

**Keynote Address by Dr Ali Allawi, former Iraqi Minister of Defence and Minister of Finance, delivered at the Nanyang Executive Centre on 28 April 2016, as part of the opening proceedings of the RSIS Conference on *Islam in the Contemporary World*.**

## **The Pathways of Modern Islam**

Ladies and Gentlemen

Those of us who have lived through the tumult of the past half century have seen a bewildering and for some a shocking transformation of the understanding and practice of Islam, at the private, social and state levels. What was widely perceived in the 1950's and 60's as a religion in rapid decline in the face of modernisation and secularisation, and which had been relegated to the margins of power in most Muslim countries, erupted on the stage in dramatic fashion. How this came about and what it portends has exercised a huge number of people around the globe, and I daresay will continue to be the case well into the future. The convulsions of a religion – a world view, a civilisation even – could be a sign of a welcome renewal – or perhaps an ominous sign – of something more sinister.

What do I mean by the “Pathways of Modern Islam”:

Pathways are well-defined tracks that originate somewhere and purportedly end somewhere else. They could intersect other pathways, creating new pathways that are continuous with the old or are in fact new directions. Pathways generally move in linear fashion; but they could be otherwise. Many pathways get lost, abruptly end or meander in confusion or even backtrack. I do not want to belabour this metaphor, but any great civilizational system exhibits some or all of these characteristics and Islam is no different. Right from its inception as a world religion in the 7th century, the evolution of Islam has moved along tracks that crisscrossed, backtracked, advanced, and retreated, interacting with, or confronting other world or regional systems, while building the scaffolding of its unique world view. A vast, sprawling, mansion with innumerable rooms, with occupants who often ignored and sometimes fought with each other, but who, if not expanding the estate, at least worked to preserve its essentialities, even as it fell into disrepair and then decrepitude. An observer examining the unfolding of this centuries old process can, I believe, discern an order of sorts, one that gives coherence and meaning to the randomness and chaos that often accompanied the events that turned Islam into a world civilisation.

This is the Islam that most Muslims identify with and seek to recapture its high moments. Let us call this Pre-Modern or Traditional Islam.

The second part of the lecture's title refers to the idea of “Modern Islam”-something that is distinct from Pre-Modern or Traditional Islam and one that has features and outlines that are unique to it. And that the birth of this Modern Islam can be traced to a set of events and personalities somewhere in the mid-19th century, which collectively mark a decisive break from pre-modern Islam. This

modern Islam in time has generated ideas and precepts that have entered the common culture and have informed the perspectives and consciousness of large numbers of people.

Does history move in such cycles with a clear beginning and an equally distinct end? I suppose if you are reflecting over long periods of time – several centuries – the distinctness of historical epochs is easier to identify. The closer you get to contemporary events the lesser is the ability to detect patterns and order that draw both unrelated and related events into definable structures. You can talk about the rise and fall of ancient civilisations with a sureness that might be lacking say, if you are talking about the rise and decline of the American imperium. The identification of the beginnings of ongoing epochs in history – whether of entire civilisations, empires, nations and ideas – is easier to establish than their end. We can mark the Rise of the West, but can we with any assurance mark the Decline of the West? Beginnings and ends are matters of profound discontinuities in the historical process. They are radical ruptures to established and confirmed ways of living, acting and even thinking. And it is in this category that I place the rise of modern Islam- that is an Islam that is preoccupied with the troubling issues that emerged with modernity – a consciousness that was in juxtaposition to its prior established and authoritative practices, in short, its orthodoxy.

## Defining Modern Islam

Much has been written and spoken on the rise of modern Islam, which encompasses the notions of both modernist and radical Islam. Few would contest that its origins lay in the encounter of the world of Islam with the West – not in the sometimes benign, but mainly adversarial forms before the 19th century – but rather in the actual conquest of Muslim lands and the overwhelming of Muslim sovereignty nearly everywhere where Muslims had once prevailed. This was a rupture of the first order – marking both an end and a beginning. Modern Islam can thus be framed as an ongoing response to this discontinuity, an attempt to understand it, contain it, come to terms with it, accept or reject it. The form in which modern Islam has expressed itself has therefore been mainly reactive to the shock of the original rupture. The challenge has been continuous and protean – and so has the response; but the response has always been reactive, rarely constructive or creative. Elements of pre-modern Islam are still evident, sometime jarringly so, but they do not hide the profound disjunctions that have taken place. Terrorist violence, slavery, abuse of women, cruel punishments have far more to do with the lamentable course of the modern world than a manifestation of any form of traditional Islam. Are not the most relevant prototypes of today's jihadis found in the 19th century revolutionary movements of Tsarist Russia? There is a peculiar link between the terrorist manifesto of Abu Bakr Naji (the "Management of Savagery" or *Idarat al Tawahush*), written in 2004, and Sergei Nechaev's "Catechism of a Revolutionary", written in 1869. Suicide bombing was invented by secular national liberation movements – the Tamil Tigers for example. As were the targeting of innocent civilians by terrorists in the name of higher ideals, from the Irgun's bombing of the King David Hotel in Jerusalem in 1948 to the indiscriminate slaughter of civilians in the Algerian war of liberation. The Assassins of the medieval Islamic world or the Khawarij at the onset of Islamic history are certainly not the prototypes of today's jihadist.

