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The Civil State vs. the Secular State in Arab Discourse: Egypt as a Case Study

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This article is the result of collaboration between the authors, one a researcher from Bar Ilan University who deals with state-religion relations in Egypt, and the second an Egyptian sociologist, a lecturer at Ain Shams University and one of the founders of a new movement calling for secularism in Egypt. The article proposes a contextual analysis of the principle ideas of this secularization movement, as presented by Shalaby at the annual conference of the Department of Arabic and Islamic Studies at Tel Aviv University in May 2020. The article analyzes the emergence of the secularization movement in contemporary Egypt, its demands for change, and its weight in public discourse, and considers the difference between the call for secularism and the more common calls in the Arab world since the Arab Spring for the establishment of civil states.

Keywords: Egypt, secularization, civil state, secularism, religion, religion-state relations, Islam, Arab Spring

Introduction

A movement has emerged recently in Egypt calling for the secularization of society and of state institutions. Egyptian sociologist Abdallah Shalaby, a lecturer at the Ain Shams University and one of the founders of the movement, presented his ideas at the annual conference of the Department of Arabic and Islamic Studies at Tel Aviv University held in May 2020 (see excerpts from his lecture, translated into English, below). The initiative advocates the privatization of religion, that is to say, its removal from the public sphere and its preservation in the private sphere only (Casanova, 1994, pp. 12-17).

This is an unusual initiative. Demands of this nature to diminish the influence of clerics or religious institutions on decision making and management of political, economic, social, or cultural affairs are not new in Egypt (Hatina, 2007). However, Shalaby and his movement seek to change the fundamental relations between religion and state, by turning religion from regimist religion to public religion, and annulling the legal status of Islam as the state religion, an idea that is taboo. Following the ideas of Murad Wahba and Fuad Zakariyya, among the leaders of the secular current in Cairo, they demand the secularization of Egypt and not just its transformation into a civil state (*dawla madanīyya*).

A "civil state" is an elusive concept: while it refers to a non-religious state, it is also used by Islamist movements—albeit not in a secular sense—as they promote the establishment of a state based on religious law (Magued, 2000). The idea of a civil state has gained a foothold in the Arab public and political discourse, as a post-secular model that departs from the familiar dichotomy of religiosity versus secularism. Alternatively, it is located along the spectrum between these two extremes, seeking to create a synthesis between Islamic and Arab cultural particularism and modern Western norms and patterns. This contrasts with the opinion of Barbara De Poli, who considers use of the term civil state an attempt to avoid expressing explicit support for a model of a secular or religious state (De Poli, 2014).

> **The ideal state: a reformed nation state where public order is governed by modern patterns of governance, such as popular sovereignty, parliamentarism, pluralism, and civic equality, without marginalizing Muslim religion, history, and culture.**

The term civil state was born out of the absence of a Western term suitable for the state model that many in the Arab world seek. The term "secular state" is considered derogatory, another way of saying a country with Western permissiveness that is anti-religious, even atheist; and the term "religious state" has a negative connotation of a repressive medieval European Christian state or the Iranian Shiite state after the Islamic Revolution. Consequently, the term "civil state" is more and more common in the Arab world today—and especially since the Arab Spring—to describe the ideal state: a reformed nation state where public order is governed by modern patterns of governance, such as popular sovereignty, parliamentarism, pluralism, and civic equality, without marginalizing Muslim religion, history, and culture (Lavie, 2016). This essay seeks to examine the implications of the growing calls in the Arab world at large and in Egypt in particular for the establishment of a civil state, and to examine how they differ from the goals of the new secularization movement.

