

# Islamists, Left and Right

**Islam has often been posited as being the middle path. In political terms this is taken to mean a median role between the left and the right. Abdel Wahab El-Affendi delves into this contention.**

IN one of those now-ubiquitous seminars on "Islamic fundamentalism" held recently at the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS), Professor A.K. Lambton of SOAS put forward the opinion that Islamic fundamentalism, and Islam itself for that matter, has a bias towards conservatism. Islam, as an "Ideology of the Book" is *per se* fundamentalist, and it frowns on heterodoxy, creative interpretation and new norms generally, and directs the people towards the eternal infallible texts. There is nothing new in fact about the claim that Islam favours conservatism. This allegation has been at the core of the debate that moved the whole Muslim world relentlessly towards secularism in the last half century or so. The western-influenced elites bred under colonialism and the attendant creeping westernisation have argued that traditional Islamic authorities block their plans for modernisation and development and succeeded to a large extent in sweeping Islam aside. This has ensured that the current Islamist movement was in fact a movement against, and not for, the status quo in the lands of Islam. And here we have, if we accepted Lambton's thesis, the paradox of conservatism fighting fiercely to upset the status quo. The issue, however, cannot be resolved that easily.

It is true that the modern Islamic movement, from its genesis in the activism of Sayed Jamal ad-Din al-Afghani in the 1870's was in essence anti-establishment. It opposed incumbent Muslim rulers as well as the western-dominated international order. But even in that phase its attitude was ambivalent. Afghani cooperated with several Muslim rulers and even wanted a deal with Britain. His disciple Abduh, through whom the movement was perpetuated, broke with the master earlier precisely over the latter's revolutionary approach. Abduh told the master that the

struggle they were waging was futile. Avenues were blocked after the two and their associates won the hostility of most Muslim rulers and after the British banned their paper, *al-Urwa al-Wuthqa* from India and before that Egypt, forcing it to cease publication. Abduh suggested that they take ten young promising students, indoctrinate them with their way of thinking, and hope that the group will multiply geometrically over the years. Afghani accused Abduh of being a defeatist and broke with him. The latter proceeded with his own approach of education in Syria and later in Egypt till he died in 1905.

