“Religious Conflict and the Future of the Middle East”

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MICHAEL CROMARTIE: I will first introduce Elliott Abrams. Elliott served in the Bush administration as the Deputy Assistant to the President and Deputy National Security Advisor on issues related to the Middle East. He is currently a Senior Fellow of Middle Eastern Studies at the Council on Foreign Relations. And just last year Elliott has a book out from the Cambridge University Press called Tested By Zion: The Bush Administration and the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict.

ELLIOTT ABRAMS: Thanks, Michael. Good morning. If we had been having this discussion, I don’t know, 10 years ago, 20 years ago, I think that the bulk of it would have been about, and I would have begun with, the Arab-Israeli conflict, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, but that’s not the central factor in the Middle East today, and President Obama said it himself in his UN speech in September, it’s just not central. It rises and falls in importance, but is kind of marginal to the main events in the Middle East. Yesterday, Mr. Baghdadi, the head of ISIS, told his folks that their prime target should be the Shia; the Shia everywhere are the ones they have to go after. Then after all the Shia have been destroyed, they’ll turn to the Saudi royal family, he said, and when that war is over, okay, then we get to the Jews, but that’s -- you know, that’s down the road apiece.

It’s interesting that, you know, he chooses as the top item the Shia; he sees that as the main conflict in the Middle East. And that’s not idiosyncratic. There are an awful lot of people in the Middle East, Sunni and Shia, who would agree with that assessment, probably more today, 2014, than 5 or 10 years ago.
You remember it was about 10 years ago, I think, that King Abdullah of Jordan made his comment about the Shia crescent. And in the eyes of Saudis, in the eyes of Iranians, that conflict is critical. It’s obviously mixed with some other conflicts. For example, there is a Persian-versus-Arab piece of this that isn’t religious. And there are simple interstate rivalries: Who is the more powerful state? But the religious part of this should really not be denigrated; I think it is quite central.

Stop for a minute and when you think about the comments we are hearing from somebody like Baghdadi, okay, he’s a monster, but there are lots of Sunnis in the region who have a perspective on us that is not quite so dissimilar.

I mean, what is U.S. policy toward the Sunni and the Shia seen from the perspective of Sunnis in the region? Okay, there is a guy who is a Shia. In their view, he is essentially a Shia, and that’s Bashar al-Assad. He’s an Alawi, but it’s a form of Shia Islam. And he is in the process of killing 200,000 Sunnis, and we don’t care, from their point of view. From their point of view, “What have you Americans done? Not a damn thing.” And they’re aware of the more sophisticated elements of the debate. Secretary Panetta and Secretary Clinton recommended that we do more to support the Syrian rebels. We aren’t. We haven’t. So 200,000 Sunnis being killed; Americans don’t care. It continues today: artillery, barrel bombs, Sunnis being slaughtered, civilians. The Americans view this as not all that important.

Now, remember about a couple of months ago the story of the Yazidis on the mountaintop. That’s when we started bombing. What percentage of Americans could have told you that day what a Yazidi is? Maybe 1/100th of 1 percent? What in hell is a Yazidi? But we had to bomb to save the Yazidis.

Kobani. Kobani: the Americans have to save the Kurds. Not the Sunnis, “Not us. You don’t give a damn how many of us are killed.” That is a widely shared perspective, I think, in the region: “Even when Bashar al-Assad uses chemical warfare against us Sunnis, you don’t do anything, you back away from your red line. And what are you doing? You’re in secret negotiations with Iran, with the Shia, with the Persians, and you’re going to do a deal with them.”
Now, for those of you who read the *Wall Street Journal*, they read that the President wrote a letter to the Ayatollah Khamenei which, quote, sought to assuage Iran’s concerns about the future of its close ally, President Bashar al-Assad of Syria. The letter -- I’m quoting -- states that the U.S.’s military operations inside Syria aren’t targeted at Mr. Assad or his security forces. That may be good policy, I’m not arguing against it, but what are Sunnis to make of that? Assad is slaughtering Sunni civilians every day, and that’s the way American policy is presented.

Recruiting for ISIS continues, and according to what I’ve seen in the papers, they’re getting about 1,000 recruits a month, that is, 1,000 young, essentially young, Sunni males coming from everywhere -- Europe, North Africa, Pakistan -- to join ISIS. We think there may be a hundred from the United States. And that argument continues to pull on them, “Come help us defend our fellow Sunnis who are being slaughtered and no one cares except maybe you, so come join us.” It looks to many Sunnis as if we are engaged against them.

Who are these young men -- and it is young men, you know, 99.9 percent -- particularly the ones in Europe? And there is a very substantial number, thousands, from Europe. They are marginal men. They are young men who have no place in their own society. Now, that is true to a large extent, I would argue, in Morocco or Pakistan -- but it’s especially true in the Netherlands and France and Spain. They are marginal in the societies in which they live in Europe. They have no jobs. They have no future. They have no wives, not an insignificant point. They have no role. Their lives have no meaning in the societies in which they live.

And then along comes the Islamic State, whose message we view as horrifying; but they don’t, in thousands and thousands of cases, hear what we hear. The message that ISIS gives to them is, “Here you can have a life of meaning, here you will have a role, here you will have a place, here you will serve God, here you will help us protect your fellow Sunnis, here you will help stop the massacres, so join us, be an actor, be a central, not a marginal, figure, give your life meaning.”

So the point I -- the simple point I want to make there is that we need to understand that message and we need to understand that whatever role our bombs have in defeating ISIS, they are going to be insufficient. There must be an ideological side to this struggle as well.
The second point I want to make is one that would have been marginal, trivial, 5 years ago, which is the question of Islam and democracy. The difference, of course, is the Arab Spring in the last 3 years. The Arab Spring was I think largely a revolt against illegitimate regimes, and today it’s led to this struggle over the role of religion in Middle Eastern societies and the role of Islam in these societies.

And there is a very strong argument -- Shadi has made it -- that Islam and democracy are not going to mix very well. They believe in what they preach, and the political dynamic is likely, as they try to reinforce their base and defend their base from the Salafis, that political dynamic is likely to move them, let’s say, further into extreme positions. And as Shadi put it once, “Islamists were Islamists for a reason; they weren’t liberals in disguise.” A good line. They have taken the stage and they have in many cases benefited from the Arab Spring. And they aren’t democrats, and they didn’t get into this to be democrats. They have a view, they have a position about what we would call Western values, individualism, liberalism, and as Shadi put it, “Why should Islamists, with no democratic culture to speak of, behave like good democrats who believe in pluralism?” Now, that’s a very logical position.

There are more optimistic positions about this. Olivier Roy, the French political scientist, said the Middle East is not hopelessly trapped, in his view, between old-fashioned secular dictatorship, you know, of the Mubarak variety, and that kind of Islamic totalitarianism because he thinks that the Arab Spring made a huge change, and we’re beginning to witness a process of democratization, he says, which is becoming rooted in Arab societies. And in his view, the Islamists are going to find themselves forced to adjust by the democratic process in which they are now engaged, the way democracy forces everybody to move in order to win an election.

And I would add that if you look at the polls, support for political Islam is not so high. There are Pew polls. There are the Arab Barometer polls that suggest that actually support for political Islam is declining and support for democracy is rising in the Arab Middle East. So there is an argument that suggests democracy is going to push Islamists toward a compromise that will be a democratic compromise.

The trouble is that that synthesis between Islam and democracy maybe turns out not to win votes. This is the dynamic I talked about before, that what Islamists want is Islam. So
could we develop a synthesis in theory of Islam and democracy in a sense academically? Could we write it down on a piece of paper? Yes. But the question is not whether a logical synthesis between Islam and democracy can be found, the question is whether that synthesis is going to be attractive to masses of Muslims who vote.

A liberal approach to religion, a liberal approach to Islam, is easy to imagine. That’s not the question. The question is whether you can sell it, whether you can market it, to voters in the Arab Middle East.

