Transcript

Speaker 1

good evening everyone and welcome. Thank you very much for coming this evening. For those who don't know me, I'm Michael Willis. I'm one of the fellows here at the Middle East Centre and I'm delighted to introduce you to the Thursday seminar series lecture for the 5th week of Michaelmas term. And I'm very pleased to say that we will be bringing our focus this evening to look at the Maghreb and of the subject of intellectual history. Now, our speaker tonight is Doctor Idris Jabbari. Doctor Jabbari is an Assistant Professor of Near Middle Eastern Studies at Trinity College in Dublin. Well, I think one of the few visitors who actually comes from the West, coming in from further out. He specializes on Arab intellectual history, particularly on the Maghreb, the subject he has written and widely published on. Born in Morocco, he studied in Geneva and London, but really saved for best to last by studying for his DPhil right here at St Anthmes College, which he successfully completed in 2016. So we're welcoming back a dear friend and colleague as well. Before taking up his post at Trinity College, he taught at Bowdoin University in the United States and also has spent time at the American University of Beirut and the Arab Council for Social Sciences in Lebanon. Now, Dr. Jabari is here this evening to really talk about his wonderful new book, Leaping Decolonisation, North Africa in the Global 60s and 70s. Now, I should really let Idris introduce you to his book, but I really can't resist the temptation of telling you how much I enjoyed it and really how good it really is and how much I appreciate it. I particularly appreciate how well and persuasively it makes the case for the contribution thinkers from the Maghreb region have made, not just individually, and this is something that Idris goes on to speak, not just individually, but collectively from a region to the thought. And in fact, I was mentioned to him as I read the book, I was rather, one thing I didn't enjoy and was slightly horrified by was that none other than the venerable founder of the Middle East centre, Albert Hourani, had been really quite dismissive of thinkers from the Maghreb region, characterizing them as either derivative of Arab reformists from the Mashreq or as simply the product of French colonialism. Now, Idris's book is very much a reposter this and a very welcome one, and indeed explicitly states that he seeks, as one of the objectives of a book, to restore the significance of North Africa as a space of intellectual production. Another thing I really would like to say I really appreciate was the focus on the period of, it says the 1960s and the 70s, but actually you talk a lot about the 80s as well. So really it is about 3 decades. And whereas I think quite a lot has been written on the 1960s, I often think of the 1970s and the 1980s as the sort of forgotten decades. but really haven't really been researched within quite the detail. I think there's an absolute treasure trove of information and things that are available. And I would really encourage anybody who's

wanting to do research to look at these two decades in which a lot of really very interesting things are happening. But I've already trespassed on Idris's time and he needs to talk about his book. You didn't come to hear me talk about the book. You heard about Idris to talk about his book. Idris Jabari. Thank you.

Speaker 2

Thank you, Michael, and thank you to all of you for coming here. I'll start with two general remarks that don't really have to do with this. It's about 10 years ago that I was here with my family for my graduation ceremony, which I just remembered the other day, and I was quite emotional remembering that day, but also The Friday seminars, when they were held, was my introduction to the vibrancy of research on the Middle East, and to be myself here in a different room, because when I began in 2011, we used to hold them in the old building, and we were all cramped, and we used to get seats at the high table dinner if we helped arrange the tables and the chairs. But to be here on the other side in this wonderful building, which I saw in the last few years of my PhD, is an incredible honor, and seeing some familiar faces. So that's maybe all the emotion that I'm going to allow myself to save some time here. I want to start by setting the scene because in June 1962 in the streets of Algiers, we witnessed a collective outburst of euphoria because the country had finally succeeded in achieving its independence by repudiating French colonialism. In so doing, the Algerians may have completed North African liberation because Morocco and Tunisia became independent in 1956. The Three Flags could now hang, float proudly alongside those of other liberated nations from across the global South, thus setting them up to a new phase of their history. This heroic narrative opens up one big question. Namely, was that day in Algiers that was celebrating here closing the episode, closing the journey of decolonization in North Africa? To those who equate political independence with decolonization, the answer is yes. 1962 was the end of a journey that began roughly in the interwar years when nationalist parties were formed in order to start demanding political rights. and the end of subjugation under French colonialism, national sovereignty, and statehood. After all, French colonialism had been the source of their subjugation, so naturally bringing it to an end would also bring to an end the journey of decolonization. 1962, according to this logic, would open Algeria and North Africa to one another stage of their history with other battles, but these would be waged by the national states of the region. However, there are other historians increasingly that take a broader view of what decolonization consisted of. For example, the great historian Frederick Cooper reminds us that decolonization was neither a single story nor a linear story, more of a process than a specific moment like the one pictured here. Increasingly, historians are viewing this decolonization as a process leading to the reversal of the effects of colonialism. It was about forming, imagining and forming alternative political imaginations, solidarities, communities, and working towards a larger goal, which is that of economic and social emancipation and a different kind of political justice, not only national

