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Experts' Workshop on the Interaction of Religion and Politics in the Public Sphere

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The Interaction of Religion and Politics in the Public Sphere

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Table of Contents

I. Background

The relationship between religion and politics is one of the thorny, controversial issues of the Muslim World. Some people believe that this relationship is an 'organic' one; that it is not possible to separate the two factors of the equation (religion and politics). They argue that Islam is "a religion and a state", that "it is a comprehensive system, guiding a way of life" and that "it has no distinction between the 'religious' and the 'secular' in it". Others, however, argue the contrary. Criticizing the authoritarian extra-comprehensive reading of Islam, they believe that to say that "there is no separation between the 'religious' and the 'secular' in Islam" is a mistake and an aberration in the understanding of religion and its role in life and in the community.

Therefore, an initiative, by the Cordoba Foundation of Geneva, held an experts' workshop on the interaction of religion and politics in public affairs. The workshop was held in Istanbul between February 28 and March 4, 2016, to make a "contribution towards easing and alleviating the Islamic – secular tensions in North Africa, as well as to promote peaceful coexistence among actors and politicians who hold different world-views". The workshop began by reviewing the status quo before investigating the significant political upheaval that the Arab region has witnessed in the past five and a half years. This included the movement that led to a series of revolutions, as well as a state of unrest, instability, wars, armed conflicts and numerous external interventions by regional and international actors; both interventions that accompanied these revolutions and that continue to do so.

The overall impact of these developments has led to a "re-drawing of the map of political participation in the public sphere and in the intellectual field". In addition, among the most important features of this change was "the entry of new actors with a religious affiliation into the field of political action". Nevertheless, these actors are not marginal constituents of the society. Various events, both in the cases of peaceful transition or in situations of armed conflict, have revealed that those newcomers to political participation enjoy considerable social weight and importance. Still, this new situation did not put an end to the debate that continues, in West Asia and beyond, about the legality of those actors' presence or their right to engage politically.

"The failure of political leadership in both religious and secular camps has ultimately resulted in civil war in Libya and Yemen, a military coup in Egypt, and very tense transition in Tunisia, culminating in *Ennahdha's* retreat from power in early 2015, within the framework of concessions agreed by all stakeholders in the National Dialogue."

It is worth pointing out here that this experts' workshop represents continuity with the two previous phases of the program entitled North Africa and West Asia in Transition (NAWAT); which was conducted by the Cordoba Foundation of Geneva between 2010 and 2015. The program was designed to contribute to the promotion of peaceful coexistence between groups that hold different visions and world-views; with the aim of strengthening networks and building the capacities of those actors towards rationalizing their differences and developing a common and collective understanding of these differences, as well as supporting local initiatives that call for change.

A workshop was held in Istanbul, in 2014, on "Constructive Political Participation outside Partisan Frameworks and Promoting Peaceful Coexistence". It has seen a qualitative and important development among the participants, with regard to their aspirations, as the political parties and movements participating in the workshop have agreed to set up "an international political forum", dedicated to actors with a religious reference in the North African and West Asia region, as well as the Sahel area and its environs.[1]

The relationship between religion and politics is an old debate that is particularly rich and vivid in North Africa and in West Asia. Contrary to the expectations of some people, religion did not lose its legitimacy, and it did not withdraw entirely from the public domain, even though many political and intellectual attempts have worked on achieving that end. Although rates of religiosity may fall in certain historical periods, in this country or that, for many diverse reasons, soon the interest in religion comes back in strength. Thus, it again affects political behavior, both among those who are in power or those who are in the opposition.

Accordingly, the Cordoba Foundation of Geneva believes that the evident return of the clash between the Islamists and the secularists is necessarily "linked to growing religiosity in the Arab world, which is featured in the various opinion polls that aim to explore the topic of "religion and religiosity in the public space". In this context, in accordance with the answers gathered in an opinion poll during the year 2015, most of the Arab public consider themselves as "religious to a certain extent" (up to 63 percent), while 24 percent describe themselves as "very religious" and only 9 percent describe themselves as "non-religious".[2]

II.   Religion and Politics in the Public Sphere: The Muslim and the Western Contexts

When the Ottoman Empire collapsed through a decision made by Kamal Ataturk, the prevailing sentiment was one that anticipated 'secularism' to be likely to succeed remarkably and sweep across all the Muslim World. It was widely believed that, through this change, the problem of the overlap between the religious and the political would cease to exist. Yet, in this climate there was an opportunity to establish dozens of associations and organizations which have emerged for defending "the crumbling Caliphate," emphasizing the organic relationship between religion and state in Islam.

