

## *The Mediterranean and the Desert*

**The Arab Predicament: Arab Political Thought and Practice Since 1967**, by Fouad Ajami, *Cambridge, Eng.: Cambridge University Press, 1981. xvi + 220 pp. \$24.95.*

THE WEST ALWAYS has encountered difficulty understanding the struggles, visions, and anguish of Arab and Islamic civilization. Today, obstacles to comprehension are daunting, as terrorism, "surgical" strikes, energy requirements, and geostrategic priorities dominate public discussion. A world of enormous variety and nuance increasingly seems homogenized, stereotyped, and reconstituted as an alien Other. To all this, Fouad Ajami's volume offers an eloquent corrective.

Born in southern Lebanon and educated in the Middle East and the United States, Professor Ajami is director of Mideast studies at The Johns Hopkins' School for Advanced International Studies. As a contemporary Arab commentary on Arab and Muslim society written for a Western audience, *The Arab Predicament* is rivaled only by Edward Said's massive *Orientalism*.<sup>1</sup> Ajami's book was prepared with financial and intellectual support from the Lehrman Institute.

Ajami examines how Egypt has responded to competing temptations from the Mediterranean and the desert, and speculates as to what such responses suggest about Arab civilization as a whole. He assesses claims of authenticity and tradition, and examines how such claims impact on ideology and religious expression. Most important, he reviews the intense critique of secular Arab nationalism which, since 1967, has produced a substantial literature in Arabic.<sup>2</sup> This critique has rarely been glimpsed in the West, and Ajami's analysis of it constitutes the most useful portion of his book.

When Muhammad Ali came to power in Egypt in 1805, on the heels of Napoleon's evacuation of the Nile Delta and the Le-

vant, Egypt began its problematic relationship with worlds both north and east of the Mediterranean. Tools and techniques of the West were acquired, and the first *ba'athaat*, or student delegations, were dispatched to European universities. Meanwhile, Muhammad Ali and his son Ibrahim turned their new, quasi-European army toward the desert, overrunning portions of Syria, the Arabian Peninsula, and the Sudan. Clearly, the Egyptian claim to leadership of the Arab region was not an invention of Gamal Abdul Nasir. Nasir, too, encouraged Egyptian youth to study in Western institutions, and sought Western expertise and military support to strengthen Egypt. At the same time, he conducted his own military campaign in southern Arabia, and asserted political primacy in the Arab world. Both Muhammad Ali and Nasir, Ajami argues, succeeded in keeping the pull of the Mediterranean and the push of the desert in some kind of balance. Such was not true, he maintains, of Muhammad Ali's grandson Ismail, who ruled Egypt from 1863 to 1879, or of Anwar Sadat.

Indeed, what began as attempts to use the West as model succumbed, under Ismail and Sadat, to efforts to make Egypt a part of the West. Ismail's articulation of an Egyptian "mission civilisatrice," and his construction with borrowed money of opera houses, Parisian boulevards, and spas for European royalty were echoed in Sadat's denunciations of alien Arab "barbarians," his dependence on American economic largesse, and his cozy interviews with Barbara Walters and Walter Cronkite. The Mediterranean emerged triumphant, and by so doing converted the West from model to threat. Ismail's bankrupt Egypt became a British colony; Sadat's occidental Egypt, which by 1982 was paying \$2 billion annually merely to service its debts, sparked his assassination.

The fatal flaw of Ismail and Sadat — and indeed of the late shah of Iran — was, as Ajami states, their

incapacity to stay at home with their own world, to keep a safe and respect-

ful distance from the West. What begins as a dialogue with the West ends in embrace and surrender. Then the legitimacy vanishes, and the adherents are exposed as collaborators. The need to appear modern to a Western audience erodes the base at home; the voice of [Islam and Arabism] reemerges to redeem self and pride.

Is Egyptian cultural and political oscillation unique, one wonders, or do the Mediterranean and desert also do battle elsewhere in the Arab world?

The short answer to this question is that sea and sand do contend elsewhere in the Arab region. Recent events in Lebanon, Saudi Arabia, and Morocco provide their own cautionary tale. But Ajami inquires whether there is something fundamental to Arab civilization itself that leaves it particularly susceptible to the ideas, the wares, and the approval of the West. "Are the Arabs," he asks, "more vulnerable than China or India? Are they only an intermediate crossroads civilization, or do they have something uniquely theirs? Are their ideas authentically theirs, or are they, like the borrowed machines that litter their landscape, mere imports?" Excellent questions: It is a pity that Ajami does not essay a detailed response.

