

The Illusion of Realism: What is the Future of Muslim Politics?

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July 24, 2017

In our so-called “post-ideological” world, even the most sincere observers have fallen trap to a myth perpetuated by the liberal order: that strategic political action or *realpolitik* transcends (or is devoid of) ideology. A case in point is the Tunisian Nahda movement’s decision to separate its political activities (primarily its political party) and its da’wah based activities. In 2016 the Nahda movement announced its shift from an “ideological movement engaged in the struggle for identity, to a protest movement against the authoritarian regime, and now to a national democratic party.”¹ This declaration came as no surprise given many of the movement’s earlier statements. During the opening of the party’s first congress since 2012, Rashid al-Ghannouchi emphasized, “We are keen to keep religion far from political struggles, and we call for complete neutrality.” This bifurcation, according to ideologues at an-Nahda, is grounded in the recognition that politics – as an activity – can and ought to be divorced from normative and/or ideological commitments. Ghannouchi explains, “A modern state is not run through ideologies, big slogans and political wrangling, but rather through practical programmes.”² The intellectual backdrop of these statements traces back to the mid 1970’s, when Ghannouchi sought to develop an Islam of a “specific Tunisian character” and released his most famous book, *Al-Hurriyat al-’Ammah fi’ Dawlah al-Islamiyyah* (Public Liberties in the Islamic State), in which he makes the case for ‘Islamic democracy’ and ‘pluralism.’ The genealogy of al-Ghannouchi’s thought demonstrates a trajectory of accommodation, in which adjusting to new political realities takes precedence over Islamic ideological imperatives. In the end, al-Ghannouchi will come to dismiss the very idea of an Islamic State in ultimate reconciliation with the demands of ‘pragmatism.’

In what follows, I shift the discussion from whether Islamists should engage in ‘realist’ politics to a more nuanced and revealing question: what constitutes ‘real’ or ‘realist’ political action in the first place? Furthermore, is the form of ‘pragmatic’ politics espoused by figures like Ghannouchi actually grounded in an ideologically neutral political space?

Realism and Ideology

For many, be it inside or outside the Muslim world, the very success of “political Islam” hinges on its capacity to forgo ‘ideology’³ and embrace objective politics. This myth, in turn, encourages “pragmatic” and/or “realist” politics. In his response to a question regarding the conditions for success in the Muslim world, the neoconservative Ariel Cohen of the Heritage Foundation puts forth such an ultimatum:

¹ Amara, Tarek. “Tunisian Islamists Ennahda move to separate politics, religion.” *Al Jazeera*. 20 May 2016. <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-tunisia-politics-idUSKCN0YB2NO>

² Rifai, Ryan. “Tunisia’s Ennahda distances itself from political Islam.” *Al Jazeera*. 21 May 2016.

<http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2016/05/tunisia-ennahda-distances-political-islam-160520172957296.html>

³ The author uses the term ‘ideology’ differently from the Marxian concept of ideology.

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The test for some of these movements is what they value more: power or ideology. If it is power, they may compromise and liberalize in the democratic context or may try for a violent solution, such as a coup - and if they do, they are likely to fail. If ideology is more important, they will remain rigid and may decline like the Western European Communists did.⁴

Cohen seemingly forgets the violent origins of the prevailing global order and its dogmatic ideology. For starters, the world-order is far from being ideologically “neutral” – quite the contrary – we live under the auspices of a neoliberal ideology which masquerades under the banners of reason, neutrality, human rights and sovereignty. But that much is now obvious. What is not as obvious is the fact that politics, be it domestic or international political action, cannot be de-linked from this ideology. Even prominent Realists Judith Goldstein and Robert Keohane, who pride themselves on their objectivity and neutrality, have come to concede that *all* foreign policy is, inevitably, the product of (1) a worldview, (2) principles, and (3) causal beliefs. They write, “at the most fundamental level, ideas define the universe of possibility.”⁵

In order to better understand this point, let us say something about our present, i.e. the space in which we *think* and *act* and the “alternative futures” that such thinking and acting seeks to enact. The key here is to understand the ways in which the present-space into which we are conscripted shapes the cognitive-political background through which we, as Muslims, conceptualize our alternative future. As Oakeshott noted, “Both future and past...emerge only in a reading of present; a particular future or past is one eligible to be evoked from a particular present and is contingently related to the particular present from which it may be evoked.”⁶ In other words, those objects of the future which we desire and the actions in which we partake to realize those desires are shaped by the ideology that shapes our present.

