

Editor's Note

Protest throughout the Arab world has washed the shores of North Africa in recent months and has spread to the eastern Mediterranean, and to Yemen and Bahrain in the Arabian Peninsula. The mass outcry that has already succeeded in deposing unjust, longtime dictators has been dubbed by the media “the Arab Spring,” inspired by the wave of revolutions in Europe in 1848 and 1849. Like Louis-Philippe of France, Hosny Mubarak of Egypt and Zine al-Abidin Ben Ali of Tunis have been overthrown at the behest of their people. Other rulers, such as the leaders of Syria, Libya and Yemen, face protests that threaten the very continuation of their rule and sovereignty and demand far-reaching changes in the distribution of assets and in freedom of expression, as well as other civil reforms.

For years, scholars who studied the Muslim world, especially the Arab world, have offered cultural or economic explanations for the lack of democracy based on the assumption that the Arab world is culturally frozen. It is time to admit, at least partially, that these theoretical structures are likely to collapse. Theories about the foreignness of democratic and liberal values to the Arab world assume the root of the problem lies in the Islamic or the patriarchal structure and in the cultural obstructions to change; these theories are based on outdated, basically Western assumptions that are sometimes motivated by fear or by excessive romanticization. It is difficult to know the outcome of the Arab Spring, but it is worth remembering that most of the revolutions in Europe failed to achieve their immediate goals. In retrospect we may argue that the revolutions were instrumental in generating many events of the second half of the century. The scholars' failure to recognize the eastern Mediterranean—the region and cultural setting which in various periods of

history were known as the Levant—as a vital culture arena makes a new reading of the region and its inhabitants imperative. An understanding of the region's complex dynamic in the modern era and a fresh look at basic issues of economic, social, cultural and political processes is a must. Current local developments, from Turkey to the shores of North Africa, challenge the assumption of a single modernism and of the Western model as the sole model for generating change and leading to the public good. Can prosperous non-Western economic regimes emerge? To what extent does Islamic modernism exist? Now is the time to try to read the world *from* the Levant and to abandon, or at least balance, the traditional reading of the Levant. In addition, it may help to question which “pure” cultural, social or economic categories will survive these processes and which, in the global Internet age, will undergo change as categories of analysis and as social phenomena.

Neither the borders of the Levant nor the nature of the Levantines are dictated or determined by a scientific system. On the contrary. Our aim is to serve as a platform for conflicting and complementary discussions of the chronological development and the use and understanding of notions of the Levant, and to thus reopen historical arguments. An explanation of the choice of the name, *Journal of Levantine Studies*, will afford readers a glimpse of the concept that was shaped in the course of many intense discussions.

The term “Levantine” was originally applied to the European inhabitants of the Mediterranean; it later acquired other meanings and was applied to diverse groups. As it developed alongside colonial practices and Eurocentric attitudes, the term, like other “culturally impure” terms, acquired derogatory connotations in both daily and academic usage. Intellectuals and social thinkers from the region renounced the term while simultaneously embracing and rejecting Western prejudices, in an effort to avoid identification with larger regional units, which would have conflicted with twentieth-century attempts to build nation-states. In academia, the term “Levantine” was largely confined to archaeology, and in the last two decades it was extended to literature, both fields that safely accommodate “cultural mutations.”

The journal's goal is to reclaim the Levant as a historical and political concept and as a category of identity and classification. In re-framing the Levant we hope to create a unique platform with novel possibilities for academic discussion that will catalyze productive debate and theoretical and empirical scholarship on the Levant and the Levantines in different geographical and historical contexts.

This is the first issue of the *Journal of Levantine Studies*. Its focus is on “authenticity” as a sociopolitical category and as a cultural strategy. Post-Ottoman

societies and Arab, Greek, Jewish and Turkish national movements were all based on the people's sovereignty and the demand to recognize the local indigenous people of the hegemonic culture as its sole authentic representatives. Levantinism and other regional ideologies and identities have lost their place in the new national order and in nation-based hierarchies. Historically, Levantinism had layered contacts with colonial powers, much like an archaeological artifact, and has thus challenged this imaginary national authenticity.

