

Modern Islamist Movements: History, Religion, and Politics

Jon Armajani

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Jon Armajani's book seeks to explain developments within Islam that have led to the rise of such radical Islamist groups as al-Qaida and the Taliban. The text provides an intellectual background for these movements in an attempt to explain how groups that profess to pursue religious objectives could justify engaging in horrific acts of terror.

Armajani opens with a thirty-six-page introduction (including notes) in which he lays out the book's theoretical foundations. He begins by defining Islamism as a subset of Islamic fundamentalism. His interest in al-Qaida and 9/11 quickly becomes clear, particularly in his discussion on whether or not the September 11 attacks could legitimately be viewed as acts of self-defense,

as Bin Laden and other al-Qaida leaders have claimed. This section examines the Islamists' grievances against the West and leads into analyses of the meanings of jihad, the totemic appeal of Bin Laden and al-Qaida, theories of religious violence, Islamist visions of the ideal state, and fundamentalist interpretations of history. The goal of the book, Armajani asserts, is to demonstrate "that the worldviews of the members of al-Qaida follow specific patterns which are rooted in twentieth- and twenty-first-century Islamist ideas and institutions as well as some intellectual currents that date to the early modern period" (p. 24).

In the interest of uncovering these patterns and roots of modern Islamism, the author traces its development through the recent histories of five countries/territories, each of which receives a chapter in the text. Given that many scholars assign the origins of Islamism to Egypt, it is natural that he begins with that country. Therefore, chapter 1 includes short summaries on the thought of three nineteenth-century Islamic thinkers (viz., Jamal al-Din al-Afghani, Muhammad Abduh, and Muhammad Rashid Rida) as well as the twentieth-century Islamist thinkers Hasan al-Banna, Sayyid Qutb, and Ayman al-Zawahiri. The narrative includes basic information on the Muslim Brotherhood, but culminates its argument with a relatively detailed discussion of al-Zawahiri's thought, including reflections upon those Islamists who influenced him.

The next two chapters focus upon the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and Saudi Arabia's role in the development of modern Islamism. Following a brief background of the conflict, Armajani documents some of the main points of Palestinian frustration and describes the rise of suicide bombing (or "martyrdom operations"). He also asserts that Israel's counter-terrorism strategy has influenced how the United States conducts "its own battles against Islamist militants" (p. 111) and that "the United States (has) pursued Israel's foreign policy interests in ways that have been damaging in some cases to the United States' own" (p. 113). In his chapter on Saudi Arabia, the author deals with the origins and rise of the Wahhabi movement leading up to the establishment of modern Saudi Arabia and the appearance of Islamist opposition to the Saudi state. The chapter's second half is dedicated to a narrative history of Bin Laden's life and the establishment of al-Qaida. Most pertinent in this section is the development of "an anti-Saudi Wahhabi Islam," which Armajani asserts arose in the aftermath of the first Gulf War.

The fact that Pakistan and Afghanistan are the last two countries covered should not be surprising, given the book's al-Qaida orientation. The chapter on Pakistan also allows Armajani to discuss the Islamist thought of Sayyid Abu'l A'la Mawdudi and the rise of the Jama'at-i Islami in the 1940s and 1950s. The chapter closes with Muhammad Zia ul-Haq's Islamization pro-

gram in the 1980s and Pakistan's role in the Afghan war against the Soviet Union. Armajani then brings the Egyptian and Pakistani Islamist strands together in a section that identifies "some striking similarities" between the Muslim Brothers and the Jama'at-i Islami (p. 181). The alliance of these two branches of Islamism was established in Afghanistan through the creation of al-Qaida (from the Muslim Brothers/Wahhabi branch) and the Taliban (from the Jama'at-i Islami branch). Armajani's chapter on Afghanistan highlights the influence of Pakistani Islamists upon the mujahideen in the Soviet-Afghan war and upon the establishment and rise of the Taliban. It discusses Mullah Omar, the Kandahar Assembly, the Taliban's wars in conquering Afghanistan, and the Taliban's post-9/11 relationship with al-Qaida as well as with the United States and Pakistan.

Modern Islamist Movements provides a useful and well documented account of the rise of radical Islamist movements, particularly al-Qaida and the Taliban. The author is fairly successful in demonstrating the connections between these movements and earlier Islamist movements, such as the Wahhabis, the Muslim Brotherhood, and the Jama'at-i Islami. The book's strengths lie in the author's scholarly approach toward his subject; in how he summarizes a variety of academic, western, and Islamic views on these movements' development; and how he elucidates upon the intellectual foundations of the movements and Islamist thinkers he discusses. The book also provides four regional maps, including a general map of the Middle East and more detailed maps of Israel, the West Bank, and Afghanistan. Each chapter includes comprehensive endnotes, and there is a fairly good index.

However, his use of chapter divisions titled with the names of different countries seems a bit artificial, since these chapters focus more on the particular individuals and movements associated with the rise of al-Qaida than with a comprehensive discussion of Islamist movements within the specific countries in question. Armajani's al-Qaida focus also means that certain topics, such as the Islamic revolution in Iran or less extreme Islamist movements (e.g., those in Turkey and Indonesia), are largely overlooked. For these reasons, the text seems most suitable within a context in which the instructor wishes to focus specifically upon the background and reasons for the rise of radical Sunni Islamist movements. Perhaps Armajani's greatest accomplishment in this book is to provide a concise and well-reasoned description of the intellectual and historical roots of al-Qaida and the Taliban.

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