

Islamic fundamentalism, the Arab Spring, and the Left - An overview

Saturday 9 September 2017, by [ACHCAR Gilbert](#), [SMITH Ashley](#) (Date first published: 1 December 2016).

Ashley Smith: One of the key developments in the Middle East over the last three decades has been the rise of what commentators variously call political Islam, Islamism, and Islamic fundamentalism. Why do you argue that this political current is better called Islamic fundamentalism, and what are its characteristics?

Gilbert Achcar: The term one uses in calling the phenomenon is related, of course, to assessment and political judgment, each term having different implications. Take one term you just mentioned—political Islam. Why doesn't anyone use this kind of designation for politically involved institutions and currents within Christianity, Judaism, or Hinduism, such as referring to "political Christianity" for instance? Speaking of "political Islam" begs the question of defining what is "nonpolitical" Islam; in other words, when does Islam start to be "political" and when does it stop? Why would Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood be considered as "political Islam," and not, say, the Grand Imam of Al-Azhar, which is a supremely political position? If you think of it seriously, you'll find that this label doesn't make much sense.

The other term people often use, which may seem more delineated, is "Islamism." They use it to refer to political movements that regard Islam as their fundamental ideology and program, hence the "ism." The term was originally intended by those who started using it—that was in France in the 1980s—as a way to avoid the term "Islamic fundamentalism," which they argued was politically loaded. But in so doing—whatever their intention, although they were actually warned by some, like the Marxist scholar of Islamic studies, Maxime Rodinson—they disregarded the fact that it was a term that had been used to refer to Islam itself. If you look in dictionaries, you'll find that Islamism was used as the equivalent of Islam at least up until a few decades ago.

Indeed, "Islamism" gets mixed with Islam as a religion in the minds of most people who hear the term. And because "Islamism" became almost synonymous with terrorism—again, regardless of the intentions of some of the term's users—it led people to confuse terrorism and Islam per se. This is obviously quite dangerous, as it feeds into already widespread Islamophobic bigotry, all the more so, in that "Islamism" reduces the phenomenon to a preserve of Islam alone, of all religions.

It is for these reasons that I don't use these two terms. I prefer the term "Islamic fundamentalism," which has two advantages. The most important is that the notion of fundamentalism applies to all religions, and one can formulate a generic definition of this term that covers all religious fundamentalisms. They all have common features—above all, the fact of adhering to literal and dogmatic interpretations of religious scriptures and a political project of imposing such views on society through the state. Thus, the notion of fundamentalism is useful in emphasizing the distinction between Islamic fundamentalism and Islam as a religion, since people are used to making the same distinction between other religions and their brands of fundamentalism. No one confuses Protestant fundamentalism and Protestantism, for example. The users of "Islamism" often argue that the term "fundamentalism" belongs to the history of Protestantism; that's actually an argument in favor of using it, in my view.

The second advantage of the term “Islamic fundamentalism” is that the notion of fundamentalism helps in fine-tuning the distinction between different currents and groups that give Islam a central place in their ideological identity. It is more restrictive than terms like “political Islam” or “Islamism” which tend to lump together in the same category very different movements. Take Turkey’s ruling party, the AKP, for instance. It is usually included in the categories “political Islam” and “Islamism” along with the Iranian regime. This is a quite misleading error that the term “Islamic fundamentalism” avoids. The AKP is not a fundamentalist party; it does not advocate the implementation of Islamic religious law, the Sharia, in Turkey. It is rather a conservative, rightwing, Muslim party, similar to Christian conservative or rightwing parties in Europe, and it remains fundamentally so despite its recent authoritarian drift.

To be sure, the category “Islamic fundamentalism” itself remains quite encompassing, as are all ideological categories that cover a wide range of movements (think of Marxism or communism, for example). While the programmatic core of an “Islamic State” based on the Sharia is, to various degrees, common to all the groups subsumed under the category of “Islamic fundamentalism,” these groups pursue different strategies and tactics. Thus, there are “moderate” fundamentalists who have a gradualist strategy of achieving their program within society first, and in the state thereafter, while others resort to terrorism or state implementation by force as is the case with the so-called Islamic State known as ISIS. But they all have in common a dogmatic and reactionary fundamentalist project.

