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PUBLISHED IN: HEMISPHERES: STUDIES ON CULTURE AND SOCIETIES, No. 22,  
2007.

**Islam and Civil Society: Mediation Between the State and Religion in the Middle East**

## 1. The idea of civil society

When referring to civil society in the European culture, we usually mean the Roman *societas civilis*, the latter, in turn, being a reference to the Greek *koinonia politike*. The semantic traces of these notions have been preserved to the modern era, when the plenitude of citizenship would express itself during the French Revolution and in the society established thereby, as well as in the Industrial Revolution, which altered the world of social relations to an unprecedented extent. The concept of civil society related to the representation of a free political organizations has survived the historical transformations and maintained its Aristotelian core pointing to the inalienable role of middle classes in stabilizing communal order (Koselleck 2001, p. 468). Mediation and communication between classes was to be ensured by the middle rich and the engagement in decision making of those who have the power over themselves as rightful citizens in the community. The idea of civil society manifested in such notions as *polites*, *civis*, *citizen*, *citoyen*. It's prescriptive elements point to self-determination among the equal members of the community. Emphasis was put on inclusion of the community fellow citizens capable of exercising the power and responsible for the society as an envisaged whole.

However, the full notion of *citizenship* was formulated in the modern era. In Europe, the ruling classes lost their political privileges in the coups and revolutions, and gave way to modern civil society, with its internal equality guaranteed by the law and conferred by the very fact of being born. In other words, the modern era established *society* in its pure sense for which the state was the guarantee of individual achievements, the security of private property and the body which was no longer an instrument of autocratic power, but a function of technocratic control over the capitalistic relations of production. The area of political definition of civil society shifted its central point from the rights of the people to the economic field of interest and marked its borders within the national state and its territory, as expressed in secular terms. This obviously would not mean that the struggle of social classes for the political influence was ceased. Still, the path of class influences were concealed in the area of civil society. Nowadays, various social forces determine electoral thresholds and render the area of traditional political game into the battlefield for influence on the 'state resources' for the sake of economic or cultural benefits\*.

The semantic turn in the idea of citizenship towards universalizing social relations was not equivalent to breaking the bonds of the earlier political interests of the great landowners, but to their shift to the level of economic, i.e. class relations. Great Britain is the best example of the clash between the idea of citizenship and the category of ownership. 'The gentry, with

all their osmosis with the bourgeoisie, always attached great deal of care to have middle classes remain where they were on the social ladder, so that the latter – incapable of being introduced into high society – were in fact left with only limited access to the parliament’, says Reinhart Koselleck (2001, p. 475).

Since the mid-18<sup>th</sup> century the citizenship terminology in Europe provided for the means of understanding one’s class position and triggered the conflict over accessing economic resources and influencing the political scene. A consequence of assuming the idea of civil equality as the determinant of being accepted to engage in exercising political power was the ongoing clash between the generality of that idea and the actual internal class divisions. The emancipation movement observable in social history in the 19<sup>th</sup> century obviously resulted from that discrepancy between the idea and the actual borderlines of political influences in the states of the industrial age.

It was only due to the major wars of the 20<sup>th</sup> century that a move away from the universality of determining electoral thresholds according to material qualifications and the implementation of universal citizenship into social life were disabled. Paradoxically, that move in post-war era materialized with the opposite effect as referred to that anticipated by the authors of the theory of the ideal citizen, i.e. through international wars and consolidating internal solidarity, as well as, as expressed by Max Weber, the peculiar ‘compensation of the equalities which are constantly and undoubtedly offered by the state to all its citizens: the purely physical safety, the minimum conditions to live, and the battlefield to die in’ (Weber in: Koselleck 2001, p. 533-534).

The above introductory notes on the issue of the formation of civil society in the European cultural sphere are intended to present the turbulent path of that concept throughout the history of the Middle East. In the Islamic countries, such a path of evolution of the idea of citizenship has never occurred. Moreover, the Islamic states have never been based on the explicit and dogmatized concept of civil society. The Islamic states are frequently accused of sharing certain fixed elements of their historical specificity which determine and limit the possibility of political and social development; consequently any attempt at introducing political institutions, models and ideas to the area of the Muslim cultural sphere must fail (see: Zubaida 1993). In other words, the simplifying essentialist approach implies the conclusion that the unified historical paths of development of the Middle Eastern region return to what has been presented in Islam since its origins, i.e. the authoritarian form of power (Zubaida 1993). Therefore, it is assumed that any actual evolution or modification of the line of development is impossible as the general outline of social and political relations are

historically determined by permanent (cyclical) return of the antidemocratic consent for the authoritarian rule. Islamic states and societies reject modernizing development in their compulsive return towards the traditional culture\*\*.

