

# Islamic Exceptionalism

AN INTERVIEW WITH SHADI HAMID

*Al Noor Staff*

A contributing writer at *The Atlantic* and a Senior Fellow at the Brookings Institution, Shadi Hamid is also the author of two widely acclaimed books. *Temptations of Power: Islamists and Illiberal Democracy in a New Middle East* was named a *Foreign Affairs* best book of 2014, and *Islamic Exceptionalism: How the Struggle Over Islam is Reshaping the World* was released in 2016. Prior to joining the Brookings Institution, he received a doctoral degree from Oxford University, where he was a Marshall scholar. He also served as a specialist in public diplomacy for the State Department, and received a Fulbright fellowship to study Islamist participation in Jordanian politics.

In the past half-decade, Shadi Hamid has established himself as one of America's leading experts on Middle Eastern politics, political Islam, and democratization. Bolstered by an impeccable academic pedigree, including degrees from Georgetown University, a stint as a Fulbright scholar, and a PhD from Oxford, his knowledge of Islamist politics is almost unrivaled. His knack for formulating his insights in a lucid, accessible style is well known to readers of *The Atlantic*, where he is a contributing writer; his articles have also appeared in *The Washington Post*, *The Christian Science Monitor*, and *The New Republic*, among other publications. Hamid is very much at home in today's media environment, regularly taking to Twitter or Reddit to defend his positions. He puts his singular mix of scholarly skill and communicative ability on full display in his latest book, *Islamic Exceptionalism: How the Struggle Over Islam is Reshaping*

*the World*. Al Noor sat down with him in October 2016 to explore some of the issues discussed in his book.

## A Conversation

*In your words, why is Islam exceptional?*

**Shadi Hamid:** All religions are different from each other, so it kind of goes without saying that Islam is different than Christianity and Christianity is different than Judaism. That's a banal observation. What I'm saying here is something a little bit different, that Islam is exceptional in particular ways that have a profound impact on how we understand the Middle East and our world today. It's not just an academic argument or intellectual exercise. It's more like: what happened fourteen centuries ago really matters all this time later. In particular, Islam has proven to be resistant to secularization, and I would argue that it will continue to be resistant to secularization. Part of what I want to do is challenge a broader issue in our culture, especially in the bastions of Northeastern elite liberalism, where a lot of us come from secular backgrounds. I think sometimes it can be hard for us to relate to the power of religion and what it means to people in their everyday lives in the Middle East and elsewhere in Muslim majority countries. I want to find a way to bring religion back into the conversation and to take it seriously as a factor, as a source of motivation, as something that causes other things instead of being a product of other factors. There is this argument that religion or religiosity is just the outcome of changes, like economic issues. People are poor, they're angry, they're looking for something to believe in, it's a crutch: we are always looking for ways to explain religion away as if we can't take it seriously on its own terms.

The other thing I will just say is I just don't like this idea that we all have to be the same, that we all ultimately want the same things, and there's just this basic trajectory that all of us are ultimately following. That it begins with the Reformation and the Enlightenment, and continues toward secularism and liberal democracy and "the end of history." To think that we could sort of superimpose that framework on Islam and say, "Well, Christianity went through this, so Islam is going to go through it" is a way to skirt over our differences because we're not comfortable with difference anymore. We're scared of micro-aggressions and offending people. We don't want to talk about difference. But maybe it's better to acknowledge difference and then start from that premise, rather than pretending those differences don't exist.

Religions have to mean something, so Islam can't just be anything Muslims want it to be. Islam has to be something; there has to be some kind of core element. Otherwise what's the point of religion? So if we think of it in terms of Christianity, Christianity without Christ might matter in a kind of cultural sense, but then Christianity is deprived of its theological content. If you just think Jesus is some ordinary guy, then what does it mean to be Christian theologically? At some point, there has to be something there for it to be meaningful. If you take away the idea that the Quran is God's actual speech, which I think is a very distinctive element of Islam vis a vis Christianity, then the entire foundation of Islam falls apart. If you take that away, what would be the point?

