The Idea of the Muslim World: A Global Intellectual History

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When President Barack Obama visited Cairo in 2009 to deliver an address to Muslims worldwide, he followed in the footsteps of countless politicians who have taken the existence of a unified global Muslim community for granted. But as Cemil Aydin explains in this provocative history, it is a misconception to think that the world s 1.5 billion Muslims constitute a single religio-political entity. How did this belief arise, and why is it so widespread? *The Idea of the Muslim World* searches for the intellectual origins of a mistaken notion and explains its enduring allure for non-Muslims and Muslims alike.

Conceived as the antithesis of Western Christian civilization, the idea of the Muslim world emerged in the late nineteenth century, when European empires ruled the majority of Muslims. It was inflected from the start by theories of white supremacy, but Muslims had a hand in shaping the idea as well. Aydin reveals the role of Muslim intellectuals in envisioning and essentializing an idealized pan-Islamic society that refuted claims of Muslims racial and civilizational inferiority.

After playing a key role in the politics of the Ottoman Caliphate, the idea of the Muslim world survived decolonization and the Cold War, and took on new force in the late twentieth century. Standing at the center of both Islamophobic and pan-Islamic ideologies, the idea of the Muslim world continues to hold the global imagination in a grip that will need to be loosened in order to begin a more fruitful discussion about politics in Muslim societies today.

The Idea of the Muslim World: A Global Intellectual History Details

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Abdelrahman Mahmoud says

In brief, the book tackles and problematizes the notion of the Muslim world, its emergence, entanglement with contemporary intellectual and political developments, demise, and continual resurgence over a period of 150 years. His contention that Pan-islamism and islamic nationalism survived the caliphate in part because they addressed continuing problems encapsulates the gist of his overall argument.

Overall, his well-argued position decidedly debunks the historical myth that the late 19th and early 20th idea of Caliphate was categorically anti-colonial. By situating Muslim intellectual debates and disparate ideologies into their proper historical context, Aydin provides us a better reading and rethinking of the role of those international movements with an Islamic/Muslim signature, and how their ideologies influenced and were fed by the late Ottoman imperial practices and Cold War dynamics, later.

There are indeed a number of commendable aspects about the argumentative structure and scope of research that underlie this book. For instance, the marked distinction between inter-war pan-islamist thinking and its cold-war era counterpart attests all the more to the pressing need to see the consecutive Muslim World(s) in their pertinent contexts. It persuasively argues that the idea of a united muslim world was first and foremost rooted in the modernist struggle against european hegemony and international world order shaped by racial and ethnic categorization. It also deals a big blow to de-colonial and colonial histories that exaggerate the narrative of the colonized and relentlessly oppressed. self-determination efforts were worked out through the mechanisms laid down by imperial structures and networks.

Moreover, its argumentative framework is bold, divergent and wide in scope, for it doesn't lazily adopt a Saidian model to explain and elucidate such a central notion to Said's polemical works, namely, political categorization and cultural representation.

However, right from the start, you are put at unease with the argument that certain key notions such as the universality of the religion was a completely nouveau polemic used by the anti-imperialist. surely the ontological content of such a concept had metamorphosed in the face of peculiar 19th-century challenges, but they have also sprung from an intellectual and long imperial tradition in the Muslim world(s). Further, his unfettered desire to phrase the discourse of and about the Muslim world during the early 20th century as that of a categorically imaginary entity has to be qualified given the counter-evidences he presents throughout the book. Or at least he should make the differentiation between the imaginary and spiritual more subtle.

