

Following is the full text of comments by Abdul Monem Abul Futouh, Member of the Guidance Bureau of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood, on “[Islamist Movements and the Democratic Process in the Arab World: Exploring the Gray Zones](#),” by Nathan Brown, Amr Hamzawy, and Marina Ottaway (Carnegie Paper No. 67, March 2006):

I read carefully your study of the six areas that continue to puzzle researchers in the West with regard to reformist Islamist movements. I would like to commend you for your efforts and your exceptional study of reformist Islam, of which the Muslim Brotherhood is a strong advocate. To my mind, the term “reformist Islam” represents a more accurate description of the activities of Islamist movements than “political Islam.” The latter inaccurately limits the movement’s activities to political participation and excludes the movement’s engagement in social, educational, cultural, and developmental issues.

Before I present my view—as a member of the Guidance Bureau—I would like to note that we have previously attempted to clarify the issues brought up in this study in several forums including the Supreme Guide’s initiative, a study that I published entitled *The Islamic Understanding of Comprehensive Reform (Al Mafhum al islami li al Islah al shamil)* and several interviews and articles compiled in a volume entitled *Reformers, not Spoilers (Mujaddidun la mubaddidun)*. I hope that these might provide some insight to your research and understanding of the concept of reform, be it in relation to current affairs or to the ideal condition that human beings should have reached in this era, in which they are still confused and suffering in their quest for the happiness, peace, and prosperity they deserve.

It is also important to note that the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood is an Islamic association, not just a religious organization or a conventional political party. There is a debate within the movement about the possibility of transformation to a political party that carries out the movement’s reform agenda. Another possibility is establishing a separate political party, with a clear delineation of responsibilities between party and movement. We differentiate clearly between political and religious activities, although repressive state practices have often led to conflation of the two, which would not happen in a free society.

A distinction must be made between religion and political life. The affairs of the latter should be administered in a modern fashion. Religion involves spirituality and cooperation between believers. It is noteworthy that the moral individual, who can distinguish between right and wrong and derives his/her judgments from free will, constitutes the core of Islam. These values are the cornerstone of Islamic culture, the full depth of which cannot be appreciated by those who have not experienced Islam closely.

In this paper, I will clarify the six issues raised in the study and attempt to remove the ambiguity, which seems to exist in researchers’ interpretations rather than in the Muslim Brotherhood’s thinking. It appears that most readings of the reformist Islamist project begin with initial rejection based on pre-conceived ideas springing from historical and cultural details that highlight the need for further discussion between the Muslim Brotherhood and outside observers.

1) Islamic Sharia

Mercy crowns all Islamic virtues; the holy Quran says “we sent you only as a mercy to the world.” Islamic sharia is a translation of this virtue. Islamic tenets assert three values, all of which stem from mercy. First is religious worship to discipline the soul; second is establishing justice among people without distinction; and third is achieving social welfare.

A religious scholar argues that where welfare exists, sharia exists; that all sharia’s commandments are intended to bring welfare to the individual. Religious scholars classify the goals of sharia into essentials that preserve the soul, religion, wealth, offspring, and others that protect the five core goals and preserve individual dignity as ordained by God (who said “and we have honored sons of Adam”). These goals encompass all of human life; they shape a Muslim individual who has allegiance to humanity, interacts with freedom and dignity with others, and who lives in peace with others. A conscious understanding and correct application of these goals is a safety valve for society; it protects it against extremism, fundamentalism, and violence.

Despite the fact that criminal penalties constitute only ten percent of all Islamic law, they have drawn the most attention among scholars of Muslim societies, leading some to mistakenly equate the sharia with punishments. Penalties stipulated in the sharia serve primarily as deterrents. The more powerful the deterrent is, the more effective the law is at preserving social stability and rehabilitating criminals. We recall the saying of the Prophet, “avert penalties through legal arguments,” encouraging the presentation of any evidence that can be used to avert application of the penalties. Some religious scholars have argued that judges are allowed to cancel penalties if the suspect repents.

It is noteworthy that developments achieved by humanity are accounted for in Islamic law. In Islam, everything is allowed except what has been definitively prohibited, and these prohibitions are known and limited. The important dialogue among Imam Muhammad Abduh (one of the founding fathers of Islamic reform), Ernest Renan, and Farah Anton may assist in illuminating these gray zones. This dialogue splendidly and objectively linked the whole of Islamic civilization with Islamic law and its aims.

2) The Use of Violence

In addition to conflicting with our principles and programs, violence is against our interests and those of our nations. Our understanding of Islam leads us to trust wholly in human nature, and in the ability of Islam to deal creatively with this nature in an atmosphere of democratic competition that respects diversity and practices tolerance. I believe that discussions about the position of reformist Islamist movements on violence have become pointless. The fundamental distinction between resistance to oppression and occupation on one hand, and intimidation and bloodshed on the other should be clear to all.

