The Future of Islam

Viable Theory of Islamic Reform is Necessary but Insufficient for Political Stability and Social Justice

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Thesis and Analysis

Islamic reform, political and economic development, social justice and related concerns have a long history in the world at large, and around the Mediterranean region in particular. It is futile and irresponsible to discuss Islamic reform without locating its methodology and implementation in the firm historical context of inter-communal and international relations. The main thesis and analysis of this brief exploration of some of the relevant factors and processes, subject to noted caveats and clarifications, can be summarized as follows:

1. Islamic reform is urgently necessary for Muslims throughout the world to achieve political stability and social justice. This is not peculiar to Islam, of course, but it is the immediate obligation of every Muslim to promote reform regardless of what others, whether Muslims and non-Muslims, are doing. What follows is merely trying to understand the context and the process of Islamic reform in practice.
2. In addition to theoretical possibilities of coherent theological methodology, Islamic reform also requires acknowledgement of the need for it, and exploration of pragmatic strategies of its sustainable realization.
3. Concern with Islamic reform should not be limited to Muslims because its consequences are global, and its context and outcomes are influenced by the conduct of colonial powers (especially the US and Russia at present) and current

major geopolitical actors like the European Union. In attempting positive engagement, colonial and neocolonial powers must renounce their familiar strategies of reckless and counterproductive neocolonial interventionism.
4. Muslims have the primary responsibility of devising and implementing necessary Islamic reform and addressing other strategies for achieving political stability and social justice, but other regional and global communities must also contribute to this process by providing sufficient safeguards for the rule of international law and protection of human rights.

I will now elaborate and discuss these propositions, and begin with a few cautionary notes and clarifications, instead of attempting to discuss the subject in terms of a categorical struggle of traditional or conservative views of Sharia versus modernist Islamic reform. While I can see the issues in terms of a struggle of ideas in a historical context, it is also clear to me that this approach can be counterproductive among those Muslims who perceive such an analytical approach to the sacred as heretical. It may be helpful to first seek to demystify the subject by considering the impact of metaphor and assumption in the theme and title of this article. Formal discussions and public discourse around the subject of this article tend to speak of "Islam" not only in the singular, but also as if it were an autonomous agent that can think, believe and act as such, independently from its human followers. If we recall that there is neither a monolithic, singular Islam, nor is any perception of Islam an autonomous agent, we can see that we are talking about Muslims, rather than Islam as such. This clarification would immediate indicate that we are talking of people in the historical context of geopolitical, economic and other

factors, and that it is about power relations and political negotiation, rather than an abstraction of an ancient disembodied religion.

Another caveat should also be noted in view of recent and current (2014-2017) events and concerns with refugees and migration, terrorists attacks, and tensions surrounding and integration of second and third generation Muslim Europeans. I am not attempting to present or discuss a precise diagnosis and treatment for "the Islam problem" in the Mediterranean region, western Europe, and/or elsewhere in the world. I am concerned with the policy implications of a clear and appropriate understanding of the role of Islam in public life, but I do not perceive this as leading to ready a prescription for a resolution of a problem to be acted upon by any Muslim or non-Muslim community or institution. Readers will of course have their respective policy priorities and concerns, but I do not assume any hierarchy or preference among such responses. Muslims and non-Muslims are equally entitled to their own analysis and policy inferences, and all sides to any issue will act on their conclusions and judgement. While this is only to be expected, it would be self-defeating, even suicidal in the long term, for any side to pursue its strategies to the exclusion or at the expense of other perspectives. The role of Islam among Muslims around the world varies, but it is always contextually significant. The influence of Islam also works through the hearts and minds of individual Muslims because of the theological weakness of institutionalized authority. It is necessary, therefore, to focus on perceptions and responses of individual Muslims, instead of expectations of collective or institutional positions. Whatever action or omission occurs, and regardless of its motivation or consequences, it is always taken by individual human beings. Focus should therefore be on religious visions and motivations of the specific Muslims in question, not just any Muslim or all Muslims at large. This should also be done with due regard to other relevant factors which are integral to the views and actions of the Muslims in question.

Another perspective to consider here is that the relationship between perceptions and responses of individual Muslims, on the one hand, and the metaphor of collective agency of communities, on the other, should be seen in dialectical rather than dichotomous terms. while individual Muslims are too dependent on the material and emotional support of their communities to exercise totally autonomous agency, the role of communities is being redefined by the impact of the centralized, bureaucratic nation-state in the broader context of a globalized world. Perceptions and concerns about the impact of Islam on political and legal institutions in the modern context is changing and adapting to shifting local, regional and global relationships and alliances. These processes are also facilitated by fast-expanding possibilities of inter-personal and inter-communal relations through public education, media and telecommunication technologies.

