

# ISSUES IN MODERN ARAB THOUGHT: SOME METHODOLOGICAL CONSIDERATIONS

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## ABSTRACT

Modern Arab thought encompasses the intellectual output of Arab thinkers since the 19th century CE, shaped by on their philosophical outlooks, social and historical perspectives, religious positions, and ideological expressions. In the modern world, the history of Arab thought has been a subject of intense debate in both Muslim and Western academia. Apart from the inherent nature of intellectual history being complicated to document and analyze, the modern Arab-Islamic thought, far from being reduced to one variable, is distinguished by a variety of conceptual issues with fluctuating degrees of intensity and interrelatedness, which make an objective analysis of its history all the more difficult. Against this contextual background, this paper, based on insights from both primary and secondary sources, attempts to furnish a thorough examination of contemporary Arab-Islamic intellectual history. Despite the vast and intricate nature of this history and its foundational theories and methodologies, the study strives to provide a comprehensive overview. Furthermore, it aims to outline the central issues underlying Islamic thought by exploring the perspectives of Arab intellectuals representing various intellectual traditions.

**Key Words:** Modernity, Arab Thought, Muslim Intellectuals, Nahdah.

## 1 INTRODUCTION

The subject of intellectual history tends to be subtle and elusive by its very nature. While trying to study the defining characteristics of modern Arab and Islamic thought, one is met with a gigantic tradition of methodology that is required to be sifted and incorporated

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into meaningful scrutiny. On the one hand, a scholar taking up this study must be properly acquainted with the theories of Islamic knowledge with their social and historical background. On the other hand, one must also possess insights in recent developments in Western sociology, philosophy, religious theories, and history in general. Broadly speaking, the progression of Arab thought from the early 19<sup>th</sup> century can be summed up in three main concepts: (1) *Nabdab* (renaissance), (2) *Thawrah* (revolution), and (3) *ʿAwdab* (return to the foundations). These concepts imply the following: (1) reviving Muslim thought from within by affirming continuity with the past, and from without by selectively borrowing from Western sources; (2) the emergence of the nation-state in the wake of resisting the political and economic domination of the West, and (3) translating Islam as a thriving and self-subsisting ideology which indicates, besides the impracticability of nationalism as an alternative to the current state of affairs, a deep confrontation between the status quo upheld by a secular and military state and all sorts of ‘Islamist’ movements carrying the banner of *ʿAwdab* (return) to what they hold to be the “true religion.” As will be illustrated below, the discourse of Arab-Islamic thought, with its different manifestations, is a distinctive intellectual formation that has to be located within the broader context of Arab intellectual history, both religious and secular.

### 1.1 CONTEXTUALIZING MODERN ARAB THOUGHT

The French Revolution was the first European movement of social and intellectual transformation that left a visible impact on the Arabic-speaking world in modern times. Nine years after 1789, the forces of that Revolution reached the East as Napoleon's armies invaded Egypt and Palestine. From that year on changes began— mostly in Egypt—that led to wide-ranging interactions with European institutions culture, thus heralding the Arab *Nabdab* (Renaissance).<sup>i</sup> It can be argued that it is simple to discern the underlying epistemological principles of Islamic intellectual history during its formative phase (8<sup>th</sup> to 13<sup>th</sup> Century CE) when the Muslim society was distinguished by a high level of urbanism and intellectual maturity, as represented by its ‘*ulamā*’ and the heterogenous nature of its intellectual and cultural production.<sup>ii</sup> In contrast, such an intellectual picture in the modern Arab world might not be as easy to discern or comprehend. As some scholars have analyzed, this may be due to the following factors: (1) the breakdown of the universalistic and holistic vision of Islam which considered religion and state to operate under the same principles; (2) the rise of varying currents of thought, especially in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, that challenged the long-established authority of the ‘*ulamā*’; and (3) the arbitrary political division and subdivision of the Arab world in the wake of colonialism.<sup>iii</sup>

These developments came about due to the convergence of internal and external factors that contributed towards diminishing the role of Islam as the main political, social, and even cultural system of modern Arabs. Although some leading historians and political economists prefer to speak in terms of one Arab nation, others would consider it doubtful that one can speak of a homogeneous Arab culture, let alone a unified Islamic culture among the Arabs of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.<sup>iv</sup> That means it is perilous to assume that there is some objective intellectual reality that might be brought to the fore merely by discussing this history. In fact, the issue is far more complicated. Hence, one of the major goals of this study is to present the central issues of modern Islamic thought as seen by a variety of Arab thinkers and scholars who belong to diverse intellectual traditions and who propose several different solutions to the issues facing them. To contextualize modern Arab thought, some key terms, concepts, and issues that have been pivotal to the intellectual development of the Arab world in the last century or so need to be highlighted. Concepts such as the Islamic tradition (*Turāth*), decline (*Suqūt*), renaissance (*Nabdab*), Westernization, modernity, and authority have gone through important transmutations in the minds of modern Arab thinkers. In that sense, one must bear in mind that these conceptual constructions do not exist in a historical or social vacuum. They influence—and are influenced by—all sorts of subjective and objective factors.<sup>v</sup>

