



FAILINGS OF POLITICAL ISLAM

How the Arab World Lost a Chance to Reconcile a Faith's Role
in Society and Secular Modernity

By Tarek Osman

Political Islam is in crisis. Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood, the oldest and largest Islamist organization operating in the Arab World, is banned in Egypt and designated a terrorist organization in the most influential Arab countries. Tunisia's Ennahda Movement, arguably the Islamist group in the region with the most developed political thinking, lost the parliamentary election in October 2014 and has been repeatedly forced to distance itself from the militant Islamists now threatening Tunisia. Morocco's Justice and Development Party, known as PJD, may be the first Islamist party to lead a governing coalition in the country, but its leaders well understand the monarchy's supreme position in the kingdom's political system.

Today, it is the extremely violent Islamist groups who are demonstrating the most impact. Jihadist organizations in Iraq and Syria control a geographical area larger than some European countries, wreaking havoc throughout the Middle East in the name of the religion. They are trying to revive a seventh-century state in the second decade of the twenty-first century, yet without the moral, historical, and cultural features that had made the original one a seed for a rich civilization. For many, this is a surreal phenomenon. For others, it is the result of decades of lethargy, intellectual decline, and failing socioeconomic policies in large parts of the Islamic World and notably in the Arab region.

In this evolution of politicized religion, Islam itself has become suspect. Large sections of today's highly connected observers, especially in the West, have come to see Islam as a religion that tolerates, if not embodies, violence. Economics aside, fear of Muslims is at the heart of the anti-immigration sentiment across Europe. There is a strong feeling in many quarters that Islam is an intellectual opponent of humanism and liberalism.

The most venerable Islamic institutions, the seats of theological learning, have so far failed to address these

◀ Islamic scholar Jamal Al-Din Al-Afghani (1838-1897). *Wikimedia Commons*

challenges. It does not help that the thinking found in such places has been shaped by the heritage of the last ten centuries, a period in which they were not subjected to the social pressures for change that Western religious institutions had faced. The result: the largest, richest, and most prominent Islamic institutions continue to inhabit an intellectual world that has not changed much in the last three hundred years.

The Rational Religion

The contemporary failures of political Islam stem from the struggle over the past hundred and fifty years to find a common ground between Islam and modernity—not with the tenets of the belief, the rituals, or the values associated with the religion, but rather the political, legislative, and social roles that Islam came to play in society and that many believe are integral to the essence of the religion.

In the past ten centuries, as the Arabian Peninsula, Persia, the eastern Mediterranean, North Africa, and parts of southern Europe and Asia Minor became the boundaries of an Islamic World, Islam emerged as the most influential social determinant in these “Islamic lands.” Despite different understandings of Islam that appeared in each of these places and that helped shape very different cultures, Islam (or how it came to be interpreted in each region) was the decisive factor in legitimizing political rule, organizing society, passing laws, and identifying the state (any state) as Islamic.

This changed in the early- to mid-nineteenth century. The arrival of European colonial powers in the Middle East exposed to Arab and Muslim publics the shocking disparity between their knowledge and means of power and that of the Westerners. This realization triggered a determination, at least within some of the elite, to escape that lethargy and catch up with the West. Throughout the nineteenth century, the Mohammed Ali dynasty in Egypt, several Ottoman sultans such as Mahmoud II, Persian shahs such as Naser Al-Din, and North African rulers such as Tunisia’s Hussein Bey modernized their armies, overhauled agrarian systems, introduced modern manufacturing, and supported changes in social norms.

The reforms, which included the general introduction of modern European-style education, diluted the political and social role of religious institutions, weakened the economic influence of religious endowments, and resulted in the replacement of religious authorities in royal courts, political circles, and judiciary positions by secular professionals. Modernity was unmistakably curtailing the role of Islam in society.

Not surprisingly, authorities in major Islamic institutions condemned this modernity. They opposed introducing secular education, gender mixing, and Western forms of financing; translating Western works of art and importing cultural phenomena such as theater; and moving away from traditional ruling and governance systems. These were apostasies to be rejected, and if need be, fought.

