

In Light of the Intellectuals: The Role of Novelists in the Arab Uprisings

JOSÉ VERICAT



Cover Photo: Tunisians look at books for sale in a bookshop window that were previously banned under the former president Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali on January 20, 2011 in Tunis, Tunisia. iStockphoto/Christopher Furlong.

Disclaimer: The views expressed in this paper represent those of the author and not necessarily those of IPI. IPI welcomes consideration of a wide range of perspectives in the pursuit of a well-informed debate on critical policies and issues in international affairs.

IPI Publications

Adam Lupel, *Director of Publications and Senior Fellow*

Marie O'Reilly, *Associate Editor*

Marisa McCrone, *Assistant Production Editor*

Suggested Citation:

José Vericat, "In Light of the Intellectuals: The Role of Novelists in the Arab Uprisings," New York: International Peace Institute, September 2014.

© by International Peace Institute, 2014
All Rights Reserved

www.ipinst.org

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

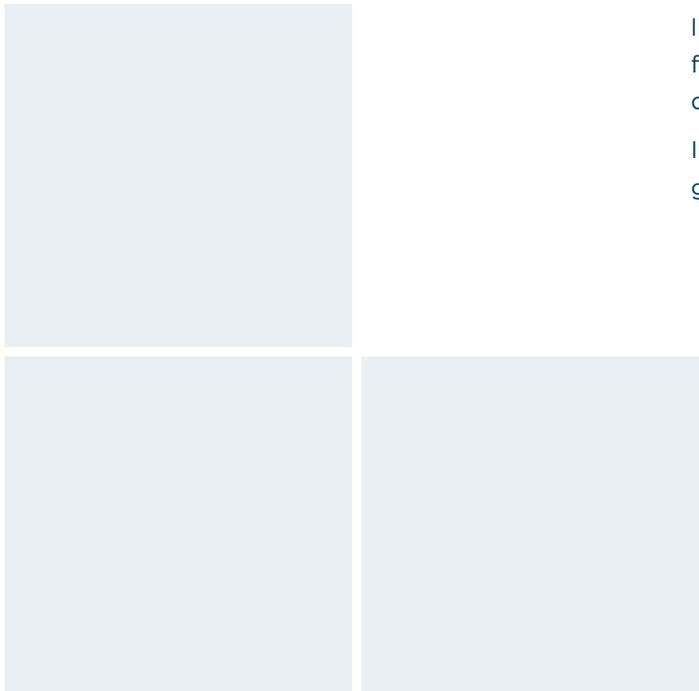
JOSÉ VERICAT is an adviser at the International Peace Institute.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This paper was inspired by the meetings held at the International Peace Institute (IPI) as part of the Arab Intellectuals Series, which was created, directed, and presented by Ambassador Abdullah Alsaïdi. The Arab Intellectuals Series was launched in September 2011 as a response to the Arab uprisings that were shaking the Middle East since the beginning of that year. The purpose was to provide policymakers in and around the United Nations with authentic Arab voices as well as fresh and informed perspectives on how to interpret unfolding events. In that same spirit, the series was succeeded by IPI's Arab Contemporary Dialogue, which continues to host Arab speakers at IPI's headquarters in New York.

The author would like to thank Professors Jose F. Vericat and Fabio Vericat as well as Nadia Oweidat, PhD, who offered useful insights on the paper in particular and the topic in general. Omar El Okdah, policy analyst at IPI, also provided a valuable critique of the text. The writers who participated in the meetings were very generous in taking the time to travel to New York to share their knowledge and experiences at a time when they were busy engaging in multiple ways with the events transforming their countries, the region, and their lives. The author would also like to thank Adam Lupel and Marisa McCrone for their feedback and expert editing of the document through the different stages of production.

IPI owes a debt of gratitude to its many donors for their generous support.



CONTENTS

Introduction.....	1
Intellectuals before the Uprising	5
Literature against Authoritarianism.....	8
Censorship and Coercion	11
Intellectual Activism	12
Postpartum	17
Conclusion.....	18

Introduction

At first glance, the Arab Spring transpired without a prominent role for intellectuals. In contrast to other revolutions, such as the 1989 Velvet Revolution in the former Czechoslovakia, no single individual has been credited with having led the masses to rise up and enforce change in the popular uprisings that began in Tunisia at the end of 2010. Instead, the rebellions that swept through the Middle East, toppling regimes in Tunis, Cairo, Tripoli, and Sana'a one after another, were fueled by pent-up anger among a mass of people who for decades lived under authoritarian rule, an absence of political rights, and deteriorating economic conditions. In fact, if any people are to be credited with embodying the struggle in any of these countries, then it is the victims, and in particular martyr figures such as Mohamed Bouazizi, in Tunisia, and Khaled Said, in Egypt.

The fact that they were driven by the desire to get rid of regimes and had apparently little to say about what to put in their place has provoked expressions of concern over the lack of an overarching strategy beyond the overthrow of the regimes in power¹ and consequent chaos.² Reflecting on the lack of a guiding principle or set of guiding principles, in December 2011 Marc Lynch wrote in *Foreign Policy*: “Throughout this year of tumult, Arabs have debated the meaning of the great wave of popular mobilization that has swept their world as vigorously as have anxious foreigners. There is no single Arab idea about what has happened [...] So while the Arab uprisings generated a marvelous range of innovative tactics (uploading mobile-

camera videos to social media like Facebook and Twitter, seizing and holding public squares), they did not introduce any particularly new ideas.”³

One of the explanations for the absence of an overarching strategy, it has been argued, is that Arab thinkers have not come forward to put into words the thoughts and feelings that others were unable to formulate on their own. As Elizabeth Suzanne Kassab claims: “Since the end of 2010, Arab thinkers, artists, and journalists have been commenting and analyzing the recent Arab sociopolitical movements, addressing a whole range of issues—among them the question of the place, or the lack thereof, of intellectuals in these movements.”⁴ Without leaders—and in particular intellectuals who can provide a theoretical framework—a conclusion may be that the uprisings are doomed to failure.

HAVEL VS. ADONIS

In the article “The Arab Intellectuals Who Didn’t Roar,” *The New York Times* journalist Robert F. Worth argued that Arab intellectuals had been conspicuously absent from the uprisings.⁵ In particular, Worth noted the dearth in the Arab world of figures like the Czech writer and leader of the Velvet Revolution, Václav Havel.

The role of intellectuals in the Arab uprisings is a question that Arab thinkers themselves have pondered.⁶ The Syrian novelist Samar Yazbek, for example, felt disappointed with the reaction of intellectuals in the uprising in her country: “Unlike other revolutions in the world, like the French Revolution and others, the Arab revolutions did not have thinkers or academics or deep ideological

1 “The revolution in Syria is often accused of being spontaneous, leaderless and lacking in strategy,” said Sadek al-Azm, in “Arab Nationalism, Islamism, and the Arab Uprising,” London: London School of Economics, November 30, 2011, available at <http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/mec/files/2011/12/Azmtranscript.pdf>.

2 “Anxious revolutionaries around the region likely attribute too much coherence and power to these counterrevolutionary efforts. But even in Egypt, the fears of chaos and disorder run deep, and many will be susceptible to the lure of a return to normality. No final answer has yet been delivered to the question posed by Lebanese liberal Hazem Saghieh: Can a corrupt dictator be overthrown without descending into chaos or a new tyranny?” See Marc Lynch, “The Big Think Behind the Arab Spring: Do the Middle East’s Revolutions Have a Unifying Ideology?” *Foreign Policy*, December 2011, available at http://fletcher.tufts.edu/Alumni/Talioires-Symposium-2012/~media/Fletcher/Alumni/Talioires/Readings/NasrSlim2_The_Big_Think_Behind_the_Arab_Spring.pdf.

3 Ibid.

4 Elizabeth Suzanne Kassab, “The Arab Quest for Freedom and Dignity: Have Arab Thinkers Been Part of It?” *Middle East—Topics & Arguments* 1 (2013): 26, available at <http://meta-journal.net/article/view/1038>. Kassab continues: “This question stems from two phenomena: Firstly, the fact that Arab intellectuals failed to predict these upheavals; and secondly, the absence of intellectual leaders in the unfolding events. Indeed, the element of surprise has been one of the dominant aspects of the recent events, while the absence of central leadership has been another. The first aspect, in my opinion, is due to the very nature of the events themselves, namely as an outburst of anger and revolt against accumulated injustice and suffering; and the second can be explained through the withering away of the avant-garde role of the intellectuals over the past decades.”

5 Robert F. Worth, “The Arab Intellectuals Who Didn’t Roar,” *The New York Times*, October 29, 2011, available at www.nytimes.com/2011/10/30/sunday-review/the-arab-intellectuals-who-didnt-roar.html?pagewanted=all&r=0.

6 Mohammad al-Sayyad reflects on Worth’s piece in “The Cowering Intellectuals of The Arab Spring,” *Al-Monitor*, February 8, 2013, available at www.al-monitor.com/pulse/pulse/politics/2012/04/arab-intelligentsia.html, which is a translation of the original in *Al-Khaleej*, available at www.alkhaleej.ae/studiesandopinions/page/f20a3230-e33a-43fa-9397-d6d0470aead. Mona Naggar offered similar criticism of Arab intellectuals in “The Silence of the Thinkers,” (2011), available at <http://en.qantara.de/content/arab-intellectuals-and-the-arab-spring-the-silence-of-the-thinkers>.

pundits that called for deconstructing society politically and socially.”⁷ She has argued that this is because the regime managed to neutralize them through fear: “Not many intellectuals came out in support of the revolution, in truth because of fear.”⁸ Fear is a common denominator of the lives of intellectuals in a number of Arab countries, especially in Syria and particularly during the uprisings. As difficult as it is to compare degrees of fear or of violence, the brutality of Syria’s repression since the beginning of the Arab Spring is in a class of its own.

