Transcript

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Islamists, Democracy and a New Middle East

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Maha Azzam

Good afternoon, ladies and gentlemen. I am Maha Azzam, I'm an associate fellow on the Middle East and North Africa Programme here at Chatham House. I have great pleasure in chairing today's meeting. Today's meeting is on the record and we can tweet on #CHEvents. We have about an hour.

I have great pleasure in introducing Dr Shadi Hamid. Dr Hamid is a fellow at the Project on US Relations with the Islamic World at the Brookings Institution's Saban Centre. He is author of *Temptations of Power: Islamists and Illiberal Democracy in a New Middle East* (Oxford University Press) and that's the title also of today's meeting. He served as director of research at Brookings in Doha until January 2014. Prior to joining Brookings, Dr Hamid was director of research at the Project on Middle East Democracy and a Hewlett Fellow at Stanford University's Centre on Democracy, Development and the Rule of Law. He is currently vice-chair of POMED, a member of the World Bank's MENA Advisory Panel and a regular contributor to *The Atlantic*. Dr Hamid may well be known to all of you actually here because of many contributions to the international press as well.

Very good to have you here, Shadi. I know that today you want to raise some of the issues you discuss in your book. You've written about the evolution of Islamist groups, primarily the Muslim Brotherhood and how it's evolved over time – within the context of democratization, it becomes perhaps more illiberal – and how repression forces a degree of moderation on Islamist groups. We look forward to hearing from you.

Shadi Hamid

Thank you so much, Maha. Thank you to Chatham House for having me and thanks to all of you for coming. I look forward to the discussion.

I want to just throw out some main ideas, main arguments, but I just want to start by saying that I started conducting research on Islamist movements in 2004. I was living in Jordan at the time and I spent a year trying to get to know the Jordanian Muslim Brotherhood. Ever since then, I have been tracking the evolution of different Brotherhood branches, in particular in Egypt and Jordan. It was interesting back then because that was before Islamist movements were really the kind of hot thing to study. I remember I was one of the only Western researchers in Jordan focusing on this particular issue. The Muslim Brotherhood then was a little bit confused because I would go to their headquarters and I would go to their archive room, sometimes every day or every other day, and at the beginning they were a little bit confused: who is this young graduate student and why does he care so much about our movement? What's going on here? So there was some initial suspicion there.

But since then I've really taken the notion seriously that to understand Islamist groups, you have to do something very simple: you have to sit down with them, get to know them, immerse yourself in their world and their ideas. I think it's unfortunate sometimes – it's a problem we have in the US, I don't know how much of a problem it is here in Britain – but sometimes you have people writing and talking about Islamist groups without having met a real live member of the Muslim Brotherhood, for example. I think that's problematic.

We don't have to agree with Islamists or like them, but we do have to understand them. That's really my starting point when I talk about Islamist groups. It's really that key element of understanding.

I want to start off with a quote from someone you all know, ex-President Mohamed Morsi. I got to know Mohamed Morsi a little bit before he became president. I met him for the first time on May 8th, 2010, which was a very important time because repression was intensifying in Egypt, but it was also about seven or eight months before the Arab Spring started. When I met with Morsi that day, we would have never dreamed that the Arab Spring was right around the corner. He would have never dreamed that he would become Egypt's first democratically elected head of state.

Morsi wasn't seen as a real strategic thinker. He was more of a kind of Brotherhood enforcer, loyalist, apparatchik. I will say this though: he's the only senior Muslim Brotherhood official I have ever met who does impromptu impressions of former US presidents. That was distinctive. He did a pretty good Jimmy Carter impression, I must say.

