



ARAB INTELLECTUALS SERIES LUNCHTIME EVENT

Introduction:

Terje Rød-Larsen, *President, International Peace Institute*

Moderator:

Ambassador Abdullah M. Alsaidi, *Senior Fellow, International Peace Institute*

Speakers:

Hisham Matar, *Libyan novelist*

Ali Al-Muqri, *Yemeni novelist*

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TRANSCRIPTION

Terje Rød-Larsen:

A warm welcome to the International Peace Institute, and to this first lunchtime event in our new Arab Intellectuals Series. The purpose of this new series is to offer a platform for Arab writers and intellectuals, and we have two of them—actually three, I would say—with us here this afternoon. We will ask them to share their own interpretations, their views and analysis on the dramatic changes which are unfolding in the Arab world in this current period of transition, and most importantly, to discuss the way ahead.

Indeed, we've heard lately many interpretations and many explanations of the root causes of the Arab Spring. Every day when we open the newspapers, switch on the television or the radio, a new piece of analysis seems to appear. Our new series aims to offer an opportunity for the diplomatic community here in New York to hear unfiltered and fresh perspectives on the events of the Arab uprising from people who have witnessed it first-hand.

Therefore I'm very happy to welcome our two speakers today, Hisham Matar from Libya on my right-hand side here, and Ali Al-Muqri from Yemen on the extreme right there, not politically-speaking. For those of you who didn't see it, Hisham Matar was featured very prominently in Sunday's *New York Times* book review. In reviewing Hisham's latest novel, which is called *Anatomy of a Disappearance*, Robert Worth writes, I quote, "For western readers, what often

seemed lacking was an authentic interpreter and witness, someone who could speak across cultures and make us feel the abundant miseries that fueled the revolt. No one plays this role, in my view," he says, "as powerfully as Hisham Matar." You must have been very pleased by that.

Hisham Matar: I deny everything.

Rød-Larsen: Our other speaker is Ali Al-Muqri. He has a strong reputation as an independent thinker with unfaltering integrity. He, very courageously, takes on controversial and important topics in Yemen. His books propose an exploration of Yemen's identity, and of tolerance in the Arab world.

We've invited them today to share their own views and interpretations of the revolts, and how it will shape the future of their countries.

I would also like to thank our moderator today, and my IPI colleague and good friend, Ambassador Abdullah M. Alsaidi, who leads this new initiative, with the support of Jose Vericat. So with these words, let me now give the floor to you, Abdullah, to chair the meeting. Abdullah, the floor is yours.

Alsaidi: Thank you very much, Terje, and I would like to welcome everyone in this gathering. We are gathering today to exchange views and listen to two Arab intellectuals who have participated, and indeed contributed to the momentous events currently taking place across the Arab world, otherwise known in the West as the Arab Spring. Many think tanks in the United States—and indeed in Europe, too—have organized multiple seminars and workshops to analyze the reasons for the current Arab awakening. Why now? Why this spontaneous, leaderless, and non-ideological revolt? Who are these young people who are remaking Arab history?

We in the International Peace Institute do not claim to know with certainty the answers to these questions, but we know for sure who will provide credible answers. They are the people who appreciated, contributed to the political awareness, and promoted fundamental rights of the people. By virtue of their work, they are equipped to speak of the underlying reasons for the uprising, and I'm speaking about Arab intellectuals particularly poets, novelists, and so on.

We are therefore privileged to have with us two distinguished Arab intellectuals, two novelists, to speak about the troubled uprisings in Libya and Yemen. And I say "troubled" with a heavy heart. We will later this fall have an Egyptian and a Tunisian novelist to speak here at the IPI, and we will later on have a Syrian and others. We have worked hard to bring a Syrian, but from Damascus these days, as you all know, it is very difficult to get someone to come.

The Arab Spring is very important. I have argued that it is an apt rejoinder to the allegations in the West that Muslims are fatalistic people; that they prefer security over freedom. This is an Orientalist problem we have had since probably the encounter between Persia and Greece historically, and that their culture and faith, and that is Islam, are incompatible with democracy. More importantly, the Arab Spring is an unequivocal repudiation of the violent ideology of Al-Qaeda, whose defeat will be realized with the efflorescence of accountable government and the triumph of the rule of law.

Arab regimes were too slow to grasp the nature and the extent of the popular discontent; therefore they have miserably failed to deal with it. Wisdom was indeed in short supply. Instead of instituting fundamental reforms, or leave to

save their country, the ravages of protracted conflict, leaders—and I know it's an oxymoron—leaders of the royal Arab republics—because they are republics, but they are royal because they want to transfer power to their relatives—remain adamant about their ability to overcome the challenges, notwithstanding the odds.

A word of caution—there is in this euphoria about the Arab Spring, I believe there is a profound dialectical relationship between lofty ideals and the mundane. The Arab Spring, besides being about dignity, it is a revolution of expectations. Therefore, unless poverty, corruption, and unemployment are dealt with in an arrogant manner, there is a danger that the luster of democracy will wither. But be that as it may, let me introduce two illustrious speakers.

To my left is Hisham Matar. Hisham Matar was born in Libya in 1970, and he's a novelist and author based in London. His debut novel, *In the Country of Men*, was shortlisted for the 2006 Man Booker Prize. *Anatomy of a Disappearance*, his latest novel, came out earlier this year, and reviewed in last Sunday's New York Times review of books. Also this year, he published a shorter story, "Naima," in *The New Yorker Magazine*, and I think it's in the last issue or the issue before the last.

Ali Al-Muqri is an intellectual poet-novelist from Yemen. He has published eight books, his latest novel, *The Handsome Jew*, was published in 2010, with one of the most important publishers in the Arab world, Dar al-Saqi in Lebanon. In his previous novel, *Black Taste, Black Smell*, he looks into the marginalization of a community of Yemenis of dark skin. *The Handsome Jew* is set in 17th century Yemen, and tells the story of a daughter of a mufti who falls in love with a Jew. It is about tolerance.

Al-Muqri has built himself a reputation as an independent thinker, and it's also evident in his essay, "Liquor and Wine in Islam," published in 2007. And I want to convey that every time I have a glass of wine and someone tells me "sinful," I said, "Mr. Muqri told me it's okay in Islam, so he takes the responsibility." Born in Taiz in 1966, the most liberal city in Yemen, Al-Muqri began writing at the age of 18. Since 1997, he has been the editor of *Al-Hikma*—"Wisdom"—the organ of the Yemeni Writer's Association. He has directed the young literary journal, *Ghaiman*, since it was established in 2007. Al-Muqri currently lives in Sana'a, and he travelled to attend this meeting from Sana'a. He arrived the day before yesterday, and he will leave tomorrow.

