



Centre for  
**Global  
Cooperation  
Research**

Report of the 26<sup>th</sup> Käte Hamburger Lecture

# An Alternative Vision of Peace in International Relations: Learning from Sudanese Sufi Theologian Mahmud Muhammad Taha

with Professor Meir Hatina

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*One of the major criticisms against the academic field of International Relations (IR) concerns its fixation on long-established, so-called Eurocentric ideas, concepts and norms that have been introduced by Western scholars and have for the most part become the mainstream reference point for theorizing about IR in general. This creates a cultural bias in IR's research community, and thus replicates and reproduces the same basic arguments and fallacies by dominantly Western thinkers over and over again. That is why a growing number of scholars – largely with a non-Western background – have sought to advance the discipline by incorporating different ideas and theories into the existing body of thought in order to make the field more inclusive and to reduce the influence of Eurocentric scholarship. Delving into this subject, one of the Centre's current fellows, Deepshikha Shahi, initiated and organized an in-house & guest workshop entitled "Sufism as an Alternative Philosophical Foundation for a Global International Relations Theory".*



*The 26<sup>th</sup> Käte Hamburger Lecture was embedded within the workshop and was held by one of the workshop's participants, **Prof. Meir Hatina**, Head of the Department of Islamic and Middle Eastern Studies at Hebrew University Jerusalem. After being introduced and welcomed by **Dr Markus Böckenförde**, Executive Director at the Käte Hamburger Kolleg / Centre for Global Cooperation Research (KHK/GCR21), Hatina provided the example of Sudanese Sufi theologian Mahmud Muhammad Taha and his ideas as a possible source for a peaceful and non-Western tradition of thinking for IR. With **Dr Deepshikha Shahi**, Postdoc Fellow at KHK/GCR21, chairing the lecture and **Dr Claudia Baumgart-Ochse**, who is Project Director and Senior Researcher at the Peace Research Institute Frankfurt (HSFK) commenting on Hatina's presentation, the lecture brought together an interdisciplinary panel that reflected the inclusivity and breadth called for by critics of Eurocentric IR.*

## Lecture

Hatina's presentation started out with an introduction of the legacy of Mahmud Muhammad Taha, who is best known for proposing a new Islamic-based ethical framework. Despite a long history of modern and liberal thinkers in Sufism, Hatina described Taha as probably the first among them to have developed something akin to a **utopian Islam**. Basing his arguments soundly on progressive Islamic faith, Taha postulated that every human being was to be considered free and equal.

Following the introduction of Taha's influence on Islamic discourse in general, Hatina then recounted the circumstances of Taha's tragic death. As a very active political figure and liberal Muslim voice, Taha and his movement– the so-called Republican Brotherhood (deliberately standing in contrast also by name to the Muslim Brotherhood)–had continuously inconvenienced and provoked the



political establishment in Sudan. First, upon their founding in 1945, the Republican Brotherhood's political resistance was directed at the British occupiers. Later on following Sudan's independence in 1954, they turned to opposition against the conservative ruling party. After having already been incarcerated and tried several times, Taha was eventually sentenced to death in 1985 on charges of apostasy. The lawsuit referred to the issuing of a leaflet which criticized the Sudanese government for their application of shari'a law in the country. It is, among other things, for this reason that he became acknowledged as a moderate Islamic martyr and is sometimes even remembered as the "Ghandi of Sudan".

### Between cosmopolitan values and modernity of religion



Hatina went on to outline the most significant aspects of the religious work associated with Taha. Despite being a cosmopolitan visionary, Taha taught his followers to uphold Islam as the highest moral authority and remain critical of secular movements as well as the West in general due to their low level of ethical values, proliferation of world wars and use of slave labour. Yet, Taha actually promoted **freedom and democracy as the two most essential elements in his inclusive religious ideology**. These terms best reflected, in his point of view, Sufi spiritual principles such as social altruism, solidarity, humanism, and compassion for the other, all of which figured prominently in his search for the true message of Islam. Against this backdrop, he called for a complete reform of Islam including its deconstruction and rebuilding to allow for modern reality in religion. His way of arriving at such a conclusion, however, was nothing short of revolutionary, albeit very controversial.