Speaking at the International Peace Institute (IPI) in 2012, Yazbek acknowledged that intellectuals have made some contribution, though not at the desired level: “After a few months, the intellectuals have started mobilizing, and there are now many who support the revolution. There are also those who have supported it from the beginning. I am a writer for example, and there is [the writer and political dissident] Yassin [al-Haj] Saleh who joined us in the revolution from the very first days, but it wasn’t a strong enough movement. It has grown stronger. There are actors and artists, [including] painters who support the revolution, but I personally believe that this movement is weak.”⁹

Worth took issue in particular with the Syrian poet Adonis—the pseudonym by which Ali Ahmad Said Esber is more commonly known—one of the most revered Arab literary figures alive, for not having become more politically engaged. Given his notoriety as well as the fact that he makes regular contributions to the Arab press and not infrequent appearances in the Western media, Adonis has indeed been the object of some controversy for not being more vocal in his denunciation of the Syrian regime. This is not to say that Adonis has not criticized the regime publicly. In June 2011, he wrote an open letter to the Syrian President Bashar al-Assad that received significant media attention. In it, he condemned the violence used by the regime against protestors, criticized scathingly the ruling Baath party, and asked the Syrian leader to pave the way for democratic reforms. However, while the poet could probably have done more to

leverage his notoriety, it is difficult to see him becoming the intellectual/revolutionary leader who Worth bemoans the loss of even if he had wanted to. Already an octogenarian, Adonis’s age might not be as much of an obstacle as his lack of a powerbase in Syria, in turn the result of an idiosyncratic personality. Adonis, who has lived in Paris since 1975, has for long felt estranged from the Arab world, in parts of which he has become persona non grata, and particularly from its literary scene, which he looks down on. Otherwise, certain prejudices that he holds about regressive tendencies in Arab and particularly Islamic culture seem to have tempered his criticism in tune with the deterioration of the conflict on the ground and, in particular, the emergence of increasingly violent and obdurate jihadist groups.¹⁰

But beyond the personality of individual intellectuals, it would simply be a struggle to find a Havel-like figure in many current uprisings, transitions, or revolutions in the world. Is the reference to the Velvet Revolution—or Yazbek’s comparison to the French Revolution—fair? How many uprisings and revolutions follow the model of Czechoslovakia? Havel—a playwright turned politician, who then became president—is a specific type of individual, and also the circumstances in which he arose are inevitably unique. The role of Havel must be understood in the context of the Velvet Revolution, which took place when the Soviet Union was already in an advanced stage of putrefaction.

There is, of course, no one template. The contribution of intellectuals in revolutions must be examined. For example, the notion of the intellectual providing the ideals of the revolution while at the same time rallying the masses is problematic. In fact, some of the most commonly referred to revolutions in the Western historical canon took place after the death of the intellectual figures who apparently shaped them. The French Revolution, which is seen as the paradigmatic example of an uprising driven by thinkers, was fought for the ideals of Rousseau and Voltaire; but both of them were deceased by the time of the upheavals. Karl Marx, who inspired the Russian Revolution, died

7 Samar Yazbek, panel discussion “Arab Intellectuals Series,” International Peace Institute, New York, September 13, 2012. See coverage of the event available at www.ipinst.org/events/speakers/details/384-samar-yazbek-violence-begets-violence-in-syria.html.

8 Ibid.

9 Ibid.

10 Sinan Antoon, “The Arab Spring and Adonis’s Autumn,” July 11, 2011, available at www.jadaliyya.com/pages/index/2047/the-arab-spring-and-aduniss-autumn.

more than two decades before it broke out. The American Revolution, it may be argued, was the culmination of Locke's liberalism dating back to the seventeenth century, and the Constitution was the work of a set of politicians who distilled the ideas of previous generations of intellectuals from continental Europe into a political document.

The Iranian Revolution may be seen as an exception, and perhaps ironically something closer to this idealized version, in that Ayatollah Khomeini was the leader of the revolt as well as the intellectual who developed a series of ideas that then shaped a specific system of government imposed after the overthrow of the Shah. This is, however, a very simplistic version of events since there were other thinkers, such as, for example, Ali Shariati, who inspired the revolution. On the whole, the protagonists of the Iranian Revolution shared more an opposition to a brutal regime than a common vision of an alternative to it. Just like in the Arab Spring, the Iranian coup was arguably more about getting rid of a system, the brutal dictatorship of the Shah, than about replacing it with something in particular. Thus, the role of intellectual-leader is further demythologized. In sum, previous revolutions took place in a particular historical context that may be comparable to the Arab world today in some, but certainly not all, respects. Also, intellectuals played a role in all of these, but in different ways and mostly quite unlike that of the intellectual/political leader. And in the case of Havel, for example, it is legitimate to ask whether he influenced events more as an intellectual than as a politician.

There is another radically different explanation of the Arab Spring that also challenges the notion that for a revolution to be successful it needs an intellectual leader. It has been argued that what the Arab world has been experiencing for the past few years is qualitatively different from anything that has come before in ways that are bound to disappoint anyone expecting every revolution to

bring with it an intellectual messiah. According to this proposition, the fact that the Arab revolts have been relatively spontaneous, leaderless, and non-ideological is positive, in fact, the very reason why they are authentic and therefore credible. One of the most enthusiastic exponents of this is Wael Ghonim, the Google executive who played such a pivotal role in precipitating the fall of the Mubarak regime in Egypt in 2011. Ghonim—who paradoxically could be a similar sort of figure to what Worth is searching for in that he is both an ideologue and an activist, though not a man of letters¹¹—claims that the distinguishing characteristic of revolutions today—what he calls “Revolution 2.0”—is that technology and, in particular, social media enable the crowd to effect change without the need for any individual leader.

In any case, criticism from the West of an intellectual void is misplaced. The Arab world has a vibrant intellectual culture and there is a heated intellectual debate that is ongoing in the uprisings. Intellectual debates and public intellectuals—including writers, thinkers, academics, and artists—are an important part of these events and of the history of the Middle East in general, as well as of the layer upon layer of deliberations taking place daily in books, newspapers, magazines, the Internet, and, of course, face to face in both formal and informal settings, and in private and public on the street, at cafes, in demonstrations, and in homes. There is, however, a tendency to portray the Arabs as helpless and passive that can be traced back in history and is at the root of this misperception of the Middle East.

ARAB EXCEPTIONALISM

Before the Arab Spring the question of why Arabs did not rebel against the dictators who for decades oppressed them was frequently answered with reference to “Arab exceptionalism,”¹² the idea that the Arab world is somehow different from other parts of the globe because there is something about the essence of Arab culture, and in particular Islam,

11 Though perhaps not a standard type of intellectual, there is a specific set of ideas that Ghonim is a consummate follower and a preacher of, albeit not necessarily ones indigenous to the Arab world, but those firmly rooted in Western liberalism and almost blind faith in the power of technology.

12 “For almost two generations, waves of democracy had swept over other regions, from southern and eastern Europe to Latin America, from East Asia to Africa. But not the Middle East. There, tyrants had closed up the political world, become owners of their countries in all but name. It was a bleak landscape: terrible rulers, sullen populations, a terrorist fringe that hurled itself in frustration at an order bereft of any legitimacy. Arabs had started to feel they were cursed, doomed to despotism. The region's exceptionalism was becoming not just a human disaster but a moral embarrassment” (Fouad Ajami, “The Arab Spring at One: A Year of Living Dangerously,” *Foreign Affairs*, March/April 2012, available at www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/137053/fouad-ajami/the-arab-spring-at-one). For a comparative discussion of this topic, see Eva Bellin, “The Robustness of Authoritarianism in the Middle East: Exceptionalism in Comparative Perspective,” *Comparative Politics* 36, no. 2 (2004).

that prevents Arabs from demanding freedom and developing democratic forms of government.¹³ History is thus presented by certain academics, politicians, and analysts as a march toward democracy, which Arabs, for reasons inherent to their way of seeing the world, their culture, and their nature, are unable to participate in.¹⁴ Other examples of this argument are claims of Muslims' preference for security to freedom and Islam's purported incompatibility with democracy.

The Arab Spring—mostly seen as popular uprisings motivated by a groundswell of discontent and a desire for freedom, dignity, and equality—has changed this perception somewhat. The wave of rebellion and change may be interpreted as evidence of the fact that Arabs are no different from any other peoples. However, these transformative events have not managed to completely dismiss the notion of Arab exceptionalism: The concept, in fact, underlies the argument that the uprisings are leaderless and, in particular, that there are no intellectuals to articulate the demands of the people, turn their raw emotion into rational arguments, and furnish the revolts with an all-important conceptual direction.

The proposition that there are no Arab intellectuals shaping the uprisings, born out of a lack of awareness of the rich intellectual activity in the region, contributes to an image of Arabs as a passive people waiting for external support. This is, however, a highly sensitive issue in the Arab world where foreign intervention has been a major characteristic of the political, economic, and cultural life as well as a subject of heated controversy at least since Napoleon's landing in Egypt in 1798. The history of colonial subjugation—often justified by arguing that the local inhabitants are unfit to rule themselves¹⁵—has made many of the peoples of the Middle East very wary of any form of external intervention. To this day, the presence of foreign organizations, including international bodies such as the United Nations, is the subject of

bitter controversy, and references to the region's colonial past, as well as current colonial designs by foreign powers, are made in the Arab press on a daily basis. Therefore, one of the lessons for policy-makers to draw from this is not to underestimate the capacity, as well as the importance, of Arabs to help themselves and to find local solutions to local problems.

IPI'S ARAB INTELLECTUALS SERIES

This paper intends to analyze the role of intellectuals in the Arab Spring and show that even if there is no Arab Havel, there are Arab intellectuals engaging in different ways and exerting extraordinary influence in Arab society, just as they have in the past.