There is another problem, which is, what if Islamists turn to democracy -- I would say this happened in Egypt -- they turn to democracy because they are persuaded this is the route to power? “We love democracy;” why not? It used to be that they didn’t. I mean, if you go back 10 or 20 years, there was a lot of writing about how democracy is un-Islamic, but they kind of got with the program because they thought this is the route to power: “Let’s have an election. We’re going to win.” And, of course, in the immediate aftermath of the fall of the government, it is very often the case that they are the only organized force.

So they win the first election. Tunisia, great example. They win the first election. But now Islamists have found things are not so easy. A, you may lose the second election. That’s what happened in Tunisia, not so surprising because you come to power, you can’t produce. Islamist parties are not known for being brilliantly sophisticated about creating jobs and improving the economy. So you lose the second election. So maybe democracy is actually not the route to power. Maybe you find that all these horrible secular parties are going to win, A. B, you may find that you do win and then the army kicks you out: Egypt.

So what happens if the Islamists conclude after, let’s say, 5 years of democracy, “This democracy thing is no good; it’s a fraud; it’s a path to defeat?” Where do they turn at that point? And maybe the answer is they turn away from democracy and back toward demanding power.

There is another thing I want to say here, which is, what does an Islamic democracy look like? We have the -- I think we fall into the trap very often of assuming that when we say “democracy” it includes the word “liberalism;” it includes secularism of the European and American variety. So if these countries are democratic, then you say they have free
elections, they have courts of law, they have freedom of speech and press, they’re going to look more and more and more like us.

Shadi wrote the phrase, “Illiberal democracy is not an unfortunate fact of life but something to believe in and aspire to. Islamist parties have a distinctive intellectual and ideological project. That’s why they are Islamists.”

Let me go back to Olivier Roy. “In order to grasp what’s happening in the Middle East, we must set aside a number of deep-rooted prejudices, first among them is the assumption that democracy presupposes secularization.” The second is the idea that a democrat must also, by definition, be a liberal, liberal in the old-fashioned sense. In what sense will they not be liberal? In two senses: one relates to religion and the other relates to sex.

And here I quote Jocelyne Cesari. She uses another phrase, “unsecular democracy” and “hegemonic Islam.” What Jocelyne Cesari calls it is “multiple initiatives to preserve the status of Islam as the religion of the nation through a discriminatory use of law.” “Concretely it means,” quoting here, “that places of worship, clerics, and institutions of the dominant religion are part of the state institutions, and the central status of religion in public space is secured by blasphemy laws and limitations on conversion.”

So she believes that there will be an evolution toward democracy in many Arab countries, but to unsecular democracy, the limitation by law of the rights of the person on two levels, spiritual and sexual, by criminalizing blasphemy, homosexuality, and indecency. And I think we’ve seen that. I mean, I think we see it today throughout the region. Obviously a lot to talk about here. We can come back to it.

Now, it raises the question, will the Islamists win if they try to seek power? And I’ve answered that in part. I think the answer is they’ll win the first election and then they stop winning, and I think we can see this in places like Malaysia and Indonesia. The bloom falls off the rose very quickly because they can’t really produce. Moreover, they win because they have a reputation at the time the dictator falls, a reputation for purity, a reputation for honesty and integrity.
And the word “reputation” is the important word because it’s an image, and, you know, then they get power, and then we find that it’s easy to resist temptation if there are no temptations. To what temptations were people in the Muslim Brotherhood subject under Mubarak? The temptation to go to jail. Now all of a sudden there is power and there is money around, and they begin to fall, some of them, into those temptations, and/or they’re just incompetent, they can’t run the state. And so you see what happens in Tunisia, a wave of support brings Ennahda to power in the first election and now they are out.

So I think one of the things that we are going -- that we already see, I think we already see it in Egypt, we already see it in Tunisia, we’ll see it in other places, the strength of the Islamists was probably heightened and exaggerated by the dictators as a strategy, a strategy directed toward their own population and toward us, namely, you may not love me, Hosni Mubarak, but it’s me or the Middle Ages, it’s me or those vicious desppicable Islamists, it’s me or Bin Laden, it’s me or Baghdadi. And in order to make that prophecy come true, of course, what does somebody like Mubarak do? You don’t crush the Muslim Brotherhood, you crush the liberal and centrist parties, which is exactly what Mubarak did. When that crushing ends, as it were, or when things are able to sort out more naturally, we find that that’s not necessarily the choice. There are parties that are much more moderate and that present different combinations of Islam and democracy.

There is a policy question that we will face in the West, and particularly in the United States, which is: What do we do -- what do we do -- about the Islamists? Do we work with them or do we cooperate with governments that are trying to crush them? Shadi has written about this, what he calls the Islamist dilemma.

Larry Diamond at Stanford is probably the foremost, certainly one of the foremost, people arguing you’ve got to work with them if you think there is ever going to be democracy in the Middle East.

Quoting, “The plain fact is that Arab countries will not achieve democracy without Islamist participation and possibly some period of Islamist leadership and governance. The challenge for these societies will be to constrain democratically elected Islamist-led government with effective constitutional checks and balances so that Islamists, once elected, cannot barricade themselves in power.”
Well, how do you do that? I mean, in Egypt everybody outside the Muslim Brotherhood that I know -- left, right, and center -- was clamoring for a military coup. They felt that the Muslim Brotherhood was barricading itself in power and the only way to get it out and to move back to a chance of democracy was to remove -- for the army to remove a democratically elected president. So what Diamond is saying is quite logical. The question really is, is it realistic?

Larry Diamond goes on. “To isolate Islamist parties and organization means to endorse the status quo of political stagnation in the Arab world. There is no way democratization can proceed in any Arab country today without some measure of accommodation with at least some substantial segment of political Islam.”

So Diamond says you’ve got to draw them into democratic elections, democratic governance, teaching what a loyal opposition is, pluralism, coexistence, if you’re ever going to have democracy. And he’s not afraid of them winning power because he says – you’ve all heard this kind of line before -- when political parties have to assume responsibility for passing legislation, crafting compromises, creating jobs, and picking up the trash, it has a leavening effect.

Well, tell it to Mohamed Morsi. Does it have a leavening effect? It sure didn’t have a leavening effect on him. He, to use Diamond’s own phrase, he barricaded himself in power. So the question of what we should do about it then arises.

I think you know what the increasingly tough line is in the region; that is, President Sisi is basically jailing everyone in the Muslim Brotherhood. The Saudis declared the Muslim Brotherhood a terrorist organization, and today the UAE declared the Muslim Brotherhood a terrorist organization, along with 82 other groups. So their view is, “You don’t understand.” And I’ve had this discussion with particularly the Emiratis, “You don’t get it. You don’t understand. There is no real difference, just a small difference, of degree, from the Brotherhood to the people you claim to dislike so intently, Baghdadi. These are Islamist ideologues. Some have a gun, some don’t; some have a sword, some don’t; yet anyway: their thought is the same. And we’re not willing to risk everything we’ve built on your academic dream that your kind of Western democracy is going to moderate them and they will move to coexistence, so we are going to crush them now while we have the chance.” And it presents a very real policy problem I would say
for the United States whether we are going to agree with that, approve of that, or protest and try to obstruct that move in Egypt or anywhere else. It’s a question that comes up right now because we’re still giving a billion, three hundred million dollars in aid to Egypt, and Congress either this year or the new Congress is going to have to decide whether to continue that aid.

MICHAEL CROMARTIE: Shadi Hamid is at Brookings Institution right now, and he has just come out from Oxford University Press, this wonderful new book called Temptations of Power: Islamists and Illiberal Democracy in a New Middle East. Shadi did his undergraduate work and master’s at Georgetown University and his Ph.D. in political science at Oxford University. And he is a Fellow with the Project on U.S. Relations with the Islamic World at the Center for Middle East Policy at Brookings Institution. And we’re delighted he can be with us.

SHADI HAMID: Thanks so much, Michael. Let me just maybe start a little bit with where I come from on this issue of Islamists and Islamism. I started conducting research on Islamist movements in 2004-2005. I was a Fulbright Fellow in Jordan, and I was a naive graduate student at the time, and I would kind of hang out at the Muslim Brotherhood headquarters in Amman, I would spend a lot of time in their archive room, and really ever since then I’ve been absolutely hooked. I find Islamist groups quite fascinating for a number of reasons.

