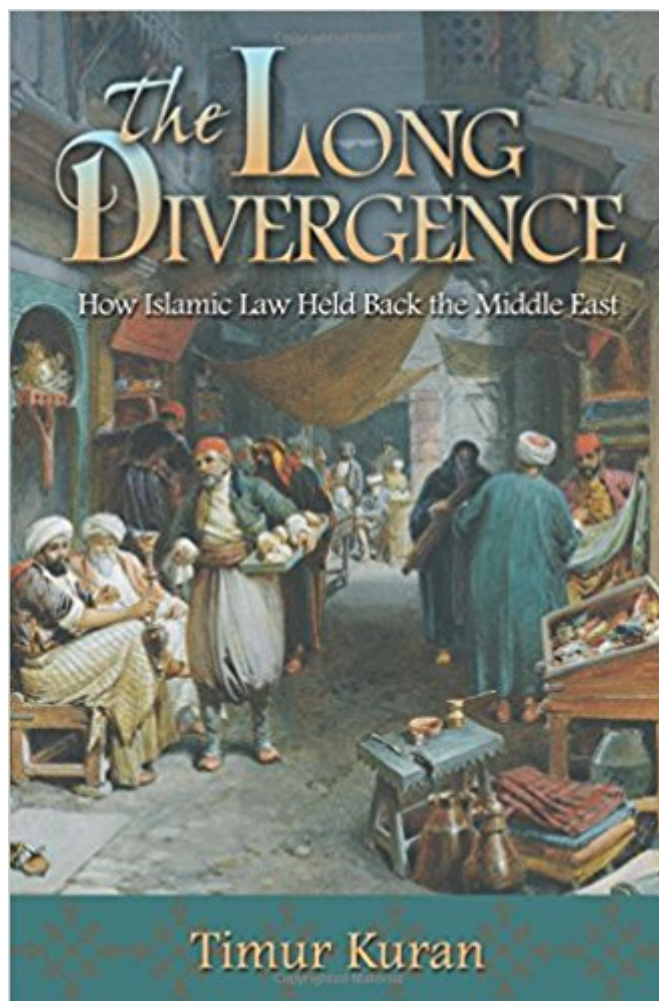


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# The Long Divergence: How Islamic Law Held Back The Middle East



## Synopsis

In the year 1000, the economy of the Middle East was at least as advanced as that of Europe. But by 1800, the region had fallen dramatically behind--in living standards, technology, and economic institutions. In short, the Middle East had failed to modernize economically as the West surged ahead. What caused this long divergence? And why does the Middle East remain drastically underdeveloped compared to the West? In *The Long Divergence*, one of the world's leading experts on Islamic economic institutions and the economy of the Middle East provides a new answer to these long-debated questions. Timur Kuran argues that what slowed the economic development of the Middle East was not colonialism or geography, still less Muslim attitudes or some incompatibility between Islam and capitalism. Rather, starting around the tenth century, Islamic legal institutions, which had benefitted the Middle Eastern economy in the early centuries of Islam, began to act as a drag on development by slowing or blocking the emergence of central features of modern economic life--including private capital accumulation, corporations, large-scale production, and impersonal exchange. By the nineteenth century, modern economic institutions began to be transplanted to the Middle East, but its economy has not caught up. And there is no quick fix today. Low trust, rampant corruption, and weak civil societies--all characteristic of the region's economies today and all legacies of its economic history--will take generations to overcome. *The Long Divergence* opens up a frank and honest debate on a crucial issue that even some of the most ardent secularists in the Muslim world have hesitated to discuss.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Kuran (Islam and Mammon), a Duke University professor of economics and political science, continues his exploration of Islam and economics in a dense volume that debunks the most common apologies for the economic plight of the Middle East, such as colonization, or the economic importance of the annual hajj pilgrimage. Kuran argues instead that the failure of Middle Eastern economics is not due to Islam itself, but to the fact that Muslims failed to reinterpret previously successful economic concepts at the onset of the Middle Ages, while the West went on to create the corporation (see InProfile in this issue). Muslims may demur, but Kuran points out that many have abandoned some Qur'anic economic practices they disagree with, including the ban on interest, and, more progressively, they have updated and refreshed the tax code described in the Qur'an. His most controversial argument is that Islam, liberated from stagnant interpretation and practice, is very adaptable to modern institutions. (Dec.) (c) Copyright PWxyz, LLC. All rights reserved. --This text refers to the Digital edition.

