

# Commentary®

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## Blind Alley

The Dream Palace  
of the Arabs:  
A Generation's Odyssey  
by Fouad Ajami

*Pantheon. 368 pp. \$26.00*

Reviewed by  
Daniel Pipes

**F**OUAD AJAMI, who is a professor of Middle Eastern studies at Johns Hopkins University, occupies two niches that he has made his own. First, as a scholar of the Arabic-speaking world, Ajami focuses not on the usual questions of statecraft and foreign policy but on in-

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tellectual developments; by bringing issues and the personalities who argue them to life, he has succeeded in interesting an educated American audience in the debates conducted by educated Arabs. Second, as a journalist and public commentator, Ajami is a regular presence on television and in leading magazines, where, despite the fact that English is not his native language, few can match him either in acuity of political analysis or in felicity of verbal expression.

Ajami displays other attractive qualities as well. One is an ability to boil ideas down to their essentials without sacrificing their complexity; thus, he pithily describes Middle East politics as a world "where triumph rarely comes with mercy or moderation," and pan-Arabism as "Sunni dominion dressed in secular garb." Another quality, no less noteworthy, is that, unlike many prominent Arab-Americans, Ajami is a political moderate who neither apologizes for Arab dictators nor spins anti-American conspiracy theories. Finally, he is blessedly free of the common Arab fixation on the perfidy of Israel.

For his robust, blunt-spoken approach to the Middle East, Ajami has regularly incurred the resentment and anger of many in the Arab-American community. One would-be rival, Edward Said of Columbia University, has accused him of offering "unmistakably racist prescriptions," while another, Asad AbuKhalil of California State University, has denounced him as a "neo-Orientalist" (a huge insult in the academic circle of Middle Eastern studies). Whatever internal price Ajami may pay for these and other slanders, he seems unintimidated and undaunted.

WHICH BRINGS us to this book, a four-part inquiry into the past quarter-century's experience with the "intellectual edifice of secular nationalism and modernity" in the

Arab world. In individual chapters, Ajami traces the biography of an Iraqi-born intellectual, Khalil Hawi, whom he takes as symptomatic of his age; assesses the impact of the Iranian revolution; surveys Egyptian public life; and interprets the response of Arab intellectuals to the idea of peace with Israel.

The recurrent theme of *The Dream Palace of the Arabs* is hope mistaken, faith misplaced. Thus, we learn here that Khalil Hawi, his expectations of a secular millennium bitterly disappointed, ended by committing suicide in 1982. As for the Iranian revolution, spearheaded by the Ayatollah Khomeini, it led to a dead end, while in the Iraqi bid for Kuwait in 1990, Arab nationalism "hatched a monster." Egypt's own experience with revolution, under Gamal Abdel Nasser, "ran aground." Finally, the Oslo accords between Israel and the PLO degenerated into "a grim wave of terror" against Israeli citizens. Recurrently, Ajami writes, "What Arabs had said about themselves, the history they had written, and the truths they had transmitted to their progeny led down a blind alley."

TO MY taste, the early chapters of this book, in which Ajami uses poets and intellectuals to represent the political currents of their era, seem a bit contrived. As the book goes along, however, the argument becomes increasingly direct, and nowhere more so than in the remarkable final chapter, "The Orphaned Peace," where Ajami addresses what went wrong in the Arab-Israel negotiations.

"No sooner had the peace of Oslo" been announced in the Arab world, he writes in that chapter, "than the new battle began, the fear of Israeli military supremacy now yielding to the specter of Israeli cultural hegemony." Although a few Arab intellectuals stood against the tide, the great majority of the educated elite saw in Oslo "not their peace but the rulers' peace." In fact,

the peace process had the surprising effect of making Arab writers, journalists, and professors even more implacable in their enmity toward Israel, for that enmity remained the "one truth that could not be bartered or betrayed, the one sure way back to the old fidelities."

Ajami ascribes much importance to the fact that the Arab intellectual class rejected Oslo. For though this class might not govern, "it structured a moral universe that hemmed in the rulers and limited their options." Bereft of the support of "the most articulate sections of the society," the rulers of Egypt, Jordan, and other countries found they could not sell the idea of peace at home. Although he pays homage to those leaders "who dared break with the culture's prohibitions," as well as to the few businessmen "eager for a new order of things," Ajami sees them losing out in the end to "the centurions of Arab political orthodoxy."

Ajami's attempt to explain the seemingly perverse attraction of Arab intellectuals to failure is sobering:

In an Arab political history littered with thwarted dreams, little honor would be extended to pragmatists who knew the limits of what could and could not be done. The political culture of nationalism reserved its approval for those who led ruinous campaigns in pursuit of impossible quests.

Extremism and failure, in other words, beget more of the same. And so *The Dream Palace of the Arabs* closes on a forlorn note: "The day had not come for the Arab political imagination to steal away from Israel and to look at the Arab reality, to behold its own view of the kind of world the Arabs wanted for themselves." If Fouad Ajami is right, Arab intellectual life will continue to exalt irrationality and to honor aggression for some time to come. We may not like this, but, having read *The Dream Palace of the Arabs*, we can at least begin to understand it.