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Marxism, the Arab Spring, and Islamic fundamentalism

- Debate - Fascism -

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The revolutionary process in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) has suffered through a period of defeats and setbacks since the heady days of 2011. Progressive and democratic forces have been or are being squeezed by two counterrevolutionary forces—the existing regimes and various strains of Islamic fundamentalism—and their imperial and regional supporters. The regimes were and are the main threat to the revolts. At the same time, Islamic fundamentalist movements have to be understood as a fundamentally reactionary political force throughout the region.

This counterrevolutionary role necessitates a reevaluation of much of the Left's analytical understanding of, and strategic approach to, Islamic fundamentalism. The Left must stake out a position independent of both the existing regimes and Islamic fundamentalists, based on a program of democracy, social justice, equality, and liberation and emancipation of the oppressed.

Why use the term "Islamic fundamentalism"?

Organizations such as the so-called ISIS, [\[2\]](#) al-Qaeda, the various branches of the Muslim Brotherhood and Hezbollah have differences in their formation, development, composition, and strategy. Nevertheless, they share a common political project, despite their significant differences. As Marxist scholar and commentator Gilbert Achcar argues, all variants of Islamic fundamentalism share a common reactionary and sectarian goal of establishing "an Islamic State based on the Sharia" [\[3\]](#) that preserves the existing neoliberal capitalist order.

This unites Islamic fundamentalists from their gradualist to jihadist wings. Thus, for example, the former deputy supreme guide of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood, Muhammad Khairat al-Shater declared in March 2011, following the overthrow of then President Hosni Mubarak:

The Ikhwan are working to restore Islam in its all-encompassing conception to the lives of people, and they believe that this will only come about through the strong society. Thus the mission is clear: restoring Islam in its all-encompassing conception; subjugating people to God; instituting the religion of God; the Islamization of life, empowering of God's religion; establishing the Nahda of the Ummah on the basis of Islam. . . . Thus we've learned [to start with] building the Muslim individual, the Muslim family, the Muslim society, the Islamic government, the global Islamic state. [\[4\]](#)

Similarly, the Lebanese Shia fundamentalist party Hezbollah (founded officially in 1985) has consistently expressed the view that an Islamic state is its preferred political system. It argues, however, that because of the country's political constitutional arrangement that apportions political power by sect and ethnicity, its implementation is impracticable at the moment. That, however, has not prevented Hezbollah from opposing several proposals to secularize the Lebanese state, calling them all anti-Islamic. [\[5\]](#) For example, it has denounced civil marriage as "an implementation of atheism." [\[6\]](#)

Islamic fundamentalist groups use different strategies and tactics to achieve their objectives. As Achcar argues, "Some 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." [\[7\]](#) The gradualists like the Muslim Brotherhood, Hezbollah, or Iraq's Dawa participate in elections and in existing state

institutions. By contrast, jihadists like al-Qaeda and ISIS consider these to be un-Islamic, and turn instead to guerilla or terrorist tactics in the hope of eventual seizure of the state. Among the jihadists, there are debates and divisions on the tactics and strategies to achieve their goal of an Islamic State. In various contexts and historical periods, the different currents have sometimes collaborated and at other times competed and even clashed with one another.

Despite their strategic differences, they all share a reactionary and authoritarian political program and vision of society. This can be seen quite starkly in their attitude toward women. All trends of Islamic fundamentalism promote a sexist vision that endorses male domination and restricts women to subordinate roles in society. First and foremost, they define women's primary function as "motherhood" and, in particular, inculcating the next generation with Islamic principles. They impose clothing and behavior supposed to preserve women's honor and that of the family.

Any straying from such norms and restrictions they consider a concession to Western cultural imperialism. For example, the leader of the Islamic Republic of Iran, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, has warned against following the Western version of gender equality, saying it has led to corruption. [8] The Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood denounced a 2013 UN report that called for the state to recognize marital rape as a crime, ensure equality between men and women in marriage, divorce, and matters of inheritance, and end polygamy and dowry as an attempt to "undermine Islamic ethics, and destroy the family." [9] These "conservative strictures on the role of women," Adam Hanieh argues, "are an integral component of broader counterrevolutionary goals," and rightly concludes that "the position of women is thus a key barometer for the health of revolutionary process." [10]

Islamic fundamentalists hold similar reactionary views of LGBTQ populations. For example, Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah accused homosexuals of "destroying societies." He described LGBTQ people as a foreign import that threatened Islamic society with moral deviance and weird lifestyles. [11] Similarly, the Egyptian Salafist Sheikh Youssef Qardawi, who is a reference point for the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood, has repeatedly described LGBTQ people as "sexual perverts" and called for their collective punishment, including putting them to death. [12] Finally, Islamic fundamentalist movements have targeted religious minorities in their own countries and promoted sectarian discourses and behaviors against them. ISIS has carried out, for example, campaigns of murder, violence, and repression against Christians, Yazidi, and other religious minorities in the territories it occupied in Iraq and Syria and launched terrorist attacks against Copts in Egypt and Shias in Iraq.

While Islamic fundamentalists are united by this reactionary worldview, socialists must recognize the differences between gradualist trends of Islamic fundamentalist movements such as Hezbollah and the Muslim Brotherhood on one side, and jihadist groups such as al-Qaeda and ISIS on the other. They are not the same, and socialists must approach them differently.

It is possible to imagine unity in action with gradualist trends in specific contexts for precise and short-term objectives. Socialists could and did work with the Brotherhood in Tahrir Square in Cairo during the eighteen days of mass mobilizations against Mubarak. It is, however, simply impossible to envisage similar collaborations with al-Qaeda and ISIS. In Syria, these groups attacked activists for raising nonsectarian and democratic slogans. [13]

At the same time, socialists should not pursue long-term political alliances with gradualist trends of Islamic fundamentalist movements, especially when they are much larger. The danger in such a situation is that socialists will put themselves under the thumb of a more powerful and reactionary movement, and instead of winning adherents away from it, will at best only provide it left political cover to the detriment of the growth of the Left as an alternative.

Islamic fundamentalism, Islam, and Islamophobia

Socialists should, however, be careful not to conflate Islam and Islamic fundamentalism. Instead we must make a sharp distinction between the religion Islam and fundamentalist groups. If we fail to do this, we risk falling into the Islamophobia fostered by the American and European ruling classes and their media. Islamophobia is a form of religious bigotry mixed with racism directed against the Muslim population.

The imperialist powers have increasingly relied on Islamophobia since 9/11 to justify their so-called War on Terror. They characterized this as a "clash of civilizations" between a "Christian/secular, civilized, and democratic West" and a barbaric and violent "Muslim World." Marxists must challenge such Islamophobia. Instead we must defend freedom of religion, and at the same time the right of oppressed groups to self-determination. In his Critique of the Gotha Program, Marx argued that we must reject state interference in matters of belief and worship. [14] We must, therefore, see rules about the wearing of the veil, whether imposed by fundamentalists or legally restricted in Europe, as a reactionary act that goes against women's right to self-determination.

