



# **Destiny Disrupted: A History of the World through Islamic Eyes**

*Tamim Ansary*

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We in the west share a common narrative of world history. But our story largely omits a whole civilization whose citizens shared an entirely different narrative for a thousand years. In *Destiny Disrupted*, Tamim Ansary tells the rich story of world history as the Islamic world saw it, from the time of Mohammed to the fall of the Ottoman Empire and beyond. He clarifies why our civilizations grew up oblivious to each other, what happened when they intersected, and how the Islamic world was affected by its slow recognition that Europe—a place it long perceived as primitive and disorganized—had somehow hijacked destiny.

## **Destiny Disrupted: A History of the World through Islamic Eyes Details**

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# From Reader Review Destiny Disrupted: A History of the World through Islamic Eyes for online ebook

## Jimmy says

Things happen, seemingly for a reason. But often I feel in the dark about these reasons. Often I feel like I'm only getting one tiny slice of the truth, the one that's most convenient and easily accessible to me, given my upbringing, my background, my experiences. Turning to the news won't help. The news only focuses on surface events, "the things that are happening are happening!" it proclaims in bold headlines. But how do I begin to understand the forces behind them? What we need is the news with context. News for dummies, maybe. Except we're all dummies. How many of us understand the subtle differences between ISIS and Al-Qaeda? Or even Sunni vs. Shia, beyond the very basics? Instead we turn that part of our brain off and think "terrorist" or "evil". But context is everything, and without it, we see the world only from our own very limited retro-active perspective. How can we continue to broaden that context, continue to see things from a larger and larger world view so that we understand why things happen instead of just *that* they happen?

History, at least when you're talking about traditionally-taught mainstream history (i.e. history for the rest of us, rather than history in academia), is a specific narrative that gets stronger and more homogenous with each generation simply by the power of repetition. Every story has multiple sides to it, any critical thinker knows this--and yet when we're talking about our own story, the story of humanity, why do we only care for one side of it?

And because we're further from the original events, we just parrot that main narrative that's passed down to us, the one the victors wrote. It's disturbing to me that, as Tamim Ansary mentions in this book, most history textbooks have only one chapter dedicated to Islam, out of maybe 30 or 40 chapters. Nevermind the fact that it is one of the most relevant threads of current events. And even if that were not the case, it is the basis for one of the largest, most powerful and culturally rich empires in history, rivaling the Roman Empire. And even if that were not the case, it is the second largest religion, around 1.6 billion people we are ready to not think about. And even if that were not the case, it is more than a religion, it is uniquely also a community project and a political philosophy.

And yet I understand that impulse not to engage. It's uncomfortable. It's difficult. It's messy and unresolvable. Good resources are hard to find and often conflicting. It's so much easier to look upon these parallel accounts as side-stories, almost inconsequential, subsumed in our own larger story. No, it's not that we deny these narratives entirely, but we look upon them as small parts of our story, rather than something completely foreign. That all past events have progressively lead step by step to our own existence, as if we (the storytellers) are the ultimate goal and purpose of human civilization.

If you want to break out of that pattern, then this book is at least one such parallel story that you could investigate. Ansary focuses on the story-arc rather than mundane details. He is very good at conveying the general sweep of many parallel currents. I learned quite a lot from this book, including etymologies of several words and phrases that apparently have their origins in Islamic history. The first few chapters about Muhammad and the four caliphates are the most straight forward, and it's nice to be able to know not only their names but also have a sense of each one's personality, unique governing style, and personal philosophy. And that's very characteristic of this book. Ansary takes time to familiarize you with the backgrounds, personalities and tendencies of the people he writes about, instead of just what they did and when. Obviously, as there are more and more schisms and offshoots, it's a little harder to do that with everyone who shows up in this grand story. But he does a good enough job most of the time that I was highly engaged and

flipping the pages as if I were reading a good mystery.

The conflict wracking the modern world is not, I think, best understood as a “clash of civilizations”, if that proposition means we’re-different-so-we-must-fight-until-there’s-only-one-of-us. It’s better understood as the friction generated by two mismatched world histories intersecting.

History is a narrative, and narratives form our identities, drive our actions. For this reason, Ansary's conclusions are quite significant. He's basically saying that the Western narrative and the Islamic narrative are categorically different. It's not simply that we've left out some events. It's that the understanding of what lead to this moment is driven by two complete different understandings of the world . Thus, when we look at the same current event, we see the causes for this event to be two totally different things. It's like we're a bitter couple, each not hearing the other person in an argument, but only becoming more convinced by our own voices.

"Here are two enormous worlds side by side; what's remarkable is how little notice they have taken of each other. If the Western and Islamic worlds were two individual human beings, we might see symptoms of repression here. We might ask, "What happened between these two? Were they lovers once? Is there some history of abuse?"

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## **David says**

History books are frequently dry and factual, even when not written as textbooks, and when they're not, they tend to reveal the author's biases or axes to grind. Tamim Ansary, however, sets out to tell the history of Islam through Islamic eyes, not as an apologetic for Islam that ignores its less edifying historical episodes and its troubled present, nor as a Westerner viewing Islam as, at best, an exotically misunderstood Oriental tradition, and at worst, the religion of terrorists and oppressed women in burkas.

Tamim Ansary, an Afghan-American, suggests that Islam and the West have for much of history existed in two parallel worlds, only rarely intersecting until the violent last few decades. The Dar-al-Islam, or the entire region that Ansary calls the "Middle World," between the European-dominated West and the Chinese-dominated East, grew, expanded, experienced theological and political revolutions, technological and scientific and literary evolution, and several foreign invasions much more significant than those Crusades that everyone today thinks were the most significant East-West interaction before the modern day.

The vast majority of Muslims, even during the height of the Crusades, simply didn't *notice* the West, which for most of Islam's early history, was an impoverished backwater land of savage, squabbling kingdoms while the Middle East and North Africa was full of wealth and education and glorious cosmopolitan cities. The Crusaders seized some cities and killed a bunch of people and certainly left some profound historical legacies, but didn't materially affected the Islamic world as much as we think they did.

The Mongols, on the other hand... they effed the Muslim world up.

I already knew a lot of Middle Eastern history from my time as an Arabic linguist for the Army. (They made us learn a bit of history and cultural along with the language at DLI.) But it was recited to us by Arabic instructors of varying levels of pedagogical ability and enthusiasm, and came from very dry textbooks. So I

vaguely remembered the Ummayads, the Abbasids, the Ottomans, the various Caliphates and Sultanates and Emirates that rose and fell from immediately after Mohammad's death until the 20th century when Muslim nation states began to congeal into more or less their present forms. But *Destiny Disrupted* tells the entire sweeping epic with a historian's accuracy but a storyteller's verve. You will actually get caught up in the rise and fall of dynasties and the shifting epicenters of Islamic scholarship and Arab-African-and-Persian power, the changes in Islam as it goes from populist movement to institutional social paradigm to bureaucratic theocracy. Islam is a complicated religion, like Christianity, with its sects and schisms and interactions with the power of the state. Yes, to Muslims, religion has never been a separate entity from the state, as it came to be in the West, but still, Islam served the interests of rulers, got coopted by those in power, brought down those in power, caused fragmentation and changes in government according to different factions' understanding of how a proper Islamic state should be run, and so conflicts between clergy and kings did play out in their own way in the Middle East too.

