Democracy, the West and the Crisis of the Arab World: Arab Intellectuals of Al-Jazeera.net as Drivers of Change

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ABSTRACT: *This paper analyzes the opinions, arguments, and topics in the writings of a diverse group of Arab intellectuals contributed to the Al Jazeera website during the period preceding the Arab uprisings of 2011. The intellectuals addressed prevalent social, economic and political problems in the Arab world and responded to dichotomies such as democracy versus authoritarianism, the Arab world versus the West, and revivalist versus moderate interpretations of Islam. Based on a Critical Discourse Analysis approach (Fairclough & Wodak, 1997; Reisigl & Wodak, 2009), a corpus of 57 articles published between 2008 and 2010 was compiled. The analysis shows that four topics underpinned these writings and provided a programmatic agenda for change. Lamenting the abysmal conditions in the Arab world, criticizing Western hegemony over the region, calling for democracy, and advocating a moderate form of Islam loomed large in their writings. This paper emphasizes the disruptive and transformative power of online media through which these reformist writers acted as drivers of change seeking reform and change in the Arab world.*

KEYWORDS: drivers of change, arab uprisings, Al Jazeera, democracy, discourses of change

INTRODUCTION

Though more than a decade has already passed, the dust of what has been commonly referred to as the Arab Spring uprisings of 2011 has not settled yet. These uprisings had been driven by a quest to replace despotism, political repression, rampant corruption, and crony capitalism with democracy, fair distribution of wealth, and popular participation (Ahmad, 2020). The seismic changes brought about by the Arab Spring uprisings had their precursors not only in the terrible conditions that peoples across the region were experiencing, but certainly in the discourses and voices in the region that had called for reform and change. The reverberations of these revolutionary movements continue to rattle the region till today in civil wars, internal strife, radicalism, and chaos in some countries, or in civil protests and counterrevolutions in others (Falk, 2016).

Years of advocacy for change by individuals, intellectuals, and civil groups preceding the Arab uprisings in 2011 were instrumental in paving the way for the radical changes the Arab world witnessed in 2011 and ever since. They were the drivers of change,

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calling for resistance in the face of the prevalent abysmal conditions and mobilizing youths and Arab societies for change and reform (see, for example, Gabsi, 2022). Many of these voices were engaging in what can be termed online activism, especially in addressing segments of people across the region and world. Their appearance through their writing in different platforms enabled them to reach large audiences across the Arab region and all over the world.

This study aims to draw a discursive map of the debates and issues in the Arab-Muslim world as tackled in the writings of a diverse group of Arab intellectuals and are published on the influential Arab media website *Aljazeera.net*. This study unpacks the stances and concerns these intellectuals had about the conditions in the Arab world including dichotomies such as democracy versus authoritarianism, tradition versus modernity, Islam versus the West, Pan-Islamism or Pan-Arabism versus the modern nation-state, and revivalist versus modernist interpretations of Islam. Donohue and Esposito (2007, p. 1) correctly point out that "although modern Muslim authors have addressed themselves to those problems, their writings are often inaccessible owning to lack of adequate translation and/or ready availability of their writings."

General Background: The Crisis of the Arab World
The encounter between the West and the Arab region over the past two centuries has since produced numerous reactions in Arab-Islamic societies. Its impact on the Arab East has forever changed the way the East saw its self and left indelible marks on its social, cultural, economic and political landscape. Since then, Arab including Islamic-oriented intellectual elite have sought to make sense of crucial issues as diverse as modernity versus tradition, the role of Islam in social and political life, women's and individual rights, secularism and democracy, and Pan-Islamism or Arabism versus the territorial nation-state, to name just a few important ones.

A central issue, for instance, that gripped Arab intellectuals has been how to deal with Western modernity which was concomitant with European colonialism and military interventions in the region. According to Abu Rabi', The colonized Arabs and their intellectual elite were bewildered by the progress of their   colonizers and at the same time were alerted to their own outdated modes of structure and thought. This dialectical situation, over the years, created many interesting Arab reactions, whose common denominator was dualism in thought and in solution to the problems facing Arab societies. (Abu-Rabi', 2004, p. 11)

The challenge of Western modernity and its military, economic and political superiority on one hand, and its cultural penetration in a rapidly globalizing world, on the other, were often referred to by intellectuals as *azamah* (a state of crisis) of Arab societies. Segments of Arab intelligentsia advocated westernizing their societies (*al-Taghrib*, in Arabic) by assimilating to the values and ideas of Western modernism. The permanence of the West's presence in its various guises - economic, military, scientific and cultural - has put the Arab-Muslim societies on the defensive which took a multiplicity of forms,

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chiefly among them is Islamic revivalism (Abu-Rabi', 2004, p. 28; see also the collection of essays by Rahnema, 2005). KhosraviNik and Sarkhoh (2017) observe that many Muslim scholars continue to draw on Islam as the most distinctive feature of the region in a quasi-essentialist way, while Arab nationalists consider the Arabic language as the characteristic of the region. This revivalism and the need to restore an authentic identity derived from a glorious Arab-Muslim past are typically modern and defensive which reflected, and still do, an uneasy preoccupation with serious crises and a perceived threat arising from Western capitalist secularism and modernity.

Dawisha (2003) locates the roots of Arab nationalism (*al-Qawmiyah al-Arabiyya*) in the writings and activities of a group of nineteenth-century Muslim and Christian Arab intellectuals and activists who were aided by an Arab literary revival and rapid economic and social transformations in many Arabic-speaking provinces of the Ottoman empire. Affected by similar nationalist impulses in the Ottoman-ruled Balkans, Arab nationalist sentiments were driven by a program for political independence from Ottoman rule first and then from the hegemony of Western powers over the region. Pan-Arabism was premised on the idea that Arab peoples should form a unitary Arab nation state whose members share the same identity, aspirations, history, interests, language, cultural uniqueness, and destiny. Arab nationalists saw the need to mobilise the masses for a renaissance project to rid the Arab nation (*al-umma al-'arabiyyah*) from all causes of weakness, stagnation, political division and subordination to the West. The invocation of an essentialist supranational Arab-Muslim identity is so entrenched in the region that any Islamic or Arab nationalist discourse would have to surpass any nation-state, territorialist aspirations (KhosraviNik and Sarkhoh, 2017).

