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ISLAMIC REVIVALISM AND THE CRISIS OF THE SECULAR STATE IN THE ARAB WORLD: AN HISTORICAL APPRAISAL Philip S. Khoury

Introduction

In recent years the countries of the Middle East have been experiencing a phenomenon known in western academic and media circles as "Islamic Revivalism."¹ This revivalism has manifested itself in a variety of ways and in varying degrees of intensity, depending on the country and society under investigation. Islam has come to play an increasingly active role in a number of critical areas, including law, education and culture, and politics.

In the area of law, especially criminal law, Islam has been regaining ground in Middle Eastern legal systems. In the realm of education and culture, the number of religious teachers is rising while religion receives greater stress in school curricula. The number of books on religious subjects is growing rapidly, inundating bookstalls in major cities throughout the region. On the social level, there is a noticeable change in the dress code for non-elite women, who are reverting to traditional garments in an effort to protect their dignity in the workplace and as an expression of opposition to western cultural hegemony. Connected to this, campaigns against gambling, alcohol, drugs, and prostitution are being fiercely waged, in the name of Islamic morality. Finally, in politics

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classes to a new socioeconomic order. These classes are most closely attached to the traditional social and moral value system commonly identified with Islam. But they are also classes that in recent years have been drawn into the modernization process but have not been assimilated by it. Consequently, these classes have been disfigured and disoriented by the overall process and this, in turn, has invited their response.

Four additional points will help to round out our argument:

- 1) On one level the state's exhaustion is a result of regional and especially international pressures on it to accept its role and fate as a weak economic and political entity — a dependency — in a new world order managed by the West. Islamic revivalism is, in its broadest expression, a reaction to these pressures.
- 2) On another level, however, the general crisis of the state is directly linked to the way the classes and elites supporting and running the state have consolidated their power, defined their interests, and made their choices for society. Islamic revivalism is a response to the inability of these classes and elites to close the gap in wealth and opportunity between themselves and the rest of society, a gap which has been growing wider in recent years.
- 3) More specifically, Islamic revivalism is a direct response to the state's inability to solve several long-term problems and short-term crises that combined in the 1970s to produce a major crisis of confidence in the state, one which brings into question its very legitimacy.
- 4) For the classes sponsoring revivalism, Islam must be seen as the vehicle for political and economic demands, rather than as being itself the "impulse" behind these demands.³ Given the positions of these classes in the social hierarchy and their continued attachment to the traditional sectors, Islam is their most convenient, readily available ideological instrument.

The Historical Context

The emergence of the modern secular state was one of the most important corollaries of the integration of the Middle East into a world economic, technological, and political order dominated

Muslim organizations are gaining strength all over the Middle East, becoming more conspicuous actors in the political arena and even engaging in armed struggle against the state. Meanwhile secular political parties have become increasingly conscious of the need to emphasize religious matters in their programs. Political leaders find it necessary to stress their religiosity and piety more than ever to counter religious opposition and to reassert legitimacy. On the regional and international levels, Islam is being used as an instrument of diplomacy and political influence alongside petrodollars.²

The purpose of this article is to construct a framework for explaining the phenomenon of Islamic revivalism. This framework is not intended to be all-encompassing; rather, it is meant to apply to certain societies in the Arab Middle East that have encountered and tried to accommodate the twin forces of modernization and secularization over the last 100 years. And though references to specific countries will generally be avoided, no attempt will be made to disguise the fact that this framework is of particular value for understanding developments in Egypt and Syria, countries which have enjoyed a considerable degree of state formation without the overwhelming assistance of petroleum profits. In particular it would be desirable for this framework to help provide answers to three related questions: What is the historical context out of which Islamic revivalism emerges? What are some of the major social and political forces engaged in revivalist movements? What does Islamic revivalism mean in a wider political and social context? But before offering answers to these questions, let us state our major argument.

The Central Argument

In the societies and countries we have singled out, Islamic revivalism can best be understood as a reaction to a crisis in the modern secular state. This crisis may be defined as "state exhaustion." The reaction is to the state's inability to bring the whole of society into modernity. More specifically, it is a reaction of certain classes in Arab society to the failure of the modern secular state to live up to its professed goal: to mobilize and assimilate these



ed first by Europe and, after World War II, by the United States and the Soviet Union (with Europe and Japan playing the role of junior partners). Two comments can be made about this process of integration. First, it was rapid in some regions and more gradual in others; but even within a particular region it tended to unfold unevenly, increasingly differentiating society and creating tensions between its component parts. Second, the managers of this new world order have never intended to iron out the disparities in power and wealth that emerged from this process of integration. In any case, all major events and developments connected with the growth of the modern secular state must be interpreted in relationship to this emerging world order and the changes taking place in its structure.

