

Religion and Politics in the Arab World: Dilemmas and Challenges

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It is a challenge in 2008 to belong to a generation that formed its basic views of the world during the late 1960s and early 1970s. Growing up in Kuwait, Beirut, and then coming to the United States to study at the age of 18 in 1971 has, naturally, affected the way I have come to view the world. The premise of my generation was simple: Old ways must be seen with new eyes; religion, tradition, and habit are not the only frameworks for examining the world. I myself was and still am the product of secularism, ranging from nationalism to Marxism to liberal democracy. Yet I am a product of religious values incorporated in my society and family. Religion was never in my understanding a formula to be applied but a set of moral values that guides our understanding of fairness, justice, respect and equality between human beings.

The 1950s and 1960s were marked by youthful rebellion against convention and the past. In the Arab context, this movement manifested itself in coups by young Arab officers, among them Gamal Abdel Nasser in 1952, the Lebanese students who went to the streets in 1969, and a new generation of supporters and activists in the Palestinian movement in the mid and late 1960s. This state of affairs led Sadiq Jalal al-Azim, a young Arab scholar at the American University of Beirut, to write his unusual and critical thesis of religious thought in 1969.

This era also produced troubling times in the world—including the reign of the Khmer Rouge

of Cambodia, the continuity of Stalinism, the Cultural Revolution in China under Mao—as well as xenophobic secular nationalism elsewhere. Arab nationalism dominated the Middle East during this period before beginning its dramatic retreat after the June 1967 War.

The violence and terrorism of the 1960s was more secular than that of recent years and today. Its practitioners had immediate reasons for its use, such as a hijacking to obtain the release of prisoners or to open political channels. The objective often was not the wanton spilling of blood. In fact, a number of Palestinian and Arab hijackers deliberately chose to avoid blood baths, instead focusing on demands that required political engagement of some sort.

In the 1960s and into the 1970s in the Middle East, religion was limited primarily to the mosque; it played only a limited role in public life. More than any group in society, it was older men who went to the mosques for prayers and socialization. In most of the Arab world, religiosity was in decline, particularly among the young. Images of public gatherings in the Arab world from the 1950s through the 1970s reveal only a rare veiled or covered woman. Middle Easterners and Moslems of the period were forward looking in their worldview and secular.

Arabs of the 1960s fell principally into two camps: supporters of the traditional monarchies who sided with the West during the Cold War and supporters of a semi-revolutionary mil-

itant Arab nationalism led by Nasser who advocated a socialist view of the world. The Arab nationalists threatened the monarchies and were closer to the Soviet Union than were the traditionalists. The military coups of this and the preceding decade in Egypt, Iraq, Libya, and Yemen had overthrown monarchies. Those royal lines that remained in power sought to contain Nasser and found in Islam an identity to counter the Nasserist secular vision.

The monarchies' unease and Israel's capture of East Jerusalem in 1967 provided the impetus for Saudi Arabia's King Faysal to work with other leaders in establishing the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC), which is headquartered in Saudi Arabia; the OIC in part was intended, among Arab leaders, as a counterweight to the Arab League, headquartered in Cairo. Furthermore, Saudi Arabia and other Persian Gulf states and monarchies in the region hosted members of the Muslim Brotherhood who faced imprisonment elsewhere, including Egypt, where the organization was banned. The Muslim Brothers, founded in Egypt in 1927 and advocating a highly politicized reinterpretation of Islam, benefited from growing support and legitimacy in Gulf societies. In Saudi Arabia, the expression of the Muslim Brothers found a sympathetic ear in the strict Saudi interpretation of Islam.

The Arabs' shockingly swift and decisive defeat in the 1967 Arab-Israeli war struck a blow to the heart of Arab nationalism, leading many to question the legitimacy and efficacy of its leaders. This loss in an area with a modern history lacking strong traditions in civil society, democratic thinking, and centrist ideas opened the door for politicized religion to fill the void left by the retreat of secular Arab nationalism.

Religious Revival: The 1970s and Beyond

In the late 1970s, Islam returned with a sense of vengeance against all after being marginalized by the -isms: socialism, Nasserism, communism, Baathism, Arab nationalism, and even Zionism. As had occurred in the past with other

movements centered around religion, this one brought with it a culture of absolutism. Urbanization and other socioeconomic developments also contributed in the 1980s and 1990s to opening the way for the steady rise of religious revival across the Arab world.

