The analysis offered in this book focuses on a couple of ideologies that are both twins and rivals: Radical Arab nationalism and Islamism, both of which began with popular upheavals to change the status quo. The text demonstrates how the two ideologies are anchored in the histories and cultures of societies aspiring to modernity, with all their frustrations and contradictory expectations. The Arab world carries the burden of a rich religious past; because of this, it must face the complex question of secularization, which nationalism had thought to outflank with economic development directed by a state reduced to the status of a mere administrative framework. Islamism’s response to this is to Islamize secularization, affirming that the separation of religion and state is heresy. Yet it offers no plan for government and its popularity is the consequence of radical nationalism’s progressive weakening and failure ever since the late 1960s. Radical Arab nationalism was triumphant since it took over in the 1950s and 1960s in Egypt, Iraq, Algeria, Syria, Yemen, and Libya, until its confidence was shattered by military defeat in June 1967 at the hands of Israel. Since then it has been challenged directly by Islamism, which presented itself as both its heir and its adversary. The fall of Hosni Mubarak in Egypt in 2011, the collapse of Muammar Gaddafi’s Libyan regime in 2011, and the more recent destruction of Syria illustrate the erosion of legitimacy of regimes that had promised economic modernization.
and social emancipation. To understand why radical Arab national-
ism moved from triumph to decline in a matter of decades, we must
study its beginnings and in a more general way return to the historic
origins of the Arab states that set themselves up as monarchies and
republics in consequence of their particular historical conditions.
The disintegration of the Ottoman Empire brought about a form of
protonationalism, which gave birth to conservative monarchies under
the benevolent care of European powers in exchange for their support
for anti-Ottoman policies. The urban elites of Syria and Lebanon
were not, to begin with, hostile to the monarchical form of the Arab
state to which they aspired. They supported the “Arab revolt” directed
by Sharif Hussein in the hope that it would lead to a single Arab state
encompassing the Fertile Crescent. But this dream was crushed by
the colonial ambitions of Britain and France, and it has been betrayed
by the new dynasties of Iraq and Jordan. These monarchies, as well as
that of Saudi Arabia, came into being between 1920 and 1930; they
were shaped to support the Europeans in their struggle against the
Ottoman Empire. For reasons linked to their own conservative nature
and their alliances with the colonial powers that protected them, they
were a disappointment to the nationalists, who had borrowed their
own concepts and methods from European liberal ideology.

This historical matrix is important if we are to understand the
later evolution of the Arab world, which responded in different ways
to contact with the all-conquering Europe of the nineteenth and twen-
tieth centuries. While the monarchies were content to ensure the
existence of formally independent Arab states, the nationalists pro-
claimed their will to reform society and catch up with the West,
going so far as to adopt liberal values before moving away from them
in defiance of Europe. Arab nationalism has a history of its own
and its distant origins lie in the reaction to Bonaparte’s expedition
to Egypt in 1798, which was a severe shock to many among the
elite, who were forced to acknowledge just how far ahead Europe
was in military, economic, and scientific terms. By a slow and sometimes contradictory process, liberal ideas penetrated the Arab world, and eventually, in the second half of the nineteenth century, they merged with a general rejection of the Ottoman Empire and then evolved toward open hostility to the European powers following the 1916 Sykes–Picot Agreement. The struggle against colonial domination led to the installation of republics that were politically opposed to the West. Paradoxically, they were closer to it in terms of ideology than the conservative monarchies, which resembled the absolutist model that had dominated Europe before the revolutions. From this point of view, the republican elites, many of them military, were the distant heirs of the liberal tendency of the late nineteenth century; they had become radicalized by borrowing their ideological language from German idealism and their rhetoric of “Arab socialism” from revolutionary Marxism. Gamal Abdel Nasser, Houari Boumediene, and Hafiz al-Assad were all closer to the Prussian or Soviet models than that of the caliphate.

In fact, the Arab world created two types of state as a result of its contact with the West: one based on the tradition represented by monarchy, whose political interests chimed with those of the Western powers, and the other affirming its republican character and its desire to end foreign domination in the region. The split between these two competing projects led to extreme tensions in the 1960s and 1970s (leading to bitter conflict between Egypt and Saudi Arabia over Yemen, between Algeria and Morocco over the Western Sahara, and between Iraq and Kuwait) and only settled down after the political weakening of the various republican regimes which, after the military defeat by Israel in 1967, ceased to denounce the monarchies. The monarchies were even asked for financial help with the rebuilding of the Egyptian and Syrian armies, when regional heads of state met in Khartoum in 1968. Once the pan-Arabist project had been dropped by the revolutionary colonels, the monarchies felt a greater
sense of security, which was further strengthened by Egypt’s tilt toward the western camp after the death of Nasser. The rejection by Anwar Sadat, Nasser’s successor, of Arabist rhetoric and the opening of the Egyptian economy to private capital flowing from Saudi Arabia and the Gulf Emirates as well as from the West heralded the failure of radical Arab nationalism. This was to be challenged, from the 1970s onward, by Islamism—an ideology that for years had been encouraged and used as a weapon by the monarchies. If the Islamists in Egypt and Algeria have gained in popularity since the deaths of Nasser and Boumediene, it is because they accused their successors of having enriched a minority by signing agreements with the International Monetary Fund (IMF). In the case of Egypt, there is the added denunciation of the peace treaty signed with Israel—which cost President Sadat his life.

