MAKING SENSE OF THE CONTEMPORARY
MIDDLE EAST, THE RISE OF THE UNMODERN
CALIPHATE*

Radu Murea

Abstract
This paper aims at offering a new understanding to the complex Middle Eastern
historical matrix in which the fundamentalist phenomenon known as the Islamic
State has risen. The main argument of the article, supported by an extensive
historical assessment, focuses on the region’s extraordinary coherence, as
demonstrated by the fragility of national borders and governments when confronted
with protest movements. Shared historical experiences, failed modernization
programs and a distinct spiritual outlook ultimately play an immense role in
constructing a civilizational environment in which radical movements can flourish
if given the chance. Thus, the fall of entrenched autocrats of the region following the
Arab Spring, signaled the rise of a new political and military force fundamentally
different from the regional political culture revolving around old intra-elite power
struggles.

Key–words: Middle East, Islam, fundamentalism, coherence, modernization.

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environment”.

1 Radu Murea holds a PhD in International Relations and European Studies from Babeş-Bolyai
University, with a thesis on Islam and Modernization. He is research assistant at the Centre
for Political Analysis (BBU). His main research interests include Islamic studies,
modernization, colonialism, globalization and religious fundamentalism. He is co-editor of:
Reţă, Identitatea Naţională (2010), Romania după 20 de ani, Vol.1, 2(2011), Intelectualii şi
puterea (2011). He is author of: “What Went Right? Islam, Modernity and the Arab Spring” in
Natalia Vlas, V. Boari (eds.), Religion and Politics in the Globalization Era, Cambridge Scholars
Press, 2013; “Defensive Modernization. Paving the way to Colonialism”, in Giovanna Motta,
Antonello Biagini (eds), vol. 2. He can be reached at murea.n.radu@gmail.com.
Introduction

The Islamic civilization projects today, probably more than ever in its glorious and impressive history, an image rifted by contradictions, conflict and convulsions. The failures of the Arab Spring revolutionary phenomenon, and the recent rise of new and (up to this point) formidable state-seeking terror organizations like the Islamic State\(^2\), seem only to reinforce this pattern and to add a new level of uncertainty to an already grim picture. Undoubtedly, this is the same civilization that threatened Christian Europe only a few decades after it embarked on conquering the known world. With incredible ease, as its almost sanctified history of worldly success confirms it, the military might of the Byzantine and Sassanid empires were easily overwhelmed by the religiously motivated armies of Islam. Reaching out from the Arabian Peninsula the Islamic civilization that arose in the wake of this unstoppable invasion would soon reach the borders of China and the Pyrenees. While its centers of political power and influence continuously shifted across its lands, the powerful symbolic charge of the Middle East will never lose its grip on the Muslim imaginary. From now on, Christendom, having lost its old Middle Eastern roots, would define its religious and civilizational identity in respect to the world of Islam\(^3\). Nevertheless, when conditions were auspicious, and Islam was weakened by the endless conflicts between its Sultans, European knights and kings would attempt to bring the Middle Eastern lands back into the Christian fold. Regardless if the English king briefly succeeded where the French one failed, in the post-medieval period European rationalist thinkers like David Hume would brand Crusades as no less than “the most signal and most durable movement

\(^2\) Islamic Stat (acronym - IS) is the new name that the terrorist organization formerly known to international media outlets as ISIS (The Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham). Al-Sham is generally used to define the Syrian territory surrounding Damascus, known to Europeans as Levant, hence the acronym ISIL. Depending on the medium, there are other terms employed to define this organization, many of them derogatory (see Daesh).

of human folly that has yet appeared in any age or nation...”. Though
fundamental to the assertive Christian spirit of the Middle Ages, the
Crusades could hardly be considered anything else then an „act of
intolerance in the name of God”, and unfortunately solidified Muslim
negative perceptions on the people of Western Europe. Two centuries of
Frankish (Christian) rule in Syria and Palestine would not be able to change
the Islamic character and coherence of the Middle East, established in the 7th
century in the wake of the first wave of Arab conquest. As successive
religious claims and influence fiercely disputed this region, so did the
political powers that supported them. Though unmatched in their time in
political legitimacy and military power, the great Umayyad and later
Abbasid Caliphates, will fall victim to tribal invaders much in the same
manner they themselves ousted the Sassanids and Byzantines from Iraq and
Syria. Unlike in Christian Europe, where the Mongol invasions almost
cripple the continent, the death of the last Abbasid Caliph in 1257 at the
hands of Hulagu Khan, will be redeemed by the later inclusion of the
Mongols and their military proveness in the service of the Islamic umma.
Skillfully attempted by the Shi’ite Fatimids of Egypt, it will be the later Sunni
Ottomans that will manage to capitalize on the political as well as spiritual
legacy of the Abbasid Caliphate. In 1517 the father of Sultan Suleiman the
Magnificent, Selim I will conquer Egypt and apart from receiving the royal
stil[e of “Servant/Protector of the two holy cities(Mecca and Medina)”, he will
also see translated to his dynasty the high political office and to some extent
spiritual dignity of Caliph. The Ottoman Sultans will make use of this
fundamental dignity of Great Caliph (Halife-i Uzma) in the Islamic world
with varying degrees of success. The need for attributes points to the fact
that there were, as today, many that would claim this political dignity or at

5 Steven Runciman, A History of the Crusades, Volume III, Cambridge: Cambridge University
Press, 1951, p. 480; Christopher Tyerman, Fighting for Christendom. Holy War and the Crusades,
least a certain hereditary spiritual ascendant.  

