Book Review

Religious Radicalism and Politics in the Middle East

By Emmanuel Sivan and Menachem Friedman (eds.). Albany: State University of New York, 1990, 244 pp.

The editors of this book seek to explain to the reader the complex reasons for the undeniable phenomenon of religious radicalism in the contemporary Middle East. According to Sivan, the starting point of such an undertaking is the recognition that religious radicalism encompasses both thought and action and that it entails the "rejection" of all other nonindigenous values and cultures. Faced with the challenges of modernity, the religious radicals' response has been "excessive" or "extremist" (terms which are used interchangeably throughout the book with "radical").

The editors have employed a comparative method, as six other (also Israeli) scholars were asked to join them in studying specific Islamic and Jewish movements which featured some form of radicalism. They chose these two religions because, in their opinion, they both share a basic affinity (i.e., the desire to shape human behavior) and, less convincingly, because they wanted to preserve the "unity of space," meaning the Middle East. One should not forget, however, that there are also radical Christian groups in the area. The major Islamic groups studied are the pro-Iranian Gaza-based Jihad, the Shi'i opposition in Iraq, and Iranian pilgrims, whom they call "Khomeini's Messengers." The Jewish groups studied are Gush Emunim, Neturei Karta, and the late Meir Kahane's Kach party.

While the editors acknowledge the difficulty of proposing a comparative framework for the analysis of religious extremism, they do suggest some outlines. The main thesis is that "the essential impulse shared by all movements described here might be termed, following Said A. Arjomand, 'revolutionary traditionalism'; that is, a political radicalism born out of a religious tradition, which transcends that tradition in an attempt to preserve its authenticity in the face of contemporary challenges."[1] Every extremist movement has revived a "myth" from its tradition which has then served as a guiding principle for its struggle of preservation against the forces of modernity. For example, the attitudes of the Neturei Karta and the Gush Emunim toward the state of Israel comes from their interpretation of the tradition concerning redemption.

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[1] Emmanuel Sivan and Menachem Friedman, eds., *Religious Radicalism and Politics in the Middle East* (Albany: State University of New York, 1990), 3.

For the first group, Jews are to remain in exile until God performs the miracle of redemption. The establishment of Israel is therefore an antimessianic and hopeless project, and members of this group accordingly detach themselves from Israeli society and politics. The second movement believes that establishing the state of Israel will hasten the process of redemption and the arrival of the Messiah.

While both Sunni and Shi'i radicals share the same view regarding the challenge of modernity and its cure, namely that "the existing regimes must be delegitimized,"[2] each group has turned to a different historical "myth." Shi'i radicals have revived both the revolution of Ḥusayn, the Prophet's grandson, against corrupt and illegitimate authority and the subsequent celebration of 'Āshūrā'. Sunni extremists have turned to what one of the authors terms "the neo-Hanbalite school" founded by Ibn Taymīyah, who taught that rebellion is legitimate under specific conditions. Thus it was natural, according to these authors, that the "father" of Sunni extremists, Sayyid Quṭb, relied heavily on Ibn Taymīyah's teachings.

Although using the concept of "revolutionary traditionalism" to analyze religious radicalism or extremism may sound plausible, it does not explain why millions of people in the Middle East are turning to religion, especially to Islam. The classic Western explanation has been that this is a reaction to the challenges of modernity, an assertion based on the neo-orientalist school of Middle Eastern studies which, like its predecessor orientalism, fails to understand the nature of Islam and its interaction with the social process in Muslim society. Despite this interpretation's dominance in Western literature, two other competing views have emerged: one from sympathetic observers of Islam like John Esposito, and the other from the Islamists themselves.[3] As for the first explanation, it will continue to misrepresent the Islamic resurgence as long as it does not understand Esposito's analysis of Islam as "faith in history," "the product of a dynamic changing process in which the word of revelation is mediated through human discourse in response to specific socio-historical contexts."[4]

The four authors concerned with Islamic radicalism also overemphasize the Sunni-Shi'i rift. This is a widespread trend in Israeli Arabology, but it does not contribute very much to the explanation of extremism within Muslim society.

