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# Against Orthodoxy and Despotic Rule

A Review of Islam and Anarchism

Javier Sethness & Jihad al-Haqq

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20 January 2023

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9. Reviewer states that I dismiss that Islam means ‘submission’ which he equates to ‘surrender.’ My introduction & page 111 explicitly notes that linguistically/etymologically Islam does not mean ‘submission’; an orientalist interpretation. I discuss based on Muslim feminist amina wadud’s work and others, how it actually means willful surrender. Ignoring the difference between both conveniently does away with anti-authoritarian Quranic practices that show otherwise (Tawhid, Shura, Ijmaa, Maslaha, Khulafa in the plural etc). Reviewer claims I argue that we have no agency. Baffling given that we all have agency. If we didn’t this book wouldn’t be necessary, & neither would my work on queer Muslims. Muslim anarchist subjectivities wouldn’t exist without agency limited in choices that we may have.

10. Reviewer ignores entire discussions on what animates economic and cooperative relations from a Quranic standpoint vs. capitalism. There’s an outright dismissal of concepts as the Quranic forbiddance of interest (riba – regarded as a pillar of capitalism) in Islam, that property in principle means something different (when all mulk – property belongs to Allah) than that derived from a protestant ethic. Reviewer ignores the material and symbolic significance of ramadan/zakat and sadaqa (which isn’t charity, yet the reviewer insist it is). Reviewer ignores that I quote/cite Esposito, Hourani, Said, Armstrong, Lapidus and others who do note how the influence of Islamic social justice economic were mostly (not always) the impetus behind its spread as opposed to it being primarily-forcibly by the sword (not to deny this happened either).

I could go on but the reviewer clearly had an agenda that he’s already noted before (as this isn’t the 1<sup>st</sup> time he’s reviewed the book), one that many Muslims are tired of addressing.

Reviewer ignores my historical-archival & transnational ethnographic PhD research/articles (cited in the book) addressing queer Muslim and queer Egyptians. Most of my participants reject Euro-American coming out narratives, marriage etc. I critique prog. politics for that reason.

The PhD work is published in al-raida, feral feminisms journal and others. See

- [alraidajournal.com/index.php/ALRJ...](http://alraidajournal.com/index.php/ALRJ...), [feralfeminisms.com/wp-content/upl...](http://feralfeminisms.com/wp-content/upl...)
- [academia.edu/38647128/Ph\\_D\\_...](http://academia.edu/38647128/Ph_D_...)

6. Reviewer accuses me of being a supporter of pedophile Hakim Bey who I quote once in a cheap ‘gotcha moment’. It seems there’s an ambivalence to the complexities of the politics of citation. Yes, I’ve condemned Bey publicly and privately. I don’t rely on his work that’s cited by BIPOC & white anarchist scholars given its influence through concepts as TAZ, SPAZ, PAZ that helped anarchists re-envision squats & autonomous zones post-Seattle ’99. Reviewer should probably look to white anarchists or even an anarchist mechanism for transformative justice as opposed to placing that burden on a poc.

7. Reviewer finds it disturbing that I refer to myself in the book as a ‘anti-militaristic militant jihadi’ having spent a whole chapter explaining what Jihad is vs. its orientalist interpretation which the reviewer is adamant to maintain. Ch. discusses the diff. between Jihad and Qital & talks about how nonviolence (which the reviewer buys into except when it’s imperialist interventionism elsewhere) is a liberal illusion. I draw on radical Black & Indigenous traditions that critique nonviolence & argue for the right to self-defense. Reviewer couldn’t be bothered with the argument.

8. Reviewer notes I don’t critique the clerical class. Astonishing given the book’s argument, & explicit passages in which I do (pgs. 81, 95, 98, 101 etc).

## Contents

Islam and Anti-Authoritarianism . . . . .	6
Sufism and the Ulema-State Alliance . . . . .	10
Abdou’s Islam and Anarchism . . . . .	13
Conclusion . . . . .	23
Works Cited . . . . .	24
The Reality of a Diverse Islam and Diverse Anarchism —	
Jihad al-Haqq . . . . .	26
A Reply From the Book Author . . . . .	28

offshoot-interpretations adhere to. Why I can methodologically build on the Islam's multiplicitous interpretations, communities & circles that I've been a part of (Sunni, Shiite, Sufi, etc. without pledging allegiance to any specific one).

The reviewer should probably check out my work on Muslims Zapatistas and the Sufi-Murabiteen movement that the former left.

4. Reviewer accuses me of being a pro-Asadist. Not true. The full transcripts with @coffeewcomrades & @sjbranson1 of @StrawFinal & others are available in debunking this lie relating to Syria & Iran. I call Asad 'the butcher of Damascus,' critique the false binary of choosing between a Zionist-Wahabbi-Euro-American alliance & a Russian-Chinese etc alliance. Am I expected to support in this moment intervention that splits Syria, Iran, in the absence of alternatives? Does my hate for Sisi & the MB trump Egypt further divided, in the absence of alternatives? No. I had the recent honor of being invited to joining Iranian feminist/scholars in discussing this during ASA2022 given that my views don't fall in either camp; neither do theirs. I'd rather offer support by working on disrupting US settlercolonialism that through proxy war usurped the aspirations of Syrians in the first place; review is dismissive of this tie between the local and international, unable to distinguish between Strategy & Tactic. Book is a critique of all nation-states (post and settler), the model, & all those in power. My strategic compasses are Palestine & Turtle Island & their mutual freeing following which the remainder will unfold.

