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On the Influence of the Intellectual in Arab Politics and Policymaking[*]

Michael C. Hudson[**]

One of the distinct dangers the Arab critical movement
runs is mirroring the ivory-tower manner of Western
criticism and its distance from social struggle. This danger
is the more real when we consider the political and
ideological constraints under which critical intellectuals
live in most Arab and Third World countries, so that
faddishness, academicism, abstraction—the ways of
withdrawal from political life—become temptations to
writers and scholars who must protect themselves against
state surveillance as much as against militant
fundamentalism. Thus to distance themselves from the
"lifeworld" of political and ideological violence becomes
the contradictory choice of intellectuals engaged in
cultural criticism in order to change society.

Hisham Sharabi[1]

1. Hisham Sharabi, "The Scholarly Point of View: Politics, Perspective, Paradigm," in *Theory,
Politics and The Arab World: Critical Responses*, ed. Hisham Sharabi. Published in Cooperation
with the Center for Contemporary Arab Studies, Georgetown University (New York and London:
Routledge, 1990), 46.

Michael C. Hudson

Hisham Sharabi, whose distinguished career we celebrate, is a premier example of the "scholar-activist" in the contemporary Arab world. His contributions as intellectual historian, political scientist, sociologist, and philosopher are manifest and important. But instead of commenting on them, important as they are, I would like to reflect upon the role of "the public intellectual" in the contemporary Arab world, concentrating in particular on the question how—or indeed, whether—the public intellectual influences public policy. In what ways is decision-making in the modern Arab state, by the regime that controls it, affected by the Arab intelligentsia? And is the relationship between the intellectual and the state changing: is there any reason to think that the scholar-activist and the public intellectual are gaining influence? To deal with these questions, we need both to identify the "intelligentsia" and also to depict the political and institutional terrain of today's Arab state. I conclude by asking what the history of Hisham Sharabi himself, as a leading Arab public intellectual tells us about the place of the intellectual in Arab politics.

The Arab Intellectual: An Endangered Species?

For Americans the idea of "an intelligentsia"—a self-conscious community of thinkers, superior in knowledge and understanding to the population in general—is less familiar than it might be to Europeans and Arabs. In the United States, where mass education, even to the university level, is more pervasive, and where notions of equality and social mobility are more pronounced, "intelligent" contributors to public debate are found in many places—universities, think tanks, newspapers, television. Expertise rather than intellectualism is the coin of the realm. In matters of public policy, experts are consulted; intellectuals often mistrusted. Professional academics in America often speak only to themselves, and "popularizers"—those whose books sell hundreds of thousands of copies and lecture fees are in the tens of thousands of dollars and higher—speak to the general public. Think tanks, NGOs, special interest groups, and lobbies—not to mention the analysis and intelligence organizations within the government itself—employ large numbers of specialists

who generate weighty research studies on a wide range of public issues, domestic and foreign. Collectively, we sometimes refer to these people as the "opinion-makers," and we think of "public opinion" as a diffuse but tangible element in our public decision-making. In the UK, the term "chattering classes" is often used to describe opinion-makers, but in the US the "chatterers" are not so much a self-conscious class as a sociologically and geographically diverse category. There is a kind of osmosis between the expertise generated in American civil society and the governmental decision-making processes. Many points of access to rich data and analysis resources, combined with a diversity of value perspectives in most areas (but not all—for example, Middle East policy) provide a "knowledge base," at least, for sound policymaking. Even though the results are rarely optimal (depending on one's point of view), we would like to think that over a period of time they are generally satisfactory.

The 22 states (including the Palestinian Authority) that make up the Arab world have a combined population of some 250 million, similar to that of the United States. But what can we say about what Harold Lasswell called "the intelligence function" in the decision-making processes of Arab states? In what ways is it similar or dissimilar to that of the US? Who are the opinion-makers of the Arab world? Are they a "chattering class"? Who listens to them? Do they reach a general public, and does it matter in an authoritarian political environment? And what kind of osmosis, if any, is there between the Arab public intellectuals and the wielders of power in the Arab state? Is there any evidence that these intellectuals influence the ruling circles and affect their policies?