We also must reject Islamophobic claims that the roots of ISIS, al-Qaeda, Boko Haram, and other fundamentalists can be found in the Koran. Such groups and their actions should be analyzed as the product of international and local social, economic, and political conditions in the present time, not as the product of a text written 1400 years ago. Do we explain the US invasion of Iraq by the religious beliefs of George Bush (who reported that God told him in a dream to invade Iraq)? Of course not. We instead explain Bush's war, his motives, and their ideological justification as the product of American imperialism.

It is thus necessary for Marxists to analyze Islamic fundamentalist groups by looking at the contemporary socio-economic dynamics that produce them and see their program as their attempt to provide reactionary solutions to real problems in society. In his article "The Attitude of the Workers' Party towards Religion," penned in 1909, Russian revolutionary Vladimir Lenin argued that if we do not use this historical materialist method, Marxists would mirror the flawed method of bourgeois ideologists who explain religious belief through the alleged ignorance of the masses or some mystical characteristic imputed to an entire people. [15] Such approaches today lead to an essentialization of "the Other," in this case "the Muslim."

The roots of Islamic fundamentalism

What are the roots of Islamic fundamentalism? The first thing to note is that such fundamentalism is an international phenomenon, not something unique to the Middle East or other societies with predominantly Muslim populations. We have seen the development of similar political currents like Christian fundamentalism, Hindu fundamentalism, and Jewish fundamentalism in Israel, that all have their own peculiar brand of right-wing politics. But none of them, despite their call to return to an earlier golden age, should be seen as fossilized elements from the past. They may employ symbols and narratives from earlier periods, but all these fundamentalisms are the product of modern societies. [16]

It is interesting to note that throughout the world, fundamentalist and conservative religious movements have supported neoliberal policies while advocating increased charitable work, leading some scholars to talk of "a smooth alliance between neoliberals and religious fundamentalists," which could be characterized as "religious neoliberalism." [17]

Islamic fundamentalism grew out of the Middle East's specific political and economic conditions, where imperialist powers have had an essential and ongoing impact on the region's states and political economy. Following the discovery of oil in the 1920s and 1930s in the Gulf countries, especially Saudi Arabia, imperialist powers saw the region as a material prize to be fought over. As Adam Hanieh argues, these powers saw the region as playing "a

potentially decisive role in determining the fortunes of capitalism at the global scale." [18]

Western imperialist powers, principally the United States, played a key role in shaping the region's rentier states, especially the Gulf states like Saudi Arabia that generate revenue by renting their oil and natural gas to international oil conglomerates. Since the 1980s, these states have adopted a neoliberal model focused on speculative investment in search of short-term profits in the unproductive sectors of the economy, especially in real estate.

The United States has used its strategic partnership with Iran (until the overthrow of the shah in 1979), Israel, and Saudi Arabia to dominate the region. It backed them to confront Arab nationalist regimes like Egypt under Gamal Nasser, the region's communist Left, and various popular and national struggles, which generally sought greater sovereignty, social justice, and independence for their countries from imperial domination. As part of this effort, Saudi Arabia fostered and financed various Sunni Islamic fundamentalist movements, most particularly the Muslim Brotherhood, to counter the nationalists and the Left.

The United States, with the help of its allies in the region, including Saudi Arabia and Pakistan, pumped billions of dollars into the training and arming of Islamic fundamentalist fighters and groups from 1979 onward. They backed such groups in Afghanistan in an effort to weaken its Cold War enemy, the Soviet Union. Al-Qaeda grew out of this process. American imperialism helped conjure into being the most extremist wing of the Islamic fundamentalism that would later turn on Washington.

Israel used a similar strategy in the Palestinian Occupied Territories, particularly in the Gaza Strip, by repressing the national and progressive forces of the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) while it turned a blind eye to the expansion of Islamic fundamentalist competitors. The Iranian Revolution's overthrow of the shah's regime and subsequent establishment of the Islamic Republic of Iran in 1979 boosted Shia fundamentalist movements in the region.

The crisis in the Arab nationalist regimes opened space for fundamentalists to flourish. Egypt and other states abandoned their previous radical social policies and anti-imperialism for two key reasons. First, they suffered defeat at the hands of Israel. Second, their state capitalist methods of development began to stagnate. As a result, they opted for a rapprochement with the Western countries and their Gulf allies and adopted neoliberalism, rolling back many of the social reforms that had won them popularity among workers and peasants. In turn, the regimes turned on the Palestinian national movement reaching an accommodation with Israel. At the same time, all the Arab nationalist regimes, and others such as in Tunisia, deliberately supported Islamic fundamentalist movements or allowed their development against leftist and nationalist movements. In Egypt, for example, following the death of Nasser in 1970, the new regime led by Sadat established a tacit alliance with the Muslim Brotherhood against nationalist and progressive forces in the country.

The last significant development that fueled the rise of fundamentalism was growing political rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran. Each instrumentalized its own sectarian fundamentalism to achieve its counterrevolutionary objectives. First, they used it to divert popular classes from pursuing their own political and socio-economic objectives and, when challenged by popular opposition, tried to divide and conquer it along sectarian lines. Second, they used fundamentalism to mobilize support both within their country and their competitor's bloc to increase their power in the region. These were the modern historical material conditions that gave rise to both Shia and Sunni Islamic fundamentalism.

The class basis of Islamic fundamentalism

The historic social base of Islamic fundamentalism from the dawn of the twentieth century onward is the petty bourgeoisie. Of course, each country's fundamentalist formations have their own particular history, but they do all share roots in various elements of the petty bourgeoisie. In Egypt, for example, it grew among the rural elements of that class that moved to the cities amid the economic and social changes of the 1960s and 1970s. Once urbanized in the 1980s and 1990s, its leadership tended to come from professional layers such as doctors, engineers, and lawyers. It found increasing numbers of adherents among the educated youth left without a future by the regimes' adoption of neoliberalism. [19]

Just like the petty bourgeoisie in general, Islamic fundamentalist organizations are pulled in two directions—toward rebellion against existing society and toward compromise with it. Either way, their reactionary project offers no solution to sections of the peasantry and working class that are attracted by it. Islamic fundamentalist parties seek to reestablish the Ummah, a religio-political entity that would gather all Muslims and transcend the cleavages that divide them today. Class struggle is therefore seen as negative because it fragments the Ummah.

Over time, the fundamentalists' petty bourgeois leadership has increasingly deepened their ties to the bourgeoisie even as they attempted to preserve their cross-class base of support. Saudi Arabia played a key role in this process. It provided the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood and other groups with privileged access to business and employment opportunities during the 1970s and 1980s oil boom. This situation accelerated the process of embourgeoisement of the fundamentalist movement. More and more capitalists began to play a leading role inside the movement. [20] The Egyptian secret services had identified around nine hundred companies belonging to members of the country's Muslim Brotherhood. [21]

In Lebanon, Hezbollah underwent a similar transformation. Originally it possessed a petty bourgeois leadership and cadres that attracted a popular social base among the Shia middle classes and poor. Over time, a Shia fraction of the bourgeoisie in Lebanon and in the diaspora became increasingly influential in the party. Hezbollah now has a major base of support among Shia businesspeople as well as among the upper middle classes, especially elite professions.

