# Introduction: Ideological thought and practice in the Arab region

Arab nationalism and Islamism[1] have proven two of the most potent ideological forces in the Arab region over the past century. On the one hand, the two trends would seem to possess a number of natural affinities. Muslims are keenly aware of the central role played by Arabs and Arabic in the development of Islamic civilization. In the words of the founder of the Muslim Brotherhood, Hasan al-Banna (1906–1949): "Islam arose among Arabs and reached other nations through the Arabs. Its noble book is in Arabic. It is found in the traditions that 'when Arabs are denigrated, Islam is denigrated . . . Arabs are the guardians of Islam'."[2] So too, Arab nationalists have acknowledged the special place Islam occupies in Arab civilization: not only is Islam the religion of the vast majority of Arabs, but Islam's golden age corresponds with one of the most celebrated periods in Arab history. Ba'th Party founder Michel 'Aflaq (1910–1989) affirmed this relation in claiming that "Islam . . . was an Arab movement and its meaning was the renewal and completion of Arabism."[3]

However, even when Arab nationalists and Islamists have found themselves facing a common enemy – such as corrupt and authoritarian regimes that seek their marginalization or suppression – they have most commonly proven to be each other's worst enemy. Throughout the contemporary period their relationship has been better characterized as competitive and hostile than as cooperative and complementary, as each of the two ideologies has fought for pride of place in the hearts and minds of people in the region. Islamists have denounced the achievements of Arab nationalists as superficial and pursued at the expense of the religiosity and unity of the *umma* (Islamic community) – tantamount to a "modern *jahiliyya*," in the words of the Egyptian Shaykh Muhammad al-Ghazzali (1917–1996).[4] They have sought to delegitimize Arab nationalists as atheistic servants of external powers or, in the words of the popular Islamist thinker Yusuf al-Qaradawi (Egypt/Qatar, b. 1926), as misguided advocates of "imported solutions" (*hulul mustawrada*).[5] Many Islamists cite Arab nationalism as the cause

of Arab and Islamic weakness in the face of its religious and civilizational opponents, particularly Israel, various European powers, and, most recently, the United States. The central role played by a number of Christian thinkers in the formulation of Arab nationalism has contributed to the ideology's secular focus, to the chagrin of Islamists. Ghazzali once speculated that "non-Muslims, of course, have welcomed nationalism enthusiastically for the obvious advantage it has of lending itself readily to the destruction of Islam."[6]

For their part, Arab nationalists – including Sati' al-Husri (1880–1967), whom many consider the father of the ideology – have denied that religion could ever constitute the fundamental element of national solidarity because of linguistic and cultural differences that exist among Muslims throughout the world. Islam, according to this argument, exists across too vast a geographical expanse and is too permeated with competing forms of identity. Some Arab nationalists have attempted to place blame for political and economic stagnation upon what they characterize as backward or reactionary ideas touted by Islamists. Islamists, they say, want to drag society back to the Middle Ages. They lack understanding of the myriad problems facing – and solutions required for – "modern society." More recently, many nationalist thinkers have sought to criminalize Islamist groups by labeling them as fanatics or terrorists.

Arab nationalists and Islamists have both been at odds – politically and ideologically – with socialist and communist forces in the region as well. Although socialism was appropriated by Arab nationalist regimes in the 1970s, the relationship between the two has not been without tensions, as those regimes often considered the marginalization, if not eradication, of Marxist influences the *sine qua non* for their consolidation of power. Communists were persecuted, imprisoned, and tortured for many years in Egypt under Gamal 'Abd al-Nasir's rule. Socialism has had an even more troubled relationship with advocates of Islamic politics. Most Islamists are avowedly hostile to socialism, both for its atheism, and for its emphasis on material (as opposed to spiritual) development. Classical Marxism criticizes religion as a factor of alienation, a form of false consciousness, and an opiate of the people. Both religion and nationalism, according to socialists, tend to lead people to heed obligations and prohibitions that hamper human development, to accept submission, inequality, and cultural backwardness, and to affirm national or religious unity over class struggle.

