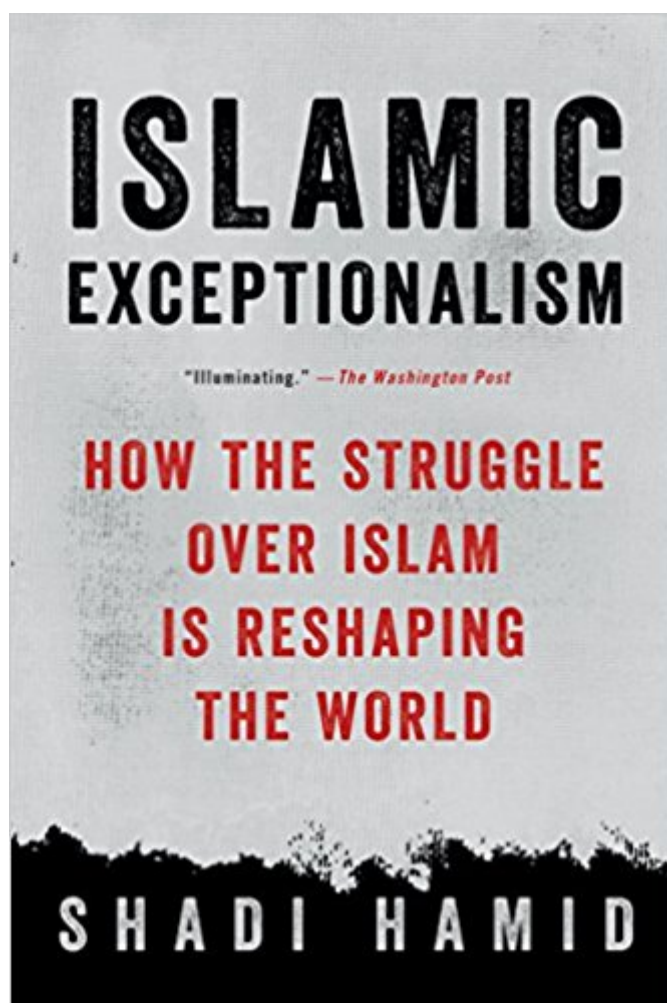


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# Islamic Exceptionalism: How The Struggle Over Islam Is Reshaping The World



## Synopsis

Shortlisted for the 2017 Lionel Gelber Prize In Islamic Exceptionalism, Brookings Institution scholar and acclaimed author Shadi Hamid offers a novel and provocative argument on how Islam is, in fact, "exceptional" in how it relates to politics, with profound implications for how we understand the future of the Middle East. Divides among citizens aren't just about power but are products of fundamental disagreements over the very nature and purpose of the modern nation state and the vexing problem of religion's role in public life. Hamid argues for a new understanding of how Islam and Islamism shape politics by examining different models of reckoning with the problem of religion and state, including the terrifying and alarmingly successful example of ISIS. With unprecedented access to Islamist activists and leaders across the region, Hamid offers a panoramic and ambitious interpretation of the region's descent into violence. Islamic Exceptionalism is a vital contribution to our understanding of Islam's past and present, and its outsized role in modern politics. We don't have to like it, but we have to understand it because Islam, as a religion and as an idea, will continue to be a force that shapes not just the region, but the West as well in the decades to come.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

A New Statesman Book of the Year "Few issues capture the public imagination quite so urgently as that of Islam's troubled relationship with the West, democracy, modernity and, indeed, itself... This is where Shadi Hamid's Islamic Exceptionalism comes into its own."

