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CONTENTS

Editorial	119
<i>Elmira Akhmetova</i>	

Articles

Human Value in Islamic Thought	123
<i>Müfit Selim Saruhan</i>	

The Life and Political Role of Kurdish Women in the Ottoman Empire	139
<i>Bzhar Othman Ahmed and AbdulWahed Jalal Nori</i>	

Muslim Dynamics in America: Challenges and Opportunities	154
<i>Dinar Dewi Kania, Ariesa Ulfa, Sari Tri Stianawati, Erpy Reinita, Rere Jessika Purnomo and Agus Saefurohman</i>	

A Study of Dosteo Bisaka's Contribution to the "Faith of Unity" Religious Movement in Western Uganda	181
<i>Ismail Kadala Murutha and Saud bin Mohammad</i>	

Book Review

Edited by John L. Esposito and Emad el-Din Shahin, <i>Key Islamic Political Thinkers</i>	206
Makmor bin Tumin	

Book Review

John L. Esposito and Emad el-Din Shahin (Editors) - Key Islamic Political Thinkers, New York: Oxford University Press (2018).

by Makmor bin Tumin

Discourses on the Islamic State continue in the Muslim world. One of such discourses is led by John L. Esposito and Emad el-Din Shahin, as they brought 11 contributors into 10 chapters in their edited book titled, “Key Islamic Political Thinkers,” tracing the development of Muslim political thought over the past century. Reviews from chapter 1 to 5 below were based on the first two parts of the book (*Founders of Political Islam and Revolutionary Ideologue*) and will be discussed briefly.

In Chapter 1, Ahmad Moussali proposed an analysis of the religious and political thought of Hassan al-Banna, the author focuses on al-Banna’s three central principles: Islam and politics, the Islamic state and *shari’ah*, as well as democracy and *shura* (consultation). Al-Banna opened the door for interpretation for the ideas of sovereignty of God and sovereignty of the *ummah* by saying that it is possible to assimilate democracy with the Islamic concept of *shura* and comprehensive governance. Moussalli, like many other Islamists, was charmed by al-Banna’s mantra, “No governance (*hukm*) except God’s,” the mantra employed by many Islamic movements to legitimise their act. Since the *shari’ah* law is subject to interpretation, in practice, it may differ from society to society. One can expect different voices to be heard in different Muslim countries, hence the mechanism of democracy and *shura* is in place to cater for this principle.

In Chapter 2, Joshua T. White and Niloufer Siddiqui presented their ideas on how Mawlana Mawdudi responded to the problem of the

collapse of the caliphate, which had forced the Muslims to live within the boundaries of the Westphalian nation state concept which created the possibility of postponement, if not abandonment, of the universal *ummah* concept. White and Siddiqui summarised that Mawdudi's ideas helped shape "the contours of modern Islamic discourse", and believed that Mawdudi's stance on the political imperatives of Islam was evolutionary, especially since his early writings gave way to a more practical and applied discussion of state power.

In Chapter 3, Shahrouh Akhavi focuses on Sayyid Qutb's idea of God Sovereignty, in which he noted, "Man-made law is a recipe or guarantee to Jahiliyyah." Western influence, in all aspects of Muslim life, strongly bothered Qutb, and the only solution to him was Islam. According to Akhavi, "activist-minded" Muslims came after him to utilise Qutb's ideas and vindicate their demands for the immediate application of *shari'ah* in all areas of life. Qutb showed little compromise with the government's *'ulama*. Islamic law is the principal source of legislation, hence ruling elites could always define the *shari'ah* so elastically as to distort it beyond all recognition, as explained by Akhavi.

Meanwhile, in Chapter 4, Akhavi highlights the important roles of Ali Shari'ati, not so much as a thinker but rather as an ideologist. Influenced by Marxism-Leninism and Jean Paul Sartre, Shari'ati, as told by Akhavi, had greatly influenced youth. His little compromise with the traditional *'ulama* and the belief mentored by his own father had made him critical about the Twelver Shi'a standing in the current generation of *'ulama*. Akhavi portrays him as both Husayn ibn Ali and Abu Dhar al-Ghifari, which implies that Shari'ati was a man who was against the idea of power, wealth, and status; all aspects which tend to corrupt a ruler. Thus, revolution was the solution for him.

