



Islam and Secularism

The stark contrast between two different perspectives on the interaction between secularism and Islam, which were presented in articles in today's issue of the newspaper *Asharq-alawsat*, revealed the serious ideological divide within the Arab/Muslim world. [PI Online](#) examines the articles written by two well known columnists, 'Abdul Rahman Al-Rashed and Fahmi Huwaidi as well as reader reactions.



Al-Rashed was writing on the communiqué issued by the eighth “Muslim World League” conference which took place in Mekkah, Saudi Arabia in mid-December. He praised the communiqué's call for tolerance, co-existence and good relations between people. He then examined the inflammatory statement which proclaimed that: “The Muslim World is experiencing an attack against its identity, its culture and its economy in the name of secularism, globalization and the new world order.” *Al-Rashed* questions the wisdom of attacking ideologies adopted by a large number of countries, including some Muslim countries like Turkey. He points out that it was the secular system of these countries, which adopted the principle of the separation of religion and state that protected their citizens, including Muslims, from discrimination and allowed them to practice their different religions freely.

Al-Rashed also questions the attack on globalization. He states that globalization is not an institutional conspiracy. Rather, it is a natural process of evolution through expanded trade in goods and technologies and greater exchange of ideas through the internet. He notes that Islam has profited from the globalization phenomenon, which enabled the expansion of Islam and promoted interconnection between Muslims across vast geographic distances. The author also objects to use of the term “new world order.” In his view, the term is simply political rhetoric, without practical application and certainly the conferees were unable to define the term. *Al-Rashed* concludes that rather than issuing obscure statements that generate controversy, the communiqué should have clearly addressed the problems confronting Muslims.



Writing on the “National - Islamic Ideological Dialogue” which took place in Alexandria, Egypt December 9-11, 2007,¹ *Fahmi Huwaidi* addresses the issue of secularism from a different perspective. The topic of the conference was how to reconcile national identity and the role of the state with Islamic identity and the role of political Islam. *Huwaidi* decried particular ideas presented during the conference, such as notion that secularism is the only road to democracy, or that Islamic countries that adopt the *Shari'a* (Islamic Jurisprudence) are unable to apply democratic principles, or that the position of the *Quran* vis-à-vis women is contradictory in nature. He reserved his sharpest criticism, however, for participants who attacked the role of Islam in the public arena. In his view, there is no conflict between nationalism and political Islam. Rather, he sees the conflict as between Islamists and nationalists on one side and secularists and communists on the other. The Islamists and nationalists are, in his view, “moderates” while the secularist and communists are “extremists.” By grouping secularists with communists, *Huwaidi* appears to suggest – by design rather than ignorance – that secularists are atheists. In doing so, *Huwaidi* frames the conflict in religious rather than political terms. He thereby transforms a political debate about the interplay between religion and the state into a religious conflict between Islam and atheists.

Huwaidi condemns secularists for portraying religion as a private matter and their refusal to accept a public role for Islam. In an apparent attempt to urge nationalists and Islamists to close ranks, he emphasizes that their common enemy is “secularism.” He argues that the problem of secularism must be resolved before nationalists and Islamists can continue their dialogue.

Reader Reactions

¹ This conference took place under the auspices of the center for Arab Unity Studies and the Swedish center in Alexandria.

Some comments on the articles were critical, others were supportive and still others added additional dimensions to the topic. Some examples are:

Al-Rashed Article

Critical:

- It is untrue that all secular systems emphasize freedom. Turkey and France forbidding women from wearing a headscarf (in schools and universities) are prime examples.
- The Western attack on Islam is obvious. How else would you explain the West's attack on Hezbollah and Hamas which are considered resistance movements? Also, isn't Israel considered a Jewish country (but democratic)?

Supportive:

- Those who act as the defenders of Islam are at times its worst enemy. Saudi Arabia should stop nurturing or financially supporting extremist groups.

New Dimension:

- Seeing the problem in a religious-political dimension, another commentator stated that, as in the case of political conferences and meetings which take place constantly, the religious clerics like the Pope and Muslim figures should convene on a yearly basis to promote understanding, tolerance and the condemnation of violence. The religious and political dimensions should work hand in hand.
- The West adopted secularism in response to the excesses of the Church during the Middle Ages, which restricted the freedom of individuals. Does Islam today contain all the same negative characteristics of the Church then, and are such excesses part of human nature rather than religious affiliation? Is there a substitute for secularism which is better suited to our culture?

Huwaiti's Article:

Critical:

- It was a secular movement under *Nasser* which fought Imperialism. Islamists never confronted colonial occupations. Power has been their only goal.
- Muslims who support secularism may have a better understanding of Islam.

Supportive:

- Like Huwaiti, some supporters' primary criticism of secularists is their refusal to admit that Islam has a role in the public arena.

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