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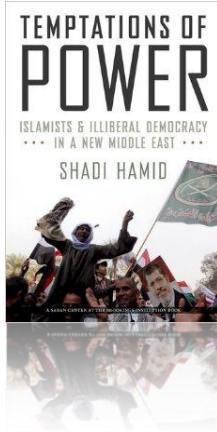
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Temptations of Power: Islamists & Illiberal Democracy in a New Middle East

Hamid, Shadi, (2014), Elevate (ed.), Oxford University Press, New York.

"Islamists matter not just because of their permanency but because, as they change, societies will change along with them, for both better and worse."

Summary

In *Temptations of Power*, Shadi Hamid challenges the theory that more democracy necessarily yields more moderation and that repression makes radicalisation more likely. The author shows that in Jordan and Egypt, repression forced Islamists to moderate their policies, work in coalitions, de-emphasize Sharia law and forget their dream of an Islamic state. Hamid shows that the democratisation ushered in by the events of the Arab Spring led the Islamists to revert to a fundamentalist line. According to Hamid, the Islamists found themselves in an enviable situation, yet it was one for which they were ill-prepared.

Groups such as the Muslim Brotherhood combine features of political parties and of religious movements. This sparks internal tensions which have proved difficult to resolve. With its conservative voters, the Brotherhood was able to defend its illiberal democracy by arguing that it was merely doing the bidding of the majority. In other sectors of society, however, these stances can provoke fierce opposition. The author conducts a deep analysis of this matter, particularly in Egypt, and concludes that repression of the Muslim Brotherhood and the *coup d'état* were devastating blows to the Islamist project. Nevertheless, he argues that it would be unwise to consign political Islam to the dustbin of history.

To support this argument, the author of *Temptations of Power* explores two distinct stages in the Islamist narrative. The first was defined by the experience of repression and the second by democratic openings that gave rise to the Arab Spring. Through many

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informal conversations and interviews with traditional Islamist movements (most stemming from or linked to the Muslim Brotherhood), he seeks to understand why they chose certain strategies and how they see their own actions, but also why they failed miserably to hold on to power in Egypt, and in general, the author aims to find out how Islamist movements evolve.

The author

Shadi Hamid is Senior Researcher at the Center for Middle East Policy at the US think-tank Brookings Institution and the author of a new book, *Islamic Exceptionalism: How the Struggle over Islam in Reshaping the World*. His book *Temptations of Power* was named best book of 2014 by *Foreign Affairs*. Hamid was Research Director at Brookings' *Doha Center* until January 2014. He was previously Research Director for the Project on Middle East Democracy (POMED) and *Hewlett* researcher at the Center on Democracy, Development, and the Rule of Law (CDDRL) at Stanford University.

Key ideas and opinion

At the beginning of the 1990s, Arab regimes lowered themselves to the depths of draconian authoritarianism, fiercely repressing the Islamist opposition in countries such as Jordan and Egypt. In general, **scholars tends to assume that good things go together – that is to say, that more democracy will lead to moderate Islamism**. Common wisdom also has it that the fewer political opportunities there are, the greater the risk of Islamist radicalisation. **The author of *Temptations of Power* argues that these conjectures miss the point**. While the 1990s were a time of strife between militant groups and Arab regimes, the history of traditional Islamist movements paints a very different picture. **The greater the oppression, the more these groups (most linked to or inspired by the Muslim Brotherhood) accepted many of the basic principles of democracy**. These included popular sovereignty and alternating periods in power. Increasingly moderate positions were taken throughout the region regarding political pluralism and the rights of women and minorities. Islamist groups even democratised their 'party' structures. For example, the Islamic Action Front in Jordan attained a level of internal democracy that remains unparalleled in the region.

Advocates of the 'inclusion-moderation' argument say that the more democratic a given country is, the more Islamists will assume democratic values and commitments. The 'exclusion-radicalisation' hypothesis states that the fewer political opportunities there are, the greater the risk of radicalisation. Following this line of thought, the belief that power is within grasp is an incentive to moderate one's policies with a view to appealing to as many voters as possible. Yet political parties do not just want to win elections: they also want to stay in power after them. That is why political parties cannot base their strategies on empty ideological calls alone; they also have to offer tangible

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change that improves the lives of citizens. Such things may include more jobs, better healthcare and education, lower food prices and better public transport.