In my article I focus on presenting the dynamics of relations between the specificity of the historical context of social formations in the Middle East and the question of introducing general model of civil society in shaping the political decision-making mechanisms between the state and society. It points to the possibility of analyzing historical trajectories of development in the Middle Eastern countries utilizing the West-European terminology of general socioeconomic and cultural processes.

## **2. Civil society and the processes of modernization**

Process of modernization can be divided into several sections, the major ones are as follows: 1) urbanization; 2) weakening of traditional social and community bonds; 3) emergence of individualized labor market and 4) the development in education and mass media which shape the image of the community by formulating standardized communication language popularized by the press and novels (see: Casanova 2005)\*\*\*. In the 1950s and 1960s, when the above mentioned processes were crystallizing in the Muslim countries under the influence of national regimes, a merely early form of the civil society was observed (Eddin Ibrahim 1995, p. 37). The national regimes in such countries as Egypt, Syria, Yemen, Algeria or Iran were confronted with their societies and expelled the religious organizations from engaging in exercising political power. Excluding these organizations and depriving them of autonomy resulted in elimination the grass-roots (indigenous) legitimization of the modern regimes. The modernization plan, which assumed eradication of the traditional social institutions, broadened the centuries-old gap between the authorities and the society. This situation generated collective mobilization process which, under the banner of Islamic collective justice, undermined the legitimization of secular regimes.

The institutional base of the civil society was revitalized in late 1970s, after the coups, when the fundamentalist protests had died down (Kepel 2002). An increase in the number of non-governmental organizations was observed everywhere in the Muslim world and provided for the material and institutional grounds for the development of the civil society as the field for dialogue above the heads of the traditional Islamic authorities, though in close connection with the reformulated and codified rules of the religious law. At the end of the 1970s and the beginning of the 1980s there were established hundreds of private charitable organizations and associations for regional development. The total number of non-governmental

organizations in the Middle East grew from 20,000 in the 1960s to 70,000 (Eddin Ibrahim 1995 p. 39).

The major socioeconomic determinants which enabled impact of the societies on their governments included in particular:

- 1) Growing social needs of individuals and local communities. The necessity to provide for the basic health care and economic needs which could no longer be met by the state, as well as the consequent explosion of political, cultural and economic claims put forward through party channels and their representatives.
- 2) Educational expansion in the Middle Eastern countries as a response of the populist governments to their failures in other fields of guaranteed benefits. Growing numbers of the educated people, a result of national programs, implied the fundamental self-reflection on the matters of imagined community of the nation (Anderson 1991)<sup>\*\*\*</sup>. This led to the emergence of the crucial sphere of individual responsibility towards the community, the limits of which were no longer determined by local loyalty bonds but transferred to the level of basic horizontal solidarity.
- 3) Extension of the margin of freedom of expression went hand in hand with the demands for political participation targeted at the state by the organizations and individuals. In recent years political parties, organizations and local groups with different ideological options have been accepted as a legal political actors on the political scene. What is more, the Islamic organizations in such countries as Lebanon, Yemen or Jordan have approved of appointing women as state officials. In the same time Islamists in the Arab countries and all over the Middle East have become an integral actor on the political scene.

Although the idea of civil society was not present in the world of Muslim culture it appeared in the opinions of certain analytics who drew their conclusions from observing the major developmental tendencies in the Middle Eastern countries. I believe that the development of the above phenomena confirms the occurrence of circumstances favorable for the development of civil society, based on establishing the specific form of national state as imagined community (as understood by Anderson). However, this does not determine that there must emerge citizenship in its fully secular form, typical for the political culture of the West. In addition, this does not mean also that in the Muslim civil society does not appear protests or violent collective mobilizations against the state. The true is just the opposite: wide

range of contemporary civil actions is based on protest activity, but it takes places within the framework set by national policy.

Islam, an additional determinant of the shape of the contemporary civil society in the Middle East, must be taken into account. This component is the basis of the political culture and the indispensable element of social imagination which determines continuous identification with one's culture. It makes the legitimizing base and field for any political activity in creating the political vocabulary, the matrix of symbolic expression, the dictionary of political contention and the established law provided for and formalized in the constitution (vide Iran) beyond its traditional point of reference.