Starting with the 19th century the four hundred years long dominion of the Ottomans in the region was coming to an abrupt end. Under the colonial umbrella, The Middle East was drifting apart from the memory of an ethnically blind, multiculturalist empire and embraced the nationalist republican or monarchical future. Losing its Middle Eastern and Eastern European possessions and being reduced to a largely Anatolian demographical base, the Ottomans were also becoming more and more locked in the narratives of their Turkish ancestry. Where their rule endured during the First World War, massacres, discriminations and privations had a longstanding psychological effect on the local population's identity. With the exception of the Saudi Kingdom, the ground was now set for the rise of the modern and democratic national republics or monarchies. Despite the immense political capital that the nascent Arab societies pinned to their advent, in the decades following independence secular states and old political elites were struggling. Islamic sensibilities, rushed by the ideologues of Arab nationalism in the confined space of a clearly delineated cultural heritage, were reasserting themselves with incredible violence. This must not be entirely considered a genuine response to the economic and military failures of the national states, as its diverse origins and manifestations are dependent on numerous other external factors.

**The coherent Middle East**

When the popular uprisings which swept the MENA countries at the beginning of 2011 started toppling the numerous entrenched rulers of the Middle East, experts and academics were taken by complete surprise. Once again, the rapid political and social metamorphosis of the region seemed to escape the grasp of any informed analysis. In fact, it was not even the amplitude and social range of the protests which broth forth the most impressive challenge for scholars, rather their unexpected scope and values. At least in their initial phase, expecting the darkest possible scenario - in this

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case an Islamist outcome - Western political elites were reluctant to embrace or show support for the nascent protest movements. Though decades have passed since the last successful Islamic revolution in the region, for some policy makers the images of an “island of stability” quickly turned Islamic militant republic, were still shaping perceptions on the Middle East. For the protests to be focused on what Kenyan political scientist Ali A. Mazrui described as “values connected with liberty, open society, and objection to detention without trial” – meaning exactly the opposite to what common knowledge on the region would have suggested, was indeed equivalent to a paradigmatic shift. On the other hand, it can be argued that the Islamist threat was not the main reason obscuring perceptions on the overall nature of protests, rather a more pragmatic view on the deep nature of most revolutions. As late economist Gordon Tullock showed in his famous paper, *The Paradox of Revolution* - and here being a basic argumentative framework for public choice theory, revolutions not only face obstacles in enlisting an individual’s loyalty and support, but are usually a catalyst in a political process by which elites in power are replaced by elites capable (willing) of assuming power. While no fundamental improvements are reflected on the public good if “a not-too-efficient despotism is overthrown by another not-too-efficient despotism”\(^8\), and most Arab countries engulfed by social unrest fit the pattern of elitist autocracies, it was conceivable for Western governments to wait for the revolutions to play out. If the new elites were anything like their former masters, and assuming that at least in Tunisia following the Jasmine Revolution, Ben Ali’s Prime Minister Mohamed Ghannouchi was able to fortify his hold on power, then Tullock’s model might have been confirmed. Remarkably this scenario proved inaccurate, as the protests continued to gain momentum, despite the intense waves of violence at the hands of the security apparatus. In this particular case, the

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8 The expression was part of the discourse that President Jimmy Carter delivered in his last state visit to Pahlavi Iran just before the 1979 Islamic Revolution, and is widely used to emphasize the structural frailty that characterizes even the most stable Middle Eastern regimes.


“people driven beyond endurance by the vicious oppression of their masters” theme was not just a one-dimensional faced of the revolutionary mythology in the background of the more complex palace coup or intra-elite power struggle.\(^{11}\)

Clearly the methodological tools employed by G. Tullock and by other social scientists focused on the region, do play a role in explaining the numerous issues affecting Middle Eastern societies, but are inept at illuminating the human tragedy of a street vendor driven by corrupt authorities to self-immolation. This simple but powerful act transcended with incredible ease national and cultural boundaries, thus proving the still remarkable coherence of the region. While many decades have passed since the completion of decolonization projects, most North African and Middle Eastern societies are unable to break free from their past. In this sense, their modernity as well as their identity is still permeated by too many social templates and cultural artifacts of tradition, and most attempts at closing the gaps proved too costly for those engaged in the process. Though the nineteenth and the twentieth centuries have subjected the Muslim societies to an incredible chain of changes and formative events their historical, social and political evolutions amount to similar experiences. In this regard, for the purposes of our study, we will focus on three main elements that are still supporting this high level of cultural, social and political coherence of the region.