Seeing the Shi'ite theology in two schools of thought emerge, the Akhbari and the Usuli, in Chapter 5, Mojtaba Mahdavi discusses the evolution of Ayatollah Khomeini's thinking through five distinct stages, beginning with political quietism and concluding with political absolutism, implying the changing thought from the Akhbari to Usuli thought. Khomeini feared the increasing secularisation, and the changing of Iranian society had led him into contemplating the importance of interpreting the original source together with the secondary law or

philosophy. In general, his idea's development or progression can be seen as a synthesis of the dialectics of heaven and earth, in which, when necessary, the government is empowered to unilaterally revoke any *shari'ah* agreement it has conducted with the people when those agreements are contrary to the interests of the country or Islam.

The last part of the book (*The "Intellectuals" of Political Islam*) portrays the contemporary intellectuals of Islam, where debates on the importance of free speech and freedom of expression is more prevalent than the *shari'ah* law itself, regardless of their persuasion.

The concept of God sovereignty versus popular sovereignty is pivotal in Islam. In Chapter 6, Peter Woodward describes Hassan al-Turabi's attempts to reconcile the sovereignty concepts by expanding the concepts of Islamic state, democracy, and popular sovereignty. Among the liberal Muslim thinkers, al-Turabi's efforts are obviously acknowledged. However, had al-Turabi confined himself to being just a theorist instead of a politician, according to Woodward, his thought would have attracted more interest and perhaps served as an inspiration for some. Al-Turabi was an ideologist in the fullest sense of the word, turning his ideas into programs of action in Sudan and beyond. Many liberal Muslims, al-Turabi included, discussed the concept of divine sovereignty with hardly any mention of specific verses in the Quran or hadith. Due to this, there are disputes on the inherent dangers contained in the vagueness and lack of textual references in al-Turabi's writings.

In Chapter 7, Azzam Tamimi explained on Rashid al-Ghannushi's innovative endeavors to introduce new dimensions of fresh ideas on public freedom in the Islamic state, citizenship, civil society, women, democracy, and the need for specialisation within the Islamic movements and separation between political practice and Islamic *da'wah* (call to Islam). Al-Ghannushi's intellectual assets lie on his comprehension of both Islamic and Western theories. On matters concerning the system of government, human rights, and civil liberties, al-Ghannushi believes that knowledge has both its own merit and its compatibility should be utilised fully. However, as noted by Tamimi, he is also known for the inconsistency in his discourse.

As a political leader, Tamimi observed, he has been compelled to make compromises, the most notable of which was his decision to remove the reference to Islam from the name of his movement in

order to qualify for registering as a legal political party. On such issue, Azzam Tamimi depicts al-Ghannushi's thought as, at times, more of a political analysis, and may even be too populist. Despite many criticisms, he continued to be democratically elected as the leader of Ennahda, a political party in Tunisia. The fact that al-Ghannushi sees in Western modernity positive aspects that are not only of great benefit but may also be indispensable for a modern Islamic revival made him unpopular among the conservatives and hardline Muslims.

In Chapter 8, Bettina Gräf explores the contributions of Shaykh Yusuf al-Qaradawi in the concept of *tajdid* or renewal, the "Islamic Solution," the moderation of the middle way (*wasatiya*), the Islamic Awakening, Muslim minorities, gender relations, democracy and pluralism, and his controversial Islamic ruling on limited use of violence. His long age (b. 1926) has been an important factor in moderating different views on contemporary Islamic discourse, especially among the Sunni denomination. He has grappled with many adversaries: Salafism and secularism included. Subscribing to the notion of *wasatiya*, he struggled to make Islamic rulings over the issues of instrumentalisation of Islam by different nation-states and in condemnation of religious extremism in Egypt and elsewhere.

