

Are Muslims Fatalists?

“According to God, your age is written on your forehead.”
— An Arabic proverb

“Sit on a beehive and say this is fate.”
— Another Arabic proverb¹

by Daniel Pipes

After a building crane fell into Mecca’s Grand Mosque on Sept. 11, 2015, killing 114 and injuring 394, the mosque’s Imam Abdul Rahman al-Sudais visited the injured and, as he met each one, told them, “This is God’s will.”²

Likewise, in February 2004, after a stampede killed at least 244 *hajjis* (pilgrims) in Mina, a town near Mecca, Saudi hajj minister Iyad Madani oxymoronicly responded: “All precautions were taken to prevent such an incident, but this is God’s will.”³

And, when in July 1990, pilgrims fell from a bridge over the crowded al-Mu‘aysim Passageway, a panic ensued, and about 1,400 *hajjis* lost their lives, King Fahd (r. 1982-2005) neither assumed responsibility for the bridge’s faulty construction nor apologized to the families. Instead, he attributed the event to “God’s irresistible will.”⁴



Despite repeated deadly stampedes and other disasters during the annual Muslim pilgrimage to Mecca, every year, thousands continue to make the journey. Many critics say that the Saudi government should do more to prevent such tragedies, but Saudis have often responded by referring to “God’s will.”

¹ Quoted by [Robert Fisk](#) in *The Independent* (London), June 18, 2000; Halim Barakat, “Beyond the Always and the Never: A Critique of Social Psychological Interpretations of Arab Society and Culture,” in Hisham Sharabi, ed., *Theory, Politics and the Arab World: Critical Responses* (New York: Routledge, 1990), pp. 147-50; idem, *The Arab World: Society, Culture, and State* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), pp. 191-4.

² [Associated Press](#), September 13, 2015.

³ *The Washington Post*, Feb. 1, 2004.

⁴ Saudi Press Agency, July 3, 1990.

Saudi and Iranian Views

These Saudi leaders responded as fatalists—meaning those who wait for change to take place “without doing anything to bring about such change” or believing that what will be must be, regardless of what a person does about it. They precisely fit the Muslim belief in *maktub* (Arabic for “It is written”) and *qisma* (Arabic for “fate foreordained by God”⁵ or “the portion of fate, good or bad, specifically allotted to and destined for each man”).⁶

It bears noting that fatalism is mainly used negatively, only explaining what is un-wished for. “It is written” justifies farmers failing to prepare for drought, parents for polio, or merchants for fire. However, Saudi officials do not invoke God’s will to explain, say, the abundance of inexpensive-to-extract oil reserves on their territory.

But official Saudi fatalism does not end the story. Iran’s no less pious leaders dismissed this fatalism with bitter scorn. “This is not the will of God,” President Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani responded to Fahd; yes, an earthquake fits the description of “God’s irresistible will” but not the collapse of a man-made bridge.⁷ The head of Iran’s judiciary, Ayatollah Mohammed Yazdi, mocked Fahd’s statement while Iranian media competed in scoffing at the Saudi authorities. *Kayhan International* pointed to criminal intent behind the event, calling it “not an accident but a pogrom,”⁸ and asked whether the tragedy was the will of God or that of the Great Satan (i.e., the U.S. government).⁹ An editorial in the newspaper

Resalat, echoing traditional Shiite resentment of Sunnis, ridiculed the whole notion of fatalism:

Fahd has attributed an incident stemming from his impiety, incapacity, and inefficiency to “divine will,” saying that “they were very fortunate to have died in this holy place, for their hour had come and they could have died in an unholy place (!).” This reminds one of the “fatalism” in the philosophy concocted by the clergymen of the royal courts to justify the crimes perpetrated by corrupt Muslim leaders throughout 1,400 years [of Muslim history].¹⁰

In the Iranian leadership’s reading, then, fatalism is a tool concocted by self-interested Muslim despots, not something inherent to the religion.

Responding to these attacks, a Saudi government spokesman feebly retorted: “Has any human being since the creation been able to prevent a time of death willed by God and engraved on the eternal tablet? It was God’s will. His judgment and decision cannot be warded off.”¹¹ The Saudis even asserted that those seeking a human explanation for the bridge disaster “do not believe in God’s will.”¹²

This antagonism among two Muslim-majority countries with Islamist rulers raises a broader question: Are Muslims recognizably more fatalistic than non-Muslim? Or is fatalism just a convenient excuse, as Tehran claims, “to justify crimes”? Or perhaps, it is an Orientalist stereotype?

⁵ Hans Wehr, *A Dictionary of Modern Written Arabic* (Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 1974), p. 763. The Qur’an does not use the word *qisma* in the sense of “fate.”

⁶ *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 2nd ed., s.v. “qisma.”

⁷ Radio Tehran, July 4, 1990.

⁸ *Kayhan International* (Tehran), July 9, 1990.

⁹ *Ibid.*, July 7, 1990.

¹⁰ *Resalat* (Tehran), July 5, 1990. Punctuation as in the original. Fahd does not appear to have uttered the sentence attributed to him here.

¹¹ Saudi Press Agency, July 9, 1990.

¹² *The Independent* (London), July 12, 1990.

Philosophical and Theological Debate

The question of man's control over his destiny has been a topic of philosophical debate since ancient Greece. The dilemma goes like this: If humans have the ability to make decisions, this diminishes God's universal powers. But if God makes all decisions, humans have no responsibility for their own deeds, negating such concepts as justice and punishment.

This controversy flourished in the classical Islamic period when leading philosophical and theological minds took it up.¹³ Two main Islamic schools of thought emerged: the Qadariya arguing for free will and the Jabriya holding that God acts through man, and the individual has no say.¹⁴ In its most radical form (forwarded by an early sect named the Jahmiya), the latter approach holds that humans act "only metaphorically, as the sun 'acts' in setting."¹⁵ The historian Bernard Lewis reprises this argument with an analogy:

In the great debate among medieval Muslim theologians on the question of predestination or free will, [chess and backgammon] sometimes served as symbols and prototypes. Is life a

Two main Islamic schools of thought emerged, one arguing for free will and one holding that God acts through man, and the individual has no say.

game of chess, where the player has a choice at every move, where skill and foresight can bring him success? Or is it

rather backgammon, where a modicum of skill may speed or delay the result, but where the final outcome is determined by the repeated throw of the dice?¹⁶

Researcher As'ad Abu Khalil notes that "there never was a monolithic view of predestination and free will in Islam. In fact, this very question regarding the responsibility of God and of people for actions lies at the heart of many schisms in Islamic thought."¹⁷

This debate continues today,¹⁸ spawning a substantial secondary literature. For example, one book analyzes the narrow topic of "the concept of fate in the Arab world as reflected in modern Arabic literature."¹⁹ But this dispute is not the topic here. Rather, the question is: Are Muslims more fatalistic than non-Muslims?