Now, my basic starting point is that we don’t have to like Islamists, but we have to understand them, and the only way to understand them is by doing something rather simple, sit down with them, get to know them, talk to them as real individuals with their own hopes, fears, and aspirations. So that’s really what I have tried to do over the past 10 years in my research primarily in Egypt, Jordan, and Tunisia. I wanted to immerse myself in their world.

And since we’re talking about religion here, I’ve kind of gone through an evolution that over these past 10 years I’ve come to appreciate more the independent power of religion and ideology when understanding these groups. And so, for example, I think -- and I think there is a session about this in the afternoon, why social scientists don’t get religion or something to that effect, and as someone who has trained in political science, there has
been a tendency to see religion and ideology as epiphenomenal, in other words, the product of a given set of material factors. So the political context, the economic context, is what explains the rise or fall of political Islam or the success of these groups and so on, and that these groups use and abuse religion, they instrumentalize religion for political ends, but when you actually spend time with the rank and file in the Muslim Brotherhood, you start to realize that they’re not really instrumentalizing, that’s not how they see it. They believe, they believe in this deeply, it’s deeply and honestly felt.

So, for example, I’ve had Brotherhood members tell me that one of the reasons they joined the Brotherhood is to get into heaven. That’s not political, that’s not about power. They believe that being part of this organization – which is much more than a political party, it has a religious and educational program, there is an ideological framework that you grow up with as a member of the Brotherhood – that that helps them become better Muslims, and that’s their primary goal.

But I saw this perhaps in a really striking fashion during and after the military coup in Egypt. So the military coup happened July 3rd, 2013, and then there was a very brutal crackdown afterwards.

On August 14th, 2013, we have the Rabaa massacre, which was, according to Human Rights Watch, the worst mass killing in modern Egyptian history, and I was actually in Egypt and spending time interviewing Brotherhood members and leaders in Rabaa just a few days before the massacre happened.

Now, no one really knew whether the massacre would actually happen, when it would happen, but it was a very tense and frightening atmosphere. But there was something very interesting to me in kind of talking to them at this point because their backs were against the wall and they were actually willing to die, and there was almost this kind of rhetoric of self-sacrifice that protesting against the coup and perhaps dying in the process was their cross to bear, if you will. And this is where all the time I’ve spent with Islamist groups, I feel I can understand them pretty well. The one thing I struggle with is their willingness to die, and let me talk about that for a second or two.

And they were, in fact, willing to die, because more than 800 of them died in just mere hours on that day. But there was a very interesting anecdote that a Brotherhood member
who was in Rabaa at the time who is now in exile, we were talking a few months ago, and he relayed this very interesting anecdote, it might be somewhat exaggerated, but I think the point holds. He said that there was this person he knew that was on the front lines of the protest as the military was threatening to come in, and he wanted to be on the front lines, and as the military came in, they were getting shot at, and a bullet grazed his shoulder, and he turns behind him, and the person behind him is shot and falls to the floor and is dying, and then he starts to cry in seeing his colleague behind him. He was obviously sad, but he was also sad that he wouldn’t be a martyr that day, that he was longing to die in God’s cause, but he missed his chance.

Now, I don’t want to overgeneralize and say that’s what everyone in Rabaa thought, but the fact that there are some people who feel so strongly and so powerfully about these ideas that they’re actually not just accepting death, but welcoming it, that’s a very interesting idea to me that I struggle to get my head around. I think that is something we have to ask ourselves about.

Now, let me then kind of use this to segue into ISIS, and I want to emphasize that I do not see the Muslim Brotherhood and ISIS as two sides of the same coin, and I’ll talk about that more as I close up, but I think they’re quite different in both their means and ends, and it’s important to make distinctions. That said, I think the religious inspiration is something that we can see across the Islamist spectrum. They use it. It leads to different ends, but they are animated by a set of powerful ideas.

I think that because of Edward Said’s legacy and the charges of Orientalism, I think for the last few decades?, especially in academia, I think there’s a fear of going too much in this direction of privileging religion over other factors. I think we’ve gone too much in that direction where this fear of being tagged with cultural essentialism has prevented us from really appreciating the role of religion.

There is a middle ground somewhere in between where we take into account religion as a powerful explanatory factor or independent variable along with political factors. That’s not to say that political factors don’t matter, they obviously do, and we can see how failures of governance and the lack of security in the Middle East has contributed to ISIS’s rise, so it’s clearly not just about religion or perhaps even primarily about religion, but we have to take into account these different factors.
I’ll just mention a couple ways it really matters when we’re trying to understand the rise of ISIS -- is, for example, in June we have the fall of Mosul, the second largest city in Iraq, and here you have about 900 fighters who are able to overtake the city and defeat a force of 30,000-plus members of the Iraqi army and Iraqi security forces. And I think we’ve seen this time and time again, that a small group of ideologically committed individuals are able to get a lot more done than their numbers might suggest. So in that sense, religion, ideology, the willingness to die are force multipliers, it gets you very far, and it’s not just with groups like ISIS.

I mean, I was struck by how little attention this got, but the capital of a U.S. ally fell the other month, and people didn’t seem to care a whole lot. I mean, the capital of Yemen fell to rebels, and these are Shia rebels, so they’re quite different than ISIS, but I think the same idea holds, that again a small group of ideologically committed fighters are able to overtake U.S.-backed military forces. So that’s one component.

Another way of looking at it is the overwhelming majority of Muslims do not share ISIS’s ideology, but that’s not to say that ISIS doesn’t draw on ideas that have broad resonance among Muslim majority populations, and this is where I think from a marketing standpoint they’ve been quite smart, and quite revolutionary I should add, that before ISIS, extremist groups didn’t mess with the idea of the caliphate. The caliphate, because of its historical weight, you can kind of talk about it as an inspiration or an aspiration, but you didn’t actually do it in real life. Al Qaeda never actually tried to establish an actual caliphate. And this is where I think ISIS, even if it’s defeated tomorrow morning, in some sense will have a lasting impact in the region because they forced Muslims to reengage with the idea of a caliphate, and the idea of a caliphate is something that I would say most Muslims are sympathetic to, not in terms of its actual implementation but in terms of the role that it played in their own history.

And I grew up in a relatively secularized American Muslim community in Pennsylvania, but the caliphate, or if you want to put it differently, the Islamic empire of past, was something that was the subtext of so many conversations that I was part of growing up, whether it was in Pennsylvania talking to other members of the Muslim community or in my travels to the Middle East, because the caliphate historically was symbolic of when we were the greatest civilization the world had ever seen in science, technology, education. This was the peak.
The struggle with modernity now is to understand how we, as Muslims, encountered one of the most precipitous declines in human history. How did we go from that just a few centuries ago to where we are now? And I think that gap between who we were and what we currently are or what we think we should be is a very profound gap, and it’s a gap that drives a good deal of the anger and humiliation that in turn lead to political violence. So that’s where I think -- so the caliphate isn’t a strictly religious concept, it also has a kind of political power.

So discussions about a caliphate conceptually have become much more routine in Turkey in the last few months where prominent Turkish writers are kind of hearkening back to the memory of the caliphate, and Erdogan himself is drawing on this symbolism and imagery and oftentimes portraying himself as a kind of caliph in waiting.

So now that the mental block of the caliphate has been removed, I think we’re going to see this for the foreseeable future, that Islamist groups and Muslims are going to actually have a conversation about the legacy of the Pre-Modern Islamic state or the Pre-Modern caliphate and what it means in the current context.

Now, let me kind of broaden this out and talk a little bit more about the role of Islam because I think we’re not just talking about ISIS.

I do think that Islam is distinctive in how it relates to politics, but I don’t think that’s necessarily good or bad, I think it just is. And there’s a couple of reasons for that. One is that Muslims aren’t bound to their founding moment, but they can’t fully escape it either.

And Prophet Muhammad unlike, say, Jesus and other prophets, was not just a theologian, a cleric, a man of God, but also the head of a political community. He was a politician, a merchant, a warrior all intertwined into one, and this has major implications especially since many Muslims look back to the prophetic model as an inspiration. And because of that precedent, it’s harder to make the case for secularism in the sense of separation of religion from politics because that’s clearly not something Prophet Muhammad was trying to do.