Convinced of the fundamental role that intellectuals have played and are still playing in the uprisings, IPI organized a series of forums engaging Arab writers, particularly novelists, from across the span of countries that have been the protagonists of the Arab uprisings, to provide a different perspective from that of regional experts and policymakers and to try to tap into how Arabs represent themselves. Taking these writers as the raw material for this narrative, the paper reflects on the role of Arab literature in politics in general, both past and present. Thus, in this paper, I intend to focus on the role of one particular category of public intellectuals: the novelists.

One of the overarching themes that will be explored is the role of literature in change in the particular context of the Arab world, that is, to understand the critical role of the intellectuals in the Arab Spring by looking at the long-term relationship between the region's writers and authoritarian regimes, writers' roles in the struggle against authoritarianism, and the repression that they suffered in the past. In fact, the existence of such challenging circumstances and the urge to confront them is one of the factors that make Arab literature particularly interesting.

13 Such arguments are to be found in David Pryce-Jones, *The Closed Circle: An Interpretation of the Arabs* (New York: Harper and Row, 1989); Daniel Pipes, "Dealing with Middle Eastern Conspiracy Theories," *Orbis* 36, no. 1 (1992); and Bernard Lewis, *The Political Language of Islam* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988).

14 "Beginning in the early 1970s, a large number of countries initiated transitions from forms of authoritarian rule to democracy. This democratizing trend, dubbed 'The Third Wave,' began in Southern Europe and continued in Latin America, the Soviet Union, and Eastern Europe. Similar transitions were also begun in parts of Asia and sub-Saharan Africa. The Middle East, by contrast, has remained untouched" (Michele Penner Angrist, "The Expression of Political Dissent in the Middle East: Turkish Democratization and Authoritarian Continuity in Tunisia," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 41, No. 4 (October 1999): 730–757).

15 For example, the mandate system of the League of Nations was applied in the region to territories that "have reached a stage of development where their existence as independent nations can be provisionally recognized subject to the rendering of administrative advice and assistance by a Mandatory until such time as they are able to stand alone," *The Covenant of the League of Nations*, Article 22, December 1924.

Intellectuals before the Uprising

To understand the role of the Arab intellectuals in the Arab Spring, it is necessary to look at the long-term relationship between the region's writers and the authoritarian regimes. Speaking at IPI in September 2011, the Libyan writer Hisham Matar underlined the importance of going back in time. He argued that the surprise that some observers showed at the outbreak of the uprisings should have been tempered, as the shock somehow implied that the factors that caused the revolts were short term, when, in fact, they were cumulative and had been ongoing for a long time. He thus questioned the premise on which inquiries about the causes of the uprisings are made. For Matar, the question, "Why now?" in relation to the uprisings, "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," meaning that the uprisings have been long coming and "it oversimplifies things to say that this has started at a particular moment in the very immediate past."¹⁶

This broader perspective facilitates an analysis of the more specific question regarding the role of literature in change, which though subtle is also significant. This is something that the London School of Economics professor Fawaz Gerges makes reference to in relation to the article by Worth, referred to previously:

If the correspondent of *The New York Times* had really bothered to take a look at the history of ideas in the Arab world in the last 100 years, he would have realized that many intellectuals, many scholars, against great odds defied the dominate political and religious patterns of thought in the Arab world. In really the darkest moments of the Arab world, there have been great minds and intellectuals that really have been roaring and barking by questioning the patterns of political and religious thought.¹⁷

Of course, Arab intellectuals, novelists among them, have been key in transforming the Middle

East through history. The Egyptian novelist and writer Khaled al-Khamissi traces the origins of the uprisings to the nationalist revolt led by Ahmed Urabi in 1881 demanding political freedom for Egyptians and the intellectual project, cultural in its foundation, that it became associated with—"Al-Nahda" (The Renaissance)—which included artists such as the composer Sayed Darwish, the sculptor Mahmoud Mukhtar, the social reformer and women's rights defender Qasim Amin, and the writer Taha Hussein.

REPRESSION

The importance of intellectuals in the Arab world may be measured by the repression that they faced. Dictatorial regimes felt threatened by them and exercised violence against them. In Egypt, for example, a whole generation of writers faced exile. On May 15, 1971, the Egyptian president Anwar al-Sadat staged what he named "the corrective revolution." Its activities included combating Egyptian culture, forcing the writer Abdel Rahman al-Khamissi, among many others, into exile. His son, the writer Khaled al-Khamissi explained with more than a hint of bitter irony:

My father received a phone call from Sadat right before May 1971. It was a very nice conversation in which Sadat said to my father 'I admire you as a writer and I am so enthralled by you that I will give you five days to leave the country and if you are to wait any longer I will arrest you.' My father left in 1971 never to return again until he died in 1987. My first and second maternal uncles also left as well as other family friends. This led the well-known writer and journalist Mohammed Hassanain Haikal to write an article in 1971 in which he said 'all Egyptian intellectuals except for me are outside the country.' This is of course hyperbole but he wanted to make a point that there is a vicious war being waged against Egyptian intellectuals.¹⁸

In all, according to al-Khamissi, during that time nearly two hundred intellectuals left Egypt, with the vast majority going to Beirut, Baghdad, Kuwait, London, or Paris.¹⁹

16 Hisham Matar, panel discussion "Arab Intellectuals Series," International Peace Institute, New York, September 15, 2011. See coverage of the event available at www.ipinst.org/events/panel-discussions/details/314-libya-and-yemen-two-arab-authors-discuss-the-troubled-uprisings.html.

17 See "Arab Nationalism, Islamism, and the Arab Uprising," London: London School of Economics, November 30, 2011, available at <http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/mec/files/2011/12/Azmtranscript.pdf>.

18 Khaled al-Khamissi, panel discussion "Arab Intellectual Series," International Peace Institute, New York, November 16, 2011. See coverage of the event available at www.ipinst.org/events/panel-discussions/details/328-riahi-arab-intellectuals-unknown-soldiers-of-the-revolution.html.

19 At the same time, in the mid-1970s a large number of persons who were affiliated with the Islamic trend returned to Egypt after they had fled to the Gulf in the 1960s during the Nasser administration. Both Sadat and Mubarak supported the Islamists; the arming of religious students at the University of Asyut in 1975-6 against liberals and leftists on campus is a famous example, which al-Khamissi referred to in the panel discussion "Arab Intellectuals Series," International Peace Institute, New York, November 16, 2011.

In Libya, something similar happened. Matar described how in the 1970s Muammar al-Qaddafi set up a mock literary festival and invited all the young writers to attend in order to arrest them and throw them in prison where a whole generation of intellectuals in their twenties and thirties spent a decade.²⁰ This sort of intimidation created a climate of fear that had consequences for years after and, once liberated, the writers would avoid contact with dissidents such as Matar, for example. Qaddafi's regime went further by persecuting non-Libyan authors and convincing the Egyptian authorities to ban books that were critical of him by writers from the neighboring country. This happened as recently as 2010 when *The Leader Gets a Haircut* by the Egyptian writer Idris Ali was excluded from the Cairo International Book Fair.²¹

Repression—and the defiance of it—in Libya spanned four decades:

[T]he 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 1970s, you'll count the writers and the intellectuals that were killed and imprisoned. If you look at the 1980s, you look at the student union and how it was dismantled very violently, and they were killed also. If you look at the 1990s, 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 published 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.²²

Even when writers were not expelled or arrested, they would face obscurity in their own countries. Numerous Tunisian authors, thinkers, and

playwrights exist “that only those Tunisians who follow the cultural scene closely know about because the regime has definitely succeeded in silencing them,” said the Tunisian writer Kamel Riahi.²³ Further, access to jobs and even education was denied to them. The “Tunisian thinker and philosopher Salim Dawla has stood throughout his life against [Zine El Abidine] Ben Ali's regime in the Tunisian street and was even prevented from continuing his university education.”²⁴ This is a sentiment that the Syrian writer Samar Yazbek reflected exactly when she said to an audience in New York in September 2012 that “in Syria the cultural scene has been blacked out; I don't think any of you know the name of a Syrian writer.”²⁵

In Tunisia, like in other Arab countries, the repression was evident in the empty shelves in bookstores. However, this did not necessarily reflect a lack of interested readers: “The official media always talks about the absence of readers and that Tunisian books do not sell and that Tunisian readers do not buy books.”²⁶ Rather, according to Riahi, this was because the few books that were available were of little interest to Tunisians, and few books published abroad were imported. Literary works written by Tunisians had to be published and distributed clandestinely—an all too common phenomenon in the Arab world, which pertains to works considered a threat to the status quo.²⁷ Although “some literary voices in Tunisia moved in the dark and published their literary works at their own expense. Because publishing houses stood against them and against these works that are harsh on the toppled dictatorial regime, these works used to be smuggled to the Tunisian audience and [they] would run out of copies very quickly,” said Riahi.²⁸ Authors, such as the Tunisian who wrote the novel *Two Faces of One*

20 Hisham Matar, panel discussion “Arab Intellectuals Series,” International Peace Institute, New York, September 15, 2011.

21 Matar also mentions the novel in his article “Two Revolutions,” *The New Yorker*, September 5, 2011. For the censorship of the novel, see “AUC Press Nubian Writer Idris Ali (1940–2010),” *The American University in Cairo Press E-Newsletter*, 2011, available at www.aucpress.com/t-eNewsletter-IdrisAli-January2011.aspx?template=template_enewsletter. These dictatorships colluded in other ways, as when Egypt kidnapped Hisham Matar's father, Jaballa Matar, a Libyan dissident, from his home in Cairo in 1990 and handed him over to the Libyans.

22 Hisham Matar, panel discussion “Arab Intellectuals Series,” International Peace Institute, New York, September 15, 2011.

