



REMEMBERING HISHAM SHARABI (1927–2005)

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HISHAM SHARABI WAS ONE of the twentieth century's most renowned Arab American intellectuals. He was the peer of men such as Philip Hitti, Amin Rihani, and Edward Said. Like them, Sharabi was a teacher and a scholar; like Rihani and Said, he was also an activist. He was a public intellectual who fought for a cause. That cause was Palestinian rights. Because that cause was misunderstood and maligned in the United States, his achievements are at once less publicly appreciated and more impressive, for those who fight earnestly and consistently against the odds created by stereotyping and propaganda are among the greatest assets of their community.

I knew Hisham in all these roles. He was my instructor and academic mentor at Georgetown University from 1967 to 1970. He was also an ally in the struggle to change an exploitative and destructive American foreign policy, particularly in the Middle East. When we met in the fall of 1967, my own struggle was focused against the U.S. war in Vietnam. In June of that year, Hisham had been summoned by the Arab-Israeli war from his "silence in exile" to renew his struggle for Palestinian justice. For both of us, the student movement of the 1960s was an inspiration. For the next thirty-seven years we corresponded and saw each other at the very least once a year, often more. We constantly exchanged analyses as well as ideas on strategy and tactics. In the process, we became very close. Apart from family members, I feel I knew him as well as any American could.

HEADING WEST

Hisham Sharabi was born in 1927 in Jaffa, Palestine, then under the British Mandate. As a consequence, his formative years were shaped by the reality of imperialism and colonialism. He was old enough to remember, and to be unsettled by, the violent Palestinian rebellion of 1936–39. By the time he was twenty-one, his family had been made refugees by the war that transformed the Zionist colonial movement into the State of Israel. The anger created by such events can find expression in depression and hopelessness, or it can be sublimated into activism. Hisham's inclination was always for the latter. He once told me that even as a child it never occurred to him to "do nothing" about the world falling apart around him. Thus, as an impressionable youth he became

involved with the pan-Syrian and militantly secular Syrian Social Nationalist Party, better known as the PPS (*Parti Populaire Syrien*), whose charismatic but authoritarian and patriarchal leader, Anton Saadeh, mesmerized him. The PPS aimed at transforming the social and political structure of the Middle East. The movement's failure sent Sharabi looking for other approaches to action compatible with his studious and intellectual nature. What he did retain from his PPS experience was the conviction of the need for radical change in the region.

In 1947 Sharabi arrived in the United States as a young graduate student at the University of Chicago. His choice of study in the United States reflected his intellectual affinity for Western thought. Despite a religious family background and the persistent efforts of his grandmother to assure his exposure to traditional Muslim learning, he had developed a secular outlook. This was probably the result of his early schooling in Western institutions. He had attended the Quaker Friends School in Ramallah and later matriculated at the American University of Beirut. This exposure to Western ideas coincided with a growing anxiety among politically aware young Arabs about the fate of a Middle East still directly or indirectly controlled by colonial forces. The resulting tension turned Sharabi away from Islam, brought him into the folds of the PPS, and triggered an exploration of the intellectual ideas that constituted the humanistic side of Western thought.

Thus, at the age of twenty, he found himself transported away from the familiar surroundings of his youth, particularly the Lebanese seaside where he and his college friends liked to fish and swim, to the wintry shores of an alien Chicago. It was not only the physical environment that was alien, but also, as he tells us in his 1978 autobiography,¹ much about the University of Chicago as well. Despite Sharabi's prior education in Western run schools in the Middle East, the fluid and debate-oriented learning environment of his new university came on him as a form of intellectual culture shock. His classroom experience in Lebanon, albeit at an American university, was culturally Arab—that is, a top-down affair. He reports that the undergraduate classrooms of his youth were patriarchal in nature and that the position taken by the professor was almost never questioned.² In Chicago, only slowly did he overcome his reticence about entering into the daily dialogue of his classes. As he did adapt, he became convinced of the methodological superiority of this approach to learning and began to travel down a road of intellectual exploration.

That road had its obstacles. His new experiences called into doubt many of the values and ways of his homeland. On the intellectual level, the ideals of democracy, gender and religious equality, and the open competition of ideas created an enduring dissatisfaction with the contemporary state of Arab intellectual, political, and social affairs. On the emotional level, however, the culture of his Arab upbringing was more deeply ingrained than he liked to admit. The resulting internal contradictions might help explain certain aspects of his behavior. As a professor, he often said little during classroom discussions. He loved to have students over for dinner and to sit with them on his back

porch for long and engrossing intellectual and political talks, but even then, he generally said little. This was not a congenital personality trait. In fact, he once told me that he had trained himself to be like this over many years. It was never clear to me why he had undertaken this transformation. Perhaps he was guarding himself against slipping into the authoritarian ways of his old Arab professors or, alternatively, the posture of his former mentor Saadeh. On the other hand, the effect of this demeanor could be quite patriarchal and even intimidating. Was this imposing quiet the result of an unconscious compromise, an effort at once to be, and yet not to be, the Arab patriarch?

