

# Culture alive

George Choucri Zaidan remembers his grandfather

Jurji Zaidan was a pillar of the intellectual movement known as the Nahda (or Renaissance), which laid the foundations for a secular pan-Arab national identity. To this day he remains a household name across the Arab world for 21 phenomenally popular historical novels that, together with histories, helped give Arabs a sense of community through their shared history and a unique language. Eminently entertaining reads, they have proved phenomenally popular to boot. Zaidan played many roles in the Nahda: historian, linguist, novelist, journalist, educator as well as political scientist and social reformer.

Born in 1861 in Beirut, Jurji Zaidan emigrated to Egypt in 1882, and died in Cairo in 1914. His phenomenal output was nothing short of astounding. He founded and for nearly 22 years (1892-1914) singlehandedly edited the great magazine *Al-Hilal*, during which time he was remarkably prolific. Zaidan wrote *The History of Islamic Civilisation* (five volumes), *The History of the Arabs before Islam*, and *The History of Arab Literature and Culture* (four volumes), as well as three books on the history and philosophy of Arabic, one non-historical novel, an autobiography and several other books on a range of subjects. As Bishara Takla the founder of *Al-Ahram* wrote: "Truly if the age of authors were measured by their output, we would have thought that the owner of *Al-Hilal* died at the age of one hundred whereas he left us at barely the age of fifty."

Being Jurji Zaidan's grandson has been a source of honour and humility. He died 25 years before I was born, so when asked if I knew him, I would routinely answer "no" without giving the question further thought. My professional life took me to the World Bank for 30 years to promote the economic and social development in developing countries. After my retirement I established the Zaidan Foundation in 2009 with the intention of informing the public in Egypt and abroad on Jurji Zaidan and his works. It was then that I realised I did know him after all, through reminiscences and values passed onto me by my father, Choucri, and my uncle Emile; and through witnessing how they built the Dar Al-Hilal Publishing House into what it became and remains today. I also read what Jurji wrote about the secrets of his success in his autobiography and his *Al-Hilal* articles as well as the letters he exchanged with family and colleagues.

Zaidan, the son of an illiterate *qahwaji* (or coffeehouse proprietor), was born into the lower classes of Beirut; he was an autodidact and a self-made man. His father forced him to drop out of elementary school to help him run his business. All of Zaidan's learning was self-taught apart from two years in elementary school and one year in the medical school of the Syrian Protestant College which later became the American University of Beirut. He adopted middle-class values and his roots gave him a good understanding of his readers. He would credit this social sensitivity (*al-hassa al-ijtima'iyyah*) with much of his success as a journalist and writer.

Zaidan believed that self-realisation and personal growth are the responsibility of the individual. He believed that character — will-power, integrity and rectitude — was more important than knowledge, education or heritage for worldly success. He credited his success above all to hard work, time consciousness and perseverance. Entrepreneurship and management, especially marketing, were hugely important attributes, and for journalists and writers this meant the ability to select interesting subjects and write objectively in a simple style. His honesty in word and deed won him the following and trust of a wide readership. Khalil Mutran eulogised him as follows: "I have not known a man that combined two such antithetical attributes — greatness and modesty."

Zaidan emigrated to Egypt in 1882 because, in his first year as a medical student, he refused to submit to the dictates of the faculty at the Syrian Protestant College. When one of his professors was dismissed for teaching the theories of Darwin, he joined a strike. Thomas Philipp comments on this episode: "In the first meeting of the protesting students he was made chairman of the meeting. Zaidan hastened to explain he was chosen thanks to his conciliatory nature. But he emerged as one of two students of his class who refused to accept the conditions the college had set up for re-entry of the striking students and left the college never to return."

My father, who was only eleven years old when Jurji died, used to often tell me that his father had a huge influence over him. I experienced this influence in various ways. My father's favourite saying was *al-hilm sayyid al-akhlak* ("Equanimity is the greatest virtue"). In the world of journalism that meant personal considerations should not influence what was published. Intentions were never questioned and issues were treated as objectively as possible; personal attacks were banned. On more than one occasion my father told me that he and his brother decided Dar Al-Hilal would not publish a daily newspaper because this could easily become a political instrument and promoting an agenda would be contrary to the mantra that writers should be as objective as possible and "display truth and frankness without inclining towards any affiliation or party".

