

Adonis, the Syrian Crisis, and the Question of Pluralism in the Levant

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Adonis, *Al-Kitaab, al-Khitaab, al-Hijaab [The Book, the Discourse, the Hijaab]* (Beirut, Lebanon: Dar al-Aadaab, 2009), 206 pp. ISBN 978-89953890722

Alexandra Nocke, *The Place of the Mediterranean in Modern Israeli Identity* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2009), 282 pp. ISBN 978-9004173248

Deborah Starr and Sasson Somekh, *Mongrels or Marvels: The Levantine Writings of Jacqueline Shohet Kahanoff* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2011), 304 pp. ISBN 978-0804769532

Abstract

This essay highlights Syrian thinker Adonis' intellectual and ideological journey from his youthful support of Syrian nationalism to his embrace of an encompassing Arab national identity, while outlining his personal history. Recently, Adonis has expressed his commitment to fostering pluralism across the Middle East. This endorsement of a more pluralist setting invokes the concept of the *Levant*, a political and cultural idea probed in this article. Levantinism and its practical applications in Lebanon, Egypt, and Israel reveal what may be the true spirit of the Middle East: a multilayered crucible of identities, supplanting the notion of an exclusivist Arab identity.

Keywords

Adonis; Syria; Arabism; Arab nationalism; Levant; Levantinism; identity

More than a century after its genesis, Arab national identity remains a vexing question for many Middle Eastern writers and intellectuals. In its 20th century heyday, it frequently overshadowed any alternative identity frameworks. Its vocal proponents dismissed any alternative, non-Arab identities, placing their ideological convictions over any other competing force. Writing in the second half of the twentieth century, Lebanese ideologue Omar Farrukh (1906–1987)

argued that it is irrelevant that Iraqis should deem themselves a hybrid of Aramaeans, Persians, Kurds, Turks, Indians, and others: “they still are Arabs, in spite of their racial diversity, [even in spite of themselves,] because the overriding factor in their identity formation is the Arabic language.”¹ Likewise, Farrukh stressed, the inhabitants of today’s Morocco, Algeria, Libya, and elsewhere in Northern Africa, may very well be a mix of Berbers, Black Africans, Spaniards, and Franks, “but by dint of the Arab nation’s realities [*sic*], they all remain Arabs shorn from the same cloth as the Arabs of the Hijaz, Najd, and Yemen.”² Beyond these ideological positions were undoubtedly more practical fears of undermining a political cause intended to unite Arabs under one political banner. Such high-pitched rhetoric also had a damaging effect on the new “nation-states” established after the Ottoman Empire’s demise at the end of World War I. These new states were deemed by their critics as artificial creations, serving the interests of foreign powers or their local cronies. For Arab nationalists, they were a pale substitute for the more appealing dream of a united Arab state. In the market place of political ideas, Arab national identity reigned supreme. But despite this ringing endorsement of Arab nationalism, mostly by Middle Eastern intellectuals, allegiance to the cause of Arab nationalism was not always given or evident. Many of the leading proponents and promoters of Arab nationalist ideology went through various stages, during which they explored—and frequently endorsed—alternative ideologies, before formally accepting the tenets of Arab nationalism.

Syrian thinker Adonis (b. 1930) is perhaps the most notable among those modern voices. His personal intellectual and ideological journey took him from siding with Syrian Social Nationalism to embracing an encompassing Arab national identity to committing, more recently, to fostering pluralism across the region. Adonis embodies these nuanced positions, serving as a leading individual who has emphasized differing ideological positions at various points of his life. This essay highlights Adonis’s transitions, along with the people and ideas that paved the way for these changes. It explores his life, while assessing the possibility of securing a greater degree of pluralism in Middle Eastern public life. Such pluralism may be found in another feature of Middle Eastern society—Levantinism.

¹ Omar Farrukh, *Al-Qawmiya al-Fusha* [Modern Standard Arabic Nationalism] (Beirut: Dar al-‘Ilm lil-Malaayeen, 1961), p. 161.

² *Ibid.*, p. 162.

To be sure, Adonis has dramatically shifted his opinions and orientations over the years at a breathtaking pace. He started out by making the case for a composite Syrian identity as imagined by Antun Saadé some eighty years prior. He even dabbled briefly with Arab nationalism and a pan-Arab outlook. His later critique of Arabism was devastating; his despair of Arab nationalist intransigence was disheartening; but he also clung to some hope in the waning of Arab exclusivism. “I have no doubt in my mind,” he wrote recently,

that the lands that conceived of and spread man’s first Alphabet; the lands that bequeathed and taught the principles of intellectual intercourse and dialogue with the “other,” since the very early discovery of Alphabetic writing; these lands that bore witness to processions of the world’s loftiest civilizations, from Sumerians to Babylonians, and from Egyptians to Hebrews, Phoenicians and Romans; these lands that spawned monotheism, humanism, and belief in a compassionate deity, etc.—I say that I am confident that such fertile and bountiful lands will no doubt shake off the torpor, intransigence, and immobilism [of Arabism], and will hurtle skyward toward modernity and progress.³

There is a clear celebration of cosmopolitan humanism and multiple identities here, as well as an invitation to cast aside the narrow, resentful chauvinism espoused by Arab nationalists of Adonis’s generation. In their brutal exercise of power, Arab nationalists, wrote Adonis, have abused and etiolated the hybrid cultural identities of the Middle East. They have reduced the human richness of the Middle East to a “single linguistic, cultural, racial, and religious totalitarianism; a uniform, monolithic, one-dimensional Arab culture ... obsessed and consumed by a need for ‘oneness’ in thought, opinions, language, and belief.”⁴ In sum, from Adonis’s viewpoint, Arab nationalism and Arab identity presented the Middle East with a narrow, regurgitant, exclusivist culture, built solely on negating apostatizing, marginalizing, and obviating “the other”—that is in addition to incessantly accusing “the other” of treason should that “other” dare stand up to the “one-culture” chauvinism.⁵

But the walls of resignation and fear came tumbling down in 2011. Meeting in Antalya, Turkey in May-June 2011, a group of Syrian expats and dissidents seemed to suggest a “non-Arab” model for an impending “post-Assad Syria.” In

³) Adonis, *Al-Kitaab, al-Khitaab, al-Hijaab [The Book, the Discourse, the Hijaab]* (Beirut, Lebanon: Dar al-Aadaab, 2009), pp. 65–66.

⁴) Adonis, “Open Letter to President Bashar al-Assad; Man, His Basic Rights and Freedoms, or the Abyss,” *As-Safir*, Beirut, June 14, 2011.

⁵) *Ibid.*

addition to demanding the ouster of the Ba’thist regime—one of the Middle East’s last remaining avatars of Arabism—the fourth clause of the Antalya Final Declaration read as follows:

We, participants in the Syria Conference for Change, affirm that the Syrian people are a composite of many ethnicities, including Arabs, Kurds, Chaldaeo-Assyrian, Circassians, Armenians, and others. The conference recognizes and asserts the legitimate and equal rights of all of these constitutive elements of Syrian identity, and demands their protection under a new Syrian constitution to be founded upon the principles of civil state, pluralistic parliamentary democracy, and national unity.⁶

The early twentieth century conception of Syria—and its “Levantine” backyard—as a cultural and ethnic mosaic, has come full-circle in the early twenty-first century. The heaving Middle East of 2011 is perhaps putting an end to a tragic chapter of its history. Arab nationalists, on the retreat, can no longer hide the hybridity of their universe. They have suppressed the Middle East’s diversity for far too long, but they could not desiccate its multi-ethnic personality to suit their monistic impulses. The Middle East is currently experiencing a shift from sectarian nationalism to a more encompassing diversity.

