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# THE SPLIT IN ARAB CULTURE

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Amid our constant, understandable worrying about the *political* problem of the Arab and Muslim world, we must be careful not to ignore the equally important and related matter of the *cultural* sphere. Underlying regime politics, geopolitical issues, and even the national and global issues of law and rights, there is a simmering cultural ferment that forms the ideological basis of what is possible in the “higher” spheres of law and politics. Ideology is, after all, more powerful than law: A law can dictate whether a woman must, or even can, wear a *burqa* on the streets; but an ideology can motivate masses of people to fill the streets, voluntarily and militantly, to demand changes to the law. And culture is the realm of discourses and practices in which ideologies are formed.

The *ulama* (Islamic scholars)—the official, state-sanctioned guardians of Islam—have always been suspicious of modern forms of cultural production and expression, because these carve out spaces that allow people to understand their lives and the world in ways which are implicitly autonomous from religion. For the most part, however, and regardless of whatever the *ulama* may have said, artistic and cultural practices have operated on a generally tolerated parallel social track, even if certain activities (modern art and painting, for example) have been relatively Westernized and consumed mainly in *effendi* (Westernized bourgeois) ghettos.

Underlying this wary tolerance has been a theological mode of thought (*kalam*) in which religion encompasses more than *shari'a* and accommodates a certain pluralist notion of society as a vast ensemble where culture develops alongside religion. In this conception, a wide array of casually profane literary and artistic activity—including poetry, calligraphy, plastic arts, and music—can be understood as being compatible with religion, even if certain examples are also understood as being on the fringe of propriety. In this way, the widest range of diversity and the most advanced forms of creativity have remained integral and treasured parts of our Arab and Muslim history.

Indeed, an aspect of Islam's grandeur has been its ability to absorb myriad cultural influences. The Muslim world protected, studied, and developed the great traditions of classical literature and philosophy. It was not a milieu for burning books, but rather one in which libraries were built to preserve them. The Muslim world was, for some time, the guardian of the founding documents of what became known as "Western civilization"—it recognized that they were a part of the intellectual legacy of all mankind. This capacity for intellectual openness and engagement is one of the most treasured aspects of our history and legacy.

With the rise of Islamist movements, however, a new public norm has taken root. This norm is often characterized as "salafist," since it is based on the narrow version of a "return" to religious orthodoxy that this word has come to imply. (The Arabic noun *salaf* means forefather or predecessor; salafists are those who favor a return to what they think of as the ways of their "pious forefathers" from the early generations of Islam.) This new salafist social norm is for the most part implicit, an unofficial ethos or ideology that is only rarely enforced with legal or administrative penalties. But it is no less powerful as a result—in fact, it is even more so. The authority and centrality of this new public religious norm derive not from the power of a regime but from the installation of an unapologetic Islam, vaguely salafist, at the heart of Arab identity; it has become the central signifier of resistance to Westernization and neocolonialism, creating a "more-Muslim-than-thou" discursive context.

In earlier decades, a triumphant Arab nationalism fought off any such overbearing religiosity; today, "moderate," secular voices refrain from challenging it. They are caught in an identity trap, constantly limiting their discourse due to fear that religious conservatives or regimes will charge them with undermining Arab authenticity and independence—even Arab nationalism itself.

We saw an example of this last year, when a group of young Moroccans decided to break the Ramadan fast with a picnic in a public park. Along with the predictable reactions from religious quarters, the Socialist Union of Popular Forces (or USFP, Morocco's social-democratic

party), including members of its youth branch, joined in demanding punishment for the fast breakers. This obeisance by the “left” to a religious norm was couched in nationalist terms—the USFP criticized the picnickers’ act as an insult to Moroccan national culture and a disruption of the ideological consensus regarding Moroccan identity. The government ended up charging the youngsters with an offense against “public order,” using an ostensibly secular statute in a way it had never been used before. This simple, direct challenge to the salafist public norm turned out to be too radical for everyone in the political class.

## The New Public Norms

The public space, then, is increasingly dominated by a cultural norm based on the elaboration of a set of strict rules, a series of dos and don’ts taken from religious texts strictly construed. As religion becomes an ever more dominant element of public ideology, it is itself contracting around salafism, creating a normative context in which the cultural is now more easily characterized and perceived by believers as not just profane, but pagan. A capacious understanding of Islam as a partner with culture has shrunk into a narrow version of *shari’a* that excludes the cultural. The pathways between the sacred spaces of religion and the casually secular discourses of profane culture—elaborate and delicate bridges that have long been part of Islamic societies—are being rudely and insistently barricaded.

