Review Essay: The Politics of Defeat: A Tribute to
Sadik al-Azm's *Self-Criticism after the Defeat*

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1. Introduction

It is difficult to write objectively about a book that changed the trajectory of my life, forty-eight years ago when I was in my teens with hardly a political thought in my head. The first day of the Six Day War, June 5, 1967, took place after final exams in my senior year at Baghdad High School. I remember standing on the front steps of the school with classmates, arguing about what had just happened. I had the advantage of having listened to the BBC World Service, and heard that the Egyptian Air Force had been decimated in the first hours of the war without its aircrafts even leaving their hangars. My classmates had, by contrast, listened to the broadcasts on Baghdad Radio, which triumphantly proclaimed the complete rout of "the Zionist enemy," and the imminent destruction of the Zionist state.

We were confused. I had assumed that this political discussion, my first, ought to follow the rules of a physics problem set—but such discussions never do, as I would learn years later. My classmates were sure of themselves. "We are winning!" they said, but without much conviction. What was happening to us, we all wanted to know?

You were defeated, explained Sadik al-Azm, in this hard-hitting, self-scrutinizing book, which appeared in 1968,[1] its subject being why "we"—and it is in that spirit of identification with his "Arabness" that the author was writing—were defeated. I became

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[1] Sadik Al-Azm, *Self-Criticism after the Defeat*, trans. George Stergios (London: Saqi Books, 2011). All further page references to this work appear in the text in parentheses.

political after reading it, meaning that I began to *think* about politics as opposed to having impulsive reactions to this or that political event.

On the occasion of Saqi Books's publication in English for the first time of *Self-Criticism*, and of the passing in December 2016 of a formidable Arab intellect to whom my own work is greatly beholden,[2] I am driven to re-think the implications of the book under review, in what I hope is my mentor's spirit.

2. Defeat

I start with the elephant in the room that no one had wanted to admit, at least not with al-Azm's searing honesty: the word *hazima* ("defeat") in the title. The first thing to note is that al-Azm was not writing about defeat in the uninteresting and purely military sense, but in the deeper one of a societal inability to rid itself of outmoded and irrelevant ways of thinking, ways encapsulated by the generals, leaders, and intellectuals who fought the war. "The blame . . . does not fall on the officers as individuals alone," al-Azm wrote, rubbing the point in. They are after all "a basic part of the fabric of Arab society, customs, and character, and it is this society that forms and produces these officers" (p. 86).

The defeat, in other words, was not about numbers and things, but about mindsets: the Israelis had fought a modern war, but our professed modernity was hollow. Being defeated is a state of mind, a stance one chooses to take upon the world. Redressing this was a monumental challenge; society as a whole needed to be overhauled, not merely its bankrupt politicians and military men replaced. The contrast with the heroic bombast all around him at the time of writing the book could not have been greater.

I was hooked; it felt to me at the time that someone had at last spoken the brutal truth. Al-Azm had said what everyone around him knew but dared not admit, and his book was my first introduction to political analysis. I started to read everything by him that I could get my hands on, as soon as it came out. His book had descended like a thunderbolt upon a whole generation, my generation that came of age politically in the aftermath of the 1967 War and that was to this day condemned to live in its shadow.

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[2] Sadik al-Azm died in Berlin, Germany on December 11, 2016. See his Wikipedia entry, accessed online at: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sadiq_Jalal_al-Azm.

Nizar Kabbani, a widely celebrated Syrian poet, called the 1967 defeat a *naksa* ("setback"), not a *hazima*. Most Arab intellectuals followed his example. It was so much more reassuring; a *naksa* is ephemeral and reversible, a *hazima* is forever and therefore history. The underlying impulse was that "victory" was a "historical" inevitability, because we had numbers, geography, and time on our side. Meanwhile, the "Zionist entity" was artificial, sustained by the largesse of Imperialism, and by nothing else. Kabbani's poem, *Hawamish 'Ala Daftar al-Naksa* (*Notes On The Margins of a Setback*), which circulated far and wide, remains to this day the most celebrated literary testament to the 1967 War. Alas, not so al-Azm's book, which, after a few years of notoriety, slipped out of sight, its truth-telling cast aside in favor of the soothing balm of moral righteousness and feeling oneself to be a victim.

