The Arab Spring —
The Original Arab Revolution?

BY ELIE CHALALA

I have read a sizable part of the literature on the Arab Spring, in addition to having watched scores of documentaries and what seems like hundreds of hours of news footage of this most unprecedented event in modern Arab history. In my Middle East politics class, I used to tell my students that, aside from the 1979 Iranian case, there had been no genuine popular revolution in the modern Middle East. Now, I can lengthen that list to include the Tunisian, Egyptian, Libyan, Yemeni, and Syrian revolutions, regardless of whether they are ultimately successful or not.

Of the many articles I have read, one in particular caught my attention. Written by the Lebanese academic Mohamad Ali-Moukaled, an article titled “The Arab Spring is Their Revolution Two Centuries After the Enlightenment” appeared in Al Hayat newspaper on August 7, 2011.

Moukaled chose two prominent Arab intellectuals that have been key players in shaping the current discourse on Arab society and politics: Samir Amin, author of the famous book “The Arab Nation” (among others), and Adonis, the pen name of Ahmad Ali Said Isber, whose oeuvre has reached well beyond the borders of the Middle East. Amin approaches the Arab Spring from an economic perspective, while Adonis examines it from a cultural one. Unlike Amin, Adonis distanced himself from the day-to-day goings on Syrian politics decades ago, refusing to sign petitions demanding the release of Syrian dissidents (such as that of fellow poet Farag Bairkadar, who had been imprisoned under Bashar al-Asad and his father). Some of Adonis’s detractors attribute the writer’s silence on the atrocities committed by the Assad regime to his Alawite background.

What attracted me to Moukaled’s substantive article, which will be cited hereafter, is the methodological criticism that enabled him to steer clear of both the personal and the sectarian. For example, Moukaled appears to be familiar with the many recent criticisms of Adonis, and faults these critics on purely methodological grounds for their position on Adonis’s approach to the Arab Spring.

II

“What has happened in the Middle East is more than a mere uprising after which society will return to what it was before. It is more than a protest but less than a revolution, in that the movement had no goals that exceeded the overthrow of Mubarak,” according to Samir Amin, as cited by Moukaled.

Moukaled and Amin have engaged each other in defining what happened in Egypt and Tunisia, focusing more on the former. Can we consider what happened in Egypt a radical change? Moukaled differs with Amin in considering the overthrow of Mubarak and the subsequent change at the country’s political helm as such. The
system of hereditary succession was ended, giving way to the possibility of rotation of power. Did the so-called revolution accomplish all of its goals or were its ambitions curtailed? Moukaled answers that the revolution fell short of true systemic change, and he goes on to raise additional questions of his own: “Who are the revolutionaries, and what is the new meaning that the Arab Spring gave to Revolution?”

Moukaled makes an insightful observation, the gist of which is that the Arab world had generally rejected modern civilization, particularly capitalism, prior to the Tunisian revolution. Consequently, the Arab world had lagged behind the tide of history for about two centuries. The question that follows is: what were the reasons for this rejection of modernity? He answers that the Arab world mostly opted out of capitalism by embracing a combination of alternative systems, some of which were wrought in reaction to capitalism. Included are nationalism, Marxism and radical Islamism. According to Moukaled, the Arab political world learned tactics of starvation and brutal exploitation from capitalism, while the socialist, nationalist and fundamentalist experiments nurtured policies of eliminating the Other by means of murder and imprisonment, which have become practically synonymous with dictatorship.

He makes a second insightful observation: Without political revolution, capitalism could not have sustained the technological, educational and economic accomplishments that the West has enjoyed during the last two centuries. The radical change in state structure that accompanied the 1789 French Revolution was the key factor in protecting and propelling the economic achievements of capitalism. Thus, until the Arab Spring, the Arab world had not yet experienced a true, homegrown political revolution, which is a prerequisite for economic and cultural development.

