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Failing the Masses: Buthaina Shabaan and the Public Intellectual Crisis

By Asaad Al-Saleh¹

“Each generation must out of relative obscurity discover its mission, fulfill it, or betray it.” (Franz Fanon, an anti-colonial intellectual who joined the National Liberation Front in 1954 and participated in fighting for Algerian independence from France.)

Abstract

This article discusses the problematic and double-sided role of the public intellectual in the Syrian revolution, which started on March 15, 2011 and is still unfolding. When recently challenged by Syrians, the regime enforced its control by carrying out military operations against its own citizens, not without endorsement by a large portion of the population. The article follows the case of Buthaina Shabaan (b.1953-), the writer, professor, and advocate of the Syrian regime. While spurring the populace to embrace the possibility of democratic reform, this female intellectual has accepted—even embraced—the political control employed by an authoritarian one-party regime, which uses her as a representative of their supposed progressive and women’s liberation agendas. Shabaan has been playing a significant role in supporting and ultimately sustaining a totalitarian regime, compromising in the process the interests of women and even children, for whose cause she has long claimed to be a champion and a spokesperson. The shift of Shabaan from being a feminist to serving the propaganda of the regime has damaged her integrity as an intellectual. This shift requires not only a revisionary approach to the Western reception of her, but also an analysis of the way the Syrian people have perceived her role in undermining the revolution.

Keywords: Syria, Syrian Revolution, Buthaina Shabaan, Public Intellectual.

Introduction: Shabaan from the Town to the Palace

Buthaina Shabaan was born in 1953 in a small town called Al-Massoudiah, which belongs to Homs, the Syrian governorate that has been a significant participant in the Syrian revolution against Bashar Assad’s regime. Graduating as the top student in Homs and receiving the fourth highest score in Syria for the secondary school final exam in 1971, she met the new leader of Syria, Hafez Assad, who awarded her a scholarship to complete a university degree. Even though her family was strict, her father, an Arabic teacher, allowed her—the first girl to leave her town unaccompanied by a male relative—to study at Damascus University. She was the first female student to major in English, and she received another grant to continue her studies in Britain. In 1977, she earned an MA degree from Warwick University, where she also finished her PhD degree. Her PhD dissertation was on the English poet Shelly, who is well-known for his revolutionary political and poetic visions as in his poem “Revolt of Islam,” about someone who has “a resolution to confer the boons of political and intellectual freedom on his fellow-creatures” (Williams 176). Demonstrating a great deal of fearlessness and independence, she married, against the will of her family, an Iraqi national whom she met during her doctoral

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study in Britain (Shabaan, *Both Right and Left Handed*, 8-9). After graduation, Shabaan taught for two years (1982-1984) in Algeria, before going back to Damascus to start a career as a professor in comparative women's literature and a writer exposing and agitating against the hindrances of women.¹

Shabaan's high achievements in school and her membership in the Ba'ath party from an early age attracted the attention of President Hafez Assad, who invited her to do a simultaneous translation for his meeting with former US Secretary of State, Warren Minor Christopher.² In a society where the President is viewed as utterly unapproachable and mysterious, working with President Assad became a source of unmatched social power. Shabaan states that after her appearance as a translator for the President, she travelled to her hometown and realized that some people wanted to meet her so that she would help "facilitate some services." Exhausted from her journey, wanting only to see her family, she asked her father to turn the visitors away. He rebuked her for abnegating her responsibility as one of the empowered toward the underpowered. He reminded her of the social contract, which in Syria mandates that people identified as mediators to the President—who is seen as all powerful—intervene for those in need. Many of Shabaan's career achievements were defined by this moment of serving the "Master of the Nation," the title to which he was often referred by the official media.

Serving the Assad regime (both the father and the son, Bashar Assad) Shabaan began in 1988 as an advisor to Farouq al-Sharaa, the Minister of Foreign Affairs who later became the vice president. Since then, she has been building a burgeoning profile. From 1993 until 2003, she was the official interpreter for the Syrian President. Besides other tasks, she was also the editor of the Arab Writers Union's journal, *Foreign Literatures Quarterly*. Between 2002 and 2003, she became the Director of the Foreign Media Department in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. In 2003, she served as the vice president of the Arab Writers Union—which is the leading government publisher in Syria, as well as the organization for its writers. In the same year, she became the first Minister of Expatriates. As a Minister, she began a project to encourage Syrians to return to their country with their talent and resources. At that time, there were rampant speculations that she would be the first Syrian and Arab woman to be Minister of Foreign Affairs. Instead, changes in the Syrian cabinet in 2008 resulted in appointing Shabaan as the Political and Media Advisor for the Syrian President, with the rank of a Minister, a position that she still holds.³

The Syrian regime has long positioned itself as a progressive political system committed to placing women in higher positions. Privileged in the current collective Syrian memory is the example of Najah al-Attar (1933-), a woman who holds a PhD in Arabic literature from the University of Edinburgh. She became the Minister of Culture in 1976 as a result of the "emancipation of women," a socio-political position endorsed by the Ba'ath party since 1960. Even though the Syrian cabinet changed several times since 1976, al-Attar maintained her position until March 13, 2000. Six years later, Bashar Assad brought her back into government as the Syrian Vice President in charge of cultural affairs. Although Shabaan and al-Attar are not the only women to hold prominent positions in the Ba'ath party government—Maha Qanout, another woman with a PhD in Arabic, was appointed in March 2000 to replace Attar as the Minister of Culture—Attar remains the holder of the highest position ever occupied by an Arab woman. In December 2001, President Bashar Assad appointed another woman to the Ministry of Culture, Dr. Najwa Qssab Hassan, a professor at Damascus University who taught in the Philosophy and Sociology departments ("48 Arab Women Nominees"). Like Shabaan, Dr. Hassan was also a Syrian nominee for the 2005 Noble Prize ("48 Arab Women Nominees"). But more than any

other Syrian woman, Shabaan has presented the regime to the world as a reform-oriented establishment, working to sustain its survival, particularly between 2011-2012, by being one of its trusted messengers to Russia.

