

Book Reviews

Euben, Roxanne L. and Muhammad Qasim Zaman, eds.
*Princeton Readings in Islamist Thought: Texts and Contexts
from al-Banna to Bin Laden*. Princeton: Princeton University
Press, 2009.

For many years now, scholarship on Islamic political thought has been praised for its timeliness. While some might consider the continued use of this trope clichéd, current events make it difficult to abandon altogether. The recent ten-year anniversary of the attacks of September 11, 2001, the demise of Osama bin Laden, and the growing unrest of the so-called “Arab Spring” remind us—if indeed we have ever forgotten—that certain forms of Islamic political thought have reconfigured “the twenty-first century geopolitical landscape in unprecedented ways” (p. 460). We are then justified in our continued curiosity about this thought and the ways it might motivate violent resistance to the institutions and values many of us hold dear.

Yet, great interest is often a catalyst for discourse that is heavy on polemic and short on substance. Over the previous ten years, much has been written about tensions between “Islam” and the “West” that oversimplifies and obfuscates. This has left many deeply confused about various strands of contemporary Islamic political thought and their relation to one another. Much to their credit, Roxanne L. Euben and Muhammad Qasim Zaman have edited a volume that will reduce, rather than perpetuate, this confusion. They have, for the most part, succeeded in producing a text that functions as “an implicit corrective to . . . reductionist generalizations . . . [and] as an explicit guide through the haze of polemic, fear, and confusion swirling around the subject of Islamism in the early twenty-first century” (p. 3).

At first glance, this book appears to be a straightforward collection of primary source material drawn from a veritable “Who’s Who” of contemporary Islamic extremists. While this sort of collection would be valuable in its own right, Euben and Zaman have given us something far more significant. As their subtitle suggests, this volume includes both texts *and* contexts, and it is the latter that mark its unique contribution. Along with an extensive essay at the beginning of the book, the editors have included 6-10 page introductions for each of the eighteen chapters. Because these chapters are themselves no more than 15-20 pages of primary source material, the editor-provided “context” makes up at least one third of this 475-page volume.

The initial essay is particularly well-crafted, substantial enough to be recommended on its own to those who want to learn more about the diversity of contemporary Islamic political thought and the complicated relationships between its various competing and overlapping strands. The primary goal of

this essay is to do that which most popular discourse on these issues fails to do: stipulate a definition of “Islamism” that has enough content to distinguish it from related movements, while remaining porous enough to leave room for significant amounts of diversity. In stipulating this definition, Euben and Zaman make three smaller arguments.

First, they contend that Islamism should be defined carefully so as to distinguish it from other strands of Islamic political thought, as well as popular terms like “Islamic extremism,” “political Islam,” “fundamentalism,” “jihadism,” and “Islamic terrorism” (pp. 3-4). According to their refined definition, Islamism refers to contemporary movements that “attempt to return to the scriptural foundations of the Muslim community” with the aim of “restoring the primacy of the norms derived from these foundational texts to collective life” in an “explicitly and intentionally political” manner (p. 4). In this sense, then, Islamism is distinguished from movements that do not limit religious authority to the scriptural foundations of the Muslim community alone, that are not primarily interested in restoring Islamic norms to collective life, and that are not explicitly and intentionally political. These include, but are not limited to, the traditionally authoritative class of Muslim religious scholars (*ulama*), the relatively recent movement of Muslim “fundamentalists” who seek to return to the beliefs and practices of the pious forebears, or *al-salaf al-salih* (Salafism), various forms of Islamic mysticism (Sufism), and the movements of Muslim modernists seeking to reform the epistemic foundations of their tradition.

At the same time, Euben and Zaman argue that Islamism should not be distinguished so sharply from these movements as to ignore their historical and ideological affinities. They argue, for example, that the “Salafi orientation is an important part of the genealogy of both modernism and Islamism” insofar as “Salafis [also] insist on deriving their norms directly from the Islamic foundational texts . . . unmediated by the medieval schools of law” foundational to the discourse of the *ulama* (p. 19). Similarly, many of the prominent Islamists excerpted in the text have what they refer to as an “ambivalent” relationship with both Sufism and the clerical establishment (indeed, many are themselves members of that very establishment). Thus, what seems to set Islamism apart is the unique way themes from each of these movements are woven together, along with a seemingly unwavering commitment to “the public implementation of the *shari’a* [Islamic law]” through the “agency of the state” (p. 11).

