
Arab Existentialism: An Invisible Chapter in the Intellectual History of Decolonization

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IN MAY 1944, WHEN THE EGYPTIAN philosopher ‘Abd al-Rahman Badawi defended his dissertation on existential time, Taha Husayn, the doyen of modern Arab letters, declared it the birth of modern Arab philosophy. The defense was a national event, and the widely distributed Egyptian daily *al-Ahram* immediately shared the news with its readers.¹ Six years later, Badawi announced that he had devised a new philosophy for “our generation.” He called it existentialism (*wujudiya*), and though it shared the name of the European movement, it was not simply a carbon copy of it, but rather a series of formulations and adaptations that collectively sought to create a new postcolonial Arab subject: confident, politically involved, independent, self-sufficient, and above all liberated. Whether in its Heideggerian or its Sartrean form, we normally think of existentialism solely as a chapter in European intellectual history. Yet in the context of decolonization, Arab intellectuals processed the ideas of Martin Heidegger and Jean-Paul Sartre into an entirely new intellectual tradition that was European in origin and Middle Eastern by design. What began as an esoteric experiment on a philosopher’s desk grew into a decentralized yet influential intellectual movement with meaningful global connections. By the early 1960s, Arab culture was dominated by the language, assumptions, and politics of existentialism. Yet this story has thus far remained an invisible chapter in the intellectual history of decolonization.

The emergence of Arab existentialism as a major category of Arab thought coincided with the worldwide process of decolonization and the rise of the first generation of Third World regimes.² Between the end of World War II, when pro-colonial Arab monarchies teetered, and the 1967 Six-Day War, when the revolutionary Arab states that had replaced the monarchies were defeated, a young generation of

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¹ Badawi’s Ph.D. oral exam lasted a full six hours and was attended by hundreds of onlookers, students, teachers, and journalists who came to celebrate a national event. “Duktura fi-l-Falsafa,” *al-Ahram*, May 30, 1944, 2.

² Even though major texts on decolonization do not focus on the Middle East, it was nonetheless an essential player in this process. Mark T. Berger, “After the Third World? History, Destiny and the Fate of Third Worldism,” *Third World Quarterly* 25, no. 1 (2004): 9–39.

Arab intellectuals employed variants of existentialism in order to meet the multiple challenges of decolonization: cultural contradictions, uneven development and the consequent social injustice, a struggle for full physical liberation, and the derivative search for an alternative Cold War political space.

This process triggered a set of pressing questions: Who is the Arab subject in the wake of the colonial experience? Can this subject think of himself or herself in terms and language that would be organic to his or her history? Can Arabs have an authentic existence, and is it possible for them to become modern on their own terms? On the eve of decolonization, in the Indian subcontinent, Africa, and East Asia, a host of intellectuals, writing in multiple languages, were asking the same questions.³ These concerns conditioned the work of Badawi's existentialist generation, people such as the Egyptian Marxist critic Mahmud Amin al-^ṣAlim, the journalist Lutfi al-Khuli, the Lebanese man of letters Suhayl Idris, the Iraqi poet ^ṣAbd al-Wahhab al-Bayati, and hundreds of other intellectuals who were born in the early 1920s. Yet a decade later, following the combined tragedy of the 1967 War and Sartre's unexpected betrayal of the Arabs, Arab existentialism was for the most part dead.

Given that existentialism was instrumental to decolonization, it is striking that there is no literature that situates the intellectual generation of Arab existentialists within the global historical context of their time. This absence is part of a larger lack within what might be called the intellectual history of decolonization. How Third World intellectuals and their ideas informed decolonization, and how in turn they were shaped by it, is an important question, yet it remains largely unanswered in spite of a proliferation of studies on decolonization and postcolonialism.

On the basis of existing historiography, it appears that scholars have largely avoided this question. Early scholarship on decolonization focused on the "transfer of power" as a unidirectional process that extended from the metropole to the periphery in the face of the so-called "onslaught of nationalism."⁴ For obvious reasons, much of this work came from scholars of the British Empire. A later variant of this literature illustrated how power was not simply "transferred," but in fact demanded, even taken by force.⁵ This process was further explained in terms of provincial anticolonial nationalisms (freedom movements) and higher-level political solidarity (Pan-Asian, Pan-Arab). But solidarity and resistance have functioned largely as tropes rather than empirical points of reference, with scholars generally assuming that anticolonial nationalism was similarly constituted whenever and wherever it occurred.⁶ The best indication of the ubiquity of this assumption can be found in surveys of the state of the field of decolonization studies. From John Darwin's 1988

³ For instance, Mahatma Gandhi, Albert Memmi, Léopold Sédar Senghor, Frantz Fanon, Aimé Césaire, and Wa Thiong'o Ngũgĩ.

⁴ For a critical summary of this idea, see John Darwin, *The End of the British Empire: The Historical Debate* (Oxford, 1991).

⁵ Recent examples of this established historiographical pedigree include Raymond F. Betts, *Decolonization* (New York, 1998); David Birmingham, *The Decolonization of Africa* (London, 1995); John Springhall, *Decolonization since 1945: The Collapse of European Overseas Empires* (New York, 2001); and Martin Shipway, *Decolonization and Its Impact: A Comparative Approach to the End of the Colonial Empires* (Malden, Mass., 2008).

⁶ Taking solidarity and resistance to colonial Europe as the overarching subject matter of their books, scholars of Third-Worldism further reduced the complex process of decolonization to the level of a power struggle. See, for instance, Vijay Prashad, *The Darker Nations: A People's History of the Third World* (New York, 2007).

pioneering call for research on the “very underdeveloped” subject of decolonization to A. G. Hopkins’s 2008 extensive rethinking of the field, an impressive line of writers and editors, including Robert Young, Dietmar Rothermund, and to a lesser extent Prasenjit Duara, have been comfortable with the assumption that the history of anticolonial nationalism accounts for the role of ideas during this era.⁷

Indeed, even postcolonial studies, a field that has made a point of studying the “decolonization of the mind,” has done little to rehabilitate local thought and its global context. While it offers an important corrective to Eurocentric scholarship on empire as well as a critique of the practices of the nation-state, the realities of colonized peoples are almost always projected against the essentialized epistemology of colonial Europe, with the ultimate goal of investigating the persistence of “colonial discourse.” With a rarefied and far from rigorous historical method that uses epistemology as the omnipresent referent for all forms of thought, we are left with the false notion that colonialism was uninterrupted by the process of decolonization. While postcolonial studies provides us with invaluable insights and a critical emancipation of marginal historical subjects, it has done little to date by way of presenting a systematic and comprehensive account of how people put their thoughts together.⁸ Even as scholarship on labor, Third World diplomacy, race (*négritude*), and gender is beginning to break new ground, the ongoing absence of intellectual history calls attention to itself.⁹

⁷ A. G. Hopkins, “Rethinking Decolonization,” *Past & Present* 200, no. 1 (August 2008): 211–247; John Darwin, *Britain and Decolonisation: The Retreat from Empire in the Post-War World* (New York, 1988); Dietmar Rothermund, *The Routledge Companion to Decolonization* (Hoboken, N.J., 2006); Prasenjit Duara, ed., *Decolonization: Perspectives from Now and Then* (London, 2004); James D. Le Sueur, ed., *The Decolonization Reader* (New York, 2003); Robert J. C. Young, *Postcolonialism: An Historical Introduction* (Oxford, 2001); Christopher E. Goscha and Christian Ostermann, eds., *Connecting Histories: Decolonization and the Cold War in Southeast Asia, 1945–1962* (Stanford, Calif., 2009). However, for some attempts to account for the role of ideas beyond anticolonial nationalism, see Clive J. Christie, *Ideology and Revolution in Southeast Asia, 1900–1980: Political Ideas of the Anti-Colonial Era* (Richmond, UK, 2001); and James D. Le Sueur, *Uncivil War: Intellectuals and Identity Politics during the Decolonization of Algeria* (Philadelphia, 2001).

⁸ As one critic put it, “It would be useful if post-colonial scholarship made more effort to situate these writers within the class structure of their home societies and the cultural context of a transnational intelligentsia so as to avoid simplistic generalizations that their work embodies some nationalist or ‘Third World’ essence.” Dane Kennedy, “Imperial History and Post-Colonial Theory,” in James D. Le Sueur, ed., *The Decolonization Reader* (New York, 2003), 1–22, here 17. Having said that, the Subaltern Studies Group and a few others in South Asia have tried to “rehabilitate” local thought and capture the mental/spiritual world of the subaltern. Their consequent claim was that the subaltern did not behave as a colonized subject and retained his or her own notions of community, politics, and culture. Hence their argument that colonialism involved dominance without hegemony. Ranajit Guha, *Dominance without Hegemony: History and Power in Colonial India* (Cambridge, Mass., 1997); Sudipta Kaviraj, *The Unhappy Consciousness: Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay and the Formation of Nationalist Discourse in India* (Delhi, 1995).

⁹ Tackling some of the same problems, Frederick Cooper observed that “Colonial history in the era of decolonization suffered a double form of occlusion. From the 1950s into the 1970s, the idea of modernization occluded the colonial. In the 1980s and 1990s the idea of modernity occluded history.” Cooper, *Colonialism in Question: Theory, Knowledge, History* (Berkeley, Calif., 2005), 53. Recent scholarship includes Piero Gleijeses, *Conflicting Missions: Havana, Washington, and Africa, 1959–1976* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 2002); Matthew Connelly, *A Diplomatic Revolution: Algeria’s Fight for Independence and the Origins of the Post–Cold War Era* (Oxford, 2002); Todd Shepard, *The Invention of Decolonization: The Algerian War and the Remaking of France* (Ithaca, N.Y., 2006); Frederick Cooper, *Decolonization and African Society: The Labor Question in French and British Africa* (Cambridge, 1996); Gary Wilder, *The French Imperial Nation-State: Negritude and Colonial Humanism between the Two World Wars* (Chicago, 2005); and Karen Bouwer, *Gender and Decolonization in the Congo: The Legacy of Patrice Lumumba* (New York, 2010).

This lacuna in the historiography notwithstanding, Arab intellectuals did in fact devise a local existentialist tradition that transcended the narrow purview of anti-colonial nationalism, with its focus on physical liberation from foreign rule and a general sense of collectivity. Arab existentialism thus fulfilled a dual role: First, it framed decolonization as a process with an extremely broad cultural and intellectual spectrum, ranging from the ontology of modern Arab subjectivity and the balance between local and universal culture (e.g., the problem of authenticity) to the nexus between politics and culture and the desired contract between state and society. Second, drawing on this elementary mapping, it helped to create a new intellectual space, which gave rise to an assertive Third World Arab intelligentsia. Arab existentialism functioned as a potent tool for social, political, and cultural self-criticism and was an important element in forging extra-regional alliances with the global front against imperialism. In addition, it aspired to ground the project of reinventing a new Arab self within a new philosophical framework. Yet while it was involved to some extent with all of these tasks, Arab existentialism emerged not as a unified and accumulative phenomenon but as a multifocal intellectual system.

Thus, interestingly, the fragmented nature of existentialism was not the result of a weak “borrowing” or “adaptation,” but rather a multilayered cross-cultural process in which European existentialism lost its original meaning at the very same moment in which it was fused with local Arab thought and created anew. Out of this process, Arab existentialism emerged as a nuanced, complex, and at times contradictory phenomenon. It thus should be seen not as a “poor application” of an original European idea, but as a salient characteristic of transnational thought as such, in which ideas are made legible across cultural borders and rendered culturally functional through creative translation, and not through intellectual fidelity to provenance.

In keeping with this “messy” process, the story of Arab existentialism begins with Badawi’s promise to liberate the Arab self from the constraints of colonial culture by fusing European existentialism with Islamic philosophy. It continues with the efforts of Suhayl Idris and Mahmud Amin al-‘Alim to forge a revolutionary and politicized understanding of existentialism and use it to marginalize the old-guard intelligentsia. In the 1960s, Arab intellectuals saw existentialism as a way to connect with the global culture of resistance. However, inasmuch as it was deployed as a constructive collective tool, Arab minorities such as Palestinians, women, and Iraqi dissidents used it to offer a penetrating critique of the Arab project of liberation. While the “end” of Arab existentialism was related to some extent to its appropriation by such critics, this intellectual tradition would be driven to its conclusion by none other than Sartre himself. On the eve of the 1967 War, shortly after he and Simone de Beauvoir made their celebrated visit to Egypt, the French philosopher abruptly withdrew his support from his Arab interlocutors and sided with Israel. Thereafter, his name became synonymous with betrayal, and his legacy was left to languish.

Taken as a whole, these multiple existentialist variants shed new light on what decolonization meant to people on the ground and how they thought about reacting to it and participating in it. Thus, the history of Arab existentialism suggests that beyond anticolonial nationalism and the straitjacket of “ideology” (Marxist, liberal,

socialist, etc.), decolonization does indeed have a meaningful intellectual history worthy of investigation.

AS GERMAN FORCES HEADED TOWARD Paris in June 1940, the Russian émigré philosopher Alexandre Koyré left France and crossed the Mediterranean, hoping to enlist with the British army in Egypt or, alternatively, with the newly organized Free French Forces.¹⁰ Instead, he settled for less action as a professor of philosophy at Cairo's Fuad University, where he had taught for several years during the 1930s. André Lalande (1867–1963), a Sorbonne retiree and one of Koyré's former professors, was also on the faculty of this young and highly ambitious university.¹¹ Indeed, students at Fuad took classes with some of the most accomplished European scholars and often traveled to the Continent in search of knowledge.¹² Upon his arrival in Egypt, Koyré began working with 'Abd al-Rahman Badawi, an advanced graduate student. Their work would critically influence the reception and reinvention of existentialism in the Middle East.¹³ While anchored in the local scholarly tradition, this reception also mirrors critical shifts in European philosophy, for instance with regard to epistemology.

Until the 1930s, epistemology, represented in France by Henri Bergson, had been the central branch of philosophy, dealing with what we can know and with what degree of certainty. Existentialism, by contrast, prioritized the problem of *being* at the expense of *knowing*.¹⁴ Before moving to France in 1912, Koyré had been a member of Edmund Husserl's phenomenological circle in Göttingen. He thus "served as a bridge between Germany and France and between Husserl and Bergson."¹⁵ He was

¹⁰ Jean Hering, "In Memoriam: Alexander Koyré," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 25, no. 3 (March 1965): 453–454, here 454.