¹³ Helmer Ringgren, "Islamic Fatalism," in Helmer Ringgren, ed., *Fatalistic Beliefs in Religion, Folklore, and Literature* (Stockholm: Almqvist and Wiksell, 1967), pp. 52-62; Maria De Cillis, *Free Will and Predestination in Islamic Thought: Theoretical Compromises in the Works of Avicenna, al-Ghazali and Ibn 'Arabi* (Oxford: Routledge, 2013).

¹⁴ W. Montgomery Watt, *Free Will and Predestination in Early Islam* (London: Luzac, 1948).

¹⁵ W. Montgomery Watt, *The Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 2d ed., s.v. "Djahmiyya."

¹⁶ Bernard Lewis, *The Middle East: A Brief History of the Last 2,000 Years* (New York: Scribner, 1996), p. 16.

¹⁷ As'ad Abu Khalil, "Al-Jabriyyah in the Political Discourse of Jamal 'Abd al-Nasir and Saddam Husayn: The Rationalization of Defeat," *The Muslim World*, July-Oct. 1994, p. 241.

¹⁸ Ulrich Schoen, *Determination und Freiheit im arabischen Denken heute: eine christliche Reflexion im Gespräch mit Naturwissenschaften und Islam* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1976); Mohammad M. al-Sha'rawi, *Fate and Predestination*, trans. Aisha Abdurrahman Bewley (London: Dar al-Taqwa, 1994).

¹⁹ Dalya Cohen-Mor, *A Matter of Fate: The Concept of Fate in the Arab World as Reflected in Modern Arabic Literature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001).

Finding Fatalism

Many modern non-Muslims observed that Muslims believe in an unchangeable destiny mapped out in advance. Some distinguished examples:

In 1810, Louis de Corancez, a French traveler to Arabia, wrote that Orientals “are always content with their present state” due to their quality of “absolute resignation,” which he found to be the “distinctive quality” of their character.²⁰ Writing in 1836, the great English ethnographer of Egypt, Edward Lane, found something similar:



The British found belief in predestination so distinctively Muslim that a word of Arabic-Persian-Turkish origins, kismet, was first adopted in English in 1849 to mean “fate, fortune.” The 1953 Broadway musical Kismet, set in a fictional Baghdad, tells of poets and caliphs. The lyrics of one song lament: “Fate! Fate can be a trap in our path/ The bitter cup of your tears/Your wine of wrath.”

Influenced by their belief in predestination, the men display, in times of distressing uncertainty, an exemplary patience, and, after any afflicting event, a remarkable degree of resignation and fortitude, approaching nearly to apathy. ... While the Christian justly blames himself for every untoward event, which he thinks he has brought upon himself, or might have avoided, the Muslim enjoys a remarkable serenity of mind in all the vicissitudes of life. ... The same belief in predestination renders the Muslim utterly devoid of presumption with regard to his future actions, or to any future events.²¹

So distinctively Muslim did the British find belief in predestination that a word of Arabic-Persian-Turkish origins, *kismet*, was first adopted in English in 1849 to mean “fate, fortune.”²²

The magisterial *Catholic Encyclopedia* of 1907-12 explained that the Muslim concept of God, plus the “Oriental tendency to belittle the individuality of man,” led to an Islamic “theory of predestination approximating towards fatalism.” It asserted that orthodox Islam holds that “all good and evil actions and events take place by the eternal decrees of God.”²³

²⁰ Louis Alexandre Olivier de Corancez, *Histoire des wahabis; depuis leur origine jusqu’à la fin de 1809* (Paris: Chez Crapart, 1810), trans. by Eric Taber as *The History of the Wahabis from Their Origin until the End of 1809* (Reading, Eng.: Garnet, 1995), p. 122. See also, pp. 24, 33.

²¹ Edward William Lane, *Manners and Customs of the Modern Egyptians* (London: Dent, 1966; first published in 1860), p. 291.

²² *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. “kismet.”

²³ [*The Catholic Encyclopedia: An International Work of Reference on the Constitution, Doctrine, Discipline, and History of the Catholic Church*](#) (New York: Robert Appleton, 1909), vol. 5, s.v. “fatalism.”

Later British soldiers and administrators dealing with Muslims perceived fatalism as a fact of life and factored this into their actions.

- Winston Churchill, reflecting his experience in Sudan, wrote in 1899 that Islam involves a “fearful fatalistic apathy. The effects are apparent in many countries. Improvident habits, slovenly systems of agriculture, sluggish methods of commerce, and insecurity of property exist wherever the followers of the Prophet rule or live.”²⁴
- T.E. Lawrence, the British hero of World War I and author of *Seven Pillars of Wisdom*, found that Arabs “had accepted the gift of life unquestioningly, as axiomatic. To them it was a thing inevitable, entailed on man, a usufruct, beyond control.”²⁵
- The British Foreign Office drew up a memorandum in 1951 to explain why Iranians insisted, against all reason, that their oil industry should fall under Iranian control. The memo explained: “Often, after finding the world does not answer their



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dreams, they relapse into indolence and do not persevere in any attempt to bring their ideas into focus with reality. This tendency is exaggerated by the fatalism of their religion.”²⁶

Americans who ran the Saudi oil concession, a near-colonial setup in its mid-twentieth-century heyday, also discerned fatalism, as echoed by the historian Anthony Cave Brown: “These Arabs were lured to work for Aramco not through any desire to improve their destinies. They believed their lot in life was already determined by Allah.”²⁷

²⁴ Winston Churchill, *The River War* (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1899), vol. II, pp. 248-50.

²⁵ T. E. Lawrence, *Seven Pillars of Wisdom: A Triumph* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, Doran and Co., 1935), pp. 38-9.