What makes an exercise in political thinking published in 1968 stand the test of time and yet be ignored? Surely not the basic facts surrounding the events of 1967. Those are long since gone; nonetheless, something else about that war has lingered, turning into a kind of syndrome worse than the war itself. And if such a syndrome has lasted until our own times, does that somehow imply that the secular generation formed in the wake of that war, my generation, might in some way be responsible for it? In the wake of the 1967 defeat, are we somehow complicit in the birth of the irrational, nihilistic, nowadays "Islamic" (not Arab) psychoses ravaging the Middle East today?

I ask these questions with the benefit of hindsight, for it seems clear to me that the collection of unraveling countries which with increasing uncertainty we call "Arab" continue to live today in a state of defeat. Until 1967 they were proceeding along more or less the same lines as other developing countries in Asia, Africa, and Latin America, but post-1967, they stopped in their tracks, faltered, and began to regress to the pitiable state in which we find them today. The 1967 War was a watershed moment, and al-Azm was the first writer to sense this. The underlying conditions preceding June 5, 1967 diagnosed by him have not really changed. If anything, they have gotten worse. In this slim volume, al-Azm had already discerned the seeds of what would prove to be a growing malignancy in Arab politics, a fact that by itself makes his book a classic.

3. Self-Criticism

The second important word in the title is "Self-Criticism." We are fortunate in the English edition of *Self-Criticism after the Defeat* to

have an Appendix that includes a number of interesting reviews that appeared in Beirut shortly after the book's publication. All of them discuss, as does the author himself in his Introduction, the book's engagement in the exercise of "self-criticism," and that is because as practiced by al-Azm in 1968, self-criticism was a very unusual thing to do in the Arab world.

Ghassan Kanafani, a major twentieth-century Palestinian poet and literary figure, understood self-criticism as being about al-Azm's refusal "to explain the defeat in terms of Israeli treachery or colonialist intervention. The defeat, in his view, has one cause and that is the backwardness of Arab society" (p. 167).

How true, although the fault seems to lie more in culture than in social backwardness; it is a problem of ways of thinking, and of the people who do the thinking in the guise of the books, articles, reports, and journalism they produce. It is not primarily a problem of backward or traditional social relations, although the two undoubtedly connect at some point in deep time. Still, it was a difficult thing for Kanafani to say because Palestinians in those days looked not to themselves but to the armies of the Arab world for deliverance from Israel.

Al-Azm and Kanafani's quest, as Fouad Ajami in *The Arab Predicament* long ago pointed out,[3] was that of a younger generation of Arab radicals, ones who demanded new and even more revolutionary political solutions to deal with the world of the failed radicals of yesterday, Gamal Abdel Nasser and Michel 'Aflaq. Their forerunners had been tested in 1967, and failed. It was possible to say such things in the immediate aftermath of defeat, but, as time passed, the intellectual courage it took to look into oneself and see one's shortcomings waned.

Al-Azm's other books deal with religion and the thought of the Palestinian Resistance movement, of which he was at first an enthusiastic supporter in the 1970s and later on a critic (as was I, walking in his footsteps). Interestingly, the word *naqd* ("critique") often finds its way into his titles (for example, *Naqd al-Fikr al-Dini* [*Critique of Religious Thought*] or *Naqd Fikr al-Muqawamma al-Filistiniyya* [*Critique of the Thought of the Palestinian Resistance*]). This contrasts with the phrase "*Al Naqd al-Dhati*" ("Self-Criticism") used in the book under review. Criticism, of which there has always

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[3] Fouad Ajami, *The Arab Predicament: Arab Political Thought and Practice Since 1967* (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 1992).

been a rich Arab literature, is not *self*-criticism, which was rare before al-Azm.[4]

The contrast is important and shows how deeply the wound of 1967 cut, even among those of us who were least inclined to be taken in by all of the pompous rhetoric of Nasser and Mohammed Hassanein Heikal leading up to the defeat; perhaps we too with our silly distinctions between "progressive" and "reactionary" Arab regimes, had misjudged the extent to which all of the bluster about "armed struggle" hid the true depths of "backwardness"[5] in the Arab world. Truth-telling and lacerating honesty is what is so important about al-Azm's book, in spite of the fact that he clearly believed at the time, as did his followers and our whole generation: "I have not the slightest doubt that we will triumph over Israel one day, and I am of the highest certainty that our victory over it is historically and logically inevitable" (p. 53).

By contrast with the central themes of *Self-Criticism,* such sentences do not stand the test of time, and I think that al-Azm, were he still alive today, would agree. Still they need to be recalled because they reveal a failing from which we all suffered and which is still deeply resonant in the culture, especially among Arab intellectuals: an unwillingness to understand the nature of Israel.