¹¹ Having taught in Cairo from 1926 to 1930, Lalande returned to Fuad University in October 1937, where he joined an established cohort of French scholars, including Émile Bréhier and Louis Rougier. This time he would stay until 1940. As a token of recognition for Lalande's unflinching commitment to Egyptian education, the Islamic philosopher Mustafa 'Abd al-Raziq conceded the position of chair to him. 'Abd al-Rahman Badawi, *Sirat Hayati*, 2 vols. (Beirut, 2000), 1: 61–62; Muhammad Mubarak, *al-Jabiri: Bayna Turuhat Lalande wa Jan-Biyajih* (Beirut, 2000).

¹² After becoming public in 1925, Fuad University voraciously absorbed new academic disciplines and experienced a rapid process of academic professionalization. Donald Malcolm Reid, *Cairo University and the Making of Modern Egypt* (Cambridge, 1990).

¹³ Given his status as a foreign intellectual whose major academic degrees were from Germany, Koyré was unable to find a permanent position at a major French university. This was one of the reasons why he, and many other European intellectuals, periodically traveled to teach in Egypt. This was the third time that Koyré had been invited to teach in the university's Department of Philosophy. While in Egypt he worked for the Comité national d'Égypte de la France libre. Badawi, *Sirat Hayati*, 1: 62. For Koyré's biography, see the online archive of the Centre Alexandre Koyré at the École des hautes études en sciences sociales, www.koyre.cnrs.fr. Ethan Kleinberg, *Generation Existential: Heidegger's Philosophy in France, 1927–1961* (Ithaca, N.Y., 2005), 59.

¹⁴ The phenomenological open-ended manner of thinking departed significantly from the theoretical cognition of knowledge and moved toward the practical concerns of everyday life. This shift was entirely new to French philosophy of the 1930s, which was still focused on Bergson. Indeed, aspiring intellectuals such as Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Raymond Aron were bored by Bergsonian philosophy and were ill-prepared, philosophically speaking, to deal with the realities of the 1930s. As Aron succinctly put it, in German philosophy he "found everything I could not find in France." Kleinberg, *Generation Existential*, 89. J. J. K. [Joseph J. Kockelmans], "Phenomenology," in Robert Audi, ed., *The Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy* (Cambridge, 1999), 664–666.

¹⁵ Koyré later held a position at the École pratiques des hautes études. Kleinberg, *Generation Existential*, 59.

also a follower of Heidegger's existentialism, believing strongly that "[Heidegger's] 'philosophy of existence' would not only determine a new stage of the development of Western philosophy but would form the departure point for an entirely new cycle."¹⁶ As part of his effort to expose French intellectuals to contemporary German philosophy, Koyré started a journal (*Recherches philosophiques*) and a seminar.¹⁷

Among the participants in this vibrant and experimental forum were Alexandre Kojève and Henry Corbin. Kojève was a Russian émigré who studied with Karl Jaspers and after 1932 was responsible for systematically introducing Hegel and Heidegger to French thought.¹⁸ Corbin was an Orientalist and the first French translator of Heidegger's *Being and Time* and other seminal texts for which Koyré wrote prefaces. Raymond Aron, who introduced Sartre to phenomenology and Heidegger, was also a member of this circle. For reasons that are not entirely clear, in 1933 Koyré departed Paris for his first academic year in Cairo, leaving the seminar in the skilled hands of Kojève.¹⁹ He took with him to Egypt a familiarity with the newest and most innovative philosophy.

For his part, following a 1937 visit to Germany, Badawi was ready to write about "Death in Existential Philosophy," a topic about which Koyré had much to say.²⁰ Indeed, he received from Koyré a new philosophical frame of reference: Max Scheler, Karl Jaspers, Martin Heidegger, Gabriel Marcel, Jean Wahl, and Emmanuel Lévinas. These thinkers fostered the rise of Arab phenomenology and taught Badawi that death is not simply an event that happens at the end of one's life, but rather an experience that shapes one's entire way of being and, especially, illuminates the condition of authenticity upon the eventual encounter with death itself.²¹

He also began to think in Heideggerian terms, attempting to explain existence in terms of time and to understand it from a circumstantial perspective in which it is not historical, linear, or continuous, but fragmented, ruptured, and synchronic. In

¹⁶ Quoted in Tom Rockmore, *Heidegger and French Philosophy: Humanism, Antihumanism and Being* (London, 1995), xii.

¹⁷ The seminar focused on Heidegger but also offered a new reading of Hegel, who until that point had been seen in France as an outdated romantic philosopher. Koyré's journal covered the same terrain. He was aided by other graduates of Husserl's circle, including Jean Hering, and by Émile Bréhier, who also taught in Cairo. Michael S. Roth, *Knowing and History: Appropriations of Hegel in Twentieth Century France* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1988), 2–9, 97.

¹⁸ On Alexandre Kojève, see Vincent Descombes, *Modern French Philosophy*, trans. L. Scott-Fox and J. M. Harding (Cambridge, 1998), 9–48; Roth, *Knowing and History*, 83–146.

¹⁹ Other participating members during the 1930s would become the who's who of French thought of the 1950s and 1960s: Georges Bataille, Jacques Lacan, Raymond Queneau, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Eric Weil, André Breton, and Emmanuel Lévinas. "What happened in that seminar between 1933 and 1939 changed the face of modern French philosophy"; Kleinberg, *Generation Existential*, 65–66, 69.

²⁰ Originally, Badawi worked with Lalande, who was still committed to Bergson's philosophy. Lalande hoped that by teaching his *Les théories de l'induction et de l'expérimentation* (Paris, 1929), he could steer the scholarly habits and intellectual orientation of students toward a pre-World War I French philosophical tradition. When Badawi evinced an interest in existentialism, Lalande instructed him to shy away from the "moda" of Heidegger and Jaspers and settle for a more canonical topic. After some negotiation, Lalande reluctantly agreed on "Death in Contemporary Philosophy." Yet with war raging in Europe, Lalande decided to leave for France, and Koyré took over his post. Badawi, *Sirat Hayati*, 1: 63.

²¹ Hassan Hanafi, "Phenomenology and Islamic Philosophy," in Anna-Teresa Tymieniecka, ed., *Phenomenology World-Wide: Foundations, Expanding Dynamisms, Life-Engagements—A Guide for Research and Study* (Dordrecht, 2002), 318–321. Badawi's M.A. thesis was what works of this kind often are: an exercise. Written in French, it was eventually published in 1964. Abdurahman Badawi, *Le problème de la mort dans la philosophie existentielle* (Le Caire, 1964).

other words, Badawi subscribed to two of the main themes of existentialism: first, *existence precedes essence* (i.e., who a human being is [his or her essence] is the result of his or her choices [existence]); and second, *time is of the essence* (i.e., human beings are time-bound, and the lived time that they experience is different from measured clock time).²² Yet by the time Badawi had come around to this new way of thinking, Koyré had abruptly left Egypt for New York City, where he would reinvent himself as a historian of science.²³

As an intimate insider of the Franco-German philosophical scene, Koyré had brought an incredible heritage to Cairo. What he left behind was ultimately a function of a simple one-on-one philosophical transaction between himself and Badawi. Badawi credited Koyré with shaping his methodology, introducing him to modern philosophical notions and the contemporary philosophical scene, teaching him phenomenology (which was new to the Arab world and was given the name *‘ilm al-zahriyat*), and, most importantly, encouraging him to draw a link between existentialism and Sufism.²⁴ Four months after Koyré’s departure, Badawi submitted his master’s thesis.²⁵ He was now ready for his Ph.D. His ability to practice philosophy at the highest level was not in question.

Badawi’s dissertation, titled *al-Zaman al-Wujudi (Existential Time)*, investigated how time shapes individual existence. It argued that “true existence is that of the individual. The individual is the subject that necessitates freedom. The meaning of this freedom is the very existence of possibility.”²⁶ He then followed a classic Heideggerian interpretation of subjectivity and embraced Heidegger’s key concept, *Dasein*, which denotes not a conscious subject, politically or otherwise, but the way human beings (both as real people and in the abstract form of “being human”) are in the world among things.²⁷ In doing so, he embraced two more axioms of existential philosophy: *radical individualism* (i.e., a humanistic focus on the individual’s quest for meaning and identity) and *freedom* (i.e., the only guarantee of individualistic self-

²² Although Badawi’s notion of time is reminiscent of Bergson’s notion of *durée* as an exploration of “real” time that eludes mathematics and science and inner life as a kind of duration, the two differed markedly in terms of their understanding of human subjectivity as the vessel of time. Characteristically immodest, Badawi preferred to think of his work as “complementary to that of Heidegger.” Badawi, *Sirat Hayati*, 1: 179–180. See Badawi, *Le problème de la mort dans la philosophie existentielle*, 1–7.

²³ In July 1941, Charles de Gaulle visited Cairo and enlisted Koyré in the effort to represent the cause of a free France in the United States. Koyré later held a one-year position at the Institute of Advanced Studies at Princeton University. He never returned to teach in the Middle East. I. Bernard Cohen and Marshall Clagett, “Alexandre Koyré (1892–1964): Commemoration,” *Isis* 57, no. 2 (Summer 1966): 157–166; John Herivel, “Alexandre Koyré (1892–1964),” *British Journal for the History of Science* 2, no. 3 (June 1965): 257–259; John E. Murdoch, “Alexandre Koyré, 1892–1964,” *Proceedings and Addresses of the American Philosophical Association* 38 (1964–1965): 98–99.

²⁴ Some of Koyré’s colleagues, including Heidegger’s translator Henry Corbin, were Orientalists, and the possibility of making such intellectual connections was viewed with excitement. Badawi, *Sirat Hayati*, 1: 63–65.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 1: 153–155.

²⁶ Badawi also published a short essay that was based on his dissertation and summarized his philosophy in accessible terms: ‘Abd al-Rahman Badawi, “Khulasat Madhhabina al-Wujudi: al-Zaman al-Wujudi,” in Badawi, *Dirasat fi-l-Falsafa al-Wujudiya* (Cairo, 1966), 236–263, here 236.

²⁷ “. . . in which a relationship is not that of one subject to another or between the subject and things but a relationship between the subject and itself.” *Ibid.*, 239. See also ‘Abd al-Rahman Badawi, *al-Zaman al-Wujudi* (Cairo, 1955), 153–239. Interestingly, with the approval of Taha Husayn, Badawi used the medieval Islamic term *Aniya* to Arabize Heidegger’s *Dasein*.

reflection and responsibility). By the time Badawi had been awarded his doctorate, he was already being celebrated as Egypt's first modern philosopher.

It was now 1944, and Badawi was a busy man, traveling, lecturing, and publishing at an incredible pace. His major project was aimed at achieving an intellectual synthesis between Sufism and existential philosophy.²⁸ He viewed both systems of thought as predicated on individual subjectivity, which is to say that we are in the world by means of a relationship of being in which the subject is our body, our world, and our situation. Like Koyré, Badawi believed that existentialism was the future of post-World War II European philosophy. Thus he thought that by fusing it with Sufism, he would instantly bring Arab philosophy up to a level of parity with Heideggerian thought.²⁹ If that could be achieved, the postcolonial Arab generation could join the modern world on equal philosophical terms.³⁰

To make this fusion happen, Badawi sought to update the medieval Sufi doctrine of the "Perfect Man" (*al-Insan al-Kamil*) as an "isthmus (*barzah*) between necessity (*wujub*) and possibility (*imkan*), . . . which combines the attributes of eternity and its laws with the attributes of the generation of being."³¹ He went on to mine this mystical doctrine for the key principles and concepts of Heideggerian existentialism, arguing that he was drawing on medieval Sufism exactly as Heidegger had built on Søren Kierkegaard. He promised his readers that this exercise would result in nothing less than the birth of a new Arab subject and "a comprehensive philosophy for our generation."³²

In hindsight, however, Badawi was in the same boat with the Chinese and especially Japanese philosophers who had "discovered" Heidegger in the 1920s, finding his work highly suggestive in terms of its relation to mysticism. In the East Asian context, Heidegger's widely noticed compatibility with Daoism boiled down to mere "correspondences, congruencies and resonances," something well short of synthesis.³³ This was also the case with Sufism. For all of his work, Badawi's search for

²⁸ Badawi also studied with Mustafa 'Abd al-Raziq, a towering figure of Islamic thought. The latter taught logic in the tradition of Ibn Sina (980–1037) and offered close, and sometime excessive, readings of original texts. He was also interested in mysticism, or Sufism, a topic that Badawi would later explore in connection with existential philosophy. In a way, by attempting to fuse existentialism with Sufism, Badawi sought to bring his two mentors, 'Abd al-Raziq and Koyré, together. For 'Abd al-Raziq's biography, see Ahmad Zakariyya al-Shalaq, *al-Shaykh Mustafa 'Abd al-Raziq wa Mudhakaratih: 'Aql Mustanir Tahta al-'Amama* (Cairo, 2006), 13–56. Ibrahim Madkur, "Mustafa 'Abd al-Raziq: Ra'is Madrasa," in al-Majlis al-'Ala li-l-Thaqafa, *al-Shaykh al-Akbar Mustafa 'Abd al-Raziq: Mufakiran wa Adabiyan wa Muslihan* (Cairo, 1982), 7–11, here 8; Badawi, *Sirat Hayati*, 1: 58–59.

²⁹ Simultaneously, he also perceived individual subjectivity as a starting point for philosophy and, more broadly, as "the only true existence." Although up until this point Bergson was quite influential in Arab intellectual circles, Badawi parted with Bergsonian philosophy, aspects of which he now criticized as mere "logical formulations" of existence. 'Abd al-Rahman Badawi, *al-Insaniyya wa-l-Wujudiya fi-l-Fikr al-'Arabi* (Cairo, 1947), 68, 94–95; Charles D. Smith, *Islam and the Search for Social Order in Modern Egypt: A Biography of Muhammad Husayn Haykal* (Albany, N.Y., 1983), especially chap. 6.

³⁰ In Badawi's words, the goal was to "establish a comprehensive philosophy for our generation." *Al-Insaniyya wa-l-Wujudiya*, 103.

³¹ R. Arnaldez, "al-Insān al-Kāmil," in P. Bearman, Th. Bianquis, C. E. Bosworth, E. van Donzel, and W. P. Heinrichs, eds., *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 2nd ed. (2011), Brill Online, <http://referenceworks.brillonline.com/browse/encyclopaedia-of-islam-2>.

³² From this standpoint, Sufism was not merely an exercise in individual self-awareness but a full-fledged analysis of subjectivity. Badawi, *al-Insaniyya wa-l-Wujudiya*, 68–71, 96–97, 103–104, 107–140. See also his exploration of the "Perfect Man" doctrine in *al-Insan al-Kamil fi-l-Islam* (Cairo, 1950).

