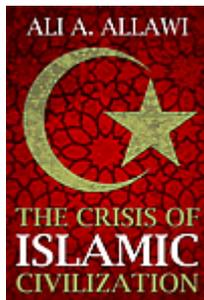


BOOK REVIEW

The Crisis of Islamic Civilization by **Ali A Allawi**

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Reviewed by Spengler

A grim assessment of Islam's survival prospects concludes this book-length essay by a prominent Iraqi politician who recently served as minister of defense and finance in the American-backed Iraqi government. Unless Muslims can restore Islam as a "complete way of life" embracing the public as well as the private sphere,

The much heralded Islamic "awakening" of recent times will not be a prelude to the rebirth of an Islamic civilization; it will be another episode in its decline. The revolt of Islam becomes instead the final act of the end of a civilization.

These are the last words of Ali W Allawi's book and might serve

as Islam's epitaph, for the restoration of the Islamic civilization he proposes seems fanciful. Allawi dismisses the notion that Islam might evolve into a personal religion of private conscience. Islam, he insists, offers an all-or-nothing proposition. Muslims either will "live an outer life which is an expression of their innermost faith" and "reclaim those parts of their public spaces which have been conceded to other world views over the past centuries", or "the dominant civilizational order" will "fatally undermine whatever is left of Muslims' basic identity and autonomy".

He rejects the "frantic hyper-modernity only scantily garbed in Islamic idioms" that characterizes the Western-looking Gulf states, but reserves even greater disdain for

the "radical Islamists" who "suffer from a different conceit, namely that, by picking and choosing from the menu of change, a happy compromise between Islam and what is acceptable from modernity can be fashioned".

Allawi's book provides an antidote for the superficial, condescending sort of reform-mongering that too often characterizes Western discussions of Islam. The previous administration in Washington, for example, seemed to think that simply by appropriating the democratic norms of the West, Muslim countries could join the modern world. But the differences between Islam and the Judeo-Christian West run far deeper than the political surface, Allawi argues, and they begin with a radically different view of the individual, or more precisely, the view that the individual human being really does not exist to begin with.

"Islam departs from the mainstream of modern constructs of the individual and the group," Allawi observes. The notion of a human individual is absent from Islamic thinking and impossible to describe in the Arabic language, he argues. Only God has individuality and uniqueness; the individual is merely an instrument, as it were. Many Western readers will skim uncomprehending over this material, and thus miss the radical thrust of Allawi's argument. Western political scientists do not learn theology, whereas Allawi argues that in the Islamic world, politics is theology. Even if it is a bit technical, Allawi's discussion is worth quoting at length:

In classic Islamic doctrine, the problem of the nature of the individual as an autonomous entity endowed with free will simply does not arise outside of the context of the individual's ultimate dependence on God. The Arabic word for "individual" - al-fard - does not have the commonly understood implication of a purposeful being, imbued with the power of rational choice. Rather, the term carries the connotation of singularity, aloofness or solitariness. The power of choice and will granted to the individual is more to do with the fact of acquiring these from God, at the point of a specific action or decision - the so-called iktisab - rather than the powers themselves which are not innate to natural freedoms or rights. Al-fard is usually applied as one of the attributes of supreme being, in the sense of an inimitable uniqueness. It is usually grouped with others of God's attributes (such as in the formula al-Wahid, al-Ahad, al-Fard, al-Samad: The One in essence, state and being, and the everlasting), to establish the absolute transcendence of the divine essence. Man is simply unable to acquire any of these essential attributes.

"Therefore," concludes Allawi, "to claim the right and the possibility of autonomous action without reference to the source of these in God is an affront." This is a remarkably clear formulation of a central premise of Islam, worth the price of the book alone, for it makes clear why individuality in the Western sense is inconceivable within Islam: an absolutely transcendent God leaves no room at all for the individual. The individual acquires from God whatever appearance of individuality he might have, but has no autonomy, in sharp contrast to the Western notion. "The entire edifice of individual rights derived from the natural state of the individual or through a secular ethical or political theory is alien to the structure of Islamic reasoning. The individual has a reality, but this is contingent upon a greater reality."

It is a commonplace to compare Islamic theocracy to the totalitarian regimes of the 20th century. That has been the approach of such critics as Daniel Pipes and Paul

Berman, among others. But Islam is much older than modern totalitarian forms, and Allawi, like Tariq Ramadan and other modern Islamic philosophers, offers a persuasive case that the "totalitarian" character of Islamic society requires no emulation of European models, but stems directly from Islam itself.

Allawi's explanation of why the individual disappears into the Islamic whole bears comparison to Franz Rosenzweig's account of Islam as a pagan parody of revealed religion. Analytically, Allawi's explanation of the mere contingency of the individual is identical to Rosenzweig's; they differ only whether they think this is a good thing or a bad thing. In a September 2007 essay in *First Things*, I quoted Rosenzweig's description of how pagan society dissolves the individual into a mere instrument of race or state:

People, State, and whatever else the societies of antiquity may have been are lion's caves before which one sees the tracks of the Individual entering, but not leaving. In fact, the individual human stands before society as a whole: he knows that he is only a part. These wholes, with respect to which he is only a part, these species, of which he is only a representative example, have absolute power over his ethical life, although they as such are hardly absolute, but are in fact themselves only examples of the species "State" or "People". For the isolated individual, his society is the society ...