If you want to have more than a superficial understanding of how Sunnis and Shias split off from each other, and why India has been the location of so much Hindu-Muslim conflict, and of course, how the United States went from a modern nation Muslims admired and respected in the early 20th century to the Great Satan it is today (yes, a **big** part of the reason is Israel, but that's not the whole story, and most of the rest of the reason is oil, but that's still not the whole story), then you will get it here, but as the title indicates, this is a history of the world through Muslim eyes, and so the West really only comes into the picture towards the end. There is a huge amount of history that took place between Europe and China that most Westerners know little or nothing about, and this book will not only tell you about it, but make it interesting.

The author's style is a great asset to this narrative. Ansary is not above tossing in wry commentary now and then, neither sparing Westerners nor Muslims from apt observations about historical hypocrisy and inconvenient truths. Ansary does not take a religious position — he grew up as a Muslim in Afghanistan, but it's not even clear from his website whether he is a practicing Muslim today. So he doesn't try to "sell" Islam (and specifically calls out the historical revisionism of those liberal Muslims who today insist that "jihad" has never properly meant violent struggle against infidels — Ansary points out that yes it has, many times in history), but neither will he satisfy those of an anti-Islam bent who insist that Islam is fundamentally and inherently a religion of violence and oppression and intolerance of unbelievers. Those who say that Muslims are incapable of peaceful, heterogeneous coexistence in societies that value reason and democratic principles ignore the fact that such Muslim societies existed for centuries.

If you are a history buff and are interested in this little-served area of history, then I think you could hardly do better than *Destiny Disrupted*. You will be truly educated about fourteen centuries of history spanning a huge chunk of the world. It's a really good read.

If you're looking for answers addressing contemporary issues - how Israel came to be and why it's an unending cancer sore to Muslims worldwide, the origins of Wahabbism (Osama Bin Laden's brand of Islamic fundamentalism), the roots of the Taliban, how the West came to become the "Great Satan" and what Iran's problem is (and what Afghanistan's problem is, and what Syria's problem is, and what Iraq's problem is, and what Egypt's problem is....) then you'll find those here, mostly in the last few chapters, but this is not primarily a book dissecting modern Islam/Western issues. It's about the whole history of the world that happened before the West was important.

Excellent book, highly recommended, an unreserved 5 stars.

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## **Kim says**

I do not think it would be a stretch to say that this book has changed my world view. A history of the world through Islamic eyes, it describes the kingdoms of Asia Minor and Persia chronologically, covering several I had literally never heard of, and explaining the various sects and rifts of Islam in a way that is engaging, memorable, highly readable, and fascinating. One learns why the Abbasids and the Fatimids split, why they are named what they are named, what the Caliphate really is, how ludicrously preposterous the Crusades were, why the Muslim Brotherhood could be a force for wonderful social good, much like the YMCA in the West, why the industrial revolution happened in frigid and cramped England instead of Persia or China, why Turkey is often left out of the Muslim fold, and who the Chaldeans, Sassanians, Parthians, Amorites, Akkadians, etc. really were and why they matter to us. Among the most interesting chapters to me was the discussion of the three superpowers that divided the region and co-existed relatively peacefully for centuries: the Ottomans, the Safavids, and the Moghuls. Among the best attributes of the book is that once you reach the end, and the author puts the events of the 20th century in context, the pronouncements and policies of our government come across as not only self-absorbed but wildly uninformed, historically and factually inaccurate, and, frankly, preposterous. A must-read!

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## **Summer Brennan says**

First, a disclaimer: I have a Master's degree in Middle Eastern studies, and come to this subject weighted down by the suitcases of multiple theories and interpretations that advanced degrees tend to confer. However, I have long wanted to find a book that I could recommend to people (by which I mean friends, family and non-specialized colleagues) as "the book" for those wishing to understand "the Middle East," by which I and they usually mean: to understand the historical context of modern events located within or connected to the Muslim world. *Destiny Disrupted* is now the book that I will recommend, but with an important caveat. At the start of the book, Ansary tells the reader that we should think of this tale very much as "a story," as if we met him in a cafe and this is the tale that he, as an astute and knowledgeable historian, might tell us over tea. Well, over two days worth of tea, anyway, since the book is long. I think this disclaimer on his part is both wise and accurate. With it, he acknowledges that some oversimplification will occur. He acknowledges that swaths of his tale are or might be subjective. I was extremely impressed with his objectivity until almost the very end, when I, as something of a specialist myself, felt that the explanations and retelling of 20th century political machinations in the Muslim world were oversimplified and slanted pro-West. For the most part, Ansary does an admirable job of painting realistic pictures of individuals and events. He is able to succinctly explain the pros and cons of an event or a political figure: for example, a quick summary of why some people may have thought X while others thought Y, or that President X was celebrated for Y but hated by a particular ethnic minority for Z. You get the idea. However I found that this kind of just assessment was dimmed or even absent when describing the "secular modernist" leaders of Muslim countries in the twentieth century, like Bhutto. This is unfortunate, since a nuanced understanding of these leaders and the revolutions or coups that toppled them is, I would argue, more important to a useful understanding of the current geopolitical landscape than an emperor or imam of centuries past. Even so, I will certainly be recommending this book to family, friends and colleagues alike, with my own caveat that the interpretations of the last 70 years of history pertaining to Islam and the West leaves something to be desired, and that Ansary reaches conclusions that don't sit entirely comfortably with me, although they almost do. All in all, an impressive and much needed addition to the field.

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## **Paul Bryant says**

### **Right time, right place, right style, this is 100% recommended.**

This is vast but fast history : you have to hang on to your hat, or whatever you hang on to, which might not be a hat, since the kind of hats which a strong wind might snatch from your head are rarely worn today. In this book a lot of obscure places and people go rushing by, like a speeded up film, like a boiling river.

Obscure to a Western reader, that is, but I'm going to hazard that Transoxiana, Khorasan, Ctesiphon, and the exact difference between Umayyads, Abbasids, Fatimids and Safavids might tax your regular Muslim on the street too.

Tamim Ansary writes in a chatty, slangy, motormouth style. Like a friendly history professor. You're out for a beer with this guy and you ask the fatal question – what's up with these Muslims anyhow? What are they all about? Forty hours later, Tamim is still talking. Telling you how, why, all about it, from the top to the bottom, with many glints of humour to get you through some very harrowing stuff.

