

## *Editorial*

# To Revolt or Not to Revolt: A Muslim Perspective on the Egyptian Experiment

Although—with a long way to go—the eighteen-day demonstrations in Egypt from January 25, 2011 to February 11, 2011, which toppled President Hosni Mubarak will ultimately go down in history as one of the great revolutions. This event stands alongside the French Revolution (1789–1799) and the Russian Revolutions (1917–1918). Almost everybody will agree that it was not a religiously motivated one, even though it was executed through an unprecedented cooperation between different religious groups and affiliations. In fact, this revolution was inspired by social, political, and economic concerns.

However, with the majority of the Egyptians being Muslim (perhaps, because of that), and despite being un-Islamic itself, the Mubarak regime couldn't resist both unleashing Islamic propaganda and appealing to Islamic sensibilities of the demonstrators in its effort to foil the demonstrations. Could or should these demonstrations have been thwarted by justifiable Islamic injunctions?

This came through the Grand Mufti (the formal, highest Muslim authority) of Egypt, Dr. Ali Jum`ah, who made several pronouncements to discourage Muslim youth and their families from continuing to participate in the demonstrations. This brings forward some important questions: are peaceful demonstrations to remove a “despotic” leader and a “corrupt” government allowed (even if riddled with potential chaos)? Or should Muslims allow themselves to be ruled in perpetual tyranny and oppression in order to foster a lack of obvious chaos (not peace; as a tyrannical rule cannot be peaceful to the people themselves in the first place)? This edito-

rial will navigate through these hard questions in light of the Grand Mufti's statements regarding the recent Egyptian demonstrations.

A disclaimer, not an apology: As an outside observer, a non-Egyptian and as the editor of an academic journal of international circulation and repute, I declare to our readers that I operate with no political motives or religious and sectarian affiliations. Instead, I speak to these current affairs (as I usually do in my editorials) with a hint of academic curiosity. Hence, with all due respect and absolute difference, even though this editorial is informed less by the political loyalties of the Mufti and more by his methodology and line of arguments (the latter being a common problem among some traditional Muslims), both will be addressed.

I have had the privilege to listen, in person, to a Friday sermon (*khuṭbah*), delivered by the Mufti. I have also had the honor to be able to interview Dr. Ali Jum`ah in 2002, in his office at al-Azhar Mosque (before he became the mufti). So I can vouch for the immensity of his knowledge and popularity, and would have comfortably classified him as a moderate scholar (if such a classification were to be necessary).

A few days into the peaceful demonstrations at Tahrir Square, and following the attack of the pro-Mubarak demonstrators in Tahrir Square, the Mufti issued, on Wednesday, February 2, 2011, what should be considered as his *fatwa* (legal opinion) on the demonstrations. He called on the demonstrators all over Egypt—and particularly in Tahrir Square—to disperse and return to their homes in order for normal life to resume and for the people of Egypt to avert the negative consequences of chaos. To substantiate his *fatwa*, the Mufti reminded the demonstrators of Prophet Muhammad's admonishments that "riot [*fitnah*: civil strife] is dormant [asleep: *nā'imah*], may God curse whoever activates [awakens: *yūqizuhā*] it." He also quoted the Prophet's advice to Muslims on the latter's farewell sermon (*khuṭbat al-wadā`*) that "indeed your blood and wealth are sacred (forbidden to be wasted: *ḥarām*).<sup>1</sup> The Mufti called on everybody to allow the government [legal system: Shar'iyah] the chance to do its work [of reform?]. Otherwise, there would be a leadership vacuum, which would lead to destruction. He insisted that it is "change, not destruction that is needed. So going against the [will of] of the government is prohibited."<sup>2</sup> The speech may have been nothing short of a tirade to the ears of the demonstrators.

