Report of the Georgetown Symposium on
Religious Freedom and Religious Extremism:
Lessons from the Arab Spring
March 16, 2012
About the Religious Freedom Project

The Religious Freedom Project (RFP) at Georgetown University’s Berkley Center for Religion, Peace, and World Affairs began in January 2011 with the generous support of the John Templeton Foundation. The RFP is the nation’s only university-based program devoted exclusively to the analysis of religious freedom, a basic human right restricted in many parts of the world. Our team of interdisciplinary scholars examines different understandings of religious liberty as it relates to other fundamental freedoms; its importance for democracy; and its role in social and economic development, international diplomacy, and the struggle against violent religious extremism. Our target audiences are the academy, the media, policymakers, and the general public, both here and abroad. For more information about the RFP’s research, teaching, publications, conferences, and workshops, visit http://berkleycenter.georgetown.edu/rfp.

About the Berkley Center for Religion, Peace & World Affairs

The Berkley Center for Religion, Peace, and World Affairs at Georgetown University, created within the Office of the President in 2006, is dedicated to the interdisciplinary study of religion, ethics, and public life. Through research, teaching, and service, the Center explores global challenges of democracy and human rights; economic and social development; international diplomacy; and interreligious understanding. Two premises guide the Center’s work: that a deep examination of faith and values is critical to address these challenges, and that the open engagement of religious and cultural traditions with one another can promote peace.
On March 16, 2012, the Religious Freedom Project turned to the events of what has been labeled the Arab Spring. We brought some of the nation’s premier scholars and policymakers to Georgetown in order to debate a critical question: what role, if any, ought religious freedom play in the struggle for self-governance among the countries of the Arab Spring?

A keynote discussion highlighted the views of three high-level officials from the Bush and Obama administrations: Dennis Ross, Stephen Hadley, and Elliott Abrams.

These officials and our panelists vigorously disputed a range of related questions. Among them: can religious liberty play a role in helping democracy to root? What is the relationship between religious freedom and religious extremism, defined as political engagement by religious actors that is hostile to constitutional democracy and open to the use of violence? Can religious freedom limit religious extremism? How should U.S. foreign policy seek to promote democratic institutions and regimes of religious liberty that can best counter religious extremism in practice?

The answers to these and similar questions are not only important for the Arab Spring countries, their citizens, and their neighbors in the region. The answers are also important for the national security interests of the United States and the American people.

The results of the conference were fascinating. Read on, and you’ll find erudition, disputation, useful insights, humor, and a great deal of enlightenment.
Program

Panel 1:
How Repression Breeds Religious Extremism—and How Religious Freedom Does the Opposite
Panelists: Johanna Kristin Birnir, Associate Professor, Department of Government and Politics, University of Maryland
Brian Grim, Director of Cross-National Data, Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life
Mohammed Hafez, Associate Professor, Naval Postgraduate School
Moderator: Monica Duffy Toft, Associate Professor of Public Policy, John F. Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University

Keynote Discussion:
Religious Freedom, Religious Extremism, and the Arab Spring: Bush and Obama Administration Perspectives
Panelists: Elliott Abrams, Senior Fellow for Middle Eastern Studies, Council on Foreign Relations
Stephen Hadley, Senior Adviser for International Affairs, United States Institute of Peace
Dennis Ross, Counselor, Washington Institute for Near East Policy
Moderator: William Inboden, Assistant Professor at the LBJ School of Public Affairs, University of Texas-Austin

Panel 2:
Fostering Religious Freedom & Curbing Religious Extremism in the Arab Spring—Lessons for U.S. Policy
Panelists: Jillian Schwedler, Associate Professor of Political Science, University of Massachusetts-Amherst
Samer Shehata, Assistant Professor in the Center for Contemporary Arab Studies, Georgetown University
Samuel Tadros, Research Fellow, Hudson Institute
Moderator: Thomas Farr, Director, Religious Freedom Project
THOMAS FARR: The overarching question for today’s conference is: What role, if any, ought religious freedom play in the struggle for self-governance among the countries of the Arab Spring? In particular, can religious liberty play a role in helping democracy to root? In Egypt, for example, what is the relationship between religious freedom and religious extremism, defined as political engagement by religious actors that is hostile to constitutional democracy, and open to the use of violence? Can religious freedom limit religious extremism? How should U.S. foreign policy seek to promote democratic institutions and regimes of religious liberty that can best counter religious extremism in practice?

MONICA TOFT: We have been tasked with investigating the empirical and theoretical causes of religious extremism, and the degree to which the exclusion or inclusion of religious actors and political parties in the political process inhibits or provokes violence and extremist behavior. I am joined by three panelists: Johanna Birnir of the University of Maryland, Brian Grim, from the Pew Forum on Religious and Public Life, and Mohammed Hafez, of the Naval Post Graduate School.

Johanna will talk about electoral politics, and the degree to which the inclusion or exclusion of religiously based parties or religious actors in groups within democracies influences how those parties’ religious actors act in that political arena. Brian has some new data that he will present about governments, and the degree to which they restrict the religious freedoms of religious groups or actors within states and the connection of that to violence. He is very clear in most of his work that correlation does not mean causation, but there does seem to be a relationship and his book actually shows that, and I think the most recent data are further demonstrating that. Finally, Mohammed will be challenging the idea that the more free societies are in allowing people to express their religion publicly, the less violence those societies are likely to face.

