



**Abdul Azim Islahi**, *Economic Thinking of Arab Muslim Writers During the Nineteenth Century*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015, 165 pages

**Reviewer:** Memduh Erdogan

A qualified evaluation of today's practical and theoretical problems requires a clear historical knowledge of the discipline. Similarly, studies on the history of Islamic economic thought have been vital — not just for examining the historical event itself but also to construct a coherent understanding on the evolution of terms, doctrines, and institutions to the present state. To that end, Abdul Azim Islahi has already published more than ten books on the history of Islamic economic thought. His last book *Economic Thinking of Arab Muslim Writers During the Nineteenth Century*, is a valuable study, which sheds light on the Islamic economic thought of Arab writers in the 19th century. Actually, this book of Islahi is the latest but not the final output of his extensive research project (as stated by himself in the book) on the Islamic economic thought produced after the 9th AH/15th CE century onwards. In the book, Islahi examines nine personalities from varied sections of the society with diverse knowledge backgrounds on Islamic economics. Apart from an introduction and a conclusion, the book consists of five chapters, with the second chapter elaborating on the socio-political and economic conjunctures of the 19th century and the rest four chapters clarifying nine Arab writers' contributions to Islamic economic thought.

After a brief introduction of the study, the second chapter helps the reader be aware of the general climate of the period under study before delving into exclusive economic perspectives of each personality. Although the chapter examines various Arab regions, including Hijaz, Sudan, Algeria, Tunis, and Tripoli; it mainly explains the reform and modernization efforts with references to the Khedivate

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of Egypt. Hence, economic initiatives such as the construction of new railways and the Suez Canal, as well as intellectual initiatives such as new schools and printing presses in Egypt, were examined.

In the third chapter, the author focuses on the economic thinking of the two scholars from Yemen and Damascus — Muhammad b. Ali al-Shawkani (d. 1250/1834) and Muhammad Amin b. Umar Ibn Abidin (d. 1252/1836), respectively. Beginning with a brief biography of al-Shawkani, the author explains his economic considerations of *bay' al-rajā'*, which refers to “selling agricultural land at the market rate or less with the condition that the seller has the right to abrogate the sale within a fixed period” (Islahi, 2015, p. 28). Islahi refers to the opinion of al-Shawkani, according to whom *bay' al-rajā'* is a valid transaction built on *khiyār al-sharṭ*, and the discount in the price of the land does not affect the ruling of the sale in case of the mutual consent obtained from the parties. Islahi goes further by elaborating on the other Zaydī scholars' views, who -unlike al-Shawkani- are of the opinion that *bay' al-rajā'* is not legally valid due to its potential use of circumventing the *ribā* prohibition even though *bay' al-rajā'* was a common practice in all varied parts of the society. Islahi, here, draws attention to the need for further studies by economic historians to find out (i) how many of the sellers abrogated these transactions by returning the price, (ii) the ratio of the lands purchased through such transactions. Having done that, the author examines Ibn Abidin's economic thought focusing on his views about taxation, monetary fluctuations, *bay' al-istiṣnā'*, and insurance. Islahi gives a lengthy discussion of insurance, or *sūkarah* (security) as stated in Ibn Abidin's works. Parallel to the increasing volume of maritime trade between Europeans and Muslims, insurance was a common practice of traders to guarantee the security of their goods. Ibn Abidin states that if the risks are explicitly mentioned or commonly included in such contracts, the guarantor is held responsible for any loss.

Chapter 4 presents the contributions made by two Azharite scholars Rifā'ah al-Tahtawi (d. 1290/1873) and Muhammad Abduh (d. 1323/1905). To Islahi, these two scholars were similar to al-Shawkani and Ibn Abidin in terms of the traditional education they received; yet, al-Tahtawi and Abduh were distinct for their awareness and interaction with Western ideas. Besides the bibliography and the works of al-Tahtawi, the author analyzes his wide range of considerations regarding several elements of the economic system — including industry, labor, trade, competition, equal opportunity, taxation, insurance, banking, and *ribā*. Furthermore, al-Tahtawi is distinct with his works providing information for the economic history of Egypt during the reign of Muhammad Ali (1805-1848) as well as the agricultural struc-

ture of the region. Islahi points out the significant impact of Western economic thought on al-Tahtawi's economic perspective. However, the author claims that al-Tahtawi critically analyzes these Western-origin ideas based on Islamic values. Despite this, Islahi points out the problematic endorsement of al-Tahtawi for the concept of colonization as a contributing factor for economic development. Moreover, the book clarifies Abduh's reflections on poverty, labor, insurance, and *ribā* as well as his interpretation of the Quranic terms "fi sabil Allāh" and "al- 'afw". Regarding the issue of *ribā*, Islahi rejects the claim that Abduh gives the permission for the interest received from deposits in post offices which is a formal practice established by the Khedivate. According to the author, such an allegation is derived from a weak narrative of Abduh's student Rashid Rida without any statement of Abduh to this sense in his works.

Chapter 5 scrutinizes the economic thinking of two statesmen from Tunisia, Khayr al-Din al-Tunusi (d. 1308/1890) and Muhammad Bayram al-Khamis (d. 1307/1889). Compared to the previous two chapters, Islahi - in this chapter - tries to find the distinct nuances in the contributions made by a statesman. As a pasha and sadrazam, Khayr al-Din considered the progress of a state to be closely related to its consolidation of justice, equity, liberty, and security for all citizens. In an effort to ensure these values, Khayr al-Din advocated learning Western sciences and technology. In fact, he considered that, to a great extent, European civilization was built upon the knowledge Western scholars received from earlier Muslim scholars; that's why it was Muslims' duty to reclaim it. Khayr al-Din criticized the capitulations granted to the foreign states, which served only to the benefit of foreigners to the detriment of the local economy. Moreover, he expressed the immediate need of Muslim countries for Western institutions, including business corporations and banks. Again, his critical reflections on the concepts of patent and copyright are ahead of his contemporaries. Similarly, Islahi elaborates Bayram al-Khamis' analysis on his time's common financial practices — including banking, interest, and stock exchange. Despite the short content on the subjects, Islahi highlights the pioneering role of these Tunisian statesmen leading to increasing discussions in the following centuries.