sovereignty. And therefore, for this reason, it remains pending even after independence and deserves to be studied. And in fact, bringing up the question of area studies in the building where we are, very recently, the historians Siris Shair and Yoav de Kapua argued that a new innovative view of decolonization oftentimes came from area studies, and in this case, Middle Eastern studies. And I refer here to a roundtable that was put together for IGMIS in 2020 asking a simple question, why decolonization? And they answered that, and I quote, this constructive revolutionary endeavor can help, on the one hand, better situate the Middle East and North Africa alongside other experiences, so moving out of this seclusion that we often find ourselves in. But also that decolonization opens the door to understanding a series of multilingual and transnational webs of practices and meanings. In other words, studying decolonization in the Middle East and North Africa allows us to locate these fascinating efforts to construct what probably Yoav de Kapua titled a new collective ontology, a political thought about life, dignity, identity that continues to shape our identity to this day, making the study of decolonization not just interesting, but I believe fascinating in the present. In Leaping Decolonization, the book that I'm very excited and happy to be here to present today, I build on these two imperatives in order to reconstruct and tell the intellectual history of decolonization in North Africa as it took place in the 60s and 70s and therefore after the moment of independence. And I found the material and the traces to be able to tell this history in the secondhand bookstores of the region as a starting point. This is a bookstore in downtown Tunis, quite legendary for those who've been there, sometimes in quite a chaotic space. And you can stumble across these areas. And I can probably tell the whole history of this project building on the archive, but I'd be very happy to deal with that and the methodology of working on periodicals in the questions and answers part. Suffice to say here that these paper trail, these paper traces, gave me an entry point into a very rich infrastructure of publishing and a whole range of people who comprise the intellectual community behind them, writers, readers, and everyone associated, allowing me to tell a different kind of history of North African ideas and decolonization than the one we're most familiar with. What I wish to focus on today is the substance of these papers, because in the pages of these periodicals that we inherit through multiple forms, be they regular periodicals or critical essays, I found that their authors were crafting visions of the future for the nation. They had inherited, on the one hand, a certain vision of what this future would look like, what the historian Omni El-Shakri called the social scientific program. In her case, it was developed in the Egyptian context, whereby the nationalist elites in Egypt were drawing on British colonial structures of knowledge production to propose what she calls a set of reforms based on the principle of the educability of the colonized subject, These ideas went on to inspire Egypt's state modernization project, even under Nasser. And so too in North Africa, these nationalists after independence had inherited a set of reforms that they wished to put in place as the basis of the national project after independence. But these policies were oftentimes devised and inspired by French colonialism. In

