

International Conference

"Towards a Civic Democratic Islamic Discourse"

27th-29th May 2006

Final Report

Al Quds Center for Political Studies and in cooperation with the Konrad Adenauer Foundation has organized a conference under the title " Towards a Civic Democratic Islamic Discourse" held at the Intercontinental Hotel in Amman – Jordan during 27th-29th May 2006 with the participation of 50 personalities of activists and researchers representing 20 Arab, Islamic and non Islamic nations.

The preparations for the conference extended to almost an entire year as tens of research studies and reports addressing what may be termed as "The Civic and Democratic Islamic Movement" in the different parts of the Islamic world and amidst the Arab and Islamic communities in Europe and the US were gathered and documented.

This effort was aimed at identifying the components of this movement and the nature of its contributions towards introducing a civic and democratic Islamic discourse. In addition, extensive preliminary contacts were conducted through all available means so as to clearly identify the identities of the potential participants and their readiness to participating in such a project and to clarify their respective roles and positions within their respective countries and societies.

Project Background:

The events of the last five years in the Middle East have exposed a number of facts related to the opportunities and obstacles with respect to the spreading of freedom, democratic and human rights values in this region namely:

- The abstention of the majority of governments and political regimes from taking genuine and tangible steps onto this path despite the progress achieved in several countries and on a number of tracks (elections in Lebanon, Palestine, Iraq and the relative progress in Egypt Saudi Arabia, in addition to limited forms of political openness in a number of other countries.

- The weakness and lack of influence of the secular and reform movement of all political and intellectual orientations. Elections in Egypt, Palestine, and Iraq have shown that this movement with all its various components have only managed between 4-10% of the electoral vote and parliamentary seats.

- The outcome of the electoral process in Palestine, Iraq and Egypt has revealed that Islamic movements have made significant gains. The Islamic movement in Palestine has won close to 60% of seats in the Palestinian Legislative Council, Sunni and Shite Islamic movements won the majority of seats in the Iraqi Parliament while in Egypt the Islamic movement won close to a quarter of the parliamentary seats despite the massive campaign of harassment inflicted upon members of this movement before and during the electoral process. Meanwhile different predictions expect the Islamically affiliated "Justice and Development Party" of Morocco to win upcoming parliamentary elections in 2007 and it is expected that its chairman Dr. Saad Eddin Al Othmani shall be asked to form the Moroccan government after the elections. In Jordan different predictions see that the adoption of the "Representative Electoral Law" shall precipitate a similar outcome. The majority of reports also indicate that the Islamic movement is making progress in Syria, Yemen, Libya the Gulf States and other Arab countries.

At a time when the need and conviction increase for the necessity of taking this region on board the path of freedom and democracy, the fears that religiously oriented forces that are not in concurrence with the democratic principals reaching power is also on the rise. An issue that encourages governments and regimes in the Arab world for preserving the "status quo" and refraining from taking any genuine reforms citing these fears as further justifications from abandoning the demanded and necessary agenda of reform.

Yet developments in the past five years have shown that new winds have started to blow amidst the realms of political Islam in the Arab and Muslim worlds. Political and ideological revisions have been evident among the Muslim Brotherhood movement and its affiliated branches that extend within most Arab nations particularly tackling the issue of participation and the concept of citizenship and the dilemma of the concept of "Hakimeeya" or governance is only to God. Similar revisions have been taking place among "Jammaa Al Islamiya" in several Arab countries, the Shite sect has and continues to perform revisions regarding the concept of theory of *velayat-e faqih*, the "guardianship of the juriconsult". The "Justice and Development" trend has been making advances taking the Turkish and Moroccan experiences as a model. Islamic intellectuals in the Arab world, Europe and the US are speaking a new language and exhibiting new conceptions. These developments work to encourage the possibilities of merging broader classes of this movement in the process of genuine democratic transformation. An issue that should merit the foremost interest as being a precondition for removing one of the most important obstacles in the way of spreading democracy in the Arab world.