Slavery and the systematic abuse and subjugation of women is not entirely alien to the modern experience. Soviet Russia, Maoist China, the Bloodlands of wartime Europe, the tens of thousands of sex slaves maintained to serve armies, are brushed over when the same crimes, on smaller scale even, are associated with modern Islam.

Even the most outlandish contemporary manifestation of an apparently uniquely Islamic project, the restoration of the Khilafa, has elements of the failed utopian – or dystopian – projects of real or imagined social and religious reformers. We can learn as much about ISIS's ersatz caliphate by reading da Cunha's "Rebellion in the Backlands" about a millenarian quasi-state in 19th century Brazil or Vargas Llosa's fictional rendering of it in "The War of the End of the World", rather than examining the course of the Abbasid Caliphate.

But yet...

Modern Islam cannot be defined by its borrowings – or rejections – from the West and the end political and socio-cultural forms that emerged in consequence of that. But neither can the profound discontinuity with its past be overlooked.

Modern Islam has certainly favoured the political in its attempts to forge a meaningful and sustainable response to the challenges of the modern world. Even the conscious archaism of some apparently apolitical mass Islamic movements – the Tablighis for example – are reflections of the political, a commitment to withdraw from serious interaction with an unacceptable outer order unless it is framed within a narrow normative form.

It is the political, broadly understood and interpreted, that has defined modern Islam-more than theology, culture or societal relations. And the political has been expressed inside three broad categories: at the level of the state, at the level of society; and at the level of individual and collective consciousness.

In its earliest manifestation, modern Islam evolved from the writings and actions of the whole gamut of reformers of the late 19th century and early 20th century. Afghani, Abduh, Ridha, were a different breed from those earlier resisters to western encroachments in Muslim lands, from say the Emir Abd el-Qadir in Algeria or the Mahdi of the Sudan. Pan Islam, a political ideology for Islamic revival and resistance, was just one indicator of the birth of a new kind of Islamic consciousness. It sought to mobilise Muslims around the world around the survival and strengthening of the Ottoman state and its claims of a universal Caliphate. Pan Islam emerged when both the forms of society and Muslims' collective consciousness were still framed in an overwhelmingly traditional mode. A functioning Muslim state, even a power, was still intact. But the process came to a crashing end with the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire after World War I. Could the Ottoman Empire have preserved the idea and reality of an Islamic state that had nevertheless found a way into the contemporary world? Perhaps, but it would have certainly treated the 'nationality' problem differently, privileging religious

identity above ethno-sectarian considerations – the stuff of the modern nation state. In the end, the encroachments of Western political modes – in the form of constitutions, Western-influenced legal systems, political parties and the very idea of the nation state – proved decisive to the final forms of government that emerged after the dissolution of the Muslim Empires.

Modern Islam was born in a world where the ancient verities were collapsing. There were many holdouts it was true- but not enough to change the tenor of affairs. And modern Islam is in fact a reflection of the confusion that gripped the Muslim mind, faced with the crumbling of the old order. In fact, I believe, that modern Islam was born with a fundamentally 'schizophrenic' condition. A number of often conflicting currents emerged that sought to reposition Islam in its modern context. The first of these currents, let us call it the current of denial, rejected the idea that Islam was incompatible with modernity, resorting to claims about how Islam in its golden periods had in fact encouraged scientific and rationalist thought. What was needed therefore was a reinterpretation of Islam that would strip away the centuries of deadwood returning it to what it had always been, namely the incubator of the highest forms of human material and spiritual ideals and progress. The advocates of such a path naively or crudely believed that Muslims could pick and choose what suited them from the mainly western menu of values and achievements- science and technology; modern statecraft and administration; new political and legal systems; new educational forms and so on. They could do so based on a utilitarian calculus of power without affecting their core fealty to Islam.

The second current reached a diametrically opposite conclusion. What was needed was not so much bringing Islam "up to date"- an anathema if there ever was one! – but rather a re-affirmation of the validity and eternal truth of 'original' Islam, as practiced in its narrowest and most precise form by its earliest adherents. Let us call this the Islam of affirmation or the Islam of authenticity. This was the Islam of the salaf as-salah, the pious companions of the Prophet and their immediate followers who lived and perfected their religion in the ideal Medina of Islam's earliest period. (Of course, if you were a Shia Muslim, your ideal model would not be the companions of the Prophet, but rather the Imams from the Household of the Prophet). Modernity was thus either something that one could use and dump as need be; or ignored or shunned if it anyway subverts, supersedes or side-lines the divinely-sanctioned praxis of the ideal period. The scale for these warriors of a golden age was an invariant Sharia, the accumulation over the centuries of exact rulings and prescriptions on all aspects of the human condition.

In between were all kinds of ideational and intellectual trends and currents that rose and fizzled away in the past century and a half. But I am speaking here of currents within modern Islam that impinged on the political. Modern Islam basically pivoted between the idea of a flexible and accommodating Islam, constrained only by the most basic of agreed principles, mainly of ritual and devotional practice; and an idea of Islam that posited that salvation and worldly success can only come by the strictest adherence to the norms established in the earliest days of Islam, and their subsequent evolution within this narrow criterion.