Interview transcripts:

- [ia801406.us.archive.org/3/items/tfsr20...](https://ia801406.us.archive.org/3/items/tfsr20...)
- & [coffeewithcomrades.com/episode-181-an...](https://coffeewithcomrades.com/episode-181-an...)

5. Reviewer is upset that I don't buy into liberal-progressive 'queer rights are human rights' discourses that animate homonationalism & pinkwashing, feed into racial capitalism. Queer Indigenious, Black, & poc critiques have made the same critique as I.

grand scheme of things, worthy of consideration for both praise and criticism.

## A Reply From the Book Author

While I appreciate the labor that went into this review, it's quite unfortunate that the reviewer engages in surface level misreads, misinterpretations & misquotes without context so let's check some facts:

1. Reviewer identifies me as postcolonialist. I'm not. I use/appreciate postcolonial scholarship but the whole book is a decolonial critique of postcolonialism. I distinguish between both based on Indigenous discourses, nuance which is completely ignored or elided.

2. Reviewer identifies me as Sunni. Don't identify as such; never have/will. It's inappropriate of the reviewer to impose a label. I'm Muslim with all the simplicity/complexities this entails. Despite the multiplicity of Islamic interpretations they're all bound by 1 book—the Quran.

This allows me to build on &/or disagree with dimensions in each interpretation while calling them out on reneged Quranic commitments of interpretation that don't.

3. Reviewer imposes his own agenda of wanting me to write a historiography of anarchist currents/individuals.. within Muslim history/societies/thought. That's not this project. This political-theological social movement work is meant to develop an anarchistic interpretation of Islam & vice versa that doesn't exist; a gap I sought to fill. While I use historiography that's not my primary interest. Why I don't work from with specific traditions (Sufism, or individuals – Sharaiti). That's Anthony Fiscella's work, who I assisted with editing the Muslim-Anarchist zine/pamphlet. It's also why I address Muslim denominations via discussing the Sunni-Khilafat & Shiite-Imamate branches that

The project of advancing anarchist reinterpretations of history and religion is an intriguing and important one. Due to its emphasis on spontaneity, non-cooperation, simplicity, and harmony, Daoism is a religion with anarchist elements, while the Dharma taught by Buddhism is an egalitarian critique of caste, class, and hierarchy, according to the anarcho-communist Élisée Reclus. B. R. Ambedkar, architect of India's constitution, similarly viewed Buddhism as seeking the annihilation of Brahminism, as crystallized in the Hindu caste system. Xinru Liu, author of *Early Buddhist Society* (2022), adds that a key part of Buddhism's appeal has been its emphasis on care and well-being over statecraft and power.

Likewise, Guru Nanak, the visionary founder of Sikhism, proclaimed human equality through his advocacy of *langar*, a practice that simultaneously rejects caste while building community through shared meals. In parallel, many notable anarchists have been Jewish: for instance, Ida Mett, Aaron and Fanya Baron, Martin Buber, and Avraham Yehuda Heyn. The Judaic concept of *tikkun olam* (repairing the world) is activist to the core. Plus, in *The Foundations of Christianity* (1908), Karl Kautsky highlights the radicalism of Jesus' message, the communism of early Christianity, and the ongoing struggles of prophets, apostles, and teachers against clerical hierarchies and bureaucracies. Lev Tolstoy, Dorothy Day, and Simone Weil preached Christian anarchism.

What, then, of Islam?

One way of answering this question would be to consider Mohamed Abdou's *Islam and Anarchism* (2022). This long-anticipated study is based on the intriguing premises that Islam is not necessarily authoritarian or capitalist, and that anarchism is not necessarily anti-religious or anti-spiritual. To his credit, Abdou does well in highlighting the transhistorical importance of the Prophet Muhammad's anti-racist 'Farewell Address' (632), and in citing humanistic verses from the Quran. These include 'Let there be no compulsion in religion,' and the idea that Allah made us 'into peoples and tribes so that [we] may get to know

one another,' not abuse and oppress each other<sup>1</sup>. The author constructs an 'anarcha-Islām' that integrates orthodox Sunni Muslim thought with Indigenous and decolonial critiques of globalisation. He laments and criticizes the supportive role often played by diasporic Muslims in settler-colonial societies like the USA and Canada, through their putative affirmation of anti-Black and anti-Indigenous racism. Although he is a strong proponent of political Islam, Abdou also recognizes that trans-Atlantic slavery had its origin in Muslim-occupied Iberia, known as *al-Andalus*<sup>2</sup>.

