

Forum

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Owning the Future: Modern Arabs and Hamlet

Responsibility for the future is very often a matter of foresight and foresight is always based on insight, as we all know. What does my insight tell me about this whole issue or problem? It informs me that the modern Arabs are truly the Hamlet of the 20th century. Like the endlessly celebrated prince, they seem able continually to join the underlying passion of the elemental to the brooding intellectuality of the cerebral to the lyrical sensitivity of the poetic but only to end up in unrelieved tragedy. The tragedy consists of unending hesitations, procrastinations, oscillations and waverings between the old and the new, between *asalah* and *mu'asarah* (authenticity and contemporaneity), between *turath* and *tajdid* (heritage and renewal), between *huwiyah* and *hadathah* (identity and modernity), between religions and secularity.

In this way, the 21st century can only belong to the conquering Fortinbrases of this world and never to the Hamlets hung up on interminably rehearsing that classic – but now totally *depassé* – European *pièce* called *La querelle des Anciens et des Modernes*. No wonder, then, to quote Shakespeare's most famous drama, that 'the times seem out of joint,' for the Arabs and 'something looks rotten in their state.' No wonder as well if they keep wondering, like the fabled Prince of Denmark himself and with as much tragic intensity, 'whether they are the authors of their woes or there is a divinity that shapes their ends.'

This analogy leads me to dig deeper inside ourselves and to think that for us Arabs to own our future, to hold ourselves responsible for it, we have to come to terms with a certain image of ourselves buried very deeply in our collective subconscious. What I mean is the following: As Arabs and Muslims (and I use Muslim here in the purely historical, cultural and civilizational sense), we continue deep down to image and imagine ourselves as conquerors, history-makers, pace setters, pioneers and leaders of world-historic proportions.

Reconciling self-image and reality

In the marrow of our bones, we still sense ourselves as subjects of history not its object, as its agent and not as its patient. We have never come to terms realistically with, let alone reconcile ourselves to, the marginality and reactivity of our position in modern times. In fact, deep down in our collective soul, we find intolerable this monstrosity of a supposedly great *ummah* like ourselves standing helplessly on the margins not only of modern history in general but even of our local and particular histories.

We find no less intolerable the condition of being the objects of a history made, led, manipulated and arbitrated by others, especially when we remember that those others were (and by right ought to be) the objects of a history made, led, manipulated and arbitrated by ourselves. Add to that a no less deeply seated belief that this position of world-historical leadership and its glories was somehow usurped from us, *fi ghafflah minal-tarikh* as we say in Arabic, by modern Europe. I say usurped – and usurpation is at the heart of Hamlet's tribulations and trials – because it is supposed to belong to us by right, by destiny, by fate, by election, by providence or by what have you.

With this belief goes the no less deeply seated conviction that eventually things will righten themselves out by uncrowning this reigning usurper, whose time is running out anyway, and by restoring history's legitimate leaders to their rightful place, former status and natural function.

This kind of thought and yearning comes through loud and clear in the work of au-

thors like Egypt's Hasan Hanafi and the later work of someone like Anwar Abdel-Malek, as well as in the tracts, analyses and propaganda of the more sophisticated Islamist thinkers and theoreticians.

The constellation of ideas that they lean on for a crutch may be summarized in the title of a most famous European classic: Spengler's *The Decline of the West*, the false implication being, if the West is declining then the Arabs and Islam must be rising. Or, to put it somewhat differently (i.e. in terms of the title of Abdel-Malek's book *Rih al-Sharq, The Wind of the East*), if the wind of history is abandoning the sails of the West, then it must be automatically filling those of the East and East means principally, here, Islam and the Arabs. If we use the title of an equally famous Islamist classic by Muhammad Kutb, *Jahiliyyat al-Qarn al-Islim (The Jahiliyyah of the 20th Century)*, then the implication would be: now that European Modernity has come full circle to the *jahili* condition, the Arabs and the Muslims must be on the verge of leading humanity once more out of the *jahiliyyah* created by Europe and defended by the West in general.

Arab nationalism: retrieving the usurped role of world leadership?

But this is not the end of the story. Reviewing the classics of Arab nationalism, it now often appears to me that the deeper objective of these works was not so much Arab Unity as an end in itself, but as a means for retrieving that usurped role of world-historical leadership and of history making. In fact, I can easily say that the ultimate but unarticulated concern here was not so much colonialism, imperialism, foreign occupation, liberation, independence, prosperity, social justice, equality, freedom as such, but the restoration of a right usurped from this great *ummah* to exercise the world-historical role and function naturally and/or providentially suited to its nature and mission. After all, the historic civilizations of our part of the world have always been of the conquering and extroverted type: Ancient Persia descending on Greece, Alexander conquering Persia and everything else within reach, Hannibal, Rome, Islam, the Ottomans, European modernity and so on.

