



# Islam without Extremes: A Muslim Case for Liberty

By Mustafa Akyol

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**“A delightfully original take on...the prospects for liberal democracy in the broader Islamic Middle East.”?Matthew Kaminski, *Wall Street Journal***

As the Arab Spring threatens to give way to authoritarianism in Egypt and reports from Afghanistan detail widespread violence against U.S. troops and women, news from the Muslim world raises the question: Is Islam incompatible with freedom? In *Islam without Extremes*, Turkish columnist Mustafa Akyol answers this question by revealing the little-understood roots of political Islam, which originally included both rationalist, flexible strains and more dogmatic, rigid ones. Though the rigid traditionalists won out, Akyol points to a flourishing of liberalism in the nineteenth-century Ottoman Empire and the unique “Islamoliberal synthesis” in present-day Turkey. As he powerfully asserts, only by accepting a secular state can Islamic societies thrive. *Islam without Extremes* offers a desperately needed intellectual basis for the reconcilability of Islam and liberty.

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## **Islam without Extremes: A Muslim Case for Liberty** By Mustafa Akyol Bibliography

- Sales Rank: #279207 in Books
- Brand: imusti
- Published on: 2013-11-04
- Original language: English
- Number of items: 1
- Dimensions: 8.30" h x .90" w x 5.50" l, .66 pounds
- Binding: Paperback
- 368 pages

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### Editorial Review

#### Review

"Akyol is doing important work that should have an impact well beyond his native Turkey." (Doug Bandow - American Spectator)

"Starred Review. Informative at every turn." (Kirkus Reviews)

#### From the Author

Beyond the two **extremes** that haunted the Muslim world, **secular authoritarianism** versus **Islamic authoritarianism**, there is a third, and promising, way: **Islamic liberalism**.

#### From the Inside Flap

Early on a cold January morning in 1981, Mustafa Akyol, then eight-years-old, accompanied his mother to the suburbs of Ankara, Turkey. Together they were visiting Akyol's father, an outspoken journalist held prisoner in the country's military barracks. The Turkish military had seized power, and those, like Akyol's father, who respected Islam were jailed. It was a period of crushing authoritarianism in the name of a secular state.

This experience stayed with Akyol as he finished his studies and became a well-respected journalist and political commentator in Turkey. He continued to wonder: Could the authoritarian regimes in Muslim countries derive not from Islam but from the deep-seated political cultures and social structures endemic to that part of the world? How else to explain the presence of authoritarianism in a secular state, like Turkey, as well as in "Islamic" states such as Iran or Saudi Arabia?

To answer these questions, Akyol, a devout Muslim, turned to both the Qur'an and a diverse array of historical and contemporary scholarship to trace the roots of liberty and tyranny in the world of Islam. In accessible and searching prose, Akyol begins at the very genesis of the religion. According to Akyol's interpretation, the death of Prophet Muhammed in the seventh century ushered in a "medieval war of ideas". Some Islamic schools of thought defended reason, freewill, and pluralism. Others promoted a more rigid and dogmatic interpretation of the faith. As the latter camp triumphed, because of the powerful classes of the Orient, a less rational and more static mindset began to shape the region. The more trade declined, Akyol argues, the more the Muslim mind stagnated.

After the 18th century, the ruling elites of the Ottoman Empire, eager to modernize, imported liberal ideas along with institutions from the West, gradually leading to a dawn of "Islamic liberalism." But Akyol's historical survey demonstrates that even these valuable efforts to effect change continued as a top-down process in which the majority of the society remained uninvolved. The way to liberal reform was also tragically blocked by the stasis inherent in the socialist and statist models toward which the Muslim world was mistakenly driven in the 20th century.

Yet Akyol finds an important exception in contemporary Turkey. There, a nascent Muslim middle class is reinterpreting religion with a more modern mindset. Slowly, the Turkish people are embracing liberal thought and speaking out for all freedoms. The stage is set for "an experiment unprecedented in the history

of Islamdom."

*ISLAM WITHOUT EXTREMES* makes the complex story of liberty in the Muslim world accessible and intriguing, while also putting forth provocative, religious arguments for a secular state, "freedom to sin," and freedom *from* Islam. With passion and clarity, Akyol synthesizes liberal ideas and Muslim faith as he powerfully points the way towards an Islam that can make peace with open society. Islam need not "secularize" itself, but rather, can coexist with religious, political, economic, and social freedoms.

Persuasive and inspiring, *ISLAM WITHOUT EXTREMES* is a desperately needed intellectual basis for the reconcilability of Islam and liberty

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