While there has been a clash of wills between the Syrian regime and people, Shabaan chose to side with the former, compromising her integrity as a free thinker committed to justice and empowerment of the oppressed. Even though her role in the Syrian government before the revolution painted her as a great success, symbolizing triumph for other Syrian women, her role during the revolution undermined this image. Her legacy was further marred by the perceived illegitimacy of the regime in the eyes of many in Syria and outside the country. This change of stature followed the regime's slaughter of the participants of nonviolent demonstrations, targeting civilian areas with heavy weapons when they became restive.

Shabaan and the Crisis of the Public Intellectual

Shabaan was involved in the US-sponsored negotiations between Syria and Israel, and was also involved in the internal preparation for Bashar's ascendancy to the presidency in 2000. This work for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the presidential palace prevented her from teaching before 2000, and she has not since taught regularly at the University. However, as a graduate student of English Literature at the University of Damascus, I was able to take a class offered by Professor Shabaan. Despite tiring overseas trips and a busy work schedule, Shabaan used to come to class in high spirits, eager to listen to her students' opinions on the readings she had carefully chosen. One novel to which she devoted ample class time was *The Sand Child* by the Moroccan/French novelist Tahar Ben Jelloun. Set in Morocco, this novel exposes the torment of a despised eighth daughter, Zahra, born to a father who had already had seven girls and determined that his wife would deliver a boy. Upon discovering that the newborn was actually a girl, the father denied her gender and instead declared her to be a boy named Ahmad. The plight of Zahra unveils the deep-rooted bias toward women about which Shabaan was so vocal, openly criticizing Arab societies' reluctance to grant women full recognition and rights. Against the backdrop of injustice demonstrated in the text, Shabaan articulately voiced her social and cultural critique.

Needless to say, students were impressed by such an open-minded professor who was at the same time working for the Syrian government, someone whose character defied the public perception of Syrian officials. Far from amicable, commonly perceived as inaccessible and inefficient, these officials habitually disdain those unconnected to the government. They relentlessly praise the regime to keep their positions or jockey for higher ones. Shabaan, on the other hand, not only broke this unpleasant image but also voiced dissatisfaction with regime-sponsored discourses that skewed the "obscure social education textbooks" (as she described them)—an especially daring shot when considering that Shabaan herself held a leading role as a member of the Ba'ath Central Committee.

Ironically, were Shabaan to return to teaching, she would certainly never be able to assign *The Sand Child* again because its author has joined what I consider to be the more responsible model of intellectuals by supporting the revolting masses of the Arab Spring. Jelloun condemns the dictators who rule unlawfully and praises the revolt's demand for dignity and freedom, ideals they are willing to die for. In an article published on June 25, 2011 in *Newsweek*, Jelloun belittles two dictators, namely Muammar Gaddafi and Bashar Assad, who turned the Arab Spring into what he describes as hell. He groups them with Saddam Hussein because, according to him, "they can't tolerate opposition, and answer it with weapons... they cling to their positions, which

they occupy without legitimacy...they count on tribalism to fortify their power...they are afraid of justice. Like him, they are convinced they are right” (Jelloun). The link between Bashar and Gaddafi is telling because both dictators refused to accept the reality of their overestimated popular support—not including the hired militias or the tribal or sectarian support, which is marginal compared to the entire populace of Libya or Syria. Unlike Jelloun, Shabaan blames the protesters, not the dictators, for the violence and destruction caused by revolutions. Seven weeks after the uprising against Bashar, she told the *New York Times*: “We think these people are a combination of fundamentalists, extremists, smugglers, and people who are ex-convicts and are being used to make trouble” (Shadid). She has not changed this pro-regime position over the last seventeen months, though the reality has by now plainly discredited her rhetoric.

Before the Syrian revolution, Shabaan was widely considered a respected public intellectual who set an example by fighting for the causes she had long claimed as her own. For instance, Shaaban’s life captivated unprecedented recognition for a Syrian intellectual in the documentary film entitled *Woman* by American-Syrian director Ziad Hamzeh. A winner of the *Golden Palm* award at the 2008 Beverly Hills Film Festival, *Woman* presents Dr. Shaaban’s work as “personal, revealing, and a dangerous quest to champion justice and equality for all women” (“International Beverly Hills Film Festival”). In the film, Shabaan states, “At one point, I was only thinking about women. I feel I want to fight for men, women, and children, everywhere and anywhere, for equality, for justice, and for human integrity” (“International Beverly Hills”). This film comes as a result of Shabaan’s long-standing opposition to political regimes that violate such principles as social justice, freedom, and equality, particularly those gratuitously violent regimes that kill and harm innocent civilians.

To her credit, Shabaan’s choice to speak out, rather than remain silent, led to the condemnation of visibly abusive regimes and the exposure of the unseen powers that care less about human lives than about political and economic gain. The hallmark of her activism has been to rightly criticize the suffering of people in Palestine and Iraq. Yet, when the Syrian regime played the same role of killing innocent people and abusing power, the widely-published feminist hardly uttered or wrote a word.