Thus, the regimes of the republics, forced on the defensive and mired in economic failure, comprehensively lost their political battle with the monarchies. Moreover, the post-1973 oil price increases raised the latter to the level of major regional powers. At the time of the so-called Arab Spring uprisings, which began in Tunisia in December 2010, the monarchies gave their support to the rebellions—thereby taking their revenge upon regimes that had accused them a few years earlier of betraying the Arab peoples. In the long term, the regimes of the republics turned out to be more fragile than the monarchies where political opposition seemed less threatening. How may we explain this fragility of regimes that claimed to originate with the people and that had sworn to modernize their countries for the good of their underprivileged social classes? The July 1952 coup d’état in Egypt, carried out by the Free Officers, led to the seizure of power by military Arab nationalists in several other countries of the region. They had the look of a deep-seated movement of authoritarian modernization, which should have accelerated national construction and created the political and economic conditions for genuine social and
cultural progress. Many academic studies have seen in them a form of Bonapartism, determined as they were to sweep away the archaic aspects of society and the shackles of dependency created by an economy based on the export of agricultural products and raw materials. With Nasser, Egypt undertook reforms that were just as bold and wide-ranging as those of Muhammed Ali, 150 years earlier, in an international environment that was far more favorable than that prevailing in the nineteenth century. So why did Nasser’s political and economic program, which had the people’s overwhelming support, fail to succeed and keep its promises? This question lies at the heart of this book, which attempts a critical analysis of radical Arab nationalism and of Islamism, the political ideology that opposes it. The hypothesis set forth here is that radical Arab nationalism, which gave birth to the republics, viewed modernization as a technical and administrative task on the premise that the state, controlled by military men, was the sole agent for change.

The analysis of the ideological texts of the different parties (the 1962 Egyptian charter, the Algerian national charter, the Baathist texts) and the policy speeches of Nasser, Boumediene, and Assad, all demonstrate a simplistic political philosophy reducible to a moral Manicheism that knows nothing of the cultural foundations of modernity or the sociological complexity of Arab societies and their contradictions. Radical Arab nationalism was promising justice from above at a time when the real challenge was to endow state power with electoral legitimacy in order that the elected bodies might reflect the various components of society. The complex social reality had been concealed by the myth of the people, a structuring concept of a utopian vision in which the collective exaltation of the group took precedence over human anthropology. This vision would have it that the people constitute a homogeneous entity with the idea that the unity of that entity is supposedly threatened by outside forces that have local support to call upon. To this effect, all social powers
are neutralized so as to prevent resistance to the policies of the leader, who alone decides who will represent workers, farmers, young people, and various other socioprofessional groups. By rejecting any autonomy of economic, judicial, and trade union power, and by suppressing freedom of expression and freedom of the press, the military regime prevented society from developing its own regulatory mechanisms and its own authentic representatives. All private initiative was discouraged by the administration that sought to control every area of social activity, everywhere seeing enemies of the revolution that had to be neutralized. Society, in turn, adapted to this blanket control by gradually infiltrating the administration, the army, and other government institutions that became hotbeds of privilege and corruption. Accusing the market of promoting inequalities and dividing the people into rich and poor classes, the regime resorted to the model of a state-run economy whose purported mission was to share the national wealth on an equal basis. This enabled the use of the economy as a political resource to discourage all dissent when the state was the principal employer in the country, taking charge of social demands (employment, housing, health, education, transport, etc.) in return for allegiance to the leader—whose party decided who would represent the population in the country’s institutions.

