

Islamists and Liberal Values in the Middle East

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The question of why people support Islamist movements and parties is a complex one. Theories abound, with focuses including the decline of socialist movements that previously addressed the dislocation and “anomie” of the rural and urban poor, the rise of provincial “devout” bourgeoisies, the economic resources available to Islamist groups, and their organizational characteristics and networks.

The extreme volatility of voting patterns in countries like Turkey, where Islamist parties have been active for several decades, suggests that religious identification alone cannot fully explain voters’ preferences. Work on the anthropology and sociology of Islam, such as that of Michael Gilson and Salwa Ismail, demonstrates that the extent to which individuals are influenced by, and behave according to, core Islamic (or Islamist) precepts varies considerably according to social context. Although it may be legitimate to regard Islam as a “civilization,” defined by commonly recognized core principles, Islamism’s capacity to translate this resonance into sustained support hinges on many factors, not least its ability to demonstrate tangible success in comparison with competing political models.

Shadi Hamid’s book by and large skirts this complexity in grappling with the broader question of whether Islam and Islamism can ever be compatible with liberal democracy. Hamid’s conclusion is that Islamists may be democrats but they will never be liberals, at least in the foreseeable future. Even if Islamist parties disappear from the scene, he thinks liberalism is unlikely to take root in the Middle East due to the immutability of Islamic precepts relating to political order, the centrality of Islam as a cultural trait,

and the fact that Muslims take scripture more seriously than do Christians.

Islamism, for Hamid (a senior fellow with the Brookings Institution), is not just any political movement. It is an expression of a much deeper yearning, apparently latent in all Muslims, to reject the modern nation-state, reestablish the Caliphate, and restore Islam to its correct place at the heart of political and cultural life. (Interestingly, this is the same way Islamists interpret Zionism: as just one manifestation of a much more fundamental Jewish antipathy toward Islam and desire for world domination.)

REPACKAGED ORIENTALISM

The argument that it is Islam that holds Muslim societies back, preventing them from advancing along the same path as the West, is, of course, central to both Orientalism and modernization theory, paradigms that have each faced sustained criticism over several decades. The general thrust of Hamid’s book is thus highly provocative. To assert that Islam is exceptional will cross a red line for many scholars, conditioned since Edward Said’s incendiary 1978 broadside *Orientalism* to strike down any hints of reification, simplification, and essentialization when it comes to Islam or Arab culture, or to credit “Islam,” *tout court*, with any special causal significance. Their alarm bells ring louder still when the dependent variable in such analysis is the Muslim world’s apparent imperiousness to democracy and its susceptibility to mindless violence—the same signs of “backwardness” that have legitimated Western interventions in the Middle East for more than two centuries. Yet this, remarkably, is what Shadi Hamid’s book sets out to do.

The book’s title is no mere concession to the St. Martin’s Press marketing department. Hamid

**Islamic Exceptionalism:
How the Struggle Over Islam
Is Reshaping the World**
by Shadi Hamid
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explicitly and boldly states that Islam is different and exceptional. Why should we expect it to be otherwise? We are not all the same and, Hamid implores, why should we be? Few would disagree with this simple truth, but it is the causal weight Hamid accords it that renders his work problematic.

Hamid's research differs from stereotypical Orientalist scholarship, and much mainstream political science, in that it is based on extensive firsthand knowledge of the region. Between introductory and concluding chapters that outline his thesis about Islamic exceptionalism, he provides readable overviews of Islamist movements such as the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, Ennahda in Tunisia, the Justice and Development Party in Turkey, and, of course, the Islamic State (ISIS).

Rather than dissecting works of classical jurisprudence to make his case, Hamid met and interviewed many Islamist leaders and sympathizers, as well as family members of young Tunisians who, disillusioned with the status quo at home, left to fight with ISIS. *Islamic Exceptionalism* is aimed at a general, nonscholarly readership and is written in an almost colloquial style. Unlike many learned studies of Islam and Islamism that also make the case for the religion's peculiar political bent, the book is notably light on abstruse jargon and complicated legal and theological concepts. And, unlike much American neo-Orientalist policy-related writing that tends to write the Arabs off and focus on strengthening relations with Israel, Hamid's work appears to express a genuinely held desire to set the United States' relations with the Muslim Middle East on a more positive course.