Another cogent point made by Aydin is the accommodative nature of the nation-state model to the trans-regional and trans-cultural identities of Muslims around the world. The assumption that the nature of imperial rule and the norms of political organization throughout the past millennium were not brought to an abrupt halt in the Muslim world as people throughout found new ways to express their Muslimness in a miscellany of different manners and ideologies. And this, he maintains, proves that the disruption brought about by the advent of the Muslim majority nation state model did not lie in its political or ontological nature. While this seems like an intuitive position to take, its reductionist approach to identity explains its appeal. While its true that even under the modern nation-states, Muslims were the same heterogeneous group they were before for hundreds for years, nationalism imbued local and regional identities with a new sense of entitlement and belonging that Empires could not bother with

Another confusing pitfall is his assertion, on p 213, that "The Ottoman Empire, and later the Re- public of

Turkey, instrumentalized the notions of caliphate and Muslim world to serve their interests and eventually abandoned both" seems more of a polemical point than a solid argument to be made. While it is true, and he shows aspects of that earlier in the book, that the Caliphate was far from being an ideal ideology that the late Ottoman Empire subscribed to, it is unfortunate, that for the sake of comparison, such a conclusion is emphasized. Which brings us to a more methodological question of how far our comparative outlook can seriously undercut the sort of intellectual history that we are studying and presenting to, I assume in this case, a wider audience. A presumption that makes itself clear in his concluding paragraphs as he rightly maintains that "Countering essentialism demands engagement with history."

Levent Mollamustafaoglu says

Somewhat interesting but has a simple premise: There was no unified concept of a "Mulsim World" before the 1980's, so this concept can not be explained as a root cause of the terrorism of today.

OK but not so creative.

JB says

A somewhat decent treatment of the issue of the "Muslim world," which - although Aydin doesn't spend as much effort in clearly defining and delineating his terms as the reader might like - is taken to refer to "a global Muslim community" existing in sufficient religio-political unity to be treated as a united demographic with common interests.

Aydin's key thesis, that *"Muslims did not imagine belonging to a global political unity until the peak of European hegemony in the late nineteenth century,"* is likely correct. His style of argument, however, is essentially not to present any arguments, but rather to simply narrate the history of discourse about "the Muslim world" as it emerged. Unfortunately, by beginning his book when he does, neglecting to do an in-depth analysis of the distinction (as he sees it) between "the Muslim world" and the *ummah*, and by eschewing clear argument, the effort is rather feeble compared with other treatments of similar themes, e.g., Mona Hassan's *Longing for the Lost Caliphate*.

Moreover, Aydin's work is steeped in a range of postcolonialist tropes (appealing for some readers, perhaps, but not terribly impressive to this one); he frequently reduces any external discourse to mere rhetorical techniques while giving greater credibility to the substantial quality of Muslim authors; and is far too free in applying labels like 'Islamophobic' in many cases where no fair person could see it applying, e.g., in Roman Catholics distributing tracts encouraging conversion to Catholicism.

But, to Aydin's credit, he does disrupt some popular images when he points out the ways in which imperial aspirations and projects were not simply a one-way street; and he does rightly criticize many Islamists for imposing their own ideologies on past figures, movements, and eras that embodied different values and sensibilities.

Mew says

That book taught me so much about History of the Ottoman Empire and the 19th-20th era. It's very detailed and well-documented with a very interesting insight of the notion of religion and race. I recommend it to anyone who wants to Know more about relationship between the Middle East and the world

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Murtaza says

Many Muslims and non-Muslims today take for granted the existence of a coherent and timeless "Muslim world," either asserting its existence in the present, or aspiring to return to it through a project of political unity. But in reality, not only has no such Muslim world ever existed, the whole concept of such an entity was the conscientious creation of both Islamophobes and pan-Islamists during the WW1-era imperial period. When "Muslim" was created as a racial category, the idea of a "Muslim world" gradually came into existence. But this idea was as ahistorical as it was opportunistic.

