

## Adam Mez, an unbiased orientalist the reception of Adam Mez in Arab orientalist studies

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**Abstract:** This paper is on Adam Mez, a renown German Orientalist whose works contributed greatly to the presentation and examination of the Islamic history, society and culture. His interest in the Muslim world guided him to explore the Islamic civilization compressively by studying its history and culture in more depth. His quest into the Islamic culture resulted in concluding all his findings in his book "The Renaissance of Islam". The publication is considered as an invaluable resource offering an accurate examination of the different aspects of the Muslim world in the 10th century. The least that could be said about this book is its unbiasedness and unprejudicedness in introducing and addressing the historic, cultural and societal models of the Islamic world. Despite his comparatively short lifetime, he developed a significant study on Muslim civilization that constituted and still does a primary reference for researchers and students seeking an informed understanding of the Islamic world. As an orientalist, Adam Mez adopted a research construct that enabled him to produce a lucid and comprehensive study on a range of features of the Islamic world. His "Renaissance of Islam" encompassed the Islamic government and its structural design with an emphasis on the importance and role of the Caliphate. He addressed administration and how the Islamic state of the time run its territories with a focus on the functions of the existing institutions, hence the judiciary system and how this guided and shaped the Islamic social life of the time. In the further course, his view on the scientific, literary and religious development in the 4th/10th centuries is analysed in a way that offered a detailed account on an array of aspects of the Islamic civilisation of the time. Interestingly, Mez's could present his view on tolerance of Muslims, which is apparently observed by portraying the image of women in Muslim society for example, as well as a reference to openness to others who differ in ethnicity, religion, or social status. Mez's research clearly shows impartiality and openness while approaching the different aspects of the Islamic world. This is evident in his adoption of the multitude of contemporary Orientalists whose research models sought a strictly scientific methodology aiming at producing an objective and unbiased account on the Islamic world, its history, culture and social lives. In this context, the importance of reviewing the works of unbiased, academically rigorous Orientalists cannot be overemphasized. These form the common human denominator that establishes cohesion among different societies and international understanding.

**Keywords:** Adam Mez, Arab orientalist studies, Islamic world

### 1. Adam Mez - Personal and Intellectual Backgrounds

#### 1.1. Who was Adam Mez?

Adam Mez (1869-1917) was a Swiss-German orientalist. Mez was born in Freiburg im Breisgau, and studied in Strasbourg and Basel, earning his habitation there in 1894 and was appointed full professor of Semitic languages at the University of Basel in 1905 and authored "The Renaissance of Islam," as subsequently published. Mez is also the author of; "Abulkāsim, Ein Bagdāder Sittenbild" and other works published in 1902 that were a good introduction to the history of the language. His humanistic outlook was seemingly conducive to his invaluable social and cultural research.

Mez was interested in studying the various aspects of the Muslim civilization, especially in the 4th/10th centuries, that constituted a peak of the intellectual development in the Abbasid era. His research is particularly stringent as aiming to establish an understanding of the specific features of this civilization in terms of literature and society. This is apparent in the different topics, including the works mentioned earlier. "The Renaissance of Islam" has been translated into several languages, including English, Spanish and Arabic.

### 1.2. *The Intellectual Background of Mez*

Understanding Mez's intellectual background is helpful as a first step to trace the history of orientalist research: At the beginning of the 20th century, there were bilateral delegations between the German and the Ottoman Empires. The delegations aimed at strengthening economic and political relations to counteract the Triple Entente (France, the United Kingdom, and Russia). One of the tasks of Orientalism was to expose the objectives of the Triple Entente. Many German Orientalists at that time were distinguished from others by the fact that their Orientalism was less prejudiced by colonialist ideas, which gained their researches a higher scientific value. This can be perceived, among other things, in the fact that they predominantly placed scientific impartiality and factual reference in the foreground. This is based on the fact that Islam is judged by its followers, not by how Western European countries view it. Henceforth, German Orientalism, as al-Munjid et al argued, "did not submit to a political, colonialist or religious agenda, as the case other European countries. Accordingly, Germany was not involved in colonization of Arab or Muslim countries and did not seek to spread Christianity in the East."

Therefore, the colonialist agenda did not have a significant influence on German Orientalism, which allowed German Orientalists to remain mostly factual and unbiased. This nevertheless does not mean that there were not enough countable scientific errors and unscientific motivations within their research. Hence, this climate of scientificity and impartiality promoted Mez's work and activities, and particularly his book "The Renaissance of Islam".