Since then, and particularly since Hassan al-Banna set the foundations of the Muslim Brotherhood movement, there has been ongoing debate between Islamists and secularists in the region. This controversy began as an ideological conflict and a political competition before it escalated, leading to violence and igniting a war of identities. The Arab region, throughout all its

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[1] Three workshops on promoting constructive political participation of new faith-based political actors in the Arab world were implemented by the Cordoba Foundation of Geneva, in partnership with the Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs. Workshop reports for these are available at: http://cordoue.ch/workshop-reports/item/430-cfg-cwr-politicalparticipation-1-en

[2] 'The 2015 Arab Opinion Index,' *Doha Institute for Graduate Studies,* 2015. Available at: http://english.dohainstitute.org/content/cb12264b-1eca-402b-926a-5d068ac60011

territory and with all its complexity, is still serving as the platform for this polarized ideological and political antagonism.

The Cordoba Foundation of Geneva, which aims to rationalize the difference between the various components of Arab and Islamic societies, has noted that the relationship between the religious and the political is one of the main topics feeding many of the conflicts that are taking place in this vital region of the world. The Foundation has also identified "the re-emergence of the discourse of the fight against terrorism, that is used in order to justify repression at the national and international levels, especially against political actors with religious backgrounds". Such discourse has already sharpened the ideological polarization and has become an obstacle to the provision of conditions enabling the achievement of peaceful coexistence between Islamists and secularists, in the new political stage that emerged along with the so-called "Arab spring".

Wary of the widening fire of disagreement between the parties to this conflict, the Cordoba Foundation of Geneva seeks to accomplish a project that "contributes to building participatory and non-exclusionary peaceful societies in North Africa, so as to contribute to the alleviation of tensions between secularists and Islamists in the region and reducing the factors that would lead to the exclusion of political actors with religious references, as well as ensuring the promotion of the political practice based on societal tolerance on a large scale while representing different points of view, including those that are inspired by religious backgrounds."

The objective of this program is to contribute to ensuring that there would be no exclusion of faith-based political actors from political participation, as well as ensuring that secularist actors and those with religious reference would adopt an approach of containment and acceptance for the different opposing viewpoints. This would mean that they accept dialogue as the primary means of coexistence, exchange of ideas and seriously working to build bridges of understanding between themselves and others. In addition, they would ensure and defend the right of each party to retain its own self-convictions, without cutting ties with others or denying their right to disagree or even dissent.

The Cordoba Foundation of Geneva has always ruled out the hypothesis that the relationship between the Islamists and the secularists is necessarily based on a complete rupture and the inevitability of conflict between the two of them. That is why the workshop in Istanbul revolved around the central and fundamental question: is it possible to establish a common space between these two parties: the Islamists and the secularists?

In this context, there might be an intelligent idea that stands out, but then, it might get lost within the atmosphere of ideological bickering and confrontation. Therefore, it would be wrong to think that all secularists are necessarily positioned against religion per se; although there are those who tend to equate secularism or the secular notion with atheism or anti-religion. The legacy of history and the testimonies gathered show that this tendency, to equate secularism with atheism or anti-religion, is just a hypothesis that is resorted to during intellectual confrontation and debate to undermine the legitimacy of this party or that.

There are religious secular people, and there are secularists who believe that religion is one of the elements of the collective personality of their own people and society. Therefore, the dispute between those parties is not a dispute over the cancellation or elimination of religion in exchange for maintaining it, but this controversy is mostly tending towards the divergence of viewpoints regarding the position of religion in the society and the state. This would mean that the dispute is not a religious one. It is not a dispute that exists between the believers in religion and those who are working to repeal and eliminate it, but rather it is a dispute over the content of religion and how to read the basic content of religion and the religious teachings and how to functionalize and utilize them in the current situation of Muslim communities.

The main challenge that these two parties are facing is about how to make religion a unifying factor within the same society and not an element of discrimination against some people or a tool for threatening national unity. In this context, most secularists reject the attempts to describe them as non-believers and they strongly reject the Islamists' attempts to monopolize speaking in the name of religion, or that the Islamists would consider themselves as the sole guardians of religion. The battle between Gamal Abdel Nasser and the Muslim Brotherhood movement in Egypt was not motivated by hostility towards Islam, and the proof of that is the work that the then-Egyptian President carried out in favor of supporting Al-Azhar institution.

In contrast, most of the Islamists, be they participants in the workshop or those who are outside it, believe that "secularism has been exported to the Arab World and it has been hostile to religion, and it always carries an exclusionary charge within it against Islam and Islamists". For this reason, the Cordoba Foundation of Geneva was keen to make the objectives of the workshop include increasing the sensitivity and realization of actors with a religious reference in the North African region, towards the various contributions of "secularism", in different historical and geographical contexts.

It is a clear aim of the Cordoba Foundation of Geneva to highlight the differences between secularism and the secular space (secularity) on one hand, and secularism in the sense of *laïcité* on the other. In other words, secularism in the sense of *laïcité* is not necessarily synonymous with any of the forms of the secular, because the concept of *laïcité* is just a special understanding or a crystallization of secularism in the context of the French experience, while secularism, as such, refers to different secularisms.

In this context, the Cordoba Foundation of Geneva emphasizes the need for careful avoidance of sharp polarization in dealing with the other parties and that this harmonization would be achieved through respect for the political rules of the game and establishing the limits needed for political stability. Therefore, the concept of "the secular" could pose a threat to the dialogue, and it could contribute to polarization within the communities of the region if it is misunderstood; especially by the actors with a religious reference who tend to consider this concept, in some cases, as an element for exclusion, when they see it as an integral and indispensable part of the "cultural invasion".

