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ISLAMIC EXCEPTIONALISM:
HOW THE STRUGGLE OVER ISLAM IS RESHAPING THE WORLD

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PARTICIPANTS:

Introduction:

TAMARA COFMAN WITTES
Senior Fellow and Director, Center for Middle East Policy
The Brookings Institution

Remarks:

LEON WIESELTIER
Isaiah Berlin Senior Fellow in Culture and Policy
The Brookings Institution

Speaker:

SHADI HAMID
Senior Fellow, Project on the U.S. Relations with the Islamic World
The Brookings Institution

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P R O C E E D I N G S

MS. WITTES: Well, good afternoon, everyone, and welcome. I'm Tamara Wittes. I direct the Center for Middle East Policy here at Brookings and delighted to have you all here. To all of those who are observing the holy month, let me begin saying Ramadan Kareem.

In a few minutes we will hear from Shadi Hamid, a senior fellow in our project on U.S. Relations with the Islamic World, about his new book. And he will then be joined in conversation by our Isaiah Berlin senior fellow for Culture and Policy, Leon Wieseltier, for what I know will be a fascinating and enlightening conversation.

After we finish our program here in Falk, we will have a reception across the hall. And I hope that you can all stay to join us and celebrate Shadi's new scholarship.

The proper role of Islam in modern politics has of course been a subject of intense debate in Muslim majority countries, at least since the 19th century with the end of the Caliphate and the rise of the modern nation state. But in the West, this discussion has penetrated largely since the rise of Al Qaeda in the 1990s.

Since then people in Washington and across America have been trying to understand what Islam means for the politics of the Middle East, for other Muslim majority countries, and for Muslim communities in the West. And from the beginning, this topic has attracted at least as much heat as light.

Indeed, the role of Islam in politics has been a subject for partisanship and polemics in very parochial political contexts from Oklahoma to Paris, from Baghdad to Abu Dhabi, from Kabul to Kuala Lumpur.

And looking back across the last 30 years or so of the Washington discussion on Islam in politics, I think it's fair to say that the fraught interaction between Islamic religious and political thought and modern politics has become one of the most discussed and least understood subjects in Western political discourse.

Our project here at Brookings on U.S. relations with the Islamic world has, from its founding in 2002, sought to help alleviate that problem and to shed light more than heat on this subject of profound global importance.

Just over two years ago, we met in this room to mark the publication of Shadi's first book,

ANDERSON COURT REPORTING
706 Duke Street, Suite 100
Alexandria, VA 22314
Phone (703) 519-7180 Fax (703) 519-7190

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“Temptations of Power: Islamists and Illiberal Democracy in a New Middle East.” That was a book rooted in Shadi’s extensive field work amongst the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood before, during, and after the Egyptian revolution that toppled Hosni Mubarek in 2011.

And at its heart, “Temptations of Power” was a book that tried to answer a very hard question. Can Islamist movements like the Muslim Brotherhood govern democratically?

After watching the Brotherhood and President Mohammed Morsi indulge in a destructive degree of majoritarianism, illiberal policy choices, and exclusionary decision making, I think it’s fair to say Shadi came away unpersuaded.

But tough intellectual questions have a way of sticking with you. And in many ways, “Temptations of Power” only opened wider, for Shadi, the question of the potential relationship between Islam and democracy, well beyond Egypt and well beyond the Muslim Brotherhood.

And so immediately after that book was published, in fact probably before it was published, he dove back in for a deeper exploration. The result is the book that we are here to launch today, “Islamic Exceptionalism: How the Struggle Over Islam is Reshaping the World.” And if you don’t yet have your copy, I certainly hope you will before the end of the evening.

Through a historical examination of Islamic political thought and through examining the politics of and over Islam in Egypt, in Tunisia, in Turkey, and among the extreme adherents of the Islamic State, Shadi has taken a bigger bite of this question. Is Islam exceptional in its relationship to politics, and especially to democratic politics? Is it possible to forge a reliably liberal political order in which Islamic political ideas and movements have a central place?

Now for Shadi, as an American Muslim and as a student of Middle Eastern politics, writing this book has not just been an intellectual journey. I think, having observed him through the process, it’s been a personal one as well. And I’m very proud that Brookings has a scholar of Shadi’s caliber and range to help enlighten our understanding on this profound question.

But I’m also very proud that Brookings is the kind of place where a scholar can dig deep, and take that journey, and produce such a fine result as the book that you have before you today. So please join me in welcoming Shadi to the stage. (Applause)

MR. HAMID: Thanks so much, Tamara, for the kind introduction. And thanks to all of

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you for being here and being a part of this book launch.

So I'll just start off by saying, because some of you know that I'm a big Twitter user, so I just want to remind you if you want to join the discussion to use the hashtag up there, Islamic exceptionalism, which also incidentally is the title of the book.

So I'm going to start with a little bit of an ominous preface and then hopefully get slightly more optimistic over the course of these introductory remarks.

But, you know, in some ways, as Tamara said, this was and is a very personal book for me. I've lived six of the last 12 years of my life in the Middle East. And the Middle East does have a way of changing you. And some of my friends, and perhaps my parents as well, tell me that I've become more pessimistic over time.

And I think they're right. I have come out of this, my experience studying the region, living in the region, with a somewhat darkened view of human nature. And we'll get into some of that shortly. I've also come to appreciate more and more the power of religion, the role of religion in public life and everyday life.

And I'll just give one example of this. You know, I'm trained as a political scientist. And we have a tendency to think that things are caused by material factors. So if someone joins an Islamist organization, they're doing so because they're poor, or they're angry, or they're seeking power, or some other tangible factor that we can measure.

But I remember one time a mid-level Muslim Brotherhood official telling me that sometimes there's a simpler reason for joining an Islamist organization. And he said, "Sometimes people just want to get into Heaven."

And I thought that was an interesting way of putting it. And it is something I've heard time and time again from individual Muslim Brotherhood members. Part of it is about something intangible, not just this life but the life to come. And in other words, joining an Islamist organization makes you a better Muslim. And if you're a better Muslim, then you have a better chance to enter Paradise.

Now, this might sound irrational to a kind of -- from a Western secular perspective. But if you look at it another way, what could be more rational than wanting eternal Paradise? So this is just a segue to kind of start off and pose the question, which is really at the center of my book, which is how

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much does Islam really matter when we're trying to understand the rise of ISIS or the demise of the Arab Spring? How do we situate the role of religion?

So one of the main arguments I make in the book and perhaps the most controversial, and already the book's only been out technically for two days, but I've been attacked already quite a lot from both left and right. And this controversial argument, I'll put it this way and try to lay it out as clearly as I can, it's that's Islam is, in fact, exceptional in how it relates to politics, law, and governance.

And in both theory and practice, Islam has been, is, and I would argue will continue to be resistant to secularization. In other words, Islam is different. It's fundamentally different than other major religions and so on. So you can see why that might be a controversial argument.

But let me get into some of the details of it. The question I often get is, well, why? Why exactly is Islam "exceptional?" And I should also say that I chose the word exceptional because I think it's as value-neutral as you can get. Exceptionalism doesn't have to be good or bad. It can be both. It can be one or the other, depending on the context. So I want to make that very clear, that being exceptional is not necessarily a bad thing.

So I'll mention here two factors contributing to Islam's exceptionalism. First, we might have to go back 14 centuries or actually 20 centuries. It might be banal to say so, but history matters, and the founding moments of religions matter.

Jesus, as you all know, was a dissident against a reigning state. The New Testament doesn't have a lot to say about law or governance. And why would it? That's not what Jesus was doing. That was not his project.

Now, Prophet Muhammad, on the other hand, was quite different. He was not only a cleric theologian and a prophet, but he was also a politician. He was a head of state. He was a state builder. And the religious and political functions were intertwined in the person of Muhammad. But not only that, they were meant to be intertwined in the person of Prophet Muhammad.

Now, of course, for the believer it couldn't be otherwise. So a Muslim would say that this was God's plan. This is how it had to happen. There is no counterfactual that we can consider. But for others, or from an outside analytical perspective, we can say that the Quran in this sense, and Islam in its early founding moment, is a product of a set of historical circumstances.

In other words, let's say Prophet Muhammad was not in a position to capture territory. Then presumably, in a sort of parallel alternative universe, the Quran wouldn't have much to say about law and governance. Because Muhammad wouldn't have been dealing with those sets of issues. But because he did capture territory, and held it, and governed it, almost by definition the Quran had to address these particular issues.

