

THE BROOKINGS INSTITUTION
FALK AUDITORIUM

ISLAM AS STATECRAFT:
HOW GOVERNMENTS USE RELIGION IN FOREIGN POLICY

Washington, D.C.
Tuesday, January 8, 2019

PARTICIPANTS:

Introduction:

SUZANNE MALONEY
Senior Fellow and Deputy Director, Foreign Policy
The Brookings Institution

Moderator:

INDIRA LAKSHMANAN
Executive Editor, Pulitzer Center
Washington Columnist, *The Boston Globe*

Panelists:

GENEIVE ABDO
Resident Scholar, Arabia Foundation

SHADI HAMID
Senior Fellow, Center for Middle East Policy
The Brookings Institution

PETER MANDAVILLE
Nonresident Senior Fellow, The Brookings Institution
Professor, International Affairs, Scholar School of Policy and Government
Mason University George

* * * * *

P R O C E E D I N G S

MS. MALONEY: Good morning, and thank you so much for joining us on this balmy January morning in Washington. I'd like to welcome you here today on behalf of the Brookings Institution Foreign Policy program. I'm Suzanne Maloney, I'm the Deputy Director of Foreign Policy here at Brookings.

We're here today to launch a paper entitled "[Islam as Statecraft: How governments use religion in foreign policy](#)", authored by two of my colleagues, Shadi Hamid, Senior Fellow in the Center for Middle East Policy, and Peter Mandaville, who is a Nonresident Senior Fellow with Brookings Project on U.S. relations with the Islamic world and a Senior Research Fellow at the Berkley Center for Religion, Peace, and World Affairs at Georgetown University.

For at least the past 40 years, ever since a mass political movement espousing the triumph of the sacred authority over secular toppled Iran's absolute monarch Mohammad Reza Pahlavi and his seemingly impregnable state, Islam has loomed large as a driver of politics and security of the Middle East and the broader Muslim world. And by extension it has loomed large for American foreign policy and for the global economy.

The interest in, and too often anxiety over, Islam in policy analysis and deliberation was exponentially magnified by the 9/11 attacks and the subsequent American interventions in a series of military conflicts in the Middle East. Too often, however, in our analysis religion is seen in uncritical and overly simplistic terms as an explanatory factor. The presumption that some primordial attachment to a particular religious doctrine is primarily responsible for the persistence of conflict among and between Islamic States. It's a fallacy and one that is quite dangerous on which to base American policy, interest, and strategy. And that is where this report steps in, to carefully dissect the ways in which various governments deploy Islam as a component of their own foreign policy conduct and to consider the policy implications for the United States that derive from a more nuanced understanding of religious soft power.

The paper that you hopefully picked up just outside this door and that you can find on our website carefully assesses the much discussed phenomenon of Saudi Arabia's export to Wahhabism, arguing that the nature and effects of Saudi religious influence around the world are more complicated than we ordinarily think. The paper also examines how Iran taps into traditional Shia discourses of dispossession and martyrdom in the process of establishing itself as a geopolitical hub of resistance culture.

Meanwhile, since 9/11 and the rise of extremist groups like the Islamic State, governments of several prominent Muslim majority countries, among them Jordan, Morocco, and Egypt, have tried to position themselves as purveyors of moderate Islam, capable of blunting the narrative of extremists groups. Peter and Shadi also examine that phenomenon, carefully dissecting how Turkey and Indonesia have been examples of emerging powers that with somewhat less fanfare have integrated elements of religious outreach into their broader soft power strategies across Asia and Africa. What they find by examining these wide ranging cases is that the ways that states use Islam and their conduct abroad is often shaped by domestic considerations. And by the same token, the impact that these strategies have in target countries is frequently something other than what it might have been intended to be due to the mediating effect of local actors and interests.

This report is the inaugural publication from a much larger project on the geopolitics of religious soft power that Brookings is undertaking in partnership with the Berkley Center for Religion, Peace, and World Affairs at Georgetown University. The initiative will examine the various ways in which governments incorporate religion and religious outreach into their broader foreign policy conduct. Over the coming months the project will publish a range of short articles, essays, and papers that analyze and assess the use of religious soft powers by countries such as Iran, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar, as well as its impact in settings from West Africa to South and Southeast Asia. Please visit our website regularly and that of the Berkley Center for more of these contributions.

This project has been made possible by support from the Carnegie

Corporation and the Berkley Center at Georgetown. Brookings is committed to quality, independence, and impact in all of our work, and all activities support by our donors reflect this commitment. And the analysis and recommendations are solely determined by the authors and the scholars.

We're delighted today to have an absolutely phenomenal panel to discuss all of these questions. Peter and Shadi will be joined by Geneive Abdo, a Resident Scholar at the Arabia Foundation, an author of several notable books on Egypt, Iran, and the broader Middle East.

In discussing these questions I'm thrilled to turn over the microphone to Indira Lakshmanan, who is the Executive Editor at the Pulitzer Center for Crisis Reporting and a Washington Columnist for *The Boston Globe*. Like Geneive, Indira has a distinguished career in foreign affairs journalism and there's no one better to lead an incisive and challenging discussion on these issues.

Thank you and I look forward to the discussion. (Applause)

MS. LAKSHMANAN: Good morning, everyone. Thanks so much for joining us early to talk about Islam as Statecraft. And that's the first point, which is that this is our hashtag, which we're trying to make a trend here in Washington DC. So anything that you want to tweet or Facebook or Instagram about our program, just use #Islamasstatecraft.

Suzanne already set up our discussion really well, the way in which the role of Islam in world politics has really tended to focus, especially since 9/11, on how religion inspires or is used by or, let's admit it, is exploited by a whole range of groups, whether it's governments, opposition political parties, or militant groups, and it's also very much a cliché within Washington foreign policy circles certainly that both Saudi Arabia and Iran are always rivaling one another in vying to be the religious figurehead as well as the political leader of the Middle East. So we're going to try to get beyond the clichés and deep into what this study has really shown us about these issues.

So I'm incredibly honored to be asked to moderate this conversation. Sitting

right next to me is Peter Mandaville, who is a Nonresident Senior Fellow here at Brookings and Professor of International Affairs at George Mason University. He's currently based at Georgetown University's Berkley Center for Religion, Peace, and World Affairs. And for those of you who don't know Peter, he previously already has a distinguished career, having worked in the State Department on the policy planning staff, as well as a senior advisor in the Secretary of State's Office on religion and global affairs. And his books include "Transnational Muslim Politics: Reimagining the Umma".

And next to him, of course I'm sure all of you here know very well, Shadi Hamid. He's a Senior Fellow in the project on U.S. relations with the Islamic world at the Brookings Institution. He's the author of "Islamic Exceptionalism: How the Struggle Over Islam is Reshaping the World", and he's most recently co-editor of "Rethinking Political Islam". And along with Peter he co-authored this study, which I hope you've all picked up a copy of.

And at the end is Geneive Abdo, who is a Resident Scholar at the Arabia Foundation specializing in Shia-Sunni relations in the Middle East. She's also an Adjunct Professor at the Elliott School at George Washington University, the author of four books on political Islam, a recipient of a John Simon Guggenheim Award, and also a Pulitzer Center on Crisis Reporting grantee.

So I'm really pleased to have all of you here.

And, Peter, I want to start with you by asking -- you know, I sort of set the stage by saying there's been this long running debate about Saudi Arabia's export of Wahhabism and what drives that and also the impact that it has not only in Saudi Arabia but around the world. So maybe if we can start small there and move to the sort of larger message that you want to make in this paper.

MR. MANDAVILLE: Sure. Thanks, Indira. So, as you said, there's been this long running discussion about Saudi Arabia's export of Wahhabism and how we should think about it and its effect in the world. I think it's important right at the outset to recognize that

Saudi Arabia is not a sort of singular monolithic actor with respect to this broader phenomenon. It's not the case that there is someone sitting in Riyadh directing money to fund proselytization to specific countries where Saudi Arabia is trying to have a particular effect or achieve a certain foreign policy objective. There are a wide range of actors within black box of Saudi Arabia that we often talk about that are involved in this. The state certainly has a role, particularly through the Ministry of Islamic Affairs and *Da'wa*, or propagation, which for decades has been involved in providing support and funding for everything from mosque building around the world, lecture tours by particular clerics, the distribution and dissemination of certain kinds of textbooks and religious materials, often I think just out of a sense that Saudi Arabia, given its role as the host of the two holiest sites in the religion of Islam has a certain obligation to bring Islam to the world. There are other actors involves, such as some of the parastatal organizations like the Muslim World League, the World Assembly of Muslim Youth, that are not actual organs of the Saudi State, but to varying degrees are beholden to Saudi funding or broader strategic direction from the Saudi authorities. But there are also a lot of smaller players, most notably I think a number of Islamic charities in the Kingdom that, again, for decades have been involved in providing support for this kind of activity.