## The Mufti's Political Loyalty

From these statements of February 2, coupled with those he issued a few days later (February 6, 2011), the Mufti left no doubt in everyone's mind

as to what his position was with Mubarak and his regime. His loyalty to the Mubarak's regime would surprise few Egyptians as well as expert observers. After all, he was hand-picked, groomed and ultimately offered the job (not withstanding his suitability and qualification or lack thereof) by the regime. Yet, Egyptian Muslims would have expected relatively religious independence from their mufti.

In 2002, when I had my interview with Dr. Ali Jum`ah, and a few years before he became the mufti, my guide around Cairo, who was a foreign student at al-Azhar University, told me that Dr. Jum`ah was praised and being groomed for the mufti position. The real truth behind his appeal may, forever, remain unknown. But my guide's speculation as to why he was such an attractive candidate was that Dr. Jum`ah was seen by the regime as a moderate scholar—an explanation I believed then, considering my impression of him following my interview with him (regarding leadership of women in Islam). However, years later, his position on the demonstrations, at least, to outside observers (for Egyptians themselves may already have scores of clues to form their opinions about him), would leave no iota of doubt that the regime had picked him because it knew all along that it could count on his unwavering loyalty, and that he could always dance to the tune it wanted him to. Interestingly, in this case, being a moderate and a stooge of the regime are not terribly contradictory qualities. In fact, they complemented each other perfectly well in serving the interests of the regime.

But what is ironic (for those who are not familiar with “religious politics” in Egypt) is how the Mufti, in time of obvious change, was so oblivious and was willing to use his Islamic authority to support political loyalties by choosing to align himself so closely with the corrupt regime. More ironic was his answer to a question posed on a TV program regarding political pretenders masquerading in religious garbs [the Muslim Brotherhood?] in order to influence the people. He said: “religion is for [religious] guidance (*al-hidāyah*) and not for political opportunism (*al-istighlāl al-siyāsī*) nor is it a ladder (*sullam*) to be climbed to achieve worldly benefits.”<sup>3</sup> This elegant answer, indeed, any simple observer would believe, applies more to him than anyone else. Yet, all that is easily but completely lost to the Great Mufti.

Even though the Mufti subsequently, yet reluctantly and cursorily acknowledged the right of the Egyptian people to demonstrate, it was clear that he had aligned himself with the regime and was speaking for it—advising people not to use Tahrir Square or Cairo Stadium for their demonstrations.<sup>4</sup> He concludes: “What is happening in front of us is unacceptable

(rejected: *marfūd*) by all measures (*maqāyīs*: [thus, religiously, politically, socially, and economically]).”<sup>5</sup>

## The Mufti’s Method and Line of Arguments

The methodology one adopts may not only determine, but may also guide and lead to his desired conclusions, and therefore, support his case. So, it is not surprising that the Mufti, in his arguments, chose to emphasize only his concerns for the safety and interest of the Egyptian nation (even though that meant the Egyptian people, as abstract nations are nothing without the people). Focusing on the lack of chaos (*fawḍā*) and the quest for peace (legitimate concerns, of course), the Mufti not only trivialized, but totally ignored Hosni Mubarak’s effective subjugation of the Egyptian people for almost three decades.

One of the best methods of argumentation is to acknowledge or even list the strengths of the opponent’s arguments before refuting them and presenting one’s own. But it would be self-defeating to totally ignore the opponent’s side of the issue, no matter how authoritative proofs one may have, or even regardless of how an authority figure one actually is. In the case of the Mufti, he should have, at least, recognized the plight of the Egyptian people (as oppressed, subjugated, helpless, and hopeless) and then try to convince them about how his call for peace (in the form of advocating for the abandoning of the demonstrations) should legitimately override their concerns. If he could not make a case in favor of his position after acknowledging the people’s, then he should not have advanced such arguments in the first place.