JOHANNA BIRNIR: The motivation for my project is the idea, found in large portions of academic literature, which holds that the content of religion directly or indirectly produces conflict. Much of the evidence for this comes from very thorough, detailed, and interesting case studies that explain how a particular group uses religion to motivate violence. We do not have generalizable theorizing about patterns that explain the association between religion and violence across contexts and even across time. We have very little cross-national empirical testing of these ideas, as well. With the exception of the projects that Brian and I will talk about, there are not a lot of data sets that aim to test these types of ideas across contexts and time.

To do this, we build on the well-known Minorities at Risk Project data set, which is the most comprehensive data set on ethnic group behavior, including violent behavior, and conditions under which ethnic groups live. These data only looked at a subset of minority groups, and did not examine any majorities. To ameliorate this problem of selection bias, we have created...
a comprehensive data set that outlines all ethnic groups, majorities and minorities alike. We code these data for religion, including majority and minority religion. We link these data to a whole suite of variables and then to data sets on conflict. For now, most importantly, we are working with the START Center at the University of Maryland, the National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism, to link the data up with their global terrorism data set, so that we can systematically examine the effect of religion on terrorism across countries and across time.

The overall theoretical intuition behind this project is that the content of religion does not have a direct effect on violence, per se. Here, we build upon the early work of Rappaport and Jürgensmeier. For example, although they do explain that members of many different religions do engage in violence, they do not argue that it is because of the content of those religions, per se. We follow in their footsteps to argue that while that is true, where majorities and minorities are divided along denominational lines, extremists may use the organizational structures and frameworks of religion—frameworks of ‘us versus them’ or ‘good versus evil’—to mobilize adherents to commit violence under certain conditions, often concerning some kind of grievance, such as income inequalities.

To test this idea, we have conducted a number of empirical studies. We have only focused thus far on democracies, because we are still in the process of building and linking different data sets. In the first study, we explored whether in democracies minorities that belong to religious families or denominations different from the majority are more or less likely to get invited into governing coalitions by majorities than their ethnic counterparts that belong to the same religion as the majority. To examine this, we looked at governing coalitions as the dependent variable. Interestingly, we found that ethnic minority groups that belonged to religious denominations that were different from the majority, are actually more likely to be invited into governing coalitions, if they field a separate ethnic party. Our explanation for this is that in liberal democracies, there is an emphasis on diversity and inclusion. Majorities see it as their strategic advantage to signal this emphasis on diversity by including ethnic minorities that are of different religions from the majority. The same is not true for ethnic minorities that adhere to a different denomination—so Protestants versus Catholics; Sunni versus Shia—ethnic groups of a different denomination than the majority are less likely to get invited to participate in the executive, if they field a separate ethnic party. We also discovered that if ethnic groups seek representation through non-ethnic parties, their religion does not seem to have any effect. Majorities really do seem to be looking for this very clear signal that allows them to demonstrate that they are being inclusive. We take this as support for our idea that there is nothing inherently conflictual about different religions or people of different religions working together in democracy.

We then asked whether the content of religion has an effect on whether a country is more or less likely to experience terrorism. To this end, we examined the effect of different religions on the number of terrorist attacks perpetrated in a country, whether a country experienced terrorism, and number of successful terrorist attacks. The most interesting finding was that we did not find very much of anything. The presence of minority religious groups did not make a country any more likely to experience terrorism. By and large, we have found no evidence that the content of religion directly causes violence.

However, the literature does show that religion is associated with violence in many cases. The third question we explored was what conditions allow extremists within ethnic groups to mobilize their adherents to perpetrate violence. Here we examined the interaction between political access and religious violence, namely, the probability of terrorism by an ethnic group. We looked at ethnic minorities that are electorally active and trying to get into government, and the time since they had last been included in government. Interestingly, we found that ethnic minorities that adhered to a different denomination and/or a different religion than the majority, when included in the political process, are actually less likely to perpetrate violence than are their ethnic counterparts that adhere to the same religion as the majority. When these minority groups are excluded, however, their propensity for violence changes very quickly, particularly if they belong to a different denomination than the majority. The longer they are excluded from full access to government, the greater the probability that the group will engage in some form of violence. And we take this to mean that if there is an exogenous grievance, for example, exclusion from government or great income inequality, it becomes much easier for extremists belonging to that group to mobilize members of the group to violence, along the lines of religion.
To conclude, we have not found any independent effect of the content of religion on violence. We have found very little evidence that there is any inherent difficulty in getting minorities and majorities of different religions to work together in democracy, although this is not as true for minorities of different denominations. However, when minorities of different religions are excluded from full access to government, their propensity for perpetrating violence does increase.

BRIAN GRIM: There are many different socio-economic, political, cultural, and historical elements that help explain particular situations in which religious violence and extremism arises. A growing body of cross-national research, however, indicates that the level of government restrictions on religion in a country is also an important part of the context within which religious violence and extremism arise. So while elevated government restrictions on religion may not necessarily be the direct or proximate cause of religious violence and extremism, it is inarguable that they are part of the larger social and political forces shaping regions such as the Middle East and North Africa today.

The data and the information that I will be speaking on come from a larger project at the Pew Research Center’s Forum on Religion and Public Life, called the Global Religious Futures Project. One aspect of this project looks at the level of restrictions on religion from governments, as well as impediments to free religious practice coming from societies, including social hostilities involving religion. To create our data set, we look at major international reports such as U.S. State Department reports, the U.N. repertoire on religious freedom and belief, Human Rights Watch reports, and Amnesty International reports. We go through these reports each year, looking at new information provided therein and we answer 33 different questions about each country by looking at these reports. It is a very non-normative process. We are not looking to support or defend religious freedom; we are merely looking at data on these topics. The time period of the data covers from mid-2006 to mid-2009, and it is an ongoing study. So we will have another report and you can stay tuned for that coming out within the next couple months. Beyond that, there will be regular reports coming out each year.

