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THE RISE OF HAMAS IN PALESTINE

AND THE CRISIS OF SECULARISM
IN THE ARAB WORLD

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INTRODUCTION

This study came to mind in the aftermath of the Hamas victory in the Palestinian elections in January 2006. Most of the commentary at the time saw the Hamas victory as a political accident and focused solely on immediate explanations for the surprising outcome. The Hamas victory had come to pass, so it was said, because of rampant corruption within the Fatah leadership, poor management by Fatah of the election campaign, and extreme divisiveness within its own ranks—whereas Hamas, on the contrary, was honest, well organized, and united. These explanations were unquestionably relevant, but they missed the main point of the election and the key historical process that was at work. The rise of Hamas as a credible and substantial political force in Palestinian politics was part of a regional phenomenon of secularism in crisis, in which secularizing Arab and Palestinian nationalism was in decline while Islamist politics were on the rise. The Palestinian example was but one instance of this broader phenomenon.

This discussion calls first and foremost for a brief note of definition. A perusal of the relevant literature reveals that it is far from clear what “secularism” actually means; various possible definitions have been offered.¹ The one followed here is a conflation of two similar definitions, one provided by Yirmiyahu Yovel and the other by Charles Taylor.² A secular society or polity is one in which:

- 1) Religion has been removed from its central place in people’s lives, has retreated from the public sphere, and is marginalized in the political and social order;
- 2) Individuals no longer see their lives in this world even marginally as a transition to or preparation for life in the next world; rather, life in this world has intrinsic value and significance solely in its own right and is not justified by any reference to an omnipotent God;
- 3) Institutions—political, judicial, and educational—are free from the normative supervision of religion;
- 4) There has been a decline of religious beliefs and observance—as reflected, for example, in church, mosque, or synagogue attendance;
- 5) There is a widespread recognition that alternative belief systems have eclipsed religion and that the mediators of religion—

preachers, priests, rabbis, and *ulama*, as well as the institutions they represent—are no longer the accepted interpreters of reality for the general public; and

- 6) The individual is seen as having the authority and the inherent right to choose, judge, interpret, accept, or reject, as he or she sees fit, normative traditions as they are passed down.³

The central thesis is that although secularism or secularizing politics never completely overtook the Muslim societies of the Middle East, the region did undergo a process of secularization in the modern era—but that European-style nationalism and the secularizing processes that it fostered have lost their momentum.

Reforms in the early nineteenth century, in the Ottoman Empire and Egypt and somewhat later in Iran, steadily reduced the control of the religious establishment over education and law in the Muslim Middle East, introducing new European-style schools and legal practices that increasingly replaced portions of the Sharia. Westernization and modernization of Muslim society gradually undermined and eroded its traditional institutions and civilization.⁴ European-style practices—affecting everything from architecture to more liberal dress codes, the mixing of the sexes in public, and other less restrictive forms of behavior—were adopted in the public space. The declining role of religion set the stage for new modes of collective identity similarly borrowed from European nationalism, with community being founded on language and territory rather than religion. Nationalism itself—Turkish, Egyptian, Arab, and Iranian, along with other territorial nationalisms that emerged in the later twentieth century—added further impetus to the secularization of the political and public domains, which continued well into the second half of the twentieth century.

It is this process which, one may argue, is presently in crisis. This, however, is not meant to suggest a total reversal of the secular in favor of the religious; the process in question is more subtle than the supplanting of religion by secularism or vice versa. It is, rather, the establishment of a new point on the secular-religious continuum, one at which religion plays a greater role in politics, society, and collective identity than hitherto. The formerly prevalent assumption on the part of the secularizing Middle Eastern regimes that the process of

secularization was one of inevitable progression that would eventually extend to all Middle Eastern societies has been proven wrong.

The notion of secularization championed by these Middle Eastern regimes was drawn from the European experience of state formation and modernization and based on the idea of secularization expounded upon in the works of the “trinity of social theory—Durkheim, Marx, and Weber—in which the decline of religious belief was ‘scientifically’ forecasted.” State secularism in the twentieth-century Middle East, however, failed to produce secular societies. Though organized religion did decline, new religious movements with mass followings emerged.⁵

The process of secularization appeared at the time to indicate that the social role of Islam would “continue to shrink until [Islam] became at most a matter of private observance.” This, however, did not happen. The political failure of secular nationalist and/or socialist ideologies created a vacuum, and in search of alternative sources of power and unity—and in order to accomplish what secular ideologies had failed to deliver—people turned to religion. Popular Islamist movements sought to “recenter society and politics around Islamic values” in the belief that only Islam was “capable of preserving Muslim identity from being submerged by the tidal waves of Western culture circling the globe.”⁶

Even in the most secularized of Middle Eastern republics, Turkey, the conservative (albeit generally moderate) Islamist Justice and Development Party (AKP—*Adalet ve Kalkinma Partisi*) has won twice in successive elections, in 2002 and again in 2007. The Muslim Brethren did well in elections in Egypt in December 2005 and would have done a lot better had the Egyptian government not intervened rather brutally to forestall such an eventuality. In Jordan the Islamists would have been considerably more successful in the November 2007 parliamentary elections had it not been for blatantly fraudulent intervention by the government and its supporters.

In post-Ba’athist Iraq, politics are driven very much by sectarianism and the concomitant religious politics rather than by the secularizing trends of the recent past. And the so-called “Cedar Revolution” in Lebanon was never the secularizing democratic upsurge that it was purported to be by the Bush administration; it represented just another shift in the Lebanese sectarian balance of power, which Hezbollah subsequently corrected. This is an old story. It harks back to the sectarian

struggles of the Druze Ma'ans and Maronite Shihabs from the sixteenth to the mid-nineteenth centuries and continued with the Maronite-Druze civil war of the mid-nineteenth century and the national pact of the mid-twentieth century—which was essentially concluded between the Maronites and the Sunnis. (The Shiites—politically, economically, and numerically inferior—were given the crumbs.) That in turn was followed by the pact's gradual erosion, first by the Sunnis, in two civil wars, in 1958 and then in the 1970s and 1980s, and most recently by the Shiites.

In one of his earliest works, over four decades ago, Bernard Lewis wrote that the “introduction of the secular heresy of nationalism, of collective self-worship, is the best founded and least mentioned of the many grievances of the Middle East against the West.”⁷ After a period in which secular nationalism assumed a dominant political role in Middle Eastern societies, its ideological offspring—the secularization of politics and society—was now being challenged and rebuffed.

All of this is not to say that a complete undoing of the secularization process is the inevitable culmination of these trends. Nor are these trends irreversible. Westernized governmental institutions, along with secular patterns of behavior in both public and private space and in collective identity, are still in place. Numerous organizations continue to promote essentially secular ideas, in addition to political platforms bearing on democracy, women's rights, and civil rights in general. Even the Islamists themselves have had to grapple with secular notions about politics and society which have infiltrated their political behavior and discourse. The Islamic regime in Iran is facing sustained widespread opposition. Nevertheless, generally speaking, in the region as a whole in the last two generations or so, it has been the Islamization of politics, society, and the public space that has had the upper hand.⁸

There is a tendency on the part of scholars in the West, usually ideological multiculturalists, to underrate or even to ignore the cultural input of the “other” as a valid explanatory and analytical tool and to obfuscate the importance of religion as a factor in people's behavior in the Middle East, even though it is fairly obvious that “religion is a key marker of identity in Muslim societies.”⁹ Alongside respect for the “other” in terms of political rights, there is a simultaneous reluctance to recognize the behavioral “otherness” of the other lest one be denounced for essentialism, or worse.

Though scholars have been urged by some to “be careful not to throw out the political culture baby with the Orientalist bathwater,”¹⁰ many have done so, and still do. Perhaps predictably, scholars who live and/or practice in the region itself—Arabs, Turks, and others who are not constrained by the strictures of the American-centric Western academic milieu—are far less inclined to this practice.¹¹

Numerous scholars have noted the tendency in contemporary scholarship to employ a secular materialist approach that eschews religion (or culture) as an explanatory factor with respect to political trends in the region. Michael Hudson has noted the preference for socioeconomic rather than sociocultural approaches. More recently, the Egyptian scholar Emad Eldin Shahin has written that “the perception of Islamic revival through the secular framework of analysis misses significant dimensions of these movements. Most studies of political Islam share, sometimes unconsciously, a reluctance to accept the concept of the inseparability of religion and politics in the Muslim countries.”¹²

Indeed, this “perspective often marginalizes the role and relevance of religion in social and political development and views the rise of political Islamic movements in Muslim societies as being the result of a process gone awry—economic crisis, societal problems, insecurity, or extremism—and not as a normal and genuine response of communities that aspire to devise an indigenous model and to live their Islam in a modern world, particularly at a time when their identity and even existence are threatened.”¹³ Jacob Lassner and Ilan Troen have similarly pointed to this proclivity to “explain events as if these were generic phenomena inextricably linked to paradigms of a universal nature. . . . Such universal paradigms attempt to explain widely divergent historical developments as if differences in culture, time, and place had no vital bearing on historical outcomes.”¹⁴

One ought to emphasize at the outset that recognizing the validity of tradition and/or religion as explanatory factors is not the same as making an essentialist argument for “Islamic exceptionalism” or the immutable, “primordial” nature of Islamic societies, as if they were inherently resistant to secularization, democratization, and other forms of social change. But it is to argue that *culture matters*. The issue for Islamic societies was to adapt tradition to the needs and challenges of the modern era in a way that enabled people to remain true to their faith

as they engaged with, but did not reject modernity. Islamism, though linked to tradition, was not antithetical or opposed to modernization; it engaged *with* modernity within an Islamic ideological and ethical framework, rather than enduring the secularizing top-down impositions of an earlier era.

Sami Zubaida has argued that “Islamism was a modern ideology, quite unlike historical precedents.” Contemporary Islamic movements, he maintained, “could only be understood in terms of contemporary socio-political conditions.” It was the “unique outcome of particular historical processes” that was being discussed, and not the “outcomes of an essential history” that were “determined by cultural essences.”¹⁵

At the same time, although Islamism is a modern ideology, distinct from historical precedents and not solely determined by cultural essences, it has not been detached from the history and heritage of its devotees, which also influenced the choices people made in particular historical circumstances. According to Asef Bayat, in view of “all the failed ideologies, chiefly Nasserite socialism and Sadat’s capitalism, and of the conditions of western cultural, political, and economic onslaught, Islam was seen [in Egypt] as the only *indigenous* doctrine [emphasis added] that could bring about a genuine change.”¹⁶ The popular appeal of Islamism derives in part from its not being an “imported ideology,” but one deeply embedded in the people’s history, collective identity, and culture.

The case made here, therefore, is against “false universalisms:” that is, the “misconceptions that arise from the tendency to assume” that the Western historical experience with social and political development was “the universal norm and has been identical for the entire world”—whereas, in fact, “other religious traditions have had a different historical experience and memory with respect to the role of religion in public life, and it is precisely this memory and experience that shapes contemporary attitudes.”¹⁷

In an essay in the mid-1990s, the Lebanese scholar Paul Salem discussed the “fall of secularism” in the Arab world. Salem enumerated a number of key causes for what he called the “remission of secularism,” by which he meant that secularization had not been extinguished, but its effectiveness as a tool of political mobilization had been eclipsed by a “religious-traditionalist world view.” He drew attention to these factors:

- 1) the exhaustion of the nationalist and Marxist movements;
- 2) the superseding, in the 1970s, of the modernist movement, which had led to the secularizing of the schools and the courts and had essentially achieved its goal, by a new, major debate on identity, cultural authenticity, and faith;
- 3) the emergence of the post-modernist debate in the West, as a result of which the West no longer projected the same self-confident vision of its own civilization and values; and
- 4) the generation of alternative sources of intellectual ferment and inspiration as a result of Egypt's turning inward and subsequent peace agreement with Israel and the revolution in Iran.¹⁸

Since Salem's article, the crisis of secularism has only become more pronounced. To the causes he cited, all of which are still relevant, one should add the rise of the AKP to power in Turkey, the accelerating fallout from the demise of Ba'athist Iraq, and the ascendance of Iran as a regional power. It was in this general regional context that secularizing politics were indeed "in remission."

1. THE CRISIS OF SECULARISM

Benedict Anderson has observed that in Western Europe, the eighteenth century marked “not only the dawn of the age of nationalism but the dusk of religious modes of thought,” which were superseded by rationalist secularism.¹⁹ In the Middle East, the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were an era of profound ideological ferment and Islamic reform, as Western ideas, such as secularism and nationalism, dominated the local intellectual discourse. But in this region the dawn of nationalism was never quite the dusk of religious modes of thought; rather, the two continued to compete with each other, experiencing different periods of relative success in the marketplace of ideas.

According to Israel Gershoni, nationalism in the Middle East, as in many other societies, was a “principal agent” for the introduction of Western modernity and progress, “forging a new and authentic collective identity, a ‘new nation,’ able to inculcate ‘in its own way’ a modern value system.”²⁰ Focusing on language and territory (rather than on religion) as the dominant cohesive elements of society, nationalism became the main secularizing vehicle of politics in the Middle East of the twentieth century. Everywhere in the Muslim world, a process of consolidation of nation-states was in motion. After all, in Egypt and the successor states to the Ottoman Empire, religion had been increasingly marginalized for well over a century.²¹

Arabism and Turkish nationalism demoted religion to a secondary role, as but one component of the cultural heritage of Arabs or Turks, and gradually led to the increased marginalization of religion in society and politics. Arab revivalism and nationalism in the early twentieth century rested on two main pillars: the rejection of foreign control and the need for internal reform and cultural change. “The future they envisaged was a modern one, by which they meant a secular one,” according to Immanuel Wallerstein, and the various Arab movements “shared many of the premises of Kemalism.”²²

For at least some of the educated urban population of the 1930s, religion “may have appeared a living anachronism.”²³ Religion was even popularly understood as being antithetical to progress. Fouad Ajami cites the memoirs of the Palestinian ‘Abd al-Latif Kanafani, who described the Haifa of the 1940s as a worldly, secular place where religious differences were of little consequence, since religion was only

in people's hearts, while "the light of progress" was "in our eyes."²⁴ Arab nationalism won the day as the neo-traditional compromise between ultra-secular territorial nationalism, the province of a minuscule, totally Westernized elite which discarded religion as entirely irrelevant, and the Islamists of the day, who seemed rather old-fashioned and out of touch with the needs of the modern era.