Arab leaders, for their part, have often traded repression and cultivation of one ideological grouping at the expense of the other to diminish the capacity of each to act as a significant oppositional force vis-à-vis the

state and further deepening the lines that divide political groups. In the 1950s, Jordan's King Husayn viewed Islamists as a strategic ally against his Arab nationalist and socialist critics; in the early 1970s, Egyptian president Anwar al-Sadat bolstered the Muslim Brotherhood in his campaign against leftists and Nasirists; in the early 1980s, Algerian president Chadli Bendjedid facilitated the rise of the Islamist movement as an auxiliary force in his purge of leftists and Boumédiennists; and, throughout the 1990s, Yemeni president 'Ali 'Abdullah Salih pitted Islamists against socialists to weaken the political influence of the latter – to cite just a few of many such examples from the region.

In light of the political and ideological tensions that have dominated much of the contemporary period, one might not expect to see many instances of cooperation between Arab nationalists and Islamists – let alone with socialist forces in the region as well. Yet a growing number of researchers are beginning to note precisely this: Arab socialists, nationalists, Islamists, as well as some liberals, protesting alongside one another – and, at times, coordinating protest activity – against policies, for example, aimed at normalization with Israel and supportive of US intervention in Iraq.[7] As early as 1992, Jordan's leading Islamist group, the Islamic Action Front (the political party of the Muslim Brotherhood), allied with seven nationalist and leftist organizations to form the "Popular Arab Jordanian Committee for Resisting Submission and Normalization," which aimed at opposing the drive to normalize relations with Israel. Among the joint actions achieved by this alliance was the staging of a series of sit-ins to protest against the opening of the Israeli embassy in Amman. In 2000, thirteen Palestinian organizations, including Fatah, the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine, Hamas, the Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine, and Islamic Jihad, aligned to form the "National and Islamic Forces," which subsequently cooperated in staging general strikes and public demonstrations, as well as in issuing joint statements. The "Cairo Anti-War Conference," which has held conferences and demonstrations against the war in Iraq annually since December 2002, has brought together members of Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood, the banned Egyptian Communist Party, the Islamist Wasat Party, the pan-Arab Karama Party, the Organization of Revolutionary Socialists, and the Socialist People's Party, as well as an ideologically wide array of international activists and intellectuals.

On occasion, these cross-ideological alliances have adopted more overtly oppositional forms by challenging existing governments on issues such as election reforms, limitations on press freedoms, or the regulation of civil society organizations, as is the case with the two groups that receive the most attention in the present work's final chapters: the Egyptian

National Movement for Change (better known as Kifaya! [Enough!]), and Yemen's Joint Meeting Parties. And, in some cases, ideologically disparate and historically opposed forces have formalized their cooperation by forming new political parties or organizations: Egypt's Socialist Labor Party, established in 1979 as a socialist-oriented movement, joined forces with the Muslim Brotherhood and the right-of-center Liberal Socialist Party to form the Labor Islamic Alliance for the parliamentary elections held in 1987. By 1989, the Labor Party formally adopted an Islamic line. A number of other smaller parties claiming to straddle historical ideological divides have formed in a number of countries and sought official recognition. For example, the Arab Islamic Democratic Movement gained party status in Jordan in 1993. Also known as *al-Du'a* (the call), the party characterizes itself as a "modern Islamic alternative" and espouses five potentially incongruous principles: Islamic-Arabism, democracy as *shura*, the correspondence of reason and spirituality, Muslim and Christian coexistence, and Islamic economic policies.

These cross-ideological exchanges and actions raise several questions of significance for analysis of the history of Arab political thought. What are their historical and intellectual antecedents? Do they constitute merely a temporary convergence of interests, cooperation undertaken purely for opportunist reasons, or are these alliances evidence of more significant convergences among – and transformations within – competing ideological traditions in the region? Is much thought given to the significance of these collaborations – that is, how do the participants rationalize and justify working with groups they have anathemized in the recent past? What are the implications of ongoing dialog for the thought and practice of the ideological traditions that inform the engagements? More broadly, the aim of the present work is both to analyze the intellectual changes that have facilitated the emergence of cross-ideological alliances, and to assess the significance of the crossing of ideological boundaries by individuals and groups for the political and intellectual landscape of the Arab region.