This is not, however, the way things began. A century ago, the idea of an encompassing Arab national identity gained traction across the region. By the mid-20th century, Arab nationalism, as noted, was the leading ideological force. It was Sati’ al-Husri, Arab nationalism’s chief theorist, who popularized the notion that all users of the Arabic language are Arab, regardless of their own wishes.⁷ Husri (1880–1967), a Turkish-speaking Syrian writer and spiritual father of linguistic Arabism, lectured throughout the 1950s and 1960s about how one is an Arab simply because *he*, Husri himself, so decreed. In a widely anthologized political snippet, Husri harangued that

Every person who speaks Arabic is an Arab. Every individual associated with an Arabic-speaker or with an Arabic-speaking people is an Arab. If he does not recognized [his Arabness] ... we must look for the reasons that have made him take this stand ... But under no circumstances should we say ‘as long as he does not wish to be an Arab, and as long as he is disdainful of his Arabness, then he is not an Arab.’ He is an Arab

⁶ “The Voice of Freedom,” *Baghdad Times*, June 6, 2011, retrieved from <http://www.baghdadtimes.net/Arabic?sid=75390>.

⁷ Abu Khaldun Sati Al-Husri, *Abhath Mukhtara fi-l-Qawmiya al-‘Arabiyya* (Beirut: Markaz Dirasaat al-Wihda al-‘Arabiyya, 1985), p. 80.

regardless of his own wishes, whether ignorant, indifferent, recalcitrant, or disloyal; he is an Arab, but an Arab without consciousness or feelings, and perhaps even without conscience.⁸

Husri was aware, indeed he was proud, of the fascistic impulses of his brand of Arab nationalism. In fact, he bragged about the Arabism that he yearned for as one that had to exude totalitarian rigidity and partisan regimentation in order for it to triumph: “we can say that the system to which we should direct our hopes and aspirations is a Fascist system,” he famously wrote.⁹ But if Husri had been intimidating in his advocacy for a compulsory Arabism, his disciple Michel Aflaq (1910–1989), co-founder of the Ba’th Party, promoted outright violence and called for the extermination of those users of the Arabic language who refused to conform to his prescribed Arab identity. Arab nationalists must be ruthless against those members of the Arab nation who have gone astray, wrote Aflaq:

they must be imbued with a hatred unto death, toward any individuals who embody an idea contrary to Arab nationalism. [...] An idea that is opposed to [Arab nationalism] does not emerge out of nothing! It is the incarnation of individuals who must be exterminated, so that their idea might in turn be also exterminated.¹⁰

This is, in a nutshell, one of the foundational tenets of Arab nationalism, and the dominant theme in the Arabist narrative of Middle Eastern history as preached by their avatars: hostility, rejection, negation, and brazen calls for the extermination of the non-Arab “other.”

Reconsidering the Arabist Narrative

Notwithstanding the appeal of Arabism as a cultural and political construction, the Middle East’s intellectual history of the past hundred years has been heedful of the region’s diversity, taking stock of its non-Arab (and pre-Arab) heritage, and laboring to valorize historical memories, parameters of identity, and geographic concepts—namely in the Levant region—as crossroads of varied cultures, languages, and civilizations, Arab and otherwise. Indeed, in today’s

⁸) Ibid.

⁹) William Cleveland, *The Making of an Arab Nationalist: Ottomanism and Arabism in the Life and Thought of Sati-al-Husri* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1972), p. 127.

¹⁰) Michel Aflaq, *Fi Sabil al-Ba’th* (Beirut: Dar at-Tali’a, 1959), pp. 40–41.

Arab-defined Middle East, there are still peoples using languages other than Arabic, cherishing memories predating the Arabs, and practicing religions other than Islam; there are also millions of Middle Easterners today who remain convinced that their ancestors belonged to a people different and distinct from the Arab people.¹¹ The distinction, or dichotomy, is between those who endorse “Arabism” and Arabic speakers who may not link their language to wider cultural and political goals. In recent times, as the Arab nationalist edifice appears to be coming undone, and as the legitimacy of states defined by the “Arab order” is being shaken, suppressed non-Arab and pre-Arab identities are being restituted, forgotten narratives are being dusted off, and dormant intellectual traditions (and non-traditional notions of selfhood) are getting a new lease on life.

Yet this is hardly a novel phenomenon. It has been years in the making, and a truth evident to many Middle Easterners. But the Western world’s infatuation with terse, neatly reductionist labels—like the generic “Arab” or “Muslim” Worlds—and Western scholars’ enduring, brilliant academic and journalistic writings, have tended to blunt the realities of a diverse, multiform Middle East.

Long before the creation of the Syrian Republic in 1936 (the precursor of today’s unraveling “Syrian Arab Republic”), indeed long before the establishment of any of the modern Arab-defined states in the Middle East, Lebanese intellectual and activist Antun Saadé (1904–1949), founder of the Syrian Social Nationalist Party (ca. 1932), advanced a unique conception of Syrian identity as an Aramaic crucible and synthesis of many cultures, civilizations, and ethnic and linguistic communities; a rich tapestry of Levantine peoples—Canaanite Phoenicians and Hebrews, Aramaeans and others—who could not be defined as “Arabs” without oversimplifying and misleading. Saadé urged his Syrians to

completely do away with the myth that they are [Arabs], and that their destiny is somehow linked to the destiny of the [Arab] peoples. We, the Syrians, are not [Arabs]. On the contrary, we are the fountainhead of Mediterranean culture and the custodians of the civilization of that sea which we have transformed into a Syrian sea, whose roads were traversed by our ships, and to whose distant shores we carried our culture, our inventions, and our discoveries.¹²

¹¹ Eirlys E. Davies, “Ethnicity and Language,” *Encyclopedia of Arabic Language and Linguistics*, Managing Editors Online Edition: Lutz Edzard; Rudolf de Jong, Brill 2011. Brill Online, retrieved from http://www.brillonline.nl/subscriber/entry?entry=call_SIM-vol2-0005.

¹² Labib Zuwiya Yamak, *The Syrian Social Nationalist Party* (Cambridge, MA: The Center for Middle Eastern Studies, Harvard University, 1966), p. 89.

Saadé categorically rejected any claims made by Arabs or Arab nationalists over his geographic and conceptual notion of “Syria” and the “Syrian people.” Drawing on his belief in the interaction between biology and geography in molding the spirit and body of the Syrian people, Saadé recognized the diverse racial origins of his *Homo Syrius*; Syrian identity, he claimed, was a function of the racial fusion of multiple ancient civilizations: “Canaanites, Akkadians, Chaldaeans, Assyrians, Aramaeans, Hittites, and Metannis.”¹³ But this hybrid Syrian crucible, in Saadé’s view, had at best a negligible “Arab” component, one that did not warrant mention, let alone deserve the dominant place it occupies today.

