Islam, Human Rights and the Possibility of Reasonable Pluralism: A case from the Tunisian constitution

Lecture by Dr. Zaid Eyadat
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A Summary by Bayan Jaber

Despite the radical and violent images of Islamic groups dominating the media, a post-secular Islam that complements human rights is also on the rise. Dr. Zaid Eyadat, Dean of the School of International Studies and Political Science at the University of Jordan, demonstrated such a rise at a lecture organized by the Issam Fares Institute for Public Policy and International Affairs (IFI), at the American University of Beirut (AUB) as part of IFI’s Human Rights Lecture Series.

Eyadat believes that in spite of the atrocities taking place in the Arab world, rational interpretations of Islam exist that are compatible with a modern understanding of human rights. He explained that what is being seen recently on the news, with the emergence of extremist groups such as the Islamic State, is not representative of the religion of Islam. This is why it is important to revisit the true meaning of Islam and its relationship with political and public life.

He explained that the problem is not Islam as a religion but rather people’s interpretations of it. He stressed that the very act of selecting one interpretation over the other is a matter of human judgment and so, interpretations of the Koran and Sunnah fall under human fallibility. Because of this fallibility, Eyadat believes that Sharia being presented into mainstream culture as being sacred is a myth.

Eyadat examined the possibility of reconciling political liberalism with Islamic values and ethics. In fact, he explained, Islam requires (secularism) to survive, stating studies that show Islam actually has little effect on public life and so, the assumed relationship between Islam and political behavior is exaggerated to say the least.

To illustrate his point, he referred to the new Tunisian constitution of January 2014 and reflected on the public deliberations and discussions accompanying the process of engineering such a constitution. He pointed out the significance of achieving constitutional consensus in light of the diversity that has characterized the composition of the political domain in Tunisia.
since the revolution in 2011, and the strong presence of both Islamist and secular parties that are divided ideologically.

Eyadat presented the Tunisian Ennahda movement as an example of a rational, moderate, post-secular Islamic movement that is compatible with human rights. “Ennahda has asserted time and time again that they did not seek to impose Islamic law. They see Islam as a source of their obligation to establish good and ethical governance that is fair to all, instead of being a guide to their policy-making”, he said.

He explained that it was to their advantage to seek the establishment of a democracy rather than a theocracy of sorts because most Tunisians tend to agree with their comprehensive claims. They therefore seek to simply remove the restrictions that prevent Muslims from practicing their faith as they choose, instead of forcing them to be religious.

As rational agents, Ennahda realized that it is in their best interest to be reasonable rather than exclusionary. Instead of taking all power into their hands, like the Muslim Brotherhood did in Egypt, Ennahda formed a coalition with two secular parties. This unlikely alliance and division of power between Ennahda and secular parties has been turbulent, but accommodating.

Eyadat also discussed political reasonability in terms of being considerate and tolerant of others. It is important to take other views into account even if these views aren’t actually implemented. It is his belief that the Tunisian constitution exemplifies this sort of reasonability as it has the most progressive text on human rights in Arab history.