And if we look at in comparison to, say, the founding moment of Christianity, Jesus was not the head of a political community, he was a dissident, and his message was at least
somewhat otherworldly and more spiritually focused, it wasn’t really concerned with practical issues of everyday governance and what it means to apply Christianity to the state. So founding moments matter, I believe.

Then we can talk about other things, too. The creedal requirement to be a Muslim is to believe in the divinity of the text and to believe that it’s literally, exactly God’s word. So, for example, if you believe that Prophet Muhammad was inspired by God but that he wrote the Quran himself, you would not be considered a Muslim from the standpoint of creed, and that’s with mainstream scholars across the board. That is also somewhat different from the other monotheistic religions, that there is a more intense attachment to the text where, for example, over time Christians and Jews, you can be both a Christian or a Jew if you don’t believe in the divinity of the text in the sense that this is coming directly from God.

It doesn’t mean that reform is impossible, and this gets us into the debate of, can there be an Islamic reformation? And this is where I think we have to be careful about comparisons. Islam has already had a kind of reformation, but the reform has led in a direction that we’re probably not going to be comfortable with.

So in the Christian case or in the case of pre-modern Europe, the decline of the clerics and mass literacy and mass education paved a way for what became known as the Protestant Reformation, which then paved the way for the Enlightenment. So in that sense, the decline of the clerics and secularism went hand-in-hand over time.

What we see in the Islamic context is a little bit different, that the decline of the clerics and mass literacy actually has coincided with the rise of political Islam. And if we look at the late 19th century, early 20th century, we have the Islamic modernists, which were the precursor to mainstream Islamism of the Brotherhood, let’s say, and what they were doing was actually an attempt to modernize, as their name would suggest, that they were trying to reconcile pre-modern Islamic law with the modern nation state, and that is in fact more or less still what the project of groups like the Muslim Brotherhood. And this is where they’re criticized by those on the far right for not being as textually literalist and not as committed to the pre-modern approaches to Islamic law. They’re more flexible, let’s say.
And it’s also worth noting that groups like the Brotherhood are generally non-clerical. They’re mostly doctors, engineers, and lawyers, if we look at their leadership, but they’re also in many cases anti-clerical. So these are some very interesting contrasts with the European experience.

So we had essentially a democratization of religious learning, that’s what we’ve had in the Middle East for the past century and a half, again because of the weakening of the clerical class. But in a counterintuitive way, that’s what makes groups like not just the mainstream Islamists, who are more pragmatic, but even groups like ISIS. ISIS would be inconceivable without the democratization of religious learning. There is no clerical control. The establishment clerics have lost their legitimacy and the message of ultraconservative Salafis, Wahhabis, and groups like ISIS is that we don’t have to worry about the establishment, we can access the text directly in a very literalist way, and this is in part the result.

So how do we make sense of all of this?

I think the rise of political Islam, as Elliott pointed out, provides us with a kind of dilemma. If the idea of mixing religion and politics is rooted in the political culture of the Middle East, then in any context of democratization, those who are elected are going to have to reflect that religious conservatism. So that’s where more democracy could actually lead to less liberalism, and that’s why I subtitled my book with the phrase “Illiberal Democracy.”

I do believe that groups like the Muslim Brotherhood are committed to the democratic process. I wouldn’t go so far as to say that means they’re democrats or not because different people mean different things by the word “democrat,” but I do believe that they have come a long way, they have committed themselves to working within the political process, and that is distinctive.

But this is where there’s a real tension because they can be committed to the democratic process but still use their political power to support illiberal ends when it comes to social legislation, when it comes to public morality, and there are a number of examples of what they might do or what they could do if they came to power that would in some ways
restrict personal freedoms, whether it’s about alcohol consumption, changing the educational curricula, banning coeducation at some levels of schooling.

There are a lot of examples of what this might be, but I would argue that this is a reality that we may have to accept, that if democracy has any chance of flourishing, we have to accept that Islam is going to play a role. This doesn’t mean that, as Elliott said, Islamist parties will always win. Sometimes they might lose, as in Tunisia, because of a disillusion with their period in governing, in governance, but the bigger point here isn’t just about Islamist parties because you can even have ostensibly secular parties who support Islamist policies because they have to appeal to the median voter. This is democracy. If that’s what your constituency wants, if that’s what voters find appealing, then that’s what you’ll do.

And we see this in cases like Malaysia and Indonesia where you have ostensibly secular ruling parties, but they’ve engaged in very aggressive Islamizing rhetoric even trying to outbid Islamists, which is a very interesting dynamic. And one example of this is the secular government in Malaysia over the past 7 years has upheld a ban on Christians using the word “Allah,” which is remarkable, and even the Muslim Brotherhood would never dream of doing that in the Middle East, but a secular party is doing that in Malaysia. And also in some local areas in both Indonesia and Malaysia secular parties have talked about and actually implemented sometimes aspects of Sharia law in those localities that are more conservative because, again, that’s more likely to help them win elections.

So where does that leave us as Americans or Westerners who are thinking about this from a policy perspective, and what do we do about this? I think we have to go beyond this idea that all good things necessarily go together. If we do believe in democracy and it leads to Islam playing a larger role, we don’t have to like it, we don’t have to be comfortable with it, but if that’s what happens, then that’s what happens.

I think the alternative is quite problematic because it requires repression and marginalization of Islamist groups, and that’s essentially what we’ve seen in Egypt where you have had this very devastating crackdown after the military coup, it’s a fool’s errand because these are not just organizations. I mean, you can kill an organization, but can you kill an idea that’s deeply rooted in these societies? And it’s been tried time and time again, vigorous attempts at secularization in Turkey and Tunisia, but once there is a
political opening, Islamists reemerge as either the strongest political group or one of the strongest. So why do we keep on falling into this illusion that political Islam can be defeated?

Now, I think there is also another risk, and that’s by repressing them and not allowing them to participate in state structures or in the political process. That strengthens the narrative of groups like ISIS. And ISIS, actually in their public statements, considers the Muslim Brotherhood and similar groups to be unbelievers, and Adnani’s August 2013 statement right after the coup in Egypt, very harsh attack on the Muslim Brotherhood, and he associates the Brotherhood specifically with the religions of unbelief, which is a very striking thing to say about what would supposedly be a fellow Islamist group.

Now, that’s why I think it’s very important to make those distinctions and it therefore makes less sense to lump groups like ISIS with groups like the Muslim Brotherhood because in some ways they’re enemies and very antagonistic towards each other.

My tendency is to see that societies progress over time, that there is almost this kind of teleological movement towards liberalism, towards reason, towards rationality, and that’s what we want to think, and that’s what we’re in some ways trained to think, but I think we have to start problematizing that more, and if we want to appreciate the role of Islam in public life, we have to raise this question of, what if Egyptians, Jordanians, or whoever else decide through the democratic process that they would rather not be liberals? What if they want to try out an alternative ideological project outside the confines of liberal democracy? We might not like that, but that may be where the region is going or will go at some later point.

WILL SALETAN, Slate: As Islamism and democracy begin to come apart in places, what is the evidence of the public’s enduring attachment to democracy versus its enduring attachment to Islamism to the extent that they have to choose? So if an Islamist government can’t pick up the garbage, how many people who supported the Islamists turn away and vote for a non-Islamist party? How does the democratic culture affect the Islamists, the parties themselves, once they buy into democracy to win the first election and they lose the next election? And what is the evidence that public opinion actually determines the outcome of this?
ELLIOIT ABRAMS: I would distinguish between Tunisia and Egypt in this sense. If you’re Ennahda, so you come back from exile or you come up, you come up from repression, and you play the democratic game and you win, and there’s another election, you lose, I think there is no evidence that suggests that from this Ennahda has learned the lesson that democracy is a big fraud and we should now junk it. What you learn is maybe you need better campaign organization, maybe you need better candidates, maybe people are stupid, and in the next election, they’ll see these people are really no good, the ones they chose, because, after all, this is their first time, too, for the more secular party. That’s different from Egypt, where you had a military coup. And I think the conclusion that you can reach in Ennahda is, “Well, maybe we’ll win next time,” but the conclusion of the Egyptian MB is, “We’ll never be able to win. Even if we have support and we win an election, what happens? We get killed.” So that I think is -- the question there is, so what, in fact, do members of the MB internalize?

