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Response to Thomas Barfield, “The Islamic State as an Empire of Nostalgia”

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If I may, I wish to both agree and take issue with parts of Tom Barfield’s conclusion that ISIS is an “empire of nostalgia” seeking to recreate a lost “golden age.” This is an exquisitely accurate assessment, suggesting that an exercise such as ISIS may be “based on illusions” and may therefore prove to be ephemeral. By osmosis, this also diminishes the tenacity and resilience of the Islamic State itself, and devalues the legitimacy of its religious bearings.

However, such an assessment nevertheless ignores the tenacity and resilience of both empire *and* religion in the Middle East. For example, suggesting that secular nationalism as a principle and basis of government, as well as a source of political legitimacy, may trump other models in the Middle East ignores the staying power of these forces in the region.

To wit, even in presumably secular, modern Middle Eastern societies such as Turkey, more citizens readily identify as Muslims first and foremost than as citizens of a “secular” republic. Surmising otherwise is a reflection of post-religious Western biases, not time-honored Muslim norms. Furthermore, secular nationalism and the *pretense* of secular nationalism are not necessarily identical when it comes to ideas and political cultures of the Middle East: the former *may* be secular; the latter only *parades* secular ostentations.

And so, I would like to push back with two—perhaps combusive—suggestions to flesh out Barfield’s assessment:

First, that ISIS may indeed be the norm in the *longue durée* of Middle Eastern history, rather than the exception;

Second, that the secular state (particularly the current crumbling Arab-defined state system in the Middle East) is the exception to the rule, and may not have the staying power once attributed to it. In other words, places like “Syria”—and in some Western and pan-Arabist circles “Greater Syria”—or for that matter Jordan or Iraq and the rest, are modern inventions that never achieved legitimacy. ISIS, on the other hand, may hold both legitimacy and authenticity.

It is true that Muslim-majority countries (or *some* Muslim majority countries) in the Arab-defined Middle East might have trotted out secular ideals with great zeal throughout the twentieth century. But to suggest that, say, the Ba’ath in Syria and Iraq, or Nasserism in Egypt, or the *jamāhiriyyah* (socialist populism) of Libya, or the monarchies of Morocco, Jordan, and the rest (which, incidentally, all proudly flaunt their kings’ direct descent from the Prophet Muḥammad) —to suggest that the above somehow drew their political legitimacy, and therefore their staying power, from secular—as opposed to religious—principles and traditions, is to paint too bright and optimistic a picture of realities that may point into darker corners of Middle Eastern societies and history.

Government in places like Iraq, Syria, Egypt and the rest in the Arab-defined Middle East, in spite of their proclaimed secular attributes (which may be more meaningful to Western audiences than to locals) remain governments of deeply religious societies and political cultures, drawing legitimacy chiefly from religion—from Islam to be exact.

It is politically soothing for Western pundits (and the Western academy in particular) to diminish the centrality of religion in Middle Eastern lives. Yet the political realities of the Middle East remain intimately entwined with religion. This is easily illustrated with one example from my own world of references.

In the mid-1970s, during one of the numerous fitful ‘pinnacles’ of Arab nationalist fervor that were then dismantling the Lebanese state (perhaps at that time the region’s only non-Muslim entity outside of Israel), Syria’s dictator Hafez al-Assad, in those days the leading man of “secular” Arabism, had to extort a *fatwā* edict from Lebanon’s supreme Shi’a cleric, Mūsā al-Ṣadr, confirming the Alawites’ Shi’ite Muslim pedigree—Alawites who incidentally wedded Phoenician paganism, metempsychosis, Christian Trinitarianism, and Greek and Gnostic conceptions of

divinity to what traditional Muslims may consider only nominally, even dubiously, Islamic practices.

Now, why would Assad seek a religious affidavit shoring up his Muslim credentials if his prerogatives as a ruler stemmed from “secular” sources in an ostensibly secular, Arab nationalist Syria? Because in multi-ethnic, multi-religious, polyglot Syria, the “secular” Ba’athist state constitution still mandated that the president of the republic be a Muslim—and Assad was obviously, in the eyes of many, not considered a Muslim. Although this is only one example that confirms the rule across the board in the Middle East, there are many other parallels to it. One ought to try to be a Coptic Christian president of Egypt, for instance.

