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Since 1967, Updated Edition

Fouad Ajami

Excerpt

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THE world can be read into small events: In Clifford Geertz's imagery, winks can be made to speak to epistemology.<sup>1</sup> The small event into which I shall begin reading things is the death of the Lebanese journalist and publisher Salim al-Lawzi.

In early March, 1980, Salim al-Lawzi was found dead and mutilated in Beirut. He had come back to Lebanon on a personal visit from London where he had been living and working for some time. Because al-Lawzi was a critic of the Syrian presence in Lebanon, it was widely assumed that the Syrians were responsible for the deed. In the Beirut of the late 1970s assassinations and murders had become commonplace: Politics had degenerated into nihilism and violence, and there was no use trying to determine who and what should be believed.

Salim al-Lawzi had not been a particularly talented or honest journalist. Nor did he have to be. He was a great success in a world in which success was its own vindication. He mingled with the mighty; he openly spoke of and flaunted the gifts given to him by this or that Arab ruler, this or that embassy. In the time-honored tradition of Lebanese journalism (where newspapers reflected the views of particular embassies), he had served a variety of patrons and offered his services to the highest bidder. At the height of Nasser's power he had served Cairo; then he shifted his services and loyalty to Saudi Arabia.

When the Arab world found its way to London in the aftermath of the October War of 1973, al-Lawzi moved there and launched a new magazine, *Events* (the exact English translation of his Arabic magazine, *al Hawadith*). *Events* picked up where the old *Hawadith* had faltered. It catered to the Arab presence in London; it showed that men could use new garb but remain themselves. *Events* discoursed in English, but it was moved by the old spirit. It catered to the winners, to the consumers; it flattered those who mattered and displayed their life style. There was no investigative journalism, no analysis, only the banalities of what passed for truth, the version of the world dictated by al-Lawzi's latest patrons. In its pages was that unique mixture of Arab life in the mid and late 1970s – the horrors of the civil wars, the tribalism, and breakdowns together with items about banking and business opportunities, real-estate deals and speculations. One foot in the hell of the old politics re-

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surgent, one in the benign utopia of finance. It spoke of the wounds and the incoherence and of the new possibilities. Back to back were the latest apocalyptic deeds and words of the Lebanese Phalanges and the deeds of the great Saudi financier Adnan Khashoggi. And, of course, *Events* offered a steady flow of anti-Egyptian polemics from the safety and distance of London: criticism of Egypt's "betrayal" of Arabism, its abandonment of the sacred struggle.

A few words said in eulogy by a friend of al-Lawzi suggest one reason why I open with al-Lawzi's death: "Freedom," he said, "is a plant alien to our part of the world. Whenever implanted, it dies . . . We used to blame the colonialists. Then some of us colonized others and the plant of freedom died over and over again. Each time it died a dreamer who inhabited his own world would try to revive it only to perish along with it . . . all those who made the effort rode against powerful windmills with wooden swords."<sup>2</sup>

This had not been a world that took responsibility for its own deeds. The invented nationalist historiography of the Arab kind had always pointed outward: It accused others – Ottomans, Europeans, and others – of causing the ills of the Arab world.<sup>3</sup> T. E. Lawrence had once expressed and helped spread that stereotype. The Arabs were once free; then the Turks came, who "choked the life out of the body politic." "Happiness," he romanticized, "became a dream" as the spirit of the Arabs "shrivelled in the numbing breath of a military government."<sup>4</sup>

But now the world the Arabs lived in was more nearly an Arab world. The Ottoman empire had become a fading memory, Turkey herself a failing society. The external scapegoats had been cut down to size. The wounds that mattered were self-inflicted wounds. The outside world intruded, but the destruction one saw reflected the logic of Arab history, the quality of its leadership. The divisions of the Arab world were real, not contrived points on a map or a colonial trick of divide-and-conquer. No outsiders had to oppress and mutilate. The whip was cracked by one's own.

In the way he lived and the way he died, al-Lawzi told volumes about what I shall continually refer to as the Arab predicament in the modern world. In the Beirut where al-Lawzi had earlier practiced his brand of journalism in the 1950s and 1960s, things seemed

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reasonably benign and harmless. No one took seriously what his and other magazines said. Much more was said about Beirut's parties, its joie de vivre, its elegant weddings, than about its slums, about the despair of that so-called belt of misery around the city, or about the real antagonisms that separated the Lebanese. Al-Lawzi's brand of journalism reflected the place assigned to the written and spoken word in Arab politics. It also reflected the peculiar nature of that Levantine city where men lived on charm, by their wits, where "principles" were things that men could not afford, where men seemed to push things to the brink and then pull back to keep the game going, to keep things the way they were.