There was thus an inherent conundrum inside modern Islam, which really doomed the project from the onset. It required considerable mental effort to reconcile a rationalist-materialist or literalist idea of Islam with traditional Islam that was rooted in the elemental notion of the sacred. By the sacred I mean the subtler realities that are felt and experienced at the supra-rational level by religious believers. The reality of all religious faith is based on experiencing the ineffable, and it is this experience and its acknowledgement that had marked the identity of the Muslim world, more so I believe than the commonality of its institutions, laws, rituals and culture. Modern Islam in fact ignores, and sometimes denies, the reality of the ineffable in the formation of Muslim consciousness. Traditional Islam existed in a sacralised world; Modern Islam exists in a de-sacralised world, in spite of protestations to the contrary. The flexibility, openness and subtleness that inflected the best of traditional Islamic thought, a by-product I suggest of an experienced sense of the ineffable, is notably absent from modern Islamic thought. Perhaps while belief had then been instinctive and lived, it now has to be taught and proclaimed.

'Aql (reason) and Naql (transmission of religious knowledge) are the foundations of Islamic thought; the first is by now heavily overlaid by western paradigms displacing the traditional understanding of reason as the mind that can discern the divine; the second by a stultifying literalism raised to the level of foundational belief. The latter is based on a fundamental and unprecedented privileging of the Law of Islam – the Sharia – above all other considerations in the understanding of the divine purpose. A Muslim's sole way of understanding the divine purpose is by living out the Law in its most meticulous form. In the process, both ethics and imagination have been marginalised. But the building blocks of ethical action are found in the universe of ideals and virtues; while the vitality of creative thought is anchored on openness and a willingness to engage with subtler realities. When both are banished from systematic political thought, the end result is barren and self-defeating. The vitality of any civilisation must be directly related to its ability to renew itself in creative action and thought. Modern Islam has signally failed to do that, in spite of many false starts that fizzled out precisely because they were based on a formulaic, derivative and quantitative understanding of what constitutes creativity. In this way, the arc of modern Islam has broken decisively with the creative élan of Islam's best periods, even as it loudly proclaimed that its primary mission was to renew the wellsprings of its civilisation.

Where has this led over the decades?

## Islamic State

Let us start by examining the fate of the Islamic state.

The ideal of the Islamic state has proved elusive, and when established as such has proved to be the handiwork of power-oriented elites and parties, or an eccentric and highly individualistic construct. The short-lived experiment of the Muslim brotherhood in Egypt collapsed with the Brotherhood denying that they wanted an Islamic state and in fact appropriating the language

of democratic political and human rights to demand their reinstatement in power. The Nahdha in Tunisia barely hung on to power, diluting to insipidity any notion of what an Islamic state actually meant and why it would be any different from the welfare states of 1950's Europe. The mighty behemoth of the Islamic state in Iran has inevitably surrendered to a pragmatism that might well end in a development-oriented authoritarianism led by the Revolutionary Guards. Sudan, which joined the ranks of Islamic states by a coup d'état has foundered in corruption, dictatorship and misgovernment, managing to lose a third of its territory to the newly founded state of South Sudan. The emirate of the Taliban in Afghanistan, another self-described Islamic state, became a byword for obscurantism and extreme violence against minorities, and the cloistering of women. I shudder to even try to explain the dystopia that is ISIS, as it subjects historic and proud cities to its reign of terror, and commits the most heinous crimes against entire peoples and sects.

So much for the Islamic state, as far away as one could imagine from the ruminations of its modern theorists such as Rashid Ridha, Mawdudi, Qutb and Baqir al-Sadr. What joined these diverse thinkers is the assertion that an Islamic state is essential to the preservation of Islam as a religion and that such a state must be based on the Sharia – no matter how one is to define it. And that through the Sharia, a revitalised Islam will unfold, driving states and societies to ever higher levels of achievement and justice. But reactionary dynasties and princely states have also appropriated for themselves the label of being governed by the Sharia. By now, the confusion as to what constitutes the Sharia is greater than ever, hardly an auspicious environment for constructing an Islamic state based on its principles, when these principles themselves are far from being agreed upon.

Let us now look at the effects of modern Islam on societies.

## Islamic Society

The main issue here is of periodisation. Certainly societies across the Muslim world appear to be more pious and observant when compared to the heyday of the secular states in which most Muslims lived – say, from the end of World War II to the 1970's. So in this respect one of the principal drives of modern Islam – that is to expand the practice of Islam and observance of Islamic norms – appears to have succeeded. But stretch the framework to reach to the turn of the last century, and then the matter looks entirely different. There, society- whether the overwhelmingly rural based population, or the urban dwelling elites-were instinctively respectful of religious authority and observant, and had no need to be reminded of their religious obligations. Their customs, habits and thoughts were organically connected to the long and rich past of Islamic life and culture. It was the disjuncture that brought modern Islam into being that reframed the issue to a population – or at least its ruling elites – that appeared to abandon the strictures of religion in droves. So, the re-Islamisation of society was in fact an invented form of religious observance, moulded to fit the needs of the Islamisation project.

