

1 Contemporary Arab thought and the specter of the *nahḍa*

In 1971, a conference was held in Cairo bearing the title “al-Aṣāla wa-l-Tajdid fī-l-Thaqāfa al-‘Arabiyya al-Mu‘āṣira” (Authenticity and Renewal in Contemporary Arab Culture). The conference aimed to uncover “the remaining sources in the Arab culture through which the Arab feels that he belongs to a nation (*umma*) with a distinguished spirit and general character.” In addition, the conference would shed light on how these roots (*uṣūl*) of Arab culture relate to modern culture, and to what extent Arab culture can productively interact with modern culture. The goal, we are made to understand, was to strike a balance between those who believe that authenticity (*aṣāla*) consists in sticking rigidly to one’s own cultural sources, and those who take renewal to mean “the dismissal of the roots (*uṣūl*) of Arab culture and the embrace of everything that is new, whatever its nature.”¹

Looking at the title and the summary of its aims, this conference fits squarely with the “standard narrative” of contemporary Arab thought referred to in the Introduction. In this chapter, we will explore this narrative and how it has come up in Western and Arab literature. Although our focus is on debates in the Arab world that have taken place in the last fifty years, the roots of this narrative go back to the age of rapid modernization during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries known as the *nahḍa*, or Arab Renaissance. The encounter during this period between old and new, between tradition and modernity, between East and West, was a precursor to the problem of how to understand, reinterpret, or balance the relationship between Arab cultural authenticity and Western modernity, which would become the pivotal question of the late twentieth century. We will return to the conference in more detail in the next chapter, but before we do so, it is necessary to present the standard narrative and its backstory, starting with the *nahḍa* period and how it is perceived as the origin of later debates about *turāth*.

1 al-‘Aziz al-Sayyid, “Mu’tamar al-Aṣāla wa-l-Tajdid fī-l-Thaqāfa al-‘Arabiyya al-Mu‘āṣira” (Cairo, 1971), i.

1.1 The *nahḍa* backstory

What I refer to as the standard narrative is founded on a binary between the authentic and the modern. It is not, it should be added, a perspective to which every treatment of Arab thought ascribes. Some even actively try to undermine it. This reassessment has been particularly pronounced in the study of the early modern period referred to as the *nahḍa*. Very generally, the term *nahḍa* stands for the “project of Arab cultural and political modernity from the early nineteenth to the early twentieth century.”² Because more recent debates both reflect on and, in some ways, continue the debates of the *nahḍa* period, we will briefly dive into the meaning of this period and how literature on the *nahḍa* has developed in recent years.

While scholars find it easy to agree with such a general definition, they differ on the specifics of:

- when this modernization started;
- how important different material and ideological aspects of modernization are, and how they relate to each other;
- who was involved in shaping it – Intellectuals? Politicians? Workers? Religious scholars? Muslims as well as Christians? Women as well as men?;
- where it took place – In Egypt and Syria? The Arab world? The Ottoman Empire? The entire world?; and
- what the precise role of Western cultural, scientific, and political power in this process was – as a catalyst? An adversary? As only a marginal factor?

Shared by all who study the *nahḍa* is a sense that this period of modernization represents a tremendous shift in Arab societies. As new modes of law, administration, and production were accompanied by new values, fashions, and modes of social organization, this period laid the groundwork for the nation-states that now collectively rule the Arab world. This also explains the continued interest in the *nahḍa* among Arab intellectuals and scholars of the Arab world more broadly. Since it is during this period that the foundations for the modern Arab nation-state were

2 Tarek El-Ariss, “Introduction,” in *The Arab Renaissance: A Bilingual Anthology of the Nahḍa* (New York: The Modern Language Association of America, 2018), xv. The Arabic meaning of this term is far from definite. While the literal meaning of *nahḍa* refers to a rising up or being again brought to life, Hannah Scott Deuchar has shown in a careful analysis of the term that this meaning took a long time to coagulate. Moreover, it has not always been exclusively used to denote an Arab Renaissance, but has also been applied in reference to a rising of the colonized East, or even of any society or group, past or present – see Hannah Scott Deuchar, “Nahḍa: Mapping a Keyword in Cultural Discourse,” *Alif: Journal of Comparative Poetics* 37 (2017): 50–84.

laid, the *nahḍa* functions as a historical point of reference for explaining the dysfunction of many of these institutions in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

Although this is primarily a study of contemporary Arab thought, it is important to hold the idea of the *nahḍa* in the back of our minds, because it looms large in debates among Arab intellectuals in recent decades. An issue that is associated in particular with the *nahḍa* and which continues to move contemporary thinkers is the issue of progress. The *nahḍa* is portrayed as a project that aimed to reform Arab societies in such a way that they would be able to catch up with the rapid pace of innovation in the West. This connection is made explicit, for example, by the well-known Moroccan thinker Muḥammad ‘Ābid al-Jābirī who argues that the “problematic of authenticity and contemporaneity” (*ishkāliyyat al-aṣāla wa-l-mu‘āsara*), which we have already seen is the central problematic of Arab thought since the 1970s, is rooted in what he calls the “Renaissance question” (*al-su‘āl al-nahḍawī*), namely: “Why did we (we Arabs, we Muslims, we the East) fall behind and why did others (Christian Europe, the West) develop? Therefore, how do we awaken? How do we catch up and join this modern civilization?”³ Al-Jābirī is only one of many who emphasize the link between the ideals and problematics of the *nahḍa* and the later philosophical discourse in the Arab world. In a sense, contemporary Arab thought may be read as a meditation on the *nahḍa*, a post-mortem that will uncover the mistakes and false turns that kept its ideals from being realized. As such, the *nahḍa* has also become an essential part of the standard narrative of contemporary Arab thought.⁴

One of the aspects of *nahḍa* thought that have informed later generations of historians and philosophers who have tried to cope with its legacy is a particular way of viewing the arc of Arab history, one that has been dubbed by Stephen Shee-

3 Muḥammad ‘Ābid al-Jābirī, *Ishkāliyyāt al-Fikr al-‘Arabī al-Mu‘āsir* (Beirut: Markaz Dirāsāt al-Waḥda al-‘Arabiyya, 1989), 20; Mohammed ‘Abed al-Jābri, “The Problematic of Authenticity and Contemporaneity in Modern and Contemporary Arab Thought,” trans. Farid Abdel-Nour, *Contemporary Arab Affairs* 4, no. 2 (2011): 176–77 (translated from Arabic). The question was posed in these terms by Shakīb Arslān in his essay bearing the corresponding title: “Why Did the Muslims Fall Behind? And Why Did The Others Progress?” – Shakīb Arslān, *Li-mādhā Ta’akhhakar al-Muslīmūn? Wa-Li-mādhā Taqaddam Ghayruhum?* (Cairo/Beirut: Dār al-Kitāb al-Miṣri/al-Lubnānī, 2012).

4 For more elaborate studies of the connection between the *nahḍa* and the problematic of authenticity and modernity in contemporary Arab thought, one may turn to: ‘Abd al-Ilāh Balqaziz, *al-‘Arab wa-l-Hadātha: Dirāsa fī Maqālāt al-Ḥadāthiyyīn* (Beirut: Markaz Dirāsāt al-Waḥda al-‘Arabiyya, 2007) (in particular the first three volumes), Ḥusayn al-‘Awdāt, *al-Nahḍa wa-l-Hadātha: Bayn al-Irtibāk wa-l-Ikḥfāq* (Beirut: Dār al-Sāqī, 2011), Muḥammad ‘Ābid al-Jābirī, *al-Mashrū‘ al-Nahḍawī al-‘Arabī: Murāja‘a Naqdiyya* (Beirut: Markaz Dirāsāt al-Waḥda al-‘Arabiyya, 1996), and Elizabeth Suzanne Kassab, *Contemporary Arab Thought: Cultural Critique in Comparative Perspective* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), chap. 1.

hi the “*inḥiṭāt* (decadence) paradigm.”⁵ This paradigm presented Islamic and particularly Arab civilization as having achieved a Golden Age in the Abbasid Caliphate (750–1258). Following this highpoint of civilization, Arab societies got caught in a negative spiral of stagnation, decadence, and decline that became particularly pronounced under Ottoman rule.⁶ Its momentum, according to this perspective, was only broken with the arrival of Napoleon’s invasion of Egypt in 1798 and with the arrival of Western missionaries in the century following it. This frame for telling the story of the *nahḍa* obviously ties in with the last of the questions mentioned above, namely, the role of the West. According to this view, it was through contacts with the advanced West that the process of social, scientific, cultural, bureaucratic, political, economic, and military modernization that would reawaken the Arab or the Islamic spirit of its Golden Age in the early centuries of the Islamic calendar was kickstarted. Its narrative emplotment, not entirely coincidentally, mirrors the Western story of a classical era followed by an age of decline and the rebirth that was the Italian Renaissance. Similarly, the liberal reformist Arab historiography of the late nineteenth century that first coherently articulated this view of history presented Arab history as evolving through a so-called classical era of the Abbasid Caliphate, a gradual decline mirroring the European Middle Ages, and an Arab Renaissance starting in the nineteenth century.⁷

In recent scholarship, this narrative has received a considerable amount of flak.⁸ On the one hand, researchers critical of the lofty aims of the *nahḍa* have por-

5 Stephen Sheehi, “Towards a Critical Theory of *al-Nahḍah*: Epistemology, Ideology and Capital,” *Journal of Arabic Literature* 43, no. 2/3 (2012): 270.