contrast, in the pages of these periodicals from the 60s and 70s, I discovered very ambitious attempts to think beyond the terms of the French colonial administration. By focusing on these imaginations as they were contained in the periodicals, we could perhaps tap into what Shea and de Capua called this new collective ontology that forms the imagination of decolonization in North Africa. My main claim in this book is that North Africa's intellectual decolonization was a project destined to overcome a certain inferiority complex that was instilled in the colonial period and that had manifested itself in this phrase, this anxiety of being historically delayed. Historically delayed in relation to a history of progress and modernity which allowed me to properly theorize or understand in light of the writing of Frantz Fanon, the famous theoreticians of colonialism, who had famously described how the colonized subjects oftentimes internalize the violence of colonial policies, whether it be in the economic realm, but also racial discrimination. and the inculcation of a sort of education culture for this native that will go on to be the elite of their country. And then this culture inculcating the idea that Western culture was superior to the native's culture and that ultimately this justifies their subjugation. So all of that is part of the anxiety and the colonial complex. And then using, in particular, the third of Frans Fanon's major works on the Algerian Revolution, studying how this complex oftentimes evolves into an anxiety over being historically delayed. And so what I hope to bring in the rest of today's presentation, building on the book, is to explore the residues and the efforts by this generation of North African intellectuals after independence to confront and perhaps overcome this sense of being historically delayed that we can oftentimes trace back to the period of colonialism. And this story is told really in terms of two big leaps, hence the title of the book. Two generations, each one corresponding to a different way of thinking about historical delay, The first one, the first generation of the 60s, being anxious to leap into the future, whereas the second generation that my book is concerned with in the 70s, a generation that instead wanted to leap away from Western modernity. And I'll go over what that means in practice. I'll start with a question. What does Ahmed bin Salah, Mahdi bin Barqa, and Ahmed bin Mamalla have in common? Aside from all three being the sons of, all three represent what the Egyptian historian of ideas and what Abdul Malik has called the national literist figures in contemporary Arab thought. Those he referred to as a generation of progressive, action-oriented thinkers who emerged oftentimes on the left wing of their respective nationalist movements, and then oftentimes took over the reins of power in the early 60s. The period lasts between 3 to 8 years in the 60s, and then we see each of these figures being involved in devising a policy for national development. The third common aspect between these three figures is they're oftentimes informing a certain melancholic views amongst progressives or Arab leftists. Through them, we wonder What could have been, what would have been the fate of socialism in North Africa and the Arab region had they been allowed to complete their mission and not interrupted after a couple of years. But in my book, I also treat them as exemplars of a certain type of thinking about national development,

specifically around the two notions of historical delay and visions of the future in North Africa. Because what they also had in common is that they each adopted a plan for national development, a very ambitious development plan that was very explicit in its goals to absorb the historical delay they had accumulated over the period of French colonialism. And paradoxically, what we find is that the very plans that they hoped would ascertain and complete their political dependence, reaffirmed and reinforced their intellectual dependence that they were working to consolidate. And what do I mean by this? For starters, all three plans and all three leaders and the intellectual elite around them believed in the power of state planification. By state planification, I mean the practice of setting very ambitious development goals backed by scientific decision making with tools that included quantification, surveys, questionnaires, and so and so on. Each of these three plans passed in the early 1960s promised that within the space of a decade, these countries would have taken off, taken a leap. And we can put that in comparison with other historical experiences across the Global South that used very similar imagery at the time. The key element that would make this possible is the role of the state. The state will be the principal actor in the radical transformation after independence and therefore they would fulfill the promise of independence. The second feature of this kind of thinking of the 1960s generation is that transformation had to be total and brutal. In these plans, society and the economy have to be changed The population has to be transformed for them to become modern. And specifically, I started to see tradition being portrayed as the enemy, something that was a sign of backwardness that reminded these leaders of why they became colonized in the 1st place, and something that in sometimes literal circumstances had to be bulldozed over for the new to emerge. And within that kind of elements of language that permeate whether the text themselves or the communication around it, I could tell that the leadership's anxiety about historical delay was still very present, yet despite the fact that they were putting in place these very ambitious programs. One example that I discuss in the book comes from chapter one and has to do with the realm of education and cultural policy in Algeria. I retrace how various party ideologues of the FLN are competing over who will be the one in charge of devising the state's cultural policy. And while they tended to disagree on some elements, Arabization or not, one thing they all had in common is they viewed the state as the main actor that was in charge of leading a radical transformation. And this radical transformation through the state and spreading of mass education for the rest of society would allow them to overcome the backwardness of having an uneducated population. In fact, one of the figures in my story who called for a more patient reform, a more in-depth study of the curriculum and the overall philosophy of the Algerian cultural renaissance, well, he was pushed out of the structures of power, Malik Ben-Nabi. In the realm of the economy, in my second chapter, there was a similar urge to plan, to modernize and to transform in the 1960s. Here I explore the thinking on rural reform and industrialization in Morocco and Tunisia as it was present in these two plans here. And despite the fact that we're talking about

