Introduction

A few months after the September 11, 2001 attacks, I had a conversation in Washington with a mid-level government official who belonged to the "neoconservative" circles pushing for a radically different American approach to the Near East. At one point he said that his office was interested in ways of "changing Islam"—not, he explained, in the sense of promoting one "moderate" interpretation or current over others, but of coming up with an entirely "new religion." A year later the RAND Corporation published a monograph by Cheryl Benard (wife of Zalmay Khalilzad, subsequently appointed ambassador by President George W. Bush first to Afghanistan and then to Iraq) which began by considering the same question: "It is no easy matter to transform a major world religion. If 'nation-building' is a daunting task, 'religion-building' is immeasurably more perilous and complex."[1] Benard, however, concluded that the United States "needs to avoid the impression" that it is "opposed to Islam," and relayed an exchange in which her interlocutor "conceded that a frontal critique of Islam was not realistic at this time, and that efforts to promote a kinder, gentler, 'defanged' Islam were likely to achieve better results."[2] She therefore advocated U.S. backing for those Muslim elements—designated as "modernists" and "Sufis"—who distance religion from politics, rejecting any notion of an Islamic state and understanding jihad as a purely "symbolic term referring to personal spiritual development."[3] It is these apolitical elements, she argued, which "should be cultivated and publicly presented as the face of contemporary Islam."[4]

Many Muslims naturally take exception to outsiders seeking to "defang" their religion, as is further discussed in chapter 1. In reality, however, the far more formidable challenge comes not from the transformative ambitions of some U.S. government agency or think-tank denizens, or their counterparts in academia, but from structural

transformations—culminating in democratization—that arise primarily from internal dynamics and that will compel Islamic societies, as they have compelled other societies, to reconsider long-held verities. In the face of such transformations, the only alternatives need not be reactionary obstinacy and abject capitulation to alien values. The purpose of this book is to identify a third alternative for Islamic polities—a realist political tradition, as indigenous as can be, that can help them navigate through the current upheaval because it has already anticipated some of the most critical challenges of the emergent culture.

In order to delineate the contours of this realist tradition, and also in the process to clarify the character of the challenges looming ahead, it will be helpful to begin with a brief review of the trajectory taken by its Western counterpart. Like all realisms, the Western tradition sets out from a naturalistic grounding; specifically, from the conviction that a proclivity toward evil inheres in human nature. Left to their own devices, without any restraining influence, human beings are disposed to selfishness and aggression, so that power becomes the primary currency, and conflict the ubiquitous feature, of human affairs. Political communities therefore require the repression or sublimation of such natural drives. Law is the primary mechanism for dealing with this problem, but it does not suffice because the aggressive energies cannot simply be extinguished. Hence the other age-old solution: redirecting them against a common external enemy. United by fear and hostility toward this enemy, the community is better able to sustain the more positive bonds that make decent political life possible.

It is evident that such a solution entails a cooptation, rather than outright rejection, of natural impulses such as ambition, belligerence, and deceit. They are disciplined and redeployed, but not eliminated. They become components—subordinate but nonetheless indispensable—of a greater good. An effective statecraft must therefore be prepared to venture into those gray areas where necessity compels the recruitment of lesser evils against greater ones. Such a solution, moreover, can never be final or definitive, because circumstances never stay the same and the calculus of necessary accommodations constantly changes. Sometimes, for example, a more aggressive temper among the populace is called for; sometimes a more pacific one. Determining what is most needful at any given time, and being able to bring it about, are the chief requirements of realist statecraft.

Until recently, the main counterpart to realism has been what may be called idealism, according to which it is in fact possible to perfect

human nature. This is accomplished by introducing into human affairs a code of principles and standards that do not derive from nature, but from an external source—such as divine providence or some other sort of transcendent right or law—capable of eliminating the aggressive and dominating aspects of the human character, and thereby establishing, here on earth, a permanently harmonious and peaceful order in both domestic and international politics. This transcendent conception of idealism sometimes takes an activist, even militant, form, in line with its conviction that utopia on earth is within reach so long as no accommodations or compromises are made. When confronted by a social environment impervious to its call, however, it can also lead its adherents to retreat from the world into an expectant monasticism.

In the West, realism gained a decisive upper hand over idealism with the advent of the modern secular era, and assumed a primary manifestation congruent with the spirit of the new age: Machiavellianism, an uninhibited embrace of the impulses and appetites of the now fully liberated self; concerned as Machiavelli himself put it with the *is* rather than the *ought*, and accordingly focused on the "value-free" techniques, the science, of pursuing one's own goals. In contrast to premodern realists such as Thucydides who sought to preserve the distinction between noble and base ends, Machiavelli valorized strife—between factions balanced within a polity, between polities in a multipolar international arena—as well as the qualities of character that strife elicits, for the sake of a notion of "greatness" that seems, to say the least, unmoored from moral concerns. Life thus becomes a war of all against all devoid of restraint.

