

Obstacles to Enlightenment in the Arab World

By Osama Henedy



Talking about the issue of enlightenment may seem more urgent than ever in the Arab case, as the enlightenment has always been at the fore of the news in the Arab countries, given the range of security, military, and political tensions that the Arab countries have suffered from for decades. And when we search for the reasons for all this, we will probably return to the question that accompanied Arab thought since the beginning of its revival - which came in different forms - but it was represented with a basic question: "Why did one idea advance and we were late, in reference to the civilizational gap that has widened between us, the Arabs and the West?"

We will try to trace all the obstacles that have emerged and will analyze any Arab enlightenment project, based on one of the most famous articles on the subject of enlightenment by the German philosopher Immanuel Kant, reading some of the axes of the article, which constitute an entry to a desired enlightenment in the Arab world.

First: What is Enlightenment (the historical context of the European Enlightenment project)

It can be said that the real beginning of changing the negative attitude of man to the world and his exit from the circle of dull certainty to the space of open knowledge, was defined by Francis Bacon (1561-1626), after him Galilei and Descartes. This was accompanied by a number of developments that took place in Europe, represented by the emergence of universities in the thirteenth century, such as the Sorbonne, Oxford and Bologna, with a great development in cities and the movement of trade.

In 1783, that is, after the troubled atmosphere of debate in Germany, a newspaper asked its readers a simple question: What is Enlightenment?

The answers to this question varied, and among the most important names that presented articles were Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, the German dramatist, Moses Mendelssohn, the Jewish philosopher and Immanuel Kant, the philosopher from Koenigsberg.

Second: A reading of Kant's article on enlightenment and its possible transfer into the Arab world

Examples of Arab enlightenment disruptions:

Perhaps the Mu'tazil movement had a prominent role in trying to establish this type of thinking, which was limited, but the audacity of its theses paved the way for what came af-

ter it, especially the mighty effort in defense of philosophy and logic, led by Ibn Rushd, the Cordoba judge and philosopher in the twelfth century AD.

Ibn Rushd, the great explainer, who comprehended Aristotle's logic and tried to adapt it to Islam, defended since the beginning of his famous book "The Article's separation and the Report Between Sharia and Wisdom from Communication" the form of a preliminary question: "Does Sharia necessitated philosophy?" Defining the purpose of this question by examining the Sharia's point of view, whether philosophy and the sciences of logic are permitted or prohibited.

After he cites several verses that called on people to put reason into practice, he presents his initial definition of philosophy as "considering existing things and considering it in terms of its indication of the maker and the more complete the knowledge of its workmanship, the more knowledge of the maker was complete."

For example, and not limited to, Francis Al-Marrash, the Syrian thinker, in his book "The Forest of Truth" in 1865, called on the Arabs to have a patriotic love, free from the purposes of religion. He considered that sectarian and religious hatreds are among the most dangerous consequences of "ignorance and brutality", as they dispersed Lebanon and shook the pillars of Damascus. Al-Marrash expressed his firm belief in the tremendous power of science to overcome the civilizational gap between East and West and that ignorance is the source of all the East's ills, and the root of all ruins and decadence in it.

Guardianship models in the Arabic case:

Kant defines enlightenment as the individual's liberation from the guardianship he brought to himself, and guardianship is the inability of the individual to use his own understanding, without guidance from the other, not because of his mental deficiency but because of the lack of courage using it, the use of reason without guidance from the other. Encourage to use your own mind, this is the motto of enlightenment!

Two critical levels of guardianship can be identified, which the Arab mind is currently suffering from:

A - Religious guardianship model

B - political guardianship model

And when we read Kant's words, especially the phrase "the use of the mind without guid-

ance from the other," in both models, we will find in the first a multi-level religious discourse, little of it gives the mind its role and place in achieving renaissance and progress, and a lot of it do not make man only a servant of God. Rather, it makes him a slave to the interpretation of a jurist who lived centuries ago, or to the guardian of a jurist who has innovated religion. Not to mention the worse investment of religious discourse, politically, through Islamic movements that perpetuated its two parts, the Sunnis, represented by the Muslim Brotherhood, and the Shiites, represented by Wilayat al-Faqih, as established by the mullahs' authoritarian regime.