I therefore seriously question whether the outer spread of religious norms, shorn of religious experience, is in any way related to the deepening of religious consciousness as such, which is why it will not be sustained over the long run. I am not questioning the sincerity of belief of the hundreds of millions who have found succour and comfort within the practice of Islam. This is an individual and collective decision which I enormously respect. But I am afraid that this has nothing to do with the scheme of re-ordering the outer world to fit with the demands of modern Islam. There is something flimsy about the mass piety movements that arose in the Muslim world over the past century, and which seemed to reach an apotheosis of sorts after the abortive Arab Spring. I do not know what long-lasting effects can be attributed to these movements. With one or two important exceptions, they appear to me structurally different from their equivalent in Victorian Britain or the US. They lack the social mobilisation component around which entire segments of the early modern economy had been built – from the co-op movements to the friendly building societies of the Quakers; from the model worker dwellings of Cadbury to the New Town movement. The global Islamic banking movement, supposedly organised to create the foundations of an Islamic economy, has degenerated into an eccentric extension of the conventional banking world. Islamic universities which came into being to infuse Islamic norms into established disciplines are forced to seek their academic legitimacy through global rankings which pay little regard to their exceptional status. I sense, admittedly with no serious research to back what I am saying, that the more overt are the signs of Islamisation (say in the number of mosques being constructed, the percentage of covered women or the number of Islamic bank branches) the less are the signs of mutual solidarity and support reflected in institutions and social programmes. And the less there is of charitable giving. There are exceptions of course as I had noted earlier. The Gulen movement of Turkey is one; but these are very early prototypes of the future pathways into which modern Islam might evolve.

Which brings me to the third aspect of the modern Islam project – that of affecting the consciousness of Muslims.

## Islamic Consciousness

The issue of raising the wa'iy or consciousness of Muslims is a cardinal element in all the action programmes of proselytising Islamic groups and parties. But this consciousness is almost entirely understood in political, doctrinal and behavioural terms, taking for granted that there is little to be done about the forms in which the modern world has evolved. As a consequence, the consciousness of modern day Muslims- and Islamists in particular- is overwhelmingly utilitarian, reductive and quantitative – in fact diametrically opposed to the consciousness of the past. The divine cannot be experienced directly. A person's only duty is to live his or her life according to the Law. This of course heightens the inherent contradiction of living in a manner which effectively banished the sacred from one's life; while at the same time proclaiming your fealty to a world view whose essential precepts you no longer experience – or aspire to experience. The Sharia becomes then a crutch which a person uses to proclaim his or her uniqueness; while at the same time contriving to use it to justify all manner of desires. Revelation in the service of Mammon. This cannot continue for

much longer without something giving way. Some of us of a certain age might recall the impact of a series of essays by ex-communists – Koestler, Crossman and the like – entitled “The God that Failed” about their disillusion with communism. I notice a deluge of articles and essays in the same vein by former Islamists all around the theme of “The Islamism that Failed.”

So if modern Islam is no longer about state, society or consciousness, what is left of this grand scheme? What is left I am afraid is simply power and dominion- an ideology for some, a route to power, and a validation of continuity in power for others. And wherever this has happened, it will bring within it the seeds of the downfall of a cycle that began in the mid-19th century.

This is mainly now defined by three dominant currents.

## Three Currents

### 1) Salafism and Wahhabism

The first is the world of the Salafi and Wahhabi Muslim, based on a materialist utilitarianism wedded with a rigid literalism. This creates the juxtaposition of archaic norms of life and conduct, supposedly demanded by an invariant faith, twinned with the most relentless expressions of materialist excess. Calvin and Gotham! But not quite! There are only superficial similarities between the Salafis and Wahhabis and their equivalent in other great religious traditions, say Christianity. The esteem given to those who make money, and the obligation of sharing it by tithing or zakat, are points of similarity. But the tensions between a puritanical literalism and the imperatives of ethical action were not successfully resolved by seeking the source of ethics only in the interpretation of scriptural texts. Ethics emerging from the Law rather than preceding and relating to the Law.

At present, of course, there seems to be little evidence that Salafism/Wahhabism will bifurcate in this manner; but in time it must. The great issue will not be race or science, as it was in 19th century Christianity, but the treatment of women. There is simply no getting around the fact that Salafism, but especially Wahhabism, is deeply misogynist and cannot accommodate the idea of equality, or even equivalence, of women to men in its theology. Once enough head of steam is built up- by greater education, by resistance to stereotyping, by the demands of natural justice- then the pressures on the regnant theology and its guardians will be enormous for it will come from everyday life and not from some grand liberation theory. We are not there yet, but I doubt that this great trauma will be too far away. Salafism/Wahhabism is now on a roll, fuelled not only by the proverbial Saudi money and the horrible euphemism of “...charitable giving by wealthy Gulf merchants”; but also because this peculiar form of religious puritanism appeals to the recently urbanised, consumerist, new middle classes of the Muslim World, seeking certainty and affirmation.

But here again, it is a matter of time before the unremitting materialism to which these people are prone, gives way to a loss of religious enthusiasm. For the moment now, it seems to have the

opposite effect, where the worst excesses of triumphant capitalist gigantism seem to coexist happily with the most rigid forms of religious practice. The transformation of Mecca into a giant shopping mall with the sacred precincts ringed by outsize luxury hotels and shopping arcades- supposedly to accommodate the ever-rising number of pilgrims- is ample testimony to this. The irony (and tragedy) of turning the sacred into the tawdry is a by-product of the literalist utilitarian mind set of the Wahhabis and Salafis. If there are no Sharia injunctions against building hulking and ugly skyscrapers next to the Ka'aba, then it is acceptable to do so. The same logic applies to the destruction of historic monuments and other sacred sites. We worship God and not things they say; therefore turn the house of Khadija, the wife of the Prophet, into a parking lot. This may continue well into the future, but only at the expense of the religious sensibility and commitment of the people.

