Views: From National Liberation to National Colonialism

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The Arab world, both states and political elites, is undergoing a collapse[1] unprecedented since the early twentieth century rise of the modern nation in the region, amidst national liberation from Ottoman then European rule. Most Arab countries are currently governed by ruthless authoritarian regimes while armed militias constitute the de facto authority in several other states. The strongest regional powers—Iran, Israel, and Turkey—vie for influence in the troubled region as the international human rights system continues to ail, straining under double standards and profound erosion of the institutional, legal, and policy frameworks that support it.[2] Russia, China, and Global South countries care little about shoring up the rights system and in fact, some of these countries are actively weakening it.[3] The rise of the extreme right and populist currents in Europe and the United States[4] threatens an even further weakening of the international rights framework.

The Arab Spring was the last serious attempt by the peoples of the region to lift their countries out of the stagnation that has undermined opportunities for economic, political, and social development under the regimes that won national independence in the 1950s. The setback sustained by the Arab Spring also exposed the fragility of non-governing political elites, who exhibited a pathological attachment to the agenda of the national liberation era - now a half-century in the past - at the expense of comprehensive emancipation, including economic advancement, human development, national integration, democracy, and human rights. The magnitude of the nation-state project's failure in the Arab world has perhaps never been clearer. These facts and conditions pose an existential dilemma for the human rights movement in the region, dictating a rigorous review of its strategies, tasks, and priorities and, logically, a re-examination of the course it has pursued over the past decades.

This review should not proceed from the assessment typical of many analyses and academic studies since the late twentieth century, which tend to adopt a broad view of the global human rights movement based on similarly general evaluations. They then propose adjustments to the strategies and working methods of the global human rights movement that are mostly irrelevant to

the nature of the challenges facing the human rights movement in the Arab world (and likely other regions of the world as well). Although I believe in the universality of human rights values and principles, I consider it foolhardy to draw conclusions about the reasons for regression or progress based on an approach that treats the global human rights movement as a single bloc, disregarding the vast array of political, cultural, and social challenges facing wildly diverse human rights organisations and actors. This diversity has implications for the way human rights organisations engage with different and changing environments across time and space and for the formulation of their strategies, priorities, and agendas. Any credible assessment of the human rights movement must therefore proceed from the specific facts on the ground in each region of the world. Accordingly, the ways to develop the human rights movement in the face of these challenges may be entirely different from one region to the next. The challenges facing local and regional groups will most certainly diverge from those facing international human rights organisations—whose geographical scope of operation encompasses all regions of the world—though the latter constitute the starting point for the relevant assessments.

This is my firm conviction, although I recognise the challenges common to international human rights organisations and those whose activity is limited to one country or geographical region. Of course, all these organisations are inspired by the same universal values and principles, make use of the same international instruments to defend human rights, and frequently sign on to joint positions and statements. Nevertheless, from my perspective, the success of human rights organisations depends not on the degree to which they engage in joint or similar tasks in defence of human rights, but rather on the degree of their awareness of the specificity of challenges faced in their region, their ability to develop effective strategies to meet those challenges, and their capacity to formulate sound priorities on this basis. There may be no better geographical space to test this hypothesis than the Arab world—that is, the region of the world most impervious to democratisation and respect for human rights.

In an article for *Rowaq Arabi* earlier this year,[5] I concluded that the root of this imperviousness lies in the 'depth and breadth of Arab authoritarianism's penetration in the Arab political and cultural space', which is more extensive than other authoritarian regimes in Africa and Latin America. In that essay, I promised to continue the discussion in a subsequent article devoted to an analysis of the human rights movement's role in the region. Where has it hit the mark and where has it exacerbated the problem? And what is to be done?

I have no doubt about the dedication of international and Arab human rights organisations. Since Arab organisations first appeared in the mid-1970s, they have criticised Arab governments' violations of human rights with firmness and professionalism and sought to mobilise Arab and international public opinion to exert pressure to end such abuses. They have similarly lobbied the relevant international mechanisms to take appropriate positions and strove to educate the peoples of the region on human rights. Unfortunately, their exhaustive efforts have not improved the human rights situation in the region. In fact, the situation has worsened significantly in most countries of the region over the last decade, despite dozens of new human rights organisations emerging during the Arab Spring and despite human rights violations in many Arab countries

becoming a semi-permanent item on the agenda of UN specialised committees, special rapporteurs, and the Human Rights Council. Committees of inquiry and/or experts have been established for some Arab countries and lasted for years. The US military invasion of Iraq in 2003 failed to deliver the promised improvement, and so have the wide variety of experts appointed by the UN secretary-general and the Human Rights Council, who have assumed rights-related, political, and humanitarian responsibilities for more than a decade in Syria, Libya, Yemen, Iraq, Sudan, and Palestine. Of course, some observers would argue that conditions would have deteriorated further in the absence of these experts.[6]

For nearly half a century, Arab human rights organisations have knocked on virtually every door possible at the UN in Geneva and New York and at the European Union in Brussels and other European capitals, and at meetings of the Euro-Mediterranean partnership between countries of the southern and eastern Mediterranean. They have turned to international and national courts in Europe with universal jurisdiction, engaged with the governments and parliaments of major Western democracies that prioritise human rights and democracy in their foreign policy, and met with ambassadors in Arab capitals. They have similarly addressed governments of the Arab states, the Arab League, the African Union, law enforcement institutions and (where they exist in the Arab world) legislative assemblies about these governments' violations of their citizens' rights. This is exactly what the biggest international human rights organisations do daily in many countries around the world, including in Arab countries. So, what is the problem? I'm afraid that the problem lies in the task itself: while this mission constitutes the bread and butter of international organisations, it is woefully inadequate for many Arab human rights organisations.