Firstly, as both the imperial pre-modern legacy and colonial experiences continue to remain an integral part of Muslim societies, they are also constantly reinforced and negotiated in their usage in religious, political or social discourse. In this sense, historical motives, symbols and images are very present in the daily lives of Muslims everywhere. The idealization of the historical period ascribed to the first four Caliphs (the *Rightly Guided Caliphs* or *Rashidun*) following the death of the Prophet, transcends the great Sunni/Shia divide. This perception of a shared history is strengthened by cultural and institutional elements specific only to the Islamic civilization.\(^{12}\) First and foremost, Arabic remained the medium of Revelation *par excellence* and thus ensured an almost sacrosanct status. Unlike the exhausted Latin or


Greek of premodern Christendom, Arabic was soon to become in the Islamic *ecumene* the lingua franca of government and commerce, science and philosophy and above all, religion and law. Hardly a monopoly though, as the classical Persian literature will also continue to enchant and inspire the cultural elites throughout the Muslim world. Supervising the Islamic legal system, compiled in the *Shari’a*, we find the autonomous group (class) of religious scholars (teachers) and doctors of law, known as the *ulama*. Their importance in the Islamic society remains unquestioned today as it was centuries ago, and their knowledge of Islamic law ensured that their advice and decisions in matters pertaining from family law to commercial life gave Islamic societies an incredible level of coherence. Architecture played again the same unifying role as the minaret of the mosque has universally adorned every Muslim town, once the Umayyad dynasty adopted them in Syria. Of considerable influence in the Muslim town, organized in self-sufficient, almost autonomous neighborhoods were the Sufi brotherhoods (*tariqa*) centered on their holy shrines, offering a popular mystic debouche to the legalist, strict requirements of orthodox Islamic theology. The pious foundations (*waqf*) supported by endowments and exempt from political interference, support the economic needs of Islamic learning institutions (*madrasahs*) or sometimes the needs of the poorer classes. The great commercial roads of Antiquity, inherited by Islam are successfully maintained and fueled by its merchants, artisan guilds and *bazaars*. Thus, a religion whose Prophet was himself a merchant and whose metanarrative is punctuated by commercial allegories was governing at the end of the 16th century the biggest commercial system the world has ever known. The human and cultural mobility required by the maintenance of the great commercial routes contributed, without question, to the great level of coherence of Islamic civilization, but it was by far not the most significant. Instead the fifth pillar of the Islamic belief system, the annual *Hajj*, or pilgrimage, as sole “concession to traditional ritual” that Islam makes, constituted through the impressive human migration that it requires a perpetual reaffirmation of Islam’s consciousness and universal collective identity.\(^{13}\) But firmly embedded in this Islamic universal identity are also the

images born out of conflict, some of them attached to loyalties that are as old as the providential heroes of Islam. The spiritual and emotional hold that they still impose even today on every Muslim makes them suitable for narratives that are meant to uphold, nationalist, ethnical or cultural stereotypes and to exacerbate historical enmity despite their intrinsic contradictions. During the bloody Iran-Iraq war, the propaganda establishment of the secular Baathist regime of Saddam Hussein used the narrative of the battle of Qadisiyya where Arab Muslim troops defeated the numerically superior Sassanid Persian army. Likewise, the Islamic Iranian Republic will play on the images of the Prophet’s grandson massacre in the battle of Kerbala by his Umayyad rivals. The murder of Husayn and his companions is seen by the Shi’a community as one the most inspiring acts of self-sacrifice and martyrdom, and its usage by the regime’s propaganda ensured a constant stream of recruits to the embattled Iranian frontline. Saddam Hussein’s regime will go even further trying to include in its propagandistic repertoire the glorious memory of the Ayyubid Sultan Saladin, regardless of his Kurdish ancestry. The fact that it was exactly the Iraqi Kurds that endured appalling massacres and repression in the final stages of the Iran-Iraq conflict did not bother the Baathist regime. Pre-revolutionary as well as post-revolutionary Syria displays the same characteristics. In 1993 Syrian president Hafez al-Assad will continue this flawed logic by unveiling Saladin’s statue in front of Damascus old citadel, without giving much thought to the country’s sizeable Kurdish community.14 Following the 2011 events, when the civil war will engulf the country, Islamist groups in Aleppo continued this behavior of symbolist contestation (or appropriation) by having a judicial Islamic council interpreting *Shari’a* so as to forbid croissants. This *fatwa* or religious ruling, labeled this specific pastry product as a living symbol of colonial oppression. In this sense at least, the memory of the Ottoman and the Mughal or the Iranian Qajar Empires brought to their knees by the modern, more

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technologically advanced colonial powers of Western Europe remains very powerful. Impressive as their historical record is, they were not match for an expanding industrious Europe, determined to carve out its own dominion in the Muslim lands. The Russians advance in the Caucasus and Eastern Europe, the Dutch conquest of the Indonesian Archipelago, the British dismantling the Mughal Empire after their victory at Plassey and their 1882 occupation of Egypt, the French and later the Italians establishing colonies in North Africa, these are all powerful signs of decline for Muslims everywhere.\(^{15}\) For some historians, the decline of the Muslim world in respect to its European civilizational rival started with the huge disaster that the Ottomans suffered in 1683 when it failed to conquer Vienne. Despite being a cataclysmic event, not so much in terms of material or territorial loses but rather at a psychological level, the battle was still fought and won under the pre-modern categories of religious warfare. Medieval Islam, with its spiritual and imperial outlook, could make sense of a Christian Europe, or Christendom, but it could hardly muster any answer to a modern Europe which started to define itself less and less in spiritual terms. A century later, when in 1798 Napoleon Bonaparte invaded Egypt, he acted under fundamentally different calculations and motivations than those of his Christian predecessors. North African Sultanates were now not so much a part of a once confident and undefeated Ottoman empire, but a territorial gain in the ever changing strategic games of European powers. Secondly, despite their technological superiority and supposed “Western knowledge of the Eastern world”\(^{16}\), European colonial powers were even less qualified at maintaining their grip on their newly acquired Muslim colonies than the former Ottoman overlords. If colonial domination was ended in the decades following the Second World War, influence and sometimes direct military or diplomatic interventions kept the Middle Eastern national states engaged in the turbulent international environment specific to the Cold War.

