

The *Introduction* chapter to  
*Islam without Extremes*  
*A Muslim Case for Liberty*

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## *Introduction*

Nothing is what it seems.

—AL PACINO, in *The Recruit* (2003)

I GREW UP IN ANKARA, Turkey's capital, as (then) the only child of a middle-class family. My father was a newspaper columnist—a career I would also pursue—and my mother was a primary-school teacher. They were both Muslim believers but too busy with daily life to find time to teach me about religion. Therefore, when my grandfather, a very devout Muslim, suggested that he could help me become better acquainted with God, my parents happily supported the idea. At the time, I was about eight, not doing much during the summer holiday besides playing with other kids on the street; my grandfather lived, with my equally pious and bighearted grandmother, just a few blocks from our apartment. So we all agreed that I would visit my grandparents in the mornings and, after enjoying their delicious breakfasts, receive a crash course in Islam.

In the next couple of weeks, my grandfather spent a few hours every day showing me how to perform the regular Muslim prayers, took me to the neighborhood mosque, and taught me to form Arabic letters and words with colorful beads. My first

big achievement was to write the pillar of the Muslim faith: *La Ilaha Illallah*, or, “There is no god but God.” My grandfather also told me stories about prophets such as Yusuf (Joseph) or Musa (Moses), while I listened with juvenile curiosity and novice religiosity. I truly enjoyed learning about God and the religion He had revealed.

One day, in my grandfather’s library, I came across a prayer book with three quotes on its back cover. The first two quotes were from the Qur’an, and they were about how and why God created humanity. One was the verse: “He it is Who made for you the ears and the eyes and the hearts; little is it that you give thanks.”<sup>1</sup> I was deeply touched by this message. For the first time, I realized that my sight, hearing, and feelings are “given” to me by God. Surely, I said to myself, I should thank Him more.

But the third quote on the book’s cover, which was from another source called Hadiths (sayings), was not moving but disturbing. “If your children do not start praying at the age of ten,” it said, “then beat them up.”

I was horrified. I knew that my grandfather—a kind, compassionate man—would never even talk rudely to me, let alone beat me. But here I was, eight years old, discovering that my religion—the religion I was so enjoying learning about—instructed parents and grandparents to hurt their children. I was shaken up.

When I brought this quote to the attention of my grandfather, he comforted me with a smile, reassuring me that the “beating” suggestion was for ill-behaved children, not nice ones like me. And such punishment was, he added, for their own good.

Although relieved by my grandfather’s words, I was not fully satisfied. Why, I asked myself, would God ask parents to beat their children to force them into prayer? It seemed not

only cruel but also unreasonable. Forcing a child—or any person—into a religious practice could never produce a sincere religiosity. Wouldn't a prayer be meaningless, I thought, if you were saying it not because you wanted to connect with God but because you wished to avoid a slap in your face?

## THE LANDS OF THE UNFREE

Three decades have passed since those summer days in my grandparents' house, but my gnawing suspicion about the if-they-don't-pray-then-beat-them-up strategy has stayed with me. The more I studied Islamic literature and Muslim societies, the more I found examples of that oppressive mindset. And I continued to ask: Is this really what Islam enjoins?

Today, the same question haunts the minds of millions of my coreligionists—and millions of others. Is Islam a religion of coercion and repression? Or is it compatible with the idea of liberty—that individuals have full control over their lives and are free to be religious, irreligious, or whatever they wish to be?

There are many good reasons to ask these questions. Islamic societies in the contemporary world are really not the beacons of freedom. In extreme cases, such as Saudi Arabia, there is the weird phenomenon called the *Mutawwa'in*, the religious police, who monitor people on the streets and “correct” behaviors that they find “un-Islamic.” If prayer time approaches and you are not preparing for worship, the *Mutawwa'in*, with sticks in their hands, may come by to ensure that you head to the mosque. They also force Saudi women to cover their entire bodies, and disallow even a friendly chat with the opposite sex. The Saudi kingdom also closely monitors its borders and bans “un-Islamic” products and publications. Other faiths such as Christianity are

not allowed to proselytize—or even to exist within the kingdom’s borders.

The Islamic Republic of Iran presents somewhat softer examples of oppression. There, women are granted better status than in Saudi Arabia, there is some public space for free discussion, and there are a few relatively democratic institutions, such as a parliament. But Iranian society is still very far from being free. Women are still forced to obey the perceived Islamic dress code. Families must remove satellite dishes from their rooftops so they won’t be exposed to Western television. Political dissidents are crushed. And the final word in governance belongs to a group of mullahs, or clerics, who supposedly are guided by God—a claim that perhaps is possible to trust but impossible to verify.