In truth, it is the West that must be cleansed of violence. According to one historian's study, during the past two centuries all of the tragedies and acts of violence visited upon mankind have come from the west: the vicious religious wars between the Catholics and the Orthodox and between both of them and the Protestants; and the Hundred Years War (1337-1453 CE) between England and France. Then from the West came the idea of colonialism, which produced capitalism, and then communism as an opposing ideology. They were followed by fascism and Nazism, ideologies of superiority and racism. Nor does human memory forget the two world wars, the vilest in human history. The Middle East now is a clear example of Western violence. Even today we hear the voices of religious fundamentalism, a political dogma believed in and cultivated by the kings and presidents of the West. It is our hope that the West will, in word and deed, have greater respect for tolerance, and perhaps produce a leader like the German Emperor Frederick II (1212-1250 CE), considered a model in his concern for cultural interconnectedness and for the true application of great human values such as tolerance.

3) Political Pluralism

To accept diversity among human beings is to accept the right to disagree. Diversity in ideas and methods is both natural and logical. Islam considers this diversity and difference of opinion a positive trait that enriches human understanding and gives it breadth and depth. In politics, leftist parties put forth ideas on social justice that are worthwhile considering while liberals offers compelling views on freedom. Societies are broad enough to encompass all of these ideas so long as they do not conflict with the highest values anchored in the constitution.

The right of like-minded individuals to meet and assemble freely has become a necessity in our times, in which the modern state has grown dominant due to tremendous technological advances. The individual in opposition is extremely weak when he resists or differs with the state. Within parties, associations, or other groupings, however, it becomes possible to confront the state. Freedom of association enables those who stand in the opposition to exert pressure on the authorities and helps create a balanced political life. Also necessary is freedom of the media, in all their wide-ranging, modern means, which provide to opinion makers important tools for expressing their views.

4) Civil and Political Rights

Democracy remains the most effective means available for achieving human rights. Reformist Islamist movements understand democracy as coexistence among all elements of society, peaceful and constitutional alternation of power, the rule of law, and the protection of individual rights and freedoms. Freedom itself is a central Islamic value. It is even more important when the issue is connected to political freedom and freedom of opinion, because among the key principles of Islam is freedom of choice.

5) Women's Rights

Islam affirms the rights of women to administer family matters along with men, through compromise and consultation. The holy Quran mentions that women in public life have equal rights of participation in guiding society and in the policies of the state. They have the right to hold any position. As political institutions develop and governance improves, it will be wholly legitimate for a woman to assume the presidency, just as a man would do.

It is worth mentioning that the issue of women's rights is by no means confined to Muslim societies. Women in France did not win the right to vote until 1945, after showing courage and strength in resisting the German occupation! In my opinion, the problem lies in a long human heritage in which women were devalued and considered deficient beings! Greek civilization asserted this faulty concept when Aristotle said that he praised God for making him a man, a Greek, and a philosopher.

Reformist Islam assigns a large role to women in the national awakening. Women are half of society and they raise the other half. Women are doctors, teachers, and engineers; they produce and work according to what they choose to do and can do. The veiling of women in Islam accords with modesty and morality; the veil does not cover a woman's mind, personality, or humanity. Perhaps it is the Western view of the woman that is in need of correction and improvement. It has reached the point where all limits have been exceeded in the degradation of women in fashion, cosmetics, and sex. This is incompatible with human and religious values, and detracts from women as mothers, sisters, and wives—half of this world.

6) Religious Minorities

Freedom of worship is the most basic of all human rights, governed by the Islamic principle that “there is no compulsion in religion.” Reformist Islamist movements consider the citizen the foundation of society, regardless of religion or color. Belief in a religion or doctrine is through acceptance of the soul, and it is logically impossible for this to occur through compulsion; therefore, in Islam, religious belief flows from complete freedom free from any pressure or incentives. The holy Quran says “Will you compel people against their will to believe?”

It is important to stress that Muslims cannot practice their beliefs except by protecting the non-Muslims among them and preserving their right to difference in religion. In reformist Islam the citizen is considered the foundation of society, regardless of his religion or color. Justice for all people is an Islamic value, as the Quran says “God commands justice.” The foundation on which the treatment of non-Muslims is built is that the individual is for society and society for the individual, with all that this entails in terms of cooperation, mutual understanding, love, and respect. We praise God that our society has never experienced the likes of what happened to Rosa Parks in Montgomery, Alabama in 1955, when she refused to give up her seat on the bus to an American who was just like her, only white, as the law at that time stipulated that the seats at the front of the bus were for white citizens, not black.

The jizya (tax on non-Muslims) and dhimma (protected non-Muslims) are historical terms only, which have been replaced by the concept of citizenship-based democracy in a nation of justice and law. This is the model that reformist Islam, with the Muslim Brotherhood at the forefront, strives to envision and to build.

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Translated from Arabic by Kevin Burnham and Dina Bishara.