

# Islamism - Consequence of, Heir to, and Rival of Frustrated Arab Nationalism

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- Islam has a bad press in the free West: followers of Islam still live in the Middle Ages, one hears, and Islamic clerics may conduct procedures their Christian colleagues have only been allowed to dream of for 150 years to veil women, stone sinners, and burn heretics to death. Some even consider the Koran an early version of “Mein Kampf” – what a fitting anti-Fascist armament for the “clash of cultures” of which the ‘free West’ still is not sure if it wants it, and if so, to what extent.
- Within Islam there have always been revival movements just like in every other religion. A world in which people seek comfort in religion is not a pleasant place. If it was, people would not have to seek comfort. The kind of comfort religion conveys is paid for with humility and sacrifice and hence religion is far from a contribution to changing the world for the better. Consequently, time and again people have tried to receive more encouragement, more help from above by a yet ‘more correct’ belief. That way Islam has undergone a split (Shiites of Shia Islam and Sunnis of Sunni Islam), there have been a couple of smaller secessions (Ismailis, Alevi, Druze) or new religions have emerged from Islam (Sikhs, Bah’i). While some stay within the framework of the Islamic religion (though worshippers of the traditional belief might sometimes disagree), there are and have been transitions to a quite different manner of praying to Allah and his mates. It has less to do with good arguments and convincing dogmas that such religious revival movements or rather: religion in general were and are able to spread and prevail. Rather, it is closely connected to two questions: whether political authorities attend to a particular deism and assert it by force and if classes or other social groups consider this kind of communication with the higher powers as a spiritual weapon for their other concerns.
- There are also fundamentalists in Islam just like in every other religion. Those are people who preach a ‘return’ to the true belief, and whose aim is, for fairly current reasons, to ‘restore’ the moral rules of their ancestors. These have never existed as such, but always amount to the same thing: sacrifice, oppression of deviant positions, submission to the ‘right’ authority and readiness to fight for this nasty programme. Far from being satisfied with the existence as merely a blinkered private opinion such a programme becomes a political movement to oblige the state to ‘re’-raise all morality. With regard to Islam this is called Islamism. Such movements seem to astonish and worry people in Europe, of all places, where almost every country has a large Christian-democratic party.
- Initially, Islamism appeared as the pan-Islamic revival movement in the beginning of the 20th century. The various tendencies within the pan-Islamic movement aimed to restore the Umma, i.e., all worshippers of Islam united under one single political authority. Between 1815 and 1914 France, Spain, Great Britain, the Netherlands, Russia, and Italy had absorbed Islamic countries from Morocco to Indonesia taking possession of them as colonies, had turned them into “protectorates” and blown the Ottoman Empire, which

continuously weakened, into separate spheres of interest. The anti-colonial struggles aimed to reverse this development.