*A lot of academics have argued that Islam is different, but it's not so different. They've rejected the idea that Islam is in conflict with Western-style democracy and have pointed to democracies like Indonesia or Senegal as proof. Their position is that the real outlier with*

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*regard to democracy and liberalism is the Arab world. How do you address that argument?*

**SH:** In the book I have a section whose heading is, “Is There an Arab Problem?” It kind of gets into the question of whether it is just about Arabs, if they’re the ones who are messed up. I think Indonesia and Malaysia are really interesting because we hail them as these models of relative democracy and pluralism, and we say, “Hey, this is the way it should be. This is the way to go.” But actually what you find is a little bit counterintuitive, that with more democracy in Indonesia, you don’t necessarily have more liberalism. There is more experimentation with the implementation of Sharia ordinances on the local level in Indonesia and Malaysia than in Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, Morocco, Algeria...the list goes on. And we don’t even realize that because no one actually cares about Indonesia or Malaysia. They’re not of particular strategic importance, at least not now. So people don’t know about that.

But it makes logical sense. Ostensibly, they have secular ruling parties but because the broad population is religiously conservative—and also there’s decentralization—if you want to win in local regions, even though you might be a secular party, you still have to meet the median voter halfway. You have to learn to speak the language of religion. You have to talk about Sharia. You even have to talk about the *hudud*, religiously derived criminal punishments. In that sense, that’s really what democracy is about, it’s about being responsive to popular sentiment.

This gets to me to a concept which I call Islamism without Islamists, where you can actually have non-Islamists doing Islamist things. So it’s not just about Islamists. There is a broad agreement in many of these countries that Islam should play a prominent or a central role in public life. It’s no longer the province of one party against another; it’s sort of part of this broader cultural conservative consensus. And that helps because that means Islam is not going to be as much a source of polarization. Whereas on the other hand in Egypt, there’s essentially one mainstream Islamist movement, the Muslim Brotherhood,



Portrait of Shadi Hamid. Shadi Hamid.

and that’s a locus or focal point of polarization. And then when the Brotherhood forms a political party and there’s only one political party that they form, then you’re sort of partisanizing or making partisan a broad-based religious movement. Whereas in Indonesia, for example, you have multiple Islamist parties and not just one major Islamist party.

*The relationship you’re talking about between Islam and liberal democracy is one of the most interesting parts of your book, because on the one hand you’re very firm that there’s no contradiction in being “American and Muslim” and that Islam isn’t incompatible with democracy, but on the other hand you suggest that it might not be compatible with liberal democracy and with liberalism. How do you reconcile Islam with the liberal aspects of American democracy?*

**SH:** I don’t know if I’d phrase my position in quite that way. I get a little nervous when I hear terms like compatible and incompatible; they sound very definitive to me. So what I would say is that Islam is in tension with classical liberalism—in tension. I think Muslim minorities in the West are a different issue, and I don’t want to give the impression that American Muslims can’t somehow be fully American because they are somehow intrinsically illiberal, and I wouldn’t want

people to draw that implication from my argument.

*As a Muslim-American, you have a special perspective on this. How do you see the position of Islam developing in America in the future?*

**SH:** Yeah, I mean, it's something I've been thinking about more in light of the rise of Trump. And it's also something more personal in that I am an American Muslim, so I guess I'm supposed to have something to say about that. But I think that to me the American model is an encouraging one, an inspiring one, and it's more promising and constructive than the contexts in Europe, which I think are more problematic when it comes to the role of Muslim minorities. But I think what's good about the US approach, if you will, is that you can be fully Muslim and fully American. There doesn't have to be a contradiction because the US, from its founding moment, is more comfortable with public expressions of faith. That's not something that's necessarily frowned upon. It's something that is part of the fabric of American society, so we don't go around freaking out about Orthodox Jews and their communities in New York being a bad thing. We say that's part of the American fabric. Or Christian evangelicals in the Bible Belt—that's part of the American fabric. We're not going to question whether Christian evangelicals are sufficiently American because they're not necessarily secular. They're just as American as anyone else.

