

Liberal Tolerance in Arab Political Thought: Translating Farah Antun (1874–1922)

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Leading figures in the Middle Eastern intellectual milieu have received ample scholarly attention, but not much has been written on the emergence of political concepts in Arab thought. The following translation focuses on the evolution and reception of one concept—the liberal concept of tolerance.

The liberal concept of tolerance is a child of the European Enlightenment, and it constitutes a fundamental core value of the political model of liberal democracy. The historical context of its evolution was the Protestant Reformation and the religious wars in early modern Europe. This period witnessed the emergence of two principles that helped refine the concept of tolerance. The first of these principles, which was a product of the Reformation, was the individualization of religious belief; the second was the advent of secularism, an offshoot of the neutralist, passive Enlightenment view regarding religious conflicts. Both individualism and secularism underpinned a new perception of justice that was detached from the conventional theological conception of true religion. These principles were institutionalized under pressure from the state and with the impetus provided by the philosophy of natural law.¹

One of the prominent events in the history of the discourse on tolerance within its Middle Eastern context can be traced to a debate that occurred during 1902 and 1903 between Muhammad ʿAbdu (1849–1905), one of the greatest Muslim reformers and the Mufti of Egypt (appointed in 1899), and Farah Antun, an Ottoman Orthodox Christian intellectual who emigrated from Tripoli to Egypt. Antun was a francophone journalist who graduated from the new private school system of Greater Syria (*bilād al-shām*).²

The intellectual confrontation between Antun and ‘Abdu took place within the pages of Antun’s magazine, *al-Jamī‘a*, and within the pages of *al-Manar*, the magazine of Rashid Rida, Muhammad ‘Abdu’s disciple and one of the prominent spiritual fathers of political Islam. The debate began after Antun published an article that explored the biography and thoughts of the Muslim medieval philosopher and jurist Ibn Rushd (1126–1198).³ In his article Antun espoused Ernest Renan’s argument from *Averroès et l’averroïsme* (1852), which argued that Islamic orthodoxy had hindered the spirit of free intellectual inquiry.⁴ The controversy that allegedly began around Ibn Rushd’s ideas ignited an already smoldering debate over political philosophy.⁵

The translated section focuses on the question of tolerance and illustrates both the advent of the liberal concept of tolerance in the Arab-Ottoman intellectual sphere and the reception of its ideational content. Additionally, the reaction of Muhammad ‘Abdu, one of the prominent Islamic scholars of the age, to Antun, who was until then a marginal figure in the intellectual milieu of Egypt, reflects the challenge these ideas posed to those with an Islamic reformist orientation.

Antun’s theoretical justification for tolerance stems from the liberal interpretation of the concept of freedom, in which the primary function of the government is to preserve the individual’s constitutional rights. The social majority and political will of governments should not interfere with individual beliefs. He argues that true tolerance can exist only when religion is restricted to the private sphere of individuals and when the concept of rights is detached from the individual’s religious affiliation and replaced with the idea of natural rights. The incessant sectarian and religious conflicts over political power within a single polity should be resolved through the development of a new concept of community that is based on secularism and individualism, the two principles that maintain “true tolerance.” These principles should constitute the civil political bond and should, therefore, be a substitute for the political loyalties of the classic religious nations. Accordingly, the religious moral code should be replaced by the ideal of freedom of expression and belief.

The emergence of new premises regarding individual and political freedoms was accompanied by profound metaphysical transitions. The impact of modernity and the spread of religious skepticism were evident among the first generation of Arab scholars of the nineteenth century. These tendencies found their initial manifestations among the Christian intelligentsia who were the first to challenge religious and social conformism (traditionalism). Among the eminent and radical cases were those of the Maronite As’ad al-Shidyaq, who converted to Protestantism during the 1820s and died in the prison of the Maronite patriarch; his brother, the prominent linguistic scholar Faris al-Shidyaq, who left Beirut for the same

reason; and Mikha'el Mishaqa and Butrus al-Bustani, well-known scholars who also converted to Protestantism.⁶ These tendencies manifested among Muslim scholars in the revival of *ijtihād* and in the intensive will to reform orthodoxy and to restore cautiously medieval heterodox traditions and premises, especially those from rationalist schools of Islam (mainly from *al-Mu'tazila* and Andalusian traditions). It goes without saying that these transitions contributed, during the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century, to the spread of secular forms of thought among Muslims and Christians alike.

Antun, who embraced anti-clerical attitudes toward Christian establishments and controversial outlooks regarding Christian faith, was not an atheist. Following scholars such as Butrus al-Bustani, he propagated a humanist ideal of natural religion.⁷ According to his outlook, true faith should necessarily preserve the universal values of human rights (*al-ḥaq al-insāni*) and fit harmoniously with rationalism and science. His stance on religious indifferentism structurally undermines the religious dogmas that he conceived as being among the main causes of human divisiveness.

