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## **Arab Contemporary Political Thought: Secularist or Theologist?**

**Conference by Georges Corm\***

The aim of this essay is to put into historical perspective Arab contemporary political thought in order to grasp its variety and richness, contrary to the present views held in the media and academia that of the existence of an invariant and indivisible “Arab mind”, supposedly exclusively structured by Moslem theology. It is a common perception that Arabs and more generally Moslems cannot accept secularism and separate religion from State and Society. Arab societies are thus condemned to remain estranged or alien to the modern world.

We will here try to show here the variety and diversity of Arab political thought within the larger horizon of the many ways that Arab culture has expressed itself. We will also identify the main factors that have contributed during the last decades to hide this very secular diversity and to focus exclusively on political Islam as being the core of the so called “Arab mind”.

### **Questioning key concepts and approaches to Arab contemporary thought**

#### *Seeking to grasp the Arab mind*

During the last thirty years many intellectual efforts have been devoted in academic circles to grasp the Arab mind. Identifying the supposed permanent structure of an Arab and/or a Moslem mind, as well as the determinants of its functioning, has been the topic of many books. In most cases, academic writers adopted an anthropological approach excluding the impact of political and geopolitical events on the functioning of Arab and/or Moslem mind. Rare are those who have questioned the validity of this type of approach as if Arabs and/or Moslems were a kind of lonely isolated tribe living far away from the evolution of the world, due to a self sustaining religious world of their own, i.e. the world of Islam. The famous French orientalist, André Miquel, defined the Moslem religion as being “insécable”, i.e. a material that could in no way be split or divided.

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This phenomenon has puzzled me for many years. In fact, it has not been exclusively confined to the analysis of the Arab and/or Moslem mind. During all the XIXth century and a large part of XXth century, this anthropological approach was also implemented to describe the “mind” or the “spirit” of other human groups. Thus the many references made in so many books and essays to “l’âme russe”, i.e. the Russian spirit or to the German or French or Italian mentality. The famous Russian writer and novelist, Dostoyevsky, has criticized in acute way in his “Journal d’un écrivain” (*The diaries of a writer*) the useless attempts of Western Europeans intellectuals to grasp the Russian soul.

The climax of this approach was that of Ernest Renan, the French famous and quite influential academic scholar. Renan developed a supposedly acute contrast between the Semite mind and the Aryan mind, both of which he defined lengthily. He opposed in many writings the “lourdeur de l’esprit sémitique” (i.e. the stodginess or headlock of the Semite mind) to the refinement and creativity of the Aryan mind. For Renan, Islam was the real incarnation of the Semitic mind; Judaism was excluded from it due to the fact that the ancient Hebrews invented the monotheistic faith; as for Christianity, according to him, it only became this “highly refined” religion when it was “aryanised” by Europe.

#### *Confusing Arab and Moslem culture*

More puzzling also to me has been this permanent confusion between the Arab and the Moslem mind. This confusion is not only attributable to Western scholars, but also to Arab scholars who adopted it as well. One of the most influential Arab intellectual on this front has been the Tunisian Hisham Djaït who popularized the concept of a long existing Arab-Islamic thought that continues according to him to characterize the behavior and values of modern Arabs. The other well known Arab intellectual, Mohammed Abed El-Jabiri, although writing extensively on the Arab mind, has in fact been describing the Moslem mind, maintaining the confusion between Arab culture and Moslem theology. As if the so called Arab mind can only be of a theological nature.

Before them the great British scholar from Lebanese origin, Albert Hourani, also tended to confine the Arabs to their Islamic identity and to draw a line between Arab Christians and Arab Moslems. He looked upon the first ones as brave secularist modernizers while the modernist aspirations of the reformists Arab Moslems would be naturally constrained by the heavy influence of Islam and its laws and jurisprudence (the famous “sharia”) on their mind. This thesis was taken to extremes by the late Hisham Sharabi in his famous book *Arab intellectuals and the West*. This wrong view continues to-day to be very influential to-day.

#### *The Western disenchantment with the Enlightenment philosophy*

It is true that nowadays concepts of religion, culture, ethnicity, civilization have become almost interchangeable. The emergence of cultural studies in the US during the last decades has contributed to the confusion. One should mention here the deep disenchantment that appeared since the seventies of last century about universalistic ideologies originating in the Enlightenment philosophy. It has generated a new

fascination towards the so called “return of religion” as a political and cultural factor in the world. It generated also a new fascination about both Islam and Judaism, thus generating more confusion between religion and culture. In addition, the emergence of new States pretending to be the representatives of these two monotheistic faith, has made it easier to bundle together culture and religion or to treat religion as an ethnic phenomenon dictating the mind and behavior of Jews and Moslems alike.