While religion lies in the realm of purity and abstraction, politics involves doing favours, meeting voters' demands and passing laws in parliament. **According to conventional wisdom, Islamist groups would focus more on political reforms than on their religious agendas as the democratic sphere expanded**. Repression, so the argument went, distorts political participation, forcing groups to adopt less moderate positions and policies than they would pursue in a democratic setting. According to Hamid, these ideas are not so far-fetched. Exercising political power tends to foster pragmatism, while extreme repression does indeed spur radicalisation. **Although this seems intuitively right, one needs to examine things in much greater detail to unravel what actually happened and why**. In most cases, causal relations and mechanisms are not studied in enough depth. This is certainly true of **Jordan** and **Egypt**, two of the most dynamic countries in The Middle East, **where the twists and turns of the Islamists challenge conventional wisdom**. Over three decades, Islamists adopted positions that would have been controversial and even regarded as non-Islamic in the past.

As the regimes in both countries became more repressive, the Islamists reaffirmed their commitment to their moderate paths. Renouncing armed struggle, they called for greater democracy and presented themselves to the world as mature, responsible players on both the regional and world stages. The 'inclusion-moderation thesis' implies a compromise: the Islamists agree to play by the rules and abandon revolutionary strategies against the regime, and in return, the regime promises them participation in the system, giving them the chance of forming legal political parties and gaining recognition as legitimate political players. This compromise implies political gains and the prospects of assuming power at the local and national levels. However, it only works if Islamists feel that their participation does indeed improve their political position – something that did not occur in either Egypt or Jordan. Indeed, in these countries, the Islamists' position worsened markedly. In fact, their commitment to playing by the rules only led to more repression. This was not fair play but even so, according to Hamid, they still maintained their commitment. Many had forecast and warned of radicalisation and political exodus, but this simply did not happen.

Although the local contexts are very different in **Egypt** and **Jordan**, they followed similar paths. Hamid stresses that the two countries **took unprecedented steps towards democratisation, before abruptly reverting to repression. Western scholars have largely failed to analyse the response of Islamic groups during these brief spells of democratisation**. Although democratisation was short-lived, it provides vital clues as to the new processes of democratisation and de-democratisation taking place since the Arab Spring.

During the late 80s and early 90s, Arab regimes sought to strengthen their legitimacy and include the waxing opposition by carrying out liberalizing reforms. **Islamic groups,**

which had spent the preceding decades waiting for this moment, made the leap from being a minority to constituting mass movements. Even so, they stayed on the fringes of party politics as they attempted to build local networks, offering desperately-needed social services and spreading their message to an audience that initially knew little about the groups. **When they finally had the chance to run in elections, the countries' elites were stunned.**

In **Egypt**, **the Islamic Alliance won 60 seats in the 1987 parliamentary elections. This was more than any other opposition party since Egypt won its independence in 1952**. The regimes did know, at the time, that the Islamists were gaining ground, but they had no inkling of the impending landslide. Thirty-six of these seats went to the Muslim Brotherhood and revealed an increasingly obvious fact in Egyptian society. This was that better education had not led to a more secular society, as expected, but rather had fuelled political Islam. **The Muslim Brotherhood interpreted the results of the elections as a mandate to promote its Islamist policies**. In the author's view, the Brotherhood sought to use parliament to Islamise Egyptian society, rather than imposing their ideas on others. Hamid stresses that **between 1987 and 1990, the Muslim Brotherhood's parliamentary activities laid great stress on Sharia law and moral matters. This made sense from the electoral standpoint**. By adopting Islamic law as its battle standard, the Brotherhood sought to mobilise its more conservative supporters and to broaden its electoral base. With a growing number of opposition parties competing not only with the government but also with one another and using religious rhetoric to attract votes, **the Brotherhood needed to present itself as the authentic voice of Islam. The political competition that had enabled liberalizing reforms in Egypt also made it hard for the Muslim Brotherhood to adopt centralist positions**.