In chapter 6, Islahi studied Ali Mubarak (d. 1311/1893) and Abd-Allah al-Nadim (d. 1313/1896) from Cairo as well as Abd al-Rahman al-Kawakibi (d. 1320/1902) from Aleppo. By analyzing the economic thinking of these three literati, who convey their thoughts and ideas in the form of stories, novels, and poetry, Islahi finalizes his multilayered search of economic understanding of the Arab Muslim writers. In this chapter, the author explains how economic thinking in the nineteenth century was reflected in the literary method. Thus, the suggestions and solutions

proposed by Mubarak, al-Nadim, and al-Kawakibi for the economic development in the Muslim countries were clarified alongside the possible barriers. Starting from related factors of economic development such as mass education, they investigated elaborate topics, including usage of machinery in agriculture, the government's role in economic investments, fair distribution, and *zakāh*. Moreover, they evaluated Western practices in the example of the stock exchange, banking, and partnership companies. Then again, they were actively critical of the *status quo* surrounding them. To illustrate, al-Nadim claimed that European imperialism stole the wealth of Eastern states and stated: "No European power ever entered an Eastern country as a self-professed conqueror; it always established itself under the guise of reform, in the name of civilization" (Islahi, 2015, p. 119).

In the conclusion, Islahi revisits the earlier chapters and tries to construct a concise and collective reading of the 19th-century Arab Muslim writers' economic thought. Hence, the dispersed subjects discussed separately for each writer have been reviewed respectively. Under each subject, the writers' positions were compared. Finally, the author presents his valuable recommendations encouraging further studies on 19th-century economic thought with an exclusive focus on the countries, personalities, and concepts.

A unique contribution of the book is its depiction of economic thought through the lenses of many personalities representing varied sections of the society. So, by gathering these personalities of statesmen to literati, Islahi tries to present an encompassing spectrum of the economic thought produced in the 19th century with an exclusive look to the Arab world. Moreover, Islahi puts an effort to contextualize the views of these personalities with references to the political and economic conditions surrounding them. Nevertheless, his analysis of historical events is sometimes methodologically problematic. Hence, there are broad statements that cannot be validated and can be regarded as highly subjective and sentimental language. For instance, Islahi states, "Yet, people's moral and religious degradation had reached such a low ebb that there was no room even to expect such practices" (Islahi, 2015, pp. 31–32), or when elaborating on the socio-religious environment in which Muhammad b. Abd al-Wahhab called out to the Muslims; Islahi states, "At that time, it was infested with corrupt beliefs and wrong practices. There was no law and order. Old practices of idolatry and superstition were prevalent, and the consumption of opium and wine common" (Islahi, 2015, p. 147). What's more, Islahi does not filter out or at least point out the reflections of the personalities, which might be consequences of their discourse of activism and political stance. This commonly leads to heroic narratives that are stuck in a dilemma between

compliment and criticism. To illustrate, Islahi mentions Ali Mubarak's appreciation of Muhammad Ali where he states, "... since ancient days, few rulers paid attention to the augmentation of farming... This was so until Muhammad Ali came to the throne, as it was he who realized the significance of agriculture and took various steps to advance it" (Islahi, 2015, p. 114).

In his analysis of economic thought of personalities, Islahi uses varied works of the person examined. So, the author benefits from a large number of Arabic primary sources, including books, newspaper articles, and treatises (*rasā'il*). On the other hand, the secondary sources are not as satisfactory as the primary sources. Despite the long quotations from secondary sources throughout the book, one might argue that the cited works are relatively out of date. There are also a couple of references to the internet websites such as Wikipedia in "Notes" which might not conform to the academic purposes of the book.

Throughout the book, there is an emphasis on the subjects, such as modernization and being in contact with Western knowledge; yet, there are not enough references to the local and traditional Islamic scholarly environment in the region. In parallel to Islahi's understanding of the historical timeline based on the golden age-decline dichotomy, he considers the late-19th century as an awakening from stagnation (Islahi, 2015, pp. 12–13, 133). Such a discourse for the 19th century leads to consider what belongs to the scholarly tradition of earlier centuries to be imitation and halt. This opinion of the author can be seen clearly in his evaluation of the commentary (*sharḥ*) and glossary (*ḥāshiyah*) literature that he considers as "a dearth of creative and innovative writings" (Islahi, 2015, p. 42). Although the author mentions his aim as to find the scholarly production in the period, he seems to neglect the glossary literature, which actually ensures a consistent development within the principles and mechanisms of each discipline (see, for instance, Shamsy, 2013). That is to say, his understanding of originality and development seems to be on the basis of Western concepts and institutions.

The book has clear and readable language. In addition to in-text translations of Arabic terms, it has a separate glossary section; hence, a non-Arabic reader can easily understand the text. All in all, this book of Islahi is undoubtedly a valuable contribution to the history of Islamic economics. The scarcity of critical studies in the area does make this book even more rewarding for the development of the literature. Coupled with Islahi's earlier works on the 16th-18th centuries (see Islahi, 2008, 2009, 2011), this well-organized series of books on Islamic economic thought would be a convenient choice for new researchers in the field.

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