As the years went by, social demands steadily increased in step with population growth, making it impossible for the state to satisfy them. Oil-rich countries like Iraq, Algeria, and Libya were untroubled by deficits stemming from social expenditure and a generalized decline in productivity. But Egypt was forced to change its economic policy to extricate the state from bankruptcy in the mid-1970s, resorting to national- and foreign-derived private capital in the hope that an “opening of the door” (*infitah*) to the market economy would have the effect of creating employment. Fifteen years later the Egyptian example was followed by Algeria in the aftermath of the October 1988 riots, which brought an end to the state’s monopoly over the economy. With
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exactly the same political personnel that was championing socialism, the regime set about implementing liberal economic reforms that favored speculation. As a result, speculation became the principal means of accumulating wealth. Populism, the ideological glue holding the regime together, was dealt a heavy blow by the ostentatious wealth of a new layer of society that came into being with the *infitah*. The contract around which the regime was built (social protection in exchange for political authoritarianism) was broken. The state renounced its social policies under pressure from the IMF while the population continued to be excluded from government institutions. Multiparty politics was technically allowed, but widespread electoral fraud gave a clear advantage to the former single party, which continued to hold its majorities in parliaments and assemblies. At the same time, relative freedom of expression emboldened Islamists to criticize the government and denounce the consequences of its economic and social policy, which gave them a popular base. As an ideological trend, Islamism has always been present in Muslim societies; what was new was the fact that, beginning in the 1970s, it became increasingly popular in the republics founded by radical Arab nationalism that indirectly gave birth to an equally radical opposition.

It is important to bear in mind the dialectical relationship between radical Arab nationalism and Islamism. The latter was inspired by the former’s rhetoric and appropriated its populism to itself, denouncing the corruption of those in power, the social inequalities, and the decline in moral standards. Tackling the regime on its own ideological terrain, Islamism accused it of betraying the nation by forming alliances with the former colonial powers and of making agreements with the IMF, whose program had the effect of keeping the poorest classes of society in a state of semistarvation. In a way, Islamism sought to continue the struggle against the West that had taken place in the 1950s and 1960s and was subsequently abandoned by the republican regimes in the early 1990s.
It is no coincidence that the Islamist protest movement today is more popular and more threatening in the republics than in the monarchies, which have symbolic resources to counter it. Police repression against Islamist groups is just as harsh as in the republican regimes, but the monarchies have ideological and institutional frameworks that are more effective at eliminating the most violent extremists while integrating more moderate Islamists into the inner and outer mechanisms of the state. Based as they are on tradition and religious conservatism, the monarchies have always taught that believers must respect the authority of the king, who is the guardian of the social order willed by God. The monopoly exerted by the dynasties in terms of religious symbolism as related to legitimacy of the monarchies (Wahhabism in Saudi Arabia; sharifism in Morocco and Jordan) allows them to benefit from the support of the charismatic ulemas, both of the zaouias (religious centers built close to a grave of a saint) and of the brotherhoods that have followers in many sectors of the rural and urban population. Moreover, the monarchies have a religious institution—the Council of the Ulemas—that lays claim to the sole true interpretation of Islam, thereby disqualifying the Islamists on their own terrain. Sheikh Abdessalam Yassine, the representative of Morocco’s extremist Islamist wing, was first placed in a psychiatric hospital and then placed under house arrest on the basis of a fatwa requested by King Hassan II from his Council of Ulemas. The same council exists in Saudi Arabia; its purpose is to disqualify all religious objection to the king’s policies. The monarchies manage to co-opt moderate Islamists, but they are exposed to the minority of violent extremists who accuse them of furthering the interests of the West viewed as the implacable enemy of Islam. In Saudi Arabia these extremists carried out deadly attacks following the king’s agreement to allow US troops into the country, which went on to invade Iraq and to liberate Kuwait in 1991. The dispute between the monarchy and al-Qaeda led by Osama bin Laden origi-
nated with the monarchy’s decision to call in the US military to protect itself from Saddam Hussein. Yet it is not by ideological choice that the Saudi royal family maintains close relations with the United States; it is by political necessity, given the danger, in earlier times, posed by radical Arab nationalism and the current threat posed by Iran. The king has convincing arguments when he seeks the support of the Council of Ulemas, when the issue is the very survival of the monarchy of which they form a part. This was already the case in 1927, when Ibn Saud Abdulaziz, the founder of the kingdom, solicited the help of the British army to crush the revolt of the Ikhwan, the Wahhabi religious militia; in 1979, when elite troops of the French army neutralized extremists who had taken over the Grand mosque in Mecca; and finally in 1990, when an American military base was authorized on Saudi soil, with a view to liberating Kuwait.

The republics have to confront the Islamists on different terrain, and they appear to be less well armed ideologically for the fray. Claiming popular legitimacy, the military and civilian elites of the republics are suspicious of religious conservatism, which they accuse of exploiting economic and cultural underdevelopment. The republican ideology is more adapted to the factory and school than to the mosque; it also spreads the idea that the poverty of the people has political causes and is actively maintained by the West, which pillages the wealth of the Arabs with the help of local allies. Radical Arab nationalism has promised to break this cycle and place the state fully at the service of the people. However, as long as social inequalities persist, the elites will continue to lose credibility, thus giving the opportunity to the Islamists who take up the banner of a nationalist Utopia garnished with verses from the Qur’an. Ever since the mid-twentieth century, the Arab countries have been awaiting a change that will bring them progress and security. Yesterday it was the nationalists who promised to bring this about; today it is the Islamists.