

## **Between Jihad and Salaam: Profiles in Islam**

*Joyce M. Davis.*

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Today, politicians and political activists of every stripe recognize the power of the international media. From the most gilded generalissimo to the grubbiest guerrilla, there are few who would pass up a chance to plead their case on the world stage. This has given foreign correspondents, particularly those from first world countries like the United States, easy access to movers and shakers across the globe. Unfortunately, understanding does not always come with access.

Nowhere has this lack of understanding been more pervasive – or more pernicious – than among those reporters covering the Islamic world. Joyce M. Davis, deputy foreign editor for Knight Ridder newspapers and former deputy senior editor at National Public Radio, sets out to remedy this problem in her book, *Between Jihad and Salaam: Profiles in Islam*. Through interviews with 17 “Islamic leaders,” Davis endeavors “to help us understand the intellectual vitality that is now igniting the Muslim world.” However, like too many of her colleagues, the author quickly becomes lost in the surface realities of that world. In the end, her book does little to challenge the stereotypes and misconceptions she promises to shatter.

Davis begins the book with an introduction that outlines her mission while revealing the limits of her own understanding. While she deftly dispels some of the more blatant misunderstandings about Islam, she also throws around technical terms like “Islamists” and “scholars” without

evincing any real understanding of what they mean. Davis acknowledges that she uses the former label to refer to any socially or politically active Muslim, while she seems to apply the latter indiscriminately to anyone with an opinion about the faith.

From this precarious beginning, Davis embarks upon a rather unsteady journey from North Africa to the Far East. Each of the book's 17 chapters is devoted to a different interviewee, and each follows a similar format. Davis begins with some background information on her subjects and the organizations they represent, and in some cases, the political situation in the country in which they reside. She also throws in some anecdotal information about how the interviews were set up, where they were held and any adventures surrounding these conversations.

All of this makes some of these introductions needlessly melodramatic, and Davis' analysis of her subjects is often colored by a tendency to judge all things Islamic by the standards and mores of her contemporary American culture. The real problem, however, lies with the interviews themselves.

Many are with well-known figures like Sudan's Hassan al-Turabi – conducted at the height of his power and influence as head of the Popular Arab and Islamic Conference – and HAMAS leader Ibrahim Ghosheh. Other chapters cover Davis' conversations with lesser-known activists like Muntassir al-Zayat, a lawyer representing al-Gamaa al-Islamiyah and al-Jihad in Egypt, and M. Habib Chirzin, prominent in Indonesia's Muhammadiyah Movement.

Serious students of Islamic thought will note a pattern emerging here – a pattern that is reinforced by interviews with such icons of political Islam as Rachid al-Ghannouchi of Tunisia's Renaissance Party, Muhammad Aslam Saleemi of Pakistan's Jamaat-i-Islami, and Anwar Haddam, the leader of Algeria's Islamic Salvation Front (who was imprisoned in the United States shortly after his interview with Davis). She also includes interviews with Mahfoud Nahnah, then head of Algeria's Islamic Society Movement (now known as the Movement for a Peaceful Society, or MPS), Ishaq Farhan, from the Islamic Action Front in Jordan, and Kamel al-Sharief, representing the International Islamic Council for Da'wa and Relief.

All of these individuals belong to organizations that trace their lineage to the modernist Muslim Brotherhood or the Saudi-funded Wahhabi movement. Even the book's most notable exception, Sheikh Yusef Abdullah al-Qaradawi of Qatar, is considered by some to be a representative of the Wahhabi camp – albeit a moderate one.

In an apparent attempt at balance, Davis throws in a couple of interviews with radical revisionists like Sa'id al-Ashmawy, a former chief justice of the Egyptian Supreme Court whose modernist writings are well beyond the pale of mainstream Islam. While al-Ashmawy might seem to be the polar opposite of Islamists like Ibrahim Ghosheh, those with a deeper understanding of the Muslim faith than Davis possesses will recognize both as representatives of relatively recent modernist trends that can hardly be called indicative of traditional Islamic thought.

It is this voice, the voice of traditional Islam, that is so glaringly absent from Davis' work. Where are the learned sheiks of al-Azhar and Damascus? The scholars of Mauritania and Morocco? The muftis of Lebanon and Syria? Davis' failure to include such mainstream thinkers creates a skewed image of the contemporary Muslim world, one that reinforces western stereotypes of Islam as a religion of extremists. It is like trying to write a book about contemporary Catholicism based solely on interviews with liberation theology priests and IRA men.

Given these shortcomings, it is hard to imagine how Davis' book could contribute to a serious study of Islam or contemporary Muslim thought. It is, however, not without its merits. *Between Jihad and Salaam* does offer some unique insights into the world of modernist, political Islam, as well as an opportunity to hear from some of its ardent advocates.

Davis presents her interviews in a straightforward, question-and-answer format with little editing. Herein lies the book's value. Individuals like al-Turabi and Nahnah rarely get much airtime in the West; Davis offers the reader a unique opportunity for them to state their cases in their own words.

But there are problems here as well. While her interviews take us from the Algerian underground to the very corridors of Malaysian power, Davis rarely alters her line of questioning. Given the general homogeneity of the respondents, this makes for rather tedious reading. Moreover, the questions she does ask are far from probing; the focus is on general queries about democracy and relations between the Islamic world and the West.

Nonetheless, Davis does manage to highlight some interesting and important themes that are crucial to understanding the *realpolitik* of the modern Muslim world. Many of her subjects are masters at explaining why Muslims have a hard time trusting the United States. They offer compelling insights into the origins of political instability in their countries and they present concrete suggestions for improving relations between the West and Islamic political groups. Additionally, as Davis states in her introduction, one truly profound conclusion can be drawn from her work:

There seems to be a relationship between the incidence of religiously motivated violence against the state and the participation of Islamic groups in the political process. It is evident that in those countries where there is at least the semblance of a democratic system in which Islamists are allowed to participate, there are far fewer incidents of religiously motivated violence than in those countries where religious parties are banned.

This is an observation that many countries, including the United States, would do well to ponder. In the final analysis, it is Davis' claim that her book contains a representative cross-section of contemporary Muslim thought that is its biggest shortcoming. However, while the repetitiveness of the responses obviates the need to study the book as a whole, individual interviews – placed in their proper context – would be a valuable addition to any reader on political Islam.

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