two different countries and different contexts, The 2 operated on very similar conceptual bases, namely, we need to transform fast so that we could leap into the future. Where the story becomes more interesting is that by following the infrastructure of publishing and the connections between some of these figures I've just mentioned and other publications they made around the same time, we stumble across a global network of development experts that connected these new independent nations with development experts in France, in Paris in particular, a number of figures that had been involved in, that were former agents of colonialism and knowledge production in some cases like Jacques Berk, but also global development experts such as Jean Dresch, Rene Dumont, Gerard de Bernice, all these figures that it would not be too exaggerated to say, we're devising development recipes that were then applied by some of these socialist leaders on the ground that were imagined and devised for the whole global S rather than specifically the circumstances in North Africa. So all of this was telling me about a certain connection between these figures And then the task of imagining independence and decolonization was still being passed on and not imagined locally, alongside this rush to modernize. The experience of the 1960s was marked by confidence, even in some cases arrogance towards those who resisted the type of vision promoted by these national development plans. And in the case of some of these leaders, it translated into obstination towards those who rose in opposition to them in the 1960s. In fact, I think these two features of intellectual dependency and a certain arrogance of transformation is what contributed to bring an end to this vision of decolonization as a leap by the end of the 1960s. The Moroccan socialists were the first to be pushed out of power between 1961 and 1962. Bembela and his allies, such as Mohamed Harbi, were pushed out of power in 1965 by Boumoudian, who maintained some of their reforms but toned them down to a significant extent. And then it was Ben Salah in Tunisia who lasted up until 1969, 1970. And some specialists of North African history present here in the room might argue that the exit of the progressive national literists may have been due to specific historical circumstances and not necessarily about the type of thinking that they were advancing in their national development programs. But there was something very telling to me in the three contexts about the source of opposition, the source it took, and the cause of their downfall. And let me explain by looking specifically at the case of Tunisia, where both peasants in the collective farms, the farms that were put place in order to pool resources and to be able to finance the country's mass-scale industrialization. So those peasants, and then the university students, those who were progressive and supposedly most allied and aligned with the vision of transformation promoted by Distorian socialism and Ben-Salach, those were the most visible and vocal source of opposition to Distorian socialism. And to me, the fact that opposition came from progressives and not conservatives in Tunisia told me that there was a certain disaffection that came from the traditional allies of these projects of national development. There was something about the failure to imagine alternatives, to propose truly utopic alternatives after

