

ORKHAN JEMAL

Islamic Revival as a Search for New Forms of Political Representation

Translation by Marlyn Miller and Jan Surer

DOI: 10.22394/2311-3448-2018-5-1-154-166

Orkhan Jemal (1966–2018) — Journalist (Moscow, Russia).

The main idea that Orkhan Jemal expresses in his interview is that the current stage of Islamic revival does not stem from the desire to move back to the past or the denial of progress. But as a result of social progress leading to the marginalization of a huge portion of the Islamic religious community due to the loss of political representation after the Islamic caliphate was destroyed, the search for new forms of such representation is in progress. This search takes place in different forms, and it is accompanied by violence as it presupposes radical political shifts. The same thing has occurred in similar situations, for example in the course of the Protestant Reformation, and in the implementation of the communist project. Orkhan does not connect the current situation in Islam with migration from Muslim states to the West (he explains the problems that have arisen here by the crisis of Europe itself). At the same time, he thinks that one of the forms of Islamic expansion should be the development of a model of life for everyone (including non-Muslims) that is morally superior to the current Western way of life.

Keywords: Islamism, caliphate, political representation, Islamic way of development, Arab spring, Islamic terrorism.

R *Recently, more and more news, and the top headlines, at that, are connected in one way or another either with the Islamic world, or with Islam as a religion, or even in some cases with Islamic eschatology. That is, something is hap-*

Originally published in Russian as: Jemal, Orkhan (2017) “Islamskoe vozrozhdenie kak poisk novyh form politicheskogo predstavitel'stva” (interview), *Gosudarstvo, religiia, tserkov' v Rossii i za rubezhom* 35(3): 318–331.

pening either with Islam, or in Islamic countries, that is constantly producing a stream of news. I can't remember the last time I heard about Africa or Latin America, but I hear about the Middle East all the time. What is actually happening here? Why is that?

Orkhan Jemal: You know, the Chinese have a saying: “God forbid that we live in an era of change.” We are living precisely in an era of change. It is simply such a difficult historical moment, we have just come to a time of change, a time of big events, a time when the overall picture, the overall contour of the world is at a point of bifurcation and will change. And this point of bifurcation is located just at the juncture of the Islamic and Christian worlds. The message isn't that Huntington and Toynbee were right in their clash of civilizations idea. No, that's not the point. But right now this is the situation the world has logically reached.

We need to recognize that all this has its roots at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries, when it was still the old world, it still bore certain archaic features, and in some of its characteristics it was comparable with the world of the era of the Crusades or even the Battle of Pavia. The vast Ottoman Empire existed at this time. It was sick, it was rotting, outdated, archaic. There were huge internal problems, internal contradictions in the Ottoman Porte: Egypt had already broken away, the Balkans were already pushing [the Ottomans] out, Turkey itself was coming apart at the seams, the Arabs were rebelling. But nevertheless, this was the very entity that claimed the central position in the Islamic *Ummah*, this political agency.

During the First World War this nightmare was brought to an end when this same decrepit Ottoman Empire, coupled with Germany, got itself involved in a huge war and suffered defeat. The Islamic world, at one level, breathed a sigh of relief, because this “sick man of Europe” was no more, this archaism was no more — an archaism which, besides that of the metropolis, Turkey itself, had still preserved a great deal of the ancient ways on its periphery, which prevented these territories from developing, from living. And then it [became] possible to absorb anything and everything within itself: Western innovations, and non-Western innovations. This was done, very specific trends appeared in the Arab world: Baathist doctrine and Arab National Socialism flourished. Systems of rule such as the Libyan *Jamahirriya* emerged. There were certain processes, but along with them agency disappeared.

Now, the world proletariat in the 20th century had a head — it was the USSR. Those who did not particularly like the USSR had lesser alternative leaders in the form of Beijing or Havana, but in principle, a certain class-based political agency remained. There was a head. And in principle, not only proletarians from all parts of the globe could appeal to it, but also people fighting for their independence, and for many other things, for example, for the environment. But Muslims did not have anything like this. At first, it seemed that this was not so important — develop, adopt innovations, see how wonderful it was in Britain, I don't know, in America, in France — how civilized and progressive they are, how far they surpass us.

The key event of the 20th century, which showed that everything was not right, that everything was increasingly complicated, was 1947, the formation of the state of Israel. In the 20th century, they did what was already not acceptable in the 19th century as a resolution of the [American] Indian question. At this moment the realization came that there was no one to intercede. There was absolutely no one to stand up. And a conglomerate of political entities of the type, say, of monarchies or Baathist regimes is very changeable, each [component/regime] favors its own side.

