

BOOK REVIEW

Talmiz Ahmad, *The Islamist Challenge in West Asia: Doctrinal and Political Competitions after the Arab Spring*, (New Delhi: Pentagon Press, 2013), Pages: 145, Price: Rs. 695.00.

Anyone following the unfolding events in West Asia, over the last three years, will have many questions: how did the hopes raised by the Arab Spring turn to discord and disappointment all around soon thereafter; what is the interface between Islam and politics, both so manifestly visible in that region; is 'Islamism' compatible with democracy; what is at the root of the sectarian conflicts that are raging; are the nations, for instance, Iraq or Syria, as constituted now, stable, or are they imploding; and many more such queries. Even seasoned diplomats who have served in the Arab world are bewildered by the complexity and pace of developments. This book is a coherent and concise guide to anyone trying to understand these issues.

Talmiz Ahmad has impeccable credentials to write this book. As an Indian diplomat, he has served in many Arab countries – Iraq, Kuwait, UAE, Yemen, Oman and in Saudi Arabia thrice (once as the Consul General and twice as the Ambassador). He has been a close observer of the Gulf and West Asia region for most of his career and has held senior positions in the Ministry of External Affairs focusing on the area. Official positions and postings apart, he is a serious scholar whose earlier works dealt with the issues of reform as also the religious conflict in the Arab world. Currently based in Dubai, as an energy consultant, he has an advantageous perch in looking at the contemporary developments and has access to media and the commentary from within the region. In addition to all this, he has a lucid style, an orderly as well as analytical mind, and an admirable capacity to synthesise the many strands that the issues encompass. This results in a substantive work that needs to be wholeheartedly welcomed.

The volume is neatly organised. The first chapter is quite important as it offers an essential introduction to what is meant by 'political Islam'. It has a short but clear overview of the theology and the belief-systems of the different strands of Islamism and the relevant history. Subsequent chapters deal with the diverse schools of political Islam: the Wahabiya of Saudi Arabia, the Muslim Brotherhood emanating from Egypt, and the radicals as in Al Qaeda or Al Shabaab. The evolution and tenets of these Sunni schools are delineated and their differences brought out. The political Islam in Shia Iran is not in a

separate chapter, but it is covered in terms of the antagonism between the Sunni and Shia doctrines. Other sections of the book deal with the situation in the nation-states in the Arab world as also their current rivalry, both political and sectarian. It is not easy to bring coherence to the different strands—sectarian, political, nationalist, in a manageable framework, but the author has done it and the narrative hangs together. The final chapters deal with the difficult issue of what may lie ahead and whether it will be possible to adhere to the principles of the *sharia* while adopting democracy.

A few words about what is meant by ‘political Islam’ are necessary, as this is a core issue. Talmiz Ahmed borrows a definition of political Islam (or Islamism) from the International Crisis Group and describes it as “the active assertion and promotion of beliefs, prescriptions, laws or politics that are held to be Islamic in character.” For Islamists, the essence of their conviction is that the answers for all questions – religious, secular, temporal or spiritual, lie in Islam. In other words, the separation of the ‘religious’ and the ‘secular’, a concept familiar to us in the modern discourse, is non-essential. The author points out that it is virtually non-existent both in the religion of Islam as the purist ‘Islamists’ conceive it, and in the society that they seek to govern. The Islam that is referred to is the ‘pristine, authentic, original’ form cleansed of all deviations, innovations and influences that may have crept into its practice over centuries. What political Islam seeks is a society and a polity closest to what existed at the time of the Prophet himself and soon thereafter. It is thus, a roll back or a reversal in time that is sought. A central tenet is the practice of Islamic law, the *Sharia*. These principles are common to all schools of political Islam.

Are such laws that were enunciated and practised centuries ago, an essential and practical guide even today? Is there not a conflict between such a world-view and modernity? How does such a belief system deal with change, innovation and compromise? These are some of the central questions that a sceptic, a non-believer, or an agnostic is bound to ask.