What are the roots of Islamic fundamentalism in the Middle East? How and why did it arise as a political force?

Islamic fundamentalism in the shape of an organized political movement belonging to the modern era was born in the late 1920s with the creation of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt. This was indeed the first modern political organization to be based on an Islamic fundamentalist agenda. And that was also the time when the theorization of the Islamic state, the core Islamic fundamentalist doctrine, took its modern shape—in Egypt again. There were, of course, earlier brands of fundamentalism and various sorts of puritan sects in the history of Islam like in other monotheistic religions, but the Brotherhood pioneered a brand of Islamic fundamentalism that was adapted to contemporary society in the form of a political movement.

This brand emerged at the conjunction of a number of events. The first was the proclamation of the republic and the abolition of the caliphate in Turkey a few years after the end of World War II. Mustafa Kemal’s declaration of a secular republic in Turkey came as a shock for those who rejected the separation between Islam and government. This was contemporaneous of the foundation of the Saudi kingdom in the Arabian Peninsula, a state based on an Islamic fundamentalist premise, albeit one of an archaic-tribal character.

Second, Egypt was a country which was becoming ripe for revolution with the accumulation of explosive problems—social problems, terrible poverty in the countryside, a rotten monarchy, leaders despised or hated by the people, and British domination. The Egyptian Left was weak, however, and the workers’ movement had come under repression in the 1920s. So you had a conjunction of factors, which enabled the emergence of Islamic fundamentalism as a political movement capitalizing on popular discontent.

From a historical materialist perspective, Islamic fundamentalism is a striking illustration of what Marx and Engels identified in their *Communist Manifesto* as one of the ideological orientations among the traditional middle classes. A fraction of the traditional petty bourgeoisie, the craftsmen, and the small and middle peasantry suffer from the crushing effects of capitalism, which develops at their expense turning a big section of them into proletariat, compelling them to shift from a status of

small producers or merchants into one of wage earners obliged to sell their labor power in order to make their living.

A fraction of these petty propertied classes oppose capitalist development by wanting to “turn back the wheel of history” as Marx and Engels famously put it— an excellent formulation indeed, pointing to the reactionary character of these class fractions. And it applies in full to Islamic fundamentalism in the sense that this current stems from a revolt against the consequences of capitalist development, fostered by foreign domination, but does so from a reactionary perspective of going back to a mythical Islamic golden age of thirteen centuries ago. And that’s what all Islamic fundamentalist groups have in common, from the Muslim Brotherhood as a mass movement, at least in its original Egyptian mainstream, to terrorist groups of which the most extreme is the appalling ISIS. They all share a dedication to reinstate in some way the form of government and social rules that existed in early Islam. In the case of ISIS they believe they are doing so already with their so-called Islamic State.

What is the relationship of Islamic fundamentalism to imperialism? Is it in opposition to it or in collusion with it?

Both, I would actually say, and there’s no contradiction here. The troops of Islamic fundamentalism are people reacting to the consequences of capitalism as well as to imperialist domination and imperialist wars. But they are responding to them in a reactionary manner. Faced with capitalism and imperialism, they could either opt for a progressive struggle, aiming at replacing wild capitalism with a socially just egalitarian society, or believe that the solution is in reinstating a form of government that is completely inadequate to our time, and adhere therefore to a very reactionary perspective.

And since it is a reactionary response to the problems that we mentioned, it ended up historically being used by all sorts of reactionary forces, including imperialism itself. From the time it was founded, the Muslim Brotherhood built a close connection with what was and still is by far the most reactionary, antidemocratic and anti-women state on earth, the Saudi kingdom. They established this link because of the affinity between their own perspective and what is usually called Wahhabism, which is the ideology of the tribal force that founded the Saudi kingdom.