Israel has never been real in the Arab political imagination; it is an uninteresting black box to bang away at from the outside, an alien outpost we choose not to know intimately (the only way to know anything), but nonetheless see as the source of unmitigated evil. It is not, for its Arab critics, a society which successfully acquired its own state, as it acquired the attributes of genuine nationhood, even as our own Arab societies are today in danger of losing theirs.

A conversation I had in 2001 a week or so after the collapse of the World Trade Center Towers and the attack on the Pentagon comes to mind. An Iraqi refugee and former activist in the Da'wa Party (an Islamist orgnization that had waged an underground war against Saddam Hussein), told me that the perpetrators "could not have been Arabs."

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[4] The Iraqi lyricist Aziz Ali comes to mind, but he was imprisoned by the Ba'ath in 1972, and died in 1995 after a long imprisonment.

[5] A politically incorrect word today which makes many of us feel uncomfortable, but that neither al-Azm nor Kanafani hesitated to use.

"Of course they were," I replied. "Read the list of names. Look at their pictures."

My friend gave the matter little thought before saying, "No Arab is capable of planning an attack like this."

I often recollect that reply. This individual, no stranger to political activism, could not imagine Arabs pulling off such a remarkable feat of planning and organization; it had to be the Israelis who have an interest in making "us" look bad, and who, as everyone knows, are "very smart." This is not a pre-1967 mindset; it is a post-1967 one. It is as telling of my friend's understanding of Israel as it is of his repressed contempt of his own Arabness.

Thirty-four years after 1967 and the condition of being defeated had drilled its way down into the core of my friend's psyche, shredding his sense of self-worth. He was not even born in 1967, but that is precisely the point. Some of us were jerked into adulthood on June 5, 1967, but my much younger Arab friend is a child of the world that it left in its wake. No doubt other failures contributed to his choice of words, but those later ones, it seems to me, were derivative of the great conflagration of 1967. Until the Arab Spring of 2011, we remained stuck in the debilitating world that our reaction to defeat had created: the Occupied Territories, the Israeli settlements, Netanyahu, the PLO, and, with the exception of regime change in Iraq in 2003, the same constellation of regimes that began to flourish in the shadow of our defeat.

A visitor to Cairo can travel the length and breadth of that city visiting museums, monuments, and landmarks going back to ancient times. But he or she will find nothing to indicate that a great war which shaped Arab and Egyptian lives for so long took place here. There is a museum extolling a different war, the October 1973 War; it tells the story of an Arab victory over Israel in 1973, without a reference to its much more important precursor in 1967, and which after all was the reason the October 1973 War was fought in the first place. Worse yet, the "victory" that the museum extols never really happened, for had the Soviet Union and the United States not intervened to stop the October 1973 War when they did, following Israel's capture of the city of Suez, the encircled Egyptian Third Army would certainly have been decimated. However, an Arab oil embargo had been announced and the Great Powers did not want another Arab humiliation, and so the Egyptian army survived to claim its hollow victory. Meanwhile, the West Bank and the Golan remain occupied; Gaza is in worse shape than ever before; the "authority" of the Palestine National Authority is

crumbling; and Israeli power relative to its Arab adversaries is many orders of magnitude greater than it was in 1967.

The Arab Mashriq (East), al-Azm wrote, was prone to "magical" and "rash" ways of thinking. These apply to the unwillingness to understand Israel as much as they apply to the inability to cope with the tragedy of the Palestinian people. "Our use of the term *nakbah* [disaster] to indicate the June War and its aftermath," al-Azm wrote, "contains much of the logic of exoneration and the evasion of responsibility and accountability, since whomever is struck by a disaster is not considered responsible for it" (p. 40).

The discussion over terminology—was 1967 a *naksa* or a *nakba*?—was by itself a symptom of the unwillingness to get at the root of the problem. Al-Azm would argue that this has its basis in religion, and the sense of fatalism that can be engendered by the often-unforgiving environment of the Middle East. Certainly one of al-Azm's other books, *Naqd al-Fikr al-Dini* (*Critique of Religious Thought),* for which he was expelled from the American University of Beirut, explores this terrain. But when you add to those underpinnings of backwardness the cataclysmic shock of total collapse in a mere six days, along with the loss of huge swathes of Arab territory persisting until today, one can understand why 1967 is a turning point in Arab political life, as great if not greater than the formation of the State of Israel itself.

