The attempt to return to an Islamic or, as Westerners sometimes call it, a pan-Islamic political identity, was not new. It has in the past century been encouraged by a number of Muslim rulers, including the Ottomans under both the old and the Young Turks, and the kings of Egypt and Arabia. These state-directed campaigns of pan-Islamism all failed, no doubt because they were seen, with some justification, as attempts to mobilize Islamic feelings for the purposes of one or another Muslim ruler. There was also a more popular and more radical pan-Islam, which won rather greater support. But this too was often sponsored by more radical states, and seen as serving state purposes.

When nationalist ideas of the European type first appeared in the Islamic Middle East, there were some who denounced them as divisive and irreligious. Today, after a long period during which nationalist ideologies reigned unchallenged, the same criticism is being heard again. A book by Abd al-Fattah Mazzûm, entitled The Sedition of Nationalism in the Islamic World, argues that nationalism is the same as racism, and was introduced to the Islamic world by "arrogant infidels," mainly Jewish, so as to divide the Muslims and turn them against one another.

But even those who oppose and reject nationalism seem unable to escape from its grip. The Turkish poet Mehmet Akif, a deeply religious man and a bitter critic of ethnic nationalism, went into self-imposed exile when the Turkish Republic was proclaimed, but one of his poems was set to music and adopted as the Turkish national anthem.

In time, these patriotic and nationalistic movements provided a new ideological expression for what was previously conceived and presented as a struggle for Islam against the infidels. The peoples of the Islamic world were acquiring new pasts, and with these new pasts came a new and different sense of their own present identity and future aspirations.
is both cruel and vindictive. He is also weak, needing to hire human hitmen to find and kill his enemies, and paying them with promises of carnal delights in paradise.

In the modern world, the political role of Islam, internationally as well as domestically, differs significantly from that of its peer and rival, Christianity. The heads of state or ministers of foreign affairs of the Scandinavian countries and Germany do not from time to time foregather in a Lutheran summit conference. Nor was it customary, when the Soviet Union still existed, for its rulers to join with those of Greece and Yugoslavia and, temporarily forgetting their political and ideological differences, to hold regular meetings on the basis of their current or previous adherence to the Orthodox Church. Similarly, the Buddhist nations of East and Southeast Asia, the Catholic nations of southern Europe and South America, do not constitute Buddhist or Catholic blocs at the United Nations, nor for that matter in any other of their political activities.

The very idea of such a grouping, based on religious identity, might seem to many modern Western observers absurd or even comic. But it is neither absurd nor comic in relation to Islam. Some fifty-five Muslim governments, including monarchies and republics, conservatives and revolutionaries, practitioners of capitalism and disciples of various kinds of socialism, friends and enemies of the United States, and exponents of a whole spectrum of shades of neutrality, have built up an elaborate apparatus of international consultation and even, on some issues, of cooperation. They hold regular high-level conferences, and, despite differences of structure, ideology, and policy, have achieved a significant measure of agreement and common action.

If we turn from international to internal politics, the difference between Islamic countries and the rest of the world, though less dramatic, is still substantial. True, there are countries in Asia and in Europe with political parties that call themselves Buddhist or Christian. These however are few, and religious themes in the strict sense play little or no part in their appeals to the electorate. In most Islamic countries, in contrast, religion is even more powerful in internal than in international affairs.

Why this difference? Some might give the simple and obvious answer that Muslim countries are still profoundly Muslim in a way that most Christian countries are no longer Christian. Such an answer, though not lacking force, would not in itself be adequate. Christian beliefs and the Christian clergy who uphold them are still a powerful force in many Christian countries, and although their role is no longer what it was in past centuries, it is by no means insignificant. But in no Christian country at the present time can religious leaders command the degree of religious belief and the extent of religious participation by their followers that are usual in Muslim lands. More to the point, they do not exercise or even claim the kind of political role that in Muslim lands is not only common but is widely accepted as proper.

The higher level of religious faith and practice in Muslim lands as compared with those of other religions is no doubt an element in the situation, but is not in itself a sufficient explanation. The difference must rather be traced back to the very beginnings of these various religions, and to an intimate and essential relationship in Islam between religion and politics that has no parallel in any other major religion.