Adonis is perhaps the most notable individual who made the case for a composite Syrian identity as imagined by Saadé some eighty years prior. Known primarily by his *nom de plume*, Adonis was born Ali Ahmad Said Ispir in the Alawite village of Qassabin. A secluded hamlet wedged between the Syrian port-city of Latakiah—the ancient Greco-Roman Laodicea—and the Assad family’s fiefdom of Qardaha in the Alawite Mountains, Qassabin rests on the lower northern confines of the geological fold known as “Mount-Lebanon” further south. Not unlike his Alawite birthplace, which teeters above an ancient Phoenician promontory wading deep into the Mediterranean Sea, Adonis is the outcome of a conflation of geographic, cultural, ethnic, and linguistic elements. Even his given name and surname reflect the crossbreed of traditions and historical memories that define him and the land of his birth: “Ali” betrays Alawite, possibly Shi’ite, ancestry, and “Ispir,” of mixed Greek and Turkish etymology, is a likely reference to an Eastern Anatolian town by the same name in Erzerum province. Interestingly, although the Turkish name of a Turkish region, “Erzerum” issues from the Arabic cognate “*Ard el-Rum*,” literally meaning “the land of the Romans,” which is to say, “the land of the Christians,” which Arab, and later Turkic, Muslims would come to conquer. Given this checkered background, Adonis’s intellectual trajectory, eluding Arabism and bending barriers of language, culture, and geography, was perhaps not too difficult to forecast.

To begin with, the Qassabin into which Adonis was born in 1930 had not yet become Syrian, and so neither had young Ali himself. Indeed, Syria as we know it today, a state established by the French in 1936 and granted independence in 1944, had its beginnings as four autonomous entities, reflecting to some extent an Ottoman administrative precedent. Those early “Syrian”

¹³ Ibid., p. 83.

states were the *État de Damas*, *État d'Alep*, *Djébel Alaouite*, and *Djébel Druze*. What's more, the Alawites of the first half of the twentieth century, and most notably among them Suleiman al-Assad, grandfather of the current president, had passionately lobbied French Mandatory authorities and legislators against attaching their autonomous state to a projected Syrian Federation. A November 1923 open letter addressed to French Deputy Maurice Barrès revealed the Alawites' desiderata and bespoke their apprehensions of an impending united "Syrian" entity. "It is with immense gratitude," they wrote,

that we applaud [Barrès's] unfailing defense and advocacy on behalf of our nascent Alawite State; a young State which some seek, unjustly, to attach to a future Syrian Federation, oblivious to the will of the overwhelming majority of our people [...] We urge you and the French National Assembly to take all measures necessary to safeguard our continued and complete autonomy, under the auspices of French protection, and ask that you kindly accept our heartfelt appreciation and our warmest thanks.¹⁴

The Alawites of the early twentieth century argued that the Syrians were too ethnically fragmented to merit a single unitary state, and warned the French repeatedly that the abolition of the Mandate would leave the Alawites prey to annihilation by Muslim mobs.¹⁵ "The Alawite people [...] appeal to the French government," wrote an impassioned Suleiman al-Assad in June 1936 "to guarantee [...] their freedom and independence within their small [Alawite] territory."¹⁶

And so, not unlike the land of his birth, stitched together in a patchwork of varied geographical and cultural fabrics, Adonis is "a child of the catacombs";¹⁷ a hybrid and a conflation of cultural legacies, ethnic accretions, and geological depositions seldom compatible with prevalent paradigms. He was an Alawite, turned Arab, then Syrian, then a post-Arab and post-Syrian shoring up new identities, unhindered by the barriers of his time's ideological, conceptual, and spatial orthodoxies. Indeed, Ali Ahmad Said Ispir's chosen name, Adonis, a Hellenized form of the Canaanite-Phoenician Tammuz—the shepherd-hunter

¹⁴ French Foreign Ministry Archives (*Archives du Ministère des affaires étrangères, Paris-Quai d'Orsay*), Correspondence Politique et commerciales, Serie "E," Levant-1918–1940, Sous-Série: Syrie, Liban, Cilicie, Carton 313, dossier 27, pp. 39–40.

¹⁵ Matti Moosa, *Extremist Shiites*, (New York: Syracuse University Press, 1988), pp. 287–288.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 288.

¹⁷ Fouad Ajami, *The Dream Palace of the Arabs: A Generation's Odyssey* (New York: Vintage Books, 1999), p. 120.

god of fertility and eternal youth—carried with it a set of beliefs reflecting an iconoclastic, non-traditional approach to identity, memory, language, and history, an approach informed to a large extent by Adonis’s own surroundings and his people’s ancient legacies, but one also influenced by Antun Saadé’s Syrian Social Nationalist Party (SSNP), of which he would remain a card-carrying member until 1960.

Some have even claimed the very name “Adonis” was bestowed upon the poet by Antun Saadé himself. In an anecdote related by Sadiq Jalal al-Azm, Saadé is said to have made a stopover at Qassabin during a 1947 “pastoral visit” to the Syrian coast—the Mediterranean lungs of his proposed Syrian nation.¹⁸ Adonis, then still a young Ali, alongside a group of local SSNP partisans, formed the welcoming company sent to acclaim the visiting *Zaim*. Saadé, a gifted and charismatic orator in his own right, was reportedly smitten by the poetic tribute that young Ali had delivered in his honor. But upon learning that the name of his budding bard from Qassabin was Ali, Saadé is said to have exclaimed, “Ali should not be your name; you are a testament to our nation’s authenticity and genius, and ancient pedigree; your name should be Adonis, not Ali; a symbol of our vigor, our rebirth, and our eternal renewal.”¹⁹

It matters little whether this story of Adonis’s “coronation” is true or not. What matters is that the poet’s intellectual trajectory lived up to the reputation of his Greco-Canaanite namesake and patron-god. Unlike most Arabic-language poets of his generation, and certainly unlike contemporary “Muslim” poets, Adonis was personally, artistically, and emotionally invested in the symbolisms and humanism of Christianity, Canaanite mythology, and ancient Levantine Pagan cycles of life, death, and renewal. His mood, often evoking funerary lamentations, was simply a prelude to an ever impending rebirth, a foundation of Christianity’s triumvirate—not to say Canaanite paganism’s trinity—of suffering, death, salvation, and resurrection. “What concerns me is that my work be visionary,” wrote Adonis,

that it contributes to spawning a new society, a new culture, a new civilization, and a new language. [...] if poetry is not in a constant state of renewal, it is dead poetry, written in a dead language that is no longer capable of communing with the word, with the language of life and motion.²⁰

¹⁸) As reported by Sadiq Jalal al-Azm in May 2000.

¹⁹) Ibid.

²⁰) Adonis, *Identité Inachevée* (Paris, Éditions du Rocher, 2004), p. 21.

Producing a new language, a new society, and a new culture that recognize the region's textured identities is a fundamental necessity for the dignity of Man in the Middle East, argued Adonis. Arabism, he claimed, a mere extension of religious fundamentalism's ethos of insularity and intolerance, and an obsessive preoccupation with issues of "roots," "authenticity," and "the evil that the 'others' do" devalues human existence.²¹ Arabs have an obligation to recognize their shortcomings, and recognize the history and narratives of the "other" among them, just as they deem their own history and their own narratives legitimate and worthy of recognition; they must recognize their region's diversity as a fountainhead of vitality rather than rendering it a continuous source of conflict.²²

In the end, claimed Adonis, it is the Arabic language itself, its rules of conduct, its prosody, and its obsolete assumptions that confine Man to a cloistered existence.²³ "Bury the ignoble face of Arab history, and lay to rest its dull heritage and traditions" he urged, already during the 1950s and 1960s.²⁴ This ruthless assault on the sacred icons of a culture was Adonis's way of challenging Arab nationalist pieties, a way of slaying all elements of a previous existence and engaging new, dynamic, regenerated non-Arab and pre-Arab referents. "The magic of Arab culture has ended [... and] I am puzzled, my country," he wrote,

for, each time I see you you will have donned a different form,/ [...] are you a graveyard or a rose?/ I see you as children, dragging their entrails behind them, resigned, bowing obediently before their shackles, wearing for each crack of the whip a corresponding skin. [...] You have killed me, you have killed my songs./ Are you a bloodbath or a revolution?/[...] ... and I chant my own calamity, and I can no longer see myself save as a man on the fringes of history, teetering on a razor's edge./ I should hope to begin a new beginning. But where? From where? How shall I describe myself and in which of my languages must I speak? For, this [Arabic] language that suckles me, also cheats and betrays me./ I shall embalm and purify her, and resurrect myself on the edge of a time that has passed; walk on the edge of a time that is yet to come.²⁵

²¹ Adonis, *Ras ul-Lugha, Jism us-Sahraa'* [The Language's Head, The Desert's Body], (Beirut: al-Saqi Books, 2008), p. 26.