Against this background, a completely different process was developing, which, in fact, shaped the current emphasis. This was a party that emerged in Egypt, called the “Muslim Brotherhood,”¹ the Ikhwans. They said that the Western way is not ours, we are the side that has gotten the worst of it in this process. But we have an alternative. Moreover, we don't need to give up Western innovations entirely and completely. We are quite ready to use something of their experience. But on the whole, we have an alternative. And so this theme of Islam's distinctive path rested on mass frustration and the understanding that to the West we were just defeated savages.

Further, the Ikhwan had its own story. Various groups branched off from them, some that we consider terrorists, some that we don't. On the one hand, these were Ikhwans who were against violence; on the other hand, we can never forget that “Al-Qaeda”² was also formed on the foundation of the Ikhwans. That is, this led to the idea of radical struggle. And this is what we have, and what generates such a stream of events — the Arab Spring, events in Syria, even to a certain extent

1. This party is banned from the territory of the Russian Federation.
2. This organization is prohibited in the Russian Federation by a decision of the Supreme Court of the Russian Federation, dated February 14, 2003, No. GKPI 03 116, which took effect on March 4, 2003.

Afghan events — it is precisely that a battle is happening in the world for a kind of greater political agency among Muslims. Naturally, there are complete dead ends: let's try networks such as "Al-Qaeda"; let's try to base ourselves on territorial administration, as did the Islamic State.³ But in general this is simply a process in which these numberless millions, the thinking class, and the radical class among them, realized that the loss of political agency is an evil for one-and-a-half billion people. This is an evil for them, and it needs somehow to be restored, the issue needs to be resolved. And this is the phase we're in — a struggle is going on for political agency. The kingdom of God is taken by force.⁴

And why is it that the idea of going back to the source in order to become a leading force in the world again has received such wide dissemination? I understand that many see the reason for Islam losing its leading role and the West leaping forward in the departure from true Islam.

First, the idea that we have moved away [from true Islam] and that's why everything is askew, awry, and if we fought with swords and bows, as in the time of the Prophet, then everything would be fine for us — we can't say that idea is entirely absent. But it is profoundly marginal.

Why with swords and bows? To hack off their hands? To stone them?

Once again, in itself the idea of returning, of forcing yourself back to the Stone Age, because it's better — is quite a marginal idea. This is well understood in the Islamic world. Of course, there are such street-tough, super-passionate people who say "yes, cut off hands, yes!" But in general, the idea itself is marginal. We simply remember the events that gave rise to this entity — the Caliphate — gave rise to it despite all circumstances. Otherwise, it is not perceived as a historical miracle. It gave rise to us.

And the struggle is actually for a return to a political role, to having political weight. When the caliph is obligated to stand up for anyone, anywhere, it means that his power is also partly extraterritorial. He is caliph of all Muslims, and not simply of those square kilome-

3. This entity is banned from the territory of the Russian Federation.

4. "From the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven has suffered violence, and the violent take it by force" (Matthew 11:12 [NRSV]).

ters. And in itself Salafism, which actively exploits this idea, is, after all, born each time there is a question of external oppression. In fact, the history of the formation of this movement can also extend beyond Ibn Abd al-Wahhab, who was a proverb to all, and even goes back to Ibn Taymiyyah. What kind of ideology was this? It was an ideology that arose as resistance to the attacking Mongols who occupied the Abbasid Caliphate and enslaved everyone. The terrible Mongol campaign swept away the Abbasid Caliphate, at which point an ideology of resistance arose; it was very clearly formulated by Ibn Taymiyyah. And Ibn Abd al-Wahhab, he was an ideologist of resistance as well, he fought for Arab independence against Turkish hegemony. That is, this also took place in this case. And the revival of this tendency on the eve of the First World War — this also eroded Turkish influence in the Arabian peninsula. That is, in general, when we say that we need to return, naturally there are people who will talk about the archaic. And there are people who understand this as a return to what has been lost.

And why is it necessary to go backward, and not forward?

And what does it mean to go forward?

Well, toward something new. Do you dismiss the idea of progress?

But why dismiss progress, if progress is evident, it is obvious, it is ridiculous to deny it. And there is technical progress, and progress in information, and the increased social complexity of the system. Progress is made. It's just that when we say "to follow the path of progress," what do we have in mind? Now historically, it happened that this huge religious community, it actually was to some extent marginalized. Yes, this is historically objective, certain causes and certain preconditions have led to this. But this doesn't mean that historical objectivity can't be overcome. In fact, history is also a cycle of those extremes that overcome historical preconditions.

