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<http://blog.pomed.org/search?q=Banna>

Liberal Islam Debate on al-Jazeera

Marc Lynch, author of the excellent blog [Abu Aardvark](#), posts about [a debate over liberal Islam on the al-Jazeera program "The Opposite Direction"](#). Lynch analyzes the arguments and declares Gamel al-Banna, brother of the founder of the Muslim Brotherhood's founder and the one supporting liberal Islam, the winner.

Liberal Islam Debate

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http://abuaardvark.typepad.com/abuaardvark/2007/04/liberal_islam_d.html

A few weeks ago I wrote about an episode of al-Jazeera's The Opposite Direction which [debated secularism in Arab politics](#). I praised host Faisal al-Qassem for putting forward a strong, well-known advocate of the secularist position (Sayid Qemni) rather than stacking the deck by putting someone openly identified with the United States as the "secularist" and thus discrediting the position. Last week, Qassem did it again, this time [featuring an absolutely fascinating debate about "Liberal Islam."](#) And again, rather than cripple the "pro-liberal" side by choosing someone like Wafa Sultan or Ibn Warraq, he put forward perhaps the strongest possible defender of the position: [Gamal al-Banna](#), brother of the Muslim Brotherhood's founder, and one of the more ideosyncratic and influential critical Islamist thinkers around.

Qassem framed the debate around the question of whether "liberal Islam" really meant "American Islam". As always, he laid out two strongly opposed positions on the question: "Why are some Islamists contributing to implementing the American project which aims at forming what it calls "liberal Islam"? ... Why the push to create a civil Islam manufactured in American research centers?" Qassem began. He then reversed course: "But on the other hand, isn't Islam a religion of moderation and toleration?... Aren't the great majority of Muslims moderate people who call for democracy and liberalism? ... Aren't the liberal Islamists worthy of respect and encouragement and not takfir?"

The argument against "liberal Islam" was made by Mohamed Ibrahim Mabrouk, [author of a recent book](#) of that title denouncing a wide range of moderate Islamists and 'liberal Muslims' as collaborators in an American campaign against Islam ([I wrote about it earlier here](#)). Mabrouk doesn't only mean the "secular Islam" crowd - he also rants against the Muslim Brotherhood,

Tariq al-Bishri, Ahmed Kamal Abu al-Magd, Mohamed Salim al-Awa, Fahmy Howeydi, Amr Khaled, and pretty much anyone who advances a "new Islamist", moderate, pro-democracy point of view.

Before simply dismissing Mabrouk as a crazy conspiracy theorist (although he does come off as a real foaming at the mouth kind of rant), it's worth noting that RAND just released a major report, ["Building Moderate Muslim Networks"](#), to which Mabrouk referred during the program. That report, authored by Cheryl Benard and several others, calls on the US to sponsor and support 'authentically moderate Muslims' (which it defines so narrowly as to basically mean secularists) along the model of the CIA's 'cultural Cold War' activities. Whatever the report contains some good ideas and some bad ones, the proposal to covertly and overtly support their organization of 'moderate Muslims' into a political force *is* pretty much exactly what Mabrouk accuses the US of doing. The main difference has to do with the wide swathe of moderate Islamists, which Mabrouk tags as part of the 'liberal Islam' threat but RAND rejects as insufficiently moderate. But the point here is just that these kinds of initiatives do give fodder to the Mabrouks of the Arab world.

At any rate, after Mabrouk presented his case, Gamal al-Banna, the brother of the Muslim Brotherhood's founder and a major liberal Islamic figure, argued forcefully on behalf of liberal Islamic trends. He pointed out that he first began arguing to reconcile Islam and democracy in a 1946 book, when there was no President Bush and no American plot to manufacture Liberal Islam. Since then, along with many others, he had pushed for new understandings of Islam to overcome the salafi concepts which - he said - had been responsible for Muslim stagnation. "The Americans don't concern me at all," he said. He repeated his long-standing call for separation of religion and authority (al-din wa al-sulta), for the reform of Islam, and for the exercise of human reason in all matters - which, in his view, would not lead to contradictions with the Quran or God's will.

Mabrouk denounced Banna and other advocates of liberal Islam as veiled secularists ([an argument he's made about Banna previously, as here](#)), which he then described as "kafir" (this did not appear to induce any particular hysterics in Banna). He demanded to know what difference there was between Banna's views and those found in the RAND report, and brought up Banna's appearances at conferences at the Ibn Khaldun Center (Saad Eddin Ibrahim) and the Brookings US-Islamic World Summit in Doha as "proof." Banna's priceless comeback: "Ibrahim Mabrouk knows that Gamal al-Banna is greater than all of this." He then proceeded to shred Mabrouk's argument into tiny little quivering pieces. There was more - including Banna's cool dismissal of

Mabrouk's invocation of jihad (defensive jihad, he explained, was incumbent on Muslims but what people like Mabrouk demanded was actually spreading fitna (divisions) among the faithful and hurting Islam) and Mabrouk's being reduced to sputtering incoherence several times. It was a riveting show; I think Banna got the better of it, but I'm sure others disagree.

One last note: there have been quite a few programs addressing secularism and 'liberal Islam' lately, not just these two episodes of The Opposite Direction. For instance, [Howayda Taha writes in today's al-Quds al-Arabi](#) about a recent episode of Amru Adeeb's popular talk show Cairo Today (Orbit) which brought together two well known philosophers (Murad Wahba and Atif al-Iraqi) to discuss secularism. Al-Arabiya, for its part, after covering the Secular Islam Conference more heavily than anyone else recorded [an interview with Nonie Darwish](#), founder of Arabs for Israel; I'd guess that this identification of secularism with support for Israel hurts the cause of Arab liberals far more than it helps them, but what do I know?

UPDATE: Faisal al-Qassem has kindly responded to this post, politely disagreeing with my verdict in favor of Banna: "I think Mr Banna did well for the first part of the program. He was really brave and tough. I admired his talk about thawabit. But sadly he got weaker in the second half especially when the other guy started talking about his links with the Americans. I do not think that Banna won the day." He [has posted](#) some [responses to the program on his new website](#), many of which seem to be running in Mabrouk's favor. All the same, I was impressed with Banna and I'm sure [I wasn't the only one](#). But it's important for Americans who want to promote "liberal Islam" to be aware of just how potent these arguments linking reformists to the US are, even to someone of Banna's stature. That "kiss of death" thing isn't just a cliché, it's all too real.