## 2) Shia Islam

A second current into which modern Islam has flowed is the abrupt sideways turn of Shia Islam, represented by the strange system of governance that has emerged in Iran. I do not want to go into the merits or demerits of the Islamic Revolution, but only to conjecture on whether it will be long lasting and thus vindicate this particular turn in modern Islam. Iran is not a theocracy but an Imamocracy. It is a country run by a privileged substratum of the clerical classes in alliance with the elite security forces, basing their rule on an unconventional interpretation of the role of the jurists in the absence of the Hidden Imam of the Twelver Shias. The enabling theology behind this amazing conclusion is too complex to go into now, but it has a finite shelf-life as it were. Perhaps because I will very likely not be around to see its results, I will make the prediction that the Iranian system of government will not exist, in its present form, by the end of the next quarter century. The internal conflicts within this system are not to do with the issue of the treatment of half the population. No matter the constraints on women in present day Iran, their lot is significantly better than their counterparts in the Salafi/Wahhabi world, and will very likely improve within the limits of the current system. What will force the fundamental changes in Iran are two matters: the first is to do with the issue of succession to an all-powerful leader; the other issue is the drive to regional power and even supremacy by a development-oriented and authoritarian security force.

I do not believe that the ruling clerical groups can or even desire to hand over unlimited power to one of their own, after the demise of the current Supreme Leader, without significantly curtailing and circumscribing his power. In other words, the appropriation of authority from the Hidden Imam will become collegial and thus open to debate, pressure and change. The tensions here will be between a rationalist and pragmatic politics framed within a supra-rationalist doctrine of the actions of the Perfect Man of Shia dogma. Already, there is a clear dichotomy between the two, and this is likely to grow.

The second matter is that Iran is one of the few countries in the Islamic world that has the potential to break out as an economic power house, with its autonomy and independence intact. Partly because of its international isolation, now significantly reduced because of the nuclear deal, Iran has

not been dependent on either foreign investments or on foreign powers to maintain its standing. There is a powerful, latent force within Iran that wants to actualise this potential and may now have the opportunity to do so. The security elites of Iran- in particular the Revolutionary Guards Corps – already control large swathes of the economy, but unlike the military in Egypt or Pakistan, they are not primarily designed to keep the top brass in clover and above scrutiny. If you add to this the economic bodies under the control of the Supreme Leader, the so-called bonyads or religious foundations, you have a huge concentration of capital that if managed efficiently and productively could form the bases of Iran's economic resurgence. Under normalised conditions, Iran will try to modernise its economy at breakneck speed in a path that will combine the Chinese experience and that of Korea under Park Chung Hee. No wonder the Gulf States and Saudi Arabia are in no end of panic.

But I am not concerned here with geopolitical rivalries, only with what these trends imply for the course of modern Islam. The quarantining of the Iranian revolution by war and sanctions contained its revolutionary consequences; it was then conflated with Shia Islam, thus narrowing its appeal even more where the Shia do not constitute more than 15% of the Islamic world; we are now in the third cycle of containment, where it is now linked nearly exclusively to the power drive of the nation state of Iran, and its budding empire in the so-called Shia crescent. The turn towards a development-oriented authoritarianism will further reduce its specifically Islamic content. You can deal with Iran as a power and a state, but still hound your Shia population at will, as seems to be happening in Nigeria and Malaysia. This development is not that unusual. The Soviet Union had earlier discovered that its allies abroad could easily imprison and decimate their local communists with no effect on their relationship with the Soviet Union.

### 3) Jihadi Islam

The third direction into which modern Islam has stumbled- quite unexpectedly I might add from a historical point of view- is the nihilism and cult of extreme violence that has gripped all manner of people acting under the rubric of jihadis. It is obviously a product of modern times- even contemporary times. One is hard put to find any equivalent either in the past or in recent history (before 1980, say) with which one can find an element of continuity. Perhaps the Wahhabi conquest of the Arabian Peninsula in the late 18th /early 19th century which was accompanied with huge killings, is the nearest such case. The paradox of this jihadi Islam is that it is rejected by most Muslims at all levels, but accepted by a significant number at some levels. I will not mince words here. Most Salafi/Wahhabis approve, are ambivalent about or are silent about jihadi violence against non-Muslims but especially against Shia Muslims and other heterodox factions of Islam. Only a minority reject it out of hand. In the former case, the ferocious response of the US after the attacks of 9/11 has made jihadis and their supporters pause to think of the consequences of their actions against a mighty foe. But as for non-Muslims in Muslim lands and Shias, other heterodox sects of Islam and Sufis, it has been fair game. The terrorists and nihilists of 19th century Europe were mainly self-contained revolutionary cells with little or no connection to state power. (The Serbian

Black Hand being an exception. They gave us the pretext for World War I). This is emphatically not the case with the jihadis of modern Islam. They are autonomous entities with their own programme of revolutionary action, but they are often connected to states and when this occurs their actions are made to coincide with achieving state objectives. There is no need to elaborate on the relationship between the mujahidin of Afghanistan and the US, Saudi Arabia and Pakistan; or the connections of al-Qaeda and its various manifestations and franchises with Saudi intelligence or the limitless generosity of Gulf well-wishers-as if these people can act independently of state power in places like Kuwait, the UAE or Qatar. The Syrian civil war is a case study of the extent to which jihadi groups are intertwined with the intelligence agencies of Turkey, Qatar and Saudi Arabia.

