



West and East: No Binaries after Today

Isam M Shihada & Mahmoud El Herthani

Book Review: Tariq Ramadan, *The Arab Awakening: Islam and the New Middle East* (London and New York: Penguin Group, 2012)

Introduction

In "*Islam and the Arab awakening*" we find that Tariq Ramdan is interested in the relationship between Islam and the West. Besides to the fact being a graduate of Geneva University of philosophy and French literature and his work as a professor of Islamic Studies at Oxford University, he has various interests. He visited many countries including Latin America, Africa and India as a social activist. He is known for focusing on the centrality of human values, a peaceful civilized co-existence and Islamic reference. Ramadan chairs the Research Centre of Islamic Legislation and Ethics at Doha, Qatar. Ramadan authored more than thirty books including "*Western Muslims and the future of Islam.*"; "*Islam, the West, and the Challenge of Modernity.*"

In "*The Arab Awakening*", Ramadan tackles the issue of orienting the Arab revolutions or Arab Spring which he names it, uprisings" rather than "revolutions". The book consists of an introduction, four chapters and sequels. In the introduction, Ramadan poses certain questions; what did really happen in Tunisia and Egypt? And what is happening now in the Arab region and its timing? Through the four chapters of the book, we find him focus on the context of the uprisings which are raging in the Arab world, the internal and external factors which caused them. Ramadan also discusses the contradictory Western policy which backed dictators in the Arab world and, simultaneously, pledge support now to the activists who are against the dictators. Ramadan also illustrates extensively the intricate relationships between Islam, Islamism and secularism. But in regard to the Islamic reference, he singles out one whole chapter for it.

Revolutions or uprisings?

Questions may arise whether what it takes place in the Arab world revolutions or uprisings. Is it liberation or just a Western interference? Why do they occur now? What are the roles of Muslims? What are the potentials of Muslims in charting their own future and participating effectively in the International arena?

In spite of the pessimistic tone of the Ramadan, he reiterates asking these questions in an atmosphere of optimism. He keeps wondering about the nature of the coming state in the Arab world and is also very concerned about the campaign of the political polarization between Islamists and secularists. The author implies that these uprisings, though most of them are under control, were planned in Western capitals and research centers in light of



principles for peaceful demonstrations which were planned by external circles and applied by the activists which consequently led to their success.

The West did not and will not concede its vital economic interests in the region easily. When it became clear to the Western policy makers that the rule of the leaders and dictators, who previously ensured these interests, is coming to an end, they opted to precede these events by changing their policy in a way that keeps their domination on the Arab region. Hence, the new Western policy took the shape of planning peaceful demonstrations in 2003.

Ramadan sees that there is a strange change in the attitude of the West towards Muslims. Muslims were viewed as the “Other” but surprisingly, they are now viewed as “alternatives” that are accepted in light of Arab uprisings.

Ramadan also sheds light on the rising power of China in the region and the gradual decline of American power citing views of some analysts that the ascendance of China serves Arab people but he rejects flatly this view on the basis that China has its own vital economic interests, political ambition and its miserable record of human rights cannot be taken for granted.

Made- to-order uprisings?

There is a difference between both the terms of revolution and uprising. Uprising as a category can be situated half way between revolution and revolt. Uprising does not become a revolution till it is carried to its fullest extents and overthrows the existing regime, the political and economic system affiliated to it. Hence, Ramadan uses the term uprising for its accuracy in the case of what is happening in the Arab world.

It seems that Arab uprisings have never been predicted or expected but if we think deeply, we may come out with different interpretations. For example, President George W. Bush explained that the war in Iraq constituted a first step toward a global democratic movement in the Greater Middle East and that Islam was by no means opposed to democracy. It is no secret that successive European and American administrations had made it clear for political and economic reasons that the region’s dictatorships had to change as a necessary precondition for opening Arab markets and integrating the region into the global economy and not for the sake of down trodden people.

For Ramadan, if the Western powers have not taken the initiative from the start, they would not have found themselves unable to control the situations in an area very vital for Western interests since everything was liable to explosion. The rise of powers like China and Turkey encouraged the West to move before the loss of the moment. It is also naïve to think that countries like America, France and China were just observers for what is going on this area. But this does not mean that the “Uprisings” were stirred by external powers totally but there are reports which indicate that there was a pre plan represented in training a number of Arab young people to use web-based social networks such as Facebook and Twitter. For instance, April 6 Youth Movement’s members in Egypt were



trained in using the social media network in Belgrade and America before the uprising in Egypt by three years. There are also three nongovernmental organizations financed by the American government which took part in the events which happened in Egypt; “Albert Einstein Institution,” “Freedom House,” and International Republican Institute.” The principles of these three institutes are to celebrate democratic values, mobilize people nonviolently, and bring down regimes without violent confrontation with the police by using slogans to shape mass psychology.

