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# The Ideological Positions of Engineers in Syria

Sari Hanafi

*CEDEJ, Cairo*

**abstract:** In this article I examine the potential ability of engineers to assert themselves as modernizers, i.e. to define themselves from the viewpoint of their profession, relative to their country's economic development. In this perspective, the position of Syrian engineers is not only the result of a reaction to the economic crisis or to the political situation. Instead this refers to the complex space where social, political, religious and national factors are combined. I also attempt to consider engineers as a heterogeneous group rather than a coherent one. They form several sub-groups, each of which combines a modernizing position in the guise of technocratic and technicist aims with identity orientations: professional, corporate, Islamic disengaged and/or vanguard identity.

**keywords:** engineers ♦ Islamist ♦ professional identity ♦ Syria  
♦ technocrats

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How can we study the ideology of scientific communities in the 'Third World'? This is a very difficult question especially when it deals with a relatively heterogeneous socio-professional group as is the case of engineers in Syria.

As a first impression it can be said that each engineer belongs to a multiplicity of groups: socio-professional, regional, religious, generational, etc. To varying degrees, the engineer owes his or her allegiance to the system of symbolic characteristics of these groups. Starting from this basis, an engineer can elaborate his or her own socio-psychological personality. Beyond this general pattern which can be applied to any individual, there is, on the part of engineers, a will to constitute a 'collective entity' through their Professional Syndicate. At the same time, there has been a profound

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transformation of engineers' status in Syria which constitutes an effective shift of their ideological position towards a technocratic logic.

The engineers' ideological positions are not simple but operate between diverse elements: between a technocratic logic and a revolutionary logic; between a professional consciousness and confessional and geographical solidarities; between tradition and modernity; between Arabic Islamic culture and Western culture; between primary socialization and secondary socialization (i.e. technical knowledge according to Berger and Luckmann).

What is the influence of engineers' education and of their professional experience on their ideological position? What is the function of Islamist ideology or of any other relevant ideology?

First one has to ask about the way in which references to European civilization occur among engineers in an Arabic Islamic society. These references can be linked either to an Islamist or a nationalist ideology. The purpose of this study is to try to understand the value and representation systems of the engineers' group, the significance of their practices and their perceptions of society.

Before dealing with the process of elaboration of ideological positions, this study will investigate changes in the status of engineers during the last three decades. I do not intend to make an exhaustive study of the engineers' situation and transformation of their status, but will attempt to demonstrate briefly the socio-political context in which the engineers elaborate their ideological positions.

### **Engineers: A Profession without a Clearly Defined Status**

Since the beginning of the 1970s, Syria has launched sizeable industrial, urbanization and hydraulic projects. Despite undeniable results, there is a growing awareness of the fragility of Syrian development policy, especially since the economic crisis of the 1980s. In fact, through the technical and political decisions taken, conflicting models of development appeared, and were adopted by the state. However, development policies cannot be reduced to decisions taken by the big firms or the state planning institutions. Among the various decision-making actors, engineers play a decisive role in the planning and implementation of development policies (as political agents, as bosses in the private sector, as urban planners, etc.).

Throughout the 1960s, and until 1974, the majority of engineers worked in the private sector as engineering consultants, as employees in civil engineering firms and so on.<sup>1</sup> It was essentially a *liberal profession* which guaranteed prestige and a comfortable standard of income to its members.

**Table 1** *Number of engineers working in Syria between 1955 and 1987*

Year	1955	1965	1970	1975	1980	1985	1987
Number of engineers	365	1837	2624	7615	11,746	22,095	38,782

Source: Hanafi (1996)

