BRIEF SYNOPSES OF NEW ARABIC-LANGUAGE PUBLICATIONS

Annotated Arabic bibliography: brief English reviews of new Arabic-language releases in critical scholarship


Does the Arab League have a real and effective role to play in the history and internal struggles of the Arab world? What about its foreign policy role in the relationship with the international community? Could the League’s institutions be mended and reactivated? These are some of the questions that the book seeks to answer, taking into account the League’s achievements at the political and economic levels and in Arab international relations, the obstacles it faces due to the intractable ills afflicting Arab states and societies, and how this reflects itself on the League’s performance.

The author believes that despite all the League’s achievements, it has been and still is dogged by failure, in particular the failure to renew itself and change its mechanisms. However, the League’s problems and negatives are not the responsibility of any of its secretary generals; they are an outcome of the crises that beset the Arab countries themselves. The League has always been and still is a reflection of the Arab system, and is therefore impacted positively or negatively by whether inter-Arab relations lean towards conflict or cooperation. It is also affected by the Arab countries’ relations with the outside world, which are subject to the varying degrees of dependence and independence.


In the past two centuries, the term ‘secularism’ has been the object of much debate and discussion in the Arab world. For while some used it as a gateway to the development of Arab societies, others rejected it, deeming it contradictory to religion. This made secularism the focus of a debate that went well beyond the concept’s basic objectives and the political reforms it proposes. This is the opinion of the book’s author who highlights the need to address secularism based on its objectives of liberating human beings...
from all forms of discrimination, ensuring equality among individuals and providing the best means of improving their lives.

Based on that vision, the author answers a series of questions on secularism: sectarianism, the history of secularism and its relationship to Christianity, Islam, the religious authorities and belief in God. He also answers questions on secularism’s position vis-à-vis the hijab; films, caricatures and books that criticize and offend religion; religious extremism and atheism; its relationship to class; and view of holy sites. He delineates the difference between the secular and civil state, and looks in detail at the main requirements of a secular state, and obstacles to the adoption and implementation of secularism in the Arab world.

The author concludes that today the Arab countries, be they at the mercy of sectarian and ethnic polarization or wallowing under dictatorships, are more than ever in need of secular civil systems that free people from discrimination, treat individuals equally and afford them civil protection.


Talk about Israel as an extraordinary phenomenon capable of achieving miracles is nothing new. From the 1950s to the mid-1960s, it was described as an ‘agricultural miracle’ that turned the desert into a green paradise; as a ‘military miracle’ that was able to defeat seven Arab armies in the 1948 War, and the armies of three big countries in six days in the 1967 War, and as an ‘economic miracle’ at the end of last century when it was considered ‘a worldwide centre of the high technology industry’.

Decades later, however, objective research on the ‘agricultural miracle,’ ‘military miracle’ and ‘high technology miracle’ carried out in the Arab region, the West and Israel itself showed the extent to which Zionist propaganda and the Western media, especially in the United States, had fabricated stories and myths about Israel’s various ‘miracles’, especially its military miracle. These proved false and were soon dispelled in its confrontations with the resistance in south Lebanon and the Gaza Strip, not to mention the October 1973 War.

This book seeks to dispel the myth of Israel’s technological miracle, not to deny it or minimize its importance, but to underline that the danger associated with the issue of Israel’s advanced technological know-how lies not only in the ‘truth’ about this technology, but also in the ‘myth’ woven around this ‘truth’. To this end, and as its title indicates, the book reviews the birth of the high-technology industry and its development in Israel, going back to the British Mandate era in Palestine up to the present, and addresses the issue from the military, economic, political, social and international dimensions. The review has two focal points. The first describes the enabling environment in which the high-technology industry first developed, and how it progressed and adapted to local, regional and international variables. The second focal point looks at the role this industry plays in supporting Israel’s regional and international objectives.

