

the contemporary Middle East. The Fergana Valley, now located at the periphery of three Central Asian republics but once the center of Central Asia, illustrates both the risks and opportunities for social and political changes in the whole region, and the book *Fergana Valley: the Heart*

of Central Asia proves that understanding the Fergana's complexities and its fluctuation between unity and diversity is crucial to understanding regional change.

Vişne Korkmaz

Yildiz Technical University

Islam Without Extremes - A Muslim Case for Liberty

By Mustafa Akyol

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In Mustafa Akyol's book *Islam Without Extremes*, the author takes up the challenge to confront the many misconceptions and false portrayals of Islam as inherently conservative or violent by tracing back Islam's history, the development of political Islam, and offering his own vision for a modern and more liberal political Islam. Throughout his writings, he is implicitly and explicitly guided by the question why a dominantly conservative brand of Islam is nowadays present in many governments or societies. Yet in the course of the book, he contrasts (formerly) authoritarian and secularist Turkey with other Islamic countries, concluding that Islam may not be the reason for authoritarianism but that other factors are at play. Drawing also on his own experiences, religious beliefs, and Turkish heritage, Akyol analyzes the emergence of political Islam by deconstructing the past, meaning he sheds light on both conservative (Traditionalists) and more progressive (Rationalists) movements within Islam and supplements his evaluation of the movements with a discussion on other factors, such as the environment (desert vs. arid regions),

cultural context (tribalism) or economics (commerce). To support his arguments and interpretations, he employs quotes from the Qur'an, Hadiths, and explains the socio-cultural setting that shaped and influenced the development of (political) Islam. Akyol focuses on the origins of Islam in the first part of the book and asserts that they provided a foundation for a more liberal future, citing women's rights (p.53) or the role of the individual (p.49). He then goes on to follow the blossoming of Islamic culture, trade and political life which all come to an end or faced stagnation from the 12th century (to a degree even earlier) on due to, among other reasons, the economic decline, and a lack of trade (pp.125-127).

However, aside the lack of economic development, Akyol also discusses the role the desert environment played on shaping the nature of Islam, the function of the middle class, and the role of the respective rulers of the land. This critical review will assess the latter point, the role and power of rulers in the Muslim world and how their interests influenced the development and interpretation of Islam.

I strongly believe that one cannot stress enough the important role of government support or sanctioning of religion and the effects it can produce.

Akyol points out two of the caliphates, Umayyad and Abbasid, stating that they played an “important role in this story by frequently offering their support for the Traditionalists” (p.118). Even though he almost dismisses this statement in the next sentence by calling it a “superficial explanation” (p.118), I would have to disagree with this judgment. He claims that it is superficial because it does not explain *why* the authorities decided to support the more conservative movement and not the more reason-minded one. However, it does not have to in my opinion. It does not matter exactly why they chose the Traditionalists, the important part is that they *did*. From a rationalistic and political realism point of view, a ruler only makes decisions that will further the consolidation of his power, especially when faced with challengers to his power. A group that chooses to use reason, consisting mostly of “well-educated, cosmopolitan intellectuals” (p.122) might have well posed such a challenge. Therefore, it is only natural that a ruler would choose to align himself with a more tradition minded group that is interested in preserving the status quo and more averse to change.

Now one could argue that the case of the Ottoman Empire would disprove the theory of rulers supporting conservative Islam, since the Ottoman Empire took great strides at liberalization. Yet a closer look at the situation shows that this kind of liberalization had as much to do with a genuine belief in it as it had with being a political necessity due to the structure of political power. The Ottoman Empire

was fairly decentralized and consisted of different ethnic, religious, and cultural groups that were all “increasingly influenced by the ideas of modern nationalism” (p.147). Thus, in order to preserve their vast territorial empire and power, it was logical to provide more liberties to the people instead of risking open revolt or secession, both would have been difficult to oppress over a long time period and in light of the rise of nationalism. This example illustrates again the interest of the ruling elite as the predominant factor in the development of Islam and its relationship to politics and government, only in this case it takes a more liberal direction.

A third and different example can be found in the rulers’ attempts at ‘Islamizing’ certain forms of punishment, even though the Qur’an did not offer these kinds of punishments. Akyol describes how Umayyad and Abbasid caliphs “could get rid of their critics simply by accusing them of apostasy” (p.276). This accusation would neatly coincide with the emergence of a Hadith, which justified the killing of apostates, thereby making life easier for the caliphs. Similarly, the accusation of blasphemy is not connected to punishment on earth in the Qur’an, yet it resulted in executions which were “political, rather than religious, events” (p.281). Again, the interest of the rulers often resulted in a manipulation of Islam in order to advance their agendas and power.

Naturally, the significance of the ruling elite cannot be the sole factor when analyzing the current conservative nature of Islam or authoritarian regimes. After all, Christianity has an incredibly long history of power hungry rulers or even a politically active Papacy, yet Christi-

anity in the West and Western political systems do differ dramatically from Islamic states. Consequently, explanations such as the role of the environment and culture need to be taken into account as well. The emergence of Islam in Arabia took place in the context of centralized rule due to the lack of irrigation (p.133), the comparison to Europe is especially interesting in this case since it shows that the rich and fertile land in Europe allowed the existence of many different centers of political power. A centralization of power almost automatically leads to less competition, less ideas or innovations and thus could have indeed proven fatal for the “formative developments” (p.128) in Islam. Another example for the influence of the environment could be seen in American political thought. The fertile, open, and vast country led to the ideology of a ‘Manifest Destiny’, influencing the belief in progress and advancement. Why then, could the arid environment and the tribal culture not have had the same effect on Islamic thought, just in the opposite direction? Akyol acknowledges that such an argument may be seen as racist (p.132), but he convincingly refutes that this is the case since our environments do shape and

influence us, sometimes in obvious and sometimes in less tangible ways.

Overall, Akyol presents several convincing explanations for the stagnation of Islam and the authoritarianism that is taking place in the name of Islam. Especially his use of Qur’anic verses and the history of the creation of Hadiths were excellent supplementations to his reasoning; they also explained many misperceptions that are dominant in the Western media. As always in the course of history and arguments, there is no singular reason why Islam has developed the way it has and why authoritarian rulers are so often found in Islamic countries. Yet this is also because of the diverse nature of Islam, of Muslim countries and of the different cultural contexts that accompanied the evolution of (political) Islam. Whether or not Akyol presents *all* these reasons does not truly matter, the important aspect of his work in my opinion is that he offers a novice viewpoint of Islam and Islamic history. Finally, he puts forth several convincing reasons *outside* of the nature of the religion that explain the current political situation.

Sarah Wagner

Islam in Europa: Religiöses Leben heute. Ein Portrait ausgewählter islamischer Gruppen und Institutionen. (Islam in Europe. Religious Life Today: A Portrayal of Select Islamic Groups and Institutions)

Edited by Dietrich Reetz

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