Introduction

For the Middle East, the old appellation of the Ottoman Empire—the “sick man”—still seems apt. The social and political order in the Middle East seems as afflicted today as it appeared to observers a century ago, and many of the symptoms have not changed. Paul Kennedy, author of Preparing for the Twenty-First Century, has provided the kind of trenchant summation perhaps only a complete outsider can dare to offer:

Far from preparing for the twenty-first century, much of the Arab and Muslim world appears to have difficulty in coming to terms with the nineteenth century, with its composite legacy of secularization, democracy, laissez-faire economies, transnational industrial and commercial linkages, social change, and intellectual questioning. If one needed an example of the importance of cultural attitudes in explaining a society’s response to change, contemporary Islam provides it.

Some historians and political scientists of the Middle East would recoil at this hint of cultural determinism, and most Arabs and Muslims would blame colonialism instead. But the Arab and Muslim world’s “difficulty in coming to terms” is undeniable.

This book is a critical assessment of two attempts to overcome that difficulty: Arab nationalism (or Arabism) and Islamic fundamentalism (or Islamism). Believers in each have tried to remake the modern Middle East into a seat of power and prosperity. So far they have failed, in many instances producing even more serious complications. While Arab nationalism seems finally to have been abandoned, Islamic fundamentalism remains the most widespread alternative to the resolute pragmatism of the “new Middle East.” Whether it will prevail is one of the great preoccupations of our own fin-de-siècle.

But this is not a future study. It is a book about modern history and contemporary politics, looking back over a troubled Arab century and a difficult Islamic decade. Like Europe, the Middle East has been buffeted by ideologies. Admittedly, their effects have not been as devastating in the Middle East; Europe paid for its nationalism with two terrible world wars, and then paid again for its communism with over forty years of threat and
division. Ideology in Europe has had a greater capacity for destruction than ideology in the Middle East.

Yet if the failings of the Arab “awakening” and the Islamic “revival” seem smaller in comparison, this is largely thanks to restraints imposed by the West. It is usually argued that the oil extracted by foreigners, the military interventions made by foreigners, and the aid granted by foreigners have combined to make the Middle East dependent. But they may have also restrained a pursuit of utopias that could have pushed the Middle East over the edge long ago, into famines, gulags, and civil wars. As it is, parts of the region have been gutted or “cleansed” in the name of the Arab nation or Islam, from Kurdistan to Kuwait, from Lebanon to Sudan.

This is necessarily a book about illusion and disillusion, but even more, it is a series of studies in contradictions that finally became unsustainable. Arabism and Islamism purported to be authentic and original creations of Arabs and Muslims, but both owed much to foreign influences, romantic and radical. Both pretended to be liberating and unifying ideals, but their practice often produced oppression and division. Most of these contradictions have ended in a shattering of dreams, and sometimes of bodies. Each chapter picks up some discarded scrap of paper or shard of glass, and asks how the hope it represented came to nought.

The structure of this book is straightforward. An integrative chapter opens each of the book’s two parts—one devoted to Arabism and the other to Islamism. Each integrative chapter is followed by seven more chapters on the particular origins or actual effects of Arabism or Islamism, in various times and places. This is not a seamless book of running narrative; its chapters are puzzle pieces, interlocking but separate. They can be assembled in more than one order, although the order suggested here seems the most logical to their author. The first part, on Arabism, revolves largely around personalities; the second, on Islamism, is structured around movements and events. The emphasis could easily have been reversed, but the sum would have been the same.

“Awake, O Arabs, and arise!”

The reign of ideology began with the spread of Arab nationalism. At the turn of the century, the Middle East was still largely the domain of the once-great empire of the Ottomans. It had been an empire defined by Islam but inhabited by peoples of many faiths and languages. Islamic tradition and
local custom defined the relations between the empire’s diverse peoples. As Western influence grew, however, the ideas of national self-determination began to make inroads—first among the subject peoples in the Ottoman Balkans, later among non-Muslim minorities in the Asian heartland, and finally among Muslims themselves. Thus was born Arab nationalism—the idea that the far-flung speakers of Arabic constituted a distinct nation, entitled to independence from “foreign” Turkish rule. Its enthusiasts called this the Nahda, the “Arab awakening”: the stirring of the Arabs to their own vast potential, after centuries of supposed subjugation.

At first the idea took a liberal form. But then came World War I and the partition of the Ottoman Empire by the European powers, led by Britain and France. Zionism, still another new nationalism, took root in Palestine under the British umbrella. Arab nationalism became radical, both politically and socially. When most Arab states became independent after World War II, they adopted a war footing, and their sense of grievance took the form of an ideological fervor, sometimes tied to the personality cult of this century’s great Arab figure, Gamal Abdul Nasser. The American socialist leader Norman Thomas attended a rally of the Arab National Movement in Beirut in 1958, and perhaps best summarized the content of this ideology: “I have a hard time understanding what Arab socialism means,” he said. “But it seems to me that its slogan should be ‘Liberty, equality, and revenge.’”

In the end, Arab nationalism produced very little liberty, equality, or even revenge. Its heroes were military dictators who promised salvation, but Nasser, its great champion, was defeated on the battlefield in 1967. The appeal of Arab nationalism and pan-Arabism has been on the wane ever since, and the resulting void has been filled by an unstable mix of state loyalty, local patriotism, and Islamic particularism. There are a few in the Arab world, and also among Arab intellectuals in the bubble of Western academe, who still proclaim the revolutionary virtues of Arab nationalism. But in the Middle East, the idea seems as tired as its surviving souls, who convened in 1994 in a conference in Beirut. “From where I sat,” an observer of this conference wrote,

the conference appeared to represent an extinct tribe using strange words—indeed, a language incomprehensible in our time. Most of them had grey hair and stooping backs. Some needed canes to help them walk. Some had hearing aids and shaking hands that made it difficult for them to write, and others had difficulty getting the words out.

“Astonishingly,” he added “none of this stopped them.” But they were “blowing in a broken bagpipe.” Among the Arabs themselves, it is the
poets who have most courageously declared the era over. In contrast, chapter 1 of this book employs prose to reassess Arab nationalism’s lost moment in the Middle East.

Although Arab nationalism came to stand for resistance against the West, it relied heavily upon foreign ideas, often transmitted by sympathetic foreign friends. In fact, the “Arab awakening” was partly a wakening of the Arabs by foreign enthusiasts and romantics. Such foreign advocacy of the Arabs ran much deeper than the famous case of T. E. Lawrence. In the unfolding of successive Arab “awakenings,” foreigners turn up in every act, to recite some of the most dramatic lines. The French social psychologist Gustave Le Bon told the Arabs they belonged to an ingenious race of conquerors. The English poet Wilfrid Scawen Blunt told them they alone practiced the pure Islam. The German Orientalist Martin Hartmann told them they enjoyed a cultural superiority over the Turks who governed them. The French publicist Eugène Jung told them they had been born to the art of self-government. The American philanthropist Charles Crane told them they would inherit the earth from a dissolute West. The British traveller Freya Stark told them they would achieve world power through unity. The British historian Arnold Toynbee told them they had been elevated by Clio, the French Islamicist Louis Massignon told them they had been graced by God. The British soldier John Glubb told them they were made for battle. The French novelist and playwright Jean Genet told them they were the stuff of dreams.

And these ideas found ways to Arab ears and eyes. The writings of these foreigners were cited, translated, and plagiarized. The task of appropriation began with two books of the early 1880s, Blunt’s Future of Islam and Le Bon’s La civilisation des arabes, that demonstrably inspired the first nationalists. Foreigners also became publicists for Arabism, as Hartmann and Jung did in the years before World War I. (They, too, wrote books: Jung’s Les puissances devant la révolte arabe and Hartmann’s Die arabische Frage.) Foreigners also sponsored nationalist journalism, including newspapers and books, exemplified by Crane’s support in the 1930s for George Antonius, the author of The Arab Awakening. And often they arrived in Arab lands as prophets from afar, as Toynbee did in several visits to Nasser’s Egypt in the early 1960s, where he lectured on the historical imperative of Arab unity. (The state-run publishing house disseminated his books and lectures in Arabic translation.)

The words of foreigners fed the nationalist imagination and provided
crucial validation for the nationalist narrative. Millions of people had to be persuaded that they were Arabs—that as Arabs they had a great history and a greater destiny. Who had more persuasive power than this gallery of foreigners, who confirmed every historical premise of Arabism? Fouad Ajami has written of “illusions that outsiders come to fix onto a region they adopt—that not only will it find its own way but that it will help others as well… they are expressed and then imported by the people to whom they refer. Nature imitates art and such illusions become part of national self-delusions.” Wittingly or not, these foreigners acted as sorcerer’s apprentices, performing sleights of hand and heart for the nationalist “awakening.” Their scholarship and speculation made crucial contributions to the trilogy of Arabism, Arab nationalism, and pan-Arabism.

Arab historiography has largely omitted the doings of foreign friends from the nationalist narrative because they undermine Arabism’s very claim to authenticity. In this book, they are presented in all their subversive variety. Five of the chapters on Arab nationalism uncover the involvement of foreigners of several nationalities—English, French, German, American—in the gestation and propagation of the Arab idea. Two chapters also consider the role of two self-professed Arabs who made some of the earliest effective Arab propaganda in the West.

Wilfrid Scawen Blunt, an English country squire, was the first foreigner to take up the cause of Arab independence. Blunt wrote in support of Arab separation from the Ottoman Empire and an Arab caliphate some thirty-six years before the Arab Revolt of 1916. And he got a hearing: Blunt was an amateur poet, explorer, and supporter of oppressed peoples who enjoyed easy access to the high policy circles of Victorian England. His literary advocacy of the Arab cause thus became famous.

But did he act to promote Arab separatism? Documents in a country records office in the south of England (separated from the bulk of Blunt’s papers in Cambridge) provided the answer. For a number of years, Blunt subsidized John Louis Sabunji, a Syrian Catholic priest-turned-journalist who conducted a press campaign against the Ottoman sultan and in favor of an Arab caliphate. Chapter 2 is an exploration of this partnership, which lasted from 1880 to 1883. It was a curious liaison: Blunt was a romantic idealist, Sabunji a consummate opportunist. Their influence on the gestation of Arab nationalism is difficult to trace, but their propaganda anticipated all its early themes.

The nascent Arab cause found an even more persistent champion in
Martin Hartmann, a left-leaning German Orientalist. After completing a doctorate in philology, Hartmann served at the German consulate in Beirut from 1876 to 1887, where he cultivated many connections to the fathers of the Arabic literary revival. He later took a position as an Arabic instructor in Berlin, and became a dissident scholar who tried to break the monopoly of formalist philology on German Oriental studies. At the turn of the century, Hartmann launched a campaign to persuade his countrymen that Germany should abandon its Ottoman alliance and support Arab independence. At the time, the Arab movement existed only as a rumor in Europe’s capitals, and Hartmann gained a reputation as a visionary. During World War I, when Germany’s link to the Ottoman Empire became a war alliance, Hartmann did a quick reversal, choosing German patriotism over his passion for the Arabs. But by this time, he had played no small role in posing “the Arab question” to Europe. Chapter 3 is a study of Hartmann’s promotion of Arab independence years before the emergence of an Arab movement, based upon his own writings and papers.

The career of Eugène Jung, a French publicist on behalf of the Arabs, completes this trilogy of three early foreign friends. It is still impossible to say why Jung, a former French colonial official in Tonkin, took up the Arab cause. He had no experience in the Ottoman Empire or in any Arab land. Jung’s enthusiasm seems to have been fired by Nagib Azoury, another Syrian Christian who arrived in Paris around 1904, and there published a book claiming that the Arab provinces were ripe for revolt. Jung gave himself wholeheartedly to Azoury’s campaign, and they worked together during the decade between 1906 and 1916 to persuade France to champion the cause of Arab liberty.

The partnership of Jung and Azoury is a famous one, but it ended in 1916 with Azoury’s death. Chapter 4 uncovers and assesses Jung’s subsequent activities. In 1916 he found a new partner, a Syrian journalist in Paris, and together they published a newspaper that attempted to galvanize French support for the Arab Revolt of the Sharif Husayn and an independent Syria under Sharifian rule. (A unique set of the newspaper survives in the press annex of the Bibliothèque Nationale in Versailles, and it is the basis of this study.) French authorities censored the newspaper and ultimately closed it, but Jung persisted in his campaign right up to the postwar peace conference. Ironically, the Arab delegation snubbed him there, leading Jung to despair of the cause he had embraced. Jung personified the limits of the early foreign friends. He had more enthusiasm than influence, and
he relied completely on the mediation of Syrian Christian journalists for his knowledge of Arab affairs. That said, Jung set a precedent of French sympathy for Arab independence which would be followed by a later generation of dissidents.

With the passage of friends like Blunt, Hartmann, and Jung, two men from Lebanon directly assumed the role of spokesmen for the Arabs in the West: Shakib Arslan and George Antonius. Between them, these two prolific polemicists repackaged the Arab argument in terms intelligible to foreign audiences, and some of their texts resonate to this day.

Chapter 5 considers the career of Shakib Arslan. Born to a notable Druze family in 1869, Arslan vigorously defended the Ottoman Empire right through the disaster of World War I. He then chose exile in Switzerland, where he worked for Arab independence from French and British rule between the wars. In particular, Arslan published a journal, La Nation arabe, which doggedly put the case for Syrian and North African independence before French public opinion. During World War II, Arslan placed his last bet on the Axis powers and he died in obscurity. But his propaganda between the wars contributed to the erosion of French resolve over Syria.

A similar fate awaited George Antonius, who defended the claims for Arab independence in the court of British and American opinion between the wars. Antonius, born a Greek Orthodox Christian in Lebanon, studied in Egypt and England, acquired the nationality of a Palestinian, and called himself an Arab. He was very much a cultural middleman, inhabiting the shifting ground between England and the Arabs, leaving many unsure of where he stood until publication of his book, The Arab Awakening, in 1938.

Antonius' book had a long and influential run as the authoritative account of Arab nationalism's origins and Britain’s wartime promises to the Arabs. It was a brilliant study of considerable literary merit, with all the appeal of an exposé. However, it was not a history. Even the late Albert Hourani (upon inaugurating the Antonius Lectures at Oxford) conceded that Antonius "rarely quoted his sources or explained why, when they conflicted, he preferred one of them to another." The Arab Awakening is ambivalent as history—an ambivalence shared, in a different way, by T. E. Lawrence's Seven Pillars of Wisdom, which covered some of the same ground.

Yet The Arab Awakening remains the bible of Arabism. There was a time when defenders of the book argued that it met all the criteria of history.
Many postmodernist readers claim that the maintenance of such criteria is hegemonic, and that all scholarship is connected to politics anyway. Yet Edward Said holds up *The Arab Awakening* as history once again; to dismiss Antonius’ book as an “emotional and subjective cri de coeur” is to dismiss its “enormous contribution to knowledge.” The book has “historical force,” writes Said. *The Arab Awakening*, almost sixty years later, apparently still provides too much comfort and assurance to permit its retirement from the canon.

In any case, chapter 6 deals not with the book but with the last years of Antonius’ life. The last episode in Antonius’ career demonstrated a confusion between idea and action, between the desirable and the feasible, that came to characterize an entire generation of Arab intellectuals. The attitudes that Antonius personified—a misreading of the force of Zionism, an intellectual intransigence dressed as a pursuit of justice, a dismissal of the very real differences among Arabs—ultimately proved the undoing of the “cause” he celebrated. This was a species of *trahison des clercs* of which Antonius was a forerunner.

In the last two chapters, the focus returns to Arabism’s foreign friends. A glaring omission from the critique of Orientalism is the projection of Western homoerotic fantasy on the Orient. Like larger Orientalism, this sub-variety had its French and English styles. It was characterized by a passionate attachment to objectified Arab males, accompanied by a guilt-repelling anticolonialism. The French playwright Jean Genet, for all his unique genius, firmly belonged to this tradition. After a remarkable career as a playwright and poet, Genet turned into a political radical in the late 1960s, adopting the cause of the Black Panthers in America and then joining the Palestinian *fedayeen* in Jordan. Chapter 7 examines the playwright’s immersion in the Palestinian cause.

As Genet admitted, his attachment to the Palestinian *fedayeen* had strong sensuous overtones, and he invoked no logic in support of his emotional bond: “I defend the Palestinians wholeheartedly and automatically. They are in the right because I love them.” This tone rather diminished Genet’s effectiveness on behalf of Palestine. But he could convey something of Palestinian suffering in a vivid language, and so served as a counterweight in Paris to Jean-Paul Sartre and Michel Foucault, who preferred Israel’s claims. (Foucault’s own erotic fascination with the Arabs, most fully indulged during a year in Tunisia, did not resurface as political passion.) Genet regarded pan-Arabism as reactionary. But his political engagement
on behalf of the Algerian revolution and North African immigrants in France suggested a broad investment of his “love” in the Arab world. Of all the foreign friends, Genet best personified the appeal of Arab causes on the very margins of Western culture. As it happened, the upheavals of the 1960s confused the center and the margins, making Genet one of the most formidable literary friends any Arab movement has ever had.

American support for Arab nationalism drew on a very different tradition, pioneered not by radical playwrights but by Presbyterian missionaries. Chapter 8 considers the rise and fall of the small groups of Americans who came to the Levant to proselytize among the Arabs, but then became proselytizers for the Arab nationalist cause in the United States. The sons of missionaries and educators became America’s first diplomats in the Arab world, and their expertise proved indispensable as the U.S. succeeded Britain and France as the dominant outside power in the Middle East.

Arab nationalism had an impressive array of well-placed friends in mid-century America. But America has no stable policy class and no fixed political elite, and by virtue of the Arabists’ long experience abroad they lost touch with politics at home. After the creation of Israel in 1948, some Arabists became self-appointed lobbyists for Arab governments or movements, and the term took on partisan connotations. Since the mid-1970s, many of the veteran Arabists have been eased out of the State Department, replaced by “peace processors” and diplomats with experience on both sides of the Arab-Israeli divide. Yet their influence lingers in subtle ways, most notably in an intellectual predisposition to appease radical Islam.

"Yes, he was a lover of Arabs," wrote Edward Said of Genet, "something not many of us are accustomed to from Western writers and thinkers, who have found an adversarial relationship with us more congenial." In fact, Arab nationalists were thoroughly accustomed to the admiring gazes of Western writers and thinkers, from whom they borrowed many of their own self-exalting theories. Perhaps one more Arab grievance against the West should be that the West held up too flattering a mirror to Arab nationalist posturing, Nasserist heroes, and Palestinian bravado. Now that all have failed, a few Arabs are beginning the painful task of reconstructing their own image, looking not to their professed friends but to themselves. The outcome is far from certain.

Islam as Ideology
One reason for that uncertainty has been the rapid rise of Islamic fundamentalism, or Islamism, in the very space once occupied by Arab nationalism.

Islam, it has been rightly noted, is not an “ism.” As a religion and a civilization, Islam has commanded vaster expanses of time and space than any modern ideology. Today it flourishes in countless forms, giving meaning to lives led in places as distinct as the immigrant quarters of Europe’s cities, the villages and towns of Egypt, and the highlands of Afghanistan. Within every society, it takes multiple forms, from the high Islam of the great theological academies to the low Islam of the backroom mosques. In the realm of politics, it has been mobilized to legitimate differing and often rival political orders, each of which claims to embody the true Islam. But Islam resists possession. It is impossible to monopolize, and its survival and spread attest to its flexibility.

Yet in the hands of some of its present-day adherents, Islam has been remade into something militant and monolithic: fundamentallism, or what some prefer to call Islamism. This is very much an “ism,” formulated not only as a religious and cultural preference, but as a modern ideology. Like modern ideologies, its exclusive claims draw stark lines in minds, and turn it rigidly against Islam’s diversity, understood as deviation. And like all modern political ideologies, Islamism is obsessed with the acquisition of political power, and largely indifferent to the means used to acquire it. Chapter 9 follows that obsession from its origins to the present.

At the heart of each subsequent chapter is the same question: has the revival of Islam become the force of renewal it purports to be? The answer, demonstrated here across a wide range of movements and settings, is that Islamism appears to embody many of the same flaws as Arabism. In part, its ideas are an “Islamic” reworking of a secular radicalism, and its effect has been to give new life to old rationales for oppression, authoritarianism, and sectarian division.

In its very essence, Islamism is a reaffirmation of difference—not only between Muslims and non-Muslims, but between different varieties of Islam, and particularly between the earliest of Islam’s choices, Sunni and Shi’ite. A long history of bigotry has divided them, and in our time it has now intruded even upon the pilgrimage to Mecca, as a result of two revolutions of religious fervor made by the House of Sa’ud and the Imam Khomeini. In 1987 the pilgrimage finally boiled over, in a bloody clash between Saudi police and Iranian pilgrims that left more than four
hundred dead. Chapter 10 seeks the context of this incident, and finds it in the reawakening of sectarian identity which is the ominous shadow of a revived Islam. The pilgrimage continues to mutate, and the chapter follows the rivalry through the events of 1994.

Another inner controversy brought to the fore by Islamism involves the Islamic standing of Syria’s Alawis (once known more commonly as Nusayris). Many of Syria’s strongmen, and most notably its president, Hafiz al-Asad, hail from this sect, whose adherents number perhaps 12 percent of Syria’s population. The concentration of power in Alawi hands coincided in the 1970s with a surge of Islamic sentiment among some of Syria’s Sunni Muslims, who form Syria’s overwhelming majority. These Sunnis painted the Alawis as non-Muslims; the Alawis, in response, sought out respected authorities in Shi’ite Islam who would declare them to be Muslims through and through.

Chapter 11 is an account of how that effort finally succeeded when a leader of Lebanon’s Shi’ites, Sayyid Musa al-Sadr, gave his endorsement to the Alawis in 1973. The regime’s suppression of a Sunni uprising in 1982 and the development of close Syrian ties with Iran have done still more to neutralize the issue of the Alawis’ Islam. But the Alawi question lies in wait for that moment when the Alawis might finally show some weakness, or perhaps when Asad is called to his God—whatever that God might be. The persistence of the Alawi question provides more evidence of the ways in which Islamic revival has disinterred differences which new national identities were supposed to have buried for good.

The Shi’ite surge which followed Iran’s revolution took yet another form in the birth and growth of Lebanon’s Hizbullah, the “Party of God.” The source of this Shi’ite energy will always remain a subject of debate. Was it the pent-up resentments of Lebanon’s Shi’ites against other Lebanese? Then perhaps Hizbullah was a revolt against the very idea of Lebanon. Or was its source a Shi’ite hatred against the Israeli invasion and occupation of Lebanon in 1982, compounded by the entry of the U.S. and France as co-occupiers? Then perhaps Hizbullah was above all a reaction against foreign invaders. Or was that energy really Iran’s own revolutionary power, transmitted to Lebanon’s Shi’ites by Revolutionary Guards and zealous emissaries? Then perhaps Hizbullah was first and foremost a creature of Iran’s making. These questions of input are difficult to answer.

Chapter 12 is concerned rather with Hizbullah’s output: the violence in all forms that brought it such renown (and notoriety) during the 1980s.
For any movement that purports to restore Islamic law to its place in the world, violence poses dilemmas. There is no ethos of nonviolence in these movements, but there is a conviction that violence must be governed by the law. This chapter assesses a decade of choices made by one movement: the steep escalation of Hizbullah’s violence in the mid-1980s, its gradual containment by the spread of Syrian power, and the movement’s recent retreat into party politics. Hizbullah is no longer quite as unique as it once was; other Islamist movements, from Jerusalem to Algiers, kill foreigners, send “self-martyrs” to immolate enemies, and hijack aircraft. But their calculus is similar, and this study might be read as an introduction to Islamist strategy generally.

