By constructing a historical continuum from the situation of the umma at the end of the 19th century, al-Manar al-Jadid emphasizes its lineal ties with its initial goals. Rida had understood that the umma required a step forward into the future. A new future, at which point the umma would be able to overcome the heavy burden of stagnation, technological and scientific backwardness, and civilizational sloth. Today, at the end of the 20th century, the challenges and fears are still on the agenda of most Arabic and Islamic societie{s}.

In light of this analogy, the leading article of Rida in 1898 and republished in the first issue of al-Manar al-Jadid, entitled ‘Risalat al-Manar’ (The Message of al-Manar), stands as a policy statement for the new periodical. In addition to the revival of umma thought, it also intends to provide new impulses to the tradition of reform (tajdid) and to bring the century-old aims of al-Manar to the centre of contemporary attention.

Revival of a religious tradition

With his motto, tadlil al-tajdid (renewal) of the 19th century, Muhammad ‘Imara is representative of the way in which historical analogies are constructed and arguments relevant to the present times are articulated in al-Manar al-Jadid. Apart from ‘Imara, the leading articles of Rida from 1898 and republished in the first issue of al-Manar al-Jadid, entitled ‘Risalat al-Manar’ (The Message of al-Manar), stand as an essential statement of the new periodical.

The notions of continuity and change in the discussions found in al-Manar al-Jadid have two central themes: the persistence of decadence as a general tendency of human societies and the desirable return to an idealized moment in history. The notion of change is only relevant as an embodiment of the process of transition from the current to an idealized vision of the umma. This highly regressive aspect of the continuity-change dichotomy means that some of the writings in al-Manar al-Jadid lose their future-oriented aspect and extend the limits of what is changeable in Islamic thought.

The contributions of the ‘new reformers’ in al-Manar al-Jadid reveal two approaches. Firstly, the strategies and approaches of Islamist reform efforts since the 1970s are subjected to a critical scrutiny. Secondly, the so-called ‘teachings of the past’ there is a debate on the prospects of theoretical and programmatic change in the Islamic spectrum. Within this framework, the process of rethinking is legitimized by emphasizing the overall societal changes and the diversity of experiences in the Islamic world. In other words, the primary continuity, which is central to the revival of the reform tradition, is substituted by a dynamic perception of the realities of modern Arabic-Islamic societies. Subsequently, the phenomenon of Islamism becomes a matter of programmatic approach. This marks a shift of focus in the discussion of future-oriented reforms. While the link to the past remains the main legitimate from the continuity paradigm of the Islamic reform tradition, the latter option, and with the works of Al-Ghanushi, paved the way for numerous other movements aimed at re-Islamizing the state and society.

Although Al-Ghanushi continues to see Islam as essential, he emphasizes that the ‘painful experiences’ of the past three decades make it necessary to reassess the strategies used and to examine their conformity to Islamic values as well as their political efficacy. The radical and violent approach characteristic of many attempts to bring about change in the 1980s and 1990s, he argues, is in stark contrast to the authentic concept of gradual change in Islamic society. The attempt to dam the credibility of the Islamists, the majority of whom have come to see in recent years that neither violence nor revolution will change modern social structures offers prospects for the future. He therefore pleads for turning away from the militant paradigm of Oustaz and for a ‘return’ to the reform tradition.

On the fallibility of contemporary Islamism

The Tunisian scholar Rashid al-Ghanushi sees Islamism as a mass movement, as the “[...] sum of the individual and collective efforts of numerous faithful men and women in order to lead Muslims to the immaculate God”. Islam being the only true source of orientation, the Islamists have the duty to start a process of re-Islamization in all spheres of life by means of legal and educational reform. Thus they make it possible to realize a model of society and family based on the authentic principles of sharia (consultation) and ijma’i shar’iyya (rule of Islamic law). The Islamism is felt by Al-Ghanushi to lie in the vitality and uniqueness of its role. In his argumentation the nation-state is redefined in the context of the nation-state. New authoritarian elites rejected the participation of any forces other than their own in the formation of the new state. This was to be achieved by a tactious institutionalization of state instruments serving to preserve their own power and even adopted religious contents and symbols for their own secular goals. According to Al-Ghanushi, the ‘alam of the new order must be to either obey the rules and ensure a mini- mum amount of freedom (in the education sector) or to inspire opposition in order to free religion and society from secular nationalism.”

The persistence of the notions of ‘return’ and ‘beginnings’ justifies the adaptation to the present by emphasizing a conceptual and symbolic affinity to the old reform tradition and, moreover, to the dominant, backward-looking paradigm of Islamist thought during the last decades. The call to rediscover the ethical and moral dimensions of Islam represents a response to the imminent tension between continuity and change in religious discourses. By restoring the separateness of (ethical-moral) thought and changing (society-related) elements in Islam and by taking the former out of the sphere of politics, the religious ideas are re-sacralized and freed from the secular con- straints of social reality.

The persistence of the notion of al-Manar al-Jadid of the Is- lamist experience over the last three decades has led to a renewal of the religio- giously influenced understanding of politics and society. The backward-looking notion of change should not obscure the signifi- cance of the reform proposals originating from the discussions in the periodical. Re- veting to authentic experiences (early-Islam- ic period) and traditions (reform tradition of the early al-Manar) is re-valued and reduced to the functionality of stabilizing the social reference system and the legit- imization of renewal. Thus a new scope is defined for discourse in which, by taking account of religious ideals and historical transformations, answers can be formulated to the tensions generated by the demands of continuity and the need for change.

Notes
2. Ibid., p. 7.

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The periodical al-Manar al-Jadid was first published in January 1998 in Cairo. In the words of its editor-in-chief, Gamal Sultan, its aim is to: ‘To establish a civilized and authentic discourse, to combat the waves of westernization, arbitrariness and opportunism in the Islamic world.’ The initiators of the publication include such prominent Islamists as Muhammad ‘Imara, Tarig al-Bishri, Yusuf Qaradawi, and Rashid al-Ghanushi, as well as activists of the younger generation, like kamil habib, a leading member of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood within the 1980s. The publication is obviously linked to the famous al-Manar issued in 1898 under the patronage of Rashid Rida.