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Commentary

Will our time progress toward the future?

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Contents

WILL OUR TIME PROGRESS TOWARD THE FUTURE?

THE ELEMENTS OF ARAB DISINTEGRATION AND THE PROBLEM OF “ARABISM” AND “NATIONALISM”	1
THE NEW FORCES: AN ARAB INTELLIGENTSIA	3
A STRATEGY FOR A FUTURE ARAB BLOC SYSTEM: THE NECESSITY OF DEVELOPING THE THINKING.....	4
OTHER EXPERIENCES AROUND THE WORLD.....	5

Over the last third of the 20th century, a deep and radical change was introduced into the lives of Arab societies following their liberation from the crisis of colonialism. This change reverberated across the entire spectrum of social environments and cultural systems in Arab societies; however, the “crisis” theme remains a concern in numerous Arab social and political circles – which is due to the Arab-Zionist conflict and the existence of Israel in the heart of the Arab world.

Today, our societies need to begin a new historic path, by sketching a new confederal project. I argue that the safest way to seek solidarity and coalescence is manifested in any form of confederal Arab political action, which could be coupled with constitutional decentralization, in addition to the reinvigoration – or reestablishment– of an Arab common market, as well as a cultural market with a distinctive fabric. Such measures would guarantee that our Arab societies would reclaim their rich historical dynamic in contemporary history, in order to build a future for themselves in the age of regional coalitions and continental forums. No such futuristic projects can succeed without the emergence of genuine harmony between state and society, especially when it comes to the restructuring of politics and the reorganization of society upon modern bases. This should take place as soon as things settle after the birth pangs of the Arab revolutions that were created by the Arab will, which has awaited this historic moment for more than thirty years –the full repercussions of the events of the year 1979 and their role in the production of divisions, crises and conflicts. The year 1979 is seen as one of the most significant years of the 20th century, as I have previously argued in my book “The Structure of Generations: an Historical Philosophy of Arab-Muslim Knowledge” (1999), and I shall devote a coming article to analyzing the importance of the year 1979 and the effects its historic events have had over our entire Arab life since then.

The task of modern formation– one of the most difficult historic tasks has taken shape at the right time: i.e. after the passage of the disappointment-filled 20th century, which were rife with political conflict, military coups, regional revolutions, ideological quarrels, propaganda campaigns and empty slogans, Arab cold wars ... up to the time of the “creative chaos” doctrine, which was propagated by the United States.

The elements of Arab disintegration and the problem of “Arabism” and “Nationalism”

Preceding the eruption of the historic shifts in early 2011, our societies appeared to be disintegrating from within, having been made vulnerable by long periods of protracted crisis on all levels. The elements of regression were extremely strong despite the passing of more than 100 years since the heralding of the so-called “Renaissance” (*Nahda*) project. The events that took place during this period were enough to hold progress back for ages. Until today, our societies have remained torn by the currents of dissent, local, ethnic, religious, sectarian, regional, and clannish conflicts capable of chief among them Israel. Intense hatreds periodically appear

between demographic majorities and minorities in our societies, reflecting instances of extremism, fanaticism, and militancy, all of which corrode national and moral values that are unique to Arab societies. For instance, “Arabism” has become synonymous with “pest” in the minds of some, who can be observed in all Arab societies, and who view Arabism as a dark and evil phenomenon without distinguishing between, on the one hand, the benign civilizational values inherent to Arabism, and, on the other, the flaws of nationalist ideologies and the transgressions of political parties that carried the banners of Arab nationalism.