In the case of the Arabs, the confusion is made easier by the fact that Islam as a new monotheistic faith appeared in the Arabian Peninsula in the VIIth century of our era and the Koran was delivered to Prophet Mohammed in Arabic. Arabs became famous in history for receiving this new prophecy and for building two successive famous multiethnic and religious empires, that of the Umayyad (659-750) and then of the Abbasid. They did not, however, last for a very long time, as the Abbasid Empire entered in decline in the second part of the IXth century after the brilliant reign of the famous Haroun El Rachid (786-809) and that of Al Ma'mun (814-833), when Persians and Turks began to dismantle it and to create separate political entities. In 1055, Bagdad is conquered by Seljuk Turks and in 1258 is conquered and destroyed by the Mongols. Only in Egypt, the Fatimid Caliphate (909-1171) maintained an Arab political entity. Arab/Berber political entities in Andalusia and North Africa lasted longer, but either disappeared (as in Andalusia) or declined at the end of the XVth century paving the way to Ottoman domination, to the exception of Morocco.

Another reason for the confusion, as we will see, is the fact that when the modern Arab renaissance began after Napoleon Bonaparte expedition to Egypt, most new thinkers focused their attention on the need to reform Islam so as to adapt it to the requirements of the modern world as shaped by Europe. Three main issues became the center of attention, i.e. education, women status and State reform. It was assumed at the time that the way Islamic laws and values had degenerated and became ossified was responsible of the decay of the Arab societies and more largely Moslem societies outside the Arab World. This exclusive approach of under development and historical decay by the need of religious reform will bear heavy consequences as religion became the central focus point of discussion between various Arab thinkers.

Whatever are the causes of the confusion, what I will attempt to demonstrate here is that Arab culture and mind is much more than a religious universe or a theological structure of thought. My main argument here will be that the variety of cultural expressions existing inside the Arab world is much wider than it is perceived inside and outside world. In no way can it be identified as an exclusively religious culture in spite of the media and academic focus on the central place of Islam in the Arab world during the last decades.

### **The multiple roots of Arab culture and the modern interrogations of Arab political thought**

I will first remind that the roots of Arab culture are in poetry and the richness of the Arab language. Until to-day poetry is at the core of Arab culture. Old and new famous poets

are honored and celebrated everywhere in Arab societies. One should also remind that Arabs were important traders and were in contact with both the Persian and the Byzantine civilizations. They were present not only in the Arabian Peninsula, but also in Syria and the Mesopotamian Basin. There were a number of large tribes that had converted to Judaism or Christianity. Arab conquests in the VIIth century under the banner of the new Moslem monotheism were able to “arabize” the Levant where important Christian, Jewish and Zoroastrian populations did not convert to Islam. While Arab conquerors islamized North Africa where many Berbers tribes kept their own language and thus did not arabize. This is to say that Arabs were not a closed group characterized exclusively by a Bedouin mode of life. They were rather people well acquainted with the larger world inside which they were living.

When they built the two successive Umayyad (661-750) and Abbasid (750-1258) empires, the Arab Caliphs opened them to the main cultural influences existing around them, they integrated Christian and Jews in the new Islamic society that was in the making. Later they even opened it to Indian and Chinese influence through the expansion of Arab trade. What we could call the Arab Islamic civilization where sciences and philosophy, history, astronomy, geography and anthropology flourished was the consequence of a deep interaction between the Arab elite and the state of knowledge existing in other great civilizations. The Arabic language became the “lingua franca” of all intellectuals of whatever ethnic origins, theologians as well as scientists. Arabs were especially well acquainted with the Aramean-Syriac language and knowledge prevailing in most parts of the Levant and the Mesopotamian Basin.

On the basis of this historical evidence, how can we explain that Arab intellectual Renaissance that began in the early XIXth century has ended in the present state of affairs where religious arguments, quarrels and violence are deeply destabilizing so many Arab societies? There are many political, military and economic factors explaining this unfortunate evolution, both internal and external, which I will try to summarize here. My main concern, however, will be to demonstrate that Arab political thought is still very diverse and dynamic. Contrary to the image given by media and academic research, it has not been imprisoned in what I call an exclusively theological mind, but remains largely secular.

I will recall here the key book of Professor Michael Hudson on the Arab search for legitimacy (*Arabs in Search of legitimacy*). This search in fact continues to be a central preoccupation of most Arab intellectuals. It is due to the very complex problems intellectuals had encountered since the decline of the Ottoman Empire that climaxed by the end of the XIXth century and ended in its crumbling at the end of World War I. Since then Arab intelligentsia has been focusing on three main issues: (i) what did cause the under development and weakness of Arab societies? (ii) What is our identity? (iii) Why are we so disunited and unable to form a modern coherent nation that is respected by other nations? These three main questioning that characterized all political writings since the beginning of the XIXth century continue to be the object of soul searching until to day. The recent events since the beginning of year 2011 have contributed to increase it.