As far as we can understand, the current stage of this movement nevertheless began with the Arab Spring. Well, in any case, it was during the Arab Spring that I began hearing things about Islam every day.

The process began, in my view, in the late 20s, very soon after the disappearance of the Caliphate and the emergence of the Ikhwans. It smoldered, continued, and decayed, it entered into a deadly embrace with Baathist entities and with pro-American regimes like Sadat's or Mubarak's. It spilled over into this great world cauldron and became significant not only for the regions, but went beyond the scale of its inner workings with the beginning of the Afghan war. It had already become an important factor. And further the situation only worsened and worsened, as it passed through different phases. When, for example, it became perfectly obvious in Algeria at the turn of the 80s and 90s that, as Mao said, the rifle gives birth to power. Meaning, only the transition of power within the political consensus ensures simple democratic processes. Any figure outside the limits of that consensus will be swept away, and the results of the vote will not matter to anyone. Algeria has shown that you can vote as you like, but there will be a military junta, not Islamists.

But all the same, the phenomenon of the Arab Spring, as I understand it, does not fully fit into your logic, because it was not a purely Islamic phenomenon. There were a number of very different forces.

You know, there's this Islamic parable. I believe it relates pretty closely to the time of Jafar as-Sadiq. They came to him and asked: Where do we look for pure, true Islam, and where do we look for pure Muslims, true Muslims? He answered: look for true Islam in the Quran, and true Muslims — in their graves. This was Jafar as-Sadiq, separated by only six generations from Hazrat Ali, one of the Prophet's closest companions. Even then there was this kind of statement. There is no pure Islam. We don't operate in some sterile, laboratory conditions, everything is everywhere. The most complex situational alliances are possible. In general, it is very mistaken to believe that everywhere the Arab Spring occurred it was the same. The only thing that unites the Arab Spring is first, that it was Arab — that is, that a universal media field was created for it. This is Al-Jazeera. The second uniting factor was that these were Islamic countries that were governed by secular authoritarian or totalitarian regimes, that is, it was the overthrow of tyranny in an Islamic country. And the fact that there were not only Muslims, but also democrats (by the way, one does not completely contradict the other), that there might be people, for whom Islam is not a super important thing, well, they just wanted to taste existential

freedom — this is another question. That is, naturally, there is no sterility. It's not an operating room.

But notice — was this really the first time that there were these eruptions, this anger and resistance in these countries? Has there never been an uprising in Syria? Has there never been an uprising in Egypt? Has there never been an uprising in Libya? There were [uprisings], [people] just really invested in them at a certain point. In Egypt it was obviously the Ikhwan forces. Yes, at first, the democrats came out. They were Muslims, these democrats. But it was specifically when the Muslim Brotherhood invested in these protests, bringing discipline, organizational experience, and experience at resistance, that they became irreversible.

Well, people came out against dictatorship, and everything ended, in the words of Timur Shaov, "unfairly." Everywhere it all ended pretty unhappily.

Well, first of all, I don't think it's so sad everywhere. I understand that a huge number of ordinary people, including ordinary Muslims, looking, for example, at Libya, say "there was order there, everything was clean, neat, there was a kind of welfare system, there was work. And generally everything was fine." These questions are, as it were, ideological. Yes, now there is less order, yes, there are a lot of conflicts. But now there is freedom. It's not quite the kind of guaranteed freedom there is in Europe, which is what we generally talk about. The freedom is guaranteed by a still greater dictatorship — it's just a mild and disguised one. But nevertheless it is freedom.

But there is no freedom in Egypt.

And in Egypt there was a military coup. This concerns a divide that exists. There are situations where just voting doesn't solve anything. And it is simply decided by force, and this is an example.

But in Egypt the divide was serious. And they began speaking against the Ikhwans even before the military coup.

Well, yes, they began to speak against them. This is actually a revolution going on. Basically, when there was a vote, it was in favor of the Ikhwans.

This does not mean that all are prepared to stand under their banners as one. But it at least means that they are not a marginal group that has seized power by force of arms. They are not usurpers of power against the general will. And excuse me, Sisi — this is already a military junta. It's a military dictatorship. And where is the democratic approach?

So for you the Arab Spring fits into the logic of the search for political representation? Because I have the impression that despite the fact that this was a pan-Arab movement, it was still national in each country. It was a struggle against local repressive regimes, it was not so much a global pursuit.