Some religious scholars, however, understood that the wave of modernity was unstoppable and indeed crucial for the development of their societies. They argued that modernity does not negate Islam. For them, Islam was a “rational religion” that had saved the Arabs from ignorance. In their view, the social manifestations that were superimposed on Islam in the previous centuries were creations of local cultures, poor interpretations of the religion’s rules and teachings, and deviations of reasoning. The most influential strand of this line of thinking was led by Jamal Al-Din Al-Afghani and later by his disciple Mohammed Abdou. They promoted a view of Islam as a “message” that had inspired a rich civilization, added to the human accumulation of knowledge and reservoir of culture, brought peoples from vastly different backgrounds together, borrowed from other traditions (from the Hellenic to the Persian), and nurtured tolerant and often areligious philosophies such as those of Al-Razi and Ibn Sina (Avicenna). This school framed Islam as a “reference” that was supposed to guide Muslim societies as they embarked on their inevitable (and in this view needed) modernization. The objective was to welcome in Muslim societies the tools (including the thinking) that had allowed the West to progress, without losing the religious and cultural features that defined Islamic identity.

Al-Afghani and Abdou became celebrity intellectuals in parts of the Islamic World. But their ideas never gained wide appeal, or acquired a huge momentum within the largest sections of Muslim-majority societies. Though in the late nineteenth century Al-Afghani had briefly been a close advisor to the Ottoman sultan Abdel Hamid II, this school of thought never had any serious state sponsorship. The ideas of Al-Afghani, Abdou, and their followers, thus ensconced in intellectual ivory towers, and disconnected from the lives of the vast majority of Muslims, remained limited in their impact. The school failed to reach, let alone convince, a critical mass of Muslims and convert them to its view of how Islam can be situated in a modern (or modernizing) society.

Another modernization project saw no place at all for Islam in society. In Turkey in the 1920s and 1930s, Kamal Atatürk sought to purge all of Islam’s political and social manifestations from the new state he created on the ruins of the Ottoman caliphate. For Atatürk and his followers, Islam was at best a faith that individuals could respect and practice in their private lives as long as it exerted no influence on the state or maintained a conspicuous presence in society; at worst, its heritage was an obstacle to progress. In Tunisia three decades later, in the 1960s, Habib Bourguiba put forward similar thinking, but with a twist. Bourguiba did not position his modernization program in opposition to Islam. He did not argue that society should sever its links to Islamic heritage altogether. Instead, he emphasized that Islam was, at heart, a faith and a set of values; that Muslim societies needed the inspiration from these values to escape the lethargy of past centuries, but that they should not tolerate the religion’s political

and social manifestations. For him, the “bigger jihad” (self-exertion) was in embracing the means that would allow Muslims to catch up with the world. And if that meant sacrificing the features that most Muslims associate with Islam’s presence in society (from sharia law to praying and fasting during Ramadan), then that was an acceptable price.

Atatürk’s state and Bourguiba’s regime lasted for decades. But they proved extremely lacking as political models. The electoral successes of Turkish Islamist parties from the early 1990s up to the present time demonstrates that Atatürk’s state was a top-down imposition of a system by a highly secular elite over a society in which large segments longed to express their piousness and connect their centuries-old Islamic heritage with the modernization they were willing to embrace. The uprising in Tunisia in late 2010 and the subsequent rise of the Islamist Ennahda Movement betrayed the rot that country’s secular state had become, and revealed that large sections of middle-class and poor Tunisians continued to see a key role for Islam in their lives, society, and state. The lesson of Turkey and Tunisia is clear: it is impossible to eradicate Islam’s political and social manifestations from a Muslim-majority society.

Some Arab nationalists sought an approach between the school of Al-Afghani and Abdou and the experiment of Atatürk. The Arab nationalist project, especially in its heyday under Egypt’s Gamal Abdel Nasser, was centered on the idea of a secular, socialist renaissance that would “free the Arab World,” bring social equality to masses of poor Arabs, and “resurrect the Arab will.” Islam hardly featured in this vision. But the faith and Islamic heritage were nonetheless conveyed as “the civilizational umbrella” overarching Arab nationalism. The wording was intentionally vague; it left it to the nationalist leaders (or their propagandists) to promote or marginalize Islam as they saw fit. Still, the approach was an attempt at advancing modernization without rejecting society’s connection with Islam. Unlike in Atatürk’s model, Islam was neither the intellectual opponent of modernization nor the obstacle to progress. But, unlike in the Al-Afghani–Abdou model, Islam was not the main identity to be preserved nor the framework against which new ideas would be measured.

This approach, too, failed. Military defeats and poor economic performance aside, the variants of Arab nationalism (Nasserite or otherwise) proved unable to deliver on the huge expectations stirred in the 1950s and 1960s. The crushing of the dream weakened the notion of Arabness. It created a colossal, and for many a painful, vacuum in the Arab psyche. Nothing was more effective at filling it than a return to “our real identity”: Islam.

