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The Arab Revolution Takes Back the Public Space

Nasser Rabbat

The expanse awaiting me really is no longer, not only, the site of the event where I must perform, it changes little by little, I glimpse bodies as they run, crawl or hide, a cloud flies above (smoke from the gun shots or tear gas?), its middle is deserted, as if over-exposed to the assailants' fire, the ground is strewn with corpses, rubble, and the light in which it bathes is studded with sparks. I understand that I am at Tiananmen Square, or Tahrir Square, or any other square which, with shared momentum, unites the crowds we are all part of.

—Marie Étienne, "Métamorphoses"¹

In 1991, al-Sadiq al-Nayhum, a Libyan thinker exiled in Geneva, published a book of collected essays in Arabic with the provocative title *Islam in Captivity: Who Stole the Mosque and Where Did Friday Disappear?*² The thesis of the book was not novel. Al-Nayhum posited that modernity had failed to take root in the Arab world because in large part it had grown out of Western history and developed in a Western cultural and epistemological context, which is incompatible with the culture and knowledge nurtured by Islam. Al-Nayhum, predictably, advocated a return to a pure, foundational Islam to rebuild the battered and confused Arab societies.³ This solution has been proposed by many thinkers before and since, especially after modern Arab states failed to achieve the promised socioeco-

1. Marie Étienne, "Métamorphoses," *Contemporary French and Francophone Studies* 15 (Dec. 2011): 644.

2. See al-Sadiq al-Nayhum, *Al-Islam fi al-asr: Man saraq al-jami' wa ayna dhahaba yawm al-jumu'a?* (London, 1991).

3. For an incisive and amazingly prescient critique of al-Nayhum's thesis, which is strangely published as one of many replies attached at the end of *Al-Islam fi al-asr*, see Na'im 'Ashur, "Ya-khiraf al-watan al-'Arabi, ittahidu" (O Lambs of the Arab World, Unite), in al-Nayhum, *Al-Islam fi al-asr*, pp. 347–55. The same reply stirred a debate on a Sudanese website in 2002; see "Sudaneseonline Discussion Board," www.sudaneseonline.com/cgi-bin/sdb/2bb.cgi?seq=msg&board=50&msg=1139729375

conomic development or military parity with Israel, which had scored a resounding victory against them in 1967.⁴ Al-Nayhum, however, differed from other like-minded thinkers by attending to the role of space in framing, sustaining, and ultimately molding the Islamic political tradition. His focus was of course on the quintessential Islamic space, the mosque, hence its appearance in his title. His understanding of the mosque was both historical and spatio-functional. He recognized both the simple but effective original layout of the mosque—its undifferentiated and nonhierarchical space and the polyvalence of that space which could serve for prayer, communal congregation, learning, and even political gathering.⁵ It is that last point that al-Nayhum emphasized in his book; the mosque was the premier public space in the Islamic city, the equivalent of the agora in the ancient Greek city and the public square in the medieval Western city.⁶ In fact, in the case of the numerous cities of antiquity that were absorbed by

4. Famously, and in contradistinction to a chorus of religious authors, Sadiq Jalal al-‘Azm ascribed the defeat of 1967 precisely to the failure of Arab societies, and especially Arab regimes, to espouse modernity and to have adhered instead to premodern, religiously based social and knowledge structures. See Sadiq Jalal al-‘Azm, *Al-naqd al-dhati ba’d al-hazima* (Beirut, 1968) and *Naqd al-fikr al-dini* (Beirut, 1969). Both books were quite controversial and led to brief imprisonment of the author and dismissal from his professorship at the American University of Beirut. Selections of *Naqd al-fikr al-dini* (The Critique of Religious Thinking) have appeared in English translations in various collections. An English translation of *Al-naqd al-dhati ba’d al-hazima* finally appeared as *Self-Criticism after the Defeat*, trans. George Stergios (London, 2011).

