

Islam and the Arab Revolutions: The Ulama between Democracy and Autocracy

By Usaama al-Azami

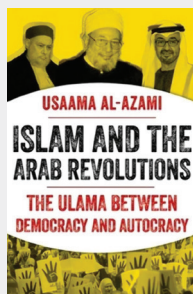
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Reviewed by Abdessamad Belhaj, University of Public Service

There is a plethora of scholarly literature available discussing the causes, dynamics, and effects of the Arab Revolutions. However, the part Islam played in the sequence of events leading up to and developing throughout the years 2011-2013 is not well understood. While the majority of elections held in North Africa were won by Islamist parties, Islamism (the author uses the terms of Islamism as well as political Islam) nonetheless is a political player, and its discourse does not properly represent religious attitudes towards the Arab Spring. Thus, it is still unclear how the religious scholars, or *'ulamā'*, who stands in for the highest authorities in Sunni Islam, feel about these developments.

This book, *Islam and the Arab Revolutions: The Ulama between Democracy and Autocracy*, by Usaama al-Azami, provides examples from prominent religious thinkers from Egypt, the U.S., and the rest of the Arab world. The focus is especially on al-Azhar and its opponents, who have been acrimoniously arguing over the legitimacy of the revolutions. The author, Usaama al-Azami, is an Associate Faculty Member at the University of Oxford, who specializes in Islamic intellectual history Islamic political philosophy, law, and ethics.

This book is divided into 9 chapters. The author addressed Yusuf al-Qaradawi in chapters 1 and 2, focusing on his early support for the



Arab Revolutions beginning in January 2011, particularly with the Egyptian demonstrations that resulted in Hosni Mubarak's removal on February 11, 2011. Al-Qaradawi's enthusiastic support for the revolutions is demonstrated by his extensive quotations from Islamic scripture, including hadith reports from the Prophet

and verses from the Qur'an. These references are directly linked to the events taking place in the region, advancing the Islamic principles of upholding justice, prohibiting immorality, and opposing oppression and tyranny.

The opinions of Sunni-Sufi-Azhari leaders who opposed the Arab Spring are discussed in chapter 3; these leaders include Ali Gomaa (Egypt), Ahmad al-Tayyib (Egypt), and Ali al-Jifri (a Yemeni scholar who lives in the United Arab Emirates). These scholars have attempted to proclaim the illegitimacy of the uprisings as rebellion while also attempting to restore harmony and order. Even though they expressed an appreciation of the societal factors that led to the protests, they denounced *fitna* (sedition) and advocated staying out of conflict with Mubarak's government. These scholars, however, supported abstaining from hostilities not just with Mubarak but also with al-Assad and other regional authoritarian regimes.

Chapter 4 analyses the positions of Hamza Yusuf (American Scholar) and Abdallah Bin

Bayyah (a Mauritanian scholar who lives in the United Arab Emirates) towards the events of the Arab Spring. Unlike Ali Gomaa, Ahmad al-Tayyib, and Ali al-Jifri, Hamza Yusuf's and Bin Bayyah's reactions to the Arab Revolutions in early 2011 were in between being enthusiastic and hostile. But as things developed, they stopped being hesitant and began to back authoritarian regimes in the Middle East, viewing the call for democracy during this time as a call for war. In chapter 5, the discourse of Ahmad al-Tayyib, the shaykh al-Azhar, and Ali Gomaa, the former grand mufti of Egypt, is expounded upon. They are portrayed as counter-revolutionary figures who played a role in legitimizing the coup and the massacres carried out by the Egyptian army and security forces against the followers of the Muslim Brotherhood between June 2012 and August 2013. Gomaa enthusiastically endorsed using violence against the protestors, whilst al-Tayyib only moderately supported the 2013 Egyptian coup d'état (in favor of Sisi and against Mohamed Morsi).