At the same time, the response to those three main political and cultural issues identified here continued to divide sharply Arab intellectual life.

In my view, due to international geopolitical events during the last half century, the very rich work of Arab secularist intellectuals have been largely ignored by Arab and Western media and academic circles. This was not previously the case at a time when world wide intellectual thought was largely opened to “progressive” way of thinking problems of the Third World, i.e. of developing countries liberated from colonial rule. Religion and theology were not on the forefront. Secular ways of thinking, either liberal or socialist or conservative, was dominating the world scene. Intellectuals as well as Head of States belonging to third world countries adhering to the Non Aligned Movement had an exclusively secular approach to fighting under development. Their preoccupation was to ascertain principles of international social and economic justice between nations, so as to narrow the enormous wealth gap between old industrialized countries and newly poor independent countries getting rid of direct Western domination of the world.

What did happen since then so that the Arab political and intellectual scene looks like an almost exclusive Islamic religious scene torn between moderate and radical Islam, making Arabs appear as being exclusively a kind of *Homo Islamicus*? This is where we need to detail the various currents of Arab political thought since the time of Muhammad Ali in Egypt at the beginning of the XIXth century. We will review these currents under the three main issues we have already identified. This will demonstrate how interlinked these issues are.

### **The three successive orientations of Arab political thought**

It is possible to distinguish three different successive orientations of Arab thought.

#### *The desire for modernity by religious reformists*

The first one begins with Sheikh Tahtawi views after his stay in France for four years. These views were expressed in a famous book titled “Paris Gold” that is the account of what he discovered during his four years stay in France from 1826 to 1830. As it is well known Tahtawi was a cleric who studied at the religious Azhar University in Cairo. He was marveled by all that he saw during his French stay. He attributed French progress and development mainly to an open liberal political system (the constitutional monarchy) but also to efforts put on people education, the improved status of women and to the love of sciences. He concluded that while in France Islam do not exist, however most people behave like good Moslems. While in contrast, in Egypt where Islam is so present he did not see any real Moslem. After his return from France, Tahtawi played in leading role in the Egyptian modernizing drive initiated by the reign of Mohammed Ali.

In fact, Tahtawi spread what I called “the modernity desire” not only in Egypt but in other Arab societies as well. He established a school of modernist thought embodied in the need for encompassing reforms, beginning with religious institutions and practice. In

Egypt, he was followed later by eminent scholars that began their intellectual formation at the Azhar University, like the famous Mohammed Abdou who became later Mufti of Egypt; but also the eminent Ahmad Amine, the courageous Ali Abderrazik who demonstrated that the Caliphate system was in no way related to any Koranic verse, and the famous Taha Hussein who did so much for education in Egypt. All of these great intellectuals saw no contradiction between modernity and Islam as the predominant religion of Arab societies. This was to be also the case of many religious scholars in other Arab societies like Kheyreddine Al Tounissi or the Algerian Emir Abdel Qader who fought bravely French occupation before being expelled from Algeria; when he settled in Damascus he became famous by his energetic intervention to protect Syrian Christians from massacres; and later the Algerian nationalist and religious scholar, Abdel Hamid Ben Badis.

This modernist movement found many followers in the society, both Moslems and Christians, in Egypt, Syria, Lebanon and Iraq that were not issued from a religious background. One can here evoke such influential personalities as Ahmad Lutfi Al Sayyed, a key intellectual figure in Egypt. He developed considerably the Egyptian press and was highly influential by his modernistic and secular aspirations. But many other intellectuals became famous during the XIXth century and the beginning of the XXth century, Moslems as well as Christians. In one of his most famous books, *Arab Thought in the Liberal Age*, the famous British orientalist scholar of Lebanese origin, Albert Hourani, made however a distinction between Christians and Moslem thinkers. The first ones according to him were more secular, as the others were constrained by the Islamic tradition making religion an essential element of State and society. He devoted certain pages of the book to the controversy between Mohammed Abdou and Antoun Farah about secularism. This allegation by Hourani will later become a canonical discourse in many other writings about Arab political thought. In particular, Hisham Sharabi devoted another well known book about the issue, *Arab Intellectuals and the West*, in which this essentialist approach is generalized based on the different religious origins of Arab intellectuals.

