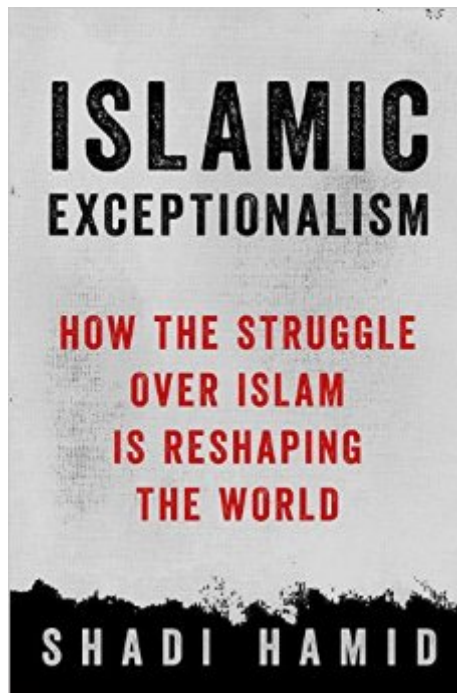


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Islamic Exceptionalism: How The Struggle Over Islam Is Reshaping The World



Synopsis

In *Islamic Exceptionalism*, Brookings Institution scholar and acclaimed author Shadi Hamid offers a novel and provocative argument on how Islam is, in fact, "exceptional" in how it relates to politics, with profound implications for how we understand the future of the Middle East. Divides among citizens aren't just about power but are products of fundamental disagreements over the very nature and purpose of the modern nation state—and the vexing problem of religion's role in public life. Hamid argues for a new understanding of how Islam and Islamism shape politics by examining different models of reckoning with the problem of religion and state, including the terrifying—and alarmingly successful—example of ISIS. With unprecedented access to Islamist activists and leaders across the region, Hamid offers a panoramic and ambitious interpretation of the region's descent into violence. *Islamic Exceptionalism* is a vital contribution to our understanding of Islam's past and present, and its outsized role in modern politics. We don't have to like it, but we have to understand it—because Islam, as a religion and as an idea, will continue to be a force that shapes not just the region, but the West as well in the decades to come.

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Islam, Islamism, Islamist, fundamentalist, salafist, Muslim Brotherhood, Salafi-jihadist, modernism, Islamic-liberalism and Islamic exceptionalism; what, if any, is the relation between each of these vague terms and why? Early in the book, Shadi Hamid says that the so-called Islamic State "...draws strength from ideas that have a broad resonance among Muslim-majority populations (pg.

11)." Beyond colonial-era anger, poverty, unemployment, restless youth, disenchantment with liberalism and political conflict, what feeds today's Islamic movements more than anything else? Shadi Hamid's book would have been like so many other current studies had it not been for the first three chapters. For Shadi, it is all about Islamic law, shari'a. Unlike Judaism and Christianity, Islam's shari'a details not only religious principles but also social and governmental requirements. It follows that Islam is more thorough because it outlines the pursuit of power in proper politics and not just religious observance. Islam is therefore exceptional because Islamism, the necessity of religion in society and political law, is inherent in Islam. The battle, therefore, between the list of "isms" is the "how" and "to what extent". The book's "exceptional" chapters discuss Christianity's debate in moral "dualism" citing Augustine and even the Reformation era Martin Luther. Jesus was often pressured to reveal his political mandates. His answer was always the same; "you're barking up the wrong tree". Jesus' own followers pined for what Islam eventually gave in to, an empire formed of human effort and spiritual motivation.

Among the many things I learned in this book is that the situation in Islam is complex, varies from country to country, and from time to time. It is hard to make generalizations about Islam, other than the comment by author Shadi Hamid, "It really depends on how you look at it" (p. 76). I knew very little about Islam and after reading several books with titles such as "100 Questions About Islam," I was looking for a book that would take me to the next step. This book has done that, but not in a way that I expected. I have come to see from the book that the situation in Egypt is different from that in Turkey, which is different from that in Tunisia, which is different from that with ISIS. These Muslim countries have different histories and cultures, and this has greatly influenced how Islamists work and how Islam is rooted in the cultures. The use of the word "Exceptionalism" in this book puzzled me. What does Hamid mean by "Islamic Exceptionalism" and is there truth to what he finds? It took me most of the book to understand that "Exceptionalism" is the uniqueness of the various national situations; there is no general "rule" that they follow. They are all exceptions to an elusive or non-existing generalization. And yes, he convinces me that there is truth to what he finds. Hamid helps clarify the question of Jihad and terrorism as perpetrated by extremist elements of Islamists. Many Muslims (and not just those in the Western world) are just as frustrated by the reality of violence as are most others.

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