The fear is that this conceptualization of 'secularism' deepens the divide between Islamists and secularists; that it is something that would weaken the paths of democratic transition, as it

could lead to certain authoritarian measures that would undermine the social fabric. Despite this tendency of exchanging accusations between the two currents, the reality of the experience proves that the positions of both the Islamists and the secularists are no longer static. In fact, there is a tangible progress in the direction of more interaction and more modifications of vision, favoring dealing with adversaries.

In this context, it is notable that there are incidents of striking developments in the perception of the issue of secularism that are re-shaping the positions of many Islamists; especially among the Ennahdha Movement in Tunisia. This movement - although it has so far refused to use the term "secular" in its official literature, made great strides in adopting many of the implications of the secular system. This movement has reached out to secular political circles in Tunisia. It has accepted not only to cooperate, but also to build alliances with the parties affiliated to the secular realm, without any reservations.

After the revolution, the Ennahdha movement formed the so-called 'Government of the Troika' with the 'Block for Labor and Freedoms' (*al-Takattul Min Ajl al-Amal w' al-Hurreyat*) Party and the 'Congress for the Republic' (*Al-Tajammou Min Ajl al-Jomhoreya*) Party, despite the differences in the ideological references between Ennahdha and these parties. Later, Ennahdha allied with the Tunisia Call (*Nidaa Tounes*) Party, even though this is the party of the supporters and formerly-active members of the dissolved party of the current President of Tunisia, Beji Caid Essebsi. All these variables affected Ennahdha's political structure and direction, which made it a movement that constitutes an indispensable part of the political landscape in Tunisia.

It could also be said that there is a new concept that is currently spreading among most of the Islamists now. It is the conception that their organization "is not the group that dominates and represents the existence of the Muslim Nation as the binding element for all Muslims, but rather a group or part of other groups among the Muslims in general". Nevertheless, there are still some people who confine themselves to the same traditional, determined conception that confuses the partisan identity with the identity of the group, or that of the religious community, as a reference group. This situation would allow us to say that the conflict between these two parties is basically an intellectual and a political one. It is not a religious conflict in the dogmatic sense; it is not a conflict between those who want to monopolize religion and those who want to monopolize politics.

The importance of this debate, along with conclusions that some movements with religious reference have reached on this matter, lies in giving us the ability to conclude that the programs advocated by these movements are not sacred. These are programs that are not necessarily representing Islam as a revelation that is binding to the believers, but they are merely interpretations and viewpoints from human beings. It is therefore possible that such programs might include some of the right thing, and they could also be wrong and inconsistent with the interests of the people. Thus, the discourse of these movements is nothing but a political discourse that is subject to being relative and never absolute. Consequently, its importance is not derived from how it relates to the religious text, but to the extent of its ability to reflect the reality and address the problems of the people.

III.   Religion and Politics: Unity, Separation, or Distinction?

When dealing with the relationship between the religious and the political, it is difficult to skip over and ignore the Western experience in this region. The Islamists - in general - believe that this problem has been coming from outside the region, and that there was a plan to export this issue to us from the West. The Islamists often pause to reflect deeply on the colonial era, as they tend to believe that colonialism continues its attempts to eradicate Islam, so that colonial powers may gain control over the land and loot the wealth. But opponents of the Islamists respond to this hypothesis by saying that the Western armies that were directed towards the Arab and Muslim world were not religiously motivated, but that there were mainly economic and political reasons for the colonizers. Nevertheless, when the colonial powers noted that religious values play an important role in the revival of the doctrine of Jihad and resistance, the colonizers attempted to weaken the motivation of those people to resist and stand against the very existence of these foreign military forces on their own territory. The Church intervened in this context, thinking that the opportunity had come for converting the peoples of this region from Islam to Christianity, without this secondary goal becoming the primary aim of colonialism. Some people are supportive of this argument by saying that "the King in Europe did not announce the Crusade, but this announcement was issued by the Pope."

The purpose of this debate is to make a reference to a case, which most Islamists believe in, which is that the Western historical experience is completely different from the Islamic historical experience. They therefore argue that the West and its experience are not the proper measure to judge Islam, and not the proper tool for understanding of Islam; in other words, the West cannot be a point of reference for the Muslim communities. Secularism in the West has had a justified course due to the predominance of the church and its involvement in all aspects of life. This Western situation and evolution contrasts with the Muslim World, which has always been an open space regarding religion, and never had to install an official religious institution with a monopoly over the sacred and control over the people on behalf of God, in every small and large element of the peoples' lives. In this setting, political rulers in the Islamic experience were not – by any means – endowed with any form of holiness or infallibility.