Before our current world of nation states, most people, of all religions, lived in multi-religious empires. There was no contradiction between being a Muslim living under the British Queen or a Christian living under the Ottoman Sultan. Both were common and unremarkable. But as the empires began to break apart these identities underwent a gradual and inexorable process of "racialization." In response to political developments, Western thinkers began to create an archetype of a "Muslim", both as an imperial subject and as a foreigner. It suddenly became suggested that Muslims shared a political outlook regardless of where they lived in the world. Muslims, like Christians, most often were asking for rights within the imperial system, rather than independence from it. But in response to these claims for equal rights, Western imperial thinkers created a racialized depiction of Muslims as inferior in order to disable their claims. As they were racialized, people slowly began to think of themselves as separate ethnicities and nations that had to live in "their own" political communities.

In response to these changes, nascent Islamist movements began arguing in favor of something called "Islamic Civilization" to assert their own equality with racist Western intellectuals. Despite their generally opposed positions, however, both sides took for granted the existence of a Muslim world that they were arguing over. Pro-Muslim scholars like Arnold Toynbee also fed into this idea, framing the world in "civilizational" terms, of which Islamic Civilization was one. Over time, this idea gained strength and led to people really believing such an entity existed, despite all evidence to the contrary - namely the vast differences among Muslims across political and cultural lines.

This racialized portrait of Muslims has survived in the present day thanks to the actions of both Islamists and Islamophobes, arguing over the characteristics of a unitary entity that never existed. Their arguments are akin to claiming that a "Black Civilization" exists, has certain characteristics, and correspondingly Black people all over the world should volunteer to fight and support certain causes, as though no material differences existed between them. Some in fact do argue this, but it is clear to see how manufactured a discourse it is.

As Aydin demonstrates, none of the signal episodes of "civilizational" clash or triumph between the Muslim world and the West were never understood as such during in their own time. The "Gates of Vienna" battle between the Hapsburgs and Ottomans was a moment in which Muslims and Christians served on both sides, and Napoleon's conquest of Egypt was never seen as a Christian attack on Muslims - Napoleon himself had considered converting to Islam for reasons of political expediency! Counterintuitively to our present way of

thinking, the biggest ever Muslim empire in the world was in fact the British Empire, a body through which Indian Muslims were able to attain a great deal of political power in the world, which they promptly lost after the empire collapsed.

Aydin's book contains many great sections on the contributions of different pan-Islamic thinkers, including lesser known figures like Shakib Arslan (actually a Druze!) and Namik Kemal. As he demonstrates, the idea of a shared political destiny among Muslims actually hit its peak around the time of WW1, a time when the Ottoman Empire was for the first time ever broadly seen as a symbol of Muslims shared hopes for dignity, safety and identity. When Western Christian empires began to break apart the Ottoman realms on religious grounds (see: The Greek War of Independence), it triggered discontent among their own Muslim subjects who viewed these actions as hypocritical and insulting. These Muslims then began to see themselves less as imperial subjects and more as a racialized category (aided in this feeling by heightening imperial racism) with profound links to other Muslims around the world, a process that was expedited by increasing lines of communication and travel among Muslims of different backgrounds. Prior to WW1, the Ottomans were clearly part of the European Concert of Empires and used pan-Islamism mainly as a pro-Western tool for keeping the peace with the Britain, only later deploying it as an anti-British ideology when the political winds changed. Divorced from those imperial origins, pan-Islamism has now become a predominantly anti-imperial and anti-Western approach to world affairs. But as Aydin demonstrates, this is very much a contingent phenomenon rather than something about Islam's inherent political content.

This book does a lot to put Islamic history back in context, particularly the idea that Islam is an "Arab" phenomenon, a claim that would have been totally baffling to anyone living even a century ago. Until recently pan-Islam ran predominantly on an Istanbul to Delhi axis, with Turks and Indians making up the dominant image of Muslims in the world. Only after the fall of the Ottomans and partition of India did Arabs and Persians begin to contest for the leadership of the "Muslim world," and manufacture an image of themselves at its head. The late-Saudi embrace of pan-Islamism (following the Camp David-triggered decline of Egyptian influence) is the most recent and powerful example of this.