## 1.2 DOCUMENTING INTELLECTUAL HISTORY

Arab intellectual history has been experiencing resurgence of late, situated as it is between the predominance of global intellectual history and the continued resilience of area studies. Such a conjuncture has led to a proliferation of Arab intellectual histories that belie the orientalist fallacy of the region as a “*no idea producing area*,” as once superficially described by Charles F. Gallagher.<sup>vi</sup> This is precisely because intellectual history does not and cannot follow a specific method of analysis. That is to say, “*Intellectual history is not a whole. It has no governing probtematique.*”<sup>vii</sup> Similarly, modern Arab intellectual history, far from being reduced to one problematic, is distinguished by a variety of conceptual issues with varying degrees of intensity and interrelatedness. In other words, the bare outlines of modern Arab thought, just as with any other collective human thought, may consist of the following:

the history of ideas (the study of systematic thought, usually in philosophical treatises), intellectual history proper (the study of informal thought, climates of opinion, and literary movements), the social history of ideas (the study of ideologies and idea diffusion), and cultural history (the study of culture in the anthropological sense, including world views and collective mentalities).<sup>viii</sup>

The established method for comprehending the nature and flow of modern Arab intellectual history has been to speak in terms of certain binary opposites, such as tradition/modernity, renaissance/decline, decadence/renewal, stagnation/revival, and elite/popular cultures.<sup>ix</sup> However, the more realistic approach would be to not take these distinctions at face value, nor as inflexible and mutually exclusive classifications of thought. To grasp the intellectual formation of Islamic resurgence as a relatively new current of thought is to shed new light on the interaction between society and religion, elite and popular cultures, and the role of religious intelligentsia in the modern or secular nation/state.

Finally, there's the question of continuity and change.<sup>x</sup> While it is practicable to speak of conceptual ruptures in the modern Arab world—for example, liberalism is not as dominant a discourse in contemporary Arab thought as it was in the 1930s—one is blameless, nevertheless, in speaking of continuities. These continuities, however, should be comprehended against the background of historical change. One still hears in contemporary Arab society similar cries to those of the nineteenth century on the necessity of reforming education, facing up to the challenges of Westernization, and adapting to modern realities and norms. One might interpret the calls all over the Arab world for the return to Islam as a reflection of a crisis, a rupture, and a response to social and cultural displacements and transformations. However, some might interpret these calls as an affirmation of the inner continuity of the Islamic discourse—or discourses—and as rebuilding on old foundations.<sup>xi</sup> In summary, the notion of continuity and change is very useful in describing the recurring themes and discourses of modern Arab thought.

### 1.3 THE VARIABLE OF *Nabdab*

The progression of modern Arab intellectual history must be understood against the backdrop of the Arab *Nabdab*<sup>xii</sup> of the nineteenth century. One scholar defines *Nabdab* as

a vast political and cultural movement that dominated the period of 1850 to 1914. Originating in Syria and flowering in Egypt, the *Nabdab* sought through translation and vulgarization to assimilate the great achievements of modern European civilization, while reviving the classical Arab culture that antedates the centuries of decadence and foreign domination.<sup>xiii</sup>

Besides backing Western achievements, the *Nabdab* movement, especially in its Muslim part, stood against the “degeneration” of Islamic thought which, according to the gross generalization of Gibb, “stayed put—that is, it remained fixed in the molds created for it by the scholars, jurists, doctors, and mystics of the formative centuries and, if anything, decayed rather than progressed.”<sup>xiv</sup> Muslim *Nabdab* thinkers—most notably Rifa’ah al-Tahtāwi,<sup>xv</sup> Jamal al-Din al-Afghani,<sup>xvi</sup> and Muhammad ‘Abduh<sup>vii</sup>—basically

postulated that a regeneration of Islamic values among people and an acceptance of the “positive” features of the West were not at all incompatible. This is perhaps what justifies a scholar such as Hisham Sharabi to postulate that the *Nabdab* “did not constitute a general cultural break in the sense the European Renaissance did; for on the one hand, it did not achieve a genuine transcendence of inherited structures of thought and on the other, it failed to grasp the true nature of modernity.”<sup>xviii</sup> In the words of Albert Hourani, the generation of the *‘ulamā’* was in no position to be complacent about the past any longer. It was a generation of religious, social, and cultural crises.

At another level, we can notice in this period a deep disturbance in the lives of educated men, not only those trained in the new schools but those formed in the traditional ways of thought; not only do their careers take different paths, but the ways in which they see their own lives begin to change.<sup>xix</sup>

With the assault of European colonialism and the propagation of Westernization as a cultural phenomenon in the traditional environment of Islam, Muslim thinkers were alerted to several ruptures in their societies that were political, social, economic, and even linguistic. This is why a scholar such as W. C. Smith theorized that the modern period of Islamic history “begins with decadence within, intrusion and menace from without; and the worldly glory that reputedly went with obedience to God’s law [was] only a distant memory of a happier past.”<sup>xx</sup> The *Nabdab* intelligentsia, thus, reacted to this decline in the Muslim world as they understood it and theorized on the options for a renaissance, while also not leaving out Western possibilities for such a renaissance.