Moukaled also claims that the Arab Spring represents a political return to the pre-imperial era—interrupted by Napoleon’s 1798 campaign in Egypt—or even farther back to the time of the ruler Mahammad Ali Pasha and his family. The interruption dealt by Napoleon lasted up until the moment that Bouazizi sparked the revolution in Tunisia. Thus the Arab world is finally undergoing political revolution after two centuries of preoccupation with nationalism, socialism and political Islam. The idea of democracy was shelved behind these great philosophies for what may have been believed to be a transitional period. But transitional it was not; the Arab peoples were subjected for over 100 years to types of violence unprecedented in that region at the hands of single-party regimes, or regimes of hereditary succession, and military coups.

Moukaled says that, although the revolution has not achieved all of its stated goals in either country, what happened in Egypt and Tunisia constitutes revolution in that the process in both countries began with an uprising and ended in the overthrow of the regime and its symbols. Yet, many expect the political revolution to expand to also include culture and economics. He pleads with Amin to extend his practical knowledge in research, history and political economy to assist and guide this progression.

Moukaled discusses what he calls Amin’s “reservations,” which he says are rooted in the academic’s fundamental convictions about revolution. These include Amin’s views on the Left, as well as on imperialism, corruption, and other topics deriving
from the Bolshevik, Chinese and even the French revolutions. Moukaled is critical of the usefulness of Amin’s leftist legacy and language, averring, “Such terms and categories offer a very limited framework for analyzing the Arab Spring.”

While the Soviets and their Cold War allies were thought to have epitomized the political left, the global Left and Right became intermingled following the collapse of the USSR. The Left and Right can still be told apart by economic indicators, Moukaled claims, but politically speaking, the distinction between the two is no longer as useful as it used to be; such easy classification ceased to be possible when the former international leftists became allied with the United States and its partners. This alliance was evident in both the Gulf and Yugoslav wars, particularly when part of the Arab left called for Western intervention to assist the Iraqi people against Saddam Hussein’s despotism.

The claim that the Egyptian or Tunisian left had a role in the recent revolutions is something of a misrepresentation, according to Mouakled. The role of the left was in fact marginal, with some of its factions “joining the revolution merely on the eve of its onset.” Many of these groups had been previously corrupted by socialist propaganda — particularly from the Soviets, who encouraged iron-fisted dictatorial leadership. Consequently, Mouakled advises Amin to launch a dialogue that might help rebuild the left in the Arab world and restructure its language and terminology.

Amin’s discussion of imperialism seems a bit antiquated— especially since the Second Gulf War, when both leftist and rightist groups pleaded for U.S. assistance against Saddam. Since Amin’s credentials on the subject of imperialism are impeccable, Moukaled asks him to rethink the relationship between imperialism and occupation, given that world capitalism has changed its methods of control in the age of globalization. The lesson here for Mouakled is that “liberation” forces must respond in kind by changing both their methods of struggle and their programs in general.

If Samir Amin doubts that the Muslim Brotherhood will be able to transform itself into a democratic organization, similar reservations should be expressed for all the various factions of the old Left, writes Moukaled, adding that it is impossible for leftists and Islamists to approach politics the same way they did in the past. Moukaled concludes his discussion of Samir Amin by agreeing with him that “conspiracy” has become a theory unsuitable for explaining imperialist “designs,” and that corruption is not the exclusive preserve of capitalism.

III

Undermining the Bulwark of Despotism

I am an avid reader of Adonis, and my admiration for him led me to translate some brief texts of his, while assigning other “Adonisian” texts to colleagues to translate and publish in this magazine. Personally, I consider him to be one of the Arab world’s greatest literary and cultural critics. Yet, many have commented on his long silence regarding Syrian politics. They have also pointed out the ambiguous terminology of his letters/essays in Al Safir newspaper with respect to the Syrian revolution. For example, Adonis recently referred to Bashar al-Assad as “the elected president”; such
statements have caused many to doubt his support for the demonstrators. I am of the
opinion, however, that the more Adonis has spoken and written, the more he has come
to favor political change and reform. By reform, of course, I do not mean the “reforms”
the Assad regime speaks of.

