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ARABISM AND ISLAM:  
STATELESS NATIONS AND  
NATIONLESS STATES

By CHRISTINE M. HELMS



THE INSTITUTE FOR NATIONAL STRATEGIC STUDIES

*A popular Government, without popular information, or the means of acquiring it, is but a Prologue to a Farce or a Tragedy; or, perhaps both. Knowledge will forever govern ignorance; And a people who mean to be their own Governors, must arm themselves with the power which knowledge gives.*

James Madison to W.T. Barry  
August 4, 1822

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# ARABISM AND ISLAM: STATELESS NATIONS AND NATIONLESS STATES

By CHRISTINE M. HELMS



**DURING THE 1980s, ISLAMIC ACTIVISTS IN THE Arab Middle East have challenged the definition of “legitimate authority” and provided the means and rationale for revolutionary change, hoping to pressure established governments to alter domestic and foreign policies. No nation-state has been immune. Fearful Arab nationalist leaders, unwilling or unable to abandon decades of ideological baggage, have begun a gradual, if erratic, process of melding the spirit and letter of Islamic precepts into existing national laws and political rhetoric.**

The rivalry between Arabism and Islam was given momentum by the Islamic revolution in Iran in 1979, assassination by Islamic conservatives in 1981 of Egyptian president Anwar al-Sadat, and reconfiguration of Lebanon’s confessional state during the 1980s. Arabism and Islam became actual combatants during the Iran-Iraq war of the 1980s when Middle Easterners—acutely aware that the governments of these respective countries were political paradigms for Islam and Arabism—warily envisioned a final, catastrophic battle in which an undisputed victor would emerge. Instead, an inconclusive ceasefire in 1988 and the death of Ayatollah Khomeini in 1989 left the fundamental dilemma unresolved. Arabism remains the seated authority, but previous assertions about its advocates’ right-of-succession are moot and ideological substance is beleaguered.

Meanwhile, Western governments, perplexed by the violence and accusations of their own role in the unfolding drama, have struggled to understand these events and create appropriate policy. Never before have superpower statecraft

and warships been so impotent against an implacable, elusive adversary with such devoted adherents. Explosive devices, delivered as “human car bombs,” destroyed the United States embassy in Beirut, Lebanon in April 1983, killing 49 and wounding 120. In October of that year, the American and French military headquarters there were similarly destroyed with a loss of 241 Americans and 56 Frenchmen. An unseen, guiding hand seemed to be motivating and orchestrating terrorist incidents internationally.

Knowledge—quite literally wisdom about the Middle East sought by objective observers—is meanwhile viewed by Islamic activists as at least as, if not more threatening than Western force. Its acquisition, however well intended, is paradoxically perceived to bestow power in its most intrusive, pernicious, and manipulative sense. This assertion is evident in the selection of foreigners assassinated and kidnapped in the Middle East since the Islamic revolution in Iran in 1979. In an unusual departure for terrorist groups, the majority of victims targeted as single individuals are civilians who have been the most sympathetic to traumas suffered by the Arab and Islamic worlds. Thus was Malcolm Kerr, president of the American University in Beirut, whose family had long been committed to the Arab Middle East, assassinated in 1984. Two years later, a revolutionary group calling itself Islamic Jihad released a photograph of the corpse of French hostage Michel Seurat, a respected scholar of the Arab-Muslim world. Terry Anderson, a journalist renowned for his deep attachment to the region, was taken hostage in 1985 and has been held longest in captivity. Many other victims—some married to Middle Easterners and others involved in humanitarian and educational work—remain hostage and have died in captivity as this is being written in early 1990.

This paper does not presume to offer policy solutions, but to provide the first step in their formulation—a context in which the political landscape of the Arab-Islamic world can be understood. That Islam has been “reinvented” by political activists as a vehicle of rejection, sometimes violent, is not surprising. This phenomenon has occurred frequently over the centuries. More perplexing, why and how have Islam and

Arabism become so profoundly entrenched in the broad spectrum of modern political expression? Often interdependent, why do they occasionally function as mutually antagonistic, distinct political paradigms? Why has no other claimant in the ideological marketplace—including democracy, Marxism, socialism, and, in particular, state nationalism—been capable of sustaining itself as a viable competitor without the garb of either Arabism, or Islam, or both? Why have Islamic activists been able to attract a wider and more committed audience, including adherents to Arab nationalist movements who had been avowedly secular and had formerly opposed them? What role does foreign influence play? How do factors unique to this century contribute? How do these underlying tensions affect intra-Arab relationships; and relations with non-Arab Muslims, such as Turks and Iranian Shi'a, and non-Muslim Western states, among which is included Israel? Finally, will the "state" be able to assert its territorial integrity and the "legitimacy" of its representative authority?

### **Declaration of Crisis**

During an interview in 1961, the Shah of Iran observed that "Twice in my reign I have seen Iranians rise up when all seemed lost . . . once during the Azerbaijan crisis [in 1946] and again in 1953 with the Mossadegh affair . . . it was like telepathy—a kind of human antenna. The whole nation acted as one to save its past and its future."<sup>1</sup> Eighteen years later the secular, dynastic power of the King of Kings was swept away by the Islamic revolution. The reverberations would be felt shortly in the Arab world and in just the same manner as the Shah had earlier observed. The seal between the past and future remained unbroken.

The Shah realized that the historical memory of a nation is not merely a repository. Our vision of the past channels our vision of the future by constraining options, but also it plays a proactive role. This memory "is actually a very important factor in struggle. . . . If one controls people's memory, one controls their dynamism. . . . It is vital to have possession of

this memory, to control it, to administer it, tell it what it must contain.”<sup>2</sup> Collective memory is the toolshed, tomorrow’s ideological arsenal, from which political concepts and symbols are selected, reinterpreted, and manipulated both by established governments and opposition groups. It may wait for decades, patiently dormant, only to be reactivated suddenly as an explosive, contagious force.

Nowhere is this more evident than in the Middle East where two distinctive memories, one sacred—Islam—and the other profane—Arabism, have coexisted and functioned as preeminent political paradigms for more than 1300 years. Muslims now comprise more than 95 percent of the populations of the 22 Arab League members.<sup>3</sup> With the notable exception of Lebanon, all the League members declare Islam as the state religion or make special provision for it in their constitutions. Conversely, the notion “Arab” holds special esteem among Muslims, whatever their ethnic origins, for three reasons. First, the birthplace of Islam and therefore its holiest sites are in the Arab world, specifically the Arabian peninsula, where it is incumbent on all Muslims to make one pilgrimage. Second, Arabic is the language in which God chose to reveal and transmit Islam’s sacred message through generations. Third, because Arabs were the first to receive this message and were entrusted to carry it to populations outside the peninsula who were coincidentally non-Arab, they acquired special, albeit controversial status within the Islamic community.

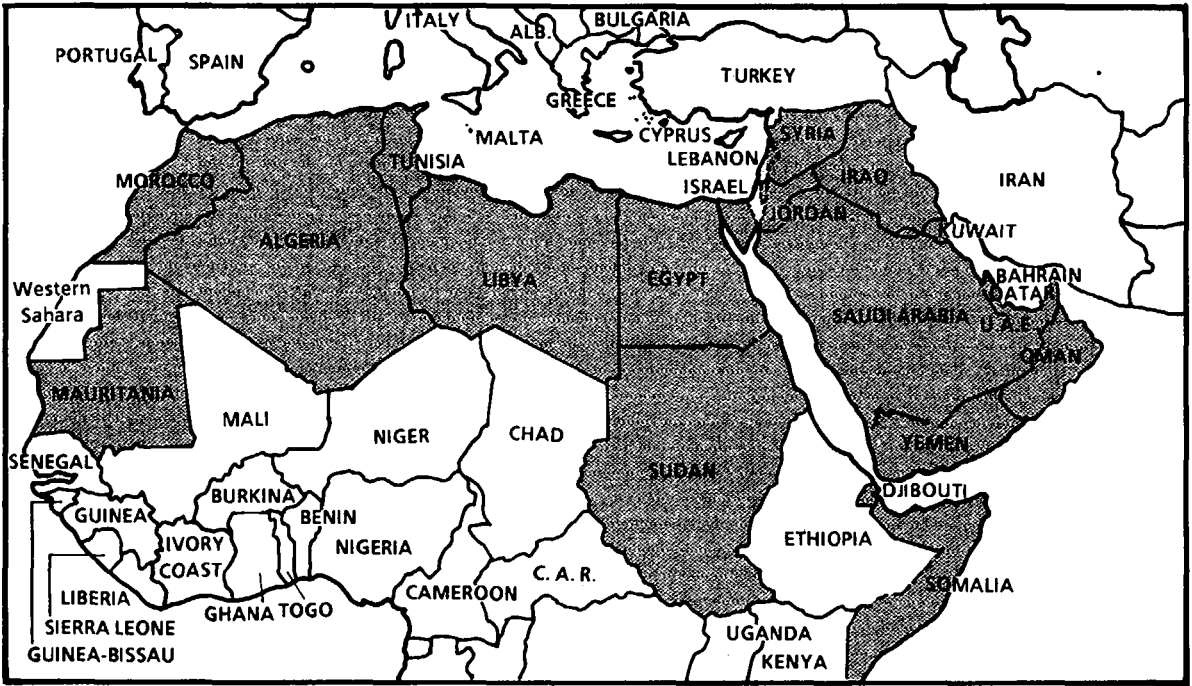
Despite this symbiosis, Arabs predated Islam by more than 1200 years. It is critical to this analysis to understand that not all Muslims are Arabs, nor all Arabs Muslim. Prior to Islam, history attests to thriving Jewish Arab settlements, Christian Arab tribes, and Arabs worshipping local and seasonal gods and goddesses. Between the first known reference to one “Gindibu the Arab” in the eighth century B.C. and today, the notion of Arab has sustained considerable reformulation. Endowing Islam with unique flavor, Arabism nonetheless claims a distinct identity and actually eclipsed Islam as a distinct political ideology during this century. Its advantage is the claim that it is better prepared to compete with the

non-Muslim world, incorporating the challenges of industrialization and modernization, and can be extended to non-Muslim, occasionally non-Arab, groups.

Meanwhile, Western observers have placed so much blind confidence in the modern nation-state system imposed in the post World-War I period, they are unaware that a vast disparity distinguishes Western and indigenous perceptions of the region. Because geopolitical structures and processes—"states" and "nationalism"—reflect Western experience and moral prerogatives, their usefulness for the interpretation of political behavior here is limited. Even the origin and evolution of the phrase "Middle East" as well as its territorial parameters arise from Western "spheres of interest" predicated foremost on the protection of maritime concerns and, latterly, associated land masses. These spheres are territorially "fixed," albeit elastic according to the latest trends of foreign policies and their defense communities, with "states" having become their own *raison d'être*.