Let me give the floor now to Hisham Matar who will speak first, and then I will give the floor to Mr. Al-Muqri. Hisham, you have the floor.

Matar:

Hello, good afternoon. Thank you for hosting this. Thanks to the IPI, and particularly to Jose for arranging it all. And thanks to Mr. Rød-Larsen for his kind introduction, and to Ambassador Abdullah Alsaïdi. And it's a particular honor for me to be sharing the podium with my brother and colleague, Ali Al-Muqri.

So I was asked to say a few words about the Libyan uprising, perhaps the roots behind, it, but also about the role of writers in this time. I think the question, often repeated, "Why now?" could be perhaps phrased in a different way, which is, "Why not now?" in the sense that this has seemed so obvious for so long. It's so extraordinary, but it's also so obvious for so long. Certainly as an Arab and as a Libyan, from as far back as I remember, I have listened to conversations about when are things going to change, and these conversations are shared across so many very different and diverse people. So I remember, for example, the bus

driver that drove me to school when I was twelve years old saying, "When are things going to change?" I remember my school teacher saying, "When are things going to change?" I remember the Communist intellectual family friends saying, "When are things going to change?" So it seems to me, it oversimplifies things to say that this has started at a particular moment in the very immediate past.

Certainly Tunisia has allowed the human and political imagination of the Middle East to see a completely different horizon. It's as if the horizon went much further than the most audacious amongst us would have hoped. And history shows that there are certain moments when actually, what is really needed is for the national imagination to imagine a different sort of reality, and we have been bogged down with certain limitations and certain kind of passivism and a defeatist sort of attitude to the future that has been so dramatically challenged and compellingly challenged over the last few months.

So what is the role of the writer in all of this? Literature, I feel, is by nature rebellious. It's by nature fixed on undermining power, speaking truth to power. It is unwieldy. It can't be employed in the service of anything. It is wild. It is, as Mario Vargas Llosa says, "Literature is fire." And so, it seems that whether we like it or not, as writers, we are outside of the historical march. The way I see us is that we are sort of perched on the trees, and we watch history move, and we reflect. We reflect. We hold up mirrors to our societies, which is why often we say things and show things that people don't necessarily want to see. And it has always seemed very interesting to me, being from a place like Libya, that in some ways, dictatorship is also involved in fiction. It's always involved in narrative. Dictatorship can't survive without stories.

So for example, I remember when I was a young boy, watching these repeated reels on television where you have at one moment Mussolini and the Italian invasion hanging people in the squares; and then immediately the next shot is Gaddafi marching on to Tripoli, as if everything in between didn't exist. So a dictatorship is involved in rewriting history, reinterpreting the present, and projecting a certain idea of the future.

The difference, of course, between the fiction of dictatorship and the fiction of novelists is interested in what it might be like to the other; it's interested in conflicting empathies; it's interested in the bizarre, and what seems at first glance incomprehensible. Somebody does an action, says something that seems completely mysterious, and that is attractive to a fiction writer.

To dictatorship, its fiction is a very different sort of fiction. It's very bad fiction. It's incredibly single-minded. It's intolerant, predictable, and doesn't accept any other alternative. And so it seems obvious, therefore, that dictatorship should come very hard on to novelists. I've always forgiven it that, if you see what I mean. Of course I haven't forgiven it that, but you know, I've always understood why it does that. It seems to make perfect sense according to its logic.

And so in these times, it's been quite extraordinary to be a Libyan writer, because you are invited to come and to speak, to engage with events in a way that you weren't in the past. And the sense of uncertainty, I think, at this particular historical moment in Libya, not knowing what's going to happen next, being captured equally by a very violent sense of optimism and also a very strong sense of foreboding and anxiety. This sort of state has allowed writers to contribute, to comment.

And I think it is exactly at moments like these that we remember the value of literature, that it's not entertainment—literature can entertain, it should entertain, but that's not what its principle role is. Literature is what reminds us of who we are as human beings. In fact, if you stop and imagine the world without literature and music and art, to me it symbolizes a sort of tunnel, a human tunnel, a sort of death.

And so we are unwieldy; we can't be employed; we are rebellious; but we are also the ones that provide the music and the ones that reflect the image.

Having said all of this, there is a romanticism involved with the writer and the revolution, which I am very sensitive towards. I think it's inappropriate. I think we are perhaps less useful than a baker in a revolution. Bakers are far more useful. So I am sensitive to exaggerating the role of the writer in the revolution, but I'm also perhaps even more sensitive to asking the writer to be anything, to do anything, to serve anything. I think from the writer's point of view, a wonderful country is a country that stands out of the way.

Alsaidi: Thank you very much, Hisham, for this very enlightening discourse. I will now invite Ali Al-Muqri to take the floor.

Ali Al-Muqri: *[Translated from Arabic]* Good afternoon. As Hisham has, I have many questions about what happened and what will happen, what is happening. The question is not, why did it happen? Why did it wait until now to happen?—this is the question that I have. In reality, as I see what happened, is the fall of imaginations, of lies of Arab regimes. This is the fall and all it means. This fall of many things—the regime taking all the wealth and controlling opinions, all of the means that were used by these Arab regimes, be it directly by controlling the rule or the governments directly, as that happened in Tunisia and Egypt and Libya, or through a false kind of elections where only a certain part of 1% is assured to win, as is the case in Yemen right now, or what happened in Egypt.

The democratic understanding is the following. The fall of this regime has many meanings. The understanding of the liberalism in Tunisia, for example—what does that mean? Also the fall, what does that mean, the fall from the other side, the fall of the other? The fall of the illusions of opposition, that when people were saying that Islam is the only solution or the priority has to be given to the Arab unity, or we have to fight first and we have to be united in fighting first, fighting the others—this gave a possibility for everybody to come closer to one another. Everybody was brandishing a slogan and did not accept the other.

So when these walls fell, now we are asking the question about, what do we have in common in this dialogue? This series of falls caused the people to go down to the street and demonstrate. This started, as we know, from Tunisia, where there was a meaning after that. There was a feeling, a unified feeling and a unifying feeling that all the Arabs started to have, that they can lead a revolution and that this is our destiny. As the poet, the Tunisian poet said, "If the people want to live one day, destiny must say yes." In Yemen, now people are talking about the revolution. Now they're talking about what is behind the revolution, what is going to happen after the revolution, what will happen in the future after the revolution? This is now the question that is being asked everywhere.

