




CRITICAL VOICES AND THE BURDEN OF FREE EXPRESSION AMONG ARAB INTELLECTUALS

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Abstract

This paper analyzes the challenge of the freedom of expression (*ta'bīr al-hurriyyah*) in the experiences of Arab intellectuals. Although freedom of expression has doctrinal support and historical precedence in Islam, it is still challenging to find its implementation in the Arab world, especially in Arab countries with authoritarian political systems. This paper begins by exploring several examples of intimidation experienced by Arab intellectuals as the consequence of expressing critical ideas. Specifically, the paper examines freedom of expression among Arab scholars in the authoritarian state of Syria. The failure of the Arab Spring made it more difficult for freedom of expression to find its space. As a qualitative study, data was collected by gathering essential information from journals, books, and online websites. The data were then analyzed through critical reading based on research questions. The paper concluded that freedom of expression has its historical doctrine in Arabo-Islamic civilization. However, this moral doctrine did not lead to absolute freedom of expression. Most Arab intellectuals undergone much difficulty in their lives due to expressing their critical voices. In the Syrian context, Arab intellectuals are divided between those who support the regime and those who support the opposition to the ruling government. However, the opposition is forced to conduct reform in silence since expressing their voices and engaging in protests will lead to exile or death. Due to this polarization, critical voices in Syria have not successfully become a powerful movement.

Paper ini menganalisis tantangan kebebasan berekspresi (ta'bīr al-hurriyyah) melalui pengalaman intelektual Arab. Meskipun kebebasan berekspresi mendapat dukungan doktrinal dan praktek faktual dalam sejarah Islam, implementasi aktualnya masih sulit ditemukan di dunia Arab, terutama di negara-negara Arab dengan sistem otoriter. Oleh karena itu, tulisan ini dimulai dengan mengeksplorasi beberapa contoh intimidasi yang dialami oleh para intelektual Arab sebagai konsekuensi dari ide dan suara kritis mereka. Secara khusus, makalah ini mengkaji kebebasan berekspresi di kalangan sarjana Arab di Suriah sebagai negara otoriter. Kegagalan Arab Spring mempersulit kebebasan berekspresi untuk menemukan ruang bebasnya. Sebagai studi kualitatif, data dikumpulkan dengan mengumpulkan informasi penting dari jurnal, buku, dan website online. Data tersebut kemudian dianalisis melalui pembacaan kritis berdasarkan rumusan pertanyaan penelitian. Paper ini menyimpulkan bahwa kebebasan berekspresi memiliki doktrin historisnya dalam Arab-Islam. Namun, doktrin moral ini tidak mengarah pada kebebasan mutlak untuk berekspresi. Terbukti, sebagian besar intelektual Arab mengalami kehidupan pahit karena suara-suara kritis mereka. Dalam konteks Suriah, intelektual Arab terbagi antara mereka yang mendukung rezim dan mempertahankan oposisi terhadap pemerintah yang berkuasa. Namun, kelompok oposisi terus melakukan reformasi secara diam-diam karena suara dan protes akan membawa mereka ke pengasingan atau kematian. Akibat polarisasi ini, suara-suara kritis di Suriah belum berhasil menjadi gerakan yang kuat.



Background

The death of one of Saudi Arabia's famous journalists and a columnist of The Washington Post in October 2018 has opened the world's eyes to the fact that freedom of expression in the Arab world is still facing many challenges. The ruling regime will do anything to silence people who have subversive opinions. The regime dominates and control the public narrative.

Based on World Freedom Reports 2018, there is only one Arab country that can be said to be truly "free," that is Tunisia. This is then followed by Jordan, Morocco, and Kuwait, which are classified as "partly free." Most Arab countries are struggling to have the freedom of expression.¹

Most Arab people hope for a better future with broader freedom of expression.² Unfortunately, the freedom of expression is an even more difficult ideal to achieve than before³. For example, after the Arab Spring, many Omani activists were arrested by the Internal Police Service due to their criticism of government policy⁴. Furthermore, in 2018, the Omani government revised the penal code to increase penalties and suppress freedom of expression.⁵

Although Tunisia was classified as the only Arab country that protects freedom of expression according to the law of 2014⁶, the arrests of some activists still occurs. An activist, Kais Bouazizi, was arrested by the police due to his criticism of the financial policies of the government⁷. This suppression contradicts the 2014 law that protects individual rights.