And there’s a problem here also between, what’s the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood? You know, it’s a centralized organization. You have to go through years of acceptance before you become a trusted member of the organization, and you then follow the leadership of the organization. Well, the leadership of the organization is being jailed and exiled, which creates a special problem for the Egyptian MB as an organization, though not necessarily for MB voters.

Three levels. What do MB voters conclude? They voted for somebody, he was elected president, he was overthrown. What do MB members and supporters believe, and then the high command, as it were? What do the few thousand people who really run the organization conclude? I haven’t seen any studies or polls that answer that question. They would be hard to do in such a repressive environment as today’s Egypt anyway. But I don’t know the answer to whether the Egyptian MB has decided this democracy stuff won’t work. It’s a fateful decision to make because, what’s the alternative? Violence. How else are you going to get power when there are violent people, namely the security forces, attempting to destroy the organization?

SHADI HAMID: So I have a little bit of an alternative reading on what happened in Tunisia, and it’s still to early to tell as we try to figure out why voters voted the way they did, but I think it’s worth noting that the secular coalition, Nidaa Tounes, which won, they actually
had a more ideologically driven campaign than Ennahda did. I mean, their whole line was, “Ennahda is the worst thing in the world; we have to do whatever we can to get rid of Islamists,” and that’s how they really rallied their base. On the other hand, Ennahda very much portrayed itself in the campaign as the party of consensus, of the center. They tried to deemphasize their ideological distinctiveness and that actually angered many in their base, Ennahda supporters who wanted to see their party taking a stronger stand, not just on religious issues, but also on things like the exclusion law or transitional justice. So there was a sense, I think, we don’t know to what extent, that those who would be considered their conservative base weren’t as excited, so there might have been a turnout issue there.

So if anything, this is a problem in deeply polarized contexts, that moving to the center doesn’t pay electorally because there is no center, and this was Erdogan’s calculation in Turkey. He said, I’m not going to even try to move to the center, because those who opposed him were so entrenched in their dislike for Erdogan and the AKP Party, what’s the point of trying to win them over? Instead, he decided, for better or worse, to focus on his base and to really double down and give them a nonstop barrage of red meat, and he was actually able -- the AKP Party was able to increase their local share of the vote from 39 percent a few years ago to 45 percent in the March 30th election, so just a few months ago.

Now, on the Egyptian side, there have been some polls post-coup, and so, for example, there was a September Zogby poll which had some interesting findings. I believe it was 51 percent of respondents did not support the coup. Now, there was a Pew poll that suggests that the number was around 40 percent who opposed the coup. In any case, this suggests that whatever the exact number, it’s a deeply divided country, and we can say maybe not 50-50, but something like that. And also in the more recent Pew poll, which I guess was just maybe around April, the Brotherhood had a 38 percent favorability rating, which I found to be remarkably high considering that it’s a criminal offense to express support for the Brotherhood. So we don’t really know exactly what Egyptians think, but that’s the whole point of elections because the only way to get a true gauge on public opinion is to have a free political environment where people can choose between different candidates. Obviously, the whole point of a military coup is to prevent Egyptians from making that free competitive choice.
So I think that we’re not going to know for a long time, but Sisi is not a secularist, so even though he and his supporters are extremely anti-Brotherhood, that’s not the same thing as being secular. This is not someone who believes in separation of religion from politics.

BYRON YORK, Washington Examiner: Given the deeply religious, unchangeably religious, nature of all this, what is the role of U.S. military force going forward in trying to bring some order to this area?

ELLIOTT ABRAMS: I think there is strong support in the country, and I think it’s not all that surprising, for using U.S. military force against the Islamic state. Now, obviously, there was a huge turn or significant turn in public opinion after the beheadings began, and it’s not hard to make an argument that, you know, we didn’t choose them, they chose us, they decided to start beheading Americans. And we can see that whatever it is we collectively believe in, they don’t believe in it. I mean, they represent a savage and destructive force whether you favor a democracy in the Middle East, whether you like the monarchies that are aligned with us. So I don’t think that’s a problem.

I think the larger question is not the use of military force, which we’re going to do, is, what do we do in a place like Egypt?

There are two questions here. One is, what happens when you have an elected government that maintains the rules of the game -- free election, freedom of speech, freedom of press -- and it’s an extremely illiberal government that imposes a system that is popular in the country, but we hate it?

There is another question, though, and it’s posed by Egypt, and that is, what about democracy? What about political rights? There, there is nothing that can be done, I think, militarily; the question is a foreign policy and aid question. What should the United States do about governments that may even want to be friends of ours -- again, Egypt -- but are increasingly undemocratic? How do we react to such governments, which, by the way, tell us, “We’re with you in the fight against ISIS. We want to be your friends and allies. Don’t turn away from us?”

My view on that is that we are pursuing the wrong policy; that is, that kissing up to General Sisi is not a means of promoting stability in Egypt in the medium run. It will not last, partly
because we are now after Tahrir Square. You will not be able to put the genie back in the bottle. The notion that the public should have no role in the political life of the country, “Just shut up. Go back to your job. We’re in charge.” This is not going to work I think in Egypt.

Mubarak had 30 years in power. I don’t think General Sisi is going to have 30 years in power. But that is a question that is completely unrelated to the question of American military intervention, and there I would say we should --

SHADI HAMID: One of the reasons that I am sometimes reluctant to overemphasize the role of religion, [is] this idea that religious and ethnic divides are so deeply rooted that, “What can we do as outsiders?” that there is something natural or inevitable about them fighting each other.

But if we look in the case of Syria, the rise of ISIS was both predictable and predicted, and this is why it’s so tragic. It didn’t have to be this way, and many Syria experts and others warned senior administration officials that if we don’t do more to support the rebels as early as early 2012, that the extremists are going to gain ground and fill the political vacuum. So in that sense, the rise of ISIS can’t be solely explained by religion or ideology, we have to add to that the lack of international commitment and the regional proxy battles and role of Iran.

I mean, there are a lot of political factors, and you have kind of a perfect storm that leads to ISIS’s rise, but that’s where I do -- you know, I do lay quite a bit of the blame on the Obama administration because you can’t really undo the damage now. We can do our best to manage a very bad situation, but now that the kind of ISIS genie is out of the bottle, we’re never going to be able to return to the way things were before, and that really, I think, illustrates the cost of waiting and dithering, and he is now being forced to do the one thing he never wanted to do in the first place, which is a bit ironic.

KIRSTEN POWERS, Fox New/USA Today/Daily Beast: You were talking, Shadi, about, what happens if more democracy leads to less liberalism? Are you okay with that? Do you ultimately say, what happens if they get democracy and they say, “Ah, we don’t want to be liberals, we want to be kind of authoritarian democrats?”
ELLIOTT ABRAMS: We have influence on countries, particularly aid-recipient countries, and I think we should be trying to use it. Remember we’re talking now about a country that is democratic but moving in the direction of illiberalism. That won’t be a 99-to-1 issue in that country. There will be NGOs, for example, there will be parties, there will be political groups that are struggling for what we would view as more sensible, more liberal. We should help them. When we think it would be useful, we should support those NGOs that are fighting, and particularly for minority rights, because we don’t just believe in plebiscitarian majoritarianism; we believe in constitutionalism, we believe in minority rights. We should say that and we should try to help people who are fighting for those things in those countries, but, you know, in the end we have to accept what they arrive at democratically.

SHADI HAMID: We had a particular sequencing in the U.S. and also in much of Europe, constitutional liberalism, step one, and then and only then did you have democracy in the sense of universal suffrage and equality for all citizens, but that’s a very historically contingent sequencing that can’t necessarily be applied in other circumstances.

Democracy has become such an uncontested normative good that it’s very hard to tell people to delay their democratic aspirations indefinitely -- maybe you can get them to delay 6 months to a year or whatever it might be, but you can’t really tell them to wait 10, 15, or 20 years. So I think that in that sense in a lot of the third wave democracies, we’re getting -- you know, democracy is almost being done backwards, the sequencing is quite different.

