

Professor Malise Ruthven reviews *Islamic Exceptionalism* by SHADI HAMID. St. Martin's Press, 2016, 320 pp. and *Islamism: What It Means for the Middle East and the World* by TAREK OSMAN. Yale University Press, 2016, 328 pp.

In January 2015, after jihadists attacked the Paris offices of the satirical magazine *Charlie Hebdo*, killing 12 people, European leaders linked arms to lead a procession of millions through the French capital, chanting "Je suis Charlie" (I am Charlie) in an expression of solidarity with the victims and contempt for their killers. Muslims all over the world also condemned the attacks, as did a number of Islamist organizations, including perhaps the most influential one—the Egypt-based Muslim Brotherhood, which posted a statement on its English-language website denouncing the "criminal attack" and stating that "true Islam does not encourage violence."

Not all of the group's adherents approved of that message, however.

A month after the killings, a Muslim Brotherhood activist in Tunisia told Shadi Hamid, an expert on political Islam, that she disagreed with the organisation's decision to issue the statement. Like many other mainstream Islamists, she opposed the Paris attack but felt that Islamists should refrain from loudly condemning it because few in the West had spoken out after Egyptian security forces massacred 800 Brotherhood members who were peacefully protesting in Cairo in August 2013. "Our blood is shed day and night and no one pays any attention," she said. "Our blood is licit, but theirs isn't. . . . The world's balance is off."

That sense of imbalance pervades Islamist organisations of all stripes. Perceived as aggressors, they see themselves as victims; condemned as intolerant, they complain about intolerance of their views. What is indisputable is that even after 15 years during which the intersection of politics and Islam has been a major theme in world affairs, Islamism remains poorly understood, especially in the West. Two recent books tackle the subject, primarily by considering the crises roiling the Middle East and examining Islam's role in the turmoil.

Both books succeed in explaining the dilemmas, paradoxes, and confusion facing political actors in the world's most volatile region, although each author emphasizes different factors.

Hamid, an Egyptian American who is a senior fellow at the Brookings Institution and who served for a number of years as the director of the think tank's center in Qatar, structures Islamic Exceptionalism around a specific question: In order for the region's Muslim-majority states to become liberal democracies, must Islam undergo the kind of reformation through which, in the West, Christianity was ultimately subordinated to the principles of the Enlightenment, such as freedom of speech, religious choice, and the idea that legal governance should issue from the popular will? Or can the Islamic world arrive at some form of Muslim democracy by following a different path whereby Islam would maintain its centrality as a private faith and public discourse even though it would remain at odds in many ways with Enlightenment ideals?

Hamid argues that the second outcome is more likely. In his view, politics is far more integral to Islam than to Christianity—which has traditionally relied on the God/Caesar distinction to separate the holy from the worldly—and thus the Muslim world is unlikely to witness a replay of the West's journey toward liberalism, which depended on separating church and state.

In his book, Tarek Osman, an Egyptian writer and broadcaster known to British radio audiences for his 2013 BBC series *The Making of the Modern Arab World*, considers many of the same issues as Hamid. But in contrast to Hamid, who takes a comparative historical approach, Osman views Islamism through a more sociological lens, identifying it as the site of a "social battle - over identities, frames of reference, the role of religion, the nature of governance, and the meaning of being Arab, Turkish, or Persian."

Although Osman's account is more nuanced, Hamid's approach offers greater clarity. By exploring the provenance of Enlightenment ideals and questioning their claims to universality, Hamid argues that Islam is fundamentally different from Christianity and that this difference has "profound implications for the future." He adds:

"This admittedly is a controversial, even troubling claim, especially in the context of rising anti-Muslim sentiment in the United States and Europe. "Islamic exceptionalism," however, is neither good nor bad. It just is, and we need to understand it and respect it, even if it runs counter to our own hopes and preferences."