Within this context, Ramadan sees that the Arab Awakening is not made by Islamist movements since these uprisings are not connected in any way to any cultural or Islamic background. The mass movements took to the streets without them and without even the approval of their leaderships. The uprisings’ fuel was males and females indignant and very angry at the miserable conditions in their countries. Hence, we find that these uprisings are devoid of any religious or anti West slogans. Ramadan thinks that the Arab uprisings have created new image of Arab people in the Western consciousness. Put differently, Arab people were viewed by the West as an example of the Muslim who does not learn but they have proved that they are similar to the Western people, believe in values of freedom, equality and justice and long to live as human beings with dignity. One may argue that this is the first time the West doesn’t view the Arab world as the “Other” and the Muslim who rejects to be developed. But the question persists how will the West deal with the Islamists who are replacing the dictators in the Arab world? For Ramadan, the West has no slight problem in dealing with the “political Islam” on one condition as long as its economic and political interests are protected by the new Islamic regimes. The Western alliance with the Saudi regime and even Taliban regime is a testimony on that.

Cautious Optimism

The author explains the impact of Al Jazeera which was viewed by more than 40 million viewers during the uprisings which represented a real narrative of what is going on in the Arab world in contrary to the narrative circulated by the means of communication owned by the regimes. Ramadan sees the timing of the killing of Osama bin Laden and the way the killing operation is represented and broadcasted can be seen as a metaphor of the new American policy in the Arab region. It is as if America wants to say that let us forget the painful past and let us open a new page with our relations. This is can also be emphasized in the celebration of the West and its institutes of the uprisings, though spreading democracy in the Arab world has never been their sole objective.

Furthermore, Ramadan does not ignore the economic factor behind the ongoing changes in the Arab world. The West’s need for resources increases daily. The Arab league demanded imposing a no-fly zone over Gaza Strip through the Israeli invasion on Gaza Strip in 2008 and it was never applied and it was not even discussed on the United Nations but when the Arab League itself asked for no-fly zone over Libya, it is applied instantly by the Western powers to the extent that the Secretary General of the Arab League, Amr Moussa, criticized the misuse of the United Nations’ powers. “Libyan oil, it seems, is thicker than Palestinian blood.” (Ramadan 2012:55). This may indicate clearly that the economic dimension is the center of the Western policy. For Naom Chomsky, “the United



States will never permit the processes of democratization to develop fully: the stakes are too high, and the consequences potentially too dangerous. Arab popular opinion dislikes the American presence, a fact the Americans are fully aware of: hence their preference for pliable political leaders or the military”. (Ramadan2012:54) Chomsky does not also see any new change on the horizon in terms of US long-term strategy. The Obama administration, like those before it, will find a way to prevent the process from being carried through and will, at best, permit only managed democracies to be set up.” (Ramadan2012:54) One may argue that there are many examples in recent history of these “democratic” transformations.” One may cite the Shah’s Iran, the Philippines under Marcos, Congo’s Mobutu Romania’s Ceausescu, and Indonesia’s Suharto where all these regimes were protected and supported for economic interests, and ironically later toppled in the name of democratic ideals in order to cover up a new European and American policy of domination and control.

The West and due to its economic interests will never permit a true democracy which may hinder its interests but they will allow a controlled democracy Examples of what happened in Haiti, Nicaragua and South Korea may testify to the Western policy of economic domination. Due to the importance of economy, China is present with its economic power and its political ambition which will not stop at ecology only but armament too. Militarily, China will be a counterpart to America in 2020 according to the American national Security Council, especially, since China spends a lot on arming. Politically, China’s foreign policy did not conform to the American policy towards Hamas in Palestine, China sent an invitation to Dr. Mahmoud Al Zahar, Hamas foreign minister, to visit China and criticized the American policy in the Middle East which made her garner support among the Arab people. This may pose a challenge to the American hegemony in the area, in a way that may drive American policy makers to rethink seriously of their policies in the Middle East.

Islam, Islamists and Secularization

The author discusses the relationship between Islamists and secularists and sees that both parties are in deep crisis. Secularism is no longer a favorable in the Arab countries since the secularists’ focus on the concept of separating religion from the state as a priority for progress is not all what Arab countries need now. It is noteworthy that many secularists have adopted the Western life style and ignored the cultural sensitivity of Arab people though there are many great Arab secularists like Edward Said who criticized the West as a colonizer but they fell miserably short in understanding their history and culture in a way that made their view towards the nation partial, reductive and sometimes harmful.