In 1974, a law was promulgated which forced young engineers graduating from Syrian universities to work five years for the state. This law was passed at a time when Syria was receiving unexpected foreign aid grants from the Gulf countries due to its 'confrontation status' with Israel. During this time, the Syrian government decided to create civil engineering firms to replace foreign companies. A high number of engineers were recruited for this task. Nevertheless, it must be taken into consideration that the state never used these foreign aid grants to industrialize the country and thus ensure permanent jobs for engineers. The efforts were mainly in favour of the construction and the infrastructure sectors (roads, bridges, dams, but also palaces!). According to the statistics of the Engineers' Professional Syndicate, a rapid increase in the number of engineers occurred during what was in fact a 'false' boom, because it took place at a much faster rate than the country's effective economic growth. This disproportion was due mainly, on the one hand, to bad planning by the state which was simultaneously educating an excessive number of engineers in its universities, and, on the other side, to the social prestige allocated to the engineering profession (see Table 1)

From the beginning of the 1980s onwards, the economic crisis that has shaken Syria has created many difficulties: high unemployment in public enterprises, low demand for engineers in the private sector, the bureaucratization of the engineer's work and radical reconversions, that is, many engineers had and have to search for work which is not directly related to their profession.<sup>2</sup> These factors have led to the deterioration of the engineers' status, particularly for those working in the public sector. In the words of Elisabeth Longuenesse (1987: 13):

they became a heterogeneous aggregate of state-dependent wage workers, dispersed, atomised, with a diversity of situations and, due to this fact, incapable of affirming themselves in a collective and autonomous manner. Only a minority continue to know the previous situation but they are completely marginalised.

However, this general statement has to be nuanced according to the sector where the engineer is located, or their social background or other factors. A final question has to be posed: can these engineers with their socially

debased identities be considered 'blocked ascendants', to use Gouldner's term (1979: 60)?<sup>3</sup> I argue that they can, if one takes into consideration the privileges and the prestige accrued by their high level of education and their profession.

The crisis is not only economic but also political. During 1979–82, there occurred a confrontation between the political regime and the opposition, led by the Muslim Brotherhood. The engineers participated in this movement individually and through their Professional Syndicate against the emergency laws and the state's oppression (alongside other professional groups such as lawyers and physicians). The engineers' stand led to the state's decision to dissolve their Professional Syndicate and impose a new state leadership.

Under these circumstances, which were not favourable to the development of the engineer's autonomous socio-professional identity, one could observe two main trends: the first was a mode of adaptation characterized by apathy as an answer to the harsh measures imposed by the state. These engineers' social behaviour generally became 'apolitical'. The second group showed different types of reaction (such as corporate or Islamic answers) to their social alienation which was created by the obstruction of their social and professional mobility.

### **Ideological Positions of the Engineers**

In January 1990, 141 interviews<sup>4</sup> were conducted involving Syrian engineers. The main area covered in these interviews dealt with topics such as development, progress, society, modernity, religion, the state, the engineers' role in society, their relationships to the hierarchy, etc. One of the key questions was: what are the obstacles to development?

I define the engineers' ideological positions here as world visions (social, economic and political views) and modes of action. According to my survey, engineers tended to favour modernization. The term 'modernization' is imprecise and gives me the opportunity to analyse the process of change produced by engineers as a single group, as a collection of sub-groups or as individuals. I found that engineers made direct or indirect references to modernization and to my research in defining its meaning. These positions refer to the way in which their participatory experience in society and their demands towards the society are articulated.

Nevertheless, actors such as engineers do not reason only in terms of rationalization or modernization but also in terms of personal and group identity. Engineers feel threatened by external forces such as 'capitalism, colonialism and the West' but also by interior forces (such as the political regime).

Being burdened by the economic crisis and an uncertain future, some engineers began making references to the 'glorious' history of the Arab people and of Islam. Other engineers defend their own interests and their privileges, as development actors, thereby creating a collective socio-professional group identity. This will be dealt with in greater detail below.

I will first try to tackle the modernizing position of the engineers and to present the serious difficulties of implementing modernization in Syria. Then I will combine this position with different identity positions.

