David L. Johnston April 22, 2016

*Sociology of Islam*

Review of Shadi Hamid, *Temptations of Power: Islamists and Illiberal Democracy in a New Middle East,* Oxford University Press, Oxford and New York, 2015, 269 pages.

In the 1950s and 1960s social scientists like Daniel Lerner and Peter Berger were trumpeting the secularization theory, which stated that as societies modernize, industrialize and urbanize, religion naturally falls by the wayside. By the 1980s, however, the near universal resurgence of religion captured the attention of scholars from a variety of disciplines and the Fundamentalism Project was born. Peter Berger himself co-edited a book in 1999 entitled *The Desecularization of the World*, admitting he had been wrong.

Here Shadi Hamid seeks to unseat the popular inclusion-moderation paradigm relative to the political behavior of Islamist parties. Jocelyne Cesari, for example, wrote that it has now been “proven” that “greater inclusion of religious parties in the political system leads to greater moderation” (2014, p. 240). For his part, Hamid offers an impressive array of data collected since 2004 to support his contention that the Islamist movement, especially in Egypt and Jordan, has moderated under political repression, and veered toward harsher Islamic positions in times of political overture. Further, he discusses the possibility that Ennahda in Tunisia might be an exception. Still, in the end, one is likely to come away with the impression that the issue is more complex than any paradigm can capture, and not with the startling discovery that like in the case of the secularization theory, a paradigm has been utterly displaced.

It should be stated first that this book is rigorously researched. Hamid conducted “hundreds of hours of interviews, discussions, and informal conversations with mainstream Islamists as well as Salafis across the region” (p. 34), including almost two years of residence between 2004 and 2013 in Egypt and Jordan. The theoretical part of his book came mostly from his dissertation at Oxford University and he discussed versions of it with some of the foremost scholars in this field. Additionally, throughout the work Hamid engages with the full spectrum of scholarship on Islamist movements. At the same time, its clear prose and engaging tone, along with its simple outline, make it an apt textbook for a college course.

After a couple of chapters introducing his thesis from a theoretical perspective (“Islamists in Transition” and “Can Repression Force Islamist Moderation?”), Hamid’s book follows a chronological outline in three parts. First, an unexpected political opening appeared in Egypt and Jordan in the 1980s and the Muslim Brotherhood entered the fray. Then, starting in 1990 in Mubarak’s Egypt and in 1993 in King Hussein’s Jordan, a mounting campaign of repression buffeted and beat down the movement for the next couple of decades. Finally, the “Arab Spring” inaugurated a new period, not in Jordan but in Egypt with the rise of Salafi activism and the election of President Mohamed Morsi.

I will make two positive remarks about this work before ending with a cautionary note. First, the greatest strength of this book comes from the rich interaction Hamid has carried out with the actual leaders of these movements at various levels of authority. Once he has adequately introduced the reader to the historical events leading up to the three periods under consideration and given them sufficient analysis leaning on some of the best sources, he explains the decisions taken by the main political actors *and* quotes from the interviews he has had with them.

When for instance in 1984, with the prospect of more open parliamentary elections before them, Egypt’s leading opposition party, the Wafd, came calling on the Muslim Brotherhood to join them and enable them to clear the eight percent threshold that was now required in order to participate. Nevertheless, this overture did not induce the Brotherhood leaders to tone down their goal of applying Shari’a law or preaching their brand of morality. Though he was not able to interview some of these actors, he quotes from several Arabic sources that do quote them.

For instance, the General Guide Umar al-Tilmisani reaffirmed the fact that the Brotherhood is not a political party but “an organization that calls for accepting God’s law in all facets of life” (p. 68). A next level of leader, Salah Abu Ismail, declared that since they are not allowed to form a party on the basis of their religious convictions and proclaim their message through that medium, the only alternative is to join an existing party. This is clearly a pragmatic decision, but one which, considering their mindset at this juncture, was bound to produce sparks with their secular partners.

From one of several interviews in 2009 with Khaled Hamza, a mid-level Brotherhood leader, who also authored a key document (“Our Testimony”) in 1994, explained to Hamid why this public statement of resolutely condemning terrorism had been necessary. At that time, when state repression was reaching new heights, “there still remained a small but influential ‘Qutbist’ wing … that saw nonviolent action only as a temporary tactical necessity” (p. 93). The movement in this period of duress was all the more intent on rejecting all forms of violence. What is more, the Brotherhood issued another document, “Shura in Islam and Party Pluralism,” followed a few months later by another extolling women’s participatory role in society. In a 2008 interview with top-level leader Essam el-Erian, Hamid was told that “Our position on political pluralism, women’s rights, and the role of Copts dates back to [the statements] of 1994.”

Later, in February 2012, just two months before the presidential elections, the Brotherhood announced that, contrary to what it had been saying from the beginning, it was fielding a candidate. Hamid’s conversations with them revealed that after their front runner was disqualified, they turned to Mohamed Morsi. They all knew he was a weaker candidate, but because one of their former leaders (forced out of the party the year before), Abdel Moneim Abul Futouh, was now the front runner. This spelled disaster to them, less for the Islamic project (at least he was an Islamist) and more to prevent the Brotherhood from splitting.

Here you might say, “doesn’t this show it was all about political tactics in a cut-throat democratic environment?” This isn’t about state repression, but it’s a very tight spot nonetheless. Hamid finds that the Brotherhood leaders are becoming paranoid about the army standing in the wings ready to pounce on them. But to win the election, they have to cater to the rank and file who are very conservative. Plus the Salafis to their right are drawing huge crowds as well. He writes, “In times of crisis, the temptation to veer to the right becomes nearly irresistible” (p. 174).

Hamid in several parts of the book stresses the uneasy and sometimes conflicting reality between an Islamic grassroots movement (like the Muslim Brotherhood) and its expression as a political party. But when push comes to shove, he argues, they double down on the Islamist ideology – except when, as it rarely occurs, they find themselves in power and, driven by fear, they overreach, as in Morsi’s case. Of course, the fear was real. The army was in the wings and in good time deposed him.

Still, these political calculations shouldn’t obscure the fact that “in today’s Arab world, belief and ideology matter more than ever before” (p. 207). He’s right, in that many social scientists (this is a sociology platform, after all) can sometimes reduce Islamist politics to socioeconomic, political and cultural dynamics. There clearly is an ideological polarization between the secular liberals and those who want more religion in politics.

Let me close with this. The “Tunisian exception,” which Hamid writes with a question mark, does in fact throw a monkey wrench into his binary “state oppression moderates and democratic openings harden Islamist ideologies.” True, we don’t know for sure where Ennahda in Tunisia is going. But the fact that it left power voluntarily to join the other political forces to help draw up a consensus constitution (which left out Shari’a altogether), should give him pause. If anything, based on my own study of Rached Ghannouchi’s current writings and statements of Ennahda parliamentarians, the party (and movement) is moving in a post-Islamic direction.