The Western Discourse on Political Islam

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Introduction

For the West, the confluence of religion with politics is a sensitive subject that has left a painful, historical wound, due to the traumatic conflict between church and state on the one hand and the conflict between politics and the church on the other. This has caused a negative perception not only for Christianity, but all other religions, including Islam. Due to the historical experience of prolonged and bitter conflict, the West insists that the convergence of religion with politics can only lead to chaos. For the West, religion is thus best seen as a formation of values, principles and ethics that regulate private life between a person and his/her God. The sphere of religion is private, while politics is the public life system based on worldly interests that may be in conflict with religious restrictions, and hence the sphere of politics is the public, as asserted by John Locke in the eighteen century.

This view has been generalized to the other monotheistic religions and is not limited to Christianity, nor especially Islam. Rather, the confluence of politics with Islam has been more sensitive and negative, since Islam is the religion that has had the most conflict with Christianity over the course of history (Esposito, 1992).

Most indicative of this is the West's invention of the term "political Islam", the term commonly used in its discourse about Islam and politics that indicates the phenomenon of politicization of Islam or the adding an ideological, political dimension to Islam to achieve the political goals and interests of those they term "Islamists." However, Muslims reject the term "political Islam" while the West insists simultaneously on using it, and as a result, a new political, academic and intellectual conflict erupted between the two sides, which seems never-ending and enduring like the other conflicts that brought Islam and the West in confrontation throughout history.

The problematic of the research

It is important to analyze the discourse regarding what the West termed "political Islam" and to discern what the West seeks to broadcast to the world. Perhaps this research paper would shed some light on this intellectual conflict within the framework of the relationship between the West and Islam. It is worth mentioning here that this paper does not view discourse about political Islam as right or wrong, but attempts to discover what lies within it in terms of messages and concepts that are produced and disseminated.

Theoretical Framework for Analysis of the Discourse of the West about Political Islam

The West believes that, from the outset, Islam has been a problem for European Christians and has also been an intellectual challenge for them (Silvestri, 2007). This can be attributed to the prolonged political and ideological conflict between Muslims and Christians over the course of history, which the West deems to be instigated by Muslims. This conflict has intensified and become ongoing due to the religious and political dimensions behind it. The ideological differences and the political conflicts of interest between the two parties have laid a strong foundation for the continuation of this conflict across generations and eras. In the eyes of the West, Islam became an immortal enemy, and religious political incidents linked them together throughout history--starting with the Islamic conquests, then the Crusades, Ottoman domination, the Arab-Israeli crisis, the Iranian Islamic revolution, and directly to the emergence of resistance factions and movements in recent years, which they have termed terrorist movements and organizations. This makes Islam a perpetual problem for the West and Christianity (Abu 'Awad, 2011).

The Western position regarding Muslims does not pay them much respect; rather, it is a stance that is characterized by fear and mistrust at the same time. One can say that the relationship between the Western and the Islamic worlds is a relationship punctuated by tension, fear and uncertainty (Halliday, 2000). As for Islam being an intellectual challenge, most importantly it means that the West believes that they must do everything they can in terms of intellectual capabilities to confront Muslims. They believe that the effective method to oppose Islam is no longer only through security and military means, but also through an intellectual and diplomatic approach. For although in the last decades, Western policy towards Islam might have resorted to security and military operations, their main policy is diplomatic and intellectual. One can say that security and military operations were only used to support to what could be termed an "intellectual process" that the West has launched against Islam and Muslims. Perhaps the most important thing the West is doing to meet this intellectual challenge against Islam is what can be termed "the discourse policy." This means the dissemination of ideas against Islam and Muslims and its propaganda through academic studies and research, the media, and diplomacy, especially the orientalist discourse as an epistemic method.

Orientalism has served the expansionist political goals of Western nations, and Orientalists had accompanied occupations, for they were, as Mr. Mahmoud Shaker, RIP, called them "the bearers of the concerns of the Christian North", and they presented extensive and detailed information about the countries that Western countries desired to colonize and take over their wealth and riches (Shaker, 1987). What recurs in the Orientalist discourse is binary of "I" and the "other," since consciousness itself is not externalized except in clashing with the West, i.e., in colonialism, as if the relationship were between opposite cultures, and not between colonialism and resistance, for the identity of the Arab does not manifest except through the other.