#### *Arab secular nationalists and modernizers*

The second orientation of Arab thought is the one characterized by the predominance of Arab nationalist ideas that were largely secular in their orientation and where again we find both Moslem and Christian intellectuals activists. This school of political thought emerged and ascertained itself with the crumbling of the Ottoman Empire and the suppression of the Caliphate in the new Turkish State. Before this big historical event, Arab intellectuals had split between those who were advocating the Islamic bond to remain faithful to the Ottoman Empire (like Al Afghani or Shakib Arslane as key figures in this school of thought) and those advocating national rights of the Arabs to separate from the Empire. In the view of pro-Ottoman Arab thinkers, the colonial aspirations of Europe at the beginning of the XXth century constituted a global threat to all the nationalities living in the Ottoman Empire and thus needed a global common response from both Arab and Turks based on Islamic solidarity. While the other school of thought was accusing the Ottoman Empire of impotence to reform itself and modernize so as to

be able to resist the colonial greed of powerful European nations. They believed the Turks were responsible for the decline of the Arabs and of Islam as a dynamic positive factor. The Empire gone and the Caliphate abolished, the way was open for a modernist Arab nationalism that will be incarnated by Jamal Abdel Nasser strong personality and the emergence of large Arab nationalist political parties, like the Baath party or the Arab Nationalist party.

*The development of an Arab critical thought in front of Arab failures*

The third school of thought emerged strongly after two big pan Arab failures. One was the failure of the short lived first unity experiment between Egypt and Syria (1958-1961) that was considered as the beginning of a larger Arab movement of unity breaking the borders imposed by the Sykes Picot agreement of 1916. The second failure was materialized by the spectacular Arab military defeat against Israel in 1967 that ended in the occupation of the Sinai Peninsula, the Golan Heights in Syria and the Palestinian West Bank territory that was under Jordanian administration. These two dramatic events gave rise to sharp criticism by many Arab intellectuals, some of them being both of Marxist and nationalist schools of thoughts. They produced many studies and books to assess the main causes behind the Arab impotence to unite to face the many challenges the Arab region was confronted with. These challenges were identified as the failure to confront the occupation of Palestine by the new Israeli State and help Palestinians to recover at least part of the territories lost in the 1967 war; the failure to confront the neocolonialist policies of the United States and its allies and the failure in accelerated economic and social development.

This school of thought globally denounced the failed policies of the military revolutions that happened in Egypt, Syria and Iraq and on which great hopes were built. In addition, they accused many conservative Arab monarchies of collusion with the United States in its policy towards the Middle East. For some of them, like the Syrian Sadek El-Azem, the main problem was the negative role religion continued to play in the Arab countries preventing Arab energies and potential to grow and contribute to the fight against under development.

For others, like Yassine El-Hafez, another Syrian, or Mehdi 'Amel, a brilliant Lebanese intellectual assassinated in 1987, the main factor that produced the failure of Arab societies was the state of submission of the new "small bourgeoisie" promoted by the revolutions initiated by military officers under to the higher strata of the local bourgeoisie. The "grande bourgeoisie" in their view had the objective to accommodate, through an alliance with the class of big landlords, the neocolonial capitalist hegemonies in the region. The new small bourgeoisie was promoted inside the State apparatus after the different military coups d'Etat and following the socialist measures adopted in the revolutionary course for social change. This newly created social strata, however, was dreaming of continuing social ascension and becoming part of the higher strata of the bourgeoisie.

Both Yassine El-Hafez and Mehdi 'Amel seem to have been influenced by the writings of Frantz Fanon, a medical doctor and psychiatrist from the French colonies in the Antilles, who joined the ranks of the Algerian National Liberation Front. Fanon, in his famous book, *Les damnés de la terre*, had described extensively the dangers of post-liberation and accession to independence period. He foresaw that the new leadership in these countries would be tempted to copy the behavior of the former colonialist masters and would easily become their allies. This is why he recommended that these new leaderships remained close to the popular masses and especially the rural part of the population as the best reservoir to pursue the way to real independence and social change in favor of the disinherited. He cautioned against making abuse of ossified traditions to keep the masses in control, turning them into folkloric expression of identity.

Already in 1965, Yassine El-Hafez raised alarm at the growing tendency of religious McCarthyism in the Arab societies to counter revolutionary and nationalist trends. On the other hand, Mehdi 'Amel sharply criticized the political, cultural and economic aims of this "petite bourgeoisie". He described its permanent attempt to keep ossified the preponderance of the cultural patrimony and heritage as the basis for uniting national consciousness. He also denounced with courage the essentialist mentality of many Arab intellectuals that believed that the old heritage could not be overlooked and should be the basic source of modernity as it constituted the essence of the so called "Arab mind", disregarding the fact that centuries have passed since the glorious days of the Arab-Islamic civilization.

Many other secularist thinkers could be evoked here, in particular the famous Syrian poet Adonis (who was criticized by Mehdi Amel for his essentialist approach to Moslem religion), but also the famous Franco-Egyptian economist, Samir Amin, or the many secular non Marxists Arab modernist nationalists like Abdallah Abdel Daïm or Constantine Zreik, two highly influential Syrian intellectuals. One cannot fail here to mention another Syrian intellectual, Georges Tarabichi, who undertook a lengthy critique of Mohammed Abed El-Jabiri work that we will discuss later. Another powerful thinker was the Moroccan Abdallah Laraoui a declared Marxist who analyzed brilliantly the self perpetuating lag between the changes in Western intellectual life and the subsequent changes in Arab thought and view of the world, so that the state and evolution of modernity could never be grasped in the Arab world. According to him, Arab intellectual life could only adequately overcome its lag in respect to modernity by adopting a view of the world based on Marxist historicism.