Afghanistan, under Taliban rule from 1996 to 2001, was the worst case in the Islamic world, for it brutally suppressed even the slightest freedoms. Not only were women forced to wear the all-encompassing *burqa*, they also were completely excluded from public life. All sorts of “non-Islamic joys”—such as listening to music, playing chess, or even flying a kite—were banned by the Taliban regime. And those who broke these strident laws were punished in the harshest ways. The Taliban banned all other faiths and destroyed their ancient shrines and symbols, such as two 1,500-year-old statues of the Buddha in Bamiyan.

Saudi Arabia, Iran, and Afghanistan are extreme cases; most Muslim countries are not as repressive. Yet every Muslim country still suffers from a deficit of freedom, in varying degrees. According to the “freedom index” of Freedom House, a Washington-based institute, not a single Muslim-majority country can be defined as “fully free.” Most nations don’t have religious police, but they do still have serious deterrents to liberty. Apostasy—the abandonment of Islam for another faith—can

bring strong social reaction or even legal persecution. Even in the West, some Muslims have proved to be oppressive by reacting violently against those who satirize or even criticize Islam—as experienced firsthand by writer Salman Rushdie, filmmaker Theo van Gogh, and the *Jyllands-Posten*, the Danish newspaper that published satirical cartoons of the Prophet Muhammad.

Given this seemingly rich evidence, many people in the West have concluded that Islam as a faith is incompatible with liberty. In the eyes of many Westerners, it is an intolerant, suppressive, and even violent religion. Why else, the reasoning goes, would Islamic societies be so unfree?

Before anyone rushes to that conclusion, let me relate a story.

### UNDERSTANDING “JUST HOW BRUTAL ISLAM IS”

In November 2006, terrifying news about Khalid Adem, a Muslim Ethiopian immigrant living in Atlanta, shocked Americans. The man was found guilty of aggravated battery and cruelty to his own daughter. What he did, reportedly, was to use a pair of kitchen scissors to remove the clitoris of the two-year-old girl. At Adem’s trial, his wife sadly explained her husband’s logic: “He said he wanted to preserve her virginity. He said it was the will of God.”<sup>2</sup>

About a year later, Warner Todd Huston, an American pundit, wrote about the incident on a popular website and denounced “this common Muslim practice of the mutilation of a little girl’s private parts.” He also made a broader inference. “We need to understand,” he told his readers, “just how brutal Islam is in how it treats its most vulnerable members: girls and women.”<sup>3</sup>

There was certainly an inexcusable brutality to this situation, and both the Muslim Adem and the non-Muslim Huston

believed that it was the decree of Islam. Yet both were wrong. For what Adem did to his daughter is a practice—known as “female genital mutilation”—that comes not from the scripture of Islam but from a millennia-old tradition in Africa. It is based on an age-old assumption that women might be “immoral” if they enjoy sexual intercourse. Artifacts from Egypt indicate that the practice predates Islam, Christianity, and even recorded history.<sup>4</sup> Unfortunately, it is still widely practiced in Egypt, Sudan, and other parts of Africa—among not just Muslims but also other faith communities. In Ethiopia, whose population is 63 percent Christian, nearly four out of five women still were genitally mutilated just a few decades ago.<sup>5</sup> Besides the nature-worshipping animists, even a Jewish tribe in north-eastern Africa maintains the terrible custom.<sup>6</sup>

So, on closer inspection, what seems at first glance a problem with Islam turns out to be a problem with some local tradition—something that passes from generation to generation without much questioning.

Should we take a hint?

Could other problems present in the Islamic societies of today stem not from religion but from the preexisting customs, attitudes, and mindsets of those societies?

And is it possible that even some Muslims themselves—Muslims like Khalid Adem, who wrongfully believed that mutilating his baby girl was “the will of God”—might not be aware of this discrepancy?

## THE WORD OF GOD IN THE HISTORY OF MEN

My own “aha!” moment with the above question came at the age of seventeen, when I first read the entire Qur’an, in

translation—something few Muslims I know ever do. To my surprise, almost none of the extremely detailed rules and prohibitions about daily life that I had seen in some ultraconservative “Islamic books” were there. The Qur’an was also noticeably silent on the issues of stoning adulterers, punishing drinkers, or killing those who abandon or “insult” Islam. Nor was there mention of an “Islamic state,” a “global caliphate,” or the “religious police.” Many things that I see in the Muslim world and don’t find terribly pleasant, I realized, are simply not in Islam’s scripture.

This, in a sense, is not unusual. Every religion has a “core,” often a text that is believed to be of some divine origin. Then this core unfolds into history—to be understood, interpreted, and misinterpreted by men. As Islam’s divine core, the Qur’an, entered into human societies, many additional doctrines, rules, practices, and attitudes were added to the words of scripture. At certain fateful junctures in Islamic history (which I examine in this book), some particular interpretations of the Qur’an prevailed over others—not because they were necessarily more valid, but because they were politically or culturally more convenient.