## WATCHING CAIRO FROM TUNIS

Although both books delve into Islamic history, they are primarily concerned with recent developments—especially the failure of the Arab revolts of 2010–11 to generate what Hamid terms "a legitimate, stable political order." That failure has resulted in the restoration of

authoritarian structures and at the same time has opened up space for more radical forms of resistance, such the jihadist violence of the self-proclaimed Islamic State (also known as Daesh or ISIS). Hamid is particularly interested in the contests that pitted Islamists against secularists after the revolts in Egypt and Tunisia that led to the fall of the Mubarak and Ben Ali regimes, respectively. After toppling their tyrannical leaders through popular movements, both countries elected governments dominated by Islamists. But at that point, their paths diverged—although not quite as dramatically as it might appear.

In the summer of 2013, Egypt's military ousted the elected Islamist president, Mohamed Morsi. General Abdel Fatah el-Sisi assumed the presidency and ushered in the return of authoritarian rule. The military coup was preceded by massive demonstrations—perhaps the largest in Egyptian history—organized by Tamarod (Rebellion), a movement spearheaded by liberals and secularists alarmed by what they saw as Morsi's plan to Islamize Egyptian society. Egyptian media outlets fanned these anxieties, as Osman relates:

Dozens of articles by leading journalists decried "the path towards becoming Afghanistan." Artists and prominent women activists accused the Islamists of a condescending view of women: "seeing us as mere sexual objects," "they think with their lower halves." Some swore to fight for the right of Egyptians not to be led by "imams," even if those imams had come to power through the ballot box. Irrespective of the change in the Brotherhood's thinking and rhetoric since the [mid- twentieth century], its dramatic move from being an illegal group to the party ruling Egypt left many Egyptians, especially in the upper-middle classes, disoriented and fearful. Alaa Al Aswany, perhaps the best-known contemporary novelist in Egypt and the Arab world, warned in a series of articles that the Islamists were using religious slogans to convince the lower-middle classes and the rural poor—traditional Brotherhood supporters—that being a "good Muslim" meant supporting a conservative agenda that ran counter to Egypt's "long, beautiful, resplendent, and plural identity."

Osman sees this polarization, fanned by "media organisations with close links to Mubarak-era power groups," as crucial to the public delegitimation of Morsi's government, which was already reeling from the collapse of foreign investment and tourism. The stage was set for the coup after Morsi responded to such challenges by issuing a constitutional declaration granting himself unlimited authority to enact legislation and investing his presidential decrees with retroactive immunity from executive or judicial review.

In Tunisia, a similar contest between Islamists and secular forces emerged after the dictatorial president Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali was toppled in January 2011.

Educated elites and the upper-middle classes had long benefited from Ben Ali's rule and were adamantly opposed to the long-outlawed but suddenly resurgent Islamist party Ennahda, which won the largest number of seats in the elections held in October 2011 and formed a coalition government with two left-leaning parties.

Although Tunisia remained calmer than Egypt during the period of Islamist- led government, it experienced the same level of polarisation. Confrontations - sometimes violent - erupted between Islamists and various secular-minded groups, ranging from the youth activists who had

started the original protests to remnants of the Ben Ali regime. The Ennahda government faced a series of general strikes launched by the country's influential, secular-oriented labor unions - the first time such strikes had happened in more than three decades. In 2013, mass protests erupted after the daylight assassinations of two opposition leaders, Chokri Belaid and Mohamed Brahmi, which were widely blamed on hardline Islamists. The ensuing political crisis, fueled by opposition parties that blamed Ennahda for being "soft" on Islamist violence, was resolved only when the Ennahda-led coalition stepped down and was replaced by a caretaker government in October 2013.