From the Sidelines to the Mainstream: The Idea of a Civil State in Egypt

Until the 1980s, there were only sporadic calls for the establishment of a civil state in Egypt. The idea then was a complete separation between religion and state, and the calls were the domain of only a few—mostly foreign diplomats, Christian intellectuals, liberals, and reformist clerics. Thus the term was not

accepted in the public at large and in Islamic circles in particular. From the 1980s, the term became more and more common, both among liberal and Islamist intellectuals. The liberals used the term civil state to soften the antagonistic call for secularization. They did not talk about separation of religion and state, but about narrowing the role of religion in politics and of preserving its status in education and culture. Islamists, on the other hand, adopted the term, but with a different meaning. The Islamic Revolution in Iran in 1979 tarnished the image of the Islamic state that Islamic groups had raised on a pedestal. Islamic intellectuals were thus pushed into adopting the terminology of a civil state as part of their political theory in an attempt to disavow the religious state in the Iranian Shiite sense, a state ruled by a religious cleric (*wilāyat al-faqīh*). To this end they developed the argument that the Sunni Islamic state is ruled by a civil leader (as opposed to a religious cleric who rules by a divine right), and thus the state is civil and not religious. This is not a secular state, as there is no renunciation of Islam as the overall system regulating life in all fields, including legislation and governance (Lavie, 2016).

From the early 2000s, the Muslim Brotherhood removed its prolonged opposition to the civil state and adopted the concept to its official platform, after Sheik Yusuf al-Qaradawi, one of the greatest Sunni jurists, declared his adherence to it (Harnisch & Mecham, 2009; Kamali, 2005; Lavie, 2017). Islamists often emphasize that they advocate a "civil state with an Islamic source of authority," a qualification added to emphasize that this does not mean a secular state, but rather a non-religious state in the theocratic sense only, without relinquishing the notion that *sharī'a* is the source of authority for the laws of the state, and that Western forms of government are acceptable only if they are consistent with *sharī'a* principles. Proponents of the "civil state" in the sense of both separating religion from politics and full civic equality, and proponents of the "civil state with an Islamic

source of authority" disagree on the source of authority for decision making and legislation (religious or non-religious), but they agree on adoption of elements of modern rule, such as a regular government turnover, democratic elections, separation of powers, rule of law, sovereignty of the people, parliamentarism, party pluralism, and more.

The differences between the Islamist and the liberal-civil currents over the concept of a civil state were particularly pronounced after the downfall of President Mubarak in the January 2011 uprising, when it became clear that the dispute over the orientation of the post-revolutionary state was far wider than any common denominator. When Egypt sought to formulate a new constitution, the Islamists blocked any attempt to define Egypt as a civil state in the constitution, as occurred in Tunisia (Lavie, 2018, 2019), out of concern that this term would be understood as a secular state. In 2011, a first attempt of this kind led by the military administration (SCAF), which ruled Egypt until the Muslim Brotherhood came to power, was blocked by mass demonstrations by supporters of the Islamist current. The 2014 constitution formulated after the ousting of President Morsi also failed to achieve agreement over the definition of Egypt as a civil state because of opposition by the Salafis. Instead, as a compromise, a more toned down and less prominent formulation was adopted. Egypt was defined in the preamble only as a "state with a civil government."

However in 2019, under President el-Sisi, another step was taken toward anchoring Egypt's civil nature in the constitution. The amended constitution now states that the role of the army is to preserve the "civil character of the state" (*madanīyyat al-dawla*). Thus, de jure, it is stated that Egypt is a civil state, and that the army is the guarantor of the country's non-religious nature. This clause signals that it is the army's duty to prevent the return to power of Islamist forces, such as the Muslim Brotherhood, who wish to give the state a religious character.

This amendment to the constitution was made possible despite the opposition of the Salafi party, after the Egyptian parliament authorized a formal interpretation of the concept of *madanīyyat al-dawla*, which clarifies that even though Egypt declares itself a civil state, the meaning is not a secular state ("Legislative Committee of Representatives," 2019). In July 2020, the amendment to the constitution was ratified in a law that determines the process for decision making in the event of danger to the civil character of the state (Al-Ashwal, 2020).