4. Rejection

In politics, how one deals with defeat is more important than the brutal fact of defeat itself; it sheds light on the future of the defeated. In 1967 Nasser grasped the reality for which he was of course primarily responsible. He tried to resign, but was not allowed to do so by his inner circle and the intelligentsia which had so egged him on; nor was he allowed to resign by the hundreds of thousands who poured out onto the streets demanding that he retract the gesture. To continue living in a state of defeat, under its cloud, so to speak, is to begin to think of oneself only as a victim of "Zionist settler-colonialism," not as having been defeated by it. Consequently, there is less of an imperative to come to terms with what happened. Accomplishing this entails a huge dose of denial, hypocrisy, and evasion of responsibility. Again, al-Azm was the first Arab thinker to understand this.

Since the publication of *Self-Criticism*, time has added another ragingly popular word to the Arab lexicon: "rejection." Rejection first entered post-1967 politics in the shape of the famous three "no's" of

the resolution of the Khartoum Arab League, adopted on September 1, 1967 ("No Peace; No Recognition; No Negotiations with Israel"), but it took off with a vengeance during the 1970s and 1980s in the form of the Arab "Steadfastness and Rejection Front," a 1977 collection of Arab States and Palestinian organizations under the umbrella of the PLO that rejected the Camp David treaty between Egypt and Israel, along with U.N. Resolutions 242 and 338.

Rejection in this and other contexts in which it makes an appearance—for instance, "rejection" of *tadhbia'* ("normalization with Israel"), the basis of the Ba'athist critique of Jordan and Egypt after the Camp David Accords—is a perfect illustration of the hypocrisy that was now becoming part and parcel of the language of politics. Thus the three "no's" of Khartoum were soon followed by the acceptance of U.N. Resolution 242, which clearly contradicted the spirit and intent of the Khartoum Summit.

In essence, "rejection" meant allowing the idea of being Zionism's victim to trump the humiliating fact of actually having been defeated by it. It was to treat defeat apolitically as it were, as if it were an affront to ego, dignity, and honor, not a failing in oneself. However, when forced by circumstance or someone of al-Azm's stature to acknowledge that something terrible had happened in 1967, the first instinct of the "rejectionist" was to turn his back on it, ascribe responsibility to external forces outside his control, and to in effect politically freeze in place—that is, practice *al-sumud* ("steadfastness," as the expression goes). By definition this is the opposite of politics. To a "rejectionist," however, to do anything other than practice *sumud* was to recognize that something called Israel existed: that this "thing" was a real state, no longer just the "Zionist entity"; that if such a state existed, it had defeated you; if it had defeated you, then it was legitimate; and if it was legitimate, then the idea of a single Arab nation and Arab rights in Palestine would forever have been betrayed.

In this dead-end chain of reasoning lies the conundrum born in 1967 that Arab political culture (not "reactionary" Arab regimes, but the broad mass of the culture) has to this day not been able to escape. We remained in denial for decades, and all the while Israel was out there to remind us of what we were doing, standing strong and getting stronger, while we turned our backs like rejected suitors pretending that she was not in the room.

Half a century is a long time, long enough to change what is an understandable initial reaction to the psychological shock of a momentous event into something much worse. We all carry the mental

baggage of our former lives, no matter how much we may try to deny it. Carrying this for so long created what Samir Kassir, a Lebanese writer/activist assassinated by the Assad regime in 2005, called a "malaise," one that has since 1967 turned into a constituent part of "Arabness." This cultural malaise, Kassir wrote, has become exceptionally acute and "permeates every corner of the Arab world."[6]

5. Identity

The decade after *Self-Criticism* made its appearance has been described by Paul Salem, a Professor of Arab Politics at the American University of Beirut, as being about "the supersession" of modernism in the Arab Muslim world, as "the main debate moved from the central-developmental issues of modernity . . . to second-level issues of identity, cultural authenticity and faith."[7] Salem is here describing a general intellectual trend, by no means restricted to the Arab world, away from the kind of issues that were so important to al-Azm, as well as to new ones—ones which may help to explain why his book was forgotten so soon after it was published in 1968.

