

Between Islamists and secularists: debating free speech in the Arab world

Sara Khorshid reports from a panel discussion that brought together former hate preachers, feminists and ordinary Arab youth to debate the limits of free speech in the new Middle East.



“Peace be on you, esteemed Sheikh... I would like to ask you a question: From your own perspective, what are the limits on freedom of expression adopted by the religion of Islam?” Whether she realised it or not, the scene of young Tunisian woman Ghada Thimech facing Moroccan preacher Mohamed Al Fizazi in a [televised live debate](#) was a symbolic microcosm of how the relationship between Arab youth and a wide segment of once-popular religious figures changed after the 2011 uprisings.

The wave of protests and vigorous political and social dynamics of the five years from 2011 to 2016 triggered new debates or re-opened old ones about freedom of speech, creating a gap between youth and preachers.

During a debate organised in 2015 amid the Charlie Hebdo events by the Munathara Initiative, an Arab civil society organization that seeks to bolster the Arab public sphere through debate, Ghada, along with secularist Egyptian writer Fatima Naoot, listed the merits of freedom. Al Fizazi and a young Yemeni woman, Walaa Al Kuhlani, listed the restrictions that should curb it in their view. The

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format of the debate entailed that one youth panellist was paired with one opinion leader to argue for the motion that freedom of expression has no limits while another youth panellist and an opinion leader argued against it.

While Al Fizazi and Naoot represented two opposite poles on the Arab ideological continuum, both prominent protagonists argued for restricting the freedoms of speech and expression in one way or another.

Unsurprisingly, Al Fizazi, who argued against the motion, called for placing limits on freedom “in line with Islamic sharia.” However, Naoot also advocated the suppression of Egypt’s Islamist Muslim Brotherhood on the grounds that they constituted “a very unique” case and were “against Egypt”. Naoot’s position was a reflection of how the fear of Islamism shaped the views of a segment of the Arab secularist elite toward freedom of speech and expression.

It was also a reminder of how the debate over freedom of expression became increasingly important and pressing at a time when questions were raised globally on whether the fight against hate speech, incitement to violence and ISIS-like ideas could only be won if such freedoms were restricted, at least to some degree.

On the opposite side, Sheikh Al Fizazi called for restricting freedom of expression to “protect the sacred” and to give political leaders the respect he believed they deserve.

Like many like-minded figures in the Arab world, he contended that if it is unlawful in a number of western countries to deny the Holocaust, engage in anti-Semitic speech or support nazism, then insulting Islam should likewise be banned and the “sacred” must be honoured and protected.

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One possible response to this argument was put by a young Tunisian who was sitting among the debate’s audience. Aly Hamouda warned that it is “in the name of protecting the sacred” that the Persian Sufi Imam Suhreverdi was killed in the twelfth century for alleged heresy, and that the Egyptian thinker Farag Foda was assassinated in the 1990s for his anti-Islamist views.

Ironically, both Fizazi, who opposed the debate’s motion, and Naoot, who supported it, were previously prosecuted and sentenced over views they expressed. Fizazi was accused of preaching violent thought in the wake of the 2003 Casablanca bombings; he was pardoned by the Moroccan king in 2011 after he revoked his previous views. Naoot was prosecuted for contempt of Islam and sentenced in absentia to five years in prison in 2015. She has been outside of Egypt ever since.

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Bio: Sara Khorshid is Communications Manager at the [Munathara Initiative](#). She is also a journalist and columnist who has covered the region's political and social issues for the past 14 years. Her articles have appeared in the New York Times, the Guardian, Huffington Post, Jadaliyya and numerous other media outlets. You can follow Munathara on [Facebook](#) and [Twitter](#).

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