A basic, distinguishing feature of Islam is the all-embracing character of religion in the perception of Muslims. The Prophet, unlike earlier founders of religions, founded and governed a polity. As ruler, he promulgated laws, dispensed justice, commanded armies, made war, made peace, collected taxes, and did all the other things that a ruler does. This is reflected in the Qur'an itself, in the biography of the Prophet, and in the traditions concerning his life and work. The distinctive quality of Islam is most vividly illustrated in the injunction which occurs not once but several times in the Qur'an (3:104, 110; 7:157; 22:41, etc.), by which Muslims are instructed as to their basic
duty, which is “to command good and forbid evil”—not just to do good and avoid evil, a personal duty imposed by all religions, but to command good and forbid evil, that is to say, to exercise authority to that end. Under the Prophet’s immediate successors, in the formative period of Islamic doctrine and law, his state became an empire in which Muslims conquered and subjugated non-Muslims. This meant that in Islam there was from the beginning an interpenetration of religion and government, of belief and power, which has some parallel in Old Testament Judaism but not in any subsequent form.

Christian theory and practice evolved along other lines. The founder of Christianity is quoted as saying, “Render unto Caesar the things which are Caesar’s and unto God the things which are God’s.” In this familiar and much-quoted dictum, a principle is laid down, at the very beginning of Christianity, that remained fundamental to Christian thought and practice and is discernible throughout Christian history. Always there were two authorities, God and Caesar, dealing with different matters, exercising different jurisdictions; each with its own laws and its own courts to enforce them; each with its own institutions and its own hierarchy to administer them.

These two different authorities are what, in the Western world, we call church and state. In Christendom they have always both been there, sometimes in association, sometimes in conflict; sometimes one predominating, sometimes the other—but always two and not one. In Muslim theory, church and state are not separate or separable institutions. The mosque is a building, a place of worship and of study. The same is true of the synagoge. Neither term was used by its own worshippers to denote an ecclesiastical institution comparable with the church in Christendom. Classical Islamic thought and practice distinguish between the things of this world and the things of the other, and the different groups of people who look after them, but the same Holy Law regulates both. Such familiar pairs of words as lay and ecclesiastical, sacred and profane, spiritual and temporal, and the like, have no equivalents in classical Arabic or in other Islamic languages, since the dichotomy which they express, deeply rooted in Christendom, was unknown in Islam until comparatively modern times. Its introduction was the result of external influences, and its vocabulary consists of borrowed words, made-up words, or old words injected with new meanings. In recent years those external influences have been attacked and weakened, and the ideas which they brought, never accepted by more than a relatively small and alienated elite, have also begun to weaken. And as external influences lose their appeal, there is an inevitable return to older, more deep-rooted perceptions.

There are some further differences. Christianity arose amid the fall of an empire. The rise of Christianity parallels the decline of Rome, and the church created its own structures to survive in this period. During the centuries when Christianity was a persecuted faith of the downtrodden, God was seen as subjecting His followers to suffering and tribulation to test and purify their faith. When Christianity finally became a state religion, Christians tried to take over and refashion the institutions and even the language of Rome to serve their own needs.

Islam, in contrast, rose amid the birth of an empire, and became the creed of a vast, triumphant, and flourishing realm, created under the aegis of the new faith and expressed in the language—Arabic—of the new revelation. While for Saint Augustine and other early Christian thinkers the state was a lesser evil, for Muslims the state—that is of course the Islamic state—was a divine good, ordained by Holy Law to promulgate God’s faith, enforce God’s law, and protect and increase God’s people. In this perception of the universe, God is seen as helping rather than testing the believers, as desiring their success in this world, and as manifesting His divine approval by victory and dominance, for His army, His community, and His state. Martyrdom, in the Muslim definition, means death in battle in a holy war for the
faith. A partial exception to this triumphalism is constituted by the Shi`a, the defeated faction in the early struggles for the caliphate. Defeat and repression gave the Shi`a an almost Christian-style conception of suffering, passion, and martyrdom. In modern times this has combined with new ideologies and new technologies to produce an explosively powerful social force.

