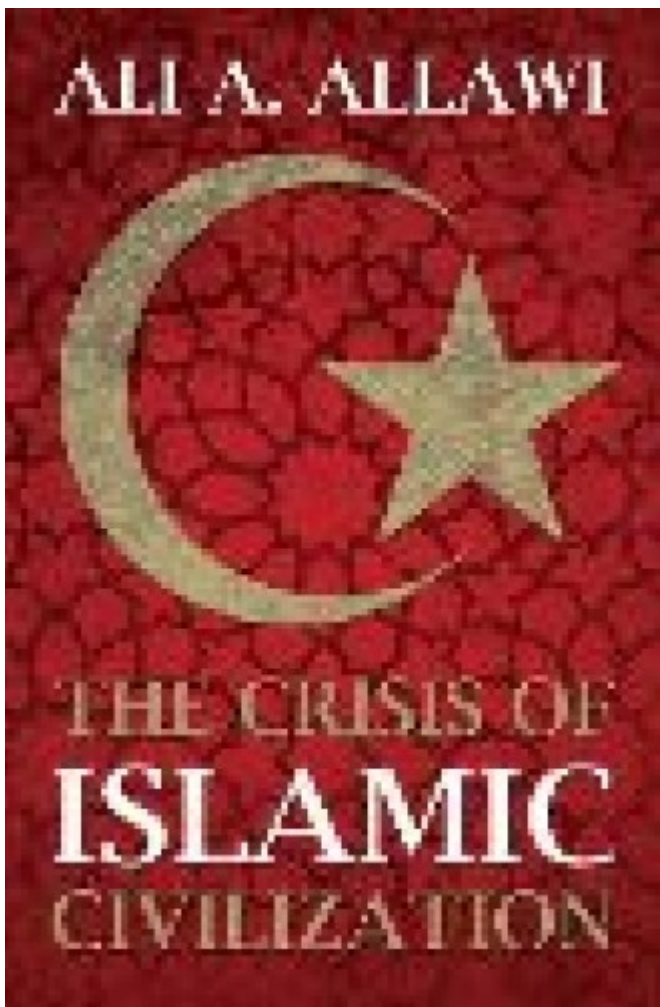


The Future of Islam/The Crisis of Islamic Civilization

reviewed by [Marlin Jeschke](#) in the [July 13, 2010](#) issue

In Review



The Crisis of Islamic Civilization

Ali A. Allawi
Yale University Press

"Osama bin Laden hijacked four airplanes and a religion." So reads a full-page ad that appeared in the *New York Times* in October 2001 and contains statements condemning the 9/11 attacks from some of the world's most prominent Muslim leaders. John Esposito calls attention to the ad as he urges readers to recognize mainstream Islam. Agreeing with Barack Obama that "America and Islam are not exclusive and need not be in competition," he says that we need to distinguish between "moderate or nonviolent activists" and "a dangerous minority of violent extremists and terrorists."

A professor at Georgetown University and editor of both *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Modern Islam* and *The Oxford History of Islam*, Esposito offers extensive references and citations to document the prevalence of a temperate and reasonable Islam. He contends that most Muslims do not want the strict Wahhabi/Salafiyya model in politics; they want Shari'a as a source of law, not *the* source of law. On the other hand, he says that most Muslims are turned off by the American political model because of its secularism and because of U.S. hypocrisy in supporting autocratic governments in many Islamic nations and in remaining uncritical of Israel's terrorism in, for example, Gaza. They want neither a Western secular state nor a theocratic, clergy-governed one.

Esposito concedes that Islam needs a reformation. He cites many spokes people in Islam—including Sheikh Ali Gomaa, Grand Mufti of Egypt—who are ready to make changes in traditional Shari'a on mixed marriages and religious conversion (traditionally called apostasy), and he reports on the rise of televangelists in Islam, popular preachers who project a different image of Islam than do the extremists who demand an enforced Shari'a.

The Crisis of Islamic Civilization is a quite different book. An Iraqi Shi'ite with degrees from MIT and Harvard who served briefly in the Iraqi government under the U.S. occupation, Ali Allawi is currently a visiting professor at Princeton University. He says that he writes to ask whether one can "speak of a single Islamic civilization any longer," whether such a civilization is a "repeatable possibility," and under what conditions a "civilizational presence" could "return to the modern world."

It's an honest book. Allawi admits the plight and pain of the Islamic world. As he reflects on the glories of Islam's past civilization, he admits that much of that civilization was borrowed from Byzantium and pre-Islamic Persia, though on Islam's

terms. All through the book is an air of nostalgia for this past, perhaps somewhat romanticized, civilization.

Allawi recounts the shock Islam has felt from “expanding Western powers” and their colonialism and from “the forces of modernity.” He reviews the efforts of thinkers in the Islamic world to cope with these challenges—their various attempts to rethink Islam—then addresses specifically how Islam will need to counter “the outer effects of the erosion of Islamic civilizational space” on political power, territory, law, economics and culture.

In his call for a reformulated Islam, Allawi repeatedly rejects Salafist proposals for a hard-line Shari’a, though he has warm feelings for what he sees as the liberal Shari’a of Islam’s golden age. Although he is Shi’ite, he declines to embrace Iran’s kind of theocracy. At the same time he definitely rejects the West’s secularism, and here many Christians in the U.S. would agree with him. He wants a society that retains a God-consciousness in its politics and economics, which is not surprising in view of Shi’ite appreciation of the better forms of Sufism.

With respect to territory, Allawi speaks of the non-Islamic world as *Dar al-Harb*, “land of struggle.” All the Internet references I found translate *Harb* as “war.” Muslims emigrating to the West may indeed need to struggle to adapt, but their new lands are decidedly not lands of war, and the flow of migrants shows the need to rethink Islam’s traditional conception of territory.

Neither Esposito’s volume nor Allawi’s makes any predictions about the future of Islam, perhaps wisely. Still, both the title of Esposito’s book and Allawi’s eloquent account of Islam’s pain in the face of modernity and globalization invite questions about Islam’s future. In these books, especially Allawi’s, I still hear too much about “Islam and the West,” a geographical image that unfortunately carries echoes of the dichotomous *Dar al-Islam* and *Dar al-Harb*. Instead, Islam’s future should be envisioned as one in which Muslims and Christians work together, sharing in the building of a global future and a global civilization. This would be much more than the Islamic world trying to salvage parts of an unrecoverable golden past. History moves in only one direction, and our task is to have a vision of the future that inspires us to shape the present.