The author informs us of schools and scholars who have contended that interpretation, innovation and adaptability to contemporary requirements are possible within the tradition of Islam. *Sharia*, it is pointed out, evolved over several centuries and the instrument of interpreting the laws or making adjustments *ijtihad* is available within the tradition. Further, even in the content of the revealed texts, there are distinctions to be made between principles concerning relation between man and God – *ibadat*, and those that govern relationship between man and man (and woman) – *muamalat*. The former are immutable, the latter more flexible. There has been a tradition of Islamic

jurisprudence that was developed in the early periods, which too can be a guide in terms of precedents and practices. On political issues, there is room for consultation – *shura*. It is thus, contended by some that these (and some other) elements allow enough room for political Islam and *Sharia* to accommodate the realities of the modern world. Some other schools, however, reject such liberal notions and call for strict and literal adherence to the texts. The author's own sympathy seems to be in the direction of the former, that there is enough leeway and room within the traditions of Islam to reconcile belief in its central tenets with the needs and imperatives of contemporary life in the Arab world. This is indeed educative for those of us who are not close students of the Islamic theology or history, but for this reviewer an argument about such a liberal view within the tradition seems a little stretched.

How did the tensions between Islam and modernity develop so deeply in the Arab world? Ahmad points to the impact of imperialism and colonialism, which resulted in an embrace of western values by the elite, but at the same time, a profound alienation from tradition for the majority. He quotes Pankaj Mishra in *The ruins of the empire*, “The long established cosmic order of Islam had been overturned.” The proud heritage of Islam and the conviction that the believers ‘were the chosen people’ had received a blow. The impact of western imperialism on the Arab world resulted in different reactions of acceptance, of adjustments, or of total rejection. Names that resound in ‘Islamism’ today – Al-Afghani, Mohammed Abdu, Rashid Rida, Sayyid Qutb have their roots in this tradition of rejecting the western/modern influence and calling for a return to the first principles of Islam. The book explains in some detail the different forms that such movements took.

In the contemporary period, the Arab spring has led to a churning. First, there was a yearning for greater dignity and freedom by people oppressed for centuries by dictators. This found dramatic expression in Tunisia, Libya, Egypt, Yemen and Bahrain, and made an impact on all Arab nations. Though the Arab spring was not essentially about Islam, the energy and the upheavals that it caused gave opportunities for Islamists. Islam was a rallying point in the sudden freedom that emerged when tyranny was being overthrown. Second, the Arab spring unleashed political, sectarian, tribal and other competitions for political power. Third, there is a regional dimension in terms of specific rivalries for influence such as between Saudi Arabia and Iran or Saudi Arabia and Qatar. There are outside influences further complicating the mix. The result is a complex and ever-shifting interplay of nations, personalities, sects and belief-systems. Ahmad covers briefly the developments in each of the countries in the last few years. The sub-title of the book “doctrinal and political

competitions after the Arab spring” is an apt summation for this narrative.

The reader gains important insights. For instance, why it is that Saudi Arabia was so afraid of the victory of the Muslim brotherhood in Egypt and supported the army take-over there. We learn that in earlier decades the Egyptian teachers and professors who had come to work in the Kingdom had preached the Muslim brotherhood brand of Islam in Saudi Arabia that was upsetting the traditional Wahhabi beliefs. Hence, Saudis are deeply distrustful of these leanings and its impact on the monarchy. Another strand is the rivalry for influence between Saudi Arabia and the tiny Qatar, flush with funds but seeking a larger profile. There are other critical equations, Saudi–Iran and Egypt–Iran that the book covers. All this, of course, is shifting sand and Ahmad notes in the introduction itself, the doubts about the longevity of some of this analysis. The causes and consequences of the failure of the Muslim brotherhood to get a stronghold in Egypt is also analysed in some detail.

The final chapter is about whether *sharia* and democracy are compatible. Here, Ahmad starts with an important feature of the Arab world that he emphasises. “Given that the core identity of the people is derived from Islam, an Islamist discourse is the only one that is likely to succeed in the region,” he writes. This is an empirical observation in that it asserts that Islam is fundamental and essential for the society. If so, the distinction between secular and religious spheres is seen as artificial, at least in the Arab world. Ahmad mentions a number of points: the institution of *shura*, the concept of public good – *masalahah*, the room for laws on individual relationships – *muamalat*, the possibility for interpretation of Sharia – *ijtihad*, to support the point that Islamism is compatible with democracy. He goes further to contend that the two are interdependent and that today the popular will in the Arab world encompasses belief in both. However, it is difficult to deny that there are no contradictions between what is accepted in many democracies today, say, individual freedom, gender equality, religious tolerance, a reformist punitive code, acceptance of individual deviationist behaviour, room for dissent, etc. and a system of justice derived from *Sharia*. From what we have seen of the state practice in Taliban controlled regions, in Saudi Arabia, or even in Iran and the normal expectations of democracy, the difficulties are evident. Ahmad underplays this tension. Nevertheless, to what extent nation-states can devise a system to manage the contradictions is yet to be fully seen. The author is optimistic. This reviewer has to suspend judgment on the issue.