These perceptions from the remoter Islamic past still have important consequences for the present time, notably in their effect on the shaping of Muslim self-awareness. For most of the recorded history of most of the Muslim world, the primary and basic definition of identity, both adoptive and ascriptive, is religion. And for Muslims, that of course means Islam or, more specifically, the particular version of Islam to which they adhere. Whatever other factors may have been at work, in order to become effective they had to assume a religious or at least a sectarian form. In the modern secular West and other regions that have accepted Western ways, the world is divided into nations, and the nation may be subdivided into different religious communities. In the Muslim perception, the world is divided into religions, and these may be subdivided into nations and, by abuse, states.

This basic religious identity still persists in popular sentiment, and has recently been extended even to the domain of nuclear weaponry. The argument has sometimes been heard that since the West, for this purpose including Russia, possesses Christian bombs, and Israel is reputed to have a Jewish bomb, it is only fitting and indeed necessary that one or more Muslim countries should acquire or produce an Islamic bomb. This point was often made in the wave of exultation that passed through many Muslim countries when Pakistan successfully detonated six nuclear devices in May 1998. An explicit disclaimer by the prime minister of Pakistan, during a visit to Saudi Arabia, of any religious identity for his bomb did little to discourage this response.

Where Islam is perceived as the main basis of identity, it necessarily constitutes the main claim to allegiance. In most Muslim countries the essential distinction between loyalty and disloyalty is indeed provided by religion. The prime test in Islam, unlike Christianity, is not adherence to correct belief and doctrine, though these are not unimportant; what matters most is communal loyalty and conformity. And since religious conformity is the outward sign of loyalty, it follows that heresy is disloyalty and apostasy is treason. Classical Islam had no hierarchic institution to define and impose correct belief, to detect and punish incorrect belief. The Muslims, instead, laid great stress on consensus, both as a source of guidance and as a basis for legitimacy. Despite the vast changes of the last two centuries, Islam itself has clearly remained the most widely accepted form of consensus in Muslim countries, far more potent than political programs or slogans; Islamic symbols and appeals are still the most effective for social mobilization.

It is useful to remember that the word “Islam” is commonly used in two different senses—as the counterpart of “Christianity,” that is to say the name of a religion, a system of belief and worship, and also as the counterpart of “Christendom,” denoting a whole civilization which developed under the aegis of that religion. There has been much confusion among outside observers who, failing to recognize this distinction, have often attributed to the Islamic religion certain widespread doctrines and practices which, though important in the Muslim past or present, are as remote from original Islam as are Crusaders and Inquisitors from original Christianity. Muslim militants and radicals have always been keenly aware of these differences, and have invoked what they perceive as authentic, pristine Islam against the innovations and falsifications of those who pretend to rule in its name. They have also introduced some innovations of their own.

In principle, Islam has neither priests nor church. The imams are merely leaders in prayer; the ulema, scholars in theology and jurisprudence, but with no priestly office; the mosque simply a place. In the early phases of Islamic history, this was indeed so,
but with the passage of time, imams and ulema acquired professional training and certification, and became, in the sociological if not in the theological sense, a clergy, albeit without sacraments. The mosque remained only a building, but the ulema grouped themselves in hierarchies, with higher and lower ranks. The interpretation and administration of the Holy Law, for which they were primarily responsible, gave them power, status, influence, and sometimes also wealth. These developments were no doubt assisted by the example of the Christian churches in the countries which the Muslims conquered, notably the former Byzantine territories incorporated in the Ottoman Empire. The, so to speak, Christianization of Islamic ecclesiastical institutions has reached its apogee in the present-day Islamic Republic of Iran where, for the first time in Muslim history, we find the functional equivalents of bishops, archbishops, cardinals, and—some would argue—even a pope. These Christian influences are of course purely organizational and brought no corresponding acceptance of Christian doctrines or values. But the rulers of Iran have indeed created an Islamic church, claiming both spiritual and temporal authority. They may soon confront an Islamic reformation.

