



Islamic and Middle Eastern Lives: Beyond Conceptual Frameworks

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Abstract

The development of Islamic Studies during the twentieth century and beyond has found little favor with Islam as a religious phenomenon. The field became dominated by rigid paradigms or concepts of antagonism and hostility among the monotheistic or Abrahamic creeds. One can cite Edward Said's "Orientalism" (1978), Samuel Huntington's "Clash of Civilizations" (1993, 1996) or the Chicago "Fundamentalism" Project (1991-1995). These Paradigms lacked an awareness of the diversity of Islam and the complexity of interfaith encounters. The paper, providing a critical review of such paradigms, aims to highlight the importance of having a historical perspective, and to examine more concrete communal realities, by using sociological and cultural insights as well as comparative religion.

Keywords: Global jihad, Salafism, Arab Spring, Middle Eastern studies, Islam

Introduction

Islamic and Middle Eastern studies in the twentieth century and beyond have found little favor with Islam. It is true that the body of knowledge on Islam has expanded. New genres of research – dealing with issues ranging from urban studies and public space to holy landscapes, religious practices, social history, gender, and the documentation and empowerment of groups that have traditionally been excluded (e.g., women, minorities, and slaves) – have gained momentum. It seems, however, that this wealth of scholarship has mainly addressed Islam as a culture and a civilization and has dealt to a much lesser extent with the evolution of Islamic thought and jurisprudence, especially in the realms of religion and state; jihad, violence, and martyrdom; war and the treatment of captives and non-combatants; and international relations. Such issues were largely discussed within the confines of traditional scholarship, which highlighted the importance of morality in Muslim public sphere guided by the imperative of “forbidden wrong” (Sura 3: 110), for example, in the areas of entertainment and interactions between men and women.¹ This scholarship also tended to describe Islam’s encounter with non-Muslim cultures in terms of dissonance, rivalry, and friction. While such notions have been disputed and challenged by scholars who have pointed to the diversity of Islamic thought and culture,² they have continued to a large extent to guide researchers, all the more so in the shadow of modern Islamic activism, culminating with brutal displays of violence by global jihadist organizations such as al-Qa’ida and the Islamic State (ISIS).

The twentieth-century resurgence in all three monotheistic religions – Judaism, Christianity, and Islam – has been characterized by sociologist José Casanova as the de-privatization of religion in contemporary life and its contentious return to the public sphere.³ This development challenged the Enlightenment project, which sought to place the keys to salvation and happiness in human hands and raised the banner of secularization, confining religion to the private sphere or to places of worship. Yet far from providing a universal social and political foundation, the Enlightenment failed to encompass major sectors of society. Churches, synagogues, and mosques remained open and active, while religious institutes continued to train clerics. Religious beliefs, symbols, and personalities

¹ On the centrality of this imperative in Islamic thought and jurisprudence, see Michael Cook, *Commanding Right and Forbidding Wrong in Islamic Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

² See for example John L. Esposito, *The Islamic Threat: Myth or Reality?* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999); John L. Esposito and John Voll, *Islam and Democracy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996); idem, *Makers of Contemporary Islam* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001); Raymond Baker, *Islam without Fear: Egypt and the New Islamists* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003); Mehran Kamrava (ed.), *The New Voices of Islam* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2006).

³ José Casanova, *Public Religions in the Modern World* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), mainly chapters 1, 8.

continued to be highly valued by myriad ethnic and social groups, whereas manifestations of atheism and heresy remained marginalized.⁴ Modernity indeed constituted a significant challenge to the established faiths, but nonetheless, these beliefs endured and continued to infuse the public culture with religious values and ideals of personal behavior and tenets that were usually protected by state censorship. They also served as breeding grounds for religious innovation and rejuvenation. In essence, modernization spawned new religious ideas, communities, and religious movements. Some of these movements were not content with providing pastoral care to individual souls but also questioned the prevailing “secular” order, seeking to reinforce public morality and, in some cases, defying the dominant political elites.

This was most evident within the Islamic milieu. The emergence of a more zealous Islamic identity made adherents resentful of local regimes for not implementing the *shari‘a* (Islamic law) and not renouncing the colonial and hedonistic West. This led to negative and demonic perceptions of the “other,” aggravating sectarian strife and ethnonational tensions around the world. The September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks were a watershed moment in the rise of radical Islam as a global phenomenon; since then, the Islamic resurgence has been the subject of study by anthropologists, sociologists, historians, social historians, and psychologists.

East vs. West

The return of Islam to the public sphere and its politicization often went hand-in-hand with assertiveness and violence. This hindered intellectual and scholarly discourse, which became dominated by rigid conceptual frameworks based on antagonism and hostility among the Abrahamic creeds, specifically, between Islam and the Judeo-Christian cultures.

These frameworks lacked a comparative historical perspective and were marked by an unawareness of the diversity of Islam and the complexity of interfaith encounters. One such concept, and even paradigm, nurtured in this postcolonial climate was that put forth in Edward Said’s influential book *Orientalism*, published in 1978. Said denounced Western scholarship for harboring invented and demonic perceptions that depicted Islam and the East as archaic, dangerous, and intolerant, in contrast to the rational and progressive West. Such perceptions of the “other,” the oriental, whom he argued was defined as barbaric and savage, ascribed a superior hegemonic status to Western culture and imbued it with the mission of “civilizing” Arab-Muslim societies. This Orientalist framework, pointed out Said, was a major intellectual cornerstone of European imperialism.⁵