And this kind of leads to a sort of side point. But I think it's an important one. So I get this question a lot. Well, does the Quran endorse violence? And I think this is sort of a weird question. Of course, there is violence in the Quran. How could it be otherwise? If Prophet Muhammad was capturing territory, the only way you can capture territory is by wresting control of it from other people.

Historically, state building, whether it's Muslims, Christians, or Jews, has been a violent process. So, yes, there is "violence", in the Quran. And again, how could it be otherwise if Prophet Muhammad was a state builder? And that's also probably somewhat controversial, but okay.

So, but I should say too, and clarify -- and make this clear, that Muslims aren't bound to their founding moment. But they can't fully escape their founding moment either. Islam can't be anything you want it to be. Every religion is defined by at least some boundaries, some limits, by a creed. And there are creedal requirements in the monotheistic religions.

Now, this has relevance and major implications even 14 centuries later. Because there is a prophetic model. And there have been secularists and liberals, particularly in the last century, who have argued for some kind of separation of religion from politics or some kind of privatization of religion.

But I would argue that they can make those arguments. And there have been prominent figures who have made those arguments, but that it's a harder sell. Because in effect, they have to argue against the prophetic model. They have to deal with this fact of history that Prophet Muhammad intertwined both religious and political functions.

Now, you can do that. And in the book I talk about, for example, I think one of the most fascinating but also least well known figures in recent Islamic history, Mahmoud Muhammad Taha, a Sudanese religious thinker. I won't go into what he advocated, but I will assume that the vast majority of you have not heard of him.

And I think there's a reason for that. Because his arguments did not gain traction in the

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Middle East and beyond. Because he had to essentially argue against the prophetic model. It can be done. It's just difficult, or more difficult than it might otherwise be.

Now, the second factor I'll mention briefly is the issue of Quranic inerrancy. So there is no equivalent of Quranic inerrancy in Christianity. And this became more clear to me the more I dove into Christian theology in writing this book and talking to Christian theologians.

And I think, in this sense, Muslims misunderstand this important aspect of Christianity. The equivalent of the Quran in Christianity is not the New Testament, its Jesus, in other words, the word made flesh.

So even if you talk to far right Christian evangelicals, or if you talked to conservative Christians six centuries ago, they wouldn't argue that the Bible is God's actual speech. They would argue that the Bible is the word of God. And I want to make that distinction clear.

Muslims, on the other hand, believe that the Quran is God's actual speech. God's actual speech is different than the word of God. In other words, if it's God's actual speech, that means every letter and word is directly from God. There is no human mediation, or interference, or any kind of involvement of that sort.

Okay. So if you accept my premise that Islam is exceptional in these ways, then the question is how meaningful is that today? How does that manifest itself today? And when I'm trying to understand the rise of ISIS, or the fall of the Arab Spring, for me obviously 2011 is an important date. 2003, the Iraq invasion, is also an important year.

But I think there's another date that doesn't get a lot of attention, 1924. And since this is a Brookings event, I'm going to assume that the vast majority of you know what I'm referring to, what happened in 1924. But it's the date of the formal abolition of the last Caliphate, the Ottoman Caliphate.

And ever since then, there has been a struggle to establish a legitimate political order in the Middle East. At the center of that struggle are a set of unresolved questions about the role of religion in public life and Islam's relationship to the state. And these are very difficult questions to answer. And I would argue there haven't been good answers yet. And that's part of the problem.

So Islamic law wasn't designed for the modern era. Islamic law was designed for the pre-modern era. So how do you take something that was designed for a particular time and adapt it to a modern era

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of nation states? How do you square that circle? The problem is you can't really exactly square the circle. You can try, you can attempt, you can try to do as much reconciliation as possible. But there isn't a clear way of doing it.

So in this sense, I think it's important to talk about mainstream Islamism. And this is where the mainstream Islamist, in other words, Muslim Brotherhood or Muslim Brotherhood inspired movements become important, because they aren't harkening back to the seventh century.

To me this is one of the biggest misconceptions about mainstream Islamists. They are inherently modern and modernist in the sense that they are a product of modernity. They're trying to do something that no one really did before. And if I had to sum up mainstream Islamism in a sentence conceptually, I would describe it as the attempt to reconcile pre-modern Islamic law with the modern nation state.

And in this sense, the very existence of political Islam, I would argue, is inherently polarizing, because it's new, and different, and unprecedented. In other words, Islamism as an "idea," couldn't have existed in the pre-modern era. The word didn't exist.

Islam imbued every aspect of everyday life for the better part of 14 centuries. It provided the overarching moral, religious, and legal culture. It imbued everything. It went without saying, so it wasn't said. You never had to assert your Islamicness, your authenticity.

But then we have the modern era, and for the first time Islam becomes a distinct political project. And in this sense, Islamism only makes sense in opposition to something else, in other words, secularism. So with the rise of Colonialism, secularism, Western ideas are coming in.

For the first time Muslims, and Islamists in particular, feel a need, a desire to say we are different. We are affirming or reaffirming our Islamic identity. So it becomes a very conscious political act. And in the process of taking part in that act, we see polarization. And this is what I think leads me to some of my pessimism, in that Islamism depends on its opposite.

Now, as I close up in the last couple of minutes, I'll just -- okay, so how this manifests itself today, and I'll just give a couple of examples, is we see a divide in many if not most Middle Eastern countries between Islamists on one hand and non-Islamists on the other. And those could be secularists, liberals, nationalists, so on, and so forth.

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So I'm under no illusion that these two sides and the various shades in between are going to reach some kind of workable resolution to the problem of the state. Because at the end of the day, Islamists and secularists have fundamentally different visions for what they want in their own countries.

So in other words, you know, people in Egypt, or Libya, or Tunisia, for that matter, they're not debating policy the way we debate policy so, like, tax policy or universal healthcare. Actually, I just thought about that now and realized we don't actually debate those things anymore. We just talk about Donald Trump. (Laughter)

So, okay, well -- But, what is at the center of debates in the Middle East are kind of intangible things. I would actually describe them as metaphysical in the sense that we're talking about divisions over the meaning, and nature, and purpose of the nation state. How do you have a reasoned discussion about that? How do you measure that? You can't. It's beyond us. It's metaphysical. It's almost spiritual in a way.

And that contributes to the existential divides that we see and in turn to the violence that we see. So then, in that sense, my hope is a fairly modest one. And you'll have to actually buy and read the book to see what the way forward is. But I'll just give you a little taste of it, is that I think people will continue to hate each other for the foreseeable future in the Middle East, for legitimate reasons, for understandable reasons.

But my hope is that they can learn to hate each other through peaceful, political processes, in other words, not to resort to violence. I think from our standpoint as kind of American or Western observers, I think part of what we need to do, and it's difficult, is to come to terms with the fact that Islam is going to continue to play a prominent even central role in public life in much of the Middle East and beyond.

And I think then we have to sort of challenge our assumptions. And it's remarkable to me how built in to our national debate this is. It's implicit, you know, it goes without saying that we just assume that all people's cultures and societies will follow a particular trajectory, reformation, enlightenment, secularization, then to end of history.

So there's almost this patronizing tone that I sometimes hear, which is, oh, you know, Muslims

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will get there. They'll figure it out, just like the Christians did. And they'll go through that linear process and all of that.

And I'll just close with a little anecdote. Some of you might remember this. It was in October 2014. Remember the famous or infamous Ben Affleck, Bill Maher debate where Ben Affleck got really worked up when Bill Maher and Sam Harris, a new APS philosopher, were talking about Islam being the mother lode of bad ideas. That's how it was phrased. So Ben Affleck got really worked up. And you could see him, like the emotion, the passion.

And I think for a lot of us, as American Muslims, we were kind of cheering Ben Affleck on. Finally, someone on national television, especially an actor, is defending us. That doesn't happen so often, cool, great.

But then when I thought about it some more, some of what Ben Affleck was saying didn't sit well with me. And I don't think it was quite accurate. He said something along the lines of we all basically want the same things. We all want to raise our kids, and eat, and whatever.

Well, he actually did give an example. He said, actually he said this. He said, "Muslims like to eat sandwiches too." But I thought to myself, it's possible to like eating sandwiches but to still believe in the implementation of Islamic law to one degree or another. The two things are not mutually exclusive. I actually know a lot of people who like eating sandwiches and who like the implementation of Islamic law.

