

Prikazi knjiga / Review Article

Tariq Ramadan, *Islam and the Arab Awakening*,
New York, USA: Oxford University Press, 2012.
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Many opportunistic books have been published on the Arab uprising and the way how the Arab societies should organize themselves in aftermath of the uprising. The term Arab uprising, or the *Arab Spring*, refers to the rise of major populist movements in Middle East and North Africa (MENA). Tariq Ramadan in this book discussed the events and circumstances that led to the opposition to the authoritarian regimes in 2011-2012, and how these events affected the future of the Muslim world. The book's 'overarching concerns' is crystallized in the question: as the Arab awakening unfolds, what role will religious references play? (p. 4.) Specifically, "the purpose of this book is to situate Islam as a religious and ideological reference in the Arab awakening" (p. 67). Very importantly, Ramadan stated that this book does not claim "...to reveal secrets, to unveil what may be strategic goals, and even less to predict the future" (p. 1). In fact, he studied the realities and suggested some lessons, not only to the Arab world but also to other Muslim majority societies.

This book consists of four main chapters in addition to the introduction and appendix. The main text of this book is only 144 pages, and the remaining 65 pages consist of 28 previously published articles by Tariq Ramadan on Arab awakening. By reading the book's appendix, the readers will encounter a wide range of viewpoints at differing points in time, coupled with analyses that have not necessarily been developed in the first four chapters of this book. For those who are not familiar with the social-cultural and political-economical components of the pre-uprising societies in the Arab world and the early commentaries on the Arab awakening, it would be advisable for them to read the appendix before going through more comprehensive chapters. On the other side, the four

main chapters of the book repeatedly stressed the Arab awakening as diversity and evolving character of Muslim responses to political and economic changes. Additionally, in the first two chapters of this book, Ramadan outlined the position of Arab societies regarding the mass mobilization against the authoritarian regimes that shocked many MENA and Western countries. The interpretation of these events lies between twofold perceptions: a premature celebration of radical reform, and a cynical dismissal of popular protest movements as being manipulated by external forces (the Western countries). The third chapter includes a bulk of criticisms and discussions about the public discourse in the Arab societies. This is marked by a polarization between ‘Islamists’ and ‘secularists’ on one hand, and between Muslims and the West on the other hand. In the last chapter, Ramadan offers an explanation of the role that Islam played in the Arab awakening. He advocates a systematic re-thinking whereby Islam becomes an ethical framework (applied ethics) guiding political conduct and ensuring the social justice in the Arab world.

Tariq Ramadan preferred to use uprising referring to mass movements in Middle East and North Africa (MENA) to describe the common character, because for him the ‘uprising’ refers to *‘unfinished revolution’*. The Arab uprising in MENA was not caused spontaneously and casually as they may seem at first. In case of Egypt and Tunisia, the two countries where protest movements first emerged, for instance, the primary cause of mobilization were economic issues: unemployment, inflation, low wages, etc. Another cause that eventually led to the Arab uprising was democratization project of the Middle East launched by the Bush administration as early as 2003. All of the uprisings in MENA had in common – fighting against dictatorship and corruption. Specifically, “the Arab awakening has clearly not been the work of Islamist movements” (p. 14), but rather involved all social strata. Additionally, Ramadan frequently affirms that the uprisings cannot be understood as phenomena directed and manipulated by foreign powers. Ramadan never systematically developed this idea. He claims:

“...the Arab uprisings are by no means a case of Western-controlled manipulation, as the most pessimistic would have it” (p. 10).

However, the Western Powers (United States and European countries) had a direct influence in creating the environment for the popular uprisings. Initially, Ramadan mentions the role of internet and media such as *Google*, *Facebook*, *Twitter* and *blogging* in forming the awareness of uprising. The Western countries provided significant assistance in the development of the oppositional skills of the *‘cyber-dissidents’*. He added that “a significant number of young activists and bloggers were given training by three American government-financed nongovernmental organizations (NGOs): the *Albert Einstein Institution*, *Freedom House*, and the *International Republican Institute*” (p. 11). Three principles and methods characterized all of these three organizations: celebrating democratic values, mobilizing people nonviolently, and bringing down regimes without confrontation

with the police or the army by using symbols and slogans to shape mass psychology (p. 11). The popular uprisings in MENA did not fully emerge out of the Western hands, the uprisings can be determined to some extent as Western-made product. However, Ramadan concluded “whatever the schemes and the manipulations of the Great Powers, the future of the Arab awakening will depend on the capacity of each society to take its fate into its own hands, to develop new approaches, and to open new perspectives” (p. 65). On the other side, the Great Powers for decades have been allied with Arab authoritarian regimes that people struggle to overthrow, Ramadan claims:

