The need for technological and economic development has remained central in the political agenda of the mainstream Islamist movements up to the present. In Egypt in particular groups such as the Muslim Brothers, the Labour Party1 (Hizb al-'Amal), and the Centre Party2 (Hizb al-Wasat) have devoted a great deal of their political energy to criticizing the failure of the economic development effort, and emphasize the need for building an independent technological base in Muslim countries, in order to escape the current total dependence on Western and East Asian countries for advanced equipment. Through their press and as elected representatives, Islamists call for rapid industrialization, improved communications, upgrading basic infrastructure and services in the villages, etc. Not least, beyond the level of immediate questions of economic policy, the Islamist interpretation of the social message of Islam is much conducive to economic development, and reminiscent of the Protestant ethics that Max Weber saw as propitious to capitalist development in Europe. This will be confirmed by a glance at what Egyptian thinkers linked to the Muslim Brothers and the Labour Party have written on economic questions.3

Based on their pronouncements the building of a strong and technologically advanced economy emerges as a sacred duty. For Adil Husayn, the deceased charismatic ideologue of the Labour Party’s turn to Islamism, this was an integral part of the quest for independence which was at the heart of his political and intellectual efforts. Economy professors Yusuf Kamal and Husayn Shahhata, central spokesmen for the Muslim Brothers on economic issues, for their part state that the Islamic Sharia aims at comprehensive development in order to achieve strength and glory for the Muslim nation. They claim that mankind is entrusted with a sacred obligation to exploit natural resources to the full for the increase of the material wealth of society, and that economic development is a fard kifaya, a collective duty, to be secured by the state if individuals fail to promote it with sufficient force. The whole development effort is likened to a jihad. Both Kamal and Shahhata emphasize the centrality of the development effort in an Islamic system through stating that zakat revenue can be used by the state for productive investment in order to further development. Shahhata states that work is to be considered a form of ‘ibada, part of the worship of God. This implies that the perfection of one’s work is a religious obligation equal in importance to the fulfillment of ritual duties like prayer and fasting, and is reminiscent of the Protestant idea of work as a calling. Shahhata holds up the furtherance of public interest, maslaha, as equal to fulfilling God’s will, and in line with this he accords the call for modernizing the economy priority over the formal fulfillment of tenets of fiqh, as in Islamist critique of “Islamic” investment companies and banks for not investing in projects which would contribute to the development of production.

There is an old fiqh principle stating that in considering maslaha in the choice between possible interpretations of the Quran or Sunna on a specific point of jurisprudence, one should proceed according to a descending ladder of priorities: first necessities, daruriyyat, then needs, hajat, then improvements, tahsinat. The Muslim Brothers take up this list of priorities and adopt it as “Islamic priorities for production and investment,”4 so that Muslim society, and the Islamic state as its representative, must before anything else secure the sufficient allocation of resources for the procurement of basic necessities for the population. Even if self-proclaimed Islamic financial institutions can be said to be operating without interest it does not make them Islamic in the eyes of the Muslim Brothers and the Labour Party if they do not support this effort, but concentrate on financing trade and currency speculation.

God’s stewards on earth
There is common agreement among Islamist writers that private property is the basic principle in Islam and that this is necessary for stimulating men to exert their best efforts at developing and preserving wealth.5 Still they all stress that public interest takes priority over private interests. A central idea is that of man as “God’s steward (khaliifa) on earth.”6 Everyone has the right to private property, but this right is limited by the fact that all wealth ultimately belongs to God. The individual is seen as holding property in trust from God and from society as God’s deputy, it as were. Therefore private property involves a social responsibility. It should be made to bear fruit in the service of society, and it should be preserved and developed for future generations. And others have claims on the property; that is, the return it brings or even parts of the property itself may be needed to satisfy urgent needs of the wider community.

The Egyptian Islamists consider it a task for an Islamic state to secure a minimum of welfare to all members of society. This is to be realized through concentrating investment and production on the provision of basic necessities, and, centrally for Kamal and Shahhata, through the zakat. The Muslim Brother writers emphasize that the zakat should provide more than what is necessary for mere survival; every member of society should have the right to a certain degree of enjoyment of life.7 The ideal of the just Islamic society is not one of radical egalitarianism, but rather of balance, of Islam as a moderate third way avoiding the excesses of capitalism and communism. This implies that the ideal is to seek a harmonious balance between different social groups and between generations. Class conflict is seen as an evil which it is imperative to avoid lest its divisive cancer split society into warring factions.

