

Egypt: Revolution 2011/2025. Dystopia, Utopia, and Political Fiction in Mustafa Al-Husayni's Novel *2025 An-Nida Al-Akhir*

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Abstract

The article discusses the novel *2025. An-Nida al-Akhir* [2025. The Last Call] written by a young Egyptian journalist and writer born in 1982 – Mustafa al-Husayni. The novel was published in early 2011, between the fall of Zayn al-Abidin Ibn Ali in Tunisia and of Husni Mubarak in Egypt. It describes a revolution against the regime of Jamal al-Mubarak, son of Husni, spurred by a group of young Egyptians. The story takes place in 2025 and anticipates the development of the political situation in Egypt and the Middle East between 2011 and 2025 in a utopian/dystopian manner. Alongside *Utopia* by Ahmad Khalid Tawfik and the poetry of Usama al-Abnubi and Abd ar-Rahman al-Abnudi, al-Husayni's book is considered to be a forecast of the Arab Spring in Egypt.

Keywords: Mustafa al-Husayni, Egypt, Arab Spring, revolution, utopia, dystopia, political fiction, politics, literature

All around the world, literature has always followed social and political change. The literature of the Arab countries, swept by the Arab Spring, has also produced a response to events which took place in Tunisia and Egypt – and in this paper I shall focus on Egyptian literary works. Poetry, which dominates in Arab literature, tends to be the genre that first responds to current events. Shortly before the memorable events in Tahrir Square (Arabic: *Sahat at-Tahrir*) in Cairo, a short collection of verse was published by a then little known Egyptian poet – Usama al-Abnubi – titled *Al-Baradi'i wa-al-Himar* [The Saddler and the Donkey]. It miraculously slipped through the tight net of censorship and, after the outburst of protest which led to the fall of Husni Mubarak, was lauded as the collection of poems which foretold the revolution – at least according to the authors of numerous articles and reviews. The poems depict the atmosphere in Egypt in 2010 quite accurately: the general mood was less saturated with rebellion than with resignation. A similar tone was present in the works of Abd ar-Rahman al-Abnudi, who writes mainly in the Egyptian dialect, and who has recently published poems criticising present-day Egyptian authorities.

In this early twenty-first century political context, prose writers have also begun to employ devices such as utopia, dystopia (negative utopia), and political fiction.¹ Among the utopias, two Egyptian novels immediately come to mind – Ahmad Khalid Tawfik's *Yutubiya*, published in 2008,² and 2025. *An-Nida al-Akhir* [2025. The Last Call] by Mustafa al-Husayni, published in 2011, which will be the main focus of this paper. Outside the utopian formula, the prose prophets were joined by Khalid al-Khamissi with his novel *Taxi* (2007).³ All the above authors are believed to have predicted the coming of the Arab Spring and the revolutionary changes in the Near East; obviously each treated the subject matter in their own way.

The term *utopia* has little significance in the Arab-Muslim culture, if any significance at all. The term was introduced into European philosophy and into wider circulation – culture – in the sixteenth century and its creator was Thomas More, the author of *Utopia* (1516). In More's time, European civilisation had almost no influence on the Arab world. Few in the Arab and Muslim world had heard about the English philosopher's *Utopia* back then, and an Arabic translation was not

¹ There is a wealth of literary theory devoted to utopia, dystopia, and political fiction. The works of e.g. Mumford, Kumar and Bann, Moylan 2000; Booker; Hassler and Wilcox, Segal, Steinmüller, Szacki, Zgorzelski.

² The novel by A.Kh. Tawfik should also be viewed as a dystopia – compare with my analysis in the article "Egipska dystopia. O powieści Ahmada Chalida Taufika *Jutubija* ('Utopia')", [Egyptian dystopia. On the novel of Ahmad Chaid Taufik *Jutubija* ('Utopia')]. English translation of the novel by Ch. Rosetti (Tawfik 2011).

³ English translation by J. Wright (al-Khamissi 2008); Polish translation by Michalski (al-Khamissi 2011).

published until 1974, therefore the idea could not spread to the south and east of the Mediterranean Sea.

