

Book Review

The dead-end of Political Islam:

Review of Hassan Aourid's "*Al-Islam Assiyassi fi al-Mizane- halat Al-Maghrib*" (حسن اوريد (الاسلام السياسي في الميزان (حالة المغرب) (*Political Islam in Question, the Case of Morocco*) (Tusna, 2016, 132pages).

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The major challenge in talking or writing about "political Islam" is how to do so without engaging in a polemical or a situational debate. For most people, the concept of "political Islam" refers to a politically and intellectually aggressive conservative movement claiming historical legitimacy to build a society away from "imported" political models and in which religion plays the central role. In the context of a Muslim world that is weakened by violence and terrorism, the project of a variously defined "Islamic state," is set up in fierce opposition to other political and societal projects that seek to build the state on the basis of modern political concepts and doctrines that have proved to guarantee a qualitative stability for the societies that had adopted them.

The history of the contemporary Arab world has proved beyond doubt that all political regimes whether socialist, capitalist, and even nationalist, have failed to advance a societal, economic, and political project. No wonder then that the reality of Arab-Islamic societies continues to be plagued by poverty and illiteracy, and most of these societies are at the bottom of the scale in terms of human development and political awareness. That is the background on which some movements sought to elaborate another project, a third way to find solutions in the cultural-religious heritage of Islam, which after all is not only of religion, but a social and cultural system that can accommodate a variety of political readings since it contains general principles that govern the relationships between ruler and ruled.

In this debate, Dr. Hassan Aourid's book: *Political Islam in Question, the Case of Morocco* (published in French in 2015 under the title *l'Impasse de*

l'islamisme and in Arabic in 2016 under the title (حالة المغرب)¹ gives a new and daring perspective. The author begins by outlining the most important stages of the evolution of political Islam in Morocco and its intellectual and ideological expansion across the Islamic world. The roots of this phenomenon go deep in the collective consciousness of the people of this region. Therefore it is crucial to understand the historical trajectory that contributed to the crystallization of many concepts that these religion-based intellectual systems utilize, starting with the defeat of 1967 (war with Israel), the Iranian revolution, the fall of the socialist bloc, Iraq's invasion of Kuwait and the first Gulf war, US invasion in Iraq in 2003, the attacks of September 11, the disruption of the 1990 elections in Algeria after the victory of the Islamic Front of Salvation, and finally the eruption of Arab revolutions In the Arab Spring that started in 2011.

However, in the case of Morocco, the author draws attention the fact that political Islam as an intellectual concept did not gain visibility until it was encouraged and employed by the state to counter leftist movements in the 1960s and 1970s. Like the rest of the Arab monarchies, Morocco considered the expanding Arab nationalism and its socialist ideology with apprehension, seeing it an imminent danger. (p. 22)

In this context, the writer invokes the idea of "inventing" traditions that contributed greatly to the creation of a favorable environment for the emergence of an identity and heritage based consciousness. According to the concept of "the invention of tradition" as theorized by Eric J. Hobsbawm,² the Moroccan state in the era of Hassan II employed this strategy to curb the expansion of the leftist and modernist forces that were opposed to the policies and orientations of the regime. This process was associated with the use of religion as a basis for providing legitimacy to the political institutions, and consolidating it with the dissemination of a system of beliefs and values to strengthen them. (p. 22). This was followed by many laws such as the criminalization of eating/drinking in public in Ramadan; a law targeting mainly left-wing students and the followers of Arab nationalism who view tradition and heritage as factors that cripple society (P23). The educational policy played a key role in the regime's political manipulation of religion by way of promoting tradition through the insertion of religious (Islamic) instruction within the

¹ Published by Tusna (Rabat) in 2016, the book was first written in French (2015) and then translated by the author into Arabic. No English translation is available. The English title provided here is a translation for practical purposes.

² Eric Hobsbawm & Terence Ranger, *The Invention of Tradition*. (London, Cambridge University Press, 1983)

system of national education. The underlying assumption was that critical thinking fuels insurrection and protest, and therefore it must be checked.

In this regard, Hassan Aourid cites the testimony of the expert in education, Muhammad Shafiq, who was asked by the late King Hassan II to do a study on the pedagogical value of teaching the Koran in the traditional “Koranic schools.” Shafiq’s report concluded that this type of education is one of the main reasons behind Morocco's backwardness (p.25). Later, the Royal Cabinet commissioned him to send a memorandum to the Minister of National Education asking him to spread this type of teaching throughout the Kingdom because “it encourages a culture of submissiveness.”

Hence, we can say that the Islamist movement in Morocco was born out of the regime, but it took a trajectory that was totally different from what the state intended for it. The movement owed its strength and expansion to the impoverishment of education and its transformation into a conservative system devoid of critical thinking. While the regime employed religion and tradition in a gradual process (development, control, revision, modernization), the Islamist movement resorted to political opposition to the point that it overran left wing parties only to end up in turn in disarray and division into factions. Some of these remained in the opposition, while others accepted the rules of the game and entered into the political system thereby preparing consciously or unconsciously what the author after Marcel Gauchet³ calls “the exit of religion from the public space. This development is the same as the French writer Olivier Roy predicted in his famous book *l'Échec de l'Islam Politique*(1992)

Evidently, it is political pragmatism that determines such shifts, and in this sense the path of the Islamic movements is no different from that of the leftist parties, whether in Morocco or Europe, especially after the experience of the French Socialist Party with Francois Mitterrand and the rest of the Communist parties after the fall of the Berlin Wall. In all of these cases, the political ideal has been abandoned in order to enter the political game, which requires political bargaining so that it can gain a seat at the table. On the other hand, as is the case with the left, the opposing party that rejects the conditions and consequences of participating in the political game remains outside the political zone and limits itself to reaction which may even include violence.

At the end of the day, the two sides of political accommodation of religion, whether moderate or extremist, contribute together in the process of removing religion from political space as a permanent reference to remain the monopoly of a central institution such as the “Principality of the Faithful” and its

³ Marcel Gauchet, *Le désenchantement du monde. Une histoire politique de la religion*, (Paris, Gallimard, 1985)

subsidiaries in Morocco. Thus the “project” of “religious reference” and the Islamization of politics remain no more than electoral slogans. Consequently, the idea of the ‘Islamization of modernity’ as advocated by Abdessalam Yassine the leader of the Brotherhood Justice and Charity, for example, came to a dead-end and finally disappeared. This is mainly due to the oversimplification of the concept of modernity, as is the case with the majority of concepts in the discourse of political Islam. Modernity is a complex and even contradictory philosophical, literary, sociological, and political concept as illustrated by the French writer Jean Baudrillard in his famous article on the subject in *Encyclopedia Universalis*. Indeed, the reduction of modernity to materialism and moral decay by Islamist thinkers makes their analyses a superficial discourse that cannot be taken seriously. Thus, the will to ‘Islamicize’ modernity indicates a lack of familiarity with the intellectual and literary currents that subjected the concept to criticism from within

The failure of the project of the ‘Islamization of modernity’ eventually led to what was rejected by the followers of political Islam, i.e. the necessity of the emergence of a modernist Islam that stems from its deep-seated principles of tolerance, equality, social justice and freedom which make it a universal religion. What is happening now, according to the writer, is a kind of secularization of the state with the direct or indirect participation of the ruling ‘Islamist’ party (i.e. PJD) that dominates the political arena. By trusting the religious affairs with the institution (i.e. “Principality of Believers” headed by the King) that avoids entering into narrow political calculations, the party acknowledges that since Islam is a common heritage to all Moroccans, no one has a monopoly over it.

In conclusion, *Political Islam in Question* raises the question of the origin and the future of political Islam in Morocco, since the latter cannot be isolated from a turbulent historical context that began with the shock of colonialism and the emergence of an awareness of the need for reform to modernize the state and society. But the issue of reform collides with the problem of references, premises and even ends. This diversity and contradiction produce conflicting and confusing discourses. What gives credence to the book’s basic premise that Political Islam has reached a dead-end is that to this day, no Islamist movement has been able to develop a viable political system nor an acceptable emancipatory vision. All experiences ended in failure, starting with the Iranian revolution and ending with the botched experience of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt and the decision of the Tunisian islamits Renaissance Party, which decided to abandon its proselytizing activism to focus on politics. Interestingly, however, the relative success of the Turkish and Indonesian experience, which

has not received much attention from the writer, remains intriguing. Therefore, even though it is too early to tell, an “Islamic modernity” whose contours are not clear yet is on the verge of appearing, and if anything, it can only be model that publicly and formally embodies the separation between what is religious and what is political.