

Book Reviews

Modern Islamist Movements: History, Religion and Politics by John Armajani, 2012, Wiley Blackwell

Mehraj ud din Bhat

Sherman Jackson in one of his articles, “Liberal/progressive, modern and modernized Islam” classifies Sunnism and divides it into three mildly overlapping intellectual groupings; liberals/progressives, modern Islamist movements and modernized Islamic tradition. The recourse to Jackson’s view may help us to understand the discourse scamped in the political movement of 20th century Muslim world labeled as Islamism or “Political Islam”. He believes that “Islamism” is represented by groups as the Muslim Brotherhood (al Ikhwan al Muslimeen), the Islamic fellowship (Jamaat Islami), and the liberation Party (Hizb al-Tahrir). The worldview of these Islamist movements takes modern history as their battle ground for counterfeiting the bogus west. The distinctive feature of these movements is their emphatic insistence on moving beyond simple piety and theological/juridical casuistry to issues of power and politics. The book under review provides a clear and accessible examination of the histories, beliefs, and rationales of these Islamist groups. It also includes discussions of their humanitarian and “militant” (colonial retaliation) aspects as well as their grievances with respect to the West and governments within the majority-Muslim world.

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This book is an addition to the countless constructing narratives which deals with the dynamics of Islamist movements across the Muslim globe. It comprises an introduction, five chapters, and a conclusion. In the introduction, the author is formulating the idea of Islamism and how its evolved as a counter narrative of Modernity. The unfolding of a larger chain of response seems vigilant and vibrant in post-renaissance and post-9/11 attack in the Asian world trying to establish the political sovereignty of God on earth. The main tenet of Islamism was to highlight the essence of consumerist and capitalist discourse which is indispensably antithetical to Islam.

In the second chapter, Armanjani focuses on the history of Islamism in Egypt. It analyzes the ideas of Jamal al-Din al-Afghani (1838–97), Muhammad Abduh (1849–1905), and Muhammad Rashid Rida (1865–1935), who resided in Egypt for various periods of time. The chapter then discusses the life and ideas of Hasan al-Banna (1906–49), who drew upon the ideas of Afghani, Abduh, and Rida, founded Egypt’s Muslim Brotherhood, and was one of Islamism’s most influential activists. Armanjani claims that until 1945 various Islamist groups, including Egypt’s Muslim Brotherhood, were influenced by the strands of German National Socialist (Nazi) thought which had an anti-Semitic character” (p. 52). The chapter also explores the lives and ideas of other significant Islamists, such as Sayyid Qutb (a profound figure in the Muslim Brotherhood’s history) and Ayman al-Zawahiri, who has played a crucial role in al-Qaida.

The author argues in 3rd chapter about the Palestinian resistance against Israel among Palestinians in the West Bank, Gaza, Jerusalem, and Israel proper, and the ways in which various groups such as al-Fatah, the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), and Hamas have mobilized themselves in their efforts to create a Palestinian state. The author claims that “Palestinian suicide assaults against Israelis in the heart of Israel and in the West Bank settlements that began in September 2000” (pp. 9-10). In fact this tactic, which has long been abandoned, started in April 1994. “For Islamists, Islamic educational institutions must wholeheartedly reject Western-based content within all academic disciplines” (p.12). This chapter analyzed the key figures in the Palestinian resistance, the structures of Palestinian resistance groups, and the various ways in which those groups have adapted and/or rejected Islamic and secular ideas in their ideologies.

Chapter 4 severely discusses the puritanical Wahhabi movement and how it played a crucial role in the development of modern Saudi state. He also describes its role for manufacturing the ways in which various leaders in the Arabian Peninsula appropriated Islam in the periods before, during and after the founding of the modern state of Saudi Arabia. The chapter analyzes the life and ideas of the influential Muslim intellectual Muhammad ibn Abd

al-Wahhab (1703–92) and the ways in which various political and religious leaders in the Arabian peninsula adapted his ideas as they formulated their conceptions of – or opposition to – the modern Saudi state. While the chapter examines the role of Wahhabism in Saudi statecraft, it also analyzes the role of Wahhabi ideas in the formation of Usama bin Laden’s ideology and his and al-Qaida’s resistance to the Saudi government.

Chapter 5 explores various aspects of some Islamist groups in Pakistan. In some ways like Egypt, the Indo-Pakistani region has been a major center of Islamic intellectual life and religious reform. A number of Sunni Islam’s most prolific modern intellectuals, such as Sayyid Ahmed Khan, Muhammad Iqbal, Sayyid Abul Ala Mawdudi, and Fazlur Rahman, have lived and worked in India and/or Pakistan. One of the largest Islamist organizations in the Sunni Muslim world, the Jamaat-i-Islami was founded in Pakistan and continues to support and operate mosques, Islamic schools, hospitals, and other social service agencies there and outside the country. Pakistani based Islamic organizations such as the Jamaat also provided educational, religious, political, and military support to the anti-Soviet Afghan mujahideen during the 1980s, to al-Qaida as it began to form in the mid-1980s and continued its work thereafter, and to the Taliban which began to take power in Afghanistan in 1994. The section on Pakistan explores the intellectual and organizational development of Islamism and reform in the Indo-Pakistani region during the nineteenth and twentieth century, giving specific attention to Muslim perspectives within this context which gave rise to the mobilization and the long-term popularity of such groups as Jamaat-i-Islami, al-Qaida, and the Taliban among segments of the Pakistani population. Over time, the regimes ruling India and Pakistan have had an interest in influencing political, cultural, and religious affairs in Afghanistan for a number of reasons. One significant impetus behind these nations’ historic involvement in Afghanistan’s internal politics has been India’s and Pakistan’s desire for security. Indian and Pakistani governments have long tried to use the Afghan region as a buffer against Iranian, Russo-Soviet, Central Asian, British, and even Chinese influence in the area. The involvement of the Pakistani government and Pakistani Islamist groups in Afghanistan’s internal affairs during the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries has been an extension of Pakistan’s long-standing concern with that country’s future. The chapter on Pakistan will also analyze the complex accommodationalist/ oppositionalist strategies that Pakistan’s government has taken toward Islamist groups operating within its borders and in Afghanistan and India.