A number of international research institutes such as (The Rand Corporation, Carnegie Institute and the Committee on International Relations) have all cited such developments and called in a number of papers and publications they issued for the distinction between moderate and violent extremist Islam. Also calling for a containment policy regarding the former while advocating a confrontational policy with the latter. Meanwhile other research centers such as the Washington Institute expressed doubts as to whether such movements can develop towards the Turkish model.

In any case, the observations of political life in the Arab world clearly show that the possibility of developing a modernized and contemporary Islamic discourse is better today than in any other time in the past, yet such a development is not expected to happen spontaneously. A number of pre-conditions and factors should first exist, at the forefront of

which is the empowering of the principal forces in this movement and aiding it in accomplishing its tasks and disseminating its ideas to as wide a spectrum as possible while simultaneously organizing and supporting its efforts of collaboration and solidarity among its elements. This in addition to assuring these principal forces that the other forces and movements are ready for mutual cooperation and collaboration.

Departing the predicament of democracy in the Arab World requires proceeding on a multi path road in a parallel and simultaneous manner if possible and this requires:

- Continuing to press Arab regimes and governments towards achieving the required reforms, encouraging public and individual freedoms and proceeding on the path to democracy. This effort is a joint effort in which the peoples and forces of reform from within the region on the one hand and the international community and western democracies on the other take part in.

- Continuing to enhance the forces of democratic change and reform in the Arab world and enabling them from unifying and coordinating their efforts and elevating their levels of political, cultural, intellectual and social conduct within their respective countries and societies. This so as to enable such forces from playing a primary role on the arena of their respective countries and be able to "break" a third path from between the paths of governments and regimes on the one hand and Islamic movements on the other.

- Exercising all available efforts for the sake of developing a "civic – democratic – modern" discourse for the Islamic movements, forces and groups in a way that would enable them from playing their role in the reform process. The rehabilitation of these forces and insuring that they abide by the rules of the democratic process and the respect for the principals of pluralism and preservation of public and individual freedoms is now a precondition for a solid advance on the path to democratic transformation and upon this context, the idea of the conference was brought about.

Profile of Participants

Participants in the conference represented a qualified elite of over 50 Islamic scholars and intellectuals in addition to activists and representatives of parties and different Islamic movements representing 20 different nation (Iran, Indonesia, Lebanon, Bahrain, Syria, Iraq, Saudi Arabia, Tunisia, Palestine, Libya, Morocco, Egypt, Turkey, Malaysia, Yemen, India, Britain, Holland, Germany, In addition to Jordan.

Throughout the sessions of the three day conference, the participants enriched the discussions with their dialogue, interpositions and working papers all of which contemplated around the need for invigorating the process of reform and democratic transformation in both the Arab and Muslim worlds. In addition to changing the perceptions of the Islamic movement from one of threat to one of partnership. The suitability of choice regarding the participants in the conference with respect to the agenda of the conference was estimated to be around 90%.

The organizers of the conference had insured that the major criteria for participation were based on geographic, ideological and political diversity and that each participant should

possess a record contributing to the development of the civic and democratic Islamic discourse. The following criteria were considered upon choosing the participants:

Geographic Diversification:

The conference was able to cover vast geographic locations extending from Europe through the Middle East and ending with Eastern and South Eastern Asian nations. While some of the participants were representing Islamic nations such as Indonesia which inhabits the largest number of Muslims in the world, countries with Muslim minorities were also represented such as India which is home to around 100 million Muslims considered a minority in a country of a billion inhabitants.

While the need for organizing such a conference came about for the purpose of providing a venue for the exchange of expertise, the inception of ideas and attending to all that is new regarding the reformist Islamic speech that does not conflict with the values of democracy, the organizers of the conference were careful to assure the attendance of those representing countries that are known for their advanced democratic practice with respect to other Arab and Islamic nations. This was evident through the interpositions made by representatives of countries like India and Malaysia reflecting upon the success stories which their respective societies have accomplished in propagating reformist Islamic thought. More so these representatives indicated that the discussions regarding some issues that were addressed during the conference sessions were outdated by their own societies decades ago and so they have clearly surpassed other countries in this regard. This bias clearly provided a beneficial learning experience particularly regarding what is common between the different reformist movements.