Suicide bombings, decapitations, slaughter of innocents, rapine, desecration of holy sites, segregation of communities, shunning and mass killings of minorities- these are now inextricably linked with the fate of modern Islam. I have witnessed all of this at first hand, so I am not theorising. Alliances of this kind, between states and terrorists and criminals, are not uncommon in history to achieve singular objectives. Think of the US Army's alliance with the Mafia in the conquest of Sicily in WW II. But this goes way beyond such tactical understandings. I will say bluntly that selective appeal to jihadis and jihadi violence is an integral aspect of Wahhabi thinking on power and an entire theology has evolved to warrant and celebrate such atrocities. Ancient notions of what is legitimate in sanctified warfare are now commonplace justifications for barbarities of all kind. This perverse development has crept into the discourse of modern Islam, with people who are far away from the world of the jihadis, eagerly debating the finer points of the theology of basically, how to diminish, ostracise and eliminate those who do not share your world view. The demeaning of the spirit of Islam from this turn of events is devastating.

## Islamic Parties and Movements

I do not want to minimise the significance of the seemingly most obvious expressions of modern Islam- namely Islamic political parties and movements, and those that are euphemistically called "Islamically-rooted". These are perhaps the most important heirs of the early founders of modern Islam, and in this respect should be considered the living embodiment of modern Islam.

But are they that in truth? I doubt it.

To me they represent the end of the cycle that began with the reformers of the 19th century and continued in the bewilderment after the dismemberment of the Ottoman Empire. The mass piety movements were all in one way or another concerned with the loss of faith and authenticity; the Islamic political parties were organised for achieving power; the social and educational movements grew as the modern nation state in most Muslim countries proved inadequate to the task of providing a decent standard of public services. The tools that they used to achieve their objectives are all either hopelessly dated, or they have been cornered into accepting the rulebook of democratic processes. It is ironic that the Muslim Brotherhood, stripped of its power in the Egyptian counter-

revolution of June/July 2012, does not base its resistance to the army-led government with calls for Islamist solidarity but on democratic legitimacy. There is no Islamist political, social or economic project beyond being ensconced in power.

So what does Islam mean in the context of parties who carry that label but offer nothing in particular except that they pretend to being able to manage the state in a more effective manner than their competitors, and seem to have a fixation on the state of public and private morality.

My own explanation as to why there was an abrupt and massive collapse in the support base of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt is not that they bungled the management of the state, or where intent on Islamising it-no matter what that meant. There is really very little evidence of that beyond the meanderings and incoherence of the Morsi presidency, which in and of itself is insufficient to warrant a military intervention followed by massive and unprecedented killings. Rather, it is to do with the recognition of the mass of the electorate that the Islamist project is really nothing more than the assumption of the mantle of power, for no other end than because it is what political parties do. The Islamist project of the Islamic political parties is a hollow construct precisely because there is nothing Islamic in it apart from the numbing repetition of the words 'Islamic' and 'Sharia'. In reality, those in the electorate who believed in the rhetoric and were prepared to give the Brotherhood the benefit of the doubt saw the reality when the Brotherhood was in power and uncovered the fraud for what it was. Lincoln Steffens, the American reporter, who visited the Soviet Union after the October Revolution, came back with the quote "I have seen the future; and it works." The electorate in Egypt who dramatically shifted their support from the Brotherhood to the coup makers could very well have said: "We have seen the future: and it doesn't work."

But what about the AK Party? Isn't it after all the best example of the coexistence of Islam and democracy?

The AK Party did remove petty restrictions on the wearing of the hijab and affirmed the rights of the piety-minded to have religious education. It is now moving into a decidedly authoritarian phase, but still one can hardly point to an Islamisation project, unless it is in fact finding a solution to that old canard, the compatibility of Islam and democracy. The AK tamed the military and the judiciary but it has always upheld the ultimately secular nature of the Turkish state. It has pursued a neo-Ottoman foreign policy twinned with social conservatism and until recently a very dynamic and successful policy of economic management. From the perspective of modern Islam, its most significant achievement could well be the reformulation of the Sharia, through a revisionist programme that is focussing on reforming the understanding of the Prophetic hadith. But we have to await the results of this effort before one can pass judgement on its efficacy and ultimate appropriateness.

## The Dead-end of Modern Islam

The evidence that the course of modern Islam is reaching a point of exhaustion is thus quite compelling. But the end is coming with a bang and not a whimper.

The reason is twofold.

## Salafisation

First is the increasing pace of Salafisation of mainstream Sunni Islam. How and why this has come about is beyond this lecture, but it has certainly affected all the traditional centres of Sunni Islam. The discourse of Salafism and Wahhabism has moved from the periphery to the centre of the world of Sunni Islam and with it has gone the nuanced and Sufi-inflected forms of traditional Sunnism. The preoccupations of Wahhabism in particular with literalism and easy declamations of heresy are now quite common. Ordinary folk are now more than likely to worship in Saudi or Kuwaiti financed mosques, preached to by ulema who have attended gratis the Wahhabi academies of Saudi Arabia, and look there for their guidance and direction. This development makes it all the easier to accept Wahhabism's a-historicity, its indifference to heritage and tradition, and to act upon the main preoccupations of Wahhabism, mainly the quarantine and elimination of what it sees are unacceptable accretions to the religion. The barrenness of the resulting culture is too sad to contemplate, for it eliminates all the creative vitality of the religion. I challenge anyone to mention one noteworthy work of literature, art, architecture or craft that has emerged from the world of the Salafis and Wahhabis over the decades, even centuries. The counterpart to that is the immersion of the common folk in material accumulation to the exclusion of almost everything else of true value.