³³ The first substantial commentary on Heidegger in any language was written in Japan. Kōichi Tsujimura, "Martin Heidegger's Thinking and Japanese Philosophy," *Epoché: A Journal for the History*

philosophical synthesis resulted only in the discovery of Heideggerian and phenomenological categories of thought in Sufism. There never was an actual merging of these spheres in a fashion that, to borrow from Nietzsche, would have allowed Arab philosophy as a whole “a past *a posteriori* from which [it] might spring, as against that from which [it] do[es] spring.”³⁴ Indeed, years later, a former student mused that he “lived” two distinct forms of existentialism (Western and Sufi) rather than one.³⁵

The Lebanese philosopher Charles Malik taught Heidegger in Beirut and had even studied under him at the University of Freiburg, but it was Badawi who dominated the philosophical discussions of his day with this promise of a new philosophy.³⁶ By 1950, young Arab intellectuals who wanted to read about existentialism in Arabic found Badawi’s work about individualism, authenticity, angst, responsibility, and freedom readily available.³⁷

Yet despite existentialism’s philosophical promise to liberate Arab subjectivity from the constraints of European cosmology, it was not clear what young people could *do* with it. Even though, during the 1950s and 1960s, Badawi was the most serious existentialist philosopher in the region, seeing it largely as an academic pursuit for its own sake, his existentialism was not, so to speak, “operational” enough, for it lacked a real-life application and a political and ethical community to support it.³⁸ It was, as the philosophy itself held, a one-man project of radical individualism that eventually functioned primarily as an important philosophical reference source for future writers in the Arab world as well as in Africa.³⁹ And there was also another problem: Badawi had nothing to say yet about “commitment” and Sartre, the “other” existentialist.⁴⁰

Indeed, while Badawi’s existentialism was making its very slow debut as a general frame of reference, the storm of Sartrean existentialism was gathering in the East. Having arrived in the Arab world on the eve of an intellectual changing of the guard,

of Philosophy 12, no. 2 (2008): 349–357. For a revisionist assessment of the relationship between Heidegger, East Asian thought, and comparative philosophy, see Stella Sandford, “Going Back: Heidegger, East Asia and ‘the West,’” *Radical Philosophy* 120 (July/August 2003): 11–22.

³⁴ Philosophical and legal synthesis had been on the minds of Arab intellectuals since the 1890s and was especially promoted by the famous reformist Shaykh Muhammad ‘Abduh (d. 1905). Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Use and Abuse of History* (New York, 1957), 21–22.

³⁵ “Hiwar ma’ al-Mufakkir al-Taqaaddumi Mahmud Amin al-‘Alim,” *Adab wa Naqd* 1, no. 21 (1986): 99–117, here, 102.

³⁶ Charles Malik of the American University of Beirut was a graduate of Harvard. He taught modern philosophy and was not concerned with the issue of synthesis and compatibility with Islamic philosophy. While serving as a diplomat during the late 1940s, he assisted Eleanor Roosevelt in drafting the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Habib C. Malik, “The Reception of Kierkegaard in the Arab World,” in Jon Stewart, ed., *Kierkegaard’s International Reception*, vol. 3: *The Near East, Asia, Australia and the Americas* (Farnham, UK, 2009), 39–95, here 41–49. For other young Arab philosophers who applied phenomenology to Islamic philosophy, see Hanafi, “Phenomenology and Islamic Philosophy.”

³⁷ By 1950, Badawi had published fourteen short books on philosophy. His most popular book was *al-Insaniyya wa-l-Wujudiyah*.

³⁸ The great irony was that in his personal life during the 1940s, Badawi was heavily involved in radical, and sometimes violent, nationalist organizations. By his own admission, he was a member of the semi-fascist “Young Egypt,” and early on he had been a Nazi sympathizer. Badawi, *Sirat Hayati*, 1: 213–223.

³⁹ Mourad Wahba, “Contemporary Moslem Philosophies in North Africa,” in Emmanuel Chukwudi Eze, ed., *African Philosophy: An Anthology* (Oxford, 2000), 50–55.

⁴⁰ Badawi did not write about commitment. Later in life, he argued that Sartre had nothing to offer by way of philosophy and added: “I do not appreciate him at all philosophically.” *Sirat Hayati*, 1: 183.

it was initially met with skepticism by established writers. The text that represented Sartre in the Middle East was not his major philosophical oeuvre, *Being and Nothingness* (1943), which was not even translated until 1966, but his 1945 contributions to *Les Temps modernes*, which were later delivered as public lectures and published as *Qu'est-ce que la littérature?*⁴¹ As far as mainstream Arab thinkers were concerned, Sartre's politicization of culture was a threat that required their immediate attention.

As one of the foremost late architects and bearers of modern Arab culture (the *nahda*), the prolific Taha Husayn was the first to grasp the intellectual appeal of Sartre's articles in *Les Temps modernes*, and he reacted to them with a clear sense of urgency.⁴² In Husayn's view, *Qu'est-ce que la littérature?* critically examined the relationship between the writer and society, making the argument that since writing is a consequential form of acting/being, intellectuals should assume political responsibility for their work and the circumstances that condition it. This call for responsibility-cum-professional action was conjoined in Sartre's concept of commitment (*engagement*). Although the philosophical concern of commitment was human freedom and authentic existence, its practical application was "something for which [one] is prepared to die."⁴³ This "something" was widely understood as a political cause, and almost overnight, commitment as total submersion in the political became a mainstay of Sartrean existentialism.⁴⁴

In dealing with the enormous potential appeal of commitment to disillusioned young Arabs, Husayn argued that, historically speaking, writers had always had more options to choose from than the alleged two Sartrean choices of engaged/progressive versus detached/reactionary. He also maintained that *engagement* was a specific response to the unique European realities of the 1930s and to the much-regretted passivity of Sartre's generation prior to the war. Since these European circumstances had no parallel in the Middle East, Sartre's notion of commitment was culturally void.⁴⁵ In his lengthy meditation on Sartre's concerns (what we write, why we write, and to whom we write), Husayn invoked his generation's apolitical notion of literature as "art for art's sake." In the mid-1950s, this specific conception of intellectual

⁴¹ However, in a series of critical essays on Sartre's existential philosophy, Naguib Baladi referred to *Being and Nothingness*. Baladi, "Jean-Paul Sartre wa mawaqifuhu," *al-Katib al-Misri*, April 1946, 427–434. See also the subsequent articles in June and July 1946, 50–59 and 277–283 respectively.

⁴² The *nahda* (Renaissance) was a mid-nineteenth-century project of cultural modernization. Arab intellectual intellectuals later expanded its meaning to cover the Arab experience of modernity as a whole. The history, meaning, and scope of the *nahda* are currently being reevaluated to the extent that Arab intellectuals often speak of various *nahdas*. For a standard, but entirely outdated, history of the *nahda*, see Albert Hourani, *Arabic Thought in the Liberal Age, 1798–1939* (1962; rev. ed., Cambridge, 1989). See also Elizabeth Suzanne Kassab, *Contemporary Arab Thought: Cultural Critique in Contemporary Perspective* (New York, 2009), chap. 1.

⁴³ In Sartre's classic existentialist novel *The Age of Reason* (1945), the protagonist, Mathieu, famously exclaims: "I am not proud of my life, and I'm penniless. My freedom? It's a burden to me; for years past I have been free, and to no purpose. I simply long to exchange it for a good sound certainty . . . I agree with you that no one can be a man who has not discovered something for which he is prepared to die." The novel is indebted to the main ideas of *Being and Nothingness*. Jean-Paul Sartre, *The Age of Reason*, trans. Eric Sutton (1947; repr., New York, 2001), 122.

⁴⁴ Even though it is often understood in this way, Sartre's notion of commitment was far from a straightforward call for politics. In fact, it was just one of the essential elements in his quest for authenticity or, in his words, the "complete consciousness of being embarked." Nonetheless, because Sartre led a politically engaged life, his non-political meanings of existentialism were easy to ignore. David E. Cooper, *Existentialism: A Reconstruction* (Oxford, 1990), 172–177.

⁴⁵ Taha Husayn, "al-Adab bayna al-Itisal wa-l-Infisal," *al-Katib al-Misri*, August 1946, 373–388.

labor was to become the focus of a fierce generational debate. Lastly, maintaining his focus on his mission to discredit committed literature, Husayn criticized Sartre's unfortunate exclusion of poetry and the visual arts from the categories of committed literary engagement.⁴⁶

But Husayn also ventured into the political sphere. The overwhelming demand for action and its manifestation in the political violence of the mid-1940s—specifically the murder of the Egyptian prime minister, Mahmud Fahmi al-Nuqrashi, in 1949; three consecutive military coups in Syria; urban riots in Iraq; and mass student demonstrations in Egypt—indicated that young people did not believe in separating the intellectual from the political. They wanted ideas to instigate real and immediate change, and they rejected the ineffectiveness of corrupt democratic institutions and their tendency to engage in endless deliberations. As a senior member of a generation of old *udaba*, or cultural luminaries, who perceived politics as an indirect extension of culture, Husayn feared the potential of commitment to embed the cultural in the political. Commitment was therefore a cultural menace.⁴⁷

Husayn's fear of commitment was prophetic, but not all of the members of his generation viewed Sartre's existentialism in the same light. Salama Musa, an Egyptian Fabian ideologue who was no stranger to a prison cell, published *Literature to the Masses (al-Adab li-l-sha'b)* in 1961, a text that embraced Sartre and challenged Husayn to answer the question "What is his message, and how does it serve humanity?"⁴⁸ 'Abbas Mahmud al-'Aqqad, a prolific humanist, rejected the individualism of existentialism, but commended its protection of freedom. He also reminded his readers that beyond Sartre, existentialism was a substantial and complex philosophical tradition.⁴⁹ Somewhat ironically, in warning the young about the dangers of commitment, Husayn gave this burgeoning intellectual movement its Arabic name: *iltizam*.⁵⁰ Young Arab decolonizers were now free to use it as they saw fit.

IF BADAWI PROMOTED THE deeply philosophical and politically disinterested brand of existentialism, the journalist, literary critic, and novelist Suhayl Idris endorsed Sar-

⁴⁶ For reasons that had to do with philosophy of language and representation, Sartre excluded poetry (as well as other non-representational arts, including music) from the list of committed modes of expression. Although he later reversed his position, Arab critics of all stripes found the omission of poetry—historically a major form of committed expression in Islamic culture—incomprehensible. Anwar al-Ma'ddawi and 'Abd al-Wahhab al-Bayati were among those who critiqued Sartre. Al-Ma'ddawi, "al-Adab al-Multazim," *al-Adab*, February 1953, 14–15; Barada, "Tahawwulat mafhum al-iltizam fi-l-adab al-'Arabi al-hadith," in Barada, ed., *Tahawwulat Mafhum al-Iltizam fi-l-Adab al-'Arabi al-Hadith* (Beirut, 2003), 8–47, here 37; 'Abd al-Wahhab al-Bayati, *Tajribati al-shi'riya* (Beirut, 1968), 37.

⁴⁷ Husayn never acknowledged the limitations of the *nahda* to engender positive political change through ordinary parliamentary life. He had already published *Mustaqbal al-Thaqafa fi Misr (The Future of Culture in Egypt)* (Cairo, 1938), a daring defense of the *nahda* that was nonetheless oblivious of the main problems of the postcolonial era. This blindness characterized other *nahdawi* figures as well and put them on a collision course with the younger generation, whose belief in democratic constitutional life was gradually eroding.

⁴⁸ Salama Musa saw Sartre's commitment as a model for intellectual action, which he himself practiced throughout his life. His systematic criticism of the monarchy landed him in jail. Musa, *Ha'ula alamuni* (Cairo, 1966), 271–280; Musa, *al-Adab li-l-Sha'b* (Cairo, 1961), 12–13.

⁴⁹ 'Abbas Mahmud al-'Aqqad, *'Aqa'id al-Mufakkirin fi-l-Qarn al-'Ishrin* (Cairo, 1968), 141–155. See a reprint of two essays from the late 1940s, al-'Aqqad, *Bayna al-Kutub wa-l-Nas* (Beirut, 1966), 15–33.

⁵⁰ Originally coined as the Arabic term for the French *engagement*, *iltizam* ultimately prevailed at the expense of the term *indiwa*. Husayn, "al-Adab bayna al-Itisal wa-l-Infisal."

tre's political existentialism.⁵¹ By the mid-1950s, it overshadowed Badawi's enterprise, signifying the triumph of literature over philosophy as a vehicle for postcolonial thought. Born in Beirut in 1923 to a lower-middle-class Sunni family, Idris grew up in a colonial atmosphere in which the urban middle class tried to appropriate the culture of the French occupiers while, paradoxically, also resisting it. This explains how he matured as both a Francophone and an avid nationalist who systematically nurtured two paths: the universal and the particular.

Idris's gift for letters became evident at an early age, and against all odds, especially financial ones, he pursued his passion all the way to the Sorbonne, where he earned his doctorate. There, between 1949 and 1952, he would write one of the first studies of the Arabic short story. When Idris arrived in Paris, existentialism was in full flower. He found a city that was dominated by the literature and theater of the existentialists and whose young intellectuals had become increasingly committed to the Sartrean idea that words are action. Impressed by this scene, he and other Arab intellectuals set out to create a corresponding literature for their own generation. As the Egyptian economist, political prisoner, and future Third World activist Isma'îl Sabri 'Abdallah explained, "The important thing in the late 1940s was not only to free our country, but to acquire the knowledge to do so."⁵²

As the Arab world entered the phase of decolonization, an entire cohort of young intellectuals flocked to the city, choosing the freedom of Paris for their project of emancipating Arab culture. Powered by sugar and caffeine, the phenomenon of Third-Worldism gained momentum in Europe's cafés.⁵³ Indeed, no one who visited Paris following World War II could avoid seeing that cafés were the focal point of intellectual exchange, social happenings, and exhibitionist behavior.⁵⁴ Around 1950, a short visit to the Café Dupont, a local favorite of Arab students, was all that was needed to meet the next generation of Arab intellectuals.⁵⁵ It was an international scene where they could interact with like-minded people from places such as Congo, Senegal, Cameroon, Togo, Upper Volta, and Cambodia. As the developmental economist Samir Amin later noted, he and his peers shared not only in the association of freedom with personal and collective dignity, but in something that would come to be called a Third World condition.⁵⁶

In the eyes of a foreigner such as Idris, existentialism was not simply an idea or a philosophy but an active scene, a daily performance of people who *did* things like sex, jazz, and wild dancing. The sharp contrast between the lived freedom of Paris

⁵¹ After the 1952 Revolution in Egypt, however, Badawi was asked to serve on the committee that drafted the new constitution and contribute his ideas about freedom and duties. That was his only political engagement with Egypt's revolutionary regime. This constitution was never implemented. Malik, "The Reception of Kierkegaard in the Arab World," 62.