Sectarian Diversification:

Organizers of the conference took into consideration the sectarian diversification when choosing the participants for the conference which reflected a mixture of Shite and Zaidi representation.

Diversifications in Lines of Specializations:

It was noticed that the majority of participants in the conference held advanced academic degrees. Twenty two out of the fifty participants held Doctorial degrees each occupying leadership roles in media or partisan institutions, serve as instructors in leading educational institutions while others run organizations or specialized research institutes. This diverse presence gives an impression as to the size of participation which is clearly indicative of the amount of interest on the part of the invitees regarding the different subjects and themes of the conference.

Women Participation:

The organizers took the effort to insure a wider spectrum of women participation yet that level remained modest. On the other hand the papers presented by the women attendees provided stimulating and important discussions largely concentrating on women rights and their participation from an Islamic perspective.

Activities of the Conference

The conference addressed a number of themes which form the basic global argument over the Islamic discourse. The reasons for adopting these themes was to contribute towards clarifying the grey areas in the discourse of Islamic movements particularly its position regarding democracy, the ruling system and regime, the rights of individuals, women and minorities and issues such as the position regarding violence, terrorism and the peaceful alternation of power.

Islam and Democracy

The participants affirmed that Islam had stressed on the issue of cooperation and accommodation among the different civilizations and societies and that Muslims should work to accommodate the modern concepts of democracy, pluralism and globalization. This, through the search for a modernized Islamic formula that would adopt these concepts through the revision of many of the literature governed by its own historical conditions and were consequently adopted by Islamic movements and tried to impose it upon its present despite the disparities that exist between the conditions by which this literature had existed and our present today.

The participants considered that finding such a formula represents a challenge as to the ability of Muslims to live up to the demands of the modern age, developing the [speech](#) and realizing the challenges that exist in our world today.

The participants indicated that the future of the Islamic discourse depends to a great extent on its ability to rid itself from the 'stamp' of terrorism and the development of a pluralistic and democratic speech that does not seek to seize power through forceful means.

Yet there are two sides of the equation. There is the "Authority" which in certain Arab and Islamic countries seeks to impose itself upon the all the classes of society both Islamic and secular. Consequently the "Authorities" ability to control the classes of society provides a safety valve and control mechanism with respect to Islamic movements, its discourse and its positions both moderate and extreme. On the other hand there are the Islamic movements that have two major schools of thought, the first is extremist, refusing to accommodate the state and confronts it seeking to seize power through force. The other is moderate that believes that the hegemony and domination of the state is the main reason behind the current violence in our societies and that it is necessary to confront this hegemony seeking to find a more favorable environment for peaceful transformation towards democracy. Yet this trend is subordinated as a result of the existing political regimes.

The Relationship between State and Religion

The participants based their inquiry into the relationship between the state and religion on the principal that Islam and through the guidance of the Quran and Sunna had described the nature of the Islamic society and not the nature of the Islamic state or the means by which it is formed citing as an example the civil state which was established by the prophet Mohammed 'Peace Be Upon Him' and other models that perused at the time of the " the righteous Caliphate" as examples of the continually developing form of the Islamic state according to the changing demands of life.

The majority of participants affirmed the need for finding contemporary methods for understanding religion and comprehending its meaning and merging it with facets of everyday life while at the same time preserving the pluralism which the prophet 'Peace Be Upon Him' had adopted in the civil state, in addition to preserving the rights of "others" for the freedom of expression and belief. A number of participants also indicated that experience has proved that Muslims are able to live freely under a secular state. Another group of participants saw that it was possible to exist a civic and pluralistic Islamic society that offers relative freedoms for others and one whose laws practically abide by the Islamic Sharia "law", and not man made laws so as not to rule by any other law than that descended by God.