In the second model, guardianship was more deadly when the tyrants of the Arab world installed themselves as guardians of the people, thinking for them and trading with them as they wanted. That is through intimidation by tyrants' repressive and oppressive security services, which use all institutions as means of recruitment in favor of their survival in power. The most dangerous of these institutions is the educational institution that, over decades, has created lazy, cowardly, and ignorant models of its critical tasks and roles.

Laziness and cowardice as hindrances to enlightenment:

Someone might say that authoritarian regimes, through their absolute monopoly on the joints of society, especially the education and media sectors, have produced, over decades, an acknowledgment form of the status quo and not having the courage to modify or change it. This is understandable to some extent, it is perhaps what makes us understand the obvious cowardice and the unwillingness to take risks that have dominated the Arab situation for decades. With the uprisings of the Arab Spring, very brave features appeared in defying all this and it became clear that what was seen as eternal is not true.

Freedom as a Necessary Condition for Enlightenment:

"Enlightenment requires nothing but freedom and the simplest thing to call freedom is for an individual to be free, to use his own mind publicly in all matters. However, I hear from everyone 'Do not argue!' The officer says: Do not argue, just do what you were told. The tax collector says: Do not argue, pay. And the priest says: Do not argue, believe!"

This clear connection, according to the enlightenment philosopher, is of paramount importance in the case of countries searching for a place in the world today, including, of course, the Arab region. Therefore, without a gradual, long-term awareness process, it is not possible to escape from the morals of blind obedience to tyrants to begin the process of enlight-

enment, no enlightenment project can exist in climates of tyranny, because freedom and tyranny are two parallel lines that cannot meet.

Parallel religion as an obstacle to the Enlightenment project:

“Does a community of priests have the right to abide by the covenant of a belief, which is changing, in order to enjoy continuous guardianship over the members of the community? I say that this is impossible, and if such a contract exists, it is an object to prevent enlightenment from reaching the people, it is null and of no value, even if a higher authority supports it like Parliament, such a contract is a crime against human nature.”

So, the guardianship of people, the claim of eligibility in their leadership, the conduct of their worldly affairs and overloading religion of what is not in it, in addition to that heritage that was transformed by an active act into a new sacred, all of this produced what is termed as parallel religion.

Third: Conclusion

Any enlightenment process must be defined as a continuous context, taking into consideration the following vital issues:

- No enlightenment project can exist under tyranny, with its two hateful ideologies - the political and the religious - as it is inevitable to continue confronting them by various means, establishing a structure capable of enlightenment.
- Rehabilitating science, scientific thinking, rejecting superstition and primitive thinking through the development of new curricula that make critical and questioning thinking a goal for them, and their tools are research, investigation and question, so that they graduate people who are qualified to enter the values and science of modern civilization.
- It is not possible to talk about enlightenment by neglecting that strict religious discourse insisting on forcibly integrating religion into public life and returning us to a time that does not resemble our own. Therefore, appeasement is no longer feasible with such discourse, because it will remain an imminent danger to any enlightening project.
- The gradualism in the process of change that could affect the Arab structure: it is not realistically possible, according to the history, for an agricultural society to turn, overnight, into a secular society or system. This is a call to the hardliners in the secular discourse, not to the secularists, to reconsider the possibilities.

- Reconsidering the status of Arab women when starting any planned enlightenment project: it is not expected that the enlightenment will be completed by one wing of society, the man. The real work to reconsider the role of women, as a human force full of capabilities, and perhaps investing those capabilities after amending women's status in constitutions, laws, and legislation, constitutes a necessary entry point for enlightenment.

-Reactivating the forces of civil society from within, not through external forces and agendas, and getting out of the current bad state of civil society, in its crude ideological and uncivilized form, in order to play its role as a true expression of the interests of people in their various social groups, away from mercenary and expediency.