⁵² David Tresilian, "Ismail Sabri Abdullah: Mapping the Arab Future," *al-Ahram Weekly*, July 4, 1991.

⁵³ Contrary to many studies on Third-Worldism, the movement did not simply start with the drama of Bandung; it began with the formation of an international intelligentsia based in Europe. See, for instance, Prashad, *The Darker Nations*.

⁵⁴ For café existentialism, see Cooper, *Existentialism*, 2, 12, 96, 170, 171.

⁵⁵ For example, from Tunisia, al-Shadhali al-Qalibi (future minister of culture), Ahmad bin Salif (minister of finance), and Mahmud Mas'adi (playwright and future minister of education); from Morocco, 'Abdallah Ibrahim (future prime minister). Badawi, *Sirat Hayati*, 2: 195.

⁵⁶ For the postcolonial generation and the Third World, see Samir Amin, *Mudhakkirati* (Beirut, 2006), 75–89.

and the strict code of social, and in particular sexual, behavior at home periodically surfaced in his correspondence. In December 1949, he wrote to his Egyptian colleague Anwar al-Maʿddawi: “Here they cherish affection and love as part of their life, whereas we in the East renounce this quality.”⁵⁷ Visibly scandalized, a group of visiting Egyptian journalists wrote home that existentialism was not so much a philosophy as it was a platform for moral laxity and sexual misconduct.⁵⁸ The father of a young Egyptian girl by the name of Liliane refused to let her leave for this city of sin “where people kissed one another in the streets.”⁵⁹ Those who were opposed to such conduct associated it with existentialism and believed that it would bring nothing but egotistic indifference and social decay.⁶⁰

In this atmosphere of existentialism as performance, Idris took the unexpected personal freedom that he experienced as representative of the philosophy of existentialism as a whole and as a model for a collective cultural renaissance at home. “Life here,” he wrote to al-Maʿddawi, “is characterized by a kind of freedom that has no parallel in the East. We are in need of such freedom. Freedom in our lands is suffocated . . . In Paris people can say and do whatever they want . . . and live humanism to its fullest extent . . . However, our freedom of speech is repressed, the freedom of thought is massacred, and the freedom of life outside the boundaries of inherited tradition is virtually nonexistent. We need to learn from the West the love of freedom as it is this love alone that would guarantee us the freedom we yearn for.”⁶¹ Prioritizing this sense of freedom at the expense of systematic thought, he was intellectually selective. Although he was well aware that Sartre was primarily a philosopher, he ignored his philosophical works and read only plays and novels.⁶² For instance, he never ventured into *Being and Nothingness* or into the work of Gabriel Marcel, the person who coined the term “existentialism.” Even Sartre’s *Réflexions sur la question juive*, a text that could have helped to expose his staunch, if well-hidden, support of Zionism, was not approached and was never translated.

In 1953, having returned to Beirut as Dr. Idris, he published his semi-autobiographical novel *al-Hayy al-Latini (The Latin Quarter)*. In this self-described existentialist work, he deals with the individualistic anxiety and conflicts of an Arab intellectual who is torn between East and West, tradition and modernity.⁶³ The similarities to Sartre’s *La nausée* (1938), which also focuses on an individual faced with an overwhelming dilemma, are clear. With such “immediate” sources of inspiration and with so many young Arabs in search of a new tomorrow, some attempts at literary renewal were comical. Such was the case with a young Syrian named ʿAbd al-Rahim al-Shalabi, who sought to “create an entirely new literature that emerged from his specific experience of life.” He worked on this novel for close to a decade. It sold

⁵⁷ Ahmad Muhammad, *Anwar al-Maʿddawi: Asruhu al-Adabi wa Asrar Maʿsatih* (al-Riyad, 1988), 193, 209. See also Suhayl Idris, *Dhikrayat al-Adab wa-l-Hubb* (Beirut, 2002), 85–87.

⁵⁸ Badawi, *Sirat Hayati*, 2: 184.

⁵⁹ Simone de Beauvoir, *All Said and Done* (New York, 1974), 378.

⁶⁰ For a debate on this issue, see “Maʿrakat al-Wujudiya,” *al-Adab*, November 1955, 72–73.

⁶¹ His letters gave his friends the impression that Paris was an endless carnival. Al-Maʿddawi half-jokingly inquired: “Are you spending your time in the nests of the existentialists, have you seen Simone de Beauvoir, have you walked behind the coffin of André Gide?” Muhammad, *Anwar al-Maʿddawi*, 190; Idris, *Dhikrayat al-adab wa-l-Hubb*, 103.

⁶² Muhammad, *Anwar al-Maʿddawi*, 196, 207, 210; Idris, *Dhikrayat al-Adab wa-l-Hubb*, 106.

⁶³ M. M. Badawi, *A Short History of Modern Arabic Literature* (Oxford, 1993).

two copies. Badawi, who recorded this episode, took it as an example—actually, more of a caricature—of compatriots who lived existentialism as style without content and as practice without philosophy.⁶⁴ It was Paris's carnival that mattered most.

Idris had also been making plans to publish a literary magazine, with an agenda modeled on Sartrean existentialism. In August 1952, he wrote to al-Ma'ddawi, "we are aiming for literature that is called '*iltizam*' or '*indiwa*'"—committed literature.⁶⁵ A year later, the first issue of *al-Adab* came out. It immediately became a cultural touchstone, prioritizing existentialism as literary action. This groundbreaking magazine would remain the key literary venue for decades to come. Its bold mission statement reads like the creed of an entire generation:

The present situation of Arab countries makes it imperative for every citizen, each in his own field, to mobilize all his efforts for the express object of liberating the homeland, raising its political, social and intellectual level. In order that literature may be truthful it is essential that it should not be isolated from the society in which it exists. . . . The kind of literature which this Review calls for and encourages is the literature of commitment (*iltizam*) which issues from Arab society and pours back into it.⁶⁶

A near-copy of Sartre's agenda for *Les Tempes modernes*, *al-Adab*'s message spread through Cairo, Baghdad, and other intellectual centers with incredible speed. Its premise was that Arab culture was in a state of deep crisis, and that intellectuals could change that situation through writing.⁶⁷

One of the most important expressions of these concerns, and the one that Husayn feared the most, was the accusation by young writers that members of the old-guard *udaba* were living in an ivory tower. Over the next two years, a specific debate about the difference between writers' "detachment," "involvement," and "engagement" would take place in the Arab world.⁶⁸ As part of their plan for cultural renewal, the younger generation reintroduced Sartre's old question: What do we write, why, and for whom? In December 1954, Idris invited Husayn to publicly debate these questions.⁶⁹

Husayn accepted the invitation and arrived in Beirut for what would prove to be a famous debate with the literary critic Ra'if Khuri. They delivered separate lectures: in "The Man of Letters Writes to the Masses," Khuri preached *iltizam* and popular action, while in "The Man of Letters Writes to the Elite," Husayn endorsed political

⁶⁴ Badawi, *Sirat Hayati*, 2: 194.

⁶⁵ Muhammad, *Anwar al-Ma'ddawi*, 231–232.

⁶⁶ Other parts of the manifesto read: "It is the conviction of this Review that literature is an intellectual activity directed to a great and noble end, which is that of effective literature that interacts with society: it influences society just as much as it is influenced by it . . . The main aim of this Review is to provide a platform for those fully conscious writers who live the experience of their age and who could be regarded as its witness. In reflecting the needs of Arab society and in expressing its preoccupations they pave the way for the reformers to put things right with all the effective means available." Quoted in M. M. Badawi, "Commitment in Contemporary Arabic Literature," *Cahiers d'histoire mondiale* 14, no. 4 (1972): 858–879, here 868.

⁶⁷ "Mihnat al-Adab," *al-Adab*, April 1953, 70–71; "Shakawa al-Adab al-'Arabi al-Hadith," *al-Adab*, May 1953, 1–5; "Azmat al-Majallat al-Adabiyya fi-l-'Alam al-'Arabi," *al-Adab*, October 1953, 12–16; Raja al-Naqqash, "fi Azmat al-Naqd al-'Arabi al-Mu'asir," *al-Adab*, November 1954, 8–10, 63–66.

⁶⁸ For a review of the Iraqi debate in the newspaper *al-Naba*, see "Muhimat al-Adab wa Waj'ib al-Adib," *al-Adab*, January 1953, 74.

⁶⁹ Muhammad Sabir 'Arab and Ahmad Zakariyya al-Shalaq, eds., *Awraq Taha Husayn wa Murasalatuhu*, 2 vols. (Cairo, 2007), 1: 266.

neutrality and what he called elitism.⁷⁰ Husayn conceded the debate, and the triumph of *iltizam* and, respectively, of Idris's journal was secured. This event also signified the marginalization of the old-guard intelligentsia and its two leading periodicals, *al-Risala* and *al-Thaqafa*, which ceased publication around that time. With this shift, there was talk of Beirut's becoming the capital of Arab thought, at the expense of Cairo, the battered *nahda*'s center.⁷¹

With *iltizam* as an occupational and ethical habit, *al-Adab*'s community was now at the forefront of nationalist culture, thus symbolizing a certain marginalization of philosophy. In 1955, when Badawi pointed out this weakness, he was immediately dismissed by literary existentialists.⁷² But he had a point. *Qu'est-ce que la littérature?*, the key text from which Idris's existentialists borrowed their active world view, was poorly translated into Arabic, by a high school student, no less, and not until 1963—a decade too late.⁷³ As the thinker Jurj Tarabishi retrospectively observed, the dominant intellectual pattern of the time was one of consumption, proliferation, and action prior to translation and reflection. And he had a unique perspective on the matter: as he shamefully admitted in 2003, it was he who, as a teenager, had produced the poor 1963 translation of *Qu'est-ce que la littérature?*⁷⁴

The dire circumstances of a younger generation who needed to radically and quickly transform their colonial environment undoubtedly led them to embrace a mode of action that divorced existentialism from its ontological context and philosophical origins as outlined by Badawi.⁷⁵ In old age, Idris acknowledged the problem:

As for me, I did not understand existentialism as a philosophy but as a social and political doctrine which put the values of liberty and responsibility, so urgently needed in the Arab world, into the center of ethical behavior.⁷⁶

The radical reduction of existentialism to *iltizam* would prompt Marxists to invest *iltizam* with their own political meaning.

AS LONG AS IN MOST Arab states a sizable peasantry was still exploited by landed elites—as long, that is, as social justice was still a central concern—Marxism and

⁷⁰ For the complete texts, see the May 1955 special issue of *al-Adab*. See also the discussion in Salma Jayyusi, *Trends and Movements in Modern Arabic Poetry*, 2 vols. (Leiden, 1977), 2: 576.

⁷¹ "Liman wa Limadha Naktub?," *al-Adab*, November 1954, 4–7; "al-Za'ama al-Adabiyya bayna Bayrut wa-l-Qahira," *al-Adab*, February 1954, 69–70; "al-Mas'uliyya fi-l-Adab," *al-Adab*, August 1954, 17.

⁷² *Al-Adab*, November 1955, 72–73.

⁷³ For a critical review of the translation, see Halil al-Hindawi, "Ma Huwa al-Adab?," *al-Adab*, February 1963, 49–50.

⁷⁴ Jurj Tarabishi, "Shahadat Nasir Sabiq li-l-Iltizam," in Barada, *Tahawwulat mafhum al-Iltizam fi-l-Adab al-'Arabi al-Hadith*, 60–69, here 61.

⁷⁵ In an attempt to compensate for the missing philosophy, the journal eclectically published philosophical works in translation. See, for instance, "Falsafat al-Zawahir," *al-Adab*, August 1953, 52–60; Renè Habashi, "Thalath Rijal iza 'al-'Abth," *al-Adab*, March 1954, 10–15.

⁷⁶ Verena Klemm, "Different Notions of Commitment (*Iltizām*) and Committed Literature (*al-adab al-multazim*) in the Literary Circles of the Mashriq," *Middle Eastern Literatures* 3, no. 1 (January 2000): 51–62, here 55. Yet in 2003 he defended the reduction of existentialism to *iltizam*. Suhayl Idris, "Abtal Sartre: Laysu Ka'inat Tajridiyya," in Barada, *Tahawwulat Mafhum al-Iltizam fi-l-Adab al-'Arabi al-Hadith*, 48–59.

communism remained highly potent forces. Although Marxism was often repressed and was politically outlawed in Egypt, Syria, and Iraq, it had a solid base of support among the literary elite.⁷⁷ Thus it was only a matter of time until these thinkers reacted to the tide of *al-Adab's* existentialism, and to a lesser extent to that of Badawi. Their reaction was to appropriate existentialism and change its meaning, coloring it red.

One book captured the nature of this response. In 1955, the Marxist literary critic Mahmud Amin al-ʿAlim and the mathematician-turned-literary critic ʿAbd al-ʿAzim Anis launched an unprecedented assault on the established literary class in Egypt.⁷⁸ As part of the power grab by Egypt's new revolutionary regime, al-ʿAlim and Anis had been included in the March 1954 purge of university professors. Dispossessed by the regime, unlike Idris, al-ʿAlim and Anis wanted radical change and thus sought not to inherit the mantle of their elderly peers but to burn it.⁷⁹ With *On Egyptian Culture (Fi-l-thaqafa al-Misriyya)*, they hoped to accomplish two things: first, to harness the prevailing sense of commitment to social causes and translate this bond into the new language of socialist realism; and second, to detach commitment from radical individualism and rearticulate it in terms of class.⁸⁰ This generational debate used literature to stake out a new political position.

From its inception, *On Egyptian Culture* dismissed the *udaba's* notion of literature as mired in passivity and submission to colonialism. It argued that the modern universalism of Husayn and his peers was naïve and elitist, lacked cultural specificity, and did not reflect Arabs' historical experience.⁸¹ By this point, the role of the *udaba* as a generation that "was dedicated to the spread of enlightenment to the masses and convinced that when this was done the masses would inevitably be one with it" was widely criticized.⁸²

Although the authors' comprehensive diagnosis focused on Egyptian intellectuals, it was valid elsewhere in the Arab East as well and was heavily debated in Beirut, Damascus, and Baghdad.⁸³ In place of the *udaba's* "art for art's sake" perspective, al-ʿAlim and Anis aggressively promoted the view that art, literature, and culture should be authentic expressions of "the social." In their words, "culture is not built on a single firm foundation; it is the result of a complex interactive process involving society as a whole."⁸⁴ Thus they expected writers to find the "social" in the "literary." As ʿAbd al-Wahhab al-Bayati put it, "The search for poetic form, which

⁷⁷ Orit Bashkin, *The Other Iraq: Pluralism and Culture in Hashemite Iraq* (Stanford, Calif., 2009), 73–85; Joel Beinin and Zachary Lockman, *Workers on the Nile: Nationalism, Islam and the Egyptian Working Class, 1882–1954* (Princeton, N.J., 1987), 310–362; Selma Botman, *The Rise of Egyptian Communism, 1939–1970* (Syracuse, N.Y., 1988).