²² Ibid., p. 102.

²³ Adonis, *Al-Kitaab*, op. cit., p. 27.

²⁴ Adonis, *Waqt bayna r-ramaad wal ward* [A Lull Between the Ashes and the Roses], (Beirut: Dar al-'Awda, 1972), p. 11.

²⁵ Ibid., p. 11 and p. 34.

Apocalyptic, harsh fighting words, issuing from one of the most celebrated and most widely read Arabic-language poets of modern times; a devastating indictment that also condenses the Canaanite myth of Tammuz-Adonis; an invitation to relinquish outmoded cultural ethos, destructive identity frameworks, and crippling national neuroses, so as to “resurrect” once more the Levantine mosaic.

Levantine Hybridity: The Retreat from Sectarian Nationalism

The shift from Arab nationalism and its narrow outlook on society towards a more diverse paradigm that recognizes multiple poles of identity is identifiable in the history of several key countries across the region. This includes Egypt and Lebanon, which both went through a phase of dominant Arab national and cultural identity, only to be bitterly disappointed with the ideology of Arab nationalism, which did not live up to its promises. The move away from Arab nationalism may lead the region towards a more pluralist setting, which will leave room for alternative frameworks, no longer beholden to a dominant narrative. Such a setting invokes the concept of the Levant.

Stemming from the Latin verb *levare* (to rise) and by way of its French cognate noun *levant* (an abbreviation of *Soleil Levant*, the Rising Sun), Levant is the term used traditionally in reference to Mediterranean lands east of Italy and Southern France. And although geographically part of the Middle East, and of crucial importance to the expansion of the Arab-Muslim civilization during the 7th century, it is false to view the Levant as the exclusive preserve of Arabs and Muslims.²⁶

The Levant, wrote Fernand Braudel, the intellectual father of Mediterraneanism, is a great cultural and civilizational “turntable”: it is a place where peoples get “caught up in a general tide of creative progress,” where “civilization [...] spreads regardless of frontiers,” where “a certain unity [gets] created among [...] countries and seas,” and where beyond the violence and bloodshed there emerges “a story of more benign contacts: commercial, diplomatic, and above all cultural.”²⁷ And so, culturally and sociologically speaking, Levant and Levantinism came to mean a cosmopolitanism blurring (or rather straddling and bridging) various ethnic, linguistic, and religious barriers, where “all kinds of exchange were possible [in] artifacts, techniques, fashions, taste, and of

²⁶ William Harris, *The Levant; A Fractured Mosaic* (Princeton, NJ: Markus Wiener Publishers, 2003), p. xi.

²⁷ Fernand Braudel, *Memory and the Mediterranean* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 2001), p. 96.

course people.”²⁸ There were many geographic and cultural conditions that had made this legendary Levantine cosmopolitanism a possibility—indeed even a necessity—claimed Braudel. But most importantly, he wrote, there was a dauntless “spirit of curiosity, [...] verging on an obsession with everything that was foreign,” that animated the Levantine type and begat what can be called a uniquely Levantine topos.²⁹

Perhaps the most definitive depiction of the Levant was that of one of its unlikeliest proponents: Kamal Jumblat, Lebanon’s preeminent socialist and champion of Arab causes. Yet, going against his Arabist grain, Jumblat still portrayed the Levant in terms reminiscent of Braudel’s, as

the birthplace of the first City-State, the first national idea, the first maritime empire, and the first representative democratic system [...] at a time when early humanity was still stumbling clumsily through its very first footsteps. Very near to this Mediterranean Sea, which radiated in the grandeur and reason of Sidon, Byblos, Tyre, Carthage, Alexandria, Athens, Rome, Constantinople, Beirut, and Cordoba [...]; here on this very unique spot in the world, where the Mountain and the Sea meet, frolic, and embrace, [one finds] the homeland of humanism, receptive and open to all of the world’s intellectual currents.³⁰

In its modern incarnation, Jumblat’s Levant had the added task of transmitting to the West the faintest pulsations of the East, as had been its immemorial calling to interpret “the life ripples of the Mediterranean, of Europe, and of the universe [...] to the [Eastern] realms of sands and mosques and sun.”³¹ “Such is an element of ‘Eternal Truth,’” claimed Jumblat.³²

In Lebanon, this Levantine conception of identity was generically referred to as “Phoenicianism” during the early 1900s, and as “Lebanonism” in more modern incarnations, beginning in the early 1950s. Exponents of both schools of thought were largely young Francophone poets, playwrights, businessmen, and diplomats, who ascribed to their loose association the sobriquet of “*Jeunes Phéniciens*” (or “Young Phoenicians”).³³ Those latter-day Phoenicians viewed

²⁸) Ibid., p. 106.

²⁹) Ibid., pp. 127–128.

³⁰) Kamal Jumblat, “La Méditerranée, Berceau de culture spirituelle,” *Les Années cénacle* (Beirut: Dar al-Nahar, 1997), p. 99.

³¹) Quoted by Camille Abousouan in “Présentation,” *Les Cahiers de l’Est* (Beirut, Lebanon: July 1945), p. 3.

³²) Ibid.

³³) Franck Salameh, *Language Memory and Identity in the Middle East: The Case for Lebanon* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2010), p. 45.

the modern Lebanese as a singular, unique, complete nation, descendants of the Canaanite seafarers of antiquity, unrelated to the more recently arrived Arab conquerors. They were described most exquisitely by one of their youngest cantors, the doyen of French-language Lebanese literature Charles Corm (1894–1963): “From the remotest antiquity, when they were still known as Canaanites, and later as Phoenicians,” wrote Corm,

the Lebanese people have created, preserved, defended, affirmed, and advanced an expansive and liberal civilization with universal impulses and predilections so accessible to other peoples, to the point that some of those, even the loftiest and brightest among them, had come to assimilate these attributes of Lebanese civilization as if they were their own, adopting and identifying them with their own national genius.³⁴

Like their ancient forefathers, Corm’s Young Phoenicians were skilled mariners, industrious traders, intrepid explorers, gifted teachers, inspired inventors, shrewd bankers, and subtle intermediaries who valued and practiced linguistic humanism and cultural fluidity. The *Revue Phénicienne*, a cultural and literary journal founded by Corm in 1919, became the Young Phoenicians’ mouthpiece and their main political clarion. Its pages featured the works and thought of two future Lebanese presidents and a number of distinguished literati, diplomats, and businessmen—all of whom would become “distinguished” subsequent to their association with Corm and his journal.³⁵

An eminent “graduate” of the *Revue Phénicienne* was Michel Chiha (1891–1954), a banker, poet, political thinker, constitutional scholar, and diplomat. Chiha was also the co-author of Lebanon’s 1926 Constitution, which consecrated and codified the country’s hybrid, cosmopolitan identity and its liberal cultural fluidity. Chiha was an exquisite exponent of multiple identities, advocating an expansive, syncretistic, humanist approach to selfhood, rather than one defined by “oneness” and cultural dogmatism. He wrote that a mere thirteen centuries of Arab domination in the Middle East were not nearly enough to make the Lebanese oblivious to, or dismissive of, the fifty centuries that preceded the Arabs.³⁶ “Even if relying purely on conjecture,” argued Chiha, “the

³⁴ Charles Corm, *6,000 Ans de génie pacifique au service de l’humanité* (Beirut: Éditions de la Revue Phénicienne, 1988), p. 7.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 170.

