



The Retreat from Universalism in the Middle East and the World

Intellectual Shifts and the Demise of Inclusive Identities

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The Islamic State may be close to defeat, but the wound it opened in the social and political fabric of the Middle East will take a long time to heal. It is not just the shock of the group's ultraviolent tactics that will linger long after it has lost all of its territory. Even more so, it will be remembered for dealing a severe blow—possibly a fatal one—to the idea of pluralism in the region. Coexistence will be hard to recover, whether between ethnicities, religions, or other identities. The group's atrocities have had severe consequences that will take years, if not decades, to rectify. What trust existed between communities has been shredded. And while the Islamic State's startling expansion was by no means the first challenge to coexistence, its extent, nature, and severity have far eclipsed previous episodes, such as the Lebanese Civil War. Long-standing minority fears have been given a concrete and brutal form in the shape of the attempted genocide against the Yazidis and the persecution of minorities. Further, the Islamic State's rise on the heels of the Arab uprisings poses a baffling and uncomfortable question: how could protest movements that started by calling for dignity, freedom, and democracy have given way to the bleak vision of such extremists?

The Islamic State may be an emblem for the failure of pluralism in the Middle East and North Africa, but its rise

occurred in the context of a much larger trend—one that is, at least in some respects, global. There is a broad and ongoing retreat from the universalism that once undergirded the progressive outlook, among politicians, thinkers, and the general population. This universalism had held that, at a basic level, the same institutions of democratic organization had relevance no matter the cultural context, that political analysis and strategy could exist without recourse to sect or ethnic identity, and that the same fundamental rights applied to and were valued by all peoples. Even regimes that brazenly abused some of these ideas, such as that in Syria, drew some of their legitimacy from a professed belief in a secular vision that would supposedly achieve these ideals in the long run.

Today, as the failures of the region's twentieth-century political projects have been laid bare, this universalism is being replaced by identity-based movements throughout the region. The Islamic State is simply an especially vivid example. It is sometimes hard to distinguish cause from correlation, but it is certain that international changes in politics and theory have paralleled the shifts in the Middle East and North Africa, if not contributed to them. There is a global dimension to the impact of the rise of identity as a political driver. Take, for instance, the thousands of European

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jihadists flocking to join the Islamic State.¹ Meanwhile, discussions about the future of politics and political identity in the Middle East and North Africa are heavily influenced by the trends in academia in the West. In particular, the region has suffered as a result of a worldwide intellectual trend away from universalism and toward specificity and particularism—a shift referred to by scholars as the “cultural turn.” The academic cultural turn left the intellectual foundations of universalism and moved toward particularist models, which has problematized both the notions of universalist politics and of inquiry. In particular, the cultural turn has dislodged class analysis and materialism, considering them as inadequate or insufficient tools for the investigation of socio-politics. This movement in academia and philosophy was echoed in the wider social and political context and helped undermine universalism, while accelerating political fragmentation, feeding the rise of exclusive identity-based movements.

In this report, I argue that the precarious moment in the Middle East and North Africa is, simultaneously, the product of political failures within the region and of a global retreat of political models that could guide the process of transition to an alternative cross-sectarian polity. The political failures encompass multiple facets: from the elite accommodation of political oppression and stumbling leadership, to the defeat of grassroots and protest movements. Both right- and left-wing secular ideologies within the Middle East have, over the last half century, failed to deliver on their promises, which has left secular political parties significantly marginalized. The rise of Islamism in various guises has coincided with this decline, which accelerated since the late 1970s and early 1980s. Political ideas like liberalism and socialism are in crisis.

We are at the moment when the shift against universalism and the movements and ideologies that it inspired during the twentieth century has created an impasse for the secular political imagination. The Islamic State rose in this context, and the Arab uprisings that began in 2011 have foundered in it. Drawing on parallels between the Middle East and the West, I argue that there are a number of political, cultural, and social developments that have occurred during the past few decades, accentuated in the post-Cold War period, that

limit the potential for the emergence of equalitarian political alternatives to divisive and sectarian politics.

The region faces two choices: either a path of fragmentation and temporary cross-alliances between different groups, or the revival of collective identities in a pluralistic and democratic manner. Nobody expects the latter to happen immediately, but facilitating it requires the creation of larger groupings that are more defined by political outlook than narrow identities.

There is thus a fresh urgency to discussions about the role of religion in the politics of the Middle East and North Africa, the meaning of sectarianism, the nature and legitimacy of secularism, and a host of other categories such as citizenship, inclusion, and pluralism. Yet at this critical juncture it seems that these discussions are incapable of offering a clear path toward rebuilding the politics of the Middle East in a way that would inoculate it against internal strife and alleviate the threat of the divisive tendencies that now dominate it.

What follows is an attempt to better understand this problem, so that we can begin to untangle it.

The Cultural Turn and the Changing Nature of Sectarianism

Within strands of postcolonial theory, the cultural turn has taken the shape of the rejection of Western models of historical development under capitalism as incapable of explaining the complexity of subsequent developments in the “East.”² While this debate took place largely in academic circles starting in the 1970s, it had wide impact on political philosophy. The East, the theory goes, requires its own categories capable of appreciating the role of religion, tradition, kin, and other factors that seemed to be missing from the materialist analysis in the West (in the Marxist tradition, for example).

Sociologist Vivek Chibber has written persuasively about this theoretical shift. “The call to rethink the basic structure of Western theory” in postcolonial studies, he writes, is based on the claim “that the structure of modernity in the East is

so ... that the categories developed out of the European experience cannot possibly be adequate for analyzing the East.”³

“Subalternists,” as these theorists sometimes call themselves, arrived at the conclusions that Chibber describes in response to the apparent failure of the bourgeoisie in colonial and postcolonial settings to emulate its Western counterpart in overthrowing feudalism and building class hegemony, “an index” of the bourgeoisie’s failure “to live up to its own universalizing project.”⁴

The implications of this failure, as diagnosed by the subalternists, are significant in influencing how politics in the Global South are viewed today. “Colonial capital’s refusal to take up its universalizing mission leaves untouched older forms for power,” writes Chibber in his critique of the subalternists, summarizing one of their key premises. As a result, it also leaves untouched “the political idiom linked to those power relations.” Thus, “the bourgeoisie does not integrate subaltern culture into its own modernizing discourse.” This dynamic, Chibber continues, leads to a situation in which the language of “premodern politics” persists in modern times, including in the support of subaltern struggles. As a result, “politics will be waged in religious language and around religious issues,” Chibber writes. “The dominant axis will typically be community/ethnicity, not individual or class interests.”⁵

I return below to the significance of these conclusions in shaping a dominant intellectual view of politics outside the West with particular relevance to the Middle Eastern context. Postcolonial theory became hugely influential during the past few decades within academic circles and, arguably, even beyond that. Many activists and political thinkers in the region relied on the central tenets of postcolonial thinking during the period that followed the Arab uprisings, often invoking the theory to justify all manner of divisive and narrow political activity. It would be an exaggeration to say that postcolonial theory is responsible for the adoption of the cultural framework among the public, but it certainly helped establish the cultural framework’s intellectual prominence. It’s important to note that this shift toward cultural explanations

extends beyond postcolonial circles, within circles with very different intellectual and political inclinations. This varied resort to cultural determinants is crucial in understanding the impact of this intellectual trend.

The shift to the cultural prism wasn’t limited to postcolonialists, however. Take “The Clash of Civilizations?,” Samuel Huntington’s famous 1993 essay. “The great divisions among humankind and the dominating source of conflict will be cultural,” the American thinker wrote, claiming that economics and ideology would no longer be the main causes of rivalries.⁶ Huntington’s essay, which was expanded into a book in 1996, was particularly influential among policymakers. Central to his thesis was the notion of a conflict involving “the West versus the rest,” which I return to below in order to highlight the nature of the current departure from universalism.⁷

The cultural turn has had a significant impact on placing culture at the center of inquiry.⁸ British writer Kenan Malik argues that the cultural turn has “transformed political conflicts” into unresolvable forms, because they are recast “as issues of culture or ethnicity or faith.”⁹ Malik wrote this in the context of multicultural politics in the West, but I argue that it is relevant in the context of the Middle East to explain the changing nature of “sectarianism.”