6 Ottoman rule grew and waned in different parts of the Arab world over the course of centuries, and may have been rule only in name in some of the further flung regions of the Maghrib. Generally speaking, in the Mashriq, Ottoman rule in Egypt began in 1517 with its conquest at the hands of Sultan Selim I, and effectively ended with the French invasion of 1798, even though under the rule of Muḥammad ‘Alī and his descendants it officially remained part of the Ottoman empire. Ottoman rule in the Levant began when the Ottomans arrived in 1516, and ended with their giving up this territory after the First World War. For an overview of the rise of Ottoman rule in the Arab world, its demise in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and the “special case” of Egypt, see: Bruce Alan Masters, *The Arabs of the Ottoman Empire, 1516–1918: A Social and Cultural History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), chaps. 1 and 7.

7 Yoav Di-Capua details the origins of this mode of historiography in Egypt in: Yoav Di-Capua, *Gatekeepers of the Arab Past: Historians and History Writing in Twentieth-Century Egypt* (Berkeley/Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press, 2009), chap. 1.

8 For a more detailed critical discussion of the “*inḥiṭāt* paradigm” see Gabriel Piterberg, “Tropes of Stagnation and Awakening in Nationalist Historical Consciousness: The Egyptian Case,” in *Rethinking Nationalism in the Arab Middle East*, ed. Israel Gershoni and James Jankowski (New York: Columbia University Press, n.d.), 42–61, Manfred Sing, “The Decline of Islam and the Rise of Inḥiṭāt: The Discrete Charm of Language Games about Decadence in the 19th and 20th Centuries,” in

trayed its unfolding as a tragic usurpation and erasure of traditional society through the institutions of the nation-state.⁹ The project of the *nahḍa*, according to this view, was compromised from the start due to the overwhelming force of Western power exerted on the colonial world, both directly through occupation and indirectly through pressures of diplomacy and the market. On the other hand, researchers have challenged the exclusive one-way street image of Arab intellectuals paying homage to European modernity by diligently implementing it in their own societies. They have shown how dynamics of social and economic change were global in kind, while emphasizing that reform was negotiated between a variety of social groups, both in and outside Arab societies, and not just intellectuals and local elites.¹⁰

This reassessment of the role of Europe in “bringing” modernity to Arab lands links up with a critical reflection on the temporal strictures that have guided previous research on the *nahḍa* and its place in Arab-Islamic historiography generally. Whereas for a long time it was standard practice to assume 1798, the year of the Napoleonic expedition to Egypt, as the starting date for the “modern” era in Arab history, recently scholars have put the centrality of this juncture in perspective. The effect of this historiographical reorientation obviously leads to a devaluation of the role of the West as the harbinger of modernity. While it does not negate European influence, to locate the rise of “Arab modernity” inside the Arab world, or even to simply highlight the intellectual achievements of Islamic scholars in the centuries before the nineteenth century, does limit the overwhelming agency at-

Inhiṭāt – The Decline Paradigm: Its Influence and Persistence in the Writing of Arab Cultural History, ed. Syrinx von Hees, vol. 2, *Arabische Literatur Und Rhetorik – Elfthundert Bis Achtzehnhundert* (Würzburg: Ergon, 2017), 11–70, and Jeffrey Sacks, “Futures of Literature: Inhiṭāt, Adab, Naqd,” *Diacritics* 37, no. 4 (2007): 32–43, 45–55.

⁹ The work of Timothy Mitchell has been groundbreaking in this regard – see Timothy Mitchell, *Colonising Egypt* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1991). It should be noted, however, that this tragic sentiment was also present among earlier generations of Islamist intellectuals following in the footsteps of Rashīd Riḍā (1865–1935).

¹⁰ For a comprehensive list of such scholarship, see Sheehi, “Towards a Critical Theory of *al-Nahḍah*: Epistemology, Ideology and Capital,” 1–2 n. 1. Recent additions to this list could include: Tarek El-Ariss, *Trials of Arab Modernity: Literary Affects and the New Political* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2013); Peter Hill, *Utopia and Civilisation in the Arab Nahda* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020); Samah Selim, *Popular Fiction, Translation and the Nahda in Egypt* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019); Kathryn A. Schwartz, “The Political Economy of Private Printing in Cairo as Told from A Commissioning Deal Turned Sour, 1871,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 49, no. 1 (2017): 25–45; and Maurizio Isabella and Konstantina Zanou, eds., *Mediterranean Diasporas: Politics and Ideas in the Long 19th Century* (London: Bloomsbury, 2016).

tributed to the West in earlier research.¹¹ This relativizing of Europe's importance may be foregrounded – as in Ahmed Dallal's *Islam without Europe* – or it may be an effect of a historian's drive to highlight a previously neglected part of Arab-Islamic intellectual history – as in Khaled el-Rouayheb's *Islamic Intellectual History in the Seventeenth Century*. Regardless, what these authors share is an understandable dissatisfaction with the older paradigm of decline, which they see as too Eurocentric and caught up in justifications for European domination in the name of progress and the Arab nationalists' dismissal of several centuries of Ottoman rule on ideological grounds.¹²

Another way in which the historiography of the *nahḍa* has been critically assessed is by deconstructing what one might call the temporal direction and flow used to tell the story of the *nahḍa*. We will discuss this further later on, but the idea is that the paradigm of decadence (*inḥiṭāṭ*) that has marked Arab historiography since the nineteenth century is indebted to a progressive-linear temporal imagination, which reads history, in very broad strokes, as a story of development and human progress from which Arab society has been diverted. It is against the backdrop of this idea that civilizational progress is in some way necessary, that the period of decline has been portrayed as an aberration that Arabs should address – whether that necessity be articulated in terms of a moral imperative, an impera-

11 Albert Hourani's sensitive and clear exposition of Arab intellectual history *Arabic Thought in a Liberal Age: 1798–1939* is the seminal work in English that popularized the older paradigm (as is obvious from the title). Another work, one of great importance to the development of the humanities generally, that builds on this “orientalist” historiographical paradigm is of course Edward Said's *Orientalism*, in which the author traces a change in the relationship between orientalism and imperial power to the Napoleonic expedition – see Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978), 79–87, and Albert Hourani, *Arabic Thought in a Liberal Age: 1798–1939* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1962).

12 See Ahmad Dallal, *Islam without Europe: Traditions of Reform in Eighteenth-Century Islamic Thought* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2018), and Khaled El-Rouayheb, *Islamic Intellectual History in the Seventeenth Century: Scholarly Currents in the Ottoman Empire and the Maghreb* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015). What is interesting about this process of reorientation is how it demonstrates the inherent link between dates, events, and subjects. A change in the historiographical order draws out certain aspects of history and makes them salient at the expense of others. The narrative of Western dominance is not merely a historical fact due to material factors like military and economic power – although it is that too. Rather, such a story is abetted by a particular view of history that prioritizes Western intervention over indigenous dynamics in the Arab world. To what extent one or the other historiographical ordering is justified or not is a different question. What is important to note here is simply the *effect* that temporal ordering has, not just on the structure of the historical narrative, but on the very subject of history itself. As will be argued in the next chapter, a similar process is at work in the temporalization of contemporary Arab thought and its fixation on the June War of 1967 and its aftermath.

tive for national survival, or even an absolute law of human nature is another matter. It is also partly against this background that we may understand the growing interest in the Arab-Islamic intellectual heritage that started in the nineteenth century.¹³ As Yoav Di-Capua has shown in his study of Arab nineteenth-century historiography, the burgeoning liberal Arab intelligentsia began to conceptualize history, not as a mere collection of past events, but as a series of causally related events that describe a movement that projects into the future. By plotting this movement and showing how eras of rise and decline correlate with human effort and ingenuity, historians could unlock the idea that the Arab future was not a mere extension or repetition of the past, but a realm of possibility for Arab progress.¹⁴ Recent scholarship has emphasized this aspect as foundational to the *nahḍa* and to the literary, social, and political imaginary associated with it, as well as the contestations of this progressive imaginary.¹⁵

13 Of course, many factors were in play in creating a surge in interest in the classical literature in Arabic among the reading public in the nineteenth century. One can think here of the introduction of technological advances in printing that made it lucrative to provide editions for a general public, a growing middle-class with the education and means to buy and read books, easier transportation and communication making it easier to find and compile complete editions of works deemed lost, new methods of critical editing, and a genuine desire to break out of a stranglehold of relatively few texts that had dominated teaching of the Arab-Islamic traditions in the centuries preceding the nineteenth century. This last point is slightly contentious in light of the recent uncovering of works of creative scholarship in the centuries that, under the *inḥiṭāṭ* paradigm, were deemed of little scholarly interest – see the previous footnote. Notwithstanding, I am sympathetic to Ahmed El Shamsy's warning that taking a more nuanced view of this so-called "post-classical" era in Arab-Islamic intellectual history, ought not lead one to the other extreme of holding this era up as a time of unbridled creative genius. We should not dismiss out of hand the critique that nineteenth-century Arab reformers voiced against their predecessors, simply because it reminds us of "orientalist propaganda" – Ahmed El Shamsy, *Rediscovering the Islamic Classics: How Editors and Print Culture Transformed an Intellectual Tradition* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2020), 239.