One could argue that the *Nabdab* phenomenon is based on a complex epistemological structure having both Islamic and Western components. As such, the *Nabdab* was translated by the Arab intellectual pioneers of the 19<sup>th</sup> century into a historical and social movement, and has, consequently, revived a substantial number of issues and debates revolving around the Islamic heritage and the challenges of the present—namely, Islam and the question of Arab cultural identity, Islam and the West, the question of women, and the issue of freedom of expression.<sup>xxi</sup>

The *Nabdab* thinkers were confronted with the problem of how to interpret the vast Islamic tradition of the *Qur’ān*, *Hadīth*, law, and philosophy in a socio-political and scientific milieu that was foreign to them because it was dominated and dictated by the West. It is somewhat true that these thinkers “lived and acted in an Islamic community that was intellectually still coherent and united,”<sup>xxii</sup> but it might be equally true that the pre-industrial and pre-capitalist notions of Muslim thought were inadequate to meet the challenges perpetuated by an aggressive Western world-view. The essential question posed by the *Nabdab* thinkers was how Muslims can be faithful to their belief system and modern at the same time. They saw the need for a total revitalization of Islam in the face of an encroaching Western culture because “the attack of the West on the Arab world,

aside from its political effects, was also a direct attack against Islam as a religion.”<sup>xxiii</sup>

The *Nabdab* intellectuals argued for the viability of Islamic reasoning in the modern age as they believed that Islam was inherently rational.<sup>xxiv</sup> Arming themselves with what they considered to be authentic Islamic criteria for thinking and discourse, they sought to improve both the internal Muslim situation and combat the external Western cultural and political invasion.<sup>xxv</sup> Thus, historical continuity with the Islamic tradition was hailed as an answer to historical, cultural, and religious inflexibility and stagnation. This continuity, furthermore, paved the way towards forging a new and important synthesis that reflected, on the one hand, the maturity of Muslim thinkers, and, on the other, the deep sense of crisis facing Muslim society.

On the conceptual side, modern Arab thought has located itself to deal with the *Nabdab* problem through three distinct yet interrelated modes of discourse: (1) *doctrinal*, (2) *philosophical*, and (3) *historical/political*. To begin with, doctrinal discourse is concerned with the purification of the fundamentals of religion. As Laoust puts it, “No doctrinal reform is possible without a return to an original source.”<sup>xxvi</sup> Reform or *Islāh* can be defined as “the return to the just form of religion, and the affirmation of transcendent truth in a modern setting.”<sup>xxvii</sup> The reformist program has dominated Arab intellectual activity up to the present time, and it revolves around the affirmation of “a traditionalist method and language” in a modern setting. Therefore, contemporary Muslim philosophers and intellectuals find themselves face-to-face with a set of social and historical questions that await theological answers. It is clear that many Muslim intellectuals remain faithful to their vision of past Muslim history, a vision based on the significant role that revelation plays in the process of history. However, as a result of the rise of political secularization in the Arab world in the wake of Western colonization, “the reign of the *faqīhs* (jurists and theologians) was substituted, for better or worse, by that of the [technical] experts and the leaders of the masses. This new situation necessitated a new mental attitude and new criteria.”<sup>xxviii</sup>

The objective of philosophical discourse, as it appears in the early writings of the noted Egyptian philosopher, Shaykh Mustafa ‘Abd al-Rāziq<sup>xxix</sup> (d. 1947), is to prove the authenticity of traditional Islamic philosophical discourse, and its relevance to the needs of modern Muslim societies. ‘Abd al-Rāziq played a major role in concentrating the attention of Arab thinkers on the need for philosophy as a medium of intellectual discourse. In his key work, *Tambīd li Tārīkh al-Falsafah al-Islāmiyyah* (*Prolegomena to the History of Islamic Philosophy*), ‘Abd al-Rāziq proposes the following: (1) the Qur’an, as the sacred book for Muslims, encourages free rational speculation (*nazar ‘aqli hurr*); (2) a ‘literalist’ interpretation of the Qur’an is inadequate to portray its rationalistic depth and attitude; (3) Islamic rationalism, which is intrinsic to the Islamic revelation, should not be confused with the Greek logic and philosophy that Muslim thinkers adopted and

modified; and (4) the Arab race is as capable of philosophy and comprehensive thought as any other people.<sup>xxx</sup> His final aim, however, is to prove the compatibility of traditional Islamic philosophy with the rationalism of modern thought.

The historical/political discourse of the *Nabdab* describes the relationship between religion and state. This relationship has undergone many transformations since the 19<sup>th</sup> century. In the first phase of the *Nabdab*, Islam assumed a nationalistic meaning, the purpose of which was to build a strong state that would be able to compete with the West. In the second phase, Islam was expressed by Jamal al-Din al-Afghani, Muhammad ‘Abduh, and Rashid Rida in pan-Islamic terms. The goal was to reinstitute the Muslim *ummah* (community of believers) in the image of the Ottoman Empire. Furthermore, Islamic resurgence rose in the form of the Muslim Brotherhood movement spearheaded by Hasan al-Banna, whose program attempted to assert the sacred law in all walks of life. Politics, as a result, dominated philosophy and theology.<sup>xxxi</sup>

To conclude, *Nabdab* provides an essential conceptual tool for the analysis of the evolution of modern Arab thought, and it defines how Arab thinkers—both secular and religious—have grappled with issues of heritage and present demands. Far from being monolithic, the concept of *Nabdab* has been interpreted multifariously in the intellectual domain of the Arab world. Two essential components of the *Nabdab* remain the same, however. They are Westernization championed by the orientalists and the Islamic tradition.