Perhaps the most devastating instrument in the hands of Islamist movements has been the “self-martyr,” usually a young man prepared to go knowingly to his death in order to kill as many of a movement’s perceived enemies as possible. The capacity to mobilize “self-martyrs” can assure an Islamist movement an impact far beyond its numbers, for a “self-martyr” is a logistical ace-in-the-hole, against which most conventional defenses are useless. Yet the tactic poses difficult problems of Islamic law, for it closely resembles the two forbidden acts of suicide and sacrifice. It requires careful calculation and a form of social selection, by which certain candidates are deemed appropriate for operations and others are not. The tactic, pioneered by Hizbullah, has now been emulated repeatedly by the Palestinian Hamas, and may become the tactic of choice for embattled Islamist movements.

Chapter 13 examines the dynamic of the competition between Hizbul-
lah and its Shi’ite rival, the Amal movement, in mobilizing “self-martyrs” during the mid-1980s. The chapter suggests that this tactic not only compensated for the superior force of the foreign occupier. It also fed a sacrificial competition between two deeply antagonistic movements, which proved crucial to the preservation of the peace between them. The end of this competitive cycle was followed by a Shi’ite civil war between Hizbul-
lah and Amal, as ferocious as any confrontation between Hizbullah and Israel. Even in the case of Hizbullah, the price of the Islamic revival also has been paid in Muslim blood shed by other Muslims—a development foreshadowed in the “self-martyrdom” operation, by which one Muslim consigns another to a certain death.

But this internecine conflict is only one face of the Islamist surge. The Islamists have also worked to resurrect the barriers between Islam and
the West. It has been argued that the Islamist revolt is a rearguard action of besieged Muslims, who believe themselves under assault by Western power and Western ways. There is much truth to this analysis, and yet it is also true that some Islamists have understood their “defense” to include acts of political violence in the very heart of the West. Two chapters place in context the recent Islamist attempts to shake two great cities: Paris and New York.

Chapter 14 considers the shadowy war waged by Islamic Iran against France during the 1980s. At the heart of the war was a grim irony. France had thought itself far more clever than the United States in dealing with Iran’s radical Islam. In 1978, France had offered refuge to Ayatollah Khomeini, who directed Iran’s revolution from a Paris suburb. The French government of the day apparently thought that this would create a special bond of understanding between Paris and Tehran. It did not. When Iran saw French weaponry flowing into Iraqi hands during the Iraq-Iran war, the Islamic Republic took its grievance straight to the French public, first by abducting French nationals in Lebanon and then by setting off bombs amidst the shoppers in Paris.

Only the Iran-Iraq cease-fire bought a respite in the Iran-France confrontation. Since then, however, France has come to face an Islam even more threatening to its security, an Islam that challenges France’s very identity. The turmoil in Algeria has begun to spill over into France. In 1994, Algerian Islamists hijacked an Air France flight to Marseille, with the apparent intention of destroying it over Paris. The image of French special forces storming the Air France jet (a crew member leapt from a cockpit window) contrasted sharply with the earlier image of Ayatollah Khomeini returning to Iran on another Air France jet (its pilot gently walked Khomeini down the steps to the tarmac). In fifteen years, the Islamic revival had returned on the very same wings. Ironically, the same French ministers who bartered with Iran in the 1980s promise a hard line on Algeria in the 1990s. But given the precedents described in chapter 14, French success in escaping compromise with resurgent Islam cannot be taken for granted.

Neither can the success of the United States, despite the separation afforded by a wide ocean. The World Trade Center bombing which shook New York City in 1993 was even more audacious than the Paris bombings. Had the bombing succeeded in collapsing one tower of the World Trade Center upon the other, some 50,000 persons would have perished. Chapter 15 locates the bombing at the junction of two processes: an Islamist
resolve to carry the jihad for power into the heart of the complacent West, and the desire of millions of Muslims to enter and feed upon the cornucopia of the rich West. The U.S., as the seat of the West’s greatest wealth and defender of the West’s broadest interests, seems bound to draw more Muslim migrants—and more Islamist lightening. Ultimately, the battle for power in the Middle East will be decided on Middle Eastern ground, but deadly skirmishes in the great cities of Europe and the Americas already have become routine.