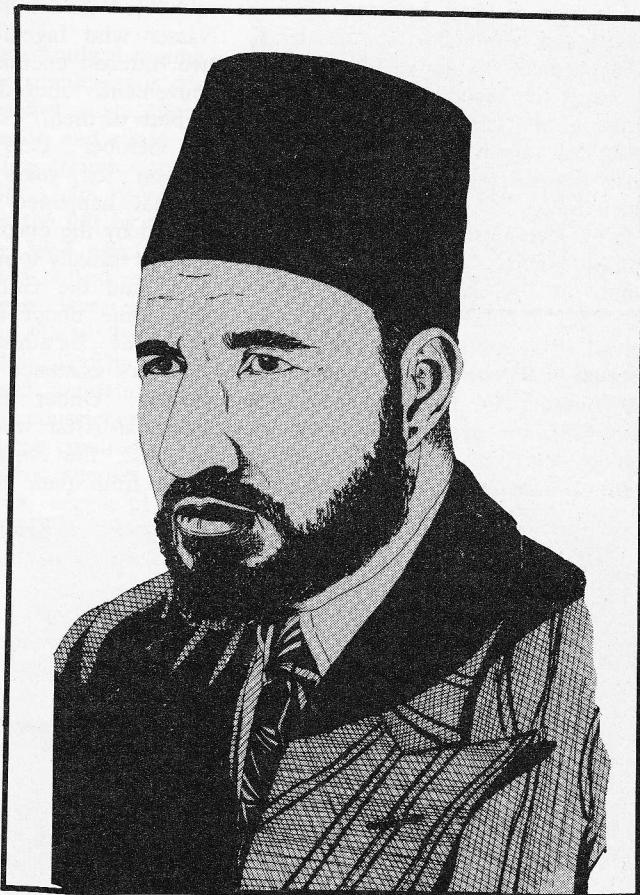
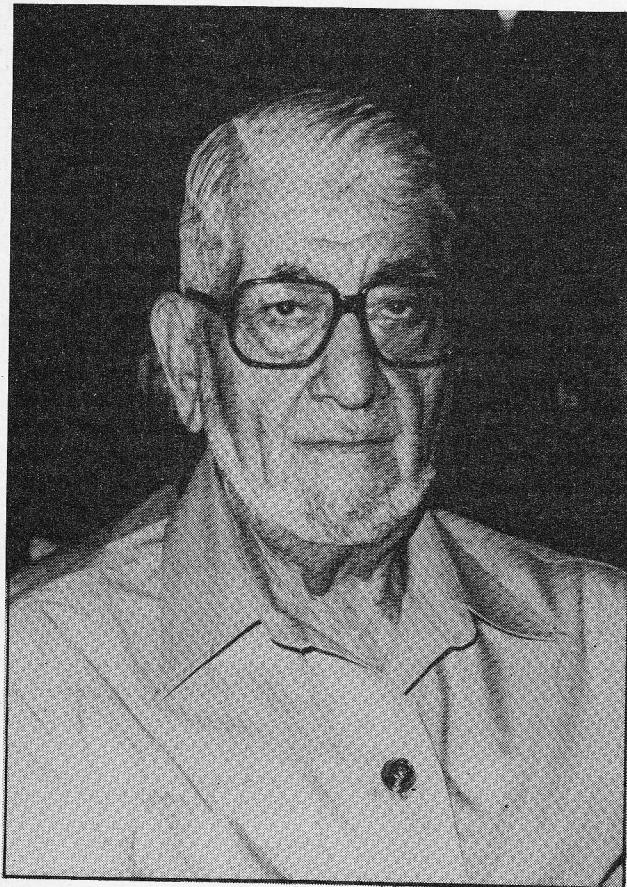
Abduh compromised even with Lord Cromer, the effective ruler of Egypt, but even then he earned the hostility of the Khedive because he refused to accommodate the latter's designs on Awqaf funds. His disciple Rashid Rida gave him the same advice he heard him offer before to Afghani regarding the latter's relations with Sultan Abdulhamid: why not compromise with the monarch on these trivial matters to gain his support for the far reaching reforms that he planned in education and mosque management? Abduh could no more accept this way of behaviour than his master could: apparently there is a limit beyond which a "fundamentalist" could not go. However, the argument about where to draw the line still remains a rich source of confusion.

The two major Islamic movements which emerged this century (*Jamaat Islami* in India and the *Ikhwan al-Muslimeen* in Egypt) inherited this ambivalent legacy. They shared with Abduh the belief that the Muslims have to be educated before they can be made to change their political environment, but also inherited Afghani's impatience with this environment. The matter was complicated even further by the fact you could not always separate education from subversion. To educate you have to

condemn the status quo, and to condemn is to go into battle.

When *Ikhwan* emerged onto the political arena in the mid-thirties they shared the enthusiasm of most Egyptians for the ascension of young King Farouq to the throne in 1936. For all Egyptians at the time Farouq's reign appeared to signal a new golden era. But for *Ikhwan* this was even more so because the King had as one of his closest advisers Shaikh Mustafa al-Maraghi, former Shaikh of al-Azhar, and Ali Maher, who was later to become prime minister. Both were respectable personalities with known sympathy for the goals of the Islamic movement. The King later disappointed everybody, but the fact that the *Ikhwan* feted and applauded him was later cited by opponents as evidence of the group's reactionary character. This is a simplification, not only because the accusations were made from the comfortable perspective of Nasser's revolutionary era. It is true that Hassan al-Banna had kept hoping the King will be saved one day and was until his last days pleading in vain for an audience with His Majesty. But it also remains true that the internal dynamics of the movement has made it a revolutionary force in Farouq's Egypt, perhaps the only genuinely revolutionary one there was. Banna himself was murdered in 1949 on direct orders from the King himself.

