Islam, Authoritarianism, and Underdevelopment: A Global and Historical Comparison

CAMBRIDGE: CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS, 2019. 316 PAGES.

AHMET KURU

In 2019 Professor Ahmet Kuru published his acclaimed *Islam, Authoritarianism, and Underdevelopment: A Global and Historical Comparison.* I say 'acclaimed' not as an endorsement but merely to point to accolades it received, such as the jointly awarded and prestigious 2020 American Political Science Association's Jervis-Schroeder Book Award. Moreover, it was keenly promoted by Kuru and publishers via a global book tour including Harvard, on top of receiving reviews in *Foreign Affairs* and numerous political science and history journals. More recently, its arguments featured in a widely reported op-ed penned by former UK Prime Minister Tony Blair in the wake of the Taliban reconquest of Afghanistan, where he characteristically decries 'Islamism' as "a first-order security threat to the west".[1]

The book itself takes a long-durée approach to questions about Islam's place in the development of Muslim states and society, especially in the contemporary post-WW2 period. Based on Kuru's research, the roots of authoritarianism, conflict, and underdevelopment lay in ancient

religio-political configurations continuing to exert pressure till today and leading the Muslim world to become "stagnant" (3), unable to produce intellectuals to counter the growing power of the West in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. As Muslim polities began their patronage of Islamic scholars (ulema), this weakened the independence of the jurists. Subsequent changes also weakened the merchant class, leading to the creation of an "ulema-state alliance" which (though militarily powerful) "failed to revive early Muslims' intellectual and economic dynamism because they virtually eliminated philosophers and marginalized merchants" (5). Even in avowedly secular states that emerged in the 20th century there continued an "enduring marginalization of intellectuals and the bourgeoisie" and hence 'underdevelopment' and authoritarianism (6).

Here, I do not challenge such core assumptions about the lack of liberal democracy in many Muslim majority countries, nor his accurate dissecting of the spurious link between Islam and violence. In this review, I want to challenge many of his other core assumptions, expose the strawmen fallacies he builds around postcolonial approaches, and highlight the implication, methodological and otherwise, of the narrative which positions the Muslim world as uniquely lagging behind the rest of the world. I do this by tackling his claim that Muslim religious scholars are the ones to blame for a lack of democracy and for 'underdevelopment'—itself a loaded term explored in latter sections. As the interpreters and conveyors of Islamic tradition, the ulema (diverse as they are) cannot be divorced from what Islam is. Kuru acknowledges this as much himself—it is, after all, 'Islam' that appears in the very title of his book. Therefore, we can say that Kuru's argument is really one which positions Islam itself as having failed to aid Muslim majority states today in keeping up with standards Kuru has set up.

By failing to keep up with this standard, Kuru presents Muslims as stagnant, volatile, and in need of *further evolution* to reach contemporary (western) standards of civilization. With a growing body of work acknowledging the power of narratives in shaping our thoughts and interactions, his work cannot be dismissed as a purely academic exercise without real world consequences. Neuroscience has long shown us that narratives are central

to human cognition (Gazzaniga 1998; 2005; 2012). The brain's propensity to organize thoughts in narrative form is related to "our general capacity to see how contiguous events relate to one another."[2] What is more, "these narratives of our past behavior pervade our awareness [in the present]."[3] In political science, Wehner and Thies have similarly demonstrated that "ruling narratives … provide the background for elites to construct world-views in foreign policy including goals, choices, and interests" (2016, 421). In other words, the narratives we hold are consequential for how we perceive our reality, thus making them hugely important entities to study and decipher in their own right (for a review, see Sadriu 2021). Kuru's work frames Muslims and Islam as in need of fundamental reform and leads the audience to think and act on this framing, something which supports harmful interventions against Muslim societies globally.

Delving into Kuru's theorization, the article works through three key issues: (1) the broader, incessant tendency of research to stereotype Islamic scholars as supporting authoritarianism; (2) the propensity to frame problems in the Muslim world as a matter generated entirely from internal dynamics; and (3) the role of discriminatory narratives about Muslims globally in legitimizing intrusive policies. I work through these issues to show the connection between Kuru's ideas and broader machinations in global politics and how a truly postcolonial analysis (an approach he strawmans frequently) can produce more fruitful ways to approach the interactions between Muslims, Islam, and the international. There is a strong base in political science and its attendant fields of security studies, foreign policy, and international relations more broadly that have paid attention to the Islamophobic and colonial underpinnings of academic and policy work on Muslims (Jabri 2006; Kundnani 2014; Qureshi 2015; Richter-Montpetit 2014; Croft 2012). This review contributes to such a discussion by focusing on how Kuru's narrative construction of a Muslim world as a distinct civilization living in the shadow of western modernity legitimizes intrusive and violent policies at the international political level. This is not to pin the onus on his particular work, but rather to show the broader imperial milieu it inhabits and how it fits neatly into many popular, rightwing, and leftwing discourses about the degenerative force of Islam in the world today. In academia, too, there

is a sympathetic audience of comparative and world politics scholarship that is only recently being called out for its inherently biased perspective on the world.[4]

After first highlighting the merits of Kuru's analysis and its embrace by current advocates of continued intrusive intervention into Muslim societies, I turn to an alternative reading of the current state of the Muslim world to show the diversity that exists, and then scrutinize Kuru's criticism of postcolonial approaches on the question about the links between Islam, authoritarianism, and development. Far from promoting the wellbeing of Muslims globally through an 'honest discussion', Kuru merely perpetuates mainstream White "civilizationist conceptualization of politics and security that occludes racial and colonial violence" (Howell and Richter-Montpetit 2020, 11) and which upholds the current global unjust status quo. The aim is hence to bring the international political context into focus, rather than seeing the Muslim world as a closed unit unwilling to change and held down by the 'curse of history' (Gruffydd Jones 2006; Barkawi 2016; Mohamedou 2017). This is necessary if we are to decolonize IR and broader political science knowledge away from a liberal hegemonic vision of reality that sees itself surrounded only by otherness and barbarity and especially the ways in which "IR has consistently portrayed Islam, the radical Other, as a pathological form beyond the pale of modernity" (Pasha 2006, 81).