It takes a very exceptional type of personality to sustain such a steely conception, however, and most twentieth-century realists ultimately shied away from it. Although his entire understanding of international politics rested on "the ubiquity of the desire for power" which "constitutes the ubiquity of evil in human action," Hans Morgenthau, for example—scorched by the horrors of European militarism, and driven perhaps also by fear of nuclear Armageddon—ended up arguing that "as there can be no permanent peace without a world state," and as current circumstances preclude such a world state, "[f]oreign policy should be conducted" in order "to create the conditions" that will make it possible and thereby "make peace permanent" as well.[5]

Morgenthau's American students, lending his tortured European realism their native optimism, went on to formulate its latest articulation, "neorealism." Here the scientific element becomes more

prominent. In the interests of scientific parsimony, for example, the decisive human impulses are boiled down to a preoccupation with maximizing power, whether for security or gain. Still, the neorealists start out retaining their predecessors' resignation about the inevitability of conflict, and consequently aspire at first only to understand—not reform—the dynamics of the international system. The most they will allow is that such understanding enables one to make better informed and therefore more prudent decisions. An actor seeking maximum power, for instance, may benefit from the information, gleaned from the historical record, that the pursuit of hegemony tends to generate successful counter-coalitions. And if an appreciation for balances of power induces moderation, according to the neorealists' leading light Kenneth Waltz, all the more so in the case of the most robust of such balances, the bipolar system: "In a world in which two states united in their mutual antagonism far overshadow any other, the incentives to a calculated response stand out most clearly, and the sanctions against irresponsible behavior achieve their greatest force."[6]

And yet it is not at all clear that such information suffices to deter would-be hegemons, because as another prominent neorealist, Robert Gilpin, points out after reviewing the same historical record: "The conclusion of one hegemonic war is the beginning of another cycle of growth, expansion, and eventual decline. . . . Disequilibrium replaces equilibrium, and the world moves toward a new round of hegemonic conflict. It has always been thus and always will be, until men either destroy themselves or learn to develop an effective mechanism of peaceful change."[7] Already in his final clause, however, Gilpin's nerve seems to crack. The old pessimism gives way to a new—to the American character, much more congenial—hope; even a new "faith": "Through the advancement of knowledge, humanity can learn to master the blind forces of change and to construct a science of peace. . . . Political realism is, of course, the very embodiment of this faith in reason and science."[8] In this way neorealism moves farther from its Machiavellian origins (to say nothing of the still older tradition exemplified by Thucydides), and closer to an alternative, altogether new perspective. Within the context of contemporary international relations theory it identifies itself as "neoliberalism" and, in a crafty tactical maneuver, presents itself as merely, in the words of one of its leading practitioners, an "adaptation" or "modification" of realism—one that believes its premises "need to be supplemented . . . not replaced."[9]

While neoliberal theorists, seeking to avoid the charge of naïve idealism leveled at earlier articulations of the liberal outlook, deny that they rely on any super-natural moral code, however, their claim to naturalism differs from realism in that it is grounded neither in the hierarchy of values pointing toward more elevated human ends characterizing the premodern realists, nor in the acceptance of aggressive and dominating impulses characterizing the modern Machiavellians. Instead, they look to a distinctive and even more prosaic set of human drives—primarily the desires for security and prosperity—as the foundations of a permanently pacific and cooperative political order. To the extent that contemporary neorealists embrace those same drives in search of "a more just and more peaceful world," therefore, they allow themselves to be absorbed into the great liberal conception that has come to dominate modern political thought.[10]

Now the new challenger emerges into view. For the promise of ever more security and ever more prosperity, liberalism exacts only the price of renouncing the preoccupation with nobility in favor of an appreciation for equality, of subsuming compelling communal commitments under an overarching valorization of the liberated and autonomous self, and of replacing the lust for power with much tamer appetites. Some in the West have viewed the advent of the liberal age with trepidation, fearing that its valorization of the self will generate a hedonism and nihilism that will pave the way either for the emergence of some new kind of tyranny from within, or for enervation and defeat at the hands of more vigorous enemies from without. Even those critics, however, acknowledge the humane, mild, altogether extraordinarily attractive character of the bargain liberalism offers. One of them asks, "[W]hat apocalypse has ever been so kindly?"[11] Others see no credible alternative arising from any quarter, and so confine their concerns to an "end of history" devoid of idealism and heroism.[12] But the most prevalent response by far has been to embrace liberalism whole-heartedly. Even where religion, say, does survive—as in America—it has adapted itself to the new conditions by taking on a more individualistic emphasis on personal spirituality and self-fulfillment.[13]

