

**ARAB LIBERALS' PERSPECTIVES ON THE ARAB SPRING (2):  
ADONIS AND SADIQ JALAL AL-'AZM:  
JOINT STRUGGLE SHATTERED BY SECTARIANISM  
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**Introduction**

The Arab Spring has assumed alternate shapes in different Middle Eastern countries. In Syria, the March 2011 demonstrations that erupted in Daraa and gradually spread nationwide were violently suppressed. This hastened their transformation into a heavily-sectarian armed conflict, which served as a magnet for militias and individual volunteers from the world over.

The war wreaked havoc upon Syria's social fabric. The hostilities in the battlefield reverberated in liberal circles, and were manifest in altercations among liberal intellectuals in the Arab press and electronic media. Even the secular were dragged into Syria's sectarian whirlpool. Syrian scholars, who had cooperated in the struggle to deliver their country from its sordid Baathist ignominy into a modern and liberal future, became bitter antagonists.

**From Spring To Spring – Syria In The 2000's**

Against all odds, the seemingly immutable and ideologically dogmatic Syria turned out to be the cradle of change in the Middle East, more than a decade before it was engulfed by civil war. In 2000, following the death of Hafez Al-Assad, president for 29 years, Syrian thinkers, businessmen, and community leaders embarked on what became known as the Damascus Spring – loosely organized, yet socially contagious, intellectual activity, that defied the political, social, and economic stagnation associated with the late ruler. Of the hundreds of Syrian intellectuals involved in this activity, the two most familiar to Westerners were poet Ali Ahmad Said Esber, more widely known by his nom de plume Adonis, and philosopher Sadiq Jalal Al-'Azm.

A decade later, however, the renowned poet and the award-winning professor of modern European philosophy found themselves at odds with one another; the shared struggle for democracy and liberties was marred by profound animosity engendered by their conflicting interpretations of the Syrian revolution and, perhaps, by their different sectarian origins.

When Bashar Al-Assad assumed the presidency in 2000, he tried to brand himself as an agent of modernity and economic reforms. The new president aspired to model Syria after China—hoping to boost Syria economically while avoiding fundamental changes into Syrian politics—rather than after post-Soviet Russia, which Bashar considered a victim of excessive political reform and scant economic development. Above all, Bashar was hailed by the Syrian media as an IT expert intent on ushering his country into the age of the Internet. When the presidency was, for all intents and purposes, bequeathed from father to son—in a state purporting to be a republic—liberal columnists throughout the Arab world responded with scorn. Egyptian sociologist Professor Saad Eddin Ibrahim, Director of the Ibn Khaldun Center for Development Studies, coined the portmanteau jumlukiyya – an amalgamation of the Arabic words jumhuriyya ("republic") and malakiyya ("monarchy").[1] It was widely

believed in Arab political circles that the Syrian model would be emulated in Mubarak's Egypt, Qadhafi's Libya, and Saddam Hussein's Iraq, and perhaps in other countries as well. Ultimately, however, Saddam was removed by international intervention, Mubarak by the Arab Spring, and Qadhafi by a combination of both, before they could transfer power to their sons.

But in Damascus of 2000, Syrian intellectuals were not discouraged by their Arab peers' disdain for the changing of the guard within the Al-Assad family. They viewed the replacement of Hafez Al-Assad by his ostensibly modern son as an opportunity, and they decided to take their chances. They challenged the new president, waiting to see if he was any different from his father. It turned out that he was – at least for a while. Immediately after Bashar assumed office, many intellectual gatherings, called "clubs" or "salons," were formed in private homes around the Syrian capital. In these gatherings, the political, economic, and social conditions in Syria were freely discussed.

When the anticipated crackdown did not materialize, the activists were emboldened, and in September 2000, the "Manifesto of the 99" was published. Adonis and Sadiq Jalal Al-'Azm were among the 99 scholars who signed this proclamation, petitioning President Bashar Al-Assad to take several measures: to end the state of emergency and martial law, to pardon political prisoners, to allow Syrian exiles a safe return, and to instate political liberties. Addressing Al-Assad's intention to exclude political reforms from the equation of change, the Manifesto of 99 emphasized that "Any reform, whether economic, administrative, or constitutional, will not bring harmony and stability to the country unless it is accompanied by political reform." [2]

The Manifesto of the 99 was published in the Saudi-owned London daily Al-Hayat, and was all but ignored by the Syrian media. Both the liberals and the authorities found themselves in uncharted waters, not knowing how this would play out. At first, liberal pressure appeared to be working. The Syrian president decided to shut down Mezzeh Prison, notorious for torture and human rights violations in his father's era. In January 2001, a second manifesto was published, this time signed by 1,000 Syrian intellectuals. The epidemic of free speech was spreading, and Bashar decided that he had had enough. The secret police was sent in to deal with the intellectuals.