The task of international human rights organisations is limited to urging governments to stop violating human rights and to hold those responsible to account. To bolster the momentum of such efforts, they engage with UN instruments as they deem fit, as well as governments with some influence over the government accused of specific human rights abuses. But no one can expect international human rights organisations to also assume the task of mobilising the local public in each country that violates its citizens' rights, to pressure their government to stop violations. This requires formulating a message that accounts for heterogenous political and cultural realities in each country or locale (there are more than 200 countries in the world, including 193 UN member states). International human rights organisations thus consider their statements to international parties to be addressed to both global public opinion and local public opinion in the relevant state. Later, and sometimes immediately depending on the gravity of the case, international media assumes the task of widely disseminating the positions of major international human rights organisations like Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch, making them less legalistic and technical. This is likely to be automatically reflected in prominent Arabic-speaking media, such as Al Jazeera, the BBC, and other outlets.

Many Arab human rights organisations fall short not because they lack global media coverage, but rather because they do not centrally prioritise national and local public opinion in their strategies; a lopsidedness that is reflected in the distribution of human and financial resources for this purpose by human rights organisations operational in the region or outside of it. To varying

degrees, many Arab rights organisations have slipped into the lazy importation of the modus operandi of international human rights organisations, neglecting the task entrusted exclusively to them: namely, engaging local communities and mobilising public opinion to lobby the authorities of Arab states to end violations.[7] This role—whether absent or inadequate—is the sole arena in which national human rights organisations can bring tangible added value to the activity of international human rights organisations.

Do Arab Rights Organisations Engage Their Local Communities?

The technical answer is yes, these organisations do engage their local communities. But does the community receive their message?[8] I do not think it does. Although Arab human rights organisations already circulate their statements to the public in their countries, the fact is that most of these statements are crafted largely for an audience of international human rights instruments, foreign governments, and/or the Arab government accused of violating human rights. Accordingly, the structure, logic, and language of most of these statements are subordinated to the needs of these parties, specifically, to the requirements of the specialised technical-legal document. Mainstreaming this specialised discourse to the general public is unhelpful and at times may be actively harmful. It conveys an indifference to the community addressed (with the exception of a limited circle of legal practitioners and jurists). It may even suggest contempt for this community, regardless of the intentions of the statement's authors. In other words, at best, the message does not arrive; at worst, it is heard but provokes a negative reaction.

Is this a question of merely 'simplifying'[9] statements to suit the majority of citizens? The problem is that the message is unpalatable for a citizen either with a minimal or even a profound level of culture because it is designed from A to Z to address entirely different parties—parties that already recognise that the legal framework for human rights as a starting point, including Arab governments that prey on their citizens morning to night, every day. Such statements are predicated on the ersatz legal and constitutional obligations ostensibly embraced by these governments, though most of them regularly make a mockery of these obligations.

Moreover, appeals to the law may be counterproductive. Vaclav Havel,[10] the Czech dissident who became the first president of Czechoslovakia after its liberation from totalitarian communist rule, cautioned that legal discourse is a kind of hypocrisy, propagating the delusion that authoritarian regimes respect the law and the constitution. It is therefore likely to serve the interests of these regimes, Havel says. Rather than curbing the human rights abuses and crimes of such regimes, as rights defenders believe, legalistic discourse may obstruct the mobilisation of public pressure on authoritarian regimes.

One fears, then, that this type of rights discourse may be seen as complicit. It does not take society into account, and when it does, it addresses the public in alienating jargon that speaks to an insular group able to decode the technical and legal aspects of human rights discourse. In addition, it could be that (contrary to the intentions of its propagators) the sole message that the public will receive from this discourse is that dictators—the same people who committed the

crimes enumerated in that discourse—are willing to abide by international human rights conventions, the law, and the constitution once their attention is drawn to them. This rhetoric and its unintended message are not only damaging but may also inadvertently reinforce the 'iron curtain' that was so deftly constructed—and exists to this day—in the early years of national independence in the 1950s, with the aim of bolstering then-nascent authoritarian regimes. Do human rights defenders have an inkling of what is going on in the mind of the public, shrouded as it is behind this curtain?

An Arab Iron Curtain

Talk of an iron curtain began to be heard one year after the Bolshevik revolution's triumph in Russia in October 1917. This non-military iron curtain would protect the revolution by blocking out dissident ideas, allowing for the intensification of direct political propaganda and psychological warfare and the dissemination and consolidation of a culture of fear, in conjunction with the violent repression of different peoples, even if they did not belong to opposition political groups. The iron curtain permitted the state to demonise democratic states and conceal from the world and Russians themselves the atrocities that were being committed even against well-known 'comrades', especially after Joseph Stalin took power. Thinkers, intellectuals, and artists were subjected to a large-scale crackdown, which only eased with the death of Stalin in 1953.[11] After the Second World War, as the Soviet state expanded into several Eastern and Central European countries that were controlled by the Russian army after the Allied defeat of Nazi Germany, the iron curtain came to separate the Soviet Bloc from the democratic countries of Western and Northern Europe. While the Soviet Iron Curtain fell in 1989 with the collapse of the communist bloc, the Arab Iron Curtain remains firmly in place.

The brutality of repression alone is not enough to explain the persistence of the Soviet or Arab Iron Curtain for some seventy years. While they are the same in certain respects and differ in others, there are three main, common and interrelated factors that prolonged the life of both iron curtains:

1. A social contract based on the exchange of bread for freedom.
2. Success in propagandising an ideology based on identity conflicts 'us and them'.
3. Success in persuading an army of public opinion makers (intellectuals, writers, university professors, politicians, poets, artists, and media professionals) to adopt this identitarian formula and sell it to the public.

The last factor spelled bad news for the human rights movement in the Arab world, indicating the magnitude of the challenge facing its pivotal task of engaging public opinion. The task is not to address the general public and simplify the human rights discourse, but rather to address those who, on a daily basis, play a vital role in shaping—and sometimes manufacturing—the consciousness and minds of the general public.