The issues discussed in these writings and the origins of these issues in current socio-political realities and the complex history of the region make this examination of the thoughts and concerns of Arab intellectuals important for an understanding of the conditions and realities preceding the Arab Spring uprisings of 2011.

Al Jazeera: A Global Media 'Trendsetter'
Established in 1996 in the tiny Gulf country of Qatar in the Arabian Peninsula, Al Jazeera satellite news channel quickly rose to prominence and became the major media outlet for Arabic-speaking viewing audiences across the globe. Raising the slogan "the Opinion and the Other Opinion", Al Jazeera has revolutionized the state of Arab media through its professional war coverage, talk shows and the space given to a range of issues and debates that the satellite network tackles in its various programs and talk shows. Al Jazeera has become "a global trendsetter among mass media networks" influencing public opinions and politics in many countries and revolutionizing a long stagnant and lame media environment in the Middle East (El-Nawawy and Iskandar, 2003, p. x). Its effects have reverberated inside Arab homes and governments and well beyond.

Unlike most state-run Arab TV networks which often served as mouthpieces for Arab governments, Al Jazeera offered the Arab viewer, for the first time, an exposure to opposing views, with the news network providing a platform for the discussion of issues long avoided in the Middle East (El-Nawawy and Iskandar, 2003, p. 11). This exposure has made Al Jazeera's news coverage and programs controversial with Arab governments which often accused the TV station of being a platform for airing dissident and anti-government views. The ferocity of criticisms directed at Al Jazeera largely stemmed from tackling a range of issues ranging from political corruption and the Arab ruling elite, government policies, Islamic Shari'a law to democracy and civil rights. The coverage rattled the Middle East especially for audiences unaccustomed to watching these issues beamed into their offices and households. Its round-the-clock coverage of international affairs has been equally immense and sometimes controversial for some Western governments, especially in covering the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.[1]

It is evident that the role of this influential media organ has been central in the diffusion of a supranational Pan-Arab-Islamic identity not only in the selection of its news presenters who come from various Arab countries, but also in the type of Pan-Arab and Pan-Islamic discourses and orientations disseminated on its wavelengths. Thus, according to Zayani (2005, p. 2), due to lack of political pluralism and government censorship, Al Jazeera has filled not only a media void but also a political void, "Al-Jazeera serves as a *de facto* Pan-Arab opposition and a forum for resistance." (italics in original) Al Jazeera's broad reach regionally and internationally has come to play an important role in broadening Pan-Arab interaction emphasizing an inclusive Arab identity which crosses national boundaries, as it broadcasts to millions of Arabic-speaking audiences across the world and apparently offering a programmatic blueprint for social and political change and reform.

The online site of Al Jazeera news network www.Al-Jazeera.net was launched in 2001. The website provides an accessible online news source for millions of Arabic-speaking audiences worldwide and has been ranked among the top five most visited sites in the world. Following the September 11 attacks and the American bombing of Afghanistan, the site scored 120 million hits and by 2004 over a billion hits (Awad, 2005, p. 81). In addition to providing news and information on current events and issues, the site serves as an archival database including complete transcripts and audio recordings of programs aired on the satellite television network. This study focuses on the opinion articles in the opinion section of the site that posts opinion articles, features and analyses on various political, economic and social issues[2] and provides opportunities for visitors of the site to post their comments and opinions on local and international issues and events.

METHODOLOGY

The analysis in this paper draws on the theoretical and methodological orientations of Critical Discourse Analysis, mainly those of Fairclough (1992, 1995), van Dijk (1998, 2001), and De Cillia, Reisigl & Wodak's (1999) Discourse Historical Approach. Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) primarily sees discourse as a form of 'social

practice' and seeks to examine the nexus between discourse and ideology, the historical dimension of discourse production and reception, and the constitutive and dialectical relationship between discourse structures and social structures and formations (Fairclough & Wodak, 1997; Reisigl & Wodak, 2009; van Dijk, 2001). Analysis in CDA aims to reveal and reflect on the dominant ideologies, representations, and power relations underlying language in use (KhosraviNik & Sarkhoh, 2017).

De Cillia, Reisigl & Wodak's (1999) presented a three-tiered analytical framework that involves the analysis of contents or topics, discourse strategies, and linguistic means and forms of realization. The present analysis is largely thematic aiming to elicit the most recurrent topics drawn upon by those writers of Al Jazeera in addressing issues and questions prevalent in the Arab Islamic world. Topics are overall meanings which cannot be observed directly, but are assigned to discourse by language users. They are typically constructed from propositions at word- and clause-levels which are then subsumed into higher-level macro-propositions which form part of the thematic structure of a text or a group of texts (van Dijk, 2001). Propositions are typically derived from textual features, such as metaphors, pronouns and deixis, speech acts and syntactic and lexical selections which seem to be salient linguistic features. Attention is equally given to De Cillia, Reisigl & Wodak's (1999) constructive strategies, perpetuation and justification strategies, transformation strategies, and dismantling or destructive strategies.