Working from the bottom up, in terms of the "educational stock" from which an opinion-making community might be derived, we must note the constricting effect of underdevelopment in the Arab societies. Male illiteracy in six Arab countries (Egypt, Morocco, Syria, Saudi Arabia, and Yemen) in 1998 ranged from a third or more in Egypt, Yemen, and Morocco to 17 percent in Saudi Arabia, 13 percent in Syria, and 9 percent in Lebanon. Female illiteracy in the same countries ranged between three-quarters and one-third, and 21 percent in Lebanon. In the US and the UK, illiteracy is in single digits for both sexes. If the population of students in post-secondary education is a closer measure of the pool from which opinion-makers are formed, we see that the US is far in the lead with 81 percent of "college-age" young people in tertiary-level education,

while the UK has 52 percent. In comparison, from our six Arab countries Lebanon and Egypt score highest with 27 and 23 percent respectively, followed by Saudi Arabia (16), Syria (15), Morocco (11) and Yemen (4).[2]

Once their education is completed, where do the putative members of the intelligentsia locate themselves in society? How do they support themselves and from what platforms can they launch their views and opinions? In the US, as we have noted, the opinion-makers are to be found in a wide variety of occupations, from universities to professional associations, the media, the think tanks, lobbies, and government itself. In Europe, the base is perhaps narrower, with degrees from a small number of highly selective universities and institutions as a requirement, and an employment base in the state-run educational and research establishment or in the civil service itself, and in "quality" journalism. Through the "high-end" print and television media, opinion-makers in both countries disseminate their views and expertise. And to some extent the major political parties in both countries have their in-house thinkers. I do not have quantitative data on the size or the societal location of the would-be Arab opinion-makers, but I think it is safe to say that the numbers are much smaller and their socioeconomic niches more precarious. For the most part the universities do not seem to produce public intellectuals, although there are a few conspicuous exceptions such as Cairo University, the American universities in Cairo and Beirut, and advanced institutes for public administration in the Maghreb. Arab universities concentrate on the teaching function; but, as Zahlan's studies have shown, they are not vibrant centers for research and scholarly or professional publication. In many of the major Arab cities there are circles of ostensibly non-political cultural producers—novelists, poets, artists, and theater people—who have an impact on the construction of public issues. Professional associations of lawyers, engineers, and doctors are another locale. If Arab intellectuals lack the Weberian formal institutionalized workplaces that their counterparts in the industrial and post-industrial societies have, some of them benefit from an earlier, traditional form of support: the enlightened, wealthy patron. Successful businessmen from Lebanon and Palestine, such as Issam Fares and Abdel-Muhsin Al-Qattan, have underwritten

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2. The World Bank, *World Development Indicators 2000* (Washington, DC: The World Bank, 2000).

the research of universities and experts on various public policy issues. Indeed, certain rulers model themselves as intellectual and cultural patrons on the model of a Medici or a Frederick the Great. For intellectual and cultural patronage, one thinks of His Highness Dr. Sheikh Sultan Bin Mohammed Al Qassimi, the Ruler of Sharjah. Nevertheless, Arab societies seem well behind Europe and America, and perhaps Asia as well, in creating foundations for the encouragement of knowledge and public policy research.

One of the most important nesting places for public intellectuals is journalism. The main centers for relatively free and critical journalism are to be found in just a few places, such as Morocco, Egypt, Lebanon, Kuwait, and Dubai. The journalists, professors, writers, and critics who contribute to the "off-shore" pan-Arab newspaper *Al-Hayat* are of special importance because of the reach of their opinions. Political parties, and the newspapers they publish, are also a place to find critical thinkers with a public orientation: for example, *Al-Ittihad al-Ishtiraki* in Morocco, or *Al-Shura* in Yemen. One thinks also of the debates over Palestine and Arab nationalism that were carried out by various Palestinian political organizations in Lebanon in the 1960s and 1970s. In the same vein, it is important to draw attention to the intense debates over "political Islam" in the last two decades in the pamphlets and books supported by Islamic research institutes and movements. Then we come to the "think-tanks"—to use that peculiarly American terminology for the public policy research institute. In Washington alone, there are probably more think tanks than in the entire Arab world; and it seems strange, given the general socioeconomic level of Arab societies, that there aren't more. To the interested outside observer, at least, there appear to be only a handful, such as the Center for Arab Unity Studies, the Lebanese Center for Policy Studies, the Al-Ahram Center for Economic Studies, the now-defunct Ibn Khaldun Center for Development Studies (Cairo), the center for social science research in Kuwait, the study group associated with *Al-Khalij* newspaper in Dubai, the Arab Thought Forum in Jordan and its namesake in Palestine, along with PASSIA, the Palestinian Society for the Study of International Affairs. Most recently, we have observed how the information technology revolution has made possible potentially significant new venues for the public intellectuals: pan-Arab satellite

television and the Internet. The latter, in particular, would seem to offer remarkable possibilities for intellectual networking.