It is this phenomenon that is now bursting—perhaps most visibly in its political manifestation, democracy—upon the Muslim world.[14] Abdolkarim Soroush, the Iranian dissident who is one of the most discerning Muslim thinkers of our time, assured his listeners at a 1995 seminar in Tehran on "cultural development" that they have

little to fear: "Those who speak with agitation about development do so because they do not have a clear view of science and cannot separate the issue of knowledge from the other components of Western civilization . . . Science is not like the customs, morality, art, and habits of the infidels and Westerners."[15] Soroush acknowledges that the Western variant of modernizing development rested on a "recognition of the base, lowly and afflicted aspects of human existence, and their employment in building the new world," and acknowledges also that this led to dire consequences: "From this point on private vices become public virtues. . . . Thus a new morality was gradually born. . . . Low and vile values came to power, were upheld, played their part proudly in building the new livelihood, and came to be held in esteem. . . . A revolution has truly taken over that brought high things down to a low level."[16] But he insists that the baser aspects of secular liberalism are not universally "inevitable prerequisites and values for development."[17] It is possible to isolate them from the "cornucopia of blessings" otherwise offered: "tolerance and lenience, . . . beautiful arts, . . . [the] essential unity of religions, . . . ecumenism, a flourishing of science, . . . women's rights, . . . democracy."[18] By shielding it from any taint of "debauchery and corruption," by defending it against various forms of anti-rationalism as well as an unhealthy "Sufi-like morality based on asceticism,"[19] and by arraying it instead in its most appealing features, Soroush seeks to give the newcomer—modern science and its bounty of material, cultural, and social liberation—as fine an introduction as possible: "no human being seeking the truth today can fail to feel kindness, pleasure, and sensitivity toward this plump guest in the family of humanity."[20]

Soroush's assurances that the various aspects of this modernizing transformation can be so easily disaggregated remain open to question.[21] Nevertheless, he makes a compelling case that must be taken seriously, all the more so as it is in turn grounded in a serious reading of both Western and Islamic political thought. The same cannot be said of others who embrace the revolution without a clue as to what they are giving up and what they are getting in return. Among these are some of the cruder Turkish Westernizers, such as Hüseyin Cahit, who wrote in 1898 that "Ibn Khaldun's philosophy of history belongs to the infantile age of the science of history. Since then, the child has grown. . . . The modern science of history is to come from Europe, not from the Arabs."[22] Or the former Education Minister Hamdullah Suphi Tanrıöver, who proclaimed with satisfaction in 1928 that the

"old literature is doomed to moulder away."[23] Perhaps more surprisingly, however, a similar disdain for one's own intellectual heritage is sometimes heard among Islamist circles as well. The Tunisian Rashid Ghannoushi, for example, whose Nahda Party won the first free elections following the revolution of 2011, once asked many years earlier: "I wonder how our students feel studying 'Islamic philosophy' when it offers them only a bunch of dead issues having nothing to do with the problems of today."[24] The realist tradition in Islamic political thought which this book seeks to explicate is perhaps the most unduly neglected strand of this altogether too hastily dismissed heritage, and the objective here will be to show that it does in fact offer insights relevant to the problems and challenges of today.

Chapter 1 sets the stage through the contemporary debate on jihad, or justified warfare in Islam; a debate that is emblematic of the broader impasse in modern Islamic political thought. Its main protagonists are often designated in the relevant literature as "militants" who advocate uncompromising offensive jihad on the one side, and "modernists" who assert full compatibility between Islam's teachings and contemporary norms of international relations, including the imperative of striving for permanent peace, on the other. While both clearly proceed from an idealist outlook, this chapter will argue that even as the modernists increasingly dominate today's discourse, pointed criticisms by the militants are pushing them more and more in a comprehensively liberal direction. There is accordingly a lacuna in contemporary Islamic political thought occupied by realism in other cultures. It is this absence of a realist perspective in Islamic writings on war, peace, and statecraft, an absence surprisingly neglected in the relevant scholarship, which the present study seeks to address.