The growth of the modern state in the Middle East was itself a defensive reaction to a dramatic and seemingly decisive shift of the international balance of power in Europe's favor in the nineteenth century. The primary goal of the ruling elites in the Ottoman Empire (and in Egypt) was to redress the adverse balance by carrying out a major reformation of central institutions and a reorganization of government, focusing first on military reform. While reform from above did not correct the balance, it did introduce large rationalized bureaucracies supported by secular legal, educational, and financial institutions manned by new civilian and military elites imbued with secular liberal ideas. Of equal importance for our argument, "defensive modernization" steadily reduced the influence of religious institutions and religious experts to the point where the state intervened in various social arrangements whose traditional arbiters or mediators had been the religious institutions and the "class" of scholars directing them. Indeed, in the twentieth century, the state went so far as to seize control of these institutions.

The religious establishment reacted to the internal erosion of religious institutions and the loss of monopoly over the law, education, and other areas of social activity. In the late nineteenth century a small but influential group of religious experts sought to revive Islam as a "religious system" in an effort to reassert their influence. To be able to do so, however, they had to accept that

Islam could be adapted to the new demands of modern life. Acceptance of rationalism as the dominant idea animating the emerging order, and of science and technology as the key to the universe, ran against the grain of the two main religious orders in Muslim society: the legal hierarchy of religious experts and the mystical (*Sufi*) orders. Indeed, in seeking to revive Islam, these religious reformers sought to shake the religious establishment to which they belonged out of its conservatism and at the same time to weaken the hold of the mystical orders, which they viewed as a seat of intellectual stagnation and political quietism. However, their efforts actually weakened the foundations on which the influence of the religious establishment rested. By attacking the mystical orders these reformers destroyed many of them, cutting the link between educated Muslims like themselves and the general populace, much of which was tied to these orders. And though they justified change through reason, Islamic modernists were unable to provide an adequate framework of principles through which they could control change. Their failure opened the doors even wider to secular liberal ideas coming from the West.⁴

Modern Secular Nationalism

Secular nationalism was certainly the single most important idea and movement to emerge out of the nineteenth century search for renewal and reformation in the Ottoman Empire. The destruction of the Empire and the imposition of direct European control in the Arab Middle East after World War I made nationalism the most useful and topical political idea of the times.

Two types of nationalism emerged — one territorial, the other ethno-cultural — and both types coexisted in all nationalist movements in the region. Although nationalism was not a thoroughly secular idea, because no interpretation of Arab history and culture, on which nationalism rested, could deny the contribution of Islam, it nevertheless possessed strong secular foundations.⁵ Indeed, the classes that translated nationalism into a political movement in the early twentieth century rejected the idea, propounded by Islamic modernist ideologues and activists, that Islam



could provide the principles for governing the modern nation state. For them, Islamic law was too outmoded as a governing system. This attitude reflected the position of these classes in the social hierarchy; these classes provided the secularized elites who were educated in modern schools, often had experience in the new secular branches of government, maintained no strong attachment to the weakened religious institutions, and were composed of the great urban absentee landowning and merchant families, ex-Ottoman army officers, the provincial bureaucratic elite, and an emerging group of middle-class intellectuals.⁶

These elements steered the national independence movements in the Arab Middle East between the two world wars. Naturally, they first sought independence from European rule. Beyond this, however, their political concepts and aims incorporated liberalism. They pressed for constitutional government, parliamentary forms, and personal freedoms. Their brand of nationalism and their political style and behavior were clear reflections of their class backgrounds. Their ideology was a version of bourgeois nationalism tailored to fit their historical circumstances. Not surprisingly, they placed little or no emphasis on socioeconomic reforms that might disturb their ultimate aim: to seize state power once Britain and France withdrew from the region.

For these classes and forces, nationalism was first and foremost an instrument with which to consolidate local power. Foreign occupation in the interwar period obviously contributed to their success, but so did the reality that the forces in control of nationalism did not face any serious challenges to their position from classes further down the social scale. The rather chaotic struggles and petty rivalries between different factions and parties in Syria, Palestine, Iraq, and even Egypt, which characterized Arab political life in the 1920s and 1930s, were not for the most part between elements from rival classes but rather between members of a single class. These conflicts could go on ad nauseam largely because the politically active elements of this upper and upper-middle class felt no particular need to close ranks and define their common interests as a class on crucial political and economic issues.

