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Jurji Zaidan as a promoter of modern Arab identity

By Georges Corm*

This paper describes how Jurji Zaidan's contributions as a historian, novelist, linguist, publisher and journalist played a central role in developing a secular Arab identity and consciousness. Zaidan work was close to that of many prominent reformist Moslem scholars who sought to modernize Islam and make it more relevant to the modern world. The result was a harmonious relationship between Moslem and Christian Arabs intellectuals that characterized the "liberal age" of the Nahda, which endured until the closing decades of the twentieth century. The secular military dictatorships that came to many Arab states starting in the 1940s and the extreme, narrow and rigid form of Islamism (Wahabism) that powerful oil exporting Saudi Arabia promoted in the Arab and Moslem world displaced the Nahda heritage. For the author, the present lack of awareness of the intellectual achievements of the Nahda constitutes in fact a dangerous breakdown of the modern Arab collective memory. It is stifling efforts to build on its accumulated knowledge and intellectual heritage, inhibiting efforts to continue to extricate Arab societies from all their social, political and economic ills and their total dependence on regional and international powers. This is why he believes that celebrating Jurji Zaidan intellectual achievements should be completed by simultaneous efforts to reinstate the very rich patrimony of the Arab Nahda, especially in the context of the present Arab changing political scene.

Jurji Zaidan has played an extraordinary role in raising the Arabs' collective consciousness of their identity. Most of his remarkable intellectual efforts were devoted to making Arab and Islamic civilization accessible and known to the ordinary Arab man with no prior specialized knowledge of his historical patrimony, ancestry, achievements and glorious past. In fact, his various and diverse writings all converged towards one

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main goal, i.e. the pride of being an Arab. Through his writings, Zaidan popularized the two main reasons for this pride: the beauty of the Arab classical language on the one hand and the Arab central role in the development of Islamic civilization with all its cultural, artistic and scientific achievements on the other. As we will see, Zaidan's work and writings are a central element of the Arab *Nahda* that began with Rifaat Tahtawi, an Egyptian Azharist, trying to understand the social and political dynamics behind the economic development and military might of France at the time when he visited it between 1826 and 1830.

This *Nahda* would last until the seventies in the XXth century. It produced many eminent thinkers, poets, novelists, historians, religious reformers that belonged to diverse Moslem as well as Christian Arab religious communities. For over a century and a half the Arab cultural and intellectual environment was tremendously enriched by all these actors in the *Nahda* to a degree that was inconceivable at the end of the XVIIIth century when Napoleon Bonaparte invaded Egypt. It was a time of increased intellectual activity in all Arab societies that analyzed and sought to understand the causes of Arab and Islamic decline during the previous centuries, at a time when Europe was undergoing social and economic change at an ever increasing pace that began in the XVth century.

In these efforts, the merits of Zaidan's work has probably not been recognized enough compared to other more prestigious thinkers who were part of the local academic world or who studied abroad or who belonged to prominent social families. It is true, however, that all the splendid intellectual efforts that took place during the period of the Arab *Nahda* have now been questioned and subtly pushed aside to be replaced by a debilitating pseudo-political literature focused on a narrow conception of Islam that encapsulates all the complexities of Arab identity and Arab political and social needs and aspirations. A position that most Arab secular or religious reformists of the *Nahda* period had contested with an enlightened broad-mindedness and tolerance but without abandoning their religious faith.

The reasons for this dramatic change are numerous and need not be described here in detail. But there is no doubt that the succession of military coups in the Arab world that began at the end of the 1940s, contributed to the promotion, in an authoritarian way, of various brands of this ideology even though they advocated Arab nationalist aspirations. The military dictatorships thus suppressed political liberties which contributed to check the creativity of the *Nahda*'s intellectual dynamism. The crushing Arab defeat in the war launched by Israel in 1967 against Arab armies was another factor discrediting the Arab collective consciousness that came to be called negatively as "pan-Arabism". This opened the door to an increased influence of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, a Kingdom practicing an extreme form of Islam (Wahhabism) as well as to increased local activism by various brands of the "Moslem Brotherhood". Members of the Brotherhood had previously been repressed in Egypt under Nasser and in other Arab dictatorships, as were repressed activities of Arab communist parties. This Muslim "fundamentalist" influence is still increasing nowadays due to the financial wealth accumulated by the Kingdom and other oil exporting emirates in the Arabian Peninsula.