The grounding of Egypt's civil character in the constitution and law, as well as the entrenchment of the civil state concept in the wider public discourse, does not involve secularization processes. The steps taken by el-Sisi are not intended to ban religion from the public arena or to abolish the involvement of the religious establishment in political and social life. The religious establishment continues to exist under the Sisi regime, sometimes subject to the President and his dictates, and sometime in conflict with him. Thus, for example, in 2015, against the backdrop of the establishment of the Islamic State (IS) and Egypt's battle with terrorists from the Sinai Peninsula operating in the name of IS, el-Sisi made the al-Azhar religious institution exclusively responsible for the renewal of the religious discourse, through a critical examination of canonical Islamic texts, their reinterpretation, and adaption to the needs of the hour. Al-Azhar worked to neutralize the voices of the radicals in public discourse, denouncing terrorism and encouraging reforms and tolerance in educational curricula, but without abandoning its conservative positions, for example on the issue of the status of women and political and religious freedoms, and without including other participants in the process who were eager to contribute, such as intellectuals and academics (Yefet, 2017). Recent tensions have been evident between the regime and al-Azhar to the point where the regime has considered separating the Dār al-Iftā' body that issues religious edicts, which

has traditionally been subordinate to al-Azhar, and placing it under government patronage as a more disciplined religious institution ("Law Regulaing Dār al-Iftā'," 2020). El-Sisi's efforts were not aimed at secularization, but at de-Ikhwanization and de-Islamization, in other words, the exclusion of the Muslim Brotherhood and the annulment of steps the Brotherhood took during their year in power in Egypt that were aimed at strengthening the Islamic character of the state.

> **The call for a civil state is a call for law enforcement, public order, personal security, and the eradication of corruption and crime. It is a call for a state that is not a failed state.**

The Perception of the Civil State in the Arab world

Calls for the establishment of a civil state are common not just in Egypt. In Iraq, for example, the main slogan sounded during mass demonstrations in 2015 protesting power outages and demanding cuts to the salaries of elected officials was "bread, freedom, and a civil state" (*khubz, hurrīyya, dawla madanīyya*) (Alnaher, 2015). The expression "civil state" here replaces the term "social justice" (ʿadāla ijtimāʿīyya) or (karāma insānīyya) that was a slogan in various uprisings in the Arab world over the past decade. The origin of the slogan lay in demonstrations to bring down Morsi in Egypt in 2012, in part in the name of a civil state, but took on relevant implications for the specific circumstances of Iraqi society (Al-Saʿdāwī, 2013; ʿAṣfūr, 2013). In this instance, the civil state means primarily a state with functioning institutions and working services, i.e., a state capable of providing the basic needs of its citizens. The call for a civil state is a call for law enforcement, public order, personal security, and the eradication of corruption and crime. It is a call for a state that is not a failed state. It is also a call for a regime that is not a regime of political Islam, the military, or a confessional

system where senior positions are divided among the major religious and ethnic sub-communities. (Al-ʿAlī, 2017; Nāṣir, 2016; Riḍā, 2016). In similar fashion, Lebanese president Michel Aoun recently called for Lebanon to be declared a civil state ("Lebanon's President," 2020).

Even in Saudi Arabia, which is often considered a purist religious state where the regime derives its legitimacy from this ideal, there have been calls over the past 15 years for the establishment of a civil state. The 9/11 attacks, which featured many Saudis among the terrorists who planned and carried out the attacks, and al-Qaeda's terrorist activities in Saudi Arabia itself since 2003, have ignited not only external criticism of the kingdom and calls for it to re-examine its Wahhabi foundations, but also an internal dialogue encouraged by the King aimed at clearing Saudi Arabia's reputation and permanently erasing its image as fertile ground for the growth of terrorists (Dekmejian, 2003, p. 400). Against this background, there have been calls for liberalization, including calls to adopt the model of a civil state (Al-Ghāmdī, 2006). The question of whether Saudi Arabia is a religious state resurfaced with the outbreak of the Arab Spring, which sparked a region-wide discourse on the desired state model and the need for a new social contract between the state and its citizens (Al-Dakhīl, 2011; ʿAdnān, 2014).

The rise of IS in 2014 further nurtured the calls against a religious state in favor of a civil state, as the answer to the radical version of an Islamic state (Bunzel, 2016). Saudi Arabia's position at the head of the alliance with Egypt, Bahrain, and the United Arab Emirates directed against the Turkish-Qatari axis that has supported the Muslim Brotherhood since its removal from power in Egypt in 2013 also contributed to these calls. The civil state in this instance stands opposed to those states that support the Muslim Brotherhood (Al-Rashīd, 2020). The call for a civil state in Saudi Arabia is not a call for a secular state or even for a state of all its citizens providing equal rights to minorities, in particular Shiites. It is directed first and foremost at diminishing the influence of the clerics and the religious institutions in politics, state institutions, and education. This is a demand for the abolition of the state monopoly over religious discourse; it is a demand to enable pluralism, the growth of a civil society, and a shared national culture. These are calls for modernization and reform under the shade of "civil Islam" (Gerges, 2013).