The Muslim Brotherhood worked in close alliance with the Saudi kingdom from its foundation until 1990, when Iraq invaded Kuwait leading to the first US war on Iraq. Up until then, the Brotherhood was a major ally of the Saudi kingdom and of the United States itself, the kingdom’s overlord. Both used them in the fight against left-wing nationalism, particularly against Nasser in Egypt (1952-70), but also against the Communist movement and the Soviet Union’s influence in Muslim-majority countries. This unholy alliance of the United States, Saudi Arabia, and Islamic fundamentalist movements was reactionary through and through.

The Saudis broke with the Muslim Brotherhood because the latter didn’t follow the kingdom in supporting the 1991 US onslaught on Iraq. That was because, on the one hand, they found it quite difficult ideologically to condone a Western intervention against a Muslim country from the territory where Islam’s holy places are located. And, on the other hand, they had to take into consideration the fact that their constituencies were very much opposed to that aggression, as was the overwhelming majority of the public opinion in Arab countries.

So most regional branches of the Muslim Brotherhood condemned the US deployment and onslaught leading the Saudi kingdom to break with them. They therefore sought out and found another sponsor—the emirate of Qatar, which has been their chief sponsor ever since. After having been funded for decades by the Saudis, they are now funded by the emirate of Qatar. And Qatar, of

course, is another very close ally of the United States in the region—a country hosting forward headquarters of the US military Central Command (CENTCOM) and the most important platform for US air wars from Afghanistan to Syria.

When the Muslim Brotherhood held power in Egypt during the presidency of their member Mohamed Morsi, they earned the praise of Washington. Their record is more than obvious. Other, more “radical,” brands of Islamic fundamentalism have also collaborated in the past with the United States. Al-Qaida’s story is well-known: how they originated in joining the US-Saudi-Pakistani-backed guerillas against the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan before turning into violent foes of the United States and the Saudi royal family after 1990, for a reason similar to that which led to the Brotherhood’s break with the kingdom.

Has the class character of Islamic fundamentalism changed with the development of these state sponsors? Is it still the case that it is an expression of the petty bourgeoisie or has it become “bourgeoisified?”

First of all, Islamic fundamentalism is not restricted to one movement. It is a broad spectrum of forces and groups, as I emphasized, from the Muslim Brotherhood to jihadists to totalitarian fanatics like ISIS. Even if we restrict the discussion to the Muslim Brotherhood, we would need to keep in mind that it is a regional and global organization whose strategies and tactics vary from place to place. However, if we focus solely on Egypt, there has indeed been a clear “bourgeoisification” of the Egyptian Brotherhood.

After Nasser repressed them, many of their members and leaders ended up in exile in the Saudi kingdom. Several of them became businessmen there and profited from the oil boom of the 1970s. The connection with the Saudi state and Gulf capital played an important role in developing a layer of what the Turks call a “devout bourgeoisie” in Egypt—a section that played an increasingly important role inside the Brotherhood.

While this capitalist fraction grew considerably in importance within the Brotherhood, the bulk of its rank and file, its troops, remain recruited among the petty bourgeoisie and poorer layers of society. This should come as no surprise to anyone. Look at Donald Trump in the United States. He is the lightning rod of reactionary politics, but his followers are not exactly Microsoft shareholders. The capitalist right-wing, especially its most reactionary brands, always seek to gain a mass following among other classes, especially among resentful sections of the middle classes and proletariat.

This said, the change in the class composition of the Brotherhood’s leadership has not fundamentally altered its program. They were never anticapitalist to start with—beyond very general phrases on social equity that you hear even from the most conservative parties. Except for groups openly adhering to a crude social Darwinism, even the most conservative political parties mouth compassionate rhetoric. Remember George W. Bush’s “compassionate conservatism.” The same goes for the Brotherhood. They will talk about caring for the poor, in order to say that Islam provides the solution and Islamic charity will alleviate poverty. All of this fits neatly with a neoliberal perspective that supports privatization of social care and its delegation to private charities.