²⁶ “Paper on the Persian Social and Political Scene,” quoted in Ervand Abrahamian, *Khomeinism: Essays on the Islamic Republic* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), p. 115.

²⁷ Anthony Cave Brown *Oil, God, and Gold: The Story of Aramco and the Saudi Kings* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1999), p. 147.

Specialists before 1980 or so concurred. Hilma Granqvist, a Finnish anthropologist, wrote in 1947 that Muslims believe that in “small things as in great, man is absolutely subject to Fate.”²⁸ G.E. von Grunebaum, the great orientalist, put the same idea in his orotund Germanic style:

“The ubiquitous phrase ‘in sh’Allah’ (God willing) becomes an excuse for taking no initiative whatsoever.”

the Muslim deeply feels man’s insignificance, the uncertainty of his fate, and the omnipotence of the uncontrollable power above him. Therefore, perhaps, he is more readily prepared than the Westerner to accept the accomplished fact.²⁹

Morroe Berger, an American social scientist, generalized that Arabs acquiesce “in what has been ordained by God and cemented by tradition.”³⁰ Raphael Patai, an Israeli anthropologist, explained: “Whatever man is or does and whatever happens to him is directly willed by Allah”; as a result, “Muslim fatalism ... makes people averse to any effort directed toward seeking betterment.”³¹

Self-identified Christians continue to espouse this view. Pat Robertson, the media mogul and one-time candidate for U.S. president, finds “tremendous fatalism in Islam, that in a sense Allah set things up and let them go. And the whole concept of Kismet or fate or

it’s the will of Allah ... You’ve got flies in your face; it’s the will of Allah. A child is hungry; it’s the will of Allah.”³² David B. Burrell, a Christian

theologian, is impressed by Muslims’ palpable sense of the presence of God:

God the Provider, to whom we are enjoined to give thanks by our actions on behalf of others. We are never to forget that our life comes forth each moment from the hand of God, and our destiny as well. This latter can easily spawn a form of ‘fatalism,’ where the ubiquitous phrase ‘in sh’Allah’ (‘God willing’) becomes an excuse for taking no initiative whatsoever.³³

Western popular culture occasionally references Muslim fatalism. Famed mystery writer Agatha Christie lived for years in Iraq with her archeologist husband and, in a 1951 novel, described the Iraqi disposition: “Not to worry over the chances of success or failure ... throw responsibility on the All Merciful, the All Wise.” She also noted “the calmness and the fatalism” that results.³⁴ The 1953 Broadway musical *Kismet* tells of poets and caliphs. A Seattle-based music group calls itself *Maktub*.³⁵

Middle Eastern Christians discern fatalism among their Muslim neighbors.

²⁸ Hilma Granqvist, *Birth and Childhood among the Arabs: Studies in a Muhammadan Village in Palestine* (Helsinki: Söderström, 1947), p. 177.

²⁹ G.E. von Grunebaum, *Islam: Essays in the Nature and Growth of a Cultural Tradition*, 2d ed. (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1961), p. 70.

³⁰ Morroe Berger, *The Arab World Today* (Garden City, N.Y.: Anchor, 1964), p. 156.

³¹ Raphael Patai, *The Arab Mind* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1976), pp. 148, 310.

³² Pat Robertson, speaking on *The 700 Club*, Oct. 20 1994, compiled by People for the American Way, Washington, D.C.

³³ David B. Burrell, “The Pillars of Islamic faith: What We Should Know and Why,” *Commonweal*, Jan. 31, 1997.

³⁴ Agatha Christie, *They Came to Baghdad* (London: Fontana, 1954), p. 34.

³⁵ Gene Johnson, “[Seattle’s Maktub is movin’ on up](#),” July 19, 2003. For more information, see [maktub.com](#).

Henry Habib-Ayrout, a Jesuit and anthropologist, observed in 1952 that Egypt's peasant mentality "is of a fatalistic and static order" and permits the peasant not to be active.³⁶ The sociologist Sania Hamady observes that "the Arab manifests a dominating belief in the influence of predestination and fatalism." She draws direct implications from this for daily life since "human responsibility for failure and success is relegated mainly to God, the individual does not feel impelled to work in order to obtain his worldly aims." As a result,

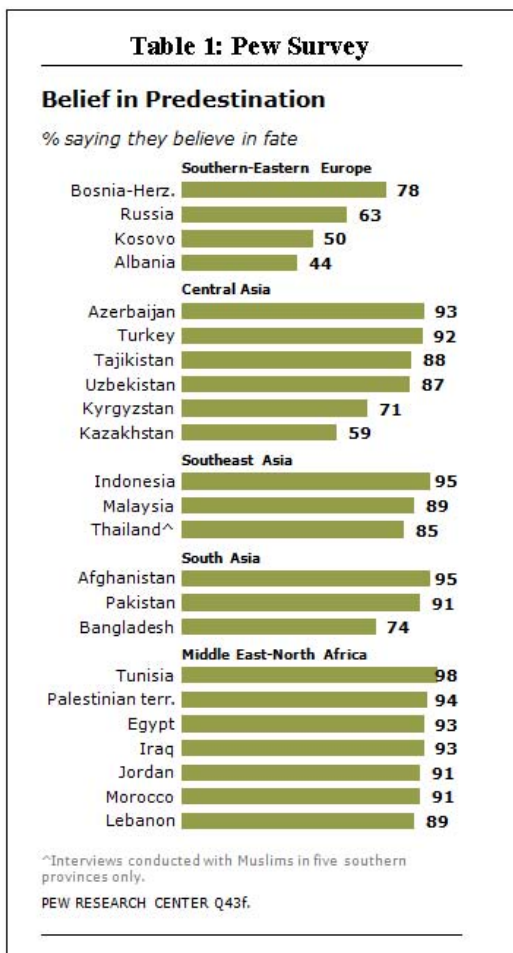
she concludes that "the average Arab has an outlook on life that is utterly improvident."³⁷

Some Muslim scholars also perceive fatalism. Iranian economist Jahangir Amuzegar discerns a "fatalistic streak in the Persian psyche" and historian Homa Katouzian writes of Iran's "unimaginable fatalism."³⁸ Kanan Makiya, an Iraqi social scientist, finds that an "extreme fatalism ... may be a characteristic of Islamic culture generally."³⁹

Survey Research Finds Fatalism

Survey research confirms these views. In a poll of 347 American Muslims, 33 percent agreed with the statement, "Everything in life is determined by God"; 38 percent with "God allows man to have some free choice in life"; and only 29 percent with "God gives man total free choice."⁴⁰ The Pew Foundation in 2012 asked Muslims in twenty-three countries ranging from Bosnia to Indonesia, "Do you believe: in predestination or fate (Kismet/Qadar)?" and found widespread fatalism:

Predestination, or fate, is ...
widely embraced by Muslims



³⁶ Henry Habib-Ayrout, *Fellahs d'Egypte* (Cairo: Editions du Sphynx, 1952), p. 170.