#### 1.4 THE ORIENTALIST CONCEPTION OF ARAB THOUGHT

It is known that, aside from its political and sometimes religious motivation, Orientalism has contributed extensively to the revival of many Islamic fields of study that are now considered to be classical. What is less known, perhaps, is the orientalist position on modern Arab thought and philosophy. Serious orientalists discussed thematically what they considered the decline of the Arab world, and came up with a unanimous method and alternative to this supposed problem, namely “Westernization” as a response to the intellectual, religious, and cultural decline of the Arab-Islamic world. To paraphrase many an orientalist attitude, “Westernization should be the intellectual problem of modern Islam.”<sup>xxxii</sup> It is still possible to distill a general orientalist attitude on decline and renaissance which is distinguishable, in some ways, from the “Arab position” on the same issue. In this section, as an example, formulations of Gibb on modern Arab thought will be briefly discussed, along with the position that the theme of renaissance/decline occupies in his works.

Gibb claims that, around the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and under the powerful impact

of technical Westernization—that is, modernization, Islam started to “collapse” as an organic theological and social system. Although “the vital forces of Islam, as a creed, as a rule of life, and as an ethical system remain unimpaired”<sup>xxxiii</sup> in the modern Arab world, argues Hamilton Gibb, “Islam as the arbiter of social life is being dethroned.”<sup>xxxiv</sup> This seems to be an extraordinary development because, for centuries, Islam had not lost its grip on either the Muslim elite or the masses. Gibb, like many modern orientalists, understands Westernization in three interrelated ways: (1) it is the adoption of Western military gear and technique—that is to say, it is an external and concrete scientific tool of progress; (2) it is a worldview—or it is a process of rationalization; and (3) it is a philosophical and educational viewpoint. A mere cumulative technological dimension of life cannot be judged to be progressive if it is not accompanied by a rational mentality, which can be cultivated only through education.<sup>xxxv</sup> To Gibb’s mind, “The main—indeed, if the word is taken in a wide enough sense, the only—sound agent of Westernization is education, and it is by the criterion of its education in Western thought, principles, and methods that the extent of Westernization in the Muslim world is to be judged.”<sup>xxxvi</sup> In other words, to guarantee the success of Westernization in the Arab world, its elite culture has to be changed enormously, from that of the traditional Islamic conception of life to a Western attitude. A necessary component of this shift in intellect and spirit is a new type of intelligentsia.<sup>xxxvii</sup> Gibb, of course, does not think of the leftist intelligentsia as an option because he prefers a secular, pro-capitalist one.

The real cause of decline, according to Gibb, is the incapacity of the “atomistic” Muslim mind to draw level with the rationalist modes of Western thought. “The rejection of rationalistic modes of thought and of the utilitarian ethic which is inseparable from them has its roots, therefore, not in the so-called ‘obscurantism’ of the Muslim theologians but in the atomism and disreputability of the Arab imagination.”<sup>xxxviii</sup> To achieve progress, the “Arab and Muslim mind” should emancipate itself from the categories of the Qur’anic revelation—those same categories that have made Islam “a classic example of an entirely self-sufficient, self-enclosed, and inbred culture.”<sup>xxxix</sup> As a supposedly rigid and closed epistemological system that eschews outside influences, Islam does not meet modernity, not even halfway. Although Edward Said suggests that Gibb prefers the *‘ulama’* to the modernists,<sup>xl</sup> it is clear from the above discussion that Gibb sees hope for Muslims only if they transcend—and not just modify or synthesize—their “ancient categories of thinking” and follow, more or less, a reformist program that subscribes to the relativist demands of modern Western life not afraid to make concessions to science.

### 1.5 THE RELIGIOUS RESPONSE TO DECLINE

Oddly enough, a good number of Muslim (even Islamist) authors agree with the basic orientalist premise that decline had been pervasive in the house of Islam up until the



European intervention in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. These thinkers assume that true Islam developed against the tumultuous background of the first few centuries, and that a general theological and ensuing social and political decline set in from the 13<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>xii</sup> In spite of supporting Orientalism on this particular thesis of decline, the solutions the majority of the Arab and Islamist intelligentsia offer are at variance with those of Orientalism. To preserve the religious integrity of Islam, and to promote Muslim consciousness in all fields of life, they propose that it is the pressing task of modern Muslims to revive and practice the deep-rooted and solid foundations of Islam.

Abu al-Hasan Ali al-Nadwi, despite being an Indian by birth, occupies a unique position in this thought, especially in the current history of revivalism. His, *What Has the World Lost as a Result of the Decline of Muslims?*,<sup>xiii</sup> translated into Arabic from Urdu, sheds some light on the historical consciousness of many thinkers representing Islamic thought. Further, Nadwi's response to Muslim decline is more interesting because of his affiliation by birth and training to the '*ulama*' class in India, and because the solutions he offers are based on radical changes in every sector of Muslim life at present.