Sometimes the chat is a little too casual, and he comes across as your uncle trying to prove he's down with the kids by doing the frug, not the best choice:

*One city they attacked in northern Afghanistan was called – well, I don't even know what it was called originally. P153*

*For three years he and his band roamed the wilds, looking for a new kingdom : kinging was all he knew, and king was the only job title he was seeking. P190.*

*Between 1500 and 1800 western Europeans sailed pretty much all over the world and colonised pretty much everything. P217*

*The sultan never made another attempt on Vienna but his contemporaries saw no sign of weakness in this. "Conquer Vienna" remained on his to-do list always.*

*P221*

But really, I don't care because this was surely a beautiful change from your usual pompous history writing.

Tamim lays out the usual story we already kind of know for the first half of the book. This is where Islam erupted – is there any other word? – okay, exploded – will that do? – out of Arabia in the 8th century and was all over North Africa and the Levant and on into Persia and Northern/Central India before you could say whatever mild expletive was common in those far-off days. There was a golden age of relative peace. There was art and science. In the 10th, 11th and 12th centuries it was unarguable that the centre of human civilisation was located in the great Muslim empire, and meanwhile, Europeans were illiterate crawlers in the mud ("ooh, some lovely mud over here, Derek!"), and eaters of beetroot and gruel, and had a life expectancy of 23. By the Middle Ages

*that early sense of Islam against the world had long given way to Islam as the world*

**CRUSADER MOSQUITOS**

The first crack in this golden period came with the Franji Wars, or as Westerners know them, the Crusades. Before then, Muslims hadn't noticed the West at all – why would you? So here comes the first real shift of perspective. In Western history the Crusades loom large. They were a big deal. They changed a lot of things. For Islam – not so much. They were annoying, like a swarm of mosquitos. You had to slap them down. There was no sense to the thing but it was purely a local phenomenon and it didn't last long. One hundred years, then normal service was resumed. The *big* thing, where the world of Muslims came crashing down, was the Mongol invasion. That's right, Genghiz Khan. Then after him, Tamburlaine, who was worse. Muslims had to figure out why God allowed pagans to kill them all. But that's an easy one for religious types. The Jews wrote a whole book about it, it's called **The Bible Part One**, or as the Christians call it, **Jesus : the Prequel**. (And God being just, the Christians got their turn with the Black Death. "Why are you doing this to us??" "Mwaaah-ha-haah!") In each case the answer is the same – God smote you all because you're doing it *wrong*. It was a wake up call. Obviously not for the ones smited, they won't be waking up ever again, but you remnant that's left, you better get back to where you once belonged, pronto.

## **SORRY FRANCISCO, YOU'RE REDUNDANT**

Tamim does a great job summarising the effects of the Reformation in Europe. For him, this was the thing which kickstarted the whole European project, which he contrasts with the Islamic project. You'd had the Renaissance, but you needed a few other concepts to add to the mix before you could get lift-off, and one of the main components was : the idea of the secular. This does not exist in Islam. Everything is God's, everything is to be explained by Islamic thought. Luther's revolutionary act was to proclaim that the Christian can deal directly with God. That there is no need for this complex machinery of priestly intercession. That the priests are actually obfuscatory interlopers when they're not out and out crooks. That they should go.

In Islam, there wasn't the superstructure of a church hierarchy, and the idea was always that you didn't need a priest to speak to God. So Tamim says the Muslims didn't need a Reformation and never got one. Therefore they never got the modernisation that came out of a reformation. Hmm.

So Luther's thought revolution had this extra European twist :

*legitimising the authority of individuals to think what they wanted about God implicitly legitimised their authority to think what they wanted about anything.*

*This did not mean contradicting the faith; it just meant that faith was one thing and explaining nature was another; they were two separate fields of enquiry and never did the twain have to meet.*

Tamim tells us that the great revival of Western science which followed had often been anticipated by Muslim scientists. Blood circulation, the spectrum, the experimental method, all had been discovered by Muslims in previous centuries. But nothing had come of any of them.

*The steam engine provides a case in point. What could be more useful? What could be more world-changing? Yet the steam engine was invented in the Muslim world over three centuries before it popped up in the West, and in the Muslim world it didn't change much of anything.*

Why ever not?

*Possibly because Muslims made their great scientific discoveries just as their social order started crumbling*

And also, possibly because of something Ray Bradbury beautifully describes in a story called “The Flying Machine” – a guy during the Ming dynasty in China invents a working flying machine, like the Wright brothers. He hot-foots it to see the Emperor, who observes a demonstration, and is impressed. He immediately orders the man’s execution.

### **JUST SIGN HERE, HERE AND HERE. THANK YOU.**

After the rise of Islam and a couple of golden centuries comes the slow not-so-graceful fall. The Muslim world began to be sliced and diced by the West, sometimes so subtly the empire or khanate or whatever didn’t realise what was going on until they were trussed up like a Turkey. The Western businessmen, government agents and flying-carpetbaggers, along with a few armies here and there, got the Muslims signed up on the dotted line every which way. India, Indonesia, Persia, the Ottoman Empire, Egypt, everywhere became either a direct or indirect colony of the West. Muslims could not, finally, refuse the glittering baubles, the manufactured items. They came to the conclusion – some of them, that is – that they had to modernise.

The whole of Muslim history for the last three hundred years can be seen as a complex struggle between the Muslims who think you can modernise without losing your soul, without selling out Islam, without becoming defiled, and those who think this is just a pipe dream. You can see which side of the fence Osama Bin Laden, the Taliban and Khomeini were on. You can also see how hard it is to figure what the Arab Spring has produced – modernisers or traditionalists? What happens if you promote democracy in countries which then elect governments who hate you?

### **AMERICA - WHAT WENT WRONG?**

Tamim gives an excellent account of how the USA turned from being heroic in Muslim eyes – yes! Can you imagine that? – it was much admired at the time of the League of Nations, when the USA was coming on strong as an anti-colonialist supporter of liberation for all nations – to the embodiment of evil for most Muslims (I think that’s a fair summary). There were two big ones which turned the whole thing – one, I had barely heard of – this was the 1953 CIA coup in Iran which deposed the democratic modernist who wanted to nationalise the oil industry and installed a King who would give all the oil revenues away to American companies. The second big one was Israel, especially the 1967 war. After that the road to 9/11 was set.

I could discuss many more fascinating points and turn this review into a Grayesque marathon – it’s long enough already, I hear you cry – but I’ll stop now.

Except to say – grab a copy, it’s brilliant!

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### **E says**

Knowing about as little about the history of the Middle World (a.k.a., Middle East to Westerners) as one can, this book offered a tremendously satisfying overview, striking the ideal balance between summary and detail, objective reporting and critical analysis. Gently derisive of both Western and Muslim prejudices and dogma, Ansary presents himself as a trustworthy guide, unafraid to critique the culture of his forebearers but

refusing to betray it or declare allegiance to another. Of course, any reader with a more detailed, prior knowledge of the region and its religion reserves the right to knock his story down and tell me everything the author got wrong.

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### **John says**

I want to recommend the unabridged audio version, as read by the author. The man's a giften historian in that he's able to tell an informed and accessible story both in writing and by voice. This book fits neatly as a grand narrative of Islam and helps to set contemporary events and worldviews into a historical context. I'd call it scholarly light, emphasizing the story over analytical details, and helps stitch more focused books into a larger picture most westerners are unfamiliar with.

