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ARTICLE

The Political Unbound: Conservative Arab Thought after Islam

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Critiques of religion in Arab political life have long been framed as a project of the left. Since the uprisings of 2011, however, the most forceful critics of theology's presence in politics have been conservatives. This article reconstructs the intellectual history of the Arab right through the work of philosopher Mohammed Jaber al-Ansari. Revisiting the intellectual and historical context of the 1990s, it advances a new genealogy of conservative Arab political thought, one that saw in all transcendental and religious identifications not only the dangers of revolution but also a forfeiture of politics itself. In decoupling conservatism from Islam, the article advances an understanding of conservatism as both contingent and structural, or permanent in its formal presence but not necessarily in content, to suggest that histories of conservatism not only provide resources for a better understanding of the present, but also can complement the task that radical and ecumenical accounts of the Arab past have long pursued in disputing the religious or cultural nature of conservatism. In that sense, intellectual history of secular conservatism is important not because it is more or less dominant than theologically inflected varieties of it today, but because of how it might help free the historian from the need to restrict her endeavour to the correction of essentialist misrepresentation and to write histories where contingency is assumed rather than histories whose burden it has been to prove it.

Introduction

In 1979 the late Edward Said published an essay titled "The Arab Right Wing," arguably the first written work explicitly dedicated to exploring the contemporary right in the Arab world.[1] Not until 2021 did the next article devoted specifically to right-wing Arab politics emerge.[2] It is no coincidence that between 1979 and the 2020s lies the broad arc of the rise (and relative decline) of Islamism: a political and ideological current that increasingly came to stand in for what it meant to be a conservative in the Arab

[1]Edward Said, "The Arab Right Wing," in Said, *The Politics of Dispossession: The Struggle for Palestinian Self Determination, 1969–1994* (New York, 1994), 224–30.

[2]Chloe Kattar, "The Lebanese Study Committee: A Christian Think Tank in Wartime Lebanon, 1975–1982," *Historical Journal* 64/3 (2021), 774–95.

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world after the Iranian Revolution of 1979, despite its being a revolutionary force as well.[3]

Put differently, Islamism's popular success in the late twentieth century had the distorting effect of shielding its liberal and nationalist adversaries from being thought of as conservative.[4] Aside from the essentialism and culturalism of conflating Islam and conservatism, to root right-wing politics in piety is to shear conservatism of its irreligious instantiations, and, in the case of the Islamic world, to reduce it to the problem of insufficient or incomplete secularization.

In this article, I argue that crucial strands of contemporary Arab thought—in this case, conservative ones—remain concealed behind some of the prevalent intellectual and political taxonomies of the late twentieth century, particularly that of the religious-versus-secular divide.[5] More specifically, the article revisits the Arab 1990s—the context in which Islamism seemed most unassailable—as the moment in which anxieties around the ascent of revolutionary, militant, and reformist religious thought and politics provoked an intellectual response to the problem of how to sever the links between politics and theology in the normative idioms of modern Arab thought. Premised broadly on the preservation of the status quo, the variety of conservatism I examine here was one formulated around the assumption that such a severance would retard the disruptive effects of theology on political life and restabilize politics around the state. And while the critique of the filial relationship between religion and politics, or tradition and modernity, took many forms at the time, here I explore just one of its strands, one whose conservative implications become visible once the contextual considerations around the ascent of Islamism are relaxed, and the ramifications of its conceptual content are revealed.

As an instantiation of this strain of thought, this article revisits the work of philosopher and theorist Muhammad Jaber al-Ansari (1939–2024), perhaps the most prominent contemporary intellectual to emerge from the monarchies of the Arabian peninsula, whose project aimed to rethink the foundations of effective political authority in an era of proliferating transnational religious allegiances in the late twentieth-century Arab world. Through Ansari's work, this article proposes a novel genealogy of modern Arab conservatism that saw in all transcendental religious and spiritual identifications not only the dangers of popular revolution but also a forfeiture of politics itself. To unfurl the conceptual and political content that makes Ansari's writings conservative,

[3]For a discussion of this tension see Behrooz Ghamari-Tabrizi, *Foucault in Iran: Islamic Revolution after the Enlightenment* (Minneapolis, 2016). I use the term "Islamism" throughout in this article in relatively comprehensive terms to refer to the "very broad and abstract conviction that 'Islam' should inform political affairs, the ordering of political institutions and the distribution of power and wealth." See Eskandar Sadeghi-Boroujerdi, *Revolution and Its Discontents: Political Thought and Reform in Iran* (Cambridge, 2020), 61.

[4]For a historiographical overview of the politically distorting effects of the rise of Islamist movements and the representation of Islam in the output of the liberal academy since 1979 see Neguin Yavari, "Postcolonial Prophets: Islam in the Liberal Academy," in Faisal Devji and Zaheer Kazmi, eds., *Islam after Liberalism* (Oxford, 2019), 91–103.

[5]Omnia El Shakry's problematization of the Islamist-versus-secular divide in Arab intellectual history explores, via Sayyid Qutb, the polemical nature and history of these categories. Omnia El Shakry, "'History without Documents': The Vexed Archives of Decolonization in the Middle East," *American Historical Review* 120/3 (2015), 920–34.

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and that is otherwise tightly bound up in the polemical melee of Islamism's high noon, is to revisit the philosophical and conceptual content of his work rather than its secular bent, or antireligious inclinations. Here, I argue that Ansari's project amounted to search for a metaphysical and historical rupture not just with the religion per se but with the systems of modern Arab thought that aimed to reconcile religion with politics, reason with revelation, and nation with faith. He framed these attempted reconciliations as impediments to a *telos* of gradualist, nonrevolutionary Arab political modernity anchored by a state whose legitimacy had to be drawn from its historical capacity to overcome and outlast its religious adversaries, rather than any transcendent claims to national or cultural representation that simply competed with religion on the latter's own grounds.

Concerned as such with what he saw as the enormous normative currency of conciliatory thought (*al-fikr al-tawfīqī*)—the cumulative intellectual attempt to reconcile the secular and sacred across the broad arc of modern Arab thought—Ansari produced a theory of indecision or irresolution that he believed lay at the heart of modern Arab intellectual and political history, or what he called *lā-ḥasm*. This theory equated the conditions of crisis and stagnation in the Arab world not with the "excess" of religiosity but with the aftereffects of religion's assimilation (including in its spiritualist, heterodox, and Christian forms) into the conceptual fabric of Arab modernity, and especially its "failed" revolutionary traditions, such as Baʿathism and Nasserism.

Recast as a search for a breach with that past, this article rethinks Ansari's project as an attempt to anchor the foundations of stable political authority in the very act of having decisively subsumed its historical rival, namely religion and the revolutionary political traditions that in his estimation relied on it for their normative validation. Ansari's conservatism thus emerges most clearly not in his critique of religion or religious tradition alone, but in the variety of ways in which he intellectualized the necessity conflict with transcendental or spiritual identifications as the criterion of historical change. Only by releasing the antagonistic relationship between reason and revelation from the strictures of conciliatory thought, he argued, could the Arab world emerge from the quagmire of unresolved or delayed ideological conflict, religious revivalism, and destabilizing revolutionary change. Somewhat counterintuitively, then, rupture or discontinuity with the religious past, and with the persistent authority of religion as rehabilitated by its modernist apologists, while usually the abode of emancipatory or progressive thinking, serves here as the basis for a conservative vision of an enduring, nonrevolutionary modern political order.[6]

Crucially, Ansari's conservatism was not primordialist or particularly identitarian in that it did not turn on the revival, preservation, or glorification of ethnonational lifeworlds.[7] Nor was Ansari a conservative who aimed to preserve a religious tradition of thought amid the flux of change brought about by modernization.[8] In contrast, he

[6]Samuel Moyn, "Hannah Arendt on the Secular," *New German Critique* 105 (2008), 71–96.

[7]Perhaps most prominent Arab thinkers of this variety are Charles Malik (1906–87) and Saʿīd ʿAql (1912–2014), who were contributors to the development of Christian Lebanese nationalism.

[8]Rashid Rida is largely read as a conservative, albeit modernist, thinker who contributed to the development of modern Salafism. For a critical account of Rida as a thinker who both acknowledges Rida's

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embraced the rupture of modernity to invest in a *telos* of gradualist progress guided by the necessity of a sovereign authority, namely the state, that was political and profane rather than moral and transcendental in its legitimating idiom. His conservatism was thus premised on the preservation of the political realm against dilution by religious law or the romantic spiritualism embedded in various traditions of Arab nationalism, and, moreover, that the integrity of any such political realm could only be secured by a decisive parting from the symbolic and textual authority of both orthodox religion and heterodox traditions of mysticism (*al-māwarāʾiyya*). To understand Ansari as a conservative thus relies on being able to see how his antirevolutionary gradualism—his celebration of political and institutional maturation of states as the privileged site of history over long stretches of time—was premised on the prerequisite of a decisive severance from the normative languages of religious legitimation, jurisprudential reasoning, and transcendental mysticism. Without such a rupture, politics and the political authority of the state would languish under conditions of perpetual debt to laws and mores that no worldly agent could decide on, and which Ansari equated figuratively with conditions of permanent civil war.

Divided into three parts, the article begins by revisiting Ansari's most important work of criticism, *The Struggle of Opposites* (*Ṣirāʿ al-Āḍdād*): a philosophical history of the attempt to reconcile reason and revelation, the secular and the sacred, across the broad arc of modern Arab thought.[9] Encoded within this history, I argue, is the endeavor to show how the autonomy of politics had been lost or ceded to theology in an attempt to reconcile the two rather than allowing for a decisive resolution of their antagonisms and contradictions. As the work through which Ansari became an intellectual read across the Arab world, the text provided the philosophical and metaphysical basis, largely drawn from a particular reading of Hegelian dialectics, on which Ansari mounted his critique of religion's assimilation into secular Arab thought. Ansari's resulting argument—that the impulse to integrate religion into the very grammar of Arab modernity was an attempt to defy history by bypassing conflict and contradiction in favor of harmony and ecumenicism—serves as the basis from which much of his more conventionally conservative positions can subsequently be understood.

traditionalism but also challenges it see Leor Halevi, *Modern Things on Trial: Islam's Global and Material Reformation in the Age of Rida, 1865–1935* (New York, 2007). Amal Ghazal's work on Yusuf al-Nabhani broadens the field of conservative religious thought as articulated against its neo-Salafi or neo-Orthodox reformist instantiations. See Amal Ghazal, "'Illiberal' Thought in the Liberal Age: Yusuf al-Nabhani (1849–1932), Dream-Stories and Sufi Polemics against the Modern Era," in Jens Hanssen and Max Weiss, eds., *Arabic Thought beyond the Liberal Age: Towards an Intellectual History of the Nahda* (Cambridge, 2016), 214–34.