So I think that that leaves open quite a bit of room for American Muslims who are more conservative. So if you have American Muslims who are more conservative in their practice they can be more conservative in their practice without necessarily being less American or having to go out of their way to justify themselves. So I think in that sense, that's why the American approach to secularism is more constructive for communities or groups that are more culturally or religiously conservative. On the other hand, in a place like France, to be truly French, to be fully French, is to believe in French secularism, which doesn't allow room for public expressions of faith. So if you're a woman who's wearing the headscarf, you could be born and raised in France and that's all you

know, but you're not going to be viewed by many of your French counterparts as truly French, because you're not reflecting a very basic part of French culture which is this kind of in-built suspicion of religion. So, that's why I think that when Donald Trump talks about Islam being a problem or American Muslims being a problem, the implication being they don't love their country as much or they're not fully American, that's really problematic because it seems like Trump is holding on to this idea of assimilation that to be fully American you have to give up your culture, religion, or traditions. So I don't think assimilation should be the goal. Integration should be the goal, and when we start to hold assimilation as the standard—and it's not evenly applied because he's not saying that about Orthodox Jews; he's just saying that about Muslims—that's just not the kind of America that we have lived in traditionally, at least in our own idealized conception of it. At least we aspire to this idea of pluralism, that different communities can do things in different ways and we don't all freak out about it. We're not trying to homogenize American culture. We shouldn't be trying to homogenize American culture.

*A lot of what you've just focused has to do with things like wearing the headscarf publically or praying publically. But in your book you discuss Islam's unique insistence on Islamic law or political expression of the faith. Do you think that in the United States that that's sort of jettisoned, or do you think there's still something intrinsic about Islam that demands a political expression and that US Muslims, if they were to be fully Islamic, would also demand?*

**SH:** Okay, part of the problem here is that when we talk about Sharia, what are we really talking about? I think that there are a lot of misconceptions about what this word actually means. That gets to an aspect of Islam's distinctiveness in that there simply is no equivalent in Christianity to Sharia, so it's very hard for people sometimes to relate to it. Sharia is broader than just law. When we hear "law," as Americans, we think about codified legislation. We think, "Oh, law! Article 123, or whatever," and that's not the best way to understand Sharia. You can't find Sharia in a book. It's not codified anywhere. So I think that's one problem.

I think there's also an issue having to do with whether you're a minority versus a majority. If Muslims were a majority in the US, that would be a very interesting test case about how they would express, as a majority, their religious identity in public life. But this is something that will never happen in our lifetimes, so who cares? So I worry that we're just coming up with these very interesting hypotheticals. "What if Muslims conquered France?" There's actually a book by Michel Houellebecq, who imagines this parallel universe where there's a Muslim prime minister who's part of this Islamic party, and somehow they come to power in 2022. That's an interesting basis for a novel, but it's not real. I think that there's also something very fundamental in Islamic law that you respect the law of the land where you live. So regardless if people are comfortable—let's take gay marriage—if that becomes the law, then you have to respect it.

Of course, you personally can object to that from a moral perspective, but someone should be able to object to a law from a moral perspective while still respecting that it happens to be the law of that land at a given time. So I think that's an important aspect of this. Just like Christian evangelicals are uncomfortable with many aspects of our legal culture and Supreme Court rulings on abortion or whatever else it might be, for the most part, they respect the law of the land. We all agree as Americans that when the Supreme Court makes a judgment, we're going to respect it, even if we think it's bad.

*So, ultimately, US Muslims are distinctive in that—*

**SH:** First of all, I don't know if I'd call US Muslims distinctive. This gets to another issue. I almost feel like there are certain aspects of my argument that I want to pull back from. When I hear you saying that

US Muslims are distinctive, my instinctive reaction is to be like, "Wait! I'm not sure if I'm comfortable with how you've described my view." But maybe it is my view, and I'm just not comfortable with it. The same thing with "incompatible." I just wanted to push back. It's a controversial, provocative argument, and it can be misused easily, and I worry that if we start from the premise that US Muslims, as a group in the US, are distinctive, then where do people take that? What does that mean in practice? Distinctiveness isn't always seen as a positive thing. So that's why I wouldn't say that US Muslims are distinctive. My argument is always more that Islam is distinctive as a religious tradition, and then we can sort of debate what that means for Muslims as expressed in various contexts.