⁷⁸ See Sulayman al-Hakim, *ʿIṭirafat Shaykh al-Shuyūʿiyin al-ʿArab Mahmud Amin al-ʿAlim* (Cairo, 2006), 36.

⁷⁹ For Idris's invitation letters to Husayn, see Sabir ʿArab and Shalaq, *Awraq Taha Husayn*, 1: 246, 255, 264, 280.

⁸⁰ This title paraphrased, and thus dismissed, the above-mentioned 1938 blueprint *Mustaqbal al-Thaqafa fi-Misr* by Husayn.

⁸¹ Mahmud Amin al-ʿAlim and ʿAbd al-ʿAzim Anis, *Fi-l-Thaqafa al-Misriyya*, 2nd ed. (Rabat, 1988), 17–37, 56–63. See also the introduction by the Marxist Lebanese critic Husayn Muruwa, 5–15.

⁸² Pierre Cachia, *An Overview of Modern Arabic Literature* (Edinburgh, 1990), 18–19.

⁸³ The book was originally published in Beirut and was extensively debated there. The first edition by an Egyptian publisher appeared only in 1989.

⁸⁴ They considered religion of secondary importance. Al-ʿAlim and Anis, *Fi-l Thaqafa al-Misriyya*, 17–19.

did not exist in our old poetry, and the metaphysical revolt against reality as a whole . . . led us to discover the wretched reality in which the masses live.”⁸⁵

This discovery prompted Marxists to argue that socially committed literary content overrode the uncommitted and free-floating nature of intellectual activity and thus necessitated a new form of expression—namely, socialist realism. A year later, al-‘Alim wrote: “The new realism adopts an attitude to life and clearly distinguishes itself by the strong bond between the writer’s participation in the events that take place and their treatment.”⁸⁶ To those who were well versed in the intellectual world of the mid-1950s, the conceptual proximity of Marxist *iltizam* to *al-Adab*’s Sartrean existentialism was quite evident.

Al-‘Alim and Anis’s next step was to attack Badawi’s Heideggerian existentialism as the alleged intellectual forerunner of radical individualism.⁸⁷ While they admitted that it was a significant school of thought with indigenous foundations in Islamic mysticism, they found it ethically flawed because it promoted a self-centered and socially alienated human being with no sense of social responsibility.⁸⁸ They agreed that individualism was a valid value, “yet not as a detached and entirely independent entity but as an element of a socioeconomic reality.”⁸⁹ For them, therefore, “[Badawi’s] existentialism was a profoundly individualistic philosophy that denied the objective truthfulness of human reality.”⁹⁰

Badawi’s existentialism was indeed apolitical, as it was a pledge to one’s authentic way of being, which, modeled on Heidegger, was antithetical to “a self-imposed commitment to attitude and action.”⁹¹ Since Badawi was the only Arab writer who wrote regularly on existentialism, al-‘Alim and Anis treated him as the official representative of the existentialist line of thought as a whole. This was intellectually dishonest, and it was based on a misreading of the differences between Sartrean and Heideggerian existentialism.⁹² Yet such technicalities made little difference. In their influential book, al-‘Alim and Anis replaced the individual in existentialism with society and harnessed it to their cause. In keeping with this intellectual “takeover,” al-‘Alim, who had previously contributed to *al-Adab*, left the journal.⁹³

The response? Almost no one among the marginalized old-guard intelligentsia rebutted the book.⁹⁴ Al-‘Aqqad said that he did not debate with communists, but

⁸⁵ Bayati, *Tajribati al-Shi‘riya*, 20.

⁸⁶ Quoted in Mahmud Ghanayim, “Between Politics and Literary Criticism,” *Poetics Today* 15, no. 2 (Summer 1994): 321–338, here 327.

⁸⁷ At the same time, they ignored the many poets and writers who began taking Sartre’s and Albert Camus’s individualism to heart, such as Badr Shakir al-Sayyab, Khalil al-Khuri, and Adunis. Jayyusi, *Trends and Movements in Modern Arabic Poetry*, 2: 644–648.

⁸⁸ Al-‘Alim and Anis, *Fi-l-Thaqafa al-Misriyya*, 63–64.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 67.

⁹⁰ The holistic and all-encompassing terms of discussion (“objective truthfulness of human reality”) illustrate the high intellectual stakes involved in these debates. *Ibid.*

⁹¹ Cooper, *Existentialism*, 72.

⁹² The cause for this misreading was that whereas for Sartre *Dasein* was a conscious subject, for Badawi (and of course for Heidegger himself) *Dasein* was an un-conscious subject and a way of being. In his 1947 *Letter on Humanism*, Heidegger strongly disapproved of Sartre’s reading of *Dasein*. Kleinberg, *Generation Existential*, 18.

⁹³ He joined *al-Thaqafa al-Wataniyya*. Klemm, “Different Notions of Commitment,” 56.

⁹⁴ Husayn reiterated a standard *nahdawi* view according to which literary form (*shakl*) is independent of theme and content (*madmun*) and must remain that way. His article “Surat al-Adab” was originally published in the daily newspaper *al-Jumhuriya* on June 5, 1954. It was republished in Taha Husayn,

Tawfiq al-Hakim, who was the subject of much criticism, made one last call for reason, balance, and moderation.⁹⁵ His plea went unanswered.⁹⁶ For its part, *al-Adab's* editorial line was critical of the Marxist attempt to appropriate *iltizam*, diminishing the importance of the individual and using class, and class warfare, as the ultimate bearers of *iltizam*.⁹⁷ Thereafter, the meaning of *iltizam*, and of existentialism more broadly, diverged, becoming tied in with multiple internal and external projects. Chief among them was the Third World revolt of the 1960s.⁹⁸

WITH THE CHANGING OF THE intellectual guard in the early 1950s, it dawned on young Arab intellectuals that they were part of a Third World community of fate, with a shared set of cultural, socioeconomic, and political challenges. However, even after the Third World discovered itself at the 1955 Bandung Conference, its existence as a viable community was almost entirely rhetorical. Separated geographically and facing the multiple political challenges of the Cold War, until 1960 it existed mainly as a community of speeches.⁹⁹ Egypt's revolutionary radio station Sawt al-'Arab, "the Voice of the Arabs," was the ultimate manifestation of this rhetorical existence. All of that changed with the Algerian War of Independence, which gave Third-Worldism a healthy dose of reality and a unity of global purpose. At the center of this development was the Arab intelligentsia, which now used the legacy of *iltizam* in conjunction with Third-Worldism to articulate the Arab experience of decolonization in global terms. Sartre's enthusiastic involvement in this movement created the illusion of a united front bound by his ideas and their creative reformulations in the Arab lands.

Early on in the process of decolonization, Jawaharlal Nehru, Gamal Abd al-Nasser, Sukarno, and Kwame Nkrumah spoke often of responsibility, sacrifice, and freedom. These familiar themes indeed underlined the Third World struggle for liberation, but they were intellectually tied to particular projects of nationalism,

Khisam wa Naqd (Beirut, 1977), 72–79. Richard Jacquemond, *Conscience of the Nation: Writers, State, and Society in Modern Egypt*, trans. David Tresilian (Cairo, 2008).

⁹⁵ Ibrahim Fathi, "al-Sira al-Dhatiya al-Siyasiya li-'Abd al-'Azim Anis," *Alif: Journal of Comparative Poetics*, no. 22 (2002): 76–93, here 90.

⁹⁶ Al-Hakim made an attempt to market the soft liberal humanism of the *nahda* as a workable answer to the cultural needs of the young: "[My usage of] the word equilibrium should not be taken here literally, to mean balance, symmetry, or even moderation and intermediateness . . . [Rather], in this book, equilibrium means the movement of both acceptance and opposition to another [human] undertaking." Tawfiq al-Hakim, *al-Ta'duliya: Madhhabi fi al-Haya wa-l-Fann (The Equilibrium: My Creed in Life and Art)* (Cairo, 1955), 121.

⁹⁷ *Al-Adab's* editors had been aware of the Marxist interest in existentialism since 1953. Anwar al-Ma'ddawi, "al-Adab al-Multazam," *al-Adab*, February 1953, 12–15.

⁹⁸ Thereafter, there were at least two prominent and competing conceptions of commitment in the postcolonial *mashriq* (East). Verena Klemm, "Ideals and Reality: The Adaptation of European Ideas of Literary Commitment in the Post-Colonial Middle East—The Case of 'Abdalwahhāb al-Bayātī," in Stephan Guth, Priska Furrer, and Johann Christoph Bürgel, eds., *Conscious Voices: Concepts of Writing in the Middle East* (Beirut, 1999), 143–152, here 147. Many young intellectuals, including the would-be judge and critical thinker Tariq al-Bishri, found their inspiration in Marxist *iltizam* and readily tied their political future to it. Al-Bishri, *Shakhsiyat wa Qadaya Mu'asira* (Cairo, 2002), 71–75.

⁹⁹ Emphasizing the rhetorical existence of Third World political solidarity and its struggle to come into its own does not mean that their Cold War challenges with regard to capital, goods, expertise, armaments, and political backing were not real and meaningful.

which only atomized the experience of decolonization rather than expanding it. Indeed, until 1962, when Sartre, Fanon, and others invented an “analytic strategy of moving from the Algerian situation to the universal struggle between colonized and colonizer,” there was not much to hold on to by way of forging an integrated international front for decolonization.¹⁰⁰

Instead, there was nationally based anticolonial action, which only intensified the need for a comprehensive theory—a theology, in fact—of struggle and liberation. Iran’s failed nationalization of its oil resources and similar, yet less pronounced, developments in Venezuela and Mexico are famous examples of atomized action, as is Vietnam’s 1954 victory over the French at Dien Bien Phu. Later came Nasser’s astonishing 1956 stand in Suez, and his successful survival of the last spasm of colonial “gunboat diplomacy.” Nasser the man inspired the Pan-Arab movement of Nasserism, following a pattern that articulated a new standard for resistance.¹⁰¹ But as he realized early on in his career, the search for grand collective designs such as Pan-Arab unity was heavily dependent on an Afro-Asian horizon of action.¹⁰² And so, however successful the local struggles of the 1950s may have been, it was the Algerian War of Independence—what one author characterizes as “The Call from Algeria”—that brought the Non-Aligned Movement and Third-Worldism into sharp focus.¹⁰³

But which exact combination of ideas moved the Third World from the Algerian situation to the universal one? First, Sartre’s 1960 *Critique de la raison dialectique* fused Marxism with existentialism and harnessed this new perspective on behalf of Algeria and the Third World.¹⁰⁴ It also elaborated a theory of collective “otherness” that resonated well with Third World intellectuals.¹⁰⁵ His practical perspective was that “Tiers-mondisme looked to ‘the colonized’ much as Marxism looked to ‘the working class.’”¹⁰⁶ As far as the Arab world was concerned, this synthesis defused some of the tensions of the 1950s and helped to close the ranks between Marxists such as al-‘Alim and the revolutionary individualism of Idris.¹⁰⁷ CIA analysts noted that Sartre’s synthesis of existentialism and Marxism “appears to be consolidating its foothold and continues to give cause for serious concern.”¹⁰⁸ Second, Sartre’s

¹⁰⁰ Shepard, *The Invention of Decolonization*, 72. For existing alternative models of decolonization, one American and the other Leninist, see Odd Arne Westad, *The Global Cold War: Third World Interventions and the Making of Our Times* (New York, 2005), 8–72.

¹⁰¹ For Nasser’s grip on Middle East politics and “his threat” to U.S. interests, see Salim Yaqub, *Containing Arab Nationalism: The Eisenhower Doctrine and the Middle East* (Durham, N.C., 2004).

¹⁰² Gamal Abdel Nasser, *The Philosophy of the Revolution* (Cairo, 1955).

¹⁰³ Robert Malley, *The Call from Algeria: Third Worldism, Revolution, and the Turn to Islam* (Berkeley, Calif., 1996). For the impact of the Algerian revolution elsewhere in the international arena, see Connelly, *A Diplomatic Revolution*.

¹⁰⁴ Sartre’s goal was not to illustrate how existentialism was compatible with orthodox Marxism but to offer a slight correction to Marxist ideology and show how ideas about freedom and individualism could reinvigorate it. For the Arab understanding of this move, see Muta’ Safadi, “Sartir bayna al-Wujudiya wa-l-Markisiyya,” *al-Adab*, December 1964, 4–6, 73–74. See also “Jawlat al-Fikr,” *al-Jumhuriya*, March 2, 1967, 16.

¹⁰⁵ Paige Arthur, *Unfinished Projects: Decolonization and the Philosophy of Jean-Paul Sartre* (New York, 2010), pt. 2.

¹⁰⁶ Shepard, *The Invention of Decolonization*, 72.

¹⁰⁷ Jean-Paul Sartre, *al-Markisiya wa-l-Thawra* (Cairo, 1962); Jurj Tarabishi, *Sartir wa-l-Markisiya* (Beirut, 1964).

¹⁰⁸ The report focused on Poland. “Communist Revisionism and Dissidence,” U.S. National Archives and Records Administration [hereafter NARA], CIA-RDP78-00915R001200120007-8.

groundbreaking work on neocolonialism showed people in politically liberated areas, including the entire Arab East after 1956, that the struggle for decolonization did not end with the technical transfer of power.¹⁰⁹ Decolonization was rather an ongoing process—a way of being. Third, the publication of Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth* in 1961 elevated the discussion to a universal level by detailing the psychological makeup of a Third World condition and prompting the colonized to redeem themselves through anticolonial violence.¹¹⁰ Sartre's riveting 1961 meeting with Fanon opened the way for successful, albeit short-lived, cooperation.¹¹¹ Through his inflammatory preface to Fanon's book, Sartre succeeded in bringing metropolitan public opinion on board with the process of decolonization.¹¹² Taken in their entirety, these developments articulated the global ambition of Third-Worldism. In Europe, "Student radicals hoped that Third-World radicalism would inject meaning and substance into an otherwise moribund global revolutionary project," thus strengthening the bond between two previously unequal partners.¹¹³ The fact that it happened because of an Arab struggle in a place where (a certain version of) existentialism and a vibrant intellectual scene were already in operation explains why, by 1962, major sections of the Arab (as well as Iranian) intelligentsia found themselves speaking in Sartre's Third World voice.¹¹⁴

Third-Worldism was surely understood differently around the globe, but it could not have become prominent in the Arab arena without rigorous intellectual labor.¹¹⁵ There were many kinds of intellectuals (Marxist, socialist, communist, and liberal) engaged in various ideological pursuits and offering different readings of *iltizam*, but it was this specific tradition that allowed Third-Worldist ideas to gain salience in the Arab world. Drawing on the resources of the Arab state, which misleadingly presented itself as the ultimate enabler of both individual and collective freedom, intellectuals of all stripes spoke of commitment to a revolutionary situation.¹¹⁶ Nasser's engagement with African struggles, such as that of Congo, illustrated the state's commitment to the ethos of revolution. From an intellectual point of view,

¹⁰⁹ See the Arabic translation of Sartre's *Colonialisme et néo-colonialisme*: Jean-Paul Sartre, *al-Isti'mar al-Jadid* (Beirut, 1964).

