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# **Middle East Flashpoint**

Centre for Mediterranean, Middle East & Islamic Studies  
University of Peloponnese

No 80

26 April 2016

## The Post 1967 Intellectual Debate in the Arab World

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*The 1967 war caused great intellectual debates regarding the political situation in the Arab world in general. These debates included a number of issues, covering a wide spectrum of social, political, economic and cultural matters. This article will try to introduce the secular critical approach by the most influential Arab contemporary thinkers regarding the implications and interpretation of the post 1967 war.*

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If we want to examine contemporary Arab culture and political thought, we, surely, have to dive into the post 1967 critique and its outstanding impacts to the Arab intellectual thought. It was the time, that the Arab – Muslim world had to re – evaluate its political institutions, its national economies, re – invent its founding national myths and forge not only their national identity, but also a holistic Arab cohesion that would be based on a common Arab originality and authenticity. The shock that the Arab world felt in June 1967 was devastating. Sadiq Jalal al-Azm (1934-), an important Syrian philosopher, has drawn a parallel between the Arab – Israeli war of 1967 between the 1904 Russian –Japanese war that led to the triumphant latter’s victory against all odds, mainly because its technological advance and its discipline.<sup>1</sup> In the intellectual realm, there has been a great eloquence of ideas and debates trying to depict the itinerary to the 1967 “disaster” and to explain how the Arab world reached this dead-end. In general, the Arab intellectual consciousness tried to deal with its crisis by following mostly two basic broad paths: one the one hand, there was a radicalization of the philosophical and political discourse towards a more progressive and a more secular reasoning, which was, in fact, not the most widespread example in the Middle East. On the other hand, the most common example was a retreat from the secular and tolerant paradigm, which led to the adoption of a more religiously orientated discourse that tried to traditionalize and, at the same, modernize the cultural critique. The latter was an attempt to find a comprehensive and indigenous worldview that was suitable to the Arab – Muslim case, which was not alienated and, furthermore, was not eroded by hegemonic and unethical western systems of ideas.<sup>2</sup> However, our main concern here will be the former paradigm, which has definitely gathered less attention, in comparison to the Islamist critique that has been widely debated, since it has been spectacularly active and unique.

The way that these two main cultural critique theories have been articulated in the Arab world depends heavily on the historical contexts in which they have been formed. For instance, in the countries where the power was exercised by the army elite, usually seized taken by coup or revolutions (i.e. Egypt, Libya, Iraq, Syria, Algeria etc.), the historical writing and the political discourse was targeted mostly towards a more revolutionary – nationalistic and anti-imperialist direction. The other nation building model, that of the Gulf countries, does not adopt a popular revolutionary breakthrough with the past, but underlines the traditional, religious and cultural continuity that is mostly based on the local powerful clans. Thus, the latter model is less open in wide cultural debates and is not really vulnerable to a different reading of the past.<sup>3</sup> Both models, but especially the first, are deeply influenced by the world historical tendencies of the period, such as the French May of 1968, but also by the shift in contextual analysis in philosophical and humanitarian studies, for example the renowned cultural and linguistic turns of the ‘60s and ‘70s.

In this social and political environment, a number of Arab thinkers, most of them educated in western universities, posed some crucial questions after the 1967 defeat, regarding a number of issues: what are the reasons for the defeat, what steps should be taken in order to fix the damage, what should be done about the corrupted Arab regimes, what kind of state should the Arabs envisage, what should be the role of the intellectuals in the new period etc.? These questions had also concerned the Arab intelligentsia for years before the 1967 war, already from the period of Taha Husayn and Khairuddin al-Tunisi, and by no means do not emerge as sui generis matters. The post-1967 debates dredged up more imperatively this time; notably, the re-evaluation of regionalism versus Arab unity, the interpretation of Arab history, the influence of western ideals and the role of religion in the modern state.<sup>4</sup> Some of these intellectuals, amongst them some Marxists, some secularists and some leftists (with most of them having the common experience of Arab prison), deconstructed the metaphysical – theological concerns of the traditional Arab thought, moving it to a more historical direction. For this group of thinkers *“there could not be reason and no science without freedom, no freedom without secularism and no secularism without a modern state, public education and democracy”*<sup>5</sup> Saadallah Wannous (1941–1997), a great Syrian playwright and a fierce critic of the Arab dictatorships,<sup>6</sup> assesses that historical awareness is one of the most important elements for a second Nahda. He criticizes Islamist

thought as ahistorical, since the cyclical view of Islam regaining political power is firstly ideological, and secondly abstract. This ahistorical interpretation, for Wannous, produces spiritual poverty, nurtures religious ambiguity and fabricates the logic of “absolute truth” that enables the pathological acceptance of oppression.<sup>7</sup>

