Re-Islamization
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al-Manar al-Jadid
Changes in the Contemporary Islamist Discourse

The periodical *al-Manar al-Jadid* was first published in January 1998 in Cairo. In the words of its editor-in-chief, Gamal Sultan, its aim is: 'To establish a civilized and authentic intellectual forum, to combat the waves of westernization, arbitrariness and opportunism in the Islamic world.'[1] The initiators of the publication include such prominent Islamists as Muhammad cImara, Tariq al-Bishri, Yusuf Qaradawi, and Rashid al-Ghanushi, as well as activists of the younger generation, like kamal habib, a leading member of the Jihad Group in the 1980s. The new periodical is obviously linked to the famous *al-Manar* issued in 1898 under the patronage of Rashid Rida.

By constructing a historical continuum from the situation of the *umma* at the end of the 19th century to the state of the Islamic world at the threshold of the 21st century, *al-Manar al-Jadid* emphasizes its lineal ties with Rida and his initial goals. 'Rida already understood that the *umma* required a step forward into the future […]. A new future, at which horizon it would free itself from the heavy burden of stagnation, technological and scientific backwardness, and civilizatory sloth […]. Today, at the end of the 20th century, these hopes and fears are still on the agenda of most Arabic and Islamic societies.'[2] In light of this analogy, the leading article written by Rida in 1898 and republished in the first issue of *al-Manar al-Jadid*, entitled 'Risalat al-Manar' (The Message of al-Manar), stands as a policy statement for the new periodical. In addition to the revival of *umma* thought, it also intends to provide new impulses to the tradition of *islah* (reform) and *tajdid* (renewal) and to bring the century-old aims of *al-Manar* to the centre of contemporary attention.

Revival of a religious tradition

With his motto, *tajdid al-tajdid*[3] (renewal of the renewal), Muhammad cImara is representative of the way in which historical analogies are constructed and arguments relevant to the present times are articulated in *al-Manar al-Jadid*. Apart from Rida, cImara refers to the writings of Jamal al-Din al-Afghani and Muhammad cAbduh. He sees the efforts of these reformers as an attempt to develop the fundamentals of a civilizatory societal project that is in harmony with Islam and contemporaneity and that calls into question both the blind copying of the West and the uncritical following of the first generation of Muslims. He argues that the main goals of the early reform were: opposing the 'harmful' Western influence; formulating an authentic understanding of progress on the basis of the totality of Islam as religion, society and state; liberating Islam from the *bidca* (innovations); promoting contemporary interpretations of the *sharica*; and mobilizing the forces of renewal in the *umma*. Finally, he emphasizes the gradual nature of reform in the Islamic tradition, contrasting it to the secular idea of the necessity of a radical break with the past. cImara sees a continuity of history and content from the old reform tradition to the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood, which he regards as the first modern embodiment of the Islamist tendency. In fact, its founder, Hasan al-Banna, took over the publication of *al-Manar* after the death of Rida in 1939. In cImara's opinion, the initial goals of *al-Manar* remain of importance, given the unbroken dominance of the West, the continued stagnation of the Arabic-Islamic societies, and the marginalization of authentic Islamic thought.

The analysis of cImara provides an essentialist discourse. His argument that the *umma* has remained in a state of stagnation reveals a one-sided understanding of developments in the 20th century, depicted as a history of decadence. As is frequently encountered in the modern Islamist historiography, he explains this history as a departure from the fundamentals of a Golden Age, the original state of grace of the community at the time of the Prophet. The same understanding of history informs his evaluation of transitions in contemporary Islamic thought, which he explains as an internal fall from a correctly guided tradition (*islah*) – a situation that is to be redressed with the help of *al-Manar al-Jadid*.

The notions of continuity and change in the discussions found in *al-Manar al-Jadid* have two central themes: the persistence of decadence as a general tendency of human societies and the desirable return to an idealized moment in history. The notion of change is only relevant as an embodiment of the transition from the current decadence to the restoration of the Golden Age and of the rediscovery of a religiously appropriate approach to the needs of the *umma*. This highly retrogressive aspect of the continuity-change dichotomy means that some of the writings in *al-Manar al-Jadid* lose their future-oriented substance. However, the revival of the ideal of reform works against the backward-looking limitations in the contemporary Islamist discourse and extends the limits of what is changeable in Islamist thought.

The contributions of the 'new reformers' in *al-Manar al-Jadid* reveal two approaches. Firstly, the strategies and approaches of Islamist efforts since the 1970s are subjected to critical scrutiny. Secondly, on the basis of the so-called 'teachings of the past' there is a debate on the prospects of theoretical and programmatic change in the Islamist spectrum. Within this framework, the process of rethinking is legitimized by emphasizing the overall societal changes and the diversity of experiences in the Islamic world. In other words, the primacy of continuity, which is central to the revival of the reform tradition, is substituted by a dynamic perception of the realities of modern Arabic-Islamic societies. Subsequently, the phenomenon of Islamism becomes a matter of pragmatic approach. This marks a shift of focus in the discussion of future-oriented reforms. While the link to the past remains the main legitimizing paradigm of the Islamist thought, it is qualified by a link to contemporary matters.