Meanwhile, the power and influence of the religious establishment in these countries continued to decrease. For one thing, the secularized and westernized Arab elites were much better qualified to engage in the politics of diplomatic accommodation and compromise which featured so prominently in the strategies of the national independence movements. Furthermore, the European authorities had no respect for the Muslim religious establishment, which they viewed as reactionary and sterile, an obstacle to progress.⁷

The Challenge of Radical Arab Nationalism

The real challenge to the class and elite steering the Arab national independence movements came only after World War II when the ruling elite proved unable to link nationalism to state power. The challenge came from new social classes and forces that had first begun to gain ground in the late 1930s through the acquisition of modern education and the effect of structural changes brought about by the more rapid integration of Arab economies into the world market. The new classes and forces, belonging to a new generation, were armed with new secular ideas about progress and development. Moreover, they had had the opportunity during the nationalist struggle to acquire organizational skills which they translated into modern political parties and national youth organizations. This enabled them to enjoy wider political and social bases in new institutions where the older generation of bourgeois nationalists held less sway.

The new political forces, led by middle-class liberal professionals, indigenous army officers, and an emerging class of small industrialists, sought to redefine relations with one another and with the government. Ultimately, they aimed to seize control of state power from the big landowning and merchant classes which a generation earlier had molded the idea of nationalism to guarantee their own control of the state on independence. Not surprisingly, the challenge posed by these new forces took the form of a struggle for control of the ideology of nationalism. Their assault was threefold.⁸ First, the emphasis on nationalism was shifted to correspond to and accommodate the rapid social and economic



changes that had taken place in Arab society. The new reformers stressed socioeconomic justice rather than constitutionalism, liberal parliamentary forms, and personal freedoms. Their vocabulary had socialist undertones: mass education, national welfare programs, rapid industrialization through the agency of the state. Second, these new forces rekindled the flame of Arab unity which they accused the old guard of forsaking. They refused to accept the artificial state frontiers imposed by the colonial powers which ran against the very grain of Arab nationalist ideology, and they blamed their rulers for willfully contributing to the loss of Palestine in 1948. Third, they advocated political neutralism in international affairs, accusing those in control of government of retaining too strong political and commercial ties to Europe and to America.

As for the role of Islam in the new concept of the Arab nation, these ascendant forces made the most systematic effort yet to refine the idea of Arab nationalism. But they no longer had to face as high a degree of tension and conflict between religion and secularism on the political level.⁹

During the 1950s and early 1960s these struggles and ambitions were played out in Egypt, Syria, and Iraq, and new elites — civilian and military, radical nationalist and socialist — replaced the bourgeois nationalists, in the process wedding their brand of nationalism to state power. Their stated goals: to bring their societies into the modern world and to forge a new basis of loyalty in society, one superseding all others — that of loyalty to the nation.

The Character of the Modern Secular State

With the new elites' assumption of rule, the modern secular state began to assume its present shape. The state seized control of the national economy through forced nationalizations. The public sector grew dramatically and with it the state bureaucracy. Meanwhile, the apparatus for a national welfare system was constructed. Another corollary of this process was the spectacular growth of the repressive apparatus — army, police, intelligence networks — and the increased role of government in the lives of the people. By the 1960s the new elites had blended into a new class which can be labeled, for want of a better term, the "state

bourgeoisie." But though this new class rested on a wider social base than had its predecessor, it still stood at a distance from the majority of society. Its members belonged to the modernized sectors and professed beliefs and values that distinguished them from a populace still tied to traditional beliefs and values associated with Islam.

In order to graft a new identity onto society, the new ruling class aimed to shape society, to define its priorities, and to make its critical choices from above for what the state claimed was the highest good of society. The rulers aimed to create an all-encompassing modern class structure, through which modernizing reforms could be pushed with the least resistance from below.

The state enlarged the bureaucracy; it dismantled the power base of the old ruling class through land reforms; it stressed industrialization over agriculture; it expanded its control over national economic resources; it brought education to the masses in the cities and increasingly into the countryside; it weakened the religious institutions and seized control of them; it created a single party system under firm state control, packing the party with bureaucrats; and, if it did not directly promote rapid urbanization, it nevertheless identified rapid urbanization with progress. And the state, in its clear commitment to modernization, contributed greatly to the mobilization of large sections of society that until then had been firmly attached to the traditional order. ("Mobilization" here means the creation of new expectations and a new consciousness with respect to one's role in society.) However, mobilization has not always led to the assimilation of these classes to the new sociocultural and (above all) political patterns drawn by the modern secular state. Assimilation has rarely proceeded at as rapid a pace as mobilization has. Those sections of Arab society which have not yet been assimilated consequently find that their material and psychological conditions do not correspond to their new expectations. This lag between mobilization and assimilation has been especially great in the area of political participation, because the ruling elite, invested with so much power, assures society that the national army will defend the national honor and that the government will promote economic interests. Therefore,



material and human resources to a succession of wars with Israel was by its very nature unproductive.