Much of his intellectual production over a fifty-year period reflected his dissatisfaction with the social and political state of the Middle East, as well as the plight of the Palestinian people. He read Arab newspapers regularly and listened almost obsessively to news broadcasts in both English and Arabic. He was always up-to-date on the politics of the Arab world and knew personally many of the important political figures of the region. He saw the history of the Middle East as being in constant motion and mostly changing for the worse. This meant that, though he was hired by Georgetown University in 1953 as a professor of modern European intellectual history and spent his entire academic career as such, almost everything he wrote had something to do with the Arab world.

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Hisham had mixed feelings about this, as if the events of his time had forced him away from subjects of study that he found more congenial. I once asked him what topics he would have pursued had he not felt compelled to concentrate on the problems of his homeland. He immediately replied that he had once hoped to write a book on Nietzsche. In his house in Bethesda, Maryland, the dining table off the kitchen would be piled high with the books he was currently studying. I use the word “studying” advisedly, for other than the occasional work of fiction, he rarely indulged in casual reading. In contrast to the Arabic newspapers that were also on hand in the dining area, the books were mostly Western philosophical, political, and historical works. In the last ten years or so of his life, the pile of books reflected his growing fascination with postmodernist writers. Thus the dining room was where Hisham’s two worlds met.

Sharabi the activist, however, was always facing East. Like so many Arab intellectuals, he had been shocked and energized by the June 1967 war. Israel’s swift and conclusive defeat of the Arabs only reinforced his long held conviction that the Middle East was in need of thorough reform. At first he appeared to believe that the inspiration for reform was to be found in the Arab intellectual past. His 1970 work *Arab Intellectuals and the West: The Formative Years, 1875-1914*³ was an effort to reinterpret the experiences and thinking of the sometimes religiously motivated Arab intellectuals of the late nineteenth century in ways that could be helpful to secular Arab reformers in the present. “All the problems that are being confronted today were confronted then,” he

noted.⁴ Just as Western intellectuals interested in enhancing political and human rights return, again and again, to thinkers such as Locke and Voltaire, he wrote, so should Arab reformers study their predecessors. "The task of Arab scholars is to go back to this period, and reinterpret it, as the classical Enlightenment has been reexamined by each generation in Europe and the United States."⁵ What is certain is that for Sharabi, the study of the past ceased to be an end in itself following the 1967 war and instead became a search for solid ground in the formulation of contemporary tactics.

Yet as time went on, I am convinced that he looked for inspiration less to the Arab past and more to Western oriented intellectual movements and ideas. During our thirty-seven-year friendship, I cannot recall him making a single conversational reference to a pre-twentieth century Arab thinker. As far as I can tell, the Palestinian leader he most admired was George Habash, leader of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine and a Marxist internationalist. He did not think very highly of the bulk of contemporary Arab intellectuals who manned the region's universities and institutes. More than once he complained to me of their "mediocrity." That is not to say that he did not have close intellectual friends in the Middle East whom he deeply admired. He also yearned to return to the Middle East to live and teach. However, in my opinion, Hisham saw the best and most promising intellectual work and social and political analysis as coming from the West, and this could not help but influence how he envisioned the future of the Middle East

THEORY AND PRACTICE

After 1967 Hisham Sharabi's work was divided between theory and practice. In terms of practice, his major activity was to contribute to the well-being of his people, the Palestinians, as they struggled against an enemy bent on ethnically cleansing them from their homeland. It is this part of his work that tapped into his emotions, channeled his anger productively, and allowed him to make a positive difference in the lives of many Palestinians. He helped establish the Jerusalem Fund with its charitable and educational support programs for Palestinians in both occupied lands and the Diaspora. He served as editor of the *Journal of Palestine Studies* from 1972 until 2002, and in 1990 helped set up the Center for Policy Analysis on Palestine, both dedicated to chronicling and interpreting the history and current evolution of the Palestinian struggle. He also tirelessly pursued "meetings with Congress, the State Department, the Pentagon, and [when possible] the White House . . . to tell them what's wrong with U.S. policy in the region."⁶ He pursued all such endeavors with a stubborn determination that refused to give in to the odds massed against the Palestinian people and their cause.