In the report, we measure two broad types of restrictions. The first is government restrictions on religion, and we use 20 different questions to give an index score for each country of the world. This measures not only laws and policies, but also actions of governments to inhibit religious beliefs and practices. This may range from government efforts to ban particular religious faiths, prohibit conversions, limit preaching, or give preferential treatment to one or more religious groups. It also includes government force used against religious groups. The second major index concerns social hostilities involving religion, namely, concrete actions within society, or hostilities by private individuals or groups within society. We see whether there has been mob or sectarian violence, hate crimes, religion related terrorism, or even religion related war within a country. Countries receive scores on these measures.

Looking at the Middle East and North Africa in particular, these regions stand out as having the highest scores in the categories of government restrictions on religion and social hostilities involving religion. In fact, government restrictions on religion in the Middle East and North Africa were on the rise in the years before the Arab Spring. We do not make a claim that the restrictions on religion coming from governments were the cause of Arab Spring, but it is certainly an important part of the context in order to understand the forces active in that region today.

As we looked at the data and of different religious groups that were impacted by these restrictions and hostilities, one interesting and surprising finding in the Middle East and in North Africa was that Muslims themselves faced harassment from governments or others in society, in a larger share of countries than did Christians or Jews. It is often the minority faiths and minority Muslim groups in a country that are facing the problems. It may be the Sunnis in a Shia majority country, or the Shia in a Sunni majority country, or a sect that is considered heretical or somehow unorthodox within a country.

One question we looked at in our data is whether or not government restrictions are self-reinforcing. In other words, when you have certain massive restrictions, do more tend to be added? The simple answer to that is yes. One way to look at that is by looking at countries that provide for religious freedom and the free practice of religion within their constitutions and basic laws, versus those that do not provide for it, or that contradict that provision through other types of laws and policies.

“I do not think any of us would say that religion has no role in some of these conflicts. The distinction lies in the mechanisms, the policies, and the situations within given societies that predict violence, rather than a particular religion.”

Brian Grim
What we have found is that countries where religious freedom is clearly protected and not contradicted, restrictions tended to decrease overall during the course of our study (a three-year time period). During that same period, in the countries where constitutions did not provide for religious freedom, we saw restrictions increase.

Now, looking at MENA, or the Middle East and North African region, only 5 percent of countries provide fully for religious freedom. In the MENA region, governments are twice as likely, to use violence toward religious groups. In the MENA region, two-thirds of governments have displayed hostility toward religious minorities, compared with one-third of countries worldwide. About 70 percent of the countries in the region have a national government that stood by while social abuses were happening and did not intervene to protect religious groups that were being harmed by society. Compare this 70 percent to the worldwide average of 25 percent. Another striking finding in the Middle East and North Africa is that 90 percent of countries in the region have a system whereby one religion is favored to the exclusion of favoring others. The worldwide average for this indicator is 25 percent.

In the Middle East and North Africa, the basic laws are not providing for religious freedom. One basic correlation that we point to in our data is that government restrictions on religion tend to be correlated with social hostilities involving religion. So as government restrictions increase, social hostilities also increase, or visa-versa. Of course correlation is not causation but we do see a clear association.

In our study, we did look at blasphemy laws in particular to see whether they had a clearer correlation with increases in restrictions. These are laws that prohibit blasphemy (speaking something negative about God or the Divine), apostasy (leaving one’s faith), or criticism or defamation of religion. We found that in countries with these kinds of laws (there are 59 such countries worldwide), they are often put forth as a way to help control social tension, because if religion is free of critique, negative sentiments will not be aroused. However we found that countries that have such laws tend to have very high government restrictions on religion, and high social hostilities involving religion in the first place. Countries that do not have such laws, tend to have low restrictions on religion. Looking at trends over a three year period, we found that in countries where there are blasphemy laws, there tended to be an increase in restrictions or hostilities over the time period, by margins of ten to one or even five to one, depending on whether the laws were enforced or not enforced. In countries that did not have such laws, we found that restrictions on religion and hostilities involving religion increased and decreased. This moves the discussion beyond simply correlation.

Of the five major regions we looked at in our study at the Pew Research Study, the Middle East and North Africa is the region with the most countries that have blasphemy laws. About 80 percent of countries in the Middle East and North Africa have such laws. Globally, 75 percent of governments that have such laws will use or have used force against religious groups. Governments that have blasphemy laws are five times more likely to try to eliminate an entire religious group from the country, compared to countries without such laws. Mob violence is twice as likely to occur and the harassment of women is five times more likely to occur in countries where blasphemy laws exist.

In MENA, violence with death occurred in 50 percent of the countries during the three year period, compared with 18 percent of countries worldwide. Mob violence was twice as likely to occur in MENA as in other regions. Religion-related terrorism happened in nearly every one of these countries, to some extent. Religion-related war affects half of country in MENA, compared with 13 percent of countries worldwide. Violence was used to enforce religious norms in two-thirds of the countries in the MENA region. This body of information provides insight into the context within which the revolutions of the Arab Spring happen. It does not say that restrictions on religion or these hostilities involving religion triggered the revolutions directly, but they are part of the grievances and sensitivities that are present within the region.

There is one particular type of restriction that is very common in the Middle East and North Africa—it occurs in nine out of ten countries in the region—governmental restriction on an individual’s right to convert. The worldwide rate for this kind of restriction is 19 percent. Countries where governments put limits on conversion are much more likely to have violence related
to conversion. 83 percent of such countries see such violence. Conversion may be considered a proxy measure for freedom of choice, freedom to change ideas, or freedom to have a different way of life. This is part of the restrictions placed on people within the Middle East and North Africa, and may be part of the grievances that were boiling underneath in the region.