Chibber makes a similar connection, writing that the cultural turn has “encouraged a turn away from structural analysis,” and “an insistence upon the local and particular, as against the more universalizing claims of traditional class theory.” Class analysis, and its universal implications, has thus become almost irrelevant for many analysts, or is so affected by local cultural considerations that its relevance is profoundly deemphasized.¹⁰

There is a historic precedent for this type of debate and theoretical adaptation that occurred in the years leading to the Lebanese Civil War (1975–90). As American University of Beirut (AUB) scholar Rima Majed has written, “pre-war debates around sectarianism were very much divided between those who viewed Lebanese society as being essentially vertically divided into sects and those who viewed

it as being primarily a horizontally divided class society.” As a result, “class-sect” analyses of Lebanese society proliferated. In grappling with this somewhat tortured construction, some analysts came to the conclusion that, in Lebanon, sect had replaced class as the main social fault line.¹¹

The Lebanese Left, understandably, led the way in advancing the class thesis, at least at the rhetorical level. As anthropologist Fadi Bardawil notes, “this earlier generation of militants grounded political practice in a thick Marxist theoretical language.”¹² By 1979, four years after the start of the war and in the wake of atrocities by the different sides, this language had given way to a critique of the reliance on Marxist and Leninist models in Arab political thought, because, as Bardawil explains, it was felt that those models “overlooked the socio-political fabric of domination and power in our societies.”¹³

The study of the specific relationship of the persistence of “pre-capitalist social relations” to class in the Lebanese context has waned in recent years, however. Majed argues that this is due to the rise of “postmodernist trends in knowledge production” and, even more so, a newfound willingness for theorists to assume “the nature of social conflict”—namely, that its causes have to do with culture more than economics. As a result, class dynamics are erased from analyses of sectarianism.¹⁴

There are clear parallels here between global academic trends and the way “sectarianism” is studied and discussed in the Lebanese context, as Majed points out. The elevation of the role of cultural determinants since the cultural turn imbues sectarian and confessional identities with a new significance, one that is not derived from their relationship to the economic order.¹⁵ This is a stark difference from the 1970s, when the Lebanese Left either clumsily attempted to collapse the difference between class and confession, or proposed to do away entirely with the confessional arrangements.¹⁶

Lebanon as a Symbol for Broader Trends

In my view, the Lebanese Left’s failure in the civil war emanated from its inability to capitalize on class conflict to mobilize wide, cross-sectarian support to reform, or even overhaul the Lebanese political system. As sociologist Theodor Hanf puts it, on the eve of the war, “the social conflict of the 1960s and early 1970s was between strata, classes, and interest groups, not communities.”¹⁷

And yet the Left failed to seize on this opportunity and ended up as a participant in what quickly became a war fought along sectarian lines. The Left’s failure to appeal to the Christian working class was particularly significant, as evidenced by the fact that both communist parties drew their mass membership predominantly from the Shia community.¹⁸ This was exacerbated by the Left’s appeal to the idea of the “class-sect” and the willful conflation between class and confession, which one former member of the Organization for Communist Action decried: “A particularly sinister example of intellectual dishonesty is the ‘theory’ of the ‘community as class.’ Those who thought it out knew exactly what they were doing.... That way one ultimately reaches the conclusion that the end justifies the means. ‘Community as class’ provides a free ticket for one’s conscience to run amok in confessionalism.”¹⁹

In light of this, the Lebanese Left’s move away from class politics during and after the civil war appears baffling. Instead of the adherence to class politics leading to the disasters of the civil war, it was in fact the failure to galvanize support along class lines that derailed its potential. One of the legacies of this experience is that the Left in Lebanon has become more attentive to cultural categories, the confounding endurance of “sectarianism, familialism and regionalism” at the expense of class analysis and mobilisation.²⁰

While Lebanon’s system has largely been seen by scholars as an oddity, it can actually be considered an antecedent of tendencies that we are seeing today in the West that were largely created by the shift toward culture and

cultural identities. As such, rather than discussing Lebanon in terms of “tribalism,” for example, it is more accurate to see it as a society in which multicultural arrangements are deeply entrenched and institutionalized.²¹ Furthermore, understanding the trajectory that Lebanon’s development followed as a consequence of its consociational polity is important for anticipating the impact of the move away from universalism, both regionally and globally. When I have made this argument in the past, the objections emphasized the uniqueness of Lebanon, and hence the limitation of the conclusions that can be drawn from its experience more widely.²² But we have already seen the example of Lebanon used as a template for Iraq in the aftermath of the 2003 invasion, as well as serious suggestions that its model could be applied in Syria and other countries in the region as a solution for diverse societies. Lebanon’s significance lies in the fact that it has served as a model, propelled by renewed energy in light of its relative stability in the aftermath of the Arab uprisings, and its wide array of intersections with global politics. As the question of identity comes to the fore in a significant manner globally, Lebanon, far from being an exception, serves as a test case for the institutionalization of identity-based politics.

In the 1960s and 1970s, there was also a movement in the West away from analyses based on class politics. “Where the old left looked to the working class as the agency of change, the New Left found new, surrogate proletariats in the so-called New Social Movements—Third World liberation struggles, civil rights organizations, feminist groups, campaigns for gay rights, and the peace movement,” Malik writes. “Where the old left talked of class and sought to raise class-consciousness, the New Left talked of culture and sought to strengthen cultural identity.”²³

Malik notes that this led to the formulation of new political demands—not for universal rights but for respect for differences.²⁴ He argues that this shift within the Left came to influence the formation of multicultural policies in Britain, particularly through municipal anti-racism, which worked through the funding of communal initiatives with the explicit aim of celebrating cultural distinctiveness—but did not address the underlying problem of racism.²⁵

In 2000, a report was released by the Commission on the Future of Multi-Ethnic Britain, set up by the Runnymede Trust, a British “race equality think tank.”²⁶ The document, known as the “Parekh Report,” is seen “as defining the essence of multiculturalism,” according to Malik.²⁷ The report describes Britain as “both a community of citizens and a community of communities, both a liberal and a multicultural society.” Further, it asserts that “equality must be defined in a culturally sensitive way.”²⁸

This idea of a “community of communities” alerted me to a surprising similarity between Lebanon and multicultural Britain when I first arrived in Britain in 2002. The notion of Lebanon as a “republic of sects” or a “democracy of sects” is often used to explain the Lebanese sociopolitical system and its peculiarity.²⁹ The system assigns a legal and political status for the various communities through allocated parliamentary seats, civil service appointments, and key government positions, as well as informally through deferring to the opinion of religious authorities of the various sects in many aspects of public life.³⁰

In both Lebanon and Britain (and in other Western countries that have adopted multicultural policies), where group identities are recognized in legal and political terms as constituents, the very process of recognition is the key driver in reproducing the power and status of these group identities. As Malik argues, you begin to see yourself in terms of a fixed identity that is recognized by bureaucracy “not just because those identities provide you with access to power, influence and resources, but also because those identities have come to possess a social reality through receiving constant confirmation and affirmation.”³¹

I don’t want to overemphasize the similarity between Lebanon and Britain. There are significant differences in how both countries are politically and socially organized, as well as significant historical differences in how they evolved. But there are also undeniable links in the underlying theory that has influenced trends in analysis of the two societies, and of others. As Malik notes, “The term ‘multicultural’ ... has come to embody ... both a description of a society and a prescription for managing it. Multiculturalism is both the

problem and the solution.”³² In a similar vein, one can talk of how Lebanon’s confessional system is both a problem and a solution.

While outright sectarian warfare has largely been avoided since the end of the war in Lebanon, “cultural identity-based divisions” appear to be on the rise, according to research conducted by AUB professor Nasser Yassin.³³ Yassin conducted a focus group survey in 2009 of a hundred Beirutis and found that postwar youth “tend to confine their social trust to a very small circle of friends and family members and to prefer living in communal enclaves,” even though they mix with people from other backgrounds in their daily lives. The maintenance of the collective, Yassin writes, is paramount in their choices and in the structure of their enclaves.³⁴

This emphasis on the collective identity has a contemporary resonance to it: this is not about security concerns in wartime, but communities living side by side in peacetime yet choosing to live parallel lives in the name of identity preservation.

These conceptions represent a radically different form of sectarian antagonism than that of the feudal era. Much like in the rest of the Middle East, the idea of sectarian frictions representing historically continuous “ancient hatreds” is an ahistorical myth that obscures their nature as primarily manifestations of political conflict and, increasingly, cultural anxiety. In fact, Lebanon’s communalist system was itself a product of an imaginative adaptation of the politics of modernity for the Lebanese context, initially designed to secure Maronite hegemony and the acquiescence of the other groups.³⁵ As I argued above, Lebanon represented more of a precursor of multicultural politics in the West than a “feudal” form of politics, as a common media misconception runs.³⁶ Lebanon is not unique in that sense: the British designed similar representational tactics in India, for example, to guarantee minority representation.³⁷ Likewise, the Lebanese system owes much to French orchestration.

It may seem strange that France helped implement such

a system, considering French universalist principles and fondness for *laïcité* (French secularism). The fact that France orchestrated a decidedly *unsecular* political system in Lebanon would seem to reveal its hypocrisy—and undermine the very essence of universalism. Such observations are often made by the Left, claiming that universalism was a ruse to mask colonial domination.³⁸ But as Chibber argues forcefully in his 2014 book *Postcolonial Theory and the Specter of Capital*, this conflation of Enlightenment ideals and colonial practices betrays a lack of understanding of the historic development and link between capitalism and liberalism in the West. The presumption was that political freedoms and rights were not handed out by an idealistic elite but had to be fought for by movements from below. It was not the elites who were driven by the idealistic vision of Enlightenment principles to emancipate. Rather, the organized working classes forcefully secured those rights, guided by those same Enlightenment principles: freedom, equality, self-determination, and the entire lexicon of currently unfashionable terminology.

