

BOOK REVIEWS

The Islamic Exceptionalism: How the Struggle Over Islam is Reshaping the World • Shadi Hamid • New York: St. Martin's Press • 2010 • 306 pp. • ISBN 978-1250061010 (HB) • 978-1250135131 (PB)

Islamic Exceptionalism has generated considerable discussion since its publication, both because of the bold question it asks (what if Islam is really an exception?) and because of the direct challenge it poses to the established norms. The problem with most books on Islam and politics is the imposition of a Western-secular framework on Islam—something Shadi Hamid casts out by simply stating the obvious: The idea of separation of mosque and state is in contradiction to the very essence of Islam. The topic is explosive and one can easily fall prey to essentialism or pre-cast modes of delineating the theme, but the success of Hamid's dramatic narrative is in its understatements: For instance, he compares Christianity with Islam or Western democracies with modern Muslim states, but often leaves the conclusion of the comparison unstated. Yet, the fast-moving narrative of the book also makes bold statements: "Muslims are, of course, not bound to Islam's founding moment, but neither can they fully escape it" (p. 42); "Islam and Christianity couldn't have been more different" (p. 45).

Half of this eight-chapter book is devoted to specific case studies (Muslim Brotherhood, Turkey and the AKP, Tunisia, the Islamic State); the other half deals with theoretical issues, but always within concrete context, which provides real-life examples for its story-like narrative. The first chapter, "To Take Joy in a Massacre" is situated in Egypt and the author returns to it in the fourth chapter on the Muslim Brotherhood. He posits two different generations of leadership of the Muslim Brotherhood, divided and standing at opposite ends: "Brotherhood and other Islamist youth were acting first and thinking later" (p. 112); this Facebook generation measured time in hours as opposed to the older generation that measured it in decades.

Hamid's narrative techniques are engaging: he has packed a powerful narrative that fluctuates between reading like an academic work and a racy journalistic narrative, and includes directly quoted lively conversations with a

range of people, including Brotherhood officials and young activists (“Portrait of a Young Man in Prison”, p. 128). To be sure, there are bold streaks in the storyline of the book, but whether one agrees with his generalizations or not, he always grounds his conclusions in specific ground realities: “I couldn’t expect Brotherhood leaders to do what they hadn’t properly done for decades: outline a clear, coherent end state” (p. 143).

“The Turkish Model: Islamists Empowered”, the fifth chapter of the book, is a model for these varied narrative techniques: it opens with a dramatic account of his meeting with Ibrahim Kalin, President Erdogan’s chief advisor and by the end of the chapter, one is face to face with Davutoglu, another senior advisor, whose impact is powerful: “Secular idiot elites were just five percent of the population,” he told me. The secular Republican People’s Party (CHP)—the party of Ataturk—was a “mistake in our history.” The CHP, he suggested, should change its name, since it was synonymous with blood and subjugation. “You shut down all the mosques. True? True. You burned the Quran. True? True,” he said. “Everyone has a story from his ancestors” about Republican repression, and so the CHP has to “get rid of its past and say it: ‘This was wrong.’” (p. 175).

His chapter on the Islamic State, perhaps the weakest in the book, takes most of its core data from questionable sources, websites whose ownership remains a mystery as Hamid falls in the same trap that many Muslim writers have fallen into: the official story is the only story with regard to the post-9/11 world: whatever happened after that pivotal point can only be seen through one lens: the lens of the official American version of the events. He does not question the veracity of the claims of extensive government-like presence of ISIS; even has quotes from people he meets here and there, who make no attempt to hide the fact that ISIS basically amounts to small groups of fighters controlling certain areas under the command of a local leader. The illusion of state, so entrenched in the media, remains unquestionable in Hamid’s analysis. He may be right that ISIS ‘benefited considerably from the manifest failures of Arab governance, of an outdated regional order, and of an international community that was unwilling to act as Syria descended into savage repression and civil war’ (p. 237), but he is far from being unbiased (or uninfluenced) from the official line and his other work and opinions attest to his support for American interventionism, which is strange given his other views about Islam and Muslims.

Islamic Exceptionalism has nothing to say about Iran or Pakistan for that matter in the making of a new Middle East. His justification for the exclusion of Iran from his work (p. 31) is simply unconvincing. Likewise, the absence of any consideration of Islam and politics in the dynamic between religion and politics, which has been the hallmark of Pakistani politics right from 1947, is

hard to understand. If there is any country where this interplay has been a constantly moving political force, it is Pakistan and although Pakistan has not produced radical Islamists, it is a good case study for a steady and perhaps more mature shade of religion and politics in the modern world. Hamid does have a grand sweep and the courage to state that Western liberalism and Islam are incompatible, but this case can be made with better and more coherent arguments and without simplifications and omissions.

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