On the level of theory, he devoted himself to the intellectual analysis and theoretical understanding of contemporary Arab society. It is this work that preoccupied his powerful intellect and kept him connected to the intellectual life befitting his personality. In this effort, he helped found the Georgetown

University Center for Contemporary Arab Studies and began writing extensively on the status of Arab culture and society. In both the English and Arabic speaking worlds, the most widely read product of that effort was his book *Neopatriarchy: A Theory of Distorted Change in Arab Society*.⁷

In this seminal work, Sharabi concluded that the traditional patriarchal culture of the Arab world, far from being undermined by imperialism, became further entrenched in a new and more powerful form. In effect, instead of inheriting democracy or civil liberties from the West, the traditional Arab elites inherited the technologically enhanced power structure of their colonial masters. As a result, the struggle against imperialism left the old Arab system of the dominant male authority figure not merely intact but strengthened by new governmental structures. This meant that the various ideologies of reform, be they nationalist, socialist, or state capitalist, carried within them the seeds of a now bureaucratized and armed neopatriarchy. Thus, the various governmental forms that neopatriarchy took failed to produce truly modern and liberating societies. Indeed, the only thing modern about them was their use of up-to-date surveillance and military equipment. Civil society languished in a perennially undeveloped state, the economy remained locked into a patriarchal patronage system, initiative and free thinking were often punishable offenses, and other human rights, particularly for women, were nowhere to be found.

In Sharabi's view, this neopatriarchal system did damage not only to the Middle East in general, but also specifically to the Palestinian cause. Thus, once Yasir Arafat and his associates negotiated their return to Palestine, they ruled the occupied territories like a shaykhdom. The neopatriarchal and authoritarian nature of the Palestine National Authority under Arafat (toward whom, after Oslo, Hisham felt only disgust and bitter disappointment) directly contradicted the goals of modernism and liberation that he both wrote about and acted to promote.

PARADOXES AND DILEMMAS

It was not only the state of the Arab world that caused Sharabi concern. The contradictions between West's intellectual heritage, as he understood it, and Western (particularly American) policy in the Middle East constituted a never ending source of frustration for him. He was an Arab expatriate whose mind had been opened through the study of Western philosophy and intellectual history to the liberating potential of a critical and questioning approach to the world. Yet once he put down the books and walked out of the classroom, he was rudely confronted with the fact that the political leaders and public in the West often suspended critical thinking in favor of unanalyzed, unquestioned propaganda, fantasy, and distortion. Worse still, this uncritical approach was applied with particular zeal by his adopted Western country (the United States) specifically to the history and struggles of his own homeland (Palestine). It was not long before the juxtaposition of Western political theory (i.e., the championship of

reason, democracy, and individual rights) and American practice (i.e., a foreign policy driven by prejudice and stereotyping) filled him with perplexity and a deep sense of injustice.

This sense of injustice was reinforced by his frequent contacts with U.S. government and civic officials. Concerning the way in which these last categorized Palestinians “in the most racist way as terrorists without anyone raising an eyebrow,” he noted: “Being at the heart of this, I am able to plumb the depth of the above attributes directly, without the comforting cushion of abstract analysis.”⁸ As for the Israelis whom these same officials portrayed as representatives of Western civilization in the midst of Middle Eastern barbarity, Hisham saw most of them as acting in a “moral vacuum which is the breeding ground of evil.”⁹

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the Georgetown chapter of the Students for a Democratic Society (SDS). The chapter had been founded in the fall of 1967 by myself and several other students. The SDS opposed the Vietnam War and had an anti-imperialist analysis of American foreign policy. For Sharabi, who sometimes attended our meetings, this anti-imperialism meant that, potentially, the organization could serve as a vehicle to promote sympathy with and support for the Palestinian cause. More broadly, he saw the SDS as a vehicle through which young citizens resisted war, propaganda, and the dehumanizing effects of bureaucratic processes. His witnessing of a popular

movement debate and analysis, egalitarianism, combining and activism suggested to him that reason could overcome fantasy and propaganda in the minds of Americans.

Encouraged by his SDS experience, Hisham broadened his efforts beyond the government and sought more media access for the message that American policy in the Middle East was wrongheaded. He appeared on television, wrote innumerable op-ed pieces, and held news conferences. He also sought to help strengthen Arab American interest group formation that had been ongoing for some time. For several years he was the head of the Association of Arab-American University Graduates. By 1970, he had learned that the SDS was in fact an anomaly within the American political scene and that it was not going to mature into a broad-based political movement. Particularly when it came to the subject of Palestine, the SDS never did evolve into the popularizing springboard for which he had hoped.