I think that, for example, now all of the illusions are falling. They realize that they cannot take over the power by themselves. Now there is dialogue, an open dialogue between everybody in which everybody is participating—how is the new

government going to be? Now the new governments are being imagined through the idea of dismantling the entire members of and remnants of the old regimes. The people who are present now in the Liberty Square in Yemen and Change Square in Yemen, Tahrir Square in Yemen—they are now dismantling the old regime in every way they can, every way that the regime loses to control the government, to control the people for example, specifying and limiting the roles of the President and also giving decentralization a priority in the country.

There are many questions: for example, should rule be through a parliamentary system or universal direct elections? Some people see that rule through a Parliament, there are pros and cons, and maybe the Islamic parties of Islamic movements may constitute a problem. So now, this is what we're talking about for the future. Now we come to the role of literature, as Hisham said before me, in this area. I believe that several revolutions don't see anything in literature, like Deodato Arellano when he became the symbol of all the revolutions.

For me, in my work, the idea of revolution started since my first novel, *Black Scent*, and this was talking about the revolutions in the '70s in the south of Yemen. This revolution, despite the fact that it encourages the black minority in Yemen to say that, "We are safe, and we are not going to be servants," they lived in conditions that are very, very bad. Even slaves have rights, but they did not have any rights, so they did not even have the rights that slaves had.

During this revolution, the revolution in the '70s in Aden, the authorities started to claim that this is the period of democratic revolution. So they're saying that this is not the period of revolution. They did not want to participate, and they did not want to share the ruling or the governing of the country with these minorities. This was an ideological revolution, and it was limited in its principle and its direction. For these people, this minority, they were fighting against being marginalized, marginalized from society, marginalized from everything, from religion, from everything. So for them, or for everybody else, for the authorities, they became traitors.

As the noble said, "They are living the great death, the death of ideology, the death of the regime, the death of a country, or the death of a government that doesn't even see them." The death of the idea of a nation. The idea of a nation is something that I worked on in my second novel, *The Handsome Jew*. So this is just a question, I cannot talk about it or answer it now. Fatima, who is the main character in this novel, who falls in love with this handsome Jew; this symbolizes the search for a new nation, a new idea of a nation. Not as the search of a nation, the search for a nation. The search for a new nation, not the same nation, because the nation became, with all of its understanding, the holy nation, the holy land, the prohibited land that did not allow anybody to talk about it; or people are not holy anymore and do not have any position, do not hold any position or any importance.

This is a very important point, and now we can go back with this idea to the current Arab revolution. They brought down the idea of the foreign nation, or this nation, that this is not my nation, this isn't my country. This is an awareness. There's an awareness right now with all the tyranny that is going on, and there is an awareness that we need to fight it everywhere and in every way possible.

I would like, before we open the floor for questions and answers, I wanted to ask you about the influence of the idea of tolerance that you spread and you really encourage in your work with the revolution, in this revolution. How do people deal with extremist movements in the Arab change, in the areas of change and

the periods of change, because the tolerance is going to be the main nucleus for success of the Arab revolution? I believe that the revolutions have brought down the idea of you and me thinking in one certain way, and not tolerating how everybody else thinks.

For example, the youth, how they look at women. Women are extremists; there movements, for example, do want to limit their participation and there are young people who do not, or stand very firmly against this commission, and they are winning. And most of the leadership of the revolutions, especially in Yemen, are actually women; very important personalities in the Yemeni society. Nobody wants to give in to this extremism or these unilateral views, and the revolution is the one that creates this kind of tolerance in this sense.

But what can we say about the role of literature in this area, tolerance? For example, it may be a cumulative role, not a direct role. Literature is how we express ideology, the changes, the revolution. I believe that it is not literature if it doesn't do that. Now maybe the ideology could be a part of the literary work, but it doesn't have to be or start from an ideological or a political standpoint. The revolution right now, for me as a writer, as a novelist, is not complete because there are things that I see that the revolutionaries, our revolutionaries don't see. That doesn't mean that I'm more aware, but from what I see—I'm an observer. I'm just an observer, as a writer and as a novelist—thanking Ali for this great intervention.

Alsaïdi: For those who want to ask a question, make observations, or critique. Please. Yes.

Jeff Laurenti: Jeff Laurenti with The Century Foundation. I wonder if you could share with us the degree to which the writer, the literary and intellectual creator, was able to insinuate messages that would have been captured by younger people, those who had been on the front lines of change, given censorship, given the difficulty of being able to find media through which your ideas could—uncensored, unvarnished—be spread. Really, in what ways do you see an impact in the young people, the demonstrators, of the ideas that you would have wanted to provide, had there been, taking the Soviet analogy, a samizdat in secret circulation that got these messages across?

And forgive me for just one little quick additional question to Hisham Matar, because you cited the propaganda film showing Mussolini and his troops, and then Gaddafi—did people see that as a self-parody of Gaddafi as equally a megalomaniac as the guy who was being parodied before him?

Alsaïdi: Hisham?

Matar: Well, on the point of information, if I understood your question correctly—in the very early days of the Libyan uprising, it became very clear that what Gaddafi was doing was that he was sealing the country off, so journalists couldn't get in and information couldn't get out. But also, anticipating the events, several of his forces had arrested several journalists, and so it became necessary for Libyans outside to try to create these bridges, and this happened in many, many different places.

But for the first two weeks of the uprising, me and a group of friends, we got together and basically set up a small, ad hoc newsroom in London that was making about a hundred calls a day to Libya, to get accounts. And what was interesting was that as soon as you call a lawyer who is in a demonstration, and

you say, "Look, we'd like you to keep notes about what is going to happen to you in the next twelve hours." And then you call someone else who you know is going to be in the vicinity and ask the same thing, people take this responsibility very, very seriously. So what I'm trying to say is that people feel a kind of commitment to documenting things, because it stands in sharp contrast to the sort of madness of the past, you know.

For forty years we lived in a country where rules were stated very clearly, and then changed almost to the opposite direction, without any explanation being offered, without even blushing, without even needing to feel that they have to justify this drastic change of direction. And the psychology that has been inflicted on the country, putting aside all of the physical oppression—the disappearances, the imprisonment, the deaths, etc., the wrongful acquisition of personal property, all of these things—all of those aside, I would argue that one of the most sinister effects that this dictatorship has had on its people is that it has inflicted on them a sense of unpredictable madness, which I would suggest is more horrendous, actually, to endure than the other things.

So in the early days, this act of documenting things was not only necessary to getting the story out, but in engaging in it; it seemed to give people a kind of routine, a kind of sanity, a kind of connection to the world, no? And so we were very surprised how many people were willing to do this, and do it not having any journalism training, to do it with great attention.