Islamic identity is not monolithic. In Egypt and generally in Muslim North Africa, Islam is overwhelmingly Sunni and, since Shi‘ism is virtually unknown, the difference is not felt to be important. Turkey too was long regarded as an exclusively Sunni country, but in recent years, thanks to the growth of democratic institutions, the previously silent Shi‘ite minorities have become increasingly visible and vocal. In Iran, alone among the Muslim countries of the Middle East and North Africa, Shi‘a Islam is the dominant and official faith, and some have seen in the Persian espousal of Shi‘ism a way of asserting their distinctive Persian identity against their predominantly Sunni Arab, Turkish, Central Asian, and Indian neighbors. But there are sizable Sunni minorities in Iran, notably in the eastern provinces, among Turkic and Baluchi speakers.

Arab Southwest Asia shows significant differences. Palestinians and Jordanians are Sunni, but elsewhere, in Syria, Lebanon, Iraq, and nowadays even in the eastern provinces of Saudi Arabia and some of the Gulf sheikhdoms, there are substantial Shi‘a populations. In Lebanon they are now the largest single group and are increasingly demanding a corresponding change in their place in the Lebanese polity. In Iraq as a whole, and even in its capital, Baghdad, they by now constitute a majority of the population. They have always been subject to a Sunni ascendancy that has continued without significant change from Turkish through British times to the independent monarchy and the present-day "republic."

As well as the mainstream, the so-called "Twelver" Shi‘a—the established faith in Iran—there are deviant groups within the Shi‘a camp. Notable among these are the Alawis, previously known as Nusayris, in Syria, where they form approximately 12 percent of the population. That 12 percent, however, includes the president and much of the ruling establishment. The same name, Alawis, has long been applied to a variety of non-Sunni Muslims in Turkey, professing different forms of Shi‘ite beliefs and Sufi mystical practices.

There are other smaller groups deviating from what one might call the mainstream Shi‘a. One of these is the Ismai‘i sect with two branches, claiming some thousands of followers in central Syria, and much larger numbers in India, Pakistan, Central Asia, and East Africa. Of greater importance in the region are the Druze, an offshoot of the Ismai‘is, with followers in Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, and Israel. In the last-named country, they are the only part of the Arab population which, at the request of their own leaders, performs military service.

In every country of the Middle East except Israel, and until recently, Lebanon, Islam is the religion of the majority. It was not always so. At the time of the advent of Islam and the Arab conquests in the seventh century, most of the inhabitants of Iran
followed one or another form of the Zoroastrian faith. West of Iran, the majority of the inhabitants were Christians, not only in the provinces subject to the Christian empire of Byzantium, but even in Aramaic-speaking Iraq, then part of the Persian Empire. These Christians were of various churches, some of them, notably in Egypt and Syria, in schism with the Orthodox Church of Constantinople.

The only other surviving religion of any significance was Judaism, represented by communities in all these countries, including, at that time, Arabia. The major centers of Jewish life and thought were in Iraq, under Persian rule, and in the former Jewish homeland, which its Roman and Byzantine rulers called Palestine.

Most of the first converts to Islam were pagan Arabians. Later converts were recruited from the Zoroastrian, Christian, and Jewish communities in Southwest Asia, North Africa, and, for a while, southern Europe. In the course of time, Islam came to be the majority religion. But the others remained, and most of the countries of the region have, or until recently had, religious minorities of one kind or another. The Zoroastrians have shrunk to some tens of thousands in Iran, with a somewhat larger number descended from Persian émigrés who fled to the Indian subcontinent. They are still known there as Parsaas, after their country of origin. Christians and Jews remain in much larger numbers.

In Saudi Arabia, in accordance with a ruling dating back to the seventh-century caliph 'Umar, no other religion is permitted, and non-Muslims (Christians but not Jews) are admitted only as temporary visitors, and confined to certain designated areas. No non-Muslim is allowed to set foot in the holy cities of Mecca and Medina in the Hejaz. In other parts of the Arabian peninsula and the adjoining islands, small Jewish minorities survived until fairly recently; Christians disappeared at an early date. In Egypt and the Fertile Crescent, both Christians and Jews lived under Muslim rule until the present time. Some Christians remain; the Jews have all but disappeared. In North Africa, perhaps because of its nearness to the European Christian enemy, Christianity died out at an early date. Jewish minorities survived much longer, and were even reinforced in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries by the arrival of Jewish refugees from Christian Europe.