14 Di-Capua, *Gatekeepers of the Arab Past: Historians and History Writing in Twentieth-Century Egypt*, 61.

15 Examples of studies, apart from Di-Capua's, that discuss the *nahḍa* discourse on progress are: Sheehi, "Towards a Critical Theory of al-Nahḍah: Epistemology, Ideology and Capital"; Stephen Sheehi, *Foundations of Modern Arab Identity* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2004); Vanessa Ogle, *The Global Transformation of Time: 1870–1950* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015); On Barak, *On Time: Technology and Temporality in Modern Egypt* (Berkeley/Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press, 2013); Omnia El Shakry, *The Great Laboratory: Subjects of Knowledge in Colonial and Postcolonial Egypt* (Redwood City, CA: Stanford University Press, 2007); Sing, "The Decline of Islam and the Rise of Inḥiṭāṭ: The Discrete Charm of Language Games about Decadence in the 19th and 20th Centuries"; Marwa Elshakry, *Reading Darwin in Arabic, 1860–1950* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2013); and Hill, *Utopia and Civilisation in the Arab Nahḍa*.

The recent surge in critical scholarship on the *nahḍa* has not yet been matched by a similar reassessment of contemporary Arab thought, either in light of the changing conception of the *nahḍa*, or in its own right. This is not to say that there has not been any effort to present alternative ways of reading contemporary Arab thought.¹⁶ However, these efforts have not yet been able to successfully challenge the established view of contemporary debates in the Arab world. Also, these studies have mostly been written from a historiographical point of view, rather than from a philosophical one. They have challenged the consensus by adding historical research that complicates the standard narrative. This is important work and more of it remains to be done. This study offers a slightly different approach. Although it too involves discussions of writers, their texts, and their historical contexts, it also enters into what one might deem a “philosophical mode of inquiry” by attempting an analysis of concepts. Looking closely at the meaning of concepts like authenticity, modernity, or progress and at the conception of time that underlies it, I will present not so much a view of how Arab intellectuals have been read, nor simply of how they may have understood their own work. Instead, we will look for new ways in which these authors *might* be read, by focusing on how a particular conception of progressive-linear time that is rooted in the *nahḍa* project of

16 In addition to an edited volume that presents new and critical research into the intellectual history of the *nahḍa*, Jens Hanssen and Max Weiss have published a follow-up that take a much needed, diverse and critical look at more recent developments in Arab thought – see Jens Hanssen and Max Weiss, eds., *Arabic Thought Beyond the Liberal Age: Towards an Intellectual History of the Nahda* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), and Jens Hanssen and Max Weiss, eds., *Arabic Thought against the Authoritarian Age: Towards an Intellectual History of the Present* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018). Other interesting additions that broaden the scope of modern and contemporary Arab thought and try to embed it in global discourses are: Anke von Kügelgen, “Konflikt, Harmonie oder Autonomie? Das Verhältnis von Wissenschaft, Philosophie und Religion,” in *Wissenschaft, Philosophie und Religion: Religionskritische Positionen um 1900*, ed. Anke von Kügelgen, Philosophie in der nahöstlichen Moderne (Berlin: Klaus Schwarz Verlag, 2017) 30–120; Robert D. Lee, *Overcoming Tradition and Modernity: The Search for Islamic Authenticity* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1997); Geert Hendrich, *Islam und Aufklärung: Der Modernediskurs in der arabischen Philosophie* (Darmstadt: WBG (Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft), 2004); Carool Kersten, *Cosmopolitans and Heretics: New Muslim Intellectuals and the Study of Islam* (New York: Columbia/Hurst, 2011); and Carool Kersten, *Contemporary Thought in the Muslim World: Trends, Themes and Issues* (London/New York: Routledge, 2019). Another strand of new research into contemporary Arab thought that presents an alternative point of view are the recent studies of the Arab Left: Sune Haugbolle, “The New Arab Left and 1967,” *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 44, no. 4 (2017): 497–512; Michaëlle Browers, “Beginnings, Continuities and Revivals: An Inventory of the New Arab Left and an Ongoing Arab Left Tradition,” *Middle East Critique*, January 22, 2021, 1–15; Fadi Bardawil, *Revolution and Disenchantment: Arab Marxism and the Bonds of Emancipation* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2020); and Sune Haugbolle and Manfred Sing, “New Approaches to Arab Left Histories,” *The Arab Studies Journal* 24, no. 1 (2016): 90–97.

wholesale societal reform underlies the way in which these authors tend to be understood. Building on this analysis, we will see how, by drawing on alternative conceptions of time, we may approach their work differently. Before we discuss what such an alternative framework for studying Arab thought from a temporal perspective might look like, however, we will need to acquaint ourselves with the way in which the story of contemporary Arab thought continues to be told from the perspective of the standard narrative.

1.2 1967 and the standard narrative

Generally speaking, Arab intellectuals and those who write about modern Arab intellectual history have adopted 1967 as the starting point of its “contemporary” (*mu‘āsir*) phase. This particular cut-off date is prompted by the seismic social, political, and economic shifts in the region following the war known in the West as the Six-Day War and referred to in the Arab world as the June War, “The Setback” (*al-Naksa*), or “The Defeat” (*al-Hazīma*). As many first-hand accounts testify, Arab intellectuals experienced this defeat as a great tragedy, as the end of an era.¹⁷ The Syrian Marxist intellectual Yāsīn al-Ḥāfiẓ mentions feeling “something like a quake mixed with shame.”¹⁸ The defeat ignited a sense of urgency and political engagement in the Syrian philosopher Ṣādiq Jalāl al-‘Aẓm, who, with his long and fiery essay *al-Naqd al-Dhātī ba’d al-Hazīma* (*Self-Criticism after Defeat*), became a harbinger of a fiercely critical strand in Arab thought. A similar sentiment could also be heard among more conservative commentators, like the Egyptian Muḥammad Jalāl Kishk, who called the defeat of 1967 more oppressive (*afḍaḥ*) than any other in living memory and took it as a call to “defeat the intellectual invasion”

17 Friederike Pannewick notes that, in addition to the authenticity–modernity dichotomy, the other “Leitmotiv” of the period after 1967 was the “crisis of intellectuals” – see Friederike Pannewick, *Das Wagnis Tradition: arabische Wege der Theatralität* (Wiesbaden: Reichert, 2000), 63. Intellectuals were, as a consequence, drawn into debates about the redefinition of Arab identity, a redefinition mostly through contrasting the self with the “Other” in a move that she characterizes as a “Culture of defense.” Interestingly, she adds that outside of Europe, movements for redefinition of the self sprang up during this time. This is a point to which we will return later.

18 Quoted in: Fadi Bardawil, “The Inward Turn and Its Vicissitudes: Culture, Society, and Politics in Post-1967 Arab Leftist Critiques,” in *Local Politics and Contemporary Transformations in the Arab World. Governance Beyond the Center*, ed. Malika Bouziane, Cilja Harders, and Anja Hoffmann (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 93.

(*nahzim al-ghazw al-fikrī*) that caused it.¹⁹ The watershed moment of 1967 was also captured in art: in Sa'd Allāh Wannūs's ground-breaking play *Haflat Samar min ajl Khamsat Huzayrān* (*An Evening of Entertainment for the Fifth of June*), in Yūsuf Shahīn's movie *'Awdat al-Ibn al-Ḍāl* (*The Return of the Prodigal Son*), in the poems of Maḥmūd Darwīsh, Aḥmad Fu'ād Nigm, and most famously in the work of Nizār Qabbānī, whose *Hawāmish 'ala Daftar al-Naksa* (*Marginal Notes on the Book of Defeat*) marked a political turn in his poetry.²⁰

The feeling of defeat is reflected in the few works available in the common languages of Western academia that offer us an overview of Arab thought in the final decades of the twentieth century. The war, in the words of Issa Boullata, proved to be the “acid test of Arab modernization.”²¹ It was a “turning point,”²² a “caesura (*Zāsūr*),”²³ a “seismic event”²⁴ that shattered the hopes of a young generation of Arab intellectuals who had been invigorated by the efforts of Egyptian president Gamal Abdel Nasser to seek an Arab national culture free from its colonial past and Western influence. It laid bare the weakness of the Arab states despite almost a century of modernization efforts. It was “interpreted as a symptom of a defective appropriation of *nahḍa* principles.”²⁵ In contrast to the promised cultural efflorescence of the *nahḍa*, the defeat of 1967 was seen as a major setback

19 Muḥammad Jalāl Kishk, *al-Naksa wa-l-Ghazw al-Fikrī* (Cairo, 1969), 12. The term “intellectual invasion” (*al-ghazw al-fikrī*) would become a staple of discourse that, following 1967, would try to link the defeat and deteriorating state of Arab and Islamic societies to Western intellectual oppression.

20 Nizār Qabbānī, *al-A'māl al-Siyāsiyya al-Kāmila li-Nizār Qabbānī*, vol. 6, *Hawāmish 'ala al-Hawāmish*, 2nd ed., (Beirut: Manshūrāt Nizār Qabbānī, 1991), 471–97; Sa'd Allāh Wannūs, *Haflat Samar min ajl Khamsat Huzayrān* (Dār al-Adāb, 1968); Yūsuf Shahīn (Youssef Chahine), *'Awdat al-Ibn al-Ḍāl* [Return of the Prodigal Son], directed by Yūsuf Shahīn (Misr International Films, 1976), film, 2 hrs. 4 mins. <https://mubi.com/en/nl/films/the-return-of-the-prodigal-son>. A less commented on aspect of the turn that the Arab-Israeli conflict took in 1967 is the effect it had on Arab intellectuals living and working outside the Arab world. The dismissive portrayal of the Arab as backward and the pro-Israeli bias in Western societies are recalled as important moments in the development of pivotal figures in critical theory, like Edward Said and Talal Asad – Talal Asad and David Scott, “Appendix: The Trouble of Thinking: An Interview with Talal Asad,” in *Powers of the Secular Modern: Talal Asad and His Interlocutors*, ed. David Scott and Charles Hirschkind (Redwood City, CA: Stanford University Press, 2006), 253, and Edward Said, *Out of Place: A Memoir* (New York: Vintage Books, 1999), 289. One scholar who has recently raised this point is Fadi Bardawil – see Bardawil, *Revolution and Disenchantment: Arab Marxism and the Bonds of Emancipation*, 85.