The Islamist movement in the Arab world had a secular dimension: It thrived on such sociological elements as classes in distress and feelings of powerlessness among cultures in the midst of changing socioeconomic structures. It provided a platform for communities seeking political participation, security, and in some cases resistance to occupation without necessarily being democratic in nature. Similar religious expression was simultaneously taking root in communities in Eastern Europe gearing up to face down communist rule. In general, religious activism has in the past provided a foundation or solace for people living in poverty or otherwise anxious times. It should come as no surprise that religion-based moral values returned to center stage in the wake of what appeared to be secularist indifference to morality and the failure of class-based ideologies claiming to advance the betterment of the weak.

Supporting Islamic movements, organizations, and leaders evolved as well as a means for fearful rulers to counter socialist and nationalist or leftist and communist influence or ascendance in their countries. This dynamic stood at the center of the financial and military assistance given to the Islamic resistance in Afghanistan by Saudi Arabia and other Arab countries, along with the United States, in the 1980s following the 1979 Soviet invasion. This support helped nurture a militant and extreme version of Islam that gave rise to the Taliban and to Osama Bin Laden and the al-Qaida network.

The 1979 Islamic revolution in Iran set the tone and paved the path for religious revival in the Middle East. The revolution transformed Iran into a theocracy governed by a class of clergy who interpreted and applied Islam to the political as well as social realms. The government imposed dress codes for men and women, banned alcohol, segregated the sexes wherever

possible, and restricted speech, including writing and the arts. It was also the antitheses of the secular dictatorship of the Shah of Iran in every aspect. The new Iranian leadership compiled a list of enemies inside the country and beyond its borders. In the Iranian government, liberals, moderates, and centrists willing to be flexible in the implementation of religion and in politics were to be feared, though sometimes tolerated. Of particular concern then and now are leaders such as Ali Akbar Hashemi-Rafsanjani and Mohammad Khatami, who have independent bases of power and espouse less strident views than those in power when it comes to policy.

The success of the Iranian model soon sparked competition between the Sunnis and Shiites of Islam concerning the expansion of the realm of religion. Moslem brothers (a Sunni group) could point to the possible success of an Islamic revolution and government. This era witnessed the rise of Islamic political parties dedicated to the implementation of sharia, Islamic law, irrespective of constitutions, public opinion, diversity, and the complexity involved in such an application.

Like other ideologies blending anger with a sense of messianic purpose, the Islamic revival intruded into private spaces, restricting personal choices, expression, and dress. While states restricted political freedom, allied Islamic groups targeted social and personal freedoms. Theater, film, music, publishing and personal interactions all suffered. These developments erected a detour away from the natural evolution of a secular era and instead directed traffic toward an extremely conservative one. The revival could have focused on modernity, efficiency, and productivity and attempted to reconcile tradition with development and moving forward, but this was not part of the agenda of religious revivalists. Rather, the emerging groups set out to change society by controlling personal and public spaces through strict interpretation and application of sharia. Thus affected states simultaneously experienced the de-secularization and de-liberalization of their politics and societies at some level.

When governments came under pressure to open their political systems to allow broader participation, some religious groups dismissed electoral politics as a Western practice. After recognizing the opportunity elections had to offer, they organized to contest them, running for legislative seats where they could. Having secured seats, they proceeded to cast parliamentary votes against women's rights, lobbied successfully for more religious education in schools, advocated Islamic punishment for criminals, and in general sought to pass measures in line with their religion-tinted view of society. The religious revivalists' attacks on curricula undermined nationalist teachings in the classroom and respect for local nationalisms. Their fundamentalist and puritanical interpretations of sharia took or threatened to take Arab and Islamic societies back centuries.

At the same time, religious groups in Parliaments focused on corruption and transparency in government, governance, and accountability. They also focused on limiting the impact of the internet and globalization on Islamic values. They considered this to be part of the Islamic agenda.

