Arab Countries
Between Secular and Religious Narrative

Research Paper Written by:

Leila Hoballah

Beirut Center for Middle East Studies

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Introduction

One of the most important features of this era, one could say, is the arguments about culture, It's relativity, plurality and even the possibility of culture to lead to *"The Clashes of Civilization"* as appeared in Samuel Huntington book, or the domination of one culture over all human cultures, as reflected by the work of Francis Fukuyama in *"The End of History and The Last Man"*. Culture does not seems to have a real essence, its definition has been a controversy and the term is used in a variety of representations. It could be referred to the 'societies ways of life' or as have been defined by the UNESCO "[Culture] is that complex whole which includes knowledge, beliefs, arts, morals, laws, customs, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by [a human] as a member of society"(UNESCO 2009-2014).

And if we want to accept this definition of culture, we could claim that different societies are characterized by different cultures, but this difference is not in the essence of the culture itself but in its representation in reality, since the only subject of culture is the human being,

which has "a fundamental elements of human nature [which is] need for creative work, creative inquiry for free creation, […] so any decent society should maximise the possibilities for this fundamental human characteristic to be realised"(Chomsky 1971). And if we are looking for the non-static feature of human culture, we could related to the human intellectual activity that refuses any culture that did not satisfy his needs, so the 'enlightenment' west will try to make a discectomy with the medieval ages, as well as the middle east 'will try to make' this intellectual discectomy between Islamic and pre Islamic era.

In this paper I will argue the importance of understanding the intellectual formation of Arab mentality, in order to understand the debate about secular or religious society in the Arabic countries. Articulating two recent articles one by Gudrun Kramer, Freie University in Berlin, 2013, and the second by Barbara Di Poli , Ca' Foscari university in Venice,2014, regarding the 'civil society' dilemma in the Arabic perception.

The Intellectual Formation of Arabic Mentality

"The wise Plato did not feel free to reveal and uncover every kind of knowledge for all people. Therefore he followed the practice of using symbols, riddles, obscurity, and difficulty, so that knowledge would not fall into the hands of those who do not deserve it and be deformed, or fall into the hands of someone who does not know it's worth or who uses it improperly. In this he was right" (Al Farabi 131).

In the core of studying any culture and its representation in reality, is the understanding of the intellectual apparatus that form this type of culture or other. And despite the different models of cultures, we cannot say that there is a disconnection between them, the Arabic culture was not isolated from other forms like Greece, Persian and European culture. But these knowledge,

philosophy, and science will be manipulated differently according to each culture intellectual formation.

The Arabic intellectuals have always give a great importance to the Arabs life as tribes in the desert, and their forced travels, to maintain their basic life needs from water and food, and for their trades, in the formation of the Arab mentality. Al Jabery, Mohammed, said that "the desert environment has shaped the Arabs minds and ways of thinking, […] and mold it in a separatist and not communicative features" (Al Jabery 24). The sands in the deserts are separated particles, and thus the intellectual production was associated with the science of physiognomy, prediction, and divination, in which there is no need for any rationalisation or causality relations. Socially this hard desert environment, and the fight to survive, will lead to the creation of what Ibn Khaldun called 'Asabiyyah', "the term emerged from the word 'ta asub' literally means bounding the turban round his own head,[….] or could be interpreted to 'group feeling' or solidarity" (Abdul Halim and others 4-5). This type of belonging will create a kind of partnership or strong association that holds number of people based on the same interest or opinion. This Arabic identity will not be formed in a meaning of unity, but in a figure of clans with hierarchal societies according to power and money.