21 Boullata, *Trends and Issues in Contemporary Arab Thought*, 1.

22 Kassab, *Contemporary Arab Thought: Cultural Critique in Comparative Perspective*, 2.

23 Hendrich, *Islam und Aufklärung: Der Modernediskurs in der arabischen Philosophie*, 155.

24 Abu-Rabi', *Contemporary Arab Thought: Studies in Post-1967 Arab Intellectual History*, x.

25 Zeina Halabi, *The Unmaking of The Arab Intellectual* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2018), 38.

(*naksa*) that capped a hopeful (if slightly naive) age of renaissance or presented by those more pessimistically inclined as an outright defeat (*hazīma*).²⁶

In explaining why this defeat was important for the development of Arab thought, two important consequences of this defeat are pointed to. First, it destroyed the aura of success and inevitability that had, until then, surrounded socialist and nationalist ideologies. The fact that a tiny country (with Western backing) had been able to resist Arab numerical superiority and destroy their armies in less than a week impressed upon Arabs the fact that their societies were lagging behind. This pointed to a more structural failure of the *nahḍa* project. The Syrian philosopher Ṣādiq Jalāl al-ʿAzm pithily expressed this sentiment, chastising his generation for falling “victim to the erroneous idea that history had already decided all the issues raised by the *Nahḍa* in favor of progress, genuine modernization, modern science, secularism, socialism, and national liberation.”²⁷ These foundations of modern society had been introduced, but they had not been allowed to take root. In the eyes of people like al-ʿAzm, something was preventing their implementation, something deep, embedded in the essential fabric of Arab culture. What could this be? This question motivated a number of intellectuals to engage in a program of soul-searching. Emblematic of this “radicalization of critique”²⁸ was al-ʿAzm’s book *Self-Criticism After Defeat*.²⁹ Published in 1969, it addresses the anti-modern characteristics of the Arab self: its subservience to authority, its lack of a work ethic and of a sense of responsibility, its lack of initiative and creativity. Before the *nahḍa* and the Enlightenment values for which it stands could truly be implemented, Arab society would need to purge itself of these structural errors in its mindset.

²⁶ It should be noted that both terms, *naksa* and *hazīma*, carry distinctly military connotations. The disagreement over whether to refer to the Six-Day War as either a setback (*naksa*) or a defeat (*hazīma*) can be traced back to the war’s immediate aftermath. Nasser, in his famous resignation speech (*bayān al-tanaḥī*) on 9 June 1967 introduced the term *naksa* as a common term to refer to the events of June of that year. What is less well known is that Nasser was initially against using this term, as he did not want to use a euphemism for what was clearly a great defeat – “an alleviation of what has happened” (*takhfīf min illi ḥaṣal*). It was his speech writer and chief ideologue of the Nasserist, Pan-Arab project, Muḥammad Ḥasanayn Haykal, who convinced him to prefer the term *naksa* over *hazīma* – see ʿImād ʿAbd al-Laṭīf, “Bayān al-Tanaḥī” wa-Dhākirat al-Ḥazīma: Madkhal Balāghī li-Taḥlīl al-Khitāb al-Siyāsī,” *Alif* 30 (2010): 151–54.

²⁷ Sadik al-Azm and Ghada Talhami (interviewer), “An Interview with Sadik al-Azm,” *Arab Studies Quarterly* 19, no. 3 (1997): 114–15.

²⁸ Kassab, *Contemporary Arab Thought: Cultural Critique in Comparative Perspective*, 2.

²⁹ An English translation of the original Arabic is available: Sadik al-Azm, *Self-Criticism After the Defeat*, trans. George Stergios (London: Saqi, 2012).

A second and related consequence of the 1967 defeat was the rising tide of the Islamic Awakening (*al-Ṣaḥwa al-Islāmiyya*), a pious movement that, through a renewal of religious vigor, aimed to trigger a new dawn for the Arab world after having slumbered during centuries of Ottoman rule and later European colonization. As many have pointed out, the dethroning of the Arab nationalist ideology that had held sway in the Arab world since the 1950s opened up space for religious political groups that had expanded in the shadow of Nasserism.³⁰ Abetted by the growing economic clout of the oil-producing Gulf monarchies, which were anxious to stave off the threat of nationalist-socialist revolutionary ideology, Islamism was allowed to flourish in the open. The defeat of 1967 left the Islamists the obvious alternative.

This development added urgency to the task of the secular intellectual. Not only did the rise of Islamism strengthen their conviction that Arab society, for all its superficial modernizations, remained stuck in a backward mindset, but it also put them on the defensive in an ideological battle for the future of Arab society. As they saw it, the Islamist camp wanted to undo the entire *nahḍa* project and thrust Arab society back to the pre-modern age. Again, al-ʿAzm is a representative spokesman for this view when he says that “today we find ourselves defending the accomplishments of *al-Nahḍa* against Salafi and other obscurantist attacks.”³¹

In the established view of contemporary Arab thought, these combined consequences of the *hazīma/naksa* explain the turn that Arab intellectual discourse took in the wake of 1967. During the 1970s and 1980s, there is a growing interest in the study of the Arab-Islamic heritage, or *turāth*, an interest, moreover, that is marked by the use of sophisticated theoretical frameworks. To be sure, the question of what the proper place and role of the shared past or tradition ought to be was already debated in the nineteenth century. In this sense the problem of *turāth* can be said to have its roots in the *nahḍa* itself. However, given the changed circumstances of the late twentieth century, it is fair to say that the discussions on Arab-Islamic heritage took a different turn, or to use a term coined by David Scott and used productively by Jens Hanssen and Max Weiss in their analysis of this period, the ques-

³⁰ Few studies present 1967 as the sole reason for the rise of Islamism in the 1970s, but it is a common theme in studies of the Islamic Awakening – for example, Yvonne Haddad, “Islamists and the ‘Problem of Israel’: The 1967 Awakening,” *Middle East Journal* 46, no. 2 (1992): 267; Asher Susser, “Fifty Years since the Six-Day War: How the Middle East Has Changed,” *The RUSI Journal* 162, no. 3 (2017): 41, and Dimitrios Machairas, “The Strategic and Political Consequences of the June 1967 War,” *Cogent Social Sciences* 3, no. 1 (2017): 5. To be clear, the point here is not to disprove all claims about there being a link between the Six-Day War and the rise of Islamism. Rather, it is to set the stage for how this aspect of the historical narrative influenced our understanding of Arab thought.

³¹ al-ʿAzm, “An Interview with Sadik al-Azm,” 115.

tion of *turāth* is framed within a different “problem-space.”³² The optimism of earlier generations of reformers – the liberal and nationalist currents described by Albert Hourani as well as the socialist regimes of the Bandung era – had given way to a mood of depression and a sense of crisis. The question of *turāth* turned into a kind of autopsy of Arab culture while at the same time “the intellectual problem-space of “Islam and modernity?” or “Islam versus modernity?” that had been suppressed – though by no means entirely absent – since the Nahda was re-

32 Scott defines the problem-space as follows:

A problem-space, in other words, is an ensemble of questions and answers around which a horizon of identifiable stakes (conceptual as well as ideological-political stakes) hangs. That is to say, what defines this discursive context are not only the particular problems that get posed as problems as such (the problem of “race,” say), but the particular questions that seem worth asking and the kinds of answers that seem worth having. Notice, then, that a problem-space is very much a context of dispute, a context of rival views, a context, if you like, of knowledge and power. But from within the terms of any given problem-space what is in dispute, what the argument is effectively about, is not itself being argued over. Notice also that a problem-space necessarily has a temporal dimension or, rather, is a fundamentally temporal concept. Problem-spaces alter historically because problems are not timeless and do not have everlasting shapes. In new historical conditions old questions may lose their salience, their bite, and so lead the range of old answers that once attached to them to appear lifeless, quaint, not so much wrong as irrelevant. (David Scott, *Conscripts of Modernity: The Tragedy of Colonial Enlightenment* [Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004], 4)

Some aspects of this definition should perhaps be highlighted to show why, following Hanssen and Weiss, the concept of a “problem-space” can help us to understand the development of Arab thought. Were we to focus merely on the topic, or the problem (of *turāth*) in general, it might be hard to see much development in Arab thought, which has continued since the nineteenth century to revolve around questions of tradition and modernity, of East and West, of religion and secularism, in various guises. The problem-space allows for a more fine-grained analysis, because it focuses not on the general problem, but on the ways in which various participants in a debate articulate particular questions with regard to this problem. It also allows us to connect changes in the way in which they thus approach the problem with changes in society and the context in which they live, showing how some questions become more salient as others become outdated. Thus, a defeat or victory in war, an economic collapse or a boom, a natural disaster, technological or intellectual developments, all may affect in different ways how people position themselves vis-à-vis a particular topic, even while the general problem ostensibly remains the same. This ultimately allows us to countenance the “problem-space” of *turāth* as both similar to what came before (in terms of the topic), and different (in terms of what is done with this topic, that is, how it is problematized and which questions are asked).