independence that quickly meant the progressives didn't support or come to support these projects. And so by the late 1960s, we start to see the end of this iteration of decolonization, decolonization as a mass scale leap that promised a total transformation in North Africa after independence. But in a remarkable twist of events, it was actually the successors of the first generation those who came to age in the 1970s that may have taken the project of decolonization to a more radical and some could say revolutionary conclusion, changing their view along the way on what needed to be decolonized. Let me bring the story a bit closer to where we are here. There was a rainy afternoon where I was a doctoral student in the old library building where I came across a shelf It contained, not too far from each other, two books, Abdullah Al-Arwi's La Khiz's Intellectual Arab and Hisham Jait's La Personalite Arabu Islamic, two books that would accompany me throughout the rest of my time here. Both were published in 1974. They offered extremely powerful and evocative critiques, very prescient critiques of Arab thought. They were products of the post-1967 critical renewal after the Arab defeat, and they were sitting on the same shelf as other similar books such as Salih Jalal al-Azm, Nawal Saidawi, or Suzanne Kassab's overview of this critical moment. So one could read them as part of that kind of conversation. But to me, these books told me more about the trajectory of ideas in the Maghreb itself after independence. And I would discover afterwards, specifically by positioning them in the periodicals, that they were merely the flowers blooming in a very rich ecosystem of ideas in the 1960s and the 70s in North Africa, a period that was widely remembered as a cultural golden age, but also a moment when North Africa and its intellectual figures were profoundly connected with other global locations at the time, Paris, Cairo, Beirut, and even California, through the connections they made possible with periodicals. What brought all of this intellectual production and these two books together in the 70s, I contend, and I want to show you their faces because I ended up writing my D-Phil on the two figures and living with them for a number of years. So here we have Abdullah Ardoui on the left and Hisham Jayat on the right. What brought all this intellectual production together is their attempt to reactivate the process of intellectual decolonization. And what do I mean by that? It was an attempt to think their future themselves, rather than continue relying on the imagination of others, to no longer continue on the path of national development that was traced by colonial or development experts and increasingly turning their ire towards French Orientalists, those who proved to be ever present even after independence in the 1960s. And so what I claim in the second part of the book, starting from chapter 3 and 4, is that the 70s generation was able to identify much better than their predecessors where the feelings of historical delay were located, and in some cases, to be able to even uproot them. And the idea of tradition is really the anchor in the story here. Tradition was an object of significant contradiction. So some it was a sign of backwardness, as I discussed in the 1960s. To others, it was an object, a reified object of authentic culture. But on the whole, I found that it was an unthought object, to use the expression of Muhammad Arkoon. It was complex, it

wasn't at the heart of conversations, and yet it was, in my view, at the heart of the Maghreb's inability to think its own future. I followed Laroui and Jahid once more. In the late 1960s, these two young historians come back, sorry, in the 1950s they come back home. They're unable to really settle in their home countries after independence, and by the late 60s they set off to Paris and to California as well. They didn't know each other, but at the end of the decade they ended up targeting the same kind of, they set their sights on French Orientalism, the discipline of knowledge production about Arab and Islamic cultures and societies that covered for a long while North Africa. And I ended up finding out that the two of them met at the famous conference of Louvain in 1970s, convened again by our friend Anwar Abdul-Malik, where their critiques of French Orientalism sharpened even more. And they each started in the periodicals targeting specific figures of the field, Gustav von Gronnebaum, Louis Massignon, where they believed that ideas of civilization decadence and cultural inferiority was baked into the discipline that they relied so much for self-understanding. But neither Laroui nor Jait was able to really name and identify the process through which the process lived on after independence. And for that, I rely on another text, a very famous text on the critique of Orientalist by Anwar Abdul Malik, who refers specifically to the figure of Jacques Berque, pictured here on the left, the neo-Orientalist, as he calls him, who was in North Africa the father of sociology, who had trained a generation of independent sociologists and advised national development, as we saw in the previous colloquium on agrarian reform. He was also one of those figures we find by reading further in the text who kept the object of tradition out of reach of this new generation in the 60s, because it was being thought and legitimized elsewhere. And so to decolonize for Larui and Jayet, North Africans had to reclaim the means of self-representation, starting from the object of tradition itself that had to be thought. And I was fascinated by the journey of these historians and sociologists in the 70s who had picked up from their predecessors in the 1970s their predecessors, excuse me, the socialist leaders of the 60s, and set their sights elsewhere, not on the need to modernize and build roads and schools and dams and so on, but to better understand themselves, to view their society as an object that needed not to be transformed, but as an object that needed first of all to be understood. To be able to understand this journey, and tell its history, I felt we needed to change our level of analysis and look at how the work was being carried out on the ground in specific locations. And so the book finishes with two chapters, each one dealing with a different sociology department in the region. Those I call the laboratories of decolonization in Tunis and in Rabat. In these locations and their respective periodicals, I was able to observe this conscious desire on the part of sociologists who had grown in the 60s and matured in the 70s to reacquaint themselves with the societies they had worked so hard to try to transform. In practice, that meant that in their text they abandoned certain normative binaries such as tradition, modernity, backwardness and progress, and they started to observe cultural nuances and give more space to cultural hybridity. Two portraits in particular struck me that I