³⁶ Michel Chiha, *Le Liban d’Aujourd’hui* (1942) (Beyrouth: Éditions du Trident, 1961), pp. 49–52.

blood, the civilization, and the language of today's Lebanese cannot possibly be anything if not the legacy and synthesis of fifty centuries of progenitors and ancestors" preceding and superseding the Arabs.³⁷

For Chiha, Corm, and the Young Phoenicians, Lebanon and the entire Levantine littoral were a diverse, multiform, polyglot, bastardized cocktail of cultures and languages; a conception of identity that valued composite, complex patchworks of ethnicities and historical memories; a millenarian universe of varied civilizations, where peoples and times blended *without* dissolving each other, and where languages and histories fused *without* getting confused with one another. Lebanon and the Levant, wrote Chiha,

are the meeting-place into which peoples flock and assimilate regardless of their origins. [They are] the crossroads where varied civilizations drop in on one another, and where beives of beliefs, languages, and cultural rituals salute each other in solemn veneration. Lebanon [and the Levant are] above all Mediterranean constructs, but like the Mediterranean itself, [they remain] discerning and sensitive to the stirring music of universal poetry.³⁸

The importance of the Young Phoenicians dwelt not simply in their advocacy for hybrid, multi-layered identities. Their importance stemmed from their remarkable humanistic, elastic conception of identity, which, granted, while opposed to essentialist Arabism, did not disown the Arabs, did not bespeak hang ups towards the Arabs, and did not shun the Arabs' rich cultural, linguistic, and literary patrimony. Indeed, Chiha was passionate about the preservation of the Arabic language in the pantheon of Lebanese, Levantine, and Mediterranean polyglossia—from his perspective, a splendid addition to Lebanon's vaunted cosmopolitanism. What Chiha and other Phoenicianists repudiated, however, was linguistic dogmatism, national rigidity, and cultural parochialism. Arabic is a wonderful language, affirmed Chiha,

the language of millions of men. We wouldn't be who we are today if we, the Lebanese of the twentieth century, were to forgo the prospects of becoming Arabic's most accomplished masters to the same extent that we had been its masters some one hundred years ago ... [How] can one not heed the reality that a country such as ours would be literally decapitated if prevented from being bilingual (or even trilingual if possible)? ... [We must] retain this lesson if we are intent on protecting ourselves from spiteful

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Michel Chiha, *Visage et présence du Liban*, 2ème édition (Beyrouth: Le Cénacle Libanais, 1984), p. 49.

[mono-lingual] nationalism, and its inherent self-inflicted deafness [to other languages]; an affliction that leads to assured cultural mutism.³⁹

There is arguably no more exquisite a celebration of cosmopolitanism, and no more a forceful rejection of nationalist jingoism than the preceding. What's more, the Young Phoenicians' intellectual heirs abound in modern Lebanon, despite a prevalent image of the country as a bastion of authoritarianism dominated by Hezbollah and likeminded maximalist company. Francophone Lebanese novelist Amin Maalouf is chief among the modern representatives of Levantine-Phoenicianist thought, where the overarching *leitmotif* remains multiplicity and hybridity.

Speaking of Leo Africanus, a fifteenth century character in his eponymous novel, *Léon l'Africain*, Maalouf described his hero's anthropomorphic Levant—and by association his tiny Lebanon, which he held to be a microcosm of the larger Middle East—as an elegant cosmopolitan mongrel, and a splendid cultural chameleon. His *carte de visite* presented him as follows:

I, Hassan, the son of Muhammad the scale-master; I, Jean-Léon de Médici, circumcised at the hands of a barber and baptized at the hands of a Pope, I am now called the African, but I am not from Africa, nor from Europe, nor from Arabia. [...] I come from no country, from no city, from no tribe. I am the son of the road; a wayfarer. My homeland is the caravan; my life the most spectacular of pathways, the most riveting of travels. [...] From my mouth you will hear Arabic, Turkish, Castilian, Berber, Hebrew, Latin, and Italian vulgari, because all tongues and all prayers belong to me. But I belong to none.⁴⁰

Not unlike his Lebanese-Christian author, the presumably Muslim Arab Moorish European-Catholic named Hassan, was neither Arab, nor African, nor even European; he was a composite cosmopolitan polyglot, who was intimately at home with the cultures and ways of Europeans, Africans, and Arabs alike, and who wielded all of their languages and rituals with the ease and affection of a native. Like his author, Leo could not be reduced to a single, politically soothing national label. He was, as Maalouf would subsequently describe himself in his 2004 self-narrative, *Origines*, a man of illusive ancestry,

[...] the child of a tribe of eternal vagabonds, wandering off endlessly in a limitless desert, wide as the universe is infinite; a native of oases perpetually abandoned, always

³⁹ Chiha, *Visage et présence*, pp. 49–52 and p. 164.

⁴⁰ Amin Maalouf, *Léon L'Africain* (Paris: Livres de poche, 1987), p. 2.

in search of greener pastures and faraway harbors; [...] a holder of varied nationalities that are only a function of random dates in time, or another steamship setting off on a new voyage; sharing only one common denominator [with members of my own family]; a common denominator beyond the generations, beyond the open seas, and beyond the Babel of languages that are mine and my people's appanage. [...] Akin to the Ancient Greeks, my identity is grounded in mythology that I know to be false, but a mythology that I revere regardless, as if it were the only true bearer of my only truth.⁴¹

But Lebanon and the Lebanese were not alone in brandishing and celebrating this form of Levantine cosmopolitanism. Early twentieth century Egyptians trotted out similar themes, namely a "Pharaonic" identity championed most notably by Taha Husayn (1889–1973). Considered by many the doyen of modern Arabic *belles lettres*, Husayn still claimed Egypt to the millenarian tradition of the ancient Mediterranean Levant—even a European Levant—not a more recent Arab ancestor. Not only was Egypt a contributor to this ebullient Mediterranean cultural blend, argued Husayn, it was indeed the crucible, progenitor, and cradle of Western civilization.⁴² Egypt is not the outcome of some Eastern sand maiden, he wrote in his magnum opus *The Future of Culture in Egypt*; the Egyptians have had "regular, peaceful, and mutually beneficial relations only with the Near East and Greece"—that is with the Syro-Phoenician and Classical worlds—not with the Arab-Muslim world.⁴³

This is a theme adopted more recently by Egyptian playwright Ali Salem (b. 1936), who, like his mentor Husayn, was wary of confining his country's millenarian identity to a narrow exclusivist Arabism. "Egypt is the child of the Mediterranean," professed one of Salem's characters when challenged by an Arab nationalist opponent decreeing Arab oneness and uniformity.⁴⁴ "One day," claimed Salem's Pharaonic protagonist,

Thousands of years ago, this [Mediterranean] sea was just a lake, crossed by [Egyptian] ships loaded with thoughts and art toward Greece, carrying the product of minds and souls, returning from there, loaded with other products of minds and souls.⁴⁵

⁴¹ Amin Maalouf, *Origines* (Paris: Éditions Grasset, 2004), p. 7.