For purposes of analysis, I compiled all articles published on www.aljazeera.net website over a three-year period from January 2008 to December 2010. The selection of these articles over this period allowed me to compile a systematic and coherent text corpus. I have chosen to focus on the last three years which immediately preceded the outbreak of Arab uprisings in early 2011 so as to identify dominant topics and establish correlations between these writings and the political contexts in the Arab world. Upon compiling the whole data set, texts were first coded for standard categories such as name of writer, day and month of publication. Then, topics were arrived at after analyzing titles, topical paragraphs, highlighted quotes, summaries, recurrent keywords, speech acts, discourse strategies, particular graphic emphasis of text and intertextual traces of other voices and discourses in the texts. At the same time, bibliographic information about the writers were also added wherever appropriate.

The compiled text corpus consisted of a total of 57 articles that specifically addressed issues of democracy and reform in the Middle East, the relation between the Arab-Islamic world and the West, and issues of modernity and Islamic movements and revivalism. It is, of course, untenable to include illustrations of all articles in the body of this paper, but the focus was commensurable with the number of texts these writers contributed to the website. For example, both Rashid Al-Ghanoushi and Munsef Al-Marzouqi contributed nearly half of the texts (each contributed 11 articles to the text corpus), and therefore their discourses are duly represented in the analysis. Since all articles were written in Arabic, the researcher translated the extracts into English and

due to word count limitations, only the English translations were included in the body of this paper.

Democracy, the West and the Crisis of the Arab World

A detailed analysis of the articles contributed to Al Jazeera shows that these writers actively engaged in the drive for change and capitalized on the opportunities offered by digital communication to reach broad and varied audiences across the region and the world. While these writers are not homogenous in their ideological or political orientations, the advocacy for political and social change took centre stage in their writings, with four topics underlying the themes, ideas, and arguments advocated in their articles, as will be shown below.

Social and political Crises: Failures and Solutions

The present political, economic and social problems facing Arab societies were the subject of much discussion in these articles. Writers were responsive to social and political crises burdened by authoritarianism, suppression of freedoms, failing economies and social problems. At the forefront of these writers lamenting the malaise touching social, economic and political aspects of Arab life is the Tunisian reformer and former President Munsef Al-Marzouqi. Quoting an Arab Development Report, Al-Marzouqi acidly remarks that the conditions of the Arab world are dismally grim with rampant poverty, illiteracy, rising unemployment, economic inequality, environmental problems and scientific backwardness[3]. The title of his article *'Edging Forward Towards the Abyss'* metaphorically sums up his understanding of the current situation in the Arab world. Historical and political contexts, analogies, comparisons and UN reports are brought forward to support his arguments. These have been primarily used to reinforce the need for action and change. He persistently locates the sources of the crises "swamping" the Arab nation in the Arab political system which is held responsible for the spread of corruption, cronyism and violations of human rights.

Extract 1

What the report of 2009 shows is that things get worse one year after another… The foundations of **the catastrophe** that threatens generations are barren lands essentially, and yet are being **eaten by desertification** day after day... thirst in overcrowded cities and deserted countryside, **crawling hunger**, **suffocating pollution** in **octopus cities** that have returned to barbarism... an **apostate poverty** that increases the rate of misery and crime.. a besieged state isolated and threatened by more **blind, ferocious violence**, convoys of **death-boats** make their way to the lifeline of any European shore. A **blindfolded nation** is **edging steadily towards the abyss**.

Particularly worth noting in the extract above are the metaphors selected by Al-Marzouqi that emphasize a bleak image of the conditions in the Arab world. Adjective-noun and noun-noun metaphorical expressions, such as 'crawling poverty', 'apostate poverty', 'suffocating pollution', 'blind violence', 'death-boats', and 'blindfolded nation' that are mapped from various source domains invoke negative evaluations of the present political, economic and social contexts and have cognitive and

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psychological effects on the readers. Charteris-Black (2006) observes that metaphor is used as a persuasive tool in political communication to provide cognitive frames for perspectives on social issues.

One can detect a high degree of emotional involvement and intensity expressed in these writings. Highly charged metaphorical and lexical references invoke images of decay, disaster, and fragmentation traverse the writings and seem to underlie a discourse of lament and disparagement of Arab conditions, as Table (1) below shows.

– Lifeless, dead, turbulent, and outside history – To fill this void and breathe life into this inert Arab body – Attempts at disintegration and fragmentation – Pushing for more fragmentation and backwardness – The age of decadence for the Arab science – The disasters befalling us and the great catastrophe that is threatening us. – in the midst of an exacerbating Arab incompetence – scourge of monopoly and tyranny – a ship without a captain

Table (1): Negative Terms Associated with the Arab Conditions

Frequent criticisms are leveled at the post-colonial territorial state for its economic and political inaction, collective weakness and failing to act to safeguard the interests of the Arab peoples. The Egyptian Islamic intellectual Fehmi Huwaidi questions the overriding ideology of the Arab "nation-state" (*Ad-Dawla Al-Qutriyyah*, in Arabic), namely the rise of the post-colonial territorial state, and its responsibility for the state of fragmentation, political division and subordination to Western powers. He charges that the Arab regimes have failed to deliver on post-colonial promises of economic prosperity, reform processes, political participation, and the fair distribution of wealth[4].

Extract 2
Since the Arab world has become **a ship without a captain**, it has lost its way and floundered to the right and to the left... The advocates of that chaos no longer need to make any effort to achieve their goal, because what the **Arab officials do with themselves and their issues** suffices them to make that effort. What's worth noting in this regard is that after the **dismantling was completed** and in light of the reassurance of the collapse of the Arab system, the hegemonic forces that **reveled** in what happened to us have **continued to manipulate** the fate of the Pan-Arab nation and **plotted to perpetuate** its disintegration and **obliterate** its identity.