Several studies have showed that after the Arab Spring, the governments of several Arab countries, such as Egypt, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, and Tunisia, used specific laws to suppress the freedom of expression online.⁸ In Egypt, the government uses new anti –

¹ Jamal Khashoggi, "Opinion | Jamal Khashoggi: What the Arab World Needs Most Is Free Expression-The Washington Post," *The Washington Post*, October 18, 2018, https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/global-opinions/jamal-khashoggi-what-the-arab-world-needs-most-is-free-expression/2018/10/17/adfc8c44-d21d-11e8-8c22-fa2ef74bd6d6_story.html.

² Zouhir Gabsi, "Tunisia's Youth: Awakened Identity and Challenges Post-Arab Spring," *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 46, no. 1 (2019): 68–87; Michelle Pace and Francesco Cavatorta, "The Arab Uprisings in Theoretical Perspective – An Introduction," *Mediterranean Politics*, 2012, doi:10.1080/13629395.2012.694040; Eberhard Kienle, "Egypt without Mubarak, Tunisia after Bin Ali: Theory, History and the 'Arab Spring,'" *Economy and Society* 41, no. 4 (2012): 532–57.

³ Waheed Ahmed Alhindi, Muhammad Talha, and Ghazali Bin Sulong, "The Role of Modern Technology in Arab Spring," *Archives Des Sciences* 65, no. 8 (2012): 101–12; Sam Kimball, "Rapping the Arab Spring," *World Policy Journal* 30, no. 4 (2013): 79–86; Ilhem Allagui and Johanne Kuebler, "The Arab Spring and the Role of ICTs| Introduction," *International Journal of Communication* 5 (2011): 8.

⁴ F. Alzumai, "Constitutional Courts in the Arab World and Freedom of Expression: A Defender or Suppressor," vol. 15, 2022, 29–48, doi:10.1163/18763375-14010004.

⁵ "Systematic Attack on Freedom of Expression in Oman | Americans for Democracy & Human Rights in Bahrain," *Americans for Democracy & Human Rights in Bahrain (ADHRB)*, 2020, <https://www.adhrb.org/2020/04/systematic/>.

⁶ Ahmad Sahide, Yoyo Yoyo, and Ali Muhammad, "Tunisia's Success in Consolidating Its Democracy One Decade Post-the Arab Spring," *Jurnal Ilmu Sosial dan Ilmu Politik* 26, no. 1 (n.d.): 49–62.

⁷ Emna Sayadi, "Tunisia: Is Freedom of Expression under Threat Due to the Economic Crisis? – Access Now," *Access Now*, January 30, 2018, <https://www.accessnow.org/tunisia-freedom-expression-threat-due-economic-crisis/>.

⁸ Jeffrey Ghannam, "Social Media in the Arab World: Leading up to the Uprisings of 2011," *Center for International Media Assistance* 3, no. 1 (2011): 1–44; Naila Hamdy, "Arab Citizen

protests law to persecute online activism. Tunisia, in contrast, uses old defamation laws to do the same⁹. Meanwhile, Saudi Arabia and Jordan use cybercrime and counter-terrorism regulations to suppress online activism.¹⁰

Another research reported that most Arab governments control traditional media and persecute internet users¹¹. These governments will only allow opinions that support their legacy.¹²

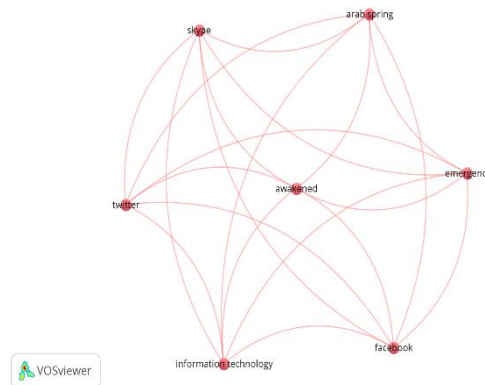


Figure 1. Previous Studies on Freedom of Expression in the Arab World

Figure 1 shows that studies on the freedom of expression in the Arab world are still relatively few. So far, studies on the freedom of expression have been chiefly about government control of online media. This paper will contribute to the study of the freedom of expression among Arab intellectuals in the Syrian context. The article begins by discussing several examples of repressive actions taken by the government or other actors against the progressive ideas of Arab intellectuals.