### ***Modernizing Position : Technocratic and Technician Aims***

In the industrialized countries, the concepts of technocracy and technocrats have connotations which are not necessarily the same in the authoritarian and socialist regime of a developing country like Syria.<sup>5</sup> If I consider Syrian engineers as technobureaucrats, it is in a very narrow sense: they are technical or administrative experts who participate in decision-making. Their participation in technical issues made them confront a political elite (the Baathist Party officials) for whom all decisions were of a political nature. The engineers at work always attempt to use their own power to limit that of the 'apparatchiks' but this entails constraints and/or compromises by both sides. This produces the problem of separation between what are considered questions of public interest and technical ones. Although there are large numbers of engineers in the state administration, they constitute a part of the strategy of the state, which wants them to appear as part of its public facade.

This technobureaucracy displays two kinds of contradictions. On the one hand, the technobureaucrats are not always recruited according to a criterion of professional excellence but through the client relationship network and political connections. In this sense, technocracy does not reinforce professionalism but, rather, limits its role. The technocrat's power does not rely on his expertise but on the place which he occupies in the political network. The second contradiction is revealed by the close link between the occupied post and decision-making. The amount of influence on the decision is proportional to hierarchical position.

From my empirical studies, I can say that the engineer technobureaucrats in Syria claim to have the capacity to solve the overall problems of society and to be able to introduce management of the economy on a rational basis, whereas the politicians' competence in this matter is questioned. Influenced by their ambition and their objectives, the engineers think that only technocrats should be responsible for technological development, which should be used for the general welfare. But as they do not constitute a coherent technocratic group, we have to define them as individuals belonging to different sectors and they cannot be unified

politically and economically. If they behave less like technocrats, they can be more than technostructure in Galbraith's sense.<sup>6</sup>

The passage to a technocratic logic is accompanied by the 'incapacity to grasp all the problems that are linked to an organisation' which Touraine calls 'technicism' (1969: 77). This technicism can be found among engineers who speak of problems directly related to their working environment. To the question 'What are the obstacles to development in Syria?', the majority, particularly the young ones, answered referring to the economy. To reduce economic dependency, they affirm that 'There must be a planning system', 'Priority should be given to the agricultural sector', 'Industry and especially heavy industry should be promoted', 'The consumption of imported products should be minimized', or 'The educational system should be reformed'.

Were they, however, of the same opinion when they were students, i.e. before being confronted with professional life? Among the people interviewed, I used to know a third either professionally or personally. During discussions on problems such as economic dependency or underdevelopment, these students used to evoke the necessity to return to 'authentic Islam' and Islamic morals or repeated the slogan 'No development without Arab unity'. However, their work experience and the confrontation with technology, with computers and with various administrative authorities have reinforced materialist convictions and, above all, made them think in economic terms.

Beyond the diversity of individual expressions, most of the engineers have a common background.

They largely share the conception of a relatively simple and immediate relationship between technique, modernity and progress, so they will agree on technical supremacy as a remedy to society's problem and will be tempted to claim technical competence in running the social change process. (Longuenesse, 1991: 23-4)

Among the engineers, a large group asserted that political and social problems can be reduced to management and modernization. They imagine that everything would be better if the management of public affairs was in their hands. This is 'technical progress' for them. I have to question, however, the utility of an advanced technology if social, political and juridical institutions are not on the same level. The engineers, even if we accept the general principle of 'rationality', adhere to 'false' ideas of progress and even modernity. But after all, is it necessary for the Syrian state to change its development agents from the apparatchiks to the engineers?

### *Identity Position of the Engineers*

The modernization of society, as mentioned above, is the watchword of and the common background for every engineer. Nevertheless, this

modernization is constructed in different forms, according to the 'identity management of modernity' to use Goole's expression (1992: 190). This means that, as we will explain, the potential of the engineers for intervention in the social differs according to their identity position.

I will use the significative elements of the framework outlined above to present the identity configurations. This can be considered as the result of a double transaction: on the one hand between the subject and the professional world and on the other side between the subject confronted with change and his/her own past (Dubar, 1991: 204). This leads to three types of identity: first, a *weak professional identity*, shared by a large number of the engineers. However, that does not inhibit the building of two other identities: a *corporate identity* stressed by a large section of the engineers, especially those who lived in the 'golden age' of the profession (autonomous Professional Syndicate, economic boom, relative democracy, etc.) and an *Islamist identity* based on a quite considerable religious affirmation which is articulated rather frequently in an 'Arab Islamic' society such as Syria.