Since the 1980s, Shabaan has ceaselessly demonstrated two intellectual activities in her scholarly and journalistic writings as well as in her public lectures. The first is denouncing and exposing the practices that devalue women and pose an existential threat to their lives and human rights. In her first book, *Both Right and Left Handed: Arab Women Talk about their Lives*, she graphically describes, probably with damning intent, an honor killing that took place in her hometown when she was a young child. Her second practice is criticizing the West for failing to efficiently react to human rights abuses when it comes to the treatment of Palestinians, Iraqis, or the Lebanese in times of war. Now, being a supporter of the Syrian regime, she certainly is not blameless of complicity when the same power structures violate human rights. While she has, in the past, been one to keep abreast of issues related to her intellectual projects, she has expressed no support for the Syrian revolution. This has been a terrible disappointment for her fellow citizens and intellectuals who decry the regime. Such a conniving position is a striking contrast with the intellectual image she had previously created for herself, an image that had been celebrated locally and internationally for a long time. Ironically, the Arab Spring established a culture of fearlessness where dictators are no longer the symbols of unchallenged authority, but Shabaan’s position sends a message that they should always be as such, a message that encourages more authoritarianism with all of the violations accompanying it.

The revolutionary role played by Arab women at the turn of the twentieth century, which

Shabaan praises in her books, is repeated by women and men in the Syrian revolution but goes unnoticed by her. In her 1999 book, *The Arab Women in the Twentieth Century*, Shabaan wrote that “despite the scarcity of what has been written about the political role of the Arab woman, she played a significant political role at the end of the Ottoman era, during the foreign mandate period, and up to the period of national revolutions, as well as in the stage subsequent to gaining political independence” (25). The examples she mentions include women “smuggling weapons, documents, and food for the [Syrian] revolutionaries in the Goutah” (25). Aided by these women—in a scenario similar to what many Syrian women do today to protect Syrian protesters from sadistic security agents—these revolutionaries sought the Goutah area of Damascus as a hideout because of its thick trees and inaccessibility.

It is odd that Shabaan ostensibly assumes that women’s political roles cannot be channeled for a regime change despite women’s contribution to the liberation of Syria from the French. Her position in the context of the Arab Spring was to condemn the Mubarak regime while keeping silent when those uprisings metastasized into Syria. While most feminists in the Arab world initially supported the Arab Spring (regardless of which regimes were targeted), Shabaan denied these revolts any support—not because of the danger they posed to citizens, but because they endangered the dictatorial regimes themselves. It’s hard to see someone who deserted women at such a key moment in Syrian history; someone who celebrated women’s resistance of colonization; someone who shifted positions as such; and who, finally, still feels entitled to a voice of activism as anything but audacious. Her writing about (and celebration of) the political role of women—while not participating in the current Syrian situation—has come to seem like a position she only held hypothetically. Not to join in discharging women’s positive political capital, to which she turns a blind eye while readily acknowledging its past existence, doesn’t negate its present existence. With the exception of those affiliated with the regime, many Syrian intellectuals have strongly supported the revolution and condemned the cruel policies adopted to neutralize peaceful demonstrators. These intellectuals have organized demonstrations against the regime, such as the popular pro-democracy protests of Wednesday, July 13, 2011, which took place in Damascus. Some participants, including artists and actors, were arrested.

While not the first untrustworthy intellectual, Sabaan is the most recent within the Arab Spring. But it seems that the term *public intellectual* always hangs on vague definitions and assumes unspecified values. The definition and role of the intellectual has been the subject of extensive studies, mostly addressing the intellectual in a Western context. According to Helen Small, although issues related to the public intellectual do not pertain to the American culture exclusively, the term gained currency in the United States one decade before the turn of the twenty-first century, and was used in Britain ten years later with little treatment given to it in other European countries. Small argues that public intellectuals are declining and need to be revived, particularly given the challenges modern cultures face, with “increased power of the media...greater state regulation of the universities and, simultaneously, their penetration by commercial and corporate interests” (Small, 2). Richard Posner—who defines the public intellectual as “a person who, drawing on his intellectual resources, addresses a broad though educated public on issues with a political or ideological dimension”—laments public intellectuals addressing the public about issues in which they lack expertise or experience. But it is certainly more lamentable to have intellectuals establishing a legacy of public authority about certain issues when they lack the integrity to stand by them, a situation that fits Shabaan.

Whether positive or negative, the intellectual has played a significant role since antiquity. Gramsci contrasts the traditional intellectual “whose position in the interstices of society has a

certain inter-class aura about it but derives ultimately from past and present class relations and conceals an attachment to various historical class formations” with the organic intellectual, or “the thinking and organizing element of a particular fundamental-social class” (Hoare and Smith 2), arguing that intellectuals should raise the consciousness of the masses and point to manipulation exercised by various kinds of power. Influenced by Gramsci, Edward Said argues that the intellectual should publicly “raise embarrassing questions... confront orthodoxy and dogma (rather than to produce them)... [and] be someone who cannot easily be co-opted by governments or corporations and whose *raison d'être* is to represent all of those people and issues that are routinely forgotten” (9). Even though Said’s definition reduces the responsibility of the intellectual to that of opposing only political and corporate hegemony, it nevertheless shows the influence of such powers to control, mislead, and abuse the public.