Political identity within the region, by contrast, is viewed as ambiguous, hence more flexible. The form and political content of Islam and Arabism ceaselessly percolate across artificial, highly permeable national borders. Not even the "state" has been able to eradicate their transnational mechanisms for preserving unity and transmitting sociopolitical values. Porosity is true even for the larger geopolitical matrix in which the Arab-Muslim Middle East is embedded. Turkey, Afghanistan, Iran, and Pakistan, for example, are not Arab, but their populations are almost wholly Muslim. Their governments must therefore give attention to events in the heartland of the Islamic world—the Middle East—which, of course, is Arab. Thus, anti-American sentiment became correspondingly more prevalent in Southeast Asia, notably Pakistan, after two Middle Eastern incidents: the attack on Meccan holy places in 1979 popularly, if erroneously, attributed to the West; and the massacre of Palestinian refugees in Beirut in 1982 following the Israeli invasion of Lebanon. Ayatollah Khomeini, a Shi'a Persian, similarly found a ready audience among young Sunni Arab nationalists who were enamored with the range





**The Overlap of the Arab and Islamic World**

of his political ideals, especially anti-Americanism and concepts of "legitimate authority." Once embraced, Khomeini's political activism was easily adapted to a variety of national contexts in the Arab-Muslim world.

The dilemma for the modern Middle East is that Islam and Arabism are the only two paradigms to date holding patents on "legitimacy." The periods when their proponents occasionally aver sole right to interpret the past and assert an apocalyptic vision for ordering sociopolitical life are characterized by virulent antagonisms and profound polarization. Intellectuals in the Middle East warned as early as the 1940s that another such period would cleave regional politics before the century elapsed. It was clearly evident by the mid-1970s not only between right and left, but also secular and religious forces. The 1980s quickly became an annealing crucible of molten grievances from which new realities were forged. Arab "moderates"—a central core of Sunni Muslim, generally pro-Western, secular nationalists who dominated the political scene since World War I—have been alternately transfixed and defensive as their position has eroded. Neither economic inducement nor political compromise has placated restive demands, particularly those emanating from the young who claim their predominantly pan-Arab leaders have failed to tackle acute regional dilemmas and challenges generated by the external world. This trend is unlikely to diminish soon. Notably, more than 70 percent of the region's population is under 20 years of age and its annual population growth rate, among the world's highest, averages 3.2 percent.

Modern political dialogue is peppered with references to "crisis mentality," "psychology of defeat," "cultural retardation," "profound fragmentation," "self-inflicted wounds," and "lack of collective consciousness." Declaring Arab nationalism "bankrupt," the political "disinherited" are not rationalizing the failure of Arabism, dissociating its ideology from graceless excesses of its proponents, or reformulating it. Alternative solutions are not contemplated. They have simply opted for the political paradigm at the other end of the political spectrum with which they are familiar—Islam.

Notably, political platitudes and actions of established authorities have gradually exhibited modification. Staunch secular Arab nationalists, such as Syria's Hafiz al-Asad and Iraq's Saddam Husain, made rare, but highly publicized pilgrimages to Mecca. Palestinian Liberation Organization leader, Yasir Arafat, began to employ Islamic sentiments in his political platform in Lebanon during the mid-1980s. The election in Jordan in 1989 for a new parliament is but one example of numerous regional attempts to allow broader participation in government.

A more realistic understanding of Middle East politics emerges as one explores not only where the Arab and Islamic worlds diverge, but also how they resist the constraints of Western packaging. Where the veneer of the West wears thin, one can discern how the game of regional politics has continued to be played alongside Western imports of "nation-state" and "boundary"; how power is held and transferred; and what qualities of social and political legitimacy are traditionally accepted.

### **Pluralism: Minorities in the Arab World**

In 1983 an Arab ambassador to the United States bluntly told me that "no one can comprehend what is happening in the Middle East today unless he understands Lebanon." Since his own country was geographically remote from Lebanon's daily upheavals, what reasons did he cite for the disintegration of the Lebanese state and what relevance do they bear when considering political identity in the Arab-Muslim world?

The answer is pluralism and the search for an as yet elusive unity. Westerners commonly assume that the social fabric of the Middle East is homogenous—peopled by Arabs, speaking Arabic, and adhering to the principles of Islam, itself undifferentiated in membership and by doctrine. The glaring exception is the state of Israel although the Israeli-Arab conflict itself buttresses the assumption that, excluding Israelis, only Arabs inhabit the region. Plurality is the more accurate characterization, whether considering the variety of ethnic,

religious, and linguistic differences or the almost endless combinations and contexts in which they occur, rendering labels virtually meaningless. Regional social groups have shown remarkable persistence, if not resilience, through many centuries. Total population figures and numerical percentages are less important here than recognition of the extent of pluralism and, further, pluralism is of less concern than that governments and opposition groups actively incorporate it as symbols of reconciliation and rejection.

Prior to World War I, pluralism had been accommodated by mechanisms indigenous to the “Islamic state” or *khalifate*. Theoretically making no distinction between religious and political authority, it possessed an acute sense of political space and time and was bound by a common sacred language—Arabic. Elaborate juridical mechanisms provided for the protection of non-Muslim individuals and nations residing within Islamic territories. Under the Ottoman Khalifate, three “nations” or *millets*—Greek Orthodox, Armenian, and Jewish—were granted the unique privilege of administering their own affairs. This explains the anomaly that in 1908 Jewish rabbis, Christian priests, and Islamic representatives jointly celebrated the victory of the Young Turk movement and what was hoped to be renewed commitment to unity and equality.

The secular nation-state system, however, proved unequal to the postwar challenge. Arab governments, at least privately, ceased to deny plurality and minimize its disruptive potential by the 1980s. In order to understand why, it is necessary to return to a classic, nearly forgotten book published in 1947 which gives rare insight on the critical period of mid-century when the first wave of colonial-mandated states had achieved independence. Its title—*Minorities in the Arab World*—is, in retrospect, shocking. Written by Albert Hourani, whose family roots are Lebanese and who himself is one of the preeminent intellectual historians of the Middle East, the book reflects the mood and aspirations of many Arab educated elites of the period.

What does Hourani’s “Arab world” of the 1940s resemble, what does he mean by “minorities,” and why is this relevant for understanding Arab-Muslim politics today? He

explains that his Arab world is restricted to Egypt, Palestine, Transjordan (Jordan), Lebanon, Syria, and Iraq because they all were once under Ottoman control and they are predominantly Sunni orthodox Muslim and Arab, linguistically and culturally, rather than racially. These states had also recently achieved independence from mandate control (see table). The territorial parameters of Hourani's definition notably correspond to the strategic tricontinental node of Europe, Asia, and Africa which—embedded in the heart of the region—is characterized by deeply incised waterways linking the Arabian Gulf, Red Sea, and Mediterranean Sea to the Black Sea region. Of significance, it is precisely these states who subsequently became the most ardent advocates of Palestinian rights and Arab nationalism.

Hourani classifies groups who are not Sunni Muslim Arabs in this region as minorities regardless of the fact they might wield substantial economic and political power. Hourani's compilation, which is selective, is replicated here to illustrate the extent of pluralism. There are three divisions. The first—Sunni Muslims who do not speak Arabic—is subdivided as Kurdish, Turkoman, and Caucasian (Circassian and Chechen). The second—Arabic speakers who are not Sunni Muslim—has four subdivisions: heterodox Muslims (Shi'a, Alawi, Isma'ili, and Druze); Christians (Greek Orthodox, Syrian Orthodox, Coptic Orthodox, Assyrian, Roman Catholic of the Latin rite, Maronite, Greek Catholic, Coptic Catholic, Syrian Catholic, Chaldean Catholic, and a variety of Protestant groups, such as Anglican and Presbyterian); Jews and semi-Judaic sects (Rabbanite, Karaite, and Samaritan); and other religions (Yazidi, Mandaean, Shabak, Baha'i). The last division, neither Arabic-speaking nor Sunni, has six groups: Persian (Shi'a, Baha'i, Jewish); Kurdish-speakers (Yazidi, Shabak, Alawi, Syrian Orthodox, Syrian Catholic, Jewish); Syriac-speakers (Assyrian, Chaldean Catholic, Syrian Orthodox, Syrian Catholic); Armenian-speakers (including Armenian Orthodox, Catholic, and Protestant); Hebrew-speakers (Jewish); and Jewish speakers of various European languages (Yiddish, Spanish, Italian, and so forth).<sup>4</sup>

## Foreign Presence and Independence in the Arab Middle East\*

| Country                 | Foreign Presence | Independence | Present Government    |
|-------------------------|------------------|--------------|-----------------------|
| Iraq                    | Britain          | 1932         | Republic              |
| Egypt**                 | Britain          | 1936         | Republic              |
| Lebanon                 | France           | 1943         | Republic              |
| Syria                   | France           | 1946         | Republic              |
| Jordan                  | Britain          | 1946         | Monarchy              |
| Libya                   | Italy            | 1951         | Republic              |
| Sudan                   | Britain          | 1956         | Republic              |
| Morocco                 | France/Spain     | 1956         | Monarchy              |
| Tunisia                 | France           | 1956         | Republic              |
| Somalia                 | Britain/Italy    | 1960         | Republic              |
| Mauritania              | France           | 1960         | Republic              |
| Kuwait                  | Britain          | 1961         | Emirate               |
| Algeria                 | France           | 1962         | Republic              |
| Yemen                   | Britain          | 1967         | Republic              |
| (South)                 |                  |              |                       |
| Bahrain                 | Britain          | 1971         | Emirate               |
| Qatar                   | Britain          | 1971         | Emirate               |
| United Arab<br>Emirates | Britain          | 1971         | Federated<br>Emirates |
| Djibouti                | France           | 1977         | Republic              |

\**Exceptions:*

*North Yemen*, a republic, has had extensive historical ties with South Yemen. Nevertheless, it was the South Yemeni port of Aden that was the objective of foreign powers; and the region recognized as modern North Yemen remained essentially isolated. Notably, North and South Yemen united in 1990.

*Oman*, ruled as a Sultanate, has essentially been independent since 1650. Attempts to establish control by the Portuguese and Persians were sporadic and limited to the littoral.

*Saudi Arabia*, formerly autonomous amirates and badu tribes, was unified in 1932 by the Al Sa'ud family who established a monarchy. It too remained isolated from foreign influence.

\*\*Britain unilaterally declared Egypt independent in 1922, but maintained control through King Fuad whom it had installed as monarch. Fuad's death in 1936 and the subsequent conclusion of the Anglo-Egyptian Treaty, under which Britain relinquished authority over domestic Egyptian affairs, is more often the date cited for independence. It was not until 1952, however, that army officers overthrew the government and forced Fuad's son, King Farouk, to abdicate; and only as recently as 1956 did Egypt successfully nationalize the Suez Canal after international pressure forced British, French, and Israeli troops to withdraw.