Unsurprisingly, when the Brotherhood came to power recently in Tunisia and Egypt, they continued the economic policies of the previous regimes. They adhered to IMF stipulations and did everything they could to please the capitalist class, including the old regime’s crony capitalists in both countries. Islamic fundamentalists did not oppose the neoliberal order that has wreaked havoc in the Middle East.

Why did Islamic fundamentalism become such a dominant political trend in the Middle

East? This is surprising given the rich history of secular nationalism and Communist organization in the region.

This is a very important issue. An impressionistic view prevails today, as a result of the media's continuous reports on various strains of Islamic fundamentalism in the Middle East. This created the impression that religion, in general, and Islamic fundamentalism, in particular, has always dominated politics in the region. But that is definitely not true.

A country like Egypt, the birthplace of the Muslim Brotherhood, provides a good illustration. The Brotherhood managed to grow there and achieve a spectacular advance in the 1940s building a force with hundreds of thousands of followers. One of the key reasons for its advance was the fact that the Left was quite weak and fragmented in that country.

This was in contrast to other countries in the region at that time, where left-leaning secular nationalists and Communists were quite strong, and the Brotherhood consequently much weaker. In Syria and Iraq, the secular nationalist Baath party was developing in rivalry with a mass Communist movement.

Things began to change in Egypt with the 1952 coup. Nasser and his group of middle-ranking military officers toppled the high brass of the army as well as the monarchy, and proclaimed the republic. They were a mixed bag politically. Over time, they kept shifting to the left, escalating nationalist and social reforms. They passed land reform, redistributing the property of large landowners. They also nationalized foreign properties, their most spectacular act being the nationalization of the Suez Canal in 1956, which led to combined British, French, and Israeli aggression against Egypt. The nationalization of foreign assets was soon followed by extensive nationalization of Egyptian private assets and the proclamation of "socialism" in 1961.

The leftwing radicalization of these nationalists—with the towering figure of Nasser central to the process—made them tremendously popular, not only in Egypt but in the whole region and beyond in all of the Third World. That was because of their social reforms and their opposition to imperialism and Zionism, which echoed the aspirations of the masses. Early on, after a brief period of cooperation, they clashed with the Muslim Brotherhood and repressed them before embarking on their radicalizing course. From then on, the Brothers became the bitterest enemies of the nationalists. And the Saudis, in tandem with Washington, used them as a weapon against Nasser.

As a result of the radicalization and rising clout of Nasserism, the Brotherhood became completely marginalized in Egypt. They had been severely repressed, to be sure, but repression alone can never completely marginalize a movement that retains a strong mass appeal. The fact is that the Brothers lost their appeal. They had no solutions to offer to the real social problems of the masses, whereas the nationalists addressed these issues in part. In that period, most people in Egypt and the whole region came to view the Muslim Brothers as agents of the Saudis and the CIA.

The situation began to change at the end of the 1960s with the crisis of secular nationalism. The defining moment was Israel's victory in 1967 over Nasserist Egypt and Baathist Syria. As in Egypt, the latter had undergone a leftwing nationalist radicalization led by a group that Assad—the father of the current butcher in Syria—would topple soon after. With the 1967 defeat, followed in 1970 by the crushing of the Palestinian guerillas in Jordan, Nasser's death and the overthrow of the leftwing faction of the Baath, radical Arab nationalism suffered a massive setback, which opened a space for the Muslim Brotherhood's comeback.

Nasser's successor, Sadat, inaugurated a course of de-Nasserization in Egypt, reversing all the progressive policies of the Nasser era, whether agrarian, industrial, anti-imperialist or anti-Zionist.