That being said, for better or worse, the overall trajectory of Abdou's argument reflects the author's orthodox Sunni bias. Even if Sunnis do comprise the vast majority of the world's Muslim population—and thus, perhaps, a considerable part of Abdou's intended audience—there is nonetheless a stunning lack of discussion in this book of Shi'ism (the second-largest branch of Islam) or Sufism (an Islamic form of mysticism practiced by both Sunni and Shi'ites). In a new review in *Organise Magazine*, Jay Fraser likewise highlights the author's 'odd choice,' whereby 'the Sufi tradition [...] receives no mention whatsoever.' Besides being intellectually misleading for a volume with such an expansive title as *Islam and Anarchism*, such omissions are alarming, as they convey an exclusionary message to the supercharged atmosphere of the Muslim world.

## Islam and Anti-Authoritarianism

At the outset of his book, Abdou proposes that a properly Muslim anarchism should be constructed on the basis of the Quran, the *ahadith* (the Prophet Muhammad's sayings), and the *sunnah* (Muhammad's way of life)<sup>3</sup>. This is a paradoxically

<sup>1</sup> Abdou 115; Quran 2:256, 49:13 (emphasis added).

<sup>2</sup> Abdou 138.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid vii, 14.

some theoretical work must concede that such a theoretical work only proposes how one anarchist society might look. This view is correct regardless of anarchist considerations: anthropologically, it is a basic truth that the religions practiced worldwide have many variations (much the same that languages have many variations over certain populations), that are themselves greatly affected by sociological factors, such as socio-economic status, existing power structures within a society, political beliefs, and so on.

Mohamed Abdou did mention this in the last chapter:

'After all, as the Qur'ān emphasizes: "There is no Coercion in Religion," and acknowledges: "And had thy Lord willed, all those who are on the earth would have believed all together. Wouldst thou compel people till they become believers?"<sup>20</sup> There is no concept of favoritism in Islām. In the Creator's sight the "best" are the tribes and nations that maintain social justice, egalitarian relations, and ethical and political conduct towards others and nonhuman life. The Qur'ān states: "Not all people are alike"...

In other places, he reaffirmed the existing diversity of Islamic belief, but did not take it in the direction I hoped.

Ultimately, I fear that because of this precise consideration, Abdou's project may have been doomed from the start. The synthesis of Islam and anarchism is up to the individual, and such syntheses might go on to become socially popular. Indeed, one of Abdou's major pillars is that of "*ijtihad*," that is, independent reasoning—even if one did not take *ijtihad* into account, Islam regardless would be diverse politically. The best a work like this can do is to point out anarchistic considerations in developing an interpretation of Islam that is anti-state, anti-capitalist, and so forth; but not establish an anarcha-Islam in its own right. The aim of this work ought to be like a commentary, not a second Qur'an. Nevertheless, it is, in the

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## The Reality of a Diverse Islam and Diverse Anarchism — Jihad al-Haqq

While Abdou acknowledges the diversity of Islam, this is not reflected in the epistemology he attempts to write. Indeed, like the breadth and width of anarchist beliefs—from anarcha-feminism to egoist anarchism—any weaving together of Islamic belief and anarchism must respect that anarchist beliefs should be able to be built on the many different kinds of Islam that are practiced: Sunnism, Shi'ism, Isma'ilism, and so forth. This is something Abdou should have made clear. The mission of his work was to tie together Islam and anarchism in only one of its possible iterations, in the same way any anarchist proposing a future anarchist society in

neo-orthodox Sunni approach that overlooks the contributions of both 1) Shi'ites, who place less stress on the *sunnah*, and 2) several anti-authoritarian and anarchistic Muslim thinkers, individual and collective, who emerged during and after Islam's so-called 'Golden Age' (c. 700–1300). In this sense, although Abdou would follow the 'venerable ancestors' (*al-salaf al-salih*) from Islam's earliest period, he does not discuss Abu Dharr al-Ghifari (?–652), one of the very first converts to Islam. Al-Ghifari was known for his socialist views, and revered by Shia as one of the 'Four Companions' of the fourth 'Rightly Guided' (Rashidun) caliph, Ali ibn Abi Talib (559–661)<sup>4</sup>.

Neither does the author examine the utopian radicalism of the sociologist Ali Shariati (1933–1977), who inspired the Iranian Revolution of 1979 against the U.S.-installed Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi. In writings and lectures, Shariati espoused a 'red' Shi'ism that celebrates insurgency and martyrdom, by contrasting this with the 'black Shi'ism' instituted by the Safavid dynasty (1501–1734), one of early modernity's infamous 'gunpowder empires,' which forcibly converted most Iranians to Shi'ism while persecuting Sunnis and Sufis<sup>5</sup>. Despite their separation by sect, this is an unfortunate missed connection between Abdou and Shariati, in light of the similarity of their analysis of *tawhid*, or the allegiance to God as the sole authority (*Malik al-mulk*) mandated by Islam<sup>6</sup>. (Likewise, monotheistic loyalty is demanded by the Judeo-Christian First Commandment.)