Secondly, in this world of perpetual conflicts and political


tribulations, where local elites, foreign ideologies and colonial interest competed for power and relevance, the religious element remained firmly attached to the identity of the indigenous societies despite the apparent rise of linguistic nationalisms. Before the Islamic revolution in Iran or the political setbacks that the once revered Kemalist ideology suffered in Turkey after 1995, it was easy to assert that “traditional Islam has become largely a class phenomenon, with the traditional religion followed by a majority of the peasantry and the petty bourgeoisie, but rejected or radically modified by the more educated classes”.17 The belief that the modernization programs initiated at the beginning of the 19th century have already created enough social support and mass to prevent a reverse trend towards perennial, religiously inspired values and traditions was widely spread. The choice between “Mecca and mechanization” was in this sense a qualitative one, dependent on acquiring the necessary prerequisites of modern education. Once the lower strata of society would have had this opportunity, their integration in the progressive society built by the educated classes would have begun.18 Such a view was in line with the Eurocentric cultural and theoretical postulates of the modernization theory, though it offered little support on the ground. Indeed, though the Western ideologies have produced sufficient mutations in the way in which large Middle Eastern ethno-linguistic groups perceive themselves and act towards achieving self-determination, the luminous path to institutional and industrial convergence was crumbling long before the so called “revanche de Dieux”.19 Numerous efforts coming from both Islamic reformers and secular intelligentsia in tapping the conceptual reservoirs of tradition ultimately failed to give Islamic credentials to all ideological incongruences and Western institutional imports. Due to this, the complex pattern of modernity that emerges in Muslim world and more specifically the Middle East, lacks fluency and linearity with its supposed universal Western model, thus enjoying a high

degree of institutional and ideological diversity. The validity and value of this eclectic model is not in question, rather the way in which it successfully circumnavigates certain defining elements of modernity by relying on traditionally sanctified social behaviors.

Thirdly, even while global ‘democratization waves’ were transforming the ideological landscape of the world, the region’s asthenic level of civil engagement was unable to stage any significant change. When Latin America, the Asia Pacific region and Eastern Europe were engulfed by the third wave of democratization, the snowballing effect was not enough to disrupt the authoritarian rulers of the Middle East. Authoritarianism in the region was perfectly established and prevailed because it had favorable conditions to do so. These conditions presented though not all specific to the region, were still heavily dependent on the absence of social pre-requisites for democracy.

Here at least, some of the indigenous conditions that enforced existing political structures, namely impressive coercive apparatuses and Western political and military support in neutralizing fundamentalist threats, augmented the exceptionalism of the Middle Eastern and North African authoritarian regimes. Unlike Eastern Europe where the crumbling of the Soviet power, allowed for democracy to take again root, the stationing of half a million American soldiers in the Persian Gulf at the beginning of the Gulf War, remained without notable consequences.

Islamic, Secular and Fundamentalist Pathways

Following this assessment we can conclude that the societies of the Middle East preserve the common heritage of a glorious Imperial past. It is


of little importance if these memories are linked to the Umayyad, Abbasid or the later gunpowder empires, as long as these historical frames continue to reinforce the age old stereotypes of worldly success. On the other hand these societies share the same painful memory of collapse and colonial occupation followed by failed attempts at modernization under the umbrella of authoritarian national states. The Western ideological imports that they followed were entrusted with an almost impenetrable confidence stemmed from the obvious European success of modernity. In time, such policies were to become the antidote to the perceived decadent premodern past. Modernizing Islam, bringing it in line with the Western narrative of progress, required tremendous cultural and social changes that were seen as a great opportunity. Nevertheless, transforming one society or another ultimately meant discarding the laborious social structure construed on an intricate network of interconnected legal schools, theological sects and a myriad of communal and religious associations and loyalties. The violence associated with the first attempts of implementing modernization programs is extremely evident in the massacres of old military castes that followed the vast reforms initiated by either Ottoman Sultans or powerful local rulers. It also characteristic to the plight of the different non-Muslim communities of the Ottoman Empire that followed the abrogation of the old confessional based pluralist social system or millet. When the Western inspired Imperial Rescripts of 1839, 1856 and 1869 as well as the Constitutional Act(Kanûn-u Esâsî) of 1876, tried to establish an “Ottoman nation”(Osmanlı Milleti) available for all its subjects, thus denouncing the juridical system by which the Muslim millet enjoyed preeminence, the old model of Pax Ottomana was destroyed.23 Christian, Jewish and many other religious communities were now left without the protection insured by the Imperial system, protection which was before grounded in the Shari’a and the Quran through its dhimmi stipulations. If social groups and religious association could be dismantled through brute force or simply by promulgating Imperial Rescripts, the underlying difficulty always remained the position of religion in such calculation. For the political elites and the Muslim intelligentsia of the late