Afghanistan and Sudan followed Iran in implementing sharia. Several Arab societies, including Algeria, faced civil strife and war over the role of religion in the political arena. In Kuwait, attempts at implementing sharia took place through the modification of existing laws. On the other hand, in Saudi Arabia, religious resurgence bred a more rigid form of the state's imposition of sharia; the religionists in the kingdom were prepared for and eventually entered into battle with the government. Most regimes confronted by religionist political maneuvering have thus far managed nonetheless to protect their legitimacy and grip on power.

The logic of the religionists, in this case Islamists, was simple: Arab secular society could only find its way out of subjugation to western powers and economic distress by implementing God's law. Islam is the answer to Islamic socio-economic problems. Accepting and obeying the sharia held the key to success and victory

against internal and external enemies. Here two schools of thought held sway.

The majority grouping believed that reaching its objective could be accomplished using political means; it therefore rejected violence without respect for diversity. Its supporters saw elections and democracy as a means to the end—Islamization of the state and society. In Kuwait, members of the parliamentary Islamist bloc did not argue for cutting off the hands of thieves; instead they focused mainly on segregating men and women in education and eliminating expressions of joy and celebration in the country found in many Arab countries such as UAE, Lebanon, Oman, Bahrain, Qatar and Egypt. In 2008 they established a committee to address negative and foreign influences in the country. First on the committee's agenda was to declare the gay and lesbian community an external influence. Committee members (according to other members of parliament and liberal writers in Kuwait) hope to bring about the passage of legislation to create religious police to monitor behavior. In the meantime, Kuwait is in dire need to update and develop its education, privatization, development, public health, and so on. These issues are of little or no importance to MPs from the Islamic bloc.

This school in Islam, known as the mainstream of the politicized Islamic movement, has accepted peaceful means to further its goal as demonstrated in Kuwait, Jordan and other countries in the region. Yet by insisting on segregating schools or passing legislation to make sharia the only source of legislation, and limiting its thinking to the application of sharia, it is undermining diversity and personal freedoms in society. The monolithic social agenda of the Islamist movement must be challenged by civil society and by the state in order to create an evolution in its ranks. The movement does not yet see personal freedoms and diversity of lifestyles as basic to civic culture and development. They also do not view politics, the state, and education as separate entities from their interpretation of Islam.

The other Islamist school, the minority, is represented by al-Qaida and similar groups. They have no qualms about employing violence to bring about the immediate application of sharia. These armed groups have a heightened sense of urgency compared to those willing to follow a purely political path. The Puritanism of these groups is of the highest order; their understanding of sharia is strict to the point of suspecting the Muslim Brothers and similar groups of selling out. Its adherents are willing to kill others, whom they have dehumanized, and sacrifice their own lives in pursuit of their vision.

Struggle Within, Struggle Without

The trail of religious violence across the Arab world cannot be missed. Religious zealots have committed almost innumerable acts of violence against the state (for example, assassinating Egyptian president Anwar Sadat) and society (for example, bombing resorts, attacking religious minorities, tourists, and local populations). The violence and terrorism of religious extremists has become a fact of life in the Middle East and has reached out to touch other parts of the world.

In recent years, various aspects of the secular state have been undermined in the region. The net result has been the empowerment of religion and an added sense of renewed strength among the religious right. Rising and ongoing conflict between government and mosque compromises the integrity of the state. Only a minority of zealots is fighting this war, but the net result is their slow empowerment, as the silent majority is neutralized under the rule of the authoritarian states and the religious right across the region.

Efforts to avoid religion-based violence have the ironic ability to empower religionists by making the relatively moderate religious center appear to be the salvaging element in the equation. To protect against radical violent groups, some societies may find themselves instead accepting of the implementation of mainstream sharia, which is nonetheless religious law and

not constitutional law. The conservative right seeking to implement sharia in stages in some ways has the upper hand vis-à-vis the government because of its mastery of cultural language, the impression that it will act to calm tensions, and its control of the symbols of religion and religiosity. In the middle stand those torn between state and religious groups depending on the issues and situation. This is how a state like Kuwait could fail until 2006 to push for women's right to vote or run for office. This is how countries acquiesce to the segregation of men and women in education and clubs to ostensibly ameliorate situations irrespective of the negative effects of such practices on development and future well-being. Sometimes, the state attempts to appropriate the symbols of religion to undermine moderate and extremist Islamists and in the end injects religion in education and sharia in other social sectors.

