

# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Francois Burgat. *The Islamic Movement in North Africa*. Center for Middle Eastern Studies: University of Texas Press, 1997. xi + 320 pp. \$14.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-292-70855-6.

Reviewed by John Calvert (Department of History, Creighton University)

Published on H-Africa (March, 1998)

Among the many recently published studies of Islamism in the English language, few make the countries of North Africa their special object of concern. Fewer still communicate the findings of French scholarship on the subject of Maghribi Islamism. Francois Burgat's *The Islamic Movement in North Africa*, translated from the French by Time correspondent William Dowell, fills these gaps.

This is the second edition of Burgat's book, and it differs from the original 1993 version only slightly: the author has added an epilogue which updates the study to 1996, and an index of names, oddly missing from the first edition, to aid the reader in quickly locating information relating to any one of the dozens of Islamist thinkers and activists examined by the author.

As stated by the book's editor, the English version is the product of a collaborative effort between The University of Texas at Austin's Center for Middle Eastern Studies and the Institut de Recherche et d'Etudes sur le Monde Arabe et Musulman at Aix-Marseille III. Both institutions are to be applauded for bringing this work to a larger audience than the French version alone would have allowed. One hopes, however, that future endeavors might produce translations less turgid and stylistically awkward than the work under review.

A striking feature of *The Islamic Movement in North Africa* is the inclusion of a number of transcribed interviews with prominent Maghribi and Egyptian Islamists, collected by the author between 1984 and 1988. By allowing men such as Rashid Ghannouchi and Ahmida Ennifer of Tunisia, Hasan Hanafi and Tariq al-Bishri of Egypt, and Abdessalam Yassine of Morocco to speak extemporaneously and at length, Burgat provides his readership an opportunity to "hear" the voices of contemporary North African Islamism directly and with a minimum of interpretive mediation.

The candid nature of these interviews makes for fascinating reading. We hear Hasan Hanafi, the representative of the Islamic Left, speak his mind on the rela-

tionship between the Arab-Islamic heritage and globalizing, western-centered modernity (p. 115); Abdessalam Yassine talk of his spiritual journey to Islamism through Sufism (pp. 14-16); and Ahmida Ennifer sketch out the Islamic Tendency Movement's eventual disengagement with Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood (p. 217-18).

The overall effect of Burgat's method is to provide Islamism with a human face, and to cast its thinkers as individuals with diverse life-stories and points of view. Burgat tells us that far from the gaze of the Western media, debates are taking place among the Islamists on the place of pluralistic politics in an Islamic state, on the status of women and religious minorities in such a state, and on the degree to which an Islamic state should adhere explicitly to Qur'anic injunctions.

Should Islamism reflect a largely populist vision centered on return to traditionally-sanctioned norms? Or should it strive for the creation of a new kind of Muslim life, one that is inclusive and commensurate with the historically unprecedented condition of modernity. What immediately becomes clear is that Islamism, far from being doctrinaire and ideologically monolithic, is a variegated phenomenon based upon the very personal responses of its human carriers to the processes of political and social strain characteristic of contemporary North Africa.

Through the testimonies of his informants, Burgat presents Islamism as the third stage in the long drawn-out process of decolonization. In this view, the first two stages, represented by the winning of political independence and the subsequent implementation of economic modernization, failed to bring about the progress and social justice promised by the nationalist leaderships. Demographic pressure, the stagnation of the state-directed economies, and political corruption combined to delegitimize the ruling elites of these "centralized Jacobin" states.

The fact that the new states had been governed since independence by bilingual elites who were, in the words

of the Tunisian Aziz Kritchén, spiritually submissive to Western values“ (p. 47), prompted many North Africans to express their disillusion by turning to familiar cultural markers of Islam, a trend which became strong by the 1980s. As Burgat writes: “One cannot express the rejection of the West, using its language and its terminology. How better to mark the distance, how better to satisfy the demand for an identity, than to employ a language that is different from its own, along with a stem of codes and symbols that seem foreign to it?” (p. 64).

Burgat admits that once the case for divine, as opposed to popular, sovereignty has been made, Islamism’s method has simply been to cast modern political concepts of community, identity and empowerment in the inherited vocabulary of Islam, thus adopting *umma* in place of nation-state, and *shura* (“consultation”) in place of democracy. Skeptics might brand Islamist “identity politics” as entirely instrumentalist in purpose. Burgat, however, is more charitable, seeing the Islamist trend a panacea capable of restoring to individual North Africans the “image of self” damaged by crises of identity, and of reconnecting them to their “public environment,” i.e. the State (p. 65).