Islam 'in Crises' and the Role of 'the Scholars'

The narrative Kuru establishes, of a Muslim world beset by authoritarianism, violence and a lack of democracy is one which is commonly seized upon by politicians and ideologues in the present to buttress policies aimed at controlling and discriminating against Muslims. It also supports a broader liberal tendency to set up the world as comprised of 'developed' (read: western) and 'underdeveloped' (read: 'other') states requiring intervention. To take a well-known contemporary example – though one which is far from unusual – France's President Emmanuel Macron eagerly built his 2022 reelection bid around a widely publicized speech to declare that "Islam is a religion that is currently experiencing a

crisis all over the world."[5] The raft of measures outlined to deal with this include even greater state control over Muslim associations and promoting 'home-grown' Islamic scholars who can convey French republican values. In foreign policy, the notion of 'crises' besetting the Muslim world is used to justify France's increasingly bellicose footprint in its former colonies like Mali (Wing 2016). Meanwhile, accusations of war crimes in the country by French forces—such as the bombing of a wedding party in late 2020, according to locals—are rejected, though the military cannot even tell us the precise number of 'terrorists' killed during the strike (Essa 2021). That France is experiencing a resurgent far-right, increasing state intrusion in people's private lives, expansion of security service prerogatives, and a general retrenchment of civil liberties (Haubrich 2003) is not important.[6]

However, much of the mainstream media and scholarly circles in the liberal West are more interested in debating 'how Islamic is ISIS' rather than how violent is France. An "essentialized and tautological understanding[s] of violence, as inherent to Islam's pathological and traditional otherness" (Pasha 2006, 81) is thus sustained through a narrative of global Muslim otherness while the crises narrative—which Kuru promotes in his book—legitimizes the hiding in plain sight of *liberal violence* in the name of *global order.*

This narrative also lends credibility to popular commentators like Mustafa Akyol, who is given a platform in influential magazines like *Foreign Affairs* and regular columns in the *New York Times* to proclaim "Yes, Islam is facing a crisis" and to advocate for liberal western-style reform in the Muslim world. Like Kuru, Akyol blames Islamic scholars as largely responsible for violence, underdevelopment, and "failing to keep up with the times" (Akyol 2020). This in turn bolsters a wider narrative of 'good' and 'bad' Muslims—the latter as pre-modern, where "culture stands for habit, for some kind of indistinctive activity whose rules are inscribed in early founding texts, usually religious, and mummified in early artifacts," and thus stuck in time (Mamdani 2002, 767). I tackle this claim in the next section in detail. What is relevant here is that Kuru, both in the book and in subsequent interviews and promotional tours, casts himself in the mold of a native informant sharing intimate

knowledge of 'his people' with the outside world, hence making such a narrative more potent. But it is not just secular liberal states like France that seize upon the supposed crisis in the Muslim world precipitated by Islamic scholars, in order to attack Muslims. China, for example, has rounded up over one million people in the Western region of Xinjiang as part of its 'people's war on terror' that is legitimized in terms of blaming 'wild imams' for encouraging people to not toe the line set by the Chinese Communist Party. So-called 're-education camps' are premised on challenging "radical ideas", reducing the propensity for violence. They frame Muslim minorities in Xinjiang as "backward" and in need of state sponsored development programs (Greitens, Chestnut, Lee, and Yazici 2020).

The embrace of Kuru's central premises about the allegedly depressed state of the Muslim world by ideologues and politicians does not mean he had intended the work to buttress their arguments. However, the premises supporting his work merit scrutiny, especially when in speaking to the popular press to promote the book he utters phrases like "the Muslim world is largely stuck in history" and that Muslims need to "stop living in history and make peace with their current conditions" (Kuru 2020).

As Kuru puts it himself, the book's key idea is that sometime between the ninth and twelfth centuries, social and political configurations developed such that the Muslim world became "stagnant" (3) and could no longer produce intellectuals that could counter the growing power of the West in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.[7] As noted above, he argues that after Muslim polities began their patronage of Islamic scholars, this weakened the independence of the jurists. Subsequent changes also weakened the merchant class and led to the creation of an 'ulema-state alliance' which, though military powerful, "failed to revive early Muslims' intellectual and economic dynamism because they virtually eliminated philosophers and marginalized merchants" (5). Current UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson, famous for having referred to Muslim women as resembling 'letter-boxes' and 'bank-robbers', presented a similar argument a few years ago when he argued "there must be something about Islam that indeed helps to explain why there was no rise of the bourgeoisie, no liberal capitalism and therefore no spread of democracy

in the Muslim world."[8] Strange bedfellows, indeed. Even in the secular states that emerged in the 1900s there continued, according to Kuru, an "enduring marginalization of intellectuals and the bourgeoisie" (6).

The outcome of this alliance between religious scholars and the state according to the framework he develops is implicated in three contemporary problems characterizing the Muslim world. One is violence (and especially the terroristic variety, 31); the second is authoritarianism (55); and third is socio-economic underdevelopment (65). All this can be linked for Kuru back to an alliance in medieval times giving rise to radical and obscurantist scholars working hand-in-glove with an elite empowered by rents from natural resources to circumvent democratic processes that could lead to western-style development.

Kuru's choice of title gives the reader a sense that she would be reading a book on the Muslim world as a whole, and that by reading this book the reader would be better served in understanding the challenges in that world today. What follows is a disappointment, since over the course of seven chapters we are given a largely Arab world-focused tract—with a healthy dose of Turkey and Iran—that is replete with a reading of history that supports racist narratives about Muslims 'stuck in time' and also misrepresents the genesis of problems today in the Muslim world. Kuru's ignoring of South and Southeast Asia has already been addressed elsewhere (Türkmen 2019). Perhaps the only glimmer of light in the book is his accurate demonstration that Islam is not uniquely responsible for violence in the world.[9]

Unfortunately, in attempting to locate the root of current intra- and inter-state violence in some Muslim majority states, he runs into major problems. The argument he offers is not compelling, nor is it based on a proper accounting of academic disciplinary trends. It is however consequential given the book's wide dispersal and whose arguments fit neatly into pre-existing narratives about a Muslim world 'in crisis'. My criticism going forward will focus on working through these two points: Kuru's historical narrative about the development of Muslim societies, especially the role of the ulema, and the theoretical weight he attempts to give this argument by enlisting political science approaches through a largely caricatured version of postcolonial approaches that he seeks to

tear down. On the first point, and whereas he blames this on a supposed ninth/twelve century union between state and the ulema that stifled innovation, as I will show, it was never the case that the state had that authority over the ulema or law in the way he presents it, that is, until colonialism ruptured life beginning in the 19th century. Meanwhile, in the 20th and our current century, it was frequently ulema activism that pushed against authoritarianism and violence, and proposed ideas for greater socio-economic development. This is not to give an overly rosy picture of the ulema but rather to acknowledge the diversity across the Muslim world and to give an accurate account of their role in contemporary political developments.

Who are Islamic Scholars and What Do They Do?