In contrast to Egypt and Tunisia, such voices have not as yet received backing from the regime, but have been rejected repeatedly by the clerics close to the palace ("Mufti of Saudi Arabia," 2012; Al-Saʿīdī, 2011). These clerics, whom Quintan Wiktorowicz calls the "quietist (ʿulamāʾ) clerics" (Ismail, 2019, p. 169), adhere to the claim that a civil state is opposed to Islam because it deprives it of control over the regime, legislation, the judiciary, and morals and conduct, and leaves it only in control of matters of personal status (marriage, divorce and inheritance) and worship. They reject the concept of "a civil state with an Islamic source of authority," as it narrows the sovereignty of *sharīʿa* to legislation only and denies its role as the framework for all state mechanisms (Al-Burayk, 2016).

The concept of the civil state in Saudi Arabia is the domain of the liberal current, which is negligible in scope. It includes figures such as Muhammad al-Qahtani and Abdullah Hamed, and a few modernist clerics (civil sheikhs) (Okruhlik, 2005, p. 204), such as Salman al-Oudah and Ali al-Omari (Al-ʿAwda, 2012, p. 127). Madawi al-Rasheed describes this group as "a minority that has carved a space for itself in the public sphere" and "who present their society with an alternative third way, between the radical Salafi-jihadi movement and the acquiescent official Salafi trend" (al-Rasheed, 2016, p. 2). They are not organized as a cohesive movement, they have not received authority or official political-institutional support, and furthermore, most of them are today either in jail or remain silent.

However, it is possible that a change in the attitude of the monarchial regime to the idea of a civil state is underway. Although a civil state is not part of the Vision 2030 program of Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman (MBS), since 2017 the Saudi media—even the more conservative branch, which seeks to glorify him and the liberal reforms that he has begun to promote, especially with regard to permission for women to drive, encouragement of leisure activity, and the reduced role of the modesty police—portrays Saudi Arabia under the leadership of MBS as a civil state marching forward to modernity and shunning its title as a religious state with a primitive and failed character (Al-Kindī, 2020).

From Civil to Secular State: The Initiative of the al-Miṣriyyin Organization for Secularization

Meir Hatina showed that up to the 1990s civil state proponents were on the margins of the consensus in Egypt (Hatina, 2000, p. 58). Today, the concept of a civil state is mainstream in many, though not all, Arab states. There are disagreements as to how the concept should be interpreted, and it has a local indigenous character in each country depending on socio-political circumstances, the type of regime, and the model of the religion and state relationship. Pure secular ideas along the lines of the ideas of Fuad Zakariyya, one of the prominent advocates of secularization in Egypt in the 1980s and 1990s, are not commonplace. The ideas of Shalaby and his associates in the movement for the secularization of Egypt, which appear below, must be read with this background in mind. They represent very narrow margins only, but raising such ideas is easier than in the past thanks to several factors.

First, the contained meteoric rise of Islamist forces such as the Muslim Brotherhood and the Salafis in the post-Arab Spring era created a comfortable environment for secular ideas. When Islamist voices are silenced by violent repression, political exclusion, or co-option, secular ideas voiced in public will presumably not elicit a counter-reaction from conservative movements. In this climate where Islamic movements have been defeated and are submissive, ideas at the left of the spectrum ranging between religion and secularism can be raised without provoking overt antagonism at the right end of the spectrum.

Second, the liberal current has declined in strength and lost credibility, and thus needs to justify its existence in new ways or to find itself a new source of legitimacy. The liberals' support for the anti-democratic military coup against the Muslim Brotherhood, which came to power in Egypt in democratic elections, proved that those who call themselves liberals are willing to accept military rule operating with anti-liberal means, so long as this protects the civil (non-religious) nature of the state and prevents an Islamist monopoly on defining the state's identity and future. With the calls for liberalization and democratization no longer convincing, alternative ideas have joined the agenda of rationalist intellectuals.