In this issue, authenticity is examined in ideological, sociological, religious-philosophical, literary and poetic contexts that reveal the multi-facetedness of the Levant. Sometimes the Levant is a tool to measure authenticity, at other times it is a counterweight and challenge to authenticity.

Many of the authors ask the questions, "What is authentic?" and whether inherent ambivalence as a cultural strategy can be considered authentic. The opening piece, "What about Levantinization?" originally written in English by **Jacqueline Kahanoff**, a Jewish writer who emigrated from Egypt to Israel in the 1950s, is being published in this issue in English for the first time. Kahanoff, born in Egypt to parents from Tunisia and Iraq, was a Western-educated polyglot who saw herself as a child of the Levant. Her article reflects the inherent ambivalence of the Armenians, Copts, Jews, Greeks, and Italians who in the pre-nationalist era regarded, as she did, the entire region as their home. Kahanoff asks why Levantinism so threatens Israeli society and *Sabra* culture, which claims to be authentically indigenous, but in truth was created by relatively recent immigrants from Europe. She exposes the inherent hypocrisy of "authentic" Israeli culture and the *Sabra's* fear of "a cultural mutation." The Levantines relinquished cultural authenticity because it did not serve them well and adopted modern Western characteristics and values. The price for this survival strategy was a loss of authenticity and of relations with the surrounding hegemonic society. The *Sabra's* contempt for the newly arrived Levantines did not prevent them from absorbing the newcomers, which seemed preferable to isolating themselves within the small Jewish community in Israel. The question of cultural mutation as opposed to indigenous authenticity is presented in the essay in a broad historical context, both spatial (the vernacularization of Latin) and temporal (the host of empires that conquered the region and left their mark on its various peoples).

Accompanying Kahanoff's article is an essay by **Daniel Monterescu**, who develops the idea of Levantinism as a cultural mutation and draws the discussion toward a conceptual framework of purity and ambivalence. Monterescu sees Kahanoff's writings as testimony to the cosmopolitan ambivalence of people whose home is the region surrounding the entire Mediterranean; he also argues that their relationship

with the hegemonic national society can be framed and understood using Georg Simmel's concept of the "stranger." The struggle of the societies in the region against colonialism led to a rejection of everything "non-authentic"—that is, everything foreign or European. The emerging "pure" territorial nationalism juxtaposed the "pure" indigenous inhabitants and the cosmopolitan strangers with connections across the sea: the Greeks, Italians, Turks and the Jews. Following Zygmunt Bauman, Monterescu sees the Levantines as multidimensional strangers who are a part of colonial modernism. Cosmopolitanism and anticolonial nationalism, he explains, are complementary rather than incompatible options. Monterescu supports the call for the creation of a new anthropology of the Levant in which conqueror and conquered are trapped together and in which the Levantine stranger helps to historicize and deconstruct the very category of indigenosity.

Gil Hochberg relates to indigenosity and authenticity in her discussion of the Mediterranean option and the politics of regional affiliation in the Israeli cultural imagination and discourse. She argues that the Mediterranean option, a non-ideological ideology, is actually an alternative to peace with the Arab world in general and with the Palestinians in particular. The attempts of many to incorporate the Mediterranean into Israeli authenticity are politically motivated by a desire to "undo Palestine." Hochberg examines the literary texts that shape this incorporation of the sea and argue for a model of cultural pluralism instead of the traditional model of Zionism. Paradoxically, the attempt to create regional affiliation increases the antagonism between Israel and its Arab neighbors. In the Jewish context, the discussion of Mediterraneanism and its historical manifestation, the social and rabbinical category of *Sepharadiyut*, ignores the colonial past and is trauma-free. *Sepharadiyut*, as opposed to *Mizrahiyut*, accepted secularization and was not traumatized. The choice of Mediterraneanism and *Sepharadiyut* instead of Levantinism and *Mizrahiyut*, similar to ignoring the Arab Middle East, is a strategic choice in the quest for Western, modern cultural purity. Hochberg argues that Mediterraneanism is related to Hellenism and to global economic interests, an invitation to a pleasant sea cruise, whereas *Mizrahiyut* and Levantinism take us to Israel's darkest corners.

