

Islam in Revolution

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Dekmejian, R. Hriar. *Islam in Revolution: Fundamentalism in the Arab World*. (2nd. ed.). Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1995.

As the radicalism of various political groups in the name of Islam intensifies in the Middle East, the interest in this religion in the West, especially the United States, is also similarly on the rise. However, this American preoccupation has largely remained in a state of flux, leaving those of us who are acutely interested in the Middle East but who are not a part of the official community wondering what sort of policies Washington would produce in dealing with the Islamic resurgence in the Middle East. As one studies the record of four US presidents starting with Jimmy Carter, one is struck by a pervasive sense of confusion and frustration related to both Islam and the Middle East in the United States.

President Carter was the first victim of the frenzy and fury of the Islamic revolution in Iran, when all his attempts to secure the release of the American hostages failed to bear fruit during his term. President Ronald Reagan's tenure witnessed the slaughter of 241 US Marines in Lebanon in 1983. His "teflon presidency" almost lost its teflon effect in the Iran-Contra fiasco. During the Reagan presidency, the United States also faced its major foreign policy setback in Lebanon related to the confluence of the presence of the Palestinian forces, the Syrian occupation, and the Israeli invasion of that country. President George Bush continued to experience similar frustrations related to the American hostages that were held by the radical Islamists in Lebanon. His DESERT STORM victory over Saddam's forces was an aberration in America's dealing with the post-Iranian revolution Middle East, where Islamist forces remained a major source of challenge to America.¹

One theme that recurs within official circles regarding the activities of radical Islamic forces is that they are against America's interests. The immediate question that arises, then, is whether those radical groups are presenting the real face of Islam. Another related question is whether Islam is against the United States or the West at large. These are very complicated questions, and cannot be answered by offering simple and straightforward explanations. Obviously, one has to study Islam as a religion and as a major political force characteristics that make it unique compared to Judaism and Christianity and develop a historical overview of Islamic resurgence since the days of the Prophet Mohammad.

Hriar Dekmejian's book *Islam in Revolution* is one such source. The main contribution of this author to the exploding literature on Islam is his portrayal of the Islamic movement in a cyclical pattern. Emphasizing the "regenerative capacity of Islam" over a period of fourteen centuries, the author notes that "[e]ach phase of decline would trigger a revivalist response a movement back to Islamic roots led by charismatic individuals."

The first of the book's three parts is an elaborate discussion of what Dekmejian labels Islamic "fundamentalism" and is particularly useful for its broad-stroke type of explanations of the Islamic resurgence. In part two, he discusses six case studies covering the Arabian Peninsula and the Fertile Crescent Egypt, Syria, Iraq, Saudi Arabia, the Gulf sheikdoms, and Lebanon. The "New Frontiers of Islam" are covered by the author in part three, which includes chapters on another visit to Egypt, the Sudan, Libya, Yemen, Jordan, Israel, the West Bank, Gaza, Tunisia, Algeria and Morocco.

One interesting discussion in this study is the classical tension within all Muslim societies about modernization vs. Westernization. Obviously, there are acute needs for bringing about modernization in all walks of life. However, when one talks about modernization, one has to be highly conscious of the values that accompany this phenomenon. Modernization is a Western notion that not only originated in the West, but also reached its peak there. When Muslim countries want to introduce modernization, they have to be acutely aware of the Western values that ineluctably follow it. A number of Islamic groups though not all responded by advocating either a selective introduction of modernization, or its rejection because it clashes with some of the most basic Islamic values.² For instance, the education of women has been implemented for years even by some of the most conservative Islamic countries like Saudi Arabia. However, such a policy has not resulted in the mixing of sexes in workplaces in *all* Muslim societies. Most Muslim scholars have not spent any time focusing on the intricate issue of value conflict that is so inextricably linked with modernization. When one reads the writings of the modernists, one is struck by their preoccupation with the notion of emulating the West. Even some major secular ideologies failed to deal with the value conflict that modernization-Westernization will bring about (and has brought about) in the Middle East. Dekmejian correctly notes that "[w]ith the exception of Nasserism and Ba'athism, there were no conscious attempts by political elites to achieve a synthesis of Western, socialist, and nativist theories that would suit the developmental needs and cultural ethos of Arab society." However, even these ideologies, since they proceed from the premise that modernization is good for the Arab world, paid no attention to value conflict.

Dekmejian's discussion of the psyche of the *Muta'assib* (i.e., the fanatic or "radical fundamentalist") and the "Islamist ideology" are quite interesting. Recognizing the speculative nature of developing a personality profile of a "true believer," the author presents a number of characteristics of a *Muta'assib*. Some noteworthy ones are alienation, dogmatism, activism-aggressiveness, authoritarianism and conspiratorial outlook. Dekmejian's discussion of the Islamist ideology is significant because it comes close to pinning down the essence of the Islamic revolution in the Arab (and Muslim) world. Islamic ideology comprises, according to him, *din wa dawlah* (i.e., faith and state), *Quran* and *Sunnah* (i.e., the traditions of the Prophet), *Sirat al-Mustaqim* (i.e., the "straight path"), the sixth pillar (i.e., the consideration of *Jihad* by some groups as the sixth pillar of Islam), the establishment of *al-Hakimiyyah* (i.e., God's sovereignty or Islamic government), *al-adalah al-Ijrimatyyah* (i.e., the collective sense of social justice), legitimate rulership *a la* the rule of the Prophet and of the "rightly guided ones," "puritanical society" (based on the *Salafiyah* maxims) and "unity of theory and practice" (i.e., "[the Islamic] ideology should be translated into a coherent program of action").

