

# Interview with Dr. Sadiq Jalal Al-Azm: The Syrian Revolution and the Role of the Intellectual

Saturday 14 December 2024, by [al-AZM Sadiq Jalal](#), [Aljumhuriya](#) (Date first published: 27 April 2013).

Doctor Sadiq Jalal al-Azm (born in 1934 in Damascus) is one of the most important Syrian intellectuals of the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries. His interests cover a variety of issues, ranging from criticism of religious thought, to Arab political affairs after the defeat of June 1967, to freedom of thought (from *The Mentality of Taboo* and *Post The Mentality of Prohibition*), to platonic love, to issues of secularism, democracy, and globalization. He is characterized by his clear style and the consistency of his basic intellectual positions in the face of changing ideological climates and thinking tools. Dr. al-Azm distinguished himself since the beginning of this century with his engagement in public life and engagement with the causes of freedom and democracy. He was a founding member of the “Committee for the Revival of Civil Society,” and an active participant in the “Damascus Spring” forums. He supported the Syrian revolution from the beginning, while maintaining a space for critique and evaluation. He has coupled his words with actions but has remained, first and foremost, an intellectual.

Aljumhuriya is honored to have conducted this extended interview with Doctor al-Azm (via e-mail).

## Highlights

The revolution is a Syrian settling of old accounts and an overdue payment of bills that were the result of Syrian silence and cowardice.

The popular Intifada in Syria seeks restoration of the republic through the toppling of the old hereditary regime that is worn-out in all its institutions, and to establish an alternative system of governance

Yes, I fear political Islam, before and after the fall of the regime.

In our culture and society there exists ample elements of authoritarianism, criminality, paternalism and vendetta, that make the reformulation of a despotic regime, in one form or another, a likely and formidable possibility, which calls for extreme caution and utter vigilance.

Syria’s “Wretched of the Earth” are participating in a revolution against a government, a party, and an authoritarian financial-military junta, and against a “nationalist” leadership of divine eternity.

If the revolution brings us somehow to the ballot boxes, then I will be a satisfied citizen.

Among the characteristics of secularism and democracy is that they provide a neutral ground for the meeting of the various religious doctrines and beliefs that are exclusionary by nature, allowing them to interact in the public space, the national arena, and the political landscape.

**As opposed to many leftists and Marxists in Syria today and in the world, Sadiq Jalal al-Azm's position is clear and unequivocal in its support for the Syrian revolution. What are the roots of this leftist ambiguity towards the revolution? And what consequence will this have for the future of the left in Syria?**

Due to the nature of this question, I will begin briefly with an introduction about myself. Many ask me if the popular Intifada in Syria against the tyrannical regime, its corrupt government, surprised me or not. My answer is yes and no at the same time. Yes, I was surprised by the timing of the outbreak of the Intifada, with a lot of apprehensiveness at the beginning due to the possibility of quick repression, which I knew was a possibility due to the institutionalized rigidity of the security apparatus in Syria, as well as its repressive ferocity, penetration of the pores of the Syrian body, and its continuous control of nearly all its movements. This reality constituted a type of inferiority complex (in me and in others) due to my impotence in the face of this military regime's overall power, as well as due to the impossibility of pronouncing a possible "no" against it (individually or collectively). I dealt with this inferiority complex by adapting slowly to this stressful tyrannical reality, and through the careful introspection of the rules and principles of interacting with it, with all that's required of hypocrisy and pretending to believe and accept, secrecy, word manipulation and circumvention of the regime's brute force. Otherwise, I wouldn't have been able to either continue with my normal life and do my routine work and daily errands, or preserve my mental and physical health.

So, why would I not align with this overwhelming popular revolution against this form of tyranny and oppression, regardless of the nature of the convictions that I hold whether they be leftist, Marxist, moderate, or even right-wing? However, I do think that Marxist methodology of analysis and interpretation is what gives us the best and finest capacity to understand the eruption of the revolution, to identify its deeper causes, and to research the historical and social background in order to stand beside and defend the revolution.

