Religious Conflict and the Future of the Middle East

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MICHAEL CROMARTIE: Welcome. For those of you who are new, welcome to the Faith Angle Forum. Some of you are veterans and have been here many times. This is our 25th Faith Angle Forum. We’ve been doing this for 15 years. We started in 1999 in Maine, and our first speaker, Elliott Abrams, was at that Faith Angle Forum.

We do our best to make sure these topics are timely, and we could not have begun this Faith Angle Forum with a more timely topic, as you all know, and so we feel like we have two of the leading experts on the political and religious situation in the Middle East here with us this morning, and so I will introduce them in turn.

I will first introduce Elliott Abrams and then I’ll introduce Shadi after Elliott finishes.

As you all know, 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. I’m sure you can find one at bookstores nearby here in South Beach. It’s an excellent book and it’s been favorably reviewed by people on all sides of the spectrum.
So Elliott is also the author of about five other books, which I won’t name; they’re in his bio.

Elliott, without further ado, thank you for joining us for this Faith Angle Forum.

ELLIOTT ABRAMS: Thanks, Michael. Good morning. I teach at Georgetown in the spring terms, and I have, after long experience, banned electronic devices because I know that actually you’re going to be surfing the web, looking up sports scores, and making believe that you’re taking notes, but that’s okay. I can’t see the screens, so --

MICHAEL CROMARTIE: You ban them from the classroom?

ELLIOTT ABRAMS: I ban them from the classroom, which, by the way, I find is increasingly popular among professors because the kids are surfing the web, they are not listening. I know, I know, if you were a better teacher, they wouldn’t be. But, you know, okay.

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. And I’m going to do some quoting of Shadi Hamid, who has written as well about this as anybody. But, you know, 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 and more like us.

Shadi wrote -- and I like this line a lot -- “For Islamists --,” well, I should start back and say remember the phrase “illiberal democracy”? Which may or may not have been Fareed Zakaria’s phrase, but he’s used it.

(Laughter)

ELLIOTT ABRAMS: It’s a useful phrase. And Shadi wrote, “For Islam --

MICHAEL CROMARTIE: What’s the phrase?

ELLIOTT ABRAMS: “Illiberal democracy.” “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. She uses -- we have “illiberal democracy.” She uses “unsecular democracy” and “hegemonic Islam.” If you think of the position of Christianity in Europe, yeah, I mean, the Queen is the head of the Church of England, the King of Denmark is the head of the Church of Denmark,
that’s not -- in reality, that’s not hegemonic Christianity, it is symbolic Christianity. We’re talking about real hegemonic religions.

And 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 despicable 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.

Now, I want to end with one other question, and obviously each of these questions is worth around 9 days of debate, but I want to stop now.

MICHAEL CROMARTIE: We’ve got time. We’ll do it here.

ELLIOTT ABRAMS: We have time later. We can come back to all this. 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 --,” 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 mean, I would like to come back to this later, I want to stop talking, but 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.

I’ll stop there.

MICHAEL CROMARTIE: But you were going to say, what do we do now?

ELLIOTT ABRAMS: Well, that’s the question. I mean --

MICHAEL CROMARTIE: Why don’t you think about that because that will be the first question that comes up.

ELLIOTT ABRAMS: Okay. All right. The bombing starts in 5 minutes. That’s the usual Republican answer; right?

(Laughter)

MICHAEL CROMARTIE: Usually -- we have two speakers, ladies and gentlemen, on this very complex topic, and the purpose is to get two perspectives, but this is the first time we’ve had a speaker continually quote the person who is supposed to give the other perspective.

(Laughter)

MICHAEL CROMARTIE: Yeah, and so your assignment now is to quote from Elliott’s book.

(Laughter)

MICHAEL CROMARTIE: We didn’t mean for it to be a total lovefest.

But 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, and it has been out for -- well, since last April.
We’re delighted you could be here with us. 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, thank you.

DR. SHADI HAMID: Thanks so much, Michael. It’s a pleasure to be here. Okay. So let me just maybe start a little bit with where I come from on this issue of Islamists and Islamism.

So I first -- 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 the most -- in a really striking fashion after the military -- or I should say -- yeah, 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, we didn’t know, 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.  

There was actually -- 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 is -- 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. But anyway, I’ll get back to that later on, but 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 we have to be -- 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, but I think we’ve gone -- and I think that that’s well intentioned, that you don’t want to culturally essentialize, you don’t want to say -- you don’t want to take Muslims or Islam and make them out into this kind of boogeyman, but at the same time, 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.
So I think we have to kind of correct, and 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.

So, for example -- and 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 that ISIS -- 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 didn’t actually -- 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.

And so much what part of the modern -- 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 -- and there was a very interesting article the other day in Al-Monitor talking about how discussions about a caliphate -- again, not ISIS’s caliphate, but 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 that this isn’t -- we’re not just talking about ISIS, and this is something that we saw in the whole Bill Maher-Ben Affleck debate, where Bill Maher took
something that was about ISIS but then there was a bigger discussion about, is there something wrong with Islam as a religion?

And, you know, it’s nice to see Ben Affleck defending Muslims, it’s well intentioned, and I was kind of -- you know, I think a lot of us were cheering him on because we -- you know, no one ever defends Muslims in the public sphere, at least not famous people –

(Laughter)

SHADI HAMID: -- but at the same time, Ben Affleck’s, I think, analysis was a bit superficial.

(Laughter)

SHADI HAMID: I understand he’s not a religious scholar, but I think this is where we have to kind of go into some uncomfortable territory. 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 creandal 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.

Now, not to go too much into all of that, but this doesn’t mean -- all of this is relevant, it doesn’t mean, though, 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.

Now, as I kind of close up here, you know, it’s this -- what’s interesting is that -- 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.

Now, let me try to provide some paths forward. So how do we make sense of all of this?

So I think the rise of political Islam, as Elliott pointed out, provides us with a kind of dilemma, and this is the dilemma that I talk about in my book. 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.”

And I will just kind of clarify my position on this. 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.

Now, they -- so -- 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 I think that -- you know, 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.

Now, you might say, well, what about the alternative? 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, and I think it’s -- I have moral qualms with repression, but even putting that aside, 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.

And I’ll just close here, and I think this is something that will probably come up in other sessions, is, I mean, my tendency, as a progressive in the kind of more classical sense or as a classical liberal, you know, as someone who grew up in this country, 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.
MICHAEL CROMARTIE: Thank you. Well, we’ve already got a list of six names of people, those are all people who have been here before, and they know to start raising their hand early on.

(Laughter)

MICHAEL CROMARTIE: Will Saletan, you’re up first, and then Byron York.

WILL SALETAN, Slate: Okay. First of all, thank you both. That was fascinating. And I want to press you a little bit more on what we know so far from the Arab Spring and the post-Arab Spring about the establishment of democracy as a social norm.

So, Elliott, you were talking about polls that showed, indicated, some rising support for democracy, potentially some falling support for Islamism, although it’s not clear to me how those are defined in the polls.

