

Recalling a thinker of Islam and modernity

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Three years ago this week, the late Egyptian thinker, economist, public servant and activist Said al-Naggar passed away after a long and productive life. I remember Naggar from a time I visited with him in Cairo, and through my recollection of discussions I held with Egyptian colleagues on the challenges and problems facing the Arab world, for which few solutions seem to emanate from Egypt anymore. Naggar's ideas about modernization in Arab and Islamic societies, however, still represent an enduring beacon of enlightened Arab thought.

Many of our colleagues around the world who ask in bewilderment about how the Arab world will ever get modern should consider for a moment this man's ideas, which are widely if quietly shared by so many in the region, though not always articulated in public.

Naggar, a professor emeritus of economics at Cairo University, spent the last years of his life running the New Civic Forum, a movement dedicated to promoting democracy, human rights and secularism in Arab and Muslim societies. He saw the forum as continuing the great tradition of reform and modernity that long defined Islamic society and thought. His immense knowledge and sense of justice also saw him continuing his public service as the elected representative of the Middle East on the appellate body of the World Trade Organization.

His activism was guided by the conviction that "secularization is the right path to progress, and it is perfectly compatible with the spirit and principles of true Islam."

One of Naggar's presentations to a conference in Berlin in 2001 was recently published by the New Civic Forum, before that body ceased to exist, falling victim, as so many others have done, to the prevailing malaise of state-dominated domestic Egyptian politics. In his talk entitled "A social science approach to modernization in contemporary Muslim societies," Naggar succinctly listed seven points that he saw as forming the basis for modernization. They are worth recalling today, given the continuing quest for a path to Arab and Islamic modernity.

The first point is the principle of social change, rather than a static truth, in all institutions, including religious, social, technological and economic ones. The second point is recognition of the findings of the social sciences as the principal basis of social organization, and not to accept only the results of research in the physical sciences, as some Islamists do. This is imperative if Arab and Islamic societies hope ever to overcome poverty, underdevelopment and dependency on the West.

The third point is that Islam should never be interpreted in a way that makes it inconsistent with basic human rights as embodied in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and other such conventions. These human rights documents are universal precisely because they are the result of contributions by Western, Middle Eastern, Eastern and other civilizations, and not the private realm or any one of them.
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Fourth, Naggar stated, in a modern national state, citizenship rather than religious affiliation should be the source of all rights and obligations. This requires shedding inherited Ottoman traditions, which

differentiate between civil and commercial matters that are governed by a single law for all, and personal-status matters that are governed by different religious laws for different communities.

Naggar's fifth point is that a distinction should be drawn between a constitutional principle which is applicable to all citizens, and a program of a political party which expresses the views and preferences of a certain group. Provisions in Arab constitutions that draw on Islam as the main or only source of legislation, for example, should be reconsidered if they place certain non-Muslim citizens at a disadvantage.

His sixth point is that a majority that has the right to govern and legislate in a democracy cannot be based on religion, race, or color. The seventh point is that Western civilization is not a geographical expression, but rather a state of mind entailing a rational approach to the solution of social problems, based on the findings of social science research.

"If Western culture is defined as a rational approach to problems, then it is not alien to Islamic culture," he noted, adding that the role of reason is placed on an elevated pedestal in the Koran.

Naggar made a powerful and systematic case for modernity in Islamic societies, based on his seeing no contradiction between secularism and Islam. Three years after his death, his thoughts are more relevant than ever, when some Arab and Islamic societies are caught in the grip of an increasingly tense face-off between so-called modern Western and traditional Arab and Islamic values. Naggar continues to stimulate and challenge us with his intellectual commitment to a brand of Arab and Islamic modernity that rejects such simplistic divisions, and instead seeks out those vast, endearing spaces where Western and Arab and Islamic societies not only coexist naturally, but enrich each other as well.

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