¹¹⁰ Fanon's work was immediately translated into Arabic. See also a translation of Sartre's review of Fanon: "Mu'dhabu al-Ard," *al-Adab*, February 1962, 2–4, 49–53.

¹¹¹ The meeting between Fanon, Sartre, and Beauvoir was arranged by Claude Lanzmann, who wrote: "I have never seen Sartre so fascinated and moved by a man." Fanon died from leukemia six months later. Lanzmann, *Le lièvre de Patagonie* (Paris, 2009), 363.

¹¹² In his *Sartre on Cuba* (Westport, Conn., 1961), Sartre brought the Caribbean and Latin America on board with this process. Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* (New York, 1963); see Sartre's introduction, 7. Noureddine Lamouchi, *Jean-Paul Sartre et le Tiers-Monde: Rhétorique d'un discours anticolonialiste* (Paris, 1996).

¹¹³ Richard Wolin, *The Wind from the East: French Intellectuals, the Cultural Revolution, and the Legacy of the 1960s* (Princeton, N.J., 2010), 29.

¹¹⁴ Suhayl Idris, "Nahnu wa Sartir," *al-Adab*, December 1964, 1. See also the February 1967 special issue of *al-Hilal*. For an analogous understanding of Sartre and Fanon and the role of the Third World intellectual in Iran, see Negin Nabavi, *Intellectuals and the State in Iran: Politics, Discourse, and the Dilemma of Authenticity* (Gainesville, Fla., 2003), 67–106; Hamid Dabashi, "The Poetics of Politics: Commitment in Modern Persian Literature," *Iranian Studies* 18, no. 2/4 (Spring–Autumn 1985): 147–188.

¹¹⁵ As an Arab revolutionary put it, "a revolution without thought and ethics is nothing but chaotic terrorism." Muta' Safadi, "Mitafisiqat al-Thawra," *al-Adab*, September 1964, 67.

¹¹⁶ Muhammad Mandur, "Thawrat al-Adab wa Adab al-Thawra," *al-Adab*, January 1960, 10–11.

this ethos was partially indebted to Albert Camus. Borrowing Camus's notion of metaphysical revolt against reality, 'Abd al-Wahhab al-Bayati wrote: "Whether for the individual or for society as a whole, the revolt against life is the first step in the revolutionary process."¹¹⁷ Camus's idea of commitment to a life of revolution even after the revolution was officially over was compatible with the political realities for Arabs, with neocolonialism, and with the message of Nasserism that the revolutionary situation authentically emerged "from the self" (i.e., that it is existential).¹¹⁸

Taking Camus a step further, when Arab existentialists spoke of revolt, they had in mind Ernesto "Che" Guevara, who was becoming a global symbol of revolt.¹¹⁹ Al-Bayati, who counted himself as an existentialist and a Camusian Third World poet, quoted Guevara's conviction that "what we must create is the man of the twenty-first century."¹²⁰ Thus the remaking of the individual through Sartre's committed responsibility, Camus's sacrifice and revolt, and Fanon's purifying violence and possible martyrdom dovetailed nicely with Arab revolutionary culture and with Third-Worldism as a whole.¹²¹

In the eyes of the Arabs, Sartre was an important symbol as well as an enabler of Third-Worldism. Beyond Algeria, Arabs were impressed by his stand on Cuba and Vietnam and his refusal to accept the 1964 Nobel Prize in Literature (in 1967 he told Egyptian students that the prize was controlled by America).¹²² Through his actions, Sartre led Arabs to believe that the "greatest thinker of freedom in the twentieth century" was philosophically as well as politically invested in the Arab cause as no Western intellectual had ever been before.¹²³ This position further enhanced his reception in the Arab world—especially in Iraq.

¹¹⁷ B. G. Garnham, "Albert Camus: Metaphysical Revolt and Historical Action," *Modern Language Review* 62, no. 2 (April 1967): 248–255; Bayati, *Tajribati al-Shi'riya*, 23. See also Klemm, "Ideals and Reality," 143–152.

¹¹⁸ However, Arab revolutionary thinkers debated the question of the revolt's causes when some ascribed it to the individual, and others, mainly Marxists, to socioeconomic conditions. "Kamu wa Nazriyat al-Tamarrud," *al-Adab*, August 1960, 22–27. One of the main aims of Arab socialism was to reform the Arab subject. The state-endorsed socialist art of 'Abd al-Hadi al-Gazzar beautifully illustrates this point. Liliane Karnouk, *Modern Egyptian Art, 1910–2003* (Cairo, 2005). See also *Abdel Hady El-Gazzar: The Egyptian Painter's Official Web Site*, <http://www.a-elgazzar.com/ar/>.

¹¹⁹ Interestingly, however, although on various occasions Camus, a self-defined non-existentialist, criticized Sartre's excess of individualism and his "propensity toward monologue rather than dialogue," in the Arab world he was mostly indistinguishable from Sartre. Jeffrey C. Isaac, *Arendt, Camus, and Modern Rebellion* (New Haven, Conn., 1992), 121.

¹²⁰ Bayati, *Tajribati al-shi'riya*, 31.

¹²¹ By the mid-1960s, Palestinian guerrilla fighters, and scores of other fighters around the world, had adopted this revolutionary ethos. For instance, Ghlib Halsal, "al-Haribun min al-Huriyya," *al-Adab*, February 1960, 36–43; Taha Riyad, *Filastin: al-Yawm la Ghadan* (Beirut, 1963). This intellectual genealogy helps to explain how people such as Nelson Mandela and Yasser Arafat found themselves together in postcolonial Algeria struggling in different arenas for what they saw as the exact same cause. According to Mandela, who visited the National Liberation Front (FLN), "The situation in Algeria was the closest model to our own in that the rebels faced a large white settler community that ruled the indigenous majority." Mandela, *Long Walk to Freedom* (Boston, 1994), 259. For the military and diplomatic support that the FLN rendered to Arafat's Fatah movement, see Alan Hart, *Arafat: A Political Biography* (Bloomington, Ind., 1984), 133–134.

¹²² "al-Huriya al-Wujudiya fi al-Sanawat al-Akhira kanat Nazwa," *al-Jumhuriya*, March 5, 1967, 12.

¹²³ Bertrand Russell was also appreciated, but his analytical philosophy offered little guidance in the way of liberation. For Sartre as an Arab hero, see Idris, "Nahnu wa Sartir," 1; Arthur, *Unfinished Projects*, 173.

IN HIS 2001 NOVEL *Papa Sartre*, ʿAli Badr revives the Iraqi existentialist scene of the 1960s and its veneration of Sartre. The story’s protagonist, ʿAbd al-Rahman, is “the Sartre of the Arabs,” the man whom “Sartre dispatched to save our nation.” “We are going to make of Baghdad another Paris; we will turn it into the capital of existentialism,” he promises his followers.¹²⁴ In the end, it did not quite work out that way, but through literature and politics, existentialism did begin to conflict with the Arab project of liberation.

Since July 1958, when the Iraqi monarchy was overthrown by a military *coup d’état*, two opposing groups had emerged: the communists and the Baʿthists, each with their own respective intellectual circles.¹²⁵ Although both groups could be branded as “anticolonial nationalists,” their nationalism had stark differences. Led by Egypt’s Nasser, who had just completed the unification of Egypt and Syria (February 1958), the Baʿthists sought to unite the Arab world politically under the banner of Pan-Arab nationalism. The communists, in turn, rejected unification and focused instead on Iraq’s internal socioeconomic problems and the traditional concerns of international communism. Both domestically and internationally, these were divergent approaches to the decolonization of Arab societies. Until his brutal assassination at the hands of the Baʿthists, Iraq’s president (1958–1963), ʿAbd al-Karim Qasim, and his communist allies rejected Nasser’s scheme of unification. The struggle between Nasser’s Egypt, Qasim’s Iraq, and their respective Arab allies was nicknamed the Arab Cold War.¹²⁶ Yet it was anything but cold. During this time, and especially during the February 1963 coup, about five thousand Iraqi intellectuals, ideologues, and rank-and-file activists met an untimely violent death. Massacres, torture, and systematic persecution in the name of ideology became so painfully common that the existential belief in “words as life” took on a particularly gruesome meaning. Arab decolonization experienced an unprecedented level of internal violence.

The view from outside, among historians of decolonization and the Cold War, was that the intellectual underpinnings of this bipolar reality were a *mélange* of Marxism, communism, socialism, and anticolonial nationalism. These ideas made it seem as though Arabs fit into the international ideological structure of the Cold War.¹²⁷ Although such a conclusion would not be entirely wrong, a closer look at Baghdad’s intellectual circles during the 1960s reveals the dominant presence of existentialism and its twin roles as an intellectual buffer zone between feuding communists and Baʿthists and an important agent in the Arab effort to psychologically decolonize the self. Both tasks were urgent, and neither was addressed by the ubiquitous brands of anticolonial nationalism.

¹²⁴ ʿAli Badr, *Baba Sartir* (Beirut, 2001), 34, 60.

¹²⁵ The Baʿth Party is a Pan-Arab socialist party that was formed in 1940 by Michel ʿAflaq and Salah al-Din al-Bitar. Although it was centered in Damascus, it spread to Iraq, where it gained power briefly in 1963, and then again from 1968 until 2003. The party’s mission was to radically transform and resurrect (*baʿth*) the Arab world. Calling for “One Arab world with an eternal mission,” and preaching “Unity, Liberty, and Socialism,” the Baʿthists’ viewed their ultimate goal as the liberation of the individual from all social, political, and psychological restraints. “Baʿth Party,” in Edmund A. Ghareeb, *Historical Dictionary of Iraq* (Oxford, 2004), 44–45.

¹²⁶ Malcolm Kerr, *The Arab Cold War, 1958–1964: A Study of Ideology in Politics* (London, 1965).

¹²⁷ See, for instance, Elie Podeh, *The Quest for Hegemony in the Arab World: The Struggle over the Baghdad Pact* (Leiden, 1995).

Because of the weakness of Iraqi cultural institutions, Baghdadi, and by extension Iraqi, intellectual life took place in cafés. In the words of the poet Sami Mahdi, “Cafés were the only alternative to a cultural life that was devoid of institutions.”¹²⁸ Indeed, dozens of cafés with names such as Waq Waq (a mythical island), al-Baladiyya (“the village”), and al-Barlaman (“the Parliament”) served as the beating heart of Iraq’s public sphere.¹²⁹ Notably, each had its own set of intellectuals and political commitments. Existentialism was predominantly a café phenomenon, represented by poets such as Husayn Mardan, who was crowned the “number one existentialist in Iraq.”¹³⁰ The task of the existentialists was to focus on the individual and create an alternative intellectual space, independent of political partisanship. Mardan’s line “I do not love anything the way I love myself” captures the spirit of political disengagement and the fear of being “lost in politics.”¹³¹

The poet Fadil ‘Azzawi, a political prisoner at the time, also struggled with politics and argued that ideologues had turned *iltizam* into a tool that produced bad politics as well as bad art. He called it a “Ba’thi *iltizam*.”¹³² Others in the Arab world concurred.¹³³ Referring to Sartre’s *Critique de la raison dialectique*, a text that sought ideological accommodation, ‘Azzawi wrote: “I liked Sartre for his attempt to unite the social with the individual; he made a difficult union between Marxism and Existentialism possible.”¹³⁴ Yet no political accommodation would take place in Iraq until 1974.¹³⁵ In the interim there was violence.

Indeed, the repression and violence of the 1960s pushed Iraqi, as well as Egyptian, writers to question the fate of personal freedom. For writers such as Sarkun Bulus, Yusuf al-Haydari, and ‘Adil Kazim, to name only a few, it was a struggle over the fundamentals of human dignity. This effort to salvage the individual used a type of existentialism that was closer to Badawi’s radical individualism than to Idris’s committed collectivism.¹³⁶ As ‘Azzawi recalled, “When I left prison in 1965, my earlier inhibitions were gone. I wanted to eliminate the holy justifications that were related

¹²⁸ “It is not an exaggeration,” states Mahdi, “to say that Iraqi cultural life was the extension of the cafés’ life.” Sami Mahdi, *al-Mawjah al-Sakhibah: Shi’r al-Sittiniyat fi -l- Iraq* (Baghdad, 1994), 37.

¹²⁹ Other famous cafés were Hasan ‘Ajami, al-Bayruti, Shatt al-‘Arab, al-Braziiliyya, Yassin, al-Shah Bandar, al-Rashid, Umm Kultum, and al-Jamahir. Faiz al-Haidar, “Ahya Baghdad wa Maqahiha al-Sha’biya Manba’ al-Adab wa-l-thaqafa,” <http://www.yanabeealiraq.com/articles/faiz-alhider181108.htm>.

¹³⁰ Fadil al-‘Azzawi, *al-Ruh al-Haya: Jil al-Sittinat fi -l-Iraq* (Damascus, 1997), 103.

¹³¹ Husayn Mardan, “al-Ihda’,” in Mardan, *al-‘amal al-Kamila*, 2 vols. (Baghdad, 2009), 1: 11; and Mardan, “al-Mafhum al-haqiqi li-l-falsafa al-wujudiya,” *ibid.*, 2: 149–150.

¹³² ‘Azzawi, *al-Ruh al-haya*, 168, 312, 356; Mahdi, *al-Mawjah al-Sakhibah*, 100.