As a qualitative study, the paper's data collection was conducted by gathering essential information from journals, books, and online websites. The data were then analyzed through critical reading based on research questions.¹³

Journalism in Action: Challenging Mainstream Media, Authorities and Media Laws," *Westminster Papers in Communication and Culture* 6, no. 1 (2017); "Press Freedom Reversals in Post-Arab Spring Countries | Arab Center Washington DC," accessed July 22, 2020, http://arabcenterdc.org/policy_analyses/press-freedom-reversals-in-post-arab-spring-countries/.

⁹ Jennifer M Stevens, "Blue Lives Matter: Identity and the Internet," 2021.

¹⁰ "The Crime of Speech: How Arab Governments Use the Law to Silence Expression Online," *Electronic Frontier Foundation*, April 25, 2016, <https://www.eff.org/pages/crime-speech-how-arab-governments-use-law-silence-expression-online>.

¹¹ Walid Al-Saqaf, "Internet Censorship Circumvention Tools: Escaping the Control of the Syrian Regime," *Media and Communication* 4, no. 1 (2016): 39-50; Alisa Shishkina and Leonid Issaev, "Internet Censorship in Arab Countries: Religious and Moral Aspects," *Religions* 9, no. 11 (2018): 358; Mohamed Ben Moussa, "From Arab Street to Social Movements: Re-Theorizing Collective Action and the Role of Social Media in the Arab Spring," *Westminster Papers in Communication and Culture* 9, no. 2 (2017).

¹² "On the Deteriorating State of Free Expression in the Arab World IFEX," accessed April 9, 2023, <https://ifex.org/on-the-deteriorating-state-of-free-expression-in-the-arab-world/>.

¹³ Musab A Oun and Christian Bach, "Qualitative Research Method Summary," *Qualitative Research* 1, no. 5 (2014): 252-58; Loraine Busetto, Wolfgang Wick, and Christoph Gumbinger, "How to Use and Assess Qualitative Research Methods," *Neurological Research and Practice* 2 (2020): 1-10.

Freedom of Expression in Islam

From its early development, the concept of the freedom in Islam has been restricted only to personal choices (*ikhtiyār*) and on maintaining personal attitudes (good or bad deeds). However, in a recent development, freedom includes several concepts, such as freedom of speech, thought, and religion.¹⁴

During the early Islamic era, two words were coined to express one's feelings: *hisbah* and *nashihah*. The term *hisbah* is used by the second Caliph of Islam, Umar ibn al-Khattab, to advocate for the good and to create peaceful societies. Meanwhile, *nashihah* refers to the practice of giving good advice to others.¹⁵

Freedom of expression in Islam is essential. The objective of freedom of expression in Islam is to foster love, tolerance, and social harmony, and to maintain mutual understanding within society. The Qur'an considers the freedom of expression as an essential human right.¹⁶ The importance of the freedom of expression can be seen in the concept of *syūrā*. Muslim communities have used *syūrā* to arrive at the best solutions to the problems they face. Within the process, every Muslim is allowed to express their opinions for the benefit of the community,¹⁷ rather than harming people.¹⁸ Therefore, the rulers in Islamic societies have the responsibility to ensure such freedom.¹⁹

In most cases, the freedom of expression in Arab countries leads to demonstrations. Hundreds of thousands of marches in Arab countries heralded a new Arab political discourse in the 21st century. The protests were usually intended to express the people's dissatisfaction with the country's government. Some Arab scholars, such as al-Qaradawi accepted street demonstrations, which should be conducted in good faith and must not conflict with Islamic law.²⁰ It is important to note that some scholars disagree with the use of the term "Arab street" because it implies volatility and irrationality; it is the product of Western media portraying Arab demonstrations as irrational and full of anger. Therefore, they suggested the term Arab public opinion as a more neutral designation.²¹

The Challenge of Free Expression among Arab Intellectuals

According to Hassan Nadhem, the relation of Arab intellectuals with political authorities is complicated because there is no free and safe space for intellectuals to express their ideas. According to Nadhem, since the independence era, Arab intellectuals in almost all Arab countries have occupied uncomfortable positions. They must deal with authoritarian governments who prefer stable situations without being disturbed by any

¹⁴ Muh In'amuzzahidin, "Konsep Kebebasan Dalam Islam," *At-Taqaddum* 7, no. 2 (2017): 259-76.