The thesis that Islamism functions primarily as a discursive foil to the modern West is, of course, widely recognized in contemporary scholarship. But it is to Burgat’s credit that he is able to trace the transition from nationalism to Islamism through personal itineraries which cross some of the most interesting terrain of modern North African history. We learn, for example, of Rashid Ghannouchi’s early penchant for Arab nationalism which had been encouraged by Nasser’s *Sawt al-arab* broadcasts and by the songs of Umm Kulthum. We find that in 1964 Ghannouchi left the Maghrib for the Arab nationalist heartlands of Egypt and Syria and there involved himself in the debates on Nasserism, Ba’thism, and the Palestine issue that were then taking place. Indeed, one of the themes of Burgat’s work is to describe the tremendous ideological influence, both Arab nationalist and Islamist, exerted by Egypt upon Maghribi youth in the middle and latter parts of this century.

We follow Ghannouchi on a trip to Europe where, face to face with the European exemplar, he came to the realization that Arab nationalism was, at bottom, western-inspired ideology which operates beyond the authenticating framework of the Islamic heritage. In his own words, Ghannouchi tells us how, on the night of 15 June 1966, he made his “final decision to move from the universe of Nasserism and Arab nationalism to that of Islam,” and set about self-consciously re-learning the

prayers and religious culture of his youth which, he says, acted “at the interior” of his soul (p. 62). Here Burgat allows his subject to express a facet of Islamism that is often neglected in scholarship on the subject and which speaks to its primarily political motivations, namely, its invention by individuals who, prior to their return to Islamism, were often religiously non-observant.

Islamism attracts attention because it desires to influence the politics of the state. Burgat spends considerable time explicating the function of Islam in North African political contexts from the 1960s to the present, and devotes individual chapters to the recent situation in Morocco, Tunisia, and Algeria, in addition to the unique case of Qaddafi’s Libya. One by one, he says, “the principle Islamist formations have clarified their adhesion to the requirements for free elections” (p. 116). Yet consistently, as Burgat points out, the North African regimes have prevented the Islamist movements from contesting elections at the national level.

The Islamist movements, he says, have responded to this blockage either by creating a “counter society” of Islamic institutions, which exist alongside those of the state or, more ominously, by resorting to violence, including the modern-day political instrument of terrorism. Burgat suggests that Islamist violence is inevitable so long as the state elites refuse to allow the Islamist movements legal access to an open and democratic national debate.

As an example of the consequences of such a policy he points to the radicalization of elements within the Algerian Islamist movement FIS after the cancellation of Algeria’s national election in 1991. Burgat makes the important point that much Islamist violence is culturally centered as, for instance, among the members of Egypt’s Islamic Group, who come from a society (Upper Egypt) “in which men still settle today their financial, family or electoral differences with a gun rather than in front of an administrator or judge” (p. 115).

Burgat is surely correct in suggesting that Islamism is better understood as a political phenomenon rooted in sociology than as the manifestation of an enduring cultural essence, as Orientalism would have it. He marshals statistics showing that a majority of Islamist activists in North Africa come from the “modernist stratum of society” whose expectations for social mobility have not been met. In this sense, he says, the Islamists are the descendants of the once mighty secular nationalists, whose cadres hailed from similar backgrounds.

The French system of transliteration is followed throughout (thus “Ahmida Ennifer rather than” Hamid al-Nayfar“). Occasionally proper names are misspelled

(e.g. "Hassan Hannafi" for "Hasan Hanafi," p. 34). Stylistic "awkwardisms" abound as, for instance, in the following: "Rather than focusing on the conditions in which the forces that are too far removed from the process of re-Islamization are in the process of irresistibly marginalizing themselves it is much more efficient to investigate the internal dynamics of this Islamist resurgence, i.e. the internal dynamic of each of its numerous components as well as the changes in the balance of forces between them" (p. 310). One might have expected that sentences such as this would have been cleaned up for the book's second edition.

Burgat may be counted among Western scholars such as John Esposito and John Voll who are genuinely sympathetic to Islamism and willing to give the idea of an Islamist polity a chance. He admits, however, that the Algerian outcome has precluded, at least for the time being, the region's best opportunity for such a state to materialize.

Copyright (C) 1998 by H-Net, all rights reserved. This work may be copied for educational use if proper credit is given to the author and the list. For other permission, please contact <books@h-net.msu.edu>

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the list discussion logs at:  
<http://h-net.msu.edu/cgi-bin/logbrowse.pl>.

**Citation:** John Calvert. Review of Burgat, Francois, *The Islamic Movement in North Africa*. H-Africa, H-Net Reviews. March, 1998.

**URL:** <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=1855>

Copyright © 1998 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at [hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu](mailto:hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu).