CARNEGIE COUNCIL *for Ethics in International Affairs*

# Islamic Exceptionalism: How the Struggle over Islam Is Reshaping the World

Public Affairs, Global Ethics Forum TV Series

**Shadi Hamid**, **Joanne J. Myers**

## Transcript

### Introduction

**JOANNE MYERS:** Good morning, everyone. I'm Joanne Myers, director of Public Affairs programs, and on behalf of the Carnegie Council I want to thank you all for beginning your day with us.

I am delighted to welcome Shadi Hamid back to this podium. Today he will be discussing his latest book, entitled *Islamic Exceptionalism: How the Struggle over Islam Is Reshaping the World*.

Shadi's reputation as one of the leading scholars on political Islam precedes him. I believe you all received a copy of his bio, which I would encourage you to read, so I will briefly tell you about his current position, which is senior fellow at the Brookings Institution and vice-chair of the Project on Middle East Democracy.

When speaking here two years ago, Shadi engaged us with a sagacious discussion on the complex interplay among Islam, Islamists, and the competing demands of democratic legitimacy. Today his discussion will focus on the importance of religion and the role it plays in the politics of the Middle East. In point of fact, it is this intricate relationship between faith and the state that makes governing so difficult.

In trying to make sense of the existential battles that have shaken the foundations of Middle Eastern order, Shadi spent more than a decade on research, in which he combined six years of living, traveling, and studying in the Middle East, thinking about how the power of ideas impacts and influences events. The result of this is his illuminating new book, entitled *Islamic Exceptionalism*, in which he focuses on Islamic movements in Egypt, Turkey, and Tunisia, particularly in the post-Arab Spring and the subsequent rise of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS).

This analysis, in which he encapsulates the tensions between Islamists, secularists, and their political parties, provides a basic understanding of Islam's relationship to the law, politics, and governance, which lead him to posit that Islam is unique—actually he says exceptional—among the world's major religions, and tells us why. Shadi's findings may surprise, and even frustrate, those of you who want to believe that the history of the Middle East will inevitably gravitate toward a secular future. Even so, as Islam will no doubt continue to be a force that shapes not only the region but the West for decades to come, his conclusions have profound implications.

To guide us in our thinking, please join me in giving a warm welcome to our guest today, Shadi Hamid. Thank you so much for joining us.

### Remarks

**SHADI HAMID:** Thank you so much, Joanne, for the kind introduction, thank you to the Carnegie Council for having me, and thanks to all of you for coming here early this morning.

Let me just start off by saying this is in some ways a very personal book. I lived six of the last 12 years of my life in the Middle East. The Middle East has a way of changing you, in my case not necessarily for the best all the time. Some friends tell me that I have become more pessimistic as a result of living in the region, and I have to say that this book—not to be too pessimistic too early in the morning—is colored by that pessimism, and I think I have also come to have a bit of a darker view of human nature. I will get to that a little later.

Not only have I become more pessimistic; I have also come to appreciate more and more the role of religion in public life and the role of religion in the hearts and minds of believers and what that actually means for them. Part of what I have been doing for the last 10 years of my work is really trying to immerse myself in the world of political Islam. I spent hundreds of hours interviewing Islamist activists and leaders throughout the region.

I think for those of us who come from a secular background it is hard sometimes to really relate to the power of religion in the more conservative countries of the Middle East. It is not just the power of religion or the role that it plays in everyday life; it is something even a little bit beyond that. I think the best way to describe it is that there is almost—in a metaphysical sense, a supernatural sense—the magic of religion in the lives of believers on an everyday basis and how they interact with the world.

I was born and raised here in the United States; I am a product of secularism; I am a product of American small-L liberalism; and I think that even though I have spent quite a bit of time in the Middle East, I myself realized through this book that I have to make almost an extra effort to understand things which to me seem foreign in some ways.

I will just give you one example: I remember—this was before the Arab Spring—I was talking to a midlevel Muslim Brotherhood official, and we were talking about the conversion stories of Muslim Brotherhood members, because everyone has a story of how they came to be a part of the movement. I am trained in political science, and oftentimes we want to look at very tangible, measurable factors. So we talk about rural-urban migration, underemployment, unemployment, people are angry, they are poor, they don't like the United States—all those things are factors that drive people to join certain movements.

But what this midlevel official told me is that, "Shadi, sometimes it's actually a bit simpler than that; some people join the Brotherhood because they want to get into heaven." I thought this was a very interesting way of putting it, and it stuck with me six or seven years later.

We might think to ourselves, "Oh, that's a kind of irrational explanation; that doesn't really fit into our conceptions of rational choice theory of action." But if you think about it another way, what could be more rational than wanting eternal paradise? Because the idea here is that if you join a group like the brotherhood there is a structured educational curriculum, you are a part of this community of like-minded "brothers," and all of that is supposed to make you in theory become a better Muslim, and if you become a better Muslim, you have a better chance of entering paradise on the day of judgment.