[9]Muḥammad Jābir al-Anṣārī, *al-Fikr al-ʿArabī wa-ṣirāʿ al-aḍdād: kayfa iḥtawat al-tawfīqiyya al-ṣirāʿ al-maḥẓūr bayna al-uṣūliyya wa-al-ʿalmāniyya wa-al-ḥasm al-muʾajjal bayna al-Islām wa-al-Gharb: tashkhīṣ ḥālat "al-lā-ḥasm" fī al-ḥayāh al-ʿArabiyya wa-al-iḥtiwāʾ al-tawfīqī li-al-jadaliyyāt al-maḥẓūra* (Arab Thought and the Struggle of Opposites: How Conciliation Contained the Struggle between Fundamentalism and Secularism and the Deferred Decision between Islam and the West; A Diagnosis of the Condition of "Indecision" in Arab Life and the Conciliatory Containment of a Restricted Dialectic) (Beirut, 1996). Hereafter *The Struggle of Opposites*.

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Next, I consider Ansari's critique of theological conceptions of sovereignty in their contemporary Islamist form. While the evasion of the sovereign decision—or the sovereignty inherent in the ability to decide on the exception to law—was principally a liberal fault for a thinker like Carl Schmitt, whom I evoke to bring Ansari's later ideas into relief, Muslim modernist and reformist thought played a similar role for Ansari in its deference to the transcendent and to divine law in particular. Ansari understood this deference to religious law as antipolitical: a relinquishment of true sovereignty and therefore a primary contributor to the crisis of authority in Arab political life. By recovering and rereading the conceptual instantiations of kingship and sovereignty in Arabic outside and against the adjudicative valence of Islamic law and theology, Ansari sought ways to overcome the problem of the "missing decision" first elaborated in his critique of conciliatory thought.

Finally, I turn to Ansari's last major work, where the conservative implications of his preceding writings emerge most explicitly. Here Ansari articulates his case for preserving the contemporary Arab nation-state against revolutionary change via an arduous passage through a "neo-feudal" phase of institutional development.[10] Crucially, reading the prevailing conditions of violence, division, and fragmentation in the Arab world as necessary and formative, rather than artificial or accidental, reveals Ansari's conservatism as a form of political quietism: an apology for the current territorial and political arrangement of contemporary Arab nation-states, rooted in his belief in their historic role as incubators of sovereignty. Framed within a broader *telos* of national Arab unity, the global history of feudalism thus serves as the theoretical basis for a break in the cycle of deference to theology and a route through which the fraternal bonds between Arab states could be rebuilt, albeit immunized from the chimeras of revolutionary deliverance and religious eschatology.

The historiography of the Arab 1990s

The so-called unipolar moment between the 1991 Persian Gulf War and the events of 9/11 form the global contextual backdrop of most of Ansari's writing, and for the emergence of the variety of conservatism he espoused. Here I wish to reposition Ansari within the Arab intellectual landscape of this moment to specify this article's contributions. My interest in revisiting this particular historical context lies more in how it has often obscured particular intellectual histories—in this case that of a conservatism as such—than in how it has been a political background that dictated the preoccupations of its intellectuals. More specifically, I wish to outline how the viability of conservatism as an analytical category and its intellectual contours in Ansari's thought rely on unpacking its intellectual history from behind some of the conventions of that decade's intellectual categories and reintroducing some of Ansari's philosophical, rather than his overt political, commitments.

[10]Muḥammad Jābir al-Anṣārī, *Takwīn al-ʿArab al-siyāsī wa-maghzā al-dawlah al-qiṭriyyah: madkhal ilā iʿādat fahm al-wāqiʿ al-ʿArabī* (Arab Political Development and the Aims of the Nation-State: Towards a New Understanding of the Arab Condition) (Beirut, 1994).

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It is precisely at this moment in the late twentieth century that Max Weiss and Jens Hanssen describe a "splintering of Arab intellectual life," in which "the intellectual problem-space of 'Islam and modernity,' or 'Islam vs. the West' … was revived" due to the preponderance of Islamism at the time.[11] Such a splintering applies well to the intellectual meanings that the term "conservative" took in being either equated with Islamism and religious thought on the one hand, or denied intellectual status altogether under the label of authoritarianism on the other.[12] When not reduced to religion in the Arab world, conservatism thus largely turns into realpolitik—the contingent contexts in which the "Pharaonic" figures of prince, autocrat, or dictator pursue their interests.[13] Moreover, in both its religious and authoritarian guises, the term "conservative" in the Arab world became impossible to reconcile with standard accounts of its intellectual genealogy as a modern category of political thought in Europe.

A major strand of conservatism's intellectual history in Euro-America—indeed the very idea of an *ancien régime*—dates its advent in the reaction to the secularizing and regicidal drive of the French Revolution.[14] The appropriateness of conservatism as a subject of historical inquiry for a given society, or indeed what qualifies that society's conservatives for investigation as such, may thus be conventionally predicated on a sense of secularism as excessive rather than lacking. The ascendency of Islamist movements in the 1990s, when Ansari wrote most prolifically, largely exempted the Arab world's secular thinkers from being thought of as conservatives and restricted the use of the term "conservative" to a descriptor for an ideological range, or the traditionalist, orthodox cohort of any given ideological position, rather than a category of intellectual inquiry in itself.[15]

Thus, when Ansari emerged on the Arab intellectual landscape in the 1990s due to his critique of conciliatory thought, his contribution aligned with the broader intellectual effort of secular Arab thinkers to understand the reasons for Islamism's success

[11]See Jens Hanssen and Max Weiss, eds., *Arabic Thought against the Authoritarian Age: Towards an Intellectual History of the Present* (Cambridge, 2018), 14, 22–3.

[12]Ibid., 23.

[13]For recent work on the sociological and tactical aspects of the post-2011 counterrevolution in the Arab world see Jamie Allinson, *The Age of Counter-revolution: States and Revolutions in the Middle East* (Cambridge, 2022); Toby Matthiesen, "The Arab Counter-revolution: The Formation of a Regional Alliance to Undermine the Arab Spring," in Lisa Blaydes, Amr Hamzawy, and Hesham Sallam, eds., *Struggles for Political Change in the Arab World: Regimes, Oppositions, and External Actors after the Spring* (Ann Arbor, 2022), 392–407.

[14]This genealogy, largely revolving around the figure of Edmund Burke and his writings on the French Revolution, has seen considerable historical revision recently. For more see Corey Robin, *The Reactionary Mind: Conservatism from Edmund Burke to Sarah Palin* (Oxford, 2011); and Jesse Norman, *Edmund Burke: Philosopher, Politician, Prophet* (New York, 2013). However, these accounts have been challenged by other genealogies of conservatism, including Emily Jones, "Conservatism, Edmund Burke, and the Invention of a Political Tradition, *c.*1885–1914," *Historical Journal* 58/4 (2015), 1115–39; and Richard Bourke, "What Is Conservatism? History, Ideology and Party," *European Journal of Political Theory* 17/4 (2018), 449–75.

[15]Abu-Rabi' uses the term "conservative" to describe an ideological "camp" or division of Arab politics at large in Ibrahim Abu-Rabi', "Abdallah Laroui: From Objective Marxism to Liberal Etatism," in Abu-Rabi', *Contemporary Arab Thought: Studies in Post-1967 Arab Intellectual History* (London, 2004), 344–69. Kassab similarly uses the term to denote range in the Arab ideological spectrum in Elizabeth Kassab, *Contemporary Arab Thought: Cultural Critique in Comparative Perspective* (New York, 2009), 47.

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at the time.[16] More specifically, Ansari joined the lively intellectual exchange on the philosophical compatibility, or reconcilability, of Islam and modernity. As a genre of criticism, the critique of conciliatory thinking more broadly had taken various forms since at least the late 1960s and continued well into the 1990s.[17] The controversial and public disagreement between philosophers Muhammad Abed al-Jabiri (1935–2010) and George Tarabichi (1939–2016) encapsulates the best-known face of this debate, and set the tone for a decade of intellectual dispute on the subject.[18]

However, Ansari was less interested arguing the philosophical compatibility or incompatibility of Islam with the modern condition and instead proceeded with the assumption that the normative inclination or impulse (*nazʿa*) towards reconciling Islam with modern modes of thought, subjectivity, and politics would not be undone with more careful philosophy, or indeed with more incisive criticism. While it is true that Ansari would go to great lengths to problematize conciliatory thought and its philosophical contradictions, his criticism was nonetheless infused with the teleological notion that the resolution to the antagonism between reason and revelation in the contemporary age had to be allowed to play out historically. Thus, in contrast to the work of Muhammad Arkoun (1928–2010), another critic of conciliatory thought engaged in the granular philosophical and epistemological task of a profound rethinking of theology, belief, and revelation as part of his critique of traditional religious reason, Ansari was more interested in mapping a historical trajectory of what an exit from that very intellectual task would look like.[19] In the intellectual context of the debates of the Arab 1990s, Ansari was thus less a philosopher than a philosophical historian who saw the Arab effort to reconcile religion with the modern condition as a historical period that delayed (*taʾjīl*) a reckoning with the loss of theological certainty.[20]

[16]Wald Abāh al-Sayyid, *Aʿlām al-fikr al-ʿArabī: Madkhal ilā khāriṭat al-fikr al-ʿArabī al-rāhinah* (Figures of Arab Thought: An Introduction to the Map of Contemporary Arab Thought) (Beirut, 2010), 150–57; Kassab, *Contemporary Arab Thought*, 253–69; Georges Corm, *Arab Political Thought: Past and Present* (London, 2015), 249–54.

[17]Abdallah Laroui, *L'idéologie arabe contemporaine* (Contemporary Arab Ideology) (Paris, 1970); Ṣādiq Jalāl al-ʿAẓm, *Naqd al-dhātī baʿda al-hazīma* (Self-Criticism after the Defeat) (Beirut, 1969); al-ʿAẓm, *Naqd al-fikr al-dīnī* (Critique of Religious Thought) (Beirut, 1969); George Ṭarābīshī, *al-Muthaqqafūn al-ʿArab wa-al-turāth: al-taḥlīl al-nafsī li-ʿuṣba jamāʿiyya* (Arab Intellectuals and Heritage: A Psychoanalytic Analysis of a Collective Neurosis) (Beirut, 1991); Fayṣal Darraj, "al-Kawnī wa-al-ʿālamī wa-al-thaqāfa al-waṭaniyya" (The Cosmic, the Global, and National Culture), *Qaḍāyā wa-Shahādāt* 5 (1992), 1–28; Nadīm Naʿīmī, "Ishkāliyāt al-fikr al-islāmī fī ʿAṣr al-Nahḍa" (The Problematics of Islamic Thought in the Nahda), in Naʿīmī, *ʿAṣr al-Nahḍa: Muqaddimāt lībirāliyya li-al-ḥadātha* (The Nahda Era: Liberal Foundations for Modernity) (Casablanca, 2000), 51–74. The critique of conciliation also appears embedded in the criticism of modern Arab thinkers, even when it is not explicitly the subject of their critique. See Samer Frangie, "Historicism, Socialism and Liberalism after the Defeat: On the Political Thought of Yasin al-Hafiz," *Modern Intellectual History* 12/2 (2015), 325–52, at 349.