Now, when this unexamined, unexercized, highly potent and deep-seated self-image collides with the all-too evident everyday actualities of Arab-Muslim impotence, backwardness, frustration and insignificance, especially at the level of international relations, then anything becomes possible on the Arab side. This includes at least grand illusions, massive inferiority complexes, huge compensatory delusions, wild adventurism, heedless political recklessness, desperate violence, and so on. Obviously, this is a recipe for owning neither the present nor the future. In fact, it is a recipe for the abdication of all responsibility *vis-à-vis* both the present and the future.

The contradiction that I have been trying to delineate and that I think we have to openly come to terms with if we are going to have any future at all is perhaps best cap-

tured – quite gently but very ironically – in the title of Hussain Ahmad Amin's pointed and lively book, *Dalil al-Muslim al-Hazin ila Muqtada al-Suluq fi al-Qarn al-Islim*. The author is a well-known Egyptian historian and high-ranking diplomat and the son of Ahmad Amin, the great historian produced by what the late Albert Hourani called the Arab Liberal Age. Interestingly enough, the title of Amin's book hints at the great classic of Moses Maimonides, *Dalalah al-Ha'irin (The Guide for the Perplexed)*. So a free translation of Hussain Ahmad Amin's title would read: A Guide for the Sad and Perplexed Muslim concerning the sort of behaviour required by the 20th century.

The contemporary Arab: sad, melancholic, perplexed and vexed?

The contemporary Muslim and/or Arab and/or what have you is so sad, melancholic, perplexed and vexed in Amin's account because his instinctive convictions, profound self-image and cherished illusions about his *ummah*, religion, culture, civilization, providence, their role and function in modern history are all given the lie by the hard realities and harsh actualities of the contemporary world at every waking minute of his life. Furthermore, the radical transformations, revolutions, sacrifices, changes, losses, etc., required to transcend this contradiction continue to be deemed unbearable, unacceptable and undesirable by Amin's totally frustrated Arab and/or Muslim. So what else is left for him to do except to muddle through his sad, melancholic perplexity right into the 21st century carrying with him the pious conviction that perhaps one day God or history or fate or the revolution or the moral order of the universe will undo the usurper and again raise his *ummah* to the status of world-historical leadership. Meanwhile, the Fortinbrases of this world will have inherited the earth at his expense.

Modernity is basically a European invention. Europe made the modern world without consulting Arabs, Muslims or anyone else for that matter, and made it at the expense of everyone else to boot. There is no running away from the fact that the Arabs were dragged, kicking and screaming into modernity, on the one hand, and modernity was forced on them by superior might, efficiency and performance, on the other.

The Crusades were ultimately repulsed, but Bonaparte's militarily insignificant expedition and adventure in Egypt and Palestine not only won the day but actually made a clean sweep of all that had historically lost the ability to live and continue on our side of the Mediterranean. The massive difference between the results of the Crusades and the results of the French expedition of 1798, distills the essence of European modernity as far as we are concerned and puts it on show for our chastisement and edification.

In fact, the modern European violent intrusion into Islamdom and Arabdom created, in my view, a final, decisive and definitive rupture with the past that I can only compare with the no less final and definitive

rupture effected by the violent Arab-Muslim intervention into the history of Sassanid Persia. And just as the history of post-conquest Persia stopped making sense without the Arabs, Islam and their eruption on the local Farsi scene, similarly, the post-Bonaparte history of Arabdom stopped making sense without Europe, modernity and their eruption on the local Arab scene as well. In my view, there is no running away from this reality no matter how many times we re-iterate the partial truth and often lame rationalization to the effect that Modern Europe got it all from us anyway: Averroes, Andalusian high culture and civilization, Arabic science, mathematics, philosophy and all the rest.

Without finally coming to terms, seriously and in depth, with these painful realities and with their so far paralyzing contradictions, tensions, paradoxes and anomalies, there is neither an owning of the future for the Arabs, nor any real responsibility for the present on their part. In other words, either we come to terms critically with this deep-seated, ritualized and stratified complex of highly emotional beliefs, valuations and images that in their turn give the sanction of sacredness, taboo and immutability to inherited illusions, archaic institutions, dysfunctional attitudes and arrangements, anachronistic but cherished modes of living, thinking and governing, or, again, the Fortinbrases of this world will win the day and have the final say.

In any case, in Mamdouh Adwan's adaptation of Hamlet, staged some years ago in Damascus, by the time the Prince wakes up, it is already far too late. ♦

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