It should be noted that any discussion of the Islamist ideology is complicated by the fact that even the analysis of the aforementioned variables leaves ample room for strict (i.e., literal) or liberal interpretations. For instance, when one considers the sixth pillar (i.e., *Jihad*), its strict interpretation by one group is likely to allow for a cataclysmic political change within their society, while its liberal interpretation would leave ample room for political persuasion, dialogue, and compromise between Islamist groups and the ruling elites within a country. Similarly, the establishment of a puritanical government in one country leaves little room for a large dose of modernization in that country as a result of a strict implementation of the *shariah* and an obvious rejection of Westernization and even modernization.

The last part of this book is in need of a brief introduction justifying the separate treatment of countries herein. My only guess is that Dekmejian wanted to treat these cases as the most recent examples of the Islamic resurgence. However, in revisiting Egypt in this section, he, in my estimation, wanted to bring his analysis of that country done in an earlier chapter up to date.

The concluding chapter, "The Islamist Venture," is decidedly the best part of this study. The author makes a number of very crucial points to which both students of the Middle East and the makers of US foreign policy ought to be paying close attention. The "symbiotic relationship between Islamism and state power" in Sudan must be closely watched because of the predominantly Sunni nature of the Sudanese polity. If or when Algeria were to undergo a power transition from military rule to rule by the Islamic Salvation Front (FIS), the Sudanese model might become a source of emulation. If such a reality were to materialize, Dekmejian's following observation must be a source of concern for everyone who is hoping for a nurturing of democratic pluralism in the Arab world:

When Islamists achieve power through electoral or coercive means, they would then impose their own ideological vision of a just and pious society by using the instrumentalities of the state, while being bound by the *shariah*. Such monopoly of state by leaders who aspire to rule by the legitimacy of divine law represents an awesome burden and responsibility even for the most virtuous of rulers. In such a state the democratic pluralism that permitted the Islamists' rise to power is not likely to remain in effect.

Would Islam serve as a vehicle for bringing about a revolutionary change in the Middle East? This is a question that is increasingly nagging the Washington decision makers, and for that matter, the ruling elites of all major Western industrial states. Dekmejian rightly gives the answer to this question in the affirmative. He does not see a high probability for the "replication" of the Iranian revolution in the predominantly Sunni Arab world, however. One of the main reasons for his argument is a general lack of "corporate cohesion" and "hierarchical organizational networks" among the Sunni clerical class. But the Sudanese example continues to worry the West. Another major reason why political moderation of the Islamist groups in various Arab politics might not last is the authoritarian (read ruthless) response of the ruling regimes. Dekmejian frequently makes

a point of this reality in this book. The growing spirals of violence in Egypt and Algeria underscore this reality quite regularly, vividly and forebodingly. The best thing going for the authoritarian rulers of the Arab states, writes the author, is that "the Islamist movement today remains in a fractionalized state in Arab countries." Even though this vicious cycle of action-reaction action being demands for political reform or change on the part of the Islamist groups; and reaction being the suppression of these groups, often ruthlessly, by the ruling elites is in favor of the latter in the short run. The long-term implication of these activities will lead ineluctably to political instability or even anarchy e.g., Algeria. Dekmejian's observation in the closing pages of this book should be heeded by all those who wish to avoid political instability in the Middle East. He notes:

Indeed, Islamist activism will persist as long as crisis conditions persist and groups of 'earnest believers' are prepared to sacrifice their lives 'in the path of God' to establish God's sovereignty on earth. Thus the Western and Marxist practice of approaching the fundamentalist phenomenon from a purely socioeconomic perspective can provide at best only partial answers. The total faith and absolute commitment of men like Banna, Quth, Baqir al Sadr, and Khomeini to the Islamist ideal *cannot be explained simply by their class origins*. (emphasis added)

One should return to the two important questions raised in the beginning pages of this essay. That is, whether the radical Islamists present the real face of Islam, and whether Islam is against the United States or the West at large. Even though Dekmejian's book does not answer these important questions directly, a careful reading of it leaves one with little doubt that radical forces represent only one interpretation of a multitude of Islamic perspectives regarding the United States and the West. However, when one views the activities of the Islamist groups of all coloration, one should be quite clear that the type of order these groups, especially the radical ones, are intent on establishing in their respective societies does not allow for the continuation of much influence, much less presence of the United States in their region. In this sense, the Islamic revolution is very much in competition with the US strategic presence in the Middle East.

In summary, this is a very well-written book. I would have preferred to see Dekmejian make a more detailed historical analysis to elaborate on his various points related to the contemporary politico-social aspects of the Islamist revolution, since he appears to be well grounded in history. My only criticism is of his constant use of the phrase "fundamentalism," which is also a part of the subtitle of this book. In my judgment, this is such a pejorative and non-analytical phrase that it tends to distract serious and knowledgeable students of Islam. Dekmejian knows better than to use this phrase in his otherwise very thoughtful book.

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Endnotes

1. For an interesting analysis of America's treatment of Islamic forces, see Benjamin Gordon, "Islam Washington's New Dilemma," *The Middle East Quarterly*, (March 1996), pp. 43-52.

2. These two ideas are articulated by the so-called modernists and traditionalists. For an excellent treatment of these schools of thought, see Albert Hourani, *A History of the Arab Peoples* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991); Leonard Binder, *Islamic Liberalism* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1988); and Majid Khadduri, *Political Trends in the Arab World: The Role of Ideas and Ideals in Politics* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1970).