There are several other shortcomings. First, although some of the authors are careful about making generalizations, such as Ravitzky who distinguishes

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[2]Ibid., 41.

[3]For example, see Abdelwahab El-Affendi, *Turabi's Revolution: Islam and Power in the Sudan* (London: Grey Seal, 1990).

[4]John Esposito, "1989 Presidential Address: The Study of Islam: Challenges and Prospects." *MESA Bulletin* 24 (1990): 2.

between radical Jewish elements and what he calls "more moderate religious trends" (chapter one), Sivan takes the other extreme by applying his findings to almost all Sunni groups in the Middle East. When he talks about the impact of Sunni groups on the Middle East's political and social processes, the term "Sunni extremists" is expanded to cover movements in Egypt, Tunisia, Sudan, Syria, Pakistan, Morocco, Algeria, and the Arab Gulf states.[6] It is true that there are extremist groups in some countries (i.e., Egypt's al Takfīr wa al Hijrah) and some extremist individuals or tendencies in the mainstream movements of other countries, but to call all of them "extremist" is not acceptable in a scholarly work. For example, in chapter six Yūsuf al Qaraḍāwī is said to have a great influence on one of the radical groups. The fact that he, along with other scholars in the mainstream movements, has battled Sunni extremists is nowhere mentioned.[6]

Second, there is the related issue of comparability. It is legitimate to carry out a cross-religious comparison, but one first has to establish that the objects are indeed comparable. If we want to compare Islamic and Jewish extremist movements, we first have to define what constitutes extremism in each tradition. If we accept that "the essence of extremism is excess," we should look at the mainstream or moderate followers of each tradition in order to measure extremism — unless we measure the supposed extremism of Islamic groups by their position on the Arab-Israeli issue from an Israeli point of view. Thus, while it seems plausible to compare Neturei Karta with al Takfīr wa al Hijrah, it is nonsense to put the Kach party next to the Islamic Tendency of Tunisia. Since one of the editors has already labeled most Sunni groups as extremists, the comparative method is abused from the starting premise.

Third, there are numerous statements which are not accurate. To be fair, most of these inaccuracies are in the introduction and in Sivan's chapter two. Examples are: a) "When in the 1960s modern Sunni extremists looked for a tradition to build upon they naturally turned to Ibn Taymiyya"[7]; b) al Takfīr wa al Hijrah" declared its leader (who was later executed) as Mahdi (Messiah and Caliph)"[8]; c) "The only Sunni organization that gave some thought to the Islamic state is al-Takfir wa-l-Hijra movement in Egypt, which depicted a Caliphate headed by Shukri Mustafa"[9]; and d) "Sunni popular religion considers the Shi'ites heretics and not Musilm; in One Thousand and One

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[5]Sivan and Friedman, 8-9.

[7]For example, see Yūsuf al Qaraḍāwī, *Islamic Awakening between Rejection and Extremism* (Herndon, VA: International Institute of Islamic Thought, n.d.).

[7]Sivan and Friedman, 3.

[8]Ibid., 6.

[9]Ibid., 56.

Nights, for instance, the term Muslim is identical with Sunni, and the Shi'ites are branded as Rafida."[10]

There is also one amusing translation mistake in an endnote to chapter six. A book by al Qaraḍāwī, *al Hulūl al Mustawridah wa Kayfa Jannat 'alā Ummatinā* (sic) is translated as "Imported Solutions and the Way They Have Driven Our Nation Crazy"! *Janat* without stress (*shaddah*) means "led astray" or "destroyed," which is how al Qaraḍāwī uses it, but with *shaddah* it means "to become crazy."

Although its importance is exaggerated, the four chapters on Islamic radicalism do offer a rigorous analysis of the divisions between radical Shi'i and Sunni groups, how they independently developed similar assessments of the situation, and why the "ecumenistic" efforts failed to bring unity or even closeness (*taqrīb*) between the two sects. For those interested in this topic, these chapters are valuable.

Najib Ghadban
City University of New York
New York City, New York