Taha's legacy, as Hatina clarified, was a synthesis of Sufism, democracy and socialism including the hope that Islam would be transformed in an evolutionary process into an individualized faith-based ethical system. The basis for this ideal can be found in the original version of the Prophet Mohammad's teaching (the "Meccan period"), which Taha intended to realign with contemporary faith. For, according to Taha, the Meccan period of the Prophet's life (612-622 BC) needed to be singled out and juxtaposed with the later Medina period (622-632 BC) because it conveyed the kind of ethics required for his vision of freedom and equality. Despite fear and repression experienced during the time in Mecca, the Prophet's responses were patience, kindness and forgiveness, whereas when forced to migrate to Medina, the Prophet and his followers exchanged their earlier enlightened religious practice for a more rigid and coercive way of life, packed with punishments and rules. Thus, for Taha, Mecca represented a pacifist



and socially desirable type of Islam that needed to be reinvigorated. The concept he put forward though essentially meant dividing the Prophet's life and; therefore, Islam as a whole into two different categories, something rarely done and considered a severe break with traditions throughout the Muslim world. Being aware of this, Taha sought to tone down his criticism of the Prophet by making reference to the harsh social conditions the Prophet experienced during his time in Medina. Still, Hatina emphasized, even other liberals who had turned to Mohammad as a progressive and inspirational figure would not go as far and take apart the Prophet's life to distinguish between Mecca and Medina.

### Taha's religious turn in Middle Eastern relations

While he came short to receive much support for his unique exegetic theses about re-evaluating the foundations of Islam, Taha's political statements were a similar point of contestation for his opponents. Having been influenced early on in his life by modern political writers such as Marx, Lenin, Russel, and Shaw, Taha advocated widely unpopular positions from an Arab standpoint. For example, he wrote a lot on remoulding Arab collective memory in an effort to promote peace with Israel. In one of his books dealing with this topic, he blamed Arab leaders for leaving the righteous and peaceful paths of Islam in the dispute with Jerusalem. In his opinion, a return to Allah would enable the Arabs to improve their relationship with the Jewish people. According to Hatina, Taha even saw the conflict with Israel as an opportunity to realize the close ties between the Jewish and Arab peoples and reconceptualize Arab relations with Israel from scratch.

### Conclusion

All in all, as a very thought-provoking and outstanding character of Sufi origin in Sudanese society, Taha did have an impact on religious and political discourse in the country. Although his controversial theories regarding the exegesis of Islam and reconceptualization of regional politics were not embraced by many other Muslim liberals, the idea of de-politicizing Islam was considered useful by fellow thinkers and theologians. So, while they upheld the unity of the Qur'an as a whole and did not completely embrace the utopian notion Taha introduced into Islamic discourse, his practice of deconstructing Islam and challenging certain commandments did lead some of them to more openly welcome the idea of assessing Qur'anic verses from a modern perspective.

### Comments

In her subsequent comments, Baumgart-Ochse stressed that religion still lingers at the periphery of IR studies and remains an issue hard to grasp for IR scholars.



She pointed out that so far IR literature has mainly touched upon the nexus between religion and violence. In her opinion, Taha could be an interesting point of reference for a different treatment of religion in IR. Given that his answers to crises in politics and religion expressed a call for more religion, not less, Baumgart-Ochse argued that his teachings could be linked to post-secular discourses. She suggested that in contrast to plain secularism, which presumably is mostly about discriminating against religious people, post-secularism claims that fresh insights for societies can originate from religion. In this sense Baumgart-Ochse indicated that **those internal debates in religion may be very important because they can underscore values relevant for entire societies, including non-religious people.** For instance, despite differences in the underlying justifications, human rights are a set of universal norms, consisting partly of different religions' common beliefs.

## Discussion

As Shahi opened up the discussion for questions from the audience, the distinction between the Mecca and Medina period in the Prophet's life was a notable point of interest. It was described as Taha's most significant contribution because it revealed the existence of a timeless Islam and an Islam clearly embedded within the Arab society of the 7th century. This however, raised the question why his ideas have yet to inspire more thinking of a similar nature. Hatina responded by saying it was true that there was currently no figure similar to Taha. Yet, he highlighted that Taha still enabled a range of daring and bold thinkers to come to the fore and start reflecting on power and the role of Islam in the international setting. Asked about the legal implications of Taha's work, Hatina offered the view that Taha had more of an ethical vision, in which law (shari'a) did not matter as much as did Sufism with its emphasis on modesty. Another question from the audience inquired how critical Israeli behaviour (such as occupation and settlements) was reflected in Taha's positions. Hatina stated that Taha never renounced the Arab claims, but in his humanist reasoning both sides had the legitimate right to coexist. Finally, the discussion revolved around the limits of public speech in Taha's view and the consequences when these rules would not be adhered to. This prompted Hatina to say that a notion of society is included in much liberal Muslim thinking but it is less solidly defined compared to Islamist ideas about the state. Democracy, civic rights and individual freedoms would; however, be tied into the liberal conception of society as envisioned by Taha.



Although the conversation ended on that note, the event was a clear indicator of how rich and diverse the sources for a truly global IR can be and in what ways the entire discipline stands to profit if it allows non-Western thoughts to be included in its theoretical knowledge production. There is an unmistakable need for further debates like this one on related topics in order to evaluate the relevance of thinkers like Taha for the academic discourse and thus broaden its narrow scope.