

Creating Global University System; and Prof. Dr. Takeshi Utsumi

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What are the Most Important Issues for the Arab World: Political, Economic, Social or Cultural?

Politics, economics, society and culture are elaborately intertwined and can hardly be separated from one another. They are the basis of civilization, and they are highly important for establishing rational mechanisms for approaching the myriad issues of daily life. Although all four are important, culture is vital. For without a strong, just and shared culture, the other three are irrelevant.

A progressive political system is born out of the revolutionary, liberal thought of intellectual citizens. Organized, motivated and sufficiently educated peoples will help produce strong economic structures. Likewise, vigorous intellectual citizens will affect change and rearrange accordingly various social values and behavioral norms. Unless citizens are educated to be critical, they lack prerequisites to taking part in essential active discourse. They forego participation in the rational guidance of overall society, as enabled through education. The Arab collective social and political life must be continually challenged in the context of critical thinking with discussion. Without a deeply integrated and rooted cultural identity, people lack not only the capacity but, just as important, the will to take part in the process of shaping public policy and all it entails for politics, economy and society.

Culture distinguishes one human group from another. Peoples' cultural identities comprise their beliefs, rules of behavior, language, arts, technology, traditions of thought and values, as well as their ways of producing and preparing food, styles of dress and politico-economic conceptions. A culture serves to place all these in a social, ideological, and historical framework that speaks for those who identify with it.

Culture, in turn, constitutes and demarcates a given society's boundaries. People share common ways of behaving and thinking by identifying with their culture. They have to know how the world "works" and how they should interact with others - individually and as a community, both inside and outside their cultural frame. In the Arab world in particular, many people rely on religion as a symbolic embodiment of their shared values and ideals.

People group together according to a number of arranged yet evolving political, social, economic and moral beliefs. Collectively and historically these impose certain points of view regarding any phenomenon. If people are satisfied they will accept the authority of these conceptions; if not, they will revolt against them. This ability to act and react to a society's belief structure is shaped by the degree of each individual's self-awareness.

Our Palestinian culture is marching backward rapidly[1]. This statement is supported by an ongoing deterioration in many aspects of our lives. We are economically dependent, politically disenfranchised and ideologically bewildered or misled. We can argue that this stems from our cultural heritage or from the way we perceive it. Is it our fault as individuals or the fault of a collectivist culture, with its tendency toward inflexibility and groupthink?

It cannot be denied that the world has taken serious steps toward a certain form of global unity, but we in the Arab world choose not to lose ourselves in perceived submission to the dominance of a given civilization (namely that version of the West transmitted by mass media and economic global shifts of recent decades). The key question is how we retain autonomous cultural identity while still joining the rest of the world. For, not to do so accelerates our march backwards.

I contend that our cultural suffering is due to our weakness in adapting new ways of thinking. Hence, an atmosphere of cultural uncertainty and insecurity accompanies any search for democratic, political or social alternatives that would free the shackled elements of our civilization to forge both an Arab and a global identity. A valuable and viable culture must contain certain developed capacities for mutually maintaining healthy relationships with the wider world, while not jeopardizing the integrity of the identity found within that culture.

Arab intellectual discourse is riddled with controversy and contradiction in the face of this challenge. Some say that we should derive all judgments from our ancestors; something that is always followed regardless of shifts in the current existential environment. "The memory of our glorious roots is the only frame of reference." Others think it is an injustice to mould us in that heritage due to its perceived inability to update or to graft itself to the concepts of today.

Another way of looking at this very important issue is considering the influence of the recent history on the Arab current cultural mentality. The Arab world has suffered a great deal since the First World War. The allies left the Arabs fighting a battle alone and then went on to impose a self-serving occupation upon the region, an occupation that colonized the people as much as the land. This factor continues to fuel the contemporary controversy. Inevitably, we were exposed to certain European values and philosophical theories without keeping a keen eye on our own individuality. Therefore, Arab identity no longer addresses our memory in its full strength. Our current way of thinking has become an irrational message that cannot face the changeable ways of the world. This lack of flexibility or natural absorption has proven to be a casket for numerous Arab revival projects.

In this context we may dare to say that we are dealing with what we call "It's a man's world". The male exclusivity of Arab society has led to the 'sovereignty of man' particularly (though by no means exclusively) amongst old and young generations. This leads to a cultural chasm and intolerance between generations, in addition to the amputation of half the Arab people, namely women, from the process of effectively shaping our world.

What happens to our gifted young people? Due to under-developed educational systems, many Arab young people are obliged to travel abroad to pursue their studies. In Palestine, this

problem has been exacerbated by the policies of the Israeli occupation. Unfortunately, when (if) these individuals return, they rarely find opportunities matching their studies or capitalizing on their skills. They then decide to migrate to other countries, leaving their country to suffer due to the absence of their knowledge. Their attitude negatively affects proper reforms of science, technology and society. The very absence of these individuals who might be willing to challenge and change the social system contributes enormously to Palestinians' dearth of opportunity and economic stagnation.