- The pan-Islamists were particularly popular in the Arabic-speaking countries<sup>1</sup>, because the Ottoman Empire's answer to the decline of its power was an intensified politics of homogenisation. After the "Young Turks" had taken over in Constantinople (now Istanbul) in 1908, they tried to turn the sultan's subjects into modern citizens of a Turkish-dominated nation state. However, the "Ottoman Porte" did not endear itself to its Arabic subjects with this politics of "turkification", besides, this way they became aware of their 'Arabic-ness'. Hence, the same happened as in the British, French and Italian colonies: the interaction of national demands and racial exclusion created a diverging, in this case, Arabic nationalism. Under the prophet's banner the aim was to gather either all Arabs or all Muslims (a clear distinction between the two was not always of concern). The alleged truth that the Arabic language alone, the language of the Koran, allows access to the divine truth emphasised the identity of Islamic revival and Arabic 're'-emergence according to Islamic insurgents. The British and French supported, armed and used such movements against the Ottoman Empire in World War I (that is the plot of "Lawrence of Arabia"), while German foreign politics also concentrated on the "Mohammedans", without much success, though. Instead of gaining independence as promised, France and Great Britain after 1919 took on the heavy burden of mandates by the League of Nations and created Syria, Iraq, the Lebanon, Palestine, Yemen as dependent quasi-colonies, and moreover, they granted the foundation of Saudi Arabia.
- The answer of the "Arabic movement" to the "Turks" and Christian "crusaders" (that is what the colonialists were called in remembrance of other hard times) and later the Zionist movement was the dream of the 're'-erection of an Arabic and/or Islamic Empire of apparently ancient beauty and greatness. But in the 1920s this pan-Islamism paled into insignificance beside the rise of the new nationalistic movements that struggled for independence within the boundaries drawn by the colonial powers and which aimed at the foundation of modern nation states such as Egypt, Algeria, Morocco, Libya, Tunisia, Syria, Lebanon, Iraq, Jordan etc.
- This did not mean, however, that those national liberation movements would have relinquished the cultural distinction of Islam toward the Christian colonialists. The statesmen-to-be indeed appreciated the belief in Allah as far as it was an integral part of the Arabic folk culture as well as a moral resource. However, as religion they did not want to take it too seriously. On the one hand, this was due to the fact that there still were many different Islamic sects as well as strong Christian minorities that ought to participate in the national projects; on the other hand Islam was often used to cement traditional feudal dependencies and thus was regarded as hindering modernisation by the nationalists.
- After World War II, when the Arabic states had achieved their ideal of sovereignty insofar as the world order allowed it that is the various countries and movements all continued to praise the ideal of pan-Arabism. This implies they accepted the contradiction that their nationalism and national politics actually served to achieve the formation of an even higher Arabic unity. Nevertheless, they continuously frustrated those ideas with their politics as illustrated by the short life spans of the various "United" Arab Republics that were founded. The rivalry between Arabic states was constantly exercised by one's own declaration of belief in the Arabic matter, the complaint about the lack of unity of the Arabic world, and the accusation of others to be solely interested in narrow-minded nationalism. Beyond all

vicissitudes the mutual enmity towards Israel, which was blamed for Arabic weakness, stayed on. But even the mutual hatred of the “Jewish State” has never led the Arabic “sister states” to even implicitly support the fight of the PLO.<sup>2</sup> Not to mention a good treatment of those who were jammed into refugee camps to await their future use as material for the Palestine state.

- Those countries where political authority laid down a Western course in politics – mainly royal dynasties like Morocco, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, the Gulf Emirates, and Iraq until 1958 – appreciated Islam as means to resist ideas of democratisation as well as to neutralise activities of a Socialist and Communist nature. This also held true for the non-Arabic states Afghanistan and Pakistan, whereas the Shahs regime in Persia (now Iran), until 1979, considered the Islamic clergy and population as nothing but a hindrance to modernisation. And even the Kemalist military in Turkey appreciated Islam as moral resource for the state. The idea of the religion being of service to the state was regarded as convenient by all of them, yet, not in terms of making the state’s programme subservient to Islam.
- Even the ‘Arab Socialist countries’ did not avoid making use of Islam (Nasser: “Mohammed was an imam of socialism”, Baathists etc.), although “socialism”, like in many other Asian and African states, did not involve much more than stating “the economic wealth belongs to the nation” (art. 26 Baath Party’s constitution). The anti-capitalism of those countries always had an anti-materialist approach preaching national dedication and sacrifice to the people; capitalism was tantamount to egoism and an overemphasis on material interests instead of fighting for the “eternal mission of the Arabic nation” (third principle of the Baath Party). If Marxism-Leninism was an inspiration at all, it was Stalin’s dictum that enemies of the people had to be smashed and Mao’s appreciation of revolutionary heroism. Other than that the class struggle was opposed to “reactionary elements” and directed against those people who were not willing to give away their wealth as well as against minorities that seemed to disturb the nation’s homogeneity with their own ‘special’ collective practices and identities. Furthermore, it obviously was directed against Israel, the “bridgehead of imperialism”, whose Jewish residents by means of persistent propaganda for the last 40 years had become the personification of Western greed. When the Eastern bloc had ceased to exist, movements that earlier had explicitly disapproved of Islam (PKK, PLO, etc.) now regarded it as a revolutionary power.
- Islamism, which until late in the 1970s played a marginal role, today is a widely spread ideology from Turkey to Sudan, from Morocco to Indonesia. This has happened, however, without its followers agreeing on who belongs to the Umma or how it should be comprised, whether Sunnis or Shiites should lead, which Islamic school and interpretation of Sharia is the correct one and whether it is about the whole of Islam or particularly the unity of all Arabs. Islamism is a nationalistic globalisation critique that rejects the nation state since it is unable to achieve pan-Arabic and pan-Islamic aims. In the fashion of almost every “pan”-movement, dissatisfied nationalism serves as starting point. The only way to rescue the fatherland is to transcend and substitute it by a higher and more powerful unit; yet certainly not without abandoning the chance of getting the hands on one’s own nation, adjusting the nation’s politics to the new goal and imposing a moral revival programme on the respective national society.
- There is no lack of dissatisfied nationalism in Arabic and other Islamic countries. Since the 1980s nearly all of these states had to grapple with matching their own “mixed economy” of state isolation and certain guarantees for the population’s survival with requirements by the