Sine 9/11 in particular, the Saudis have been much more stringent about their oversight of the charitable sector, but I think it's fair to say that there are still a number of organizations that operate with some level of impunity in the sense that they enjoy the patronage of certain members of the royal family, which allows them to have free reign in terms of these activities. So we have a wide range of actors involved in this kind of activity.

Where there's a story about Saudi religious soft power with respect to the Kingdom's foreign policy I think comes down to the question of the oversight and regulation of this activity in the sense that there are vowels, broadly speaking, that the Saudi State can open and close. They can make it easier or more difficult for the actors that I just mentioned to engage in this kind of activity. And what we've seen over the years is a pattern whereby in

the 1950s and '60s where Saudi Arabia perceived the secular Arabism, Pan-Arabism of Gamal Abdel Nasser in Egypt as the main geopolitical threat. Islam and religion was used as a tool to counteract that from the time of the Islamic revolution in Iran in 1979. I think the focus pivoted to the idea that Saudi religious export activity is a useful antidote to Iranian influence. But it's also I think important to note that this is not just a story of Saudi Arabia's goals and objectives, but also the objectives of Saudi Arabia's allies. So in the context of the Cold War, for example, the United States government actually looked quite favorably on some of the religious export activity that organizations like the Muslim World League engaged in because in the kind of broad strategic viewpoint of American policy makers during the Cold War, the more religion you have in the world the more effective you will be in combating the rise of communism.

MS. LAKSHMANAN: Of communism. Exactly, that there's less space for communism if there's more religious belief. So of course it was seen in that way as a useful tool against an ideological force.

All right. So you've given us a good historical picture of what's happened in Saudi Arabia, the use of Islam by the state or not and the ability to sort of turn the faucet on and off for how much people can use that. And as you say, there are a number of different groups. Just in 2017 the Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed Bin Salman talked about being committed to returning Saudi Arabia to moderate Islam. What did he mean by that?

MR. MANDAVILLE: I think this very intriguing pronouncement by the Crown Prince in late 2017 was in my view broadly misunderstood, particularly among his audience in the West, who I think wanted to take it as an indication that Saudi Arabia would back away from the very ultra conservative literalist interpretation of Islam associated with its religious establishment.

MS. LAKSHMANAN: And support for some groups who might have been associated with terrorist activities. Certainly after 9/11 there was that concern.

MR. MANDAVILLE: I think that's a separate question, certainly in the way

we treat it in the report. Our report is not focused on support by the Saudi State for particular militant groups. That's certainly an instrument in the Saudi toolkit. And Saudi Arabia, along with a wide range of other governments in the region -- Iran certainly, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates -- have over the years, and particularly in recent years, provided plenty of support to particular militant groups in countries in the region, particularly those in conflict, where the Saudis and the other Gulf countries are trying to push and nudge those conflicts in particular directions.

What we're focused on in this report, though, is more this question of just broad based support for religious activity and proselytization. When Mohammed Bin Salman said that he wants to return Saudi Arabia to moderate Islam and dated that, in fact, to the year 1979, I think what he meant was he wants to push back against politicized interpretations of Islam of all sort, including the sort of mainstream Islamism associated with groups of the Muslim Brotherhood, which obviously Saudi Arabia has taken a particularly hard line towards recently. So I think when he spoke of moderate Islam audiences in the West heard a narrative about reform and movement away from ultra conservative religion, whereas I think what he had in mind was something more akin to moving away from interpretations of religion that might actually pose a threat to his consolidation of political control in Saudi Arabia.

MS. LAKSHMANAN: Mm-hmm. So something entirely different from what we read here in Washington?

MR. MANDAVILLE: Yes. Indeed.

MS. LAKSHMANAN: All right. So let's widen the lens a bit for people and explain to me in this report, you know, you're not just talking about Saudi Arabia of course, you're talking about the rise of religious soft power. What do you mean by that and why should we care? I mean we've been talking about soft power since Joseph Nye, you know, and we talk about it a lot in the U.S. context. If we're allowed to have soft power why shouldn't Muslim countries be able to have soft power? What's the problem?

MR. MANDAVILLE: Absolutely. So there's no problem. I think in returning to a story about soft power what we're trying to draw attention to is the fact that we have a fundamentally different geopolitical context from the one that Joseph Nye was addressing when he first coined this term in 1990, which was the end of the Cold War and the idea that something like American values or international liberalism broadly because of their appeal was starting to have a universalizing effect. All peoples in countries around the world, in his view -- which of course you see echoes in Francis Fukuyama's account of the end of history -- the idea that all peoples around the world were embracing or felt favorable towards American values. And what we're trying to say in this report is that as we move toward something like perhaps a post liberal or post Western world order ideas matter again. And we need to start paying attention to the circulation of ideas in geopolitics. We note that the conventionalisms and ideologies like socialism have already been debunked, liberalism, you know, there seems to be a debate about its staying power, nationalism, as we note in the report, by its very nature doesn't really cross national boundaries very well. And so what's left?

And so what we want to say in this report is that it's important to start paying attention to religion again as in inherently transnational force and to see how states are harnessing that religion, harnessing religion as part of the broader soft power strategies.

MS. LAKSHMANAN: Okay. I want to drill down on that further during our discussion. But, Shadi, I want to ask you, you know, what's confusing here I think to the average listener is that when we hear the word Islamist we think about people who are using Islam in foreign policy, in some sort of extremist way. But you also write in this report about how secular, or even anti Islamist governments, are also using religion and specifically Islam just as much as a tool of foreign policy in geopolitics.

So explain to us how it is that countries as different as Indonesia and Saudi Arabia, or Turkey and Iran, are all using Islam, you argue, as a political force.

MR. HAMID: Well, so the interesting thing here is that pretty much every

country that we look at in the paper, but also in the broader project, so far at least, in all of these countries governments use religion, but they don't merely use religion, they feature it as a major element of their foreign policy. And there isn't really a notable exception. And we tend to think, as you said, that Islamists are the ones who use Islam and politics and mix Islam in both foreign policy and domestic policy, but even more secular. Or countries that try to promote themselves as more progressive, reformist, or secular. And I put secular in quotation marks because there isn't a single major Muslim majority country I would say that is secular in the sense of separation of mosque and state. All of the states control, manipulate, and otherwise try to limit religion. There is no independent religious establishment in the vast majority of these countries.

So, in other words, you can be Islamist, you can be secular, you can be progressive, and, for example, Morocco and Jordan are two countries that try to promote themselves as promoting a kind of progressive Islam, so to speak, but this is a very kind of active approach on their part to promote a particular brand of Islam.

MS. LAKSHMANAN: Let me just ask, even post Muslim Brotherhood, you would also say that Egypt -- you count Egypt within those where there's not a separate religious establishment from what is now a military led government?

MR. HAMID: So one thing that Abdel Fattah el-Sisi, the President of Egypt, talks about quite a bit -- and he had a major speech about this sometime back -- is a religious revolution, religious reform, and these sort of things that he's really tried to feature. And, again, kind of talk about what that means in practice, but some of it is kind of packaged, not just for domestic audiences but also for international audiences, for the West, because we as Westerners and Americans, we love this kind of talk and we fall for it quite quickly in some cases. And, you know, Peter talked about MBS, Mohammed Bin Salman, the Crown Prince, de facto leader of Saudi Arabia. He's quite interesting in this regard because Saudi Arabia is still in some ways the most rigidly Islamist State in the world as a regime. However, I would argue that MBS himself is not an Islamist and that he is someone who is a sort of anti

Islamist. So you have this kind of interesting dualism where you have a state that is Islamist but a leader of this Islamist state who is in some ways rather different. And, as Peter said, he has his own particular understanding of Islam, which I would argue is very aggressive in its own way, but in a different way than say the Muslim Brotherhood.