Notable figures in the Damascus Spring movement were arrested and sentenced to up to 10 years imprisonment, and the salons were shut down. The 2001 crackdown on the Damascus Spring, along with Bashar's conduct during Pope John Paul II's visit to Syria in May of that year—when the Syrian president made blatant antisemitic statements and reportedly demanded a Western apology for the Crusades—smothered the hopes that the West had pinned on him. Despite repeated efforts at rapprochement by European leaders, Bashar's relations with the West throughout the decade were strained and marked by mutual antagonism.

In the years to follow, several attempts were made to jumpstart the liberal momentum of the Damascus Spring,[3] but all the efforts were met with a swift crackdown by the regime. In the following decade, the Syrian revolution would be led by a new generation and by new forces. Although Riad Seif[4] and several

other leading Damascus Spring figures were involved in the efforts to unite the ever-more-divided opposition to Bashar Al-Assad, the liberal intellectuals found themselves taking a back seat to the now dominant Islamist militants.

### **Contrasting Perspectives On The Arab Spring**

Adonis and Sadiq Jalal Al-'Azm have offered contrasting interpretations of the Arab Spring in general and of the Syrian revolution in particular. Al-'Azm believes that the Arab Spring has picked up from exactly where the Damascus Spring was stopped. Therefore, the Damascus Spring could be seen as "a theoretical rehearsal" for the Arab Spring. All the slogans of the Arab Spring revolutions were voiced a decade earlier in Damascus, and had the regime acquiesced to some of these demands, the course of history may have been different. [5]The Damascus Spring provided a safety valve of sorts, Al-'Azm explains, by relieving some of the pent-up political, social, and sectarian tensions that had festered in Syria for more than half a century. However, the regime could not tolerate even this modicum of freedom and preferred to allow the pressure to build, until it ultimately exploded in the Arab Spring.[6]

Professor 'Al-Azm, a somewhat passive member of the National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces, believes that the Syrian revolution has brought historical justice—or historical revenge—upon those who suppressed the Damascus Spring. The Syrian intelligentsia, the driving force behind the Damascus Spring, has been playing second fiddle to the fighting forces in the Syrian revolution, and Al-'Azm feels entirely comfortable with that. The revolution, which erupted spontaneously, does not need elitist Damascus Spring-style intellectuals for leaders, he believes. The intellectuals should place themselves at the service of the revolutionary forces operating on the ground, and not vice versa.[7]

Adonis, on the other hand, believes that the Syrian revolution has been entirely derailed from the liberal track outlined by the Damascus Spring. To his mind, the Syrian crisis offers nothing but bad alternatives, as it boils down to a clash of illegitimacies—the illegitimacy of the Baathist Al-Assad regime versus the illegitimacy of a violent, dogmatic, and essentially Sunni Islamist uprising. However, as the weeks, months, and years passed by, with the casualty toll soaring exponentially, Adonis began to focus on the illegitimacy of the opposition. True, he continued to call for President Al-Assad's resignation. "In my opinion," he said in a 2012 TV interview, "the president should step down, for moral reasons. One cannot continue to rule against the backdrop of blood and body parts. From the moral perspective the president's role is over." [8] However, on several occasions Adonis stressed his concern that if successful, the opposition to the Al-Assad regime would replace it with a similar or even worse rule that would further suppress liberties.