For Qustantin Zurayq (1909-2000), a Syrian historian that studied in Beirut and Chicago, the nationalist project was in the first place a civilizational project rather than a nationalistic obsession. In his book *Fi Ma'rakat al Hadara* (The Battle for Culture: 1964) he strongly asserts to distinguish between a descriptive review of cultures and a conceptual critical evaluation of civilizational processes. In order to better understand the Arab world, he posits that we need to look closer to the foundations, motivations and purposes behind the driving forces of the Arab culture and its political aims. The values of this culture are not abstract and unchangeable. They are the products of a system of ideas and the manifestations of its historicity that allows them to have a different function depending on the social classes. For Zurayq what is necessary is a “revolution of reason”, a revolution that will confront the Arab past and the present realities and can end up in “self-examination”: “This revolution of reason is, in our view, the guarantee for any other revolution and the necessary condition for its solidity and its success”. Zurayq explains that critical historical writing can reach this reasoning, only if it is used not for mystifying the past, but embedding oneself in the real historical time and circumstances.<sup>8</sup> In addition, the Syrian philosopher rejects all forms of historical determinism and millenialism, whether theological, Marxist or nationalistic.

Anouar Abdel Malek (1924-2012), a Coptic Egyptian sociologist, in his emblematic work *Contemporary Arab Political Thought* (1983), insists that it is time the Arabs thought not about the other (imperialism), but “determinant factors endogenous to socially and historically specific contemporary Arab societies should now be the main focus for analysis”.<sup>9</sup> Abdel Malek, who was a leftist – Marxist like Samir Amin, endorsed the latter’s scheme that self-criticism after 1967 was even more imperative, since capitalism has grown stronger in the Arab world and has not failed at all.<sup>10</sup> For most of these thinkers, what has failed in the Arab world, even after the socialist experiments, is addressing deeply the “superstructure” of the Arab societies, that is, the system of thoughts, of values and beliefs. For al –Azm, a radical confrontation with the above elements is inevitable if the Arabs want a real change to be accomplished. Al-Azm, in his books *Naqd al-Fikr al-Dini* (Critique of Religious Thought: 1969), and particularly in *Naqd al-Dhati ba’ad al-Hazima* (Self-Criticism After the Defeat: 1968), published in Beirut but later forbidden by censorship, draws a picture of the Arab reasoning that puts the blame on superficial rationale for the 1967 defeat: the lack of religious commitment, the trickery of the Israelis and their malign conspiracy against the Muslims etc. Even the use of the words, *al-Naqba* or *al-Hazima*, according to al-Azm, reveal the “greatest effort in order to shirk our responsibility and shift it instead onto factors outside our control”.<sup>11</sup> Al-Azm criticizes the Arabs of emptying all the conflicts and the contemporary realities from their historical contexts, not only 1967 but also other defeats, making them, thus, a supernatural-religious problem. The Syrian philosopher supports vehemently the separation of the state and religion, and adds that even the most progressive Arab leaders, did not dare to state this publicly. The lack of effective political institutions in the Middle East makes the Arab slip, in times of crises, to his tribal and family affiliations rather than clinging to the state, al-Azm suggests. In addition, al-Azm borrows a term from Hamid Ammar, the *shakhsiat al-fahlawiyyah* (the smart personality), to describe the current Arab personality. With this term he tries to show that this character seeks the greatest possible success with the least possible effort, pointing that he/she is not uncomfortable by the failure itself but by the embarrassment it brings.<sup>12</sup>

The question of identity has also been largely debated amongst all political factions: liberals, leftists and Islamists. A number of conferences reveal this anxiety regarding identity issues, like the conferences in Cairo in 1971, 1984 and 1994, and that of Kuwait in 1974. Especially after 1990’s, despite their differences, there has been numerous documented approaches that reached even to the level of political alliances, vis-a-vis the authoritarian Arab regimes and, to a certain extent, a common foreign agenda. The examples of Egypt in 1987, of Jordan in 1992 and of Palestine in 2000 are revealing.<sup>13</sup>