This dynamic of salafization occurs even as the population continues to live among, experience, and consume a proliferation of profane and basically secular cultural products via television, videos, the Internet, and popular literature. It is easy—too easy—to identify the Western and global forces driving the proliferation of secular and profane culture and therefore to denounce them as “foreign.” Yet this would be to ignore the creativity and ingenuity with which Arabs have appropriated and transformed the entire gamut of contemporary means of cultural production. At the level of elite culture, there is a burgeoning patronage system for artistic modernization, financed by Western foundations and transnational NGOs, but also by the Gulf monarchies. This process was accelerated by the 2003 UN Development Programme report that cited the paucity of literary publications in the Arab world, and by doing so helped to encourage transnational organizations and wealthy Arab patrons to remedy this perceived deficit. With its focus on traditional indices, however, this report failed to capture the real flowering of popular cultural creativity in the Arab world.

At the level of popular culture, of course, products of Western media conglomerates are ubiquitous. But there is also an undeniable, and growing, presence of indigenous media outlets—from news sources such as Al-Jazeera and Al-Arabiya, to soap operas, to the popular literature of

self-help and romantic advice, to the explosion of musical and artistic creativity that the Internet has made possible and that young Arabs have seized upon enthusiastically. In the Arab world, as everywhere else, the result is a prodigious cultural mash-up—the commercialized version of which is the “festivalization” of modern Arabic culture, a phenomenon in which Arab businesses, promoters, and middlemen are entirely complicit.

Most of these cultural practices are without religious content or intent, are thoroughly saturated with global—not just Western—influences, and are, for all intents and purposes, completely secular. Despite the growth of political Islam, attempts to Islamicize art and culture in the Arab world have been relatively weak and ineffective. Still, caught between the pressure for modernization from secularized global culture and the pressure for solidarity and authenticity from the salafized indigenous public norm, artists and cultural producers in the Arab world now prefer to call themselves “Muslim” (but not “Islamic”), even though their artistic practice has nothing to do with religion and may be implicitly contributing to the secularization of Arab societies. By referring to themselves as Muslims, they are affirming an identity, not a religious practice; but they are doing so in a way that avoids challenging the salafist norm and avoids identifying themselves as secular or even “non-practicing.”

What is occurring in the Arab and Muslim world, then, is a kind of schizophrenic lived experience: In private, one regularly consumes the culturally profane—via television, videos, the Internet, and popular literature, or in carefully segmented and reserved semipublic spaces—while in public, one is careful to proclaim his or her Muslim identity, avoids going to a movie theater, and perhaps makes a show of religiosity by attending the mosque, sporting a beard, or wearing the veil. The two forms of cultural experience unfold in parallel, kept at a safe and discreet distance from each other. Yet it is the religious norm that maintains hegemony in the public space, while profane cultural consumption remains private—in the closet, as it were—with all the lesser legitimacy which that implies. In the Arab and Muslim world today, cultural practices produce, and cultural subjects experience, a process of secularization, but no one is allowed to acknowledge or accept it.

It would be a mistake to see this problem simply as an expression of the social division between elites and masses. It is true that, well into the twentieth century, there was a simple working compromise: Westernized elites could partake of profane culture while ordinary people stayed in the cultural sphere dominated by Islam. This traditional sociocultural divergence is by no means irrelevant. Over the last few decades, however, education, literacy, and the exponential growth in the means of communication—particularly television and the Internet—have brought

profound changes, and contact with other languages and cultures has begun to spread beyond the elite.

## The Diversification of Mass Culture

Today, we have an increasingly diverse set of cultural practices throughout the Arab world. Young Arabs read novels, watch movies and videos, listen to music, read blogs—and also *create* all of these things—in many different languages. They are not just consuming but mastering modern cultural practices that are irreversibly influenced by and inextricably intertwined with linguistic and cultural influences from the East, North, South—and, yes, the West. To pretend that this is not so, to disbelieve that it could be so, or to insist that it should not be so would be folly. It is time to recognize that the days of linguistic and cultural “purity” never really existed and never will. And it is time to recognize the severe shortcomings of any paradigm, whether nationalist or religious, that sees such “purity” as not only possible but necessary.

