

Conference, Symposium, and Panel Reports

Islamic Reform Movements after the Arab Spring

On June 24-July 3, 2013, the International Institute of Islamic Thought held its annual Summer Institute for Scholars. Given the number of presentations, only a few of them will be mentioned here.

In his welcoming remarks, Abdul Aziz Sachedina (George Mason University) spoke eloquently about how change has to come from within, how politics still dominates values, and how the Qur'an and Sunnah are being read not for inspiration, but for putting down opposition and dissenters. The Arab Spring represents a challenge to undertake such an internal reform. Unfortunately, he said, cyberspace contains no serious conversation in this regard, just hostility and animosity, which only damages Muslims. He called for leaders to "moralize" the entire issue in order to achieve co-existence, mainly between Shi'is and Sunnis, and wondered if the reformers could deal with this and other issues.

John Voll (Georgetown University), who delivered the keynote address, "Pop-politics and Elections: Islam and Democracy after the Arab Spring," raised the question as to whether the Arab Spring makes any difference, given that reform movements have been going on in the Muslim world since 1880. Are we, he asked, "looking at something moving forward/different, or just rehashing the same old arguments?" He opined that a new vocabulary is needed and that people have to move beyond "interfaith," "tolerance," and interreligious dialogue and speak to each other about "shared interests." He then discussed earlier Muslim reform movements and how their goals have changed over the years.

Yahya Michot (Hartford University) presented a special lecture entitled "Taymiyyan Thoughts for a Temperate Arab Summer." He pointed out how different groups (e.g., those groups responsible for assassinating Sadat, the Algerian civil war, and 9/11) took Ibn Taymiyyah's anti-Mongol fatwas out of context to justify their actions. Thus they ignored the underlying issues: The supposedly "Muslim" Mongols were still massacring Muslims; they de-

manded absolute loyalty (which is not even due to the Prophet); and the need to create a “war theology designed to stir up resistance to the [Mongol] invaders.” All during those dark years, however, Ibn Taymiyyah remained loyal to the rightful rulers (the Mamlukes), even though “they weren’t much different than the Mongols.”

Emin Poljarevic (University of Edinburgh), in his “Agency and the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood: Micro-Level Analysis of Youth Activists,” presented to results of almost thirty in-depth interviews of Muslim Brotherhood youth activists conducted in Cairo two years before the revolution. He argued that the structuralist approach, both in its conceptual core and its adducing of extra variables, cannot satisfactorily explain what happened. Rather, he stated that it is the social actors and their mutual interactions that ultimately form the core of the social groups and institutions and that one must analyze these to understand the revolt. But in order to understand why they protested in the first place, their reasons for consciously, intentionally, and emotively choosing to engage in such a risky undertaking needs to be determined. He did this by looking at what he termed “personal ambitions,” “moral activism,” and “mobilization space,” all of which gradually led the interviewees to join the Muslim Brotherhood.

Syed Muhd Khairudin Aljunied (National University of Singapore), “An Islamicate Awakening: Revival and Reform in the Arab World and the ABIM Connection,” asserted that there is too much emphasis on the Middle East and North Africa, for the ummah is vast and interconnected. Thus changes that occur in one area affect what happens in another area. He considers “Arab Spring” a misnomer, for it did not break out in the “spring,” implies a degree of optimism that is way too early, provincializes the events, and masks class inequalities and the newly emerging class coalitions – all of which limits analysis. And besides, according to him, not all participants are Arab or Muslim. He suggested “Islamicate Awakening” as a more accurate term, for “Islamicate” is a neutral term and “Awakening” reflects the ongoing imagining of new possibilities and the formation of new identities. Such a term would place the Arab world within the larger context of humanity. He then related how ABIM had set up active networks with post-Mubarak Egypt, provided humanitarian aid to Syria, publicly supported the Brotherhood, and held consciousness-raising events to explain what was going on. He closed by declaring that the world needs to see that the Arabs are not, as so often portrayed, a special, unique, or isolated case.

Ahmad Najib Burhani (University of California – Santa Barbara), “The Arab Spring and the Reformasi ‘98: A Coparative Study of Popular Uprisings

in Tunisia and Indonesia,” took issue with the assertion that whenever democracy is “introduced,” the Islamists get most of the benefit. After Suharto’s downfall in 1998, the Islamists were not elected because they had allied themselves with the dictator during his last years in power. Thus they were just another party, as opposed to the opposition. This did not happen with Ennahda, which maintained its opposition status and was elected after Ben Ali’s ouster. In his opinion, the main reason for the Islamists’ poor showing in post-Suharto Indonesia is the “fading away of political or ideological streams ... since [the] Islamist agenda has been carried by all parties, even secular ones.”

Mojtaba Mahdavi (University of Alberta, Canada), “Making Sense of Post-Islamism: Lessons from the Arab Spring,” asserted that post-Islamism is a third path to modernity, the other two being those proclaimed by Francis Fukuyama (the “end of history”) and Samuel Huntington (the “clash of civilizations”). At their core, however, both paths are unsuitable because they are West-centric and that every other civilization must go through the same process if it wants to develop and modernize. Mahdavi presented an alternative discourse – universalism from below – which says that all cultures have a rich reserve (e.g., freedom, dignity, social justice) that needs to be extracted, reinterpreted, analyzed critically, and brought into reality. He concluded by saying that one has to distinguish between state and civil society and that an “Islamic” state cannot exist because the state is a secular entity based upon human interpretation.

Peter Mandaville (George Mason University), addressing a panel discussion on “Islam and Politics after the Uprisings: Case Studies,” asked “How can we talk about post-Islamism if the Islamists won?” He made the following tentative observations: The Islamists have embraced procedural parts of democracy but have not internalized political pluralism or liberalism. Egypt’s Muslim Brotherhood, now in power, has lost much of its inner plurality and is now trying to consolidate its power. The judiciary has tried for checks and balances, but Morsi sees these as leftovers from the Mubarak regime and anti-Islamism. The political system is broken, the Brotherhood has an ideological basis and a streak of authoritarianism (as did Mubarak), “social Salafis” have become influential (a cause of alarm for women and religious minorities), and who gets to define what “principles of the Shari‘ah” means. Other pressing concerns are the exact role of al-Azhar and the “Senior Council of Scholars,” Islam’s role in society, the worsening economic situation, and how long the people will be patient. In short, the new government is overwhelmed, needs to find an effective way to provide the expected services, and is “no longer the only game in town” that brings society closer to Islam.

Ali Mazrui (Binghamton University), “The Arab Awakening and the Turkish Unrest,” compared the Arab Spring 2011 with the unrest in Turkey during the second half of 2013. He then moved on to analyze Turkey under Ataturk (“the most spectacular example of democratizing a Muslim society from above”) and the attempts in Tunisia and Egypt to “democratize a Muslim society from below.” According to him, Ataturk saved Turkey’s political independence only to sacrifice its cultural authenticity due to his belief that Turkey had to westernize, secularize, and liberalize itself in order to become a true democracy. As the Arab world has never seen “so many popular uprisings which seem to be inspired neither by Islam nor by anti-imperialism, but in the quest for liberal reforms,” he called upon research institutes in Turkey to play an active research and scholarly role in an “effort to promote greater understanding of this new phase in Arab history.”

The 2014 Summer Institute for Scholars will be held toward the end of June. Please check www@iiit.org for the call for papers, which will be issued during October, or contact iiit@iiit.org for more information.

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