As he embarked on that regressive journey, he released the Muslim Brotherhood from jail and opened the door for its members in exile to return. That was because he needed them as allies in his reactionary enterprise in Egypt. They happily played that role, becoming the shock troops of Sadat's ideological backlash in countering the Left. Sadat allowed them to rebuild their organization into a mass movement, provided that they did not challenge his rule. They maintained this relationship with Sadat's successor, Mubarak.

However, in a context of a weak organized Left, whose most visible section was involved in a similarly ambiguous relation with the regime, the Brotherhood filled a vacuum, attracting disgruntled sections of the population. With funds brought by the new capitalists in their ranks and provided by their Saudi sponsor, they managed to grow spectacularly anew. But with their newfound power came ambitions of playing more of a political role than the regime would allow. This created tensions leading, at times, to their repression by the regime. But each time they were released from jail after relatively brief periods of detention. They never suffered as harsh a repression as they had under Nasser. Mubarak never attempted to crush them or fully ban their movement. They remained tolerated in order to be used by the regime, encountering temporary repression only when the regime thought that they overstepped their bounds.

Thus, they didn't emerge out of the blue in 2011. They were a very important force in Egypt, including in the electoral arena. In 2005, they even managed to get 20 percent of the seats in parliament. Mubarak used this controlled surge as a warning to the George W. Bush administration, which was putting pressure on him for some degree of political liberalization. With no significant forces on the left or among liberals able to challenge the regime and to embody popular discontent, Islamic fundamentalism was pretty much in the best position to capture this potential.

But history shows that when there is a progressive current with some credibility, it can counter fundamentalism effectively. The weakness of the left is inversely related with the strength of Islamic fundamentalism. Between these two currents, it is a zero-sum game, unlike the relationship of the left to liberation theology in Latin America. There, liberation theology, which is a progressive interpretation of Christianity, is a major component of the left, with which it is involved in many places in the same organizations, as used to be the case in Brazil's Workers Party (PT) in its radical heyday. In the Middle East, the Left faces Islamic fundamentalism as one of two main poles of reactionary politics, the regimes constituting the other pole.

Thus, the Arab uprising has been confronted since 2011 with two forces of counterrevolution—not a traditional binary opposition of revolution and counterrevolution, but a triangular configuration, with a revolutionary process facing two counterrevolutionary poles. The progressive forces, expressing the aspirations of the uprising, were instrumental in initiating and organizing it in the early stages. But they soon tumbled against the regimes, on the one hand, and the Islamic fundamentalist oppositions to the regimes on the other hand, both equally opposed to the aspirations of the revolutionary wave and, in some countries of the region, directly collaborating in thwarting its radicalization.

Egypt, again, provides a good illustration of the Brothers' collaboration with the military in 2011, the first year of the uprising. This actually opened a space for the progressive camp. The 2012 presidential election saw the emergence of the progressive pole with the Nasserist candidate, Hamdeen Sabahi, managing to get—to the surprise of everybody—the largest vote in Cairo and Alexandria and one fifth of the vote nationally. He came quite close to the two leading candidates in the first round, the candidate of the military and that of the Muslim Brotherhood, Mohamed Morsi.

Unfortunately, however, Sabahi fell into the trap of supporting the military coup against Morsi in 2013. Instead of carrying on opposing consistently both counterrevolutionary camps, he fell behind

one of them: after allying with the Muslim Brotherhood in 2011, he allied with the military in 2013. It is only when he stood at equal distance from both in 2012 that he achieved a breakthrough. From this experience, the Left must learn a key lesson if it wants to become a credible force and lead a new uprising to victory. It must build an alternative both to the regime and to the Islamic fundamentalists. If it does not, and since politics like nature abhors a vacuum, the Muslim Brotherhood could make a comeback and rebuild itself as the main opposition to the regime, or worse, we could see the development anew of more violent brands of Islamic fundamentalism.

This seems to me worth developing some more. How should the Left position itself in relation to Islamic fundamentalist forces fighting imperialism or Zionism? For example, how should the Left approach Hamas and Hezbollah?

