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# Contending Arab Visions

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# CONTENDING ARAB VISIONS

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Emmanuel Sivan

## I. Myths on the Decline

These are not easy times for pan-Arab nationalism, the hegemonic ideology in the Middle East. Three of its major myths have withered in the harsh winds of the last quarter-century.

The first to be hit was the myth of “Arab Piedmont and Prussia.” As an ethnic-cultural nationalist movement, Arabism got much of its inspiration from nineteenth-century European nationalism, especially from the Italian and German experiences. In 1940 Sati’ al-Husri had already drawn a pivotal lesson from that experience, namely that it is not enough to build from below through education and the organizing of civil society. Given the deep chasms within the Arab world, it is incumbent to have a solid territorial basis, i.e., a state strongly committed to Arab unification and headed by a powerful leader. Such a state should be ready and capable to serve as a magnet for those ludicrous fragments of Arab political entities to appeal directly to the masses and, if need be, impose itself with their help upon these statelets. The only Arab candidate to fulfill this role, played by Piedmont in Italy and by Prussia in Germany, was Egypt. Husri had no doubt about that, impressed as he was by Egypt’s demographic and cultural weight, geopolitical location, and military potential.

Nasser inherited this vision and tried to implement it. The 1967 Arab-Israeli War was evidently a severe blow for the dream of Egyptian leadership, yet the quest for an “Arab Prussia” remained alive. As Sadat’s Egypt followed a separatist path, the believers of Arabism had to look elsewhere. Qaddafi attempted in vain to cloak himself with the leader’s mantle, but

it was apparent that his resources were too paltry. Syria could have assumed the leadership, but Assad, always the paragon of *realpolitik*, had learned the lesson of Nasser's failure and circumscribed the horizon of his ambitions; since 1974, the Ba'hist regime turned to the path of al-Sham, or "Greater Syria" — a revised version of Antun Sa'adeh's concept (minus Cyprus). And then, to the pan-Arabist's relief, Saddam Hussein rose in the late 1970s and took up in Iraq's name the scepter of the supreme commander of the struggle for unity.

Like his role model, Nasser, Hussein tried to exploit the confrontation with an external enemy so as to generate internal solidarity upon which to build his hegemony. The confrontation led to a war that ended in defeat and ignominy. In accordance with Karl Marx's dictum, history repeated itself twice: once as a tragedy (1967) and once as a farce (1991). A patent truth was exposed: Iraq and its ruler were a giant with feet of clay, and when that giant crumbled down, there was no pretendant to the title of "Arab Prussia."

The second myth to be dissipated was that of "artificial borders." This is how pan-Arabists dubbed the demarcation lines separating political entities created in the Middle East upon the ruins of the Ottoman Empire: artificial — for they were nothing but the product of imperialism and its native henchmen, the reactionary Arab regimes. The dual pressures of the Arab masses from down below and Arab Piedmont and Prussia from above were supposed to erase these borders and reunite the Arab-speaking lands.

It is in the name of this myth that Saddam Hussein justified his invasion into Kuwait and its subsequent annexation in August 1990. For could one imagine a better example of an utterly artificial British creation than this despicable emirate, which Iraq had always considered part and parcel of its historical territory? Arab public opinion, including that of most intellectuals, applauded the annexation. And no wonder — the myth's hold was still powerful. Other territorial entities in the Middle East have acquired some legitimacy over the past half-century, but Kuwait and the other Gulf emirates (and to some extent Jordan and Lebanon as well) remained suspect, a memento of an era of weakness and subservience, a reminder of the "divide and rule" policy imposed by colonial powers.

The myth should already have been called into question at the time of the Iran–Iraq War, for a major aim of the Iraqi invasion in September 1980 was to take over the oil-rich province of Khuzistan, defined as “Arab” (and Iraqi) territory due to the fact that it is populated by Arab-speakers. Yet, surprisingly enough, the Khuzistan inhabitants did not take up cudgels for Hussein and stayed loyal to Iran. This aspect of the war barely received any media coverage, however, and thus saved the pan-Arabists from any gnawing doubts.

A decade later, the Kuwait annexation laid bare an astounding state of affairs: despite the reactionary regime, the local population adamantly refused to collaborate with Hussein. The Iraqi ruler could not even establish a puppet regime. Kuwaiti society, however lacking in a tradition of voluntaristic association, organized civil disobedience, nay even armed resistance, in the face of ruthless Iraqi repression.

It became strikingly evident that even entities founded artificially, such as Kuwait, may, as has so often happened in Africa, develop a community predicated upon a common attachment to territory, upon a collective memory, and upon a cultural variant of the Arab-Islamic civilization. Otherwise put, they seek to become nation-states, states the citizens are willing to die for. If this was the case in Kuwait, it was all the more so in Jordan, whose inhabitants withstood the crucial loyalty test of “Black September” (1971), and in *a fortiori* entities with deep historical roots such as Syria, Algeria, and Sudan. Another refutation of the myth has been recently added: the disruption of Yemeni unity in May 1994 and the subsequent breakout of civil war between north and south along boundaries laid down by British imperialism.

Last but not least came the turn of a third Arab myth, “the common interests.” Following the 1967 debacle and the rise of Arab territorial states in the 1970s, an alternative path for unity was pro-Syria in the anti-Hussein camp.