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### **Alliyah says**

It took me over a month but I FINALLY finished Tamim Ansary's fantastic global history, *Destiny Disrupted*. It is undoubtedly a 5/5 read for me. I haven't read much history outside of the western canon so Ansary's simple, accessible and pleasant writing style was perfect for someone with little knowledge of such a vast and complicated history.

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If you are at all interested in reading about the rise and fall of the Muslim world from the 7th century to the 21st, I wholeheartedly recommend *Destiny Disrupted*. If you'd like a little more detail on the book, check out the review on my blog. The link is in my bio!

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### **Willowwind says**

Ansary is a remarkable story teller in the best sense of the word. Few Americans are sufficiently conversant with the history of the West, let alone Islam. Ansary takes us through the birth and decline of one of humanities most brilliant civilizations from an Islamic point of view, explaining why that culture sees things differently than the industrial west does. He also shows how the seeds of current conflict in the Middle East were sown not only by differing ideas about the world but by the actions of the various world powers pursuing their own interests ususally to the detriment of local populations. I really liked the audio version because the inflexions in Ansary's voice told its own tale. But neither is Ansary just a cultural cheerleader. Rather he is a judicious observer of social and political failures are well. If you want to know the source of the conflict between Sh'ia and Sunni or how the Wahabis came to be the most powerful force in modern Islam, you will find it here as well as why the Iranians deservedly dsitrust the US. But you will also hear of the poets, mathematicians, astronomers and scholars who preserved the literature of the classical world and passed it on to a Medieval Europe which had largely forgotten it existed.

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### **J.S. Bangs says**

World History, says Tamim Ansary in his introduction, is always the story about how *we* got to be where we are. It therefore always includes an implicit notion of who "we" are, and what our current place in the history of the world is.

Most people with a basic college education feel that they know how history works. First there was the ancient world, from whose murky depths emerged the cultural brilliance of the Greeks and the political might of the Romans. Then the Roman Empire fell, plunging the world into an age of superstition and darkness, from which we finally emerged during the Renaissance. Shortly thereafter we discovered science, democracy, and industrialization. Now the First World has reached the pinnacle of human development, and all that remains is for the rest of the world to finally bring itself up to our level.

This history is false.

Or at least incomplete and parochial. This is the historical narrative of a particular civilization in a particular time, and it clashes and competes with alternate historical narratives told by people from outside our cultural milieu. But by conflating our history with the history of the whole world, we not only marginalize and insult those whose historical narratives are different, but we make ourselves incapable of understanding the interactions that we have with the other worlds around us.

And so we come to *Destiny Disrupted*, Tamim Ansary's attempt to write an Islamic history of the world accessible to Western readers. According to the very brief autobiography in the book's introduction, Ansary was raised in a traditional Islamic household, but all of his formal schooling was in Western-style schools, giving him a bifurcated view of the world which he struggled to integrate. His book is part of that resolution.

*Destiny Disrupted* is a world history, but it's a world history as understood by the Islamic world. As such, it features a very different set of actors and key events than the more familiar world history given above. The Roman Empire is a footnote in this story; the universal state which defined the classical age is the early united Khalifate. The central geographical regions are Arabia and Persia, with the latter being the cultural and intellectual center of the world for most of its history. The frontiers of civilization were the Sahara Desert in the south, the Central Asian steppes in the north, barbarian Europe in the west, and the Indus river in the east. Within this area the drama and tragedies of civilization played out, only occasionally interrupted by incursions from the outside, such as the catastrophic invasions of the Mongols or the nuisance of the *Franji* (Franks, i.e. Christian Crusaders).

Ansary does an excellent job of presenting the narrative of this world history so that it's accessible and interesting to a reader who knows almost nothing about it. His history is not overly detailed---he occasionally skips over entire centuries with a few paragraphs---but it suffices to make one understand who the actors are and how they see the world. More importantly, he gives his narrative a sense of *flow*, so that every subsequent development makes sense in light of earlier ones, and one can gain the feeling that history is

going somewhere and means something.

And that, of course, is why it's heartbreaking when the whole story turns sideways.

The period that we think of as the Renaissance, Enlightenment, and colonialism comes across in this book as a series of bitter catastrophes. It isn't simply the case that the European powers overwhelmed the Islamic world militarily---military setbacks and invasions had happened before, and anyway the Europeans didn't actually *conquer* the Islamic world except in a few places at the outskirts. Rather, the problem is that the Islamic powers were suddenly changed into pawns, and they found themselves being played around by foreigners who didn't have any role at all in world history up to that point. Ansary does a masterful job of getting you into the perspective of the Islamic world on this point, so that the sudden domination of Europe feels like a shock, and the crisis it precipitates is profound.

There are weaknesses in this presentation, and if you have a deeper familiarity with the historical epochs Ansary visits you may find much to criticize in his approach. When he discusses the Christian middle ages, the description is so brief that it severely distorts several things, and his presentation of the Reformation is a caricature. But in some ways these distortions are part of the logic of the story. After all, the doctrinal nuances which agitated the Protestant Reformers are of no interest at all to the Islamic world, and so who actually cares if he gets them right? What is more important---and what Ansary does very well---is presenting the internal logic of the Islamic world.

Ansary ends his story on a cliffhanger, with the events of 9/11 and the assurance that, contra Fukuyama, history is not over. Events since then are too recent to recount as history. Nonetheless, this book changed my perspective on one event more recent even than the publication of this book: the "Arab Spring" of 2011. Here in America, coverage of the uprisings presented them as a liberal phenomenon, a recapitulation of the revolutions in the West in which a democracy-seeking populace overthrew the old monarchs and aristocrats. But Ansary's book makes it clear that this misunderstands the history of the region. The dictators which were overthrown were not in any way the *ancien régime* of the Islamic world, but were what Ansary calls "secular modernists." They were committed to a secular state (run by them), modernization (by force if necessary), growing a modern, capitalistic economy (at least for the elites), and imitation of Western forms and customs. The revolt against these powers was democratic exactly insofar as it reflected the popular ethos of the Islamic heartland, for which the centrality and ubiquity of Islam is non-negotiable and the West is a corrosive foreign invader rather than a model for emulation.

Events in Egypt since the revolution have largely played out along these lines, with one more secular party (the army) trying to hold on to power against a coalition of popular "Islamist" groups. (The term "Islamist" conflates a number of different streams with wildly different ideals and aspirations together, a fact which Ansary also discusses.) The error that the popular media of West made with regards to the Arab Spring is very similar to the error that we've been making all along: we assume that the Islamic world is replaying a scene from our own past, rather than enacting a drama of their own.

We repeat this mistake to our peril.

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## **Nurul Suhadah says**

Tema pembacaan saya untuk bulan Ogos dan September ini adalah berkisar tentang sejarah dunia dan juga sejarah Sepanyol atau Andalusia. Persediaan untuk musafir dalam bulan Oktober nanti insyaAllah. Setelah bulan Julai, sistem pembacaan saya sedikit terganggu dan juga boleh dikatakan ‘ke laut’, hilang fokus dan keghairahan.