Al-Sulta al-Siyasiya wal I’lam fil Watan al-Arabi [Political Authority and the Media in the Arab World], by Ahmad Qaran Al-Zahrani (Series of Doctoral Theses No. 113). Beirut: Centre for Arab Unity Studies (CAUS), 2015. 304 pp. ISBN: 9789953827032
The book looks at the relationship between the political, intellectual and social authorities and the media. The author sees this as a dialectic relationship governed in the democratic countries by mutual interests among the parties involved, while in non-democratic countries that control their media, whether directly or indirectly, it is governed by the political, intellectual and social tendencies of the day.

The author’s aim is to reveal different aspects of this relationship, starting with research on political structures and theoretical concepts relevant to politics, governance systems, political education, political participation, human rights and freedom of opinion and expression, and ending with the relationship between the political authorities and the media.

In his attempt to understand the relationship between the political authority and media in the Arab countries, the author relies on the results of his analytical and field study of the situation in Saudi Arabia. He begins by asking Saudi newspaper readers about their reliance on local newspapers in their quest to learn about Saudi issues, and whether they trust Saudi press coverage of various issues. He also asks them whether they are satisfied with the Saudi press given its adherence to the government’s policies and vision, and in light of the significant media openness and existence of outlets not subject to censorship or government oversight.

Though the author focuses on the Saudi public’s reliance on local press coverage of various political issues, and its priorities in the selection of domestic and international issues, he concludes that despite the considerable openness that took place in the past few years, thanks to government and private satellite channels and the freedom they enjoy to tackle public issue, the study confirms the narrow margin for freedom of expression and the negative view that the public has of most issues covered by the Saudi press.


The book tackles the timid recognition of the scientific community in the Arab countries, despite its considerable presence at universities and, to a certain extent, the wealth of its scientific output. It wonders whether this disconnect could be blamed on the institutions or if is it the result of deep political and social impediments that stem the production of scientific knowledge. The book also sheds light on the tension between internationalizing research and its importance locally and, consequently, the presence of a missing link between research, the universities and society. It severely criticizes the restriction of research activities to pure scientific outputs, which neglects material resulting from the transformation of knowledge into other forms, such as offering advice on public policies and activities.

The book, which contains statistical figures, ethnographic testimonies and the detailed biographies and professional histories of the researchers, is divided into two sections: the first is general and addresses research practices and research as a profession, scientific research systems and the knowledge produced by various specializations; and the second focuses specifically on the social sciences.

Though the book addresses factors that impact the dynamics of Arab scientific research and the erratic development of social sciences in the Arab region, it develops a number of theories on the condition of Arab research, and offers recommendation for
its future to the benefit of all those concerned (the scientific community, policy-makers and the public). Among the most important recommendations are: the need to address the missing link between research, the universities and society; making creativity a clear public policy objective; giving political and financial support to research and creativity; ensuring that the region has the necessary scientific arrangements at its disposal; enabling research teams; placing a big part of the universities’ research activities under the PhD and MA programmes; putting fluency in the Arabic language on the same footing as fluency in foreign languages; publishing more academic journals showing the results of scientific research; promoting cooperation among Arab scientific research institutions; initiating joint local and regional projects; and benefitting from the expertise of Arab scientists abroad by encouraging contacts with the diaspora, and appointing emigrant scientists to temporary positions in their original home countries.


The book addresses the history of Jews in the Arab countries, and looks at their condition at different periods of Arab-Islamic history, as well as their social, economic and cultural lives. It also looks at the condition of Arab Jews inside Israel, and at the invitation to all Jews in the Arab world to return to their homeland, and what options the Arabs had with respect to this matter.

The book makes it clear that the term ‘Arab Jews’ refers to the Jews of the Arab world or those of Arab origin who lived in the Arab countries like native citizens rather than as mere residents, and spoke Arabic like Arab Muslim and Christian citizens did, with accents typical of the areas in which they lived. They were well integrated socially, maintained good relations with other citizens, achieved high rates of success, and some became members of public institutions, representative councils and linguistic academies.