But that day he said something really interesting. I described the Brotherhood as an opposition group. He objected to the word 'opposition', and this is what he said: 'The word "opposition" has the connotation of seeking power, but at this moment we are not seeking power, because that requires preparation and society is not prepared'. Again, eight months before the Arab Spring started, this was the mindset that the Brotherhood was in: that the prospect of power was so far off into the future that you couldn't really even envisage that scenario. Similarly, many years before – actually, when he was living here in exile in London – Rachid al-Ghannouchi, the head of Tunisia's main Islamist party, said something similar: 'The most dangerous thing is for Islamists to be loved before they come to power and hated afterwards'.

Let's fast-forward a little bit, to two months after Mubarak fell in 2011. This was May 2011. I had an interesting conversation with Hassan [indiscernible], a senior Muslim Brotherhood official – now most of these guys are in prison, obviously. But as I was finishing up my book, I was going back over some of my recordings and I noticed that Hassan [indiscernible] had said something very interesting that I wouldn't have thought he'd say. He said: 'The people won't accept an Islamist president'. He went on to explain why. But again, this was after the Arab Spring and there was still this mindset that power maybe was dangerous, it was something to be very careful about. That's why I decided to call my book *Temptations of Power*, to really capture the ambivalent relationship the Muslim Brotherhood and other Islamist groups have had with the very notion of power.

The 'temptation' part is important too because they insisted that they knew better. They would always say things to that effect, as I mentioned in these previous quotes. The long game: 'we're willing to wait, we're in no rush'. But they ultimately succumbed to the temptations of power, and that's a whole different story as to why.

Let me just mention a couple of the key arguments; Maha mentioned this briefly as well. In the book, I try to look at distinctive phases in the evolution of Islamist parties. One of those phases is obviously in opposition: for most of their history, they've been in opposition, under repression. The other phase is when the temptations of power become more attractive and you have democratic openings. So the question is: how do Islamists respond to repression on one hand and to democratic openings on the other? Obviously, the discussion has become much more important in light of the Arab Spring and the subsequent events.

One of the key arguments is that repression, contrary to the academic and popular wisdom, can actually have a moderating effect on Islamist groups over time. This is one of the things I started to realize in my research over the years that I was looking at Egypt and Jordan. Over a 20 or 30-year period of time, Islamists became more moderate along a variety of indicators: de-emphasizing shari'a law in their political programme, embracing many of the tenets of democratic life, reaching out to liberal and leftist

groups, democratizing their internal organization structure. So there was a real evolution on the part of many, if not most, mainstream Islamist groups.

But what I noticed was this process of moderation was happening as repression was intensifying. So I saw this – and obviously, correlation is not causation, so I tried to understand to what extent these two things are related. If you're interested in that particular argument and the causal mechanisms and all of that, I discuss that in considerable depth in Chapter 2 of the book. I don't want to get into it too much, it's a complex, nuanced argument.

But also I just want to put out a disclaimer: I'm not saying that repression always has a moderating effect, and there are different kinds of repression obviously. What we're seeing in Egypt now is a whole different level that I'm not really talking about in the book. Eradication is a totally different thing. What we had under Mubarak and under King Abdullah in Jordan was low to moderate levels of repression. It got worse but there was never really an attempt to eradicate Islamist groups altogether. So I just want to put that out because increasingly I've been attacked for being – which is odd to me, as someone who's spoken out against these things for quite some time – that I'm an apologist for repression. I'm making simply a descriptive argument, not a normative argument, about the effects of repression.

The flip side of this is what happens to Islamists under democratic openings. The conventional wisdom there, and there's a longstanding strain in the academic literature to this effect, is that ideological parties under democratic openings move to the centre, because they have to build broad-based coalitions, they have to reach out to independent voters – the median voter, and the median voter is often thought to be in the centre. So they have to move to the centre. This is what happened to Christian democrats in Western Europe and Latin America; it's what happened to socialists, even communists to some extent.

But does that happen with Islamists? That's been the idea for a long time, that the more you include Islamists in the democratic process, that they too will become more moderate. This is also known as the inclusion-moderation hypothesis. But it's actually become something that's been very much embraced by policymakers as well at the highest levels. It shows how some of these things filter up or filter down.