Am I okay with it? Again, it’s not really for me to say. I’m an American liberal, a small “I” liberal, that I think liberalism is preferable, and part of that is because I grew up here and I think it’s successful, I like it, and so on and so forth, but I’m a little bit uncomfortable with imposing a very distinctive ideological conception of the Good on other societies.

We can encourage them, we can nudge, but if they want liberalism, then liberals in Egypt or liberals anywhere else are going to have to fight for it, they’re going to have to make the case that liberalism is the best ideological approach in Egypt. That’s for them to do, but they have to do it through the democratic process without the shortcuts of saying, “We can’t win elections, so we’re going to support military coups.”
MICHAEL GERSON, Washington Post: Elliott, I wanted to follow up on something you mentioned earlier about this broad perception that the U.S. doesn’t care about Sunnis in the Middle East and some of that rooted in Syrian policy. When you talk with administration officials, they are almost exclusively focused on the eventual Iranian negotiations as what their goal is in this, and they don’t want to offend the Iranians in Syria with their proxies.

So I wanted to raise the question, how much of this is a recognition that the Shia power in the region is the one we’re trying to play with?

Shadi, you mentioned the power of the appeal of past historical greatness as sort of a non-religious common appeal that is made, but maybe you can just comment as well just on the role of popular eschatology, theories of the end times.

ELLIOTT ABRAMS: I think it’s a mistake in policy. I think you are accurately describing the policy, and I think it has been this way since 2009. Since very early on, the President had the idea of the outreach to Russia, the reset, and to Syria and to Iran: 0 for 3. And in the case of Iran, there are byproducts in the region. We are terrifying our Sunni allies. It’s a losing game in the long run because there are just -- there are a lot more Sunnis than Shia. And it’s a particularly venomous regime. It’s an extremely repressive and aggressive regime which we still call the world’s greatest state sponsor of terrorism.

But I think it is correct that the administration’s calculation is that this would be a major foreign policy achievement, not the Iran nuclear weapons deal per se, but rather the broader rapprochement with Iran would change the whole Middle East, and it would change the whole Middle East, it’s just the question is whether we change it in a positive or negative fashion.

I think it would be a negative fashion because we would be accommodating ourselves to the rise of Iranian power, and Iranian power in the region is not neutral for every other of -- every other country in the region, many of which are allied to the United States -- Jordan, Egypt, Israel, Saudi Arabia, the Emirates, Bahrain, Kuwait. They’re all scared by this. So I think it is what the President is doing, and I think it is a very damaging policy for our own position in the region.

SHADI HAMID: So on Sunni prophecy, it’s a really important point because ISIS does draw on this considerably, but it’s worth noting these are mainstream Sunni prophecies in the
sense that there are certain sayings of Prophet Muhammad that talk about the signs of the day of judgment. Now, when most Muslims hear these things, they don’t take it very seriously because that could happen 5,000 years from now, and there is no way to really tell, they just see it as a kind of objective description of the period right before the end of days.

Now, where ISIS is different is there is almost a proscriptive element, that they can play a role in helping to bring about the end of days, they’re actors in this apocalyptic fantasy, if you will. So it takes on a different dimension with ISIS. There’s a couple examples of prophetic sayings that the final battles with the infidels will be fought in Sham, modern-day Syria, and there is actually a prophecy regarding a part of Syria, in a small town in Syria called Dabiq, which is also incidentally the name of ISIS’s English language magazine, where that’s a specific site of one of the final battles. So that’s actually one reason that they really focused on capturing Dabiq, because it’s not strategically vital.

DAVID GREGORY: I would just like to understand a little bit more about what kind of religious pushback there is within Islam and throughout the region. Is this a static, across-the-region [rise of] literacy combined with the decline of clerical influence leading to more political Islam? I would just like to understand more of this.

SHADI HAMID: The only way to access text directly, which is the whole premise of Salafism, is you need to be able to read the text yourself. So that’s why literacy is very essential here. Without literacy, then you depend much more on a clerical establishment.

Western notions of nationalism are there, and you can’t pretend that never happened, but that’s part of the real struggle right now: what is this new regional order going to look like? How do people feel about the existing borders? But this is why if we want to save the Westphalian order in the Middle East, Islam and perhaps even Islamism has to be part of that.

Islam in some sense can legitimate the nation state. If you insist on pushing Islam and Islamism outside of the nation state, then they’re going to be at cross-purposes, and the latter is going to undermine the former. I mean, that’s one way of looking at it.
But I have issues when people say, “Well, where are the moderate voices condemning ISIS?” I mean, I hear them all the time personally. They just don’t get a lot of attention. ISIS doesn’t have mass popular support. They don’t need mass popular support to necessarily stay in power and to control territory.

There is incredible diversity from Ennahda on the more progressive liberal side, to ISIS on the absolute far right, and everything in between, and these different strands of Islamism are debating each other. Then there is post-Islamism. Then there are Islamically influenced parties that wouldn’t consider themselves Islamist. Then there are liberal parties. There is a lot going on, and I think part of the issue is that a lot of these groups hate each other. I don’t believe that you can necessarily stop the hatred, but what I would hope for is that people agree to hate each other within the democratic process. Hate each other all you want, but just do it through peaceful means and don’t start killing each other. I think that’s the best we can hope for in the Middle East.

Civil society does play a role in many of these countries, and they are bringing up issues like, how do we constrain executive power? How do we encourage citizens to monitor their local governments? How do we encourage citizens to be active politically and not to simply give up hope? The problem is, though, civil society is coming under intense attack throughout the Middle East, and most, I think -- most strikingly in Egypt. There is a war on civil society.

ELLIOTT ABRAMS: I wanted to comment on this question of, what is liberal Islam? What is conservative Islam? What is authentic in Islam? Is ISIS an authentic form of Islam or is it not? I think it’s very important that the United States government shut up about that question because we don’t know anything about it.

ROBERT DRAPER, New York Times Magazine: Elliott, you cited these different post-totalitarian models for governance, democracy and Islamism and a synthesis of them, but there is also, at least in countries I’ve visited, like Somalia and Libya, a sort of fourth way, and that is this decentralized governance that’s provided in more or less a stop-gap persistent fashion by militias. And so I wondered how you regarded them as these countries begin to stand up whatever government they are standing up. And as an ideal in terms of government, Shadi, I’m wondering if there is a kind of dissonance amongst
moderate Muslims posed by the fact that when they think of a caliphate, they are thinking not just in a political or religious context but in a more holistic way, cultural and intellectual, and whether it’s hard to imagine ISIS promoting that sort of thing.

ELLIOIT ABRAMS: I would call the militias the expression of the lack of governance rather than a form of governance. I think what you have is the militias appearing when the nation state has collapsed, and that’s disastrous for the people in the country. And the militias do not appear in any country in which there is a decently strong central government.

SHADI HAMID: So when we look at the caliphate historically, it’s not just power and being at the peak of civilization and all of that, the clerics were a self-regulating community that provided a check on executive power. So that’s also what people are thinking about, that the old -- the pre-modern Islamic state, there was a kind of rule of law. So I think that’s part of the appeal of the pre-modern period.

ISIS isn’t just revolutionary in how they use the word “caliphate,” they’re revolutionary in that they take governance much more seriously than previous extremist groups. ISIS actually has had some success in governance. They have been able to provide some degree of law and order. They run local administrations. They provide social services. So I think that this is part of what makes ISIS a more challenging enemy, because they are able to incorporate these notions of governance.

When they’re invoking the term “caliphate,” they understand what that means to moderate Muslims, and it doesn’t just mean order, it means greatness, it means greatness in a cultural and intellectual way. You know, it’s a very encompassing term. And yet ISIS’s invocation of the term “caliphate,” doesn’t necessarily buttress the notion that they would be the ideal promulgators of that.

