

# Prospect

## Last gasp for global Islam

Robin Yassin-Kassab

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Islam's global revival is a hollow shell—and the Muslim world must heed Ali Allawi's devastating account of how its leaders are failing their people



**The Crisis of Islamic Civilization**

*By Ali A Allawi (Yale, £18.99)*

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The contemporary religious revival is a complex business. In the same period that Muslim societies, in their weakness, seem to have re-embraced Islam, America, in its strength, has re-embraced Christianity. Western Europe remains avowedly secular.

Despite the contradictions within the west, mainstream Orientalism holds that all cultures are developing towards the universal—or, more specifically, globalised—model of secular modernity and the market. According to this view, the Muslim world experiences backwardness to the extent that it resists secularisation. The *Crisis of Islamic Civilization*, a subtle and erudite book by former Iraqi minister Ali A Allawi, challenges this thesis. Surveying the Muslim world's social, economic and moral failures, and the terror espoused by certain Islamist groups, Allawi suggests the problem might not be too much Islam, but too little.

Islam is a civilisational framework that rests on the tripod of private ritual, public ethics and individual spiritual striving—and the legs of the tripod must balance each other. But, Allawi argues, the current Islamic “revival” is operating only in the field of religiosity: focusing on naked symbols and rules, proclaiming the superiority of Islam while adopting indiscriminately the technology, economics and cultural products of the west. It emphasises Sharia as a set of fixed punishments rather than as a framework of legislative principles. For the revivalists, the public sphere is too often reduced to the state—and their political project is simply to seize control of repressive state apparatuses.

The result is a discomfiting disjunction between inner and outer worlds, symbolised by contradictory Muslim landscapes: home interiors spotlessly clean, while the streets outside are strangled by plastic bags. For Allawi, the courtesy, hospitality and warmth still met with in the Muslim world are the mere remnants of Islamic civilisation, and the religious revival may be its last gasp.

So what happened? Allawi doesn't romanticise the Islamic past, yet he rejects the Arabcentric myth of continual decline since the Mongol destruction of the Abbasid empire in the 13th century. As he sees it, a dynamism and internal coherence—and a universalism that in the 14th century allowed Ibn Battuta, trained in Tangiers, to find work as a judge in the Maldives—lasted until the European penetration in the early 19th century. Even then, the first responses to western imperialism came on Islam's own terms, from leaders such as Chechnya's Imam Shamil or the Algerian Abd al Qadir, whose legitimacy derived from their ethical Sufism as much as from their championing of law. Abd al Qadir waged jihad against the invading French in the 1830s and 1840s, and later saved thousands of Christians from the mob in his Damascene exile.

After military defeat by colonial powers, the Sufi orders degenerated (Allawi concedes they were in many cases already mired in superstition), were co-opted by imperial powers and encouraged to ignore the problematic public realm. As a result, the tariqat—meaning the “way” or “path” and denoting the pursuit of spiritual truth via Islamic law—became irrelevant, and Muslims lost the heart of their tradition. Sadly, the process continues today, in the form of the tame and supposedly Sufi-oriented Quilliam Foundation, whose co-founder has opined on “the racist Arab psyche.”

Almost everywhere, Allawi maintains, Islam experienced a traumatic rupture rather than an evolution into modernity. Colonial powers and then westernised ruling classes dismantled the institutions of Islam, from seminaries to the Caliphate. The work ethic disappeared with the guilds connected to urban Sufi orders, leaving a corrupt marketplace and a culture of backstabbing. Kemalist Turkey not only substituted more “modern” Roman letters for Arabic script in the 1920s, but even criminalised reading Osmanli Turkish (contrast this with the self-consciously modern state of Israel, which re-established Hebrew script).

Allawi holds up Japan’s Meiji restoration of 1867-68 as a modernising response to external challenges that was achieved on the basis of Japan’s own cultural framework, and wishes Muslims had managed something similar. He points out that where Islam did evolve towards modernity in countries beyond western control, the results were encouraging. During the Iranian constitutional revolution of 1906-09, for example, Najaf-based ayatollahs promoted “the liberty of the general public from arbitrary and unaccountable government by force,” and described freedom as “a rational process and one of the pillars of the Islamic faith.” The Iranian parliament was established as a result. Despite the existence of Islamic concepts allowing for democracy (shura), freedom of speech (naseeha and ra’i) and social justice (’adl), however, voices such as those from Najaf have been exceptions to the rule of defeat and stagnation across the Muslim world.

