



God's Authority v. Power to the People: The Views of Influential Islamic Writers

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Al-Ghannouchi



Huwaidi

Western commentators on Islam and the Arab World too often quote liberal Arab writers and ignore Islamist writers who have far greater influence on a large and growing segment of the Arab/Muslim population that is increasingly more disgruntled and religiously conservative. *PI Online* analyzes the ideology of this conservative group, which the late Middle Eastern professor Louis Cantori¹ called “Republican Islamism”, through the eyes of two of the most popular Islamic writers, the Tunisian *Rashid Al-Ghannouchi*² and the Egyptian *Fahmi Huwaidi*.³ Both writers are regularly published in *Al Jazeera* and other Middle Eastern opposition newspapers and enjoy a considerable following, particularly among the Muslim conservative movement, which rejects Western democracy as incompatible with Islam.

Al-Ghannouchi and *Huwaidi* share a common dislike for most of the current Arab rulers. Both writers would most likely also agree with professor *Cantori* about why Muslims consider “Republican Islam” more appealing than Western individualism. Republican Islam, *Cantori* explained, has three fundamental principles: “1) the past incorporates within it the revelations of God as expressed in the Qur’an as the spiritual centre of gravity; 2) community and family take precedence over the individual and 3) the goal of society is the enjoining of that which is good and the prohibition of that which is evil.” The term “Republican” for *Cantori* refers to the Republicanism of Ancient Rome which according to *Cantori* means “(a) the limitation of the powers of a strong and benevolent and moral state, (b) an elite pledged to serve the public good (*maslahah*), (c) a citizenry also pledged to serve society, and (d) an embedded law respected and upheld by all.”

Aside from these general points of agreement, however, the philosophical views of *Al-Ghannouchi* and *Huwaidi* are strikingly different in many respects. Following *Cantori*’s approach to Islam, *Huwaidi* has consistently maintained that individualism and Western democracy are anathema to Islam. In his view, the Islamic/Arab Nation is the essence of society and can only be governed by the Islamic *Shari’a*. The rights of individuals and political authority can only be exercised within the framework of Islamic dogma. For *Huwaidi*, the “republic”

¹ Dr. Louis J. Cantori obtained his Ph.D. in political science from the University of Chicago and studied Islamic philosophy in the Faculty of Theology, al-Azhar University. He was the author or editor of several books, including *Local Politics and Development in the Middle East*, and about fifty articles, including *Modernization and Development* (The Oxford Encyclopedia of the Modern Islamic World) and *Civil Society, Liberalism and the Corporatist Alternative in the Middle East* (Middle East Studies Association Bulletin (1997)). He also co-edited *Muslim Thought in the 20th Century*. Professor Cantori’s last academic appointment before his death in 2008 was as a professor of political science at the University of Maryland.

² *Al-Ghannouchi*, a Tunisian politician, founded the “*Mouvement de la Tendence Islamiste*” in 1979 (renamed “*El-nahdah*” in 1989), which was never legalized as a political party. He was arrested and sentenced to life imprisonment on charges of violence and plotting with foreign powers to overthrow *Bourquiba*’s government in 1987. He was pardoned and freed in 1988 under President Ben Ali’s general amnesty. Denied recognition and participation in the multiparty elections, his movement went underground and was again accused of waging a war against Ben Ali’s regime. After a major crackdown 1991–92, *Al-Ghannouchi* fled the country and obtained political asylum in the UK.

³ Journalist *Fahmi Huwaidi* is probably the most widely read Islamic political analyst. His articles are regularly published in *Al-Jazeera* and the opposition newspaper *Al-Dostor*

encompasses the entire Arab/Muslim nation. In his view, the very existence of separate national entities in the Arab world has a corrupting influence that undermines the higher interests of this entire Arab/Islamic *Ummah*.

Huwaiti also believes that the present regimes in many Arab countries are corrupt and should be replaced by an Islamic regime. Although many liberal writers have tried to discredit *Huwaiti*, he remains quite popular with the masses who face everyday problems and find little solace from their governments. *Huwaiti*'s constant criticism of governments and his pessimistic view of society resonates well with the masses; therefore, without offering any realistic or constructive solutions that fall short of destroying the entire system, he remains popular.