The first problem with the narrative Kurus establishes is the treatment—or rather, the lack thereof—of the category "ulema". We are never given a proper definition warranted by a prize-winning, university-press published book, but are led to assume this refers to jurists. Never mind that 'the philosophers' against whom the jurists are juxtaposed by Kuru—such as Ibn Khaldun, dubbed 'the father of sociology' (d. 1406), Taftazani (d. 1390), Mulla Sadra (d. 1640) and others used as examples of outliers in an otherwise decaying Muslim world—were all heavily invested in the scholarship of jurisprudence! What matters here is that Kuru's discussion of the relationship between the ulema and the state is, as will be shown, only a marginally altered form of the outdated ideas of 'Oriental despotism' that characterized Muslims as subservient to executive rule and which were thoroughly debunked in a critical and widely read book by Edward Said (1978). According to this obsolete thesis, Muslim societies are in a depressed state because they are unable to mobilize intellectual or economic resources to challenge their authoritarian leaders who work in tandem with a pliant and greedy religious clergy.[10]

If this sounds all too familiar, it is because Kuru is also working from similar starting points. His innovation appears to be in bringing together a great many orientalist assumptions and repackaging these as an original contribution. Indeed, his book relies on another only thinly-veiled but

equally outdated thesis that has been routinely dismissed for decades in fields such as Islamic Studies and History: that is, the idea that early in Islam's history, the gates of jurisprudential innovation were closed and intellectual pursuits in legal innovation halted. The historian-cum-war-monger Bernard Lewis also perpetuated such ideas (Lewis 2011, 226-8). Strange bedfellows, indeed. For Kuru, a certain "conservatism" can be blamed as the "main reason why Muslim thought has been stagnant for centuries and recently caught unprepared to respond the jihadist claims of Al-Qaeda and ISIS" (25). Such ideas would not be out of place in any of the myriad of right-wing commentaries produced daily about the 'back-wardness' of Muslim societies and the tacit role this backwardness plays in fomenting violence. Neither would they be foreign to the countless political science works produced for the most prestigious outlets since the 2000s that have focused most noticeably on variations of a narrative seeing Islam as posing the biggest threat to liberal-western order (Pasha 2017). Indeed, the resurgent "Islam vs. West" narrative presumes a universal liberalism, just as an "intensified secularization becomes the new crusade'' (Pasha 2017, xxi).[11]

Crucial to such analysis about the Muslim world is a narrative about recalcitrant Muslim scholars promoting extremism in the region. Kuru's work supports such a thesis openly, and in many sections of the book even references Wael Hallaq, an authoritative author and Professor of Islamic Law at Columbia University, to support his views. However, emblematic of the shoddy research underpinning Kuru's work, it appears as though he has not really read Hallaq. As Professor Hallaq demonstrated over three decades ago, this idea of centuries of intellectual inertia in the Muslim world is "baseless and inaccurate" and—relevant to our present discussion—he outlines the development of Islamic legal theory and positive law well into the 19th-century Ottoman period (Hallaq 1984). What is clear for Hallaq is that the ulema were constantly debating newly invented tools and instruments so as to respond to contemporary problems (Hallaq 1984). In his more recent work, *The Impossible State* (2012), Professor Hallaq joins a chorus of other scholarship to outline the role of the ulema more broadly, in an argument that directly challenges Kuru's caricature of Muslim societies and the role of the jurists. Hallaq points

to the ways in which Islamic societies developed across the centuries in a way where executive authority (what he calls 'Sultanic authority') could never fully creep into the domain of the judiciary, because the "community" from which the jurists emerged from came before the "executive, both historically and logically, just as the Sharia (Islamic Law) takes precedence, at both levels, over that executive" (2012, 50). So much for Kuru's thesis about a powerful political elite dominating a moribund ulema.

We must appreciate this alternative narrative gleaned from serious legal and historical work if we are to fully appreciate the reasons for violence and authoritarianism today. This way, we avoid the pitfall of extending causal weight to a single (heterogenous as they are) group, the ulema, as part of analytical heavy lifting. Jurists and judges—the group allegedly coopted by the twelve century—are better thought of in the Muslim context as civic leaders called upon to run civic affairs.[12] Their power was not vested in them by an executive but by the community, because they were seen to defend and guard the Sharia. Moreover, the courts, as an expression of executive power itself, "could not make law, and its ultimate reference was neither itself nor an executive authority" (Hallaq 2012, 54). As we can see, the ulema did not "make law" as Kuru falsely argues (168), but in fact protected society from executive overreach. Kuru's argument that the ulema continually resisted progressive reforms well into the 19th century by keeping up "medieval interpretations" that opposed democracy and separation of powers (47-48) is also mistaken. Works in Ottoman History—the Ottomans representing the largest and longest-lasting Islamic polity to date (1299-1922), and thus an important case to test his theories—have long shown the ulema's relentless engagement in intellectual juristic enquiry, in debates around constitutionalism, and their promotion of education drives and state reform throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries (Tezcan 2010; Yaycioglu 2016) and later nineteenth and twentieth centuries (Bein 2011; Yilmaz 2015; Ahmed 2018). Such trends intersected with social/political processes across the Muslim world, from Afghanistan (Ahmed 2017) to Indonesia (Laffan 2003).

While Kuru exhibits some awareness of the different historical and philosophical trends in Islamic history, he is less inclined to draw on

contemporary scholarship when it disproves his own thesis. Take the Princeton Professor of Near Eastern Studies and Religion, Muhammad Qasim Zaman, whom Kuru references eight times but whose book *The Ulama in Contemporary Islam* first published in 2002—a book that literally includes the subtitle 'The Custodians of *Change'* (my emphasis)—is ignored. Zaman writes on 18th and 19th century South Asia, a region Kuru dismisses as merely imitating Ottoman trends. Yet Kuru need only have read the introduction to this book, where Zaman directly responds to the idea that the ulema were a recalcitrant force:

> The 'ulama have not only continued to respond—admittedly, with varying degrees of enthusiasm and success—to the challenges of changing times; they have also been successful in enhancing their influence in a number of contemporary Muslim societies, in broadening their audiences, in making significant contributions to public discourses, and even in setting the terms for such discourses … the 'ulama, as I show in this book, are hardly frozen in the mold of the Islamic religious tradition, but this tradition nevertheless remains their fundamental frame of reference, the basis of their identity and authority. (2002, 2-10)

As Zaman shows, the ulema are not a static nor homogenous community: they are diverse; although bound by tradition, they are active interpreters of it, shaping their responses to an evolving world around them. Kuru's narrative of a subservient Muslim juristic mirrors the one about an "overbearing religious tradition" besetting the Muslim world propagated by figures like Fouad Ajami, a keen advocate of the Iraq War—a war he saw as a necessary prelude to the Arab/Muslim world's road "toward modernity and development" (Ajami 2003, 10). Strange, strange bedfellows indeed!

Reviving Orientalism

To remind the reader about the power of narratives, we recall that these are our "main interface with the world"; narratives are constantly drawn

boundaries constructed for ourselves and others (Baker 2010). Kuru's work fits neatly into renowned comparative literature professor Mona Baker's schema of how narratives become powerful, in that his work contributes to a public, disciplinary and meta-narrative at the same time.