Their increasingly bourgeois funding sources explain the fundamentalists' support for the capitalist system and its current neoliberal regime of accumulation. They receive donations not only from various states, but also private religious donations (the zakat) from private networks made up of bourgeois and petty bourgeois sectors of society. For example, Hezbollah receives massive funding from Iran as well as the Lebanese Shia bourgeoisie and petty bourgeoisie.

Hezbollah also gets "donations from individuals, groups, shops, companies, and banks as well as their counterparts in countries such as the United States, Canada, Latin America, Europe and Australia." [22] With their bourgeoisification, Hezbollah owns "dozens of supermarkets, gas stations, department stores, restaurants, construction companies, and travel agencies." [23] Similar dynamics can be found among some branches of the Muslim Brotherhood. All of this serves to integrate the fundamentalists into the existing order.

The tensions between the fundamentalists' increasingly bourgeois leadership on one side, and its social base in the petty bourgeois and impoverished sections of the peasantry and working classes on the other side, have produced contradictions in their political program and activities. On the one hand, they profess a commitment to equality and social justice that they address mainly through top-down charitable projects. On the other, they advocate neoliberal economic principles and denounce social movements from below, especially the trade union movement. [24]

These contradictions run right through fundamentalism's theory and practice. For example, the founder of the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood, Mustafa al-Sibai, argued "the socialism of Islam leads necessarily to the solidarity of various social categories and not to the war between classes as communism." [25] His 1959 book, *Socialism of Islam*, put

forward the idea that social equality can be achieved by appealing to an individual's moral obligation to donate to the poor instead of governmental and social reforms like progressive taxation, nationalization, and establishing welfare state programs. Sibai's vision for an Islamic socialism was however a purely rhetorical maneuver used to contend with the rising influence of the country's Baathists and Communists. [26]

With the retreat of Arab nationalism and the Left, Islamic fundamentalist thinkers abandoned such radical rhetoric and increasingly stressed that the solution to the problem of poverty lay in a return to Islamic values and tradition. Rached Ghannouchi, the leader of Tunisia's branch of the Muslim Brotherhood, al-Nahda, argued, "We need to emphasize that poverty, in the eyes of Islam, is linked to unbelief," and went on to state, "We (the Islamic fundamentalist movements) are the guarantor of a particular social order and of a liberal economic regime." [27]

A similar trend can be found among Shia Islamic fundamentalist figures and movements. For example, during the Iranian Revolution, Khomeini presented Islam through the lens of social justice, praising the oppressed poor and condemning the rich, the greedy palace dwellers, and their foreign patrons. He used this rhetoric to mobilize the urban populace against the shah's regime.

But after Khomeini consolidated the new Islamic regime and repressed his competition on the left, he abandoned this egalitarian rhetoric to depict the free market as an essential pillar of society and to extol private property. He transformed his definition of "the oppressed" from an economic category describing the deprived masses into a political label for the regime's supporters including wealthy bazaar merchants. [28] He also stressed that the regime sought harmonious relationships between factory owners and workers and between landlords and peasants. The regime even ruled that land reform should not limit ownership, since such restrictions would violate the sacred rights of private property enshrined in sharia.

Neoliberalism and charity

Islamic fundamentalists have supported neoliberal policies and built charitable organizations to fill the vacuum left by the destruction of welfare state programs. They use these to win people's allegiance to their reactionary project. The Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood is perhaps the best example. [29] Hassan Malek, a businessman and ranking figure in the Brotherhood declared in 2012 that the former dictator Hosni Mubarak's neoliberal policies were sound, and that only corruption and nepotism marred their implementation. [30] Recognizing a potential ally, the Cairo investment bank EFG-Hermes set up a meeting in June 2011 between fourteen international investment funds and the Brotherhood's deputy supreme guide Khairat al-Shater. The investors declared that they "were positively surprised to find some of the ideas shared by the Brotherhood to be mostly capitalist in nature." [31]

The Lebanese party Hezbollah has also consistently endorsed free-market policies and defended private property, despite also professing a commitment to social justice goals. Hezbollah has supported policies such as privatization, liberalization, and opening up to foreign capital. It in no way sees these in contradiction to its purported commitment to social equality, despite the poverty these policies have caused.

The fundamentalists have used charitable organizations to address the social impact of neoliberalism. While these organizations cannot overcome poverty, the fundamentalists have used them to win hegemony among sections of the popular classes. Often they have worked out agreements with the state to direct funds into their charitable organizations promoting Islamic principles. [32] In Egypt, as the state has cut back the welfare state, the Muslim Brotherhood has used its huge network of organizations to spread their fundamentalist principles among sections of the subaltern classes.

Similarly, Hezbollah won leadership among Lebanon's Shia population through a combination of consent and coercion. On the one hand, it won support by its provision of much needed services to large sections of the Shia popular sector, and, on the other, through repression of those who defied its moral norms and political dictates. It combined consent and coercion through its domination of the armed resistance against Israel. Hezbollah has thus managed to establish itself and its fundamentalist ideology as the dominant force among Shias in Lebanon.

Geopolitics, Islamic fundamentalism, and the Arab Spring

Imperial and regional powers have used Islamic fundamentalists to increase their influence and diminish that of their opponents in the Middle East. Iran has backed Hezbollah in Lebanon and Shia Islamic fundamentalist organizations such as al-Dawa in Iraq. Saudi Arabia supported the Muslim Brotherhood until 1991, and then various Salafist movements after that. Qatar replaced Saudi Arabia as the Brotherhood's main supporter after 1991 and at the same time bankrolls other Salafist organizations. These capitalist states do not support the fundamentalists for religious reasons but as a way to increase regional power, weaken their opponents, and hijack or repress democratic social movements from below.

For example, Qatar has used the Muslim Brotherhood during the uprisings in the MENA region to expand its political and economic influence in the region. They recognized that the Brotherhood was a safe alternative to the decaying structures of the old regimes. It hoped to replace the old dictators with a procapitalist fundamentalist ally. With these it hoped to stabilize the region after the uprisings and expand its regional role at the expense of other Gulf Powers like Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE). This explains Saudi Arabia's recent push to isolate Qatar.