At the same time, it would be naïve to presume that this diversification of mass culture will inevitably lead to movements for secularization or democratization. Although the growth of mass culture may entail an implicitly secular and democratic dynamic, on an explicitly political level it has often been conjoined with a consensual identity politics that includes the public norms of resurgent religiosity. The mechanism for managing this phenomenon of cultural empowerment combined with cultural confusion is not censorship, but segmentation. While this includes the division of society into isolated cultural sectors, perhaps even more important is the segmentation of cultural practices within the same person, who will read romance novels or astrology books one day and mass-produced religious tracts (bought in the same bookstore) the next, or who watches *Iqraa* (a religious television channel) at lunch and *Rotana* (the MTV of the Arab world) after dinner.

Thus within the individual as well as the society, the extension of mass profane cultural production and consumption unfolds in parallel with the propagation of the salafist public norm, which has adapted well to the new means of mass cultural diffusion. Paperback devotional and inspirational tracts and Internet blogs increasingly replace theological texts, and a kind of collective autodidacticism reinforces social and cultural segmentation and alienation from elitist “intellectualism.”

It is important for both the salafists and those who rule Arab regimes that mass profane cultural consumption be experienced by the people as a distraction only—something understood to be not entirely respectable and to have no implications for a movement of social or political change. One must show respect for the salafist norm, even if one does not practice it. Indeed, the common and commonplace personal transgressions—with the accompanying *frissons* of slightly shameful pleasure (under-

stood as diversionary, unserious “entertainments”)—only reinforce the importance and social respectability of the salafist norm.

The norm may even intrude directly into more profane forms of mass culture—for example, television shows whose stories of romance or adventure are couched in the form of moralizing tales. This trend is particularly evident during Ramadan, a favorite time for televising historical miniseries with Islamic backdrops. A similar kind of superficial Islamicization characterizes the growing genre of self-help and personal-development literature, in which a nod to the power of prayer or devotional ritual is often folded into an individualist and escapist—if not hedonistic—program of personal improvement.

All this has helped to make an ill-defined salafism the reigning explicit norm of the common public sphere while leaving open the possibility of multiple and complex forms of cultural consumption on an individual and private level. Transgression is individual; the public norm is salafist. This is a form of ideological “soft power” that is far more effective than any bureaucratically enforced censorship.

The same schizophrenia is also found in the Arab attitude toward language, the foundation of culture. Historically, the *ulama* have always considered scholarly writing to have the highest intellectual and social importance. Ironically, this belief has led to a constriction of Arab writing today. An Arab intellectual does not write in the language that he or she speaks. On this point, pan-Arab nationalism and Islamism converge. Both insist that classical Arabic (Fus‘ha), the language of the Koran, is the only legitimate language for cultural expression: For pan-Arabists, Fus‘ha is the glue that holds the Arab nation together; for Islamists, it is the bond of the *umma* (community of believers). This, of course, ignores the profound divergences between everyday spoken and even Modern Standard Arabic (the language of journalism, television, academic discourse, and popular and literary fiction) and Fus‘ha, which is rarely used outside religious schools. This paradigm also makes the novel a particularly suspicious genre, since it explores the “existential” questions of life and its meaning in ways that are doubly transgressive—the novel is not only relatively autonomous with respect to religion, but also reinvents the Arabic language in ways that go far beyond the putative limits of Fus‘ha.

Yet just as one cannot question salafism as a public religious norm, one cannot question Fus‘ha as the public linguistic norm. Although transgressions in linguistic practice are inevitable in real social and cultural life and thus are tolerated, one can never openly recognize them as constituting a new legitimate norm or sets of norms. Even though strict adherence to an ancient univocal linguistic norm is clearly not possible, everyone must nonetheless pretend that it is, upholding it as the ideal. As a result, none of the multitude of dialects in use throughout the Arab world is ever recognized, respected, or codified *in Arabic*. In fact, the

grammars of these modern Arabic dialects are always published in other languages. One could hardly imagine a more extreme example of how a religious norm can hobble our language—preventing it from understanding itself and modern Arabic culture as a whole.