Then grimness crept into this world – part of the broader grimness that came into Arab life in the aftermath of the Six Day War. The sensitive could sense the gathering of the storm. In the preface to the third edition of his *The Arab Cold War*, Malcolm Kerr lamented that Arab politics "had ceased to be fun. In the good old days most Arabs refused to take themselves seriously and this made it easier to take a relaxed view of the few who possessed intimations of some immortal mission."<sup>5</sup> When these words were written, the ordeal of Lebanon that sent al-Lawzi to London and the unraveling of Arab society that jumbled past and future, fundamentalism and technicalism, the cultural anguish and the business deals had yet to come.

There is no "fun" in the material handled here: It is a chronicle of illusions and despair, of politics repeatedly degenerating into bloodletting, of imagined transformations followed by despair that there is some immutable core that disfigures it all, that devours all good intentions, that mocks those who would try to change things. The seemingly harmless games played by the preceding generation, the hair-splitting arguments of Arab ideologues gave way to a deeper and more terrifying breakdown. One generation had sown the wind and the other was now reaping the harvest. The stock-in-trade of men like Nasser, the Syrian Ba'athist theoretician Michel Aflaq, the braggart Ahmad al-Shuqairi of the Palestine Liberation Organization, was symbols and words. There was ample room for maneuver, a margin for errors. In the decade or so that followed the Six Day War, words were replaced with bullets, which now seemed the final arbiter. This generation, writes one observer, split

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into two groups: those who saw authority growing out of the barrel of a gun and those who packed up and left.<sup>6</sup> The young thugs roaming the streets of Beirut and the snipers on its tall and modern buildings that once stood as a monument to Lebanon's "cosmopolitanism" exposed the tribalism of a deeply sectarian country whose civilized forms were only a cover for biases and prejudices, an escape from realities intuited and known by its inhabitants.

The 1970s of Lebanon, wrote an analyst in a bitter commentary, are the 1980s of the region as a whole. Just as Lebanon led the Arab world into the bourgeois age (it was really Cairo that did so, but the writer is a Lebanese), it now leads them to the new age. It shows them the hell that lies in their future. Its storm will spread to their skies. Which country will be next? Which country will perform the "dance of death"? Will it be Turkey or will it be one of the states of the Arabian peninsula?<sup>7</sup>

Three great events dominate the period that concerns us: the Six Day War of June, 1967, the October War of 1973, and the Iranian Revolution of 1978–79. Men fought, worked, and reflected in the shadow of these events. In a curious way, the defeat of 1967 was better handled in the Arab world than the so-called victory of 1973. In the aftermath of the June defeat, the dominant order sought to put together an answer of its own to the defeat, as it had to if it were to survive. That it did in the form of an organized, large-scale war in October, 1973. Between 1967 and 1973, the dominant order could rely on patriotism; it had the "safety" of a limited task. Grim as its task was (for it knew that a military victory against Israel was not in the cards) it operated from givens shared by the overwhelming majority of the masses. The defeat was culturally, psychologically, and politically unacceptable, and it had to be dealt with. The managers of order patched up their differences and descended from the world of metaphysics into a more concrete world. They knew that the defeat was intolerable; they sensed the growing despair and tried to stem it. In the process they acquired some badly needed facts and rules about the way the international system worked: They learned how to speak to the outside world; they displayed some skill in a subdued coming-to-terms with the world. To be sure, the 1967–1973 interlude had its dreamers, those who thought that the world could be unmade and remade with a pam-

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phlet, but on balance caution prevailed and the social order hung together.

The “victory” in October, 1973, proved more difficult to control, more difficult to live with. For some, that historic watershed promised an instant remaking of the world, a settling of the great score with the West, a great revenge for past injuries. The long view of this can be appreciated from the following passage by historian Bernard Lewis:

This confrontation [between the Arab oil producers and the West] is the culmination of a long process which has been going on for centuries. It began with the expansion of Europe from both ends in the late 15th century, the Russians from the East, the Portuguese and other maritime nations from the West. This expansion, and the ascendancy to which it gave rise, eventually affected the whole world. It took different forms in different places. In some areas it led to direct colonial rule. In the Middle East this only happened in few places and for relatively brief periods. In most of the countries of the Middle East the impact of Western domination was indirect but, nevertheless, powerful enough to shatter the old society beyond repair and to initiate a process of violent social, economic, and political change which disrupted the traditional order, destroyed traditional loyalty and relationships, and engendered a deep resentment against the Western standard-bearers of the civilization from which these changes originated.<sup>8</sup>