At the risk of sounding banal, it is worth recalling at this juncture that it was Edward Said, himself emerging from the original field studying narratives (literary criticism), who first developed a fully-fledged framework for understanding how European colonial endeavors created and became reliant on stock narratives about the world around them in constituting their imperial affairs (1978). Ideas of 'the East' as barbaric, backward, lazy, exotic, and violent became part and parcel of the legitimation of colonial subjugation. Juxtaposed with these qualities was an 'enlightened' western world. Over the past decade, narrative approaches in political science have produced important insights into the ways in which political elites leverage the narratives around them as part of their rhetorical jostling—for influence, to push particular policies, or to out-maneuver their opponents (Jackson 2006; Krebs 2015; Goddard 2009; Koschut et al 2017). Other work has also explored how narratives sustain "regimes of truth" and the wider structures of meaning wherein narratives are built, such as by academic output (Dunn 2006), a topic I aim to contribute to here. I view Kuru's work as part of a larger process that sustains narratives of Muslims as backward and in need of civilizing. Blaming Muslim scholars and the state in the nitty-gritty of his argument does not distract from this in the slightest, for humans need very little cues for their cognitive process to elicit emotional responses (Miall 2011). Islam features in the very title of his book alongside negative associations to 'authoritarianism' and 'underdevelopment', thus conjuring popular tropes of a religion responsible for 'global' and 'historical' regression (other words found in his title!).

Being charitable at this stage, one might argue that despite the bombastic title there is substance to the main argument he makes within. Alas, this is lacking. Besides the mischaracterization of the role of Islamic scholars outlined above, he commits two further errors in accounting for the ways in which authoritarianism and lower levels of development are sustained in some parts of the Muslim world. Both have consequences beyond his work.

Kuru bases much of his judgment on Freedom House scores and levels of GNI, literacy, years of schooling and life expectancy (2; it is also the subject of Chapter 3, pp. 56-66). However, the merits of viewing the Muslim world as homogenous when addressing the question of democracy is wholly inappropriate—if not juvenile—and ignores cultural, geographic, political and other differences (cf. Dharish, Mazlan and Manan, 2020). Sadly, Kuru's narrative more accurately fits into the general homogenizing tendency of neo-orientalists such as "Samuel Huntington, Bernard Lewis and other intellectuals and journalists to serve the political and ideological function of rationalising US imperialism and Western hegemony in the world" (Amin-Khan 2012). Kuru is inattentive to this context and maintains a homogenizing tendency.

Indeed, the nuance needed to appreciate the diversity in the Muslim world eludes Kuru. This brings us to another criticism: for Kuru, Muslims lagged behind Western Europe because the latter embraced diversity among its burgeoning influential classes, with the military and clergy joined by artisans and merchants and wider developments like the emergence of universities (157-63). This was allegedly lacking in the Muslim world because of the ulema-state alliance that dismissed philosophical enquiry and shunned innovation. But this simply reproduces Eurocentric narratives that position Europe or 'the West' as the principle subject driving world history, being uniquely responsible for all that is good—in the process legitimizes imperialistic endeavors (Sabaratnam 2013). As research has shown, however, Europe's architectural tastes, for example, were largely modeled on those found in Muslim polities (Darke 2020) while the origin of institutions like common law (and things like the jury and trusts) were likely taken directly from Sharia law (Makdisi 1998). I return to the ways in which our modern world is very much a product of Muslim might at the end of this section.

For now, it is worth continuing our own narrative of how Kuru's work is little more than a stylized form of the classic orientalism that Sadowski noted almost three decades ago had sought to prove that "Muslim countries have the most terrorists and the fewest democracies in the world," and moreover that they always would because of an

absence of societal pressure groups that could challenge them (!). In other words, "rather than challenging the ruler's authority, the argument went, groups in Islamic societies tended to be vehicles of supplication and collaboration" (Sadowski 1993). Kuru seems to simply have shifted from blaming Islam (via an elaborate defense on pages, 2, 3, 9-10 and the whole of chapter 2) to blaming the ulema. Yet we have already noted that this is a distinction largely without a difference.

It is worth reiterating our argument from above: the ulema were historically the guardians of the Sharia (Islamic Law) and emerged from within society, not outside of it, and their role was to guard the community from the executive. The claim that they were an obscurantist group, dismissing innovation and propping up authoritarianism, means that Islam, too, must necessarily be seen in his narrative as a "kind of family curse that lives on, crippling the lives of innocents generations after the original sin that created it" (Sadowski 1993). However, the Muslim judiciary "was not in the service of applying a law determined by the dominant powers of a state or a peremptory ruler but rather of safeguarding a Sharīʿa law whose primary concern was the regulation, on moral grounds, of social and economic relations" (Hallaq 2012, 59). Even as the executive, typically the sultans, deliberated with others to appoint judges, "no judge presiding in a Shari'a court, the default court of the land, could apply any other law. It was unheard of," since everyone, including the sultan, "stood under the Shari'a law, not above it" (Hallaq 2012, 59). In fact, "It is by no means an exaggeration to say that the Shari'a and its jurists emerged from the midst of society" (Hallaq 2012, 56) and that, as a "bottom-up system of governance", the "Islamic system was a democracy of the first order, superior, at any rate, to its modern Western counterpart" (Hallaq 2012, 52).[13]

Hallaq is hardly alone in showing both the centrality and integrity of the Shari'a judicial system to Muslim societies (Brown 1997). Kuru thus misses the crucial role of Shari'a—"understood not simply as a legal system but more broadly as a set of institutions and practices"—in regulating the relationship between the executive, the community and the ulema (Brown 1997, 365). It was only the emergence of state building projects—premised on Weberian and broader Christian-European

ideals—that fundamentally changed this relationship by restricting Sharia to narrow legal issues rather than a set of institutions and practices (Brown 1997), opening a space where the ulema could hold more sway. The ulema continued to serve Muslim societies until the shari'a was effectively dismantled. By ignoring this fact, Kuru's narrative positions Muslims as lacking any genuinely useful indigenous sources of inspiration for legal-political development and thus beholden to the trajectory set by Euro-centered liberalism. It is this very narrative that ignores the "mutually constitutive nature of modernity and colonialism," premised on a racial logic of superior and inferior subjects of the world ripe for intervention (Howell and Richter-Montpetit 2019). And this leads us to the next criticism of Kuru, the strawman of postcolonial theory he builds up and then proceeds to dismiss.

Take for example research into the case of the Republic of Kosovo, the newest Muslim-majority country in the world. Local Islamic scholars there long advocated for mass political participation, rallied against corruption in the face of authoritarian leadership and rising extremism, only to be left in the lurch and swept up by the so-called 'war on terror' that criminalized their basic existence as a threat to global peace (Sadriu 2015; 2019). It was not the ulema—whom Kuru sees as stuck in a twelfth-century construct of their own making and professing conservative values—that has led Kosovo to its present depressed state (with mass youth unemployment and a depressed economy). Rather, what has achieved these problems is the experience of brutal settler-colonialism and genocide after the dismemberment of the Ottoman Empire in 1912, followed by a communist dictatorship, only to be replaced in the 2000s with a post-communist secular elite that orientalizes its own citizens and is helped along by western officials that prioritize 'order' and neoliberal economic reform above all else.[14] Here, we may mention also that despite Howell and Richter-Montpetit (2019, 2020) and other critical scholars usefully highlighting the racialized logics of contemporary western academia and security practices that remain central to the organization of the world, still more has to be done to understand the particular place Islam and Muslims have in all this. In particular, a focus on the logic of anti-Black racism must not blind us to appreciating how Muslim identity

shapes the experience of White hegemony today (Qureshi 2020; 2010; Ferizaj 2019).

