

FOUAD AJAMI GOES TO ISRAEL

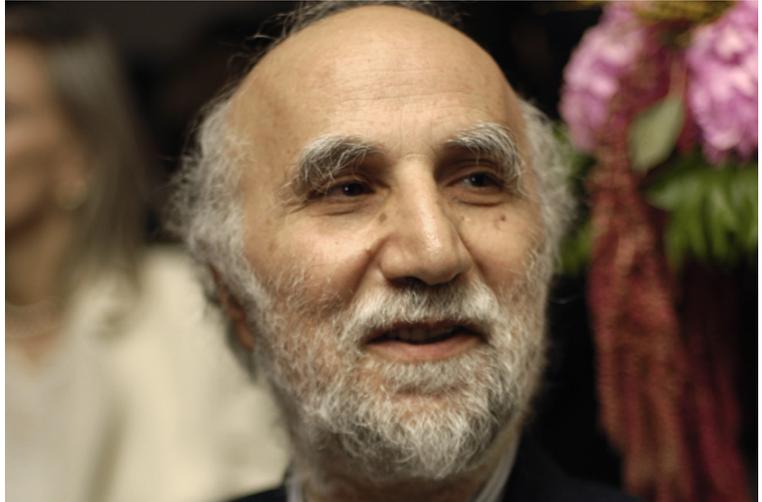
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The Lebanese-born scholar knew more about the Jewish state than any Arab intellectual of his generation.

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“In a curious way, my exposure to Israel was essential to my coming to terms with Arab political life and its material.” —Fouad Ajami

The scholar and public intellectual Fouad Ajami, who was born in Lebanon and died last summer in Maine at the age of sixty-eight, specialized in explaining to Westerners the complex and traumatic encounter of the Arab peoples with modernity. He didn't write much about Israel per se, or claim any unique insights into its complexities. And yet, at a certain point in his life, he decided he would discover Israel for himself—not only by reading and meeting Israelis abroad, but by visiting the place.



Fouad Ajami at a dinner in Toronto in 2010. Photo by Lucas Oleniuk/Toronto Star via Getty Images.

As it happens, I witnessed several of the stages of this discovery, first as his student and later as his friend. Here I want to mark those stages, and then offer some observations on the crucial insight I believe he derived from his quest.

I start with a passage written in 1991:

At night, a searchlight from the Jewish village of Metullah could be seen from the high ridge on which my [own] village lay. The searchlight was a subject of childhood fascination. The searchlight was from the land of the Jews, my grandfather said In the open, barren country, by the border, that land of the Jews could be seen and the chatter of its people heard across the barbed wire.

Fouad's native village, Arnoun in southern Lebanon, stands less than five miles from Metullah, the northernmost point in Israel. The story of his discovery of Israel surely begins with this searchlight, beaming and beckoning across an impenetrable border. From childhood, he would later [recall](#), “I retained within me an unrelenting sense of

curiosity” about the Jewish state.

But the actual discovery began only much later, after Fouad passed through Beirut and came to America. Exactly 40 years ago, in the fall of 1974, I was a Princeton University senior in Fouad’s class, Politics 320, “Modernization in the Middle East and North Africa.” I was twenty, with two years of study in Israel under my belt; Fouad, recently arrived as an assistant professor of politics, was twenty-nine. Richard Falk, who taught international law at Princeton and would later become notorious as an anti-Israel agitator, played some role in bringing him onto the faculty; he has [remembered](#) Fouad as one who “shared a critical outlook on the follies of the American imperial role and felt a deep sympathy for the Palestinian struggles for their place in the sun.” Falk also claims that he introduced Fouad to Edward Said, with whom there was a “rapid bonding.”

Although I place little faith in Richard Falk’s word on anything, I imagine this to be true. Still, I have no personal recollection, from the fall of 1974, of Fouad as a firebrand. In that class there was an Israeli freshman, a twenty-four-year-old artillery captain who had distinguished himself in the October 1973 war and who was the first Israeli officer to go abroad on undergraduate study leave. He later rose to the rank of brigadier general. I can’t be absolutely certain, but he may have been the first Israeli whom Fouad ever encountered.

This young Israeli came right out of central casting—a confident soldier-scholar, not only a sabra but a graduate of Phillips Exeter, the elite New Hampshire boarding school. My vague recollection is that Fouad was fascinated by him, and the class often turned into a back-and-forth between the two of them. When this Israeli was [profiled](#) in Princeton’s alumni weekly, he said of Fouad that “we get along well. Relationships at Princeton are very intellectual.” That same semester, incidentally, some of my Jewish classmates decided to invite Fouad to dinner at the kosher dining facility on campus. I’m sure it was his earliest kosher culinary experience—the first (and quite possibly the worst) of many to come.