During the years after 1973, the Western thrust into the Arab world, in Ajami's view, succeeded all too well. As a result, indigenous evocations of authenticity and tradition flourished. The secular and cosmopolitan elites of the Arab nations were perceived to have mediated cultural surrender, and denunciations of those elites, often expressed in anti-American terms, were frequently an expression of the region's "rage at itself, at how dangerously and uncomfortably permeable its boundaries had become." Salient among the indigenous reaction were a critique of ideology and an apparently heightened religious commitment.<sup>3</sup>

First, the "liberal nationalism" that had dominated the period from the 1920s through the 1940s, and had survived in

certain quarters well into the 1960s, was definitively rejected. This ideology, which empathized with Western values and attempted to graft the constitutional and democratic structures of the West on the Arab body politic, was perceived to have failed. Moreover, the West, once admired for the intellectual contributions of such institutions as the American University of Beirut and the apparent sympathy of the United States for Arab nationalism, was now denounced as in the unshakeable geostrategic embrace of Israel. No future George Antonius or Taha Hussein was likely to employ the West as intellectual model, or to preach the superiority of Western civilization. The defeat of 1967, and perhaps even more the "victory" of 1973 and its aftermath, put an end to the Arab liberal age.

Second, Marxism, which in one incarnation or another bid briefly to replace liberalism during the 1950s and 1960s, was also dismissed. Socialist systems had been shown wanting in 1967, and were not redeemed by the limited victory of 1973. Without a mass following, Marxism was rejected by all but a few *engagé* academics and café intellectuals in Beirut and Cairo. The Soviet Union had not even the meretricious allure of the West and was widely regarded as useful only as a depot for arms. That such arms often proved inferior in combat did little to enhance Soviet prestige.

Most significantly, the defeat of 1967 occasioned an audit of secular Arab nationalism, the regnant ideology of the previous fifteen years. Ajami is at his best in describing Arab disillusionment with Arab nationalist ideology in its Nasirite and Baathist forms. He depicts Arab society's dialogue with itself, its "anguished self-appraisal." In 1967, the normal capacity of political orders to deny or to evade, he observes, was

denied to the [Arab nationalist] heroes of yesterday. There on brutal display was the world they had wrought. They could not lie. . . . In a hypermasculine political culture, a small state had

displayed their historical inadequacy, had seized massive chunks of land, and had devastated the armies whose weapons and machismo had been displayed with great pride for the last decade or so. There was no place to hide.

What, above all, did the defeat say about the quality of the Arab as an individual, and about the basis of Arab society?

Halim Barakat's haunting, pessimistic response to this question in his autobiographical novel, *Days of Dust*, is — or was — widely endorsed in the Arab world. During those black days immediately following defeat in June 1967, Barakat writes, the world

changed into water, and darkness covered all. The sun was extinguished, and the moon did not yet exist. To Ramzy Safady it seemed that all was taking form anew; the biblical legend was repeating itself. Earth was a desolate wasteland and there was darkness over the face of the deep; but the spirit of God did not move upon the waters.

Ramzy made his way up to the heights overlooking the basin and valley of the River Jordan. Crossing the river was forbidden. Lamentation filled the distance between him and his brothers.

There was no light, no firmament. The waters did not gather, and the earth crumbled in thirst. The land grew neither grass nor trees. The Arabs stubbornly farmed stones.

No birds flew above the children in the refugee camps.

The Arab was not made in the likeness of God, so the fish of the sea, the birds of the air, and the creatures of the land had dominion over him.

And the Arab saw all that he had done and behold, it was very bad.<sup>4</sup>

Where was the exit, Arab and Muslim intellectuals inquired, what the path to a brighter future?

Two contradictory solutions were ad-

vanced. Radicals advocated uncompromising assault on tradition, Islam, and the Arabic language itself. Conservatives proposed a revival of tradition, authenticity, and religion, and denounced secularism. Radicals dominated the period from 1967 to 1973; conservatives controlled public debate into the early 1980s.<sup>5</sup> The radical critique, congruent with that of the Western New Left, is familiar enough. The conservative analysis, widely misunderstood in the West, is more interesting.

For fundamentalists ("traditionalists" is a more accurate term), Arabs lost the Six Day War precisely because secular elites had abandoned their faith. Ajami demonstrates that for Egypt's Muhammad Jalal Kishk, Israeli religious fever contributed significantly to the Jewish state's stunning victory. In fact, Kishk speaks admiringly of the Israeli soldiers who prayed behind their rabbis at the Wailing Wall after the capture of Jerusalem. Why, Kishk inquires, did Muslims not display the same religious zeal? In his opinion, imported Western ideologies — varieties of Marxism and nationalism — had seduced Egypt and Syria, and had led the Muslim world astray. The new, "Socialist Mamlukes" thrown up by the 1950s and 1960s were responsible for the catastrophe of 1967. In response to all this, Kishk evokes an indigenous, unsullied Islam as antidote, and advocates reconstruction of a society of moral standards and common values based on Muslim authenticity.

Similar themes are adumbrated by Lebanon's Salah al Din al Munajjid. Not only, however, does al Munajjid denounce the Soviet Union and radical nationalism, but all those who restrict "freedom of commerce and industry." Ajami emphasizes that al Munajjid's Islam "inveighs against those who nationalize the people's wealth and make them dependent on a parasitic, godless version of socialism and on the capricious desires of the state." For al Munajjid, private property — sanctioned by Islam — enhances individual freedom, limits the power of government, and fosters economic growth. In his view, mar-

riage of Islamic values to Muslim entrepreneurship alone will enable the Arab world effectively to confront Israel and to deal with both the West and the Soviet Union from a position of strength.