As to your other comment about the Mussolini-Gaddafi thing, there are certain advantages involved in ruling a country for forty years. So if you repeat the same narrative over and over—Libya is extraordinarily young, you know. Most Libyans—almost 80% of Libyans—are under the age of thirty. Most Libyans don't even remember the hangings in the 1980s of the political dissidents in the sports stadiums. They don't remember those. When they see videos of them they say, "Oh, my God! I didn't know this was taking place!" But the parallels between Gaddafi and Mussolini are stylistic, in the sense that, of course, you know, it's ridiculous to compare. I mean, Mussolini did much worse things, that he halved the Libyan population. But, you know, the hangings, the public hangings, there are lots of stylistic parallels there that many Libyans have made those connections, yes.

Alsaïdi:

Ali?

Al-Muqri:

[Translated from Arabic] The question about what message can the writers send—as I said, what the revolutions don't see in literature, there's also what literature doesn't see and what the writers don't see. If you follow the events, sometimes you can reach a point where you do not believe in the revolution; however, many leaders—even now the Arab leaders—are talking about the revolutions. However, what is happening in the Arab world right now is a revolution over the understanding of revolutions. So, what writers don't see sometimes is that revolutions are necessary, like water or air and everything else, and this period, and the circumstances in which the Arab world is living right now, the control of everything including wealth and opinion.

So I believe that a writer can give an opinion on a Facebook page or in the newspaper, and he or she can be seen as an artist, or as a musician. Everyone can listen to him from every walk of society, and this is the role of the modern novel, the modern writing. You do not have to have a specific political or ideological position. So I fear that it will now be void, literature will be void of its beauty. However in these circumstances that we live in, I can say that we are

asking the writer to give his opinion, but I'm saying that the writer does not have the obligation to give his opinion. He should not be in the front himself, or he should not be part of the fight himself or herself, even if he sees that this is a necessary chance.

Alsaïdi: Please.

Hugh Roberts: Hugh Roberts, UNDP. Your conception of the writer, which is, if I understand it right, holding up the writer, obviously that's a key function of a writer, but you spoke in universal terms, not just about novelists, not just about Arab writers. I wonder if that is an abdication from a tradition of more engaged writers. I wonder if, for any revolution to sustain itself, it needs its Miltons, its Paines, its Camus. And if you felt able to say something a bit more political, it would be great to hear either of your thoughts on the UN, whether the Security Council or Human Development Reports, and how you think the UN relates to events, and please speak frankly.

Alsaïdi: Well, I know Hisham is very frank, so I'll give him the floor.

Matar: Whatever gave you that idea?

Alsaïdi: Your writing.

Matar: It's very difficult to speak in general terms, and although I said that writers shouldn't feel obliged to occupy a certain position, that's not to say that they are not free to do whatever position they want to consider. How do I feel about the UN? It's very difficult to answer. I don't know. I can't, I'm not informed enough about it. I mean, I can tell you what I feel about it from the little that I know about it, which is that I need to know more.

Alsaïdi: I have a view of, I think, the UN is not keeping up with the events. I haven't seen a coordinated group to deal with the phenomena as an Arab phenomenon. Obviously the uprisings, in my view, the uprisings are rehabilitating Arab nationalism, and it is also partly led by the Islamists. Where the UN stands, you see one person here, one person in this department—they have not had a coordinated response, a coherent response to this. But in any case, the floor is still open, of course. Jose.

Jose Vericat: Hi. I'm Jose from IPI. Just a quick response, because I've been following your writing, Hisham, concerning the UN. It's a question I wanted to pose to you, you know, in comparing Libya to Iraq and the international intervention there, and to follow-up on the previous question. I think that the issue of dignity of the people, and being a people-led revolution, I think is very important. And I think part of the crisis in Libya, from my position, is to what extent do you think that it really has been a people-led revolution? And to what extent will the foreign dimension influence the way that people see events as they have happened, given the great importance of local ownership?

Matar: I'm happy to speak about this in more general terms than the UN, in the sense of Libya's relationship to the international community, and how it has seemed to me, particularly the 2003 switch, welcoming the Gaddafi regime back into the fold, seemed, from my perspective, at least, a huge act of diplomatic negligence, and it was scandalous. But also, in very real terms, helped the regime to maintain its grip on power, helped it to oppress its people more, not less. And in various dialogues I've held, merely just as a human rights campaigner with the British Foreign Office and its equivalents in Europe, the idea was that, you know, the

more we engage with these people, the more we will urge them to reform; and that hasn't obviously proven to be the case at all. Or, the more we engage with them, the more reasonable they become. Again, it hasn't worked. And the terms started floating around such as "leveraged engagement", which reminds me of what Margaret Thatcher used to say with the South Africans during apartheid, so "constructive engagement", "leveraged engagement."

So this new dialogue started, and the term we began to hear, which was "the Libyan model", meaning a successful way of engaging with thuggery and so on; all didn't prove to be true. In fact it's the opposite. So during that period, we felt incredibly isolated, and we felt incredibly angry and incredibly cynical about the world, because we watched these respectable countries treat our oppressor with respect, and giving him more power to continue oppressing us. This has pushed Libyans into a really different corner. It's a corner of the political imagination, no? It's very difficult to escape from that corner, and history shows that nations usually go down dead-ends once they surrender to that corner.

And so what is dramatic about right now is that even though the NATO intervention overcomplicates things, without a doubt, it represents to a country that is relatively speaking a young country, a country with rudimentary institutions in civic society—it represents to it a very, very powerful diplomatic challenge, which is, how do you negotiate with these huge countries that are now going to feel that they do have a leveraged engagement with you, you know? That overcomplicates things, without a doubt, absolutely.

But I think on the upshot, what it does is that—and this is not political at all—because I think also there is a problem about, and this is one of the things that I think rising literature does, is that it corrects the inverted cone through which politics views life, views the private moments, you know. It abstracts human life, a lot of the times. And so outside of the political issues and the ethical issues and the legal issues that are concerned, vis-à-vis NATO's involvement, there is another effect on the Libyan people, which is suddenly they feel connected to the world in a way that they didn't before. They feel, after forty-four years of isolation of—you know, very difficult for them to travel—they feel suddenly that there is something connecting them to the world, and I think that's a very positive thing, and it's something that returns us to our internationalist roots. Libya being where it is on the Mediterranean, its relationship to Africa, to Europe, and to the Middle East is a complex one, and has, for many years, been a rich one, a source of positive things, but it hasn't been so in the last forty years. So hopefully this will engage it more.