[18]Muḥammad ʿĀbid al-Jābirī, *Naqd al-ʿaql al-ʿArabī* (The Critique of Arab Reason), 4 vols. (Beirut, 1982–2001); George Ṭarābīshī, *Naqd Naqd al-ʿaql al-ʿArabī* (Critique of *The Critique of Arab Reason*) (Beirut, 1996).

[19]Muḥammad Arkūn, *Tārīkhiyyat al-fikr al-ʿArabī al-Islāmī* (The Historicity of Arab–Islamic Thought) (Beirut, 1998); Muḥammad Arkūn, *Naḥwa naqd al-ʿaql al-Islāmī* (Toward a Critique of Islamic Reason) (Casablanca, 1990); Arkūn, *The Unthought in Contemporary Islamic Thought* (London, 2002).

[20]Ian Hunter discusses this genre of historical writing in "The Contest over Context in Intellectual History," *History and Theory* 58/2 (2019), 185–209.

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Moreover, one reason why Ansari's work is not normally read for its conservative implications is that the critique of conciliation in Arabic originated among leftist thinkers.[21] By the time Ansari began publishing widely, the critique of moderation and conciliation was therefore already a well-established genre that saw the desire for secular modernity woven with the threads of tradition as intellectually unconvincing and apologetic at inception.[22] Yet when revisited for its philosophical underpinnings, Ansari's contribution to this debate supersedes a call for a more muscular secularism and points to a distinctively conservative political and intellectual disposition as a thinker of the political.

The metaphysics of secular conflict

Ansari's broader project was more than a reinscription of conflict and antagonism into the history of conciliatory thinking that he was concerned with. His antipathy towards the ecumenical attempts at reconciling reason and revelation across the canon of modern Arab thought, however polite, was indeed the mark of a secular thinker. Yet Ansari conceptualized antagonistic struggle (*ṣirāʿ*) not for its own sake, or as an index of what politics in a robustly pluralistic society might look like, but as a condition of perpetual reckoning with loss.

Drawing directly from Nietzsche's *The Birth of Tragedy*, Ansari understood secularization as a process not of overcoming the symbolic, material, and historical influence of religion but of enduring the loss of certainty traditionally furnished by theology.[23] For Ansari, the tragic sensibility made visible the limits of politics and was integral to any truly secular program or agenda. It is with such an understanding of tragedy that Ansari equated the eschewing of antagonism in the conciliatory impulses of canonical Arab thinkers with the lack of Dionysian vitalism.[24] The expansive intellectual history of conciliatory thought, and the insistence on harmony at the expense of conflict within it, are ultimately reducible for Ansari to the hesitation to live in a world without guarantees. Such a world refuses to reckon with tragedy, and furnishes the conditions for reason and theology to continue their symbiosis. In one of his boldest statements, Ansari goes so far as to suggest that the absence of suicide in Arab political history is a symptom of such a refusal.[25]

And while the call for this kind of defiant, even destructive, vitalism is visible throughout his work, Ansari's understanding and treatment of tragedy are ultimately geared towards a resignation from the heroics of revolutionary eschatology: a sober

[21] Sadik J. al-Azm, *Self-Criticism after the Defeat* (London, 2011); Nils Riecken, "Relational Difference and the Grounds of Comparison: Abdallah Laroui's Critique of Centrism," *ReOrient* 2/1 (2016), 12–30.

[22] Ansari explicitly draws on this genre and quotes its founders. In *The Struggle of Opposites*, he cites al-ʿAẓm, *Naqd al-fikr al-dīnī*, 46–51.

[23] Ansari, *The Struggle of Opposites*, 589–92.

[24] Ibid., 589.

[25] Ibid., 591–2. Ansari's eventually explored the theme of suicide more fully specifically in its relationship to the "life of the mind." See Muḥammad ʿAbd al-Jabbār Anṣārī, *Intihār al-Muthaqqafīn al-ʿArab wa-Qaḍāyā Rāhina fī al-Thaqāfa al-ʿArabiyya* (Suicide of Arab Intellectuals and Contemporary Issues in Arab Culture) (Beirut, 1998).

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descent from the barricade and a purging of the self from the illusions of perpetual harmony among Arabs. The metaphysics of struggle (*ṣirāʿ*) in Ansari's work thus formed part of a broader political disposition that understood conflict to be historically generative, but that considered the proper locus of such conflict to be within the modern Arab subject, and between Arabs themselves, rather than their external foes alone.

For example, in questioning the prehistory and core texts of the Arab revolutionary nationalist tradition, Ansari was also working through the problem of inter-Arab solidarity and its future, given that tradition's historical failure to actualize the fraternity of Arab nations into a larger unity. Far from simply doing away with the pan-Arab aspirations of the mid-twentieth century, Ansari's intellectual project sublimated and redeployed them in forms he believed fit for a non-revolutionary age. Indeed, as I discuss below, Ansari's critical conceptual work on conciliation (*tawfīq*), indecision (*lā-ḥasm*), sovereignty (*ḥukm*), and kingship (*mulk*) fed into a more normative and prescriptive intellectual undertaking that aimed to convert the substance of Arab fraternity from a given of history, kin, and culture (a brotherhood of blood), to a feat that could be achieved only out of conflict and the embrace of division and antagonism (a brotherhood of history).[26]

Ansari thus launched his project not merely as a critique of religion, but as a critique of ideological and conceptual systems that he believed had sutured and concealed a reality of deep discord and loss, both between Arabs and within the modern Arab self or subject. Part of his project, then, was an attempt to turn the disarray of fraternal dispute into a prerequisite of solidarity, and to locate the sources of political rebirth by embracing not that which was readily shared among Arabs but, as I discuss below, their divisions. As Shruti Kapila, reading Alain Badiou, has argued, it is in that question of conflict and antagonism within the intimate domain of fraternal bonds that some of the most productive strands of a truly global intellectual history lie.[27] To rethink Ansari as a conservative within the canon of contemporary Arab thought is to recover the metaphysical underpinnings of his work, which he marshaled towards the possibilities of a decisive historical reckoning (*ḥasm tārīkhī*) with the revolutionary and reformist traditions of the past. This was also how he would rediagnose the problem of acrimony between Arabs from a problem of irreconcilable difference into one of excessive intimacy, where the positive potential of politics had curdled under the imperative to force a conciliation (*tawfīq)* between tradition and modernity, and between Arabs themselves.

Read as failures of fraternity, the manifold capitulations and geopolitical reversals of the 1990s—the 1991 Gulf War, the 1993 Oslo Accords, and the Algerian Civil War (1992–2002), to name but a few—made the decade an appropriate canvas on which to rethink the Arab "house." In this Ansari was not unique, but scholars of Arab thought

[26]"Revolutions by definition entail violence, a necessary part of revolutionary change." Ansari, *The Struggle of Opposites*, 545.

[27]Shruti Kapila, "Global Intellectual History and the Indian Political," in Samuel Moyn and Darrin McMahon, eds., *Rethinking Modern European Intellectual History* (Oxford, 2013), 253–74.

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have explicitly either downplayed or excised these conceptual and metaphysical underpinnings of his work, or preferred instead to evaluate its efficacy as another broadside against the Islamism of its time.[28]

Such a historiographical departure or reframing of Ansari's work is brought into even sharper relief when one considers Ansari's preoccupation with concepts of kingship and sovereignty as the conceptual locus of decisive authority (in the theoretical rather than the charismatic sense). It is no coincidence that monarchy, and specifically the figure of the sovereign ruler (*ḥākim*), featured in his work not as a political and historical threshold to be overcome on the road to freedom but as the abstract locus of the "truly" political—the embodiment of the Schmittian decision—that needed to be preserved as a bulwark against the antipolitical effects of contemporary Islamic law. In his work on the state, Ansari thus intellectualized the figure of the absolute monarch not nostalgically but as the conceptual replacement for popular revolution that indexed the moment of decisive departure from traditional attachments and the divine, and mediated the historical passage from feudalism towards modernity.[29] The sovereign thus represented a solution to the conceptual and historical problems on which his initial critique of conciliation turned.

Tawfīq as the spirit of Arab modernity

Ansari was born in Bahrain in 1939, then a British "protectorate," and educated in Beirut. His career spanned the era of radical Arab politics, from the 1960s through to the immediate post-Arab Spring period of counterrevolutionary consolidation after 2011, to which he lent his support.[30] Living in Beirut from the late 1960s almost continuously until 1979, when he completed his doctoral work, Ansari wrote from institutional settings at a distance from much of the violence that had beset the region. Barring his proximity to the Lebanese Civil War, he completed his doctoral thesis in the protective atmosphere of the American University of Beirut, under the supervision of Constantine Zureiq. Soon after, in the early 1980s, Ansari moved to Paris, where he was involved in the founding of the Institut du monde arabe. Only in the late 1980s,

[28]For example, Elizabeth Kassab notes, "I should raise the question about the adequacy of applying the Hegelian teleological model to our post-metaphysical world. For al-Ansari, the issue is that of harmonising the unitary nature of Islam with the dialectical principle of our current age. A better characterisation of this age in my opinion, is the differentiation of the various fields of life and knowledge … suggested by Weber." Kassab, *Contemporary Arab Thought*, 264. Similarly, Wald Abāh al-Sayyid and George Corm prefer to focus on either the sociological or the more polemical elements in Ansari's work broadly framed in liberal terms, the latter characterizing it as a "stirring call for individual liberty." See al-Sayyid, *Aʿlām al-fikr al-ʿArabī*, 150–57; Corm, *Arab Political Thought*, 245.

[29]There is a revival of interest in monarchy in the Arab world, specifically the interwar period of the Hashemite and Egyptian monarchical traditions, but also on modernizing mythos of the Moroccan monarchy. See Adam Mestyan, *Modern Arab Kingship: Remaking the Ottoman Political Order in the Interwar Middle East* (Princeton, 2023); Muhammad Tozy and Beatrice Hibou, *Tissier le temps politique au Maroc: Imaginaire de l'état a l'âge néoliberal* (Paris, 2020); Michael Herb, *All in the Family: Absolutism, Revolution, and Democracy in Middle Eastern Monarchies* (New York, 2016).

[30]Muḥammad Jābir al-Anṣārī, "Thalāth mulaḥaẓāt fī al-waḍʿ al-ʿArabī al-rāhin" (Three Observations on the Current Arab Situation), *al-Ayyām*, 14 July 2011; Anṣārī, "al-Malik ʿAbdallāh yasʿā li-taqaddum ḥaqīqī fī Jazīrat al-ʿArab" (King ʿAbdallāh Seeks Genuine Progress in the Arabian Peninsula), *al-Ayyām*, 6 Oct. 2011.

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when he returned to the Gulf to take up various professorships, did his writing begin more consistently to reach broader Arab audiences.

