

'Futurism' is Shaping up as an Alternative to Islamism, and It May Need to Be Protected from Its Champions

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Brief Analysis

The nation-state system in the Middle East is almost a century old and has now witnessed the rise and fall of four “grand narratives”—Modernism, Arab Nationalism, Revolutionary Socialism, and Islamism. These were frameworks that shaped cultural and political understandings of current conditions, as well as the path towards the narratives’ envisioned goals. Each shared the promise of achieving a baseline of prosperity, dignity, and liberty, supplemented by narrative-specific conceptions of what such a successful nation would entail. These narratives oscillated between elitism and populism, as well as between nativism and universalism. In many cases, two narratives overlapped, with one rising as the previous vision declined. At their respective apexes, each “grand narrative” dominated the public discourse, commanding defensive reactions from its predecessors. Today, a contender for new grand narrative has entered the scene: Futurism.

The Grand Narratives of the 20th Century

The first narrative of “modernism”—which outsiders often associated with “the Arab liberal age” while understood locally as heir to the nineteenth century *Nahdah* (often translated as “Renaissance”)—was the least self-conscious articulation of a comprehensive proposition. Its discourse was openly elitist and paternalistic, and it embraced the broader optimistic universalism of the post-WWI era in which it was founded. Still, it promised an ascent to “modernity” both implicitly and explicitly.

Objectively, this elitist modernism can claim considerable achievements. Modern states formed through top-down reform efforts in Baghdad, Cairo, Damascus, Beirut, and Amman—chaperoned by colonial Great Britain and France as mentors through the League of Nation “Mandate.” The dynamics of these new states challenged and permanently altered the pre-war expectation of an adversarial relationship between society and government. Yet these achievements, which were not coupled with a successful vision to cement national identities, allowed for challenges to the emerging political, social, and economic structures. The inability of the new states to accommodate or productively explain the burgeoning State of Israel sealed the fate of the regional order and its poorly articulated first grand narrative. With the resulting Palestinian *Nakba*, the dissonance between ruling elites and growing political contenders in the Arab state system was exposed.

The alternative to elitist modernism that developed was both populist and nativist. With an unacknowledged

appropriation of methods and templates from European nationalism, “Arab nationalism” presented itself as the restoration of an organic style of ruling that had been lost due to Western colonialism and Ottoman Turkish “decadence” (*inhitāt*). The new nationalist grand narrative envisioned glory and unity as its defining features, as well as a focus on a promised victory for Palestine. This focus allowed a new class of elites, groomed in administrative and military roles within the new state structures, to obfuscate their states' internal conflicting interests during their ascent to and hold on power. The narrative's demise was this divergence between the narratives claimed goals and its internal conflicts, which culminated in another existential defeat—the *Naksah*, or the June 1967 war. Nevertheless, Arab nationalism's elites maintained their positions in power as a new narrative emerged.

Revolutionary Socialism—oscillating back to a class-conscious elitism rebranded as “avant-guardism” (*tali'ah*) and to a universalism now classified as “internationalism”—was conceived as the natural replacement for the failing nationalist grand narrative. Many nationalist militants underwent self-critical examinations and publicly embraced Revolutionary Socialism, which redefined the nationalist struggle as one against a triad of malevolent actors: global imperialism (the United States and its Western allies); Zionism centering Israel as the “national enemy”; and “Arab reactionism” (*al-raj'iyah al-'arabiyyah*), identified as regional regimes hostile to the Soviet block.

While instrumentalized by Moscow and often manipulated by Arab “revolutionary” regimes, including Algeria, Libya, Syria, and Iraq, the revolutionary socialist narrative was successful in presenting “social justice” as a new and widely popular goal. It is a modest achievement for a conflicted narrative promoted by an equally confused set of political groups, yet its relatively short life-span during the 1960s and 1970s was ultimately the result of extraneous circumstances. Both the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan and the Islamic Revolution in Iran proved detrimental to its functionality as an Arab narrative. Moreover, while both elitist modernist and nationalist narratives had a lifespan double that of Revolutionary Socialism—spanning from the 1920s-1960s and 1940s-1980s respectively—Revolutionary Socialism's waning influence has continued to inform later Arab political discourse even today.

Islamism, the fourth grand narrative, has not yet exceeded the duration of its earlier predecessors, spanning from the late 1970s to today. The narrative was a return to both populism—with a renewed pretense of reflecting the true nature of its Muslim base—and to nativism—with its claim of authenticity and promotion of a cultural autarky. Islamism topped-up previous promises—maintaining glory, unity, and social justice, while adding a pre-ordained “divine victory” to them. Islamism's “deliverable” was nothing less than a divinely-sanctioned comprehensive system.

Accommodationist Islamism, the variant of the ideology accepting a gradual progression within the existing order, anticipated a staged “Islamization” of individual, family, society, and state in preparation of a global leadership role (*ustadhiyyah*) for the putative unified Islamic state. Radical Islamism—with various approaches embracing coups d'état (*Hizb al-Tahrir*), revolution (*al-Qaeda*), or conquest (the “Islamic State”) — sought a regimented universal totalitarian order, the *Khilafah*, as an end goal. The Islamist formula, as a grand narrative, may have been far weaker, in objective elements, than all of its predecessors. Still, it was successful in recruiting a vital threshold of ideologized individuals, while relying on the malaise of its target base towards governments unresponsive to its needs and on the prestige of the faith that it claims to embrace for its survival. It can be argued that Islamism was bound to fail. The decades through which it has succeeded in delaying its demise, though, have been costly to its region and to the world.