Through his elucidation of 'Anarcha-Islām,' which 'adopts and builds on traditional [Sunni] orthodox non-conformist Islamist thinkers,' Abdou does consider the revolutionary potential of Shi'i eschatology—crystallized in the prophesized return of the twelfth imam (or *Madhi*), who is expected to herald world peace—as evi-

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<sup>4</sup> Haarman.

<sup>5</sup> Shariati; Kuru 181.

<sup>6</sup> Abdou 10–11, 84; Shariati 26–7.

dence of an ‘internalized messiah and savior complex’<sup>7</sup>. It is in the first place paradoxical for an ostensible anarchist to so overlook messianism, and especially troubling when such a Shi’i tradition is ignored by a Sunni Muslim developing an anarcha-Islām. Still, while Abdou pays lip service to the criticism of Muslim clerics, he hardly mentions the theocracy imposed by the Shi’i *ulema* (religious scholars) who appropriated the mass-revolutionary movement against the Shah for themselves over four decades ago, having spearheaded the Islamic Republic of Iran (IRI) since 1981.

Even more, in a November 2022 podcast interview on ‘Coffee with Comrades,’ Abdou complains in passing about the ‘mobilization of gendered Islamophobia’ in Iran following the murder by the ‘Morality Police’ of Mahsa Amini, a 22-year old Kurdish woman, two months prior for rejecting imposed veiling. Presumably, this is in response to criticism of Islamic *hijab* by Westerners and Iranians alike, but he does not make clear his opinion of the ongoing youth- and women-led mass-protests that have rocked the country since then. By contrast, members of *Asr Anarshism* (‘The Age of Anarchism’), based in Iran and Afghanistan, stress in an upcoming interview on *The Commoner* that the ‘struggle with the clerical class [...] constitutes a basic part of our class struggles’<sup>8</sup>.

Likewise, the late Indian Marxist Aijaz Ahmad (1941–2022) openly viewed the IRI’s *ulema* as ‘clerical-fascist[s],’ while Shariati would have likely considered these opportunistic, obscurantist lynchers as part and parcel of the legacy of ‘black Shi’ism’<sup>9</sup>. In parallel, the Sri Lankan trade unionist Rohini Hensman takes the IRI to task for its abuse of women, workers, the LGBT community, and religious and ethnic minorities, just as she denounces Iran and Russia’s ghastly interventions in Syria since 2011 to rescue Bashar al-Assad’s regime from being overthrown<sup>10</sup>. Abdou’s lack

<sup>7</sup> Abdou 101, 127–46.

<sup>8</sup> Asr Anarshism, forthcoming interview in *The Commoner*.

<sup>9</sup> Ahmad.

<sup>10</sup> Hensman 119–50.

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perspective to critique settler-colonialism, white supremacy, and Western imperialism. There is no question that these are real ills that must be contested, but the post-colonial framing espoused by Abdou crucially overlooks internal authoritarian social dynamics while facilitating the avowal of the orthodoxies he affirms. This problem also extends to South Asia and its diaspora, as Hindu-nationalist sanghis have taken advantage of the naïveté of many Western progressives to normalize Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi's fascist rule<sup>48</sup>. Still, authoritarian rule does not appear to be Abdou's goal, and his efforts to produce a non-authoritarian vision of Islam are at times noteworthy. A question this review poses is how, in mental and material terms, can adherence to an exclusive doctrine produce an anti-authoritarian world?

Whereas Abdou focuses on challenging and defeating Western hegemony, he avoids mention of the ills propagated by states other than the USA, the European Union, and their allies. Indeed, the disinformation he advances in the conclusion about Assad and Putin's lack of responsibility for atrocious crimes against humanity in Syria is one with post-colonialists' downplaying of Russian imperialism, especially in Ukraine. His outright 'strategic' support for Assad and lack of sympathy for the women's protests in Iran, as revealed in the aforementioned podcast interview, typify pseudo-anti-imperialism. Beyond this, the author's post-anarchist views inform his denial about the expansionism practiced by Islam's early adherents, and his omissions about the close historical relationship between the new faith and commerce. It is apparent how far his anti-rationalist perspective is from that of the Mutazilites, al-Rawandi, and Ibn Rushd.

## Works Cited

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<sup>48</sup> Ramnath.

of commentary on Iran and Shi'ism in *Islam and Anarchism* is thus glaring.

Furthermore, in the conclusion to his book, Abdou questionably echoes the Kremlin's propaganda by blaming the mass-displacement of refugees from the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) into Europe a decade ago exclusively on President Barack Obama's use of force, presumably against Libya and the Islamic State (IS, or *Da'esh*)—with no mention of the substantial 'push factors' represented by the atrocious crimes against humanity perpetrated by the Syrian, Iranian, and Russian states<sup>11</sup>. Worse, in his interview on 'Coffee with Comrades,' the author finds himself in alignment with the neo-Nazi Ku Klux Klan leader David Duke on Syria. Let us quote him at length:

'It's so easy for David Duke to come out and say, 'Well, I'm against the war in Syria!' Well, how about that: an anti-imperialist stance coming from a white supremacist? Right? Well, of course I don't agree with him on much of anything else. [...].