Nevertheless, this debate, and subsequently the question of identity, has troubled the Marxist Moroccan historian Abdallah Laroui (1933- ), who studied in Paris and wrote in French. Laroui describes his system of thought, as historicism, which as he defines it, is the tools used to describe socio-political conditions and are strictly ascribed to certain sociohistorical realities. His book, *The Crisis of the Arab Intellectual: Traditionalism or Historicism*, is an effort of contextualizing Arab history and escaping from ahistorical and prejudiced thinking. Laroui, a fierce critic of Islamists, bases his analysis on the social, economic, political and cultural retardation of the Arab world in comparison with the “Other”, the West, and the intricate connection and encounter with that “Other” that exists even after colonial domination. Even though Laroui’s schema seems simplistic, he concludes that the holistic and static approach towards the Arabs reduces the notion of history to that of simply a culture, the notion of culture to ideology and consequently ideology becomes Muslim theology. This reconstruction is one of the main tools of analysis, according to Laroui, by Islamists.<sup>14</sup> For the Moroccan historian, putting the present in its real dimensions and demystifying the “absolutes”, especially those coming from the West and from the Islamic tradition, is one of the main actions that the Arab intellectuals should carry. Some of these “absolutes” are the continuity of language, religion and culture, which, for Laroui, should not be taken for granted and should be deconstructed. Laroui, thus, shows his influence by the cultural and linguistic turn of the western intellectual scene of the 1970’s.

For other important Arab intellectuals, who supported critically scientific socialism, such as the Egyptian Mahmud Amin al-Alim (1922), a revival of a genuine Arab culture and identity is almost impossible in a globalized world, since, according to them, there is a single universal civilization, which is based on capitalist hegemony and has homogenized local and religious cultures.<sup>15</sup> For the Egyptian philosopher Fouad Zakariyyah (1927-2010), the inertia of Arab cultural production is the result of the constant fruitless comparison with the glorious past. Zakariyyah underlines Zurayq’s and Laroui’s thesis that the critical examination of the past should be constant and that Arabs should finally overcome superficial reasoning. This critical reasoning should be as passionate as is the revival of the defence of tradition (*turath*), since the Arabs, as he states, have not managed to combine effectively modernism with tradition as other peoples did (i.e. Europe or Japan). Nevertheless, Zakariyyah and Zurayq disagreed on whether the wrong view of *turath* is the symptom or the manifestation of Arab backwardness. In his late writings, Zakariyyah, became critical also towards the liberal intellectual trend of the Arabs expressing his doubts whether the secular intellectuals can carry a real Arab renaissance in the post-modern world.<sup>16</sup>

The Arab post 1967 intellectual production can be considered as an enormous field of research. It also includes miscellaneous thinkers that can not severely ascribe to only one intellectual trend, such as the Egyptian Hasan Hanafi or the Palestinian Munir Shafiq, who adopt a socialist – Islamist thinking. Nevertheless, it seems that there are mainly two common grounds for the post 1967 intellectual production regardless of their ideological orientation: first, is the state of Israel, its colonial policies and the Zionist project, and, second is the predicament of the Arab political and intellectual elite that sometimes chooses to side with the Arab dictatorships in order to combat “the enemy within”.

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3. Iggers, Georg, Wang, Edward Q., Supriya, Mukherjee, *A Global History of Modern Historiography*, New York – London: Pearson Education, 2008, pp. 432-433
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5. Kassab, Elizabeth – Suzanne, *Ibid.*, p. 62
6. Saadallah Wannous had directed a play titled *Haflat Samar min Ajl Khamseh Huzairan* (An Entertainment Evening for June 5) in 1967-68, that is made for important Arab politicians and personalities, but actually never gets started because of Israel's military aggression and the "sudden" Arab defeat that leaves everyone dombfounded. For more information for Wannous' work, see <http://www.aljadid.com>
7. Kassab, Elizabeth – Suzanne, *Ibid.*, p. 63
8. *Ibid.*, pp. 67-71
9. Abdel Malek, Anouar, *Contemporary Arab Political Thought*, London: Zed Books, 1983, p. 21
10. Abu Rabi, Ibrahim, *Ibid.*, p. 28
11. Al-Azm, Sadiq, *Ibid.*, pp. 38-39
12. *Ibid.*, p. 49 and p. 73
13. For more see Browsers, Michaelle, *Political Ideology in the Arab World: Accommodation and Transformation*, Cambridge: CUP, 2009, pp. 1-19
14. Kassab, Elizabeth – Suzanne, *Ibid.*, pp. 82-85
15. Abu Rabi, Ibrahim, *Ibid.*, p. 188
16. This opinion is expressed in Fouad Zakariyyah, *Orientalism and the Crisis of contemporary Arab Culture*, *Protagma Review*, Vol. 8, November 2015, pp. 203-225