More's concept had its roots in European philosophy, going back to Plato's *Republic*. Medieval Muslim political philosophy drew significantly from the works of ancient philosophy – the best example of this inspiration are possibly the reflections of Abu Nasr al-Farabi (9th-10th century), especially his treatise *The Virtuous City* (Arabic: *Al-Madina al-Fadila*).⁴ Despite that, I would not be far from the truth if I stated that the type of thought that can be described as utopian was in general foreign to Arabs and Muslims. Admittedly, the philosophical novel *Hayy Ibn Yaqdhan* by Ibn Tufayl (twelfth century) is often mentioned in this context,⁵ but this work (which may have provided inspiration for Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*)⁶ has little in common with utopia as the term is understood in Europe. Utopias are sometimes merged – transcending the purely philosophical meaning of the term – with fantasy narratives. As neither Arabs nor Muslims ever lacked fantastic imagination, this literary genre continued developing – for instance, in various versions of the *Arabian Nights*, also known as *One Thousand and One Nights*. Another example is the cosmography describing “marvels of creatures and strange things existing” (Arabic: *aja'ib al-makhlūqat*) (Abu Deeb), which is part of Arabian adventure fiction – and includes a characteristic, although not indispensable feature of a Utopia: a traveller arrives into an unknown city and gets to know the local customs. However, even that does not entirely display all characteristics of a utopian narrative understood from a European perspective. One could conclude that utopian narratives did not exist in Arabic and Muslim literature, even if some works display indistinct utopian features. This applies to the Middle Ages as well as later centuries and to related philosophical ideas and literary genres such as *science fiction* (Khayrutdinov, Morgan). The latter began to emerge as late as the twentieth century, undoubtedly under the influence of the West.

The cultural mismatch of utopia and the world of Islam is demonstrated by the fact that this world did not produce an adequate term for this literary device and settled on a direct borrowing: *yutubiya*. In the words of A.Kh. Tawfik, author and translator of science fiction literature, utopian narratives have not become popular in the Arab world until today; there are, however, rare examples of novels in both the east and the west of the Arab world that employ themes reminiscent of SF motifs known in Western culture. For a political context, one should look to the 1994 novel *As-Sayyid min Haql as-Sabanikh* [The Lord from the Spinach Field] (ash-Sharuni) by the Egyptian author Sabri Musa. It would be interesting

4 English translation by R. Walzer (Al-Farabi 1985); Polish translation by J. Bielawski (Al-Farabi 1957).

5 English translation by R. Kocache (Ibn Tufayl 1982); Polish translation by J. Bielawski (Ibn Tufayl 1958).

6 About utopian contexts of D. Defoe's novels, compare James.

to examine why such narratives did not fall on fertile turf in Arab and Muslim culture; however, it is not the aim of this paper – within its scope I can only present facts and ask tentative questions to be explored in future research.

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Mustafa al-Husayni was born in 1982 in Al-Manufiyya in the north of Egypt. An engineer by education, he graduated from the October 6 University (Jami'at 6 Uktubir) in Giza; he is mainly a journalist and a writer. He founded and is the co-owner of the Dawwin publishing house and another one, which publishes e-books. The novel analysed here was his 2011 debut, which was followed by a collection of short stories titled *Muthir wa-Muflit al-Intibaq* [The Sexy and Eye-Catching One] published later the same year.

Al-Husayni's novel was published in March 2011, shortly before the overthrow of Husni Mubarak. The author himself emphasised in one of the interviews that although he had been writing the novel for some time back then, the factor that drove him to finish it quickly was the fall of Zayn al-Abidin Ibn Ali in Tunisia (al-Husayni, *Shabb al-ladhi...*). The popularity of the novel among the readers (I did not manage to find many opinions of literary critics) led to the book's nomination for the Arab Booker Prize in 2012 (Isma'il).