¹³³ In the early 1960s, criticism of *iltizam* as political partisanship and “slogan-shouting” became more widespread. The Egyptian literary critic and poet Luwis Awad gently insinuated that *iltizam* was culturally destructive, and the critic Muhammad Mandur and others agreed. *Al-Adab*, March 1962, 109; Badawi, “Commitment in Contemporary Arabic Literature,” 870; Muhammad Adib al-‘Amari, “al-Hayah wa-l-Iltizam,” *al-Adib*, April 1962, 2; ‘Amari, “al-Ilham wa-l-Iltizam,” *al-Adib*, July 1962, 2; Muta ‘Safadi, “Multazimun am Muta’sibun?,” *al-Adab*, February 1960, 61. Even as far away as Bahrain, uncommitted writers were attacked for their position. Qasim Hadad, “An al-Iltizam,” in Barada, *Tahawwulat mafhum al-Iltizam fi-l-Adab al-‘Arabi al-Hadith*, 126–132. Idris rushed to defend his original cause in its pure Sartrean interpretation, arguing that they preached for *iltizam* and not for *ilzam* (coercion). Suhayl Idris, “Adabuna la Thawri,” *al-Adab*, January 1960, 1–2. Even Idris’s level-headed *al-Adab* took a political stand and supported the brutal suppression of Iraqi communists: Fa’iz Saigh, “Ma’rakatuna ma’ al-Shuyu’iyya,” *al-Adab*, June 1959, 1–3.

¹³⁴ ‘Azzawi, *al-Ruh al-Haya*, 78.

¹³⁵ In 1974, the Ba’th Party and the communists established a National Front, which brought the political conflict of the 1960s to an end.

¹³⁶ ‘Azzawi, *al-Ruh al-Haya*, 88.

to revolutions, morality, society, sex, regime, religion, poetry and writing . . . I wanted to believe in a new revolution that would wash itself of the blood that had always adhered to it.”¹³⁷ This mission statement united the Iraqi sixties generation and their quest to destroy “the old world and its various institutions such as the state, society, family, gender, and even poetry.”¹³⁸ In the search for a new Arab selfhood, these Iraqi intellectuals branded themselves “existentialists.”¹³⁹

Focusing on the failure of the Arab project of national liberation to address the problem of individual freedom, the sixties generation drew their inspiration from Sartre, Camus, Beauvoir, Guevara, and Arthur Kostler, as well as Allen Ginsberg and the American Beatniks.¹⁴⁰ It was an eclectic fusion whose main purpose was to critique political bigotry, militarism, social violence, and sexual repression. Casting themselves as social rebels, bohemians, misfits, and politically indifferent individuals whose lives revolved around alcohol, tobacco, and sex, existentialists were publicly visible as non-political advocates of lost individual freedom.¹⁴¹ Herein lies the value of Iraqi existentialism, as the self-actualization of one’s circumstances and the consequent refusal to distinguish between political and existential freedom.¹⁴²

Although the Iraqi existentialist community had no counterpart elsewhere in the Arab world, existentialist themes such as alienation, anticipation of death, absurdity, angst, estrangement, and revolt became dominant in much of the poetry, prose, and theater of the era.¹⁴³ An important example of this new form of pre-1967 self-

¹³⁷ Ibid., 90.

¹³⁸ Mahdi, *al-Mawjah al-Sakhibah*, 264–265.

¹³⁹ They also distinguished themselves from the intellectuals of the 1950s, whose collectivist anti-British nationalism appeared to them naïve and simplistic. ‘Azzawi, *al-Ruh al-Hhaya*, 122–123.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid., 14. Merleau-Ponty and Neruda also figured strongly. Ibid., 51; Mahdi, *al-Mawjah al-Sakhibah*, 22.

¹⁴¹ Many of them engaged in highly abstract conversations about why we live and die and why we write. Lines such as “Existence exists not for my sake but for its own” were not uncommon. Mahdi, *al-Mawjah al-Sakhibah*, 149, 170–171. Concomitantly, in the eyes of their critics, the existentialist scene was nothing more than melodramatic role-playing tantamount to exhibitionistic “posing” and “acting out.” Sami Mahdi, a Ba‘thist, charged existentialists with eclecticism and philosophical superficiality. He acknowledged that their aim was “to find humanistic truth and decipher the enigma of its existential angst,” but he scorned their posing. Ibid., 221. Muhsin Musawi also found several inconsistencies in Iraqi existentialism. Musawi, *The Postcolonial Arabic Novel: Debating Ambivalence* (Leiden, 2003), 183.

¹⁴² Iraqi existentialists thought of the “gap” between these two freedoms as “the absurdity of being.” Mahdi, *al-Mawjah al-Sakhibah*, 149; ‘Azzawi, *al-Ruh al-Haya*, 63.

¹⁴³ Taking this message to the next level, the Syrian “theater of the absurd” dealt with similar themes of revolt and estrangement and expressed strong longing for the emergence of an authentic unitary Arab individual or subjectivity, in which everything has its demonstrable place and value. The absurd in these dramas is based above all on two themes: detachment/alienation and violence. Sa‘d Allah Wannus, who was trained in France, was one of the most prolific existentialist playwrights of the mid-1960s. His 1965 play *Glass Café (al-Maqha al-zujaji)* vividly depicts the tragedy of human existence with strong references to Arab reality. After the 1967 defeat, he used absurdity as a sharp tool for sociopolitical criticism. Other important playwrights were Walid Ihlassi, Farah Bulbul, and ‘Ali Uqla ‘Ursan. Ewa Machut-Mendecka, *Studies in Arabic Theatre and Literature* (Warsaw, 2000), 86–96; Nadim Ma‘alla Muhammad, *al-Adab al-Masrahi fi Suriyah: Nash‘atuhu, Tatawwuruh* (Damascus, 1982), 62–165. In fiction, similar influences existed in the writing of the Egyptians Naguib Mahfouz, Mustafa Mahmud, and, most interestingly, Sonallah Ibrahim. Heavily influenced by Camus’s *The Stranger*, Ibrahim’s experimental novel *The Smell of It* famously introduced into Arab literature the alienated ex-convict protagonist who has been reduced by his aimless life to a set of mechanical daily actions, such as eating, getting dressed, smoking, and joyless sex. Crushed by the authoritarian state for his politics, he is the exact opposite of the committed nationalist hero of the 1950s and 1960s. His angst is the outcome of living in “bad faith” under the sway of an alienated state and away from the authentic existence that decolonization promised. In addition to Sonallah Ibrahim, a sense of metaphysical revolt underlies *Awlad Haritna* (1959; English trans. *Children of Gebelawi* [London, 1981]), which is an allegory of mankind’s religious struggle to achieve har-

criticism was the existentialist feminist cry against patriarchy. In 1958, at the young age of 22, the Lebanese writer Layla Ba^ʿalbakki released her debut teen-angst novel, *Ana Ahya (I Live!)*. It tells the story of Lena, a nineteen-year-old girl-woman with a thirst for freedom. She does not share the Arab nationalist fever of her times:

Frankly, I am not smart enough to find a solution to the problems of Palestine, Kashmir, or Algeria . . . My concern . . . is how to walk the first time I wear my high-heeled shoes, which raise me seven centimeters above the ground. Will they break as I hurry into the street?¹⁴⁴

This is no simplistic teenage nihilism. Her radical individualism reflects her broad horizons, and what follows constitutes an attack, an open revolt, against the Arab sociopolitical order. She rebukes her greedy and sexist male colleagues. She rebels against the prison-like institution of the Arab family, with its authoritarian father figure and its double standards for the sexuality of men and women. She hates her father's authoritarianism and denounces her mother, who "knows nothing of life except sharing a man's bed, cooking his food, and raising his children."¹⁴⁵ In revolt she finds her authenticity, her voice, and a hope for freedom. She talks only of her own freedom, sexuality, thoughts, needs, and wishes. Known at the time as the "Françoise Sagan of the Arabs," Ba^ʿalbakki was accused of nihilism, radical individualism, and egoism.¹⁴⁶ Her tirade against patriarchy and her call for sexual liberation eventually became a public scandal, which landed her in jail for "offending public morality."¹⁴⁷ As she demonstrated, decolonization begins with the self, continues with the family, and is then extended toward society.

Existentialism was also present in the work of the Palestinian writer-in-exile Ghasan Kanafani. In 1963, Kanafani published his much-acclaimed novella *Men in the Sun*, in which three Palestinian refugees decide to sneak across the Iraqi border, drawn by the riches of Kuwait.¹⁴⁸ They meet the elder Abu Khaizuran, a veteran political leader in the lost land of Palestine who is now a truck driver. When he promises to smuggle them in his truck's empty water tank and guide them safely to Kuwait, they agree. However, the three men never make it to Kuwait. They lose their

mony and justice. Absurdist themes characterize much of Mahfouz's writing from the 1960s, when the promise of rational national politics reached its dramatic limits. His 1961 novel *al-Mustahil (The Impossibility)* features an estranged protagonist whose father suppressed the emergence of his selfhood. Striving to find meaning in life, he ultimately revolts against societal conventions, especially those related to sex. Having an affair with his married neighbor, he comes to realize the absurdity and impossibility of their relationship. Haim Gordon, *Naguib Mahfouz's Egypt: Existential Themes in His Writings* (New York, 1990). Another relevant novel of the time was Mahmud Diyab's *al-Zilal (The Shadow)*, in which a selfish protagonist endorses existentialism as "meaning for everything," which leads him to embrace an unconventional and highly relativist personal morality that damages society. Ali B. Jad, *Form and Technique in the Egyptian Novel, 1912–1971* (Oxford, 1983), 295–307; Samia Mehrez, *Egyptian Writers between History and Fiction: Essays on Naguib Mahfouz, Sonallah Ibrahim, and Gamal Al-Ghitani* (Cairo, 1994), 39–57; Stefan G. Meyer, *The Experimental Arabic Novel: Postcolonial Literary Modernism in the Levant* (Albany, N.Y., 2001), 16.

¹⁴⁴ Layla Ba^ʿalbakki, *Ana Ahya* (Beirut, 1963), 45.

¹⁴⁵ She calls her father an opportunist war profiteer and a "shadow of a human being." *Ibid.*, 15, 19–20, 112–113.

¹⁴⁶ Anis Sayigh, *al-Adab*, May 1958, 59.

¹⁴⁷ Samira Aghacy, "Lebanese Women's Fiction: Urban Identity and the Tyranny of the Past," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 33, no. 3 (November 2001): 503–523.

¹⁴⁸ The three were Marwan, whose father abandoned the family for another woman; Asad, who was escaping an arranged marriage and the Jordanian authorities; and Abu Qais, who, in dire need of support for his family, lost his small fortune to traitorous Iraqi brokers of cheap Palestinian labor.

lives in that water tank, succumbing to thirst, heat exhaustion, and suffocation while their guide spends time joking with the Kuwaiti border police. The novella closes with the driver's memorable cry when he realizes what has happened: "Why didn't you knock on the sides of the tank? Why didn't you say anything? Why?"¹⁴⁹

In this allegory of the Palestinian tragedy of 1948, with the failure of the Palestinian leadership, the death of the omnipotent father figure, the collapse of the family as an existential sanctuary, and the betrayal of Arab allies, Kanafani examines the question of individual control "with respect to the issue of national will, purpose and destiny."¹⁵⁰ Through the death in the desert, the true and authentic condition of the Palestinian people is revealed in a Heideggerian fashion that individualizes their situation in the world (*Dasein*): the Palestinian is alone.¹⁵¹ As exemplified in Kanafani's own revolutionary life, this understanding holds promise as a new beginning for liberation on one's own "Fanonian" terms.¹⁵²

In sum, because anticolonial nationalism is "outward-looking" and thus is unable to be self-critical, writers used existentialist themes in order to confront the ubiquity of patriarchal norms, political impasse, state authoritarianism, violence, and an overall absence of freedom. In that sense, self-criticism of Arab liberation began and peaked with existentialism years before the 1967 defeat. In their words and deeds, these intellectuals issued the alarming reminder that internal decolonization remained a critical cultural task, and that unless the Arab project of liberation was completed, it might be compromised or even destroyed altogether. Sartre's highly anticipated visit to Egypt took place in this context.

IN LATE FEBRUARY 1967, Sartre and Beauvoir arrived in Cairo, where they were greeted at the airport by Egypt's progressive intellectuals.¹⁵³ For Egyptians, their two-week visit was an intellectual holiday (*farah fikri*), and more than twenty new publications on existentialism were released for the occasion.¹⁵⁴ For improved marketability, some book covers even depicted nude women, which Sartre found shocking.¹⁵⁵ Although Lutfi al-Khuli and his wife Liliane (the same Liliane whose father had deplored public kissing) hosted Sartre and Beauvoir during their stay, it was

¹⁴⁹ Ghassan Kanafani, *Men in the Sun and Other Palestinian Stories*, trans. Hilary Kilpatrick (Cairo, 1991), 56.

¹⁵⁰ Meyer, *The Experimental Arabic Novel*, 28.

¹⁵¹ Barbara Harlow, "Readings of National Identity in the Palestinian Novel," in Issa J. Boullata and Roger Allen, eds., *The Arabic Novel since 1950: Critical Essays, Interviews, and Bibliography* (Cambridge, Mass., 1992), 89–108; Orit Bashkin, "Nationalism as a Cause: Arab Nationalism in the Writings of Ghassan Kanafani," in Christoph Schumann, ed., *Nationalism and Liberal Thought in the Arab East: Ideology and Practice* (London, 2010), 92–112.

¹⁵² This new form of commitment to the Palestinian cause motivated Kanafani's intellectual, political, and guerrilla labor on behalf of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine. He was killed in 1972 by Israeli agents.

¹⁵³ The couple were invited to Egypt by *al-Ahram*'s editorial team when they learned that *Les Temps modernes* intended to send an investigative delegation to both sides of the Arab-Israeli conflict and publish a special issue on their findings. Given the mounting military tensions in the region and the importance of European public opinion, both Arabs and Israelis wanted to influence the final outcome of this visit. In his capacity as managing editor of the journal, Lanzmann joined the tour. Lanzmann, *Le lièvre de Patagonie*, 396–404.

¹⁵⁴ *Ruz al-Yusuf*, February 27, 1967, 50; *al-Akhbar*, March 5, 1967, 16.

¹⁵⁵ *Al-Jumhuriya*, March 3, 1967, 10.

Jean-Paul Sartre made a two-week visit to Egypt (25 February-13 March 1967). The purpose of the visit was to acquaint the European philosopher with the Egyptian view of the Arab-Israeli conflict, as well as to offer him first-hand experience of the "Arab path to socialism" Egypt was embarked on at the time. Right, pictures of the visit from the archive of Al-Ahram and the personal collection of Liliane El-Kholi, to whose kind help *Al-Ahram Weekly* is much indebted.