After my graduation and a year in New York, I returned to Princeton as a graduate student in 1976. Fouad was still there. He had become a star lecturer, with a huge course in international politics enrolling more than 300 students. In those years, he still wore his Palestinian sympathies on his sleeve. Many will have seen a Youtube [clip](#) from 1978 of an exchange between one Ben Nitay, a twenty-nine-year-old economic consultant known today as Benjamin Netanyahu, and a thirty-three-year-old Fouad in a jet-black beard. In this encounter, which took place a scant two years after the IDF’s dramatic rescue of Jewish hostages held by Palestinian terrorists at Entebbe (an operation in which Jonathan Netanyahu lost his life), Fouad is very much the angry Arab, peppering an unflappable Bibi with aggressive questions about Israel’s policies toward the Palestinians.

In the archives of the *Daily Princetonian*, I find an April 1979 report under this headline: “Politics Professor Informs Precept of PLO Invitation to Visit Lebanon.”

According to a student cited in the report, Ajami “told us that Yasir Arafat had invited him and six students to come visit him.” According to another student, Ajami “said jokingly the reason he had received the invitation was because he had spoken out for the PLO in the past, and they hoped he would do so again.”

That Fouad might have thought to visit Beirut, where he himself grew to manhood, on an invitation from the PLO, speaks of another time and a different Fouad. It’s usually said that he broke with the Palestinians over the PLO’s abuse of the Shiites of his native Lebanon, especially in the lead-up to Israel’s 1982 invasion. But the shift was probably expedited by his move from Princeton to the School of Advanced International Studies at Johns Hopkins, and his engagement with the *New Republic*, especially its owner Martin Peretz and its literary editor Leon Wieseltier, and subsequently with Mortimer Zuckerman, publisher of the *Atlantic* and *U.S. News & World Report*.

Among American Jews, Fouad found the kind of free-wheeling, serious intellectual camaraderie that the Arab-American community, then and now, simply couldn’t sustain. Israel would not have been the cause of his being drawn into this world, but there he would have been challenged to test his second-hand notions of Israel against the reality.

And so he did test them. Fouad paid his first visit in 1980, crossing from Jordan over the Allenby Bridge. “It would have been too brave, too forthright to fly into Israel,” he later wrote. “I covered up my first passage by pretending that I had come to the West Bank. . . . Venturing there (even with an American passport) still had the feel of something illicit about it.”

From then on, he began to pay fairly regular visits, and to fly directly. Because I’d been his student, and we could pick each other out in a crowd, I volunteered for the pleasant task of meeting him when he landed at Ben-Gurion airport. Although an American citizen, he had been born in an enemy country, and his Israeli friends wanted to spare him any indignity or delay at the airport. So I would greet him before he entered passport control. Then we would take a seat while border officials scrutinized his papers. Once he’d been cleared, we would claim his bags, and I’d drive him to his hotel. By the end of this ritual, we’d have caught each other up on our news, and I would know what he was hoping to do on this trip.

Here is Fouad’s 1991 [description](#) of these visits:

I knew a good many of the country’s academics and journalists. I had met them in America, and they were eager to tutor me about their country. Gradually the country opened to me. I didn’t know Hebrew; there was only so much of Israeli life that was accessible to me. But the culture of its universities, the intensity of its intellectual debates would soon strip me of the nervousness with which I had

initially approached the place. The Palestinian story was not mine. I could thus see Israel on its own terms. I was free to take in the world that the Zionist project had brought forth. Above all, I think I had wanted to understand and interpret Arab society without the great alibi that Israel had become for every Arab failing under the sun. In a curious way, my exposure to Israel was essential to my coming to terms with Arab political life and its material.

The visits were personal, and Fouad usually came alone. He didn't participate in conferences, deliver lectures, or grant interviews. He did want to meet public figures; my colleague Itamar Rabinovich arranged most of those meetings. I have a clear memory of a Sabbath lunch hosted by Itamar at his apartment so that Fouad could meet Yitzhak Rabin, then out of government; I'm sure Itamar made many more such introductions. On another occasion, in the mid-1990s, I went through a former student to set up a meeting for Fouad with Benjamin Netanyahu, then in his first term as prime minister.

I never heard Fouad boast of these meetings, and of course we would never spread word of them. He wasn't collecting trophies. He wanted to learn what made the country's leaders tick. But he valued no less highly his meetings with intellectuals. He felt an especially deep affinity with the political analyst Meron Benvenisti, a former deputy mayor of Jerusalem and vocal advocate of binationalism, whose almost tragic complexity fascinated him.