“For decades there has been an objective alliance between Arab dictatorships and the Western powers that have, without exception, supported dictatorial regimes in North Africa and the Middle East in the name of maintaining stability and safeguarding the West’s geopolitical and economic interests” (p. 13).

The Western alliances with the Arab authoritarian regimes were created simply because it was more profitable to work with a dictator like *Hosni Mubarak* than with an Islamist government. The Arab uprising recalled that the problem for the West is not Islam or Islamism, but whether Muslims and Islamists can be bought. Ramadan then added “with or without dictatorships, with or without Islamism, we arrive at the same conclusion: private interests must be protected. They may be dictators or Islamists, but Western governments’ best friends are those who best serve their interests” (p. 14). Nevertheless, the Islamism has been used as a pretext by the Western powers to intervene in the domestic affairs of Muslim countries. Due to economic and security reasons, countries in Middle East and North Africa are too much strategically important to Western countries (energy security) to be left to their own people. Therefore, democratization is not a solution for that region, but rather a part of the problem. “Certainly neither the United States nor Europe, not to mention Israel, will allow the Egyptian people to make their dream of total democracy and freedom come true” (p. 163). The July 2013 military coup in Egypt of elected president *Mohamed Morsi* clearly marked the failure of Egypt’s two-year attempt to realize the democratization of the country after the 2011 mass uprising against the authoritarian regime (Brown, 2013). The democratic West remained approvingly silent. Under such circumstances, with the clash of the popular uprising and the foreign powers’ interest, what roles can Islam play or what role Islam played?

Ramadan argues that there is one single Islam, a diversity of interpretation – one of which is *Political Islam*, and plurality of cultures. He added that Islam “as a religion, cannot be reduced to the behavior of one or of a small group of its faithful” (p. 69). The oversimplification of the diversity is frequent and dangerous. As an example for the Political Islam, Ramadan explained the evolution of the *Muslim Brotherhood* which was founded in 1928 by *Hassan al-Banna*. It began as a non-violent anti-colonialism movement, but became more radicalized as early as

1960. It suggested twofold matters on which the Muslims should pay attention. First, secularism is not incompatible with Islam. In his arguments, Ramadan says that “some people continue to refer to secularization and secularism, or to Islam and political Islam, in terms either directly borrowed from Western definitions and categories, or little better than ideologically generated caricatures” (p. 80). The real issues, in Ramadan’s view, involve defining “the relationship of Islam to authority in its many forms” (p. 81). Along this line – the distinction between divine and human authority, Ramadan briefly mentioned the examples of *Ibn Rushd*, *Mâlik ibn Anas* and *Ahmed ibn Hanbal* and their criticism and opposition on state authoritarianism. The courage of Mâlik ibn Anas and Ahmad ibn Hanbal cost them years of imprisonment. However, both of them “are seen as too ‘religious’ to be recognized as having early drawn a distinction between the two authorities, divine and human, doing so not only as Muslim scholars but also as legal philosophers” (p. 83). Muslims, Ramadan recommended, should reconcile themselves with this aspect of their history, and stop seeing themselves through the prism of the West. Rather, Muslims should read their history, and not allow ignoring their own past and their own being. Second, Muslims should reconsider three fundamental policies: economic (agricultural) policy, educational policy, and media and cultural policy. Ramadan added that secularists have “nothing new to offer in these three vital policy categories” (p. 88). There cannot be a true democracy without the profound restructuring of the economic priorities, redefining the schooling system by enabling women to study, work, and become financially independent, and developing a more open and transparent media. The Islamist government – particularly in Egypt, has been less successful in developing new policies and the ‘new policies’ were obstructed by the Western Powers. Referring to Muslim Brotherhood and Mohamed Morsi, Ramadan added “nothing new, nothing forward-looking was said about economic, social, or political issues” (p. 93). It was too soon to judge the policy and strategy of Muslim Brotherhood and Mohamed Morsi just after the revolution. Morsi offered a new foreign policy that was different than the one employed by Hosni Mubarak for decades. “For over 30 years Egypt’s foreign policy has stood on three key pillars: building strategic relations with the United States, maintaining the peace treaty with Israel, and promoting the security of Arab states in the Gulf” (Morsy, 2013). The peaceful relations with Israel became questionable under the Morsi government because of his ties to the Muslim Brotherhood, which does not recognize Israel. Additionally, the regional cooperation could become a reality with an Islamic government in Egypt. Iran, for instance, has expressed a great interest in restarting the relations with Egypt under the government of Morsi. Morsi’s government aimed in strengthening the country’s position in the international affairs.