5. The emergence of an “Islamic” city with its new “Islamic” institutions is best analyzed by Hichem Djait, *Al-Kūfa: Naissance de la ville Islamique* (Paris, 1986), pp. 65–137. See also Paul Wheatley, *The Places Where Men Pray Together: Cities in Islamic Lands, Seventh through the Tenth Centuries* (Chicago, 2000), pp. 32–54, 263–69.

6. Oleg Grabar, “The Architecture of the Middle Eastern City from Past to Present: The Case of the Mosque,” in *Middle Eastern Cities: A Symposium on Ancient, Islamic, and*

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the expanding Islamic caliphate, such as Damascus, Antioch, Alexandria, Cordoba, and later Constantinople (Istanbul), the open space of the main congregational mosque may have actually, and probably consciously, replaced the agora in both its urban and political functions. In Damascus, for instance, the original agora—Rahbat al-Khalid (Court of al-Khalid)—which seems to have remained an open space in the early medieval period, lost its congregational function and became a space for a temporary market immediately after the construction of the Great Mosque of Damascus in the early eighth century. It was totally built up by the thirteenth century.⁷

Like the agora, the mosque provided the space in the city where the adult male population exercised its political rights, particularly on Friday, when the community reconfirmed its allegiance to its leader or withdrew it in vocal responses to a formulaic oath included in the sermon.⁸ Many cherished narratives from the formative period of Islam exalted the instances in which subjects threatened their caliphs and governors with removal from office within the mosque's space and during congregational prayers. In one famous episode quoted in countless accounts, but not in the original biographical sources, the second Caliph, Omar ibn al-Khattab, exhorted his subjects during his accession speech at the Mosque of the Prophet in Medina to correct him if he deviated from the right path. A simple Bedouin in the audience immediately retorted, "I will correct you with my sword," to which Omar is supposed to have magnanimously replied: thank God for having chosen some people in the nation of Muhammad who will correct Omar's deviation with their swords.⁹

Contemporary Middle Eastern Urbanism, ed. Ira Lapidus (Cambridge, 1969), pp. 26–46, made that same argument.

7. See Nikita Elisséeff, "Damas à la lumière des théories de Jean Sauvaget," in *The Islamic City: A Colloquium*, ed. A. H. Hourani and S. M. Stern (Oxford, 1970), p. 174 and *Nūr ad-Dīn: Un Grand Prince musulman de Syrie au temps des croisades (511–569 A. H./1118–1174)*, 3 vols. (Damascus, 1967), 3:862.

8. See Thierry Bianquis, "Derrière qui prieras-tu, vendredi? Reflexions sur les espaces publics et privés, dans la ville arabe médiévale," *Bulletin d'Études Orientales* 37–38 (1988): 7–21.

9. Hanan Solayman, "Muslim Martin Luther Kings," www.onislam.net/english/culture-and-entertainment/iblog/450731-muslim-martin-luther-kings.html. Although this story is repeated in almost all Islamic modern treatises on the companions of the Prophet, it is not recorded in the major early sources. A similar story, without the sword, is quoted in Abu Jafar Muhammad ibn Jarir al-Tabari, *Tarikh al-rusul wa-l muluk*, ed. M. Abu al-Fadhl Ibrahim, 11 vols. (Cairo, 1960–77), 4:214–16, but its chain of transmission is deemed weak and unreliable; see 'Abd al-salam bn muhsin al-'issa, *Dirasa naqdiyya fi al-marwiyyat al-warida fi shakhsiyyat 'umar bin al-khattab wa-siasatahu al-idariyya*, 3 vols. (Madina, 2002), 2:573–74. Of course the story could be construed as inciting armed resistance against unfair rulers, a command under which traditional Muslim rulers would feel very threatened if it were sanctioned—hence probably the doubts about its authenticity expressed in official sources.