Antun's text reveals a temporal construction of collective identity that is absorbed by liberal values. The semantics of the concept of nationhood (he employs the term *umma*) in his text manifests an ideational content that is rare in subsequent historical phases of Arab political thought. In his works the concept of nationhood is detached from the classical implication of imperial affiliation and replaced with the legal perception that interweaves citizenship (political rights) and patriotism (*waṭaniyya*). Apparently the concept of nationhood that was predicated on ethnic-cultural or religious foundations did not enchant him. This premise was emphasized throughout most of his intellectual career via his espousal of Ottomanism and his opposition to Arab and Turkish nationalism.

In addition, Antun's endeavor to advocate liberal tolerance was confronted not only with the assumption of a conflict with inherited hierarchic traditions but also with the structure of language. To discuss tolerance in Arabic, Antun employs the term *tasāḥul* (this term was replaced later by *tasāmuḥ*, which purveys equivalent content) and thus provides additional difficulty. On the one hand, *tasāḥul* embodies a positive moral principle: to permit differences; on the other hand, tolerance carries a negative connotation: to bear differences, which thus embeds dissatisfaction.⁸ Antun, aware that the liberal concept of tolerance is new, states that tolerance, as a linguistic term, is a neologism, and thus its content is new to the Arabic language.

Antun's argument represents the aspirations of a new, educated generation who came from a background of free professions and found notions of enlightenment

to be an outlet for change. Antun's intellectual career was dominated by the endless pursuit of a new social contract for the people of the Levant and their different ethnicities, religions, and sects. His aspiration to form a new community brought him to perceive himself as an "Easterner,"⁹ a political concept that was generated by the intellectuals of a former generation, such as Butrus al-Bustani, Adib Ishaq, and Jamal al-Din al-Afghani. Antun's vague conception of Eastern solidarity (*al-sharq, al-mashriq, al-jami'a al-sharqiyya, al-rabita al-sharqiyya*) was, as previously mentioned, accompanied politically throughout most of his career by his advocating Ottomanism, which he conceived as a potentially liberal nationalism.¹⁰

Antun's aspiration to define a new social contract that would be predicated on individualism and secularism posed a crucial challenge to Islamic reformers who endeavored to refine a new political culture within the limits of the Islamic traditions. From 'Abdu's perspective, the challenge that Antun posed was crucial as well as destructive. The idea of individualizing religious belief and, in so doing, individualizing membership in the religious *umma*, was perceived as a direct threat to the sacred ties of Islam and its superiority as a collective identity and religious faith. Furthermore, combining the conflicting components of the concept of the civil state with the concept of religion was unendurable.

The rejection of Antun's argument is evident in 'Abdu's assertive reaction. 'Abdu, who endeavored throughout his scholastic career to maintain and reinforce the religious roots of the Islamic political community and to eventually challenge the individualist model posed by liberalism, argues that Islam constitutes a different case from that of Christianity. That is, not only are there no clergy in Islam but Islam also embeds internal norms of toleration. He further argues that the history of persecution in Islam is not a result of religious dispute, as was the case in Christian Europe, but rather a struggle over political power.¹¹ 'Abdu's argument stems from the desire to promote a particular perception of tolerance that relied on Islamic divine truth.¹²

The theoretical foundations of both Arab ideologies, Islamism and liberalism, are significantly evident in this debate. The temporality reflected in Antun's text conceptualizes the transformation of that historical time to the age of ideology. Much like the development of Western European thought, the process of thematizing tolerance in Arab-Islamic thought arose in conjunction with the emergence of dissatisfied social voices that challenged the conventional, hierarchical meaning of "rights." For intellectuals such as Antun, the ideas of the Enlightenment addressed not only the emancipation of religious minorities but also the struggle for class and gender equality within the context of the emerging model of nation-states.

The concept of tolerance becomes the core of the political and religious debates regarding the implications of the “civil state” (*dawla madaniyya*) and the definitions of membership in the political community. Both scholars—and later, both political streams (liberalism and Islamism)—embraced the same term, *madaniyya*, and aspired to attain a civil state while simultaneously endeavoring to infuse it with different content. While in Antun’s case *madaniyya* is necessarily secular (that is, religiously neutral), for ‘Abdu it meant maintaining the true religion, that is, the pure roots of Islam. In the first case the legitimacy of the civil government should theoretically be derived from the will of the citizens with no regard to their religious identity, while in the second, the concept of legitimacy is attached to the classical content of the religious *umma* and to the necessity of maintaining a divine moral code. It goes without saying that the historical repercussions of this debate address topics such as tolerance of ethnic, gender, sexual differences.

The debate around the definition of *madaniyya* has been revitalized since the 1980s, beginning with the intellectual reassessment of the leftist authoritarian ideologies¹³ and with the actual overthrowing of presidents during the past decade (beginning in Iraq in 2003 and in some of the Arab republics after 2011). In all of these countries, the debate surrounding the subject of tolerance came to the forefront and was transferred from the intellectual sphere to the public sphere. The new historical context not only uncovered repressed conflicts that had been muted by autocratic regimes but also questioned the concepts of political legitimacy that underpinned the previous regimes and their political contracts since the revolutionary acts of the 1950s and 1960s. The distribution of sectarian politics, the renewal of religious-sectarian clashes in central states in the region such as Iraq, Egypt, and Syria, and the struggle to manipulate the state symbols by a single sectarian group coupled with the persistent quest to tighten the link between law and particular interpretations of Islam revitalize the theoretical conflict displayed in this debate and make it once again relevant to the present time.