At the same time, however, the magnitude and speed of change seems to intensify internal anxieties and tensions over a societal loss of control over traditional systems of socialization. The magnitude and speed of change is perceived by many Muslims to be challenging and redefining the core values of Islamic identities and self-understandings. These tensions can be particularly complex and intense in regions like the Mediterranean, which is the site of historical confrontation and current interaction among Muslim and non-Muslim communities. Many Muslims tend to see the current protracted violent conflicts in the region as predictable outcomes of European colonialism, and that of France and the United Kingdom in particular.[1] These European powers have entrenched structural conditions of political instability and sectarian violence at the foundations of all states in the Middle East and North Africa (herein called MENA).[2] Those foundational "time-bombs" are also blamed by some Muslims today for rationalizing and facilitating persistent intervention by the United States, which prompted counter-intervention by the Soviet Union and now Russia in their own geopolitical struggle over the MENA.

Most importantly, sectarian and ideological regimes of post-colonial MENA and their local constituencies bear the ultimate responsibility for manipulating colonial mischief and relying on neocolonial interventionism in their native zero-sum games of abso-

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[1] BARR, James. *A Line in the Sand: Britain, France and the Struggle for the Mastery of the Middle East*, New York: Simon & Schuster, 2011.
[2] This article focuses on MENA in line with the publication for which it is intended, but many Muslims would reject such sub-regional differentiations as neocolonial. Yet, calls for pan-Islamic unity has also failed in the post-colonial Muslim world, and Islamists have in practice tended to conduct their politics in accordance with the territorial reality of the post-colonial nation-state.

lute control of the State and its resources to their own ends. While clearly appreciating the destructive role of European colonialism and neocolonial interventionism, focusing on the responsibility of post-colonial leaders and communities is more productive for forward-looking possibilities of sustainably mediating the chronic humanitarian crisis in the region. The prospects of peaceful conflict mediation and sustainable democratic politics require the diffusion of historical hostilities and promotion of religious and ethnic pluralism. Sustainable peaceful conflict mediation also requires fair and inclusive economic and social development. It is from this perspective that I argue that a viable theory of Islamic reform is necessary but insufficient for realizing political stability and social justice in MENA and around the global Muslim world.

Addictive Intervention and Resentful Dependency

Despite, or perhaps because of that colonial history, the paradoxical relationship between the states and societies of MENA, on the one hand, and western Europe, on the other, continues to be characterized by what I call "resentful dependency" on the MENA side and "addictive intervention" on the European side. What I mean by this characterization is that MENA societies and their states continue to depend on western Europe for economic, political, security and technological needs. This resentment is often promoted and coordinated by leaders of political Islam to rationalize the reckless and indiscriminate violence against whoever happened to be at the site of a mob riot, women and children, Muslims or non-Muslims alike. With these overwhelming realities MENA societies and their states present a paradox of strident resentment of dependency, without taking effective action to gradually diminish that dependency. This paradox itself affirms and entrenches the realities of dependency, despite the pretense of resentment, especially among leaders of political Islam who falsely glorify reckless and arbitrary violence in the name of "defending" Islam and Muslims. MENA Muslims must dig themselves out of this paradox by appreciating the compelling need for Islamic reform, and exploring viable means for its achievement.

By characterizing the position of the western European side as one of "addictive intervention" I mean that those societies and their states seem unable to wean themselves off the irrational habit of multifaceted intervention in every aspect of public and private life of MENA. While colonial and neocolonial domination and exploitation was rationalized by European powers as "the civilizing mission of the white man," interventionism is in fact counterproductive in this age of self-determination and effective mass resistance. See, for instance, how the mighty United States, NATO and other allies have failed to subdue the "primitive" force of the Taliban for fifteen years in Afghanistan, and the Sunni insurgencies for some ten years in Iraq. A more subtle point is that failure to diminish arbitrary intervention is in fact part of the cyclical process which is feeding into and drawing from MENA's resentful dependency. Continuing attempts by European societies and their states to rationalize neocolonialism as "the peacekeeping mission of the white man," is in fact undermining the fundamental basis of international legality.

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The free for all, self-help and vigilante justice we see in the actions of European powers and their MENA allies in Syria and Libya at the time of writing (June 2017) confirm the worst charges of Islamist leaders against Western imperialism and a renewed Christian crusade. Having deliberately created conditions of permanent political instability and sectarian violence, as noted earlier, France and the United Kingdom are now pointing to their own self-fulfilling prophecy of violent sectarian civil war to justify the continuation of their interventions in MENA, this time in the guise of humanitarianism.

The most fundamental consequence of European colonialism and the consequent multifaceted dependencies of MENA on former colonial powers is the territorial concept and institutions of the so-called nation-state.[3] The legacy of colonialism, moreover, continues to shape and reshape the political, economic and social systems of MENA and the Muslim world at large. Colonialism also persists in state ideologies, political visions, and institutions of post-colonial states throughout the global Muslim world. The idea of a territorial state, much like the idea of nationalism, originated and developed in Europe and was then imposed on Muslims and other colonized peoples of the Global South. The inclusion of the concept of the territorial state in Muslim politics and the actual boundaries of Muslim-majority states are both products of colonialism. Colonial authorities drew boundaries but did little to unify the peoples who lived within those boundaries into a national culture. At times colonial administrations did exactly the opposite; namely, sought to maintain control by encouraging competition between ethnic, linguistic, religious, or tribal groupings.

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This is not to say that ethnic affiliations and national identities were absent in the history of the Muslim world, but ethnic nationalism and its association with the nation-state were imposed for the first time throughout the colonized world during European colonialism. Yet, tensions remained between territorial nationalism as the primary form of political identity, and ideological, Arab and Islamic, identities.

The tension between traditional formations of Islamic and ethnic identities, on the one hand, and territorially-based national identities, on the other, clearly underlies current violent conflicts and civil war in several MENA countries. States of Muslim majority countries gained independence in territories that were delineated by the colonial powers, and they largely accepted the shapes in which they were born, as well as the fact that states would be bound by international borders into distinct sovereign entities. Post-colonial states have rarely challenged the division of the territories of the Islamic empires, and, by implication, the Islamic world, by colonial powers or the criteria used by those powers in determining new borders.

The legacy of colonialism in this region has not been free of tensions, however, because many of the divisions were problematic. Some were carried out arbitrarily to accommodate local colonial officials without regard to their impact on peoples and resources. Other divisions reflected the needs of colonial powers to resolve diplomatic tensions among themselves. For instance, post-World War I plans for the division of the Ottoman Empire were made to appease France, Italy, and Greece. The need to protect India from Russia meanwhile led to the creation of Afghanistan, as similar concerns about France after 1798 led to British occupation of Egypt, which in turn warranted British control of Palestine after World War I. Strategic decisions and economic interests finally led to the creation of new colonial territories which became the bases for future states. British interests in Persian Gulf oil led to the creation of Kuwait. France created Lebanon out of Syria to fulfill its desire to establish a Christian-Arab state; and Britain created Jordan to accommodate Amir Abdullah, who had fought on the side of the British in World War I and whose family felt betrayed by the division of the Arab lands of the Ottoman Empire between European powers.

New states often appropriated existing ethnic identities, such as "Iraqiness" or "Syrianness," and at other times contrived nationhood, has happened at the creation of Jordan, Malaysia and Pakistan, to produce nationalist ideologies that could sustain

[3] The following overview is based on Syed Vali Reza NASR, "European Colonialism and the Emergence of Modern Muslim States." In *Oxford Encyclopedia of the Modern Islamic World*, edited by John L. Esposito. Oxford Studies Online, www.oxfordislamicstudies.com/article/book/islam-9780195107999/islam-9780195107999-chapter -13 (accessed 13 June 2017).

state formation. The process also resulted in the suppression of competing ethnic identities and preventing them from developing into nationalisms. Iran, Iraq, and Turkey have sought to prevent Kurdish identity from asserting itself as nationalism. The success of experiments with state formation often depended on how successful the development of national consciousness was. That, in turn, depended on the strength of the ethnic identity that formed the basis of nationalism. Over time, ethnic and territorial definitions became the boundaries for national identity formations; they developed as a secular and dominant form of political identity in lieu of memories of a united Islamic world in history.

In the final analysis, the apparent rise in Islamic politics, as propagated by fringe groups in MENA and elsewhere in the Muslim world and advertised by fascist organizations in Europe, United States and Australia, will not lead to any geopolitically or economically coherent notion of "Muslim nationalism." The incoherence and unsustainability of this oxymoron is confirmed by any sober review of the global scene, as conclusively confirmed by fourteen centuries of Islamic history. Politics has always been and will remain local for Muslims, as it is for all human beings in their communities everywhere. Alliances and solidarities will rise and fall among Muslims and between Muslims and non-Muslims, but that will develop from multiple and interactive political and socioeconomic factors and processes, and not from a monolithic or integrated trans-regional or global "Islamic identity."