But it gets, I think, to a very challenging almost kind of philosophical question that I think is difficult for us as, I think, most Americans are small l liberals, small d democrats. I think it's hard for us to really grapple with the fact of difference, of this divergence in cultures or religions.

And I think what I would say is we aren't all the same. We don't ultimately all want the same things. But then again, why should we? So I guess I'll just end there, actually. Thank you.

(Applause)

MR. WIESELTIER: Thank you. The most significant event — you'll pardon my coughing. I have bubonic plague. (Laughter) The most significant event of our time in the Middle East, we thought, was the Arab Spring. We now know that the most significant event of our time in the Middle East was the failure of the Arab Spring which was really one of the most shattering events of our lifetime.

And I see your book, I have to tell you, as probably the most thoughtful attempt that I know to come to grips, to try to make sense with the rubble of the Arab Spring, to see what can be done after these colossal disappointments. I mean, one heartbreak after another.

You know, there is a sentence in Alexander Herzen, the 19th century Russian revolutionary, who was watching another massacre in the streets of Paris in 1848. And he wrote, "We did not know we had so much left in our hearts to be broken." I mean, and one really has this feeling that over and over -- and as I say, your book is important as an attempt to think through what is possible.

It is obviously an expression of despondency. I can't tell if it's an expression of despair. In some passages, it seems to be that, in others it doesn't.

I think that it performs a signal service. Your notion of Islamist exceptionalism, I think, you clearly refute and effectively refute certain very pervasive liberal platitudes about certain things, the liberal platitude about the linear, confident, inevitable nature of progress, for example, when in fact the failures of the Arab Spring are just the latest evidence we have that progress always provokes a horrific response and that it's usually fitful. And it's one step forward, two steps back, which is why people who are for progress in the long run have to learn to keep their heads.

You very effectively refute the liberal condescension towards religion which is essentially a kind of more polite version of the old Marxist idea that religion is just epiphenomenal to things, it's just an expression of social, economic, or political interests, or worse that it's just an opiate, that it's just a drug that people take because they're experiencing hardship.

And you very eloquently establish that the integrity of belief, not just the reality of it but the integrity of it, for many, many believers. And these are very important correctives. These are very important correctives.

Then you go on, and you want to, in this notion of Islamic exceptionalism, to make an argument that is interesting to me. And this is what I hope we could talk about. You argue that there are many progressive elements within Islam.

In other words, the fact that the grip of Islam has not been broken, upon the societies that we're all studying, may not be just the bad news. Because Islam has many, many positive things in it, and you -- and by the way, I should immediately say I'm not an Islamic scholar. When I read your book, I

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make many, many parallels with what I do know which is Judaism. And the parallels are actually extraordinary, much closer than the parallels with Christianity, by the way, extraordinary.

But you show very persuasively that Islam has attitudes and doctrines about the state and about the administration of the state, that there are of course elements of reason and decency in Islam and so on, that there's a lot to work with, as it were, in the modern age, that it is not -- and I should say one of the other nice services of your book is that it exposes what I think of as the myth of anachronism.

In other words, you always hear people say how in the 21st century can we see an 8th century Caliphate like ISIS when, in fact, ISIS is just as much a 21st century phenomenon as the iPhone in my pocket. You know, if it's happening today, it's not anachronistic. And your book clears away all that illusion about anachronism and so on, which is part of that kind of Whiggish interpretation of history that we now see everywhere.

But you make these arguments about Islam, and you say that we have to work, there's a lot to work with here. And so I have two questions for you, Shadi.

The first one is isn't it the case that in Islam, as in Judaism, that since Islam is not only a great religion but a great civilization, and since every great religion and every great civilization must include within it nourishment for every kind of soul and community that wishes to call itself Jewish, or Islamic, or Christian, and therefore has many different strands of thought and spirituality, isn't it the case that Islam contains a broad diversity of political and moral values, some of which certain parties choose to italicize and others of which other parties choose to italicize?

You know, when -- which is to say isn't Islam and, essentially, isn't the work of Muslims always essentially interpretation? Isn't this really -- aren't we confronted here with choices between interpretations of the religion? And modernists will choose one version, anti-modernists will choose another. But all of them are Islamic.

I mean, I have to say, you know, when Obama and others say that when terrorists kill someone shouting allahu akbar, it's not a Muslim act. I think to myself, well, actually no, it's not the only Muslim act. But if someone bursts into your house screaming, you know, when a Jewish terrorist kills someone and recites a Hebrew Biblical verse, I would not dare to suggest that he did not commit a

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Jewish act. It's just not the only possible Jewish act.

And so my first question to you is, isn't it the case that there is support in Islam for both progressive politics and reactionary politics, and that the battle we're seeing now is really a battle about that?

And the second question I have for you is that, I mean, I find it very hard to imagine, at the end of the day, where we're talking about the eventual emergence of an open society, some sort of genuinely free and fair society, which may not emerge the way it emerged in Europe out of Christianity -- though I have to tell you, it took centuries for that to happen, it took -- a lot of people were burned, a lot of books were burned.

You know, we are so accustomed in the West to liberalization and secularization that we act as if John Stuart Mill was born the day after Thomas Aquinas died. That's not how it happened here. That's not how it happened here. I mean, democratization, liberalization, it's not an event. It's an era. It's an era.

But my question to you is, if we are actually seeking the emergence of open, free, fair societies in the Arab world, in the Muslim world, I have to say, no matter how -- any way I look at it, no matter how I try to get around all the differences that you posit, I don't see how finally that can happen without breaking the grip of the mosque upon the public square. I honestly don't see how that can happen.

Now, there could emerge enlightened theocracies. That's possible. Because there may emerge -- believing Muslims may come to power who actually kindle to the more progressive elements in their tradition and choose to italicize and emphasize those.

But one, the idea that an enlightened theocracy is what we, meaning all, what we, you know who we are, that what we are struggling for or what our brothers and sisters, the dissidents in Iran, and Egypt, and elsewhere are struggling for, that doesn't seem right to me. That doesn't seem right to me. And so I wonder whether -- I guess I'll leave it at that. And then we can talk about these things.

MR. HAMID: Thank you so much, Leon, for the kind words on the book and for your thoughtful comment. There's a lot to say. And I look forward to discussing it. And I guess I would just start, so I'm happy that you mentioned what you mentioned about ISIS.

And I remember when President Obama said something along the lines of groups like ISIS have no place in the 21st century which sounded nice, but then I thought about it. ISIS is inconceivable in any century but our own. And so that's just the first thing.

But, you know, on your point about so what does Islam really contain in this issue of different interpretations? And so actually one of the, I guess, counterintuitive arguments I make in the book is that Islam, I would argue, may very well be the most modern, "modern," of the monotheistic religions in the sense that you don't have to choose between being modern and being Islamic.

Because Islam historically, and to this very day, has been able to absorb and incorporate foreign ideas with surprising effectiveness. So that's why you can essentially put the word Islamic before any noun, and it sort of works, Islamic socialism, Islamic capitalism, Islamic Calvinism, Islamic banking, Islamic music, Islamic rock, so on and so forth.

So the fact that people can sort of take ideas, and then retroactively say they're Islamic, or make them Islamic, and in effect Islamize them, I think that makes it very difficult to push Islam to the side, because it doesn't, in a sense, need to be pushed to the side. You can accommodate these other ideas.

So for example, the precedent or tradition of Shura or consensus in Islamic history and Islamic law, that's not democracy. But you can sort of argue, well, it was a precursor to democracy and that it's an analog. And we can update Shura and make it into at least procedural if not liberal democracy or substantive democracy.

So I think that -- and that's what we see with the Islamic modernists of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. They see this challenge of secularism, and colonialism, and then they're trying to update the Islamic tradition but still keep Islam central.

MR. WIESELTIER: Can I say --

MR. HAMID: Yes, yes. Sure.

MR. WIENSELTIER: -- something to that? Two things. First, what you're describing, of course, is how all religions and who all legal systems survive. They survive by adapting to circumstances. And the trick is to do so in a way that preserves that integrity of the system.

But there's no question that Islam has survived into the 21st century in the way Judaism

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has, because it knows how to adapt to new circumstances, and because it honors the needs of its communities. So I think that's certainly true.