These three identities are always in movement and are in a deconstruction–reconstruction dynamic. They do not correspond to three specific types of engineers. In fact an articulation is operating between the professional, corporate and Islamist identities, all stemming from the primary and secondary socialization.

***A Weak Professional Identity.*** It has already been suggested that engineers act as a heterogeneous socio-professional group and that they are a new middle class. The engineer represents the interests of his family, his social, ethnic or confessional group much more than those of his professional group in which he might find rivals. Engineers generally belong to the new middle classes. They are at the same time producers and bureaucrats in the state apparatus, for instance in the strategic sectors of institutions that manage the relation between the state and the population. As mediators, their behaviour shows signs of ambiguity: a weak economic capacity but significant social, cultural and political capital. This means that they act sometimes as simple bureaucrats supporting the state's interests because they are state-dependent wage workers, and sometimes act as technocrats in favour of the population and their professional interests.

In this context, the engineers, or at least a considerable number of them, identify themselves only to a low degree with their profession. In the democratic countries, the professions are organized around three main interests: those of the state, society (different socio-economic groups) and the professional group. Through negotiation, a compromise is reached between these three different interests. But, in authoritarian societies, the absence of negotiation results in the domination of one over the other. In

Syria, the fact that the state took control over the engineering profession after 1980 (which led to its de-professionalization) went against the engineers' own interests and those of different socio-economic groups. This process has weakened the engineers' identification with their profession.

With the economic crisis of the 1980s, the engineers who thought they were protected in their profession and work identity found themselves brutally atomized. This deep crisis had the consequence of allowing the engineers to identify themselves more as waged workers than as a socio-professional group. The engineers' work has not really built a professional identity but an occupational one, directly linked to the type of field where they work. Here, each engineer interiorizes his/her professional identity in the image of the work. The interviewees often used 'I' as citizen or individual engineer but 'we' when they referred to themselves in the role of civil servant or sometimes when they referred to the nation. It is very rare for them to use 'we' to refer to the group of engineers. Due to the weakness of professional identity, the engineers tend to see themselves as modernizing actors rather than an effective professional group. Many of these engineers participate in the modernization initiated by the state. However, they do not challenge the process and do not question the legitimization of the political system.

***Corporate Identity.*** My research indicates the appearance of a 'corporate identity', especially among the older engineers and those from the private sector. I do not consider social identity as 'transmissible' from one generation to the next because 'it is not built only by each generation on the basis of categories and positions inherited from the preceding generation but also through the identity strategies expressed in the institutions that individuals cross and that they really transform' (Dubar, 1991: 128).

The young engineers forge their own identity not on the basis of their group or present situation but rather by identification with a 'reference group', that is the older engineers, who often work in the private sector to which they wish to belong in the future. This aim is expressed when our interlocutors explain that 'only the engineers should be ministers' or 'deputies in the parliament', or when they emphasize that 'they are the only ones who can solve the country's problems'. They never refer to the local administrators, perhaps because of their less prestigious status!

All these characteristics of corporate identity are observed in a pronounced form with engineers who have more than 10 years of work experience and who benefited, from 1973, from the boom in the building sector and the increase in infrastructure.

The profession's bureaucratization<sup>7</sup> and the economic crisis from the early 1980s have severely undermined their opposition and have led to a freeze in their social ascent. They are worried about their personal future



and feel threatened by unemployment. For them, the state is always mainly responsible for this situation. But, in fact, 'blocked ascendancy', to use Gouldner's phrase, or the alienation linked to the gap between the possession of cultural capital and a very limited access to power and privileges, has not produced a radicalization of their political activity. Only a few of the engineers address their political criticism to the state. Their demands remain mainly economic.