⁴² Taha Husayn, *The Future of Culture in Egypt* (Washington, DC: American Council of Learned Societies, 1954), pp. 4–5.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, pp. 86–87.

⁴⁴ Ali Salem, "The Odd Man and the Sea," *The Daily Star* (Beirut), August 17, 2004.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

Egyptians cannot be expected to privilege their recent Arab ancestors and disown their Pharaohs, their distant original forefathers, argued Salem.⁴⁶ “The Arabs are my fathers,” he wrote in response to an Arabists’ exhortation to embrace a domineering Arab identity, “but the [ancient] Egyptians are my forefathers; do you advise me to inherit from my fathers and ignore the treasures left to me by my forefathers?”⁴⁷ The answer from Salem’s Arab interlocutor came discharging an ominous decree, taken straight out of Husri’s playbook: “I don’t advise you,” he said, “I order you.”⁴⁸

Despite being savaged by unreformed proponents of Arabism, Salem’s model of identity remains remarkably relevant, not only because it aims to rehabilitate and commune with an ancient, neglected, culturally elastic ancestor, but more importantly because it seeks to subvert an overbearing, compulsory, often aggressive national discourse as advocated by Arabism. And there is the rub: this innocuous, humanistic conception of selfhood has a charming parallel in modern-day Israel, an Israel which, ironically, in Arab nationalist discourse is often depicted as uniform, aggressive, and irredentist.

Israeli Levantinism

As a 2009 study by Alexandra Nocke makes clear, the “place of the Mediterranean,” and Levantine hybridity, have been conspicuous themes in modern Israeli identity.⁴⁹ Even in pre-state years, when few in the Yishuv (Jewish community) would have readily challenged the Zionist enterprise, a “Canaanite movement” consistent with Adonis’s approach to identity, and boasting convictions akin to those of the Young Phoenicians and Young Pharaohs of Lebanon and Egypt, attempted to advance a “cultural nationalism” narrative of a multi-layered Israeli identity integrating the disparate populations of the fertile crescent: Jews, Arabs, Christians, and others. To be sure, Canaanism sought to replace the Jewish attributes of Israel with a Levantine cross-breed identity meaningful to the Jews of the Yishuv, but also inclusive of local Druzes, Christians, and even Arabs. The children of the Levant—or the Land of Kedem as the “Young Hebrews” called it—were ultimately Canaanite Hebrews. They were

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ See Alexandra Nocke’s *The Place of the Mediterranean in Modern Israeli Identity* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2009).

Arabized, Christianized, some even Judaized; but in the end they all belonged to the same Canaanite-Hebrew nation. In sum, what Canaanism advocated was a braiding and co-mixing of Levantine identities, and their fusion into a single native Canaanite essence.

One of the most eloquent exemplars of this spacious conception of Israeli identity came in a 1972 novella, *The Orchard*, by Benjamin Tammuz. In this fictional narrative, Tammuz told the story of two brothers, Daniel and Obadiah, one Jewish, one Muslim, battling over an orchard in the land of Israel, during the period spanning the downfall of the Ottoman Empire and the Israeli-Egyptian war of 1956. *The Orchard* was also the tale of two brothers fighting for the favors of a mystical woman, Luna, also symbolizing the land. Luna is depicted as a radiant halo, ageless, haunting, mysterious, born to Jewish parents, but raised by a Turkish Muslim land-owner from Palestine. The *Orchard's* story is one of love, violence, and loss; but it is also the story of brotherhood and the triumph of history over forgetfulness.

Uncertainties abound in *The Orchard*. The reader is constantly pressed into questioning the protagonists' origins, and motives Is Luna Jewish? Is she a Muslim? Was her son the offspring of Daniel or Obadiah? Was Obadiah truly a Muslim? A half-Muslim? A half-Jew? Does it matter? In the end, the narrator tells us that all those questions are for naught; that it did not really matter who was what, or whom; that all of the *Orchard's* protagonists were children of the same crucible, the same breeding-grounds; and that they were all the offspring of the Land of Canaan, children of the same culture:

Whether [Luna] was a child of a Jew or a Muslim, for her I was both; for I was of the first [new Jewish] settlers and spoke the language of the Arabs like one of them. With the passage of time, my face had grown tanned and my skin sunburned, and I looked like one of the Arab fellaheen, who are perhaps the surviving traces of those primitive Jews who never went into exile and gradually became assimilated with the country's Muslim inhabitants. Perhaps Luna thought that I was the ancient link connecting Obadiah's race to Daniel's; for, if truth be told, she, in her deafness and dumbness, faithfully served both together, sharing her favors between them—if not equally, then according to the degree of the demands and firmness of each, according to their changing temperaments during the changing days.⁵⁰

This pleasing definition of the Levant and Levantine complexity is rivaled perhaps only by Amin Maalouf's earlier description of Leo Africanus. But this is an identity theme that continues to preoccupy Israelis of the twenty-first century as well.

⁵⁰ Benjamin Tammuz, *The Orchard* (Providence, RI: Copper Beech Press, 1984), p. 62.

In a recently published collection of papers and short stories by (little known) Israeli essayist Jacqueline Kahanoff (1917–1979),⁵¹ Deborah Starr and Sasson Somekh suggested Levantine fluidity and hybridity to have had its champions in the State of Israel. Kahanoff, wrote Starr and Somekh, had in the early 1950s already envisioned a solution to the Arab-Israeli conflict, a solution culled from the confines of her native Egypt, where Jews, Muslims, Christians, Greeks, Syrians, Arabs, and others had lived together for centuries in peace and harmony, celebrating their multi-ethnic heterogeneity, and partaking of each other's languages and cultural rituals without even being conscious of their differences. As a child in Egypt, wrote Kahanoff,

I believed that it was only natural for people to understand each other even though they spoke different languages, for them to have different names—Greek, Muslim, Syrian, Jewish, Christian, Arab, Italian, Tunisian, Armenian—and at the same time be similar to each other.⁵²

Like the Israel of her old age, the Egypt of Kahanoff's youth was a symbiosis of religions, national origins, languages, and histories that were all uniquely Levantine.⁵³ It is nationalism, and in the case of once cosmopolitan Egypt, it was Arab nationalism of the 1950s that brought an end to Levantine diversity: under Nasser, “the idea of a liberal, pluralistic Egyptian nationalism which included the non-Moslems and was accepted by them had died,” lamented Kahanoff in 1973.⁵⁴

From Kahanoff's perspective, the Middle East will know peace *only* by recovering the halcyon times of ecumenical Levantine identities, where Arabs, Jews, and others lived together in friendship, and where hybridity and pluralism were celebrated elements of unity and overriding parameters of selfhood.⁵⁵ Likewise, Kahanoff intimated that Israel might never find peace unless Zionism, a conceptual bedmate of Arabism, came to terms with its own Middle Eastern essence.⁵⁶

⁵¹ Deborah Starr and Sasson Somekh, *Mongrels or Marvels: The Levantine Writings of Jacqueline Shohet Kahanoff* (Stanford, CA.: Stanford University Press, 2011).

⁵² Nocke, *The Place of the Mediterranean in Modern Israeli Identity*, op. cit., p. 221.

⁵³ Starr and Somekh, p. 125.

⁵⁴ Ibid., p. 126.

⁵⁵ Ibid., pp. xi–xii.