The Left has developed a rich tradition that we should draw on in approaching this question. This tradition consists in supporting just struggles against colonialism and imperialism, regardless of who is waging them, without turning this into uncritical support to those who are waging the struggles. For instance, when fascist Italy invaded Ethiopia in 1935, it made complete sense for any anti-imperialist to oppose the invasion, although Ethiopia was ruled by a regime that was extremely reactionary by any leftwing standard. Opposition to Italy's invasion did not mean uncritical support to the Ethiopian emperor.

The same approach should be followed today. Hamas or Hezbollah have been indeed engaged in struggles against Israeli occupation and aggression. We support this struggle, regardless of who is waging it. But Hamas is not the only group fighting Israel; there are other groups on the Palestinian scene. So we need to determine within that range of anti-Zionist groups which are closer to our political perspective. And the same goes for Lebanon.

In both Palestine and Lebanon, the zero-sum game between the Left and these forces is a fact. Hamas managed to grow at the expense of the Palestinian Left. At the time of the first Palestinian intifada in 1988, the Left was the leading force in the 1967-occupied territories. But its groups regrettably ended up directly or indirectly condoning Yasser Arafat's capitulation to the US and Israel. And this was disastrous for their political influence, opening a door to Hamas. Remember that Hamas was founded by the Muslim Brotherhood's branch in Palestine, which until then had been actually favored by the Israeli occupation as an antidote to the PLO.

The same goes for Hezbollah in Lebanon. It emerged after the Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 1982, but it did not initiate the resistance to this invasion. It was actually the Communist Party and leftwing nationalist forces that did so, drawing on a tradition of struggle by these forces against repeated Israeli invasions of southern Lebanon. Hezbollah built itself at the expense of these forces—especially the Communist Party. The latter had a strong influence in Shia-majority regions in Lebanon and was therefore seen as a major competitor by Hezbollah—a sectarian Shia organization.

Hezbollah went so far as to assassinate prominent Shia figures of the Communist Party. Although it became the dominant force in a just fight—the struggle against the Israeli occupation—it is definitely not a progressive force. It achieved its status while repressing and squeezing out progressive forces that were waging that same struggle. It was nevertheless correct to support the Lebanese resistance, even though it became overwhelmingly dominated by Hezbollah. This is not the same as supporting Hezbollah in general, unconditionally, and uncritically.

Hezbollah's domestic politics in Lebanon, whether economic, social, or cultural, are absolutely not progressive. The Party of God (Hezbollah in Arabic) accommodated itself very well with the neoliberal reconstruction of Lebanon. And one cannot also forget that it is closely dependent on the Iranian regime, which is anything but progressive. Now, if the US or Israel launched an attack on

Iran, we would not hesitate in supporting that country. But this does not mean that we don't regard the Iranian regime as a reactionary, repressive, capitalist regime, and therefore an enemy of the social cause for which we fight.

This is very important to grasp because, in recent years, Iran and Hezbollah have come to the rescue of the counterrevolutionary regime in Syria. They have supplied it with key shock troops that have joined its onslaught on the popular democratic movement. This shows their deeply reactionary character. For the Iranian regime, this was in direct continuity with its crackdown on the democratic movement in Iran in 2009.

How should the Left position itself vis-à-vis the Brotherhood in Egypt today? Some characterize it as a reformist force with which the Left can form united fronts. What do you think of that? And what's your alternative to that approach?

Well, let me point to the attitudes of some sections of the Left in Egypt rather than prescribing a line from afar. There are sections of the Left that adhere to a position that I find correct, of opposing the military seizure of power and condemning the very brutal repression against the Muslim Brotherhood, without giving any political support to the latter.

Characterizing the Brotherhood as "reformist" is misleading, to say the least. Unqualified, such a label can imply that the Brotherhood is seen as similar to reformist wings of the workers' movement, which would be a preposterous confusion. You could say, of course, that the Brotherhood is "reformist" (or "moderate") in comparison to "radical" jihadists and terrorists such as al-Qaeda and Isis, but that would be within the spectrum of reactionary Islamic fundamentalist ideology.