The movement suffered internal tensions on the issue of revolution early in its history, when activists from a rival group, (the Young Egypt party which later became the Socialist party) went out smashing liquor stores "to enforce Sharia" and defied *Ikhwan* to emulate them. Banna cautioned his followers about the futility of this approach, but the debate ended in a split by the radical group which formed the *Shabab Muhammad* (Muhammad's Youth). That was back in 1937 but the radical group, far from creating a revolution lapsed into oblivion. However, the radicalisation of the mainstream movement itself took place as the Palestinian issue prompted it to form a secret military wing which was then tempted to use its force against local Jewish and foreign targets in Egypt as well as against the



**Under Tilmisani (left) the movement created by Hassan Al-Banna (left) has moved decisively to the right**

British and those accused of supporting them. The outcome of this unplanned confrontation was defeat for the movement and suppression. It was also the catalyst that hastened the 1952 revolution of which *Ikhwan* were active backers and ardent supporters.

Up to the time of the revolution the *Ikhwan* appeared hardly conscious of social issues, apart from decrying the decline of morals and foreign control of the economy. They based their alliances with other forces in society on the sole criterion of their Islamic pronouncements. They supported the unpopular regime of Ismael Sidqi in 1946 because he promised some Islamic reforms, while they fought the very popular Wafd party for no apparent reason other than the reasons for which rival football supporters champion their respective teams. Thus they did not seem particularly concerned about the dynamics of social identification or political choice. It did not matter whether the regime or individual they supported were popular, lacked legitimacy or

were backed by corrupt cliques, as long as he paid lip-service to this or that Islamic goal and promised a hard-line stance on the British occupation.

But if this was so in Egypt, things were different with the branch in Syria. There *Ikhwan* took a very militant socialist stance from the late 1940's. They allied themselves with populists and left-wing groups opposed to co-operation with the West. One of the Syrian *Ikhwan* leaders, Muhammad al-Mubarak, even went so far as to say that his movement was offering "Marxism in the Islamic cup." In 1949 the *Ikhwan* formed the *Islamic Socialist Front* as their political forum, and continued to spearhead the fight against western influence. This culminated in the publication in 1959 of the book by Mustafa al-Siba'i, leader of the Syrian *Ikhwan*, entitled *Islamic Socialism*, which continued to be an influential work in the Islamic movement for quite a time.

In Sudan the founder of the group which eventually dominated the movement was actually a former Com-

unist who quit the party after being informed that to be a Communist meant not to believe in God. The movement was thus radical from the start. The group, which was founded in 1949, suffered a split in 1953-4 and the radicals were ousted that year. Babikir Karrar, the actual founder, led the radicals out to form *al-Jama'a al-Islamiyya* (the Islamic group). In 1965 the group formed the Islamic Socialist party, which made little impact on Sudanese politics. In the 70's members of the group, including Karrar, left for Libya where they are said to have played an important role in formulating Qadhafi's brand of Islamic socialism. The main group of Sudanese *Ikhwan* drifted gradually away from its radical socialist past, embracing what it thought to be the truly Islamic middle ground.

In Jordan, the *Ikhwan* who started as anti-royalist rebels soon made a reconciliation with the Hashemite family, to the extent that the movement's leader was offered the premiership in 1957. A similar accommo-

dation was reached between *Ikhwan* groups and monarchies in the Gulf, giving radical opponents ammunition to rail at the reactionary conservative nature of the Islamists. Yet to understand this situation in perspective one must analyse the protracted process which led to it.

It all started with the 1952 revolution in Egypt. This represented the climax of *Ikhwan* radicalism. Before that the *Ikhwan* were actively involved in support for the short-lived February 1948 revolt in Yemen, and the fighting in Palestine to which many *Ikhwan* members volunteered. But in 1952 came what seemed to many *Ikhwan* as their final vindication

squabble. As it happened, it was Nasser who ingeniously lumped his two bitterest enemies together into a conveniently alleged plot, and got rid of both of them. That fateful moment in October 1954 announced the *Ikhwan's* long years in the wilderness.