⁵⁶ David Green, “Levantinism Finds its Place in Modern Israel,” *Haaretz*, 25 August, 2011.

The guiding spirit behind Kahanoff's intellectual journey had been one that saw Israel as "an integral part of the Mediterranean or Levantine world, a vision that was very much an intimate part of her life."⁵⁷ She incarnated most exquisitely the hybridity and cultural flexibility of a model intellectualized by Fernand Braudel, the architect of the idea of a Mediterranean "continent" as "cultural stew; [...] a sea ringed round by mountains [...] the flesh and bones of a shared Mediterranean identity."⁵⁸ However, to claim as do Starr and Somekh that Kahanoff singlehandedly developed the social model of "Levantinism" might be a bit of a stretch, especially when the Levant of her time—namely the Levant of her native Egypt, and later her adoptive Israel—had already been brimming with syncretistic notions of Pharaonic, Phoenician, Canaanite, and Mediterranean identities, long before she had set out on her own intellectual journey.

Born in Egypt to an Iraqi-Jewish father and a Tunisian-Jewish mother, Jacqueline Kahanoff was raised in the port-city of Alexandria, and grew up proud of her hybrid Mediterranean pedigree. Like many Christian and Jewish minorities of her generation, issuing from Ottoman coastal centers like Izmir, Alexandria, or Beirut, Kahanoff was a gifted polyglot intimately acquainted with her city's maritime confluences, kissed by its fluidity, at home with several of its languages—wielding with native familiarity a number of Arabic vernaculars, speckled with French, Hebrew, Italian, Turkish, and English—and straddling multiple cultures and multiple religious traditions. And so, Kahanoff's intimation that Israel "become part of the Middle East" was a reflection of her background, the outcome of her upbringing and the human space in which she came of age. Most importantly, it represented the cosmopolitan ethos of her times, already expounded by Lebanese, Syrian, and Egyptian precursors from the 1920s and 1930s. Like her Mediterraneanist elders, the language of Kahanoff's literary output avoided Arabic and Hebrew, languages that she knew well, but which she deliberately avoided, due to their exclusivist association with Arabist and Zionist political ethos.

Kahanoff's relevance is not in that she dared live and utter anti-nationalist, even nihilist, precepts. Her relevance is in that her work, her thought, and the intellectual school to which she belonged are being excavated, rehabilitated, and valorized in modern-day Israel. Israel as "an integral part of the Mediterranean or Levantine world," is not an unorthodox notion. Israel *is*, after all,

⁵⁷) Ammiel Alcalay, *Keys to the Garden* (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1996), p. 18.

⁵⁸) Braudel, *op. cit.*, pp. 4–6.

of and *from* the Middle East, despite its detractors' claims to the contrary, and even if the Zionist ideology that was behind Israel's creation had been the outcome of European—*not* Middle Eastern—political tradition. So was, by the way, Arabism, the region's prime opponent of Zionism, equally an outcome of European thought. Still, the rehabilitation of Kahanoff's vision is not an idiosyncrasy—nor is it for that matter repudiation of Zionism and espousal of an Arab "Middle East." Being Middle Eastern and being Arab are not synonymous. The Middle East is much more complex than to be relegated to the narrow interpretations of overarching Arab, Muslim, or for that matter Jewish, nationalism. And so, the rehabilitation of Kahanoff is a "sign of the Times!" It is also a "sign of the Place"; an honest way of heeding history and geography; a recognition of the Middle East's—and the Levant's—cultural and ethnic diversity, beyond the assumptions of twentieth century nationalism, and past today's fashionable exuberance before skittish "Arab Springs," and miscarried "Arab Revolutions."

Reviving Kahanoff and rehabilitating suppressed Levantine identities might be naïve nostalgic yearning for a golden age of hybrid Middle Eastern identities, an era preceding resentful nationalisms, where multiplicity—rather than uniformity—had been the dominant social identifier. But reviving Kahanoff is also a way of communing with the true spirit of the Middle East, and coming to terms with its true essence: a twined, multilayered, pantheistic crucible of identities, rather the prevalent image of a uniform universe of Arabs alone—or for that matter Jews alone—that advocates of exclusivist identities still cling to.

Conclusions: Towards a Pluralist Middle East

Certainly, there remain a number of stigmas attached to being Levantine, stigmas often plotted by advocates of homogenous identities who deem cultural hybridity incongruous, spurious, nihilistic. Chief among those antagonists was the eminent British-Lebanese historian Albert Hourani—arguably himself an outcome of a Levantine cultural amalgam. "Being a Levantine," wrote Hourani during the Phoenicianist and Pharaonic heyday,

Is to live in two worlds or more at once, without belonging to either; it is to be able to go through all the external forms which indicate the possession of a certain nationality, religion, or culture, without actually possessing any. It is no longer to have one standard of values of one's own; it is to not be able to create but only to imitate; and so not even to imitate correctly, since that also requires a certain level of originality. [Being a Levantine] is to belong to no community and to possess

nothing of one's own. [Being a Levantine] reveals itself in lostness, pretentiousness, cynicism and despair.⁵⁹

Carping and contemptuous as this characterization might seem, nothing could have depicted the Levantines and their bastardized identities more accurately, and nothing could have flattered them more. The very cosmopolitanism, polyglossia, and urbane sophistication that Hourani painted most pejoratively, were all elements of pride that intellectuals like Kahanoff, Adonis, Chiha, and others, flaunted like a badge of honor.

In 1999, long before the fitful rise and fall of the 2011 “Arab Spring,” former Arab-nationalist author and public intellectual Hazem Saghieh published a scathing critique of what he considered outmoded Arab dogmas and delusions. *The Swansong of Arabism*, his book, was a work of painful introspection, in which he called for casting aside the jingles of “Arab Unity” and discarding the assumptions of “Arab identity.” Saghieh urged his former comrades-in-arms to bid farewell to the corpse of the Arab nation.⁶⁰ “Arabism is dead,” he wrote, and Arab nationalists would do well bringing a healthy dose of realism to their world’s changing realities: “They need relinquish their phantasmagoric delusions about ‘the Arab world’ [... and let go of their] damning and outmoded nomenclatures of unity and uniformity [... in favor of] liberal concepts such as associational and consociational identities.”⁶¹

Returning to Adonis, in 2011, the now former Arab nationalist wrote an “Open Letter” to Syria’s embattled dictator that a culture that accepts and privileges Arab identity at the expense of others is a culture doomed to extinction:

A nation consumed by a need for “oneness” in thought, opinions, language, and belief, is a culture of Tyranny, not singularity; it is a collectivity stunting personal and intellectual enlightenment ... History beckons to the Arabs to put an end to their culture of deceit; for, [the] states of the Levant are much greater, much richer, and much grander than to be reduced to slavery for the benefit of Arabism [...] and no amount of cruelty and violence emanating from Arab nationalists will change the reality that the Middle East is not the preserve of Arabs alone.⁶²

⁵⁹ Albert Hourani, *Syria and Lebanon: A Political Essay* (London: Oxford University Press, 1946), pp. 70–71.

⁶⁰ Hazem Saghieh, *Wadaa’ al-Uruuba* [The Swansong of Arabism] (Beirut and London: Dar al-Saqi, 1999), p. 9.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 9–13.

⁶² Adonis, “Open Letter to President Bashar al-Assad,” op. cit.