The appearance of Islam as a new religion with 'Arabic prophet' and 'Arabic scripture' the Quran, will create a new domain for power to the Arabic clans. Now the identity could be uniformed under 'Arabic Islamic identity', and the determination of this identity means the presents of different others, Edward Said claims that "the development and preservation of any culture, requires the presents of 'the other' who is different and comparative" (Said 45). This will lead to the development of the main elements in the political Islam discourse, and "reshaping for mentality and reality according to forces relation in its three dimensions, based on knowledge,

wealth, and power" (Hareb 19). That will not only shape the relation with other cultures, but unfortunately will separate the Arabic Islamic culture from within. It will form a paradoxical identity, that cannot reject Islam, because it's the source of unity and power, and at the same time Islam should be shaped by the Arabic dissociated identity, which will lead to the failure of sociological Islam.

Neither the Islamic empire, nor the modern Arabic states will fulfill the dreams of the Arabic elites, in having a 'civil society' based on freedom and equality, and two types of intellectuals will arise, The Islamic intellectuals with their nostalgia to the 'golden Islamic era', and the Arabic intellectuals with their dreams for 'Arabic union', with different agenda and different approach. Leading to neither secular nor religious societies in the Arabic countries, if it is correct to make this duality between these concepts, since it is difficult to say that this society is absolutely secular or religious. The problem of the Arabic Islamic culture, is that the "type of Arabic intellectual structure, was at the first level a culture of the prevailing system, which is a culture that play the rule of a system, that asks to hold on assets, and to keep the inherited values"(Adonis 22).

Arabic identity as well as Islamic identity, will remain as throne of sacred, that we are not allowed to decipher, or to destroy the throne of sacred, and emancipate our intellect to rediscover the importance of them, for our present and future.

Modern but Not Secular

"An impartial examination of history would reveal that the doctrines of freedom and equal rights, are simply the doctrines of the oppressed, and that democracy and socialism are merely the secular embodiments of these slave moralities" (Nietzsche 120).

The dilemma of our thinking process is in understanding the concepts as opposite duality, right/wrong, secular/religious, developed/underdeveloped … which prevent us from examining the interlaced relation between these concepts, and between them and the dominant discourse that determine their definitions. The active social movement and revolts in the Arabic region, in the last four years, will bring a lot of questions to the mind, regarding the shape of the states and societies that will be formed, in between secular and civil societies or religious and conservative ones.

In his article about '*religion identity and the ordre public in the Arab middle east'*, Gurdun Kramer brings an important question about religion as a social function and a cultural meaning, and its articulation in different fields in the Arabic region. He said that "a close look at modern political thought and practice (including notably Islamic discourse), economics, law, art, and education would reveal that secularization processes form an integral part of Middle Eastern history and society"(Kramer 630). This is could be understood that despite exporting the 'modern style' from the west, the religion will stay as a background of our Arabic identity, but will not be the only player on the field.

According to Jose Casanova there are three dimensions of secularism, functional differentiation, religious decline and privatization of religion, so "separation of 'church' and 'state', religious diminishing with respect to groups and individuals [interpretations], [….] and withdrawal of religion to the private sphere" (Kramer 630). Kramer tried to correlate these three differentiation with what we have in the Arabic Middle East, reaching a point that he suggested to add a fourth dimension for secularism which relate religion to 'spirituality and economy'.

So Kramer in his comparison find that , regarding the religion and state, in Islam there is no church or clergy to look for the separation that took place through history, but there is a religious

and legal scholars(*ulama, fuqaha*), who played a functional role beside the '*Calipha*', the political leader in the Islamic empire. And their intellectual function in understanding and interpreting the scriptures "will always be subject to intense debate and varying implementation" (Kramer 633).

In the second dimension, about privatization of religion, Kramer claims that Islam is not just faith but religion, so it cannot remain in the private sphere. So through a public practices, like pilgrimage and Friday prayer, this "visibility tends to merge into hegemony" (Kramer 634).

For assessing the degree of decline of religion, Kramer said that through an empirical surveys regarding the decline of religion; religion has not declined in the Arab middle east, and this is could be assessed through the proliferation of Islamic institutions; banking, economics, and fashion. But he brought an important note in saying that "Islamic activists of the present age, have made in their declared aim to liberate Islam from tradition, custom and superstition, and thus to revitalize community and society" (Kramer 637).

