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

The book’s title is obviously inspired by Albert Hourani’s 1962 classic *Arabic Thought in the Liberal Age 1798–1939* and must be understood as an answer to its shortcomings. This is no coincidence, as other historians have already attempted to move beyond Hourani’s framework in general,[[2]](#footnote-2) not least by inscribing the Arab Left into the Arab intellectual history.[[3]](#footnote-3) In the present case, the author’s first argument against Hourani’s classic is that liberalism did not vanish after 1939. The second argument is visible in the title’s inversion 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, whereas the age is qualified as “modern.” The underlying idea of this inversion is to indicate that there has always been a clearly distinguishable group of liberal thinkers that has shaped modern Arab political culture. The third asset of the study is that its author looks beyond Egypt and Greater Syria, which usually loom large in studies on the contemporary history of ideas, presenting 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 admits the weakness of Arab liberalism, especially when it comes to political organization; moreover, Arab liberals were often discredited as stooges of the West. Various authors have stated a lack of true liberals in the Arab countries throughout the twentieth century and only accepted that some liberal “elements” could be found in other ideologies, from Arab nationalism over Islamic populism to socialism. The author convincingly argues against this pessimistic view of Arab liberalism that dominates 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 and a minority position on the political margins that endured in spite of all the obstacles, “remaining a constant feature of the Arab landscape” (p. 20). In this way, he points at the tireless pursuit of liberal ideas by some 40 writers (p. 21) in different 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 the Lebanese philosopher Nasif Nassar and the journalist Hazem Saghiya, the Iraqi historian Sayyar al-Jamil, the US-Jordanian intellectual Shakir al-Nabulsi and the Tunisian writer al-ʿAfif al-Akhdar discussed the 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 but called for a third *nahḍa* after 2011, which should be built on democracy instead of the “militarocracy” and abandon 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 and then moves 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 or the Tunisian historians Abdelmajid Charfi and Mohamed Talbi argued that no conception of democracy existed in pre-modern times and that modern *shura* 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 sub-chapter 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) and recounts how they explain the “lack of civic culture” (p. 151) and “the crisis of individualism” (p. 158) in Arab societies and how these deficits are connected 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 the Arab liberals’ positive view of the modernization and globalization of Arab countries. Drawing on other non-Western societies, they argued that modernity was not a Western invention alone. Several Arab liberals also pleaded for a reconciliation with Israel, as they saw the Arab-Israeli conflict as a main factor hampering democratization. In this context, the author also underlines how some Arab liberals took on a 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 disappointing turn of the political events, they started to criticize the uprisings as “illusions and dreams” (p. 217), some even pleading for Western interventions. The conclusion sums up the current state of affairs with the 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 stock-tacking of liberal thought in Arab countries, which aims to trace not only the lines of continuity, but also the efficacy of liberal ideas. The author creates a narrative that spins together well-known and lesser-known intellectual figures with media figures (like US-Syrian Wafaʾ Sultan) and gives the over-all impression of a unanimous liberal agenda of central political and social topics. However, as contexts are only sparsely illuminated, there are also some problems in this way of writing intellectual history.

First, 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 similarity of argumentations. Thus, quotations are put together from short articles, academic studies, popular books, and interviews of various decades, without relating them to changing circumstances. The question arises whether a great deal of 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” and an interesting question would be what the argument against dictators actually means under specific circumstances.

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

Thirdly, the way of presenting liberal thinkers gives the impression that they not only followed a rather monolithic agenda beyond time and space but were also generally right. The author seems satisfied with presenting a colourful bouquet of liberal ideas, without commenting or categorizing them. Whether these ideas were based on false or questionable assumptions, led to wrong conclusions, or were contradictory, is mostly not part of the analysis. The book refrains from asking unpleasant questions and does not present controversial discussions between Arab liberals – with the only exception of the debate of whether Western intervention was welcomed or rejected in 2011.

Fourthly, least convincing from this reviewer’s point of view is the chapter on the West and Israel as models for democratization because the chapter is reduced to the positive sides of Westernization. Although the author recognizes the detrimental effect of the Arab-Israeli conflict for Arab democratization, Western foreign policy is not discussed as a major problem – from the stabilization of dictatorial regimes over the half-hearted support of democratic forces to illegal interventions and human rights violations in the global war on terror. Thus, Arab democracy is principally presented as an internal problem of Arab societies that has to be solved domestically, with the minority of liberal intellectuals supposedly holding the key for the solution.

Despite the limitations, the book is a welcome first step towards a new historiography of Arab liberal thought since the mid-twentieth century and can be 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: 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); iidem (eds.), *Arabic Thought against the Authoritarian Age: Towards an Intellectual History of the Present* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2018). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)