

Former French Culture Minister: Arabic is “A National Treasure” (Part 2)

by Hugh Fitzgerald



Jack Lang, the tireless promoter of Arabic – a language he admits he does not know – in France, insists that Arabic enabled French culture to “open to history.” As Muslims, the Arabs have not been interested in any history but their own, and not even the whole of that history. What matters to them is the history that comes after their acceptance of Islam. Everything that came before Islam is not worth studying; those centuries are to be dismissed as the Time of Ignorance, the Jahiliyya. Of the handful of Arabic-language historians, almost all narrowly concerned themselves with aspects of Islam and Islamic history. The monstrously prolific As-Suyuti, for example, wrote about the “Qur’anic sciences,” and, with his teacher Jalal al-Din, compiled a Qur’anic exegesis, a History of the Caliphs, and a study of the miracles of Muhammad. This is not history in the Western sense, but rather, is a branch of theology, and of religio-political history.

If you research “famous Arab historians” online, you will discover fewer than two dozen names are cited. There is only one listed who lived after 1505 (when As-Suyuti died), and that single “historian,” the Moroccan Mohammed Abu Khubza, who appeared 400 years after the previous entrant, turns out to have been a theologian, Shari’a scholar, and linguist, rather than an historian.

The only Arabic-language historian who made any impression in the Western world was the remarkable Ibn Khaldun (I cannot resist giving his full name: Abdurahman bin Muhammad bin

Muhammad bin Muhammad bin Al-Hasan bin Jabir bin Muhammad bin Ibrahim bin Abdurahman bin Ibn Khaldun al-Hadrami). Ibn Khaldun was a pioneer in historiography, economics, sociology, and demography. But other than being discussed by Machiavelli, Ibn Khaldun did not become well known in the West until the 19th century, and while he then garnered praise as a “father of sociology,” no one has claimed that he was a significant influence on Western, or French historians. Appreciation of his work has grown in the 20th century, but that is not the same thing as having influence on historians in the past, which is what Jack Lang means when he describes the Arabic language (that is, Arabic-language historians) as having enabled French culture to open to “mathematics history, medicine.” Again it’s a puzzlement: what can Jack Lang possibly mean?

The French had nearly five hundred celebrated historians in the Western tradition to emulate: Herodotus, Thucydides, Polybius, Livy, Sallust, Strabo, Priscus, Procopius, Flavius Josephus (a Jewish historian,) Bede, Asser, William of Malmesbury, Saxo Grammaticus, Joinville, Foissart – and I’ll stop there. You need only do an online search of “famous historians” for the complete list. And it brings you up to the late 20th century, with Arnaldo Momigliano and Fergus Millar. Or you can search for “famous French historians,” and you will be supplied a list online of hundreds of distinguished names: Voltaire, Michelet, Hippolyte Taine, Tocqueville, right up to the present, with Furet, Veyne, and Ferro. And unlike the case with Ibn Khaldun, the works of all these Western historians were translated and are widely available.

Yet Jack Lang wants the French to think that Arabic has enabled French culture to open to “mathematics history, medicine.”

Did the Arabic language “enable French culture to open to medicine”? Averroes, or Ibn Rushd, did write a textbook on medicine that was used in Europe for several centuries, but

only in Latin translation; the Arabic language was not the conduit for that knowledge. Avicenna, or Ibn Sina, wrote among his many works – both Averroes and Avicenna were polymaths – a medical encyclopedia, The Canon of Medicine (Al-Qanun fi't-Tibb). It was used as the standard medical textbook in the Islamic world and Europe up to the 18th century, again in Latin translation; Arabic was not necessary. French doctors had no need of that “treasure of France,” the Arabic language.

According to [The National](#), a newspaper in the United Arab Emirates:

Mr Lang has urged the French government to “restore to Arabic its place in public education and beyond that, its recognition and dignity in our society.” Mr Lang says a program to extend Arabic needs to be long-term and no longer vulnerable to “electoral transitions and partisan affiliations”.

He told The National that his successors at the education ministry had failed to follow through with the reforms he introduced from 2000 to 2002 to boost the number of Arabic teachers and courses.

“But, he said, even people fueled by “stupid xenophobia,” who resent hearing or seeing unfamiliar languages, should recognise the practical advantages of widening Arabic’s availability in public education.

Is Arabic the language of a rich culture that the French are missing out on? Or is it the language of people who are surpassingly incurious about other cultures and whose own “civilization” is distinctly unimpressive? Does Jack Lang remember the report of Rima Khalef, then the head of the Arab Development Project at the U.N.? She and her staff – all of them Arabs – found that the total number of books translated into Arabic yearly is no more than 330, or one-fifth of the number translated in a small country like Greece. Indeed, the

total number of books translated into Arabic during the 1,000 years since the age of Caliph Al-Ma'moun to this day is less than those translated in Spain in one year. Yet Jack Lang presents Arabic as the language that opens out into the world, and that enabled French culture to be open "to mathematics, history, medicine."

In a furious exchange on the French television channel CNews, Mr Lang was accused by a right-wing writer, Eric Zemmour, of being a "useful idiot" aiding a process of "re-Arabising France in order to re-Islamicise it."

Eric Zemmour is not a 'right-wing writer.' He has always been politically on the center, even sometimes on the center-left, but that epithet is slapped on him, as on others, for one reason only: he is an islamocritic.