But I'll tell you a story about someone you write about in the book, my good friend Michael Waltzer. Many, many years ago we got into the only real quarrel we've ever had. We were studying a 13th century Jewish text. It was a legal opinion. It was a Teshuvah which is, I guess, like a Fatwa. And it had to do with decision making for communities. And it was civic decision making, not religious decision making.

And it was about -- and it was by a great 13th century German rabbi who ruled that decision making would be done by taking a vote of the majority of the notables of the city. What the Hebrew phrase is Tovei ha-ir, the notables of the city.

So my friend, Michael, who was very keen to find liberalism and democracy in his tradition, said, "Aha, there's democracy here." And I would say, no, no, no, no, no, no. There's proto-democracy at best. What this is is majority rule in an oligarchy. All those notables were men, and all those notables were rich. So we have to be very careful.

So one may find element -- and again, it was also encouraging, because it was rational decision making. No one suggested that necromancers be consulted or that the rabbi with the longest beard have the most authority. I'm sure you have similar problems where you come from, right?

But still, but still, it's not what we -- and so the issue for me is not whether or not you have to put Islam aside. Because Islam isn't budging. It's not going anywhere, as you say. The question is whether certain values that are not in the Islamic tradition, but that we value on independent philosophical grounds, can be introduced into Islamic societies without a rupture. For example, the value of equality.

I mean, I don't know enough about Islam to say whether there is anything like the modern value of equality. I will tell you this. There is nothing like the modern value of equality in Jewish law and in Judaism. There are all kinds of lovely things about the dignity of man and about all human beings made in God's image. There are wonderful things to quote.

But if we're talking about equality of the kind that liberals mean, that allows us to live in this society as free individuals, and not just male free individuals but free individuals; I wonder whether all

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the good progressive news about Islam will ever be enough to bring Muslim societies to that point.

MR. HADIM: Yes. So I would make a distinction here. I think Islam is very much compatible with democracy. Where I do think there is tension, and this is what you're getting at, is there is tension between Islam and liberal democracy or liberalism.

And I think that it raises this question. So you talk about the goal of a fair society or fairness as a kind of normative good. Can you have a fair society without it being liberal in the modern, Western classical sense? To what extent is liberalism the required end point, right?

And in this sense, I think that I'm -- so in terms of precedence in Islamic law and history, you don't have equality in the modern sense, but you very much do have what I would describe as egalitarianism. And those aren't the same things. And gender equality is obviously an issue where, let's say, most Middle Eastern countries are lacking.

And if you look at the polling, the polling is very clear. It's not just an issue of Islamists but large majorities in places like Egypt, Jordan, or even Malaysia and Indonesia do not believe in gender equality in the modern Western sense.

So part of this is also I'm making a pragmatic argument, a realistic one, that even if we might want certain outcomes, so you and I, as small I American liberals, or the many of you who are small I American liberals, we might prefer these outcomes.

But what I try to do in this book, and what I try to do in my work, and what I get attacked a lot for is I believe that as an analyst I have to, at least to some extent, suspend my personal ideological preferences.

So if I think that liberalism is preferable, and if I'm skeptical of religion playing a role in U.S. government as an American Muslim, that's great for me. But I just don't know, it's not clear to me why those preferences should be superimposed on people who disagree with me, in the sense that I think that I'm a liberal, in part because I'm a product of secular American society.

MR. WIESELTIER: Yes, yes.

MR. HAMID: So it's context bound.

MR. WIESELTIER: Well, I would disagree with that. I think that even though, as a biographical, historical, contingent matter, its context bound. But I think that these values can, in fact, be

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argued to be universal values. I really believe in universalism. I don't see how we can operate as a planet, actually, without it. And I do think that the origin of the provenance of a value isn't all you need to know about it.

I mean, algebra is something that my Jewish son has to study even though a Muslim invented it, right? In other words, there are universal values. But the thing I wanted to say is that I'm uncomfortable -- what I find hard to do is to tell other people that -- well, let me back up for a second. And you're absolutely right that the problem we may be facing is not Islam, in a doctrinal or abstract way, but the actual social philosophies of millions of ordinary Muslims in many countries.

As we were saying earlier, I first came upon this, I was shocked, when I read Wael Ghonim's memoir, who was the hero of Tahrir Square, and discovered a political revolutionary who was a social reactionary. And I thought, well, that's interesting. And it helped to explain how a million people turned out in Tahrir Square a little bit later for the opposite of one thing.

But I find it -- I have a moral problem telling other people that they must learn to live with a soft version of the oppression. I have a problem with that. In other words, I think that -- first of all, as an empirical matter, there are also many people, dissidents, democratizers, in many Arab states, in Iran, in Pakistan, and elsewhere, who are actually battling for a secular space in which, of course, religion would be free. We're not speaking about Voltaire here. We're speaking about pluralism and respect for religion.

But I think that -- I have trouble telling them, well, you think that the options before you should be government by bad mullahs, government by good mullahs, or government by no mullahs at all. I can't go to them and say, sorry, the option of no mullahs at all is off the table and that you just have to decide between good mullahs and bad mullahs. We can define good and bad however you want.

MR. HAMID: So the interesting thing there in this issue of mullahs or clerics is that Islamist movements are, in a way, non-clerical. They've even historically sometimes been anti-clerical which I think is a really interesting distinction in the sense that Islamist movements are made up primarily of doctors, engineers, lawyers, teachers.

And if you actually talk to members of Islamist movements, the mainstream Islamist movements, I should say, they're not really strong on Islamic law. So they're not great at quoting

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Medieval philosophers or Medieval scholars, where actually celiphies are better at doing that, somewhat counterintuitively.

So, you know, when Islamist movements come to power, we're not actually talking about the rule of clerics, we're talking about the rule of lay people who have strong religious views and may want to push them on other people to some extent.

But I think — so I totally take your point that people have to be free to fight for liberalism or secularism which is why, I think, small d democracy in the Middle East is so critical. So even if you just have minimalist procedural democracy, that would still guarantee the rights of secularists and liberals to spread their ideas and to try to convince as many of their fellow citizens or voters that liberalism is better.

And they should have a chance to win at the ballot box if they get a plurality or a majority of the votes. It just happens to be that they struggle to get a plurality or majority of the votes.

And another issue too, and I remember I had a very interesting conversation with one of the most intriguing, promising, smart Egyptian liberals that I know — I don't want to get him into trouble, but he's pretty well known — Mostafa Naggar. He started a new liberal party in 2011 right after the revolution.

And I remember we were talking about his electoral strategy of his new party. And he told me, well, when we go outside of urban areas, we don't actually — we would never use the word liberalism.

MR. WIESELTIER: Democrats here feel the same way. (Laughter)

MR. HAMID: Yes, good point. But it's interesting. So it even goes well beyond that. The most anti-Islamist politician in the Middle East today is maybe Abdel Fattah el-Sisi, the president of Egypt. He hates the Muslim Brotherhood. But he is definitely not a secularist. He does very much believe that Islam should play a prominent role in public life. He just disagrees on what that prominent role should be.

And in his presidential campaign, I remember him talking about — he actually said that, "It is the role of the Egyptian president to promote the correct perspective on religion," this kind of, sort of patriarchal, father figure savior. I have to tell you what Egyptian Islam is, or what it should be, and so on.

But the thing is that very few Egyptian secularists, or Jordanian secularists for that

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matter, call themselves secularists in Arabic, or actually even in Tunisia which has a tradition of secularism. They prefer to call themselves Hadefiuiin modernists rather than Unmanieuiin secularists.

MR. WIESELTIER: I guess my point --

MR. HAMID: So I think that it's sort of part of -- there's a -- yes?

MR. WIESELTIER: My point is though it's important that we define -- that they define their goal clearly. In other words, the new can only emerge out of the old. And there is always a period when the new -- and the new doesn't emerge out of the old suddenly. There was always a long period of overlap in which there are elements of the old still present and elements of the new emerging.

In your book, you mention Locke's Letter on toleration, right, which is a perfect example, which was a truly revolutionary document, advocated a genuinely, a really sophisticated and absolute idea of toleration which it then violated with all kinds of exceptions of its own. Because Locke was still operating within the confines of a Christian political culture.

But similarly, the founders of this country, right, were Christians who used concepts which they regarded as Christian but were nonetheless concepts that would apply to non-Christians and would carry us beyond and outside of the Christian framework in which they were conceived.