The world brought about by October 1973 blew away the cobwebs of Arab society. Buffeted by mighty winds and propelled by temptations and possibilities unknown before, its cultural container ruptured. It strutted on the world stage for a brief moment; then the breakdown came. There were great victories on distant stages and paralyzing wounds at home. A world seemed to back into the past because the new terrain looked unfamiliar as old verities were challenged, old limits broken and violated. An essay written in 1978 from Cairo on the eve of the Iranian Revolution expressed my own attempt to understand the undoing of the world that the October war of 1973 had ushered in. I reproduce it here because it foreshadows my own analysis in the pages that follow:

To those so inclined, divine will must be sending a message to the Muslim people of this region and making known its disapproval of what has come to pass in the age of affluence and “petro-power.”

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Since the oil embargo of October 1973, the moment of that perceived great triumph over the West, there has been the tragic collapse of Lebanon, disarray in Arab politics, and of course the recent eruption in Iran. In Muslim and Middle Eastern cosmology, there is a particular emphasis on the fate of those who ride and aim too high and who come to suffer as a result of having dared to break sacred limits and having entertained false pride and ambitions. Since October 1973, the principal malady has been cultural and psychological: a growing imbalance between men and things and the rupturing of the normative order. This may sound a bit poetic and elusive, but it is not intended to be. It has to do with some very concrete things: traffic jams and inflation, growing inequalities, the wearing thin of patience and tradition, and the aftermath of an economic boom that has raised some men to new heights of grandeur and power and demeaned the dignity of others.

Five years ago, the Arabs won what seemed to be a victory over the West: The oil weapon was seen as providing the dawn of a new age of grandeur and power, a revenge for the injuries inflicted on this part of the world. The true age of "petro-power" has visited on the Arabs – as well as on Iran – great suffering and dislocation. Oil money spawned great dreams, but those were inevitably of power and "things." The recurring theme in the tales of "The Thousand and One Nights" is that of the beggar becoming king and the king a beggar. The oil victory was to be that kind of theme: a world that had structured a whole moral and social order around poverty could now do unlimited things. It could humiliate those who had once humiliated it and resurrect a great imagined past grafting onto it the power of the modern West. But the new age was not to be. Unable and really unwilling to import the West as "process" – such features as the accountability of rulers, as well as personal and cultural freedom – the oil states would import the West in the form of "things." The strategy has backfired. When it is in the West, the machinery of the West makes sense: It emerges from a larger social and political order. But imported, the same machinery poses serious problems: The narrow streets of most Middle Eastern capitals are as inhospitable to the machines of the West as are the hearts and habits of men.

The dilemma leaves those engaged in it in the midst of powerful crosscurrents. The mighty wind from the West promises power, glamour, and the possibility of doing away with what once seemed to be unbreakable bounds. But there is also the voice of authenticity and tradition with its own compelling message. It promises to sweep away injustices and troubles and to erect a more caring and true order. It raises the banner of brotherhood at a time of mounting inequalities, hence its power and relevance. Some men have pros-

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pered in the new order and many have lost out in the boom. And the losers have not been convinced that the winners deserved all that they have accumulated. This has colored the relation between the winners and the losers both within the Arab countries and Iran and among the Arab states themselves. It is responsible for a deeply felt wound in Egypt and the widespread feeling that richer Arabs want Egypt, as one Egyptian writer put it, to starve alone, die alone, fight alone and go bankrupt alone. The sight of Arabic newspapers in London and Paris that cater to the Arab rich attacking Egyptian policies has a pathology all its own that has not been lost on Egyptians.

The phenomenal wealth of some has made a mockery of the brotherhood of man and man. One does not have to be unduly old or nostalgic to recall better times for this region – times when people had less but shared it more equitably and when the normative order had its own balance. This area's vast depths of compassion and humanity that survive and escape breakdown and violence will have to be tapped if the current malady is to be shaken off. For, as Muslim theology maintains, Allah will help and sympathize only when the believers do their part.<sup>9</sup>

In a useful periodization of recent Arab history, the Moroccan scholar Abdallah Laroui identified four distinct phases:

- 1 The *Nahda* (the Arab Renaissance) from 1850 to 1914. This was dominated by the quest to "assimilate the great achievements of Western European civilization."
- 2 The struggle for independence. This phase began with the collapse of the Ottoman Empire at the end of World War I and lasted until the mid-1950s: "It gave rise to popular parties that played an important cultural role by promoting the spread of democratic ideals and, to a lesser extent, of socialist values."
- 3 The "Unionist movement" that flourished after 1948 and found its leadership in President Nasser of Egypt and the Ba'th party in Syria.
- 4 The "moral crisis" that followed the 1967 defeat. This "culminated in a period of anguished self-criticism, a searching re-appraisal of postwar Arab culture and political practice."<sup>10</sup>

The post-1967 years of concern to us can be arbitrarily divided into three distinct phases. The first lasted from 1967 to 1973. In this phase, the Arab state system tried to clean away the debris of the defeat and worked out a reconciliation between the "radical"



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states and the conservative ones. The deal was worked out between President Nasser of Egypt and King Faisal of Saudi Arabia. What Malcolm Kerr labelled the "Arab Cold-War" was thus liquidated. But this cycle's early heroes were the newly radicalized Palestinians: It was their guns and pamphlets and their challenge to both radical and conservative states that dominated this cycle. This was brought to an end by the Jordanian civil war of September 1970. King Husein's army may have carried the fight to grim limits and thus frightened off those who had commissioned him to take on the Palestinians. Local grievances and offended sensibilities in Jordan forced a particularly grim battle to erupt. The Jordanian army had watched the erosion of its authority, the growth of a state within a state as the Palestinians turned Jordan into a sanctuary for attacks against Israel and into a political base. But the fight was not Jordan's alone. Save for the pariah Syrian regime (which was brought down by Hafez Asad in November of the same year), all the Arab states had either directly sanctioned the Jordanian effort or simply looked the other way: This was true of Nasser and Qaddafi and of the radical regime in Iraq, as it was true of the conservative states.

At stake was the state system's sensitivity about outsiders who play by a different set of rules. King Husein's army performed the grim service and carried it out with more zeal than some of those who had acquiesced may have wanted: As the casualties ran into the thousands, the Arab states wanted the carnage to stop. But there was no doubt as to their acquiescence in the project. The audacious radicals had to be taught a lesson; the Arab world had to be purged of Marxists; free-lance guerrillas had to be disciplined if the states were to negotiate with Israel or to respond to the diplomatic initiatives offered by outsiders. States are jealous entities: They protect their monopoly on violence and on order, and the Arab state system was no exception. The Arab states had to maintain their hold over their populations, redeem their battered pride, prove themselves to the young at home, and prove themselves to superpowers and assure them that they could deliver their constituents and make good on their promises – either promises of diplomatic deals or threats to go to war if Israel persisted in its occupation of the land they had lost.

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By 1970, the dominant political order bounced back. Nasser's death and his replacement by Sadat in 1970, the coming to power of Hafez Asad in the same year, and the defeat of the Palestinians, gave the dominant political order a breathing spell. The states used the time to put together the trilateral alliance – Egypt, Syria, and Saudi Arabia – that waged the October War. The deed was done against overwhelming Israeli military power, in the face of the superpower detente that had pretty much frozen the status quo in the Middle East, and against mounting pressure in the Arab world for some kind of solution.

The second phase (1973–1979) involved the ascendancy of the dominant political order. There was a brief moment of elation. All, including the Palestinian self-determination, seemed possible. Great and sudden wealth spawned all sorts of dreams about development, about military power, about the resurrection of the Arab world. All this happened against a promising global background: the revolt of the Third World majority at the UN, disarray in the West, nuclear proliferation (with its promise of greater equality), the illusion that modernity and power could be bought off the rack. This was also America's moment in the Middle East: The United States was to serve as broker in the peace and as a protector of the moderate Arab order. Like all periods of euphoria, none of the troubles vanished; worse still, new and unprecedented troubles were brought about by the new wealth. There were early signs of trouble: the Sinai accord in September, 1975, concluded by Israel and Egypt under American auspices confirmed Egypt's determination to go its own way and was a harbinger of things to come. That same year also witnessed the outbreak of the civil war in Lebanon in which all Arab states were directly or indirectly involved. The great wealth was helpless to arrest the drift toward interstate discord or domestic upheaval in the Arab world. Egypt's diplomatic defection and Lebanon's collapse ended the great historic moment of triumph. Sadat's search for a separate Egyptian path took him to Jerusalem – there were no more subtleties and half-hearted measures. The bloodletting in Lebanon became institutionalized, and there was a definite drift toward de facto partition between a Muslim Lebanon and a Christian one.

The third phase is dominated by the Iranian Revolution of 1978–