³⁷ Sania Hamady, *Temperament and Character of the Arabs* (New York: Twayne, 1960), pp. 185, 213, 187.

³⁸ Jahangir Amuzegar, *The Dynamics of the Iranian Revolution: The Pahlavis' Triumph and Tragedy* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1991), p. 91; Homa Katouzian, *The Political Economy of Modern Iran: Despotism and Pseudo-Modernism, 1926-1979* (New York: New York University Press, 1981), p. 65.

³⁹ Samir al-Khalil [pseud. of Kanan Makiya], *Republic of Fear: The Politics of Modern Iraq* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989), p. 100.

⁴⁰ Yvonne Yazbeck Haddad and Adair T. Lummis, *Islamic Values in the United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), p. 25.

around the globe. In 19 of the 23 countries where the question was asked, at least seven-in-ten Muslims say they believe in fate.⁴¹

In four of the five regions where the question was asked, a median of about 90 percent believe in fate. (See Table 1.)

In another study, a 2004 World Values Survey questionnaire shows Muslims to be more fatalistic than Christians though only marginally more so than the Greek Christian Orthodox but much more so than Protestants. (See Table 2).

Muslims Express Fatalism

Plenty of Muslims express fatalistic views. A few documented instances:

When an unkempt Saddam Hussein was captured by U.S. troops in December 2003 in an underground hole, a local supporter, Dhaif Rayhan Mahmoud, commented bitterly: “We Muslims only believe in fate. It was God’s will.”⁴² At the end of 2004, asked about the

persistent, random violence wracking his city, a Baghdadi money changer also offered a fatalistic approach: “We must continue to live normally because our destiny is in God’s hands. God alone will decide.”⁴³

Decades of water mismanagement left the Shatt al-Arab, the confluence of the Tigris and Euphrates rivers, an ecological disaster; among other problems, salt water from the Persian Gulf reaches further up the river than ever before. As the *New York Times* explains, this “has ravaged fresh-water fisheries, livestock, crops and groves of date palms that once made the area famous, forcing the migration of tens of thousands of farmers.” And how did the Iraqi government respond to this man-made catastrophe? “We can’t control what God does,” said the deputy director of water resources in Basra, sounding rather like an insurance appraiser.⁴⁴

Fatalism, not surprisingly, is widespread in war conditions. An American Muslim about to join the mujahideen in Bosnia announced: “All our destinies are already written. Our time

Table 2: 2004 World Values Survey*

National Religion	Mean	Median	Standard Deviation	N
Muslim	4.02	4	2.807	19,726
Muslim (E. Europe)	3.90	4	2.771	3,912
Greek Orthodox	3.84	4	2.547	8,857
Catholic	2.86	3	2.288	32,640
Protestant	2.53	2	1.845	7,303

* Survey’s results summarized by sociologist Gabriel A. Acevedo

41 *The World’s Muslims: Unity and Diversity*, Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life, Washington, D.C., Aug. 9, 2012, p. 41.

42 Associated Press, [Dec. 16, 2003](#).

43 Agence France-Presse, Dec. 31, 2004; *Middle East Online* (London), [Dec. 31, 2004](#).

44 *The New York Times*, [June 12, 2010](#).

of death is already written as well.”⁴⁵ The conductor on an Algerian train often attacked by Islamist rebels when asked if he feared for his life replied: “We Muslims believe in destiny. So whether we die in our beds or on this train, it’s all the same in the end.”⁴⁶ Fatih Çoban, 33, a private security guard, was riding a subway in Istanbul when a metal rod, probably from a construction site, seriously injured him, piercing his body and spearing his hips. The family will not seek a legal remedy against the subway authorities because, his father explained, “This is God’s will. Whatever is written in your fate will happen to you.”⁴⁷

Fatalism has obvious allure for those engaged in shameful or embarrassing activities. A Muslim salesman for a beer factory in Egypt is asked how he reconciles his work with his religion: “What can I do? Everything is written in advance, and God assigned me to work here.”⁴⁸ Few Muslim homosexuals take seriously the threat of AIDS and other sexually transmitted diseases, one learns; their usual thinking is, “We don’t care. Life and death are in the hands of God.”⁴⁹ “Heroin is written in my fate,” said a Pakistan addict, a needle in his arm and a prayer cap on his head. “No one

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can change the decree of fate.”⁵⁰

Muslims living in the West also express these sentiments. A Turkish student in Paris casually refers to herself as a “fatalist.”⁵¹ In the aftermath of an EgyptAir crash off New York, Imam Ghazi Khankan of the Islamic Center of Westbury, N.Y., said that as Muslims, “We are ordered to be patient as much as possible from the moment we are born. God knows when we are going to die. It is not a punishment, it is fate.”⁵² Whereas Christian prisoners in Switzerland, reports Fr. Alain René Arbez, try to understand what landed them in jail, Muslims “usually respond in a fatalist way because everything that happens is wished for by God.”⁵³

Scholars Do Not Find Fatalism

Despite this bulk of evidence, contemporary scholars of the Middle East overwhelmingly disagree with the notion of Muslims being disproportionately fatalistic. The historian R. Stephen Humphreys disparages those “European commentators in the early twentieth century” who

dwelled on the resignation and passivity of Muslim societies, the dispirited effort simply to maintain the institutions and values essential to an Islamic way

⁴⁵ Muzaffar Haleem and Betty Bowman, *The Sun Is Rising in the West: New Muslims Tell about Their Journey to Islam* (Beltsville, Md.: Amana, 1420/1999), p. 29.

⁴⁶ *The New York Times*, Mar. 13, 1999.

⁴⁷ *Today's Zaman* (Istanbul), Sept. 29, 2014.