I think looking back, when I was in graduate school studying political science, we never really talked about paradise in my political science seminars. [Laughter] So I think that part of what I want to do in this book is to bring religion back, but hopefully do it in a nuanced, constructive way, because it is a difficult issue.

Part of what I want to get at here is the question of how much does religion really matter? When we are trying to understand the demise of the Arab Spring or the rise of ISIS or the civil wars in the region,

how much of it is about Islam and how much of it is about "politics?" I put politics in quotation marks because even the presumption that religion and politics are separate categories and that we can say one is one and one is the other, I think is itself problematic. When you talk to many people in the region—and not just Islamists—you will find that the two are endlessly intertwined, and it is hard to know where one ends and the other begins.

Before I get into the meat of the argument, I will offer a little disclaimer here, and you will see why in a second. It is a weird thing for someone who wrote a book to say, but I am slightly uncomfortable with my own conclusions in this book, so I have been trying to make an effort when I talk about the book to be as clear as possible. But I do have a concern that in talking about Islam's exceptionalism—and I will get at what means in a second—that can obviously be misused for people who want to talk about that exceptionalism but in a negative way. For me, the word "exceptionalism" is value-neutral; if something is unique or different, it can be good in some ways and bad in others, and we have to look at how it manifests itself in each particular context.

The argument that I am making is that Islam is in fact exceptional, but not just in any way, because it almost goes without saying that all religions are different from other religions; all religions are unique in their own way. The argument here is that Islam is exceptional in a particular set of ways that have a profound impact 14 centuries after its founding, today in our own world, and we can actually see how that exceptionalism plays out in modern-day politics. It is about Islam's relationship specifically to law, politics, and governance.

In both theory and practice I argue that Islam has been resistant to secularization and that it will continue to be resistant to secularization for a long time to come—I would argue for the foreseeable future. Now, I cannot really speak to what is going to happen in 300 or 400 years—anything is possible then; we will all be dead by then—so I am not sure how relevant it is. So I wanted to focus on realistically what we have to deal with really for the rest of our lives as observers, as analysts, as people who care about the Middle East—and of course the Middle East does affect the rest of the world, whether we like it or not.

Why is Islam resistant to secularization? Why will it continue to be that way? I am going to mention here a lot of reasons, but if you want all the reasons, you should read the book, so I will put that little plug there.

I will mention two factors to get the conversation going and also to be a little provocative. These two factors really go back to the founding moment of Islam 14 centuries ago. It may be banal to say so, but history matters in my view and the founding moments of religion matter, so we have to look back and see what happened in that founding moment.

I was thinking about this the other day because Thanksgiving is coming up, and I mention this little anecdote in the book. Two years ago, Thanksgiving 2014, my family and I and some family friends in Pennsylvania were getting together, having turkey and all that. But everyone—you had Muslims of various religious backgrounds, some more practicing, some less—was talking about ISIS because that was just a couple of months after ISIS came to dominate our headlines. We were trying to make sense of how is it possible that this savage, brutal organization could come to be and to speak in our name and so on.

We started talking about the modern day. But, before we knew it, we started talking about events that had happened literally 14 centuries ago. So we could not make sense of ISIS without going very much back in history. We were talking about the Prophet and the Prophet's closest companions, the four righteously guided caliphs of the early period. It really hit me at that moment that, as an American Muslim and as someone who grew up in this community, that history feels alive in a way that is somehow hard to describe. It feels very intimate.

Even the way we talk about the first four caliphs—Abu Bakr, Omar, Uthman, and Ali—we are even on a first-name basis with them. I remember going to Sunday school. We would talk about Omar and he seemed almost like a friend of ours—"Omar this, Omar that."

When I talk to American audiences, I try to come up with what is the closest analogue to that in, say, American history. I guess the closest thing is the Founding Fathers, but do any of us really go around talking about, "Well, hey, George or Thomas or James?" There is not that same level, I think, of intimacy in a way.

That is a little digression, but I think that is one way to understand the point that history, even if it happened a very long time ago, can feel very real.

In the founding moment—and this is I think a very key point of departure between Christianity and Islam—Prophet Mohamed was not just a prophet, a theologian, or a cleric; he was also a politician; but not just a politician, he was a head of state; and not just a head of state, but a state builder. Unlike Mohamed, Jesus, in contrast, was a dissident against a reigning state. In this respect, Jesus was never put in a position to govern. So it is no surprise then that the New Testament does not have much to say about public law or governance because that is not what Jesus was dealing with at that particular time in the evolution of what would become Christianity.