Several factors helped. The exponential increase in oil prices in the 1970s triggered a huge wave of migration from non-oil exporting Arab countries to the Gulf states. Millions of Egyptians, Jordanians, Moroccans, Palestinians, Syrians, and Sudanese went to Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and the United Arab Emirates at a time when these countries were much more conservative than they are today. This coincided with a

gradual but unmistakable change in the role of the state in poor Arab countries. These states were increasingly unable to meet the obligations they had assumed in the 1950s and 1960s: free education and healthcare, and highly subsidized food and energy.

In the span of two decades, these developments caused a transformative change in the composition of the middle classes of several large Arab countries such as Egypt and Syria. Traditionally conservative social groups were climbing the social ladder; strict values (and religious doctrines such as the Saudi-funded Wahhabism) were exported from the Gulf to the eastern Mediterranean and North Africa. The look and feel of Arab societies were being altered: from a dramatic rise in the percentage of veiled women to conspicuous changes (many would say deterioration) in the quality of Arab culture, art, and entertainment. Some Arab regimes, most notably that of President Anwar Sadat in Egypt, gambled on the conservative religious trend to weaken the nationalist legacies of their predecessors and rivals and consolidate their legitimacy. They empowered Islamist groups in universities, professional syndicates, and in the mass media at the expense of secular Arab nationalists.

The fall in 1979 of the shah of Iran's highly Westernized regime in a fiery Islamic revolution inspired hard-line Muslims to dream of removing secular political systems and returning society to the "righteous path." The Soviet Union's invasion of Afghanistan, also in 1979, provided the Islamist movement with tens of thousands of battle-hardened fighters. Several countries, led by the United States, worked to turn the Soviet adventure into a struggle in which Islamic fighters fought to expel the "atheist Soviet Union from Islamic Afghanistan." A decade after the Soviets withdrew, those victorious fighters returned to their home countries to use their way of jihad—guerrilla war—against the "infidel regimes soiling the Islamic lands."

All of this gave strong momentum to longstanding Islamist political groups like the Muslim Brotherhood as well as to militant organizations and militias that emerged in the Arab World in the 1980s and 1990s. None of these groups, however, was concerned with putting forward thinking that addresses the challenge of reconciling Islam's social and political manifestations with secular modernity. On the contrary, they seemed to represent different versions of Islamism that negated the experience of Arabs and Muslims in adapting to modernity over the previous century.

Islamists who opted to work through existing political systems managed to build solid constituencies; establish expansive support and services networks catering to the poor and the lower middle classes; and even in some cases develop large and sophisticated economic and financial empires and media platforms. But their Islamism was primarily concerned with social features (for example more mosques and less gender mixing) and legislation (strengthening the influence of Islamic jurisprudence on civil and criminal laws, opposing modern financial products, and resisting social reforms, for example in women's rights).

Militant jihadists, for their part, worked toward overthrowing regimes. They also sought to bring about social revolutions to Islamicize their societies (in the way they defined Islam and its political and social manifestations). For them, modernity was an affront not only to their Islamic heritage but to Islam itself. Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, the militants consisted of bands of jihadists fighting isolated and unsuccessful guerrilla wars in different parts of the Arab World. They justified their acts of often extreme violence on the notion that if sections of society were unwilling to adopt, implement, and live by the rules of Islam (as the militants defined them), then they were effectively rejecting Islam and becoming apostates. The Egyptian Sayyid Qutb, arguably the godfather of contemporary militant Islamism, viewed these Muslims as living in *jahiliya* (ignorance) as the entire world did until the Prophet Mohammed brought God's message to mankind. Qutb's thinking became the intellectual framework for those bent on fighting ruling regimes and their own people for "rejecting God's rule."

The Islamists, whether working within existing systems or using violence to overthrow them, have failed. Neither approach has succeeded in taking control of a single Arab country. By the early 2000s, all Arab countries seemed secure under hereditary monarchies or secular military-backed republican regimes. Most Arab Islamist groups became aware that to have any serious presence in politics, even at the margins, they needed to assure ruling regimes that they posed no threat and were willing to operate by the rules like other legal or tolerated opposition groups. They began to cautiously contest elections, making sure that they did not overly mobilize their constituencies or flaunt their financial resources lest they trigger an anti-Islamist backlash. The situation was different for the jihadists. Their repeated confrontations with the secular regimes (most notably in Egypt and Algeria throughout the 1990s) left them decimated and unable to operate. Some of them immigrated to Europe, where they used the protections afforded by political liberty to launch media campaigns against rulers back home. Others relocated to militant-friendly strongholds such as Afghanistan and Pakistan, where they grouped into new structures such as Al-Qaeda.