**Islamic Identity.** The results of the interviews show that, although technocrat or technician in outlook, some Syrian engineers identify themselves as nationalist, Islamist or communist. When analysing the interviews, it seemed to me that these engineers have scarcely changed their views since they were students. The nationalist engineer recommends pan-Arabism as an absolute necessity without which any regional development would be impossible.<sup>8</sup> The communist view stresses 'the necessity of class struggle between the working class and the bosses. As the bosses are the state in Syria, the latter has to be destroyed.' The Islamist advocates the Islamization of society, the return to Islam, its practice and its moral values.

All these groups (nationalist, Islamist or communist) often challenge the established order whether political or cultural. They act in the name of collective interests and use nationalist language. Their claims and demands cannot be reduced to the work sphere but also refer to global society. During an interview, I could observe the interaction among four engineers of whom one was a militant nationalist. When his fellows expressed their dissatisfaction at work and their refusal of any kind of compromise with management, he shifted the discussion to a general political debate. In general, the militant interlocutors made deep analyses of the economic crisis with reference to the historical experience of the Arab world, to the West and to the past. They have an intellectual rigour but also a 'utopian' outlook. When imagination does not find satisfaction in the existing world, it seeks refuge in places and times that desire builds (Mannheim, 1959: 144).

However, it was important to go beyond a surface reading of answers of the engineers regarding the development issue. If one not only analyses their discursive practices, but also takes into account their social practices, one can come to the following conclusions: when the engineers identify with Islamist, nationalist and communist groups, their kind of identification does not correspond only to their actions and ideological views concerning concrete aspects of social, cultural and economic life. In other words, this identification is *aesthetic*<sup>9</sup> rather than having a strong influence on their practices. In this sense, an engineer who is a declared Islamist could be in favour of democracy or not, in favour of a liberal economy or a socialist one, and in favour of a conservative society or an open one, etc. The engineers cannot be classified according to their

identities without regard to the context in which these identities take shape. I decided to deal only with the Islamist engineers, since Islamism is currently the strongest discourse. It marks the dominant position of their cultural and political engagement compared to their nationalist or communist colleagues. I focused on Islamic identity with attention to their modes of action, in order to be able to grasp the social, cultural and political meanings of this identity.

The examination of Islamic engineers' attitudes provides us with a privileged observation of ideological phenomena and the use of discourse by a group which wants to control the social and ethical processes in society and to reconcile a theological, philosophical and juridical rationality with a scientific rationality.

This study should challenge the ethnocentric and simplistic vision which connects the Islamist movement to '*obscurantism*' as if the dichotomy<sup>10</sup> modernity/tradition meant the opposition darkness/enlightenment. It is impossible to understand the Islamic issue without linking it to the socio-economic and political context in which it is situated. We cannot talk about one single type of Islamist movement. All movements, in all the Arab and so-called 'Muslim' societies, are not necessarily specifically religious, but may also be mainly religious in their form and become carriers of social, political and economic projects. We cannot talk about one homogeneous Islamism because it is deeply and structurally diversified, often even inside the same society. The diversity of the movement should turn out to be fundamental for our analysis: there is not only one and we should not neglect differences.

With the help of this analytical framework, we can return to our object, the engineers. This group has a certain specificity which leads us to distinguish two types of Islamist actors : the *disengaged* and the *vanguard*. The two types can alternate as they are not necessarily members of a political party, whether legal or illegal, nor do they belong to the religious current. Among the engineers, we can consider them a vague tendency but a qualitatively important one.

Beyond the common background of these two types, the origin of the identity and thus the meaning of action diverges. For the disengaged actors, the turn to Islam is an escape from the authoritarian political, nationalist and socialist socio-economic system. This disengaged Islamism finds its politico-ideological function in the very notion of a return to Islam, which the political regime tried to exclude. This attitude does not always lead to a mobilizing action of the public against the system because it neither reflects a systematic project nor a strong militant engagement.

On the other hand, for the vanguard actors, Islam is a societal project which constitutes the only way to have access to modernity, to economic development and to social peace. They fight for their ideas through books

and conferences. Their mobilizing action is far more important and efficient than that of the preceding type.