Ketika saya mencari-cari buku yang saya mahu telaah tentang sejarah dunia, ada beberapa rakan mencadangkan kepada saya buku ini, “Destiny Derupted” tulisan Tamim Ansary. Saya melihat ulasan di Goodreads juga agak bagus. Malangnya apabila saya cuba melihat di website Kinokuniya, buku ini “out of stock”. Tetapi ketika saya membelek-belek rak buku sejarah di rumah ini, saya terjumpa buku yang juga tertera perkataan Tamim Ansary di kulit muka depan buku.

Oh rupa-rupanya saya sudah lama memiliki buku ini. Tetapi versi terjemahan daripada Indonesia yang telah diberi tajuk “Dari Puncak Baghdad Sejarah Dunia Versi Islam”. Saya membelinya daripada kedai buku Raudhah Al-Miqyas beberapa tahun lalu ketika kedai buku ini belum pun bertapak di Bangi Gateway seperti sekarang.

Pembacaan dimulakan dan ternyata ianya begitu mengasyikkan. Kali terakhir saya benar-benar menekuni buku sejarah ialah ketika mengambil STPM tahun 2005 dan ketika itu saya atas pilihan sendiri mengambil subjek Sejarah. Pada ketika itu dibahagikan kepada dua bahagian, Sejarah 1, Tamadun Dunia dan Sejarah 2, Tamadun Islam. Ada dua buku teks tebal Tamadun Dunia dan Tamadun Islam yang wajib kami baca dan dibawa ke hulu ke hilir. Itu rasanya kali terakhir saya benar-benar bersungguh-sungguh membaca Sejarah. Pada ketika itu minat memang ada, tetapi yang lebih menguatkan juga ialah kerana peperiksaan STPM itu sendiri juga.

Membaca karya Tamim Ansary ini helaian demi helaian dengan gaya penceritaan naratif bersulam fakta-fakta membuatkan kita tidak cepat bosan membaca sejarah. Ya, sejarah yang selalu dikaitkan dengan penuh fakta dan kekeringan. Tetapi Tamim Ansary ada gaya tersendiri dalam penyampaian buku ini. Malah, topik yang terawal sekali dalam buku ini beliau menyatakan betapa beliau sebenarnya tidak berapa kisah dengan sistem transliterasi nama dan kata-kata yang mungkin bagi sesetengah orang sangat penting dan sentiasa bertelagah tentang siapa yang paling benar. Beliau mengatakan beliau hampir tidak kisah namanya sendiri dieja dengan pelbagai ejaan yang berbeza-beza. Yang penting orang yang dirujuk itu ialah dia.

### Tamim Ansary dan pertemuan beliau dengan Arnold Toynbee

Cerita ini beliau nukilkan dalam bab pendahuluan dalam buku ini. Ketika beliau masih kecil berumur sembilan atau sepuluh tahun, beliau siperlakukan dengan sejarahwan tua Inggeris yang sangat terkenal iaitu, Arnold Toynbee. Ketika itu Arnold Toynbee melawat Afghanistan dan melewati kota kecil kelahiran Tamim Ansary iaitu Lashkargah. Ketika Arnold Toynbee di pekan itu, seseorang telah memberitahu beliau tentang seorang anak kecil pencinta sejarah yang terkenal di pekan itu. Arnold Toynbee mahu bertemu dengan anak itu maka bertemu lah Tamim Ansary dengan sejarahwan tua Inggeris itu.

Mereka bersempang-sembang dan berosal jawab dan di akhir pertemuan, Arnold Toynbee menghadiahkan

sebuah buku The Story Of Mankind karya Hendrick Willem Van Loon kepada Tamim Ansary.

Buku itu sangat berpengaruh dan memberi kesan yang besar kepada sorang anak kecil di pekan kecil Afghanistan itu. Beliau telah membesar dengan terus membaca dan membaca karya sejarah dan seterusnya tumbuh membesar menjadi pencinta sejarah yang sejati.

Mengapa Tamim Ansary menulis buku ini ?

Berbalik kepada buku tulisan Tamim Ansary ini, beliau menyatakan antara sebab beliau menulis buku ini ialah apabila beliau melihat ada kelompangan yang agak besar setiap kali beliau membaca buku-buku sejarah dunia. Kelompangan itu ialah pada sumbangan Islam dalam sejarah dunia.

Ketika beliau terlibat dalam satu projek untuk merangka silibus pengajaran dalam buku teks sekolah di Texas untuk matapelajaran sejarah, mereka sepakat dalam banyak perkara kecuali tentang untuk memberikan cakupan yang lebih luas tentang Islam dalam sejarah dunia itu.

Islam hanya dilihat sebagai fenomena relatif kecil yang kesannya sudah berakhir jauh sebelum Renaisans. Islam hanya menjadi satu topik kecil dalam 30 daftar isi buku sejarah dunia itu.

Pada masa itu beliau merasakan yang mungkin penilaian beliau mempunyai unsur ‘bias’ kerana beliau mempunyai kepentingan peribadi dengan Islam. Tetapi kemudian beliau kembali bertanya bukankah penilaian beliau itu berdasarkan objektif apabila ditelusuri dengan lebih adil dan cermat tentang sejarah perkembangan Islam dalam sejarah dunia. Ada enam gambar peta yang dikepikan dalam buku ini yang menunjukkan bagaimana Islam berkembang di dunia ini bermula dari 632 Masihi sehingga sekarang.

Beliau kembali menggali sejarah Islam dengan lebih mendalam bukan hanya sebagai untuk mencari identiti peribadi, tetapi dalam usaha untuk memahami perkembangan agama besar itu. Beliau mula menyedari bahawa tidak seperti sejarah Perancis atau Malta atau Amerika Syarikat, sejarah negeri-negeri Islam bukanlah sebahagian daripada sejarah tunggal yang tidak terkait langsung dengan sejarah dunia.

Kedua-dua sejarah, Islam dan juga jika boleh disebut sebagai Barat secara umum bermula di tempat yang sama, di antara Sungai Tigris dan Efrat, Iraq Kuno dan juga berakhir di tempat yang sama pertarungan global di mana Barat dan dunia Islam menjadi pemain-pemain utama. Kedua tamadun ini melewati lanskap yang berbeza tetapi anehnya paralel dalam banyak perkara.

Keunikan dan kritikan kepada buku ini

Inilah antara perkara utama dan keunikan buku Tamim Ansary iaitu cuba menyoroti sejarah dunia dalam versi Islam. Bermula daripada zaman kuno, Mesopotamia dan Persia, kelahiran Islam, era kekhalifahan, zaman perpecahan, bencana daripada tentera Salib dan Monggol, kelahiran kembali tiga kerajaan terbesar dalam dunia Islam, era Barat mula mengunjungi Timur, gerakan reformasi, kemunculan secular modernis sehingga kepada krisis modeniti. Semuanya dirungkai oleh penulis dengan gaya penceritaan yang bersahaja, disulami fakta dan pandangan ulasan beliau sendiri.