## Assessing the ideological terrain

A number of works have provided differing accounts of the latest events and impending prospects of the ideologies that have animated the Arab region during the period under study here. Some studies suggest new ideologies have emerged to replace the old. In the most recent and expanded edition of his influential study of *Arab Nationalism*, Bassam Tibi characterizes Islam and nationalism as ideological rivals, and maintains that "this tension characterizes the turn to the twenty-first

century: to despise Arab nationalism *fi mizan al-islam* (on the balance of Islam), while reviving Islamic universalism."[8] Tibi maintains that the delegitimation of the ideology of Arab nationalism was accelerated by the Arab defeat in the Six-Day War of 1967, and that its demise both caused and was completed by the rise of political Islam, which "was not only a challenge to secular Arab nationalism and the project of its Pan-Arab state[, but also] . . . presents its own alternative: the Islamic state."[9]

This view of the incommensurability of Islam and Arab nationalism is reiterated in Emmanuel Sivan's study of electronic preachers (audiocassettes of Islamist preachers and activists that circulate in the Middle East) for whom Arabism assumes the "frightful bogey" and "the equation Arabism = state police is . . . experiential and affective."[10] In other cases it seems Arab socialism, whether in its nationalist or Marxist forms, plays the role of bogey. For example, the Islamist prosecutors of the liberal Egyptian thinker Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd (b. 1943) repeatedly criticized him for his "Marxian analysis," which alone seems enough to substantiate his presumed apostasy in the minds of his detractors.[11] In the assessment of a number of scholars, political Islam has emerged as the final negation of secular and socialist Arab ideologies.

In contrast to Tibi and Sivan, Leonard Binder, in his classic work, *Islamic Liberalism*, noted what he understood to be a "convergence" between the orientations of "modernists" and "fundamentalists:" "the modernists are becoming more 'Islamic' while the fundamentalists are becoming more liberal."[12] While Binder considered this convergence to be largely "verbal," he also suggested that "the possibility of bringing these two groups together is a tempting political goal. The liberal modernists believe that they know how to run a modern state and how to build effective administrative institutions, but the fundamentalists or the authoritarian modernists seem to be able to mobilize and move the masses."[13] Such a possibility offers both promise and potential pitfalls. The task, Binder argues, is for liberal Muslims to "appropriate religion as part of a new ideology before it is appropriated by some rival force." Islamic fundamentalism poses the most threatening rival in Binder's assessment. But the predicament for Islamic liberals, Binder argues, is that they must at once avoid too close association with Western culture (in which case they run the risk of being stigmatized with inauthenticity or sacrilege) and avoid foolhardy coalitions with the fundamentalists (lest they fall into the same trap as their counterparts in Iran).[14]

Other works have pointed to a striking number of intellectuals who have crossed the line and fallen into the trap of which Binder warns. Sivan notes "the number of former Arab nationalists and Marxists who

[have] converted to radical Islam from the late 1970s on," such as the Egyptian thinker 'Adil Husayn (1932–2001) and the Palestinian thinker Munir Shafiq (b. 1936), both of whom migrated to Islamism from the more decidedly socialist wing of Arab nationalism and the latter of whom converted to Islam from Greek Orthodox Christianity.[15] 'Adil Husayn was the secretary-general of the Labor Party until his death and played a central role in its eventual transformation into an Islamist party. Munir Shafiq was director of the Palestine Liberation Organization's Palestine Planning Center until 1992. Today Shafiq is a spokesperson for Hamas. Based on such cases, François Burgat declares that "Islamism is effectively the reincarnation of an older Arab nationalism, clothed in imagery considered more indigenous."[16] The Egyptian law professor, Hussam 'Issa (b. 1939), provides a similar assessment:

> After the defeat, people would say: we tried liberalism before the revolution in 1952, then we tried Arab nationalism, and then we had to find another form of identity. Then the Islamists came and said: before we are Arabs we are Muslims. And this approach, after 1967, can explain part of the [Islamist] phenomenon … It's a change of identity. Now the Muslim intellectuals are coming to say: we are Arab Muslims. Meanwhile, the Arab nationalists are coming closer to the Islamists, whereas the Islamists are becoming more Arab.[17]

Another competing perspective is offered by Paul Salem's 1994 study, *Bitter Legacy: Ideology and Politics in the Arab World*. Working from an understanding of political ideologies that associates ideological thinking with periods of "rapid social, economic, political, and cultural change," which contribute toward "considerable psychological strain" and openness to "ideological formulations of reality," Salem identifies three phases of ideological upheavals, each of which corresponds to a twenty-five-year generational shift. The liberal and conservative regional nationalist ideologies that emerged after the collapse of the Ottoman Empire were opposed by the revolutionary pan-Arab nationalism that emerged after the loss of Palestine. Radical Arab nationalism was in turn challenged by the Islamic revivalism that gained strength after the 1967 defeat.[18] However, rather than concluding that Islamism would begin to ebb at the end of its twenty-five-year cycle (presumably by the mid-1990s), Salem detected the rise of a middle class that began to drift away from ideological thinking as they began to achieve political dominance in the mid-1970s. This leads him to conclude that the rise of Islamic radicalism "does not represent the beginning of a new phase of ideological effervescence but the last throes of an age of ideology that is gradually coming to an end, and

which may give way to a period of more widely pragmatic politics in the not-too distant future."[19]

