Acculturation and its Future in Muslim Societies: An Islamic Point of View

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I

In writing this paper on acculturation and its potentiality in the present and for the future of Arabs and Muslims, I have faced two aspects that have attracted the Arab intellectuals in the last decade. The first aspect deals with values in Muslim societies and the second is specifically about perceptions of democracy in many Arab and Islamic countries. However, if we want to be more precise in describing these aspects, I would say that, along with others from the first decade of the 21st century, they are all based on one common perception, a perception that indicates that there is a real problem involving political,

ethical and religious dimensions between Muslims (especially Arabs) and democracy, which is described as a "value," a "culture," practices and, finally, a way to build political regimes and policies. The intellectuals who deal with the first aspect conclude that the problem is in the "culture" as a conflict between legislation and political freedom and its institutions, even if it is not strong and widespread. On the other hand, the second group of intellectuals, which claims to be a recognised one, comes to a different conclusion: the problem does not have to do with the understanding of Arab and Islamic societies but with their dominant political regimes. The first group suggests that in order to overcome the problem we need to enhance the role of civil society institutions and encourage democracy education programs. The second group says that the problem can be solved by the development of the regimes, or their replacement, so that there can be a rotation of authority, adoption of political freedom, and wide and developed public participation. Thus, the group of the first aspect believe that "acculturation" faces a number of obstacles that are related to the past of Muslims and their "identity policies" and strategies in an era of globalization. The second group believes that acculturation is taking place among the Arab and Muslim elites, particularly in this epoch of globalization, but they consider that "democratic activity" can be achieved through different approaches. They also emphasize that the Arab and Islamic approach should be genuine and

self motivated in order not to collapse following the change of political regimes or during development and liberation.

Why did I elaborate in summarising the findings of the two groups? Because I wanted to show that the latest Arab revolutions are inconsistent with the findings of researches and analyses developed during the last ten decades. Those who talked at length about the difficulties of democracy in religious, cultural, political and international systems were incorrect because these democratic revolutions actually erupted and attracted people without putting into question the legitimacy of democracy or the authority of the people. Accordingly, there were no problems related to considering democracy a value, a practice, or both. On the other hand, those advocating the second opinion and believing that the problem lies in the existing regimes and not in the people, again emphasized the specificity of the Arab case as requiring an Arabian democracy, so to speak. We think, on the contrary, that the Arab revolutions are free of this concern, that is, they are not interested in differentiating between what can be considered as international or foreign, Egyptian or Tunisian, or Arab or Muslim. Actually, liberty means liberty, the authority of the people is the authority of the people, and the representative institutions resulting from free and fair elections are the same around the globe. Some people even said that they joined the crowds in Tahrir Square in Cairo to prove that Egyptians aspire to become

part of the world movement and its values, societies and countries. Those young people said that the obstacles in Egypt were not genuine but created by the regime, which was dependent on popular ignorance and on its security systems. In addition, they were afraid that, in spite of an apparent welcome, their response would not be enthusiastically received by the Americans and Europeans, who were "happy" with the previous regime!

II

In view of this critical analysis, we have to go back to "acculturation" and what it means to us, both Arabs and Muslims, in the 21st century. In this regard, we have two intermediary or classical experiences, or many recent or contemporary ones. By an intermediary experience, I mean that of Baghdad in communicating with ancient and contemporary civilizations—the Greek, the Indians and the Persians—through the sciences, arts and philosophy during the 7th and 12th centuries. The second was the Andalusian experience, which lasted for seven centuries. It was a huge acculturation experience through translation (Greek and Latin—Arabic and Latin) and the coexistence between Muslims and Christians. Both these experiences were successful to some extent, (I will return to this point later). However the both ended tragically. Baghdad's experience ended with the Crusades, which affected badly the relationship between the East and the West and turned the humanitarian and cultural

communication between the two sides (Christians and Muslims) into suffering, accusations of infidelity or killing for more than three decades. The Andalusian experience ended in war, which uprooted all levels of the Islamic, human and cultural existence in Spain.