The Potential and Drawbacks of Paternalistic Futurism

The failure of Islamism is now a reality: its proponents have not yet been able to offer credible and sustainable fulfillment of even a scaled-down version of its promised aims. Yet without an alternative in place, new incarnations of Islamism may reappear in repackaged forms. Fortunately, an alternative is being proposed, but it too is laden with potential problems.

Arab political culture, willingly and coercively, is welcoming “paternalistic futurism” as an unstated but forcefully articulated new entry in the line of grand narratives. True to the oscillation pattern so far established, futurism is both elitist—with the ruling stratum roaringly claiming its patriarchal status—and “universalist”—in its open embrace of cultural and material globalization. A substantive caveat here is that the globalism of the new grand narrative deliberately rejects the “values” of universalism—the Enlightenment and its derivatives are posited as irrelevant to Arab societies, which are instead presented as governed by a distinct set of values derived from an understanding of the Islamic faith provided by political leadership.

The new grand narrative formalizes the social contract that had been implicitly in effect in much of the Arab world prior to the “Arab Spring,” where the Arab citizen (or subject) concedes a portion of his or her political rights in exchange for the promise of services and support. The “Arab Spring” may represent a response to governments unable to keep their part of this agreement, whether due to depleted resources resulting from corruption and kleptocracy, or through the demographic and economic shifts presenting a strain on government resources. However, the subsequent “Counter-Revolution” (*al-thawrah al-mudadah*) has not rejected the pre-Arab Spring formulation of authority but has rather doubled down both on previous promises and the corresponding requirement of submission to authority.

From the Egyptian “Capital Cairo”, to UAE’s “Mars City 2117”, through Saudi NEOM, and even the Syrian “Reconstruction,” grand ideologies are being replaced by grand projects. Citizens (subjects) are invited to place their trust in a benevolent leadership, with absolute authority, that promises national ascent through measurable forms of development.

Paternalistic futurism as practiced in Europe during the first half of the 20th century failed to yield praiseworthy results. Yet the project is not necessarily doomed to fail, even given the reductionist method in which new futurism has been applied in the Arab region. On the other hand, the current discourse of paternalistic futurism may ultimately be dismissed as a mere diversion while the Arab political order recovers the elements of autocracy and coercion it has lost in the previous phase. The need to curtail Iran, which relies on external non-state actors to extend its own influence, can be viewed accordingly as part of the effort to reclaim the gravitas and enforcement power of the state. A more charitable reading may consider the examples of Abu Dhabi and Dubai in the UAE, as well as Singapore, as models of progress and prosperity achieved through fair and predictable autocracy.

A new generation of Arab citizens (subjects) may be eager to remedy the lacunae in its societies and welcome opportunities for productive globalism. With notional adjustments introduced to avoid anachronisms, this statement is as true today as it was at each junction in which promises were made by previous grand narratives. If the new narrative is to succeed where previous ones have failed, it is imperative to avoid the traps almost deliberately condoned by the others. An external focus, be it Palestine or Iran, may provide immediate mobilization and support, but would almost certainly allow the emergence of patterns of allocation of resources at the detriment of the promise of prosperity. The stifling of individual rights such as the rights to speech, assembly, and dissent—even if to insist on the safeguard of collective imperatives of sovereignty, loyalty, patriotism—may reduce the nuisance of opposition, but will certainly provide the rationale for a reconstituted radicalism.

The champions of the new grand narrative of paternalistic futurism seemed to have come full circle to the values that shaped political discourse at the beginning of the past century. Prosperity, modernism, and globalism are at the forefront of discourse—now with far more vision and articulation than before. In so doing, they may be addressing the weakness of the poorly expressed elitist modernism of the first part of the 20th century.

But the specificity of the current narrative also raises the ceiling of expectations, and thus exposes its proponents to the risk of backlash in the case of unsatisfactory delivery. With the public expected to be mere recipients of a future conceived and ushered in by a distant leadership, the leadership also accepts the sole responsibility of both

successes and failures of the future. None of the regional leaders has yet exhibited a steady hand indicating that mistakes would be avoided. In fact, each of the regional capitals has been witness to dramatic and even tragic mistakes of the past few years.

With an enthusiastic, yet neither utopian nor dystopian, focus on a future of prosperity, the new grand narrative of paternalistic futurism is a welcome alternative to the exhausting and exhausted propositions of Islamism. Yet, with current paternalistic leadership structures prone to adventurism and impulsiveness, the potential for the new grand narrative to strike roots is hampered. This may indeed be an alternative in need of protection from its champions. ❖

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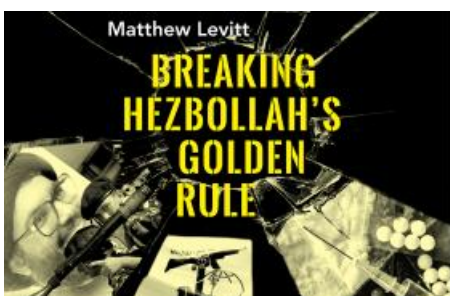
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