Political Islam: A Critical Reader

Reviewed by Alina Shymanska

What is the true meaning of Political Islam? And why do some followers of Islam prefer violence? Where exactly does this violence originate from? These are just a few of the questions raised in the book Political Islam: A Critical Reader, edited by Frédéric Volpi. This book is a collection of articles written by different authors about issues pertaining to Political Islam. Despite being published in 2011, this book continues to be relevant for those researching Political Islam, its rise, typology, and goals. This book review will mainly focus on the issue of how the violence is presented in the context of Political Islam. For this reason, I will pay particular attention to only two articles among those published in the book. The articles are titled “Origins and Development of the Jihadist Movement” by Gilles Kepel and “A Genealogy of Radical Islam” written by Quintan Wiktorowicz. These can be found in Section Six (“Political Islam and Political Violence”).

Gilles Kepel starts off his article by sharing his opinion on how the United States-sponsored confrontation between the Red Army and jihadists in Afghanistan became an indirect investment into 9/11. According to Kepel, the American government skillfully took advantage of the belief that defensive jihad means the duty of all Muslims to protect their fellow Muslims from external threats. This belief is
what led the legion of Mujahidin attacking the Soviet Red Army immediately after they entered Afghanistan. Kepel says that it was the United States who persuaded the Muslim Brothers (as the author refers to the group) from Egypt and Jamaat-e-Islami that are the equivalent of Muslim Brothers from Pakistan, as well as the Saudi insurgents to fight against the Soviet ‘infidels’ who were oppressing Afghanistan. What the American decision-makers didn’t realize was that the Mujahidin survivors would return to protect the fellow Iraqi nation from the threat of Western expansion during the Gulf War. The author also describes the emergence of al-Qaeda’s suicide bombing between 1996 and 2001; this guerilla military practice was borrowed from the Shi’ite by the Sunni jihadists, and the symbolic meaning of 9/11 demonstrated America’s vulnerability in facing jihadi fighters. Kepel concludes that despite the special characteristics of these terrorist operations and the enormous impact of destabilization that it caused the United States, Islamists ‘had not been able to force the USA to modify its policy on the Middle East’ (p. 268). After 9/11 the United States began to interfere in Middle East issues with doubled intensity.

The article by Quintan Wiktorowich elaborates on the theoretical debates among several Salafi thinkers, such as Mawdudi, Qutb and Faraj on various issues, such as infidelity, global jihad, the jihad outside of the warzone, killing civilians, and suicide bombing. The author tries to demonstrate the way al-Qaida formed visions on the problems mentioned above. The main argument of Wiktorowich is that al-Qaida has intentionally constructed a doctrine that fully justifies their targeting civilians and suicide attacks regardless of the condemnation of these actions by some jihadi ideologists (especially the supporters of non-violent jihad) and prohibitions of suicide in the Quran. The article concludes that there are in fact plenty of controversial points about how the Quran should be understood and how real Muslims should behave and that none of the suggestions can be seen as solely true. For instance, it is hard to answer questions about Mawdudi promoting Sharia law through the means of political reforms or the Qutb, who viewed radical jihad as the only way to build an Islamic state that was more dedicated to Islam and the Quran. It seems like there is no single person, group, or institution that can legitimately claim to speak for all Muslims and Islam as a whole.