⁴⁸ Karim El-Gawhary, “Religious Ferment(ation),” *Middle East Report*, Summer 1999, p. 15.

⁴⁹ Stephen O. Murray and Will Roscoe, eds., *Islamic Homosexualities: Culture, History, and Literature* (New York: New York University Press, 1997), p. 274.

⁵⁰ *The New York Times*, Apr. 19, 2000.

⁵¹ Quoted in Herbert Mason, *Memoir of a Friend: Louis Massignon* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1988), p. 65.

⁵² Associated Press, Oct. 31, 1999.

⁵³ Abbé Alain René Arbez, “Detenus Musulmans Dans Les Prisons Suisses: (Le Constat D’un Aumônier Catholique),” Commission of the Conference of Swiss Bishops for Migrants, Mar. 31, 2000.

of life, which they perceived among Muslim peoples. Absurd as it now seems, for many decades the most influential foreign “experts” asserted that Islam was inherently a religion of fatalism and lethargy, though of course it might be punctuated with unpredictable, brief, and irrational outbursts of violence.⁵⁴

In mid-1960s' Egypt, 90 percent of peasants believed a person's social position “is dependent on his own efforts.”

A survey conducted by Hani Fakhouri in Egypt in the mid-1960s may have been the first blow: He found 90 percent of peasants believed a person's social position “is dependent on his own efforts” and only 10 percent thought it “the result of God's will.”⁵⁵ Marcia C. Inhorn, an anthropologist who studied Egypt's urbanites, finds that

just because life is “written,” human beings are not passive creatures, devoid of volition and will. God expects human beings to exercise their minds and to make choices, including decisions about how to lead their lives.⁵⁶

Olivier Roy writes about the ordinary Afghan:

Far from being imprisoned within the narrow confines of a religion

shot through with a sense of fatalism, the peasant finds in this same religion [Islam] a useful tool of analysis, a means of comparing one thing with another and of making sense of his own personal universe.⁵⁷

Islam: Gary S. Gregg, a professor of psychology, shreds the very notion of Islamic fatalism and its effect of breeding inaction and stalling development. He attributes this notion to Western diplomats and administrators in Muslim-majority countries who

vent their frustrations with the pace of progress at religious “fatalism,” which they view as a deep-seated cultural or psychological trait. At almost any capital city cocktail party or Peace Corps beer bash, a voice or two will rise above the murmur of chat and pronounce: “These people are so used to sitting around waiting for God to do things that they won't get up and help themselves.”

In other words, Gregg contends, Westerners wrongly interpret the “saturation of daily life with God's power,” something unfamiliar to most of them, as fatalism. He finds this alleged characteristic irrelevant to underdevelopment:

As most scholars recognize, Islam is remarkably flexible, and, like “honor,” it takes diverse forms within a region, a village, or even a single family. Like other religions, Islam can be

⁵⁴ R. Stephen Humphreys, *Between Memory and Desire: The Middle East in a Troubled Age* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), pp. 186-7.

⁵⁵ Hani Fakhouri, *Kafr el-Elow: An Egyptian Village in Transition* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1972), p. 41.

⁵⁶ Marcia C. Inhorn, *Infertility and Patriarchy: The Cultural Politics of Gender and Family Life in Egypt* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1996), p. 78.

⁵⁷ Olivier Roy, *Islam and Resistance in Afghanistan*, trans. by First Edition (Cambridge, Eng.: Cambridge University Press, 1986), p. 34.

invoked to advocate or oppose modernization, to justify or condemn violence, to indict an oppressive government or cloak it in legitimacy. Whether it mobilizes initiative or counsels resignation appears to depend mainly on the presence or absence of real opportunity.

Poetry of the time of Islam's development contained strong elements of fatalistic thinking.

fatalistic as the less Westernized population of Saudi Arabia. More broadly, he finds that, other than India, all countries

“show no statistically significant effects of being Muslim when compared to other religious groups in that particular country.”

From this, Acevedo concludes that no connection exists between fatalism and Islam. He offers two different (and conflicting) explanations: “What is mistaken for ‘Islamic fatalism’ may be best interpreted as a greater acceptance of central authority and a relinquishment of life’s outcomes to an omnipotent deity.” He concludes with a jargon-laden observation:

there is a need to re-conceptualize fatalism as a multidimensional cognitive orientation that includes both feelings of perceived personal control as well as culturally influenced orientations that look to cosmological forces as sources of mastery over life’s outcomes.⁵⁹

In other words, what gets labeled “fatalism” results not from faith but from political circumstances and a deep religious sensibility. Each is connected to overwhelming power: that of God over man or that of despots over subjects.

Islamic Religiosity as Cause

Poetry of the time indicates that the environment in which Islam developed contained strong elements of fatalistic

Gregg concludes that fatalism

plays no larger role in Islam than it does in Hinduism, Buddhism, Confucianism, or Christianity; nor is it any more a trait of Arabs than of any other peoples. And it no more retards development in the MENA [Middle East and North Africa] than it has in Asia.⁵⁸

History: Gabriel A. Acevedo, a sociologist, complains that “Islam has long been associated with a specific brand of extreme fatalism that is too often depicted as irrational and fanatical” and seeks to disprove this connection. He approaches the topic indirectly, asking if it is “possible to predict that the amount of Western influence on a country would affect levels of fatalism in that nation”; in other words, does fatalism go down under increased Western influence? He looks for answers in a couple of major polls; in his reading, they show an absence of correlation between modernity and fatalism. For example, Indonesian Christians show more fatalism in daily life than do Indonesian Muslims; the more Western-influenced population of Turkey is as

⁵⁸ Gary S. Gregg, *The Middle East: A Cultural Psychology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), pp. 30-3.

⁵⁹ Gabriel A. Acevedo, “[Islamic Fatalism and the Clash of Civilizations: An Appraisal of a Contentious and Dubious Theory](#),” *Social Forces*, 86 (2008): 1711-52.

thinking.⁶⁰ The concept of things being “written” existed before Muhammad’s time,⁶¹ and poetry contained allusions to the allotment that God makes to each human.⁶²

The Qur’an contains many fatalistic passages⁶³ as do many more *hadith* (statements and actions attributed to Muhammad).⁶⁴ A Qur’anic sampling:

Nor can a soul die except by God’s leave, the term being fixed as by writing. (3:145).