As Islamism and democracy begin to come apart in places -- so in the Tunisian example, losing an election, or in Egypt, a coup -- 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? And we have the Tunisian example, but maybe there are others you could bring up. I mean, I’m basically ignorant about a lot of other countries that may have held elections and may have furnished some evidence about that question.

In Egypt, I still don’t know after the coup how much of the public was upset about the means by which Morsi was tossed out. Do people -- you know, in this country, people say, oh, it’s so sad that it only lasted for one election and then there was a coup. Did the Egyptians feel that way?

And how does the -- 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? So what do we know so far about, do they say, “Okay, well, we lost this one, but we’re going to continue to play the democratic game”? Or do they go home
and say, “Now we’re going to return to some kind of struggle, perhaps an armed conflict”?

And what is the evidence that public opinion actually determines the outcome of this? I mean, before the Arab Spring, we got used to the idea that dictators ran these countries, and whether the public supported you or not wasn’t that important, you just had to have an army. Have the rules changed and has the culture changed about the power of the people and about attachment to democracy?

MICHAEL CROMARTIE: Elliott?

ELLIO T ABRAMS: Well, there are 30 questions there.

(Laughter)

ELLIO T ABRAMS: First, I would distinguish between -- because I think it’s a very important distinction, 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 don’t think that that has -- and 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.

I mean, when Morsi won the election, and it was a close election, he won 51-48, but that means that he got votes from millions of Egyptians who were not members of or associated with the MB.

So now one question is, what do the rank and file conclude? Another question is -- 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 have seen -- and maybe Shadi can help -- 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 Egyptian -- 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? I haven’t seen any evidence yet, and I think part of the reason is because the leadership of the organization has been so disaggregated and disorganized deliberately by the government. So that’s an answer to 1 of your 30 questions.

MICHAEL CROMARTIE: I want you to comment on this. I forgot to mention to you all who are big Twitter people that we have a Faith Angle Twitter account handle which is @FaithAngle. And then I’m supposed to tell you the conference hashtag is also in your program here, which is #FaithAngle14. So tweet away.

And now -- you know, urgent things first, but go ahead, Shadi, comment on this.

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 de-emphasize 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 -- and this is I think a bigger -- this is a problem in deeply polarized contexts, that moving to the center doesn’t pay electorally because there is no center, and this is I think what was --

(Laughter)

SHADI HAMID: -- this was Erdogan’s, I think, 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.

I don’t want to draw too much from this, but that’s an alternative reading of what it pays to do electorally and in a deeply polarized context.

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. One of them was -- I believe it was 51 percent of respondents did not support the coup. Now, there are other polls which suggest -- there was a Pew poll that suggests that the number was around 40 percent who opposed the coup. In any case --

MICHAEL CROMARTIE: Of Americans?

SHADI HAMID: No, no, Egyptians.
MICHAEL CROMARTIE: Okay.

SHADI HAMID: Yeah. So 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, not just -- it actually is a criminal offense.

UNIDENTIFIED MALE SPEAKER: The real number is probably higher.

SHADI HAMID: Yeah, the real number could -- might be higher, yes.

MICHAEL CROMARTIE: I’ll say.

SHADI HAMID: So I think -- 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, after a military -- 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. And Sisi himself has been known -- you know, is known to be quite a devout person, which is actually why the Brotherhood thought ‘we found our guy in the military because he prays with us five times a day, he does the supplemental fast on Mondays and Thursdays, which means he is really, really devout.’ And even now post-coup, he’s attacking the Egyptian gay community, women’s rights hasn’t really improved significantly, he uses a lot of Islamic rhetoric. So in his presidential campaign he actually said that it’s the president’s role to promote the correct understanding of Islam, so the president has to lead on moral issues. So this is not someone who believes in separation of religion from politics.

MICHAEL CROMARTIE: Okay. We’ve got 12 people on the list here.
So, Byron York, you’re next. And we appreciate your precision.

BYRON YORK, Washington Examiner: This question is to both of you. President Obama often talks about the idea of a lid in the Middle East, that -- a lid. He said basically there is this murderist sectarianism there, and for several years a brutal strongman keeps the lid on it. We blow the lid off by invading Iraq and then kind of figure out how to put it back on but only with 170,000 U.S. troops there. Now the lid is off again, and Obama says, well, yeah, we could go back and put it on, but they really have to solve their own problems and come up with an inclusive government.

So the question for both of you is, 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?

MICHAEL CROMARTIE: Elliott?

MICHAEL CROMARTIE: Are you okay? Elliott? Elliott?

ELLIOTT ABRAMS: Yes. 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 when a -- 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 are -- 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 -- we can come back to Syria and Iraq policy, I have strong views on that, in fact, I’m testifying Wednesday in the House Foreign Affairs Committee on Syria and Iraq policy. But I think the harder question, the more interesting question, in a way for us is, you know, what do we do in a place like Egypt?
There are two questions here. One is, what happens -- the question that Shadi posed, and he posed it in the book, too -- 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? That’s one question.

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?” That is precisely the question posed by Egypt.

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 --

BYRON YORK: Which was my question.

ELLIOTT ABRAMS: -- which we should be intervening as we are to fight ISIS, and I think we should be intervening if need be to protect some friendly governments if they are -- Jordan would be a good example — if they are actually threatened by ISIS. The problem we face in the Middle East is not primarily a military problem.

SHADI HAMID: So if I can just add to that --
MICHAEL CROMARTIE: Then we’ll get some others in.

SHADI HAMID: Yeah. So one of the reasons that I am sometimes reluctant to overemphasize the role of religion, because that can lead us along the slippery slope towards the ancient hatreds thesis of Robert Kaplan and others, which was used as a justification for inaction, non-intervention in the Balkans, 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 -- and I was in the room once or twice -- 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.

ELLIOTT ABRAMS: Let me just say I took your question to mean direct U.S. military intervention rather than support for groups like the Syrian rebels, which I also favor, but that’s a separate --

MICHAEL CROMARTIE: Okay. Kirsten, pull the mic up.

And then, Mike Gerson, you’re up.

And then David.
KIRSTEN POWERS, Fox News/USA Today/Daily Beast: You were talking, Shadi, about, what happens if more democracy leads to less liberalism? And I think it’s something that keeps coming up, and I guess I just wanted to get down to the bottom, very bottom, line on this, where you guys stand. 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,” or whatever? You know, what’s your bottom line on that?

ELLIOTT ABRAMS: It’s not our country. You know, what are you going to do? We have influence on countries, particularly aid-recipient countries, and I think we should be trying to use it. For example, let’s suppose you have -- 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. We should help them with the bully pulpit.

When we think it would be useful, we should support those NGOs that are fighting, and particularly for minority rights, because one of the things we definitely -- you know, 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.

We can cut our aid. We can say, “We hate what you just did,” but we’re not -- what are we going to do? We’re not going to invade them.

SHADI HAMID: I mean, I think I totally agree, first of all, but I think that --

MICHAEL CROMARTIE: Well, you guys are agreeing a little too much.