During the seventies, in respect to the failure of Arab societies to engage in accelerated economic development, there were a number of Arab economists who began to question the growing dependency of Arab economies on the oil rent. They also questioned the export of skilled and unskilled manpower, the tendency to increase luxury consumption, the neglect of the rural population and the agricultural capacity to produce food for domestic consumption, as well as the failure to appropriate sciences and technology and thus the very high dependency on imports of industrial machinery and equipments. One of the most famous Arab economists in this respect was the late Youssef Sayigh who wrote in 1978 *The determinants of Arab Economic Development*. This book remains until



now the most exhaustive and superbly written description of the failures of public policies in the Arab World. Sayigh also wrote in 1961 a small essay under the title *Bread with Dignity* that summarizes the key socio-economic issues in the Arab societies. In the light of the large Arab popular protests that exploded in most Arab societies in 2011 asking for employment opportunities, social justice, political liberties and fight against corruption, Youssef Sayigh essay ... years before the social explosions shows how deep was the author farsightedness. Another Palestinian economist, Antoine Zahlan, a physicist, analyzed extensively the many reasons behind the failure of Arab societies and their governments to grasp the issues of science and technology appropriation.

### **The anti modernity trend in the Arab thought: “Islam is the solution”**

We have evoked the Western disenchantment trend about the Enlightenment philosophy. This trend will considerably enlarge with the decline of socialist ideologies followed by the collapse of the Soviet Union. It was accompanied by the conversion of many Marxist intellectuals to the emerging neo liberal and conservative ideologies that included a return to religious values in the political field. The philosopher Leo Strauss was the leading figure in this trend arguing that societies based on religion might avoid totalitarianism as developed by Nazi and Soviet ideologies. *Athens or Jerusalem* is the title of one of his famous writings.

#### *The historical emergence of Arab political Islam*

This Western trend in political philosophy was to influence and greatly contribute to an already existing trend in Arab thought, that of political Islam advocating the falseness of modern secular values and thus the return to the basics of traditional Moslem religious values and “laws” (the *Sharia*). It appeared after World War I through both the emergence of the Saudi Kingdom with its brand of extremely rigorous Wahhabi practice of Islam and the constitution in Egypt of the Moslem Brotherhood. Both events appeared simultaneously in the twenties of last century and in my view they are interlinked, although this needs to be adequately documented.

In fact, Moslem Brotherhood acquired a high profile in Egypt after World War II. It opposed fiercely the Nasserite ideological and political hegemony that was taking place in the 50’s and 60’s of last century. The Movement was also influenced by the Moslem Indian radical thinker, Aboul Ala Al Mawdoudi, advocating that Moslems should only live in societies dominated by Moslem laws implemented in a radical way so as to maintain its purity. Mawdoudi was also highly influential in the Indian Moslem separatist movement that succeeded in creating the State of Pakistan (i.e. the State of the “Pures” or “unadulterated”). Moslem Brotherhood was considered as a force of counter revolution, the more so that Western Governments were supporting them and condemning their repression. Members of the Brotherhood would easily find refuge in Western capitals from domestic repression.

With the worldwide decline of socialist ideologies and later on with the fall of the Soviet Union, some former Marxist Arab intellectuals followed the path of Western intellectuals in converting to different conservative ideologies, the most popular one being to join the new trends in Islamic thought. These trends were opposite to the trends I described above, that of the Islamic reformers. The laterers were accused of intellectual subservience to the European Enlightenment ideas and to estranging their society in relation to their glorious patrimony.

*Stimulating factors and the conversion of many Arab Marxist thinkers to political Islam*

The anti-modernist new Islamic trends were stimulated by two important factors. The first one relates to the Cold War and the instrumentalization of religion in the fight against the expansion of communism in many third countries and among them Arab and Moslem countries. This use of religion in international politics to prevent the expansion of communism and accelerate the fall of the Soviet Union was promoted by Zbigniew Brzezinski. One of its main implementation was the military and ideological training in Islamic radicalism of thousands of young Arabs in Saudi Arabia and Pakistan. They were sent to fight the Soviet army that invaded Afghanistan in 1979. This was the origin of the founding of Al Quaëda organization and the Taliban Islamist regime.