Olivier Roy's book, *The Failure of Political Islam*, seems to combine the conversion and post-ideological theses. In Roy's account, rather than leftists becoming Islamists, Islamists have reformulated a 1960s Third Worldism, appropriating its anti-imperialism and models of economics and revolution. However, the ideology's inability to formulate a distinctively Islamic model for society that could provide an alternative to Western modernity is what Roy claims ultimately results in the "failure" of Islam as a social movement and revolutionary force in the 1980s, and accounts for what he identifies as a current drift into a form of neofundamentalism, a more individualized and less politicized form of Islam.[20]

Thus, we face several alternative accounts of the transformation of Arab ideologies in the contemporary period: Arab nationalism and socialism have been supplanted by political Islam (Tibi and Sivan); an intellectual or ideological convergence is taking place, whether through the formulation of Islamic liberalism (Binder) or by virtue of various conversion experiences toward political Islam (Burgat); or we have reached a post-ideological age, characterized either by increasingly pragmatic thinking (Salem) or by post-Islamism (Roy). None of the views discussed above consider the possible emergence of a simpler ideological rapprochement among the various contending political groups in opposition – let alone their joining forces despite enduring ideological differences in order to challenge the regimes in power. Without dismissing some aspects of the supplantation, convergence, conversion, and post-ideological pragmatism theses, I argue that the relationship among competing ideologies of opposition in the contemporary Arab region is best characterized as accommodationist, with strategic alliances forming among more pragmatic and moderate wings of otherwise opposed ideological factions of marginalized groups. Further, alliances are as much a product of, as they are a source for, shifts (but not an end) in ideological debates that have occurred over the past several decades.

Based on analysis of works by Arab nationalist and socialist intellectuals who draw from Islamic sources in their discussions of national unity and liberation; the writings of Islamic thinkers associated with what has come to be called the *wasatiyya* (centrist or moderate) trend; the published proceedings of a variety of meetings that have put members of diverse political persuasions in dialog; interviews with scores of participants and organizers of such forums; and various other documents, such as media coverage of the cross-ideological dialogs and actions and joint statements released by cross-ideological political groupings, this book provides a historical and analytical account of the development

of Arab ideological writings from the end of what some have called the "Arab Age of Ideology" through the outset of what might be termed the "Arab Age of Ideological Transformation."[21] The evidence provided here suggests that the level of ideological transformation that has occurred is significant but limited, falling far short of the "end of ideology" Salem anticipates, the liberal-Islamic convergence Binder hopes for, and the "post-Islamism" Roy announces. Rather, historically opposed ideological trends and groups have found mutual enemies more than common political visions, and related political goals rather than shared understandings of basic political and social concepts.

### Accounting for changes in thought and practice: moderates and moderation theses

The account of ideological accommodation and transformation offered here has implications for the now considerable political science literature that engages what Jillian Schwedler has termed "the inclusion-moderation hypothesis" – that is, the idea that participation in multiparty political processes leads toward an increased willingness to work within existing systems.[22] Most of the early works that examine this hypothesis in the context of the Arab region tended to be too narrowly focused on Islamists and on formal political processes – typically confining analysis to Islamist participation in national elections.[23] The conclusions of such studies usually suggest either one half of Binder's convergence thesis (with Islamists becoming more liberal) or a part of Salem's pragmatism thesis (with Islamists becoming less doctrinaire or more self-limiting in their political aims). Recent studies by Schwedler, Clark, and others have shifted much of the debate from the question of whether inclusion results in moderation toward the question of whether working across ideological divides contributes toward moderation and, in the process, their work has broadened analysis previously focused on party–state relations to encompass a wider range of interactions among ideologically opposed parties.[24] This change in focus largely results from Schwedler's important contribution to our understanding of the "mechanisms" by which moderation – "in the sense of being relatively more open and tolerant of alternative perspectives" – is likely to occur.[25] Schwedler finds that the key element lies in the extent to which a party's leadership has engaged in the deliberations necessary to justify changes in strategy. Inclusion can contribute to moderation, but only when the party manages to develop "modes of justification" for engaging in political practices with other political (and ideologically opposed) political groups. However, the results of cross-ideological cooperation