The liberating force of faith
Over and above the general principles enunciated as guiding an Islamic economy, the Islamist writers emphasize the liberating force of faith itself. Faith induces good behaviour towards others and thereby creates a solid framework for social solidarity, says Kamal. Husayn stresses belief in a sacred doctrine as an indispensable prerequisite for the will to sacrifice without which any serious development effort is doomed to failure. More generally this is linked to the idea that a true Muslim is involved in an unceasing battle for good against evil, and Middle Eastern Islamists have been unequivocal advocates of bringing their societies up to the technological level of modern industrial society. In fact, the most fertile recruiting ground for Islamist organizations has been students in technological and natural science subjects. As Islamist movements gather strength year by year, and are poised to be the main beneficiaries of any turn towards democratic government in the region, it seems imperative to gain an insight into their ideas on economic issues.

Islamist doctrine
... possess[es] a substantial potential for economic mobilization.
should use her or his measured time in this world in a disciplined and purposeful way. When the energy of the believer through the values listed above is directed towards the realization of the Islamic message. There is a strong focus on the individual as responsible not only for his own proper conduct but also for all the affairs of society and state that contrasts with more traditional communistist attitudes and a traditional division of roles where politics would be the domain of notables and religion that of the clerical leaders. Especially with the Muslim Brothers the focus on individual duties is coupled with a strong defence of individual rights against the encroachment of the state. Common to all Islamists is a strong emphasis on merit, which is also in view of the individualizing aspects of Islamist interpreta

Misguided belief in miracles?
In his influential works on Islamic economics, notably Islam and Mammon: The Economic Predicaments of Islamism, Timur Kuran presents a rather more gloomy picture of Islamism. The literature analyzed by Kuran stems mainly from the South Asian Islamic region, and is mostly not produced by political Islamists. It is probably correct to say that the writings in question tend to be of a more technical and scripturalist nature than that of the Arab Islamicdiscourse. Yet this can at best partially account for Kuran’s inclination to reduce Islamic economic thought to a misguided belief in the miraculous effect of reintroducing medieval economic principles.

It would seem that in his effort to dispute the “workability” of Islamic economic prescriptions Kuran becomes insensitive to the dynamic aspect of Islamist reformulations of Islam. He does acknowledge that equality and justice are part of wider set of moral injunctions. But to Kuran these injunctions can be summed up as a general call for altruism and this he summarily dismisses as unworkable, since altruism can only work within small social units, such as the family, and not on the scale of a nationwide market. This statement in itself is certainly debatable. But more importantly Kuran fails to notice that Islamists advocate of hard and conscientious work, the establishment of merit as the sole criterion for economic decisions, and the urgency of economic development as central Islamic values, gives a thorough

A pro-modern ideology
On the whole, then, I would argue that mainstream Islamism in the Middle East as exemplified by the Egyptian movements discussed here should be considered as a pro-modern ideology not only in the sense of its stressing the need for economic and technological development, but also in view of the individualizing aspects of Islamist interpretation of the Islamic message. There is a strong focus on the individual as responsible not only for his own proper conduct but also for all the affairs of society and state that contrasts with more traditional communistist attitudes and a traditional division of roles where politics would be the domain of notables and religion that of the clerical leaders. Especially with the Muslim Brothers the focus on individual duties is coupled with a strong defence of individual rights against the encroachment of the state. Common to all Islamists is a strong emphasis on merit, which is also in view of the individualizing aspects of Islamist interpretation of the Islamic message. There is a strong focus on the individual as responsible not only for his own proper conduct but also for all the affairs of society and state that contrasts with more traditional communistist attitudes and a traditional division of roles where politics would be the domain of notables and religion that of the clerical leaders. Especially with the Muslim Brothers the focus on individual duties is coupled with a strong defence of individual rights against the encroachment of the state. Common to all Islamists is a strong emphasis on merit, which is

Notes
1. The Labour Party, founded in 1978, was originally a leftist-nationalist group, but in the late 1980s adopted a clear-cut Islamist platform.
2. The Centre Party was formed in 1996 by liberal dissidents from the Muslim Brothers.
4. For instance Kamal, Fiqh al-qiiyad al’l-amn, 150.

Image not available online

Egyptian workers in a garment factory in Cairo

Muslim NGOs

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