In the first years of the twenty-first century, tension in Egypt was rising; this led to official recognition of the opposition group, April 6 Youth Movement, and the activity of other groups, such as Kifaya. Despite that, the Egyptian public did not believe in the possibility of change. Most people expected events at the top of the power ladder to unfold in a way resembling the situation in Syria in 2000 – a presidential dynasty would rise to power and Husni Mubarak would be replaced by his son, Jamal. Al-Husayni's novel, although it discusses contemporary events and was published after the first riots in the at-Tahrir Square, is set in the year 2025. It seems that the writer did not believe in the power and determination of Egyptians (as subsequent years have shown – quite correctly) and therefore moved the novel's setting 14 years into the future – to when Jamal Mubarak would rule.

The plot of the novel is rather uncomplicated. As a literary work, the novel may not stand the test of time, despite a second edition. However, this paper does not analyse it as an eminent literary achievement, but as an example of purely political fiction and a description of a certain state of mind representative of young Egyptian intelligentsia. The emerging picture is rather pessimistic and has been confirmed by actual events which took place in Egypt after 2011.

It is the year 2025 in Egypt. A band of young people form a group called Al-Ya'isun (The Desperate Ones) and decide to overthrow the current political system through a revolution – I shall return to this term, as it is central to both the novel

and the most recent events in the Near East. Egypt and the Near East in the novel are going through an unstable period of chaos and disintegration. The author has provided a calendar of events leading up to the revolution. Starting in 2012, religious conflict between the Muslims and the Christians continues; the first call for freedom for Egyptian Christians in the south comes in 2013; similar demands are then voiced by the Nubians and Bedouins. In 2014, Israel decides to take Sinai in order to separate itself from the social unrest which shook Egypt. In 2015 the government in Cairo becomes so weak that it can only control the capital governorate – in fact, the weakness of the government leads to a complete loosening of the social structure, and in late 2015 a group of officers decides to stage a coup d'état. This is unsuccessful and all the participants of the plot are executed. In 2016, the son of the president (Husni Mubarak) is elected for another term. 2017 sees another violent attempt to overthrow the regime, this time with the help of Iran. In 2018, Israel first threatens Cairo with occupation, while the American air force bombards Alexandria in order to protect the US fleet on the Mediterranean. In 2019, the Matruh governorate declares its incorporation into Libya; in the same year many buildings in the capital are burned by insurgents from the south, who demand autonomy for Christians. In 2020, under pressure from the USA and Israel, the president disbands the army due to suspected activities of fundamentalists who formerly belonged to the armed forces. The group Al-Ya'isun is formed, led by Ahmad Jabr; in 2021, millions take to the streets to demonstrate support for the postulates of Ahmad Jabr. In 2022, the president flees the country but soon returns and attempts to compromise with the opposition, which brings no results. In 2023, A. Jabr declares the beginning of an armed struggle against the authorities, and finally in 2024 – Al-Ya'isun take up arms against the Israeli occupation of Sinai (24–28).

On April 6, 2025 the revolution begins and the young people led by Ahmad Jabr put their plan into practice. One of them turns out to be a traitor who feeds the government detailed information on the location of revolutionary cells in Cairo and – very importantly – the location of their headquarters in the city centre. However, the traitor is prevented from achieving his goal; on the contrary – government soldiers fall into traps the revolutionaries set in the disclosed locations. However, the president is alerted and calls his aide Sharqawi Bek, a retired specialist in liaising with US intelligence, to help neutralise insurgents' activities. One of the revolutionary groups manages to kidnap Sharqawi. There are spies on both sides. In the Al-Ya'isun group, a young man involved from the very beginning turns out to be the son of an important government official. In a plot twist, as the espionage activities are discovered quite early, the armed forces are directed to areas apparently deserted by the revolutionaries and consequently eliminated by much more poorly equipped and significantly less numerous insurgents. In one of the scenes the author describes how policemen join the revolutionaries (21–22). Al-Ya'isun is quick to declare the victory of the revolution and read a proclamation to the people

(41–42), but the president remains in power. The novel’s ending is somewhat unresolved and ambiguous. The author writes:

“Reader, you have now reached the end of the story. Yes, you understood me correctly. This is the end. No, I will not tell you what the revolutionists did, if the president escaped or committed suicide (...). No, I will not write what you expect me to and let you close the book with a sense of self-satisfaction and contentment with the world. It will not be so, because I did not write these pages for this end. I wrote them because I am waiting for you. I am waiting for you there... in the time of revolution... in the street!” (151)

The American writer and orientalist Sofia Samatar refers to the novels by A.Kh. Tawfik and M. al-Husayni as dystopias (Clarke), thus this term appears in the title of this paper. However, I am not entirely convinced of the validity of this classification in case of *2025*, especially because Samatar does not justify her opinion further. While al-Husayni’s novel can surely be considered a form of utopia, ascribing dystopian features to this novel is somewhat problematic, to which I shall return below.

The key term in the novel is of course *revolution* – in Arabic *thawra*. Its participants surely regard it as such. However, it is worth noting that this word – as used in the novel – is closer to Muslim tradition than to Western political theories. In the novel we observe a mixture of terminology, very characteristic for modern Arab thought and resulting from a relatively unreflective, sometimes purely lexical adoption of terms – and a consequence of the worldwide domination of Western thought. The concepts of revolution in Muslim philosophy have been comprehensively discussed – among others, by the Palestinian scholar Ibrahim Abrash in his work titled *Ilm al-Ijtima as-Siyasi* [Political Sociology].⁷ Abrash points out that since February 2011 the term *revolution* has dominated the Arab political discourse. He also emphasises the intermingling of terms which I mentioned above. This is not a modern phenomenon – approximately from the mid-twentieth century Arabs have been using that term to refer to all types of revolts and revolutions as well as military coups, which occurred in successive countries in the region. At the same time he acknowledges that the term *revolution* applies only to Palestinian actions against Israel and the events of 2011 in Tunisia and Egypt – the Arab Spring. Abrash stated that the events in Egypt were “the end of [old? bygone? – M.M.D.] history and the beginning of a new one” (Abrash, *Ilm al-Ijtima as-Siyasi*, 299). This perspective was also adopted by the researcher ad hoc, nevertheless in an article from 2014 he admitted that, in fact, this was not about any revolution at all, and that it was only a struggle for power and wealth (the word play on the meanings – *thawra*

⁷ For another perspective on revolution, compare with Al-Jabiri 21 and others; also compare with Ayalon.

– “revolution,” *tharwa* – “wealth”) (Abrash, *Sira ala as-sulta...*). The Palestinian emphasised a close relationship of this term with the political, social, and religious events – from this point of view, for instance, the appearance of new monotheist religions was a form of revolution. Revolution is to effect a global qualitative change (Abrash, *Ilm al-Ijtima as-Siyasi*, 277 and further) – not just in one sphere of life, as some definitions of revolution in Western science dictate. In the case of al-Husayni's novel, from among numerous definitions and aspects of revolution, there is only one that matches: the overthrowing of a government by the citizens of a country.

For al-Husayni, the fomenting of a revolution is the essence of his futurology. The most important goal of a revolution is to overthrow a dictator; however, it seems that society is not ready for a real revolution – therefore it is effected by a group of “revolutionists” who hope to bring people out onto the streets (43).⁸ However, the majority of people are still lethargic and unaware of their situation – at least that is the impression given by the characters in the novel. The revolutionaries also lack a clear vision for the future of the country, except for vague promises of democracy and the role of the people as the ones who – imitating the classic political theory in Islam – will demand that the government enforces the rule of law (50).

The Egyptian president is somewhat lethargic, or at least seems unaware of the reality (which may also be read as a deliberate attempt to ignore it). In his conversation with a confidant, he discusses the overthrow of Zayn al-Abidin in Tunisia and concludes that after all the events of 2011, he must remain strong and not allow his people to take a single breath of relief – the people must remain weak so that they could be ruled absolutely (93). In order to attain this goal, a special program is implemented called *At-Taghayyub* (Arabic “Alienation”), which employs all available psychological and technological methods to manipulate people, who as a result stop paying attention to essential matters and instead focus on insignificant details (106–110).