(Laughter)

ELLIOTT ABRAMS: I’m going to start defending Obama, see, that’s --
(Laughter)

SHADI HAMID: So one alternative is the kind of Fareed Zakaria approach he talks about in his book *The Future of Freedom* where he coined the phrase “illiberal democracy,” that you establish the foundations of constitutional liberalism, and then you can think about democracy, and that’s how we approached it in our own history. We had a particular sequencing in the U.S. and also in much of Europe, that, again, the 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.

I mean, I can’t go to Egyptians or whoever else and say, “Hey, guys, Fareed Zakaria wrote this book called *The Future of Freedom* where he says that you should focus on constitutional liberalism and then --,” you know. 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.

So I just think that -- am I okay with it? Again, it’s not really for me to say. I’m an American liberal, a small “l” 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 CROMARTIE: Michael Gerson and then David Gregory and then about 10 others.
Michael, get the mic there.

**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 and whether that is -- how you view that.

And let me just ask one more of Shadi because it’s on a different topic, but I just wanted to raise it, about 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, kind of theories of the end times, among these groups, because I’ve read some about that, but I don’t really understand it, and that’s kind of the opposite side of that debate, so --

**ELLIOTT ABRAMS:** I’m sorry, go back to the --

**MICHAEL GERSON:** It’s really the role of the Iranian negotiations in this administration determining everything else --

**ELLIOTT ABRAMS:** Well, you asked -- I mean, I know -- trying to decide whether to attack the Obama administration in the vicious way that Shadi did recently.

*(Laughter)*

**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 is a major -- 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 is a lot about -- 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, that they are kinds of -- 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. So people were asking, “Why are they so obsessed with getting this city?” Well, one reason is because it plays into their kind of eschatological messianic dimension.

MICHAEL CROMARTIE: Before we go into a break, David Gregory, will you take us into your question? Then we’re going to take a coffee break for 15 minutes.

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 kind of clerical decline? And did you say it was the rise of illiteracy or the rise of literacy?

SHADI HAMID: Literacy.

DAVID GREGORY: Yeah, literacy combined with the decline of clerical influence leading to more political Islam. I mean, you know, the return to the good old days is not likely to happen for lots of reasons, including that Western notions of nationalism have taken such deep root and informed a lot of other people and movements, like the Palestinians.

So I’m just wondering, not just at the clerical level, you have vast populations of Muslims, and there has got to be, you know, rejection of these ultraconservative ideas. You have the role of tribal Islam and the role of clerics within the tribal structures.

So I would just like to understand more of this -- Shadi, you said that reformation is sort of spoken for, and it’s going in a direction we may not like, but it’s got to be a more dynamic situation that’s going on because what we hear so much of is, “Where are the moderate Muslims standing up and saying this is horrible?”

SHADI HAMID: Yeah. One point on the literacy issue. So 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.
Now, Western notions of -- you’re right, 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 I think if we want to save -- to use the Kissingerian term, I mean, what he has been talking about the last few months, 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’m a little bit -- 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. I mean, there have been God knows how many letters where, you know, 100-plus scholars sign and say that ISIS is bad, terrible, and doesn’t represent the true Islam, and so on and so forth, and ISIS doesn’t have mass popular support. They don’t need mass popular support to necessarily stay in power and to control territory.

But I think you’re right to point to a very dynamic situation where the diversity of the Islamist -- there is incredible diversity from Ennahda on the more, if you will, 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, parties that are even hardcore secularist, as we have in Tunisia, that actually do believe in the separation of religion from politics.

So there is a lot going on, and I think part of the issue is that a lot of these groups hate each other. There are real foundational divides about the nature, meaning, and purpose of the nation state. So if people hate -- I don’t believe that you can necessarily stop the hatred, I think it’s natural that people are going to dislike each other strongly because there is so much at stake, it’s existential, but what I would hope for is that people agree to hate each other within the democratic process. So 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.

**DAVID GREGORY:** But what kind of debate is happening among the population, I mean, among, you know, civic groups, just within communities, within countries, these kinds of debates that aren’t just political parties fighting each other?

**SHADI HAMID:** So, I mean, civil -- I mean, yeah, 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?

I mean, 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, and the Sisi regime is putting incredible pressure on these groups to the extent that many of them won’t be able to operate any longer for a number of legal reasons. And, I mean, just the other week, just a few days ago, a civil society activist who was active, in January 25th in Egypt, Zainab al-Mahdi, committed suicide, and that was a huge deal on social media, it had this kind of symbolic power, that someone who was so hopeful about the revolution became so disillusioned, distraught, and hopeless. So it captures, I think, this rise and fall of the Arab Spring in a very powerful sad way.

**MICHAEL CROMARTIE:** Elliott?

**ELLIOTT ABRAMS:** I wanted to comment on this question of, What is liberal Islam? What is conservative Islam? What about Islam -- what’s authentic? 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.

It used to annoy me enormously when President Bush, for whom I was working, would say Islam is a religion of peace, because the real response to that is, “Where is your theology degree from?” And the same thing is true of President Obama. For American government officials to be telling Muslims, “I know the real Islam. I know this” is
ridiculous and it’s an outrage; it would be an outrage about Christianity and Judaism as well.

So I think it’s important that while clearly we have interests at stake here, for government officials, who are 99 percent Christians, to be trying to define what’s authentic in Islam seems to me to be a fool’s errand.

MICHAEL CROMARTIE: We have about 10 or 12 people on the list, and I did see your hand. And we’re going to begin with Robert Draper.

Robert, pull the mic up, and then also be sure to turn it on.

Every now and then you’ll see me point. It’s because I want my sound man to know which side to have it on. It’s over here. Ready?

Robert.

ROBERT DRAPER, New York Times Magazine: Yeah. Okay. I wanted to ask questions relating to governance, both in practicality and as an ideal, and, 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. Do militias play a role that is essentially a nuisance role? Are they facilitators? Are they destabilizers? I’m curious about that because they are the ones who essentially provide the services that many of these governments are incapable of, and as an ideal in terms of government, Shadi, you had talked about how ISIS invokes the governing ideal of a caliphate and how that resonates with moderate Muslims, but, as we all know, the messenger counts, and when the wrong politician invokes Reagan or invokes JFK or Clinton as a governing ideal, it falls on deaf ears.
And so I’m wondering if there is a kind of dissonance amongst moderate Muslims, a resonance and a dissonance, posed by the fact that they think -- 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, even as they play to nostalgia, given the context of Sharia law.

MICHAEL CROMARTIE: Elliott first.

ELLIOTT 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.

So one of the things that has happened in a number of places largely as a result of the Arab Spring -- I mean, Yemen is a longer story, but certainly Libya -- is that no force, no institution, has replaced the national government, and it looks as if it’s going to be a while until it does. But I wouldn’t call that a kind of another form of governance, I would call it just chaos.

