# An Introductory Note on Contemporary Arabic Thought

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This is a preliminary note of the study on contemporary Arabic thought. I start this study by reviewing the meaning of 'contemporary' in Arabic intellectual history, while trying to clarify some characteristics of 'contemporary' Arabic thought as distinguished from 'modern' Arabic thought. The problem is how to locate the intellectual history in the framework of modern Arabic history.

Abdallah Laroui's *The Crisis of Arab Intellectuals* (1976) and Bulis al-Khuri's *The Heritage and the Modernity* (1983) showed us incidentally the same classification of four periods in modern Arabic (intellectual) history. They are the followings. (1) *Nahda* (the great Arab cultural Renaissance) period, from the 19th century up to the year of 1914; (2) the period between the two World Wars characterized by the development of thoughts which played a leading role in social movements, especially in nationalist movements; (3) the period of the Arab nationalist experiments on the unionist ideology of Nasser and the Ba'th Party, after the Second World War (or 1948 War) up to the 1967 War; (4) the period of moral and political crisis after the defeat in the 1967 War.

According to this classification, it is possible to say that the contemporary stage of Arabic thought emerged from the critical situation after the 1967 defeat (*hazima*). That situation meant not only the crisis of the dominant regimes and ideologies (especially Arab nationalism), but also the crisis of existing ideas and discourses which 'modern' Arabic thought had produced since the Nahda era.

## 1. The 1967 Defeat and the Crisis of Arabic Thought

The defeat of the Arab armies in the 1967 War had a great impact on the Arab World. This continual impact has penetrated deeply into Arabic intellectual life. Even now, more than twenty years after that defeat, Arab intellectuals keep on discussing its causes and effects.

For example, Bulqaziz's article titled "Twenty One Years after July Defeat"(1988) introduced a review of the different explanations on causes of the defeat, most of which are connected with criticism of the dominant regimes and ideologies. This criticism is attributed to the following different ideological trends. Arab Marxists outside the Arab nationalist movements accused defects in the political systems and the lack of participation of the *proletariat* class in the national liberation movement (ex. Mohsen Ibrahim and Mahmoud

Hussein). Liberal intellectuals pointed out the historical backwardness of the Arab society in question (ex. Yasin al-Hafiz, Iliyas Murkus, and Abdullah Laroui). As for the Islamic fundamentalists, they blamed the faithless attitudes toward Islam prevalent in Arab society, and the secular ideologies such as the one urging the separation of religion and state (ex. Muhammad Jalal Kishk).

Likewise, Fouad Ajami's *Arab Predicament* (1981) pointed out four trends of political thought emerging after 1967 defeat. These were: (1) a new radical criticism movement; (2) self-criticism inside the ruling party (Ba'th Party); (3) radical Islamic fundamentalism; (4) conservative fundamentalism. Also he found two opposite inclinations in these waves of criticism. The first one is a total break down with the past, and the second one seeks redemption in a tradition that used to supply order and meaning.

Sadiq Jalal al-'Azm's *The Critique of the Religious Thought* (1969) and Adonis ('Ali Ahmad Sa'id)'s *The Permanent and the Changeable* (1974-78) are the representative works which can be classified into this first category. Both of their works were attempts to counteract the strong ideological trend of the second category which has gathered strength after the 1967 defeat.In the chapter "Drama of *Ibris* (Satan)" of al-'Azm (1969), he tried to analyze the dominant sentiment in Semitic religions, especially the fear of God's anger and His punishment by using the method of mythology. Adonis, a well-known poet who found a tendency toward of imitationism in Arabic poetry, attempted to reread Arab cultural and political history critically and concluded the necessity of destroying the cultural and political heritage for the sake of the progress of Arab society.

But their works were neither accepted warmly by general Arab readers nor were they throughly understood. Al-'Azm's work was once submitted to the court having been charged with the incitation of confessionalism in Lebanese society. Adonis lamented in the 3rd edition of his book that it had provoked many arguments but most of the readers who 'criticized' his book did not take up even a simple fundamental question raised in the book.

Juruj Tarabishi's recent study under the title of *Arab Intellectuals and the Heritage* (1991) is another work which analyzed the impact of the 1967 defeat on contemporary Arabic thought. According to Tarabishi, this defeat was psychologically a shock (*sadma*) to the contemporary Arabic discourse (*al-khitab al-'arabi al-mu'asir*), and this shock turned into a trauma (*radda*) and provoked trends of retardation (*rukud*) in Arabic thought.

Laroui (1976) also used the term of retardation in the light of such a critical situation in contemporary Arabic thought and warned against new trends of inward traditionalism which would oppress the positive historical thinking among Arab intellectuals. Both Tarabishi and Laroui regard the 1967 defeat as the second shock which hit Arabic thought and shock led to the phenomena of ratardation (or traditionalization), just like the first shock after Napoleon's invasion in the 19th century.

