Second-Generation Islamists and the future of the Islamic Movements: A Response to Shaykh Rashid Ghannoushi

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This article is both a response to and a continuation of the conversation initiated by Shaykh Rashid Ghannoushi in his extremely interesting, self-critical and reflective article, ‘Islamic Movements: Self-Criticism and Re-consideration’. Shaykh Ghannoushi is one of the most prominent leaders and thinkers of the contemporary Islamic movement. His intellectual influence and spiritual leadership is not limited to the Al-Nahdah (Renaisance) movement of Tunisia, increasingly Islamists in Turkey, the Middle East, Africa and even in the West are looking to him for new ideas and new directions. Needless to say, he has been a fountain of resurgence in Islamic political thought. Ghannoushi’s most important thrusts are his ideas about power-sharing between Islamists and secularists and his systematic development of Islamic democratic discourse. He is, without doubt, the most sincere and the most compelling advocate of democracy and free politics in the contemporary Muslim world. He is a prototype of an Islamic-Democrat.

The Second-Generation Islamists

Ghannoushi is what I call a second-generation Islamist. The first generation obviously includes the pioneers of Islamic revival such as Jalaluddin al-Afghani, Hassan al-Banna, Maulana Mawdidi, Sayyid Qutb and Ayatollah Khomeni. I describe him as second generation not because of any chronological reasons but because of the developed character of his thought. The first-generation Islamists were guided by two overriding goals. One, to revive the interests in elements of Islam which go beyond ritual and spiritual issues. Their focus was to drive home the point that Islam was not just a religion but a ‘complete system’ that could provide answers to existential as well as temporal questions of socio-political organization. Secondly, they tried to increase the political influence of Islamic ideas and tried in essence to crystallize an Islamic society with an Islamic state as the central vehicle. The first generation Islamists were extreme idealists, often polemical towards the West and modernity and full of certitude. The second-generation Islamists, as personified in Ghannoushi, are more concerned with the practical implications of the claim, ‘Islam is a complete system.’ Such people are trying to go beyond polemics and polemics and are trying to find practical and policy-oriented solutions. As Ghannoushi says in his article, ‘The uneducated think that the Islamic program is a ready-made entity: stick it in the mud and implement it’ (p.16). They are aware that unless the Islamists can advance specific and particularized interpretations of Islamic principles with direct correlations to specific existing conditions, their claim that ‘Islam is the solution’ will ring hollow and be exposed for being nothing but a rhetorical gambit.

The most important element of the second generation thinking is the new and by far the most interesting development of reflection, introspection and self-criticism. It is in this singular respect that Islamists like Ghannoushi stand out from the Mawdidi and the Qutbs. It is this progressive element which has prompted me to call them ‘second-generation Islamists’ for they are indeed an intellectual step ahead of those of the past. It is through their work that the ideas and claims of the pioneers becomes more salient and meaningful. They also provide a new breath of life to the Islamic revival. Turkey’s
Necmettin Erbakan, the leader of the Refah (Welfare) Party, would also qualify as a second generation Islamist, as would the new President of Iran, Mohammad Khatami. Hassan Turabi of Sudan remains an enigma: he is more like a pioneer facing the dilemma of the second-generation Islamists. Perhaps he and his ideas were the bridge from the first to the second generation.

**NEW THINKING**

The discourse of the second generation Islamists is characterized by proclivity for democracy. Erbakan has already provided the Islamic revivalist movement with a priceless precedent. He has proven that Islamists can come to power through democratic process, run a democratic government and then give up power without seeking to destroy the democratic credentials of the state and without resorting to meaningless violence. He has proven wrong all those (especially in the American establishment) who claimed that all Islamists believe in one vote, one-time. Ghannoushi himself has gone on record as saying that not only are Islam and democracy compatible but perhaps the best way towards Islamization is through democracy. In the article being discussed here, he comments: ‘I don’t see any choice before us but to adapt the democratic idea.’ The new Iranian President Khatami too has repeatedly expressed his concern for the development institutions of civil society and has emphasized the need for governments to obey the law: a remarkable departure from the totalitarian tendencies of the early Islamists.3