The participants affirmed that the Islamic state was never a "theocratic" state and that the rural was never 'God's representative on earth' but was always the representative of the 'Umma' ruling by the laws of God. Meaning that similarities between democracy and Islam are abundant not as prescribed by extremist some of whom describe democracy as being the rule of Satan

Islam, Authority and the State

A number of participants called for the establishment of a unified constitution for the Islamic states based on the criteria of pluralism as being part of modern societies. At the same time calling for the need to abandoning the culture of violence and negation of the "other", a policy perused by the ruling regimes in some countries particularly in the Middle East against Islamic movements and considering such a policy the basis for creating extremism and violence within Islamic societies. This, despite the relative flexibility expressed by these movements lately towards a number of issues such as democracy women and minority rights.

One of the participants in the conference addressed the concept of "Bayaa" pledge of allegiance in Islam and that it was a form of Social Contract between the people and the ruler and that it was neither eternal nor absolute but develops with time and had its pre-conditions. If the Ruler was not to abide by his pledges to the people then the people may depose him.

The participants indicated that "the overwhelming presence of the extremist interpretation is linked to a group of reasons with differentiating impact towards contributing to the creation of a disturbed cultural and social atmosphere. It is this overwhelming presence, according to the participants that incubates and provides the cultural and social atmospheres from which today's "kawarij" and the proponents of exclusivist 'takfiri' ideology and perpetrators of bombing" arise. It is therefore necessary to rid ourselves from this enclosed understanding of Islamic fiqh ' jurisprudence' seen to be a basic pillar of extremism and violence.

With respect to the issue of the inclusion of Islamists in sharing power in the Arab world, the speakers indicated that such a process would depend on three parties: The Islamic movement itself, the ruling regimes in the Arab world and the influential external powers namely the United States and Europe. The speakers also affirmed that during the current period, the Islamic movement will not be able to preside over power through peaceful

means unless it abandoned some of its slogans and positions and was able to share common ground with the Western powers that are in dominance of regional politics and supporting current regimes.

More so, these powers and specifically the United States has come to realize particularly after the events of 9/11 the significance of realizing joint relationships with moderate Islamists and supporting them in reaching the realms of power on the condition that they abandon certain slogans which the West deems a source of threat to security and stability and a source of worries for their own interests in the region.

Islam, Individual Rights and Freedoms

Within the context of this theme, intellectuals and scholars discussed a number of issues among which, the rights which Islam had provided to individuals and the duties it had obliged these individuals with. In addition to the position of Islam with respect to minorities in Islamic societies and the rights and obligations of women in Islam.

With respect to the rights of individuals in Islam, these rights were addressed in light of the purpose behind the existence of man which is the subordination to and worship of God and the realization of the purposes of the "Sharia" in preserving the "faith, the soul, the wealth, the mind and the honor". The speakers concentrated on the rights of self expression for individuals and stressing the rights of individuals in choosing their faith, an issue that gave rise to heated debate among the scholars and intellectuals with respect to the issue of 'rida' Apostasy. In addition to the right of those who are Muslims by virtue of birth in changing their faith citing the verses of the Holy Quran: "Let him who will believe, and let him who will, reject" and "Let there be no compulsion in religion". While some intellectuals called for the permissibility of changing ones faith others stressed the need for strictly up holding laws of the Islamic Sharia in this regard. This issue was a source for rich debate which included the citing of many religious ruling and evidence and historic referrals in support of both sides of the argument. No one party was able to convince the other in this regard yet many of the intellectuals believed that recognizing the rights of individuals in changing their religion and faith does not contradict with Islam.

In the context of speaking about the rights of minorities in Islamic societies the speakers stressed the need for equality with regard to the rights of obligations between Muslims and non-Muslims under the context of the existing national state. This issue raised controversy again when a number of speakers demanded that the use of terms such as "Ahl el Zimma – Ahl el Eqd" (non-Muslims enjoying the protection of Muslims) in describing these minorities should be dropped.

The boldest proposition was the demand for allowing these minorities to assume any post which they are mentally and personally capable of assuming in the context of a democratic order if chosen by the people. These bold ideas invited a second wave of rejection on the part of several participants. The same applied with respect to the issue of women when intellectuals demanded that certain texts deemed unfair to women rights be revised and that women should have the right to assume public posts, while laws should be amended to allow women to play their part in the building of their respective societies and fulfilling their message.