wish to spend some time on here. In Tunis, the sociologist Lilia bin Salem was a leading figure of her center's cultural term, meaning abandoning the survey methodology to pay more attention to cultural traditions and what they meant. In the late 60s, she had surveyed 837 hotel employees in the region of Cabon, the tourism sector between Hamamet and Nebel, where the children of the peasants of the interior had oftentimes become the employees of the tourism sector. At first in the 60s, those were the people that were being touted for being the future modern subjects. Could they be educated? Could they acquire new values to become modern and lead the charge afterwards? In the 1960s, because there were two studies, Ben Salem noted that these employees were attracted to the possibility of clean jobs, working alongside Western tourists, leaving the field and the workshop. But in the 1970s, she returned to the same place. And she changes the way that she talks about those very workers and reaches different conclusions. Yes, there were Westernizing in certain elements and certain dimensions, but there were also developing ambivalent conduct towards tourists, taking on certain elements, certain social cultural traits and consumption habits, but doing so consciously and selectively rather than being taken over by this wave of modernization. In other words, for her, they were hybrid Tunisian subjects. And then my favorite, I have to admit, Fatima Barnisi, who drew a fascinating portrait of Zor, a domestic worker, or a khaddama as they are known in Moroccan Darija, for this magazine called LSS in the early 1980s. To understand, to put this into context, there were thousands, if not 10s of thousands of domestic workers in the Moroccan capital. oftentimes the children of peasants who were oftentimes overlooked in public and scholarly discourse because their condition was shameful. Manisi's peers preferred to study the modern middle class, the modern woman, giving another image of the country to foreign audiences still connected to this idea of the anxiety and colonial inferiority complex. But Menisi's focus on the domestic worker in Rabat, Zohor, raised significant unique insights on space, class, and gender. But what struck me the most about this particular portrait is how Menisi didn't talk about Zohor, but she engaged with her, identifying her as a fully rounded character, not a faceless remnant of traditional of traditional conduct and highlighting the choices she made as she navigated her world. So for example, Zahol was uneducated and oftentimes wears her traditional jalaba to work, but she also spends her Sunday dressed in the European style after doing her hair. She speaks of her love of cinema her desire to learn French, to make a decent living as a seamstress. On her days off, she goes to the beach, and she hides her condition to her male suitor, a civil servant, by pretending that she is, in fact, a seamstress, all while projecting an alternative life surrounded by those she calls educated people rather than the illiterate like me. And so in Mornisi's gaze in the periodicals, Hor is a fully rounded character. She disrupts the categories of tradition and modern, those that were oftentimes imposed from the outside to make sense of Moroccan society. These 2 examples allow me to reach a few conclusions about the goals and the outcomes of intellectual production in the 70s. First of all, it revealed a desire to move away, to leap away from the