Gräf noted two important decisions by al-Qaradawi, which are the understanding of the local reality of daily life (*fiqh al-waqi'*) and the task of making life easy for Muslims and not difficult and full of interdictions (*yusr la 'usr*). As a teacher, preacher, counselor, monitor, and admonisher, al-Qaradawi has demonstrated a good model for Muslim thinkers to emulate. Although Gräf had mentioned al-Qaradawi's contribution a lot, it is difficult to trace the specific political philosophy which al-Qaradawi embraces, except by saying that he took the middle way (*wasatiyah*).

In Chapter 9, Mahmoud Sadri and Ahmad Sadri, analyse Mohammad Khatami's intellectualism and political activism as a reformist in the Iranian society. The issues of cultural openness, human rights, political participation, and civic liberties are the concerns of Rashid Ghannushi in Tunisia, as discussed by Azzam Tamimi, and the same issues are the concerns of Khatami in Iran, implying that these issues are not issues culturally specific to a society but rather universal (to Muslim) societies, both the Sunni and Shi'i community. The authors were

reflective in the observation of Khatami's acumen when they bring up Max Weber's work on political vocation, in which they emphasised how, in normal times, Khatami might have not chosen "politics as his vocation." Khatami's discourses on cultural openness, human rights, political participation, and civic liberties were derived from the above mentioned Iranian thinker who derived his from European Enlightenment thinkers such as Hobbes, Locke and Rousseau.

In Chapter 10, basing his discussion on the Neoplatonism movement, especially under Mulla Sadra's illuminationism-rationalism ideology, Behrooz Ghamari-Tabrizi examines the intellectual discourse of Abdolkarim Soroush, very much like Mahdavi did in the last part of Chapter 5. A seventeenth-century Persian Gnostic philosopher, Mulla Sadra's influence on Shi'i contemporary philosophers is extensive. Ghamari-Tabrizi provides interesting comparisons between Ali Shari'ati, pointing to Abu Dhar al-Ghifari's activism, and Soroush, pointing to Ibn Sina's intellectualism, explaining that Soroush's contributions were not only in the field of political philosophy, but just as significant, in theology as well.

Neoplatonism being one of the most important rationalism movements in contemporary Iran, Ghamari explains how Soroush began his journey with an ideology critique, first of Marxism and later of Islamism of pre and post-revolutionary Iran. His hermeneutics and pluralist approach to Islam, as illustrated by Ghamari, reminds us the Nietzschean and Foucauldian line of thinking, particularly his debates on truth claim and historical contingency of Islam. Soroush's contribution in political philosophy perhaps can be judged based on his calling for struggle for participatory democracy through the recognition of competing interpretations of Islam.

Commenting on the entirety of the book; firstly, without *'ulama* of conservative intellectual thought or *shari'ah*-based political Islam, this book shows little nuances to provide a better understanding on contemporary Muslim intellectual discourse. This book should also include thinkers from other regions such as the Southeast Asia, in which many countries with Muslims as majority can be found. Secondly, this book has not seriously dealt with the richness of the thinkers' ideas, but rather is more focused on their activities and ideology, leaving the

readers unsure as to what the political take away was from the political thought that the contemporary intellectual thinkers left us with.

Thirdly, the term “philosophy-based political Islamists” is better suited to describe the liberal Muslim thinkers, and in contrast, the term “*shari’ah*-based political Islamists” is more appropriate to explain the conservative or hardline Muslim thinkers, for the reason that liberalists and conservatives in the west are both products of liberalism; this, however, is not the case in the Islamic world. Fourthly, concepts such as *shari’ah* law, God sovereignty are important concepts, and they should be explained at the outset, perhaps in the introductory chapter.

Lastly, although contemporary Muslim intellectuals discussed in this book seem to convince on the impossibility of the Islamic state, in order to have a better Muslim society, it does not mean that the discussion on family institutions is not important in shaping society. The great western contemporary political philosopher, John Rawls, admitted that if he had the opportunity to reformulate his work “A Theory of Justice,” he certainly would have included the family institution in the equation. Even great western philosophers such as Plato, John Locke and Jean-Jacques Rousseau included discussions on the family institution, and the same goes to early Muslim philosophers. We are not so sure whether the lack of mention of family institutions is the thinkers’ decision or that the contributors to this book did not mention the thinkers’ contribution on this matter.