The fact that he can selectively quote a Prophetic statement to support his own point of view without considering other side of the issue or exhausting the entire Prophetic traditions is, at best, dubious, and irresponsible, at worst. The most compelling cases for the Egyptian people for wanting Mubarak out (which the Mufti failed to acknowledge) included how Mubarak ruled over them with an iron fist for far too long; how he presided over a corrupt regime; how they were oppressed for almost three decades; how they were under constant fear for their lives; how they were deprived of their economic rights; how Mubarak, his family, and their friends had monopolized the country’s wealth; and how they, the people, had no freedoms to challenge Mubarak in whatever he decided or to fully participate politically in the affairs of the nation.

Few people in Egypt and around the world will disagree with these as legitimate facts and concerns. The least that the Mufti could have done

was to acknowledge them. And herein lays my concern about his conclusions. For the negative impact of all the aforementioned concerns regarding the people of Egypt, will far dwarf the impact of whatever was the Mufti's concern (a legitimate one in and of itself). And his concerns pale in comparison with the urgency of the people's. So the question is: were the demonstrations, as the Mufti said, truly "unacceptable (rejected: *marfūd*) by all measures (*maqāyīs* [thus, religiously, politically, socially, and economically])"? Absolutely, not.

That Egyptian people suffered a great deal under Mubarak's regime is acknowledged by many; that his regime was a dictatorship is rejected by a negligible few—and that the Egyptian's plight would have changed drastically in a positive direction had he been allowed to continue his rule is laughable. So for the Mufti to have implored the people to give Mubarak's regime a chance to continue was either naïve or hypocritical.

Speaking of exhausting the Prophetic traditions on all issues before giving a fatwa, one wonders why the Mufti failed to consider how the Prophet had encouraged Muslims to speak out with the truth (*kalimat ḥaqq*)—about tyranny; injustice, and oppression against an unjust and oppressive ruler (*sultān jā'ir*). Obviously, the reason behind the Mufti not considering this prophetic advice was the fact that he did not believe that Mubarak was oppressive. But, if the latter was, in fact, an oppressive ruler (as the majority of Egyptians believed), then the people of Egypt were absolutely justified, from Islamic perspective, to come out in millions to revolt against Mubarak.

ʿUmar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb, the second caliph, reprimanded his representative governor to Egypt, ʿAmr ibn al-ʿĀṣī, and his son who were accused of abusing their power against a young Egyptian man. Significantly, ʿUmar was adamant to prove to Ibn al-ʿĀṣī that no human being (Muslim or non-Muslim) should be treated as a slave in Islamic polity. He insisted that as all people are born free (*aḥrār*), nobody has the right to treat them like slaves. Can the Mufti honestly testify that Mubarak and his regime did not treat Egyptians like their slaves, who were to be scared to speak out for the fear of being punished? This situation alone (not to talk of the real threats of torture, imprisonments, and disappearance) justified their calls for his departure (*raḥīl*).

Another significant gap in the Mufti's line of arguments was how oblivious he was about some significant details regarding one of his main concerns: who was behind the chaos? Who was dragging Egypt possibly into what he called a "civil war" (*ḥarb ahliyyah*)? He blamed everything

squarely on the demonstrators, while ignoring the fact that the Mubarak's regime and its supporters were responsible for the ensued chaos across Egypt. Who can forget the frightening scenes of Mubarak's supporters storming Tahrir Square mounted on their camels as they attacked the peaceful demonstrators? Until the so-called Mubarak's "thugs" including his security apparatus and prisoners unleashed their horror on the demonstrators, the uprisings across Egypt were largely peaceful and orderly.

So the perpetrators of the violence were Mubarak's supporters (actually, Mubarak's regime), not the demonstrators. Had the Mufti honestly reflected on these facts, or had he not deliberately decided to side with the regime, he would have certainly been critical of the latter. His best options, as the Mufti, were to either criticize the regime or "shut up." But blaming the demonstrators was totally a misplaced priority, which rendered his fatwa utterly baseless.