As I said before, the intermediary acculturation, which took place in Baghdad and Andalusia and was initiated by Muslims, was of limited success because "authenticity" was a serious hindrance in both thought and practice. It is true that a strong current of culture and philosophy existed in Baghdad, and other big cities, which maintained its existence during medieval times. This was considered the "Greek wisdom" and belonged to truth, evidence and perpetuity and by which it unhesitatingly advocated the absorption of logic, sciences and the arts, and the interpretation of the Holy Qur'an in accordance with informed Aristotelian and Platonic philosophies. However, the strongest and biggest currents in our civilizations had formed quickly, and came to a standstill before retreating under the pretext of authenticity and protection of religion from corruption through idolatrous philosophies. Logic remained, in addition to pure and applied sciences, but philosophy was rejected because of its foreign nature and what remained of it was altered. The limits of the Andalusian experience came about because the coexistence between Christians and Muslims could not continue. Those who eradicated Muslims from Spain and Portugal were the grandchildren of

people who had coexisted with Muslims, regardless of the fact that they benefited from them and the Arabic translations of Latin literature that affected the subsequent European Renaissance in a major way.

The modern and contemporary experience of Arabs and Muslims with the West and their acculturation activities are different from the intermediary experiences in terms of motive, extent and results.

Westerners (Europeans) were the ones who took the initiative in imposing their culture on the world in an overwhelming way that included all aspects of private and public life. As this process was taking place, European troops were occupying most of the Muslim and Arab countries. Thus, many religious Muslims perceived this acculturation (even when this acculturation was happening in a non-violent way) to be as Ibn Khaldun said, a "defeated imitation of the dominant." The violent and non-violent processes resulted in creating deep wounds in Arab and Muslim psychology, although many people are convinced that this "important process" was necessary to get out of the depression of "backwardness," and regardless of its importance, should not be violent. Khair al-Din Al-Tunisi (1888-) said that this West (cultural and political) is similar to a flood that cannot be stopped by force, violence, ductility or reconciliation and, therefore, people have to assimilate its waves and accept and live with it; otherwise, they will be drowned by the force of its waves. Al Tunisi, along with other

senior officials and literates, considered this important and believed that absorption would not lead to the dissolution of Muslims or the abolition of their religion and culture because the use of modern tools would enable them to acquire immunity to develop their lives and compete with the West.

These important processes took place at a time when Muslim communities and their culture were stagnant and, accordingly, lacked any kind of immunity except the religious one. Thus, European developments soon clashed with religion, not only with Muslims but also with the old Christians of the East. Hence, Muslims were divided into two groups: the first believed in the importance of absorbing European modernity and adopting it in order to confront the Europeans and rebel against their military dominance; the second tended toward confinement and isolation in order to protect their uniqueness and their religion. The rebels did not succeed (from the late 19th century up to Ibn Ladin) and neither did the pragmatists, because they ended up practicing the idea of a "defeated imitation of the dominant."

On one hand, many literate Muslims did not consider this development process an acculturation because it was imposed upon them, but on the other, Muslims did not offer anything beneficial to the colonizers. Thus, there was equally rivalry and participation, although many Muslims kept repeating that Europe owed its Renaissance to the work of Muslims and should repay its debt.

III

The current Arab revolutions have revealed a "vision to the world" by the masses that appeared on the streets and cities of, until now, eight Arab countries, something that was completely unexpected by researchers, strategists or the reports of international and regional institutions. These institutions have always talked about the weakness of the civil society institutions in the Arab world, what they attributed to a weakness of the values of modernity, participation and democracy, in addition to pressures by the regimes and their suppressive policies.

For many weeks, the people who amassed in the streets of the Arab cities tolerated peacefully the violence of the security organizations. They were calling for freedom, rotation of authority, separation of powers, transparency, fighting against corruption, and free elections in order to have representative institutions. All these values, principles and measures are civil values of a modern and democratic state. The majority of the demonstrators were calling for these demands and could see no reason for not having them met, apart from their long-standing rulers and organizations. When the Islamists or the Islamic political parties joined the crowds, they ignored their original calls regarding adherence to Islamic legislation. Instead they focused on the claims of the demonstrators. Thus, acculturation or adoption of modern age values was successfully perceived by the demonstrating youth. On the contrary of the expectations of the researches, there was

no outburst of religious or radical motivations, nor signs of hostility against the West. Therefore, it is not the case of discussing a conflict of civilizations or an Islamic or Arab objection to liberty and democracy.