A similar ambivalence marks the realm of law. Each Arab state has its own legal code and defines its own version of legality and “Islamicity”—for the most part, by incorporating some modern secular principles of rights and justice. Yet almost all refer to *shari‘a* as the ultimate source of law, and none will explicitly refuse to concede supremacy to *shari‘a*. This obligatory primacy of the Islamic norm delineates the impassable horizon of the Arab polity at the present moment. Once again, however, this norm can easily become an element of an identity paradigm rather than a rigid religious prescription. It maintains itself as the public standard of judgment, but does not always define or determine the real practices of courts and the law.

### Policing Piety

To be sure, today’s Arab regimes have found many ways to profit from the increasing salafization of the public norm. This is true even among regimes that do not identify with or claim to represent an “Islamist” project. Authoritarian regimes find numerous ways to take advantage of the social and cultural tensions that arise from such a situation, playing leading roles as mediators and consensus-builders in ways that steer conflictive and potentially contestatory discourses and practices in a nonthreatening direction.

In accepting the salafization of public norms related to everyday mores and behaviors (for example, requiring the veil or suppressing the cinema), the modern authoritarian state can renew its alliance with the *ulama*, who are more interested in exchanging favors with regimes than reforming them. An authoritarian regime can tolerate, while officially keeping at arm’s length, politically “quietist” Islamist currents whose program of *shari‘a* consists mainly of mobilizing religious ideologues—not agents of the state—to obsessively police piety within local communities. In order to appear to local moderates and Western observers as the only rampart against complete Islamicization, a regime only has to act against a few of the most shocking *shari‘a* penalties (such as the stoning of women who have been raped), while leaving unchallenged the ultimate primacy of salafism as a public norm.

At the same time, secular intellectuals who might otherwise pursue democratic reforms often end up relying on the protection of the authoritarian state against the *ulama* or fundamentalists and find themselves having to defend it in return. The state, by protecting some spaces of cultural autonomy and offering the possibility of future liberalization, can sell itself to these intellectuals as the lesser evil when weighed

against Islamism. Many secular intellectuals, for example, gave reluctant support to the Algerian state during its struggle against the Islamists in the 1990s, and today the Egyptian state has protected writer Sayyid al-Qimni since a *fatwa* was launched against him. Meanwhile, rural and socially conservative people who fear the intrusion of Western mores find these kinds of tensions and *détentes* between the regimes and Westernized elites remote from their own concerns.

States may even enter into implicit covenants with certain rhetorically militant but actually quietist Islamist currents considered less politically threatening than salafists of the Muslim Brotherhood stripe—sometimes going so far as to grant such groups minority status within the electoral system as part of the tolerated opposition. This enables the regime to crack down more harshly on those politically militant Islamists and other dissidents who are seriously contesting state power.

The net result, amid all the cultural confusion, is that the regimes reap political benefits from maintaining a precarious equilibrium among these contending social actors. The state has redrawn its contract with the various social forces, freeing itself from too much insistence on democratization and maintaining a program of harsh (but now more finely targeted) repression, while reinforcing the fundamentally undemocratic notion that the salafist public norm is beyond challenge.

Among cultural intellectuals, this frustrating situation can produce various forms of politically debilitating withdrawal. On the one hand, there is both a real and a virtual “brain drain.” Many Arab intellectuals and artists actually live and work abroad or direct their intellectual energies outside their home countries. They might, for example, identify themselves as Arab and Muslim rather than Egyptian or Tunisian, in the process asserting an identity whose founding elements are very close to those of salafism: The Arabic language is *Fus’ha* and to be Arab is inseparable from being Muslim. Intellectuals in the diaspora, whether geographic or ideological, lose touch with their specific national and social bases and become generic “Arab” intellectuals. It is to the benefit of authoritarian regimes that such an identity can make intellectuals more comfortable with an abstract unanimity in support of global causes such as Palestine and Iraq, and less engaged with local political tensions.

