

THE CRISIS OF ISLAMIC CIVILIZATION¹REVIEWED BY MAJOR JOHN R. MALONEY²

*If Muslims do not muster the inner resources of their faith to fashion a civilizing outer presence, then Islam as a civilization may indeed disappear . . . Islam will simply be another motif in a consumer-driven, self-obsessed, short attention-span global culture; another 'player' in the marketplace for ideas and religions. The retreat of Islam into the private, individual sphere will be complete. The much-heralded Islamic 'awakening' of recent times will not be a prelude to the rebirth of an Islamic civilization; it will be another episode in its decline. The revolt of Islam becomes instead the final act of the end of a civilization.*³

I. Introduction

The Crisis of Islamic Civilization is an exploration of the nature of Islamic civilization, the forces which have resulted in its progressive decline, and the various means by which the Islamic world may come to grips with modernity. It is within this context that Mr. Ali A. Allawi⁴ addresses the issue of "political Islam" or "Islamism," which he uses to characterize Islam as a political ideology that emphasizes religious and

¹ ALI A. ALLAWI, *THE CRISIS OF ISLAMIC CIVILIZATION* (2009).

² Judge Advocate, U.S. Army. Presently assigned as Litigation Attorney, Torts Branch, U.S. Army Litigation Division, Arlington, Virginia.

³ ALLAWI, *supra* note 1, at 273.

⁴ Ali A. Allawi formerly served as Minister of Finance, Defense, and Trade in Iraq's post-war government. He is currently a Senior Visiting Fellow at Princeton University. Born in Baghdad in 1947, Mr. Allawi graduated from MIT in 1968 with a BSc in Civil Engineering. He went on to do postgraduate studies in regional planning at the London School of Economics, and then obtained an MBA from Harvard University. Mr. Allawi was active in the opposition to the Baathist regime from 1968 onwards. He spent a number of years in finance in various positions outside Iraq, including a position at the World Bank. In 1978, he co-founded Arab International Finance, a merchant bank based in London. In 1992, he founded Fisa Group, which manages two hedge funds. From 1999–2002, he was a Senior Associate Member at St. Anthony's College, Oxford University. Ali A. Allawi, http://www.cceia.org/people/data/ali_a_allawi.html (last visited Sept. 8, 2009).

rigid perspectives in all aspects of the public life.⁵ Mr. Allawi's analysis has great relevance for judge advocates and military professionals.

Though *The Crisis of Islamic Civilization* comprehensively incorporates history, philosophy, theology, sociology, economics, and politics,⁶ three primary arguments form Mr. Allawi's thesis. First, Islamic civilization is fundamentally different from other civilizations, and, in particular, from Western civilization.⁷ Second, European encroachment on the East thwarted Islamic civilization from developing its own pathways to modernity.⁸ Third, Islamic civilization must come to grips with modernity by first reconnecting with the spiritual dimension of Islam, and then developing political, legal, and economic models which are rooted in an authentic understanding of Islam.⁹

II. Analysis

A. Islamic Civilization is Different

Mr. Allawi believes that the world of Islam is distinguishable from other civilizations in its emphasis on a spiritual dimension that informs every other aspect of Islamic civilization.¹⁰ By contrast, modern Western civilization is defined by a starkly secular perspective and an emphasis on the individual.¹¹ The strict separation of spiritual authority from secular authority—characteristic of modern Western civilization, has no basis in historical Islam.¹² To the contrary, Islamic civilization holds that the secular and the spiritual can, and should, be harmonized.¹³ Islam does not conceive of the concept of the individual or of individual rights; instead, Islam views the individual as being completely dependent upon God, unable to exercise free will and individual choice, except by reference to God.¹⁴ In Islam, no one, either individually or collectively, can assume the authority to determine an ethical or moral standard of

⁵ ALLAWI, *supra* note 1, at 1.

⁶ *Id.* at xvi.

