



Political Islam Online

ON LANGUAGE

Al-Marja'iyah Al-Dineyyah (The Supreme Religious Council) A *Shi'a* Concept Conveniently Adopted by *Sunni* Political Movements



The group of religious *Shi'a* leaders in Najaf, Iraq, which became known as the *Marja'iyah*, originated as a strictly religious and elite group that was to interpret religious texts and resolve religious questions. Very soon, however, the group interjected itself into the political arena. The term *Marja'iyah* is used to refer to the Supreme Religious Clerics who are considered the primary source of religious wisdom. The term is derived from the root word *raja'* meaning “to consult” or “refer to.”

Because the *Marja'iyah* is portrayed as a relatively peaceful theological group participating in politics, Sunni fundamentalist movements, like the Muslim Brotherhood, have recently adopted the word in their political platform. The Brotherhood believes that using this term to label the powerful religious body they propose would make that body less threatening than the more rigid principle embodied in the term *Welayat al-Faqih*, *i.e.*, establishing an elitist religious hegemony represented by a supreme imam leader, as applied by Khomeini in Iran.

Author *Wahid 'Abdel-Meguid*, in his article entitled “The Religious *Marja'iyah* ... and the Islamic Movements' Impasse” takes issue with the principle the Muslim Brotherhood has labeled *Marja'iyah*. He characterizes this principle as fundamentalist Sunni opposition to the sovereignty of the state and a total disregard for the modern political system and its democratic foundation. The author identifies the main flaw in the Brotherhood's political dogma as their inability to avoid conflict between the supremacy of the State and the supremacy of religion. The Brotherhood seems to have adopted the slogan “A civil nation with religious *marja'iyah*” as a way to gloss over that dilemma. *'Abdel-Meguid* notes that the Sunnis' concept of a religious-political *Marja'iyah* is vague and he accuses the Brotherhood of inventing another empty slogan similar to “Islam is the Answer.” In the author's view, the Brotherhood should have tried to harmonize the concepts through a serious religio-political dialectic and clearly identify their differences from the Khomeini principle of *Welayat Al-Faqih*.

'Abdel-Meguid notes that:

- **The religious body proposed by the Brotherhood was never intended to act only in an advisory capacity, but rather to be the final decision-making body with the authority to override any legislative or executive decision, which essentially negates the power and responsibility of democratically appointed bodies.**
- **Considering that the use of the term Muslim “*Ummah*” (motherhood) by fundamentalists extends beyond geographical borders to encompass citizens of any country, it is conceivable that foreigners could be part of the ruling *Marja'iyah*.**
- **The Brotherhood's platform specifies that the *Marja'iyah* shall be formed through elections in which both the candidates and the electorate come from the body of religious clerics. That concept, the author points out, negates the democratic process in which the entire population is to elect its leaders.**

The author concludes that what he describes as the current impasse in Political Islamic movements has exposed their inability to develop the concept of the *Marja'iyah* in a way that creatively reconciles the sovereignty of the State with the primacy of the *Shari'a*.

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