So all I'm saying is that, if one seeks equality, right, it makes perfect tactical, and cultural, and psychological sense that people living in a Muslim society, and especially if they're believers, obviously, will seek to find proof texts and foundations for those views in their tradition.

But we have to be candid that at some point there may have to be a rupture of some kind. I mean, whether or not Muslims do it the way Christians did it, or the way Jews did it, I think it's still safe to say that there can't be an easy segue from a traditional society, run along theological or theocratic lines, to an open secular society, even if religion remains prominent in that society.

There will be some pain. There will be a moment of rupture. And I think one of the things I see when I look at the Saudis and others is they have this weird illusion, probably because they have so much money, that they can have modernity without the rupture.

MR. HAMID: Right.

MR. WIESELTIER: That somehow they can beat this, that they can beat this, or that they can immigrate to America, but that somehow their kids are not going to go out with the

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wrong people, unlike the Christians and the Jews who came here and discovered that their daughters were dating the wrong boys, right?

MR. HAMID: Yes.

MR. WIESELTIER: I mean, there's always going to be a rupture. And so I think that people -- it's important that it be described in this way.

MR. HAMID: So in that sense, can we say then, like, liberalism, as a universal normative value, is still a moving target in the sense that, if we read Locke's work, by today's standards we would not consider him a small liberal. Because there were limitations on the rights of atheists and Catholics.

MR. WIESELTIER: Catholics, certainly. Yes.

MR. HAMID: So, or Madison, you know, who --

MR. WIESELTIER: Yes.

MR. HAMID: -- was, you know, one of the founding fathers of liberalism, is someone who did not believe in equality between the races and owned a lot of slaves.

MR. WIESELTIER: But here's the difference. But they created concepts on the basis of which they could correct their own limitations. In other words, when Martin Luther King argued for integration, he did so in the name of the American constitution, even though the constitution defined slaves as less than a person. And he was able to do so because the concept in the constitution refuted the moral and historical limitations that were expressed in the same document, you see.

MR. HAMID: Yes.

MR. WIESELTIER: That was the difference. That was the difference. And if concepts could be found within a religious tradition, as you can see, I'm skeptical about this, my own view is that there are enlightened elements in religion, but if you want enlightenment you better leave it. Because there's more enlightenment outside of religion. Now, there's also a lot of rubbish outside of religion too. I'm not idealizing anything.

MR. HAMID: So let's talk -- so outside of religion, so this is where I think -- so I talk obviously about exceptionalism. But I think quite a bit has changed from when I started writing this book to when it's actually come out. And I think what we're seeing isn't just Islamist or Islamic opposition to liberalism or liberal democracy, but we're seeing it more universally.

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And, you know, it's fascinating to me that for the first time perhaps in our history we, as Americans, might actually elect an illiberal democrat as our president. So we are no longer immune to this.

And I remember years ago when I started to talk more about illiberal democracy, Americans didn't really -- they would struggle to really understand or maybe relate to that concept. So, I mean, I wouldn't wish Trump on anyone, but he has done one thing. He's offered sort of a learning opportunity. And we're seeing that there are real tensions between --

MR. WIESELTIER: But here's the difference. When Trump expresses misogynistic views, we can say that his misogyny is a betrayal of the American idea.

MR. HAMID: Yes.

MR. WIESELTIER: Because the American idea is one of full equality. And we've updated it constantly, but it's one of full equality. When the Ayatollah Khomeini expresses misogynist ideas, I'm not sure we can say he's betraying the Islamic idea that he represents. That's the difference.

MR. HAMID: Yes.

MR. WIESELTIER: Because that idea still awaits philosophical and moral correction by these values. Now, it rejects that correction. I mean, this is a fight; this is a war of ideas. But Trump is an outrage, because he betrays who we are. You know, there are European equivalents of Trump in Hungary and Poland about whom it can be said that they're terrifying not because they betray what Hungary and Poland are, but because they exemplify certain aspects of the Hungarian or Polish political traditions. That's the difference.

MR. HAMID: But isn't it possible that -- so if we look at the broader sweep of history, liberalism only becomes prominent or dominant ideologically in a very brief moment in that broader sweep. And it's hard for us to sort of remove ourselves from our own kind of cultural and moral moment.

But, you know, it's possible that we're also entering a period where liberalism will come under more and more attack. And I'm glad you mentioned Poland which doesn't get a lot of attention but which recently elected some pretty illiberal --

MR. WIESELTIER: It's very special.

MR. HAMID: -- people.

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MR. WIESELTIER: Yes, yes.

MR. HAMID: Hungary, I mean, Israel has its strong current of illiberalism. India elected right wing Hindu nationalists. So there seems to be this bigger issue that there's kind of a gap. For a variety of reasons, liberal democracy has not been able to successfully provide people a politics of substantive meaning where a lot of it is about kind of minute policy discussions or economic tinkering. But there isn't a kind of broader message about morality or —

MR. WIESELTIER: Well, you see, I wouldn't put it that way. I think that liberalism contains, at its heart, an absolutely irresistible concept of the person, a philosophical portrait of the human being that I think is — I would say that the problem is that, unlike other political systems — and by the way, you're right that liberalism always provokes the forces of illiberalism.

And the struggle is never going to end. This is not — we are never going to come to the final climactic triumph. That's why Fukuyama's idea was so stupid. (Laughter) That we are never, ever going to reach the end that. Because people will — but the reason is, I think, is because liberalism imposes a very heavy intellectual and moral burden on the ordinary citizen, on every individual, insofar as liberalism is a system in which people, every individual's opinions will count, in which people will be expected to be thoughtful about, et cetera, et cetera.

I think liberalism asks more than other systems do.

And it's not any historical surprise. Most people get their beliefs from just their surroundings, their parents, their communities or, God forbid, the Internet, right.

MR. HAMID: Yes.

MR. WIESELTIER: I mean, so I think you're right. It's a constant, it is a constant struggle. But I don't want, you see, I don't think -- Islamic liberalism, to me, is a little bit like Islamic mathematics. I don't know what that means, except it's, in other words, Islamic mathematic, the adjective Islamic, to me, could only be historical. It's about its origin, its provenance, right. But there can't be anything essentially Islamic about algebra, right.

And the same thing is true for me when I hear the phrase Islamic liberalism. Either the word Islamic means — well, Western liberalism, either the word Western simply refers to the origins of these ideas, and it's true that as a historical matter the ideas of liberalism were developed in the West, or the

word Western is there to delegitimize --

MR. HAMID: Right.

MR. WIESELTIER: -- the liberal idea for all non-Western societies which is how it's usually used.

Because in the aftermath of colonialism, everything that originated in the West is ipso facto, deemed to be antithetical to all that is good for post-colonial societies. And I regard that situation as tragic.

MR. HAMID: Yes. So I guess, I'm also -- I want to be mindful too that --

MR. WIESELTIER: Because we should have questions.

MR. HAMID: Yes. So I'll just say one thing on that. So, I guess, one thing that I've thought a lot about is how naturally does liberalism come to us. And this is where I think the darkened view of human nature has sort of affected me a little bit.

And, you know, I don't want to bring my family into this, because my parents are actually here. But I think one thing --

MR. WIESELTIER: I'm sorry his book is perfect.

I'm sorry -- (Laughter)

MR. HAMID: So, I mean, so there's a particular moment in the Arab Spring air that had a big effect on me. And so I was in Tahrir Square when the announcement came that Mubarak had fallen. And it was a beautiful, once in a lifetime moment. It's really hard to describe.

But I think that I also, I was also in Egypt in the lead up to the massacre, August 14th, 2013. And I should also say that you were one of the most vocal and outspoken people, very shortly after the coup, saying, I think your article was called "Its Name is Fascism."

MR. WIESELTIER: Yes.

MR. HAMID: And I think that what we saw in that moment was so frightening. And I had people who were very dear to me -- so I'm born in the U.S., but I'm originally Egyptian, family members, relatives, people who were very dear to me, maybe even loved them or liked them to some extent.
(Laughter)

And I saw something that I guess I've never, I've read about it in history books, but I've never

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seen it in real life. And I guess the best way to describe it is the desire to kill. It's almost -- and, you know, almost like this violence would be kind of cathartic event.

And through the act of violence or at least watching it, because to be fair they didn't actually participate directly, but they cheered it on. But by cheering on an act of violence that somehow they came to feel more alive. It was a kind of, a process of self-affirmation. And to see people who are otherwise good --

MR. WIESELTIER: It's a mob, the mob.