Al-Nayhum believed the political function of the mosque was crucial and lamented its disappearance from practice with the onset of a less consultative and less pious form of government not long after the end of the Medinese period, which covered the reigns of the Prophet Muhammad and his four immediate successors, evocatively called the Rightly Guided Caliphs. His aim was to restore that early tradition as an Islamic form of democracy, even though he had to overcome a large historical gap filled with a succession of Islamic despotic governments spanning more than 1,300 years. There, too, he was not the first. Most fundamentalist ideologues draw their models strictly from the foundational Islamic period and ignore subsequent Islamic history. Nostalgia for the perfect time of the Prophet and his immediate successors has in fact defined all Islamic utopian formulations of the last two centuries, ranging from the Wahhabi revolt in early nineteenth-century Arabia to the current Salafi movements spreading across the Arab world. This nostalgia has always provided the mental tool to bridge the distance separating the present from the remembered Golden Age. It has also allowed the refutation of a vast amount of political and intellectual experiments conducted across the Islamic world over the same time span as corrupt, contaminated by non-Islamic influences, or downright conspiratorial.¹⁰

These earlier fundamentalist movements did not operate in a void. They had sprung up as angry responses to the purported secularism of the modern territorial states, which had formed in various parts of the Arab world after the disintegration of the Ottoman Empire and the elimination of the caliphate in 1924 and which were under direct or indirect colonial influence. These new states adopted a modern, Western-inspired political apparatus, complete with three branches of government, some form of parliamentary representation, and a national army, which in many cases was to eventually usurp the rule in most of these countries.

The modern Arab states also witnessed major changes in their social, economic, and cultural structures that were Western-influenced and sometimes Western-implemented and that varied in intensity from one country to the other and from one city to the other.¹¹ These transformations translated into alterations to the built environment that had hitherto

10. See Aziz al-Azmeh, *Islams and Modernities* (London, 1996), and Noah Feldman, *The Fall and Rise of the Islamic State* (Princeton, N.J., 2008).

11. One of the most accessible analyses of the modernization process in the Arab world and its social, political, and cultural repercussions is Albert Hourani, *A History of the Arab Peoples* (Cambridge, Mass., 1991), pp. 271–364; see also Jacques Berque, *Les Arabes d'hier à demain* (Paris, 1960); trans. Jean Stewart under the title *The Arabs: Their History and Future* (London, 1964). See also Eugene Rogan, *The Arabs: A History* (New York, 2009), pp. 85–318.

evolved at a slower pace and with little foreign interference. Old historic cities—shortly thereafter to be dubbed Islamic cities—saw their layouts open to modern interventions that cut through their urban fabric and sat uneasily next to or on top of their traditional plans.¹² Concurrently, new extensions branched out of the old cities' cores and in many instances sapped their vitality by absorbing most of their upper class and wealthy inhabitants and most of their economic and social functions. Furthermore, some of these *extra muros* new districts were built exclusively for foreigners who were invited by local or colonial authorities to run the modernization process and to profit from it and who were thus accorded most of its amenities, such as modern houses, parks, boulevards, and public spaces. These districts, adjacent as they were to the old cities, were nonetheless entirely separated from them by spatial, legal, and behavioral barriers, although some seepage occurred both ways. The end result, however, was that cities like Algiers, Tunis, Cairo, Damascus, Beirut, Baghdad, Aleppo, and many other smaller cities entered the twentieth century with two poorly reconciled and heavily hybridized halves: a pseudomodern and a faux-traditional one.¹³

A new form of public space, the plaza or the square, started appearing in the late nineteenth century in these dualistic Arab cities either as nuclei of urban developments *à la française* or as leftover spaces, which were then turned into plazas.¹⁴ A type of open space, called *maydan*, already existed in the Arab cities. It was introduced as a hippodrome for equestrian exercises when most of the Arab cities were ruled by military dynasties in the pre-modern period.¹⁵ Although the *maydan* sometimes doubled as an open-air

12. See Janet Abu-Lughod, "The Islamic City: Historical Myth, Islamic Essence, and Contemporary Relevance," *International Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 19 (May 1987): 155–76, and Nezar AlSayyad, "The Islamic City as a Colonial Enterprise," in *Forms of Dominance: On the Architecture and Urbanism of the Colonial Enterprise*, ed. AlSayyad (London, 1992), pp. 27–43.