The intellectual withdrawal from complex and divisive local struggles into the abstract unity of a virtual international community is exacerbated by the lack of national financial support for cultural activities. State assistance for artists and intellectuals is in free fall, while alternative means of professionalization remain underdeveloped: Many authors and publishers, for example, have little experience with the new competitive realities of international copyright conventions, contract laws, and marketing. The lack of supportive public policy has led to a cultural milieu that is individualistic and depoliticized, forcing cultural producers to seek foreign audiences and sources of support. This exter-

nal patronage has been forthcoming from Western organizations such as the Ford Foundation, as well as from Gulf princes. As a result, we now see an increasing number of cultural artifacts representing an abstract Arab-Muslim identity, produced for and appearing in Western galleries and Gulf showcases. In the realm of fiction alone, for example, there are now multiple competitions for the best examples of “Arab” culture: the Emirates Foundation International Prize for Arabic Fiction (known as the “Arabic Booker”), Lebanon’s Blue Metropolis Al Majidi Ibn Dhaher Arab Literary Prize, and the International Prize for Arabic Fiction (managed with the Booker Foundation in London).

Certainly, the artists, musicians, writers, and thinkers of the Arab world have every right to accept much-needed support from Arab and external patrons. There is nothing wrong with artists from the Arab world becoming more thoroughly integrated with cultural developments globally; in fact, this holds progressive potential. The risk, however, is that, as the status of “Arab” artists is elevated among international audiences, they may become even more disconnected from, and therefore less valuable to, their own compatriots.

### Is the Web a Game-Changer?

The Internet has certainly fostered new spaces of cultural production and consumption that have interesting political potential. Yet while the Internet can contribute to the growth and tactical efficacy of an existing political-protest movement with a strong base of support, it cannot create one. As we have seen in Egypt and Iran, it can be an effective tool for mobilizing people, but it cannot substitute for the kind of ground-level organizing in local communities needed to sustain the sort of persistent movement that can pose a serious political challenge.

We should also be aware that old regimes, too, can learn new “e-tricks”: After the famous June 2010 “Facebook protest” in Egypt, the security services used the electronic-networking trail to track down and arrest the protesters and organizers. While video-upload and social-networking sites are convenient for organizing flash mobs, it would be naïve not to recognize that these sites are also ideal tools of state surveillance. We must also not forget that jihadis are among the most inventive and effective users of the Internet as an organizing tool and means of disseminating propaganda. Their salafism has no problem with the *technological* aspects of modern culture—a function, perhaps, of the distinction they make between the praiseworthy “thinker” (*mufakkir*) and the reviled “intellectual” (*muthaqqaf*).

It can be argued, in fact, that while Internet culture encourages the formation of a wider and stronger discourse of community—a potentially powerful political phenomenon, to be sure—it also contributes to isolation and segmentation. Internet users tend to form discrete groups of

social subjects who communicate exclusively—and often anonymously—online, continually reinforcing a closed sociopolitical discursive loop. Within each of these closed loops, the preferred mode of discourse becomes permanent irony directed at all the others. Anonymity allows

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dissenters to ratchet up their radicalism without risking open confrontation and any harsh consequences. Using the Internet, it is easy to mock power while avoiding the real-world organizing that would be necessary to challenge or to seize it.

Too often, then, artists and intellectuals achieve their independence apart from the national public sphere. And even when they completely eschew religion, contemporary artists and intellectuals do not necessarily become part of a secularizing movement. They do not, as they once did (and still do,

in such places as Iran and Turkey), form an *avant-garde* within movements spearheading social, political, and cultural change. Rather, they become a kind of “court” faction, working in spaces protected and tolerated by the state or by wealthy and powerful patrons (both national and international). The figure of the artist with a message of political contestation, such as Egyptian writer Son’allah Ibrahim or the Moroccan musical group Nas El Ghiouan, has largely disappeared. For example, *avant-garde* painter Farouk Hosni is presently serving as Egypt’s minister of culture. In 2008, the prime minister of Syria selected Hannan Qassab Hasan, translator of the often-licentious Jean Genet, to direct the UNESCO-sponsored program “Damascus, Arab Capital of Culture.” Other artists, such as Wael Shawqi (featured in the Alexandria Biennial) and Hala El Koussy (winner of the Abraaj Capital Prize from the Gulf), are not engaged in political contestation at all, no matter how modern their cultural and social views may be.