True, it didn't go global. But just to draw an analogy with Marxism. Before Trotsky's concept of permanent revolution appeared, how many struggles had there been against oppression, which could take various forms: the form of a national liberation struggle, the form of anti-colonial movements, or the form, I don't know, of the Paris Commune. All these things could happen in the most varied forms, and it seemed that this wasn't universal. It became universal.

That is, the Arab Spring — this is the phase that preceded the universalization of the movement. Yes, it was national outbursts against regimes that were well integrated into the world system or were heading toward this. Not all of them had social problems, Gaddafi had no particular social problems that couldn't be completely resolved. But nevertheless these uprisings occurred. But what happened next? The Arab Spring swept in in 2011 and touched Syria. Syria had already flared up by 2012, and here, this national theme, it ended in Syria. It became universal. This has become a space in which everyone is interested, all Muslims are following it intently: who, whose side, will win. People completely from the outside go there and interfere, people who are converts. The converts did not go to fight in Libya, they did not go to resist Sisi. None of this happened. And here it is a completely different story. That is, it has stopped being a narrow, national struggle of one national group against another national group.

So the Ikhwan's idea failed?

It didn't fail. First, the Ikhwan had no clearly expressed general idea. It is a current, it is a river, that carves out new streams, new

branches. Moreover, the groups that disassociated themselves, that left the Ikhwan, they might curse their own subsidiary-parent structure and even accuse them of apostasy, but genetics is genetics. And the Ikhwan themselves modernized in their own mainstream, they ranged from terror to the seizure of power by democratic means, using European institutions. Of course, the idea of the Ikhwan did not fail, because it's not one concrete idea that might or might not demonstrate its effectiveness. This is a trend inside which there are disputes, squabbles, and conflicts. In fact, when we study the history of politics in the 20th century, the lion's share is the history of factional struggles within the left. Just like here. This is a general trend, which apparently will be the main issue of the coming century at a minimum. I think that if you lived a century earlier somewhere in America, you would be wondering why there's so much news from Russia, for example.

But the form in which the project became global can't be said to be too attractive. And why was the global Muslim project realized in such a terrible, bloody, monstrous form?

And do you know the bloody form in which the project of the building of socialism was implemented? You should know this, you live in this country, you have studied its history. And do you know in what bloody form the antimonarchical project of republicanism was realized? And look at the form in which the religious reform process was ultimately realized. Germany lay in ruins, in blood. One of the sources from this period wrote that you could travel for three days and not encounter a single populated settlement. These were the peasants' reformist wars. I don't think there was a single phase of that project about which you couldn't say, "God, what a horror!" Moreover not just a horror, but unimaginable horror.

That is to say, the way it all began in Egypt: by voting, by a peaceful acquisition of power, by a referendum on the constitution — there was nothing at all like that?

I am again speaking from my own point of view. The rise to power is not realized through voting, through a procedural system at all, but the transfer [of power happens] within a specific political system,

where there is a consensus among all the players. Even when the figure who comes to power is not from the central bloc of this continuum, but from its margins, this distorts the continuum, as, for example, America [is distorted] through Trump. And this is not about a man from the outside who says, “now everything will be different, inside and out.” We’re talking about very serious, systemic players, who just don’t happen to be located at the center of the system. And when it comes to a player who is outside the margins, then, excuse me, there are no procedures, no voting, that’s just how it is. Who survives, survives.

And then what?

And then the story just goes on.

Where? Your prediction.

Well, as a Muslim, I proceed from the idea that history itself is final, it comes to an end, it will end with a terrible battle, Armageddon, universal death, resurrection, the Last Judgment.

Let’s return to the current situation. At present there’s another one of these very significant processes that affects the contemporary world – this is mass migration to the West, particularly to Europe, from Islamic countries. What do you see as the consequences of this process for the West and for Islam?

Well, I don’t think the process of migration is so important or so fundamental. It’s quite an understandable story, they teach us in geography lessons in school that air moves from a high pressure to a low-pressure zone. Likewise, people from a zone of high economic pressure move to a zone of low pressure. The average person migrates from bad conditions to better conditions, and takes any opportunity to do so. We’re talking about purely economic migration: there is more money there and better shops. And about fleeing from war. And running toward a better social system, when we’re not really talking about such crude matters as having a job, having sausage, but we’re talking about better education, better medicine. That is, people migrate to better conditions. It is clear that in the second or third generation av-

erage people under certain conditions easily become lumpens.⁵ That is, this is like the peasants who came to the city, who got involved in some kind of industry, in some kind of craft business. They are drifters, from whom you can expect all kinds of excesses, and this is the milieu of crime. As the Russian classics captivantly described life in Petersburg at the turn of the 19th–20th centuries, what we read in Krestovsky’s *Petersburg Slums*. This process, scaled up to the level of continents, is now underway. And then the capital’s merchants, the capital’s inhabitants, did not like it very much that various riffraff from the villages were overrunning the place. But, nevertheless, the process goes on.