Nadwi follows the orientalist method in tracing Muslim decline to the premodern era. In fact, he tells us, the decline started soon after the reign of the four Rightly Guided caliphs (*al-Khulafā' al-Rāshidūn*), and its first symptoms were seen in the *de facto* separation between religion and state as practiced by the later Umayyads and 'Abbasids. The religious establishment was unable to prevent this split between state and religion, and some '*ulama*' were actually guilty of justifying and propagating secular activities and tendencies. Nadwi elaborates on the theme of '*ulama*' and power in modern Muslim societies, and accuses a great number of '*ulama*' of "intellectual prostitution." He argues that the intellectual core of Islam, as represented by its theological class, has crumbled because of the willingness of that class to play into the hands of politicians. The '*ulama*', who are supposed to take the general welfare (*maslahah*) of the community into account, have abandoned their traditional duties, and "are even open to purchase by the highest bidder. They have put themselves up for auction."<sup>xiii</sup> The religion-state dichotomy has had far-reaching consequences on the morality, mental aptitude, and religious thinking of Muslims. Nadwi argues that, far from permitting moral degeneration to direct their lives, Muslims adopted Greek and foreign doctrines, methods, and ways of thought that were unharmonious with the intellectual and theological orientation of the Qur'ān and, as a result, revealed and man-made law became confused. "If the Divine Law becomes tainted by human intervention," Nadwi maintains, "it will cease to be what it should be—a guarantee for success in this world and the next. Neither will the human intellect submit to it nor will the mind of man be won over."<sup>xiv</sup>

In a sense, Nadwi maintains that Muslims would not have been colonized in the modern era if they did not carry the dispensation to be *colonizable*. He shares this sentiment with Malek Bennabi who in turn borrows this concept from Ibn Khaldun.<sup>xv</sup>

Nadwi himself follows a Khaldunian analysis and critique of Muslims in decline “Dazzled by the power and progress of the Western nations, Muslims began to imitate Western social and economic institutions regardless of the consequences. The prestige of religion was diminished. The teachings of the Prophet ﷺ were forgotten.”<sup>xlvii</sup> It is hard to believe that modern-day Muslims profess the same ideology as that of their noble predecessors. Even though he advocates that Muslims learn from the technological superiority of the West, only as long as they remain sincerely attached to their own intellectual and moral traditions, he is concerned about the philosophical spirit underlying the Western world. This world in his view is distinguished by imperialism, capitalism, and communism—all of which are exported to the ‘Third World’. Looking deeper into the West, he postulates the following: (1) religion has been pushed to the periphery. As a result, moral degeneration and spiritual malady have become rampant; (2) aggressive nationalism is the norm, and has proven to be destructive to the Muslim *ummah*; and (3) religious ethics and secular power have been separated. Atheistic materialism, according to Nadwi, is the logical consequence of the conditions prevalent in Europe.<sup>xlviii</sup> Violently exported to the Third World, materialism has had the malevolent effect of swaying Muslims from their faith, even to the point where one notices in modern Muslim societies a perplexing alliance between Muslims and Paganism.

The solution to this state of degeneration requires a radical intellectual revolution. “The *Qur’ān* and the *Sunnah*,” argues Nadwi, “can still revitalize the withered arteries of the Islamic world.”<sup>xlix</sup> It is necessary, therefore, to establish a highly conscious and realistic Muslim leadership that is aware of the perils surrounding the Muslim *ummah* and that exhibits a strong sense of integrity to respond to the multitude of evils that have crept into the inner Muslim consciousness. One of the first tasks of this leadership is to analyze the power structure in Muslim societies, and critique the power elite that does not hesitate for a minute “to mortgage the destiny of [its] people and walk away with it.”<sup>l</sup>

## 1.6 THE SECULAR ANALYSIS OF STAGNATION

The religious equation has proven to be at the center of modern Arab intellectual debate. Although on the whole, secular Arab thinkers adopt different premises and methodologies than those of religious-oriented thinkers, they nevertheless cannot avoid dealing with the religious issue. Laroui’s viewpoint on the matter represents the radical—or Marxist—critique of Arab society, culture, and its religious bedrock. “Criticism of religion is the premise of all criticism.”<sup>1</sup> Thus declares Marx in his writing. Abdallah Laroui follows this maxim rather ardently and applies it to the intellectual history of the modern Arab world which, in his assessment, has not as yet transcended the “problem of religion.” To place religion in its proper place and weaken its popular effectiveness, Laroui proposes a critical method based on philosophy. “Philosophy,” he tells us, “is born, develops, and lives again in polemic. It is

not by re-examining old problems with the old terminology that it can save itself from ever-threatening anachronism; it renews itself only by occupying itself with the questions that are the stuff of everyday social practice, and these first appear in the form of critical polemic.”<sup>ii</sup>

Laroui deals with the religious question rather unenthusiastically. His philosophy is guided by a secular, democratic, progressive, and even atheist vision that aims to transform Arab society from a state of “backward tradition and religion” to one that seeks a radical revolution and liberation of the Arab individual and the creation of a socialist society. To achieve this end, religion must be done away with. However, the obsession with the problem of religion, which permeates the entire work of Laroui, acts as a reminder of the centrality of religion in the modern Arab discourse.<sup>iii</sup>

Laroui proposes three principal ideological currents that deal with the questions facing Arab society: (1) the religious current, best represented by the cleric or the *shaykh*; (2) the political, represented by the liberal politician who, more or less, sees in the West his only chance for intellectual and material survival; and (3) the technical, represented by scientists and technocrats who are concerned with the resourceful introduction of science and technology into society.<sup>iiii</sup>