19th and much of the 20th centuries transforming their societies and committing them on the path of nation-building the issue of Islam seemed manageable. First both rulers and Islamic intellectuals strived towards finding an equilibrium between the institutional and social innovations required by modernity and the Islamic tradition. The solution advanced by the later expressed the need of an Islam returning to its fundamentals, cleansed of the innovations that appeared to have crept into its fabric across centuries. On this pure Islamic foundation, modern European political concepts like democracy, freedom and the rule of law were discovered to have already existed firmly embedded in the political practice of the first Medinian Muslim community. Tradition became nothing shorter than a fertile conceptual reservoir ready for fueling or disguising the political transformations that were now unfolding. Many Islamic scholars of the time believed that as long as Islam was detached from cultural and parochial innovations and reason, equality and rational argumentation would be allowed to surpass blind imitation, could again hope to attain a universal status. This approach is not only plagued by “intellectual confusions” as orientalist H. A. R. Gibb characterizes it, but it is remarkably contradictory as it genuinely attempted to concomitantly remove and accredit cultural innovations.\textsuperscript{24} Politically, for post-colonial elites firmly attached to different nations-building or ideological programs the religious puritanism advocated by 19th century Islamic reformers could not serve their purpose. This scripturalist, orthodox Islamic pathway had already been attempted with disastrous results by the Ottoman Sultan Abdul Hamid II (1876-1909) and his Pan-Islamic ideology. Famous for ending the Tanzimât (reorganization) reforms started in 1839, this able Sultan will place the fate of his empire not in defensive, European inspired, modernization programs, but in the huge political capital offered by religious unity. Pan-Islamism was appealing because it restored the rights of the Muslims in the Empire by suppressing the former attempts to build an Ottoman identity together with many previous reforms. Islamic intellectuals like Jamal al-Din al-Afghani will become indispensable in shaping the ideological consistency of Pan-Islamism and in diffusing its tenets. For a Western contemporary of this

phenomenon, it was clear the Ottoman sponsored Pan-Islamism aimed at combining, "by the ties of religion Moslems of every race and country, in the work of conserving and propagating the faith and of freeing it by means of political and military force from alien rule and thus making it again a triumphant world power". The First World War and the consequent disintegration of the Empire would prove the bankruptcy of Abdul Hamid’s Islamist policies. Pan-Islamism, already weakened by the success of the Young Turks Revolution of July 1908, also failed to prevent the pro-Entente Arab revolt of the Hashemite family or to stir Muslims through the proclamation of jihad. Despite being backed by the Shaykh al-Islam’s fatwa and a large number of religious authorities, the proclamation of jihad against Allied powers by the Sultan Mehmet V, in his capacity of Caliph, would not achieve any significant result.

Thus, having exhausted the Islamic pathway the new political military or bureaucratic postcolonial elites searched for different, more secular elements suitable for building a national, secular identity. While Islamic as well as imperial legacies were considered obsolete, Turkish and Iranian distinctively secular leaders could still count on a clearly defined identity. It is plausible that this is actually the main reason for which both Iran and Turkey were already embarking on extensive and ambitious modernization programs. Establishing the republican Turkish ideal in particular, under the iron fist of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk involved not only dropping the quintessential symbol of Islamic unity, the institution of the Caliphate, and thus sending shockwaves across the Muslim world, but also other established Islamic institutions like the Ottoman Shari’a courts or the imposing office of Shaykh al-Islam. The process of secularization (layiklik) initiated by Atatürk continued until the medieval facets and symbols of the Ottoman Islamic world were lost in favor of a new and modern Turkish society. Dress codes already subjected to considerable changes during the modernizing rule of Sultans like Selim III and Mahmud II were now

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completely Europeanized and the abolition of the beaurocrat’s _fez_ came together with the obligatory renunciation of any other Islamic forms of male headwear. Adopting the Western Gregorian calendar and the Latin alphabet while also forbidding the muezzin to pronounce the call (_ezan_) to prayer in Arabic symbolized not only the complete secession from the Islamic past but also a testimony to the uncompromising nature of the modernization program.\(^\text{28}\) This is probably the reason why historian Bernard Lewis goes as far as defining a “Turkish model” of state building which will gain a strong footing throughout the Muslim world. This model presupposes following a distinct, complete pattern of modernization, secularization on the premises of religion’s complete exclusion from the public space.\(^\text{29}\) Decades away from being contested, the ideology of Kemalism endured and was seconded by another equally, for a period at least, successful Iranian model. Mirroring the Turkish pattern by which a successful military carrier ensured the rise to power of an equally successful modernizer, the former leader of the Persian Cossack Brigade, Reza Khan will rise to power by assuming the imperial prerogatives of the deposed Qajar dynasty. Unlike Atatürk who inherited many of the functional aspects of previous administrative, military and bureaucratic reforms, the new Iranian Shah had to adopt policies that resemble the autocratic rule of the Egyptian 19\(^\text{th}\) century reformer, Muhammad ‘Ali (1769-1849). This implied destroying the internal tribal, local magnates and religious opposition while circumnavigating foreign British and Bolshevik economic, financial and territorial interests. Funding and implementing the project of a modern Iranian state and nation, required a new and functional fiscal system able to support a strong administration and a large national army. It also required a new educational system, inspired by the French model, which in time would be able to produce candidates loyal to the Shah and his modernizing program. Not surprisingly facing increased opposition from the clerical class which will culminate with the 1935 Mashed shrine revolt, Reza Khan Shah will bolster by all means