Again, I was looking back at some old notes and quotes as I was finishing up my book, and again I noticed a very interesting quote from another former president, George W Bush. He was responding to a question in 2005 about Hezbollah's participation in Lebanese politics. It's actually a pretty interesting quote so let me just quote that here: 'I like the idea of running for office. There is a positive effect. Maybe some will run for office and say: vote for me, I look forward to blowing up America. But I don't think so. I think people who generally run for office say: vote for me, I'm looking forward to fixing your potholes'. Also known as the 'pothole theory of democracy' – one of George W Bush's contributions to our political discourse. I'm only partially joking. Now you can actually find academic articles where people refer to the pothole theory of democracy. But obviously George W Bush here is building upon a notion that's been there for quite some time about the effects of governing and the responsibility of power on political parties.

I argue again here that the reality was quite different. If we look at particular periods, kind of forgotten periods in Egypt and Jordan – I look at the early to mid-1980s in Egypt and from 1989 to 1992 in Jordan. What you have here is small but significant democratic openings, more so in Jordan but also to an extent in Egypt. What I found in my research is not what I would have expected: that Islamists actually double-down on their conservative discourse and further emphasize shari'a in the event of these democratic openings. You almost have a kind of near-obsessive focus on the implementation of shari'a law.

It’s not just Islamists, and that’s what’s really interesting here. This is not an argument just about how Islamists shift to the right under democratic openings but how the whole political spectrum can shift to the right. So what we see in the case of Egypt is even an ostensibly secular party like the Wafd Party Islamizes its political programme in the mid-1980s. So you read over the 1984 political programme of the Wafd Party, and part of this was because they were in alliance with the Brotherhood, but they’re using a kind of discourse that you would never see from a real secular party. They talk about *din wa dawla*, for example, that Islam is religion and state. They talk about implementing shari’a law. They actually introduce a very explicit shari’a plank for the first time.

Not only that, in the early 1990s there was a massive project that was overseen by the speaker of parliament under Sadat then briefly under Mubarak, Sufi Abu Taleb, where there was an effort to reconcile Egyptian law with Islamic law. They had different committees focusing on different areas. Even secular and liberal parties were taking part in this massive undertaking. Mubarak eventually paused it but they came up with hundreds, if not thousands, of draft articles in a variety of different areas. There was a Wafd leader, for example, who was in charge of the litigation committee of this project to bring Egyptian law in accordance with Islamic law, or shari’a.

Then Jordan is quite interesting too because it’s one of the only cases, at least before the Arab Spring, of a democratically elected Islamist party in power. They were part of a coalition government for a very brief period in 1991, for only six months. This never gets any attention, partially because it was quite brief but partially because people don’t care about Jordan that much. If you look at this period as well, 1991, we see the peak of these Islamizing activities. So in a very short period of time, the Brotherhood bloc in parliament proposed three pieces of legislation: a piece of legislation to ban alcohol; another one to put limitations on interest; and to prohibit co-education on different levels of schooling (primary, secondary and the university levels). There’s a lot of other examples as well.

This also extends to the Arab Spring, where during Morsi’s one year in power and more generally as the Muslim Brotherhood was rising to prominence, we again see the Muslim Brotherhood veering to the right very much, in terms of its rhetoric, in terms of its allying with Salafis for a period of time. Also in its overseeing of the draft constitution, which became the constitution in 2012. You see explicitly illiberal clauses in that constitution. So on and so forth.

Why might this be the case? Why do we have this counterintuitive result where democratization actually pushes Islamists further to the right? I’ll just mention briefly a couple of those factors.

First of all, these are deeply conservative societies when it comes to the social arena and when it comes to the role of religion in public life. So naturally, if a party or a leader is democratically elected, they have to be responsive to that very real popular sentiment. Another way to look at this is: if there is a popular demand, someone has to supply it.

