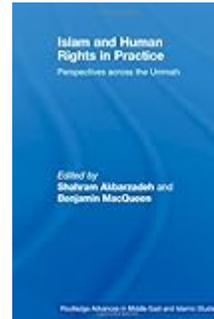




Shahram Akbarzadeh, Benjamin MacQueen, eds. *Islam and Human Rights in Practice: Perspectives Across the Ummah*. London: Routledge, 2008. x + 176 pp. \$140.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-415-44959-5.



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Moving beyond “Islam and Human Rights”?

Islam and Human Rights in Practice: Perspectives across the Ummah addresses a vexing theoretical issue: can contemporary human rights practically inform normative and political structures in the Muslim world? Plenty of ink and not a small amount of blood have flowed over this topic, as current events in Iran attest. Editors Shahram Akbarzadeh and Benjamin MacQueen lend to this controversy two distinct contributions. The first of these is that the book’s chapters (with one exception) ground their discussions of “Islam and human rights” in the political dynamics of a single Muslim-majority state; this counteracts the sometimes irresistible academic temptation toward overly sweeping theoretical generalizations. The second is that, rather than focusing in these chapters on the “usual suspects” for a book such as this—i.e., countries in the Arab world or the broader Middle East—their case studies extend into Southeast Asia, a region that is often ignored in such discussions. This is a useful decentering that moves the reader away from the too common conflation of the Middle East and the Muslim World. Beyond these well-

thought out editorial decisions, some of the volume’s individual chapters are also smart and valuable, particularly those that focus on ongoing—and quite dynamic—debates on gender and women’s rights.

One can always wish for more, of course. To this reader there are three elements, in particular, on which the volume could perhaps have pushed its ambitions further. The first of these lies in the very title of the book as well as the way that title conceptually frames much of the book’s approach (though with exceptions that will be noted below). Akbarzadeh and MacQueen’s introduction nicely frames an “Islam and human rights” binary and approaches to that binary in the academic literature. But perhaps it would have been worth noting, as well, approaches that question and attempt to move beyond this binary, and explore ways in which posing it obscures as much as clarifies variables at play regarding human rights in the Muslim-majority world. Is an “Islam and human rights” binary that implicitly assumes an opposition really the only way to enter into a discussion of the complexities of multileveled constructs such as “Islamâ

and human rights?

This leads into the second element that might have pushed this collection in a more original direction. Appropriately, the book's editors and authors emphasize Islam's diversity. Historically, Islam can be and has been constructed as everything from positively secular, passively quietist, to essentially political—and a dizzying variety of other such variations (often simultaneously!). This point is helpfully repeated throughout *Islam and Human Rights*. Understanding Islam as a singular entity, essentialized as being based in, say, a seventh-century holy book, is a distortion. That said, while the international human rights regime is not the rich, centuries-old tradition that Islam is, like Islam it is not a static, unchanging entity. Unfortunately, with very few exceptions the collection generically refers to international human rights as just such an essentialized thing, rather than a regime in a constant process of change and redefinition. As with Islam, it is a distortion to understand human rights as being eternally defined by one foundational element. Of course the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights (or a few early treaties) has relevance to human rights—just as the Qur'an (and *hadith* or, more broadly, the *sunna* of the Prophet) has relevance to Islam and to Muslim-majority societies. But perhaps the emphasis could be on how human rights have been consistently rearticulated in a transnational context if one is to avoid an overly simplified notion of human rights' foundations?

That transnational dynamism leads to a third thought. As mentioned above, one of the volume's merits is how it is grounded in local context (or national context, anyway—state geography is generally assumed to be defining by *Islam and Human Rights*'s authors). This is a welcome antidote to overly broad theoretical arguments that ignore local realities. Nonetheless, while recognizing the merit of this comparative politics approach, these domestic contexts still exist within and are affected by transnational normative and political currents. Somewhere between grand theorizing and local research, there should be space for work that notes how the local is informed by the transnational, just as the transnational is informed by the local. Particularly in regard to both Islam and human rights—which, if nothing else, share the fate of being backed by transnational winds—there might be the potential to explore more richly some of these currents that move beyond local or national borders while not surrendering the richness of research informed by local dynamics.

These notes made, overall *Islam and Human Rights*

is a solid contribution, with an introductory piece by Akbarzadeh and MacQueen that, as mentioned, gives a (perhaps overly) concise overview of approaches to the topic. While this introduction's conceptual ambition could be grander, it does very neatly define the field and what the authors identify as the two reigning approaches to Islam and human rights: literalist and humanist. Literalism is the position of both, ironically, traditional Muslim leaders, as well as Islamists (p. 1) and that of those Westerners (Bernard Lewis, et al.) who argue for the incompatibility of Islam and human rights. The humanist approach is identified by the editors primarily with Islamic reformers, somewhat broadly grouping together thinkers as disparate as Abdullahi An-Naim and Tariq Ramadan as arguing that Islam and human rights are not in contradiction but, rather, can be reconciled—i.e., that there is a compatibility of secular law and Islamic principles. While fair enough so far as it goes, this introduction could use more specificity and—both within and beyond literalist and humanist categories—perhaps move into more differentiated positions on the topic.

The editors summarize their introduction by stating that reconciling Islamic rule with the principles of human rights ... cannot be an overnight achievement, pointing to the chapters that follow as showing that the conceptual realignment to reconcile Islam and human rights tends to lag behind empirical cases (p. 7). The introduction is immediately followed by excellent chapters from Ann Elizabeth Mayer and Rebecca Barlow, respectively, on gender and rights both in the Muslim world writ large and, in Barlow's case, in Iran. Mayer's chapter is a wonderful overview of changes in normative discourse around women's rights and Islamic law. It incisively illustrates how processes of change occur at the intersection of normative and political action. Barlow's superb chapter discusses Iranian feminists, including those who focus on an anti-systemic approach that refuses an Islamic reformist reliance on using Islam to justify human rights. It is especially recommended as it is the one chapter to move past an Islam and human rights frame and, importantly, it emphasizes human rights as a non-static, dynamic framework that remains under constant expropriation and development by state parties from all regions of the globe (p. 48). As I suggest above, these are two elements essential to a more sophisticated approach to the book's topic, and one that could have usefully informed both the book's introduction and the chapters that follow Barlow's.

As tends to happen in collections that flow out of conferences (in this case a 2005 conference held in

Melbourne), other chapters are less integrated into the book's overall themes. MacQueen and Akbarzadeh do a good job in their chapters of summarizing the literature on two topics of broad interest: gender and freedom of religion in the constitutional life of post-Saddam Iraq, and relations and would-be coalitions between the Muslim Brotherhood and human rights groups in Egypt. Each is a topic on which there has been much speculation, and while essentially based on reviews of the secondary literature, each of the two chapters gives useful

summaries of the relevant background and incisive arguments. While it is exciting that the four chapters that follow move east toward Afghanistan, Malaysia, and Indonesia, with the exception of Patricia Martinez's well informed (but poorly edited) chapter on Malaysia, they are not substantial contributions to the book's thematic focus. Nonetheless, overall *Islam and Human Rights* is a welcome addition on a topic that is theoretically demanding and practically important.

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