Participants also called for abandoning discrimination amongst the different Islamic sects and refraining from passing judgments of apostasy and renunciation upon other Islamic groups with which we differ. Working instead towards accepting the other and existing and stressing points of commonality as opposed to amplifying the reasons for disunity.

This session produced many opinions which may be looked upon as 'renewal' opinions reflecting a genuine possibility for change which requires more dialogue and meetings to clarify and explain its attributes. Yet the mere fact that these opinions were introduced in such a serious and scientific manner indicates that deep intellectual transformations have occurred on the part of Muslim scholars, while a sizable direction exists towards more rights and freedoms which may be attained through an Islamic perspective.

Muslim Minorities in the West

The speakers confirmed that relationships with others is primarily one of peace and not war, while the existence of Muslims in Western countries obliges them not to violate these countries' rules. A Muslim is bound by his pledges and an entry visa to these Western nations is considered a pledge. As it is the duty of Muslims to preach Islam where ever they may be it is also their obligation to set an example in these societies and to build good relationships with its citizens. They should also work to build and develop these countries as its own citizens, working towards achieving their demands on the basis of citizenship and not on the basis of differentiation.

As a result of the continuous increase in the number of Muslim immigrants to the West whether legally or illegally, this has created problems particularly in the form of violence related to these migrating communities. Violence committed both by and against these communities. Consequently it is the obligation of Islamic leaderships and particularly those in the West to work towards validating the basis of conduct and to work towards the building of dual bridges between the Islamic and Western civilizations. On the one hand working towards merging Muslims in these communities as active members and helping them to accept the values and concepts of Western life and to deal with such values in the right way without having to abandon their Islamic identity. On the other hand working towards acquainting the West with the Islamic civilization and removing any misinterpretations in the understanding of different Islamic customs and virtues consequently tearing down the wall of fear and suspicion between the two communities and removing existing tensions.

The question of discrimination which Muslims are subjected to in non Muslim communities was also alluded to specifically in Western countries and in particular after 9/11.

The Status of the Conference on the International Arena

The world in the past six years has witnessed a long series of meeting, conferences and seminars. Has this conference been any different? And how?

It can be said that this conference although not the most celebrated in terms of the number and diversity of participants never the less it enjoyed several distinctions more importantly:

First: This conference came about as an initiative by the (Middle East) region, meaning that it was a reflection of a local demand by this region and its people for developing a civic and democratic Islamic discourse.

Second: This conference has set the basis for a bold dialogue and debate regarding issues that were for long a red line and a taboo consequently setting the background for a new wave of thinking about issues such as: Women's rights and jurisdiction, relationship with secular movements, the position on democracy and the rights of individuals and groups, relations with the West.

While the final declaration of the conference did not reflect all these sides for reasons related to the sensitivities of the issues raised, the working papers and deliberations which shall be published should merit considerable controversy in this regard.

Third: The conference was distinct in the diversity of its participants both intellectually and sectarian wise, grouping intellectuals and activists that are representative of the most prominent and active Islamic movements in the region and thereby it has overcome an exercise of mere abstract intellectual debate into direct political practice.

Forth: The conference established the foundations for an international network or coalition of forces, intellects and activists that are directly concerned with the developing of a civic and democratic discourse of an Islamic background. This matter if realized, should empower these participants and others from intervening in the current intellectual debate and political verve currently undergoing in Arab and Islamic societies, in addition to confronting the advocates of extremism and radicalism on the one hand and the counter democratization and reform forces on the other.

Media Coverage of the Conference

The activities of the conference and throughout its convention enjoyed large and extensive coverage from the local, Arab and the Western media. The presence by the mass media was very evident ranging from radio, satellite, printed Arab and foreign press, electronic media and radio band news agencies which covered the conference with daily out briefs.

It is also worth mentioning that satellite television stations such as Al Jazeera had aired live sessions of the conference while other stations such as Al Manar, Al Hurra, Abu Dhabi and others had followed up on the deliberations and activities of the conference through their prime news broadcasts this in addition to tens of interviews that were carried out by the mass media with participants in the conference.