The large demonstrations were mainly formed by youths, with 85% of them under the age of thirty. It is known that youngsters in the Arab world average approximately 70% of the population, so they gathered and organized their groups through new communications technologies. Present revolutions in the Arab world are instigated by youth, what has to do with its demographic revolution. On the other hand, middle-class youths form the majority of the demonstrators, and they know how to operate modern communications technologies effectively, unlike more traditional or conservative people. This does not mean that conservative people no longer exist in society, because they do, and in large numbers. But they are not able to determine the direction of the process and have no control over the public opinion, cannot change the prevailing values among youths and have no power to revolt against them. The discussion on acculturation is important here because conservatives and liberals alike adhered to the same values and showed commitment to modern shared values, what means that there is a strong and shared awareness among the youth about being a part of the free modern world with their democracies and civil societies. Among these values and practices are the belief in liberty and tolerance with differences of opinion. In Egypt and Tunisia, people went to the polls and they accepted the

results without complaint, even though these were not in line with their expectations and desires.

The third distinguishing feature of the youths is their peacefulness, their rejection of violence and shedding of blood, and their determination to preserve public and private property. Even when the police were using force against them, they did not retaliate. They were determined to remove the political security and physical suppression systems through continuance of their peaceful demonstration until they dissolved or collapsed. Such strong and persistent peacefulness was previously unknown to the civil, green and environmental movements that appeared after the Cold War. Consequently, we can say that these civil movements are youth movements of a new type and reflect a high level of acculturation or participation in the values of a modern civilized world. They are also welcoming other movements opposing the dictatorial regimes, and trying to communicate with all groups of people even those who did not participate in the movement. Thus, warnings of division in countries such as Libya, Syria and Yemen are unfounded. The current movements actually brought together the north and the south in Yemen, Kurds and Arabs in Syria, and Berbers and Arabs in Libya. Many people discussed the reasons for this phenomenon and how should it be interpreted in the light of the specificities that are believed to be encouraged by globalisation. The revolutionist youths are enthusiastic about public liberties and place strong

emphasis on the equality of citizenship and non-discrimination in regard to race, religion and place. The Copts played a major role in the Egyptian revolution and it appears that the previous regimes were behind the former divisions and disagreements between Egyptians, divisions and disagreements that disappeared in the aftermath of the revolution.

If the process in course in the Arab countries is to be completed, some expect that there will be no serious problems related to current and future acculturation. The intensity that sometimes prevailed during the last decades was the result of exceptional circumstances experienced by the Middle East, in result of repressive regimes and the Islamists' influence, and the international and regional pressures applied by the USA and Israel. It is ironic that the era of Bin Ladin came to an end simultaneously to the end of the reigns of his rivals. In the case of Palestine, if a fair solution is found, there will be no violent or non-violent radicalism in the coming decades.

In October 2010, the well-known intellectual Mohammad Arkoun passed away. He had spent the last four decades revealing the obstructions made by the religious texts in the past and present Islamic mentality. Among these obstructions, which were observed by Arkoun and other liberals and leftists, is the fact that religious Muslim youth lacks the values of the past and its knowledge. According to Arkoun, Aljabri and Hanafi there is a deficiency in critical reading of religious texts, adoption of

the values of this age and, at the same time, an emphasis placed on the values of specificity and authenticity. According to this perception, Arabs will not move forward towards modernity unless they stop their conformism to sacred texts through radical religious reform, similar to what happened in Europe during the last three decades, unless these values become part of their ethical and civil systems. Most of the Arab youth involved in the revolutions are religious, and they manifest that acculturation largely occurs with the old values. People who achieved acculturation actually have to deny their religious texts, ie. Islam was not an obstacle in moving towards democracy. Instead, in some cases in Yemen, Libya and Syria, religious ethics prevented people from using violence and damaging public and private property, and enhanced a kind of confidence in the success of their peaceful democratic movement because God neither accepts injustice nor support tyrants, but He does help the true believer to protect human dignity and reach freedom.

Specificity and identity discussions are not yet over and they will not cease with the occurrence of revolutions. There will always be extremists who consider democracy a threat to religion. However, we now know that a public approach is a dominant acculturative approach that looks forward to communicating with the other and does not deny him/her the aspiration to participate in the civilization of the age and the world, not only in the name of modernity but also in the name of Islam.