***Disengaged Islamist Engineers.*** Refusing to choose between modernization and Arabic-Islamic traditions, most of the disengaged engineers define modernity in an instrumental manner with reference to its material aspects (a comfortable standard of living, the leading role of science in life, etc.) and with reference to Islam's utility in modernity and development. This 'Weberian idea' is strongly and frequently advocated: 'there is no contradiction between Islam and *modernity*, a dynamic Islam can match with progress and can give the necessary ethos and will to work'. We think, thus, that the cleavage between the Islamist engineers and the rest of the group cannot be expressed in terms of tradition and modernity, just as we cannot dissociate religious experience from modernity.

Concerning technical choice in work sphere, some Islamists are fascinated by high technology which is, for them, the only means to compete with foreign products. Certain Islamists characterize the so-called Islamic economy as capitalist. Asked about the Islamic law which prohibits the charging of interest in the banking system, they responded that 'it is impossible at this time to deal with the question of Islamic financial operations, because we are completely dependent on the world economy'. They are looking for new modes of coexistence between a capitalist economy and one based on Islamic values. This critical economic position suggests that this Islamic identity is influenced by the engineering profession.

We notice an extraordinary dynamic capacity on the part of engineers to use a margin of interpretation regarding the religious texts in general and the Koran in particular. Their interpretations are adopted to meet the needs and interests of the engineers in creating a complex society and 'scientific' reason. They do not advocate the 'Islamization' of science, as in Egypt. According to Sylvie Chiffolleau (1991), the Egyptian Islamist physicians have called for this. Science or medicine can only be called 'Islamic' or 'Moslem' 'by the ethic it claims and not by its autonomous scientific path. Modern science is not condemned in itself but has to be purged of its materialist and atheist basis to be coherent with Islamic values' (Chiffolleau, 1991:).

The Islamist does not hesitate to accept some modernization processes already begun by the state like industrialization, rationalization of the economy, the growth of GDP. However, they want to control the ethics of society. For example, some engineers respond positively to women working outside the home but 'on condition that they dress properly according to the Islam standard', etc.

Nevertheless, the question has to be posed: how do these Islamist engineers, essentially being technocrats, integrate theological thinking in their

world view? More generally, how do they combine their professional consciousness with their Islamist identity?

In fact, Troeltsch's approach provides us with a rich analytical framework. While studying Protestantism, Troeltsch demonstrated the complexity of Protestantism's influence and its historical configurations on the emergence of the modern world or on modernity. His ideas reveal the progression from the religious text to its modern effect on culture, law, economy and politics. According to him, Protestantism played a crucial role in spreading the modern spirit but in 'indirect', 'unconscious' and 'involuntary' ways.

Troeltsch's sociology invites us to look beyond the religious texts to see how, in a particular social or cultural context, the same texts can generate different effects. So, looking at the religious texts interpreted by Syrian engineers is not the only way to explain the meaning of their actions. One has also to take into consideration the socio-historical context. The religious discourse is not only the determinant for their actions but also has a function of a 'make up'. For these reasons, we prefer to speak of an 'aesthetic' Islamist ideology.

If we start with a negative definition, we can say that the aesthetic Islamist ideology is not an instrumental ideology because it does not necessarily imply a conscience or a vocation of the actor. The choice of this ideology is based on its mobilizing role, on its 'radiation' which attracts the public. It beautifies the action's forms like a theatre decor which can be used for different texts.

When one engineer identifies himself or herself as an Islamist calling for an Islamic Republic, this does not mean that he or she advocates the application of the Shari'a and the religious norms, but rather that the integration of a religious dimension should guarantee a new social, cultural and imaginary order.

It does not make sense to speak of Islamist ideology; one has to look at the basis on which this ideology is articulated. Does it have a Third World, Arabist, revolutionary origin or does it derive from the economic infrastructure, or the political context? In such a perspective, I would like to take some distance from the political and ideological debate, which is full of stereotypes, and to favour a more sociological approach to the specific case such as that of the Islamist engineers in Syria during the 1980s and the 1990s.