Orientalism has made a tremendous contribution to historical research in general, and to Islamic and Middle Eastern studies in particular. It has significantly altered the way we think, write, and present the history of the peoples of Islam and the East. It displays sensitivity and empathy towards them and heightens our awareness that non-Western societies can develop their own strain of modernity without necessarily breaking away from indigenous identities and cultures- what Shmuel Eisenstadt called “multiple modernities” and what Niklas Olsen termed “history in the plural.”⁶ Yet, ironically, despite its constructive approach, Said’s “Orientalism” narrative sharpened the dissonance between East and West precisely because of its sweeping assertions; in fact, it gave further impetus to the politics of identity. It portrayed a European and Western plot to uproot local indigenous cultures, and it permeated not only Islamic protest movements, but also educational and academic institutions in the Arab and Muslim world. One of Said’s Arab critics, the Syrian writer Sadiq Jalal al-‘Azam, shared Said’s view that Orientalism as an intellectual enterprise had close ties with colonial rule in the Middle East. Nonetheless, he remarked sadly that Said’s premise actually distanced the East from the West instead of promoting their rapprochement.⁷

Academic works, influenced by the Orientalist paradigm of criticizing and revising Western perceptions of Islam and the Arabs, largely failed to grasp the rise of the “culture of self-criticism” (*thaqafa al-naqd al-dhati*) that pervaded Marxist-socialist and liberal circles following the traumatic Arab defeat of 1967.⁸ These circles, inspired

⁴ See also Stephen Bullivant and Michael Ruse (eds.), *Atheism: The Oxford Handbook of Atheism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

⁵ Edward Said, *Orientalism* (new ed., London: Penguin, 2003); also his *Culture and Imperialism* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1993). On the concept of otherness and its symbolic and social functions, see Jean-François Stazak, “Other/Otherness,” R. Kitchin and N. Thrift (eds.), *International Encyclopedia of Human Geography* (Oxford: Elsevier, 2008), vol. 8, 43–47.

⁶ S. N. Eisenstadt, “Multiple Modernities,” *Daedalus* 129/1 (2000): 1–29; Niklas Olsen, *History in the Plural: An Introduction to the Work of Reinhart Koselleck* (New York and Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2014).

⁷ Emmanuel Sivan, “Edward Said and His Arab Reviewers,” in idem, *Interpretations of Islam: Past and Present* (Princeton, NJ: The Darwin Press, 1985), 133-154.

⁸ Among the few works which discussed these critical voices, see Fouad Ajami, *The Arab Predicament: Arab Political Thought and Practice after 1967* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), chapter 2; Ibrahim Abu Rabi‘, *Contemporary Arab Thought: Studies in Post-1967 Arab Intellectual History* (London: Pluto Press, 2004); Elizabeth S. Kassab, *Contemporary Arab Thought: Cultural Critique in Comparative Perspective* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009); Ahmad Agbaria, “Dār al-Ṭalī‘ah and the Question of Arab Authenticity in the 1960s,” *Journal of Arabic Literature* 52 (2021): 228–253; Christoph Schumann, *Nationalism and Liberal Thought in the Arab East: Ideology and Practice* (London: Routledge, 2010); Meir Hatina

by Western ideologies, debated Islamic injunctions and ethos in an attempt to foster an Arab enlightenment, be it socialist-secular or liberal. Western scholarship did shed light on post-1967 Arab discourses that advocated civic culture from within, that is, based on Arab historical experience and a scientific and rational reading of Islamic texts. Such was the case of *asala / turath* (cultural authenticity), which promoted freedom of thought, the emancipation of women, the separation of religion and state, and so forth, through the deconstruction of local traditions and the broadening of their humanist values. The main point of reference for these “new partisans of the heritage,” such as the Moroccan Mohammed Abed al-Jabri (d. 2010) and the Egyptian Hasan Hanafi (b. 1935), was Islamic culture.⁹

Another post-1967 civic discourse centered on *wasatiyya* (centrism), a reformist Islamic philosophy that emerged mainly in Egypt, Jordan, and Morocco, and which infused modern Sunnism with innovative, critical thinking. *Wasatiyya* spokesmen declared their loyalty to the national interest while renouncing violence as being a deviation from Islam. They articulated the view, based on the Qur’anic verse: “We have made you [believers] into a just community [a middle nation], so that you may bear witness [to the truth] before others” (Sura 2: 143), that human nature tends toward moderation and the quest for righteousness (*al-sirat al-mustaqim*). The *wasatiyya* believed that the spheres of political and socioeconomic activity were secular and should be open to the general public, including women and non-Muslims. Its followers sought to reinvigorate Islamic thought by shifting the focus from the *shari’a* (Islamic law) to the *maqasid al-shari’a* (intentions of Islamic law). In this context, they employed three judicial mechanisms: *ijtihad* (legal reasoning), *talfiq* (“patching,” i.e., the integration of elements taken from various legal opinions in order to address current needs), and *maslaha* (public welfare).¹⁰

Both schools of thought – *turath* and *wasatiyya* – gained a foothold among researchers. However, most scholarly attention was diverted to the resurgence of Islam (*al-sahwa al-Islamiyya*) and its call for the restoration of past glories and the resurrection of seventh-century, pristine Islam, imbued with the ideals of purity, strength, and territorial expansion. Fouad Ajami (1992) sadly observed that,

Now, a younger generation – for whom liberalism had become anathema, another word for Western colonialism – would seek a different inspiration [. . .]. Here and there some liberal voices were heard after 1967, but this was not to be a liberal era. Long before 1967, the liberals had lost power and self-confidence. None of what happened after 1967 improved the prospects for liberal politics. Indeed, the political milieu was to become less hospitable to liberal politics and ideas.¹¹

The decline of liberalism, Ajami lamented, was followed by the rise of fundamentalism:

In the aftermath of defeat, the turning of the masses to religion for solace and consolation [. . .] served as a reminder that God may be dead elsewhere – particularly in existential European literature and in Marxists tracts read by Arab youth – but was alive and well in the Arab world [. . .]. Indeed, fundamentalism made an eloquent and moving case of its own and turned defeat into advantage.¹²

Preoccupation with political Islam or Islamism advanced an increasingly powerful binary paradigm of Muslim-Western dissonance. This development did not escape the attention of political scientist Samuel Huntington when he formulated the theory underlying his influential *Clash of Civilizations* (1996).

