



No place for political Islam?

Political Islam falls under the spotlight in the latest edition of the Doha debates under the motion “this House believes that political Islam is a threat to the west”. Hussain Hadi interviews Shadi Hamid, who speaks against the motion

Shadi Hamid is a Hewlett Fellow at the Centre for Democracy, Development, and the Rule of Law (CDDRL) at Stanford University and director of research at the Project on Middle East Democracy (POMED). A Marshall Scholar, Hamid is completing his doctoral degree in politics at Oxford University, writing his dissertation on Islamist political behavior in Egypt, Jordan, and Morocco. Hamid argues that the west must be willing to engage in a meaningful dialogue with Islamist groups which fulfil the dual conditions of renouncing violence and respecting the democratic process.

HOW WOULD YOU DEFINE POLITICAL ISLAM?

Broadly speaking, political Islam refers to a loose and rather diverse movement which advocates a larger role for Islam and Islamic law in public policy and government. I would go further and use the term more narrowly to refer to those groups and parties that use the political process to advocate for Islamic ends. This allows us to distinguish between groups that operate within politics, like the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood, and those groups that are either apolitical, like Hizb ut-Tahrir, or operate outside and beyond politics, such as Al Qaeda and its affiliates. Let us be clear, Al Qaeda and other terrorist groups are not representative of “political Islam” because they don’t believe in politics. Instead they advocate violent methods with the aim to terrorise populations.

WHAT EXISTING GROUPS OR MOVEMENTS WOULD FALL UNDER THIS CATEGORY?

The largest, most influential Islamist organisation is the Muslim Brotherhood, which operates in most Middle Eastern countries, but is strongest in Egypt, Jordan, Palestine, Kuwait, and Yemen. Others include the Justice and Development Party in Morocco, Al Nahda in Tunisia, as well as groups in south and south-east Asia, such as Jama’at Islami in Pakistan, the Pan-Malaysian Islamic Party in Malaysia, and the Prosperous Justice Party of Indonesia.

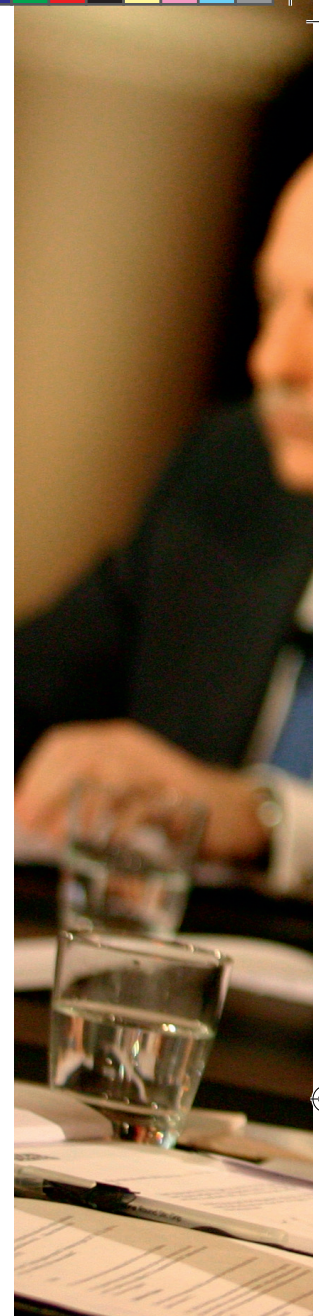
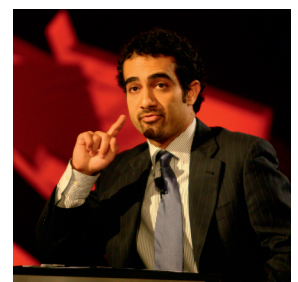
ARE DEMOCRATICALLY ELECTED ISLAMIC PARTIES INCLUDED IN THIS MOTION?

We often think of Islamist parties as being primarily in the opposition. But this is not always the case. There are democratically elected Islamist parties governing Turkey and

Iraq, two countries that happen to be strong western allies. More recently, Hamas came to power through free elections in 2006. Islamists have also won elections at the local and regional level, including the Pan Malaysian Islamic Party (PAS) and the Muttahida Majlis-e-Amal (MMA) in Pakistan, which won control of the North-West Frontier Province in 2003. Then there are tragic cases from the near past. The Islamic Salvation Front won the first round of Algeria’s 1991 elections, before the secular military intervened and cancelled the elections, provoking a bloody civil war that would claim more than 100,000 lives.

AREN'T RADICAL GROUPS SUCH AS HIZB UT-TAHRIR TOO SMALL TO BE OF A THREAT TO THE WEST WHEN THEY REPRESENT SUCH A MINISCULE PART OF THE MUSLIM WORLD?

Groups like Hizb ut-Tahrir are relatively inconsequential in the long run. It is a fringe group, and there will always be fringe groups that prey on the young and impressionable. However, Hizb ut-Tahrir and others like it, present a vision that, for the vast majority of Muslims, is unattractive – not to mention utterly divorced from reality.





HOW SHOULD THE WEST RESPOND TO POLITICAL ISLAM?

If western countries are serious about democracy, which I hope they are, then they don't have much of a choice. If the Middle East becomes more democratic and holds free elections, then Islamist groups will inevitably win either majorities or pluralities. The sooner we come to accept this reality, the better. After all, dictatorship cannot be a permanent solution. So, this means that the US and the EU must be willing to engage in a meaningful dialogue with those Islamist groups that fulfil the dual conditions of renouncing violence and respecting the democratic process. The west must also be more consistent. When members of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt are arrested, then the United States must be willing to speak out, just as it speaks out for secular activists such as Saad Eddin Ibrahim or Ayman Nour.

DOES THE WEST TRADITIONALLY FAVOUR OPPRESSIVE SECULAR REGIMES IN LESS DEVELOPED COUNTRIES OVER POLITICAL ISLAMIC MOVEMENTS, EVEN IF THEY HAVE GRASSROOTS SUPPORT?

The west has supported repressive secular regimes out of a fear that free elections would result in Islamists coming to power. For the United States, there is an understandable fear that Islamist parties would not support America's strategic objectives in the region. A particular concern is that the Muslim Brotherhood, in say Egypt, would cancel the peace treaty with Israel. For Europe, it seems that the main fear is that Islamist parties will rollback the rights of women and

"MAINSTREAM ISLAMIST GROUPS HAVE DEMONSTRATED A WILLINGNESS TO REVISE PAST POSITIONS"

religious minorities and impose Islamic law. These fears are exaggerated. It is very unlikely that the Egyptian Brotherhood would cancel the peace treaty, and already leading members of the group have publicly supported the idea of a two-state solution. As for women's rights and minorities, mainstream Islamist groups, over the last 20 years, have become more moderate on these issues and demonstrated a willingness to revise past positions.

CAN DEMOCRACY BE RECONCILED WITH SHARI'A LAW?

For the most part, it's already been reconciled. The vast majority of Islamist groups have accepted the foundational components of democracy, including alternation of power (*tadowul al-sulta*), popular sovereignty (*al-shaab musdar al-sultat*), and protection of minority rights. Democracy in Muslim-majority countries will have an Islamic flavor, but there's nothing undemocratic about this. Democracy, ultimately, is about respecting the will of the people, and if the people want to vote for a non-violent Islamist party, then who are we to tell them they can't? ■