This has prompted Arab thinker Dr. Azmi Bishara to publish “To be an Arab in our days”, a book that uses calm rationality rather than dreamy romanticism to address the severe challenges facing our Arab societies, as well as the internal and external forces that turn every Arab into accused suspect. Consider the following passage from Bishara's book: “The margin has narrowed to the point that anyone identifying himself as an Arab becomes an Arab nationalist in their eyes, for they deny Arabs the right to merely identify themselves as Arabs. At the same time, the disintegration of local state projects into (open or latent) sectarian, tribal, or regional groupings has led to the equivalency between Arabism and Arab identity becoming a self-fulfilling prophecy. Stressing Arab language and identity in the face of sectarianism, tribalism, and regionalism has become an Arabist posture. To be an Arabist in our days is to adopt the Arab identity as an alternative to the politicization of fragmentary identities ... to be an Arabist means – in our days – the conscious adoption of Arab identity. The ongoing reductionism performed by the enemies of Arab nationalism may have been a blessing in disguise, for their simplifications have almost made every Arab into an Arabist ...”¹ I have previously treated the trend of civilizational Arabism, which extends to a dazzling historical depth, in comparison with Arab nationalism, which was born just a century ago. I found much difference between the values of the former and the application of the latter in the twentieth century.

The very act of deliberating and seeking ways to limit the factors of disintegration, which were created by opposing forces that are deeply entrenched in our societies and fueled by superpowers, would save these societies from their pitfalls, which are becoming increasingly dangerous each day. The very act of allowing the extraction of lessons from the past and the elucidation of the veritable history of coexistence in our Arab societies is sufficient to erase all the deformed imageries sketched by our present realities by the hands of these opposing forces. In recent years, I have repeatedly stated that any official initiative for future change must consider the awareness of this change, the need to sow this awareness and tend to it carefully, so that our societies may reach a state of dual awareness regarding the difficulties of the present and the challenges of the future.

¹ Azmi Bishara, **To be an Arab in our Days**, 2nd edition (Beirut: Center for Arab Unity Studies), pp. 69-70.

The new forces: an Arab intelligentsia

Elites were born, ideas and visions were created, and varying factions of the Arab intelligentsia were bred at the appropriate time, despite numerous campaigns waged by the ruling regimes, which launched all manner of accusations against the intellectual class. A thesis began to emerge to the effect that the starting point for an Arab civilizational project may be in a decisive *Nahdawite (renaissance)* turning point, which would be very useful – for historians – to measure the futuristic depictions of this starting point. This applies particularly to this historic moment, whose factors emerged – imperceptibly– in 2009, and took off with the end of 2010. A new generation will continue its struggle for a project that would extend until 2039, but that depends on the ability of our societies to establish new principles and a practical basis for an Arab system in the 21st century, one for life and the future that differs from what people knew in the 20th century and continue to endure today.

The situation in many Arab countries appears very difficult in the opening years of the new century. In fact, conditions can be painful, frustrating, and disappointing, but these must not be reasons for regression, pessimism, and desperation. Nonetheless, there is a need to contemplate and condemn the humiliating retreats and massive mistakes, which are absolutely unforgivable, on the part of some political regimes that ruled societies with iron and fire and allowed their henchmen to dominate the people. Indeed, we must ponder historical phenomena with a broad horizon, and not submit to the mechanism of desperation that has been inflicted on us by the tragic events that took place over thirty bitter years. We must interact, as part of an active and contemporary history, on the Arab and international levels, and we must not view our current situation as unprecedented, especially since Arabs have endured harsh challenges, conditions and events throughout their long history and in varying contexts. It has become clear that the age of change has brought Arab solidarity back to its previous strength after witnessing an unmistakable weakening since 1979. After thirty years, we have witnessed an organic interaction between the Arab Levant and the Maghreb, in addition to all Arab societies sympathizing with each other to a great extent. The rationalists are back to participating in Arab decision-making, and the Arab League has shown growing strength in its quest to unite the factions of the nation following thirty years of abject failure. I have previously published several articles criticizing the weakening of the Arab League, and the enlargement of its role today is not due to internal reasons, but to factors engendered by the Arab Spring and the collapse of certain despotic Arab regimes that formerly used their influence to keep the body weak, frail, and inactive.

Contemporary Arab societies are truly in need of change and rebuilding, beginning with this seminal moment and continuing indefinitely. Arab leaderships – especially the new ones – must be aware of their historical responsibilities and provide contemporary Arab societies and states with the requirements for progress. Some may disagree with the following opinion: society faces problems and challenges due to its regression and intellectual stasis, and the hegemony of a

cluster of ideas, traditions, texts, fictions, and myths. This situation would make the task extremely difficult in the coming decades, depriving Arab states of the political, security, and economic stability, which are among the priorities for building the future of the Arab nation— which should be pursued through flexible, calm, and rational political methods, on the part of all the leaders, activists, and forces on the ground, with the purpose of resolving the problems that could emerge from within Arab societies.