¹⁵ Muhammad Bhat Ali, "Freedom of Expression from Islamic Perspective," *Journal of Media and Communication Studies* 6, no. 5 (2014): 69-77.

¹⁶ Dr Saeed and Riaz Ahmad, "Quranic Concept of the Freedom of Expression: A Descriptive Study in Modern Socio – Political Perspective," *Al-Qalam June*, 2013.

¹⁷ Noor Asma Said and WMKFW Khairuldin, "Freedom of Speech in Islam and Its Connection with Street Demonstrations," *International Journal of Academic Research in Business and Social Sciences* 7, no. 4 (2017): 122-29.

¹⁸ Dmytro V Lukianov, Volodymyr M Steshenko, and Hanna P Ponomarova, "Freedom of Expression and Islam: Charlie Hebdo's Lessons," *Journal of the National Academy of Legal Sciences of Ukraine* 28, no. 1 (2021): 61-70.

¹⁹ Abdul Hai Madani, "Freedom and Its Concept in Islam," vol. 17, 2011, 116-20.

²⁰ Said and Khairuldin, "Freedom of Speech in Islam and Its Connection with Street Demonstrations."

²¹ Terry Regier and Muhammad Ali Khalidi, "The Arab Street: Tracking a Political Metaphor," *The Middle East Journal* 63, no. 1 (2009): 11-29.

critical thinking.²² Authoritarian regimes felt threatened by them and exercised violence against them.²³ In Egypt for example, a whole generation of writers faced exile. However, intimidation or repression does not always come from the government but also from certain radical religious groups.

One of the Arab intellectuals who experienced an acrimonious relationship with the government was Hassan Hanafi. As an Arab intellectual living amid an authoritarian government system, Hanafi was not afraid to throw sharp criticisms. For example, despite claiming to be a follower of Nasser, Hanafi dared to criticize Nasserism as outlined in two volumes of *Qadhyā Mu'shirah* (Contemporary Issues). When Sadat signed the Camp David Treaty, Hasan Hanafi wrote his second testimony in *ad-Din Wats-Tsaurah fī Mishr 1952-1981* (Religion and Revolution in Egypt: 1951-1981).²⁴

When the Iranian Islamic Revolution erupted, Hanafi supported Khomeini and even proclaimed the Islamic Left as a revolutionary Islamic ideology without Khomeini's Shi'ism. Hanafi's scathing criticism of Mubarak's government manifested in the two other voluminous books of *Humūmul-Fikr wal-Wathan* (Suffering of Thought and Homeland).²⁵

Hanafi's criticism of Sadat's disregard for the policies of the previous president, Gamal Abdel Nasser, as well as Hanafi's enthusiasm in supporting the Iranian Islamic Revolution, led him to exile, and he was banned from teaching in Morocco and the Gulf countries in the early of 1980s.²⁶ When he was in Morocco as a visiting lecturer at Fez University in 1983, Hanafi once criticized of the kingdom by saying that it was not following Islamic teachings. For his statement, he was interrogated and asked to leave the country within 24 hours immediately. In 1970, he went to America and stopped teaching for a while. It was recorded that the local police had monitored his lectures on the Iranian revolution.²⁷

In the 1990s, Hanafi was threatened by Al-Azhar's conservative wing because he was considered to have tarnished the Islamic religion. However, he still received protection from secular groups; other support came from moderate Islamic groups. This precarious position reflects the difficulty of positioning Hanafi's intellectual activity. On the one hand, he supports reformist Islamic groups represented by the Muslim Brotherhood, but on the other hand, he is close to the revolutionary left. These two positions merge into a single mainstream.²⁸

In 2006, Hanafi was criticized for insulting the Qur'an. He illustrates the Qur'an as a Supermarket: "*The Kuran is a supermarket, where one takes what one wants and leaves*

²² Hassan Nadhem, "Arab Intellectuals and Authority: A Continuity of an Implied System.," *Kufa Review* 1, no. 1 (2012): 67-82.

²³ JOSÏ VERICAT, "Intellectuals before the Uprising," In Light of the Intellectuals: (International Peace Institute, 2014), 5, JSTOR, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep09631.4>.

²⁴ Carol Kersten, *Cosmopolitans and Heretics: New Muslim Intellectuals and the Study of Islam* (Hurst & Co Publishers and Oxford University Press, 2011).