13. This historical process has been analyzed in many studies. The pioneer in providing detailed examinations of the evolution of specific examples of modern Arab cities is Janet Abu-Lughod. See Abu-Lughod, *Cairo: 1001 Years of the City Victorious* (Princeton, N.J., 1971) and *Rabat: Urban Apartheid in Morocco* (Princeton, N.J., 1980). For collected essays that analyzed other cases, ranging from cities, to districts, to specific streets, compare *From Madina to Metropolis: Heritage and Change in the Near Eastern City*, ed. L. Carl Brown (Princeton, N.J., 1973); *The Middle East City: Ancient Traditions Confront a Modern World*, ed. Abdulaziz Y. Saqqaf (New York, 1987); Stefano Bianca, *Urban Form in the Arab World: Past and Present* (London, 2000); and *The Evolving Arab City: Tradition, Modernity and Urban Development*, ed. Yasser Elsheshtawy (London, 2008).

14. See Nasser Rabbat, "Circling the Square: Architecture and Revolution in Cairo," *Artforum* 49 (Apr. 2011): 182–91, for an analysis of the history of Tahrir Square, the most famous of these Arab new plazas.

15. The most famous of these military dynasties are the Mamluks, who built at least six

marketplace or was even appropriated by the populace for public protest, it was always the privileged space of the rulers and was never considered a civic space, one that is related to the city and its citizens. The new squares, on the other hand, came with the notion of “citadinity” embedded in their idealized genealogy (from Fustel de Coulanges and Alexis de Tocqueville to Max Weber and Richard Sennett).¹⁶ But like most other modern urban amenities, they were imported as complete forms, which had been conceived, tested, contested, and settled elsewhere. They had no local history that would have endowed them with meaning, as they had not been shaped by a political struggle similar to the one that marked the evolution of the square or the city center in premodern European cities. Moreover, plazas or squares in Arab cities have been imposed mostly by the colonial authorities, either to provide the colonial settlers with a familiar European urban environment, as was the case in most cities of the Maghrib from Morocco to Algeria to Tunisia, or to distinguish the new developments from the traditional city, as was the case in precolonial and colonial Egypt and in the cities of Bilad al-Sham and Iraq. In both cases, however, the authorities were also enacting a system of spatial control with wide, straight boulevards radiating from the squares that enabled surveillance, military movement, and crowd control.¹⁷

Though new to the local culture, many plazas and squares assumed civic meanings in the public eye when the nationalist movements of the early twentieth century revolted against the colonial rulers. The squares were consecrated by the blood of protestors who demonstrated for independence and clashed with colonial forces, or by the execution of national revolutionaries by the colonial forces or their local agents. Thus, many squares in various Arab cities—such as Beirut, Damascus, Tripoli, Algiers, and Aden—acquired the very revealing name of *midan al-shuhada* or *sahat al-shuhada* (square of the martyrs) to commemorate the martyrs of independence.¹⁸ After independence, many of these squares became the choice

maydans in their capital, Cairo; see David Ayalon, “Notes on the *Furusiyya* Exercises and Games in the Mamluk Sultanate,” *Scripta Hierosolymitana* 9 (1961): 31–62.

16. See Isabelle Berry-Chikhaoui, “Les Notions de citadinité et d’urbanité dans l’analyse des villes du Monde arabe Essai de clarification,” *Les Cahiers d’EMAM* 18 (July 2009): 9–20.

17. One of the most complete analyses of the urban policies of colonial authorities in the Arab world is Zeynep Çelik, *Urban Forms and Colonial Confrontations: Algiers under French Rule* (Berkeley, 1997). See also Gwendolyn Wright, *The Politics of Design in French Colonial Urbanism* (Chicago, 1991), which examines the French urban policies in Morocco among other French, non-Arab colonies.

18. On *sahat al-shuhada* in Beirut, see Nour Dados, “Revisiting Martyrs’ Square . . . Again: Absence and Presence in Cultural Memory,” in *Moment to Monument: The Making and*

place for national celebrations and parades and, sometimes, political and social protests,¹⁹ especially under the first postindependence governments, which, though representing the bourgeois and land-owning classes, maintained a modicum of freedom of expression under the umbrella of their fledgling parliamentary regimes.