True, the Arab nationalism trotted out by Syria’s Assad (and his Ba’athist clone in Iraq, and others elsewhere) *had* initially been a secular creed at its inception in the early twentieth century. But this early secular Arab nationalism was in the main the creed of Arabophone Christians, intelligible only to them and other non-Muslim minorities at the time. That is, secular nationalism was the doctrine of non-Muslims preoccupied with building a post-Ottoman polity for themselves where they would no longer be relegated to second *dhimmitude* living by the sufferance of a Muslim state, often enduring persecution, discrimination, and the indignity of a devalued existence. But a secular Arabism denuded of its Muslim content ultimately proved unintelligible, and therefore unattractive, to the bulk of the Muslims of the late Ottoman period.

Even Michel Aflaq, the Damascene Greek Orthodox Christian founder of the Arab Ba’ath Party—a committed secularist by all accounts but nevertheless a Christian secularist—even *he* could not escape the centrality of Islam in his neighborhood, and the centrality of Islam to the secular Arab nationalism that he promoted. He conceded that being an ‘Arab’ and being a ‘Muslim’ were complementary, if not synonymous. From the time of the Prophet Muḥammad to the time of the prophet of Arab nationalism — Michel Aflaq himself *also* adopted the name Muḥammad in later years— during that time period, spanning some fourteen centuries, little has changed in the sense that identity and self-awareness under Islam have always been religious. So in a sense, not only is there no opposition between Islam and the so-called secular Arab nationalism of the modern Middle Eastern state system; indeed, there is a great deal of conflation, and harmony, and cooperation, and synonymity.

Secular Ba’athist doctrine as articulated by Michel Aflaq held that the Prophet Muḥammad was also, in point of fact, the founder of the Arab nation and was to be venerated as such by every Arab nationalist, whether Muslim or not. Indeed, Aflaq himself practiced what he preached and is believed to have converted to Islam.¹ He was anyway given a Muslim state funeral in Iraq in 1989.

There are many adages in the literature of Arab nationalism that confirm the fact that secularism as a source of legitimacy in the post-Ottoman, Arab-defined Middle East is at best a pipe dream that defies the region's laws of nature, which remain overwhelmingly defined by religion (which is

to say, defined by Islam). For instance, a leading Iraqi Arab nationalist writer, 'Abd al-Rahmān al-Bazzāz, noted that Islam is the religion of the Arabs (and by the Arabs), *par excellence*. "There could in no way be a contradiction between Islam and Arabism," stressed Bazzāz.² Another writer from the same school agreed, maintaining that "Islam is the other face of Arabism."³ Munāḥ al-Ṣulḥ, a prominent Lebanese Arab-nationalist theorist, confirmed his cohorts' attitudes, claiming that "Islam is another name for Arab nationalism."⁴ Even Michel Aflaq himself is noted to have claimed repeatedly that "Islam is to Arabism what bones are to the flesh."⁵ But perhaps most significantly, the logo of the Arab League itself—an 'Arab' and not a '*Muslim*' league, one ought to remember—is emblazoned with a fragment of a verse from *Sūrat Āl 'Imrān* of the Qur'ān, which reads: "You are the finest nation (*ummah*) that has been brought forth to mankind."⁶

So, in conclusion:

ISIS *is* indeed an "empire of nostalgia," but it is grounded in nostalgia that stands on solid historical ground—nostalgia that is to many more real than reality itself.

The brief "secular" interlude in the Middle East of the early twentieth century was exactly that: brief, and just an interlude. It was also the exception to the rule. The rule was and remains: empire and religion, tightly conjoined—a fusion that long preceded Islam, or even monotheism.

"Secularism" is an absurdity in the Middle East.

Empire (and indeed theocratic empire) can be said to be a Middle Eastern invention. From the time of the Sumerians to ISIS in our time, the pattern has been one of discontinuity and change, and many iterations of cultures and rulers; but empire in varied incarnations has remained unchanged, and Islam as a badge and rationale for empire has endured. ISIS is in line with that time-honored pattern. Islam, after all, to the majority of Middle Easterners (not only to the ISIS types) is the pinnacle of human existence; whatever came before Islam is not worth remembering, let alone preserving—and ISIS is making good on that principle. And whatever may come after Islam can never measure up.

Lastly, whether ISIS endures or not, *that is not the question*. What matters is that ISIS is here; perhaps not here for long, but it has been here long enough; it is demolishing cultures and peoples and monuments that withstood and stood the test of time.

And today, in the year in which many commemorate the hundredth anniversary of the Armenian Genocide, one may be rightly concerned with the fate of millions of Middle Easterners under the gun, Muslims and non-Muslims alike. One may be concerned with the fate of tens of thousands of Middle Eastern migrants escaping the violence of their homelands, strewn about in rickety boats adrift around the Mediterranean. These are moving images and compelling causes for concern! And yet, the collapse of the Middle East and the destruction of Near Eastern Christianity and Christendom continue unabated.