### 1.3. *"The Renaissance of Islam": The Scientific Method and Impartiality Towards Muslims.*

Mez was noticeably devoted to the study of the history of Arabic literature, especially in the Abbasid era, as this is evident in his work "Ḥikāyat Abī al-Qāsim" by Muḥammad Abū l-Muṭaḥhar al-Azdī, as well as other similar works. The most important work in this regard is "The Renaissance of Islam" where the author noted that Muslims explored natural sciences, medicine, and Greek philosophy centuries before Christian Europeans. In "The Renaissance of Islam" which would be published posthumously by his professor, Mez excelled in analyzing the depth and breadth of the Islamic spirit and Muslim civilization. According to critics, he was mostly unbiased standing away from other orientalist researchers. Mez did not seem to express any orientalist presumptions, as evident in his assessments of social phenomena, especially the Ḍimma concept.

"The Renaissance of Islam" not only combines scientific stringency and precision but also cites numerous sources and provides a comprehensive analysis of social phenomena during the Abbasid era which may have been one of the most important reasons behind the book's translation into different languages. Ridwan as-Sayyid qualifies it as a rare work with respect to its ideas, resourcefulness and quality knowledge. The most important contribution is its theoretical introduction to cultural history and its definition, and particularly its special attention to the idea of institutions. His work also met with a positive response from 'Abd ar-Raḥmān Badawī, who mentioned that this was "an excellent sketch of Muslim civilization in the 4th/10th centuries, in which he considers all aspects of the city."

Interestingly enough, the fundamental question that one ought to ask is, "what does civilization mean?" The philosopher, Durant defines civilization as a social order that helps people to create culture. Civilization apparently consists four key components: Economic provision, political organization, moral traditions, and the pursuit of science and the arts. In this sense, the discovery of Islamic civilization by Orientalism was a significant positive factor for the development, freedom and independence of the European world. In this respect, scientists, such as Mez, conducted unbiased research on the Muslim civilization contributing to the discovery of the role that Muslims played in the enrichment of humanity

at various levels, including the scientific and social ones. Mez has succeeded in this to a great extent as detailed in "The Renaissance of Islam," especially in his analysis of the two basic pillars of human civilization, namely the cultural aspect and the nature of institutions and their role, among others, in the political and social lives.

## 2. The Nature of the Nature of the Islamic Institutions in Mez's Book "The Renaissance of Islam".

In this context, it is less important to trace individual historical events than to analyze the main pillars on which the Abbasid caliphate stood and thus secured political power and stability. The rule of the Abbasids was based upon three bedrocks: Religion, the military, and the administration. However, the main question here is about the way Mez analyzed these institutions and explained their extended social, political, cultural, and economic roles during the Islamic "Renaissance".

### 2.1. *The Concept of the Caliphate Based on "The Renaissance of Islam"*

Mez often relied on well-known historiographers such as aḏ-Ḍahabī, al-Mas'ūdī, ibn Kaṭīr, Aṣ-Ṣūlī, and others. Here, it becomes apparent that the Abbasid caliphate was essentially the one of decadence in the 4th/10th centuries. Numerous manifestations of luxury and delight on the one hand, as well as those of violence within the dynasty on the other, are worth mentioning. Politics is, to a greater extent, no longer conducted by the incumbent but by ministers and women associated with the incumbent, including both the mothers of the caliphs and their serfs, many of whom belonged to the mawālī. In the same section, Mez mentions the presence of Shiite rule in Egypt during that time.

Mez correctly notes that the decline of the institution of the caliphate in this phase of the Abbasid dynasty was not due to religious reasons or the nature of the Muslim rule. Instead, historical events such as the tragic end of the Qāhir bi-llāh, among others, as Mez referred to, were the real triggers, similar to what Ibn Kaṭīr also noted.

Mez also correctly observes that the religious significance of the title amīr al-Mu'minīn is gradually diminishing as more and more princes and rulers of small regions are claiming the same status. Despite this, the religious factor remains present in the formation of the Islamic territories, which together would unite to form an Islamic empire."