For the great majority of Arabs in the mid-twentieth century, many of whom were rural masses newly dislocated to the big cities, Arab nationalism, with its secularizing thrust alongside a linkage to Islam as the cultural heritage of the Arabs, was an attractive middle ground. "At this moment of a 'crisis of urbanization' and a 'search for identity,' only the Islamic-Arab culture could offer them both adequate compensation for the forsaken traditional patterns of life and a functional system of neo-traditional symbols (based on Islam and Arabic) with which they could identify and through which they could interpret, and experience, the rapidly changing world around them."²⁵

The secularizing nationalist regimes of mid-century in countries like Egypt, Iraq, and Syria maintained the relevance of religion in politics by dabbling on occasion, for their own purposes, in Islamic politics. All the same, they were effective blocks to the Islamists, who were crushed underfoot by repressive military dictatorships. As Stephen Humphreys and others have contended, had "the nationalist regimes not bent every effort to controlling the resurgence of Islam . . . it might well have swept the boards even by the mid-1950s. . . ."²⁶

Indeed, for the Islamic fundamentalists, Arabism was not only the ultimate political oppressor but also an ideological adversary which had served as the "supreme manifestation of political secularism." The fundamentalists had pursued a tactical flirtation with Arabism in its heyday, but when Arabism met with ignominious defeat in the 1967 war with Israel, the final divorce from those who had thrust Islam onto the margins of politics and society was total.²⁷

The retreat of Arab nationalism was also a setback for the secularization process that had introduced nationalism in the first place. The post-1967 era was witness to two simultaneous but contradictory trends. On the one hand, the failing fortunes of pan-Arabism paved the way for the pragmatic acceptance of the colonially created Middle Eastern state order, for the entrenchment of the territorial state, for territorial formulations of nationalism, and for the unapologetic

pursuit of *raison d'état* by the various Arab states. On the other hand, the ideological vacuum left by Arabism was filled by the Islamists, who contested the incumbent regimes and now sought far more energetically to Islamize their respective states and societies.

Arab societies in the post-1967 era therefore generally tended to share, in varying degrees and with different orders of priority, a multidimensional set of identities. Egyptians, Jordanians, Palestinians, and Iraqis were the proud possessors of their respective territorial identities as they were also, at one and the same time, Arabs and Muslims, Christians, Sunnis, or Shiites, and so on. In the new circumstances, it was the more secularist purveyors of the emergent territorial identities who competed with the Islamists. As for the pan-Arabists, they were increasingly marginalized after the two or three decades in which they had marginalized their ideological competitors.

Secularism was in its origins a project of the state—first of the colonial state and then of its post-colonial successor. It was a Western import intended to support the state's long-term aim of modernization and development. The dislocations attendant on rapid urbanization and changing cultural and socioeconomic relationships, coupled with increasing economic mismanagement and corruption and rising poverty and income inequality, undermined the legitimacy of Arab regimes, creating the impression that the modernization project was failing. These developments also reflected badly on secularism, as the post-colonial regimes were by and large openly secular nationalist. The despotism and ruthless suppression instituted by these regimes were similarly associated with secularism—which increasingly began to resemble an ideology of repression.²⁸

For reasons of political expediency, and in order to cope with the increasing antagonism they had engendered, the modern, originally secular states in the Arab world “progressively accommodated” the Islamist sectors of their populations. Moreover, these Arab regimes did not refrain from becoming instruments of Islamization itself, in a perverse process that led them to adopt the programs of their critics. Thus, throughout the Arab world the activist secularizing policies of the modern state were “sacrificed on the altar of survival,” while the secularizing intelligentsias resigned themselves to “the victory of Islamism even before it [had] come about.”²⁹

These trends were closely related to the economic reforms imposed on key Arab states like Egypt and Jordan by the IMF and other restructuring programs in the 1980s that resulted in the importation of “liberalism,” “neo-liberalism,” or market-based economies into these countries and that, in turn, gave rise to important socioeconomic changes. In Egypt, for example, during the 1980s and early 1990s, shortcomings in traditional top-down planning and in implementing development objectives boosted the expansion of small-scale development projects—especially by NGOs, many of which were run by Islamists. During the early 1990s, thousands of private voluntary organizations, mostly Islamic, were providing charitable and health services to over five million Egyptian poor, while similar organizations operated in Jordan, albeit on a much smaller scale, to compensate for the government’s retreat from social welfare provision after the implementation of neo-liberal economic policies.³⁰

As a result of all these developments, Islamic movements gradually captured the strongholds of secularization. It was the Islamists who came to dominate the universities in the Arab states; and in Egypt, for example, “even [at] that once unassailable stronghold of secular liberalism, the University of Cairo . . . the bookstalls are stuffed with Islamic tracts, while left-wing and Arab nationalist books are hardly to be found anywhere.”³¹ Indeed, as of the mid-1970s, universities throughout the country had been transformed from bastions of secularization “into a kind of *terra islamica*.”³²

The *jama’at Islamiyya* (the Islamist groups on campuses) would be the engine for the process whereby Egyptian society would be transformed from its *jahili* nature (that is, governed by unbelief) into a true Muslim society. In the eyes of *jama’at* ideologues, nationalism was but another form of Westernization through which infidels had penetrated the minds of the people. Thus, it was incumbent upon the *jama’at* to devote themselves to the revival of Islam and to fulfill their role as the “vanguard of the *umma*.”³³

The *jama’at Islamiyya* and their allies in Egypt and elsewhere in the Arab world made most impressive inroads with respect to the de-secularization of society. Thus, for example, as reported in the 2003 UN Arab Human Development Report, it was only in the publication of religious books that the Arab states were way ahead of the world average: Religious books accounted for 17 percent of the total number

of books published in Arab countries, compared with 5 percent of the total number produced in other parts of the world.³⁴ The fact that Islamic movements had risen to preeminence in Algeria and Palestine—the lands of the FLN and the PLO, the two prototypical national liberation movements of the twentieth-century Middle East—was another dramatic illustration of secular dissipation.³⁵ In Ba’athist Iraq under Saddam and in the Syria of the Assads, the thrust of secularizing policies was arrested once it became clear that they had become a costly liability—and that their regimes would be better served by policies that were more respectful of, and conciliatory toward, religion.

These developments were symbolically indicative of “the crisis of secularism:”³⁶ They marked the end of an era. The process of secularization and Westernizing reforms that had begun in the early nineteenth century had lost its momentum, and the trend of a century and a half was being arrested and even reversed. In the mid-twentieth century, when Arabism and secular nationalism were at their political and intellectual peak, they appeared to be the inevitable wave of the future. But that proved not to be so.³⁷ A process of secularization, which by definition had at its core a belief in the sovereignty of man rather than the sovereignty of God and which had never really permeated the hearts and minds of the great majority of the Arabs, was now being dismissed by the Islamists as an “imported ideology” promoted by “infidel regimes.”

The agenda of the Islamists of the late twentieth century was a far cry from that of their predecessors, the Islamic reformers of a century earlier. Islamic reformers of the late nineteenth century—like the greatest of them, the Egyptian Muhammad ‘Abduh—promoted an ecumenical approach of synthesis between Islam and the West. For ‘Abduh, the objective was to control the process of Westernizing reform by adapting to Western secular ideas and norms without abandoning the cultural and social underpinnings of Islamic society.

For the Islamists of today, after more than a century of intensive exposure to the intrusions of the West into every sphere of daily life, the emphasis is very different. Almost everything has been shaped by Western influence: from the dress code and relations between the sexes to daily diet; from law and education to the media, first print and then electronic; and extending to just about every domain imaginable. Against this transformation into the so-called global village, the

Islamists felt a need to actively fight for the preservation of the Islamic character of their societies. They have therefore become “purveyors of an alternative form of modernity, one that is open to technological advance but rejects secularism and its attendant values.”³⁸

The Islamist revolutionaries, who sought to impose their views on the state by overthrowing the regime through the use of force in countries like Egypt or Syria, were ruthlessly suppressed in the 1980s and early 1990s. Their repression heralded the impending demise of militant Islamism, leading to a “reformist outcome,” whereby the activists opted for a gradualist, nonviolent approach of Islamization, which the regimes could also live with. This was particularly true in Egypt, where the failure of the revolutionary project led to a recognition of the futility of a violent strategy that had also deeply alienated the population. That failed approach gave way to what Asef Bayat has called the “passive revolution,” which focused on a struggle against secular values in the name of elevating personal piety and morality and upholding an Islamic identity and ethos.³⁹

Processes of democratization and political pluralism, meanwhile, have tended to empower the Islamists. This has been true almost without exception, from Egypt to Morocco, and from Jordan and Palestine to Kuwait. The common refrain amongst Western observers of the Middle East had been that the Islamists dominated the opposition to authoritarian regimes primarily because no one else was given the chance—besides which, it was said, the Islamists always had the mosques at their disposal, no matter how repressive the regimes. Democratization and pluralistic politics have proven otherwise. Pluralism was intended by various Middle Eastern regimes and their Western supporters to counter Islamist influence by opening up opportunities for more secular political forces. But in practice, multiparty elections set the stage for the invariably strong showings of the Islamists, while secular liberals were exposed as having hardly any following at all.

The secular materialist, socioeconomic explanation attributes Islamist political success to the disbursement of resources by the Islamists in the form of very substantial social services to broad segments of relatively impoverished people. Though that has, of course, occurred, it explains far less than it might appear to. For one thing, why is it that the Islamists, and not their competitors, are so relatively well endowed with resources? Where does the money come from? Do the secular

opponents of the Islamists have no resources of their own? And why do the Islamists perform just as well in countries like Kuwait, one of the wealthiest in the world,⁴⁰ where the voters—that is, Kuwaiti citizens, not foreign workers—are hardly destitute and are in no need of handouts.

The Islamists are supported by countries like Iran or Saudi Arabia, but they are also handsomely supported by private donors, only some of whom are very wealthy residents of the Gulf. The Muslim Brethren in Palestine, and subsequently Hamas, raised money from wealthy West Bankers, but also from Muslims of ordinary means, in the West Bank and Gaza and in Europe and the U.S., who donated their *zakat* (required Islamic charitable donations) to the Islamist cause. The Muslim Brethren engaged in systematic fundraising throughout the occupied territories and, on the part of branches of the Brethren abroad, through a network of *zakat* committees that were established for this purpose.⁴¹ Islamist NGOs in Egypt were similarly funded with *zakat* from businesses and migrant workers in the Gulf.⁴²

The secularists were also in receipt of considerable support, especially from Western foundations and government sources in the European Union. Western government funding, probably far in excess of the amounts that the Islamists obtain from their state benefactors, is poured into the coffers of countries like Egypt and Jordan and into those of the Palestinian Authority, but with no similar attendant success in mobilizing popular support.

Was this failure due solely to the corruption of the secular regimes, or was it that money was not the only valid explanation for the Islamists' success? Could it simply be that people preferred the Islamists, who they felt truly represented their authentic culture and identity and who spoke a political language they intimately and immediately understood? After all, why do so many private individuals donate *zakat* money to the Islamists in the first place, rather than to their secular liberal or Marxist competitors? Part of the answer probably does have to do with the uncorrupt reputation of the Islamists,⁴³ but one could hardly exclude purely religious motivation as a major part of the explanation, especially when the support is given as *zakat*.

As Egyptian political scientist Amr Hamzawy has observed, Islamists did well in elections in various parts of the Arab world, from Egypt to Iraq, because they were “well embedded in the social fabric”

of Arab societies. This ought to dampen, he wrote, “the dangerous illusion” that political openness in the region “will ultimately replace authoritarian regimes with secular forces” committed to Western-style liberal democracy. To invest hope in secularists, he argued, was to be completely detached from the realities of the current situation.⁴⁴

A poll conducted by the Center for Strategic Studies at the University of Jordan in Amman was published in 2005 under the title “Revisiting the Arab Street: Research from Within.” The pollsters asked Muslim respondents whether the Sharia should be the *only* source of legislation, *one* of the sources of legislation, or not a source of legislation at all. Most Muslims believed it should be at least one source of legislation. Support was particularly strong in Jordan, Palestine, and Egypt: In these three countries, approximately two-thirds of Muslim respondents stated that the Sharia must be the only source of legislation, while the remaining third believed that it should be one source. By comparison, in Lebanon and Syria, a majority (just over half in Syria and nearly two-thirds in Lebanon) favored the view that the Sharia must be one source of legislation, but not the only source. Responses did not vary significantly with levels of education. “Pooled data from Jordan, Palestine, Lebanon, and Egypt indicated that 58 percent of respondents with low education, 59 percent of those with moderate education, and 56 percent with higher education believe that Sharia must be *the only* source of legislation in their countries.”⁴⁵

In many parts of the Arab and Muslim world, just the use of the word “secularism” is met with suspicion and distaste. This is not only on account of its Western origins, but because of “the religious underpinnings that shape[d] and inform[ed] Muslim political culture”⁴⁶—whereas “secularism” is widely understood to convey a hostility to religion—or even conflated or confused with the perceived immorality of atheism. Politicians in Pakistan, for example, are said to fear being branded as secularists because of the certain damage it will cause them. Even Mahmoud Abbas had to explain after the rise of Hamas that he was a “good Muslim” and “not a secularist.”⁴⁷ Indeed, in the internal Palestinian debate, “secularist” is used by the Islamists as a pejorative form of utter derision with which to denounce their rivals.⁴⁸

Even finding a suitable translation for the term has been problematic from the outset, since no equivalent existed in classical Arabic, Farsi, or

Turkish, and the words commonly attempted today in these languages do not really convey the same meaning as “secular.”⁴⁹ Moreover, in the Middle Eastern experience, secularism was essentially imposed from above, and was not preceded or matched by a sustained social and intellectual transformation from below; hence, political secularism had “weak intellectual roots” in the Muslim world. Very few Muslims actually internalized a secular outlook, and Muslim societies were generally responsive to Islamist appeals that rejected secular political principles.⁵⁰

Consequently, for the peoples of the region the question of a nation-state identity had always been problematic. For most of them, their identity fell within ever-widening concentric or overlapping circles “including family, clan and tribal, communal and ethnic, religious and sectarian,” capped only recently by the modern construct of the nation-state. Not only had the nation-state not solved the problem of overlapping identities, but in many instances it had made matters considerably worse.⁵¹

Numerous Arab scholars and intellectuals have in the last generation or so made repeated reference to the importance of *‘asabiyya*, kinship ties of tribalism or group solidarity as a facet of Arab politics. In 1987, the Lebanese scholar Ghassan Salameh spoke of Arab regimes based on “old group feelings that now dominate the state and society through the army, behind a mere façade of modern institutions.”⁵² Salameh subsequently referred to “democracy without democrats,” and to democracy as “the prisoner of the *‘Asabiyyat*,” or kinship groups, in an effort to explain the inherent tension between democratic organizations established as free associations of individuals, on the basis of a shared political platform or ideology, and the prevalence of political organizations in the Middle East founded on *group* solidarity and/or ties of kinship.⁵³

More recently, Hazim Saghiya, the Lebanese editor of the London-based Arab daily *al-Hayat*, has reiterated the political relevance of *‘asabiyya*.⁵⁴ In Saghiya’s view, the reassertion of these religious sectarian, tribal, and other sub-state identities was an obvious corollary of the declining appeal of secular nationalism. Nationalism was supposed to have superseded all of these traditional identities in the name of the modernity of which it was part and parcel. But at least in the Lebanese case, Saghiya concluded, nationalism was seemingly “against nature.” Considering the prevalent subnational and supranational senses

of belonging (*intima'at*) in Lebanon, the generation of a Lebanese nationalism by means of an accommodation between all these identities was virtually impossible.⁵⁵

Ba'athist Iraq was another case, Saghia argues, where all the modern trappings of the regime were a mere pretext for sectarian Sunni domination of Iraqi society. Saddam's regime was founded on the kinship values of family, relatives, and blood ties as they prevailed in the so-called Sunni Triangle (the area in Iraq between Baghdad in the East, Ramadi in the West, and Tikrit in the North), especially within the "Tikrit group" (*majmu'at Tikrit*)—that is, people from Saddam's hometown.⁵⁶

Hassan Nafaa, a professor of political science at Cairo University, has observed with undisguised concern that throughout the Arab countries, "a common denominator prevail[s]: overwhelming anxiety over the future of the Arab world. . . . [over the danger that] the Arab order will collapse entirely and the whole region will fall into protracted chaos and bloodshed. . . . [There was] the risk of comprehensive chaos and the fragmentation of the Arab world into rival sectarian entities. . . . [Therefore] the most urgent task is to keep the existing states from shattering into even smaller entities founded upon narrow sectarian, ethnic or tribal affiliations . . . [and] to steer the Arab world out of its present era of darkness. . . ."⁵⁷

Secular nationalism no longer carries anywhere near the sway it once enjoyed amongst the urban elites as well as within large segments of the urban middle and lower classes for whom the Islamists are far more attractive. As for the rural periphery, secular nationalism had never really made its mark there. In the more remote villages of Anatolia, the Nile Valley, Southern Lebanon, and elsewhere, actual secularization had been minimal, while the power and appeal of religious tradition had always remained very prominent. As the process of urbanization accelerated in the last half-century, former villagers with their religious mores and traditions have come to dominate ever-increasing swathes of the urban landscape.