What happened after was largely shaped by the encounter with Nasser. *Ikhwan* initially took refuge in Jordan, Syria and the Gulf states. As Syria first came under Nasser (1958) and later the Ba'athist radicals (1963), *Ikhwan's* existence there became precarious. Under the leadership of Issam al-'Attar who succeeded Siba'i in 1962, the Syrian *Ikhwan* moved away from their radical socialism of

indelible mark on the subconscious of the movement.

In the democratic Sudan of mid-sixties, one of *Ikhwan's* then rare outlets of expression, one started to hear the eulogies of liberal democracy, and the praise of King Faisal of Saudi Arabia's pan-Islamism, simultaneous with the condemnation of pro-Communist military dictatorships. Gone were the earlier references to Islamic socialism. The process was given a push by Sayyed Qutb's radical rejection of any dilution of the Islamic message. We should not and need not, Qutb wrote, assimilate Islam to any other worldly ideology. The literature of the movement was hen-



and the advent of the order they had worked for. The triumph was soon to sour as the hostility of the young officers became more and more apparent. Even General Naguib, whose side *Ikhwan* took, was not sympathetic to the *Ikhwan* programme, as he confessed later. Thus *Ikhwan* were doomed no matter which side triumphed in the Nasser-Naguib

yesterday, and became opposed to the Ba'ath and other left-wing groups, as well as to the swell of Nasserism that challenged them in their very urban Sunni base. For them as for *Ikhwan* elsewhere, the only open refuge became the monarchies of the Gulf or the liberal democracy of pro-western Lebanon. An alliance of convenience first, but one that left its

ceforth dominated by this celebration of the uniqueness of the Islamic message. This helped the *Ikhwan* escape what had seemed to be a choice between capitalism and socialism. In particular, it saved them from the embarrassment of having to support Nasser's anti-colonialist pan-Arabist stance, or to oppose it in spite of its popularity.

The Nasser era created a big upheaval in the ranks of the Islamist movement. To start with, the differences arose with Nasser mainly over his allegedly mild approach to the British occupation. The agreement on troop withdrawal signed in 1954 was condemned by Hassan Hodaybi, *Ikhwan's* new leader, for giving the British the right to reoccupy in case of war. But no sooner were the *Ikhwan* locked up in 1954 than Nasser appeared to be the anti-western hawk. This was more traumatic for *Ikhwan* than the crackdown on them. Many sent word from prison volunteering for the 1956 war against the French-British-Israeli invasion. Nasser's secret police carried a ruthless psychological onslaught on *Ikhwan* prisoners from then on, putting pressure on them to pledge allegiance to Nasser's revolutionary aims. The complicated trauma led to a three-way split. Young radicals who questioned the wisdom of the leadership's opposition to Nasser, pledged allegiance to Nasser and were subsequently released, but like their predecessors of 1937 and later radicals they left hardly a trace on the later development of the movement.

Influence was divided between two currents, the older leaders who resisted any compromise and stuck to Hodaybi's line, and the ultra-radicals influenced by Sayyed Qutb's writings. The latter condemned not only the repressive dictatorship of Nasser, but also the society that tolerated this brutal regime and even applauded it. For them Islam has to be reintroduced anew in this society totally devoid of it. For Qutb, the problematic of left-right, radical-conservative, progressive-conservative, did not have any meaning. He wanted people to reject the whole lot and start anew.

With Qutb came a new era, where Islamists abandoned identification with "Islamic socialism", "democracy", etc., in favour of unadulterated Islam. But this was in theory. In practice this meant alignment with the axis of the right in Arab and Muslim politics. In those years, the monarchies in the Arab East were on the defensive, as the relentless advance of socialism continued well into the early seventies. As Arab country after Arab country fell under radicalism's seemingly invincible March, Islamists found themselves pushed into a tighter and tighter corner, and found refuge and support

only with the conservative monarchies.

The fall of Sukarno's radical regime in Indonesia and the simultaneous demise of the Communist party there gave Islamists a respite and cause to rejoice and hope. The Islamic movement internationally had become deeply mistrustful of the left by then. The defeat of June 1967 which was endured mainly by the radical regimes of Syria and Egypt was also a welcome relief. Now Nasser had finally been discredited at his own game, and the *Ikhwan* could condemn and despise him in good conscience. But the irrepressible Nasser countered by finally bringing Islamic themes into the political discourse, urging people to appeal to Islam for moral support. But this only helped strengthen the Islamist appeal.