Third, Shalaby's remarks oppose el-Sisi's measures to constitutionalize and codify Egypt's civil-ness. Shalaby wishes to generate deeper change in Egypt with respect to the place of religion: not to suffice with excluding the Islamists and annulling their political achievements, but to declare explicitly the intent to secularize society and to translate this into practical steps. Only thus, in his view, will Egypt become a democracy, as secularization is a necessary and critical precondition.

Egypt in the 21st Century: A Civil State or a Secular State? Measures Required to Secularize the State and Society
From a lecture by Dr. Abdallah Shalaby[1]
Distinguished friends and participants, I send you my gratitude and appreciation from Cairo and wish to thank especially the Department of Arabic and Islamic Studies at Tel Aviv University and my dear friend, Dr. Ofir Winter, for giving

me the opportunity to speak to you. Allow me first to present to you a few key ideas necessary to understand my remarks. These ideas constitute the essence of the initiative to support secularization and a civil state in Egypt, of which I have been one of the architects since mid-2019....

> **Whoever wishes to understand the developments of the 21st century, not only in Egypt and the Middle East, but throughout the world, must understand the significance of Islamic terrorism, and in order to do so, must understand that terrorism is the gravest stage [on the scale] of Islamic fundamentalism.**

Whoever wishes to understand the developments of the 21st century, not only in Egypt and the Middle East, but throughout the world, must understand the significance of Islamic terrorism, and in order to do so, must understand that terrorism is the gravest stage [on the scale] of Islamic fundamentalism. How is this so?

The first stage [on this scale] is the refusal to understand Islamic texts rationally, arguing that their meaning is literally clear and does not require the intellect. The second stage, derived from the first, is the stage of ruling by consensus (*ijmāʿ*) where common sense is obliterated, along with the [possibility] of interpreting these texts beyond their literal meaning (*taʾwīl*), and on this basis issuing religious rulings (*ijtihād*). The third stage, which derives from the *ijmāʿ*, is the stage of accusing anyone who opposes it as a heretic against Islam (*takfīr*). The final stage is that of terror, including violence, killing, and destruction. All these stages necessarily lead to the view of modern societies, in the absence of God's sovereignty, as un-Islamic (*jāhilīyya*). From here emerges the ostensible obligation to judge these societies, with their publics and regimes, and declare them infidels, as they corrupt life and religion. These societies should consequently be overturned through violence

and jihad, which is a fundamental obligation and religious duty in Islam. This duty also stems from the false claim that members of Islamic terrorist organizations alone hold the absolute truth and are obligated by heaven to kill those on earth [infidels in their eyes], committing crimes such as murder, destruction, and sabotage, on the religious pretext that they fulfill God's will. In my opinion, this is an immoral claim that is contradictory to belief in God.

In the face of the fundamentalist danger and the false claims of Islamic fundamentalists to hold the absolute truth, secularism stands as a counter-current of thought and a defensive force against Islamic fundamentalism....In my opinion, secularism (*ʿalmānīyya*) is a language. The origin of the word in Arabic is from the word for world (*ʿālam*)—[and not from the word for science (*ʿilm*) as some people claim], the world associated with the changing times. Secularism is a path and a world view that encourages thinking about nature, society, and man from a relative and humanistic point of view and not from a perspective of absolute divinity....This definition of secularism implies expropriating from the hands of divine oversight all affairs of life—politics, economy, administration, government, and culture—and transferring religion from the public sphere to the private sphere, so that it will no longer have any control over any aspect of society, but over its disciples only. Then a different world view free of sanctity, a totally humanist perception, will rule. Religious practice and ideas will lose their importance and influence over social life in general, and their conduct will be subject to reason, science, and the will of free and rational people. What is intended is the dissociation of religious belief from controlling all aspects of life.