23 Kamel Riahi, panel discussion “Arab Intellectuals Series,” International Peace Institute, New York, November 16, 2011; examples quoted by Riahi include Kamel al-Zoughbani, Abel Jabbar Alich, Tawfiq al-Joubali, al-Fadl Jaibi, Jalilla Baccar, and Taoufik Ben Brik. See coverage of the event available at www.ipinst.org/events/panel-discussions/details/328-riahi-arab-intellectuals-unknown-soldiers-of-the-revolution.html.

24 Kamel Riahi, panel discussion “Arab Intellectuals Series,” International Peace Institute, New York, November 16, 2011.

25 Samar Yazbek, panel discussion, “Arab Intellectuals Series,” International Peace Institute, New York, September 13, 2012.

26 Kamel Riahi, panel discussion “Arab Intellectuals Series,” International Peace Institute, New York, November 16, 2011.

27 There are many examples, though perhaps one of the most publicized cases is that of the Egyptian academic Nasr Abu Zayd, who was accused of apostasy and forced to flee from Egypt for advocating an interpretation of the Quran as a literary text.

28 Kamel Riahi, panel discussion “Arab Intellectuals Series,” International Peace Institute, New York, November 16, 2011.

Corpse, which deals with torture in prisons in the Arab world, were forced to publish their novels abroad.²⁹

Riahi is himself an author who used his writing as thinly veiled criticism of the regime, describing life under oppression and social unrest, and who pushed the boundaries of censorship at great personal cost. Not only did the authorities try to stop the publication of his novels, but also journalists were too afraid to pen reviews of his work, denying him the opportunity of the literary debate and publicity that normally accompanies the publication of a book. The Internet did, however, allow a certain reprieve from censorship, and Riahi used it repeatedly to his advantage.³⁰ When the regime tried to prevent his first novel *The Scalpel* from seeing the light, he threatened to publish it online and actually began to release parts of it, forcing the authorities to eventually relent. However, when the novel was finally published in 2006—receiving the Comar D’Or prize for Arabic literature—it was forbidden from being displayed in the bookstores’ windows. “That book had to be hidden as if it was a sin, and that was an added form of insult to me,” he said.³¹

Then, in 2009, Riahi was blacklisted and forbidden from employment in Tunisia for ten years. That was a year when the economy was particularly dire, with high levels of unemployment, which was of course one of the major triggers of the revolution and which Riahi’s biography reflects: “Until I was 37 years old I did not receive a penny from the Tunisian republic and this republic did not care about this person who has been alive since 1974. How is this person alive? How is he living? I was surviving thanks to my articles in Arab and foreign papers even though whoever worked as a correspondent for these papers without the permission of the authorities was considered a traitor of course.”³²

Riahi turned again to the Internet, and to Facebook in particular, to express his grievances and as a form of protest.³³ Through the status bar on Facebook, he would address messages to the then president Zine El Abidine Ben Ali. “The first letter was very normal with my own background information, demanding my right to work as a Tunisian artist,” Riahi explained.³⁴ But then attempts were made to shut down his Facebook account after he posted a picture of himself with Democracy Street—the name of a thoroughfare in Tunis—in the background. However, this only encouraged him to become more satirical: “I said ‘I am a Bedouin. I am from the northwestern area of the country,’ of course this is a region that both Bourguiba and Ben Ali completely neglected, ‘and because I am a rural person I cannot visit you without a gift, therefore with every message I will send you a paragraph from a new novel I am working on.’”³⁵

In fact, as the days passed and he released excerpts from his new novel, a Tunisian journalist wrote an article asking for Riahi’s unemployment to be extended so that his Facebook audience could continue to read the novel.³⁶ These were the first extracts that he released of his novel *The Gorilla*, an allegorical text, which, as it is the author’s inclination, parades through the underworld of Tunisian society but has as its main target the authoritarian regime of Ben Ali. By this stage, Riahi had started to receive phone threats to which he responded with a short-lived hunger strike before finally fleeing to Algeria.

THE GORILLA

The Gorilla reflects Riahi’s obsession with finding the essence of tyrannical rule, clearly a result of his own victimhood. A satire of life under the oppressive regime of Ben Ali, it takes as its starting point actual events: an individual who one August day in

29 “The Creator of *The Corpse with Two Faces* at the Free Writers Association,” interview with Lazhar Sahraoui by Rashida al-Sharani, The Tunisian Free Writers Association, *almanar57.arabblogs.com*, June 2008, available at <http://almanar57.arabblogs.com/archive/2008/6/586225.html>.

30 Works by Muslim intellectuals that are considered to encourage violence, such as for example, Sayyid Qutb’s *Milestones*, are among the most available works to download from the Internet.

31 Kamel Riahi, panel discussion “Arab Intellectuals Series,” International Peace Institute, New York, November 16, 2011.

32 Ibid.

33 Kamel Riahi, “My Novels Remove Many Masks,” interview by Muhammad al-Asfar, *Al-Jazeera.net*, October 1, 2011, available at www.aljazeera.net/news/pages/3e14009a-0e51-4aad-8fad-2f09e38da9a6.

34 Kamel Riahi, panel discussion “Arab Intellectuals Series,” International Peace Institute, New York, November 16, 2011.

35 Ibid.

36 Kamel Riahi, “My Novels Remove Many Masks,” interview by Muhammad al-Asfar, *Al-Jazeera.net*, October 1, 2011, available at www.aljazeera.net/news/pages/3e14009a-0e51-4aad-8fad-2f09e38da9a6.

2009 climbs the 7th November Clock Tower³⁷ in a central square in Tunis and a symbol of Ben Ali's regime.³⁸ The man—whom Riahi refers to as the Tunisian King Kong—proceeded to stay atop the structure for seven hours. Despite the harmless nature of this act—nevertheless forbidden—the commotion he provokes in the square below makes the regime very nervous and leads it to mobilize its resources to bring him down. He is then made to disappear in the Ministry of Interior, situated right in front of the tower, “to its dungeons where they have a political torture party,” said Riahi sardonically. Of the original, real-life incident, the media had said that the man who had climbed up the tower was mentally unstable and demanded money, Riahi mentioned. “Of course, as a writer, as a novelist, I wasn't really sold on that official tale. Therefore I decided to write a biography of this person, who did what every Tunisian had wanted: to climb the clock tower of the dictatorship and stop the hands of time of this regime,” Riahi affirmed, providing with this tale a sui generis genealogy of the uprising in his country.³⁹

After the Internet release of sections of the novel, Riahi then published whole chapters in different collections and magazines, though always abroad and either in translation or in bilingual texts.⁴⁰ Then after seven months in Algeria—where he served as the head of the translation department at the High Arab Institute of Translation—he decided to return to Tunisia to oppose the regime from inside. “I personally felt, like other Tunisians, very combative. We believe that Tunisia is our responsibility as artists and thinkers.”⁴¹ And thus toward the end of 2010, he proceeded to stage a reading of the novel at the inauguration of a cultural salon in Tunis.⁴² In a highly charged atmosphere, the sensitivity of the content forced members of the

media and the audience to flee for fear that the event would be interrupted and the authorities would pursue the participants. Riahi was indeed subsequently interrogated by the Ministry of Interior. However, this took place shortly before the uprising was ignited—only a couple of weeks before Mohamed Bouazizi set fire to himself and to the Tunisian uprising—and “we went on with our new dream.”⁴³

The Gorilla was finally published in full in early 2011—shortly after Ben Ali was deposed—by Dar al-Saqi, a reputable Arabic publishing house. Reflecting on the role of intellectuals before and after the revolution, he argues that though “their voices may have grown dimmer after the revolution, beforehand they were decisive, they were suicidal in their confrontation against authority, which was a violent model of a police state.”⁴⁴ Thus, books such as *The Gorilla*, as well as the struggle with censorship itself, helped to rally people against the regime: readers reacted to the implicit criticism of the regime, felt emboldened by its words. Others participated in the literary gatherings and felt empowered by the gathering of people, the defiance.

Literature against Authoritarianism

But why exactly do authoritarian regimes display such violence toward literature? Novelists play an important role in subverting authoritarian regimes because literature is in some ways uniquely equipped to express what is forbidden while undermining that very prohibition. Although writers are part of the intelligentsia, they do not necessarily work within the “formal political activity” that James C. Scott juxtaposes against the subordinate classes in his

37 “Revolves around a Cup of Coffee in the Old City of Tunis: The Author of *The Gorilla* Kamel al-Riahi Shares Its Creation with a Select Group of Actors in an Enacted Reading in the Itinerant Cultural Salon,” *14october.com*, December 3, 2010, available at www.14october.com/news.aspx?newsno=75131.

38 Ben Ali toppled the statue of his predecessor Habib Bourguiba to build this clock tower as a symbol of his regime.

39 Kamel Riahi, panel discussion “Arab Intellectuals Series,” International Peace Institute, New York, November 16, 2011; see also Meriam Ben Ammar, “Kamel Riahi ou l'écrivain qui a prédit la révolution tunisienne à travers 'Gorilla,’” April 2, 2012, available at <http://archive.jawharafm.net/jawhara-fm/16938-kamel-riahi-ou-lecrivain-qui-a-predit-la-revolution-tunisienne-a-travers-qgorilla-q-interview-.html>.

40 For example, his work appeared in a bilingual collection by Peter Clark, ed., *Emerging Arab Voices* (London: Saqi Books, 2009). See also Noam Schimmel, review of *Emerging Arab Voices*, by Peter Clark, ed., *The Majalla*, November 30, 2011, available at www.majalla.com/eng/2011/11/article5227974. His work also appeared in the anthology by Samuel Shimon, ed., *Beirut39: New Writing from the Arab World* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2010); and the literary magazine *Banipal*, which prints Arab writers in English translation. See www.banipal.co.uk/contributors/741/kamel_riahi/.

41 Kamel Riahi, panel discussion “Arab Intellectuals Series,” International Peace Institute, New York, November 16, 2011.