Many interactions with my uncle Emile illuminated who Jurji Zaidan really was and what he stood for. Emile's favourite saying was "*La yasih illa al-sahih*" ("Only what is valid is valid") was inscribed on a plaque on his desk. This is also the title of one of his articles in *Al-Hilal* (May 1912). The article conveys the importance of truth and honesty in personal and business relationships. One day when I was in his office, I asked Emile what the significance of the plaque was. He translated it with an English quote: "Honesty is the best policy". This meant balance, perspective and good judgement; and sticking to the facts and the issues without letting words and arguments become substitutes



for deeds. Constructive criticism from readers and others was sought out and published.

Towards the end of his life, during the Ottoman Constitutional Crisis of 1908, Zaidan reflected on what made a society distinctive and what made power legitimate. In a letter to his son Emile in 1908, when the latter was studying in Beirut, Zaidan argued against violent revolution against the Ottomans: "If the Ottomans had mandated the teaching of the Turkish language in all the Ottoman Empire," which they didn't, "our first loyalties may well have been towards the Ottomans rather than the Arabs."

*Al-Hilal* was founded in 1892 and has been published continuously to this day — making it the longest-running magazine in the Arab world. Jurji Zaidan was its founding editor-in-chief, manager and printer. He strove to make it a popular periodical that would influence public opinion and help educate the people. At the time *Al-Hilal* was first issued, culture in Egypt was limited to literature. The new periodical gave it a wider

and more comprehensive meaning. It included history, science, philosophy, sociology, politics and economics, thus merging intellectual thought with art, and science with philosophy. Zaidan believed in the importance of educating the whole of society in the broadest sense.

Zaidan also turned *Al-Hilal* into a platform for the works of distinguished authors, pioneers of Arabic literature, including giants like Hussein Heikal, Taha Hussein, Mohamed Farid Wagdi, Ali Al-Jarim, Abbas Mahmoud Al-Akkad, Mustafa Lutfi Al-Manfaluti, Ahmed Amin, Gubran Khalil Gubran, Khalil Mutran, May Ziadeh and many others. And all this made *Al-Hilal* a towering and unique institution of journalism.

Towards the end of his life, during the aforementioned constitutional crisis, Zaidan reflected on what made a society distinctive and what made power legitimate. But for the most part *Al-Hilal* remained a cultural project and did not engage in political discourse. His non-confrontational nature and his belief that writers should be

as objective as possible without leaning towards any affiliation or party kept him in the intellectual realm and away from political activism.

To this day *Al-Hilal* reflects everything Jurji Zaidan stood for. It remains a beacon of knowledge in all fields: intellectual honesty and truth in discussing complex issues; moderation in discussing political and social issues; and opposition against extremism and terrorism — in short, the cultural heritage of the Nahda. Special issues of *Al-Hilal* celebrated its centennial in 1992 and its 125th and 130th anniversaries in 2017 and 2022. Nothing better illustrates Zaidan's legacy than the cover of the 2017 issue, which says: "*Al-Hilal* is not only a magazine but a repository of the history of Egypt and the Arab nation and a bulwark against extremism and terrorism." As for the cover of the 2022 issue, it proclaimed: "*Al-Hilal*: Still Writing History."

Following Jurji's death in 1914, his two sons, Emile and Choucri Zaidan turned Dar Al-Hilal into a pioneer in launching new types of maga-

zines. By the time Dar Al-Hilal was nationalised in 1961 it had launched: *Al-Musawwar*, the first illustrated weekly magazine in 1924; *Al-Kawakeb*, the first weekly magazine for films; *Hawaa*, the first weekly magazine for women; and several weekly magazines for children starting with *Samir*. Dar Al-Hilal has also had several monthly publications: *Riwayat Al-Hilal* (Al-Hilal Novels); *Kitab Al-Hilal* (The Al-Hilal Book); *Tabibak Al-Khaas* (Your Personal Doctor); and others.