Aydin charts a very compelling narrative of how the "Muslim world" discourse has emerged and reinforced itself, generally to the detriment of all. Muslim solidarity and support against oppression does not necessitate arguing for the existence of a shared civilization or political order across the world, and the effort to argue for such an order has been a hugely destructive effort by Islamists and Islamophobes alike. There is an urgent need for disaggregating identities to fight both anti-Muslim racism and religious homogenization. The latter project is currently being pursued most forcefully by the establishments of both Saudi Arabia and Iran, countries that are trying to deploy an illusory "Muslim world" for strategic purposes, just as the late-Ottomans and even Ataturk once did.

This is really an excellent book that I will be thinking about for a long time. Along with unearthing such great history, its biggest value is in demonstrating how contingent and recent many of our ideas about the world and our identities really are.

Hadrian says

Proposes the idea of the 'Muslim World' is comparatively recent in origin - largely from the colonial period of the 19th century and the advent of 'scientific racism'. Yet in response, Muslim intellectuals advocated pan-Islamic ideas in the hope of a more concerted response to foreign influence.

Rajat Yadav says

This book is a pretty dense read if you want to explore the premise of every example and inference used. What really attracted me towards reading it is that the book explores the farcical notion of ancient demand for a Muslim caliphate, and rebuts the idea with tons of examples.

The book speaks of how an Imperial hegemony over dissemination of geopolitical ideas has confused the world post the imperial age into believing that there has always been a semblance of unity among the muslim nations, who are now drawn in their struggle to build an Islamic Caliphate. Cemil Aydin takes every imperialistic notion of the caliphate, and breaks through them by quoting historical facts and precedents that are contrary to the very foundation of such beliefs.

Simplistically, the books brings to fore the idea that Islamic world is not an idea conjured alone by the pious radicals of Islam, but is a consequence of the brutality and marginalization of many muslim majority countries by the English, Dutch, French, Russians and many others.

Lastly, I would like to state that this book should not be treated as the absolute truth, but as an interesting perspective that doesn't usually find resonance across popular mediums. I would however implore you to read this book, and many others like this to better understand the issue.

Thomas Mackell says

super succint and important historical analysis/geneaology of the racialization/essentialization of Islam and Muslims. goes through the eighteenth century up through the fall of the ottoman empire through until the present. dense history but smooth reading

Yasmine Flodin-Ali says

Absolutely excellent. Very helpful global tracing of the racialization of Muslims, predominantly from the 19th century onward. Aydin helpfully distinguishes between the concept of umah and the much more recent created notion of a Muslim world.

Mounaeir says

The last paragraph in conclusion sums it all. Interesting read with a lot of never known facts revolving around politicised theology.

Vivek Tewary says

This is well-written book. The first thing that it brings to mind is that historical research and in particular, any creation of knowledge is a great effort and should not be taken lightly. I consider myself a good reader

but often I had to read entire passages repeatedly because it was the subject matter is difficult.

About the theory itself, it is great. I had a few quibbles but I guess they are mostly trivial. For example, the author sometimes credits people with more clout than they probably had. I cannot cite those examples because I did not make notes while reading. Also, at one point, he mentions that the particular history is not only that of the elites but of the subaltern too, which is followed by one example of such an occurrence. I guess these things are related to the particular methodologies of the subject, of which I am clearly not aware. Nevertheless, I am in wholehearted agreement with the central thesis of this book and many more such clear minded expositions need to be written.

On a trivial note, are there any books where people discuss the methodologies of their discipline, but in a somewhat lighter vein? I do wonder if such books exist for mathematics, say. I know that ethics and conformity to methodologies is probably not what researchers actually do. People want jobs finally.

Sami Eerola says

Good book that goes deeply on the origins of the concept of a united Muslim word. The Only problem is the scarcity of exact references. Still this is way better than the Graham E. Fuller's "A World with out Islam" (2010) that deals with the same concept.