The oldest and most creative of the Arab Jewish communities—the most fully identified with the country and people of which they were a part—were the Jews of Iraq. Jews had lived in Iraq since the days of the Babylonian captivity and are—or rather were—profoundly rooted in the soil. Compared with them, the Arabs of Iraq are newcomers, dating only from the seventh century C.E. The Jews of Iraq adopted Arabic at an early date, and except for some minor particularities, shared the language, culture, and way of life of their Muslim compatriots. After the establishment of the separate state of Iraq in 1920, they were of course Iraqis. In the heyday of European-style patriotism they too, like their Christian compatriots, saw themselves and in some nationalist circles were seen as Arabs. In the 1920s and 1930s some Iraqi Jews joined with other Iraqis in rejecting what they described as the alien implantation of European Jews in Arab Palestine.

This dream of Iraqi brotherhood was gradually weakened by the struggle for Palestine and still more by the extremely effective propaganda of Nazi Germany. The dream was violently ended in June 1941, when the first major attack on a modern Jewish community in an Arab land took place in Baghdad, in the brief interval between the collapse of the pro-Axis Rashid 'Ali regime and the arrival of the royalist and British troops. This was followed by numerous other outbreaks of anti-Jewish violence in Iraq, Syria, Egypt, southern Arabia, and North Africa, in which hundreds were killed or injured and many more rendered destitute by the destruction of their homes and workplaces.

These attacks and the resulting flight of Jews predated the establishment of the State of Israel, and no doubt contributed to its creation. That event, and the ensuing war, further undermined
their position, and led to the flight of the remaining Jewish communities—sometimes, as in Iraq and Yemen, with the cooperation of the governments of those countries—and their transfer to Israel. At the present time the only Arab country with a significant Jewish community is Morocco, and that too is being reduced by voluntary emigration. The long and distinguished history of the Jews in Arab lands appears to be drawing to an end. Small Jewish communities remain in Turkey and Iran. In the former, their official status is that of equal citizens in a secular state; in the latter, of tolerated and protected subjects of an Islamic state. Their numbers, in both countries, have in recent years been greatly reduced by emigration, much of it to Israel.

The decline of the Christian communities was, except in Lebanon, less traumatic. But the overall trend, both demographic and political, has been unmistakably against them. In Lebanon, they emerged from the long and bitter civil wars with depleted numbers and reduced power. In Turkey and Iran, both Christian and Jewish minorities survive, but play no significant part in public life. Except for the old-established Persian-speaking Jews, these minorities, unlike those in the Arab countries, were until recently linguistically and culturally as well as religiously different from the Muslim majorities.

The Christians, though much fewer in numbers than the Muslims, exhibit far greater sectarian variety. There are some Protestants, resulting from the activities of European and American missionaries from the nineteenth century onwards, and much larger numbers of Catholics, most of them Uniates, from various Eastern churches that at one time or another entered into communion with Rome. And then there are of course the Eastern churches, offering a wide spectrum of the theological and ecclesiastical history of Christendom in the first thousand years of the Christian era. Followers of the Orthodox Church, irrespective of their ethnic affiliations, are still known as Rûm.

Among Jews there are no comparable sectarian differences, but there are major cultural differences. The most important of these is the distinction between the indigenous Middle Eastern Jews, historically and culturally part of the world of Islam, and the European Jews, culturally and historically part of Christendom. The many contrasts and occasional clashes between these two groups in Israel reflect, in miniature, the larger confrontation of Christendom and Islam. These encounters affect, and are affected by, the looming conflict between the religious and secular interpretations of Israeli and, ultimately, of Jewish identity.