ROBERT DRAPER: But would they obstruct the formulation of another --

ELLIOTT ABRAMS: Sure. Sure. Because, I mean, the formation of a central government now is another way of saying, “I’m in charge, put down your guns,” and this will be very difficult to do and will require lots of bargaining because who is, after all, going to be strong enough to do that? We can offer certain -- we in the EU, the UN -- can offer a certain degree of legitimation to some forces, we can offer military aid, political support to some forces. You know, in the end, the question is going to be, though, who is stronger? Because they have really returned in Libya to a really Hobbesian state of nature at this point, they’re fighting it out to see who is stronger.

SHADI HAMID: So when we look at the caliphate historically, the role -- I think there is a lot of association -- it’s not just power and being at the peak of civilization and all of that, but if you look at the role of the clerics and the role of Sharia in the pre-modern period, the clerics were a self-regulating community that provided a check on executive
power, so the relationship between clerics and executive power was very different than in, say, Europe, where there was a kind of clerical despotism.

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, not in a totally modern sense, but something that resembles the rule of law, that there was a way to keep rulers in check and that the clerics were always going to be an independent source of authority because they represented God’s law, and the sultan, the head of the caliphate, could only do so much because he was facing up against the rule of Sharia as represented by the clerics. So I think that’s part of the appeal of the pre-modern period.

On the question of governance, I think it’s worth noting that ISIS -- so 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. I mean, Al Qaeda did a lot of blowing up and destroying, but it didn’t do a lot of building; it had little interest in capturing and holding territory and then implementing Islamic law and providing this kind of extremist model of an Islamic state.

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. And there was an interesting piece in the New York Times I guess last week by Kareem Fahim saying some of the growing anger in Raqqa over U.S. air strikes against ISIS because at least even if they dislike ISIS and don’t agree with its ideology, there was at least some degree of order, and the alternative to that is disorder, and if you have to choose, then you have to choose, and order is preferable obviously.

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.

ROBERT DRAPER: But this proves that ISIS can do what a militia does basically, they can pick up garbage, but when it comes to invoking a caliphate and all that that means when it plays to the hearts of moderate Muslims, do they find -- have you found in your conversations with moderate Muslims that they find that cognitively dissonant with the
promotion of Sharia law, that being an intellectual and cultural fountainghead comes at cross-purposes with Sharia?

SHADI HAMID: So intellectual and cultural --

ROBERT DRAPER: Fountainhead, basically that -- I mean, 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 there is -- much of ISIS’s methods, despite its invocation of the term “caliphate,” don’t necessarily buttress the notion that they would be the ideal promulgators of that --

SHADI HAMID: Exactly, yeah, exactly, and as you say, this is where 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.

But also I think there is a dissonance in that they hearken back not just to the prophetic model, but also to the Abbasid caliphate specifically, and that’s why Baghdad matters for them, because Baghdad was the seat of the caliphate during the greatness of the Abbasid Empire. But, again, I mean, the Abbasid Empire was defined by intellectual and legal pluralism and an openness to other cultures and philosophical traditions, Greek tradition, Greek philosophy. And so if you kind of really interrogate how ISIS is appropriating this heritage, there is a massive gap between -- as long as you know what the Abbasid caliphate stood for and what it was able to offer to Muslims, and I think that is slowly but surely becoming more obvious to a growing number of Muslims.

MICHAEL CROMARTIE: Karen and then Jeff Hardin and then Tom and David Rennie and everybody.

Karen Tumulty.
KAREN TUMULTY, Washington Post: Yeah. I was sort of interested in the degree to which economic opportunity for people plays into this. Elliott, you suggested, for instance, that a lot of the European fighters who have joined ISIS are young men who basically didn’t have any hope or opportunity in Europe, but Shadi says that literacy, education, you know, hasn’t -- you know, that it’s flourished even as literacy has grown.

So I was wondering, because 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 -- he’s a modernizer, so he’s only talking about one wife --

(Laughter)

ELLIOTT ABRAMS: -- 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 -- what should we say? -- advanced situation for women, is the country that is closest to what we would call a kind of Western-style democracy.
So, of course, it’s very hard to do, and if you look at Egypt, one of the reasons I think Egypt will -- I think General Sisi will fail is that while it is obviously the case that a dictator can modernize the economy, we saw that in South Korea, we saw it in Pinochet’s Chile, they had armies that weren’t getting in the way of modernizing the economy. He’s got an army that’s very much involved in the economy and wants to maintain its hegemony. So economic reforms of the kind of, you know, free market, Chicago School variety are not going to be so attractive to the Egyptian army.

But I think that literacy among men is very, very widespread. It’s still the case in a lot of Arab countries that literacy among women is lower than you might think. In Morocco, for example, it’s quite low for women.

But I think it is still correct to make the old Moynihan statement that if you can provide -- or “provide” may not be the right word -- if there is significant economic growth and people feel there is a future for them, including a family as part of that future, it’s going to have a large impact.

Just one other comment, and that is, 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.

There is one other question that I would add, and I add it as a question. A psychiatrist, British psychiatrist, who writes as Theodore Dalrymple in National Review, raised a very interesting question in National Review about a month ago, which is, A, why is it that the United Kingdom seems to be supplying such a percentage of ISIS and other extremists in the Middle East? And, B, a more interesting question, why is it that they seem to be the most brutal? Why are the beheaders speaking in British accents? He offered no answer, but I think it’s a very -- it’s a strange and interesting question.

MICHAEL CROMARTIE: He gave no answer even though he raised the question.

ELLIOTT ABRAMS: Yeah.

MICHAEL CROMARTIE: That was helpful.
(Laughter)

KAREN TUMULTY: I do that all the time.

(Laughter)

MICHAEL CROMARTIE: Do you want to add to this, Shadi?

SHADI HAMID: Sure. Sure. So 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 -- in political science, we call it the 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, and I think it’s unfortunate but true, but the middle class in, say, Egypt, they’re some of the biggest supporters of dictatorship.

And I remember after the coup, people who are dear to me, who I’ve known for a long time, well-educated, secular, elite Egyptians, calling publicly for the mass killing of innocent civilians, you know, Facebook posts calling -- you know, saying that there should be mass execution of Brotherhood members without due process, things of that nature, and then ultimately most of them, most Egyptian liberals, did support the crackdown on the Muslim Brotherhood.

So I would kind of question the way we normally look at it, that Islamists are the ones who have the bad record on democracy. Part of that is we don’t know yet know because Islamists haven’t really had a chance to be in power, but if we look at the last 6 decades, I would say it’s the secular elites that have held very closely to this idea of the
kind of benevolent autocracy that knows what’s best for the depraved masses, that sort of thing.

So this is why when the Obama administration, and I suppose other administrations, they 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, and if they’re more autocratic, that suggests that they’re probably not going to be as responsive to their people in the medium to long term.

MICHAEL CROMARTIE: Jeff Hardin, you’re next right here, and then David Rennie, and Tom Hallman.

JEFF HARDIN, University of Wisconsin: So I’m on a university campus and have been involved in some interreligious dialogue there, and what strikes me about some of that dialogue and some of the sense of perpetual surprise that some of our political leaders seem to evince when these kinds of things happen that we have been talking about goes back to underlying assumptions that we’ve touched on already, which is that modern Western liberal democracies, and certainly some of that interreligious dialogue sort of assumes a post-Enlightenment position that is very foreign to the thought leaders in the Middle East, and including the fact that they maybe run around the Enlightenment entirely and go back to Andalusia or some other Golden Era caliphate or something like that. And I just 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 that need to be -- we need to be in dialogue with.