Islamists add to this argument by saying that many Western countries have not completely separated 'religion' from the 'state'. For example, until recently in Norway, the King headed the Church, according to Article 16 of the Constitution and, according to Article 12, more than half of the ministers must be devout Christians. These articles were only repealed in 2012 through an amendment to the Constitution of this country. One of the participants in the workshop said that the Protestants did not aim - at first - for the separation of religion from the State, but their main goal – and it is the main objective of Protestantism - was the liberation of the Church from the King (the monarchical power). Still, Max Weber was the one who translated that desire for separation into action, in the way that interprets Protestantism as the origin of secularism and the basis of the birth of the nation-state and capitalism. Thus, religion in most of the Western societies still plays a mixed role in directing the policies of the State, with varying degrees from one country to another, and it is still a functioning point of reference for many parties and organizations in many ways, as it reflects itself in the polling stations, or in the official State institutions.

From that point, it was useful to allocate one of the Cordoba Foundation of Geneva's workshop sessions to review the European and Western experience, to learn about the evolution of the relationship between 'the political' and 'the religious' in the West. It was an opportunity and an experiment, which allowed the participants to understand the multiplicity of experiences of various countries in this matter. This was also indicative that there is no single model imposed on everyone, but that each community had its own specificity, which should be taken into consideration when choosing the appropriate political system for a certain society.

The review of these experiences has also indicated that secularism in the West has not abolished the role of religion in the society, but there are crafted legal rules to protect the exercise of religious beliefs. The secular Western experience has also put religion outside the direct political sphere, to prevent it from getting involved in the political areas, where it could be possible that religion might lead to extensive damage to the religious faith, as has previously happened in medieval Europe.

Accordingly, it is not proper to hold colonialism as the sole reason and the sole element responsible for all the problems that the people in the Muslim region have suffered from and continue to suffer until now. This idea was put forward by many of the participants in the workshop. One of them, representing a secular orientation, pointed out that "without understanding the religious wars that Europe has suffered, it is not possible to understand secularism as a practical solution in order to establish tolerance". Other participants of the same orientation denied the existence of an Arab Islamic specificity that would hinder our countries from meeting the need of interacting with the world in all its multiple dimensions, diverse components and enormous achievements.

Islamists have asserted their narrative that the West has continuously and consciously planned to dismantle the Ottoman Caliphate, and that Western countries have worked to achieve this since an early point of history; particularly since Napoleon Bonaparte's expedition to Egypt, which was launched in order to control the important and rich parts of the Muslim World and which attempted to separate the peripheries from the capital of the Ottoman Caliphate at that time; Astana. For this reason, the Islamists usually focus on this kind of narrative as well as on Western countries' manipulations, which continued until taking the final decision to abolish the Caliphate. The Islamist discourse on this matter tends to associate Kamal Ataturk, who founded the Turkish State based on the separation of 'religion' and 'state', with this Western scheme.

Consequently, many of the Islamists' criticisms begin with the secular Turkish experience; with all its failures and successes. There are those who point out that although the state in Turkey claimed to separate religion from politics, it continued - all the time - subjecting the 'religious establishment' to the strong grip of the 'state'. The Islamists did not lead the battle in facing secularism alone, as their predecessors, including Al-Azhar scholars, as well as the Sheikhs of Al-Zaytouna mosque, Al Quaraouiyine mosque and the Sufi orders, were involved in the same confrontation. Based on this and other events and facts, it has also been accused that the West's political and academic institutions were the main support for some of the modernist elites from the people of the colonized nations. This elite has imported the concepts of secularism to lead the

campaigns and establish the political parties and the associations that are working to isolate Islam and deepen the separation between religion and state.

There is a prevalent viewpoint that strongly defends the organic link between religion and politics, in principle. It is the argument that "Islam, as a religion, has emerged as a ruling belief from its inception" and, therefore, it is difficult to separate the two basic components of the equation; i.e. religion and politics. Yet, this argument has been subjected, for some time, to many criticisms by many critics, even from within some circles that are affiliated to the Islamists. In fact, some of them came to believe that Islam has been negatively affected by this organic relationship that links it to political power.

The advocates of this viewpoint argue that the state has been, and still is, benefiting from this rigid link between religion and politics, to legitimize the policies and interests of the ruling classes. This tendency has taken shape since the Umayyad dynasty came to power and established the 'Umayyad Caliphate'. Such a situation led to posing the following question: how it is possible to liberate religion from the authority of the state, in the Muslim World? There are those who consider secularism not to be the real problem per se, but that the dilemma is related to the ruling authority's employment of the political power of religion, attempting to monopolize it and turn it into a weapon in the State's fight against its opponents; i.e. using religion as a weapon to withdraw legitimacy from the opposition. One of the participants highlighted the example of Saudi society, which has not witnessed a struggle between the secularists and the Islamists, as religion continues to be a major institution that is supportive to the ruling regime, nevertheless, Saudi Arabia has not witnessed the birth of a modern state.