On the other hand, Mohamed was capturing and holding territory. What happens when you hold territory? You have to figure out how to govern it. Presumably, if Mohamed is receiving a revelation, that revelation has to have something to say about Mohamed's particular time and place. One of his primary challenges with the early Muslims was how to govern, and this is why the Quran talks about things like family law, contracts, religiously derived criminal punishment, and so on and so forth.

If you are coming at it from the perspective of a believer, you might say, "Well, it couldn't have been otherwise. History had to evolve this way because it was God's plan." If we are coming at it from the perspective of outside observers or analysts, we would say that history was contingent; so it is possible to imagine alternative, parallel histories.

What if Mohamed and the early Muslims had lost some of those early critical battles and they were not able to build greater support, they were not able to actually have an incipient state of their own? Then, presumably, the Quran would not say the same things because they would not be in a position to govern, so what would be the point of the Quran talking about governance if Mohamed was not in the position to do those things? That is another way to look at it, that once history happens, there is a path-dependence. So once it turned it out that way, that has implications going forward, and you cannot really undo that history.

Why would that matter 14 centuries later? I do not want to give the impression that Muslims are bound to their founding moment—no one is bound to anything—but I think at the same time Muslims cannot fully escape their founding moment. And why would they want to? If you are a believing Muslim, however practicing you are or are not, you are still going to look at the founding moment with some degree of admiration and interest, and Muslims emulate and admire Prophet Mohamed. So naturally the founding moment will have some effect on the way that you see the world if you are a believer.

There are Muslim secular reformers today, but because of this founding moment, because of this history, I would argue they face an uphill battle, in the sense that if they are arguing for the separation of religion from politics, they are pretty much in a way arguing against some aspects of the prophetic model. It can be done, and I talk in a book about a number of very creative and original Muslim secular reformers—some of whom live in the West and Europe and are quite prominent, at least here—but they have not been able to gain mass traction in the Middle East and South and Southeast Asia because the arguments they are making are very complex.

How do you get around the prophetic model of intertwining religious and political functions? You can do it, but it requires a lot of complex reinterpretation, hermeneutical techniques, and things which are mostly in the realm of intellectual elite discussion about Islam. The ordinary Muslim who is trying to get by every day would prefer Islam probably to be more straightforward or simple and does not want to get into complex issues of Islamic philosophy—if I had not written this book, I probably would not have gotten too much into the theology and philosophy of it, and it is a very rich and complex history.

The second factor I will mention is the question of scriptural inerrancy. Oftentimes we hear Christian evangelicals talking about how they believe the Bible is the word of God; we hear that all the time. Muslims, we think, also say that the Quran is the word of God; so wouldn't it be similar? But actually, the more I dove into it —and I had to do a lot of diving into Christian theology and talking to pastors and Christian theologians to really get a better handle on this—where Christians, at least evangelicals in the United States, would say, "The Bible is the word of God," Muslims take it one step further and say, "Not only is the Quran the word of God, but it is God's actual speech." This is not a semantic difference.

When you say that, "The Bible is the word of God," there still is an acknowledgment of a human role, human authorship; no one would deny that Paul wrote certain parts of the Bible. But Muslims—and it's not just conservative Muslims—as a creedal requirement, Muslims believe that the Quran is directly from God; in that sense it is his actual speech and every letter and word is directly from him; Prophet Mohamed himself played no role in the actual content of the scripture. This has major implications because this is the foundation upon which Islam rests. If you take that out, a lot of other things which are very important theologically crumble. If you look historically, there has never been a major sect or denomination in Islam that has argued otherwise—that there is any kind of human authorship in the Quran.

On the other hand, there is no major sect or denomination in Christianity that has ever argued that the Bible—every letter and word of it—is directly from God. This obviously has major implications because if something is in scripture and is directly from God, you can reinterpret it and you can find five Muslims who all say that the Quran is God's actual speech but they disagree profoundly on what that means in the modern context. So you can disagree even if you all think it is God's word, but still you cannot ignore or dismiss the text altogether and say, "Well, hey, that was just something that someone wrote 1,400 years ago or 2,000 years ago." You have to at least engage with it because it is God's speech.

Moving on to the modern period, if you accept my premise that Islam is exceptional in some way, then let's dive a little bit more into what that actually means.

When we are trying to understand the rise of ISIS and all the things that are going on in the Middle East over the past few years, I think we tend to focus on a couple of dates that are quite recent: 2011, the start of the Arab Spring; or we talk about 2003, the Iraq invasion; 9/11; so on and so forth.