Islamists still had a long way to go, however. The consolidation of the Ba'athist regime in Syria was on the way, as was the Ba'athist takeover in Iraq. In Sudan a Moscow-supported left-wing regime swept the *Ikhwan* to jail, and swelled the ranks of Islamist exiles in the Gulf and Europe. In 1971 in Pakistan following the havoc brought by the secession of East Pakistan, two left-wing regimes came to power in both parts. The Islamists were unhappy with both, even though Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto, the new Pakistani leader borrowed heavily from Islamic symbolism for his radical programme. Thus the early seventies appeared for the Islamists as dark years where the forces of evil were advancing everywhere.

But soon there was light at the end of the tunnel. In 1970-1 after the death of Nasser and the liquidation of most proponents of his legacy the Islamists found a breathing space. Sadat, Nasser's successor, also made rapprochement with the oil rich Gulf states. This enabled these countries, which had become the patrons of the Islamists, to push Sadat and the Islamists towards each other. But Sadat's limited liberalism opened the arena not for a monolithic Islamic movement, but a variety of groups not all of them prepared to deal with Sadat. 1971 also saw the Communists lose a power struggle in neighbouring Sudan.

The seventies also saw the left retreat in the Muslim world on all fronts. The October 1973 war and the oil shock caused by it enhanced the prestige of Sadat and his conservative allies in the Gulf. Even Syria under



Nasser (above) took up the call of Islamic socialism, as did Ghaddafi (far left) and Bhutto. The Islamists were, however, unimpressed

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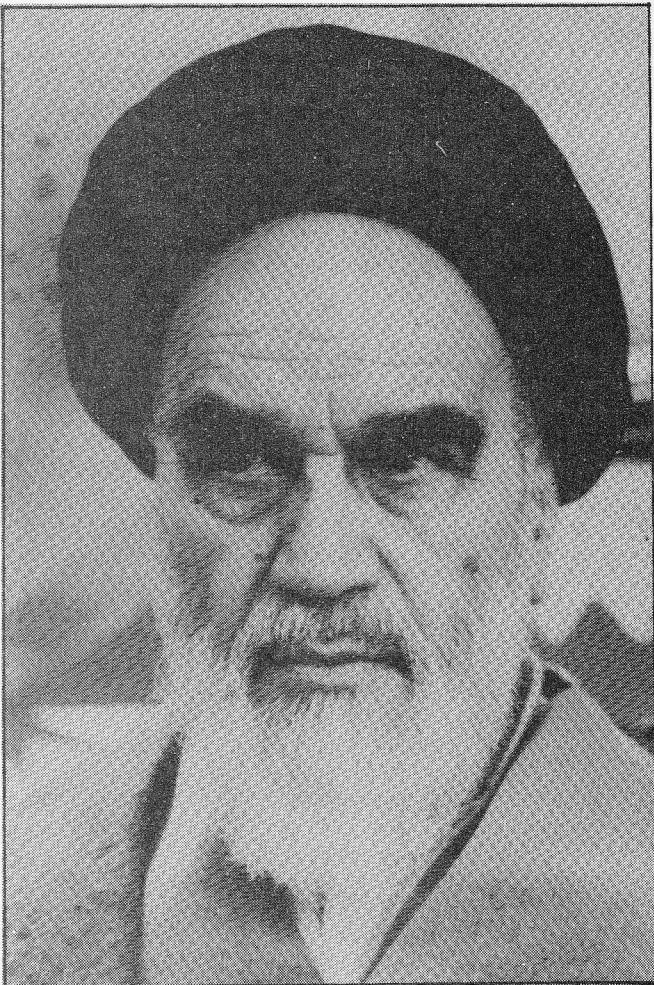
Assad showed signs of socialism-weariness and was slowly but firmly moving to liberalise the economy, a path that was spearheaded by Egypt and later was to attract Sudan, Iraq and Algeria. In 1977 Bhutto was toppled by sustained agitation spearheaded by Jamaat Islami. The same year saw the National Reconciliation in Sudan, with opposition leaders, including *Ikhwan*, participating in the government. In Egypt *Ikhwan* were leading a cautious revival, while the *Jama'at Islamiyya*, the loosely associated Muslim youth groups were moving to dominate the universities.

