

Symposium on
Jurji Zaidan's Contributions to Modern Arab Thought and Literature

Opening Remarks

George C. Zaidan

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Your Excellencies Sameh Shukry, the Ambassador of Egypt, Antoine Chedid, the Ambassador of Lebanon, Aly Augali, the Ambassador of Libya; Dr. Mohammed Al Hussaini Al Sharif, the Ambassador of the League of Arab States; and my good friends Ambassadors Hussein Hassouna and Clovis Maksoud.

Dear Friends,

It is my turn and a pleasure to welcome you all to today's Symposium on *Jurji Zaidan's Contributions to Modern Arab Thought and Literature*. A rich and varied program awaits us, but before we get to it, let me take a few moments and put this Symposium in the context of the broader work of the Zaidan Foundation. The Foundation was established in 2009 to enhance intercultural understanding and bring the thought and literary treasures of Jurji Zaidan to English-speaking readers.

As many of you know, Jurji Zaidan was a leader of the *Nahda* at the end of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. His leadership derived from the many roles he played in that movement—as historian, linguist, novelist, journalist, educator, political scientist, social reformer and much more. We will be evaluating some of these roles later today. And the Foundation is promoting his contributions in many of these areas through the following initiatives:

First, the Foundation has so far sponsored the translation of **five** of his **22** historical novels into English. In the hundred years since they were written almost all these novels were translated into one

or more languages. We discovered more than one hundred translations but surprisingly none into English. Of the five novels we selected, two are set in Spain -- *The Conquest of Andalusia – Fath al-Andalus* -- taking place at the time of the Arab invasion in 711AD, and *The Battle of Poitiers – Charles wa Abdel Rahman* -- some twenty years later, in which Charles Martel was able to thwart the Arab invasion of Europe. Two other novels are set during the Abbasid period. The first -- *The Caliph's Sister* or *Al-Abbasa Ukht al_Rashid* -- is set at the time of Harun al-Rashid at the zenith of the Abbasid Empire. The second -- *The Caliph's Heirs* or *Al-Amin wal Ma'mun* -- describes the war between his two sons that heralded the fragmentation of that Empire. A fifth novel deals with *Saladin and the Assassins*. These novels were translated by eminent literary scholars. Several will be presenting papers later on to review Zaidan's contributions as a historical novelist. All the novels have been published and are available at Amazon.com. I should also mention a sixth translation -- *The Tree of Pearls* or *Shajarat el Durr* -- that will be published by Syracuse University Press in the fall. The five novels that have been published can be viewed in the room next door. There are limited quantities for purchase at a discount.

Second the Foundation is supporting a new study of how Jurji Zaidan's approach to history and the Arabic language shaped his views of Arab nationalism. The author is here with us today—Professor Thomas Philipp, a leading expert on the thought of Zaidan. His forthcoming book is entitled ***Jurji Zaidan and the Foundations of Arab Nationalism***. The book is expected to be published before the hundredth anniversary of Jurji Zaidan's death in 1914. If you want to have a sneak peak, there is an advance copy in the room next door. There is also a flyer describing what the book is all about that you are welcome to take.

The above initiatives leave several “gaps” so to speak in covering some of the areas that Zaidan influenced in important ways – in particular his role as journalist, political scientist, educator and social reformer. The purpose of this Symposium is to cover some of these areas from a variety of different angles. The Proceedings of the Symposium will be published in a volume that will complement his book which I just mentioned. In this way we plan to cover as broad an area as possible of most of Zaidan's contributions.

Also next door we plan to project on the TV screen an Opera on the life of Jurji Zaidan entitled “Hilal Masr”. It was produced in 1992 by the Ministry of Culture in Egypt on the occasion of the hundredth anniversary of the birth of Al-Hilal. This Opera will be projected during the lunch hour.

Let me end on a personal note. I discovered Zaidan as a thinker and novelist late in life. And I was utterly surprised and delighted to realize how much research and study on the *Nahda* and Zaidan was being done in leading Western universities. “Jurji Zaidan” is no household name in the West, the way it is the Arab world, where his novels are still published every few years. But the serious research that is being done on this side of the world about the *Nahda* is no less – and some would say more – than the research that is occurring in the Arab-speaking world. And many representatives of these universities are here today. To take just one example of a scholarly and extensive review of Zaidan’s work, let me mention the 700 plus page book by Anne-Laure Dupont, *Gurji Zaydan (1861-1914): Ecrivain Réformiste et Témoin de la Renaissance Arabe*. It was published in 2006 and a copy can be seen in the room next door. All this research is encouraging, not only in its own right, but also because of its relevance to what is being dubbed as the Arab Spring.

In conclusion, the activities supported by the Foundation could not have come to fruition without the support and dedication of so many people too numerous to mention. But let me single out a few in my closing remarks – the Library of Congress, of course, with its Librarian, Dr. James Billington and those representing him today; as well as Mary-Jane Deeb and her colleagues in the Near East Section of the African and Middle Eastern Division for sponsoring and organizing this Symposium; and for Dr Raja Sidawi for making it possible. To Ambassador Hassouna, a member of our Advisory Council, I owe special thanks for promoting, tirelessly and effectively, the work of the Foundation in so many ways. And also to Ambassador Clovis Maksoud as well as other members of the Advisory Council, many of whom are here with us today. Thomas Philipp supported many of the Foundation’s activities -- contributing so much to the study of Zaidan’s work and helping conceive and design this Symposium. This is also true of the participants to this Symposium for adding their varied and enriching perspectives of Zaidan. Last but not least I owe a special debt of gratitude to my wife, Hada, who had the original idea for several of the works sponsored by the Foundation. She and our son George Jr worked tirelessly in helping me to transform so many ideas into the products you see before you today.

And now on to what promises to be a most stimulating and informative day. Our keynote speaker is Dr. Ismail Serageldin, the Director of the Library of Alexandria an old colleague and friend from the World Bank.

He will be introduced shortly but before he is, let me take a few minutes to tell you about the work of the Library of Alexandria on Dar-al-Hilal. Dr Serageldin spearheaded this work as part of the Memory of Modern Egypt Series which he created. The five year Dar Al-Hilal Documentation project was completed in January 2012, on the occasion of 150 th anniversary of the birth of Jurji Zaidan. The first phase digitized the whole collection of Al-Hilal Magazine. In the second phase, the Catalogue on Dar Al-Hilal Madreset Al-Tanweer or “Dar Al-Hilal: A School of Enlightenment” was published within the Memory of Modern Egypt Series. This major project documenting the history of Egypt in the last 200 years is an additional reason, if any were needed, for Ismail Serageldin to be the ideal keynote speaker to our Symposium today.

Thank you.