A good part of the problem was that Hisham, and the rest of us who supported the Palestinian cause, were doing verbal battle in an informational environment that more often than not failed to recognize the validity of any non-Zionist interpretation of reality. This made any effort to promote Arab and Palestinian interests in the United States extremely difficult. Any public statement Sharabi might make, no matter how accurate, would immediately

elicit angry and sometimes libelous responses by the Zionist operatives who command attention in the nation's capital. His assessment that Israel and its American allies were, to all intents and purposes, seeking to "subdue" the Palestinians in the occupied territories (an understatement relative to what was actually happening on the ground and an assessment with which any objective observer would agree) was condemned as an outrageous falsification by emotionally driven pro-Zionist elements at Georgetown University and the Jewish community of Washington, DC.¹⁰ When he spoke in the Middle East he was forthright and descriptive. He commented to a Beirut newspaper that "Americans had entered the region [the Middle East] to possess the oil resources and redraw the geopolitical map," and once told an Arab audience that the Middle East was under neocolonial attack.¹¹ Although both statements are supported by abundant factual evidence, they and similar utterances nonetheless called forth accusations that he suffered from the "fantasy element that dogs Arab discourse."¹²

It is an indication of the dilemma Hisham faced that even Zionists who claim to have known him well were convinced that he wished for nothing less than the destruction of Israel (a reversal of what the Israelis not only yearned for relative to the Palestinians, but in fact executed).¹³ In any case, it does not matter what Sharabi yearned for in his heart of hearts. Unlike some empowered Zionists, his behavior was not controlled by vengeful and genocidal yearnings. When it came to practice, "fantasy" was as far from Sharabi's mind as stars in the heavens. Unless, of course, you consider the following position statement, written in 1998, as delusional:

I try to remind myself of what sustained all Palestinian refugees over the long years of exile: this land is not a memory, it is not lost, it is out there where it can be seen and touched, a patrimony that can never be given up or taken away. Does this mean that there can be no peaceful solution to the conflict? Does the solution lie in the reversal of what happened 50 years ago and the destruction of Israel? No, the clock cannot be put back, the past cannot be redeemed, Israel's destruction cannot be the goal. The conflict's real solution cannot be a zero-sum outcome, but only a political compromise. The legitimate struggle of the Palestinians will seek a solution based on justice, international law, and the imperative need for mutual accommodation and survival.¹⁴

Fantasy? Only if those who hold power in Washington and Jerusalem insist on a "zero-sum outcome" and then call that sanity.

Right to the end, Hisham Sharabi refused to accept as inevitable a world of Zionist realpolitik and as permanent the horrors it engendered. Right to the end he believed in acting within the public sphere, and in the possibility of melding theory and democratic practice—just as he had seen accomplished

for a brief historical moment by the Georgetown SDS. More than once he told me that “I miss the ‘revolutionary’ days.”¹⁵ I would respond that he carried the seeds of a humanistic revolution within him and had helped nurture the same potential in others. I still believe this to be so. Through his work, both theoretical and practical, he chose to keep alive an alternative perception of reality that was eminently sane and humane. And he never gave up. Thus, he was, and will remain as long as his memory prevails, a model for those who fight for a world ruled by reason and justice.

NOTES

1. Hisham Sharabi, *Al-Jamr wa al-ramad: Dbikrayat mutbaqqa arabi* [Embers and Ashes: Memoirs of an Arab Intellectual] (Beirut: Dar al-taliy'a lil-tiba'a wal-nashr, 1978).
2. Sharabi, *Al-Jamr wa al-ramad*.
3. Johns Hopkins Press, 1970.
4. Jordan Sand, “Hisham Sharabi, Bridging the Arab and European Worlds,” published in the Faculty Profiles section of the 1998 History Department Newsletter, Georgetown University, Washington, DC, 1998, online at www.georgetown.edu.
5. Sand, “Hisham Sharabi.”
6. Letter to the author dated 6 September 1980.
7. Oxford University Press, 1988.
8. Letter to the author dated 10 March 1986.
9. Letter to the author dated 18 June 1999.
10. Patricia Sullivan, “Arab Intellectual Hisham Sharabi, 77, Dies,” *Washington Post*, 16 January 2005.
11. Sullivan, “Arab Intellectual Hisham Sharabi, 77, Dies.”
12. Barry Rubin, “Sharabi: Death of a Teacher,” 18 January 2004, online at gloria.idc.ac.il.
13. Rubin, “Sharabi.”
14. Hisham Sharabi, “The Palestinians: Fifty Years Later” (Washington: Center for Policy Analysis on Palestine, 1998).
15. Letter to the author dated 23 January 1976.