Shiraz Maher, The New Statesman "Fresh, provocative thinking." Kirkus Reviews "Well, it turns out, there is something going on with Islam, and Shadi Hamid, quite helpfully, has figured it out" [An] illuminating book. Carlos Lozada, The Washington Post "A page-turner" For me, the book also provided the rarest of enjoyments; it changed the way I looked at the world, even if just a bit." Murtaza Hussain, journalist at The Intercept "[Islamic Exceptionalism] limns the Islamist mind in unnerving detail... Hamid is unafraid to talk about heaven, theodicy and divine justice. The National Interest "Perhaps [Hamid's] most provocative claim is this: History will not necessarily favor the secular, liberal democracies of the West. Emma Green, The Atlantic "Shadi Hamid provides an invaluable corrective to Western interpretations of Islam, Islamism, and the future of democracy in the Muslim world. Whatever debate remains to be had cannot take place without reference to this insightful and sympathetic document. Lawrence Wright, author of The Looming Tower and Thirteen Days in September "A riveting account of the Arab Spring and all that followed, by one of the world's leading scholars on political Islam. Shadi Hamid explains convincingly that Islam and the political movements it spawns are truly exceptional and likely to frustrate the liberal determinists who believe that history inevitably gravitates to a secular future. A hugely important book. General David Petraeus (Ret.), former director of the CIA and commander of coalition forces in Iraq and Afghanistan "Islamic Exceptionalism is an honest, deeply researched, and at times anguished effort to make sense of the Middle East after the failure of the Arab Spring and the rise of ISIS. Particularly rich and subtle on the crisis facing the Muslim Brotherhood, the book offers both a snapshot of a painful moment and a long-view inquiry into the meeting between Islam and democracy. Sobering, urgent reading for anyone who cares about the region, past and future. Noah Feldman, Felix Frankfurter Professor of Law, Harvard Law School and author of Cool War, Scorpions, and The Fall and Rise of the Islamic State "A smart and highly readable book by one of the leading experts on the topic. Hamid examines the defining problem in the modern Middle East: how to mix religion and politics. His heartfelt fear is that in the age of ISIS a solution won't come quickly because the features of a modern democratic state are often at odds with the path to God. David Gregory, former host of Meet the Press and author of How Your Faith Hamid offers readers a vital road map to navigate the chaos and confusion that is the post-Arab-Spring Middle East. Reza Aslan, New York Times bestselling author of Zealot and No God but God "Beyond the zero-sum proposals of Islam

or liberalism, Shadi Hamid boldly wrestles with how these two can negotiate the future of Muslim polities. Along the way, he educates us, challenging entrenched stereotypes and blind presumptions, especially the notion that the Muslim world must, can, or should go the way of the West. Islam is a constant not a variable. Islamic Exceptionalism suggests that this may be the beginning of wisdom for anyone wishing to understand, let alone shape, the political future of majority Muslim states.

— Sherman A. Jackson, King Faisal Chair in Islamic Thought and Culture, University of Southern California "Ambitious and Challenging"

— Amanda Zeidan, The Huffington Post "Probably the most thoughtful attempt that I know to come to grips, to try to make sense of the rubble of the Arab Spring, to see what can be done after these colossal disappointments."

— Leon Wieseltier, Isaiah Berlin Senior Fellow in Culture and Policy, The Brookings Institution "Hamid's work offers a tempered, well-researched analysis of Islamism in its current state and offers tentative hopes for those seeking a new way through the intricacies of Islamic politics in the Middle East."

— Publishers Weekly "Excellent."

— The Irish Examiner "For those who feel that everything will be solved by an 'Islamic reformation,' Hamid has cautionary words." --Prospect

Shadi Hamid is a senior fellow in the Center for Middle East Policy at the Brookings Institution and a contributing writer for The Atlantic. An expert on Islamist movements, he previously served as director of research at the Brookings Doha Center. His first book *Temptations of Power: Islamists and Illiberal Democracy in a New Middle East* was named a Foreign Affairs Best Book of 2014. Hamid lives in Washington, D.C.

A highly-readable, well-argued survey of how Islam's political impact in the Arab World is shaped by a different view of religion's role in government, law and politics. Unlike earlier arguments (i.e., Huntington, Lewis, Pipes), Hamid goes beyond generalities to explore the specifics of how Islamists see their political role. The result is a fascinating perspective on the dynamics of how Egypt, Tunisia, and Turkey have grown more polarized since the 2011 Arab Spring. Unlike Christianity and Judaism, which have evolved to largely separate faith from government, Islam has been political from the start. This difference will continue to play a role in Arab politics and state-building. Attempts to foster democracy must take into account the deep divisions within Muslim societies over how Islam should shape government and society. Hamid does a good job of illustrating how today's Islamist groups grew out of modern challenges and have shaped their politics of gradualism to placate authoritarian rulers and suspicious secularists. He also gives some attention to the divisions

between Islamist groups such as the Muslim Brotherhood and Ennahda and the Islamic State. Many analysts focus on Islamists as a threat to democracy. Hamid concedes the point, but notes that many of the most draconian "Islamic" legislation has come from secular groups attempting to play the Islamic card. Hamid also draws from the failures of the Arab Spring, particularly the 2013 coup in Egypt, to argue that secular liberal sensitivities over perceived Islamic threats also undermine democratization. Not all readers will agree with all of Hamid's conclusions, but his perspective is a valuable contribution to the discussion. Highly recommended.

