Modern Muslims Reformers, Post-colonial Authoritarianism, and the Crisis in Modern Islamic Thought

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Abstract

Like the conventional belief that Palestinian is coterminous with terrorist, Islam has become synonymous with violence in the Western gaze. Because extremist and politically motivated activism in the name of religion is not sustainable, Muslims have debated for centuries the question of how to balance religious and political authority. Rather than a duality between good and evil, contemporary Muslims in the West describe the relationship between religion and politics as interdependent. The political arena is thus seen to need religion just as religion cannot exist within a political vacuum.

I.   Introduction

In reviewing religious responses to political conflict in the context of Israel and Palestine, it is necessary to discern whether religion is a factor in the socio-political dynamic, and if so, what resources it has provided for defining justice and organizing society justly. One can assume religion plays a role in determining Palestinians conception of state power just as it did Egyptians' during the colonial era. The question is according to what definition of justice and toward what end.

The question of Islam in the context of Israel-Palestine is different from that asked of Judaism in light of Israel's alliance with the Jews. However, just as a comprehensive look at the trajectory of Jewish identity from the ancient to modern period leads one to ask, "Are Zionists the only or most authentic representative of Judaism?" one also must also ask within the political context of the modern Islamic reform movement, "Are Islamists the only or most authentic representatives of Islam?" The answer to both questions is elusive. As Marc Ellis and others have argued, the story of Israel and Judaism after the Holocaust has been an existential struggle with state power—yet it is a story that predates Israel and whose conclusion remains open(Science, 1986).

The story of reformist Islam as it developed in Egypt during the nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries—that is, in the region most influencing modern Islamists in Palestine today—is one where the lines between traditional and modern, spiritual and political also remain in tension. Since its declaration of independence in 1988, the Palestinian Liberation Organization has set forth a secular and democratic vision of Palestine whatever its shortcomings in or obstacles to implementing that vision. Islam is not allied thus with either government at issue in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Yet over 90 percent of Palestinians in Gaza—the most overcrowded and politically radicalized

area—support the Islamist agenda. What then should be said of Islam in its vision of social and political justice as it is brought to bear on the realities of Palestine and the Palestinians?

II. Discussion

While all Palestinians are culturally affiliated with Islam, Muslims are not an empowered group in Palestine or Israel. Moreover, Christian Palestinians have not always paralleled the nationalistic trajectory of their Muslim compatriots. Debate over Palestinians' local and regional political identity, which dominated the scene after Israel and Lebanon's role in the Sabra and Shatila massacres in 1982 and the PLO's move from Beirut to Tunis, led to the popular rebellion known now as the first intifada. With international reaction during the peace process, the role of Christian Palestinians in mediating violence was revived both because of their religious and family connections in the West but also their support for a secular, democratic future of Palestine. Today, as President Abbas begins a new phase in Palestinians' national story and addresses the needs of Palestinians in post-disengagement Gaza, the question is asked again about the legal and economic orientations of the future Palestinian state (Kristianasen, 1999).

The Islamic struggle for self-reliance and honor is deeply rooted in the model of the Prophet Mohammed. This memory animates contemporary "Mosque-State" relations in the context of Israel-Palestine. Because Islam is a continuation of the Abrahamic story that God began with Jews and Christians, it shares in the divine Covenant and believes that Muslims too are obligated to the eternal God. Negotiation with the socio-political order is thus a question of ethics and over the nature of Muslim identity. However, because justice must be defined and implemented in real time, that effort has existential and political dimensions. As noted in previous chapters, support for Palestinian Islamist opposition groups, such as Hamas and Islamic Jihad, is not absolute. Instead, it corresponds inversely with the tangible results brought forth by the dominant PLO parties and personalities.

In her essay on "The Desire of Islam," French journalist Martine Gozlan argues that Islam "proposes certainty" where the other monotheistic traditions "manage doubt." Her thesis suggests that Islam is a closed and monolithic enterprise that can be named and measured. Swiss Islamic scholar and Muslim intellectual Tariq Ramadan disagrees, asking in effect what Islam could say then, if that were true, to the fact that many of its strongest adherents live in non-Islamic societies and display little desire to "return" (often for the first time) to the so-called "Islamic" world(Alcalay, 1996). One might ask whether the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is in actuality a microcosm of the struggle between Islam and the West that right-leaning hawkish Jews, Christians, and Muslims would suggest. What future does this view of Islam today herald for the Palestinians, who seem to face a microcosm of the struggle between Islam and the West that is said to exist at a broader, global level?