The transitivity selections in extract 2 are particularly worth noting, with the writer negatively presenting two actors, namely, Arab governments and Western hegemonic forces, as the agents responsible for the state of loss and chaos and the disintegration of Arab societies (for a discussion of transitivity, see Fairclough, 1992; Halliday, 1994; Hodge and Kress, 1993). The Arab regimes occupy the role of the negative actor for

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their inaction and apathy to existing conditions, failure to act or lead. Verbal and nominal phrases such as 'do with themselves and their issues" and "the dismantling was complete" clearly designate the Arab regimes' negative agency. Similarly, Western powers are also assigned a negative participant role as clearly marked negative action verbs such as 'continued to manipulate", "plotted to perpetuate", and "obliterate". At the same time, the Arab nation is placed at the receiving end of negative actions as a passive entity, confused and disoriented, and without leadership or active agency.

This delegitimation stance also comes to the fore in the writings of Rashid Al-Ghanoushi who criticizes the isolationist attitudes of Arab governments. He laments that while the world is moving toward globalizing policies by forging alliances and blocs to address economic and political challenges, Arab regimes "promote territorialist policies which have failed in the projects of democracy and development."[5] A call for action permeates his writings enticing the Arab youth to act against enduring problems of authoritarianism and fragmentation, and to lay the ground for alternative democratic systems which reflect the will of the Arab nation and realize its aspirations.

In articulating a response to political despotism, Al-Marzouqi employs what De Cillia, Reisigl & Wodak's (1999) refer to as 'dismantling or destructive strategies' which serve to de-mythologize or demolish existing identities or elements of them. In his article titled 'There is no Solution in Islam is the Solution'[6], he deconstructs this often-raised slogan by Islamist movements as being unable to find solutions to the Muslim societies' economic, political, and social crises, and that the complex nature of present-day societies reject any form of "tutelage" and that there are no "magical recipes". He grounds his argument on a rationalist approach by providing a list of ways in which state authoritarianism and corruption can be challenged and subverted. He prescribes that the solution to the Arab nation's dilemmas lies in cultivating "a spiritual revolution" by moving away from dogmatism to pragmatism, from metaphysical thinking to scientific thinking, and from over-simplification to an awareness of the enormous complexity of the world we live in.

A main theme that runs through these writings is the construction of an imagined Pan-Arab-Islamic nation (*Ummah*, in Arabic) with sentiments of shared history, language, culture, historical experience, hopes and destiny. One could cite numerous examples of these writings, but chiefly among them are those of the Tunisian Rashed Al-Ghanoushi whose writings generally focused on examining the relation between Islamist movements, the West, and the call for revolution. This is quite evident in an article titled "When will the Arab stop repeating the legacy of the Sects' Monarchs."[7]

Extract 3
My advice to the *Ummah*'s youth and its advocates is not to lose sight for a moment, while they deal with the differences and contradictions **in the ranks of the *Ummah***, no matter how great, about **these Western schemes** that are fixed in their comprehensive view of the *Ummah*, which obliges us to rise above our differences, … and we think

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by the logic of the **Ummah**, not by the logic of the sect, tribe, country or party, [we think] **by the logic of a single *Ummah*.**

The frequent mention of the word 'Ummah' in the extract refers to De Cillia, Reisigl & Wodak's (1999) 'constructive strategy' that aims to maintain, support and reproduce a supra-collective identity that transcends nationalist, ideological, or territorial boundaries. Here the reference to the '*Ummah*' presupposes pan-Arab-Islamic sameness and it takes for granted that there exists a homogenous we-group with shared past, language, destiny and future, and that it should act accordingly.

Here Al-Ghanoushi gives further weight to the notion of 'we are in the same boat' aiming to discursively construct the Arab nation as facing a grave collective danger due to totalitarianism, divisions and splits, and external schemes and attacks. He exhorts the Arab youth to think of themselves as one community being under attack and that their interests are not served by continuing their silence over attempts at their marginalization and political disengagement. An explicit call for action on the youth is communicated to take courageous steps to change the socio-political status quo and take matter in their hands.

East Versus West: The Negative Role of the West
In addressing the presupposed conflictual relationship between the Arab world and the West, two constant themes seem to dominate these writings. The first involves a pronounced disillusionment with Western, especially U.S., military and political hegemony over the region that is mainly held responsible for the region's problems and failing conditions. A clear emphasis on the West as an obstacle to Arab renaissance and reform is traced in the linguistic choices and imagery drawn upon in the texts. The mood of dissatisfaction and rejection of the West's policies is conveyed in highly charged lexical references, such as "the forces of international hegemony", "ferocious foreign powers", "Western onslaught", "arrogance of US power", "common enemy" and "attack on Islam", etc. The West is consistently presented as an agent of negatively charged verbs such as "impede", "intervene", "exploit" and "impose obstacles", while the "*Ummah*" is presented as the recipient of these negative actions. Secondly, writers did not close the door shut in the West's face nor advocated a clash of civilization. Rather, they called for a more balanced relationship premised on recognition of mutual interests and respect of cultural particularities that need to be acknowledged and protected.

The misgivings about the West are underlain by an "emphatic" indictment of the West for its backing of autocratic Arab regimes. The West's colonial encounter with the Arab East is brought forward in some writings as evidence of the former's inherent imperialistic drive for domination and control and in keeping the region backward, weak and fragmented (For a similar portrayal of this relation in the writings of Egyptian intellectuals during 1930-1945 Egypt, see Gershoni and Jankowski, 1995, p. 46).