And again, this is where we have to be very intelligent and very smart. Of course, I feel for my Syrian kin. They are my own blood. But, if you ask me now with regards to Bashar al-Assad, I will say: keep him in power. Why? I'm able to distinguish between tactics and strategy. Unless you have an alternative to what would happen if Bashar was removed, let alone, what would you do with the State: please, please stay at home. Because what you will create is precisely a vacuum for Da'esh [the Islamic State]. You will create a vacuum for imperialism, for colonialism to seep in.'

Abdou here affirms a cold, dehumanizing, and statist illogic that is entirely in keeping with the phenomenon of the pseudo-anti-

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<sup>11</sup> Abdou 231–2; Hensman.

imperialist defense of ‘anti-Western’ autocracies like Syria, Russia, China, and Iran<sup>12</sup>. In reality, in the first place, both openly anti-Assad rebels and TEV-DEM in Rojava have presented alternatives to the Ba’athist jackboots, and the Free Syrian Army and YPG/SDF forces have fought *Da’esh*. *The YPG/SDF continue to do so, despite facing a new threat of destruction at the hands of the Turkish State and the regime axis*. Beyond this, does Abdou believe Russia’s military intervention in Syria since 2015 somehow *not to* have been imperialist? Millions of displaced Syrians would likely disagree with the idea. We can recommend *For Sama*, about the fall of Aleppo in 2016, as documentary evidence of Russian President Vladimir Putin’s war crimes.

According to Leila al-Shami and Shon Meckfessel, ‘[m]any fascists take Russia’s backing of Assad as reason enough to support him,’ and the global far right is even heartened and inspired by the regime-axis’s ultraviolence and unmitigated cruelty<sup>13</sup>. Indeed, in this vein, for over a decade, Russian State media and their fascist and ‘tankie’ (neo-Stalinist) enthusiasts have blamed the West for problems perpetrated by the Kremlin and its allies themselves—from mass-refugee flows from Syria to genocide in Ukraine. It is therefore disturbing to see Abdou betray anarchism *and* internationalism by not only reiterating deadly disinformation, but also by openly endorsing Assad’s tyranny.

## Sufism and the Ulema-State Alliance

<sup>12</sup> Hensman.

<sup>13</sup> al-Shami and Meckfessel 198, 208.

*yourselves* so that you may find comfort in them. And He has placed between you compassion and mercy’<sup>44</sup>.

Overall, Abdou endorses the classic shortcomings of post-colonialism and post-left anarchism in his conclusion. Here, he simultaneously provides an overwhelmingly exogenous explanation for the rise in Islamic-fundamentalist movements, denounces the ‘destructive legacy of liberalism,’ condemns Democrats’ ‘obsession’ with Donald Trump, and provides discursive cover for Assad and Putin’s crimes<sup>45</sup>. His downplaying of the dangers posed by Trump is clearly outdated and ill-advised. Although Abdou is right to criticize certain factors external to MENA, such as Western militarism and imperialism, he does not convincingly explain how anarcha-Islam can overcome existing authoritarianism and prevent its future resurgence, whilst simultaneously committing itself to the authority of a particular theology. Indeed, Abdou at times prioritises fundamentalism over progressivism and libertarian socialism—thus proving anarchist scholar Maia Ramnath’s point that the ‘same matrix [...] of neoliberal global capitalism [...] provides the stimulus for both left and right reactions’<sup>46</sup>.

## Conclusion

In closing, I would not recommend Abdou’s *Islam and Anarchism* very highly, principally because the author’s vision of ‘anarcha-Islām’ is exclusive rather than cosmopolitan, in keeping with post-modern, anti-humanist, and sectarian trends emanating from MENA and the West. In his own words, as we have seen, Abdou is a ‘*militant jihādi*’<sup>47</sup>. Besides preaching revivalist, neo-orthodox Sunni Islam, he uses a primarily post-colonial

<sup>44</sup> Zaharin 12–17 (emphasis added); Quran 30:21–2.

<sup>45</sup> Abdou 230–2.

<sup>46</sup> Achcar 104–8; Ramnath 244.

<sup>47</sup> Abdou 209 (emphasis in original).

Meanwhile, the author avows Muslim queerness with reference to bathhouse (*hammam*) cultures and the *Maqamat* of al-Hariri (see above). He could also have incorporated the *hadith al-shabb*, which conveys the Prophet's encounter with God in the beauty of a young man; quoted some of the homoerotic *ghazals* written by Persian poets like Rumi (1207–1273), Sa'adi (c. 1213–1292), and Hafez (c. 1325–1390); or considered the complaints of Crusaders about the normalization of same-sex bonds in Muslim society<sup>40</sup>. Indeed, the bisexual German poet Johann Wolfgang von Goethe viewed the meditative recitation of the '99 Names' of God (*al-asma al-husna*) as a 'litany of praise and glory'<sup>41</sup>. Even so, Abdou does not acknowledge or critique the existence of homophobic and lesbophobic *ahadith*, much less contemplate how the Quranic tale of the Prophet Lut associates gay desire with male rape, thus closing off the possibility of same-sex *mawaddah* (or love and compassion)<sup>42</sup>. Instead, he cites an article from 2013 on the role of Islam in the treatment of mental illness, which explicitly perpetuates the reactionary view of homosexuality as a psychiatric disorder, without comment or condemnation<sup>43</sup>!