Concluding Remarks: the Theology and Politics of Islamic Reform

Space does not permit a general discussion of the concepts and methodologies of Islamic reform, or the history and prospects of particular approaches. Instead, I am concluding this short article with some reflections on the paradox of the theology and politics of Islamic reform. I will explain and illustrate this paradox with the case of *Ustadh* Mahmoud Mohamed Taha and the Islamic reform movement he established and led in Sudan from the early 1950s until his

public execution, the banning of his books and suppression of his movement in January 1985. I have personally adopted *Ustadh* Mahmoud's methodology of Islamic reform since the 1960s, and applied it in my own work since the 1980s.[4] Instead of trying to summarize this approach, in comparison to other Islamic reform methodologies and strategies, I will briefly explain the curious paradox of the need for open advocacy and call for the implementation of Islamic reform in the face of the threat of execution for the capital crime of apostasy (*ridda*) under Sharia, in addition to the risk of ruthless repression by authoritarian regimes. As this case tragically illustrates, assertions of constitutional and human rights freedoms of religion and belief, expression and association, do not mean that these rights are in fact respected and protected in practice.

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Briefly stated, *Ustadh* Mahmoud introduced in 1951 his theory that Islam consists of two messages. The first message was revealed in Media during the last ten years of the Prophet's life (622-32) but enacted the main principles of what came to be known among subsequent generations of Muslims as Sharia. In contrast to the predominant assumption of Muslims, he believed that the historical understanding of Sharia represented a postponement of the universal and fundamental message of Islam which was revealed to the Prophet during his mission in Mecca (610-622). He further argued that now (20th Century) is the appropriate time for the elaboration and application of the Second Message of Islam,

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4 Taha, Mahmoud Mohamed. *The Second Message of Islam,* Syracuse University Press, 1987; An-Na'im, Abdullahi Ahmed. *Toward an Islamic Reformation: Civil Liberties, Human Rights and International Law,* Syracuse University 1990, 1996; An-Na'im, Abdullahi Ahmed. *Muslims and Global Justice*, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011.

and abrogation of those aspects of the First Message of Islam that are no longer compatible with the needs of humanity.[5]

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Ustadh Mahmoud was able to propagate those views, and develop an active social movement to spread and practice his ideas in Sudan until 1983 when he opposed the authoritarian imposition of Sharia by President Nimeiri. As a result, he and leading members of his movement were detained without charge or trial for eighteen months. Upon his release on 19 December 1984, he issued a statement reiterating his opposition to the imposition of Sharia as a distortion of the true message of Islam, and for the resumption of the civil war in South Sudan. This time, *Ustadh* Mahmoud was ar-rested and put on trial on secular charges of treason and undermining the constitution. The Sharia capital charge of apostasy was subsequently added to the record after the trial, and he was publically executed on 18 January 1985. His books were burned, their publication or circulation banned and the movement was suppressed.[6]

Recalling the title of this short article, I believe that *Ustadh* Mahmoud Mohamed Taha of Sudan presented a viable theory of Islamic reform which was suppressed in 1985 by an authoritarian regime of President Nimeiri, which was able to manipulate the same principles of Sharia that said theory was intended to reform. Since *Ustadh* Mahmoud's theory of Islamic reform could have prevailed if it was permitted to be propagated and debated openly and freely among Muslims of Sudan, MENA and the rest of the Muslim world, the immediate priority should be the protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms. Yet the legitimacy and efficacy of that prerequisite of Islamic reform is as much undermined by the continuing neocolonial interventionism of former colonial powers, including the United States and Russia, as it is by the arbitrary violence of political Islam. All Muslim and non-Muslim supporters of Islamic reform must therefore unite in combating both threats to their common goal.

[5] See TAHA, *The Second Message of Islam*, pp. 124-164, for detailed elaboration and substantiation of his views from the Qur'an and Sunna of the Prophet.

[6] Abdullahi Ahmed AN-NA'IM, "The Islamic Law of Apostasy and its Modern Applicability: A Case from The Sudan," *Religion,* Vol. 16, 1986, pp. 197-223. https://drive.google.com/file/d/0B_xWbXTA_LnlY1JQLTZTNDRhZlE/view