The Jews who settled in Israel came, overwhelmingly, from countries of two civilizations, from Christendom and the lands of Islam. Inevitably, they brought with them much of the civilization of the countries from which they came, including their perceptions and definitions of identity. Anyone who has visited Israel will recognize the difference between, for example, Jews from Berlin and Jews from Baghdad, not in their Jewishness, but in the German culture of the one, and the Iraqi Arab culture of the other. But this contrast goes beyond city or country; it arises from the difference between the two civilizations, Christian and Muslim, that meet in this small Jewish state and community. The much-discussed distinction between Ashkenazic and Sephardic Jews, in purely Jewish terms, is only about minor differences of ritual, each recognizing the other as valid. This distinction has no theological or legal significance. Nor does the difference, as some explain it in currently fashionable terms, arise from the conflict between Euro-American and Afro-Asian Jews. The really profound dividing line is between what one might call the “Christian” Jews and the “Muslim” Jews, using these terms with a civilizational not a religious connotation. The Jewish immigrants to Israel brought with them, from their countries of origin, much of their cultures of origin, and it was therefore inevitable that there should have been disagreements and even clashes between them.

The State of Israel thus brings together, with a common
citizenship and a common religion, representatives of two major religiously defined civilizations, in both of which they had played a minor but significant role. The Jews had of course their own religious culture, which remained authentically Jewish, though profoundly influenced by the dominant religious cultures of the countries from which they came. But since the destruction of the ancient Jewish state, there has been no real Jewish political culture. Jews as individuals may have at times participated, in a subordinate capacity, in the political process. Jewish communal leaders did at times have some powers over their own people, but they were always limited powers under delegated authority—greater under Muslim rule, smaller under Christian rule, but always delegated, limited, and revocable. There was no Jewish sovereign power. The memories of ancient Jewish sovereignty were too remote, the experience of modern Jewish sovereignty too brief, to provide much in the way of guidance. There is of course extensive discussion of the state and its business in Jewish religious literature, but since the participants, for the most part, had no access to the power of the state, their arguments are overwhelmingly abstract and theoretical—or, to put it in different terms, messianic. In the absence of an explicitly Jewish political culture based on experience, it is in politics, more than anything else, that the culture of Israel is derivative. The countries of origin offer a variety of examples: clergymen and ulema, bishops and muftis, archbishops and ayyarollahs or, looking perhaps in a different direction, Crusade and jihād, inquisitors and assassins. The recent immigrants from the countries of the former Soviet Union brought some additional models—commissars and apparatchiks and other elements of Soviet political society, including the use of the party as a kind of an established church.

These groups bring with them very different cultural traditions on such matters as the relations between politics and religion, between power and wealth, and more generally, on the manner in which power is attained, exercised, and transferred. In Israel there have of late been increasing signs of Middle Eastern attitudes on these matters. If this trend continues, Israel will develop greater affinities with the region in which it is situated. This will not necessarily make for better relations. It could indeed have the opposite effect, and might even endanger the qualitative edge which has enabled Israel to flourish in a predominantly hostile environment.

In Muslim countries, the rapid transformation of society, culture, and above all the state presents the leaders of organized religion with new problems, for which their own history offers no precedent, their traditional literature no explicit guidance. The establishment of a Jewish state has also confronted Jews, for the first time since antiquity, with the problem of the relationship between religion and government—in Muslim terms, between the affairs of this world and the next, in Christian terms, between church and state, between God and Caesar. Christians did indeed find a solution for the resulting dilemma. It took centuries of bitter religious war and persecution before they arrived at the solution. But most Christian countries have by now accepted it, in practice if not always in law. It is the solution known as the separation of church and state. This device achieves a double purpose. On the one hand it prevents the state from interfering in affairs of religion; on the other, it prevents the exponents of one or other brand of religion from using the power of the state to enforce their doctrines or their rules.

For a long time the encounter between church and state was seen as a purely Christian problem, not relevant to Jews or Muslims, and separation as a Christian solution to a Christian dilemma. Looking at the contemporary Middle East, both Muslim and Jewish, one must ask whether this is still true; or whether Muslims and Jews, having perhaps caught a Christian disease, might consider a Christian remedy.