And I think also, it seems on some level, nothing has really changed from the Western point of view, from America and Britain and France and Italy's point of view. Nothing has really changed. They still look at Libya in a similar way. It's basically, how do we get our—and I don't mean to sound cynical—but it does seem that that is the tone. So the challenge then, to all of civic society, Libya and European and American, is how do we hold these people to account? How do we create a new dialogue that isn't profoundly set by politicians and corrupt corporations, but by men and women of culture, men and women of justice, men and women of peace? How do we start to create that sort of dialogue? That seems to be a challenge, but also an opportunity, I feel.

Alsaïdi:

Thank you, Hisham. And the lady here.

Unidentified

Woman: Firstly to commend IPI for bringing together two writers, one representing literature in a foreign language living in the West, and the other living in the Arab world writing in Arabic. I wonder to what extent is the audience and readers for your writings, both of you, to what extent do they merge? Is your work translated and read in Arabic by the same people who perhaps are reading your work, Arabs living abroad and émigré? And I ask this, because as a Pakistani-American, I know that we deal with this kind of almost horizontal, bi-national, bilingual kind of merger in our work, and its effect.

Alsaïdi: Ali, you start?

Al-Muqri: *[Translated from Arabic]* In reality, I don't know if you can measure quality of the book by the fact that it is spread between many people. I receive letters from the Arab world, and they prove that my work has been read extensively and has a cultural impact. These letters are very sensitive, they feel that my work has had an impact on their lives. Even if I talk about something very sensitive, when I speak about the black people in our community and how they are treated like outsiders, and all the values and the concepts that are in my work, I always try to research them.

In my work, *The Handsome Jew*, some people read it as a work that speaks about the conflict between Muslim Arabs and Jews, and some others consider it a typical Yemeni situation. One of the writers wrote that there is no more time to protest about the Palestinian cause, but this novel is a representation of it. In reality, it was important for me to understand what people are saying about my work, and readers for me are very important and they have reactions, and I'm very interested in their reactions and knowing their opinion. But I think that literature is a cumulative work, not just like music, for example, where you can hear a piece of music or you read a poem, and you remember some different words. We have to give incentives to the reader to have an opinion, to have a position. Not that he would go and protest in the street, but this is the role of writing, in my opinion. Hisham?

Matar: I think we forget how radical it is an act to make someone empathize and feel deeply for somebody completely different from them. It's a civilizing quality of literature. Who do I write for, is I think a question that is related to your question, in the sense of what language do you write in and where is my work translated into Arabic. I write in English but my work is translated into Arabic, and I work very closely with my Arabic translator, and it's something that I'm deeply engaged in. But who do I write for? It changes depending what I'm writing. If I'm writing fiction, I'm writing for no one, in a way, or it's too abstract. Maybe the closest definition is what Hemingway said when somebody said, "Who do you write for?" He said, "I write for myself and the woman I love, even if she can't read me." So in a sense, writing is an act of love. It is an act of wanting to connect with other people, but not necessarily specific people. I don't think of a set of people that I'm writing for.

And also, my whole posture, my whole state of mind is very different when I'm writing fiction. When I sit and write an article, then I do think I'm writing for a specific audience, depending on whom I'm writing this article for, if it's for an Arabic paper or for an English paper. The effect of writing in another language for me is, on some level not by choice, and on another level purely by choice. In other words, there are very practical reasons why I write in English, due to my education, etc., etc.

But there are also other reasons that I think are perhaps more existential for me, in the sense that by writing through another language, a language with which I do have a love affair, it somehow paradoxically allows me a sort of distance that allows me to write with more courage, that allows me to write about the things that really matter to me, the things that all writers write about. You can't sit and write a novel without being obsessed with what you're writing, and so you write through obsession, in a sense, or towards obsession. And somehow by writing through another language, it gives me that sort of distance that allows me to be braver, and it allows me to have that quality of restraint and quality of calmness that I am attracted to.

And which I think, by the way, to me I see it as an artistic act of resistance because on some level, what the dictator really wants, the project of dictatorship is to retard society, to retard the individual, to make you either silent or in prison or underground or abroad, or so angry that even the people that agree with you don't want to listen to you. So from an artistic point of view, it becomes a very interesting challenge—how can you create art under this situation? How can you be as nuanced as possible? How could you do all the things that the situation makes it difficult for you to do?

Alsaïdi: Thank you, Hisham. Please.

Ann Phillips: My name is Ann Phillips. I'm on the Board of the IPI. Since the beginning of what we call the Arab Spring, I have been to numerous meetings where I have heard discussions about what's been going on in the Middle East, either by scholars, by diplomats, by students, by politicians. This is the first time I've had the opportunity to hear this unique perspective coming from artists, and this has been a very special experience that I want to thank you both very much for this.

And Mr. Al-Muqri, I want to thank you for making that arduous journey, a very quick one, to be here today. We really appreciate it very much.

Now my question is, I'm interested to know whether, in either or both of your countries, the artists have actually organized as a group, as a collective group, identified as such, and participated either actively known to be artists, or intellectually identified as artists, in what's been going on in recent months in your countries. I don't know if I made that clear.

Al-Muqri: *[Translated from Arabic]* Yes. This happened. This took place in many places, in many organizations in our country—participation of artists and literary people who went to Tahrir Square. I was one of the ones who participated with them, and we issued a report signed by sixty-three Yemeni writers. In this framework, there are several activities that took place. Many go to the squares and write or make drawings, expressive drawings. This is direct participation.

Personally, I wrote several articles in Arabic newspapers, and some of them were translated into English. Also, there are musicians who lead activities and perform songs, maybe character songs about the old regime. The role of the song was very interesting, and it was very widely accepted and used through YouTube, viewed through YouTube and Facebook and also through mobile phones. These are all basically satirical videos or songs about the old regime, or maybe a montage of the President and other personalities, to compare what they used to say with what they used to do. This is more of a media role, not real literature. Professional literature, as literature itself, will talk about revolutions and many things through a very analytical reading of what is going on and what they want to see right now, because revolution has many faces.

We talk about the role of women in the revolution, and the role of minorities. We're talking about the role of women. I see Mrs. Amat al-Alim, who was the star of Yemen, the big star in Yemen, and she is a revolution herself. In her life, everything about her is a revolution, in the way she was acting and in her behavior, and also in her work, and I salute her. Right now. Over here.

