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Development as Divinely Imposed Duty

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The need for technological and economic development has remained central in the political agenda of the mainstream Islamist movements up to the present. In Egypt in particular groups such as the Muslim Brothers, the Labour Party¹ (Hizb al-'Amal), and the Centre Party² (Hizb al-Wasat) have devoted a great deal of their political energy to criticizing the failure of the economic development effort, and emphasize the need for building an independent technological base in Muslim

countries, in order to escape the current total dependence on Western and East Asian countries for advanced equipment. Through their press and as elected representatives, Islamists call for rapid industrialization, improved communications, upgrading basic infrastructure and services in the villages, etc. Not least, beyond the level of immediate questions of economic policy, the Islamist interpretation of the social message of Islam is much conducive to economic development, and reminiscent of the Protestant ethics that Max Weber saw as propitious to capitalist development in Europe. This will be confirmed by a glance at what Egyptian thinkers linked to the Muslim Brothers and the Labour Party have written on economic questions.³

Based on their pronouncements the building of a strong and technologically advanced economy emerges as a sacred duty. For Adil Husayn, the deceased charismatic ideologue of the Labour Party's turn to Islamism, this was an integral part of the quest for independence which was at the heart of his political and intellectual efforts. Economy professors Yusuf Kamal and Husayn Shahhata, central spokesmen for the Muslim Brothers on economic issues, for their part state that the Islamic Sharia aims at comprehensive development in order to achieve strength and glory for the Muslim nation. They claim that mankind is entrusted with a sacred obligation to exploit natural resources to the full for the increase of the material wealth of society, and that economic development is a *fard kifaya*, a collective duty, to be secured by the state if individuals fail to promote it with sufficient force. The whole development effort is likened to a jihad. Both Kamal and Shahhata emphasize the centrality of the development effort in an Islamic system through stating that zakat revenue can be used by the state for productive investment in order to further development. Shahhata states that work is to be considered a form of *'ibada*, part of the worship of God. This implies that the perfection of one's work is a religious obligation equal in importance to the fulfilment of ritual duties like prayer and fasting, and is reminiscent of the Protestant idea of work as a calling. Shahhata holds up the furtherance of public interest, *maslaha*, as equal to fulfilling God's will, and in line with this he accords the call for modernizing the economy priority over the formal fulfilment of tenets of *fiqh*, as in Islamist critique of "Islamic" investment companies and banks for not investing in projects which would contribute to the development of production.

There is an old *fiqh* principle stating that in considering *maslaha* in the choice between possible interpretations of the Quran or Sunna on a specific point of jurisprudence, one should proceed according to a descending ladder of priorities: first necessities, *daruriyyat*,

Middle Eastern Islamists have been unequivocal advocates of bringing their societies up to the technological level of modern industrial society. In fact, the most fertile recruiting ground for Islamist organizations has been students in technological and natural science subjects. As Islamist movements gather strength year by year, and are poised to be the main beneficiaries of any turn towards democratic government in the region, it seems imperative to gain an insight into their ideas on economic issues.

then needs, *hajat*, then improvements, *tahsinat*. The Muslim Brothers take up this list of priorities and adopt it as "Islamic priorities for production and investment,"⁴ so that Muslim society, and the Islamic state as its representative, must before anything else secure the sufficient allocation of resources for the procurement of basic necessities for the population. Even if self-proclaimed Islamic financial institutions can be said to be operating without interest it does not make them Islamic

in the eyes of the Muslim Brothers and the Labour Party if they do not support this effort, but concentrate on financing trade and currency speculation.

God's stewards on earth

There is common agreement among Islamist writers that private property is the basic principle in Islam and that this is necessary for stimulating men to exert their best efforts at developing and preserving wealth.⁵ Still they all stress that public interest takes priority over private interests. A central idea is that of man as "God's steward (*khalifa*) on earth."⁶ Everyone has the right to private property, but this right is limited by the fact that all wealth ultimately belongs to God. The individual is seen as holding property in trust from God and from society

as God's deputy, as it were. Therefore private property involves a social responsibility. It should be made to bear fruit in the service of society, and it should be preserved and developed for future generations. And others have claims on the property; that is, the return it brings or even parts of the property itself may be needed to satisfy urgent needs of the wider community.

The Egyptian Islamists consider it a task for an Islamic state to secure a minimum of welfare to all members of society. This is to be realized through concentrating investment and production on the provision of basic necessities, and, centrally for Kamal and Shahhata, through the zakat. The Muslim Brother writers emphasize that the zakat should provide more than what is necessary for mere survival; every member of society should have the right to a certain degree of enjoyment of life.⁷ The ideal of the just Islamic society is not one of radical egalitarianism, but rather of balance, of Islam as a moderate third way avoiding the excesses of capitalism and communism. This

implies that the ideal is to seek a harmonious balance between different social groups and between generations. Class conflict is seen as an evil which it is an imperative to avoid lest its divisive cancer split society into warring factions.

The liberating force of faith

Over and above the general principles enunciated as guiding an Islamic economy, the Islamist writers emphasize the liberating force of faith in itself. Faith induces good behaviour towards others and thereby creates a solid framework for social solidarity, says Kamal. Husayn stresses belief in a sacred doctrine as an indispensable prerequisite for the will to sacrifice without which any serious development effort is doomed to failure. More generally this is linked to the idea that a true Muslim is involved in an unceasing battle for good against evil, and

Islamist doctrine

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should use her or his measured time in this world in a disciplined and purposeful way. When the energy of the believer through the values listed above is directed towards the increase of material production, Islamist doctrine would seem to possess a substantial potential for economic mobilization. This is true not least since there is an emphasis not only on an Islamic state enforcing these values, but ultimately on them being internalized as natural instincts by believers.