But many Western (particularly European) intellectuals have failed at this expected and often simple task, even while they have enjoyed democratic systems and little fear of persecution. That is why in his analysis of several intellectuals—starting with the German philosopher Martin Heidegger and his controversial involvement and support of the Nazi regime—Mark Lilla in *The Reckless Mind* poses the disturbing question: “What is it about the human mind that made the intellectual defense of tyranny possible in the 20th century?” He continues, “How did the Western tradition of political thought, which begins with Plato’s critique of tyranny in the *Republic*... reach the point where it became respectable to argue that tyranny was good, even beautiful?” (198). Lilla’s treatment of certain European intellectuals and their irrational approach to politics is meant, he suggests, to be a companion to Czeslaw Milosz’s 1951 *The Captive Mind*, a classical work of anti-Stalinism written the same year that Milosz defected to France, losing a prestigious government position in Poland as the cultural attaché. In this book, the Nobel laureate of literature examines the “vulnerability of the twentieth-century mind to seduction by sociopolitical doctrines and its readiness to accept totalitarian terror for the sake of a hypothetical future” (Milosz vii). As a public intellectual, Shabaan is susceptible to the critique leveled by these authors against those whose relationship to political power endangers their responsibility: intellectuals whose role merits reevaluation as they serve the power system that crushes the masses. Shabaan has long enjoyed speaking in the name of the masses, but in the shadow of the thuggish Syrian regime she stands tongue-tied.

The Confusing Intellectual of Syria

On January 31, 2011, in the wake of the Tunisian and Egyptian revolutions, and just two weeks before Syrians started their own, Buthaina Shabaan wrote an opinion column in the London-based Arabic newspaper *Asharq al-Awsat* that praised the Arab masses for creating “a new epoch” and paving the way for “freedom.” Under the title “The Voice of the Masses,” Shabaan presents herself as an overjoyed intellectual hailing Egypt’s newly gained freedom from Mubarak’s corrupt rule. Imploring the Arab masses “not to forget or neglect” the leaders who failed them; approving the revolutionaries who “overcame their leaders”; and failing to foresee that the Syrian regime would face a massive uprising the like of which toppled Hosni Mubarak and Bin Ali, Shabaan asks, “Has the moment come when Arab masses take to the streets to force their will on their governments, the governments which for decades have imposed their will, slogans, failures... and disagreements over millions of them and without achieving their hopes and aspirations?” While it is true that between Arab Spring uprisings there were chronological gaps, it is hard to see how Shabaan could mistake this dormancy for Syrian contentment. She endorsed non-Syrian revolutions before the Syrian people would revolt, as well, chanting: *The*

people want to overthrow the regime.

It is most likely not a coincidence that President Bashar Assad, for whom Shabaan serves as Political and Information advisor, gives the same view in an interview with the *Wall Street Journal*. (Both pieces appeared on the same date; January 31, 2011.) In the interview, Assad was asked about his reaction to the events in Tunisia and Egypt. In his response, he explained that it was a “disease” caused by stagnation. Elaborating on what the events meant for the then-quiet Syria, he said, “we are not Tunisians and we are not Egyptians... We are not a copy of each other, but we have many things in common.” He also pointed out that what happened was motivated by desperation, adding:

Whenever you have an uprising, it is self-evident that to say that you have anger, but this anger feeds on desperation. Desperation has two factors: internal and external. The internal is that we are to blame, as states and as officials, and the external is that you are to blame, as great powers or what you call in the West ‘the international community.’ (“Interview with Syrian President”)

Assad and Shabaan, however, adopted a different rhetoric later to deal with the fact that Syrians could indeed manage a revolt. There is no doubt that had they known that Syria itself would face the same uprisings they would not have responded in the same manner, reflecting the regime’s long-standing underestimation of Syrians—the same regime that had been working for decades to stifle any potential uprising, accumulating loyalists in the country’s infrastructure and making Syria a security state, where it became almost impossible to do anything without government clearance.

Shabaan has assumed the regime’s habit of blaming outsiders and armed gangs for the unrest, which continues to dominate the official Syrian rhetorical response to the uprisings.¹ Never mind that at the time of this article’s writing, the uprisings had escalated to a degree that the Arab League had to step in but failed to stop the violence; that the international community could intervene even militarily and put an end to the atrocities in the country. The increasing internal and international pressure on the regime has forced it to change its formerly adopted strategy, which was to claim that it was only ‘*azma*’ (a crisis) and would soon be over.⁴

Shabaan’s relationship to the regime is typical of many intellectuals who sell their souls to authoritarian dictatorships, eventually losing any respect gained for voicing commitments to values which they do not commit to in times of trial. Shabaan allied herself with intellectuals who take on the burdens of humanity. But when such responsibilities become urgent in her own country, she relinquishes the opportunity to take a stand against the regime. Her relentless defense of Palestinian rights and her legacy as an activist and defender of women’s rights cannot stand up to scrutiny. When Bashar Assad showed his real face, doing what the other power systems she constantly criticizes did, such as the Israeli government and its treatment of civilians in Gaza or Lebanon, Shabaan stood by the regime, ignoring its violations of human rights and blaming the whole situation on extremists, which is exactly how Israel regularly justifies its retaliatory actions against Palestinians.

This dual personality of public intellectuals becomes more troubling when one realizes that Shabaan, while applying universal appeals to condemn a country like Israel or the United States, does not apply these appeals against an aggressive regime fighting its own people to stay in power. If this is due to lack of courage, then one is pained to understand why Shabaan always praised those courageous writers and activists who tell the truth and resist silence when facing

abusive power structures. For example, in “What We Have in Common with Stanley McChrystal,” Shabaan writes on June 28, 2010 about an American general whose disapproving remarks about the White House appeared in *Rolling Stone* magazine and led to his being recalled from his post in Afghanistan and forced to resign. In this article, Shabaan accuses the US administration of turning a deaf ear to the voices of its own military experts, specifically those who advocated for leaving Afghanistan. She wonders why someone like General McChrystal, whose “courageous, praiseworthy, and honorable history” as she puts it, cannot convince his superiors of the validity of his anti-war views. Furthermore, she depicts him as a general with integrity, someone who “condemns his soldiers being killed daily...in a battle which he knows for sure will lead only to more casualties” (Shabaan, “What We Have in Common with Stanley McChrystal”). For Shabaan, such a heroic military figure represents, prior to his public criticism, those who disagree respectfully with their leaders, even though their leaders do not respect them or have the same ethics. She laments how the most powerful country in the world has reached a stage where it implements “the shutting up of mouths, hiding facts, and punishing those who dare to have the courage to point to the real areas of danger, whether these are Helen Thomas, Noam Chomsky or General Stanley McChrystal” (Shabaan, “What We Have in Common”). Apparently, Shabaan has a clear sense of the distinction between governments that almost exclusively dictate the way power is used or abused and a truth-telling citizen rejecting such a dictatorship, but she totally denies the fact that her regime unquestionably exploits power.