But there is one date which I think is very important which we do not talk about as much, and that is 1924. All of you are very smart, so you are all probably nodding to yourself, "Yeah, 1924." I'll tell you what happened in 1924; 1924 marks the date of the formal abolition of the last caliphate, the Ottoman caliphate. Ever since then, there has been a struggle to establish a legitimate political order in the Middle East. There has been a kind of religious and political vacuum since then. That is not to say that the caliphate was not controversial and people were not fighting over the meaning of the caliphate. But the point here is that for the better part of 14 centuries no one doubted that Islam provided the overarching legal, moral, and religious architecture. That was the natural order of things.

With the end of the caliphate—and, more generally, even before that with the rise of Western ideologies, Western influence, and imperialism in the Middle East—secularism and other ideas, such

as nationalism and socialism, come to the fore. This challenges for the first time the overarching religious and legal architecture.

So really, ever since the fall of the caliphate, there is this struggle. At the center of that struggle is a set of unresolved questions—and they remain unresolved to this very day—about Islam's relationship to the modern nation-state—again, that is a new thing—the role of religion in everyday life, the question of whether the state should be ideologically or religiously neutral, or should the state promote a particular conception of the virtuous life or the good life. The fact that people have not resolved those problems explains at least part of the conflict that we are seeing today.

Part of the challenge here is that premodern Islamic law, which was revealed in seventh century Arabia, was not designed for the modern era—and of course how could it be; of course it wasn't. The question is: How do you square this circle? In some ways you cannot; it is an impossible thing. You cannot take something that was revealed for the premodern era and find a perfect, easy way that everyone will agree with to apply it in an era of modern nation-states.

This is where I turned to how we think about the word "Islamism" and "Islamist movements." Islamism is a very modern thing. Islamism does not hearken back necessarily to the seventh century because Islamism could not have existed four or five centuries ago, because when Islam was the natural order of things no one had to go out of their way to assert their Islamic identity. But that is exactly what Islamism is; it is a way to say, "We have to make a political project out of Islam because it is being removed from the public sphere." In that sense, Islamism only makes sense in opposition to its opposite—namely, secularism.

I think this is very important to grasp because in the premodern era it went without saying, so it was not said. But in the modern era it does not go without saying that Islam should play a central role in public life, and this is why you have moments that define their political project around this particular concern—how to make an Islamic law prominent or central in public life and in legislation.

In this respect, Islamism is inherently polarizing precisely because it depends on its opposite. This brings me to a lot of the divides that we have seen over the past few years, that there are a number of other cleavages that are perhaps economic in nature, class-based, and so on, and I do not want to pretend that those things do not matter. But the primary divide in the Middle East, or at least in most Middle Eastern countries, is that between those we call "Islamists" and "non-Islamists." The divide there again is about these unresolved questions about Islam's relationship to the state.

In that sense, when people are debating politics in the Middle East today—and I am sure all of you have seen this—they are not really debating policy. People are not talking about tax policy or how to fight unemployment and a lot of specifics; that is not what is really at stake. People are debating the meaning and nature of the nation-state. They are talking about the very basic foundations of what it means to be an Egyptian or a Tunisian or a Turk. That is why policy discussions seem less relevant.

If I had been giving this talk a couple of years ago, I would have said, "Some of you might be thinking, 'Well, actually that kind of sounds like American politics now,' that we are not really debating policy anymore." Let's be honest; no one goes to Hillary Clinton's website and looks at all the specifics of the policy proposals because this is an existential debate we are having in this country now between Trump and Clinton about the meaning of what it means to be American. Just as a little aside, I feel that because of my experience in the Middle East, I understand this era of American politics more, which is a depressing thought.

Putting all that aside, the point here, though, is when you move away from policy and you talk about the things that are raw and existential, and you can split the middle on economic issues because it is tangible and measurable—you are dealing in a sense with numbers, even if people disagree on

economic models—but how do you split the middle on religion, ideology, or identity? You can try to understand the other; you can have national dialogues—and you should; and that is what people do—but in the end we should not be under any illusion that in the Middle East people will agree on these fundamentals because it is very existential and people have fundamentally different visions about how they want their countries to proceed.

As I close, what does that mean going forward?

One option is to have an authoritarian approach and say, "Well, if people cannot agree on Islam's role in everyday life, the best thing to do is to have an authoritarian government that represses it and does not allow people to really debate these issues and you just have one way of approaching it." That is obviously problematic because repression is not good generally.

Another thing that I really want to highlight is this idea of a reformation. Oftentimes people will say, "Well, the Middle East or the Islamic world has to go through its own reformation and then after reformation, enlightenment, then secularism toward the end of history of liberal democracy. Sometimes I get in conversations where people will say to me, "Hey, Shadi, you know, we went through this ourselves—you know, we had the Thirty Years' War, the Hundred Years' War, we had a lot of religious conflict—but don't worry, we figured it out. It took a lot of time. You guys'll get there. You're just struggling a little bit, you know."

