

The Destructive Legacy of Arab Liberals

By [Joseph Massad](#)

Global Research, April 03, 2015

[Electronic Intifada](#) 30 March 2015

Region: [Middle East & North Africa](#)

Theme: [History](#), [Religion](#)

Image: Arab liberals have allied with Israel, the US and Saudi Arabia to wreak an unparalleled record of destruction. ([Ahmed Asad](#) / [APA images](#))

It has become commonplace to present Arab Islamists of all political stripes (liberals, conservatives, radicals, neoliberals, moderates, extremists, nonviolent, violent, etc.) as a most, if not the most, dangerous political force in the Arab world since the [1967 War](#).

In fact, and as the following will show, it has been a new brand of Arab liberals — secularists and Islamists (though the former have been far more dangerous) — who have been and continue to be a most dangerous and destructive political force in the post-1967 Arab world.

The Western, Israeli and Saudi war against Egyptian President [Gamal Abdel Nasser](#) and anti-imperialist Arab nationalism required the birth of a new liberal intelligentsia. Their emergence on the scene in the late 1950s and in the 1960s, before the war, was part of the American-sponsored “cultural Cold War,” which financed intellectuals across the world for the anti-communist and anti-socialist liberal imperial crusade that also targeted anti-imperialist Third World nationalisms.

This was part and parcel of the Eisenhower Doctrine, which the Americans inaugurated in 1957 to intervene militarily and in every other way in the Middle East to fend off Soviet influence. It was in this context that the US intervened in [Lebanon](#) in 1958 against Arab nationalism with Saudi- and US-funded Lebanese liberals cheering on in the liberal press.

Many of these liberal Arab intellectuals were lackeys of US intelligence and they and their newspapers were financed by the US and Gulf regimes, especially the Saudis. They would exalt the virtues of the liberal West against Soviet and non-Soviet forms of communism and socialism and would attack Nasserist Arab nationalism.

While some would argue that Arab liberals are not true to the liberal tradition, I am less concerned with how well they approximate an imaginary Western liberalism, or whether they are “true” or “false” liberals, than with the fact that they present themselves and are presented by others as adhering to “liberal” principles. These include free parliamentary and executive elections, freedom of expression and of the press, freedom of association, civilian control of government and the military, a capitalist economy and varying degrees of separation between government and religious authorities.

Out of Egypt

In the post-1967 War period, the emergence of this new brand of Arab liberals was seen as confined to the [Egyptian Sadatist intelligentsia](#) whose main aim was to combat Nasserism in

both its socialist and nationalist aspects and promote pro-Americanism. As the new century dawned, the Egyptian example became widely generalized across the entire Arab world.

The 1970s Egyptian liberals sang the praises of American power and imperialist capitalist penetration of their country and pushed for full surrender to the Israeli Jewish settler-colony under the banner of the “peace” negotiated by Nasser’s successor, President [Anwar Sadat](#).

They insisted that Israel should be forgiven all its sins and that rendering Egypt its lackey and the lackey of the US would bring about many economic and political benefits to Egyptians. The [Muslim Brotherhood](#), whose liberal transformation in the 1970s allowed them a seat at the Sadatist table, would join the political contest on the side of the liberal secularists against the Nasserist legacy.

Aside from state intellectuals, prominent litterateurs and artists pushed for this campaign. These extended from writers Yusuf Sibai to Naguib Mahfouz, and lesser figures like playwright Ali Salem, not to mention famous composer and singer Mohammed Abdel Wahab, intellectuals and academics of the ilk of Anis Mansour and Saad Eddin Ibrahim and many others. While Mahfouz and Abdel Wahab belong to an earlier generation of Egyptian liberals that have little in common with the post-1960s liberals, including mediocre state functionaries like Mansour, who edited the state-owned magazine *October*, they all joined the Sadatist ideological project in one way or another.

In this context, it should be mentioned that while the earlier generation of Arab liberals that emerged in the early part of the twentieth century and prospered in the 1920s and 1930s were mostly pro-European in their “civilizational” outlooks, they were not always pro-colonial, though a good number of them were. Indeed some, like Ahmed Lutfi el-Sayed, the “father of Egyptian liberalism” and anti-Arab Egyptian nationalism, were even friendly to Zionism. Al-Sayed would go as far as attending the celebrations of the opening of [Hebrew University](#) in Jerusalem in 1925.

