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Interview - Tariq Ramadan

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Professor Tariq Ramadan has been described as one of the "most important innovators for the twenty-first century" by *Time magazine*. Ramadan works primarily on Islamic theology and the position of Muslims in the West and within Muslim majority countries, arguing for the re-interpretation of Islamic texts and emphasizing the heterogeneous nature of Western Muslims. His writings and lectures have contributed to the debate on issues of Muslims in the West and the Islamic revival in the Muslim world. He is Professor of Contemporary Islamic Studies at the Faculty of Oriental Studies and St. Anthony's College (University of Oxford), and the Director of the Centre for Islamic Legislation and Ethics (Doha). He is also President of European Muslim Network (EMN), a think tank, in Brussels. His books include *The Quest for Meaning* and *The Messenger.* Ramadan holds an MA in Philosophy and French literature and PhD in Arabic and Islamic Studies from the University of Geneva. In Cairo, he studied classic Islamic scholarship from Al-Azhar University scholars.

Professor Ramadan answers your questions about the compatibility of Islam and liberal democracy, prospects for the Arab Spring, autocratic regimes in the Middle East, and the ongoing crisis in Syria.

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Where do you see the most exciting developments and debates happening in contemporary world politics?

Unfortunately I'm not sure that I can see anything new and exciting about world politics. Of course we can talk about what is happening in the Middle East, but I'm cautiously optimistic and I don't see the right questions, the priority questions, being dealt with. So I can't tell you something that is exciting me now.

How has the way you understand the world changed over time, and what (or who) prompted the most significant shifts in your thinking?

I think that if we look at history, very often the people who are the agents of change are the people who are either dominated or oppressed or in very bad social situations, and these are the driving forces. Now we also have to deal with intellectuals, visionaries that are helping the process to occur, intellectuals and leaders and people who are trying to change the world cannot do it on their own, they need the strength that is coming from social and political forces, and even cultural forces, that are pushing toward changes, and I think that history is telling us that it's a combination of factors, but very often it is unhappiness and marginalization and injustice that is making people move ahead.

You have argued that Islam is compatible with the liberal democracies of Europe. How do you respond to figures like Ayaan Hirsi Ali who argue that they are incompatible, especially with regards to women's rights?

I think that is not only in Europe- I'm talking about the whole world today. There are millions of western Muslims who justify every day that they abide by the laws of the country, that they are democrats, and they are participating and voting. I'm not just talking about one person, I'm not just talking about one community, I'm talking about millions in

the United States, in Europe. We can see this not only in the West, but if you look at Muslims in Africa, Muslims in India, Muslims in Turkey, in Indonesia, also Ayaan Hirsi Ali- they are Muslims and they are democrats and they don't see a contradiction, as I do not see a contradiction.

The clash of civilizations thesis is built around an "us" versus "them" construct that results in perpetual conflict. In the increasingly interconnected age, are those differences hardened by greater interaction across traditional cultural boundaries or are they broken down because of a greater sense of interdependence?

I really think that globalization is affecting all of us by in fact spreading around fear and mistrust, and the people are asking who they are, what are their values. The whole very close definition of nation is now scattered, and identity is becoming a reference that is protecting us from who we are not and the people we do not know or are scared of. And I think that it has nothing to do with only civilization, I think it has to do with the way the world is now, and as you were asking the second part of your question, is people interacting, people living together, and paradoxically this means that people are more scared- they don't recognize their own psyche. But I would say that this is a transitory period, because the old references are lost now we are lost ourselves, and we are trying to find ourselves. And this is what we can call "negative identity." What we need is positive identity for the future, and the only way that identities are positive is when we acknowledge the fact that we have multiple identities.

What is your assessment of the media coverage of the alleged Boston marathon bombers? Is it possible for media to cover such events without advertently or inadvertently stereotyping ethnic and religious groups?