All these contradictions were laid bare in a most virulent fashion in late 1990, when Saudi, Egyptian, and Syrian forces were positioned in battle formation, flanked by Western forces, against Iraq and its Arab allies. And subsequent to the war, the mass expulsion of Palestinian residents from Kuwait and of Yemeni workers from Saudi Arabia has provided yet another

refutation of the “common interests” myth. Such commonality was bluntly sacrificed for the sake of territorial-state homogeneity and internal security.

A third major Arab myth expired in the sands of the peninsula.

By the same time, an additional pan-Arab dream was in the process of dying out. Given its populist nature, representing, so to speak, the innate nature and urging of the masses, pan-Arabism was supposed to democratize politics. No wonder, then, that pan-Arab regimes, Nasser’s, and the Ba’th (as well as Yemen, Algeria, and Libya) were self-styled people’s republics. Yet it became evident time after time that all these regimes, whatever the sincere idealism of their founders, ended up as tyrannies, no different than the conservative regimes they despised. The sense of disillusionment was best expressed by the Syrian poet Nizzar Qabbani, who followed his famous ode “Lamentation on the Demise of Arabism”<sup>1</sup> with this one titled “Top Secret Memorandum”:<sup>2</sup>

Do you know who I am?  
A citizen who lives in Qam’istan [land of repression]  
A land the major export item of which  
Are leather bags  
Made of human flesh  
Oh, Allah, what a time  
We live in...

Do you want to know about Qam’istan,  
That stretch of land extending  
From North Africa to Naftistan [the oil states];  
From the shores of dictatorship  
To the shores of slaughter;  
Where rulers weigh heavily from time immemorial  
Upon the necks of their subjects  
Boring out the eyes of their children  
Hating the paper, the pen, and the writer.  
And what is article number one  
In its constitution?  
Herewith we render null and void  
Man’s need to speak,  
To express himself.  
Oh, Allah, what a time  
We live in...

Do you know who I am?  
A citizen of Qam'istan  
A citizen  
Who dreams that one day  
He'll be upgraded to animal.  
A citizen afraid to sit in a café  
Lest the state check  
The dregs of his coffee cup;  
A citizen afraid to get near his wife  
Without the protection of the security services.  
A citizen I am, son of the Qam'istan people,  
Shuddering like a leaf in the storm  
Before entering a mosque  
Lest some secret agent report  
That I've read Koranic verses there  
Oh, Allah, what a time  
We live in...

Do you know what is Qam'istan?  
A satanic state  
And what is the nature of this fabulous land?  
One wants there to go to the loo,  
he must get a governmental decree.  
A couple want to procreate,  
They need an officially stamped license  
The policeman forbids  
The hair of the beloved  
To swing in the wind  
Unless it has a license, a decree  
Oh, Allah, what a time  
We live in.

## **II. The Rise of the Nation-State**

While pan-Arabism still enjoys the support of quite a few intellectuals, most Arab elites have forsaken it—in actual fact if not in rhetoric. Most of these elites are somewhat confused as to the nature of the regional system in which they operate. Two important and vociferous minority groups, however, put forward clear-cut alternatives to pan-Arabism, namely Radical Islam and Middle Easternism. Their struggle for hegemony will be described further on. But first we have to emphasize that both

groups concur that the nation-states are the sole effective collective entities in the region and that they enjoy a substantial measure of legitimacy in the eyes of their citizens/subjects. While the regimes have recourse to sticks (repression and deterrence by the ever-present security services) as well as to carrots (client networks of people employed in public administration and in the public sector, the recipients of soft loans, import licenses, etc.), they skillfully use this legitimacy of the state, a legitimacy predicated upon a bond between residents and territory presented by local elites as having deep historical roots, and one that occurs even in states that are, in fact, the product of the colonial partition and/or the collapse of the Ottoman Empire. A huge educational effort has been conducted to inculcate the views of these societies-at-large with a striking degree of success.

Indeed, the regimes tend more and more to speak openly, and without reservations or qualms, in the name of what one may dub the “egotism of the nation-state.” Thus, President Assad or King Hussein explain their respective strategies toward post-war Iraq or toward Israel in terms of the interests of Syria or Jordan. Only in the margin do they pay lip service to the “commitment to our Arab brothers.” The disappearance of the cleavage between “progressive” and “conservative” Arab regimes — manifest long before the end of the Cold War — makes the regional rules of the game reflect realpolitik rather than ideology. Moreover, no regional actor actually aspires to hegemony anymore. Iraq lost its ambitions with the 1991 defeat; Syria lost its with the demise of the Soviet Union, its protector; Egypt still entertains some such aspirations yet has to confront a depressing chasm between them and its laggard economy.

The best way to seize the centrality of the nation-state in collective consciousness is to look at symbols and rituals of the various countries of the region. Perhaps the most readily available are postage stamps and bank notes, all issued by the holder of sovereignty and all objects of daily use.

If we examine stamps from Egypt (the first sovereign Arab state [1921]), we see that the Pharaonic past — which is pre-Islamic and pre-Arab — is the most common iconic representation, whether under the monarchy or after the 1952 Revolution.

Is it just because of the physical presence of the Pyramids on the landscape? Is it just an aesthetic choice?

This is not the case with stamps from Syria, a country where vestiges of the past are less prominent and where the regime's pan-Arab orientation is much more deeply rooted. Even after the rise to power of the Ba'th Party in 1963, stamps depicted Ugaritic and Sumerian sculptures and Hellenistic and Roman reconstructed temples, despite their lack of reference to an Arab or Islamic past. This is undoubtedly a political act interwoven with a perception of the character of a certain delimited territory in the region.