In contrast, researcher Aisya Aymanee Zaharin deftly elaborates a progressive revisionist account of queerness in Islam that is critical of social conservatism and heteronationalism among Muslims, particularly in the wake of European colonialism and the Wahhabist reaction, led by Saudi Arabia and Qatar. Zaharin builds her case from the vantage point of an essentialist belief in the naturalness of same-sex attraction, the importance of human dignity and affection within Islam, and supportive Quranic verses mentioning how Allah has 'created for you spouses *from among*

<sup>40</sup> Williams 443–8; Zaharin 3, 9.

<sup>41</sup> Goethe 201.

<sup>42</sup> Zaharin 4–8.

<sup>43</sup> Abdou 97, 271n84.



Cover illustration of *The Confessions of Al-Ghazali* (1909)

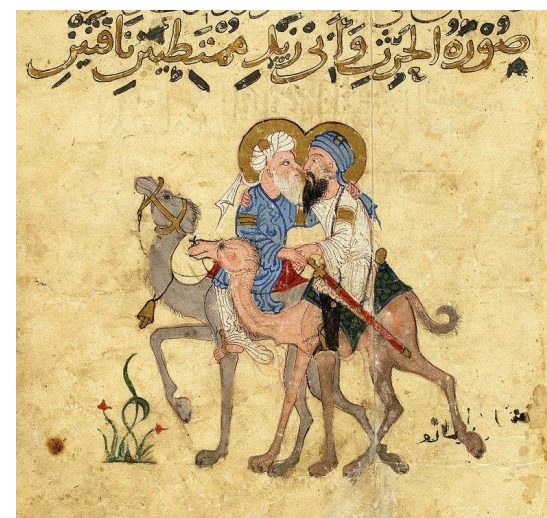
Although Sunni orthodoxy, jihadist revivalism, institutionalized Shi'ism, and secular autocracies are undoubtedly oppressive, Sufism has been misrepresented by many Orientalists as negating these stifling forces. In reality, while some Sufis have 'preached antiauthoritarian ideas,' Sufism is not necessarily progressive<sup>14</sup>. Although the Persian thinker Ghazali (1058–1111, above) resigned from teaching at an orthodox *madrassa* in 1095 to preach Sufism and condemn political authority—only to return to teaching at a similar *madrassa* late in life—he played a key role in legitimizing the toxic alliance between *ulema* (religious scholars) and State. Moreover, by affirming mysticism, asceticism, and irrationalism, Sufi sheikhs have often re-entrenched spiritual and sociopolitical hierarchies<sup>15</sup>.

Actually, the Janissary shock-troops of the Ottoman Empire belonged to the Bektashi Sufi Order, and the autocratic Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan is reported to be part of the Naqshbandi Sufi Order. Furthermore, Shah Waliullah Dehlawi (1703–1762), who inspired the founders of the Deobandi school of Islam—a variant of which the Taliban has imposed on Afghanistan twice through terror—was a Sufi master. On the other hand, so were Nizamuddin Auliya (1238–1325), who advocated a Sufism critical of class divisions and despotism; Muhammad Ahmad bin Abdallah (1844–1885), a Nubian warrior and self-proclaimed *Mahdi* who spearheaded a *jihad* against the Ottomans, Egyptians, and British in Sudan; and Imam Shamil (1797–1871), an Avar chieftain who led anti-colonial resistance to Russian conquest of the Caucasus for decades.

In his compelling study of comparative politics, *Islam, Authoritarianism, and Underdevelopment* (2019), Ahmet Kuru provides important insights into the historical trajectory of the Muslim world, vis-à-vis Western Europe. He shows how an alliance between the

<sup>14</sup> Hammond 36.

<sup>15</sup> Kuru 40–2, 48, 103–112, 143–5.



“Farewells of Abu-Zayd and Al-Harith” from the *Maqamat* of al-Hariri, c. 1240

show the risks of this very approach, considering how Michel Foucault's belief that Iranian Shi'ites had a different 'regime of truth' from Westerners led this philosopher not only to uncritically support Khomeinism, but also to legitimize its newfound *ulema*-State alliance in the eyes of the world<sup>39</sup>. Unfortunately, Abdou's perspective on the Syrian regime is not dissimilar.

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<sup>39</sup> Afary and Anderson 50.

