

On Islam and modernism: a talk with Sadiq al-Mahdi

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One of the prevalent trends that defines so much of what is both right and wrong about [the Arab world](#) today is the convergence between religion, nationalism, and politics. The three are used to practice unspeakably cruel violence against foes and innocent civilians alike, while simultaneously challenging unjust authority, resisting foreign military invasions and building more equitable societies.

The combination of religion, politics, identity and nationalism is inescapable in the contemporary Arab world, which has been unable to thrive as either fully secular or explicitly theocratic. Those movements and leaders who use the combination of modern forces and traditional identities to offer a nation-building program that appeals to the best instincts and basic rights of a large number of their fellow citizens will emerge to define a better, more peaceful and prosperous Arab world. There are not many candidates for this mantle of enlightened Arab leadership on the horizon, but there are some. I had the pleasure of several long discussions with one of them earlier this week: former Sudanese Prime Minister [Sadiq al-Mahdi](#).

His views are worth pondering, given his country's rich experiences and his own particular credibility. Now in his early 70s, but showing the physical and intellectual vigor of a person half that age, Mahdi enjoys a rare combination of assets: religious legitimacy, nationalist credibility, experience in power and in opposition, and several stints in jail. His great grandfather, Mohammad Ahmed al-Mahdi, fought against British colonial rule in Sudan in the late 19th century, and Sadiq al-Mahdi is the leader of the [Ansar Sufi](#) order and the Al-Ummah political party.

He also encapsulates a modern Sudanese experience that, he says, has gone through every conceivable form of government in the past 40 years: elected democracy, Islamist rule, communism, authoritarian dictatorship, one-party rule, and non-ideological transitional military rule. None has worked very well. No Arab country has been able to shed authoritarian tendencies and adopt a modern, democratic governance system, he adds, because none has been able to strike that required critical balance between political modernity and a traditional Islamic reference in society.

He sees most authoritarian Arab governments as being "under siege" today by their own people, and also by foreign forces in some cases. A variety of domestic forces, including civil society, demand change for the better in many Arab lands: Islamist groups, reformist movements, new social forces such as women, student and business groups, and even radical groups like [Al-Qaeda](#) that seek a new caliphate that goes beyond the current cyber-caliphate they have already established.

Internal Arab reform has lost credibility due to its ineffectiveness, and external demands for change have crashed on the shoals of the Anglo-American misadventure in Iraq, leaving most Arab societies with two alternatives: to escape into Western materialism and emigration, or to escape to the Islamic past that Al-Qaeda and other such groups offer.

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Neither of these are realistic or desirable options, Mahdi says, and a third alternative is required: a coalition of humanistic, democratic forces in the Arab world to pressure existing regimes and force a transition to democratic rule that is also anchored in traditional values and principles. He calls for a coalition of Islamist, [Arab nationalist](#), democratic and human rights, secular, and other groups in society to join forces to transform Arab governance systems into ones that strike a sustainable and realistic balance among several key forces: democratic political governance, modernization, Islamic and other traditional ascriptive identities, marginalized social forces, credible human development, and international relations that neither blindly follow nor hatefully attack Western and other foreign parties.

Any party, movement or individual that wishes to join such a coalition of forces for Arab modernity and democracy must adhere to two basic values: equal rights among all human beings, and commitment to universal human rights principles. Neither traditional Islam alone nor secular Western democracy alone can respond to the modern needs of the Arab world for development, dignity and stability. When Islam or modernity alone was attempted as drivers of political governance, Arab societies experienced a severe backlash against both.

A combination of the two is needed, and Mahdi points out that we might be experiencing something of the sort in our current era in which "[post-Muslim Brotherhood movements](#)" are growing and sometimes ruling democratically. He sees the ruling Justice and Development Party in Turkey as an example, along with the party of the same name in Morocco. The [Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood](#) shows signs of moving beyond defining Islamic tenets as its foundational principles, which can be adapted to meet the needs of modern life and governance.

Sadiq al-Mahdi is a rare Arab leader who offers a program of inclusive democracy that affirms the principles of both efficacious modernity and traditional Islamic-Arab values. This is not an easy balance to strike, but it is probably a necessary one to seek if the Arab world is to find a way out of its modern nightmare of sustained authoritarianism combined with chronic war and erratic human development.

Rami G. Khouri writes a twice-weekly commentary for ***THE DAILY STAR***