Transnational Political Islam: Religion, Ideology, and Power

Azza Karam, ed.
London: Pluto Books, 2004. 157 pages.

Amid the escalating conflicts and polarizations separating "Muslim" from "Westerner," the book under review is a helpful contribution to the academic and policy literature. Prominent anti-immigrant right-wing movements, such as those led by Pim Fortyn (the Netherlands) and Jean-Marie Le Pen (France), have seen their perspectives enter and influence mainstream politics. Recently, Dutch movie director Theo van Gogh was murdered by a Muslim on the grounds that he had demeaned Islam. Demonstrations against the brutal murder and attacks on Muslim institutions followed. The already-overheated climate of antagonism has risen by several degrees. These developments are echoed in other clashes in Europe revolving around identity politics, such as the hijab issue in France.

Western states are coping with the dual demands posed by integration and police work: seeking to integrate Muslims into European and American societies while simultaneously pursuing terrorist cells and networks. Azza Karam's edited volume considers such questions as the relationship between political Islam and violence, distinguishing extremism from moderate Islam (often presumed to be "mainstream" Islam), and how Muslims in the West relate to these. Karam's volume includes articles covering France, Germany, Sweden, the Netherlands (all described as non-English speaking countries with less English scholarly literature on these topics),

and Albania (featuring an "Islamic" population but not necessarily an "Islamic" culture).

Diversity within the Dutch, French, German, Swedish, and Albanian Muslim communities is a key theme noted by the contributing authors. In the Netherlands, such diversity makes a mass Muslim political movement difficult to create and then sustain. While Islamists have appealed to Euro-Muslim communities for logistical and financial support, so have other actors, such as secular Turkish authorities who train imams to serve Turks in Germany. Sweden is faced with integrating its Muslim minority into Swedish society. Muslim organizations that engage in politics risk losing state subsidies. Jan Hjarpe argues that political Islam has become marginal to the integration process, commensurate with the general privatization of religion and the replacement of collective social norms with individualistic ones. Islamic jurisprudence (*fiqh*) becomes absorbed as an individual choice rather than as a moral or social order. An immigrant generation gap is causing a significant rift among immigrant Muslims.

Karam's volume also includes an intriguing chapter by Amr Hamzawy on *Al-Manar al-Jadid* (The New Lighthouse), an Islamist periodical that may be compared to the original *Al-Manar*, published by Rashid Rida in the early twentieth century and then in 1939-40 by Hassan al-Banna, the founder of Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood. Despite its failure to live up to its proclaimed goal of genuine dialogue with non-Islamist intellectual currents, it contains rich internal dialogues among Islamists and, in particular, the modernizers' questions. Hamzawy notes what may be the most significant development in *Al-Manar al-Jadid*: the interrogation of previously sacrosanct Islamist premises. One such premise is the traditional distaste for political parties, which are opposed for embodying *hizbiyah* (divisive factionalism). Inside this periodical, a prominent record of Islamist ideological discourse, intellectual challenge, and self-critique has taken root. This both enriches and complicates the effort to reach definitive conclusions about Islamism's policy platform.

There are some theoretical oddities: Karam makes the grammatically curious claim that the name "Al-Qaida" is neither a noun (such as al-Ikhwan [the Brotherhood]) nor a verb (Karam gives *islah* [reform] as an example, but this is the noun form of the verb "to reform."). Karam offers the insight that al-Qaeda means more than simply "the base," as it is usually translated, and can mean the "rule," "principle," or "norm" according to which thinking and planning are organized, and which apparently recognizes no nation or boundary (p. 4). But the name was a label quickly adopted and reified by

media reports, and its choice might be more a reflection of western fears and perceptions than a thoughtful decision by Islamists.

Any attempt to discuss political Islam, Muslim political consciousness, and fundamentalists inevitably includes some effort to classify and categorize. Karam chooses a Venn diagram featuring three intersecting circles. The circles are labeled "Islamists" (politically engaged Muslims who seek to make governance and society more "Islamic"), "fundamentalists" (who hold literal interpretations of sacred texts, are less creative in interpreting "religious" understanding, and may or may not be politically engaged), and "average Muslims," who are, presumably, the rest of the identifiably Muslim community. Why and how these circles intersect is unexplained; as defined, the categories appear to be mutually exclusive.

Karam describes Islamist thinking as a continuum ranging from moderate to radical/extremist/militant tendencies, and acknowledges that where movements belong is controversial and greatly affected by the analyst's prior politicial proclivities. Moderate Islamists, such as the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood, are gradualists who participate in elections and seek peaceful change and social transformation; radical Islamists, such as the Islamic Jihad in Egypt, see violence as a legitimate means to an end. Radicals may veer toward moderation on some issues at some times, such as Hizbollah's participation in Lebanese parliamentary elections. Conversely, moderates may become radicalized, as happened to Algeria's Islamic Salvation Front after the military annulled its 1991 election victory with its 1992 intervention.

Such structural changes as the disintegration of social bonds and emergent hostile attitudes contribute to polarization, a situation that mirrors the "you're either with us or against us" thinking that has prevailed in the United States since the 9/11 tragedy. As conflicts escalate, they are accompanied by such structural changes as disintegrating social bonds between groups, increasingly hostile attitudes, and new militant leaders. The result is polarization, where being pro-West is tantamount to being anti-Islam. The potential for mass political engagement grows as individuals are forced to identify their allegiances to one of the two camps. Karam does note the impact that blowback (viz., misinformation resulting from the recirculation into the source country of disinformation previously planted abroad by that country's intelligence service) has on transnational Muslim communities. However, considering a wider class of structural changes could enrich this book's predictive component.

Several voices in the American policy arena (e.g., the RAND Corporation and the Defense Science Board among them) have suggested that the

United States should support the moderates in order to undermine the radicals. Karam elegantly advocates strategic alliances between westerners and moderate Islamists framed around international social justice, for moderate Islamists have more legitimacy than the existing governments in important Muslim countries. This volume provides insights into who these moderates might be, while noting the popular support for anti-American, pro-Islam platforms in election campaign tickets and using the religious coalition Muttahida Majlis-e-Amal's rise in Pakistan as an example. Karam's work refuses to adopt a simplistic generalized understanding of the transnational Muslim community. Given a context in which crude and superficial punditry dominates popular perceptions, this is a valuable and timely contribution.

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