A couple examples of this broad support for a conservative reading of the role of religion in public life. This was actually one of the most interesting when I was looking back at some of the polling data: in a Pew poll from March 2012, 61 per cent of Egyptians preferred the model of religion in government of Saudi Arabia, over 17 per cent who favoured the model in Turkey – 61 to 17 per cent. This is in April 2012, so well after Mubarak fell, you still see that sentiment. In Jordan, in the 2010 Arab Barometer, 62 per cent of Jordanians said they would support ‘a system governed by Islamic law in which there are no parties or elections’. There’s a lot of other examples to this effect.

Other factors. Under democracy, groups like the Brotherhood no longer have a monopoly on the Islamist vote. They have to compete with new parties that have just been established, ultra-conservative parties – the Salafis, for example, who have a more textual-literalist interpretation of Islamic law. I call this the Tea Party effect, where essentially you have the far right dragging the centre-right further rightwards. So it's not totally unique to the Arab world. We see it, obviously, in the US with the Tea Party. We see it to some extent in Europe as well, where you have far-right parties that drag the mainstream parties further to the right on issues like immigration, when it comes to anti-Muslim sentiment, things of that nature.

What does this all mean? If democracy pushes Islamists further to the right, at least under certain conditions, that means we have a situation where Islamists may be committed to democracy and the democratic process – and I would argue that they are – but they pursue illiberal objectives through the democratic process. When I say 'illiberal' objectives here, I'm talking about illiberalism more in the social arena, when it comes to the role of religion in public life. I mentioned a couple examples, when it comes to certain kinds of legislation. But also if you look more fundamentally at the nature of the state, we're also talking about the kind of impact that Islamists would like to have on the educational curricula, for example. Or the question of: is the state ideologically or religiously neutral? Does the state promote a particular conception of the good? Does the state want to encourage its citizens to be good, virtuous citizens or good, virtuous Muslims or something to that effect?

So this raises a very thorny question, especially for those of us in the West – whether Americans, Europeans or whatever else – and I want to pose this question to all of you: do Egyptians, Tunisians or anyone else have the right to decide through the democratic process that they would rather not be liberal? Or to put that a little bit differently: do Arabs have the right to try out alternative ideological projects, outside the confines of liberal democracy? Just ponder that for a second.

People like Francis Fukuyama had written a while ago that seeing liberal democracy as the kind of final endpoint for human civilization – there's a kind of bold, linear trajectory for all societies and cultures. It might take a long time but everyone ends up eventually at that final resting point of ideology, or the lack thereof. But I think we have to question that kind of secular determinism or this liberal determinism. I think it's difficult because as Americans – and this is even to some extent true for Britain as well – liberalism and democracy went hand in hand. So in an American context, and speaking as an American here, we had constitutional liberalism first as the foundation for society. Only later on did you have democracy in the sense of universal suffrage and full political rights for all citizens, so there was a very particular sequencing.

As I close, I want to just mention an example of how this divide, this tension between liberalism and democracy, manifests itself in the Arab context. So for example, when Morsi and the Brotherhood were overseeing the drafting of the constitution in 2012, we did see some of this. In the constituent assembly, on the right flank you had Salafis; on the left or liberal flank, you had non-Islamists, liberals, leftists or whatever you want to call them. You had two fundamentally different conceptions of the good. So liberals, by definition, are supposed to believe that certain rights and freedoms are non-negotiable. Salafis, by definition, believe that interfering in people's private lives in the name of religion is also non-negotiable. So here you have two non-negotiables on opposite sides.

Is it possible to reconcile these two radically different conceptions of the good? In this particular case, I'm not sure it was, because you had a situation where Salafis were threatening to withdraw from the constituent assembly if the language wasn't changed from the 'principles of shari'a' are the primary source of legislation to the 'rulings of shari'a' are the primary source of legislation. So the Brotherhood was trying to find a compromise solution. They came up with Article 219, which clarified the meaning of shari'a – in

a somewhat restrictive way, but it wasn't as far as the Salafis wanted to go. So it was somewhere in between the Salafi and liberal conceptions. But it was still very frightening for liberals, and understandably so. Ultimately liberals, most of them, withdrew from the constituent assembly because of that article and several others.