Antara kelebihan penulis ini juga ialah, beliau bukan sahaja sememangnya berasal daripada sebuah negara Islam yang sememangnya sejak dari kecil terdedah dengan ajaran Islam tetapi beliau juga kemudiaannya telah berhijrah dan tinggal di Amerika Syarikat dan menekuni dunia Barat itu sendiri. Latar belakang ini memberi kredit kepada beliau kerana beliau dilihat tidak ‘bias’ kepada Islam semata-mata kerana Islam mempunyai kepentingan peribadi kepada beliau.

Penulisan ini membentangkan sinopsis sejarah yang adil walaupun mustahil untuk kita katakan ianya ‘neutral’ sepenuhnya. Tetapi, buku ini boleh menyebabkan orang Barat yang mungkin tidak begitu mengenali Islam dan sejarahnya akan lebih mengenali Islam dan orang Islam sendiri akan menemukan kembali identiti mereka dalam sejarah dunia yang mungkin selama ini banyak digelapkan.

Saya tidak menafikan yang saya sebagai seorang pembaca buku ini yang merupakan seorang Muslim dan mempunyai sedikit latar belakang tentang era kemunculan Islam, era kenabian dan zaman kekhalifahan merasa sedikit bosan ketika melewati topik-topik biasa bagi saya yang menerangkan tentang Sirah Nabi Muhammad SAW dan juga empat khalifah selepas baginda.

Antara topik yang paling saya suka dalam buku ini ialah bab pertama yang menerangkan tentang “Dunia Tengah”. Dunia tengah yang dimaksudkan ini ialah dunia tengah sebelum kemunculan Islam. Permulaan awal tamadun manusia yang bermula di wilayah Tigris dan Efrat itu sendiri. Saya suka bab ini kerana ternyata banyak fakta yang saya masih belum tahu dan peta yang saya tak tergambaran keadaan dunia ketika itu. Termasuklah juga tentang Persia Kuno yang saya kira sejarahnya sangat menarik. Juga tidak ketinggalan perkembangan agama ketika itu yang bermula awal seperti Zoroastrianisme.

Melewati bab-bab seterusnya, saya melihat penulis ada menukikan beberapa tokoh besar dalam dunia Islam secara sepintas lalu. Ada satu topik yang membicarakan tentang ulama, filsuf dan sufi. Bermula di zaman kegemilangan dan keemasan Islam sehingga pada zaman terakhir Daulah Islamiyah yang dipimpin orang Turki Uthmaniah. Beliau ada menukikan tentang Sayyed Jamaluddin Al-Afghani yang saya kira memang dekat dengan penulis sendiri, Al-Ghazali, Ibnu Taimiyah dan lain-lain.

Dalam bahagian ini saya perasan yang kredit yang sangat besar diberikan kepada Al-Ghazali sebagai antara pemikir besar Islam di zaman pertengahan abad ke-11. Penulis menggelarkannya sebagai ‘raksasa intelektual dalam sejarah dunia’. Buku Al-Ghazali sampai ke Andalusia dan di sana buku Al Ghazali telah memukau orang-orang yang membacanya. Penulis menukikan dengan sangat baik sumbangan Al-Ghazali kepada dunia Islam walaupun secara sepintas lalu.

Tetapi agak berlainan komentar yang diberikan terhadap Ibnu Taimiyah. Lebih banyak sisi negatif ditambah dengan keadaan tekanan persekitaran pada masa itu yang dikatakan penulis melahirkan seorang pemikir ekstremis seperti Ibnu Taimiyah. Dalam bahagian ini, banyak yang saya tidak bersetuju dengan sisi pandang penulis.

Selain itu, yang paling memeritkan dan ada kala saya memang berhenti daripada membaca dan merenung panjang ialah apabila tiba pada bahagian sejarah kemunculan Syiah. Perpecahan dan perperangan yang menyakitkan yang akhirnya memunculkan Syiah. Panjang lebar penulis menulis tentang ini dan ada kalanya saya memang tidak bersetuju dengan sisi pandang penulis dalam bab Syiah ini. Setelah saya selesai membaca buku ini baru saya terdengar desus yang mengatakan Tamim Ansary ini seorang Syiah. Tetapi penilaian saya sebelum ini langsung tak dipengaruhi oleh doktrin ini. Bagi saya, penulis memang menumpahkan ideologinya dalam penulisan. Itu perkara biasa. Tetapi kesahihan fakta tentang ini juga belum terbukti dan bagi saya wajar sahaja ditolak tepi.

Ya, saya menikmati helaian demi helaian sehingga ke akhir buku ini. Sejarah yang lebih moden juga dapat dikupas dengan baik oleh penulis. Buku tebal yang mempunyai 500 lebih muka surat ini merupakan antara revensi yang baik untuk melihat kembali sejarah dunia dan Islam.

Tanpa menafikan buku ini juga ada kelemahan-kelemahannya yang tersendiri. Terutamanya jika anda membaca versi terjemahan dalam Bahasa Indonesia ini. Jika anda tidak biasa membaca buku-buku

terjemahan Indonesia, anda akan mengalami kesukaran dalam memahami buku ini. Buku ini buku sejarah, buku versi terjemahan dalam Bahasa Indonesia pula. Lebih baik anda mencari buku asal dalam Bahasa Inggeris tulisan Tamim Ansary ini. Tapi untuk saya yang sudah biasa membaca buku-buku terjemahan versi Indonesia, ini sudah tidak menjadi masalah untuk saya. Malah bahasanya menyebabkan saya lebih asyik.

Untuk orang awam seperti saya yang tidak mempunyai latar belakang akademik dalam bidang Sejarah, buku ini sudah cukup baik. Yang paling saya tidak sangka dan mengujakan saya ialah, saya boleh habiskan buku tebal ini setelah lama meninggalkan pembacaan buku sejarah yang tebal-tebal ini.

Selamat menikmati dan mengulit sejarah, kerana sejarah sentiasa akan menjadi cermin terbaik buat kita untuk menempuh masa depan.

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#### **•Karen• says**

World history from the Islamic point of view, yes, but written very much with the Western reader in mind, which is fair enough, presumably Middle Worlders don't need this kind of broadstroke overview. Ansary uses analogies with concepts that will be familiar to his audience in order to make things clearer and more easily digestible: for example when describing the gap left by the death of Mohammed, he points out that when a saint dies, you can't just appoint a new one in his place, and on the other hand when a king dies, people don't say 'Wouldn't it be good to have a king again some day?'. Mostly these analogies were extremely helpful, but I wasn't too sure about comparing the beginnings of the Muslim Brotherhood with the Boy Scouts. But what would I know. Sometimes his jokey facetious remarks irritated me a little, but, heck, I finished it, so they can't have been too distracting. It was published in 2009, so long before the Arab Spring of this year, but to Ansary's credit, he does emphasise the huge and growing gap between the privileged technocrats and the indigent rural inhabitants of Middle World countries, and how isolated the latter group are from the political process. Quite acute of him, I think.

