

Observations On the *Arab Awakening* And “The Arab Spring”

(A LECTURE ON THE OCCASION OF GEORGE ANTONIUS’ 120TH BIRTHDAY)

George Antonius never bought the idea of a Jewish State in Palestine. The emphasis in his case and at that time was on *State* as such, not on its being *Jewish*. In his memorable *The Arab Awakening* he lists as one solid reason for why a Jewish State is unviable the Palestinian peoples’ natural and expected refusal to be dispossessed of their own homeland, as well as of their political rights –both of which, he reasoned, will surely accompany the attempts at creating this State. But George Antonius also lists other reasons for why a Jewish State was unviable,

and why, in its place, he thought a Jewish commonwealth or a “home” for the Jewish people in Palestine would make more sense: While a Jewish State would have to come about by force and would therefore remain to be a source of instability in the region, and would directly jar with the hard-acquired and coveted state citizenship of Jews in other countries, a cultural home within Palestine might provide just what is needed for a renaissance of Jewish religious and intellectual life, and this could happen in concert rather than in conflict with the Muslim and Christian communities in the Holy Land.

Lest one might think that George Antonius was in this respect prejudiced in favor of Palestinian

nationalism, and would have supported the establishment of an independent Palestinian State during those early, post-Ottoman days, it must be said straight away that, deeply affected by the Pan-Arabist sentiment of the time, his political perspective was that of a united and independent Syria-based region, and the inclusion, therefore, of Palestine, Lebanon and Jordan in a single political unit under one kingship, alongside the other Arab blocs that were in a renewed process of formation in the beginning decades of the 20th century, like Iraq, the Arabian Peninsula, the Yemen, and North Africa, such that the entire stretch from the Atlantic to the Gulf would eventually become the cauldron in which a renewed and pluralistic Arabian civilization could thrive. Being keenly

aware of the specific cultural and religious needs of the various minority communities in such an enlarged Arab world, and returning once again to Palestine and the Jewish issue at the time, Antonius supported his view of a Jewish commonwealth in place of a fully-fledged State by also quoting the Hashemite Sharif (later, King) Hussein, who openly expressed his view that, in the context of his dream for a united and independent Arab World, he would welcome a Jewish home in Palestine that would not detract from the political rights of its Arab inhabitants. Whether the creation of such a “home” would or would not be conditional upon guaranteeing those political rights was one of the major points of contention between the Sharif and the British at the time,

with Foreign Secretary Balfour secretly preparing to limit them, in collusion with Dr Haim Weizmann, to just the basic civil and religious spheres.

As we know, the post-Ottoman pan-Arabist dream of unity and independence was not realized. Antonius places much of the blame for that –quite rightly- on the colonial powers of the time, but he does not fail to point out the weaknesses and failings within the Arab World itself that also contributed to the disappointments that followed upon what Antonius described as “the Arab Awakening”. Among such failings one could list the internal political schisms and discordances –especially in the more tribal areas of the Arab world-

among the key ruling figures as they each vied for power— the Hashemite Sharif Hussein, for whom the Arab dream seemed most real, and who therefore sought to expand his dominion with that pan-Arabist purpose in mind; Ibn Saud, whose political focus, being at first less ambitious and confined to the Hejaz, even so, or because of this, constituted an objective political obstacle to the fulfillment of Sharif Hussein’s vision; Ibn Rashid, also within the larger Peninsula, for whom the Ibn Saud regime in the Hijaz was a direct political and territorial threat; the Idrisis, in the southern Peninsula, and so on. Although the Allies (in particular Britain and France) mostly left the inland Peninsula to itself, focusing their colonial energy in the other parts of the Arab world, including Greater Syria, Iraq,

and Egypt, yet one cannot but wonder in retrospect whether it wasn't because of their action or inaction in that Peninsula, whether by way of help or hindrance to one or another of those various players, which eventually left the Sharif Hussein, and his sons, Faisal, Abdullah and Ali, too weak in their father's home-base in Mecca in the end to be able to implement that larger Arab dream.

But, one might ask, wasn't the real reason for that dream not getting fulfilled the fact that the so-called "Arab Awakening" was not, really, an *Arab people's awakening*, but a mere change at the outer governing surface in the Arab World, brought about by a re-shuffling of the political decks at the level of the world powers of the

time? And is it not the case that the Arab World was not, and can never really be, a single independent political organism in the first place? Wasn't –Isn't- this dream really only a dream, simply a form of wishful thinking in the minds of a few?

Given the state of the Arab World today, this question goes to the heart of the matter before us. On the one hand, George Antonius traces a straight line of influence of enlightened nationalist thought originating from the mid-19th century Lebanon to the anti-Ottoman insurgencies of the Sharif and his sons, which would seem to imply that these armed insurgencies, and the eventual Syrian national congresses expressing and espousing pan-Arab

nationalist sentiment, had their roots especially during that time when, sparked by Western missionary and Church initiatives, Arabised educational programs -together with a newly-introduced Arabic printing press, new curricula, and a surge in educational institutions- re-awakened knowledge of and pride in the Arabic literary and cultural heritage, thus opening the way to the emergence of a literary renaissance and the sprouting of literary and then secret political societies in Beirut agitating for liberation from Ottoman rule. Various clandestine nationalist movements were born during that period, and, in street mobilization strategies uncannily presaging modern-day facebook and twitter techniques and earlier underground resistance leaflets, these groups

took to announcing their programs and calls for agitation through graffiti and declarations pinned or painted on walls. Thus, according to this narrative, the eventual –though short-lived– act of the crowning of Faisal as King of Syria by the 17th National Congress couldn't be understood except against the background of this great peoples' movement for a free, united and independent Arabia.

This, on the one hand, is the narrative Antonius would have us believe. It is a narrative, furthermore, that can be corroborated by pointing out countless further examples since the publication of his book, whether on the literary or political fronts, of an underlying united Arab passion for unity and independence,

a passion expressed in the creation of pan-Arab political movements, in attempts over the years at federations and unions, in poetry, films and song, and in multifarious other forms of expression of national solidarity, not least being the latest so-called “spring” that swept the Arab world.

This, then, is one narrative. On the other hand one may be tempted to conclude, given that this entire tidal wave seems to have ended up – whether then, or since- crashing on the rocks of a fractious political reality, that what Antonius highlighted was more a wishful theoretic projection of his own, than a reflection of objective reality –that while the concept of Arab unity may have been, and still is, a romanticized

fiction that has currency among the elite few, such as enlightened leaders, or poets and intellectuals, the real world of the many in the Arab World and even among speakers of the same language is that of an irredeemably discordant human nature. How else, it may be asked, could one then explain the dismal failure, in spite of rhetoric, of all these attempts at real unity in the Arab world? And, returning to the vision of an open Arab society tolerant of cultural, ethnic and religious multiplicity –the kind which Antonius preached would be a natural safe home for the Jewish or, indeed, even the Christian communities, don't the facts glaring at us today just fly in the face of such a vision, with Israel, even as a State, and after all these years, still being rejected by the Arab

World as a foreign implant, with Lebanon continuing to suffer from sectarian and religious violence, with Iraq's 1.5 million Christian community being reduced by Muslim terrorism within the space of ten years to under 300,000, with Egyptian Copts beginning to be harassed by Sunni Muslims, with the Sunnis themselves beginning to run violent against the Alawites in Syria, and, last but not least, with Sudan's Christians in the south voting to be severed off entirely from the rest of their country, not wishing any longer to remain united with the Muslims, but opting to become independent instead?

It could be retorted, of course, that these last examples distort the facts, as rather than being

symptomatic of an intrinsic national fault, they are but byproducts of failed initial experiments of secular self-governance –that what Antonius described as an already finalized product of nationalist awakening was neither a wishful projection nor an objective reality, but the beginning of a necessarily undulating socio-political process, with ebbs and flows, and with a trajectory that one should view in terms of centuries rather than decades. In this light, a swelling of fundamentalist culture and sectarian violence should be viewed as being but a natural and short-lived consequence of the military and economic failures of the secular pan-Arabist experiment of the past few decades; and this will surely be followed by yet newer surges for a free and open society, the driving principle

being that history moves forwards, not backwards, its ebbs constituting an integral part of its forward movement.

One could, of course, and in this context, cite the Bu-Azizeh's fiery cry that shook the entire Arab World, eventually bringing down what had seemed like impenetrable and immovable Pharonic structures of government, if not in brick and mortar terms such as in Tunisia and Egypt, then at least in terms of legitimacy, such as in the Yemen and Syria. After all, this so-called Arab Spring proved, beyond a shadow of doubt, the existence of a latent and ever-growing Arab passion for precisely those values of freedom, citizenship, and dignity that were the hallmarks of Antonius's Arab Awakening,

and despite the fractious religious fallout we now witness in Egypt, or in Syria, it is noteworthy that the peoples' spontaneous eruption in all those countries was indiscriminately pluralistic, mindless of religious differences, and reflecting what are essentially universal human values. It is also noteworthy that it is precisely because the Spring's source, so to speak, enshrined those values that its echoes were picked up in countries and places as far away as Japan and Australia, and in environments –strange as this may sound- as hostile to the Arab World as Israel. Because, like it or not, Israel's tent movement was a conscious echo of the humanist surge that swept the Arab World, calling for an end to financial exploitation by the political

system, and for dignity and respect for human worth.