frameworks that no longer worked, perhaps never did, to explain North African society by those who were able to craft the tools to get there. They often did so by reacquainting themselves with this society, returning to engage with those that made the social fabric. In so doing, they could alleviate this sense of historical delay. They were not delayed. They were not in transition towards anything. They were evolving and their society was made of a series of complex hybrid plural individuals who lived within their time and made choices informed by their ambitions and their possibilities. And thinking society along these new terms would be for them a more efficient entry point into discussions about what the sources of oppression were. So returning again to this process of decolonization, What were the means of emancipation that were needed in North Africa after independence? And to me, that was the essence of the process of intellectual decolonization. It illustrated the benefits of mining these periodicals, not simply to add a couple of figures to the canon with undiscovered social theorists, but to retrace the process through which they crafted these tools of understanding. especially as these periodicals were available to mine for today. Which brings me to the third leap. I began by saying there were two leaps in the book, and along the way I discovered there was actually a third leap. And I want to turn to some closing thoughts on the lessons that can be reached by these periodicals and North Africa's intellectual decolonization by bringing myself apologies again into the story, as it sheds light on the moment when I was closing or writing the ending of this book here. After completing my DPhil in 2016, I headed over to Beirut, where I began A postdoctoral fellowship at the American University of Beirut, thanks to the Arab Council for the Social Sciences. And my intention in going there in the 1st place is to try to understand what made Beirut as an Arab intellectual milieu after 67. And also to study the dynamics of intellectual circulation between the Maghreb and the Mashreq in periodicals such as Al-Mustaq Bal-aravi. And I initially had a couple of difficulties getting into Beirut, as Eugene will remember. The underlying goal of this work was to challenge the view that the Maghreb represented an intellectual periphery of the Arab space of ideas. A view, as Michael reminded us earlier goes back to the Nada, how the Nada's narrative was written that we owe to the founder of this fantastic center, Albert Hourani. Drawing on the possibilities of the global turn in intellectual history, Samuel Moyn, Andrew Sartori, and so on, there was an opportunity to reappraise the region of North Africa, to locate it amongst different kind of geographical belongings and connections. And in fact, I'm very happy to report that since then, the last 10 years, scholars have highlighted the centrality of Moroccan figures in the broader frame of Arab thought, such as Mohamed Abdel-Jebri, transnational connections of cultural activists from North Africa to elsewhere, writers across the global S, especially on the African sub-Saharan continent, and the multiple ways through which North African writers have experimented, innovated, appropriated the languages in which they write, and produce ideas and text, French, Arabic, Amazigh, Spanish, et cetera, et cetera. So the idea of the need to prove North Africa's belonging and contribution to a global space of ideas isn't

as needed as one once thought. Perhaps I can add a contribution to this conversation here, as I contend in the book, what made North Africa distinctive in this global geography of ideas was its roots towards decolonization. Perhaps North Africa can teach other parts of the world the benefits of reappropriating the means of self-definition. But as I began to worry about the end goal of wanting to demonstrate or prove that North Africa had contributed to a global conversation, I started to get worried. If the goal was simply to excavate and show like in a museum, perhaps my intention was driven by a similar anxiety, an inferiority complex as the one that I found in the figures of the 1960s. who also wanted to show that they could modernize. And luckily, I found the afterlife of this project going in a different direction in the second-half of my stay in Beirut in 2017. I briefly worked for the ACSS as a program officer on the Arab humanities, a fantastic institution, by the way, that plays an essential role in supporting knowledge production in the Arab region. For under two years, I saw how from Beirut, the ACSS were contributing to these goals, putting the questions of my research and my book in contrast with their present day urgency and requirements. And oftentimes on their biannual big conference, such as the one pictured here, there was a large group of grantees that came together in many ways, putting me in a conversation with those I considered to be the descendants of the people I studied in my book. The ACSS conference brought two types of grantees together. Arabs in the diaspora who were studying in wonderful places such as the University of Oxford, but also those living, working and studying in the Arab region itself. And on the first opportunities I got to sit down and meet with them and share research, I was curious to see if my colleagues from Warren, and so on, how they were dealing with the legacy of the periodicals that had inspired me so much, the periodicals of decolonization that I spent years reading to write this book. And I was struck by the fact that decolonization seemed like a very distant concern from theirs. Humanities, social sciences, knowledge production in the Arab region today is in a genuine state of crisis. It's facing a multitude of prolonged crisis ranging from censorship, ideological extremism, funding limits, large class cohorts, other imperatives such as training workers rather than elucidating deep questions about models that best explain their social order. So spending time crafting new tools for self-understanding was quite low on their list of concerns due to those who were a bit higher up. And then to my concern, when there was some curiosity for this intellectual heritage, it took unexpected forms. We saw events that commemorate and celebrate these past thinkers, but the way that we celebrate all the relatives from far with respect without really seeking to establish, in order to establish genealogy and belonging rather than to create a spark and a conversation about these legacies. The greatest illustration of this particular phenomenon is the dialectic of what I call Takrim Au Tajdid. On the one hand, one afternoon I was in Rabat and I come across a posh bookstore that may be known to those who know Rabat. And I was fascinated by a box set of this magazine. Just yesterday I was studying in a library called Sufer. It's not the one on the left. This is from a museum exhibition, but perhaps that's even more telling.