Mr Lang threatened to leave the studio but retorted: "You are the agent of Islamicisation. You'd leave the teaching of Arab [sic] in the hands of propagandists and manipulators whereas I want language teaching to occur inside the school."

Jack Lang seems to think that the Arabic language should be taught in the French schools because otherwise, he claims, Arab students will learn it from evil extremists – he calls them "propagandists and manipulators." But teaching Muslims Arabic in schools will make the Qur'an, in its virulent original version, more readily accessible to those Muslim students. It keeps them rooted in Islam, less able and less inclined to integrate into French society. For non-Muslim pupils, persuaded to study Arabic in school, such language study will for some turn out to be a vehicle for their islamization. These non-Muslim pupils who are learning Arabic, reading verses from the most important Arabic text, that is, the Qur'an, having Arab classmates to emulate (for they will have had a head start in the language) and Muslim Arab teachers who will do their utmost to present Arabic, and

Islam, in the most attractive light to their non-Muslim students. Offering Arabic in French schools, from the first grade to university, as President Macron announced on May 2, would also become a vast jobs program in French schools for Muslim Arab teachers. Their increased presence on the faculty will affect the atmospherics of the schools, and inhibit islamocriticism among both teachers and students.

And why should the non-Muslim French students be encouraged to study Arabic as part of the school curriculum? In French schools, students are generally taught only one foreign language. How many would choose Arabic over English, Spanish, or Mandarin, given the greater practical utility of all three and, as well, their rich literary cultures, as compared to the pitiful offerings in Arabic? And how many Arab students in French school, who already know spoken Arabic from their homes, would want to improve their Arabic by studying it in school, rather than studying the language that is far more important for their futures – English?

If Jack Lang were to get his way, the French would be studying en masse *La Langue Arabe, Tresor de France* ("The Arabic Language, a French Treasure"). Mr Lang describes the language as a "the beautiful unknown." Few who hear this guttural and aggressive-sounding tongue would agree with Lang's praise of the language. But he is, let's not forget, the president of the Institut du monde arabe, and needs to flatter those who pay his fat salary.

Lang may be "critical" of those who reject his extravagant claims for the teaching of Arabic in French schools, but don't they have a point? They do not want French schools, through the promotion of Arabic study, to be the unwitting vehicles for the spread of Islam. Don't those he criticizes have it right? Isn't it impossible to separate the Arabic language and Arab culture from Islam, a faith whose holy book, the Qur'an, was delivered, over 23 years, to an Arab and in his language? Believers are taught that this Qur'an contains all of

knowledge. They must ideally read the Qur'an in Arabic; their five daily prayers are to be recited in Arabic. They say those prayers while prostrate and facing Mecca, in western Arabia. They must, if they can afford it, make the hajj – again, to Mecca. Many non-Arab Muslims take Arab names, and some even assume false Arab lineages, connecting them to the tribe of the Prophet. The late Anwar Sheikh offered a lapidary formula: "Islam," he said, "is the vehicle for Arab supremacism." And the Arabic language, the language of the Qur'an and hadith, is the vehicle for the spread of Islam.

In flowery terms, he [Jack Lang] says the language has become an object of contrary fixations, "for some discredited, quarantined by merchants of fear or hatred who cling to a stunted conception of what France should be; for others, a vector of rupture."

If you are French, and take pride in the civilization of France – its art, architecture, literature, music, philosophy, scientific advances, and of course its expressive, rich, and beautiful language – and do not wish to see that culture diluted by the millions of Arab migrants who have managed to settle in France, behind what their faith teaches them to regard as enemy lines, Jack Lang has no time for you. French people in his view are not allowed to be proud of their rich and multifarious culture. If you do so, and if you want France to remain recognizably France, and not begin to resemble Algeria or Morocco, as some neighborhoods in Marseilles and Paris already do, for Lang you are a "merchant of fear or hatred."

Who are these "merchants of fear or hatred"? Lang consigns to the outer darkness all the supporters of Marine Le Pen, who would like to halt Muslim migration. Le Pen's supporters are not "merchants of fear or hatred" – the "hatred" to be found today in France is that which the Muslims direct at their non-Muslim hosts and the non-Muslim state. Those who agree with

Marine Le Pen are simply unwilling to pretend that “the authentic Islam” has nothing to do with violence; they have seen the steep rise in crimes, especially violent crimes, that are the result of Muslim criminals. Muslims make up 12% of the population, but are 70% of the prisoners in French jails. They have been made well aware of how the Muslims in certain neighborhoods, such as Seine-St. Denis, have created No-Go zones where non-Muslims, including firemen and policemen, are made distinctly non-welcome. At the same time, they see the way that Muslim economic migrants have managed to take full advantage of all the benefits a generous welfare state lavishes upon them: free or highly subsidized housing, free education, free medical care, unemployment benefits (without the need to have previously been employed), family allowances, and more. They see the high levels of Muslim unemployment, and the apparent lack of desire of many Muslims to seek, or train for, gainful employment. They learn, too, of the increasing rates of criminality among Muslims, especially for such violent crimes as rape and murder. That is the information that leads Marine Le Pen, and her supporters, to insist that further Muslim immigration would be folly. But for Jack Lang, if you dare to take note of this data on Muslim immigrants, you are a “merchant of fear or hatred.”

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