For another example, take the case of Algeria, whose colonial history goes back further still (1832-1962) and resulted in the murder and plunder of half its population, and which created a disconnect between a French-educated elite and the masses, convening the conditions for brutal dictatorship and civil war in the 1990s (Bennison 1998; Sartre 2001 [1956]). Further demonstrating the orientalist and essentialist narrative underpinning Kuru's work is a tendency to "downplay the importance of imperialism. Indeed, a fairly consistent refrain in orientalist studies is that 'in the Middle East the impact of European imperialism was late, brief, and for the most part indirect'" (Sadowski 1993). To be sure, for orientalists,

> There is no point in dwelling on the fact that half the populations of Libya and Algeria died during the course of their colonial occupation. The fact that the Ottoman and Qajar Empires were effectively deindustrialized when European imports wiped out their proto-industrial manufactures during the 19th-century era of 'free trade' is irrelevant to issues of economic development. (Sadowski 1993)

Forget also that endowments (Arabic: *awqaf*) bequeathed by the rich to society and offering education scholarships and other services were effectively robbed by imperial states, depriving the community of a source of income—something which post-colonial elites maintained (Hennigan 2004).

In short, the narrative offered by Kuru fits neatly into many popular, rightwing, and leftwing discourses about the degenerative force of Islam in the world today. In academia, too, there is a sympathetic audience of comparative and world politics scholarship that is only recently being called out for its inherently biased perspective on the world. For example, Howell and Richter-Montpetit's (2019) recent article demonstrates the "methodological Whiteness" embedded in security studies that promotes a liberal militarism casting those outside the liberal world as dangerous and ripe for reform. I tackle this further below, though here it is worth

mentioning that Kuru, too, seems to suffer from a failure "to comprehend 'the colonial global' (Bhambra 2013, 309)—the entwined, co-constitutive relations between social, political, and economic processes and actors in Europe and the colonies and the concomitant fundamental raciality and coloniality of the modern subject… [but also] the stubborn persistence of racialized relations in the postcolonial/settler colonial present" (Howell and Richter-Montpetit 2019, 6-7).

That is to say, it is inconceivable that Christian Europe's economic and political rise as imperial hegemons can be discussed without a deeper analysis of its co-constitution with the rest of the world—especially Muslim polities (Nisancioglu 2014; Anievas and Nisancioglu 2013; Mikhail 2020; Bull and Watson 1984). In ignoring this, Kuru upholds rather than challenges the notion of Europe as the apex of civilization, and makes "becoming like Europe a moral imperative" (Howell and Richter-Montpetit 2020). Missing from his narrative altogether is the long peace and economic dominance experienced in Muslim empires like the Ottoman (Barkey 2008; Pamuk 2009) and Mughal cases (Washbrook 2007; Pardesi 2017).

Will the Real Postcolonialists Please Stand Up?

It is as this juncture that we can also address Kuru's political science angle, and especially his misrepresentation of postcolonial/decolonial approaches and reliance on assumptions made in the democratic peace debates. Kuru introduces what he considers to be the postcolonial or anti-colonial approach as one which "stresses Western colonization of Muslim countries and ongoing Western exploitation of their resources as reasons for Muslim societies' contemporary problems. Many ideological groups in Muslim countries, from Islamists to secularists, have shared this anti-Western perspective" (xv). Kuru's argument is that because Muslim societies had "already suffered multiple political and socioeconomic crises" from the twelfth century onwards, these cannot be seen as the necessary nor sufficient condition for contemporary violence (xv).

Putting aside the idea that denouncing exploitation of resources is sufficient to be labeled 'anti-Western', I want to focus here on the source

of contemporary violence that is identified not just by Kuru but a range of scholars, and which is subject to increasingly lively debate. One of the main issues identified by especially postcolonial/decolonial scholarship is an "understanding of global war as a distinctly late modern form of control" (Jabri 2006, 47), and especially its implication in the ways in which liberal order-making is required "to make war on whatever threatens it" (Dillon and Reid 2009, 42). Even this idea, as Howell and Richter-Montpetit note, however, does not go far enough in acknowledging racist ideas underlying this process and that certain people are considered *more dangerous* than others (Howell and Richter-Montpetit 2019). It is my contention that Kuru's narrative works to legitimize Muslims as uniquely dangerous.

This is achieved largely by focusing on the purported source of problems beguiling the Muslim world today, that is, "authoritarianism" through the alliance of state and ulema. The main thrust of the argument is given 'scientific' backing through the adoption of Democratic Peace theories. Democratic Peace Theory begins with an empirical fact "that democracies do not go to war with one another" and theorizes that this is down to accountable democratic institutions which prevent elites from waging war. This theory is not without its critics (for a thorough assessment, see Rosato 2003). In particular, adding to the above critique by Jabri, postcolonial approaches have long noted that peace in democracies is only sustained through ideas and policies which "allows the continuation of violence against 'nonliberal' others..." (Barkawi and Laffey et al., 2001; Jahn 2018). In other words, democracies may be peaceful with one another, but they are certainly not peaceful outside of this field of a "zone of democratic peace." In fact, authoritarianism is often a justification for violence against non-liberal societies. For Kuru, this is only an after-thought, however, and an issue to be dismissed in favor of arguments focusing on the internal depression of Muslims. Violence in the Muslim world is also attributed to the ulema, who have "contributed to the escalation of violent sectarianism in the Middle East" (30), an argument that ignores the largely exogenous impetus for sectarianism as a product of imperialism (Makdisi 2016). That "violence is characteristically a multicausal phenomenon" (30) should be treated as no more

than a rhetorical ploy by Kuru and a cover for his real argument: that the ulema is to blame for everything, because they are both extremist and fail to hold authoritarianism to account.

His other claims, for instance that "Muslim societies have largely been unable to counter the propaganda of ISIS and other jihadist groups" because of the "inability [of the ulema's ambition] to monopolize the interpretation of Islam and the resulting intellectual stagnation among Muslims" (30), are also demonstrably false. A rich literature exists showing how the ulema worked to systematically counter extremist narratives during and before the rise of ISIS (Sanberg and Colin 2020; Thurston 2015; Ashour 2006), while some of the most important counter-terrorism programs in the world would not work without the help of local Islamic scholars (Boucek 2008). A closer analysis would allow for appreciation of how global processes of conflict *and* peace are mutually constituted by a range of actors interacting across states and societies.