Robson starts from this Orientalist epistemological perspective and gives himself the authority to interpret the term "Islam," and deals with it from the lexical meaning. The intended meaning is what Orientalists impute, i.e., Islam is defined by submission and

surrender and there is no plurality in the divine self in Islam, which makes it a repressive religion that believes in one ruler. Hence it cannot be liberal, and Islam speaks for itself, for it is restricted to a specific epoch and people. (Robson)

Renan laid the foundation for such [Orientalist] statements, since he was interested in Semitic languages and had an infamous position on the Semitic mind, namely that it is not fit to study science. Anton followed by stating that the problem is in monotheistic religions, for Arabs cannot produce anything else. Arabs are pagans whose race is impure, and Semites only produce oppressive religions; religion is a historical stage that is bypassed, as evidenced by the progress of people with the decline of religion and the emergence of the state, which has become an incubator for everyone's ambitions. These thinkers considered what Hegel had said as a historical law, since the evolution of the human form for Hegel begins with the state and then civil society, so the problem of producing a free, liberal individual lies with the state or with the society and then with the family history. Based on this Hegelian gradation, Islam is out of date. What has been defined as knowledge about religion in the West represents the absolute truth (Renan).

Muslims, too, fall into the Orientalist trap and go along with Renan concerning the necessity for Arabs to achieve what Europe had achieved, which can only be done via science and philosophy, since [human] evolution is essential (Al-Afghani). Secularism sees itself as a starting point where 'religion' is defined in its relationship to it. According to anthropologist Talal Asad, "The 'secularist' represents himself in the discourse of modernity as the foundation from which the theological discourse had risen…" Asad distinguishes between secularism as a political project, or rather a number of overlapping projects with various contradictions, and as an epistemological foundation in the construction of social sciences. The problem in this characterization is that secularism, so that it supports its non-religious identity, must deny its mutual dependence on a religious "other." The secular approach needs to be purified constantly, and must reformulate the "dissimilarity" continuously between the secular 'self' and the religious 'other' through the definition of the existence of the latter as a mere danger that must be marginalized (Asad, 2003).

One could conclude that the contemporary definition of secularism deals necessarily with religion, in the sense that it desires to control and set limits to it. Asad attempts in his definition to set the boundaries between secularism and religion as he links them with each other, since one cannot understand one without the other and secularism in its contemporary form cannot be defined without what is being defined as Islam: "Perhaps that is why the liberal state finds itself having to try and impose on its citizens the disciplines and limitations that it calls secularism."

The ambiguity in defining secularism, which creates ambiguity between the political and the religious, is necessarily in favor of force. Egypt, for example, has incomplete secularity, since it allowed the Muslim Brotherhood a margin of activity. It is not separation between religion and politics that best characterizes secularism, but continual deepening of power politics and religion for the purpose of protecting liberalism, which constitutes the organizational capabilities of the modern state; this raises the important question of the processes taking place below secularism (Agrama).

In an interview conducted by Saba Mahmood, Asad was asked about [the view of] Islamic movements as an expression of tradition that impede the progress of modernity from the Western perspective: "Do you believe that these movements compel us to re-think modernity? If so, then how?" Asad replied:

> I think it should compel us to re-think many things, for Western universities have focused their attention and care to the analysis of these movements, which originate in from hypotheses that do not question the various aspects of modernity, which allows us to examine many responses They describe those movements as reactionary and contrived, while assuming that Western modernity surpasses the idea of the example that should govern the current developments. Hence the evolution of the political/religious movements should make us re-think the sole Western model of secular modernism. Perhaps some desire to face these movements in its various manifestations, and it is possible on the condition that it be completed based on the necessity of giving these movements the status of special origins, as it is a useless action to seek to set up the total concepts of modernity as a sole criterion for examining all things, and one cannot consider the history of Islamic movements outside colonialism.