The members of this generation were jailed and their magazine banned. But here it was a couple of decades later re-edited and republished and sold at a cost of nearly 70 EUR. It was likely to be bought by those who were put in their living rooms to admire rather than to engage and peer over and spark conversations about culture, society, the revolution, and so on. The benefits, the other option, I have to go back slightly to the moment of COVID. And this is from the National Library where we needed to keep a bit of distance in order to prevent the virus from spreading. And at this point in time, I realized that with the benefit of hindsight and spending so much time to complete this book, I could also see its significance emerge in places that I didn't necessarily expect. A couple of months into COVID, as you can see from the picture on the right, there was an event naming the big theater at the University of Rabat, and launching the Abdullah Al-Adwi chair, after the country's most influential thinkers of the 70s, and I'd be maybe biased in saying that since I wrote my PhD on him. And the room was packed, as I saw from the pictures, I couldn't go. And what was striking was that a room of such size was packed even with the stairs, and it was packed in great numbers by young people drawing parallels with the image of the 1970s. Why did the younger generation of Moroccans in this case, this story could be repeated across the region, why did they flock to this event to see this thinker from a different time who was notoriously difficult to get a hold of? Perhaps according to some that I interviewed back then, there was a search for genealogy, meaning, alternative meanings. The digital space allowed some of this interest to move. It allowed for this young generation to discover this intellectual heritage. And of course, this is not to say that the digital space contains all the answers and doesn't come with a range of dangers and difficulties. But what was interesting to me was that it helped a young generation reappropriate an intellectual legacy from the 1970s, and it echoed in many ways the methodology of those I studied who chose to reappropriate and to make this heritage in line with their needs for the present. And so I start and finish with this idea of decolonization as a leap, a story that I found across the book and that I hoped to narrow down as the contribution to the book. The first leap being a desire to leap away from historical delay. The second leap being a desire to jump away from the constraints of Western modernity. And perhaps, and this is the unfinished part of the story, there is a third leap that is ongoing, a leap towards the present and a reconfigured and yet to be determined meaning going forward. Thank you very much.

Speaker 1

Thank you so much. That's a wonderful presentation and ranging across a whole range of subjects of how we understand the history of the region and your pictures of the bookshops reminded me of how much I owe to you. Those of you who have just been inside my office and seen the collection of a lot of old books, many of them I wouldn't have if it weren't playing to Idris, who's invited me to a whole range of different, have shown me even on a map getting out where to go to most obscure bookshops. I've

discovered all sorts of fascinating things and small corners. There's some gems there that you actually find, they're worth waving through to find all sorts of interesting things. Although I do seem to remember Do you remember when we did this, we tried to do that in Algiers? Yeah. And we found this wonderful bookshop and this, everything, we looked in the window and said, we must go in there. And we went in there and said to the gentleman behind, have you got any books on this and this? We're very interested in this and this and this. And the guy just looked at us and said, no. And then just we looked at each other. And you said, well, I suppose that's the end of that. And we brought that. I think, I hope it wasn't because I was with you or whether it was just looked like he was a guy who was having a bad day.

Speaker 2

Those spaces are mediated by the goodwill of the owner. Sometimes the owner is in a good mood that can help you, and sometimes, I don't know, when it's the time of their nap or something, but it's very arbitrary to me.

Speaker 1

It was on the Douche Morat, wasn't it? It was right at the top. I've always wanted to go back and see if he was in a better mood. But thank you for a wonderful presentation, and please Join with me in thanking Idris Yabaru for an absolutely fascinating talk and coming here today. Thank you.