The main catalyst for Ennahda's decision to give up power may have been watching the coup unfold in Egypt, which concentrated Islamist minds greatly in Tunisia. As an Ennahda deputy told Hamid:

"We're sorry for what happened in Egypt, but it led to a result which was in a kind of way positive for our base. They saw how the Brotherhood's insistence on unilateral acts might benefit you in the short term, but you lose in the long run. Your existence in the political scene is tied to the guarantee of democracy. "

In addition to dissolving its ruling coalition, Ennahda also took an accommodating approach to the process of drafting a new constitution, which had begun in 2011 and continued under the caretaker government. The Islamists compromised on a number of critical areas, dropping their demands that the new constitution criminalize blasphemy, cite Islamic law as the source of legislation, give men the right to marry more than one woman, and refer to women as "complementary," rather than equal, to men. These were major concessions that sacrificed core elements of the Islamist agenda.

What is more, there was a good deal of public support in Tunisia for making religion more central to governance, even after the Islamists had stumbled while in power. In 2014, a Pew Research Center poll found that more than half of Tunisians believed that the country's laws should "follow the values and principles of Islam"; 30 percent of respondents took an even more conservative position, agreeing with the statement that laws should "strictly follow the teachings of the Koran."

Ennahda, however, seems determined to survive Tunisia's transition to democracy even if doing so requires adopting a de facto separation between religion and government. At a party congress in May, its members overwhelmingly supported a motion to separate the group's political affairs from its religious and cultural activities, while retaining Islam as its primary ideological source.

Among modern Middle Eastern states, Tunisia may be unique in several respects. It

experienced a long period of secular government and institutional state building, first under its founder, Habib Bourguiba, who negotiated the country's independence from France during the 1950s, and then under his successor, Ben Ali. Tunisia also has the advantage of having an Islamist leader of rare intellectual stature in Rached Ghannouchi, co-founder of Ennahda and the group's guiding force. After returning to Tunisia in 2011 following more than 20 years of exile in the United Kingdom, Ghannouchi has apparently come to see that his movement's survival—and perhaps that of Islam itself—depends on some level of separation of mosque and state. As Hamid argues, the basic project of Islamist movements such as Ennahda is to "reconcile premodern Islamic law with the modern nation-state"—a negotiation in which the state usually gets "the better end of the deal," Hamid writes, because the very process of state building, buttressed by the international system of state recognition, is inherently secularizing and forces Islamists to limit their ambitions.

That, of course, did not happen in Egypt. The difference in the two countries' outcomes may be attributed, in part, to differences in the qualities of their Islamist leaders. In Egypt, the increasingly paranoid Morsi tried to use the presidency and the state apparatus to face down his liberal opponents. In Tunisia, by contrast, Ghannouchi saw that his movement could survive only through compromise.

## IMMODERATE TIMES

Ennahda's pragmatism and gradualist approach run counter to the religious fervor of the many Islamists who have joined the jihadist droves flooding Iraq and Syria; indeed, it might be no coincidence that Tunisia is one of the largest suppliers of foreign jihadists to those countries. Ennahda's accommodationism is out of sync with the messianic and utopian currents that are coursing through Islamic thought today, anchored in the belief that the word of God, as revealed to the Prophet Muhammad in the Koran, is destined to supplant the flawed or distorted versions of divine locutions preserved in the Jewish and Christian Scriptures.

The theological problem such extreme views pose can be addressed, if not resolved, through sophisticated discussion between religious specialists. But the social forces unleashed by religious passions are proving much harder to contain.

The Sunni Muslim tradition suffers from an especially acute problem that stems from what I have referred to elsewhere as "the argument from manifest success"—the notion that the absolute truth of the Koran and the rectitude of Muhammad's mission were proved by the

success of the Arab conquests in the Middle East that followed the Prophet's death in 632. That view, which took hold during centuries of hegemonic Islamic rule in the Middle East and North Africa, has been difficult to square with the unpalatable reality that during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, virtually every part of the Islamic world came under the rule of Christians—and, in one particularly contentious case, of Jews—whose beliefs were supposed to have been superseded by the finality of Islam.