Today, the Arab world is territorially and numerically much larger because it has been continually redefined by the region's politicians. The farther one recedes from the geographic core described by Hourani to the outermost states now included within the Arab League, the more pluralistic it becomes as remote, diverse cultural areas are included under the umbrella of "Arabism"; and, one sees evidence of Islamic schisms. In eastern Africa, for example, Somalis speak Somali in preference to Arabic; and southern Sudan is predominantly black, non-Arab, and Christian with animistic survivals. North Africa, by contrast, is generally Sunni Muslim, but varies ethnically and linguistically from the Arabian peninsula. Berbers may well be an ethnic majority in Algeria where Arabs are viewed as newcomers after the Islamic invasions of the seventh century. Some 80 percent of Mauritania is Moorish, half black of Sudanic origin, who speak Arabic with an admixture of Berber. Its other 20 percent is Tukulor and Fulani, who speak Fulfude, and the Soninke and Wolof, who speak discrete tribal languages. On the eastern periphery of the Arab world, Oman displays distinct Indian and African influences and is Ibadī Muslim. Portions of the Arabian Gulf demonstrate a strong Persian Shi'a influence. Iraq, occupying the eastern flank of the Arab world and bordering two large non-Arab neighbors—Turkey and Iran—is a living museum of ethnic, religious, and linguistic groups. In particular, it is in southern Iraq, where an historic battle symbolizes the schism between Sunni and Shi'a Islam, that the Sunni Arab core is populated primarily by Shi'a although they are also concentrated in pockets of the lower Gulf and in southern Lebanon.<sup>5</sup>

Other factors accentuate pluralism. Scarce water and grazing resources have severely constrained patterns of settlement and exchange, leading to development of autonomous subregional economies. Flowing unfettered through a barren landscape where rainfall is virtually nonexistent, the Nile, for example, has permitted continuous, permanent occupation for more than 5 millennia along a corridor more than a 1,000 kilometers in length, but never more than 13 kilometers in width. No less than 95 percent of the Egyptian population lives on less than 5 percent of the country's total land area. It is

this reason that substantiates the claim by Egyptians that only they among Arabs possess genuine national identity—"Egyptian." The Arabian peninsula, by contrast, has no major rivers, but the presence of underground aquifers and scattered rainfall spawned the evolution of hundreds of tribes, each with laws regulating *usufruct*, rites of passage, and nomadic-settled relations. This subsequently led to the formation of constantly shifting tribal confederations and so-called tribute- and city-states. Even today more than 80 percent of the Saudi population claims a tribal affiliation.

More recently, the serendipitous location of oil in isolated and underpopulated regions with scant water resources has exacerbated disparities between groups that theoretically belong to a united Arab-Muslim world. In consequence, the region's political-economic core shifted, at least temporarily, to its geographic peripheries.

There also are active population movements as a result of environmental and political-economic duress. Some Jews in the Yemens, Iraq, Syria, Egypt and Morocco migrated to Israel after its creation in 1948 while, conversely, Palestinian refugees in 1985 totalled some 5,520,600 in Jordan, Lebanon, Syria, the Gaza strip and the West Bank alone. In the Sudan, both civil war and persistent drought have caused an enormous and destabilizing influx of people from the southwest towards the capital of Khartoum. Severe economic displacements are also being caused by a disturbing rural-urban migration pattern as typified in Cairo, Egypt and Amman, Jordan. Further, migrant labor flows are significant. In north Africa, migration has been outward, but in the lower Arabian Gulf the situation is reversed. It was estimated in 1985 that 59 percent of Kuwait's population comprised expatriates: including 400,000 Palestinians, 90,000 Iranians, and 50,000 Armenians. Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and Oman also have significant numbers of Pakistanis, Yemenis, Iranians, and Lebanese. At one point, 4 out of 5 workers in Qatar were expatriates.

Further, one must consider whether a "community" is concentrated or dispersed; and, if the latter, the extent of its "cohesiveness." Many are aware that Kurds, theoretically belonging to one nation, were divided by the mandate powers



into five states. Few realize, however, that there are a multiplicity of Kurdish tribes, each with its own dialect and traditional political leaders, the most famous of whom have most often been pawns, receiving support from powers distant from and antagonistic toward the region. Kurds have fought each other as often as they have rebelled against their own and neighboring governments. In northern Oman, there are immigrants from India and Persia who, having settled generations long since, are now integrated; yet, deep in the south, where one finds the purest racial Arab and hears the earliest Arabian languages spoken, people still prefer to call themselves Dhofari rather than Omani.

At the same time, seemingly antagonistic associations can be entirely compatible and cross-fertilizing, giving rise to anomalous combinations of ethnicity, religion, and language. During the Iran-Iraq war, for example, numerous predictions were made that Iraq's Shi'a community would join Iranian Shi'a, but Shi'a perfidy had not occurred 9 years into the war. There are other surprises. The Druze, who have their own religion, serve in the armed forces of Lebanon, Syria, and Israel. There are also some Circassians who, speaking Arabic and Hebrew, are Muslim and yet see no contradiction in serving in the Israeli armed forces while there are Circassians in Jordan who serve as King Husain's private palace guard. There are also Sunni tribes in Iraq whose traditional leaders are Shi'a.

Religious, ethnic, linguistic, national, and regional identities are also complicated by processes that are unique to and have accelerated during this century: depletion of scant water resources; growth and distribution of populations; changing roles of urban- versus rural-structures; regional versus subregional development; exploitation of new resources; intercommunal marriages; incorporation of advanced technology and new educational strategies; changing job markets; improvements in communication and transportation; as well as transnational crises, such as the Israeli-Arab conflict and the Iran-Iraq war.

### **Stateless Nations and Nationless States: Twentieth Century Disunity**

The single most important factor exacerbating the traumas of pluralism during this century has been the imposition of the European state system. Dismantling of the Ottoman Empire left a political void Great Britain, France, and Italy filled as mandate powers. Their respective spheres of influence crystallized as the modern map of the Middle East which literally gave birth to two unwanted pariahs—stateless nations and nationless states—whose unrequited parentage has yet to be legitimized. The delineation of “borders” and “states” and the introduction of European “nationalism,” products of the nondynastic secular state, were completely alien in the region. “National” groups, such as the Berbers and Kurds, were divided among states. Other “nation-states” were so pluralistic that intense debate ensued over their survivability. Lebanon, a multi-confessional state, ironically was lauded as the showpiece of intercommunal co-existence worthy of emulation after its independence. Since the mid-1970s, however, more than 150,000 of its citizens have been killed in a civil war precisely because of their inability to reach a formula of accommodation. The Sudan is now rent with similar strife.

The mere creation of these states sparked entirely new processes. Hoping to quell opposition and prolong their influence, colonial powers imported new elites and aligned with emergent forces learning to manipulate the newly institutionalized state apparatus. Centuries of traditional linguistic, ethnic, tribal, class, regional, and religious forms of association were suddenly competing with recently defined nationalisms and influence groups. A variety of diverse governments evolved: republics, monarchies, emirates, a federated emirate, a sultanate, and military dictatorships. The state structure itself significantly altered a number of important tribal movements, rural-urban relations, and interregional contacts.

British strategy, as an example, was to protect its Indian Empire and consequently the creation of two linchpins—Iraq and Egypt—became the vital component of its associated

Middle East policy. Military requisites propelled the design of a land-air corridor which linked Iraq and Egypt via Jordan while separating French-mandated Syria from Saudi Arabia. The Iraqi-Jordanian linkage was further solidified by installing members of the Al Hashim as kings in both countries. Among the earliest acts of these nascent governments was the curtailment of traditional socioeconomic exchanges in order to reinforce already fragile central authority.

Also overlaid on these indigenous elements now are the languages bequeathed by the Europeans which, sometimes spoken as a "first language," affect intraregional unity. Libyans may speak Italian; Lebanese, Syrians, Algerians, and Tunisians—French; and Iraqis, Jordanians, Egyptians, and some Libyans—English.

Neither able to eradicate vestigial memory, nor assert validity, "states" now more often find their role in limbo. Native populations gradually rejected, sometimes brutally, foreign-allied elites who had promoted their own ends and assumed an alien taint in what since has become an endless cycle of selection-rejection.

Notably, the reception of European nationalism has been rarely studied even though its impact on the political identity of states and individuals has been profound as the relationship between indigenous populations and their governing authorities changed considerably. Consider, as one example, there are some Baghdadis old enough to recall the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire; occupation by British forces during World War I; creation of an entity called Iraq after the war and British installation as "king" of the Al Hashim family who had formerly resided in al-Hijaz on the Red Sea coast; independence of the state in 1932; a revolution in 1958 that irrevocably ended foreign-imposed Hashimite rule and subsequent nationalization of their strategic resources; three successive military dictatorships in a decade; another revolution in 1968 which secured the rule of civilian, secular Arab national Ba'thists; a debilitating conflict in the mid-1970s between the state and Kurdish guerrillas who were supported by Iran and the United States; and a costly 9-year war with

Iran begun in 1980 in which Ayatollah Khomeini often reiterated his intention to bring southern Iraq under Persian Shi'a control and establish an Islamic government in Baghdad. In addition to scores of attempted coups throughout this century, continuing foreign attention to the strategic oil resources of this region as well as its critical locale which, among other assets, controls more than one-quarter of global maritime "choke points," has accelerated a rate of change already staggering.

Every Middle East state has an equally cataclysmic tale to relate about its inception. Even as recently as 1986 a reporter covering the Sinai peninsula was startled to hear a nomad say that "The Bedouin is not Egyptian. . . .The Sinai is not Egyptian or Israeli. It is Bedouin."<sup>6</sup> The conundrum after achieving independence has been to maintain state integrity both from within and without, establish the legitimacy of governmental authority, and strive for regional integration.

This has entailed rationalizing imported systems with native antecedents. As old mechanisms to accommodate pluralism become less relevant, new questions continue to arise about the relationship of authority to the ruled and of legitimacy. References to "social engineering," the necessity of melding personal and national identity, are pervasive in literature written during the first half of this century. Forms of power sharing, introduction of democratic structures, and development projects are only a few of the carrots dangled before the disinherited; nepotism, repressive force, and shifting alliances are some of the applied sticks. Meanwhile, traditional associations never disappeared. They operated in tandem with new elements, occasionally assuming camouflage or going underground for preservation. The Islamic activist group *Da'wa*, for example, can be traced at least to the 1950s, long before it became known as a radical terrorist group during the 1980s. Throughout, hereditary leaders, military officers, and a multitude of nationalist parties continue to have two related obsessions: securing unity and legitimizing authority.