available the pre-Islamic Iranian identity. Though even during the Persian Constitutional Revolution of 1906 the many cultural and linguistic Arabic imports were sometimes criticized by the nascent Iranian journalists, the process is now transformed into a state policy. In 1934 the name of the country is changed to Iran and a significant number of cultural organizations, most important being the Cultural Academy or Farhangestan as well as numerous journals and a national radio station, found their prime objective in promoting a standardized Persian language, cleansed of historical imports. The Shah will also adopt the name Pahlavi for his dynasty and will renounce the Islamic lunar calendar in favor of the Iranian or Zoroastrian solar calendar. Though remaining mostly an Oriental despot, becoming very soon the biggest land owner in the Middle East, Shah Reza Khan’s attempt to break with Persia’s premodern Islamic past will remain influential in defining his son’s policies. In 1971 Shah Mohammed Reza Pahlavi will go as far as attempting a connection between his Pahlavi dynasty and the Achaemenid dynasty inaugurated by Cyrus the Great (c.600 BC). Celebrating 2,500 years of Iranian unbroken monarchical tradition while also disregarding the Islamic past, was destined to offend not only religious sensibilities but also different factions of the secular opposition to the Shah’s discretionary rule. This unlikely alliance will ultimately bring down the Shah’s regime and will foster the success of the 1979 Islamic revolution. Pahlavi Iran will not be the only state of the region caught in the identitarian dilemmas associated with modernization programs that were trying to limit Islam’s social role. Egypt will find itself caught between the Islamic identity enshrined in the Arabic language and culture and the temptations of retrieving facets of the pharaonic past. Iraq, the result of territorial permutations produced as a result of Ottoman demise and Western involvement, will not only embrace ideological constructs like the Baathist socialist pan-Arabism, but will also try to establish a connection

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with the old Sumerian, Assyrian or Babylonian civilizations.\textsuperscript{31} When the contemporary Islamic state fighters were destroying historical artifacts from museums all over Iraq and Syria, they were not only following Quranic injunctions. Rather, they were showing the bankruptcy of defensive modernization programs as well as their supporting identitarian and ideological imports. The recent rise of the Islamic State and its odd medieval style universalist claims, signals in our opinion the completion of a cycle in the Middle East that started with the Islamization of Muslim societies in the decades following independence. The factors that fuelled this development can be identified in the failures of Middle Eastern national secular republics or monarchies. Unable to offer any viable alternative once the ideological attraction of Nasserism was exhausted, Arab regimes will hide their military and economic failures in a discourse that will enhance the chances of fundamentalist forces in gaining support. Many other elements must be taken into account as demography, increased oil revenues and the ever-present perception of the Western economic and cultural hegemony decline, all played a significant roles. Islamic values and aspiration were reasserting themselves because at one level or another they never really left Muslim societies. Hidden behind layers of conflicting loyalties, the fundamentalist appeal to a scripturalist path, in which the omnipresent divine sovereignty would transcend the mundane compromises of secular leaders, gain wide popular support. While sometimes discredited by massacres and terrorist actions that would claim even Muslim lives, the message advanced by Islamist ideologues enjoyed the conceptual consistency and spiritual credentials no other discourse could. As we have already observed, for many early Islamic modernizers\textsuperscript{32}, a pure Islam free of cultural accretions was supposed to facilitate the adoption of modern values and thus ensure the success of modernity. But as the Western values and ideologies were replacing each other with incredible speed, Muslim societies and thinkers were ever less inclined to give in to conceptual innovations and the ideal of


\textsuperscript{32} I prefer to consider here great Islamic intellectuals of the 19\textsuperscript{th} century like Khair al-Din al-Tunisi (1820-1879), Rifaa al-Tahtawi (1801-1873), Abdul-Rahman al-Kawakibi (1849-1902), Jamal al-Din al-Afghani (1839-97) and Muhammad Abduh (1849-1905).
a puritan Islam would support. Sayyid Qutb, the ideologue *par excellence* of present day Islamists movements executed by the Egyptian Nasserist regime, places the modern Islamic societies that by now had been, in the same state of *jahiliyya* or ignorance characteristic to the period before the advent of the Islamic prophecy. Fighting against this state ignorance and bringing about God’s *hakimiyya* or sovereignty, through the means of *jihad* as prescribed by Qutb, will come to define the basics of most Islamist movements. Qutb clearly builds his ideas on the work of Islamic modernizers like Muhammad Abduh, or Rashid Rida, but distances himself accusing them of falling prey to Western methods. Instead he legitimizes placing some Muslim societies and individuals (in his opinion apostates) in the same inimical category as the West, by making reference to a medieval thinker, Ibn Taimiyya. Known only for previously having inspired Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab, the founder of the puritan, orthodox doctrine of Wahhabism, the ideological grounds on which the house Saud built its Kingdom, Ibn Taimiyya would again rise to influence in the Muslim imaginary through his use of the concept and practice of *jihad*. Because he considered declaring *jihad* against Mongols who though already converted to Islam were not following Shari’a as valid, he become once again useful for ideologues like Qutb or various other radical elements attracted by medieval formulæ. The great danger of this new perspective meant that neither the Western world nor the Muslim societies were safe in this fundamentalist perceived epochal, universal confrontation between good and evil.

