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Universal Aspirations

The Muslim Brotherhood in Europe

BRIGITTE MARÉCHAL

Shumuliyyat al-islam (Islam as encompassing every aspect of life) is the first of twenty principles laid out by the founder of the Muslim Brotherhood movement, Hassan al-Banna, to teach his followers the proper understanding of Islam. Even though this principle, usually translated as the “comprehensive way of life,” still remains integral to the teachings of the members of the Brotherhood, both in Egypt and in Europe, it is strangely enough neither commented upon in scholarly references nor by the wider public. When the Federation of Islamic Organizations in Europe (FIOE, representing the Muslim Brotherhood movement at the European level) presented the European Muslim Charter to the international press in January 2008, none pinpointed this “universal dimension” of their understanding of Islam despite the potential tensions or even incompatibilities, both political and legal, that this concept might have on a discourse on integration and citizenship. What do the Muslim Brothers traditionally say about this concept and how do they justify their call for it? What are its constituents and the scope of its application? Are there any significant modifications to the concept in attempting to contextualize it within a pluralist Europe?

Muslim Brotherhood's principles

The Muslim Brotherhood offers its members a basic Islamic education informed by the teachings of its founder that promote both a personal and communal sense of Islamic identity that is proud of itself, strong, and capable of the revitalization of the ummah. One's affiliation to the movement is built around the proper understanding of the Islamic message contained in the first of ten pillars. That pillar is itself comprised of obedience to twenty principles that, together, constitute a real practical method for grasping Islam and the spirit of its message: it is an all-encompassing framework of attitudes to

be adopted with regard to individual practices all leading to escaping the “pathways of hell.” For example, while the sources of legislation are the Quran and the Sunna the principles warn that the use of intuition is not allowed unless it does not contradict Quran and Sunna.

The very first of these twenty principles concerns the comprehensiveness of the message of Islam. It suggests that Islam should be understood as a complete system that concerns state and nation, beliefs and legislation, cult and behaviour, and the social, political, and the historical. According to the Muslim Brotherhood scholar Yusuf al-Qaradawi, al-Banna derived this notion from examining the early history of Islam: the Prophet was both a spiritual guide and a head of State. It is also based on the interpretation of Quranic verses, notably S. 16, V. 89: “And

we reveal the Scripture unto you as an exposition of all things, and a guidance and a mercy and good tidings for those who have surrendered (to Allah)” as meaning that Islam takes into consideration

Since its foundation in 1928, the Muslim Brotherhood has advocated a holistic vision of Islam as being both a political ideology and a social doctrine. This vision is now also propagated in Europe, where members and sympathizers of the Brotherhood form a largely informal but nevertheless quite influential movement. The author argues that the Muslim Brotherhood in Europe, while encouraging citizenship and integration within European societies, still promotes the totalizing discourse of the days of Hassan al-Banna.

the totality of all matters.¹ Together, these twenty principles induced for the Muslim Brothers a holistic vision of the world that contains a political ideology and a social doctrine. On this wise, al-Banna sought to construct an Islamic orthodoxy to go beyond the differences that divided Muslims in order to reinforce Islam and the power of Muslims world-wide as well as to counter foreign ideologies that might weaken Muslims.

The Muslim Brotherhood in Europe

Members and sympathizers of the Muslim Brotherhood have migrated from Arab countries to Europe as political exiles or students since the end of the 1950s. At first, they organized inward-facing groups. But since the 1980s, they became a powerful force acting within the community as a whole: they established mosques, Muslim student organizations, Islamic charities and centres, national bodies, etc. aiming at a full representation of Muslims within the European countries.

Today, the movement is mostly composed of a variety of secretive informal networks with low membership count (around a thousand for United Kingdom, France, and Belgium together). Nevertheless, they are quite influential: through inner circle education and open conferences, they continue to transmit an ethos of living as Muslims.

In Europe, the organization still considers the ten pillars as unalterable and the Brothers continue to endorse these principles. The most important of which is *shumuliyyat al-islam*. It is mainly understood as a complete way of life that can solve all human problems and as a world-wide message addressed to all people because it is inclusive of all divine messages that are relevant for all times and places. A second concept, *fikr al-jihad*, calls for exerting one's effort so as to change oneself. Altogether, they remind Muslims of the importance of devotion to God and perseverance and of getting involved in “Islamic work,” to bring about a “gradual reform” of society. These themes represent milestones that define the contours of behaviour that is supposedly authentically Islamic.

The European Muslim Brotherhood thus advocates the principle of the universal nature of Islam, but without fleshing out the principle in detail. Despite the fact that European societies are mainly composed of non-Muslims it still aspires to an Islam that could inform every single aspect of life, even collective life. It seems as if it takes the context into consideration, but not when it invokes such traditional concepts. The concept is neither explicitly stated in the discourses, precisely defined, nor are its implications clearly expounded.² It is usually contextualized in references to those abstract concepts of *i'tidal* (principle of right behaviour) and *wasatiyya* (principle of moderation): The principles of Islam supposedly are all comprehensive of every aspect of life but they also have to be understood in a moderate way – the paradox can hardly be resolved.