By the mid-1990s Ansari had published a rapid succession of widely read texts, such as *Islam and Arab Political Crisis: The Makings of a Chronic Condition*, *The Arabs and Politics: Where Lies the Fault?*, *The Suicide of Arab Intellectuals*, and *Revitalizing the Nahda through the Rediscovery and Criticism of the Self*.[31] These were central to his developing a broad readership that extended well beyond rarefied intellectual debate. But a sense of epochal change had precipitated the publication of Ansari's primary intellectual intervention published in 1996, the scale and ambition of which matched the sense that politics needed to be ontologically rethought against the "ideological" assumptions of previous eras. Thus, as ruling Arab elites worked to variously co-opt, include, suppress, and even eradicate the threat of popular Islamism to their authority in the mid- to late 1990s, a global Fukuyaman moment imposed a sense of ideological closure on the era of revolutionary change. Events in the Arab world consolidated that sense of epochal change. The end of the Lebanese Civil War in the early 1990s coincided with the rise of reformists in Iran soon after, namely the feted presidency of Muhammad Khatami, which sought a detente with Iran's Arab neighbors. Saddam Hussein's failed attempt to annex Kuwait helped to further discredit Baʿathism among Arab audiences and, through the resulting string of US military bases, led to the full securitization of the Persian Gulf region. This brought the Arab world firmly into the ambit of globalized neoliberal hegemony that made the monarchies of the Gulf, rather than the former Arab metropoles in the Levant and Egypt, the centers of regional gravity.

The sense of intellectual safety that Ansari enjoyed came from this particular political juncture in contemporary Arab history, in which the prospect of revolutionary change—Marxist, Islamist, or nationalist—seemed at its most distant in living memory, and whose intellectual atmosphere welcomed political thought that matched the era's sense that history itself had ended. And so, rather than labeling Ansari an advocate of a generic secular liberalism, I develop an alternative reading of his early work that advanced a philosophical understanding of the political realm as the space of conflict and antagonism from which political life could begin anew.[32]

In 1996 Ansari published his most important work, *Arab Thought and the Struggle of Opposites: How Conciliation Contained the Struggle between Fundamentalism and Secularism and the Deferred Decision between Islam and the West; A Diagnosis of the Condition of "Indecision" in Arab Life and the Conciliatory Containment of a Restricted Dialectic* (*al-Fikr al-ʿArabī wa-ṣirāʿ al-aḍdād*).[33] Rather than posing a frontal attack on

[31] Muḥammad Jābir al-Anṣārī, *al-Taʾazzum al-siyāsī ʿinda al-ʿArab wa-mawqif al-Islām: mukawwināt al-ḥāla al-muzmina* (Islam and Arab Political Crisis: The Components of a Chronic State) (Beirut, 1995); Anṣārī, *al-ʿArab wa-al-siyāsa: ʾayna al-khalal? judhūr al-ʿaṭal al-ʿamīq* (The Arabs and Politics: Where Is the Flaw? The Roots of Deep Inertia) (London, 2012); Anṣārī, *Intihār al-Muthaqqafīn al-ʿArab*; Muḥammad Jābir al-Anṣārī, *Tajdīd al-nahḍa bi-iktishāf al-dhāt wa-naqdihā* (Renewing the Nahda through the Discovery and Critique of the Self) (Beirut, 1992).

[32] Recent intellectual histories of contemporary Arab thought cite Ansari as an important contributor to these debates. See Kassab, *Contemporary Arab Thought*, 253–69; Corm, *Arab Political Thought*, 249–58.

[33] This text was originally Ansari's doctoral dissertation, completed in 1979.

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the "irrationality" of religious ideology in a disenchanted age, Ansari sought to critique the way the very foundations of politics, as the realm of conflicting antagonisms, had been lost or deliberately defused by the authors of modern Arab thought.[34] The disavowal of antagonism between tradition and modernity within the canons of modern Arab thought, however, could not have simply been a matter of failure on the part of secular thinkers. More than any author or school of thought, Ansari wished to identify and historicize the capacious form of deliberate reasoning (conciliatory thought) that had willfully invited religion into the conceptual, rhetorical, and discursive registers of Arab modernity.

The Struggle of Opposites combs through the canon of modern Arab political thought to show how the abiding concern of its authors had been to reconcile the secular with the sacred at the cost of the rupture that might have allowed for the development of an Arab modernity free of the need to protect itself from the loss of tradition, and therefore free of the need for a forced (and false) harmony that Ansari wished to uncover.[35] Rather than a particular historical juncture, Ansari lodges the modern conciliatory impulse across most of the modern era, beginning with the *nahḍa*—the nineteenth- and twentieth-century Arab literary and intellectual revival or "awakening"—through what he believed were the culminating nationalist projects of postcolonial Arab modernity, Nasserism and Baʿathism.[36]

Ansari had essentially written a political theology of how religious tropes were systematically protected in the conceptual development of modern Arab thought, especially in the traditions of revolutionary Arab nationalism. In such reconciled form, modern Arab political life had languished in a state of indecision (*lā-ḥasm*) premised on many of its canonical thinkers' conviction that the conflict between the sacred and the secular was not only unnecessary but compromised by its mimetic posture towards the West.

In terms slightly more faithful to Ansari's own terminology, *The Struggle of Opposites* is a critique of the metaphysics of Arab modernity centered around the problem of indecision between the binaries that had shaped its discourse. Ansari's animating principle of conciliation (*tawfīq*) revisits the "classics" of modern Arab thought to demonstrate their authors' excessive appeasement of culture and tradition, and how they adapted themselves to the received philosophical and juridical traditions of Islam,

[34]Quite aside from Schmitt, "the political" reemerged globally at roughly the same moment Arab thinkers such as Ansari theorized antagonism in their own contexts. Moyn discusses "the rise internationally of the notion of the political, in spite of the Schmittian precedent … traceable to events around 1980." Samuel Moyn, "Concepts of the Political in Twentieth-Century European Thought," in Jens Meierhenrich and Oliver Simons, eds., *Oxford Handbook to Carl Schmitt* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 291–311.

[35]For recent examples of how the debates of the late twentieth century have been revisited by intellectual historians revising the categories of tradition, modernity, and culture see Yasmeen Daifallah, "*Turath* as Critique: Hassan Hanafi on the Modern Arab Subject," in Hanssen and Weiss, *Arabic Thought against the Authoritarian Age*, 285–310; and Hosam Aboul-Ela, "The Specificities of Arab Thought: Morocco since the Liberal Age," in ibid., 143–62. Also see Ahmad Agbaria, *The Politics of Arab Authenticity* (New York, 2023), for a new account of perhaps the most controversial debate on the compatibility of tradition and modernity of that era between Syrian writer and philosopher George Tarabichi and Moroccan philosopher Muhammad Abed al-Jabiri.

[36]Ansari, *The Struggle of Opposites*.

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Christianity, and other transcendent forms of identification to compensate for the deficit they perceived in modernity's normative resources.[37] Rather than centering his critique on the cultural and sociological barriers to the uptake of democracy and secularism, as many Arab thinkers did at the time, Ansari set his sights on what he believed was the suspiciously *good* relationship between religion and politics, or tradition and modernity, in the corpus of modern Arab thought. That good relationship had culminated in the historical and normative success of a particular form of hesitant and faltering ecumenical thought: conciliation.[38]

Yet despite such an extensive critique, almost nowhere in *The Struggle of Opposites* is there any clear identification with secularism as a stand-alone value or secular social organization per se because Ansari is concerned less with how to secure the victory of secularism than with the critique of its neutralization, and by extension with the neutralization of worldly politics at large. This is what Ansari meant by indecision (*lā-ḥasm*). It is not the inability to decide between the worldly and the transcendent but rather the willful choice to evade it in the name of a presumed wholeness that conciliatory thought, in its overpowering aspiration, might deliver. In more than six hundred pages of text, Ansari's efforts are thus relentlessly geared toward exposing the vagaries of conciliatory thought, and rarely, if ever, toward exposing the pitfalls of religiosity or the blessings of secularism. More than any secular ideology, it was the metaphysical rupture in extant systems of thought wrought by reason, and the generative force of the antagonisms that such a rupture would unleash, that Ansari was theorizing the loss of in the Arab context.[39]

Ansari begins his history of modern conciliatory thought by recounting the earliest attempts at reconciling reason and revelation among nineteenth-century modernists such as Jamal al-Din al-Afghani, Muhammad Abduh, Rashid Rida, and Abd al-Rahman al-Kawakibi. Subsequent chapters focus variously on the nationalist, Shi'i, and Christian Arab political thought of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, then finally explore how conciliatory thought evolved within Ba'athism, Syrian Arab nationalism, and finally Nasserism. The critical thread that unites much of the text is a search for how close Arab thought comes to a true rupture with the ontological and normative conventions of religious doctrine or religion's reverberations in spiritualist and transcendentalist tendencies within Arab nationalism. Notably, Ansari identifies the interwar period as the point closest to that breach, as embodied in the work of

[37] See Peter Gordon, "Contesting Secularization: The Idea of a Normative Deficit of Modernity after Max Weber," in Philip G. Nord, Katja Guenther, and Max Weiss, eds., *Formations of Belief: Historical Approaches to Religion and the Secular* (Princeton, 2019), 184–201.

[38] Ansari explicitly spells out what he believes were the Western philosophical cognates of *tawfīq* in the history of Arab political thought as a choice between terms: "eclecticism," "(re-)conciliation," and "concord." I have continued to use "conciliation" in keeping with previous intellectual historians' use of the term, but also because Ansari considered it able to convey the intensity of the anxiety in modern Arab and Muslim thought around contradictions that needed to be overcome, rather than implying that they already had been, as "concord" or "eclecticism" might. See Ansari, *The Struggle of Opposites*, 104.

[39] For an overview of the theoretical literature on the relationship between the metaphysics of rupture and 'the political' in the work of Alain Badiou, Giorgio Agamben, Slavoj Žižek, Catherine Malabou, Joan Copjec, Jacques Racier, Kojin Karatani, and Lee Edelman, see Paul Eisenstein and Todd McGowan, *Rupture: On the Emergence of the Political* (Evanston, 2012).

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Marxists and left-leaning thinkers such as Mansur Fahmi, Ismail Mazhar, Farah Antun, Salama Musa, and Yaqub Sarruf.[40] In Ansari's periodization, that interwar moment was nonetheless soon eclipsed by revitalized and revanchist varieties of postwar conciliatory thought that fortified its progenitors' claims by deepening its philosophical basis.

The work of Muhammad Husayn Haykal, Mustafa Abd al-Raziq, Abbas al-Aqqad, and Ibrahim al-Labban, Ansari argues, represents late or neo-conciliatory thought (*tawfiqiyya mustajadda*) and effected a branching out of its early canon into particular avenues of argumentation. These tributaries include the "rediscovery" or reading back of rationality into Islam; the reinscription of rationalist philosophy into the Qur'anic text as originary rather than derivative of Greek philosophy; the accommodation of theology toward modern idealist philosophy; and the demonstration of the sharīʿa's compatibility with processes of civil legal codification and with modern scientific knowledge, most notably Darwinism.[41]

Ansari's criticism throughout the text varies in quality, often engaging in a rapid demonstration of logical fallacies. For example, Ansari critiques Abbas al-Aqqad for positing particular Qur'anic verses, interpretable as analogous to natural selection, as sufficient demonstration of noncontradiction, while ignoring evolutionary biology's severe implications for creationism at large. Similarly, Ansari criticizes Mustafa Abd al-Raziq's attempts to open a space for reason within modernist Islamic thought as equal rather than subordinate to faith by demonstrating how the prophetic tradition in Islam relied on reason (*sharīʿat al-ʿaql*, as Abd al-Raziq called it), *before* the prophet Muhammed received the revelation (*waḥy*). Again, Ansari argues that Abd al-Raziq's reasoning relies on evading the question whether the ontological nature of prophecy is radically different to that of the exercise of reason; their historical concurrence, Ansari argues, cannot stand in for their philosophical compatibility.