⁷ *Id.* at xiv.

⁸ *Id.* at 9.

⁹ *Id.* at xiv.

¹⁰ *Id.* at 10.

¹¹ *Id.* at 2.

¹² *Id.* at 10.

¹³ *Id.*

¹⁴ *Id.* at 11.

conduct without reference to God, as any objective ethical or moral standard is necessarily derived from God.¹⁵

Mr. Allawi's contention that Islamic civilization is different because it is founded upon a spiritual dimension glosses over the fact that Western civilization, for much of its history, was similarly founded. Within a few centuries of the fall of the Roman Empire, Europe witnessed the coalescence of a new geopolitical, cultural, and religious order.¹⁶ This new order would come to be called "Christendom,"¹⁷ founded upon a feudal system that incorporated Roman Catholic Christianity, Roman legal tradition, and the Germanic ideal of liberty.¹⁸ This spiritually-founded Western civilization of Christendom endured until the Protestant revolts of the sixteenth century.¹⁹ Protestantism provided a framework for subordinating the Church to the State.²⁰ Within two centuries, this subordination led to the doctrine of separation of church and state; within two centuries more, it led to the irrelevance of church to state.²¹ It may be that the process of de-sacralizing Western civilization was a necessary step on the path to modernity. If so, then it may also be that the differences between Islamic and Western civilization have less to do with the presence or absence, respectively, of a spiritual dimension than they do with the fact that these civilizations are simply at different stages of development along the same general trajectory.

B. European Encroachment Thwarted Islam's Path to Modernity

In Mr. Allawi's view, the failure of the Muslim world to find an alternate path to modernity resulted, in large part, from the fact that Islam proved unable to meet the challenges presented by engagement with the modern West.²² In the nineteenth century, the Muslim world was suddenly and compellingly confronted with the dramatic reversal that had taken place with respect to the relative power of the civilizations of

¹⁵ *Id.* at 13.

¹⁶ H. W. CROCKER III, TRIUMPH: THE POWER AND GLORY OF THE CATHOLIC CHURCH—A 2,000-YEAR HISTORY 116 (2001).

¹⁷ *Id.*

¹⁸ *Id.* at 117.

¹⁹ *Id.* at 235.

²⁰ *Id.*

²¹ *Id.*

²² ALLAWI, *supra* note 1, at 9.

Islam and the West.²³ Until the late seventeenth century, Islamic civilization had, in the main, been in the ascendant.²⁴ Despite occasional defeats,²⁵ some of which were nothing less than catastrophic,²⁶ Islamic civilization had generally proved more than equal to the challenge posed by other civilizations, particularly the West.²⁷ It was a bedrock belief of Islamic civilization that the Muslim world would ultimately triumph in the clash of civilizations.²⁸ During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, however, Islam was suddenly everywhere on the retreat.²⁹ The nature and impact of this reversal was devastating:

The projection of European imperial power in an almost effortless demonstration of its superiority in military, technical, material, organizational and governance matters challenged the core assumptions that underlay the world view of Islam. Nearly all contemporary Muslim observers of the unfolding drama of European conquest and expansion would bemoan the huge chasm which had opened between the capabilities of the two civilizations and the helplessness of Islam in front of the European juggernaut.³⁰

Confronted with what appeared to be an almost unbridgeable civilizational gap, the Muslim world experienced a crisis of self-confidence with respect to the merits of its own specifically Islamic political, legal, and economic models.³¹ But for European encroachment, Mr. Allawi believes that Islamic civilization might have sought a means

²³ *Id.* at 24.

²⁴ *Id.* at 26.

²⁵ Islam suffered a temporary reverse with the arrival of the Crusaders in the Levant, and more permanent reverses through the loss of Spain, Portugal, and Sicily. These were, however, more than compensated for by the capture of Constantinople and Turkish advances into southeastern Europe. BERNARD LEWIS, *THE MIDDLE EAST: A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE LAST 2,000 YEARS* 274 (1995).