ELLIOTT ABRAMS: Go ahead.

MICHAEL CROMARTIE: Shadi, you go first, and that way he’ll formulate his answer.

(Laughter)
SHADI HAMID: Okay. So, yeah, I think this is a real challenge. How do we, as people who are very much part of the post-Enlightenment, post-Enlightenment tradition, how can we 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., they can’t -- you know, “What? What?” I mean, but for people, they can visualize heaven, it’s practical, it’s real, and it drives them, and that’s just one example of where I think there is a kind of -- there is a big gap and people have to try to make the jump.

But I think you’re right, that there is a kind of liberal determinism, this idea that we’re all going to end up in the same place, and the kind of Ben Affleck talk that we all eat sandwiches, we all raise kids, we all bleed, of course, we do, yeah, there are certainly things like eating sandwiches together which define us as human beings, and we do, but, I mean, it’s very simplistic in that it doesn’t appreciate culturally and historically embedded differences that accumulate over time. I mean, you can’t undo history, and maybe that’s part of -- you know, because maybe our history is more limited, it’s shorter, we have less to draw on historically, and we tend to be, I suppose, not to generalize, but I think Americans like to see themselves as future oriented and they can’t understand how maybe X Muslim looks back at the 7th century and he talks about the Prophet’s companions as if he knows them, that they have first names. You talk about Omar and Abu Bakr, these are people that you grow up with in Sunday school and they’re real, they’re part of a living history.

So, I don’t know, I think that’s challenging for people to really take on.

MICHAEL CROMARTIE: Okay. Do you want to add to that?

ELLIOTT ABRAMS: First I want to add the Northwestern liberal elites to the Northeastern liberal elites.

(Laughter)
ELLIO T ABRAMS: Yeah. Look, I remember I was 17 years old in high school the first time I had a real conversation with a Catholic priest. I’m Jewish. And I said to him -- we were talking -- and I said, “Why did you become a priest?” and he said, “I thought it was my best chance of getting into heaven, saving my soul.” Wow. That blew me away. It was not a conversation that I was used to having with people. And there is -- pardon?

MICHAEL CROMARTIE: Especially when you’re 17 years old.

ELLIO T ABRAMS: Yes. 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 -- I mean, 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 alw

So I agree completely, I think it makes it extremely difficult for us to put ourselves in their shoes and try to see the world the way they see it and therefore to figure out what’s coming next.

SHADI HAMID: Just very, very quickly to that.

MICHAEL CROMARTIE: Sure. Sure.

SHADI HAMID: You know, when Obama talks about evil, I think you see this in a kind of striking way, and 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.” And I think that’s part -- I don’t want to overstate this, but I think it partly explains Obama’s unwillingness to act decisively, that if things just play out, it will all somehow, you know, 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.

ELLIOTT ABRAMS: I think -- yes, he said -- I think it was Obama who said, you know, what ISIS was doing had no place in the 21st century --

SHADI HAMID: Right.

ELLIOTT ABRAMS: -- which I thought, wow, what is the meaning of that statement? You know, we know what has a place -- we defines the 21st century, and this kind of religion has a blind --

MICHAEL CROMARTIE: David Rennie, you’re up next. Pull the mic over to yourself.

And then, Tom, you’ll be up. Go ahead and get the mic, Tom.

DAVID RENNIE: I wonder if you could -- you’ve done a very good job of explaining how it is all much more complicated than our sort of foolish political leaders acknowledge.

UNIDENTIFIED MALE SPEAKER: (Off mic.)

DAVID RENNIE, Economist: You’ve done a very good job of explaining how everything is much more complicated than our foolish political leaders are willing to acknowledge and how we are very good at making things kind of worse, but 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? Because I don’t spend a lot of time doing Middle East policy, I’m not a Middle East guy, but I write about American politics, so I spend a lot of time talking to voters, and there is a really simple
explanation for why we defended the Yazidis, why we like Kurds, and why we’re indifferent to 200,000 dead Syrians, which is that most Americans voters are done with Muslims right now, they don’t like fixing the Muslim world. They think that’s what they’re like. It’s the ancient hatreds thesis. And a lot of opportunistic politicians, certainly on the Republican side, that’s what they play. They say, well, you’re persecuting Christians, but you’re not defending the Christians; or this is bad for Israel; or we shouldn’t be Al Qaeda’s air force. You know, they’re playing the most simplistic possible line because what they know is the core reality is that after 13 years of not very successful war in the Muslim world, the American public is in a kind of 1930’s analogy sort of moment where they think these people are just beyond fixing and we shouldn’t try and get into kind of Sunni versus Shia, you know, they’re just -- we’re done with that.

So what should American politicians say?

And then just very finally on that, I mean, 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?

ELLIOIT ABRAMS: Complicated question. I thought you were going to tell us why the beheaders are British, but we can come back to that.

(Laughter)

ELLIOIT ABRAMS: I think I probably don’t agree that -- 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. Right? We spent all this money, thousands of Americans died, and we didn’t do any good, and those people are -- however, I think that feeling was diminished significantly by the beheadings. You know Trotsky’s old line, you may not want war, but war may --

UNIDENTIFIED MALE SPEAKER: (Off mic.)

ELLIOIT ABRAMS: Pardon?
CARL CANNON, RealClearPolitics: He didn’t say that.

ELLIOTT ABRAMS: Trotsky didn’t say that? It’s a good line. I’ll say it.

(Laughter)

ELLIOTT ABRAMS: As Fareed Zakaria said.

(Laughter)

ELLIOTT ABRAMS: Or Thomas Friedman. Okay?

(Laughter)

ELLIOTT ABRAMS: It sounds like Thomas Friedman.

UNIDENTIFIED FEMALE SPEAKER: A cabdriver said it.

(Laughter)

ELLIOTT ABRAMS: That’s it. That’s it. A cabdriver in Istanbul.

(Laughter)

MICHAEL CROMARTIE: What’s the line?

ELLIOTT ABRAMS: You may not want war, but war may want you.

MICHAEL CROMARTIE: Yeah.

ELLIOTT ABRAMS: I think there was a change, and one of the indications of it is you see Rand Paul, who had been the most isolationist guy around, beginning to backtrack after the beheadings because he feels public opinion is moving.

So I think that -- I don’t -- 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.

Now, take the red line on Syria, chemical weapons. I’ll make a counterfactual statement, so it can’t be proved right or wrong, but when I asked people in the White House in the months after that, “Why did you not bomb?” the answer I got from them was, “Did you see the polls? 80-20 against.” Now, that’s a better poll than President Clinton had when he went into the Balkans. Nevertheless, he provided leadership and did it because he thought it was the right thing to do. So I think that’s a crummy excuse for inaction.