It is surprising that in this vision of the future the author almost does not attempt (except what was described above) to predict the directions of social developments in Egypt, quite unlike A.Kh. Tawfik in his *Utopia*. Society remains *outside time* and unchanged. The year 2025 is a direct representation of 2011. The leader plays a game with society – a game identical to that played by Husni Mubarak; members of society fight back in the same manner as they have in 2011. The role of the Muslim Brotherhood, to which one of the novel's protagonists belongs, is also very similar to the one it played in 2011. It seems interesting that al-Husayni has predicted the manner in which this group would join the revolutionary movement – not directly, during the main events, but somewhat from a “back seat.” Political groups listed above, which already existed in 2011, are still

⁸ References to the novel are placed directly in the text.

active players on the political scene 14 years into the future. The insurgents also include Christians (118).

The revolutionaries do not generate any new ideas, social or political visions or programmes. Their idols are still Che Guevara and Malcolm X (Goldman), and from among historical figures – the nineteenth-century Syrian social and religious reformer Abd ar-Rahman al-Kawakibi (Rahme; Jamsheer) and martyrs from the early history of Islam – the third Shia imam, Al-Husayn (died 680) (Vaglieri), who fought with Abbasids, Mohammed an-Nafs az-Zakiyya (died 762) (Buhl), and above all, the anti-Umayyad *heretic*, Ghaylan ad-Dimashqi (died before 743) (Pellat). The biography of the last of these heroes is described in the novel in great detail (125–133), as he is lesser known than the others. This *revolutionist* opposed the government and was sentenced to death by crucifixion by the ruling caliph.

In a conversation between the president and his men, the revolutionaries are also referred to as *Kharijites* (Arabic: *khawarij*), which has clear religious and political implications.⁹ The revolution is to be a Muslim revolution. The heroes of the first centuries of Islam have remained role models for the Egyptians; there is no mention of – for example – the revolution of 1952 by the Free Officers Movement. Another interesting factor is the total absence of women from the imagined revolution – which is not reflected in reality. Although it would be hard to speak of a pivotal role of women in the Arab Spring, the female voice was very well heard both in Tunisia and Egypt, as well as in Yemen (Shihada). In al-Husayni's novel there is only one female character, and her role is entirely marginal. It is as a matter of fact a men's revolution. Therefore the Egypt of 2025 is still a country of tradition and patriarchy.

In the novel, society is not coming of age, maturing into democracy (regardless of specific definitions of that term), and the outcome of the revolution is most likely to be just the trading of places. Evidence of this is to be found when a former collaborator with the security forces is interrogated – the revolutionaries deny him just as Sharqawi's men used to do only a few years earlier. "The time of ultimate revenge has come," says one of the torturers bluntly (61). According to Sara Salem, "Torture and brutality stemmed from a culture of abuse that functioned as a disciplining measure" (Salem 29). Freedom is barely mentioned in the novel and there is no mention of equality or happiness. Another interesting issue is that al-Husayni does not predict any technological development – and it seems that not just in Egypt, but also in the world, as Egypt does not exist outside of the global context. Kalashnikov rifles are widely used (148), RPG (19) as well as mobile and cordless phones. The year 2025 is now...

⁹ *Khawarij* – a puritan Muslim sect created in mid-7th century by the followers of Ali Ibn Abi Talib in conflict over the caliphate with the secularised Umayyad dynasty; their doctrine in its political aspect could be reduced to fighting any government lacking God's mandate (compare: Levi Della Vida).

Although – as I mentioned above – the author describes changes to the political situation, the presence of the enemies of the Egyptian people (yet not necessarily enemies of the Egyptian government) – the Americans and Israelis – is a constant factor (compare with the outline of events after 2011 and p. 35). The former are faithful defenders of the dictator and are ready to quash the insurrection (83), while at the same time they are one of the main causes of Egypt's downfall (120). The presence of these two main enemies also characterises the dystopia created by A.Kh. Tawfik.