Thus, in Lebanon, Shiites have been migrating for half a century from the periphery in the Bekaa and the South to the political and commercial center of Lebanon: the capital, Beirut. When Lebanon's modern political order was established by the National Pact of 1943, which was essentially an agreement between the Maronites and the

Sunnis, the presence of the Shiites was hardly felt. At present, however, the Shiites are on the march in Lebanon, gradually becoming not only the most numerous community in the country but also the most politically powerful, both in the capital and in the country as a whole.

P. J. Vatikiotis has observed that the “religion-based identity of Middle Easterners has resisted the secular integration of nationalism, and politics itself has been understood and regarded as a variant of religion.”⁵⁸ The reassertion of religion throughout the region has tended to reinforce traditional modes of corporate identity, and of familial, tribal, and religious community, at the expense of the more secular national identifications, such as pan-Arabism or the territorial state. Democratization actually tended to promote sectarian politics in heterogeneous states, as Sunnis, Shiites, Maronites, and Druze, along with family, tribe, and clan, competed for political power while reasserting traditional solidarities. It was abundantly clear that people voted for the Islamists and for their respective religious community representatives not only as a default option, on account of regime corruption and dysfunction, but as the “preferred option” that preserved the “spirit and collective identity of the people.”⁵⁹

Voting patterns were almost entirely sectarian, noted a Syrian liberal intellectual: “How can we imagine an enduring democracy when we know that a Sunni would never vote for anyone but a Sunni candidate, and likewise a Shiite for a Shiite, and a Catholic and an Orthodox [Christian] for a Catholic and an Orthodox?” Copts being a small minority in Egypt could hardly ever be elected and therefore had to obtain almost all their seats in Parliament (far less than their numbers warranted) via appointment by the government.⁶⁰

Simultaneously, however, Islamism as a modern ideology, rather than as a simple replication of primordial patterns of behavior, was in some ways a product of the very same globalized world, various other parts of which the Islamists firmly rejected. So, for example the media revolution—especially the ubiquitous penetration of the Internet, some of which embodied the degenerate West to the Islamists—also provided novel means of expression, and an avenue for the dissemination of ideas, by the Islamists themselves. The media revolution was expected to break the powerful hold of central governments on the public space, and to set the stage for some measure of political pluralism. Indeed, it has expanded the extent of uncontrolled space within which new

oppositional political forces can take root, as shown in Iran (following the elections of June 2009) and elsewhere; and it has provided the Islamists, in addition to mosques, with another zone of relative freedom, offering them increased protection from the long arm of potentially repressive governments.

What an Arab commentator called the “fatwa industry” (*sina‘at al-fatwa*), whereby both more and less qualified preachers offer their rulings to millions of viewers, has developed in the deeply traditional societies of the region, through the Internet and satellite television.⁶¹ Modern technology was thus being harnessed in the service of Islamism at least as much as, if not more than, it was being exploited for the sake of change in the direction of some Western-style secular democratic political order.

Another case in point is that of the accountant turned preacher in Egypt, ‘Amr Khalid, who by the late 1990s had become a household name in Cairo. In the style of modern televangelists, he and others like him lectured in private homes and exclusive clubs, in mosques in trendy suburbs, and on satellite TV channels, also making use of his own state-of-the-art website along with audio- and videotapes that reached the more affluent classes. Preachers like ‘Amr Khalid especially targeted the women and the youth of the elite, with the message that they could and should lead a pious lifestyle while maintaining, and continuing to enjoy, their power, affluence, and prestige. With the message that piety and privilege could coexist, Khalid and others were enormously successful in making profoundly conservative inroads into the socioeconomic elite.⁶²

In Saudi Arabia, a competition has raged in cyberspace between the Saudi regime and its opponents. The Saudis introduced the Internet to enable modernization and for business uses but sought simultaneously to filter sites used by the opposition as well as other sites it found objectionable. As important as it was for the regime to allow for modernization, it was equally critical that it prevent globalization from compromising the traditional values of the Kingdom.⁶³

Islamic banking was yet another example of interacting with modernity while consciously seeking to preserve the values intrinsic to the Islamic religious and cultural heritage. Modern Islamic banking institutions were established as part of a capitalist socioeconomic reality, but the nature of the response to the challenge was shaped by a “self-

consciously Islamic perspective.” The creation of distinctively Islamic financial institutions was designed to harness economic growth for the benefit of the wider Muslim community without losing sight of Islamic moral principles. These institutions were intended to provide a moral compass to those seeking to lead a “good Muslim life in the world of capitalist modernity.”⁶⁴

Islamic financial institutions were meant to ensure that in a world of changing economic conditions, the norms of the Islamic faith would protect the community from “impoverishment on the one hand, and from secularization and spiritual corruption on the other.” They were intended by their founders not only to be engines of economic development but also to remind Muslims, as they engaged in capitalist economic endeavors, “of their relationship with a divine order.”⁶⁵ They did not always succeed in doing so and often had to revert in practice to the regular norms of the global banking system, but they did provide a way of engaging with the world which was “congruent with various facets of an Islamic identity.”⁶⁶

Like the media and the economy, contemporary political language reflected an Islamizing trend. These were no longer the spirited days of secular revolutionary terminology of *thawra* (revolution) or *wahda*, *hurriyya*, and *wa-ishtirakiyya* (unity, freedom, and socialism), as in the heyday of ‘Abd al-Nasser and the Ba’ath in the late 1950s. That was the terminology of an era dominated by a more secular notion of Arabism whereby the Arab nation (*al-Umma al-‘Arabiyya*) had seemingly supplanted the community of believers (*Ummat al-Mu’minin*). That was an era that has long passed, and its language has faded with it.

The secular language of the nationalists was now being challenged by the language of believers—the discourse of *jihad* and *takfir* (holy war and the accusation that other Muslims are impious infidels) having superseded the secular/nonreligious armed struggle (*al-kifah al-musallah*) in a world where God is the prime mover, not the “masses” (*al-jamahir*) of yesteryear. In Palestine, those who believed in Muslim Palestine (*filastin al-muslima*) are posing an unprecedented challenge to the standard-bearers of Revolutionary Palestine (*filastin al-thawra*), now making the nationalist argument in purely religious terms.

As Arab societies were becoming less secular, the non-Arab Muslim states of the Middle East that might have provided alternative models were themselves undergoing a similar process of change, albeit of a

different kind. Turkey experienced the creation of a new synthesis of religion and state, while Iran underwent a far more radical Islamic revolution.

The Islamic revolution in Iran in 1979, notwithstanding its specifically Shiite character, was a source of inspiration for the Islamist revival in the Sunni Muslim Arab states. It demonstrated with stunning success the mobilizing power of religious fervor and served as a source of encouragement for the various Islamist movements in the Arab world—and as an alarm bell to Arab regimes. As of the late 1970s and early 1980s, Arab governments, monarchies and republics alike, began to demonstrate their own religious rectitude and piety, while at the same time sharpening their tools of repression.

Perhaps even more striking, albeit less dramatic, was the rise to power of the conservative AKP in Turkey, not by revolution but through the ballot box—and twice in succession, in 2002 and again in 2007. No other Muslim country had ever undergone a process of intensive state-imposed secularization as had the Turkish Republic. But there, too, secularization was being pushed back, to the extent that in the eyes of some Turks, a quiet counterrevolution was underway. The Kemalist revolution had never really penetrated into the depths of the rural periphery, and the rural folk who had migrated in ever-increasing numbers to Turkey's major cities were still deeply attached to their traditional norms and values. Instead of the cities bringing secular Kemalism to the villages, the "Islamist periphery" has brought religion back into the city. There is, as a result, a growing sense of trepidation within the ranks of the secularist center that the "Islamist periphery" will gradually erode the founding secularist principles of the republic and establish a new regime that would not pay homage to the Kemalist revolutionary heritage.⁶⁷

In the over seventy years since the death of Atatürk, Islamist political parties have become an ever more salient feature of Turkish politics. Ironically, the military itself, historically the ardent protector of the secular order, was partly responsible for the Islamic revival. After the 1980 coup, the army was seeking societal reform that would counterbalance the extreme ideologies of both the Marxist Left and the Fascist Right, both of which had disrupted Turkish politics. The alternative they presented came to be known as the "Turkish-Islamic synthesis" (*Türk-Islam Sentezi*), which meant a controlled Islamization

process undertaken through the vehicle of state-supervised religious education. As a consequence, religion made some headway into Parliament and personal religious devotion “was now considered normal”—and so religiosity became much more publicly visible from the 1980s on. All of the above were, of course, in stark contrast to the original Kemalist formulations of the basis of the Turkish Republic,⁶⁸ and they could not but eventually make their mark in the upper echelons of the political order.

The rise of an Islamist party to power in Turkey not only paralleled the rise of Islamist politics in the Arab world but also corresponded with an increasing interest amongst Arabs in Ottoman history, and a much more favorable perception by Arabs of the Ottoman legacy. “The Ottoman period, with its powerful Turkish dimension, was no longer seen as external to the making of Arab society and culture, but rather as an organic and pivotal phase” in Arab and Islamic history.⁶⁹ The old “Turkish images of ‘Arab traitors’ and the Arab perception of ‘Ottoman imperialists’” meant very little amidst the more Islamist reality of contemporary Arab and Turkish societies.⁷⁰

The Arabs may very well come to see Turkey as a model for emulation. But regardless of whether the evolving Turkish equilibrium between Islam and secularism proves to be an applicable model for other countries or not, it is abundantly clear that the former radical secularizing model of the Ataturk era is no longer the source of inspiration it once was for many of the states of the region. For the embryonic Arab nationalist movement, Turkey was seen as a success story, and Ataturk was lauded as an impressive enforcer of a program of modernization. The Ataturk era was a beacon of secularization that influenced an entire new middle class of officers and intellectuals who rose to power in the Arab states after the Second World War.⁷¹

Today’s Turkey represents something quite different. The Turkey of the AKP is an extremely complex example of revived Islamist politics within what has remained a secular constitutional framework. But did this Turkey represent a “rising tide of conservatism”⁷²—that is, the thin wedge of Islamization—or was it a “home grown version of Muslim secularism”?⁷³ That remains an open question.

2. ISLAMIZING TRENDS IN THE ARAB EAST (*MASHRIQ*)

Whatever the Turkish model may herald, in the last generation or so, in the Arab world in general and in the Arab East (the *Mashriq*) in particular, the various regimes, albeit in very different circumstances, have all, without exception, found it politically prudent and expedient to reformulate their relations with the forces of political Islam and to invest more intensive efforts to enhance their Islamic legitimization. In the Arab states around Palestine, the regimes no longer actively pursue a policy of secularization, and religion has made deep inroads into the core of politics, society, and collective identity after having being relegated to the periphery for much of the twentieth century. Not only had the state failed to secularize society, but forces from within society were now Islamizing the state. Nowhere was this more apparent than in Egypt, the erstwhile bastion of Westernizing Islamic reform, secular intellectual innovation, and secularizing Arab nationalism.⁷⁴

Egypt

Egypt is unique among the Arab states in its longstanding existence as a stable state with a strong sense of collective identity, based on a relatively homogeneous population of Sunni Muslim speakers of the Arabic language. The people of Egypt were united by an extraordinary sense of millennial historical continuity as the inhabitants of the Nile Valley, whose daily life, politics, society, and economy have been regulated since time immemorial by the flow of the great river.⁷⁵ Egyptian intellectuals in the 1920s, much earlier than in other Arab states, spoke with justified conviction of the distinctiveness and permanence of the environment of the Nile Valley that had shaped the uniqueness of the “Egyptian spirit,” the “Egyptian mentality,” and the “Egyptian personality.”⁷⁶ This sort of pure territorialism, however, which completely marginalized religion, never progressed beyond the limited confines of a very small ultra-secular Westernizing elite.

In the heady days of ‘Abd al-Nasser, Egyptianness was overtaken by Arabism, in the expectation that with time all the Arab states would have no choice but to follow Egypt’s example in accordance with the “will of the masses.” This “progressive” vision, however, incorporating Arab

unity, Arab socialism, and an alliance with the Soviet Union, proved to be an illusion. 'Abd al-Nasser's passing in 1970 led to his replacement by Anwar Sadat, who followed an unabashed de-Nasserization policy of "Egypt first," based on the single-minded pursuit of state interest.

Sadat's new orientation was wedded to a domestic policy of economic openness (*infitah*) and measured political liberalization, which was part and parcel of the systematic dismantling of the Arab socialist power structure built by 'Abd al-Nasser. Within this framework, Sadat also allowed far more political freedom for the erstwhile mortal enemies of 'Abd al-Nasser—namely, the Muslim Brethren and other Islamist groups. The unintended consequence of this policy, however, was the eventual need to resort to the repression of Muslim extremists, a confrontation that culminated in Sadat's assassination.