And just more broadly, I mean one question that I think comes up quite a bit and we try to address in the report, is why, why are all these governments doing this. Peter touched on this a little bit, that it's really the only effective ideological option for Muslim majority governments. If they want to promote a certain message to their own citizens, but also more broadly to other Muslim publics, Islam works. And why does Islam work? Because enough Muslims, and in some cases a large majority of Muslims in many of these states find Islam compelling and appealing as an ideological discourse. Then you might ask, well, why do they find that? That's maybe beyond the scope of what we're talking about here, but Islam works, so people are going to use it and take advantage of it.

MS. LAKSHMANAN: And why use Islam as your ideological currency when you could use nationalism? I mean certainly the Egyptians in the past were able to use nationalism as their currency. Why not go back to that?

MR. HAMID: Well, it would be difficult to promote Egyptian nationalism beyond Egypt because I mean other folks in the Middle East don't necessarily want to become Egyptian nationalists. Maybe there was a time in the late '60s early '70s where Syria became part of Egypt in a way and that was maybe a different time. I mean Pan-Arabism has its limits and has also, as I think Peter said, if we don't have the Pan-Arab socialism or this kind of secular socialism that Nasser tried to promote, I think we're well beyond that being particularly appealing for a number of reasons.

When it comes to Islam though there's this interesting question of how it -- domestic security, that these countries, they care about regime security and regime survival, so for them if Islam is resonant in the public's fear, if you don't brand Islam and if you don't have your own particular approach to Islam, then you're leaving an ideological vacuum that

domestic challengers can take advantage of. And that really becomes a question fundamentally of regime survival. So if you're MBS or if you're President Sisi, you can't afford to do that. So you have to engage on these very foundational questions of Islam's role in public life and Islam's relationship to the state, because if you don't, others will.

And this actually gets to I think something which is quite worrying from my perspective, which is that because Islam is so inherently political and public for these regimes and also for many citizens of these countries, private acts of faith are basically transformed into questions of national security. So if you're an individual Muslim in Egypt or Saudi Arabia you might say well, hey, I want to do my own thing and believe in my own way, and maybe you don't want that to be very public, it's just something that you care about personally. Regimes will still at least potentially consider that your own personal beliefs to be threatening or they could potentially be threatening in the future. And these are regimes that I think are -- they want to nip any kind of competing religious interpretation in the bud. And we see this, and there are so many examples that we can talk about. And I think that that is something that we have to be aware of. It might seem that it's private, but then it becomes a question that has public implications.

MS. LAKSHMANAN: So just to be clear on this, your point is essentially that especially for authoritarian regimes, if you don't engage in foundational questions over the role of Islam that you're taking a risk and that's because you're leaving some sort of opening or ideological vacuum. Is that because of domestic challengers, is it because of foreign challengers? Ideological vacuum for whom?

MR. HAMID: Well, kind of a mix of both. So if you take say the UAE, Egypt, and Saudi Arabia, they're primarily concerned about Islam as challengers. And in this case it would be Muslim Brotherhood groups, or groups that share the Muslim Brotherhood school of thought. And this also has regional implications because there are two countries are more sympathetic to the Brotherhood approach to Islam and promote it to one degree or another, and those would be Qatar and Turkey.

So just to kind of give an example of how this divide may play out in practice, because often times, like Peter and I we talk a lot about religion and politics and they can sometimes be quite conceptual, and we get this question of well, what is a practical implication of this for say a policy maker. So here's one example. So it has to do with the Qatar crisis, which has been going on for I guess about more than a year and a half now and will probably go on for a lot longer for reasons that I'll mention right here, but I think often times we look at this divide between Saudi Arabia and the UAE on one hand and Qatar on the other as being a geopolitical divide.

MS. LAKSHMANAN: And the blockade. I mean it seems to be all about --

MR. HAMID: Yeah, the blockade against Qatar. Yeah.

MS. LAKSHMANAN: -- exerting power and squashing a smaller neighbor.

MR. HAMID: Yeah. Yeah, so I don't actually see it as a fundamentally geopolitical divide. Now, we can get into this interesting debate of when does geopolitics end and religion begin. And sometimes these things are so intertwined that even to kind of come up with these distinctive categories can be a little bit problematic because if you ask -- let's say you ask a particular Islamist actor in the Middle East, are you doing this because of politics or are you doing this because of religion, they'll see that question as a little bit odd, because for them, in their own minds at least, these can be quite intertwined. But the reason why I see this -- so if you look at Qatar, the UAE, and Saudi Arabia, they all have fundamentally different conceptions of Islam's role in public life, and specifically Islam's relationship to this state. And because, as I mentioned, these are very foundational issues, it's really hard to resolve them because on, say, geopolitical issues or economic issues you can split the middle because you can measure them in a way. How do you really measure or quantify something which is very raw and existential for these three countries?

So the UAE and Saudi Arabia I would say they kind of subscribe to what I would call statist Islam. So Islam is important but it's ultimately subservient to the state, the state above all. And this is not a particularly -- this actually has a long precedence in Islamic

history and Islamic thought, this idea of deference to the existing authorities. So this is not something that they're just kind of making up in the age of the modern nation state, this is something that has always been an important intellectual strain. Where Qatar also subscribes to a kind of statist Islam, but it's a different kind. And, as I mentioned, we can have a debate about why Qatar has supported the Muslim Brotherhood to one degree or another. But the one thing that I think we can all probably agree on is that Qatar does not have an ideological objection to Muslim Brotherhood style Islamism. And so to say that the Qatar ruling family, they're not necessarily Brotherhood themselves, but they don't have an objection to supporting it or they're broadly sympathetic to it. This is not the case for the UAE and Saudi Arabia, which see Brotherhood style Islamism as, along with Iran, pretty much the fundamental threat and they will do anything in their power to make sure that Brotherhood style Islamists do not gain ground.

So if you look at from this perspective and you see it as a very foundational issue about the role of Islam in three countries that have very different conceptions of the role of Islam, that makes it very difficult to resolve. And that's one reason I'm very pessimistic that this can be conclusively resolved anytime soon, unless there is external pressure. And this is where I think the policy implications become important, because if religion matters as much as I think it does, and if you take my premise, that means they're not going to resolve this on their own. There has to be some kind of external stimuli or external pressure that essentially pressures these parties and these countries to resolve these very foundational issues.

MS. LAKSHMANAN: All right. Well, of course, I have to take the bait -- this is Washington (laughter). Is that external party that you're expecting to somehow intervene and influence and put pressure, is that Washington? Is that something we can do or we should do?

MR. HAMID: Well, there's not really another option. So I mean that's the thing, if there has to be some external actor, then we can kind of go through the list of who could be a plausible contender to play that role. And for better or worse, that's still going to

be the U.S. And the U.S. still has a very close relationship with both sides of this divide. Qatar is a close ally, Saudi Arabia is a close ally.

MS. LAKSHMANAN: So what constructively could we do since we seemingly haven't done it yet?

MR. HAMID: Well, so we can talk about how we can use our leverage more effectively. And this gets into I think a broader conversation we're having now in DC about how we use our leverage with Saudi Arabia in particular. Not to say that we should -- so should we fundamentally break the alliance, should we fundamentally reassess our relationship? I would say that Saudi Arabia is going to be an ally whether we like them or not or whether we like Mohammed Bin Salman or not. But I think what we can all agree on is that there are important points of leverage and pressure when it comes to things like arms sales and the security umbrella that we provide for Saudi Arabia. And I think that we're already having debates in congress in particular about the Yemen war, but it can be kind of applied more broadly about how we as Americans use our leverage to try not to punish Saudi Arabia for the sake of it, but to try to induce better more constructive behavior. That can apply to the Qatar blockade, it can apply to releasing certain dissidents, it can apply to the Yemen war, so on and so forth.

MS. LAKSHMANAN: Or Jamal Khashoggi's case. I'm sure that will come up in Q&A.

MR. HAMID: Yes, exactly.

MS. LAKSHMANAN: All right. Geneive, Shadi and Peter invited you here bravely (laughter) to take them on and to be the sort of outside expert giving them some tough love and constructive criticism on what you think of the report. So give it to us straight. You read the report in advance, what do you think of their analysis?