A group of Egyptian intellectuals came together in the Institution of Egyptians (*Muʾassasat al-Miṣrīyyīn*) which is among the civil society organizations in Egypt, and after deliberations launched an initiative that was at first called the Initiative Supporting Egypt as a Civil State. I was not happy with the use of the

word "civil" due to considerations that I will explain. We reached an agreement on the name the Initiative to Support a Secular Modern State, but out of political and social considerations, and a lack of courage, a number of colleagues requested that the name be changed to the Initiative for Support of a Secular Movement and a Civil State in Egypt. In my assessment, Egyptian society does not have any rooted and influential secular current for us to support.... We only have a fundamentalist Islamist current that has taken root and penetrated thought and practice in society and in the various state institutions in Egypt. Opposing this stream are individuals, small groups, and secular forums alone. Some have a headquarters or a meeting place and some exist only in a virtual form on internet websites. All in all, this is a random jumble and not a deep-rooted and effective secular stream. All these shreds of secular groupings cannot move from the virtual world to the real world, to gain a foothold among the Egyptian general public, and instill values, perceptions, and means of social action that will lead Egypt as a society and as a country to a path of total secularization.

The question I raised before my partners in the initiative was, is it their intention to demand a civil state or a secular state in Egypt. Those following the struggle between the secularists and the [Islamic] fundamentalists in Egypt can see that the secularists of various kinds stand alone against the Islamic current without any support from the state, whose constitution determines that it is a civil state and that its army is the defender of the constitution, the principles of democracy, and the civil character of the state (article 200 of the 2014 constitution following its amendment in 2019). However, in the absence of a substantive secular current in Egypt, I see the term "civil state" in this context a vague expression of ingratiation that creates erroneous opinions around this fateful issue, which is meant to define the future of Egyptian society...I believe that the term civil state (*dawla madanīyya*) does not provide a good

enough response to the Islamic fundamentalist stream whose plans and demands to establish a religious state in Egypt are clear and defined, as a nucleus for the caliphate destined to rise when the Islamist fundamentalists seize power in Egypt. This movement is characterized by a high degree of organization and influence, while those who call for a civil state err in illusions reflecting their fear of the anger of the Islamist fundamentalists and regressive forces in Egyptian society.

In my opinion, the historic turning point at which the motherland now finds itself necessitates the daring and courage to demand a secular state and an initiative supporting the secularization of the modern state in Egypt. [Only] that way can Egyptian society get on a real democratic track, as in our view, democracy cannot exist without secularism. We, the founders of this initiative, understand full well the philosophic and rationalist nature at the heart of the liberal political view. Modern European rationalist philosophies were founded on the rejection of the right to rule by divine decree, and adopted concepts of secular rule, social contract, enlightenment, liberalism, and democracy. This advancement of human civilization was achieved in the West thanks to the abandonment of medieval concepts that for a long period tied the fate of the earth to the heavenly will. In the framework of this initiative, we propose dynamic steps and processes that must materialize simultaneously in order to increase awareness and critique among the Egyptian public, which in turn can lead to the formation of secularism in Egyptian society. It seems to me that a struggle for these demands, conditions, and processes [detailed below] and a serious and courageous debate regarding them may benefit the launch of secularization of Egypt as a state and as a society.

First, an enlightened and vital secular current must be established that extends beyond the enlightened and secular intellectual salons and beyond individuals and groups calling for secularism and enlightenment. Secularism must

become a substantive stream within Egyptian society that raises piercing questing about the dominant Egyptian culture, which is primarily of a conservative and traditional nature. Such questions and the social objections this will foster could generate an important change in the mind of Egyptians, their perceptions, and dominant values, leading toward the secularization of state and society. This could establish the critical rationalist approach among Egyptians and lead to its adoption as their way of thinking about themselves and the world around them. The Egyptian education system must be developed at all levels in order to root out the culture of backwardness, superstition, and fear of change, and nurture the acquisition of knowledge and skepticism among the general public and the common man. All enlightened and secular groups, organizations, and individuals must reach out to and confront the masses at all levels, to integrate into Egyptian society and the state and all its institutions, at all meetings, forums, political parties, and civil society organizations dealing with the future of the motherland. They must also discuss the significance of enlightenment and secularism with them via social media. No short cuts should be taken and the state [mechanisms] should not be forgotten, especially those enlightened national elements in the institution of the presidency, as they have particular influence on education and the media.