3. **Population Growth and Rapid Urbanization:** The steady drop in infant mortality rates due to improved medical and hygienic care contributed to dramatic population increases, especially in urban areas. Meanwhile, increasing rural uprootedness forced cities to try to absorb larger and larger numbers of landless peasants seeking new livelihoods. These immigrants quickly discovered that regular and gainful employment was hard to come by. Industrial growth could not keep pace with population growth in the cities and rapid urbanization without rapid industrialization swelled the ranks of the urban unemployed. This process also helped to reinforce the geographic and sociocultural divisions in the city, which generally included, on the one hand, modern districts inhabited by westernized elites and containing new institutions, schools, landscaped parks, government offices, and modern business areas, and, on the other, an old town of ancient quarters, mosques, churches, and bazaars populated by classes engaged in traditional trades and casual labor who were still attached to values associated with Islam. But rapid urbanization also created a third division in the city: the shantytowns and refugee camps on the city outskirts where immigrants from the countryside and refugees from wars and natural disasters lived in conditions of squalor. To the extent that the city provided public works and services, these went first to the modern city, then to the old town, and only rarely to the recently settled poverty belts.

The state also faced several other problems. Although it made significant progress in spreading education to the masses, a factor of immense importance in the mobilization of large sections of the urban population, the state found it increasingly difficult to provide the requisite remuneration expected by the newly educated. The state also encountered difficulty in its drive to enforce a modern national identity on all communities. On the one hand, there was the pull of supranational loyalties (to pan-Arabism, for example) and, on the other, there was the more complicated pull of subnational loyalties, to religious and ethnic

the masses are encouraged to remain apart from political action, a separation that the repressive apparatus of the state helps to reinforce.

As was noted earlier, the general unevenness of state-imposed development — itself attributable to the Arab states' vulnerability to international and regional pressures and to the specific interests of the state bourgeoisie — has in recent years created a disturbance in the societal balance evoking different reactions from different sectors of Arab society. Certainly one of the loudest reactions comes from those forces labeled as "Islamic."

State Exhaustion

To return to our central argument, by the early 1970s the secular state began to show signs of strain in its effort to modernize society. At the same time, the state felt growing pressures from the West to make the political and ideological compromises required to attract the hard loans and other forms of foreign capital needed to regenerate a sluggish economy. What were some of the problems and pressures exhausting the state?

1. **Agriculture:** In general, the agricultural sector was given relatively little attention by the state. Within this sector, cash-cropping continued to spread, making the Arab countries less and less self-sufficient in food and thus requiring them to rely increasingly on foreign earnings to finance food imports. Meanwhile, land reform measures, though allowing the new ruling class to destroy the economic base of the old social classes, did not benefit the mass of peasants. Rather, reforms served the interests of the rural middle stratum from which the new elites came. All this added to the ranks of the dispossessed and landless peasantry.
2. **Industry:** The state found it increasingly difficult to build a modern industrial base without the assistance of foreign capital. The old landowning class failed to reinvest its compensation from the land reforms in industry, and import-substitution industries had built-in limits on growth. Meanwhile, the political and ideological orientation of the new radical nationalist regimes created automatic barriers to western investment, and the commitment of



communities, especially in the case of compact minorities seeking cultural and political autonomy and sometimes independence. And, of course, the state's continued failure to uphold the national honor after a quarter-century of military defeats by Israel tended to erode the legitimacy of Arab nationalist regimes.

Finally to exacerbate an already deteriorating situation, there were serious indications that certain factions of the state bourgeoisie were growing restive by the late 1960s and early 1970s. Having contributed heavily to the creation of a new state order and having become in the new state order a ruling class, these elements now wanted to enjoy the prerogatives of that status. Throughout the 1960s the state bourgeoisie had been hampered in this by radical nationalist austerity measures and the socialist rhetoric of the progressive wing of the state bourgeoisie. But the built-in shortcomings of the economy enabled the conservative wing and its allies in the private sector to redirect state policy. This wing argued that the regimes were bankrupt and ineffectual at modern organization and development planning and that if they hoped to survive they would have to lift the institutional barriers and political impediments barring the foreign capital needed to regenerate economic life. Behind this argument for economic liberalization, of course, lay the desire of this fraction of the ruling class to enjoy the material benefits of an alliance with foreign capital.