²⁶ Consider the sack of Baghdad by the Mongols in 1258. The Mongols razed the city, massacred most of the population (estimated to have been several hundred thousand people), and murdered the last Abbasid caliph. JAMES CHAMBERS, *THE DEVIL'S HORSEMEN* 143–46 (1979).

²⁷ LEWIS, *supra* note 25, at 274.

²⁸ ALLAWI, *supra* note 1, at 26.

²⁹ The nineteenth century saw the establishment of a French North African empire in Muslim Algeria, the absorption of Muslim Egypt into the British dominion, and the displacement of Muslim rule in India in favor of British imperial authority. *Id.* at 24.

³⁰ *Id.* at 25.

³¹ *Id.* at 33.

to modernize on its own terms.³² The Muslim world might have developed models specific to the demands of Islamic civilization that would have permitted them to close the civilizational gap while at the same time, preserving their core cultural perspective and values. Instead, the Muslim world jettisoned, in whole or in part, the political, legal, and economic models which had previously served Islamic civilization and attempted to import Western models in their place.³³

This argument is also problematic—a fact that Mr. Allawi recognizes in his comparison of Japan’s experience in confronting Western civilization and the process of modernization with the response of Islamic civilization to these same forces:

Here the case of the successful modernization of Japan, which commenced in earnest only in 1868 after the Meiji Restoration,³⁴ represents a serious counter-example and raises a dilemma concerning the apparent failure of modernization in the nineteenth-century Muslim world . . . At the end of the century, Japan was well on the way to joining the advanced powers, while Egypt languished under British rule. In Japan, the emphasis was on strengthening the bonds of Japanese exclusiveness through education, through state Shintoism and through the traditional virtues of thrift, diligence and loyalty in order to construct a modern economy. These were the legacies of Japan’s Tokugawa past, and they were not discarded or questioned in the Meiji reformer’s plans.³⁵

The dilemma raised by the Japanese experience with Western encroachment and modernization is that it directly contradicts Mr. Allawi’s argument that these same forces deprived Islamic civilization of the opportunity to find an Islamic path to modernity. Japan was

³² *Id.* at 9.

³³ *Id.* at 33.

³⁴ The political revolution that brought about the fall of the Tokugawa shogunate and returned control of the country to direct imperial rule under the emperor Meiji, beginning an era of major political, economic, and social change known as the Meiji period (1868–1912). This revolution brought about the modernization and westernization of Japan. W. SCOTT MORTON & J. KENNETH OLENIK, *JAPAN: ITS HISTORY AND CULTURE* 147–67 (2005).

³⁵ ALLAWI, *supra* note 1, at 34.

confronted with the overwhelming military and technical superiority of the West when a squadron of American warships, commanded by Commodore Matthew C. Perry, sailed up to Uraga near the mouth of Edo Bay and delivered to Japanese officials a letter outlining a series of American demands.³⁶ Though Japanese authorities were deeply concerned, and were impressed by the technological superiority of the American ships and weapons, they did not experience a moral collapse or crisis of confidence in the merits of their own civilization.³⁷ To the contrary, Japan rapidly found ways of reconciling the core values of its civilization with the demands of modernization. What, then, does this example say about the failure of Islam to adapt in a similar fashion when confronted by the same forces? Mr. Allawi raises this question, but provides no answer.

C. Islamic Civilization Must Find an Alternate Path to Modernity

Mr. Allawi contends that the Muslim world must find a way to harmonize modernity with the core values and perspectives of Islamic civilization.³⁸ This will require the development of alternative political, legal, and economic models—ones that are consonant with the spiritual foundation of the civilization.³⁹ The need for alternative models derives from the fact that Muslim leaders, in their haste to close the civilizational gap, failed to assess whether Western models would function in a civilization which had not undergone the transformational experiences that led to the development of these models in the West in the first instance.⁴⁰ These Western models, e.g., industrial manufacturing, secular commercial law, the nation-state as a unit of political organization, etc., were alien to a civilization that had not experienced the Reformation, the Enlightenment, or the Industrial Revolution.⁴¹ More importantly, in light of the fact that these models were the product of a largely secular culture, many would prove to be incompatible with the spiritual dimension which forms the basis of Islamic civilization.⁴²

³⁶ MORTON & OLENIK, *supra* note 34, at 138.