In the mid-1950s, national independence regimes that had liberated their countries from foreign occupation began constructing the Arab Iron Curtain. Prior to this, the peoples of the region were fighting for liberation from Western colonial occupation, which was essentially a struggle for the political empowerment of society in the face of a foreign usurper (with the exception of Algeria). To this end, they needed organisational 'weapons' that were independent of the will of the occupation and its agents, including political parties, professional syndicates and labour unions, civic, student, and artistic associations, and the press. In tandem with this grand historical struggle, these same peoples tapped the sources of scientific and cultural progress in the West, individually and collectively (through frequent study missions), keeping local communities abreast of the latest cultural, intellectual, and scientific developments in the West. Despite foreign occupation, this era was one of productive political, intellectual, cultural, artistic, and social openness to the world, after centuries spent captive to the obscurantism of the Ottoman Empire. Political and social leaders of that age knew how to distinguish between the demands of the direct political struggle against European occupation and the demands of political, social, and cultural development amidst, and for the sake of, this struggle and the post-independence era. This creative engagement produced many of the giants of the social, political, intellectual, and scientific renaissance in the region, whose fingerprints are still visible in the twenty-first century. Though they loathed Western occupation and colonialism, they did not fall into the trap of hating the West as a civilisation, a source of culture and science, and the cradle of the democratic system. Taha Hussein, the most important Egyptian thinker of the twentieth century (and perhaps the coming centuries), devoted one of his most significant intellectual contributions to proving that 'the Egyptian mind, in its essence and nature, is no different from the European mind'. Speaking of national duty after independence, he wrote: 'When we enact laws, establish schools, spread science, organise the economy, and borrow democratic systems from Europe, we are striving for one thing: equality, which is the natural right of all the children of a single nation'. Hussein stressed that Egypt's relationship with Europe must be one of equals, not dependence: 'We must acknowledge in ourselves that the system of equal rights and duties that we wish to affirm in our domestic lives is the same system that we must affirm in our external lives and in the ties between us and Europe'.

In other words, Hussein wanted Egyptians 'to walk the road and follow the path of Europeans, in order to be their peers and their partners in civilisation'.[12] Hussein's *The Future of Culture in Egypt* captures some features of the ambitious renaissance project and the aspiration for equality with the West after the end of foreign occupation. In 2024, eighty-six years after the publication of his book, the governments of Egypt and Tunisia would sign disgraceful agreements with the European Union that would give them financial grants in exchange for preventing their citizens (whose rulers, despite the demise of foreign occupation a half century ago, have failed to provide them with the minimum means of a dignified life at home) from taking 'death boats' and risking their lives for a possible opportunity (if they do not drown in the Mediterranean) to live in societies they may not necessarily view with the same affection as Taha Hussein. In fact, they may see them as corrupt societies hostile to their own country and hateful to Islam. It is worth mentioning that as a result of the cumulative political and economic failure in both countries, debt has nearly

swallowed GDP whole: in 2023, debt accounted for more than ninety-five per cent of GDP in Egypt and eighty per cent of GDP in Tunisia.[13]

Taha Hussein's outlook, with its creativity and sense of equality with the West, should have flourished when Western colonial occupation came to an end. But the political regimes that achieved independence had other strategies, for which the Arab world continues to pay a heavy price. The common element of these strategies was to limit the task of national liberation to the ousting of the foreign occupier, exclusive of the emancipation of peoples and the liberation of their energies. Indeed, national autonomy was harnessed to subjugate peoples, prevent their comprehensive political, economic, and cultural emancipation, and elide economic and societal empowerment from the question of national liberation. National liberation was reduced to a one-dimensional agenda focused solely on external affairs, the exclusive remit of the armed forces and intelligence, which enabled 'national' ruling elites (civilian and/or military) to indefinitely monopolise the government. To serve this same purpose, the persecution of those on the left and the right classified as 'agents of colonialism' turned into a never-ending mission for their successor regimes for decades on end, long after colonialism's demise.

There is no better way to understand the essence of this strategy than through the attitudes of the spiritual and political father of 'national liberation' in Egypt, Gamal Abdel Nasser, the inspiration for Arab regimes that have followed in his footsteps since the beginning of the second half of the twentieth century. In his encyclopaedic, 750-page volume on Nasserism,[14] Egyptian academic Sherif Younis observes that the leader's permanent occupation of the seat of power and the centrality of permanent external confrontations are inextricably linked. In this way, rulers are relieved of all responsibility for political, economic, and social crises. The ruled, instead of holding their rulers to account, are called on to rally around them against ever-present lurking enemies. The practical task of rooting out the so-called agents of colonialism, which coincided with the ouster of colonial powers, became a permanent ideological pillar. Younis writes: 'Outward-facing belligerence was the justification for the liquidation of domestic forces as servants of colonialism, and maintaining this liquidation was linked to a leadership that revolved around external confrontations. As a result: 'The early victories entrenched an identitarian ideology that revolved around hostility to the West'.[15]

This facilitated the systematic eradication of genuine oppositional politics and political and civic actors across the ideological spectrum (Islamists, nationalists, Marxists, and liberals) while serving to limit the agenda of society to the confrontation with colonialism and its 'agents' at home. A culture of fear thus spread, further insulating populaces from global and domestic calls for democratisation (especially those issued from Western countries) while individuals and groups in Arab countries advocating for democracy were suppressed. The violent exclusion of partners in the national liberation struggle, on both the right and left, became the order of the day for the next several decades, from the 'Years of Lead' in Morocco to the repression of the Shia majority in Bahrain, whose diverse political leaders had constituted the backbone of the national independence movement.

The fact that some groups fighting for national liberation before independence were only weakly democratic propelled this eliminationist drive. Apart from the liberal current that embraced 'constitutional patriotism',[16] an autocratic outlook found common currency with nationalist, leftist, and religious groups. Though fed by different sources, they all shared 'authoritarian tendencies'[17] and the concept of a 'just tyrant'. For some this was Omar bin al-Khattab; for others, Joseph Stalin or Hitler.[18] In several Arab countries, 'armies, as professional and conspiratorial minorities, assumed the mission of enacting the authoritarian aspect of the ideas of nationalist intellectuals',[19] offering a living model of the just tyrant.

