THE CULTURAL FOUNDATIONS OF ISLAMIST LEADERSHIP IN MOROCCO

Mohammed Maarouf*

Over the past four decades, Morocco has experienced an Islamist challenge to the dominance of the ruling elites. From the period of the emergence of Shabiba al-Islamiya (Islamic Youth) in the 1970’s to the recent times when Jihadi Salafism rose on the scene in the Islamic Maghreb, the country homed a variety of Islamist groups with homegrown characteristics well explored by researchers in political sciences and sociology of religion. What has been given little consideration, however, is the cultural embedding of these Islamist movements, their cultural specificity and enrollment in local activities at the bottom of social space.

The context of existing Literature on the subject of Islamism delineates three main perspectives. First, there is an approach focusing upon the activist role of Islamist minorities, the causes of their radicalization and their organization and scope of influence. Mamdani (2002), Nathan J. Brown, Amr Hamzawy, and Marina Ottaway (2006) and Cavatorta (2005), for instance, have been concerned with the politics of Islamism. Lamchichi (1990, 1994), Tozy (1991, 1997, 1999, 2003), Benoamar (1988) and Vermeren (2004) have mainly been dealing with the political rapport the monarchy has established with Islamist groups and how it has managed to control the socio-religious field. Chekroun (2005) and Pargeter (2009) have explored the causes of cultural radicalization, Chekroun focusing on the political economy of Islamist radicalization, Pargeter on localism talking about the economic, regional, historical, and moral causes of radicalization starting from the cramping condition of social living in shantytowns to the social conservativeness of the Rif, the Northern Region in Morocco. Second, there is an approach that focuses on the Islamist discourse and ideology including radical trends (Abu Zayd 2006; Darif 1995; EL-Khal 2003; Ouaradi 2010; Oukasha 2010).

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Arkoun in this respect has been keen on approaching Islamic culture and tradition from a critical interdisciplinary perspective. His main objective has been to dismantle the ‘unthought’ and the ‘unthinkable’ in classical and modern Islamic thought, heading towards an unprecedented shift from ‘rethinking tradition’ or even ‘rethinking the Quran’ to ‘rethinking Islam’ in general. Several of his books in English and French reflect such modern concerns: *The Unthought in Contemporary Islamic Thought* and also *Rethinking Islam, Common Questions, Uncommon Answers*. By analyzing the historical, cultural, social, psychological and linguistic contexts, Arkoun seeks to emancipate the ‘unthought’ and/or the ‘unthinkable’—such as the rule of law and civil society—from the blinkers of dogmatic thinking on Islam, *shari'ah*¹ (the Islamic code of law), democracy and human rights, and initiate “a radical re-construction of mind and society in the contemporary Muslim world” (Arkoun 1994: 1). Issues such as the nature of revelation and holy book, secularism, and individualism are all ‘unthought’ and ‘unthinkable’ due to the dominant position of orthodoxy in the history of Islamic culture. The building block in Arkoun’s project is the critique of Islamic reason, the withdrawal from classical *ijtihad*² that is restricted by the epistemological constraints established by jurists in the 8th to 9th centuries, and the effectuation of a modern critical analysis of the structure of Islamic reason (Arkoun 1992: 17).

Tariq Ramadan is another scholar who has been concerned with modes of discourse in Islam but this time with particular importance to the discourse produced in the West. Living with some 15 million Muslims in Europe, Ramadan feels it is time to forsake the binarism in Muslim thought that defines Islam in opposition to the West. For him this is possible if one uproots Islamic values from their culture of origin and implants them in the cultural context of Western Europe. Ramadan says: “I am a European who has grown up here. I don’t deny my Muslim roots, but I don’t vilify Europe either. I can incorporate everything that’s not opposed to my religion into my identity” (Ramadan in: Quesne n.d.). Islam is not the only nominee to be redefined in the European

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¹ The diacritic marks normally used in the transliteration of the Arabic script have been omitted throughout this article. Arabic words are spelled in the singular with plurals indicated by ‘-s’; the dialect sound ‘g’ pronounced as ‘g’ in ‘grand’ is added to the Arabic consonants.

² It is the endeavor of a Moslem scholar to derive a rule of divine law from the Koran and Hadith without relying on the views of other scholars.