Osman admirably captures how the gap between the vision of Islamic supremacy and the reality of Muslim subjugation has fueled in Islamist circles a mixture of anger, nostalgia, and disenchantment with pragmatists such as Ghannouchi. Although a majority of Islamists may have come to accept the reality of the modern nation-state, Osman notes that most have not yet abandoned the notion of *seyadat al-Islam*: Islam's sovereignty and its superiority over any other religious and man-made framework. This means that beneath the acceptance of equal citizenry and secular nationality as the basis for an individual's belonging to any society lurks the idea that any non-Islamic social or political framework is threatened by its status as inferior, if not flawed.

Ennahda's "official rhetoric intelligently adheres to the vernacular of any party functioning in a secular democracy," he writes, but it is not clear how long it will succeed in sustaining this posture in the face of "the reality that Salafist jihadist ideas have captured significantly large areas of the Islamic world." He maintains, however, that considering the persecution that party members had suffered prior to 2011, Ennahda had done "the best that could have been achieved in a short space of time."

Still, the group's quotidian language and modest accomplishments pale in comparison to the soaring rhetoric and lofty aspirations of more hardline Islamists, such as the influential Qatar-based Egyptian scholar Sheik Yusuf al-Qaradawi. In their analyses of the problems facing Muslims, Qaradawi and other hard-liners tend to reduce a century and a half of complex interactions between Islamists and the state to a simple confrontation between Islam and secularism.

Dismissing social polarization, conflicting identities, and opposing views of national security or economic challenges as mere secondary issues, Qaradawi and others favor a narrative that sets "the Islamists' rise and fall in a much longer historical context," in which the abolition of the Ottoman caliphate by Kemal Ataturk after World War I becomes "an affront to God's rule," Osman explains.

The emphasis on victimhood and loss - which can be remedied only by vindication and restoration - also defines the vision of violent jihadists, such as the self-styled caliph of Daesh, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. In a recorded sermon released on the Internet last year, Baghdadi urged Muslims to leave the "abode of war" (comprising all the "infidel" lands, including those governed by nominally Muslim leaders) and join Daesh in the only true "abode of Islam." "We call upon you so you leave the life of humiliation, disgrace, degradation, subordination, loss, emptiness, and poverty [for] a life of honour, respect, leadership, [and] richness," Baghdadi declared, promising new recruits "victory from Allah and an imminent conquest."

## THE IRAN PROBLEM

How can the Muslim world escape the dual curse of secular authoritarianism and religious extremism? Hamid persuasively challenges the idea -

advanced by the activist and writer Ayaan Hirsi Ali, among others - that Islam must undergo a reformation akin to the Christian one. As he writes, "lessons learned in Europe" are not necessarily applicable in the Middle East. There is a curious absence in his book, however: Iran, which for nearly 40 years has served as the clearest testing ground for political Islam. Hamid claims that Iran falls outside the scope of his study because the ideas that guided the Iranian Revolution are relatively recent Shiite innovations, whereas he is concerned with only the Sunni world. But he overplays the importance of that distinction, and it is far from certain that his thesis about Islamic exceptionalism could survive an analysis of Iran without severe modification.

In Iran, which arguably boasts the world's only Islamist government, clerical governance has led to a steep decline in religious observance; in 2011, the Iranian Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance lamented that after more than 30 years of theocratic rule, only three percent of Iranians attended Friday prayers. (Prior to the revolution, the figure was almost 50 percent.) And yet Iranian society and governance have not liberalized in any meaningful ways: the theocracy represses dissent at home and supports militants abroad, such as the Lebanese group Hezbollah. This poses a problem for Hamid's view: put simply, the argument that political Islam can evolve into Muslim democracy would be more persuasive if the world's most prominent Islamist country offered more impressive evidence of that possibility.

Perhaps a better way to rebut the idea that the Islamic world can follow only the European path toward modernity, by way of reformation, would be to note that even Europe didn't really follow

that path—at least as it is often portrayed. The Enlightenment was the outcome not only of the Reformation but also of centuries of violent religious conflict, after which sensible people concluded that they were not improving their lots by killing one another in the name of God. That is the grim lesson that Muslims in the contemporary Middle East may yet find themselves learning from European history.

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