MS. ABDO: Well, since this is a diplomatic town I'll start with the praise before I get to the criticism. (Laughter) But I mean just to sort of step back a moment and try to address why this report is so important, and both Shadi and Peter have given sort of a very

detailed analysis of what states are doing, but I think that the first question is really why have states become so smart, why have they identified religious soft power as an instrument that they can use to ensure their own survival and sustainability. And I think that we have to give credit where credit is due, and that's to -- and I'll speak specifically about the Arab world because that's the subject of my own research, not other parts of the world -- but I think that Arab societies have really -- after the Arab uprisings have stepped up to the plate and forced this kind of enormous shift that we're seeing in how states deal with Islamists, how they deal with trying to control the Islamic message. Because before the Islamic uprisings, particularly if you look back at the 1990s, states -- and Egypt is a perfect example of this -- were pretty inept at doing this. I mean they tried to license mosques, they couldn't do that, they tried to license imams. There was no control over the religious message.

And there was also a de-emphasis on the role that religion played in Arab society. So I think that one of the great contributions of this report is to in a very nuanced, complicated, and detailed manner, to teach us the importance of religion in Arab societies, which people I think for many decades, particularly in the West, have always tried to minimize. There was always an excuse for a role that religion seemed to play in Arab societies, the collapse of secularism, the collapse of nationalism, the absence of any other ideology. And religion was never measured, understood, or studied on its own terms. So I think that that's the first value of this very sophisticated and nuanced report.

And I think the other value, broadly speaking, is that it shows us how states have recovered from the Arab uprisings, even in states where there wasn't an Arab uprising, such as Saudi Arabia. So the responses that we're seeing from states are taking the region in context, regional actors. Because we can no longer talk, for example, about Salafists in Saudi Arabia because the Salafists in Saudi Arabia influence the Salafists in Lebanon. The Salafists in Lebanon are influenced by the Muslim Brotherhood's in exile in Turkey. So I think that states very quickly recovered and adjusted and adapted to the chaos from the Arab uprisings by looking at how they can use religious soft power to their advantage. But they're

looking at in the regional perspective. And I think that the report makes this clear, both by talking about the differences in approaches and also the similarities and the commonalities.

And so those are what I think are the most important take aways from the study, broadly speaking. Where I think that we have to be careful is that even though, as both Peter and Shadi have told you in great detail, and the study is very detailed, how states have recovered from the Arab uprisings. They are still vulnerable and I think that we have to really understand that no matter how much you try to use religious soft power, no matter how much you try to monopolize and take ownership of the religious message, there's always going to be an ideological vacuum. It comes with the nature of how political Islam has evolved since really the 1960s. And I take a bit of issue with the fact that all of this began with the 1979 revolution in Iran. A lot of these movements began evolving separately in Arab countries and Arab societies long before the Iranian revolution even though that was a catalyst that caused a very, very seismic shift in how these movements operated vis a vis Iran.

But putting that --

MS. LAKSHMANAN: So, Geneive, let me just ask you --

MS. ABDO: Sure.

MS. LAKSHMANAN: -- what you mean when you say that even though it appears that states may be taking charge, sort of taking ownership of how Islam is practices, you're saying that no matter how much they do that there are always going to be ideological vacuums here and there. And you're saying that's because over the last 30-40 years Islam has become democratized in a sense?

MS. ABDO: Yes. It's because there are multiple interpretations of the message. That can't be controlled. And I'm speaking primarily about Sunni Islam not Shia Islam. So we're sort of coming full circle. The reason that states have become far more sophisticated, as the study explains, in dealing with trying to control and take ownership of religion in their own societies and in the region in general, the reason this is happening is

because they have seen an explosion and a democratization of how Islam is practiced and interpreted.

MS. LAKSHMANAN: Long prior to the Arab uprising.

MS. ABDO: Long prior. And so I think that we have to be careful in assessing the success of how each of these countries -- as the report has detailed -- what their approaches are. If we look at this 10 years from now, how successful are their strategies. And I would say that if you look at Saudi Arabia as an example, and I'll just pose a question, the Crown Prince has mentioned that he has, you know, sort of curtailed the activities of some of the Salifists in Saudi Arabia that have a regional influence. I mean some of these people have 21 million twitter followers, and that was 6 months ago.

MS. LAKSHMANAN: That's even more than Shadi. (Laughter)

MS. ABDO: Believe it or not, someone has more twitter followers than Shadi.

MS. LAKSHMANAN: Hard to believe.

MS. ABDO: So the question that we will come to at some point in time is how successful is this strategy.

MS. LAKSHMANAN: All right. But then explain to us why -- it seems like you agree that how citizens understand or interpret religion becomes a matter of national security for the state.

MS. ABDO: Absolutely.

MS. LAKSHMANAN: Explain to us why.

MS. ABDO: Well, I would say also that that's something new, that states finally came to realization that their national security depends upon not -- we're not talking about the extremists here, but how the normal citizen practices Islam, understands Islam. And that's what this is really about. This is addressing general populations by using this kind of soft power strategy.

And I think that the reason that this has become important is that for many

decades the mainstream and the majorities in all these societies were ignored because the focus was on the extremists. But then at some point in time people, even the mainstream, began to be redefined by the extremists and the people who exist on the edge. So as this redefinition occurred states had to adapt, right. They can't focus just on the extremists anymore, it's not just about ISIS, it's not just about Al Qaeda, it's about how the normal person is absorbing these messages. And so the way I sort of see it is that a shift was necessary because you couldn't separate these two worlds any longer.

MS. LAKSHMANAN: But isn't it also true that the existence of sectarianism, or even let's say the rise of sectarianism regionally has made the advancement of Islamist soft power much more challenging?

MS. ABDO: Absolutely. And that's because the actors that were unleashed by some states to advance a sectarian agenda, particularly on the Sunni side against the Shia, what happened -- and Syria is a perfect example of this -- what happened was that -- especially if you look on social media and how anti-Shi'ism became a primary discourse in social media in Arabic. Once that started happening on a grand scale it began affecting who was going to fight in Syria, it began affecting how people, how Sunni Muslims perceived this kind of Shia threat that they thought was out there among, you know, just normal people. And so what happened is by advancing a sectarian agenda, once the genie was out of the bottle it was difficult to put it back in.

So I think that that's the other reason that states have become more sophisticated. And I think also that we have to consider another I think important part of this report, or an important dimension of it, is that there are many offenders. It's not just the Saudis and Wahhabism. So the report goes far beyond the kind of clichés that we've been locked into in viewing the role of Islam. So if we're talking about Iran, for example, you know, even though there aren't actors, sort of non state actors in Iran that are on social media to the degree that the Sunnis are advancing an anti Sunni message, the Iranians are masters at what this report is talking about, which is religious soft power. And they've been at this game

really since the revolution. So for them it's not something new. They've taken it to an art form.

And I will just use Iraq as an example of where we are in Iraq today. The Iranians became very entrenched in Iraq, even though there are centuries of religious ties between Najaf, which is the clerical center in Iraq, and Qom, which is the clerical center in Iran. So there was a long history of religious connections. But after the 2003 invasion, Iran very, very cleverly began creating religious schools at Iraq. They began this kind of soft power that now what's happened in Iraq -- and I think that the study doesn't really focus that much on Iraq -- but I think that what's interesting in Iraq is that the Iranians have sort of perpetuated this kind of ideological strategy that all Shias support Iran's system of government, which is supreme clerical role on the *vilayat-e faqih*. So when we in the West think of the Shia we think oh, they're all Iranian loyalists. And this has been part of their strategy. But what's happened in Iraq, for example, is that the clerical establishment and key political actors and parties have now become very anti Iranian. And so in a way their entrenchment in Iraq, which really dates to 2003, and that's when it became so deep, now it's backfiring. But if you look at the Iraq case, it's a perfect example of what this report is talking about and how the Iranians have cleverly built and established institutions, they have support political parties, they fund Shia militias. So it's a multi layered type of soft power that has enabled them to really create a stalemate now within the Iraqi government.

MS. LAKSHMANAN: All right. Well, we'll come back to that because I also do want to talk about the way in which Saudi Arabia and Iran both are sort of using their religious soft power to try to empower proxies, domestic and foreign. So we'll come back to that.