In the thoroughly organized State, the State and the individual do not stand in the relation of a whole to a part. Instead, the state is the All, from which the power flows through the limbs of the individual. Everyone has his determined place, and, to the extent that he fulfills it, belongs to the All of the State ...

The individual of antiquity does not lose himself in society in order to find himself, but rather in order to construct it; he himself disappears. The well-known difference between the ancient and all modern concepts of democracy rightly arise from this. It is clear from this why antiquity never developed the concept of representative democracy. Only a body can have organs; a building has only parts.

Following Rosenzweig, perhaps we should look backward to the integralism of ancient pagan society to make sense of Islam's need to embrace every aspect of public and private life, rather than forward to the totalitarian political movements of the 20th century for a comparison. Islamic civilization is not a caricature of modern totalitarian political movements; on the contrary, totalitarian movements are neo-pagan, and like all pagan political forms dissolve the individual into a mere extension of the polity.

Allawi's criticisms of reformers and Islamists are crystal-clear. Murkier, though, is what he proposes in their place. The restoration of an all-embracing Islamic society is an idea whose time already has come and gone in Iran, where the Shi'ite current of Islam that Allawi professes created an Islamic Republic. The result is a kleptocracy that turns upwardly mobile young women into prostitutes for the political class. I have documented the explosion of social problems in Iran in recent essays, including *Sex, drugs and Islam* (*Asia Times Online*, February, 23, 2009) and *Worst of times for Iran* (*Asia Times Online*, June 24, 2008).

The fastest decline in birth rates every recorded has occurred in Iran during the past generation, an unmistakable measure of moral decline. Of all this, Allawi says nothing. To be sure, to refer all of Allawi's hopes for a new Islamic theocracy to the horrible example of Iran is not quite fair to his argument, for what he wants is nothing less than a globalized Islam, rather than one whittled into nation-states.

Even so, the decay of Shi'ite theocracy in Iran requires some comment. Apart from a whimsical aside about the "Platonist" character of the Iranian state, Allawi has nothing to say about its pathologies. His index contains nine references to corruption, including numerous denunciations of the Gulf states and a characterization of Algeria as "a corrupt and brutal kleptocracy". His silence about Iran speaks volumes.

Rather, Allawi dismisses the nation-state as a Western construct that does not serve the requirements of Islam. He cites a 2005 Pew Research Center survey showing that "large majorities of Muslims in countries as diverse as Pakistan (79%), Morocco (70%) and Jordan (63%) viewed themselves as Muslims rather than citizens of their nation-states.

Even in countries such as Turkey with its long secular history as a nation-state, 43% viewed themselves as Muslims in the first place, although 29% saw themselves as citizens of the nation-state. But where does this desire lead? Not to a Muslim super-state in the form of a revived caliphate, despite the fact that "the existence of a caliphate has been integral to the idea of Islamic civilization. ... However, the reality is such that the caliphate, at least in its historical form, is unlikely to be resuscitated. The current division of the Muslim world into nation-states, republics and monarchies, democracies and autocracies, is too far advanced to assume that they could ever be regrouped within a single empire or super-state inspired by religion."

Although Allawi does not hold out much hope for the political unification of the Muslim world, he toys with the idea of a Shi'ite bloc centered in Iran:

The Shi'ite world, also a block of nearly 200 million Muslims, is one that cuts across ethnic and cultural lines. Shi'itism will continue to be colored by its status as the national religion of Iran and by the powerful role of Iranian ayatollahs. But it will have to contend with the possibility of a reinvigorated and independent hierarchy emerging from the upheaval in Iraq. A combination of a territorial Shi'ite hierarchy, focused on a particular country but with grand ayatollahs hailing from different parts of the world (a phenomenon which seems to be emerging in Iraq) may co-exist with a "national" Shi'ite authority, as in Lebanon.

Although Allawi does not spell it out, the reader is left with the impression that his hopes for Islamic civilization are centered in his own Shi'ite world. About the means by which a Shi'ite bloc might consolidate its influence, such the importance of a future Iranian nuclear umbrella for the irregular military and terrorist units that the Islamic Republic employs to extend its influence, Allawi, again, says nothing.

There is not a word about the most contentious issue dividing the West and the Muslim world, namely the suspected Iranian nuclear weapons program. That is a major weakness, for he wants to portray the revival of Islamic civilization as a project

that in no way threatens the West. The West, however, does perceive a threat in the form of nuclear proliferation, and it seems incongruous to speak of a Shi'ite bloc without addressing this issue.

Allawi's failure to mention the issue of nuclear proliferation raises a larger question: to whom is this book addressed? Perhaps one cannot really address a global Islamic audience that variously reads Arabic, Farsi, Turkish, Punjabi, Urdu and Malay except in English, and in the form of a polemic directed against the Western view of Islam.

If Allawi's book really is addressed to Muslims, and Westerners are reading it over their shoulders, it seems reasonable to ask why the West should want his project to succeed. If Islamic civilization cannot prevail except by dissolving the individual into a collective, why should the West want to see anything but the last of it?

The Crisis of Islamic Civilization by Ali A Allawi (Yale University Press: New Haven, 2009). ISBN-10: 0300139314. Price US\$27.50, 304 pages. "Spengler" is channeled by David P Goldman, associate editor of First Things (www.firstthings.com).