MOHAMMED HAFEZ: I will lay out two general points. The first relates to this overall proposition that greater religious freedom leads to greater moderation among religious movements, and conversely, that less religious freedom leads to greater radicalism. As much as we would like this to be true, anecdotally from the Middle East and North Africa, and from much of the Muslim world more generally, we see that it is not as clear cut. I will point out some of those contrarian examples to make an empirical, not a normative claim.

The second point I want to make today relates to the rise of what is known as the Wasatia tendency, or the centrist tendency, or the reformist current within Islamism. This is a current that has its roots in the 1970's and 1980's, but certainly, it has taken organizational form in the 1990's and in the current period, in groups like Ennahda in Tunisia, or the various Muslim Brotherhood organizations in the Middle East. I want to explore what explains that moderation, given the fact that we all recognize that much of the Muslim world, and certainly the Middle East and North Africa, is living under authoritarian regimes of some sort. Yet we have seen a greater tendency towards moderation within, represented by that Wasatia movement.

This panel is entitled, “How Repression Breeds Religious Extremism, and How Religious Freedom Does the Opposite.”

The premise of that question is that the political context shapes how religious movements or Islamist movements, in particular, behave—their strategies, their tactics, perhaps their ideological orientation. I am pleased that the issue has been framed in the sense that such groups are not forever bound by a hostile, fanatical ideology, but are rather shaped by the political context.

Groups in the Middle East, and Islamist groups in particular, are actually quite malleable. They exhibit an ideological ductility such that they can twist and shape themselves in different ways to fit within the political context. The Salafis in Egypt are proof of this. For a long time they were against political participation and speaking against the government. Now they are organizing a political party, and indeed have done fairly well in the last elections.

I disagree with the title, “How Repression Breeds Religious Extremism and How Religious Freedom Does the Opposite” because it assumes a causal mechanism, namely that freedom leads to moderation, and repression leads to extremism. Three examples from Turkey, Tunisia, and Pakistan will illustrate my point.

The Turkish military has, for a long time, been a strong bulwark against the rise of Islamist movements, and whenever those movements made any progress in the electoral system, the military would gently—or not so gently—step in and remove the Islamists from power. Turkey has the most secular laws against the headscarf, against polygamy, and indeed, against the public declaration of Islamist ideology that would seek to turn Turkey into an Islamic Sharia state. Yet the effect of such consistent repression over decades has not been a radicalization of Islamists in Turkey, but on the contrary the Party of Justice and Development that currently rules in Turkey is largely moderate and accepting of the secular state. They do not officially call for Islamic law. They seek a secular state with protections for the Islamic identity. This is a clear example of a country that has actually restricted religious freedom when it comes to Islamist movements, and the reaction has been to moderate, rather than to radicalize.

We have a similar situation in Tunisia, whether under Bourguiba or under Ben Ali. Both presidents restricted Islamist movements, indeed, repressed them, exiled them, imprisoned them, and put laws in the books that restrict the headscarf, polygamy and some other aspects of Islamism in Tunisia. Here Rashid Al Ghannushi’s Ennahda Party was one of the most progressive in its moderation of the Islamist ideology, rejecting political violence, accepting the parameters of the secular state, and adopt-
ing the formula that has become the standard that we often see today: “We want a civic state with an Islamic identity.” This is really the formula that we see increasingly adopted in places like Morocco and Egypt and elsewhere.

Turning to a third example in Pakistan, this is a country where one cannot claim that Islamism has been repressed. Islamism in Pakistan has always found a place ever since the state was created in 1947. Even in times when the state sought to crush Jamaat-e-Islami, the courts came to the organization’s rescue. In the 1980’s, while the state of Pakistan become more repressive, it did not become more repressive towards Islamists. Indeed, it gave them added leeway in the political sphere, the social sphere, and the judicial sphere. No one can claim that that has had a moderating effect on Pakistan. Indeed, today, Pakistan has an extremism problem.

So does that mean that repression breeds moderation and inclusion breeds radicalism? Well, of course not. We have plenty of examples where repression has led to radicalization—whether in Algeria in the 1990’s, or Egypt during the Nasser or Mubarak years, or, Chechnya, or in Syria in the 1970’s and early 1980’s. All of this is to say that the proposition that inclusion leads to moderation and exclusion leads to radicalism is empirically unfounded. It is much more complex than that, unfortunately. As a social scientist, in my book, Why Muslims Rebel, I argued that we really need to look at various other factors. Inclusion/exclusion matters, but so does the nature of state repression, the capacity of these groups to resist the repressive state, the nature of external support for the dissidents, as well as for the incumbents’ regimes.

Despite the largely authoritarian nature of much of the Middle East and North Africa, we have seen a lot of moderation among Islamists, represented by the Wasatia movement—this centrist tendency represented by individuals such as Yusuf Al Qaradawi or Rashid Al Ghannushi, or Ali Muhammad al-Sallabi, among others.

What does Muslim moderation look like? This Wasatia tendency is a clear departure from earlier ideological positions of fundamentalist movements that emerged in the twentieth century, and indeed it is one that seeks to reconnect with the original Salafist tradition which argued for an Islamic modernism, an alternative modernity, a modernity rooted in the Islamic faith, not in opposition to it. I believe that this Wasatia tendency actually holds a great deal of hope for the Muslim world today, because it says that it is possible to be modern and to be Muslim.