Shabaan does not want to do as those intellectuals whom she rightly praises have. She does not even write about the Syrian intellectuals whose voice of truth against the regime has put them in jail or forced them to escape the country. She quotes Chomsky, whose work as an intellectual demonstrates the commitment that Shabaan lacks. Chomsky’s famous and first political essay, “The Responsibility of Intellectuals” (published in 1967) emphasizes that “Intellectuals are in a position to expose the lies of governments, to analyze actions according to their causes and motives and often hidden intentions” (73). In a TV appearance, Chomsky criticizes the Syrian regime for the inhumane treatment of the Syrian economist, professor, and regime critic Arif Dalila who was sentenced in 2001 to ten years in prison for publicly condemning corruption and the lack of freedom in Syria and for his role in what is known as the Damascus Spring: the emergence of civil society groups in 2000 after the inauguration speech of Bashar Assad—accusations the regime framed as “sovereignty”-related. If Shabaan could only follow the model of Chomsky, she would be respected as much as him. But, she certainly betrayed the responsibility of the intellectual and the person whom she always praised.

Integrity

Having integrity is a basic prerequisite for any intellectual who assumes that they can answer the public by working responsibly for their causes. It is a classic rhetorical move to use one’s ethos to establish conviction among one’s audience. Accordingly, if personal ethics are not in good standing, one’s credibility is negatively affected. Shabaan has established herself as an intellectual who appeals to her Arabic and English readers with logic about issues that concern them. Respect for justice and human rights is at the heart of her public persona. She presents herself as someone who is objective, even though often times she preys on pathos while addressing serious issues. But even though she uses these rhetorical moves effectively in her lectures and writings, particularly her widely syndicated editorials, her credibility has been greatly damaged since the onset of the Syrian revolution. What she had demonstrated before the revolution has been undermined by what she has done since, so much so that it is doubtful that

the majority of Syrians can take her seriously anymore. Consequently, she presents herself as someone not genuinely concerned about the values she espoused and called for, including equality, justice, and joining collective efforts for the common good and better future. In fact, it is this lack of integrity that seems to allow Shabaan to twist facts to fit only her arguments and positions, regardless of the ethical abuse involved in the process.

One does need to look very far into Shabaan's life to find a disparity between her writings and the character she wants to project; moreover for critical readers, her writings suffer from (probably intentional) errors of both substance and fact, making her hardly a trusted intellectual. On July 30, 2009, President Obama named Mary Robinson as one of the 16 recipients of the 2009 Presidential Medal of Freedom (White House Press Secretary). Celebrating the first female President of Ireland (1990–1997) and the former United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (1997–2002) did not go unnoticed by Shabaan. Less than a month later, she wrote an editorial in *Asharq Al-Awsat* entitled “Staring Inside” to praise Obama's choice, stating that Israel was upset about the honor Robinson's work received simply because it condemns “Israeli violations of human rights in the Occupied Territories.” Shortly after, in the same newspaper, Shabaan wrote an article entitled “Articles Threatening the National Security of Israel!” which denounced Israel for ignoring crimes against Palestinians by diverting media attention away from such crimes. In this article, she describes Robinson as someone who was “taking a courageous stand for the sake of justice in Palestine” (Shabaan, “Articles Threatening the National Security of Israel!”) Hailing the courage of Robinson, Shabaan adds:

They [Israelis] did the same with the author [Shabaan] because she wrote an article in *Asharq al-Awsat* about the significance of the [US] recognition and saluted the courage of Robinson and her honorable positions in defending human rights...They have written an inflammatory article against me in the newspaper *Jerusalem Post*, (August 17, 2009) and launched a great deal of provocative charges against me, inciting negative and presupposed attitudes against me as an author. (“Articles Threatening the National Security of Israel!”)

This “great deal of provocative charges” comprised 549 words. It basically summarized Shabaan's former article about Robinson and gave additional information about similar publications she wrote against Israel. Written by Alex Sorin, whose profile on the *Jewish Outlook*, states that he is “responsible for scanning Arabic media and translating articles not yet covered in Israel and English news. In addition to writing articles based on the articles he found, he wrote independent articles” (Cone). In fact, Sorin has clearly indicated that Israel does not care about Shabaan's writings and quoted a spokesman for Israel's Foreign Ministry who told *The Jerusalem Post*, “We have no intention of commenting on an editorial that we have no intention of reading” (Sorin). Adding his share of hyperbole—either intentionally or due to a lack of Arabic language knowledge—Sorin wrongly stated that, “Dr. Buthaina Shabaan blasted Israeli policy,” adding in his summary of her article that she decries “Zionist influence over the world media” (Sorin) when nowhere in her article do those words appear. This misleading quotation was the only mistake that deserved correction, but Shabaan did not do so, for she wanted to make a more serious albeit spurious case out of it by trying to convince her Arab readership that Israel was creating raving recriminations about her. This is not to indicate that hers was a delusional response. Rather, it shows that Shabaan adopts the same decades-long rhetoric favored by the Syrian regime: that they are defending Palestinian rights and are heroes singlehandedly opposing

Israeli policies. This rhetoric fits with the regime's propaganda that they are being attacked by foreign powers for resisting Israel and Western imperialism.