But soon things started to go sour again. Sadat put himself on a collision course with the Islamists with his visit to Jerusalem in 1977, and before that by clashes with Muslim radicals in 1974 and early 1977. The alliance of Jamaat Islami with the military rule of President Zia ul-Haq in Pakistan was soon running into problems. The movements themselves were starting to face internal problems, as the radicals inside them challenged conciliatory positions of the leaders.

Then came the 1979 Islamic revolution in Iran which changed the surroundings of the Islamic movements radically. This together with the elimination of Sadat in 1981 at the hands of radical Islamists, changed the tenor of political discourse in the Muslim world irrevocably. The leftist revolutionaries who dominated national discourse for three decades were finally reduced to confess their impotence and failures and look up to the Muslim example. The revolution also introduced anti-imperialism and anti-West radical sentiments, previously the preserve of leftists, into reputable Islamic discourse. It also influenced the radical Islamic groups in Lebanon whose astounding victories against the Israelis and the Americans breathed new hopes in the *umma* during very hard times.

This has posed to the Islamists very important questions that have yet to be answered. The nature of the questions and likely answers to them can be seen in the discourse of the Tunisian Islamist movement and also in the debate that has been going on in Iran for years regarding the role of the state in the economy in an Islamic order. The Tunisian *Islamic Trend Movement* (ITM) has since 1978 addressed the question of how to react to the concrete economic and social problems facing the community, and concluded that Muslims must take a stance on issues such as exploitation

Sayyid Qutb (bottom) declared that solving the problems of present day society is none of our business, but the Islamic revolution under Imam Khomeini (right) is paying serious attention to precisely these problems



and economic inequality, and they did. They took a radical leftist stance in support of the economically disadvantaged classes. In Iran a similar debate has finally been resolved by Imam Khomeini in favour of state interventionism in the economy and elsewhere. For the Sudanese Islamist movement, spearheaded by the *National Islamic Front*, now the biggest Islamic mass movement outside Iran and the one with the most detailed set of concrete programmes, the issue was also looked into, but the answer given was somewhat to the right of their Tunisian colleagues. For the rest of the Islamists the question appears not to have even been addressed, let alone answered.

Between the two extremes of the Tunisian position and the Qutbist rejectionism there are many shades of opinion. People speak of social justice, of democracy, of equality, of opposition to tyranny and foreign domination and of many other values applicable to the domain of the social and political. But the question arises, does one have to be committed on these

issues? And why not say with Qutb that the problems of present societies are none of our business, since they are problems of un-Islamic societies we might never have in the society we are envisaging? But it is clear that silence on these issues is a commitment in itself. Can one be silent about the plight of the Palestinians and claim with the Palestinian branch of *Ikhwan* that this is the business of a future Islamic state while even non-Muslims are standing up to be counted on this issue? How can the Islamists reconcile the recognised Islamic duty of speaking out against evil with the silence some of them maintain regarding social injustice? Islamists, after all, speak out on many issues. So how can one decide what issue to be silent about?

If one looks at the history of the Islamist movement we surveyed sketchily above, one finds that their silence (and even their pronouncements) has operated in favour of the forces of conservatism. This is not a condemnation, for one cannot summarily blame the *Ikhwan* for support-

Sayyid Qutb



ing King Faisal and opposing Nasser when the latter persecuted them while the former gave them sanctuary. But the question is: was this a conscious choice or have they been pushed into it by circumstances? Have the Islamists sat down and outlined this policy or was it that they found themselves between the devil and the deep sea and made a choice of the least of two evils?