While the Sadatist liberals were condemned and excommunicated across the Arab world (indeed Sibai, who served as minister of culture under Sadat, was assassinated by the Abu Nidal group on account of his visit to Israel and his support for the Sadatist surrender), their alliance with the US and Israel and their promotion of the selling out of Egypt to a new business class would not bring prosperity. Rather, it brought enormous poverty to most Egyptians and destroyed whatever achievements in education and healthcare the pre-liberal Nasserist order had achieved.

The only thing that increased and became more advanced in this liberal-supported Egypt was the level of political and economic repression for decades to come and the alienation of millions of Egyptians who lost even the possibility of an economic future, except for the hundreds of thousands (later upwards of four million Egyptians) whose employment was subcontracted to neighboring countries — Libya, Jordan, Iraq and the Gulf states. Meanwhile, tens of millions of Egyptians languished at home in dire poverty.

Liberalism spreads to Palestine

Soon, and by the late 1980s, the political and economic line the Egyptian liberals pushed for, let alone the international alliances they favored, would be adopted wholesale by a new class of Palestinian, Iraqi and, to a much more limited extent, Algerian intellectuals, who had until then been solid anti-imperial leftists and socialists.

In this vein, West Bank and Gaza-based Palestinian intellectuals pushed for a [two-state solution](#) that would grant those territories an independent state at the expense of diaspora Palestinians and [Palestinian citizens of Israel](#).

It was the rights of the latter two groups of Palestinians that these intellectuals, under the sponsorship of the [Palestine Liberation Organization](#) (PLO), wanted to barter for an independent state granted exclusively to the one-third of the Palestinian people that lives in the West Bank and Gaza Strip. Indeed, many began to predict that the US-sponsored “peace process,” which they supported, would turn the West Bank and Gaza into a new “Singapore,” an economic miracle that would transform the lives of these Palestinians at the expense of the rest.

Once the PLO adopted this line of thinking fully, Palestinian liberal intellectuals became advisors, consultants, negotiators and ministers in the [Palestinian Authority](#) and brought about more massive poverty across the West Bank and Gaza, the erosion of international support for Palestinian rights and multiplied the forces of repression of the Palestinians by adding the PA security forces to the Israeli occupation army. This has led to the squandering of Palestinian political and economic achievements during the [first intifada](#).

Imperial invasions

Simultaneous with the rise of this liberal intellectual class among Palestinians, the 1990 Iraqi invasion of Kuwait unleashed a new class of Iraqi liberals who were allied with American imperial geostrategic interests and who immediately called, in the name of democracy and the end of dictatorship, for an imperial invasion of Iraq.

The US-led invasion in 1991 expelled Iraqi forces from Kuwait, but left Saddam Hussein’s government in place, albeit under sanctions that claimed hundreds of thousands of lives — a price US Secretary of State Madeleine Albright notoriously deemed “[worth it](#)” to pursue American aims.

The 2003 US-led invasion, under the pretext of locating “weapons of mass destruction,” finally granted the liberals’ wish, and as a consequence cost the lives and livelihoods of untold millions and destroyed the entire country while enriching this class of comprador intellectuals and the new and old business classes they serve.

Indeed, many of them went into service for the US occupation of the country and the ensuing regime it established. While the Iraqi liberals were the first Arab liberals to call openly for an imperial invasion of their country, one could point to the precedent of Gibran Khalil Gibran and pro-French Lebanese liberal expatriates based in New York who had called in 1918 for a French invasion or “protection” of Syria to liberate it from the Turks.

Concomitant with these developments was the Algerian military coup against the elected Islamists in early 1992, which unleashed a massive civil war and military violence that led to upwards of 200,000 dead Algerians. Some of the extremist liberal secularists, like the Rally for Culture and Democracy party, supported the army’s “eradication” of the Islamists.

Sectarian incitement

Ironies abound. Terrified by the popular Arab schadenfreude expressed in massive demonstrations across the Arab world in solidarity with Iraq, demonstrations that did not sympathize with Kuwait and other oil-producing Gulf countries, the illiberal Saudis launched

pan-Arab newspapers and satellite channels that bombarded the Arab world with pro-Saudi and pro-US liberal propaganda to reverse this Arab anti-imperial nationalist tide that also opposed the Arab regimes allied with US imperialism.

