

Review: Islam and the Arab Awakening | CultureMob

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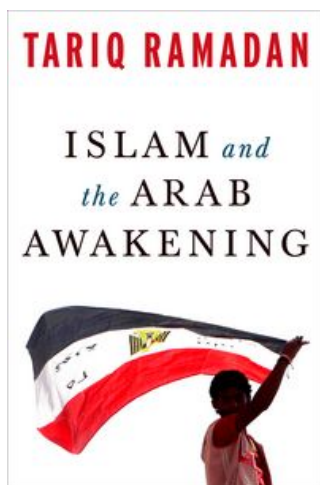
Review: Islam and the Arab Awakening

by Gemma Alexander | 06/19/12 |

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Tariq Ramadan is a Professor of Islamic Studies at Oxford University, and the Director of the Center for Islamic Legislation and Ethics in Doha, Qatar. He is not an uncontroversial figure, particularly in the U.S., where nothing related to Islam is without controversy, but he is without a doubt well-informed on issues relating to modern Islam and its relationship to Western culture. His new book, *Islam and the Arab Awakening*, attempts to make sense of the uprisings that began in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) in late 2010.

He assumes a general familiarity with the significant events and figures involved. Rather than a history, Ramadan is providing a country-by-country analysis of the factors that influenced the events of the Arab Spring. He writes from a position in the middle, as a scholar of the Qur'an who understands and supports Islam, and as a European member of civil society. He urges "us" and "them" to set aside idealist visions and xenophobic conspiracy theories in order to understand that the uprisings in MENA are both more powerful and more fragile than the interpretation of events given by either "side." To the Western reader who wants to believe in a spontaneous resistance to religious dictatorship in order to adopt the rational, democratic ideals of the West, he provides ample evidence that young leaders of the uprisings had received support and training from Western powers for half a decade before the first tweet was sent in the "Twitter Revolution." To the wary Muslim conspiracy theorist, he provides ample evidence that Western powers were not in control of events during 2011 and were in fact often surprised by the way things unfolded.

Drawing from a non-literal interpretation of the Qur'an, centuries of Islamic legal tradition, and the historical foundations of the Islamist movement, Ramadan provides a surprisingly convincing argument against secularism as prerequisite establishing stable democracies in the Muslim-majority nations. Claiming that the nations of MENA are hobbled by the dichotomous world view that pits fundamentalist Islam against Western secularism, he suggests that those striving for democracy

ask the questions that will make it possible for them, should they so decide, to define themselves as contemporary and autonomous Muslim subjects.

Islam and the Arab Awakening envisions a new form of democracy divorced from the abuses of both colonialism and literalist Islam, instead rooted in the particular cultural genius of Muslim history and legal traditions. He refuses to take sides with any of the simplistic, soundbite-friendly views of current events provided by CNN and Al Jazeera. Ramadan serves biting criticism to MENA dictators, petro-monarchies, and Western democracies alike. He argues forcefully that Western powers, particularly the U.S. and France, would like to have been and continue to try to be in control of events in the Middle East. Together with his claim that there may be a place for shari'a in a modern, civil, Muslim-majority nation, it is easy to see why Ramadan's views have created controversy.

Yet on every page Ramadan makes a plea for dispassionate analysis and careful observation over dogmatic assertions and emotional reactions. An open-minded reader of his arguments must agree that democracy may indeed be safer in the hands of a government based on the moral and ethical values of the common Muslim people than driven by unfettered market forces that favor multinational corporations, as in the West.

Ramadan devotes considerable space to examining the role of external forces such as the U.S. and France, as well as the big corporations, in each nation as the uprisings progressed. By highlighting the way the inconsistencies in their response to uprisings in different nations correspond to the geography of oil reserves, he clearly demonstrates that these organizations are far more concerned with protecting their own economic interests than they are with the development of democracy. He is less clear in his views of the many groups that are currently jockeying for power in the MENA countries, especially as so many of them still have poorly defined agendas.

Whether you agree with Ramadan's interpretation of events or vision for the future of the Muslim-majority nations, *Islam and the Arab Awakening*, is a thoughtful and nuanced examination of the events others have termed the "Arab Spring." There is no question that Ramadan supports the rule of law, freedom of religion, and the right of self-determination for all peoples. In his own words

...there is everything to be gained from identifying the spaces and the historical opportunities that peoples can grasp in order to turn the meaning of history to their advantage, to seize control of that which their would-be masters cannot control at the heart of the historical dynamic.

If you are looking for a straightforward history, or want simple answers to complex problems, this book is not for you. But if you are trying to understand the issues facing the Muslim-majority nations today, *Islam and the Arab Awakening* is a good place to start.

Islam and the Arab Awakening by Tariq Ramadan will be available in hardback from Oxford University Press in September 2012 for \$27.95.

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