No, I was not surprised by the revolution against tyranny—like the regime was—because of some of the experiences and observations derived from living in and experiencing everyday life in Syria, and specifically in Damascus. And the regime came nowhere near understanding these observations and experiences, because the nature of tyranny does not allow that. I repeat that I was not surprised by the revolution because my confusion (and that of others) was a feeling of apprehension, anxiety, and fear for Syria generally after the repression of the "Damascus Spring," in which I felt that Syria was stuck on the edge of an abyss, and the fall was inevitably coming. Life in Damascus, for example, looks quiet, normal, and monotonous on the surface, however, you could feel and be certain that volcanic lava was brewing underneath, which everyone was trying to ignore as much as possible, in the hope that it will remain below the surface for as long as possible and not float quickly to daily life in the country. When the revolution erupted, it broke this contradiction between the quiet, normal appearance on the surface that was a falsity, on the one hand, and the real volcano that was brewing underneath on the other. Thus, I had to align with the real and the deep, and I stand by its side and leave to others the task of justifying the forged surface, defending the fake, and standing by the idle side. Ordinary people very simply used to express their feelings on this contradiction with spontaneous slogans such as: "It needs a match to light up," "It needs a spark to explode."

In the intellectual world, every intellectual had his or her own language and unique metaphors to explain the same reality. In an interview with the American magazine Newsweek in the year 2007, Ali Ferzat explained the situation by saying: "Either reform, or the flood." My preferred metaphor then was that Syria is like a pressure cooker whose temperature rises very quickly, hour after hour, with all the safety valves disabled. Ahmed Burqawi in his unique position, said, "The rift in Syria happened and passed." However, he tried to camouflage his words by saying, "Everyone knows the reality of the situation in the country and what is happening in it, but it's all good..." Others reached

the conclusion "that the only thing left of the regime is its role as a safety valve of last resort so that Syrians do not fight amongst each other, though the regime was more surprised than others by the outbreak of the uprising and revolution.

I also have realized that the revolution is a Syrian settling of old accounts and an overdue payment of bills that were the result of Syrian silence and cowardice in moments such as the siege of the city of Hama in 1982, and its destruction and killing of its people. Syria did not lift a finger at that time, despite the fact that we all knew exactly what had transpired in Hama. Syria also accepted for a long time the crimes of its rulers in murder, torture, arbitrary detention and enforced disappearances, as well as tens of thousands who were quietly missing; and it was as if all of this was a normal practice and a natural phenomenon.

Then came the moment of the inheritance of power of the republican government in Syria in the year 2000, and Syria swallowed the humiliation quietly and sedately, which was an unenviable position these days, and blood is being spilled today to erase its effects. The moment that the "Damascus Spring" tried to light a candle at the end of the tunnel, it was eliminated with a visible ferocity, and once again, Syria was silent and it accepted the suppression of the Damascus Spring with shocking normalcy. I will say again, in its revolution today, Syria spills this much blood in order to atone for all its past sins and erase its shame, and for this reason, I am with it.

As for the second part of the question concerning the ambiguity and obscurity of the left's stance on the revolution, I'll say: First, it is known that the left brings together committed activists and advocates from different religious, confessional, doctrinal, regional, ethnic, and tribal backgrounds for the sake of a future civil state which surpasses these primordial affiliations and loyalties. After the end of the Cold War and the collapse of the left and its dispersal everywhere (especially the numerous and differentiated communist parties), many of these leftists reverted back to their primordial and more primitive loyalties, especially the religious, confessional and doctrinal ones; accordingly, their stance on the revolution is based on such primordial loyalties, which they resorted back to and hid under, and not on the basis of their acquired but now-lost leftism.

Second, after the end of the Cold War, the left split into a large bloc that adopted what might be called "the Civil Society program". It is a program which emphasizes certain issues, such as: Respect of human rights (even if only in word, or in the minimum possible manner), priority for the idea of citizenship and its practice in addition to civil rights and public freedoms, equality before the law, separation of powers, a secular state, an independent judiciary, democracy, decentralization of power and effective governance rather than passing power around between family members, as is happening in Syria today. In other words, the largest bloc of the left retreated to the second line of defense in the form of a "civil society program," and its defense in the face of military-security-familial tyranny on the one hand, and medieval religious obscurantism on the other hand. I think that this bloc of the left in general sympathizes with the revolution in Syria, and certainly does not have a position that is hostile towards it or firmly against it, given that this bloc played a large role in the fomenting of the Arab Spring in general. Most of the leftists who support the revolution belong to this bloc in one way or another.