I think this is a problematic way of approaching it because it assumes that the trajectory that Christianity—specifically Christian Europe—followed can be superimposed onto the current and future trajectory of Islam. I think we have to be careful not to fall into that liberal determinism, this idea that all people's cultures and societies will follow a particular historical path, especially when, as I have discussed, Christianity and Islam are different in very important ways. What that means in practice is that, even if we may wish there could be a reformation, even if that may be our personal preference, we have to be realistic and in some way come to terms not necessarily with Islamism writ large or it does not mean we have to like Islamist movements—and as Americans there are many things we obviously will not like about these movements and disagree profoundly on.

But I think it is broader than that. There is going to be a role for Islam in public life, and it is not just Islamists who say that. You will find that there are many secular parties or liberal parties in the Middle East or Asia which say that they want Islam to play a prominent role in public life; they just disagree on to what extent and how far that goes.

The question then is: Is that something we can really come to terms with, and what does it mean to come to terms with that? I will just close here—I want to mention a debate that I think captures this quite well.

Some of you may remember the Ben Affleck/Bill Maher debate in October 2014 with Sam Harris, the New Atheist philosopher, where they were talking about Islam. Bill Maher said something like, "Islam is the motherlode of bad ideas." Ben Affleck got really emotional and went on a—I don't want to say rant, but it was nice for me as an American Muslim to see a famous actor defending Muslims on national television. It does not happen very often. So I went, "That's kind of cool."

But then, when I thought about what Ben Affleck was saying, I was like, "I'm not sure if it really makes sense." He was essentially saying Muslims are just like us—they raise children, they care about their jobs—and then he literally said this—this is a direct quote: He said, "Muslims like eating sandwiches too." And I'm like, "Yeah, I can vouch for that. Muslims really like sandwiches. Yeah, definitely." But you can like eating sandwiches but still believe in the implementation of Islamic law.

I think what we saw in Ben Affleck's remarks was this very strong desire to say that we were

essentially all the same, we all ultimately want the same things. But I think that is not the most effective way of thinking about these issues. What I would suggest is perhaps we should learn to recognize difference but not see that as necessarily negative or bad, but to appreciate, respect, and see how we can live with people we disagree with or we do not like. That is the challenge in terms of power sharing and living in countries where there are strong ideological divides.

I think it raises a more profound question that we can get into, which is: Do we really want other people to be like us? I think we are not all the same, and I would pose the question to you: Why should we all be the same?

I will end there, and thanks for having me.

**Questions**

**QUESTION:** Warren Hoge, International Peace Institute.

Shadi, just continuing this tension between the state and Islam that you talk about in the book and you talked about this morning, it occurs to me that among Westerners who are not anti-Islamic but who do wonder about the compatibility of Islam with Western society, the word they always focus on is "sharia." In the book you talk about the secularization or the secular sharia. Could you explain that? Recognizing that sharia is a word that sets off a lot of people in the West, can you explain why it should not?

**SHADI HAMID:** I feel like the word sharia, as you are saying, is very much misused and misunderstood in our public discourse. I remember when Newt Gingrich was talking about it a few months ago, and there was a big debate about what is sharia.

Sharia is not just about law in the narrow sense. It goes beyond that. Our modern conception of law is very much based around this idea of codified law, but there is nowhere you can actually go—there is no book—to find the sharia. That is why there is a lot of confusion about it. There are hundreds, if not thousands, of legal commentaries, debates, different schools of law, and philosophical approaches, and that is why you can have five Muslims who all think Islamic law is important but disagree on what that actually means in practice.

But it also deals with private practice, in the sense that Muslims cannot pray five times a day without the sharia because the sharia is what tells people how to pray, in a sense, and you have different schools of law: According to one school of law, you pray with your hands to the side; according to another school of law, you pray like this. You cannot figure that out without having access to the sharia in the broader sense. That is one thing.

But even if you look at the medieval history of Islam, the time of the Abbasid caliphate, you never had the separation of religion from politics, but you did have at least some separation between the caliphate and clerics. In some sense, there has always been the separation of mosque and state. You had the clerical class, and they were an autonomous, self-regulating community of scholars and clerics. In the caliphate, the caliph would not actually come up with his own law; he would very much be dependent on the ones who were actually schooled in the sharia.

This is the idea of the secular sharia or what is called *siyasa shari'iya* in Arabic, and it is public discretionary law, where the caliph could do certain things that were not explicitly mentioned in the Quran or in the Sunnah of Prophet Mohamed, but it was still within the overall rubric of the sharia, and in that sense it was legitimate because they were not contradicting anything in the sharia.