But where does this Arab Spring fit into the narratives we just outlined? Does the volcanic eruption that swept through the Arab World perhaps vindicate –with minor amendments to do with time- Antonius’s vision? Or is the communal break-up, disorder and violence we are now witnessing further proof of an intrinsic disunity that is a hallmark of the peoples of this region? We could at this point in our analysis of the political map put in juxtaposition two other reflective voices that have come out more recently of the Lebanon, both also of some kind of Palestinian hue, but differing in political tone. The first voice I would like to draw attention to

is that of intellectual and journalist Samir Kassir (*Being Arab*, Verso 2006), assassinated in a car bomb in Beirut in 2005. The reason for quoting him in this context –invoking again George Antonius and his analysis of the 18th and 19th centuries, is the seminal distinction he makes out between the humanist and the nationalist aspects of the renaissance or the *nahda*, so to speak. Antonius, and many others in his wake, tend to conflate between these two, identifying the humanist awakening in the Arab World during that period –an awakening as much rooted in the apex of the pluralistic Islamic civilization as in the values of the European Enlightenment- with the nationalist passion that was beginning to rear its head at the time. Confounding the one for the other, and having

borne witness to what appears to have been the failed experiment of Arabism, people might well find themselves –Kassir warns us- turning against the humanist values that are associated with the renaissance. And, in turning their backs to the values of liberalism, rationalism, and individualism, they come to embrace a fundamentalist Islam that has as little to do with Islam’s civilization as with the reformist Islam associated with the *nahda* period. The Arab World, in this way, comes to find itself in a state of *Malheur*, a depression of being caught between the anvil and the hammer, neither in possession of those elements of the Islamic civilization that makes for distinction and progress, nor yet free of those elements of nationalism that have constructed exploitative

and dictatorial political edifices whose hallmark is impotence. Had he lived, Kassir would have probably welcomed the Arab Spring as an example of how the Arab World can overcome its impotence, proving to itself how possible it is to take its destiny into its own hands. But it is not clear whether he would go as far as describing the moment with the sweeping optimism expressed in the writing of the other voice I wish to invoke, that of Rami Khouri.

Writing in his column in the Lebanese *Daily Star* a couple of weeks ago Rami Khouri tells us that the political map of the Middle East has recently undergone a radical transformation, one that portends major political changes in the region. He lists as one of ten signposts of this

radical transformation how the power-game has changed, or how for example the Palestinian UN bid showed that weak international parties can now shake up the global political system. Another signpost he lists is the end, as he views it, of conventional war as a political trendsetter in the Middle East. In this respect, Israel can no longer hope to determine the political contours of the region through its military superiority. A third signpost is the collapse of the police state in the region, and its replacement by an unfolding role of the principle of the consent of the governed. Rami Khouri also adds to the list, in this article and in another one afterwards, what he perceives as the U.S.'s waning relevance in the region. While he means this, perhaps, as a warning sign for the U.S., his

observation is if anything corroborated by Secretary Clinton herself in a recent article outlining future U.S. Foreign Policy. Writing in the journal by the same name, Secretary Clinton devotes perhaps only one or two lines of her 20-page article to the Middle East, which she otherwise devotes to explaining why U.S. interests require that the future for U.S. involvement lies in the Asia-Pacific region. Given both Rami Khouri's and Kassir's emphasis on the strategic importance the Middle East's geography has so far had in the shaping of its politics, and despite the fact that no disengagement is spelled out in the Secretary's article, yet the ramifications on the Middle East of a possible re-orientation of American foreign policy are well-worth taking seriously, even for

America's closest ally in the region, Israel. Indeed, given that both Europe and the Middle East are mentioned in the same (very short) breath by Secretary Clinton in that article, it would seem that Israel will have to fend for itself in ways that it was not used to before.

