Identity Contradiction in Islamic Awakening and the Reformation Attempts
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Since Muhammad ‘Ali Pasha and the Ottoman reforms in the first half of the 1800s, European waves of colonization between 1827 to 1882, Western imperialism after WWI, and the Cold War schism, the Arab Middle East and North Africa have been undergoing a severe identity crisis and heated internal debates. These debates took several directions between pan-Arabism and pan-Islamism, between socialism and liberalism, and between modern secularism and religious sectarianism. Interestingly, the 1980s brought about the Islamic awakening, al-Sahwah al-Islamiyyah, which seems to be the victorious voice, at the popular level, of all these identity trends. Yet, understanding this Islamic awakening is neither immediate nor homogeneous. In order to properly investigate this cultural phenomenon, I argue that the Islamic awakening demonstrates essential and unconscious contradictions that motivate continuous identity transformation. Remarkably, the identity contradictions within the Islamic awakening are not clearly conceived by the factions of this awakening themselves, e.g., Muslim Brotherhood, al-Tahrir Party, Salafism, Jihadi Salafism, or the Shi’i factions allied to the Islamic Republic of Iran.

These Islamic movements sought to present an amalgamation of reactions to modernity that would respond to western challenges in order to convince and appeal to native Muslim intellectuals and the general public in the Arab world. In this line, the Islamic awakening paradoxically hastened to: 1- tackle the domain of worldview and epistemology by admitting the primacy of scientific knowledge, 2- respond to developmental ideologies by demanding social and technological progress, 3- react to weakness and western domination by striving for Arab unity, 4- respond to Arab secularists by adducing the examples of the American and German Christian democratic parties, 5- challenge communism and atheistic trends by embracing the Abrahamic path and calling for unity with Jewish and Christian monotheism in addition to world spiritualism, 6- confront the narrative of Eurocentrism by cultivating pride in the medieval Islamic achievements in mathematics, astronomy, and medicine, 7- defy literary and fashionable trends brought by the globalized media and capitalistic market by calling for the organic and authentic return to Arab-Islamic heritage, 8- answering the moral and day-to-day questions in a precise manner by insisting on the primacy of prophetic Hadith traditions as interpreted by certain medieval schools of thought. The identity amalgamation of these eight responses might be the cultural weaving that enabled the Islamic awakening to gradually dominate since 1980s. However, as I shall articulate below, this amalgamation is highly contradictory and is likely to exacerbate identity conflicts in the Arab world. Contradictions in the group identity, at the cultural level, is as serious and dangerous as schizophrenia, at the psychological level, since both allow the person and the group to claim something while unconsciously doing the opposite.

The following cases exemplify each point of identity contradiction found in the discourses of the Islamic awakening: 1- Admitting the primacy of scientific knowledge took place, while disparaging its philosophical and methodological presumptions seen in physical-chemical materialism, biological Darwinism, and epigenetic psychology, 2- Demanding social and technological progress, while disapproving of the potential irreligiosity associated with progressive trends such as tolerating the fallibility of absolute creeds, respecting individualism even if contrary to social customs, orientation to worldly pleasures and marginalization of otherworldly goals, practicing free-speech and skepticism even if it leads to the criticism of religious beliefs, 3- Striving for Arab unity without recognizing the needed concessions and
identity adjustment that should be given to non-Muslim Arabs to include them with a unifying nationalistic identity. 4- Admiring American and German Christian democratic parties, in the recent decades, while disapproving of the very amenability of these Christian parties to change and adjustment to parliamentary and popular legislative outcomes, 5- Embracing the Abrahamic path in response to communism and calling for unity with the Jewish and Christian traditions, without accepting the possibility of tracing the influence of these traditions on the Qur’an and Hadith and without admitting the non-Abrahamic traditions of Hinduism, Buddhism, and Taoism into the camp, 6- Being proud of the creativity of Islamic heritage in natural and philosophical fields while rejecting the clear indebtedness to Greek, Zoroastrian, Aramaic, Babylonian, and Indian influences, 7- Calling for the organic and authentic return to Arab-Islamic heritage, in the humanities and social domains, while deeming as heretical several literary, philosophical, theological, sectarian, and mystic doctrines of classical Islam. 8- Insisting on the primacy of Hadith traditions as interpreted by certain schools of Hanbali and Wahhabi thought while denouncing the militant fanaticism of Jihadi Salafism that traces its agenda to these very Hadith traditions.

Of course, identity contradictions are not something endemic to Islamic awakening only, but rather it is an aspect that can be attributed to several cultural phenomena, including modernity itself. For example, 1- modernity called for the control over nature while industrial pollution, global warming, viral genetic mutations, and nuclear warfare proves that tampering with nature is getting out of human control, 2- modernity sought equality and fraternity while spreading nationalistic wars in Europe in addition to colonialism, imperialism, and exploitation to the rest of the world, and 3- modernity demanded rationalism and demythologization of religious cultures, but most 20th century philosophies argued that rationality is relative and mythology is endemic to the very nature of cultural identities. In short, modernity suffers from several contradictions in the environmental, egalitarian, and human rights domains. In this vein, Islamic awakening as well as modernity face internal contradictions as a necessary sign of human fallibility. Yet, there is a sharp difference between the two cultural phenomena in that modernity is becoming more aware of its contradictions and has been striving to critique and amend them. The self-awareness and insistent preoccupation in self-reformation on the side of Islamic awakening does not match that of western modernity.

