



The Current State of Arab Culture

In this, Dr. Faysal Darraj analyses the effects of the June 1967 defeat and the ensuing developments, including the oil boom, on Arab thought and literature.

From the beginning of national independence up to the June 1967 defeat, the Arab East (Mashreq) witnessed a great rise in both nationalist and Marxist ideologies. Both defended a set of comprehensive positive values, looking forward to the realization of a new Arab society. The nationalist ideology called for Arab unity, social progress, liberation from colonialism, restoration of ancient Arab glory, assimilating positive aspects of European civilization, defense of science, etc. The Marxist ideology raised the slogans of liberation of both the individual and society, comprehensive social justice, unity of human thought, etc. In both cases, rationalism occupied a dominant position. The nationalist ideology gave priority to national identity as compared to religious identity, consequently defending a civil, secular society. The Marxist ideology fought metaphysics, and defended the principles of social development, the interaction of civilizations, etc. It glorified reason, and struggled for the politicization of the masses and democracy in word and deed.

In spite of the complete historical failure of these two ideologies for many reasons that cannot be listed here, their progressive character becomes clear when we look at the currently dominant ideas. Twenty years after the defeat, confessionalism has flourished and religious fanaticism has increased, while the concept of civil society has been waning. In addition to all its other results, the June defeat resulted in the defeat of Arab rationalism and the victory of various obscurant trends.

THE CRISIS OF ARAB THOUGHT

The June war led to the defeat of the political forces which stood for progress, humanist culture, rationalism, etc. Theoretically, it was essential that the defeated forces make self-criticism. However, their historical fragility prevented them from doing so; hence, the continuation and ever-growing magnitude of the defeat; and hence the fact that Arabs have started to look for an ideological alternative, or to withdraw in protest against the ideological trends which had risen before the defeat. In both cases, religion seemed to be the sole way out for a great part of Arab society. In such conditions, religion carried a multitude of different meanings according to the social forces which adopted it. Some found it an individual solution or a kind of protest against the failure of both capitalism and socialism. Others used religion to face the alienation they suffered in their daily life or took it as a cultural weapon to resist the European style of life. Still others resorted to a kind of political religion, considering Islam a method to build a new society based on Islamic ideals and concepts.

Although defeat has contributed to the creation of the objective conditions of a new revival of religion, this revival would have been impossible without the oil boom, especially in Saudi Arabia. This spread into many Arab countries, managing to dominate a great part of the ideological machinery which produces social consciousness, from the astounding increase in the number of mosques, to the audiovisual mass media and the establishment of publishing houses, newspapers, magazines, research centers etc. This has succeeded in creating a new cultural atmosphere, divorced from the actual problems of reality and even capable of pushing them away. Thus, the phenomenon of disguising the actual problem, while celebrating the delusive ones, has become the principal characteristic of the oil culture which is, in fact, the dominant Arab culture. Even when the real problems are approached, the solutions remain illusive.

The essential character of the prevailing Arab culture is not manifested in political allegiance or a partisan position, but in a series of ideological stereotypes which fight the defeat from defeated positions. Such stereotypes never criticize the thinking that prevailed before June 1967 in order to develop it, but in order to prove its complete failure, thereby resorting to ideas more backward than those of the Arab renaissance of a century before. Looking at the subjects taken up by Arab thought in its best known and most effective types, one sees how confused and impotent it is. Dr. Anwar Abdul Melik, an Egyptian Marxist from the fifties, recently wrote about «The Eastern Wind which Defeats that of the West.» He divides the world into East and West, and sees the future of mankind in the East, and its past in the West. The East, in his view, consists of the Arab-Islamic countries, together with China, Japan and the Muslims in the Soviet Union. To achieve the victory of the East, he considers the alliance between the intellectual and the authority necessary, because the latter is blind and without culture, while the former remains disarmed without power.

One of those who inspired the Islamic fundamentalist movement, Hassan Hanafi of Egypt, demands in all of his many books (*Tradition and Renovation, From Faith to Revolution*, etc.) the alliance of inspiration and history, after putting the former above the latter, assigning absolute authority to inspiration and consequently rendering Islam valid for all times and places. Hisotry, in his view, is the religious consciousness of the masses, or religion as perceived by the masses. Ultimately, he arrives at a concept very close to the «mass spirit» which leads to absolute irrationalism in both theory and politics. This irrationalism is clearly revealed in the concept of the «Islamic essence» whereby he believes that the Muslim is the sole one capable of understanding his religion, reality and future. Therefore, Dr. Hanafi rejects Western ►