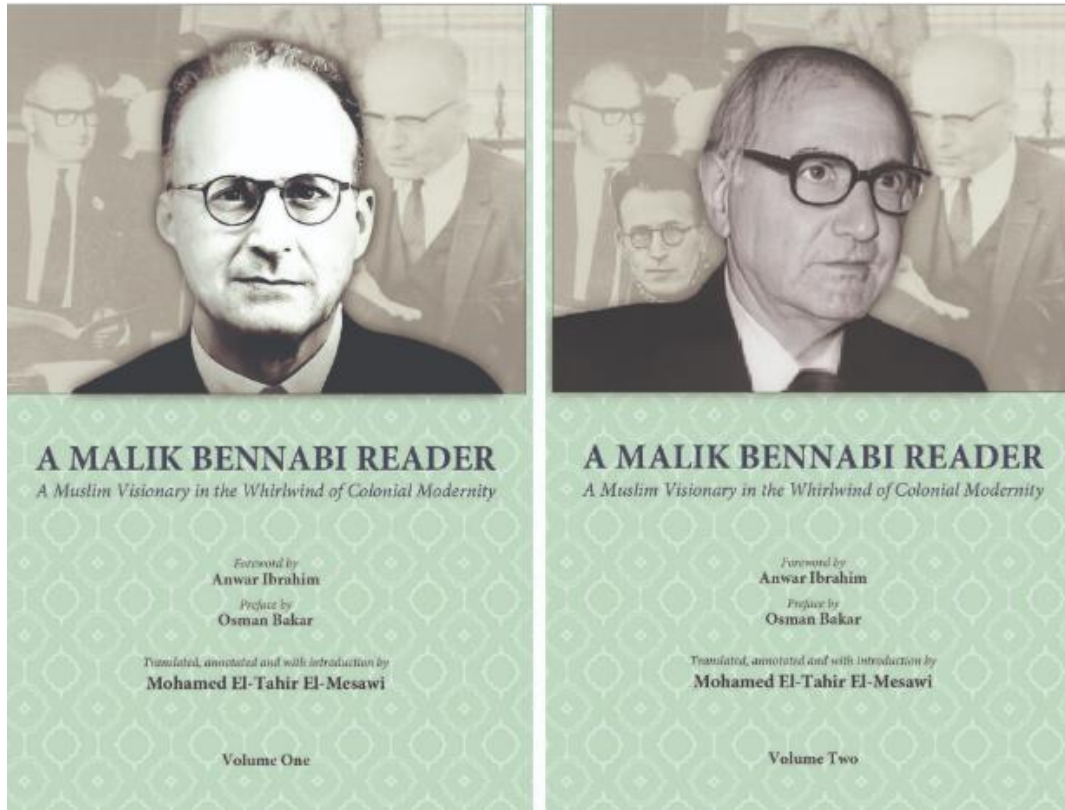


UNVEILING THE LEGACY OF MALIK BENNABI (1905–1973): A READER'S JOURNEY

(Report on the launch of “A Malik Bennabi Reader” at ISTAC, IIUM with Dato’ Sri Anwar Ibrahim, Prime Minister of Malaysia)



“At the heart of Bennabi’s philosophical framework lies a spirited and profound intellectual expedition anchored on the drive for civilisational renewal. His insights into these core themes are as timeless as they are transformative.”

Dato’ Sri Anwar Ibrahim, Prime Minister of Malaysia

By, Muntaha Artalim Zaim

Background of the Even

On Wednesday, 5th February 2025, corresponding to 6th Sha'ban 1446 H, ‘A *Malik Bennabi Reader: A Muslim Visionary in the Whirlwind of Colonial Modernity*’ was honoured to see the light of day. The birth of this new book was announced at the book launch ceremony held at the International Institute of Islamic Thought and Civilization (ISTAC), International Islamic University Malaysia (IIUM). This historic occasion witnessed the coming together of prominent Muslim scholars, think tanks, postgraduate students, intellectuals, and others who are interested in contemporary Islamic thought. This book was authored by none other than Prof. Dr. Mohamed El-Tahir El-Mesawi, a scholar who is an expert on the ideas of Bennabi. Prof. El-Mesawi is a senior professor and a distinguished scholar in Maqasid al-Shariah and Islamic

Contemporary Thought at the International Islamic University Malaysia (IIUM). For many decades, Prof. El-Mesawi has contributed significantly to his field of specialization.