Debaters and demagogues and pundits and pedagogues deliberate with zeal and clarity and alacrity about ISIS and the causes of ISIS and the life-expectancy of ISIS, while Christians in the Middle East (others as well, of course others, but disappearing Christians and non-Muslim minorities in the main) are stalked by a looming gruesome end, wondering how much longer they will be able to hold out. Conferences and academic papers and attempts at understanding, and all the jeremiads and condemnations and righteous indignations and analyses that follow, may all be well and good! Yet little else beyond the academic and the perfunctory is being done! Little else perhaps *can* be done! And the breviaries of the victims and the hunted grow longer! And all that is offered ultimately remains a creepy form of modern voyeurism: looking at the atrocities, flinching with horror, getting offended, and then moving along social media circles, avidly scrolling further down Twitter feeds.

Crucifixions, beheadings, victims burned alive, others buried alive, and on and on and on. This ought not be the eighth century! Our modern calendars assure us we live in the twenty-first century. We all know that. But we all also live in a smug post-religious, post-imperial Western bubble, and assume the rest of the world does so *too*, or *ought* to.

In March 2015, at the behest of France, the United Nations Security Council debated the possibility of a UN “Action Charter” aiming at protecting Near Eastern Christians (and other indigenous endangered species) from the cruelty of ISIS.⁷ Some clamored to suggest this was a fantastic initiative! Better than nothing, they claimed! In reality—and beyond the fact that it never amounted to anything—France’s was an initiative sadder and more ominous than reality itself. It marked the last chapter in a long-standing saga of destruction, signaling a sort of resignation in the looming extinction of one of the founding elements of human civilization—the non-Muslim “first nations” of the Near East—and the rise of an empire that to many Westerners may be deemed archaic, obsolete, and cruel, but which to many Middle Easterners is *not* totally bereft of legitimacy, authenticity, and historicity. ISIS may indeed be an “empire of nostalgia”! But its

yearned-for “secular” alternatives are perhaps a cross between *Candide* and *Pollyanna*, and we may indeed currently be living in the middle of “the best of all possible worlds.”

About the author

Franck Salameh is a Middle East commentator and Associate Professor of Near Eastern Studies at Boston College. He is founding Editor-in-Chief of [The Levantine Review](#), and author of [Language, Memory, and Identity in the Middle East: The Case for Lebanon](#) (Lanham, MD: Lexington, 2010); [Charles Corm: An Intellectual Biography of a Twentieth-Century Lebanese “Young Phoenician”](#) (Lexington 2015); and the forthcoming *The Other Middle East: An Anthology of Modern Levantine Literature* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2017), as well as a memoir of Lebanon’s Jewish community, *Fragments of Lives Arrested* (London: Palgrave-Macmillan, 2018).

Notes

All digital content cited in this article was accessed on or before September 21, 2016.

[1] Olivier Carré, *Le Nationalisme Arabe* (Paris: Petite Bibliothèque Payot, 1993), 52.

[2] Sylvia G. Haim, *Arab Nationalism: An Anthology* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1964), 174.

[3] Abū Mūsā al-Ḥarīrī, *A-‘Arabiyyun Huwa? Baḥṭhun fī ‘Urūbat al-Islām [Was He an Arab? A Study Pertaining to the Arabness of Islam]* (Beirut: The Hard Truth Series, 1984), 16. For more on Adel Hussein’s impressions of Arabism, see Al-Ṭayyib Ayt Ḥammūdah’s [“Al-‘Urūbah wa’l-Islām... Takāmul am Tanāfur?”](#) [“Arabism and Islam; Unity or Repulsion?”], *The Center for the Study and Research of Secularism in the Arab World*, December 28, 2010.

[4] See James Jankowski and Israel Gershoni, *Rethinking Nationalism in the Arab Middle East* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), 219. See also Kamal Salibi, *A House of Many Mansions: The History of Lebanon Reconsidered* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), 50.

[5] Michel Aflaq, *Fī Sabīl al-Ba‘ath [For the Sake of the Ba‘ath]* (Beirut: Dār al-Ṭalī‘ah, 1959), 43, 68. Another version of this adage is “Arabism is a body whose soul is Islam.” See Carré, 52–53.

[6] Q 3:110: *kuntum khayr ummatin ukhrijat li’l-nās.*

[7] "France proposes a [sic] Action Charter for the minorities in the Middle East," Permanent mission of France to the United Nations in New York, press remarks by Laurent Fabius, Minister of Foreign Affairs and International Development, March 27, 2015 (<http://www.franceonu.org/Laurent-Fabius-proposes-a-Action>).

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