Secularism can rely on technological tools for power, and become an imperialistic project intended to shape fundamentalists and traditionalists. Mahmood's understanding of the women's movement in mosques in Egypt is different from the understanding of liberal secularism, since she believes that the ethical is linked to the political, and that the private appears in the public, in contrast with Western analysis Secularism defines the scope of the "secular" and links this to public power, sound reasoning, rational dialogue, justice, tolerance, and public interest, while it characterizes the "religious" as the contrary and links its scope to a personal God and beliefs regarding that God (Connolly 1999). In an Orientalist secular context, the discourse of the West regarding Islam and politics emerged through what is termed "political Islam." Through this discourse, the West disseminated ideas that primarily centered around Islam as a religious doctrine and form of worship that has nothing to do with politics. The preoccupation of Muslims with politics is viewed as a deviation from its nature and a politicization of Islam, and political Islam is a threat and a problem for both the West and Christianity. The assumption is it has failed and will not find its way to success in the modern world.

I shall discuss these ideas and reveal the notions that the West desires to popularize and disseminate, and the discourse and policies that accompany their dissemination in the international community.

The Discourse of the West on Political Islam

The following sections deal with issues relating to the discourse of the West regarding political Islam, namely: the concept of political Islam, Islamists, and political Islam and the West.

The Concept of Political Islam

The liberalization of Islam necessarily invented a new Islam, for the term "political Islam" dates back to the previous decades. Attia Al-Wishi (2001, 210) wrote in *The Dialogue of Civilizations*: "The first person to use this term was Hitler, when he met Sheikh Amin al-Husseini, Mufti of Palestine at the time, and told him: 'I am not afraid of the Jews or of communism, but I'm afraid of political Islam!'" In, *Political Islam and Political Pluralism from an Islamic Perspective*, Mohammad Amara (5-6) says: "I am not too comfortable with the term "political Islam," despite its prevalence, and the publication of much literature on this subject and under this title. As I recall, in the limits of my readings, the first person to use the term "political Islam" is Sheikh Mohammad Rasheed Ridha, yet he used the term to describe Muslim governments, which he called 'political Islam,' while he meant those who administered the nation within the framework of the Islamic nation. But the term, 'political Islam' is now used, and since the last three decades and the rise of the Islamist tide and phenomenon, to mean: the Islamist movements that are occupied in politics. And in this term, "political Islam", lies the dubiousness of reduction of Islam to politics, since there is no Islam without politics (Amara 2003). This term has been invented and produced in the West since the previous century in the context of its discourse about Islam and its relationship to politics, and is used in particular to refer to "political parties based on Islamic principles" (Abuza, 2007).

Guilian Denoeux (quoted in Bradley 2007) describes the [Islamic] political world: "It is a form of exploitation of Islam by persons, associations, and organizations, for political objectives, with an imagining of the future on the basis of reconciliation and fabrication of ideas taken from the Islamic tradition".
According to Megan Bradley (2007):

> Political scientist Guilian Denoeux defines political Islam as a "form of instrumentalization of Islam by individuals, groups and organizations that pursue political objectives. It provides political responses to today's societal challenges by imagining a future, the foundations for which rest on reappropriated, reinvented concepts borrowed from the Islamic tradition.

Denouex attributes this view to Islamists (rather than Muslims, attributing an ideological dimension to Islam) and thus considers that Islam has nothing to do with politics, as it is a religion whose principles are based on the relationship between a person and his God is based, and which is remote from the political dimension. This also implies that the Muslim preoccupation with politics and the attribution of their political activities to Islam is merely an invented idea that has no basis in Islamic teachings and traditions, and those groups that do so divert from its nature as a religion. This is an attempt to achieve the political objectives of those for whom Islam is a political affiliation. In light of this concept, the term "political Islam" signifies its distinction from religious Islam, or the distinction between a deviant, political Islam from authentic, religious Islam.