Egypt is no longer the great regional power it once was, but there is no correlation between the country's declining external influence and the overwhelming power of the regime in relation to its domestic opponents. Sadat's assassination notwithstanding, the domestic balance of power between the regime and its mostly Islamist opponents is tilted very heavily in the regime's favor, with the security organs and the entire military and defense establishment very much on the regime's side, and the Islamists effectively kept in check by occasionally brutal repression. But the regime has not sought endless confrontation, and under President Hosni Mubarak, it has also made significant concessions to the Islamists.

Egypt at the turn of the twenty-first century was said to be in the throes of a "culture war" as different sectors of society struggled over the "country's soul"—as they had been doing for over a hundred years—with Islamists doing ideological, philosophical, and legal battle with secularists. This was a struggle between believers in the religion of Islam as defining the "paramount cultural code for the community" and others who subscribed to basically secular values. The regime, though secular at heart, chose to abstain from taking sides so long as the struggle did not affect its hold on power. Its role was "one of containment, not leadership," as the government maintained a neutral stance and even denied that it served as the standard-bearer of a secular world view.⁷⁷

By choosing this course, the regime was in fact conceding much of the public space and public debate to the Islamists. Moreover, in

response to increasing popular religious sentiment, the Mubarak regime frequently resorted to religious legitimization considerably more than its predecessors, regularly seeking the endorsement of the religious establishment for its policies and actions.⁷⁸

In practice, the government acquiesced in the erosion of the secularizing foundations of the Egyptian Republic. Under 'Abd al-Nasser, Sharia courts were abolished⁷⁹ and were accorded no role even with respect to matters of personal status, which was much further than many other Muslim countries had gone in such respects. Under Mubarak, however, the regime has allowed the Islamists to apply the Sharia to cases in the secular courts. The courts have been regularly used by Islamist lawyers to bring secular intellectuals, writers, professors, artists, and journalists to trial and to convict them for the purely religious crimes of blasphemy and apostasy.⁸⁰

This was all part of a project of socio-religious change initiated from below by the Islamists and subsequently appropriated by the state, which from then on sought to contain and control the trajectory of the process.⁸¹ Egyptian society from the late 1980s onwards showed ever more external signs of increasing religiosity. The construction of new mosques was rampant; people of all classes flocked in great numbers to Friday prayers; the *hijab* was worn by over 80 percent of women; and the consumption of religious literature was constantly on the rise—while movie going, alcohol consumption, and the patronage of bars and nightclubs all declined.

Even the regime could not escape acknowledging the prevalence of the idea of an “Islamic solution.” The minister of interior, noting in 1992 that all laws in Egypt were based on the Sharia, even went so far as to publicly declare that the “Egyptian government would never allow the establishment of a secular state.”⁸² Islamic activism penetrated civil institutions and mass media as well as the spheres of education and community and social services. The Muslim Brotherhood assumed control over Egypt’s major professional unions—including the lawyers syndicate, traditionally Egypt’s most liberal and secular association.

The state itself, through its own agencies, reclaimed religious space and gave free rein to state religious authorities to aggressively pursue their own Islamization project from the top. Al-Azhar, Egypt’s leading institution of Islamic higher learning, followed its own mission of “safeguarding religiosity” and scrutinized books, films, and plays,

banning whatever it found undesirable. Islamists controlled the Teachers Training College, where they trained future teachers who would disseminate Islamization into the classroom. In the late 1980s, the Ministry of Education promoted greater religiosity in the schools through a revised curriculum, and religious sentiments and ideas were said to dominate the schools.⁸³

The mainstream print and electronic media in Egypt were likewise deeply influenced by Islamization. The mostly state-owned press shifted toward conservative religiosity and self-censorship, abandoning much of the secular liberal content of the 1950s and 1960s. Official religious publications were decidedly anti-secular, and national radio and television promoted a religious sensibility by increasing the number of Islamic-oriented programs.⁸⁴ In the prevailing atmosphere, the radicals in the Muslim Brethren took firm control of their movement. In 2007, they introduced crucial changes into the organization's proposed political party platform which prohibited Copts and women from running for public office and subjected the legislature to religious oversight.⁸⁵

Islamic sentiment thus "eroded nationalism's secular expression."⁸⁶ Discord was occasionally apparent between secularists and their religious compatriots. In September 2009, the ire of the secularists was aroused when the Egyptian Ministry of Interior launched an unprecedented campaign to apprehend public violators of the fast during the month of Ramadan.⁸⁷ More significantly, Islamic activists openly challenged Egyptian secular national solidarity by assuming an ever more militant posture toward the country's Coptic Christian minority, while the government invested little or no effort in effectively deterring them. From the 1970s onwards, while President Sadat acquiesced in, or even encouraged, militant Islamism as a tool in the dismantling of the Nasserist edifice he had inherited, the situation of the Coptic minority became steadily more precarious as they were exposed to increasing levels of intolerance and violence.⁸⁸

As the Muslim majority turned increasingly to religion, the Coptic minority followed suit—but they meanwhile sought to protect their own communal identity and solidarity, resulting in an exacerbation of inter-communal tensions. The building of churches in Egypt had always been difficult, and the obtaining of the requisite licenses was fraught with legal hurdles—as opposed to mosques, which did not require any

licensing for construction. The Copts were thereby forced to improvise and began building churches illegally, leading their Muslim neighbors to cry foul. This often resulted in a resort to violence, which became commonplace in Egyptian inter-communal relations from the early 1970s until the present.⁸⁹

The Copts were generally politically marginalized in Egypt and underrepresented in the institutions of state.⁹⁰ They were legally barred from running for the presidency, which according to the Egyptian constitution was the sole preserve of Muslims. In state schools, Islamic religious education was part of the Arabic language and history curricula, which were compulsory subjects for non-Muslims, too. School textbooks tended to represent Egypt as a Muslim society and sometimes included specifically anti-Christian texts—and the curriculum required students to recognize the supremacy of Islam and the special relationship between Islam and the State of Egypt.⁹¹

The Islamization of society was having such a negative impact on Egyptian social cohesion and on relations between Muslims and non-Muslims that, in the summer of 2008, the Egyptian doctors syndicate banned all transplants between Muslims and Copts on the grounds that “society would not tolerate organ donations across religious boundaries.”⁹²

Secularization in Egypt was being steadily diminished as the Islamists occupied more and more of the public space and discourse. But the increasing religiosity of the Egyptian state resulted as much from the deliberate policy of the authorities as from “the Islamist movement’s *socialization of the state* toward religious sensibilities.” Though the state still had the wherewithal to maintain the supremacy of the essentially secular ruling elite, it had consciously acquiesced in the transformation of Egypt into what had actually become a “seculareligious” state.⁹³

Jordan

Jordan has a religiously homogeneous population just like Egypt, with well over 90 percent of its people being Sunni Muslim speakers of the Arabic language; there is a small minority of Arab Christians. Much is usually said, justifiably, about the cleavage between original Jordanians and Jordanians of Palestinian origin. But not enough attention is paid to the fact that the great majority of both Jordanians *and* Palestinians

are Sunni Muslims, a collective cultural and religious identity that has bound them together for centuries, and is more significant than their distinct, but relatively new and more shallow, modern national identities. Marriage is a useful barometer by which to identify critical social fault lines—and Jordanians and Palestinians marry each other as a matter of course. The decisive fault line in such matters is religion rather than national identity: Thus, Jordanian Muslims invariably marry their Palestinian coreligionists, as do Jordanian and Palestinian Christians.

Jordan has weathered many storms, regional and domestic, and has undeniably acquired a collective identity and 'stateness' of its own. The Bedouin tribes in Jordan were well integrated into the state and gradually emerged as the standard-bearers of 'Jordanianness,' largely defined vis-à-vis their internal Palestinian "others." It was this distinctly Jordanian state that crushed the PLO in the notorious "Black September" civil war of 1970. If the Palestinians in Jordan had constituted the main opposition to the regime until then, from the late 1970s and early 1980s on the essentially secular Arab or Palestinian nationalist opposition was superseded by an Islamist challenge, propelled by the overarching regional trends, the Iranian revolution, and Jordan's economic woes. The regime and the Islamists, however, established an informal, albeit uneasy, *modus vivendi*. They were protagonists who were not really mortal enemies.

Though the regime and the Islamists were now clearly on opposite sides of the ideological barricades, they had not always been so. In fact, the Muslim Brethren and the Jordanian regime had been longstanding political allies in the confrontation with the Nasserist and Ba'athist secular Arab socialists throughout the 1950s and 1960s. The regime had never resorted to anti-Islamist socialist and pseudo-socialist rhetoric or policy; on the contrary, it had accused the Nasserists and their allies of trying to "Bolshevize" (*balshevize*) Muslim Arabs. The Brethren also loyally stood by the regime in its war against the PLO, whose ranks included Marxist factions that also happened to be led by Christians.⁹⁴

There was, therefore, no residue of bad blood between the regime and the Islamists, as there was in countries like Egypt, Syria, and Algeria. Moreover, the Hashemites were not seen by the Islamists as a religiously illegitimate minority, like the 'Alawis in Syria. On the contrary, as the

monarchy had increasingly emphasized since the Iranian revolution, it possessed a noble Islamic ancestry as descendants of the Prophet, who was himself of the House of Hashim.⁹⁵

The regime has also consistently played up its commitment to Islamic history and tradition as well as its religious rectitude and piety. Much publicity is, therefore, given to the King's attendance at prayers; his performance of the hajj; the monarchy's assistance in enabling others to perform the pilgrimage; the public observance of Ramadan; the regime's encouragement to the populace to fulfill their religious duty to pay the *zakat*; its investment in the upkeep of the Muslim holy places in Jerusalem; and the construction of monuments at the burial sites in Jordan of the companions of the Prophet (*al-sahaba*).⁹⁶ The public space in Amman, inspired by both private and government initiatives, has also undergone some degree of Islamization since the early 1980s: a remarkable rise in mosque construction, a growing preference for what is seen as an Islamic form of public architecture, and the increasing tendency of young women to wear the *hijab*.⁹⁷

By the early 1990s, the Islamists were in control of Jordan's major professional associations.⁹⁸ There was also an informal network of Salafi groups who believed in grassroots change but had come to the conclusion that violent tactics were counterproductive, as they only provoked harsh regime repression. In Jordan, as elsewhere, the main body of the Islamist opposition was the Muslim Brethren, which was the most well organized and politically formidable. The Brethren expanded their presence through a variety of civil society organizations in the fields of culture and charity, and they also had a web of political and personal connections to their brethren in Hamas on the other side of the river.⁹⁹ A variety of Islamic NGOs proliferated as part of an effort to solve socioeconomic problems in a way that "cleansed and purified" Jordanian society of "non-Islamic customs" and promoted Islamic values "as an alternative to secularism and Western value systems."¹⁰⁰

But the Muslim Brethren and their political party, the Islamic Action Front (IAF), were no match for the East Bank establishment. The Islamists won 40 percent of the seats in Jordan's 1989 parliamentary elections—an amazing feat and a sign of the changing times—whereas in the last elections before the 1967 war, the leader of the Muslim Brethren could not even get himself elected in Amman. The feat of 1989, however, has never been repeated. The regime has used all

available means, from legislation to repression and fraud, to ensure that no similar outcome would ever be achieved again.

The cohesion of the East Bank elite, the loyalty of the military and the domestic security organs, and the international support for Jordan on account of its geopolitical centrality in a very volatile region have all remained key supports of what has proved to be one of the most stable countries in the Middle East. That is not to say that there have been no Islamizing inroads into the establishment. One example is to be found even in the upper echelons of the military, where officers clubs are no longer venues for social gatherings where alcohol is consumed and men dance with their bareheaded wives, British-style.¹⁰¹

The bottom line still has been, however, that the Muslim Brethren and other Islamists like the Salafis have very soberly appraised the balance of power in Jordan and generally tended to deliberately shy away from head-on confrontations with the regime. The Islamists in Jordan, as in Egypt, were evolutionaries rather than revolutionaries,¹⁰² and in Jordan they have similarly succeeded in Islamizing society—though controlled and monitored by the regime somewhat more effectively than in Egypt. Jordan, as opposed to Egypt, enjoys the advantage of its eminently manageable small size. The population of the country is only some six million, almost entirely concentrated in the North Western corner of the country. In Jordan, therefore, it has generally been relatively easy for the central government to assert its efficient control.

Unlike Egypt and Jordan, Lebanon, Syria, and Iraq do not have religiously homogeneous populations. These countries of the Fertile Crescent have been natural havens for minorities, who found secure homelands in the less accessible mountains, the more distant valleys, or the unnavigable marshes of the undulating and irregular terrain. The countries of the Fertile Crescent were a mosaic of Sunni Muslim Arabs and non-Sunni or non-Arab minorities: Maronite Christians, Orthodox and Catholic Christians, Shiites, and Druze in Lebanon; 'Alawis, Orthodox and Catholic Christians, and Druze in Syria; and Kurds, Jews (until the mid-twentieth century), and Shiites in Iraq. Politics in these countries have traditionally been governed by sectarianism, with group identity based on religion and men of religion often possessing inordinate power and influence in the politics of their respective communities.

Syria

Ba'athist Syria was deeply influenced by sectarian politics, and 'Alawi sectarian solidarity continued to play an important role in regime stability—a fact never openly admitted by the men in power, but a fact just the same. As Hanna Batatu wrote many years ago about the regime in Syria: “[T]he ruling element consists at its core of a close kinship group which draws strength simultaneously, but in decreasing intensity, from a tribe, a sect-class, and an ecological-cultural division of the people.”¹⁰³ Confessionalism as a system of government was deeply embedded in the political order in Syria. Its Ba'athist secularism was a vehicle for the sectarian domination of the 'Alawi minority, and for the political dispossession of the Sunni majority in the struggle for control of the modern Syrian state.

The 'Alawis came from the most humble origins, and were the downtrodden underclass of rural Syria for centuries. They were regarded by their Sunni neighbors as heretics (who deify 'Ali bin Abi Talib, the son-in-law of the Prophet and the fourth Khalifa; thus the name “Alawis,” derived from 'Ali). They enrolled in large numbers in the armed forces under the French Mandate, a practice that continued on a much larger scale after independence. The army was to be their main avenue of social mobility, coupled with membership in the Ba'ath party and the systematic marginalization of religion – a blessing for the 'Alawis, whose religion was a political and social liability.

From its inception in 1963, the Ba'athist regime was avowedly secular, and even radically so during the rule of the so-called “neo-Ba'ath” from 1966 to 1970. But under Hafez Assad, the Ba'ath changed course. Rising to the presidency in 1970, Assad sought to enhance the religious legitimacy of the 'Alawis. In 1973 he reinstated the clause in the constitution requiring the head of state to be a Muslim, a clause that the “neo-Ba'athis” had previously removed. Assad also managed to get the Lebanese Shi'ite cleric Musa al-Sadr to recognize the 'Alawis as Orthodox Twelver Shi'ites—and thus, as ostensible Muslims, constitutionally eligible for the presidency.