The new rulers' dependence upon the logic of excluding and purging opponents required that a permanent image of the 'enemy' be embedded in the popular mind, even after colonial occupation's demise everywhere but Palestine and despite their relations of political and security dependency with former colonial states and/or major Western powers. Colonialism was therefore treated as an 'original sin', according to Lebanese writer Hazem Saghieh.[20] Original sin is indelible by its very nature; this is especially true given that the spectre of colonialism continues to hold sway over the Arab political, cultural, and religious landscape and may be the sole reason[21] that certain parties continue to have a foothold. By this I mean not only ruling elites, but also influential groups, militias, and political, cultural, and religious elites. While they may disagree fundamentally about basic ideological, political, and identity issues, they all agree on the primacy of the external agenda, the core of which is hatred of the West. Here 'the West' is seen as the embodiment of the vileness of (now bygone) colonialism and its complicity with settler colonialism in Palestine and the invasion of Iraq. Although the rhetoric of 'us or the West' has played a vital role in radicalising Islamic fundamentalism in Arab societies, it is worth noting that the religious persecution and crimes against humanity, committed for years, against millions of Muslims in China, Myanmar, and India has given no pause to rulers or political and religious elites in the Arab world.

The vitriolic anti-Western rhetoric of some rulers and leading political elites is essentially the promotion of an identity-based patriotism suspended in the void, having failed to produce any concrete economic manifestation of the independence obtained a half century ago. 'The most prominent evidence of independence remained invective against a colonialism that is no more and the threat to uproot it after the fact',[22] Saghieh writes. This rhetoric has morphed into a ritual of collective psychological compensation for failure. Saghieh warns: 'Arab societies are losing not only their ability to organise themselves, but also their ability to produce culture and knowledge, to look at themselves and to criticise themselves…Chauvinism eases the mind and lets one avoid thought and critique'.[23]

Prior to its genocidal war in Gaza that erupted in October, Israel's repression or war crimes in the West Bank and Gaza triggered popular protest in the Arab world. As Mohammed Masbah says: 'Pro-Palestine protests were often viewed by authoritarian regimes as beneficial. In one sense, they provided a useful safety valve to channel the population's frustration with economic hardships and lack of freedoms towards external threats, such as Western intervention, imperialism, and Zionism. Pro-Palestine protests also allowed the regimes to portray themselves as Arab nationalists

opposing what they framed as Western hegemony'.[24] But the increasing fragility of Arab states no longer allows for such protests, which, it is feared, may no longer confine themselves to condemning Western double standards, and may turn against the state itself.

Notably, the current state-sanctioned mobilising discourse goes beyond condemning collusion to target the West itself on other grounds—as the beacon of democracy, for example—leading Tunisian writer Ziad Krishan to ask[25]: Are we to cast liberal democracy into the 'dustbin of history' as a 'colonial remnant' because it is the product of Western civilisation?

Of course, this negative message is conveyed not only by official media, but also by the educational system, culture, religious institutions and mosques, and platforms for political and religious opposition.

When the early months of the Arab Spring revealed that the US administration and several other Western states were decidedly on the side of the uprisings and were willing to sacrifice alliances with some Arab authoritarian regimes, it did little to undermine the prevailing 'Westophobia'.[26] The Supreme Council of the Armed Forces, which took power in Egypt after President Hosni Mubarak stepped down following the uprising of 25 January 2011, immediately grasped the significance of the shift in the American position and so went on the offensive. For the first time in the country's history, it greenlit military force raids on the headquarters of pro-democracy US institutions. The Public Prosecution conducted investigations into the staff of these organisations on fabricated charges, in a case that was not closed until several years later. But that did not change the public's negative view of the United States, and in fact, hardened it further.

Marc Lynch, an academic who specialises in the affairs of the Arab world, believes that Arab anti-Americanism is attributable to an entrenched cognitive bias that makes it difficult for some to see other than what they want to see.[27] Of course, Lynch and other Arab and Western analysts do not mean that the US government has not committed (and continues to commit) major political crimes worth condemning, especially in Palestine, Iraq, and several other non-Arab countries. But there is a big difference between condemning specific positions (which the American people also forcefully condemn) and hatred. Contrast this with the decades-long tacit tolerance of incapacity and outright failure and of those directly responsible for it since the end of foreign occupation.

Yes, colonialism passed from the world more than half a century ago, but it never left the collective mentality that was assiduously cultivated by the ideological discourse of each country's founding dictator and his media. Colonialism remained central to mainstream political, media, and cultural discourse in the Arab world, both official and unofficial, a spectre that could be evoked every day using various synonyms (neocolonialism, imperialism, the West, neoliberalism, savage capitalism, savage globalisation, dependence, asymmetric development, fourth-generation warfare, terrorism, Islamophobia, orientalism, pornography, homosexuality, racism, the white man, etc.[28]). This process allowed for permanent mobilisation against what is portrayed as a foreign assault on native values and religion, thus exempting society from the burden of accountability for those who 'protect its values and religion'. This process also facilitates violations of human rights and the persecution of human rights defenders and groups as traitors and agents of the Western 'beast':

Authoritarian regimes that claim to oppose Western hegemony consider individual freedoms to be tools of subversion, used to penetrate their societies and entrench cultural dependency on the West. These regimes thus see freedom of conscience and expression, the inviolability of private life, the right to choose a life partner and sexual choices as Western strategies designed to perpetuate control over these dominated societies.[29]

