

# CURRENT BOOKS

## SCHOLARS' CHOICE

*Recent titles selected and reviewed by Fellows and staff of the Wilson Center*

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**RADICAL ISLAM:  
Medieval Theology  
and Modern Politics**

by Emmanuel Sivan,  
Yale, 1985  
218 pp. \$18.50

Browsing through Arab bookstores in Cairo and Jerusalem a few years ago, Emmanuel Sivan was struck by the brisk sales of reprints of medieval texts on Islamic law and jurisprudence, and also by the manner in which modern Arab commentaries on these texts sought to apply medieval Islamic principles to present-day problems.

This extensive literature, Sivan found, is an insistently political literature. It reaches back to medieval times—the more effectively to criticize today's Arab governments. It argues seemingly arcane theological questions—the better to argue for political activism. And it provides the ideological underpinnings for the new wave of Islamic radical thought. It is the subject of Sivan's perceptive and pertinent book.

Sivan, a professor of history at Jerusalem's Hebrew University, not only introduces Western readers to scores of important but little known contemporary Islamic thinkers (*Sunni* thinkers, one should emphasize: hence, not in full agreement with Shi'ite fundamentalists such as the Ayatollah Khomeini). He also breaks new ground in his analysis of their work and activities. Sivan, for instance, shares the view of other scholars that defeat in the 1967 Arab-Israeli War led many Arabs to re-examine long-held assumptions, but he dates the genesis of the ideas associated with Sunni radicalism back to the late 1950s and early '60s.

While the author focuses, quite naturally, on the Arab world, he attaches great importance to the influence of Abu Ala al-Maudoodi, an Islamic thinker of Indo-Pakistani origins. It was Maudoodi's works that first taught modern Islamic fundamentalists to think of their era as a second *Jabilyya*—the age before the advent of Islam when paganism and ignorance reigned in Arabia. Maudoodi also draws on the great medieval jurist Ibn Taymiyya to argue that true believers have a duty to oppose rulers who, though professing Islam, fail to live by its teachings.

Sivan acknowledges that Islamic radicalism is a reaction to the external pressures of Westernization and modernization. But developments inside Islamic states, he believes, have been even greater catalysts. Egypt's fundamentalist Islamic Brotherhood, after all, showed little enthusiasm for Gamal Abdel Nasser (Prime Minister and then President of Egypt from 1954 to 1970), even though he was lionized throughout most of the Arab world. Muslim movements elsewhere—in Syria and Iraq—have been just as suspicious of other presumably revolutionary and progressive Arab governments. Indeed, says Sivan, revolutionary governments threaten Islamic fundamentalists precisely because their revolutionary and anti-imperialist credentials are so impeccable. They are more effective than their conservative predecessors in winning the favor of the masses and the middle classes.

And they are adept at using the military, the police, the bureaucracy, and the media to accomplish their goals—including, notably, the repression of religious zealots. One Syrian Islamic writer summed up the fundamentalists' view of secular military juntas: "the most depraved social group . . . full of traitors, drunkards, fornicators, non-Muslims, and heretics."

Sivan notes a change in the attitudes of radical Muslims, marked by growing self-confidence and uncompromising defiance. The change came sometime around the mid-1960s, when Sunni fundamentalists stopped going along with Arab nationalism and pan-Arabism. During the 1956 Arab-Israeli war, imprisoned members of the dissident Muslim Brotherhood volunteered to fight on the front and to return to prison afterwards. By contrast, during the 1967 war, political prisoners in Nasser's jails refused to volunteer. "Israel and Nasser [are] both . . . but two variants of tyranny," they said, "both totally inimical to Islam."

Similarly, Islamic ideologues no longer feel any pressure to show that their faith is compatible with democracy. "The state in Islam obeys the law, not the people," says one. They are also openly contemptuous of such notions as equal treatment of religious minorities and women's liberation.

Sivan notes that Sunni radicals, though critical of governments and modern influences, have no qualms about seizing and using the modern instruments of the state for their own purposes. Even that great tool of Western devilry, the television set, can be put to orthodox ends. And although Sivan's subjects are ultimately critical of Iran's Shi'ite leader Khomeini, they grudgingly admire what he accomplished. Indeed, the Sunni radicals hope to do the same—crush the secular state and establish Islamic governments subject to Allah's law.

—Sbaul Bakhash '85

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**NICARAGUA: Revolution  
in the Family**

by Shirley Christian  
Random, 1985  
338 pp. \$19.95

In this measured study of the tangled and bloody affairs of Nicaragua since 1970, Shirley Christian, a Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist, exposes many of the myths that have bedeviled the American public debate over U.S. policy toward the troubled Central American nation.

Among those myths: that the shortsightedness of U.S. policy toward Nicaragua during the 1920s and '30s precluded a useful

American role during the 1970s and '80s; that Latin American leaders wished only to be left alone by the *yanquis*; that the Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN) was an ideologically mixed force, turned toward Leninism by the Carter and Reagan administrations; that opposition to the FSLN regime in Nicaragua is primarily led by ex-Somocista figures who hope to return their country to its authoritarian and oligarchic past.

Perhaps the most striking part of Christian's book is her description of the vacillation of the Carter administration in 1978 and 1979. The tale