End of the 19<sup>th</sup> century in the Middle East was the time when Islamic countries started to implement comprehensive modernization reforms. Liberal market relations prevailed in production and exchange, cities became the major centers inhabited by the country's population, traditional blood ties and patron-customer relations were broken, mainly due to the development of expansive and centralizing state administration (Utvik 2003 p. 44). Therefore one of the consequences of the modernization process was not automatic emergence of the idea of secular citizenship, but rather formation of the sphere of symbolic communication which involved the above-mentioned relations between the state and the society by embedding them in the context shaped by Islam as the religion which includes all areas of social activity.

Islamic civil society is the processual relation. On the one hand, it is an outcome of the process of modernization clashed with the Islamic tradition, on the other, it is the guiding principle of Muslim reformists – an attempt at combining Islam with the Western methods of rational governance of a modern state. Civil society assumed the form of the 'arena' for sharing opinions between the society and the state, intended to reconcile the 'form' of the western state with the cultural 'content' of the Islamic way of understanding power relations. The thematic scope of contentious claims and symbolic identifications ensured legitimization of the modernization plan as an inherent component of the contemporary political and cultural heritage of Islam. The turn towards establishing civil society was made by realizing the necessity for the rational state and Islam to coexist after the 'revolutionary fundamentalism' era in their mutual relations. Therefore civil society is perceived as the mechanism of 'translational turn to re-Islamization of the public discourse' (Turam 2004) resulting from the *longue durée* nation-building process.

### 3. Modernizing force of Islam

The transformation from traditional to modern societies was made largely with the participation of the Islamic movements. The reference made by these movements to the questions connected with the modern socioeconomic relations showed how advanced were the attempts at reconciling the modern way of thinking with the Islamic culture (Utvik 2003, p. 43). Linking these two positions was intended to develop a hybrid whole including the state, the nation and the society, united under the aegis of Islam as the indicator of the right way of development which supports both individual and collective efforts to become wealthier or organized into political force. In the words of Bjorn Olav Utvik, 'It's certainly beyond question that Islamists defend the idea that Absolute Truth has been revealed to us through the Quran and the Sunnah (example) of the Prophet, and this truth should guide our individual and collective behavior. But this does not necessarily mean that their political discourse in general has a non-rationalist character' (Utvik 2003 p. 45).

Let me have a brief account of the Islamist view on economy and politics. The thinkers connected with the Society of the Muslim Brothers, the greatest Islamist social movement in the Muslim world, such as Sayyid Qutb, Yusuf Kamal, Husayn Shahhata, or Abd al-Hamid al-Ghazali, represent a wide spectrum of ideas referring to economy and political life in the context of development of modern political formations. All of them shared opinion that the gates of *ijtihad* remain open to interpretation when confronted with particular historical circumstances. From their perspective, economy functions as an element of the shared law of *sharia*, as a tool to mold stable and just society. The main focus is on shaping such economic mechanisms which would unite the Muslim society in its joint efforts to build sovereign development for which God's law is the indispensable condition and moral force required to introduce the solutions ensuring social harmony and justice above petty divisions and interests (Utvik 2003, p. 47). According to the authors, the traditional Muslim jurisprudence (*fiqh*) provides a reference in every discussion on economy rather than the subject of the actual dispute. At the same time, the authors refer to the economic science in explaining the functional mechanisms of the modern production and redistribution systems.

This trend is expressed best in the idea of Yusuf Kamal who referred to 'God's will [which] is found in that which serves the public interest' (Utvik 2003 p. 49). Yusuf Kamal himself declared that 'his purpose is to connect the present with the sacred text in order to develop a contemporary interpretation through *ijtihad*' (Utvik 2003 p. 49).

The Islamist movement constituted a social response to the unrest caused by the modernizing changes. Islamists provided the masses, eradicated from traditional societies,

cultural capital dressed in the new robes of the modern Islam. This movement, the link between the modern culture of the state and the developing mass society, made it possible to cope with complex dilemmas of achieving social and economic positions in the modern world. Movement made it possible to live in harmony with the commandments of the Koran and, while reach high positions in modern companies.