The accentuation of this dichotomy involves assigning positive and negative predications to particular participants and actions. Negative references to a hegemonic

and aggressive West abound in these texts in what van Dijk (1998, 2001) refers to as a macro argumentative strategy of positive self-presentation and negative other-presentation. More negative images of America and the West in the writers' remarks emerge in the analysis than positive images. These images centre on a construction of the West as supporting dictatorships in the region, supporting Israel, and perpetuating a state of poverty, stagnation and subordination to Western interests. The linguistic triggers for this emerging topic can be observed in expressions in Table (2) below:

> - The hegemonic powers that reveled in what has befallen us
> - That only benefit the enemies of Islam
> - The time of the Crusades.
> - To weaken the *Ummah* and abort its renaissance projects
> - Western hegemony
> - constant Western schemes
> - A price for ongoing Western support and silence over regimes' gross violations
>   of their peoples' rights and forging their will
> - The Imperialist West
> - The imperial discourse on the Arab world
> - Proxy war
> - Manipulating the destiny of the Ummah and reinforcing its disintegration
> - Winds of dismantling and uprooting
> - To thrust Israel and enhance its legitimacy in the region
> - To put his hand on the resources of the region
> - To dismember the body and paralyze the factors of its advancement

Table (2): Negative Terms Associated with the West

The most interesting linguistic structure from the table is that most of the specific references about the West invoke the image-schematic metaphor of a *container* (see, for example, Charteris-Black, 2006; Colakovac, 2019; Drury, 2002; Kovecses, 2005; Lakoff and Johnson, 1980; Natorski, 2020) through the conception of the Arab Islamic world as one community that is being penetrated by external, foreign threat, as instantiated in expressions such as 'hegemonic powers', 'Western schemes', 'enemies of Islam', 'imperialist West', 'Crusade', 'weaken the Ummah', 'thrust Israel;, 'put his hand', etc.

The reservoirs of images, motifs, themes and vocabularies that are variously circulated in these writings emphasize images of the West in terms of threat, atavism, manipulation and hegemony. These negative depictions construct a polarization between two worlds, an Arab world that is being threatened and manipulated, and a Western world that is framed as constantly seeking to further its interests by exercising its domination, on the one hand, and by supporting internal forces precluding opportunities for the Arab societies to develop and exercise their full potential, on the

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other. Here the writers draw much on the readers' repertoire of shared knowledge and experience of the stagnant conditions in the Arab world.

A stridently negative assessment of the West's role in the region is reiterated in Fehmi Huwaidi's article, who faults what he calls the "forces of hegemony" for consolidating Arab fragmentation by attempting to impose different formulae such as 'The New Middle East' or 'The Greater Middle East'. He sees these policies as aiming to open the door wide open for Israel and promote its legitimacy in the region[8]. The Islamist Tunisian writer Rashid Al-Ghanoushi is vocal in his negative portrayal of the West as persistently aggressive in pursuing its economic and strategic interests. He charges that such Western interventions are a visible impediment to the region's progress by supporting dictatorial regimes which have kept the region disunited and under-developed and "continuously prevented attempts for democratic transition in the region."[9] These writings evoke feelings of resentment and a sense of urgency for action and taking the initiative to change the status quo, and that their interests are not served by continuing their silence over the situation.

In a related vein, fear over the Arab-Islamic identity and culture from Western interventions is a recurrent theme in the writings. The writings point to a concomitant intellectual and cultural imperialism and a new form of Western hegemony resulting from the ongoing encounter with the modern, capitalist West. According to Rajaee (2007, p. 17), the hegemonic narrative of modernism disrupted the cultural homogeneity of the Muslim world and afflicted the minds of the people with "Weststruckness" – modern *jahiliya* (ignorance), or "Westamination" – a notion that lies at the heart of the proposed Islamic modern imagined community." For Sayf Da'na, the supremacy of Western values also assisted in the hegemony of the Western imperialist project which looks down upon anything that is non-Western. He holds that the threat of obliterating local identities by the West's hegemonic narrative and cultural products requires adopting a counternarrative which maintains Arab cultural authenticity and sets Arab identity apart from others[10]. Da'na charges that aiding this external threat over identity is a group of local elites, which he calls "local Orientalists", who identified with Western identity and cultural values, do the imperialists' bidding and aid the West in its cultural penetration of the Arab East. A dichotomy is constructed between "us" and "them" making the dictators and their Western supporters the "other" group standing in the way of change in the Arab world.

That said, rather than advocating a perennial and irreconcilable conflict with the West, these writers called for a more equitable relation to reverse the current confrontational relationship between the East and West. That is, the attitudes of these writers were not resolutely anti-Western, but rather they were more Arab- and Islamic-oriented, emphasizing a new course to correct the relationship with the West; criticism of the West was not directed at Western modernity, but it was leveled within the specific contexts of Western military, economic and cultural influence.

For Burhan Ghalyoun, neither Pan-Arabism nor the U.S.-backed Middle East order that long competed in shaping the Middle East and controlling the interactions between its various actors are viable any longer[11]. He proposes a multi-polar world system through which each party reaches understandings based on mutual interests and fair and acceptable principles. In keeping, perhaps, with much earlier views on responses to modernity such as those voiced by Sayyid Qutub, Ghazi Al-Tawbah draws a lesson from Japan and how it maintained its cultural authenticity while achieving material and scientific successes based on Western technology[12]. What he proposes is not a wholesale rejection of Western modernity, but rather selecting what is good in material and scientific progress and placing all within a more authentic Islamic alternative embedded in "Islamic values and traditions".

Democracy and the Causes of Failure
The issue of democracy interlinks all other addressed issues. There is a consensus among the writers on the centrality of democracy and democratic reform as a prerequisite for change. Writers sought to identify the causes of the prevalent conditions of despotism and authoritarianism in the Arab world. Some writers addressed political and social realities in Arab societies, and the role of Arab regimes and the West in obstructing the process of democratization. Others were rather concerned with the inherent, problematic structure of Arab societies which hampers the efficacy of democratizing processes and their underlying assumptions.

A case in point is Al-Marzouqi's contrast between the West's creativity and energy with the East's rigidity, insularity and stagnation. He compares the success of the Europeans who are "rich, educated, free and united", while 400 million Arabs are "poor, illiterate, enslaved and divided". He locates the causes of European success in their democracy, while common among Arab societies is the presence of despotism and authoritarian tendencies[13]. He locates the responsibility for the absence of democracy in the structure of Arab family and the dominance of patriarchal and traditional structures and educational practices, which reinforce the despotic practices of Arab regimes[14].

Majed Al-Kayyali sees the problem of democracy in the rigidity of Arab reality, the fragility of its interactions, and the weaknesses of its activist powers which in turn weaken their ability to achieve democratic progress. He holds that the concepts of state and citizenship are still foreign to Arab societies[15].

Extract 4
The **plight** of democracy in the Arab world stems from the absence of the historical, political and cultural legacy of the concept of state and citizenship. This legacy is rather based on religious "succession", "monarchal provisions" and "Mamluk" paradigms, and there is support to this legacy in the political and cultural realities which reinforce and reproduce it in different colours.

In this extract, Al-Kayyali first characterizes the situation as 'plight of democracy' and points the finger at the nature and development of the post-colonial, territorial state in

the Arab world. This state arose from the "military establishment" or has been based on "sectarian or tribal allegiances", which led to the erosion of the state of institutions in favour of authoritarianism and prevented a true transition to democracy. The concentration of political power typically lies in the hands of ruling military elites or a few tribes who prevent the possibility of power-sharing on the basis of equal opportunities for all citizens. He sees that restoring democracy comes through restoring respect for the state of institutions, the supremacy of the rule of law, the separation of authorities, and respect for public and individual liberties.

Comparisons drawn between the advanced West and the stagnant East is a recurring theme. These comparisons serve to emphasize the need for change for the betterment of the Arabs. For instance, Ghalyoun is acutely aware of the abysmal conditions of the Arab world. Thus, he assigns a central place to the role of internal change in the thinking, values and cultural make-up of Arab societies to emulate wholeheartedly the essence of democratic and modernizing processes. Unlike European societies, Arab societies did not experience "a real and enduring democratic political life which helps these societies internalize values of freedoms in the civic and political spheres."[16] He problematizes the role played by international policies in a strategically important region in preventing a transition to democracy. He holds that some Western powers have persistently portrayed Arab societies as "outside history" and as "static and unchanging" in an effort to condemn these societies and close the door on any political, democratic transformation.

Responding to the place of Islam in the modern world and the social, political and economic challenges facing Islam and Muslims, a central theme in Al-Ghanoushi's work focuses on the centrality of Islam to modern society and that democracy and democratic institutions are not incompatible with Islam and Islamic values. The thrust of his argument is that there is no one single form of rule in Islam but a set of values and benchmarks which organize the relationship between the rulers and the ruled[17]. He takes to task the Caliphate system advocated by some radical Islamist groups if it meant asserting despotic tendencies and prevented the collective rule of the nation.

Extract 5
To be true, there is nothing in the Caliphate ruling system that prevailed in our history impels Muslims to treat it as holy or to gloss over its oppressions and exclusion of the rule of the Ummah… There is nothing that justifies calling again for establishing the Caliphate if it only meant a totalitarian rule that does not shy away from committing brutality against its opponents.

Al-Ghanoushi uses a delegitimation stance against Islamist movements that failed to effectively respond to the challenges of modernity, economic prosperity and globalization, Al-Ghanoushi's rationalizing stance is built on the argument that enforcing *Shari'ah* is not enough in today's world, because such view diverts attention from the real predicament that is befalling the Muslim nation lying in the prevalence of tyranny and oppression. An abundance of analogies and comparisons between the past

and the present can be noticed in his writings wherein he advocates a new political order that is premised on individual and civic rights and liberties, and one which derives its values from the Islamic civilizational repertoire. Arguing by giving an example from the Medinan state established by the Prophet Muhammed which was inclusive of all powers and sects in the Medina[18], Al-Ghanoushi advocates a similar approach based on religious pluralism and acceptance of difference even within Islamic movements.

Similarly, Abu Rumman holds that Islam does not specify a particular type of political governance as there are no legal texts which spell out the type of political system in Islam, but rather identifies a set of values and standards which generally accord with humanitarian law and universal moral values[19]. For Ahmed Al-Raysouni, central to Islamic values and ideals are the notion of justice and service to the people, for the liberal values of equality, justice and respect for human rights are not incompatible with Islamic values since the latter also apply to issues of justice, equality and human rights[20]. He attempts to rationalize the congruence between democracy and Islamic beliefs and coming to terms with democracy and freedom as cornerstone for building a new Arab reality.

Questions of Political Islam and Revival
Just as one cannot really make sense of the writers' strident criticism of prevalent conditions in the Arab world without considering the role of Arab regimes and the West in the region, one has to look at the issue of democracy in relation to questions of political Islam and revival and the role of Islam in Arab societies. In evaluating the experience and ideological underpinnings of Islamist revivalist movements, these writers underscored the necessity of democratic values, pluralism and acceptance of other ideological positions. Writers developed themes which all emphasized the moderate character of Islam. They decried the literalist dogmatism of revivalist groups as having run their course and as disconnected from the lived reality of many Muslim and Arab societies. They attempted to answer the ultimate questions: 'why others progressed while we regressed?', 'Why are we still weak, illiterate, poor and fragmented?', and "What can be done to improve the lives of Muslims?" Three key notions are anchored in this main topic: an advocacy for a new identity of Muslim society and the return to the pure version of Islam, an emphasis on the distinctiveness of Muslim society and beliefs, and a congruence between Islam and ideals of democracy, modernity and citizenship.