On the fallibility of contemporary Islamism

The Tunisian scholar Rashid al-Ghanushi sees Islamism as a mass movement, as the '[…] sum of the individual and collective efforts of numerous faithful men and women in order to lead Muslims back to their merciful God'.[4] Islam being the only true source of orientation, the Islamists have the duty to start a process of re-Islamization in all spheres of life by means of legal and educational reforms. Thus they make it possible to realize a model of society and politics based on the authentic principles of *shura* (consultation) and *siyasa sharciyya* (rule of Islamic law). The relevance of contemporary Islamism is felt by Al-Ghanushi to lie in the vitality and uniqueness of its role. In his argumentation the transformations of the 20th century constituted a break within Islamic history. The rise of modern nation-states put an end to the old separation of power between rulers and religious scholars, which was based on a functional distinction between the spheres of politics and society. In his view, the traditional role of the culama' was to sanction political power and to protect people against despotic rule. However, this lost its significance within the context of the nation-state. New authoritarian elites rejected the participation of any forces other than their own in the formation of the new national society. They degraded religious institutions to state instruments serving to preserve their own power and even adopted religious contents and symbols for their own secular goals. According to Al-Ghanushi, the culama' had the option to either obey the rulers and thus ensure a minimum amount of freedom (in the educational sphere in particular) or to inspire opposition in order to free religion and society from secular nationalist rule. The Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood was a typical result of the latter option, and with the works of Al-Banna and Sayyid Qutb it paved the way for numerous other movements aimed at re-Islamizing the state and society.

Although Al-Ghanushi continues to see this goal as essential, he emphasizes that the 'painful experiences' of the past three decades make it necessary to reassess the strategies used and to examine their conformity to Islamic values as well as their political efficacy. The radical and violent approach characteristic of many attempts to bring about change in the 1980s and 1990s, he argues, is in stark contrast to the authentic concept of gradual change in Islamic thought. These attempts damaged the credibility of the Islamists, the majority of whom have come to see in recent years that neither violence nor a complete rejection of modern social structures offers prospects for the future. He therefore pleads for turning away from the militant paradigm of Qutb and for a 'return' to the reform tradition of Al-Afghani, cAbduh, and Rida, and above all to the pacifist, ethical-moral principles of Al-Banna. By emphasizing gradual change and relevance to the present as the main criteria for evaluating social activity, Al-Ghanushi opens the way for a critique of the central principles of contemporary Islamist practice.

The plea for an appropriate return to the gradual reform tradition and the ethical beginnings of modern Islamism indeed marks a break with the dominant radical understanding of politics and society over the past three decades. While since the 1970s such negative evaluations have been a prime feature of the secular criticism of Islamism, the fact that they are adopted in current Islamist discourses indicates a fundamental change. The inclusion of historical and contemporary processes of change in determining the societal goals and strategies of Islamism means a reversal of the radical assumption that social structures must be (re-)formed according to a(n) – essentialized – religious world-view and by political means. This gives relevance to the question of the social plausibility of certain religious contents and the form in which they are mediated in the public sphere. The primacy of adapting to 'changeable' social conditions becomes a central element of the discourse. The persistence of the notions of 'return' and 'beginnings' justifies the adaptation to the present by emphasizing a conceptual and symbolic affinity to the old reform tradition and, moreover, to the dominant, backward-looking paradigm of Islamist thought during the last decades. The call to rediscover the ethical-moral dimensions of Islamism represents a response to the immanent tension between continuity and change in religious discourses. By restoring the separation between timeless (ethical-moral) and changing (society-related) elements in Islam and by taking the former out of the sphere of politics, the religious ideals are resacralized and freed from the secular constraints of social reality.

The review in *al-Manar al-Jadid* of the Islamist experience over the past three decades has led to a renewal of the religiously influenced understanding of politics and society. The backward-looking notion of change should not obscure the significance of the reform proposals originating from the discussions in the periodical. Reverting to authentic experiences (early-Islamic period) and traditions (reform tradition of the early *al-Manar*) is re-valued and reduced to the functionality of stabilizing the sacral reference system and the legitimization of renewal. Thus a new scope is provided for discourse in which, by taking account of religious ideals and historical transformations, answers can be formulated to the tensions generated by the demands of continuity and the need for change.

Notes

1. *al-Manar al-Jadid*, 1 (1998), p. 4. This article is based on an analysis of the first seven issues.
2. Ibid., p. 5.
3. Ibid., p. 14-20.
4. Ibid., 2 (1998), p. 64.

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