One thing I realized in writing this book is that Islam is not a very simple religion to understand. I grew

up with this idea that, "Oh, Islam is supposed to be simple, rational, straightforward, and all that; you pray five times a day, you fast, you do this; there are the five pillars, you know, heaven, hell, prophet—you know, done. That's Islam." But when you actually go into the history of Islam, you realize that it is a very rich, diverse, and sometimes contradictory tradition. I now can relate more to people—like casual American observers who do not follow the Middle East very closely, and hear all these things about sharia and the caliphate, and there is no equivalent of sharia in Christianity; the closest you have is canon law, but canon law does not quite get to where sharia is. Canon law is more about the internal organization of the church and its surroundings.

In that sense, I understand the difficulty more. I think the only way to address that is to make the extra effort to talk about it with those nuances.

**QUESTION:** Thank you very much. Hareep Puri, diplomat/author, attempting to be one.

In many respects, this discussion is about the theocratic state, where religion defines the actions of the state. It is also about the Middle East. Now, maybe you have answers to what I am going to ask you in your book, and I am at a disadvantage not having read the book, which I look forward to reading now.

What I am concerned about is that we are looking at the issue of Islamic exceptionalism in the context of the Middle East. To me, what is happening in the Middle East is not so much an Islamic problem as a problem which revolves around the nature of the state which exists in those countries. If it were an Islamic problem, you would have that problem surface in Indonesia, Bangladesh, and India, which are the larger Islamic populations. This is a particular Arab problem where the state is brutal and repressive and Islam is being used for mobilization by both those who are fighting the state, and the state, in turn, uses Islam in order to repress people.

When you talk of exceptionalism in that context, the sharia law—whether it is codified or not—how will the rest of the world react to the dominant strains in Islam today when the nature of the state where this problem is being defined is fundamentally at variance with other secular democratic societies? This was a problem with the Arab Spring. We all were very excited about it because we thought it would resonate on a Western liberal democratic template, and it turned out that the rest of the world underestimated the brutality of the state which put it down so strongly; hence, other problems arose.

Forgive me for raising a very basic question; maybe your book answers it.

**SHADI HAMID:** It is a great question. I actually do talk a bit about South and Southeast Asia in the book—Indonesia and Malaysia in particular; Pakistan is also relevant.

In some sense, I think the closest thing we have to a model—I should not use the word "model" because then that jinxes it; remember when we used to call it the "Turkish model" and then it went downhill; so let's just say template—is in Indonesia and Malaysia. I think what they have been able to do is to normalize the role of Islam in public life. It is interesting that you have these two countries that are—maybe Malaysia less so—models of pluralism, tolerance, and at least some democratic practice; yet, those are also two countries where you have seen more sharia ordinances on the local level than, say, Egypt, Jordan, Morocco, Algeria, Lebanon, and so on. That seems a little bit counterintuitive.

The two things that these countries have are, first of all, decentralization, and they are more democratic. So if you are in a local conservative region of Indonesia and you want to win an election, you have to meet the median voter halfway and you have to learn to speak the language of religion. So you have actually had attempts to ban alcohol, you have had dress codes in the civil service, you have had in some localities requirements to be able to recite parts of the Quran to get married, and things like that. Some of them are no longer operable because of tensions between the local and federal law.

It is interesting to me that the Supreme Court in Malaysia has repeatedly upheld prohibitions on non-Muslims using the word "Allah." Now, think about that for a second. That would be unheard of in a place like Egypt, even if the Muslim Brotherhood came to power. Can you imagine if the Muslim Brotherhood said, "Oh, Christians can't use the word 'Allah.'" Even in Indonesia, there are debates now about whether adultery should be illegal, and there have been attempts to talk about that from a legislative perspective. Because these countries are democratic, there is openness to talk about that, and it is ongoing.

What is interesting too is that even ostensibly secular parties in both Indonesia and Malaysia have very much used Islamist discourse, or even been responsible for some of these sharia bylaws, because again there is almost a conservative consensus where everyone is trying to move to this conservative middle.

Pakistan is a good example of this too, where again ostensibly secular ruling parties have not gotten rid of the anti-blasphemy laws, which we hear so much about in the media. Because Pakistan is supposed to be an Islamic republic, all of the parties, regardless of whether they are secular or Islamist, still buy into this basic idea that Islam has an important relationship to the state.

A lot of people might say these examples are bad. But I think in another way they are better than the alternative because at least there is an ongoing debate and people can disagree through the democratic process, and then also you have a constitutional order and supreme courts which can then adjudicate, for better or worse.

I think the difference in the Arab world is that you have entrenched secular elites and you have stronger states, so I think this is a big part of the problem. This is why I have become more skeptical about the nation-state, because it is the best we have; it is what we are going to have for the rest of our lives; alternatives are not good—fine. But, at the same time, the logic of the nation-state—it is very centralizing; it brings power toward it; it is hard to decentralize because of the state's desire to surveil, to control, and so on and so forth. I think the question then is: How do you distribute power away from a centralized, bloated state?