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#### **Mike says**

This book is an excellent exploration of not just Islamic history (dates, names, events, etc.), but also provides a fascinating insight into cultural forces of Islam. Speaking as someone with a pretty good knowledge base I can honestly say I learned a great deal from this book (beyond never accepting a dinner invitation from the Abbasids) and viewed history in a different light. Ansary rightly points out that Islamic history, one where Islamic cultures were much more advanced than European societies, are relegated to very small slices of world history text books. After reading this, it is difficult to understand why when Islamic cultures are major players in world history.

The most important aspect of Islam the author (who is himself a Muslim) stresses is that Islam is not about individual salvation but about the community. Many Muslims throughout history and today have harkened

back to the very first community of Muslims, when Mohammad still lived among them, as an ideal to strive for. In that society the leaders were humble and lived among the people. Mohammad was on hand to settle disputes in a just and fair manner and there was much harmony among the Muslim community. From a Christian or Western perspective, it would be as though Jesus was never killed and lived among his followers, continuing to provide divine wisdom and guidance. While that may not have been how things actually played out, Ansary notes that the story of how it happened has influenced Islamic culture ever since.

Ansary then does a diligent job highlighting the direction the Muslim community (which at this point was still confined to the Arabian Peninsula and among Arab tribes) went after Mohammad passed. The rightly Guided Caliphs, as they are known, led their community in to a vast expansion, with each victory lending further credence to God being on their side. This link between victory and divine approval was a keystone to the community for much of its early existence. The first Islamic Empire spread from Central Asia to Iberia, making it one of the largest in history.

What I found fascinating was how the community absorbed and was changed by converts. What was once a close community composed of Arab tribesmen became a multiethnic Empire. At different periods various ethnic groups were the dominant force in the Muslims world. Initially it was Arabs but at various times it was Persians or Turks or some other group. The mixing and merging of different peoples also lead to a diverse expression of Muslim piety and power. However, whichever group was in power, still saw their victories heavily outweigh their setbacks.

That is until the greatest calamity the Muslim world had seen to date fell upon them. No, not the crusaders from Europe. They were at worst a nuisance, really only conquering four major cities and not penetrating into the Muslim heartland. They had struck during a time of chaos within the Islamic world where the great Empires of the past had devolved into competing cities in the Eastern Mediterranean world. At times battles would be fought between armies that saw Muslims and Crusaders on both sides of the lines. The Crusaders were just another piece on the board that various Muslim rulers had to take into account.

The calamity which, arguably, still resounds to this day, were the Mongols. They swept through central Asia (which had its share of advanced Islamic civilizations) destroying literally everything in their path. They sacked (and I mean SACKED) Baghdad so hard it has yet to recover after hundreds of years, and general owned just about everyone they came across. While some parts of the Mongol population were eventually converted to Islam, the swiftness and severity of their devastation shook the very core of the Muslim world. Why had God forsaken them? Were they no longer in his favor? What did they do wrong? While some within the community argued that in the end the conversion and defeat of the Mongols meant God still favored them, many turned to new ways to understand Islam and Allah. New schools of thought and law were developed in response to the Mongols that has resonance to this day.

For me, the most interesting part of the book dealt with the response the Muslim world had to the rise of the West. The dynamism of the west driven by the emphasis on individual achievement and powered by the industrial revolution made inroads into the Muslim world (by this time mostly dominated by the Ottoman Empire and Iran). Slowly, piece by piece, these empires were places further and further under the thumb of European powers. Be it through Western technical advisers who helped reform the government and military, or the monied interest that extended loans to find these reforms, or business interests that could buy off entire portions of a country's economy the West slowly became dominant over the Muslim world.

This wasn't some grand conspiracy among the various Western powers, even if the ends were the same. They were concerned about other powers gaining an advantage in The Great Game and had to make the appropriate count moves. This resulted in unsettled populations, resentment between the ruling and upper

classes who benefited somewhat by these changes and the lower classes who were displaced or exploited. Ansary does an excellent job parsing the various currents and forces that flowed through the Muslim world, explaining how they reacted to the change of events and why. It was extremely fascinating to see the various responses to modernism in the Islamic world and how those responses influence the world today.

Simply put this book is an essential part of any attempt to understand the modern world and especially the modern Muslim world. It is extremely well written, being accessible to novices and informative to the more well-read. It provides a unique set of fascinating insights in Islamic history and culture that I have found somewhat lacking from Western sources.

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### **Ulfah says**

So let me write here, first and foremost, if you'd like to understand a more thorough understanding of our world's history unfolding during the last 15 centuries, please do try to read this book. Having been born Indonesian and spent some time in Europe, makes me question a lot of things, seeing the insights of both culture, and from time to time trying to understand why Indonesians or maybe Indonesian muslims view the Western world as it is, and why the Europeans view the muslim world as it is. I mean nowadays aren't as awful as a few years ago, when more people are lacking in knowledge, and Islamophobia is on its height. But still I can sense that sort of feeling here and there (the return of the far-right wing party in Germany or the clashes they have in France, etc). Even I, when reading books with religious theme like this (well, world history through Islamic eyes, actually), always feel the need to hide the title from public view while reading it in public transportation, because I'm always afraid that people would think that I'm an extremist of some sort.

Anyways, the book started off with the comforting story of the revelation through prophet Muhammad and how the first four caliphates strive after his death. This part was no new news from me, after reading it so many times from different context and different writers. What unfolds afterwards is ever more interesting for me. You see, I didn't understand how the greatness and humbleness of the four caliphates could transform into Muawiyah's dynasty and so on as other Islam dynasties unfolds (the Umayyads, Fatimid, Abassid and finally the Ottomans), and how different ethnic groups and different course of understanding of the core teachings of Islam were intermingling in between these changes. This book helped me to understand that. I also wonder how the Crusade war had any great impact to the crumbling of Islam golden age, when I finally understood, the crumble came from within rather from the outside (if any, the attacks by the Mongols had greater impact rather than the Crusade wars were). The history goes on, and then I got shocked again to understand, that although the Europeans didn't intend it to be, but colonialism did change the world as we live in now. And gosh, I didn't grasp it fully till now that most Middle eastern countries were made by the Europeans as the result of colonialism and how Wahhabi became a prominent standard of beliefs in Saudi Arabia (I always wonder how that happened!). And how the idea of nationalism is so new and kinda artificial and how the idea of being better than other ethnic group just by coming from different country is so nauseating. And my God, Britain, why made a same promise to three different parties resulting today's ongoing conflict of Israel vs Palestine?

