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The Arab Intellectual is Resting, Not Dead

by Ramzy Baroud

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Professor Said, and many such giants, were missed most during this current upheaval, where intellectuals seemed negligible, if at all relevant.

Whenever a new poem by Mahmoud Darwish was published in al-Quds newspaper, I rushed over to Abu Aymen's newsstand that was located in the refugee camp's main square. It was a crowded and dusty place where grimy taxis waited for passengers, surrounded by fish and vegetable venders.

A poster of Palestinian scholar and activist Edward W. Said pasted onto the annexation wall Israel has illegally constructed in the West Bank (Justin McIntosh/Wikimedia Commons)

Darwish's poetry was too cryptic for us teenagers at a refugee camp in Gaza to fathom. But we labored away anyway. Every word, and all the imagery and symbolism were analyzed and decoded to mean perhaps something entirely different from what the famed Palestinian Arab poet had intended.

We were a rebellious generation hungry for freedom that was soon to carry the burden of the popular uprising, or Intifada, and we sought in Darwish's incomparable verses, not an escape, but a roadmap for revolution.

Ignore the political choices made by Darwish after the disastrous Oslo peace process – that is for another discussion about intellect and politics, which, frankly, rarely works. Darwish represented a generation of revolutionary intellectuals: humanist, Arab nationalists, anti-authoritarian and anti-imperialist. In fact, they were mostly defined by the 'anti' in their careers, rather than the 'pro', and that was hardly coincidental.

In those years, long before Twitter coerced us into cramming whatever we wished to say – no matter how complex – into 140 characters or less, such a thing as books existed. Back then, ideas seemed to be more like a mosaic, involved and intricate productions that were enunciated in such a way as to produce works that would last a generation or more.

A novel by Abdul Rahaman Munif represented the pain of a past generation, and the aspiration of many to come. Language was timeless then. One would read what Tunisia's Abu al-Qasim al-Shabbi wrote in the 1930's and Palestine's Samih al-Qassim much later and still feel that the words echoed the same sentiment, anger, hope, pride, but hardly despair.

Hey you, despotic tyrant, Darkness lover and enemy of life,

You scoffed at powerless people's groans; And your hands are tainted with their blood.

You embarked on empoisoning the allure of existence and sowing prickles of grief in its horizons.

.. The flood of blood, will wipe you away, and the flaring gale will eat you up.

The "Arab Spring" resurrected the above words of al-Shabbi, but also those of others. It was believed that the peaceful protests of Arab nations was strong enough to 'wipe away' the 'darkness lovers', but the battle proved more brutal than many had expected, or hoped. 'The flood of blood' is yet to be contained. Several Arab countries – Iraq, Syria, Yemen and Libya – are 'sovereign' by name, but practically divided, in politics, sects, tribes and geography.

But this hardly concerns the 'spring' per se, but instead the Arab intellectual and what he/she represents or failed to represent.

What has become of the Arab intellectual?

When I was younger, and Edward Said was still alive, I always wondered what his impressions of certain events were. His column ran in Egypt's Al Ahram Weekly. His non-conformist political style – let alone his literary genius – did more than convey information and offer sound analyses. It also offered guidance and moral direction.

Professor Said, and many such giants, were missed most during this current upheaval, where intellectuals seemed negligible, if at all relevant. There is no disrespect intended here, for this is not about the actual skill of articulation, but alternatively it concerns the depth of that expression, the identity and credibility of the intellectual, his very definition of self, and relationship with those in power.

Sure, there were those scholarly minds who joined Egyptian youth as they took to the streets in 2011, but timidly did so. Some appeared to be as if they were members of a bygone generation, desperate for validation. Others, were simply present, without owning the moment or knowing how to truly define it, or define their relationship to it.

Yet the 'spring' generation, which prided itself on being 'leaderless' proved equally incapable to capture popular imagination beyond the initial phase of the protests, nor offered a new cadre of intellectuals that would formulate a new generational vision. Many of the secularist intellectuals, who had already grown distanced from the masses, in whose name they had supposedly spoken but never truly represented, were confounded by the new reality. Although they failed to bring about any kind of change, they feared losing their position as the hypothetical antithesis to the existing regimes. Their words hardly registered with the rising new generation. They were out of touch and as surprised as the regime by the changing tide.

But it was when various Islamic parties seemed to be reaping the outcome of the revolts through the ballot box that these secular intellectuals felt truly threatened. They perhaps accidentally enlisted as mouthpieces for the very regimes they had purportedly fought for decades. At best, they grew dormant and faded into oblivion.

This is a strange period in the history of Arab culture and politics. It is strange because popular revolutions are propelled by the articulation and insight of intellectuals. It is truly unparalleled since the Al-Nahda years (roughly between 1850 and 1914), which witnessed the rise of a political, cultural and literary movement in Syria, Egypt and elsewhere with the utilitarian blend between pan-Arabism and pan-Islamism. The intellectuals of that Arab, Islamic renaissance seemed often united in their overall objectives, as they stood against Ottoman dominance and imperialist ambitions. They were inclusivists in the sense that they sought answers in European modernity, but self-respecting enough to challenge foreign dominance through the revival of Arab culture, and Islamic teachings.

How that movement evolved is quite interesting, and complex. Today's Muslim reformists -the so-called moderates – can be traced back to those early years. Mohamed Abduh and Jamal al-Din al-Afghani are towering figures in that early movement, although they were and remain controversial in the eyes of the more conservative Islamists. The secularists, on the other hand,

merged into various schools and ideologies, oscillating between socialism, Arab nationalism and other brands. Much of their early teachings were misrepresented by various dictatorships that ruled, oppressed and brutalized in the name of Arab nationalism.

Still, there were prominent schools of thought, manned by formidable intellectuals, whose ideas mattered greatly. There seems to be no equivalent of yesteryear's intellectual in today's intellectual landscape. The closest would be propagators of 'moderate Islam', but they are still a distance away from offering the kind of coherence that comes from experience, not just theory. The secularists have splintered and become localized, jockeying for relevance and vanishing prestige.

But this is temporary. It has to be. The great cultures that have survived prolonged fights against brutal dictators and foreign dominance for generations, yet still gave birth to some of the most brilliant intellectuals, novelists, and poets of all time are capable of redeeming themselves. It is only a matter of time, and perhaps, initiative.

History without the moral leadership of intellectuals is devoid of meaning, chaotic and unpredictable. But this is a period of seismic historical transition, and it must eventually yield the kind of intellectual who will break free from the confines of the ego, regimes, self-serving politics, sects, ideologies and geography.