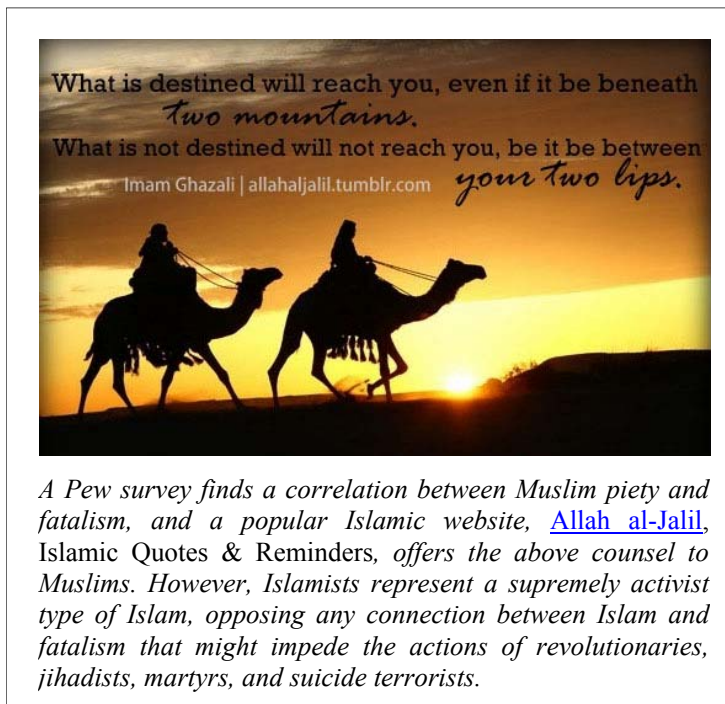
All people have a set term, and when the end of that term

approaches, they can neither delay it by a single moment, nor can they speed it up. (7:34)

Nothing will happen to us except what God has decreed for us. (9:51)

Those who believe, God will strengthen with a firm word, in this world and the hereafter; but the unjust he leads astray [in this world and the hereafter]. God does what he will. (14:27)

God guides those He pleases to guide. (28:56)



If We had willed it, We could have brought every soul its guidance. (32:13)

God allows to stray whom He wills and guides whom He wills. (35:8)

No misfortune can happen on earth or in your souls but is recorded in a book before We bring it into existence. (57:22)

But you do not will, except as God wills; for God is full of knowledge and wisdom. (76:30)

The German sociologist Max Weber perceived a direct connection between the Islamic emphasis on God’s omnipotence and His direct control over humans: “The Islamic belief in predestination easily assumed

fatalistic characteristics in the beliefs of the masses.”⁶⁵ The Pew survey finds a correlation between Muslim piety and fatalism:

⁶⁰ Helmer Ringgren, *Studies in Arabian Fatalism* (Uppsala: A.-B. Lundequistska, 1955).

⁶¹ Abu Khalil, “Al-Jabriyyah,” p. 242.

⁶² Ibid., p. 243.

⁶³ For a listing, see Saleh Soubhy, *Pèlerinage à la Mecque et à Médine* (Cairo: Imprimerie Nationale, 1894), p. 15.

⁶⁴ Abu Khalil, “Al-Jabriyyah,” p. 243.

⁶⁵ Max Weber, *Economy and Society: An Outline of Interpretive Sociology*, Guenther Roth and Claus Wittich, eds. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978), p. 575.

Belief in fate varies by level of religious commitment. In seven of the 23 countries where the question was asked, those who are more religiously committed are more likely to believe in fate. The prime example is Kosovo, where 59% of those who pray several times a day believe in predestination, compared with 36% of those who pray less often.⁶⁶

The Qur'an, other Islamic writings, and folk wisdom tilt toward fatalism but offer an inconsistent message.

fatalism that might impede the actions of revolutionaries, jihadis, martyrs, and suicide terrorists. Muzammil Siddiqi, a Los Angeles-based imam, explains:

We do not use the word "fate" in Islam. The word "fate" means "the power that determines the outcome of events before they occur." Some people believe in fate as an independent and invisible power that controls their destinies. Such people are called "fatalists." A Muslim is not a fatalist person. Muslims believe in Allah and only Allah has the power to predetermine anything.⁶⁷

In all, the Qur'an, other Islamic writings, and folk wisdom tilt toward fatalism but offer an inconsistent message.

Despotism as Cause

The Iranian statement about fatalism being a "philosophy concocted by the clergymen of the royal courts to justify the crimes perpetrated by corrupt Muslim leaders" has some truth, for rulers have exploited the fatalistic theme for their own ends: By discouraging initiative, fatalism makes their rule easier to maintain. Along these lines, the *American Colliers Encyclopedia* explains that fatalism results from "the theological emptiness that overtook Muslims in the wake of social and political decadence."⁶⁸

Other Qur'anic verses, however, contradict a fatalistic outlook by calling for personal responsibility:

God does not wrong people at all, but it is the people themselves who do wrong. (10:44)

God does not change the condition of a people until they change that which is in their souls. (13:11)

Do not the believers know, that if God pleased, He would guide all men? (13:31)

Similarly, Arabic proverbs often suggest a spirit that is anything but passive:

"Whoever toils will achieve."

"He who does not sow does not harvest."

"First think things out, then rely on God."

Islamists represent a supremely activist type of Islam. Of course, they vociferously oppose any connection between Islam and

⁶⁶ [The World's Muslims: Unity and Diversity](#), p. 61.

⁶⁷ "[Fate or Free Will, Nature or Nurture](#)," OnIslam.net (Doha), Aug. 16, 2003.

⁶⁸ *Colliers Encyclopedia* on CD-ROM, r.v. "kismet"; Encarta Encyclopedia, accessed 6/4/15, s.v. "[kismaayo](#)."