Imperialist powers have also backed fundamentalists for their own purposes. The United States was favorable to the Brotherhood's election to government in Egypt and Tunisia during the MENA uprisings, seeing them as a way to stabilize and preserve the existing order under a new leadership, recognizing that, in the words of Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa's Tancredi in *The Leopard*, "If we want things to stay as they are, things will have to change." [\[33\]](#)

The United States hoped the Brotherhood would follow the precedent of the Recep Erdogan's Justice and Development Party (AKP) in Turkey. Erdogan's regime is procapitalist, sometimes collaborates with US imperialism and certainly does not challenge it, and remains a loyal member of NATO. But the AKP is different from the Brotherhood in significant ways. It is not an Islamic fundamentalist party but a conservative, nationalist, and authoritarian one. Thus, in its first years in power before its crackdown after the recent coup attempt, it managed to win support from liberal and even leftist sections of society for its effort to reduce the army's power in the country.

The AKP also came to power in a nonrevolutionary situation and was able, at least for a time, to establish more stable hegemony over the country. As a result of these differences, the Brotherhood in Egypt and Tunisia was unable to replace the ancien régime or win hegemony among the popular classes. Nevertheless, it is significant that the United States saw the Brotherhood as a possible solution to stabilize the states in Tunisia and Egypt threatened with revolution.

Neither "Islamofascist". . .

The rise of fundamentalism has led to a sharp debate among socialists about how to characterize it and position the Left in relationship to it. Some socialists such as the Egyptian Marxist Samir Amin have characterized the various

trends of Islamic fundamentalism, including the Brotherhood, as "Islamofascists."

Amin argues that Political Islam's program belongs to the type of fascism found in dependent societies. In fact, it shares with all forms of fascism two fundamental characteristics: (1) the absence of a challenge to the essential aspects of the capitalist order (and in this context this amounts to not challenging the model of lumpen development connected to the spread of globalized neoliberal capitalism); and (2) the choice of antidemocratic, police-state forms of political management (such as the prohibition of parties and organizations, and forced Islamization of morals). [34]

This definition is so generic that it could be applied to many of the region's authoritarian regimes, including the supposedly secular ones, which oversee rentier economies and advocate conservative religious policies. As such, it is neither useful for explaining fascism nor Islamic fundamentalism. Fascism is far more specific than Amin's definition. Historically, fascism emerges in the petty bourgeoisie during a period of deep social crisis. It aims to protect the middle class against capitalist society's two main classes—big capital and the working class. While it espouses anticapitalist rhetoric, its primary objective is to build a mass street movement to smash the working class and its organizations, stifle political liberties in general, and scapegoat oppressed populations.

Islamic fundamentalism is not fascist. As Gilbert Achcar explains,

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 MB did not emerge in imperialist countries in reaction to a workers' movement challenging capitalism and in order to embody a harder version of imperialism. [35]

For example, the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt was founded in 1928 in reaction to the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, British occupation, and the spread of secular ideologies and foreign cultural influences. [36] Shia Islamic fundamentalist movements spread from Najaf, Iraq, through transnational clerical networks with the aim of opposing secular and communist ideologies and organizations. This is dramatically different than European fascism.

Moreover, Islamic fundamentalist movements generally aim to unify the *Ummah* regardless of territorial and ethnic limits. They also want to restore a mystified past political system, the caliphate. This is a dramatic contrast to fascist movements, which want to sharply define the nation in ethnic terms and build a new order and civilization.

Fascism is also an inaccurate characterization of jihadist groups such as ISIS and al-Qaeda. Of course they are violent, sectarian, and have a totalitarian vision of society. But they are very different than fascism in their origins and nature. Al-Qaeda emerged as a product of the Saudi, American, and Pakistani support for fundamentalist rebels against the Russian occupation of Afghanistan. Only later did it turn against the United States.

ISIS was born out of the American occupation of Iraq. It grew out of al-Qaeda in Iraq, which resisted both the US occupation and the Shia fundamentalist regime installed by the United States and supported by Iran. It later spread to Syria as it attempted to establish an Islamic Sunni caliphate. These formations are the outgrowth of imperialism and counterrevolution in the Middle East.

They do not have the typical characteristics of fascism. They do not attempt to build mass movements. Neither ISIS nor Syria's former al-Qaeda affiliate, Jabhat al-Nusra, [37] have mobilized mass demonstrations let alone popular struggle of any classes, even when they have faced popular opposition to their reactionary policies. [38] They both operate principally as an army or terrorist network, rather than as a mass political movement with an armed wing.

Based on this misidentification of fundamentalism as fascist, Amin and others have disastrously supported the existing regimes in the region. [39] They do so in the hopes that the state will curb the fundamentalists. This has led to catastrophic results especially in Egypt where many on the left supported General Abdel Fattah al-Sisi's coup against the Muslim Brotherhood or even participated in the interim cabinet following the coup d'état in July 2013. [40] Predictably, his rule has led to wholesale repression and denial of civil rights and liberties not only for members of the Muslim Brotherhood but also everyone else, including secular revolutionaries.

Similarly, many on the left have backed Bashar al-Assad's regime as the only alternative to al-Qaeda and ISIS. They thus betrayed the Syrian Revolution and became apologists for the regime's counterrevolution that in the main did not target ISIS or al-Qaeda but the revolutionaries, laying waste to the country in the process. Amin and others' tacit or open support for dictators like Sisi and Assad provides them left-wing cover to limit and close the space for democratic and progressive forces to organize. Even worse, it puts a left gloss on the regimes' justification of their repression as a "war against terror" against "extremism," rehabilitating American imperialism's principal justification for their global warmongering.

Socialists should not choose between the two poles of counterrevolution, especially the principal one, the existing regimes. Instead, the Left should oppose dictatorships, their counterrevolution, and champion the defense of democratic rights. In Egypt, for example, the Left, even as it refuses political support to the Brotherhood, should oppose Sisi's repression of it. Why? Because Sisi has used, and will continue to use, its attacks on the Brotherhood as a precedent to curtail everyone's right to organize, including progressive and democratic forces. Thus, to defend the democratic rights of all, including gradualist Islamic fundamentalist movements like the Brotherhood against state repression, is to defend the rights of social movements, the trade unions, the popular classes, and the Left.

Similarly, socialists should oppose war waged by states for imperialist, colonialist, and authoritarian objectives, while at the same time support the right of resistance to imperialism regardless of the ideology of the actors leading it. For example, in the case of wars launched by Israel against Lebanon and the Gaza Strip in the past, socialists should stand in solidarity with the people in these two territories and support the right of resistance, including from movements such as Hezbollah and Hamas.

Failure to do this means one is siding with the oppressor against the oppressed. However, whether in the case of opposition to repression or defense of the right of resistance, this should not translate into sowing illusions in, nor supporting the political project and program of, Islamic fundamentalist formations.

Socialists must understand that siding with the existing order will not challenge Islamic fundamentalism but actually preserve the conditions created by imperialism, dictatorship, and neoliberalism that led to their development in the first place. We can only sideline it as a force by building the Left and social movements for progressive social change. That means socialists have to side with the democratic and progressive groups on the ground struggling to overthrow authoritarian regimes, build an alternative to Islamic fundamentalists, and defeat neoliberalism and the class inequalities and social oppressions from sectarianism to sexism that it fosters. At the same time, we must oppose all regional and imperialist powers' counterrevolutionary interventions.