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, the editors argue that this definition of Islamism leaves room for diversity on three important issues about which popular discourse assumes Islamists are in agreement. More specifically, Euben and Zaman hope to show that Islamists hold a range of positions on the relationship between Islam and democracy, the role of women within the movement, and the permissibility of using violence to achieve one’s goals (p. 1). That is to say, contrary to popular belief, the “Islamist movement cannot simply be characterized as violent, antidemocratic, and oppressive of women” (p. 29). Instead, “the chapters in this volume suggest

that what makes Islamist politics distinctive (if not *sui generis*) is the claim to recuperate an ‘authentic Islam’ comprised of self-evident truths purged of alien and corrupting influences, along with an insistence on remaking the foundations of the state in its image” (p. 27).

The remainder of the book is designed to reinforce this argument. Both the selection of texts and their organization serve to illustrate the “regional breadth, gender dynamics, and political, theoretical, and theological complexity” of contemporary Islamism (p. 1). Of the eighteen chapters, two excerpted texts were written by women, four cover works by Shia Islamists, and at least eight were written by formally educated *ulama*. Six of the thinkers they selected are Egyptian, but Afghanistan, India, Iran, Iraq, Lebanon, Morocco, Pakistan, Palestine, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the Sudan are also represented. Rather than organizing these excerpts chronologically or geographically, Euben and Zaman choose to group them by theme “to bring into view the web of concerns animating Islamists, as well as the polyvalent conversations across history and culture in which they participate” (p. 2).

In order to achieve this goal, the book is divided into five parts. The first, entitled “Islamism: An Emergent Worldview,” introduces the reader to the works of Hasan al-Banna, Sayyid Abul a’la-Mawdudi, Sayyid Abul-Hasan Ali Nadwi, and Sayyid Qutb. Part II, “Remaking the Islamic State,” excerpts texts of Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, Muhammad Baqir al-Sadr, Hasan al-Turabi, and Yusuf al-Qaradawi about the nature of the Islamic state and the place of democracy therein. Part III addresses the theme of gender in Islamism, and includes portions of texts from two female Islamists, Zaynab al-Ghazali and Nadia Yassine, as well as the Iranian cleric Murtaza Mutahhari. “Violence, Action, and Jihad” is covered in Part IV, with excerpts from the works of Muhammad Abd al-Salam Faraj, Umar Abd al-Rahman, Muhammad Hussein Fadlallah, Hamas, and the Taliban. The volume ends with a discussion of “Globalized Jihad” as evidenced by the statements of Osama bin Laden and the final instructions of Muhammad Ata al-Sayyid.

As noted above, Euben and Zaman ought to be praised for their willingness to introduce their readers to contemporary Islamic political thought in all of its complexity. Moreover, the collection of texts they have assembled in this volume should be required reading for all who hope to understand the historical and ideological lineage of contemporary Muslim political unrest. Nevertheless, the volume is not without its weaknesses. Indeed, it is precisely its ambition—“to make visible the heterogeneity of Islamist arguments and ideas”—that creates unresolved difficulties, leaving the work vulnerable to critique (p. 5). Euben and Zaman hope that a Wittgensteinian definition of ‘Islamism,’ which stipulates “family resemblances” rather than fixed attributes, will reinforce their argument about its heterogeneity. Yet, the imprecision of their definition leads to problematic distinctions, a questionable selection of sources, and a decidedly incoherent “thematic” organization.

The editors are aware that their initial definition of ‘Islamism’ is vague, but hope that its complexity will be brought into “sharp relief by way

of contrast with several other Muslim orientations” (p. 5). I have already noted that the chosen points of contrast with Islamism include the orientations of Muslim modernists, *ulama*, Salafis, and Sufis. Yet, the contrasts that are drawn do more to obscure than clarify their preliminary definition; in all four cases, we learn that there are many Islamists who actually *embrace* these orientations, undermining the significance of the initial contrast. Although Euben and Zaman introduce these contradictions intentionally, in order to illustrate the “difficulty of distinguishing between Islamism and other religious, intellectual, and political trends in terms of neat characterizations, of grand, translocal generalizations,” they leave the uninitiated reader genuinely confused about even the most basic features of the phenomena about which they are reading (p. 27). While their resistance to “neat categories” (which I take to mean non-overlapping categories) and “grand generalizations” is to be applauded, I can think of no reason why this resistance should have prevented them from providing a carefully delineated stipulative definition in this case.