42 “Revolves around a Cup of Coffee in the Old City of Tunis: The Author of *The Gorilla* Kamel al-Riahi Shares Its Creation with a Select Group of Actors in an Enacted Reading in the Itinerant Cultural Salon,” *14october.com*, December 3, 2010, available at www.14october.com/news.aspx?newsno=75131.

43 Kamel Riahi, panel discussion “Arab Intellectuals Series,” International Peace Institute, New York, November 16, 2011.

44 *Ibid.*

classic work *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance*.⁴⁵ Nor is their form of opposition either that of the “organized, large-scale, protest movements” or the everyday forms of peasant struggle.⁴⁶

In her seminal study on the semi-nomadic Bedouin communities living in northwestern Egypt, *Veiled Sentiments*, the anthropologist Lila Abu-Lughod describes how women use poetry—and the ambiguity of its literary form—in everyday life to express feelings that the conservative society they live in would otherwise not allow them to say in a normal conversation. It is precisely this space that artists, in particular, inhabit. Because they do not write directly about reality but work in the realm of metaphors and symbols, they are able to express disapproval implicitly and in ways that make it harder for regimes to censor. Thus, novelists can take advantage of the ambiguity inherent in their writing to condemn a reprehensible state and use this mechanism to voice ideas that contribute to the political awareness and promote the fundamental rights of people who are being oppressed. In this way, links may be established between literature and the uprisings.

EMPATHY AND THE IMAGINATION

However, to understand more profoundly the causal connection between the novel and the Arab uprisings one needs to start by thinking about the influence of literature on the individual in a more basic way. On this question, at IPI in 2011, Matar argued: “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.”⁴⁷ Matar underlined also the role of the imagination as the linking thread between literature and political change in particular. “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 [a] 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.”⁴⁸

This is something that, for example, the Tunisian uprising, which set off the wave of protests across the Middle East, achieved. Thus, “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 envisioning this horizon is a role that novelists, creators of fiction, and those for whom the imagination is the most essential instrument, also play, Matar argued.⁴⁹

FICTION AND AUTHORITARIANISM

Matar sees a natural confrontation between dictatorship and literature, because both are in a way competing over the same craft: the creation of fiction, but in opposite and conflicting directions. The role of writers is to think up alternatives to reality, but different ones from those of the dictator, and therefore they constitute a direct challenge to the latter. And so according to Matar, to be a novelist is by definition to be against authoritarianism: “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.”⁵⁰ The element of repetition is particularly important to these narratives: Dictatorships are about hammering a particular narrative, repeating it over and over again.

Matar recalled: “When I was a young boy, [I watched] 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 Qaddafi 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.”⁵¹ In fact, the system of government of the dictator *depends* on imposing a certain fiction to control the population—and this is where the emphasis on repetition comes in. Though one

45 James C. Scott, *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1985), p. xv.

46 Ibid.

47 Hisham Matar, panel discussion “Arab Intellectuals Series,” International Peace Institute, New York, September 15, 2011.

48 Ibid.

49 Ibid.

50 Ibid.

51 Ibid.

may argue this point about all governments, perhaps the difference is that authoritarian governments are more explicit in their intolerance of any form of challenge.

The difference between the authoritarian regime's fiction and the writer's fiction is that the fiction of novelists deals with "what it might be like to be the other; it is interested in conflicting empathies; it is 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."⁵² While,

To dictatorship, its fiction is a very different sort of fiction. It is very bad fiction. It is incredibly single-minded. It is intolerant, predictable, and doesn't accept any other alternative. And so it seems obvious, therefore, that dictatorship should come very hard on to novelists. [...] It seems to make perfect sense according to its logic.⁵³

More generally, intellectuals, and not just novelists, challenge dictatorship because of their capacity to stand back from the narratives that authoritarian regimes try to impose on them. On the role of the intellectual against dictatorship, Riahi made a similar point when he said that "it is not enough to topple governments and tyrants, rather one must also topple the thoughts that he has inherited about wrong and right, about evil and good, and about justice and injustice."⁵⁴

Matar is unequivocal on the role of literature and the confrontation with dictatorship. He proposes that literature "is by nature rebellious, it is by nature fixed on undermining power, speaking truth to power. It is unwieldy. It cannot be employed in the service of anything. It is wild. As Mario Vargas Llosa says, 'literature is fire.'⁵⁵ And Matar argues that it is, in fact, in such circumstances that the importance of literature in human lives more generally becomes apparent. Whether under authoritarian rule or not, literature, art in general, is of extraordinary importance in that it is

what keeps people from losing their humanity: "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."⁵⁶

However, because of the importance of literature and its capacity to undermine authoritarianism, writing is a difficult and risky task. Though in the case of Matar, the painful experience of exile has, in fact, helped him overcome the obstacles that a writer faces in a dictatorship and enabled him to put to words what it is like to suffer under it. It has given him the distance—and a form of freedom—from the cruelty of a repressive regime that is needed to be able to give the reader a sense of its measure. This particular condition also allowed him to serve as a bridge between two cultures that profoundly misunderstand each other, providing a rich and multilayered portrayal of his country of origin.⁵⁷ His debut novel, *In the Country of Men*, which came out in 2006, focuses on life under Qaddafi's authoritarian regime, and it is a portrayal that is difficult to forget. His latest work, *Anatomy of a Disappearance*, deals more indirectly with dictatorship, through the experience of exile.

Matar, who writes in English, appeals to an audience broader than the Arab world. In the Arab world, hampered by censorship, writers typically have more limited sales. As Riahi mentioned, Arabic bookstores are often half empty. However, this is not always the case. In recent times, Arab writers, such as al-Khamissi and Alaa al-Aswany, have written bestsellers. Also, with the Internet, electronic versions of books have gone viral, thereby overcoming censorship and other access problems. Yet the numbers of copies sold or distributed are not necessarily a reflection of their

52 Ibid.

53 Ibid.

54 Kamel Riahi, panel discussion "Arab Intellectuals Series," International Peace Institute, New York, November 16, 2011.

55 Hisham Matar, panel discussion "Arab Intellectuals Series," International Peace Institute, New York, September 15, 2011.

56 Ibid.

57 In reviewing Matar's latest novel, *Anatomy of a Disappearance*, Robert Worth writes: "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." See Robert F. Worth, "A Libyan Author Writes of Exile and a Vanished Father," review of *Anatomy of a Disappearance*, by Hisham Matar, *The New York Times*, September 9, 2011.

true impact. As the Yemeni novelist Ali al-Muqri noted, “In reality, I don’t know if you can measure quality of the book by the fact that it is spread among 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.”⁵⁸ Thus, though the influence of literature is subtle, it is also profound and of a particular threat to authoritarian regimes, which is why they react to it and try to suppress it.

Censorship and Coercion

CONTROLLING INTELLECTUALS

However, Matar is perhaps too optimistic about the rebelliousness of literature, unless he would simply deny the label to the work of writers who are too compliant. Writing literature under the threat of repression is not an easy task, and not all writers have been defiant. Repression and intimidation, often in extreme doses, have frequently led to coercion. Whether enticed or intimidated by power, intellectuals have been co-opted by authoritarian regimes and in good numbers.

Coercion was made manifest in different ways. To avoid the sort of political critique that might bring them into disfavor with the authorities, some Egyptian writers became more introspective in their work. Literature, and art in general, does not have to be politically engaged, in fact much of it is not. Also, it would be unfair to divide it into such neat, self-contained categories. However, some critics have noticed an excessive concern with the “I” in Egyptian novels, particularly in the 1990s, which may be interpreted as a form of escapism. During this time, “authors were busy with the details of their internal struggles,” argued al-Khamissi.⁵⁹

Speaking at IPI in November 2011, al-Khamissi referred to the coercion in rather graphic terms: “A large number of intellectuals were tamed, this a word that in the past twenty years has been used to refer to intellectuals that are basically a bunch of

chickens who were put in a coop, and the political regime just had to feed them and keep them happy in their coop, and nobody was the wiser.”⁶⁰ He argued, however, that with the revolution this type of intellectual has suddenly disappeared: “They no longer exist. They can no longer be heard. They have lost their credibility, their connection with the audience, with the people.”⁶¹ One may want to argue that writers are co-opted in every society, serving specific interests consciously or unconsciously, explicitly or implicitly; however, perhaps in the Middle East the distinction is starker between those who did and those who did not.

In contrast, some of the literature in the early twenty-first century became more focused on society. Al-Khamissi’s *Taxi* and al-Aswany’s novel *The Yacoubian Building* are prime examples of books that address the problems facing society rather than the individual.⁶² Al-Aswany provided stinging criticism of the regime and the corrupt society it had spun. With *The Yacoubian Building*, he became the most renowned Egyptian novelist of his generation. In *Taxi*, published during the reign of Mubarak and also a bestseller translated into multiple languages, al-Khamissi celebrates popular culture but also provides a bitter critique of Egyptian society by threading together conversations with Cairo’s taxi drivers. In fact, his portrayal of the country and his description of the social ills, the suffocation of the individual by the economy, and political repression, serve as a roadmap to the Egyptian uprising that continues to be relevant today.

Working in parallel, there seemed to be another group, a new generation, of intellectuals who were neither co-opted by the regime nor directly struggling against it, a generation of writers from the early 2000s who predated the Arab Spring and managed to live and work independently of the regime: “The experience that my Tunisian colleague has just described who has lived all his life outside the political bubble is the same experience of hundreds of Egyptian intellectuals who

58 Ali al-Muqri, panel discussion “Arab Intellectuals Series,” International Peace Institute, New York, September 15, 2011. See coverage of the event available at www.ipinst.org/events/panel-discussions/details/314-libya-and-yemen-two-arab-authors-discuss-the-troubled-uprisings.html.

59 Khaled al-Khamissi, e-mail message to author, August 1, 2013.

60 Khaled al-Khamissi, panel discussion “Arab Intellectuals Series,” International Peace Institute, New York, November 16, 2011.