But Hamid's apparently unimpeachable methodology and reasonable-sounding argumentation do not alter his work's continuity with Orientalist traditions. Hamid positions his work as a riposte to those who believe in liberal determinism, or "the notion that history moves with intent toward a more reasonable, secular future." In asserting that "Islam is fundamentally different," Hamid follows in the weighty footsteps of the sociologist and anthropologist Ernest Gellner, who viewed Islam as a distinctive civilization supporting movements whose structural and ideological characteristics were compatible with at least some form of modernity.

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Hamid anticipates the same critique that was leveled against Gellner, namely that the religiously mandated unity of state and religion has rarely if ever been achieved in Islam, and that throughout history the Muslim world has been divided far more than it has been united. But "infighting," for Hamid, does not detract from the fact that before 1924 there was a Caliphate, providing a form of political sovereignty Muslims found authentic, and that since then a struggle to restore legitimate political order has raged.

Hamid's own liberal idealism colors his analysis, again redolent of Gellner. Liberal democracy, he insists, is the ideal political form but it depends on the existence of a liberal political culture. This cannot be achieved so long as Islam continues to occupy center stage in Middle Eastern societies. Islamism can prevail without Islamists, but liberalism in the absence of liberals will flounder. As Hamid says, "liberals have simply been incapable of winning elections" in the Arab world.

This observation may be true. But to attribute the lackluster fortunes of liberal (or, indeed, most other) political parties to Islam tentatively ignores many other explanations for authoritarianism in the region. To explain why the nation-state and nationalism have not taken root in the Middle East (itself a highly dubious proposition), Hamid asserts that Islam cannot support a liberal political culture.

CLINGING TO THE CALIPHATE?

Hamid recognizes that Islamists, while they have insisted on the necessity of sharia as a general legal framework, have usually accommodated themselves to the reality of the nation-state. But he seems to view Muslim societies as more "Islamist" than the Islamists. Islamist parties are modern and willing to work within state structures, even acceding to the demands of secularist rivals, but their would-be supporters still apparently cling to the ideal of the Caliphate. Hence the rise of ISIS, which by this logic constitutes a more authentic and legitimate political entity for Muslims than do the states in which they live.

Having put forward his case that Islam is exceptional, and for the primacy of Islam as a driver of Muslims' voting preferences, Hamid advocates for the imposition of "supraconstitutional principles," similar to the US Bill of Rights, to prevent Islamists

from playing to the illiberal preferences of their retrograde supporters. As a staunch democrat, he does so with a heavy heart, but feels the Muslim masses are not yet ready for unfettered democracy. In time, Hamid evidently hopes, the Muslim world may have a proper reformation and Islam will cease to hold it back, but this cannot be expected to occur in the foreseeable future.

It is unfortunate that such culturalist simplification in scholarship can still command a wide audience. Political culture, indeed culture in general, cannot be reduced to one dimension. The interpretation and salience of Islam varies enormously over time and space. A single believer will practice and understand Islam differently according to context, as Gilson and other anthropologists have convincingly shown. That majorities of Muslims

in some countries may (according to polls, which often have their own shortcomings) support the application of sharia says little about the way they would like to see it applied, or to what areas of life. Even if religion “matters” more to Muslim voters than it does to Christians and others, this does not mean all Muslims reject the nation-state and bemoan the demise of the Caliphate.

Islamic Exceptionalism does a disservice to political activists past and present, within and without the Muslim Middle East, who have sought to foster more progressive and democratic politics. One wonders why, if the societies in which liberal and left-wing activists operated are so impervious to liberal and democratic values, the regimes of the region have devoted so much effort to suppressing them. ■