In this present context, it is extremely important to remember the Arab *Nahda* and to honor Jurji Zaidan's central position in this *Nahda*. This is the more so because the present state of Arab culture ignores the contributions of so many great Arab thinkers during a century and a half—contributions that promoted the reform of Arab societies and the inflexible and dogmatic way in which Islam was being interpreted and practiced. This lack of awareness of the intellectual achievements of the *Nahda* constitutes in fact a dangerous breakdown of the Arab collective memory. It is stifling efforts to build on its accumulated knowledge and intellectual heritage, inhibiting efforts to continue to extricate Arab societies from all their social, political and economic ills and their total dependence on regional and international powers.

In my view, Zaidan's most important contribution to the spirit of the *Nahda* was his attempt to build a proud Arab identity and consciousness based on heroic episodes and outstanding personalities of the glorious past. He successfully managed to promote a very harmonious identity in which an Islamic civilization introduced by Arab conquerors was

a source of pride due to its great scientific achievements, to its famous philosophers, jurists, and notorious travelers, like Ibn Batuta or Ibn Jobeir. But the glory of the past would not imprison a modern Arab identity nor would it become a corset that prevents the Arabs from reinventing themselves after centuries of backwardness.

Thus, his 22 novels written in a very simple and clear Arabic language constituted a kind of historical encyclopedia of the most interesting Arab and Islamic heroic figures, both masculine and feminine. These 22 novels made these figures familiar to the reader who could easily acquire some basic knowledge of the complexities of Arab and Islamic history. At the same time, the reader was able to reconstitute through the various novels the most important episodes of this history. The quality and importance of his novels has been studied in depth by specialists of the *Nahda* period, so I need not describe them here. But what is particularly striking is the prominence given by Zaidan to heroic women in so many of his novels. Most of his novels include assertive and strong-willed women and no less than one third of his novels have these heroines in their title: Armanoussa the Egyptian; The Ghassanide Damsel; The Virgin of Qureish; Al Abbassa, the sister of Rashid; The Bride of Ferghana; The Damsel of Kairaouan and Ghada Kerbala. While the role of men was emphasized in traditional Arab and/or Islamic history, here was a modern novelist who singled out at that time several Moslem women to show their importance and their many qualities as part of the glorious history of the Arabs.

Thus, Zaidan played a doubly innovative role through his novels, as he not only introduced historical novels in Arab culture but also emphasized through many of them the eminent role of women in Arab history. Given the formalistic way Arabic education was taught in schools—and remains so to this day in many parts of the Arab world—young men and women were provided by Zaidan with pleasant and easy readings that would allow them to acquire some basics about Arab and Islamic history.

In addition, at a time when written Arabic was still rigid and complex, the simple style of Zaidan's writings allowed any young man or woman who had only a rudimentary

knowledge of Arab history and the Arabic language to understand easily what he or she was reading and to be made to feel they were the descendants of all those – men and women – who shaped the heroic acts of this history. Today some Arabic TV series present certain episodes of Arab history that aim at replicating what Zaidan sought to do, although most of those efforts do not have the impact of Zaidan's novels.

As for the many young Arabs studying in French or British schools where they acquired a very deep knowledge of European history, but only a very limited knowledge of their own history and complex language, reading the Zaidan novels opened a whole new world. Arab and Islamic history then appeared as attractive and interesting as European history or the history of Western Christianity. Zaidan thus offered them an easy and accessible way of becoming as familiar with Arab and Islamic history as with European history including the history of Western Christianity that they were acquiring through European educational institutions. I can myself attest to how much my discovery and readings of Zaidan's novels was a key factor in making me eager to develop my knowledge of Arab history and Islamic civilization so that I would become at least as knowledgeable about it as I was with French and European as well as the Ancient Greek and Roman history that I acquired during all my school years at the Cairo Jesuit College.