Illustrative of this reformist view which reconciles the teachings of Islam to the imperatives of modernity is that of Rashed Al-Ghanoushi, who wrote extensively on the topic. His writings sought to wrest control of Islamic interpretations from oppositional Islamic groups and state-sponsored and tightly controlled religious bodies. For instance, in an article that examined these questions, Al-Ghanoushi contrasts the views of the Egyptian well-known Islamic revivalist Sayyid Qutub[21] and the contributions of the Algerian intellectual Malik Bin Nabi (1905-1973), favouring the views of Bin Nabi as offering a rationalist explanation of Muslims' regression[22]. Bin Nabi attempted to locate the causes of this collective decline in the economic and

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political spheres of Muslim life and their history. In this perspective, a Muslim may be "backward", "oppressor' and "wasteful of his time" or "civilized" and "just and rational in his use of time and material potential". Unlike Qutub who equates Islam with civilization, Bin Nabi makes a distinction between the two and regards the former as a divine revelation, while the latter is man-made and comes about when people utilize their time and material potential.

Al-Ghanoushi brings up this contrast as part of a delegitimation tactic to lament the lack amongst Islamists of the intellectual legacy of Bin Nabi. He chastises the waves of Islamist radicals who offered a doctrinally narrow perspective which has failed to both achieve a consensus among Muslims and to respond to the challenges of the modern world. In their response to modernism and modernity, these radical movements offered dogmatic, inflexible interpretations which eschewed a proper understanding of Islam. Al-Ghanoushi stresses that the internal conflicts among different Islamic groups and sects are mainly driven by tyranny and a political conflict over the privileges of power, and that these groups and currents have failed to resolve their differences through a broader Islamic perspective that encompasses all sects and ideological spectra[23].

Extract 6
The nation's internal problems are many… Sectarian strife is nothing but a branch of tyranny by opinion, by claiming to exclusively possess the religious truth, excommunicating **those** who do not accept that as **yours**, and defiling **their** sanctities...Usually, **our** disputes over power are **masqueraded by the burqa** of religion... Thus, **our** disputes over power after the era of the rightly-guided were resolved by the sword, and **we** failed to think up mechanisms to manage disputes peacefully.

Seeking to show that Islamic movements failed to effectively respond to the challenges of modernity, economic prosperity and globalization, Al-Ghanoushi points out that the principle of enforcing Shari'ah (Islamic religious law) is not enough in today's world because it diverts attention from the real predicament that is besetting the Muslim Arab nation which is the prevalence of tyranny and oppression. Gabsi (2022) observes that the Arab Spring marked a watershed moment underpinned by identity politics and the quest for dignity. As noted previously, the extract above presupposes a collective Arab and Muslim identity which is linguistically constructed in the use, for instance, of the first-personal plural pronouns 'our' and 'we' which are associated with this imagined, all-encompassing identity sharing similar perceptions and practices. Once this construction is anchored, he uses that to reject and de-rationalize such exclusivist perceptions and practices as reflective of despotic tendencies and attitudes.

Two speech acts are performed here; first, a speech act of denouncing is readily performed against Islamist currents for their thirst for power and for 'masquerading' their differences behind religious overtones. A speech act of co-opting is also expressed here with the aim of getting the readers to go beyond sectarian, exclusivist, ideological, or religious fault lines and embracing unity, tolerance and understanding. It is essential

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to highlight Al-Ghanoushi's call on mainstream Islamic movements to engage in reform, so that Islam becomes a collective identity which embraces all visible and invisible differences within the various Islamic and secular forces in the Arab-Islamic world. He encourages adopting an open-minded Islamic political thinking which rejects "monopoly over Islam", acknowledges "religious pluralism" within Islamist currents, and recognizes the right to compete for power on the basis of citizenship and coexistence of all sects in Arab-Islamic societies.

This is also mirrored in Haitham Manaa' discourse that focuses on advocating a liberal and modern view of Islam and Muslim societies. Manaa' largely appeals to liberal values of human rights, civil liberties and religious pluralism. At the same time, he presents a negative evaluation of *Salafi*, revivalist interpretations of Islam, such as those of Qutub's that sought to reduce issues of modernity to the question of religious revivalism[24]. He condemns Qutub's religious totalitarianism which arose in response to authoritarianism considering the former as the main dilemma of Islam and the problem of Arab-Muslim society.

Finding trouble in the current revivalist exhortations, Al-Marzouqi is a vocal proponent of a rationalist approach to remedy the malaise at the heart of Arab societies[25]. He sought to de-mythologize the often-stated slogan "Islam is the solution" often raised by those revivalist movements, arguing that they are no different in their psychological and ideological characteristics from nationalist, Pan-Arab and Communist movements in sanctifying their claims and in the violence that they direct at their opponents. Al-Marzouqi roundly decries these narrow-minded and rigid interpretations of Islam as responsible for the current problems in Arab societies and the deterioration of their political, economic and social conditions. He urges the Islamists to work on resolving people's daily problems which he considers the real benchmark for good governance, which was responsible for the success of the Turkish experience.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

This paper examined a range of key issues addressed by an influential group of Arab intellectuals concerned about conditions of authoritarianism, economic failures, and an overall collective weakness in the Arab world. The analysis shows four general orientations that characterized the writings examined in the paper and are expressed linguistically through lexical and transitivity selections, metaphorical expressions, arguments, a range of speech acts ranging from explicit invocations, appeals and calls for actions to rationalizations and explanation, and argumentative moves including positive self-presentation and negative other-presentation.

This paper shows that the writings of these reformers are motivated not so much by ideological or doctrinal motives, but rather by current political and socio-economic conditions in the Arab world. These writers sought to achieve the desired reform and change in Arab societies in their responses to current realities by formulating and

disseminating their ideas to broad sectors of Arab-Islamic societies, and seemed to provide a programmatic agenda for change.