Following the retreat of imperialism, Salem argues, ideas surrounding our common humanity (human rights, or democracy as a universal and not culturally specific politics), along with the notion of modernization as "catching up" with the West, or of "replicating" its developmental experience, even of overcoming our own self-perceived "backwardness," all gave way to "post-modernist viewpoints and discourses." That which was shared or sharable by our whole species, irrespective of nationality, race, or religion, became relative and culturally determined. Liberal Arab political parties were now disappearing in the region, at the same time as it was harder than ever to make a case against torture or censorship on the grounds of the idea of the sovereignty of the individual person—the inviolability of his or her body, for instance. These trends occurred worldwide.

I recall, for instance, how Ayatollah Khomeini's *fatwa* calling for the death of Salman Rushdie, the author of *Satanic Verses*, became difficult to oppose in absolute terms in London by friends of mine on the political left. The most that some were willing to say in his defense was the rather anemic thought that "while you [i.e., Khomeini] may do

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[6] See Samir Kassir, *Being Arab* (New York: Verso, 2013).

[7] Paul Salem, "The Rise and Fall of Secularism in the Arab World," *Middle East Policy* 4, no. 3 (March 1996), p. 155.

things this way in your culture—which is none of our business—you are not allowed to execute your *fatwa* in ours." We were all now drowning in the age of identity politics, or "abandonment of the universals," as it's been called.

In this post-Vietnam War era, the self-confidence of the U.S. was also taking big hits in the Middle East. Consider the humiliation for the United States of Khomeini's 1979 Islamic Revolution, followed by the U.S. embassy seizure in Tehran, followed in turn by the fiasco of a hostage rescue attempt under President Jimmy Carter, followed by the hasty and unseemly exit of American troops from Lebanon under President Ronald Reagan following Hizbollah's successful bombing of the U.S. embassy. Naturally, all of these American setbacks were noticed by Saddam Hussein and were part of his deliberations when he invaded, occupied, and annexed Kuwait in 1990, in his (as it turned out mistaken) belief that the U.S. would not act against him.

As early as the late 1970s, this post-imperial world-cultural shift left Arab cultural life without any "living intellectual lifelines."[8] The new financial muscle of rentier oil states like Saudi Arabia after the October 1973 War, the Iranian Revolution in 1979, and the Saudi-American alliance in the 1980s supporting Islamic "jihad" against the U.S.S.R., did not facilitate the creation of such intellectual lifelines. Instead, the shift encouraged the "culturally specific" and politically regressive labels, now of "Islamic" rather than "Arab" provenance, giving them the room to flourish and grow.

There was nothing "traditional" about the political Islam that now began to replace the failed secularist and nationalist ideologies of my generation. To be sure, new "Islamic" ideological parties were emerging, but they operated much as their nationalist and leftist predecessors had done, and when they latched onto Islam in either its Sunni or Shi'a varieties, there was little that was "Islamic" about the way in which they organized themselves. The Middle East was not lapsing into its traditional religious and tribal patterns, as is often argued; it was forging its own new and grotesquely deformed kind of modernity. The Iraqi Islamic Da'wa party, for instance, or the Islamic Council for Islamic Revolution in Iraq, founded in 1960 and 1982, respectively (both of which are in government in Iraq today), have leading members who were Marxists at first, then Ba'athists, and finally Islamists after the 1979 Iranian Islamic Revolution. They have learned more about organization and politics from the Stalinist

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[8] Ibid., p. 156.

practices of the Iraqi Communist Party than they ever learned from Islamic history.

Being "defeated" in such a climate, followed by "rejection" and "denial" of that defeat, and an ever-growing sense of lack of self-worth and irresponsibility created a witches' brew of poisonous sentiments that were now coalescing around an ever more regressive kind of politics. It is useful to recall similar situations in other parts of the world. Consider the rise of fascism in Germany on the heels of its defeat in World War I. Better yet, imagine a world in which Germany and Japan were to deal with their defeat in World War II in something like the way in which the Arab world dealt with its defeat in 1967. One shudders to think about the outcome.

Symptoms of the Arab malaise described by Kassir appear first of all in the cultural domain; its high priests, the intelligentsia, are the main carriers of the disease. Ordinary Arab men and women just want to get on with their daily lives; politicians, professionals, and businessmen have positions and privileges to protect. Only intellectuals have the tools with which to construct ways of reading the world designed to explain away uncomfortable facts by blaming it all on someone else (Israel, the West, Imperialism). After the 1979 Iranian Islamic Revolution, they used those same tools to discover virtues in an Islam that seemed to bestow upon them the kind of "cultural authenticity" they now so eagerly sought, and which their previous secularism had denied them.