MR. HAMID: Yes. But the interesting thing, these are people who are well educated, spent a lot of time in the West. They are "liberals," right, in quotation marks. So how do otherwise good people do evil things? And to what extent, at what point do otherwise good people cease to be otherwise good?

So I guess, for me, I just see how we can kind of be tempted by that impulse so easily and so quickly. It just doesn't make me very optimistic.

MR. WIESELTIER: Yes. This has not been springtime for human nature. There's no -- and so we have questions, right? Yes. Okay, we'll have a few questions. Ma'am?

SPEAKER: Thank you.

MR. WIESELTIER: Please try to be brief, because there's business to do.

SPEAKER: Thank you, yes. Now --

(Audio interruption)

SPEAKER: -- at Cairo University considered the highest ranking --

(Audio interruption)

SPEAKER: -- what he said. It could be debated, the problem --

(Audio interruption)

MR. HAMID: Yes. So Leon, do you want to take a couple? Or how would like to --

MR. WIESELTIER: I think one at a time is the best, if you would.

MR. HAMID: Okay. So you bring up a really good point, because there is no equivalent of the Catholic Church or the Pope in at least Sunni Islam. So there's no one who can really definitively say with authority, with definitive, total authority that any one is Islamic or non-Islamic. And this kind of

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leads to problems when it comes to talking about ISIS.

Well, to be fair, there is someone who deemed or declared ISIS to be apostates. But it wasn't the head of Al-Azhar. It was John Kerry. (Laughter) This is actually not a joke. He actually, in a speech, called ISIS apostates.

MR. WIESELTIER: Well, the Kerry Fatwa.

MR. HAMID: Exactly, the Kerry -- so Al-Azhar is well respected but more historically than in real life. Because part of the problem is that, with the rise of the modern nation state, the clerical class is no longer semi-independent or semi-autonomous.

It was actually the case in the pre-modern era that the clerical class provided a meaningful check on executive power. So you have the caliph or the sultan, and he had to care or at least think about how the clerics would respond to some of his executive decisions. And in that sense, clerical despotism was not the problem in pre-modern Islam, unlike in saying Christianity, where clerical despotism was and became a problem.

But I think that, you know, with the rise of the state, the modern state, the state needs to control everything. It can't allow for autonomy. So essentially Al-Azhar, Al-Azhar's clerics are state appointees, at least the senior ones. So they essentially are making -- so if they're making religious pronouncements, they are also, by definition, political pronouncements.

And that's what was troubling about the coup and the massacre in Egypt, is that 800 people are killed in mere hours in broad daylight. And then you actually have senior clerics who support the so-called secular reform rebel, Fattah el-Sisi, using Islamic argumentation to justify the killing of Islamists. That's interesting.

MR. WIESELTIER: Well, I just want to add that I've thought for a long time that the greatest shortcoming, at least in my knowledge, but I blame the media for some of this, is that we read all the time about the radicals in the Islamic world and about the theologians. Everyone can -- the names of Sayyid Qutb, Ben Hassan al-Banna, can trip off of everyone's lips, Maulana Maududi, we all know about the extremists. But nobody reports on what precisely the battle of ideas in the Islamic world is.

In other words, theologically, at the level of theology in Islamic thought, clearly there are theologians and figures who are disagreeing with what we would call the bad guys. And again, I blame

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the media for it, some of it. But the thing I most want to read about this all the time is what is the other side of the war of ideas in Islam, and just what kind of war is it, and who are the figures, and what are the central concepts?

MR. HAMID: Plus, we don't seem as interested though in nice ideas. That's the problem.

MR. WIESELTIER: Well --

MR. HAMID: So, you know, before I mentioned him on the podium, how many of you have heard of Mahmoud Muhammad Taha? I'm just -- oh, wow. This is a pretty -- okay. Maybe, like, some people have heard of him.

MR. WIESELTIER: He's the one who was executed, right?

MR. HAMID: Yes, wow.

MR. WIESELTIER: He was executed, right.

MR. HAMID: There's Brookings for you.

MR. WIESELTIER: Yes, exactly. (Laughter)

MR. HAMID: Okay.

MR. WIESELTIER: Islam lives at Brookings. Sir? You, yes. Wait, I think there's a microphone coming.

SPEAKER: I must have bubonic plague too. You talked about rupture. And is rupture really of any effect as long as what was the finest inerrancy of the text as if -- for example, wasn't it a rupture what Ataturk did in Turkey?

MR. WIESELTIER: Sure.

SPEAKER: And to a lesser extent, what the Shahs did in Iran? And still it was overcome.

MR. WIESELTIER: Well, I think absolutely. As I said, I think it is a constant struggle. I think democracy, or liberalism, or secularism, or any of those things never wins permanently, ever, ever. I think it -- and I think it's a never ending struggle.

The second thing I would say is that I don't believe that there is such a thing as the inerrancy of the text in Islam, as there certainly isn't in Judaism. I think all there are are schools of

interpretations of the texts.

And that the debates, you know, people talk about Muslim fundamentalists. There aren't -- I mean, these people operate with very sophisticated readings of very difficult texts. There's nothing fundamentalist about them. We may think they're wrong, and we may think they're immoral, but when people talk about Jewish settlers on the West Bank, they too operate with very sophisticated interpretations of very difficult texts. So nobody here is talking about the inerrancy of --

MR HAMID: But I think the difference in Islam is that, at least mainstream scholars would generally -- and I'm actually not, I can't think of any exceptions right now, but would argue that it's a credo requirement for Muslims to believe in the inerrancy of the Koran. In other words, if someone --

MR. WIESELTIER: Sure. Sure, but the striking thing is, that even though that's the case, I mean, every Muslim opinion has to have a proof text, right. I mean, you have to show that it's in the revelation. But what's striking is how many of the same proof texts can be used for how many different purposes.

MR. HAMID: Yes. Yes, so certainly, so just because something is said in the Quran doesn't mean it has to be taken literally. So you can think that something is God's exact literal word, but you might say to yourself, well, the Quran was revealed in the 7th century, so it might have been appropriate for 7th century Arabia, but it's no longer appropriate now.

And what you do is that you take the rule that's in the text of the Quran, and you find the reasoning behind it. And you take that -- so, anyway, that's what you can do. But I think still the fact that you're dealing with what's considered to be God's actual speech makes people very nervous and jittery about doing too much experimental interpretation.

MR. WIESELTIER: You, yes. The microphone's coming.

MR. HAMID: And also, if people could just say their name and affiliation as well.

MS. BACHRACH: Okay. My name's Eleanor Bachrach. I've lived and worked in several quite different Islamic majority, Muslim majority countries.

MR. HAMID: Yes, I've seen you before at another event. I think --

MS. BACHRACH: Yes, I come to a lot of these. And my question, I guess, may seem pretty stupid. But, it seems to me that government is government. It provides certain circumstances. And I've never quite figured out what Islamic government is as opposed to regular government or any

other bureaucratic influenced state.

MR. HAMID: So, I mean, well, a lot of Muslims would agree with you. A lot of Islamists would agree with you. There hasn't actually been, there haven't been successful models. We don't actually know what this looks like in practice, at least mainstream Islamists.

Now, we do have extremist counter-models, if you will. And I think ISIS is the most obvious case there. And for me ISIS is much more interesting. I'm not -- I don't find the battlefield dynamics or which city they control. And even if ISIS was defeated tomorrow morning, their legacy would be with us for the rest of our lives. You cannot undo the damage. They've set the gold standard for extremists.

Anytime you have an ungovernable space, for the rest of our lives the local extremist group is going to think to itself, oh, why don't we try to establish a mini-Caliphate or a mini-Emirate? Before ISIS, the focus was more on destroying things. ISIS has an unusually pronounced interest in governance. So I would say that.

But I think that if you -- so part of what I've tried to do in my work, I've spent hundreds of hours talking to Islamists, getting to know them on a personal level, immersing myself in their world. This is also why I get attacked a lot, because I try to understand people that I disagree with.

It's apparently problematic but, you know, in the effort to talk to and understand Islamists from various countries, they all have different conceptions of what the end point is. Or sometimes they can't even articulate clearly what the end point is. And this goes back to my original point that they're trying to square a circle that can't be squared.