Since national independence in the 1950s, the charge of treason has been an effective moral, security, and judicial weapon used by successive rulers in the Arab world to eliminate political opponents. As Tunisian researcher Malel Lakhal observers, this weapon has been deployed from the era of the liberator president, Habib Bourguiba to that of Tunisia's current president, Kais Saied.[30]

Worse, this disastrous discourse constitutes a pillar of an ideologically diverse political current, which functions as the best prop for dictators in the Arab world. This current has lent support to Bashar al-Assad's massacres of the Syrian people, on the grounds that he is confronting a Western colonial conspiracy. Atop this strident discourse and hundreds of thousands of corpses, other national liberation leaders—most notably Syrian President Hafez al-Assad and Iraqi President Saddam Hussein—built a monument to their national disgrace, turning military artillery, airplane bombers, and chemical weapons on their own people. Their victims were neither Israelis nor Westerners, but Syrians and Iraqis: Sunni and Shia Muslims and Kurds. It is no less painful to the soul and mind that the list of people complicit in these crimes—those who publicly glorified one of their worst perpetrators, Saddam Hussein—include prominent thinkers, poets, writers, journalists, and even jurists across the Arab world, from the ocean to the Gulf.[31] This is yet another indication of the magnitude of the task that awaits the human rights movement, and it clearly demonstrates that this task cannot be confined to addressing governments, Arab or non-Arab.

National Colonialism

Colonialism passed from the region, supplanted from the ocean to the Gulf by authoritarian regimes, or what the Iraqi academic Faleh Abdul Jabbar calls 'the neototalitarian peripheral state model'[32] 'whose foundations were established gradually in Egypt starting in the 1960s and whose modalities spread to most Arab republics in modified local forms'.[33] Abdul Jabbar summarises Iraq's woeful trajectory in one dense paragraph:

> The regime chose destructive social, cultural, and political policies: the exclusion of all leftist, rightist, and centrist political groups and the denial of political rights; the personalisation and tribalisation of political structures; the forced assimilation of Kurds and other non-Arab ethnic groups; and vicious attacks on Shia religious dignitaries and the exile of entire segments of the Shia population, planting the seeds of the disintegration of the nation. Finally, the totalitarian regime fell into the

lethal trap of regional and expansionist adventurism, first in Iran (1980–1988) then Kuwait (1990–1991).[34]

The landscape in Egypt is no different: 'The officers brought with them no new political or social force as they assumed power; it came only in principle, with the call to leave the public square so that the dreams of glory could be made a reality, provided that everyone fall silent'.[35] The national liberation regime in Egypt had no programme 'save for dominating the legacy of the state established by the 1919 revolution',[36] which had lit the spark of national and democratic liberation in Egypt. Younis's description of Egypt mirrors that of Abdul Jabbar for Iraq: 'The July regime applied a top-down program on this state that boiled down to curbing and subordinating these institutions'.[37] In other words, it brought to heel those institutions that for several decades had led the bitter struggle for national and democratic liberation in Egypt and the construction of a pre-independence state.

The cumulative result of these developments in Iraq was 'the emergence of a mass urban society that was atomised and emptied of institutions of self-defence'.[38] Using similar terms, Younis writes that in Egypt 'the idea of the nation (that is, the populace as a cultural entity) supplanted the idea of the people (that is, the political collective) to become a virtual political collective based on identity, demanding leadership of the entire political sphere'. Younis rightly describes the vague promise of liberation as 'the instrument of the capitulation of the population and the surrender of its political capacities to those who had the audacity, rather than the ability, to promise salvation'.[39] It is the 'updated Sultanic state', in the words of Syrian writer Yassin al-Haj Saleh.[40]

In order to achieve the goal of eradicating politics and comrades in the national struggle, 'national liberation' regimes employed the worst kinds of tyranny and oppression against all forms of independent political and civic organisation (which had been won from the foreign occupier at a high price) and replaced them with 'institutions whose sole purpose was to guard the vacuum designated by this term [the people]'.[41] These regimes then embarked on the systematic abuse of the individual rights of citizens—unfair trials, murder, exile, enforced disappearance, ethnic cleansing, genocide, torture, displacement, work and travel bans—which in their brutality far exceeded the crimes of the foreign occupation, with the exception of the French occupation in Algeria. In some Arab countries, this was done with the help of experts from Nazi Germany (Egypt), and/or from the former occupying state (Jordan and Bahrain). In Egypt, the Free Officers began consulting with the embassy of the Great Britain, the former occupying power, for advice on how to confront the communists on 31 July 1952[42]—that is, just eight days after the proclamation of the 'revolution'. The principal aim of the brutal repression was less to obtain information about political opponents than to clear the field of any other political actors, even allies against the occupation and fighters for national liberation. An Egyptian communist prisoner wrote: 'The apparatus of repression at the time had no problem extracting confessions from Egyptian communists because the communists had no secrets to hide from their allies in the Nasserist state'. Even so, the torture was 'extremely cruel and barbaric, aimed at shattering the human decency of political opponents. It was the kind of torture that is carried out with deliberation and over long

periods with the aim of destroying the intellectual and spiritual energies of the human being by means of slow, calculated destruction and constant gruelling pressure on the physical vessel'.[43]

The goal was to eradicate politics from society, make political actors renounce politics, and completely clear the field for the 'new liberators'. A Syrian Marxist writer would later use similar terms in his analysis of the brutality of his country's national liberation regime and its eliminationist tendency, calling it 'a mad exultation in atrocity'.[44] An Iraqi writer reminds us of one of the ugliest innovations of Saddam Hussein's regime: the assignment of employees trained in the rape of women. The business card of one of these employees was formally inscribed: 'Profession: A fighter in the People's Army. Activity: Assault on Women's Honour'.[45] These are just various means of barbarism devised by diabolical minds to achieve the same eliminationist goal: forcing people with moral weight in Iraqi, and later Kuwaiti, society out of politics.