This thesis has addressed some historical and cultural influences on Palestinian nationalism that go back to the 1870s and 1920s, and which ground the paradigm within which current Palestinian identity and political activity transpire. It has also noted that where religion is reference by opposition groups, it is done so to galvanize personal and political power, not because it reflects either the ethics of the tradition or the true views of the people. Islam is present in the minds of the people, however. As Palestinians and

others observe these two polarities, is there consensus on how they—or even just Palestinian Muslims— define justice? Again, the authenticity of the current Islamists' political vision and religious authority is in question, given the dual nature of Palestinian Islamists' challenge to the PLO as much as Israeli intransigence (Javadikouchaksaraei, Reevany Bustami, Fazwan Ahmad Farouk, & Akbar Ramazaniandarzi, 2015).

Questions abound, including how Palestinian Muslim perspectives of their non-Muslim fellow compatriots, the degree of their resentment toward Fatah for the failures of the peace process under Arafat, what price a privatization of traditional identity will pay given the Islamism of the opposition groups today, and whether non-Islamists (especially within the Arab world) can learn to tolerate current Islamic political groups given the tumultuous history they have shared with nationalists since the 1950s. It may seem moot for Palestinian Muslims in the diaspora to ask what principles exist within their tradition to guide Palestinians' quest for liberation today given the struggle for political liberation that characterizes in a near-absolute way the lives of Palestinians in Gaza, the West Bank and East Jerusalem. Yet they too face a future that "remains open," in Ellis's words. An identity based on victim-hood may be a catalyst for nationalism, but it is not a healthy foundation for a stable or integrated future. Therefore even within the Palestinian Islamic movement, the questions of "Liberation from what? and for what?" remain (Bickerton & Klausner, 2002).

Religious historian Karen Armstrong, like various others, has written on the ideological and political struggles Islam has undergone since the eighteenth century, which resulted on the one hand with a rejection of the modern reality and a stubborn reliance on literal interpretations of Muslims' fundamental beliefs and structure for righteous behavior; on the other, there was an accommodation of modernity through a revision of Muslims' self-perception and the narrative purpose of Islam. Scholars of Islam such as Tariq Ramadan, Farid Esack, Asghar Ali Engineer, and Yvonne Haddad, as well as non-Muslim scholars of Islam like Armstrong and John Esposito, each argue and together exemplify the facts that contemporary Islam is both a dynamic and plural set of traditions, and that it is compatible with democracy, pluralism, and economic reform. In their own bodies of work, each contributes and become a part of the historical narrative of Islam as much as the medieval jurists because of the textual and ritualistic orientation of Islam like Judaism (Tuma, 1988).

Arab Muslims, like many others in the world, are sensitive to the individualism that secular definitions of identity entail. In pluralistic, non-Islamic societies, they seek definitions of citizenship based on a religious consensus that takes into consideration the transcendental dimension of their faith as a balance to the agnosticism of modern commercial production. However, in so-called Islamic societies, Muslims are intimately familiar with the brutal means of control that politics in the Arab world have entailed, whether under the secular, socialist nationalism of Egypt, Iraq and Syria; the imperial religiosity in Jordan and Saudia Arabia which were installed in the 1920s by Europe and survived the Arab nationalist rise of the 1950s; or the revolutionary religiosity of Iran after the Shah's demise in 1979. Arab Muslims have had to turn inward to find space for the spiritual dimension of faith, in part through the Sufi movement that developed within Shi'ism and spread from Saudia Arabia to Lebanon to Morocco. In many of the nation-states within the former Ottoman regime, some say that "two countries" have come to exist between a wealthy, secularized urban elite and a poor, traditionally religious

peasantry. Thus, given the socio-economic tensions of their own countries, support for the Palestinian cause has been mainly within the nationalist struggle against the imperial powers of Britain, France, America, and now Israel which has been thin and mostly limited to the rhetoric and power of the ruling elite (Bickerton & Klausner, 2002).

While the fervor of secular nationalism that replaced the nineteenth- and early twentieth-century colonialism of Britain and France failed in its attempt at ordering society fairly, let alone justly, one cannot say that it did so simply because it separated religion from the public sphere. However, in its repression of religious belief and dominating reliance on new, foreign concepts of meaning, it did alienate a majority of its citizenry. Princeton University professor of foreign affairs Carl Brown explains that while there is no equivalent within Islam to the church or its hierarchy of religious authority within Christianity, "throughout the ages Muslim religious spokesmen have confronted Muslim rulers-ever so circumspectly at times, but occasionally in thundering condemnation. The ulama have often led or been intimately involved in movements toppling rulers from power."