I recall the ongoing reaction of Egypt's secular intellectual class to *tadhbia'* ("normalization") with Israel, and the positions it took after the Camp David Accords. Sadat's Egypt was opposed by them not in the first place for its autocratic nature, but for its attempt to get over the debacle of 1967, first by a limited war in October 1973 and then by a peace treaty with Israel. In Egypt more than anywhere else, the intelligentsia remained stuck in a pre-1967 mode, more backward on the question of Israel and "normalization" than either the state or the population at large (recall the huge demonstrations of support that Sadat received upon his return from addressing the Israeli parliament). Much the same argument can be made of Jordan, the popularity of Hizbollah before the Arab Spring, and the failure of the Palestinian-Israeli Camp David Peace Accords in 2000.

Sadik al-Azm wrote what is to this day the best intellectual critique of this whole turn of events. If "essentializing" the Orient is the cardinal sin of Western "Orientalism," as Edward Said argues in

his influential book of the same title,[9] then surely there is also an "Orientalism in Reverse," as al-Azm had written in 1981, which applies to these very same once-secular Arab intellectuals whose only constant was their "essentialization" of the West and Israel.[10]

6. Victimhood

Once the threat of the Palestinian resistance organizations had faded after their crushing 1970 defeat in Jordan, and after "armed struggle" and the "liberation of Palestine" had turned into a military occupation of Lebanon and participation in its bloody civil war, the form that "the supersession of modernism" took in Arab political culture was extolling victimhood—one's own of course. A "politics of defeat" was morphing into a "politics of victimhood."

Palestinian victimhood is of course real; it was real in the past and it is still real today. Iraqi and Syrian victimhood under their respective Ba'athi regimes was real, and in the case of the Sunni Arabs of Syria and Iraq, remains more real than ever today. But the concept of *Arab* victimhood (excluding today's millions of Arab refugees) is not real, at least not in this day and age. Being defeated in war does not qualify, but that is how the regimes of Iraq and Syria successfully legitimized themselves after 1967.

Real or not, however, victimhood is never ennobling. Whether real or imagined, it is always a demeaning and dehumanizing condition. The attribute of being a victim permanently degrades one's humanity, scarring its casualties for life. Victimhood is therefore something to be pitied and empathized with, but never eulogized or, worse still, striven after like a badge of honor. It is difficult to escape the fact that both Palestinian and Israeli identities have been constructed as mirror images of each other's victimhood, neither being able to establish itself without active denial of the other. Victim and victimizer are thus caught up in a never-ending cycle of violence. The same vicious cycle describes Iraqi and Syrian politics today. Such symmetries (and there are many others) have sustained a powerful complex of victimhood which undermined reconciliation efforts like Oslo or Camp David, and which are applicable to one degree or another to all the peoples of the Middle East (Palestinians, Israelis,

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[9] Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage, 1979).

[10] See Sadik al-Azm, "Orientalism and Orientalism in Reverse," *Khamsin* 8 (1981), pp. 5-26, reprinted in *Orientalism: A Reader*, ed. A. L. Macfie (New York: New York University Press, 2000), pp. 217-38.

Kurds, Armenians, Chaldean Christians, Turkomans, and all Syrian and Iraqi Shi'as and Sunnis). It sometimes feels as though the Middle East is peopled entirely and only by victims, politically speaking of course. There can be no political road out of such a morass when at some primal level all of these so-defined collectivities, through their politicians and intellectuals, are stuck in mindless competition with one another over who has suffered the most and whose cause is more just than that of the others.

Bathing oneself in the soothing balm of victimhood is a handy escape from the burdens entailed by acknowledgment of defeat. Victims after all can never be blamed. Nothing is their fault. The work of intellectuals turns into one of extolling the virtues of victims and defending their rights, but this, over time and through endless repetition, cannot but lead to idealizing the condition of victimhood itself. Many of the failures of post-1967 Palestinan politics in particular can be traced back to the intractability of this syndrome in Palestinian political culture.

Consider what happened when Saddam Hussein invaded Kuwait in 1990: Palestinians and many other Arabs saw in his brutal occupation, sacking, and erasure of the "brotherly" Arab state of Kuwait from the map a kind of salvation from victimhood at the hands of "Zionism" and "Imperialism." They opted, in other words, to "link" their future as Arabs to that of the great tyrant. If this was the case in 1990, are we that far away from al-Qaeda and ISIS and all the other abominations that a culture of Arab victimhood has given rise to?