In his conclusion, Kramer says that the advocate for 'civil state with religious references' will be the Islamists, like Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt and El- Nahda in Tunisia, as have noticed after the Arab revolts in these two countries.

The weakness of the Arabic countries model of secularism, if there is any, lies basically in the absent of Arabic philosophical background for the concept, and usually the advocate for it are looking for braking the taboo of the authoritative government and calling for democracy, rather than having a clear agenda for what do they need from secularism. In the Arabic countries "The regimes often wrongly defined as secular, since they were run by non-religious and often military leadership, and mostly took on an outwardly republican appearance" (qtd. in De Poli

96). Islam as a religious concept in the Arabic region has its particular philosophy which includes its ideas and the ways of practice, and it have been always understood as 'what is in the heart and reflected by work', so religion here "finds and retains work to do other than relating individuals to the supernatural" (qtd. in Taylor, 432).

On the other hand Islamic normativity '*Sharia*' has never been the base of any law formation, and most countries restricted sharia to a more or less reformed family law, " and only one third of the countries with Muslim majorities[…] abolish religious law, as Turkey did" (De Poli 96). The '*qadi*' in the Islamic University of Al Azhar, Ali Abd al Raziq, conferred legitimacy only on the 'secular state', in his work in 1925, *Islam and the foundation of Authority,* he stated that "since the Qur'an and Sunna were lacking in any clear instructions concerning possible forms of Islamic power, the death of the prophet could only be followed by a secular government, and hence Muslims had always been free to govern themselves according to the needs of their times" (qtd. in Di Poli 95). In the Arabic region, it is both secular and religious at the public sphere, and could be depicted in the social context easily, but at the level of power or regime its Arabic authoritative model, that will absolutely refuse secularism when it comes to citizen rights, and religious when it will put the authority of '*Ulama*' (clergy) over the power of '*Calipha*' (President).

The Civil State "*Al Dawla Al Madaneya*"

"Social facts can never be conceived of as true or false. It is the discourse itself that creates the truth about a particular topic and competing discourses create competing truth" (Foucault 27).

As have been reflected above, both Arabic intellectuals, Islamic and Non Islamic, are seeking the same end, the civil society "*al dawla al madaniyya*" through different paths, knowing that secularism means in Arabic language "*Almaniyya*", and has been interpreted and understood by them differently . Barbara Di Poli focuses in her article, *Arab Revolts and the Civil State*, on the use of term 'civil state' by both Islamism and secularism in the Arabic countries, she stated that "an unresolved ambiguity concerning the nature of the state emerged immediately after the fall of the regimes [...] Where conditions for democratic reconstruction appeared to be more favorable" (De Poli 96). Here the old, new, conflict revolving around the options of either secular or religious will emerge to the surface after the Arab revolts, as seen in Egypt and Tunisia.

De Poli's strength lies in focusing on the use of certain terminology that could be conceptualized differently in the Arabic context. She said that secularism in the Arabic language means '*almaniyya*' which means the abolition of the public effects of faith, which is seen in Arabic world as anti-Islamism or atheism, and certainly will be refused by the religious nature of the Arabic societies. So another concept could be created and implemented without this refusal of the Islamic parties, '*Al mujtamaa al madani*' which means civil society or '*Al dawla al madaniyya*' civil state. An example of that what happened in Egypt with the Islamic party Al Ikhwan, when Morsi, as a president, said that "Egypt is not a secular state, it's a civil state […] we don't mean a theocratic religious state, but a state where popular sovereignty express itself through an elected parliament, representing the will of the people" (qtd. in De Poli 98).