Chapter 6 examines the role of Islamist groups in Afghanistan. Afghanistan’s protracted war against the Soviet invasion and occupation from 1979 to 1989 and the subsequent Afghan civil war in the 1990s not only decimated the country, it made Afghanistan a crucial center for the formation and growth of al-Qaida and the Taliban.¹²⁵

This chapter will examine the role which American military, financial, and political support of the mujahideen and of Usama bin Laden played in the origins and development of Islamism in Afghanistan during the 1980s and 1990s. It analyzes various Afghan and Muslim responses to the substantial decrease in American economic aid to Afghanistan after the Soviet pull-out from that country in 1989. There was, for instance, an expectation among many Afghans that after the war against the Soviets, the United States would support an extended redevelopment program. Millions of Afghans felt betrayed when the United States showed little commitment to rebuilding the country after it had played a key role in helping the Afghans oust the Soviets in the 1980s.

The chapter on Afghanistan also discusses the monetary and religious contributions which Usama bin Laden made – and which many Afghans believed he had made – to a poverty-stricken Afghanistan in the aftermath of American disengagement. Central to this analysis is an examination of Islamism’s growth in Afghanistan through an exploration of the Taliban’s history, organization, and ideology. The chapter also examines the role of madrasahs in the Taliban’s rise and development.

Chapters 7, the book’s conclusion, summarize some of the findings and suggest some ideas regarding the future of Islamist movements. The chapters in a book such as this one could be ordered in a variety of ways. The chapters in this volume move geographically in an approximate manner from west to east, Egypt being the westernmost country, which receives extensive treatment, Pakistan and Afghanistan lying further to the east, with Israel, the West Bank, Gaza, and Saudi Arabia lying roughly in between. While this study could have begun in any of the countries that are analyzed, Egypt is a viable place to begin because of the vitality of Islamic thought which has been present in that country for substantial periods of its history and because of the influence that Islamic ideas which have emanated from Egypt have had on the majority-Muslim world.

This work is one of the important contributions for understanding the Islamist discourse vis-à-vis at the same times lacks proper methodology which creates serious problems at various instances in the book. He argues that “Palestinian suicide assaults against Israelis in the heart of Israel and in the West Bank settlements that began in September 2000” (pp. 9-10). In fact this tactic, which has long been abandoned, started in April 1994. “For Islamists, Islamic educational institutions must wholeheartedly reject Western-based content within all academic disciplines” (p. 12). Actually, Islamists in much of the Middle East established and run some of the best and most modern academic institutions. A visit by the author to the Gaza Strip, Jordan or Egypt would have enlightened him on this matter. He further describes that the “One of the most urgent demands that various Islamic groups, including Al-Qaida and the Taliban, have been making is for the creation of a fully

autonomous Palestinian state” (p. 26). This is absolutely incorrect. Islamic movements do not think of the Palestinian issue as being one of statehood but rather of the liberation of a Muslim land occupied by foreigners. The Palestinian state discourse is a secular nationalist idea and not an Islamic one. “... Until 1945 various Islamist groups, including Egypt’s Muslim Brotherhood, were influenced by the strands of German National Socialist (Nazi) thought which had an anti-Semitic character” (p. 52). This is a ludicrous allegation taken from Zionist literature seeking to explain Islamic opposition to Zionism in terms of anti-Semitism. The author did not even bother to consult Muslim Brotherhood literature or interview any of their ideologues. “In 1954, a segment of the Muslim Brotherhood planned an assassination attempt on President Nasser” (p. 54). At the very least, what the author should have done here is to refer to the Brotherhood denials and claims that this incident was orchestrated by Nasser to justify his onslaught on their movement. His argument that “ Hamas’s world view is similar to that of some other Islamist organizations in that Hamas views people and organizations who do not subscribe to its form of Islam as *jahil* or ignorant and potentially legitimate targets for its attack” (p. 105). Unfortunately, the author has not spoken or interviewed any Hamasian leader for removing his confusions and false edifice of his thought process regarding Hamas. In the concluding lines, this book seems to be a bit dicey for those who desire to identify the contextual and ideological schemes of Islamist movements across the Muslim world but nonetheless provides important information regarding the on-going political trends in Muslim Diasporas. The imperialistic wind of western literature is reverberatingly portraying Islam and all its offshoots as pre-modern, irrational, anti-progress and fanatically monolithic. Hopefully, this book may prove helpful for the students and scholars of Islamic studies, Middle Eastern and south Asian students who are interested in understanding the dynamics of modern “political” movements working across the Muslim world.