Iraq, under its own Ba'th Party, has been involved in a much more intensive effort to put into sharp relief its ancient Mesopotamian identity, and it has done so not merely in stamps and bank notes, but also through public festivals, a minute reconstruction of the city of Babylon, and investment in archaeological digs. The same picture repeats itself in various other countries, whether they be the product of an imperialistic partition (Jordan and Kuwait) or have precolonial existence (Morocco and Algeria) or even deep roots anchored in ancient history and/or geography (Tunisia). What is common to all cases is that the modern state in the region saw as its supreme duty and necessity the development among its subjects/citizens of an affective affiliation to territory.

The modern state exerted this effort even in periods when this very territory was considered by some elites to be but a part of a larger whole (Greater Syria, a reconstructed Caliphate). The reason is evident: the territory in question, however exiguous, was the only real estate in its possession, the sole piece of land where the state had an effective monopoly. The larger whole, be it pan-Arab, pan-Islamic, etc., was — and still is — a dream, a political project. Anchoring the collective consciousness in the givens of the here and now was vitally important, even in eras when the state (e.g., Egypt under Nasser) attempted to pursue this dream, and all the more so when it relinquished the effort (e.g., under Sadat), perceiving it as unrealistic. Both leaders and the upper echelons of the administration — those who supervise the issue of bank notes and stamps, organize public festivals, and so on — were and are aware of these imperatives. Their propagation among the population at large was and is greatly facilitated by



the need felt by subjects/citizens to experience a fit (or close correlation) between the present as lived—i.e., within defined territorial boundaries—and the past as they remember it (or as they were taught to remember it). In other words, there was a dire psychological need to avoid facing up to a cognitive dissonance between reality and collective consciousness.

The very fact that the modern state was involved in developing its territorial identity, creating a linkage between memory and polity, created ingredients of a collective consciousness (or collective imagination, if you will). In other words, it laid the foundations of a nation-state. For what is a nation-state but a territorial state (be it originally dynastic or foreign-imposed) endowed with a collective memory? These ingredients had already been constituted, as we could see in the celebration of the pre-Arab, ancient past. When pan-Arabism began to decline, the sole political force capable of taking its place was, thus, the nation-state in the making. Even the only state supporting pan-Arabism wholeheartedly today—Libya—depicts on its stamps Hannibal, that “quintessential Libyan hero, champion of the fight against Imperialism—Roman in ancient times, American today.”

The persistence of the effort of nation-state building over the last six or seven decades is likewise evident when one examines how nineteenth- and twentieth-century history is represented on bank notes and stamps. Virtually all heroes and events celebrated at a given time are related to the territorial framework of the state that issued them. The continuity between the trajectory followed by various regimes in one and the same country is too uniformly striking to be coincidental. Egypt still commemorates, as it did under the monarchy, Muhammad Ali, perhaps not as founder of the dynasty but certainly as the founder of modern Egypt. The same goes for Arabi Pasha, leader of the 1882 revolt against the British, and Mustafa Kamil, who laid the foundations of modern Egyptian nationalism. Even Saddam Hussein’s Iraq returned to commemorating King Faysal I, while continuing the cult of the popular rebellion of 1920.

More telling, perhaps, is the fact that although towering writers are read beyond state borders by all educated Arab-speakers, each state celebrates only those born on its territory. The same goes for artists, notably popular singers, who were lis-

tened to everywhere long before the age of satellite television and the video cassette. None but Egypt would celebrate Umm Kulthun; none but Lebanon would do so for Fayrouz. Even a thinker like Sati' al-Husri, who had a deep influence upon all currents of pan-Arabism almost everywhere, is commemorated solely in Iraq, where he lived after the fall of the Ottoman Empire.

So much for continuity of effort. What about the situation today?

A good vantage point from which to observe this issue is provided by the public calendars of the various states. Bank notes and stamps are examples of the visual symbols of the state festivals, and holidays are its rituals; that is, they are symbol-laden social activities, stylized, repetitive, and designed to formulate the boundaries and meaning of collective identity. They are located in acyclical time and constitute its set-apart, quasi-sacred high points.

Leafing through the calendars, one readily perceives that there are two sets of public holidays — religious and secular — regulated by two distinct time-computation systems, the Hijri (Muslim) system for virtually all religious holidays (except in Lebanon) and the Gregorian for secular ones. All secular holidays are intertwined with the state and bespeak its modern character. Religious ones testify to Islam as a bedrock of traditional identity. They are quite often manipulated by the state, especially in monarchies and emirates, but in recent years also by self-styled progressive republics (as part and parcel of the fight against Radical Islam, which I will discuss at a later point).

What is striking about secular public calendars today is the almost complete disappearance of holidays and festivals referring to themes not intimately related to the past or to other concerns of the territory/state in question. Precious few pan-Arab holidays are still celebrated. Ba'th Day is still celebrated on April 7 in Iraq and Syria, but each state mixes the pan-Arab rhetoric with claims to its own (Iraqi or Syrian) "pioneering role" in furthering the Cause. In Egypt, Unity Day died, after some agony, following the disruption of the short-lived United Arab Republic (UAR) in 1961; the same holds true for Syria.