Incidentally, the reduction of politics to the sense of being a victim was becoming a powerful political force in the Middle East as a whole (for example, Kurdish nationalism and Iraqi Shi'a sectarianism post-2003) at the same time as it was becoming one worldwide. We can see variations of it in the phenomenon of identity politics in the West (for example, Black power in the 1970s in the U.S. or rising anti-immigrant sentiment in Europe today). Even in Israel, "Oriental" Jews started to separate themselves from European Jews, looking backward to their "roots" in Morocco, Iraq, or Yemen, to escape their marginalization in modern Israel.

Victimhood in all of these cases can be real or it can be imagined. It can take place in the here and now (Palestinians under Israeli occupation, for instance) or it can be "remembered" from way back in time (Armenians during World War I and Jews during the Nazi Holocaust). Politically speaking, neither form matters nor changes things so long as one's behavior in the here and now is primarily

governed by this simultaneously enabling and toxic sensibility. It is toxic because it rests on the view that responsibility for the future rests on concessions that by right have to be made by the victimizer only. This phenomenon, whatever else it may be, is not politics.

There is a price to be paid for allowing oneself the luxury of sinking into victimhood, whether at the hands of the West, Israel, the world capitalist system, or what nowadays is called globalization. It almost no longer matters who or what you hold responsible. My Iraqi Shi'a friend—who thought that only Jews could have pulled off 9/11—held Saddam Hussein responsible at first for what he deemed to be the victimization of Iraq, and then, after 2003, imperceptibly switched responsibility to the entire community of Iraqi Sunnis. Today, when he is no longer a victim because the U.S. overthrew his victimizer (Saddam Hussein) and empowered his community (the Shi'a), the same person justifies supporting another Ba'athi, Bashar al-Assad, in his war against the Syrian people, calling it an act of Shi'a self-defense. There is no point in reasoning with him. His state of mind, suffused as it is with a sense of his own "eternal" victimhood, is beyond all that. Can the same not be said for many a Sunni today in Iraq and Syria, or a Maronite or Shi'a or Druze in Lebanon, or a Kurd and a Palestinian, wherever they may be in the world?

The "anti-imperialism" and "anti-Zionism" of the so-called Arab street that erupted many times after 1967, be it in the language of Saddam Hussein or Hafez Assad or even that of Osama bin Laden and ISIS, was only possible because of the abdication of responsibility that al-Azm first diagnosed in 1968. It was a relatively new or understandable phenomenon when he wrote his book in the initial flush of defeat and when he was targeting an older generation of Arab radicals, but it is no longer new. Today it is simply the latest and most virulent variation of an idea held by Islamists but nurtured originally by secular, nationalist, and leftist Arab intellectuals like myself in the immediate aftermath of the 1967 Arab-Israeli War.

During my first decade of political activism (the 1970s) that abdication went under a variety of different labels: anti-imperialism, anti-Zionism, Arab socialism, pan-Arabism, and my own particular shibboleth of those years: Arab Socialist Revolution. Whatever else you might care to say about those older labels, at least they took as their point of departure genuine grievances, some of which were more legitimate than others. The most legitimate of those grievances was the injustice caused by the dispossession of millions of Palestinians that accompanied the birth of the state of Israel in 1948 and its later

expansion in 1967. However, in the hands of Arab nationalists, leftist "anti-imperialists," and social revolutionaries of my generation, the lessons that al-Azm had been trying to teach, were being lost. It took me over ten years even to begin to return to them after I quit revolutionary politics while remaining a man of the left. I turned away from the problems of the whole Arab world to look for the first time only at Iraq, beginning in 1980 to write *Republic of Fear*, a book that took six years to finish because it required so drastic a change of mental orientation.[11]

The point is that our first impulse as young diehards of the radical left did not get channeled into thinking about our own countries or building civil societies based on hard-won expansions of freedoms and liberties wrested from our own tyrannical regimes (such as happened in Latin America in the 1980s). And this was our cardinal sin. Here too al-Azm stands apart; at least his Syrian regime had actually fought Israel in 1967 and lost territory to it, so that *Self-Criticism* targeted his own country's "backwardness" as well as that of the whole system of post-World War II Arab states. The same cannot be said of myself or of the thousands of young men like me from other parts of the Arab world. We let our socialist "Arab Revolution" of the 1970s, now led by the "vanguard" of the Palestinian Resistance organizations, be hijacked by the "Arab Ba'ath Socialist Party," which claimed to be leading that revolution even as it set about establishing its own "Republic of Fear" at home. Even the Iraqi Communist Party, the oldest truly national political party in Iraq, conceded the leadership of the revolution it had first called for in the 1930s to the Iraqi Ba'ath, entering a Ba'athi-led government in the mid-1970s only to be decimated because of it. Variations on this story can be told for other Arab countries.