In **Jordan**, the 1989 elections also marked a break with the past — perhaps even more so than in the case of Egypt. Democratisation, unthinkable just ten years earlier, now allowed participation by the Islamist movement. **In the first free elections since the 1950s, the Muslim Brotherhood won 31% of the seats, despite fielding only 4% of the election candidates**. Furthermore, independent Islamists won 12 seats. In total, the Islamists won no fewer than 34 out of the 80 seats. **The first and most important item on the Brotherhood's agenda — as revealed in its election manifesto — was to comb through all Jordan's laws and regulations for consistency with Sharia law**. On social issues, they took controversial steps such as seeking the separation of the sexes in ministries, banning fathers from attending sports competitions in which their daughters took part, and forbidding books considered at odds with the country's religion and moral code.

Islamist groups had become powerful very quickly and the regimes feared they would lose control. To meet this challenge, **Egypt**'s President **Mubarak repealed the reforms and declared the electoral law unconstitutional**. He also took draconian steps through **legislative changes** and other **repressive action**. Arrests of the Brotherhood's members

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became commonplace, rising from 5,000 in 1990 to 16,000 in 1995. **The Muslim Brotherhood chose to respond by moderating its positions markedly**. It stated its rejection of terrorism and by so doing, set itself apart from extremist groups. It also argued for political pluralism in Islam and for women taking a major role in public and political life. In addition, the Brotherhood advocated the Shura (an Islamic term that means *consultation*, giving the community as the source of authority – a position linearly opposed to the Salafist notion of power stemming from divine authority). **This positioning made pluralism and democracy priorities for the Muslim Brotherhood, and relegated Sharia law to an issue of lesser importance**. Furthermore, the Brotherhood held internal elections to renew itself and elect leaders capable of putting this new agenda into action.

In **Jordan**, the end of the first Gulf War and the defeat of Iraq had left Amman in a vulnerable position. Jordan's **economic situation had worsened — in part because of the war**. The Jordanian king's support for Saddam Hussein had led to him losing the support of Saudi Arabia and Kuwait, his two most generous supporters. **The Jordanian monarch was becoming ever more isolated, and worried about his political survival. These concerns led King Hussein to edge closer to the western powers**. In 1991, King Hussein took part in the Madrid Conference and signed a peace treaty with Israel. Hamid points out that the king seemed to get what he wanted, including almost $1 billion in debt relief, a boom in tourism, and a generous aid package from the US that turned Jordan into the second-biggest aid recipient in *per capita* terms. **These events significantly transformed Jordan's political landscape**, which between 1989 and 1993 had seen the Islamists and left-wing opposition holding an absolute parliamentary majority. During this time, the Muslim Brotherhood had organised mass demonstrations against the Gulf War and taken an increasingly anti-American stance. **Driven by fear that the Muslim Brotherhood posed a threat to the peace treaty between Jordan and Israel, King Hussein changed the electoral law and used it to limit the Brotherhood's influence**. Oddly enough, as Hamid notes, the greatest political deterioration in Jordan, between 1993 and 2007, coincided with the biggest changes in the **Jordanian Islamist parties, who adopted an ever more democratic discourse**, with a focus on institutions, constitutional reform, separation of powers, and parliamentary and judicial independence. They also began to cooperate with secular parties in grappling with the political situation.

The Islamists thought that by lightening up on Islamic law and saying the right things when it came to democracy, pluralism, women's rights and minority rights, they would strengthen their hand and give paranoid governments less excuse for attacking them. Fear of repression also led them to limit their electoral ambitions and to insist that they did not seek power, especially in the aftermath of 09/11 — a period in which the regime cracked down harder. **In Egypt, the Muslim Brotherhood responded to the crackdown with a reform initiative**, reflecting the need to prioritise reforms in the face of growing authoritarianism and to restate their commitment to a constitutional republic and a

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democratic system of government within the framework of Islamic principles. Hamid stresses that this was a formula the Islamists had never used before. **The Jordanian Islamists, influenced by their Egyptian counterparts, published a reform initiative in 2005**. It focused on institutional and constitutional reform, and aimed, in particular, at preventing the Executive branch of government riding roughshod over parliament. This initiative was noteworthy: one would think that an Islamist party would see the judicial system as critical, for the application of Islamic law. As Hamid notes however, **in the eight major proposals for reforming the system, Islamic law is mentioned just once** and then only to ensure that legislation does not conflict with Sharia Law. In general, all references to Islamic law are imprecise, and enshrined in universal principles (especially those bearing on freedom).