The type of events celebrated has become almost identical: Independence Day, events on the route to independence, Mar-

tyrs Day, Army Day, etc., each related to the specific history of the state in question. Only Revolution Day distinguishes between republics and monarchies, but even the republics (Syria, Libya, Iraq, and Sadat's Egypt) have recently instituted quasi-monarchical public rituals such as the (current) ruler's birthday, Accession Day (a.k.a. Corrective Movement Day) to celebrate his seizure of power (usually by coup d'état), and so on.

A nation-state secular religion is thus rising to prominence in the Middle East, in twenty-odd varieties, in part due to persistent efforts of certain elites over many decades but also due to the implosion of pan-Arabism under the pressure of its own contradictions and illusions. This implosion has rid those nation-states (e.g., Syria, Egypt, and Iraq), which were also paragons of pan-Arabism, of an inherent tension between their *Qawmi* (Arab) and *Watani* (territorial) dimensions of identity. That very implosion was a boon for all states whose pan-Arab credentials had been suspect, e.g., the monarchies and emirates. Last but not least, it has taken some of the pressure off of non-Arab minorities within the existing states (e.g., Berbers in Algeria and Morocco, and Kurds in Iraq and Syria), who can now lay better claim to participation in the political community.

Yet this relative success does not come without a price. New problems arise. New tensions come to the fore. While ethnic and linguistic minorities are better off, religious minorities (especially the various Christian denominations) find themselves in a more precarious situation. The nation-state, which in principle recognizes native-born Christians as endowed with rights equal to those of Muslims born and bred on the same soil, is, in fact, constrained to make concessions to Radical Islam, which denies this equality. Moreover, even the state's public face (i.e., ceremonies, symbols, rhetoric, and, above all, education) is incrementally Islamized due to the same kind of concessions. That such a situation owes more to political expediency than to conviction on the part of the state is cold comfort for non-Muslims.

A still more important tension results from the fact that the nation-state has no vision of the regional system, other than as an arena where the egotism of each state reigns supreme, subject, of course, to realpolitik constraints. But what exactly are the rules of engagement? What constitutes a reasonable, common-

sensical constraint? All this is left in the void. In the age of pan-Arabism there was a distinct regional vision; rules were more or less agreed to, at least among pan-Arabist regimes, albeit not always adhered to. What might develop now on the ruins of Arabism is a Hobbesian Middle East.

It is this nightmarish anarchy that the two minor contenders to hegemony attempt to prevent. These two new political forces are Radical Islam and Middle Easternism. It is to these two that I now turn.

### III. Radical Islam

Radical Islam is by no means identical to Islam. There surely are other forces operating in Muslim lands: conservative (Saudi Arabia), moderate modernizers (the Egyptian political elite), and liberal (losing ground, but still present in intellectual circles). Yet Radical Islam is the most dynamic political social force upon the Muslim scene — it sets the agenda for all the others, spearheads the opposition in most countries, and holds power in two of them (Iran and Sudan).

The common ideology of the radicals can be subsumed as follows.

- **Diagnosis:** Islam is in mortal danger of extinction, not by invasion and conquest as in the past but by “West-toxication” (*gharbazadagi* in Persian; *istighrab* in Arabic); that is, through infatuation with modern, secularist, materialist ideas and ways of life. These ideas and modes of living are of Western origin (with roots in the Enlightenment), yet they are spread today by false (as well as naïve) Muslims. The most effective mechanism for this euthanasia (Greek for “easy death”) is the state with its monopoly on lawmaking, education, the media, the economy, and the repressive apparatus.
- **The Cure:** True-blue Muslims must secede and organize themselves in voluntary associations (*jama’at*) outside the reach of the state. These autonomous enclaves should then proceed to conquer the state — by spreading the realm of the “enclave,” by lobbying and pressuring the elites, by entering parliament and investing in other elected bodies (professional and trade associations), by hoping to win a majority, by terror

aimed at destabilization, and, ultimately, by direct seizure of powers. The dosage of means is to be left to pragmatic considerations, but whatever the dosage concocted, it should be preceded by an in-depth propaganda effort so as to delegitimize the powers that be, which should be presented as lackeys of the West as well as of hedonistic, secularized modernity. They are indeed the enemies of Islam and, hence, infidel. The best index of their infidelity is that they do not apply Islamic Law.

This ideology is upheld by those whom some Western observers call “moderates” as well as by those they dub “extremists.” From the movement’s own viewpoint, these distinctions are immaterial. “We are zealots (*muta’assibun*) not extremists (*mutatarrifun*),” is its slogan. To raise the moderate/extremist distinction is to disregard the fact that the choice of “cure” is definitely pragmatic and depends upon the circumstances: possibilities of penetrating the political structure, the efficacy of repression, the leeway for freedom of expression and association, the existence (or not) of a socioeconomic crisis (Iran, Algeria), and the availability of allies in the military and security forces.

Whatever the exact *modus operandi*, the aim—seizing political power and establishing a regime governed by Islamic Law (*Shari’a*)—is the same.

Moreover, to raise such a distinction belies ignorance of the premodern roots of the ideology, i.e., the doctrine of *al-amr bi-l-ma’ruf wa-l-nahy ‘an al-munkar*, as well as of the social practice of vigilante action derived therefrom and prevalent in the Islamic world at least from the fourteenth century onward. This doctrine-cum-practice was transformed into the twentieth-century radical variety because the danger has become more acute. It is no more a matter of fighting against believers who transgress precepts and rebuking negligent rulers. The state itself has become an active agent of alien (formerly colonial) ideas; the impact is not just on tiny elites but on the bulk of the population, those “brainwashed by media”; and the regimes do not operate as a “watch dog state” but rather attempt to shape all walks of life and even invade the private domain.