Whereas the smaller bloc of the left has hardened its old positions, as if nothing happened after the end of the Cold War, and with time its attitudes and methods became of the same nature as that of the Taliban-Jihadis or dogmatic closed-minded sectarians, or even that of terrorist "Bin Ladenites," in its blind defiance of the West, global capitalism (a global capitalism that Russia and China are now a part of) and imperialism. This bloc from the left, in the Arab world and internationally, is today the most hostile to the Syrian revolution and the closest to defending the tyrannical military-security-familial regime using several arguments, not least of which is that the entire world plotted, apparently, against this regime that is peace-loving and stable. This type of leftist emphasizes "the

game of nations” and “geopolitical analysis,” with stories of collision of interests and plans of the great powers and their dominance in our region, and does not want to view the revolution in Syria through anything other than through this lens, and neglects all that happens inside Syria and to Syria’s revolutionaries today, as well as ignoring all the reasons that led its people to a peaceful revolution, and later to taking up arms in the face of a “nationalist” tyranny that is allied with this kind of leftist. In other words, this leftist has no problem with sacrificing Syria if it leads to a victory being handed to their international camp and “geopolitics” that wants a global victory in the “game of nations.” Their first priority is not Syria or its people in revolt to restore the republic, their freedom, and their dignity, but the game of nations at the global level of analysis and the side that they want to win.

**How does the author of Critique of Religious Thought stand by a revolution that had mosques as a center meeting point for its protests, and that has a military component with an evident Islamist face? Are you not afraid of political Islam after the downfall of the Assad regime?**

The author of Critique of Religious Thought also stood with the revolution of the Iranian people against the rule, corruption, and tyranny of the Shah, and against his famous intelligence apparatus known for its ferocity (the SAVAK). He stood with it despite the fact that the leadership role of the clergy and ayatollahs was evident from the outset, and as I recall, the left in those days was almost entirely in favor of the Iranian people’s revolution despite the fact that demonstrations emerged from mosques, cemeteries, and funerals. The important thing here is to stand with the people’s revolution against a tyrant and against arbitrariness, regardless of the nature of the places and centers that the popular revolutionary movements emerge from or gather in.

The author of Critique of Religious Thought also stood with Liberation Theologists in Latin America and other places, because Liberation Theology supported people’s liberation movements in those countries against base tyrants such as Samoza in Nicaragua, criminal coup-makers like Pinochet in Chile, and the rule of the bloody generals in Argentina. After all this, is it possible for the author of the mentioned book to fail or let-down in the issue of standing with the revolution of the Syrian people against the rule that has surpassed Samoza, Pinochet, the Argentine generals, and the Shah of Iran combined in its tyranny, murder, and destruction? The contradiction here is not in my position, but in the position of those who once stood in support of the revolution of the Iranian people or the Liberation Theologists and their churches or for movements of national liberation almost everywhere, yet refuse to support the revolution of the Syrian people under the pretext that its demonstrations and protests spring from the mosque and not from the opera house or the national theatre, as Adonis justifies.

Yes, I fear political Islam before and after the fall of the regime. I fear it for reasons beyond the overbearing Islamic face with which the Syrian revolution presents itself for the world. I fear it because in our culture and society there exists ample elements of authoritarianism, criminality, paternalism and vendetta, that make the reformulation of a despotic regime, in one form or another, a likely and formidable possibility, which calls for extreme caution and utter vigilance. In our current conditions, it is unfitting to underestimate the possibility of the emergence of some form of military dictatorship, one which, for example, would be cloaked with religious creeds, jurisprudence and sectarian extremism. Thus, I try to follow closely what is happening in Egypt today, for when the elected president there, Mohammed Morsi, abruptly gave himself despotic powers and immunities in the form of “My actions don’t get questioned, theirs do” (which is the definition of tyranny), almost half of the Egyptian population blew up in what was a surging popular revolt to prevent the president from reproducing the tyranny in Egypt, even if it was for a limited period of time according to him, and even if his discourse was an Islamic discourse; even the Sheikhs of Al-Azhar stood with the popular revolt, and Cairo voted a resounding “no” against the constitution which the Muslim

Brotherhood fabricated (as the Egyptians claim). I don't think that Syria will be less cautious of itself against the return of despotism of any kind. Of course, the choices and historical form of the coming future remain open, and there are no pre-given guarantees for anyone, especially when we are facing immense historical events such as revolutions and their near and far consequences.

My predictions concerning this matter can be summarized as follows: After the fall of the regime, and the return of the people of Hama to Hama, and the return of the people of Homs to their Homs, and the people of Houran to what remains of their houses, and after overcoming a tense period of possible chaos, vengeful vendettas and reckoning between a number of people and groups, the moderate and forgiving religiosity of the Syrian people will prevail once again, as it did in the modern Syria that I know, and which the Syrian people have been known for since the reign of King Faisal.