Fortunately, there is a certain philosophical method that deals with resolving complex-thought contradictions proposed by the contemporary German-American philosopher Nicholas Reacher (born in 1928), who used to be the editor in chief of the American Philosophical Quarterly (APQ). According to Rescher, the Greek word ‘aporia’ is seen as “a group of contentions that are individually plausible but collectively inconsistent”.[1] Unlike the skeptic, who might throw up his hands in the air and leave the aporetic scene altogether, the practitioner of systemization attempts to salvage whatever is rationally and experientially valuable in a difficult situation of inconsistency.[2] Such aporetic clusters and the various attempts to resolve them with systematization is at the very core of the philosophical scene that prevailed from pre-Socratic times to the present. “In philosophy as in politics there are only individual positions, not collective ones – the community as a whole is too diversified, too balkanized for doctrinal coherence. We can say what philosophers teach, but not what philosophy teaches”.[3] The astonishing fact about philosophical systematization is that “the continual introduction of the new ideas that arise in the

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2 Ibid., 96.
3 Ibid., 41.
wake of new distinctions means that the ground of philosophy is always shifting beneath our feet”.

Understanding this perplexing situation is crucial to the contemporary Arab identity in particular because the eight proposals of Islamic awakening is a grand case for aporetic cluster. Clarifying one’s identity competently, admitting the stance, and making distinctions is “the prime instrument for removing aporetic inconsistency in philosophy”. Yet, there remains the final step where any action of consistency involves elimination or modification of one or more of the problematic contentions that cannot cohere with the whole.

Islamic awakening has to recognize its contradiction in the specified eight points above and seek to propose a creative synthesis that can adjust to the: 1- philosophical and methodological presumptions in modern science, 2- the potential irreligiosity associated with progressive trends, 3- the needed nationalistic concessions and identity compromises that should be given to non-Muslim Arabs, 4- the amenability of western Christian parties to parliamentary legislative outcomes, 5- the genealogical possibility of tracing the Abrahamic and Fertile Crescent creeds, rituals, and texts in the Qur’an and Hadith, 6- admitting the scholarly indebtedness to Greek, Zoroastrian, Aramaic, Babylonian, and Indian influences, 7- rehabilitating and embracing the unorthodox and creative contributions of several literary, philosophical, theological, sectarian, and mystic doctrines of the Islamic heritage, and 8- rethinking the literal interpretations of the Hadith traditions and the possibility of more appropriate hermeneutical approaches.

In other words, if Islamic awakening seeks to be scientific, progressive, nationalistic, democratic, spiritualistic, rooted in world civilizations, pluralistic in its own heritage, and hermeneutical with its classical scriptures, then it has to recognize its internal identity contradictions and seek to create a resolution. Fortunately, in each of these stances there are cases of recent individual Arab scholars who are attempting to creatively resolve these contradictions. Nevertheless, these scholarly contributions are less known in the west and do not add up to a social movement in the Arab world. These attempts to rethink the identity include the writings of Jabiri and Salah ‘Uthman in science, Shahrur and Jamal al-Banna in progressive morals, Balqaziz in nationalism, Ghannushi and Iliyyah Hurayq in democracy, Sawwah and Nashid in spiritualism, Niqula Ziyadah and Duri in relationship to world civilizations, Hasan Hanafi and Arkun in identity pluralism, and Qabanji in hermeneutics. I strongly believe that the articulation of the proposals of these critical scholars present an ongoing reformation of the contemporary Islamic awakening in the Arab world. Additionally, presenting this analysis to a western audience provides a rarely known internal conversation over the Arab-Islamic identity.

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4 Ibid., 125.
5 Ibid., 116.
6 Madkhal ila Falsafat al-‘Ulam al-‘Aqlaniyyah.
7 Al-Namudhaj al-‘Ilmi bayna al-Khayal wal-Waqi’.
9 al-Mar’ah al-Muslimah bayna Tahrir al-Qur’an wa Taqyid al-Fuqaha’.
10 Min al-‘Urubah ila al-‘Urubah.
11 Al-Dimuqratiyyah wa Huquq al-Insan.
12 Al-Dimuqratiyyah wa Tahaddiyat al-Hadatha.
13 Din al-Insan.
14 Qalaq fi al-‘Aqidah.
15 al-Masihiyah wal-‘Arab.
16 Al-Takwin al-Tarikhil lil-Ummah al-‘Arabiyyah.
17 Sirr al-‘Ijaz al-Qur’ani.