In this respect, one may regret that Zaidan did not touch through his novels the history of Eastern Christianity that dominated the region before the advent of Islam in the seventh century. But I believe that his main preoccupation at that time was to show that an Arab Christian writer and novelist could identify himself with the great achievements of Arab and Islamic civilization, of which Eastern Christianity was a part, through interaction between the Syrian Aramaic culture and the new emerging Arab Islamic civilization. More recently, an Arab Islamic scholar, Youssef Zaidan, having the same family name as our great novelist period (what a coincidence!) produced a splendid novel, *Azazil*, in an attempt to restitute to us the intricacies of early Christian Eastern history and its theological debates¹. But one could in this respect also refer to the writings of the famous

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¹ The novel published in Cairo 2008 by Dar el Shourouk was largely praised. It received the prestigious prize of the best Arab novel in 2009. Zaidan wrote also a very challenging book, *Al Lahout Al 'Araby wa*

Lebanese historian and theologian Maronite priest, Yoakim Moubarac (1924-1995)² who belonged to another generation than Jurgi Zaidan and wrote in another context, less harmonious than the one that prevailed at the time of the *Nahda*.

As many of his Christian contemporaries, Zaidan was more preoccupied in asserting their capacity to be part of an Arab *Nahda* alongside their Moslems brethren than in asserting a specific and separate Christian culture and identity. Let us not forget that European domination of the Arab East was viewed by many Moslems as being a Christian domination. This might explain why the numerous Arab Christian scholars that participated so actively in the Arab *Nahda* beginning in the XIXth century did not devote their attention to the very rich history of Eastern Christian churches. They rather preferred to show how deeply and strongly they were identifying themselves with Arab history and Islamic civilization. Neither Zaidan nor any of his Christian contemporaries were keen to show Arab Christian communities as having a separate cultural or ethnic identity. Instead they were keen to show how attached they were to the Arabic language and Arabic history of which they were part. Zaidan's novels in this respect would depict the role of Christians in Arab and Islamic history through creating in his novels Christian protagonists working, collaborating and supporting the Moslem heroes of his novels.

These were times when great tolerance and mutual respect existed between Moslem and Christian scholars, as has been so well described by Albert Hourani in his classic and well-known book *Arabic Thought in the Liberal Age*. Specific ethnic, religious or sectarian identities were not cultivated or promoted as opposed to what today would be called an "Arab-Muslim personality" described by the Tunisian intellectual Hicham Djaït³. The intellectual political scene was in fact dominated during that period by a secular Arab nationalist ideology or secular local nationalism in countries like the ones

ousoul al 'ounf al dini (The Arab Theology and the sources of religious violence), published by Dar el Shourouk in 2009, whereby he attempts to show all the common elements of the three monotheistic faith (Judaism, Christianity and Islam) which brings him to identify it as the Arab Theology, the three faiths having appeared and developed in what is the Arab region to day.

² See Yoakim Moubarac, *Un homme d'exception. Textes réunis et présentés par Georges Corm*, Librairie orientale, Beyrouth, 2004; see also his *Pentalogie Antiochienne. Domaine maronite*, Editions du Cénacle Libanais, Beyrouth, 1984.

³ See Hichem Djaït, *La personnalité et le devenir arabo-musulmans*, Le Seuil, Paris, 1974.

that developed in Egypt or Lebanon, Syria and Iraq. Even those attracted to some kind of Moslem ideology, such as pan-Islamism, were advocating a renovated Islam adapted to modern technical and scientific progress and to modern democratic values. Such an ideology was designed to allow greater resistance to European colonialism, but without rejecting all that European civilization could offer to the Arabs and Moslems to build their own brand of "*Nahda*". Wahhabism and the Egyptian Moslem Brotherhood had not yet emerged as a political force rejecting the new brand of enlightened Islam that renowned Azharists such as Mohammed Abdou, Ahmad Amin, Ali Abderrazik, Taha Hussein and others were successfully promoting.

Zaidan's efforts to shape an Arab collective identity are also to be found in his prominent role in the development of Arab periodicals. The famous magazine he founded in 1892, *Al-Hilal*, became one of the most important sources of information on all aspects of the cultural life in Egypt and other Arab countries, including arts, literature and poetry. *Al-Hilal* survived his death in 1914 and remains a very popular magazine in the entire Arab world after more than a century. In this sense, he was a remarkable "cultural entrepreneur", as he would be described today.

