

Barbarism in the Middle East

By Aziz Huq

Shadi Hamid, *Temptations of Power: Islamists & Illiberal Democracy in a New Middle East* (Oxford University Press 2014)

Patrick Cockburn, *The Rise of the Islamic State: ISIS and the New Sunni Revolution* (Verso 2015)

The vintage harvested in 2011's Arab Spring has ripened, aged, and turned to ashes in its cultivators' mouths. Starting in December 2010, when the Tunisian street vendor Mohamed Bouazizi self-immolated in protest at municipal corruption, a concatenation of popular uprisings beginning in Tunisia diffused weakly west and sharply east. Mostly directly affected were the states that Roger Owen usefully classifies as "systems of Arab presidents for life." Yet only in the first full and ironic flourish of historical development would it become clear that the most consequential fruit to fall from the Arab Spring would be beyond that world: It would land instead in the notionally democratic, but in fact increasingly autocratic, regime bequeathed by the United States to the once and forever Shia partisan Nouri al-Maliki.

In its heartland, by contrast, the Arab Spring either yielded a reiteration of the repressive status quo ante (Egypt, Bahrain, Algeria, in diverse ways) or else revealed the essential vacuity of the state's claims to legitimacy (Libya and Syria). In effect, the revolutionary wind of the Arab Spring sorted between strong and weak states, sending the former into reactionary paroxysm and the latter into conflict and, in Libya's case, outright dissolution. Only natal Tunisia seems partially exempt from this pattern. There, street protests succeeded in displacing the septuagenarian Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali in favor of seemingly real electoral competition. Yet even in Tunisia, the current prime minister, Habib Essid, is a former Ben Ali man.

Understanding the immediate results from the Arab Spring, nevertheless, is only a first step to positioning the events falling under that loose rubric into a wider historical architecture. There are many questions worth posing, but a first wave of scholarship flags two of immediate interest. First, 2011 is not the first instance of transnational insurrectionary diffusion. Another "Springtime of Peoples," in 1848, is an obvious precursor. Presumably, however, the mechanisms of interstate contagion, reactionary response, and state disintegration will differ from then to now. But how? And under what circumstances does popular mobilization seeded through the international diffusion of ideas, slogans, and claims conduce to regime transformation, as opposed to regime consolidation?

Second, the terrorist attacks of 9/11 have revived interest in the idea of political Islam, understood roughly as projects to organize the state along theocratic and highly religion-specific grounds. Since the Hegira of 622 C.E. wherein the community of early Muslims migrated from Mecca to Medina, the problem of political order has played some role in Islamic theory and theology. Whether this axial position is inevitable is questionable. Recent revisionist work by Fred Donner underscores the pietistic and ecumenical qualities of early Islamic practice, and its relatively tardy coming to state-building. Whatever the case about its history, political Islam today works as a neuralgic spot in both American liberals' and conservatives' thinking about politics and international order. In its least anxious iteration, this comprises an endless anguished round-robin about the 'clubbability' of Islam within the family of liberal democracies. That the Arab Springs altered the declension of political Islam for its conjugation as "one of us," as well as its compatibility with Occidental forms of political order, seems plain by now. How, and in what direction, its vector of change operated, are somewhat less clear.

To write well of both local causal dynamics and durable transformations in the modalities of faith-based political would seem to require a foot in each of two worlds: A position in the Arab streets, enabling thick local knowledge, and a high synoptic eyrie. In this regard, Shadi Hamid appears eminently credentialed. He has spent years prior to 2010 researching branches of the Muslim Brotherhood on the ground, sometimes, he notes, as the only American or European scholar in the field. Today, he is perched at a nexus of influential global institutions, including the Brookings Institution, the World Bank, and Stanford University—not just clubbable, in short, but securely clubbed. His 2014 Brookings-sponsored monograph,

Temptations of Power, moreover, has been well received and Hamid has fast become one of a source of received wisdom on political Islam.