The first problem is that the term "political Islam" is Orientalist and its objective is to isolate resistance, in a strategic military fashion, from within the Muslim community (Abu 'Awad, 2011). The process of definition of political Islam and other related terms, such as fundamentalism, Islamic awakening, Islamic extremism, terrorism, Islamic terrorism, and

Islamophobia involve another problematic aspect, as the concept of political Islam is presumed to overlap with these concepts. There are disagreements between researchers and academics in approaching them, despite the broad parallels in all the definitions. The debate does not stop at this point: Which Islam do we mean, and which Islamists? Is it the Islam of the nation or the Islam of individuals? Is it popular Islam or official Islam? Is it the Islam of governments or political Islamist movements? And if it is the Islam of governments, is it the Islam of Saudi Arabia, Iran, or the Taliban? If it is the Islam of political movements, is it the Islam of the Muslim Brotherhood, Hizb Al-Tahrir, the Islamic Group, or Islamic Jihad? And if it is the Islam of the educated elite, is it the Islam of Sayyid Qutub, Abu Al-'Alaa' Al-Mawdudi, Hasan Al-Hudaibi, or Al-Qaradawi? (Al-Barghouthi, 1998).

The West ascribes political Islam to those termed "Islamists" and those who intend to add an ideological dimension to Islam to achieve their political objectives (Lahoud, 2005) or those who believe that it is not enough for society to be a Muslim community, but that it must also be Islamic. This will only be achieved through political efforts and movements. They considered the thought of Islamists to extends to Salafis, but as not driven by clerics (Roy, 1996). As to the Islamists' motives and objectives, they are the dissemination of culture in secular European societies and the application of *Shari'a* (Islamic jurisprudence) when possible (Tibi, 2008). This means that their main motivation is not a political and cultural motivation against the hegemony of the West, but is a religious motivation that propels them to establish an Islamic society in all parts of the world. These are fiery messages that disclose relationships of infinite strength and dominance, which overturn designations and replace them as they please, with "Islamists' instead of "Muslims" and "political Islam" instead of "politics in Islam."

Since politics is not what Islam brought, Islamist politicians are therefore not Muslims. They assume that true Muslims who are well-versed in their religion would not be politicians. They deduce this from the phenomenon that the movements of Islamists are not driven by those who are knowledgeable in Islam, but by "young civilians" who claim that they are "religious thinkers." Once again, the scenario is repeated in the recent Arab revolutions in Egypt and other countries, which cannot be viewed as instigated by anybody but enlightened youth who studied in the West. With this, the West wants to emphasize, again, that Islam does not have a political dimension and that its link to politics is a result of political attempts by those who do not understand the true nature of Islam. As to the motives of Islamists and their objectives, they are deemed to be the preaching and application of religion, in an attempt to divert attention from the economic, political, social and colonial hegemony of the West, since they feign innocence, as if many of those movements were not reactions to Western policy (Ayubi, 1993).

Political Islam and the West

The most important assertion of the West in its discourse about Islam and politics is that Islam in its political and ideological cloak constitutes a threat to Christians and the West. They consider the phenomenon of political Islam and Islamists as the most important manifestation of this threat; hence it must be confronted and challenged intellectually. For

example: "The Muslims were a threat to Western Christendom long before they became a problem" (Esposito, 1992). According to Oliver Roy: "Many in the West seem to view the end our century as the era of the 'Islamic Threat'" (Roy, 1996). It seems that many in the West view the end of this century--the previous century--as the era of the "Islamic threat." Satloff concludes from the analysis of various speeches and statements that there was no U.S. policy toward political Islam, but toward states, institutions and interests. However, he believes that Islamic movements as a whole constitute a threat to Western interests; since Islamists, even if they disagree on means and ends, agree on the goal of the inception of the Islamic state (Satloff, 2000).

The West believes that political Islam and Islamists pose two threats simultaneously, for two reasons: first: the Islamists hate the West for its hegemony that has extended to the Islamic world. Second: political Islam has a special system and principles that Islamists would like to apply to reorder the world (Tibi, 2008). Although these two threats are different in terms of formulation, since the first can be described as a direct threat while the second is the opposite, yet they both share one point, which is resistance to Western hegemony. This means that these two threats represent two form of resistance and this is what is happening in actuality, since the West dominates the Islamic world not only through political and military means, but also, and in a stronger fashion, through political and economic concepts and the cultural system (Bin Sayeed, 1995).