The causes of violence are bitterly contested in political science, ranging from rationalist explanations focusing on strategic dynamics of communication between states, commitment problems, states going to war simply because some issues cannot be compromised on (Fearon 1995), or even those accounts viewing war as a part and parcel of the making of states in the first place (Tilly 1985). In the context of civil war, the results are even more disparate, with factors ranging from elite competition/greed (Collier and Hoeffler 2004), grievance/repression (Young 2013), and opportunity-cost scenarios (Fearon and Laitin 2003). Kuru's analysis relies heavily on Solingen (2007), who gathered data to show disparities between the Middle East and East Asia following WW2 and argued that "since 1965 the incidence of interstate wars and militarized conflicts has been nearly five times higher in the Middle East" (Solingen 2007, 758). The clear tendency here is to ignore imperial wars by proxy. In the final analysis, Solingen puts the disparities she noticed in peace down to "distinctive models of political survival." Those in East Asia prefer integration into global systems, while Middle Eastern states focus on inward-looking self-sufficiency. Crucially, and as Kuru notes (28), Solingen highlights that "both models relied on authoritarianism, state institutions and the military as key allies in securing political control"

(Solingen 2007, 758). Kuru does not follow through the logic of her argument, however. For Solingen, this divergence can be partly explained by the domestic partners buttressing this system. She argues that the key role here was played by the Arab middle class, mainly working for the state bureaucracy (2007, 764). (No mention of Islamic scholars here.) And while Solingen mentions the importance of the military in sustaining authoritarianism in the Middle East, Kuru is characteristically silent on this: we get no sense of how militaries deftly play off various societal forces to maintain their hegemony (see the case of Egypt in Abul-Magd 2014). Gulf states, by contrast, do not fit either Kuru's or Solingen's model: they have been far more peaceful—and richer—than others in the Middle East, while rulers there relied more heavily on legitimacy from Islamic scholars (Niblock 2004). Indonesia and Malaysia—both Muslim majority states—also feature in Solingen's model for East Asia and are clear outliers that Kuru cannot account for; both are competitive democracies and economically stable. Indeed, recent research suggests that it is not Muslim-majority status that is statistically significant in accounting for democracy and what would be considered liberal rights; rather, being from the MENA region and having oil displays the strongest effect (Albertsen and De Soysa 2017).

In short, the narrative of an authoritarianism-violence nexus and the alleged role that an alliance with the ulema plays in this is not demonstrated via any detailed discussion of cases beyond the Arab world. (Not to mention that only a quarter of Muslim-majority states are located in what is commonly regarded as the Middle East.) Moreover, nor does the argument Kuru propose adequately consider exogenous factors, or foreign intervention, in the relationship:

> Western colonization/occupation is not a necessary condition either, because several non-Western countries and groups have fought each other for various reasons … [the anti-colonial approach] overemphasizes the impact of Western countries' policies toward other parts of the world while downplaying the role of non- Western countries' own domestic and regional dynamics. (19)

This passage betrays a fundamental misunderstanding of the co-constitution of states and liberal order-making mentioned above, the latter directed primarily through war but also other means, and which is central to postcolonial analysis. Indeed, the role of violence as a material, epistemic, and structural force in world politics is central to understanding "their joint role in imperialism's shaping of people, places, and relations" (Laffey and Nadarajah 2016, 128). What is Kuru's own baseline for violence? By avoiding this question, he exoticizes Muslims and appears to internalize the liberal western belief that the West is more peaceful. In the process, western violence is normalized as merely responding to external anarchy—a 'state of exception'—rather than encouraging the kind of research that uncovers the ways in which the colonial backdrop and attendant securitization is held together by stigmatizing certain groups (Howell and Richter-Montpetit 2019).

In his defense, Kuru claims that it cannot be western imperialism that led to the Muslim world's supposed underdevelopment, since Germany and Japan—both examples of states invaded by the US—experienced hugely successful post-WW2 rebuilding; hence, the argument goes, the explanation for violence must be "country-specific characteristics" (19). Yet this mischaracterizes and conflates the largely Anglo-French imperial endeavors of the eighteenth, nineteenth, and twentieth centuries with the ascent of US rule following WW2, a period characterized by complex alliance structures affording the US a primary position but one which was willing to delegate and work with others in the service of global capitalist accrual (Harvey 2007). In this post-war setting, Germany and Japan's development was built up via massive economic support and tutelage as part of "bringing Europe and Japan into alignment with the United States to shape the global financial and trading system in ways that effectively forced all other nations to submit" (Harvey 2007, 32). By the 1950s, most Muslim-majority countries were not even independent, so the analogy and 'explanation' simply does not hold.

Moreover, the claim that some Muslim countries were not even colonized, like Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and Iran (18), obscures what postcolonial theory has shown to be the subtler shades of imperialism.

Postcolonial theorists outline the ways in which western imperialism has endured through economic bodies that regulate global trade patterns, through engineered coups, support for military rulers, and 'strategic alliances' that crackdown on democratic opposition. The coup against Iran's democratically elected president in the 1950s comes to mind. Although Turkey and Saudi Arabia were never formally colonized, they do not operate outside of western hegemonic power-structures that have dominated the post-WW2 world. Nor are people living there insulated from epistemic categories shaped by, and in the favor of, such a system and its continued hold over the globe (Quijano 2007). For example, take Turkey's continued desire for EU membership despite decades of rejection, sustained by a deep-rooted a desire to be accepted by the West (Sandrin 2020).

If postcolonial/decolonial approaches necessarily involve the deconstruction of ideas that place Europe at the center of development and elevate Eurocentric historiographies above others (Sabaratnam 2011), then Kuru's deeper assumptions must needs be interrogated. This is especially pressing given the book's wide dispersal and the bait it will provide for future narrative-building against Muslims. Indeed, the central tendencies of Kuru's work have so far been shown to include orientalist assumptions and a dismissal of exogenous (read: colonial) factors in issues like state conflict and "underdevelopment". Here, we can finally turn to what is meant by development.

As a discourse—a set of discursive tropes and practices—development it has functioned since the end of WW2 as a rallying cry for a host of policies directed towards mainly the non-Western world in a bid to get places there to "catch up with the West" (Dallmayr 1996, 149-50). Development/modernization drives resembled colonial practices of old, since indigenous intellectual arguments for how change could be brought about were systematically suppressed in favor of western-style technical programs designed to remake societies in a Western mold (Escobar 1993). Such a discourse, rather than helping level out inequality between the global north and south, has actually entrenched a relationship of dependence and facilitated continued practices of domination (Duffield 2010). Such debates have surfaced in IR theorizing too, with

"neo-modernization" theories providing theoretical foil for contem-
porary hegemonic processes that view non-liberal states as problems
that must be "managed" (Blaney and Inayatullah 2002). For Muslims,
globally, this has manifested in a quixotic mix of policies pursued by
western states against them: on one hand, there is the desire to root out
'traditional Islam', to 'make way' for modernization in the liberal west-
ern mold, while at other times the Muslim's very devotion to the Sharia
is leveraged to battle enemies (like the Soviets). Whenever Islamic forces
have come close to power, the ensuing crackdown by secular/author-
itarian regimes has generally been supported, implicitly or otherwise,
by major western powers. And it is not just the likes of Huntington,
whose racist diatribe helped legitimize intellectual Islamophobia in the
1990s by arguing that "Western democracy strengthens anti-Western
political forces" and "complicates relations between Islamic countries
and the West" (Huntington 1993, 12). The coup in Egypt in 2013 and the
meek support for the preceding, democratically-elected government is
testimony to the ways in which the liberal zeitgeist across the board
tacitly endorses secular rule above notions of democracy that may bring
Islamists to power.