Hamid's monograph is neither a narrative account of the uprisings nor quite a sustained treatment of *longue durée* dynamics. Rather, it is framed initially as a response to Samuel Huntington's "inclusion moderation" thesis, one of those peculiar academic theses that leak from Ivory Tower to take on freakishly independent life. The book then morphs incrementally into a more general thesis about the compatibility of one strand in political Islam with liberal democracy. Hamid's very success in persuasively debunking a faddish piece of conventional wisdom, however, works at cross-purposes with his ultimate thesis about political Islam. And even Hamid's success is limited by the narrow breadth of his case studies and its conceded gaps in coverage. The result, as might be anticipated from its institutional provenance, is a work that speaks persuasively to a Beltway-bound *parti pris*, but offers little of generalizable heft to larger debates on the Arab Spring or political Islam, despite Hamid's obviously rich knowledge and nuanced approach.

A threshold problem in discerning Hamid's theses is his book's editing—or rather lack thereof. Far from a chronological narrative of events, Hamid scatters his argument among a scrambling of historical facts, repeatedly returning to some events (such as the Muslim Brotherhood's volte-face on running a presidential candidate in 2012), and simply assuming knowledge of others. Key events, such as the assassination of Tunisian left-of-center politician Chokri Belaid, are introduced fleetingly in subordinate clauses, and then discussed pages later as if the reader had been fully briefed. Rather than posit a distinct analytic claim, develop support, and then examine counter-arguments, Hamid's method involves an accumulation of aperçus, arguments, and anticipatory responses. The net effect is a dilution of his argument's force, and of the book's contribution, especially to those not already versed in the events of 2011 onward. Contra his ecstatic blurbs, Hamid's book is hence assuredly not a "first draft of history" that either aims to or does clarify in narrative form the causal forces propelling international diffusion, reactionary repression, or state dissolution among the Arab states.

Which is not to say Hamid's threshold negative argument fails to land. His target is Samuel Huntington's "inclusion moderation" thesis, as channeled by State Department officials from 2011 onward. This asserts that increased state repression leads to further radicalization of ideologically "radical" parties, whereas political liberalization conversely leads to "moderation." As Hamid rightly notes, in the Arab context the binary of "radical" and "moderate" is casually employed to reference both preferences over democracy and also preferences over a set of values aligned with political liberalism, such as gender equality and religious toleration. In the Arab context, Hamid marshals these divergent theses into what he labels the "pothole theory of democracy": the notion that responsibility for mundane governance presses political Islamists in Arab states away from ideological appeals to "bread and butter" issues.

By sketching the arc of Muslim Brotherhood participation in Egyptian and Jordan politics from the early 1980s to the Arab Spring, Hamid demonstrates this thesis to be incorrect at least for one class of cases. He persuasively demonstrates that the Brotherhood in these countries responded to repression by seeking alliances with non-sectarian groups, whereas democratic competition in Egypt, and especially the fight to draw votes from the Salafist Nour party, drove the Brotherhood to ideological purer and less democratic positions and actions.

This is a valuable corrective to an institutional nostrum so far as it goes. The problem is it doesn't go very far. Hamid's case selection is extremely narrow. The conditions for generalizing his counter-thesis are not clearly specified, although they may be implicit in his argument. To begin with, Hamid delimits his claim to circumstances of "low to moderate levels of repression short of outright eradication." He acknowledges econometric work by Alan Kruger and Julia Maleckova to the effect that increased political repression generates increasing resort to terrorist violence. Next, Hamid's argument is largely constrained to the Egyptian and Jordanian examples of the Muslim Brotherhood; Tunisia's Ennahda party gets late, brief, and inadequate treatment. Hamas is barely mentioned at all. No effort is made to contrast this thimble-size sample with instances in which the inclusion-moderation thesis might have greater explanatory force in respect to political Islam beyond the Brotherhood, such as the Turkish and the Indonesian cases.

Finally, Hamid's gaze remains firmly fixed on nonviolent forms of political Islam. His account does not address the possibility that either discrete individuals or factions may break off from an otherwise moderating organization in order to turn to political violence, an outright rejection of democratic ordering.

Large numbers of men from both Arab states and Europe, for example, have flocked to Syria and west Iraq to fight under the banner of the Islamic State since 2012. It is far from clear how this migration, or earlier iterations to Bosnia or Afghanistan, influenced the domestic trajectory of the Brotherhood in Egypt or Jordan. Given these geographic, temporal, and institutional limits, as well as the absence of meaningful comparative analysis, it is hard to discern what Hamid thinks are the conditions under which the inclusion-moderation thesis fails.