Peter, I want to ask you about your view of the Crown Prince in Saudi Arabia and whether he is basically a transactionalist above all. Is he using religion in a operational way for his own power, and how is that different -- let's be honest -- from any leader ever, any authoritarian leader in the whole world ever?

MR. MANDAVILLE: Yes. I think at core he is a transactionalist and an instrumentalist. So I think Shadi made the very important point that he doesn't have any particularly strong ideological commitments with respect to the question of the relationship between religion and politics. He absolutely has made some moves against the religious establishment in the Kingdom to reign in its influence, both domestically and abroad. But, again, I don't read that as opposition to religion, I read that as opposition to any force in Saudi society that may threaten his consolidation of power.

The flip side of that, however, is the idea that if and when he deems it useful to, as you yourself said, Indira, open up that faucet of religion in order to achieve some objective that he has, I don't think he'll hesitate to do that. And so where we continue to see that even now, I think, is with respect to Iran and what the Saudis have perceived, I think not incorrectly, as an enormous and aggressive push on the part of Iran to assert itself across the region after 2003 and after 2011.

And so insofar as Crown Prince Mohammed Bin Salman views the use of religion and particularly the inherently anti Shia strain of thought that is present in the Salafism at the heart of the Saudi religious establishment. Insofar as he regards that as a useful tool for counterbalancing and pushing back against Iranian influence, he will continue to make space for that kind of activity.

MS. LAKSHMANAN: So if you look across the Muslim world, and it is of course extremely varied -- I mean I mentioned Indonesia, we haven't talked about Indonesia at all -- but when I covered Indonesia in the late '90s and early 2000s, part of the whole deal was Indonesia post Suharto talking about how they were a secular majority country. Things have changed since then, but still in the way that soft power is used I'd like to hear from you which Muslim leader do you think is using soft power, Islamist soft power most effectively right now. And it can be for good and it can be for bad from your perspective, but who is doing it most cannily, most effectively right now.

MR. MANDAVILLE: I think that as a practitioner of statecraft, as much as I

personally have serious concerns with the growing autocracy that seems present in his country, Turkey, I think that the Turkish president, Erdoğan, has been very skillful in the way that he has incorporated religion into Turkey's broader emerging power outreach strategy. This has certain immediate neighborhood regional effects in terms of the position that Turkey has taken in this broader axis of divide in the Middle East around the question of the Muslim Brotherhood movement and those ideas. But beyond that the way in which Erdoğan has sought to return to this kind of conception of a glorious neo ottoman Turkish past and sought to kind of rekindle a sense of positive and favorable attitudes toward that history among a great number of countries in its near abroad, particularly territories and countries such as the Caucuses, parts of southeast Europe today that were formerly Ottoman territories. But even beyond that, you know, we often tell the story of China's enormous investment in Africa. Turkey has been sinking huge amounts of money into infrastructure development in particularly Eastern Africa. But what's interesting is that in addition to building the highways, Turkey is also providing money to build the mosques that go along those highways. And so we have this multilayered strategy here that, yes, it's about the idea that we're going to enable economic prosperity in your country, but we're also going to remind you of other kinds of cultural affinities between our two countries as we do this.

MS. LAKSHMANAN: Interesting. I mean, trying to make people aware, trying to sort of remind and excite Turks about the glorious history of the Ottoman Empire, that's not just religion, that's nationalism, it's sort of cultural pride.

MR. MANDAVILLE: Sure.

MS. LAKSHMANAN: You see that in China, you see that in India, where the governments there, and it has nothing to do with religion, are constantly talking about 5,000 years of Chinese history, you know, 5 millennia of Indian cultural achievements. So it's not a purely religious thing, although what you're talking about projecting their power around the world in a way to try to draw in other Muslim countries as allies.

MR. MANDAVILLE: Absolutely. And we don't want to say that religion is a

force that is completely separate from other things like nationalism and national identity. There are a great number of countries in the Muslim world, but beyond as well. You know, our report and our project primarily focused on the Muslim world, but the story of religious soft power is not one that is restricted to the Muslim world. There are other countries in the world today that do this. Russia, in the way that Putin has leveraged the transnational influence of the Russian Orthodox Church. And we see that playing out right now around the question of autocephaly for the Ukrainian church. The Russian Orthodox Church has become a tool of Russian statecraft in recent years. Likewise India under the BJP, that has also leveraged elements of a transnational Hindu identity in its outreach, particularly to Indians living outside India itself.

MS. LAKSHMANAN: Likewise Hungary under Viktor Orbán, who is talking about a new kind of Christian democracy that he says is Christian liberalism, is not the same as liberal democracy, according to Orbán. So there are lots of people employing it.

Shadi -- yes, I want you to respond to that, but I also want to ask you, for your nominee, for the Muslim leader around the world who is using Islam as soft power most effectively, for good or for ill.

MR. HAMID: Most effectively. I would say that none of them are particularly effective for a variety of reasons. I would say that maybe Saudi Arabia has, at least until the recent Khashoggi crisis, I could see the emergence of an MBS approach that was really going to curry favor with the West, and still will to one degree or another, but it's obviously been sullied. The UAE is quite interesting because they're another example of statist Islam, but one thing they've really tried to do -- and I think they've done it rather effectively -- is promote a lot of Sufi sheikhs and do a lot of these interfaith summits, Muslims, Christians, Jews together. There was one actually somewhat recently in the UAE. And, again, I mean if I was the UAE leadership I would do this too. Again, not just for my own domestic audience, because Westerners love this stuff (laughter) -- interfaith summits.

And there's a lot of talk about diversity and pluralism and we have to be very

careful about what we mean by these words. And even Trump -- well, I mean I don't want to say Trump fell into this trap, but he did tweet the other day that oh, Sisi is great because he's promoting inclusion because of the new cathedral that's being built in Egypt, that this is a sign of a more inclusive Egypt. This is a very narrow way of looking at inclusion, and authoritarian regimes love this way of looking at inclusion, that it's about this very in some ways super official ethno religious diversity. But anything that has to do with political diversity or political pluralism, that is not part of pluralism or diversity. And it's also I think somewhat patronizing to minorities, as if to suggest that Christians don't care about political freedoms or democracy or basic individual rights or civil liberties, which I think is very problematic.

So that's one thing I would say. But, you know, in this broader discussion, and also hearing some of the examples that Peter was just talking about, it really strikes me -- and maybe this is my own bias -- I mean I think more and more that the modern nation state is just bad for Islam. That's really for me what -- because the modern nation state by definition is centralizing, it's bloated, it's big, it wants to control the minutia of life, it has the technological resources to surveil, it isn't willing to leave the private private. And that wasn't the case in the pre-modern era. However authoritarian a leader would have in previous caliphates, pre 1924, there would have been limits to what they could do and there was always a space for independent power outside of the state because the state was always going to be somewhat limited. In the modern era it's hard to limit the state.

And this also affects our foreign policy because we see how states are so powerful in the Middle East and more broadly, so we talk to our partners in these states and say, well, can you promote a better kind of Islam. So that might be fine in the short-term because moderate clerics, all that stuff, let's send them around and say nice things about Islam. We can have a conversation about that. But in the long run, it just leads to a doubling down of state control of religion. And if I had a long-term goal as a U.S. policy maker -- like let's say 30 years from now, one of my major objectives in the Middle East would be to find a way to weaken the state's control over pretty much everything, but particularly religion.

MS. LAKSHMANAN: All right. Geneive, I want to open it up in a minute to questions, but before we do I'm going to sort of ask you a variation of the same question, which is a lot of what you study is Saudi Arabia and Iran's interaction with one another. So who's playing this game better? I don't mean to reduce it just to a game, but if we're talking about the projection of soft power domestically and abroad, you look at Iran, you look at Saudi Arabia, you were sort of saying that Iran has been doing incredibly cannily since 1979 and BS has certainly gotten a lot of attention for doing it the last few years. So who is doing it better?

MS. ABDO: Well, I think that -- and going back to some of the details on the report -- I think that question can't really be answered because their approaches are so different. So I would say that the Saudi approach is more -- you know, as we've all agreed, what happens domestically also has ramifications regionally or becomes foreign policy for these states. So the two are intertwined. But I would say that the Iranian approach is much more to, as the report indicates, cultivate Shia populations in the region, in the world really, and co-op them, and co-op them with an ideology that is generally anti American, focuses on martyrdom of the Shia based upon their religion history vis a vis the Sunnis. So the Iranian approach is to try to co-op Shia societies. And, again, to try to make them believe all the Shia Iranian loyalists. So we're your big brother, we're coming here to build schools, we're coming here to provide social services, because we're going to take care of you.

