# Background Paper: On the Political Realm in Islamic Countries

An Academic Symposium Hosted by the ACRPS in Tunis, Tunisia

Following Islam's very short-lived "Meccan Period" which was dominated by proselytization, the Prophet Mohammed was quick to take up the political mantle, and went on to lead his community of believers and bring order to their communal life. With organizational imperatives occasionally taking precedence over spiritual affairs, his religious mission could no longer be categorized as purely peaceful. With time, elements of an Islamic political life began to emerge: the first year of the *Hijra* became known as "The Year of the Decree," while the second year was later called "The Year of the Delegations," in reference to the emissaries sent by various tribes not only to embrace the new religion, but also to swear fealty to the new authority in Medina. The "Wars of Apostasy" (*Hroub al-Ridda*) followed immediately after the death of the Prophet, and were a turning point after which the rationale of statecraft superseded religious considerations. From this point forward, precepts of the new religion and the imperatives of social order and politics became thoroughly entwined. This marriage of the religious and political became a constant theme both conceptually and practically through the 19th century. Even today, many maintain a conviction as to Islam's relationship between the religious and the political.

This relationship, which occasionally led to conflict between the two spheres, was reflected in a number of surviving sources: these include contemporaneous chronicles, texts of religious jurisprudence and, in particular, books on the norms of government. By convening this symposium, ACRPS hopes to trace the development of political thinking in Muslim countries, and to understand how Muslims through the ages and in various domains approached political affairs. More generally, we seek to understand Muslim thought and political affairs, and in particular to uncover the process by which the Arabic word *siyasa* became the cognate of the Greek *politikos*.

A second point of interest for the symposium is the unending ambiguity both discourse and concepts deployed by historical and modern Muslim authors on the subject of a relationship between religion and politics. Oftentimes, concepts blur or overlap, or politics and morality are mistaken for each other. Similarly, concepts such as canon law ("Sharia") and "democracy," "the people," and "the community of the faithful" are often used interchangeably. Commentaries on this ambiguity appeared periodically from the 9th to the 19th Century AD, when Kheireddine al-Tunsi wrote his famous treatise *The Surest Path* ("Aqwam al masalik li maarifat ahwal al mamalik"). Through that work, al-Tunsi was able to rejuvenate the political lexicon of the Islamic world, introducing novel words for "constitution" (which he previously transliterated before it became the Arabic *dustoor*), and "revolution" (for which he used the

word *inqilab*, and has since come to mean "usurpation" or "coup de etat"), and "freedoms" (in the sense of individual liberties). In fact, until the 20th century, Arabic sources continued to use the word *millet* (or "community") in place of the more modern *al-shaab* ("the people") to describe the polity within a country, and no concept of citizenship emerged until the end of the 20th century.

The symposium seeks to find a way past timeworn discussions that focus on the details of transitions of power and the means to it, or the various forms of government in the Muslim past, and instead, seeks focus on broader questions, categorized into the following themes:

## The Meanings of "Politics" and "Dispensation" (*Tadbir*)

Beginning with the earliest usages of the Arabic word *siyasa* (for politics), this theme seeks to investigate the development and growth of the term's meanings through various eras and in a variety of Islamic contexts.

## Art of Governance through Islamic Sources

This theme seeks re-readings of traditional Islamic texts on the rules of governance and other sources addressing the wisdom of governance and political ethics. Papers highlighting contributions from Persian, Indian, or Hellenic sources are particularly encouraged.

## Political Discourse

Devoted to political discourse, this theme asks the question: to what extent, and how, did Islamic sources promulgate a legalistic vision of the foundations and forms of governance? Can one speak of contracts between the rulers and the ruled? How does the "Ghazali Ranking"—which orders "Religion/King/Army/Finances/the construction of the country/Justice"—fit into these models?

## Political Terminology: A Semantic Approach

In investigating the relationship between religion and politics in the Muslim past and present, the study of Islamic civilizations' political lexicon seems an urgent endeavor. Through understanding the development of how specific terminology was deployed through the ages and in different regions, this theme seeks to better understand how political actions in the public sphere have developed.

## Islam and Modernity

This theme will be devoted to the study of the impact of Western modernity on Islamic political thought and on political praxis in Islamic countries. In this regard, two particular sub-themes stand out: the question of *laique* (laity, or secularist) as a phenomenon; and that of "Islam and Democracy."

## Important Guidelines, Deadlines and Notes

- Symposium proceedings shall be conducted in Arabic, French, and English
- Each oral presentation must be accompanied by an abstract written in a language different from the language in which it is delivered
- All written submissions must include the following information: name and title; title of the proposed paper; the conference theme to which the research contributes; author's email address; a brief CV covering present employer and job title
- A written abstract/proposal, no longer than 400 words that:  identifies the research problem being investigated; outlines the project's approach and methodology; lists keywords covered by the research paper; and a concise bibliography/list of sources
- All abstracts/research proposals must be received **before June 30, 2015**
- Authors will be notified in writing of the Academic Committee's approval/rejection of proposals by July 20, 2015
- Final and completed texts to be received by September 15, 2015
- The symposium will be held on October 8-10 in Tunis

Symposium proceedings will be published at a later date.

Proposals to be sent to the following email address: carep.tn@gmail.com  (ACRPS Tunis Bureau)

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The organizers shall cover costs of transportation to and from the airport as well as accommodation in Tunis for four nights (October 7-10, 2015). Participants are kindly requested to attend all days of the symposium.