We turn, finally, to what some might call the pinnacle of the Arab intelligentsia—the "superstars" whose reputations command a devoted following. Certainly, Hisham Sharabi belongs on the short list of public intellectuals whose names are household words among top government officials, politicians, and the opinion-making stratum across the Arab world. Others on such a list (without pretending completeness) might include Adonis, Muhammad Arkoun, Hisham Djait, Sadik Jalal al-Azm, Saad Eddin Ibrahim, Muhammad Abid Jabari, Abdalla Laraoui, Fatima Mernissi, Hussein Mrouah, Edward Said, and Tayyib Tazzini. Among the prominent Islamist intellectuals would be counted Rashid Ghannoushi, Muhammad Shahrour, and Hassan Turabi. In addition, we might designate a few journalistic "heavyweights" like Muhammad Hassanein Heykal of Egypt and Ghassan Tueni of Lebanon. These public intellectuals are the descendants of a thin line of thinkers dating to the nahda. They exert what might be called intellectual charisma. They have created networks of likeminded intellectuals, students, and followers among the highly educated elites. They also, in most cases, bridge the cultural divide between Arab civilization and the West, having studied in the West and interacted with Western intellectuals and intellectual trends. One wonders if some of their legitimacy in Arab educated circles isn't a reflection of their Western experience and reputation. These men and women are "framers" and "constructors" of the Arab intellectual agenda. Their advocacy of national causes like Palestine, Arab unity, social justice, women's rights, democratization, and good governance has gained them many followers.

But the intellectuals also have found adversaries, whose interests have been challenged by their critical analyses. Not surprisingly, these adversaries have included some American critics who have accused them, and the Arab intellectual establishment generally, of leading the Arabs into fruitless and morally dubious confrontations with Israel and American interests in the Middle East. American columnists have accused the Arab intellectuals of betraying their own societies with grandiose and anachronistic national and economic projects, and of improper silence in the face of Arab governmental cruelty.

Granted that the social "base" in the Arab world of literate people, and those with a post-secondary education is proportionally well inferior to advanced industrial societies, the numbers steadily increase. Moreover, the institutional location of an opinion-making stratum, while comparatively limited, is probably expanding as an emerging civil society invests more resources for developing expertise. And the intellectual luminaries, though few in number, appear able to generate a respectful and influential general educated audience, to a greater extent perhaps than is the case with popular intellectuals in the United States. But do the Arab public intellectuals reach and influence the holders of political power?

The Intellectual Environment of the Arab State

At the risk of overgeneralization, I would propose that the Arab regimes are afraid of the Arab intelligentsia. It is no secret that by the standards of America, Europe, and a number of countries in Asia and Africa, Arab states are authoritarian to greater or lesser degree. Decision making in foreign and security affairs as well as economic policy is carried out by leaders with near-absolute power in consultation with small and trusted circles of high officials and political confidants. Certainly, there are differences from one Arab country to another: at one extreme stands Iraq, whose now-deposed tyrannical president appeared to be surrounded by frightened "yes-men" and who therefore was prone to making catastrophic policy mistakes. At the other end of the spectrum is a country like Lebanon, in which the leadership is required by the structure of the political order to access a variety of perspectives. Elsewhere, I have suggested that Arab political systems are "information-averse,"[3] but this is to overstate the case. One could argue to the contrary that Arab regimes are "information-hungry," especially their overdeveloped security and intelligence services. What rulers are averse to is not information as such, but alternative opinions and contestation over policy issues. This is what often makes political opposition and critical journalism such dangerous occupations. When the

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3. Michael C. Hudson, "A 'Pan-Arab Virtual Think Tank': Enriching the Arab Information Environment," *Middle East Journal* 54 (Summer 2000): 362-77.