I think in countries like Egypt there is a political culture of having this strong state, coming from Nasser onward. How do you move away from that? What that requires, I think, in some cases is weakening the centralized state; but then that is dangerous because if the state is weaker, then that might provide vacuums for local actors, including militant actors or more extreme actors, to become more active on the local level. So there is a tension there, I think.

**QUESTION:** Allen Young.

Notwithstanding people like Newt Gingrich, and maybe even Donald Trump, most people believe that American Muslims subscribe to the basic principles of American liberal democracy. But we have to understand of course that the Muslims in America are a minority. What if the Muslims became a majority? Would they still subscribe to these traditional American values, or would they attempt to impose—and that is what people like Donald Trump suggest—sharia on everybody, including non-Muslims?

**SHADI HAMID:** This is a really interesting question. But I also worry about this question because it is a pure hypothetical; it will never happen. I cannot think of any conceivable scenario in which this could be possible. But even if we said that Muslims were somehow a majority in the United States, then it would obviously not be the United States as we know it because it would be much more informed by the fact that Muslims were a majority; just as if blacks were a majority, or if whites are a majority, or any group is a majority, that has a particular effect on the basic fabric of society.

I am very much inspired by the American model, which I think is preferable to European analogues because this is a country—at least in my view—where you can be fully Muslim and fully American and you do not have to make a choice because this is a country that historically has been receptive to public expressions of religion as long as you express your religious beliefs within the constitutional order. But there is not an issue that if you are a woman who is wearing the headscarf on a beach, you do not have to worry about the police coming to you, like in France, because there is not this very aggressive, intrusive secularism.

That is not just as it relates to Muslims but also if you look at Christian evangelicals. Christian evangelicals feel, I think, under siege—whether that is a fair or unfair perception—but at least Christian evangelicals are able to express their Christianity in various parts of the country, and that is part of the American fabric, and I would never question their Americanness even though they believe in things with which I profoundly disagree as a small-L liberal, whether it is on things like gay marriage, gay rights, and so on; or Orthodox Jewish communities in New York. I think there is that tradition.

I worry that there is more talk now in the United States about the necessity of assimilation. I do not think assimilation should ever be the goal in the United States because assimilation suggests giving up your own traditions, some of your religious beliefs, your identity, to be part of this assimilated, homogenous whole. That is not—at least to me—what America is all about.

I worry that with the growing threat of terrorism there is more pressure to homogenize, and I think you see some of these problems more and more in Europe. I think that will be the key test of the next few decades because unfortunately—and not to be overly pessimistic here—I think we are going to live with terrorism for the rest of our lives. It is not something we can ever eliminate 100 percent. We can do our best to minimize it, to reduce it, but there will always be that threat, and that threatens the very nature of our country and how we think about what it means to be American. But I do think thus far this is a very positive model or template here in the United States.

**QUESTION:** Shadi, I understood all about the exceptionalism of Islam, but you did not discuss at all another ism—nationalism. If you were to define a lot of the countries that are involved in the troubles of the Middle East—whatever the differences; Shia, Sunni, and so on—you would find in the end that they define themselves above all else, "I am an Egyptian," "I am a Saudi," "I am a—whatever," and they would fight on those principles in many ways deeper—I think from what I know of the Middle East—than those divisions that you have described. You did not at all discuss that. I have not read your book, so I do not know whether it is in your book.

**SHADI HAMID:** One thing I discuss in the book is—you are right that there is a sense of Egyptianness. Just to give one example, my parents are originally from Egypt and I spent a lot of time and lived in Egypt. What is interesting there is that, even though Egyptians have a sense of state, there is an idea of what it means to be Egyptian. Egypt has existed for quite a long time. It is not as artificial or arbitrary as some more recent states like, say, Jordan, for example. But the primary divide in Egypt is between Egyptians—Islamists and non-Islamists—and we saw this in the case of the military coup against—

**QUESTIONER:** Take Saudi Arabia and Iran, one Persian civilization against the other. That is the fundamental divide in modern politics in the Middle East. It is religions, but it is also national.

**SHADI HAMID:** I am not saying that nationalism does not matter. I think in the case of Saudi versus Iran it is more sectarian; it is more about Sunni and Shia; and the anti-Shia sentiment in Saudi Arabia is obviously very strong.

One thing I talk about is once nationalism happens, once we live in an era of nation-states, you cannot undo that. Even for people who do not like the idea of the nation-state that much, the vast majority of

citizens of the Arab world have only lived under nation-states. If you are 90 or 95 years old in Turkey, you would have had two years of the Ottoman caliphate. If that is all you know, then naturally there is still going to be a sense of nationalism.