What are the core beliefs of this moderate movement? First and foremost, they believe that religion is subject to renewal, and this is not only something that is desirable, but it is actually something commanded by God. Islam has to renew itself in every time and place to be relevant. They have taken an old fundamentalist concept and turned it on its head. Secondly, they believe in gradualism and they reject revolutionary violence. Thirdly, they believe that pluralism is the natural state of humanity so to expect everyone to believe and practice in the same way is antithetical to Islam. They believe that the state is a civic institution, not a religious one; again, this concept of a civic state with an Islamic identity. They argue that Islam does not impose a political system, but it does impose principles that should guide a variety of political systems. Those principles include justice, accountability, limits on tyranny, mercy and compassion, freedom from oppression, and commanding the good while forbidding vice. They also believe that the modern nation state system is a reality and they reject the notion that Muslims must merge together once again and form a caliphate. They believe in the compatibility of Islam with democracy. They take the example of Abu Bakr, the first person to replace the Prophet Mohammed, who was elected by the consensus of the community, as prima facie evidence that Islam is compatible with an electoral system. They believe in consultation, consensus, and the idea that one cannot impose religion on others. They see these principles as based in Islamic texts and tradition. Finally, they believe that the principle of citizenship should govern relations between majorities and minorities in Muslim states. To reference a contemporary situation, they reject the notion that Coptic Christians are second class citizens.

I would argue that these go beyond intellectual ideas. They have permeated the rhetoric of various Islamist movements today, whether in the Justice and Development Party in Morocco, or Ennahda in Tunisia, or the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, and elsewhere. They have both rhetorical basis as well as an organizational basis. Now, these will certainly be tested
in the Arab Spring, and this is going to be important to see if this actually comes to fruition. But to assume that these people are going to reverse democracy is an unfair accusation to make.

Now, let me be clear—the moderation of the Wasatia tendency is not perfect, particularly from a Western U.S. perspective. The Islamists still hold rather maximalist views when it comes to the Arab-Israeli conflict. They do not mask their suspicion of the United States and its interests in the region, and they would prefer an anti-U.S. realignment in the area. So in that regard, they are not going to be our friends, or at least not immediately. We have to cajole them and appeal to them to make them our friends. These are groups that actually have supported suicide bombings in the past under certain circumstances. This has to be taken in the context of the Arab-Israeli conflict, and the context of the region.

What factors help to explain the rise of this form of Islamism? Firstly, many of these organizations and individuals have witnessed the failure of revolutionary strategies, as in the cases of the Algerians, the Egyptians, the Tajiks, the Kashmiris, and others. Not only did revolutionary violence not work, it actually led to a worse condition for many of these Islamist movements, and indeed, it framed Islam as a kind of violent, bloodthirsty religion. I think those in the Wasatia movement do not want Islam portrayed that way. So in this case, actually, repression had something to do with their moderation.

Secondly, while most governments in the Middle East and North Africa were more or less authoritarian, they did begin engaging in certain political liberalization projects, largely to secure and to solidify their authoritarianism, not to genuinely or gradually bring about democratization. Nonetheless, this created opportunities to be in Parliament, to create political parties, to participate in civic associations, and so on. In order to be able to do that, Islamist groups had to modify their ideology. They had to reject the language that previously saw democracy as being antithetical to God’s sovereignty and so on. Here, a mixture of political opportunities and the general nature of the powerful, repressive states they were confronting, led these groups to a strategic choice to modify their ideologies.

Thirdly, we have what could be called the rise of the pious middle class—the technocrats, the engineers, the doctors—who largely permeate the organizations that constitute Islamism today. These people, on the one hand, were tired of the secular repressive state that largely was a failed state. It failed to deliver on the promise of modernity, on the promise of its own rhetoric. On the other hand, this middle class was also deeply imbued in the project of modernity and globalism. They were learned and exposed to the world and to technology. They felt that one could be both modern and Islamic; the two ideas are not in contradiction. So any Islamist movement like Al Qaeda that seeks to revert back to conditions 1400 years ago, is not something that will appeal to them. I think the ideology of Wasatia is really seeking to mobilize that constituency.

Finally, I think this is part of a dialectical or a dialogical process, by which Islam has formulated its more moderate positions, largely in response to the opposition that was constantly saying, “You are anti-democratic, anti-women, anti-Coptic.” They had to respond to show that Islam is not necessarily anti-democratic, anti-minority, etc. In doing so, that helps solidify the Wasatia ideology as an alternative to neo-Salafism and Wahabism on the one hand, or pure secularism on the other.

MONICA TOFT: In your empirical work and your theorizing about this, does it matter who is repressed? Does it matter if it is one group, or the majority or a minority or does it matter if everybody is repressed, such as in a highly secularized regime like Turkey? What effect does this have on religious freedom?

JOHANNA BIRNIR: I am not quite sure that anything that Mohammed said really contradicts my findings, because in the general political science literature, the association between regime type and violence is thought to be curvilinear. In the most repressive regimes, you tend to see less violence than you do in transitional regimes, and then again, violence decreases in liberal democracies. We are only looking at democracies so far, and it is possible that once we start looking at authoritarian regimes, we will find more of a curvilinear relationship. I also agree that the real world is messy but we can still account for that in cross-national and longitudinal analysis. In our studies, for example, we account for things like group concentration and country specific affects, electoral institutions, and the economy, etc. That does not mean that we have necessarily
captured everything, but we certainly can capture a lot of variation associated with that messiness. Also, the predictions that we make are probabilistic, not deterministic. If you subject an ethnic or religious minority to particular conditions, it makes that minority more likely to engage in violence. It does not necessarily mean that will happen in every single case. So it is not clear to me that there is any disagreement between the aggregate empirical analysis and the case study analysis. I just think that there is a lot more analysis to be done, and I think that these sorts of detailed case studies improve our understanding of these relationships.

