

## **The Will to Live**

### **Abu Al-Qassem Al-Shabi**

Ghayth Armanazi, Syrian diplomat and writer, provides an urgent and timely translated extract from the iconic Arabic poem 'The Will to Live', which is also known widely as the 'Marseillaise' of Tunis. He writes:

Abu Al-Qassem Al-Shabi's poem became the rallying call for the Tunisian Revolution. It is galvanising street protests everywhere and spreading with new vitality throughout the Arab world.

Al-Shabi was born in Tunisia in 1909 and, because of persistent ill-health, died at a very young age in 1934. He left a substantial poetic legacy, often giving vent to a romanticism and almost Rousseau-like passion for nature. He was also an early twentieth-century champion of his country's independence and of the 'people's' struggle against tyrannical rule everywhere. This poem is his most famous, and generations of Arab students in the thirties, forties and onwards memorised its powerful, stirring words as they sought the freedoms they were being denied by colonial regimes.

Now these verses have come full circle to inspire a new generation struggling against repression from 'within' a post-independence Arab state system.

## **The Will to Live**

Once the people summon the will to live

Destiny is bound to answer their call.

Night is also bound to clear away

And the shackles doomed to destruction.

Those who are not surrounded by a passion for life

Will evaporate and perish in its wake.

This I am told by the living nature around me,

And when I hear the call of its invisible Spirit

As the wind blows in the vales,

Over the mountains and through the trees –  
Should I be called to a high purpose  
I shall ride the waves of hope and dismiss all trepidation.  
For he who desires not the ascendance of mountains  
Shall live ever after between the crevices.  
In my heart erupts the blood of youth  
And in my breast a raging wind,  
As I listen to the bursts of thunder  
And the rhythmic tune of storm and rain.

The Earth replied when I asked: do you hate humanity?  
I bless among people the champions of ambition  
Who find pleasure in riding the storm  
And I curse those overtaken by the charge of time –  
Submitting to a life quiescent as a stone.  
Alive is the Universe with its Love for Life.