Huntington’s “clash of civilizations” theory challenged and replaced Francis Fukuyama’s “the end of history” (1992), which asserted that the worldwide spread of Western liberal democracy and free market capitalism, ignited by the collapse of communism, signaled the endpoint of humanity’s sociocultural evolution and would become the final form of human government.¹³ In contrast, Huntington put forward a more melancholy and

and Christoph Schumann (eds.), *Arab Liberal Thought after 1967: Old Dilemmas, New Perceptions* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015); Meir Hatina, *Arab Liberal Thought in the Modern Age* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2020).

⁹ On Arab *asala/turath* see Kassab, *Contemporary Arab Thought*, chapter 3; Armando Salvatore, “The Rational Authentication of Turath in Contemporary Arab Thought: Muhammad al-Jabiri and Hasan Hanafi,” *The Muslim World* 3/4 (1995): 191–214; Eyadat Zaid, Francesca M. Corrao, and Mohammed Hashas (eds.), *Islam, State, and Modernity: Mohammed Abed al-Jabri and the Future of the Arab World* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018).

¹⁰ On *wasatiyya*, see Raymond W. Baker, *Islam without Fear: Egypt and the New Islamists* (Harvard: Harvard University Press, 2006); Meir Hatina, *Identity Politics in the Middle East* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2007), Chapter 9; Ron Shaham, *Rethinking Islamic Legal Modernism* (Leiden: Brill, 2018); Sagi Polka, *Shaykh Yusuf al-Qaradawi: Spiritual Mentor of Wasati Salafism* (New York: Syracuse University Press, 2019).

¹¹ Ajami, *The Arab Predicament*, 48.

¹² *Ibid.*, 61.

¹³ Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (new ed., New York: Free Press, 1992).

pessimistic paradigm of global politics in the post-Cold War period, one characterized by cultural wars and sectarian conflicts. He argued that Islam in particular has a built-in tendency towards intense antagonism, violent conflict, and “bloody borders” between Muslims and non-Muslim groups, and demonized Islam as a religion of tyranny, intolerance, and violence.¹⁴ Huntington’s Achilles heel lay in his essentialist perception of Islam as a monolithic culture that is inherently enraged, zealous, and hostile toward the West and its modern way of life. He assumed that Muslim antagonism towards Western societies is a continuation of, or a reflexive response to, historical rivalries and wars, such as the Crusades. Huntington explicitly ignored the diverse and multiple faces of the Islamic world, ranging from Indonesia and Malaysia in Southeast Asia to Algeria and Morocco in North Africa, and its array of intellectual traditions. The emergence of global jihad –especially in the wake of the September 11 attacks – seemed to validate Huntington’s thesis. It created a climate of cosmic war, of a permanent state of dissonance and confrontation between Islam and the West, along with its allies in the Muslim-Arab orbit. Global jihad’s moral compass was provided by the doctrine of “loyalty and disavowal” (*al-wala’ wa’l-bara’*) and its dichotomous division between true believers and hypocrites. The doctrine’s aims were twofold: purifying Islam of its alien elements and upholding the exclusive sovereignty of God (*tawhid*, lit. “oneness”). Global jihadists undertook a campaign of moralistic activism, focusing on molding pure and committed believers determined to protect their indigenous identity from the waves of globalization and “McDonaldization.” The battlefield and martyrdom became their frames of reference and sources of authority. Their claim of exclusivity in speaking in the name of Islam left no room for discourse, dialogue, or debate.¹⁵

The militant face of Islam, together with the “clash of civilizations” narrative, was reinforced by the rise of ISIS at the threshold of the twenty-first century and its chain of victories in Iraq and Syria. Following the proclamation of an Islamic caliphate in June 2014, ISIS claimed sole authority over the Muslim milieu and positioned itself as an international actor defying the world order. The question, posed by early Islamists in mid-twentieth century, as to whether there would be a revival of the religion of Muhammad had been replaced by the question, posed by global jihadists, as to whether anyone would be able to stand up to the religion of Muhammad. The theme of *kasr al-hudud*, namely the dismantling of geographical and political boundaries, was ISIS’s driving force.¹⁶ This self-confidence and militant mood were reflected in ISIS’s English-language online magazine *Dabiq*, which opened one of its issues with the article “Break the Cross” and closed it with “By the Sword.” The cross had become a code phrase for the “new Crusade” – humanity’s deviation from the path of God through social phenomena such as democracy, liberalism, feminism, and atheism. Unorthodoxy served as a trigger for the purifying force of violence.¹⁷ “We hate you,” ISIS spokesmen declared,

first and foremost, because you are disbelievers; you reject the oneness of Allah [. . .]; you blaspheme against Him, claiming that He has a son; you fabricate lies against His prophets and messengers, and you indulge in all manner of devilish practices [. . .]. We fight you in order to bring you out from the darkness of disbelief and into the light of Islam, and to liberate you from the constraints of living for the sake of the worldly life alone so that you may enjoy both the blessings of the worldly life and the bliss of the Hereafter.¹⁸

Fundamentalism and Salafism

Yet even scholars and observers who were not convinced by such paradigms as “Orientalism” and the “clash of civilizations” continued to focus on the confrontational and political aspects of modern religious revival in all its forms, from neo-Evangelism to messianic Zionism, Israeli ultra-orthodoxy, Shi’i awakening, and Sunni radicalism. In our context, when delving into Islamic militancy, most scholars have downplayed Islam’s historical legacies, dynamism, and multiplicity, as well as the fact that various regions and local traditions have reacted differently, and in different degrees, to modernity. They have also overlooked other empirical factors that have historically triggered radicalization: intergenerational power struggles, economic and social strife, political suppression,

¹⁴ Samuel Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996), mainly 254–265.