The way was cleared for a shift in direction after the June 1967 war with Israel when Egypt began its retreat into localism. This trend, however, was more firmly established after Jamal 'Abd al-Nasir's death in 1970 and the rise of Anwar al-Sadat, who (a year later) consolidated power by discrediting and defeating the 'Ali Sabri group. The conservative wing of the state bourgeoisie was now in charge in Cairo. In Syria a more gradual and indeed uncomfortable shift took place after Hafiz al-Asad's victory over the Salah Jadid wing of the military-Ba'th alliance, also in 1970. No corresponding shift took place in Iraq until much later, largely because of that state's control of vast oil wealth which freed the Saddam Hussein regime from a heavy reliance on foreign investments and loans. The important point is that the ideals of Arab unity and pan-Arabism embraced so tightly by Nasirist and Ba'th-

ist ideology were weakened and then superseded in the 1970s by the force of regionalism: Egypt-Sudan, Syria-Lebanon-Jordan, and Iraq-Arabian Peninsula and Gulf. The best indication of this economic and political realignment was the 1973 war with Israel, which was launched by Egypt and Syria with limited aims: to clear the ground for a diplomatic solution to the debilitating Arab-Israeli conflict. The October War enabled the Arab regimes to liberalize their economies and expand their private sectors (in Egypt's case, it facilitated an acceleration of the *infitah* or "open door" policy begun in 1971). Though the new institutional arrangements created to attract foreign capital did not always work smoothly, due to various infrastructural deficiencies and to resistance from the progressive wing of the state bourgeoisie and other disaffected elements, those in the accommodationist wing capitalized on the convergences of international and regional pressures with their personal interests to take charge.

In sum, rapid urbanization without dynamic industrialization, the increasing inability of the state to distribute goods and services adequately, the retreat from pan-Arabism, successive defeats at the hands of Israel, and mounting external pressures on the state to liberalize the economic system (liberalization, among other things, contributed directly to escalating inflation in the 1970s) combined to increase polarization in Arab society. One important expression of this polarization has been Islamic revivalism.

The Social and Political Forces of Revivalism

To explain why Islam has become the main vehicle for expressing discontent with the state, we must investigate the nature of forces most actively engaged in revivalism.

Briefly, the leadership and the rank and file of movements in the Arab countries identifiable as Islamic come largely from those sections of the urban populations most closely attached to the traditional order and belief system. These forces are the ones the modern secular state has so far proved unable to assimilate to the new socioeconomic and political infrastructure it has built. Consequently, they have paid a heavy price for the state's efforts to modernize society from above. One should, however, recognize



the urban lower-middle class: the shopkeepers, small bazaar merchants, middling bureaucrats, popular preachers, and university students. In general they form a "class caught in between," composed not so much of those who have been completely passed over by the state in its drive to modernize society and thus are angry bystanders, but rather of groups who have been pulled by the interventionist state in the direction of modern society and culture to a certain point where they encounter barriers to advancement due to the state's growing impotence and its economic policy reorientation. Their appetites whetted, they are then prevented from fulfilling their new expectations. This "class caught in between" is largely concentrated in the old city; though its members are not recent immigrants, they often maintain links to the countryside. Furthermore, unlike the rank and file, many of these elements have acquired a relatively high level of modern secular education, enough to draw them into the mobilization process but not enough to provide them with satisfactory employment opportunities or incomes. Perhaps they did not acquire a sufficiently advanced degree to be able to advance to a higher rung on the bureaucratic ladder. Or, perhaps they were unable to acquire foreign language skills that might have given them an entrée into the expanding private sector (especially the service sector) of the last decade with its intimate ties to foreign capital.

Families from this class had hoped to move out of the old city and decaying quarters into wealthier modern districts but soon discovered that they could not afford the transition. Young university-educated men found it impossible to marry and start their own families because they were unable to afford the key money on an apartment or even the rent. Instead, they were obliged to continue living with their parents, grandparents, and siblings with little or no hope of improving their situation as they watched their real incomes decline due to the rapid inflation of the 1970s. Meanwhile, these mobilized and, in some cases, partially assimilated elements grew increasingly jealous and angry as the ruling class began to flaunt its wealth and power publicly, revealing its decadence and corruption.

But, as in the case of the marginalized immigrants from the

the social and economic distinctions between leadership and rank and file.

Rank and File

The rank and file are recently settled immigrants from the countryside, an uprooted peasantry that has been drawn into the process of rapid urbanization. Many of these immigrants have come directly from the rural sector to the city; others, however, may have stopped in intermediary towns along the way to the big city, where they may have acquired some skills and experience enabling them to adjust more easily to the problems of this massive transition.¹⁰ Some of these uprooted peasants have managed to settle in the ancient popular quarters of the city, though most live in the new mushrooming peripheral districts in temporary and often inadequate housing. Most have had difficulty securing regular employment and have ended up in the vast pool of casual labor or among the unemployed. Although this class has been mobilized, its limited education and lack of opportunities for steady employment have prevented its assimilation to the modern sector.