The demise of self-criticism is perhaps the most important development in Islamic revivalist thought and clearly an indication of an emerging maturity. It is also a measure of the self-confidence that Islamists now feel in the power and appeal of their interpretation of Islam. They sense that perhaps at this moment in history the Muslim World is poised to embrace Islam in its totality and therefore a measure of self-criticism and critical reflection will not diminish its prospects. Alternately, one may theorize that there is a realization that the ideas of the pioneers can take the Islamic juggernaut only this far. From here on it needs the infusion of new ideas and new directions or the movement would stall, stagnate or regress.

The lack of any significant developments in Egypt are already revealing the stagnation of the Islamic movement. Shaykh Ghannoushi, being a pragmatic intellectual, has realized the need for rethinking or new thinking and his self-criticism may well be the manifestation of such a realization. But will self-criticism carefully cloaked in a self-congratulatory tone provide the impetus necessary for a new thinking? I am skeptical. And it is on this score that I wish to challenge Shaykh Ghannoushi by raising some critical questions about the direction and the intellectual content of the Islamic movement.

**GHANNOUSHI AND THE ISLAMIC VISION**

Ghannoushi considers reflection and self-criticism as a form of repentance. He argues that it is the duty of every good Muslim to indulge in continuous self-evaluation. He also argues that unless a movement is willing to examine its own performance critically, it will not be able to correct its performance. Self-criticism has two dimensions: one relates to vision and the other with strategy. It seems that Ghannoushi’s re-evaluation of the Islamic revivalist movement has both elements to it. Strategically he is willing to reconsider alliances with secular democratic forces and is categorically opposed to violence. On the vision front he is, interestingly, returning to basics. He re-examines the fundamental purpose of the revivalist movement by asking what its priorities are—doing social work or acquiring power?

He argues that while these two objectives are not mutually exclusive, in the event that they are contradictory, then social work—da‘wah—should gain precedence over politics. This ‘return to basics’ argument is indeed a significant rethinking of political Islam. It is a reaffirmation of the dictum—First Islamic Society, then Islamic State. It is an articulation of the realization that fundamental change in society cannot be top down. It has to be bottom up. One person, one soul, one heart at a time! Ghannoushi asserts: ‘It has been proven that what is achieved socially is more permanent and better than what is achieved politically’ (p.14). The rediscovery of the need for fundamental change prior to political transformation is not a new one. In a previous article in The Diplomat I had argued that both pioneers, Mawdudi and Sayyid Qutb, had advocated a gradualist approach to Islamization and had maintained that the most effective and Islamic methodology would be to first establish the Islamic society and then the Islamic state.4

**THE MORAL GAP**

Perhaps Ghannoushi in his reflections is not putting his finger on some crucial aspects of the revivalist tendency. And that is why his self-evaluation seems like a return to the primary wrong achievement of the gap but more on the edge. They right critical thinking and that blind spot. The call for Islam ported by Iran is for the right of the significant count: Islam beyond the re until bigger, bigger, bigger through not in with Islam. Then another supplier are for the response that is too expensive to provide large scale supplier Iran that was in a form of sustainable state be a social...
principles of the forefathers. Something went wrong with the Islamic movement, and its achievements notwithstanding, it needs desperate rethinking. If Ghomoushi had been more critical he would have realized the moral gap between the vision of Islamic revival and the execution of that vision. I am suggesting that perhaps the people who followed the pioneers lacked the fortitude and wisdom to stay on the straight path. They were too eager to condemn everyone who disagreed with them. They succumbed to the seduction of self-righteousness, thereby shutting themselves to critical evaluation. People who are convinced of their own virtue and righteousness become blind to their own flaws and to the path that they are following.