¹⁵ Benjamin Barber, *Jihad vs. MacWorld* (new ed., London: Corgi Books, 2003); Raymond Ibrahim, *The al-Qaeda Reader* (New York: Broadway Books, 2007); Meir Hatina, *Martyrdom in Modern Islam: Piety, Power and Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), mainly chapters 5, 6; Joas Wagmakers, “The Transformation of a Radical Concept: *al-wala’ wa’l-bara’* in the Ideology of Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi,” in Roel Meijer (ed.), *Global Salafism: Islam’s New Religious Movement* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009), 81–106.

¹⁶ *Kasr al-hudud* was the title of a video that ISIS distributed in 2014, covering the organization’s advance from Iraq into Syria; it announced the abolishment of the Sykes-Picot Agreement, which was signed between Britain and France during World War I and divided the Middle East into colonial spheres of influence.

¹⁷ *Dabiq*, 1437 Shawwal, no. 15. In: <http://clarionproject.org/wp-content/uploads/islamic-state-magazine-dabiq-fifteen-breaking-the-cross.pdf>

¹⁸ “Why We Hate You and Why We Fight You,” *ibid.*, 30–33.

injustice, displacement, and exile. These omissions gave rise to another conceptual framework in Islamic and Middle Eastern studies, namely fundamentalism. Fundamentalism dealt with religious movements through a comparative prism and developed such labels as “Puritanism,” “scripturalism,” and “strong religions.” Fundamentalism in world religions was presented by the University of Chicago’s five-volume *Fundamentalism Project* (1991–1995) as a product of the pressures of modernity and reactions to these pressures: thus, secularization led to religious revivalism;¹⁹ the consolidation of feminist ideologies caused a backlash favoring modesty and family-based ideologies; and technology and free access to knowledge led to religious confinement and censorship.

“Fundamentalism” enabled the construction of a cross-cultural vocabulary, conducive to the formulation of comparative patterns of religious movements that highlighted similarities and differences in their thoughts, social structures, modes of action, and attitudes to the modern state. Especially useful is the concept of “enclave culture,” coined by Emmanuel Sivan. This concept encompasses the modes of action and maintenance strategies, ranging from seclusion to integration that a group might use in defending itself against a secular and hegemonic society and the degree to which those strategies impact ideological perceptions.²⁰ Despite its theoretical significance and comparative insights, fundamentalism is not without flaws. Historically, the term is associated with Protestant Christianity in early twentieth-century North America, which raises methodological and historical questions when it is applied to other religions and cultures. More importantly, fundamentalism is defined as “religious militance by which self-styled ‘true believers’ attempt to arrest the erosion of religious identity, fortify the borders of the religious community, and create viable alternatives to secular institutions and behaviors.”²¹ Such an all-embracing definition ignores what humanists and social scientists alike have termed the ambivalence of religion, namely that religious faith may not only ignite defiance, and extremism among some believers, but may also encourage reconciliation and co-existence among others.²²

In the case of Islam, ecumenism was embodied by a modernist-liberal discourse advocated mainly by men of letters: professors, writers, and essayists. Their compass was utilitarian and activist, guided by the principle of *maslaha*, namely the intensification of believers’ wellbeing in this world while simultaneously showing openness to the surrounding environment. Modernists, and liberals even more so, adopted a critical, and at times censorious, attitude towards Islamic texts, norms, and institutions, calling for the depoliticization of religion and the expansion of universal ideals of individual liberty, pluralism, citizenship, and human compassion, regardless of religion, race, and gender.²³ They drew inspiration from European and Western sources, as well as from indigenous Arab-Islamic sources that highlighted classical Islamic rationalist philosophies, and from the ninth-century Mu‘atizilites, who assigned reason an elevated role, equal to that of revelation, in man’s attempt to understand the world. Another, later, source of influence was mid-nineteenth-century Islamic reformism, championed by open-minded ‘ulama’ centered mainly in Baghdad, Cairo, and Damascus; included among these were Khayr al-Din al-‘Alusi, Muhammad ‘Abduh, Husayn al-Marsafi ‘Abd al-Qadir al-Jaza’iri, Tahir al-Jazahiri, ‘Abd al-Razzaq al-Bitar, Salim al-Qasimi, ‘Abd al-Rahman al-Kawakibi, Rashid Rida, and ‘Abd al-Hamid al-Zahrawi. The primary goal of these Muslim reformists was to assert Islam’s viability in the modern world through its alignment with reason, science, and enlightenment. Highlighting the rational and utilitarian aspects of human life was reflected in al-Kawakibi’s broad interpretation of the jihad motif. He argued that the Qur’anic term jihad in the cause of God

¹⁹ Martin E. Marty and R. Scott Appleby (eds.), *The Fundamentalism Project* (University of Chicago Press, 1991-1995). Another work that came out of the Fundamentalism Project is Almond, Gabriel A., R. Scott Appleby and Emmanuel Sivan, *Strong Religion: The Rise of Fundamentalisms Around the World* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2003). See also Bruce Lawrence, *Defenders of God: The Fundamentalist Revolt against the Modern Age* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1989); Richard T. Antoun, *Understanding Fundamentalism: Christian, Islamic, and Jewish Movements* (Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press, 2001); Michael Cook, *Ancient Religions, Modern Politics: The Islamic Case in Comparative Perspective* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2014).

²⁰ Emmanuel Sivan, “The Enclave Culture,” in Martin E. Marty, and R. Scott Appleby (eds.), *Fundamentalisms Comprehended* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1995), 11–63.

²¹ Almond, Appleby, and Sivan, *Strong Religion*, mainly 1–22, 90–115. The quote is on p. 17.

²² Israela Silberman et al, “Religion and World Change: Violence and Terrorism versus Peace,” *Journal of Social Issues* 61/4 (2005): 761-784. The methodological problems associated with the notion of fundamentalism are acknowledged by its adherent scholars, but they argue that the term can better highlight common and distinctive features between religious movements. Ibid., 14–17. A recent study by Nimrod Hurvitz and Eli Alshech (2020) pointed to the intense debate over fundamentalism but compared Muslim movements only to each other rather than to Christian and Jewish fundamentalism. Such a study, focused on fundamentalism within Islam, could produce a more balanced representation of the Islamic milieu by illuminating the inner dynamics and disputes between moderates and militants. Still, the study pays allegiance to fundamentalism’s rational and conceptual framework, and even more, excludes from the discussion non-fundamentalist currents in contemporary Islam, which take different paths in navigating the challenges of modernity. N. Hurvitz and E. Alshech, *Making Sense of Muslim Fundamentalisms: The Clash within Islam* (London and New York: Routledge, 2020), mainly 1–19.

²³ See, for example, Mehran Kamrava (ed.), *The New Voices of Islam: Reforming Politics and Modernity* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2006); Hatina, *Arab Liberal Thought*; idem, “Dismantling the Sacred in the Name of Humanity: Mahmud Muhammad Taha’s Cultural Revolution,” *Journal of Political Ideologies* (forthcoming).

(*al-jihad fi sabil Allah*) represents “every effort that benefits religion and this world. Even [seeking a] livelihood can be called jihad.”²⁴ Al-Kawakibi and his colleagues sought to solve the inherent dilemma of how to be an Arab Muslim and part of the modern world at the same time, a dilemma that continued to occupy their contemporary followers.²⁵

The fundamentalist notion of strong religious purity and adherence to scriptures facilitated the development of another related movement, namely Salafism (a term which derives from *al-salaf al-salih* – the pious ancestors of Islam – whose example all believers must emulate). Scholars created a typology of Salafi factions, from quietists who are engaged in preaching and proselytizing, to political activists who challenge local regimes, to jihadists who promote violence against the new Crusaders, i.e., the West and its allies in the Arab-Muslim world. Still, the study of Salafism, like the study of Islamic fundamentalism in general, suffers from a too-neat classification of trends, thus ignoring the fuzziness of ideological conceptual borders. Moreover, Salafi studies, which emerged in the late 1990s around the same time as the rise of global jihad, aimed to analyze the features and sources of inspiration associated mainly with the Wahhabi creed of Saudi Arabia. It thus focused attention on assertive and militant Salafis while overlooking modernist-progressive voices within the Salafi camp and within the Islamic arena in general, voices which posited alternative, more inclusive, narratives for Islam’s engagement with modernity and its challenges.

Scholars invested considerable – at times excessive – efforts in tracing the genealogy of a Salafi religious militancy that adhered to a literalist interpretation of the scriptures. This genealogy reached back to Ahmad b. Hanbal, who founded the Hanbali legal school in the ninth century; to the renowned medieval jurist Ibn Taymiyya; to Muhammad b. ‘Abd al-Wahhab, who founded the Wahhabiyya movement in Najd in the late eighteenth century; and to mid-twentieth-century Egyptian revolutionist Sayyid Qutb.²⁶

Communal Realities

Neither Said’s “Orientalism” nor Huntington’s “clash of civilizations” nor Chicago’s “fundamentalism” project and Salafi studies reflect the complex nature of interfaith encounters, which have displayed elements of both unity and dispute. Viewed from an historical perspective, civilizations have never been fixed polities, but rather are heterogeneous and diverse in geographical, cultural, and political-economic terms, with a variety of intellectual traditions and changing boundaries and orientations. Moreover, they are exposed to inner tensions, which at times overshadow external conflicts with other cultures. This is true with regard to Europe’s religious wars as well as to clashes within Islamic societies. In this respect, the global jihad waged by al-Qa’ida and ISIS represented only a small radical wing of a multifaceted Islamic spectrum, occupied also by state official ‘ulama’, Sufi shaykhs, modernists-liberals, or communal Islamists involved in proselytization (*daw’a*).

On the Jewish-Christian axis, recent years have witnessed an abundance of research reflecting a revived Christian interest in Jewish tradition, for example in Kabbalah. Important contributions have been made by scholars like Stephen Burnett, Giulio Busi, and Israel Yuval.²⁷ This revisionist scholarship has changed the long-standing stereotype of a never-ending monolithic divide between Judaism and Christianity that was fueled by sustained polemic traditions, modern anti-Semitism, and the Holocaust. This scholarship highlighted the multifaceted nature of the study of Jewish esoteric lore among Christians and, simultaneously, presented the Jews as agents of cultural transmission functioning within the framework of a wider society. Similarly, research on religious conversion shifted from the notion of apostasy as a total break with the convert’s former community toward a perspective emphasizing continuity and “mingled identities” of Jews accepting Christianity and – albeit less frequently – Christians turning to Judaism.

²⁴ Al-Kawakibi, *Umm al-Qura* (Cairo: al-Maktaba al-Tijariyya al-Kubra, 1931), 214.

²⁵ Hatina, *Arab Liberal Thought*, mainly chapter 2. The reformist circles in late nineteenth-century Syria are also referred to as modernist or progressive Salafis. See, for example, David D. Commins, *Islamic Reform: Politics and Social Change in Late Ottoman Syria* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990); Itzhak Weismann, *A Taste of Modernity: Sufism, Salafiyya and Arabism in Late Ottoman Damascus* (Leiden: Brill, 2001).

²⁶ Roel Meijer (ed.), *Global Salafism: Islam’s New Religious Movement* (London: Columbia University Press, 2009); Henri Lauzière, “The Construction of Salafiyya: Reconsidering Salafism from the Perspective of Conceptual History,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 42 (2010): 369–389; Joas Wagemakers, *A Quietist Jihadi: The Ideology and Influence of Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 1–26; Daniel Lav, *Radical Islam and the Revival of Medieval Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012); Itzhak Weismann, “A Perverted Balance: Modern Salafism between Reform and Jihad,” *Die Welt des Islams* 57 (2017): 33–66.

²⁷ Stephen Burnett, *Christian Hebraism in the Reformation Era, 1500–1660* (Leiden: Brill, 2012); Saverio Campanini and Giulio Busi, *Four Short Kabbalistic Treatises* (CITY: FPBP, 2019); Giulio Busi (ed.), *Hebrew to Latin—Latin to Hebrew: The Mirroring of Two Cultures in the Age of Humanism* (Berlin: Institut für Judaistik, 2006); Israel Yuval, *Two Nations in Your Womb: Perceptions of Jews and Christians in Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006); David Ruderman, *Early Modern Jewry: A New Cultural History* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010).

The recognition of a more diffuse reality of common beliefs and shared histories, rather than alienation, applies even more to a multiethnic and culturally diverse Muslim orbit. In medieval times, Jewish and Christian communities, though treated by Islamic law as protected subordinates whose social interactions were restricted, were influenced by Muslim values, norms, and practices, and vice versa, revealing deep processes of acculturation. In the domain of the Mamluk and Ottoman sultans, Jews and Christians were employed as state officials, sometimes in powerful positions, and moved freely between imperial cities (Cairo, Damascus, Jerusalem, Istanbul, Thessaloniki) and throughout the outside world, serving at times as cultural brokers. Thus, the perception of the “other” became less antagonistic and dichotomous.²⁸

At the same time, the nineteenth century witnessed negative socio-political repercussions on communal relations in the Ottoman Empire. Conflicts erupted between Muslims and Christians in the urban centers of Syria and Lebanon in 1850 and 1860 in response to Western influences and modernizing reforms (Tanzimat), which also involved the emancipation of non-Muslim minorities.²⁹ Still, voices expressing mutual understanding and attempts at rapprochement were also heard. This was evident in the *Nahda* (cultural renaissance) enterprise, in which both Muslim and Christians participated and which included the opening of modern schools, the establishment of print and publishing industries, and the translation of foreign works. The Nahdawis sought to invigorate Arab heritage and align it with scientific analysis, progress, and humanism. Their intellectual endeavor was marked by such key concepts as civilization (*taddamun*), progress (*taqqadum*), enlightenment (*tanwir*), freedom (*huriyya*), and tolerance (*tasamuh*). Their two key mottoes were “the wheel of the world spins on the tip of the pen” (*dawalib al-'alam yadur 'ala ra's al-qalam*), and “religion belongs to God and the homeland to the people (*al-din li'l-lah wa'l-watan li'l-jami'*). The first motto elevated knowledge and science and renounced violence, sectarian conflicts, and cultural wars; the second advocated a civic polity based on freedom, tolerance, and equality.³⁰ Ottoman Jews, too, absorbed these themes and often sided with the empire against European encroachment. Jews who were integrated into the economic and educational systems and introduced to colonial influences served as intermediaries between local societies and foreign powers.³¹ Cultural rapprochement was also set in motion on the Jewish-Arab axis in Palestine on the eve of World War I, when intellectual encounters and sincere efforts to learn about each other's history, religion, and culture were recorded. These encounters, however, did not gain momentum; on the contrary, they paved the way for the escalation of hostilities between Jews and Arabs in Palestine. This was mainly due to the disintegration of the Ottoman Empire and the establishment of British Mandate rule.³² The emergence of territorial-national states in the early twentieth century and the process of state formation created new frameworks of belonging with which Christians and Jews (in, for example, Egypt and Iraq) identified and to which they paid allegiance.³³

Approaching prevailing conceptual frameworks in Islamic and Middle Eastern studies as relative ones that should be examined cautiously will allow scholars to highlight cross-cultural features and introduce a more constructive and balanced analysis of modern Islamic resurgence, thus refashioning the landscape with regard to

²⁸ See, for example, Mark R. Cohen, *Under Crescent and Cross: The Jews in the Middle East* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994); Luke B. Yarbrough, *Friends of the Emir: Non-Muslim State Officials in Premodern Islamic Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), mainly 3–27; Bruce Masters, *Christians and Jews in the Ottoman Arab World: The Roots of Sectarianism* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001); Yaron Ben-Naeh, *Jews in the Realm of the Sultans: Ottoman Jewish Society in the Seventeenth Century* (Tübingen, Mohr Siebeck, 2008); Heather J. Sharkey, *A History of Muslims, Christians, and Jews in the Middle East* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017).

²⁹ See also Meir Hatina, “Fatwas as a Prism of Social History in the Middle East: The Status of Non-Muslims in the Nineteenth Century,” in Martin Tamcke (ed.), *Koexistenz und Konfrontation: Beiträge zur jüngeren Geschichte und Gegenwartslage der orientalischen Christen* (Hamburg: LIT, 2003), 51–74; Bruce Masters, *The Arabs of the Ottoman Empire, 1516-1918* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 157–191.

³⁰ These mottoes were coined by the Syrian Christian Butrus al-Bustani (d. 1883) and the Egyptian Muslim Muhammad ‘Abduh (d. 1905), respectively. For selected literature on the *Nahda*, see Albert Hourani, *Arabic Thought in the Liberal Age 1798–1939* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1962); Abdulrazzak Patel, *The Arab Nahdah, The Making of the Intellectual and Humanist Movement* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2013); Jens Hanssen and Max Weiss (eds.), *Arabic Thought Beyond the Liberal Age; Towards an Intellectual History of the Nahda* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016); Tarek El-Ariss (ed.), *The Arab Renaissance: A Bilingual Anthology of the Nahda* (New York: Modern Language Association, 2018); Butrus al-Bustani, *The Clarion of Syria: A Patriot's Call against the Civil War of 1860*, trans. by Jens Hanssen et al (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2019).

³¹ Orit Bashkin, “‘Religious Hatred Shall Disappear from the Land’: Iraqi Jews as Ottoman Subjects, 1864-1913,” *International Journal for Contemporary Iraqi Studies* 4 (2010): 305–323; Lital Levy, “Historicizing the Concept of Arab Jews in the Mashriq,” *Jewish Quarterly Review* 98 (2008): 452–469.

³² Abigail Jacobson, *From Empire to Empire: Jerusalem between Ottoman and British Rule* (New York: Syracuse University Press, 2011); Abigail Jacobson and Moshe Naor, *Oriental Neighbors: Middle Eastern Jews and Arabs in Mandatory Palestine* (Waltham, MA: Brandeis University Press, 2016); Jonathan Gribetz, *Defining Neighbors: Religion, Race, and the Early Zionist-Arab Encounter* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2014).

³³ Aline Schlaepfer, “Between Cultural and National Nahda: Jewish Intellectuals in Baghdad and the Nation-Building Process in Iraq (1921–1932),” *Journal of Levantine Studies* 2 (2011): 59–74; Orit Bashkin, *New Babylonians: A History of Jews in Modern Iraq* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2012).

perceptions of the “self” and the “other” in Islam. Such a balanced approach will also eschew a binary picture of cultural wars and stereotypes that are largely stigmatizing and simplistic in favor of a more complex and diffuse reality of intertwined worlds: on the one hand, religions striving for the sole possession of revelation and holy places; and on the other, mutual recognition of a shared background of myths, founding figures, injunctions, values, cosmology, social behavior, and interactions across time and space. Interfaith and intercultural dialogue (*hiwar*) and which aimed at promoting communal peace, was also at work in modern Islamic thought and practice, mainly as a counter-response and alternative to the path of alienation and violent encounters.³⁴

Moving away from sweeping analytical concepts to examine more concrete communal realities, using sociological and cultural understanding as well as fieldwork, is more productive and insightful. Thus, many now speak of Muslim religiosity and its manifestations in the public sphere, like the adoption of a more religious lifestyle, the performance of religious rituals such as mosque attendance, or the incorporation of religious values into educational institutions and media programs. I would argue, however, that in the context of Islam in Israel, for instance, an increase in the number of mosques and welfare associations is clearly not a sufficient indication of the strength of the Islamic Movement (established in Israel in 1971) or the degree of Islamization of the Arab public space. Public polls conducted in recent years among Muslims in Israel show that only 20% of the respondents thought that religion should play an active role in the public sphere; the rest saw it as a moral and cultural code and adopted a pluralistic approach to religion. The Islamic Movement in Israel is thus confronting ongoing resistance by rival factions, such as the Communist Party (*Rakah*), or secular groups that have expressed their aversion to the Islamic agenda. The Islamic Movement should not be viewed as merely a form of religious fundamentalism seeking to return to pristine Islamic imperatives. Rather, it is a discursive movement, absorbing certain values, accepting certain institutions from the hegemonic Israeli environment, and paying careful attention to the needs and expectations of the Arab public.³⁵ Moreover, field studies conducted in mixed localities, such as Haifa, Nazareth, and Kafr Qana, in which Muslims and Christians coexist, have found cordial interethnic relations based on interpersonal and family acquaintances, joint activities in local institutions, and common interests related to these communities’ minority status vis-à-vis state authorities.³⁶

If we turn our gaze outward towards the Middle Eastern landscape as a whole, we will discover a similar picture of Islamization as a relative process. One example would be the wearing of a veil or head covering (*hijab*), which provides a social as well as a religious vehicle for allowing women to move freely in the public sphere. Notably, Islamic institutions of education and welfare in which women are active have served as platforms for self-empowerment and levers for social change and the promotion of women’s rights.³⁷ Since the beginning of the 21st century, opinion polls and interviews conducted in various Arab countries have showed that a significant percentage of respondents, mainly young people, favor the safeguarding of personal freedoms and the establishment of democratic regimes. Some of them have been indifferent to, and skeptical of, religion and have even held atheistic views.³⁸ Similar tendencies were also observed among some 50,000 adult respondents to a 2020 opinion poll conducted in the Islamic Republic of Iran: 60% of respondents reported that they did not pray, and 32% stated that they grew up in believing, but non-religious, families. Two other interesting pieces of data: 72% of respondents opposed the mandatory wearing of the women’s veil in public spaces and 35% of respondents stated that they consume alcoholic drinks occasionally or on a regular basis.³⁹ These indicators, together with different views and approaches regarding the place of Islam in the polity, are clear signs of religious diversity.

³⁴ Itzhak Weismann, “Between *da’wa* and Dialogue: Religious Engagement in Muslim-minority Environments,” *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations* 30/4 (2019): 505–522.

³⁵ This observation mainly applies to the southern branch of the Islamic Movement (based in Kafr Qasim), which favors integration, including participation in parliamentary politics, as part of the struggle to improve the standard of living among Muslim citizens of Israel. Following the Israeli elections of March 2021, the southern branch, represented by the United Arab List, even joined the government coalition, with the declared aim of obtaining concrete civic advances for the Arab population. The more radical northern branch, in contrast, advocates the convergence of autonomous, cultural, and communal space (*al-mujtama’ al-isami*). This branch was outlawed in 2015 because of its alleged close ties with Hamas. Meir Hatina and Muhammad al-Atawneh, “The Study of Islam and Muslims in Israel,” *Israeli Studies* 24/3 (Fall 2019): 101–125.

³⁶ *Ibid*; Chad F. Emmett, *Beyond the Basilica: Christians and Muslims in Nazareth* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), mainly chapter 6.

³⁷ Deniz Kandiyoti, “Contemporary Women Feminist Scholarship and Middle East Studies,” in idem (ed.), *Gendering the Middle East: Emerging Perspectives* (London: I.B. Tauris, 1996); Lila Abu-lughod (ed.), *Remaking Women: Feminism and Modernity in the Middle East* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1998).

³⁸ See, for example, Brian Whitaker, *Arabs without God: Atheism and Freedom of Belief in the Middle East* (California: Createspace, 2014).

³⁹ Iranian Attitudes toward Religion: A 2020 Survey Report, in: gamann.org.