The colonial elites who refused to grant those rights to the poor in Europe were not likely to hand them out to their colonial subjects, as Chibber observes. But colonial subjects still sought those rights. As C. L. R. James illustrates in *The Black Jacobins*, it was the Haitians, not their colonial masters, who liberated *themselves* from slavery and were guided by the Enlightenment principles. The ideals of the French Revolution “meant far more to them than to any Frenchman.”³⁹ That the French in Lebanon weren’t in the business of exporting *laïcité* and universalist principles should not be surprising. In fact, the French in Lebanon and the British in India have had more in common with the anti-universalist/culturalist position than with the Enlightenment and its thinkers. Both seemed to agree, for example, that the “East” should not aspire to the same forms of liberal democracy that historically emerged in the West.

Middle Eastern Exceptionalism

Since the beginning of the Arab uprisings in 2010, a recurrent theme in response to the eruption of the mass protests has been to question the feasibility of the idea of democracy in the context of the Middle East and North Africa. As early as

January 2011, Massimo Calabresi asked in *Time*, “Is the Arab World Ready for Democracy?”⁴⁰ This was followed over the years by many articles and columns with titles such as “Why Western Democracy Can Never Work in the Middle East,” “Why Arab Democracy Will Fail,” and “There Is No Hope of Democracy in the Middle East.”⁴¹ While some tried to locate the difficulty of transitioning toward democracy in the region within a historical and political framework, taking into account the nature of the autocratic regimes or geopolitical imperatives, others dismissed the possibility of democratic transition outright on cultural grounds. For example, Andrew Green, former British ambassador to Syria and Saudi Arabia, has argued that “democracy is empathically not the solution for extremely complex societies.... The fundamental reason for our failure is that democracy, as we understand it, simply doesn’t work in Middle Eastern countries where family, tribe, sect and personal friendships trump the apparatus of the state.”⁴²

While Green, founder of the United Kingdom’s virulent anti-immigration Migration Watch, is decidedly not on the Left, his comments do echo, in a less sophisticated form and from a different political position, the postcolonial position. As Chibber puts it, “the Subalternist collective issues a firm injunction against such universalistic ideas,” such as the desire for democratization.

They deny that agents share a common set of needs or interests across cultural boundaries, arguing instead that the peasants and industrial workers in the East have a wholly different psychology from those in the West. In the West, we are told, political psychology revolves around secular conceptions of the individual and his rights; whereas in the East, agency is motivated by the concept of duty, or obligation, making the actor’s basic orientation religious, not secular. To expect that political modernization in the postcolonial world will follow a course similar to that of the West is therefore mistaken.⁴³

The resonance between ideas on the Left and the Right, between cultural relativism and postcolonial theory, between the clash of civilizations thesis and culturalism, illustrates today’s ascendancy of anti-universalism. In fact, as Chibber

argues, many of the assumptions that postcolonial theorists make about the “specificity of the East” are themselves reminiscent of old Orientalist tropes about the “backward East.”⁴⁴ Thus, when it came to the Arab uprisings, protests that began with explicit demands for democracy, freedom, bread—universalist demands, one would say—were discussed, in the examples I cite above, in heavily anthropologized language and framing. These sorts of headlines about the prospects of democracy in the Middle East and North Africa or the Arab world were accompanied by similar thoughts about the relationship between Islam and democracy, such as “Is Islam Compatible with Democracy?”⁴⁵ These questions were sometimes met with outrage on social media and in critical responses, but the intellectual foundations for this anthropological stance had been constructed over decades by both the Left and the Right, in no small measure due to the deliberate dismantling of the Enlightenment legacy, the undermining of its universalist foundations, and the dilution of the language of political economy.⁴⁶ As I illustrate later in this report, those questions were also being asked by Muslim thinkers.

The exhaustion of “universalist” political parties and ideas in the region has had another impact that has been accentuated since the start of the Arab uprisings in 2010. Today, the only sides claiming to represent an inclusive universalist approach are authoritarian governments like those of Syria and Egypt.⁴⁷ Those regimes’ claims may not hold up to close scrutiny, but at the rhetorical level they continue to represent tools for legitimacy for rulers in both countries, as they portray themselves as protectors of minorities and opponents of sectarianism. While these claims are regularly dismissed by some observers, they do play an important role as a means for positioning those countries as leading the fight against jihadism.⁴⁸

The nature of global and regional political alliances in the Middle East is being reshaped along this narrative, for example when it comes to the role that Russia has played in the Syrian war, capitalizing in no small part on the shock of the emergence of the Islamic State and the threat it represented. Both Russian and Syrian officials have stressed the narrative that Russia’s involvement is in defense of secularism against

jihadi extremism. As historian and analyst Fiona Hill writes, “in Putin’s view... Syria is the latest battleground in a global, multi-decade struggle between secular states and Sunni Islamism, which first began in Afghanistan with the Taliban, then moved to Chechnya, and has torn a number of Arab countries apart.”⁴⁹

Parallel to this development, the idea of secularism has come under attack in a manner that gained significant traction throughout the Arab uprisings, building up on its apparent failure in the years that followed independence in countries like Tunisia, Syria, and Iraq, and culminating in the reaction against the outright violent repression of the uprisings at the hands of regimes that claimed to be secular. Incomplete and badly implemented as this form of state-led secularism was, it was also, as noted above, a key rhetorical claim for many regimes in the region. As the uprisings rapidly started to gain a clear religiously driven form, it allowed regimes to represent the conflicts that followed the uprisings as a clash between Islamism and secularism.

Joseph Daher has documented these fissures in the context of Syria within the ranks of the opposition, focusing on the hostility between Islamists and secularists and the attacks by the former on the secularists’ contribution to the uprising. According to Daher, such attacks focused on the alleged secularist antagonism toward Muslims, attempting to represent secularism as a form of apostasy and its advocates as foreign tools who didn’t play a significant role in the uprising.⁵⁰

Daher focuses on the Islamist nature of the attacks and critiques of secularism, but looking outside of Syria, there are much wider critiques of secularism and from varying ideological positions that are influential today, such as in academia. The scholar Daniel Coluccello Barber sums up some of the strands of this criticism. “Religion has not disappeared,” he writes. “If anything, religion has become more visible. Consequently, the academy finds itself talking less about the advance of secularization, and more about the so-called ‘return of religion.’ And with that return, the secular has come under critique. Once taken as the inevitable product of history, secularization is now being questioned

from multiple angles and schools of thought.”⁵¹

Here again there is a sense that the Right and the Left have converged to undermine secularism, though they started from different positions. In the United States for example, the Right led the attack on secularism partially due to the growing political strength of the evangelical movement. Some left-leaning thinkers legitimized Islamists by consequence of this position, arguing that they represent authentic and anti-imperialist tendencies.⁵² Meanwhile, thinkers of the (largely postcolonial) Left were questioning the validity of secularism in the Global South, or in the Arab and Islamic contexts.

For instance, the late Saba Mahmood, in her book *Religious Difference in a Secular Age: The Minority Report*, took the view that the plight of Egyptian Copts was caused by Egypt’s political secularism, not just in terms of its practice but as an innate characteristic of secularism regardless of context. Mahmood introduced her book with the following:

While Islamic concepts and practices are crucial to the production of this inequality, I argue that the modern state and its political rationality have played a far more decisive role in transforming preexisting religious differences, producing new forms of communal polarization, and making religion more rather than less salient to minority and majority identities alike. Furthermore, I suggest that insomuch as secularism is characterized by a globally shared form of national-political structuration, the regulation of religious difference takes a modular form across geographical boundaries. Two paradoxical features of this secular political rationality are particularly germane. First, its claim to religious neutrality notwithstanding, the modern state has become involved in the regulation and management of religious life to an unprecedented degree, thereby embroiling the state in substantive issues of religious doctrine and practice. Second, despite the commitment to levelling religious differences in the political sphere, modern secular governance transforms—and in

some respects intensifies—preexisting interfaith inequalities, allowing them to flourish in society, and hence for religion to striate national identity and public norms.⁵³

Mahmood's conclusions are an extension of the postcolonial antagonism toward universalist ideals, much as we have seen with subalternists' position with regard to democracy. Her work has been influential in mounting the intellectual challenge to the idea of secularism. It's not an exaggeration to say that she was one of the leading voices against what she herself described as the "old idea" that secularism means the separation of church and state.⁵⁴ But, much like the wider postcolonial attitude to universalist concepts, it is based on dubious representations of the workings of secularism.⁵⁵ In her review of Mahmood's book, the Palestinian-American scholar Lama Abu-Odeh picks up this point about the anti-universalist impulse. "Mahmood makes much of the tainted origins and the bad company that 'political secularism' had historically kept," writes Abu-Odeh. "As the recipients of secularism gave no proper 'consent,' and even worse, something precious was lost in the process, namely, 'religious difference,' this secularism became irredeemably tainted for Mahmood. Its globalism was imperialism simpliciter."⁵⁶

Mahmood's argument rests on accepting the Egyptian state's claims about upholding secularism, ignoring the historical instrumentalization of religion by the very same state for explicit political aims, as Michael Wahid Hanna has illustrated.⁵⁷ To take the claim that the Egyptian state is secular in any meaningful sense requires enthusiastic credulity. The Egyptian state's instrumentalization of religion wasn't and isn't a manifestation of the secular state's abstract impulse to regulate religion. On the contrary, it was the product of an explicit political project to shore up its legitimacy *at the expense of secularism*. That this is manifestly contrary to secularist principles can only be overlooked by an ideologically motivated impulse to discredit secularism.