Lastly, the fact is that because the people turned a blind eye on the Mufti's fake admonishments and persisted on their demonstrations, it led to the accomplishment of their goals in what came to be considered as one of the great revolutions in the history of the modern era. God does not change people's situation until they make the efforts to change it by themselves—a popular Qur'anic teaching.<sup>6</sup> Reciprocating with the Mufti in religious language, it should be noted that this successful Egyptian experiment was not only a result of the people's bravery, perseverance, cooperation and defiance (without which they would have never been emancipated), but significantly also a result of God's volition and backing for the average people of Egypt. And, if there is any lesson to be learnt at all, it should be that God will never allow tyranny and oppression to reign supreme forever—a great lesson, indeed, for all.

The upcoming special issue of AJISS (28:3) is dedicated to the intellectual legacy of Ismā'īl Rājī al-Fārūqī. For this reason, we hope we can dedicate next year's (2012) special issue to some aspects of "Muslims and Political Change." We would later publish a call for papers for academically well-written articles that address not only theoretical or historical debates, but also those analyzing practical issues such as those being witnessed in the Muslim nations recently.

This year's first issue of AJISS begins with M. Ashraf Adeel's "Modernity and Muslims: Toward a Selective Retrieval." Adeel focuses on some conditions in today's world of globalized media, which, he argues, produce either an uncritical acquiescence or fright in Muslim societies. His central concern is to suggest that fundamentalism is neither the only

nor the most reasonable response for Muslims in the face of contemporary modernity. He suggests that using the ethics of the Qur'an, Muslims must adopt an independent and critical attitude toward modernity to reshape their societies.

The next paper is Anke Iman Bouzenita's "The Dilemmas of Islamic Bioethics in the Twenty-first Century: 'Being a Stranger in a Strange Land' (Or: Procrustes 'Islamized')." Bouzenita attempts to describe the decontextualization of Islamic concepts from a background of secularized medical care and the ethics in Islamic world—as well as the estrangement due to some questions of Islamic law from its holistic framework of application. Bouzenita also discusses chosen bioethical case studies, with a focus on the concept of brain death. She argues about how constructed realities related to the life sciences have been imported from a secular setting into an already estranged Islamic context.

"An Outline of the Historical Evolution of Qawā'id Literature in Islamic law" is penned by Necmettin Kizilkaya. He concentrates here on *al-qawā'id al-fiqhiyyah* (translated by many as "legal maxims") instead of on *al-qawā'id al-uṣūliyyah* (hermeneutic principles). Kizilkaya deals with the concept of *qawā'id*, its importance in Islamic law and the historical overview of the development of *qawā'id* literature in four Sunni schools of law. He also examines the evolution of the genre in three important periods, extending from second/eight to thirteenth/nineteenth centuries. As one of the strengths of this paper, the author concludes with an extensive list of classical and modern traditional *qawā'id* works.

Finally, we close with Ahmad F. Yousif's "Strategies for Enhancing the Understanding of Islam in the Media." In a lucid writing style and coming from Islamic studies background, Yousif seeks to examine some of the reasons behind the media's misunderstanding of Islam by posing several questions. How has this misunderstanding come about? Why is Islam misunderstood in the global media? And how can this situation be remedied? He concludes by proposing some strategies for enhancing the media's understanding of Islam.

I hope AJISS has, once again, assembled a collection of thought-provoking articles that would not only help clarify many issues, but also stimulate and generate more debate about the diverse issues involving Islam and Muslims the world over.

**Endnotes**

1. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7leQws-tEB0>. Textual reports on this speech may be consulted on: [http://www.masrawy.com/News/Egypt/Politics/2011/february/2/fetna\\_demons.aspx](http://www.masrawy.com/News/Egypt/Politics/2011/february/2/fetna_demons.aspx).
2. Ibid.
3. Ibid.
4. <http://www.onislam.net/arabic/newsanalysis/newsreports/islamic-world/128389-2011-02-06-15-22-25.html>.
5. [http://www.masrawy.com/News/Egypt/Politics/2011/february/2/fetna\\_demons.aspx](http://www.masrawy.com/News/Egypt/Politics/2011/february/2/fetna_demons.aspx).
6. Qur'an (13:11).

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