

Beyond the clichés

Michael Thumann argues for new perceptions of Turkey and its neighbours

Michael Thumann, Der Islam-Irrtum. Europas Angst vor der muslimischen Welt, (The Islam Error. Europe's fear of the Muslim world), Eichborn, Frankfurt am Main 2011.

Michael Thuman, Istanbul-based Middle East correspondent of the German weekly “Die Zeit”, published his book “The Islam Error” immediately after the revolutions in Tunisia and Egypt in early 2011. In his book he describes current political and social constellations in countries of the eastern and southern Mediterranean and the Persian Gulf, hence of states and societies often subsumed under the label of “the Islamic world”. Thuman combines analysis with journalistic reports and features, with observations and talks in Turkey, Iran, Iraq, Lebanon, Egypt, Saudi-Arabia, Bahrain, the United Arab Emirates and Morocco. The common theme running through the book is one basic message: The fixation of large parts of Western media publics on religion and culture obstructs an understanding of political and social processes in these countries.

Thuman tries to cure what he describes the Western “obsession with Islam” through a perspective that follows the categories of political and social analysis - the categories of power, interests and conflict dynamics. In the case of Egypt he argues that the Western perception of the Muslim Brotherhood exaggerated its power and unity. Many in the West were in his view deluded by Mubarak’s efforts to present the movement as a bogie and convince Western governments that his dictatorship was necessary to prevent a radical Islamist take-over, a strategy also used by other authoritarian Arab regimes.

Thumann expects that under freer conditions the diversity and discrepancy of voices in the Brotherhood and other Islamist movements will become increasingly visible. He postulates that reformers inside the movements will benefit from a democratic process more than orthodox fractions, since success can now be achieved through political participation, and moral rigidity alone will not be enough anymore to convince followers. Freedom, Thumann suggests, will lead to a differentiation of Islamist movements. He refers to Turkey as a main example and describes the Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan as an “alarmingly successful renegade” in the eyes of the archconservatives inside the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood.

In this respect Thumann sees Turkey as a model, albeit he calls the country an “uncompleted democracy”. He describes an internally polarized society divided in a conflict between an established elite and ascending population groups represented by the Justice and Development Party, AKP. Although under the government of the AKP the country has made impressive progress towards democratization, not least because the EU accession conditions were in line with the interests of the social climbers from Anatolia, the country is far from crossing the finishing line. Thumann sees the main obstacle of further democratization in an exaggerated centralism rooted in a fear of disintegration and in mistrust against parts of the population. When it comes to the country’s governance, the political powerlessness of regions, districts and cities and their lack of own financial resources is striking, writes Thumann, considering Turkey’s economic, political and cultural diversity.

In Thumann’s eyes a further problem is associated with centralism: The missing counterbalance to the Prime Minister and the President. Even though the AKP grew as an opposition to the way power was exercised through the traditional political elites, Thuman’s sees its functionaries meanwhile growing into the old institutions instead of changing them. For Thumann this is visible in conflicts with free media, in harsh police operations against protesters, in a political instrumentalisation of the judiciary, in a rigid policy towards the Armenians and Cyprus, in provocative rhetoric towards the Kurds and in the preferential treatment of industrial corporations affiliated with the government. The decisive question with regard to a new Turkish constitution is for Thumann, if the Justice and Development Party is ready for any mode of power sharing.

Seen through the glasses of religion, Thumann writes, related conflicts are hardly understandable. In Turkey, but also in states like Iran, Lebanon or the Palestinian areas, nationalism remains the major mobilizing ideology, and religion is a surface phenomenon at most, serving as a legitimization in classical power struggles. According to him the main political conflicts in these countries would exist without Islam in quite a similar way.

Since parts of the elites in the EU and the US are being trapped in an “obsession with Islam”, distorted perceptions influence their strategies. For Thumann this is one reason why Turkey’s EU accession process got stuck. He calls it a “historical misfortune” that after accession talks started two major door openers for Turkey, German Chancellor Gerhard Schröder and French President Jacques Chirac, left the European scene. Since that time especially in France and Germany perceptions of Turkey being part of a non-European Islamic culture have gained ground: “The way European politicians treated Turkey’s accession bid is a classic example for

identity ideologists hijacking a central issue for European politics.” Moreover, the admission of the Republic of Cyprus before settling the Cyprus conflict, a step Thumann calls “foolish”, obstructed further progress as well as a stagnation of reforms in Turkey since 2006.

For Thumann Europe’s clash-of-culture-ideologists resemble the very Islamist fundamentalists they warn against in one important point: Both are longing for simple pictures of a complicated reality. In no way, writes Thumann, is the culture struggle a natural fate – it can only be inflamed by those on both sides that hope to profit from the demonization of the other.

In his conclusion Thumann names seven “cardinal errors” of US and European Middle East policies: The support of dictators for the sake of political stability, the view of countries like Egypt, Saudi Arabia or Jordan as “moderate” as opposed to Iran or Syria, the policy of non-communication against the Muslim Brotherhood and Islamist parties, that lead to a lack of information on these groupings, the “wars on terror” in Afghanistan and Iraq, the demonization of Muslims, a “fortress mentality” reflected in European and American visa policies and the European fear of enlargement that has led to a loss of the EU’s credibility.

Thumann’s book is one of a whole array of publications released in the past months in the German-speaking countries that deal critically with the influence of anti-Muslim resentments on politics. The peculiarity of Thumann’s book lies in his ability to confront the biased and simplistic perspective with a colourful account of the empirical reality in Mediterranean and Mid-Eastern societies, their conflicts and the processes of social and political change.

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