Thus, the belief that Islam does not distinguish between religion and politics is wrong both historically and "theologically." One can indeed draw a social and political dimension of justice from Islamic jurisprudence. In contrast to the common belief of Islam that, "unlike Christianity, there is no tradition of a separation of church and state [or] of religious organization as contrasted with political organization," Brown argues that, "in Islam, just as in Judaism, there is the potential for tension between of the ulama and the sufis, the religion of the head and the heart, the religion of law and of illumination." Indeed, that tension is a continual one that provides a backdrop to modern Islamic identity at its essence.

In order to critique the injustice and oppression that Muslims have experienced, Ramadan argues that they can and have relied on certain universal principles about the nature of God and the pathway that the Prophet provided toward God which are found within the Qur'an, the Sunna, and the state of the world. He notes that "the Sharia," or tangible pathway back the "intangible Source of Belief," is a human construction which is meant to evolve according to the new social, political, and scientific environments in which Muslims live, in light of the Prophetic tradition that says "God sends to this community, every hundred years, someone to renew its religion," just as human thought evolves and just as some aspects of the Quran and the Sunna were revealed over time (Stein, 1961).

While foreign domination and internal corruption have lead Muslim political leaders to lose their spiritual compass, fueled by what Armstrong and Ramadan describe as a reliance on the isolated, closed and fallible instruction of Medieval jurisprudence, they continue to claim to act in the name of the faithful. As others have noted, this is because the language of religion conveys a sense of authority and divine legitimacy that political leaders need. Also, the language of religion is a cohesive factor that Muslim leaders from Morocco to Afghanistan and beyond have sought to use for political ends. Thus the reformers' challenge the political leaderships' use of Islam and practical implementation of its spiritual obligations under God have, not surprisingly, been largely unwelcome.

Approaching modernity in different ways, reformers since the eighteenth century have sought to realign the socio-political identity of Muslims according to the universal,

prophetic principles they draw from the Qur'an and the Sunna, cast as it were according to each respective historical context. By challenging power on the grounds of religion even where the political establishment claims religious authority, they have put religion into tension with itself and not just secularity. Ramadan argues that there are three tools that believers can use—indeed, that are required—for eliciting the universal principles on which Shari'a is based and for seeing forward a pathway toward God. These include the notions of maslaha, or the common good; ijtihad, or the intellectual effort and critique of legal formulations needed to draw relevant meaning out of the texts; and fatwa, or the carefully structured legal opinions that apply the "comprehensive nature of the message of Islam" to specific circumstances (Hermann, 2005).

Like Ibn Taymiyyah and al-Afghani's return to the origins of Islam as a foundation for a way forward, Ramadan argues that his grandfather, Hasan al-Banna, founded the Muslim Brotherhood in 1920s Egypt as a way to renew the spiritual depth of Muslims' engagement with power through the structure of the State. While the immediate context of the Muslim Brotherhood's activity was British colonialism during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, their dissent from the elitist Egyptian monarchy of King Farouk has contemporary implications. Most notably, it is the radicalization that happened among the followers of these reformers, who both watched and shared in the repression of their spiritual leaders at the hands of the nationalists threatened by their opposition (Guyatt, 1998).

The Muslim Brotherhood in its Egyptian foundation has neither been dissolved nor remains inactive, yet Ramadan argues that it has changed significantly in its contemporary orientation through a reliance on violence as a necessary corollary of its social vision. In particular, the repression of the Muslim Brotherhood by the political leadership in Egypt after Nasser's 1952 military coup is the foundation from which the writings Sayyid Qutb (al-Banna's successor as leader of the Muslim Brotherhood) came to be celebrated by radicalized political activists who commit suicide and kill in the name of Islam today. As John Esposito, founding director of the Center for Muslim-Christian Understanding at Georgetown University writes, "Qutb himself moved from an early phase which spoke of an Islamic alternative to Western systems to a latter stage in which an Islamic alternative became the Islamic imperative which all Muslims were obligated to implement, for which the true believers should be willing to live and die."

