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Book Reviews: International Relations

The Many Faces of Political Islam: Religion and Politics in the Muslim World.

By Mohammed Ayoob. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2008. 232p. \$65.00 cloth, \$22.95 paper.

Broad scholarly claims about Islam and politics used to intersect mostly with debates about democratization or “civilizational” conflict, and the study of political Islam was confined to a specialized corner of the discipline. Since 2001, for obvious reasons, everyone has had an opinion about political Islam, but accessible and serious books to help inform such opinions have remained woefully few. Mohammed Ayoob's *The Many Faces of Political Islam* makes a fine contribution toward remedying this problem, offering a sophisticated and sweeping analysis that will be welcomed by multiple audiences. Written explicitly for advanced undergraduates and general readers, the book will also appeal to scholarly non-specialists looking for a wide-ranging, theoretically informed synthesis of the best work available. No existing book combines such comprehensiveness with clarity, confidence, and authority.

Ayoob presents his account in eight succinct chapters, each divided into sections of fewer than five pages each. An introductory chapter challenges three pervasive “myths”: the unusual and inherent interconnectedness of Islam and politics, the monolithic quality of political Islam, and the inevitable association of Islamism with violence. Chapter two elaborates the book's core argument that Islamist politics reflect the varied and changing domestic conditions found throughout the world. Chapters three through seven present structured comparisons of several countries and forms of political Islam: Saudi Arabia and Iran, as avowed Islamic states; Egypt and Pakistan, as longstanding sources of Islamist ideology and activism; Turkey and Indonesia, as unfolding experiments in Muslim-majority democracy; Palestine's Hamas and Lebanon's Hezbollah, as distinctive Islamist movements in nationalist contention; and the Tablighi Jamaat, Hizb ut-Tahrir, and al-Qaeda, as transnational Islamists. Chapter eight reprises major claims and considers the role of democracy and American foreign policy.

The central theme running throughout this brief text is that Islamist activity reflects local political conditions in highly varied and consequential ways. These conditions are responsible for the growth (or decline) of Islamist opposition, the many specific forms it takes, the willingness of Islamists to participate in democracy, and the likelihood of their resort to violence. Political Islam's domestic variability results from distinctive trajectories of state- and nation-building, which produce an array of shifting state policies and nationally specific conditions. Even seemingly universal Islamist vocabulary gets

refracted through local conditions to create different meanings in each national environment. As Ayoob notes, “no two Islamisms are alike” (p. 15), otherwise-similar groups like Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood and Pakistan's Jamaat-i-Islami are “prisoners of their respective contexts” (p. 88), and self-declared Islamic states like Saudi Arabia and Iran are so distinctive as to defy replication elsewhere. Even transnational Islamists are divided by locale, with only a small minority of international “jihadis” obtaining disproportionate attention by resorting to spectacular acts of violence (p. 37).

National variation in political Islam has profound implications for the Muslim world's democratic prospects. In considering the possibilities, Ayoob emphasizes the indeterminacy of the faith, with “nothing in Islam that militates against Muslim polities adopting democratic forms of rule ... [and] nothing in Islam that prevents autocratic rule in Muslim countries” (p. 93). He does contend, however, that the socializing effects of democratic participation can be powerful and beneficial. Moving beyond the conventional notion that Islamist involvement in elections is purely instrumental—one person, one vote, one time—Ayoob asserts that democratic participation has conditioned mainstream Islamists in Egypt and Pakistan via “a process of political learning” (p. 81) to press for democracy, not only to assure their survival, but out of an eventual genuine commitment to democratic pragmatism and alliance-building. He demonstrates how transformative the domestic political landscape has been for Islamists contributing to Turkey's democratic consolidation, as well as those aiding Indonesia's democratic transition. Resilient authoritarian regimes in the Middle East, in contrast, have eviscerated the secular opposition but created space for Islamist groups, which cannot be eliminated due to the pervasive use of Islam in state legitimation strategies and the ready availability of religious institutions and networks for organizing and mobilizing opposition.

Remarkable in scope, the book's major contribution is its successful marriage of a compelling, theoretically sound general argument with a wide array of specific cases synthesizing the best work by specialists. Rather than offering a string of discrete, disconnected summaries of Islamist activity in various far-flung places, the book makes an exceptionally well-integrated argument about the national origins of Islamism. Its clever comparisons are designed to advance the larger claim while shedding light on the particular cases. The comparative framework is especially valuable because quibbles about individual cases do not undermine the work as a whole. While the author might have included more cases—Sudan, Somalia, and the rest of sub-Saharan Africa are barely mentioned but well-suited to demonstrating the effects of state failure—this is hardly necessary.

Readers should know that this is not an anodyne textbook lacking a discernable point of view or political commitment. As such, not everyone will be convinced by an account that, of necessity, is suggestive of the possibilities more than it is definitive in presenting evidence. Consequently, some readers will differ with the author's assessment of particular cases. While sensibly framed, moreover, in terms of varied experiences with state- and nation-building, the argument lapses occasionally into a linear, even teleological view of political change, and it makes generalizations that some will find

unhelpful. It refers, for example, to “the Muslim countries' current stage of state making and nation building” (p. 93), and makes a few seemingly self-contradictory generalizations about “most Muslims,” (p. 163) as if such a decontextualized formulation can be meaningful or even measurable.

This, of course, is the author's point, for the book is premised on an expansive view of Islam as encompassing both unity and diversity: a single faith, but with strikingly different manifestations emanating from the ground up. The lesson is not that the world's 1.2 billion Muslims cannot be equated with a relative handful of jihadis; it is that millions of politically engaged Muslims cannot be reduced to a single type, militant or not. The irony of recognizing political Islam's many faces will not be lost on attentive readers pondering the American position in the world today: Ayoob shows how Islamism turns the motto E Pluribus Unum on its head by achieving many forms from one faith. Some of these forms, the author agrees, inspire the most reprehensible acts of terrorism. Others, through all manner of political activity, embody the more hopeful possibilities obscured by a jihadi-obsessed overemphasis on al-Qaeda, the only face of political Islam we see in the crowd.