Ambivalence is also central in **Amir Banbaji's** article, which considers the role of the East in the literature of the Haskalah, the Jewish Enlightenment. Banbaji proposes Levantinism as a strategy for textual analysis in his attempt to undermine the humanistic triumph that current scholarship attributes to the literature of the Haskalah. Employing "a Levantine sensibility," or a reading beyond the European imagination, he argues that the presence of the Orient in the texts of the Haskalah

reflects significant resistance to turning Hebrew literature into a passive instrument in the modern “project.” Reading the early history of modern Hebrew literature with a Levantine sensibility exposes its internal conflict. This conflict, typical of the Haskalah’s ambivalence regarding the modern and the secular, appears in the texts of Isaac Euchel, Shlomo Löwisohn, and Abraham Mapu as rivalry between two equally powerful aesthetic traditions: the sublime and the beautiful.

In a maneuver contrary to Banbaji’s, **Salman Bashier** seeks the West and the shadow of Max Weber in the writings and visions of Islam of three important influential scholars—Ahmet Davutoğlu, Muhammed al-Jabiri and Richard Khuri—in today’s Muslim world. Bashier posits that Weber’s analysis of Islam’s failure to convert its notion of transcendence into the Protestant order of rationalization is based on a flawed conception of the true implication of this notion for the Islamic mystical tradition. In his discussion of the three scholars, Bashier demonstrates that even those critical of Western approaches, who try to create new sociopolitical approaches, are still captives of the Weberian view and unable to abandon the negative valuation of Ibn al-‘Arabi, the greatest Islamic mystic. Bashier thinks that only Khuri’s approach, which recognizes the value of the mystical tradition in general and Ibn al-‘Arabi’s unique notion of transcendence in particular, has any potential for rescuing Islamic critical thought from the Weberian trap.

The challenges of modernism, secularization, colonialism and anti-colonialism have all generated a heated discussion of authenticity that is both classical and suited to every place and time, in contrast to the foreign and the temporary. For this first issue we have chosen to translate the introductory chapter of *The Struggle for Humanism in the Islamic Context*, by the late French-Algerian philosopher **Mohammed Arkoun**, who was one of the most important Muslim philosophers in the world. In contrast to Salman Bashier, who sees al-‘Arabi as the key to rejuvenating and revitalizing Islam, Arkoun believes that the key is in understanding and reviving tenth-century methods. He attacks the separation of disciplines that removes Islamic studies from religious studies, as is customary in both the Muslim and the Western world, and rejects the ceaseless quest for authenticity. He complains that the Muslim world is afflicted by modern ideologies without being included as a partner in the construction of this modernism, and calls for intellectual, sociological, legal and philosophical activity by scholars of Islam to restore reason to Islam. He blames the failure of enlightenment in the Muslim world on the education systems of countries and religious movements that emphasize authenticity, patriarchal nationalism, national character and difference, thus sowing the seeds of fanaticism and hatred of strangers. The obsessive search for authenticity serves the dominant movements as

an escape from their problems and hinders the development and revitalization of humanism in the Islamic context. Arkoun argues that hiding behind the search for authenticity will not let them permanently avoid the difficult challenge of analyzing the texts underlying Muslim law. Only such an act will restore Islamic studies to the disciplinary framework of religious studies and energize humanism in the Muslim world.

Accompanying the translation of Arkoun's essay is an article by **Wael Abu-ʿUksa**, which deconstructs Arkoun's arguments and takes the discussion of authenticity and humanism to political spheres. Abu-ʿUksa notes Arkoun's objections to both postcolonial Arab ideologies and the rise of political Islam. The failure of these two streams has led liberal intellectuals in the Muslim world to seek authentic sources of modernism in Arab and Muslim history; Arkoun finds them in the tenth century. Arkoun deconstructs and reassesses traditional Islamic epistemology with a new analytical system he terms "applied Islamology," that is inspired by the applied anthropology of Roger Bastide. Abu-ʿUksa emphasizes the political meaning of this move in the Mediterranean context, the meeting place of Europe and the Arab world and of the modern humanist streams of Judaism, Christianity and Islam. In contrast to the view of those who ascribed humanism to Renaissance Europe, Arkoun points out that the foundations of Islamic philosophy, influenced by Greek philosophy, were in the Mediterranean. Abu-ʿUksa then argues that one may deduce the possibility that the foundations of modernism lie equally in Renaissance Europe and in Mediterranean Islam.