The 2011 upheavals rippling through the Middle East, the tenuous realities of its crumbling patrimonial (Arab) dynasties, the region's striking cultural diversity, and its remarkable intellectual and historical accretions, might very well be the charter of a new resurrected emergent Middle East—a new Middle Eastern state-order in the making, but one already dreamt up (and about) close to a century ago by Israeli, Lebanese, Syrian, and Egyptian Levantines. The hybrid Levantine Middle East, at peace with its diversity and multiplicity, might not materialize for some time. But there is no doubt it is coming, as its suppressor is, no doubt, breathing its last. “Bring along your axes and follow me,” wrote Adonis in 1972:

Pack up your <Allah> like a dying Arab Sheikh, open a pathway to the Sun away from Minarets, open a book to a child besides the books of musty pieties, [and] cast the dreamer's eye away from Medina and Kufa. Come along with me! I am not the only one ...⁶³

In his 1972 *Waqt bayna r-ramaad wal-ward* (A Lull between Ashes and Roses), as well as his 2008 *Ra's al-Lugha, Jism as-Sahraa'* (The Language's Head, the Desert's Body) and *Identité Inachevé* (Éditions du Rocher, 2004), Adonis provides additional indictments of the idea of a “united Arab nation” as “an obscenity and a profoundly flawed and unattainable abstraction.”

Interestingly, in the *Language's Head*, Adonis relates an encounter with Edward Said in New York, during which Said revealed something to the effect that “the concept of homeland or fatherland are caricatures and romantic yearnings that do not appeal to me one bit ... Indeed, peregrination and wandering off from one place to the next are what I love most about my life,” argued Said.⁶⁴ He called New York “home” precisely “because of its ever-changing, multi-colored chameleon-like attributes, allowing one to *belong* to her without issuing from her, and without being enslaved or held captive to her.”⁶⁵ In that sense, (and this is still Said speaking), places where he grew up, Ramallah for instance, left him utterly unmoved, and can hardly be considered a “homeland” to him; whereas Cairo, like New York, gave him a true feeling of “being home.”⁶⁶ “Not only is it possible for a man to partake

⁶³ Adonis, *Waqt*, op. cit., p. 11. (Emphasis in the original.)

⁶⁴ Adonis, *Language's Head*, op. cit., p. 15.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

of multiple identities,” said Said to Adonis, but “multiplicity, hybridity, and composite identities should be man’s very mission and ambition.”⁶⁷

In answer to this, Adonis explains why he remains critical of (even abhors) Arab nationalism, which he calls a

conceited, narcissistic self-love pathology, represented by the Baath Party, which elevated Arabness to the level of a metaphysical postulate bordering on an alternate theology second only to Islam; a theology whereby the non-Arab ‘other’ would amount to nothing more than depravity and evil.⁶⁸

Adonis recalled one of his elementary school history teachers, a Baathist “petty demagogue” named Abdelhamid Darkal,

a hack enthralled by the sound of his own voice, haranguing his charges about Arabism and the authenticity of Arab nationalism, the Arab fatherland, the Arab nation, and its everlasting mission ... His rants were like earworms, still playing in my head, warning us about “the despicable insects rejecting Arabism, advocating for [so-called] Sumerian, Babylonian, Assyrian, Pharaonic, and Phoenician identities; human vermin that need be crushed under noble Arab feet.”⁶⁹

Adonis claims that this sort of cultural and ideological narrowness was among the chief reasons that drove him into the ranks of the Syrian Social Nationalist Party, for in the late 1940s the SSNP was perceived to incarnate distinction from the rigidity of the Arab model of nationalism. What made the SSNP attractive to a minoritarian like Adonis was its rigorous secularism, its rejection of racial, ethnic, and linguistic purity as advocated by Arabism, and its celebration of diversity and hybridity. And it was in the context of the SSNP that Adonis would relinquish his given name (Ali) and integrate a pagan—and no less a Greco-Canaanite—moniker; an assault, as it were, on the assumptions of Arabism, and a call for new, expansive, resurrected, multi-faceted, and enlightened identities.

Arabism, he wrote, is incompatible with Levantine identities; it is a negationist ethos obsessed with rejecting the “other,” denying the legitimacy of the “other,” and refusing to reflect on the “other” in language, temperament, and social habits.⁷⁰ It is precisely for these reasons that one can no longer

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Ibid., p. 26.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ Adonis, *Identité Inachevée*, p. 22.

write, think, or create in today's Middle East, he wrote recently. Many of his peers, he claimed, still invested in old Arabist (and of late Islamist) assumptions,

harking back to a closed, blinkered, repetitive kind of culture, where there is nary the opening to the outside, where the only 'other' is Evil, Hell, Satan. The prevalent logic is the following: 'you are either like me, or you are nothing.' Distinctness and plurality are not an option.⁷¹

This is “cultural pollution” *par excellence*, claims Adonis; one whereby Arab thinkers submit to, and perpetuate, an “intellectual obscurantism” institutionalized by way of symbiotically linked linguistic and religious traditionalism. His recent critique of the Syrian regime's brutality, and in equal measure his denunciation of the religious impulses of some of the insurgents, were dismissed by some of his opponents as the rantings of someone “disconnected from reality; an elitist bourgeois poet obsessed with removing Islam from the lives of Muslims.”⁷² Ahmad al-Shuraiqi wrote recently that it is morally reprehensible that Adonis somehow finds equivalency in, and is opposed to, both the brutality of the Syrian regime and the religious zeal that drives some of the insurgents—whom Adonis mockingly called “the mosque revolutionaries.”⁷³

Indeed, although Adonis has come out very strongly against the Assad regime, he remains apprehensive of an Islamist theology replacing the Arabist one.⁷⁴ His lifelong advocacy for Levantine hybridity has always presupposed relinquishing all manners of orthodoxy and chauvinism; religious and nationalist alike. He is unyielding in his defense of change and his opposition to political and religious cultures that “devalue individual freedoms and reject the 'other,' either by casting the 'other' off, by blasting him alternately as 'infidel' or 'traitor,' or by simply killing him.”⁷⁵ The bedrock of Arab and Muslim identities, wrote Adonis, is “text and scripture,” religious texts and nationalist scriptures; “it is based on those scriptures that Man in Arab culture is lent legitimacy or banished; indeed, it is for the sake of those

⁷¹ Ibid., pp. 22–23.

⁷² Ahmad al-Shuraiqi, “Al-Ana al-Muta'aalia wa Dimaa' al-Suriyyeen” [Adonis; His Transcendental Ego and the Syrian People's Blood], *Al-Jazeera*, May 11, 2011, retrieved from <http://www.aljazeera.net/NR/exeres/061B41F7-22D2-442A-A4D8-3179FBCF24CC.htm>.

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ Adonis, “Open Letter,” op. cit.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

scriptures, and often for the sake of a certain interpretation of those scriptures, that Man is killed—both intellectually and physically.”⁷⁶

And so, Adonis’s apprehensions of an Islamist takeover remain in line with his humanist convictions, and his lifelong struggles to rid Middle Eastern societies of orthodoxy—the infatuation of the “loud few” with the “divine unitarianism of nation and culture,” and their fear of a looming, ever-present “humanist earthly [...] Levantine essence—a fated, congenital, enduring essence.”⁷⁷

It took Adonis’s vision a good forty years to begin materializing. But salvation is perhaps at hand. Pitfalls notwithstanding, *this* vision of Adonis’s is the authentic Middle East that many of its decent children—Arabs and non-Arabs alike—have been dreaming up and yearning for. *This* is ultimately the future of the region as imagined by the Levantine thinkers of the early twentieth century. And *this* is what many modern-day Levantines hope is the “new order” looming on the horizon of “the other” Middle East.

⁷⁶) Ibid.

⁷⁷) Ibid.