The problem faced by recent immigrants is not simply one of economic subsistence, however. Forced to settle in the anonymity of the big city in districts with no firm traditions, immigrants have been cut from their roots, stripped of the symbols of their culture and heritage. Alienated and disoriented, they want to preserve their identities by reinforcing traditional culture and values. And though their interpretation of Islam — a mixture of popular religious belief and village customs — may not conform to the highest principles of the religion and law, they frame their search for and defense of identity in what they claim to be Islamic terms. Here the recently settled immigrants from the countryside are given added encouragement by popular leaders, both religious and secular, who belong neither to the religious establishment nor to the urban bourgeoisie.

The Leadership

The main force behind Islamic revivalism that shaped it into a sociopolitical movement seems to be composed of elements from



countryside, the "class caught in between" did not just face problems of material subsistence. The effects of mass education left men and women disoriented and confused, their values and traditions twisted by the unevenness of modernization. It is thus not surprising to find elements from this class seeking to recapture their traditions and trying to retreat into what they claim is authentic culture, as embodied in Islam.

The power of the "class caught in between" (which provides the leadership of Islamic revivalist movements) can be measured by its ability to establish ties binding it to the truly dispossessed in the city. Indeed, the leadership's main aim is to create a dependency relationship in which it dominates the rank and file, articulates its beliefs and values, channels its frustration, and even protects it from the state in return for the mass support that might enable the lower-middle class to regain position and power in society.

One additional characteristic of the revivalist leadership needs underscoring. In the Arab countries that have experienced a substantial amount of secularization and modernization over time, the leadership of Islamic movements tends to come from outside the Muslim religious establishment. Whereas in Iran the Shi'i Muslim clergy managed to retain a certain degree of independence from the state, in Egypt and Syria the Sunni Muslim religious leadership was long ago co-opted by the state, its members often serving as salaried officials of the government. Indeed, the revivalist leadership, though difficult to define precisely, appears to be a mixture of lay intellectuals and liberal professionals and a sprinkling of popular Muslim preachers supported by bazaar merchants. But the absence of an independent Muslim religious leadership in command of Islamic movements in the Arab countries does make them vulnerable to criticism and even subversion by the state. Arab regimes can rely on government-controlled religious institutions administered by religious officials to counter the challenge of an independent Islamic opposition and even to co-opt it.

At this juncture one may justifiably ask why the social classes involved in revivalism have not been attracted to other ideologies

movements in the Arab countries such as leftist political organizations which also focus on opposition to the state and to western control? The answer seems to be that in most of these countries left-wing parties have rather bad reputations. Often they are thoroughly discredited in the traditional sectors of society. This is especially true of the communist parties, which are viewed as more extreme secular versions of what already is embodied in the state. Not only do communist parties have difficulty dealing with the question of religion in their programs, but they are also seen as unauthentic, too closely identified with and under the control of the Soviet Union. Also, there is no doubt that communist parties primarily appeal to the modern organized working class, the middle-class intelligentsia, and, in some cases, to religious and ethnic minorities, none of which are closely tied to the social formation from which Islamic revivalism springs. In any case by the 1970s the "Arab Left," and in particular the communists, had been systematically suppressed, purged, or co-opted (depending on the country) and was in no position to rally the forces of opposition to the state.

Islamic Revivalism in its Wider Political and Social Context

Now that we have tried to isolate the different forces and classes behind the recent resurgence of "Islam," we should highlight some of the major issues on which revivalism focuses.

Revivalist movements generally express strong anti-western sentiments on several related levels — political, economic, socio-cultural — due to the West's dismal record in the Arab world, with special emphasis on the United States and its many activities in the area. Within this context, revivalists are particularly hostile to the penetration of western capital, whether through loans, joint ventures, or multinationals, because this is perceived as harmful to the material interests of the Arab world. Revivalists also oppose the entry of luxury goods from the West which the "westernized classes" have been importing in much greater quantity with the relaxation of import controls in the 1970s. But even though Muslim revivalists oppose western capital, they should not be classified as anti-capitalist. On the contrary, they appear to be in



fundamental agreement with the ideas of capitalism: profit, financial returns on investments involving risk, and, above all, private property.¹¹ However, their inclination is toward some form of autarky or national economic self-sufficiency in which goods and services will be distributed more equitably throughout society.

Along with their opposition to western capital, revivalists are demonstrating a growing intolerance for the religious minorities. This is particularly true with respect to Christians, who have been historically identified with the West and foreign capital and who have recently become more conspicuous and aggressive in their roles as middlemen, export-import merchants, and leaders in the service sector, all because of economic liberalization.

In the area of politics, revivalists express their hostility both to the United States and to its major ally in the region, Israel, which is perceived as a western implantation occupying Arab-Muslim territory. By adopting a rejectionist line on the question of a peaceful diplomatic resolution of the Arab-Israeli conflict, revivalists also can criticize their governments for their continued failure to liberate "Palestine," calling into the question the very legitimacy of these regimes. At the same time, revivalists attack the state for turning away from the other major goal of nationalism: Arab unity. Some movements may try to compete with the government for control of the ideology of Arab nationalism, though the inclination of most is to stress pan-Islamic principles in order to distinguish themselves clearly from the state which is still in control of nationalist institutions.