"Professor Kuran's book offers the best explanation yet for why the Middle East has lagged. After poring over ancient business records, Professor Kuran persuasively argues that what held the Middle East back wasn't Islam as such, or colonialism, but rather various secondary Islamic legal practices that are no longer relevant today."--Nicholas D. Kristof, New York Times

"This is a book to be not just tasted but chewed and digested. Instead of facile claims that Islam is the solution or Islam is the problem, readers get a detailed history of economic institutions in the Middle East as compared to those in the West. Kuran shows that the Islamic law and practices underlying Middle Eastern commerce worked well for a long time and were much more flexible than usually assumed. . . . Clearly presented quantitative data and illuminating anecdotes add up to a fine feast."--L. Carl Brown, Foreign Affairs

"Mr. Kuran's arguments have broad implications for the debate about how to foster economic development. He demonstrates that the West's long ascendancy was rooted in its ability to develop institutions that combined labour and capital in imaginative new ways."--Economist

"The Long Divergence offers a pathbreaking analysis of why the flourishing premodern economies of the Islamic world fell into relative decline as Western Europe rose. And it explores the issue of whether conservative Islam is compatible with modern economic institutions. You'll be surprised by many of his conclusions."--Peter Passell, Milken Institute Review

"[The Long Divergence] explains a large part of why the Middle East and Turkey fell behind the West and law and economics has a lot to do with it. Various laws in Islamic societies were not conducive to large-scale economic structures, at precisely the time when such structures were becoming

profitable and indeed essential as drivers of economic growth. This is not a book of handwaving but rather he nails the detail, whether it is on inheritance law, contracts, forming corporations, or any number of other topics."--Tyler Cowen, *Marginal Revolution*"In an interesting new book called *The Long Divergence*, Timur Kuran of Duke argues that Islam's economic restrictions, rather than its cultural conservatism or isolationism, stunted development in countries where it was the dominant religion."--Massimo Calabresi, *Time.com's Swampland blog*"Kuran's thesis is contentious; but it does provide us with an incentive to reformulate Islamic law. It is an excellent starting-point for a debate long overdue."--Ziauddin Sardar, *Independent*"[G]round-breaking. . . . In this wide-ranging study, Kuran explores other possible factors which favored the non-Muslim business ethos over the Islamic one, but as a true scholar he rehearses other possible explanations."--Arnold Ages, *Chicago Jewish Star*"A ground-breaking book. . . . Kuran argues Islamic law primarily failed to develop the concept of a corporation: an economic and legal construct, separated from family and tribal loyalty, designed to encourage investment and profit sharing."--Chris Berg, *Sydney Morning Herald*"Timur Kuran is an avid reader of Islamic economic and legal history and an immensely well informed scholar. This latest work not only combines his earlier arguments but also provides some new perspectives."--Murat Cizakca, *EH.Net*"[A]n invaluable contribution to the debate."--Choice"[T]his is a most informative book and may make contemporary Muslims wonder whether a forthcoming second codification of Islamic law should heed some of the warnings of the author."--Murat Ã¼zizakÃ¼Å¸a, *MESA Bulletin*"Kuran deserves to be lauded for providing a narrative for how certain Middle Eastern institutions negatively affected economic outcomes. This book represents an advance in our understanding of the functioning of commercial institutions in the Middle East and of their dynamic consequences. . . . Kuran has provided an important scholarly resource for both academics and those interested in the economic and political development of the region more broadly."--Eric Chaney, *Development and Change*"By eschewing simple explanations and challenging scholars to look at such heated topics as the Capitulations in a new light, *Long Divergence* offers a new window on an old dogma. In a time when there is a trend to blame much of the Middle East's problems on Western meddling, it is important that scholarship swims slightly against the current in shedding new light on questions of modernity and the reasons behind economic stagnation in the Muslim world."--Seth Frantzman, *Digest of Middle East Studies*"*The Long Divergence* is an excellent book that should be of great appeal to scholars interested in the Middle East and its history, economic historians interested in the general question of why some regions failed to modernize, and social scientists interested in the historical and institutional roots of comparative underdevelopment."--Metin Cosgel, *Journal of Economic History*"In this beautifully

crafted book, Timur Kuran provides a remarkably rich analysis of how Islamic law impeded economic progress in the Middle East and North Africa. Kuran's views are fresh and powerful, and they are subtle."--Jack A. Goldstone, *Perspectives on Politics*"The Long Divergence is a bold and stimulating book, based on a prodigious amount of research in world economic history. It is the first work of its kind to wrestle with the big question about the Middle East's economic path. . . . Though it may stir up controversy among those who may not take well to his critique of Islam, this landmark study will find a broad readership to debate its provocative conclusions."--Ghislaine Lydon, *Global History*"[This book] is a major achievement that should be read by everyone with an interest in the region, as well as by scholars in economic history and institutional economics."--Mark Koyama, *Public Choice*