Moreover, if Hamid's central contribution is a negation of the inclusion-moderation thesis by counter-example, its novelty is dubious. A decade before Hamid's book, for example, Carrie Wickham offered evidence contrary to the thesis in her excellent study of the Wasat party, founded in 1996 as a breakaway faction from the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt. In 2013, she published an illuminating analysis of ideological developments within the Brotherhood itself. While fairly citing Wickham, Hamid does not sufficiently discuss her important work. Wickham is also not unique: Jillian Schwedler and Omar Ashour have also offered important caveats to Huntington's thesis. In light of these previous critiques, it is fair to ask whether simply showing that Hilary Clinton gets things wrong is startling news.

If causal mechanisms are to be disentangled from Hamid's account to explain moderation (however defined), they raise questions about his second thesis: This is the idea, floated rather abruptly toward the book's close, that "illiberalism is central to the Islamist *raison d'être*," and that the Brotherhood embrace of democracy is contingent on its belief that this commitment will only aid its Islamizing mission given the preferences of the public. Like Wickham, Schwedler, and Ashour, Hamid identifies rational, strategic thinking both in the Brotherhood's moderation under repression and also its increasing ideological drift during political openings. In both periods, the Islamist groups being studied responded to potential gains from international pressure, tactical alliances with other regime opponents, and—most vitally—the preferences of the public. Hence, it was by dint of the deeply conservative set of views generally held by the Egyptian public that the Brotherhood not only *could* drift to ideologically rigid views, but was *induced to do so* given electoral competition with Salafist groups.

Hence, to critique the inclusion-moderation thesis, Hamid shows that the Brotherhood's policy preferences and positions are shaped in large measure by exogenous forces, and prove malleable by evincing sudden and large shifts in moderation or polarization in the wake of external shocks. Yet to answer the clubbability puzzle that preoccupies the Beltway bien-pensant, he posits a fixed and stable set of preferences, which seem largely immutable under environmental stresses. One cannot, though, have these things both ways.

But perhaps, to his detriment and ours, Hamid is simply looking in the wrong places for the future of political Islam. In the first half of 2014, a former al Qaeda in Iraq figure with the nom Abu Bakr al Baghdadi led a force of roughly 6000 men to sweeping military victories across Sunni areas of eastern Syria and western Iraq. The cities of Fallujah and Mosul fell in the space of roughly 100 days, despite the \$41.6 billion expended on the Iraqi army since 2011. The best account of the Islamic State's rise is to be found in Patrick Cockburn's deeply sourced and powerfully narrated work, recently collected into a brief if somewhat repetitive book. Unlike Hamid, Cockburn has a journalist's eye for the telling detail, such as the spiking price of bullets in Baghdad after Mosul's fall, and the pendular swings from denial to panic at Shia *iftars* as the Islamic State proceeded apace. Nor does Cockburn trim his sails to accord with the norms of Western chancelleries in explaining the Islamic State's rise. He hence fingers not just Saudi and Qatari funding, but also Turkish intelligence support for jihadist groups, and (most importantly) links the Islamic State's success to the weakness of an Iraqi state hollowed out by a decade of sanctions, an ideological lustration rammed down by Paul Bremer and his factotums, and the persistent failure of both Bush and Obama administrations to reckon with the endemic corruption their military aid spawned and succored.

Not one for exaggeration, Cockburn uses the label "terrifying" to describe a new power, governing six million-plus subjects (more than Denmark, Finland, or Ireland), animated by a barbaric, inhumane, and totalitarian ideology, but also well able to deploy slick new-media propaganda tools to recruit thousands of men and women who feel marginalized or dispossessed, or who simply seek some larger meaning to life. The Islamic State, he predicts, will exert gravitational force distorting other forms of political Islam in the near term, with staggering and dismaying human costs. The notion that it can be combated through merely military means is belied by the faltering progress of the Iraqi army and the limited efficacy of American air power.

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If there is a lesson to be drawn from the aliveness to facts in the world in Cockburn, which contrasts starkly with the Beltway-bound analytic parochialism that ties Hamid's analysis down, it is that we likely want for either the analytic, intellectual, or strategic tools to address perhaps the most terrifying and dangerous new form of politics to be birthed yet this millennium.

Aziz Huq, February 2015.