The second factor was the Iranian revolution of 1979 from which part of the religious establishment succeeded in creating the new political regime of the *Wilayet Faqih*, i.e. the control of the clerics on the functioning on the new political institutions. This new regime gave priority to addressing the question of the poor and marginal people as well as the issue of Palestine to be liberated from Israeli occupation. On the other hand, and at the same time, conservative monarchies in the Arabian Peninsula launched a drive for a “Moslem Revival” (*sahouat islamiyya*) that will compensate for all the shameful failures of the Arab secular nationalist ideology and Arab regimes who endorsed it.

These geopolitical events stimulated the anti-modernist trend in intellectual writings. These were specifically focused on demonizing secularism as being an extremely dangerous tool to depersonalize Moslems and Moslem societies. Two main arguments were invoked here. The first one focused on the fact that contrary to Europe, Moslem societies can not separate religion from the State. By essence according to them, State and religion are linked together in any Moslem societies, so that any attempt to separate them will create deep discomfort and discontent. The second argument was drawn from anti-secular Western writings advocating the view that secularism in the Western societies has brought materialism and allowed for dictatorship and authoritarianism to flourish.

Many former Marxist or leftist Arab intellectuals endorsed these kinds of views. This was the case of Adel Hussein, Abdel Wahhab Messiri, Hassan Hanafi, Mohammed Amara, Tarek El Bishri, all of them high profile Egyptian intellectuals. Under their influence the vast literature of former Moslem modernist reformers that we mentioned previously slipped in almost total oblivion. The argument being used was that the first generations of Arab Islamic reformers (Tahtawi, Mohammed Abdou, Ahmad Amin and others) where

only agents of Western influence and intellectual corruption. This wide spread of this distorted view has greatly contributed greatly to the decline of Islamic “Enlightenment” to the advantage of various forms of Islamic radicalism.

At the same time the new Islamic revival trend promoted by these intellectuals became a new academic business in Western societies. In addition to promoting the works of the new generation of Islamic “scholars”, Western academia focused on the works of Sayyed Qotb, a radical member of the Moslem Brotherhood who qualified all Moslem political regime of being heretic for not abiding strictly to the laws of God and thus the need to revolt against them. French scholars, like Gilles Keppel, Olivier Roy, Bruno Etienne and François Burgat played a great role in promoting all the radical Islamic views, including those of the Pakistani Al Mawdoudi and Ibn Taymiyya a radical Moslem cleric who lived in the XIVth century and advocated the religious obligation to kill all Moslems adhering to unorthodox interpretation of the faith, like the Shia or the Druze, and to implement a strict regime of control of Christian and Jews.

In the US, some members of the academic establishment like John Esposito or John Voll also explained at length the new Islamic ideology as being a natural reaction to a failed modernization process and to the hegemony of Western way of life and thinking on Moslem societies. They resented this “cultural aggression” that was endorsed and forced on them after independence by secular authoritarian Arab nationalist regimes. This has become a story telling and a canonic narrative about the Arab world that have invaded media and academia worldwide. In addition, Leonard Binder a respected American scholar in his book *Islamic Liberalism. A Critique of Development Ideologies* (1988) explained that access to democracy in the Arab world can only come through the gateway of Islam that should be accommodated by the West and which few excesses will be corrected with time. This is a global trend in Western Academia that is confirmed also by the book of Larbi Sadiki (*The Search for Arab Democracy. Discourses and Counter-Discourses*).

In addition, the abundant intellectual work of Mohammed Abed Al-Jabiri who tried to analyze the detailed functioning of the Arab mind had a large influence in the Arab world. His books were praised, promoted and discussed lengthily. They focused mainly on an anthropological approach to grasping the Arab mind almost exclusively through the development and structure of Moslem theology, as if all the other secular feature of Arab culture outside theology and Islamic jurisprudence never existed.

He described different theological forms of Arab mind in shaping Islamic law, creating a deep divide between a Gnostic and mystic mind that characterized according to him Eastern Arab mind (i.e. the Shia mind) on the one hand and a more rational leaning mind characterizing the Western Arab mind (i.e. in Andalusia and the North African – or Maghreb societies) on the other hand. The first kind of the Arab mind was named “the resigning mind” or the non rational mind (*al ‘akl al mustakil*), while the second kind was considered as opened to rationality. In his view, this second kind of Arab mind in his view was not able, however, to continue producing philosophy and philosophers which is antagonistic to the Arab theological mind. According to him, Ibn Rushd according to him

was an isolated case. But this rational leaning mind could well be developed to-day by the contacts with Europe.

The work of El-Jabiri contributed greatly to the view that the Arab mind is exclusively theological, self constructed with no external influence on its culture and thus closed upon itself as well as self sufficient. This is the view of most Western Islamic scholars that was denounced by the late Edward Saïd in his famous book *Orientalism*. Islam is supposed to be an indivisible and immobile corpus of laws and rules of social and political behavior as argued by so many Western Scholars. This attitude became that of many Arab intellectuals who argued that it is only through Islam that Arab societies can modernize in depth.