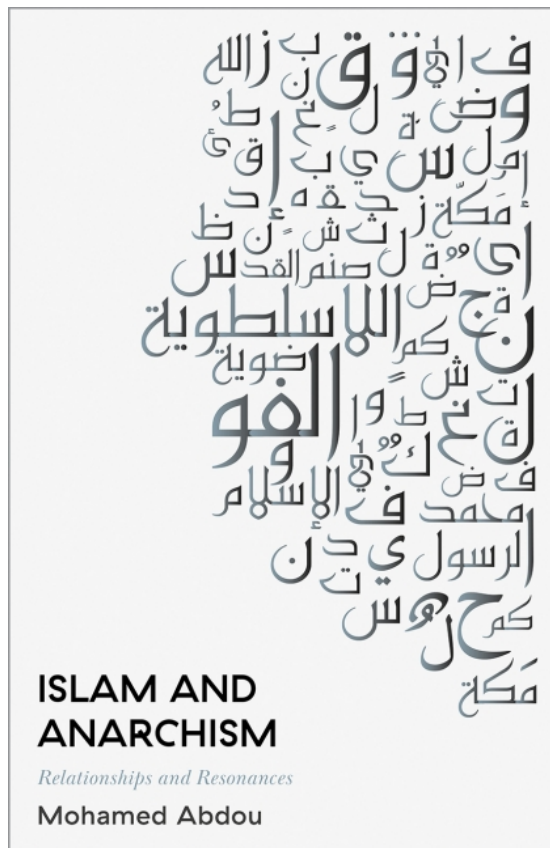
State and *ulema* was adopted by the Seljuk Empire in the eleventh century, and then inherited and upheld by the Mamluk, Ottoman, Safavid, and Mughal Empires, prior to European colonization. Its noxious legacy undoubtedly persists to this day, not only in theocratic autocracies like Iran, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Qatar, and the members of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), but also in ostensibly secular military dictatorships, such as Syria and Egypt, and electoral autocracies like Turkey. This is despite past top-down efforts to secularize and modernize Islamic society by breaking up the power of the *ulema*, as Sultan Mahmud II, the Young Ottomans, the Young Turks, and Mustafa Kemal (Atatürk) sought to do during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries<sup>16</sup>—notwithstanding the chauvinism and genocidal violence of these Turkish leaders, echoes of which resonate in Azerbaijani attacks on Armenia in September 2022.

In the remainder of the first part of this article, I will review Abdou's account of anarcha-Islām. The second part will focus on Kuru's arguments about Islam, history, and politics, tracing the anti-authoritarianism of early Islam, and contemplating the origins and ongoing despotism of the *ulema*-State alliance.

## Abdou's Islam and Anarchism

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid 216–30.



Quraysh, is itself ‘derived from trade (*taqrish*)’<sup>32</sup>. Economic historian Jared Rubin adds that ‘[t]he Arab conquests of the seventh and eighth centuries [...] provided security and a unifying language and religion under which trade blossomed.’ Baghdad during the Abbasid dynasty (750–1258) was a riverine commercial hub, with each of its four gates ‘leading outward to the major trading routes’<sup>33</sup>. In this sense, Islam may have influenced Protestantism, not only due to certain Muslims’ critiques of political authority resonating in the Protestant Reformation, but also due to the two faiths mandating similar work ethics and fixations on profit<sup>34</sup>. That being said, ‘unlike Jesus, Muhammad commanded armies and administered public money’<sup>35</sup>.

Abdou avoids all of this in his presentation of anarcha-Islam. While such lacunae may be convenient, to consider them is to complicate the idea of coherently mixing orthodox Islam with the revolutionary anti-capitalist philosophy of anarchism<sup>36</sup>.

As further evidence of Abdou’s confused approach, the author engages early on in outright historical denialism regarding Muslim conquests during the seventh and eighth centuries, which involved widespread erasure of Indigenous peoples, but later block-quotes the poet Tamim al-Barghouti, who contradicts him by referring to these as ‘expansionary wars’<sup>37</sup>. In one breath, Abdou praises the pedophile apologist Hakim Bey as an ‘influential anarchist theorist,’ and in the next, he asserts that truth regimes are different in ‘the East and Islām,’ compared to the West<sup>38</sup>. Such claims are consistent with the post-modern denial of reality. In *Foucault and the Iranian Revolution* (2005), Janet Afary and Kevin Anderson convincingly

<sup>32</sup> Kuru 80–1.

<sup>33</sup> Rubin 553.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid 81n86, 200.

<sup>35</sup> Kuru 94.

<sup>36</sup> Abdou 13.

<sup>37</sup> Abdou 47, 123–4, 195.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid 30, 54–5.

authority'<sup>28</sup>. Implicitly channeling the fatalism of the orthodox Sunni theologian Ashari (873–935) over the free will championed by the scholar Taftazani (1322–1390?), Abdou proclaims that '[n]othing belongs to our species, including our health, nor is what we "possess" a product of our will or our own "making"'<sup>29</sup>. The ascetic, anti-humanist, and potentially authoritarian implications of this view are almost palpable: Abdou here asserts that neither our life nor our health is our own, and that we have little to no agency.

Against such mystifications, in *God and the State* (1882), Mikhail Bakunin describes how organised religion blesses hierarchical authority, while in *The Essence of Christianity* (1841), Ludwig Feuerbach contests the idea that religious directives are divine in origin, showing that they are instead human projections made for socio-political ends. According to the Persian iconoclast and atheist Ibn al-Rawandi (872–911), in this vein, prophets are akin to sorcerers, God is a human creation, and neither the Quran nor the idea of an afterlife in Paradise is anything special. Therefore, although Abdou claims to disavow authoritarian methods throughout his book, it is unclear how a fundamentalist belief in the divine authority of the Quran can be reasonably maintained without mandating a particularly orthodox approach to religion and politics.