Huwaiti's primary criticism of Arab regimes is that they give little freedom to their constituents. While *Huwaiti*'s criticism may be justified, he fails to see or purposefully ignores the fact that the same could be said of his vision of Islamic rule. He champions Pan-Arabism in which "Islam is the answer", but at the same time is a proponent of the view that there is "no liberty in Islam" – all actions must conform to a higher authority as grounded in religious dogma. The regime he envisions would necessarily have to be imposed through totalitarian dictatorship if needs be as dissent shall be suppressed. *Huwaiti* also flatly rejects any form of secularism, which he views as a Western evil.⁴ Here he is in sync with the Muslim Brotherhood's ideology, which equates secularism with atheism. *Huwaiti* also believes that Islam must influence politics but politics may not influence Islam.

Huwaiti finds himself supporting the Iranian system of clerical guardianship with ultimate power over the population. Such Islamic dictatorships, however, rely on ideological mind-control, not expanded freedoms for the citizenry. They do not offer any more freedom than tyrannical regimes whose primary goal is to maintain their own power. Many would in fact argue that the ideological tyranny of a Republican Islamic regime would be much worse. *Huwaiti* himself ignores the restrictions on civil liberty in Iran's regime, including the suppression of the rights of the *Sunni* sect to which he belongs. *Huwaiti* must also be watching with dismay as the ultimate authority of the clerical body in Iran is being slowly supplanted by the growing power of a military junta.

In contrast, *Al-Ghannouchi*, who was imprisoned and forced into exile, values dearly individual liberties. In one of his most recent articles, "Freedom First",⁵ he tries to demonstrate the relationship between the democratic process and liberty, which he considers to be the cornerstone of governing. To support his argument he asserts that sheikh *Al-Qaradawi* believes that "liberty" must take precedent even over application of the Islamic dogma embodied in the *Shari'a*. For Islamists, that is an extreme – almost revolutionary – statement.

Al-Ghannouchi claims that Arab rulers are the first to reject democracy. He therefore makes his plea to the majority of Muslims, who in his opinion represent "centrist" tendencies, urging them to accept the democratic concept of individual participation in the political process as the primary role of citizenship. His views regarding the duty of citizens to exercise their democratic right to vote for the best person without regard to religion, ethnic group or gender, and his belief in the people's power to select their form of government is more in conformity with Western values than with conservative Islam. Speaking in Doha this week's at the conference organized by Al-Jazeera, "*Political Islam – Options and Policies*"⁶, *Al-Ghannouchi* stated that while the *raison d'être* of today's Islamic political movements is to combat tyranny and dictatorships, the intellectual challenge confronting their ideologies remains. Where *Al-Ghannouchi* differs from Western principles is in rejecting the notion that secularism – the separation of church – is an essential prerequisite for democracy. It is therefore unclear whether *Al-Ghannouchi*'s democratic views reflect a truly forward thinking ideology or simply his realization (and perhaps desire) that in a democratic system the Arab Muslim masses are likely to elect an Islamist government and choose the *Shari'a* as their governing law.

⁴ Islam and Secularism <http://politicalislam.org/Articles/PI%20526%20-%20Islam%20and%20Secularism.pdf>

⁵ Source: Al-Jazeera 12/21/2009 <http://www.aljazeera.net/NR/exeres/863EA3AC-FC98-47EA-87E5-929FB6E9126C.htm>

⁶ February 23, 2010 <http://www.aljazeera.net/NR/exeres/EEAFA278-A71A-4535-B426-F1EB284C7CDA.htm>

There are only two Middle Eastern countries in recent times – Turkey and Iran – with a national Islamic government and both come from outside the Arab World.⁷ They stand as a stark reminder of how different Islamism can be applied. In Turkey, despite the recent confrontation between the secular military and the Islamic government, the government seems to be gaining popularity with the citizens and is becoming more accepted by the West. In contrast, the Islamic government in Iran is considered a dismal failure on the national as well as the international scene. Similarly, the stark contrast between the relatively forward thinking *Al-Ghanouchi* and the combative pessimistic *Huwaidi* highlights the breadth of philosophical differences between political Islamists in the Arab world.

Most analysts have come to recognize that a totally secular system of government is difficult to achieve in the Arab World at this time. Some may point to the secularist government in Tunisia but then must confront the fact that it was autocratically imposed rather than democratically elected and is considered illegitimate by most Arabs. It remains to be seen whether the political participation of Islamists in government is unavoidable. In the meantime, those attempting to read the tea leaves should study those like *Al-Ghannouchi* and *Huwaidi* who are presently attempting to influence the answer to that question.

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⁷ We note that Hamas in Gaza and Hizbullah in Lebanon are local movements, not national governments.