### *Deconstructing political Islam*

Many brilliant and knowledgeable Arab intellectuals deconstructed political Islam and clearly showed the dead lock that this ideology represented for Arab societies. It is remarkable that their work has remained neglected to a large extent by the main academic trends in Western universities, as compared to the intensive focus on Arab intellectuals that joined the promotion of political Islam as the solution to the torments of Arab societies.

First among them there is Aziz El Azmeh, a Syrian scholar, who wrote a detailed book on "Secularism from another perspective" (*Al 'ilmaniyya min manzouren moukhtalef* - 1996), whereby he showed the extent to which Arab societies have been secularized since the time of Mohammed Ali in Egypt. He denounced the attempts by governments and intellectuals to reinstate rigid forms of manifesting the adherence to religious appearance and behavior in Arab societies as a dangerous trend preventing a full appropriation of the inescapable modernity. Arab governments wanted to show their fidelity to the patrimony and to import only the physical appearance of modernity, but not its contents in terms of social and political behavior.

El Azmeh did also engage in a vivid dialogue with the Egyptian intellectual already mentioned, Abdel Wahhab El-Messiri, this dialogue was published in a book under the title of "Scrutinizing Secularism" (*Al 'ilmaniyya tahtal mahjar* - 2000) whereby each of the two authors exposed its point of view and comment on the other discussant view.

In addition many courageous Egyptian intellectuals spoke and wrote openly about the dangers of political Islam as preventing the free speech and free thinking without which any society would see its culture and its economic, scientific and technical performance decline sharply, maintaining underdevelopment and autocracy. This was the case of Hamed Nasr Abou Zeid, a University professor, who was suspended from his professorship and had to flee out of Egypt with his wife who was ordered by a tribunal to quit him as he has become an heretic Moslem. The case of Farag Foda, an agricultural engineer that criticized sharply political Islam and the Moslem Brotherhood for distorting Islamic history and teachings to impose an authoritarian way of life on Arab societies was even sadder. Farag Foda had explained that secularism was not at all antagonistic to the

nature of Islam. He was assassinated in Cairo in 1992. Let us remind also that the famous novelist, Najeeb Mahfouz, was also condemned by the Brotherhood as an heretic Moslem. He survived an assassination attempt in 1994.

A Lebanese scholar well versed in religious issues, Ziad Hafez, wrote a very detailed and inspiring book, *La pensée religieuse en Islam contemporain : Débats et critique* (Religious Thought in Contemporary Islam: Debates and Criticism – 2012). He shows the extent to which trends in Islamic modernist reformist thinking have continued unabated in spite of the intimidation atmosphere that political Islam was creating in most Arab societies since the 1980's of last century. Hafez book focused on the continuity of the tradition of critical Arab Moslem thought in the field of religion. It gives a vivid account of the work of many scholars that continue to maintain the tradition of modernity aspiration by reforming rigid and traditional way of understanding and practicing Moslem religion.

One could also mention here also the many interesting and fascinating books of the Moroccan scholar, Abdelilah BelKaziz, devoted to an historical detailed analysis of the relations between Islam and political regimes since the death of the Prophet Muhammad (see in English *The State in contemporary Islamic Thought*). He demonstrates through his in-depth knowledge of the history of Islamic political entities that the instrumentalization of religion by the various rulers had always motivations that were mundane and not religious or theological. Bel Kazziz also criticizes the Arab intellectuals that have turned to political Islam in the last decades, including his compatriot Al Jabiri.

Al Jabiri substantial work on the Arab mind was heavily criticized by Georges Tarabichi, a Syrian philosopher who wrote several books demonstrating the limits of Jabiri work and his essentialist approach to the "Arab mind" that he considered resulting from the influence of Western orientalism on Jabiri way of grasping the Arab mind. In spite of central importance and richness of the Jabiri-Tarabichi controversy, it did not receive much academic attention. Nothing substantial was written about it except a good essay by Catherine Louise Wright replacing this debate in the context of the much older controversy between Al Ghazzali and Ibn Rushd about the antagonism between religion and philosophy.

Two others Arab political scientists wrote a very detailed criticism of political Islam as opposed to secularist trends in the Arab world. Both of them condemned political Islam as producing a culture antagonistic to modernity and to the capacity to escape underdevelopment. The first one, Mohammed Jaber Al Ansari, from Bahrain, is critical of the shyness of the secular Arab thinkers that could not confront adequately political Islam. He believes too many Arab intellectuals have tried to reconcile the secularist approach to life with traditional Islamic values invoked by Arab intellectuals that joined political Islam. For him, the future of Arab societies depends on the secularist approach being able to supersede the Islamist approach.