The West has assumed two different positions vis-à-vis these threats; in return for the hatred declared by the Islamists against the West, the latter took the position of defending its political and economic interests in the Arab world through cooperation with the ruling regimes and the local state authorities where Islamist resistance against Western interests appeared. To do so, it resorted to diplomatic processes and sometimes military operations.

As to confronting the policy of the Islamists who seek to reorder the world through the application of the Muslim social system, the West has resorted to a policy of discourse. In this way, the West disseminated its discourse by all possible means, bearing messages that centered on responding to the Islamic political system and emphasizing its contradictions with the political system in the contemporary world. It is in this regard that the West emphasized that Islam is a religion that does not include a political system and that any attempt to add a political and ideological dimension to Islam is only a process of politicization of religion for political purposes. They also emphasized that political Islam will not achieve its objectives as to what Islamists aspire to; the establishment of an Islamic state or Islamic society is a fiction and cannot be implemented in actuality. Roy (1996) writes:

> "One need only skim the literature of ulamas or the Islamist, or listen to the sermons in the mosques, to admit that there is an Islamic political imagination dominated by a single paradigm: that of the first community of believers at the time of the Prophet and of the first four caliphs ... this model offers the militants of political Islam an ideal for Muslim society"

The most important connotation of the term "Islamic fiction," of the impossible Islamic

state, is that what the Islamists are seeking in terms of establishment of an Islamic society modeled on what was established in the era of the Prophet and the Rightly Guided /the Righteous Caliphs (al-Khulafā'u r-Rāshidūn) is a fantasy that will not be achieved. This is due to the authentic model of the Islamic society not being based on a clear political system since the boundaries between the authorities and the religious, political, economic and social functions were not clear. This community also was not bound by logical limits as known in the modern system. Taking such a society as a model in this era of modern politics is a distant fantasy. In this, the West deduced that the idea of a "state" originated in and is specific to the West, and was not a familiar idea in the Islamic tradition. Hence, there are insufficiencies in Islamic political concepts, in terms of the body politic, the governor, and the government (Ayubi, 1993).

Conclusion

In conclusion; one can say that there are three major stereotypes formulated by Western Christian imagination about Islam in the median era, namely, an association with: idolatry, violence, and lustfulness, with all the attached connotations of faithlessness, brutality, and moral decay! With these stereotypes, the process of constructing a Christian discourse about Islam took place, in which imagination and "fantastical" aspects occupy a prominent place, and where that discourse became hostage to a spoken and symbolic lexicon simultaneously (Al-Jabiri, 2009).

The discourse of the West regarding political Islam pivots upon the following points:

1. The popular opinion in the West is that religious texts are limited to the time frames and locations in which they appeared, and that the culture of the present era should not be understood as it is, but must be construed as an interpretation that makes it appropriate for the culture of the era.
2. Islam is viewed as having an inferior position in relation to the West, having a barbaric and irrational tendency, and being primitive. The discourse of Orientalism emerged since its early beginnings loaded with relations of power and hegemony between the West and the East.
3. Hostility toward Islam is used to justify any discriminatory practices towards Muslims, their exclusion from society, and their isolation or marginalization.
4. Islam is viewed as a religion with a non-political doctrine, and does not introduce a clear political system that can be implemented, and the Muslim society, which Islamists seek to achieve, is fictional, will not materialize, and is an impractical plan. It is an "impossible" society.
5. Political Islam does not represent Islamic traditions, but is a politicization of Islam for political and military purposes, while Islamist movements are only the embodiment of this objective.
6. Islamists do not represent Muslims, and their ideas do not represent a sound way through which Muslims can understand their religion, hence all Islamic resistance movements and factions are terrorists and cannot be viewed otherwise.
7. Islam in its political and ideological cloak is a threat to the West and Christianity, and "if it is not with us it is against us." Islamophobia is a manifestation of Western megalomania.

8. This rejection of Islamic political thought and its applications belongs to the secular perspective. It includes the tendency of secularists to view Islam from a unilateral perspective and to link it to violent and anti-democratic trends.

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