I think that because of the first statement coming from President Barack Obama, the media were cautious for a few hours, one and a half days, until it became quite clear that this was coming from Muslims and had to do with Islam, and then when this started we heard things about violence, terrorism, and all this stuff. No one can deny the fact that for a while the media were cautious, because we didn't know who was behind the whole thing. But again and again, this coverage, this new controversy that we have every 6 months, is not helping the leaning together, is not helping for the Americans to understand the fact that Islam is an American religion and we are all victims of violent extremists. The vast majority of Muslims are against it, condemning this, and they are victims themselves of what is happening. Unfortunately, we are caught in a vicious circle- the more we talk about violence, the more we are making Islam alien to the state, and the more the homogeneity and the leaning together is at risk.

Your book *The Arab Awakening: Islam and the New Middle East* takes a critical look at the so-called "Arab spring." Given the recent political turmoil in Egypt and Tunisia, is there hope for a democratic future in these countries?

You know, from the very beginning I took an intellectual position saying that I am cautiously optimistic. Unfortunately, we are very much obsessed with only one political challenge which is, is it going to be a democracy or not. And I think we aren't talking enough about what are the conditions for democracy in Muslim majority countries, or in the Middle East, or anywhere else. There are conditions, and the problem that we are facing today is disappointing because we see literalists, Salafis, we see reformist Islamists, and the secularists striving for power and creating within the society this kind of polarization between secularists and Islamists, in ideological terms, and trying to take over power, while the conditions to get democracy have to do with corruption- acting against corruption, deciding what will be the role of the army, what should be done in educational reform, what kind of economic system we have and which kind of economic relationships we need in the region- South-South relations and not only an obsession with the West. I think that these are important- social justice and empowerment of women are critical for any democratic processes. And, I think that we also have to add, the cultural challenge is the celebration of imagination, and art, and I referred to this in my book. And I think that as long as we all keep talking about the political challenge, and being trapped in the discussion of Islamists vs. secularists, democracy will be a far hope, a remote desire not being achieved.

In your book, you state that Libya's oil wealth was at the core of Western countries' decision to intervene in Libya. Is Libya better off without Gaddafi? What geo-political considerations might influence the

ultimate outcome there?

If we in the West were very much consistent in our hopes for democracy, we would hope the same for Bahrain, and for Saudi Arabia, and Qatar, and all of the petro-monarchies to become democratic societies. But that was not the point. The point was in Iraq to secure oil production, and in Libya, exactly the same. You know, the Arab League statements asking for a no-flight zone in Libya was used to get the resolution at the United Nations to invade Libya, but the same request was made by the Arab League to protect Gaza, the Palestinian civilians and civil society, and the innocent citizens in Gaza, by asking for a no-flight zone, but this was not heard. We heard the request in Libya and not in Palestine, only because in Libya the people and the country have oil, which is much more interesting than Palestinian blood. That's the point, and I think that we have to understand without being naïve, that yes, we can celebrate democracy in theory, but at the end, what we are promoting is really economic interest and geo-strategic interest. It's not new, it's as old as politics.

Is Turkey's model of secular government a potential model for other states in the Middle East, especially the states of the Arab awakening that have undergone rapid political change recently?

No, I don't think of it as a model. I don't think we have one model that we can follow. I think that the current government in Turkey did quite well over the last 10 years by being re-elected, acting against corruption, and trying with the means that he [Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan] had to do a good economic job. And I think that no one can deny the fact that he has been successful in political terms because it is stable in economic terms, and I think that this is very important. Now, we still have to say that freedom of expression, minorities, what has happened now with the change of the regime from a Prime Ministerial regime to a more Presidential regime, these are questions and matters of concern if we are serious about democracy in the future. So I think that we have been doing well in many terms, that the secular Turkish political regime is working with people who have Islamic and Islamists references, but I wouldn't say it's the model for the future.

What is your analysis of the on-going crisis in Syria? Is there still a possibility for regime change?

You know, I ended up having a very cynical assessment of what is happening. I think at the beginning, no one was expecting the Syrian people to be courageous enough, to go and take to the streets the way that they did. And I think that this is one of the points for me, and one of the proofs for me that this was not controlled by the West. For 8 months, the Obama administration, and the European governments, were asking Bashar al-Assad to reform his regime from within, and then because you have nothing to trust in the opposition, it took them 8 months to try to reconnect with the opposition and to find people whom they could work with and collaborate with. And then they decided that was over because saw it was not going to end. This was something important.