### Search for Unity: An Arab Sunni Core

The process by which Arabism expanded and consolidated at the expense of Islam during this century has been convoluted, but its success in uniting diverse regional groups to oppose foreign presence and intervention is undeniable. That it took a remarkably short time is evident when one recalls that the last Islamic Khalifate had been abolished only as late as 1924. Whether Arabism has succeeded as a mask for regional pluralism is less relevant at this juncture than the extent to which Arab credentials have been gradually extended to non-Arab, sometimes non-Muslim groups, and its future impact on regional politics.

During the late 1940s, at precisely the time Hourani was writing *Minorities in the Arab World*, the Middle East state system was a house built on shifting sand. Only a few Arab regions had been recently freed from European mandate control and assumed statehood; others were just beginning to sense the hope, as well as uncertainty, of independence; and, the rest would not know it for thirty years. Enumerating "traditional suspicions . . . entanglement of nationalism with religion . . . differing social customs . . . and the pervasive instability of administrative and political life," Hourani inquired whether the means can be created for minorities to lead a normal political, social, and intellectual life. Could different communities co-exist in any political society? Following the withdrawal of foreign powers, he is less concerned about survivability of state authority, than its authentication. If nationalism cannot provide the rationale for cohesiveness, what solution remains? Further, colonial-mandated states must find a formula of accommodation termed "fellowship" or "community" after independence.

This is the same period in which Israel—a non-Arab, non-Muslim state which, like Islam, is based upon the notion of a sacred community bound by a sacred language—was inserted into the Middle East equation. It is of inestimable importance that this event could only have been accomplished with the active support and guarantees provided by foreign mandate powers as stipulated in the Balfour Declaration. During the

1950s, that is within a decade of the publication of Hourani's book, Israel's leader, David Ben-Gurion, elucidated the strategy that Israel's natural allies in the Arab world were none other than minority groups. If turned against each other, these groups could stimulate instability within the Arab world, effectively dividing Israel's enemies. At the same time, an intermeshed and broad-based Israeli effort was initiated to improve relations with regions bordering the Arab world: Africa, Turkey, and Iran. The policy was publicly articulated although details of its implementation remain clouded. Only after Iranian students pieced together shredded documents in the United States embassy in Tehran during the Islamic revolution, for example, were a number of details surrounding wide-ranging Iranian-Israeli military cooperation publicly released. Similarly, we know that Israel has assisted in the training of police and military units in Africa over the last several decades and has cooperated militarily with the government of South Africa, even though the details remain speculative. Ethiopia and Israel are also natural geopolitical allies since they are the only two non-Arab states fronting the Red Sea. Here too, however, little is known publicly about the nature or extent of their contacts. A secret airlift to Israel from November 21, 1984 to January 6, 1985 of Ethiopian Falasha Jews who had taken refuge in southern Sudan was suspended after a news leak. More recently, United States administration officials stated in January 1990 that Israel had supplied the Ethiopian government with cluster bombs.

While Arabs predictably assail the aims of these two policies, it is unknown to what extent Israel has reevaluated their long-term strategic value. Yet, as recently as 1982, an Israeli advocated that divisions inherent to the region be stimulated for the sake of Israeli national security;<sup>7</sup> and, indeed, Israel pursued such a policy when it supported Iran during the Iran-Iraq war. As one Israeli official stated "Ideally we'd like to see Iraq disintegrate into a Shi'ite, Kurdish, and Sunni community, each making war on the other."<sup>8</sup> Proving there may be no better teacher than one's enemy, the converse of these hostile policies is the Palestinian "population bomb," whereby Jews would become a minority in Israel somewhere

near the year 2010, assuming that the projected emigration of one-half to one million Jews from the Soviet Union to Israel during the first half of the 1990s is not fulfilled.

What is important here is that many in the Middle East were talking about the possibility, value, and *raison d'être* of a "supra-national" state to combat further foreign intervention and domestic fragmentation. Specifically, they argued that the survival of such a state must be based on a "creative notion" or "mystique" stronger than European nationalism. In retrospect, Hourani wrote that

I did think at that time that a state supported by national feeling was more likely to be stable. . . and that Arab consciousness, deeply rooted in language and culture, was more likely to provide a firm basis than consciousness of belonging to an artificially created state.<sup>9</sup>

Discussions held in Cairo in 1943 and 1944 surrounding the foundation and rationale of the Arab League were the crux of this debate. "Arabness" or Arab unity, particularly in the states of the tricontinental node, was seen by liberal nationalists, who were not by accident the sociopolitical elite of the region who belonged to newly independent states, as the essence of supra-nationalism. Religious differences were regarded as irreversible cleavages. Egypt, as but one example, had a large Coptic population. Therefore, Arabness, an "artificial" concept whose ethnic and linguistic parameters are imprecise and malleable, was the most promising path in pursuit of stability and legitimacy. Variations on the pan-Arab theme—as manifest in the formation of a single state, a federated state, or individual state integrity recognizing and supporting fellow states—did not yet matter. Just how recent is the idea is exemplified by the assertion of Egyptian Wafd leader, Sa'd Zaghlul, during the 1920s that "our question is Egyptian, not Arab" and, further, Arabism was a notion where "0 + 0 = 0." Few could have predicted that five decades later Egypt's president Abd al-Nasir would become Arabism's most effective, most renowned single proponent.

Despite the creation of the nation-state system and the adoption of Arab nationalism, however, pluralism has

become, if anything, more rather than less sensitive. Governments tacitly ignore religious and ethnic differentiations. No Harris polls are allowed to plumb the public conscience. Census figures, when and if they are taken, are unreliable, do not generally provide population breakdowns, and are often kept secret. To do otherwise would be an admission that pluralism, power sharing, and ultimately state legitimacy remain specters of disunity. No one since publication of *Minorities in the Arab World* has dared update its contents except under the guise of travelogues and in specialized, often arcane anthropological literature, nor has a national government authority dealt in such a forthright and comprehensive manner with its themes. Even though discretionary power to designate an official state religion rests with each state—not surprisingly most have designated Islam—the Arab League asserts it is a secular organization. Only Lebanon, an extreme example of pluralism, refers neither to Islam nor Christianity in its constitution. In a convoluted power-sharing scheme, its president is a Christian, prime minister a Sunni Muslim, and head of parliament a Shi'a Muslim. Cabinet positions and other political forums are also similarly apportioned.

### **Arabs and Non-Arabs: The Myth of Equality**

Why hasn't Arabism been as successful as its proponents had hoped in achieving unity? What role have Arabs played in Islam? What impact does this have on intra-Arab politics and the broader Islamic community, in particular the Arab-Persian and Sunni-Shi'a rivalry? The answers are driven by three factors. First, the chrysalis of the Arab-Muslim association gave birth to a controversy between Arabs and non-Arabs in Islam that has become a source of modern enmity. Second, even prior to the advent of Islam, there existed racial, cultural, tribal, and class inequalities among Arabs themselves that persist and have broad ramifications for modern Arab and Islamic politics. Third, while the formative role played by the Arabs in early Islam earned them an uncontested seat of honor in the historical memory of Islam, the loss of Arab control over



the Islamic empire also has been seared into Arab-Muslim consciousness.

These factors must be analyzed within the context of regional pluralism, which was recognized even during the time of the Prophet Muhammad, and the Islamic emphasis on "community." Together, both play a major role in modern Arab-Muslim political behavior that has little relevance for the other two monotheistic religions—Judaism and Christianity—that also arose in nearly the same region of the Middle East. Each stresses the importance of community, but significant differences minimize the impact of pluralism. Judaism, for example, has an elite and restricted membership which, until the dilemmas of twentieth-century nationalism, kept centrifugal tendencies in check. Conversion and accommodating non-Jewish groups are thus moot issues. Unlike Judaism, Christianity and Islam are "universal" religions, yet the manner in which Christianity spread and its tenets, particularly those relating to personal faith and the separation of "church" and "state," deflect problems arising from pluralism.

Islam, by contrast, is a universal religion, but places heavy emphasis on community. Long before Islamic conquests had begun, "equality" had therefore become an acutely sensitive, indispensable tenet. Idyllic professions notwithstanding, however, equality never existed in practice precisely because an Arab versus non-Arab distinction insinuated itself into the embryonic Islamic state when Arabs, who were the first to receive the Islamic revelation, became its earliest arbiters and protectors and, eventually, its disseminators. During this process, Arabs assumed rights analogous to primogeniture, claiming privileges incumbent on a hierarchal elite over non-Arab groups belatedly converted. In the critical years after the Prophet's death, a "successorship" or Khalifate—the earthly embodiment of a united religious and political realm, essentially the "Islamic state"—had been established to guide the Islamic community. The reign of the first four khalifas, known as The Righteous Khalifas, is revered by all Muslims. Notably, each was a member of the Prophet's tribe and, therefore, Arab.

The Arab and non-Arab distinction quickly evolved into controversy as the early Islamic empire absorbed ever more numerous, diverse groups. When the last of the Righteous Khalifas died a mere 29 years after the tenure of the first began, the Islamic empire had engulfed Egypt, Palestine, and Syria, and moved east into modern Iraq and central Iran. By the year 850, the Islamic empire had spread across North Africa, east to the Indus, and north into Europe as far as modern France. It was then under the control of the Abbasid Khalifate which, significantly, was the last Arab Khalifate. Thereafter, non-Arabs—notably, Persians and Turks—assumed control of subsequent Islamic empires to the shame of Arabs. From 950 into the 1100s the united religious-political realm of the earthly Islamic community was increasingly bifurcated and its territories fragmented. Berbers, Crusaders, Seljuk Turks, and Mongols nibbled at the empire. Multiple autonomous administrations and regional rivalries arose to the extent that in the tenth century no less than three major Khalifates existed, each claiming to be the most legitimate.

The Arab and non-Arab distinction was not the only legacy of the pre-Islamic period bequeathed to the new Islamic state. Even prior to the chrysalis of the Arab-Muslim association, an elaborate exegesis of racial purity, hence inequality, existed among the Arabs of the Arabian peninsula who traced prestige through Arab tribal genealogy and social organization. Contrary to romanticized Western concepts of tribal democracy, there were “noble” and “ignoble” tribes which had finely-tuned, hierarchal relationships which were a function of ascribed Arab status and the ability of a tribe or family to extend its authority. Only later did association with Islam enhance their reputations further. Perpetuation of this pre-Islamic tribal hierarchy in Islam is readily illustrated by the evolution of the Arabic term *mawla*. It initially referred to “client tribes” paying a “brotherhood tax” to a noble tribe in return for certain rights to resources and military protection. Later, *mawla* connoted a freed slave. After the advent of Islam, it came to signify a Muslim convert who was

subjected to a supplemental tax. In this century, the Al Saud of Arabia utilized the same concept of freeing ignoble tribes and imposing Islamic taxes, thus centralizing political authority.

As early as the Abbasids, further distinction had arisen with regard to the word "Arab." There was a dichotomy, which still exists, between someone versed in classical Arabic culture and a badu from the desert. The former use of Arab now connotes two possible meanings: either membership in a cultural-linguistic group as employed by modern Arab nationalists or ascription of racial purity and prestige—"who is most Arab of the Arabs"—as used by Saudi, lower Gulf, and Yemeni Arabs. Notably, there are many Arabian peninsula families who discourage or forbid marriage to less-noble Arabs and non-Arabs. Not only does tribal custom assert that women transmit purity of descent, but also Islamic law forbids Muslim women to marry non-Muslims. Therefore, while Christian Arab women have been known to marry Arab Muslims, it is rare to find a Muslim-Arab woman married to an Arab Christian. That membership in certain families and tribes renowned for Arab credentials bestows considerable prestige, especially when buttressed with those Islamic, is evident in that many have sought to improve their status by claiming a different lineage.

By World War I, the Islamic empire had sustained many changes. For the purpose of understanding political behavior in the Middle East, it is particularly notable that the empire had been controlled by non-Arabs for centuries. Small wonder that Arabs were sanguine when the Ottoman Khalifate, which had been maintained by the Turks, was abolished in 1924. The Islamic holy places had finally reverted to Arab control in general, Saudi control in particular. When the prestigious Islamic university Al Azhar convened a Khalifate congress in Cairo in 1926, it is therefore also not surprising that no official Turkish, Persian, or Afghan representative was in attendance. Indicative of intra-Arab rivalries is the fact Saudis themselves were absent. As one of the three Arab states in which no mandate power was interested in the post World War I period, Saudi Arabia had emerged with de facto

independence and taken control of the holiest Islamic cities. It was a *fait accompli* that has also given the Saudis leverage in intra-Arab politics. Nevertheless, once the modern Middle East state system was established, Arabs have abstained from discussion about the reconstitution of the Khalifate.

It was not until the 1980s when Khomeini reintroduced the possibility of reestablishing the universal Islamic state, that is, uniting now segregated religious and political realms, that the Arab versus non-Arab controversy again assumed acute significance. Throughout Islamic history, this controversy has referred foremost to Arab-Persian rivalries. It first erupted in hostilities as early as the eighth century on the Abbasid-Persian frontier, exactly where some 1000 years later the modern Iran-Iraq war would reopen the same wounds: Arab Sunni versus Persian Shi'a antagonisms.

The debate centers on the *shu'ubiya*, a designation for dissident Islamic sects believing that no race or tribe assumed superiority over any others. Namely, all men were equal before God. The term *shu'ubiya* derives from Quranic verse 49:13: "We have created you from a male and female and divided you into *shu'ub* ["peoples" or "nations"] and *gaba'il* ["tribes"] that you might come to know one another." Were the *shu'ub* non-Arab tribes, settled or nomadic persons, or simply an indicator of Muhammad's recognition rather than advocacy of pluralism? No explanation is fully satisfactory. Yet, historians agree that chief among Muhammad's formidable challenges was the suppression of any pluralism capable of undermining Islamic unity. This was evident in that only one's family was given specific blessing in Islam among preexisting institutions. The continuing relevance of this verse to the question of equality generally is demonstrated by the fact that modern Arab-Muslim women cite it as God's affirmation of female equality within the Islamic community.

During the earliest centuries of Islam, *shu'ubiya* was applied to movements generally antagonistic to Arab civilization; later, they embodied a wider set of issues challenging the whole orientation of Islam; and, in the next incarnation, advocated Persian superiority.<sup>10</sup> An adherent of such a movement—*shu'ubi*—became identified as someone who

resented the superior position of Arabs within Islam. Therefore, they are sometimes facetiously called *ahl al-taswiya*, “the people [advocating] equality,” who believe piety is a better qualification of “legitimacy” to rule than descent.

Khomeini, notably a Persian Shi’a who could not claim Arab heritage or descent from the Prophet, also emphasized the importance of piety. His attacks on the legitimacy of Arab Muslim hereditary leaders—the three kingships of Morocco, Jordan, and Saudi Arabia; the Sultanate of Oman; and the shaikhdoms of the lower Gulf—are understood within this context. It is notable that Islamic activists who assassinated Egyptian president Sadat categorically stated that “Sadat made Egypt a kingship, but it is a republic.” In the Quran, kingships refer only to non-Muslim rulers since power in an absolute sense is possessed only by God, explaining why even members of the Saudi family opposed assumption of the title “king” early in this century.

The modern relevance of this debate to individual Muslims is perhaps nowhere better documented than in a book written as recently as 1986 by Fouad Ajami; he recounts the life of Musa Sadr, an Iranian mulla who in 1959 left his home in Iran to become the spiritual leader of Shi’as in southern Lebanon. Sadr’s unexplained disappearance in 1978 fuelled the Lebanese civil war, elevating him to martyr’s status. It is Ajami’s own rationale for writing this book, however, that weaves together several of the historic, recurring themes of Middle Eastern politics in a modern vernacular. His attention to the Arab and non-Arab dispute as personified in the Arab-Persian debate is important.

As I was a Shia *assimile*, from a background in the rural south [of Lebanon], anxious to pass undetected in the modern world of Beirut, I showed no interest in the cleric [Sadr]. My school [in 1963] then was devoutly Pan-Arabist. . . . Anything Persian, anything Shia, was anathema to me at the time. My great-grandfather had come from Iran to Lebanon in the mid-nineteenth century. That was part of some buried past, unexplored. It was given away in my last name, *Ajami*, which in Arabic meant “the Persian.” The Arab-*Ajam* divide was very deep. And a Shia mullah [Sadr] wearing the black turban of a *sayyid* (a descendant of the Prophet) and speaking Persianized Arabic was a threat to something unresolved in my identity. . . . [By the

early 1980s] I saw the [same] cleric . . . as standing at the crossroads of so many issues—across the Arab-Persian divide, across that split between the “modern” and the “traditional,” the worldly and the sacred.<sup>11</sup>

Arabic dictionaries list synonyms for *ajam* other than “Persian,” such as “foreigner” and “non-Arab” generally, probably from an earlier meaning of someone who is “incomprehensible” in speech, particularly Arabic. Since the racial-cultural antagonism of Persians and Arabs had been present prior to Islam, it is not surprising that “ajam” is often equated as “Persian.” In one of the most famous of pre-Islamic battles still related to Arab school children, central Arabian tribes defeated the Persian state of Hira in 611 A.D. in what is modern Iraq. Small wonder that Fouad Ajami felt sensitive about his origins and the Persianized Arabic of Musa Sadr. “Ajami” is still used today in the Arab world as a pejorative, just as “arab” is used in Iran.

The dual role of the Arabic language has further exacerbated this controversy. Within a century after Islam’s revelation, Arabic replaced Aramaic, formerly the lingua franca of the region. In many instances, such as in Egypt, populations were being Arabized faster than they were becoming Muslim. Arabic today is not only indisputably linked with Arab nationalism of the secular state—some declare its knowledge is the sole criterion for claiming Arab credentials—but also its association with Islam as a vehicle of divine Quranic revelation endows it with sacrosanct and immutable power. There exists the anomaly that many non-Arab Muslims mnemonically recite Quranic passages in Arabic whose meaning they do not know. While Atatürk, who was striving to separate issues of “church” and “state” in the manner of European nations, deliberately imposed a Europeanized script on Turkish, similar attempts to convert Arabic have met with resounding failure so close is regarded the special linkage between preservation of the Islamic community and an untainted heritage. Confirmation of the sensitive role of Arabic in Islam is also found in the modern controversy surrounding Salman Rushdie’s *Satanic Verses*. Notably, Khomeini himself could not have begun his rise in the theological hierarchy of Islam without

knowledge of classical Arabic even though, like Musa Sadr, his spoken Arabic was Persianized and, according to Iraqis, his preferred associates when he was exiled in Iraq were Iranian Shi'a.

If Fouad Ajami's book reflects the sentiments of individual Muslims regarding the Arab and non-Arab debate, the Iran-Iraq war of the 1980s revived both the ancient, enduring antagonism of racial-cultural differences and the broader, fundamental debate about who would dominate and influence the "vision" of Islam's future on a national, if not an international scale. Of note, all Arab states, excepting only Syria and Libya, offered varying degrees of support to Iraq during the war. North Yemen even contributed a brigade and there are individual Egyptians who are today prisoners-of-war in Iran. Within this context, an Arab-Muslim explained to me in 1987 the relation of the shu'ubiya to political dialogue in the modern Arab world.

To be called a shu'ubi in the Arab world today means something bad, implying disloyalty. It has never been applied to Arab people, only to others, and the term is never applied to Kurds since there is no Kurdish nation. Not even Barzani [Mulla Mustafa Barzani, a well-known Kurdish guerrilla leader who died in 1979] was considered a shu'ubi [since Kurds were subordinate to other cultural-political authorities even in early Islam, genealogists artificially extended to them the Arab label just as modern Iraqi Ba'thists tried to do in an effort to broaden support for their party and state stability]. These movements were always felt much more strongly on frontiers where cultural groups met and assumed adversarial positions. Berber-Arab and Turkish-Arab antagonisms are strongly felt, but do not last long as movements because they get crushed or rationalize their ideology when the political climate gets too polarized.

Even prior to the Iran-Iraq war, an Iraqi Ba'thist confided to me that the term shu'ubiya had begun to arise in internal Ba'th party discussions as a reaction to a renewal of Islamic activism in the early 1970s. It was associated with groups inside Iraq who were perceived as having "more loyalty to Persia than Iraq and who therefore are viewed as a fifth-column." References were considered so inflammatory that they were not publicly recounted, nor documented in party records. Only when the Iran-Iraq war erupted did the term

shu'ubiya begin to appear publicly. One reference was to a well-organized, clandestine movement known as the *Hizb al-Da'wa al-Islamiya*, "the Party of the Islamic Call," or simply Da'wa. Formed at least as early as the 1950s, Da'wa was a small religious group whose members were in their 40s and 50s. From the late 1960s it is believed to have had links both to the Shah of Iran and Iranian Shi'a clergy. It underwent several internal schisms between 1968 and 1974 when the Iraqi government began to clamp down on its activities as it became more political and attracted a younger membership. Advocating Shi'a concerns, its members were almost entirely of Persian extraction. During the 1970s they were in contact with Khomeini during his exile in Iraq and were increasingly observed using religious occasions, such as Ashura, to attract followers. As the Islamic revolution in Iran neared, Da'wa engaged in terrorist acts against the Arab nationalist government in Iraq, which retaliated and forcibly expelled thousands of Persian Shi'a into Iran. By 1982, the Iraqi government had the movement under control although sporadic "human car bomb" incidents still occurred. Exiled Da'wa members have subsequently been involved in terrorist acts targeting Arab nationalists, Arab governments perceived to support Western interests, and the personnel and property of Western governments in Lebanon and Kuwait during the 1980s. Today, their support comes from members of the Iranian government.