Ramadan argues that the militant transformation of the Muslim Brotherhood, whose rise to power was a religious critique of Western colonial hegemony as well as the secular elitist Muslim nationalists' "hijacking" of Islam, does not constitute a "failure" of political Islam. Rather, he believes it is an important challenge to the conventional account of Islamic civilization, which asserts that its demise began in the mid-19th century and culminated in the downfall of the Ottoman Empire in the twentieth century. Contrary to the dominant image of groups like the Muslim Brotherhood and its offshoots as a "political Islam," or the insurgent and "unprecedented irruption" of Islam into "the secular domain of politics,"Ramadan refers to the 1920s and the era of intentional and constructive Muslim engagement with the socio-political order as an opening of a new Islamic renaissance (Liebman & Don-Yehiya, 1983).

Palestinian life is culturally Islamic, such that even Christian Arabs are accustomed to the normative Islamic tradition, yet political scientist Mark Tessler finds that Palestinian Muslim attitudes toward the Arab-Israeli conflict do not differ significantly

between those who are highly religious versus those who are more secular. However, Palestinian sociologist Mahmoud Mi'ari of Birzeit University finds that among Palestinian Muslims, the more religiously active and oriented those polled were, the less likely it was that respondents supported normalization with Israel and the more likely they were to be prejudiced against Jews in comparison to non-religious respondents (Javadikouchaksaraei, 2017).

Religious orientation does not always determine political behavior. Palestinians such as Samia Khoury, Mitri Raheb, and others point out that both Muslim and Christian Palestinians experience occupation equally. They say that any claimed difference is a subversive one aimed at bolstering Israel's ability to control both groups. However, Tessler has found that statistically, one's religious orientation and degree of personal observance is more influential than one's cultural or associational relationships on one's political behavior.Tellingly, he also found that the more Muslims in Palestine, Lebanon, Jordan, Egypt, and Kuwait support religious political movements, do not criticize Islamic militants, and favor a prominent role for religion in political and public affairs, the less likely they are to support diplomatic negotiations or normalized relations with Israel(Tessler, 1994).

Tessler's findings would support the belief that there is more commonality between Muslim and Jewish fundamentalists, both prepared ideologically to use armed struggle in defense of their convictions, than there is between salafi traditionalists, literalists and reformists, to use Ramadan's categories for the various trends of Muslim religious reflection and action.

The latter trend, reformist Islam, is contextual theology and a search for a more just, God-like social order. An illuminating parallel can thus be found in the critique made of the use of power within Catholic thought and social structure in the Latin American context known today as liberation theology, or the theology that emphasizes a (the) liberating narrative within the Bible and that argues for a biblical hermeneutic where God is intentionally on the side of the poor and oppressed. While the liberation theology of Gustavo Gutierrez and Leonard Boff may no longer be seen with the apprehension.

it once was—both because of its time-tested relevance and because of the plethora identity-based movements that it subsequently inspired, like feminist theology, black theology, "mujerista" theology in Mexico, "minjung" theology in Korea, and so on—it is incontrovertible that it has provided a language and a model for phenomenal changes within Judaism and Islam, as well as Catholicism and Protestantism around the world (Al-'Ulaymi, 1968) (Freda, 2017).

Progressive Muslim intellectuals face a doubly difficult project, argues Ebrahim Moosa, a South African professor of Islamic theology now teaching at Duke University. The gap between the vision of intellectuals and the historical results of mass political action can be found in any ideological enterprise. It is by no means unique to Islam or the Islamic world, and may be a phenomenon common to any enterprise attempting to implement an idealistic belief system, religious or otherwise, by human hands and within the structures of human society. Indeed, such a gap marks the historical trajectory of post-Enlightenment thinkers from Martin Luther to Karl Marx, Mahatma Gandhi to Martin Luther King, Jr.

The point of departure for future scholars reviewing anti-oppression movements must always be toward a more complete understanding of the context in which political

resistance and social revolution occur and the reasons why the transformation was not realized, so as to better remove the negative sources of their inspiration and/or transform the power structures by which such persons were initially disenfranchised. The increase of Palestinian political action under the banner of Islam has been poorly understood in the United States and abroad, because of both a limited scope of intellectual discourse and an a priori bias against Arabs. The use of violence on behalf of Palestine has become part of a stereotype or narrative about Palestinians in which Palestinians have little direct say. While the use of armed struggle by Palestinian "Islamists" may confirm such views among outsiders who think the political and religious realms of Palestinian identity are synonymous, essentially violent, and equally "anti-Semitic," this is a problem of perspective and ignorance, not a relevant concern for Palestinians as they assess and gauge their own future. The question remains for Palestinian Muslims what they envision after occupation given the facts that cannot be changed—such as the psychological effects of over five decades of political alienation and victimization—as well as the devastation that Israeli occupation has wrought on the Palestinian economy and civil infrastructure (Pedahzur, 2001).