Intellectuals from across the Arab world joined the effort, abandoning old leftist, communist, Nasserist and Islamist positions and adopted the much, much more profitable pro-US and pro-Israel liberal line politically, and the neoliberal economic order being globalized. By the dawn of the new century, the Saudis and the Americans issued new orders to their media and agents to spread an unprecedented sectarian campaign against Shiites inside and outside the Arab world.

The campaign would be first articulated in 2004 by the new and neoliberal King Abdullah of Jordan, a self-styled “liberal” monarch who possesses absolute and unchecked power. The king expressed his and others’ fear of the rise of a “[Shiite crescent](#)” in the region.

It is in this regional context that Syrian liberals joined the fray. Upon the long-awaited death of President [Hafez al-Assad](#) in 2000, they launched what they called a “Damascus Spring” from intellectual salons and from the halls of the US embassy in Damascus, whose cultural attaché was a main sponsor of their “Spring.”

While they would soon be suppressed by the authoritarian regime of [Bashar al-Assad](#), Syrian liberals would re-emerge in 2011 claiming to speak for “revolutionary” forces that have, with the full participation of the repressive Assad regime, caused the death of hundreds of thousands and destroyed the country.

The US ambassador would also aid in their efforts by making appointments and assigning roles within the Syrian exile opposition. Not unlike their Iraqi counterparts, the Syrian liberals — secularists and Islamists alike — called for imperial intervention in the name of democracy and to end the Syrian dictatorship. They got what they wished for in the form of the draconian [Islamic State of Iraq and Syria](#) (ISIS — also known as ISIL or just “Islamic State”).

Not to be outdone, Lebanese liberals and former Lebanese leftists, communists and Arab nationalists would also have their own “Spring” following the assassination of the corrupt and corrupting neoliberal billionaire, Lebanese Prime Minister Rafiq al-Hariri in 2005. They would help launch a local sectarian anti-Shiite campaign in the country and would call for more imperial intervention to save them from their powerful Syrian, but not their more dangerous Israeli, neighbor. They would also relaunch anti-Palestinian campaigns by cheering the Lebanese army’s destruction of the Palestinian refugee camp of [Nahr al-Bared](#) in 2007. While their country was under heavy Israeli bombardment in 2006, many of these liberals cheered on the Israelis privately and publicly and prayed for the destruction of [Hizballah](#) fighters to restore a “liberal” Lebanese order that they longed for.

Liberal extremism

The proliferation of Arab liberals through the good offices of their US and Saudi patrons would lead to more liberal extremism. Saudi-financed newspapers (both print and electronic, like *Asharq Al-Awsat* and *Elaph*) began to espouse openly Zionist and pro-Israeli positions without apology.

Arab liberals would also abet an [anti-democratic Palestinian Authority coup in 2007](#) against

the democratically elected [Hamas](#), a coup that was successful in the West Bank but failed in Gaza. This Palestinian liberal and comprador class of intellectuals also sought to fully submit to US and Israeli political, military and economic diktat (then neoliberal Prime Minister [Salam Fayyad](#) best exemplified this submissiveness) and hoped that the 2008-2009, 2012 and the 2014 Israeli invasions of Gaza would finish off Hamas, a hope that would be dashed by the steadfastness of Hamas and other groups committed to military resistance.

It is with this as background that Arab liberals — secularists and Islamists among them — would emerge during the [so-called Arab “Spring”](#) of 2011 as leaders of the revolts of Egypt and Tunisia (and Syria and Libya, Bahrain and Yemen). In the telling case of Tunisia, the liberal Islamists’ (mainly the al-Nahda party) and secularists’ infighting brought about a *modus operandi* that led to the partial restoration of the *ancien régime*.

In Egypt, the secularist liberals were transformed into outright fascists overnight and allied themselves openly with the Mubarakist forces, both in government, the military and the business sector against the liberal and neoliberal Muslim Brotherhood, which was only able, during its brief stint in power, to ally itself with the Mubarakist army, which ended up toppling its government.