This rather benign, though old-fashioned and paternalistic form of government was shattered after 1948. The insertion of Israel in the heart of the Arab world caused deep fissures in an already embattled Arab culture and politics. A series of military coups in Syria (1949) and Egypt (1952) came immediately after the war of 1948 and the dismemberment of Palestine.²⁰ The officers who led the coups used the shocking, and allegedly conspiratorially plotted, defeat of the Arab armies at the hands of the nascent Israeli one as the main reason for their decision to remove the corrupt politicians of the bourgeois parties and to take national destiny into their own hands. This development, which ultimately spread to Iraq, Yemen, Algeria, Sudan, and Libya, has of course been disastrous. The military regimes were unable to reclaim Palestine (instead they lost what was left of it in 1967) or to achieve social justice and democracy, as they have promised. Instead, they metamorphosed over the years into the ugliest form of autocratic government: the rule of the one inspired despot and his family or clan, combining in one system a sophisticated modern and an archaic form of manipulative power.²¹ Along the way, they used the cause of Palestine and, more generally, that of Arab unity as no more than a fig

Unmaking of Cultural Significance, ed. Ladina Bezzola Lambert and Andrea Ochsner (Bielefeld, 2009), pp. 169–81. On *sahat al-shuhada* in Damascus, see Leila Hudson, “Late Ottoman Damascus: Investments in Public Space and the Emergence of Popular Sovereignty,” *Critique* 15 (Summer 2006): 151–69.

19. See Elie Podeh, *The Politics of National Celebrations in the Arab Middle East* (Cambridge, 2011), which tells the story of modern celebrations, national and religious, in five Arabic countries.

20. The question of Palestine is an issue that has been interminably debated, and no consensus can be reached with the heightened emotions still animating both sides; see Avi Shlaim, “The Debate about 1948,” in *The Israel/Palestine Question: A Reader*, ed. Ilan Pappé (London, 2007), pp. 171–92. For a concise and fair account of the Palestinian *nakba* and its repercussions, which is nonetheless cast as biased in Western media mostly because of the identity of its author, see Edward Said, *The Question of Palestine* (New York, 1979). See also Walid Kazzuha, “The Impact of Palestine on Arab Politics,” in *The Arab State*, ed. Giacomo Luciani (Berkeley, 1990), pp. 300–18; Rogan, *The Arabs*, pp. 247–317; and *The War for Palestine: Rewriting the History of 1948*, ed. Rogan and Shlaim (Cambridge, 2001).

21. The literature on this development is vast and varied. For an introduction, see Elizabeth Picard, “Arab Military in Politics: From Revolutionary Plot to Authoritarian Regime,” in *The Arab State*, pp. 189–219. See also *Debating Arab Authoritarianism: Dynamics and Durability in Nondemocratic Regimes*, ed. Oliver Schlumberger (Stanford, Calif., 2008).

leaf, albeit a very effective fig leaf, before discarding it altogether by the beginning of the twenty-first century.

Needless to say, the military regimes could not tolerate any form of political freedom or criticism. Over the years, they built a complicated apparatus of security, the *mukhabarat*, to keep watch over the public (and the public space) and to quash any potentially subversive move.²² At the same time, they set up a loud, though naïve, propaganda machine that had sole control of the airwaves until the advent of new satellite channels in the early 2000s. Public life in Arab cities retreated from open spaces to private ones, and even in the privacy of their own homes people learned to be very careful in their criticism lest they would be caught by the mighty *mukhabarat*, reputed to be ominously present. Public squares too lost their burgeoning civic role to become stages for the speeches of the supreme leader thundering in front of thousands of seemingly adoring citizens, in many instances forcibly rounded up from their places of work or study to fill the squares. Gamal Abdel Nasser, the charismatic president of Egypt, was the paradigmatic figure who inspired many rather pompous or standoffish later leaders like his successor Sadat, Hafiz al-Assad of Syria, Mu'ammar Gadhafi of Libya, and Saddam Hussein of Iraq to manipulate public squares as theaters for the exercise of their cult of personality.²³ The two Ba'athi leaders of Syria and Iraq, al-Assad and Hussein, both extreme megalomaniacs, saw fit to proclaim a permanent presence in public spaces through the erection of larger-than-life-size statues of themselves in all the major squares of the cities in their countries, probably in imitation of Communist strongmen in Europe and Asia (fig. 1).²⁴

