

Adonis the Disingenuous! Youssef Abdelke Deserves the Truth from Adonis and Khalida Said

BY ELIE CHALALA

A great majority of Syrian and Arab intellectuals and artists have rallied to protest the abduction of Youssef Abdelke, one of the best living Syrian artists, whose life could be wasted like many others behind bars until their "natural" death in Syrian prisons. This happened recently to one of Abdelke's friends, Abdel Aziz al-Khair, an opposition figure who was arrested last year, and, according to unconfirmed reports, died or was killed in prison.

Adonis and Khalida Said were among the intellectuals who issued a statement calling for the release of Abdelke. But there is something disconcerting about their statement which appeared in Al Hayat newspaper on July 25th. The statement lacked specificity, direct language and kept the authority responsible for the abduction nameless. Creative ambiguity has become the trademark of Adonis's statements on the Syrian revolution.

Does Adonis really believe or want us to believe that he does not know who abducted Youssef Abdelke in Tartus? The same vagueness surrounds his description of Abdelke's arrest as a "political act" or "practice." This language is disingenuous, to say the least. I agree with Ali Atassi's post on his Facebook that one might give Adonis the benefit of the doubt if Abdelke had been arrested in Al Raqa, Homs or Daraa, which are predominantly pro-opposition. Yet, he was taken in Tartus, a pro-Assad territory.

Even more dismaying is Adonis's "intellectualization" of the abduction, comparing it to the beheading of the statue of the 10th century philosopher and poet Abul Ala al-Maari. This comparison gives the impression that the abduction is an aberration rather than a daily occurrence for the regime. Adonis provides lessons about its significance as if Arabs and Syrian readers do not know enough about the Assad regime's violations of basic human rights.

The cultural and historical spin to Abdelke's arrest is distraction from the real issue: his unlawful abduction. Recalling dark pages of Arab and Islamic history to decipher Abdelke's abduction would be appropriate in most places, but not in Syria where hundreds of thousands have been abducted by the military regime for almost half of a century. Adonis' attitude toward the Assad regime has shattered the expectations of thousands of his readers, who expected a much more humane response to the Syrian "calamity," especially when his position remains at odds with the most respected and legitimate international and human rights organizations.

Adonis and Khalida Said continue to dance around the truth by discussing the difference between arresting a creative person and the defamation of a cultural icon like the statue of Al Mari, offering a commentary on how the arrest dehumanizes man, and how law becomes debased when the creative person is equated with the thief and the criminal. Adonis and Said also are angered by this "political act," despite all the "tragedies and calamities" happening in Syria in the "name of this great country."

Perhaps inadvertently Adonis presents Syria as if it is a pluralist system run by a law-abiding government, and suddenly some type of an anomaly has taken place which necessitates the call upon unspecified authority to find out who unlawfully detained Abdelke. He presents the abduction as an isolated incident, and not part of deadly pattern where hundreds of intellectuals have been and still are being detained in Syria. Even to

Abdelke himself imprisonment is not an anomaly; from 1978 to 1980 Abdelke was arrested along with his wife Hala Abdallah and his sister Sabah Abdelke in what is known as the May 17 Campaign. (The prison experience in the Abdelke family even runs across generations, for Abdelke's father was also imprisoned at an earlier time for political reasons.) Abdelke's 25-year exile in France followed this prison experience. How can it then be that Adonis and Said forget who is in charge in Syria?

For the sake of brevity or political correctness, the statement does not move beyond generalities thus skipping the vital elements of the "calamity." A man of Adonis' stature should be the first to recognize the apocalyptic proportions of the Syrian tragedy rather than hiding in the shadows of words: the war has caused more than 100,000 dead, between five and seven million Syrians forcibly displaced inside and outside Syria, close to 100,000 disappeared, and one-third of the country's physical structures destroyed, historic cities, towns, villages suffered the wrath of all internationally banned weapons, including chemical such as Sarin gas. For a moment, one could mistake Homs for Dresden after WW II. If all these cannot move Adonis to make a more daring statement, what could?

I cautioned earlier against wasting time debating the "Adonisian" thesis that was popularized in Arabic to be a revolution in *Alrou'ous* and not in *al-Kursi*, which roughly means a revolution ought to be in the "heads" of the people and not the "chair," meaning state or regime. I have already suggested that we direct our attention toward the state or the regime, and that Adonis is not and will not be the only intellectual who accommodates or befriends an authoritarian regime. I argued this approach, not a discussion focused on either intellectual issues or his sectarian background. A legitimate inquiry should be directed at Adonis's "soft" position on the Assad regime. This irresolute position on who abducted Abdelke can only be understood in Adonis's hidden sympathy for the Assad regime.

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