It should also be added that revivalists are not particularly enamored of the modern working class and trade unions, which are perceived by the revivalists as relatively privileged and are, in any case, either under firm state control or linked to left-wing political organizations like the communist party. Not surprisingly, revivalism is strongly anti-communist and anti-Soviet. The Soviet Union is seen as an interventionist power in every sense, one that seeks to impose its atheist ideology on Islam.

So far we have discussed what revivalism is a reaction to and what it opposes. It is also important to explain briefly what revivalists are seeking in more positive terms. First one must recognize

that wherever revivalism has been translated into political movements, these movements have demonstrated modernist tendencies. Indeed, in their political manifestation, the revivalists are organized into parties with leaderships, political and socioeconomic programs, and propaganda arms such as journals and newspapers (legal and illegal). After all, the leadership of the Islamic revivalist movements has had access to modern education, giving them, as one observer has put it, "the ambience, contacts, and intellectual tools to organize groups and movements."¹²

Revivalist programs, however, seem to be a mixed bag of traditional and modern ideas, reflecting the position in society of the revivalist elite. At the same time, their programs are rarely systematic or consistent. Indeed, they are often superficial and characterized by contradictory principles. In part this can be explained by the leadership's intermediary position between the traditional and modern orders in society, but it is also due to the fact that Islamic movements in the Arab countries are still fundamentally opposition movements, more concerned at this stage with "practical action" rather than philosophical rigor and consistency.¹³

Islamic movements are concerned with more than a return to and reinforcement of traditional rules of behavior and the reestablishment of the *shari'a* (religious law). Prohibition of alcohol, drugs, prostitution, gambling, and the like are issues around which to rally the masses against the state's failure to uphold traditional norms of morality, the corruption and decadence of the upper classes, and westernization in general, but they are also a way of expressing a growing need to defend a culture and way of life from erosion at a time when nothing positive or suitable has been offered as a replacement. So the contradictions embodied in Islamic revivalism are to be expected. Mobilization without full integration or assimilation into a new modern order is bound to create conflicts and tensions for those classes that have been drawn into the process and are now "caught in between," disoriented and confused. It is not surprising to discover revivalists, as they watch their women being drawn into the public sphere of life,



on the one hand stressing the need for women to return to their traditional activities and places in the home and, on the other, beginning to realize how important a second income is to the survival of their families. And women's reversion to traditional dress is not just a way of voicing opposition to the westernized ruling class and to the aggression of the West; it is also a way to help preserve their self-respect and dignity, which are being eroded by the sexual division of labor imposed in the public workplace.

In many ways, Islamic revivalism is fundamentalist in the sense that it seeks remedies to present ills in old truths, by linking current problems to evil, satanic powers and men—local and foreign—and by arguing that recovery requires a rediscovery of traditional ways.¹⁴ Yet revivalists do not reject modernization, industrialization, or even the idea of a powerful interventionist state. On the contrary, they want these and more, but they also want to create their own framework to guide development.¹⁵

Their aims and aspirations are to be realized through the creation of an Islamic state which revivalists claim will reestablish the moral link between government and society that has been severed by the classes in power. But the contours of such a state are hard to trace. With a pliant religious establishment in the Arab countries, the question of who would form the leadership of an Islamic state would be difficult to resolve. Would the new urban leadership be able to take control of a state based on Islamic law when this leadership itself is not qualified to interpret the law?

Conclusion

Islamic revivalism, in its political manifestation in countries such as Egypt and Syria, is a movement of opposition to the modern secular state. It is peopled by elements from urban classes who are still closely attached to their religious beliefs, traditional values, and culture. Islamic revivalism has great potential for building a base in the traditional sectors of urban society, among the poor immigrants from the countryside and the lower-middle class, and it has capitalized on the failure of the left-wing secular movements to establish a strong foothold in these sectors of society.

Like other Islamic movements of the past, Islamic revivalism's great appeal is that it makes the traditional classes in Arab society feel temporarily better (in a psychological sense) because revivalist leaders are able to provide an explanation for their frustrations and disorientation in acceptable and comprehensible language. These leaders offer solutions and cures that they claim have always been rooted in Islamic culture but have been neglected and need restoration.

Islamic revivalism is initially defensive but it also seeks to be creative. It wants to recreate Arab Muslim society according to the society's own inner dynamics and thus win final cultural and economic independence from the West. In this creative sense Islamic revivalism is potentially attractive to large sections of society. In fact, the more radical elements among revivalists are known to have adopted certain socialist theories and principles and are seeking a massive social and political revolution that would topple the present system of government and transform the economic system.¹⁶ But so far, Islamic revivalists have been unable to strike deep roots in the modern classes in Arab society, which view revivalism as dangerously backward and reactionary and, in the case of the ruling class, as a direct threat to the rulers' security.