Arab Awakening

Misrule, corruption, and economic stagnation eventually took a toll on the secular regimes of the Arab World. Some of them were quickly swept aside by the uprisings that began in Tunisia in late 2010 and spread throughout the Middle East. The so-called Arab Spring started a decisive political and strategic transformation of the region. It catapulted Islamist groups to the upper echelons of power. Islamist groups came to control parliaments in Egypt, Kuwait, Morocco, Tunisia, and to a lesser extent, Libya; in the case of Egypt, they ascended to the presidency.

The positioning and rhetoric of these groups changed substantially. Since the mid-2000s, they had begun to put forward Islamism as a frame of reference for their societies. This meant taking lighter-touch approaches on how traditional interpretations of Islamic jurisprudence should influence politics, legislation, and economics. Several prominent Islamic scholars, most notably Rachid Ghannouchi, leader of the Ennahda Movement in Tunisia, repeatedly invoked the compatibility of Islamic jurisprudence with the tenets of democracy as they are understood in the West. By effectively accepting the notion of secular states governed by man-made laws, some scholars seemed to have resolved the dilemma of dual loyalty to the Ummah (the global community of Muslims) and to one's own nation-state. The Muslim Brotherhood put forward social and economic initiatives inspired by case studies from Brazil, Indonesia, South Africa, and Turkey. Here, the Islamists were (and without challenging ruling regimes) positioning themselves as providers of social support networks serving the poor and needy and, subtly, as potential managers of their countries. Increasingly the leadership of these groups seemed forward-looking: traditional Islamic scholars were replaced by younger leaders drawn from the Islamists' business and social services networks. Several Arab Islamist groups selected young females as spokespersons. The Islamists took every opportunity to put themselves and their organizations online, adapting to the immense social changes brought by the revolution in communication technologies.

All of this improved the standing of the Islamists at home and abroad. Islamists seemed to want to transcend the divide between Islamism and the secular modernity that their societies had experienced in the previous hundred and fifty years. Their ascendance into government through free elections after the Arab uprisings marked the beginning of a promising new attempt at resolving the Islam–secular modernity conundrum.

The promise proved short lived. Most of the Islamists exhibited inexperience, even incompetence, in governance. They found themselves having to handle severe social problems and economic challenges after decades of mismanagement, ineptitude, and corruption on the part of ousted regimes. Some Islamists such as Morocco's PJD and Kuwait's Islamic Constitutional Movement did not envisage changing their countries' political systems. In Tunisia, Ennahda was more ambitious. Coming to power in arguably the freest election in the Arab World in the previous half-century encouraged Ennahda's ambitions to try to merge its Islamist thought (influenced by its leaders' intellectual work in the previous twenty years as well as by decades of exile in Britain, France, and Italy) with the country's secular heritage. In Egypt, the Muslim Brotherhood went further. It sought to control key state institutions, widen its economic influence to the most lucrative sectors in the country, and imbue legislation and public life with assertively Islamist tones and connotations. The Muslim Brotherhood rise

was accompanied by an air of imperiousness, having finally taken the helm of power after decades in the wilderness of political repression and exile.

But the Islamists coming to power resulted in a deep social polarization. Across the Arab World, large segments of society became apprehensive about what they perceived to be an Islamicization project. Especially in countries with rich secular heritages such as Egypt, Morocco, and Tunisia, many feared that the Islamists' rise would bring not merely gradual changes in the political and economic structures but a complete transformation of the identities, social dynamics, and look and feel of societies. The fears were only heightened when austere, apolitical, and once marginalized groups such as the Salafists (those who revere the *salaf*—the predecessors, a reference to the earliest communities of Muslims in the seventh century) emerged as a social and political power to be reckoned with.

To be sure, many Arab secularists stoked the polarization. For them, the rise of the Islamists was a painful experience. The older generations of secularists saw it as the final blow in a succession of failures throughout the past half-century in which they were used and abused by regimes run by monarchists, Arab nationalists, and militarists. Young secular activists felt that they played a significant role in triggering the Arab uprisings only to find themselves facing Islamist groups that were by far richer, much better organized, and enjoyed significantly larger social constituencies. As the secularists were dealt one electoral defeat after another, many felt they were fighting in an unfair game.