vived.”³³ It is within this context that we see writers like al-‘Aẓm, but also Abdallah Laroui, Muḥammad ‘Ābid al-Jābirī, Adonis, Zakī Najīb Maḥmūd, Ḥasan Ḥanafī, Naṣr Ḥāmid Abū Zayd and many others trying to get to the root of what had gone wrong with the *nahḍa* project. After all, if modernization was held back by a structurally anti-modern mindset prevalent among Arabs, then the only way to analyze and eventually overcome this deficiency would be to analyze its sources – that is, the intellectual sources that made up *turāth* and had shaped the shared Arab-Islamic consciousness.³⁴

33 Hanssen and Weiss, *Arabic Thought against the Authoritarian Age*, 14. Here it should be mentioned that 1967 did not signal the birth of self-critique among Arab intellectuals. Critical reflection on the achievements of the *nahḍa* had already been current, particularly in the 1950s following “al-Nakba,” or “The Catastrophe,” which was the term used to refer to the creation of the State of Israel and the displacement of a large part of the Palestinian people during the 1948 Palestine War. An interesting example of this critique is found in the works of Quṣṭanṭīn Zurayq. His emphasis on achieving an abstract ideal of reason through a critical reading of history in important ways prefigures the kind of discourse on *turāth* that would become ubiquitous from the 1970s onwards. What this earlier period arguably lacks however, is the clear sense of defeat and loss of hope that results in a much more fierce and deeper style of critique following the war of 1967. For more on Zurayq, see: Quṣṭanṭīn Zurayq and Ibrahim M. Oweiss, eds., *Arab Civilization: Challenges and Responses: Studies in Honor of Constantine K. Zurayk* (Albany, N.Y: State University of New York Press, 1988); Elizabeth Suzanne Kassab, “An Arab Neo-Kantian Philosophy of Culture: Constantine Zurayk on Culture, Reason, and Ethics,” *Philosophy East and West* 49, no. 4 (1999): 494–512; and Kassab, *Contemporary Arab Thought: Cultural Critique in Comparative Perspective*, 65–74.

34 To give a sense of how *turāth* was defined among this more recent generation of intellectuals we may look to some of these principal voices in the *turāth* discourse. A common way to speak about *turāth* is to stick closely to the lexical meaning of *turāth* as relating to whatever is inherited from the past. This leaves open the question, however, which part of what is inherited counts as “heritage.” Adonis, for example, takes a rather circumscribed view of *turāth*, equating it with only the earliest sources of the Arab-Islamic tradition pre-Islamic poetry, the Qur’an and the *hadith* – see Adūnīs, *Hā-Anta, Ayyuhā al-Waqt: Sira Shi’riyya-Thaqāfiyya* (Beirut: Dār al-Ādāb, 1993), 57. By contrast, Ḥasan Ḥanafī’s conception of *turāth* is much broader, encompassing not only all the written texts of the Arab-Islamic tradition, but also the experience of *turāth* in light of current events – see Ḥasan Ḥanafī, *al-Turāth wa-l-Tajdīd* (Cairo: al-Markaz al-‘Arabī li-l-Baḥṭh wa-l-Naṣhr 1980), 13–15. This more dynamic conception is also displayed in al-Jābirī’s conception of *turāth*. He maintains that the term “heritage” (or at least the French cognates “héritage” or “patrimoine”) does not cover the meaning of *turāth* as it is used today. This is because the term has developed to refer, not just to what is inherited from the past, but to that which is shared by all Arabs, namely “faith and sharia, language and literature, reason and mindset, longing and ambitions. In other words, it is at the same time: The epistemic, the ideological and their rational foundations and their sentimental inner life in Arab-Islamic culture” – see Muḥammad ‘Ābid al-Jābirī, *al-Turāth wa-l-Ḥadātha* (Beirut: Markaz Dirāsāt al-Waḥda al-‘Arabiyya, 1991), 23–24. For an even more extensively argued division of the various aspects and meanings of *turāth*, see Fahmī Jad’ān, *Nazariyyāt al-Turāth wa-Dirāsāt ‘Arabiyya wa-Islāmiyya Ukhra* (Amman: Dar al-Shurūq, 1985). Jad’ān discerns three dimensions in

At the same time, according to the standard narrative, *turāth* also began to take center stage due to the principal role that it played in Islamist ideology. One of the attractions of this ideological trend was its clear-cut view of identity. It presented Islam as a holistic vision for the private and the public life of its practitioners and promoted itself as the guardian of this authentic way of life. By appealing to a collectivist sense of authenticity it gave many a sense of belonging, self-respect, and dignity. Armando Salvatore describes the link between *turāth*, authenticity (*aṣāla*), and the *ṣaḥwa* straightforwardly, arguing that “the feeling of *naksa* [...] generated a search for *aṣāla* “authenticity” whose most visible political-intellectual outcome has been the discourse of *al-ṣaḥwa al-islāmiyya*.”³⁵ Since Islamist ideology is premised on the retrieval of an authentic Islamic heritage as the sole route to future greatness, it displayed a keen interest in *turāth*. More precisely, Islamists presented themselves as guardians of this *turāth* and its defenders against would-be modernizers whose aim it is to replace *turāth* with secular Western ideas. The Islamist attempt to monopolize *turāth* made its study of vital importance to the more secular-minded intellectuals. They now needed to study their heritage, not only to analyze why their societies refused to become modern, but also to undermine the Islamist narrative and thwart its appropriation of *turāth*.

This, in broad strokes, is what I will refer to as the standard narrative. Summarizing it briefly, it consists of the following aspects:

- Contemporary Arab thought began as a reaction to the defeat of 1967.
- The main problematic revolved around how to balance authenticity (sticking to one’s cultural roots) versus modernity (the need to progress and adopt modern, Western ideas, science, and institutions).
- The main topic for this debate was *turāth*, or Arab-Islamic cultural and intellectual heritage.

The standard narrative will feature heavily in this study. Indeed, our reading of Zakī Najīb Maḥmūd, the first of our three Arab interlocutors, will serve largely as an illustration of how it functions.³⁶ The goal, however, is not to entrench its

the discourse of *turāth* – p. 14: A religious dimension, a nationalist dimension, and a humanist one. The first two clothe *turāth* in a simple garb of sanctity, either by identifying it with Islam or with the accomplishments of Arab history, while the humanistic dimension sees *turāth* as the Arab contribution to the universal project of human civilization.

³⁵ Armando Salvatore, “The Rational Authentication of Turāth in Contemporary Arab Thought: Muḥammad al-Jābirī and Ḥasan Ḥanafī,” *The Muslim World* 85, no. 3–4 (1995): 194.

³⁶ Admittedly, Maḥmūd started to develop his ideas about *turāth* before 1967, so on this point he is not a “perfect” illustration of the standard narrative. As will be discussed in more detail further on, this can be explained by the fact that the structure of the post-1967 *turāth* discourse was al-

use, but to challenge it and look for alternatives. The narrative presents a clear and helpful way of categorizing Arab thought. But such clarity and neatness often come at a price. This narrative is liable to paper over divisions and differences between thinkers that do not fit easily in a binary paradigm of authenticity and modernity. Putting it more strongly, the dominant perspective on Arab thought has made it difficult for Arab thinkers to articulate and communicate ideas that do not square with this neat categorization. More than being a perspective among others, the standard narrative has become *paradigmatic*; it structures the way people speak about Arab thought and about modern Arab culture more generally. Our goal will be to understand what underlies this paradigm; what are its epistemological underpinnings. We will then use this understanding to explore different ways of appreciating Arab thought, both as a local product of the Arab context and as a tradition embedded in a global modern intellectual discourse.

1.3 The standard narrative in the literature on Arab thought

In the next chapter, we will look in more detail at the extent to which the standard narrative dominates contemporary Arab thought, and contrast its ubiquity with a few critical voices who gesture at alternative paths. Before we get there, however, we need to be more acquainted with the structure of the narrative, its basic dialectic that pits traditionalism against modernity. We will focus for the moment on Western commentaries of the *turāth* debate, but it should be borne in mind that this narrative is just as current in Arab intellectual circles. Western surveyors of Arab thought have on the whole based their descriptions on a prevalent understanding of contemporary Arab thought among Arab intellectuals themselves.

A typical illustration of this narrative is found in Issa Boullata's seminal book on contemporary Arab thought. In it he distinguishes three intellectual orientations: cultural revolutionaries, gradual reformers, and religious purists. The first aim to "transform Arab society and inculcate new ideas and values in it."³⁷ The second group consists of "Arab intellectuals who consider traditional Arab culture to be viable in modern times if only it is interpreted and understood better, and if certain of its elements are developed in the light of modern needs and the experience of modern nations."³⁸ Lastly, the third group consists "of Arab intellectuals

ready in place before the defeat. Rather than having caused a shift in Arab thought, the Six-Day War may be more correctly understood as a convenient watershed moment and starting point in formulating the standard narrative.

37 Boullata, *Trends and Issues in Contemporary Arab Thought*, 3.

38 Boullata, *Trends and Issues in Contemporary Arab Thought*, 3–4.

who are committed to the religious aspect of Arab culture.”³⁹ These thinkers focus their attention on the “Islamic elements in Arab culture ... advocate the elimination from Arab society of all external cultural influences, mainly Western ones, and they call for a return to the original pristine essence of Islam.”⁴⁰ In short, Boullata describes the problematic of authenticity and modernity in terms of an axis with authenticity on one side and modernity on the other. Arab intellectuals are distinguished according to where they position themselves on this axis.