Fatalism was espoused by the first Muslim dynasty, the Umayyads, for whom it had the handy implication of discouraging rebellions against their authority. And so it stayed through the ages as rulers hoped that fatalistic notions would engender political passivity with regards to the challenges of life and the decisions by rulers. Abu Khalil observes how “attempts by Muslim/Arab leaders in the past and in contemporary Arab history to rationalize defeats and failures through resorts to pure *Jabriyyah* has become typical to the point of predictability.”⁶⁹

Their support gave this interpretation of the Qur’an enough momentum to prevail. Reviewing the history of fatalism, Abu Khalil notes, “While the history of Islamic thought witnessed a struggle between those who believed in free will and those who believed in the inescapability of fate ... the latter school become dominant by virtue of the political support it received from the various Islamic governments.”⁷⁰

Kismet came to denote in the Ottoman Empire, reports C.E. Bosworth in the *Encyclopedia of Islam*,

a general attitude of fatalism, the resigned acceptance of the blows and buffetings of destiny. ... The climate of popular belief in fate and chance is well seen in many stories of the *Thousand and One Nights* and in much of the Perso-Turkish moralistic literature.⁷¹

Modern rulers have found the language of fatalism no less useful, and they frequently invoke it. Gamal Abdel Nasser of Egypt regularly dismissed unpleasant developments as inescapable destiny even as he associated his



Modern rulers have found the language of fatalism useful, and they frequently employ it. In the aftermath of the terrible defeat of the Egyptian army in June 1967, President Gamal Abdel Nasser resorted to an Arabic proverb: “Precaution does not change the course of fate.”

own decisions with inescapable fate, so as to encourage acceptance to the one and discourage resistance to the other. In the aftermath of Israel’s routing of the Egyptian armed forces in June 1967, he resorted to an Arabic proverb (“Precaution does not change the course of fate”) and homely analogies (“Like a man who was hit in the street by a car”).⁷² With this, Nasser sought to absolve his government of blame and signal that it could have done none other than what it did. Likewise, after his defeat

⁶⁹ Abu Khalil, “Al-Jabriyyah,” p. 246.

⁷⁰ Ibid., pp. 243-4.

⁷¹ *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 2nd ed., “Kismet.”

⁷² Abu Khalil, “Al-Jabriyyah,” p. 247.

in 1967, King Hussein of Jordan remarked to his subjects,

If you were not rewarded with glory, it was not because you lacked courage, but because it is Allah's will.⁷³

When Saddam Hussein's conquest of Kuwait in 1990-91 ended in similar ignominy, he also reverted to such language, dramatically reversing decades of boisterous, secular assertions of control over one's destiny.⁷⁴ He apologetically explained why his diplomacy failed so badly and Iraqi forces faced so wide a coalition: "We may seem fatalistic in our view of many leaders in the world because we do not expect anything good from them in terms of humanitarian standards."⁷⁵ His spokesman Tariq Aziz described the outlook of Iraq's leadership (read: Saddam Hussein) as "fatalistic," suggesting even that this attitude might have been sincere.⁷⁶

Husni Mubarak responded in 2006 to the sinking of an Egyptian ferry boat, *Al Salam Boccaccio 98* and the drownings of more than a thousand of its approximately 1,400 passengers and crew by reminding Egyptians that they accept the hand of God. He also asked the

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Almighty to accept the drowned as martyrs.⁷⁷ The military ruler of Gambia, Yahya Jammeh, exhibited "an Islamic fatalism," and he routinely replied to questions about his in-

attention to stand for election with the statement, "It is in God's hands."⁷⁸

If these examples point to an instrumental use of fatalist rhetoric by leaders, other signs suggest they are sincere. This is highlighted especially in discussions of their own deaths: Saudi King Faisal believed, according to David Holden and Richard Johns, that "his death was preordained to the exact second the day appointed by Allah. That partly explained his contempt for security arrangements in general. He was irritated by guards whom he looked upon as an unnecessary encumbrance."⁷⁹ This lack of protection enabled his assassination by a relative in 1975.

Interestingly, this attitude can also extend to a Middle East Christian such as Boutros Boutros-Ghali, then Egypt's minister of state for foreign affairs. Warned in August 1979 that Palestinians would try to kill him, he replied by asserting his belief that "the date of a man's death is written," and he could do nothing about it.⁸⁰ Yasser Arafat used similar language when speaking about his death: "When my turn will

⁷³ Michael B. Oren, *Six Days of War: June 1967 and the Making of the Modern Middle East* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), p. 310.

⁷⁴ Abu Khalil, "Al-Jabriyyah," pp. 249-55.

⁷⁵ Saddam Hussein, meeting with papal representative Cardinal Achille Silvestrini, May 3, 1993, on Republic of Iraq Radio, May 4, 1993.

⁷⁶ Quoted in Ghazi A. Alghosaibi, *The Gulf Crisis: An Attempt to Understand* (New York: Kegan Paul International, 1993), p. 38; Milton Viorst, *Sandcastles: The Arabs in Search of the Modern World* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1994), p. 345.

⁷⁷ Eli Lake, "[Egypt's Titanic Ups Pressure On Mubarak](#)," *The New York Sun*, Feb. 6, 2006.

⁷⁸ Inter-Press Service (IPS, Rome), Sept. 24, 1996.

⁷⁹ David Holden and Richard Johns, *The House of Saud: The Rise and Rule of the Most Powerful Dynasty in the Arab World* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1981), p. 379.

⁸⁰ Boutros Boutros-Ghali, *Egypt's Road to Jerusalem: A Diplomat's Story of the Struggle for Peace in the Middle East* (New York: Random House, 1997), p. 264.

arrive, no one can stop it. This is part of my religion.”⁸¹

If rulers sometimes use fatalism as a tool, at other times they seem to believe in it.

Muslim Activism

The historical record shows that rulers who expect Muslim political passivity are often in for a rude surprise: Muslim masses have often acted very actively.

After World War I, Western administrators assumed that Turks would submit to Allied domination with what one British Foreign Ministry official termed “sulky fatalism.” But they assumed wrong: “The war was not over as far as the leaders of the CUP [i.e., the Young Turks] were concerned,” and they fought hard (and successfully) to keep the Europeans out.⁸²

The last shah of Iran, Mohammed Reza Pahlavi, believed in the fatalism of his subjects. According to John Stempel, a U.S. diplomat stationed in Iran, “The tendency of most Moslems to take a fatalistic view of life ... was neatly woven into the Shah’s philosophy of government, which regarded the leader as active ... and the people as passive.”⁸³ He learned his mistake the hard way in 1978-79, when he lost his throne to country-wide revolution. Surprisingly, Amuzegar made his observation



Rulers who expect Muslim political passivity may be in for a rude surprise: Muslim masses have often taken forceful action. The demonstration across Egypt against Mohamed Morsi in June 2013 was the largest, single political event in human history, involving millions of protestors.

about a “fatalistic streak” in a book about that same revolution.