In one of its most engaging sections, the book focuses on Islam’s urban crisis. The colonial separation of “old” and “new” cities epitomised the initial civilisational rupture of the 19th century—and post-colonial regimes have committed even greater vandalism since. The Wahhabi House of Saud has, for instance, demolished 95 per cent of historical buildings in the sacred cities of Mecca and Medina for fear of idolatry. And it has done so to make way for the true idols of the time: consumer outlets and gated accommodation. Meanwhile, Gulf city-states are characterised by what Allawi summarises as “rampant commercialism, brand worship, gigantism, strict class segregation and a calendar of ‘festivals’ and ‘events’ designed by marketers.”

The economic news is worse still. For all the oil wealth and untrammelled capitalism, the 57 member countries of the Organisation of the Islamic Conference (the OIC) account for 22 per cent of global population yet generate only 6 per cent of world GDP. An Islamic alms tax (zakat) of 2.5 per cent on the sovereign wealth funds of Gulf countries would produce an annual \$75bn wealth transfer to the poorest Muslim states, but this isn’t on the agenda. Key Islamic values like justice, fairness and education have been ignored. Meanwhile, an illusory counter-movement to the collapse has been led, in the Sunni world, by Wahhabism. This puritanical reform movement is painfully literalist, unimaginative, and viciously sectarian. As anti-intellectual as it is anti-mystical, it rejects the flexibility of the traditional schools of law. Its influence has been projected far beyond the central Arabian desert by oil money and the ungodly Saudi-US alliance. The result is a schizophrenic response to the west—passivity and collaboration on the one hand, nihilistic terrorism on the other.

Unlike those (such as Hazel Blears) who assume all visions of a potential Islamic superstate can be equated with al Qaeda's, Allawi suggests that "it is the absence of any formal and substantial Islamic political presence at the global level that contributes to instability and disorder." Chinese-Confucian and Indian-Hindu civilisations have, more or less, territorial contiguity. The west is represented by two powers—the EU and the US—and by institutions from Nato to the World Bank. But since the loss of its multi-national empires, Islam is splintered between weak states lacking popular legitimacy and very often governed by client regimes. Muslim countries have thus become adjuncts of the established civilisational blocks—Morocco to Europe, for instance, or Malaysia to China—with no serious power capable or willing to defend suffering Muslims internationally. It is noteworthy that one of the only Muslim voices to have condemned China's oppression of Uighur Muslims is al Qaeda.

Allawi could be criticised for skirting too close to Huntington's "clash of civilisations" thesis. His constant application of the "Judaeo-Christian" epithet to the west is slightly annoying—surely the west is Hellenistic too, and for that matter Islamic, through Spain and the scientific heritage. But he avoids the fallacy of absolutely discrete cultures, and it is refreshing to read a Muslim participating in a "civilisational" discourse that has usually targeted Muslims.

The book's insistence on the role of the divine in public life will be controversial in the west, but not in most of the Muslim world. Seventy-nine per cent of Pakistanis, 70 per cent of Moroccans and even 43 per cent of Turks consider themselves to be Muslims before citizens of their respective nation states. Again, Allawi's argument is not theological but civilisational: he calls for a culture confidently aware of its core values and able to act upon them.

The Crisis of Islamic Civilization offers a comprehensive sweep of Muslim world issues, from banking to human rights and the role of Muslim migrants. It introduces some remarkable but little known Islamic thinkers such as Muhammad Asad (born Leopold Weiss), Pakistan's first ambassador to the UN, Iranian dissident Abd el Karim Soroush, and the Sudanese Mahmoud Muhammad Taha, who understood those sections of the Koran revealed at Mecca to be of universal spiritual relevance, but the Medinan verses to be limited to the Prophet's specific moment. In its rich and diverse portrayal of Muslim thought, the book is a corrective to the simplistic Orientalism of the Bernard Lewis school.

Allawi tries hard to find positive signs. He praises the work of architect Hassan Fathy in re-establishing traditional Islamic rather than western building techniques, the anti-sectarian Amman message (an influential joint statement made in 2004 by senior clerics of various sects, calling for Muslim unity and tolerance) and the current resurgence in Sufism even in the Wahhabi heartland. He mourns missed opportunities, such as Mahathir Muhammad's proposed gold-based currency for intra-Islamic trade. And he stresses these ideas are still there for the taking. But ultimately, the book is more a lament than a programme for renewal. Waiting for the renewal, the Muslims suffer with Libyan

novelist Ahmad al Faqih, who wrote, “A time has passed and another time is not coming.”