Meir Hatina, *Arab Liberal Thought in the Modern Age*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2020. 272 pp., ISBN 978-1-5261-4291-7.

The author of this work has previously published studies on Arab liberal discourse, co-edited a volume on liberal thought after 1967, and is, therefore, well-known for his interest in the subject.[[1]](#footnote-1) This monograph focusses on liberal debates from the post-1967 crisis to the 2011 revolutions but it can also be read as in part the quintessence of his previous studies.

The book’s title is obviously inspired by Albert Hourani’s 1962 classic *Arabic Thought in the Liberal Age 1798–1939* and an answer to its shortcomings. Other historians have already attempted to move beyond Hourani’s framework,[[2]](#footnote-2) not least by inscribing the Arab left into Arab intellectual history.[[3]](#footnote-3) Hatina’s first argument against Hourani’s classic is that liberalism did not vanish after 1939. The second argument is visible in the title’s variation on Hourani’s which substitutes “Arabic thought” in “the liberal age” by “Arab liberal thought” in the “modern age.” The adjective “liberal” qualifies the mode of thinking not a period of time, while the age is qualified as “modern.” The underlying idea is to indicate that there has always been a clearly distinguishable group of liberal thinkers shaping modern Arab political culture. The third advantage of the study is that it looks beyond Egypt and Greater Syria, which usually loom large in studies on the contemporary history of ideas, and addresses Arab intellectuals from both the Mashreq and the Maghreb more even-handedly.

The book consists of a useful introduction (pp. 1–36), a short conclusion (pp. 224–30), and five chapters. In the introduction, the author acknowledges the weakness of Arab liberalism, especially when it comes to political organisation and that Arab liberals have also often been discredited as stooges of the West. Various authors have stated that there was a lack of true liberals in the Arab countries throughout the twentieth century and have only conceded that some liberal elements could be found withxZin other ideologies, from Arab nationalism to Islamic populism to socialism. The author convincingly argues against this predominantly negative view of Arab liberalism in both Western historiography and Arabic literature. Against such analyses of doom and failure, he aims to give a positive and more nuanced picture of Arab liberalism and reframes it as a liberal discourse on the political margins that has endured despite all the obstacles to it, “remaining a constant feature of the Arab landscape” (p. 20). In this vein, he points to the tireless pursuit of liberal ideas by some 40 writers (p. 21) in various Arab countries, although he mainly refers to about a dozen authors whom he quotes repeatedly throughout the book. The author argues that the Arab revolutions of 2011 happened contrary to the prevailing academic assumptions about the intellectual and political fields because most scholars had overlooked the “stubborn struggle” (p. 26) of liberal circles and a vibrant civil society.

In the first chapter on “historical endurance, ideological fervor” (pp. 37–89), the author gives a historical overview of the liberal infrastructure, prominent intellectuals, their networks, and liberal manifestos. He connects current debates with the history of Arab liberal thought and shows how intellectuals like Lebanese philosopher Nasif Nassar, Lebanese journalist Hazem Saghiya, Iraqi historian Sayyar al-Jamil, US-Jordanian intellectual Shakir al-Nabulsi, and Tunisian writer al-ʿAfif al-Akhdar have discussed Arab history from the nineteenth-century *nahḍa* to the present. Nassar called for a second *nahḍa* after 1967, whereas the Lebanese writer Elias Khoury saw a second *nahḍa* already emerging after the 1948 defeat and called for a third *nahḍa* after 2011 built on democracy instead of the “militarocracy” and abandoning the old terminology used by dictatorial regimes to suppress the people (p. 63).

The second chapter, on the liberal “revisiting” of Islam “toward an ethical vision” (pp. 90–150), starts with ideas about the separation of religion and state by well-known thinkers like the Egyptians scholars ʿAli ʿAbd al-Raziq and Khalid Muhammad Khalid before moving on to immediate arguments for representative democracy. While the Egyptian Muhammad Saʿid al-ʿAshmawi drew on the Islamic concept of *shura*, other liberal thinkers, such as the Kuwaiti secularist Ahmad al-Baghdadi and the Tunisian historians Abdelmajid Charfi and Mohamed Talbi, argued that no conception of democracy existed in pre-modern times and that modern *shūra* councils in Arab states failed to prove political effectiveness, compared to Western parliaments (p. 98). The author also recalls the “contextualization” and “rationalization” of the Qurʾan as well as a “depoliticization of Islam” (p. 225) by authors such as Egyptian Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd, Syrian Muhammad Shahrur, and Moroccan Fatima Mernissi. Finally, he dedicates a long section to the “unique contribution” of Mahmud Muhammad Taha, the founder of the Sudanese Republican Brothers (pp. 117–28).

The third chapter takes up the liberals’ critique of “oriental despotism” in Arab politics (pp. 151–82), recounts how they explain the “lack of civic culture” (p. 151) and “the crisis of individualism” (p. 158) in Arab societies, and how these deficiencies relate to the rise of modern-day Islamism.