The doctrine of *al-amr bi-l-ma’ruf* calls for combating the danger to the Faith “by hand or mouth” (force or persuasion),

according to the circumstances. This is why Radical Islamic movements fluctuate over time between reform and revolution, propaganda and violence, or, as they dub it, between *da'wa* and *jihad*. The two modes are closely related, and in many movements there are even parallel apparatus to deal with them. In the course of the 1980s, some movements turned from reformist to terrorist-revolutionary (Algeria and Gaza), others moved in the opposite direction (Tunisia), and still others preserve both modes of action (Egypt and Jordan).

Radical Islam has not succeeded in seizing power except in Iran, Sudan, and Afghanistan, while participating in the ruling coalition in Yemen as a junior partner. Everywhere else it is in opposition, quite often forced underground (Syria, Iraq, Algeria, and Tunisia). But whether aboveground or under, it tends to spearhead the opposition and to hold cultural hegemony, in the sense that Radical Islamic discourse determines the way public, especially political, questions are being formulated. Quite often it also controls the way some (not all) questions are being answered, e.g., on the issues of women and minorities (which I will discuss later).

Yet, Radical Islam's success is due not merely to intellectual attraction. It possesses undeniable communication skills, adroitly manipulating a bedrock political language with deep historical and plebeian resonances but vehiculated through modern media, particularly the audio/video tape cassette (and going as far as using the fax machine, satellite television, pirate radio, and the Internet). It thereby circumvents the state's monopoly on television and gives civil society, hitherto mute or muzzled, a voice. Indeed, it is in the reinvigoration of civil society — which had suffered attrition and later destruction at the hands of the regimes of the past century — that Radical Islam has drawn much of its holding power. It is civil society, where it created free spaces (e.g., private mosques, professional organizations, trade unions, clinics, savings and loan associations, Islamic banks, schools), that provides fundamentalism with an ever-flowing reservoir of new recruits, enabling it to infiltrate every nook and cranny. This success in the sphere of voluntary organizations is not something to be sneezed at. Such organizations tend to be rare in the world of Islam today (one per 50,000 inhabitants, compared to a ratio of 1:1,000 in Europe and 1:3,000

in East Asia). Although the success of these organizations is due in great part to the inventiveness and initiative of the Radicals, the crisis of the present nation-state is also an important factor.

In effect, the nation-state in the Middle East and North Africa is more often than not a combination of *rentier* state and welfare state. As a *rentier* it draws most of its resources from its monopoly on certain precious minerals (oil, natural gas, phosphates, etc.) and major waterways (e.g., Suez Canal); from subsidies from foreign powers (United States, USSR, Saudi Arabia, and the Gulf emirates); as well from remittances from its emigrant workers. As such it does not rely heavily upon taxation and has no reason to be attentive to the wishes of civil society. With this society, the regimes have a tacit covenant, according to which they provide their subjects with free (or subsidized) basic staples, education, housing, medical services, and welfare transfers; in return, the subjects acquiesce to a curtailment of human and civil rights. This tacit covenant could no longer be held after the decline of oil prices in the international market (in the late 1970s and mid-1980s), the eviction of migrant workers after the Gulf War, and the breakup of the USSR. As outside sources of income dwindled, the state — whose economic policy consisted of “imported development without growth” — faced bankruptcy, a situation that became all the more acute as fertility rates remained high while mortality declined (due to better medical services and nutrition).

The state could no longer uphold its end of the bargain; its welfare functions were increasingly deficient, thus creating a social climate conducive to mass protests, which were soon staged by Radical Muslim activists holding a religious discourse of social justice. Yet the militants did more than just preach. They moved quickly into the vacuum created by the bankruptcy of the nation-state. Their existing network of associations (*jama'at*) focused on the propagation of the faith (*da'wa*), using well the free mosques and free schools and clinics they had slowly developed over the years. They quickly expanded the nebula of voluntary associations and thus created a solid social base, especially among those most heavily hit by the enduring crisis (urban lower-middle class, proletariat, and unemployed university and high-school graduates) — namely those frustrated by the modernization preached by the nation-state.

Within their association, the Radicals evolved an egalitarian structure, loose yet supple, that provided urban dwellers and recent rural migrants suffering from anomie with a sense of solidarity and empowerment otherwise lacking in their lives. Decision-making in these groups is not stifled by this structure, as the groups are led by charismatic individuals revered for their learning and moral probity.

All this is not to say that Radical Islamic success is due essentially to communication, economics, and organization. The “vision thing” is crucial. The state, no longer in possession of an uplifting ideal like pan-Arabism, makes too many compromises with Islamic lingo and laws to be credible. Moreover, it is perceived as being too elitist and remote. The Radicals, on the other hand, have a message that is clear, simple, and grounded in a popular Islamic discourse about identity and social justice that has informed these societies over the centuries and has never really been eradicated by the modernizers. That message is that modernist moral depravity is the source of all social ills, and the Radicals skillfully play on a combination of private frustrations (unemployment; poor housing; steep dowries which impede marriage) and public ones (crime; higher rates of celibacy; sexual harassment in the congested public transportation) to make their point. The sole solution, they say, is the application of *Shari'a* (Islamic Law).