Chapters 2 through 4 trace the evolution of just such a realist tradition in the premodern Islamic world. The thinkers reviewed lived in such different times and places, however, and pursued such diverse intellectual agendas, that it may be asked whether one can even speak of a "tradition" encompassing them all. These chapters proceed from the premise that to the extent they alerted the best and brightest of their times to the full range of political pathologies—including some of the vulnerabilities which modern critics ascribe to liberalism—in order to rally them to a flexible type of engagement that recognizes the ubiquity of evil and strife in this world, they can indeed be grouped together coherently. Acknowledging that great intellects resist neat or comprehensive categorization, then, this study

seeks only to outline the contours of an Islamic realism along the same lines that one can speak (as any number of university course syllabi attest) of a Western realist tradition encompassing figures as varied as Thucydides, Machiavelli, Hobbes, and Morgenthau, as well as his American offspring. At the same time, no claim to exhaustiveness is made here. There are no doubt other thinkers worthy of inclusion in a less preliminary overview of medieval Islamic realism, but whose contributions to it will need to be elaborated on elsewhere.

Chapter 2 begins by outlining three primary responses—revolutionary idealism, ascetic idealism, and Islamic realism—to the establishment of an imperial Islamic state after 661 CE, then goes on to identify systematically some key features of the emerging realist current as reflected in the writings of figures such as Ibn al-Muqaffaʿ, al-Jahiz, and the anonymous author of a ninth-century military manual. These include not only features shared with realist traditions everywhere—a this-worldly focus on prudent statecraft, for example, or a recognition of the ubiquity of conflict in worldly affairs—but also those where the Islamic tradition is distinctive: in its insistence on the political centrality of religion, in its rejection of scientific certainty, in its valorization of hierarchy as opposed to equality, and in its adherence to empire as the optimal framework for virtuous action.

The central figure in chapter 3, the philosopher Ibn Rushd (d. 1198), is shown to articulate a philosophical expression of the emerging realist tradition outlined in the previous chapter. His project, carried out in large part through a highly critical reading of his predecessor Ibn Sina, entailed affirming the philosopher's obligation to attend to the well-being of the political community by engaging actively in political reform; delineating a clear division of labor between rational and religious inquiry rooted in his understanding of the diversity of human types; and eschewing both theoretical certitude and legal dogmatism in favor of an artful and flexible imperial statecraft. The pursuit of such an agenda, according to Ibn Rushd, constitutes a practical (political and moral) counterpart and complement to the theoretical pursuit of the Good. This focus on Ibn Rushd's realism is accordingly informed by but also departs from influential alternative perspectives rejecting the notion that *political* philosophy occupied any significant place in medieval Islamic philosophy,[25] or privileging more mystical or gnostic currents as the true representatives of Islamic philosophical thought, or reading Ibn Rushd and other Muslim philosophers as advocates of private contemplation rather than political engagement.

Chapter 4 presents Ibn Khaldun (d. 1406) as the synthesizer of the insights of his predecessors into a comprehensive realist vision; a vision with a normative goal (a civilization in which human creativity can flourish to its maximum potential) that shapes a practical agenda: establishing a polity of sufficient magnitude, complexity, and duration—in short, an empire—capable of sustaining advanced culture. Ibn Khaldun's realism emerges in his account of how political communities, as well as the normative ties of solidarity that bind them together (*ʿaṣabiyya*), grow through conflict and conquest from primordial origins to ever more complex polities; and how internal contradictions can then set in that begin a process of enervation and decline. Contrary to the prevailing interpretation, however, it is argued here that this is far from a fatalistic vision. The purpose of his historical account is to draw instructive lessons from the past that can help future statesmen counter the engines of social and political decay. This analysis of Ibn Khaldun as a systematic synthesizer of the realist elements formulated by earlier writers stands in contrast to influential scholarly views of him either as an orthodox thinker who reasserted the legal authority of religious scholars over political rulers, or alternatively as so unique as to be a "solitary genius" without predecessors and successors in the history of Islamic political thought.[26]

With the core elements of the Islamic realist tradition having now been outlined, chapter 5 opens by briefly discussing an efflorescence of Ibn Khaldunism during the waning years of the Ottoman Empire, exemplified in the writings of the scholar Kâtip Çelebi, in order to show the persistence of this tradition beyond Ibn Khaldun. It then leaps ahead to today, interpreting the current upheavals besetting the post-Ottoman political order in the Near East as a region-wide "*ʿaṣabiyya* crisis" of identity and legitimacy, and reviewing the range of responses this crisis is eliciting, from the revolutionary militant to the proto-democratic. The chapter ends by considering the recent revival of interest in Ibn Rushd among Arab intellectuals, with a view to determining the extent to which the long-forgotten realist tradition may yet prove relevant in the context of the democratizing and liberalizing flood tide looming on the horizon of the Muslim world.