Kuru's book thus reinforces a narrative focusing on the purely
internal dynamic of states that he believes can potentially change but
won't do so unless they embrace in totality the same Renaissance-
Protestant Revolution trajectory of Europe that produced a bourgeois
and intellectual class (187-193). Kuru thus falls into the tendency to
reproduce what historian of Islamic reform movements Indira Falk
Gesink has referred to as the propensity of scholarship to have "only
the modernists' side of the story". Attempts in International Studies to
acknowledge the interaction between 'Western/non-Western perspec-
tives' have unfortunately also relied on such framing (an example is
Euben 2002). Yet Gesnik shows that despite the modernists depicting
the Islamic legal tradition as stagnant and in need of revival, 19th-20th
century debates about reform at the Al Azhar University—one of the
pre-eminent higher education institutions in the Muslim world—was
characterized by intense debates among conservatives *with modernists*
in a challenge to western-style centralization efforts seeking to further

the intrusive powers of the state (2010, 9).[15] Indeed, the Muslim challenge against global hegemony and local authoritarian regimes is well documented (Ayoob 2007).

On one level, we can read in Kuru a tendency to reinforce a liberal bias at the heart of much research that prioritizes "the actions, discourses, beliefs, and strategies used by liberal actors" rather than appreciating the embeddedness of "individual agents and global ideological structures" (Adamson 2005, 547-8). On another level, we see the perpetuation of the type of Eurocentric analysis that postcolonial scholarship has warned sustains current disciplinary blind spots by favoring a model that sees Europe as the source of all inspiration (Sabartnam 2011). It is thus no exaggeration to say that Kuru's narrative is of the type which sustains the notion of a western/liberal world's unique role in 'helping' the rest of world 'catch up'—and hence a whole host of destructive, misplaced policies that ultimately generate more global violence (Rampton and Nadarajah 2017). This narrative also produces imperial hubris (Barkawi 2004), costly wars that kill countless people and destroy countries, and, in places like Afghanistan, a failed understanding of motivations for local resistance (Egnell 2010). One of these consequences is clear to all: the United States of America has just lost its longest war to a sophisticated insurgency sustaining itself via a powerful ideology, eager local recruits, exceptional organizational capacity, and an astute balancing of regional powers. Unfortunately, judging by the banal, orientalist commentaries (in the mold of that I have described above) in reputable American and British papers, it seems as though little has been learned from this experience.[16] For popular writers commenting on the end of the war like Thomas Friedman, stereotyping is even more brazen: "When were the good old days for government in Afghanistan? Before Genghis Khan? Before gunpowder?", he quips, before asking rhetorically, "Could the future bury the past there or would the past always bury the future?"[17] The overall agenda Kuru has set in his book provides the foil for narratives of a Muslim world stuck in the past and perpetually violent. However, the liberal western trajectory assumed to be universal by Kuru is simply undesirable for many. Insisting on its perpetuation will only lead to more bloodshed.

Conclusion: What's in a Story?

Narratives matter not only because they shape our understanding of a present situation but because they also intervene into the world for future narrative building (Herman 2013). In attempting to show that the relationship between the state and Islam today is derivative of the relations between the *pre*-nation-state's relationship with Islam in the Muslim world, Kuru is guilty of anachronism: the authoritarianism that does exist today in some parts of the Muslim world results from the modern state's drive towards western-inspired modernization. Indeed, the dialectic that has produced the modern Muslim states of the world today cannot conceivably be viewed as produced sometime in the eleventh/twelfth century to endure to this day. To do so would be to reject basic social-scientific understandings of the world as constituted by diverse identities, practices, and agents. It would, moreover, render Muslims as immune from change and stuck in time in an even more warped form of orientalism than Said ever imagined, though no doubt to the delight of hawkish interventionists everywhere.

This discussion is important because the narrative established by Kuru is powerful, if ultimately misleading. It is powerful because, as decades of research in cognitive psychology and latterly political science has shown, narratives are the underlying means through which we store and recall memories; they bear down powerfully on how we interpret the present. His book's wide dispersal in academia and the mainstream press will no doubt help set the tone for debates.[18] This is because questions of violence, development, and democracy remain essential themes of political and broader social science research and as such, any generalizations about their causes needs to be scrutinized carefully. In this article I argued that narrating current issues of democracy and inter-state violence in the broad category that is the Muslim world as being due to Islamic scholars' connections to the state is based on outdated orientalist tropes and also misreads the sources of disorder today. If Islamic scholars are perceived as the primary source of this problem, this makes it harder to see their role in combatting precisely the ills of authoritarianism and violence; at the same time, because they

are the ones who ultimately hold sway in interpreting what Islam is, the narrative lends credence to intrusive policies that seek to reform Islam and Muslim societies from the outside, ultimately generating resistance and hostility.

Moreover, this account further perpetuates notions of an underdeveloped Muslim world constantly in need of intervention that serves as cover for the 'everywhere war' that today characterizes US military ambitions (Gregory 2011). Looking at a map of bombings and 'counter-terror' activities recently produced by Brown University's Watson Institute for International and Public Affairs, it is clear that a disproportionately high burden for such ambitions is placed on Muslim majority states. This, "despite the Pentagon's assertion that the U.S. is shifting its strategic emphasis away from counterterrorism and towards great power competition with Russia and China," while there is in fact "yet to be a corresponding drawdown of the counterterror apparatus."[19] The effects of this mischaracterization will not be felt by scholars like Kuru but by ordinary Muslims from Mali to Xinxiang who will bear the brunt of political order-making premised on the notion of a backward Muslim subject requiring reform. To be sure, the narrative Kuru establishes buttresses increasingly maligned approaches to the study of world politics that have been shown to reproduce racist and Eurocentric accounts that end up ultimately legitimizing war and intervention around the world.

A more accurate narrative needs to acknowledge the complex variance in peace, democracy, and development experienced across Muslim majority countries and the leading role many civil society leaders, such as Islamic scholars, are playing in defining the contours of debate, mobilizing people, and holding leaders to account. If we are to take the role of Muslim scholars seriously in all this, it should be done via a deep appreciation for disciplinary trends in Islamic Studies and History. More broadly, scholars should be attuned to narratives that exceptionalize the Muslim world as uniquely responsible for the ills of the world and how the ways in which they write perpetuate such myths. Fruitful avenues for research should include how contemporary processes of peace and war are mutually constituted by alliance structures, ideological commitments, and economic agendas at the global level. Lastly, the topics covered

in this paper also encourage further debate within critical approaches, especially postcolonial/decolonial ones in IR, in terms of the role that religious identity plays in the broader racialized logics characterizing liberal hegemony today.