Where does the challenge of Radical Islam actually lie? A close scrutiny of the record of the Radicals in power (Iran and Sudan), their intra-movement methods, and indoctrination of their troops in opposition suggests the following.

First, these movements deny the validity of human rights, especially with regard to the social groups in the lands of Islam that are traditionally discriminated against: women and non-Muslim minorities. For example, after 1979 the Iranian government reduced the age of marriage to thirteen, rendered licit “provisional” marriage (i.e., short-term concubinage), abolished wife-initiated divorce, curtailed a divorced woman’s alimony, etc. The platform of the “moderate” Muslim Brethren in the Egyptian parliament contains similar measures. At the same time, Islamic militants in Egypt, Algeria, Yemen, Morocco, and elsewhere have put pressure, often violently, on women to cover themselves up with the tentlike Islamic garb (a.k.a, *Chador* or



*Niqab*) or, at the very least, the veil (*Hijab*); they forcibly stop them from attending “sex-mixed” halls (lecture rooms, cinemas, ballrooms, etc.); and offer female students segregated shuttle buses. These militants fight implacably state-sponsored campaigns for family planning and preach to young women the gospel of nurturing as woman’s first, God-instituted role even if she is educated; work, not career, is what they say she should aspire to. She must resign herself to being of a different mold, never fully equal to Man, the family’s provider. They support *Shari’a* laws that allow a woman only half of a man’s share in inheritance and that decree that the testimony of two women equal that of one man. These laws are already the case in Iran, Sudan, and Afghanistan and are likely to be instituted elsewhere when the militants take power.

Nor do the Radicals believe in the freedom of religious expression. Baha’is are persecuted in Iran; Christians and Pagans in Southern Sudan are the victims of a vicious war perpetrated by the Islamist regime of Sheikh Hasan al-Turabi; Palestinian Christians are harassed by Hamas; and Copts in Upper Egypt are murdered.

Second, Radical Islam, even when it plays the parliamentary game in opposition, does not believe in democracy but rather in “one man, one vote, one time.” We have seen this in operation in Iran and Sudan, where single-party, repressive regimes were established. And one hears the same note in intra-movement tapes of oppositionary radicals: “enemies of Islam” (i.e., secularists and liberals) should be outlawed and refused access to the media; parliament has to install the God-given *Shari’a*, which, of course, cannot then be abrogated, and the *Shura* (consultation) doctrine they refer to means consultation of Islamic elites, namely *Ulama* and *mollahs* (men of religion). This is what *Shura* meant throughout history; this is also what it means in present-day Iran. *Shura* does not equal democracy. One should add that the way the movements themselves are governed inside is strictly authoritarian, even dictatorial. Dissent is prohibited; ideological deviants are persecuted and sometimes killed.

In public utterances, especially to the gullible Western media, Islamic leaders sometimes speak of their commitment to democracy, pluralism, and human and civil rights. Yet in their preaching inside the movement — which one can listen to on

audiocassettes—they show their true colors: democracy is tantamount to apostasy, and when and if they get to power through the ballot box, they must apply the rule of “one man, one vote, one time.”

Last but not least, the Radicals have distinct notions of their own about the emerging world and regional order. They are staunchly opposed to the concept of the New World Order, as envisioned by Gorbachev and Bush, a concept that assumes that the world of the 1990s is so interdependent (in economics, the environment, immigration, and the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction) that conflicts are particularly dangerous and must be avoided through consensus and peaceful resolution. Islamic Radicalism rejects this emerging world order as a Western ploy to preserve its dominance and believes that peaceful resolution of conflicts is an illusion because international relations are inherently conflictual. *Jihad* (holy war) theory rightly describes international relations as they are, namely as a sort of Hobbesian jungle. Conflict is and will be the norm, at least until the arrival of the *Mahdi* (messiah) in the End of Times.

The Radicals believe, then, that Holy Combat for the Cause of Allah is the only recourse the Muslim world has in response to the current regimes, which are dominated by Western ideals. Only when these regimes are toppled and the unity of the Muslim *Umma* (community of the believers) is restored, as in the Golden Age of the Caliphate, can peaceful relations within the *Umma* be reinstated. (The Caliphate is not expected to come back, however; its modern equivalent would consist of a loose federation of Islamized regimes, each governing one of the present nation-states. Loyalty, of course, would be first and foremost to Islam, not to the state.)

It is no small wonder, then, that for Islamic Radicalism the current regional system of realpolitik is predicated upon the dominance of “Apostate,” West-toxicated Arab regimes. Yet, by the same token, Radicals reject the contending concept of “Middle Easternism.” Middle Easternism accepts the assumptions of the New World Order and implies the legitimacy of the execrated Arab regimes and the secularized, atheistic Turkey and infidel Israel. It is this unholy alliance of apostates and disbelievers that is seen to account for foreign rule over Islamic holy places, and repression and persecution of faithful Muslims.

Consequently, the economic growth promised by Middle Easternism is a false promise designed to dull criticism of the West and erode Islamic morality (through interest taking, the values of the consumer society, permissiveness, and particularly the spread of alcohol and drugs).