IMF in order to stay creditworthy. Since the Eastern bloc's downfall, the global market as well as the competitiveness of the own production have become the determining political standards in all countries worldwide. The "programmes of structural adjustment" by the IMF imply new hardships to those masses who are not blessed with wealth anyway, with respect to food (bread subsidies), health care, education, etc. Islamism is growing not only because the Muslim Brotherhood establishes alternative networks (schools, Islamic hospitals, soup kitchens for the poor) but because the Islamist explanations for the new situation and their proposed solutions match the existing wide-spread servile cast of mind and the regimes' official propaganda well. After all, Islamism is from Morocco to Malaysia accompanied by anti-Semitism. This has nothing to do with Israeli politics, except that those provide the occasion. Instead it is closely connected to nationalistic anti-capitalism: against greed, enrichment and materialism the anti-materialist virtues of Islam is set and an economy according to Islamic principles of fair sharing and prohibition of interest is promoted. Even those who apparently fight Islamism Egypt, Turkey, some former Soviet republics with Islamic majorities attempt to assert Islamic moral rules in society, thus, laying the ground for Islamism.

- The new Islamism is therefore consequence and heir of and rival to Arab nationalism. Islamic fundamentalism results from a state of dissatisfaction with the outcomes of these politics. It inherits the nationalistic critique of capitalism which was popularised by Arab socialists; at the same time Islamism fights the remaining nationalists and Arab socialists as godless people and Western collaborators. Particularly in regard to women emancipated by Arab socialists as a corollary to modernisation modern Islamists hold out an ideal of moral renewal where morality and sexuality are the main topics. Three fears seem to be important: first, the idea that Allah is not on one's side in case one lacks proper moral, second, the idea that sexuality weakens male power to fight in the jihad, and, third, the apprehension that fulfilled sexuality and love, would generally result in rejecting jihad and thus may get in the way of politics. How exactly the interaction between these thoughts works is a subject for a further study.
- Just like every other religious fundamentalism seeking national renewal, the transition from Islamism to Fascism is fluent. This has nothing to do with the Koran, but it has everything to do with the disappointed idealism of Arab and non-Arab Nationalists.

1For those who do not know: Islam is anything but equivalent to Arabic. Turkish is a completely different language, as is the language spoken in Iran; in Bangladesh and Indonesia people speak entirely different yet again. The fact that these languages use/used Arabic script does not change the fact that they are all different.

2

See the massacre of Palestinians by Jordanian security forces in the so-called "Black September" in 1970, which gave name to the group that attacked the Israeli team during the 1972 Olympic games in Munich.