But the counterfactual thing is I believe that if the President had gone on TV and said, “Do we want to leave our children the kind of world where poison gas is back, something that’s been gone essentially since World War I? No. And so last night I ordered blah, blah, blah,” I think he would have had it 80-20 the other way. I don’t think people are willing to say we have no interest in the Middle East and there isn’t anything we can do that would be useful there or helpful there.

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.

So I just -- 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:** So I think the bigger issue is that Obama doesn’t like the idea of fixing the Middle East, and I think, as Elliott alluded, I think that too often public opinion is used as a copout for things that Obama himself already strongly believes, because even
after the beheadings and after greater U.S. support for involvement against ISIS, Obama still refuses to get serious about Syria. There is a massive gaping hole in our Syria strategy. And since we started air strikes in September, the mainstream Syrian rebels have been begging for U.S. military assistance against ISIS, and it has not been forthcoming, and they have lost time and time again in various battles against ISIS. So that to me says something, that for a variety of reasons, Obama doesn’t want to address the Syria issue, and part of addressing the Syria issue is doing something about the Assad regime.

But 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, you know, 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. So, you know, let’s just try to -- I think we have to incorporate that into the analysis.

MICHAEL CROMARTIE: Okay. Representing the Northwest media elites, Tom Hallman, all the way here from -- you came the furthest.

TOM HALLMAN, The Oregonian: (Off mic.) I have a story coming from the Northwest. This summer I got my motorcycle and rode through six states with the Sturgis Motorcycle Rally, and along the way, I talked to people and I heard them say many of the things both of you said, life has no meaning, the leaders are barricaded in power, we need to immerse themselves in their world, people don’t seem to care that a U.S. bad capital failed.
MICHAEL CROMARTIE: Where was this again, Tom, you were motorcycling?

TOM HALLMAN: I rode the Sturgis Motorcycle Rally, South Dakota, from Oregon.

MICHAEL CROMARTIE: Okay. Got it. I just wanted to see where you were.

TOM HALLMAN: But kind of following up David’s question, in simple language, why should the people who I met along that trip, if they were in here, why should they 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?

(Loud noise)

MICHAEL CROMARTIE: On that note.

(Laughter)

ELLIOTT ABRAMS: Let me just ask you to finish the sentence, you said, can we in a sense help solve what? In that sentence?

TOM HALLMAN: That’s the question, what is -- it seems like there is this -- you kind of both alluded to it, there is a continual problem, whatever that problem is, over in the Middle East. Is there a solution, some kind of solution, or is it just getting back to this, the leaders are barricaded in power and here we go again? I’m talking about just not the intellectual elite of the country, but just the ranchers in Montana, the guys in the timber industry that I ran into, if they’re here, why should they care about this?

ELLIOTT ABRAMS: Well, okay. I’m not in the business of reducing this to a political speech. There are people whose business that is and who can no doubt -- will be trying to do that as we get closer to 2016, but I think it is possible to explain.

I gave the example of the red line on chemical weapons. 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.

TOM HALLMAN: Wow.

SHADI HAMID: I think part of the problem, though, is if we really wanted to -- I don’t want to use the word “solve” because we’re not going to be able to solve the Middle East problem, whatever that is, but 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. Otherwise, we have what we have in Libya, where I think it was right, moral, and strategic to support the NATO intervention in Libya. But where I think the mistake happened wasn’t the original intervention, it’s what happened the day after and the fact that we left Libyans to their own devices afterwards.
Now, it’s clear this administration didn’t really have the stomach for greater involvement, and I’m not even talking about troops on the ground, but I’m saying a real commitment to the Libyan people, whether it’s helping to train their army, the kind of technical assistance and help with state building for a country that lacked institutions for 5 decades. That’s a big undertaking. When we talk about Syria, that’s a massive undertaking. And my colleague Ken Pollack recently wrote a very interesting piece in foreign affairs where he laid out what building a Syrian rebel army would require from the U.S., he put the price tag at $3 to $10 billion a year annually for 2 to 5 years at least. Now, that’s if we want to do it the right way, if you will, and not do these kinds of half measures. But there’s an open question: Are Americans willing to go for that? Maybe they aren’t, but I think that it’s up to foreign policy practitioners and senior U.S. officials if they believe this is the right thing to do, to make that case and hope for the best. But ultimately foreign policy has always been a bit of an elite venture, so I don’t want to -- I think Gruber said something about this recently and he got into some controversy about elites and their control of policy.

MICHAEL CROMARTIE: Who is that?

SHADI HAMID: Gruber, about health care, so I don’t want to go in that direction.

(Laughter)

SHADI HAMID: But I think you can certainly say that about foreign policy, that it’s traditionally not been something that involves a lot of mass public participation because most Americans are more concerned with domestic issues and economic issues at home.

MICHAEL CROMARTIE: Now, before I go to Sarah, let me just tell you where we are on the list, and before I do that, I want to ask Elliott, the speech you just gave, have you given that to someone and who did you give it to? What candidate has heard what you just said? It sounded like something you’ve written for somebody.

ELLIOTT ABRAMS: I think that’s actually -- it’s a pretty common Democratic and Republican centrist speech.
MICHAEL CROMARTIE: Yeah. Okay. I just was trying to see who you might have leaked it to.

ELLIOOTT ABRAMS: I can hear that speech coming -- not that speech, but, you know, those ideas coming from Jeb Bush, Hillary Clinton. You know?

MICHAEL CROMARTIE: Yeah.

ELLIOOTT ABRAMS: It’s pretty normal stuff.

MICHAEL CROMARTIE: Okay. Let me just quickly, Sarah is up next, and then Carl Cannon, Scott Wilson, Emma Green, Byron York, Matt Lewis. I just wanted you all to know that you’re on the list. Sarah Bailey.

SARAH PULLIAM-BAILEY, Religion News Service: I wrote my question down just to try to stay focused. I’m not sure if I accomplished that.

So many of the journalists here are political reporters and can write about these issues through the lens of politics. So religion might be part of the story, but it’s often less prominent when you’re writing through the lens of foreign policy. But as a religion reporter, I work for a religion news service, I think it’s difficult to know how much to write about the religion angle when writing about groups like ISIS. So you’ve touched on some of these, but here is a three-part question that all sort of relate to each other.

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?

Is it helpful for Obama and other Western leaders to say things like there is nothing Islamic about the Islamic state? ISIS claims to be the Islamic state and seems to have resonance among many Muslims.

There is some coverage of Muslims being different from ISIS. On the way down here, I was listening to NPR’s “On the Media,” writing about how Muslims are trying to sort of counteract that thought that they might be connected with ISIS. How do journalists
write about the Islamic-ness of and Muslim appeal of ISIS without demonizing or exonerating a religion in religious communities?

MICHAEL CROMARTIE: Hmm. You might want to print those out.

(Laughter)

MICHAEL CROMARTIE: You go first and then Elliott.

SHADI HAMID: Whew.

MICHAEL CROMARTIE: Did you get all three?

SHADI HAMID: Yeah, I got the basic thrust.

So it’s difficult, and 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 I think have maybe a little bit of a different responsibility.