In the Islamic countries the translation of the word ‘modernization’ (*tahdith*) refers to the concept of self-rebirth (*tajaddud dhati*) (Utvik 2003 p. 56). Islamists emphasized building relations between the individual and the society and pointed to the obligations imposed by that relation. Movement underlined the enormous role of personal participation in social life as a response to substituting traditional horizontal bonds with vertical ones and making the society members equal in their rights to participate in the economic and political life. Emphasis on the individual path of every Muslim meant setting the individual in the new conditions in which he must make free decision in concord with the God’s law and adopt the obligation of *jihad* as his personal way in struggling with evil. The path of an individual was related in these concepts to the obligations towards the community of the believers; corruption and drawing personal benefits from one’s position were condemned. The major criterion of free choice was dedication of one’s professional life to the benefit of the community, presented as the imagined whole consisting of the individuals equal to one another. They should participate in the life of the historical body whose rhythm is determined by the calendar of religious events and the dates in press headlines which denote the passing of time in the everyday system of work subordinated to the projects of individual careers.

Islamism as a modern social movement focused on binding the modernizing influences with defining one’s way for individual development free from the colonial and Westernizing context. All forms of the modernization process pointed out above, i.e. individualization, bureaucratization and rationalization, became widespread in the Muslim world and provided for the conditions which enable civil society to arise in the institutional sense. The interpretative efforts undertaken in the face of these sudden social changes in the Middle East transformed into the discursive framework stabilizing the relations between the state and the society in the form of the Islamic civil society. It was built as a response to the practices of state regimes and the threat of foreign influence and domination.

The concept of utmost relevance for this processual understanding of civil society is the idea of *political field* developed by Iranian sociologist Sami Zubaida (1993). For Zubaida, the most important factor is that ‘alongside these state forms there developed a whole complex of political models, vocabularies, organizations and techniques which have



established and animated what I call a *political field* of organization, mobilization, agitation and struggle. The vocabularies of this field are those of nation, nationality and nationalism, of popular sovereignty, democracy, liberty, legality and representation, of political parties and parliamentary institutions, as well as various ideological pursuits of nationalism, Islam and socialism' (1993, p. 146).

#### **4. Sociological mechanisms of historical civil society**

The phenomenon of development of the Islamic civil society is based on the mechanisms as follows: 1) *objectification* of interpersonal and inter-group relations occurs when people become aware of their religion and praise the issues regarding the nature and significance of religion (Moaddel 2001, p. 374); 2) *fragmentation* means deprivation of religious authorities the right to the 'only correct' interpretation of Islam. 2) *consultations* (sometimes violent) of conflicted claims between the state and the symbolic foundations of the Middle Eastern societies; process which defines the 'understanding' of the political issues of importance for the Islamic people. The historical 'past' and tradition on the one hand, and the politics of the state's 'presence' on the other, were to provide one another with the means to function mutually. Therefore institutionalization of civil society was both a result of the modernization processes and a way to deal with the state extremism and the fundamentalist radicalism from the other side.

The fundamental needs of providing oneself with well-balanced internal relations in the face of development of the modern social structures and the urge to represent sovereign social interest as part of state politics were related to the wider nation-building process. In this process, social movements began to consult their positions in the area of political and cultural relations. An important element of that process were rapid consultations on the educational, economic, and political system questions, the philosophical aspects of a good government and the differences between the law coming from God and the law established by people in the name of God.

#### **5. Summary**

In the theoretical context we can speak of two types of civil society: 1) 'processual (historical) civil society' as the outcome of the contentious forces and 2) 'ideal civil society' aimed at the idea of democracy, i.e. the self-aware sphere, accompanied by democratic values and cultivated by the whole of society, the latter being a value, recalling the well-known phrase of Marks, 'for itself'.

The processes which generated fundamentalist response to the modernization led to the collapse of the legitimization of the former political rules. Later, the same process became responsible for raising awareness of the nation by familiarizing, confronting and consulting claims in the traditional area of symbolic production. Firstly, on the basis of grass-roots Islamic movements, than by activating their political potential for mediating between the state and the people.

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\* There is a constant dilemma in the contemporary discussions about the just government: redistribution or recognition? (see: Fraser, Honneth 2005).

\*\* One of the good examples of such 'compulsive' turns in the history of Middle Eastern politics, most often referred to by the supporters of the essentialist approach, is the case of depriving women the right to wear veils by Reza Shah in Iran, followed by reintroduction of the obligation to wear veils by the post-revolutionary Islamic government in 1979.

\*\*\* The development of the press implies the possibility to identify with fellow citizens who read the same newspapers; headlines quote particular dates and present certain layouts of the topics raised, thus creating the space of a shared notion of the national issues.

\*\*\*\* According to Benedict Anderson, the community is 'imagined' in a sense that 'the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow members, meet them or even hear of them, yet in the mind of each lives the image of their communion' (Anderson 1991, p. 15).

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