tend to be mixed when viewed from the level of parties. Schwedler's own comparative work between the two main Islamist parties in Jordan and Yemen concludes that while Jordan's Islamic Action Front (IAF) has become more open and tolerant of alternative perspectives through participation in pluralist political processes, the inclusion of Yemen's Islah Party in similar processes has not.[26] Janine Clark's study of the Higher Committee for the Coordination of National Opposition Parties in Jordan "questions the degree to which cooperation leads to ideological moderation" on the part of the IAF.[27]

In fact, these works have pointed to the importance not only of ideology, but also to individuals and groups of individuals in the formulation of ideology and the forging of cross-ideological cooperation. Political parties do not work for moderation, individuals within and outside of parties do. Further, while the moderation of individuals and groups of individuals can have an impact on the discourse and practice of political parties, it need not. As Michael Freeden has noted, "parties operate at the mass production end of the long ideological production line. Ideologies *emerge* among groups within a party or outside of it. Those groups may consist of intellectuals or skilled rhetoricians, who themselves are frequently articulating more popular or inchoate beliefs or, conversely, watering down complex philosophical positions."[28] Thus, focusing on inclusion or cooperation at the level of parties may miss both the impetus and the outcome of cross-ideological interactions. They miss the impetus when they focus on structural conditions – such as the democratic openings of the early 1990s, which are said to have brought more groups into political processes – but neglect the intellectual context, often the result of exclusion and closings and conflicts (rather than inclusion and openings), that precede observable moments of cooperation and provide some of the discursive and ideational elements that enable the interaction to take place. They run the risk of mischaracterizing the outcome when they look too exclusively to political parties as the locus of change, rather than focusing on networks of individuals, which might indicate possibilities for intellectual transformations, generational changes, or even nascent political movements. The present work is intended to contribute to the inclusion-moderation and cooperation-moderation debates by further shifting the focus from structural to intellectual and ideological contexts, and from parties to individuals and networks of individuals that cross or work outside party lines. Attention to a broader array of ideological forces offers a fuller and more complex picture of the character of contentious politics in the Arab region. While many scholars are asking whether Islamists have become more moderate through participation in electoral and governing processes or through cross-ideological

engagement, considerably less attention has been paid to what my study demonstrates: that those processes many scholars deem central to moderation processes required moderates – that is, thinkers with no small measure of pragmatism and creativity of thought. Attention to the intellectual "back-story" of recent cross-ideological engagements is essential for beginning to understand such questions as:

1 why groups and individuals from other, competing ideological trends choose to engage Islamists;
2 why Islamists choose to engage;
3 how such engagements are articulated and justified and whether these articulations and justifications constitute "moderation"; and
4 what impact such engagements have had (and not only on Islamists).

While cognizant of the observation, articulated by Muhammad Habib (b. 1943), the supreme guide of Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood upon the killing of Abu Musab al-Zarqawi (1966–2006) by US forces in Iraq – that Americans always make the mistake of focusing on individuals – training in intellectual history leads me to attempt to identify particular figures who have been central to the various intellectual reformulations that have made these alliances possible, though in addressing the role of the Islamist parties and political groups I focus more on generations and trends of thinkers.[29] In analyzing both the writings of central intellectual figures of Arab nationalism, Arab socialism, and Islamism, as well as instances of dialog among them, I conclude that by constructing largely oppositional frameworks that focus attention on broad issues of concern, such as the Palestine–Israeli conflict, US intervention in the Middle East and, to some extent, on the need for democratization and respect for human rights in the region – and by avoiding substantive discussion of areas of disagreement – a broad spectrum of intellectuals and activists reveal a growing number of overlapping concepts emerging amidst persisting and often intense ideological conflict. These points of overlap have proven significant in fostering cross-ideological interactions in a number of Arab countries. While in many respects the points of agreement achieved have been partial and temporary, it is also possible to detect a significant morphology of the various political concepts that comprise not only Arab nationalism and Islamism (though it is seen most clearly in those two traditions), but also socialist and liberal strands in the region. This analysis demonstrates that rather than Arab nationalists and socialists becoming more Islamist, or Islamists becoming more Arab nationalist or socialist, a wide variety of ideological groupings are developing a shared store of concepts increasingly dominated by