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# Without Hassan Abbas, the World Is a Poorer Place

→ Bassma Kodmani



Hassan Abbas



## **Without Hassan Abbas, the world is a poorer place**

It is on purpose that I sidestep my emotions when writing this. I do so in an effort to make this easier for myself and to avoid what follows coming across as a fleeting remembrance or some tiresome duty where I am compelled to write about Hassan Abbas.

I was yet to meet him when I had first heard his students in Europe talk about him with passion. Even years after leaving Syria, they continued to talk about him as they would an eminent Damascene teacher. I first met Hassan in the 1990s at the French Institute of Damascus, and we continued meeting every time I was in Syria or he in France. These meetings culminated in 2005, when I founded the Arab Reform Initiative (ARI) together with my friend and colleague Salam Kawakibi. We both agreed that Hassan's drive and innovative thinking meant that he should be one of our head researchers. I remember how excited and proud I was when he agreed to work with us. He became a regular writer for ARI, and the Citizenship League, a Syrian research institute, has become a lifelong partner in all our projects.

As time passed and with the regular contact, we kept through our work, especially on issues of citizenship. I discovered Hassan's sensitivity to any mention of a person's religious or sectarian leanings, be they Syrian or from any part of the Arab world. I was always apprehensive of his reaction when research dictated that he deal with sectarian issues; for him, this was akin to a complete annulment of the human themselves. He would immediately rectify any related definitions and allusions, considering them to be a dangerous illness to be cured. He did this not in ignorance or denial of the diversity present in Arab societies but rather in service to it.

One day, Hassan suggested to me that ARI could work on a research project for Syria called "the Cultural Map," for which he had done a large portion of the research himself, based on his expansive and detailed knowledge of Syrian history, geography, and cultural heritage. He explained his idea using examples from Damascene suburbs and from a set of villages on the Syrian coast inhabited by Syrian groups from different religious, ethnic, and cultural backgrounds living together harmoniously and sharing produce, in some cases, for over one thousand



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years.

The aim of his project was not only to describe this rare and diverse mosaic. It also relied on explaining the trade and socio-cultural ties that bound these villages together and that are based primarily on economic integration. Hassan's idea aimed to activate this cultural heritage and breathe life into the old relations between these villages, such as trade, as a means to restore post-conflict peace and social integration.

I listened to Hassan's proposal with excitement and proposed it to donors fully confident they would see how important this work is and would fund its implementation. I hoped to help Hassan realize his aspiration not only through developing this Cultural Map but also through crystallizing the original and authentic Syrian reality, a reality often forgotten by the world and by many Syrians themselves. The goal was to establish a forward-looking vision for a society reconciled with itself and for which all its citizens would feel a shared pride in a legacy and heritage of mutual interaction spanning centuries.

Sadly, most of our societies, along with many thought leaders, deal with diversity in two ways: either as a central issue for regulating society and the conduct of Arabs, or a figment of the imagination brought in with colonizers and their politics to tear apart and destroy our societies. In the midst of all of this stood Hassan, opening a new horizon for diversity, a living embodiment of the idea that societal relations between different groups, in Syria specifically, are in themselves a richness to be revitalized, a path towards living together in peace, and the beginning of a social contract embraced by all.

This important project, unfortunately, did not work out due to donors' focus on topical projects with short-term vision. I do not believe they quite understood either the importance of this project or its uniqueness in the Syrian context.

When the revolution broke out, Hassan was just as excited as the young men and women who took to the streets in protest, though he chose rather to quietly continue his work. He was closer to a father figure and spiritual inspiration for new revolutionary thinking, working to develop this thinking from activists' long-term efforts and perseverance. Hassan especially thought of female activists, and many



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women can bear witness to his deep feminism.

Further to all of this, Hassan's words worried me from the first months of the revolution, when he used to say to me, worryingly: "this will take years before we see a true alternative appear, because this alternative doesn't exist now, and it has to grow from within the popular movement." I thought that his predictions for the future came from frustration and I would always try to keep them far from my mind, thinking them to be an obstacle to the work required by all of us in an ever-changing context. Some time later I realized that Hassan had a long-term vision for his project, one he was preparing for by helping foster an authentic revolutionary generation that would carry forth the values and ideas for which the Syrians were taking to the streets. His efforts were focused on stabilizing and consolidating values of democratic thought, this same thought that had been distorted during the first years of the revolution. He was convinced that the resilience Syrians need to confront anti-democracy influences and projects could only be established through clarity of ideas and built on full citizenship.

Gone is this subtle man, who spoke to my very being, who activated forgotten and ignored reservoirs in our political minds. In his absence, life is no longer as rich. It now falls on us, the friends who believed in his ideas, to bear the responsibility to carry them for him and to continue what he began.



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## About the author



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## About Arab Reform Initiative

The Arab Reform Initiative is the leading independent Arab think tank working with expert partners in the Middle East and North Africa and beyond to articulate a home-grown agenda for democratic change. It conducts research and policy analysis and provides a platform for inspirational voices based on the principles of diversity, impartiality and social justice.

- We produce original research informed by local experiences and partner with institutions to achieve impact across the Arab world and globally
- We empower individuals and institutions to develop their own concept of policy solutions
- We mobilize stakeholders to build coalitions for positive change

Our aim is to see vibrant democratic societies emerge and grow in the region.

Founded in 2005, the Arab Reform Initiative is governed by a Plenary of its members and an Executive Committee.

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