In the fourth chapter, the author presents some liberals’ view of the West and Israel as “an inspiring model” (pp. 183–208). Here, he looks at Arab liberals’ positive views of the modernisation and globalisation of Arab countries. Drawing on other non-Western societies, they argue that modernity is not a solely Western invention. Several Arab liberals have also urged a reconciliation with Israel, since they see the Arab-Israeli conflict as a main factor hampering democratisation. In this context, the author also underlines how some Arab liberals have challenged the widespread Arab denial of the Holocaust, arguing that the “Arab recognition of the Holocaust would force Israel to pay more heed to the plight of the Palestinians” (p. 202).

In the relatively short chapter on the 2011 revolutions (pp. 209–23), the author tries to drive the point home that, prior to the uprisings, liberal ideas and conceptions of society – freedom and democracy – had become keywords for “the young generation, which had known only revolutionary-centrist regimes in the second half of the twentieth century” (p. 209). Liberal thinkers quickly saw the 2011 events as a “natural outcome” of their own efforts and “as a proof of the victory of civil society” (p. 212). After the subsequent disappointing turn in political events, they began criticising the uprisings as “illusions and dreams” (p. 217), some even pleading for Western interventions. The conclusion sums up the current state of affairs with this remark: “The confidence of the liberals in the rightness of their path and their declarations of victory did not eliminate the question marks about whether the Arab people in the present day were more ready for enlightenment than before” (p. 228).

In general, the book is a historically informed stocktaking of liberal thought in Arab countries which aims to trace not only lines of continuity, but also the efficacy of liberal ideas. The author creates a narrative that combines well-known and lesser-known intellectual figures with media figures (like US-Syrian Wafaʾ Sultan) and gives the overall impression of a unanimous liberal agenda on central political and social topics. However, as contexts are only sparsely illuminated, there are also some problems with this way of writing intellectual history.

Firstly, liberal ideas are presented as a sequence of the same themes and discourses throughout the decades. The book does not pay much attention to the location in time and place of specific arguments and authors, but rather foregrounds the similarities of argumentation. Thus, quotations are put together from short articles, academic studies, popular books, and interviews from various decades without relating them to the changing circumstances. The question arises whether a great deal of the putative consistency is more due to the book’s composition than to the intellectuals’ output. It often remains unclear how the liberals’ arguments are reactions to specific contexts and against what kind of political or intellectual opponents they argue. That intellectuals are against dictators, for example, is no surprise, but this criticism is not only found among “liberals.” An interesting question to have been addressed would have been what the argument against dictators means in specific circumstances.

Secondly, biographical backgrounds and intellectual trajectories of the liberals discussed are rarely stated in much detail. That some liberal or other had formerly been a far-left activist is sometimes mentioned, but it remains unclear how this informs his or her “liberal” agenda. Similarly, it seems questionable whether the Islamic reformer Mahmud Muhammad Taha should be counted among “liberal” thinkers, especially since the author takes great care to precisely delimit liberal thought, not merely seek to identify liberal elements within other ideologies, as is the case in Taha’s mixture of secular, spiritual, and socialist ideas.

Thirdly, the way of presenting liberal thinkers gives the impression that they have not only largely followed a monolithic agenda beyond time and space but have also been generally right. The author seems satisfied with presenting a colourful bouquet of liberal ideas without commenting on or categorising them. Analysis as to whether these ideas are based on false or questionable assumptions, lead to wrong conclusions, or are contradictory, is mostly absent. The book also refrains from asking unpleasant questions and does not present controversial discussions between Arab liberals, the only exception being the debate on whether Western intervention was to be welcomed in 2011.

Fourthly, the chapter on the West and Israel as models for democratisation is the least convincing because it is confined to the positive sides of Westernisation. Although the author recognises the detrimental effect of the Arab-Israeli conflict on Arab democratisation, Western foreign policy strategies — from the stabilisation of dictatorial regimes to the half-hearted support of democratic forces to the illegal interventions and human rights violations in the global war on terror — are not discussed as major problems. Thus, the problem of Arab democracy is principally presented as internal to those societies to be solved domestically, with the minority of liberal intellectuals within them supposedly holding the key to solving it.

Despite these limitations, the book is a welcome first step towards a new historiography of Arab liberal thought since the mid-twentieth century and is recommended to readers interested in liberal intellectuals and their discourses.

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1. Meir Hatina, *Identity Politics in the Middle East: Liberal Thought and Islamic Challenge in Egypt*, London: I.B. Tauris 2007; idem: “Arab Liberal Discourse: Old Dilemmas, New Visions”, *Middle East Critique* 20 (2011), 3–20; idem and Christoph Schumann (eds.), *Arab Liberal Thought after 1967: Old Dilemmas, New Perceptions* (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan 2015). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Dyala Hamzah (ed.), *The Making of the Arab Intellectual. Empire, Public Sphere and the Colonial Coordinates of Selfhood* (London: Routledge 2013). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Jens Hanssen and Max Weiss (eds.), *Arab Thought Beyond the Liberal Age. Towards an Intellectual History of the Nahda* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016); idem (eds.), *Arabic Thought against the Authoritarian Age: Towards an Intellectual History of the Present* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2018). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)