The early response from the masses to the call for Islamic revival soon reached a plateau. Islamists everywhere gained tremendous support but not overwhelming support except in Iran. In Pakistan there is less than 10% support for the Jamaat-I Islami. After 50 years of activity they are an important presence but not a significant force in the decision-making of the country. In the Arab World and Turkey, Islamists have gained support but are often behind nationalists. Islamists gained support in some sectors of the society and often alienate the rest. Turkey is a good indicator. Recep, until it was banned in January 1999, was the biggest political party, but it represented only 26% of the Turkish people. Support of this kind may be able to gain Islamists power through political machinations but is certainly not enough to launch a broad-based fundamental social transformation like the kind the Islamists desire.

The disaster that Algeria has become is another instance of what politics with limited support can do. While the secular nationalists are primarily responsible for scuttling democracy and precipitating a civil war in Algeria, the Islamists too are culpable for the black hole that Algeria has become. They seem to be too eager to resort to violence. Was FIS incapable of coming up with peaceful strategies to protest the murder of democracy by the secularists? If they had overwhelming popular support then it would have translated into an Iran-like revolution. But the limited support that FIS had from a section of Algerian society was not enough to achieve the kind of transformation that FIS desires. The Islamists’ lack of support from the armed forces is remarkable. They simply seem to fail to penetrate the state system nearly everywhere. This failure to be able to appeal to all sections of Muslim society is perhaps the biggest failure of contemporary Islamic movements. I would like to attribute it to a moral gap in the activists themselves. Their self-righteousness, their intolerance towards disagreement, their eagerness to indulge in ta’lif (declaring Muslims as kafirs) and their impatience and shortightedness, all come together in limiting their Islamic appeal. It is not as if Muslims do not want to be Islamic! It is just that many Muslims are alienated by the modus operandi of the Islamists. It is tune leaders with the wisdom and stature of Ghomoushi came out and recognized this unfortunate tendency and try to discipline their cadres. The eminent Shaykh of the recom- 

ISLAMISTS AND WOMEN

The status of women in society remains a contentious issue between Islamists and secular-humanist, particularly when one examines the Islamist aspirations from the West, the easiest way to critic and even condemn the social justice agenda of Islamists is to focus on their idea of the role that women should play in society. Without doubt, Islam, which a thousand years ago had the most emancipatory and liberating conception of women’s role in society, is today in the Islamists’ rhetoric regressive to say the least. While Islam gave women rights and new roles in the management of human affairs, Islamists are determined to take away the gains that women have made. Two things are most problematic about the Islamist revivalist movement. One, it lacks women leaders and two, women’s intellectual contribution to the Islamists’ world view is glaringly absent.

A’isha (r.a.), the youngest wife of the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ played a normative and interpretive role in society, the like of which Muslim women cannot even dream of today. Scholars consulted her on the meaning of the Qur’an and the Sunnah of the Prophet ﷺ. She was involved in politics, was a major voice in the public discourse of Medina and even rode a camel into the battle field. Islam was at the cutting edge of social reformation when it came to restructing gender relations. But in the discourse of the Islamists, women are once again relegated to second-class status. Yes, Shaykh Ghomoushi says they are equal to men, and Hassan Turabi says they hold any position, but why do these rare proclamations sound so hollow? Because these words are not backed by deeds. What one sees is the Taliban treating women as if they were cows and the rank and file of Islamists apparently unaware of the lofty ideas of
of their leaders on the role of women. Perhaps they think that their leaders’ rhetoric is for Western consumption only.

Until there is a serious turn-around on this front, both in words as well as deeds, the project of self-criticism and reconsideration will remain woefully incomplete. How can a movement for social justice be so indifferent to the considerations of its half its people? Pompous words designed for Western critics will not suffice. What we need to see is the presence of women in the higher echelons of Islamic movements. Women are present in the Islamic movement in Jordan but they are not a visible or as vocal. We need to see more of them articulating a re-envisioned position of women in the Islamic design of Muslim societies. Until then, when women become equal partners in the pursuit of the various republics both in form and content, the Islamic movement will remain suspect and partial in its appeal. I invite the eminent Shaykh to target his critical vision on this issue. Indeed, I challenge him to go beyond the stale rhetoric and to make some significant comments on this subject.