Mez would also refer to the barbaric actions of invading Roman troops in the 10th century and points out what damage and chaos they caused. In contrast to Joseph Schacht's work, "The Legacy of Islam" which ignored the bloodshed and destruction caused by Christian warriors whenever they invaded Muslim lands, Mez made clearer reference to these, thus drawing a more accurate historical picture. These indications suggest that Mez, unlike many other Orientalists, did not use his analyses and arguments to pursue an agenda.

### 2.2. *The Administration and Its Civil Role as Detailed in the Book, "The Renaissance of Islam"*

The origin of the administration in the Abbasid caliphate can be traced back to the bequeath of the second Caliph Umar ibn al-Khattab. Thereafter, it evolved according to the empire's expansion over the centuries and dynasties. The administration was divided into several dīwānen (registers). These well-known dīwānen existed exclusively for the army, criminal law, tax law. In principle, these were separate from one another, but the financial registers had overlaps, so that responsibilities could not always be precisely assigned. Mez stated that the caliphate consisted of many provinces and no central registry summarized this. Each province administered itself through its local registers until Caliph al-Mu'taḍid (279-289/892-902) compiled the registers of the provinces and introduced a central register called dīwān ad-Dār.

Mez denoted the names of the registers and their roles, as well as their flaws. He attributed some inconsistencies to the decadence of the political class, as well as to the inclinations of certain fractions within the Abbasid administrative bodies in the 4th/10th centuries. These fractions include the Turks, whose administrative support the caliph al-Wāṭiq (227-232/842-847) enlisted, especially in military

matters. The most important registers were the army, supply register (dīwān an-Nafaqāt), treasury register (dīwān bayt al-Māl), attachment, letters, and welfare register.

In his discussion of the civil role of the administration, Mez makes an important basic assumption: the administration of these registers is different from the administration of religious affairs. In that regard, he draws attention to the civil aspect of the state, even though the caliphate is subordinate to religion in terms of religious symbolism, legitimacy and authority. Despite this, its internal administration is based purely on administrative and technical foundations. In this way, the European reader should not confuse the Islamic state structure with a totalitarian theocracy in the way of a projection, as was practised in the Christian West.

### 3. The Scientific Movement in the 4th/10th Centuries Based on Mez's Findings

#### 3.1. *The Scientific-Literary Discourse*

It is generally known that the literary movement flourished during the Abbasid dynasty. This was due, among other things, to the special attention that the viziers and caliphs devoted to literature and sciences, which also had a monetary impact. Mez distinguishes between religious sciences and literature. While the former requires specialization, the latter needs a universalistic and all-encompassing approach. The second approach led to further development of sciences that stood alongside kalām and philosophy, such as geography and linguistics.

Besides the capital city of Baghdad, Khorasan was considered a paradise for scholarship during that time, as Mez describes it. Moreover, he also mentions the enormous libraries in the Islamic empire, which had hundreds of thousands of books, and compares them to the libraries of Christian cathedrals, which had no more than a hundred books. This is another indication of Mez's impartiality when it comes to expressing the characteristics of that civilization. This contrasts with other orientalists who drew the Islamic tradition with imperialist narratives and tended to show bias in favor of Christianity, as seen in Schacht's work, among others.

#### 3.2. *The Scientific-Religious Discourse*

Mez mentions that the jurists with the most students and attributes aspired to hold offices in the state. Although this remark is correct in principle, it fails to recognize the unique position of the legal doctrine among Muslims. This is due in its proximity to the two main canonical sources of Muslim laws, namely the Qur'an and the Sunna of the Prophet Muhammad. It is the science that, as such, was already directly taught and cultivated by the Prophet's companions, unlike other religious sciences that were formed over the subsequent generations due to the changing needs for learning. Muslims have always recognized the importance of jurisprudence in history, which is why numerous students have paid special attention to it.

The legal scholars paid high tribute to the prophetic tradition, as Mez mentions in his book "The Renaissance of Islam." Mez traces the great efforts of the hadith scholars in their enterprise of memorizing the numerous hadiths along with their chains of transmission and then critically verifying them based on their tridents. This is another indication of Mez's impartiality, since he objectively acknowledges the accomplishments of the hadith scholars, while other orientalists strongly doubted them on the pretext of the existence of purported reports. In doing so, they failed to recognize the achievements of the hadith scholars in distinguishing verily authentic reports from less so.