Referring to a national leader active prior to the Free Officers revolution, Gamal Abdel Nasser, the symbol of Egyptian national liberation, is quoted as saying: 'He taught me politics, but I will make him give up politics'.[46] This phrase neatly encapsulates the era of 'national liberation': a bloody era in which the region was freed of those who fought for its national liberation and of the logic of emancipation itself. But as dozens of memoirs written by Muslim Brothers and communists like Saad Zahran remind us, the process of clearing the political arena of comrades in the struggle for national liberation entailed not only the cruelty of displacement, long years of imprisonment, and torture, but also savage murders in which prisoners were drowned or dissolved in acid. In November 1967 - a year after the most ignominious defeat of the Egyptian army in modern history and the complete destruction of the Egyptian air force in three hours, and while the Israeli army was still occupying Sinai - Gamal Abdel Nasser could find no way of persuading Egyptian university students protesting the defeat to 'stop engaging in politics' safe for opening fire on them from helicopter gunships. The plan was scrapped due to objections from the air force commander.[47]

Two decades after liberation from the foreign occupier, the bitter outcome of this era led Syrian academic Burhan Ghalioun, followed by a growing number of Arab academics and writers, to consider these regimes a form of 'internal colonisation'.[48] The essence of colonialism, foreign or domestic, is the 'the top-down, autocratic imposition of modern structures'.[49] Others describe it as the terrorist state:

> The rogue state...decimates its subjects with a savagery that cannot be justified on the grounds of the internal opponents it faces. The level of abuse in the subject societies was more than a challenge to human and national ties; it was akin to a mad exultation in atrocity. It went beyond punishing political opponents to the establishment of a full-scale terrorist industry that mastered the art of revenge and terrorising the entire subject populace.[50]

Egyptian academic Mohamed El-Sayed Said points out that the concept of internal colonialism is not new; it has been adopted by a number of social scientists.[51] He attributes its origin to 'a

formidable sense of the possession of a brute force that is not accustomed to showing responsibility or being subject to regular oversight by the institutions of society or the state'.[52] This authoritarian tendency begins to morph into internal colonialism 'on the day that a class that controls the instruments of power is able to overwhelm, marginalise, and obstruct the authority of society'.[53] Said writes that the 'doctrine of state ownership' is common in Egypt within the 'ranks of the military class and police officers', and that such a widespread sensibility in itself 'denies and uproots the principle of citizenship'.

The hard, bitter truth, almost seven decades after the end of foreign occupation, is that the national state-building project has failed. Academic studies attribute state failure to three core factors.[54] These apply to most Arab states to varying degrees, although the first factor does not pertain to some oil-exporting Gulf states:

1. Little to no capacity to meet the basic needs of citizens and public services.
2. Breakdown of law and order, either due to the use of state institutions to oppress and terrorise the citizenry or the state's loss of its monopoly on the legitimate use of violence and its inability to protect its citizens.
3. Loss of credibility among the international community.

A major factor in the failure of the national state project is the failure of national independence regimes in the Arab world to appreciate the central importance of integrating all ethnic groups and religious communities in the state. Regime leaders must understand that this cannot be achieved by coercion but requires a long-term process of strategic societal dialogue. This realisation was not characteristic of the majority of rulers, who achieved a precarious national independence grounded in neither sustainable economic development nor national integration. In fact, those who demanded such things were subject to repression, branded as colonial or Western agents seeking to fragment Arab societal unity. This is not to say that tensions with the former colonial states and their hostile practices have ceased entirely; nevertheless, this is 'barely a drop in the sea of catastrophe of the Arab regimes'.[55]

Banners with ill-conceived slogans were unfurled, absent any societal dialogue. Newly independent states launched military adventures at high human and material cost (Algeria with Morocco, Egypt in Yemen and its provocation of Israel in May 1968, Iraq with Iran and the invasion of Kuwait, and Syria's military intervention in Lebanon against the Lebanese and Palestinians). Some national independence regimes engaged in the organised repression of the Amazigh in Morocco and Algeria, African minorities in Sudan, the Shia majority in Iraq and Bahrain, the Kurds in Syria and Iraq, the Sunnis in Syria, and the Shia in Saudi Arabia. This assumed the form of genocidal war in countries like Iraq, Syria, and Sudan. The disintegration of the state as an entity in several countries in the context of the Arab Spring is one manifestation of the bitter failure of national integration. Even Egypt, historically one of the most cohesive states in the region, is no longer immune to breakdown, according to Robert Springborg.[56]

I agree with Egyptian academic Amr Hamzawy on the crucial role of what he calls 'destructive leadership' in the failure of Arab states in particular. Without the blight of destructive and even megalomaniacal leaders like Gamal Abdel Nasser, Saddam Hussein, and Muammar Qaddafi, the miserable situation in which the Arab world finds itself after seven decades of independence would not have been possible:

> Although structural dysfunction and social tensions are important to explain the collapse and failure of the state, this phenomenon is largely man-made, as leaders' mistakes destroy viable states or even prevent them from emerging, often for reasons of personal gain. It is the series of decisions made by rulers and governing cadres that gradually saps state capacities, separates the state from society, and generates opposition movements or ignites the flames of civil war.[57]

National colonialism has reached depths unimagined by national liberation pioneers in the first half of the twentieth century. During the so-called Arab Spring, the national liberation regime in Syria brought in Russian and Iranian foreign forces, Lebanese and Iraqi militias, and mercenaries from Pakistan and Afghanistan to help suppress the Syrian people's aspirations for freedom. The sectarian regime in Iraq has allowed Iran to exert direct daily influence on political, security, and military decision-making in Iraq, including the suppression of the people's aspirations for freedom from Iranian influence during the second wave of the Arab Spring in 2019. Bahrain's monarchy, too, relied on forces from Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates to quell the 2011 popular uprising.

The Day After

The era of national liberation in the Arab world outlived its usefulness decades ago. Today the region suffers not only from chronic, systemic failure in all areas, but also the decay of political elites across the ideological and political spectrum, both rulers and ruled, who make concerted efforts to hold societies back from progress.