It is an interesting footnote that in modern Arab nationalist writing, such as that of Sati al-Husri, the terms shu'ubi and shu'ubiya are applied as criticisms of those advocating a limited, territorial nationalism, such as Egyptian or Syrian, rather than pan-Arab nationalism. During the late 1950s and early 1960s, the term shu'ubiya also arose during controversies between pan-Arabists and communists over who would secure power in the Middle East. The latter were derisively labelled shu'ubis because their political platform and material support originated from a power foreign to the Arab world—the Soviet Union. Bearing the implication of disloyalty and betrayal, it found resonance in historical memory. Even if Arab communist parties might be foremost motivated by the best interests of the Arabs, the label was an explicit



accusation that benevolent motivation could never be their sole intent.

With no formal resolution to the Iran-Iraq war, or at least no absolute clarity between victor and vanquished, the controversy over the *shu'ubiya* remains, like ever-present stigmata, in Middle Eastern political dialogue. Moreover, the argument "who is most Arab among Arabs" remains a hotly debated topic in intra-Arab politics, particularly in Arabian peninsula affairs, quite apart from the Arab-Muslim calculus. Intra-Arab rivalries over resources and joint policies, such as the conduct of relations with foreign powers, continue to be discussed in the Arab League, but the relatively new forums of the Gulf Cooperation Council, Arab Cooperation Council, and Arab Maghreb Union belie its once unquestioned role.

### **Fatal Wounds: Universal Islam Takes the Offensive**

Islam, which we have so far explored only as it relates to pluralism and Arabism, is an ideal political vehicle that had been waiting patiently as the Middle East state system sought its equilibrium. Despite political activities spawned by the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt and elsewhere, this movement was largely portrayed by established governments as anti-progressive and containable. Even as Islamic activism gained momentum, Arab leaders, who were absorbed in establishing control and preaching Arab unity during the last forty years, never cast a single backward glance at dire predictions of political polarization cast as early as the 1940s.

In the years since then, political expression in almost all Middle East states has been very restricted, if not repressed. Political parties are only permitted in national fronts run by central authorities. Parliaments, when they exist, have a history of being dissolved at a whim. A large percentage of many countries' budgets is devoted to military establishments, which are increasingly seen by populations as a drain on development funds and a tool used by established governments for "defense from within." In wealthier countries, largesse is seen as

both a preventive and curative for dissent. Malcontents are therefore forced to be clandestine or rendezvous in a neighboring Arab state.

By the early 1970s, however, polarization was increasingly apparent throughout the region as Islamic activist groups gradually emerged and some essentially religious groups reformulated their *raison d'être* and attracted new memberships. Governments remained silent, however, until the late-1970s, when it was undeniable that Islamic activists had returned to center stage with targets of retribution and agendas of sociopolitical and economic change. What were the currents that had been eddying under supposedly placid waters? Two are notable. One is that Islam survived where secular groups had withered and died. Islam is an ideal political vehicle: Islam's vocabulary and symbolism were legitimized centuries earlier and its concepts and institutions are perfectly suited for transmitting both the sacred message as well as sociopolitical ideas. A glance at the contents of *The American Journal of Islamic Social Science*, for example, illustrates the encompassing and adaptable nature of Islamic thought in the modern world. There are articles on Islamic administration, human resource development, reorganization of banking and other financial institutions, and commodity exchange. In addition, there are articles about the Muslim theories of anthropology, knowledge, science, and even the media. Further, while Islam cannot be forced to assume a completely clandestine mode, it can do so if need be. Any leader attempting to curtail access to the mosque does so at his peril. In any event, Islam allows for this contingency. Since certain political conditions necessitate innovative response, an increasing number of small groups in Soviet central Asia and throughout the Middle East have been meeting at homes, essentially private mosques. These groups comprise anywhere from 5 to 20 persons. More than 200 such groups were identified in Cairo alone during the early 1980s, one of which assassinated Sadat. Similarly, young women throughout the Middle East increasingly began to wear the veil and other Islamic attire. Yet, governments feared that if they forbade this, populations might declare they were anti-Islamic. The consequence is that Islamic attire is an increasingly

familiar sight on Middle East streets and, in some countries, it conveys a political as well as a religious message.

The second current of change is that the close relationship between Islam and Arabism allowed Islamic activists to appeal to diverse groups that occasionally worked at cross purposes. After the Islamic revolution in Iran in 1979, it was felt that this time Islam would reestablish the "ideal" world. The revolution was applauded throughout the Arab-Muslim world even by secular Arab nationalists. While many Westerners believe that Islamic activism existed mainly among Iranian students who had studied in the West and then returned to their own societies, this is only a small part of the story. Islamic resurgence was palpable in nearly all segments of Middle Eastern society by the 1980s, including individuals from rural areas, illiterates, and those who had never travelled outside the region. Granted, the Iran-Iraq war and Khomeini's diminishing interest in the Palestine question as the war became increasingly protracted dimmed some of the early fervor. Nonetheless, it was common to hear young Arabs state that Israel and Khomeini both had been politically successful because they were religious and, therefore, it was time to re-evaluate the failures of their own secular Arab nationalist systems. Ayatollah Khomeini, a Persian Shi'a and the preeminent standard bearer of the revolution, had transcended the bonds of Arab unity and appealed to the Muslim conscience of Arab youth. Apologists have tried to explain this appeal by noting that many of his political goals, such as the restoration of Palestine, were identical to Arab nationalists. This is true, but misleading since the relationship was much deeper. As only one example, Shi'a literature from Iran was being imported to the Sudan and taught to Arab youth; and Arab Muslim leaders, such as Hassan Turabi, began travelling to Iran to meet with Khomeini.

The nature of the discontent expressed by Islamic activists is of less concern here than how Islam has continued to be a powerful force during this century despite adversity, and how it is used specifically as a political tool. What is the Islamic world view, the screening mechanism of every Muslim, that

allows not only a reinterpretation of social ills, but also provides solutions? There are three interrelated precepts crucial to understanding the political content of Islam. First, as mentioned earlier, it is a "universal" religion that emphasizes "community" rather than the "individual." A Muslim can be "apart from" Islam, that is, separated from a region inhabited predominantly by Muslims, but never "without." Second, the entire community is bound by concepts regarding sacred time and space which, implicitly political, reinforce its cohesiveness. Third, religious and political authority are united.

The Prophet Muhammad himself speculated about why the once united, earthly community had become a plurality of diverse groups. The Islamic community or *umma* was to be universal, including non-Arabs and issuing provisions to protect non-Muslim populations residing and travelling through Muslim territories. Thus, for example, Jews and Christians or "the people of the Book," receive special guarantees of protection. Universality could work only if traditional, particularistic associations of diverse groups were filtered through the Islamic prism.<sup>12</sup> "Islam" itself is derived from *aslama*, literally "submission," which broadly construed is the sublimation of any conflicting source of loyalty. Manifested physically by the prostrate attitude assumed in prayer, a Muslim at least once in his life must sincerely "testify" to the *shahada*: "There is no God, but God; and Muhammad is his Prophet."

The five pillars of faith articulated in the earliest decades of Islam demonstrate that, irrespective of their role in affirmation of personal faith, they also serve a very specific political purpose: they transcend pluralism, refocusing attention on the united and divinely guided community. The *shahada* is, not surprisingly, the first, since one must openly acknowledge commitment. Derived from the same root, the *shahid* is a martyr who, suffering death in defense of the community, bears ultimate testimony. Hence, Khomeini encouraged recruitment for the war by bestowing this honorific upon Iranians killed fighting the "apostate" Iraqis. Not to be outdone, Iraq and even North Yemen, which had contributed a brigade to the Iraqi war effort, also referred to their dead as *shahids*.

Suicide bombers in the Arab-Muslim world generally, whose objective has been to purge the tainted Muslim world and its foreign "oppressors," are similarly known.

The second pillar is prayer, preferably five daily congregational prayers at a mosque rather than those performed by lone individuals even though practicality has tempered this practice. Nevertheless, so central is the mosque in affirming communal life that on Fridays, prayers convene at the "Friday mosque," usually the largest in any city where a sermon of sociopolitical content is delivered. Thus were Khomeini's incendiary anti-Shah, anti-American messages delivered, taped, and distributed throughout the Muslim world. Ironically, the inevitable attendance of political leaders at the Friday mosque has made it a favorite choice of assassins for centuries: Abdullah, the grandfather of the present King Husain of Jordan, thus met his fate in 1951 going to the al-Aqsa mosque in Jerusalem.

The third pillar is a tax called *zakat*. Originally intended as the means to fill state coffers, it is also important because its payment signifies allegiance to and recognition of a lawful Islamic government. Thus, many "Islamic" governments have deliberately tried to collect it. When the Saudis were negotiating a territorial dispute over the Buraimi oasis with the British during the 1930s, for example, the latter were continually perplexed when the Saudis kept producing volumes documenting collection of *zakat*. In Shi'a Islam, by contrast, individuals contribute *zakat* directly to their religious hierarchy, which in Iran became wealthy and autonomous. The Shah's attempt to divest them of land during the 1970s alienated both the hierarchy and devout Iranians.

Fasting during Ramadhan, the month in which the Quran was revealed, is the fourth pillar. During this period, the entire community is drawn closer together. Abstinence by the individual during daylight hours becomes the counterpoint for renewal of Islamic unity and communal festivities during the evening.

Pilgrimage to the holy city Mecca is the final pillar. Muslims from all over the world join together, essentially

becoming the earthly embodiment of the spiritual Islamic community. During the pilgrimage, elements key to understanding Islam are brought to life and relived by individual Muslims participating, yet again, in a communal endeavor.

Concerns of Muslim thinkers are identical to, indeed often more elaborate than those of secular soldiers and statesmen because, once the importance of community had been established, a reservoir of intermeshed political ideas naturally devolved. Regulations control the moral-ethical relationship between rulers and ruled as well as rulers and God. Political "legitimacy" and "genuine authority" are elucidated in contradistinction with mere political power and with those who hold power unjustly and/or are unqualified to rule. Thus, precepts guide the selection of leaders, their preferred qualities, and incumbent duties of office. A host of rules also relate to personal conduct. Not only are profane acts imbued as sacred rites and observances, but many laws, such as those relating to hygiene and resource management, enhance common welfare. Superseding all other laws, Islam continually refocuses conflicting allegiances on the common goal of unity. At the heart of all these precepts rests the concept that, if everyone is individually obeying the divine rules of salvation, the Islamic state and society are both legitimate and prospering. Thus, there are explicit guidelines about civic responsibility to avoid societal chaos. Indeed, some believe corrupt leaders should be obeyed if dissent means the community will be torn apart; others, such as Khomeini, believe struggle against such a ruler is incumbent on every Muslim in order to reestablish the unity and legitimacy of the Islamic community. Even personal and family routines are linked by Islamic conservatives to a moral and physical bankruptcy in the life of their polities and their weakness in relationship to the outside world. Thus, some of the most virulent disputes in Islam have been waged by Muslims against other Muslims who are accused of subverting the purity of the aggregate.