61 Ibid.

62 *Taxi* was published by Dar Alshorouk in January 2007 and has been translated into more than ten languages. In October 2009, Dar Alshorouk published al-Khamissi’s second novel, *Noah’s Ark*.

worked outside the political sphere starting in the year 2000.”⁶³

The Syrian philosopher Sadiq Jalal al-Azm is less severe in his criticism of intellectuals under the Arab authoritarian regimes. He argues that most of them were forced to reach some sort of compromise with the regime but few sold themselves to it: “If we think for example of an Egyptian intellectual living in a totalitarian system, he would have been forced to come to terms with that system. I do not believe that he served that system. I know from the experiences of many intellectuals that they had to make a number of compromises in order to continue working as university professors or writers—compromises that were however, in my opinion, not all that compromising.”⁶⁴ And he also highlights the role of intellectuals under authoritarianism and credits them with having contributed to the Arab uprisings: “I in fact believe that intellectuals played a key role in laying the groundwork for the revolutions.”⁶⁵ Fawaz Gerges actually credited al-Azm himself with having made a contribution: “I would submit that he has made a key role, a key contribution to the great awakening that we have witnessed in the last ten months, not just in terms of the classroom but more than that.”⁶⁶

CHALLENGING TABOOS

In fact, resistance literature does not all have to directly address the political system, authoritarianism, or state repression. There is another category of socially engaged intellectuals who challenged stereotypes and deeply held taboos and denounced inequalities. The work of al-Muqri offers an example of such literature. Born in the Yemeni city of Taiz in 1966, al-Muqri has built for himself a reputation as an independent thinker, taking on some of the most controversial topics in his country, exploring Yemen’s identity and the notion of tolerance in the Arab world. This is evident in his essay, “Liquor and Wine in Islam” (2007), or in his novel, *The Handsome Jew* (2009).

In “Liquor and Wine in Islam,” a work of nonfic-

tion and for which he and his family suffered physical threats and ostracism, he questions the intellectual foundations of the Islamic prohibition on alcohol. In *The Handsome Jew*, al-Muqri writes nostalgically about Jews in Yemen, a sensitive subject in the Middle East due to the regional impact of the ongoing conflict between Israelis and Palestinians. In his previous work of fiction, *Black Taste, Black Odour* (2008), he looked into the marginalization of a Yemeni community of dark-skinned people, the *akhdam* (Arabic for “servants”), writing about the revolution that took place in the south of Yemen in the 1970s, which he argues encouraged the colored minority, but which ultimately gave them no rights.

Yazbek—a writer “who consistently has spoken her mind in a way that is fearless and iconoclastic,” according to her English translator Max Weiss⁶⁷—is similar in her insistence on confronting oppressive and conservative values and social stereotypes in her work. This is, in fact, also a distinguishing feature of the oeuvre of Riahi, who takes particular pleasure in exposing the social taboos and pushing the limits of the conservative values that prevail in his country of origin, indulging in the more marginalized members of society: a homosexual, a drug dealer, and a convict. In *The Scalpel*, Riahi challenges social stereotypes and, in particular, racial discrimination, which he considers to be rife in the Arab world.⁶⁸ Both of his novels feature black characters—and in the case of *The Gorilla* this is the color of the protagonist.

Whether al-Khamissi’s severe critique or al-Azm’s more forgiving attitude is correct, they both agree that there were intellectuals challenging the regime in one way or another.

Intellectual Activism

THE ROAD TO THE UPRISING

Arab intellectuals have struggled for change not only through their work but also by mobilizing

63 Khaled al-Khamissi, panel discussion “Arab Intellectuals Series,” International Peace Institute, New York, November 16, 2011.

64 “A New Spirit of Revolution: Interview with Sadiq Jalal al-Azm,” by Mona Naggar, January 2011, available at <http://en.qantara.de/content/interview-with-sadiq-jalal-al-azm-a-new-spirit-of-revolution>.

65 Ibid.

66 See “Arab Nationalism, Islamism, and the Arab Uprising,” London: London School of Economics, November 30, 2011, available at <http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/mec/files/2011/12/Azmtranscript.pdf>.

67 Max Weiss, panel discussion “Arab Intellectuals Series,” International Peace Institute, New York, September 13, 2012.

68 “White Skin, Black Mask: An Interview with Kamel Riahi,” by Soudan Hammad, *Beirut39.blogspot.com*, March 24, 2010, available at <http://beirut39.blogspot.com/2010/03/white-skin-black-mask-interview-with.html>.

themselves as a collective and grouping together to lobby for reform. In Egypt, the activism of intellectuals for political change can be traced back prior to the uprisings. Though labor and student movements were more visible in the social unrest that started in 2004 in Egypt, intellectuals were also heavily involved in the coalitions formed around them, including the Movement for Independent Universities, the Coalition for Independent Culture, as well as Kifaya, the name for the Egyptian Movement for Change. These groups were a critical part of Egypt's modern history, which was accompanied by a cultural revolution, with the mushrooming of independent theatrical troupes, music groups, poetry gatherings, and bookshops. "I witnessed the closing of bookshops in the 1970s, and I never imagined that I would live to see new bookshops emerging," said al-Khamissi, who counted twenty new bookshops in downtown Cairo having opened in the last few years as well as an increase in the number of publishing houses and books being sold. "Books used to be sold in editions of 500, now [there are editions of] 10,000 and 100,000," he said.⁶⁹

Intellectuals such as al-Khamissi and al-Aswany remained engaged after the ousting of Mubarak, attempting to effect change during the period of transition, through regular columns in the press and public speaking. Al-Khamissi and al-Aswany thus belonged to a group of writers who were politically and socially engaged across the Arab world, despite the existence of censorship, and who continued to write, aware of the risks and, therefore, with a sense of purpose, pushing the boundaries of what is considered permissible criticism of the regime or society through their work. And they are not the exception: "Now we have intellectuals who work outside the regime with a free and independent voice. Some of the younger writers chose Facebook, others chose other means, what is definite is that we have experienced a complete cultural revolution that came in tandem with [...] a protest movement." These were "a new generation of intellectuals, whose work is totally different from that of the 1980s, 1990s, and early 2000s, completely outside the box of the political regime," says al-Khamissi.⁷⁰

Intellectuals have been involved during the uprisings in ways other than writing, and they have assumed leadership roles in protests, in representing civil society, and in organizing parallel activities. A sample of the range of activities was provided by al-Khamissi, who cited a few events taking place in Cairo simultaneously as he was speaking at IPI in New York in November 2011: Laila Soueif—a founding member of the Movement for Independent Universities and the seminal Kifaya movement, as well as a lecturer and activist—was among a group of activists on a hunger strike demanding the release of her son Alaa Abd el-Fattah and other political prisoners; a demonstration led by the Coalition for Independent Culture was taking place in downtown Cairo, also asking for the release of political prisoners and the end of military rule; and a seminar was being held by a group of intellectuals to celebrate International Tolerance Day.

Al-Muqri also noted the activism of intellectuals in Yemen:

This happened in many places, by many organizations in our country. I was one of sixty-three authors who signed a writer's proclamation. I also wrote several articles in Arabic newspapers, and some of them were translated into English. There is also direct participation. Many artists and literary people went to Tahrir Square [Sana'a]. I was among those who participated in these events. Many go to the squares and write or make drawings, evocative designs. There are musicians who lead activities and perform songs, maybe songs critical of the old regime. The role of song has been very interesting, and they were very widely distributed through YouTube and Facebook as well as mobile phones.⁷¹

In Syria, where the stakes were highest due to the degree of violence of the originally peaceful uprising, intellectuals were at the forefront of the drive toward reform before the Arab Spring. A few months after the succession of Bashar al-Assad in 2000, a group of ninety-nine artists, writers, and professors signed a manifesto published in the pan-Arab daily *Al-Hayat* asking for greater political openness in the country. This was followed by other similar initiatives, creating a degree of contestation and paving the way, to some extent,

69 Khaled al-Khamissi, panel discussion "Arab Intellectuals Series," International Peace Institute, New York, November 16, 2011.

70 Ibid.

71 Ali al-Muqri, panel discussion "Arab Intellectuals Series," International Peace Institute, New York, September 15, 2011.

for the uprising in the country—a similar sort of mobilization to the one that took place around the time of the presidential elections in Egypt in 2005 referred to previously. Then, when the revolt started in 2011, intellectuals such as Yazbek were again heavily involved in the initial protests demanding change. At the time, Yazbek felt the need to leave the relative safety of writing and became involved in direct action, including participating in and organizing demonstrations.

Intellectuals also engaged in the uprising using their public status—rather than their writing per se—to attract attention to the cause by participating in protests. For example, members of the performing arts, across all sects, used their notoriety to denounce the abuses. Syrian actresses Mai Skaf and Fadwa Suleiman tried to mobilize support for pro-democracy groups through social media, uploading videos calling for peaceful protests on the Internet. Also, actress Mona Wassef, singer Asala Nasri, director Nabil Maleh, and the composer Malek Jandali participated in protests. However, due to the sudden deterioration into an open civil war, they were left to play a peripheral role.

As in Egypt, the uprising in Syria started with demonstrations in support of the uprisings in other countries, mostly youth who stood near the Libyan, Egyptian, Tunisian, or Yemeni embassies in Damascus. This is when they began to consider whether there also would be a revolution in Syria, which was “a frightening question,” said Yazbek.⁷² However, as these rallies turned into all-out civil war, violence appeared to make all other forms of protest redundant, and intellectuals became marginalized. “You are now under a hail of bombs; we are facing death directly. I am a writer, and I am supposed to be concerned with my books and my writing, but I am currently obsessed with the blood flowing on the streets, how the food will get to those who need it, what will happen to the millions of the displaced on the streets, how [...] aid [will get] to the children that are dying. What about the

refugee camps? Not just me, everybody is just preoccupied with that,” she mentioned.⁷³

The extreme violence left no room for the peaceful dissent of writers or anyone else. However, the concerted efforts of a number of public intellectuals to try to engage must be noted. Yazbek began to receive threats for her criticism of the regime and was detained a number of times. After seeing the horror of the jails and the corpses of young Syrians piled up—which she has documented in articles for the media as well as in her book *A Woman in the Crossfire*⁷⁴—she was forced to leave the country, seeking asylum in France. Since then, the shock of what she saw and what continues to take place have left her in a profound and at times paralyzing state of shock. Nevertheless, she has been relatively lucky leaving Syria physically—though not mentally—unscathed. Many others, however, were not.