While its major contender, Middle Easternism, recruits mostly among the elites and the middle classes, Radical Islam has a reservoir, or recruitment pool, drawn from alienated youth: high-school and university graduates who are un- or underemployed, rural immigrants in search of a support group in an alien milieu, and professionals kept out of the closed decision-making circles in their own trade. The existence of the pool should be traced back to the dysfunctions of the modern states in the Middle East and North Africa: stagnant economic growth, spiralling population, unbridled exodus from countryside to metropolis (rather than to medium-sized towns), a bloated but underfinanced educational system, tyranny and the withering of civil society, and foreign conquest (Afghanistan, Bosnia, Palestine, and Lebanon). When dysfunction turns into structural crisis (Iran, Sudan, Algeria, and, for a while, Tunisia), the Radicals may develop a cross-class recruitment, including individuals from among the traditional middle class as well as parts of the modern middle class (especially professionals).

It is thus the dysfunctions of the present Arab socioeconomic system that replenish the Radical pool despite a high turnover rate caused by attrition and repression. As such, Radical Islamic views are bound to continue to be in vogue well into the next century.

#### IV. Middle Easternism

What about the other contender for hegemony? The concept of a Middle Eastern Common Market, or Middle Easternism for short, was first launched by Mustafa al-Fiqqi, an Egyptian intellectual and diplomat and currently Egyptian Ambassador to Vienna, in a controversial best-selling book entitled *Al-Sharq Awsatiyya* that created a major discussion at the 1993 Cairo Book Fair.<sup>3</sup> It produced a ripple effect and gained many a spokesperson from Morocco to the Gulf, particularly among economists, journalists, academics, and parts of the modern middle class.

Ranking politicians who support it include Crown Prince Hassan of Jordan as well as Usama al-Baz, President Mubarak's closest advisor.

Middle Easternism argues that the region constitutes a geopolitical unit, whose main actors are the states, characterized by strong interdependence. These components encompass the Arab-speaking states as well as Turkey, Iran, and Israel. The cornerstones of regional stability are to be the principles of peaceful resolution of interstate conflicts, the search for consensus, and the nonexclusion of any state from the framework of this consensus; in other terms, one must apply to the Middle East the rules of the emerging New World Order, putting an end to the region's exceptionalism, to its tradition of exclusivity, and to conflict. Joining the New World Order would enable the region to join the new global market and hence create real economic growth, which is inevitably export-oriented.

It follows, then, that regional, interest-based cooperation is bound to be for the benefit of all concerned. It is also argued that consensus is not just an ideal target but a laudable goal within the realm of possibility. For even states considered in the past to be problematic (e.g., Israel until the Sadat initiative, Iran under Khomeini) are now within the fold, all the more so after the Oslo peace process. All arrangements should be achieved through initiatives coming from within the region, not from outside (and, needless to say, not imposed by nonregional actors).

The instruments for establishing such a consensus-seeking should be regional organizations devoted to specific topics that could elaborate agreements, understandings, and information-exchange procedures and, ultimately, develop organs for monitoring the implementation of these understandings and the sorting out of disagreements about their interpretation. The most promising arena seems to be economic cooperation modeled on the European example. The aim is to build up a Common Middle Eastern Market that might lay the foundation for developing cooperation in other fields as well.

Quite a number of proponents of this view attach great importance to the setting up of an Arab subsystem within this framework: first and foremost in the realms of media and culture, and, if and where feasible, in economics as well. Such an agreement may, in some cases, be just a ploy to allay the fears of

recalcitrant pan-Arabist intellectuals; but in other cases (such as that of the former left-wing journalist Lufti al-Khuli in Egypt), it reflects a sincere effort to combine old and new ideas, a cultural reality (Arab) and a politico-strategic one (Middle Eastern).

Acceptance of the nation-state as a given and the setting aside of exclusion and conflict — all this, say the Middle Easternists, would inevitably pave the way to the region's full-fledged integration into the emerging New World Order. Economic cooperation, albeit with former enemies, is a positive value, nay even the only option for countries who want to pull themselves out of the mire of backwardness and underdevelopment.

While Middle Easternism attracts much attention and enjoys broadening support, its Achilles' heel is the nebulous character of its thinking on organs of cooperation, a weakness that pan-Arabists and Islamicists hasten to point out: what kind of treaties/agreements/understandings are to be envisaged on water, arms control, and so forth? Are economic arrangements to be bilateral or multilateral? Do we speak of free trade zones or customs unions? Should one aspire to an association with the states on the northern shores of the Mediterranean?

Are the Middle Easternists fuzzy thinkers, or are they groping for real answers in an important search for a bold new regional order? The jury is still out. However, their obvious indebtedness to the concept of the New World Order is a sign of pragmatism and modernity in the eyes of some parts of the Arab-speaking public; for others, they constitute an omen of dependence and obsequiousness to the hegemonic West (or to "Great Satan," the United States).