The Sunnis at least accepted Shi'ites as Muslims, in contrast to their rejection of the 'Alawis as heretics. Many in the Sunni majority community, particularly in the big cities, continued to regard the 'Alawis as socially inferior heretics, whose political dominance was anathema. The failure of the regime's efforts to secure religious legitimacy for the

'Alawis eventually resulted in the revolt of the more militant factions of the Muslim Brethren in 1976–82, which was finally and ruthlessly suppressed with the destruction of the last redoubt of the rebels in the northern city of Hama in February 1982. Assad was unflinching in battle but magnanimous in victory, and from the mid-1980s he offered the former rebels a reconciliation of sorts, albeit on tough terms set by the regime.¹⁰⁴

Hafez Assad's more conciliatory attitude to the Brethren was matched in the 1990s by a greater measure of tolerance toward religion in general. The process begun by Hafez Assad, of having the 'Alawis accepted as twelver Shiis, was accelerated under Bashar, his son. Bashar has developed a more sustained program of "Shiization" generally with the help of the Iranians, as a means of legitimizing both the 'Alawi community and the regime in the eyes of the Sunni majority. Hundreds of 'Alawis were sent to Iran for religious training while Iranian men of religion toured Syria to preach on Shiite religion in the 'Alawi areas, as the regime sought to rid itself of its former ultra-secularist, anti-religious image. The Syrian mass media diligently presented Hafez Assad to the Syrian public and the world at large as a bona fide Muslim. Bashar, like Hafez before him, made a deliberate effort to portray himself not only as a Muslim, but as a devout one.

Furthermore, since the 1990s, religious schools have opened all over the country; religious literature is readily available and sells to the general public in far greater quantities than books on other subjects; the number of students studying Sharia in university is constantly on the rise; popular religious programs are broadcast on national television; and Syrian society, especially its Sunni components, is becoming more observant—at least if judged, for example, by participation in prayer or the adoption of the Islamic dress code. Syria is similar to other countries, like Egypt, wherein even though radical Islamist movements failed in their efforts to overthrow the regime, society (even in Ba'athist Syria) is becoming more religious, and the regime tends to at least portray itself as such as well.¹⁰⁵

Iraq

A similar but far more overt interaction between religious sectarianism and politics was apparent in Iraq. Upon the establishment of the country one could hardly speak of an Iraqi nation, nor was there ever any tradition of cooperation between its disparate ethnic

and religious communities.¹⁰⁶ Arabs were an approximately 80 percent majority in Iraq, but Arab nationalism was undeniably a Sunni Muslim enterprise, with which the Shiites, for the most part, and the non-Arab Kurds generally did not identify. Iraq was a country dominated in the name of Arabism by the Sunni Arab minority, at first in the form of the British-installed Hashemite monarchy together with the Sunni urban landowning and mercantile elite. Under the strongman of Iraqi politics for many years, Nuri al-Sa'id, Hashemite Iraq turned into an authoritarian state, albeit one not quite repressive enough to forestall its overthrow in a military coup in 1958.

A decade of relative instability elapsed until the Ba'ath finally came to power in 1968. Just like the Hashemites, the Ba'ath ensured Sunni domination, albeit through a different class of Sunnis: They elevated men from rural provincial backgrounds rather than royals and urban notables. The core of Saddam's regime was composed of members of his own family and allies from his hometown of Tikrit. It is they who developed the Ba'athist regime into a totalitarian machine of control and repression that put Nuri al-Sa'id's authoritarianism in the shade, in terms of its arbitrary and ruthless suppression of all opposition.

This machinery was what Kanan Makiya so aptly described as the "Republic of Fear."¹⁰⁷ The Kurds and the Shiites were crushed into submission by the minority Sunni Arab-dominated order. Arab nationalism—just like the Iraqiness fostered by Saddam, founded on the imaginary continuity of Iraq from its Babylonian "origins"—could not disguise what in essence remained a regime that ensured Sunni Arab supremacy over the two other major Iraqi communities. The Ba'ath tended at first to emphasize its strictly secular Arab nationalist nature, as a way of ameliorating potential Sunni-Shiite cleavages in its pursuit of unrivaled Sunni supremacy.

In later years, particularly after the Iranian revolution and Saddam Hussein's final rise to power in 1979, the Ba'ath abandoned this policy in favor of a combination of Iraqi national consciousness, drawing on Iraq's supposed pre-Islamic Babylonian past, and "political Islam," when it felt that such a shift might better serve its purpose. Thus, while cracking down on Shiite political movements, outlawing the Shiite opposition party *al-Da'wa*, and arresting and executing Shiite leaders,¹⁰⁸ the regime changed gears in its political language. Saddam began to claim direct descent from 'Ali bin Abi Talib, revered by the

Shiites as the rightful successor to the Prophet. (Their name, “Shiites,” derives from their political origins as the “faction of ‘Ali”—*Shi‘at ‘Ali*.) From then onwards the employment of Islamic themes for regime legitimization increased consistently, from a “toeing [of] the Islamic line” for most of the 1980s to “deliberate Islamic flag-waving” in the 1990s.¹⁰⁹

During the war with Shiite Iran, hundreds of thousands of Iraqi Shiites fought shoulder to shoulder with their Sunni compatriots, partly out of loyalty to the state of Iraq and to their own Iraqiness, partly out of intimidation by the state’s ruthless organs of repression. The war, however, also made it increasingly clear to the regime just how effectively the Iranians had made religion into a mobilizing force, as opposed to the “weakness of Ba’ath ideology in emotionally motivating Iraqis.” This further encouraged the process of Islamization, which peaked on the eve of the Gulf War in early 1991, when the words “Allah akbar” were embroidered on the Iraqi flag.¹¹⁰

Despite all the conflicting subnational and supranational identities, some sense of Iraqiness and identification with the state had coalesced over the almost one hundred years since Iraq was founded. This sense of Iraqiness has not been erased from the consciousness of Iraqis, despite the profound religious and sectarian cleavages. Thus, the Shiites of Iraq have shown no inclination to wed their Arab state to the Iranian state of their Persian coreligionists, and ethnic tensions between Persians and Iraqis are part of the Iraqi-Iranian reality.

Saddam’s Islamic and “Babylon-Iraq” manipulations, however, could not erase or even paper over the sectarian identities within Iraq, nor did they really reinforce Iraq’s internal cohesion.¹¹¹ The Sunni-dominated regime ruled with an iron fist, and it would take a foreign invasion, not a local coup or uprising, to overthrow the Ba’ath. In post-Ba’athist Iraq, the linkage between religion and politics has become far more overt. The invasion of Iraq by the United States and its allies in 2003 crushed the centralized control of the Ba’ath, catapulting the Shiites, for the first time in Iraqi history, into the driving seat of Iraqi politics while simultaneously marginalizing the Sunnis, in what now became an openly sectarian struggle.

The Iraqi elections of December 2005 ended with impressive victories on the part of religious parties in both the Shiite and Sunni communities, coupled with a similarly decisive victory for the Kurdish

ethnic coalition. The three communities' high level of participation in the elections was mobilized primarily in order to secure the group rights and privileges of Shiites, Sunnis, and Kurds, respectively, as was reflected very clearly in the voting patterns. Shiite religious groups that had joined forces on a common list gained 41.2 percent of the votes, the Sunni Islamic list received 15.1 percent, and a joint Sunni-Shiite list barely mustered 8 percent, while the Kurdish coalition won 21.7 percent.¹¹² The figures attest to the fact that Shiites, Sunnis, and Kurds voted almost entirely for representatives of their respective sects.

In Ba'athist Iraq there had been a "taboo of sectarian discourse," in the words of 'Ali 'Allawi, the former minister of defense in the post-Saddam Iraqi government. According to 'Allawi, the political discourse in Ba'athist Iraq was channeled in any number of directions—into Arab nationalism, socialism, modernism—but never into an examination of the sectarian basis of power. "The denial of sectarianism was so potent and deep-rooted that it pushed discussion of this problem to the outer limits of acceptable dialogue. In time, this denial created its own reality, and became an article of faith."¹¹³

The U.S. invasion of Iraq "swept away this comforting fantasy" of a nonsectarian society. "For the first time in the modern history of Iraq, the Sunni Arabs were forced to confront the loss of their ascendant power *as a community*."¹¹⁴ The fact that the Sunnis had to contend with the "apparent ascendancy of sectarian consciousness amongst the Shi'a" and the Sunnis' concomitant "fear of marginalization and impotence in the face of both a rising Shi'a militancy and a powerful occupying force kept most Sunni Arabs in a state of active or passive hostility to the new order."¹¹⁵

The key shift in Shiite thinking, however, was "a move from the politics of 'victimization' to an insistence on their rights as a majority. This went beyond the simple assertion of majority rights and extended to the heart of the Iraqi state itself, and the redefinition of the identity of the country. . . . Rather than celebrate their release from the Ba'athist dictatorship . . . most of the Shi'a gravitated towards their religious leadership, and to explicitly Islamist groups."¹¹⁶ Shiite clerics came to the fore as the most effective and influential leaders of the community, albeit in competition with each other. In reaction, Sunnis tended to flock to religious groupings too, and opinion polls and voting patterns showed a shift away from secularism to religious parties.¹¹⁷

In the deliberations on the new Iraqi constitution, there was one thing that all parties and factions could agree on, and that was “the complete rejection of secularism.”¹¹⁸ In the political arena, “sectarian divisions or politicized men of religion had become daily facts of life.” Political parties in Iraq, for the most part, had a “sectarian coloring,” and religious authorities were playing key roles in deciding who would run for office.¹¹⁹ In the Shiite heartland south of Baghdad, posters and portraits of the most revered Shiite Imams or prominent clerics were ubiquitous in public. “God [was] everywhere.”¹²⁰ Even intersectarian terrorist attacks often targeted religious shrines, on the assumption that for the parties concerned, these were the most sensitive and potentially hurtful targets. In a contest “over who is more profoundly sectarian,” between the new Shiite rulers of Iraq and Saddam Hussein, “the objective observer would have a hard time coming to a conclusion.”¹²¹

According to a draft report by the Iraqi Human Rights Ministry, between 2004 and 2008, the period of the bloodiest sectarian strife, 85,694 people were killed and 147,000 wounded.¹²² Thereafter, sectarian violence, while far from over, diminished significantly. Provincial elections in early 2009 seemed to have been somewhat less blatantly sectarian, and in the run-up to the elections of 2010, political parties were said to be organizing on national rather than sectarian lines.¹²³ Nonetheless, a system of government accepted across ethnic, sectarian, and regional lines had yet to be agreed upon, more than six years after the war¹²⁴—and Arab commentators constantly lamented the ever-present “demon of sectarianism” (*ghul al-ta’ifiyya*) that continued to bedevil Iraqi politics.¹²⁵

In the words of one Iraqi commentator, the people of Iraq, almost a hundred years after the establishment of their state, still dealt with their future as Sunnis, Shiites, and Kurds rather than as a unified nation.¹²⁶ The military and the police in Iraq were said to be heavily politicized; even the various divisions of the Iraqi army had distinct sectarian loyalties.¹²⁷ Sectarianism was unquestionably rife and dominated just about every facet of Iraqi political life.¹²⁸

Lebanon

Lebanon, for its part, never even pretended to be above sectarian politics. A 2008 poll showed that “religious beliefs and values are important in the lives of the great majority of the Lebanese public”

of all religious denominations, Muslims and Christians alike.¹²⁹ The Republic of Lebanon was founded in 1920 under the French Mandate as a confessional confederation of religious minorities, which was actually a continuation of the semi-autonomous *mutasarrifiyya* formed under the Ottomans in 1861. The National Pact of 1943 distributed power between Lebanon's religious communities more or less according to their relative size, as reflected in the census of 1932. The fundamental weakness of the National Pact, however, was its incapacity to accommodate change. It was structured from the outset to perpetuate the status quo of 1943, when the pact was negotiated and when the Christians may still have had a tiny majority but probably already did not—which explains their adamant refusal to conduct a new census that might have revealed the true proportions, which everyone already knew.¹³⁰

Despite the fact that the demographics were constantly shifting against the Christians, the political order remained unchanged. Maronite (and other Christian) numbers were in constant relative decline, owing to lower birthrates and higher rates of emigration, as opposed to the Muslims, especially the Shiites. The National Pact survived the first shock of civil war in 1958, but it did not survive the second civil war that tore Lebanon apart from 1975 until 1989. After fifteen years of warfare, Lebanese parliamentary deputies convened in Ta'if, Saudi Arabia, in October 1989, and approved the accord that brought the civil war to an end. The 1943 power distribution was amended to at least partially reflect demographic change. The Maronites kept the presidency, as the Sunnis preserved the premiership, but executive authority would shift from the presidency to the Cabinet, in which Christian representation would not drop below 50%—as would be the case in Parliament, where the new requirement would replace the historical 6–5 ratio in the Christians' favor.

Maronite dominance was clearly being undercut, but the accord still left the Christians with more than they deserved based on their proportion of the population and the Shiites with considerably less than their numbers would warrant. By the end of the Lebanese civil war in 1990 the Shiites were the largest community (they are now thought to constitute some 40 percent of the population¹³¹), and they were led by their charismatic religious authority, Hassan Nasrallah, and their powerful militia (Hezbollah—the party of God). Driven by

a fundamentalist fervor, they were determined to achieve domestic political influence commensurate with their numerical supremacy. They also had the good fortune of being supported by both Iran and Syria, whose regional policies were “now strategically linked to [Hezbollah’s] political preeminence in Lebanon.”¹³²

In the aftermath of the U.S. invasion of Iraq in March 2003, many Lebanese—Maronite Christians, Sunni Muslims, and Druze—sought to reclaim their country from Syrian occupation, and France and the United States sponsored UN Security Council Resolution 1559, in September 2004, calling for Syrian withdrawal from Lebanon and for the disarming of Hezbollah. Senior Lebanese politicians, such as the Sunni Muslim former prime minister Rafiq Hariri and the Druze leader Walid Jumblat, rallied anti-Syrians in the Lebanese political establishment, eventually provoking the Syrians to orchestrate the assassination of Hariri on February 14, 2005.¹³³ In response, as many as one million Lebanese (some say even more) gathered in the streets of Beirut on March 14 to demand the immediate withdrawal of Syrian occupation forces from the country. In their hour of relative weakness, the Syrians did in fact withdraw in April, delivering a major success to the Lebanese Christian–Sunni–Druze coalition that had become known as the “March 14 forces,” and who had now achieved what would henceforth be referred to as the “Cedar Revolution.”