Adonis refuses to call the Syrian insurgency a "revolution," and insists upon categorizing it as an "Intifada," or "revolt." "We can give rise to a nicer president, but the real question is whether we are capable of building a new society," he said.[9]Adonis argues that Libya is a case in point. The whole world supported the removal of Qadhafi, but the result is a catastrophe: "We killed one beast and turned Libya into a jungle of beasts." [10]

He pins very little hope on the Syrian revolution—or any of the Arab Spring revolutions for that matter—producing profound social change; consequently, while he gives the Arab Spring a "thumbs up" for spontaneity, he deems it unworthy of support: "We have not read a single communiqué by the leaders of the modern Arab intifadas calling for separation of religion and state or for granting women their full rights. The rebels themselves play a religious game, because their goal, so it seems, is to attain power rather than to build a new society." [11]

#### **Adonis: A Bleak Vision Of The Arab World's Future**

Adonis' skepticism towards the Arab Spring is rooted in his disenchantment with the ideologies that have dominated the Arab world in the 20th century. For years, he has been concerned with the decline of the Arab world, which he believes was expedited by religious ideologies—some in secular guise. Thus, while Arab democratization requires, a priori, the separation of religion and state, that in itself is not enough: religion must become, once again, a personal experience, rather than a group-ideology encompassing the entire society. "The preconditions for democracy do not exist in Arab society, and cannot exist unless religion is reexamined in a new and accurate way, and unless religion becomes a personal and spiritual experience," he explained in a 2006 TV interview. [12] His conclusion is a cataclysmic one:

"If I look at the Arabs, with all their resources and great capacities, and I compare what they have achieved over the past century with what others have achieved in that period, I would have to say that we Arabs are in a phase of extinction, in the sense that we have no creative presence in the world... We have become extinct. We have the quantity. We have the masses of people, but a people becomes extinct when it no longer has a creative capacity, and the capacity to change its world..."

"The great Sumerians became extinct, the great Greeks became extinct, and the Pharaohs became extinct. The clearest sign of this extinction is when we intellectuals continue to think in the context of this extinction... We are facing a new world, with ideas that no longer exist, and in a context that is obsolete." [13]

Adonis has been critical both of the revolutionary pan-Arab ideologies and of political Islam. He believes that the ideologies of all Arab political parties, including ostensibly secular ones like the Baath, have become religious ideologies because "they relied on the methodology of religious ideology and have done nothing to separate religion and state." [14]

The proponents of pan-Arabism have always described their military coups as revolutions, "yet some of the rebellious movements, in their reliance on the text, were more stagnant than those they wanted to overthrow," Adonis explained in 1997. [15] The ultra-nationalist pan-Arab ideologies have alienated the public from the concept of a "nation" and replaced it with the notion of a regime, he said. Thus, Adonis explains, in the tyrannical circumstances of the Arab world, a person develops a relationship with the regime, not with his country. [16] The pan-Arab "revolutions" of the 20th century have also failed colossally as a vehicle of liberation. "Arab society is based on many types of invisible slavery, and the ideology and political rule conceals them with worthless slogans and

political discourse," he contended. "The infrastructure of Arab societies is a structure of slavery, not of liberty." [17]

Adonis made his disenchantment with Baathist ideology and the Arab revolutionary movements clear in an interview with Al-Arabiya TV in April 2011, when the first demonstrations in Syria broke out:

"For the past fifty years, at the very least, the Arabs have been calling for revolution, for reform, for progress, for liberation from colonialism, and so on, but the outcome of these fifty years, as we all know, is catastrophes and regression on all levels. In the name of unity, we have been torn to shreds, in the name of liberty, our countries have been turned into prisons, and in the name of socialism and pan-Arabism, we have been driven to poverty and homelessness." [18]

Despite his highly critical analysis, it was the Arab Spring itself that cracked Adonis' pessimism. "The beginning of the Arab Spring was brilliant, especially in Egypt's Tahrir Square," he said, "I believe that this beginning will remain deeply-rooted, and the day will come when it will manifest itself in a democratic way, which respects human beings and their rights." [19]

Adonis models his liberal vision for the Arab world on Europe's secularization process. He believes that the separation of religion and state in Europe rectified the mistake of medieval clerical rule, but in the Islamic world, which has not undergone a similar process, political rule continues to rely on religion. [20] "As long as the religious perspective has prevalence in society – in its institutions, its culture, its law, and its legislation – we will not be able to attain democracy or build a civil society," says Adonis. [21]

In his view, the interpretation of Islamic texts by the 20th-century proponents of the Islamic Awakening movement is detached from true Islam—the Islam of individual worship—and has led to nothing but violence and infringement upon the rights of women and minorities. "I had hoped that there would be an Islamic awakening in the humanistic sense, that there would be a reexamination of Islam, and that Islam would take part in the building of today's world," he said on one occasion, "but the entire 'Islamic awakening' of today is based on violence, killing, and terrorism..." [22]