Mez's integrity also stands out in the context of Quranic studies. Numerous Orientalists have attempted to portray the Quran as the invention of the Prophet Muhammad and the continuation of a pre-existing traditions through research. In contrast, Mez acknowledges the accomplishments of scholars in preserving the Qur'anic readings and that these do date back to the Qur'anic manuscript of 'Utmān ibn 'Affān. These readings allowed for the exclusion of deviant ones, which were pronounced by some contrary to the rules of the scholars' language and doctrinal tradition. This led the vizier to reprimand Abū 'Alī ibn Muqla ibn Šunbūd (d. 328/940), as well as the sultan Abu Bakr al-Aṭṭār (d.

354/965) when he used a variant reading than that of the canonical. These examples show the special interest Muslims took in the Qur'an and its readings.

After the Tafsīr scholars based and developed their exegesis mainly on reports, the Kalām scholars joined this scholarly discourse, with the Mu'tazila participating before the Aṣ'arīts. Subsequently, the Sūfīs and Shiites joined in as well. They all disputed the role of tradition and understanding and were divisible into traditionalists and interpreters. Mez was impartial and had scholarly integrity by presenting the scholarly discourse unbiasedly, without the underlying intention of doubting the divinity of the Qur'an or centralizing that doubt. Something similar is evident in the Kalām discourse: Mez emphasizes that the influence of Greek and Christian foundations on the Kalām is limited to the Mu'tazila. After mentioning their dogmas regarding tauḥīd and qadar, he refers to the logical writings of the Mu'tazila as influential even on non-Muslim philosophers such as Spinoza. This contrasts with other Orientalists, such as Henri Gauthier, who deny any innovative power to the religion of Islam.

Finally, the "exotic" Mez, as one may almost call him, shows himself in the question of the causes for the Sufism movement. While many Orientalists, such as von Hammer-Purgstall, Alfred von Kremer, and Hans Schaeder, attribute the development of Sufism to foreign influences, such as Christianity, Hinduism, Hellenism, and Zoroastrian, Mez believes that the reasons for the development of Sufism is the religion itself as he argued.

It is clear from the cited examples, that Mez acknowledges and unbiasedly draws the inner strength of the Muslim civilization, unlike other Orientalists who have been almost eager to attribute certain developments within Islam or among Muslims to external factors.

#### 4. Muslim Civilization and Human Rights According to Mez

In his book "The Renaissance of Islam," Mez covered many aspects of the Muslim civilization such as administration, sciences, religion, and social relations. One of the topics he paid special attention to was the relationship of Muslims to others, especially the mawālī and ahl ad-Ḍimma. Additionally, Mez analyzed the lives of women in the Islamic caliphate. Through these themes, we can understand both the Islamic values in dealing with others and appreciate the scientific integrity of Mez.

##### 4.1. *The Image of Women in Islam as per Mez*

The development of women's rights through the Islamic legislation constituted a noticeable leap for humanity, whereas previously they had often been disadvantaged in tribal structures and excluded from public life. However, the new norms set gave them basic rights such as choice of a partner, inheritance rights, etc., which they were entitled to for the first time. However, Orientalists have rarely acknowledged any in this way. On the contrary, it seems that this was relativized with the sole argument that in Islam, plural marriage is permissible in principle. Some Orientalists have presented this as if it were a free pass for the Muslim man.

Mez based his stages on women in the 4th/10th centuries on accounts by narrators and historians. However, he mostly relies on a singular tradition or generalizes the account to all social groups when discussing the prevalence of young boys and eunuchs in the houses of caliphs and princes, and of fornication in the societies of the time. This is one of the common mistakes of historians who are not specialized in verifying traditions, which resulted in a predominantly negative picture of women in the Islamic civilization during that era. Moreover, unlike some Orientalists who were at least sceptical of Islam, Mez's work generally adopted the accounts uncritically without interpreting them. In his introduction to Mez's work, Aḥmad Amīn observed that Mez's textual treatment may be almost exclusively based on the collection of a large number of thematically related texts from numerous sources. He has contented himself with this without introducing his opinions and views into the discussion, except in rare cases."

##### 4.2. *Tolerance in Islam According to Mez*

The level of tolerance reached a civilizational peak in the 4th/10th centuries. According to Le Bon, religious tolerance flourished in the Arabs civilization. There is clear evidence of this, although it has



not been discussed in detail. The experience of Monsieur KANZLER based on the story of a Kalām scholar points this out. KANZLER used to take part regularly in philosophy sessions in Baghdad. Jews, heretics, Zoroastrians, Muslims, and Christians all took part. Such tolerance did not reach Europe even after 1000 years of bitter wars. The Abbasid caliphate united a variety of ethnicities and religions in the 4th/10th centuries. Perhaps one of the most crucial phenomena here was the marriage between Arab men and non-Arab women.

