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BOOKSHELF

Interpreter of Maladies

For 30 years, Fouad Ajami took Westerners into the heart of Arab civilization, unafraid to show his readers its afflictions and dreams.

By **DEXTER FILKINS**

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For as long as any of us can remember, the Middle East has been a place of extraordinary upheaval: wars, coups and revolutions; Arab nationalism, Arab terrorism, Arab Spring. From such torments we in the West might ordinarily avert our gaze—we do almost everywhere else. Except in this case the region has been the repeated scene of Western, and especially American, interventions, which, in turn, have prompted no small number of Arab interventions in the West. Like two strangers locked in a phone booth, the Arab world and the West have been forced to understand one another, despite differences in histories and culture that often seem incomprehensible.

For 30 years, the foremost American interpreter of the Arab world was Fouad Ajami, who died earlier this year at the age of 68. In his books, which include such landmarks as “The Arab Predicament” (1981) and “The Dream Palace of the Arabs (1998);” through his regular appearances on CBS and CNN; and in his opinion columns, many of which appeared in this newspaper, Ajami reached an audience whose size was probably unprecedented for an academic studying a foreign region. He wrote beautiful prose, further setting him apart from his comrades in academia. At the same time, Ajami was often a polarizing figure, labeled a “neoconservative” for his support for the U.S. invasion of Iraq, and sometimes even accused of being a kind of Arab Uncle Tom, who told Americans reassuring notions about the torments emanating from the region.

With the publication of “In This Arab Time: The Pursuit of

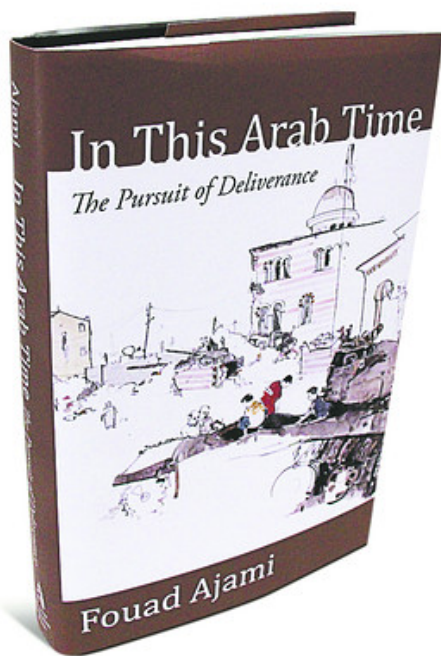
Deliverance,” a collection of Ajami’s essays, we have not just a refined encapsulation of the late scholar’s arguments but also a sweeping tour, over time and space, of the Arab world in crisis. “In This Arab Time” is a kind of literary and historical wonder-cabinet, with essays on subjects as far-ranging as the Syrian uprising and the war in Iraq to the Egyptian novelist Naguib Mahfouz and Spain before the expulsion of the Jews in the 15th century. Together, these 11 essays take you into the marrow of Arab civilization, offering an extraordinarily clear sense of its afflictions and dreams. It’s elegant, rich and sad—much like the region Ajami wrote about.

What set Ajami apart from his peers, I think, was not just his command of the subject, which was unparalleled, but his frankness. Born in a southern Lebanese village to a Shiite family, Ajami left home for the U.S. as a young man and never returned. His origins set him up to know the region as only a native could; his self-imposed exile gave him the distance to see the place as a local could not. He did not apologize for pointing out the pathologies that bedevil the Arab world or for the role of the United States, whose influence over the course of Arab life he thought was exaggerated. Unlike so many other commentators on the Middle East, Ajami went right to the thing itself.

For Ajami, the recent history of the Middle East is about the demise of Arab nationalism and secular politics, which dominated the region in the 1950s, and the rise of authoritarian governments and fundamentalist Islam. None of these projects was able to provide better lives for the vast majority of the people they purported to serve. Schools produced graduates who were literate but disinclined to critical inquiry. Governments so stifled personal initiative and creativity that, by 1995, the Arab world’s quarter-billion people exported less than Finland’s five million. Meanwhile, the dictators plundered their countries with boundless depravity: Ajami estimates that Zine El Abidine Ben Ali, the former ruler of Tunisia, and his wife, controlled a third of the country’s economy.

The result, on the eve of the uprisings that spread across the Arab world, was a failed civilization, which no amount of anti-Zionism or anti-Americanism, pumped up by cynical despots, could obscure. “The solitude of the Arabs in the contemporary order of nations, their exceptionalism if you will, had become a moral embarrassment to the Arabs themselves. It was as though they had left history and become spectators to their own destiny,” Ajami writes in “The Arab Awakening, 2011,” the book’s first, and strongest, essay. “It was a bleak landscape: terrible rulers, sullen populations, and a terrorist fringe that hurled itself in frustration at an order bereft of any legitimacy.”

Ajami regards the anti-Americanism that animates so much of the



Arab world's political discourse as a diversion from its real problems. Even when he writes about the invasion of Iraq, a war so fraught with error and disaster, he essentially gives the Americans a pass. "The terrible errors of this war can never smother its honor," he says. While this might be difficult for some readers to swallow, Ajami reminds us that, for Iraqis, the war was about more than just the strategies and miscalculations of the United States. It was a chance to shape their own futures. "It is not nightfall that has descended on Iraq," he writes, "but a savage and uncertain dawn." Savage indeed.

IN THIS ARAB TIME

By Fouad Ajami

Hoover Institution, 300 pages, \$19.95

Ultimately, Ajami was on the side of the secular liberals, the people who, at least in the early days of the Arab Spring, appeared to be ascendant. Now, in Libya, Egypt, Syria, Yemen and Bahrain—not to mention Iran—they are either embattled or they've been crushed. Here, and in his writing for other publications, Ajami is bitterly critical of President Obama, who has been determined to scale back America's role in the region following two grinding wars, and as a result remained largely aloof from many of the popular uprisings. "A new standard-bearer of American power, Barack Obama, delivered the autocracies a reassuring message. America was done with the diplomacy of change; it would make peace with the status quo."

Ajami wrote these words before President Obama ordered airstrikes against extremists in Syria and Iraq. Once again, an American president, even one as wary as the one currently in the White House, finds himself drawn back into the Arab world just as it appears to be coming apart. It's a pity we won't have Fouad Ajami to guide us through it.

Mr. Filkins, a staff writer at the New Yorker, is the author of "The Forever War."

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