On the other hand, when the reconstruction and rebuilding process gets underway, I think that the Syrian capitalist and the Syrian bourgeois in general will proceed to take over this process and invest in it and dominate it. And Syria will most probably witness the rise of personalities and magnates and new leaderships from these bourgeois circles pursuant of the continuation and expansion of the process. Thus, I believe that the Islam which will surface is a "business" Islam, and the Islam of businessmen, entrepreneurs and traders that is different from the political Islam we fear for its intransigent strictness in the midst of this ongoing battle. In this kind of expected climate, the hardline Islamic currents will be absorbed by and diluted in the sea of popular and traditional Islam as well as by the typical Syrian business-Islam. That is to say that Syria is not suitable for the dominance of a kind of Islam that bans education and burns schools and closes universities and paralyzes institutions and denies a woman her right to education and productive work. If we can manage to lead the revolution to the voting poll in relative security, I don't think that any of the Political Islamic currents in Syria will manage to sweep the results of the elections as they did in Egypt or Tunisia.

### **Is there an implicit class struggle in the Syrian revolution? How does it meet or oppose the sectarian dimension which pervades the revolution's journalistic and cultural discourse?**

Yes, there is a dimension of class struggle in the Syrian Revolution which does not exclude its religious-sectarian dimension, however, we should not take the issue of class struggle in its classical European-Marxist meaning whereby, on the one hand, the industrial proletariat and the working class in general face, on the other hand, a bourgeois class that owns the means of production and monopolizes surplus value. The closest to our reality is the class struggle as identified and explained by Frantz Fanon in his well-known book *The Wretched of The Earth*, and it is useful to return to it today for any attempt at diagnosing the Syrian revolution and understanding its nature, especially given that Fanon was a real pioneer in describing the mechanisms and the stages of transformation of political powers, parties, and organizations that start as parties and national liberation movements in oppressed third world societies but change into a clique of rulers completely separated from their beginnings, their popular foundations, and their liberal programs that they had adopted which formed the purpose for their coming to power, only for them to oppress and step on the neck of the wretched of their population; they then, inevitably, move towards glorifying the sole leader who rises from their ranks and raise his personhood above the level of humanity, earth and country leading to his deification. This is conducted in the name of safeguarding against the monopolization of wealth and power along with what accompanies them from privileges, gains and narrow class and factional interests at the expense of the rest of the population of the country. The class struggle present in Syria is of this nature whereby Syria's "Wretched of the Earth" are participating in a revolution against a government, a party, and an authoritarian financial-military junta, and against a "nationalist" leadership of divine eternity.

The striking irony in this situation is that the workers, peasants, craftsmen, students and small-earners of Syria (and they are part and parcel of the Free Syrian Army) are the ones who form the base structure for a revolution against a party which, once upon a time, used to present itself as the party of the workers and peasants, as a “national” leadership that used to claim that it is truly part and parcel of the workers and peasants, and that it has come to save them from the feudal, bourgeois and colonial oppression. This cluster of the Syrian wretched of the earth doesn’t only act through a unified class-consciousness, but also by virtue of its religious belongings and sectarian affiliations and doctrinal loyalties, and through its impulse to avenge its squandered dignity and stolen liberties, as well as the harsh reality of extreme subjugation that it lived and is still living, in addition to its constant marginalization and accumulated and continuous disappointments.

### **What are your views toward the mechanisms of democratic transition in Syria?**

I don’t think that any Syrian today has a clear view or a solid picture of the mechanisms for a democratic transition in his country after the ousting of the Asad regime. If the revolution brings us somehow to the ballot boxes, then I will be a satisfied citizen. It is also natural for the revolting Syrian population to look forward to the easiness of democracy after the wretchedness of despotism, tyranny, and oppression. Democracy enforces itself in this situation as an alternative option for many reasons, but especially because of its capacity to absorb the elements of the rich Syrian mosaic that is the Syrian people in its diversity and variance. This means that democracy in Syria will contain a certain amount of “participation” which one cannot evade in the present condition until we reach a democracy based on liberated citizens, completely free from all other considerations. As for the actual mechanisms for transitioning into a democratic state, we cannot yet make assertions or even predictions, because this depends on the outcome of the revolution as well as the revolutionary process and direction, which is still open to surprises and various possibilities. My realist side demands that I don’t allow my imagination to expand on this issue, but rather to look at the reality of what happened and is happening around me in countries such as Egypt, Tunisia, Libya, Lebanon, and Iraq wherein their respective societies reached an anxious and turbulent democratic condition (State) after passing through a transitional phase of violence and unrest, ambiguity and uncertainty in the wake of major events which shook their societies and overthrew their regimes. Based on the analogy with this witnessed reality, I expect something similar to Syria, perhaps more chaotic and turbulent and violent than the other cases for reasons specific to the Syrian revolution which relate to the excessive brutality that the regime resorted to in order to quell and intercept the revolution.