Elsewhere, democratic and liberal politics in the shape of a fight for civil liberties was taking root—in the countries of Latin America in the 1980s and in Africa and other parts of the world in the 1990s. Such was not the case in the Arab world where we were still nurturing grievances and could only look toward epic battles yet to be fought with outsiders. As we looked away from our own autocracies, we were replicating in our politics what al-Azm criticized about the politicians and intellectuals he criticized in the run-up to 1967.

Our failure created a vacuum which was increasingly filled by wilder versions of a conspiratorial view of history, a view no longer

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[11] Kanan Makiya, *Republic of Fear: The Politics of Modern Iraq*, updated ed. (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1998).

equipped intellectually to do anything but blame others for the ills of one's own world. The dangerous unstated corollary of this "politics of defeat," was the notion that Arabs had little agency to change the terribly unjust way that the world works. Thus, the culture began to see itself as consigned to a Sisyphean "struggle" against absolute or Satanic injustice, the perfect conditions for the birth of millenarian and nihilist organizations like al-Qaeda and ISIS. Lost was a sense of ourselves as authentic political actors with the capacity for imagining concrete and gradual gains in the political arena. A region that potentially had it all—intellectual talent, financial resources, territorial spread, and geographical variety—was now bereft of a culture that could offer its citizens agency and therefore true citizenship.

Between Israel's stunning victory in the Six Day War of 1967 and the Arab Spring of 2011, this complex morphed into the prime driver of politics, pushing into second place the struggle one must have with oneself, with one's own inadequacies, and one's own home-grown tyrants. Upon this foundation murderous *mukhabarati* states[12] like Saddam Hussein's Iraq and the Assad's Syria legitimated themselves, and the political realm was conceded to previously marginal transnational millenarian zealots.

In the Arab Mashriq the inherent unreasonableness of a "politics of defeat" has fueled the full-scale conflagrations of today. Our post-1967 world had been defeated over and over again since that original watershed moment. It was torn apart by wars and self-inflicted violence, which in tiny Lebanon alone killed or maimed half a million people and made refugees of one in every three Lebanese between 1975 and 1989. Here was the dress rehearsal for what took place in Iraq in the wake of its 1991 *intifada*, and what has been going on in Syria for at least five years. The eight-year long Iran-Iraq War killed more people than all of the Arab-Israeli wars, Palestinian *intifadas*, and Israeli incursions into Gaza and Lebanon put together. Its effect on the countries that waged it was no less than that of World War I on, say, France or Germany. The situation is always getting worse; it never stabilizes. If what is left of the Arab world today is a basket case of collapsing economies and mass unemployment underpinned by either anarchy or ever more repressive and unstable regimes, my point is that toxic ways of thinking about politics made it so.

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[12] "*Mukhabarat*" is the Arabic word for "intelligence," as in "intelligence agency." A *mukhabarati* state is a state whose intelligence services constitute its most powerful and prominent bureaucracy.

Our failures were driven initially by intellectuals—people like myself and of my generation: writers, professors, journalists, public intellectuals and activists, and upper-echelon civil servants—people who, with a few exceptions, failed to examine and take on their region's most paranoid fantasies. If anything, we buttressed them by becoming propagandists for political parties and armed struggle organizations, and by refusing in general to break out of destructive nationalist or "culturally specific" religious and nationalist identity paradigms. Instead, my generation consistently acted as "rejectionist" critics, who when they would take on their own regimes did so in order to excoriate them for being insufficiently anti-Zionist or anti-imperialist. Lost in all of this was the difficult work needed to create from within a modern, rights-based, and above all "self-critical" political order.

In the absence of that alternative focus, in the thick of all that endlessly self-pitying rhetoric, is it any wonder that our self-defeated Arab world would produce despairing young middle-class individuals who gravitated toward apocalyptically violent forms of political expression aimed at smiting a now wholly demonized Other? Muhammad Atta and Ziad Jarrah, who flew planes into the World Trade Center towers, paid the price that previous generations shaped by the great *hazima* of 1967, above all mine, were unwilling (or fortunate enough, depending on your point of view, not to have) to pay.