This conflict between ideals framed in universalist terms and "local" alternatives manifested itself in the programs of the Syrian opposition. As Daher notes, the concept of "secularism" has become so discredited in some circles that

"the term 'civil state' has been increasingly used by both secular ... and Islamic fundamentalist groups." These groups, Daher writes, "argue that this concept of civil statehood based on citizenship is less controversial for members of the society, while also incorporating the same principles of a secular state with no discrimination based on sect or gender." But such groups are unable to get specific when it comes to dealing with sharia and personal status laws.⁵⁸ As such, these programs represented a compromise by the liberal and leftist elements in the Syrian opposition in favor of the Islamist forces, particularly when it came to the role of religion in the constitution, the position of minorities, and women's rights. Ultimately, this hurt the Syrian opposition's chances of presenting a convincing substitute to the regime.⁵⁹

Beyond opportunism, the waning appeal of universalism also explains the concessions made by seasoned liberal and communist Syrian dissidents, largely to accommodate the Islamist viewpoint. There is a definite intellectual shift that makes such accommodations palatable, and much of it is due to the ascendancy of culturalism. Again, the question of identity here is central, broadly affecting the nature of politics and social struggles, and weakening larger ideological platforms in the process. The accommodations made by both leftist and liberal movements to identity-based and culturalist demands are eroding their credibility. Moreover, if politics is to be perceived as a clash of identities, then the obvious conclusion is to rally around group identity, a conclusion that many across the Middle East have arrived at. The immediate effect of this is that liberal organizations and movements appear alien, as their support wanes in favor of communalist and ethnic groups.

The Islamic awakening

In all of this, there is a sense, as many writers have identified before, that this historical moment represents a failure of modernity as it was understood during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, in its political, social, and cultural forms. I am of the view that this failure is a failure to modernize political arrangements and social relationships in a manner that ushers in equality and political and social freedoms and rights. There is nothing unique to the Middle East and North

Africa in this lag between capitalist development and social and political progress; indeed most, if not all, societies have experienced this lag.⁶⁰ This setback is largely responsible for the major cultural and political shifts in the Middle East and North Africa over the past few decades, but crucially this failure is part of a historic process that is still developing.⁶¹ The resurgence of the Islamic identity is perhaps the most obvious manifestation of this transformation. This is not to say that there is something inherently contradictory between modernity and Islam, but rather that, starting in the 1970s, the revival of a social and political Islamic identity, known as “the Islamic awakening,” was an outcome of the failure of the social and political forms associated with modernity (secular parties, nationalism, and the state).

Significantly, this revival occurred at a moment when it seemed that leftist and liberal parties and movements had failed to deliver on their promises in the Middle East and North Africa. Islamism gained ascendancy to fill the void left by their defeat.⁶² Examples of the revival of a social and political Islamic identity include the rapid rise of Hezbollah in Lebanon, that of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt and other Arab countries, the rise of Hamas in Palestine, and above all the Iranian Revolution and its huge impact on its neighbors and the entire Middle East and North Africa.

The reaction to modernity’s faltering is certainly not limited to Muslim societies. In fact, modernity has been accompanied by such internal tensions since its beginning and its evolution was far from a linear and parallel progression. Economic modernization and capitalist development could coexist with authoritarian states; they didn’t lead to secularization everywhere; and social liberalization didn’t go hand in hand with democratization. On the philosophical level, thinkers have been debating whether the violent ruptures that modernity creates with tradition are capable of sustaining a fulfilling sense of meaning for individuals and social groups. The question has certainly intensified during the last few decades. The resurgence of the Islamic identity, and subsequently that of other, minority identities within the Middle East, certainly seem to be one part of a global

story of tension between modernity and a romantic view of tradition. However, the rise of the Islamic identity is not only the result of these tensions. Rather, it has occurred within a specific social and political context defined by authoritarian rule and failing secular movements that have given the contemporary Islamic identity’s rise a political and sometimes militant dimension.

There are multiple other, and competing, explanations for the Islamic awakening and the rise of Islamism. Some have proposed that this Islamic resurgence is, at least partly, due to the fact that Islam itself is different from other religions and particularly Christianity, and that the separation of religion and politics is impossible in Islam. This fits within a broader framework of how the identity construct operates and how the culturalist frame is applied to Muslims.⁶³

For example, Shadi Hamid has developed a thesis of “Islamic exceptionalism,” which he described in an *Atlantic* article that was later expanded into a book.⁶⁴ The thesis follows a widely articulated Islamist argument about the place of religious law within Islam. For example, the influential Egyptian religious cleric Youssef Qardawi argues, “it is to be noted that Islam, being God’s final message to humanity, is a comprehensive system dealing with all spheres of life; it is a state and a religion, or government and a nation; it is a morality and power, or mercy and justice; it is a culture and a law or knowledge and jurisprudence; it is material and wealth, or gain and prosperity; it is jihad and a call, or army and a cause, and finally, it is true belief and worship.”⁶⁵

Hamid’s thesis rests on this aspect that he says is unique to Islam. “Islam is distinctive in how it relates to politics—and this distinctiveness can be traced back to the religion’s founding moment in the seventh century,” he writes. “Islam is *different*... ‘Islamic Exceptionalism’ is neither good nor bad. It just *is*.”

He continues: “Because of this exceptionalism, a Middle Eastern replay of the Western model—Reformation followed by an Enlightenment in which religion is gradually

pushed into the private realm—is unlikely. That Islam—a completely different religion with a completely different founding and evolution—should follow a course similar to that of Christianity is itself an odd presumption.”⁶⁶

Many contemporary culturalist dismissals of universalist models often construct a similar reasoning: they formulate a linear, idealized view of historical progress in the West: for example, the Reformation, followed by Enlightenment, followed by secularization; or, in the case of the subalternists: capitalist development, followed by bourgeois hegemony, followed by democratization and rights. They then argue for its limited applicability outside of the West based on cultural divergence. The trouble with these formulations, invariably, is that they are historical myths that misconstrue the processes at work in the West, and base their rejection of it on this mythical linear diagram.

In Hamid’s formulation, secularization in the West appears as a historic unfurling that occurs within Christianity as a natural evolution enabled by theological underpinnings. Its real history tells of confrontations with religion, often violent (e.g., the French Revolution), and of backward and forward movement that extends to our present day (e.g., the culture wars in the United States as an expression of the inability to resolve issues at the intersection of religion and public life). Secularization is far from a linear process. One has to account for figures like Francisco Franco with his anti-secularism and use of Catholicism in the very recent history of Western Europe. Put differently, the instrumentalization of religion for political purposes is not an exclusively Islamic or Middle Eastern phenomenon, nor should it be seen as a matter of historic inevitability.

There is a self-referential aspect to Hamid’s exceptionalism thesis, and the Islamist position broadly, to which the French political scientist Olivier Roy has alluded in his work. Roy is a leading scholar of political Islam in the Middle East and Central Asia. He has taken a view at odds with many other experts in attributing radical Islam to peripheral Westernized forms rather than to impulses intrinsic to Islam as a religion and a community. “To reduce all the problems of the contemporary Muslim world ... to the residual effects

of Islamic culture seems to me tautological,” he writes. This “political imagination ... conceals all that is rupture and history: the importation of new types of states, the birth of new social classes, and the advent of contemporary ideologies.”⁶⁷

In other words, one must account for the history of modernity. In Hamid’s characterization, the notion “of returning to the unblemished purity of Islam’s founding,” which was novel in the late nineteenth century, was a response to pressures that were brought about by modernity, including the rejection of religious foundations by secularists. But this is far from evidence of an inherent tendency within Islam—it is, instead, a response among a section of Muslims to what appeared as overwhelming circumstances.⁶⁸

That response, Roy points out, is itself a product of modernity. “It is not that the Middle Ages are invading our modern world, but rather that modernity itself produces its own forms of protest,” he writes.⁶⁹

Hamid sees modern Islamist movements as part of an inevitable effort to reconcile Islam with its necessary political expression. But rather than being an expression of an authentic, historically continuous Islamic impulse, modern Islamism is very much a modern invention. Contemporary Islamism, likewise, is a product of our present-day conditions, as Malik interprets Roy: “What [Roy] means is that contemporary Islamic radicalism, far from being an expression of ancient theological beliefs, is really a reaction to new political and social changes: the loss of a sense of belonging in a fragmented society, the blurring of traditional moral lines, the increasing disenchantment with politics and politicians, the growing erosion of the distinction between our private lives and our public lives.”⁷⁰

Syrian writer Yassin al-Haj Saleh is critical of the exceptionalism thesis and its analytical and political implications. He also sees a link between political forms and intellectual trends. He writes that, in media and academic research, Muslims are being excluded “from the universal validity of the humanities.” Muslims’ actions and conditions are instead explained “through their religious beliefs, through

a spirit of their own which distinguishes them from others, one known as Islam.” Ironically, Islamists have supported this view with “their claims of a non-transformable particularity of Islam and Muslims.”⁷¹

The Islamic awakening occurred in a contentious global context. Muslim identity, due to a number of factors (mass Muslim migration to Western countries, the War on Terror, the 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq), found itself in the global spotlight and became fiercely contested and politicized in a relatively short period of time. The nature of this contestation has defined the way Muslim identity is shaped and discussed in a manner that has had its impact both in the West and within the Middle East. Furthermore, it has affected the way other (minority) identities in the Middle East are defined in relation to that “dominant” identity, that of Sunni Islam. This tension, which has historic roots in the region, now acquires a new dimension that will shape the debate on how we can move toward democratic and inclusive societies in the region.

That secularization hasn’t really gained traction within the Middle East and North Africa isn’t a controversial statement. Even countries that lay different claims to secularism, such as Syria and Tunisia, in effect had limitations on the religion of the head of the state and other areas of legislation.⁷² The question when it comes to the discussion in this report is whether the separation of religion and state was an incomplete historic process that would have eventually developed over time, or whether such a separation is fundamentally incompatible with Islam and therefore has no place in Muslim-majority societies. The pertinence of this question is in highlighting whether secularism and universalist politics stand a chance of achieving political change in the region.

There are two common responses put forward in response to the Middle East and North Africa’s difficulty with the separation of religion and the state. Both explanations are problematic. On the one hand, there are those like Hamid who insist on the incompatibility of secularism with Islam because of its religious and theological specificity. This argument tends to largely ignore the consequences of the inability to implement secularization for countries such as

Egypt, Syria, and Iraq, with significant minorities who remain at an inferior legal citizenship status and are denied religious freedoms as long as secularism is regarded as impossible.

Secondly, there are those who emphasize “reforming” Islam as a path to allow it to be more compatible with modern political systems.⁷³ This is a misplaced effort. While the contest over what Islam means can and will continue indefinitely at a theological and social level, the urgent political task is prescribing the limits of Islam within the state, primarily as a political rather than a religious mission.

The Muslim Identity as a Special Case

The debate over the Islamic awakening is occurring in a global context in which Muslim identity is being interrogated in response to issues ranging from terrorism to the integration of Muslim minorities in the West. This creates a unique set of pressures, as any attempt to alter the way Islam fits within society could be perceived as yet another assault on Islam itself. Paradoxically, the convergence of the Right’s demonization of Islam in its War on Terror rhetoric and the Left’s reaction to that demonization has resulted in the establishment of Muslim culture and identity as the operative factors in this global set of relationships at the intersection of foreign policy, terrorism, and migration. While Huntington’s “clash of civilizations” thesis sought to identify Islam as a perpetual enemy of the West because of fundamentally different cultural outlooks (shaped by a violent history), some of the attempts to champion Muslims also reinforce this idea of civilizational and cultural divides.⁷⁴ In some respects, they also echo Islamist claims about a transcendent Muslim identity, thus mirroring the Islamist instrumentalization of Islam.

Some on the Left have contributed to the perception that the 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq (and the broader context of the War on Terror) was a conflict between the West and Islam. For example, the Stop the War coalition, a British group, declared on its website: “In the last 25 years Britain and other Western powers have conducted invasions and major military interventions against a series of Muslim countries from Afghanistan and Iraq to Libya, Pakistan, Somalia,

Sudan, Mali and Syria.”⁷⁵ Instead of seeing the Iraq War as an invasion of a sovereign, multiethnic, multireligious nation, the primary emphasis was on its Muslim identity. A similar point could be made of the other countries on the list where the West has intervened. Glenn Greenwald echoed Stop the War’s point in 2014, lumping together the American bombing of targets inside Syria with “Afghanistan, Pakistan, Yemen, Somalia, Libya and Iraq,” since they are all “predominantly Muslim” countries.⁷⁶ The framing of those military actions, a framing which is quite common, again emphasizes that the countries under attack are “predominantly Muslim,” making it appear as if this is the main reason for those offensives. As it happens, in the same article Greenwald identifies “the five allied regimes”—Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, the United Arab Emirates, Qatar, and Jordan—that collaborated with the United States in the bombings. These countries are of course also predominantly Muslim, highlighting the geopolitical nature of these interventions, which are more complicated than the United States or the West being at war with Islam or Muslims.

While the U.S. War on Terror has “targeted Muslims almost exclusively,” both globally and domestically, and thereby contributing to rising hostility toward Muslims, increased surveillance, and wide-scale devastation in countries like Iraq and Afghanistan, its impact and consequences were not discriminating.⁷⁷ The destruction of Iraq and its destabilization had a severe impact on all its people, not just Muslims—and it was the invasion of Iraq that created the conditions for the rise of the Islamic State, whose victims included Yazidis and Christians, among many others.⁷⁸

This framing of the War on Terror and subsequent American and Western interventions as a war on Islam is counterproductive and ultimately appears to vindicate Huntington’s thesis. By portraying this as a conflict with Islam, the question of Muslim identity comes to the fore and becomes the operative category. And the championing of victimized Muslims in this framing helps move the discussion away from the imperialist nature of U.S. foreign policy, and how it is reformulated by different administrations, to a narrative of deeply ingrained cultural conflict—even when that is not the intention.

Beyond the specifics of his civilizational model, Huntington was aiming to discredit the idea of the universality of Western values and political systems, and by consequence the idea of universalism itself. Traditionally, the anti-imperialist Left would have articulated its position on such matters in the language of universalism. There was a notion of holding the West to account for its declared values, which were inconsistent with its actions across the Global South (for example, the United States in Vietnam or France in Algeria.) The shift to this cultural paradigm is pushing some on the Left away from the universalist assumptions that historically governed the parameters of solidarity, in some instances creating the sense of progressive Westerners as the guardians and defenders of victimized Muslims.⁷⁹

This shift in framing reveals the desire to repackage multiple causes and conflicts, from the War on Terror to Palestine, from Afghanistan to the Uyghurs, from Kashmir to the Rohingya, under one category. Paradoxically, it is this framing itself that buttresses the claims of cultural peculiarity, as it elevates the Muslim commonality above the contextual and geopolitical factors.

It is this attitude in particular, which now touches every aspect of the intersection of Islam and Muslims with the West, that has become especially counterproductive and is contributing to the perception of Muslim identity as a special case that needs to be handled with extra care.⁸⁰ Examples like the outcry over the Charlie Hebdo cartoons and some of the reactions to the murders of its staff have illustrated how there is now a desire on the Left to shield Islam itself in a manner that would not be expected with other religions.⁸¹ Rather than positively contributing to the discussions around Islam, this increases the sense that Islam is exceptional and, by consequence, at odds with the rest of the world.⁸² Countering real assaults on Muslims with this form of manufactured essentialism is problematizing the place of Islam within Western societies and subjecting it to emergency measures that end up alienating it.

Reclaiming Universalism

There are, then, both internal and external factors that are contributing to the sense that Islam is “exceptional” and that the development of Muslim-majority societies therefore must not aspire to the same kind of arrangements that emerged in the West and spread to other parts of the world. For both sets of reasons, the role of Islam has been accentuated at the expense of other factors. Its supremacy over other identity markers in an era in which identity plays a pivotal role creates deep problems for how it coexists with other groups, both within and outside the Middle East and North Africa. And when it comes to exploring the path to more tolerant and democratic societies in the region, the relationship with Islam is pivotal. It not only determines the situation of ethnic and religious minorities, but also social minorities and secular Muslims who might not identify with Islam, or identify with it to varying degrees. The notion of citizenship itself remains problematic as long as this religious dimension remains active in the constitution of public life and organization of the state.

The Islamic State casts a long shadow over this discussion, even in its retreat. The Yazidi genocide and the attacks on Kurds, Shia, Druze, Christians, and “apostate” Sunnis all left scars that may never heal, but which nonetheless require urgent attention. To many minorities, their survival now may necessitate unsavory choices. At the same time, another consequence of the Islamic State’s rise has been to make minorities’ identities acquire a renewed, existential, meaning. This is embodied by the rise of various militias as community defense groups in the face of the Islamic State attacks that targeted them because of who they are. Some of these militias form parts of political movements that are seeking autonomy.⁸⁵ Another path must be found, one that leads not to more fragmentation, but to the reemergence of pluralistic and democratic societies. Nobody expects such a reemergence to happen immediately, but facilitating it requires the creation of larger groupings that are defined by political outlook more than by narrow identities. There are glimpses of hope in the 2015–18 protests in Lebanon, Jordan, and Iraq that might in time develop into full-fledged national movements.⁸⁴

And there are examples from history as well that illustrate

both that identity-based politics isn’t the default for the region and that cross-sectarian, universalist movements can thrive even under conditions of oppression. Hanna Batatu’s seminal 1978 study, *The Old Social Classes and the Revolutionary Movements of Iraq*, illustrates the demographic constitution of the Iraqi Communist Party and its wide reach within Iraqi society. At the peak of its power, it was able to bring hundreds of thousands to the streets and led the 1948 uprising, known as Al-Wathbah, against the British.⁸⁵ The diversity of the party was researched meticulously by Batatu, revealing how it brought together Sunnis, Shia, Kurds, Christians, and Jews. The party also had a wide class base, and was particularly adept at mobilization. Given this history, universalism in the Middle Eastern context is not a novelty.

In an earlier episode, the Syrian Constitution of 1920 represents another example of universalist politics, though of a different, broadly liberal flavor. It also provides a historical glimpse into the nature of the political and intellectual debates in the region a mere century ago, before the abolition of the last caliphate. As Elizabeth F. Thompson describes it, “the 1920 Syrian-Arab constitution was the most secular and democratic to date in the Middle East.” The constitution guaranteed equality under the law regardless of religion. It did not mention Islam as a source of legislation.⁸⁶

Thompson’s account of the constitutional congress (known as the Syrian Arab Congress), expanded in a forthcoming book, portrays the Arab struggle to be admitted to a universality that Arabs had so far been excluded from. It also tells the story of the debates and deliberations between the liberal, traditionalist, and Islamist wings of the Congress, which were representative of the wider population and how they arrived at a document which, according to Thompson, remains exemplary within the Arab context. The fate of the constitution was sealed as the French tanks rolled into Damascus to enforce the Mandate for Syria, dealing a blow to the Syrians’ aspirations and firmly excluding them from this desired universality. Still, the history of the Syrian Arab Congress shows liberalism was not just of interest to elites, but that “lower-class populists also embraced liberal forms of government.”⁸⁷

These twentieth-century examples illustrate the recent

history of universalist politics in the region, as well as the role of European countries in frustrating universalist movements to maintain their colonial control. Britain played a significant role in the defeat of the communist-led uprisings in Iraq, and the French ultimately put an end to the Syrian constitution and the experiment in democracy by occupying Syria under the pretext of the Mandate. Far from spreading universalist values, they worked to undermine them and stir tensions and fragmentation. The Lebanese experience has shown that while a country designed as a federation of religious sects can acquire resilience and longevity, it would also be dysfunctional and prone to periodic crises. And it is Lebanon itself that embodied, from its inception, an obsession with identity in its politics in a way that perhaps was prescient of a more global development. Lebanon's own attempt at a secular revolution was short-lived, quickly giving way to sectarian fragmentation that defined the nature of its civil war. Yet prior to the start of the war, there was a significant cross-sectarian alliance active in fighting for social and political causes. One of the legacies of this history is the persistence of the idea of the secular state as an ideal in the Lebanese political imagination, perhaps a rarity in the region.

Despite Lebanon's chronic problems, it is precisely its form of fragmented polity that is being pursued across the globe, in reaction to universalism's apparent failure and its inability and unwillingness to accommodate diversity. Worryingly, as mentioned, Iraq's politics were remodeled to resemble those of Lebanon's consociational and political model. And there are various calls to consider similar arrangements in Syria.⁸⁸ The struggle of the secular vision against the hegemony of the "federation of sects" will continue to inspire movements, but the secular vision's lack of success so far should be a warning about the power of identity-based politics. The revival of universalist ideals is an urgent task today.

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Author

Karl Sharro is a Lebanese-Iraqi-British architect and satirist.

Notes

- 1 In December 2015, the Soufan Group estimated that there were more than five thousand foreign fighters from Western Europe in Syria and Iraq. See "An Updated Assessment of the Flow of Foreign Fighters into Syria and Iraq," Soufan Group, December 2015, <http://soufangroup.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/12/TSG-ForeignFightersUpdate3.pdf>.
- 2 This is particularly the case in the strand of subaltern studies. See Vivek Chibber's *Postcolonial Theory and the Specter of Capital* (New York: Verso Books, 2014).
- 3 Chibber, *Postcolonial Theory*, 47.
- 4 Chibber, *Postcolonial Theory*, 15.
- 5 Chibber, *Postcolonial Theory*, 15-16.
- 6 Huntington, "The Clash of Civilizations?" *Foreign Affairs* (Summer 1993): 22-49, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/1993-06-01/clash-civilizations>; and Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of the World Order* (New York: Touchstone, 1997).
- 7 Edward W. Said, "The Clash of Ignorance," *The Nation*, October 4, 2001, <https://www.thenation.com/article/clash-ignorance/>.
- 8 The British writer Kenan Malik defines the cultural turn as "the shift that's occurred in recent decades that has led us to view social differences largely in cultural terms." See Malik's post on his personal website, "Against the Cultural Turn," September 22, 2016, <https://kenanmalik.com/2016/09/22/against-the-cultural-turn/>. For more context and analysis, see Ron Eyerman, "Jeffrey Alexander and the Cultural Turn in Social Theory," *Thesis Eleven*, no. 79 (November 2004): 25-30.
- 9 Malik, "Against the Cultural Turn."
- 10 Vivek Chibber, "Rescuing Class from the Cultural Turn," *Catalyst* 1, no. 1 (2017), <https://catalyst-journal.com/vol1/no1/cultural-turn-vivek-chibber>.
- 11 Rima Majed, "The Political (or Social) Economy of Sectarianism in Lebanon," *Middle East Institute*, November 7, 2017, <https://www.mei.edu/publications/political-or-social-economy-sectarianism-lebanon>.
- 12 Fadi Bardawil, "Theorising Revolution, Apprehending Civil War: Leftist Political Practice and Analysis in Lebanon (1969-79)," *London School of Economics, Middle East Centre Paper Series*, no. 16, October 16, 2016, http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/68237/13/Bardawil_Theorising%20revolution_2016.pdf.
- 13 Specifically, Bardawil writes that these Marxist and Leninist models in Arab political thought "formulated the issues of Arab societies and their problems in the mould of these concepts: The—unified—state, the dominant or hegemonic class, the unified political society, the dominant ideology, political and social democracy," Bardawil, "Theorising Revolution," 10. Bardawil also examines the writing of Waddah Charara, a "major theorist of the Lebanese New Left in the 1960s and early 1970s," and "highlights how Charara's analysis rethought the question of power away from class politics in the wake of his diagnosis of the failure of hegemony in Lebanon." Bardawil, "Theorising Revolution," 5. Bardawil notes that Charara's conclusions were similar to those of the Indian subalternists regarding lingering cultural attributes in Lebanon and Arab societies, albeit with a different emphasis on the sense of historical continuity they represent. In essence, he held that "sectarianism, familialism and regionalism" were not holdovers from earlier times, but were instead produced anew in response to capitalist development. Bardawil, "Theorising Revolution," 12.
- 14 Majed, "Political (or Social) Economy of Sectarianism in Lebanon."
- 15 The term "sectarianism" is widely used in scholarship about Lebanon, but it can be confusing, because it is simultaneously used to describe intercommunal sentiments and the country's political system. For the latter, I prefer to use the term "confessionalism," which describes the country's power-sharing arrangements and consociational model. The different understandings of sectarianism are summarised in Suechika Kota, "Undemocratic Lebanon? The Power-Sharing Arrangements after the 2005 Independence Intifada," *Journal of Ritsumeikan Social Sciences and Humanities* 4, no. 6 (2012): 103-33, http://www.ritsumei.ac.jp/acd/re/k-rsc/hss/book/pdf/vol04_06.pdf.
- 16 As Theodor Hanf writes, "from the mid-1970s onwards, a number of authors

more or less equated social class and community in Lebanon, and interpreted conflicts between these communities as class struggles. Of course, this thesis was an effective mobilizer. It also satisfied the desire of some media for simple explanations of complex situations. The cliché of ‘rich Christians’ and ‘poor Muslims’ has had a brilliant journalistic career—and it may not be over yet.” Hanf, *Coexistence in Wartime Lebanon: Decline of a State and Rise of a Nation* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2015), 97.

On the attempt to do away entirely with the confessional arrangements, see a May 1976 declaration by the Progressive Socialist Party: “Secularism attempts to abolish confessionalism, that is, abolish the social dispersion and division occurring in Lebanon.” Hanf, *Coexistence*, 135.

17 Hanf continues: “All in all, there was little to distinguish these forms of social conflict from those in homogeneous societies in times of economic crisis... Lebanon seemed to be evolving into a society in which supra-communal class conflicts were more important than cleavages between the communities, and it seemed that the class conflicts, notwithstanding their intensity, could be regulated peacefully.” Hanf, *Coexistence*, 110

18 “In the decade preceding the outbreak of the war the CP [Communist Party] had considerable success among Shi’i Lebanese. The recruiting pattern of the OACL [Organisation for Communist Action in Lebanon] is similar: the leadership is drawn from all communities, the mass of its members are Shi’i.” Hanf, *Coexistence*, 76.

19 Hanf, *Coexistence*, 412.

20 Bardawil quoting Charara. Bardawil, “Theorising Revolution,” 12.

21 See my review of Sandra Mackey’s *Mirror of the Arab World: Lebanon in Conflict* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2008). Sharro, “The Illogical End of Multiculturalism,” *Culture Wars*, August 28, 2008, http://www.culturewars.org.uk/index.php/site/article/the_illogical_end_of_multiculturalism/.

22 Such objections were made by my colleagues in the podcast associated with this report, which can be found at <https://tcf.org/content/tag/tcf-world-podcast/>.

23 Kenan Malik, *From Fatwa to Jihad: How the World Changed: The Satanic Verses to Charlie Hebdo* (London: Atlantic Books, 2017), 60.