This constant reference to the universal nature of the message of Islam tells us something about how and why the ideology of the organization usually succeeds to survive beyond the shifting context in Europe: it is precisely the fluidity of the discourse that allows its persistence. The organization's concrete activities are nevertheless nowadays limited; whereas previously its members had joined politi-

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PHOTO BY DOMINIQUE FAGET / © AFP, 2008



cal parties and created a secret military apparatus to defend their organizations, today they shun political parties and hardly invest themselves in social actions, although they are involved in representative organizations for Muslims. However, they reinforce the concept of Islamic norms via the establishment and promotion of the European Council for Fatwas and Research, which tries to legally advise Muslims on sensitive issues. As such, they keep alive this idea of an Islamic law that might still be relevant for any aspect of contemporary life for all European Muslims.

Universal aspirations in two countries

The emphasis on the principle of the universality of Islam differs according to each country. In the United Kingdom, home office policies promote multiculturalism and a wide autonomy for ethnic and religious communities. Accordingly, some claims are explicitly referring to the sphere of politics and to the juridical dimension of Islam, carried on by a few Muslim Brotherhood intellectuals. In France, where government policies are focused on the integration of individuals and not collective groups, the claims are usually less explicit and provocative as they seem to be limited to the social sphere. Nonetheless, at the end of the day, the actual understanding and use of the term *shumuliyyat al-islam* does not really differ that much.

In Great Britain, the discourses refer to historical slogans including, explicitly, some political and juridical dimensions: at the 2004 annual conference of the Muslim Association of Britain (MAB), Jamal Badawi took up the slogan "Islam is the solution" (to all problems). He based this proposition on *rabbanniya* (the majesty of God, that imposes God's will in and of itself, upon everyone) and the fact that Islam gives fundamental guidance to human beings and offers practical advice. It is also common to hear Islam spoken of as a societal alternative, especially with regard to the application of Islamic law in family matters. And the British approach is not limited to this aspect either. For example, a partisan of the MAB expressed the view that Islam offers solutions to each of our contemporary social evils; he recommended assigning a higher value to individual piety and a complementary approach to the social alternatives most often proposed. He recognized the two-sided nature of this universalist project, concerning the this-world and the beyond. When he claimed that this is not antagonistic to existing societies, he went against the views of Zahid Parvez who presented Islam as an alternative to both socialism and capitalism at a seminar of the MAB in Glasgow in December 2002.

In France, such ideas are usually not expressed in the same way and the claims seem to be more limited. In a mosque near Lille, in 2005, the imam Ahmed Miktar intones the same incantatory formula, but he adopts a slightly different tone of discourse: he does not claim that Islam is the solution for everything but only claims that Islam is the solution to many social problems, that it produces good citizens who act for the common good, and that it is a positive force in society without going any further.

Some innovations are nevertheless noticed in France even if the claims expressed might finally be understood as radical stances as in Great-Britain. A first example refers to the public discourse of Mohsen N'Gazou a member of the Union of Islamic Organizations in France (UOIF), who is also a member of the FIOE. At the annual meeting of the UOIF, in Paris in 2003, he emphasizes the universal dimension of Islam as completely correlated to the modern context. After presenting spirituality as a fundamental dimension, he affirms that humanism is not sufficient in order to make human beings fully human. Faith, according to him, gives meaning to existence and is an irreducible universal imperative. Moreover because the world is global nowadays it is important that Muslims should undertake action on a global scale as well. Therefore, it is the context

that "justifies" the global responsibilities that have been placed upon Muslims, that concern even non-Muslims. A new form of argument, of a contextual type, is thus applied by this speaker to the claim of the universal nature of Islam, initially only derived from the sacred texts, in order to reinforce its relevance.

A second example shows a paradigmatic change in the way to conceive the imperatives of the divine law, the Sharia, presented as not questioning the western system at first sight although it does so radically: when Abdallah Benmansour, influent member of the UOIF, affirms in 2005 that "Islam is involved in almost every insignificant thing," he implies that Islamic prescriptions are ever-present for any person who pays attention to them. The divine hegemony is all the more in evidence, inasmuch as each action offers us the possibility of conforming to the Islamic way, whatever its importance may be. Instead of exhorting the faithful to modify current laws or to push for the adoption of political amendments that would make current laws and policies more compatible with the spirit of Islam, rather he challenges his listeners to realize that every human activity already presents, in and of itself, an occasion for action in conformity with Sharia. Implicitly, he lets it be understood that the perspectives of a utopian Islamic system should still be part of the present, and easily accessible for any individual. Every aspect of life, be it work, marriage, or finances is an opportunity to introduce Islam into life.

Old slogans in a new context

The differences in the concept of *shumuliyya* in the United Kingdom and in France are very relative however. In both countries the European Muslim Brotherhood adopts an unquestioning and totalizing discourse which maintains its long-term vision. Islam is still affirmed as a whole alternative system, probably under fear that any restriction to it would end up destroying the whole ideology. The tradition is kept alive, so is its utopia, even if its realization remains quite limited and their new modalities of action prove that they take changing circumstances into consideration.

The Muslim Brotherhood actively promotes citizenship and integration within the European societies (such as in their European Muslim Charter) but far from accepting the marginalization of their ideology after all its past failures in achieving their goals anywhere, some of the members are still also fully promoting their old slogans in quite a simple way. In doing so, they show the limits of their will and abilities to really develop a renewal of their ideology that would be adapted to the modern European pluralist context.

**FIOE President
Chakib
Benmakhlouf
presenting
the European
Muslim Charter**

Notes

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1. Hassan al-Banna, *20 principes pour comprendre l'islam* [explained by shaykh Yusuf al-Qaradawi] (Paris: Médiacom, 2004).
2. Tariq Ramadan, in his book *Western Muslims and the Future of Islam*, could only dare to express that this idea could be confusing.