Notes

- 1 Ingrid Creppell, Russell Hardin, and Stephen Macedo, “Introduction,” in *Toleration on Trial* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2008), 2–5; István Bejczy, “Tolerantia: a Medieval Concept,” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 58, no. 3 (1997): 367; Shlomo Fischer, “Petah davar” [Prologue], in *‘Al ha-sovlanut*, [On tolerance], ed. Adam Seligman and Shlomo Fischer (Jerusalem: Van Leer Jerusalem Institute, 2007), 8–9.

- 2 For Antun's biography, see Donald M. Reid, *The Odyssey of Farah Antun: A Syrian Christian's Quest for Secularism* (Minneapolis: Bibliotheca Islamica, 1975), 3–23; Marun 'Isa al-Khouri, *Fi al-yaqaza al-‘Arabiyya: Al-khitab al-susyuluji ‘ind Farah Antun* [On Arab revival: The sociological discourse in the works of Farah Antun] (Lebanon: Jrus, 1994), 69–91; Husain al-Manasra, *Farah Antun—riwa’iyan wa-masrahian* [Farah Antun as novelist and dramatist] (Amman: Dar al-karmil, 1994), 27–44.
- 3 Antun's article and reaction to ‘Abdu was published in *al-Jami‘a* 8, no. 3 (1902) and *al-Jami‘a* 4, no. 4 (1903). Antun collected and published his work in Farah Antun, *Ibn Rushd wa-falsafatuhu* [Ibn Rushd and his philosophy] (Alexandria: Al-jami‘a, 1903).
- 4 Reid, *The Odyssey of Farah Antun*, ix.
- 5 For a general survey of the debate, see *ibid.*, 80–88; Albert Hourani, *Arabic Thought in the Liberal Age, 1798–1939* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 253–259; Alexander Flores, “Reform, Islam, Secularism: Farah Antun and Muhammad Abduh,” in *Entre réforme sociale et mouvement national: Identité et modernisation en Egypte (1882–1962) [Between social reform and national movement: identity and modernization in Egypt (1882–1962)]*, ed. Alain Roussillon (Cairo: Cedej, 1995), 565–576; Alexander Flores, “Modernity, Romanticism, and Religion,” in *Nationalism and Liberal Thought in the Arab East: Ideology and Practice*, ed. Christoph Schumann (London: Routledge, 2010), 122–124.
- 6 For additional cases, see Elie Kedourie, “The Death of Adib Ishaq,” *Middle Eastern Studies* 9, no. 1 (1973): 95–96.
- 7 *Ibid.*, 95.
- 8 For a comprehensive comparison of the lexical implications of the two terms, see Husain Bu Khamsin, *al-ta‘adudiyya wal-tasamuh al-dini: Bayn al-fikr al-Islami wal-Gharbi* [Pluralism and religious tolerance: Between Islamic and Western thought] (Beirut: Dar al-mahajjah al-bayda’, 2008), 27–34.
- 9 Antun advocated this idea in many articles. See, for instance, Farah Antun, “al-‘anasir al-sharqiyya wal-taqrib baynaha” [The importance of solidarity between the Eastern nations], *al-Jami‘a* 4, no. 4 (1903): 243.
- 10 Reid, *The Odyssey of Farah Antun*, 98–99. For the evolution of the “Eastern idea” in Egypt during the interwar period, see James Jankowski, “The Eastern Idea and the Eastern Union in Interwar Egypt,” *The International Journal of African Historical Studies* 14, no. 4 (1981): 643–666.
- 11 For the complete argument on this topic, see Muhammad ‘Abdu, “al-idtihad fi al-Nasraniyya wal-Islam” [Persecution in Christianity and in Islam], in *Al-a‘mal al-kamila lil-Imam al-Shaykh Muhammad ‘Abdu*, ed. Muhammad ‘Imara (Beirut: Dar al-shuruq, 1993), 3:266–315.
- 12 For the evolution of a particular concept of tolerance in Islamist thought during the twentieth century, see Emad Shahin, “Toleration in Modern Islamic Polity: Contemporary Islamic Views,” in Creppell, Hardin, and Macedo, *Toleration on Trial*, 169–192.

- 13 The renewed debates on the subject of secularism occurred in the context of the reassessment of the basic premises of modern Arab thought, especially by prominent intellectuals such as Muhammad ‘Abid al-Jabiri and Hassan Hanafi who, to a certain extent, embraced the Muhammad ‘Abdu thesis, and Georges Tarabichi, who indirectly advocated Antun’s assumptions. Part of this debate was presented in Yusri Hazran, “Georges Tarabichi and the Religionization of the Public Sphere: A Heretic Voice from the East,” *Journal of Levantine Studies* 1, no. 2 (2011): 192–202.