That Adonis is disappointed with both the regime and the opposition, as Moukaled
claims, can almost not be quarreled with. But the important question remaining is
why Adonis, of all Syrians and particularly Alawite intellectuals, declined to openly
condemn the enormous violence used against peaceful demonstrators? The sectarian
explanation is that Adonis does not speak out against the Alawite regime because he
himself is Alawite. Although Adonis is known for being secular, many of his critics
have advanced the sectarian theory. It should be kept in mind, though, that these
attacks are mere speculations and cannot be verified.

Also relevant is the fact that Adonis’s two letters, one to the Syrian president and
the other to the opposition, were published in a daily newspaper that generally
supports the Syrian regime but, at times, also features articles by anti-Assad regime
writers, both Lebanese and Syrian. The contradiction and ambiguity follow Adonis
all the way, with very few commentators citing his courage in undermining the two
most prominent pillars of despotism: the Baath Party and political Islam. Unfortunately,
as Moukaled observes, most critics believe that Adonis’s position produces the
opposite effect: it neither helps the revolution nor furthers the cause of change, but
rather supports the two aforementioned despotic powers.

Though critical of Adonis, Moukaled thinks the attacks leveled at him are too
harsh. These criticisms, he says, amount to “revolutionary despotism,” with blasphemy
now among the tactics used by progressives and reactionaries when they sense they
are losing a debate. This is not surprising, since blasphemy can be used against those
who question religion, as well as those who break away from a politically correct
position. In both cases, the individual is accused of heresy for having challenged the
main religious or ideological line. Adonis is undeserving of such mudslinging because
he remains an Arab intellectual who has spent more than half of his life calling for
change through scores of books and a major work of four volumes titled “Al-Thabet
Wa all-Mutahawel” (The Static and the Changing). In all of his works, Adonis was in
the forefront of those calling for intellectual, artistic, and even political changes in
Arab and Islamic society.

Many also accuse Adonis of having an overall flawed approach to the Arab
revolutions— especially the Syrian one. An erroneous approach will probably not
lead to sound conclusions, even if the terminology and the analytical tools happen to
be the correct ones. The results become even more catastrophic if the misuse of terms
is added to the equation, claims Moukaled. He adds, nothing explains the problem
with Adonis more succinctly than what the late scholar and leftist activist Mehdi
Amel said about him in his book, a “Critique of Daily Thought.” Amel considered
Adonis’s critique of religion to be derived from religious thought itself, with his
approach based on the deadly dichotomy inherent in all of the monotheistic faiths, as
well as in atheism. Amel claims that this duality has been one of the principal sources
of despotism throughout history. “Angel or Satan, black or white, heaven or hell,
neither meets the other”— the negation of the Other springs from here.

In Mouakaled’s opinion, Adonis’s secularism is not secularism in the liberal tradition. He instead terms it a “despotic-fundamentalism that seeks to negate the Other.” The problem with Adonis’s approach is that he stands against religion, but not against the religious establishment, the equivalent to the Church. Adonis cannot coexist with religion because he views it “as an enemy,” and this explains why he trusts neither the Syrian revolution nor the opposition, especially since the latter seeks shelter in mosques. The implication of his approach is that “the struggle is cultural in the first place and not political.

Perhaps the harshest criticisms of Adonis followed his discussion of “the mosque.” The critics countered with a simple question: where else should the demonstrators congregate, since demonstrations are banned? Should they organize their rallies at the Baath Party headquarters, or perhaps at the Opera House? In other words, the mosque is the only place that is safe enough for Syrians to speak relatively freely. Moukaled says that the Arab Spring shows up Adonis’s dated assertions about religion and culture with a bold and courageous new vision of struggle that the Syrian writer has yet to grasp. This new vision promulgated by the Arab revolutions aims at creating a system that embraces and protects cultural and political diversity rather than exploiting or suppressing it. While the old Arab political mind rejected the values of plurality and diversity so that power would remain with the dictator and within the single-party system, the revolutionaries are unanimous in their insistence that plurality and diversity increase the vibrancy of the democracy they are striving to create. They also hold that the rotation of power is a critical pillar of democracy that must be instituted in the future political system.