The event on that day was made even more special with the presence and officiation of the launch made by the Honourable Dato' Seri Anwar Ibrahim, Prime Minister of Malaysia. One of the highlights of the book launch was to emphasize the importance of Bennabi's ideas in understanding the Islamic civilization and the challenges faced by the Muslim Ummah.

Malik Bennabi (1905–1973) was an Algerian Muslim thinker known for his profound discourse on the *problématique* of Islamic civilization. He extensively analyzed the factors leading to the decline of the Muslim world and proposed solutions based on the concept of *évolution des idées* (evolution of ideas). His theories on *colonisabilité* (susceptibility to colonization) and *le phénomène coranique* (the Qur'anic phenomenon) have left a significant impact on intellectual discussions regarding the revival of the Muslim ummah.

With the launch of this book, it is hoped that Bennabi's thoughts will gain wider recognition and be further explored by future generations of academics and political leaders. This book serves as a significant contribution to the development of future studies rooted in Islamic values.

The book launch ceremony held at the ISTAC Seminar Room was truly a special occasion, with prominent professors attending this auspicious event. The ambience at the venue felt as though a reunion of Muslim scholars from around the globe had convened in Malaysia to congratulate Bennabi. Many attendees travelled from abroad to participate in this significant occasion, including Prof. Dr. Ibrahim Zein, a senior professor from Qatar University. The event underscored Malik Bennabi's enduring influence and the global academic community's deep appreciation for his intellectual legacy.



Prime Minister Dato' Seri Anwar Ibrahim's Appreciation for Malik Bennabi

It is a matter of great pride when a political figure, especially a prime minister, appreciates major intellectual works. After further research, it became evident that PM Anwar Ibrahim shares a deep historical connection with Malik Bennabi.

He emphasized that his admiration for Bennabi's intellectual thought has been nurtured since he was a youth. In a personal reflection, he stated, *"On a personal note, I have been an ardent student of Bennabi since my ABIM days and continue to discover new bezels of wisdom and pragmatism in his work"* (vol. 1, p. xi). This statement highlights not only his long-standing appreciation for Bennabi's ideas but also his ongoing engagement with the depth and practicality of Bennabi's thought, which continues to inspire and offer valuable insights. This highlights the deep intellectual bond between Anwar Ibrahim and Malik Bennabi's works, which has existed ever since 1971, when ABIM (Angkatan Belia Islam Malaysia, or the Islamic Youth Movement of Malaysia), was founded. At that time, Anwar Ibrahim served as its president. This long-standing connection underscores the enduring influence of Bennabi's ideas on Anwar Ibrahim's intellectual and political journey. Besides that, he has even served as a keynote speaker at several conferences dedicated to Bennabi's ideas. In recognition of this, Prof. Emeritus Datuk Osman Bakar, former rector of IIUM, described Anwar Ibrahim as a *die-hard* admirer of Malik Bennabi's works. This profound connection underscores the significance of Bennabi's legacy in shaping contemporary intellectual and political discourse.

In writing the foreword for El-Mesawi's book, PM Anwar Ibrahim equates Malik Bennabi's intellectual stature with that of other great Islamic figures like Ibn Khaldun, citing the vast scope of knowledge both scholars mastered in their respective fields. He also emphasizes the urgent importance of *qiyam* (values) within Bennabi's work, stressing the philosopher's commitment to the reform and renewal of Islamic thought.

What distinguishes Malik Bennabi from other reformers, according to PM Anwar Ibrahim, is Bennabi's ability to frame his intellectual approach within "Islamic principles, refraining from endorsing any departure from religion" (vol. 1, p. xi). This unique characteristic underpins Bennabi's enduring relevance in the field of Islamic reform.