I had some knowledge of Islam prior to reading this book but the author's ability to explain to a "Westerner" how Islam differs fundamentally from Christianity and how those differences make a gradual modulation of Islam to something compatible with Western democratic processes was eye opening. The chapter on ISIS was transformative in how I understood its genesis and what the West can expect its future to be. (It ain't just going to go away. You can kill as many true believers as you can but you can't kill the ideal that drives these people.) The chapters on Turkey and Tunisia got a bit "long." Anyone hoping for easy answers to "the problem," is going to be disappointed.

Not until Shadi Hamid's *Islamic Exceptionalism* (2016) had I seen an attempt to define Islam, Islamism, or any Islamic governmental state as exceptional in any way. His careful analysis of the conditions following the end of the Ottoman Empire, the geographic boundaries imposed after it, and the strife of the last 50+ in the Middle East and North Africa make a strong case for Islam being unique in both religious and political perspective. Islamic "exceptionalism" is, in fact, defined as a fusion of religion and politics that stands in contrast to the generally accepted notion that governments must be secular in order to be modern and democratic. Hamid's analyses included the three cases of Egypt, Turkey, and Tunisia. These cases are distinct in terms of the types of changes sought, who was involved, and the process of change. Much can be learned from these examples; the bottom line is that, in the face of rising Islamic fervor, where a number of political actors are present, and where the state is strong enough to be worth capturing, there is no question that ideological and religious polarization will follow. This polarization and reformation will take many years to work out and both those who endure the strife of the Middle East as well as observe and struggle with it from afar, will be better served to understand the history behind the various Islamist movements and how that impacts the alliances that form and dissolve as the process works toward an eventual solution.

Islam, Islamism, Islamist, fundamentalist, salafist, Muslim Brotherhood, Salafi-jihadist, modernism, Islamic-liberalism and Islamic exceptionalism; without quality analysis these often-cited catch phrases become no less vague. Early in the book, Shadi Hamid says that the so-called Islamic State "...draws strength from ideas that have a broad resonance among Muslim-majority populations (pg. 11)." Beyond colonial-era anger, poverty, unemployment, restless youth, disenchantment with liberalism and political conflict, what feeds today's Islamic movements more than anything else? Shadi Hamid's book would have been like so many other current studies had it not been for the first three chapters. For Shadi, it is all about Islamic law, shari'a. Unlike Judaism and Christianity, Islam's shari'a details not only religious principles but also social and governmental requirements. It follows that Islam is more thorough because it outlines the pursuit of power in proper politics and not just religious observance. Islam is therefore exceptional because Islamism, the necessity of religion in society and political law, is inherent in Islam. The battle, therefore, between the list of "isms" is the "how" and "to what extent". The book's "exceptional" chapters discuss Christianity's debate in moral "dualism" citing Augustine and even the Reformation era Martin Luther. Jesus was often pressured to reveal his political mandates. His answer was always the same; "you're barking up the wrong tree". Jesus' own followers pined for what Islam eventually gave in to, an empire formed of human effort and spiritual motivation. While Islam found its answer, the Christian dualism continues to be debated well beyond the scholars mentioned by Shadi in the works of Reinhold Niebuhr, John Yoder, Paul Tillich, Oliver O'Donovan, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Jim Wallis and many others. The hallmark of Shadi Hamid is that his discussions are not overly condescending towards any side. He is gracious towards Muslims and non-Muslims alike by not citing wackos on the periphery of each argument but respecting the central and respected voices in each camp. Shadi is as clear in describing the Bible's gospel message by grace through Christ as he is in describing Al-Azhar's top scholars or Islamism's foundational key ideologues. Oddly enough, he is perhaps most critical of al-Azhar's moderates than any other Islamic personality. Al-Azhar University is the most prestigious school of Sunni thought, located in Egypt; and arguably the most influential. Shadi is also able to accomplish something that neither Western secular scholars nor the Al-Azhar elites can do. He writes with great empathy AND criticism for groups like Muslim Brotherhood. Islam's scholarly base discourages reflective criticism claiming that the "ghaw-gha" (Arabic: ignorant rabble masses) are too religiously weak to handle the truth. Shadi, however, is not restrained by general taboos that hamper Muslim authors who are shamed into ensuring the dignity of Islamic doctrine, history and society. Finally, few can claim to have collected better primary source interviews ranging from Muslim Brotherhood leaders, Turkish government