### **How do you assess the interaction of Syrian intellectuals with the revolution? And what might be, in your opinion, the position and role of intellectuals in the new Syria?**

In general, I evaluate it positively. I want to mention that long before the eruption of the revolution, Syrian intellectuals were (and still are) prevalent in the world and were able to engage people’s minds. My impression is that countless numbers of them stand with the revolution and express it, each in their own way, and they do what’s in their capacity to do to help the revolution continue and reach victory.

As for the handful of Syrian intellectuals and artists who acrimoniously opposed the revolution or coyly stood against it, or even the ones who were at times negatively neutral and in other times positively neutral—these people are known and are in the minority. Surely, the Arabic proverb, “few are the dignified,” does not apply to them in the time when the revolution is passing them without them recognizing it.

This question of the relationship between the intellectual and the revolution takes me back to the seventies, when a series of debates, disagreements, discussions, actions, and reactions around this issue were rife within the Palestinian revolution; a good deal of Arab intellectuals contributed to and

participated in this debate. At the height of this debate, I was working in the Research Center of the Palestinian Liberation Organization, was a founding member of the Magazine *Shu'un Filistiniyya* (Palestinian Affairs) and was a member of its editorial board. Thus, I was able to follow closely the big controversy arising around the issue of the intellectual and the revolution. The symbols that represented those flying sparks at the time were: first, the model of intellectual who worked for the PLO apparatuses, such as the research and planning centers, as well as the organized press and its media, and even the Institute of Palestinian Studies which is independent from the PLO; this model is contrasted with the model of the guerrillas and fighters at the front lines of the revolution. As for the second type, it was the "word" versus the "bullet", and can the word ever have the effect of a bullet! And what is the link between the bullet and the word, this was idle talk. In the final analysis, this cultural debate remained fruitless and was not productive for anyone, and I came to the conviction that the question from the start is riddled with errors and that the primary problem is fake and pointless, because what the question implies is the common assumption that the intellectual must have an exceptional relationship with the revolution, which is different, for example, from that of the doctor, the pharmacist, the lawyer, the employee or the average human being on the street. From my point of view, this assumption asks of the intellectual and the culture to hold more roles and burdens than they can bear, for the intellectuals don't make or lead the revolution, they may pave the road for it and incite it and draft its statements and programs, and publicize it and write its literature and sing its poetry and produce its analysis and die for it as Ghassan Kanafani, Kamal Nasser, [Federico García] Lorca, and many others did. I don't want the revolution in Syria to tumble on the bump of reproducing of discord and debate, as did the talk of "trenches" and "hotels", which proved its sterility over the course of the Palestinian revolution.

As for the new Syria, one of the most important things that intellectuals can do in the beginning is get rid of what is called the Ministry of Culture and the Ministry of Information, then form their own cultural bodies, literary forums, intellectual circles, and independent autonomous unions, and manage them all without abidance to anyone or the dominance of one over the other. After that, there is what is customarily recognized as values which defend freedom of thought and conscience, expression, media and the circulation of information of which we should be very protective, since we suffered a lot as a result of its despoilment, monopolization and absence. Then, it is up to the intellectuals to be generous with the best that they have to offer to the people, so that the intellectual in the New Syria is active and engaged. Indeed, the Syrian created a lot of interest and discussion during the Damascus Spring, despite its brevity. For despite the long decades of Syrian-Baathist-Intelligence censorship, prohibition, interdiction and seizure of books and magazines, and the tearing of newspapers and journals, and the erasure of words from dictionaries and lexicons, and the control of the media and of a single official culture at the time, the intellectuals proved, through the works that they produced ranging from books to articles (during the Damascus Spring), that they are the children of the present in all meanings of the term, in style, methodology and content, and that they are not lagging behind in their age and time and the wider world with its advancements and developments. They also proved that all the long years of censorship and prohibition did not affect them or bar them from the culture, philosophy, thought, and the other politics of the World. And it turns out, in the final analysis, that these ominous years were spent in vain, as if they were naught for the intelligence and surveillance agencies.