. . . Nor reformist and anti-imperialist

Designating Islamic fundamentalism fascist and supporting the existing regimes will only set back the project of building a progressive and independent Left. A minority on the left has attempted to present an alternative to this by characterizing gradualist Islamic fundamentalist organizations such as the Muslim Brotherhood as reformists and even anti-imperialists that the Left can and should collaborate with in united fronts under certain conditions. Jad

Bouharoun qualifies this designation, arguing for example that they are not reformist "in the classical Marxist sense of using reforms in order to attempt to bring about socialism; nor can they be considered of a similar nature to European social democratic parties."

At the same time, he uses the term reformist in a rather elastic fashion that downplays the reactionary character and project of the Brotherhood. Thus, he argues that they are "reformists insofar as they promise their supporters real change through institutionally sanctioned reforms to the existing state." He calls both the Brotherhood and Nasserite leftists "institutional reformists." [\[41\]](#)

Anne Alexander also rejects the analogy with social democracy. For example, she argues that she and others have "never argued that the Brotherhood has either the program or the social base of a social-democratic party. The Brotherhood's reformism is an expression of its internal social contradictions, which pull it constantly between confrontation and compromise with the regime, often despite the wishes of its leadership." [\[42\]](#)

Alexander has also, however, compared Mohammed Morsi to the reformist socialist Salvador Allende of Chile. "Morsi, of course, repeated Salvador Allende's mistake of appointing the man who would overthrow him. Social democratic reformists do all these things, and worse, in moments of profound class polarization and struggle." [\[43\]](#)

Those on the left that characterize the Brotherhood as reformist repeatedly compare it with socio-democratic parties. Phil Marfleet, for example, claims its 2011 political program echoes a "social democratic program worldwide" with the exception of references to zakat and waqf, it might have been a reformist agenda presented by parties across Europe." [\[44\]](#)

Thus, socialists who describe the gradualist strain of fundamentalism as reformist use the term in a slippery fashion, denying the analogy with social democracy while repeatedly using it. In reality, the Brotherhood's 2011 program was far from being social democratic; it was neoliberal. The repeated analogies with social democracy are problematic and confusing.

First, let's be clear what reformism is and is not. Originally, social-democratic reformism believed it possible to use the ballot box to win elected power in the bourgeois state and use it to dismantle capitalism and usher in socialist society. Its leadership did not in general come from the capitalist class but generally from the trade union officialdom and the petty bourgeois intelligentsia, while its membership was overwhelmingly working class.

Their leadership's class origins and especially the officialdom's role as a negotiator with capitalists in union struggles shape their conservative politics and practice. As Marxist Ernest Mandel explains, the reformists defend their own interests when they institutionalize class collaboration. These interests coincide historically with the defense of the bourgeois order. They do not necessarily coincide at every moment with the defense of the immediate interests of the majority, or even the whole of the big bourgeoisie. The reformist bureaucrats want to increase their "share of the cake." [\[45\]](#)

In the specific conditions of the long postwar boom, social-democratic parties and their bureaucratic forms of "struggle" succeeded in providing higher salaries, better benefits, stabilized working conditions, and an expanded welfare state in Europe. But after the onset of crisis in the 1970s, reformist parties increasingly adjusted their policies to this new situation of deteriorated living and working conditions. The labor bureaucracy and reformist politicians in Europe had thus no alternative but to make compromises and concessions to the employers' offensive and to manage austerity policies by capitalist state. [\[46\]](#) Moreover, social-democratic governments have sided with their imperial state in wars and maintained exploitative relations with colonies, semi-colonies, and the less powerful states of the "Third World." More recently, the vast majority of former social-democratic movements have adopted

neoliberalism and its policies of austerity.

Despite the many shortcomings of reformist organizations and their counterrevolutionary role at various points in history, it is misleading to compare them with gradualist version of Islamic fundamentalism. Parties and movements like the Brotherhood and Hezbollah have never in their history sought to or even claimed to have sought to gradually dismantle capitalism. The opposite is the case; the gradualists have historically supported capitalism including its current rapacious neoliberal regime of accumulation.

As we have seen, the social origins and composition of the fundamentalists' leadership and membership are very different from social-democratic parties. The fundamentalists' social base is the petty bourgeoisie, whereas social democracy's social base is the working class. Moreover, the gradualists' leadership, as we have seen, has undergone a process of embourgeoisement. Capitalists now play an increasing and explicit role in these parties and movements.

The gradualists, in contradistinction to even the most neoliberal reformists, promote a conservative, sectarian, sexist, homophobic, and anti-working class political program. The real analogy to European social democracy in Egypt is not the Brotherhood, but the Nasserite politician, Hamdeen Sabahi. Sabahi possessed a reformist program and he made reformist mistakes, notably support of Sisi's coup and repression of the Brotherhood. Nonetheless, he represented the democratic and social aspirations in the 2012 presidential elections. He promised a strong program of social reforms such as the implementation of a minimum and maximum wage, expansion of the public sector to create jobs, re-nationalization of companies, and a one-off 20 percent tax on the wealth of the richest 1 percent of the population. [47] His party, al-Karama, was generally composed of workers, and he found far more support in the workers' movement and their new independent trade unions than in the Brotherhood. In addition, he rejected the Brotherhood's sectarianism and attacks on women's rights.

A closer analogy to Sabahi is the Chilean socialist leader Salvador Allende of the early 1970s. Any comparison of the Chilean reformist to the Brotherhood is misleading. First it ignores the huge ideological gap and the policies implemented by the two actors in power. Moreover, their policy toward the military is drastically different. Allende selected General Augusto Pinochet after an earlier coup in the hope that he was a "legalist" who would respect the neutrality of the army in politics. This of course was disastrously naïve.

But it is very different than the relationship between the Brotherhood and the Egyptian army. The Chilean army never played as central a role in the political economy of Chile as the Egyptian army does in Egypt. Sisi's army is the real ruling power and core of the deep state. Morsi and the Brotherhood did not turn to the military in the hopes of staving off a coup; they attempted to form a direct alliance with the army from the first days of the uprising in 2011, knowing very well its political weight and its repressive role over decades.

From the first days of the revolution, the Brotherhood acted as a bulwark against criticism and protest of the military until after the overthrow of Morsi in July 2013. Before then, they denounced those protesting against the army as counterrevolutionaries and spreading sedition. Indeed, Morsi appointed Sisi as head of the army knowing full well that he had jailed and tortured protesters.

The distinction is even clearer when it comes to the respective policies of Morsi and Allende toward mass protests. Allende's mistake was not supporting and building on the popular mobilization of workers in Chile against the bourgeoisie in order to challenge its power in the country. By contrast, Morsi and the Brotherhood opposed and even repressed the popular and working-class mobilizations in Egypt and defended the army.