Since the independence of Syria in 1946, the staple of the regime's discourse has been pan-Arabism. As taught extensively in the Syrian educational system in primary and secondary school (and up to the third year at the university level), the concept denotes uniting Arabs in one homeland—a historical unity reminiscent of the Arab world before foreign colonization and imperially imposed divisions. Pan-Arabism was not only adopted as a popular idea in Syria but, according to Michael Scott Doran, was also an official policy (Doran 25). The ascendancy of the Ba'ath party to exclusive rule of Syria in 1963 coincided with an increased emphasis on pan-Arabism, which the Ba'ath regime used to justify many of its decisions related to interior and inter-Arab affairs. Consequently, Hafez Assad's manipulation of this ideology, in addition to other factors, allowed him to play a dominant role in the region, personifying the big brother who equated "Syrian interests with those of Arabs generally, occasionally to the irritation of Arabs elsewhere" (Drysdale and Hinnebusch 54). Yet the regime's indifference in the face of the Syrian revolution of 2011 betrayed no genuine concern for Arabs or Syrians but rather for keeping power and control. With measures against its citizens incongruent with acceptable governing standards, the regime has lost its legitimacy in the eyes of many Syrians. Still, the regime cleaves to the same bleak and futile language as the defender of Arab rights against a "universal conspiracy" targeting the country and the entire region, a conspiracy plotted by such Western countries as the United States, Britain and France, in addition to Israel.

To reiterate such rhetoric of "a plot" against Syria, Shabaan and other influential figures including the grand mufti of Syria, attended a widely publicized event in Aleppo on July 29, 2011. At the conference, she pointed out in reference to the Arab Spring, that the "crisis" stole the spring and summer of a great number of Syrians and non-Syrians. Her defense of the regime regurgitated the discourse of Syria's special place in the Arab world as the last guardian of its historical and legitimate rights, including anything related to the question of Palestine. For Shabaan the revolution was a conspiracy because, as she put it, the events "revealed without any doubt that we are all being targeted, in our cities and towns, in our schools and trains, and that we all, the Arabs, are the envy of the world and the location for its conspiracies and continuous bragging" ("Syrians Emphasize National Unity"). This escapist, but at the same time, ethnocentric discourse is used with deliberate manipulation of the appeal to ethos.⁵ Because her immediate audience, which is here the average Syrian and not only the pro-Assad citizens, trusts her knowledge and view of world affairs—based on her education, experience, and the worldwide recognition she has already achieved—they may as well believe they really are the envy of the world. Thanks to Shabaan, they might also believe that their leader has been targeted by evil powers because of how good he is. It is obvious that such indoctrination (which this author himself received while growing up in Syria), is only for "local consumption," as some educated Syrians say when hearing such baffling praise for the president or clash-of-civilization-articulations by government speakers. Shabaan is not able to address her Western readers or her English literature students in the same manner, but she knows that an audience in Aleppo expects and loves these statements; therefore, she lathers on a great deal of them.

Using double standards and escaping real issues (by referring to distant ones) is a common feature of Shabaan's reaction to the Syrian revolution. Like the regime she represents, Shabaan addresses questions about democracy, human rights, and freedom in the strangest ways. For instance, on December 8, 2003, Shabaan addressed an Arab and Syrian community in Los Angeles by elaborating the need for Syrian expatriates to unite and embrace their Arab identity.

Yet, she shanghai's this collective identity, which is based on historical bonds among Arabs, to justify her regime's inability to adopt modern concepts such as democracy. When asked in the World Affairs Council of Northern California about democracy in Syria, she replied only indirectly, adducing the example of Muslim and Christian coexistence since 636. She adds:

And I did not tell [the questioner] that the head of John the Baptist is buried in the Umayyad Mosque, and that no bulldozer entered the mosque to erase a Christian symbol. That is so because we Muslims respect and revere him just like Christians in our country respect our Islamic symbols. I told [the questioner] that the Armenians came to our country after they had been subjected to persecution and that Circassians also came to our country when they were persecuted. We are proud of this democracy that we have lived in for thousands of years. (Shabaan, "With the Arab Community in Los Angeles")

Obviously, this perception of democracy is agonizingly flawed because of its inapplicability to the very essence of democracy itself. Shabaan here does not distinguish between religious tolerance or coexistence and a political system based on non-dictatorial practices. Such fallacies are akin to the Western rhetoric of colonization, such as the idea of *Mission Civilisatrice*, which French officials expressed in their writings to justify their colonial control of Syria from 1922-1946.⁶ And Shabaan's reference to democracy does not meet even the narrowest view of this principal. She may as well remind us of Lenin's definition of democracy when he states that it "represents, on the one hand, the organized, systematic use of force against persons; but, on the other hand, it signifies the formal recognition of equality of citizens, the equal right of all to determine the structure of, and to administer, the state" (Lenin 85). But if this contradictory way of recognizing democracy was acceptable in 2003, can it still be valid during the Syrian revolution against Bashar? Has not the regime responded to the uprising by destroying mosques and forcing persecuted citizens to flee as refugees to neighboring countries, such as Turkey, Lebanon, and Jordan? If the regime itself cannot tolerate any person seeking democracy in Syria, it is obvious that any social harmony among Syrian citizens is not due to the existence of such a regime. Moreover, when the BBC asked Reem Haddad, another regime spokeswoman, about reports of Syrians fleeing from Jisr al-Shogour to Turkey, her reply, which became the talk of the town in Syria, was, "A lot of them find it easy to move across because their relatives are there. It's a bit like having a problem in your street, and your mum lives in the next street, so you go and visit your mum for a bit" ("Trumpet Reem Haddad"). This response prompted *Guardian* journalist Esther Addley to state that Haddad, "may look like the actor Isla Fisher and speak like a Mayfair lady who lunches, but appearances – and words – can be deceptive" ("Syria's State TV Director"). Like Haddad, Shabaan has been labeled by many Syrians as one of those *bouq al-nithaam* or a "trumpet of the regime," a term referring to their relentless, loud and repeated false proclamations.