To be realistic, I'd say that if 25-30% of this occurred in the New Syria, then Syria would then have achieved a huge advancement and a great leap forward. As a side note: when we talk about cultural action and the effectiveness of culture, we have to consider things in the long run, and not on the basis of a particular event, even if it were a massive revolution, because cultural action is socially cumulative and historically slow, and its unique results only appear belatedly. When I followed what was happening in Tahrir Square in Cairo and other similar situations in the Arab world, and scrutinized the raised slogans and the proposed demands, and I heard the words and phrases that

are coming from these youthful masses such as: dignity, freedom, social justice, constitution, religious tolerance, civil society and human rights, I immediately thought of the accumulated cultural production by a long series of intellectuals such as Ahmad Amin, Abdallah Laroui, Mohammed Abed Al-Jaberi Taha Hussein, Fouad Zakariyya, Zakariyya Ibrahim, Louis Awad, Zaki Naguib Mahmoud, and Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd; and in Syria especially in Jamil Saliba, Anton Makdisi, Adib Allajmi, Adil Al-Awwa, Yasin al-Hafiz, Tayyib Tayzini, to the end of this very long list.

**You are a secular intellectual with a leftist orientation. Unlike you, many seculars and leftists reject the notion that what is happening in Syria is a revolution. What do you think this opinion is based on? And is it really a revolution?**

I want to begin the discussion of this subject by speaking about local cases. In 1952, the Free Officers in Egypt carried out a military coup that overthrew the monarchy there, and this coup was called the “23<sup>rd</sup> of July Revolution.” In 1958, an officer in the Iraqi army carried out a military coup under the leadership of Abd al-Karim Qasim that overthrew the monarchy there as well, and this coup was called the “14<sup>th</sup> of July Revolution.” And then there were successive military coups in Iraq: the military coup on February 8, 1963 became known as the “14<sup>th</sup> of Ramadan revolution,” and another coup in 1968 became known as the “17<sup>th</sup> of July Revolution.” In 1963, a group of rural officers in Syria carried out a military coup in which they seized the civilian authority in the country at the time, and their coup became known as the “8<sup>th</sup> of March Revolution,” and for the first time in the Arab world, something new emerged called the “Revolutionary Command Council.” After the defeat of the Arab armies by Israel in the Six-Day War in June 1967, the armed Palestinian resistance stepped up to fight the Israeli occupation, and they called this “the Palestinian revolution,” and its slogan was “revolution until victory.” And in 1978-79, a massive popular uprising took place in Iran that overthrew the rule of the Shah—under the leadership of Shia clergymen—and the entire movement was called “The Islamic Revolution of Iran.” Thus, if it has been an Arab custom for over half a century to refer to all these military coups, as well as the Palestinian armed resistance campaigns and the massive popular uprising in Iran, as “revolutions,” then why are they [secular and leftist intellectuals] frugal in giving the Syrian people’s performance of epic heroism today in fighting tyranny and despotism the title of “revolution”? Most of these scrooges were going along with the general current of calling the aforementioned events “revolutions.” So now, what is the stinginess of these scrooges based on? I think that most of them hold prototypes, which they use to measure the course of history and fateful, momentous events, then impose on each one labels and classifications, dictated by their small-minded and fossilized prototypes. This applies to the nationalists in regards to the coup of Gamal Abdel Nasser in Egypt, for example, and to the leftists and many of the communists in regards to Abd al-Karim Qasim’s coup in Iraq. This applies to the Islamists in Ayatollah Khomeini’s revolution in Iran, as well as the veteran communists who see a vanguard party, a charismatic leader, and a ready revolutionary theory lacking in the Syrian revolution, to the last elements of the established template. Add to that what I mentioned before regarding dissolution of frameworks and political and cultural centers of the past, as well as many of these scrooges returning to their sectarian, regional, and ethnic fanaticism and primordial loyalties, which doubled the number of prototypes that they measure the Syrian people’s revolution against and classify it accordingly.

However, if some of these scrooges wanted a ready-made revolutionary theory for the revolution in Syria, it exists. For the Syrian revolution spontaneously practiced the revolutionary theory of “revolutionary focus” or “foco,” as explained by the French theorist Regis Debray in his bestselling book *Revolution in the Revolution?* The revolution is practicing spontaneously, without too much theorizing, what was theorized at length in an earlier period, concerning the popular liberation wars’ adoption of tactics which disband the more heavily equipped military troop that is superior in its military firepower, and disperse it in as many places as possible, which leads to its paralysis and the



neutralization of its superiority in firepower and quantitative advantage. The Syrian revolution thus spontaneously and unknowingly exercises old revolutionary Chinese-Maoist theory (which Arabs have said much about, especially by some of these scrooges), that states that the rural revolutionary regions should move forward by besieging cities and making them fall one after the other, as the people consider them the last forts of authority that they wish to dismantle. The Coordinating Committees also live in the sea of the Syrian people “as fish live in water” in the words of a famous phrase Chinese revolutionary theory gave to the world.

