

BOOK REVIEW

Tariq Ramadan, *The Arab Awakening: Islam and the New Middle East*, London: Penguin Books Limited, 2012.

The Arab Awakening: Islam and the New Middle East is set against the backdrop of the Arab uprisings of 2011 and attempts to explain how Muslim countries can harness political developments to usher in comprehensive social and cultural transformation. The book discusses the contemporary situation in the Middle East, the empowerment of the general populace, and the future of the Muslim World.

The first chapter titled ‘Made-to-Order Uprising’ details and describes the situation in the Middle East since the first incident of the uprising. The author dwells on the wave of “cautious optimism” that swept the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) as mass mobilizations challenged decades long dictatorial regimes. In chapter two, ‘Cautious Optimism’, he discusses the role of Islam with reference to the existing progression of the uprising. In the third chapter titled, ‘Islam, Islamism, Securitization’, Ramadan analyses the role of Islam in society and its compatibility with democratic pluralism and religious diversity. The final chapter, ‘The Islamic Reference’, addresses the challenges Arabs in particular, and Muslims in general, face with reference to their history and traditions.

Ramadan’s examination of the political developments in MENA and their consequences stems from three important questions:

- What actually took place in Tunisia and Egypt?
- What is happening in the region at large?
- Why now?

In an attempt to answer these questions, the author embarks upon a study of the recent history, the central figures, and the geopolitical and economic framework of the region.

Ramadan details the reactions of the U.S. and European governments towards the Arab uprisings as well as the role played by the international media in covering the event. He says that selective coverage and diplomatic backing contributed to the rise of opposition movements in some Arab countries. Tunisia and Egypt are two cases that are outlined most significantly in this account, with

sporadic references to developments in Libya, Syria, Bahrain, Yemen and other countries. The author adopts a holistic approach when analyzing the Arab Uprising, recounting crosscurrents within the region thus providing relevant and critical context to his arguments.

The second half of the book deals with the:

- Evaluation of the ideological narratives deployed (internally and externally)
- Outline of an intellectual plan to direct the future route of action
- Explore how Islam can contribute to political developments

Ramadan reserves his core criticism for the present state of public discourse within the Arab world. On the one hand, this discourse polarizes the secularists and Islamists, and on the other hand fuels the historic narrative of “us” (Muslims professed as sufferers) versus “them” (the West) who are held responsible for all the troubles facing the Muslim world. The author argues that those supporting secularization as a way out for Middle Eastern societies oversimplify and are detached from actual communal issues. Similarly, those supporting Islamist podiums have little to propose other than sensitive appeals to tradition to improve their own integrity. Ramadan cogently argues that due to the negative connotations associated with ‘secularism’ in the Muslim world, the term has come to be loathed and feared. According to the author, in mainstream Muslim and Arab societies, secularization is associated with repression, colonialism and Islamophobia.

Ramadan challenges Arabs to discard a counter-productive contest between old-fashioned theoretical categories and to triumph over rationalizing colonization. He calls for persistent self-criticism and intellectual rebuilding as well as employing native histories, cultures, identities, and assurances to re-establish dignity. A striving demand for social and cultural replenishment encompasses standard elements that include full rights; revamped educational systems; democratic political course; religious freedoms; and pluralism. The stress on social justice also comprises of a strident critique of the worldwide neo-liberal economic array, and the control put forth by international financial institutions, multinational corporations and commanding states on countries of the global South. Ramadan recognizes the changing realignment of global powers with the decline of Western economies and the growing worth of China, Brazil, Russia, India and others, as a critically enabling aspect in the tumbling of Middle Eastern dictatorships. He observes the crises as a prospect for Arab and other Third World countries to push for supplementary and

impartial economic relations, but without specifying how that will come about.

In the centre of his sanguinity about the future of the Muslim world, Ramadan downplays the potential threat of radical and militant Islam or the ongoing ‘war on terror’ that complicates relations with the West. He might be correct in stating that the style and substance of the Arab uprisings signal an end to earlier confrontational paradigms, but that assertion still merits a more careful examination. Similarly, he assumes the continuing salience of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in the new paradigm rather than demonstrating it. This slim volume was written while the events it describes were still unfolding, and serves primarily to clarify the religious and political positions of which the author has been a passionate proponent. The book is full of exhortations for the readers, and frequently becomes repetitive and tendentious. The careful middle ground that Ramadan tries to chart might still, however, appear too bold or controversial to some of his Western or Muslim/Arab audiences who will no doubt take offense to some of his views.

Ramadan however distinguishes himself from other authors in discussing the role he foresees Islam to play in the new Middle East. The Islamic reference is ever-present in the formation of new governments and new constitutions that have come to power following the Arab Spring. He promotes an elementary rethinking whereby Islam presents an ethical framework directing political conduct and guaranteeing social justice. As a substitute to providing laws, rules and prohibitions, Islamic teachings form a foundation of spirituality and meaning. It is a graceful formulation but not effortlessly adaptable into genuine practice.

What he does noticeably rebuff is the notion of an “Islamic state” claiming that a division between divine and worldly power has always been present in Islamic jurisprudential thought. He opts for the substitute “civil state” that a few Islamist movements are now supporting, i.e. a democratic, secular state decoupled from religious power; the contiguous modern estimate of which is the Turkish model. Lacking a prosperous civil society and a vigorous commitment to their Islamic heritage, Ramadan warns that Muslim societies will not be familiar with real liberation and peace.

On the whole, the discussion put forward by Ramadan concerning the challenges within the region include a lack of leadership in the existing movements; restricted self-awareness shared with dualistic visualization of political realities; the lack of economic and global dynamics; and lastly, the

sectarian tension between the Sunnis and the Shiites. The author concludes enthusiastically, “Whatever the plans and the exploitation of the Great Powers, the future of Arab awakening will depend on the aptitude of apiece society to take its fortune into its own hands, to enlarge novel approaches and to unlock new perspectives...the moment has arrived for the young people who conceded the Arab awakening, to figure and decide – beyond their mastery of technology and technique - a vision, a project, an alternative.”

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