Shabaan in the Eyes of Syrian Revolutionaries

Shabaan's name was repeatedly intoned in the Syrian demonstrations immediately following a conference on March 24, 2011 where she announced that the government was considering ending emergency rule, allowing more political freedom, and raising salaries. This marked the first official response to the Syrian uprisings, which started in the southwestern city of Daraa, where some children were imprisoned and tortured for anti-regime graffiti. With the

regime's reaction to the uprisings leaving dozens of people dead, demonstrators chanted slogans indicating that it was not food they wanted, but freedom and dignity. Some of the popular slogans were, "Ya Buthaina ya Shabaan, al-sha'b al-Suri mish jou'aan" ("O Buthaina Shabaan, the Syrian people are not hungry") and "Ya Buthiana ya Shabaan, al-sha'b al-Suri ma biyinhaan" ("O Buthaina Shabaan, the Syrian people will not be humiliated"). These slogans confirmed popular speculations made well prior to the revolution that it would be, not hunger, but national pride which would motivate a Syrian revolt against the regime.

The day after Shabaan's appearance, 24 people were killed in Daraa in demonstrations—labeled the "Friday of Dignity" by protestors themselves, joined by fellow dissenters in the capital Damascus and the northern Kurdish area of Qamishli (Abouzeid). Outraged by acts of defacement made by the revolutionary masses, the pro-regime troops opened fire on those who were trying to destroy a statue of the late Syrian President Hafez Assad. Since then, mass demonstrations have been planned every Friday, and women and children have been active participants in daily protests against the regime. On Wednesday April 13, 2011, *USA Today* reported the following in Homs: "'We will not be humiliated!' shouted some 2,000 women and children who blocked a main coastal road in northeastern Syria, where security forces and pro-government gunmen have cracked down on dissent in recent days" ("Syria Uprising Grows as Women, Students, Protest"). Shabaan, who has also been on the lookout for crimes against children in the region, has never protested the targeting of women and children by the regime in Syria.

With her Western education and worldwide recognition and exposure, Shabaan's writings and lectures have been devoted to enlightening the world to violations against children and have even criticized the silence that too often attends these violations. In such provocative titles as "The Day the United Nations Legalized the Killing of Children and Civilians," which was for an article she published in *Asharq al-Awsat* (May 11, 2009), she disparages the failure of the United Nations to take action against those who commit such crimes, as when, on December 27, 2008, they balked in response to children and civilian Palestinians killed in the Gaza war. She laments the Iraqi and Afghani victims killed by white phosphorus bombs. One year earlier, on March 10, 2011, she wrote an article in the same newspaper—syndicated to various Arabic online newspapers—with the title, "The Crime of Silence on Israeli Massacres against Children," in which she denounced the killing of children in an operation launched on February 29, 2011 against Gaza: according to the BBC, 106 Palestinians were killed, 25 of them minors ("Israeli Gaza Operation 'Not Over'"). Shabaan wrote, "I have not read a single statement by any 'civilized' or 'democratic' Western source condemning the killing of these innocent children" ("The Crime of Silence"). Yet, it seems that she herself has become part of the culture of silence while crimes against children continue, as the Syrian regime itself has not spared children in its silencing of citizens.

On April 29, Hamza al-Khatib, a 13-year-old boy from Daraa was arrested; nearly a month later his body was returned to his family horribly mutilated with wounds from gunshots and burns; his genitals were severed. Images of his body went viral on YouTube, outraging millions of Syrians who honored his memory by making him the symbol of their revolution and dedicating the 28th of May as the "Saturday of Hamza Al-Khatib." His cousin told Aljazeera that Hamza's mother was shown only his face. He added, "We tried to tell his father not to look, but he pulled the blanket back. When he saw Hamza's body he fainted" (Macleod and Flamand). Hamza was participating in a protest in his village when gunfire erupted. As his cousin described, "People were killed and wounded, some were arrested. It was [so] chaotic [that] we

did not know at that point what had happened to Hamza. He just disappeared” (Macleod and Flamand).

The “Universal Declaration on Human Rights”—one of many international treaties the Syrian government has violated—announces in Article 5 that “No one shall be subjected to torture or to cruel, inhumane or degrading treatment or punishment”(Nabshah Bālī 212). In fact, on February 13, 1991, the Syrian government signed the Convention on the Rights of the Child (Nabshah 14), which stated that no child shall be subjected to “torture or other cruel, inhumane or degrading treatment or punishment” or “deprived of his or her liberty unlawfully or arbitrarily. The arrest, detention or imprisonment of a child shall be in conformity with the law and shall be used only as a measure of last resort for the shortest appropriate period of time” (Nabshah 296)—a ruling the regime itself has violated indiscriminately for the sake of political consent.

