

'Resistance' is the essence of Islamism

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Resistance: The Essence of the Islamist Revolution
By Alastair Crooke

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By Rami G. Khouri

Once in a while a wave of ideas sweeps across societies and countries, and when combined with political and social activism it changes global history for a time. We are living through such wave now in the global Islamist movement that has swept across much of the Arab world and Asia, as well as pockets of other societies since the late 1970s. Many different forms of Islamist movements have come and gone; some have endured for decades; most have embraced non-violent change that starts within the hearts of pious men and women; a few have veered off into violent confrontation or terrorism; and all have generated significant opposition, especially after the 9/11 attacks by Al-Qaeda against the United States.

Islamism broadly defined encompasses many dozens of different forms of nationalist, local, religious, charitable, social, economic, military resistance-based, and the occasional terror movements.

It is also controversial, misrepresented and misunderstood.

We are fortunate in this respect to have available a new book that provides, in my view, one of the most comprehensive, accurate and useful analyses of the core philosophy and motivating political principles of political Islamism that is available to English-speaking readers. The book is titled 'Resistance: The Essence of the Islamist Revolution', by Alastair Crooke. It cuts through much of the ideological venom, post-9/11 vengefulness, neo-Orientalist stereotyping, or mere nonsense that characterizes much of what is said and written about Islamist movements in much of the Western world and Islamic societies alike.

Crooke, who is based in Beirut, knows the Islamist movements intimately. He has worked or interacted with them in various capacities in the Middle East and Afghanistan-Pakistan for the past three decades, whether in his long service with the British government or the European Union, or more recently as founder and co-director of the Conflicts Forum, an NGO that focuses on meetings and exchanges between Islamist movements and interested parties in the Western world.

The book's strength, aptly captured in its title, is that it distills into 10 chapters the most important core motivating forces of Islamism as it has developed in our generation, especially since the Iranian Revolution of 1979. Though Crooke traces Islamism's historical roots to the early 20th century and beyond, he concentrates on systematically analyzing its philosophical, ethical, cultural, religious, economic, psychological, national and political values that are important in two respects: First, they explain why and how Islamism, through the lens of 'resistance', has mobilized hundreds of millions of individuals seeking to change the way their societies, politics, and economies operate; and second, they clarify the essential differences, even the confrontations, between Islamic values and the drivers of 'Western' values deriving largely from the Euro-centric nation-state anchored in its brand of democracy, secularism, individualism and materialism.

Crooke focuses heavily on philosophical and ethical differences between Islamism and Western traditions. He writes that the West keeps misreading events in the Islamic world, 'because the West interprets Islam as a simple struggle over power and sovereignty. It is not. It is a distinctive view of human behavior that posits an alternative method of thinking about the human being; his and her place in the natural order; his and her conduct towards others; his or her place in society; the ordering of his and her material needs, and the management of politics.'

The heart of the Islamist revolution is the revival of the radical Koranic message about social justice, centered on the divine command to individual Muslims to struggle and fight daily for justice and for human respect and compassion. These philosophical perspectives were translated into operational politics and mass resistance by a string of powerful personalities in the 20th century (and to this day) that included Sayyed Qutb, Mohammed Baqer al-Sadr, Musa al-Sadr, Ali Shariati, Sayyed Mohammad Hussein Fadlallah, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, Sayyed Hassan Nasrallah and others. Crooke's chapters on Hamas and Hizbullah explore how those two groups, reflecting their local conditions, translated their Islamist values into strong movements that are locked in ideological and military battle with some of their foes.

A critical common element for all Islamist movements, heavily sparked by the Iranian Revolution, is the sense of empowerment and action, as well as the refusal to acquiesce to others who enjoy superior power or who claim superior rights over other human beings. Resistance changes the balance of power and the terms of debate among parties that had suffered severe power and rights disparities.

Islamist movements will succeed or fail largely “on the basis of their ability to offer a clear alternative social and economic vision from the Western model for the distressed and poor in their societies,” he writes. The Islamist revolution is in its early days, he concludes, and the coming period will see considerable fluidity, tension and change.

This is one of the most substantial and useful books on Islamism to appear in a generation. It may not change many minds among those who support or oppose Islamist movements, but it will provide a combination of clarity and factual information about this phenomenon that has been sorely missing from the debate.