A more recent and very comprehensive survey of contemporary Arab thought, written by Elizabeth Kassab, portrays the main oppositions among Arab intellectuals along similar lines. She too views the Arab intellectual as stuck between the pressure to “defend and restore a positive sense of self” on the one hand and “to catch up with the West economically, politically, socially, and culturally” on the other. Confronted with this impossible choice and facing the pressure of a society eager for change, she argues that many postcolonial intellectuals felt the need to offer fast-and-easy solutions, thereby foregoing the “autonomous intellectual agency ... necessary for a sense of self.”⁴¹ Kassab’s overt aim is to point to the exceptions to this rule, to describe the Arab intellectuals who did not give in to a “deep yearning for a holistic vision that could offer an indigenous, non-alienating worldview,” but rather engaged in a “radicalization of critique” and whose ideas have unfortunately been overshadowed by the radical writings characteristic of “the search for totalizing doctrines, especially religious doctrines.”⁴²

Although not quite presented in the same terms, the structure of Kassab’s perspective on contemporary Arab thought is by and large in line with Boullata’s. She describes a problematic of finding the just mean between authenticity and modernity, here described in terms of an opposition between defending “a sense of self” and “catching up,” which leads one camp to go for “totalizing doctrines” and another to opt for “radicalization of critique.” The first of these clearly follows the authenticity–modernity paradigm. The second does as well, but in more covert terms. This is seen more clearly if we look at whom she refers to as proposing these “totalizing doctrines.” Although this label does not mention religion *per se*, Kassab does clarify that she is talking about “especially religious doctrines” or “especially Islamist ones.” In effect, most of the descriptions of the Arab intellectuals that Kassab categorizes as “critical” focus on how they try to undercut the claims

39 Boullata, *Trends and Issues in Contemporary Arab Thought*, 4.

40 Had he written his book twenty years later, Boullata would probably have relied on the general reading public’s current familiarity with the terms “Salafism” and “Islamism” to clarify which group of thinkers he has in mind here.

41 Kassab, *Contemporary Arab Thought: Cultural Critique in Comparative Perspective*, 8.

42 Kassab, *Contemporary Arab Thought: Cultural Critique in Comparative Perspective*, 2.

of Islamists. Mention of totalitarian doctrines of the non-religious kind is almost absent. What this leaves us with is, essentially, a familiar dyadic division between a religiously minded movement of those seeking authenticity and a more secular strand of thinkers who try to undermine their claims through (philosophical) critique – the ideal of rational critique, of course, is standardly related to secularism as well as to the rise of the West in post-Enlightenment European thought.⁴³

This overlap between discourse on authenticity and religion is strengthened by the original definition of contemporary Arab thought. The year 1967 is taken as a turning point because it signifies the end of the nationalist era and heralds the Islamic Awakening of the 1970s and 1980s. The interest in heritage is explained as a reflection of this development, as both Islamists and those wanting to argue against them turn to the study of *turāth*. This particular way of justifying the taking of 1967 as a starting point of a new era in Arab thought therefore automatically forefronts religious–secular opposition. We see this tendency reflected in a number of studies. One early example is Fouad Ajami's book *The Arab Predicament: Arab Political Thought and Practice Since 1967*. The author follows Boullata in describing Arab thought in terms of two poles representing authenticity and modernity. Ajami, however, explicitly equates the one side with religion and the other with secularism. He further distinguishes between two branches on each side of this divide, one radical and the other conservative. Thus, on the side of modernity he puts a group of secular intellectuals with a "radical sensibility"⁴⁴ together with dejected secularists, resigned to the fact that any attempt at modernization of Arab society is doomed to failure, due to the weight of tradition.⁴⁵ On the side of authenticity we find an equally radical group of religious fanatics, as well as a group of conservative fundamentalists who advocate a cautious interpretation of heritage so as to keep the social order in place.⁴⁶ Another instance of this overtly religious version of the standard narrative is Armando Salvatore's discussion of the *turāth* debate. Salvatore describes *turāth* discourse as a central aspect of the "Islamic Awakening." The view of *aṣāla* that he attributes to Islamists he describes as highly essentialist and reified.⁴⁷ Against this he posits a group of critical thinkers, among

⁴³ For a deeper and critical analysis of the link between secularism and critique, see Talal Asad et al., *Is Critique Secular?* (Berkeley, CA: The Townsend Center for the Humanities, 2009).

⁴⁴ Fouad Ajami, *The Arab Predicament: Arab Political Thought and Practice Since 1967* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 32.

⁴⁵ Ajami, *The Arab Predicament: Arab Political Thought and Practice Since 1967*, 48–59.

⁴⁶ Ajami, *The Arab Predicament: Arab Political Thought and Practice Since 1967*, 74–87.

⁴⁷ Salvatore, "The Rational Authentication of *Turāth* in Contemporary Arab Thought: Muḥammad al-Jābirī and Ḥasan Ḥanafī," 194.

them Muḥammad ‘Ābid al-Jābirī and Ḥasan Ḥanafī, who counter this appropriation of *turāth* by de-reifying and de-essentializing it, opening Islam up for adaption to the modern way of life. Nelly Lahoud, in her book on political thought in Islam, uses a comparable distinction between Islamists, apologists, and intellectuals.⁴⁸ She concurs with Salvatore that the “intellectuals,” notwithstanding their many differences, are united in wanting to undermine the “rigid understanding of the *turāth*” propounded by the opposing groups, especially the firebrand Islamists.⁴⁹

The aforementioned perspectives on Arab thought share a certain progressive liberal outlook. Their view is that of Arab society gripped by a struggle between secular-liberal reformers and religious reactionaries. The picture is a familiar one of liberal modernity fending off the attempts of the undemocratic, unenlightened forces who want to roll back modernity. This opposition is further strengthened by overlaying it with the division between critique and submissive conformity to tradition – a common trope of secular discourse since the Enlightenment. A somewhat different take on contemporary Arab thought is formulated by those who subscribe to a more leftist orientation, or at least by those who also discuss the Arab Left or Arab Marxists as a separate faction. One early example is Hani Faris, whose short introduction to the *turāth* debate is one of the first published in English. He distinguishes not only between the Salafiyya, whom he refers to as “Muslim modernists,”⁵⁰ and Arab liberals, but also the Arab Left. All three,

⁴⁸ Lahoud in turn admits having taken over this categorization from Ghassan Finianos. See: Nelly Lahoud, *Political Thought in Islam* (London/New York: RoutledgeCurzon, 2005), 2.

⁴⁹ Lahoud, *Political Thought in Islam*, 33.

⁵⁰ This identification of “Salafism” with “modernism” may appear incongruous, given that the current popular image of a Salafi is that of a Muslim fundamentalist, who tries to stick as close as possible to the customs, ideas, and values that he associates with the first generations of Muslims – the pious predecessors (*al-salaf al-ṣāliḥ*) from whom the Salafi movement derives its name. It should be noted, however, that the earliest stirrings of the Salafi movement have been associated not so much with this now ubiquitous understanding of Salafism, but rather with the reform (*iṣlāḥ*) movement of the late nineteenth century whose early proponents were Jamāl al-Dīn al-Afghānī (1839–1897), Muḥammad ‘Abduḥ (1849–1905), and, one generation later, Rashīd Riḍā (1865–1935). Rather than present Salafism as a return to the ways of the very first generations of Muslims, these reformers had a more catholic conception of what the term “predecessors” (*salaf*) ought to refer to, with ‘Abduḥ, for example, taking it to refer to the great thinkers of the Islamic intellectual tradition up until Ibn Taymiyya (1263–1328). The current image of Salafism as a movement of extremely pious and traditionalist followers of the Ḥanbalī *madhhab*, only took off two generations later, with students of Rashīd Riḍā, such as Muḥammad Bahjat al-Biṭār (1894–1976) and Muḥammad Ḥamid al-Fiḍī (1892–1959) – see Henri Lauzière, *The Making of Salafism: Islamic Reform in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016), chap. 2. To what extent these two strands are linked, and whether it is therefore justified to apply the Salafi label to each, has recently been the subject of a debate between Henri Lauzière and