A quick survey of his other works and writings indicate how deeply Zaidan was committed to developing an Arab modern identity and giving a sense of pride for being Arab. As with many other fellow Lebanese Christians, he devoted so much energy to promoting classical Arabic as a sophisticated and rich language and a magnificent tool of expression. This represents another side of Zaidan's intellectual efforts to strengthen an Arab identity. These efforts were devoted to studying the history of the Arabic language and that of the Arab culture.

Zaidan also wrote extensively on the history of Islamic civilization and all its great achievements. Here again, he was showing that an Arab Christian could be proud of having been part of these achievements. In this way, he was asserting that the Islamic content of the Arab collective identity did not constitute a barrier to Arab Christians. This specific Zaidan legacy is what distinguishes his intellectual work from that of most other

Christian intellectuals of his time. As previously mentioned, his whole work tended to have one main goal, i.e. to construct an Arab modern identity whereby Arabism and Islamism would coexist in a harmonious way and, far from excluding Arab Christians, would make of them a pillar of this identity.

Unfortunately, this harmonious integration has been shattered during the last decades by ferocious debates about the relations between an Islamic identity and an Arab identity. The changes brought in 2011 by Arab revolutions, far from appearing tensions and controversies about the content of the Arab identity (religious and political) have increased them without any consensus on how to resolve these tensions.

This is why I believe that we need to go back to the fundamentals of Zaidan's approach to the Arab collective identity and its relation with Islamic civilization. This should be part of an effort to rehabilitate all of the *Nahda* patrimony. In fact it is sad and counterproductive for the development of Arab societies to see Arab writings and attitudes about "Ourouba" and "Islam" being trapped in a vicious circle since the end of secular pan-Arabism at the end of the XXth century and the resurgence of a new brand of exclusive and closed pan-Islamism, very different from the one that existed at the end of the XIXth century and the beginning of the XXth century.

As mentioned earlier, this first brand of pan-Islamism was open to new values adapted to scientific and technical progress and democratic values, while the present one is rather closed and defensive, encapsulating the complexities of Arab identity in a rigid and authoritarian approach to Islamic values as embodied in a dogmatic and simplistic approach to the *Sharia*. It views the outside world as hostile and "pagan" and has developed a very narrow understanding of the "Spirit of Islam" and its patrimony.

This was never the case with the different brands of "'Ouroba" ideologies that were all characterized by a strong sense of the positive values of secularism. The fact that many Arab dictatorships tried to legitimize their suppression of political liberties by adopting pan-Arabism should not discredit all the valuable writings of those who advocated a

secular Arab identity tied to a liberal and open approach to the role of Islamic civilization in shaping the Arab historical identity. This identity cannot and should not be viewed as exclusively structured by religion in a closed and formal way, thus becoming totalitarian and excluding all the other elements that a human being needs in order to feel he can be an intrinsic part of this identity.

This is why it is worthwhile to study in greater depth how the first generation of Arab reformists to which Zaidan belongs were able to develop an Arab collective sense of identity in a harmonious way without contradiction with the Islamic patrimony. It is my belief that reconsidering Zaidan's works along this problématique could be of great value. In this respect, a study of the interaction between Zaidan and his fellow enlightened Moslem clerics like Mohammed Abdo, Ahmad Amin, Ali Abdel Razik and so many others could provide a key contribution to changing the path of the present sterile debates between those advocating a secular identity for the Arabs and those insisting on keeping Arab identity in a closed and exclusive Islamic identity. Did Zaidan's work on Islamic civilization inspire Ahmad Amin's remarkable history of this civilization? Or was Zaidan influenced by the teachings of Mohammed Abdou? In my view there are many intellectual efforts that could be devoted in the future to promoting the magnificent works of all these scholars, Moslems and Christians, in which the figure of Zaidan remains central in raising Arab consciousness of their identity at a time when the Ottoman Empire was crumbling and Arabs were become "orphans" in the new world order that would emerge from the First World War.

I am sure that this important Conference on Jurji Zaidan will constitute a milestone to reopening studies on the Arab *Nahda* to which he contributed so eminently.