Even Islamists very much act according to their national context, where the Jordanian Brotherhood is very different than the Egyptian Brotherhood, Tunisia's Ennahda is very different than the Egyptian Brotherhood, and so on and so forth.

So I do not want to give the impression that the sense of nation does not matter. But within nations I think you see this very starkly—and I will just mention a very quick example: One thing that really had an effect on me, which colors my darker view of human nature, is that a month after the coup in Egypt in 2013 the worst mass killing in modern Egyptian history happened—August 14, 2013.

My family members in Egypt—people who are dear to me, who I like, some whom I don't like as much—they are my relatives—but people who you know very well and are important to you—and I saw how not only did they support the coup against a democratically elected Brotherhood government, they also supported the mass killings. I had one member of my family who came out publicly, and without shame, and essentially was calling for mass executions. It was a very fascinating and frightening puzzle for me: How can otherwise good people who are very well educated, part of the secular elite and so on, support these very terrible things?

This is where the raw and existential part comes in. They saw the Brotherhood and its continued existence as such a threat to their way of life, of how they understood their own country, that they were not willing to let the democratic process play out because they were worried that Islamists would keep on winning.

That to me really captures this sense of divide powerfully. They all considered themselves Egyptians. If you talk to Brotherhood members, they might consider their Muslim identity to be more, but they are also proud to be Egyptian. But, despite sharing that, they turned against each other and were willing to kill each other. And this was just two-and-a-half years after the start of the Arab Spring.

I looked at other examples and tried to see if there were other examples where people who claimed to believe in democracy turned against it so quickly, just in the matter of a couple of years, and I could not find a historical example that quite gets at this. Because what you had was the vast majority of Egyptian liberals and members of the secular elite supporting the coup; it was not that they were divided. The fact that you saw that unanimous position on the part of this portion of Egyptian society was very striking, I think.

**QUESTION:** Ron Berenbeim.

This is not really my field, but I have studied world history. All this is incompatible with what I understand to be the uniquely tolerant reputation of the Islamic world for the first thousand years or so of its existence, which is perhaps without precedent in human history. Can you explain this incompatibility?

**SHADI HAMID:** Don't get me wrong. When we talk about the caliphates historically, or even the implementation of sharia historically, there are progressive interpretations of Islamic law. This goes back to Warren's question. Islamic law should not be automatically assumed to mean harsh implementation of Islamic law.

In the Abbasid caliphate, you still had a caliphate; you still had sharia. But it was a more broadminded approach to Islamic law, it was more pluralistic, and so on and so forth. We know about that historically in terms of the advancements in science and philosophy and translation of Greek works and so on and

so forth.

That said, if we took that caliphate and applied it today, it would not reach quite the level of modern liberalism. We also should not sugarcoat it and say that Jews and Muslims were 100 percent equal. For the time, it was unprecedented to have that level of pluralism in, say, Andalusia or in Baghdad. But if we had that today, it would not quite be liberalism.

I think this is also the challenge, that we have these modern conceptions of post-Enlightenment liberalism and human rights, which if we superimpose them a thousand years ago, obviously there is going to be a dissonance. That is even the case if we look at the Founding Fathers of our own American liberalism, like James Madison, who owned a lot of slaves.

Part of the difficulty here is trying to understand how to apply one context to another. But I think your point is very important. I think one thing that allowed for this kind of broadmindedness was the weakness of the central state. For a lot of people, the caliph in Baghdad was not very relevant to their everyday life because he was powerful but he—he and the kind of bureaucracy—did not have control over every little thing in every local province because states were incapable of that in the premodern period.

Actually it is interesting that many caliphs were known to be quite proficient wine drinkers. Obviously, we all know that alcohol consumption is legally prohibited according to Islamic law according to any school of thought. The idea there was they would do things in the private realm, but they would still uphold the prohibition on alcohol consumption in public because that is what the social order depended on. You have this kind of public/private distinction, which you could have had a thousand years ago but you cannot have now, because if there was a caliph somewhere in the Middle East, people would be tweeting—someone would take a picture of him drinking wine, and then everyone would be like, "Oh my god, the caliph's drinking wine," and people would freak out.

It is also in this sense that the masses are not willing to be as deferential to elites now because of higher levels of literacy and education. That was not the case a thousand years ago.

I think we have to take into account all these factors, which again makes it hard to compare. I would never want to give the impression that when we use words like "caliphate," caliphate means a strict implementation. I think the examples that you point to, that we look at, show that it can be, at least for its time, very forward leaning, broadminded, and pluralistic.

**JOANNE MYERS:** I want to thank you very much for a very interesting discussion.

**SHADI HAMID:** Thank you.

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