The discourses of Azhari scholars, especially Hasan al-Shāfi'ī and Muḥammad 'Imāra, who were against Sisi's coup d'état, are illustrated in chapter 6. These Azharis, meanwhile, were intellectuals who had graduated from al-Azhar rather than religious authorities within the institution. All of the latter's higher authorities backed the coup in 2013. 'Imāra and al-Shāfi'ī had several collaborations with Islamism in general and the Muslim Brotherhood in particular. In chapter 7, the author examines Gomaa's stances supporting the Sisi Administration from 2013 to 2017, including the excommunication of Morsi's followers and the cheering of the Rabaa massacre (August 14, 2013). In the following chapter, the author discusses several scholarly responses to the Rabaa massacre from religious scholars such as Rajab Zakī, Yusuf al-Qaradawi, Ali Gomaa,

Aḥmad al-Raysūnī and Muḥammad 'Imāra. Al-Azami argues that by October 2013, Gomaa and his pro-coup associates had essentially lost the moral case, at least outside of Egypt and possibly even inside. The last chapter attempts to understand counter-revolutionary fatwas and their implications beyond the events in Egypt. The author pinpoints republicanism, which is concerned with the survival of Egypt as a nation-state, and authoritarianism in premodern Islam as the origins of anti-revolution discourses in Egypt between 2011 and 2013. Finally, considering that many Sunni scholars supported the Arab Spring, the author questions the notion that Sunnism might be quietist. He concedes that there is a strong Sunni quietist tradition that encourages self-reformation and thus appeals to authoritarians, but he contends that none of the scholars who have voiced opposition to the Arab Revolutions are quietists; rather, they are activists who are dedicated to supporting authoritarian regimes.

This book presents readers with two accounts of the 2011 Egyptian revolution and the 2013 coup d'état. Al-Azhar's religious leaders and other Egyptian scholars inside Egypt primarily backed the Egyptian government in 2011 and 2013 and opposed the Muslim Brotherhood and other revolutionary forces. Conversely, Muslim scholars outside of Egypt were split between groups that supported the revolution (they were close to the Muslim Brotherhood and Qatar) and those that opposed it (anti-revolution scholars who were supported by the United Arab Emirates).

This book's strongest point is its thorough documentation, which includes rich contextualization and translated discourses to illustrate each narrative. This is one area where the book is really informative. In addition to thorough analyses of the perspectives of the

religious leaders, the author includes three appendices with information on Goma and al-Qaradawi.

In terms of methodology, the author employs a current history approach. He arranged the events that happened in Egypt starting in 2011 and continuing through 2017. He then examined how scholars viewed these events. Repetition results from this method as the discourses do not change in a few years. Alongside this historical approach, al-Azami offers thorough theological and ethical examinations of the various religious authorities' perspectives. His comprehension of Sunni political thought enabled him to effectively articulate the meanings of these debates.

The book's major flaw is that the author overtly supports revolutionary voices. Al-Azami

does not approach the topic of investigation with the necessary scholarly and critical detachment. Yet, as a scholar of Islamic studies, he comprehends the political and theological arguments put forth by the anti-revolutionary voices. Often, anti-revolutionary scholars were shown to be on the wrong side of history.

Overall, this book is thorough and informative, using various sources and providing contextualization of religious discourse in light of the political shifts brought about by the Arab Spring. It demonstrates that Islam is a variable –possibly not the most defining one or even not as significant enough as many might think– but it is nonetheless politically and discursively engaged in political events, serving to either validate or undermine the revolutions against the Middle Eastern ruling regimes.

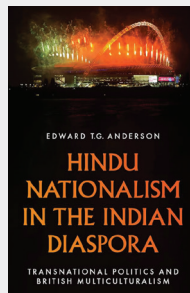
Hindu Nationalism in the Indian Diaspora: Transnational Politics and British Multiculturalism

By Edward T.G. Anderson

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Reviewed by Kerim Sert, Middle East Technical University

In *Hindu Nationalism in the Indian Diaspora*, Edward T.G. Anderson provides a thorough and illuminating exploration of the complex interplay between Hindu nationalism, diaspora communities, and global politics. Edward T.G. Anderson is an assistant professor in History at Northumbria University, Newcastle. He was previously the Smuts Research Fellow in Commonwealth Studies at the University of Cambridge, where he also studied for a PhD in History.



The book, structured around the central theme of Hindu identity and its manifestations in various contexts, unfolds a nuanced narrative that spans continents and decades. The book consists of 6 chapters, an introduction, and a conclusion. Its chronological and thematic approach helps weave a comprehensive tapestry of the multifaceted aspects of Hindu nationalism. In the first chapter, Anderson delves into the historical evolution of Hindu nationalism, particularly focusing on