The holy sources of Islam and legal works defined how free people should treat enslaved individuals. The Qur'an contains many surahs that motivate the liberation of enslaved people and prescribed praiseworthy treatment of them, as does the Sunna. Therefore, any deviation from this norm is due to political, social, and cultural causes. Mez drew attention to the fact that the way Islam dealt with enslaved people angered many people. However, first generation of Muslims provided a certain protection for enslaved people and dealings with them were to be amicable.

The people of the *ḍimma*, on the other hand, enjoyed rights that led them not to mingle with the Muslims. However, there is an issue with the author's statement that the life of Christians among Muslims led to tolerance models highly demanded by contemporary reformers. Likewise, he attributed the high degree of tolerance, which was not known in Europe in the Middle Ages, to the necessity of living together. Rather, this is due to the values of Islam itself. Mez himself expresses that "the Islamic empire assured religious autonomy to each religious community of the people of the *ḍimma*."

Mez makes it clear that in the middle of the 4th/10th century, the caliph issued a decree protecting and defending the Sabians and other dissenters. Also, during this era, the Zoroastrians were recognized as people of the *ḍimma*, and giving them a representative to represent them in the caliph's palace and before the ministers. Furthermore, Mez mentions that the Islamic doctrine prohibited the people of the *ḍimma* from pursuing any form of employment. As a result, they gained a strong foothold in the crafts and made high profits. Thus, among them, there were money changers, merchants, farmers, and doctors.

Mez's knowledge of the institutions, sciences, and statutes of that time is demonstrated in his discussion of manifestations of tolerance. The peculiarity of this tolerance, especially in the historical comparison with other cultures, is highlighted throughout historical analysis. Moreover, they make clear the impartiality of this researcher in most cases of his work. The few erroneous conclusions can usually be attributed to weak traditions of individual historians and narrators and the generalization of marginal phenomena. However, the value and scholarship of Mez's works are not diminished, and his efforts to analyze the Islamic civilization in an unbiased and as objective manner can serve as a basis for rapprochement between civilizations.

#### 4.3. *Closing Words*

The relationship between the West and the Orient was affected by Institutionalized Orientalism. Thus, it evolved from ideological hostility to an attempt to discover the treasures of the Islamic heritage, while still accompanied by a colonialist agenda. Despite this, there were positive results, such as making this heritage known in at least a rudimentary scientific manner, and there continued to be unbiased researchers who approached the truth through scientific rigor. In this context, several personalities, mostly German orientalists, shone for their work in revealing the sciences, tolerance, and civilizational achievements of Muslims and Islam. Adam Mez was among the leading ones among them, and his comprehensive work, "The Renaissance of Islam," presents the Arab-Islamic civilization in the Abbasid era. He used a wealth of sources, including historians, narrators, and religious scholars to describe events, sciences, and statutes. For the most part, Mez was unbiased and maintained a stringent approach and did not attempt to project his thoughts onto the sources. Among his greatest achievements is his account of the institutionalization of the statutes of the caliphate, literary and religious life, and the manifestations of religious tolerance in Muslims' dealings with the weak, those of other faiths, and ethnically diverse people.

#### 4.4. The Main Findings of This Paper Are

- Civilization is a human heritage that transcends geography and ideology. It is to be evaluated based on how it benefits humanity. Islamic civilization, in this regard, is noteworthy as it inspired Western civilization.
- Despite its bias towards Islamic civilization, Orientalism paradoxically revealed numerous of its unique merits. Perhaps the greatest merit is that it made the great heritage of Muslims accessible to humanity.
- Several Orientalists, particularly German scholars, who followed scientific stringency approached Muslims and their civilization in an unbiased manner.
- Adam Mez enjoys special recognition in Arab-Islamic circles due to his significant contributions to the field.
- Many Muslims have found sufficient hostility in Orientalism, which resulted in them overlooking the unbiased and epistemological researchers.
- Adam Mez is one of those Orientalists who drew the attention to the profundity and high morality of the Islamic civilization.

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