BRIAN GRIM: In our approach, we do not look at a restriction on religion as a particularly negative or a positive thing. There are many situations in countries where the government and the society are very supportive of a certain restriction on religion. Even in the United States, we restrict the ability of groups to proselytize if they receive government funds to carry out a social program. In the data looking at the Middle East and North Africa and some of the other countries that Mohammed was speaking about, including Turkey, we see a wide variation in government restrictions. Ironically, in Tunisia, government restrictions were lower than in the neighboring countries. In Libya, Egypt, and Algeria, restrictions were much higher and increasing. I think that is why it came as a surprise to many that these revolutions started in Tunisia because there was not such a strong government clampdown there. Turkey falls somewhere in the middle, in terms of government restrictions on religion. Pakistan has very high government restrictions and also very high social hostilities involving religion. So within these countries, there is a wide variety of restrictions put on religion, as well as a wide variety of social hostilities. I do not think that we can put forward one model of explanation but there are certain connections between a type of government restriction and certain types of social hostilities. This is not necessarily a causal relationship.

MOHAMMED HAFEZ: I struggle with the notion of how we are to define radicalization. I think radicalization can manifest itself in many ways. There is a behavioral form of radicalization where one takes up arms. However, most of the time, there is a repressed, internal radicalization that stems from viewing one’s own government as being illegitimate. A person in the Middle East would tell you, “Our governments are illegitimate. They do not represent us. These governments are puppets in the hands of whatever Western or foreign power that is there.” There is a legitimacy deficit in the Middle East and North Africa and that leads to a form of radicalization that is connected directly to the fact that these are exclusionary regimes. If the dependent variable is how many suicide bombers, or how many attacks, or how many people have joined a guerilla organization in this context or that, I think the variable of inclusion/exclusion, in and of itself is of little use.

JOHANNA BIRNIR: Actually, during the time that Turkey has been the most repressive, it has also experienced a great deal of violence. It is really only when there is a political opening that you are seeing this more moderate expression of religion. Regarding Turkey, you can make the case that ethnic, rather than religious repression has bred extremism. I think that the moderation we are seeing now is the result of a political opening, not of political repression.

MONICA TOFT: It is interesting that much of your work, Johanna, examines how these groups are responding to the institutional discrimination that they may or may not face from the ground up. Brian, you are looking top down, although you do have the social exclusion or social restriction aspect to your investigation. If there is a policy in place, then people are more apt to use that to legitimate discriminatory action against some religious minorities. However, how would you view a population that may push for certain policies from the bottom up, wherein the government must either validate or reject their wishes? I think a very critical variable is the degree to which a government is willing and able to oppress.

“I believe that this Wasatia tendency actually holds a great deal of hope for the Muslim world today, because it says that it is possible to be modern and to be Muslim.”

Mohammed Hafez
government then enforces can go both ways, and Egypt is an example where it went back and forth between the two.

RICHARD HYDE (Religion Consulting Group): Professor Hafez, could you tell us more about Sunni and Shia modernizers? Do they get along well with each other? If so, how? How do they differ with one another?

MOHAMMED HAFEZ: I have not looked at the Shia counterparts, but I think this is an area where there are limits on the moderation of the Wasatia tendency. The fundamental divide between Sunni and Shia creates a problem in terms of a general unity, based on an Islamid identity. Any unity is found in the notion that they agree to disagree.

MINA (Egyptian Coptic activist): What is the modern perspective on religious freedom for groups like the Muslim Brotherhood and other Salafist groups?

MOHAMMED HAFEZ: I do not lump the Salafist with the Wasatia tendency. The Wasatia presents itself as a critique of neo-Salafism that essentially wants to revert back to the pious founding fathers of the religion, which would mean adopting many traditional institutions. There are debates within the Muslim Brotherhood because it is not a unitary organization. There are many within the Muslim Brotherhood who have abandoned many traditional views, and then there are those that hold onto them. Are these people completely liberal and moderate, in the way that we would like to think of them here in the West? Is that the proper standard by which to judge? We need to be more patient with Egypt with regard to its transition and its moderation, including that of the Islamist movement. To expect all criteria to be met at once is an unfair burden to impose on those parties and organizations. The anti-Semitism that these groups express is also expressed by secular parties, nationalist parties, atheist parties, because that is a product of the tensions of the Arab-Israeli conflict. It is a historically contingent condition, not one that is rooted in the Islamist movements more generally, I would argue.

MONICA TOFT: How does the treatment of the Copts in Egypt indicate the progress of democracy? Perhaps the Copts can be viewed as a kind of indicator of the advancement of rights and freedoms in the country, such that if their rights are being abrogated, it does not bode well for how democracy may proceed in Egypt.

MOHAMMED HAFEZ: I am not sure what rights are being abrogated. Their churches were bombed under Mubarak. So this is not something that is relatively new, or exclusive to the transition. It is not something that is led by the Muslim Brotherhood, but rather by the Salafists.

The majority of Muslims are oppressed in Egypt, so it is important to consider the general context of the region. I think we are holding countries that are quite different from our context and level of development, to standards by which we ourselves may even fall short.

MITHCELL TYNER (International Religious Liberty Association): A question that goes to the credibility, transparency, and reliability of the moderate groups that you referenced: To what degree does their position adopting modernity reflect a true change of heart and mind? Do they accept some degree of toleration and diversity and all those things as the ultimate good? Or is this simply a tactical, grudgingly accepted position, an acknowledgement of current reality?