In Tunisia, the situation was different. The secularists have succeeded in establishing the nation-state led by the Constitutional Party. Yet, then-President Habib Bourguiba did not separate religion from the state, but rather managed to subject religion to the arising needs of the state, after he had emptied the religion of a large part of its legislative content. Despite the efforts by the founder of the nation-state in Tunisia, his endeavor did not prevent the emergence of political movements with a religious reference. This situation made the relationship between religion and the state contested and debated until the advent of the Tunisian revolution, in 2011. The new constitution then came to settle the controversy through clearly aligning with the 'civil state' in Tunisia.

IV. Religion and Politics in the Islamic Tradition: Distinction not Separation

In this context, the thesis of Dr. Saadeddine Othmani on the relationship between religious and worldly / life matters triggered a very heated, yet rich, discussion among participants.[3] Dr. Othmani launched his arguments from the question: "to what extent can Islam co-exist and establish

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[3] Dr. Saadeddine Othmani is president of the national council of the Moroccan Justice and Development Party and served as Minister of Foreign Affairs (2012-2013). He has written numerous books on psychology and the Islamic Law.

harmony between the Muslim community and the civil state, where legitimacy would be based on the will of the people?". To answer this dilemma, Dr. Othmani asked another question regarding the actions of the Prophet Mohammed: are they all to be considered as "a revelation that should be followed or not?"

After reviewing the religious texts and the opinions of jurists and specialists on the fundamentals of Sharia, Dr. Othmani stated that the actions of the Prophet are divided into two categories. First is a category with special legislative dispositions, which are "the actions by the Prophet whose objective is to have them followed and emulated by all Muslims". The second category of the actions and behaviors of the Prophet are "non-legislative" and, therefore, they are acts and works by him, yet they are "non-binding" to the believers. Dr. Othmani believed that there is confusion between the two levels of the works and actions made by the Prophet. According to him, such confusion is the result of some sort of a state of "color blindness" that has perhaps affected some people.

Accordingly, Dr. Othmani concluded by saying that "the actions of the Prophet as the Imam (i.e. in the matters that related to managing affairs of the government and ruling the state) should be regarded as partial and temporal actions that are linked to managing the realities of daily-life and the policies that govern the community. Thus, these are specific to their time, place and circumstances" and "these actions are not general and holistic as part of Sharia, i.e. not legally binding as Sharia to the nation until the end-of-days".

Therefore, Dr. Othmani concludes that "having a rigid stalemate by the scholars and Sharia experts when regarding those prophetic acts, although there is a dire need to change such perspective, would be nothing but a further departure from the intended objectives of Sharia and Fiqh, and it would stand as an element that hampers implementing the Sunna and the teachings of the Prophet". Supporting his point of view, Dr. Othmani stressed that "the acts of the Prophet as an Imam (i.e. ruler) were aimed to achieve the public interests, and his actions as a political leader should be considered as discretionary actions". Therefore, the opinions of the Prophet on these matters could be subjected to being "right in some incidents and wrong in others". Dr. Othmani considered that "there should be **a distinction** between the actions that are aimed for the interests of worldly matters and those that are intended to be serving the interests of the after-life". In this context, Dr. Othmani emphasized the distinction between the actions that pertain to religious affairs and those that relate to worldly affairs. He said that this argument is an interpretation of the Prophet's Hadith that says: "If it was one thing of the things of your religion, it's on me, and if that was a thing of your worldly life, it is up to you. If I have commanded you with something from your religion, you should take it from me… and if I have commanded you with something out of my mind, you should know that I am only a human being".

Therefore, Dr. Othmani, believes that this categorization of the actions of the Prophet, could offer a possible conceptual framework for the "renewal of the Islamic political jurisprudence". He also pointed out that such division and categorization of the Prophet's actions "would basically provide a solid methodological foundation for many of the issues in contemporary Islamic political thought". He said that the actions of the Prophet as the Imam (i.e. political ruler) do show that the concept of the Islamic State (not be confused with ISIS) is a civil

state, and it is not a "religious theocratic one". And thus, the "Islamic State is a non-theocratic state and its decisions are human-driven" because "the political ruler in Islam does not derive his legitimacy from the metaphysical un-earthly power, as he stands as a single human individual, and he derives his mandate from the nation that has freely chosen him to rule".

The second conclusion that Dr. Othmani reached is that "there is a need to remove the holiness and sacredness from all the aspects of politics and religion, with the exception of the general principles and the major objectives of Sharia; as the rest of all things are merely mundane worldly and earthly human affairs". According to the consensus (*Ijmaa'*) of the Muslim scholars and the opinion of the constitutionalists - be them the ancient or the modern ones - the basis for legitimacy is "the nation or the people". Therefore, if this is "applicable on the basis of legitimacy of the state, it would, a fortiori, apply also to the other constitutional elements and requirements in the political system; such as good governance and accountability of the political institutions, proper free election of the State officials at all levels, as well as limiting the terms of being in office for the state leaders, determining the relationship between the different authorities in the State and ensuring their independence, etc.; bearing in mind that all these political elements are, by default, subjected to human diligence".