Another aspect to look at in the current situation of Arabic thought is provided by two prominent intellectuals from Egypt : Yusuf Idris, a novelist and Samir Amin, an economist. Idris who died in August 1991 left for us a collection of essays, *The Poverty of Thought and the Thought of Poverty* (1985). In this book, he criticized the situation in which the term 'crisis' is too frequently used. Idris asserted that the real crisis should be expressed by the

term 'poverty' rather than 'crisis'. The term 'poverty' he used does not mean 'material poverty' but rather 'spiritual poverty' which tends to produce movements which force people to accept incorrect understandings of their religion.

It is important that Idris considers this poverty of thought to be caused by the structural change in Arab economy after the oil boom and *infitah* (open door) economic policy since the 1970's. Idris's argument on the moral crisis of the Arab world in the era of the 'development of poverty' may be supported by some Arab economists (such as Galal Amin, *The Economic and Cultural Distress in Egypt* (1982)).

Samir Amin's work, *The Crisis of the Arab Society* (1985), is similar to Idris's in the way it clarifies the social background of the crisis in Arabic thought. Amin's political interest is primarily directed to the crisis of the Arab left who are supposed to play a role as the vanguard in the Arab unionist movement. According to him, the crisis of the Arab left is an inseparatable part of the whole crisis of Arab society, and their crisis comes from not understanding both sides of the crisis of Arab society. One side of the crisis is related to the question of where the Arab economy is situated in the framework of world capitalism, and the other side is expressed in the controversy of Arabic thought over 'heritage *(turath)*, authenticity *(asala)*, and modernity *(mu'asira)'*. He attempts to analyze the relation of these two sides, the relationship between the crisis of thought and the social reality of Arab society which is subordinated to the dynamics of the modern world system.

In contrast to Amin's analysis of the intellectual crisis as a part of the social crisis of the Third World in the modern world system, Laroui (1976) tried to analyze this intellectual crisis in the context of trends of thought in the 'core' of the world system, the transformation of epistemonological framework in the thought of the West. Laroui regards the crisis of Arabic thought as a parallel phenomenon to the cultural retardation of post-liberal thought in the Western society.

According to Laroui, this retardation means the decline of historicism in philosophical thinking,that is the subordination of historical time to higher value and criticism to historical nationality. The traditionalization in Arabic thought is considered a sign of the participation of Arabic thought in this world wide cultural retardation.

From the above argument, we can notice some basic conditions for the critical situation which several authors indicated in their works on contemporary Arabic thought. The first one is the impact of the 1967 defeat on the intellectual life of Arab society, the second is the socio-economic situation after the oil boom which caused a demoralization of the society, and the last one is post-liberal Western thought which has a hegemonic influence on Arab society.

## 2. Is There a Second Nahda in Arabic Thought?

While Laroui (1976) warns about the traditionalizaiton of contemporary Arabic thought, he also indicates a new movement as a sign of starting to overcome this crisis. He defines this movement as *the second Nahda*. This means that Arabic thought faces an era of a second resurgence similar to the first one in the 19th century.

The term 'the second Nahda' itself was used before Laroui's book was published. Sometimes the term 'the second Nahda' has been used to indicate Nasser's experiments in the 1950's and 60's which were compared toward the movement of modernization in the 19th century. We can pick up one example in a work by 'Anwar 'Abd al-Malik, *The Nahda of Egypt* (1983).

Contrary to this use of the second Nahda, Laroui shows that this resurgence began in 1963-65, in so-called Nasser's era, and has developed into a full scale trend since the 1970's, after the failure of Nasser's experiment. Laroui seems to think that this movement can be carried out by 'the revolutionary intellectuals' who contribute to establish historicism in Arabic thought. In this context we can understand why he paid attention to al-'Azm's work and others.

Other authors consider that this new intellectual movement includes a wider spectrum of thought than such a radical view. For example Hisham Sharabi points out in his study, *Neopatriarchy* (1988), this movement emerging in Maghreb intellectuals who have received the new philosophical and epistemonological ideas from the West, especially from France.

Sharabi says, 'The radical critics (particularly the Maghribi critics) play a role paralleling that of the secular intellectuals of the early part of the Awakenig [*nahda*], particularly the Syrian-Lebanese intellectuals. Like the latter, they project a new consciousness at odds with the dominant discourse and oriented toward modernity and change, but with this difference: the Maghribi critics offer a radical criticism while their intellectual predecessors only offered a conceptual compromise.'(p. 171)

And Sharabi pointed out the names of some prominent thinkers in this new thought movement in Maghreb such as Muhammad Arkun from Algeria and Muhammad al-'Abid al-Jabiri from Morocco. These thinkers attempt to use the new methods of structuralist, post-sturucturalist, disconstrucionist perspectives to reinterpret the classic texts of Arab heritage (*turath*).