The traditionalist Sunni world view, as represented by Kishk and al Munajjid, has much in common with that of U.S. conservatism.<sup>6</sup> Properly cultivated, it constitutes a potentially major obstacle to Soviet ambitions in the Middle East. Unfortunately, Ajami does not discuss Shiite fundamentalism or analyze why it — unlike the Sunni variety<sup>7</sup> — has proven rabidly anti-Western and occasionally terroristic.<sup>8</sup> The reasons for and significance of the contrast between Sunni and Shiite traditionalism have major intellectual and policy importance, and deserve detailed analysis.

Furthermore, Ajami exaggerates the finality of Muslim rejection of Arab na-

tionalism. Since the late 1970s secular nationalism as an ideology has recovered somewhat and is likely to play a role of some importance in the future.<sup>9</sup> Also, he ignores the contributions that Arab nationalism of the 1950s and 1960s made to solidarity between the Arab elites and masses, and especially to dialogue between Arabs and the West.<sup>10</sup> Today, the question as to whether religious traditionalism or a new, harder Arab nationalism will capture the future remains very much open.<sup>11</sup>

On the whole, Ajami's compact and gracefully written volume does provide the nonspecialist Western reader an accurate and almost unique view of Arab and Muslim intellectual ferment during the decade and a half following the Six Day War.

— Reviewed by Antony T. Sullivan

<sup>1</sup>New York, 1978. Ajami agrees with Said that the West errs when it perceives a "basic incompatibility" between Islam and the Occident, a "great binary division." Unfortunately, this Western misperception is widespread, and has led sources as diverse as Claude Levi-Strauss and the *Wall Street Journal* to conclude that the current Islamic revival is nothing but a revolt against modernity. Ajami observes: "It is easy to judge but hard to understand the ghosts with which people and societies battle, the wounds and memories that drive them to do what they do." <sup>2</sup>For his earlier comments on this and related themes, see Ajami's "The End of Pan-Arabism," *Foreign Affairs* (Winter 1978-79), pp. 355-73. <sup>3</sup>Ajami does not believe that the Muslim world is really more Islamic today than it was ten or thirty years ago. It only seems more so, he argues, because "mobilization has succeeded in bringing into the political arena classes and individuals traditionally cowed by political authority and convinced that power is the realm of people other than themselves." Nevertheless, "fewer and fewer people in the Muslim world today are convinced that Mustapha Kemal Ataturk, the prime secularizer who served as an example for the shah in Iran and for Abdul Nasir in Egypt, was the genius he was once perceived to

be. The Turkish state that led the movement to secularism is now in shambles, its politics a theater for rightist and leftist violence. . . . The cultural price paid by Turkey for this change was immense; the benefits are not easy to see." <sup>4</sup>Trans. Trevor Le Gassick (Wilmette, Ill., 1983), p. 3. <sup>5</sup>Such conservative control has emphatically not been the case among Arab intellectuals in the West. There, a secular, radical world view, antipathetic to Islamic revival, continues to prevail. The 1984 annual meeting of the Association of Arab-American University Graduates, for example, discussed Nasirite and Baathist pan-Arabism as though events from the mid 1970s through the early 1980s had somehow not occurred. <sup>6</sup>This common denominator is illustrated by the close relationship between Stephen J. Tonsor, University of Michigan, and a neofundamentalist Sunni graduate student. Tonsor, an associate editor of *Modern Age*, specializes in European intellectual history. The Muslim graduate student recently completed a dissertation on the Islamic Conference Organization. Despite these very different fields of historical interest, the two have been drawn together by their holistic view of society, their religious outlook, and their rejection of secularism. The student has informed me that it was Tonsor's classroom

critique of the Encyclopedists that originally attracted his attention. <sup>7</sup>I do not intend to suggest that Sunni traditionalism has been without its terroristic manifestations. Sadat's assassins, members of al-Takfir wal-Hijra, were committed Sunni fundamentalists. Nevertheless, I do argue that extremist impulses among Sunnis are weaker than those among Shiites and would probably be weaker still were U.S. policy toward the Arab-Israeli-Palestinian conflict perceived to be more even-handed. In early 1979 the terrorism of al-Takfir wal-Hijra was condemned by Egypt's traditionalist Sunni Muslim Brotherhood. In Lebanon, Sunnis are the only major religious community that has refrained from establishing a militia. <sup>8</sup>The terroristic component of Shiite fundamentalism

was not, of course, as obvious in the late 1970s as it is today. <sup>9</sup>On this score see especially the interview with Najah Wakim, a member of the recently formed, Syrian-backed Lebanese National Democratic Front in the Lebanese magazine *Monday Morning*, October 22-28, 1984, pp. 60-64. <sup>10</sup>For a brief but excellent discussion of those contributions, see Malcolm Kerr, "Arab Nationalism: Is It Obsolete?" *Middle East Insight* (May 1982), pp. 20-22. <sup>11</sup>For an argument that Islamic fundamentalism is challenged rather by the emerging, particularistic nationalism of recently consolidated Arab nation-states, see Flora Lewis, "Arabs: Nation or State?" *New York Times*, January 4, 1985, p. 23.