The social polarization was exacerbated, of course, by the fears of religious minorities. For some years even before the ascent of the Islamists, Arab Christians and other minorities looked with trepidation on emerging trends: the strengthening of the role of sharia in civil and penal codes, constitutions brought into closer conformity with Islamic law, the emergence of known militant Islamists in political life, unmistakably strong Islamist rhetoric in domestic discourse and in foreign policy, and a palpable feeling that diversity and “un-Islamic” lifestyles were becoming unwelcome.

The fears were hardly quelled by the spread of shockingly violent jihadist groups in the region. Offshoots of Al-Qaeda, such as Jabhat Al-Nusra and the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS), espoused more or less the same ideology as the militant jihadists of the previous few decades. But their resources became significantly larger at a time when the Arab state system that emerged in the aftermath of the First World War and collapse of the Ottoman caliphate was finally crumbling. The demise of central rule in Iraq and Syria undermined the nation-state in the eastern Mediterranean, gave space for sectarianism to flourish, and allowed non-state actors—and especially the militant Islamist groups—to entrench themselves in parts of the region.

The chaos convinced national security establishments in the Arab World that Islamists were part of a larger effort (some are convinced of a “conspiracy”) to redesign the region: divide some countries, redraw the borders of others, and crucially,

undermine the secular Arab nation-state. For these Arab national security establishments, fighting the Islamization project in all of its forms—whether in politics or on the battlefield—became a national mission to “save” their countries.

Five years after the Arab Spring, political Islam in the region, despite a brief moment of ascendancy, has returned to its earlier status: marginalized, mistrusted, or persecuted. The potential for a reconciliation of Islam with secular modernity has gone unfulfilled.

In Tunisia, social polarization, the spread of Salafism, and the coalescing of secular forces from the old Bourguiba establishment against Ennahda forced the Islamist movement to hand over power to a technocratic government. Ennahda’s political opponents formed a formidable political bloc that received significant financial backing from inside and outside Tunisia and secured victory in the country’s 2014 presidential and parliamentary elections. Ennahda retreated from its ambition of promoting its progressive views about how Islam can be a frame of reference for a modernizing society, and became concerned with defending its ideology and differentiating it, to any listener, from the militant Islamism that has spread in Tunisia. In Egypt, the Islamist–secularist divide evolved into a confrontation between Egyptianness (the traditional understanding of the nation’s identity and way of life as held by the middle and upper middle classes) and what large social segments perceived as an aggressive Islamicization project led by the Muslim Brotherhood. Large demonstrations in the summer of 2013 championed a military intervention that ejected the Muslim Brotherhood from power.

“Islam Is the Solution”

The experience of the past five years has made reconciliation between Islam’s social and political manifestations and secular modernity even more problematic. For many Arabs, these manifestations have now become associated with Islamists and the notion of political Islam, which they have come to mistrust as rarely before. From the perspective of the Islamists, the rejections they experienced, and the fierce and often bloody crackdowns to which they were subjected, clearly showed that large segments of society (including self-described liberals) were willing to sacrifice democracy to deny them power. A desire for revenge has been gaining ground within some Islamist groups, and especially amongst their young cadres. In this view, large sections of Arab societies are not opposed to Islamists but to Islam itself.

This view drives many Islamists to draw the wrong lessons from the Arab Spring. Highly influential Islamists now reduce the history of the last century and a half to a mere confrontation with the secularists. To them, the Arab uprisings signaled the failure of Arab liberals and socialists, and marked the beginning of the Islamists’ age. Secularists had ruled the Arab World (and Turkey and Iran) since the region’s first encounter with modernity in the nineteenth century, the reasoning goes, and they had

failed. The displacement of Islam as the basis for political legitimacy, and relegating it to being a mere component of a rich social fabric, was an affront to God's rule. To the Islamists, it was now the time for them to enter power and correct what had gone wrong. Their rise to power was the dawn of a new age of Islam. When the Islamists instead found themselves ejected from power, they viewed it as a strike against Islamic rule and even a rejection of Islam. Few of their leaders paused to consider why large sections of the Arab public had turned against them so rapidly. The rhetoric focused on the Islamists' confrontation with the powerful nationalist institutions that fought them. They seemed oblivious to legitimate concerns that accompanied the rise of the Islamists, such as deep social polarization, weakened national security, and lack of preparedness in confronting acute economic challenges.