Thus the two potential public spaces of political expression in the city, the (remembered) mosque and the (imported) plaza, were denied their civic function for anywhere between thirty and fifty years of despotic rule across the Arab world depending on the country. Abrupt and violent revolts sometimes managed to stage their protests in one or the other for a

22. Best captured in Kanan Makiya, *Republic of Fear: The Politics of Modern Iraq* (Berkeley, 1998).

23. One of the best sources on Nasser's life and travails in English is Faysal Mikadadi, *Gamal Abdel Nasser: A Bibliography* (Westport, Conn., 1991). See also Adeed Dawisha, *Arab Nationalism in the Twentieth Century: From Triumph to Despair* (Princeton, N.J., 2003), pp. 135–250. On Nasser's use of cinema as a medium of propaganda, see Viola Shafik, *Popular Egyptian Cinema: Gender, Class, and Nation* (Cairo, 2006), pp. 102–9.

24. Assad and Hussein used complex propaganda machines to create their image as inspired and almost infallible leaders of their nations. See Samir al-Khalil, *The Monument: Art, Vulgarity, and Responsibility in Iraq* (London, 2004), which shows how Saddam Hussein used art and architecture to assert his authoritarianism. Lisa Wedeen, *Ambiguities of Domination: Politics, Rhetoric, and Symbols in Contemporary Syria* (Chicago, 1999), is a potent analysis of the construction of the Hafiz al-Assad cult in Syria.



FIGURE 1.

short moment, but the reprisal of the regime was usually swift and ruthless (the 1964 and 1982 religious uprisings in Syria, the 1977 “Bread Riots” in Egypt and elsewhere, the 2000 Shi‘ite revolt in southern Iraq).²⁵ It was thus a surprise when the Arab revolutions of 2011 managed to reenlist both spaces in the service of a new form of civil protest and to succeed against tremendous odds. The surprise was even more startling, at least for the students of Arab history, because the two spaces functioned in tandem despite the decades of mistrust between the religious movements, which saw the mosque as their sanctuary, and the populist, generally Left-leaning political movements, which recalled the days when the public squares were their favorite arena.²⁶

The observer is justified in seeing the radical transformation of social media as the facilitator of the recent Arab revolutions. Dedicated activists indeed conducted their communication, recruitment, and organization online from Tunisia to Egypt and from Yemen to Bahrain to Libya and

25. See Larbi Sadiki, “Popular Uprisings and Arab Democratization,” *International Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 32 (Feb. 2000): 71–95. On the religious uprisings in Syria, see Radwan Ziadeh, “The Muslim Brotherhood in Syria and the Concept of ‘Democracy,’” www.csidonline.org/9th_annual_conf/Radwan_Ziadeh_CSID_paper.pdf

26. It is too early to evaluate the full extent of the interplay between the mosque and the square but, for a preliminary report that highlights the promises and the pitfalls, see Peter Hessler, “The Mosque on the Square: Two Weeks inside the Egyptian Revolution,” *The New Yorker*, 19 Dec. 2011, pp. 46–57.