In the interest of representing the full debate: a different take on this comes from Asad Haider, who also wrote about the problem of “identity politics” in his book *Mistaken Identity: Race and Class in the Age of Trump* (London: Verso, 2018). For Haider, identity politics have to do with creating “an inclusive revolutionary politics”—a revolt against the exclusionary identities and hierarchies, some of them hidden, in other mass movements, such as black liberation and feminist movements. Nevertheless, Haider is also critical of the development of identity politics, because “it does not account for intra-group differences, it does not provide a basis for forming coalitions and solidarities across groups, and it reduces politics to gaining recognition rather than transforming the social structure.” See Samira Shackle, “The Problem with Identity Politics,” *New Humanist*, July 13, 2018, <https://newhumanist.org.uk/articles/5342/the-problem-with-identity-politics>.

24 Malik, *From Fatwa to Jihad*, 61.

25 “Rather than tackling the central problem of racism itself, municipal anti-racists insisted that cultural differences between various groups in society [were] of paramount importance.” Malik, *From Fatwa to Jihad*, 62, quoting Gita Sahgal and Nira Yuval-Davis of the Asian women activists’ group Southhall Black Sisters.

26 “About Us,” *Runnymede*, accessed February 8, 2019, <https://www.runnymedetrust.org/>.

27 Malik, *From Fatwa to Jihad*, 62.

28 Bhikhu C. Parekh, *The Future of Multi-Ethnic Britain* (London: Profile Books, 2000), ix. See also Malik’s quotation of this passage in *From Fatwa to Jihad*, 62.

29 For example, it is used this way in Mahdi Amel, *Introduction to the Illogicality of Sectarian Thought: The Palestinian Issue in the Ideology of the Lebanese Bourgeoisie* (Beirut: Dar Al Farabi, 1988, Arabic), 177.

30 A key arena in which this is increasingly becoming manifest is through censorship of cultural production. There are countless examples, such as the case of the 2018 American horror film *The Nun*, which was banned last year. “Last Wednesday, the Catholic committee watched the movie and asked the General Security to ban it in Lebanon for religious reasons.” See “Lebanon Bans Screening of *The Nun* on Religious Grounds,” *New Arab*, September 17, 2018, <https://www.alaraby.co.uk/english/society/2018/9/17/lebanon-bans-screening-of-the-nun-on-religious-grounds>.

31 Malik, *From Fatwa to Jihad*, 69.

32 Malik, *From Fatwa to Jihad*, 70.

33 Nasser Yassin, “Sects and the City” in *Lebanon: After the Cedar Revolution*, ed. Are Knudsen and Michael Kerr (London: Hurst, 2012), 203–17.

34 Yassin, “Sects,” 216–17.

35 For an explanation, see Marie-Joëlle Zahar, “Power Sharing in Lebanon: Foreign Protectors, Domestic Peace, and Democratic Failure,” in *Sustainable Peace, Power*

and Democracy after Civil Wars, ed. Philip G. Roeder and Donald Rothchild (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2005), 219–40.

36 “The core problem is Lebanon’s electoral system, which is more feudal than democratic.” Hady Amr, “What Lebanon Needs Now,” *Brookings*, June 4, 2008, <https://www.brookings.edu/opinions/what-lebanon-needs-now/>. For other examples of descriptions of Lebanon’s “feudal” politics, see also Joseph Kechichian, “Feudal Lords Maintain Grip on Lebanese Politics,” *Gulf News*, May 11, 2016, <https://gulfnews.com/world/mena/feudal-lords-maintain-grip-on-lebanese-politics-1.1824901>; Charles Glass, “A Massacre and Lebanon’s Law of Vengeance,” *Stratfor*, November 28, 2018, <https://worldview.stratfor.com/article/massacre-and-lebanons-law-vengeance>; and

Mona Yacoubian, “Lebanon’s Unstable Equilibrium,” *United States Institute of Peace*, November 10, 2009, <https://www.usip.org/publications/2009/11/lebanons-unstable-equilibrium>.

37 See the Indian Councils Act of 1909. “One portentous innovation” of this law “was the inauguration, for the first time in the provincial and central legislative bodies, of separate electorates in which only Muslims could vote, and reserved seats in the councils for Muslims. This provision implied that only a Muslim could represent Muslims, or protect Muslim interests—a presumption that would shape political life in India for decades to come.” Barbara D. Metcalf and Thomas R. Metcalf, *A Concise History of Modern India* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 160.

38 See, for example, Robert J. C. Young, *White Mythologies: Writing History and the West* (London: Routledge, 1990). Universalism “articulates a philosophical structure ... which uncannily simulates the project of nineteenth-century imperialism; the construction of knowledges which all operate through forms of expropriation and incorporation of the other mimics at a conceptual level the geographic and economic absorption of the non-European world by the West.” Young, *White Mythologies*, 34.

39 C.L.R. James, *Black Jacobins* (London: Penguin, 2001) 198.

40 Massimo Calabresi, “Is the Arab World Ready for Democracy?,” *Time*, January 27, 2011, <http://swampland.time.com/2011/01/27/is-the-arab-world-ready-for-democracy/>.

41 Andrew Green, “Why Western Democracy Can Never Work in the Middle East,” *Telegraph*, August 16, 2014 <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/middleeast/11037173/Why-Western-democracy-can-never-work-in-the-Middle-East.html>; Ronald Bailey, “Why Arab Democracy Will Fail,” *Reason*, August 23, 2013. <https://reason.com/archives/2013/08/23/why-arab-democracy-will-fail>; Ed West, “There Is No Hope of Democracy in the Middle East,” *Sunday Express*, August 23, 2013, <https://www.express.co.uk/comment/expresscomment/424101/There-is-no-hope-of-democracy-in-the-Middle-East>.

42 Green, “Democracy Can Never Work in the Middle East.”

43 Chibber, *Postcolonial Theory*, 153.

44 “Subaltern Studies... resurrects the worst instances of Orientalist mythology... Subaltern Studies insists that Eastern agents operate with an entirely different psychology than do Western agents... It assigns science, rationality, objectivity and similar attributes to the West, instead of regarding them as common to both cultures... Its celebrations of the local, the particular... end up justifying an exoticization of the East.” Chibber, *Postcolonial Theory*, 288–89.

45 Alon Ben-Meir, “Is Islam Compatible with Democracy?,” *Huffington Post*, September 7, 2013, https://www.huffingtonpost.com/alon-benmeir/is-islam-compatible-with_b_3562579.html.

46 See for example Mehdi Hasan’s “Reality Check: Yes, Islam Is Compatible with Democracy,” *Al Jazeera*, September 24, 2016, <https://www.aljazeera.com/programmes/upfront/2016/09/reality-check-islam-compatible-democracy-160923193103650.html>.

47 See, for example, Syria’s presidential political and media advisor, Bouthaina Shaaban. “Syria is a secular country and the Syrian people do not discriminate between Muslims and Christians,” she said in 2016. “Shaaban Meets Delegation from US Evangelical Presbyterian Churches,” *Syrian Arab News Agency*, April 17, 2016, <https://sana.sy/en/?p=74833>. See also Egyptian minister of culture Helmy Al-Namnam. “Egypt is secular by nature,” he has said. Maher Gabra, “Egypt Is Secular by Nature,” *Huffington Post*, November 3, 2016, https://www.huffingtonpost.com/maher-gabra/egypt-is-secular-by-nature_b_8453196.html.

48 “Bashar al-Assad’s Syria Is Not Secular, Sovereign or Independent,” *Muftah*, April 14, 2017, <https://muftah.org/bashar-al-assads-syria-not-secular-sovereign-independent/>.

49 Fiona Hill, “The Real Reason Putin Supports Assad,” *Brookings*, March 25, 2013, <https://www.brookings.edu/opinions/the-real-reason-putin-supports-assad/>.

50 Joseph Daher, “Secularists, Secularism and the Syrian Uprising,” *Syria Untold*, August 18, 2018, <http://syriauntold.com/secularists-secularism-and-the-syrian->

uprising-part-1-2/. For a discussion of how Syria's revolt strayed from its inclusive roots, see Daher's report in this series, "Pluralism Lost in Syria's Uprising."

51 Barber, "The Act of Criticism and the Secular," *Los Angeles Review of Books*, August 14, 2014, <https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/act-criticism-secular/>.

52 See, for example, the writings of David Thurfjell. "The core of postcoloniality is the ambition to decentralize 'the West,' or western modernity," he writes. "Islamism has successfully managed to provide an alternative center of moral, political and ontological focus among its adherents. This, arguably, makes it one of the most obvious examples of a subaltern postcolonial voice today." Thurfjell, "Is the Islamist Voice Subaltern?," in *Neither East Nor West: Postcolonial Essays on Literature, Culture and Religion*, ed. Kirsten W. Shands (Huddinge: Södertörns högskola, 2008), 159–60.

53 Saba Mahmood, *Religious Difference: The Minority Report* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016), 2.

54 Maya Salam, "Saba Mahmood, 57, Dies; Traced Intersection of Feminism and Islam," *New York Times*, March 28, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/03/28/us/saba-mahmood-dead.html>.

55 See Lama Abu-Odeh, "Secularism's Fault," *Feminist Dissent* (Summer 2017): 8, <https://scholarship.law.georgetown.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=2975&context=facpub>.

56 Lama Abu-Odeh, "Secularism's Fault," 9–10.

57 As Hanna writes: "Egypt's military-led political order has championed an Egyptian nationalism that itself incorporates key aspects of Islamist thought. In distinction to the Islamist project, however, it is important to note that the current instrumentalization of religion is employed as a buttress to state authority and legitimacy and in furtherance of the Egyptian regime's statist vision." Hanna, "Public Order and Egypt's Statist Tradition," *Review of Faith & International Affairs* 13, no. 1 (2015): 25.