On weekends, he was sometimes free. I remember Fouad coming to my home for a Sabbath lunch, and a walk we took to a nearby moshav, a kind of collective farm. He loved the rustic houses, the idling tractors, the scent of freshly turned earth, the dogs lazing in the road—all reminded him powerfully of his native village, and he shared some stories of a distant childhood. On the way back we entered a military cemetery, and I read him some of the tombstones, explaining how each war came to have its official name. He was thoughtfully silent.

Back in America, Fouad generally steered clear of appearances before the bevy of organizations that support Israel. He had made an exception in 1992, when he allowed friends to "draft" him (his word) to [speak](#) at a New York fundraiser for the Jerusalem Foundation, alongside Dan Rather and Henry Kissinger. The Arabic press was all over him, and friends learned not to ask this sort of favor again. But two years ago, when the American Friends of Tel Aviv University put on a gala dinner in New York to honor his and my mentor Bernard Lewis, Fouad did [speak](#), with humor and emotion. For Bernard, Fouad would do anything—another large story. But he also nodded toward Tel Aviv University, and his statement of friendship is very much worth having in these days of academic-boycott resolutions by bigoted people whose knowledge of Israel and Israeli universities is as nothing compared with his.

Fouad also welcomed publication of his books in Hebrew. Four appeared, in a curious order. First was *The Vanished Imam*, on the political awakening of Lebanon's Shiites, rushed to translation in 1988 when Israel was facing a Shiite insurgency in Lebanon's

south. Then came *The Dream Palace of the Arabs*; only after that, its predecessor *The Arab Predicament*, a full two decades after its original publication; and finally, in 2012, *The Syrian Rebellion*.

What did Fouad take away from his forays of discovery? Much of what's said on this subject misses the point—a failure exemplified by the absurd claim, made in an old [hit piece](#) in the *Nation*, that he “became an ardent Zionist” and even underwent a “Likudnik conversion.” Far from it. Fouad was one of those—and I would include among them the late, great Jewish scholar Elie Kedourie—who began as naysayers but reconciled themselves to Israel because it had become, in Kedourie's words, a “going concern.” Or, as Fouad [put it](#), “the state that had fought its way into the world in 1948 is there to stay.” Fouad wasn't an “ardent Zionist”—and believe me, I know us when I see us. He was a hard-bitten realist who believed that the dreamy denial of Israel's permanence was crippling the Arabs.

Fouad accused Arab elites, and especially Arab intellectuals, of failing in their most critical responsibility: to grasp the power of Zionism and later Israel, and so pursue an urgent accommodation with the new reality. Instead they had done the opposite, feeding Palestinian refugees and Arab publics with the cruel illusion that history could be undone.

Again and again, Fouad would return to the phrases “history's verdict” and “harsh truths.” “It would have been the humane thing,” he [wrote](#), “to tell the [Palestinian] refugees that huge historical verdicts are never overturned. But it was safer to offer a steady diet of evasion and escapism.” And [this](#): “Ever since the Palestinians had taken to the road after 1948, that population had never been given the gift of political truth. Zionism had built a whole, new world west of the Jordan River, but Palestinian nationalism had insisted that all this could be undone.” And [this](#): “Arafat refrained from telling the Palestinians the harsh truths they needed to hear about the urgency of practicality and compromise. . . . He peddled the dream that history's verdict could be overturned, that the ‘right of return’ was theirs.” In short, Arab rejection of Israel had been predicated either on willful ignorance or a lie.

Fouad taught himself more about Israel than any Arab intellectual of his generation. He knew its flaws and faults, but he also understood its virtues and strengths. “On a barren, small piece of land,” he [wrote](#),

the Zionists built a durable state. It was military but not militaristic. It took in waves of refugees and refashioned them into citizens. It had room for faith but remained a secular enterprise. Under conditions of a long siege, it maintained a deep and abiding democratic ethos. The Arabs could have learned from this experiment, but they drew back in horror.

“The Arabs could have learned from this experiment”— in that sentence, Fouad

suggested the ultimate purpose of his quest. It wasn't to ingratiate himself with the American Jewish establishment, as his critics charged. It was to break down the wall the Arabs thought they had erected around Israel, but in truth had erected around themselves.

By a circuitous route, Fouad traced that beam of light he first glimpsed shining across the night sky from the far northern edge of Israel back to its very source. Yes, he told truths about the Arabs to America. But perhaps his greater legacy will prove to be the truths he told about Israel to the Arabs.

A somewhat different version of this essay was delivered as an address at a [memorial](#) to Fouad Ajami at the Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies on November 12, 2014.