I think what is happening in Syria today is, first of all, an overwhelming popular Intifada, in the classical sense of the word Intifada as invented by the Palestinian people, which was then forced to militarize. Any uprising against a military tyranny transforms the forces of the striking army to an occupation army, in the full sense of the term, which destroys the stone and the country as well as kills people without expense. Second of all, what is happening in Syria today is also a revolution in that the popular Intifada in Syria seeks restoration of the republic through the toppling of the old hereditary regime that is worn-out in all its institutions, and to establish an alternative system of governance. Isn't this adequate to recognize that what is taking place in Syria today is a real revolution?

**Given the choice of being either a snake that suffocates if it doesn't shed its skin, or a Protean Chameleon that doesn't desist from changing its appearance according to the changes of its surrounding (according to the debate between Adonis and yourself), how do you see the intellectual reacting with a changing reality? And in general, why is it that the intellectuals in our part of the world seem to be modified rather than modifiers?**

Away from the metaphors of snakes and chameleons that Adonis began, I say: there is no overarching sententious answer to this kind of questions in our Arab World, especially in the absence of any reliable field data, or polls of public opinion in general and particularly among intellectuals. So I have to base my words on intuition, generalities, and impressions, nothing more. For the different orientations among intellectuals, as individuals and as groups, and the diversity in their attitudes and the nature of their interests, does not allow for definitive and accurate answers regarding this question.

Personally, I think what is demanded of the intellectuals is that they always take into account the developments which come with the changing reality, and to absorb it in one way or another with a critical open mind, that is to say a critique based on, on the one hand, the direction of this changing reality, and on the other hand, with respect to the intellectuals themselves, on their own categories, axioms and assumptions that they originally hold and use to approach this changing reality. I assume that the serious and assiduous intellectual tests his/her cultural, epistemological, and rational apparatus with what it holds from commitments and responsibilities towards this changing reality, as well as to reconsider this apparatus in light of his/her experience with reality and its developments. Moreover, he/she uses her apparatus in critiquing reality when s/he sees fit. Primarily, a really living culture does not stop critiquing and auto-critiquing itself, nor does it stop reviewing its preliminary assumptions and its basic premises, or else it would not be able to overcome its present and build its future. I know that this talk is merely generalizations, but if I want to be specific, I'd mention, for example, that a great intellectual and poet like Muhammed al-Maghut ended up in a state of deep despair, an unrelenting pessimism and a calamitous melancholy towards the changing Arab reality. Adonis preferred denial, evasion and justification in his dealing with the changing reality of the Arab Spring, and especially the popular revolution in Syria. Adonis had raised the slogan “positions for change, freedom and creativity” in his famous magazine Mawaqif (Positions); however, when the serious change began to occur in Syria and freedom was near, Adonis retreated more than two steps backwards instead of absorbing seriously and critically the development of the changing Arab reality, and instead of critically reviewing the axioms of his

cultural and epistemological apparatus in light of the mobile and new Arab Syrian reality. His slogans imply that such an intellectual would be at the forefront of people leaning towards change and freedom in Syria and defending them, but he preferred to distance himself from all of this and he discarded his slogan in the dustbin of history.

From another point of view, we know that the changing reality sometimes changes very slowly, which leads to despair and frustration. And at other times, it changes abruptly, seismically and catastrophically which shocks and disorients the intellectual and the non-intellectual alike. And there is no method until now which pre-determines how any intellectual or group of intellectuals, Syrians or Non-Syrians, should deal with this abrupt and seismic change which we call the Syrian Revolution today. For example, the defeat of the Arabs against Israel in the war of 1967 and the collapse of the Soviet Union and the whole communist idea, formed a sudden, seismic and catastrophic historical change in reality. This is not the place to try and survey how Arab intellectuals dealt with these two historical variables, for there are those who absorbed the developments and understood their significance, and there are those who critiqued both reality and themselves, and then there are those who stubbornly refused to do so, and those who denied and justified, and those who forgot and neglected, and those who lost their minds as Mamdouh Adwan exemplified in his booklet *In Defense of Madness*, etc. The question is difficult and the changes in Arab life makes answering it harder than the question itself.