Dr. Othmani's thesis concluded by stating that "the Islamic experience in the era of the first four Rashidoun Caliphs is a "historic" one" and therefore it "does not extend beyond its own time, place and the circumstances that configured it and imposed many elements on it". He also pointed out that "the fact that the State in Islam is a civil state would make the Muslims always open to develop a governance model according to what mechanisms and political administration models mankind invents. This would also make the Muslims always able to represent the democratic model at the best of its forms".

The thesis of Dr. Saadeddine Othmani represented one of the discussion topics at the workshop, where some participants interacted with it from either a supportive position, endorsing the results that have been reached through it, or taking the other position, as some participants objected to it, particularly regarding its emphasis on the need for the separation between religious and worldly/life matters. For example, Dr. Abu Ya'rub el-Marzouki – who cannot be categorized as an Islamist – considered the approach adopted by Dr. Othmani as "a secular reading of the Quran". Moreover, Dr. el-Marzouki made a remark regarding the way Dr. Othmani categorizes the actions of the Prophet to conclude that some of the actions of the Prophet were not religious. Dr. el-Marzouki said that such perspective is "a very serious matter", adding that this is "a thesis that aims to repeal and abolish the Islamic Sharia".

On another level, some participants wondered: what is to be done if the secular/worldly things are in conflict or contradiction with the religion? Should the religious be upheld superior to the worldly matter or the other way around? Yet another question arose, stating that if things are based on this interpretation, what is the function of religion in the democratic state? Besides, some other participants expressed their belief that "the separation between the religion and worldly affairs is not appropriate for this region of the world because religion, from the point of view of those commentators, came about to organize the affairs of this world; not to stay away from them". These participants have denied that the Islamic tradition has witnessed any distinction between

religion and worldly matters. Some of them said that the Sharia rules and provisions are the religion, while the implementation of these provisions would be a matter of some mechanism that could be mundane or secular.

In contrast to this, other participants defended the idea of the distinction between the religious and the secular. One of them said that the most important evidence of this distinction and separation was the historical experiments of exercising political power throughout Islamic history, where all these experiences were human trials, attempts and worldly experiences. Then, a more elaborate question was asked: what have the Islamists presented as a contribution to establish Islamic alternatives in the various fields of life? It was said that the reason for asking this question is that simply answering this dilemma by saying that Islam is a holistic approach to life, without proving it in practice, would not change anything in the lives of the people at any level.

V.   Shari'a and Democracy

In this context, the controversy remains constant and the deadlock persists among Islamists themselves, and between them and the Arab secularists; as both sides differ and disagree on the meaning and the interpretation of many terminological titles, concepts and terms. The first and foremost would be the terms "secular" and "civil". Some of the participants regarded the term 'civil state' to be "a Western term that has been imported from outside and imposed on the eastern Arab and Islamic culture and thought". Dr. Attiya Adlan[4] said that the meaning of the term 'civil state' is the "non-religious state, i.e. the secular state where there is no relationship between it (as a state) and religion; even though such state is not necessarily fighting against religion". He said that is how the term 'secular state' is widely used by specialists involved in dealing with this issue. He also said that he has been searching for some common denominators that could combine both the Islamic State and the modern state. On such a basis, he discussed some of the objections that are often voiced by the conservative current whenever this issue is raised and whenever there is a debate on the question of the civil state.

The Islamic system did not set a time-frame for exercising power and remaining in office, but according to the viewpoint raised by this scholar: "we would not claim or even assume that the Islamic system is based on the idea of perpetuating an extended and limitless period for assuming the post of the 'Caliphate of Muslims'; nor assume that the Caliph's political contract with the nation should be holding a life-time presence in that post". To illustrate an explanation and the reason for this argument, this scholar stated that "the legitimate Sharia-based reason which requires the ouster of the Imam and removing him from leading or deciding the state's matters, would be the contract he has with the people - i.e. the contract that stands between the clients; the people who are the true owners of power and authority on one hand, and the agent, who is representing these clients and assumes the authority on behalf of the people. If this contract was termed to be held with temporality and a specific term in office, stating that it expires at a certain

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[4] Dr. Attiya Adlan is a member of the International Union of Muslim Scholars, deputy head of Arab Academics Association in Turkey, and head of the 'Islah' (Reform) Party of Egypt. He was also member of the Egyptian Parliament in 2012.

point in time, the Sharia, in such a case, would stipulate respecting this condition and abiding with it, calling the ruler to step down and retire; or else, to obtain another new term of legitimacy in power for a certain period of time".

Accordingly, Dr. Adlan supports the orientation and doctrine of "those who say the permissibility of determining the duration of the presidency is to be stated in the nation's constitution, and there is a genuine right for the nation to require the person in office to vacate his post at the end of the specified period, termed as the duration of the mandate he holds in a position of authority. The nation also has the right to determine the duration of the mandate for the ruler to be in office and the extent of the possibility of the renewal of such mandate. As such an issue should be subject to the public interest criteria. This is essentially needed because "the concentration of power always leads to a problematic situation and it would inevitably lead to a bad outcome and tyranny".