Mouakaled also discusses what he calls the “deadly generalization” at the heart of Adonis’s reasoning. Adonis reduces the struggle to a fight over the state, insists that society merely consists of communities, and holds that the Arab state will inevitably resort to violence, which is in turn linked to the religious question. Moukaled says these generalizations are borrowed from Adonis’s past writings, namely from the Al Thabit and Al Mutahawel in Arab history. If so, is this a problem? According to Mouakaled it is. He claims that comparing the outcome of the present circumstances to the outcomes of circumstances past is a gross mistake. He goes on to say that every political struggle is a struggle for the state or the apparatus of power, with violence, according to Max Weber’s definition, being monopolized by the state. This does not mean, however, that the struggle for power must be the only feature of this or any other conflict. Furthermore, every prominent religion, including secularism, has at some point been involved in a political power struggle, making the religious presence nothing new or particularly noteworthy. Adonis’s simplistic ideas help explain why he has sometimes wavered in his positions, such as when he initially praised the Iranian Revolution only to later withdraw his support and censure himself for his previous stance.

To demonstrate the continuity between Adonis’s past and present views, Mouakled cites some of his “redundant” questions: “Is Islam the Islam of Ali or Muawiyiyya? Is the Quran created or written? Is the Muslim belief in heaven and hell literal or
metaphorical?” But Adonis’s preoccupations are apparently not shared. No one read anything like this in the myriad slogans promoting the Arab Spring; no demonstrator wrote anything similar on any sign, nor were these sorts of quandaries the subjects of discussion on anyone’s Facebook page, according to Moukaled. Yet, the central question presented by Adonis to himself and others is: why have the Arabs failed until today to build a civil society? Important as this question undoubtedly is, he does not raise it as a matter of scientific or probing political inquiry, but merely as a rhetorical question venting anger and disapproval. Thus, it remains the question of the poet, but not the scientist. Had he left it open for discussion, Adonis might have found a multitude of diverse answers untainted and unbiased by bitterness and disappointment.

Adonis’s textual narrative is also problematic. In it, he refers to revolution as “the moment the beautiful tempest comes to shake the minds.” A romantic statement indeed. Although Moukaled believes that the beauty of Adonis’s writings lies in his poetry, he says that when Adonis writes about politics in a poetic style he registers and understands politics as a poet. In doing so, Adonis misunderstands the mechanisms of revolution (confusing its terms), judges the present by the standards of the past, and defines revolution as a fundamental change in cultural values and the structure of society itself. This unfortunately leads him to label Nasserist, Khomeinist and Baathist coups as revolutions.

The Arab Spring is a revolution that has been overdue for two centuries. However, this level of change and uprooting takes time; one cannot expect a speedy transformation in thoughts, values, traditions and customs, nor is a swift overhaul of the economic structure likely.

What, then, does Moukaled say can be expected from the revolution? He believes that a full revolution will not take place unless the political foundation is laid first. It is the political revolution that will usher in the social, cultural, economic, and scientific ones. Europe witnessed overwhelming renaissance in the realms of science and culture during the age of enlightenment, which was accompanied by a religious reformation that shook the pillars of the Catholic Church. These changes helped ignite a massive economic reconfiguration that moved humanity from the old world to the new. Nevertheless, the only event in Europe that deserves the label of revolution is the French Revolution. This political upheaval and reorganization reintroduced the world to the concepts of republics, rotating power, and the rule of law. What follows the Arab Spring will, hopefully, constitute the first step in placing the train of Arab development on the correct rail: the path to democracy and the rule of the people. Only then will the other revolutions become possible. The key to full revolution, then, is the elimination of despotism; reservations, worldviews, and poetic sensitivities that do not work toward this objective may unfortunately be working against it.