Matar:

Yes. Well you know, in the Libyan uprising, there's a poem that was written by a poet who was in prison who was anticipating the uprising, and he wrote this poem that is a ludicrously long poem, it's five pages long. And you're thinking that, you know, if you're going to write a poem for a revolution, make it short enough that people will remember it, no? No, he writes a five-page poem. I remember this conversation I was having with a friend of mine, a wonderful Libyan poet called Khaled Mattawa, and he and I were lamenting. We always said that one of our pet subjects is we lament the oral tradition—only if our people wrote everything down, we would have avoided so many different problems. We attributed everything ill to the oral tradition.

And we were wrong, because one of the most glorious moments I think in the history of Libya was when Benghazi was liberated, and you had 50,000 people standing between the courthouse and sea, holding hands, walking together, and singing the five-page poem, word-for-word, not missing one, you know. And the poem starts, "We will remain here until pain vanishes."

But also on another level, we all realize, not only Libyans, but also Arabs, how these idiots were dividing us, how these idiots were keeping us apart. I'll give you some examples. In 1977, the Gaddafi dictatorship did something that I think is, even by its standards, quite vile in the history of dictatorship. It set up a mock literary festival, invited all the young writers of the generation. Many writers attended. It was a trap. They caught them all and threw them in prison. That generation spent about ten years in prison. So they went in in their mid-twenties, late-twenties, early-thirties, they came out on average ten years later. Some stayed later than that.

Now some of these writers, whenever they would come to London, they would not see me. They'd feel uncomfortable seeing me. They're worried about being seen with me. They're worried about giving a reading with me. And of course, I understood that, and never for a moment suggested anything different.

But once the uprising started, we all did a reading together at the London Book Fair, and it was the first time in my life that I gave a reading with Libyan writers. It has never happened before. And it was wonderful, because suddenly—and I didn't bring up the subject—we gave a reading. It was a reading, and it was a discussion about literature. But then they started to speak about that time, and it was a sense that we were as brothers returning to each other.

But also, you have to remember that the Gaddafi regime had a very negative effect on Egyptian literature also. It forced the Egyptian government to ban books by Egyptian writers that were criticizing Gaddafi. For example, there's a novel called, *The Leader Gets a Haircut*, and it's a novel about this ridiculous time in Libya; the Egyptian writer who was living there, I think, was working as a school teacher. I wrote about it for *The New Yorker*, I think only about a week ago. But also, in a very personal sense, these dictatorships, the way they colluded with each other; for example, the Egyptian dictatorship kidnapping my father, who was a Libyan dissident, from his home in Cairo in 1990, and handing him over to the Libyans, created such a rupture in one's own personal feelings

towards this country—a country that I love, Egypt, the country that I lived in when I was a young boy, and where the family home still is and where many friends are and writers that I know.

And every time I would go to Egypt in these years, since 1990 to today, whenever I would go there and I would sit with my old childhood friends, we would sort of tiptoe around the subject of my father. They felt uneasy. They felt embarrassed and they felt, you know, and I didn't want to inflict that on them, and so we were all kind of—there was a silent room in our friendship. Once the Egyptian dictatorship fell and the Libyan dictatorship was challenged, I went to Egypt, and everything is completely changed. The same people felt closer than they ever did before. Egyptian writers were talking about Libya not as this kind of other bizarre country next door, but as our neighbor and Libyans as our brothers. So artistically, cultural life is, I believe, hugely rejuvenated by these actions.

Alsaidi: Thank you. Michael.

Michael Scott: Thank you. My name is Michael Scott. I come from Baltimore, where I'm working on Arabic literary translation. I'm a former UN staff person, but now I translate Arabic novels and short stories.

I was struck by Ali Al-Muqri's statement introducing *The Handsome Jew*, that his novel is not about searching for a homeland. It's more about creating an alternative homeland. In view of that, I wonder if, Ali, you could comment on the cover of the book, which is the middle book there, which conveys a picture of almost the wandering Jew searching for the homeland. So, the cover seems to stand, to my mind, in opposition to your own statement. I realize that you were not involved, probably, in choosing the cover for the publisher, and I think Dar al-Saqi should be criticized for that. I think the cover is really unfortunate, and it's not a very useful cover. But that's my own view. I wonder if you have a comment. Thank you.

Al-Muqri: *[Translated from Arabic]* In reality, I love art and I love drawing, and when I dealt with the cover, it's not from an expressive point of view. It doesn't express the story. When the publicist sent me the cover, I was happy, and I told him that I want to keep this cover. It doesn't have to have a relationship with the story. This doesn't have to be a Jew from Yemen. He doesn't have a Yemeni traditional outfit. As I said, the cover itself is an art. It doesn't have to express what's in the story. This is how I dealt with it, from this point of view. I don't believe that the actual story, the modern story, really is interested that the cover should express the inside of the book. It could be just an artistic work. This is how I dealt with it, and why I dealt with it in this way, and I was happy with it.

Alsaidi: Thank you. Richard.

Richard Barrett: Thank you. Richard Barrett from the United Nations. I'd just like to go back to something that Mr. Al-Muqri was saying earlier about the role of the novelist as a satirist, or he thought that it was a role that may not be appropriate for a novelist, but it would seem in the context of current social movements in the Middle East, that satire, or some form of subversion, would be quite an appropriate role for a novelist. And I just wondered whether he could sort of explain a little bit more the limit to which he thought a novelist should go in being subversive, and maybe Mr. Matar could also comment on the value of satire. Thank you.

Al-Muqri: *[Translated from Arabic]* I didn't understand exactly—the role of the writer? —it could be part of the literary work. Some artists or some novelists have this

satirical style in their writing, and I believe that it's possible. However, this satire became something that the modern media can do, not in the real literary sense of the work. There is satirical literature, for example. I personally do not understand, or I cannot deal with it, or maybe I don't know how to deal with it. Maybe there is some kind of satirical literature, but I don't believe that I can write satirical literature. Most satire was at the level of the media. Songs, for example, direct songs, encouraging songs; not the songs, for example, that have been worked on for a long time. The songs whose objective is to criticize. There are also social songs and social pieces of literature that we heard in the media.

Abraham:

Thanks a lot. I'm Abraham, a lecturer and activist from Yemen. I came a couple of weeks ago directly from Change Square, so that's why I'm the only one who's not wearing formal clothes here.

So, within young people in Yemen and in the squares, there's a sense or a feeling that the international society is dealing with the Arab Spring in a sense of inconsistency—for instance, Libya and Yemen is a great example. Libya is an example where the international society would intervene and would closely follow what's going on there, while in cases like Yemen and Bahrain, the UN international society will take a blind eye in dealing with these cases. So I'm wondering what do you think about that and what do you think about the hundreds of thousands of young people who are still protesting in Yemen, for instance. And what will happen to them if they experience a setback? What will happen to them if the ambitions and dreams that they lived for, for the past six months, did not succeed? I'm sure a politician cannot answer this question, but considering that you are novelists, you understand what it means for young people and for a generation that will be living for the coming decades.