President of Egypt, a relatively "soft" authoritarian regime, cracks down on an articulate public intellectual like Dr. Saad Eddin Ibrahim, or when opinionated journalists and academics in supposedly liberal states like Lebanon, not to mention less liberal ones like Syria or Yemen, suffer death or injury, the message to the scholar-activists and critical thinkers is clear.

How many of the current Arab heads of state respect or seek counsel from the intelligentsia? Very few from the long-serving older generation do. It is said that some of the new younger kings and presidents in Jordan, Syria, Morocco, Qatar, and Bahrain are ready to allow more access by intellectuals to the decision-making process. Even the most tyrannical regimes in the Arab world are more than one-man shows. As Nazih Ayubi and others have argued, authoritarian rulers have sought to build compliant and predictable corporate constituencies. Admittedly, it is hard to imagine a critical journalist or professor in Iraq even daring to seek the attention of (now-deposed) President Saddam Hussein and his immediate entourage.[4] But in most other Arab countries it is easier to envisage the predicament of the public intellectual: he or she is patriotic and wants to advance the welfare and interests of society and perhaps the larger Arab nation. But how to gain the ear of the leader or the inner circle of power? In the absence of protected public platforms for the expression of political ideas, the best route would seem to be to try and gain access privately to those individuals with access to the inner circle. For most of the intelligentsia, this is an impossible task; only a few will succeed. To attain this objective the intellectual must convey to the intermediary—a key official or relative—that he or she is in fact trustworthy and reputable. This means becoming part of a patronage network, with the implicit agreement that access—ideally in the form of a coveted audience with the king or president himself—tacitly may obligate the intellectual to silence or temper his critique. Access, so scarce, has a price.

According to several scholars (e.g., Ayubi, Norton, Korany)[5] the authoritarian

4. Eric Davis, *Memories of State: Politics, History and Identity in Modern Iraq* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005).

5. Nazih Ayubi, *Over-Stating the Arab State: Politics and Society in the Middle East* (London: I.B. Tauris, 1995); Rex Brynen, Bahgat Korany and Paul Noble (eds.), *Political Liberalization and Democratization in the Arab World*, vol. 1, *Theoretical Perspectives* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 1995); Augustus Richard Norton, "The Future of Civil Society in the Middle East," *Middle East Journal* 47 (Spring 1993): 205–16.

Arab state is gradually retreating in the face of a more expansive and dynamic civil society and the slow growth of the market economy and the private sector. The title of Ayubi's important book on this subject is *Over-stating the Arab State*. Moreover, among the globalization trends so evident since the end of the Cold War is the now-hegemonic ideology of political liberalization. Finally, one might argue that the dire straits Arab governments find themselves in at the beginning of the 21st century will impel their leaders, however feeble their democratic sympathies, to seek advice from the intellectuals about how to cope with stagnant economies, massive unemployment, corruption and inefficiency in governance, and the foreign and security policy challenges presented to the Arab world collectively and Arab countries individually by Israel and the United States. When the Arab opinion-makers can articulate their critical ideas in public forums and not just through private networks, they will have achieved significant progress in their effort to influence the powers-that-be.

Sharabi as an Exemplar of the Arab Public Intellectual

Over a long and distinguished career, Dr. Hisham Sharabi has achieved almost mythic status as a scholar-activist, critic, and conscience of the Arab world. Today he commands large audiences wherever he is invited to lecture. His books in Arabic, including his famous critique of Arab society, *Neo-Patriarchy*, and his political autobiography are, I dare say, well known in official as well as intellectual circles. He has been a man of the secular opposition during his years in the Syrian Social National Party; he has at other times criticized Arab regimes for their lack of unity and subservience to the United States. As a sympathizer with the left wing of the Palestinian resistance movement, he opposed what he considered to be the opportunistic leadership in Fatah and the PLO. Lately, he has championed the cause of women's rights and full participation in public life. He has been both a man of the opposition, and yet later in his career, he has enjoyed access to several heads of state and the innermost ruling circles in many Arab countries. He is the founder of at least one think tank, the Center for Policy Analysis on Palestine (in Washington) and an influential voice in the activities of several others. His voice is also heard, if not often heeded, in American policy

circles. Few intellectuals have been as skilful as he in navigating the complex terrain of Arab politics and even fewer have achieved his level of influence.