Frank Griffel. This academic squabble was ignited by Griffel's critical appraisal of an article by Lauzière in which Salafism is considered from the perspective of conceptual history – see Henri Lauzière, “The Construction of Salafiyya: Reconsidering Salafism from the Perspective of Conceptual History,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 42, no. 3 (2010): 369–89, and Frank Griffel, “What Do We Mean By ‘Salafi’? Connecting Muḥammad ‘Abduh with Egypt’s Nūr Party in Islam’s Contemporary Intellectual History,” *Die Welt des Islams* 55, no. 2 (2015): 186–220. According to Griffel, Lauzière was mistaken in only applying the term “Salafi” to the later incarnation of Salafism, whose members self-identified with it. He sees a significant connection between the latter and the reform movement through their common roots in the *lā-madhhabīyya* (‘non-schoolists’), which was a movement tracing its origins to Muḥammad ash-Shawkānī (d. 1834), a Yemeni scholar who proposed a break with the practice of following the opinions of a particular school of law (*madhhab*) in adjudicating cases – a practice known as *taqlīd* – as well as critiquing the establishment consensus of Ash‘arite theology and the dominant role of Sufism in the Islamic tradition at the time. The *lā-madhhabīyya* later combined with the Wahhabi ideology as well as a growing appreciation for the Hanbali school, in particular following the rediscovery of the writings of Ibn Taymiyya in the late nineteenth century. While Griffel admits that al-Afghānī or ‘Abduh were not as radical in rejecting *madhhab* jurisprudence as some others, he argues that their shared intellectual pedigree is obvious and they should therefore, as he summarized in a later rejoinder, “be counted within the broader Salafi movement of the 19th and 20th centuries” – see Frank Griffel, “Rejoinder: What Is the Task of the Intellectual (Contemporary) Historian? – A Response to Henri Lauzière’s ‘Reply,’” *Die Welt des Islams* 56, no. 2 (2016): 250. Lauzière, in his reply to Griffel, has rejected this categorization, arguing that, as he had shown in the earlier article to which Griffel had written his reply, the term *salafiyya* was never “used as an abstract noun (*maṣḍar ṣinā’ī*) meaning “Salafism” prior to the 1920s” – Henri Lauzière, “Rejoinder: What We Mean Versus What They Meant by ‘Salafi’: A Reply to Frank Griffel,” *Die Welt des Islams* 56, no. 1 (2016): 90. At root, then, this debate is not simply about Salafism, but about a more general question of historiographical practice. The question at stake is who has the ultimate authority in categorizing a group of people under a particular label – that is, the people in question or the historian studying their relations – and what provides sufficient grounds for doing so. For Lauzière, self-identification is paramount, whereas for Griffel, this is a task for the historian, who may judge certain thinkers, artists, politicians, activists etc. to belong together on the basis of intellectual genealogical relations that they themselves do not necessarily recognize. Lauzière is dismissive of Griffel’s argument by genealogy, seeing it as “unnecessarily confusing” and a reflection of the academic’s preconceptions, rather than of historical fact. Griffel, meanwhile, has faulted Lauzière for not properly understanding the task of the intellectual historian, which is to come up with terms that help one analyze changes, continuities, and evolution in the history of ideas. As he argues, if we were to adopt Lauzière’s way of defining terms only through the self-identification with the term by those whom it intends to describe, then a whole host of useful historical categories may well be assigned to the dustbin – including, but not limited to, the pre-Socratics, socialists, Neo-Platonists, and early Enlightenment thinkers. While I am personally sympathetic to Griffel’s argument as being more sensible from a historiographical standpoint, one can also see why Lauzière would push back against this view, since it hardly influences the practice of Salafism as it manifests currently and is thus of little value to researchers interested merely in the contemporary study of Salafism. The way to challenge this more pragmatic

he argues, have come to the realization that the crisis in the Arab world is the result of a clash between Western modernity and authentic Arab values, and they agree that the only way to reconcile the two is by understanding one's heritage.⁵¹ A more substantial Marxist perspective on contemporary Arab thought is offered by Ibrahim Abu-Rabi' in his sizeable monograph *Contemporary Arab thought: Studies in Post-1967 Arab Intellectual History*. As is clear from the title, Abu-Rabi' follows custom in taking 1967 as his starting point. His inflammatory exposition of contemporary Arab thought, however, adds some revolutionary spice to Boullata's more subdued, liberal narrative. Abu Rabi' explicitly problematizes and politicizes the status of Western modernity. He views the causes of the turn to authenticity in economic terms, emphasizing the "gradual proliferation in the Arab world of the capitalist mode of production" that caused the "derailment of traditional Muslim thought."⁵² Inauthenticity is caused by this derailment, not because it necessitated reform, but because it led to Arab dependence on the West. Abu Rabi' explicitly opposes authenticity, not to modernity, but to dependence.⁵³

This particular way of framing authenticity has repercussions for his depiction of contemporary Arab thought. In response to the derailment, Abu Rabi' explains, there arose four ideological currents: Salafist, nationalist, liberal, and Marxist/Leninist.⁵⁴ These can in turn be divided into "two main paradigms contending for authority in the Arab world."⁵⁵ The first is represented by the liberal ideology of capitalism and globalization, which he reads as "Americanization," whereas the second is represented by "Arab and Muslim values." Though the latter is practically synonymous with Salafist ideology, this is not necessarily the case. It is only due to the fact that the other two possible authentically Arab ideologies, Marxism and nationalism, failed to provide an adequate alternative to liberalism that Salafism rose to prominence. "Arab Marxism did not develop a unique Arab philosophical or intellectual expression"⁵⁶ necessary to develop popular consciousness "along Marxist/socialist lines,"⁵⁷ whereas nationalism has been defeated by the combined forces of American-Israeli recolonization, lack of social, economic, and political de-

approach would be to show not just how the conceptual lineages run, but also how intellectual genealogy, wittingly or unwittingly, influences current Salafi thought and practice.

51 Hany Faris, "Heritage and Ideologies in Contemporary Arab Thought," *Journal of Asian and African Studies* 21, no. 1–2 (1986): 100.

52 Abu-Rabi', *Contemporary Arab Thought: Studies in Post-1967 Arab Intellectual History*, 7.

53 Abu-Rabi', *Contemporary Arab Thought: Studies in Post-1967 Arab Intellectual History*, 13.

54 Abu-Rabi', *Contemporary Arab Thought: Studies in Post-1967 Arab Intellectual History*, 64–65.

55 Abu-Rabi', *Contemporary Arab Thought: Studies in Post-1967 Arab Intellectual History*, 79.

56 Abu-Rabi', *Contemporary Arab Thought: Studies in Post-1967 Arab Intellectual History*, 82.

57 Abu-Rabi', *Contemporary Arab Thought: Studies in Post-1967 Arab Intellectual History*, 84.

velopment, and Egypt's bowing out of its role as the natural leader of the nationalist movement."⁵⁸

In Abu-Rabi's analysis thus arises a twofold division between the liberal on one side and the Salafist, socialist, and nationalist currents on the other. Liberalism is the only ideology that does not advocate radical change and instead adheres to a democratic system of gradual transition. It is inauthentic, according to Abu-Rabi', not so much because it tries to implement modern reforms, but because it is dependent on the West. The other trends, meanwhile, are each revolutionary in their own particular way. They strive for independence, that is, for their respective mode of being authentic in being independent. Needless to say, Abu-Rabi' favors the Marxist revolutionary cause over the other two as the most truly progressive and liberating.⁵⁹

What is interesting about this Marxist depiction of contemporary Arab thought is that, even though it paints the *turāth* debate with a different brush, Abu-Rabi's perception of it does not differ structurally from those of a more liberal bent. Instead of emphasizing the opposition between progress and backwardness or religiosity and secularism, Abu-Rabi' brings out the East–West binary that the liberal ideal of secular progress merely implies. While this makes for an interesting alternative perspective on contemporary Arab thought, it does not break with the kind of binary thinking that has dominated this discourse. It merely highlights one aspect of the binary division at the expense of another.

Finally, a recent addition to the discussion of Arab thought in Western academia is Ahmad Agbaria's *The Politics of Authenticity*. Although Agbaria follows precedent in taking 1967 as the turning point in Arab thought towards *turāth*, he also describes the subsequent search for authenticity as resulting from a broader phenomenon of disillusionment among intellectuals with the project of decolonization.⁶⁰ The need for authenticity is seen by him as a reaction to the revolutionary agenda of the 1950s and 1960s that called for a "radical rupture with earlier styles of being and a complete break with past traditions."⁶¹ This reaction, according to Agbaria, gave rise to a new type of Arab intellectual that he refers to as the

58 Abu-Rabi', *Contemporary Arab Thought: Studies in Post-1967 Arab Intellectual History*, 78–79.

59 A recent (and less intricate) defense of an imagined Marxist position vis-à-vis the current state of Arab thought can be found in: Jaafar Aksikas, *Arab Modernities: Islamism, Nationalism, and Liberalism in the Post-Colonial Arab World* (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2009).

60 An earlier important event in this regard is the 1965 coup that put Ahmad Ben Bella in power, thereby shattering the dreams of the Arab Left for a free socialist state in the Maghrib – see Ahmad Agbaria, *The Politics of Arab Authenticity: Challenges to Postcolonial Thought* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2022), 7.