When in law school, I studied Islamic legal theory. I wish this book had existed then. But even for a lay reader who is interested in social development and asks why the Islamic world seems not to have been able to develop a modern commercial society, this book will provide insight into why. This is not an easy book. It presumes some knowledge of Islamic thought and of Islamic belief, as well as more generally of the history of the region from about 1400 to about 1900. Okay, fine, you weren't going to buy this if you're scared of the big words, but still be ready. I put it aside a few times and came back to it. But I always came back to it. Kuran is an excellent writer and his prose is clear. His conclusions may not be indisputable, but they are well-drawn from his premises and they are highly plausible. They are also derived from data. He has gone through not just previous writers but also historical archives to get primary source data to back up his thoughts and analysis. This isn't Niall Ferguson - you don't have to wade through pages of tables and statistics - but it's clear that if Kuran had wanted to write that book he could have. The other review of this book (at time of my posting there was only the one) has gone into great depth on the discussion of the rules of inheritance, and I won't repeat. I'll focus instead on one element that suggests to me that Kuran is onto something: his explanation for why Islamic societies continued to allow choice of law to religious minorities even after it was clear that they were benefiting from this, while denying it to Muslims who therefore couldn't have benefited. In an oversimplified nutshell, Kuran suggests that it's related to various societal factors all of which were intended to benefit Muslims and that this was an unintended side effect, and that foreign governments which were becoming more dominant in the world capitalized on their local co-religionists in order to extend their reach into the Muslim world. You may agree, you may not, but the argument is well-made. But his most important argument is this: there is nothing innately anti-Islamic about modern capitalist structures, and the fact that

Islamic countries haven't adopted them is a historical artefact and not an innate impossibility. As I was reading this, the revolution in Tunisia had just ended, Egypt was just ending, and Bahrain/Yemen/Algeria/Iran/Libya were ongoing. It will be interesting to see, if any of these countries decides to bring themselves into the modern commercial era, whether Kuran is right.

I have read many books on Islam. I read them to understand why Islam conquered so much so quickly, and why it failed both politically and economically over the last 500 years. The relative economic decline is of interest because around 1000 CE, the Muslim world was as wealthy as Europe. This is the first book that provided understanding that I could use. Not on conquest directly, but on the economics. In "The Long Divergence", the author emphasizes two themes around Muslim law of inheritance. Islamic law mandated distribution of wealth after death amongst multiple heirs. This mandate had two results. First, it forced partnerships to be short lived: Death followed by demands for their part of the inheritance by heirs required liquidation of a partnership. Knowing that any death would end the partnership, Muslims tended to favor two person partnerships of short duration. In contrast, after 1000 CE Europeans developed forms of partnership and corporations that could survive the death of a single participant. Partly this was adoption of primogeniture, under which a single descendant could inherit the whole of one person's assets in a property, business or partnership. At the same time Europeans were becoming innovative about the types of business arrangements used to accumulate wealth. Something like modern corporations developed to manage guilds, monasteries, and even cities. European rulers, desperate for money, and often only weakly in power, were willing to allow independent groups take local power, in exchange for stability and the right to tax revenues or profits. These independent institutions were allowed to change their internal rules and general goals as circumstances changes. The second theme in "The Long Divergence" explaining relative Islamic economic decline is Islam's failure to develop anything like the European corporation. Again this relates to Muslim inheritance law. The Waqf, the only way Muslims could create an enterprise that could outlive the founder had to be established for only one purpose and that purpose could never change. So, for example, a Waqf to establish a caravan station could never become anything else, even if trade routes or means of transportation changed. Meanwhile, as mentioned in the last paragraph above, European corporations could adapt to changing circumstances to redirect investment in the more productive ways as circumstances changed. There is much more in this book. I think the author has discovered something about the role of law in economic development that explains a lot about the relative decline of the Islamic world relative to Europe. There is one other benefit I got from reading "The Long Divergence". The

author argues that the codification of rules of inheritance in Islam provided economic laws that were superior to alternatives available in much of the world at the time of the early Muslim conquests. Although he does not argue that this caused the rise of Islam, it suggests one reason for its early success. Also noted in the book, is that the separation between Church and State in Europe helped lead to innovation in Europe and stagnation in the Islamic world. This made me remember independently that existence of canon law, which the Catholic Church created to govern its internal ecclesiastical affairs, independent of the laws of the political entities in which it served the religious needs of Europeans. Canon law still exists and is still used by the Church to settle issues pertaining to the Church alone. (These include discipline of clergy, alteration of church property, etc.) Many protestant religions have their own versions of canon law. Another thing: From this book I learned that Shia and Sunni Muslims have slightly different inheritance laws. I did not know that despite much reading on Islam. The book made is entertaing, and made me think. Not too much more to ask for in a book on a potentially boring subject!

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