For the above reasons, al-Husayni's utopia is the present transported a dozen years into the future. In terms of the utopia/dystopia categories, one can only conclude that the utopia here is an escape from a dystopian reality as drawn by the author in his depiction of the political situation in Egypt of 2015. In that sense, the presumed victory of the revolution forms the utopian vision.

The text is saturated with a sense of hopelessness which resembles the general mood in Egypt in the early twenty-first century: the passage of time does not seem to change it – at least not from the imagined perspective of a dozen years into the near future. Setting the story, whose beginnings were witnessed by the author, in the future, may signify a certain degree of social and political awareness in the young generation of Egyptians, who in fact do not believe in the possibility of change. Paul Danahar quotes the blogger Iyad El-Baghdadi: “It really felt like this state of stagnation was permanent. (...) A lot of us thought that something has got to give at some point, but we didn't really think it was going to happen for another twenty years. We thought it was not going to be our generation but the next generation that would be doing it” (15, quote from *The Arab Tyrant's Manual*). These words clearly confirm my conclusions from the novel. Looking at Egypt four years after the events of the Arab Spring, one could say that perhaps this was a justified reflection and that the novel is a prediction of revolution for which time may come in ten years.

How can Mustafa al-Husayni's novel be categorised? Can it be called a utopia? Dystopia? Political fiction? Without doubt it bears the markings of dystopian thought, which is clearly demonstrated in the outline of events after 2011 presented in the novel. And how did the events unfold in real life? Freedom gave the Egyptians a president coming from amongst Muslim fundamentalists, Muhammad Mursi, who was chosen in democratic elections in 2012. However, the following year he was overthrown by the army, and in 2015 sentenced to death by the Egyptian court. At the time of writing, the country is led by the Field Marshal, Abd al-Fattah as-Sisi, who barely differs from Husni Mubarak, overthrown in 2011, and seems fairly similar to Mubarak's son as described in the novel. Therefore the dictatorship has returned. There is no real chance to abolish it permanently, at least not for some time. Is this not in fact a dystopia? As Rolf Schwedter accurately pointed out, little is needed for the imagination to transform a utopia into a dystopia

(Schwedter 24). One could add that sometimes there is no unambiguous distinction between the two. However, very few features of utopia can be seen in al-Husayni's novel – its reality presents quite a probable turn of events.

Andrzej Juszczyk, Polish scholar specialising in utopian and dystopian literature, defined dystopia as a “pessimistic vision of the future, structured along an attempt to present negative consequences of current reality” (Juszczyk 91). From this standpoint, *2025* can partly be considered a dystopia – if the *predictions* made by the novelist for the course of events in the Near East in 2011–2025 can be considered dystopian. Looking at the novel's plot in 2015, the depicted events do not seem overly pessimistic or improbable. So is the Egyptian novel utopian? A distinct characteristic of utopian narratives is the indeterminacy of location; meanwhile in the novel analysed here the story is set in Egypt, a very real place. Moreover, utopian stories offer visions of a happy society – al-Husayni provides no such depiction. Perhaps the revolution of 2025 can be seen as an introduction to shaping a new society, but that is not certain. Therefore it seems that Mustafa al-Husayni's work is not a utopia either. Still, quite obviously it is not intended as a realist novel – it shows a vision of the future. It appears therefore that that it is closest to political fiction, or maybe a political prediction.

In their presentation of methods of political forecasting, Tadeusz Bodio and Andrzej Chodubski considered extrapolation to be the simplest one – and one that does not reach out too far, but aims to show an approximate direction for the development of events (compare also: Tuzovsky 52). However, they emphasised that a revolution cannot be predicted (Bodio and Chodubski 275). It seems then that the concepts presented by al-Husayni can be defined – using the term proposed by a Russian scholar, Ivan D. Tuzovsky – as “future-oriented presentism” (32).

Certainly this novel remains a great literary and political question mark.

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