Morsi certainly never promised or tried to deliver social-democratic reforms like Allende. Thus, Saint-Just's famous

saying, "Those who make revolutions halfway only dig their own graves" cannot be applied to the Brotherhood. Instead it would have to be rewritten as "Those who collaborate with the old regime dig their own graves." Despite Brotherhood's efforts at collaboration with the army, it overthrew Morsi. In the end, the army and the Brotherhood represented different wings of the capitalist class, with different regional backers, who could not find an accommodation. The far more powerful army decided in the end to assert its direct dictatorial rule, to the detriment of all in Egypt.

It is also a mistake to see fundamentalism as some deflected expression of anti-imperialism. The fundamentalists possess a religious conception of the world, notably the goal of returning to a some mythical "Golden Age" of Islam as a means of explaining the contemporary world and providing a solution to its problems. First of all, we should be critical of the notion that the liberation and development of Arab countries depend firstly upon an assertion of an Islamic identity posited as "permanent" and "eternal."

This is reactionary pure and simple, and stands in stark contrast to the genuine anti-imperialist movements of the past. The nationalists and socialists look forward to progressive social transformation of the socioeconomic structures of oppression and domination; the fundamentalists instead frame the struggle as a battle of cultures and religions. They view imperialism as a conflict between "Satan" and the oppressed faithful, not as nationalists and socialists traditionally view it as being one between the great powers, their capitalist system, and oppressed countries. In this regard, Islamic fundamentalists echo Samuel Huntington's conception of the world as a "clash of civilizations," where the struggle against the West is based upon a rejection of its values and religious system rather than exploitative global relations.

Thus they do not have an anti-imperialist worldview. Indeed, unsurprisingly, both the jihadist and gradualist wings of Islamic fundamentalism have had imperial and regional state sponsors. As noted previously, the United States, Saudi Arabia, and Pakistan supported Islamic fundamentalist movements in Afghanistan as a tool in their interimperialist conflict with Russia against the Moscow-backed regime in Kabul. The United States funded the production of textbooks read by millions of Afghan children which glorified jihad and martyrdom. It created Islamic warlords by pouring billions into the country, and flooding it with arms. [\[48\]](#)

The same is true of the gradualists. Far from consistent anti-imperialism, they have cultivated a relationship with both imperialist and regional powers. The Brotherhood was sponsored by Saudi Arabia until 1991 and more recently by Qatar, and it reached a deal with the United States in its brief period in charge of Egypt. Hezbollah is sponsored by Iran and collaborates with Russian imperialism in the Syrian counterrevolution.

The fundamentalists are neither reformists nor anti-imperialist. To identify their rhetorical advocacy of "reforms" and "fight against corruption" as proof of their dedication to a more open democratic political scene is problematic to say the least. Why? Because these demands are yoked to the implementation of the Islamic state and "an Islamic way of life." As the former supreme guide Muhammad Mahdi Akef of the Brotherhood declared:

If [we] wish to achieve any progress in our lives, [we must] return to our faith and apply sharia [Islamic law]. . . . The establishment of God's law is the real solution to all of our suffering, whether it is due to domestic or foreign problems. This [the introduction of sharia] is achieved through the creation of the Muslim individual, the Muslim household, the Muslim government, and the state, which leads Islamic nations and carries the banner of dawa so that the world is fortunate enough to receive the best of Islam and its teachings. [\[49\]](#)

Of course, the gradualist Islamic fundamentalist movements are run through with internal social contradictions between their bourgeois and petty bourgeois leadership and their popular base. But this is true of all elite-run political parties from mainstream capitalist parties to right-wing populist parties throughout the world. The existence of class contradictions within parties is not exclusive to reformist parties. And their existence among the gradualists does not

justify calling them reformist.

The gradualists are of course subject to tensions rooted in their contradictory class composition. But we must make a sharp distinction between fundamentalists that use reactionary ideology to win over popular classes, and reformist parties that possess a secular progressive program that, in however compromised a way, express the interests of oppressed classes and groups.

In reality, the various Islamic fundamentalist forces constitute the second wing of the counterrevolution, with the first being the existing regimes. Their ideology, political program, and practice are reactionary and completely opposed to the objectives of revolutionary emancipation—democracy, social justice, and equality. Their policies are repulsive to the most conscious sections of the workers and oppressed groups like religious minorities, women, LGBT people, and others.

Building a progressive alternative

The MENA revolts have suffered defeats at the hands of the regimes, their imperialist backers, and the fundamentalists. They are in a complicated and dire situation, and there are no easy answers for how to extricate them from the grip of counterrevolution. But we must draw some lessons sharply and present at least a preliminary way forward for the Left. This must begin by rejecting any illusions in, and support for, the authoritarian regimes. But it must also reject similar illusions in Islamic fundamentalist forces.

Collaboration with authoritarian states has and will lead to destructive results, reducing significantly the democratic space for workers and oppressed people to organize for liberation. The regimes remain the first and foremost enemy of revolutionary forces in the region. At the same time, Islamic fundamentalist movements offer no alternative. In power or out of power, they also target workers, their unions, and democratic organizations, while promoting neoliberal economics and reactionary social policies. They are also part of the counterrevolution.

Instead of turning to either of these two forces, the Left must concentrate on the building of an independent, democratic, and progressive front that tries to assist the self-organization of the workers and oppressed. Only through this process can our side begin to think of itself as a class with interests in common with other workers and opposed to the capitalists. Progressive politics must be based on defending and encouraging the self-organization of the popular classes with the objective of struggling for democracy.

Workers' struggles alone will not, however, be sufficient to unite the working classes. Socialists in these struggles must also champion the liberation of all the oppressed. That requires raising demands of rights for women, religious minorities, LGBT communities, and oppressed racial and ethnic groups. Any compromise on the explicit commitment to such demands will impede the Left from uniting the working class for the radical transformation of society.

How should such a Left relate to Islamic fundamentalist forces? While they are indeed the second wing of the counterrevolution, the gradualists do not represent a similar danger as the existing state. When not in control of the state, as they are for example in Iran or Saudi Arabia, they generally don't have the same destructive capacities as the existing regimes. But that does not mean that the Left should consider them a lesser evil. Treating them as such risks sowing illusions that they are potential allies in changing the political system towards more democratic and social rights. They are not. And thinking they are weakens the Left's ability to break fundamentalism's links with popular classes.

What does this analysis mean for strategy and tactics in the struggle? It does not mean that socialists should refuse united action in a particular context for precise demands with the gradualist sections of Islamic fundamentalism. If these actions can advance the cause of the exploited and oppressed, then such tactical unity in action is right and just. The way to deal with organizations with which progressives don't share much in common beyond a common enemy was summarized by the Bolsheviks over a century ago. Gilbert Achcar summarizes the approach:

Do not merge organizations. March separately but strike together. 2) Do not abandon our own political demands. 3) Do not conceal divergences of interest. 4) Pay attention to our ally as we would pay attention to an enemy. 5) Concern ourselves more with using the situation created by the struggle than with keeping an ally. [50]

Achcar adds to this,

If these rules are observed, then what remains is for the progressives to prove to the masses that they are as much dedicated to the struggle against the common enemy than the fundamentalists, while resolutely defending the interests of workers, women and all exploited and oppressed categories in direct contrast with the fundamentalists and, often, in opposition to them.[Ibid.]

