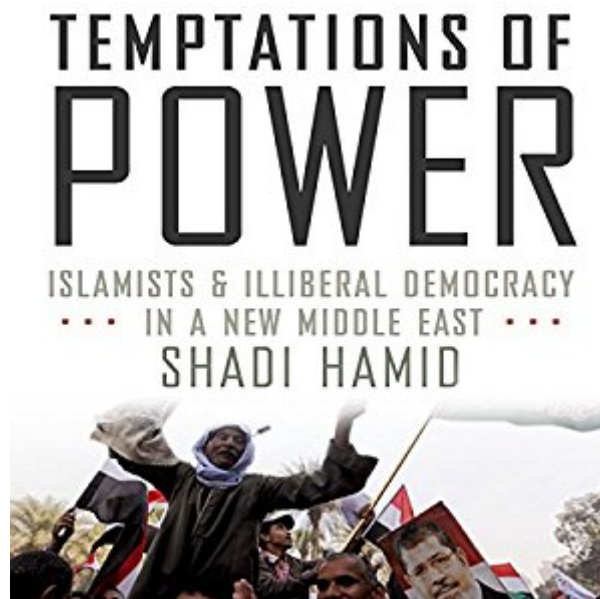


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Temptations Of Power: Islamists & Illiberal Democracy In A New Middle East



Synopsis

In 1989, Francis Fukuyama famously announced the "end of history." The Berlin Wall had fallen; liberal democracy had won out. But what of illiberal democracy - the idea that popular majorities, working through the democratic process, might reject gender equality, religious freedoms, and other norms that Western democracies take for granted? Nowhere have such considerations become more relevant than in the Middle East, where the uprisings of 2011 swept the Muslim Brotherhood and other Islamist groups to power. In *Temptations of Power*, Shadi Hamid draws on hundreds of interviews with leaders and activists from across the region to advance a new understanding of how Islamist movements change over time. He puts forward the bold thesis that repression "forced" Islamists to moderate their politics, work in coalitions, de-emphasize Islamic law, and set aside the dream of an Islamic state. Meanwhile, democratic openings in the 1980s - and again during the Arab Spring - pushed Islamists back toward their original conservatism. With the uprisings of 2011, Islamists found themselves in an enviable position, but one for which they were unprepared. Groups like the Brotherhood combine the features of both political parties and religious movements, leading to an inherent tension they have struggled to resolve. However pragmatic they may be, their ultimate goal remains the Islamization of society. When the electorate they represent is conservative as well, they can push their own form of illiberal democracy while insisting they are carrying out the popular will. This can lead to overreach and significant backlash. Yet, while the Egyptian coup and the subsequent crackdown were a devastating blow for the Islamist "project", obituaries of political Islam are premature. As long as the battle over the role of religion in public life continues, Islamist parties in countries as diverse as Egypt, Tunisia, and Jordan will remain an important force whether in the ranks of opposition or the halls of power. But what are the key factors driving their evolution? A timely and provocative reassessment, Hamid's account serves as an essential compass for those trying to understand where the region's varied Islamist groups have come from and where they might be headed.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

Temptations is an academic, yet accessible work that details the struggles of some of the groups of people who believe that Islam is a complete recipe for life and living, and feel motivated to form a society that is a complete and uncorrupted manifestation of it. It introduces the inherent conflict between the western notion of 'liberal democracy' and right of a people to demand it be limited by Sharia or other conservative religious admonitions. The book does not pass judgement on the strengths or weaknesses of Islam-as-government, but rather examines Islam-as-political-party, and their strategies, following, successes, failures, and weaknesses. I was very impressed how the author could write such a book without showing any detectable sign of bias. Be aware that Temptations is an insiders book - it tosses in terms and names that I wasn't familiar with. It would have been nice if the author included a one-page guide or cheat-sheet that gave a quick breakdown on terms like "vicegerency", or "umma", or "Rachid Ghannouchi", or, most importantly, exactly what the hell "Sharia" actually is. The book chronicles Islamic political movements primarily in Tunisia, Egypt, and Jordan. While Hamid chronicles and analyzes the Arab Spring - which has happened before our eyes these last four years, he provides background and historical context for each of those countries. He also provides some limited amount of analysis at the end about the role of US influence in these governments has tainted the people from finding their own natural political center, and how that still lingers and demurs those whom it effects. I found Temptations to be very useful in understanding and wetting my appetite for learning more about Islam and Islamic government, but it is a chicken nugget and not a Happy Meal - it doesn't attempt to wrap everything up into one tidy package. You will need to search further if you are interested in a fuller understanding. I am already looking for the next book in this puzzle.

This is certainly a very worth while read in trying to fathom what is and are the primary issues in the Islamic world at the moment. There is no doubt that some of the Islamic people are torn between wanting all the attractions of the (Christian) west, yet torn between the traditional beliefs of Islam

and trying to survive in this modern high tech world. Pragmatic politics, hide fundamental issues that are well detailed and outlined in this study of the "Brotherhood" across the Arab world. In this book, it would appear that Democracy is not and never will be able to easily sit with Islam. A fundamental shift in tolerance (that was traditional in the Muslim religion) of the need to live as a Muslim and yet respect the state to serve all its subjects will be required if the Muslim peoples are going to avoid self implosion. Illiberal democracy is not democracy at all, and the obsession with Sharia law being the only way appears counter intuitive and incompatible in a modern society, yet something worth dying for. I found this study very informative and it has broadened my understanding of a very interesting religion, people, and their development of their societies.

Hamid's primary argument is that Muslim Brotherhood groups (primarily in Tunisia, Jordan, and Egypt) became more moderate as a result of regime repression. The argument is an interesting contrast to the usual ideas of increased radicalization from repression. Jordan and Tunisia groups joined together and moderated fringe elements to gain access to the political system under repressive regimes. Egypt is similarly described, but I think more attention should have been given to the role of extremists (vs government repression). The MB in Egypt had to shift to the center and decry violent means to avoid being lumped in with more extreme elements. In Egypt's case, moderation was caused more by the group distancing itself from the fringe to avoid repression than it was from the repression itself. Shadi Hamid makes extensive use of personal interviews from the cafe's of Jordan and Tunisia to the tents of Tahrir square to give the reader a sense of what the men on the ground think about their organizations and machinations. Hamid makes a solid case for his argument and the book was a pleasure to read.

Prior to reading the book, I believed, alongside many other foreign policy commentators of today, that the waves of the democratic Arab spring would eventually lead to a liberalization and moderation of Islamist political parties. Shadi flips this thesis on its head by eloquently analyzing the Egyptian and Jordanian Muslim Brotherhood organizations in an interesting, yet not overly-scholarly manner. The author's anecdotes of meetings with senior Islamist figures gives the text an extra dimension and I would recommend this book to anyone interested in the Middle East and political parties.

This book gives a much clearer view on the thinking of the Islamist than I have seen before and offers insight into their extreme difficulties in coming to power. It, when read with *Fields Of Blood* helped

me understand why much that has happened and continues to happen in the Middle East is going to be very problematic for many years to come! In the west we think of sharia as something that only radicals would want, but in reality much of the Muslim world actually wants and expects it to be the law. Perhaps I am wrong, but I don't think so. I think the next few decades are going to be very difficult and would not hazard a guess as to how it all sorts out. RDB

Hamid has unique access to key leaders and groups involved in MENA Muslims politics. His interview-based study is essential reading for Islamism, political Islam, and post-Arab Spring studies. Hamid also builds on Wickham's work by providing novel analyses and critiques of political science truisms.

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