In Laroui's view, the cleric, as the guardian of tradition, cannot rid himself of the ancient polarization and conflict between Islam and Christianity. He still thinks according to these obsolete categories, Laroui claims. Thus, his religious consciousness does not allow him to comprehend the fundamental changes taking place in the West since the Renaissance and their characteristic secular traits. Nonetheless, the religious consciousness of the cleric is marred by a duality. “The conscience of our cleric is religious when he analyzes society, but he becomes liberal when he critiques the West.”<sup>iv</sup> The liberal politician, although not dismissing Islam in public, has borrowed all of his notions about consultation and democracy from the West. However, he sometimes gives them an Islamic umbrella, as in his use of the terms *shūrā* and *ijmā'*. He still appeals to the Islamic tradition as both a symbol of legitimation and an indicator of cultural authenticity. The technocrat, on the other hand, pays lip service to both religion and politics. He sees the difference between the Arab world and the West, not in terms of religion or political organization, but in the way in which each has developed applied science. “The technocrat does not feel any need of interpreting the dogma or even changing its traditional meaning; he simply ignores doctrine.”<sup>v</sup> Laroui is perhaps justified in drawing our attention to this latter idea mainly because the modern Arab technocrat grew up in the shadow of either colonialism or secular nationalism, both of which struggled to relegate religion to a peripheral status.

Laroui struggles particularly with the notion of the Islamic tradition per se. Although dismisses the entire theological and philosophical heritage of Islam as outmoded, he

admits that traditional categories of thought still dominate the intellectual output of a large number of the Arab intelligentsia. “Arab intellectuals think according to two rationales. Most of them profess the traditionalist rationale [*Salafi*], and the rest profess an eclecticism. Together, these tendencies succeed in abolishing the historical dimension.”<sup>lvi</sup> According to him, the real crisis of the traditionalist Arab intelligentsia is to be found in the foundations that give birth to their thought. This mental dependency on and refuge in the past makes the chances of historical consciousness and growth quite remote. What is, therefore, the alternative? Laroui argues that the only way to get rid of the traditionalist mode of thinking, “consists in strict submission to the discipline of historical thought and acceptance of all its assumptions.”<sup>lvii</sup> Laroui is not quite clear about the nature of this historical school. Yet, his challenge to the functioning categories of the modern Arab mind still awaits an answer. In the words of Hourani, Laroui calls for the adoption of historicism, “that is to say, a willingness to transcend the past, to take what was needed from it by a ‘radical criticism of culture, language, and tradition,’ and use it to make a new future.”<sup>lviii</sup>

Lastly, Laroui takes the weakening of Islamic influence as an indicator of the incompatibility of Islam’s basic formulations with modernity. Here he shares, to a considerable extent, the orientalist thesis that “the traditional Islamic mentality includes elements of reasoning which are based on intellectual concepts no longer accepted.” Laroui, however, goes further than the orientalists in suggesting that Marxism, as a worldview, method, and ideology, is the only viable alternative to the crisis of traditionalism.<sup>lix</sup>

## 1.7 CONCLUSION

In summary, modern Arab thought can be defined as a theoretical framework encompassing intellectual and ideological discourses that have molded the Arab landscape since the 19th century. Engaging with both internal and external forces of change, modern Arab thought navigates its Islamic heritage and the contemporary influences of colonialism and nationalism. Arab intellectuals recognize the necessity of generating ideas and philosophies relevant to present intellectual, social, and cultural challenges. Given the diverse nature of any society’s intelligentsia, it is acknowledged that Arab intellectual concerns vary. Notably, while addressing modern issues, various tendencies within Arab thought consistently reference the Islamic tradition, regardless of differing interpretations or assessments of its relevance in the current context.

A clear distinction is drawn between Islam, viewed as both a method and praxis, and Westernization, seen as a technique and process. Modern Orientalists, including some Muslim thinkers, express a preference for Westernization as the sole viable solution and intellectual option for contemporary Arabs and Muslims. Despite a shared narrative of

decline in Arab and Muslim history during the Ottoman period, these perspectives tend to characterize it broadly as stagnation. While Orientalists propose moving away from “Islamic dogmatism,” obscurantism, atomism, mythology, and ancient beliefs, the majority of Arab and Islamist intelligentsia, while acknowledging the causes of decline, advocate solutions divergent from those of Orientalism.<sup>k</sup> They emphasize the urgent need for modern Muslims to revive and practice the universal foundational principles of Islam to preserve its religious integrity and foster Muslim consciousness across all aspects of life. This common concern for the revival of Islam is shared by both conservative and modernist Muslims.