SHADI HAMID: The messenger matters, and there is quite a bit of dissonance, and that’s why perceptions of ISIS’s success are important. If they are being rolled back and aren’t able to gain more territory, then there is a dissonance between their ambitious claim to a caliphate and the reality that they’re actually losing territory. And one of the preconditions to a caliphate is a large swath of territory.
KAREN TUMULTY, *Washington Post*: I think a lot of Americans have this idea that if people there could see sort of an economic future, the potential of prosperity, if there was really a vigorous middle class, that they wouldn’t be so drawn to this. Is that true or is that sort of kind of myth that we Americans have convinced ourselves of?

ELLIOTT ABRAMS: Well, I don’t think it’s a myth. I, in the distant past, worked for Senator Daniel P. Moynihan, and Moynihan wrote in the ’60s that any country that has a lot of unemployed young men is heading for trouble, and the country he had in mind was the United States of America. I think it’s a sort of universal truth really. What do you do to occupy those young men so that they do not go out rampaging?

It’s interesting that the immediate response of the King of Saudi Arabia to the Arab Spring was to announce that he was going to spend $110 billion, and some of the things he was going to do was just literally provide jobs, just provide jobs, work for the state, do something, but a huge housing program was a large part of that money. A huge housing program. Why? Because those young men need wives and families to tame them. That was the King’s calculation. They are living at home and they have nothing, and if they had a job and a wife, then their attitude toward life would be different. I think that that is actually psychologically and historically correct. I think it’s not accidental that Tunisia, you know, which has the largest middle class and the most advanced situation for women, is the country that is closest to what we would call a kind of Western-style democracy.

It’s also not surprising to see so many young Arab males coming from European countries where there are huge ghettos and very little assimilation. It’s not a surprise in that sense that fewer come from the United States, where there is much more assimilation and much more of a sense of social mobility.

SHADI HAMID: I think part of what mass literacy and mass educational attainment do is they raise expectations of what’s possible, and so this happened to a considerable degree in the ’50s and ’60s, the modernization -- the period of secular modernization under the Nasser regime in Egypt, and then not shortly thereafter we see the emergence or reemergence of political Islam in the universities. In the 1970s, the universities were the main ground for Islamist groups.
So I think this is the problem that expectations are raised, and the modern state isn’t able to absorb those demands, and that gap between want formation and want satisfaction – and, I mean, that drives certainly some of the anger and humiliation that many young Arabs feel. But I would kind of -- I would question this tendency to see economic development and the creation of a middle class as some kind of be-all answer.

When the Obama administration, and I suppose other administrations, try to go for the low-hanging fruit and say, well, it’s all about building a middle class and preconditions and economic development and these kind of slow, long-term things. I think we have to question how successful that’s going to be without having the other parts of the solution, which is political participation, inclusion, modern nation-states that are able to actually deliver.

JEFF HARDIN, University of Wisconsin: I wonder to what extent you both think that we need to set aside these kind of post-Enlightenment presuppositions that we have in order to get inside the heads of the people we need to be in dialogue with.

SHADI HAMID: I think this is a real challenge. How do we, as people who are very much part of the post-Enlightenment, post-Enlightenment tradition, remove ourselves to the extent where we can see other cultures and societies and movements more the way they see themselves rather than just us projecting our own liberal ideals onto them? I think this is very challenging.

I mean, something as simple as understanding why people would do something because they want to get into heaven. I think there is something that sounds almost quaint and archaic to a lot of at least Northeastern liberal elites in the U.S. But people can visualize heaven, it’s practical, it’s real, and it drives them, and that’s just one example.

ELLIOTT ABRAMS: There is a general view in the American political system -- and by that, I mean almost all of our officials and almost all of the media -- that the religious parties in Israel are bad. Why are they bad? How do we know they’re bad? Well, they’re religious parties, and it’s because they actually believe in certain positions that they view as above politics. And, of course, we are very uncomfortable with the notion that there are, if you will, political positions that are above politics because it’s certainly very inconvenient and sometimes dangerous, and we don’t do that in the United States. And when we do, do
it, obviously we get into the toughest social and political battles, for example, the question of, when does life begin? And the right to life, and so forth.

**SHADI HAMID:** When Obama talks about evil, there is almost this kind of presumption that evil has no place in this world and it’s treated as this kind of, “How is this possible? And it’s only a matter of time until the forces of reason and rationality win the battle.” I think it partly explains Obama’s unwillingness to act decisively, that if things just play out, it will all somehow work out in the end, and this idea that you can always reason and rationalize with your enemies, if you sit with them, you know, the Iranians on the nuclear talks, we can just figure something out because we can speak the language of cost-benefit and it can be transactional, and I think there is a real naivete there that undermines our ability to do business in the Middle East sometimes.

**DAVID RENNIE:** Could you just set out what you think politicians of the Republican and Democratic Party should be currently telling Americans are the vital interests at stake in the Muslim world? Michael Gerson makes the point that the policy is being informed by the desire to deal with Iran on stopping Iranian bomb. I suspect if you polled the American public, that’s about the only thing they do care about in that region; isn’t it?

**ELLIOTT ABRAMS:** I do agree that Americans, as you say, are sort of finished in the sense that there is a sense that that region of the world is hopeless. We spent all this money, thousands of Americans died, and we didn’t do any good. However, I think that feeling was diminished significantly by the beheadings. I think there was a change. I would not describe isolationism as the mood. I would agree that there is that sense that so much of the Middle East is hopeless for nation-building kinds of interventions. There is still very broad support for Israel, and I think that there is broad support for the notion that the United States has to be the strongest country in the world, so if our interests are being threatened and our allies are being threatened, we have to react.

I think that the President could get support, will get support. I mean, look, he’s already got support for 3,000 Americans on the ground. I don’t believe that if he came up with another 1,500 or 3,000 over the course of the next year the public would rise and revolt or that Congress would rise and revolt.
I think that Americans are very wary of massive involvements particularly of one kind, huge commitments of 100,000 or 200,000 soldiers, but I think if the commitment is we’re going to bomb these people or we’re going to send a few thousand advisors, I don’t think there will be much public counter-reaction because I think there is a pretty widespread understanding that we have significant political and economic interests there.

SHADI HAMID: I would just make a bigger point, that when Americans get really frustrated, look, it’s understandable, but we can’t act as if we’re innocent bystanders in this. We are in some sense complicit in the unraveling of the Middle East, and I feel that that part of it is so rarely addressed head-on. I mean, we have a tragic, sometimes terrible, legacy in the Middle East of supporting autocratic regimes and actively undermining nascent democratic movements for the last 6 decades. That tends to have a distorting effect on the region, and that’s not even bringing in the whole kind of colonial thing, so -- and the Iraq war, you know, that was a devastating experience for many people in the region and certainly for Iraqis, and that continues to this day, the instability in Iraq. So I think that we have to look at our role, and we can add drone policy to that, and the killing of innocent civilians in a way that is very concerning.

TOM HALLMAN, The Oregonian: In simple language, why should people care? And can we do anything, given our political system now, to solve or to help any of this? And what is the role of the media, of messengers, to help the average person understand what all this is about?

ELLIOTT ABRAMS: I think it’s easily possible for the President to explain to the American people in a short speech, “We are the most powerful country in the world. We’re in a position to say no more chemical weapons. We’re in a position to enforce that, and we’re going to do it. And I did it last night, and it’s over, and you ought to feel good about it.” I think you can do that. I think more generally it is possible to explain.

There is no region of the world -- not Europe, not Asia, not the Middle East -- from which we can wall ourselves off and say it doesn’t matter. In the case of the Middle East, the price you pay at the pump matters to you, and there is a global oil price. But more than that, these people like killing Americans and they are growing in power very fast. I mean,
they came out of nowhere, nobody ever heard of these people, and they conquered large territories in two central Arab countries, Syria and Iraq, and if nobody stops them, they’ll keep going. And their ultimate goal is you and taking down America. And this world has been a much better place for you and your children since World War II because we were the dominant power, and if you don’t want to see the whole world turn into a kind of chaos of constant warfare, it’s going to need some involvement and organization from the United States. We’re too powerful to be able to turn away. I mean, that’s the kind of speech I would make, and I think it will sell because it’s true.