Which brings me to the catastrophe-in-the-making to modern Islam by the accelerating schism between the Shia and Sunni Muslims.

## Shia-Sunni Conflict

Some might say that this is overdramatizing what has been in effect a permanent divide in Islamic history, but this entirely misses the mark. Until very recently there had been a consensus amongst Muslims regarding traumatic episodes in early Islamic history, namely the rightness of the cause of Ali versus Mua'wiyya, and the events leading to the martyrdom of Hussein, the son of Ali. These are of course key elements in Shia Islam, but one could declare oneself on the side of Ali and Hussein without necessarily accepting Shia doctrine. Nearly all the Sufi tariqas, staunchly Sunni in legal matters, trace their lineage to Ali. In fact, many of the figures of early modern Islam were born Shia, such as the pan Islamic agitator Sayyid Jamal al-Din al-Asadabadi commonly known as al-Afghani, but nearly all his key followers, stalwarts of modern Islam such as Abduh and Ridha, were Sunni.

However, a combination of factors has moved what is in essence a doctrinal conflict within the folds of Islam into a lethal animosity. Wahhabism's hostility to Shia Islam has never abated but it was kept in check by the realpolitik policies of the Wahhabi's strategic allies, the House of Saud; and the

confinement of Wahhabism to the area of central Arabia. Following the Iranian revolution, the Saudis felt exposed to Iran's revolutionary fervour and sought to contain it by first encouraging Iraq's war effort and subsequently by relying on the US's military presence in the Gulf. This policy was seriously jeopardised by the invasion of Iraq which seemed to empower Iran even further by installing a Shia-led government in Baghdad. Surreptitious support to al-Qaeda in Iraq did not end with the fall of the new order in Iraq, pushing the Saudis into adopting a more indirect strategy of demonising Iran and Shiism in the broader Islamic world. The ramping up of anti-Shia sectarian discourse can be traced to the mid 2,000's with the congruence of Saudi fears of Iranian hegemony with the traditional Wahhabi rejection of Shia Islam. This has now seeped into a number of Islamic countries, some with insignificant Shia populations. It has also neatly coincided with the indiscriminate violence of jihadis against Shia populations in Iraq and Pakistan, and has proved a powerful rallying cry for the tens of thousands of jihadis currently fighting in the Syrian civil war. Wahhabi and jihadi hatred of Shia Islam now easily trumps any antipathy to the west. With the advent of King Salman to the throne, and the transfer of huge power to his son, Saudi Arabia has now abandoned totally its deliberate cautiousness in state-to-state relations. It is all but at war with Iran, and is rapidly mobilising a global Sunni-I stress specifically Sunni- alliance to counter what it sees as an aggressive and expansionist Shiism, led by Iran. This is extraordinary in historical terms. Something like a global Sunni 'nationalism' is being invented and deployed as a replacement for Pan Islam and narrow ethnic nationalism, primarily to serve the dynastic interests of the al-Sauds and to conflate Sunnism with militant anti-Shiism. I believe the Wahhabi project aims at nothing less than the expulsion of Shia Muslims from the fold of Islam, in fact treating Shiism as a different and hostile religion to be confronted and vanquished. What the Shia are supposed to do when faced with such an onslaught beggars the imagination.

These are the elements that I think could augur the start of a new cycle in the course of Islam: in a universe of division, hostility, strife and recrimination; and the apparent ascendancy of Salafism/Wahhabism in the Sunni lands of Islam. Sunni Islam might not totally surrender the understanding of the religion to the fringe interpretations of Wahhabism, but there is little doubt that the centre of gravity of Sunni Islam has shifted dramatically towards acceptance of key Salafi/Wahhabi doctrines and tenets. The consequences of this to the welfare and vitality of Islam are enormous.

But still, is this new turn a true disjuncture which decades from now a future historian can look back and say that the events of this period marked a fundamental break in the story of modern Islam? Are we witnessing the beginnings of Islam's version of the Thirty Years War whose outcome though uncertain will nevertheless be decisive in defining the forms of the next cycle?

Almost by definition events overlies deeper structures, and dramatic twists and turns might appear less so from the safe perspective and distance of a longer time framework. However, I cannot believe that this is merely froth on top of the wave, for it is affecting both the mentalities and perspectives of people, and at some level also the way that they organise their daily lives. If

communities segregate and avoid or even demonise each other; if intimate matters such as marriage, family and friendships become hostage to deep sectarianism, then they will create their own realities which in turn become structural.

## Reformation, Enlightenment and the Romantic Movement in Islam

The transition of modern Islam from one world to another has been difficult and fraught with problems. The cycle is ending in failure- at least in terms of the three aspects which it sought to change: State, society and consciousness.