However, the regimes did not respond to this strategy in the way the Islamists had hoped. Hamid posits that **for autocrats, moderation is a greater threat than radical attitudes. After all, a moderate party is a viable substitute for a regime** and is capable of enlisting the support of left-wing and liberal voters to create a common front against the autocrats. **The more moderate Islamists seem, the more acceptable they are in the eyes of Western politicians**. This makes it all the harder for the autocratic Arab regimes to pass themselves off as reliable allies and their opponents as dangerous fanatics.

Even so, **the 2011 revolution in Egypt caught the Brotherhood off guard. In the author's view, its members were also frightened**. How would it all end? What would happen if Mubarak refused to stand down? **The Muslim Brotherhood feared repression and hoped that the United States would drop its support for the regime. It stressed the moderate policies** it had defended over the previous two decades, using terms such as 'consensus', 'dialogue', 'loyalty to the flag'. It also repeated time and again that it would not seek a majority in parliament and would not field a presidential candidate. **The parliamentary elections gave the Islamists 75% of the seats, with the Brotherhood as the clear winner**. Nevertheless, the veto by the army and opposition in parliament led the Muslim Brotherhood to reconsider its stance on the presidential ballot. **It finally decided to field a candidate (Morsi), who ended up winning by a slim margin (51.7% of the votes)**. **Yet, as Hamid notes, there is a world of difference between an Islamic movement in opposition and an Islamic party in power**. Among other things, holding office forced the Islamists to stop sitting on the fence when it came to dealing with the controversial issues they had shied away from in opposition. With Egypt more polarised than ever, the Muslim Brotherhood began to lose interest in wooing liberals and left-wingers and **instead focused on winning over Salafist voters** – a segment of the electorate that was on the rise. Hamid stresses that once again, it came down to pragmatism. The same grouping that had spent so much time downplaying Sharia law before taking office **now resuscitated the Islamic message** – especially during the constitutional crisis of 2012.

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Democratisation, notes Hamid, removed some of the barriers hindering the Islamists from expressing their main mission, namely Islamisation. **During the 1990s and 2000s**, they had spent a lot of time trumpeting their democratic credentials and improving their position in the face of repression. Islamist groups saw the international community in general and the US in particular as an audience they had to play to. **They felt that attaining power would prove impossible without the US supporting them, or at least adopting a neutral attitude towards them**. In addition, they took moderate positions when in opposition because they believed that revolution was a hopelessly unrealistic option. They felt that once a democratic transition had taken place, they would have time to think more deeply about the relationship between Islam, democracy and the nation-state. The problem is that history took a different twist. Furthermore, **the 2011 revolt showed the Islamists that they did not need the United States or Europe to bring down their regimes**. Hamid believes the shift towards re-Islamisation confirms the pattern seen in many transitions, namely the tendency for ideology to take over, whether it be of an Islamic or a hyper-nationalist nature.

Few in November 2010 could have imagined that Morsi would soon become president of Egypt. Even fewer would have guessed that **the Muslim Brotherhood would suffer a crushing defeat in July 2013** at the hands of the youth, liberals, part of the old regime and, of course, the Egyptian army. Despite the brutality of the *coup d'état* and the repression that followed, there was also an initial sense of relief. **According to Hamid, it is still too soon to write off political Islam**. The divisions between Islamists and liberals are real enough: they are fundamental and bear on the state and national identity. **The Islamists, says Hamid, are what they are for a reason. They have a distinctive ideological project**, even if they sometimes find it hard to say exactly what it is. **They do not think that a secular society would allow them to express their beliefs and convictions**. Religion, as far as the Islamists are concerned, stretches far beyond the individual and touches on the very nature of the state. **Arab societies need to work out these fundamental differences through halting (and sometimes bloody) democratic negotiation and institutional development. This debate could perhaps be managed better, but it is unlikely to go away**.

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