Matar:

What has happened, the double standard that you signal to, is absolutely true. And that's why in an earlier comment I said we shouldn't be naïve. We should be aware of not only a double standard, but what it implicates and what challenges it represents to a country like Libya and such an involvement. But also I would say that holding the West to account has to be done in a way—I think we have this new opportunity of a kind of a new sense of maturity. I see this time as an invitation to maturity for both peoples. For us, for example, to be asking the questions about what we want, and what sort of society we want, and what sort of people we are. To remember the role that mythology plays in our own conception of ourselves has been incredibly powerful, and we see different variance of this.

So all of that, I think, and not knowing what is going to happen, you know, lots of people are anxious, particularly in the West, and say, "Well, what is going to happen next? What are you going to do? What's going to happen here? What if the boogeyman comes in?" You know, all of these questions. And what I always like to remind people is that how extraordinary it is not to know what's going to happen next, for a Libyan. It's amazing! I'm forty years old. My entire life has been lived under the shadow of the dictatorship. My personal life has been affected hugely by its actions. I have always known what to expect. I have always known what is expected of me. I have always known what I should read, what I shouldn't read, what I should eat. I've known everything, you know? Suddenly I don't know, and to me, that's a sign of maturity, not to know. To be okay with not knowing is a sign of a mature human being. And I think as a country, to investigate what it is that we want, is also a sign of maturity. So that's on our side.

On the side of the West, the invitation into maturity is in some ways more difficult, more challenging for the West than it is for us, because we are represented with this incredibly compelling reality. Things have changed so dramatically that being mature or not mature is not so much a choice, or as much of a choice as it was before. We are implicated into it. Whereas the West can continue to act in a way where it sees us as sort of tools for its own designs, to not regard us a mature people, to be cynical. So what I mean by immaturity, it's also a sense of cynicism.

And so that's why I return to what I said earlier about men and women of culture, men and women of peace and justice, because it's those new alliances that will take us out of this place. We can't be in the old paradigm anymore where we are sitting in the Middle East pointing fingers at Western governments. We have to create significant and powerful and compelling bridges with civic society in the West, which has been profoundly sympathetic and profoundly moved by our actions. It's probably for the first time in living memory, certainly, but I think for the first time in centuries, when the West, Europe, is looking at us for inspiration, for political inspiration. So I think that's a fantastic opportunity to engage with.

Alsaïdi:

Ali?

Al-Muqri:

[translated from Arabic] Thank you. As far as the foreign intervention, I believe that revolutions and rulers in the Arab world brought down these illusions, the illusion of the foreigner – “me” and “the other.” The idea of “me” and “the other” in two countries where the ideological slogan was, the underlying slogan, that it's us against them; they're the enemies; they're the colonialists, in Syria and Libya. Now, since the beginning of the revolution, there's a call for international intervention. The revolution brought down the idea that we can live without the others; however, there are several questions that were asked about this intervention. Should it be a land intervention or an air intervention, and there's some kind of confusion. Some people wanted intervention but with conditions; the conditions by the people who were asking for help or seeking help. We're talking about interests and everything; these are good questions that everybody wondered about.

For the case of Yemen, as in other Arab countries, people are counting on international intervention to help the revolution remain pacifistic, peaceful. I'm not optimistic in many ways however, with the Arab revolutions, I believe that everybody's going too far. People are talking about the after-revolution, the period after the revolution, as if the revolution had already happened. In 1994, the political authorities succeeded. They brandished a slogan of "Unity or Death." People wanted unity. However now, the Reform Party is with the revolution, and the tribes are with the revolution, regardless of any kind of ideological dividers. This is not an ideological revolution. This is a revolution against a control of everything, of wealth and opinion, and I think this is going to be successful.

Adam Lupel:

Hi. This actually sort of follows up on this point that was just made on Yemen, although the question is really more for Libya. You've spoken really beautifully about the role of the writer in resistance, and the engagement of dictatorship, in essence also writing fiction. But I'm wondering about the role of the writer after the fall, after the fall of the dictator. We've spoken about the role of writing as resistance, and engagement of dictators, in essence, writing fiction. One route, of course, we could take sort of the Václav Havel route into politics, but I think a more interesting role to explore is the role of the writer in exploring national identity, and the role of national identity after the fall. And I'm wondering if you

have any thoughts on that, and also within the context of Libya and concerns about national unity in the months and years ahead.

Matar:

Well, I think the role of the writer before, during, and after the revolution is a very similar one, which is to do his or her best when faced with a blank piece of paper. And as a novelist, the quiet solitude that you need in order to write is probably your most prized possession. It's more valuable than any money, any house—that space. And in days like these, it felt like my entire country, troubled and broken and wounded, has crash-landed on my writing desk. So I look forward to time when I can perhaps dust all that off, and I can return to that space.

I've been accused of selfishness when I said this once before, that basically what I prize more than anything is that quiet space. "Where is your patriotism, man? Where is your national feeling?" you know. Well, I think there's no contradiction for me, in the sense that I really, truly see a separation between my role as a citizen—and my role as a citizen might involve writing articles, might involve writing whatever it is that I wish to write to voice my opinion, which just because I'm a writer, I don't regard to be of any more or less value than anybody else, but this is how I voice it. And then my role as an artist, which exists outside of any kind of national affiliation, any kind of gender. I don't feel like I'm a man or a woman or a Libyan—I don't think that way at all when I sit and write fiction. And that distinction to me is incredibly important to guard.

Shirley Chesney:

My name is Shirley Chesney. I'm an art historian of Paleolithic imagery who teamed with a Moroccan anthropologist; and my colleague who helped her husband introduce Africa to the American population through music, his name was Baba Olatunji, and that's Amy Olatunji. We've created a program called Creating Peace through the Arts and Media. My Moroccan friend is a linguist, a writer, and a defender of the Berber Movement across North Africa, and recently, after many years of silence, began to receive indications that the Libyan uprising hopes—from people using the Amazigh language.

How much contact is there between intellectual life among the enlightened Libyans and the Berber and Amazigh-speaking Tuaregs in Libya, some of whom were reported in the papers to be pro-Gaddafi, others anti-Gaddafi, tribal, militants, defenders of Tripoli? The newspaper men seem to have no cultural understanding, and gave the world perhaps a different world than you as a cultured man and a writer and an artist might have. So could you clarify things for us a little?