However, this did not prevent the Arab Jews from becoming the subject of a controversy after the 1948 Nakba, the creation of the Zionist state and the ensuing developments in occupied Palestine, not to mention the ambiguity and confusion that faces the researcher in Jewish history, in general. This is due to the long Jewish history that uses the ‘Old Testament’ as its only source, leading to an elastic intellectual–religious thought that cannot be relied upon because it differs and sometimes contradicts documented history.

The book has six chapters and an additional special chapter. Chapter 1 addresses the condition of Jews in the Arab Mashrek (the Jews of Iraq, Syria, Lebanon and the Arabian Peninsula) before their mass migration; and Chapters 2–4 address respectively the condition of Jews in the Nile Valley (Egypt and Sudan), in the North African countries (Algeria, Tunisia, the island of Djerba, Marrakesh and Libya) until their mass migration, and the condition of oriental Jews (including those in the Arab countries) inside Israel.

Chapter 5 addresses the invitation to Jews from the Arab countries to return to their homeland, and the issue of Arab compensation for their abandoned property. And while Chapter 6 looks at the migration or mass exodus of the Arab world’s Jews, specifically those of the Arab Mashrek, Nile Valley and North African countries, the additional chapter looks at Arab Jews in Israel and their struggle for identity, and for social and economic justice.

The Conclusion looks at the condition of Jews still living in the Arab countries; Israeli statistics show that between 1948 and 2010, the total number of Jewish
immigrants to Israel from the Arab countries was 619,875, and that the number of those still living there was 4100. Of these, 2700 were in Morocco, 1000 in Tunisia, 200 in Yemen, 100 in Syria and 100 in Egypt. The latter are well treated due to the effort of Arab countries in which Jewish communities live to treat them well, thus proving to the world their commitment to the teachings of Islam that call for the respect and protection of Ahlul-Kitab (members of other Abrahamic faiths).


In his book, the author enumerates a list of questions that he considers should be answered intellectually, placing more focus than before on the crisis between the political and religious and the reasons behind it. The questions he evokes cover issues of how Islam could have been transformed from a doctrine for the entire ummah (nation) – a doctrine on which it agreed and drew its principles, morals and value system from – to a political ideology in the hands of a single group in the nation; one that uses it in its struggle for power against its enemies? How could Zeid or Omar, i.e. any common individual could take it upon himself to monopolize Islam, steal it from everyone else, and present their story as the only dependable one that conforms to the true religion, refuting all others as wrong, going so far as accusing others of apostasy, of being outside religion while resorting to their bloodshed? How could a unifying all-embracing religion, whose adherents were nurtured on the idea of unity (unity of the ummah and community), be turned into an object of endless conflict and a reason for division, disunity and civil war? How could this flagrant falsification of Islam’s image and message have come about, and how could millions of people have fallen into the trap of believing in the Islamic political project and then march towards its dramatic outcome?

In this context, the author highlights the fact that although the problems associated with the link between the state (politics) and religion in contemporary Arab sociology are not new, the presence of Islamist political forces in the political arena and the corridors of power in a number of Arab countries, especially after the Arab Spring, has reignited the intense public debate round the link between state and religion, as a result of the broken political transition process.

According to the author, the crisis associated with the link between the political and religious is essentially due to two historical and structural factors: the distorted formation of the national state in the Arab countries, and the overlap between the religious and the temporal in the public’s mind, especially among the Islamist elite. The political make-up of the ‘national state’ in which inherited aspects of both the Sultanate and colonial authority were mixed had a considerable impact on its failure to resolve the dilemma concerning the link between the political and religious in a modern and balanced manner, while Islamist groups have been competing with the state since the 1920s to use the place of religion in the lives of people and societies for political ends that ultimately revolve round the issue of power.

Although women stood shoulder to shoulder with men in the squares of freedom during the Arab Spring (2011) in the struggle to bring down the despotic rulers from power, they soon disappeared from the political scene as the Islamists gained electoral strength and assumed power. This has give rise to a series of questions regarding the impact the Islamists’ and Salafists’ arrival to power has had on women’s legal rights to play a role, and participate in the governance system, decision-making process, administration and reconstruction of the state along democratic lines. It has also given rise to questions regarding the reasons behind their disappearance from the political scene.