In contrast to this evaluation of Maghreb's Nahda by an intellectual from Mashreq, Bulqaziz from Morocco shows a cool response in anoter article "Speech of Maghreb and Judgment of Mashreq: on the *Nahda* of thought in Maghreb" (1989).

Maghreb has been in the position of a receiver of the cultural and intellectual movement in Mashreq and Egypt since the first Nahda era. But Maghreb has changed its position from a receiver to a producer and sender of thought, and Mashreq began to receive and judge these new products. This change of relation began in the midst of the 1980's. Balqaziz suggests two points as the background of this new evaluation.

The first one is an expansion of the exchange in the field of thought between Maghreb and Mashreq. This expansion is supported by three factors. These are (1) intellectual magazines published in Mashreq began to deal with products of Maghreb thinkers; (2) the activity of inter-Arab organizations and institutes to organize symposiums and conferences; (3) the role of 'gates of Paris'. Hasan al-Hanafi and Muhammad 'Abid al-Jabiri's *The Dialogue between Mashreq and Maghreb* (1990) is considered as a representative fruit resulting from the third factor.

The second point which Bulqaziz indicated is the influence of political crisis in Mashreq (especially the effect of the Camp David Agreement and the civil war in Lebanon) on the

evaluation of Maghreb's Nahda. It is the retogression of intellectual production in Mashreq as a result of political crisis (political oppression and the escape of intellectuals from the civil war) that produces an image of Maghreb's Nahda in a relative meaning. Bulqaziz considers that the intellectual crisis is taking two extreme forms. One is a nihilistic negation of the heritage (*turath*), and the other is a regressive denial of modernity (*hadatha*).

Bulqaziz's argument gives us an indication of an new integrated movement, or a structural change occurring in the world of contemporary Arabic thought because of the expansion of interexchange between the west and the east in the Arab world. It seems that this integrated movement is a reverse phenomenon of the split situation in the Arab politics. But it is an important problem to realize the meaning of this movement whether it is only the horizontal expansion drawn by Bulqaziz or, if it is a vertical expansion including a qualitative change (that is the second Nahda).

Another important problem is how we can resolve the paradox of a coexistence of the second Nahda and crisis in the contemporary Arabic thought. Bulqaziz seems to succeed in solving this question by contrasting the political and thought crisis in Mashreq with 'relative' progress in Maghreb's thought. But the current political crisis in the Arab world could not be a partial one (or a local one limited to Lebanon or Kuwait) as the result of some contortions of the Arab order (so called *al-nizam al-'arabi*), but it is thought to be related to the Arab world as a whole. Also we find new attempts to study of the causes the political crisis in Mashreq (for example the Neo-Marxists' works like Mahdi 'Amil's study (1985) on the confessionalism in Lebanon).

In order to understand the contradictory coexistence of an intellectual crisis and the second Nahda, we must reconsider the meaning of Nahda itself. The first Nahda in the 19th century can be thought of as a response to the crisis caused by the shock of the encounter with the West. It seems that this crisis and Nahda had a symbiotic relation. Nevertheless, we can not prove the existence of the second Nahda by using the contemporary crisis in the Arabic thought as its evidence.

But if it is possible to say that the current intellectual crisis indicates the end of the 'modern age' of Arabic thought which began with the first Nahda, we can also recognize that the assertion of an emergence of a second Nahda derives from the expectation of the beginning of a new era. In other words, while we observe the criticism against the existing concepts and discourses of 'modern' Arabic thought, we find the attempt to study the same intellectual problems of the first Nahda from new epistemonological perspectives. This is a self-conscious attempt to critically supersede the intellectual problems of the first Nahda.

It is important that the interpretation of the crisis and the Nahda differs according to the trends in contemporary Arabic thought. As mentioned above, Laroui considers the current intellectual crisis to be traditonalization (or cultural retardation), and expects the role of radical criticism against the heritage (*turath*) by some secular Mashreq thinkers like Sadiq al-'Azm. Some Maghreb intellectuals like Bulqaziz find the crisis in these extreme intellectual attitudes (negation of modernity and destruction of the heritage), and attempt to introduce some new perspectives to overcome these dichotomous attitudes. And according to some thinkers of 'the pure Salafism' (*al-salafiya al-khalis*; named by Tarabishi), the first Nahda was nothing but

the Westernization process (or 'the era of historical defeat'); therefore, the real Nahda must be the Islamic Nahda to eliminate the impurities caused by this secularization.

In conclusion, we found the coexistence of a warning of an intellectual crisis on the one hand and the attempt to give rise to the second Nahda in the contemporary Arabic discourse on the other. Both of them concurrently have given a common debate ground for the different intellectual trends, where they can exchange criticisms on the intellectual crisis and can compete with one another in the perspectives of their second Nahda. This mutual criticism and the competition among different intellectual movements are generating the world of contemporary Arabic thought.

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