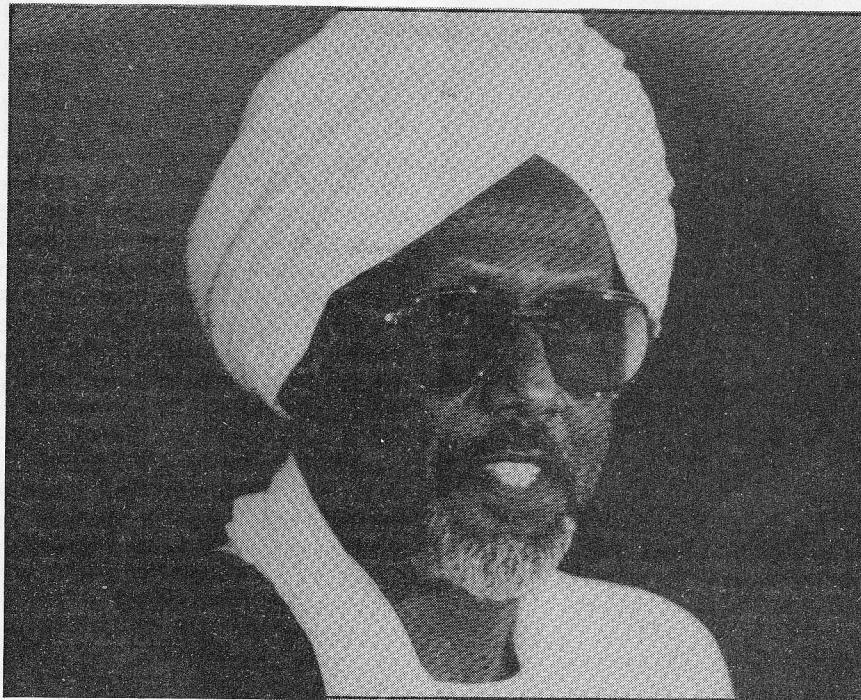
To come back to the question posed by Professor Lambton's claim about the conservative nature of Islamism, one must answer that far from being inherently conservative, Islam has

with their own president. That path has since been trodden by the Islamic Youth movement of Malaysia, the Kuwaiti, Qatari and other Gulf groups.

The question still remains: is the Islamist movement inherently anti-left? We do not purport to answer this question in this limited intervention, but a few remarks can point to an answer. First the practical experiments of the Syrian, Tunisian and early Sudanese Islamists point to a possible synthesis of left wing and Islamist themes, although no such synthesis, including the one preached by

Qadhafi, seems to have achieved reasonable success. Second, socialism has been pushed into Muslim countries by Communists, by non-Muslims or by people whose commitment to Islam was dubious, to say the least. It was difficult (and still is) to separate socialism from its anti-religious philosophical grounding. Third, while conservative countries have devoted a lot of resources to support what were perceived as Islamic causes and concerns, the leftists adopted an arrogant anti-Islamic attitude. It took them numerous and bitter defeats and failures to reconsider their misguided position. The advent of Iran did a lot to reverse this situation, but then Iran soon became absorbed in conflicts that limited its ability to make a significant impact abroad. And even then Iran remains quite conservative on social issues in spite of its political radicalism.

However, the ultimate question may not be the search for new conditions that will cause Islamists to change their stance, but for a stance that Islamists should stick to in all conditions; a moral stance reflecting the true precepts of Islam, which will protect them from having to be pushed around by considerations arising from the whims of this dictator or that. And that is the question. ■



Turabi and Ghannoushi: Answers from left and right, but are they adequate?

proved a very disruptive force to Western modernity. But because modern Islamic activism fought its main battles with its rival reformers, the leftists, and had to make a tactical alliance with the conservative enemies of their enemies, this stance is not directly related to Islam, but to political conditions. The Syrian *Ikhwan* who started as red socialists ended up engaged in a bitter fight for survival with the mildly socialist regime of Hafez Asad. But then they made an alliance with the Ba'athist regime of Saddam Hussein of Iraq who was the enemy of Syrian Ba'athists. If the Jordanian *Ikhwan* fought their king they would probably have sought Syrian support. Instead they preferred their own devil as did the Sudanese *Ikhwan* who broke the alliance with Libya's Qadhafi in favour of a deal