However, Ansari's objective here was to set up an intellectual history that the reader could recognize as more than a tendency or a trend, but as a normative anchor of Arab modernity at large. Moving through such widely ranging examples, Ansari demonstrates that as these tributary branches of thought developed, they solidified the broader enterprise of conciliatory thought, which by mid-century had matured to the extent that its practitioners could articulate and justify new amalgams such as an "Islamic secularism" by drawing on a conceptual vocabulary derived from the Qur'an and Islam's prophetic tradition and history.[42] To Ansari, the genesis of this modern canon of conciliation was neither really secular nor faithful to Islamic tradition, but was above all an ideology of non-conflict or forced harmony.[43] The result was an interlinking web of compromises between "religion and nationalism, sectarianism and nationalism, religious law and secularism, rationality and the

[40] Ansari, *The Struggle of Opposites*, 57.

[41] See ibid., 147–205, for a complete discussion of the evolution of conciliatory thinking during the intellectually rich interwar period in Egypt.

[42] Hisham Sharabi, *Arab Intellectuals and the West: The Formative Years, 1875–1914* (Baltimore, 1970), quoted in Ansari, *The Struggle of Opposites*, 259.

[43] This is how *tawfiq* becomes *al-tawfiqiyya*, in other words conciliatory thought acquires an "-ism" like any other ideology. See Ansari, *The Struggle of Opposites*, 101.

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mysticism that had made the historical settlement or synthesis between them near impossible."[44]

Far from being simply hostile, Ansari's critique of the history of conciliatory thought operates from the initial assumptions of its remarkable normative success, despite the unresolved contradictions he would go to great lengths to reveal within it. In that sense, Ansari's criticism unfolds with respect to some of the historically specific reasons why Islam and modernity had to be reconciled, such as the anticolonial struggles of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Conciliation thus represented more than just a wayward tradition of thought for Ansari. It was also a core normative plank of an era of Arab history (as represented in thought) that could only be superseded by first recognizing its remarkable normative sway.

This is why Ansari primarily used the terms "the conciliatory project" (*al-mashrūʿa al-tawfīqī*), "the conciliatory impulse" (*nazʿa tawfīqiyya*), and "the spirit of conciliation" (*rūḥ al-tawfīq*) to describe the object of his criticism. Such a capacious treatment of the intellectual canon of conciliatory thought allowed Ansari to view it as successful on its own terms, even if he saw it as a source of a broader crisis in Arab political history. This bifurcated comportment toward conciliatory thought as both a successful *and* an ill-fated project derived from Ansari's adoption of Hegel's dialectic equally as a source of a rational understanding of the world as it was—that is, in its reconciled form—and as a way to see the seeds of the present's own undoing through its irrepressible contradictions. In fact, he draws on Hegel's *Philosophy of History* to define conciliation itself, his primary object of criticism, as "an expression of the Spirit of those eras that Hegel described as 'periods of harmony, when the antithesis is in abeyance.'"[45]

Thus Ansari gave the concept of conciliation a history without reducing it to the plans, motives, or intentions of any one set of individuals. Handling conciliatory thought as a spirit or *Geist* of Arab modernity, he produced a critique of conciliation as a distinct and nominally successful historical and intellectual formation that continues to provide the Arab world with the philosophical and normative foundations for some of its most influential political currents. His task was to highlight the stability of conciliation as a particular form of thought across—even despite—a wide range of contexts in modern Arab history. *The Struggle of Opposites* leaves the reader with the impression that the ideological currency of conciliation across modern Arab thought is insidious not because it is deep and obscure but because it hides in plain sight. Moreover, such a vast ideological and intellectual project had serious material and historical manifestations.

For example, the Free Officers Revolution of 1952 occupies the final part of *The Struggle of Opposites*, and is treated as a culmination of how a century of conciliatory thought and practice manifests in the figure of President Gamal Abdul Nasser as its tragic hero. This shift in tenor and in subject matter from a history of thought toward more overt politics and the heroics of revolutionary leadership is Ansari's attempt to demonstrate, at the end of his long critique, how conciliatory thought had produced

[44]Ibid., 142–3.

[45]G. W. F. Hegel, *Philosophy of History*, trans. J. Sibree (Mineola, 1956), 27 n. 92, quoted in Ansari, *The Struggle of Opposites*, 142.

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"a revolution that was fundamentally nonrevolutionary."[46] To this effect Ansari states, "The movement of 23 July 1952 … was a conciliatory response [*istijāba tawfīqiyya*] to the call in the *Mashriq* [the Arab East] to avoid fragmentation and division … [Nasserism's] revolutionary nature lies in it being a freer, more agile and advanced form [*ṣiyāgha jadīda, mutatawwira, marinā*] of the theory of conciliation and its pacifying amalgams [*murakkabātihā al-taṣālūḥiyya*] that branch out into the political and social realms."[47]

In Ansari's reading, the Revolution of 1952 was above all an exercise in containment. Conciliation was more than just a mode of thought here; it was also the historical and political form that the conciliatory project took to avoid dangerous levels of potentially violent polarization and even civil war. Ansari reads a heightened anxiety in the intellectual and political landscape of the decade that preceded the revolution in 1952, observable in the split in Egyptian politics between a religious and fascist right and a socialist left as exemplified by Young Egypt, the Muslim Brotherhood, and the Egyptian Communist Party. Nasserism's "historic conciliatory role" was to draw on the deep well of normative and affective values (*qiyam shuʿūriyya*) that conciliatory thought had by then firmly established in Egyptian society and that prioritized the reinstitution of a stabilizing ecumenical ideology of "nonalignment" that shied away from any decisive political and historical orientation in favor of retaining the ability to represent both Islam and secular pan-Arabism, both socialism and nationalism, in its ideological thrust.

In this way Ansari presents the revolution as incapable of repeating the decisive political orientation he reads in the Russian and Chinese revolutionary events of 1917 and 1949 respectively. Rather, the Free Officers Movement, unable to commit other than to a moderating or stabilizing role (*tawfīqī wasaṭī*), found its *raison d'être* in channeling the political energy of a religious right and a socialist left toward a reconstituted and reinvented center that absorbed the dangers of polarization—*yastawʿib khaṭar al-inshiṭār*—even as it fulfilled that role in innovative ways. This is how Ansari reads 1952 as "a *revolution in conciliation* … rather than a revolt against it."[48]

Tawfīqiyya versus *jadaliyyah*

Rather than the historical accuracy of Ansari's critical treatment of this intellectual and political history, which is debatable and lies beyond the scope of this article, it is the nature of what Ansari meant by "conciliation" (*tawfīq*), or "conciliation-ism" (*al-tawfīqiyya*), in philosophical terms, that I wish to highlight here. For behind Ansari's criticism lay an idealized notion of antagonism, or political conflict as an engine of history, that draws on Hegel to highlight precisely how, in contrast to the dialectic (*al-jadaliyyah*), the practice of conciliatory thought restricts historically transformative conflict even as it pays lip service to the process of modernization.

[46]Sadiq Jalal al-Azm declares the Arab radical tradition nonrevolutionary (*ghayr-thawri*), as quoted in Ansari, *The Struggle of Opposites*, 598.

[47]Ansari, *The Struggle of Opposites*, 496–7.

[48]Ibid., 497, added emphasis.

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Although Ansari was not a scholar of Hegel, he had nonetheless found in the dialectic a method of highlighting the persistence of metaphysical contradictions within Arab political thinkers' very efforts to resolve those contradictions. Ansari's affinity with Hegel here is structural: the dialectic acts as the yardstick by which conciliation (*tawfīq*) is measured as a practice of synthesizing opposing concepts. Unlike the dialectic, Ansari argued, the tradition of conciliation in Arabic deployed an idiom of resolution in a way that suppressed historical and epistemological change even when it professed to pursue it. At the core of Ansari's philosophical critique of conciliation lay the claim that those engaged in the practice of conciliatory thought generated conceptual amalgams and composites by assuming the essential, noncontradictory substance of the categories they worked with. This prerequisite of conciliation, as Ansari defines it—drawing from Aristotle's principle of noncontradiction—ensured that concepts such as nation, reason, or natural selection did not intrude excessively on prevailing understandings of God, revelation, creation, and prophecy.[49]

It is in this key, pertaining to the ontological stability of religious conceptions of the divine, that Ansari's critique becomes more extensive and moves beyond the demonstration of logical fallacy. One of Ansari's primary examples is Syrian Arab nationalist thinker Antun Saadeh's concept of *madrūhiyya*—a literal combination of the Arabic terms for materialism (*madda*) and spirit (*rūḥ*)—by which Saadeh turns the choice between the material and the spiritual into an opportunity to express them as dual prerequisites for his theory of Syrian Arab nationalism.[50] In so doing, according to Ansari, Saadeh explicitly "rejects the conflict between the principle of materialism and the noumenal or spiritual" to provide an archetypal conciliatory alternative that "trades in dialectical conflict for conciliatory appeasement."

Here Ansari is not advocating atheism but is rather concerned with a form of thought that assumes the a priori reconcilability of reason and spiritualism without acknowledging the conflict and anxiety (*tawattur*) inherent in a "godless" modern world *that might thereby generate* new synthetic forms of secular or spiritually inclined thought. The critical difference for Ansari was that modern neo-religious thought, such as conciliation, even when disavowing secularism, must nonetheless emerge in admittance of an intolerable existential anxiety induced by modernity, which he exemplifies in the work of Søren Kierkegaard, for it to carry the mark of genuine synthesis as opposed to forced and ersatz combinations. Crucially, Ansari's critique relies on a fundamental distinction between conciliation and the dialectic as two fundamentally dissimilar procedures that nonetheless share a superficial resemblance in their synthesizing role. Distinguishing them fundamentally for Ansari, however, was that the dialectic not only accepts conflict and antagonism but admits the contradictions inherent within things themselves rather than simply between them, thereby forming a system founded on the imminent self-division that maintains conditions of constant conflict.[51] The following, for example, is typical of how Ansari describes the relationship of conciliation to the dialectic: "Conciliation affirms with the dialectic the final

[49]Ibid., 595.

[50]Ibid., 445–51.

[51]Ibid., 600.