Second, a new system for religious affairs must be formulated and established, one that will act to correct the way in which antiquated religious concepts are perceived. Based on a rational and open minded examination of the religious tradition (*turāth*) in its entirety, it should provide guidance on how religion and its expression should be understood in Egyptian daily life. We believe that religion is a social historic fact, and that since its emergence as part of the human experience and throughout its long history it has not constituted a single, complete, and harmonious entity. What we mean by this is the relativity of religiosity among human beings, which varies according to the circumstances of communities that believe in one religion or another…Religiosity as human behavior, in all its forms, both phenomenologically and practically, is in essence a social product, whose origin is in an objective social-material reality defined by the economic, political, social, and cultural contexts of the given reality at a given historical stage. In this sense, religiosity is tightly connected to this reality and plays specific and diverse roles that are often contrasting….

Our initiative points to the need to change the dominant religious system formulated over the early centuries of Islam—the guardian system—by launching serious and courageous debate and placing daring demands with regard to the relations between religion and politics and society in general. We call for a new religious discourse and for a critique of the prevailing religious thought, especially among official religious institutions, as a prelude to a critique of religion itself and of existing religious practices at all levels. We call for the establishment of a scientific discipline of critique of religion, with its own subjects, methodologies, and foundations. I believe that initial steps have already been taken and serious attempts have been made in this direction, and these may be supplemented….

Third…the formation of secularism requires absolute neutrality on the part of the state in relation to religion and the abolition of the official religion of the state, as the state is a non-religious legal entity. The state's declaration in its constitution that it adopts Islam [as an official religion]—as expressed in the statement: "Islam is the religion of the state and Arabic is its official language. The principles of Islamic *sharīʿa* are the principle source of legislation" (in the second clause of the 2014 constitution that was amended in 2019)—implies fervent support by the state for this religion over the other religions practiced by some of its citizens. On the other hand, the state's commitment to neutrality toward all the religions practiced on its soil means first of all that it is a secular and

tolerant state that does not prefer one religion over another, but recognizes all religions equally, and guarantees adherents of these various religions the best possible conditions in order to conduct their religious rites and ceremonies. Neutrality on the part of the state will make it a state of all its citizens, regardless of their religion and intellectual leaning. As a result, all these citizens will enjoy legal equality and all rights to fill political and bureaucratic positions in the various mechanisms and institutions of the state, according to their abilities and skills. The modern secular state is a nation state with its political, social, and cultural implications, as it differentiates between the believer and the citizen. In its perception, the believer is a person who belongs to a particular religious denomination, but whose religious affiliation does not provide him with or deny him civil rights. Every citizen, male or female, is entitled to civil rights, without any connection to his/her religious affiliation….

In this context, our initiative raises the need to draft and formulate a new constitution in place of the 2014 constitution, in order to completely repeal the legacy [of previous constitutions and amendments ratified under the rule] of Sadat, Mubarak, and the Muslim Brotherhood, as these constitutions all emphasize the Islamic fundamentalist character of the state and the authority of religious institutions to interfere in the social order, and establish the factional and ethnic character of society and the state. I believe that the 2014 constitution was drafted in extraordinary and tense social and political circumstances, and that now, Egypt as a society and as a state is on a path to rehabilitation and recovery. Thus, the existing constitution, and its amendments, is not a constitution that represents the 2011 and 2013 revolutions in any way, or even the "civil state," but is merely a recycled version of the constitutions I mentioned previously. The new, modern, and developing Egypt requires a new constitution that paves the way for complete secularization of the state and society. The new constitution will

be a new social and political contract between society and the state and will ensure an overall system of rights and citizenship anchored in international charters of human rights that Egypt has officially adopted and embraced in all legal and constitutional frameworks. This constitution will define a modern system of civil duties and will completely release society from the authority of the clerics and religious institutions, and from their involvement and hegemony in society and the state. The sources of authority in the new constitution shall be [human] reason, science, law, international charters of human rights, and the [desire] to protect the supreme interests of the state. I call for the establishment of a national committee on the basis on a national consensus that will seek the opinion of all Egyptians and formulate a new constitution that will be presented for public debate (for three years at the most) prior to ratification. A secular Egypt means that religion is not the source of authority of laws and legislations, but rather reason, science, the supreme national interest, and the free will of the people….