Guy Miron's article takes us on a journey to Hungary, on the northern shores of the Levant. The role of such categories as East and West are discussed from two perspectives: that of the national discourse and national historians and that of Hungarian Jewry, that struggled to maintain its place in the face of anti-Semitism. Miron demonstrates how East and West have taken on a variety of social, religious and national dimensions in different periods and in various historical episodes. They were "localized" in internal debate and thus acquired certain political and social meanings. While the West was seen as Catholic and culturally part of the German sphere of influence, the East resembled a secular, Protestant vision. Past encounters with the Ottomans and with the Russians, both eastern powers, were examined with national needs in mind, and accordingly viewed, either favorably or antagonistically. Miron demonstrates how historians who shaped Eastern and Western orientations recruited the past and the commemorative symbols in aid of their national political visions. He explains that on the eve of and during the First World War, the Jewish community was quick to adopt the Eastern orientation as it

strengthened Hungarian liberal values. While the East-West dualism continued to exist in the post-cold war era, the Western orientation became dominant and the Eastern orientation lost its appeal.

An important purpose of this journal is to encourage critical essays by scholars and by both young and established artists exploring cultural themes. For this issue we have chosen to publish poet and writer **Almog Behar**'s essay on Mahmoud Darwish and poetry's "state of siege." Behar describes the strategy of Darwish, who experienced exile and migration more than once in his lifetime and who transferred the arena of the struggle to the region of memory. Denial and memory are at play in the state of siege and weigh on the poet's ability to write. He sees the state of siege as evidence of the Israelis' fear of Arab culture. Both besieger and besieged are trapped together in the same "state." Darwish reminds us of the common denominator shared by the Palestinians and the Israelis—the lack of a distinct, authentic culture. Both communities share a culture impacted by many empires and peoples. The end of the state of siege will hopefully lead to a shared reading of cultural treasures.

In the section devoted to review, **Victor Roudometof** presents a critical discussion of two books that illustrate the significance of the ongoing reappraisal of the national past in Greece and Turkey. **Andrekos Varnava** and **Merav Mack** review two books that deal with the Christian space of the Levant. Future issues will feature books written in Mediterranean countries and published in languages that are not accessible to readers of English. This maintains our policy of translating essays from the region, such as Arkoun's, in the current issue, and Cemil Meriç's, scheduled for the upcoming issue.

I would like to thank all those involved in this journal from its inception. The journal is not the work of a single individual but rather the blessed efforts of a large team, from the crystallization of the idea and construction of the concept to the final result. I especially thank: my colleagues Amnon Raz-Krakotzkin and Yuval Evri for their inspiration, ideas and assistance in the founding of this platform; Yochi Fischer, Wael Abu-Uksa, Samir Ben-Layashi, Kinneret Lahad, Merav Mack and Daniel Monterescu, who contributed greatly to the clarification of the journal's concept and content. I would like to take this opportunity to thank David Segall, the journal's first coordinator, and Nathalie Alyon, who took over his role as assistant editor and whose intelligence, skills, determination and dedication have brought the project to fruition. Thanks also to Esther Hecht for her translation and editing; to Felice Kahn Zisken, the journal's copy editor; and to Nomi Morag, for her special design. I am grateful to Ronny Someck for permission to publish his poem and drawing, to Deborah Starr for drawing our attention to Jacqueline Kahanoff's

article and to the Kahanoff family for permission to publish it. I would like to express my gratitude to Tal Kohavi, Executive Editor and Director of Publications at the Van Leer Jerusalem Institute, who from the moment of her appointment to the position supported me and this issue with wisdom, leading us to a safe haven.

Above all, I would like to thank the Editorial Board and especially Professor Gabriel Motzkin, Chairman of the Editorial Board and Director of the Van Leer Jerusalem Institute for his trust in me and for the opportunity to establish and serve as editor of the *Journal of Levantine Studies*.

Anat Lapidot-Firilla

August 2011