³⁷ *Id.* at 139.

³⁸ ALLAWI, *supra* note 1, at 271.

³⁹ *Id.*

⁴⁰ *Id.* at 35.

⁴¹ *Id.* at 20–21.

⁴² *Id.* at 213.

As was the case with Mr. Allawi's argument regarding the impact of Western encroachment on Islamic civilization, Japan's experience with modernization seems to contradict Mr. Allawi's argument that Islam must develop alternative political, legal, and economic models for modernization if it is to preserve its core values and perspectives. Japan's approach to the reformation of its army and navy is exemplary:

The Japanese leaders intended not to Westernize, but to modernize; that is to say, they decided to choose the best model in each field of technology and administration which would make Japan powerful and a match for other nations. They did not intend to sacrifice or to alter fundamentally "the spirit of Old Japan," *yamato-damashii*, the soul of the nation, or the basic structure of their society under the emperor through which this spirit was expressed. Deputations of leading statesmen were sent abroad to bring back information and ideas upon which reforms could be based.⁴³

If Japan was able to chart a course to modernity through the implementation of Western models, while at the same time preserving the core values and perspectives of Japanese civilization, why did Islam prove unable to do so? Again, Mr. Allawi offers no answers.

D. Political Islam

Mr. Allawi believes that the first step in the process of developing an alternative path to modernity is for the Muslim world to reconnect with the spiritual dimension of Islamic civilization.⁴⁴ Ironically, Mr. Allawi sees political Islam (Islamism)—an ideology that promotes outward expressions of Islamic observance in all aspects of the public life—as standing squarely in the way of this reconnection with the spiritual dimension.⁴⁵

According to Mr. Allawi, "[W]hen Islamists proclaim that Islam 'is a total way of life,' what they really mean is that Islamic forms should shroud the modern world. There is no serious questioning about the

⁴³ MORTON & OLENIK, *supra* note 34, at 151.

⁴⁴ ALLAWI, *supra* note 1, at 272.

⁴⁵ *Id.* at 253.

underlying conceptual framework of this world.”⁴⁶ In other words, while political Islam seeks to superficially impose an Islamic veneer on Western models, it has little or nothing to say about the validity of the models themselves.

Despite its apparent elevation of form over substance, political Islam nevertheless wields considerable influence in the Muslim world.⁴⁷ It is for this reason that *The Crisis of Islamic Civilization* may have some relevance for judge advocates and other military professionals operating in the Muslim world. Mr. Allawi provides a valuable insight into historical and contemporary Islamic civilization. In particular, his explication of the tension between the desire for modernization and the desire for an Islamic culture in the Muslim world can assist judge advocates involved with the reorganization of legal systems and civil government in Iraq and Afghanistan. Understanding that Islamic forms, as opposed to Islamic substance, are what seem to matter most to Muslim societies can inform decisions concerning implementation of political, legal, or economic models and the means by which acceptance of these models by the Muslim population can be facilitated.

III. Conclusion

The Crisis of Islamic Civilization is an impressive attempt to explain the current state of Islamic civilization and to propose a means by which the Muslim world might recover from the decline of the last two centuries. Well-written, well-researched, and remarkably informative, *The Crisis of Islamic Civilization* is a valuable resource for anyone seeking a more nuanced understanding of the ways in which modernization has shaped contemporary Muslim society.

⁴⁶ *Id.* at 252.

⁴⁷ *Id.* at 270.