The Arab Revolutions of 2011

Perhaps it is, after all, not surprising that the Arab revolutions of 2011, dubbed the “Arab Spring,” did not erupt on religious grounds or with demands for implementation of the *shari‘a*, but rather emerged against the backdrop of national and secular issues, such as individual and civil rights, social justice, and democratization – with the huge demonstrations held in Cairo’s al-Tahrir (Freedom) Square serving as a prominent example. It is quite plausible that the failure of the Muslim Brethren to promote these “secular” issues brought about their downfall in 2013, only a year after they were elected. The Brethren believed that the Egyptian masses who voted for them were devout Muslims who would continue to support the movement and express their faith in it as an authentic representative of Islam. They were wrong.⁴⁰ The lessons from the failed Egyptian experience were grasped in full by the Nahda movement in Tunisia, which embraced a more civic outlook and, in 2016, even called for the separation of church and state, thus seeking to position itself at the heart of the public consensus.⁴¹

The 2011 uprisings overturned entrenched research paradigms about the endurance of authoritarian regimes in the Middle East and the inherent submissiveness of its people, as if they were still *ri‘aya* (literally, the flock), divested of any public and political say. The Arab public space changed both its face and its historic role: It was no longer merely the background against which rulers projected their authority through public speeches, processions, or official festivals, while the masses played a submissive role, cheering and granting them legitimacy. Gone were the days when public grievances were confined to cultural salons and media forums. The demonstrators, led by educated and embittered youths, assembled in city squares, turning them into arenas of open defiance against the regime, and clamored for change. They stormed the symbols of Arab state sovereignty and clashed with its military forces, creating new modes of collective action or “a new Arab street,” to quote anthropologist Asef Bayat.⁴²

The dramatic events of 2011 testified to the political maturity of the masses, especially the young people, who demanded genuine partnership in shaping their own future. They emerged as citizens (*muwatinun*), as individuals with rights and claims against state authorities. These events also revealed the potential for an active civil society in the Arab world, a potential that had previously slipped under the scholarly radar. The Arab Spring attested to the existence of a Middle East that was an integral part of the global village in terms of its exposure to modern technology, communication networks, and Western ideas.

Though the post-2011 scholarship seemingly recast its frame of analysis, in reality this was not the case. Two years after the Arab revolutions, in the shadow of civil wars in Syria, Libya, and Yemen, and against the backdrop of ISIS’s rise as a non-state actor, another analytical concept emerged – the failed state. The failed state model refers to the erosion of the state’s authority and the disintegration of its effectiveness and legitimacy, a process which was accelerated by the renewed vitality of ethnic, religious, tribal, and geographical identities. In this model, ethnic-religious sectarianism became a central component of the Middle Eastern landscape, providing a platform for instability and bloody confrontations.⁴³ Yet this conclusion seems too sweeping, and completely ignores 100 years of state-building in the Arab world, a century that witnessed the consolidation of geographical borders and the construction of national identities, albeit feeble ones. The nationalist narrative, having at its disposal effective outlets such as state educational and media resources, became a driving force in the reshaping of the post-Ottoman polity after the end of World War I. It claimed possession of the community’s historical memory, cultivating a sense of joint origin (a myth of descent) and shared destiny based on ethnolinguistic affinities and historical experiences.

⁴⁰ Hazem Kandil, *Inside the Brotherhood* (Cambridge, MA: Polity, 2015), 137–145.

⁴¹ Ibid; also Eric Trager, *Arab Fall: How the Muslim Brotherhood Won and Lost Egypt in 891 Days* (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2016), mainly chapters 9, 10; Anne Wolf, *Political Islam in Tunisia: The History of Enahda* (London: Hurst, 2017), 156–187.

⁴² Asef Bayat, *Life as Politics: How Ordinary People Change the Middle East* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009). For selected literature on the Arab Spring, see Jean-Pierre Filiu, *The Arab Revolution: Ten Lessons from the Democratic Uprising* (London: Hurst, 2011); Gilbert Achcar, *The People Want: A Radical Exploration of the Arab Uprising* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013); Adeed Dawisha, *The Second Arab Awakening: Revolution, Democracy, and the Islamist Challenge from Tunis to Damascus* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2013); Dan Tschirgi, Walid Kazziha, and Sean F. McMahon (eds.), *Egypt’s Tahrir Revolution* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 2013); George Joffé (ed.), *North Africa’s Arab Spring* (New York: Routledge, 2013); Fawaz A. Gerges (ed.), *The New Middle East: Protest and Revolution in the Arab World* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014); Lina Khatib and Ellen Lust (eds.), *Taking to the Streets: The Transformation of Arab Activism* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2014); Kjetil Fosshagen (ed.), *Arab Spring: Uprising, Powers, Interventions* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2014).

⁴³ Kobi Michael and Yoel Guzansky, “The Nation State vs. the Failed State and the Arab Upheaval in the Middle East,” in Vladimir Sazonov et al (eds.), *Cultural Crossroads in the Middle East* (Tartu: University of Tartu Press, 2019), 220–235.

Concluding Note

This critical review of prevailing notions in Islamic and Middle Eastern studies does not aim to draw firm conclusions, but only to raise points for thought and discussion. The “food for thought” presented here highlights the importance of having a historical and sociological perspective, as well as familiarity with comparative religion. Scholars in our field of study need to keep in mind that it is essential to trace the evolution of religious discourse, map its historical contexts, and draw the sociological profile of its main protagonists and of the extent to which their writings match past traditions or, alternatively, deviate from them in order to advance a dissident agenda. Historical monitoring will keep us from falling into essentialist concepts of Islam, such as “the religion of the sword” or “the army of shrouds” (a reference to suicide bombers).⁴⁴ Surely, one should not ignore formative ethos, heroic epics, and judicial rulings that are anchored in a society’s classical texts but must closely examine the modifications outlined in them and the new interpretations that have permeated them. At the end of the day, social agents and movements play a crucial role in the remolding of the “truth” of scriptures, in accordance with the circumstances and aspirations of their time.

⁴⁴ Hatina, *Martyrdom in Modern Islam*, mainly chapter 8.