If we really want to help in a significant way, I’m afraid that the kind of limited interventions that maybe Americans are okay with won’t be enough. So, yeah, they’re fine with targeted interventions, you know, we bomb something here and there, and there are no troops on the ground, that’s all fine, but I think that the only way there is going to be a real stabilization in the region is if we -- I know it’s a bad phrase, but nation building. I mean, there has to be a nation building component to what the U.S. does in the Middle East.

SARAH PULLIAM-BAILEY, Religion News Service: ISIS aims to get publicity by posting videos of beheadings and being active on social media. Do journalists play into their hands by overplaying their global reach? How do journalists write about the Islamic-ness of and Muslim appeal of ISIS without demonizing or exonerating a religion in religious communities?

SHADI HAMID: I struggle with this in my own writing, that I want to recognize the power of religion and the Islamic inspiration to what ISIS does, but not in a way that contributes to a negative discourse about American Muslims or demonizes the faith. And I think that, you know, it’s a struggle to get it right. I don’t know exactly how to do that perfectly. But at the same time, when I write, I don’t really see it as my job to kind of advocate for Islam. I mean, I try to call it as I see it and be faithful to what I found in my research, but obviously journalists have maybe a little bit of a different responsibility.

I think the best you can do is to emphasize that this is a minority movement, that there are distinctions between different Islamist groups. I try to make very clear and careful
distinctions between, say, whether it’s ISIS, the Muslim Brotherhood, Ennahda, Hamas, all of these groups are different in both means and ends to various degrees, and I would be concerned about lumping them together, and I worry that I’m seeing more of that in the Washington discourse, that Islamism is a problem, it’s not ISIS.

ELLIOTT ABRAMS: I’ll be in some disagreement here on Islamism. I mean, it’s a matter of definition, but Islamism, if it means a hegemonic position for Islam, which it pretty much does, is something we should criticize and oppose, just as we should oppose a hegemonic position for any religion. There will be dissenters within that religion, there will be religious minorities who are going to be at a significant disadvantage, so I think we can define Islamism as part of the problem. Not every Islamist is holding a rifle, but some are.

Is there something in Islam that has led some Muslims to behave in a way we consider to be terrible? And what’s the debate within Islam? And who are the people that we can go to, that you can go to, who are fighting this and saying that this is a terrible distortion of Islam?

CARL CANNON, RealClearPolitics: After the elections in Egypt that were won by the Muslim Brotherhood, the fear that when an Islamic party wins an election, that the old doctrine of “one man, one vote” becomes “one man, one vote once,” and that was what was invoked to justify the coup. And you both also mentioned that Islamic style democracy might be so illiberal as to be unrecognizable to us as a democracy. And my question is this: If the Islamic party has made one basic concession, one, which is that this won’t be the last election, that we will abide by elections if we lose them, isn’t that enough? Because then the rest of this could evolve.

SHADI HAMID: This “one man, one vote, one time” thing that’s often leveled at Islamists, it frustrates me a lot because it’s never actually happened in real life. There is not one recorded instance of Islamists coming to power through democratic elections and ending democracy as we know it. Now, you could say it will happen soon at some later point, but if we just go by the evidence that we do have, then it hasn’t happened, it hasn’t happened yet.
So ’80s, ’90s, into the 2000s, into the lead up to the Arab Spring, if you look at the Muslim Brotherhood’s political programs, they stated publicly time and time again that they would respect the outcomes of a democratic process, they would commit themselves to rotation of power, so on and so forth. The problem is that many people don’t believe their sincerity, and there is no way to kind of preemptively prove that one way or the other. So that’s what makes it challenging. And I think a fear is not that the Brotherhood wouldn’t give up power if they lost an election, but that they would become so dominant electorally that secularists wouldn’t be able to win. So Erdogan keeps on winning elections. It’s not as if he’s rigging the vote against the secular opposition, it’s just that the secular opposition is so weak, so incoherent, and doesn’t have a clear ideological program and hasn’t been able to gain the confidence of enough Turks, so it raises the question of, in a free political competition, can secularists win?

ELLIOTT ABRAMS: I don’t agree with that because I think the answer to your question is mere words of pledge, “We’re going to have another election,” can be contradicted by actual conduct. Erdogan is a very good example of this. There are more journalists in prison in Turkey than in China. I mean, Erdogan is not running a democratic political system. It might be that in a free vote he would win anyway. I mean, certainly his first few elections he did win, clearly free elections, but he is squeezing that system tight now to make sure -- the judiciary is another example -- to make sure that he can stay in power forever.

The Muslim Brotherhood, I would argue, in Egypt was behaving in that fashion; that is to say, sure, if you ask Morsi, “Will there be other free elections?” he would say yes, but that’s not the way they were behaving in power.

SCOTT WILSON, Washington Post: Elliott has said a couple of times that Israel is not the link, but, of course, many there believe it is. And you said, Elliott, this is not our country, depending on how they vote. That was not the policy when Hamas won the parliamentary elections in 2006; we decided they were not the right people to run the Palestinian authority.

So we not only hate their system, but we hate their politics. And how do you begin to discuss that in an adult way? And I’m pretty stunned still that, as President Bush said 3
days after the attacks, we’re not at war with Islam. President Obama still says we’re not at war. Why does he need to keep saying that? Because no one is convinced we’re not.

And I would just like to hear you all on, what is the sort of courage of our own political leaders to begin seriously talking about Muslim grievance, for lack of a better term?

**ELLIOTT ABRAMS:** The hypocrisy of U.S. policy over the years has been gigantic. Look at the support for Mubarak over a very long time. Bush’s freedom agenda was saying, in agreement with that famous 2002 Arab Human Development Report from UNDP, that the problem is a freedom deficit here. And in 2000 basically ’03, ’04, ’05, we put a lot of pressure on Mubarak to begin to open up the system, and I’ve had lots of Egyptians, from secularist liberals to Muslim Brotherhood people, say, “Yeah, life was a lot better in those 2 or 3 years. You forced him to open up the system.” So I think sometimes, how did we do that? You know, we didn’t invade Egypt. It was really political pressure.

Sometimes we can do that, and we should do more of it. We are doing the opposite right now. We are kissing up to President Sisi as he closes the political system in Egypt, as Shadi described, destroying civil society, putting NGO leaders in jail, shutting down the NGOs, putting Muslim Brotherhood leaders in jail--and what are we saying about this? Nothing.

I don’t think it will prove to be a successful policy, and one thing it will do is persuade the Egyptians to hate the United States because, I mean, Bernard Lewis once said there are two kinds of countries in the Middle East. There are countries where the population loves the United States because the United States opposes the tyranny under which they live, Iran, and there are countries where everybody hates the United States because the United States supports the tyranny under which they live.

But I think your basic point is right. Every government will operate with a certain amount of hypocrisy. A government is not an NGO. A government has many interests: financial, commercial, military. So we’re always going to be different from Human Rights Watch. But the element of support for human rights I think rise and fall, and frankly it is falling right now, and that’s, I think, a mistake.

**SHADI HAMID:** There are so many legitimate grievances, and Elliott talked about one of the big ones, which is consistent American support for autocratic rule. I agree that the
Bush administration doesn’t get enough credit for the freedom agenda, and I think sometimes the liberal caricature of neo-conservatives or Republicans is that they don’t recognize root causes, but actually the freedom agenda was an attempt to do just that, to recognize that the political violence of 9/11, and more generally in the Arab world, one of the contributing factors was the lack of democracy in the region, and that if we want to fight extremism and terrorism, promoting democracy has to be part of it. So I’m just surprised that Obama hasn’t really taken this on. There are 2 years left, and my hope is that he will articulate something resembling a freedom agenda, his own freedom agenda.

DAVID GREGORY: Isn’t it significant, that in our kind of political pragmatism, the calculation is not strategy to deal with underlying grievance, but it’s simply to say, well, where and how precisely do we make a difference?

ELLIOTT ABRAMS: The two can go together in the sense that if you’re absolutely persuaded that there is a situation that will not lend itself to American intervention, political diplomatic intervention, what are you doing it for? I mean, Clinton didn’t just want to get caught trying; he thought he had a real good shot, he thought he could come very close. So I think you have to do both, but I think that the problem with saying, “The critical question is, where can we make a difference?” is that it is a very good excuse for inaction.