The book tries to answer these questions by applying the ‘theory relative to the degree of party religiosity and women in leadership positions’, which explains women’s frustration in the wake of parliamentary elections in Egypt, Tunisia, Yemen and Libya. The theory could also explain why Salafist Islam threatens to reduce women’s rights in the context of establishing democracy in the Arab countries.

This cross-border theory that could easily be applied to several countries signifies essentially that ‘the higher the level of party religiosity the lower is women’s share of leadership’.


The author closely follows the issue of oil and gas in Lebanon that was found both underground and under the seabed, off the Lebanese coast, had previously given preliminary estimates of the size of these resources as amounting to approximately to 96 trillion cubic feet of natural gas and 860 million barrels of mukathaffat (condensate) and crude oil.

He underlines the fact that these resources are a historical opportunity for Lebanon to increase its revenue, revive its national economy and solve the problems of electricity, unemployment, migration, a public debt amounting to over US$65 billion, and other problems ailing the country.

He warns, however, that these expectations are still in the realm of dreams and could become a curse if those in charge do not realize the importance of putting in place the right technical, legal and administrative procedures necessary to exploit these resources for the benefit of all, in full transparency and without any secrecy or detours. In this context, the author highlights the fact that the initial signs are worrying given that the already drafted legislative and organizational texts, relevant to the oil and gas industry in Lebanon, are shrouded in secrecy, have many loopholes and could lead to huge financial losses. They could also prevent the state from playing its basic role in the country’s oil industry through a national oil company and by overseeing various oil companies.


The objective of this study is to deconstruct the thought of Yasin Al-Hafiz (1930–78), the late Syrian intellectual, starting with his main body of work, *The Entire Works* (Beirut: Centre for Arab Unity Studies, 2005) and ending with an attempt to understand
his vision in view of reaching what we could call ‘internal sovereignty’ and ‘sovereignty towards the other’.

In Al-Hafiz’s vision, the internal sovereignty at the foundation of the modern state is achieved through rational thinking, a democratic system, public participation, a strong economy and the effective presence on the scene of marginalized social groups such as women and youth. For without these elements, neither could the state be modern nor could society be entirely sovereign. Al-Hafiz addressed these issues in his publications, criticized the failure of the Arab state and its efforts to achieve comprehensive development, and offered a number of development-oriented solutions, chief among these being regaining national sovereignty. He says when addressing the Arab future that this future ‘no longer lies in an illusory return to a past golden age, but in building a new society based on the foundations, curricula and values of more modern and advanced societies, the triumphant and hegemonic societies’.

Building this new society requires research on five main issues that the study addresses according to their order in Al-Hafiz’s thought. The first is the political issue; the backbone of his intellectual project, ‘since it is difficult to talk about a modern society without political development’. The study looks closely at Al-Hafiz’s critique of the Arab state and his vision of the modern state, at democracy’s struggle against the authoritarian military state, and at Al-Hafiz’s vision of the regional state’s borders and horizons of the nationalist state. The second issue has to do with the social dimension and its interwoven complex elements, such as poverty, ethnic and religious conflicts, the relationship between the city and countryside, and marginalization of women and youth, all of which could impede development and progress if not diluted within a modern system. The third issue is not separate from the above two, since it relates to the economy and the manner of addressing the obstacles that impede economic development; while the fourth concerns culture, and deals with three secondary issues: the place of tradition and religious concepts in Al-Hafez’s thought, his vision of rationalism and secularism, and education’s place in the new society. The fifth issue centres around rationalizing the relationship with the other, an issue that is not only a cultural challenge but also one that has threatened Arab national interests throughout the ages, and will continue to do so in future.

Since these issues are at the base of Al-Hafiz’s thought, since self-criticism and criticism of the other complement one another in a rational way, and since scientific alternatives are proposed to address the shortcomings, the future overview is not absent from these proposals, since today many interested parties and thinkers talk about both the demands of the ‘Arab Spring Revolutions’ and about Al-Hafez, ‘the absent-present figure in these revolutions’.