It is difficult to foresee the developments in the Arab world, even in the short term. Since the publication of the book, U.S. has started talking to Iran, causing anxieties in Saudi Arabia and the Gulf States. Syria is likely to see a

long drawn out conflict as well as negotiation. Libya is facing internal turmoil. Egypt, at least in the short run, is veering towards demoralisation and decline. The future of the region is unpredictable but in trying to fathom the developments, Talmiz Ahmad's analysis of the interplay of religion and politics will be a valuable resource.

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R. Rajaraman, *India's Nuclear Energy Programme: Future Plans, Prospects and Concerns* (New Delhi, Academic Foundation, 2013), Pages: 278, Price: 995.00.

Eminent scientist R. Rajaraman's edited volume, *India's Nuclear Energy Programme: Future Plans, Prospects and Concerns*, highlights the importance of nuclear energy in India's science and technology policy. The issue of nuclear energy has generated considerable public debate in recent years. Some of these debates emanate from the importance of nuclear energy in maintaining the current rate of growth of the Indian economy while others are based on concerns about the safety of India's nuclear installations. This edited volume also attempts to dispel misconceptions surrounding the prospects of nuclear energy in India.

India's Nuclear Energy Programme is an edited book comprising of eleven chapters written by scientists who have distinguished career records in atomic science. It is sub-divided into four sections dealing with a broad overview of the importance of nuclear energy for India; the radiological concerns; the fuel cycles; and the technology and regulatory issues. The edited volume also presents the perspective of a leading non-governmental organisation. These papers were presented in the Workshop on "Challenges in Nuclear Safety" organised by the Indian National Science Academy on 14–15 February 2012. The deliberations in the workshop were focused on the viability of nuclear energy as a safe energy option in the backdrop of the Fukushima incident in Japan.

The first chapter by Dr Chidambaram emphasises the need to communicate to the people living in the vicinity of a Nuclear Power Plant (NPP) the importance of nuclear energy option for their region as well as for the rest of India. He advocates that India needs two parameters to calculate its Human Development Index (HDI) – per capita electricity consumption and female literacy. He projects that for India to meet its growth requirements, its per capita electricity consumption has to expand by about “six times”. Hence, India must consider all possible energy options. To this extent, “expanded use nuclear technologies offers immense potential to meet important development needs” (p. 38). The justification for nuclear energy is not only to satisfy India’s energy demands but also to reduce the dangers of climate change. Given the enormous potential of the nuclear energy option, efforts must be made to inform the public about the efficacy of the nuclear option. Credible outreach programmes must be undertaken “to make available relevant technological knowledge to the rural communities around nuclear power plants, through proximate academic institutions” (p. 28). After the Fukushima accident, there are wide concerns about the safety of nuclear power. However, this must not be a basis to foreclose the nuclear option. Instead, a safety culture must be put in place to assure the safety features of the NPP and the importance of its development not only for various regions but also for the rest of India.

The second chapter by Srikumar Banerjee highlights the major concerns that have been raised in the media recently about the growth of nuclear power in India. These issues range from the need for nuclear energy, whether renewable energy resources can fulfil India’s electricity consumption requirements, concerns regarding radiation from the NPP, the necessity of constructing Light Water Reactors and India’s regulatory mechanism. Quite like the previous author, Banerjee agrees that nuclear energy must be expanded in the near as well as distant future, as renewable energy resources would not be able to meet the large-scale electricity demands in India. He argues that it is futile to cite the examples of countries like Germany, which have agreed not to produce nuclear energy beyond 2011. In India with its ever-expanding population, electricity generation has increased by over 50 per cent in the last five years and is expected to amplify further. Dispelling fears about high radioactivity from India’s NPPs and from fuel cycle activities, the author emphasises on the “prerequisite of a robust nuclear safety mechanism for establishing a nuclear capacity, which will be a significant part of the overall energy mix” (p. 47). To that extent, the present regulatory process monitored by the AERB is “indeed technologically sound and is fully effective” (p. 47).