So it raises the question: how do you square the circle on that? Is there a way to square the circle on that when we're talking about competing non-negotiables? Now, liberals would say that their solution is the compromise solution: that in a liberal society, such as the one that I grew up in, in the US, everyone has the right to express their religious preferences. Conservative, liberal, Salafi, secular, whatever it happens to be – I assume Britain is somewhat similar in this regard. But the notion of liberalism's neutrality can only be accepted within a liberal framework. Islamists cannot fully express their Islamism under the strict confines of secular liberal democracy. So again, we have an impasse.

Let me close and say a couple things. It's not just that Islamists are moving to the right because they're responding to a conservative base or other electoral imperatives. What I wanted to do in this book was bring ideas and ideology back into the discussion. These are ideas that are deeply and honestly felt by Islamist groups. They do have a distinctive worldview. They do have a distinctive vision for society. They are, after all, Islamists for a reason – that's why we call them Islamists. If they were something else, we'd call them something else.

So I argue that Islamists by definition are at least somewhat illiberal. Illiberalism is a continuum, and you see a variety of different approaches along that spectrum, but even the most mild Islamists are going to be at least somewhat illiberal. I think that we have to, as outside observers, really respect the importance of ideas and ideology. As someone who's spent a lot of time with Islamist activists and leaders, it's very clear that they do believe in something quite strongly. I think there's been a tendency in the academic literature and also to some extent in popular discourse to emphasize context and structure and de-emphasize ideology. There's a kind of political correctness about it too, that you don't want to be arguing, as an outside observer, that Islam is deterministic in how it affects the behaviour of Muslims. That can be a controversial argument. So I think we've tried to move in the opposite direction of really emphasizing context, but I think we have to get the balance right again and think seriously about the role of ideas in these debates.

I'll just close by saying that if we have this fundamental impasse between different conceptions of the good, there are a couple solutions. Repression is obviously one of them. If you, as a liberal, see Islamists as such an existential threat, then you might say, well, repression is the only way to go. That's what a lot of liberals seem to think in a place like Egypt. I'm against repression for moral reasons, but putting that aside, repression doesn't work in the long run. You can try to eradicate Islamists; in the short run, you might have some success, but the examples of Egypt in the 1950s and 1960s, Tunisia in the 1990s and 2000s, and even Syria in the 1980s – it worked for a little while but once you had democratic openings, Islamists very quickly re-emerged and became some of the strongest political forces in their respective societies, because they're reflecting something that is deeply felt in these societies. You can kill an organization, but can you kill an idea? Probably not. So repression is not going to work. It's a fool's errand.

The other option is the secular state system in the Arab world has to find a way to accommodate Islamist participation in the democratic process. I would argue that I do think Morsi and the Brotherhood were failures, in the sense that they weren't able to stay in power, very obviously, but also they made a number of major mistakes. So there was a failure there.

But the deeper failure of the Arab Spring, in my view, is precisely this failure of the existing state system to accommodate Islamist participation. I do think that if democracy is to flourish in the Middle East, we will have to come to terms with the notion that it will have to at least be somewhat illiberal, because Islamists are going to be a part of it – but also, social conservatives more generally in these societies will be a part of this process, so that's going to have to be reflected to one degree or another in policy. So that's solution number two.

The third solution, the alternative perhaps, is that Islamists find a way to concede their Islamism. They just say: there's too much of a confrontation here, we're going to give up our Islamism. This is what the Turkish Islamists did. But I would question whether or not that is sustainable, and I think we're seeing now in Turkey that it's not necessarily a long-term solution. Ultimately, Islamists will want to reflect their Islamism in public policy.

I'll end there. Thank you.