Misguided belief in miracles?

In his influential works on Islamic economics, notably *Islam and Mammon: The Economic Predicaments of Islamism*,⁸ Timur Kuran presents a rather more gloomy picture. To Kuran the core of the recently emerged idea of an Islamic economy stems from a notion of justice based on the two principles of equality in distribution and fairness in productive, commercial, and financial interaction. The realization of these principles is presented as flowing naturally from the implementation of the Islamic procedures of *zakat* (which secures equality), and the prohibition of *riba* (which secures fairness). Kuran argues that this is an illusion based on unrealistic presumptions about the workings of a modern market economy. The literature analyzed by Kuran stems mainly from the South Asian Islamic region, and is mostly not produced by political Islamists. It is probably correct to say that the writings in question tend to be of a more technical and scripturalist nature than that of the Arab Islamist discourse. Yet this can at best partially account for Kuran's inclination to reduce Islamic economic thought to a misguided belief in the miraculous effect of reintroducing medieval economic principles.

It would seem that in his effort to disprove the "workability" of Islamist economic prescriptions Kuran becomes insensitive to the dynamic aspect of Islamist reformulations of Islam. He does acknowledge that equality and justice are part of wider set of moral injunctions. But to Kuran these injunctions can be summed up as a general call for altruistic behaviour, and this he summarily dismisses as unworkable, since altruism can only work within small social units, such as the family, and not on the scale of a nationwide market. This statement in itself is certainly debatable. But more importantly Kuran fails to notice that Islamist advocacy of hard and conscientious work, the establishment of merit as the sole criterion for economic decisions, and the urgency of economic development as central Islamic values, gives a thoroughly modernizing flavour to the "package" of values presented as those guiding an Islamic economy. Furthermore, and precisely for this reason the fact that efficiency, growth, employment, and industrialization are held forth as important goals, stands for Kuran as somehow isolated from, and partly in contradiction to, the "moral economy" otherwise propagated. A careful reading of this same moral economy would rather show consistency between the moral principles advocated and what is set up as practical economic goals. Kuran instead ends up suggesting that the only link between Islamism and modernization would spring from social reaction against "fundamentalist" Islamic regimes.

Kuran concentrates on discussing the feasibility of the solutions proposed by the "Islamic economic" literature. This leads him to disregard the possibility that the inconsistencies he points to might be understood as expressing a tension between the resolve to promote a reading of the Islamic message relevant to the problems of modernizing society, and the equally strongly felt need to guard the sanctity of the scriptures. The tension in question reflects precisely the innovative character of the discourse.

A pro-modern ideology

On the whole, then, I would argue that mainstream Islamism in the Middle East as exemplified by the Egyptian movements discussed here should be considered as a pro-modern ideology not only in the sense of its stressing the need for economic and technological development,

Image not available online

Egyptian workers in a garment factory in Cairo

but also in view of the individualizing aspects of Islamist interpretation of the Islamic message. There is a strong focus on the individual as responsible not only for his own proper conduct but for all the affairs of society and state that contrasts with more traditional communalist attitudes and a traditional division of roles where politics would be the domain of notables and religion that of the clerical leaders. Especially with the Muslim Brothers the focus on individual duties is coupled with a strong defence of individual rights against the encroachment of the state. Common to all Islamists is a strong emphasis on merit, which is the idea that there should be full access to social

mobility for every individual regardless of family background, and that all promotions should take place based on consideration of individual merit in piety and in efficient and good work. This would require equal access to education and employment and an end to age-old practices of nepotism and favouritism in public and business life.

The stress on merit is therefore closely linked to the Islamists' frenetic campaigning against corruption. The main target is the misuse of public office to further personal interests or those of individual or groups close to the office holder. The Islamists criticize officials taking bribes and illegitimate charges for exercising their duties, and denounce the misappropriation of funds for buying votes and for paying commissions to cronies of people in office, or by awarding public contracts to other than the one presenting the best tender. In this can also be seen a modernizing aspect, in that the borderline is very thin and vague between corruption and traditional patron-client relations. One might perhaps say that corruption thrives in the confrontation between inherited social structures based on the reciprocal solidaric obligations of kinship and client networks, and the institutions of a modern market and a modern state. The Islamists seem not only in their campaigning against corruption, but also to the extent that they are involved in business, to favour a detached impersonal style focused on economic efficiency.

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Notes

1. The Labour Party, founded in 1978, was originally a leftist-nationalist group, but in the late 1980s adopted a clear-cut Islamist platform. Its activities as a legal party were frozen by the authorities in 2000, but the party remains active in the opposition.
2. The Centre Party was formed in 1996 by liberal dissidents from the Muslim Brothers. It has yet to gain formal status as a legal party.
3. Main references: Adil Husayn, *Al-islam din wa hadara: mashru' lil-mustaqbal* (Giza, 1990); Yusuf Kamal, *Al-islam wa'l-madhahib al-iqtisadiyya al-mu'asira* (Mansura, 1986) and *Fiqh al-iqtisad al-amm* (Cairo, 1990); Husayn Shahhata, *Al-minhaj al-islami lil-amm wa'l-tanmiya* (10th of Ramadan City, 1990).
4. For instance Kamal, *Fiqh al-iqtisad al-amm*, 150.
5. Kamal, *Al-islam wa'l-madhahib al-iqtisadiyya al-mu'asira*, 150–155.
6. Shahhata, *Al-minhaj al-islami lil-amm wa'l-tanmiya*, 45–46; Husayn, *Al-islam din wa hadara*, 44–47.
7. Kamal, *Al-islam wa'l-madhahib al-iqtisadiyya al-mu'asira*, 214–216.
8. Timur Kuran, *Islam and Mammon: The Economic Predicaments of Islamism* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005).