On the other side, Ramadan thinks that the Islamists don’t have a clear agenda or program. Though Islam encourages diversity and democracy but we can see that the world heads towards an era of post- Islamist movements where Islam can be a reference but not in the way done before. The author cites an example of Turkey under the rule of Justice and Development party. This party has Islamic reference but not Islamist as the way understood. Within this context, Ramadan asks seven questions he sees that Islamists



should answer accurately. Who is the Muslim? What is their attitude towards violence? Is Islamic jurisprudence a closed or an open system? What is their attitude towards establishing Islamic parties? What is the role of woman within the party and society? What is the nature of the relationship between Muslims and non-Muslims? Is there any other alternative than confronting relationship with the West?

The Islamic Reference

Ramadan introduces Islam as an essential element in the relationships between the East and West. The author asks till when Islam will represent the “Other” for the West, urging Muslims to exert sincere efforts in fathoming their position in the world and their relationship towards the “Other”. Ramadan explains that most of Islamist movements have gone through substantial change. The civil state was not on the agenda of Islamists movements who called for Islamic nations for decades. One may argue that this change of attitude and position of Islamist movements is due to the endless efforts of scholars Sheikh Yusuf al-Qaradawi and Tunisian leader Rached Ghannouchi who see there is no contradiction between democracy and religion besides to their interest in jurisprudence in seeing the affairs of people and their living. The problem of Islamists with secularists in the past is that they used to look at secularists as people who adopt the vision of the West. But things change and we find some Islamists like Heba Ezzat call for “Islamist Democratic Secularism” To elaborate more, for left-wing intellectual Muhammad Imara, he sees that “the Islamic state is a civil state, ”based on *Shura* or consultation. For Ramadan, in order to facilitate effectively the concept of “Islamist Democratic Secularism”, we must focus on educating all the society.

No Binaries after Today

The author concludes his book that the binary relationship between the West and the East is declining nowadays and in the coming two decades, it will lose its meaning and wonders if the Arab world is ready for this cultural change and probably the Arab awakening will be useful within this context. There is also responsibility lying on the shoulders of Muslims living in the Western world to be an element of stability in the West, bridge the gap and enhance the understanding between the Eastern and Western World. He finally emphasizes on the importance of working towards consolidating the values of freedom, justice, progress, human rights and women empowerment and just rule politically and economically.

References:

Tariq Ramadan, *The Arab Awakening: Islam and the New Middle East* (London and New York: Penguin Group, 2012)



Teaching Myung-hee

Jimalee Sowell

I waited outside the subway exit at five o'clock on a Saturday afternoon for Myung-hee—just as we had planned, but she didn't come. I walked around a bit—up and down the sidewalk and went into a store and bought some stationery supplies—thinking she would arrive soon. It began to rain. I started to feel annoyed. I had put so much effort into setting up the appointment, and I was the foreigner—I was the stranger in a strange land, trying to manage in a language that I was only somewhat functional in. Where was she? Finally, I called again. “Oh, you're there? Okay, I'm on the way. I'll leave in a few minutes.” In spite of all our back-and-forth texting the previous week and especially that day, Myung-hee hadn't trusted that I would actually show up for our tutoring session. Eventually, she arrived at the subway station exit with her daughter—both of them on bikes that they walked back to their apartment as I walked with them. There was no talk about why she was late, no apologies or excuses.

On the way back to Myung-hee's apartment, she did her best to speak English.

“Nice to meet you,”

“How old are you?”

and later,

“Do you have a boyfriend?”

These are important first-meeting questions for Koreans. They need to know your age so that they know how to address you, the kind of language used relates to whether you are older, younger, or the same age. The boyfriend question—usually, it was a marriage rather than boyfriend question, but I guess I didn't look married. Marriage is extremely important in Korean society, and though Myung-hee might have had some pity for me for not having a husband, at least if I had a boyfriend, there would be some hope. Of course, I asked her the same questions. She was in her early thirties, and she, at first, claimed to have a husband. Later, she referred to her husband as her boyfriend saying that, of course, she wasn't married. How could she be?

“It's too expensive to get married.”

It was hot that day, and Myung-hee, was wearing a T-shirt. She had a long, raised scar on her upper arm that I was probably spending too much time looking at. “I escaped from a North Korean firing squad, carrying my daughter on my back,” she said. “I'm from North Korea,” she continued as though she didn't quite realize I already knew that. Before we were allowed to start our volunteer tutoring work, the organization I was working through told us not to ask about our students' previous lives in North Korea. Before I had a chance to respond, she continued, “Life in South Korea is hard.” Then, she showed me around her apartment, and we chatted a bit more; I left, promising to return the following week for our first official lesson.