

Former French Culture Minister: Arabic is “A National Treasure” (Part 3)

by Hugh Fitzgerald



In the view of Jack Lang, former French Minister of Culture and currently the president of the Institut du Monde Arabe, the French apparently have a duty (where this duty has come from is unclear) to allow into their midst still more millions of those who are taught to despise them – Muslims being, in the Qur’an, the “best of peoples,” while non-Muslims are “the most vile of created beings.” Why? Where does this duty to allow into your country people whose faith inculcates hatred for their hosts come from? Jack Lang doesn’t justify or explain this, because he can’t. He merely insists, without more.

The Institute of the Arab World, which Jack Lang heads, is very well endowed. The Institute is housed in a building that cost \$250 million when it was built between 1981 and 1987; in today’s dollars that would be half-a-billion dollars. At the time, it was the most expensive building in France in modern times. Lang is, unsurprisingly, a great promoter of the Arab, and Muslim, presence in France. And he describes those who beg to differ with his celebration of the Arabs, Islam, and the Arabic language, in France, people such as the combative Eric Zemmour, as being “merchants of fear or hatred,” people who “cling” – note the implied losing-battle desperation in that word – to a “stunted conception of what France should be.”

Mr Lang said the study and recognition of the Arab world and cultures is more necessary than ever.

Jack Lang has it wrong. What the West – what the entire world of Unbelievers – needs to study and understand is not the Arabic language, but the fanatical faith – Islam – that its speakers embrace. The peoples of the West have done quite enough pretending that Arabic is the language of a “great civilization” in order to keep a “dialogue” going with the Arabs. But what “great civilization,” comparable to those of Europe, India, or China, have the Arabs produced? What masterpieces of art, when all paintings, and all statues of living creatures, are haram? What rich musical tradition could the Arabs possibly present, when Islam forbids all instrumental music? What is the heritage of Arab philosophy – can you name a single Arab philosopher of significance, aside from Ibn Arabi? How much of Arabic poetry consists of panegyrics of a ruler who is also a patron, or denunciations of those who, powerful and rich, deny the poet adequate support? And why is so much Arabic literature tendentious political propaganda, such as the works of the late Palestinian writer Mahmoud Darwish?

But if the Institute of the Arab World were being created today, he [Jack Lang] believes there would be calls for it to be named the Institute of the Muslim World, given that a majority of Muslims are not Arabs.

Does that mean that Lang is undercutting his own promotion of Arabic, by recognizing that most Muslims are not Arabs, and many speak Farsi, Urdu, Bengali, Bahasa? Should Farsi and Urdu, Bengali and Bahasa, also be offered in French schools, or should all Muslims, including non-Arabs, have the option only to learn Arabic?

“The Arabic language and cultures cannot be reduced to Islam,” he [Lang] says.

If so, it is not for want of trying by Muslim Arabs. They are uninterested in Arab culture in the period that preceded the

arrival of Islam. They call that period the Jahiliyya, or Time of Ignorance. Arabic is so identified with Islam that there is practically no cultural space left for Arabic-without-Islam. And Islam cannot be separated from the language in which the Qur'an was sent down, over 23 years, to an Arab, and in his language.

What Lang wants to make you believe is that there is a rich tradition of literary works in Arabic having nothing to do with Islam. But what are the names of these works, and who are their authors? Look high and look low, but you won't find, in all of Arabic-language literature, more than a handful whose writings "cannot be reduced to Islam."

"In a secular framework, such as advocated by republican law, what better way to transmit elements of culture than through learning the language? It is through language learning that we discover the multiple aspects of a civilisation."

We come back to the main point with which we began. In the schools, the time for learning languages is limited. Choices have to be made. If the schools offer, and promote, Arabic, that will mean fewer students in French schools will be studying English, a language far more useful, in the sciences and the humanities, in business, sport, and entertainment, than Arabic. Jack Lang would apparently deny that possibility to Muslim pupils, on whom family pressure to study Arabic would be intense.

The IMA [Institut du Monde Arabe] has already acted on Mr Lang's commitment to Arabic, having run courses for all ages and levels for more than 20 years and more recently offering an internationally recognised certificate, so far allowing 500 students to sit for qualifying exams in France and other countries, including the UAE.

Mr Lang is not among them.

“Sadly, I speak only a little Arabic, not well enough to hold a proper conversation,” he said.

So Jack Lang himself, even though he is the president of the Institut du Monde Arabe, can't be bothered to spend the time to study Arabic, not even that small amount one would need to carry on a conversation. If he knows so little Arabic, how can he comment on the splendors of the language itself? How does he know, for example, how well Arabic accommodates scientific terminology? Or has in its lexicon acquired sufficient philosophical terms to discuss modern – i.e., Western – philosophy? He is singing the praises of a language that he admits he hardly knows.

There is a word for this, but it's not in Arabic: chutzpah. It is chutzpah for Lang to praise and promote a language he does not know. It is chutzpah for him to declare that one of the most advanced cultures in the world, that of the French and their “perfected civilization” (as Chamfort called it), owe to the Arabic language, that *soi-disant* “treasure of France,” so very much. For according to the shameless Jack Lang, “Arabic has enabled French culture to open to mathematics history, medicine.”

The Arabs who pay Lang's salary must be quite pleased with his performance. He deserves – he's earned – his fat salary from the Institut du Monde Arabe. And the latest news from France confirms his value: President Macron issued a decree on May 2, stating that beginning in the fall of 2020, Arabic would be offered in French schools, starting in the first grade and continuing right through to university. At least it will not, for now, be mandatory. But with this option, some Muslim students who will study Arabic in school, pushed to do so by their parents, will not have the possibility of studying English, which is far more important than Arabic to their job prospects.

According to Macron's plan, the language study in France will be offered in collaboration with the government of Tunisia. Who will be monitoring these teachers of Arabic, making sure they do not manage to include Islamic propaganda in what are supposed to be purely language lessons?

Questions, questions. One thing is certain: this expanded teaching of Arabic in French schools will replace the study of English among Muslim students, those who can least afford to go without studying English; the result will be a pedagogical mess. And unless closely monitored, such teaching may not be limited to the Arabic language, but become a vehicle for indoctrination in Islam. Jack Lang is not concerned. He knows Arabic is a "treasure of France," without which the French would have had a hard time opening to "mathematics, history, and medicine." Jack Lang's paymasters must be very proud.

First published in