The other one, Mohammed Daher, from Lebanon, wrote a detailed and well informed book on the confrontation between secularists and Islamists since the time of Muhammad

Ali in Egypt at the beginning of the XIXth century. He details Muhammad Ali achievements in the field of secular type of modernization as well as Jamal Abdel Nasser secular policies and achievements as models for the future.

These two important books have been largely disregarded by Western academia, as has been the in depth controversies between Al Azmeh and Messiri or between Al Jabiri and Tarabichi.

### **Conclusion: Coming out of the trap in which Arab culture is imprisoned**

How can one figure out breaking the present vicious circle in which not only Arab political thought has been imprisoned, but more largely large parts of Western intelligentsia engaged in discussion the theories about the “clash of civilization” and thus the need of religious and cultural dialogue between nations? How can we change the almost exclusive focus in the realm of the social, cultural and political studies in the Arab world on Islamic radical theology? Such a trend of course is invigorated by the multiplication of political parties in the Arab world advocating Islam as their central ideology, the more so that many terrorist organizations are ascertaining their legitimacy by raising Islamic slogans. We are thus in a vicious circle that needs urgently to be broken.

We have here reviewed here all the political and geopolitical factors that have concurred to hide the diversity and richness of Arab secular culture in music, poetry, novels, painting to the exclusive benefit of recurrent studies on political Islam. In spite of this, it is remarkable that the secular Arab culture is still very lively and diverse. Arab artists, poets, musicians, famous singers and divas, and famous novelists or actors continue to be very popular in all Arab societies. Even Arab intellectuals opposed to political Islam are widely read, although their works are very seldom reviewed in academic magazines or newspapers. On the ground, many actors of secular culture and secular political thinking can be much more popular than clerics preaching radical Islam through satellite TV stations, like *Al Jazeera* or *Al ‘Arabiyya* or stations exclusively devoted to religion and preaching of radical nature.

We believe in this respect that time has come to change the academic agenda related to the observation of Arab societies. There is no intellectual value in continuing to discuss *ad nauseam* the various forms and interpretations of Islam that are advocated by political movements or armed movements whose sole ideology is “Islam is the solution” and who may exercise in many cases different forms of terrorism against other Moslems. We should not forget that the practice of Islam had already been reformed by high profile Arab clerics and intellectuals that we have evoked. This is why the call for a new reformist Islamic Movement is rather odd. What needs to be done in this respect is to identify and stop the financing of these different groups advocating under an Islam banner the so called “radical” or “extremist” interpretation and practice. This is rather difficult to accomplish as radical Islam is officially implemented in two main political regimes, that of Saudi Arabia and that of Pakistan, two close allies of the United States.

Without forgetting the Iranian Islamic regime. In addition, the fact that Israel claims to be a Jewish State adds to the “legitimacy” of those advocating the need for Islamic States.

In this context, it is high time to turn attention to the causes of growing social and economic failure of most Arab States in terms of appropriation of science and technology, industrialization and high value added economic activities, inclusiveness and empowerment of the poorest strata of the population. The millions of young Arabs that are unemployed and marginalized in their societies constitute the local negative environment where violent and terrorist organizations can succeed in recruiting them. The Arab region has the worst ratios of unemployment between all the regions of the world, especially within the young strata of the population. In spite of the wealth of many Arab countries nothing has been done to correct social imbalances and secure adequate employment opportunities in sufficient numbers. With a very high number of Arab billionaires this situation is even more scandalous.

This is why much more intellectual attention should be giving to the causes of such a failure as compared to successes in other parts of the Third world in Latin America or in Asia. Other nations than the Arabs have been aggressed by Western imperialism, they have been able however to succeed in appropriating modern sciences and technologies and becoming dynamic and innovative economies (South Korea, Taiwan, China, Singapore and even Japan in the XIXth century). They have also stopped having a love hate relationship with the Western world. They have integrated global modernity as diffused by Western societies within the dynamics of economic globalization. An inquiry in why and how the Arab rich secular thought and culture and its modernity desire has been put in check should become a central issue in academic studies. Another issue would be for Arab scholars to focus less attention on relations between the Arab and Western societies and cultures so that they concentrate on studying the process of the successful modernization of the most dynamic Asian and Latin American societies. There will certainly be many lessons to be learned by these experiences. Up to now very few Arab scholars have studied them. It is high time in my view to amend the academic agenda on the Arab world to get out of sterile discussions on Islam. A religion and its various interpretations are not a static phenomenon. Religion is what people make of it, especially political leaders and religious clerics. Religion can never be a substitute to the complex fabric of culture and thought.

The “Arab mind” is thus not an exclusive theologian mind. It has known through history many changes and its culture, either Islamic or pre-Islamic, is built on a variety of ways to express itself, beginning with poetry and ending with philosophy, music, painting, and literature of all kinds. Reducing it to a pure religious and theological mind is an absurdity.

Link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=791wpuGRsy0>