And I would say that on the issue, “There is nothing Islamic about the Islamic state,” should Obama and others say things like that? I think Elliott covered that earlier. I’m bothered by that rhetoric as well because Islam is ultimately what Muslims make of it. I think and believe that Islam and its kind of celestial essence is not evil or bad or supports the killing of innocent civilians, but Islam in that kind of divine state, if you will, doesn’t exist. Islam can only be understood through the interpretation of human beings. So naturally if Muslims do bad things in the name of Islam, then you can’t say that’s not Islamic. For them, it’s Islamic. I think the best you can do, though, in that context is to emphasize that this is a minority movement, that there are distinctions between different Islamist groups. I mean, one thing I try to do in my own work is 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 this kind of -- Islamism is a problem, it’s not ISIS, it’s not extremists, it’s not Salafis, it’s Islamism, the idea that Islam and Islamic law should play a prominent role in political life. I mean, that’s basically the definition of Islamism. So I think that’s a problematic thing, and to the extent that we, as analysts, writers, and journalists can push back on that, I think that would be a positive contribution.

MICHAEL CROMARTIE: Elliott, quickly?

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.

The British have had long years of experience, about 15 now, at trying to combat extremism by working with the people who were maybe extremist, but they weren’t violent. So we would work with the nonviolent against the violent, and I think it’s fair to say that the British government has pretty much found out that doesn’t work; that is, that the not-yet-violent extremist is still an extremist, and the not-yet-violent extremist is not going to be a persuasive force in arguing with violent extremists to put down their arms because he’s an extremist or she’s an extremist, too. So on Islamism, I think that is part of the problem.

I think the media has a really tough problem here, and I would analogize it to the problem of political leaders. I think that -- I mean, we’ve just talked about this constant statement by American political leaders that Islam is wonderful, Islam is a religion of peace, and the average American thinks, “This is crap,” right? “Because all these people who are doing beheadings are Muslims, so don’t tell me it’s all wonderful.”
So I think it is much more sensible to ask the question in a sense the way Shadi is asking it: Well, what is there -- 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? I mean, that’s a real description of a real problem; saying Islam is a religion of peace isn’t.

And I think that when political leaders do this and when you -- if, not when -- if you do this, you have the same result, which is people will lose confidence. Why is it that Europeans are voting, for example, for Le Pen? I think one of the reasons they vote for Le Pen is that their leaders are not describing the reality of France, which is a country which has a huge immigration problem now, and terrible intergroup relations, and huge Muslim slum areas in which people are not -- out of which people are really not permitted to assimilate and become, in their eyes or the eyes of others in France, real Frenchmen. It’s a real problem. And you don’t do any good by making believe there is no problem. What you do in a case like France is that the voter will turn away from a center right or center left party and go for a far right party because at least they seem to be describing the reality that the voter is seeing.

MICHAEL CROMARTIE: Quickly on this point, we’re going to witness two former members of the Bush administration have a strong disagreement.

Michael, you wanted to intervene here.

MICHAEL GERSON: No, I don’t know how strong. I would just say because it’s been mentioned a couple of times, I mean, we do praise Christianity as a religion of peace on Christmas. We do praise Judaism as a religion of courage on Hanukkah and other things. And we praise Islam, and every president from now on will praise Islam on religious holidays because there are millions of peaceful citizens who hold this view.

It’s also a theologically sophisticated view, as opposed to what you’re arguing, which is every tradition, religious tradition, has forces of tribalism and violence in its history, background, of theology, and every religious tradition has resources of respect for the other.
And you emphasize, as a political leader, one at the expense of the other in the cause of democracy. That is a great American tradition that we’ve done with every religious tradition that comes to the United States, included them as part of a national enterprise and praised them for their strongly held religious views and emphasized those portions that are most compatible with those ideals. I just don’t see that as any different. I mean --

ELLIOPT ABRAMS: Well, I do. I think that the pro forma statements that we make on religious holidays every year, the same statement every year, are not particularly relevant. Of course, we’re going to continue to do that just like we say about Mother’s Day, it’s all wonderful.

When you react to an act of fantastic violence like 9/11 by saying Islam is a religion of peace, you’re doing one thing that’s very important that President Bush did by visiting the mosque in Washington immediately, which is you’re reassuring American Muslims about your view and the nation’s view of them, and you’re trying to make sure there are no incidents. But you’re doing something else, which is you’re basically lying about the problem, and the problem is, I would say, as Shadi has described it, there are resources. The people who are doing these things view themselves as good Muslims. That has to be addressed and explained. They’re doing it because of their religion. So you cannot then say, “No, no, you guys in ISIS, you guys in Al Qaeda, you don’t understand Islam the way I do.” That’s not a sensible thing to say.

MICHAEL GERSON: How is that exclusively a problem with Islam? I mean, there are Christians in Nigeria that are engaged in violence because of their faith. There are a variety of groups around the world --

ELLIOPT ABRAMS: Right. Yeah. There are a variety.

MICHAEL GERSON: -- Hindus have engaged in violence because of their faith. Isn’t it part of the role of political leadership to say, no, actually this is the portion of those traditions that the resources within every faith that encourage respect for the other because they exist? And in fact the predominant reality of American Muslims and
Muslims around the world is exactly what you’re describing. That’s their daily experience.

ELLIOTT ABRAMS: I think you’re being much more sophisticated than the political statements that have been made, which are blanket statements that say this has nothing to do with Islam. Well, it does have something to do with Islam, it does have something to do with it. Even if it’s a perversion of it, it has something to do with it. And the sophistication of that statement I think would be interesting to hear from a political leader, but we have not had that.

MICHAEL CROMARTIE: This will continue over lunch.

Carl Cannon, you’re up.

Thank you, gentlemen, for heightening the tensions.

(Laughter)

MICHAEL CROMARTIE: Carl Cannon.

CARL CANNON, RealClearPolitics: I have one observation and then a question. Shadi, your answer to Sarah Bailey made me think you would have been a better responder to Bill Maher perhaps than Ben Affleck and Sam Harris.

(Laughter)

CARL CANNON: People forget this unless they watched the show, but Ben didn’t just say Muslims don’t punch their wives, like to eat a sandwich, and pray five times a day. I don’t know where the sandwich part came in, but --

SHADI HAMID: Ben Affleck, he said that.

CARL CANNON: Yeah, that’s a direct quote.

SHADI HAMID: Yeah.
CARL CANNON: But he also said then when -- during the crosstalk when he was frustrated, he just finally said his real view, he just said, “Jesus Christ!” which was an interesting interjection, I thought.

(Laughter)

CARL CANNON: But after the elections in Egypt that were won by the Muslim Brotherhood, the fear -- you both talked about it -- 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, though: 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 -- isn’t that enough? -- because then the rest of this could evolve, the rest of these problems? That’s my question.

MICHAEL CROMARTIE: It’s a very good question. Let me do this. Why don’t we hold your answers and can Scott and Emma and the others who have not been able to get in, give us -- are you going to withdraw Byron?

BYRON YORK: Yes.