**One of the premises Arab secularism is built on is the idea that Arab society has failed and thus Arabs are not eligible for democracy. This is probably what led to the idea of "Enlightenment" advocated by secular elites, which tasks them with preparing Arab societies for democracy. Dr. Sadiq, do you think the Arab revolution have disproved this idea? Is time to talk about the substance of a new secularism?**

Fundamentally there are no peoples or societies that are more suited than others or a priori more qualified for democracy by virtue of their nature. Wherever you look, East or West, in our contemporary world, we find that democracy is usually acquired, and the secular state is also acquired and is not that easy to launch. There has always been a great many obstacles, internally and externally, for all. I also do not think that the enlightened secular elites' goal was originally only to prepare their communities to become eligible to accept democracy. Their goal, ambition, as well as their demand was a comprehensive renaissance of the vocabulary of democracy and secularism. The real sense of the deep and chronic historical failure was generally towards all societies and cultures of the world since the surge that occurred in Western Europe during the Scientific Revolution of the seventeenth century, the Industrial Revolution of the nineteenth century, and consequently, their results and great historical transformations. Because of the reality of this deep failure, the continuous deficits, and the total exposure, the terms of this reform, renewal, modernization, enlightenment, and contemporary renaissance entered a field of interaction that consisted of actions and reactions, give and take. This not only happened to us, but to all civilizations, cultures, and peoples. In the search for our enlightenment and renaissance, we always come back to Jamal ad-Din al-Afghani and Mohammad Abdo, but a bit of scrutiny will show that there was something like al-Afghani and Mohammad Abdo and what they represent in Iran, Russia, India, China, Japan, and Africa. So I think that the issue of enlightenment is much larger than groups of educated and secular elites that are trying to make the people eligible to accept democracy through public awareness of the need of secularism and secularization to overcome the failures and existing deficit. And I do not think that the current Arab Spring revolutions are able to set aside the idea of a broader enlightenment in ahistorical sense, if they had wanted to, because they also speak the language of reform, democracy, renewal, freedom, dignity, renaissance, and constitutionalism. And they [the Arab Spring revolutions] want, if they can, to respond to a deep-seated desire which sweeps almost all of these masses, a desire to surpass the existing shortcomings in their societies

and overcome the impotency which they always feel deep down. The conditions and possibilities of the success or failure of all this remains another matter.

Finally, what is most important in secularism and democracy is their energetic capacity, particularly in diverse and pluralistic societies... In addition to this capacity to provide a good, positive atmosphere to restore civil peace, and not to oppress and use bare force, and to provide well tested mechanism (in many countries and people and societies and cultures today) for peaceful transfer of power as widely as possible in society. Among the characteristics of secularism and democracy is that they provide a neutral ground for the meeting of the various religious doctrines and beliefs that are exclusionary by nature, allowing them to interact in the public space, the national arena, and the political landscape based on common denominators and voluntary, free consensus that makes it impossible for any of these doctrines and dogmas to survive in a vacuum. I am afraid of phrases such as “the substance of a new secularism” or “democracy compatible with our values and heritage,” which entails a circumvention of secularism and democracy, which is what occurred in tyrannical regimes in every place in order to beautify and perpetuate their authoritarianism.

In regards to the question about our need for a secularism with new substance, the new substance that I hear being discussed boils down to, it seems, replacing the idea of a “civil state” in countries such as Iraq, Syria, and Egypt, places where secularism is already lacking. In the final analysis, this is not a polite way to discuss secularism in the aforementioned countries. This is form, but in substance: it is known that the substance of secularism strictly prohibits, for example, that a Christian citizen of Iraq, Syria, or Egypt to be “Dhimmi”(non-Muslim citizens of Islamic states). Can you add new tenets to secularism, as we know it, while ignoring its original tenets, or without confirming them and perhaps cancelling and replacing them? If we really want citizenship and equality, it must be of the secularism that we already know, even if it comes under other names.

Secularism today in Iraq means removal of the Shiite current of Islamic Law (welayat el-faqih) and the Sunni current of Islamic law (al-Hakimiye), their removal from power, the state, and its organs, and not allowing any of them to control public life of the country and its facilities, in order to avoid a likely civil war and to prevent sectarian war.

I ask now: Is there new substance that we can give to the meaning of secularism in Iraq today that is able to deal with this problem in a different way or to lead the country out of the dangerous impasse that threatens it? In other words, if we want Iraq to be able to maintain itself and maintain social and civil peace, it must be through the aforementioned secularism, whatever nomenclature or terminology we use to describe it.

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**Aljumhuriya**  
**Dr. Sadiq Jalal Al-Azm**

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**P.S.**

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Translated by Nader Atassi and Ziad Dallal

January 10<sup>th</sup> 2013