What unites Muslim, Christian, and Jewish approaches to power during the twentieth century was the bifurcation that resulted within their own communities between religious and secular observance of the tradition. For Muslims, power in historic Palestine during the eighteenth through early twentieth centuries was understood in the context of foreign domination, be it Ottoman or British. The Qur'anic injunction against being dependent on foreign entities was of immediate relevance to Arab nationalism. According to Armstrong, the tension—between a conservative agrarian society on the one hand and an efficient, increasingly exclusive, technologically-inclined one on the other—resulted in a bifurcated society unable to withstand invasion or develop its resources on its own. Historians note, however, a sullied side of Islamic reform movements such as the Muslim Brotherhood in 1920s Egypt and the Renaissance Movement (Harakat al-Nahda) in 1970s Tunisia. Both had secret military/terrorist wings that were involved in presidential coups and political assassinations, for which the members of the military branches as well as the leaders of the broader organizations were jailed, exiled, and/or killed (Yacobi & Tzfadia, 2009).

The continuation and defense of violence by militant groups, often made in the name of religion, has made many who are sympathetic to the militants' cause very uncomfortable, whether it is Jews acknowledging the racist bigotry of Gush Emunim or Palestinians faced personally with the families and/or images of the human suffering caused by suicide bombings in Israel. The belief that Islam was established within the Abrahamic tradition and never against the "people of the Book" is of little comfort in light of the fratricidal and communal warring that has developed within modern-day Palestine.

Palestinian Muslims remain confined by Israel in many tangible ways even after the Gaza withdrawal, in terms of their sovereignty, control over land and sea ports, access to natural resources, and so on. Yet after the passing of Yasser Arafat, Palestinian Muslims face a new leadership and new opportunities to define themselves and unify in solidarity against Israel. Islam forms an important backbone of Palestinians' social and cultural identity, in large part because 98.5 percent of Palestinians in the Occupied Territories are Muslim—that is, essentially all Palestinians from the Gaza Strip as well as

most from the West Bank. Jerusalem is considered one of the most symbolic cities of Islam, and Islam is as historically integral to the region as Christianity and Judaism. The claim that Islam justifies a jihad against "infidel" Jews or Palestinian "collaborators" Palestinians poses a particular challenge to the Palestinian leadership as they attempt to maintain a democratic, unified, and plural state structure.

The long-standing tradition of reform within Islam seeks an authentic foundation for Muslim observance as a way to challenge the injustices of imperial power and fulfill the obligations of faith for each believer, not unlike the project of religious reform called for by Palestinian Christian theologians in the late twentieth century. There is hope that because of the relevance of Islam to daily Palestinian life—it being a common motif in Palestinian narratives—that pragmatic necessities will continue to force the question of exactly how Muslims can enact justice within a modern political economy without rejecting either themselves or their tradition (Khashan, 2000).

This is a natural part of our society. Another woman interviewed, whom Hass identified as formerly atheist, says that being religious revives her ability to deal with the chaos around her. She says, "During the intifada, I began to believe in God. I started to talk to Him. And during the uprising, it made it easier for us to go out on the streets and face the soldiers, to see one of us get killed. We had faith that it was not death; that the dead were going to Paradise.

III.   Conclusion

The destitute belief that only death will provide justice, which one finds in some camps and among some groups of young Palestinians deprived of the stability, critical capacities, and creative pursuits afforded to the human mind through education and the humanities, reaffirms the need for a pragmatic foundation for justice within the world today that adequately answers the problem of oppression for Palestinians. The subject of oppression and liberation are certainly germane within Islamic thought, in the tradition of the modern Islamic reformers, however the twentieth century was a period wrought with reactionism and tyranny against the very ideal toward which the Prophet Mohammed worked. Lacking evidence to the contrary, one can only hope that Palestinian Muslims will stand in solidarity with Palestinian Christians and dissenting Jews and demand a just peace especially where it challenges the armed religious opposition groups who would sell the soul of Islam for their own empowerment.

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