Coherence, Fundamentalism and the rise of the Islamic State (ISIS/ISIL)

It is from this standpoint that the novelty and baffling democratic initial evolution and manifestation of the Arab Spring seemed to challenge and shatter all the historically- deterministic patterns of the region. Protests

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and demands were focused on democratic rights, personal freedom and economic security as opposed to the repression practiced by the security apparatus. Ordinary people were especially critical to the established culture of corruption and inefficiency that characterized local administration services, but rarely if ever employed any Islamic overtones in articulating their demands. If this was the initial impulse that generated the fall of so many entrenched rulers the question that immediately arises is, how was the Islamist preeminence achieved? On the other hand any answer tackling the Islamist outcome, no matter if it was reached via ballot box or armed insurgency, must not consider this as a fixed, predetermined result. In Tunisia and Egypt the Islamist wave is already receding, first with Enhada Party losing the parliamentary elections in the fall of 2014, and secondly with the Muslim Brotherhood being swept aside by the all-powerful Egyptian army. Unlike the relatively calm political environment ensured by the Jasmine Revolution in Tunisia, the post-revolutionary Egypt struggled without much hope to achieve a national consensus. Regardless of the high level of violence reached during the intense confrontations between the Muslim Brotherhood’s supporters and their opponents, the situation will remain exponentially more stable than the turbulent conflictual state in which Syria, Libya and of late Yemen are finding themselves. The Syrian civil war in particular, will give the world the most uncompromising expression of Islamic religious fundamentalism, under the self-assumed name of Islamic State. This is, without question, the most malign development to be fostered by the Arab Spring and its ability to resist against all odds is undoubtedly surprising. In a sense, ever since it announced the establishment of the Caliphate in the territory it controls in Syria and Iraq, the terrorist organization manages to hold the entire Middle Eastern and North African societies under a skillfully designed informational siege. Countless attempts at explaining the rise of IS/ISIS/ISIL and its appeal in enlisting the loyalty of young Muslims across the globe have been advanced in the media. Most of them focus on particular issues and some even draw comparison with the European Wars of Religion, as Islam is now at approximately the same temporal level that Christianity was when the reforms of Luther divided the continent and ushered decades of religious conflict. Comparing the modern Middle East with medieval Europe, and thus the Christianity of the 16th
century with today’s Islam is, in our opinion, misleading. That is because the Europe of Reformation and religious wars has little in common with the present day Middle East, apart from the tremendous level of violence directed against religious minorities. What is now at work is not the result of religious reform, nor the starting point of a new perspective on religion and the place of the believer in relation to both the spiritual and the secular realms. Rather, the completion of a cycle started, as we have observed, roughly two centuries ago. The Islamic State and its ideology is ultimately the product of a civilizational matrix that since the beginning of the 19th century has largely failed to find an answer to the challenges brought on by European modernity. Their methods and excessive cruelty might seem medieval, their discourse orthodox and scripturalist and their ultimate political goal in line with the basic Universalist tenets of Islam, but this guise cannot extract them out of context. Their rise and appeal, regardless of historical precedents, is possible only in a modern technologically connected environment, in which information and propaganda travels unhindered and is able to reach the minds of future followers. It is also possible in a turbulent political and ideological environment that characterizes Muslim societies following the demise of authoritarian rulers and the failure of establishing credible, democratic alternatives. Without such conditions being met, the advent of the Islamic State is doubtful to have taken place, and their Islamic utopia would have still been confined to the narrow conceptual fields reserved only for the most radical elements. Regardless, as the entire world struggles to come to grips with this development, its appeal and success must be explained and thoroughly investigated by placing them in the appropriate context.

History, as this article has shown, plays the most important role as it delineates the conceptual and civilizational environment of any large scale social movement while also establishing fundamental connections that transcend the gap of time. The central argument of this work revolved around the Middle Eastern civilizational coherence, and the tremendous impact on Muslim societies everywhere due to the region’s high standing in the Islamic religious imaginary. Because of this coherence the desperate act of Mohamed Bouazizi transcended with great ease national borders across the region and quickly found support as every society in the region
understood its meaning. Likewise, if a comparison can be attempted, the puritan discourse of the Islamic State is similarly understood across the region and thus manages to easily transcend the same national borders. The reason can be identified in its reliance on a terminology that is completely permeated by Quranic motives and Islamic historical comparisons and lessons. In doing so it ensures a constant stream of recruits to its ranks. Most of them, either from the Middle East or abroad, are persuaded by the vision of a renewed and righteous Muslim polity that reestablishes the connection of the Islamic umma with the unchanging time of the prophecy. The fall of Islamic Empires and the territorial loss associated with the rise of modern Europe, is now reverted as the map detailing the five year conquest plan of the Islamic State promises to erase the injustice of the colonial era. The propaganda of the fundamentalist group goes even further by rediscovering a hadith of an utterance attributed to the Prophet by which God will grant Muslim armies victory and conquest of Rome [ar-Rum]. To back this ambitious plan Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, the enigmatic leader of the Islamic State assumed the title of Caliph and leader of believers [Amir al-Mu’minin]. As we have already observed this immensely important title for the political conceptual universe of the Muslim world has had various success in enlisting the allegiance of Muslims after the fall of the Abbasid Caliphate. This bold political move, as the Caliphate has been historically in the Sunni practice a political title and less a spiritual one, of reestablishing this office is not the only recent attempt of this sort. In 2006 the leader of Al-Qaeda in Mesopotamia, terrorist structure that at one point included the future Islamic State, declared its loyalty to a new Caliph known only as Abu Omar al-Baghdadi. According to Islamist sites this again elusive character could prove his illustrious descent from the Quraysh tribe of the Prophet, thus fulfilling at least one of the traditional requirements for the office. Just before falling again in anonymity and be forgotten, the new Caliph will declare Osama Bin Laden as his chieftain of the Mujahedin.37 Mentioning Bin Laden