²⁵ Yudian Wahyudi, *Dinamika Politik "Kembali Kepada al-Qur'an Dan Sunnah Di Mesir, Maroko, Dan Indonesia"* (Yogyakarta: Pesantren Nawesea Press, 2007).

²⁶ Shahrough Akhavi, "The Dialectic in Contemporary Egyptian Social Thought: The Scripturalist and Modernist Discourses of Sayyid Qutb and Hasan Hanafi," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 29, no. 3 (1997): 377-401.

²⁷ Hassan Hanafi, *Ad-Dīn Wats-Tsaurah Fī Mishr 1952-1981: Al-Yasār al-Islāmī Wal Wihdah al-Wathaniyyah* (al-Qhirah: Maktabah Madbuli, 1989).

²⁸ John L Esposito and John Obert Voll, *Makers of Contemporary Islam* (Oxford University Press, USA, 2001).

what one doesn't want."²⁹ The parable is considered inappropriate and demeaned the position of the scriptures. However, the parable is intended by Hanafi for those who used certain verses for their political interests and ignored the essential meaning of the Qur'an.

Other Arab intellectuals had experienced exile and threatened with death. These are Sadeq Jalal al-Azm from Syria, Nawal el-Sa'dawi, Nasr Hamid Abu Zeid, Najib Mahfouz, and Farag Fauda from Egypt. In 1970, Sadeq Jalal al- 'Azm, a Syrian intellectual, published a book *Naqdul-Fikr ad-Dīnī* (Criticism of Religious Reason), which later became a scandal. He was prosecuted in court for allegedly insulting religion, although he was later released. At that time, al-'Azm was a professor of philosophy at the American University of Beirut. Because of the publication, he was no longer allowed to work there, and he was considered a Marxist.³⁰

Nawal el-Sa'dawi was a novelist and feminist from Egypt. As a doctor and psychiatrist, Nawal worked in the mid-1950s in Egypt and moved to Cairo. In 1972 she published her first non-fiction book, *al-Mar'ah wal-Jins* (Women and Sex); because of the work, she was later fired from the Ministry of Health and was forced to relinquish her official position. The book expressed her critical views of some Islamic dogmas, which she regarded as being biased against women. Nawal once stated that wearing a veil is not mandatory. According to her, establishing an Islamic state will bring Islam into its most rigid form, namely, Islam as mere ritualism.³¹ Even though she no longer has a formal position, el-Sa'dawi's thoughts on gender equality have strongly influenced young Arab feminists and other Muslim intellectuals.³²

Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd, a Cairene University professor, was accused of having left Islam because he wrote a book about a critical method for studying and analyzing verses of the Qur'an. A book written in 1992 and titled "Criticism of Religious Discourse" (*Naqdul-Kithāb ad-Dīnī*). It contains Abu Zayd's view that some of the early writers of Islam had interpreted the Qur'an to political, social, and certain philosophical interests. This bias also happens at present time.³³ He blamed the classical commentators or *mufassir* who had ignored the al – Qur'an's linguistic and cultural contexts, so it became ancient, archaic, and irrelevant to the modern context. He also accused the fundamentalists' groups of manipulating the interpretation of the Qur'an for their financial interests.³⁴

Due to these activities, Abu Zayd was forced to resign from the university where he worked. Furthermore, conservative clerics decided that his marriage is no longer valid based on the argument that Muslim women cannot continue be in wedlock to an apostate man. Abu Zayd and his wife, Ibtihal Younis chose to leave Egypt and settle in the

²⁹ Agence France – Presse, "Egyptian Professor in Hot Water for Comparing Quran to Supermarket – Daily News Egypt," *Daily News Egypt*, 2006, <https://www.dailynewssegypt.com/2006/10/01/egyptian – professor – in – hot – water – for – comparing – quran – to – supermarket/>.

³⁰ Elizabeth Suzanne. Kassab, *Contemporary Arab Thought : Cultural Critique in Comparative Perspective* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010).

³¹ Susanne Olsson, "Apostasy in Egypt: Contemporary Cases of Hisbah," *The Muslim World* 98, no. 1 (January 1, 2008): 95 – 115, doi:10.1111/j.1478 – 1913.2008.00212.x.

³² Kassab, *Contemporary Arab Thought : Cultural Critique in Comparative Perspective*.

³³ Naṣr Ḥmid Abū Zayd, *Critique of Religious Discourse* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2018).