In the case of Bahrain, for example, the -- well, I don't think you could define it as soft power, but the Iranians seized opportunities. In the case of Yemen, they seized opportunities. So it's not even a case where Shia groups, whether they're militant, whether they're militias, necessarily are seeking Iranian support directly, it's more of a situation where the Iranians see an opportunity and figure out a way how to capitalize on that opportunity.

And I think that the other thing that's discussed in the report, which is very important as to the different strategies between the Saudis and the Iranians, is that the Iranians treat their proxies differently in every country. So their client relationship with the

Houthis in Yemen is totally different than how their relationship is with the Shia militias in Iraq. The Shia militias in Iraq have a direct relationship, they're under the Revolutionary Guards, they take orders from the Revolutionary Guards, technically they're supposed to be under the authority, the legitimacy of the Iraqi government. That doesn't happen in practice. The Houthis have a completely different relationship with the Iranians and that's where we get sort of stuck because we tend to generalize. Well, all the Houthi activity in Yemen is coming from orders from Tehran. And so even Hezbollah has a completely different relationship with the Iranians. It's a mature movement that's highly important and influential in Lebanon, it's directly involved now in Lebanese politics.

So does Nasrallah take orders from Tehran? Maybe, but I wouldn't call it orders, I would say that the relationship is a very mature one. So I think that the difference in their strategies, I would say that the Saudi strategy is much more domestically oriented, in part because the Iranians have been at this game for 40 years now. So they've expanded and sophisticated their strategies and their objective was always different. Their objective was to have influence in the region, and that's why they have also -- and the study mentioned this as well -- they've also tried to cultivate and attract Sunni groups. So the strategy for the Iranians isn't necessarily strictly on a sectarian fault line. Where they see opportunities on the Sunni side, they at one point were harboring Al Qaeda operatives in Iran. Now there are reports that they are trying to appeal to Sunni communities in Iraq again.

So they're highly sophisticated in how they use this soft power and it's not always on a sectarian fault line.

MS. LAKSHMANAN: Okay. Good. So we want to open it up to questions. There are a couple of microphones here and I'd like to ask everybody if you would kindly identify yourself, any affiliation you have, and make sure that you're asking a question, not making a statement. And this was the first hand to shoot up right here, so let's give this gentleman a chance.

MR. BOKHARI: Thank you. Wonderful, insightful, rich panel. Thank you to

everybody. Kamran Bokhari, Center for Global Policy.

I want to go back to the question of geopolitics and religion, and this is for everybody. I see geopolitics as the ability of a state to use specific tradecraft. Now you talk about religion as a medium in this report, but to me -- and this goes back to what Geneive was just saying about the Iranians and their sophistication -- is that I see this more as a function of how good your intelligence tradecraft is, how good your military strategies are in order to be able to use that vehicle, whether it's religion, whether it's sectarianism, whether it's nationalism, or just sort of we're all Muslims, as the Iranians reach out to the Sunnis, so let's have a deal. So how much of it is religion? I know I'm not going to get a straight answer, this is a complicated topic, but I really want to get your thoughts on the technical aspect, the tradecraft aspect when it comes to a state in terms of its intelligence apparatus and recruitment techniques and whatnot.

Thank you.

MS. LAKSHMANAN: Okay. Who would like to take that?

MR. MANDAVILLE: Sure. I think, Kamran, that I -- and this is maybe where there is a little bit of difference between myself and my co-author in that I don't place exclusive emphasis on the religion as religion component of it, that those states that are most successful to my mind are those that manage to incorporate religion as one layer of a broader outreach strategy that also incorporates some of the more conventional tools of exerting influence, hard and soft, around the world. And that's precisely I cited President Erdoğan and the way that Turkey has incorporated this as a sort of accessory or ancillary component to the way that it exerts influence around the world.

On this question of like who is more sophisticated in doing it, I won't hesitate to say that Iran, in my view, is more sophisticated than Saudi Arabia. Sophistication is different from the question of who is more effective. There are places where Saudi Arabia has been more effective in terms of short-term objectives on the security front that they have sought to achieve while, in my view, potentially unleashing all other of malignancy that we

may have to deal with years down the line. But I think Tehran as a practitioner of soft power is much more sophisticated.

And I can just cite one very brief example of something that I witnessed firsthand in Indonesia. It's a perfect example of -- it's contained in the report as well, but I'll cite it -- it's a perfect example of what Geneive mentioned in terms of outreach to Sunnis as well. They set up a sort of soft power center at the National Islamic University in Jakarta. And so I think in Washington's imagination of what Iranian soft power projection looks like, it's about this idea of the export of the glories of the Islamic revolution. And when I visited NIU in Jakarta my host sort of pointed upstairs to this thing called Iranian Corner. And it was packed out, everyone was in there. And it perhaps showed my bias that I expected to find basically a shrine to the glories of Imam Khomeini and the concept of *vilayat-e faqih* and the glories of this revolution. Nothing of the sort. It was as if the Islamic revolution in Iran had never happened. What it was was a library dedicated to Persian Sufi contributions to Islamic history, showing that the Iranians know their audience incredibly well. National Islamic University grounded in the *Nahdlatul Ulama*, the traditionalist Sufi oriented mass movement in Indonesia. So what they were saying was, hey, if you're into Sufism, then you need to regard Iran/Persia as historically a major source of that. That's incredibly skillful and sophisticated soft power projection.

MR. HAMID: Well, this is the thing too, is that peter really is getting at this, the Iranians just have been -- they have to be more scrappy in their approach. They're more of the underdog. Also demographically speaking, 10-15 percent of Muslims are Shia, so you can't have an overtly or aggressively narrowly Shia approach to religious soft power. And we can debate why this is, and I would say that some of it has to do with Shia just being a minority for such a very long time. It's very easy to -- it's not very easy, I mean they're not like down the street, but it is easier to find Sunni takfiris. In other words, takfiris, people who believe that you can pretty much excommunicate other Muslims and therefore their blood is illicit and therefore you can kill them. Sunni takfiris is a thing. It's actually relatively hard to

find Shia takfiris who would say that if someone is a Sunni they are outside the fold of Islam and therefore their blood is illicit. So if you want to kill people you have to use a different justification, in other words, which is relevant. (Laughter) You know, so I think that -- it's actually not -- it's -- anyway. So I think there is a kind of imbalance here when we look at how just because of a demographic balance Sunnis are going to approach things a little bit differently because they are the vast majority of Muslims where Shias, almost from the very beginning -- and it's almost basically included in how we have come to describe them as Shias, as a kind of a group apart in a way, that they just have to approach things fundamentally differently.

So that to me is really interesting, and that's why I think Iran has been forced in a way to be more sophisticated. They have to be more sophisticated where the Saudis -- and the Saudis have survived, so we can also have a conversation about what the ultimate objectives are. So Iran I think cares about regime survival, but they may also care about some other ideological objectives as well, where I think the Saudis, their fundamental concern at the end of the day is just simply regime survival.

MR. MANDAVILLE: I think there's a policy relevant alert point here, briefly, to make, which goes back to this point about what Iran is doing in a country like Indonesia. Because the other thing I noticed on that same visit to that Indonesian University is that there's something called an American Corner, which is something that U.S. embassies set up often at universities around the world. It's like a little kiosk that people can visit to get a sense of what American life looks like. The American Corner at that University was dusty and shoved into a corner, no one was at it. No one was interested in that. Whereas Iranian Corner was packed out. So rather than just having a discussion about who's being more effective, Saudi Arabia or Iran, I think that other practitioners of soft power projection and public diplomacy, including the United States, needs to be aware that the landscape that we're playing in with respect to public diplomacy and soft power is changing in fundamental ways. And I'm not sure that our thinking about public diplomacy in Washington is keeping up

with that.

MS. LAKSHMANAN: That's a really interesting point.

Okay, in the interest of getting a couple of more questions in, I'm going to ask two now at a time and maybe we can keep the answers a little bit shorter. There's a gentleman here, wait for the microphone to come.