In the midst of these struggles, the state views civil society, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), and freedom of expression of all kinds as challenges. In choosing between religious groups and liberalizing forces, governments have tended to favor the religious, often mistakenly believing that they can control the outcome. Middle Eastern states' suspicions and fear of local (and international) NGOs, human rights organizations, and independent expression have resulted in weak civil societies and strengthened, sometimes inadvertently, religious groups. In short, the states see in centrist and civil society groups a long-term threat that undermines their power by seeking to lay the foundation for democracy. This lies at the root of the weakness of most governments of predominantly Islamic societies in dealing with the challenge of the religionists. At the end of the day, the states, in assessing what is best for them, have in essence created a situation in which the only choice is between the radical implementation of sharia and the supposedly moderate implementation of sharia. A centrist middle is missing because the state and the religious groups have decided that such a center-liberal, democratic, and secular-is counter to both

their long-term objectives. (See the excellent book by Marwan Muasher: *The Arab Center*.)

The Future: State and Religion Amid Change

The development of the nation-state in modern world history established, for the most part, that sovereignty belongs to the state, not to religion, and that politics is a secular and a temporal activity. Challenging a state, when government is in the hands of an Islamic party that claims representation of the divine, is not equivalent to confronting a secular government. The separation of state and mosque or church or synagogue will continue to be an important achievement in all cultures, but the struggle between them will continue and will be reflected in laws and culture. Are the two one authority because an interpreter of Islam says there must be no separation or do societies create separation in addition to coeducational learning environments because they lend themselves to better education, benefit males and females in the workplace in a globalized economy, and contribute to building more equitable societies in general? Must laws and regulations be constructed on the basis of the daily needs of society or based on religious text? Whose interpretation of the world of God is the correct interpretation? The challenge is how to maintain levels of separation without sparking an extremist religionist reaction.

The relationship between religion and state in the Middle East has the potential to follow a number of paths, some of which are already being trodden.

- Surrender of the state to religion or religious zealots: government by sharia, possibly as in Afghanistan, Iran, or Sudan, or other areas; getting there will likely involve civil war.
- Defeat of religion: secular authoritarian governments prevail, ending the prospect of liberal democracy in the near term, as in Egypt, Iraq under Saddam, and Syria.

- Continuity of a state of violence and religionist pressure: the state continues to resist implementation of sharia as demanded by religionists, but no middle path, as in Kuwait, Lebanon, Saudi Arabia, and Yemen. This power struggle cannot remain a permanent state of affairs.
- State and religion compromise with a focus on development and citizenship rights: States agree to further accommodate religion as long as it respects the rights of all groups and communities within society, including liberals, women, and religions and other minorities.

Key to this last model for the long term are economic development and prosperity and the creation of democracy and a dynamic civil society. In such a scenario, the state cannot undermine secular and liberal forces while granting concessions to Islamist trends. A fair playing field, or pitch, for political competition is important for such a model to succeed. Today Turkey is leaning in this direction. Bahrain, Jordan, Oman, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates—and potentially Lebanon and Kuwait, were they to resolve their more immediate crises—could move in this direction if the essence of such a view could penetrate state policies. The challenge is how to move in the direction of civil society and democracy while maintaining state neutrality and economic development.

Today's postmodern world is a combination of old and new, but it remains on the course of compromise between secular states and mainstream religion; this has been the case since the Enlightenment. In this compromise, religious values are incorporated into state structures and practices as well as societal ethics, such as human and individual rights. In the postmodern world, religion has a place as long as it does not dominate, exclude and undermine difference. Inclusivity and coexistence—including the ability to be secular and simultaneously to respect religion and religious interpretation—are the essence of the era.

The implementation of sharia is carried out by people with their own biases, and like others, with a penchant for a degree of excess in some respects. With the passage of time, however, people are apt to recognize these biases and the corrupting influence of power. As Iran illustrates, claiming to govern by sharia does not put one closer to God than those who choose a different path. Such acknowledgment or self-revelation may open the way to compromises that resurrect religion as a spiritual force of importance to the individuals' well-being. Today in a number of societies, the military has returned to the barracks and permitted civil society to manage the affairs of politics. When will religion in the Arab world return to the mosque and leave politics to politicians?