Thus there is a confluence of new cultural forces that, on the one hand, promote an implicit dynamic of secularization and democratization and, on the other, have the immediate effect of further compartmentalizing society. Societies become divided into multiple segments, each of which has greater access to potentially progressive cultural influences. At the same time, however, each of the segments becomes reinforced in its particular subidentity, making it difficult for them to coalesce into something “social” in the large sense of the word. These segmented subidentities prevent rather than encourage the effective socialization of demands for political and cultural reform. They perpetuate the divide between the secular and the religious, between the enlight-

ened artist and the vulgar philistine, between the “in” and the “out.” The artist’s secularizing and democratizing potential is, in many cases, sealed within an escapist identity that adopts a posture of mental exile from concrete social reality.

The flip side of this segmentation is a process of internationalization, culminating in the already mentioned “festivalization” of Arab culture. This process is a commercialized, middlebrow corollary to the financing of elite cultural projects that focus on Arab identity and the Arab world while encouraging the promotion of secular, modern, Western-friendly sentiments. Festivalization is not just a Western intrusion. In today’s globalized reality, it has been enthusiastically embraced by local entrepreneurs and promoters and has inevitably resulted in the proliferation of commercialized Arab-themed cultural celebrations and festivals—some traditional, some contemporary—that provide new outlets for artists and new vehicles for profiting from the cultural tastes of modernized Arab middle classes. This is also the culmination of a process by which states have “privatized” art, just as they have the economy, abandoning it to private-sector guardians (even while preserving the prerogative to police it).

As culture budgets are cut, funds are redirected toward tourism promotion, which is coordinated with privately sponsored galas that present a modern, secular, and festive country. Festivals such as those of Baalbek in Lebanon and Mawazine and Fez in Morocco are at the zenith of this phenomenon. They showcase a wide range of musical and artistic talent far outside any recognizable salafist norm. For example, despite publicizing its program as “sacred music,” the Fez Festival features such un-Islamic genres as American gospel music.

No mere picnics, these elaborate celebrations typically span several days and draw international audiences (primarily from Europe and the Arab world). To some extent, then, such festivals are a means of building bridges from the sacred to the profane, but in a way that is highly commodified and controlled, and carefully prevented from leaking into the everyday cultural sphere. They are amply supported by a panoply of sponsors—corporate (banks, airlines, hotels, and media outlets), private (including princely and royal foundations, as well as private individuals), and governmental (especially tourism ministries). There is no public disorder here.

With the creation throughout the region of these protected spaces of imaginary liberalization, culture becomes a substitute for dissent, the accomplice of a state’s efforts to contain opposition and to ensure stability through diversification. The “culturalization” of secular and democratic tendencies—a process that both segments and internationalizes progressive elements of society—brings a semblance of freedom (nonpolitical freedom, to be sure) without putting into question the hegemony of the regime or the dominance of salafist ideology. When the audience goes

home, however, the salafist norm continues to extend its influence in the public sphere, unchallenged (and even reinforced) by traditionally progressive cultural and political currents—all to the satisfaction of the state.

To be clear, modernizing cultural movements in the Arab world do have real progressive potential. The participants gain a kind of symbolic transnational capital and become global cultural actors. As such, they can either exile themselves from their own society by self-identifying as part of either a global culture or an abstract Arab *umma*, or they can try to influence local trends, using their transnational cultural capital as an asset. Most cultural actors will negotiate this tension with ambivalence, alternately emphasizing the different dimensions of their respective cultural personalities. The manipulations worked by regimes are not perfect, and in their ceding of new spaces to cultural autonomy and experimentation, they may be setting in motion a process that could, over the long term, foster a new type of opposition to authoritarian rule in the Arab world.

One thing is certain, however. If artistic and intellectual practice is to have any effect on democratization, it will be necessary to confront the salafist paradigm on its home ground, armed with a credible and consistent alternative. We must, openly and without fear, take up the challenge of secularism, something that has been done throughout the non-Islamic world—not just in “the West.” Of course, this is not a matter of adopting any other region’s prefabricated model. Rather, we must first reconnect with the Arab and Islamic tradition that built spaces for cultural autonomy over centuries. A new cultural paradigm, a new public norm—appropriate to the contemporary world as well as to our own traditions—cannot be built by either ignoring the salafist paradigm or merely paying lip service to it. Instead, we must engage it with respect and courage in seeking a transition from religious closure to political openness. This will require carefully negotiating all the intricate passages of our religion and our traditions, as well as our relationship to the world culture in which we are now inextricably entwined. It will not be easy, but we must take bold steps to craft a new paradigm of cultural modernity that will celebrate the diversity and creativity of the Arab world.