Tactical short-term alliances can be made with the devil, but that devil should never be confused with an angel. But there should be no longterm orientation on strategic unity with the gradualist fundamentalists. Thus this recommendation of an approach of occasional tactical unity in certain situations is different from a united front strategy, which seeks to unite with reformist and democratic forces who are willing to organize to try to win immediate demands that benefit workers and oppressed groups and increase their consciousness, confidence, and fighting capacity.

Islamic fundamentalists, just as populist and extreme right-wing movements throughout the world, should not be included in this united front strategy for all the reasons laid out in this article. To speak of a united front strategy with these forces is to create illusions in them. Instead the Left must build its own political organization and participate in the struggle for liberation and democracy, sometimes in tactical unity with the gradualists, but always with the eye of winning the exploited and oppressed away from this second force of counterrevolution.

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[1] For an overview of the counterrevolution see Gilbert Achcar, *Morbid Symptoms: Relapse in the Arab Uprising* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2016).

[2] The US press refers to the Islamic State, or Daesh (as it is called using its Arabic acronym), as ISIS

[3] Gilbert Achcar, "Onze thèses sur la résurgence actuelle de l'intégrisme islamique," *Europe Solidaire*, February 1, 1981, <http://www.europe-solidaire.org/spip.php...>

[4] Amal al-Ummah TV, "Mashru' al-nahda al-Islāmiyya . . . Khayret Al-Shā'ir," April 24, 2011, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JnS...>

[5] Naim Qassem, *Hezbollah, la voie, l'expérience, l'avenir* (Beyrouth: Albouraq 2008), 288.

[6] Mikaelian Shoghig "Overlapping Domestic/Geopolitical Contests, Hizbullah, and Sectarianism," in *The Politics of Sectarianism in Postwar Lebanon*, ed. Jinan S. Al-Habbal, Rabie Barakat, Lara W. Khatib, Shoghig Mikaelian, Bassel Salloukh (London: Pluto Press 2015), 171.

[7] Gilbert Achcar, "Islamic fundamentalism, the Arab Spring, and the Left," *International Socialist Review* 103 (Winter 2016-2017),

<https://isreview.org/issue/103/isla...>

[8] "Women and Men are Different in Some Cases, Similar in Others," *Khamenei.ir*, March 19, 2017, <http://english.khamenei.ir/news/472...>. In Iran, women have fewer rights than men in inheritance, divorce, and child custody. They are also subject to restrictions on travel and dress. And "morality police" enforce strict Islamic law.

[9] "Muslim Brotherhood Statement Denouncing UN Women Declaration for Violating Sharia Principles," *IkhwanWeb*, March 14, 2013,

<http://www.ikhwanweb.com/article.ph...>

[10] Adam Hanieh, *Lineages of Revolt: Issues of Contemporary Capitalism in the Middle East* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2013), 172.

[11] Joey Ayoub, "Empowerment is Underway, Despite Nasrallah's Homophobia and Misogyny," *The New Arab*, April 3, 2017,

<https://www.alaraby.co.uk/english/c...>

[12] Qardawi on Homosexuals," *MEMRI TV*, January 27, 2013, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Nxn...>

[13] I have not addressed military cooperation in this article, which has different dynamics.

[14] "Everyone should be able to attend his religious as well as his bodily needs without the police sticking their noses in." Karl Marx, *Critique of the Gotha Program*, *Marx-Engels Collected Works*, vol. 24 (New York: International Publishers, 1989), 98, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/ma...>

[15] Vladimir Lenin, "The Attitude of the Workers' Party towards Religion," *Collected Works* vol. 15 (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1973),

<https://www.marxists.org/archive/le...>

[16] Martin E. Marty, "Fundamentalism as a Social Phenomenon," *Bulletin of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences* 42, no. 2 (1988): 17.

[17] Jason Hackworth, "Faith, Welfare and the Formation of the Modern American Right," in *Religion in the Neoliberal Age, Political Economy and Modes Of Governance*, ed. F. Gauthier and T. Martikainen, (Surrey, UK: Ashgate), 100-105.

[18] Hanieh, *The Lineages of Revolt*.

[19] In Syria, the Muslim Brotherhood was mostly composed originally of individuals belonging to important religious families drawn from the class of small tradesmen in urban areas. The shops of the tradesmen-religious men were generally situated in the neighborhoods of the mosques. This is why the Muslim Brotherhood was always a natural ally of the economic liberal middle-class Syrian working in the suq (local market). The suq, usually located in the old quarters of cities, was most often a stronghold of conservatism and a guardian of tradition, values promoted in the activism of the Muslim Brotherhood.

[20] See Hanieh, *Lineages of Revolt*, and Stephan Roll, "Egypt's Business Elite after Mubarak, A Powerful Player between Generals and Brotherhood," September 2013, <https://www.swp-berlin.org/fileadmi...>

[21] Gilbert Achcar, *Le peuple veut, une exploration radicale du soulèvement arabe* (Paris: Sindbad-Actes Sud, 2013), 147.

[22] A. Nizar Hamzeh, *In the Path of Hizbullah* (Syracuse, New York: Syracuse University Press, 2004), 64.

[23] *Ibid.*

[24] During the revolution in Egypt and Tunisia, the Muslim Brotherhood once in power attacked workers and trade unions, while promoting neoliberal policies. Similarly, in the occupied Iraq after 2003, the successive governments dominated by the Shia fundamentalist party, al-Dawa, repressed trade unionists, workers, and labor protests.