The term was, in truth, a U.S. invention originating in the ranks of the spin doctors of the Bush administration,¹³⁴ the insinuation being that democracy was spreading in the Middle East in the wake of the U.S. invasion of Iraq, as predicted by administration policy planners from the outset. There was, needless to say, not a shred of evidence to suggest anything of the kind. Iraq at that point in time was sinking into sectarian strife rather than evidencing a peaceful democratic transition worthy of imitation; and developments in Lebanon were similarly based on the historical confessional rivalries of Lebanese politics, which had nothing to do with Iraq except for the fact that the presence of 150,000 U.S. troops next door to Syria severely constrained Syria’s room for maneuver and thereby emboldened the Lebanese. A year after the so-called “revolution,” sectarian tensions were said to be running high as Hezbollah continued to refuse to disarm. Thus, neither disarmament nor sweeping democratic reform was on the horizon.¹³⁵

After Israel's war with Hezbollah in the summer of 2006, Lebanon plunged into a deepening political crisis. The country tottered for months on the brink of civil war as Hezbollah strove to gain veto power over government decision-making "with an eye toward changing the political structure in Lebanon so as to make it commensurate with Shi'a plurality."¹³⁶ The rival parties were eventually invited to Doha, in May 2008, by the emir of Qatar to hammer out an agreement and rescue Lebanon from possible civil war. The agreement, signed on May 21, acceded to almost all of Hezbollah's demands: They obtained veto power in the Cabinet and their militia remained intact.¹³⁷

The so-called "Cedar Revolution" never was a revolution. The real revolution in the making was the gradual, albeit incomplete, domination of Lebanon by the Shiites—backed by their external allies, Iran and Syria—and their brand of religious fundamentalism. In the June 2009 elections, Hezbollah did not do as well as expected, but that had more to do with the system of seat distribution which still did not yet grant the Shiites their fair share. In fact, Hezbollah and its allies won more of the popular vote than the pro-Western Sunni-Maronite alliance.¹³⁸ The general direction was clear: The sectarian balance of power had shifted irreversibly, and Lebanon's Shiites would be increasingly at the helm as time passed, especially as they were destined not just to maintain their plurality in Lebanon but, eventually, to become an absolute majority.¹³⁹

In a polity founded on religious sectarianism, a fundamentalist Shiite organization led by a cleric, drawing its inspiration from the Khomeini revolution, and devoted to the creation of an Islamic order had transformed the Shiites from a neglected, almost invisible community on the margins of society into the driving force and pacesetter of Lebanese politics.¹⁴⁰ The end product is a far cry from the Maronite-dominated, partly French-speaking, cosmopolitan, Western-oriented Lebanon of the mid-twentieth century.

Concurrent with this return of religion to the core of politics and collective identity in Arab states such as Egypt, Jordan, Syria, Iraq, and Lebanon was a seemingly opposite engagement on the part of the Islamists with the secular world of politics and ideas. Thus in Egypt, Jordan, and Iraq, Islamist parties all tended, in one way or another, to endorse free elections, pluralism (*ta'addudiyya*), and multiparty politics. These pragmatic flirtations with secularism, however, were for

the most part merely tactical, intended to capitalize on the Islamists' popularity and/or to escape harsher repression. They were uniformly held in check by a rigid commitment to a core of related principles defining an essentially religious, non-secular worldview. After all, the Islamists' final objective and *raison d'être* was the creation of an Islamist state that would implement the Sharia (*tatbiq al-Sharia*).¹⁴¹

Thus, in Egypt, while the Muslim Brethren demonstrated a consistent commitment to democracy, they simultaneously remained devoted to an Islamist program designed to promote faith and the Sharia, one that offered a vision of a more Islamic society with a genuinely Islamic culture. Many Egyptian liberals and secularists, not surprisingly, viewed this agenda as “inherently incompatible with democracy”¹⁴²—or, in less hospitable terms, as a not very well disguised “intention to implement religious tyranny.”¹⁴³

In Jordan, the Brethren, while supporting a democratic multiparty system, made clear that ultimately in Islam the source of authority was the Sharia and not the people. After all, the “people cannot . . . endorse what the Sharia has prohibited or prohibit what the Sharia has endorsed.”¹⁴⁴ As has been noted elsewhere, the Islamic Action Front in Jordan was a force for democratization not because the party members were “Jeffersonian democrats, but rather because greater democratization has served [the IAF's] organizational and political interests.”¹⁴⁵ In Iraq, Shiite clerics were as committed to the ballot box (to ensure the dominance of the Shiite majority), as they were to a constitution that would also have to be based on “pure Islamic religion,” and to a political system in which “un-Islamic laws would be prohibited” in accordance with the Sharia.¹⁴⁶

In all these cases, there was a clear distinction between the acceptance of the *procedures* of the democratic system and endorsement of its philosophical underpinnings: freedom of thought, freedom of and from religion, individual human rights, the sovereignty of man, and the rule of man-made law. What was lacking in these movements was an Islamic understanding of secularism that would unequivocally embrace all of the above. After all, even given potentially flexible boundaries between religion and government, one red line that could not be crossed in a truly liberal democracy was that religious organizations could not be accorded a veto power over decisions made by democratic legislatures.¹⁴⁷ In other words, at the end of the day, the sovereignty of man, not of God, had to reign supreme.

3. THE POLITICAL SHIFT IN PALESTINE

Against the background of the ubiquitous rise of Islamist politics and the crisis of secularism, the ascendance of Hamas in Palestinian politics was neither unique nor surprising. It was an integral part of a much greater regional phenomenon, whereby people were turning to religion both as a cultural preference and in recognition of the failings of the more secular nationalist worldview. Yet, as with other Islamist movements, the rise of Hamas also has roots specific to its setting—in this case, Palestinian roots. Religion and nationalism have been intimately related from the earliest evolutionary phases of Palestinian collective identity.

The Palestinian national movement was initially led by a cleric, Hajj Amin al-Husayni, the mufti of Palestine under the British mandate. The founding father of the Palestinian armed struggle against the Zionists was yet another man of religion, the Syrian-born Izz al-Din al-Qassam,¹⁴⁸ who was killed by British forces in a skirmish in November 1935 near Umm al-Fahm, in today's northern Israel. As noted by Issa Khalaf, in the “largely agrarian society of Arab Palestine . . . the Mufti symbolized the dominant nationalist-religious idiom within which the peasantry perceived its world and functioned. Because he was an urban notable of national stature and a religious functionary, he was readily understood and followed by the clannish peasantry.”¹⁴⁹

Islamic concepts and historical parallels were “utilized to mobilize the people *en masse* to social action”; the Palestinian struggle against the Zionists was “perceived in religious terms,” as this was their “only recognizable *Weltanschauung*.” After their defeat in 1948, the Palestinians generally adopted an Arab nationalist stance and became enthusiastic supporters of ‘Abd al-Nasser in the belief that Arab unity and an alliance with the Soviet Union would eventually deliver Palestine. It was they who were the most ardent exponents of the dominant Arab nationalist discourse in the mid-1950s and early 1960s.¹⁵⁰

After a decade of Palestinian nationalist decline in the wake of the disaster (*nakba*) of 1948, it was identification *with* the *nakba*, as a formative, traumatic collective experience, that was to become the core of a reconstructed Palestinian national consciousness. In the late 1950s, the revival of the notion of a Palestinian entity (*ihya al-kiyan al-Filastini*) stemmed from two sources. One was within the Arab

League, as the Arab states, led by Egypt (then still the United Arab Republic, or UAR) and Iraq, pressed for the creation of a representative Palestinian political framework. These efforts eventually culminated in the establishment of the PLO in 1964, in accordance with an Arab Summit resolution, as the organizational embodiment of Palestinian nationalism.

The second source was an autonomous and initially clandestine Palestinian effort, inspired by the Algerian model of popular war against the French, to form independent organizations committed to the rejuvenation of Palestinian nationalism through armed struggle against Israel. Fatah, under the leadership of Yasser Arafat, turned out to be the most important and successful of these embryonic attempts. After the Arab setback in the 1967 war, Fatah and likeminded fighting organizations took over the PLO and transformed it into the umbrella organization of a plethora of Palestinian fighting organizations.

The revived devotion to a Palestinian entity in the late 1950s and early 1960s coincided with what were still the more optimistic days of the Arab nationalist era, though Nasserism was, by then, notably past its peak. Those were still the days when nationalism, both Arab and territorial, tended to shift religion from the core to the periphery of the people's collective identity, though Islam was never made entirely irrelevant. The "Arab Palestinian people" (*al-sha'b al-'Arabi al-Filastini*) was an essentially secular concept that united Palestinians, Muslims and Christians alike, with respect to the clearly defined territory to which they belonged and to the greater Arab nation of which they were an integral part.

The PLO Charter, as initially formulated in 1964 and amended in 1968, described Palestine as an "Arab homeland linked by ties of Arab nationalism (*qawmiyya*) to the other Arab countries" and as an "integral part of the great Arab homeland." Islam was not even mentioned in the Charter. Muslims and Christians were all Palestinians, united by their common homeland and by the language and culture that they shared.

Though religion was not the only unifying element of Palestinian society, it was nonetheless an important component of the cultural heritage of the Palestinian people, which served to inhibit the crystallization of a purely secular Palestinian identity. The national movement, accordingly, exploited religion for its own purposes and repeatedly enlisted religion in the service of the nationalist cause. The

PLO, which constantly sought to speak for all Palestinians—the great majority of whom were Sunni Muslims—could hardly ignore the fact that religion was a central facet of their being for many Palestinians.

Fatah, in particular, resorted to a popular discourse that was markedly Islamic and heavily laced with religious imagery.¹⁵¹ Conversely, the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP) and the Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine (DFLP), which were Marxist organizations and were, not surprisingly, led by Christians (George Habash and Nayif Hawatma, respectively), who were generally less observant than their Muslim compatriots, and the Marxists among them were at times irreverent and demonstratively irreligious in their behavior.¹⁵² It was not uncommon for the DFLP, for example, in the heyday of the *fidaiyun* in Jordan in the late 1960s, to hoist the red flag over mosques to celebrate Lenin's birthday or other anniversaries on the Marxist calendar.¹⁵³ It was also from the ranks of the DFLP that the notion of transforming all of Palestine into a "secular democratic state" arose in 1969. Interestingly enough however, the term "secular" (*'ilmani*) was never used in official PLO documents in Arabic, which invariably referred only to the "democratic state" of the future. Even the leftists who believed in secularism were afraid to use the term in their Arabic materials, lest they be ostracized by the masses whom they hoped one day to represent.¹⁵⁴

The shifting ideological sands in the Middle East had not bypassed the Palestinians. After the 1967 debacle, pan-Arabism and the degree of secularization that went with it seemed to represent failure, disappointment, and disorientation—and initially, this failure of Arabism gave rise to Palestinian particularism, independent decision making, and devotion to the Palestinian armed struggle rather than to Islamic politics. These were the heady days of the *fidaiyun* in Jordan in the late 1960s, the myth-making days of the heroic armed men with the *kafiyas* and the AK 47s. Religious politics, which were already making headway in other Arab societies, had no place at this great revolutionary moment.

In the late 1960s, scarcely any distinguished figures in Palestine publicly identified themselves with the Muslim Brethren, while at the same time the Brethren were losing some of their finest men to Fatah. Islamic politics only began to develop in earnest in Palestine in the late 1970s and early 1980s, after the PLO had been routed twice—once

by Jordan in 1970 and then by Israel in Lebanon in 1982. While the PLO faltered, like the Arab regimes had before it, the Islamists in the various Arab states, especially in Egypt, along with those involved in the Islamic revolution in Iran all appeared to be radiating success and revived self-assurance, while proudly defying the West. That in turn inspired Sunnis and Shiites alike and contributed to the growing influence of Islamism, as religion and religious politics returned to the core of the public discourse and collective identity of Palestinians as well.

The year 1979, therefore, saw a significant increase in the Brethren's base of support in Palestine, as in other places. The anti-Israel and anti-American rhetoric of the newly founded Islamic Republic of Iran "was music to the ears of the Palestinian public." The successes of the jihad against the Soviets in Afghanistan were also greeted with enthusiasm throughout the West Bank and Gaza, at a time when the nationalist project of the PLO seemed to be failing.¹⁵⁵

The crushing defeat of the PLO in Jordan in 1970 was the beginning of its long, gradual decline after the euphoric days of the late 1960s, when it appeared that the *fiḍa'iyyun* could do no wrong and were the unquestioned saviors of the Palestinian future. Israel's incursion into Lebanon in 1982 was yet another major turning point in the annals of the PLO. The loss of the Lebanese autonomous base of operations was a disastrous setback for the PLO. Waging armed struggle without a safe haven on Israel's borders was becoming virtually impossible. As a result, the center of gravity of Palestinian politics shifted from the Palestinian Diaspora to the West Bank and Gaza, a process that served Hamas far more than it did the PLO.

From its foundation the PLO was a Diaspora-based organization, and its centers of power were in the refugee camps of the "outside" (*al-khariḡ*), as it was known in Palestinian parlance. Hamas, on the other hand, was never a Diaspora organization. It was founded, as an extension of the Muslim Brethren in Palestine, in the Gaza Strip, and its roots ran deep into the society of the "inside" (*al-dakhiḡ*), especially amongst the refugees living in the socioeconomic deprivation of Gaza.

The outbreak of the first Intifada in 1987, which was ignited in the Gaza Strip, was a culmination of the movement of the core of the Palestinian national endeavor from the Diaspora into the Occupied Territories. The Intifada, as an "insider" phenomenon, catapulted

Hamas to the center stage of Palestinian politics at the expense of the PLO and its various factions. In the first Intifada, Hamas played a leading role, as an equal, alongside the supporters of the various constituent organizations of the PLO.

For the first time in the conflict with Israel, it was the Palestinians inside the Occupied Territories, of whom Hamas was an ever-growing component, who led the struggle, while the PLO in the Diaspora was reduced to the position of a passive bystander. The moral high ground was now held by the strugglers on the front line of the civilian uprising. The Intifada outshone the traditional armed struggle waged from without by the PLO, which had proved over the years to have been comparatively ineffective. For the first time, the monopoly of the PLO in Palestinian politics was being called into question.

The slogans and rallying cries of the anti-occupation movement were often couched in Islamic terms. Jerusalem and its religious significance were cast as the heart of the struggle, and mosques were transformed into starting points for demonstrations as well as safe havens and centers for other social activities connected with the perpetuation of the struggle.¹⁵⁶ Stephen Humphreys observed a decade ago that it was “dangerously reductionist” to argue that Islam was “only a rhetorical mask for rage rooted in socioeconomic conditions. . . . Gazans and West Bankers are no doubt Palestinians and Arabs, but most of all they are Muslims; an appeal to act as Muslims is bound to have an immediacy and power that no foreign ideology can possibly match.”¹⁵⁷

By the end of the 1980s and the early 1990s, the Islamists, as represented by Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad, had already firmly established themselves in second place in the Palestinian political arena, very closely behind the PLO and Fatah and constantly closing the gap. With the rise of Islamic politics throughout the region, religion emerged in Palestine as well “as a self-assured and active alternative to European-style nationalism.” There was clear evidence of an Islamic entry into the Palestinian political realm. In student elections in the universities—the erstwhile bastions of secularization—Islamist candidates won steadily greater shares of the popular vote¹⁵⁸—while the Marxists of the PFLP and the DFLP became virtually irrelevant in the wake of the collapse of the Soviet Union and international Communism.