Adonis has always emphasized that he does not oppose religion itself, but opposes the modern interpretation of religion adopted by the Islamic Awakening movement. This interpretation obscures the original text to the point that it is nearly impossible to distinguish between text and interpretation: "We always back up anything we say with a quotation from our ancient predecessors instead of a quotation from research," he said. "But who were those ancient predecessors? They said what they said in the context of their reality. Some of them were great people who should inspire us, but cannot serve as a source of authority of any kind." [23]

Adonis, who emphasizes women's liberation as a pivotal element in any liberal reform in the Arab world, supported the French ban on wearing the veil in public places, stating that the veil and other religious symbols belong in the mosque and not in public places, where they represent "an assault on common values." [24]

In October 2008, his secularist notions set him on a collision course with the proponents of political Islam. During a lecture at the National Library of Algeria,[25] he called upon Muslims "to completely divorce their religious heritage and adopt a modern mindset, which rejects the sanctification of the principles that Islam holds sacred." Adonis added that "according to the Quran, a woman does not have legal personhood. She is not free and is not responsible for her own fate—she serves as a vessel for satisfying man's desires."

The lecture infuriated Algerian Islamists. Abderrahmane Chibane, Algerian Ulama Association chairman and former religious affairs minister, described Adonis as a "rebellious apostate poet." [26] Even Algerian President Abdelaziz Bouteflika found it necessary to declare that he was not responsible for the "ideological deterioration that occurred at the lecture of the Syrian poet Adonis." [27]

It seems, however, that the only criticism that Adonis took to heart was that made by Culture Minister Khalida Toumi, a former leader of the struggle for women's rights in Algeria. Toumi sacked novelist Amin Zaoui from his position as director of the National Library of Algeria, and in a press conference, justified the barrage of criticism against the Syrian poet, saying that it "reflected the outrage of Algerian society at the insult to its faith and its character." [28]

In Adonis's view, Minister Toumi's conduct demonstrated that the social revolution in the Arab world had atrophied. "This radical assault on the freedom of culture," he wrote, "comes from a woman, Khalida Toumi, in the name of culture and on the grounds of my dangerous 'ideological deterioration'." That woman would never have attained the position of culture minister were it not for the notions of liberation and progress promoted by the Algerian revolution... Her attitude is further proof that the Arab revolution – to which millions aspired and for which millions spilled their blood – has in some countries evolved into a regime that undermines its own principles and places new chains upon the people." [29]

#### **On The Violence Of The Revolution**

Adonis strongly disapproves of the violent means employed by the Syrian rebels, "who try to topple the regime using its own methods," and he believes that violence corrupts the revolution. [30] "A revolution should embrace and love the others, and push them a step forward. It is not about killing and destruction," he said in a France 24 TV interview. "A revolution should not respond to violence with violence. It should respond with a deeper struggle, stronger love, and protection of public property and national treasures. This should be the revolution's response to injustice and tyranny." [31]

This logic is rejected by Professor Al-'Azm, who argues that violence does not render the revolution illegitimate. "History shows that only rarely were revolutions conducted by peaceful means," he told the same French TV channel. "Violence is part of the nature of the revolution." [32]

Like other liberal supporters of the revolution, Professor Al-'Azm struggles to explain how a revolution commanded by Al-Qaeda could still evolve into a democracy sometime in the foreseeable future. He draws a distinction between

wartime revolution and post-war rebuilding of the state. Although Al-Qaeda and its derivatives are dominating the battlefield and have repeatedly affirmed their intention to build an Islamic caliphate in post-revolution Syria, Al-'Azm believes that they are unlikely to succeed. Al-Qaeda is made up of "wandering Jihadists," he explains.[33] They move from one place to another, from one war to another. They flourish in time of war, but once the war is over, they move on. Al-Qaeda represents "high-voltage Islam," which appeals to people who have been harmed and is typical of times of war. Its life expectancy, however, is short: once the war is over, people are bound to return to the "spontaneous Islam" upon which they were raised. Al-'Azm draws confidence from the opposition to post-revolutionary Islamist rule in Egypt and Tunisia. Although history offers "no absolute guarantees,"[34] Al-'Azm views these developments as evidence that the rise of the Islamists is not irrevocable.