MR. ABED: George Abed, IIF. One of the main ideas that came out this discussion is that regimes in the Middle East kind of snatched a victory out of the jaws of defeat with the 2011 chaos that erupted in the region. And the ones who succeeded are the ones who, to some extent, are able to repackage mainstream Islam in a way to their purposes, to serve their purposes, especially through statecraft and through domestic control of potentially disruptive elements while at the same time hitting away at the extremists, crushing the extremists and ISIS, and at the same time sort of splitting off the Brotherhood, sort of isolating them or at least trying to demonstrate that this is not legitimate Islam that we all know by delegitimizing the Muslim Brotherhood.

And then, Geneive, you said something interesting, which you didn't follow on and none of the speakers did, and that is but they're still vulnerable. Which means this victory will go on for a while probably. But the question is, what is the source of the potential vulnerability, where is that coming from, domestic, external? And what the character of that vulnerability is to the extent this mode runs its course over several years?

MS. LAKSHMANAN: Thank you. And we have another man right in front.

QUESTIONER: Peter Apri, intel analyst and a former diplomat. I have another candidate, Shadi, as an external actor that could lead the charge here. We noticed that when Muslims are killed in the Levant the Muslim world explodes. But the killing of Rohingya in Burma, or Muslims in China is met with utter silence. So I wonder if perhaps the OIC couldn't stand up, expand its mandate a bit, to become the defender of Muslims everywhere, not just in the Levant. And as defending Islam means turning down the heat on the pervasive fanaticism, that the OIC couldn't be a body to inculcate moderation throughout

the faith.

MS. LAKSHMANAN: Okay. Two good questions. So let's first start with the one from George about snatching victory from the jaws of defeat in 2011 with the Arab uprisings, repackaging mainstream Islam, and what are the vulnerabilities, domestic or external.

Do you want to start, Geneive?

MS. ABDO: Sure. So I think that you can sort of look at this in different ways, but if you look at Egypt as an example -- and I know that what I'm about to say is highly controversial in this town, but I think that to assume that the Muslim brotherhood is no longer a factor in Egyptian or regional politics is a very naive assumption. And so they've been crushed for now, they're operating in exile, certainly aren't part of the political process in Egypt. But that doesn't mean that on a societal level they don't have still an immense amount of support. The Washington Institute just issued some polling information which shows that a third of Egyptians support the Muslim Brotherhood. I think that's -- I mean I'm glad there's actual survey research indicating that, but I think that's also an underestimated percentage.

QUESTIONER: (Off mic). I'm sure they have not succeeded.

MS. ABDO: Right. So my point is that if we get into this kind of complacency of saying ISIS is defeated, the Muslim Brotherhood is defeated, I think that we're not understanding what's happening on the ground. So look at Sinai, ISIS is reconstituting itself in parts of Iraq already. There are bombings now close to Baghdad. There was even some activity in Rukka a few days ago. So I think that we have to look at these two worlds as being connected. The sophistication of religious soft power and the new measures and the new techniques, some of them very effective, that states are taking to take ownership of Islam because they consider it to be an issue of national security. But also the other side is becoming more sophisticated too. And I don't think that we can assume that the roots that they established in the societies where they had power have totally disappeared simply because states have regrouped since the Arab uprisings.

So that's my point. It's almost as if we shouldn't underestimate the unknown. We don't know what the Muslim Brotherhood's power is going to be in Egypt 10 years from now. We don't know what ISIS's presence is going to be in Iraq 10 years from now. But I think that even in the U.S. government, you know, you have our President saying ISIS was defeated only to hear John Bolton say two days later that we're trying to still combat ISIS in Iraq. So I think that we have to be very careful to understand that there are two separate worlds we're dealing with now and the more unknown I would say you can sort of parse out, dissect, analyze what states are doing, but I think what's less known is the other side. Because we don't have contact, because we don't really understand their ideological underpinnings the way we understand states. And that's always been the universe that we've lived in and people who have studied all of these issues.

MS. LAKSHMANAN: If people want to know more about the resurgence of ISIS in Iraq and beyond, I highly urge you to look at a Pulitzer Center Project that just ran in *The New Yorker* last week by Ben Taub, with photos by Moises Saman. It was our project that is incredible, that really looks at how ISIS is coming back. So you're absolutely right, we need to be aware of that and not complacent.

To the second question that Peter had about when Muslim, Rohingya, or Uighurs are killed, you hear crickets in the Arab world or throughout the Middle East, and should the OIC take a leadership role.

MR. HAMID: Just one point I'll just make about what Geneive said. I have this sinking feeling that in 10 or 20 years we're going to be here in DC debating the same issues in the same way. And I mean I feel like even the way we're talking about the Muslim Brotherhood now, it's reverted to the mid 1990s when an Islamist party was on the verge of coming to power in Algeria the military stepped in, there was a civil war. There's almost a sense where at least with this Administration we're stuck and we're going to have to get back to this -- I don't know, whenever it is that there's a political opening in Egypt or elsewhere and the Muslim Brotherhood plays a role, we're going to essentially have to redo this debate.

On the OIC and the role that they can play, well, the OIC -- I want to be nice (laughter) -- the OIC is not a serious -- well, I don't -- maybe it could become a more serious effective organization in the future. It is not currently that, so I think we have to be realistic about the role the OIC can play. The OIC also is mostly just a collection of Muslim majority states that kind of don't like each other. And not all of them are authoritarian because obviously -- actually a lot of Muslim majority states are not authoritarian outside the Arab world, and there are some that we don't really talk about, like Burkina Faso, for example, which is I think a Muslim majority state.

But I think it is a bigger question, why isn't there more attention to things that are happening in China. I think one reason is that states themselves want to limit attention towards those issues because they care about economic cooperation with China, China is trying to become more influential in Muslim majority countries. I should also say this because he's in the crowd, that Mustafa Akyol, the *New York Times* columnist, wrote an excellent piece -- he's over there -- I think last week or the week before on why aren't Muslims doing more, more outraged about the terrible and horrendous treatment of Chinese Muslims. So I think take a look at that piece. And thankfully it's getting more attention I think.

MS. LAKSHMANAN: Okay. So I'm going to take two more questions now. Are there no women in the audience who have any questions? (Laughter) Okay, thank you. Could we get a microphone over here? This lady right here.

MS. FAZEL: Thank you so much. Hi, I'm Marina Fazel, an Afghan-American journalist. I wondered if you would please turn this on its head, if you will. I agree that all religions are a form of statecraft. In fact, one can argue that this is the oldest form of statecraft. For the United States, with its big role around the world, what can you advise the Trump Administration when we see schools, for example, that are accused of being supported by the Turkish cleric here, and we see diplomacy being played out that involves exchange of clerics? Can you sum this up in how the Trump Administration has played out statecraft vis a vis religion, especially for a country that wouldn't -- America, it's Constitution

really has been shaped by Christianity and people bringing back the Constitution to a more egalitarian basis?

Thanks.

MS. LAKSHMANAN: Okay. Thank you. And I see a question back there. The person with their hand raised up.

QUESTIONER: Thank you. Ari Zalhav. I run a blog (inaudible), which includes conversation on conflict and development in the Middle East.

My question is how would the death of Sistani affect the Shia Arab world's political philosophy, both in terms of religion and the secular connection to Iran?

Thank you.

MS. LAKSHMANAN: Okay. And let's take one more question. There's a woman in red in the very back there.

MS. TRIBBLE: Megan Tribble, a grad student at American University of Beirut.

MS. LAKSHMANAN: Can you speak up please?

MS. TRIBBLE: Megan Tribble, a grad student at American University of Beirut. My question with regard to state control of religious expression in the Arab world and the Middle East more broadly.

MS. LAKSHMANAN: You're going to have to speak into the microphone more or something.

MS. TRIBBLE: I am. Okay.

MS. LAKSHMANAN: It's really hard to hear you.

MS. TRIBBLE: With regard to state control of religious expression and religious actors in the Arab world and the Middle East, I heard two conflicting expressions of thought from the panel. Geneive, you said sort of the Arab world had stepped up to the plate and had tried to -- and had gotten better at bringing people into the fold and exerting control over mosques and educational institutions. But then, Shadi, you concluded that you had

hoped in the next 30 years there would be a lessening or decreasing of that control.