Palestinian society in the 1990s showed various signs of growing religiosity—as measured, for example, by mosque attendance and

observance of the traditional dress code. In the Gaza Strip, it was said that the construction of mosques had greatly increased since the 1990s, and the attendance of worshippers had risen by 200 percent.¹⁵⁹ Consistent polling data as of the mid-1990s revealed a Palestinian society steeped in religion and a religious worldview. A poll conducted in May 1995 at Birzeit University near Ramallah revealed that the most important self-descriptive categories for students were religiosity and political activism. Approximately one-third of respondents described themselves as religious and 43 percent said they were somewhat religious, while only the remaining fourth declared they were not religious. Just under 17 percent described themselves as leftist, and slightly less than 15 percent as secular.¹⁶⁰

A similar poll conducted in 1996 at An-Najah University in Nablus—where the student body is almost entirely Muslim and partly rural, as opposed to Birzeit, where the student body is almost entirely urban and includes a significant population of Christians—likewise revealed that the most important self-descriptive category for students was religiosity, but the data showed far more extreme differences. Half of the respondents described themselves as religious and 42 percent as somewhat religious (that is, over 90 percent combined, as opposed to approximately 75 percent at Birzeit), while only the remaining 8 percent declared they were not religious. At most 7 percent described themselves as leftist, and only 4 percent as secular.¹⁶¹

In more recent polls, some 46 percent of the Palestinian public fully supported, and another 12 percent partially supported, a political system based on the Sharia even if this meant the absence of elections and political parties. A majority (56 percent) of the public agreed that men of religion ought to have influence over government decisions.¹⁶² Just over 46 percent of West Bankers and 57 percent of Gazans supported the imposition of the *hijab* in public spaces and schools, while only 20 percent in the West Bank and 15 percent in Gaza found that unacceptable.¹⁶³ From all of the above, it was abundantly clear that the “the traditional nature of Palestinian society provide[d] Hamas with a highly fertile ground for expansion.”¹⁶⁴

As of the early 1990s, Hamas exuded growing self-confidence as the PLO and Fatah had to show ever more deference to religion and accept its place in politics and society. This was strikingly apparent in the capitulation of Fatah to Islamist influence in the educational

institutions of the post-Oslo Palestinian Authority (PA). Hamas was adamant from the outset that it wanted a “curriculum that [was] based on Arab and Islamic civilization, not one that [was] adulterated by foreign influences.”¹⁶⁵ Not only did the PA allow Hamas to promote its ideology through an extensive network of privately run schools, but it also introduced Islamist influences and teachers into its own schools, as a way of currying favor with the public.

Shortly after the Oslo accords, a curriculum committee headed by the renowned American-educated Palestinian professor Ibrahim Abu Lughod drew up a plan of reform for Palestinian education which emphasized critical thought and the fostering of free-thinking citizens of a democratic polity. The ministry of education, however, made it clear from the outset that it would not be receptive to such free thinking on matters pertaining to religion, because of the public reaction it could be expected to provoke.

As far as the ministry was concerned, critical thought and individuality had their place, but the underlying purpose of the curriculum was “to transmit and preserve values rather than evaluate or change them.” The vision pursued by the ministry “restored the centrality of religion in the curriculum.” Whereas the Abu Lughod committee presented Palestinian identity as embracing an international, an Arab Islamic, and a specifically Palestinian dimension, the ministry’s plan paid far less attention to the international dimension and “designated the Islamic dimension as distinct.”¹⁶⁶

The new textbooks of the PA’s educational system incorporated typically Islamist views on the sanctity of Palestine, on the Arab Islamic identity of the Palestinians, and on the defense of Palestine as a Muslim religious duty.¹⁶⁷ Fatah, in its effort to compete more effectively with the Islamists after the outbreak of the second Intifada in 2000, also “fused national and religious symbols in order to use Islam as an instrument of mobilization.”¹⁶⁸

When the PLO suffered its serious setbacks in the 1970s and 1980s, the Islamists continued unabated to invest their energies in penetrating the social strata that had hitherto been the preserve of the secular national movement—such as the student unions, the trade unions, and the professional associations—rather than in trying to erode the PLO’s representative status. Only with the outbreak of the Intifada in 1987, and the establishment of Hamas as an extension of the Muslim

Brethren in Palestine, did the Brethren make an open challenge to the PLO's political monopoly.

In early 1990, Hamas demanded that it receive 40 percent of the seats in the Palestine National Council (PNC), the quasi-parliamentary body of the PLO that had some 550 members at the time, as a fair reflection of its popular support. In return, Arafat offered just a pittance of 24 members, about one-tenth of the Hamas demand—which was, needless to say, rejected out of hand.¹⁶⁹ As the Oslo process faltered and the Camp David talks failed in the summer of 2000, followed by the outbreak of the al-Aqsa Intifada and the waves of suicide bombers in Israeli towns, Hamas popularity continued to mount. This was true even though the suicide bombers came from the ranks of Fatah as much as they did from Hamas.

In municipal elections in the West Bank and Gaza in late 2004 and early 2005, Hamas did well in the West Bank and actually beat Fatah in the Gaza Strip. Hamas was encouraged by these successes to participate in the upcoming elections to the Legislative Council, the parliament of the Palestinian Authority in the West Bank and Gaza, which it had refused to do when the previous elections were held in 1996. Riding an unprecedented wave of popularity and having exceeded expectations in the municipal elections, Hamas seemed to be on course to do particularly well in the elections to the Palestinian legislature.¹⁷⁰

Relatively centralized authoritarian states like Egypt and Jordan have kept their Islamist opponents in check by preserving the unchallenged monopoly of the state over the powers of force and coercion. The Palestinian state in the making, under the PLO and Yasser Arafat, failed in this mission. As the PLO was losing ground to the “insiders” in the wake of the first Intifada, it became obvious to Arafat that the PLO had no future languishing in the Diaspora. The West Bank and Gaza had not only developed a political dynamic of their own but had become by far the most meaningful Palestinian political arena—and there would be no future for the PLO unless it became an integral part of this “insider” constituency. That could happen only by agreement with Israel, and was finally made possible by the Oslo Accords in September 1993.

The Palestinian Authority that was established as part of the Oslo process was expected by Israel to impose its authority over all Palestinian organizations and to guarantee security. Arafat, however,

preferred to control or co-opt Hamas, and was never truly determined to use force to suppress the Islamists. The ineffectiveness of the PA was exacerbated by cronyism, rampant corruption, and a deliberately decentralized style of government adopted by Arafat that allowed for attacks on Israel by various Palestinian factions over whom Arafat had ostensibly lost control.¹⁷¹ For their part, successive Israeli governments lacked either the desire or the will to contain settlement expansion—and for the Palestinians, further Israeli settlement activity was the ultimate antithesis to the peace process.

Confidence in the process gradually eroded on both sides, leading eventually to the failure of the Camp David talks in the summer of 2000 and the outbreak of the second Intifada. As opposed to the first Intifada, which was characterized by civilian struggle, the second Intifada exposed Israeli society to the worst form of indiscriminate attack that Israel had ever faced: suicide bombings, which exacted a very high toll of civilian casualties. Israel retaliated with massive punitive actions against the PA, which in turn led to the descent of the PA into an almost complete lack of governance in the West Bank and Gaza. Palestinian society showed increasing signs of fragmentation reminiscent of earlier periods in its history, such as in the late 1930s—during the Arab Rebellion in Palestine—or in the late 1940s, culminating in its complete disintegration under the impact of war in 1948.

The development of both national statist identities and a supranational (pan-Arab) identity over the years had eroded the political and social importance of kinship ties of family, clan, and tribe amongst the Palestinians, as in other Arab societies. But the weakening of governmental authority tended to encourage a noticeable resurgence of the clan as a political organization, a socioeconomic safety net, and a means of collective protection in what was increasingly turning into a situation of anarchy (*fawda*).

Clans had become “a focus of political activity and major hubs of local power.” As tensions between Hamas and Fatah escalated, both groups began to rely on local clans to support their troops.¹⁷² The loyalty of even senior members of the various security organs to their extended families often came at the expense of their loyalty to the central government, naturally impairing their efficacy in law enforcement.¹⁷³ Hamas’s preaching on family values, and its vision of the family as the cultural unit responsible both for the education of the next generation

and for the transmission to it of the nation's heritage, put Hamas in a position to exploit this reversion to traditionalism.¹⁷⁴

Popular disillusionment with the peace process, disappointment with the rank corruption in the increasingly dysfunctional PA, talk of a leadership vacuum, and the pervasive lack of law and order undermined public support for Arafat; after his death, his successor, Mahmoud Abbas, did not fare any better. Hamas and the clans were the major beneficiaries of the PA's weakness and its failure to deliver either peace or good governance.

Three cardinal principles had governed the political tradition of the PLO since the late 1960s, when it became the umbrella for the Palestinian fighting organizations (foremost among them Fatah): national unity (*wahda wataniyya*), the unity of representation (*wahdaniyyat al-tamthil*), and independent decision making (*istiqlal al-qarar*). These were the lessons Palestinians absorbed from repeated defeats caused by internal fragmentation and Arab intervention in Palestinian affairs.

The recognition of the PLO by the Arab League in 1974 as the "sole legitimate representative of the Palestinian people" was, therefore, a great achievement. The PLO itself was by then, after the Jordanian debacle, well past its peak. But in the aftermath of the October 1973 war, and buoyed by the incipient power of the oil boom, the Arab states were confident that they could coerce Israel and the U.S. to come to terms with the PLO, and it was they who conferred upon the organization what was arguably its greatest achievement ever.

But, at present, there is barely a trace left of the former guiding principles of the PLO, nor of its signal achievement;¹⁷⁵ Fatah and the PLO have irretrievably lost their monopoly over Palestinian politics. They may, of course, win elections in the future and again take the lead in Palestinian politics. But their almost unchallenged monopoly is a relic of the past. Hamas and Islamic politics are undeniable facts of life in Palestine and no decision of the Arab League will change that.

The victory of Hamas in the January 2006 Palestinian elections was the culmination of a prolonged process that marked, as Bishara Doumani put it, "both the official end of a half century in which the Palestinian national movement was dominated by a [more] secular political culture, and the beginning of a new phase of unknown duration in which an Islamist political culture will be an integral, if

not dominant, part of the movement.” The Hamas victory was not just a consequence of Palestinian corruption, dysfunctionality, and poor management; it came about against the background of the “internal corrosion and lack of vitality of Fatah in its current configuration.” On the regional level, it was part of the larger trend of political Islam’s ascendance and the re-Islamization of society and politics generally—even though it was achieved, ironically, through the ballot box—the iconic vehicle of the secular liberal political order.¹⁷⁶

Conventional wisdom has it that the electorate cast a massive protest vote for Hamas to punish Fatah. Indeed, exit polling data confirmed that 71 percent of those who identified corruption as their top priority voted for Hamas.¹⁷⁷ Observers sympathetic to Hamas, however, offered a more complex set of explanations. Their contention was that the approximately 40 percent of the popular vote garnered by Hamas was a true reflection of their support—as reflected consistently in elections to student and trade unions in the last decade, and in the recent municipal elections as well. As Hamas would have it, the people voted for Hamas because they supported its stand against Israel, they supported its Islamist ideology, and they were appreciative of its social welfare programs for the populace.

Moreover, went the case for Hamas, Israel’s unilateral withdrawal from Gaza just a few months before the elections was proof positive that the armed struggle and not PLO-style negotiations produced results against Israel.¹⁷⁸ Irrespective of the “real” immediate motivation for voting for Hamas, however, it was plain for all to see that the only credible alternative to the ruling party was the Islamists. It was certainly not the secular opposition of the Left, which had dwindled into insignificance in Palestine, just as it had in other Arab states.

Having won the elections, Hamas proposed to Fatah and the other Palestinian factions that they share in a government of national unity. It took Fatah a long time to overcome the shock of defeat and be able to even contemplate participation in a government that was not theirs; in the “natural” order of things, it was they who, for nearly half a century, had with greater or less magnanimity offered participation to junior partners. In February 2007 the Saudis managed at long last to broker the Mecca Accord between Hamas and Fatah, which paved the way for the formation in March of a government of national unity headed by Prime Minister Ismayil Haniya of Hamas.

Hamas leader Khaled Mashal declared that the Mecca Accord had laid the foundations for a power-sharing process that would also pave the way for the reconstruction of a more inclusive PLO that could “become the legitimate representative of all Palestinian people.”¹⁷⁹ That said it all. In Mashal’s mind, the shoe was now very much on the other foot: The PLO, in his thinking, would regain its representative status only when Hamas was firmly ensconced in the driver’s seat—that is, where Fatah was in 1968–69. The change in the historical balance of power was indeed revolutionary.

The ink had hardly dried on the Mecca agreement, however, when a major crisis erupted between Fatah and Hamas over ultimate control of the security forces in Gaza, culminating in the forceful takeover by Hamas of the Gaza Strip. The national unity government was immediately unseated by President Mahmoud Abbas, and Hamas and Fatah were now poles apart.

In the late 1990s, there were those who argued that the growing popular Palestinian support for Hamas was “not the result of their mass turn to faith” but rather the fruit of PLO failings.¹⁸⁰ But after the Hamas takeover of Gaza, things looked very different. There was an accelerated Islamization of Palestinian society, driven by the growing strength of Salafis and other Sunni radicals—though it was difficult to gauge precisely the extent to which the changes originated in the grassroots or were imposed from above.

A special security force operated under the Ministry of *Awqaf* (religious endowments), enforcing Islamic codes of behavior in public. The wearing of the *hijab* had become an accepted norm to such an extent that even Christian women followed suit. Books deemed unacceptable were banned, and even foreigners were not allowed to bring alcohol into the Gaza Strip. Access to “immoral” internet sites was restricted, and the Sharia was increasingly employed in judicial proceedings. It is interesting to note, however, that these developments were said by some to have resulted from grassroots agitation and the insistence of ultra-religious elements both within Hamas and outside it, rather than being part of some Hamas master plan for the creation of an Islamic republic.¹⁸¹

Whatever the case, resurgent Islamist politics had “shattered the once-dominant secular-nationalist consensus”—and, as in other countries in the region, they tended to exacerbate sectarian tensions.