I mean, so there are things that we can imagine they would do if they actually could. But those don't get to the -- those aren't the most -- so restricting alcohol consumption, obvious, some restrictions on blasphemy, obvious, you know, maybe you want to have some sex segregation in certain ministries.

This actually happened for a brief period. The Jordanian Muslim Brotherhood was part of a coalition government in 1991. They had six ministries. And in two of the ministries, Ministry of Education and Ministry of Social Affairs, the Muslim Brotherhood ministers tried to have segregation in their particular ministries.

But that doesn't really get to the fundamentals or the foundations of the state. So, and

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that's a very short term thing. So what would it look like if there was an Islamist party in power for 50 years?

We actually might find out with the Ak Party in Turkey. That's actually the one case where we'll see. If Erdogan stays in power forever, not because he is — he is authoritarian, but it's also because he's very good at winning elections. Let's also not pretend that he isn't popular among his own people. But if he stays the president for the rest of his life, we will have a very interesting case study.

MR. WIESELTIER: Yes.

MR. SMITH: My name is Tom Smith. I'm a North African field researcher. And first off, thank you very much for this delightful speech. I think you raise a very pertinent question about what can we do for reformation inside the Islamic world. But I strongly suggest, or I strongly believe that that's only half the question.

The other question that I think we have more control of -- and I say we, I mean the West, American Muslims, et cetera -- is we can control and bear down into the question of why are most Arabs, when they say secularism, why are they not using the word secularist? They're using the word modernist.

And I would argue the answer to that, or part of the reason is the fact when you say secularist, many Arabs would associate that to the corrupt regime of the Shah of Iran or the massively corrupt Mubarak, or Ben Ali in Tunisia. They don't associate those words of secularism or Western liberalism to what we associate those words, and the good things and the societal benefits that we do.

So we can answer that question. We have control of not having relationships, beneficial government relationships with the Mubarak regimes, with the Shah of Iran. I feel like we have more control over that. I'd be interested in your thoughts. Thank you.

MR. HAMID: So, as far as I know, Mubarak never referred to himself as secular. So I would — so part of the issue here, I don't think that people associate secularism with Mubarak. And if they did, secularism would actually be more popular. Because you hear a lot now in Egypt, oh, the good old days of Mubarak, yes, pretty much my entire family in Egypt.

But I think that the issue is more that they associate secularism with Western imperialism, Western colonialism. It's something foreign. And it's been, in a way, imposed. And we also have to be

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honest. The people in the Middle East, by and large, really don't like U.S. policy. So naturally anything that is connected to the U.S., secularism, liberalism, these kinds of values, you know, can suffer from a taint, if you will.

MR. WIESELTIER: And there's also the idealization of religion, according to which religious people are never corrupt.

MR. HAMID: Right, right.

MR. WIESELTIER: Which is not the case.

MR. HAMID: So funny little side story on religious people being corrupt. So I was on a field research trip last year in Tunisia. And I was interviewing Ennahda leaders and all that.

And I was trying to push them a little bit on, okay, you guys are trying to move away from the Islamist label. You're trying to be all nice, and fluffy, and everything. Great, okay. What does it mean to be Muslim democratic, which is now their preferred term?

And I remember that, well, I can mention his name, because I actually mentioned his name in the book, because it was on the record. I think he was trying to impress me. But he said that, you know, we in Ennahda are different than the secularists. Not because we have a particular vision about the implementation of Islamic law or Sharia, but it's actually because we don't steal. And it gave an example. And the example he gave was about Hamas. He said, for example, if Hamas gets 100 dinars they'll pocket ten dinars and spend 90 on the people.

MR. WIESELTIER: That's a pretty good ratio. (Laughter)

MR. HAMID: But then he said, if Fatah gets 100 dinars, they will pocket 90 --

MR. WIESELTIER: There you go.

MR. HAMID: -- and they only give ten to the people. So Islamists, yes, that was essentially his argument. And I thought to myself, that's not very compelling. (Laughter)

MR. WIESELTIER: Right.

MR. HAMID: Because -- and it also gets to this thing that even when Islamists try to be nice and fluffy, they still see themselves as better or apart from society. So essentially what Nouredine Arbaoui, who's one of the kind of founding members of Ennahda, very close to Ghannouchi, he was essentially making the point that Islamists are better Muslims. And because they're better Muslims and

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they feel accountable to God, they're going to pocket less money. That still means that they're fundamentally different than their competitors for religious reasons.

MR. WIESELTIER: Yes. I think it's also amazing what people do when they think God is on their side.

MR. HAMID: Yes.

MR. WIESELTIER: Sir?

(Discussion off the record)

MR. WIESELTIER: I'm afraid you have to. Yes.

SPEAKER: Hi, my name's Ryan, with IRD. I read your book, and I'll be writing a review on it. So thank you very much for that.

MR. HAMID: Great, okay.

SPEAKER: And my question is this. You say that Christianity is ambivalent about law, when it comes to law, at least in the New Testament. And I would agree with you in that it says very little about governance. But what it does say, in Romans and first Peter, is that governing authorities are instituted by God, whether good or bad.

And the duty is, the duty for a Christian is to respect those authorities. Whereas Islam, or at least Islamism, wishes to implement pre-modern Islamic law with the modern state. And sometimes, I would say even often, that results in rebellion.

So using your comparison with Christianity and Islam, which works fairly well, I would say, do you think that pre-modern Islamic law is less compatible with the modern state than Christianity is?

MR. HAMID: Okay. Well, first of all, I'm glad that you read the book, enjoyed it, and will hopefully be writing a very kind review. (Laughter)

MR. WIESELTIER: He didn't say he enjoyed it, he just said --

MR. HAMID: Oh, right. Oh, yes, okay. (Laughter)

So part of the issue, we go back to this issue of scripture and what part of the New Testament you take. But if you look at some of what Paul said, and a lot of it, if I recall, is in Galatians, he says things like Christ became -- so Christ redeemed us from the curse of Allah by becoming a curse for us, right, and

things of that nature.

And, you know, Paul talks about the law as something heavy, divisive, unnatural. And, you know, Paul is a very important figure in the founding moment or founding moments, plural, of Christianity.

But again, we go back to this issue that, in those critical early centuries when Christianity is developing, Christians are living as minorities under the rule of others. So they didn't actually, in that critical period when you're developing your theology, they didn't have to worry so much about issues of public law.

So again, that's a product of historical circumstance. We can imagine alternative history if we believe that alternative histories are possible. Let's say that the early Christians were able to capture territory, and hold it, and govern it. Would the early theology have developed in a fundamentally different way? I don't know, it's an interesting question.

I don't know if that's really answering your question. So on this issue of pre-modern Islamic law, to what extent is it compatible? Again, I don't want to give the impression -- so, I worry sometimes in our sort of public discourse that when we talk about Islamic law or Sharia it's this monolithic thing, Islamic law this, Islamic law that. It's a very rich, diverse tradition.

There are an incredible number of different approaches, there are different schools of law. There are also, forgotten now, but different, I guess you'd sort of call them philosophical schools that deal with -- anyway, so like the Mu'tazilites, and the Ash'aries, and so on and so forth. So there is a very, very rich tradition.

And so when we talk about Islamic law, we have to ask a second question, which is what kind of Islamic law? What does that actually look like in practice? Is it on the far right, is it somewhere in the middle, are we talking about a kind of Ennahdafied approach to Islamic law which is nice and fluffy? So I think we have to sort of, we have to be very specific when we talk about this Islamic law thing.

MR. WIESELTIER: Also, I mean, most of the Sharia Americans fear the Sharia courts that have been diabolized. They would deal with civil law and ritual law in the way that rabbinical courts are operating all over America dealing in civil law and ritual law in a way that threatens absolutely nobody. It's not a threat to American law; it's not a secession from American law. It's not a philosophical retort to

liberalism. It's nothing of the kind. It's really the rules that bind the community.

Yes, sir. Yes?

SPEAKER: Yes, I'm Jim Burn. I'm a lifelong journalist here in town. And currently I'm writing papers for Jamie Raskin, who won the Democratic nomination for Congress in the 8th Congressional district in Maryland. And the first one I wrote was on ISIS, of all things. And then everything changed. I have got to rewrite that one. But --

MR. WIESELTIER: But was ISIS an issue in the 8th District? (Laughter)

SPEAKER: At issue in the 8th District of Maryland, everything. Anyway, the question I have for you, there was a remarkable conference in 2014 at the U.S. Institute of Peace. And the star of it was a Mauritanian cleric. And I'll shorten his ten names here to Dr. Bin Bayyah, is particularly what they called him.