The Arab-Israeli conflict also rebuts clichés about fatalism. Israel’s forces defeated their Arab foes on the field of battle in 1948-49, in 1956, in 1967, in 1970, and in 1982, then again in 2006, 2008-09, 2012, and 2014. Yet the Arabs, impervious to the apparent message of these defeats, have continued their struggle against the Jewish state. This record over three generations hardly suggests a people who accept whatever fate metes them out.

In Egypt, an increase in the price of bread in 1977 led to food riots. In Iraq, as soon as the brutal rule of the Saddam Hussein regime was momentarily lifted in 1991, rebellions erupted throughout the country. The Arab upheavals that began in late 2010 rapidly overthrew rulers in four countries—Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, and Yemen—and led to a civil war in Syria.

Saudi authorities may have blamed hajj calamities on fate, but at other times,

⁸¹ Channel 1 Television (Jerusalem), Aug. 11, 1996.

⁸² Nur Bilge Criss, *Istanbul under Allied Occupation, 1918-1923* (Leiden: Brill, 1999), p. 4.

⁸³ John R. Stempel, *Inside the Iranian Revolution* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1981), p. 13.

they solved problems in a no-nonsense way. They did not respond to Saddam Hussein's invasion of Kuwait by mumbling about "God's will" but invited half a million foreign troops to defeat the

Iraqi tyrant. The nephew who assassinated King Faisal of Saudi Arabia claimed to carry out God's will, but the judges had him beheaded for "willful and premeditated murder."⁸⁴ A steep drop in the price of oil in late 2008 found the Saudis energetically organizing fellow exporters to cut back on production. The double threat of the Iranian nuclear buildup and American fracking in 2014 found the Saudi leadership keeping production high to reduce energy prices. In 2015, the new Saudi king went to war in Yemen. Such examples can be multiplied a hundred-fold, and each of them refutes the notion of passivity and acceptance of one's lot.

Finally, two outstanding examples: A far larger percentage of the population participated in the Iranian revolution than in the French, Russian, or Chinese revolutions. The demonstration across Egypt against Mohamed Morsi in June 2013 was the largest single political event in human history, involving millions of protestors.⁸⁵

Accounting for Activism

If this record of activism refutes a reputation for fatalism, adherents of this explanation can cleverly account for hyperactivism; they do so by seeing it as a safety valve. The *Catholic Encyclopedia* explains that a "lethargic and indolent [tendency] in respect to the ordinary industries of life" contrasts with a "recklessness in danger which has proved a valuable element in the military character of the people." Iraqi analyst

A far larger percentage of the population participated in the Iranian revolution than in the French, Russian, or Chinese revolutions.

Kanan Makiya finds, "The idea of submission to the will of God is the passive counterpart of the quest for martyrdom in His cause."⁸⁶ Abdel-Halim Qandil, an

Egyptian columnist, says of his fellow citizens:

There is a deeply rooted conviction among Egyptians that politics is outside their range of interests. True, Egyptians silently endure oppression for long spells of time. But when they have had enough, they erupt like a cyclone.⁸⁷

Conversely, Gary Gregg tells about "one of the more progressive men" in a Moroccan town who built up a café for tourists, only to have it appropriated by a government official. After venting his fury but realizing he could not win, the would-be café owner gradually resigned himself, bitterly muttering, "Maktub, maktub." Gregg concludes from this that "the opening of opportunity breeds a kind of achievement-oriented, 'Muslim ethicist' religiosity; the closing of opportunity breeds resignation in the solace of religious fatalism." In other words, resignation crept in when opportunity closed.

This definition of fatalism, however, allows one to have it both ways: Muslims are fatalistic whether quiescent or not, whether passive or active. This renders the thesis of Islamic fatalism adaptable to all eventualities and means it cannot be disproven. This is not scholarship nor social science. Rather, it is a semantic trick. If fatalism can mean itself and its

⁸⁴ Holden and Johns, *The House of Saud*, p. 383.

⁸⁵ *The New York Times*, [June 30, 2013](#).

⁸⁶ Khalil, *Republic of Fear*, p. 100.

⁸⁷ Associated Press, [Mar. 28, 2005](#).

opposite, its utility as an analytical tool disappears. A fatalistic people passively accepts its lot and suffers whatever tyranny or brutality is its fate. By definition, a people that rises up is not fatalistic.

Conclusion: Fatalism and Its Opposite

Fatalism coexists with powerful currents of Muslim activism, energy, and enterprise. Von Grunebaum noted this dual heritage:

the Muslim usually acquiesces in impositions backed by superior force. He is aware of the transient character of human power and is apt to minimize its ultimate influence. On the other hand, one glance at the countless rebellions in Muslim lands will show that the believer's acquiescence had very definite and rather narrow limits. However often disappointed in its expectations, the populace was ever ready to fight for a cause instead of patiently waiting for the pre-ordained outcome. So it seems highly doubtful whether "fatalism" can be actually described as a retarding power in politics.⁸⁸

Or, as this author wrote in 1983 about pre-modern life:

Although Muslim subjects were often referred to by the Arabic

term *ra'iya* (tended flock), indicating their passivity, it would be more apt to see them as cattle which, normally placid and complacent, sometimes turned against authorities and stampeded them. Rejection of the [traditional order] happened rarely, usually at moments of extreme crisis, but often enough to keep Muslim rulers apprehensive.⁸⁹

"Fatalism," in short, is a simplistic reduction of a complex Muslim reality. Yes, there is a disproportionately fatalistic inclination (the Pew polls establish that); social science skepticism notwithstanding, fatalism does appear to be more prevalent among Muslims than among other peoples. But so too is there a contradictory record of hyper-activism (as symbolized by the Iranian and Egyptian cases). Their mix is unpredictable. Seeing only half the picture distorts the whole. Fatalism does not help explain Muslim life. The term should be retired from analysis.

Daniel Pipes is president of the Middle East Forum (DanielPipes.org; @DanielPipes). The author thanks Lenn E. Goodman for his comments on this article.



⁸⁸ Von Grunebaum, *Islam*, p. 70.

⁸⁹ Daniel Pipes, *In the Path of God: Islam and Political Power* (New York: Basic Books, 1983), p. 63.