



Elizabeth Suzanne Kassab. *Enlightenment on the Eve of the Revolution: The Egyptian and Syrian Debates.* New York: Columbia University Press, 2019. 240 pp. \$30.00, paper, ISBN 978-0-231-17633-0.

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Arab Spring Eve: Debates in Egypt and Syria

Scholars have spilled considerable ink during the last decade over the Arab revolutions that began in 2011. The fates of each revolution differed substantially. Egypt arguably witnessed the most impressive popular mobilization of the twenty-first century so far, until it was usurped by a Bonaparte in the person of Abdel Fattah el-Sisi. In Syria, a genuine popular revolt turned into a reactionary civil war within six months. In Bahrain, Saudi tanks quelled the popular rebellion. In Libya, a sham revolution provided the excuse for intervention from a coalition of imperialist and regional powers, leading to the unraveling of a country. Only Tunisia avoided a massive crackdown or civil war following the initial success of the revolution. All in all, these popular uprisings profoundly changed the political and social landscape of the region, leading to a keen interest in the causes and consequences of these world-historic events. Elizabeth Suzanne Kassab's latest work, *Enlightenment on the Eve of Revolution: The Egyptian and Syrian Debates*, fills a lacuna by exploring the intellectual landscape before the revolutions in Egypt and Syria through the debates around the concept of *tanwir* (enlightenment).

The book consists of two parts, focusing respectively on the discussions in Egypt and Syria,

with each chapter also structured in two parts that roughly correspond to the debates of the 1990s and 2000s. Kassab makes the point that the "Western Enlightenment legacy per se was not a focus of the *tanwir* debates" (p. 3). Instead, she anchors these debates in the "Arab fin-de-siècle mood" and disillusionment within the post-independence Arab states (p. 2). Although the legacy of Western Enlightenment was only of secondary importance, "the centrality of the *nahda* [renaissance] in both the Egyptian and the Syrian debates was unmistakable" (p. 151). After identifying the features they share in common, *Enlightenment on the Eve of Revolution* convincingly argues that the two countries' *tanwir* debates differed in some crucial aspects.

In Syria, Kassab sees continuity between the debates of the 1990s and the 2000s, or between the Sisyphean and Promethean moments. In Egypt, on the other hand, she identifies a rupture. While the *tanwir* debate at first was oriented against the perceived threat of Islamism, the state then co-opted it. This co-opted *tanwir* is discussed through the writings of Mourad Wahba and Gaber Asfour. Co-opted enlightenment (*tanwir hukumi*) in turn created an Islamist response in the conception of *tanwir islami* (Islamic enlightenment), as demon-

strated by the writings of Muhammad Imarah. The second wave of *tanwiris* in Egypt, discussed through the writings of Mona Abaza, Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd, and Sherif Younis, directed sharp criticism at their predecessors.

These differences, Kassab argues, stem from the differences in political and historical contexts of the two countries. In Egypt since the times of Muhammad Ali Pasha, there had been a "traditional organic bond between the Egyptian intellectual and the state," and "despite changing official ideologies and failures in delivering on promises, the state continued to be the central motor of modernization, stability, and security for most Egyptians and Egyptian intellectuals" (p. 5). In Syria, however, there was "a much narrower space for open debates and political contest, if any, and its state and state institutions have had less legitimacy, as well as little moral or symbolic credibility for its population and independent thinkers. Moreover, no margin of freedom of thought or expression was left for co-opted intellectuals, thus creating a very different relationship between intellectuals and the state from that in Egypt" (p. 7).

Enlightenment on the Eve of Revolution is best when comparing the two countries' intellectual landscapes and their divergent political evolutions. The book's division into separate Cairo and Damascus sections, however, tends to overlook the interactions between the two simultaneous *tanwir* discussions. At times, though, the book mentions the interaction between these two sets of actors (Egyptian and Syrian), that they read one another's works and presumably interacted with the "other" *tanwir* debate. Mentioned in passing is the situation of Gaber Asfour, who was extremely important to the *tanwir* debate in Egypt during the 1990s and who received an invitation to join the journal *Qadaya wa-shahadat*, published by Saadallah Wannous, Faysal Darraj, and Abdel Rahman Munif in Syria. More focus on these types of connections would have enriched the book considerably.

Kassab's consideration of the debate participants as post-ideological political humanists is not entirely convincing. According to her, political humanism in Syria and Egypt called for "the free and public practice of reason in view of producing knowledge that enlightens people about the realities they find themselves in and nurtures their yearning for a dignified and free existence" (p. 8). Even though she does not see causal links between the *tanwir* debates and the Arab revolutions, she argues that the aspirations of this political humanism were also the ones voiced on the streets of Cairo and Damascus. This political humanism, however, is defined very broadly and becomes a catch-all term within which almost all the political and intellectual actors could fit, regardless if they were pro-Mubarak, Marxist, or Islamist. Linking the popular mood during the revolutions to this vaguely defined position obscures more than it clarifies.

Enlightenment on the Eve of Revolution, nonetheless, is a useful addition to the literature about the Arab revolutions and the intellectual history of the region. It discusses the intellectual landscapes within Egypt and Syria prior to the revolutions and carefully links these debates to the *nahda* discussion. *Enlightenment on the Eve of Revolution* should be read by scholars interested in these subjects.

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