How he has managed to accomplish all this is worthy of careful study. From the perspective of a long-time friend and colleague, one might attribute his success to the following factors: a powerful intellect, an articulate voice, an instinctive sense of politics, the ability to network broadly to diverse constituencies, the capacity to generate lasting trust, and a commitment to principles and causes that resonate deeply in Arab society. But how successful has this most successful of Arab public intellectuals been in advancing the causes that he cherishes? This is of course a question that we must ask of Sharabi himself. But in lieu of his response, one might make two observations. First, the Arab situation today appears as bleak as it ever has been. The policy advice he has offered on Palestine and Arab national issues appears to have fallen on deaf ears, at least among the power-holders. But, secondly, it is probable that he has helped raise the social consciousness and frame the national issues for a new generation of opinion-makers; and his influence today is amplified thanks to an invigorated civil society and the new media and information technologies. Much remains to be done, he probably would say, to bridge the gap between the public intellectual and the holders of power.

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Some Tentative Conclusions

• The dilemma of the Arab public intellectual is that in order to be influential he has to join the patronage networks of the officials, thus compromising his role as critical thinker. Unlike his more fortunate Western counterpart, he lacks the legitimate and protected institutional platform from which to disseminate effectively his message. As a critic he finds himself in the company of a political opposition that is generally weak, often extremist, and always suspect in the eyes of the authorities. It is no easy matter to bridge the gap between the opposition and the incumbent power-holders. In the absence of a public sphere bounded and protected by the rule of law, the Arab intellectual must tread cautiously between principle and expediency.

- The authoritarian Arab state, dominated as it generally is by a single chief executive—a president or king—does not appear accessible to the Arab public intellectuals as a category. If a particular head of state is interested in outside opinion or expertise, he is likely to seek it through informal channels. The scholar-activist who can tap into a ruler's inner circle or patronage network might then achieve extraordinary influence, but this would be by virtue of his network connections rather than his intellectual "office."

- The Arab regimes, to the extent that they seek intellectual expertise or opinion, probably favor Western sources over the indigenous intelligentsia. The globalization of a liberal economic and political ideology in the post-colonial, post-industrial, post-bipolar, and post-modern world, combined with almost frictionless communication that collapses boundaries and geographic distance, makes it convenient for Arab governments—and indeed Arab intellectual establishments themselves—to tap into the think tanks of Washington, New York, and London. The economic thinkers behind "the Washington Consensus," for example, are probably invited to consult at the highest levels of Arab governments more frequently than Arab intellectuals or experts. The few active Arab think tanks are eager to bring in foreign lecturers in conjunction with if not in preference to Arab scholar-activists in most areas of public policy, from Gulf security to Arab-Israel conflict resolution to economic reform, gender issues, and even democratization.

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- The influence of the West on Arab intellectual production, as well as most other aspects of Arab society, remains an issue for the Arab public intellectuals. Sharabi himself has devoted considerable attention to the matter. In its crudest formulation, the problem is the extent to which Arab intellectual production is framed by Western paradigms and priorities. Paradoxically, the Arab intellectual community, and especially its top echelons, has been shaped by Western schools and trends, even as it searches for an authentic and distinctive language and syntax, as Sharabi, citing Derrida, puts it.[6] Perhaps, he writes, "a counterdiscourse can perhaps still be constructed."

6. Sharabi, "The Scholarly Point of View," 46-7.

• The Arab public intellectual is gaining influence. With the gradual erosion of authoritarian control, and the powerful platforms created by the new information technologies, the Arab scholar-activist and public intellectual is gaining ground both in terms of framing issues for Arab public opinion and for gaining access to Arab officialdom. Even the most authoritarian regimes increasingly can be penetrated by the thinkers. Look to the children of the ruling elites to convey "from within" the new thinking. Look to an increasingly media-exposed public to absorb and debate what the public intellectuals are saying.

But how valuable and relevant is what are they saying? This is a question that I would not presume to try and answer. But if, as Sharabi has cautioned, they are speaking only in faddish and obscure terms on abstruse philosophic issues intelligible and interesting only to a tiny community of other intellectuals, in Europe or America, they are not likely to engage even the most enlightened Arab despot. The same holds true if they are purveying only simplistic nationalist or religious ideological projects. Obviously, it is important to identify the obstacles to the intellectuals' influence in public affairs that arise from the nature of the authoritarian state itself, but if the intellectual products themselves are intellectually inadequate, that too must be recognized ■

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