

Books

“The Islamist Challenge in West Asia: Doctrinal and Political Competitions After the Arab Spring”,

By Talmiz Ahmad

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Reviewed by Professor K.R. Singh

I have known Talmiz Ahmad for almost 15 years. His postings as member of Indian Foreign Service in many Arab states has given him a first hand opportunity not only to understand but also experience various nuances of religious orientations in the region he has covered in the book.

The book under review is an outcome of the paper presented by the author in a seminar organized by the IDSA, New Delhi. It covers a short and yet a controversial period in the contemporary Arab world. The book was completed on 15 August 2013. Events are still moving fast and time might put question marks on some of the prognosis but the author has done a good job of presenting complex events in a fashion that can be understood even by a non-expert.

The book analyses the impact of the Arab Spring on domestic developments in the Arab world. Not only has the author highlighted major events but has also given details of major contemporary Islamist movements in the Arab world as a backdrop to the understanding of the present trend.

The author has highlighted three major trends. The first is the ‘quietist’ Salafiya movement as endorsed by the Saudi regime. One, however, fails to see any quietism in Saudi Arabia’s use of Islam in promoting its interests. The second trend is the liberal/democratic trend as represented by the Muslim Brotherhood and its offshoot, the Sahwa movement in Saudi Arabia. The third is the radical/jehadi Islam as represented by al-Qaeda and its several affiliates. These three trends also interact with two other variables; the armed forces and the so-called civil society.

Talmiz Ahmad has analysed two major intra-Islamic divisions. The one is the well-known Shi-Sunni divide. The other, less well known but likely to dominate the Arab political scene in future, is the contest between the liberal/democratic ideology of the Muslim Brotherhood and the rejectionist ideology of the Salafis as promoted by the Saudi regime. The Saudi regime sees in the liberal/democratic face of the Muslim Brotherhood an emerging ideological challenge to its political legitimacy. Recent events in Egypt and Syria have already been affected by this ideological divide within Sunni Islam.

One cannot fully understand the implications of the recent developments in the Arab world without simultaneously analyzing similar developments in the entire space between the Asia-Pacific and the Afro-Atlantic region. Though India is an odd country in this broad space, it cannot escape from the fallout of the developments in the Arab-Islamic world. Indians, therefore, need to understand these trends and to evolve an appropriate response that will be in tune not only with its domestic but also regional environment. The book by Talmiz Ahmad will hopefully contribute towards that.