So from the perspective of American foreign policy, is that not asking contradictory or impossible feats? And should we, as Americans -- or should the American foreign policy establishment have a preference either way, for there to be a loosening or tightening of this state control over religious expression?

MS. LAKSHMANAN: Okay, good. Thank you. All right. So who wants to take the first question on the Trump Administration's use of religion in foreign policy and the potential exchange of clerics?

MR. MANDAVILLE: No, I'm to take a stab at that and also very briefly a couple of the others.

So of course based on the U.S. Constitution, which prohibits the U.S. federal government through the establishment clause from taking positions on matters of religion or supporting particular expressions of religion, this has meant that this question of where religion figures in U.S. foreign policy is somewhat more complicated. That said, I think it would be naive to not recognize that a particular conception of American religion has been part and parcel of our foreign policy conduct for years, even if only indirectly. So in the same way that I mention that certain activities by Saudi sponsored entities during the Cold War regarded favorably by the U.S. government as counterbalances to communism, likewise there are ways in which the private activities of American missionary organizations were also viewed favorably by successive U.S. governments of multiple partisan orientations for precisely that same reason.

At present, of course, you know we've had a strong swing towards an emphasis on the promotion of religious freedom as a component of American foreign policy. And this idea of religious freedom is something that has had I think a particular valence historically in sort of America's conception of itself and its role in the world. I think what complicates the matter now is that the present emphasis on that issue is very much identified with a center of gravity located in conservative evangelical circles in the United States, and so

it was perceived as a way in which that particular constituency is able to exert influence on an administration that is very keen for its own domestic political concerns to be responsive to them. And I think that complicates America's ability to be perceived as an honest broker in religious freedom promotion because I think there's a perception, not incorrectly, that many within those circles pushing for more religious freedom promotion are first and foremost concerned with religious freedom violations against Christian communities around the world.

The professional staff of organizations such as the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom and the State Department's International Religious Freedom Office, you know, in my experience are heavily committed to being very even handed in identifying and calling out for violations against religious freedom of all groups. And so I think this creates a certain sort of tension.

I'll say very briefly on the question of the implications of the death of Grand Ayatollah Sistani -- Geneive will have much more to say on that -- I think this is a very important issue because Sistani more than just being a senior Iraqi cleric is a figure, in the sort of senior clerical ranks of Shi'ism globally, is someone who is followed by a great many Shia around the world, not just in Iraq itself. And one thing that's been very notable about his ideological orientation is his function as a bulwark against the broader spread of the official ideology of Iran. This concept of *vilayat-e faqih*, which promotes the idea that clerics should have direct political power. And he served as a very important bulwark against that idea in Iraq itself. We already know that the Iranian seminary cities of Qom are circling around Najaf as Sistani enters the latter years of his tenure as the premier cleric in Iraq and with his demise I think we're likely to see a lot of competition between those two seminary cities for influence.

Finally, very briefly, to this question about vulnerabilities. I think Geneive was absolutely right in saying that we are wrong to count the Muslim Brotherhood as a force in Arab society out. They are and will continue to remain a force. We have seen this movie before. We have seen efforts on the part of Arab regimes to systematically eradicate the

(inaudible) as a force in society in the late '60s and early '70s in Egypt, for example. And over time, however, that story changed. And one can imagine any number of scenarios where even Abdel Fattah el-Sisi in Egypt may need to make more space for the Brotherhood to come back into political life as part of the regime survival move.

The vulnerability that I think we're not paying enough attention to and where Washington is absolutely being duped gets back to the circuits of interfaith conferences that Shadi referred to that take place in places like Dubai and Abu Dhabi and Doha, where particularly certain religious scholars who have entered into affiliation with the governments of, for example, the United Arab Emirates, who have been propped up as these voices of moderation and pluralism, you know, are showcased and highlighted, and it's a piece of theater. It's a piece of theater designed primarily for consumption in places like Washington, DC and London. So the vulnerability lies in the fact that the voices and institutions that these governments in the region are relying on have very little credibility with the populations themselves because they are regarded as mouthpieces of the government. And that is not going to work as a long-term strategy.

MS. LAKSHMANAN: Since we only have two minutes left, quickly, Geneive, did you want to add anything about Sistani, about the impact of the death of Sistani that you expect?

MS. ABDO: The only thing I'd like to -- just really briefly, is that everything Peter said is correct in how the (inaudible) school has been opposed to supreme powerful role. However, what's interesting is because the Iraqi state has been so weak, since the 2003 election, Sistani has directly entered the political fray. So he was very instrumental, for example, in the appointment of the current prime minister. So when he dies the question will not only be well, you know, the (inaudible), as Peter said, are already circling and had already audaciously designated who his successor should be. But this cleric by the name of Shahrudi died during the holidays. But that's how audacious the Iranians are.

But the Iranian issue aside, the other problem for Iraq is going to be who is

going to be the powerful, influential, and very effective player and sort of powerhouse once he dies in trying to resolve all the stalemate that goes on now that Iraq has to sort of deal with its issues on its own terms. The United States has pulled out. The Iranian influence I would say to some degree is experiencing much more resistance. They've declared there will be no more foreign influence in the country, the new government, or try to minimize it in any way.

So without Sistani, what happens to Iraq itself? I think that that's a crucial question.

MS. LAKSHMANAN: Shadi, can you wrap us up with taking up this final question about the contradiction that the listener heard about whether from a U.S. policy point of view should we be favoring the tightening or the loosening of state control over religious actors?

MR. HAMID: Sure. So I actually think that what Geneive said and what I said could theoretically be reconciled in a sense that I do agree with Geneive that Arab regimes have become better at controlling religion, of using religious soft power domestically as well as abroad more effectively in various cases. I think that they've gotten better. I don't think them becoming better at that is good from a U.S. national security standpoint, from the standpoint of values, morals, whatever.

That said, this gets to a bigger question about what our ultimate aims in the Middle East are, like down, down the road. And I have a particular orientation and I think that I'm probably more and more in the minority, at least for now. Very sad for me. I still think that the U.S. should quite consistently and perhaps even aggressively without the use of force -- I'm not talking about Iraq -- promote political reform and democracy. In the long run I do think that is the best thing for the U.S. and for the region. I don't think there's a huge constituency for that for now and that's why I think that I find a lot of these --

MS. LAKSHMANAN: Huge constituency in Washington you mean? Or anywhere?

MR. HAMID: I don't know where -- I mean there -- yeah, in Washington, but

also just in Western capitals more generally. So this is the last thing I'll say, there's two ways of approaching this. One is to say that authoritarian regimes that are allies of ours, that's good and we should promote them and strengthen them because they promote our national security interests, narrowly defined. If that is your approach, then Saudi Arabia being better at controlling religion internally is a good thing. If you think that ultimately the only way you can have true some semblance of peace, justice, and security in the long run is through some kind of democratic opening, then presumably you wouldn't want states to control religion. You would want them to loosen their grip on religious expression and all kinds of expression, non religious forms of expression. And I do think that is a fundamental divide that we have in our debate here in Washington. And a lot of what we think are disagreements, are differences, and we're not sure why we have these differences with other people, a lot of it comes down to our foundational assumptions on this question.

MS. LAKSHMANAN: All right. Well, I just want to remind everyone, I want to thank you all for your attention. This is an incredibly packed room with people standing in the back, and for everyone to stay for the whole 90 minutes, thank you for attention. It means the speakers were really good. So thank you to Peter and Shadi and Geneive, and thank you to Brookings. (Applause) To anyone who is sharing this on social media, just a reminder, #Islamisstatecraft and you can tag Brookings.

Thank you. See you next time.

* * * * *

CERTIFICATE OF NOTARY PUBLIC

I, Carleton J. Anderson, III do hereby certify that the forgoing electronic file when originally transmitted was reduced to text at my direction; that said transcript is a true record of the proceedings therein referenced; that I am neither counsel for, related to, nor employed by any of the parties to the action in which these proceedings were taken; and, furthermore, that I am neither a relative or employee of any attorney or counsel employed by the parties hereto, nor financially or otherwise interested in the outcome of this action.

Carleton J. Anderson, III

(Signature and Seal on File)

Notary Public in and for the Commonwealth of Virginia

Commission No. 351998

Expires: November 30, 2020