³⁴ Caryle Murphy, *Passion for Islam: Shaping the Modern Middle East: The Egyptian Experience* (New York: Scribner, 2002).

Netherlands as a place of exile.³⁵ The exile was also necessary to avoid the religious opinion (*fatwa*) of capital punishment issued by jihadi groups.³⁶ Abu Zayd received an academic contract in the Netherlands at Leiden University.³⁷

Egyptian novelist Najib Mahfudz also provoked outrage among the conservative wing of al-Azhar scholars. His novel, *Awlad Haretna* (Children in Our Hallway), was accused to have tarnished the prophets of Islam. The book was banned but later became a best-seller, winning the Nobel Prize for literature in 1988. On October 14, 1994, Mahfouz, who was elderly and blind, was stabbed.³⁸ One of the perpetrators, named Naguib Mustafa, claimed to be following a scholar named Omar Abd al-Rahman, who considered Mahfouz's novel to insult Islam. Omar Abd al-Rahman followed in Ayatollah Khomeini's footsteps, who issued a fatwa on capital punishment for the author of the novel *Satanic Verses*, Salman Rushdie, in 1989.

In June 1992, terrible things happened to an intellectual and secular writer named Farag Fauda. He was shot dead in Cairo by the followers of Jama'ah al-Islamiyyah. They claim to do so based on a fatwa issued by one of the al-Azhar Islamic Research Academy members, Sheikh al-Ghazali, which allows killing people deemed opposed to Islamic law (*shari'ah*). Farag Fauda strongly opposed the idea of applying Islamic law because he considered incompatible with modern realities and can interfere with the relationship of Islam with other religions, especially the Coptic Christians in Egypt.³⁹ Instead of supporting *shari'ah's* implementation, Fauda suggested dealing with specific problems such as housing shortage.⁴⁰

The suppression of the freedom of thought does not only come from radical Islamic groups. The government also do not hesitate in arresting anyone who is considered to be a threat to "national stability." Therefore, one persistent phenomenon in intellectual and political relations in the Arab world is the prison experience.⁴¹ This prison experience is illustrated in the works of Muhammad Hassaniin Haykal, Nawal El Sa'dawi, Ghali Shukri, Faridah al-Naqqash, Latifah al-Zayyat, Fathi 'Abdl al-Fattah, Abbas Madani, Hassan al-Turabi, Sayyid Qutb, and others. They have all experienced the bitterness of being imprisoned. Through this difficult experience, however, unique works of Arab thought and literature was born, marked by reflection, criticism, and feelings of alienation.⁴² ⁴³ The same also occurred to one of the most prominent Indonesian Muslim intellectuals,

³⁵ Geneive Abdo, *No God but God: Egypt and the Triumph of Islam* (Oxford University Press, 2002).

³⁶ Olsson, "Apostasy in Egypt: Contemporary Cases of Hisbah."

³⁷ Fouad Ajami, *The Arab Predicament: Arab Political Thought and Practice since 1967* (Cambridge University Press, 1992).

³⁸ Fauzi M Najjar, "Islamic Fundamentalism and the Intellectuals: The Case of Naguib Mahfouz," *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 25, no. 1 (1998): 139–68.

³⁹ Abdo, *No God but God: Egypt and the Triumph of Islam*.

⁴⁰ Ana B Soage, "'Faraj Fawda, or the Cost of Freedom of Expression,'" *The Middle East Review of International Affairs* 11, no. 2 (2007): 26–33.

⁴¹ Yoyo Yoyo, "Neo-Patriarchy and the Problem of the Arab Crisis: A Critical Study on Hisham Sharabi's Works," *QIJIS (Qudus International Journal of Islamic Studies)* 6 (August 24, 2018): 251–68, doi:10.21043/qijis.v6i2.3808.

⁴² Yoyo, *Pemikiran Arab: Dinamika Intelektual, Ideologi, Dan Gerakan* (Yogyakarta: Sociality, 2017); Yoyo Yoyo, Fadlil Munawwar Ahimsa Putra, Heddy Shri Manshur, and Setiawati Muti'ah, "Tren Pemikiran Intelektual Muslim Kontemporer Di Timur Tengah Pasca-Difitisme 1967," *Kawistara* 2, no. 3 (December 22, 2012): 225-328, doi:10.22146/kawistara.3941.