MOHAMMED HAFEZ: Time will tell, of course. We do not know if these groups have completely changed their hearts and their minds in that regard. One thing that we know empirically and from historical record is that radical groups can moderate: consider communist or green parties in Europe. I think this will be the case with regard to the Wasatia tendency.

MONICA TOFT: Brian, why is it that your more recent data are showing more repression, particularly in the Arab world?

BRIAN GRIM: We do see an increase in restrictions in the Middle East and North Africa, both from the government and social hostilities, as well. To simplify a few of the many complex factors at play, many of the governments in the region were suppressing political groups and religious groups like the Brotherhood. That was part of the rising restrictions. It was not a situation where they were trying to close mosques or churches, as much as it was a situation where certain groups were targeted and the restrictions were tightening in those fields. At the same time, if something happened against religious minorities, the government was not as quick to act to protect them. This was the context of the restrictions in the region. It remains to be seen whether governments will be more
responsive to protecting religious minorities, or whether they will be more inclusive in allowing different Muslim groups to have a voice in society. Before the Arab Spring happened, we saw a tightening of restrictions. Now we are seeing new restrictions or new enforcement of existing restrictions, which arouses greater social support for such laws.

MONICA TOFT: Johanna, having looked at established democracies, what lessons or implications could be brought out from your study?

JOHANNA BIRNIR: The institutional literature is currently going through a bit of a revision. We have to think about what are the religious and ethnic cleavages in society. We have to think about whether there is great polarization or great fragmentation. We need to make institutional recommendations on a case by case basis. I really do not think that the literature at this time, or my research, supports any kind of blanket statement about the most appropriate type of institution to ensure representation that does not lead to violence.

SIMON POLINDER (Fellow, Berkley Center): To Professor Birnir, how does your conclusion, that religious content does not influence conflict, per se, relate to research that suggests how religion, and even several denominations, can influence a democracy?

JOHANNA BIRNIR: Our conclusion is that any religion can be used for violence. When we look at countries across time and space, we do not find systematic evidence that one religion is predominantly used for violence. That is why we say the content of the religious philosophy is not a root cause of violence. It is not evident to us that the content of any particular religion is necessarily linked to violence or is necessarily going to be used to motivate violence. That does not mean that religion is not used for violence on many occasions. We do say that if exogenous conditions are such that it is plausible to frame a conflict in religious terms, then extremists within a group will often use that tool. This is not limited to one religion. Extremists across different religions, given the proper incentives, may use religion as a tool to motivate for violence.

ATTILLA MOILA: Does the value of this kind of discussion only lie in a retroactive capacity to analyze past events or might there be some predictive ability that emerges from all of this research?

BRIAN GRIM: Gathering and analyzing information from a quantitative point of view, is a very lengthy process. In looking back, we can see that there were some indicators that something was going to happen. Predicting the future is a very difficult thing to do, of course, but at least at the Pew Research Center, we are developing a growing body of annual measures that we monitor. As we look at those trends over time, perhaps it may be possible to see trends that are indicators of other areas of danger. A large part of what we are doing here is having a dialogue that was not happening ten years ago, or maybe even a few years ago.

JOHANNA BIRNIR: To develop warning indicators, we use longitudinal data, going back decades, as well as cross-national samples. Yet even those indicators are probabilistic. With prediction, one always has to take into account the context of the particular case. The best we will ever be able to do is give a probabilistic prediction about something that might happen in the future. We can identify certain structures or certain types of behavior that make an outcome more or less likely.

CYNTHIA BOWLER (Attorney): I would like to press Professor Birnir on her thesis that the content of the religion does not necessarily inspire conflict. There is a general understanding that there exists a theological underpinning of Jihadism, and that government sponsored Madrasa schools, for example, tend to strengthen such theological underpinnings.

JOHANNA BIRNIR: It is true that such schools can be used as a tool for violence in Islam. However, the same principle holds true for every other religion that I have looked at in my analysis. Conflicts often tend to be framed in religious terms. That is why we hold that the content of religion is not the root cause of violence, rather, religious doctrine may be used as a tool for violence. Across time and space, every religion has had a group that used the content of that religion as a motivator for violence.

MOHAMMED HAFEZ: I completely agree with that. In order to justify their violence in Islamic terms, Jihadists have to engage in a lot of framing and ideological manipulation.

BRIAN GRIM: In a study I did with Roger Finke at Penn State we did an advanced statistical test, controlling for what predicts religion related violence. We found that social restrictions on religious freedom, resulting in government restrictions on religious freedom, lead to violence. This creates a cycle of religious violence. We controlled for the religion of each country, and we found that Islam did not directly predict religious violence in this model. One statistically significant factor was whether the government deferred to religious law and religious authorities within the country. That tended to drive up the level of social restrictions on religion, when government and religious authorities were working in tandem. I do not think any of us would say that religion has no role in some of these conflicts. The distinction lies in the mechanisms, the policies, and the situations within given societies that predict violence, rather than a particular religion.
Religious Freedom, Religious Extremism, and the Arab Spring: Bush and Obama Administration Perspectives

TIMOTHY SHAH: The idea that religious freedom may be an effective policy strategy for addressing religious extremism is not new. Consider the policies that Thomas More designed for the Island of Utopia about 500 years ago. In Utopia he writes, “There have been constant quarrels about religion, and the various warring religious groups have refused to cooperate with each other. So then, a new leader came along who made a new law by which everyone was free to practice what religion he liked, and to try to convert other people to his own faith, provided he did it quietly and politely by rational argument. If he failed to convince them, he was not allowed to employ violence or personal abuse.” So in Thomas More’s Utopia a policy of religious freedom was the effective solution for the problem of religious extremism, religious conflict, and religious violence. That was Utopia. But what about the real world? To lead us in the discussion of this crucial issue, we are honored to have William Inboden.