Dr. Adlan deduced from this argument that "this principle (of deciding the duration of the term and mandate to be in power), as well as the other relevant principles should not contrast with, or be inconsistent with, the public interest, by any means. These principles would not collide with Sharia, even though such arrangement did not exist in the Islamic history or in our political systems throughout history. The absence of this limitation of the duration in office should not be regarded as a kind of shame or disgrace, as it is not a matter of shortcoming or a disadvantage in our great Islamic Sharia".

This same scholar of Islamic law has made other comparisons and analogies regarding other accounts in the democratic system; such as the separation between the judicial and executive branches. He has concluded from this analysis that "the method or tool that does not make the nation and people the party that plays the main role in building the political system, should be regarded as an illegal method"; and that "the practical method which leads to the establishment of the nation's role is the one that should be regarded as the legitimate tool, even if there was no Sharia text regarding this matter". Dr. Adlan said: "I think that this debate, which has been raised regarding the principle of building on the principle of the conservative majority, and attempting not to break such consensus or majority, could be seen as a kind of stipulation, dogmatism and exaggeration… The origin of such a state of mind is the very prevalent cautious tendency, as well as skepticism about everything that comes from the West; without making a distinction between things that are part of the Sharia provisions and other worldly mechanisms, which do not, at any account, affect or harm the Islamic Sharia in any way".

This opinion is of great significance, because it reveals the existence of a genuine intellectual flexibility prevailing in some people from within the Salafi movement; a flexibility that enables those people to re-structure and modify their political positions in the direction of aspiring to build a common ground with those who call for building civil democratic systems that are non-hostile to religion. This flexibility was confirmed when discussing Democracy and Sharia, where some participants stressed the importance of distinguishing between the principles on the one hand, and the tools and mechanisms on the other. All participants approved of the notion that such distinction should be made so as to avoid conflicts between the past and present, and also to

ensure that democracy and Islam agreed on the issues of *Bay'aa* (Allegiance) in the Islamic term and election in the modern term; where both words would mean to invoke the will of the nation and that of the people. The participants also noted the formulas of compromise that many Islamists, and others, have adopted in order to deny the contradiction between Islam and democracy; such as emphasising that 'democracy' means '*Shoura*', and that the mechanism of *Ahl el-Hall wa el-Aqd* (the people of opinion and decision) is identical with the formula of parliament; and that the concept of *Bay'aa* (Allegiance) could be carried out in today's world through the mechanism of elections, while also emphasizing that "'what is really important is the function of these comparisons rather than the original meanings of the terms". It is important to refer, in this context, to the writings of Abdul Rahman Al-Kawakbi, when he proposed in his book titled "Characteristics of Despotism" (*Tabaie el-Istibdad*) the necessity of exerting effort to differentiate between the concepts of political ethics and those of political practice.

Yet, besides all that, there were participants that did not refrain from expressing their fear for the view that sovereignty should be for the Sharia, and the nation or people. They pointed out that they fear the existence of some entity that is like the so-called 'Expediency Council' in Iran, which is a council made up of Islamic scholars and clerics. They feel troubled and afraid that such a Council would have an absolutist, unquestioned power that enables the Council members to reject any act or law that was debated inside the elected Shura Council, under the pretext of being inconsistent with the Sharia. Those participants pointed out that such legal and political arrangement would lead to a monopoly of interpretation of religious texts by a group of individuals and having such arrangement by claiming the existence of such a body is a prerequisite for the protection of the Islamic system.

At the same time, there are Islamists who clearly stressed during the workshop that "there is no specific Islamic political system that is prescribed as the ultimate Islamic model". They also state that the protection of the interests of the people could be achieved through the establishment of a "neutral civil state". Other participants considered the ones that are labeled as the Ulama and scholars of the Sultans as the most dangerous element, as they have always justified tyranny. Those participants considered that the 'just state' is the one that relies on the rule of law and upholds the supremacy of the constitution.

VI. The Question of the Relationship between Values and Freedoms

The question of the relationship between values and freedoms is one of the vital and unavoidable issues when addressing the relationship between religion and politics. For this reason, it was only natural to address the problem of managing the affairs of multi-ethnic and multi-faith communities in that, contrary to what some people might think, national unity on a religious or ethnic basis is not a necessity for the establishment of democracy. The examples for this are many and varied within the Muslim World. Common interests are usually the basis of governance. Therefore, one of the participants pointed to the experience of an important African country: Senegal. Senegal is considered an Islamic country because Muslims make up most of its population and yet Leopold

Senghor, its president, was a religious Roman Catholic, while his deputy, Amadou Diop, was a Muslim.

Participants in the workshop, though coming from various worldviews, have defended the principle of citizenship, even though the culture of the pan-Islamists is a one of transnationalism; and even though the tribe, as a societal and communal entity, still plays social and political roles in many Arab countries. Some of the participants pointed out that, both in terms of legislation and practice, the concept of citizenship has not yet reached the same level of consistency in most of the Gulf countries, as it has in the Arab Maghreb countries. In this context, the issue of the Shiite minorities in some Arab countries was raised. As the Shiites constitute a minority that still strives for integration in the framework of the nation-state, they therefore struggle to achieve equality of the members of these minorities with the other citizens in their countries.