What will Israel have to fend against? A Middle East more in the sphere of Europe than in that of the United States will mean an Israel that will by necessity become more embroiled in and affected by the politics and prospects of the Middle East than heretofore. This means, for a start, the need for a better understanding of where the Middle East is headed, as well as an interest in where it should be headed. On the wider front, Israel has already engaged Greece

and Turkey (through Cyprus) in a contentious and potentially dangerous encounter over the recently-discovered off-shore gas field. This encounter, we also know, is of interest to Lebanon, and, via Lebanon's Hizbullah, therefore to Iran. Given this realignment of political alliances and interests, a military showdown with Iran over its nuclear program will definitely look different than it might have looked if Israel's military alliance with Turkey had remained what it was. In other words, here Israel is arguably confronted with a dangerously inflammable oil keg.

Another potentially inflammable keg lies within Israel itself. Under its immediate hegemony, which is to say, in both pre- and post-67 Israel, a

growing Arab population one way or another can seem to pose a threat to the State's continued future as being both Jewish and democratic. If Israel gives Arabs full political rights, it loses its Jewish-ness, and if it continues to withhold those rights, under whatever pretext –including the pretext of holding out hope for an eventual two-state solution- it loses its westernized form of democracy, and therefore its support, not only from the West, but from large sectors of the Jewish community itself. Either way, the Israel of high Jewish hopes will quickly disintegrate into yet another failed society.

Israel's Arab neighborhood, with which we began, might also give reason for serious

concern. For, whether the political trajectory is as the optimists describe, and the nationalist renaissance continues to grow; or it is as the pessimists forewarn, and fundamentalism awaits us around the corner, this neighborhood in any case looks bound to burst under economic pressure in major sensitive parts of its body-politic, given a growing, under-educated, and unemployed population, thus threatening to make the entire neighborhood inhospitable as well as unsavory for any enlightenment project, be it Jewish, or Arab.

In short, if the future of the Arab World seems uncertain, and should give rise to serious concern, especially at the economic and cultural levels, so does the political future of Israel,

assuming the two worlds remain apart, each unilaterally pursuing its independent salvation, and, within the Arab World itself, with each part being also left to pursue its independent salvation. However, that future is not inevitable. A different future can be imagined, and can be created. But for it to be created, each party has first to be able to see clearly the deep and dark abyss into which the entire region would be thrown if matters were left to unfold the way they seem to be headed. In some strategic scenarios, it is not mere perception that can make the kind of difference that is meant and sought here, but real-life blood, and actual human tragedy. One hopes it doesn't come to that, and that all sides concerned can anticipate

and therefore avoid the human cost that can be expected from continued confrontation policies.

On the other hand, one also hopes that all sides can come to agree on the kind of future they wish to see coming about, and that such a future is one that is guided by those very principles of human values that both Arabs and non-Arabs boast of either possessing or of having at one point possessed. Such values, to recall Kassir, would have to be abstracted from the narrow nationalisms or fundamentalist religiosities of the different parties concerned, so that, in terms of priorities, the more context-based affiliations and loyalties of individuals and communities do not detract from or blind one to the over-riding beacon of shared human values that people must

continue to be guided by. This means, in other words, that we all strive to create that ideal open society in the region where different nations and communities can co-exist peacefully with one another, sharing resources, and weaving a symbiotic economic relationship that allows room for all to lead a good life.

Let me conclude by simply pointing out two areas where practical but far-reaching steps need to be taken in order to achieve that goal:

In Israel/Palestine, an open society of shared resources can be constructed on a federal basis, allowing national political associations to coexist within a European Union-type open space. Some preconceived notions would have

to be done away with, including what the boundaries of the two respective states should look like, how resources should be shared, and how certain mixed population centers, such as Jerusalem, need to be governed. I would suggest a two-tiered system of political as well as civil rights, one differentiating between and the other bringing together the two nations. A technologically and economically thriving federation of this sort could prove to be an engine for further economic advancement in neighboring Arab countries.

Equally important is the distribution of resources in the larger Arab World. Clearly, the Economic Cooperation Gulf Council experiment will need to be strengthened and expanded,

possibly with federation models evolving in those areas and in the larger Arab World, and with resources available in some regions of the Arab World being diverted for major investments in other parts. In other words, and spelt more clearly, the oil wealth of some of the Arab countries needs to be invested in such a way throughout the Arab World as to guarantee an overall consistent economic growth which can transform populations and lands in those areas into mechanisms for further economic development in the region at large.

Such far-reaching steps clearly require far-sighted and enlightened leaderships. Without them, the future looks, at best, quite bleak. The peoples in the region can every now and again

rise in a show of resentment, rebellion, rejection of bad governance, and once and again, they can pay the price in their own suffering and blood. But until and unless the right leaderships somehow find a way to step in to lead their peoples into a new and better future, the cycles will simply repeat themselves, inching forward, perhaps, but at painful speeds.

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