- [25] Olivier Carré and Gérard Michaud (a pseudonym used by Michel Seurat), *Les Frères musulmans Égypte et Syrie* (1928-1982), (Paris: Gallimard and Julliard, 1983), 87.
- [26] Raphael Lefèvre, *Ashes of Hama, the Muslim Brotherhood in Syria* (London: C. Hurst and Co., 2013), 53; Joshua Teitelbaum, "The Muslim Brotherhood in Syria, 1945-1958: Founding, Social Origins, Ideology," *Middle East Journal* 65, no. 2, (2011), 220.
- [27] Luiza Toscano, *L'Islam un autre nationalisme?* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 1995), 28, 95.
- [28] Ervand Abrahamian, *Khomeinism: Essays on the Islamic Republic* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 53.
- [29] "Election Program of The Freedom and Justice Party," Freedom and Justice Party, 2011, "Election Program of The Freedom ...
- [30] Reuters, "Egypt Brotherhood Businessman: Manufacturing is Key," *Ahram Online*, October 28, 2011, <http://english.ahram.org.eg/NewsC...>
- [31] Quoted in Mariam Fam, "Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood Embraces Business," *Bloomberg Businessweek*, July 11, 2011, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/arti...>
- [32] The concept of hegemony is understood here in the Gramscian sense, as encompassing the range of beliefs and cultural norms embedded in society that engender consent among the oppressed and exploited.
- [33] Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa, *The Leopard* (New York: Pantheon, 2007), 28.
- [34] Samir Amin, "The Return of Fascism in Contemporary Capitalism," *Monthly Review*, vol 66, no. 4, <https://monthlyreview.org/2014/09/0...>
- [35] Gilbert Achcar, "Islamic fundamentalism, the Arab Spring, and the Left," *International Socialist Review* 103, (Winter 2016-2017), <http://isreview.org/issue/103/islam...> This does not mean however that fascistic organizations can't appear in countries outside the Western world, especially with the emergence in recent decades of many new centers of capital accumulation—newly industrialized countries that are politically influential and increasingly important sites of regional investment.
- [36] Hassan al-Banna, the founder and main ideologue of the Muslim Brotherhood, was a disciple of Rashid Rida. Rida transformed the reformist tendencies of pan-Islamism, particularly of famous reformist intellectuals such as Mohammad Abduh and Jamal al-Din Afghani, toward a fundamentalist orientation. Rida's evolution brought him closer to the puritan Hanbali doctrine, particularly its Wahhabi followers. He became a determined defender of the Saudi regime and Wahhabism, while collaborating with Saudi King Abdel Aziz. He started opposing and fighting the Sufi brotherhoods and practices of their adherents. He argued for the restoration of the caliphate after its abolition in 1924. He also developed a strong anti-Shia diatribe, accusing Arab Shia of being agents of Iran (a theme often found today among Salafis and other Islamic fundamentalist movements). Rashid Rida particularly had a prominent influence on the intellectual and political framework by the Muslim Brotherhood as he sought to revive Ibn Tammiyya's literalism and call for jihad. This new Salafi tradition was spread individually by intellectuals like Rashid Rida in the 20s and 30s, and socially by groups such as the Brotherhood later in Egypt and elsewhere.
- [37] Jabhat al-Nusra was able to mobilize some sectors of the society and organize small demonstrations, but nothing comparable to the massive protests of the Syrian popular movement.
- [38] Jabhat al-Nusra and ISIS differ in their methodology to achieve a caliphate rather than the desired end state. Jabhat al-Nusra's schism with ISIS is mostly because it followed Zawahiri's methodology and is committed to it. Zawahiri had pleaded for a gradualist approach, most prominently during the height of the Iraq War, arguing vehemently against the strategy of sectarian mobilization and overt declaration of an Islamic state by Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, the leader of the ISIS forerunner, al-Qaeda in Iraq. ISIS rejects Zawahiri's gradualist concept and continues to follow Zarqawi's strategy of active, overt mobilization. The gradualist approach has not prevented Jabhat al-Nusra from its increasingly violent behavior against other armed opposition groups following its break with ISIS. Yet Jabhat al-Nusra has tried to follow Zawahiri's core methods of conducting social outreach and establishing ostensibly grassroots structures to achieve the grand strategic objectives of al-Qaeda. In addition to this, despite serious clashes between both groups since their separation in 2013, it did not prevent tactical cooperation between Jabhat al-Nusra and ISIS after the split. In Qalamoun for example, in the summer of 2014, the two jihadist groups maintained close relations. Al-Qaeda leader

Ayman al-Zawahiri, although denying any legitimacy to ISIS and its leader, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, declared in September 2015 that he was prepared to cooperate with them in Iraq and Syria to fight the US coalition. He said, "Despite their serious mistakes, if I was in Iraq or Syria, I would cooperate with them to kill the crusaders, the seculars and the Shia, even though I do not recognize the legitimacy of their state," he stated. Orient le Jour, "Al-Nosra prend possession de la dernière base du régime dans Idlib", September 10, 2015. <https://www.lorientlejour.com/artic...>

[39] Samir Amin, "Interview of Samir Amin," Samir Amin 1931, July 15, 2013, <http://samiramin1931.blogspot.co.uk...>.

[40] The veteran trade unionist and Nasserite Kamal Abu Eita, former head of the Real Estate Tax Authority Union and president of the Egyptian Federation of Independent Trade Unions (Al-Ittihad al-Masri lil-Naqabat al-Mustaqilla, EFITU), for example served as minister of Manpower in the interim cabinet following the military coup in July 2013 until March 2014, and at the time accepted the army's transitional "road map."

[41] Jad Bouharoun, Understanding the Counter-revolution, International Socialism 153 (January 2017), <http://isi.org.uk/understanding-the-...>

[42] Ann Alexander, "Reformism, Islamism & Revolution," Socialist Review, Issue 406, October 2015, <http://socialistreview.org.uk/406/r...>

[43] Ibid.

[44] Phil Marfleet, "'Never Going Back': Egypt's Continuing Revolution," International Socialism Issue 137 (January 2013), <http://isi.org.uk/never-going-back-...>

[45] Ernest Mandel, "The Nature of Social-Democratic Reformism, The Material Foundations of Opportunism," Marxist.org, October 1993, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/ma...>

[46] For further information on this issue, see Charlie Post, "Ernest Mandel and the Marxian Theory of Bureaucracy," Ernest Mandel.org, July 1996, [https://www.ernestmandel.org/en/aboutlife/txt/charlespost.htm#_ftn9]; Charlie Post, "The Myth of the Labor Aristocracy, Part 1," Against the Current, 123 (July-August 2006), <https://www.solidarity-us.org/node/...> and Charlie Post, "The 'Euro-Labor Aristocracy' and Working-Class Struggles: Consciousness in Flux, Part 2," Against the Current 124 (September-October 2006), http://www.solidarity-us.org/node/129_46

Socialists should thus have no illusions in social democrats or their strategy. Indeed, reformists can and have played a counterrevolutionary role in the history of the workers' movement.[[See Ernest Mandel, "La social-démocratie désassemblée" "Nature du réformisme social-démocrate," Ernest Mandel.org, September 21, 1993, <http://www.ernestmandel.org/new/ecr...>

[47] Anne Alexander and Mostafa Bassiouny, Bread, Freedom, Social Justice, Workers and the Egyptian Revolution (London: Zed Books, 2014), 20.

[48] Anand Gopal, "The Roots of ISIS, Imperialism, Class, and Islamic Fundamentalism," International Socialist Review 102 (Fall 2016), <http://isreview.org/issue/102/roots...>

[49] Jeffrey Azarva and Samuel Tadros, "The Problem of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood," American Enterprise Institute, November 30, 2007, <https://www.aei.org/publication/the...>

[50] Cited in Abbas Shahrabi Farahani and Gilbert Achcar, "Towards Progressive Politics in the Middle East, Problematica in Conversation with Gilbert Achcar," March 24, 2016, <http://newpol.org/content/towards-p-...>