Reinforcing this, Islam has a unique and highly developed sense of sacred time and space which imbues daily life with resonance and regulates relations of the body politic toward

the non-Muslim world. Shortly after the Prophet's death, an Islamic calendar was sanctioned. It is a lunar calendar that, bearing no correspondence between seasons and the cycle of festivities traditionally celebrated by many pre-Islamic cults, enjoins adherents to refocus errant attention on a single remote, unseen, and omnipotent deity. Even today in the Middle East, most government documents bear the Muslim date.

To the dimension of time is added that of space. The universal Islamic state theoretically possesses no territorial parameters, hence political limitations. Even though most Muslims do not believe that there can or should be a single Islamic state, there nonetheless exists a range of precepts describing both the physical and moral-ethical relationship between the Muslim and non-Muslim worlds until universality is achieved. Muslims reside either in the House of Peace, that is, territory which is under Islamic leadership and has a preponderance of Muslims, or the House of War, its converse. It is incumbent on Muslims wherever they reside to obey Islamic law and, if they are outside the House of Peace, to return. This "emigration," or *hijra* which is named after the Prophet's historic journey to Madina, is also used by Islamic movements to describe their own path to purification. Saudis applied the same term in the early 1900s to settlements where they hoped to encourage badu to reside, recognizing the Islamic authority of the Saudis rather than customary tribal law. It partly explains Khomeini's ire at Salman Rushdie's explication of his Westward "emigration."

The obligation as an individual "to strive" to be a better Muslim and as the community to strive against corrosive forces threatening both physical and political unity share the same noun, *jihad*. In the latter sense, when it is necessary to take up arms, it is often translated as "holy war." From this concept, which some groups consider a sixth pillar of Islam, have devolved volumes of exegesis on topics as diverse as types of defensive and offensive war, conduct of diplomatic relations, conditions of and parameters for peace, division of spoils, treatment of prisoners, attitude to rebels, martyrdom, ransoming of hostages, and even suicide missions.<sup>13</sup>

Injunctions regarding jihad and the House of War have been tempered over the centuries since it is impractical to be continually waging war. Nevertheless, it remains a potent force as demonstrated by countless regional hostilities during the last several centuries. Whether fighting other Muslims, such as raids by Saudi-led Ikhwan against surrounding territory in the early 1900s, or against foreign powers, such as the Mahdi's war in the Sudan against the British in the last century, the use of the term jihad has served to validate the political conduct of hostilities. Khomeini himself used it frequently during the Iran-Iraq war. Indeed, when he repeatedly asserted that Islam has "no frontiers or borders," it is precisely the Islamic state in a literal sense to which he referred. The thrust of his message cannot be diluted by Iranian apologists. Among other Muslims, it is tantamount to declaration of war. Explicit in his affirmation of the universal Islamic community is his rejection not only of fixed nation-state boundaries, but also imported, Western nation-states in their broadest sense, including their governments and the international law that sanctioned them.

Even as Khomeini agreed in July 1988 to drink from the "poisonous chalice" of the United Nations ceasefire resolution with Iraq, he still reiterated that he desired a world united by Islam since the "war is one of ideology and does not recognize borders or geography," and "acceptance of the resolution. . . does not mean that the war has been resolved." God's commandment is still in force even though human flaws cause its temporary abeyance. An official statement issued by the Iranian military's general command said "new conditions have been created which call for adoption of new stances in order to continue the sacred defense and protect Islam. . . . What has happened is expedient by divine assignment."<sup>14</sup> Despite the fact that Arab Muslims argue Khomeini intertwined Islam and Iranian nationalism, there is no doubt that Khomeini was certain of his theology. Circuitous language does not adulterate the thrust of his statement: acceptance of the ceasefire does not imply recognition of the West, abandonment of the quest for Islamic unity, or recognition of a state of peace. It is merely a temporary truce, which is permissible.



Universal Islam, however, is also observable in less extreme examples. There is remarkable cooperation, for example, among the 42 member nations of the Islamic Conference Organization. The three subjects most under discussion have roots more than a millennium ago: threats to the integrity and security of Muslim states from non-Muslims; aspirations of Muslim minorities; and general consideration of colonialism, racism, and their counterparts—liberation movements. Disagreements are deliberately discouraged.<sup>15</sup> There is similar unanimity among some 40 members identifying themselves as Islamic at the United Nations. An enormous variety of governments from monarchies to military dictatorships, whether pro-West or pro-East and adhering to socioeconomic platforms ranging from socialism to capitalism, have demonstrated a 70 to 100 percent voting consistency.<sup>16</sup> Despite occasional exceptions, such as Nasir's support of nonalignment in the rivalries between Greeks and Turks over Cyprus and between Indians and Pakistanis, most governments whose populations are predominantly Muslim cannot afford to be less committed to Islam than allied countries for fear of being accused of compromising universal Islam.

It is not only because Islam is a universal religion that makes it such a potent political force, but the fact that its institutions are also designed to be transnational even though the rise of the modern nation-state has diluted this capability to an extent. There are, for example, renowned "Islamic" families. Thus, members of the Sadr family, originally reputed to be Persian Shi'a, have settled among Shi'a communities in Lebanon, Iran, and Iraq where they have had political as well as religious influence. There are also "transnational" cities, such as Mecca in Saudi Arabia and al-Najaf and Karbala in Iraq, which are magnets for devout Muslims of all sects and for Shi'as, respectively. Similarly, Islamic centers of learning such as Al Azhar in Cairo are "international."

Of inestimable importance, these and many other Islamic institutions—the "sermon," the Shi'a religious hierarchy's societal role, the Sufi *tariqa* (loosely translated as a "Muslim order"), and the private mosque—allow Islam to circumvent

illiteracy and carry a political as well as a sacred message. This is not to say these are the only groups now attracted to Islamic activism. Indeed, a substantial number of new adherents are young professionals, especially those from scientific and engineering backgrounds. Nevertheless, for political parties seeking broad-based support, the fact that illiteracy in some rural areas of the Middle East can be 60 percent and in urban areas 40 percent is daunting.

Arab nationalist groups, by contrast, are almost entirely literate for the reason they must rationalize and extend the label "Arab" to non-Arabs and non-Muslims. The ability to put aside one's prejudices to join these groups has usually meant a much greater degree of toleration acquired through literacy. It is not accidental that the earliest Ba'thists, for example, were school teachers and found a ready audience among their students. Ironically, Ba'thists who were arrested also found their military and police guards avid disciples. Nor is it a coincidence that two of the most ambitious literacy campaigns in the Middle East during the last decade were in Iraq and the Sudan, both highly pluralistic.

Another phenomenon has recently been observed in many areas, notably Cairo, known as the "ruralization of the city." It is the movement of migrants to major urban areas in such large numbers that, when coupled with a large birth rate like Cairo's which adds 1 million persons every 8-10 months, a dualism has arisen. Alongside or instead of modern nation-state structures and processes which faltered, old forms of arbitration, exchange, and social welfare—including schools and health clinics—are being reestablished by traditional Islamic leaders or their intermediaries from the rural areas. These are the leaders of genuine authority: judges, local leaders, teachers, and clergy. Their network of contacts was never dissolved, nor had the faith of the average Muslim in their claim to leadership.

Finally, religious and political authority are theoretically united in the Islamic state. Classical Arabic did not have a word for "secular." One was adopted after increased exposure to the West by Christian Arabs.<sup>17</sup> Politics was not even studied as a separate discipline in the Middle East until the 1700s.

Before then, it was subsumed in Islamic theology and jurisprudence. Demonstrative of this melding of religious-political realms is the fact that the spiritual head of Islam is also responsible for the political administration of the state from its most mundane domestic affairs to foreign relations, including the conduct of war. His relationship with God and his people is strictly regulated. A range of political-administrative concepts were accordingly articulated.

There is, however, one issue which the Prophet Muhammad did not or would not elucidate before his death—succession. How should it be determined: by electoral, appointive, or hereditary means? Over this, more blood has been spilled within Islam than over any other issue. Dissent was evident early on. Three of the four Righteous Khalifas were murdered. An ensuing debate caused a major doctrinal split between orthodox Sunni Islam which advocated consensus and those who believed succession should be based on descent from the Prophet. The latter supported the candidacy of Ali b. Abi Talib, the fourth Righteous Khalifa and the cousin and son-in-law of the Prophet. They are known as Shi'a Ali, literally "the people of Ali," or simply Shi'a. Nevertheless, all Islamic leaders generally maintained the fiction of an ideal, united community. In later centuries the Persian Shah and the Ottoman Sultan tolerated each other, but in word and deed acted as if theirs was the authentic community, just as Ayatollah Khomeini did this century.

The differences between Sunnis and Shia's are complex and sensitive because they have evolved different interpretations on many doctrinal issues relating to the nature of authority and the political community. In Sunni Islam the relationship of the individual with God is direct, that is, there are no intermediaries. Indeed, it is a remarkable commentary on the humility of orthodox Sunni rulers that few have dared claim any title which could be construed to impinge on divine authority. Titles such as sultan and shah are mistakenly viewed in the West as grandiose emblems of absolute authority. A sultan may be powerful to the extent of dictating life and death, but he possesses *sulta*, literally earthly political "power" and is

also subject to God's law. This is also true for *malik* or "king" who possesses mere "authority." Thus, King Husain of Jordan, in November 1984 during a private interview in which he was discussing the responsibilities of political leaders in the troubled Middle East, told me that "Life does not begin or end with me. I hope I can identify what is really required. I am more proud of being a part of the House of the Prophet [than a king]." Notably, the pre-Islamic term *shaikh*, which earlier meant an individual venerated due to age and evolved to signify the "leader" of a tribe, has survived in the lower Gulf. Making no presumption whatsoever on religious power, a paramount leader is simply called *shaikh al-shuyukh*, "shaikh of the shaikhs," but rarely, *amir* or "prince."

The Shi'a, however, were more radical and merged the notion of an Imam, which means to be "in front of" just as the man who leads prayers in a mosque is called, with a leader considered to represent living continuity with Muhammad, essentially divinity personified. The Shah quite literally was powerless in contrast to the authority of Imam Khomeini although Khomeini styled himself as the "caretaker." The Shi'a eventually evolved a large and powerful clergy who function as an intermediary between God and man. This role allowed them to assume a range of perquisites not present in Sunni Islam. Khomeini's tomb will accordingly become a shrine of adulation while a Saudi leader will be buried in an unmarked desert grave because it would be an unseemly encroachment on divine authority to be an object of reverence in death.