*Earlier, you mentioned that we run away from difference and we're afraid of difference. How should we discuss difference when it's a matter of individuals, of Muslims, not just their abstract faith tradition? Can we discuss distinctiveness in this way?*

**SH:** American Muslims, assuming they're believing Muslims—and there are people who are just sort of nominally or culturally Muslim, and that's a little bit different—but if we're talking about believing Muslims, then almost by definition, believing Muslims believe in something called Sharia, right? But not Sharia in the sense of *hudud* punishments and cutting off the hands of thieves, but in the broader sense that the Sharia speaks not just to public law but to private practice. So, if a Muslim wants to pray, they can't pray, they won't be able to pray, without Sharia. That's how Muslims know how to pray. That's part of the overall corpus of law and tradition. How do we know whether to pray like this or with our hands to our sides? That would probably depend on which school of law you

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subscribe to: Malakis, Hanafis, et cetera. That's part of Islamic law. In that sense, American Muslims believe in something, Sharia, which may seem foreign to non-Muslims. It's hard for them to understand what that would really mean to an individual American Muslim. In that sense, there is that distinctiveness that we need to engage in the concept of Sharia.

*One of the most interesting parts of your book discusses how, for many Muslims, the decline of the Abbasid Caliphate feels as fresh as if it were yesterday. It still feels very potent. How has this memory colored Muslim responses to the rise of the West and to Western hegemony? In what ways has it influenced the more radical responses?*

**SH:** Well, Islamism couldn't have existed in the pre-modern era. Even the word Islamism didn't exist in the pre-modern era. Why would it have to exist? Islamism only makes sense in opposition to something else. Islamism is taking a slab of religion and saying that, "Hey, Islam needs to be applied, it needs to be affirmed or reaffirmed." So it is going out of your way to affirm something which was previously self-evident. And, why do you have to affirm it now? Because it is being challenged. Islam in the pre-modern era provides the overarching legal, religious, and moral culture. No one questions that basic order of things. It is only in the modern era, where you have something like secularism or classical liberalism, where that basic structure began to be challenged. That is where this idea comes from, that Islam needs to be reasserted in some distinctive way. And therefore Islam becomes a political project. It is no longer enough to say, "We are Muslim." You have to go to the next step and say, "What does that mean for politics?" That is basically what Islamism is. But you see why there is no need to have Islamism in the pre-modern era, right?

So in that sense, I argue that Islamism is inherently polarizing, because it depends on its opposite. It couldn't have existed without its opposite, which in this case is secularism. That's a problem. You can't

really undo that. Even if secularism won't win out, you can't undo the effects of a secular world. We live in a world shaped by secular ideals, whether you like it or not. Muslims have to contend with the results. You can't pretend the last 150 years didn't happen.

So I think we have a lot of grist for endless polarization. I think there are ways to address it more effectively, but I'm not under any illusion that the fundamental problem can be resolved in an easy, straightforward way. Going back to that Abbasid Caliphate issue, it's hard to convey this, because there isn't an exact parallel for Americans who aren't Muslim. It is important to get this idea that for a lot of Muslims, you grow up with the idea that Mohammed doesn't seem like a historical figure. Abu Bakr doesn't seem like a historical figure. Omar doesn't seem like a historical figure. You're on a first-name basis with them. These are people who are alive. That's why the idea of a caliphate is so powerful. There's such a reservoir of nostalgia, of longing, that you hear when you're a kid. You know it intuitively, even if you can't explain it, that something went wrong, and there used to be something called the Abbasid Caliphate where Muslims were awesome. They're no longer awesome. That's the cognitive dissonance here. Islamism isn't about practicing the religion with no worldly implication.