Hamza was not the only child who became a fallen hero during the Syrian revolution. From mid-March to the end of May 2011 at least 25 children under eighteen were killed, according to the Local Coordinating Committees of Syria, as reported by *Guardian* correspondents, Shiv Malik, Ian Black, and Nidaa Hassan in Damascus. The reporters state that the death toll includes “a seven-year-old girl, Majd Ibrahim Airfaee, from Deraa, who was shot in the abdomen on April 26, 2011, and Tamam Hamza Al-Saidawi, age five, from Homs, who was shot dead in the car he was travelling in with his family in a case that has incensed the city” (Malik, Black, and Hassan). The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) found that by December 2, 2011, 307 children had been killed in Syria, with a total of 4,000 people killed and more than 14,000 in detention. The OHCHR accused the regime of committing crimes against humanity including, “acts of killings, torture, rape and other forms of sexual violence, imprisonment, or other forms of severe deprivation of liberty and enforced disappearances throughout the country since March of this year [2011]” (“Statement by UN High Commissioner for Human Rights”). Having passionately written about victims of other conflicts, whether women or children, Shabaan failed to do so when her own people stood waiting for her to acknowledge their victimhood. As someone whose life focus has been praising nonconformity, it is unclear why she overlooked the brave resistance her people demonstrated right in front of her eyes, readily dying for the human values about which she only theorized.

Women have joined men to demand the establishment of a new Syria. Having proved, by joining the revolution, that they cannot be subjugated, these women are exactly the women Shabaan used to praise outside of Syria. They rallied for a political system that respects human rights, meets economic demands, and rejects a ruthless, corrupt regime—one that uses bullets and cannot accept the ballot box. One may wonder whether Shabaan has, instead of honoring her intellectual responsibility, internalized the culture of subordination by following a path of either supporting the regime or remaining silent about its crimes. The position she has taken dashed the hopes of many Syrians, who wished that she would join other intellectuals in support of their cause. Instead, she has empowered the regime, allowing it to continue its killing of dissenting civilians.

Conclusion

The Syrian revolution has established an unprecedented degree of resistance against the regime, and it is still unfolding. Escalating from peaceful demonstrations to a full-blown conflict, the military seems at this point to be aggressively following and targeting the most resilient protesters. Many Syrians feel that the regime should be penalized for the atrocities it has committed while trying, desperately and by all means, to smash the revolution. When tested,

Shabaan could not play a role similar to that of Helen Hunt Jackson, the American writer and activist who wrote articles in newspapers and magazines to genuinely support those persecuted by abusive powers in her own country. In 1881, Jackson published a book entitled *A Century of Dishonor*, awakening the national consciousness to the injustices suffered by Native Americans at the hands of the bigoted US government. Jackson not only used a strong tone of criticism (as the title suggests) against her country's crimes, but went so far as to suggest that the United States was punishable for having "outraged the principles of justice, which are the basis of international law; and having laid ourselves open to the accusation of both cruelty and perfidy" and thus "having made ourselves liable to all punishments which follow upon such sins—to arbitrary punishment at the hands of any civilized nation who might see fit to call us to account, and to that more certain natural punishment" (Jackson 29). In contrast to Jackson's appeal to international law, however, Shabaan considers reversion to international intervention to be a conspiracy against her country—rather than the final recourse for civilians whose positionality vis-à-vis government is life or death. Bringing state regimes to justice for grave violations of human rights has been the proper domain of the international community, which acted, for example, against Muamar Ghaddafi in Libya in addition to NATO's military action against the military of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia from March 24 through June 10, 1999. Speculations about an international intervention in the form of forced protection of Syrian civilians have been made by activists and civilians alike. But if military intervention is controversial in the conflict in Syria, then an intellectual one becomes essential.

Not many Syrians, I suspect, agree with my characterization of Shabaan as someone who has failed as a responsible intellectual. It is clear that the Syrian version of the Arab Spring is very complicated, and those who support the regime, oppose it, or dally in between, have their own plausible reasons to do so. Evidence of the regime's crimes against civilians, their pathetic response to initially peaceful demonstrators—with the world witnessing these grave violations of human rights—leaves no doubt where an independent intellectual should stand and how unacceptable Shabaan's position has been. Shabaan has been much-admired for her compassionate voice, iconic status, and her powers of scrutiny. Perhaps it is time she turned this critical eye on herself and a regime that, anyway, faces unavoidable collapse. If an intellectual has any reason for being in such a place and time as this, it is to renounce self-interest and fear and join the people.

Notes

1. For more on her biography, see Moubayed, Sami M. *Steel & Silk: Men and Women Who Shaped Syria 1900-2000*. 572.

2. See her interview with Nuqtat Tahawal on *Turning Point* on MBC, New York. 31 Mar. 2010. <www.mbc.net/portal/site/MBC-PROGRAMS-PORT>.

3. See more details about her appointment in *Al-Sharq al-Awasat* newspaper. 31 July 2008. <<http://www.aawsat.com/details.asp?section=4&article=480908&issueno=10838>>.

4. Shabaan told the *New York Times* on May 9, 2011: "I think now we've passed the most dangerous moment. I hope so, I think so" (Shadid). Yet, on Friday, 28 October 2011—the day when reports indicated that the regime's security forces opened fire killed thirty Syrians—the British writer and journalist Robert Fisk published his interview with Shabaan who said that she was afraid to go to her hometown.

5. In her Los Angeles lecture, while repeating the same narrative, she claimed that she was not using it as superior, ethnocentric or racist, but to counter the Western attacks that

connect Arabs and “terrorism and backwardness.”

6. For more on the shift of domination over Syria, see Smuin, Benjamin James. “Roots of Domination: Political Institutions and Social Structures in Syria from the French Mandate to Hafiz al-Asad.” *MA Thesis*. U of Utah, 2011.

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