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Book Review

Al-Kawakibi, Abdul Rahman. *The Nature of Tyranny and The Devastating Results of Oppression*. Foreword by Leon T. Goldsmith. Translated by Amer Chaikhouni. London: Hurst, 2021, 152 pp. Hardback.
ISBN: 9781787385481
Reviewer: *Carimo Mohomed*

Book Review

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Reviewer: Carimo Mohomed, Collaborator Researcher, Catholic University of Portugal, Lisbon.

Considered as one of the architects of Arab political philosophy in the 19th century, the Syrian educationalist ‘Abd al-Raḥmān al-Kawākibī (born in mid-19th century and died in 1902) was influenced by reform ideas of Jamal al-Din al-Afghani (1838/9-1897) and Muhammad Abduh (1849-1905), and he advocated a return to the original purity of Islam, claiming that alien concepts and distortions such as mysticism, fatalism, sectarian divisions, and imitation had led to ignorance and submission to stagnant theologians and despotic rulers who suppressed freedoms, promoted false religion, and corrupted the moral, social, educational, and financial systems of the Muslim nation. According to him, the best, or in this case the worst, example was the Ottoman Empire, while advocating Arab independence and an elected Arab caliph with limited powers as the basis for the revival of Islam.

His book is no less than revolutionary in its call for the overthrow of despotic regimes and the restoration of governance by the people and for the people. Appearing in English for the first time, the text has a foreword from Leon T. Goldsmith, offering an overview of Al-Kawakibi’s intellectual contributions. The first chapter of the text provides a definition of tyranny, presenting it as akin to a sickness or malaise that seeps into all classes of society, leaving behind decay. The following seven chapters apply this conception of tyranny to what Al-Kawakibi sees as society’s crucial elements: religion, knowledge, honour, economy, ethics, and progress. Having laid a theoretical framework

for understanding the centrality of tyranny, its characteristics, and its devastating effects, Al-Kawakibi concludes by setting forth a brief programme for remedying the 'disease' of tyranny. The final chapter outlines another book in which he had planned to elaborate upon his ideas, but his death, under mysterious circumstances, came first.

Al-Kawakibi was born in Aleppo to an influential Syrian family. He received a thorough education in the Islamic sciences and the languages of the region including Arabic, Turkish and Persian. As a young man, he was very interested in literature and politics, having edited *Furat*, the official paper of Aleppo from 1875 to 1880. He also edited the highly influential reformist journal, *al-Manar*, which was started by Rashid Rida (1865-1935). After working at *Furat* and *al-Manar*, Al-Kawakibi started his own literary journal called the *al-Sahba*, a journal which vehemently criticised the despots and dictators of his time and alluded to the tyranny of the Ottoman Empire. He especially focused his criticism on the new *wali* of Aleppo, Jamil Pasha. Due to Al-Kawakibi's political outspokenness, the journal was shut down by the local Ottoman Government after only fifteen issues. After his work as editor, Al-Kawakibi entered politics more directly, and worked for various positions in the Ottoman civil service in Aleppo. Despite his opposition to the Ottoman Empire, Al-Kawakibi wanted to serve the Arabs. During this point in his career, he became an honorary member of the board of lawyer examinations. Al-Kawakibi, along with other Aleppans, complained about the *wali* to the central government in Istanbul, criticisms which fell on deaf ears until Istanbul sent a representative to Aleppo to investigate, and immediately threw Kawakibi and his followers into prison in 1886 after an unsuccessful attempt on the life of Jamil Pasha. Once released from prison, Al-Kawakibi's popularity rose, and he became the mayor of Aleppo in 1892. Later, he went to Istanbul to study the Ottoman Empire's despotism and problematic leadership more extensively. With his newfound knowledge, he returned to Aleppo and began working for the Ottoman government again. Because of his opinions, he was subject to harassment and intimidated on a regular basis. He decided to publish his book *Umm al-Qura (The Mother of Cities: Mecca)* in Egypt, rather than in Syria, and finally left his home country in 1899, moving to Egypt, where he was welcomed by other Islamic intellectuals residing there.

Written between 1898 and 1902, *Tabāi' al-Istibdād wa-Maṣāri' al-Isti'bād (The Nature of Despotism and the Harm of Enslavement / The*

Characteristics of Despotism and the Destructions of Enslavement / The Nature of Tyranny and the Devastating Results of Oppression) is a text which can be placed within the realm of political philosophy. Apart from being a criticism of the despotic regime of the Ottoman Sultan ‘Abd-ul Hamid II (1842-1918, r. 1876-1909), the book is also an *exposé* of the causes of despotism and its effects upon the society and the individuals. At the same time, it looks at the relation between the status of knowledge and despotism and at the mechanisms which prevent knowledge and promote ignorance within the despotic society, mechanisms which are closely related to how despotism spreads in it. Despotism is portrayed by the author like a virus that penetrates all layers of society, pervades all social classes and, in the end, destroys the social body. To be sustained, despotism needs people’s ignorance or a general absence of knowledge. According to Kawakibi, knowledge is important because through it, human beings will come to know their rights and only if they know their rights can they demand it and thus force the evil despot to act in the interest of the people. Hence, knowledge is the remedy that cures the illness of despotism. A combination of conscious and unconscious processes prevents knowledge from spreading; psychological factors in the individuals, the relation between the various groups within society and the physical outlook of the despotic society which is defined by chaos and unrest leaves no room for organised education. These factors contribute to the fact that knowledge under despotism has a confined and limited status.

The text is characterised by a rich vocabulary and a wide use of metaphors, something which makes it vital and refreshing. Kawakibi employs rhetorical tools and the book at times bears resemblance with that of a political speech. Following the events of the so-called “Arab Spring”, this translation by Amer Chaikhouni makes a seminal historical text available to English audiences [a French translation was published in 2016 under the title *Du despotisme et autres textes (On Despotism and Other Texts)*] and demonstrates that Al-Kawakibi’s pioneering thought remains relevant not only to intellectuals and young generations but to people all over the world who are searching for ideological doctrines to bolster their aspirations for political and social change.

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