Given the foregoing discussion, the human rights movement in the Arab world must carefully re-examine the ground on which it stands and its future tasks, priorities, and strategies, first and foremost how it 'can create significant, fundamental change in visions, modes of operation, and the practices of major social forces'[58] in their countries, as urged by Mohamed El-Sayed Said. It must not confine itself or allow other actors to confine it to the role of proselytiser and admonisher or to become a purely 'moral space'.

This reassessment is made all the more urgent by regional developments since the Hamas attack on 7 October 2023 and Israel's ongoing genocidal war in Gaza, which have exacerbated the Arab public's negative attitude towards international law due to the double standards of the United States and other Western countries. It is worth noting that Arab public opinion itself is indifferent to tragedies currently underway in Sudan, just as it was indifferent to ethnic cleansing in Darfur

and South Sudan for nearly two decades, genocide in Syria during the Arab Spring, genocide of the Shia and Kurds under Saddam Hussein in Iraq followed by invasion and occupation of Kuwait, and the humanitarian tragedy in Yemen that has endured for several years. It is also worth noting that no Western country stood accused of responsibility for these tragedies or of protecting the perpetrators, although the West was in the dock for criticising the states responsible for these crimes and adopting a generally correct moral and political position. This pattern of double standards brings us back to the core question of this essay: the absent mission of the human rights movement in the Arab world and even the future of human rights itself.

At the same time, the growing chasm between Arab governments and peoples frustrated by the position of their governments and restrictions on their freedom to protest the genocidal war in Gaza may not stop at frustration. This accumulation of collective frustration and a sense of helplessness could conceivably spark a large-scale rebellion in one or more countries,[59] which, of course, would bring new qualitative challenges related to the future of the region or some of its countries. It would also bring an additional challenge for the human rights movement, taking response to the question of 'what to do' to another level entirely, regardless of the correctness of some analysts' predictions for the 'day after' in the Arab world.

About the Author

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[1] Cairo Institute for Human Rights Studies (2024) 'Salon Ibn Rushd: Iran and Israel Are "State Breaker" Countries, and Clear Enemies to the Concept of State and Stability in the Arab World', 9 May, accessed 10 June 2024, https://cihrs.org/iran-and-israel-are-state-breaker-countries-and-clear-enemies-to-the-concept-of-state-and-stability-in-the-arab-region/?lang=en; Moussa, Amre (2024) 'Risala ila al-Qimma al-'Arabiya: Bi-Ayat Hal 'Udti Ya Qimma?' [Message to the Arab Summit: In What Condition Has the Summit Returned?], *Asharq al-Awsat*, 16 May, accessed 10 June 2024, https://t.ly/N3jWk.

[2] Nadery, Nader (2024) 'Human Rights under Siege', Wilson Centre, May, accessed 10 June 2024, https://wilsoncenter.org/publication/human-rights-under-siege.

[3] CIHRS (2024) 'Priorities of the Human Rights Movement amid a Region in Crisis and a Crumbling International Order', 2 May, accessed 10 June 2024, https://cihrs.org/conclusions-of-the-27th-regional-forum-of-the-human-rights-movement/?lang=en.

[4] Brooks, David (2024) 'The Authoritarians Have the Momentum', *New York Times*, 16 May, accessed 10 June 2024, https://www.nytimes.com/2024/05/16/opinion/trump-liberals-authoritarians.html; Edsall, Thomas (2024) 'The Seeds

Had Been Planted. Trump Didn't Do It Himself', *New York Times*, 15 May, accessed 10 June 2024, https://www.nytimes.com/2024/05/15/opinion/trump-authoritarianism-democracy.html.

[5] Hassan, Bahey eldin (2024) 'Views: Democratisation and Human Rights in the Arab World, Enduring or Temporary Impasse?' *Rowaq Arabi*, 8 January, accessed 10 June 2024, https://cihrs-rowaq.org/views-enduring-or-temporary-impasse-democratisation-and-human-rights-in-the-arab-world/?lang=en.

[6] Syria is a good example here. Despite the intensive efforts for international accountability, the end result is largely symbolic. A joint Syrian-European report states, 'Despite all these positive outcomes of accountability efforts, their effects are limited. The proceedings have neither led to a recognizable improvement of the human rights situation in Syria, nor threatened the regime's grip on power in the country. They have not even prevented world leaders from normalizing their relationships with the regime in certain cases'. See: Syrian Network for Human Rights (2024) 'Patchwork Justice for Syria?', 15 May, accessed 10 June 2024, https://snhr.org/blog/2024/05/15/patchwork-justice-for-syria/.

[7] I do not mean to suggest that this problem is specific to the Arab region, but I have not studied the rights movement in other regions to be able to make such a determination.

[8] Said, Mohamed El-Sayed (2001) 'al-Iftitahiya: Hal Yastami' Ahad?' [Introduction: Is Anyone Listening?], *Rowaq Arabi*, 6 (2), pp. 6–20, accessed 10 June 2024, https://cihrs-rowaq.org/wp-content/uploads/2001/03/Said-2001-Ar-Intro-Is-Anyone-Listening-6-2.pdf.

[9] During the national struggle against the British occupation of Egypt, and in order to reinforce engagements that would crystallise the national character of Egyptians, some advocated that classical Arabic be replaced with the local vernacular in order to bridge the gap between the people and the cultural elite. For more on this trend in the Arab region, see: Safwan, Mustafa (2020) *Li-madha al-'Arab Laysu Ahraran* [Why the Arabs Aren't Free] (Lebanon: Dar Saqi). Newspapers were issued in Egypt using the Egyptian vernacular in the 1870s. A pioneer in this regard was Yaqub Sanu. See: Awad, Louis (2022) *Tarikh al-Fikr al-Misri al-Hadith* [The History of Modern Egyptian Thought], vol. 3 (Cairo: Dar al-Mahrousa). In the Global South, some people advocate the use of colloquial languages as well. See: Merry, Sally Engle (2006) *Human Rights and Gender Violence: Translating International Law into Local Justice* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press).