Naturally, this can cause certain reactions in Europe, and this is exploited by the right. But we must understand that what we call a European crisis is, by and large, not the result of arriving migrants. Migrants are one of the elements that make up this crisis. In the final analysis, these migrants were originally invited as a cheap workforce; they were deliberately imported: the Turks to Germany, the Algerians to France. That is, it was a stimulated process. In Europe there is a specific, perhaps even civilizational crisis, and Europe is reacting to it in some way. But it is not Arab migrants who will destroy Europe, if it is fated to be destroyed.

All right. All the same, more and more Muslims are beginning to live in Europe and to somehow fit, or not fit, into the European context. Will this somehow influence Islam and Islamic movements?

We are now just at the stage when Islam — I will even allow myself the expression — a Greater Islam that passes beyond liturgical borders, Islam as a comprehensive doctrine — is right in the middle of a state of phase transition in its understanding of itself. In principle, we find ourselves in a space that considers that there is the liturgy, you need to fast, you need to pray five times a day, you need to pay *zakat*, to participate in the Hajj if you have the opportunity, then take on yourself a bunch of entirely understandable and entirely universal human ethical constraints. And everything will be well for you, in principle this is enough for the Last Judgment in the absence of any other serious

5. *Lumpen* refers to (typically) lower-class individuals who have become detached from their previous class affiliation. — Trans.

sins, it is enough for Paradise. Our feet are here, but our heads are already in another place and say: yes, yes, all this is true. But another task stands before us. The task before us is much broader: it is expansion, it is development, it is life.

And this development — it's not only that we're now going to grab another piece. There was a writer who liked to pen horror stories: what would happen if the Muslims captured Paris, and there was a terrible medieval obscurantism in Paris, where a bunch of diehard liberals from the underground try to resist. That's not what this is about. Expansion will also consist of this, that at last a model must be proposed for all, which will possess firm moral excellence.

After all, when it comes to the great expansion of Islam, how many people in fact fought there? I somehow began to explore this question. And I came across an interesting figure: at that moment, in the era of the Prophet and the era of the righteous caliphs, Muslims never put forces of more than 30,000 men on all fronts, and were never able to concentrate more than 10,000 swords on any front. This was quite a ridiculous force compared to those they went up against. And Sassanid Iran, a super-empire, rooted in remote antiquity, opposed them. The Byzantine Empire, the heir of great Rome, which had made all mankind tremble for thousands of years, opposed them.

And these people, who couldn't put more than 10,000 bayonets on a single front, swept throughout the world in the course of one hundred years. This could not have been done with weaponry. Such things are not rendered with weapons. Naturally, there were also processes of coercion. But in order to bring about such a qualitative change in such a short period of time, there had to be a certain moral superiority. If this understanding of Islam as something morally superior to everything around it is offered to all, then surely the task of Muslims will be fulfilled.

Does the phrase "Islamic terrorism" make any sense to you?

Of course. When terrorists carry out attacks as Islamists, as Muslims, addressing their own Islamic ideological goals, this is Islamic terrorism, just as terrorism might be Catholic, far-left, or far-right. We have already discussed both the liberal French and the socialist Russian revolutions, and the revolution of the Reformation. By the way, we can also call to mind the Baathist revolution — a revolution is going on inside the Islamic world as well. Nowhere did this happen without terror.

But at some point it exhausted itself.

Well, at some point the movement fizzles out. Everything is exhausted, nothing is eternal. You cannot make changes with the maximum exertion of force, and say that once and for all the changes are completed. Did the Marxists change the world? They changed it. Fundamentally? Fundamentally. Did they really change it forever? Nothing like that. In a century it fizzled out and turned into nothing. In general, we all understand that the world has changed so that they are not relevant. You can't do something once and for all. Anyway, others will come later and redo what you have done once it loses its meaning.

So then the Islamist project will also run out of steam?

In the form in which it exists now — yes, of course it will run out of steam. It will fizzle out in order to give impetus to a new project. Islam is part of history. That is, it's not something you can do once and for all. I have a mystical perception of history — history is the language in which God speaks to people. And you cannot settle things once and for all, you will be tested and tested and tested. You will go through these trials again and again until it is said to us about everyone, all of humanity: That's it, you've suffered enough, the end.

Interview by Irina Starodubrovskaya