ISLAMISTS, DEMOCRACY & CIVIL SOCIETY
Shaykh Ghanouni’s most profound comment deals with democracy and civil society.
It is a question that he not only breaks from the past but also advances new ideas and genuinely contributes to the development of modern Islamic political discourse. He begins with the powerful recognition of the fact that there is no modern example of the implementation of Islamic governance. He is also not afraid to acknowledge that Islamists have not come up with an alternative that is better than democracy. He prays the virtues of democracy as a system that allows peaceful competition for power and one that guarantees freedom of thought and participation (p.16). He feels that it is to the advantage of the Islamists to adapt democracy and that it might even be dangerous to ignore it. He believes that Islamists have the most to gain from democracy and therefore they must promote democracy.

Ghanouni’s ideas about the state of underdevelopment of Islamic political thought are compelling. He is not afraid to acknowledge that Islam is not a ready-to-go system that merely requires Muslims to turn to the switch. This is a profound insight. Ghanouni’s critical ideas could generate a new burst of thinking in Islamic governance leading to more ideas and programmes. But let’s consider his ideas on democracy now.

It seems that Ghanouni sees democracy as a means and not as an end. Democracy may allow Islamists to come to power, while it creates the environment which allows them to operate without the fear of state oppression until they can come to power. Democracy can be an ally in the Islamists’ search for power so it is a good thing. But once in power, does he believe that the environment of freedom of thought and participation should be preserved even if it means that Islamists could be voted out of power? Will people be allowed to entertain ideas that may contradict the Islamists’ positions? Is freedom a value worth defending and will Islamists guarantee it? What will happen to a Muslim critical thinker in Ghanouni’s utopia? Will I have to be like him to be free or can I be critical of him and fear not for my life as I am used to in America?

Ghanouni makes an interesting comment when he says that Islamizing democracy is the closest thing to implementing sharia (consultation). He believes that democratic governance is a very serious and systematic effort that operationalizes the principle of consultative government. Consider the American system where the legislature, the judicial system and the executive are separate. The legislature makes the laws and the executive manages the affairs within that legal framework. The judicial system primarily protects the constitution and guarantees that the legislature remains faithful to it. Let us juxtapose the Sharia for the American constitution and process. The elected executive (call it the Khilafa if it matters) executes the laws promulgated by the elected legislature (call it sharia if you please). The key role will be played by the judicial system (let us call it the fiqhul—jurists) which will keep an eye on the legislature and make sure that it does not violate the Sharia when it makes laws.

The biggest problem that Islamists have with democracy is their argument that in the ideal Islamic state the laws are made by Man while in the ideal Islamic state these laws come from Allah. Therefore while the former laws can change according to the whims and fancy of public opinion, the latter are eternal and immutable. Both these claims are not true and not as simple as the Islamists make them out. First of all, the American constitution has undergone less than 220 changes in over 220 years! Secondly, what Muslims consider as the unchanging and eternal divine Sharia is basically an imaginary essence. What is real is the understanding and interpretation of
humans such as Imam Abû Hanîfa, Imam Shâﬁ‘î, Imam Malik, Imam Hanbal and
Imam Ja‘far. The divine Sunna remains divine in its principle form but is humanized as soon as it
interacts with human reason.
No law is independent of human reason and human judgement. It is human reason that determines which divine law applies when and it is human reason which relates texts to context. This is the process of ijtihâd and is perhaps the only fundamental difference between Islam and other forms of socio-political organization. Other systems can be entirely human or entirely divine but Islam through the dynamics of reason and revela
tion remains at once divine as well as human. Therefore the elected shâri‘a will formulate the laws keeping the best interests of people (maslaha) in mind and the fitâh can keep an eye on the shâri‘a. The problem that Islamists will have in such a democratic set-up is if Muslims in general do not wish to live by Islamic laws; that is the crux of the issue and that is what frightens the Islamists. At heart they are totalitarian and wish to impose their understanding of Islam and its laws on all Muslims. A democratic set up with the Shari‘a as a constitution may allow public opinion to rule since the fitâh can always choose to support the decisions of the shari‘a after judging the public mood. What the Islamists want is a dictator whom they can legitimize as Khalîfa and impose their under
standing of Islam regardless of what Muslims in general want. This is the issue that people such as Ghanouchi must address if the Islamic movement is to go further. How is Ghanouchi going to challenge this totalitarian streak and inculcate a respect for freedom of thought in the Islamic movement? Without it the democratic system cannot be adapted by Islamists.