Syria. But the actual protests, the ones that toppled a few regimes and are still challenging a few more brutal ones after many months of vicious crackdowns, take place in the real space of the city. In most cities in revolt, the mosques (at least many mosques) operate as the relatively safe gathering spot for protestors (who are not all worshippers or even Muslims) and, in many instances, as the environment in which their political dissatisfaction is magnified and vindicated in sermons and in shouted slogans. They come out of their mosques imbued with the will to march and to face up to their oppressors and their brutal attacks. The mosques as such become the incubators of political protest in an updated and more proactive version of what al-Nayhum was adducing from the idealistically remembered mosques of early Islam.²⁷

In the scheme of demonstrations perfected by the Arab revolutions, the small rallies emanating from the mosques (and other gathering places in the city) converge on the square. Sometimes the security forces block the way to the square, and the demonstrators retreat to their mosques or disperse to prepare for a comeback. Sometimes they manage to penetrate the security cordon and reach the square where other demonstrators join them to swell into magnificent public protest, such as the ones we witnessed in Tunis, Cairo, Alexandria, Benghazi, Manama, and San'a but also in smaller cities, such as Dar'a, Homs, and Hama in Syria and Ta'iz in Yemen. The protestors stand together in their square, hoisting their banners and chanting their slogans demanding the departure of the corrupt regimes. The squares virtually become their homes, their operation rooms, and our window on their revolution. They sometimes morph into the places where they live, sleep, pray, socialize, demonstrate, and shape their destiny. Many lost their lives defending their squares and their burgeoning revolution therein against the attacks of the security forces and the regime's thugs (named differently in different countries). Others found meaning to their lives in finally breaking the chain of fear and revolting against the regimes that had dehumanized them for so long. In fact, squares such as Tahrir Square in Cairo, Taghyir (Change) Square in San'a, and Sahat al-Sa'a (Square of the Clock, renamed Freedom Square) in Homs have come to frame the Arab revolutions and to represent their

27. Of course the mosques controlled by the state and their *khatibs* still function as the exact opposite. Badr al-Din Hassoun, the state-appointed grand mufti of Syria, has been one of the most ardent defenders of the regime of Bashar al-Assad. He went to ridiculous ends to assert this support; see, for instance, www.memritv.org/clip/en/3142.htm. On 7 February 2011, the Grand Mufti of Saudi Arabia, Sheikh Abdul Aziz al-Sheikh, condemned the revolution in Egypt as *fitna* (chaos), which is, according to a prophetic saying, worse than killing; see Khalid Amayreh, "The Ignorant Saudi Sheikh," mwcnews.net/focus/politics/8507-the-ignorant-saudi-sheikh.html

exuberance and anguish at the same time. To a world that watches with wonderment, they have acquired the same mystique that other squares of revolution had gained before: the Place de la Bastille in Paris, the Red Square in Moscow, the Azadi Square in Tehran, and, most famously for our short-memored present, Tiananmen Square in Beijing.²⁸

The new revolutionary episode on the path to Arab liberation has facilitated a kind of dialog between the spaces of tradition and the spaces of modernity in the city that may result in a new civil order, an order in which the revived mosque, with what it represents, is neither the antithesis of the reclaimed square nor its substitute.²⁹ Both are regaining their civil roles through the daring deeds of anonymous citizens, without necessarily relinquishing any of their other functions that still distinguish them from each other and endow them with their various epochal or urban references. In this new order, both spaces shelter and nurture the expression of the people's civil rights, each at its best capacity and in its best tradition. And both spaces together address on the urban level the kind of synthesis that modern Arab culture has been searching for for some time: how to reconcile a heritage overloaded with strong notions of identity and particularity with a modernity that is essential for contemporary life, but is nonetheless imported, sometimes imposed, and allegedly manipulated in ways detrimental to indigenous self-expression.³⁰

28. Already many books have been published on Tahrir Square; compare Ashraf Khalil, *Liberation Square: Inside the Egyptian Revolution and the Rebirth of a Nation* (New York, 2012).

29. Many illuminating examples of that dialog can be found at www.jadaliyya.com/; see also *The Arab World Geographer* 14 (Summer 2001), and the dossier "Arab Spring?" in *Survival* 53, no. 2 (2011), www.iiss.org/publications/survival/survival-2011/year-2011-issue-2/

30. This is perhaps the most perennial subject of debate in and about the Arab world. See, for instance, Ibrahim M. Abu Rabi', *Contemporary Arab Thought: Studies in Post-1967 Arab Intellectual History* (London, 2004), who offers in the second half of his book a review of six of the main Arab intellectuals who contributed to that debate in the last forty years.