Maha Azzam

Thank you. Before I open it up to the floor – I think one of the main arguments you posit, and I think it's one that certainly is very important, is that the centrality of ideology, of faith, of dogma, in our understanding of a movement, particularly given the emphasis in the decades of the 1980s and 1990s to think of Islamists in the context of their rise – which of course, is a factor: the economic problems, the political environment and so on. But I think there is a very strong argument to say that we've got to look at what they believe in and the strength of that belief.

Let me take it just a little bit further, maybe it's an aspect which you discuss in your book, but perhaps you could open it up here to the international dimension a little bit. The social conservatism or the moving to the right of Islamists may well be the case, but how important is that really to the opposition that they face from international players? Because ultimately we see that conservatism in Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states, and we see the United States and others having very good relations with those countries. So what is it precisely? Is it the equation of democracy plus Islam that has created this kind of anxiety, not only among the Gulf states but also in Western capitals? Maybe if you could elaborate a little bit on that before we open it up.

Shadi Hamid

Sure. First of all, I think it's the main reason for opposition among major domestic players in these countries, if we're talking about liberal elites in places like Egypt, Jordan, Tunisia. So if we talk about June 30th, the mass protest which eventually led to the military coup, we had probably a lot of those people there because they were frustrated: economic problems, lack of security, whatever it happened to be. But if we're talking about the elites that drove this movement to oust Morsi, then we're talking about a real existential fear of Islamism – not so much a fear of what Morsi had done or was currently doing, but a fear of what he might do in the future. This was always what it came back to in my conversations with Egyptian friends and colleagues: if they stay in power, then this is going to happen later. Which is a very difficult conversation to have because it's about something that hasn't happened yet; it could happen but we don't honestly know.

But this fear that Islamists would alter the nature of the state – and I think Egyptians at the elite level, unfortunately, have this obsession with the state. Everyone is concerned about the identity of the state and who's going to control the state apparatus. So I think there was a real fear there. Now, these liberal elites or old-regime elites are the people who talk most often to their counterparts in places like the US or Britain. So it is an argument that many people in the West hear a lot from their interlocutors.

But more generally, I do think the Obama administration – and I can't speak as much to the British government, but the Obama administration early on did want to give the Muslim Brotherhood a chance. There was a willingness to work with them, and I think you saw that. I think there was some disappointment over the course of the year they were working with the Morsi government, for sure. But part of that is ideological – that there's a general American discomfort with the role of religion in politics, especially if we're talking about the Democratic Party or liberals, or actually Republicans too, which is somewhat odd because they believe in a role for – anyway, that's a different issue.

So I think there's a general discomfort but it goes beyond ideas when we're talking about foreign policy. It's also about interests. Where Saudi Arabia might be a theocracy, it's still part of the Western security orbit, so it very much is seen as an anchor for US security interests in the region. But there is a real fear that groups like the Muslim Brotherhood have an alternative conception of the regional order. They don't necessarily buy into the basic premise of American hegemony – they don't. Obviously, groups like the Muslim Brotherhood have a long history not just of anti-American sentiment and a general kind of anti-Westernism to one degree or another, but also anti-Israel sentiment. That is important in this context as well, that the US will continue to see Israel as a major strategic partner. It's a real question as to what extent will Israel clash with rising Islamist parties in the region.

So I think it's a mixture of different things, but also the US has been oriented around autocratic regimes for a long time. That's what we're comfortable with as a country in the Middle East. That's who we do business with. So I think it's very hard, certainly from a bureaucratic standpoint, to shift the whole approach of American policy in the region to be much more accepting of working with democratic partners. We're just not used to it. That's not how our bureaucracy has been oriented.

I think we're seeing how the US is reverting back to business as usual, the pre-Arab Spring status quo, in terms of how it deals with the region. You see that in Obama's recent speeches, this emphasis on core national security interests and where democracy is relegated to second-tier status. It's back to business as usual.

Maha Azzzam

Thank you.