advisers and political prisoners exposed to the recruitment tactics of Islamist preachers. Islam is an active part of society at all levels. While the Christians may have succumbed to liberal enlightenment, keeping the church from influencing laws and governance, Islam could never do that. Has the Christian church been slow to read and adapt to social movements as a result? Yes. Did the marriage of the church to a political seat of power often lead to serious abuses? Yes. Because Christians do not have political direction, Shadi argues, they could lay dormant in the face of political corruption where Islam could not. Islam could only ever be stagnant for a short period of time before a renewal movement kicked back into gear. These movements still don't have it so easy. If Christianity has too little instruction on legal codes, Islam may have too much. Islamic Modernists like Jamal al-Din al-Afghani and Mohamed Abduh saw that Islam was "buried under layers of highly Qur'anic and legal commentaries (pg 72-73)." Islamism, unlike Salafism tended to be more politically savvy than religiously deep. The former is pragmatic, insisting on shari'a but patient and flexible to let it play out according to contemporary appetites. Salafists prefer to whittle down the legitimate legal documents to the initial era of "pure" Islam. When creative Islamism meets self-righteous and literal Salafism it can lead to a wide variety of dangerous creations many of which scholars would even call "un-Islamic". Islamic institutions are at once afforded religious mandates for legal codes and at the same time are drowning in the inevitable result of diverse human traditions through Islam's history. Not to belittle the immense scholarly efforts it must take to readjust and apply Shari'a to the world's countless cultures transforming through scientific advancements and social diversities, Shadi Hamid does admit that any Islamic scholar has an immense collection of tradition through which to design, or in the case of Islamist extremism, "cherry pick" the desired legal framework (pg. 233). What follows is a deadly inter-Islamic battle at all levels. The Muslim Brotherhood is considered one of the main vehicles of Islamism. After the first three provocative chapters, the book slows down to recap Turkey, Tunisia and even ISIS in relation to Islam's "exceptional" mandate to legal codes. Egypt's experiment witnessed a full blown "coup", as Shadi called it, to oust the Islamists, July 2013. In contrast, Turkey's Brotherhood ascension was slow and painful but now firmly established. In Tunisia, Ghannouchi encouraged his Ennahda party to compromise to the point of liberalism, ostensibly to promote peace over conflict in non Salafi-jihadi fashion, waiting for Islam to recognize the mandates of shari'a. Egypt's story between 2011 and 2016 is especially interesting. While poll data concluded majority support for Muslim Brotherhood and Salafi parties combined in 2012, the society has shifted to banning the Brotherhood and targeting every inch of its social influence. The former Grand Mufti of Egypt, the moderate Ali Gomaa, sanctioned the massacre that killed hundreds of Brotherhood sympathizers in the summer

of 2013; himself gaining control of the thousands of Brotherhood mosques and charities. As the author implies, instead of shedding Islamism's cloak over Egypt, the coup-President Sisi simply rebranded and reformed the same mission. The repeated theme throughout the book is that one can have Islamism without Islamists. "High profile" Arab Muslim nations may have to balance diplomacy with religiosity but low profile Muslims in Indonesia or Malaysia already have shari'a law at multiple local levels. According to "Islamic Exceptionalism" Islam will never have an Enlightenment that leads to a Western conception of liberal democracy. To do so would be un-Islamic... so stop trying. These realities should influence foreign policy. While it is regrettable, as Shadi laments, that people still "kill" for patriotism and nationalism, he is hopeful that Islamism can produce a peaceful pattern. One unspoken reminder in this excellent book is that non-Muslims misunderstand the importance of shari'a in Islamic life in the same way that a Muslim may misinterpret "Christendom" as a Biblical imperative. Muslims easily wrongly assume that the failings of capitalism, democracy and liberalism reveal deficits in the Christian empire. Islam ties land, law, lineage and language to Islamic doctrine. The Muslim majority who knows no better assumes the Christians do the same, which leads to religious, not political, interpretations of everything from the Crusades to Colonialism. Both sides misinterpret the other but for the opposite reason. The comparison between Christian teachings and Islam's exceptional shari'a should continue to be an open discussion. One religion claims a kingdom through hearts without political borders. The other holds that hearts without legislative mandates is empty. Those who are looking for the legislative answers in the Bible will miss the central message of Jesus. Could the most carnal give away of the Qur'an and Islam be that it defines proper legislation, the base power temptation for social leaders since the beginning of time? Could it also be the biggest failing of the church that it retreats from Jesus' clear direction to love with action and instead attempts to install security through secular powers alone?

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