These very same limited horizons and their concomitant shaping of what is ‘real’ and ‘possible’ are part and parcel of Muslim political consciousness today. Muslims find themselves between walls, in a world not of their own making, and a world that offers only a limited set of ‘real’ possibilities. David Scott echoes this in his critique of postcolonial intellectuals:

I want to notice how the idea of alternative or subaltern modernities operate by constructing a normative expectation of resistance or overcoming. Notably, it does this, at least in part, by imagining the conditions of the modern as largely passive or negative environment merely waiting to be surmounted or mastered or translated or displaced by preconstituted subjects: modern transformations occur, and subaltern respond in more or less creative ways. Imagined in this way, what is obscured is the extent to which the transformed terrain on which these creative responses are being enacted is itself positively constituting (or rather, reconstituting) these subjects, their new objects of desire, and the new concepts that shape the horizon of that desire.⁷

⁴ Khan, MA Muqtedar. *Debating Moderate Islam: The Geopolitics of Islam and the West*.

⁵ Goldstein, Judith and Robert O. Keohane, *Ideas and Foreign Policy: Beliefs, Institutions, and Political Change*.

⁶ Scott, David. *Conscripts of Modernity: The Tragedy of Colonial Enlightenment*. 40.

⁷ Ibid.

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As such, the modern order not only instigates its own forms of counter-discourse but also furnishes us with the language (primarily modern categories) and realm of action for such resistance. More so, the modern order maintains its hegemony by arbitrating itself the right to determine what is *real*, or as a Hegelian dictum put it, “the real is rational.” And as such, “realism” in international politics comes to mean that which falls within the totalizing horizons of the modern project. The result is two-fold; the prevailing order is able to maintain its closure of the present - the finality of history, and the horizon of the colonized reaches only as far as the gaze of the master from whom recognition is sought. There is, in this narrative, no future, for the present becomes *the* horizon beyond which all is impossible if not unthought.

As with any deity, the international order comes to define what is *real*. It conflates the “rules of the game” - the legal and structural stipulations of the international community - with the seemingly transhistorical laws of nations. And like any other false deity, it upholds for itself the ability to create the illusion of choice. The sovereign order, to use the words of Schmitt is characterized by its ability to both ordain such lies whilst suspending it.

It follows that there are no purely “pragmatic” courses of action beyond “ideological” politics. *If we can deduce anything from the political trends now emerging in the Muslim world, it is that those who uphold “pragmatic” politics have, far from abandoning ideological commitments, consciously or unconsciously internalized the ideological precepts of the prevailing world-order.*

Far from being a disavowal of politics altogether, the task at hand is to liberate politics from the straightjacket of the prevailing ‘order of things.’ It is helpful, in this regard, to recall Oliver Marchart’s distinction between *le politique* (political) and *la politique* (politics). Politics, in this sense is the “sedimented, institutionalized political,” whereas the political is “the pure disruptive/constitutive moment of the social” and the “founding or reconfiguring the relations of power as they reach closure in the form of society.”⁸ In other words, *the political* creates a new ideological terrain; politics is the operationalization of that ideological terrain. The inauguration of the modern political order (and its concomitant disruption and reconfiguration of the Islamic polity and its social relations) constitutes our political moment, and has given rise to new forms of institutionalized politics.

Contemporary Muslim *politics* – divorced from a radical commitment to a new *political* moment – has only served to sediment the prevailing world order’s closure of alternative possibilities. In contrast, a new political moment would disrupt this closure by generating a new mode of *politics*. Ghannouchi’s *politics* is then not merely neutral or strategic – as he would have it – but is in fact grounded in the colonial political moment and that moment’s own ideological commitments.

The rise of a new Islamic politics hinges on the ability of Muslim movements to think beyond the sedimented and institutionalized political order. It will require the audacity to imagine a new political horizon and demand the impossible.

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⁸ Yenigun, Halil Ibrahim. “The Political Ontology of Islamic Democracy: An Ontological Narrative of Contemporary Muslim Political Thought.”