The final Declaration of the Conference

The final declaration of the conference came about in the form of practical demands upon which there was an agreement amongst the participants in the conference that achieving these demands should lead to the construction of a modern and balanced Islamic [speech](#) that guarantees the spread of democracy and sustains human rights and creates a common ground for dialogue amongst all political trends of different ideological and intellectual originations in a way that would guarantee the achieving of peaceful democratic transformation in its mechanisms and constructive in its content within Islamic societies.

The conference called upon the Islamic movements to take the initiative in articulating a national discourse that emerges from contemporary realities with all its demands and complexities and enhancing of its intellectual, practical and political efforts in renouncing violence and terrorism and distinguishing themselves from those that practice it.

The conference further called for the originating of a balanced discourse with the West that does not invite animosity but also seeks to build bridges of cooperation and understanding with the wise and fair handed. Also calling for the respect and preservation of the rules of democracy in dealing with the other political and social forces within its borders.

What is required from political regimes in the Arab and Islamic nations: The contribution towards the building of nationalistic atmospheres beyond tensions and adversity the creation of a solid platform for defeating the phenomenon of extremism and terrorism amongst our societies, the revision of their policies towards the Islamic movements, to deal with all political movements through one political framework and to invite these forces according to their respective power and weight to share in the practice of authority as the democratic framework would demand.

As for the other political forces and movements in the Middle East, the conference called upon them to revise their positions and to meet in common ground through recognizing and accepting the other and considering such an issue necessary for self existence before it is a necessity for the existence of the other. Pluralism and the acceptance of the other are to be a condition for the enrichment of dialogue and the democratic experience.

In the end, the conference called upon the West represented by the US and Europe to adopt policies that are in harmony with the principals of legitimate rights, freedom, justice, equality and the rights of self determination for peoples. The conference also called upon the West to accept the rights of Islamists for self expression, theorizing and political participation as long as they are committed to the democratic choice and reject violence as a form of political expression. The West was also called upon not to peruse undemocratic means that would lead to sidelining of certain movements and pushing such movements into political enclosure and radicalism.

As for Islamic minorities in the West, the conference affirmed that the West should peruse a policy of convergence based upon the respect of the citizenship of these minorities their rights under citizenship, the abandonment of discriminatory policies against these minorities. Muslim minorities in these countries on the other hand are required to preserve their culture, customs and faith and to behave under the context of their citizenship and abiding by its obligations.

It is evident from the final declaration of the conference and the related working papers and discussions of the conference that the Islamic discourse in the coming period shall witness a qualitative transformation towards a new understanding of Islamic script as it relates to the demands of the modern age and the concepts of democracy, freedom, human rights, women, children, pluralism, openness and other such terms that have come to rule over our current state, all of which are originally in harmony with the spirit of Islam.

The participants in the conference although do not represent the entire scope of Islamic movements in particular the more radical ones, yet they represent a massive intellectual and

geographic diversity and the majority of whom are personalities of extensive influence within their respective societies.

This group of scholars and intellects has adopted a number of distinctive ideas such as the establishment of a unified Islamic constitution for all Islamic states and working towards a comprehensive revision of the extracted religious rulings to accommodate the demands of this historic stage, the necessity for working towards the acceptance of the concepts of pluralism the building of dialogue with the other and upholding women rights and empowering them within society.

In addition to the presentation of many ideas considered the most democratic and contemporary in nature and despite the fact that acceptance of such ideas was not unanimous, never the less the mere fact that such ideas were addressed through an international Islamic conference reflects the magnitude of openness and freedom of expression of the pioneers of the Islamic movement and is considered a positive step towards the production of a civic and democratic Islamic discourse and a prelude towards formulating an international coalition of these forces and personalities.

It remains to be mentioned that many of the ideas, theories and suggestions that were stated in the final declaration and recommendations of the conference seem to be in need of systematic and persistent follow-up as there is a need for more seminars, conferences and exchange of meetings. As there is a need for the maturing of many of the novel and bold ideas, and it is here that the need arises for providing the tools and platforms for this movement so as to interact with its own components and with other movements. Tools such as the publication of an intellectual journal, the establishment of an electronic website, the publication of more books and studies and insuring the continuity and periodic nature of these conferences.