Ramadan speaks of Islam “as a corpus of principles and objectives capable of orienting and inspiring political action” (pp. 106-107) in a framework of the

ethics of good governance. He added that “a genuine, tangible process of reform, democratization and liberation cannot take place without a broad based social movement that mobilizes civil society as well as public and private institutions. It is precisely here that the reference to Islam assumes...an immediate, imperative and constructive meaning” (p. 113). He also refreshed the old-style Islamic unity of ‘religion’ and ‘state’ by replacing the concept of *‘Islamic State’* with an idea of *‘Civil state’* endorsing the “existence of two distinct authorities: one political, the other religious” (p. 105) guided by the *‘applied ethics’*. Specifically, Ramadan claims that “applied ethics cannot be reduced to an assessment of whether the technique of a transaction is licit or illicit (halal or harâm). It is a matter of the highest ethics to begin by reclaiming the wealth of the land and the nation: oil, gas, enterprises of both the private and public sectors” (p. 123). In this sense, the *“shari’a* is not a rigid, sanctified legal structure. Quite the contrary: it corresponds with a spiritual, social, political, and economic dynamic that reaches toward higher goals” (p. 114).

Ramadan also examined the future of political Islam, the crisis of democracy, the triumph of neoliberal capitalism, the *‘four social priorities’* (education, employment, women’s rights, and campaign against poverty and corruption), the compatibility of Islam with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and democratic values, and the relations among the Muslim majority countries. As noted in the book, the former Turkish Prime Minister *Necmettin Erbakan* stated that the “trade among European countries is between 70 percent and 80 percent, while trade among Muslim countries is only 7 percent. We must increase the percentage” (p. 100). Ramadan elaborated that “the intent was clear: in addition to carrying out an Islamization policy at home, a new ‘Islamic’ power bloc was to be created through economic means within the existing world order” (p. 100). According to the Islamic Development Bank the lack of political will, cross-border disputes and mistrust are major factors hampering the development of trade among *Organization of Islamic Cooperation* (Dawn, 2012). However, Erdoğan’s priorities were different than Erbakan’s: he turned toward the West and the European Union, aiming to integrate Turkey into a union that would be primarily economic. Therefore, Ramadan says that one Muslim majority country was successful in implementing attractive economic, social and political policies: Turkey.

In conclusion, the book *Islam and the Arab Awakening* can be considered as worthy addition to Ramadan’s already considerable oeuvre. He has consistently put forward his reformist ideas by maintaining the appreciation for the past, understanding the present and discussing possibilities of the future for the Muslim majority societies. He has thought that there will be many challenges ahead with democratization in countries including Egypt, Tunisia, Syria, and Yemen. His arguments remained undeveloped taking into consideration the events that emerged after the publication of this book (e.g. emergence and strengthening of ISIS etc.). Very interestingly, Ramadan concluded that Egypt will face difficulties

in the democratization, because "...neither the United States nor Europe, not to mention Israel, will allow the Egyptian people to make their dream of total democracy and freedom come true" (p. 163). This has proved to be true because the Western countries remained silent on the 2013 Egyptian military coup on the democratically elected government. More importantly, Ramadan considered Turkey as a stable Muslim majority democratic country, but a year after the publication of the book, the *Gezi Park* riots broke out in Turkey in 2013, and the failed *coup d'état* in July 2016 became a part of the Turkish history. The serious problem of this book is that the author didn't see many events and developments coming. This book only illustrates the early stages of the Arab uprisings.

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