The second part of the book is extremely important. It carries an important message, which dispels common fears relating to NPPs, one of them being radiation. The Fukushima incident has instilled deep scepticism and concerns about the prospects of nuclear energy in India. However, this volume has made a commendable effort in conveying to the public that in any NPP “the radiation received by members of public around the plants is practically negligible when compared to the natural background radiations at any place on earth” (p. 59). This is possible due to the multi-layered defence and in-depth design approach used in all NPPs that makes the occurrence of an accident with radioactive release an “extremely rare event”. Even if such rare incidents take place, there are adequate emergency procedures in place, which can be implemented in time to contain any health hazards. Assessing the impact on aquatic ecosystems, biodiversity, agriculture and human health in areas having operating NPPs, the volume conveys that strict laws govern heat dissipation into water bodies. An additional benefit of such strict regulations has been that adequate attention is given to the need to assess thermal impact on ecosystems of India. The volume dispels misinformation that propagates that construction of NPPs at Kudankulam or Jaitapur will destroy biodiversity. NPPs at Kaiga have maintained the bio-systems in the regions. In fact, the “Narora Atomic Power Station has substantially increased the avian biodiversity” (p. 78) in the vicinity. This volume thus, disproves apprehensions raised by the media that NPPs have adverse effects on biodiversity and agriculture. This section also makes an appeal to “avoid unfounded apprehensions” based on unscientific and unreasonable extrapolations. Questioning the linear non-threshold hypothesis, this book authoritatively argues “there is considerable scientific evidence to argue that low and high doses produce exactly opposite biological effects and therefore the LNT hypothesis is incorrect” (p. 123).

An alternative opinion on nuclear energy is evident in the chapter presented by the anti-nuclear activists from the NGO Anumukti. Drawing on an empirical analysis on the basis of surveys conducted in the areas around Jaduguda mines and Rawatbhata, it has been “unambiguously” revealed, “there is a higher rate of congenital deformities among the people living in the vicinity of both” (p. 153).

The third section focuses on the issue of fuel cycles and technology. Eminent physicist Frank Von Hippel focuses on the concerns about large-scale reprocessing plants. Apart from the risks of radioactive release caused by an accident or some malicious act, the author argues that these programmes involve huge costs. It also creates large stocks of weapons-usable and

radiotoxic plutonium oxide and liquid high-level waste, which are attractive terrorist targets. In order to deal with these challenges, he suggests that India may have to “shift away from an exclusive focus on breeder-reactors and plutonium separation” (p. 172). However, if India decides to continue with its breeder R&D programmes, he recommends that substantial efforts must be undertaken to minimise the costs and risks by securing separated plutonium and by vitrifying high-level liquid wastes immediately. Presenting a contrary view, C. Ganguly argues about the necessity for large international reprocessing plants under IAEA safeguards for India. This will help in reprocessing spent fuel from LWRs and PHWRs that are under IAEA safeguards. The international reprocessing centre can also provide reprocessing services for those following closed fuel cycle like India. International collaboration on nuclear energy will brighten prospects for sustainable nuclear power and peaceful use of atomic energy fast reactor technology worldwide.

The last section of the book deals extensively with the legal and regulatory issues governing nuclear energy in India. This section informs the public about the details on the national framework consisting of national acts, legal instruments, international treaties, conventions and agreements to which India is a party. In the backdrop of India’s commitment and obligations arising out of these legislations, India has outlined its nuclear policy as to generate environmentally sustainable nuclear power and follow the closed nuclear fuel cycle resolutely. As part of its efforts to address criticism of the current regulatory structure in India and to allay fears following the Fukushima accident, India tabled the National Safety Regulatory Authority Bill (NSRA) in the Lok Sabha in 2011. The Bill seeks to replace the existing AERB with a new regulatory authority. The functions of the proposed Bill would be to ensure radiation safety and nuclear safety during activities relating to “production, storage, disposal, transport, export and import of nuclear material or equipment for production or use of nuclear material” (p. 271). The NSRA is expected to be an autonomous body that will ensure better transparency on the “safety of DAE/NPC installations” (p. 277). Despite genuine apprehensions against the NSRA, this volume argues that the Bill is a “first satisfactory step towards a truly independent and functionally autonomous nuclear regulator” (p. 278).

India’s Nuclear Energy Programme is an exhaustive volume that presents views on a variety of issues concerning nuclear power. The edited volume makes a seminal contribution towards addressing the concerns and apprehensions of the Indian people regarding the prospects of nuclear energy in India. The book simultaneously highlights the benefits of nuclear energy for a growing economy like India. Nuclear energy is expected to play a

significant role in putting the country on the path of development. Perhaps the strength of the book lies in projecting the views of those who have serious reservations about India nuclear energy programme. The volume is an important and timely contribution in the field of nuclear energy in India. It does service to the nation by informing the public about the various issues concerning nuclear energy. At present, this reaching out to the public is the most important task of the nuclear energy establishment of India. This edited volume has fulfilled that public service commendably.

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