From right: Sartre, Nasser, Simone de Beauvoir and Claude Lanzmann at the president's residence



In front of Abdel-Hadi El-Gazzar's painting "The High Dam"



Watching a scene from *Huis clos* at the Theatre Institute



At Cairo University giving a public lecture



At the Cairo Opera House with Egyptian intellectuals



With de Beauvoir and Lanzmann at the Ben Ezra Synagogue in Cairo



At a Palestinian refugee camp in Gaza



With Lutfi El-Kholi in Gaza



Trying out his new *taqiyya*, a present from the peasants of Kamshish



"Bread and salt" with workers at Mudiriyat Al-Tahrir

FIGURE 1: This screen shot from *Al-Ahram Weekly* features a series of photographs taken during Sartre's and Beauvoir's 1967 visit to Egypt. *Al-Ahram Weekly On-line* (Cairo), no. 47 (April 13–19, 2000), http://weekly.ahram.org.eg/2000/477/bk6_477.htm. Most of the pictures were taken by Liliane al-Khuli, who, along with her husband, hosted the French couple and traveled with them.

nonetheless a semi-official visit that included a meeting with President Nasser. Sartre pleaded with him to release some communist prisoners. Nasser did. They traveled across the country as if they were heads of state. They saw the Aswan Dam (where locals mistook Sartre for Fidel Castro), visited the heavy industrial plants, and traveled to remote villages that had recently purged themselves of feudalism.¹⁵⁶ They met workers, teachers, students, intellectuals, and peasants who clamored on command “Long Live Sartre! Long Live Simone!”¹⁵⁷ From Beirut, Idris encouraged Sartre to visit a Palestinian refugee camp.¹⁵⁸ The couple traveled to Gaza, where they guardedly expressed solidarity with the refugees.¹⁵⁹

A fascinating aspect of the visit was Egyptians’ high level of intellectual preparedness and their insistence on engaging Sartre intellectually at every turn, even when their guest was pressed for time and visibly exhausted.¹⁶⁰ During these encounters, Egyptians asked endless questions. They wanted to know, for example, whether existentialism was dead, whether it had a future in the Third World, and whether it was compatible with Marxism and Arab socialism.¹⁶¹ Sartre’s public exchange with the communist Mahmud Amin al-‘Alim, who a decade earlier had attacked his radical individualism, answered many of these questions and ended with mutual agreement.¹⁶² Having come from Beirut, Idris tried to get Sartre to speak clearly about Palestine. He chased Sartre to his car, only to have the door slammed on his bleeding hand as the vehicle drove away. Sartre was not interested in discussing Palestine.

Weeks later, and only a few days before the 1967 War, Sartre signed a pro-Israeli manifesto denouncing Arab aggression. Arab intellectuals were stunned: Sartre, an Arab hero, had unexpectedly betrayed them.¹⁶³ In Cairo, an emergency meeting condemned him in the strongest possible terms.¹⁶⁴ A CIA field officer quickly cabled a brief note to his superiors on Sartre’s fall, describing him as a “victim to the current

¹⁵⁶ The couple visited Kamshish, where, as a result of popular resistance to landlords, a symbolic victory against feudalism had been achieved the previous year. Ibid.

¹⁵⁷ Beauvoir, *All Said and Done*, 375–376.

¹⁵⁸ “Muqabala Adabiyya ma’ Sartir,” *al-Adab*, January 1966, 5.

¹⁵⁹ However, Beauvoir’s recollection of the meeting with the Palestinians was highly negative. She blamed them for their own condition. Beauvoir, *All Said and Done*, 38. Lanzmann, too, recorded a disappointing meeting, during which “Each Palestinian phrase was a chant of war.” Lanzmann, *Le lièvre de Patagonie*, 402. For Egyptian coverage of Sartre in Gaza, see “Sartir wa-l-ma’sa fi Ghaza,” *Akhir Sa’a*, March 15, 1967, 70.

¹⁶⁰ Sartre asked for a minimum of three hours to discuss philosophy. “Sartir Yatalaq ‘ala Hadith li Mahmud Amin al-‘Alim ‘an al-Wujudiya wa-l-Ishtirakita,” *Al-Jumhuriya*, March 3, 1967, 10. Of great interest, but unfortunately outside the scope of this article, was Beauvoir’s intellectual reception by Egyptian feminists. See “Milaf Khas: Hiwar Sartir wa Simone,” *al-Tali’a*, April 1967, 117–137.

¹⁶¹ Sana’ Fath Allah, “al-Falsafa al-Markisiya,” *Al-Akhbar*, February 28, 1967, 9; Isma’il al-Mahdi, “Thaqafa wa Fann,” *Al-Jumhuriya*, March 14, 1967, 2.

¹⁶² By this point, after the publication of *Critique de la raison dialectique*, Sartre was seen as an existentialist-Marxist whose teachings were compatible with socialism and communism. For the summary of their exchange, see *Al-Jumhuriya*, March 3, 1967, 10. Husayn was not invited to meet Sartre. *Al-Jumhuriya*, March 14, 1967, 12.

¹⁶³ In large part, the Arabs’ surprise was due to the absence of any serious attempt to understand Sartre’s position that the Jewish condition was an element of the general human condition, with important positive consequences for Zionism as a legitimate project of Jewish authenticity. His 1948 *Réflexions sur la question juive* was never translated into Arabic. At the time of his visit, only one critical article appeared in the press, and it was not followed up. *Al-Jumhuriya*, March 4, 1967, 5.

¹⁶⁴ The Jordanian and Syrian press were already critical of Sartre and charged him with doublespeak. Amnon Kapeliuk, “Sartre in the Arab Press,” *New Outlook* 10, no. 4 (May 1967): 29–33.

Middle East crisis.”¹⁶⁵ Then came the devastating war. Lutfi al-Khuli spent the first weeks of June 1967 in Paris and thus missed the war.¹⁶⁶ He was aware of the defeat but did not know any of the details. According to an Arabic newspaper headline, the Americans and British were fighting alongside the Israelis. That report was inaccurate, but it sounded plausible to Lutfi.¹⁶⁷ He also knew that Nasser had resigned, and he took note of the French celebration of Israel’s victory. He found the anti-Arab atmosphere in Paris frenzied and distasteful.¹⁶⁸ Lost, confused, and angry, he confronted Sartre. In an intimate yet volatile meeting, Lutfi and Liliane accused Sartre and Beauvoir of intellectual inconsistency and hypocrisy.¹⁶⁹ Beauvoir wrote in her diary: “They blamed us angrily for not having loudly and publicly taken Egypt’s side against Israel. It was a painful interview.”¹⁷⁰ On his widow’s behalf, Fanon’s publishing house, Maspero, insisted that Sartre’s preface be removed from *The Wretched of the Earth*.¹⁷¹

Although Sartre reiterated “his friendship to the Arabs” and insisted that he had been “misunderstood,” the Arab view of him as a traitor gained currency.¹⁷² The following months saw the birth of a new intellectual era, a time of increased retrospection and self-criticism, but also of renewed interest in and greater respect for religion and religiosity. The Arab Third World moment of decolonization was fading away.

THE MULTILAYERED STORY OF Arab existentialism raises two primary questions that substantiate the meaning of decolonization. First, what intellectual tasks did existentialism accomplish that anticolonial nationalism could not? Second, what happens “inside decolonization” when ideas such as existentialism that were created in one historical context move to another and yet another context? In answering these questions, we can see that decolonization was a transnational process rich in intel-

¹⁶⁵ CIA, Intelligence Memorandum, June 2, 1967, NARA, CIA-RDP79T00826A002000010078-8.

¹⁶⁶ Al-Khuli believed in Arab socialism and Third World power, but unlike many of his preaching comrades, he was not given to slogans or flat thinking. He was also not an existentialist and, in his writings, has largely avoided this trend. Yet along with the defeat itself, his critical engagement with Sartre and Beauvoir was instrumental in the fall of Arab existentialism.

¹⁶⁷ *Al-Ahram*, June 7, 1967, 1.

¹⁶⁸ Lutfi al-Khuli, *Hiwar ma’a Bertrand Russell wa Sartir* (Cairo, 1968), 78.

¹⁶⁹ Sartre denied the allegations and reiterated his support for “the struggle of Arab nations, including the Palestinians, toward freedom and progress.” “The only thing to which I principally object,” he added, “is war itself.” In a second meeting, Sartre remained equivocal and said that he had been misunderstood. He condemned elements in Zionism, but not Zionism as a whole. He objected to some Israeli policies, but not to the overall conduct of the state. He refused to condemn Hertzl’s Zionism and to judge it by the moral standards that he himself articulated in the cases of Algeria and Vietnam. He also could not see how his unconditional support of the state of Israel was in sharp contradiction to his famous condemnation of neocolonialism. *Ibid.*, 111–112.

¹⁷⁰ A month earlier, she had said that Liliane “knew nothing whatsoever about the Jewish question as it existed in the West.” Beauvoir, *All Said and Done*, 382, 402.

¹⁷¹ Eventually, Fanon’s widow, Josie, decided not to publish a new edition, and thus Sartre’s preface was canonized with the text itself. Lanzmann, *Le lièvre de Patagonie*, 365.

¹⁷² Shortly thereafter, on a different occasion, Sartre said that he would never abandon Israel and that “I know that my stance earns me the enmity of certain Arabs, who cannot understand that one is unable to be at the same time for Israel and for them.” Jonathan Judaken, *Jean-Paul Sartre and the Jewish Question: Anti-Antisemitism and the Politics of the French Intellectual* (Lincoln, Neb., 2006), 185; al-Khuli, *Hiwar ma’a Bertrand Russell wa Sartir*, 80–81, 111–112. For Sartre as a traitor, see Edward Said, “My Encounter with Sartre,” *London Review of Books*, June 1, 2000.

lectual cross-pollination, and not simply an atomized transfer of power from a sinking empire to a newly formed nation-state.

Anticolonial nationalism was undoubtedly successful in creating a sense of community and opposition against colonial rule, but in all other respects it was intellectually limited. The versatility of existentialism compensated for this lack. In its philosophical version, it addressed the question of authenticity—a key aspect of the effort to decolonize the self. In its version as *iltizam*, it functioned as a powerful political tool, marginalizing the colonially complacent intelligentsia and drawing a younger generation into concrete political struggles both at home and abroad. Existentialism thus tied the Middle East to the worldwide anti-imperialist movement of the 1960s and to its prominent leader, Jean-Paul Sartre. Finally, in its literary form, existentialism criticized the ongoing retreat of the Arab subject in the face of an allegedly liberated society and tolerant state. This critique made the easy-to-miss point that the state's violence against its own citizens was intrinsic to the process of decolonization. In fulfilling these functions, Arab existentialism acted not as a unified idea but as a multifocal and decentralized intellectual system. Regardless of its contradictions, Arab existentialism has a central place as a variation on the post-colonial theme of self-liberation as it was elaborated by people such as Gandhi, Memmi, Senghor, Fanon, and, of course, Sartre.

A salient feature of the current literature on decolonization is that if it addresses intellectual exchange at all, it does so within the framework of an incomplete and unsatisfactory “borrowing” or “adaptation” of European ideas to Third World realities.¹⁷³ If evaluated against the original existentialism of Heidegger and Sartre, Arab existentialism might indeed be condemned as a “poor application” that was philosophically eclectic and politically incoherent.¹⁷⁴ At times, even Sartre felt so.¹⁷⁵ Yet it is futile to seek enduring intellectual integrity in the course of this process. The reality was that even though the results were not always successful, Arab thinkers creatively reinvented, reformulated, and domesticated European existentialism in a way that enabled them to confront the formidable challenge of decolonization from a collective, transnational perspective rather than from a solitary, autochthonous standpoint.

Sartre fertilized decolonization everywhere and was even viewed by some as an “African philosopher,” yet outside Europe, existentialism per se was mostly an Arab phenomenon. This lost chapter in the history of decolonization, an account from deep within Arab thought, demonstrates the inner workings of ideas in places and by individuals who until now have remained obscure. The obvious lesson for historians of this era is that they cannot artificially separate the political act of decolonization, nation-state-making, and Cold War struggles from their transnational

¹⁷³ On this problem and on the limitation of “reception studies” in literature and science, see Marwa S. Elshakry, “Knowledge in Motion: The Cultural Politics of Modern Science Translations in Arabic,” *Isis* 99, no. 4 (December 2008): 701–730; Elshakry, “The Gospel of Science and American Evangelism in Late Ottoman Beirut,” *Past and Present* 196, no. 1 (August 2007): 173–214.

¹⁷⁴ For the many methodological challenges of “traveling ideas,” see Edward W. Said, “Traveling Theory,” in Said, *The World, the Text, and the Critic* (Cambridge, Mass., 1983), 226–247; Said, “Traveling Theory Reconsidered,” in Said, *Reflections on Exile and Other Essays* (Cambridge, Mass., 2000), 436–452.

¹⁷⁵ During his visit to Cairo, Sartre hinted that Arab existentialism borders on propaganda and populism. “Al-Kuttub Yunaqishun Sartir,” *al-Jumhuriya*, March 8, 1967, 12; Rushdi Salih, “Sartir wa Rihlat ‘Umrihi,” *al-Akhbar*, March 5, 1967, 16; “Ma‘ al-Muthaqqafin,” *al-Tali‘a*, April 1967, 146.

intellectual context.¹⁷⁶ A recent collection on the literary heritage of the Cold War makes this point obvious and shows how, much as in the Middle East, the heritage of Latin American intellectuals has also gone unnoticed.¹⁷⁷ In failing to acknowledge how this universal intellectual matrix shaped the global 1960s, and in focusing solely on anticolonial nationalism and/or “ideology” (Marxist, socialist, or other), decolonization studies and related fields overlook critical patterns of continuity, change, and convergence that make episodes such as French Maoism and the international collaboration of the radical left during the 1970s unintelligible.¹⁷⁸ If widely practiced, an intellectual history of decolonization can help to fill this gap.

¹⁷⁶ Even though they do not focus so much on intellectual history, scholars of the Cold War and their revisionist *Journal of Cold War Studies* acknowledge the intricate transnational nature of that era.

¹⁷⁷ Jean Franco, “The Excluded Middle: Intellectuals and the ‘Cold War’ in Latin America,” in Andrew Hammond, ed., *Cold War Literature: Writing the Global Conflict* (London, 2006), 226–241.

¹⁷⁸ Left-wing international terrorism during the 1970s by groups such as the Japanese Red Army, Baader-Meinhof, the IRA, and multiple Palestinian organizations was a direct outcome of the transnational intellectual affinities that were formed during decolonization. For more on such connections in French history, see Wolin, *The Wind from the East*.

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