I wonder how the next history of the world will unfold, now with the many refugees coming into Europe and the non-stopping war in Syria. But I must recall one other thing. A few days ago, I saw in facebook a picture of Kabul and Tehran ladies in the 70s, wearing Western dresses (as in, short skirts, etc), and the next pic of early 90s where the ladies of Kabul and Tehran wore burqa and or the long black hijab (people should really stop seeing muslim pics from the Middle East and see how Indonesian muslims dress! Hahaha). And the last

pic, in relation to the influx of refugee to Europe, European girls wearing short pants and a horrifying prediction of the future that they will also soon be covered with heavy hijab. Referring back to the book, one of the main premise of the book, is on how the Muslim world, in addition to using Islam as the way of life, felt that there's an urgency of returning to the first Ummah as portrayed by the life of prophet Muhammad and the first four caliphates (which as until now, I believe, was a revolutionary era, in which women were liberated, the poor was taken care of, familial function was revived, justice was fulfilled, and so on). As centuries went by, some Muslim thinkers thought, 'hey, we should beat Westerners on their game by being more like them' and in contrast, others thought 'hey, we should be more restrictive in how we interpret the Quran and hadits' and these two ideas were the driver of the movements, first the Secular Modernists which banned the use of hijab and the enforcement to use Western clothes as in 70s Afghanistan, Iran or Turkey, which was followed by radical conservatism that hey, Western clothes are now banned, and you should only wear heavy hijabs. I think that that picture circulating in facebook was taken totally out of context, and how funny it is when I understand the real background of such propaganda. Ah yes, we're still spewing the old mistake of taking things in fragments rather than trying to understand the bigger view...

Anyways, such a satisfying read! Thanks Mr. Ansary!

ps: by the way, granted, this book is, rather than describing tons of facts (at least unlike Karen Armstrong or Tom Holland), is a way to give and overlying opinion of the chain of events that unfold. But I guess, that's what I really need and that's why I like it.

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### **Grace Tjan says**

Being neither Muslim nor Western, but nevertheless a citizen of what CNN and other Western media regularly dub “the world’s largest Muslim nation\*”, I often feel baffled by the so-called “clash of civilizations” between these two entities. And lately, not just baffled, but also profoundly disturbed by the scale and frequency of sectarian violence in my country, the majority of which allegedly perpetrated by those the author of this book calls “jihadists”. The overwhelming majority of Indonesians are no doubt moderate and tolerant, but there is no denying the fact that acts of violent extremism have increased exponentially and that at times, the perpetrators seem to have acted with impunity. Is this the inevitable result of a Huntingtonian clash of civilizations?

Tamim Ansary, an Afghan-American “secular Muslim”, thinks that it is something else altogether:

“The conflict wracking the modern world is not, I think, best understood as a “clash of civilizations”, if that proposition means we’re-different-so-we-must-fight-until-there’s-only-one-of us. It’s better understood as the friction generated by two mismatched world histories intersecting.”

The key word here is “mismatched” --- the West and the Muslim world have been developing more or less separately for centuries and have been talking at cross purposes for much of their (relatively recent) shared history:

“Did the perpetrators of 9/11 really see themselves at striking a blow against freedom and democracy? Is hatred of freedom the passion that drives militantly political Islamist extremist today? If so, you won’t find it in jihadist discourse, which typically focuses, not on freedom and its opposite, nor on democracy and its opposite, but on discipline versus decadence, moral purity versus moral corruption, terms that come out of

centuries of Western dominance in Islamic societies and the corresponding fragmentation of communities and families there, the erosion of Islamic social values, the proliferation of liquor, the replacement of religion with entertainment, and the secularization of the rich elite along with the ever hardening gap between rich and poor.

One side charges, “You are decadent.” The other side retorts, “We are free.” These are not opposing contentions; they’re nonsequiturs.”

Ansary is no apologist and is not interested in sweeping away potentially divisive issues under the rug of political correctness:

“On the other side, I often hear liberal Muslims in the United States say that “*jihad* just means ‘trying to be a good person,’” suggesting that only anti-Muslim bigots think the term has something to do with violence. But they ignore what *jihad* has meant to Muslims in the course of history dating back to the lifetime of Prophet Muhammad himself. Anyone who claims that *jihad* has nothing to do with violence must account for the warfare that the earliest Muslims called “*jihad*.”

Like the holy books of other so-called Abrahamic religions, the Koran contains verses that might be interpreted as advocating violent acts.

Likewise, he doesn’t shy away from the darker side of Islamic history. Islam, though originally conceived as an admirably “epic, devotional social project”, was also a political entity. And very soon after Muhammad’s death, it became an empire. An empire of epic proportions that stretched over continents and ruled millions of non-Muslims. Long before Westerners colonized the Muslim world, Islamic empires ruled over large swathes of Christendom. And like other empires, including those that adhered to Christianity or other religions, it was not immune of the usual bloody internecine fighting --- some involving Muhammad’s close relatives and companions --- and oppression of people who became their subjects.

Ansary tells the rest of Islamic history in a light, conversational style that is eminently readable, even if he necessarily simplifies certain aspects of it (perfectly understandable, considering that he has to cover 1,300 years of history in a relatively slim book). We learn of the different interpretations of Islam, ranging from the comparatively liberal, tolerant Sufism to the literal, rigid Salafism and Wahabism. We also learn of the theological and racial factors that gave birth to Shiism and other schisms in Islam. We are reminded of how Islamic scholars “saved” the works of Greek philosophers, long forgotten in the West, and of the reasons why despite of that, science and technology failed to develop during the Abbasid Caliphate’s golden age. And of how the Crusades, a pivotal event in European history, was barely a blip in the Muslim narrative (the most traumatic event in Islam’s history is instead the 13th century Mongol invasion, which had an impact akin to the Black Death in Europe).

The most interesting, and pertinent part of the narrative for me is the chapters that cover the interaction between the West and the Islamic world in the last two centuries, as the roots of the current conflict could be traced to the events that happened in those crucial eras. The gist of it is that Western colonialism and continuing meddling in Muslim countries, aided by their corrupt and/or westernized elites, fuels extremist rage:

“Helping the Iraqis was a way to weaken Iran and possibly keep the Soviets at bay. Here again as a catastrophic intertwining of the Muslim and Western narrative still about secular modernism versus back-to-source Islamism, the other still about superpower rivalry and control of oil, though couched in rhetoric about democracy and totalitarianism.”

And also:

“In the Muslim world, the difference was not just economic but cultural and therefore the gulf between the worlds fed alienation and produced a more anti-colonialist flavor of resentment, but against the nation’s own elite. This resentment led to occasional civil unrest. Since these culturally divided countries had no democratic institutions to mediate disputes, governments casually resorted to force to suppress disorder.”

A plausible explanation for conflicts in Muslim countries in the Middle East, but probably not entirely adequate to explain sectarian violence in other Muslim countries which are democratic, and where Western interference is minimal, like Indonesia. I wish Ansary had spent some pages discussing such countries, but perhaps they are considered too peripheral in comparison to the Middle East to worth analyzing.

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\* Indonesia is not a Muslim country, in the sense that it is not based on Islam (or any other religion). Indonesia’s state ideology, Pancasila, and its constitution guarantee the freedom of religion for all of its citizens.