Matar:

Gosh, I don't have any—I won't be able to give you an unequivocal kind of judgment on to what extent there are these collaborations going on. I don't have information about that, but perhaps I can speak in more general terms, and in very frank terms. Libya, over the last forty years, the sense of isolation that I was trying to describe, and that if you were to, for example, ask what are the overwhelming characteristics of your experience as a Libyan over the last forty years, I would wager that most Libyans, even people that worked for Gaddafi—and I know this from personal experience—would tell you that the overwhelming feelings are pain, because everybody knows somebody who is either in prison, but also pain through humiliation and restriction and interference into private life; fear, because no one is immune, you know, even the people very close to Gaddafi, are always looking over their shoulder; and embarrassment, because it's embarrassing having these idiots represent you. It's very embarrassing. And so that sort of unholy trinity that we have been confronted with as Libyans has made us feel very shy in the modern world, and made us very shy with our neighbors.

One of the ways that this kind of shyness expresses itself is fear and prejudice, and so Libyans haven't had the sort of confidence that one needs in order to engage with the world and regard it as your equal. And so a lot of Libyans have been engaging in finding any kind of excuse for supremacy, either vis-à-vis their neighbors in Africa or their minorities there. I remember, for example, when I was very young, Tripoli being an incredibly cosmopolitan, exciting sort of open city, similar to any Mediterranean city. It had that sort of life to it, and now it looks like a very different place. It's a place that is more provincial, more parochial.

The exciting thing is that I sense that many Libyans know this, and they speak about it, and so there is a hunger for a new kind of openness, or actually an old kind of openness to be revived. It's been kind of a nice, pet subject for the media—I've been speaking about the importance of Facebook and Twitter in these revolutions, and undoubtedly they've played the role, no? I think in Libya, more importantly, the mobile phone has played a more important role because of taking pictures and films and so on. But I've always felt that as nice as this subject is, and fashionable, it misses an important point, which is that another thing that has played a significant role is old mythology, actually. Questions to do: what does it mean to be a Libyan? Rediscovering our national identity. One of these interpretations suggests that actually to be a Libyan means that you've been fighting Fascism for a hundred years. In 1911, the Italians came, and they were there for a good number of years; and then we had a small break under King Idris; and then after that we had our own home-grown version of Fascism that ends in 2011, in exactly a hundred years from then. And that sort of identity, I think, is a very positive identity, and it's an identity against intolerance. And such conversations give me optimism. But do we have an incredible problem with racism? -- Yes, we do. Do we have an incredible problem with sexism? -- We do, absolutely. Are we conservative as a people? -- We are. That has some positive things, but it also has a lot of things that I think are deeply negative. But it's moments like these that allow the sort of opportunity to engage with these subjects in a way that is confident.

Alsaidi: Thank you, Hisham. We have an opportunity for one more question, and if you do not insist. Microphone. Raghida Dergham, of the Arab Al Hayat newspaper. Very famous.

Raghida Dergham: I just wanted to follow up to the point you just made, Hisham. It's just as you feel it, and that applies to you as well. What is the talent of your people? You know, we were led to believe that the Libyans were so broken, that there was never an opportunity, they were never to be able to get up and make a change. And the same thing about Yemen, that Yemen, as soon as there is any need to make a change, that they will turn to each other and kill each other because they're all armed. So what is the talent, from your point of view, of your own people, that made happen what happened? And take that question as well, if you don't mind, after you, Hisham.

Al-Muqri: *[translated from Arabic]* It seems to me that the possibilities that what can happen in the revolution is that everybody can come together. The political and social powers can join at the revolution. Even the people, those who criticized the government or criticized the revolution, the Islamists and others, even Al-Qaeda leaders are saying that we are in Tahrir Square. If Al-Qaeda becomes a member and in the future engages in political work instead of terrorism, that would be great. So all of these came together to bring down the regime; the regime that

was negative for all of them, that did not believe in any of them as parties or as directions or different ideologies.

The possibilities—what are the possibilities? What can the revolution achieve? What can the people achieve? This is a very difficult question to answer. What will they pay for the revolution? Will it go in the same direction as it did in Syria or Libya, or will it be peaceful? This is a question that no one can answer right now, except the remnants of the regime that is presently in Sana'a today. Will it give in to the pressure of the revolution and the international pressure and step down peacefully? Or will they decide to choose the military option? I'm not an optimist by nature, however all the indicators point to the fact that the revolution will be victorious. It will win and will succeed. And I thank you very much. Thank you. Hisham?

Matar:

My people—the talent of my people is a deep and sincere expression of audacity in the face of violence over forty years. If you look at the '70s, you'll count the writers and the intellectuals that were killed and imprisoned. If you look at the '80s, you look at the student union and how it was dismantled very violently, and they were killed also. If you look at the '90s, you have the endless disappearances, the assassinations of Libyans inside and abroad in places like Rome and Milan and Athens and so on. If you look in the 2000s, you'll have the young men and women who were the so-called Internet rebels, who were going from one Internet café to another, then were arrested, and when they come out, they publish lists of people who are in prison or ill. This to me is not only a talent, but it's a genius of a people, to keep doing this.

And then the grand finale is this revolution, where we've seen not only an extraordinary level of violence, I think that history will record, where a government is willing to inflict that level of violence on a civilian population, not only the level of violence, but its sinister, dishonorable character. There's honor even in war, no? There's absolutely nothing sacred to the Gaddafi regime. They attacked mosques. They attacked families. They raped women. They raped men. It was a particularly sinister, awful aggression.

And frankly, to see these very young people—one of the nicknames of the Libyan revolution is the Revolution of the Men in the Falling Jeans. They're young men. They're men who are half of my age, facing tanks and bullets and dying, and then returning again. It's incredible. It shows a kind of resilience that is amazing.

And on the other hand, there's sort of the civic genius or the civic talent. There's all of these endless committees that have been set up. In Benghazi alone, there's more than 115 new newspapers and magazines in the last eight months. Most of them aren't good at all—I don't recommend you to read them—but it's an incredible expression of the desire to express. Committees about the great and the small, committees about the role of women, committees about the avant-garde cinema, you know? Fantastic!

And so very, very briefly, what is the talent of the Libyan people? An incredible hunger for life after probably one of the most comprehensive dictatorial projects history has ever seen.

Alsaïdi:

Thank you very much. I think you all will agree with me, this has been a very fascinating afternoon; and we are grateful for the two distinguished novelists, Hisham Matar and Ali Al-Muqri, and I propose that we give them strong applause for an excellent presentation.