MICHAEL CROMARTIE: You pass. Okay. Thank you for that. Spoken as a veteran.

Scott, did you want to get yours on the table here? And then we can let them give summary comments before we break for lunch. Scott and then Emma and then Matt.

SCOTT WILSON, Washington Post: Okay. It’s not much different from Carl’s, and it has to do with both the political discussion we have in this country about the Middle East and the message heard in the Middle East and the hypocrisy around American policy and the idea that to many people in the Middle East we are essentially infantilizing them about what our true motives are.
Elliott has said a couple of times that Israel is not the link, but, of course, many there believe it is. And I think some of the -- what you said, Elliott, before about 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? We’re 13 years out from 9/11, and we’re still having a very basic conversation about Islam and its influence on politics in the Middle East, whether Islam is the banner under which politics is played in the Middle East and whether the grievances, frankly, are extremely secular and they’re not about eating sandwiches and finding jobs, and there is a -- you touched on this earlier, Shadi -- there’s a basic sense of, why can’t people in the Middle East be angry? And how do we have an adult conversation about that in this country, that there are grievances and there are values?

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?

MICHAEL CROMARTIE: Okay. Emma, then Matt, and then we’ll get it all -- well, wait a minute, hold it.

Carl, you want your question answered; right?

CARL CANNON: Well, you’re going to get pretty lost with everybody.

MICHAEL CROMARTIE: Okay. Do you remember Carl’s question?

SHADI HAMID: Yes.

MICHAEL CROMARTIE: Emma and Matt, we’ll come to you in a second.
SHADI HAMID: Okay. So 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.

And, again, I mean, I think if we look at secularists, they have a more troubled history with democracy, so why don’t we ever say, well, why don’t secularists insist that they’re committed to the democratic process, and they’ll give up power if they lose elections? So we never pose that question to those who it should be posed to more perhaps. I think there is a double standard there.

CARL CANNON: Yeah, look, but the coup happened. I wasn’t in favor. It happened, and that was the rationale. My question is, if the Islamist parties promised this, would that be --

SHADI HAMID: But did it --

CARL CANNON: Wait a minute. Would that be enough to solve these problems that you’re both worried about, that democracy in the meantime would be not illiberal? I was asking it in a positive way, wouldn’t that be --

SHADI HAMID: Yeah, but so, you know, they have done that. 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 made clear -- now, we can doubt their sincerity, but they have 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 -- and this is the more legitimate fear among secularists -- 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?

ELLIO T ABRAMS: Can I just -- 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. You know, they have a law on the books in Egypt that says -- many Arab countries, too -- it’s an offense to insult the president. That law was invoked more times by Mohamed Morsi to put people in jail than it had been invoked from the period of King Farouk, when it was insulting the king, through Nasser, Sadat, and Mubarak. He was president one year, and he had more prosecutions for insulting the president. That’s not a guy who wants free debate and is looking to have a second free election. The pledge isn’t enough.

Now, there was a second part to the question. Or, sorry, there was Scott’s question.

MICHAEL CROMARTIE: Scott’s question.

ELLIO T ABRAMS: Yeah, the hypocrisy of U.S. policy over the years has been gigantic. Look at the support for Mubarak over a very long time. And you’re asking, why can’t -- why not discuss the grievances?

My answer to that in a sense is that is to some degree what Bush’s freedom agenda was all about. It 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, putting -- it’s odd, I mean, in a certain political way -- putting secular and liberal political leaders in jail who have supported him, who even supported the coup: jail. And what are we saying about this? Nothing. We’re with Sisi.

It’s really -- I’m part of a thing called the Egypt Working Group, which is a nonpartisan group of, you know, academics, former policy people, in Washington. We’ve been making this case since 2009 when it was Mubarak whom we were criticizing. We’re doing the same thing now. It’s a different president of Egypt, but basically we’re just hearing, you know, “the canal is too important, the peace treaty with Israel is too important, we don’t want to talk about that.”

Well, I don’t think it will prove to be a successful policy, and one thing it will do is persuade the Egyptians, as it has already persuaded so many people in the Middle East, 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. Egypt is a very good example of that. There are other examples.

So I think it’s a mistake in policy. I think that Bush got too little credit for that fundamental insight that the lack of freedom is a critical problem in the Middle East. Obviously other places in the world, too. But you and I should have a separate -- I
am prepared to speak for 30 minutes without stopping about Hamas in 2006, but that’s really not the purpose here.

(Laughter)

ELLIOTT ABRAMS: 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.

MICHAEL CROMARTIE: Shadi?

SHADI HAMID: So, Scott, I like how you framed it, that American governments don’t respect the Muslim right to be angry. I like that. So there are so many legitimate grievances, and I think Elliott talked about one of the big ones, which is consistent American support for autocratic rule. There’s a lot of other things that we can add to the list. I mean, certainly our policies in Palestine. Now, it might not be the central issue, but it is clearly a source of distrust and dislike towards America. I think we saw that very clearly over the summer with the Gaza war, how that galvanized Arab-Muslim public opinion. Now, their governments didn’t do much about it for a variety of reasons, but there clearly was anger towards the U.S. and Israel for their policies and so on.

But I think this is actually something I’m happy that Elliott brought up because 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.

And, I mean, I was living in the Middle East during the height of the freedom agenda, and back then -- we forget it now -- the phrase “Arab Spring” was used then. That was the first Arab Spring. There was an optimism in Egypt, in Jordan. I even had
Brotherhood leaders after Obama came to power and tried to make nice with Mubarak, there was almost a kind of Bush nostalgia.

I wrote a piece about Islamist Bush nostalgia in 2010. So there was something real there, and kind of counterintuitively because we see Obama as the guy who really gets grievance. You know? His foreign policy has been quite devoid of the recognition of Arab and Muslim grievance, and even right now our anti-ISIS -- so if we kind of -- if Obama’s war against ISIS is kind of his version of Bush’s war on terror, where is Obama’s freedom agenda? Where is the intellectual framework, the strategic vision that looks at the root causes of the mess we have in the Middle East? Obama has offered barely any of that. And we’re actually doing I think the opposite, where we’re so reliant on some of the most repressive regimes in the region to fight ISIS that we run the risk of just getting stuck in this endless cycle of dependency on autocratic regimes, which only makes the extremism problem worse.

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.

MICHAEL CROMARTIE: Okay, David. Yeah. Pull the mic over, David.

DAVID GREGORY: I got it. Usually I can project pretty well.

You know, Obama said notably that the United States should be thinking about where it can actually make a difference, which is a fundamental difference from projection of American power to stand for certain moral clarity in the world, and even Bill Clinton, who believed engaging in the Arab-Israeli peace process, that you ought to get caught trying, and Blair believed that as well.

So isn’t that 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?

MICHAEL CROMARTIE: You have to give really short answers.
ELLIOIT 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.

MICHAEL CROMARTIE: Ladies and gentlemen, you know a session has gone well when it’s gone overtime and you don’t want to go have lunch, you want to keep asking questions. So join me in thanking our presenters.

♦ END ♦