A strategy for a future Arab bloc system: the necessity of developing the thinking

A thorough reading of the experiences of common Arab planning and labor— projected over the coming thirty years and including the establishment, development, and evolution of these relations, which requires wisdom, flexibility, and openness – reveals that the Arab system will be the sole beneficiary of such experiments seeking to build a distinctive Arab future. Similarly, the rights of this Arab system will be regained, if not at the hands of this generation, then with the next one. The Arab system would also benefit from constant attempts to open new doors to all world cultures in order to build a bright future. Such a project should begin by addressing priorities related to a productive economic future, and these priorities must be well grounded and closely linked to the reshaping of the Arab mentality and Arab production on vital new bases at the levels of society and the state. This is especially true since the Arab region is distinguished among all the world regions with its location in a vital sphere that must be exploited, especially on the economic and media fronts.

The coming generations must consider their future before their past; and they must also find working arrangements regarding both the state and society. A host of qualitative changes must take place in the institutional structures of each state, and in the social structures and systems of each society, and the rhythm of qualitative changes must accelerate over time. Radical changes must be made in the standard of bureaucratic performance and local service-provision, starting today; and debate – not conflict – must continue over the nature of these changes that must be accepted by society in a natural, voluntary, and direct manner. Such an initiative requires the kind of open-minded mentality that can rationally distinguish among a number of dichotomies without sinking into their contradictions. In this regard, I recommend the assigning of an “intellectual development and mentality-change” curriculum to millions of young students in the basic and primary phases of education, so that they can learn how to think in seeking truth; how to rid themselves of the power of myths; that time represents the most important value in human life; that they need relative, not absolute, thinking; real meanings rather than imagined symbols; realism, not utopia; truths, not fiction. This context involves various factors requiring in-depth study to examine tradition, values, and their historical and social systems, and then to exert epistemological and critical comparisons in relation to time and space in order to extract new meanings and values, notably: the history of the Arabs’ opening to the entire world over the past ten centuries.

Other experiences around the world

There have been previous experiences that led to changes in the structural forms and dispositions of states and societies, including the examples of the Asian Tigers. Such changes can especially be observed on the infrastructure level of the processes of accumulation in the institutions, organs, and structures since the beginning of the 1970s. The dominant current seemed to advocate the relocation of the processes of capitalist accumulation and their precise employment in development and services, in order to transport these states from the low-income category to the high-income one. In other words, making these countries into productive ones instead of remaining consumers. The opposite took place in Arab states (and in countries of the Islamic world as well), whose leaders did not master the art of managing transitions. The dominant trend seemed to advocate the re-concentration of capital in the high-income countries and regions, especially through the failed socialist experiment that gravely damaged the social and developmental conditions in major Arab countries. These states began to gradually regress, given the new policies and the direction of the authorities toward shrinking the geography of capital that was almost blindly controlled by the state, and irrationally invested. Thus the state brought itself back, leading to a degradation of its Nahdawite structures compared to the situation in the first half of the 20th century – especially after the failed (socialist) applications in Egypt, Iraq, Syria, Algeria, Libya, and South Yemen, where measures were applied on the ground without any study of reality and the local environment.

After all the arguments presented above, the question remains: will our time progress toward the future?

I answer by saying that our time has begun a strong movement, but we do not know – precisely – in which direction. Our time has begun to move, but who will really lead it into the future? Our time is moving swiftly, but within which national track, value system, and Arab civilizational project? Our time has suddenly begun to move after more than thirty years of suffering, but where is the roadmap? I have a strong conviction that Arabs, all Arabs, lack a roadmap, a project, and any plan relating to the future. On the other hand, it has become horrifying to imagine them following a roadmap drawn by others. We must bless any step toward change, but such steps will not be complete unless they are accompanied by a “working project” or “roadmap”, or a cluster of principles. Shall we, then, absorb the lesson and construct a vision? This is not a lesson in history, but a vision for the future.