Fourth, Egyptian creativity and innovation must be freed from all barriers and cultural prohibitions supposedly based on religion, and human creation must be judged according to objective criteria. Even though the Islamic fundamentalists prohibit others from being involved in affairs of religion, including history and doctrines connected to religion, they themselves are involved, often in a very vocal manner, in making accusations of heresy and the abandonment of religion, in areas that have no connection to religion, such as societal, political, philosophical, scientific, literary, and artistic affairs. They insist that religion must be the binding source of authority in all areas of human activity. Only they hold a monopoly on the authority to judge the many shades of human creation, according to solely religious criteria. It should be noted here that in the view of the state, the official religious institutions—al-Azhar and the Church—

and other fundamentalist groups that have penetrated state institutions, have the full right to express their opinion and even to have the last word on matters of philosophy, science, literature, and art. Moreover, the state and its institutions are always willing to request the opinion of these elements and to give way to their council and limit the thought of Egyptians by placing prohibitions on the dissemination of certain books, ideas, works of art, and literature, and by censorship....

> The more the concept of a civil state spreads in the Arab world, the more it sheds its original secular meaning and takes on the meaning of a state where the dominance of Islam does not indicate backwardness and does not impede progress.

Fifth, the sources of fanaticism should be desiccated and the values of citizenship should be purified of this fanaticism, so that already in the early years of education [Egyptians] will acquire a deep awareness of their Egyptian identity and not an identity associated with a particular religion. There are Islamic religious curricula taught at the various stages of public education, which often sanctify factionalism and sectarianism, accuse adherents of other religions of perverting religion and heresy, emphasizing that Islam alone is the true faith, and that God accepts only those who believe in Islam. There are also schools that educate Muslims from a young age to hate Christians, their brothers in the motherland, only because of a religious difference, and thus they plant within them an intentional separatism from adherents of other faiths in the motherland. We call for a change in these curricula to a program based on human morality and general Egyptian history. These curricula have the potential to reconstruct the historical memory of Egyptians, infusing in them a new spirit that supports the secularization of the state and society as a general national project, and to create a national fabric of belonging to an open and progressive

Egyptian identity that is above religious and traditional affiliations and identities. In this way, Egyptians will understand from a young age that they are the children of one nation and equal partners in the building of the motherland and its advancement.

Conclusion

In the circumstances of a local, regional, and international campaign against political Islam that has been underway since the 2013 overthrow of the Muslim Brotherhood regime in Egypt, the Institution of Egyptians seeks to establish a secular alternative on its ruins. Out of recognition that the Egyptian secular stream lacks deep foundations in Egyptian society, members of the movement promote a conscious rebellion against the religious status of the country and the dominance of religious thought over various areas of life, from the constitution and politics to education, culture, and art. However in a state like Egypt, which Asef Bayat (Bayat, 2013, p.186) typifies as a "religiosecular" state, the call to establish a secular state is not popular and even sparks resentment. In its place, a more prevalent call is for a civil state, which embodies within it the desire to adopt modern norms, institutions, and forms of government, within the boundaries of religion.

The more the concept of a civil state spreads in the Arab world, the more it sheds its original secular meaning and takes on the meaning of a state where the dominance of Islam does not indicate backwardness and does not impede progress. The idea of a civil state is interpreted in different ways in different Arab societies and even within the same country. But at the foundation of the various perceptions of the civil state lies the common assumption that the ideal state is an Islamic state that is at the same time modern and neither secular nor theocratic. The adoption of the idea of a civil state is interpreted today as support for a state model that integrates Islam and modernity, and the rejection of Islamic state models that

wish to restore the past, such as the IS model, or to impose the rule of clerics, as in the Iranian model. Alongside this, the adoption of the idea of a civil state also means the rejection of the secular state model and opposition to the controversial assumption that modernization by necessity requires secularization.

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Notes

1   Translated from Arabic into Hebrew by Yehudit Harel; Hebrew translation edited by Limor Lavie.