Furthermore, Abdou presents his puzzling view that Islam is anti-capitalist, just as he affirms the faith's emphasis on property, banking, charity, and market competition—most of which are fundamentally bourgeois institutions<sup>30</sup>. The French historian Fernand Braudel is more blunt: 'anything in western capitalism of imported origin undoubtedly came from Islam'<sup>31</sup>. Indeed, Kuru observes that 'the Prophet Muhammad and many of his close companions themselves were merchants,' and that the name of the Prophet's tribe,

<sup>28</sup> Quran 4:59.

<sup>29</sup> Kuru 129; Abdou 149.

<sup>30</sup> Abdou 147–64.

<sup>31</sup> Quoted at Kuru 159.

In his book, Abdou mixes post-anarchism (an ideology combining post-modernism, post-structuralism, and nihilism) with Islamic revivalism to yield "anarcha-Islām," a framework which rejects liberalism, secularism, human rights, and democracy almost as forms of *taqut*, or idolatry<sup>17</sup>. His study thus bears the distinct imprints of the thought of Egyptian jihadist Sayyid Qutb (1906–1966), whom he regards as a 'non-conformist militant conservativ[e]'<sup>18</sup> (Notably, Qutb has inspired al-Qaeda and the Islamic State). In keeping with the Qutbist view that all existing societies are *jahili*, or equivalent to the ostensible 'state of ignorance' in Arabia before the rise of Islam, Abdou laments and denounces the Saudi ruling family's commercialization of Mecca and Medina, and makes comments that are not unsympathetic toward the egoist Max Stirner, plus Muhammad Atta and other terrorists<sup>19</sup>. He describes the U.S. as a 'Crusading society.'

Abdou endorses researcher Milad Dokhanchi's view of decolonization as 'detaqutization' (the iconoclastic destruction of idolatry, or *taqut*) and condemns the 'homonationalist and colonial/imperial enforcement of queer rights (marriage, pride) [...]'<sup>20</sup>. Even the mere concept that 'queer rights are human rights' is irretrievably imperialist for him<sup>21</sup>. Moreover, he focuses more on violence than social transformation through working-class self-organization—in keeping with an insurrectionist orientation<sup>22</sup>. In sum, the author himself confesses to being an '*anti-militaristic militant jihādi*'<sup>23</sup>.

<sup>17</sup> Abdou 5–8, 32–3, 75, 226.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid 23.

<sup>19</sup> Kuru 25–6; Abdou 168–9, 175, 181.

<sup>20</sup> Abdou 41, 74–5.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid 81.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid 188–220.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid 209 (emphasis in original).





Ibn Rushd (Averroes), depicted by Italian painter Andrea Bonaiuto (1343–1377)

Through his conventional reliance on the Quran and *ahadith* and his parallel avowal of anarchic *ijtihad* ('independent reasoning'), Abdou mixes the rationalism of Abu Hanifa (699–767) and the Hanafi school of jurisprudence with the orthodox literalism of Shafii (767–820) and Ahmad ibn Hanbal (780–855), the 'patron saint' of traditionalists who, together with Ghazali and Ibn Taymiyya (1263–1328), pushed for the *ulema*-State alliance<sup>24</sup>. (By comparison, the Taliban has implemented a combination of the Deobandi school, a branch of the Hanafi tradition founded in British-occupied India in the nineteenth century, and Hanbalism, due to heavy influence from Gulf petro-tyrants.)

Considering the apparent risks involved in legitimizing religious fundamentalism, it is unfortunate that Abdou omits discussion of Muslim philosophers like the proto-feminist Ibn Rushd (Averroes, 1126–1198) and only mentions the Mutazilites—the first Islamic theologians, who espoused liberal-humanist views—and the anarchistic Kharijites in passing<sup>25</sup>. The Kharijites, who arose in the First Islamic Civil War (656–661), rejected the authority of the early Umayyad dynasty (661–750 CE), and even assassinated Ali ibn Abi Talib, the last Rashidun caliph. Some Kharijites rejected the need for an imam altogether<sup>26</sup>. In turn, the Mutazilites advocated reason and moral objectivism, while questioning the theological reliance on *ahadith* and divine commands. This is despite the *mihna*, or inquisition, imposed by the caliph Mamun from 833–851 to propagate Mutazila doctrine.

In his book, Abdou goes so far as to claim that 'anti-authoritarianism [is] inherent to Islām'<sup>27</sup>. Yet, he omits several important considerations here. For instance, he dismisses that the religion's name literally translates to 'surrender' or 'submission,' and ignores that the Quran mandates obedience to 'those in

<sup>24</sup> Kuru 17–18, 94–5, 202, 227; Williams 442.

<sup>25</sup> Abdou 17–18.

<sup>26</sup> Lewinstein.

<sup>27</sup> Abdou 207, 228.