

Literature Review: The Clash of Values

Moaddel, Mansoor. 2020. *The Clash of Values: Islamic Fundamentalism Versus Liberal Nationalism*. New York: Columbia University Press.

The contemporary Middle East and North Africa have seen the rise of two competing ideologies. Liberal nationalism and support for secular politics have gained traction since the protests of the Arab Spring in 2011, but have also been met with a renewed surge of religious fundamentalism. In *A Clash of Values*, sociologist Mansoor Moaddel uses his decades of experience to gather empirical evidence on the factors that drive people to support these conflicting values. He highlights the role that social discourse, the human agency of subalterns, and various factors such as age and education play in the shift towards either liberal nationalism or Islamic fundamentalism. Moaddel argues that the institutionalization of liberal democratic discourse in everyday society, which has been recently initiated by the Arab Spring, is an essential step in the transitions towards stable democracies in the Middle East.

Rather than focusing on intellectual leaders or politicians in his research, Moaddel takes an alternative approach by assessing the value orientations of the general public to avoid oversimplifications and stereotypes often present in other studies on social change. In attempts to make sense of the differences in development between Western societies and the rest of the world, prior research tends to categorize countries into different phases of a single, universal process of development. Moaddel contradicts this, emphasizing that social change is not an inevitable outcome, but a result of “people’s attempts to resolve the specific issues they

collectively encounter” (Moaddel 2020, 7). Moaddel’s study reflects this perspective by using panel data from a wide range of participants in Egypt, Iraq, Lebanon, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Tunisia, and Turkey to analyze the “extent of social support for liberal value and religious fundamentalism and the variation in this support by age, gender, and education” (35).

In chapter two, Moaddel measures expressive individualism, or the “recognition of an individual’s private judgment about and ability to decide matters related to their lives” (39), emphasizing this as one of the foundations of liberal democracy. His study assesses respondents’ support for three specific, non-political issues that focus on how people express their individuality: preference for love as a more important basis for marriage than parental authority, endorsement of a woman’s right to dress how she wants, and preference for imagination and independence rather than obedience as favorable qualities for children. The results showed that support for expressive individualism was highest among members of the youth bulge (18-29) and educated citizens.

Moaddel’s findings align with the data in chapter 7, where the majority of participants in the Arab Spring were youth, and the index of liberal values was positively linked to participation in Tunisia and Egypt. These regional trends provide evidence for the idea that the Arab Spring has ushered in a “new cultural episode” in the region (228). The majority of the educated youth show higher levels of support for liberalism, indicating cognitive liberation and, in the case of the Arab Spring, insurgency. The unique features of the Arab Spring are the rebellion and subsequent upheaval it sparked across the entire Middle East. The spread of liberal ideas triggered a shift in the prevailing discourse; when asked if society would benefit from politics

and religion being separated, the percentage of Egyptian respondents who agreed increased from 54% to 83% between 2011 and 2016. To ensure lasting change, Moaddel asserts that leaders and organizations must work to instill liberal values into daily conversations, “bringing together diverse groups and social forces in harmony against the ruling religious fundamentalist regimes” (251).

The Clash of Values takes one of the most debated questions in the contemporary MENA region and frames it through a largely unexplored lens – the lens of the subaltern. By providing thorough, empirical evidence mapping the current state of the Middle East in terms of its various stances on liberal nationalism and religious fundamentalism, Moaddel provides research is essential to understanding the events and commonalities that led countries towards one or the other. But more importantly, as Moaddel notes, this research is key in predicting the future of Middle Eastern countries. He identifies the broader shift in values across the region, pinpointing the Arab Spring as the triggering event, while still acknowledging the unique contexts of each nation. Future research should expand upon Moaddel’s initial study, taking into account the various circumstances, the prominent discourse, and the degree of cooperation between intellectual leaders and the subaltern populations within each nation. By balancing sociopolitical nuances with broader, cross-national patterns, *A Clash of Values* provides compelling evidence for the ideological shift towards liberal nationalism across the Middle East.