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unity between things without similarly upholding the reality of conflict [*ṣirāʿ*] … It joins the dialectic in its final phase, the negation of negation, but does not join the dialectic in the conviction—in principle—of inherent contradiction in the nature of things."[52]

Conciliation, on the other hand, does not allow for inherent contradiction, especially for notions of the divine, and thus stems conflict between oppositions. Instead it relies on other, nondialectical, modes of reasoning, such as Tawfiq al Hakim's notion of equivalence (*taʿdūliyya*), which Ansari states "only admit conflict insofar as the overall aim is to restore a permanent balance, but does not admit the continuation of conflict for the synthesis of new unities." Such modes of thought "retain extant dualisms or oppositions in a state of interminable equivalence," even when they admit opposition "in a permanent Manichean struggle, rather than transcend them."[53]

Once systematized as a hegemonic discourse of accommodation toward such unitary revealed or transcendental truths, *The Struggle of Opposites* becomes a saga of diffused conflict and a theory of how social and political stability is secured during disruptive periods of transition, akin to Reinhart Koselleck's notion of *Sattelzeit*, or saddle-time.[54] The primary target of critique here is such a spirit of stabilization. Describing such a forced harmony, Ansari states,

> The zeitgeist of conciliation that infuses Arab thought expresses itself in terms of balance [*taʿdūliyya*] and is tinged with dialectical thought that ensures the spectacle of struggle between opposing forces but accepts a degree of conflict [*ṣirāʿa*] only insofar as it serves the restoration of that very same sense of balance rather than the continuation of struggle that leads to the victory of one force over another and that allows for the emergence of a new force that transcends older oppositions.[55]

Once we think of *The Struggle of Opposites* as a call for rupture with the past, and with the forms that religious thought takes when subjected to the imperatives of conciliation, it becomes clear that the text is not so much a prescriptive liberal or secular tome as it is a history and theory of the absorption and neutralization that sheared modernity of its disruptive capacity in the name of compromise with tradition. A call for rupture between religious tradition and secular modernity as Ansari saw it might easily be mistaken for a radical position. But the drama of conceptual opposition that Ansari sets up in *The Struggle of Opposites* is the basis of a far more conservative vision of political change—not altogether unsurprising given that clashing binaries or oppositions carry the signature of conservative thinkers across the modern Western intellectual canon, from Leo Strauss's conflict of Athens and Jerusalem, to Michael Oakeshott's civil-versus-enterprise association, to, most famously, Carl Schmitt's friend–enemy distinction.[56]

[52]Ibid., 142.

[53]Ibid., 600.

[54]Reinhart Koselleck, *The Practice of Conceptual History: Timing History, Spacing Concepts*, trans. Todd Samuel Presner et al. (Stanford, 2002), 4–6.

[55]Ansari, *The Struggle of Opposites*, 487.

[56]Perry Anderson, *Spectrum: From Right to Left in the World of Ideas* (London and New York, 2007), 27.

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Rupture as a conservative trope

In his mid-1990s context, Ansari had elaborated a theory of agonism and conflict as an engine of history just as so much ink was being spilled on the question of how to harmonize religion and politics in the Middle East in the heyday of a now globalized liberalism.[57] Ansari had not been concerned with the innate irreconcilability of Islam with modernity; he was much more troubled with the quality of its relationship with secular thought, mainly nationalism. For an antagonistic relationship to be so easily reconciled and conflicting politics sedated by conciliatory ideology was tantamount to deceiving history itself. Indeed, it was this concern with the history of neutralization and absorption of politics (in this case by religion) that might make particularly apt a comparison with Carl Schmitt's suspicion of liberalism as an evasion of conflict. Ansari summarized the spirit of conciliation in Arab thought thus:

> Conciliatory views that by nature evade conflict and ignore its demands and exactions may not be the most appropriate to such eras of transition … [Conciliatory ideas'] moderated positions in conflictual entanglements of the new and the old equalize both positions or create a false equivalent between the two, without coming to terms with a conclusive result in which the new may take precedence over the received, which is a requirement for historical and cultural movement in new directions.[58]

Although Ansari does not directly reference Schmitt, such an ontology of conflict or antagonistic enmity is central to understanding Ansari as a conservative. For Schmitt, the loss of conflict as encapsulated in the friend–enemy distinction also constituted the loss of the basic premise of politics and all that which could be considered political.[59] Indeed, although Ansari allowed for the dialectical synthesis that emerges from conflict, his philosophical and critical emphasis in *The Struggle of Opposites* is an extended argument for antagonism as the basis of the political and a critique of the utopian illusion that thought could creatively do away with conflict. While Ansari and Schmitt shared a concern with the decision, or the idea that a decisive act could ground sovereignty in the political realm and save it from dilution by morality, they arrived at it from different directions. Schmitt's *Political Theology* famously analogized the sovereign decision to the religious miracle, tethering politics to the religious past. Ansari, on the other hand, developed a reverse political theology, exploring a missing rupture with tradition.

In the corpus of Western political thought, Schmitt's *Political Romanticism* perhaps most closely resembles this form of criticism; Schmitt states that "at the root of the romantic sublimity is the inability to decide … In other words, it is the way out of the either–or." Schmitt's most ardent accusation against political romanticism was its desire to interpret events or outcomes opportunistically, not as having discrete and rational causes but as occasions for the irrational, the poetic, and the transcendental to intrude

[57]For examples see Katerina Delacoura, *Islam, Liberalism, and Human Rights* (London, 1998); Augustus Richard Norton, *Civil Society in the Middle East* (Leiden, 1995).

[58]Ansari, *The Struggle of Opposites*, 597.

[59]Carl Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political* (Chicago, 1996).

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into one's interpretive capacities. In other words, romanticism inhibits our ability to comprehend reality through wilful abandonment of reason, rendering conflicts merely occasions to abandon the responsibility to choose, and to reinstate the transcendental, irrational, and poetic in recompense for disenchantment.[60] Ansari's analysis of conciliation outlined above echoes precisely the capricious and escapist qualities that Schmitt identified with political romanticism.[61]

How would these philosophical foundations manifest themselves in an era that Ansari felt demanded real-world solutions to the problem posed by religious authority? After all, this was the heyday of transnational Islamist movements that took their cues from a fundamental distrust of the postcolonial era's politics and the very conception of the territorial nation-state on which it was premised. *The Struggle of Opposites* was conceived and written in the 1970s, but it laid the groundwork for Ansari's later texts on the antipolitical nature of Islamism in the 1990s, which were much more explicitly concerned with securing the space of politics and the political from its theological "competitors." In those texts his inherent decisionism would manifest in much stronger ways.[62]

"Decisionist" authority in the age of Islamic law

Ansari's critique of Islamist thought was, like all his work, not entirely a direct critique of religious thought but was, like Schmitt's, premised on the dilution of political authority and its reduction to legal processes and procedures. In fact, Ansari would base his critique of Islamist conceptions of sovereignty on its inherent proceduralism, or a legalism which had taken leave of the centrality of the sovereign decision in the Schmittian sense—and by extension the realm of the political.[63] In the midst of widespread Islamist militancy and nonviolent bids for power at their peak across the Arab world, from Algeria and Egypt to Saudi Arabia, and a concerted period of unrest led by Islamist groups even in his native Bahrain, Ansari's political theology of conciliation was also a veiled justification for preventing the prevailing order from descending into religious violence by decoupling political order from religious precepts. While Ansari's earlier work had traced the political theology of the conflict between the secular and the sacred, his later work would fixate on secular justifications of order that he deemed lacking. The "ideology of indecision" (*īdiyūlūjiyyat al-lā-ḥasm*) that Ansari had theorized in *The Struggle of Opposites* was also a "decisionist" statement on the problem

[60]Carl Schmitt, *Political Romanticism*, trans. Guy Oakes (Cambridge, MA, 1986), 117, 76–83.

[61]In *Arab Political Thought*, George Corm was the first to identify Ansari's critique of conciliation as essentially a critique of the romantic or romanticist spirit in the history of Arab political thought.

[62]An example of the competition between the political and the theological in the history of conservative political thought is Leo Strauss's politico-theological problem. Daniel Tanguay, *Leo Strauss: An Intellectual Biography*, trans. Christopher Nadon (New Haven, 2007). For a more explicit discussion of this conceptual problem see Heinrich Meier, *Carl Schmitt and Leo Strauss: The Hidden Dialogue* (Chicago, 1995).

[63]For a historical overview of Islamism's suspicion of the state and the problem of "legalism" in relation to sovereignty see Faisal Devji, "A Caliphate beyond Politics: The Sovereignty of ISIS," in A. Azfar Moin and Alan Strathern, eds., *Sacred Kingship in World History: Between Immanence and Transcendence* (New York, 2022), 299–322.

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of sovereignty.[64] Decisionism is expressed most regularly in Ansari's work through the opposition he sets up between *ḥasm*, in a sense of historical reckoning, historical settlement, or a parting of paths, and its opposite in *tawfīq*, or ersatz ecumenicism and conciliation. Ansari thus critiqued indecision—*lā-ḥasm*—as an evasion of sovereignty and of the agency that politics promises.

In 1995 Ansari published *Islam and the Arab Predicament*, in which he discusses the problem of defining sovereignty by navigating the theological, juridical, and ethical semantic valences of the term "rule" (*ḥukm*).[65] Contrasting *ḥukm* with "command" (*amr*), Ansari distinguishes worldly powers of kingship from the adjudicative valence of *ḥukm*, or rulership, in the political lexicon of Islamic philosophy and theology. The explicit target of the essay was the Islamist injunction for sovereignty to be a matter reserved for the judgment of God alone (*al-ḥākimiyya li-llāh*). Ansari develops a critique of the notion's primary theorist, founder of the Jamaat-e-Islami, Abul A'la Maududi. In short, Ansari argues, the Qur'an does not provide a serious theoretical basis for worldly sovereignty rooted in religious law, nor does it recognize the necessity of authority in human affairs as a matter for the faithful to decide collectively. In this critique Ansari spells out the stakes involved in the choice between what he saw as a necessarily distinct realm of political sovereignty associated with kingship (*amr* and *mulk*), on the one hand, and the deferral of that sovereignty to the legal realm of Muslim jurists, and by extension to the eventual judgment of God, on the other.

By endorsing such a deferral to the divine, Ansari claimed, contemporary Islamists had excised humans' ability to exercise a sense of agency over their worldly affairs, and could therefore never be truly sovereign. Islamists' suspicions of profane power, especially that of the state, had thus resulted in the suspension of sovereign authority, replacing it with divine law that only acted as a deferral of true sovereignty. The sovereignty inherent in the *event* of the decision had been ceded to the *process* of adjudication.[66] This is how sovereignty and its opposite, legal adjudication, imply the decisiveness (*ḥasm*) and adjournment (*taʾjīl*), respectively, in Ansari's critique. This deferral to divine law, Ansari claimed, was the source of the immense sense of crisis that had beset Arab politics, which could only be remedied through an honest reappraisal of religion's ability to provide solutions to the problem of political authority in modernity. Indecision (*lā-ḥasm*) was more than equivocation and ecumenicism. It was the constitutive material of a false intimacy, or what he called *talfīq*—a forgery that marries the moral and the political, reason and revelation, nationalism and Islam—that Ansari found so troubling for its evasion of generative conflict under the imperative to harmonize Islam and modernity.