⁴³ Ibrahim M Abu-Rabi', *Contemporary Arab Thought: Studies in Post-1967 Arab Intellectual History* (London: Pluto Press, 2004).

namely Hamka. He was in prison for two years (1964-1966) on charges of being a traitor to the state. However, during this period he managed to complete his phenomenal Tafsir al – Azhar.⁴⁴

Thus, oppression and threats to intellectuals in the Arab world affect those from leftist and liberal persuasions.⁴⁵ Even Islamist thinkers, such as Sayyid Qutb, have also experienced Egyptian prisons and the death penalty. Therefore, Arab thinkers, especially those from the Eastern Arabia (Syria in particular) and North African regions (such as Egypt), have generally experienced confrontations directly and indirectly with government suppression. This phenomenon seems to plague the Arab nation and the Muslim world in general.

Syrian Critical Voices

The Syrian state is a dictatorship. The system has been running since 1949, when the military ruled the country.⁴⁶ Supported by the Soviets, this country adopted Arab nationalism and joined Egypt in the United Arab Republic.⁴⁷ The ideology of Arab nationalism triggered the birth of the Arab Socialist Ba'ath Party, which came to power in 1963 through a military coup.⁴⁸ Founded in 1947, the party paved the way for Hafez al-Assad to secure his dictatorship for 30 years to his son's reign at the present time. He enacted emergency laws to protect his dictatorship system. However, not all Syrian passively accepted these emergency laws.⁴⁹

Ghadry noted that at least two groups actively opposed the laws. The opposition groups emerged in the 1970s with various movements, such as the Muslim Brotherhood as the Islamist representative, the secularists, and socialist groups.⁵⁰ Due to the repression from the ruling regime, the intellectuals in Syria were divided into two camps. First, groups of scholars preferred to join and support the ruling government in cultural or non-cultural institutions while enjoying the regime's facilities. The other camp of intellectuals opposed the rule but conducted the reform in silence since voicing their protests would lead to exile or death.⁵¹

In the new context, two features of Arab intellectuals who participated in the revolution and actively opposed the government emerged. First is the engagement of women activists in the revolution. During the Arab Spring, some women activists were arrested while others were kept silent⁵² or fled to other countries. Figures such as Razan Zeitouneh, Fadwa Soliman, Reem Al Ghazzi (who are in prison), Rosa Yassin, Hassan, Khawla Dunia, Hanan al – Lahham, and so many others live outside Syria. The second

⁴⁴ Usep Taufik Hidayat, "Tafsir Al-Azhar: Menyelami Kedalaman Tasawuf Hamka," *Buletin Al-Turas* 21, no. 1 (2015): 49 – 76, doi:https://doi.org/10.15408/bat.v21i1.3826.

⁴⁵ Yoyo, "Sociology of Failure in the Contemporary Arab Thought (Reading on Syaui Jall's Work on the Arab Left)," *Codrul Cosminului* 26, no. 1 (2020): 45 – 56, doi:10.4316/CC.2020.01.004.

⁴⁶ John F Devlin, "The Baath Party: Rise and Metamorphosis," *The American Historical Review*, 1991, 1396-1407.

⁴⁷ Amos Perlmutter, "The Praetorian State and the Praetorian Army: Toward a Taxonomy of Civil – Military Relations in Developing Polities," *Comparative Politics* 1, no. 3 (1969): 382-404.

⁴⁸ Raymond Hinnebusch, "Syria's Alawis and the Ba'ath Party," *The Alawis of Syria: War, Faith and Politics in the Levant*, 2015, 107.

⁴⁹ Farid N. Ghadry, "Syrian Reform: What Lies Beneath," *Middle East Quarterly*, January 1, 2005, 61-70.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Nadhem, "Arab Intellectuals and Authority: A Continuity of an Implied System."

⁵² Wendy Pearlman, "Narratives of Fear in Syria," *Perspectives on Politics* 14, no. 1 (2016): 21-37.

feature is "intellectuals of the word," or the traditional intellectuals, who had no significant role in the revolutionary context. They have experienced failure and other psychological traumas in their lives. Their places are replaced by the young generation who use social media rather than books to promote their voices.⁵³

Adnan Ali, in his article, divided the Syrian scholars into more detail. The first is the employee of the state media and cultural and academic institutions that generally adopt the regime's narrative in attributing the leading cause of the Syrian crisis to external conspiracies such as Salafists, "terrorists," and "corrupt individuals." The second are intellectuals who are not connected to the regime and present themselves as independent. However, due to the regime's pressure, they need to choose whether they are with the government or in opposition to the regime. In most cases, these intellectuals decided to support the ruling power.