It would be utterly wrong and misleading, however, to say that the Brotherhood is "reformist," without any qualification, meaning that they are reformist in the same way as some nonrevolutionary progressive currents, whether of Stalinist, social democratic, or leftwing nationalist—currents that believe they can achieve socialism without dismantling the bourgeois state. The ultra-neoliberal Muslim Brotherhood is "reformist" only in implementing its Islamic fundamentalist program, not at all in some social-democratic sense. It is an utterly reactionary force in social politics. But this does not justify in the least supporting their repression at the hand of regimes that are as much reactionary as they are. The Left should always be the most consistent fighter for democratic freedoms.

What are the lessons you draw for the Left from the role of Islamic fundamentalist forces in the Arab Spring as a whole?

What I have said about Egypt can be extended to the whole Arab uprising. The Left must adopt a correct attitude of opposition to both counterrevolutionary poles represented by the regimes, on the one hand, and the Islamic fundamentalist forces, on the other, and strive to build a third pole, equally opposed to both in strategic perspective.

Of course, on a tactical ground, the Left may "strike together" with one against the other—the most dangerous of the day—provided it continues to "walk separately" with its own program, challenging both reactionary poles. Strategically, the Left should be waging its fight on both fronts. Instead of this approach, tragically, we have seen progressive forces align themselves with the Islamic fundamentalists against the regimes—as happened in the first stages of the uprising in many countries, or is still happening in the Syrian case—while other sections of the Left lined up with the existing regimes against the Islamic fundamentalists.

And whereas you may find among the first category in the region a few individuals mislabeling the

Muslim Brotherhood as “reformist” (the truth is that this characterization is so odd that very few people can sustain it), most groups in the second category mislabel the Brotherhood as “fascist,” which is equally wrong. The analogy with fascism disregards major differences between the two currents and focuses only on some organizational features that are common to very different parties based on mass mobilization and indoctrination, including the Stalinist tradition. Unlike historical fascism, the Muslim Brotherhood did not emerge in imperialist countries in reaction to a workers’ movement challenging capitalism and in order to embody a harder version of imperialism.

So you have these two symmetrically opposed types of approaches. And then you find leftwing forces that have shifted from one to the other. For instance, the Egyptian Nasserist party led by Sabahi shifted from allying itself with the Muslim Brotherhood in 2011, to the point of joining their electoral coalition as a junior partner, into allying itself with the army in 2013, joining the chorus that sang the praise of Field-Marshal Sisi. This political pattern is disastrous for the building of a progressive alternative in the region. It is crucial for the progressives to assert a third revolutionary pole, equally opposed to both counterrevolutionary poles now dominating the scene, if they are, at some point, to embody again the aspirations that inspired the Arab Spring in 2011.

Short of that, we will see more of the ongoing disaster with a regional scene overwhelmed by the clash between the two counterrevolutionary poles. The best scenario in the short term is a coalition between the two reactionary poles, as happened in Tunisia where the local equivalent of the Muslim Brotherhood entered into a governmental coalition with the old regime forces, or in Morocco where the king coopted the local equivalent into government. Washington and its European allies are very much pushing for this scenario almost everywhere in the region: reconciliation between the two counterrevolutionary poles makes full sense from their perspective, of course.

But such reconciliation would also be beneficial from a progressive perspective, because it would compel the progressive forces to oppose both counterrevolutionary poles and facilitate their emergence as the alternative to both of them. In any event, the future of the left in the Middle East hangs on getting this orientation right.

Gilbert Achcar interviewed by Ashley Smith

P.S.

* ISR, Issue #103: Interviews. Winter 2016-17:

<http://isreview.org/issue/103/islamic-fundamentalism-arab-spring-and-left>

Special thanks to Robin Horne, Sarah Levy, and Andrea Hektor for transcription.

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