The closest they come to doing so is when they argue that “*More than anything else*, Islamists seek to implement Islamic law through the agency of the state” (p. 11, emphasis mine). Following through on this definition, they go on to argue that “it is only when the Salafis . . . begin striving . . . for a new *religio-political order* that they can be said to join the ranks of the Islamists” (p. 22, emphasis mine). Yet, even here, with the one feature that defines Islamism “more than anything else,” Euben and Zaman are willing to muddy the waters. This is most evident in their selection of texts, many of which include works by Muslims who have explicitly been opposed to movements that seek to impose *sharia* via the enforcement mechanisms of the state. Thus, for example, “Islamists” like Sayyid Abul-Hasan Ali Nadwi in India and Muhammad Hussein Fadlallah in Lebanon have actually defended political systems that make room for the pluralistic religious communities of those two countries (pp. 109, 391). Similarly, at least two of the Islamists excerpted in the section on Islamism and gender seem to have more interest in *da’wa* (evangelism) at the *societal* level than in promoting the legal institutions necessary for a properly functioning Islamic *state* (pp. 275-315).

Thus, in their attempt to leave their definition of Islamism “porous,” the editors seem to have stripped it of any discernible structure. Though their introduction claims that their definition provides “enough grounds to broadly distinguish [Islamists] from other activists, intellectuals, and orientations in the Muslim public sphere,” one would be hard pressed to name these grounds after completing the volume in its entirety (p. 27). Although part of the problem here is theoretical, it is equally a practical difficulty. Given that the primary goal of this volume is to highlight the diversity of Islamists on a number of core issues (democracy, gender, and violence), Euben and Zaman often let those concerns govern their selections, sacrificing definitional consistency in the process. Had they been more restrictive in their definition, they may have found it difficult to secure sufficiently complex texts on these subjects. Similarly, their desire to highlight the extent to which Islamism cuts

across regional, sectarian, and gendered lines make it difficult for them to avoid a collection of theoretically disjointed texts.

These problems also manifest themselves in the organization of the material. While there is nothing intrinsically problematic about the “thematic” structure of the book, the selection of themes, and the texts that would be identified with each, is curious. Despite their explicit disavowal of chronological organization, the editors devote the first section of the book to the “Emergent Worldview” of Islamism. As might be expected from such a title, the works of the *earliest*, and arguably most influential, Islamists are included here. Similarly, the final section, “Globalizing Jihad,” is nothing more than a unit devoted to the most *recent* manifestation of Islamism in the works of al-Qaeda. The primary problem with these explicitly chronological “themes” is that they make the placement of texts in the *actual* thematic sections seem more significant than they actually are.

While it is immediately clear why the works of Hasan al-Banna are included in the first section, the placement of Qaradawi in the section on the “Islamic State” and Fadlallah in the section on “Violence, Action, and Jihad” is anything but self-evident. Indeed, had the editors selected different texts from each thinker, their placement could easily have been switched without altering the structure of the book. Yet, to the average reader who is unfamiliar with either Qaradawi or Fadlallah, the current organization suggests that the former is best known for his work on the Islamic democracy and the latter for his arguments about Islamic terror. Perhaps more importantly, similar sorts of misunderstandings are bound to arise with respect to *every* thinker excerpted in these thematic sections, for many of the same reasons.

Although Euben and Zaman never claim that their book would provide a comprehensive introduction to each of the thinkers excerpted in their volume, a slightly different organization could have avoided some of these problems. Given their stated goal of highlighting diversity, their move toward a thematic organization makes sense. Yet, the volume would have been far more successful had they selected fewer thinkers and included excerpts from the work of each on all of the chosen themes. This could have been organized so that each thinker would reappear in every thematic chapter, or so that each theme would reappear in chapters devoted to individual thinkers. Either way, such an approach would have helped readers better understand the range of issues individual Islamists have addressed, as well as the complex relationship *between* these issues within unified bodies of thought.

Most importantly, however, this simple shift in organizational structure might have prevented many of the theoretical problems outlined above. As it is currently organized, many of the most important (and prolific) Islamists are included within the first and last sections; this then encourages the editors to “reach” for additional texts to make their case for diversity on the issues of democracy, gender, and violence. The problem with this reaching is that it often leads them to make room for thinkers and texts that break the mold of their “preliminary” definition of Islamism. If, on the other hand, they

had limited themselves to a small number of particularly significant thinkers, they could have produced a volume that highlighted the diversity of Islamist positions on these issues without undermining the very coherence of the category.

Despite these problems, this volume continues to warrant a strong recommendation. Whether one considers their definition of Islamism useful, or their selection and organization of the primary sources coherent, Euben and Zaman have produced an indispensable collection of texts. Scholars will be thrilled to discover that many of their most cherished sources have been distilled and compiled into a singular reference book; teachers will find a text that is both comprehensive and flexible enough to be used in numerous courses; and students of all ages will be thankful for a volume that makes many of these primary sources accessible for the first time.

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