On the subject of civil society, Ghanouchi is falling into the false propaganda that Western scholars and secularists are making about the absence of civil society in the Muslim world. Civil society is no doubt weak in the Muslim world but so is the state. The states in the Muslim world in general can do little more than sustain themselves. It is the society at large (including the state) which is underdeveloped and weak in the Muslim World. The Islamic revivalist and other movements represent the civil society in the Muslim world. The various da‘wa move
tments, the private Islamic madrasas, the mosques, the hâlâqah (local discussion groups) are all institutions of civil society. What is missing is a respect for the deliberative process where disputes and disagreements are resolved through peaceful means and com
promise rather than violence. It is this ten
dency perhaps which prompts Western scholars to argue that civil society is missing in the Muslim world. The Ikhwan (Muslim Brotherhood) in Egypt and Palestine is prac
tically a parallel state, given the social services from health care to education that it provides. Thus, rather than calling for civil society it may be more meaningful to seek developmen
t of the Muslim World. Development is what is necessary even though uncannily it may sound old fashioned. Poor societies with low levels of literacy cannot build civil societi
es or for that matter effective states.

THE FUTURE OF THE ISLAMIC REVIVALIST MOVEMENT

As Ghanouchi points out, the Islamic Revival has gained significant foothold in the Muslim world. Indeed he is correct in saying that secularism cannot defend itself any more without resorting to violence. From Egypt to Algeria the secularists are using the military arm of the state to brutally squash Islamic aspirations. In Turkey the generals have dam
aged Turkish democracy perhaps gravely by banning its largest political party and exclud
ing Refah’s leaders from the political system. Indeed Turkish secularists have made a mockery of their own polity, demonstrating why they are called as the ‘sick man of Europe’? But what of the future of political Islam?

In Egypt the movement is clueless as to its next step. In Algeria the Islamists have split
tered. Some have resorted to horrible vio
lence while others have become victims of violence. In Iran the soft left has made a signifi
cant incursion and, with the election of moderate Muhammad Khatami as President, it appears that Iran is heading towards a healthy democracy with an Islamic tendency. That is if the clerics do not interfere and destroy its democracy to protect their con
trol. In Kuwait and Jordan as well as Palestine the Islamic movements have lost ground. They seem to be able to rally themselves only through polemics against the West.

The future of political Islam depends on new and critical thinking by second-genera
tion Islamists. How much can Ghanouchi do? Can he assume the global leadership of Islamic movements, at least in an intellectual
What is missing is a respect for the deliberative process where disputes and disagreements are resolved through peaceful means and compromise rather than violence.

Political Islam needs two things in order to survive the current impasse. One, it needs more and more leaders who are intellectually second-generation Islamists. Two, the next phase of Islamic revival will be contingent on the extent to which Islamists can facilitate democratization of Muslim societies. But ushering in democracy is not easy. The secular forces which now control state mechanisms will oppose democracy just as vehemently as they oppose Islam. To circumvent that Islamists will have to become more pluralistic and build bridges with all pro-democracy forces in the country. They must reduce their virulent rhetoric and display šikāma (wisdom) in both words as well as deeds. The rhetoric of the Islamic state and call for immediate implementation of hudud/Shari‘a will have to be moderated by including the concerns of moderate Muslims—men and women. They must not forget that their job is to develop an Islamic society, a society based on virtue and justice where all citizens feel free and safe—not where one imposes one’s preferences over others, whether a moderate Muslim, a woman or even a non-Muslim. All deserve the dignity of freedom and the guarantee of security.

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NOTES
3 M.A. Muqtedar Khan, ‘First an Islamic Society then an Islamic State: But Democracy Now?’, The Diplomat, November 1997, 48–51.

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