Therefore Ansari's critique of the antipolitical effects of legalism inherent in *ḥākimiyya*, or Maududi's reservation of sovereignty for God alone, was also an attempt to recover a more worldly notion of sovereignty by revisiting the context in which the notions of kingship and statehood (*imāra* and *dawla*) were ceded to jurists such as Maududi and then reworked into Arabic. Indeed, Ansari argues that the transmission

[64] Ansari, *The Struggle of Opposites*, 19.

[65] Anṣārī, *Al-taʾazzum*, 145–70.

[66] Ibid., 154. A concise interpretation of this critique can be found in Devji, "A Caliphate beyond Politics."

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of such a conception of divine sovereignty relied largely on the Egyptian scholar and theorist Sayyid Qutb, who had abstracted Maududi's concept of *ḥākimiyya* from the colonial context in which it was first elaborated. So, while *ḥākimiyya* might have made sense in colonial India, amid Muslims' attempt to insulate themselves from Hindu majoritarianism by protecting sovereignty from the colonial state, Ansari argued, its semantic valence was contradictory in the Arab world, where there was no similar threat. *Ḥākimiyya* was a dangerous concept because it had severed the link to all authority as manifest in the figure of a king or sultan (*amīr*), leaving contemporary Islamists without a coherent theory of worldly rulership.[67] Ansari was articulating not a simple monarchism but a conceptual history of how worldly sovereignty, symbolized in the *figure* of a ruler, had been lost to the figure of the jurist.

Yet to concretize his criticism of the theological and legal languages that militated against profane or worldly political authority, Ansari turned to the contemporary Arab nation-state, and its ability to govern and protect territory effectively as the most realistic route towards detranscendentalizing the language of politics. The nation-state was a historically decisive political form for Ansari because it was the vehicle through which the contemporary Arab subject's relationship to authority could be reorganized from transcendental to more immanent.[68] In identifying the existing nation-state (*al-dawla al-qiṭriyya*) as the preferred site of such a reordering of politics, Ansari was also dismissing the basic premise of both revolutionary nationalist and Islamist conceptions of unity and the connecting substance of those forms of solidarity as culturally inherited rather than historically forged.

To Ansari these were but expressions of the conciliatory spirit that had attempted to hastily alter a reality of fragmented or territorially dispersed institutional and political entities for a utopian fantasy of national unity (*luḥma waṭaniyya*), such as the United Arab Republic (1958–61). Modern Muslim thinkers' disinterest or unwillingness to territorialize their understanding of the Muslim commonwealth (*umma*) was similarly misguided.[69] To Ansari, the contemporary *umma* was, in contrast to the nation-state, a pure idea that followed Muslims wherever they lived without fusing (*iltiḥām*) to a fixed territorial demarcation of itself. While fully cognizant of the power of such an abstraction, Ansari took issue not with the desire for transnational Muslim solidarity but with its lack of symbolic ownership over *a land*.[70] Somewhat echoing his critique of conciliatory thought, he argued that the spatial dimensions of the *umma* expanded and shrank along with the historical fortunes of Muslims, thus limiting their ability to institutionally and historically actualize such a fluid, almost oceanic, understanding of belonging.[71]

[67] Anṣārī on Maududi in *al-Taʾazzum*, 165.

[68] Egyptian psychoanalyst Mustapha Safouan's account of such a reorganization of the Arab relationship to authority is a recent example of this debate that has had several prior iterations in contemporary Arab thought. See Mustapha Safouan, *Why the Arabs Are Not Free: The Politics of Writing* (Malden, 2007).

[69] Faisal Devji, *Muslim Zion: Pakistan as a Political Idea* (London, 2013).

[70] Shruti Kapila discusses the problem of symbolic ownership of a spatialized conception of India in the political thought of Vinayak Savarkar, the founding ideologue of the right-wing Hindutva nationalism. See Shruti Kapila, *Violent Fraternity: Indian Political Thought in the Global Age* (Princeton, 2021), 89–130.

[71] Anṣārī, *Al-ʿArab wa-al-siyāsa*, 232–6.

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These critiques prefigure Ansari's work on the nation-state, to which I turn below as his attempt to think through the problem of how to terminate and rethink the recurring appeal (*kasr al-ḥalāqa*) to supranational, religious, or civilizational tropes as the basis of any broader Arab political project. Moreover, any such future project had to be built out of a decisive historical reckoning (*ḥasm*), with the sobering realities of a fragmented and dispersed collection of Arab nation-states as the principal agent of such a future. In the final part of this article, I turn to these writings because they are where Ansari's conservatism emerges most clearly—and where Ansari sought to provide a "non-conciliatory" alternative to the traditions of thought that he had been critical of in the past, albeit appropriately chastened of any appeal to divine or romantic tropes. Moreover, such a conservative position is most accurately understood as a form of quietism: an apology for the extant arrangement of powers in the Arab world as historically indispensable to any viable political future regardless of the democratic or authoritarian nature of such states today. In short, this was Ansari's attempt to produce a theory of *raison d'état* for the contemporary Arab world.

Universal feudalism and the reforging of Arab fraternity

In an era marked by transnational religious movements that threatened the integrity of the nation-state, Ansari needed a theory of gradualism premised on the idea that the political allegiance of the contemporary Arab subject could not be assumed but had to be built over long stretches of time. He did that by rendering the present a delayed premodern past, or a "missing" feudal phase of Arab history, in which political, military, economic, and symbolic layers of statecraft could fuse and cohere around the imperative of governing effectively, thereby generating the conditions conducive to allegiances that were not shared or legitimized by conciliatory appeals to religion or an illusive "Arab nation." His last major project, *Takwīn al-ʿArab al-siyāsī wa maghza al-dawla al-qiṭriyya: madkhal ilā iʿādat fahm al-wāqiʿ al-ʿArabī* (Arab Political Development and the Aims of the Nation-State: Towards a New Understanding of the Arab Condition), schematized and spatialized the institutional conditions from which the state could overcome both the legacies of revolutionary nationalism and contemporary transnational religious movements.[72]

Unlike the canon of Western conservative thinkers such as Strauss, Oakeshott, or Hayek, for whom the state shrank in the name of liberty, Ansari argued for a robust, institutionally expansive state whose task was deliverance from the excesses of civil war or revolution, coinciding with the peak of the Islamist challenge to the nation-state in the Arab world. In fact, Ansari's defense of the contemporary Arab nation-state in the face of its theological and theocratic opponents was premised on his reading of contemporary Arab history as a condition approximating a civil war between competing conceptions of belonging and a legacy of the long history of indecision, or failed reconciliation, between political and theological systems of normative legitimation.[73]

As civil wars and violent confrontations with the state emerged in Algeria, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Yemen, Iraq, Sudan, and his native Bahrain in the mid-1990s, Ansari's

[72] Anṣārī, *Takwīn al-ʿArab al-Siyāsī*, 45.

[73] Anṣārī, *Al-ʿArab wa-al-Siyāsa*, 90.

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ideas were premised on an absence of authority that he not only saw in the present but also read deep into the Arab past. The proliferating transnational and bifurcated allegiances (*izdiwājiyyat al-walāʾ*) that characterized both everyday Islamist political mobilization and more militant currents of that era occasioned Ansari's most sustained theoretical case for protecting the integrity of the state against its would-be opponents.

In this work, Ansari argued that the extant conditions of fragmentation, division, and precarity that beset almost all Arab states necessitated their preservation in their current form as preconditions to their institutional maturation as stable territorial nation-states. Only then, when Arab nation-states could command the willing allegiance of their subjects rather than compete for it with shifting religious or any other form of sociopolitical organization, could the bonds that formed the substance of Arab solidarity be reimagined and reforged.[74] The result was one of the most elaborate theoretical justifications for the historic role of absolutism in Arabic from that era, and certainly the most explicit one written in the monarchical context from which Ansari worked, as the dynastic states of the Gulf region began shedding their reliance on legitimation by religious authorities after the 1991 Persian Gulf War.[75]

To Ansari, the normative and institutional bases of stable and hegemonic state authority were historical processes that first occurred in the European Middle Ages through the socio-institutional integration that marked European and Japanese feudalism. Moreover, by lavishing such considerable attention on European feudalism's Asian cognate, Japanese feudalism, Ansari implied a universal relevance for feudalism that detached it from any culture or creed. Disparate feudal holdings, Ansari argued, were the prerequisite for the development of a mature state (*dawla nāḍija*), which would then birth an institutionally elaborate absolutist nation-state in the eighteenth century. Although highly selective and methodologically problematic, this historical and sociological tract cascades into a set of conclusions around the current state of affairs in the Arab world.

Following a sharp critique of Arab Marxist historiography, Ansari attempts to refute the historical existence of any kind of "Arab feudalism."[76] He argues that various eras dominated by nomadic, Seljuk, Ottoman, and other dynastic states prevented the development of small polities capable of integrating the local military, economic, political, cultural, and social structures that were the signature of Europe's feudal era. Instead, fragmentation and disintegration of political authority were only compounded by vast desert landscapes prone to centrifugal rather than centripetal patterns of settlement and accumulation. In the cumulative organicist imaginary at work here, institutional and political integration at humbler local scales eventually grew from feudal into larger national entities.[77]

[74] Anṣārī, *Takwīn al-ʿArab al-Siyāsī*, 91.

[75] Rosie Bsheer, *Archive Wars: The Politics of History in Saudi Arabia* (Stanford, 2020), 19–29.

[76] Anṣārī, *Takwīn al-ʿArab al-Siyāsī*, 134–7, 139–46.

[77] Ansari devotes considerable time to refuting any kinship between tax farming under the Mamelukes, for example, on the one hand and European feudalism in France and Germany on the other. While the former was militaristic, exploitative, and prone to unstable lines of succession, in his reading, the latter consolidated and systematized property ownership, generated permanent institutional systems to mediate between lord

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In such a phase, division and fragmentation are not just goods in themselves; they belie the autonomy and by implication the sovereignty of a state that takes priority over its amalgamation into a larger whole. A European feudal holding, which Ansari likens to the contemporary nation-states of the Arab world, was autonomous in its ability to wage war, grow an economy, conduct foreign policy, and levy taxes. Its instrumental logic was unquestionable, and certainly not easily captured by the interests of a constituency. Here there was no difference between the appropriative and the sovereign aspects of titular lordship over land and its administrative and managerial roles. Sovereignty had meant to be all-encompassing or pervasive, a principle for which Ansari quotes the feudal French law of *nulle terre sans seigneur*, or "no land without a lord." In play throughout Ansari's polemic was this autonomy, which implied the victory of the political over the social, and of institutional state continuity over the possible predations of church, sect, regime, creed, or caste.[78]

While he was careful to rely on the work of important Arab political theorists, and social scientists such as the sociologists Ali al-Wardi and Burhan Ghalioun, Ansari's ideas around the centrality of a feudal "phase" that precedes a modern institutional nation-state are drawn mostly from European and particularly American medievalist historiography.[79] Indeed, the intellectual origins of Ansari's thought, even as he makes consistent reference to modern and medieval Arabic sources, are also firmly rooted in a particular scholarly tradition of medieval historiography appropriated to serve ideological needs of modernization theory.[80] Crucially, the core evidentiary base and causal link that connects, for example, the modern state of France to its feudal past is drawn primarily from the work of a single, if influential, American medievalist, Joseph Strayer.[81] While Strayer represents an earlier, now somewhat dated, phase in American medievalist scholarship, his work has been particularly useful for conservative appropriation in the context of the War on Terror and specifically the arguments justifying the killing of non-state actors, or partisans operating in the absence of state authority—precisely the conceptual problem around which Ansari initiates his argument on sovereignty.[82]

Rather than contradicting such readings of history, I merely highlight them as origins of an eventual counterrevolutionary argument Ansari makes towards preserving the status quo in the Arab world. As the region experienced a protracted period of militancy and unrest in the 1990s, the state became a *katechon* that Ansari imagined as the only restraining force capable of preventing civil strife.[83] His was an extended

and vassal, and presaged a stable absolutist order and eventually a thriving capitalism. Anṣārī, *Takwīn al-ʿArab al-Siyāsī*, 149–50.