Despite these fiercely divisive forces, all unleashed by the Islamic revival in the Middle East and the West, many Western observers have hailed Islamism as the long-awaited quantum leap to reform, modernity, and democracy. Just as Arabism in its heyday found foreign friends and apologists, so does Islamism today. Chapter 16 surveys these views, and then allows the Islamists themselves to rebut them. It will fall to some future historian to document in detail the myriad motives of Islamism’s foreign friends—from the structured optimism of the democracy theorists to the grim pessimism of the moral self-flagellants. What is already clear is a persistent tendency among some in the West to amplify the latest political passion in the Middle East with a passion all their own.

**Political Religion**

Pursue identity or pursue interests? According to the Tunisian historian Hichem Djait (who will reappear in Chapter 1), the Arab-Muslim world has always been too predictable in its choice:

For at least a century, the Muslim world has tended toward two principal goals in the course of its development: to participate in the modern world, but at the same time to demand recognition for its own special historical, cultural, and religious heritage. These two goals frequently converge; but they can also diverge. In fact, the search for recognition, through both nationalism and Islam, has always taken priority over everything else.

The chapters of this book chronicle this single-minded search for recognition; its high costs are tallied in the conclusion. Recognition of one’s “special heritage,” whatever other satisfactions it may bring, cannot feed, clothe, educate, or employ—a simple truth for which the Arab-Muslim world now stands as a grim example. As the conclusion demonstrates, the futurist philosophers, from Francis Fukuyama to Samuel P. Huntington, do recognize that the Arab-Muslim world is “special,” depressingly so. It seems impervious to the worldwide triumph of liberal democracy. It is heavily armed and poorly educated, and it remains susceptible to ideo-
logical excess in an age of pragmatism. Despite an Arab “awakening” and
an Islamic “revival,” much of the Arab-Muslim world still dreams.

There are some who believe that the Arabs cannot do without a dream,
or at least a charismatic leader who will keep their heads raised well above
their surroundings. “If the problem is to be overcome,” wrote another
foreign friend of Arabism, the late Malcolm Kerr, “it may be because a
new and more dynamic set of ideas—a new political religion—will arise
to take the place of the old. Perhaps this will be a new Nahda, less Western
oriented and more authentically rooted than the old one.” The assumption
here is that while the West has politics, the Arabs need “political religion,”
some comforting myth of authenticity that can legitimize change.

No doubt many Arabs do need “political religion,” and some are finding
it by politicizing even more thoroughly the religion they already have. But
this Islam is already failing (a first book has appeared declaring The Failure
of Political Islam), and all the evidence of this century is that the politics
of identity, any identity, can only divide and disappoint the Arab world.
Among Arab intellectuals, there is a growing recognition that authentic-
ity, whatever its gratifications, can also be a trap. “Such a society has no
chance at all of ever flowering again,” laments the Algerian writer Rabah
Belamri. “It will no doubt continue to slumber amid all its tiresome idols,
which it habitually goes on praising, and its sclerotic ancestral values,
which it continues to exemplify; but that is about it.”

Still, such voices are themselves the sign of a stirring. Is the spell now
finally broken?

Notes

1. Paul Kennedy, Preparing for the Twenty-First Century (New York: Random House,
1993), 208.
2. Quoted by Jon Perszyk, “Vignettes—Bits and Pieces,” in Paths to the Middle East:
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Press, 1993), 246.
3. Fahmi Huwaydi, “The State of the Nation,” Al-Ahram, 17 May 1994, quoted in Mid-
est Mirror, 17 May 1994. Huwaydi is an Islamist.
4. Fouad Ajami, The Arab Predicament: Arab Political Thought and Practice since
5. Albert Hourani, The Emergence of the Modern Middle East (Berkeley and Los An-
34.
8. Elie Cham Daif, “It’s Time to Reverse the Condemnation of Salman Rushdie,” in For
Rushdie: Essays by Arab and Muslim Writers in Defense of Free Speech (New York:
George Braziller, 1994), 121.