Now, it's quite clear that China and Russia do not want to repeat the scenario they had in Libya because they lost their prerogatives, their interests and geo-strategic presence there. So now, it's as if we have agreements between on the one side, Europe and the States, and on the other side Europe and Russia, agreeing not to agree on that and to keep the situation as it is for a while. But now, the situation is 170 people being killed *every day*, 65,000 people killed, more than 1 million refugees, and I think that is not going to end. So the fact that they are giving weapons to the opposition means that they all know it is going to last for a long time- by the way, it has lasted too long already. But I think that the situation is what the State Department calls "low-intensity conflict," meaning that it is not going to go beyond the Syrian borders and destabilize the region. And unfortunately, no one is ready, no country, no government is ready to change this. It's as if we see it, but we don't want to intervene or interfere in one way or the other.

The United States recently announced that it would increase the aid given to rebel groups within Syria. Do you see this as part of a broader geo-political strategy that the U.S. is pursuing?

We heard that Qatar and Saudi Arabia are financing the opposition, so they don't want to intervene, but they want to give money to the opposition. And what they want is an internal conflict with hopefully the victory coming from the hands of the opposition. So we are told that this is the only option. I don't think so, I think that there was a way to try

to find a way to put more pressure on Assad. Now it seems that the only option left is to arm the opposition and hope that step-by-step they will gain on the ground and overthrow the dictator.

So the problem is, I'm not sure it's going to solve the problems of the Middle East, because for the first time we have such a fracture between Shi'ia and Sunni, we have tensions in the region- Iran, Lebanon, and Syria on the one side, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Bahrain, and even Turkey on the other side, so the Middle East is fractured, it is divided, and very fragile.

King Abdullah II recently gave an interview in *The Atlantic* in which he seemed to say that there is a fundamental tension in Jordan between liberalization and democratization on the one hand and Islamist radicals. Will it be possible for Jordan to peacefully and gradually democratize?

I don't see that happening. You know, just after the first uprisings in Tunisia and Egypt, he [King Abdullah II] dismissed his Prime Minister and then he had to work with people in the streets, the Muslim Brotherhood, and other opposition groups. Now, the Jordanian monarchy is not a democracy, and it is not ready for democracy, because if there was a democracy in Jordan, I think the monarchy would be challenged, and it would be difficult. So I think that what we can hope for Jordan is a transition, reforms that would open the political game. So far, I think that there have only been symbolic gestures to survive the clash, but not real fundamental structural reform to move towards more democratic processes within the country.

You recently won 2 lawsuits against the city of Rotterdam and Rotterdam Erasmus University. What was the significance of these cases and their outcomes?

I think it's very critical. You know, I was a visiting professor at Rotterdam University, and I was working for the municipality on something that has to do with citizenship and identity. At the beginning I went not as a Muslim scholar, but as someone who has expertise on the ground. And then they decided because of the pressure coming from some local, far-right populist parties to create controversy. I won the first case when they tried to target me on homosexuality, and the municipality said there is nothing wrong with what Tariq Ramadan is saying. And then two months later, they came back out against me on the fact that I was working for an Iranian channel, without even discussing what I was saying and doing—I have always been critical towards the regime and supporting the reformists, and at this channel, lots of people support the reformists and are reformers themselves. So as a Sunni, it was also important to have a Sunni voice in the Shi'ia channel, open to all the topics. So at the end what happened is I won the case against the municipality and the case against the University, meaning that in a society where there is rule of law, citizens should not accept discrimination, should stand up for their rights, even though the political atmosphere is supporting far-right parties that wanted to burn the Qu'ran and who were comparing the Qu'ran to *Mein Kampf*. These people are not dangerous only to Muslims, they are dangerous to the whole society. As citizens of their own society, Muslim citizens should stand up for their rights and contribute for the future of their society, and one of the ways they can help is to call for dignity, call for justice, and contribute to more solidarity. And my position on this was, I'm not going to let this be done to me because this was unfair, unjust, and undignified. So the courts in the Netherlands just confirmed my position, and this is significant because it means that we always have to struggle for our rights.

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This interview was conducted by Alex Stark. Alex is Features Editor and a director of e-IR's editorial board. She is currently studying for an MSc International Relations (Research) at the London School of Economics.