#### **The Debate On Foreign Intervention In The Syrian War**

The removal of the Qadhafi regime by foreign intervention and President Obama's August 2012 threat that any use of chemical weapons by the Syrian regime would be considered crossing a "red line," and would change his "calculus" regarding military American involvement in Syria, have intensified the debate on foreign intervention among Syrian intellectuals.

Adonis opposes foreign intervention. He believes that a real revolution "cannot take place in a medieval society, like Arab society,"[35] and that therefore, the Syrian uprising will fail to generate the desired social change. His recipe for successfully revolutionizing a "medieval society" consists of three conditions: 1) the secularization of society, without which there can be no justice, freedom, or equality; 2) the liberation of women from the shackles of religious law; and 3) strict avoidance of foreign intervention, in a revolution or in any other circumstances. In his view, the Syrian uprising does not meet any of these conditions; most rebels demand foreign intervention, but have very little interest in secularization or women's liberation.[36]

Adonis objects to foreign intervention on principle, not only with regard to the Syrian crisis. No leading liberal Arab intellectual has rejected foreign intervention more unequivocally than the Syrian poet. Adonis contends that foreign intervention may replace a leader, but it cannot transform society: "If the Arabs are so inept that they cannot be democratic by themselves, they can never be democratic through the intervention of others." [37]

When, in February 2014, French President François Hollande declared that the ratification of the post-revolution constitution in Tunisia "affirmed that Islam is completely in line with democracy," Adonis viewed this as a sign that the Western powers were siding with the reactionary forces in Arab society. "Hollande does not know Islam," Adonis said, "but this makes me wonder whether the West adopts a policy of disdain for Islam and for the Arabs, and would rather keep them in their current condition. If they really wanted to change the Arab world, they would ally themselves with the progressive Arab forces." [38]

It seems that more than anything else that Adonis ever said or wrote about the Syrian revolution, it was his comments about foreign intervention that led many

to regard him as a fiend incarnate, rather than a mere adversary. On a Dubai TV interview—aired in March 2013, three days after the "Friday of Immediate Foreign Intervention" declared by the opposition— Adonis stated: "Even if the public demands foreign intervention, I personally am against it... I am against military intervention of any kind and for whatever pretext or reason. If the people are not capable of making the sacrifices necessary to change the regime, then the change is meaningless." TV host Zina Yazji, a Syrian herself, was appalled. "You expect the people to suffer even more casualties"?" she asked. "Absolutely," Adonis snapped back. "A revolution cannot be completed in a day or two, with only one or two deaths." [39]

A whole year into the uprising, with the casualty toll measured in scores of thousands, the poet's poor choice of words seemed cold and heartless. "It will be difficult for the public to hear you say such a thing, when you are far away in Paris," Yazji warned. But Adonis did not flinch: "Madam, it's okay if they curse me. I must say the truth." [40]

#### **Open Letters To Bashar And The Opposition**

But as it turned out, Adonis was not entirely immune to the horrors of the civil war. About a year after his appearance on the Yazji show, he sounded shocked and appalled when the Al-Qaeda-affiliated Jabhat Al-Nusra beheaded the statue of the 11th-century poet and philosopher Abu Al-Alaa Al-Ma'arri in Maarat Al-Nu'man, south of Aleppo.

Headless bust of poet (image: [bancaynegocios.com](http://bancaynegocios.com))

"The intellectuals associated with the revolution did not denounce this... The decapitation of a statue is very symbolic. It means the decapitation of thought, the decapitation of freedom, the decapitation of democracy, the decapitation of the human being," Adonis said. [41] Adonis's shock at the "very symbolic" beheading of a statue only makes his seemingly apathetic reaction on the Yazji show to the loss of human lives all the more inexplicable.

Adonis's approach is somewhat elitist. He believes that the Arab masses, which prefer to cling to ironfisted, undemocratic ideologies rather than deal with the complex uncertainties of liberty, are responsible for the chasm between them and the Arab elites: "If we are slaves, we can be content and not have to deal with anything. Just as Allah solves all our problems, the dictator will solve all our problems." [42]

It seems that Adonis favors the Damascus Spring modus operandi of signing petitions and appealing to the regime to reform itself over the violent attempts to get rid of the regime when these pleas are ignored. Thus, in June 2011, Adonis resorted once again to an appeal to the Syrian president to lead the reforms. Unlike the Damascus Spring petitions, this call was not signed by 1,000 or 99 intellectuals, but was issued by Adonis alone.

Addressing the Syrian president in an open letter published in the press, [43] he called upon Bashar Al-Assad to lead a constitutional transformation that would sever the Gordian knot tying the Baath Party to political rule in the country and develop a mechanism that would make political rule available to all. Adonis made it clear that this constitutional change should be Bashar Al-Assad's last action before free elections were held: "It seems that it is your destiny to redeem

the errors of the [Baath] experiment, and send the decision back to the people," he wrote to the "elected president," suggesting that Al-Assad relinquish power and, in return, enter the annals of history. "Rest assured that your foes themselves, as well as your friends, will then say that you laid the foundations for a new political phase in Syria's history, and maybe even in the history of the entire Arab region," wrote Adonis, in a somewhat sycophantic tone.[44]

About a month after his letter to President Al-Assad, Adonis penned another public letter, this time addressed to the Syrian opposition. In this discouraging message, he recalled that all the Arab coups and revolutions of the 20th century claimed to be acting in the name of freedom and democracy, but begot nothing but slavery and tyranny.[45]

#### **The Haunting Ghosts Of 1979**

The Yazji show has turned into a venue for the dual between Adonis and Al-'Azm, who exchanged allegations of collaboration with the Al-Assad regime over the years. Adonis accused Al-'Azm of benefitting from the Baath party;[46] Al-'Azm, who was Yazji's guest on her show some three months after Adonis's appearance, responded that all he had done was accept a nomination to the position of a Damascus University lecturer and that throughout his university tenure, he had not even owned a car. When Yazji reminded Al-'Azm that Adonis had been blacklisted by the regime and expelled from the Damascus-based Arab Writers Union in January 1995, Al-'Azm retorted: "Whoever joins a union like that deserves to be expelled from it. Adonis should have had more sense than to join such a union." [47]

Professor Al-'Azm's most salient argument, however, was that Adonis was acting out of sectarian motives. Like the Al-Assads, Adonis belongs to the Alawite minority, and Al-'Azm claimed that this was not the first time that the secular poet's Shiite origins had been awakened. In his Dubai TV interview and on several other occasions,[48] Professor Al-'Azm accused Adonis of supporting the Iranian Ayatollahs during the 1979 Islamic revolution against the Shah. Indeed, in 1979, many in the Arab left had supported the Iranian revolution, including Sadiq Jalal Al-'Azm, as he himself admits: "The important thing is to stand by the revolution of the people against tyranny and oppression, regardless of whence the popular revolutionary momentum emerges." [49] According to Al-'Azm, however, Adonis' support for the Iranian revolution exceeded the general backing of the Arab intelligentsia for a revolution against a dictator. Allegedly, Adonis went as far as to support the Rule of the Jurisprudent, the constitutional cornerstone of the Iranian revolution that grants the supreme religious leader authority overriding that of the entire political process.[50] Al-'Azm repeated his accusations in an Al-Hayat interview, in which he said that Adonis defended the Rule of the Jurisprudent "in an entirely medieval language, as if he were a cleric or an Islamic jurisprudent himself." [51] In addition, Al-'Azm accused Adonis of remaining silent when Ayatollah Khomeini issued the fatwa against Salman Rushdie.

On the other hand, Al-'Azm says that Adonis "stutters, stammers, falters, and speaks vaguely and passively" when it comes to the Syrian revolution.[52] Adonis and others have supported many revolutions, he added, but refuse to

stand by the revolution of the Syrian people, under the pretext that the demonstrations emerge from the mosques "and not from the opera house or national theater." [53] Al-'Azm himself marshals an impeccable revolutionary record. How could he, who supported the Iranian revolution against the Shah and the revolutions against the South American dictators, possibly do anything other than support the revolution of his own Syrian people against a regime "more tyrannical, murderous, and destructive than Somoza, Pinochet, the Argentinean junta, and the Shah of Iran put together?!" [54]

It seems that by now, Adonis has lost his appetite for this mutual bickering. In this intellectual dual, Professor Al-'Azm was the last one left standing—or at least, the last man left standing. To the rescue came Adonis' wife, film critic and columnist Khalida Said. She accused Professor Al-'Azm of being "obsessed" with her husband. She wrote in a column in Al-Hayat that although her husband has chosen not to respond, one cannot remain silent when accused of sectarianism. She made obvious efforts to defend her husband without stooping to personal slurs, but could not resist the temptation of recalling that Damascus University had arranged a special course to allow Al-'Azm to complete his M.A. degree, so that he would qualify to teach there. [55]

Said rejected Al-'Azm's claim that her husband supported the Rule of the Jurisprudent, and protested that similar accusations had reached the committee deliberating the Nobel Prize in Literature. She claimed that her husband's support for the Iranian revolution in its early stages was consonant with the position of the Arab left and of Western intellectuals and philosophers, all the way to Michel Foucault himself. Nevertheless, she admitted that Adonis was "too optimistic and too quick to judge" the Iranian revolution. [56]

With regard to the allegation that her husband had failed to defend Salman Rushdie, Said wrote that "all he could possibly have done was to publish in the Mawaqif journal an Arabic translation of what Rushdie wrote in his own defense, but the laborers at the printing house refused to clear the text for print." [57] Al-'Azm was quick to reject this last, somewhat lame, argument, pointing out that Adonis could have found another venue to publish his own defense of Rushdie or could have gone to another printing house, whose laborers were not supportive of the Ayatollahs. [58]

Months later, while promoting his new book, *Printemps Arabes: Religion et Révolution*, Adonis said that "what is happening today in the Arab countries cannot be compared with the Iranian revolution." He explained that he supported the Khomeini revolution when it was "a revolution against imperialism," but he did not support the religious regime and state that emerged from it. [59]

### **Conclusion**

When it was becoming clear that the Arab Spring was not the highway to liberalization that many had hoped for, Syrian liberals, like their peers across the Middle East, were presented with a tough choice: a military-backed, non-democratic regime or an Islamic rule striving to instate shari'a law.

Adonis and Professor Al-'Azm have presented conflicting interpretations of the Syrian crisis. Adonis emphasizes the ideological nature of the conflict. The initial

innocent revolt of the Syrian youth was hijacked by an extremist Islamism that strives to render Syrian society more medieval and less secular. In his view, fending off radical Islam should take precedence over ousting the non-democratic Assad regime. As Syria was being deflected from the liberal vision espoused by Adonis, the poet began to believe that the uprising should be brought to an end, to allow a liberal society and state to develop in the more distant future.

Professor Al-'Azm considers the Assad regime's ouster to be the first step towards a future liberal democracy. In his view, fears that the Islamists would take over Syria are understandable but unjustified, as evident in the anti-Muslim Brotherhood backlash in Egypt and Tunisia. In Al-'Azm's view, the conflict is essentially sectarian rather than ideological. He refuses to term the war in Syria a civil war, preferring to view it as "a highly-militarized minoritarian regime, dependent upon a strong form of sectarian solidarity, which has a lot to lose if they are out of power... suppressing the revolt of the numerical majority, which is Sunni." [60]

Did Adonis' Alawite origins play any role in the formation of his opinion about the Syrian revolution and the Arab Spring in general? It is safe to assume that it did, but not in the sense implied by Professor Al-'Azm. Adonis is far from being a Shiite fanatic and has no interest in cementing Alawite minority rule in Syria. True, he was born into an Alawite family, but, as he himself says, "nobody gets to choose whether to be born a Sunni or a Shiite." [61]

Yet it would be naïve to assume that Adonis is blind to the genocidal depths to which the war in Syria could yet plunge. Professor Al-'Azm said in one interview that he was "truly amazed" how the Sunni majority had refrained from attacking Alawite villages "on the popular level," even though there were lists of villages from which Alawite militias had allegedly set out to launch massacres. [62] Adonis and other liberal Shiite intellectuals could draw little comfort from such Rwanda-esque descriptions.

Thus, sectarian considerations have further complicated for Syrian liberals the choice between the two illegitimacies that has confounded liberals across the Middle East. Hopes that Arab liberals could rise above the sectarian and religious animosities that characterize the post-Arab Spring reactionary age have turned into illusions. With the leading champions of a modern and liberal Syria at each other's throats, the vision for which they have been fighting seems beyond reach in the foreseeable future.

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