Equally problematic, especially after what appeared to have been a serious evolution of Islamist thinking before coming to power, is that the Islamists in ascendance did not provide any answers to some of the most difficult questions Islamism has always triggered. Islamists have always looked at episodes in Islamic history as ideal epochs. The first three decades in Islamic history have always been regarded by most Muslims as the purest era of the "rightly guided" leaders. Other Islamists look at the ninth century (the Abbasid dynasty, when the Islamic caliphate was, arguably, the most powerful and richest state in the world, and the preeminent center for science and the arts) as the "golden age" of the Islamic civilization. Islamists who invoke Islamism's acceptance of "others" (and especially Christians and Jews) cite Islamic rule in Iberia (the Andalusian era) as an example of how Islamic regimes could (and should) maintain an inclusive and harmonious society. Many Islamist thinkers reflect on the second half of the nineteenth century as the time when Islamist reformers (such as Al-Afghani and Abdou) put forward ideas that incorporated modernity without sacrificing the "Islamic nature" of the state and the "Islamic identity" of society.

The problem is the Islamists' backward-looking perspective. Apart from the romanticizing of these eras (which were hardly examples of utopian social harmony), they all were the products of social, political, economic, and cultural circumstances that are vastly different from the ones that have shaped today's Middle East. Invoking these "ideal" historical epochs could, at best, inspire, but at worst, mislead. In reality, they do not correspond at all to the present. These, and other episodes of Islamic history, will always be integral parts of Islamic heritage; they will always be important anchors of the cultures of societies with Muslim majorities; they will continue to enrich the identity of anyone associating him or herself with Islam (as a faith and/or a cultural background). But they will not guide political and economic systems in today's world.

Islamists also continue to clutch to a naïveté that is inconsistent with their long and rich experience. Many Islamists invoke *al-Imam al-fadel* (the righteous leader),

al-madina al-fadila (the ideal city), and the notion that “Islam is the solution.” Several Islamist groups continue to use these slogans to mobilize the public, especially in elections. In the early twentieth century, some founding fathers of political Islam derived these terms from medieval schools of Islamic philosophy and tried to imbue them with meanings that relate to twentieth-century Arab societies. These attempts had some merit in the 1920s and 1930s. Perhaps they were acceptable in the 1970s when Islamism was recovering from its marginalization and persecution under Arab nationalism. They could have been passable in the 1990s when Islamism was refashioning its thinking. But after the Islamists’ long experience in the last eight decades, and especially the serious social turmoil they have recently been embroiled in, such emotionally charged terms have become meaningless, if not delusional. These terms could be effective sound bytes, but they, and the thinking behind them, have nothing to offer to societies confronting serious social and economic difficulties in need of tangible and implementable solutions. Today, Islamists, let alone the jihadists, lack the intellectual tools (and perhaps the will) for another attempt at resolving the Islamism–secularism dilemma.

Islamism in the modern age thus seems to have come full circle, back to where it was in the nineteenth century. Some Islamists are looking back to the “tenets of the rational religion,” trying to merge them with modernity, openness to change, and highly flexible understandings of what an Islamic frame of reference means. Others are looking back in anger, rejecting modernity, seeing secularism as a threat destroying Islamic heritage, and insisting on a combative Islamism that rejects moving forward and repudiates the “other.” Today, as it was a hundred and fifty years ago, the Arab World, the heart of the Islamic World, is undergoing an immense political and social transformation. The difference is that today’s transformation is significantly bloodier, and therefore more intense and painful. Also today’s Arab secularists have by far less respect for genuine liberalism than that of their intellectual predecessors a century ago. In this context, it is understandable that jihadism is the most potent form of Islamism operating today.

As a result, no serious attempt at solving the Islamism–modernism dilemma is in sight. Feelings are inflamed, societies are deeply polarized, the most promising Arab and Muslim youths are disillusioned, and large sections of the secularists and Islamists in Arab and Islamic societies are severely disconnected, eyeing each other with distrust, and often contempt.

Time will have to heal the wounds that have been opened in the past five years. It must be hoped that secularists will finally recognize that, irrespective of the level of force and oppression they employ, it is impossible to extinguish Islamism from Muslim-majority societies. It must be hoped, too, that new leaders will emerge within the Islamist camp, with innovative thinking that will have absorbed the Islamists’ multiple mistakes.