

# ARAB AWAKENING & ISLAMIC REVIVAL



The Politics of Ideas in the Middle East

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## Conclusion

This volume has traced two ideas, one Arab nationalist, the other Islamist, that have dominated the Middle East for a century. While Arabs and Muslims continue to debate their identities, it is already evident that both these ideas, in their most widespread form, have disappointed. They have not made the Arabs and Muslims masters of their destinies. Indeed, despite the striking increase in population, the process of decolonization, and the advent of oil, it is doubtful whether Arabs and Muslims have mattered more to the twentieth century than they did to the nineteenth.

At various points in the twentieth century, it seemed to some observers that the “awakening” of the Arabs or the “revival” of Islam would overturn the absolute dominance of the West, that there would be an Arab-Muslim resurgence to global prominence. Such predictions became the stock-in-trade of Middle Eastern ideologues and their Western sympathizers. When Westerners made these predictions, they often made sweeping statements of self-reproach. “We Europeans have been lording it over the rest of the earth,” announced Marshall G.S. Hodgson, the American historian of Islam, in 1944. “The other nations are already objecting, and their objections seem likely to increase. Is it not time that we wake up to the fact that we are not the only people in the world that matter?”<sup>1</sup> To buttress his point, he criticized modern map makers, and especially the Mercator projection, which seems to exaggerate Europe’s land mass and diminishes India, China, and the lands of Islam. Through his indictment of Western cartography, Hodgson sought to humble his Western readers, to demonstrate a pervasive Eurocentrism even in the ostensibly scientific representation of the earth’s surface.<sup>2</sup>

One wonders what Hodgson would have thought of today’s thematic maps which magnify and shrink countries according to the size of their gross domestic products or per capita incomes. These maps are always striking to read, because they too are so at odds with the Mercator projection. North America and Europe loom as super-continentals; East Asia’s cats grow into tigers; little Israel seems to dominate the Middle East. These

are arguably the most accurate maps of the contemporary world, the maps which people carry in their heads when they produce, consume, invest, and read. If maps are meant to guide, then these maps are far more reliable guides to real landscapes than any physical map. They trace the contours of a different kind of power, economic and social, to which land mass and population are largely irrelevant.

On such maps, the place occupied by the Arabs and Muslims is small, and it has continued to shrink through this century. There are Arabs and Muslims who might call this kind of mapping one more Eurocentric ruse to diminish them. But this is no ruse. It is an all-too-accurate measure of their diminished place in the world, which a century of ideological churning has done nothing to reverse.

Others have amassed the evidence. The Arab-Muslim world does not fare well in the U.S. State Department's annual *Patterns of Global Terrorism* or Freedom House's annual *Freedom in the World*. For anyone concerned with the present state and future of the Arab-Muslim world, perhaps it is UNESCO's annual *Statistical Yearbook* which makes the most sobering reading. In its dry pages of statistics, the grim realities of dependence become all too vivid.

By these indices, the Arab-Muslim world remains a great redoubt of poverty and illiteracy. There are approximately one billion Muslims in the world, a fifth of the world's population; 86 percent of them have annual incomes of less than \$2,000; 76 percent less than \$1,000; and 67 percent less than \$500. Muslim illiteracy worldwide stands at about 51 percent for all age groups over fifteen. Despite a rapid increase in primary school enrollment, only 45 percent of Muslim children aged six to eleven attend primary school.<sup>3</sup>

An even larger gap exists at higher levels of research. In the developed world, scientists and technologists employed in research and development number about 2,600 per million; the corresponding figure in the Muslim world is only 100 per million.<sup>4</sup> "The policymakers in the U.S. must be all too aware that Islam does not pose a threat to Western interests," concludes the Bangladeshi writer Bahauddeen Latif. "Certainly the numbers are large, but the technological base is pea-sized and littered all over Afro-Asia like a patchwork, with no center to hold."<sup>5</sup>

The Arab-Muslim world is also one of the most economically dependent zones in the world. Only about 10 percent of the trade of Muslim countries is conducted among themselves. For purposes of comparison,

proportions of total intraregional trade are around 60 percent in Europe, 37 percent in East Asia and 36 percent in North America. The Muslim world exports a raw commodity, oil; it depends upon the outside world for everything from arms to food. An Islamist figure has complained that even the *ihram*, the pure white gown worn by the devout Muslim pilgrim as he circumambulates the Holy Ka'ba in Mecca, is today imported from Japan; the *sajada*, the prayer rug, is usually made in China. What do Muslims sell one another? Half of their paltry intraregional trade is in oil and gas; the rest is other raw materials. As imports have grown, the debts of the Arab-Muslim world have also spiralled upward. Both oil and non-oil producers have seen a rapid expansion of debt.

In short, the Muslim world, led by its Arab component, has grown more dependent on the West over the last half century, despite political independence. Whatever the causes of this dependence—and they are hotly debated—there is a broad consensus that it has deepened.

### Visions of the Future

Will the place of the Arabs and Muslims shrink still further? Since the end of the Cold War, and with the approach of the twenty-first century, an industry has grown up in the United States around imagining history before it happens. Much of it is naturally focused upon the destiny of the West in general and the United States in particular—the hubs of the modern (and postmodern) world. At times, however, the new oracles have peered over the ramparts into the places where Arabic is spoken and Islam is professed. Not surprisingly, they are divided over what they see.

Francis Fukuyama, an American policy analyst whose vision came to be known as “Endism” after his 1989 article, “The End of History,” assumes that the Arab-Muslim world will remain shrunken, despite the noise surrounding Islam’s revival. For Fukuyama, that revival is an archaic remnant, a pocket of resentment against the triumph of the idea of liberal democracy. The Islamic world is out of synchronization with world time; its conflicts are waged in distant outposts that have yet to hear the news of liberalism’s triumph. In this, as in so much else, Fukuyama replicates Hegel, who construed Islam as an antithesis to the Roman thesis, rendered irrelevant by the synthesis of modern Europe. (“Islam has long vanished from the stage of history,” Hegel opined early in the last century, “and has retreated into oriental ease and repose.”)<sup>6</sup>

For Fukuyama, Islam is first of all irrelevant as a cultural pole and ideological force in the wider world:

Despite the power demonstrated by Islam in its current revival, it remains the case that this religion has virtually no appeal outside those areas that were culturally Islamic to begin with. The days of Islam's cultural conquests, it would seem, are over: it can win back lapsed adherents, but has no resonance for young people in Berlin, Tokyo, or Moscow. And while nearly a billion people are culturally Islamic—one-fifth of the world's population—they cannot challenge liberal democracy on its own territory on the level of ideas.

Fukuyama then goes one step beyond Hegel: Islam is increasingly irrelevant to Muslims themselves:

Indeed, the Islamic world would seem more vulnerable to liberal ideas in the long run than the reverse, since such liberalism has attracted numerous and powerful Muslim adherents over the past century and a half. Part of the reason for the current, fundamentalist revival is the strength of the perceived threat from liberal, Western values to traditional Islamic societies.<sup>7</sup>

A pointed response to this vision of an irrelevant and embattled Islam comes from Ali Mazrui, the Kenyan Muslim historian who teaches at the State University of New York. Mazrui argues that Islam's role in the shaping of history, far from diminishing, is growing. True, in the first half of this century, Muslim peoples were "just passengers, sometimes passengers in chains." But in the second half, "we began to be members of the crew—at least some of us." In Algeria, the struggle against France profoundly altered French politics and European history; in Afghanistan, the struggle of the *mujahidin* precipitated the downfall of the Soviet Union. "The collapse of communism required the resistance of Islam," proclaims Mazrui, pointing out that communism never triumphed in any Muslim country.

Mazrui sees the possibility, over the next decade or two, for a Muslim "resumption of their role as makers of history." He dutifully notes that Muslims will become ever more numerous, but more important, their influence will run beyond simple numbers, to the realm of ideas. There are lacunae, Mazrui maintains, if not in democracy then certainly in capitalism. Their worst effects are mitigated by Islam, here understood not as a religion but as an egalitarian value system, and one which "has been the most resistant to the ultimate destructive forces of the twentieth century."<sup>8</sup> For Mazrui, the place of Islam in the world can only expand, as capitalism shrinks in the wash of its own contradictions.

The growing relevance of Islam can also be affirmed in a negative way. Harvard political scientist Samuel P. Huntington takes precisely this view of Islam's vitality in his 1993 article, "The Clash of Civilizations?" Huntington anticipates that the next global pattern of conflict will be a reversion to the age-old pattern that preceded the West's own "civil wars." The antagonists will be the old cultural formations known in the West as civilizations. Islam is one of eight civilizations in Huntington's reckoning, and it is central to his thesis: the division between Islam and the West is the world's oldest cultural fault-line, marked by conflict for 1,300 years.

Huntington sees the project of re-Islamization as a serious alternative to liberal democracy, and bolsters his argument for the salience of civilizational struggle largely by pointing to skirmishes already underway on the frontiers of Islam—in Bosnia to Islam's west, in Azerbaijan to its north, in Sudan to its south, and in Kashmir to its east. "Islam has bloody borders," writes Huntington; today's skirmishes are adduced as plain omens of the big clash to come. This return of history has enormous disruptive potential due to the proliferation of nonconventional weapons, permitting Islamic (and Confucian) civilization to pose a threat to the West at the pinnacle of its power. In the longer term, concludes Huntington, the economic and military strength of the West relative to the non-West—including Islam—will decline.<sup>9</sup>

Huntington's "descriptive hypotheses," the obverse of Fukuyama's, draws its most pointed response from a Muslim critic: Fouad Ajami, a Lebanese Shi'ite who teaches Middle Eastern politics at The Johns Hopkins University. For Ajami, Islam is no longer intact as a civilization; the real fault lines of conflict already run through its very core. Modernity and secularism have taken firm hold among Muslims; the "thrashing about" in the name of Islam must not be mistaken for the vitality of a battered tradition. Indeed, like Fukuyama, Ajami sees Islamic fundamentalism "less a sign of resurgence than of panic and bewilderment and guilt that the border with 'the other' has been crossed." As for the prospect of any kind of unified front among Muslims, it is a fantasy: "The world of Islam divides and subdivides," each state and society making a separate calculation of its interests as it scrambles for a place in the global economy. For Ajami, the Arabs and Muslims have chosen to join universal modernity on its own terms.<sup>10</sup>

In this *fin-de-siècle* American fascination with future speculation, Islam remains enigmatic. Fukuyama plays down the significance of Islam's

surge; Huntington plays it up. Mazrui sees Muslims making history by relying upon Islam's ethos; Ajami sees them joining history by embracing the West's values. The Arab-Muslim world provides evidence to sustain all these contradictory hypotheses, which is another way of saying that it stands at a crossroads.

### The Last Option

Of all Muslims, the Arabs face the most painful choices. The future cannot be divined, but one thing seems certain. The world will not wait for the Arabs in the twenty-first century—not the first world, not the second, nor even much of the third. Already the Western passions once excited by the Arab world are yielding to indifference. In the global marketplace, the Arabs produce nothing that threatens, and they consume so avidly that they have lost all romance. Even the phenomenon of the foreign friends is fading fast, an archaic remnant of the age of imperialism and guilt. At home, the Arabs are caught between regimes that will not reform and Islamists who cannot adapt.

Many Arab futurists are still dreaming of a solution through unification, attempting to revive pan-Arabism by arguing that the next century will be dominated by large, unified blocs of states. Some old-guard Arab intellectuals have done a massive futurological report calling for unification as the only solution. It rivals the fantasies of Islamists as a formula for future strife.<sup>11</sup> Blocs of states are indeed forming around the world, but they are doing so on the basis of shared interests, and these blocs bind together people of different nationalities. The project of Arab unity is a nineteenth-century relic, not a viable twenty-first-century program, and the intellectuals who propound it still prevent a thorough and honest reassessment of Arab prospects.

If, as this volume suggests, the politics of identity have failed, what then is left? The clearest option is a post-ideological Middle East, resting on a resolute pragmatism. This idea, drawing upon a vision of peace, development, and democratization, is offered as the West's alternative to Arabist fantasies and the Islamist ideology of retribution, sacrifice, and the rule of God. It is encapsulated in the phrase "new Middle East," that now trips off the tongues of many statesmen—Arab, Israeli, and American.

Ultimately, this "new Middle East" is also a promise of power—not the power to defeat enemies on battlefields, but to feed, house, and

employ masses of people in cities. In many ways, this is a pledge more far-reaching than anything offered by Arabism or Islamism. The Nassers and Khomeinis could manipulate the language of authenticity, persuading millions to endure deprivation and forfeit freedoms for some distant redemption. The “new Middle East” must promise swifter, even instant gratification, because it speaks to interests, not identity. And it must produce results still faster, because it is linked to an alliance with the United States and peace with Israel, both regarded by critics as evidence of defeat.

Fast peace, fast democracy, and fast markets are a rude introduction to a fast-changing world. But other choices carry still greater risks, and a wrong choice might make the Arab world difficult to find on any map but Mercator’s. “Awake, O Arabs, and arise!” These words formed a well-known ode in the last century, and a famous epigraph in this one. Without a thorough transformation, they might become a solemn epitaph in the next.

### Notes

1. Marshall G.S. Hodgson, *Rethinking World History: Essays on Europe, Islam, and World History*, ed. Edmund Burke III (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 37.
2. *Ibid.*, 4–5.
3. Islamic Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (ISESCO) report, *Al-Sharq al-Awsat*, 25 December 1991. ISESCO figures are extracted from UNESCO’s *Statistical Yearbook*.
4. ISESCO figures, *L’Opinion* (Rabat), 12 January 1992.
5. Bahauddeen Latif, “Chaos,” in *For Rushdie: Essays by Arab and Muslim Writers in Defense of Free Speech* (New York: George Braziller, 1994), 210–11.
6. Quoted by Albert Hourani, “Islam in European Thought,” in his *Islam in European Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 27.
7. Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York: Free Press, 1992), 46.
8. Ali A. Mazrui, “Islam and the End of History,” *The American Journal of Islamic Social Sciences* 10, no. 4 (Winter 1993): 512–35. One is reminded of the similar verdict of a non-Muslim, the anthropologist Ernest Gellner: “[Islam’s] sober and unrestrained unitarianism, its moralism and abstention from spiritual opportunism, manipulativeness and propitiation, in brief its ‘protestant’ traits, give it an affinity with the modern world. It did not engender the modern world, but it may yet, of all the faiths, turn out to be the one best adapted to it.” Ernest Gellner, “Forward,” in *From Nationalism to Revolutionary Islam*, ed. Said Amir Arjomand (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1984), ix.
9. Samuel P. Huntington, “The Clash of Civilizations?” *Foreign Affairs* 72, no. 3 (Summer 1993): 22–49.
10. Fouad Ajami, “The Summoning,” *Foreign Affairs* 72, no. 4 (September–October 1993): 2–9.

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11. Centre for Arab Unity Studies, *The Future of the Arab Nation: Challenges and Options* (London: Routledge, 1991).