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Endnotes

1   "Islamism remains first-order security threat to west, says Tony Blair," *The Guardian*, 6 Sept 2021, https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2021/sep/06/islamism-remains-first-order-security-threat-to-west-says-tony-blair.

2   Gazzaniga 1998, 24.

3   Gazzaniga 1998, 174.

4   One recent example is Howell and Richter-Montpetit's (2019) recent article demonstrating the "methodological Whiteness" embedded in security studies that promotes a liberal militarism casting those outside the liberal world as dangerous and ripe for reform.

5   Transcript of "Fight against separatism – the Republic in action: speech by Emmanuel Macron, President of the Republic, on the fight against separatism" (Les Mureaux, 02 Oct. 2020). Available at https://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/en/coming-to-france/france-facts/secularism-and-religious-freedom-in-france-63815/article/fight-against-separatism-the-republic-in-action-speech-by-emmanuel-macron.

6   The crisis narrative is consistently drawn on by France's political and cultural elite in pushing back against criticism of the state's inability to properly manage people of Muslim heritage in the country, and the feeling of alienation which ensues (Adida, Laitin and Valfort 2014; Mucha 2017). Indeed, "the key political battle being waged in contemporary France" is centered on trying to "focus the anxiety onto immigrants and their descendants—in other words, to blame the consequences of inequality on those who tend to suffer from it the most" (Wolfreys and Wolfreys 2017, 127). The problem, put differently, is not to be seen in the French system—borne of liberal modernity—but Muslims themselves failing to adjust to it. Much like Kuru, France's political and social elite seem adamant that it is Muslim internal decay causing all this.

7   The great Algerian Muslim intellectual Malek Bennabi presents an almost identical argument about the decline of Muslim societies. However, his idea is rooted in a recognition of Muslims needing to find succor in Islam, rather than western modernity. Kuru's book does not cite him once.

8   Quoted in *The Guardian* and available via https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2019/jul/15/boris-johnson-islam-muslim-world-centuries-behind-2007-essay.

9   This is the subject of chapter one, where Kuru points to data that not only shows Muslim majority states are less violent when it comes to global homicides rates, but also demonstrates that the onset of terrorist violence is a chiefly post-1980s affair (15).

10   Such a narrative legitimizes forms of intervention premised on 'saving' Muslims (especially women) that simultaneously establishes a hierarchy of global good with western liberals at the top (Abu-Lughod 2015). I return to this in detail later.

11   As Bilgin (2008) has also shown, such is the hegemony of western IR that "think-ing past western IR" is fraught with the difficulty of separating out those western discourses suffused in non-western approaches, due in part to the ways in which modernity has been imagined as a western project discounting (erasing) the con-tributions of others. Indeed, as Acharya and Barry Buzan have also noted, almost all IR theory "is produced by and for the West, and rests on an assumption that western history is world history." The need to diversify the field so as to make it less hegemonic has also already been noted (Shani 2008) but, as will be shown, Kuru does not allow for critique of the "assumptions of western cultural distinctiveness and superiority which are constitutive of the discipline" (Krishna 1993; Tickner 2003; Pasha 2005; Hobson 2007; Hutchings 2007; Shani 2007a).

12   Cesari pushes back on Hallaq's characterization of the state/Islam dialectic as one of incomparability (2018, 2-3; see also Emon 2016). For purposes of our discussion, however, I believe Hallaq is closer to the truth in terms of outlining the indepen-dence of the ulema in the face of executive authority. For an interesting example from the Ottoman era, see Sheikh 2016.

13   This alternative narrative of history can form an important backdrop for further debate about the role of Islam in the world, a debate free of orientalist assumptions and paternalistic analysis that ignore indigenous solutions to contemporary prob-lems of political order.

14   It is not exaggeration, therefore, to say that the narrative Kuru establishes here legitimizes the attack against the ulema in Kosovo rather than allowing for their positive role in the development of a just political order.

15   For Kuru, conservative forces continued to dominate from the twelve century onwards, stifling innovation. Of particular note is a faction of Muslims, known as Salafis, who are blamed for this and dealt in characteristically uncritical ways: "Salafis take the Quran and Hadiths literally and reject any innovative interpreta-tions" (16). Kuru ignores the various strands of Salafism, from the quietist to violent and everything in between (Bubalo and Fealy; Liow 2009; Salae 2017; Anjum 2016). Blagden and Porter (2021) similarly produce such narratives. For Kuru, drawing particular ire is the figure of Ibn Taymiyya, one of the most illustrious and misun-derstood figures in history. It is worth dwelling on this briefly because it again shows the tendency of Kuru to caricature Islamic history and the ulema and to ignore scholarship that disproves his ideas. His attacks against Ibn Taymiyya—the "rep-resentative" of the "jurisprudential approach" (149)—is used to contrast regressive figures with enlightened philosophical ones (represented by Ibn Rushd and others) and to buttress his point about the lack of intellectual enquiry in the Muslim world from the 13th century onwards (as compared to events in Christian Europe). Serious scholarship on Ibn Taymiyya by prominent scholars like Michot (2011; 2012; 2013), Anjum (2012; 2016) and Hoover (2006; 2019) is completely neglected in favor of outdated works that paint misleading images of Ibn Taymiyya. He becomes a proxy for all that is wrong with contemporary ulema. This leads to absurd claims that Ibn

Taymiyya promoted "literal understandings", "attacked logic," and the "ulema-state alliance (146). Such claims appear to be stem from Kuru reading the title of Wael Hallaq's book *Ibn Taymiyya Against the Greek Logicians* (1993) without actually delving into it. As Kuru notes, Ibn Taymiyya spent much of his life in prison due to his religious and political activism and indeed died there. His ideas have been used both to promote quietism and radical moves against authority. (Thus he is clearly not a simple authoritarian.) What is more, his contributions to philosophy, politics, ethics, legal theory, economics, and more should not be reduced to soundbites and distortions.

16 For a typical report in the *New York Times*, see Sanger and Shear 2021; its equivalent can also be found in the *Financial Times*, see Findlay, Yousafzai and Manson 2021.

17 Thomas Friedman, "'What Joe Biden and I Saw After the U.S. Invaded Afghanistan," *New York Times*, April 18, https://www.nytimes.com/2021/04/18/opinion/joe-biden-afghanistan-2002.html.

18 Kuru boasts of it being translated into Indonesian while the Turkish, Arabic and Japanese are forthcoming. See https://www.jadaliyya.com/Details/40252; such interviews about the book have also featured in Balkan media: https://balkans.aljazeera.net/teme/2020/8/30/ahmet-t-kuru-samo-politicki-i-finansijski-nezavisna-ulema-moze-donijeti-promjene.

19 https://watson.brown.edu/costsofwar/papers/2021/USCounterterrorismOperations.

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