The renowned Syrian cartoonist, Ali Ferzat, suffered severe beatings and had both hands broken as a punishment for drawings in which he dared rebuke the regime and, since then, lives in exile in the Gulf. The photo of his bludgeoned face and bandaged limbs circulated widely through the Internet. Some, such as the artist Youssef Abdelke, were arrested for their opposition; others, however, paid the ultimate price and died after suffering persecution and torture. Ibrahim Qashush, a local singer and composer of protest songs from Hama, had his throat cut in early July 2011.⁷⁵ In May 2012, the body of the musician Rabie al-Ghazzi was found with a bullet in the neck in the trunk of a car parked on Baghdad Street in Damascus.⁷⁶ At the funeral in Damascus, writer Khaled Khalifa was beaten so badly by regime agents that he needed to cast his arm in plaster.⁷⁷ Days later, Basil Shihada, a filmmaker and student in the United States who decided to go back to Syria to support the uprising was shot dead by a sniper in the city of Homs. And thus, the Arab Spring has caused a new diaspora of Arab intellectuals.

72 Samar Yazbek, panel discussion “Arab Intellectuals Series,” International Peace Institute, New York, September 13, 2012.

73 Ibid.

74 See Samar Yazbek, “A Testimony from Syria,” *The Guardian*, August 3, 2011, available at www.theguardian.com/books/2011/aug/03/author-author-samar-yazbek-syria.

75 Bassel Oudat, “Come On, Leave Bashar,” *Al-Ahram*, July 14–20, 2011, available at <http://weekly.ahram.org.eg/2011/1056/re10.htm>.

76 The Syrian Revolution Forum, “Damascus: The Activist Rabie Abdelhamid al-Ghazzi Was Martyred 5-25-2012,” May 26, 2012, available at www.syria2011.net/t32654-topic.

77 Michael Peel, “Syrian Artists Pay Price of Resistance,” *Financial Times*, July 13, 2012, available at www.ft.com/cms/s/0/06d46008-ccda-11e1-b78b-00144feabdc0.html#axzz2d6lX36zk.

DOCUMENTING

One of the resistance activities common to all writers in the uprisings, even in places such as Syria, where extreme forms of repression have left no space for nonviolent protests, is that of documenting acts of violence. This has become increasingly important in the struggle for truth, as the facts have become vigorously contested by the different parties involved in all of the uprisings. In the Syrian revolt, discovering what really happened, identifying who was responsible, and informing about it have become major challenges, and this is a task that Yazbek took upon herself as explicitly described in her book on the uprising. We can see this challenge in the other countries too. Concerning Libya, Matar said that

in the very early days of the Libyan uprising, it became very clear that what Qaddafi 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.⁷⁸

Which prompted Matar to try to fill this gap: "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."⁷⁹

THE INFLUENCE OF FICTION

These are, however, examples of either writers or artists as public intellectuals analyzing developments, generating new ideas, and using their writing skills or public position to further a particular cause, but not of novelists using fiction per se to contribute to the uprisings. The latter is a question relevant to the broader debate of the relation between art and politics.

As already mentioned, literature has played a key role in challenging authoritarian regimes in the lead up to the 2010 and 2011 revolts. However, its

role during the uprisings appears to be more limited. Al-Muqri holds a clear stance on this issue, arguing that there is no necessary connection between literature and the uprisings: "I believe that several revolutions don't see anything in literature." In 2011, he argued that there is no particular role for the novelist in a revolution. "We are asking the writer to give his opinion, but I am saying that the writer does not have the obligation to give his opinion. He or she should not be in the forefront." This is because al-Muqri believes that politics and art should not mix: "Maybe the ideology could be a part of the literary work, but literature should not start from an ideological standpoint."⁸⁰ He considers that the mixture of ideology and art, for example, made the Soviet era a barren period for literature. Ideology makes literature void of beauty, and this stands as a warning against such combination. He concedes that writers may be able to see things others do not and thus contribute toward change: "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. But that doesn't mean that I'm more aware." This is because he is very cautious about the uncertainty of the period of change, and for a novelist to adopt any particular position would be too risky.⁸¹ According to al-Muqri, "if you follow the events, sometimes you can reach a point where you do not believe in the revolution," and become completely cynical.⁸²

Despite his claims about the apparent incompatibility between the two realms, al-Muqri does not stay away from politics in his novels. His first novel *Black Taste, Black Odour*, for example, deals with the uprising in the 1970s in Aden, in the south of Yemen, which the authorities claimed to be a democratic revolution. The uprising encouraged the emancipation of the black minority in Yemen from their status as servants, but then the authorities did not fulfill their promise and failed to share power with them: "They lived in conditions that are very, very bad. Even slaves have rights, but not them."⁸³

78 Hisham Matar, panel discussion "Arab Intellectuals Series," International Peace Institute, New York, September 15, 2011.

79 Ibid.

80 Ali al-Muqri, panel discussion "Arab Intellectuals Series," International Peace Institute, New York, September 15, 2011.

81 Ibid.

82 Ibid.

83 Ibid.

He also acknowledges the influence of politics over literature with regard to his novel, *The Handsome Jew*. Though he prefers to distance himself from any specific reference to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, he recognizes some readers may see it there: “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.”⁸⁴ He recognizes other parallels between *The Handsome Jew* and events in the physical world in which he questions the notion of the nation, how it is built, and how it constitutes a barrier between people. One of the central points in the novel is the search for a new nation, the idea of which is represented by Fatima, the main character in the novel, who falls in love with a Jew. Speaking at IPI in September 2011, he said he believes the uprisings in the Arab world have had a positive impact on such questions surrounding the nation, further drawing parallels between his writing and the uprisings. “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 [...] 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.”⁸⁵ These links between his novels and politics notwithstanding, he remains skeptical about the capacity of literature to make a positive contribution.

For Matar, on the other hand, the fact that writers stand outside events is precisely what allows them to play a role: “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.”⁸⁶ And they have a particular role to play in this period of transition: “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 [engaged] in the past. And [there exists] 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.”⁸⁷ And yet he is anxious not to romanticize the role of writers in revolution:

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.⁸⁸

LITERARY REFERENCES

Beyond this debate about the exact relation between art and politics, literature has clearly been a source of inspiration for the uprising. Though there is no one book, whether fiction or nonfiction, that can be said to have had a major influence on the uprisings, in the Arab world, where there is also a rich oral tradition, poetry has definitely played a role. The early twentieth-century Tunisian poet Abu al-Qasim al-Shaabi, in particular, has been influential, and a verse from one of his poems has become the slogan of the wave of change across the Arab world and continues to exert great influence over these epochal events: “If, one day, the people desire to live free, then fate must answer their call; their night will then begin to fade, their chains will break and fall.”⁸⁹

There are also other specific instances. In Libya, for example, a poem, which had been written by an inmate, Adil Mshaitil, in one of Qaddafi’s notorious prisons, and which lit a desire for freedom and deliverance from authoritarianism

84 Ibid.

85 Ibid.

86 Hisham Matar, panel discussion “Arab Intellectuals Series,” International Peace Institute, New York, September 15, 2011.

87 Ibid.

88 Ibid.

89 Abu al-Qasim al-Shaabi, “If the People Wanted Life One Day,” n.d.

among Libyans, became an anthem for the anti-Qaddafi uprising: “We’ll stay here until our pain disappears. We will come alive and sweetly sing. Despite all the vengeance, we will reach the summit and scream to the heavens. We’ll stand together with balm and a pen.”⁹⁰ Matar recounted how the poet Khaled Mattawa and he used to lament the Arab oral tradition. “If our people wrote everything down, we would have avoided so many different problems. We attributed everything ill to the oral tradition,” but then they were positively surprised when Benghazi was liberated, and thousands of people standing between the courthouse and the sea were seen “holding hands, walking together, and singing the five-page poem, word-for-word, not missing one.”⁹¹ This anecdote highlights the different impact and use of prose and verse, and in particular, the more direct effect of the latter in moving people to action. Poetry has had, for example, a massive influence over the Palestinian nationalist movement. Poems by Mahmoud Darwish were read at political rallies, and the metaphors in his verses have shaped the imagery of Palestinian nationalism and the identity of modern Palestinians.

Postpartum

Though it is impossible to say what the uprisings will bring about in the long term for artists and writers in particular, in their immediate aftermath, the environment has changed dramatically. There are certainly newly found freedoms that have resulted in an explosion of creativity: “Endless committees have been set up. In Benghazi alone, there are more than 115 new newspapers and magazines.... 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 [have been established and are], you know, fantastic,” said Matar.⁹² Also, now writers are able to travel and

meet openly with other writers. Matar, for example, participated in a reading with colleagues from Libya in a literary festival in London and spoke movingly about this experience: “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.”⁹³ Relations among writers, and people in general, from different countries also improved. When Matar visited Egypt after the Egyptian president fell and Libyans were beginning to challenge their own dictator, he felt “everything is completely changed” at least at the level of relations among people: “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 [a] neighbor and Libyans as brothers. So artistically, cultural life is, I believe, hugely rejuvenated by these actions.”⁹⁴

However, new challenges have also cropped up. Liberal intellectuals lament the poor results in the elections of the secular parties in Tunisia’s elections in October 2011, which according to Riahi reflect the failures of the intelligentsia. Though the appointment of Moncef al-Marzouki, a medical doctor as well as an intellectual, as the first president of the Republic after the fall of Ben Ali is worth noting, on the whole, intellectuals and progressive, liberal, and leftist parties have failed to reach the masses.⁹⁵ Riahi attributes this, at least partly, to the fact that ironically “the left in Tunisia is very bourgeois.” Riahi also denounced the lack of interest in culture and cultural figures. The media in the postrevolutionary era paid little attention to intellectual voices and thinkers, with few Tunisian artists being interviewed on official or private stations, and not a single party launched a cultural program.