[78]Ibid., 159, 168.

[79]Ansari draws consistently from the work of Abdallah Laroui on the state, synthesizing Laroui's insights in service of his argument. Specifically, see Abdallah Laroui, *Mafhūm al-Dawla* (The Concept of the State) (Beirut, 1988).

[80]Bruce Holsinger, "Medievalization Theory: From Tocqueville to the Cold War," *American Literary History* 22/4 (2010), 893–912, at 895–7.

[81]Anṣārī, *Takwīn al-ʿArab al-siyāsī*, 156–60.

[82]Holsinger, "Medievalization Theory."

[83]Anṣārī, *Takwīn al-ʿArab al-siyāsī*, 73.

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argument for an evolutionist trajectory of slow modernization articulated explicitly against its rapid revolutionary opposite.

Yet modernization does not capture the valence or the implications of Ansari's work on the state here. The clue to an alternative, and in my estimation more accurate, reading of this work is the historical trajectory towards unification (in the pan-Arabist sense) that undergirds his text *Takwīn al-ʿArab al-siyāsī*, despite his harsh criticism of the pan-Arab tradition. For Ansari the violent division and instability that beset the contemporary Arab world are not incidental or accidental, but rather crucial and formative, because territorial division was a necessary precondition of solidarity.[84] Indeed, such a sense of unity was a vestige of Ansari's political inclinations as a pan-Arab nationalist, and is likely an intellectualized reaction to the military and ideological failures of the pan-Arab nationalist movement. And while, like Schmitt, he does not provide a theory of nationalism, he also appears to have yielded to its myths.[85] For if Ansari had a theory of nationalism at all, it was premised on the conservative notion of the relative exclusivity of the subject's allegiances to a territorial nation-state both as an achievement of history and as an undisputable good. In other words, the imperative for contemporary nation-states to command the sole allegiance of their subjects—rather than compete for it with theology or any other supranational identification—was not only desirable, but also the most plausible path towards solidarity among Arabs. In that sense, the "feudal" Arab present in Ansari's reading is best understood as a historical phase in which the long tradition of conciliatory thought could finally be brought to an end and in which a more realistic receptacle of the modern Arab subject's allegiances is recognized in the form of the contemporary nation-state.

While his reading of the European past as a blueprint for such a process was both problematic and selective, Ansari was nonetheless forthright in placing division and violence at the heart of Europe's history of modernization, despite the regular elision of violence in triumphalist varieties of that narrative. In fact, it was the ability of a given nation-state to wage war successfully that Ansari posited, among other capacities, as an index of its historical maturity as a truly sovereign entity, and therefore of its ability to command the allegiance of its subjects.[86] Thus, despite its somewhat hasty appropriation, this was a less rarefied vision of the European past than it might initially seem. Once the strict separation of his historical examples from his contemporary arguments is relaxed, we can see how they meld into a particular vision of sovereignty premised on an ideal of competing, albeit institutionally robust, states freed of the imperative towards feigned fraternal harmony that lie at the core of his earlier critique of conciliation. Ansari's polemical statement that the Arab world is currently in the midst of a "delayed feudal phase" was not a pejorative statement on the region's backwardness,[87] but a way to reimagine the free play of antagonism, or history freed of the conciliatory impulse.

[84]Muḥammad Jābir al-Anṣārī, "Al-Dawla al-Waṭaniyya: Firaq al-Tawḥīd? Ruʾā Tārīkhiyya wa-Ijtimāʿiyya Mawjūda" (The Nation-State: Division or Unification? Actually Existing Historical and Social Perspectives), in Anṣārī, *Takwīn al-ʿArab al-Siyāsī*, 105–26.

[85]Moyn, "Concepts of the Political," 296.

[86]Anṣārī, *Takwīn al-ʿArab al-siyāsī*, 189.

[87]Ibid., 130.

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It was the "feuding" nature of the contemporary Arab world that Ansari understood as a necessary condition not only of the formal integration of the state apparatus in the procedural and institutional sense but also of the process through which the allegiances of the modern Arab subject were galvanized and soldered into powerful patriotisms.[88] The deployment of feudalism as a category of criticism was thus how Ansari attempted to resolve two dimensions of politics at once: one related to the problem of how to detranscendentalize the language of legitimation of the modern state, and another of how to secure the allegiance or attachments of citizens and subjects.[89] Moreover, any such patriotic attachment could never be assumed but must be forged in processes of historical confrontation for survival.

Revolutionary Islamist or nationalist calls towards unification and democracy, Ansari argued, could never take root without the existence of such a state or the political subject that that might engender; indeed, it was the reforms and violent wars of the absolutist states in France and Russia that made the subsequent revolutions in those countries so historically productive and generated the substance of fraternal citizenship. "The Arab state," speaking abstractly, "cannot yet withstand democratic pluralism," for such a plurality of allegiances within the Arab polity inevitably descend into a state of "civil war."[90]

This was an abstracted idea of institutional statehood that survives despite those in command of it precisely because of the accumulation of historical and institutional layers as well as strong fraternal attachments that make it impervious to the impulses of militants or revolutionaries.[91] His logic was that it is only after such a state takes root—a process that was more often violent than not—that supranational thinking becomes plausible. Because Ansari believed that the Arab world had experienced this sequence in reverse, his central anxiety around transnational religious allegiances or revolutionary nationalisms had thus become inextricably linked to the prospect of civil war. Indeed, it is precisely at this juncture, only a few years after the collapse of communism, that comparative study of revolution "declined rapidly even as the study of … civil war boomed."[92] Conflating the two in an age of Islamic militancy and the collapse of socialism and was no mere coincidence for Ansari; indeed, that very conflation marks his theory of statehood as a caution against revolution not only in itself but as a euphemism for civil war.

[88]Far from being unique to Arab political thought, the debate on feudalism's role in modern history has long served polemical arguments on the crucial turning points that presage the modern age in European historiography, where the "becoming feudal" of the present "is the narrative and conceptual basis of modern politics." See Kathleen Davis, *Periodization and Sovereignty: How Ideas of Feudalism and Secularization Govern the Politics of Time* (Philadelphia, 2008), 26–9.

[89]Arjun Appadurai, "Full Attachment," *Public Culture* 10/2 (1988), 443–9.

[90]Anṣārī, *Takwīn al-ʿArab al-siyāsī*, 187, 190. When discussing the merits of the French or Russian revolutions, the axes around which those events turn are the respective reforms of Louis XIV and Peter the Great. The mature institutional nation-states of France and Russia emerge in a narrative sequence that forgoes the centrality of the revolutionary events themselves to modernization in favor of the absolutisms that preceded them. Yet ultimately Ansari aims to develop in his argument the kinship between the Middle Ages and modernity to lay the groundwork for the absolutist state as a bridge between the two epochs.

[91]Anṣārī, *Takwīn al-ʿArab al-siyāsī*, 186–9.

[92]David Armitage, *Civil War: A History in Ideas* (New York, 2018), 122.

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Conclusion

In the summer of 2012, barely a year into the aftermath of the Arab uprisings of 2011, Ansari published a short article—somewhat hastily translated into English—on the "Perils of Permissive Societies."[93] If a reader were asked what part of Ansari's corpus was most recognizable as the work of a conservative, it would very likely be this one short rebuke of the then thriving Occupy protests, the breakdown of intergenerational care and responsibility, and the dangers of homosexuality to society at large. A career initiated with the careful and meticulous attention to the possibilities of emancipation from the binds of tradition was coming to an end in the bathos of antipathy to the permissive "West," whose history Ansari had so long idealized. And while Ansari's later writings became increasingly conservative in the most conventional of senses, he never entirely succumbed to the cultural essentialism that made up the ideological cosmos of more blunt ethnonationalists or sectarian fearmongers of the post-Arab Spring era.

This brings me to the choice of Ansari as an apt example of a conservative intellectual for that very era. For there are certainly more fervent chauvinists, religious fanatics, and sectarian ideologues within the pantheon of contemporary Arab reactionaries comparable to their global counterparts. In fact, were it not for his distrust of consensus and conciliation, a reader might even think of Ansari as an old-fashioned liberal. And yet it is precisely because Ansari did not embody such vitriolic forms of essentialist or particularistic conservatism or neo-traditionalism that he is both a more interesting conservative, and one whose thought was able to speak to various national contexts in the Arab world. More importantly, it is precisely because the Arab world's counterrevolutionary and conservative discourses, legible from Tunis to Abu Dhabi, explicitly express the language of law and order, patriotism and stability against Islamists, that Ansari's thought is a more apt representation of contemporary Arab conservatism.[94]

Thinking of him as a theoretician rather than an ideologue partly explains his expansive audience, from Morocco to the Arabian peninsula, but also provides a starting point from which to consider the intellectual history of the counterrevolutionary project in the contemporary Arab world beyond the tactical maneuvers of capricious rulers. Ansari's critique of the metaphysical alliance with transcendental and religious thought provided a solution to the problem that Arab rulers and elites continue to face in their attempt to produce a contemporary conservative rhetorical lexicon. In other words, Ansari's career enables thinking about authority, stability, law, and the sanctity of the state despite the role of religion, rather than with it—precisely the challenge that the region's leaders face in the post-Arab Spring era.

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[93]Muhammad Jaber Al-Ansari, "Perils of Permissive Societies," *Arab News*, 2 June 2012 (translated from the Arabic language daily *al-Hayat*), at www.arabnews.com/perils-permissive-societies.

[94]Blaydes, Hamzawy, and Sallam, *Struggles for Political Change*; Andreas Kreig, "Little Sparta's Counterrevolution, or How the United Arab Emirates Weaponizes Narratives," in Kreig, *Subversion: The Strategic Weaponization of Narratives* (Georgetown, 2023), 146–74.

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