Hamas's ascendance decisively split the Palestinian political arena between a "rejuvenated Islamist milieu and the long-dominant secular-nationalist one." Palestinian Christians consequently began to question the viability of the secular-nationalist project, and to wonder, as the "Islamist moment had arrived," whether they might not find themselves under pressure to accept the subordinate status of *ahl al-dhimma* (the protected non-Muslim minorities in the traditional Islamic state), which they found totally unacceptable in this day and age.¹⁸²

As one Palestinian Christian defiantly declared, "the age of *ahl al-dhimma* is over."¹⁸³ The new reality, nevertheless, forced many Christians to wonder whether the nation "still [had] a place for them." Given their fear of an even greater Islamization of society, Christians were left with little choice but to continue supporting the PLO and the PA as bulwarks against religious sectarianism.¹⁸⁴

The interface between religion and nationalism was not an entirely one-way street, however, and the Islamists, for their part, were also pressed to come to terms with entrenched popular nationalist sentiment amongst the Palestinians.¹⁸⁵ As the ranks of Hamas swelled and the organization was transformed into a mass political movement, the leadership was compelled to adapt itself to the dominant nationalist discourse. The Hamas victory in the elections of January 2006, followed by its takeover of Gaza in June 2007, forced the movement to further recalibrate some elements of its ideology. While Hamas rejected nationalism as a secular, imported ideology, it did not ignore its usefulness as a tool enabling it to reach out to a wider audience. This was true to such a degree that Hamas in power even appeared to be subordinating its pan-Islamic vision to the national struggle.¹⁸⁶

As Hamas made clear, it was not nationalism as such that the Islamists reviled, but the doctrine promoted by Westernizing elites that "the only true nationalism was secular nationalism," and that citizens "owed to their nations—and not Islam—a singular devotion."¹⁸⁷ The Hamas Charter denounced the PLO's commitment to a "secular state"; secular thought, after all, "completely contradict[ed]" religious thought.¹⁸⁸ Nizar Rayyan, one of the Hamas leaders in Gaza (killed by the IDF in January 2009), proclaimed in no uncertain terms that Hamas's fight against Fatah was to "uproot secularism in Gaza."¹⁸⁹

The solution Hamas sought with respect to the inherent tension between religion and nationalism was, therefore, not to dismiss or reject

Palestinian nationalism, but rather to de-secularize or Islamize it. Even Islamists who were opposed in principle to the idea of the territorial state as running counter to the universal vision of Islam accepted the state as a central frame of reference for Hamas's political activities and ideological doctrine, just as the Muslim Brethren had done in other Arab countries.¹⁹⁰ Palestinianness, in the Hamas formulation of national identity, was primarily a function of the holiness that was attached to the soil of Palestine (as the land of *al-isra' wal-mi'raj*—the Prophet's nocturnal flight to Jerusalem on his magnificent horse al-Buraq, and his ascent from there to Heaven) rather than of the distinctiveness of the Palestinian people.

Palestine's sanctity was also a function of its ostensible designation as a *waqf* (religious endowment) by the Khalifa 'Umar bin al-Khattab, who conquered Palestine in 638. This depiction of Palestine as a *waqf*, however, was a Hamas invention which had no legal basis in the Sharia. Palestine, after all, had state (*miri*) and private (*mulk*) land as well as *awqaf* (plural of *waqf*). Legally it could not be, and historically it never was, all *waqf*. But the designation had political value. It served as the religious foundation for the contention that not an inch of Palestine could be conceded to the Zionists. As a *waqf*, Palestine did not belong exclusively to the Palestinians, but to all Muslims. Therefore, neither the Palestinians nor the Arabs, in this or any future generation, had the right to concede any territory in Palestine to an alien entity.

For Hamas, the Palestinian cause was “not about land and soil,” but about “faith and belief.” It was a struggle not between two nationalist movements but between two rival religions, Islam and Judaism. The Palestinian cause was driven by an “Islamic essence” and was, in the Hamas view, part of the larger war between Islam and Western civilization.¹⁹¹ Just as the PLO and Fatah nationalized religion in the service of their more secular vision, so Hamas Islamized nationalism. For Hamas, the first and second Intifadas were part of a *jihad* that emanated from the mosques and embodied the return of the Palestinian people to their “authentic Islamic identity and belonging,”¹⁹² a line of argument that was bound to resonate positively with a sizeable constituency.

Fatah was by no means resigned to its political and ideological setback and it returned to the fray with renewed determination. But this was now a struggle to set the ground rules for an ultimate power-sharing formula with Hamas—now accepted as a rival and an equal

as well as a threat—and that, in and of itself, was an entirely novel reality.

In August 2009, after no less than a twenty-year hiatus, Fatah held its sixth general congress, after years of disarray that verged on complete political disintegration. The congress ousted the old guard and elected a new leadership, which gave an initial impression of political resurrection. The new leadership was composed of younger “insiders” born in the West Bank and Gaza, who were said to be “determined to push for a more moderate Hamas and to work toward peace with Israel.”¹⁹³

The Fatah congress was attended by more than two thousand delegates the great majority of whom were also from the West Bank and Gaza, thus finally transforming Fatah into an “insider” organization rather than the Diaspora organization it had been when it was originally founded. This consummated the historic transfer of the Palestinian national endeavor to the West Bank and Gaza and brought Fatah potentially closer to the people in the occupied territories, thereby making it more effectively competitive with an entirely homegrown movement like Hamas. Indeed, the conflict with Hamas, the threat Hamas posed to Fatah, and the need to regain lost ground, whether by reconciliation or by confrontation, dominated the congress proceedings.¹⁹⁴

The initial impression of resurrection was, however, short-lived. In the post-Arafat era, Fatah needed to regain political cohesion and ideological coherence if it was to contend and compete with Hamas and possibly co-opt it into the ruling regime. Fatah’s challenge was one of leadership: It lacked a clear definition of its political agenda. After having been the backbone of the Palestinian national struggle for decades, was Fatah solely the party of negotiation and settlement with Israel? In an era when resistance was spearheaded by Islamic and not secular groups, what exactly was Fatah’s role?

Despite the successful convening of the Fatah congress, for the most part, these questions remained unresolved. Fatah was said to be in a “strategic muddle,” in which neither its vision nor its role were clear.¹⁹⁵ Fatah’s capacity to co-opt Hamas rather than be co-opted by it will depend in no small measure on the extent to which it succeeds in negotiating a nationally acceptable agreement with Israel. These are open, interrelated questions, the answers to which are in the realm of the unknown—but they hover in a rather pessimistic atmosphere.

CONCLUSION

However the Palestinian state of the future may develop, Hamas at present is a credible political force to be reckoned with. It represents a significant segment of Palestinian society—just like its sister movements in other Arab states, who are representative of large constituencies in their respective societies. For better or for worse, Hamas, like other Islamist movements, cannot be wished away, or blocked from people's hearts and minds; nor can the movement be engineered out of political relevance by economic manipulation and retribution.

As opposed to authoritarian Arab states like Egypt and Jordan, where the central government has full control over the forces of coercion, in the Palestinian state in the making this did not materialize. The Palestinian Authority never established an effective central government that could keep the Islamists in check, as the more authoritarian Arab states have tended to do successfully. (This was in truth partly the PA's own doing and partly that of the Israelis.) The balance of power in Palestine has changed dramatically, and for the first time in almost half a century the major Palestinian organization of the post-1948 era, Fatah, which was the backbone of the PLO for decades, is challenged by a rival of more or less equal stature and popular support: Hamas. The PLO has lost its monopoly over Palestinian politics, and its greatest achievement—its recognition as the sole legitimate representative of the Palestinian people—is being called into very serious question.

By systematically Islamizing the nationalist discourse, Hamas is rewriting the Palestinian national narrative. In a society where so many define themselves as religious, the Islamization of that narrative is bound to have great popular appeal. But in rewriting the nationalist narrative, Hamas is not repudiating the deeply embedded sense of Palestinian nationalism and shared collective history and identity that runs throughout the Palestinian body politic. As Meir Litvak has concluded, even if the Palestinian state of the future were to be “Islamic from an ideological standpoint,” it would be “Palestinian in its identity and structure.”¹⁹⁶

The change in Palestine came about against the background of a transformational shift elsewhere in the Arab world. During much of the twentieth century, Middle Eastern politics were dominated by

secular nationalist ideas: Arab nationalism swept through the Arab-speaking world, and Turkish and Iranian nationalism similarly reigned supreme in Turkey and Iran. A process of Westernizing secularization, which had begun timidly in the nineteenth century, seemed to be making continuous progress toward an inexorable reduction in the role of religion in modern Middle Eastern politics and society. That process, however, has been curtailed since the latter part of the twentieth century, and the tide has since been moving in a different direction. Erstwhile secular regimes have become “seculareligious” as they have acquiesced in the steady Islamization of their societies.

As the greatest of all Arab states and the intellectual hub of the Arab-speaking world, Egypt has served, throughout the modern era, as a bellwether of ideological ferment and intellectual innovation. The home of Islamic reform in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the powerhouse of secularizing Arab nationalism in the mid-twentieth century, it now serves as a model to the rest of the Arab world with respect to the gradual Islamization of the modern state. If a secular society or polity is one in which religion has been removed from its central place in people’s lives, has retreated from the public sphere, and is marginalized in the political and social order, then secularism in Egypt and much of the rest of the Arab world is indeed in remission.

While the current Islamizing trend does not oppose modernity, it does seek to cast modernization in an Islamic moral and ethical mold, and expressly refuses to abandon traditional religious and cultural markers of collective identity in the name of a secularly defined modernism. So, for example, the Islamists do not reject such modern ideas as nationalism, the modern capitalist economy, or the products of the media revolution. Their object is to de-Westernize or de-secularize them, and to harness them to the greater cause of the Islamization of politics and society.

Secular nationalism had been overrated and the power and relevance of religion undervalued by Westernizing Middle Eastern elites and by scholars and observers of the region for much of the 20th century. Writing in the mid-1980s on the understanding of the Great Powers of the Middle East at the end of World War I, the British historian Malcolm Yapp observed that the “Europeans made errors in their identification of the opposition and greatly overestimated the role of nationalism in it. To some extent they were the victims of their own propaganda of

the last years of the war which had depicted an enemy world full of nations . . . ready to emerge . . . under the banner of self-determination. But perhaps more importantly the Europeans wanted nationalism to be the most prominent element; nationalism they understood—it was a modern European doctrine and those who professed it talked the language of debating chambers. Islam and tribalism, on the other hand, seemed dark and dangerous factors, elemental passions rather than doctrines; and their leaders, if they could be discovered, were hard, uncompromising men. . . .”¹⁹⁷

With some minor modifications, these words of wisdom could apply to current Middle Eastern affairs—and, more specifically, to recent U.S. policies in Iraq, which failed to recognize, let alone respect, the perfectly legitimate non-secular components of Iraq’s “otherness.” Rory Stewart, a former official in the British Foreign Office, who served for some two years as a senior administrator in Iraq following the allied occupation of 2003, wrote a perceptive account of his experiences in the field; his conclusions were as candid as they were enlightening about Westerners and Middle Easterners—in this case, Iraqis. “We overestimate the power of the United States and its allies,” Stewart concluded, and “we underestimate the power of Iraqi society.”¹⁹⁸

Abbas Kelidar pointed out in the late 1990s that “social engineering in transitional societies is a dangerous occupation. The result of any particular process may not correspond to the original intention, and the Middle East is littered with its deformed creatures.”¹⁹⁹ Had the allies understood the “otherness” of Iraqi society from the outset and planned accordingly, they might have spared the Iraqis and saved themselves some of the terrible pitfalls of their invasion, a state-building and nation-building adventure now tragically being repeated in Afghanistan.

Having discussed the crisis of secularism at length, one may ask in conclusion, as did Sadiq al-Azm, the renowned Syrian professor of philosophy: “Is Islam secularizable?”²⁰⁰ Of course it is, just as any other religion is. Will Muslim societies really become secularized? That is another question altogether. Turkey suggests a variant of what one might call an “indigenized” secularism, which at present sets it apart from the Arab Muslim world.²⁰¹ Is the Turkish synthesis a sustainable formula? Will the Arabs follow suit? Is the Islamic Republic of Iran on the verge of a counter-revolution? Time alone will tell.

ENDNOTES

- 1 Nader Hashemi, *Islam, Secularism and Liberal Democracy: Toward a Democratic Theory for Muslim Societies* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), pp. 104–131.
- 2 Yirmiyahu Yovel (Hebrew University, Jerusalem) and Charles Taylor (McGill University, Montreal) are both professors of philosophy.
- 3 Yirmiyahu Yovel, “General Introduction: Modernization and Secularization in Jewish Culture,” in *Modern Jewish Times: Jewish Culture in a Secular Age; An Encyclopedic Overview*, vol. I (Jerusalem: Keter Publishing, 2007), pp. xviii–xx [in Hebrew]; Charles Taylor as quoted in Hashemi, *Islam, Secularism and Liberal Democracy*, p. 106.
- 4 Uriel Heyd, *Revival of Islam in Modern Turkey* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, (1968), p. 8.
- 5 Mansoor Moaddel, *Islamic Modernism, Nationalism, and Fundamentalism: Episode and Discourse* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), pp. 339–40.
- 6 Musa Budeiri, “The Palestinians: Tensions between Nationalist and Religious Identities,” in *Rethinking Nationalism in the Arab Middle East*, ed. James Jankowski and Israel Gershoni (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), pp. 191–92.
- 7 Bernard Lewis, *The Middle East and the West* (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1966), p. 70.
- 8 See, for example, the dismal failure of civil and women’s rights groups in the early years of the reign of King Abdullah II in Jordan to change the criminal code on honor killings, even though the royal family stood behind the reformers. See Curtis Ryan, *Jordan in Transition; From Hussein to Abdullah* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner, 2002) p. 133.
- 9 Hashemi, *Islam, Secularism and Liberal Democracy*, p. 135.
- 10 Michael Hudson, “The Political Culture Approach to Arab Democratization: The Case for Bringing It Back In, Carefully,” in *Political Liberalization and Democratization in the Arab World*, ed. Rex Brynen, Bahgat Korany, and Paul Noble, vol. 1: *Theoretical Perspectives* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 1995), p. 65. Hudson’s article was countered in the same volume by Lisa Anderson’s “Democracy in the Arab World: A Critique of the Political Culture approach,” pp. 77–92.
- 11 See, for example, the two very different papers on the Muslim Brethren in Egypt, by Marc Lynch and Abdel Monem Said Aly, published by the Crown Center in its *Middle East Briefs* series and discussed below; or the findings of the Turkish scholars Ali Carkoglu and Ersin Kalaycioglu on the religious

- motivations for the donning of the headscarf (see Ersin Kalaycioglu, “The Mystery of the *Turban*: Participation or Revolt?” *Turkish Studies* 6, no. 2 (June, 2005), pp. 240-247; Carkoglu and Kalaycioglu, *The Rising Tide of Conservatism in Turkey* (New York: Palgrave-Macmillan, 2009), p. 112), as opposed to the tendency of some Westerners to explain the phenomenon as mainly one of women’s liberation or gender equality. (See, for example, [John Wallach Scott, “Gender Equality and Islamic Headscarves,” *SSRC Blogs*, February 10, 2008.](#)*)
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