Thus, the Islam of today carries the weight of fourteen centuries of tradition. Far worse, it even carries the weight of the political crises and traumas endured by Muslims in the past two centuries.

The better news is that not only is it possible to reinterpret Islam in newer, fresher ways, there also are signs that these new interpretations are likely to thrive. One key example is modern-day Turkey, where, as we shall see, there is an ongoing, silent, Islamic reformation.

Before rushing into Turkey, though, I need to relate another story.

## UNDERSTANDING HOW BRUTAL “NON-ISLAM” CAN BE

On a very cold and snowy morning in January 1981—just several months after my “summer school” at my grandparents’ house—my mother woke me very early. Normally, she would prepare me for school, but she and I had other plans for that day. After a quick breakfast, we left home and took two separate buses to go to Mamak, a destitute neighborhood in the suburbs of Ankara. Our destination was not a park, not a mall, but a scary place: the military prison.

This was a huge facility with many barracks, all surrounded by electrified barbed wire. There were many soldiers holding machine guns, some looking down sinisterly from ugly watch-towers. Honestly, the whole scene looked very much like a gulag.

After we stood for about an hour at the prison entrance, the soldiers took us, along with a dozen other mothers and a few children, to a courtyard that was divided in half by a yard-wide fence of barbed wire. “Line behind the fence,” one soldier yelled. “You have only ten minutes.” Then I saw a group of inmates marching toward us in military fashion. The soldiers were yelling at them as well: “March! Left, right, left!” A few seconds later, the group was also ordered to chant the slogan “How happy is the one who says I am a Turk”—the famous motto of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, Turkey’s secularist founder. And then, as the inmates lined up on the other side of the barbed-wire fence, I came face to face with him—my father.

He was much thinner than four months earlier, the last time I had seen him, and his head was shaved. Yet he had the same

big smile on his face, and he greeted us happily. As I remember vaguely, he told me that he was very comfortable at the prison and that he would be home soon. But he and my mother were hiding some bitter facts from me: There was systematic torture at Mamak Prison, and most inmates, including my father, were on trial for capital crimes.

For what? Well, for nothing but being a public intellectual. As I said, my father was a columnist, one with a particular political line: he was a member of the Nationalist Action Party (MHP) and the associated “nationalist” movement, which was mainly a reaction to a growing tide of Communism in Turkey. So my father wrote books refuting the Marxist-Leninist ideology and criticizing “Soviet imperialism.” In *Violence in Politics*, he condemned all authoritarian regimes, focusing on the French, Bolshevik, and Iranian Revolutions and their similarities. He also opposed the militant tendencies in his own political camp. Hence, even some of the leftists respected him as a voice of reason on the right.

But the coup launched by the Turkish military on September 12, 1980, recognized no such nuances. The generals ordered the arrest of all politicians and activists from all camps, whose number, in the next three years, would amount to a staggering six hundred thousand people. Some of these detainees were held without trial for many months, only to be released later without any conviction. (My father’s share was fourteen months in prison.) Thousands were subjected to brutal torture, during which 175 died, and many others were left disabled. Fifty people were sent to the gallows. The whole process, in the words of a Turkish liberal, was “an orgy of violence.”<sup>7</sup>

The generals argued that they had launched the coup to “end the era of anarchy and terror” that beset Turkey in the

late 1970s as a result of armed clashes between Marxist and nationalist militants. That was not untrue, but the terror the junta unleashed proved to be far greater. Besides, it sowed the seeds of future violence. The Kurdish inmates, who suffered the worst forms of torture in the infamous military prison in Diyarbakır, craved revenge after their release, and some of them, under the banner of the armed Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK), launched a terrorist campaign that would hit Turkey in the decades to come.

Notably, all this cruelty took place in Turkey, a Muslim-majority country, but it had almost nothing to do with Islam. The Marxists were against Islam, and while the nationalists respected it, their main motivation was patriotism. (These two opposing camps regarded the Islamic-minded youth, who remained pacifist, as sissies.) And the most brutal of all camps, the military, followed the doctrine of none other than Atatürk—one of the most secularist leaders the Muslim world has ever seen.

In other words, on that cold winter day at Mamak Prison, I, as a Muslim kid, faced tyranny not in the name of Islam—as some Westerners would have readily expected these days—but in the name of a secular state. As I grew up, I observed even more examples of the same trouble. Instead of “religious police” forcing women to cover their heads, for example, I saw “secularism police” forcing women to uncover their heads.<sup>8</sup>

That’s why, I think, when I saw “Islamic” dictatorships in other countries—such as Iran, Sudan, and Afghanistan—I did not assume an inherent connection between Islam and authoritarianism. Rather, I realized that the authoritarian Muslims in the Middle East and the authoritarian secularists in Turkey shared a similar mindset, and that this illiberal mindset, rather than religion or secularity as such, is the problem. I also found

it quite telling that the same problem has haunted non-Muslim countries in Asia, such as Russia and China.