The third are nationalist intellectuals who tend to prioritize the "resistance position" of the regime rather than the popular movements of the Syrian people. The fourth, which is probably the most numerous, consists of those who remain in silence. They avoid pronouncing explicit positions and wait for the opportunity to join the winning team, whichever this may be.

The fifth group of intellectuals are those who have openly committed themselves to the popular movement through the media or through legal or human rights activism. These intellectuals consist of opposition figures who may have been arrested or detained.⁵⁴ Sadiq Jalal al- 'Azm is one of the revolutionary Arab thinkers who remain actively involved in his country's affairs and the debate surrounding it.⁵⁵ Based on this division, the main reason for the unsound position of the Syrian scholars is that they are politically and intellectually weakened and cannot diagnose any social and political issues happening in their country.

Since the beginning of the revolution, social media such as Twitter, YouTube, and blogs have had a significant role in reporting and spreading the news about the revolution to the world. However, since the regime blocked Twitter, YouTube, and Facebook, young Syrians have been using blogs to support the protests and to document any humiliating actions by the government against the protesters. However, these bloggers cannot use their real names for fear of intimidation.⁵⁶ Besides, this young generation has no chance to participate in public debates because of the regime's unwillingness to recognize their existence. Therefore, this generation developed their national and cultural consciousness only through social media.

As a cultural transformation, critical voices in Syria have gained momentum during the Arab Spring, in which every citizen, including intellectuals, shared collective critiques of

⁵³ Rosa Yassin Hassan and Max Weiss, "Where Are the Intellectuals in the Syrian Revolution?," in *Arabic Thought against the Authoritarian Age*, ed. Jens Hanssen and Max Weiss (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 370 – 73, doi:10.1017/9781108147781.021.

⁵⁴ "Syrian Intellectuals: A Problem of Fear, or a Crisis of Consciousness – Google Search," accessed April 16, 2023, <https://www.google.com/search?q=Syrian+Intellectuals%3A+A+problem+of+fear%2C+or+a+crisis+of+consciousness&oq=Syrian+Intellectuals%3A+A+problem+of+fear%2C+or+a+crisis+of+consciousness&aqs=chrome..69i57j69i60.562j0j15&sourceid=chrome&ie=UTF-8>.

⁵⁵ T. S., "Sadiq Al – Azm: Portrait of a Syrian Intellectual," *The Syrian Observer*, December 13, 2016, https://syrianobserver.com/features/24608/sadiq_al_azm_portrait_a_syrian_intellectual.html; Yoyo, "Neo-Patriarchy and the Problem of the Arab Crisis: A Critical Study on Hisham Sharabi's Works."

⁵⁶ Hussein Ghrer, "Social Media and the Syrian Revolution," *Westminster Papers in Communication and Culture* 9, no. 2 (2017).

the ruling elite. Their voices are manifested in the academic world, literary works such as poetry, novels, and music. These literary works reflect cultural criticism and redefine Arab identity and social, cultural, and political crises.⁵⁷

Conclusion

The voices of the Arab intellectuals in most Arab countries are silent. This is not because they have no voice. Rather, they prefer to avoid direct confrontation with the ruling regimes. However, some experienced the bitterness of life in exile. In most Arab countries, unpopular ideas or critical voices will continue to oppose the ruling elite or established institutions. Although some Arab countries have transformed into a more open states, they have not adopted the fundamental values of a modern state. Freedom of expression, a product of contemporary transformation, has not been successfully implemented in most Arab countries. Within the context of Syria, freedom of expression is silenced both through systematic laws and military approaches. Although freedom of expression is guaranteed in Islamic teachings and has been practiced in early Islamic history, it has not been implemented in the social and political life of most Arab countries. Furthermore, the new generation of Arab intellectuals do not have the freedom to express their opinions except through social media.

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⁵⁷ Eid Mohamed, "Culture and Society during Revolutionary Transformation: Rereading Matthew Arnold and Antonio Gramsci in the Context of the Arab Spring's Cultural Production," *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 23, no. 2 (March 1, 2020): 150 – 68, doi:10.1177/1367877919842572.

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