in this context is important, not because Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi severed his links with his former terrorist organization, and is even competing for resources and recruits at this point, but because he restates many of the ideas present in Bin Laden’s declaration of Jihad against the West. Indeed, rebranding even unknowingly such a threat to the Western world would be not completely unheard of, as many other fundamentalist groups practice this discourse with regularity. But the Islamic state recent history is one of military success, thus any threat it makes is surrounded by the firm belief that this victorious path will not change. Keep in mind that even its resounding defeats at the hands of the Kurdish or Iraqi forces were achieved only with significant Western air support. Taking on weak, repressive, corrupt and ultimately inefficient Arab governments which are no more than the remnants of the nation building programs initiated by postcolonial elites, feels very much like engaging the West. Not in same manner as the mighty Soviet Army being humiliated in Afghanistan or the US Rangers disgraceful retreat in front of Mohamed Farrah Aidid’s militias in Mogadishu, but in a more personal and utterly meaningful way. These “victories” occurring only on the fringes of the Muslim world reinforced the morale of those committed to the fundamentalist cause but added little value to the Islamist imaginary. Unlike Afghanistan and Somalia, today, the fight takes place in the heartland of Islam, in places that are charged with memories and meaning going back to the time of the Prophet and his companions. Autocrats, monarchs and governments of the Middle East are easily portrayed as following Western interests and thus be depicted like the ancient enemies that Islamic armies faced when their conquest began. On the other hand the Islamic State’s interest in advancing this perception has been made easy by the Arab regimes policies regarding Islamist movements. For them as for their repressive apparatus it was of little importance if Islamist movements were violent or not, or if their demands were valid. What it mattered was that they were protest movements that threatened their hold on power and thus had to be repressed by all means? Acting under the “Islamist threat” cover for

their Western supporters, government across the region discredited themselves and forced even moderate elements into the radical camp.39

When it extended its rule from Syria to the Iraqi cities of Mosul and Tikrit, the birthplace of former dictator Saddam Hussein, the Islamic State propaganda announced the erasing of the Sykes-Picot Agreement. As the memories of European postwar border drawing experiments and treachery were constantly refreshed by the numerous political and military interventions across the 20th century, this act gave the Islamic State legitimacy. For their supporters it also signified the reestablishing of the glorious Islamic history and the erasing of centuries defeats and injustice. In this mix of failed modernization, exhausted nation building programs and bankrupt postcolonial statehood designs the rise of the Islamic State is clearly troublesome. That is not to say that sooner or later it will not be defeated, but that this will not alleviate the deeper, fundamental problems of the Muslim World. The same civilizational settings that allowed IS to achieve its Caliphate will remain unchanged in the future, as all other pathways attempted to reach stability and prosperity have already failed.

**Conclusion**

As this study has emphasized, explaining the rise and success of the Islamic State cannot be achieved without exploring the civilizational and historical matrix that produced the contemporary Muslim world. Historical analysis and assessment is also necessary because it offers the only valid option in confronting the fundamentalist message in its basic form. Establishing causal connections between the failures of the defensive modernization programs and the rise of fundamentalist organizations blocks their attempts at tapping the deep sources of the Islamic imaginary. It also illuminates the way in which such discourses are internalized today by Muslim societies of the Middle East, and how many of them are still gripped by such powerful images. Indeed, the incredible cultural and spiritual coherence that the region enjoys, which ultimately is a result of shared historical experiences, can act both in favor of promoting democratic change.

as well as fundamentalist projects. But without exploring the historical formative landmarks, recurrent claims and political objectives might appear exceptional. When the embattled still independent Muslim polities attempted to adopt European modernity the process was supposed to be limited in scope and duration. As we have observed such a view was quickly dismantled by the ever increasing need for change in front of European colonialism. Later on, modernization programs and secular pathways were discredited, much in the same way Islamist attempts have been in the final days of the Ottoman Empire. Without taking account of these changes, of the many residual intellectual, cultural and conceptual elements that every stage has inflicted upon Muslim societies the current state of the Middle East cannot be understood. Likewise, searching for premodern European equivalents becomes dangerous because it presupposes following a predetermined historical result and it obscures the ardent need for solutions. Clearly, the spiritual and ideological bankruptcy of the Islamic State will sooner or later be revealed, but the immense sufferance and tragedy it inflicted on Middle Eastern societies will not. Besides defeating it military, most importantly its message must also be confronted and deconstructed so as to lose any relevance it might hold today. Doing this requires understanding Islamic history and the challenges that this civilization faced and was unable to overcome in the last two centuries.
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