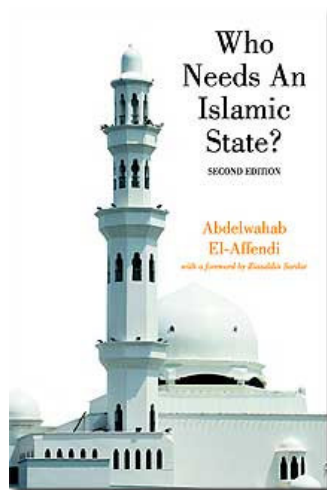




Viewpoints contain background analyses and comments on critical global and regional trends, issues and developments. *Viewpoints* also occasionally include analytical reviews of ISEAS books. The responsibility for facts and opinions expressed rests exclusively with the authors and their interpretations do not necessarily reflect the views or policy of ISEAS.



Rejecting the Islamic State

[Published in Malaysiakini.com] Aug 18, 2008]

By Ooi Kee Beng

Review of the second edition of Who Needs an Islamic State? by Abdelwahab El-Affendi, with a foreword by Ziauddin Sardar. Published by Malaysia Think Tank London 2008.

Abdelwahab El-Affendi published the first edition of his book *Who Needs An Islamic State?* in 1991. This was a brave move by the Muslim scholar since the thrust of the work was to criticise mainstream Islamic movements such as Hamas, the Iranian Revolution or the Taliban in Afghanistan for being authoritarian.

More profound was the general question why Islamic activism associates itself so strongly to political suppression. The problem, as Abdelwahab sees it, can be studied through a critique of the notion of the Islamic state itself - and through studying the philosophical preference among activists.

It is because Abdelwahab, presently a lecturer at the University of Westminster, feels that his arguments are more relevant today than 17 years ago - when the first edition came out – that Malaysia Think Tank London agreed to release the second edition. After 9/11 and the invasion of Iraq, and with no end to the “war on terror” in sight, his worry is now greater than ever that the deteriorating relationship between the Islamic world and the West will further encourage authoritarianism in Islamic movements.

Backed by a summary historical rendition of western political thought as well as a trend in Islamic thought that started with Ibn Khaldun, Sudan-born Abdelwahab argues that “Muslim

communities should give the highest priority to freedom and democracy and seek to escape the straitjacket of the modern nation state through more creative formulas.”

Ibn Khaldun was a scholar from the fourteenth century who anticipated many elements of modern social sciences such as philosophy of history, demography and sociology.

To someone like me, who is trained more in history and political science than Islamic political thought, what is striking about the discussion is how typical a case the fate of Islamic political civilisation is within the global framework of international relations over the last two centuries.

Political structures buckled

As modern Western capitalism gained force over the two hundred years, political structures buckled under the weight. In far-flung parts of the world, other civilisations met their demise over the same short period of time.

Chinese dynastic history came to an end in 1911, while the Japanese had to dismantle their samurai culture seven decades earlier in order to avoid colonisation. These are some of the striking cases.

The process, though less dramatic, was the same for other cultures less powerful or less influential. Being overpowered by the new material culture of the West driven by scientific knowledge and industrial production.

In trying to retain some pride despite the loss of political sovereignty, most peoples argued for the ethical superiority of their defeated cultures and polities, and sought to identify tipping points in their history to blame for how things went so wrong.

Indeed, in the end, empires on the European continent itself were not spared this fate. More specifically, in the aftermath of the First World War, a series of civilisations fell along with the Muslim Caliphate in Turkey, including the Austrian-Hungarian empire and the Russian empire on European soil. These too had to find their own paths of modernity from then on.

This whirlwind died down over time, with nationalism providing the much needed compass for the civilisational disorientation caused by colonialism. The stronger the influence of a particular civilisation had been, the harder it seemed to be for it to attain a new viable polity within a world of nation states.

China took 140 years to reach the crucial point where Deng Xiaoping's reforms could finally push the subcontinent towards economic progress. Japan switched footing already in the 1840s and turned itself into a modern power, albeit by practically committing cultural suicide.

The Muslim world seems to remain caught in this maelstrom, and many of its young men, intellectuals and politicians still seek a workable format in which cultural pride and socio-economic progress can co-exist. It is here that the concept of the Islamic state that Abdelwahab takes issue with has its greatest relevance.

Middle ground

By arguing for democratic development in Muslim communities, and against the idea that the legitimate successor to the Caliphate has to be the Islamic state, Abdelwahab seeks a middle ground that gives serious consideration to Islam's inherent aims rather than its historical forms.

As has been the case with peoples of other civilizations in modern times, Muslims have to confront the fact that "the Western state has been based on dubious moral and factual assumptions, but is still the most successful model around." While the glories of ancient Muslim polities are happily remembered, "modern Muslims have been unable to progress towards either model."

In asking *Who Needs an Islamic State?* so starkly, Abdelwahab reminds the reader that the Islamic state is not a neutral concept. It is instead informed by certain conscious interests on the one hand and by destructive ambitions aiming for unattainable Muslim political unity on the other.

Quite rightly, he recognises the classic argument in much of western philosophy and in the likes of Ibn Khaldun that "anyone attempting to run the affairs of society must not be guided solely by ideals, whether heavenly or earthly, but primarily by the realities of power politics, which afford the most virtuous of reformers only a limited margin of manoeuvre. Virtue is what the logic of power permits."

OOI KEE BENG is Fellow at the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies (ISEAS).