Naive calls have been made from time to time for an Islamic Reformation or an Islamic Enlightenment, to somehow track Islam along the trajectory of Christianity and the modern world. In fact, both of these have been experienced but not necessarily with the expected results. If one means by "Reformation" the breakdown of traditional forms of authority and hierarchy, then Wahhabism is a distorted form of such a reformation of Islam. If by "Enlightenment" we mean the enthronement of reason at the heart of human endeavour, then we have also had that ever since Syed Ahmad Khan and the quest for a rationalist and rationalising Islam. Both Reformation and Enlightenment have ended with completely unexpected results as I have tried to outline.

History does not deal with roads that were not taken but I will nevertheless try to envisage the enlivenment of a crucial potential within Islam as the route towards the revival of an altogether different expression of the religion. Contemporary Islamic thought is not barren but it requires great courage to face up to the disasters of the past decades. The late Franco-Algerian thinker, Muhammad Arkoun, saw hope in the potential willingness of Muslims to ponder the "unthinkable" and unthought-of in Muslim intellectual history. He did not really produce a corpus of work that led onto this path; rather he skirted around it, declaiming the necessity of drawing on the social sciences and anthropology to revitalise the tradition. Others have sought the seeds of revival in a new engagement with philosophy, in particular picking up from the medieval rationalist philosopher Ibn Rushd. Still others have revisited the aborted rationalist school of the Mu'tazzila, seeing in them the possibility of questioning key points of dogma that had underpinned Sunni theology since the 9th century.

Iran has also produced its intellectual religious dissenters. They are unknown to a large extent in the broader Muslim world, apart from academic circles. Bazargan, Kadivar, Shabistari and above all Abd al-Karim Soroush point to an altogether different path for Islam. Soroush has boldly questioned the foundational pillars of traditional Islamic belief, all the while affirming his own commitment to the faith. The sanctity of the Quran as the unmediated word of God; elevating reason to be equal the Word of God; ethics as moral progress through an individual's self-realisation; and that the Muslim ummah has no special claim to be exceptional. The Soroushian project might be a step too far in present circumstances, but he is asking the unthinkable and unthought of. All of these trends might peter out or coalesce into a current that could reinvent the idea and practice of Islam. It could lead to

a “religious secularity” not so much an oxymoronic statement, but a genuine attempt to emancipate religion from the strictures of power and politics.

I will add my two pence’s worth. What I say Islam needs is not Reformation or Enlightenment but its own version of the “Romantic Movement”, which privileges the individual, honours the drive for human perfectibility, an ethic of toleration, a theology of freedom and justice, a cultivation of the sense of the ineffable and its attributes of beauty and creativity. All this within a structure that is built on the notion of the ethical and the acknowledgement and experience of the sacred.

The “Romantic Movement “of Islam will re-imagine the faith and challenge the new dogmas and the authority behind them. It will elevate ethics to a central position in Islam, and see its source in the universe of ideals and archetypes, rooted in the attributes of God; and not exclusively in the meticulous observation of rules and precedents, no matter how august. It will seek inclusiveness and acknowledge diversity and multiplicity. It will celebrate nature and protect the natural order. It will accept the validity of other expressions of religious belief. It will seek to expand the realm of individual freedoms and liberties. It will seek new forms of communal solidarity, transactions and ownership. It will redefine the nature of legitimate authority and subject it to constraints. It will seek to redress the chasms of inequality and disadvantage. It will rebalance gender relations.

The Renaissance in Europe was based on the rediscovery of the classics of antiquity; the Renaissance of Islam might very well emerge from the recovery of the ‘imaginal’, a form of thinking and experiencing which has produced its own edifice of spiritual knowledge, but which has been deliberately belittled or ignored by its castigators. Its greatest exponent is the medieval mystic, Muhy al-Din ibn ‘Arabi but his legacy has been misappropriated and misdirected. Ibn ‘Arabi is of course hated by the Salafis and Wahhabis, precisely because his rendering of Islam is completely at odds with their literalism, and points a course for Islam that is utterly alien, even unthinkable for them. The ulema of the Shia are ambivalent and often hostile to ibn ‘Arabi and to mystical thinking generally because it challenges them at the level of doctrinal authority. I am not saying that we should all start reading the 200-odd works of ibn ‘Arabi or immerse ourselves in the works of Rumi, ibn al-Faridh and Attar, and expect to stop the march to self-destruction. But it is a fundamental start that may halt the galloping desertification of modern Islamic thought and practice implicit by the emergence of a Salafi/Wahhabi ascendancy. It is also a powerful antidote to the consumerist materialism that has seized the minds of the Muslim middle classes. And has submerged us in a world devoid of colour, beauty and originality, producing crass urban landscapes and degraded natural environments; and mind-sets and outlooks that demean the human spirit.

## Conclusion

The next expression of modern Islam could well be defined by the heirs of ibn Taymiyyah, the medieval theologian who is the inspiration to the Salafis and Wahhabis; confronting the as-yet undefined heirs of ibn ‘Arabi; and the battleground will be the course of modern Islam in the next

several generations. If the potential of the inner dimensions of Islam are not realised and there is no such grand stand-off, then the world of Islam could well bifurcate into Salafi/Wahhabi domination of the majority Sunni world; and a rump and alienated Shia Islam huddling around a resurgent Iran. The course of Islam will therefore not be the occasion of its revival but it could well set it on the path to its ruination as a vital civilising force.

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