As Dar Al-Hilal made major contributions to the development of journalism in Egypt it also became a de-facto "school of journalism". Many well-known journalists and owners of publishing houses started out at Dar Al-Hilal. Naguib Mitri founded Dar Al-Maaref after his association with Jurji Zaidan; Mustafa and Ali Amin worked many years at Dar Al-Hilal before they founded Akher Sa'a; Anwar Al-Sadat — the third president of Egypt — worked briefly at Dar Al-Hilal writing articles in its magazines before he founded *Al-Gomhouriya*. Many well-known writers held jobs as editors of its magazines, among whom were Fikri Abaza, Ahmed Bahaeddin; Youssef Al-Sibaei and Makram Mohamed Ahmed — the last two became chairmen of Dar Al-Hilal.

Zaidan's instrument was the pen, and he pioneered the historical novel as a new genre of Arabic literature. His 21 novels about Islamic history were serialised in *Al-Hilal*. Set in the context of historical events from pre-Islamic times to the end of the Ottoman Empire, they educated the public about their heritage, culture and history. Whereas writers like Walter Scott and Alexandre Dumas only used historical settings for their characters, Zaidan used the novel and its characters as a way to teach history. His novels were less concerned with exploring human frailties and sensibilities than they were with setting out historical events. He described his approach as follows: "the reader learns about historical facts while he thinks he is reading an entertaining story." He achieved this in prose that makes him a remarkable stylist, hailed by his great contemporary Mustafa Lutfi Al-Manfaluti as "simple and clear though difficult to replicate".

Zaidan's historical novels contributed to the development of a new Arab consciousness and identity and to the secular nationalism of the Nahda. Taha Hussein assessed his contribution in these terms: "The historical novels that Zaidan published had the most important impact which enabled the *Nahda* to bear fruit that readers of today still enjoy."

The novels remain popular to this day throughout the Arab world and also in countries with large Muslim populations. They are also popular in the West. Zaidan's novels have been translated into many languages including Persian, Turkish, Uighur, Urdu, Indonesian, Kurdish and Azeri as well as English, French, German and Spanish. They are republished every decade or so in the Arab world in Egypt, Lebanon and Tunisia. His *History of Islamic Civilisation* was translated into English, Urdu, Turkish and Persian.

Zaidan wrote widely on Arab and Islamic history and on the Arabic language, the basic foundations of Arab cultural and national identity. He was a major advocate for the creation of Cairo University, the first university to be established in Egypt in 1908, and for the establishment of the Mugamma' Al-Lughawi, a language authority modelled on the *Académie Française*.

He had a remarkably productive professional life. In barely three decades, he went from ambition to achievement and from humble beginnings to the heights of recognition. He made a profound impact on the culture of his people, the history of his region, and the literature of his language. His work helped to forge the modern Arab identity, found the modern mass media of his era, educate the masses and bring culture to the broad public. Such is the legacy he bequeathed to the world.

In 1992, the Egyptian government commemorated the 100th anniversary of the establishment of *Al-Hilal* and by commissioning an opera about Zaidan's life, *Hilal Masr* (Egypt's Crescent), produced by the Ministry of Culture and attended by president Hosni Mubarak along with top government officials and prominent Egyptian and Arab figures. The government also issued a commemorative *Al-Hilal* stamp and minted a silver one-pound coin with the portrait of Jurji Zaidan. In 2012, in recognition of *Al-Hilal's* contribution to Egypt's cultural development, the Library of Alexandria digitised the complete *Al-Hilal* issues from 1892 to 2007 as part of its project on the Memory of Modern Egypt.

My own modest contribution to keeping the memory of my grandfather alive is the Zaidan Foundation, established in 2009 to enhance intercultural understanding between the Western and Arab-Islamic cultures. Misunderstandings between the two worlds often begin and are greatly magnified by limited or erroneous knowledge. The Zaidan Foundation's website, launched in 2012, honours the legacy and works of Jurji Zaidan; it is designed to be a resource for scholars and readers all over the world, including important works in Arabic, English and French by and about the great man. One hundred and fifteen years' worth of *Al-Hilal* issues and eleven historical novels can be read in Arabic, so can all the major books Zaidan wrote on language and his autobiography. Four major works on Zaidan's contributions can be read in English and French. Nine novels translated into French and six into English are also available. *Hilal Masr* and other videos about Zaidan can also be viewed on the website.

The writer is an economist who directed the World Bank department that covered the Middle East and supported Egypt's economic and social development. He founded the Zaidan Foundation ([www.zaidanfoundation.org](http://www.zaidanfoundation.org)) in 2009.