The communists and the Nasserists joined the liberal ranks by transforming themselves, like the liberals, into fascists who fancy their fascism as a form of “liberalism.” They argued tirelessly and still argue that supporting a military coup against the elected and liberal Muslim Brotherhood, and the massive massacres that the coup authorities committed, were the epitome of liberalism and the restoration of a liberal order.

Arab liberals have gone as far as launching a war against European Muslims and Arabs, demanding that they ought to assimilate into their “host” Christian and secular societies. The liberal Sheikh of al-Azhar, the chief cleric of this central Muslim institution, demanded that French Muslim women abide by French laws and not wear the *hijab*. Yet it is the same Arab and Muslim liberals who demand that Arab Christians must not be made to submit to the majority Muslim culture of their societies and that respect by Muslims and Muslim states must be accorded to their differing Christian religious traditions.

One is dumbfounded by what Saudi and US money and political power (and the crucial Israeli role) can do in a short period of time. The proliferation of US- and European-funded nongovernmental organizations across the Arab world since the early 1990s (as is the case elsewhere around the globe) has successfully conscripted whole armies of Arab intellectuals and technicians into US-, Israeli- and Saudi-style liberalism.

It is these Arab liberals — especially and mostly the secularists among them — who helped bring about and justify such massive levels of destruction across the Arab world. The Islamist liberals in turn called for and cheered NATO intervention in Libya, which took place directly, and in Syria, which took place indirectly through massive infusions of cash and weapons. These levels of destruction are unprecedented in scope even in colonial times.

Tallying these Arab liberal achievements, we find that the horror they visited or helped visit on the Arab world is enormous. The death and injury of millions from Iraq to Syria, to Algeria, Palestine, Lebanon and Egypt, to Yemen and Libya, the complete destruction of Iraq, Syria, Gaza, Libya and now Yemen, the massive poverty in Egypt, Palestine, Iraq and Syria, let alone in Lebanon, Jordan, Morocco, Tunisia, Yemen, Sudan, among others, have all been abetted by a majority of Arab liberals.

In fact, many of these events came about as a direct result of policies that liberals in government service or in the opposition and among intellectuals called for and helped bring about. These liberals continue to work assiduously to justify the destruction and shift the blame for these crimes onto others and to justify all sorts of crimes committed by their patrons.

Neither the radical and extremist ISIS nor its precursor al-Qaida can lay claim to such a stellar record of destruction and misery. The destruction wrought by and with the backing of liberals has been so immense that even the horrors that the Baath party, in its Iraqi and Syrian versions, has visited on Syria and Iraq and on their neighbors, is smaller in comparison. Yet it is these same liberals who continue to speak of freedom, peace and prosperity while they bring about more repression, war and poverty.

Arab liberals and Arab liberalism have been a principal enemy of social, political and economic justice across the Arab world during the last half-century. To claim otherwise would be to ignore their criminal record and to remain oblivious to the horrific reality they helped engender.

Joseph Massad is professor of modern Arab politics and intellectual history at Columbia University in New York. He is the author most recently of [Islam in Liberalism](#) (University of Chicago Press, 2015).

The original source of this article is [Electronic Intifada](#)
Copyright © [Joseph Massad](#), [Electronic Intifada](#), 2015

[Comment on Global Research Articles on our Facebook page](#)

[Become a Member of Global Research](#)

Articles by: [Joseph Massad](#)

Disclaimer: The contents of this article are of sole responsibility of the author(s). The Centre for Research on Globalization will not be responsible for any inaccurate or incorrect statement in this article. The Centre of Research on Globalization grants permission to cross-post Global Research articles on community internet sites as long the source and copyright are acknowledged together with a hyperlink to the original Global Research article. For publication of Global Research articles in print or other forms including commercial internet sites, contact: publications@globalresearch.ca

www.globalresearch.ca contains copyrighted material the use of which has not always been specifically authorized by the copyright owner. We are making such material available to our readers under the provisions of "fair use" in an effort to advance a better understanding of political, economic and social issues. The material on this site is distributed without profit to those who have expressed a prior interest in receiving it for research and educational purposes. If you wish to use copyrighted material for purposes other than "fair use" you must request permission from the copyright owner.

For media inquiries: publications@globalresearch.ca