One should note, however, that over the last year or so, attempts have been made by Middle Easternists to render their vision more precise and realistic by grappling with obstacles and ambiguities. The highly regarded Egyptian journalist and thinker Muhammad Sid Ahmad (a former left-wing pan-Arabist) probed the question of a Middle Eastern nuclear-free zone and other limitations on the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction. Dr. Taha al-Alim of the Al-Ahram Center for Strategic Studies in Cairo discussed the application to the region not of the oft-mentioned West European model (which cannot fit a culturally heterogeneous and much poorer part of the world) but of the Asian-Pacific one: how cultural and economic discrep-

ancies may be marshalled into a system based upon growing cooperation and peaceful resolution of conflicts of interests without eliminating the possibility that some such conflicts (on water, for instance, between Turkey and Syria/Iraq and between Israel and Syria) might become heated at times without getting out of hand. Dr. Usamah Ghazala Harb, head of the same center, and Tahsin Bashir, Sadat's former adviser, ponder the modalities of free-trade zones (inside the Middle East). Influential commentators such as the Lebanese Khayr Allah Khayr Allah and Hazim Saghia (who write for the London-based *Al-Hayat* newspaper), as well as Jordanian analyst Mustafa Hamarneh and top Egyptian economist Sa'id al-Najjar, discuss how overall free-trade arrangements may benefit the poorer partners first (as happened with NAFTA) and how technological cooperation (e.g., on water desalinization) may benefit all. The beginning of this effort was the convening of the Regional Economic Cooperation Conference in Amman in 1995. Unlike its predecessor held in Casablanca, the conference in Amman was modest in scope and aspiration, taking a step-by-step approach to institution-building while putting the accent on the role of the private sector, with governments as facilitators. Existing joint ventures between businessmen from formerly warring countries in the region, which normally imply substantial technology transfers, are to be studied in detail so as to draw lessons for future initiatives.

Still, Middle Easternism remains quite fuzzy and elusive. And the same criticism could be leveled against Islamism. Most of its proponents (with the exception of the Islamic Liberation Party) do not raise the banner of the Caliphate. How, then, would they insure that nation-state interests, even in the hands of Islamicist governments, would not clash with the ideals of Muslim solidarity? How to bridge the Sunni-Shiite divide? Isn't their acceptance of some of the myths of the nation-states (at least when they refer to Muslim history) while rejecting others (those of Pharaonic Egypt, Numidian Algeria, Mesopotamian Iraq, Ugaritian-Hellenistic Syria, and Canaanite Palestine) a doomed effort given the efficacy of the state-controlled education and media?

## V. Concluding Remarks

Doubts remain. Fault lines are evident on both sides of the regional debate. The battle for hearts and minds rages on. But one must beware of focusing on visions alone. As could be concluded from the above discussion of pan-Arabism, it failed not so much because of the limitations of its multicultural vision (it was inclusive of non-Muslims yet rejected linguistic and ethnic minorities like the Kurds and Berbers and preached a vision of a primordially Arab region where the Iranian, Turkish, and Jewish states are never full-fledged actors), but because of the basic deficiency of its Dialogue of Actions — that is, the failure of its three major myths when put to the harsh the test of reality.

In like manner, the Islamic Radical vision, while inclusive of ethnic/linguistic minorities, excludes from the multicultural *Umma* (the Muslim community/polity) all non-Muslims living in Islamic lands, relegates Muslim women to an inferior status, and refuses pluralism (i.e., equal rights for secularists and even for “tepid believers”). This vision, by and of itself, limits its appeal, at least among the middle class and parts of the petite bourgeoisie. Yet it does it no harm among the less-well-off and, certainly, not among the various victims of modernity. Still, this in itself points out that to the extent that the deficiencies of the modern system are somewhat alleviated (e.g., better economic performance and opening up participation in politics), its attraction is diminished. By the same token, the deterring example of the regimes in Sudan, Afghanistan, and Iran (as well as the Shi-ite character of the latter) do circumscribe its chances. Recourse to terrorism (against fellow Muslims) and vicious internal squabbling among Islamic groups work in the same direction. Economic crisis, unemployment, and foreign occupation work in favor of Radicalism. In a word, how the movement acts and what the context of action does may vitiate or augment Radicalism’s chances.

The nation-state is, in principle, more inclusive on both ethnic and religious accounts, yet its actual behavior in these fields may belie its promises (e.g., Iraq vis-à-vis the Kurds and Shiites, Syria vis-à-vis the non-Alawite majority). Furthermore, the issue of democracy still looms large in most countries of the region. Last but not least, the nation-state’s success hinges upon eco-

nomics and demography: will it move from “development without growth” to real growth, in the manner of the East Asian Dragons? Or, will it, in the case of the less-performing countries, simply reverse the current stagnation? Will the population growth decline below the fatal 3-percent rate, still common to most states in the region? And so forth.

In the same vein, the fate of Middle Easternism will be decided not only on the clarity of its views or the attractiveness of its catchwords and premises, but also by the degree of real-life cooperation and/or resolution of divergences between the countries of the region. This is going to be influenced to a large degree by what the enemies of this idea, notably the Islamicists, do. In addition, there are the consequences of domestic developments. Purely internal events — like the recent Israeli elections with their eventual impact upon the future of the peace process, or the inclusion of some Islamicists in the polity (e.g., Jordan, Egypt, Yemen, Morocco, or Algeria) — would weigh heavily in the balance. So would business initiatives for joint ventures, cooperation between governments and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) on environmental and water problems, as well as the fight against abuse of human rights.

A vision is an important mental construct, a sort of compass to help human collectivities chart a course in tumultuous waters, and a guide for decision-making in times of uncertainty. The inner magnetism or contradictions of the four visions discussed above are no doubt important. Still, the dialogue of actions they develop in a challenging environment is what would determine their impact upon the lives of the peoples of the Middle East and North Africa.

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## Notes

1. This is a poem published in *Al-Hayat* (28 October 1994).
2. This was published in the cycle *Enraging Poems* (Beirut: Manshurat Nizar Kabbani, 1987).
3. Mustafa al-Fiqqi, *Al-Sharq Awsatiyya* (Cairo: Madbuli, 1994).

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