58 Daher, "Secularists, Secularism and the Syrian Uprising."

59 Daher, "Secularists, Secularism and the Syrian Uprising."

60 And as Chibber points out, the real engine of democratization is not the capitalist class itself but popular pressure such as struggles led by workers, often against the explicit resistance of the capitalist class. As such, it is not an automatic development of capitalism but a political process dependent on social actors. Chibber, *Postcolonial Theory*, 145–51.

61 This is in opposition to, for example, Bernard Lewis, who blamed the failure of modernity on an essentialist cultural explanation, largely attributing it to inherent characteristics of Islam. Lewis, *What Went Wrong? The Clash between Islam and Modernity in the Middle East* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002).

62 Olivier Roy ties the Islamist resurgence to this exhaustion of alternative secular models, both in the West and within the region: "It is this absence of an alternative thought that we should examine without anchoring it to 'Islamic culture,' which we imperceptibly tend to transform into a psychological category, especially since the self-satisfied defense of the Western model proposed for the Third World... has been divided, internally, by increasing virulent debate about the crises of politics and values in Western societies." Roy, *The Failure of Political Islam* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994), 8.

63 The Syrian writer Yassin al-Haj Saleh has written eloquently on this topic. "As identities (i.e., the cultural definition of societies or groups) become inexplicable descriptive premises, the realities of local and international power; of class, modes of production, and distribution of wealth; and of the formation and dissolution of identities in history (through active, lukewarm, or reverse identification processes) are all but neglected." Haj Saleh, "The Re-Enchantment of the World," *Al-Jumhuriya*, October 25, 2017, <https://www.aljumhuriya.net/en/content/re-enchantment-world>.

64 Hamid, "Is Islam 'Exceptional?," *Atlantic*, June 6, 2016, <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2016/06/islam-politics-exceptional/485801/>; and Hamid, *Islamic Exceptionalism: How the Struggle over Islam Is Reshaping the World* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2016).

65 "How Islam Views Secularism," *Islam Online Archive*, accessed January 10, 2019, <https://archive.islamonline.net/?p=822>. Translated from Yusuf Al-Qaradawi, *How the Imported Solutions Disastrously Affected Our Muslim Nation*, in Arabic, (Wehbe Publishing Library, 2006) 113–4. Translated quote has been edited for style.

66 Hamid, "Is Islam 'Exceptional?'"

67 Roy, *Failure*, viii.

68 Hamid, "Is Islam 'Exceptional?'"

69 Roy, *Failure*, 1.

70 Malik, *From Fatwa to Jihad*, 25.

71 Haj Saleh adds: "Islamists demand to administer this particularity and exclude their religion and themselves, as well as our societies, from any universally applicable principles of understanding and good governance." Haj Saleh, "Re-Enchantment of

the World."

72 In Syria, for example, "the 2012 constitution stipulates that the president must be a Muslim man or that 'the main source of law is the Sharia.'" Daher, "Secularists, Secularism and the Syrian Uprising."

73 See Mahdi Hassan, "Why Islam Doesn't Need a Reformation," *Guardian*, May 17, 2015, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2015/may/17/islam-reformation-extremism-muslim-martin-luther-europe>.

74 Huntington, "The Clash of Civilizations?"

75 "Ten Reasons Why We Can't Ignore Islamophobia and the 'War on Terror,'" *Stop the War Coalition*, accessed on January 7, 2019, <http://www.stopwar.org.uk/index.php/news/991-murdered-by-order-of-barack-obama-eight-innocent-drone-victims>.

76 Glenn Greenwald, "Syria Becomes the 7th Predominantly Muslim Country Bombed by 2009 Nobel Peace Laureate," *Intercept*, September 23, 2014, <https://theintercept.com/2014/09/23/nobel-peace-prize-fact-day-syria-7th-country-bombed-obama/>.

77 Maha Hilal, "The War on Terror Has Targeted Muslims Almost Exclusively," *Foreign Policy in Focus*, September 11, 2017, <https://fpif.org/the-war-on-terror-has-targeted-muslims-almost-exclusively/>.

78 Greg Barton, "Out of the Ashes of Afghanistan and Iraq: The Rise and Rise of Islamic State," *Conversation*, March 2, 2016, <https://theconversation.com/out-of-the-ashes-of-afghanistan-and-iraq-the-rise-and-rise-of-islamic-state-55437>.

79 Just one example is Australian journalist C. J. Werleman, who introduces himself on his crowdfunding account as "a journalist, published author, political commentator, and activist who provides insights into the Israel-Palestinian conflict, injustices carried out against Muslims under the guise of the US' [sic] global war on terrorism, and rising anti-Muslim discrimination. Insights the mainstream media too often ignores." He goes on to say that donations "will not only allow me to spend more time in the Middle East, but also help further my research into injustices carried out against Muslims. Thus turning my fight against anti-Muslim discrimination into a full-time career." See "CJ Werleman Is Creating Journalism to Defeat the Islamophobia Industry," accessed January 8, 2019, <https://www.patreon.com/cjwerleman>.

80 See Werleman, "Why I Don't Criticise Islam," *Middle East Eye*, December 24, 2014, <https://www.middleeasteye.net/columns/why-i-dont-criticise-islam-1747762439>. Having published two "hard-hitting critiques" of Judaism and Christianity, Werleman explains his decision not to go after Islam in the same fashion.

81 See for example Malik's post on his personal website, "Charlie Hebdo, One Year On," January 7, 2016, <https://kenanmalik.com/2016/01/07/charlie-hebdo-one-year-on/>.

82 Malik's *From Fatwa to Jihad* traces the roots of this attitude to the Salman Rushdie fatwa, highlighting how the Satanic Verses was seized upon by Saudi Arabia and Iran for political purposes, and employed in their rivalry. Malik also illustrates the role of the Rushdie affair in pushing many activists away from secular universalism to identitarian politics.

83 See for example the Syriac, Assyrian, and Chaldean groups in Syria and Iraq, described in Mark Chamoun, "Understanding the Christian Militias of Iraq And Syria," *Pavlovic Today*, August 16, 2017, <https://www.thepavlovictoday.com/understanding-christian-militias-iraq-syria/>; and the Yazidi Sinjar Resistance Units, described in Michael Knights, "Turkey's Waiting Game in Sinjar," *Turkeyscope* 1, no. 8 (2017), <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/uploads/Knights20170622-Turkeyscope.pdf>.

See also Saad Salloum, "Iraqi Minorities Move Forward with Autonomy Plan," *Al-Monitor*, March 16, 2017, <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2017/03/rafadin-minorities-iraq-nineveh-plain-autonomy.html>.

84 On the Lebanese protest wave of 2015–6, see "Beirut Shocks Its Old Guard," *Economist*, May 11, 2016, <https://www.economist.com/middle-east-and-africa/2016/05/11/beirut-shocks-its-old-guard>; on Jordan, see "Jordan PM Hani Mulki Resigns Amid Mass Protests over Tax Bill," *Al Jazeera*, June 4, 2018, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2018/06/jordan-pm-hani-al-mulki-resigns-mass-protests-tax-bill-180604112844970.html>; on Iraq, see Patrick Cockburn, "Iraq Protests: Demonstrators Blame 'Bad Government, Bad Roads, Bad Weather, Bad People,'" *Independent*, July 17, 2018, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/iraq-protests-bad-government-roads-weather-people-haider-abadi-sadr-oil-a8451736.html>.

85 "However, from this point, the Communists emerged unmistakably as the fundamental force of the Wathbah, with the 'Cooperation Committee' and the 'Student Cooperation Committee' as their chief levers. The stormy mass march of 20 January, in which for the first time the Schalchiyyah workers and the hungry shargāwiyyas took part, was a distinctly Communist initiative." Batatu, *Old Social*

Classes and the Revolutionary Movements of Iraq (Princeton: Princeton University Press), Amazon Kindle ebook locations 12024-12028.

86 Elizabeth F. Thompson, “Rashid Rida and the 1920 Syrian-Arab Constitution,” in *The Routledge Handbook of the History of the Middle East Mandates*, ed. Cyrus Schayegh and Andrew Arsan (New York: Routledge, 2015), 244–57. For additional discussion of the historical context of the Syrian Arab Constitution, see Thompson’s report in this series, “The Arab World’s Liberal–Islamist Schism Turns 100.”

87 Thompson, “Rashid Rida,” 253.

88 On Iraq, see Maha Yahya, “The Summer of Our Discontent: Sects and Citizens in Lebanon and Iraq,” Carnegie Middle East Center, June 30, 2017, <https://carnegie-mec.org/2017/06/30/summer-of-our-discontent-sects-and-citizens-in-lebanon-and-iraq-pub-71396>. On Syria, see Jevin J. Jones, “The Lebanese Model: A Multi-Religious Solution for Syria and Iraq?,” *Catholica News Agency*, November 13, 2014, <https://www.catholicnewsagency.com/news/the-lebanese-model-a-multi-religious-solution-for-syria-and-iraq-50377>.