates Center for Strategic Studies and Research, 2006\), p. 564.](#)

[16 Hamid 'Abd al Samad, Suqut al- 'Alam al-Islami: Nazra fi Mustaqbal Umma Tuhtadar \(Cairo: Dar Mirit, 2010\).](#)

[17 Fernand Braudel, La Méditerranée: l'espace et l'histoire \(Paris: Flammarion,](#)

1985), p. 22 (author's translation).

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