[10] Havel, Vaclav (1985) 'The Power of the Powerless', in John Keane (ed.) *The Power of the Powerless: Citizens Against the State in Central-Eastern Europe* (London: Hutchinson).

[11] Arendt, Hannah (1951) *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York: Schocken Books).

[12] Hussein, Taha (2001) *Mustaqbal al-Thaqafa fi Misr* [The Future of Culture in Egypt] (Sousse, Tunisia: Dar al-Maarif).

[13] World Bank (2024) 'Conflict and Debt in the Middle East and North Africa', April, accessed 10 June 2024, https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/server/api/core/bitstreams/0441b490-2581-4ae6-915d-ec814976331e/content.

[14] Younis, Sherif (2012) *Nida' al-Sha'b: Tarikh Naqdi li-l-Idiyulujiya al-Nasiriya* [Call of the People: A Critical History of Nasserist Ideology] (Cairo: Dar Shorouq).

[15] Ibid.

[16] Saghieh, Hazem (2000) *Qawmiyu al-Mashriq al-'Arabi* [Nationalists of the Arab Levant] (Riyad Al Rayyes Books and Publishing).

[17] Younis.

[18] On the influence of Nazi thought on nationalist groups in Egypt and Levant, see: Saghieh.

[19] Ibid.

[20] Saghieh, Hazem (2024) ''An al-Isti'mar bi-Wasfih Khati'a Asliya' [On Colonialism as Original Sin], *Asharq al-Awsat*, 8 May, accessed 10 June 2024, https://aawsat.com/الرأي/5005941-عن-الاستعمار-بوصفه-خطيئة-أصليّة.

[21] Ibid.

[22] Saghieh, Hazem (2024) 'Nahnu wa-Uruba: Ashkal al-Ta'aththur wa-l-Ta'thir' [Europe and Us: Forms of Influence], *Asharq al-Awsat*, 9 June, accessed 10 June 2024, https://aawsat.com/الرأي/5029074-نحن-وأوروبا-أشكال-التأثر-والتأثير.

[23] Al-Zoghbi, Maladh (2024) 'Ghazza wa-l-'Arab wa-l-'Alam al-Yawm: Hiwar ma' Husam 'Itani Judhur wa-Muhassalat ma Yajri fi Mantiqatina wa-ma Hawlaha' [Gaza, Arabs, and the World Today: A Discussion with Husam Itani on the Roots and Outcomes of Developments in and around Our Region], *al-Jumhuriya*, 25 April, accessed 10 June 2024, https://aljumhuriya.net/ar/2024/04/25/hosam-itani/.

[24] Masbah, Mohammed (2024) 'The (Surprising) Silence of Arab Universities on Gaza', *Middle East Council on Global Affairs*, 10 June, accessed 10 June 2024, https://mecouncil.org/blog_posts/the-surprising-silence-of-arab-universities-on-palestine/.

[25] Krishan, Ziad (2024) 'La Badil Dimuqrati 'an al-Dimuqratiya al-Libraliya 1: Muqaddamat Dururiya' [There Is No Democratic Alternative to Liberal Democracy 1: Necessary Prefaces], *Le Maghreb*, 5 June, accessed 10 June 2024, https://ar.lemaghreb.tn/سياسة/الإفتتاحية/item/109082-لا-بديل-ديمقراطي-عن-الديمقراطية-الليبرالية-i-مقدمات-ضرورية.

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27 Ibid.

28 Saghieh, Hazem (2024) 'An al-Rajul al-Abyad' [On the White Man], *Asharq al-Awsat*, 5 May, accessed 10 June 2024, https://shorturl.at/GZhjX.

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31 For names, testimonies, and published passages, see: Makiya, Kanan (2005) *al-Qaswa wa-l-Samt: al-Harb wa-l-Tughyan wa-l-Intifada fi al-'Alam al-'Arabi* [Cruelty and Silence: War, Despotism, and Uprising in the Arab World] (Germany: Al Kamel Verlag).

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33 Ibid.

34 Ibid.

35 Younis.

36 Ibid.

37 Ibid.

38 Abdul Jabbar.

39 Younis.

40 Saleh, Yassin al-Haj (2016) *al-Thaqafa ka-Siyasa: al-Muthaqqafun wa-Mas'uliyatuhum al-Ijtima'iya fi Zaman al-Ghilan* [Culture as Politics: Intellectuals and Their Social Responsibilities in the Time of Ghouls] (Lebanon: Arab Foundation Publishers).

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42 Sirrs, Owen (2010) *A History of the Egyptian Intelligence Service* (Routledge).

43 Zahran, Saad (2006) *Mudhakkirat Sajin* [Memoirs of a Prisoner] (Cairo: Mahrousa for Publication, Press Services, and Information).

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47 Al-Salmawi, Hisham (2010) *al-Jil al-Ladhi Wajah 'Abd al-Nasir wa-l-Sadat* [The Generation That Confronted Abdel Nasser and Sadat] (Cairo: Jazirat al-Ward).

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49 Younis.

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55 Basil, Saleh (2024) 'Khitab Muharabat al-Isti'mar wa-Ihya' Haymanat al-Tasallut' [Anti-Colonial Discourse and the Revival of Hegemony of Authoritarianism], *al-Arabi al-Jadid*, 6 June, accessed 10 June 2024, https://www.alaraby.co.uk/opinion/التسلّط-هيمنة-إحياء-و-الاستعمار-محاربة-خطاب.

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57 Hamzawy.

58 Said, Mohamed El-Sayed (2001) 'Rijal al-A'mal: al-Dimuqratiya wa-Huquq al-Insan' [Businessmen: Democracy and Human Rights], CIHRS.

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