### NOTES AND REFERENCE

- <sup>i</sup> Nabil Matar, “On the Eve of the Napoleonic Invasion: Arab Perceptions of the World”, in Mahmoud Eid & Karim H. Karim (Eds.), *Re-imagining the Other: Culture, Media, and Western-Muslim Intersections*, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 35.
- <sup>ii</sup> One can get an idea of the diversity of Classic Islamic intellectual history by consulting the following works of Ahmad Amin: *Fajr al-Islām* (Beirut: Dār al-Kitāb al-‘Arabi, 1975); *Dubā al-Islām* 3 vols. (Beirut, 1976); *zubr al-Islām* (Beirut, 1976).
- <sup>iii</sup> Ibrahim M. Abu Rabi, *Intellectual Origins of Islamic Resurgence in the Modern Arab World*, (New York: State University of New York Press, 1996), 2.
- <sup>iv</sup> See, for example, Samir Amin, *The Arab Nation: Nationalism and Class Struggles*, Eng tr. Michael Pallis, (London: Zed Press, 1978).
- <sup>v</sup> Ibrahim M. Abu Rabi, *Intellectual Origins*, 3.
- <sup>vi</sup> Cited in Hosam Aboul-Ela, “The Specificities of Arab Thought: Morocco since the Liberal Age,” in Jens Hanssen and Max Weiss, eds., *Arabic Thought against the Authoritarian Age: Towards an Intellectual History of the Present*, (Cambridge: CUP, 2018), 143–62.
- <sup>vii</sup> Robert Darnton, “Intellectual and Cultural History”, in Michael Kammen, ed., *The Past Before Us: Contemporary Historical Writing in the United States*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1980), 337.
- <sup>viii</sup> Ibrahim M. Abu Rabi, *Intellectual Origins*, 4.
- <sup>ix</sup> A good example of this method is illustrated in Gali Shukri, *al-Nabḍah wa al-Suqūḥ fi Fikr al-Miṣrī al-Ḥadīth* (Renaissance and Decline in Modern Egyptian Thought), (Beirut: Dār al-Talīḥ, 1976). Also, Djait comments on the attempts of modern Arab and European authors to study the evolution of classical and modern Arab political leadership as follows: “This idea [studying the historical evolution of Islamic leadership] might prove quite useful, if we sharpened its focus, because it sheds light on the problem of continuity and discontinuity better than the rather hollow dyads of apogee/ decline, decadence/ renaissance, Arab/ non-Arab, orthodoxy/ heterodoxy, not to mention the recent dialectic between tradition and modernity.” Hichem Djait, *Europe and Islam: Cultures and Modernity*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), 124.

- <sup>x</sup> Denoted by the Arabic terms *Tawātur* and *Tagayyur* respectively.
- <sup>xi</sup> Ibrahim M. Abu Rabi, *Intellectual Origins*, 5-6.
- <sup>xii</sup> Often translated as *Rebirth* or *Renaissance*. On the meanings of *Nabḥab*, decadence, and stagnation, see Seyyed Hossein Nasr, “Decadence, Deviation and Renaissance in the Context of Contemporary Islam,” in Khurshid Ahmad & Zafar Ishaq Ansari, eds., *Islamic Perspectives: Studies in Honor of Mawlana Sayyid Abul A’lā Mawdūdī* (Leicester: The Islamic Foundation, 1980) 35-42. Nasr argues that, “*The modernists never tire of speaking of nearly every form of activity in the Islamic world as a renaissance, whose Arabic translation, al-Nabḥab, has become such a prevalent word in contemporary Arabic literature. There is something insidious about the carefree usage of the word renaissance, for it recalls the Renaissance in the West when the rebirth of spiritually deadly elements of Graeco-Roman paganism dealt a staggering blow to Christian civilization and prevented it from reaching its natural period of flowering as a Christian civilization.*” (*Ibid.*, 37). The modernist attitudes that Nasr criticizes are represented by the following: Fazlur Rahman, *Islam and Modernity: Transformation of an Intellectual Tradition* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1982); and Mazheruddin Siddiqi, *Modern Reformist Thought in the Muslim World* (Islamabad: IRI, 1982).
- <sup>xiii</sup> Abdallah Laroui, *The Crisis of the Arab Intelligentsia: Traditionalism or Historicism?* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976), vii.
- <sup>xiv</sup> Hamilton Gibb, *Modern Trends in Islam*, (Illinois: The University of Chicago Press, 1947), 1.
- <sup>xv</sup> See Jack Crabbs, *The Study of History in Nineteenth Century Egypt: A Study in National Transformation*, (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1984).
- <sup>xvi</sup> See Nikki Keddi, *Sayyid Jamal al-Din al-Afghani: A Biography*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1972).
- <sup>xvii</sup> See Charles Adams, *Islam and Modernism in Egypt*, (New York: Russell & Russell, 1933).
- <sup>xviii</sup> Hisham Sharabi, *Neopatriarchy: A Theory of Distorted Change in Arab Society*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 6.
- <sup>xix</sup> Albert Hourani, *Islam in European Thought*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 109.
- <sup>xx</sup> Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *Islam in Modern History*, (New York: Princeton University Press, 1956), 16.
- <sup>xxi</sup> Ibrahim M. Abu Rabi, *Intellectual Origins*, 8.
- <sup>xxii</sup> Muhsin Mahdi, “Islamic Philosophy in Contemporary Islamic Thought,” in Charles Malik, ed., *God and Man in Contemporary Islamic Thought*, (Beirut: American University of Beirut, 1972), 105.
- <sup>xxiii</sup> Seyyed Hossain Nasr, *Islam and the Plight of Modern Man*, (London: Longman, 1975), 90.
- <sup>xiv</sup> See, for instance, Muhammad ‘Abduh’s arguments on Islam and science in Muhammad ‘Imarah, *al-‘Amāl al-Kāmilah li al-Imām Muḥammad ‘Abduh*, Vol. 3, (Beirut: Dār al-Shurūq, 1972), 278-282.
- <sup>xxv</sup> Ibrahim M. Abu Rabi, *Intellectual Origins*, 9.