The call for freedom, political reform and social justice loomed large in the thinking of these writers with a mission of reorienting Arab societies towards a political order of democracy and reform. Years of advocacy for change preceding the Arab uprisings in 2011 were instrumental in paving the way for the radical change the Arab world witnessed in 2011. The writers here acted as drivers of change, calling for resistance of abysmal conditions, and advocating reform. What is worth noting about these writers is that they projected Pan-Arab-Islamic sentiments of one nation united by its destiny and shared historical and geographical realities. Writers also did not offer a blanket condemnation of the West, but rather criticisms were given within the specific contexts of Western interference and hegemony over the region. They lamented the absence of an equitable relation with the West based on recognition of mutual interests and cultural sensitivies of Arab societies. Third, these writers agree on the fundamental issue of a humane and inclusive Islamic approach which tolerates difference, emphasizes universal values of social justice, respect for human rights and democracy, and seeks common grounds in order to respond to enduring political, economic and social challenges.

Much research has shown Al Jazeera's coverage of news and current affairs to challenge regimes and address central issues of Arab societies. Equally, Al Jazeera's influential website, www.aljazeera.net was used for the diffusion of ideas and sending a message about the imperative for change and revolution. Kriesberg (2012) correctly observes that effective expressions of outrage and calls for change entice people sharing similar grievances to mobilize and revolt against oppressive circumstances. It seems that Al Jazeera was quite successful in setting the agenda for change through the articulations of such calls for change and reform. It provided a platform through which reformist discourses were channeled and articulated.

It could be argued that the intellectuals whose writings are examined here had taken on the role of drivers of change and democracy through providing the rationales, arguments and orientations for creating an atmosphere of political awareness and mass participation and effecting a change in Arab conditions. They did so through their engagement in what can be termed online activism especially in addressing segments of Arab societies across the world. The possibilities offered by the digital media enabled them to reach large audiences across the Arab region and all over the world. Droz-dit-Busset (2022) shows that the transformative power of mediatization lies in its widespread distribution of ideologies, and the pervasiveness of digital media in people's lives means that media discourses are becoming even more powerful in shaping how people make sense of themselves and their social world. Such massification of intellectual production would likely have contributed to the growing drive among the masses for change that saw its most lucid manifestation in the Arab Spring uprisings of 2011 and since. Their articulation of different political views and representing multiple identities points to a position that Al Jazeera adopts in appealing

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to different ideologies and political orientations in the Arab world. This also underscores the significance of digital media in mobilization and in serving as a platform for change.

Serious convulsions are still hitting the region and a state of uncertainty is prevalent, especially as the causes of the first wave of uprisings are taking sway and real work to address these causes is still out of sight. The Arab world is currently living a new reality of popular mobilization, which cannot be ignored or suppressed. The main platform for this reality is the new media which had radically changed, and still do, the media and political landscape in the Arab world by serving as venues through which peoples' aspirations and hopes are expressed and defended. The popular uprisings in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Syria, Bahrain and Yemen show that the new media have undeniably played a role in mobilizing broad sectors of Arab societies towards much desired democratic reform and change. More of this role remains to be seen in this vital, yet endemically turbulent part of the world.

NOTES:

1 See, e.g., news report http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/2893689.stm

2 https://www.aljazeera.net/opinion/

3 Al-Marzouqi, M. (2009, November 12). إلى الأمام نحو الهاوية [Edging Forward to the Abyss]. Available from https://t.ly/4yUd

4 Huwaidi, F. (2009, December 22). عقد تفكيك العرب [The Age of Fragmenting the Arabs]. Available from

https://t.ly/ugXn

5 Al-Ghanoushi, R. (2009, December 24). متى يكفّ العرب عن تكرار سيرة ملوك الطوائف؟ [When Will the Arab Stop Repeating the Legacy of the Sects' Kings]. Available from https://t.ly/ksh-

6 Al-Marzouqi, M. (2009, December 30). لا حل في الاسلام هو الحل [There Is No Solution in Islam Is the Solution]. Available from https://bit.ly/3zECgd1

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11 Ghalyoun, B. (2007, March 18). ما بعد القومية والاستعمار [Post-Nationalism and Colonialism]. Available from https://cutt.ly/SZfP6AZ

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Available from https://cutt.ly/LZfAaBl

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14 Al-Marzouqi, M. (2010, February 02). الكارثة العظمى بين مسؤولية الأنظمة والشعوب [The Great Disaster between the Responsibility of the Regimes and the Peoples]. Available from https://cutt.ly/CZfAvsj

15 Al-Kayyali, M. (2009, November 22). عن محنة الديموقراطية في العالم العربي [About the Plight of Democracy in the Arab World]. Available from https://cutt.ly/BZfAQS7

16 Ghalyoun, B. (2008, July 21). الجذور الثقافية لغياب الديموقراطية [The Cultural Roots of the Absence of Democracy]. Available from https://cutt.ly/zZfAG6K

17 Al-Ghanoushi, R. (2009, October 14). هل في الإسلام نظام للدولة أم مرجع للقانون؟ [Is in Islam a State System or a Reference to the Law]. Available from https://cutt.ly/iZfANk8

18 Al-Ghanoushi, R. (2009, November 21).الحرية أولا [Freedom First]. Available from https://cutt.ly/BZfSwzi

19 Abu Rumman, M. (2006, October 31). الإسلام والعلمانية.. هل إلى لقاء من سبيل؟ [Islam and Secularism ... Is There a Chance of Meeting]. Available from https://cutt.ly/jZfSyTE

20 Al-Raysouni, A. (2006, July 11). فقه السياسة وسياسة الفقه [The Jurisprudence of Politics and the Politics of Jurisprudence]. Available from https://cutt.ly/ZZfSpEc

21 Sayyid Qutub has been for long associated with Islamic revivalist movements and his writings inspired many of these movements to act violently against governments.

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