90 Nicolas Pelham, “Zero Hour in Benghazi,” *The New York Review of Books*, March 8, 2011, available at www.nybooks.com/blogs/nyrblog/2011/mar/08/zero-hour-benghazi/.

91 Hisham Matar, panel discussion “Arab Intellectuals Series,” International Peace Institute, New York, September 15, 2011.

92 Ibid.

93 Ibid.

94 Ibid.

95 Kamel Riahi, panel discussion “Arab Intellectuals Series,” International Peace Institute, New York, November 16, 2011.

Riahi also denounces the opportunism of some intellectuals: “Before the revolution there were shortcomings by intellectuals, either because they kept their heads down, or they were in the lap of authority, or in many instances they fled abroad or fell into silence. The problem is that after the revolution, and this is the big disaster, many so-called artists rushed to grab positions in the interim governments.”⁹⁶ Others chose to remain silent in fear of what might happen and the type of authority that might come to power, especially those leftists, liberals, and others who feared the right or the extreme right, the Islamist movement.

The controversy over freedom of expression became apparent very soon after the fall of Ben Ali, and Riahi pointed to three events in particular: the destruction by Salafis of the Africa Hall, a well-known art-house cinema that had screened the film *No God, No Master*, which was deemed to be blasphemous purely on the basis of its title; the attacks and threats against the satellite television channel Nessma—in particular directed at its offices, employees, and owner’s house—after it showed the cartoon movie *Persepolis*; and finally, the banning of a sculpture that was meant to represent the Tunisian revolution in the shape of a woman, which was considered indecent.⁹⁷ Riahi considers this to be “the start of a true battle. I am very optimistic that we will have a confrontation and that we will become cultural warriors in the Tunisian scene so we can continue to have it, because you need to put your life in danger to realize the true value of your life, and this is a chance for everyone to be creative.”⁹⁸

In Yemen, al-Muqri received further threats, among them accusations of apostasy, since the publication of his novel *Hurma* (a derogatory term for women) in 2012. Also the poet and lecturer Ahmed al-Arami was suspended from the University of Al-Bayda and forced to flee the country after he sent the text to his students.⁹⁹

Hurma, written in the first person and containing explicit sexual content, tells the story of a woman who is oppressed by her family to the point that she is never referred to by her personal name, denouncing in the process the hypocritical attitude of jihadists toward women, sex, and religion.

Despite these many setbacks, the overall trend has been toward greater freedom of expression. As an Egyptian historian declared in January 2014: “The challenges are huge because the old regime has not collapsed—if anything, it has managed to position itself—but I think the genie is out of the bottle. I don’t think it is possible to revert back to the situation before January 2011.”¹⁰⁰ Though he spoke regarding Egypt in particular, the same could be applied to the rest of the Arab countries that underwent an uprising. The uprisings have provoked a lively debate, and an increase in the capacity to question the established order appears so far to be one of the enduring legacies. The Arab newspapers provide evidence of this lively debate, with numerous opinion pieces critically analyzing developments, suggesting alternatives, and speculating about possible consequences. These discussions do not confine themselves to politics but also creative expression. One article in the Lebanese *Al-Akhbar*, for example, asks questions about the style of Arabic prose itself: “The pressing question here is: Will Arab revolutions be the theme of the coming novels? Or will the revolutions shape these accounts in accordance with their language and style and new technical tools? How can the revolutions change our current societies, without changing what is told about them in writing, poetry, and theater?”¹⁰¹

Conclusion

That there may not be a Havel-like figure—an intellectual turned politician who managed to lead a revolution and successfully overthrow a dictatorial regime—in the Arab uprisings does not mean

96 Ibid.

97 See Myriam Ben Ghazi, “Statue of Naked Woman Shocking People at Avenue Habib Bourgiba,” *Tunisia-live.net*, October 31, 2011, available at www.tunisia-live.net/2011/10/31/a-shocking-statue-of-naked-woman-in-avenue-habib-bourgiba/.

98 Kamel Riahi, panel discussion “Arab Intellectuals Series,” International Peace Institute, New York, November 16, 2011.

99 See Zahi Wahbi, “Ink and Salt: ‘Hurma’ Ali al-Muqri,” *Al-Hayat*, June 13, 2013, available at <http://alhayat.com/Details/523579>; and Ala Uthman, “Intellectuals Express Their Concern for the Death Threats against al-Arami and al-Muqri,” *Al-Youm al-Sabia*, May 31, 2013, available at www1.youm7.com/News.asp?NewsID=1092672&SecID=94.

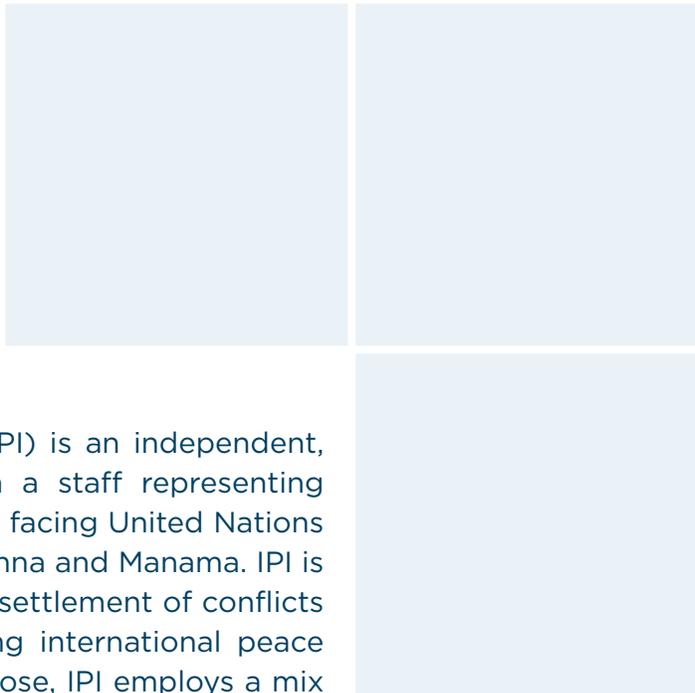
100 Khaled Fahmy, “Egypt Revolution Stumbles, but the ‘Genie is Out of the Bottle’: Interview with Khaled Fahmy,” interview by José Vericat, *Global Observatory*, January 14, 2014, available at <http://theglobalobservatory.org/interviews/655-egypt-revolution-stumbles-but-the-genie-is-out-of-the-bottle-interview-with-khaled-fahmy.html>.

101 Ili Abdu, “Kamal al-Riahi: The Techniques of Tyranny,” *Al-Akhbar*, October 14, 2011, available at www.al-akhbar.com/node/23648.

that there are no intellectuals who are trying to effect change. Further, such denunciations illustrate a tendency to overlook the intellectual activity ongoing in the Arab world. Intellectuals participate in revolutions in a variety of ways and the Václav Havel model is just one of these.

What is undeniable is that intellectuals and particularly literary figures—who are the focus of this paper—have played a unique and crucial role resisting authoritarianism in the Arab world. Fiction allowed writers to do what no one else could: criticize authoritarian regimes publicly. Walking a fine line between freedom of expression and censorship, writers have demonstrated extraordinary courage confronting brutal, oppressive governments with their stories and have become catalysts for change, culminating in the Arab uprisings that started at the end of 2010. During this revolutionary wave, intellectuals have been deeply involved and have mobilized themselves from Yemen to Egypt participating in direct action like any other group of citizens but also contributing to the debate and shaping the direction of the struggle. Though of course not all intellectuals have used their medium to undermine authoritarian regimes; some have been co-opted or forced into submission.

It is also simply premature to identify the intellectuals and the ideas that have shaped and are shaping the Arab uprisings. Right now this historical phenomenon appears to be more destructive—about ending a type of governance—than constructive—about fighting for a specific set of principles. The narrative is still being contested. Islamists would of course fit it into their intellectual references and history of their struggles. Others would look at the particular history and set of conditions that have shaped the region as it is today in the context of its colonial past—an international interest in the region that endures to this day. Similarly, the seeming absence of a single charismatic leader promoting a particular vision is not so much the result of a lack of engaged intellectuals, or intellectuals in general, as it is perhaps the result of no one managing to rally enough people around her or him. For the moment, it is difficult to discern intellectuals' influence due to the cacophony of voices, the variety of opinions struggling against each other. Notwithstanding speculations about how active intellectuals are, whether more or less than in other revolutions, protests, or unrests in history, what is undeniable is the richness and complexity of the intellectual debate in the Arab world.



The **INTERNATIONAL PEACE INSTITUTE** (IPI) is an independent, international not-for-profit think tank with a staff representing more than twenty nationalities. It has offices facing United Nations Headquarters in New York and offices in Vienna and Manama. IPI is dedicated to promoting the prevention and settlement of conflicts between and within states by strengthening international peace and security institutions. To achieve its purpose, IPI employs a mix of policy research, convening, publishing, and outreach.

www.ipinst.org

www.theglobalobservatory.org



777 United Nations Plaza
New York, NY 10017-3521
USA
TEL +1-212-687-4300
FAX +1-212-983-8246

Freyung 3
1010 Vienna
Austria
TEL +43-1-533-8881
FAX +43-1-533-881-11

51-52 Harbour House
Bahrain Financial Harbour
P.O. Box 1467
Manama, Bahrain
TEL +973-1721-1344