- <sup>xxvi</sup> H. Laoust, “Le Reformisme orthodoxe des ‘Salafiyya,’ et les caracteres genieaux de son organisation actuelle,” *Revue des Etudes Islamiques*, 6(175-224), 185, cited in Ibrahim M. Abu Rabi, *Intellectual Origins*, 10.
- <sup>xxvii</sup> Ibrahim M. Abu Rabi, *Intellectual Origins*, 10.
- <sup>xxviii</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>xxix</sup> On Mustafa ‘Abd al-Raziq, see: Ibrahim M. Abu-Rabi, “Al-Azhar and Rationalism in Modern Egypt: The Philosophical Contributions of Shaykhs Mustafa ‘Abd al-Raziq and ‘Abd al-Halim Mahmud,” *Islamic Studies*, 27(2), Summer 1988, 129-150; also, James Broucek, *The Controversy of Shaykh ‘Ali ‘Abd Al-Raziq* (Ph.D. Dissertation), (The Florida State University, 2012).
- <sup>xxx</sup> Mustafa ‘Abd al-Raziq, *Tambid li Tārīkh al-Falsafah al-Islāmiyyah*, 3rd ed. (Cairo: Dār al-Kitāb al-Labnānī, 1966), 5.
- <sup>xxxi</sup> Ibrahim M. Abu Rabi, *Intellectual Origins*, 11.
- <sup>xxxii</sup> Ibid, 11.
- <sup>xxxiii</sup> Hamilton Gibb, “Whither Islam?” In Hamilton Gibb, ed., *Whither Islam? A Survey of Modern Movements in the Moslem World* (London: Victor Gollancz Ltd., 1932), 343.
- <sup>xxxiv</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>xxxv</sup> Compare this to what Marwan Buheiry has to say about the Russian orientalist Eugene de Roberty, “*Modernization, to him, was a universal model, and in this respect, he wanted Europe 'to work on the Muslim elite... by sending Western scholars, artists, engineers, and workers, while keeping strictly at home in Europe the Catholic, Protestant, priests, and missionaries. The real task was to build railways in the world of Islam and proceed with a secular colonization of land and industry.*” Marwan Buheiry, “Colonial Scholarship and Muslim Revivalism in 1900”, in Lawrence Conrad, ed., *The Formation and Perception of the Modern Arab World: Studies by Marwan R. Buheiry*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989), 114-115.
- <sup>xxxvi</sup> Hamilton Gibb, “Whither Islam?”, 329.
- <sup>xxxvii</sup> William Polk, “Sir Hamilton Gibb Between Orientalism and History”, *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, 6(2), April 1975, 139.
- <sup>xxxviii</sup> Hamilton Gibb, *Modern Trends in Islam*, 7.
- <sup>xxxix</sup> Hamilton Gibb, “The Heritage of Islam in the Modern World”, *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, 1(1), January 1970, 4.
- <sup>xl</sup> Edward Said, *Orientalism*, (India: Penguin Books, 2001), 279.
- <sup>xli</sup> A number of scholars challenge the thesis of general decline before the onset of the West in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. See Roger Owen, “The Middle East in the Eighteenth Century—an Islamic Society in Decline? A Critique of Gibb and Bowen’s Islamic Society and the West”, *British Society for Middle Eastern Studies*, 3(2), 1976, 110-117; and William Smyth, “The Making of a Textbook”, *Studia Islamica*, LXXVIII, 1994, 99-116.
- <sup>xlii</sup> Abu al-Hasan ‘Ali al-Nadwi, *Mādhā Khasir al-‘Ālam bi Inhitāt al-Muslimīn (Islam and the World)*, English tr. Muhammad Asif Kidwai, (Leicester: UK Islamic Academy, 2005).

- <sup>xliii</sup> Ibid, 169.
- <sup>xliv</sup> Ibid, 95-96.
- <sup>xlvi</sup> Malek Bennabi, *Islamic in History and Society*, English tr. Asma Rashid, (Islamabad: IRI, 1988).
- <sup>xlvii</sup> Abu al-Hasan ‘Ali al-Nadwi, *Islam and the World*, 178.
- <sup>xlviii</sup> Ibrahim M. Abu Rabi, *Intellectual Origins*, 20.
- <sup>xlix</sup> Abu al-Hasan ‘Ali al-Nadwi, *Islam and the World*, 189.
- <sup>1</sup> Ibid, 193.
- <sup>1</sup> Karl Marx & Friedrich Engels, *Collected Works*, vol. 3 (New York: International Publishers, 1975), 175. Marx maintains the following: “*Man makes religion, religion does not make man. Religion is the self-consciousness and the self-esteem of man who has either not yet found himself or has already lost himself again.*”
- <sup>li</sup> Abdallah Laroui, *The Crisis*, 83.
- <sup>lii</sup> Ibrahim M. Abu Rabi, *Intellectual Origins*, 23.
- <sup>liii</sup> Abdallah Laroui, *L’ideologie arabe contemporaine* (Paris, 1970), 4, cited by Ibrahim M. Abu Rabi, *Intellectual Origins*, 24.
- <sup>liv</sup> Ibid, 39.
- <sup>lv</sup> Ibid, 27.
- <sup>lvi</sup> Abdallah Laroui, *The Crisis*, 153-154.
- <sup>lvii</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>lviii</sup> Albert Hourani, *A History of the Arab People*, (Cambridge: CUP, 1991), 445.
- <sup>lix</sup> Laroui is the representative of a major trend in modern Arab thought that can be generally termed Marxist which has pronounced more than once “*the death of religion.*”
- <sup>lx</sup> Ibrahim M. Abu Rabi, *Intellectual Origins*, 17.