Despite the use of these concepts by religious parties, the fear of the secular parties and the intellectual elites in the Arabic countries, has not been relived, for these terms could be used just for a momenta to get the authority form the people, and after having the power another

authoritative conservative regime will be dominating. The mistrust between the intellectuals or the political parties, is based on historical conditions, which correlate between 'legal Islamization' of the country and the inevitable consequences on the religious and gender minorities. De Poli brought attention to this by looking to Arabic anthropologists (Sharabi 1988, Hammoudi 2001, Ennaji 2007) writings regarding using Islam as the base of the state constitution, for them " Islamic law reinforces the patriarchal model, which makes blind hierarchical obedience (to God, to the autocrat, to his subordinate, to men by women" (De Poli 100).

De Poli has concluded that for any regime to success in the Arabic countries, religion should be embedded in its political philosophy, but not as a theocratic model, and by that "only a democratic civil state can avoid both secular and religious" (De Poli 98). For her an overview for what happened after the revolts, could reflect the 'fragile nature' of the Arab social and political systems.

Maybe what have been said by the German poet Henry Haveh before more than one hundred year is absolutely true, regarding the effect of the ideas, "the philosophical ideas that are proposed by a man from his quite office, has the power to exterminate a whole civilization" (qtd. in Manif 55), this fragile nature, is nothing but the reflection of the Arabic search for a modernized political, as well as social, models outside his reality. If concepts like secularism and civil society find their historical context in the West political and social development, this does not mean the same for the Arabic region, and therefore a deformity while applying the concepts will be expected. The arguments should be about how to bring these concepts into practice in a particular culture, for the benefit of the people, and how to destroy any thrones of sacred, in which sacred could be more than religion.

The political independence for Arabic countries from colonization, did not help in the creation of a civil states, and the "social texture that have been in certain period convergent or unified, and has a degree of solidarity, freedom of movement and indwelling, transformed into a network of connections based upon division and diversity" (Manif 161). Neither national sates, nor the Islamic empire lead to civil societies in the Arabic countries, maybe not the civil society by its western meaning, so what should be done is creating a model that fits our cultural background , and satisfy our developmental needs. It's only by moving from intellectual development toward social, economic and political development societies could civilize and flourish, and thus we could free ourselves from non-useful traditions and non-effective modernity.

Conclusion

"*Representation cannot be truthful, and truth is but a representation constituted by some common history, tradition, universe of discourse. Representation itself keeps the subordinate… subordinate the inferior… inferior*" (Said 273).

Maybe the main concern of this paper is to highlight the importance of understanding the historical context of any culture, especially the intellectual formation, in analyzing the present crisis. The dilemma in the Arabic countries does not lie in accepting certain form of concepts or rejecting others, it lies in the interlaced relation between identity and power, whether to be or not to be as a modernized Arab in the world field, and if this new identity will deal with religion as a barrier or a motive to be accepted by others.

The papers that we have discussed showed a juxtaposing concepts like secular/ religion, civil state/authoritative state, Islamism/secularism, that are confusedly connected in the Arabic

countries, and no clear conclusion could be drawn. This could call for the use of different approaches to understand the case from within. In his book 'A Secular Age', Charles Taylor, tried to show the importance of how we assess the present or absent of any concept, he said that "what is religion? If one identifies this with the great historic faith […] then it seems to be declined. But if you include a wide range of spiritual and semi- spiritual beliefs[…] one can make a case that religion is as present as ever" (Taylor 427). This could summaries the problem in diagnosing the real obstacles, there is no absolute religious or secular cities, and the idea is not whether we apply this form or that, the crucial issue is how much this model could be adapted effectively in the society, and how much it leads into human development. The adoption of secular states with religious frame in Turkey and Malaysia did not prevent them from developing their societies, and the 'theocratic Iran' is one of the leading countries in industry.

There is nothing more dangerous to any society than ignorance, religion and secular could be both destructive if applied just for domination and power, and could be very fruitful if used for flourishing humanity. It's only through the continuous process of positive criticism to our past and present that we could succeed in the future, it is not the end of history, and the human cultures will not clash, if we emancipate our minds from any universals that did not serve humanity.

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