So, I asked myself, could the authoritarian regimes in the Muslim world stem not from Islam but from the deep-seated political cultures and social structures in this part of the world, on which Islam is just a topping?

In other words, could authoritarian Muslims be just authoritarians who happen to be Muslim?

## FROM MECCA TO ISTANBUL

Those are some of the questions that I will explore in this book, while presenting a more liberal-minded understanding of Islam—in a long argument divided into three main parts.

In Part I, I will go to the very genesis of this religion and show how its core message of monotheism—with implications such as the individual's responsibility before God—transformed the Arabs and then the whole Middle East in remarkable ways. We will see how rationalist and even liberal ideas emerged in those earliest centuries of Islam, and why they failed to become definitive in the long run. We will also examine the distinction between the eternal message of the Qur'an and its temporal implications, even including some of the political and military acts of the Prophet Muhammad.

Part II deals with more recent history. First, there is a chapter on the Ottoman Empire, the Muslim superpower from the sixteenth to the twentieth century. I will particularly focus on how the Ottoman elite imported liberal ideas and institutions from the West and, most important, reconciled them with Islam. This is a story largely forgotten both in the West and the East, but also a very important one for both.

Then we will examine the anomaly of the twentieth century, which gave us oppression, militancy, and even terrorism in the name of Islam: Islamism. As we shall see, this modern ideology, which is different from the fourteen-century-old religion to which it refers, is quite misguided in itself but also very much mishandled by its foes, including the West.

The last chapter of Part II focuses on Islam in modern-day Turkey. The reason for this is not only that I am a part of that story, and thus know it well. It is also that the exceptional story of Turkey, which is largely unnoticed in the West, represents a growing synthesis of Islam and liberalism. The Ottoman legacy certainly plays a role here, along with the lessons Turkey's Muslims have learned from their interaction with the country's secular forces. In addition, Turkey has recently become the stage for an experiment unprecedented in the history of "Islamdom": the rise of a Muslim middle class that has begun to reinterpret religion with a more modern mindset. For centuries, Islam has been mainly a religion of peasants, landlords, soldiers, and bureaucrats, but in Turkey, since the "free-market revolution" of the 1980s, it has also become the religion of urban entrepreneurs and professionals. These emerging "Islamic Calvinists," as a Western think tank referred to them—alluding to sociologist Max Weber's famous thesis on the "spirit of capitalism"—strongly support democracy and the free-market economy.<sup>9</sup> Furthermore, they are far more individualistic than their forefathers. Consequently, as a Turkish observer recently put it, they want to hear about "the Qur'an and freedom," rather than "the Qur'an and obedience."<sup>10</sup>

Yet these more modern-minded Muslims, and the millions of their co-religionists throughout the world who are concerned about the authoritarian elements within their tradition, still need an accessible synthesis of the liberal ideas they find appealing and

the faith they uphold—which, despite all the appearances to the contrary, might actually be compatible.

They need, in other words, a genuinely Muslim case for liberty—something Part III provides, with religious arguments for “freedom from the state,” “freedom to sin,” and “freedom from Islam.”

THIS IS THE BRIEF STORY of why and how this book came to be. It is the fruit of an intellectual and spiritual journey that began in my grandfather’s house thirty years ago and has continued uninterrupted to date. I went to modern, English-language schools, which taught me a great deal about the liberal tradition of the West, but meanwhile I retained my passion to learn, discover, and experience more about my religion. Hence, since the early 1990s, I have engaged with various Islamic groups and have seen firsthand their virtues as well as their flaws. In the end, I decided to subscribe to none of those groups, but I have learned from the ways of each of them.

One trait I have developed over the years is an instinctive aversion to tyranny. I had seen it first as the eight-year-old kid behind barbed wire, looking down the barrel of secular guns. But as I studied the Middle East, first in college and then in my job as a journalist, I came to realize that the barrels of Islamic guns are no better. Despots acting in the name of “the nation” or “the state” obviously were terrible—and so were despots acting in the name of God.

Ultimately, I have become convinced that a fundamental need for the contemporary Muslim world is to embrace liberty—the liberty of individuals and communities, Muslim and non-Muslims, believers and unbelievers, women and men, ideas

and opinions, markets and entrepreneurs. Only by doing so can Muslim societies create and advance their own modernity, while also laying the groundwork for the flourishing of God-centered religiosity.

To explain why this is not as impossible as it might seem to some, I first need to go back fourteen centuries to explore how Islam unfolded in history—and, in the meantime, what happened to liberty.