***Vanguard Islamist Engineers.*** This group is a relatively small one but it has an large impact which extends far beyond the religious sphere. It can affect the general public. This group of engineers believe, as I have already said, that Islam constitutes a societal project against 'underdevelopment, dictatorship, archaism and religious extremism'. Some also think of

religion in terms of a socio-economic praxis. Here, the societal project is not an evasion of social conflict in the name of Islam, but it creates a new form of conflict with the *Ulama* (religious elite) and the conservative groups of Islam. This group is talking about the engineers' role, engagement and responsibility towards others, which is considered to be more cultural than social.

To illustrate this cultural role of the engineers, we chose an emblematic figure: Mohammed Chahrour, a Syrian engineer who put forth modernizing ideas that combine universalism and particularism. Born in 1940 in Damascus, he graduated in civil engineering at Moscow University and did his PhD at Dublin University. He is professor at the faculty of engineering in Damascus and has a famous consulting office. At the end of 1989, he published a book in Arabic called 'The Book and the Koran: A Modern Reading', which consists of modern exegesis of the Koran. Starting from a linguistic approach, it adopts the idea that religious obligations should be submitted to modernity, i.e. to science and to the capacity for human understanding. This book created a lively polemic in Syria and elsewhere concerning the validity and legitimacy of *Ijtihad* (innovation). Chahrour's work is widely read in comparison with others on the same topic. It seems that the background of the author aroused some curiosity among the public, although the cost of the book was too high for an ordinary citizen (500 Syrian pounds, i.e. \$14). What were people's reactions?

An engineer says that 'this is a book which demonstrates how Islam can be dynamic and be able to adapt to reality'. A professor, on the other hand, expresses his admiration of the author, 'because of his scientific knowledge that puts an end to the *Ulama's* monopoly'.

There has been a very strong reaction from Chahrour. This vanguard Islamist repeats during the interview 'if there is to be such a religious innovation, it will come through the engineer', i.e. innovation will be made by those who have as an ideal 'one word one meaning', to quote Gouldner (1979: 67). This understanding of the engineer's cultural role is at the same time Taylorian, 'one best way', and Veblenian (1971: 44), 'the social engineer', both of whom assign the role of being the agents of rationalization of the public and of political power to the engineers.

Despite all the hostile allusions to the *Ulama* in the work of Bouti (1990: 16–21) and Abou Khalil (1990) who criticize the content of the book as well as its author's background, this publication succeeded in making Chahrour's ideas and partially mobilizing effect well known.

The case of Chahrour shows that the principal aim of the Islamist vanguard engineers is culture. There is no need to change society from the top or the bottom but rather to change Islam, i.e. to create a new reading of Islam *being aware* of its historicity.

Mohammed Chahrour's example is not an isolated case. His project is widespread among the engineers. They believe that they have a role to play in society through the modernization of Islam as a tool for progress and development. To become the vehicle of these ideas, the engineers benefit from some advantages in comparison to other groups: the legitimacy and high status of scientific and technical knowledge in contrast to social sciences, and relatively greater autonomy from the state than the *Ulama*.

With their approach, they stand in opposition to the 'secular' state which excludes religion from any discussion on development and modernity. In such a perspective, the actions of the vanguard engineers cannot be analysed as a search of individual or professional salvation or as an evasion of conflict. So, these engineers express their desire for modernization through the adaptation of Islam to modernity.

Since it identifies the modernization of Islam with economic and social goals, the idea launched by Chahrour is not so far different from Liberation Theology in Latin America, even if this latter movement is much more politicized.<sup>11</sup>

## **Conclusion**

Between macro-economic studies dealing with the conditions of development, and the micro-anthropological analyses concerning transformation in rural and urban societies, a sociology of new actors, such as the engineers, seems to shed light on recent social and political changes as well as on the problems of the implementation of development policies.