61 Agbaria, 14.

“connected critic.” In contrast to the social critic, the connected critic does not borrow from Western frameworks, but looks to his own heritage for inspiration in taking on contemporary problems. Agbaria paints the post-1960 intellectual scene in the Arab world as a confrontation between these two types of critic, personified in his study by the aforementioned Muḥammad ‘Ābid al-Jābirī and the Syrian thinker Jūrj Ṭarābīshī. Interestingly, while not changing or undermining the main division of Arab thought, Agbaria’s analysis shifts the demarcation between what is usually considered the modernist party of reform and the traditionalists. Al-Jābirī is often portrayed as a progressive, liberal leftist taking a stand against the traditionalist appropriation of *turāth*. This uncompromising conservative position, which maintains authenticity by rejecting all (foreign inspired) innovation, is left out of the discussion, leaving Agbaria to focus solely on two figures, both of whom espouse radical reform. Between these two figures, the only difference appears to be that al-Jābirī aims to articulate his reform program without relying on Western frames of thought. Instead, he claims to uncover the authentic rationalist tradition of the western part of the Arab world, or Maghrib, which has long been marginalized by the more assertive intellectual voices of the eastern part, or Mashriq.⁶²

It should be noted that the schema used by authors writing in the languages of Western academia to conceptualize contemporary Arab thought is obviously inspired by Arabic sources.⁶³ An influential articulation of this perspective on Arab thought is found in several articles and books by one of our main interlocutors Zakī Najīb Maḥmūd, and as we will see, it forms the backbone of reflections on *turāth*, which he describes in terms of a struggle between the forces of authenticity and modernity – see Chapter 4 of this book. But Maḥmūd is certainly not the only Arab intellectual to frame the discourse in this way. A different set of terms is used by Ḥasan Ḥanafī to distinguish between those who hold that *turāth* is self-sufficient (*al-iktifā’ al-dhātī li-l-turāth*), and their opponents who argue for the self-sufficiency of the new (*al-iktifā’ al-dhātī li-l-jadīd*) and the harmonization (*tawfiq*) of *turāth* and the new.⁶⁴ A similar division is used by Ṭayyib Ṭizīnī, who identifies the Salafī, the contemporary, and the fabricated (*al-naz’a al-talfiqiyya*) trends as cen-

62 Agbaria, chap. 4.

63 Mohammed Ourya, in his French survey of Arab thought, admits this rather frankly, attributing his tripartite division of Arab thinkers to Fu’ād Zakariyyā – see M. Ourya, *La pensée arabe actuelle* (Paris: L’Harmattan, 2016), 14–16. It should be noted that Zakariyyā introduces this distinction with some reservation, saying that he does not want to get caught in the ongoing struggle (*al-ma’raka al-dā’ira*) over *turāth* – see Fu’ād Zakariyyā, *al-Ṣaḥwa al-Islāmiyya fī Mizān al-Aql*, 2nd ed. (Dār al-Fikr al-Mu’āsir, 1987), 39.

64 Ḥanafī, *al-Turāth wa-l-Tajdid*, 27–34.

tral to the modern discourse of authenticity and modernity.⁶⁵ Focusing on the situation in Egypt, Naṣr Ḥāmid Abū Zayd also notes a division between Islamists like Muḥammad ‘Ammāra, Fahmī Huwaydī, and Muḥammad al-Ghazālī, secularists like Fu‘ād Zakariyyā and Sayyid Yāsīn, and those who steer the middle course, like ‘Abd al-Mun‘im Sa‘īd.⁶⁶ In addition, there are views of the *turāth* debate that take into account the Marxist position. One finds this in Muḥammad ‘Ābid al-Jābirī’s *Naḥnu wa-l-Turāth: Qirā’āt fī Turāthinā al-Falsafī* (*We and the Heritage: Readings in Our Philosophical Heritage*; henceforth *We and the Heritage*), for example, where he distinguishes between a Salafī, and Orientalist, and a revolutionary reading of *turāth*.⁶⁷ The distinction has continued to be applied well into the twenty-first century. Thus, we find yet another slightly different conception of this division in the work of ‘Abd al-Ilāh Balqaziz, when he announces that the study of *turāth* ought to start from the epistemological division of the venerating (*tabjīliyya*), the disdainful (*iḥtiqāriyya*), and the utilitarian (*istithmāriyya*) trends. Whereas the first and the second refer to the traditionalists and the modernizers, respectively, the third are presented as agnostic with regard to the intrinsic worth of *turāth*, using it merely to advance their own ideological projects, whatever they may be.⁶⁸ In mentioning these authors, I do not want to suggest that they all support these divisions and the way in which *turāth* is debated. Certainly, as we will see, some of them are critical of the way this discourse is ordered and debates about *turāth* are conducted. The point is, however, that this is the background against which they work, and that it therefore provides the standards by which their own contributions are judged. Even someone like al-Jābirī, who is explicit in his desire to overcome the divisions over *turāth*, finds it hard to escape being categorized alongside the liberal, modernist, pro-Western crowd.⁶⁹

65 Ṭayyib Tizini, “Ishkāliyyat al-Aṣāla wa-l-Mu‘āsara fī al-Waṭan al-‘Arabī,” in *al-Turāth wa-Taḥaddiyāt al-‘Aṣr fī al-Waṭan al-‘Arabī: al-Aṣāla wa-l-Mu‘āsara* (Beirut: Markaz Dirāsāt al-Waḥda al-‘Arabiyya, 1985), 90.

66 Naṣr Ḥāmid Abū Zayd (Aboe Zaid), *Vernieuwing in het islamitisch denken*, trans. Fred Leemhuis and Rob Leemhuis (Amsterdam: Bulaaq, No Date), 146 (translated into Dutch from Arabic).

67 Muḥammad ‘Ābid al-Jābirī, *Naḥnu wa-l-Turāth: Qirā’āt Mu‘āsira fī Turāthinā al-Falsafī* (Beirut/Casablanca: al-Markaz al-Thaqāfī al-‘Arabī, 1993), 12–16.

68 ‘Abd al-Ilāh Balqaziz, *Naqd al-Turāth*, vol. 3, al-‘Arab wa-l-Hadātha (Beirut: Markaz Dirāsāt al-Waḥda al-‘Arabiyya, 2014), 53–54.

69 As Wael Hallaq puts it: “To say that these scholars, like Jābirī and many like him, are struggling (consciously or unconsciously) to accommodate Islam within liberalism is to state the most obvious” – see Wael Hallaq, *Reforming Modernity: Ethics and the New Human in the Philosophy of Abdurrahman Taha* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2019), 75. This assessment would seem to undercut Agbaria’s reading of al-Jābirī as a “connected critic” who articulates a modern framework for Arab-Islamic thought on authentic (that is, non-Western) foundations. For a discussion

In conclusion, what we face at the start of our inquiry into Arab thought is an established paradigm, a standard narrative that depicts the core dynamics of intellectual debate in the Arab world in a few strokes. This story is easily digested, and is repeated in descriptions of intellectual discourse in introductions to the modern Middle East or Islam.

In the Arab world, it is also rehearsed and commented on for a broader public in news articles and TV debates.⁷⁰ Its pervasiveness in public political discourse is underlined by the founding of a political party in Morocco in 2008 that adopted “The Party of Authenticity and Modernity” (*Ḥizb al-Aṣāla wa-l-Muʿāsara*) as its formal title.⁷¹ Moreover, the religious–secular binary that is closely linked to the dichotomy between authenticity and modernity is a well-known trope in political commentary on the state of Arab societies, and is a dichotomy that is often invoked by political actors to shore up their base.⁷²

What explains the dominance of this narrative is a complicated question. There is certainly an interesting story to be told about the institutional, political, and social dynamics that favor it. That, however, is not our aim in this study. Our aim is not to explain, but to explore. Our aim is to imagine different ways of understanding Arab thought. And in order to do this, we need to destabilize and dislodge an overly rigid conception of Arab thought. In Chapter 2, we will start shaping this counternarrative with some general observations about the *turāth* debate and how it is framed using particular conceptions of authenticity, time, and space. We will briefly look at the role played by the traumatic experience

of this particular point in light of Agbaria’s portrayal of al-Jābirī, see Harald Viersen, “Critique as Reception: Can There Be an Objective Study of Contemporary Arab Thought?,” *Denkanstöße – Reflections* (blog), January 16, 2023, <https://philosophy-in-the-modern-islamic-world.net/critique-as-reception-can-there-be-an-objective-study-of-contemporary-arab-thought/>.

⁷⁰ A recent example of the continuing relevance of the *turāth* discussion is the widely discussed spat between the president of Cairo University, Muḥammad al-Khusht, and the president of al-Azhar University, Aḥmad al-Ṭayyib, where the former took up the mantle of the secular camp of modernity by attacking al-Azhar’s overly strict adherence to *turāth* – see Gamal Essam El-Din, “Long-Held Positions of Islamic Heritage Come to the Fore,” *al-Ahram Online*, February 6, 2020, <http://english.ahram.org.eg/NewsContent/50/1201/362931/AlAhram-Weekly/Egypt/Longheld-positions-of-Islamic-heritage-come-to-the.aspx>.

⁷¹ Ferdinand Eibl, “The Party of Authenticity and Modernity (PAM): Trajectory of a Political Deus Ex Machina,” *The Journal of North African Studies* 17, no. 1 (2012): 45–66.

⁷² For interesting contestations of this perspective in light of the Arab uprisings of the early 2010s, see Charles Hirschkind, “Beyond Secular and Religious: An Intellectual Genealogy of Tahrir Square,” *American Ethnologist* 39, no. 1 (2012): 49–53, and Hussein Ali Agrama, “Reflections on Secularism, Democracy, and Politics in Egypt,” *American Ethnologist* 39, no. 1 (February 2012): 26–31. Whether these commentaries have stood the test of time is a matter for debate, but if anything they affirm the dominance of visions of Arab societies as divided between religious and secular.

of the June War of 1967 and the role it plays in grounding the standard narrative. Following this, we will see how the story of contemporary Arab thought may be told differently from both a local and global perspective. Having demonstrated how time and space play a role in conceptualizing Arab thought, we shift to the conceptual plane and explore the contestation of the meaning of authenticity (*aṣāla*) by Arab intellectuals. Contrary to common perception, this concept does not necessarily refer to a shared communal origin, but can equally refer to the ideal of original, unique creativity often associated with (Western) modernity. In Chapter 3, we will explore this ambiguity in the term authenticity some more by looking at how the ideal of authenticity is an inherent aspect of modernity. The creative instability in the dichotomy-cum-equivalence of authenticity and modernity will provide the foundation for the analyses of our three interlocutors – Zakī Najīb Maḥmūd, Adonis, and ‘Abd al-Raḥmān Ṭāhā – in Chapters 4, 5, and 6.