Well, he founded a, well basically, his fundamental point to us was with the fall of the last Caliph, lots of people lost interest in becoming experts on the Quran. And so politicians kind of took over the interpretation of what the Quran means.

DR. WIESELTIER: We need a question.

SPEAKER: Huh?

DR. WIESELTIER: We need a question.

SPEAKER: I'm getting to the question here. He founded an outfit -- I'll put my glasses on -- it's called the, my goodness, oh, the Global Center for Renewal and Guidance. And the goal was to improve the quality of Islamic religious teachers.

A similar organization was founded by Tony Blair called the Faith Foundation. And I really have been trying to find out if there's been an evaluation of the work of these organizations. Are they getting anywhere? And I've asked the woman who put on that conference. And she didn't have an answer. So have you guys heard that?

MR. HAMID: Yes, yes. Okay, so don't get me started on Tony Blair, okay.

MR. WIESELTIER: I associate myself with that remark. (Laughter)

MR. HAMID: Okay. I don't want to get into the Tony Blair Faith Foundation.

(Discussion off the record)

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MR. HAMID: Bin Bayyah, yes. Okay. Here's the problem. You know, I think this is kind of popular in some policy circles here in D.C. I hear it sometimes. Oh, let's find a nice moderate cleric and kind of send them on a State Department funded trip to talk about Islamic moderation and persuade people to be nice, and peaceful, and all of that.

And I worry that there's a kind of, this pre-approved set of clerics which are maybe great. They have -- and Bin Bayyah is a -- I'm not talking about him in particular. He's well respected. He has tremendous knowledge. But he's not the most popular; he's not an extremely popular figure. He doesn't have the kind of traction with the very people who might be predisposed to radicalization.

The people who are at risk, who are predisposed to radicalization, are not going to listen to state approved clerics. They're going to listen to oppositional clerics, caliph clerics who oppose the Saudi regime, or whatever regime.

So I think that makes it difficult. And I also, you know, I was going to say if I had one wish, but I don't think this is super important. But if I had ten wishes, one of them would be to get rid of this word, just stop using moderate, whether its moderate rebels, clerics, moderate this, moderate that, moderate Muslims.

The times that I've been -- you know, there have been times, luckily it doesn't happen as much anymore, but when people weren't as politically correct. I remember I was at a reception. And I was saying something that probably sounded nice to this person.

And they're like, oh, you know, you sound so moderate, you know. And I thought, okay, great. But, I mean, this idea that there's a class of people called moderate Muslims, it's patronizing. Moderate, I mean, what does that even mean, moderate relative to what?

So I would just urge everyone who is in this room or is watching on webcast, if you take nothing else from this discussion, try your best to avoid using or misusing this particular word.

MR. WIESELTIER: Well, another way to make your point is that for too long we allow the extremists to set the terms of the debate so that people who are not them are defined as not them, as opposed to what they are autonomously in their own religious identities.

(Discussion off the record)

Yes, sir? One more question after this.

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SPEAKER: Thank you. I really appreciated what you said about the historical foundations of Islam. Can we also say that Christianity has unique historical foundations as well as Confucianism and Hinduism?

And as people are moving away from neoliberalism, can we get to a point where all of these great traditions have unique historical foundations? And we can respect the differences that those produce. So not just Islam is exceptional, but they're all exceptional.

MR. HAMID: So, okay. Well, I mean, we're all unique in our own ways, right. I mean, we're all different. See, I just worry about this instinct or impulse to try to minimize difference that is so much part of our -- it isn't what liberalism should be, but it's become what liberalism is, and small liberalism in America. We always want to minimize difference.

Ben Affleck really -- he didn't want there to be any differences between us. I respect that, but it's not real life. And I don't know why we can't acknowledge difference. We don't have to like it or agree with it. But, you know, well, first of all, you know, if you really want the full case of why Islam is exceptional, you're going to have to read the book. So I will just say that.

But, you know, I think it's exceptional in particular ways. So everything is ultimately different than everything else. But what I'm trying to zero in on here is that Islam is different fundamentally in ways that have profound implications for the future of the Middle East.

MR. WIESELTIER: I would just add that, I mean, certainly you're correct, that the denial of difference is obviously a colossal mistake and also a moral mistake also. But the thing that always strikes me, when one recognizes all the exceptional analytics of things and all the differences, is how we are nonetheless able to speak to each other across those differences.

I mean, I think it -- now, one of that is because, in our more serious work, we resort to reason. And I think that reason is not something that is the sole province of any particular tradition. Nobody owns reason.

But more generally, I think that a belief in difference is not only compatible with universalism, but if it represents a denial of universalism, then it's almost a preparation for conflict. It's almost an intellectual preparation for conflict. One more question? Yes, you. I apologize to everybody else.

SPEAKER: I'm Asarma Kadi. I'm with the Washington Report on Middle East Affairs.

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So Islam is obviously a religion that has been around for centuries and that has been in so many countries around the world, even as a majority. So my question to you is is Islam the exception or is the Middle East an exception to Islam?

MR. HAMID: Okay. So I do talk a bit in the book about Malaysia and Indonesia which I think are fascinating cases. But no one really cares about them, because they're not important to U.S. national security interests. So who cares?

But, you know, it's interesting that these are kind of held up as models of tolerance, pluralism, and democracy. And they are among the most democratic Muslim majority states. But what's kind of counterintuitive is that they are the most democratic Muslim majority states, less so Malaysia, but definitely Indonesia.

But they also, those two countries feature more Sharia ordinances on the local level than many Arab countries, Egypt, Tunisia, Turkey, Jordan, and so on. So that's, huh, that's a little bit weird, right?

Well, part of the issue there is that because these countries are more centralized, they have a federal system, and they're more democratic, even ostensibly secular ruling parties, so Golkar, for example, in Indonesia, and UMNO in Malaysia, they essentially, in even regions they control, have implemented Sharia bylaws, because they're trying to meet the median voter halfway. They want to win in those regions. And if sentiment is conservative, they have to be responsive to it.

And this is why, I think, when people say, well, democracy and Islamism can't coexist, I think it's actually often the opposite. It's hard to imagine real democratic progress or democratization, at least in some Muslim majority countries, without having some resulting Islamism.

Pakistan's another very interesting case which, let's not get into that, but anyway, so I guess, since we're closing up, I would just say, to kind of wrap things up on my end before Leon closes, is first of all, you know, thanks to all of you for, you know, being a part of this book launch.

I do just -- for those of you who are skeptical about the argument, I really just want to urge you to just consider it with an open mind. You know, I believe in every word that I wrote in this book. And the reason that I wrote it, or what I wanted to -- and what it to do now is I hope that it can play a small role in encouraging a more nuanced, constructive debate about Islam and its role in public life, not

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just in the Middle East but also in the West.

And I have to be honest. I'm slightly uncomfortable with some of my own conclusions. I'm worried about that, to be honest. And already anti-Muslim bigots, without really reading much of what I've written, they'll take a headline or a sentence, and they'll run with it. And they'll say, oh, look what this guy named Shadi said about Islam. So I'm worried about that, to be honest.

And I hope that we can kind of return to the tradition of actually reading as much of books as possible. Because --

MR. WIESELTIER: Forget it. (Laughter)

MR. HAMID: But what I want to do with this book is to help people understand what I, even myself as a Muslim, have realized is a pretty complicated religion. When you think about Islam and study it, it is not easy to grasp, especially for those of us who come from a secular background or who don't see the everyday power of religion.

And that's, I think, at least in the bastions of northeastern liberal elitism, people don't talk about religion the way they do in the places that I've lived in the Middle East. And it's not just the power of religion, it's the everyday magic of religion.

They believe in magic in a sense. But I don't mean that in a negative way. They believe in the supernatural, they believe in what comes next, whatever that might be. So I just hope that, I just hope we can have more of that kind of nuanced debate.

And I also just remind all of you that I will be signing books outside. And we're going to have a little reception too. So I hope that you'll all join us and that we can continue the conversation.

MR. WIESELTIER: Well, I just want to say thank you for writing the book. Thank you all for coming. Buy the book, read the book. There's free food in the room next door. Thank you very much for coming. (Applause)

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