He also emphasized during the launch event that Bennabi's writings are highly relevant in addressing contemporary challenges. Even though his ideas date back some time, they continue to offer solutions to numerous complex issues, grounded in both the spiritual and intellectual heritage of Muslims. Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim expressed deep gratitude to Prof. Dr. El-Mesawi for translating Bennabi's work into English, as well as for analyzing and providing important commentary on Bennabi's writings. This thoughtful effort ensures that Bennabi's intellectual legacy continues to resonate in today's global discourse.

During the book launch, the Prime Minister emphasized that the name Malik Bennabi is not well-known outside academic circles. According to him, Malik Bennabi could be considered a "student" of Ibn Khaldun and had a unique capacity to articulate these issues through a deep understanding of Islam, identity, and values.

Although Bennabi passed away more than fifty years ago, his thoughts remain timeless and profound. Bennabi sought to understand why some societies were vulnerable to domination while others thrived, aligning with Ibn Khaldun's theories on social dynamics. The speaker emphasized that Bennabi's call for true liberation was not just about casting off external rule but also about renewing society's intellectual and spiritual foundations. The concept of *colonosibilité*, coined by Bennabi, refers to a "colonized mentality" — a mindset that remains submissive even after colonial powers are gone. This mental colonization, the speaker argued, persists in societies even after the physical presence of colonial powers has ended, creating intellectual inertia, political stagnation, and social fragmentation. He also highlighted that Bennabi's perspective was not one of isolation or excessive religiosity but rooted in spirituality and inner faith. His intellectual pursuits were driven by courage and deep moral convictions, not political rhetoric or intellectual games.

In winding up his speech, the Prime Minister called on the audience to revive their spirit of "convivencia" — the era of knowledge and cultural exchange that once defined Al-Andalus. He further expressed his hope that Malaysia, too, would embody this spirit and become a crucible for ideas, cultures, and wisdom. The Prime Minister's gesture in providing the foreword for this book marks his close connection to the ideas of Malik Bennabi.

IIUM Rector's Messages

In his speech, the IIUM Rector, Prof. Emeritus Datuk Dr. Osman Bakar, emphasized that his academic connection with Prof. El-Mesawi regarding Malik Bennabi dates back to 1991, during *The International Seminar on Malik Bennabi*, held from September 1-4, 1991. According to him, that conference was a historical event, because that was the first time ever a conference on Malik Bennabi was held in the Muslim World.

At that conference, it was the first time he met Prof. El-Mesawi, and during that occasion, Prof. El-Mesawi presented a paper titled "*Malik Bennabi's Contribution to Islamic Social Theory*." During that time in 1991, Prof. El-Mesawi was still a master's student at IIUM.

During the launch, the IIUM Rector mentioned that the relationship between Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim and Malik Bennabi's thoughts has become deeply rooted (diehard). Therefore, he was very enthusiastic about providing the foreword and even launching the publication of this book.

He also expressed his gratitude to Prof. El-Mesawi, who is the translator and editor of this work. The publication of this book by a senior professor, according to him, should serve as a motivation for others to publish their scholarly works.



Prof. El-Mesawi with Dr. Muntaha

Prof. El-Mesawi's Book 'A Malik Bennabi Reader'

The publication of this book reminds me of my experience a few years ago, around 2012 and 2013, when Prof. El-Mesawi was preparing a very special book about Ibn 'Ashur. During that time, I began to delve deeper into Ibn 'Ashur's works, not only his Tafsir and Maqasid but also his writings in various print media. Prof. El-Mesawi asked me to transcribe Ibn 'Ashur's articles published in newspapers and magazines. As I recall, I transcribed numerous pieces from newspapers and magazines published in Tunisia, Egypt, Syria, and other places. I typed hundreds of pages, and through this process, I learned a great deal from Ibn 'Ashur's writings.

That experience not only deepened my understanding of Ibn 'Ashur's intellectual contributions but also served as a formative moment in my own academic and intellectual journey.