And you get back to the question of theodicy, or why God allows evil. In the early days of Christianity, Christianity's early success wasn't tied to territorial conquest. Early Christians were a minority living under other empires or under Roman law for several centuries. What's different about Islam is that from the very beginning, you see these two ideas that are intertwined together, which is that if Muslims turn to God, they will achieve worldly success. And you see this in the first 100 years, where you see this incredible amount of territory that Muslims were able to take control of, even as far as modern-day France. So I mean, then there's this idea that, "Okay, well, if Muslims are not successful, if they aren't experiencing worldly success, then God is punishing them for not

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being good Muslims.” So it’s hard to disassociate these two concepts, which is an important point.

*You’ve said that President Obama, to the extent that he refuses to take on ISIS as something beyond just a bunch of fanatics, isn’t taking them on seriously. He’s argued, of course, that his position makes sense because connecting ISIS to Islam would validate the terrorists and alienate Muslim allies in the Middle East. What do you make of Obama’s response?*

**SH:** I appreciate that. I think President Obama is well-intentioned. He doesn’t want to make Muslims upset? Great. It doesn’t mean he’s analytically accurate.

But I’m not even sure if it’s even effective on its own terms. If President Obama is concerned about Islamophobia, I worry that by skirting around the religious motivations of ISIS, you’re almost compounding the problem, because it’s sort of opening up space for a dissonance. Ordinary Americans are turning on their TVs, they’re seeing all this conflict in the Middle East, they see ISIS, and it’s clear, it seems self-evident that ISIS has something to do with religion. They’re not a secular Marxist party, right? People see that, and then they see Obama, or whatever politician, saying that, and they say, “Wait a second. What’s going on here?” I feel like there has to be a middle ground. Of course, we all know that the majority of Muslims oppose ISIS, but that doesn’t mean that we have to pretend that ISIS is some sort of secular, Ba’athist organization because we don’t want to offend Muslims. I think that Muslims can handle that. It shouldn’t be so controversial to say that ISIS is a tiny sliver of Muslims, and the vast majority of Muslims don’t like them, but they believe that what they’re doing is right, and they believe that what they’re doing is commanded by God.

And they’re not instrumentalizing religion. I don’t like this language where—I always hear this kind of thing: “They’re using religion, but what they really care about is something else.” Why couldn’t it be the other way around? Why aren’t people using politics or power for religious ends? No one thinks about it that way. Why can’t they be instrumentalizing power for religion?

*So secularization might not be the endgame then. Not to get too speculative, but what do you think the endgame is? What happens after ISIS goes away? Will there ever be another caliphate? What does the future of Islam look like?*

**SH:** You know, there are certain things in life that you like in theory, but you don’t actually want to act on in practice. I wonder if the caliphate is, as an idea, one of those things. It’s nice, but you don’t want to mess with the historical legacy. You want to keep the Abbasid Caliphate off to one side and protect it. You don’t want to infringe on that memory. And I guess the Righteously Guided Caliphs, and, to a lesser extent, the Ottoman Caliphate, are the same way. The caliphate is a good reservoir for nostalgia, but it’s bound to disappoint if anyone actually tries to recapture its glories.

It’s interesting, because ISIS, in a sort of brilliant stroke, appropriates the idea of the caliphate—but at the same time, to what extent will ISIS taint the idea of the caliphate? We’ll have to wait and see how the experience of ISIS affects how people conceive of this particular word, “caliphate.” As for what the endgame is, we live in a world of nation-states. I have a professor friend who said, half-jokingly, “I’m going to bet money that Erdogan re-announces the caliphate in 2023,” the centennial. That’s an interesting thing. I’m sure deep-down, he would like to do that, just for his historical legacy, but we live in a world of reality. And this is a constant tension that I get at in the book: what we want in our ideal world is different from what we can accomplish in the world we actually live in. That’s just part of humanity. We want things, even in our own personal ideals, and we have the real world we live in, and we’re always struggling to close the gap between what we are and what we ideally would want things to be.

It’s the same in the case of Islamism. Islamists want things in their ideal world, but those things aren’t possible. Pre-modern Islamic law wasn’t designed for the modern era, so you’re trying to square an impossible circle. How do you do that? ♦