This article has attempted to examine the potential ability of engineers to assert themselves as modernizers, i.e. to define themselves from the viewpoint of their profession in relation of their country's development. In such a perspective, the positions of Syrian engineers are not only the product of reactions to the economic crisis or to the political situation. Instead, they refer to the complex space where social, political, religious and national factors are combined. I also attempted to consider the engineers as a heterogeneous group rather than a coherent one. They form several sub-groups, each of which combines a modernizing position, in the guise of technocratic and technicist aims, with various identity orientations: professional, corporate, disengaged Islamic or/and vanguard Islamic identity. This means that the engineer's actions have various meanings, according to the type of his/her identity.

We can also find many combinations of the different professional identities (weak professional, corporate) with different political-cultural identities (disengaged Islamic, vanguard) (see Table 2). The majority of the Islamist disengaged engineers have a weak professional identity: 24 percent of the interviewed engineers (only 8 percent show a corporate

**Table 2** *Combinations, in percentages, between Islamist identities and other identities*

	Weak professional	Corporate	Total %
Non-Islamic	33	19	52
Disengaged Islamic	24	8	32
Vanguard Islamic	6	10	16
Total	63	37	100

identity). This means that the engineers could not be engaged without referring to the profession or/and the Syndicate, especially because these constitute the most important modern areas in a country such as Syria where civil society only exists in a restricted mode. Concerning the Islamist vanguard engineers, they have a corporate identity (10 percent of the interviewed engineers) rather than a weak professional one (6 percent).

### Notes

1. Interview with Al Omari, former president of the Engineers' Professional Syndicate, in August 1991.
2. According to the statistics of the Engineers' Professional Syndicate, 10–12 percent of engineers work in the industrial sector.
3. Gouldner studied the alienation of the 'New Class' (intellectuals and technical intelligentsia) and shows the blockage of social mobility as being the basis of this alienation, using the example of the French Jacobins.
4. The engineers I interviewed had a minimum of three years work experience and came from all economic sectors (civil engineering, industry, agriculture, trading, etc.). It was quite hard to obtain such interviews. First of all, I had to avoid meeting them at their workplaces so that they might not feel embarrassed to speak freely in the presence of their colleagues. Usually I met them at home or in cafes. I also used my own contacts with engineers. As a second precaution, I avoided recording or taking notes of interviews with engineers I did not know well. In this case, I wrote down the discussion and my observations afterwards.
5. For the analysis of the technocracy in industrial societies see J. K. Galbraith (1968: 71–82), Daniel Bell (1976), Georges Gurvitch (1949) and Alain Touraine (1969).
6. J. K. Galbraith (1968: 71–82) defines this concept as the group of engineers and technicians who have the power of decision-making instead of the capital owners in the organizational system of the modern industrial enterprise.
7. For instance, in Syria there is compulsory work for five years for the state for a menial wage without any other reward, either material or symbolic, of their functions.
8. There is quite a consensus amongst the engineers on the eventual impact of such an Arab unity, but what is rather new, for these nationalists, is that they insist on the impossibility of achieving development on a regional basis, i.e. on a one-state level.

9. This idea will be developed in depth below.
10. This dichotomy is usually used as an ideological opposition mode and not as an analytical tool.
11. Hassan Hanafi, an Egyptian intellectual, stresses the importance of Liberation Theology for Arab readers. He refers to famous figures such as Gustavo Gutierrez and considers this movement as the 'progressive' model for religion's engagement to be followed by Arab society. This model is not far away from Chahrour's reasoning.

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**Biographical Note:** Sari Hanafi is a sociologist now living in Egypt. Educated in Syria as an engineer, PhD in Sociology, École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales Paris, he is currently researcher in charge of the 'Diaspora Palestinian Economy' project at CEDEJ, a French research institute in Cairo. He has published many articles and two books: *Between Two Worlds: Palestinian Businessmen in the Diaspora and the Construction of a Palestinian Entity*, Muwatin (Palestinian Institute for the Study of Democracy) (Ramallah) and *Dar al-Mostaqbal al-arabi*



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**Address:** CEDEJ, PO Box 494, Dokki, Cairo, Egypt. [Tel. (home) 202 302 44 87, (work) 202 361 19 32; fax: 202 349 35 18; email: [cedej@idsc.gov.eg](mailto:cedej@idsc.gov.eg)]