Eventually, he contacted me and presented me with a special gift: a book titled "*Jamharat Maqālāt wa Rasā'il al-Shaykh al-Imām Muḥammad Ibn 'Ashūr*", which is a compilation of Ibn 'Ashur's works that were scattered across various media, brought together in one collection. This book was published in four volumes, with approximately 2,000 pages in total.

This gesture was not only a profound gift but also a significant milestone in my academic journey, as it allowed me to see the breadth of Ibn 'Ashur's intellectual contributions in a consolidated format. It reinforced the depth of his impact on modern Islamic thought and my own understanding of his ideas.

This work not only reignited interest in learning more about Ibn 'Ashur but also brought together new aspects of his thought that were previously unexplored. By compiling these previously unpublished materials, this book allows Ibn 'Ashur's figure to be seen more clearly and comprehensively.

Through this collection, readers are provided with a more complete picture of Ibn 'Ashur's intellectual contributions, further highlighting his significance in the development of modern Islamic thought. The book offers a deeper insight into his perspectives, shedding light on his vast influence and the relevance of his work today.

Prof. El-Mesawi's latest academic work, *A Malik Bennabi Reader: A Muslim Visionary in the Whirlwind of Colonial Modernity*, consists of two substantial volumes, with a relatively small font size. The first volume contains 506 pages, while the second volume has 599 pages. Altogether, both volumes comprise 1,105 pages—quite a hefty book.

My acquaintance with Prof. El-Mesawi goes back a long way. There was a time when he requested my assistance in managing *at-Tajdid Journal*. Later, when I became his supervisee during my PhD program, I got to know him more closely. I realized that all of his academic works are original, meticulously verified in great detail, and thoroughly read and re-read. At this juncture, I can honestly say that all of his written works are conducted professionally, without compromising academic quality. His work ethic is close to that of a perfectionist. His definition of scholarly work requires a high level of patience, persistence, meticulousness, resilience, and, of course, the sacrifice of time and huge effort that is difficult to even imagine. His commitment to excellence has not

only shaped his academic career but also set a standard for the high caliber of work he has produced, leaving a lasting impact on those fortunate enough to work with him.

Prof. El-Mesawi's focus on Malik Bennabi's works is not just in this book. It began with various contributions, including his translation and analysis of Malik Bennabi's *"The Qur'anic Phenomenon: An Essay on the Theory of the Qur'an"*, published by Islamic Book Trust in 2004. He also authored the book *"The Qur'an, Modernity, and Globalization: Studies in Commemoration of Malik Bennabi"*, published by IIUM Press in 2014, and there are other works on Malik Bennabi in the form of articles in journals and book chapters.

The launch of this by the author truly unveiled the essence of Malik Bennabi's ideas in a more profound and comprehensive manner, presenting Prof. El-Mesawi as a multi-disciplinary and multi-talented figure in the realm of intellectual pursuits.

In the book we are discussing, '*A Malik Bennabi Reader*', Prof. El-Mesawi has translated 88 of Malik Bennabi's works and divided them into seven major sections. These sections cover a wide range of topics, including religious matters, social issues, culture, socio-history and civilization, politics and policy, economics, and the role of Islam and Muslims in the modern world.

This comprehensive structure by Prof. El-Mesawi allows the readers to engage with Bennabi's multifaceted intellectual legacy across various disciplines, showcasing the depth of his analysis on the challenges facing the Muslim world and offering insights into his vision for its revival and progress.

Bennabi's original writings in French and Arabic have been translated and deeply commented upon by Prof. El-Mesawi in English. This work by Prof. El-Mesawi will undoubtedly become a crucial reference and a valuable addition to the intellectual treasure trove, further enhancing Malik Bennabi's recognition and appreciation of his ideas. The reason for this is that English-speaking readers dominate this era, and even Islamic studies, which were once primarily conducted in Arabic, are now often presented in English.

And this book is expected to extend the influence of Bennabi and his ideas not only in Southeast Asia but also around the world.

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