It was emphasized that the nation-state is responsible for protecting its citizens, regardless of sex, color, race, religion, creed or sect. From a human rights' perspective, the nation and the state are invited to ensure equal opportunities for all. The participants considered citizenship as an element that could be a viable solution and that can provide space for the resolution of various problems arising from the coexistence between the minority and the majority in a society. The individualistic-oriented citizenship could succeed in the culturally-consolidated and culturally-unified countries, while the mass-oriented citizenship could succeed in multi-cultural societies. Participants warned against failing to ensure, protect and manage diversity within the same state, as this would lead to a real disaster. They pointed out that such a failure may lead to the outbreak of civil war and secessionist demands, as happened in Sudan. For this reason, it was stated that the duty of everyone is to protect the unity of the homeland, by providing all the guarantees that would protect the coexistence of all people and groups that constitute the inhabitants of the same country, and by taking advantage of the common heritage of all these groups to promote unity and solidarity.

There are also divergent and contrasting opinions between the Islamists and the secularists on the issue of individual freedoms, which is a contentious issue by default. This issue is controversial between these two groups to a far greater extent than their differences on issues relating to collective freedoms; which most of the political parties now recognize and defend. For this reason, again, many religious movements were surprised with the Tunisian Ennahdha Movement's consent on the text of the new Tunisian constitution, which explicitly recognizes freedom of conscience. It is a constitution that was drafted through compromises and in a consensus-building manner between Islamists and secularists after the Tunisian revolution. Some of the participants emphasized that the challenge facing the peoples of the region lies not in the religious values as much as in the process of delivering those values to the people on the ground, by translating them into policies and programs. Other participants warned of a possible kidnapping of the system of values by the state as a center of power. They also warned against having the state working and acting to contain these values to justify tyranny.

There is also some tension that prevails between activists and actors who come from a religious background on one hand, and those who are secularists, when it comes to certain categories of controversial values; especially the issues that are related to women's rights and the

issue of gender equality or sexual freedom. Values, per se, impact on the quality and the level of flexibility of the legislation, and thus, this issue raises the ire of Islamists in general, by virtue of their fear that the secular demands would lead to a conflict with the religious texts, such as the call to abolish the death penalty under the pretext of conflict with the value of the right to life.

VII. Conclusion and Recommendations

As a conclusion, it is possible to say that the workshop has achieved its objectives, and it has revealed that secularists and politicians from different religious backgrounds can meet and dialogue together quietly and deeply, away from the atmosphere of tension and stress. It is a fact that this interaction, which occurred in Istanbul, can be replicated and brought back to all parts of the North African countries that are prepared for going forward using such new conceptions and perspectives. This is a fact because these countries constitute an important testing ground to help to overcome the dilemma of the secular - Islamist conflict, which has consumed a lot of energies and efforts, while it has also contributed to disabling these societies and adding to the complexity of the path towards the democratic transition in many of the Arab countries. The ongoing events in Tunisia and Morocco prove that coexistence between the two camps (the secularist and the Islamist) is possible and truly necessary.

At the end of the workshop, and through the notes that have been recorded and the points of discussion that have been observed, it is possible to draw the following recommendations in the way that many of the participants have highlighted. These are the consensus-based and the consent-generated starting points that did not encounter substantive objections.

Among these **recommendations:**

∗ The need to institutionalize the dialogue between the secularist and the religious currents and focus on the main elements and dimensions that help creating a common ground between Islamists and secularists. This common ground should be strengthened through direct discussion and practical initiatives that would support the rapprochement between the two sides. It is advisable to avoid debating doctrinal issues and raising the theoretical controversial issues of contention, which – despite their extreme importance – would remain unfit and unhelpful in constituting an entry-point for building confidence and achieving convergence around a minimum common ground between the different parties.

∗ Working on freeing religious discourse and religious institutions from formal employment, abuse and instrumentalization by the ruling power that wishes to dictate a certain conception on such institutions. It is elementary to respect religion and the general principles that stem from it, as they represent a unifying and grouping factor, against the divisive and threatening ones that may destroy the country's national unity.

* Ensuring freedom of imams and preachers in their religious discourse and counseling, together with holding a commitment to meeting the needs of the faithful and staying away from partisanship and engaging religion into the political strife.

* Expanding the scope of studying religions in colleges and universities, to raise awareness and highlight the importance of diversity, as well as the detection of commonalities between believers of different spiritual and moral experiences.

* The need to move towards a distinction between policy and faith, without assumption that the distinction would mean depriving the believers of their right to rely on their own beliefs to take positions that would support freedom and equality between all groups of citizens.

* Standing seriously against policies that deceive the public and make the masses believe that the suppression of peaceful political groups with a religious reference would help achieve stability. Various experiences from all over the world have proven that democracy is not possible if it is established through systematic repression. Freedom is a right and should be a right for all.