Some intellectuals remain, but their crisis is one of the main characteristics of our culture. The passive role of this group is born of frustration. Living under Arab political regimes, the individual equipped to critically assess his or her culture commonly faces three options: adaptation, isolation or out-migration, all representing varying degrees of alienation.

To be forced to adapt your personal beliefs to the strictures of dominant ones obliges the individual to use all sorts of self-denying hypocrisy in order to meet normative societal expectations. In resorting to isolation, the individual retreats from society into a self-styled 'tower', an act that devolves to the erosion of the self as well as the society.

In out-migration, one expresses defeat, indicating a loss of harmony with a society deemed unable to support a process of true sharing. The departure from (and commonly the denial of) one's roots of birth is followed by a synthetic and superficial attempt to 'graft' to another 'plant'.

Society, politics, and economics are derivative from and contributive to a culture. The four constitute a carefully woven networked system. Each depends on the others, but culture can, more than any other single component in the Arab world today; provide the soil for the maturation of a guiding set of principles and mechanisms for setting in motion and supporting the necessary process of overall change.

There is, despite (or even because of) the challenges summarized above, cause to hope that the foundations of healthy Arab intellectual and cultural structures can yet emerge as a driving force, free of today's fetters. These cultural structures will pave the way for the upward and outward expansion of a self-conscious, democratic, liberal Arab identity, existing in harmony with itself, its history, its environment, its future and the rest of the world. Thank you

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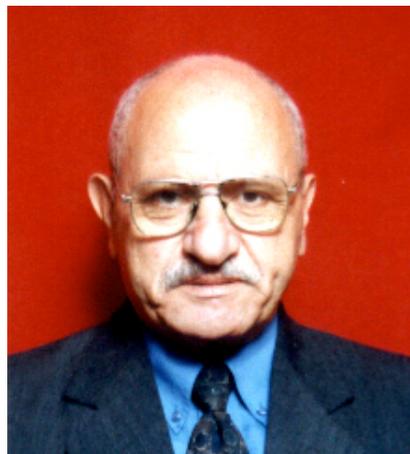
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[1] More justification is needed and more reasons for why the Palestinians are moving backwards.

Author Biographical Sketches

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Summary Curriculum Vitae

An American born in The Gaza Strip, Dr. Fouad M. EL-Harazin is currently the president of the Gaza International Foundation for Peace on Earth (GIFPE), an NGO, and also heads the International Programs for National Research Center (NRC). Formally, He has acted as the Director of International Programs at AL-Aqsa University and has a M.Sc. and Ph. D. in Solid State Physics. He worked for 32 years at Northern Telecom, Inc., Eureka X-ray Tube Company, and Zenith Radio Corp. in the U.S.A.

Dr. EL-Harazin worked as a lecturer in Physics in Gaza City and is active there in the Society of Scientific Research and Studies and also the Palestinian Information Technology Committee. Currently, he is working in joint collaboration with several Palestinian Universities to develop distance learning.

Dr. EL-Harazin frequently participates in local, regional and international conferences. He has presented and published numerous papers and articles in both English and Arabic.

Recently, Dr. EL-Harazin developed and accomplished a great deal on e-Learning University in Gaza after we completed an e-Learning agreement with the University of Northern Virginia in USA. Also, he has also developed partnerships between The National Research Center (NRC) in Egypt-Cairo and NRC in The Gaza Strip-Palestinian Authority and, planning and developed an academic program for a Master's and/or Doctoral Degrees for the Faculty of Science, the Department of Environment & Earth for Islamic University in Gaza.

Dr. EL-Harazin utilizes the Internet to conduct a collaborative cross-cultural e-Learning program (MIT LINC; <http://linc.mit.edu>) in efforts to facilitate cultural bridging and collaborative dialog. Furthermore, these programs provide badly needed opportunities for underserved students in conflict-ridden areas.

The most recently is to prepare to create in Palestine "The Global University System/Palestine/ Gaza and West Bank". The Global University System (GUS) is a worldwide initiative to establish broadband Internet infrastructure for enhancing e-learning and e-healthcare across national and cultural boundaries for global peace. The philosophy of GUS is based on the belief that global peace and prosperity would only be sustainable through education. The prime objective is to achieve "education and healthcare FOR ALL," anywhere, anytime and at any pace.

Dr. EL-Harazin's mission is to promote innovations for peace in the Middle East and to help the Palestinian people. He has been charged with the responsibility of developing educational policy, methods of implementation, and curriculum within the Palestinian school systems. He works within local and international communities to bring people with diverse knowledge, perspectives and resources together in hopes of building an excellent Palestinian academic system.

Thus far, Dr. EL-Harazin has raised in excess of three million dollars for education, which has translated into seventy-thousands books (donated to Palestinian Universities) and has purchased greatly needed medical materials and computers in for Gaza strip.

To learn more about Dr. EL-Harazin's peace and educational efforts, please visit: <http://www.gifpeace.org>

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