Islamic revivalists have managed to force the state to accede to some of their demands to the extent of allowing Islam to creep back into certain institutions and other aspects of social life. The state's accommodation is itself an admission of revivalism's potential for destabilizing current regimes; it is also, however, a way of reasserting a regime's legitimacy.

Yet, in the sense that Islamic revivalism is a tool wielded by a certain class to regain position in society through the domination and manipulation of another class, it is as narrow as were bourgeois and radical nationalism before it. Whether Islamic revivalists succeed in the end in toppling current Arab regimes or in radically redefining them, one thing seems certain: they are not seeking to stem the tide of history and to obstruct development. Rather, through the ideological force of Islam, the traditional social classes seek to redefine their relations with each other and with the state, to their advantage. By doing so they hope to clear



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the prickly path between tradition and modernity on which they are destined to tread.

NOTES

- 1 Both the "academy" and the media failed to predict this revival. For the most systematic explanation of this failure and the bias and misunderstanding in which it is rooted, see Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Pantheon, 1978) and Said, *Covering Islam* (New York: Pantheon, 1981). For a select bibliography of recent literature (in English) on different interpretations of Islamic revivalism, see the list at the end of this article.
- 2 See "Contemporary Islamic Revivalism, Discussion Group with a Paper by M. E. Yapp," *Asian Affairs* 11 (June 1980), p. 178.
- 3 *Ibid.*, p. 189. Here I must concur with the conclusions arrived at by a group of experts in Britain studying the phenomenon of revivalism.
- 4 This passage borrows heavily from the analysis of Albert Hourani, "Middle Eastern Nationalism Yesterday and Today," in *The Emergence of the Modern Middle East* (London: The MacMillan Press Ltd., 1981), pp. 183-185.
- 5 *Ibid.*, pp. 186-187.
- 6 The social foundations of Arab nationalism before World War I are discussed in my unpublished doctoral dissertation: "The Politics of Nationalism: Syria and the French Mandate 1920-1936" (Harvard University, 1980).
- 7 This characterization of bourgeois nationalism is derived from "Politics of Nationalism."
- 8 This is suggested in Hourani, "Middle Eastern Nationalism," p. 190.
- 9 *Ibid.*, p. 188.
- 10 "Contemporary Islamic Revivalism," p. 185.
- 11 On the subject of Islam and capitalism, see Maxime Rodinson, *Islam and Capitalism* (New York: Pantheon, 1973), and John Thomas Cummings, H. Askari, and A. Mustafa, "Islam and Modern Economic Change," in J. L. Esposito (ed.), *Islam and Development: Religion and Sociopolitical Change* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1980).
- 12 Nikki Keddie, "Iran: Change in Islam; Islam and Change," *International Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 11 (July 1980), p. 529.
- 13 "Contemporary Islamic Revivalism," p. 186.
- 14 See Maxime Rodinson, "Islam Resurgent?" *Gazelle Review* 6 (1979), pp. 1-17.
- 15 "Contemporary Islamic Revivalism," p. 186.
- 16 For one view of the historic role of revolutionary movements in Islam, see Thomas Hodgkin, "The Revolutionary Tradition in Islam," *Race and Class* (1980), pp. 221-237.



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SOCIAL IMPLICATIONS OF LABOR MIGRATION IN THE ARAB WORLD Janet Abu-Lughod

Just as the seventh century saw a massive out-migration from the Arabian Peninsula to what later became known as the Arab world, so the late twentieth century is witnessing the opposite, a significant reflux of population toward the Peninsula. Although today's migration does not match the earlier movement in terms of the proportion of total population taking part, it does involve a considerably greater number of persons. Moreover, the present trend differs from the former in its consequences. Assimilation, the building of a common culture, and the establishment of a polity capable of incorporating new groups were the goals of the first migration; all these are different in the present migration.

How many persons are currently involved in the "new migration" cannot be determined with accuracy. All told, Arab labor migrations to Europe and the Americas (which will not be discussed in this paper), as well as those internal to the Arab world (the focus of our attention here), probably now involve some five to six million persons, including dependents moving with the laborers but not those left behind. If family members left behind are added, the *minimum* number of persons affected doubles. And if one considers all Arabs affected by migrations over the past few decades, the number may again double. Since the Arab world includes a total population of about 160 million, one can estimate that one out of every eight Arabs is affected, directly or indirectly, by international migration. The proportion would be even higher if persons residing in areas of population in-migration, as well as those in areas of out-migration, were included.

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