Nevertheless, not only Islamic activists, but also Muslims of diverse persuasions found themselves in concurrence on a wide range of issues during the 1970s and 1980s. All were agreed, for example, that the "West," a general category in which Islamic conservatives curiously lump the Soviet Union, had committed grievous assaults on the region. Among other issues, they were accused of its literal subdivision, including the ceding of Palestine; exacerbation of disputes among Muslim states; appropriation of strategic regional resources; and destabilization through the forces of modernization and industrialization.

True, Arab nationalist leaders had always placed considerable emphasis on independence of any Arab territory from foreign influence and control. Syria's historical complaints about Turkey's possession of Hatay and Iraq's claims to "Arabistan" early in the Iran-Iraq war exemplify this. However, it is precisely Syria's permission to allow Iranian activists to enter Lebanon and their own occupation of Lebanese territory during the 1980s that has led to the perception among Arabs that an era has passed. These acts are seen as setting a precedent which encourages interference by Arabs in the affairs of neighboring Arab states.

By contrast, Islamic activists could literally talk in a popular vernacular about how the political space of the community had been violated. They could point out that there once had been and, indeed still was, a sacred time which bound the community. In the past, they noted that Arab achievements were associated with the Islamic empire. Now, Arab historians and writers marked time by referring to failed relations with the Western world, such as interference by Western powers in the early twentieth century. In more recent years, they even used the dates marking a succession of Israeli-Arab wars to discuss the political and social evolution of the Arab-Muslim world. Notably, Israel's bombing of the Iraqi nuclear reactor, literally termed "technological imperialism," and its invasion of Lebanon in the early 1980s were not viewed as isolated events in the region. These acts brought cries of outrage from Arabs throughout the region, including Egypt, who perceived this as an assault on their own integrity. Yet, Arab nationalist leaders, many of whom had a range of pro-Western contacts, were seemingly impotent.

Both Islamic activists and disgruntled Arab youth accused indigenous leaders, who were perceived of allowing this sacrilege, of complicity. In addition, these leaders were blamed for a host of new dilemmas: inadequate educational and manpower strategies leading to unemployment, new groups of marginal men, and dependence on foreign labor; inadequate infrastructure development accelerating pressures in already compromised cities; and unchecked environmental

degradation. There were even more serious accusations. Petro-power was portrayed as a myth and, as the gap between rich and poor states continued to widen, once powerful concepts of unity were decried as empty slogans. All told, Islamic activists argued, Arab nationalism had not only failed to achieve equality, but exacerbated the existing and profound fragmentation in the region. In the ultimate paradox, defensive Arab nationalists had no new solution at hand. Many travelled the full arc of the pendulum to opt for the Islamic paradigm which, at least in theory, had all the answers.

### **The State: Visionary Futures**

Arabism and Islam are so deeply rooted in historical memory that some wonder if Middle Easterners can have an “unobstructed” vision for the future. That is, are those who do *not* forget history, eternally condemned to repeat it? The ceaseless convulsions of Lebanon and the Sudan—which revolve precisely around the old issues of pluralism, the search for unity, and power sharing—suggest this. The inconclusive end to the Iran-Iraq war, if anything, has further obscured the future. Neither Islam nor Arabism has been fully legitimized as a political ideology. Yet, both have staunch, implacable advocates. Pluralism and the search for unity continue.

Only “the state,” just decades ago an alien import, can be said to have assumed *de facto* credibility in the aftermath of the Iran-Iraq war. Indeed, the unresolved debate about “legitimacy,” so integral to modern Middle East social and political dialogue, may now shift to an entirely new plane. If it is redefined as the search for “productivity,” the state as a vehicle of change is ideally suited. In the past, many Arab governments felt that securing and maintaining power were sufficient criteria for justifying rule. If nothing else, the Islamic revolution in Iran proved that a false assumption.

Nonetheless, states also confront serious long-term challenges, requiring both individual and regional strategies. The Middle East’s population, for example, continues to

grow at a rate which even now overtakes the ability of present governments, but which will shortly outstrip the resources of the natural environment. Critical resources such as water, scarce even now, will not be sufficient to maintain minimal standards in the quality of life. The range of popular demands will increase, not diminish.

Meanwhile, few vehicles of political participation that can effect social and economic change have been legally institutionalized to date, while Islam can be adapted as a clandestine political vehicle under any circumstance. Will governments feel the pressure to allow more freedom in the political marketplace, allowing Arab nationalist and other secular groups to compete, in order to achieve a broader base of support? Elections in Jordan, as one example, suggest this. What is definitely clear to all is that the state will literally have to validate itself as a political paradigm in order to survive.

An associated challenge arises from increasing economic disparities among Middle Eastern states and between what a Muslim observer has characterized the anomaly of Arab states which possess wealth, but no technology; military power, but no influence. As these disparities widen, old political slogans about equality will become more discredited. Already, formerly antagonistic regimes—hereditary, republican, and military—are trying to overcome traditional prejudices as they continue the search for securing unity and establishing legitimacy. However, coalitions are unlikely to be successful unless they, too, focus on productivity. All Arab states had achieved independence by the late-1970s, thus satisfying a primary requirement for membership in the Arab League, but meanwhile each has sustained enormous economic, social, and political change. Unless the League can adapt to these changing circumstances, which inevitably means modifying its charter or revising the concept of the Arab collectivity, Arab states will find it increasingly difficult to reach unanimity on a range of issues. Some privately contemplate the death of the League. More pragmatic subregional associations—such as the Gulf Cooperation Council, the Arab Cooperation Council, and Arab Maghreb Union—one of which arose in 1981 and the other two only as

recently as 1989, demonstrate that Middle East leaders are groping for more realistic, flexible solutions to a multiplicity of common problems.

Relations with the West will continue to be suspect, albeit schizophrenic, since Western technology is highly desired. It is difficult to make predictions about state-to-state relations because of a plethora of variables. However, as United States involvement with Israel has deepened, Arab-Muslim states are actively pursuing stronger bonds with Europe and Third World countries in Asia and Latin America.

Although not widely discussed in public, the Persian-Shi'a schism will remain sensitive in the Arab-Muslim world. Iranian Shi'a, disgruntled because the holiest Islamic cities are under Saudi control, have repeatedly disrupted the pilgrimage since the Islamic revolution. In 1987, some 400 persons were killed in pro-Iranian, anti-Saudi clashes. Not even the death of Khomeini has dimmed Iranian fervor. In September 1989 the Saudis beheaded some 16 individuals, including 10 of Iranian origin, for their complicity in planting bombs during the annual pilgrimage. It was revealed that they had been trained and financed by Iran. In November 1989, the last remaining Saudi embassy official in Beirut was killed by a group identified as the pro-Iranian, Islamic Jihad.

Whether it is adequate to the challenge, the state nevertheless bears the onus of accommodation, because Islam and Arabism will not soon disappear. They will assume new form and substance in the changing realities of the region. Dilemmas inherent to this century and the gauntlet delivered to hitherto unquestioned political caveats will continue to exacerbate the competition between Islam and Arabism, their quest for political platforms and supporters, and the credibility of all other claimants, including the state. Visions of the future, especially when they are sacred and apocalyptic, can never be entirely freed of historical, emotive baggage. Even if Islamic political activism and pan-Arabism diminish in their intensity, they will endure as subtle, formative forces in all aspects of life. Indigenous inhabitants are fully aware that these influences have profound resonance in their lives. At the



same time, these forces act like invisible sentinels in the mind, standing ready to cast a long shadow as unconscious motivators of political behavior.

### Notes

1. *National Geographic*, vol. 119, no. 1 (January 1961), p. 84.
2. Michel Foucault, quoted in translation from Keith Michael Baker, "Memory and Practice: Politics and the Representation of the Past in Eighteenth-Century France," *Representations* 11 (Summer 1985), p. 134.
3. Arab League members are Algeria, Bahrain, Djibouti, Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Libya, Mauritania, Morocco, Oman, Palestine, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Somalia, Sudan, Syria, Tunisia, United Arab Emirates, and Yemen (North and South Yemen united in 1990).
4. Hourani, *Minorities in the Arab World* (Oxford University Press, 1947), pp. 1-3.
5. The fourth orthodox khalifa to succeed the Prophet Muhammad was Ali b. Abi Talib, the Prophet's son-in-law and cousin. He was assassinated in A.D. 661 at al-Kufa and buried nearby where the city of al-Najaf arose. It is Ali who is considered the first Imam of the Shi'a. In A.D. 680, his son, Imam Husain, was also "martyred" at Karbala, near al-Najaf. It is his demise in battle that has come to symbolize the split between Sunni and Shi'a Islam. The most important Shi'a festival—Ashura—commemorates the martyrdom of Imam Husain. Of the twelve Imams revered by Shi'a, it is of note that half of them either died in Iraq or while travelling there. Further, it is al-Najaf where Ayatollah Khomeini chose to reside from approximately 1965 to 1978, sometime after his exile from Iran to Turkey and prior to his expulsion from Iraq to France and the start of the Islamic revolution in 1979.
6. *New York Times*, August 15, 1986, p. 5.
7. Oded Yinon, *Kivunim*, no. 14 (February 1982). See also an analysis in the *Wall Street Journal*, December 8, 1982, p. 34.
8. *Newsweek*, July 26, 1982, p. 32.
9. Correspondence with the author on 21 December 1989.
10. Three classic articles on shu'ubiya movements are H.A.R. Gibb, "The Social Significance of the Shu'ubiya," *Studies on the Civilization of Islam* (Beacon Press, 1962), pp. 62-73; Ignaz

Goldziher, *Muslim Studies*, vol. 1 (1967), pp. 137-73; and Roy P. Mottahedeh, "The Shu'ubiya Controversy and the Social History of Early Islamic Iran, *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, vol. 7, no. 2 (1976), pp. 161-82.

11. Fouad Ajami, *The Vanishing Imam: Musa al Sadr and the Shia of Lebanon* (Cornell University Press, 1986), pp. 5-6.

12. Refer to H.A.R. Gibb, *Mohammedanism* (Oxford University Press, 1969) for details on the congregational aspects of Islam.

13. Death incurred on jihad elevates one to status of martyr, entitling immediate entrance to paradise. Some feel that in the circumstance where an individual knowingly accepts a mission that will almost certainly result in death, it is considered a "suicide" which is unlawful in Islam. Others, such as Khomeini, contend suicide missions are the highest form of sacrifice and therefore lawful.

14. These excerpts, portions of lengthier statements, are found in *The New York Times*, July 23, 1988, p. 5 and *The Washington Post*, July 19, 1988, p. A15.

15. Hamid H. Kizilbash, "The Islamic Conference: Retrospect and Prospect," in *Arab Studies Quarterly* (Spring 1982), p. 144.

16. Abdel Hamid Abdel-Ghani, "Islam's 'Revival': What Impact on the Middle East" in *Trialogue* (October 1980), p. 30.

17. Bernard Lewis, *The Political Language of Islam* (University of Chicago Press, 1988), pp. 3 and 117.

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