WILLIAM INBODEN: Thank you to everyone for turning out for what we hope will be a stimulating and insightful discussion. Any one of our panelists would be more than capable of delivering a keynote address on his own, so the fact that each has agreed to join a conversation is all the more enriching. Between them, they have served in seven presidential administrations—every one since the Ford Administration. And they have presided over some profound democratic transitions, including, most recently, the Arab Spring. So let me start with this question: During his presidency, President Bush spoke often of his belief that the peoples of the Arab World both desired and deserved democracy. Would you view the events of the Arab Spring as a vindication or perhaps a cautionary tale for some of the vision that President Bush laid out?

STEPHEN HADLEY: We have to start with the fact that the revolutions in the Middle East are being made by the people of the Middle East. President Bush looked at 9/11 and articulated very clearly and publicly that U.S. policy had been wrong for about 50 years because it was premised on the notion that you could support tyrants and authoritarians in the Middle East and get stability. For over 50 years, we thought we needed that stability for oil and to keep out the Soviets. The lesson that President Bush drew from 9/11 was that supporting authoritarians led, not to stability but rather to terrorism because it created a culture of despair and a lack of hope that made the Middle East a recruiting ground for extremism.

President Bush came out and said very clearly and that the United States had to have a different policy. It had to have a policy that supported freedom, democracy, human dignity, and the right of people to take control of their own future. This, in turn would, over time, lead to a real kind of stability based on
democracy and freedom. I think he was right and I think he celebrates with the people of the Middle East that freedom and democracy are finally coming to the region. It has been said that this is not an Arab Spring; this is an Arabic Awakening and there will be spring, fall, winter, and summer: ups and downs. It is going to take a long time, but at least we can say that freedom and democracy are beginning to be on the march in the Middle East, and that is a very good thing.

WILLIAM INBODEN: It appeared at times that the Obama administration was caught by surprise by the initial advent of the Arab Awakening or Arab Spring. Could you reflect from your time there on the inside how this played out within the Obama administration? What do you think the administration got right? What do you think they got wrong in responding to these events in real time?

DENNIS ROSS: I think you are right about the fact that everybody was caught by surprise. The truth is that nobody predicted what would happen. In the summer of 2010, the President signed a Decision Memorandum that was to launch a whole government review of our approach to the Middle East on the question of reform. It was based on the premise that President Bush had articulated, that the reality of the region was creating an illusion of stability, but not the reality of stability. The existing formula was not one that was going to be sustainable over time. Our relationships with some authoritarian regimes that were rooted in traditional strategic interests were understandable at one level, but the cost of association with them was going to go up because their ability to keep themselves in power was going to become increasingly problematic.

In the final weeks of 2010, the administration brought in 30 activists from the region and I met with them. At one point I asked the question, “How soon do you think change could come?” Not one of them thought change could come soon. When they looked at the reality of trying to change oppressive governments they had a sense that they themselves were not organized in a way that would necessarily produce change very quickly. The people who had the greatest stake in change did not see it coming. So I do not think it is a huge surprise that we did not see it coming the way it came. When it did come, the administration was confronted with many immediate dilemmas. There were debates within the administration between those who saw this as a matter of being on the right side of history, versus those who seriously considered America’s 30-year relationship with Mubarak and other leaders in the region. In the real world of policymaking, you have to make choices between options many of which are not all that desirable, and sometimes you choose the ones that you think are least bad. In this particular case, a judgment was made as it related particularly to Egypt to try to convince Mubarak that, in the interest of stability, a transition was necessary wherein he would leave and his son would not replace him. The basic decision was actually to have the President speak to Mubarak. Additionally, we sent an emissary, Frank Wisner, to try to manage a transition. There was the question of who or what would replace Mubarak and how best to manage the transition. How much influence do we have and what is the best way to exercise it?

Broadly speaking, I think the administration got right the fact that you had to manage transitions, but you also had to realize the limits of doing so. The effort to identify with the spirit of what was in the street was the right approach. One can debate the question of whether we should have done more sooner. There was the recognition that the United States did not have the credibility as a symbol of change because of our long associations with the Mubarak regime. There was also the criticism that the United States did not have firsthand experience with transitions. One of the things that that we focused on was not just working with the E.U., but working with a number of those countries that had had transitions to see if we could develop common themes that would have a greater likelihood of receptivity and greater degree of credibility. On the issue of what we were doing and saying publically, I think we took the right approach. On the issue of how we could have tried to orchestrate with others sooner, maybe we could have done more. On the issue of how we dealt with the staff of the Mubarak government, maybe more could have been done sooner to impress upon them the need to adopt, not just the words of a smooth transition, but credibility in how they responded to real freedom of speech. In many ways they undercut their own credibility early on. The straight answer
is that getting this exactly right is maybe easy to describe theoretically and hard to do practically.

WILLIAM INBODEN: What do you think the Bush Administration got right and what do you think the administration could have done better on these issues of democracy, reform, human rights, and religious freedom in the broader Middle East?

ELLIOTT ABRAMS: After 9/11, President Bush began an effort to understand what happened and why it happened. The famous 2002 Arab Human Development Report from the United Nations Development Program showed that there was a freedom deficit in the region, particularly in the Saudi regime. This was evident especially in the political organization of these regimes. This freedom deficit led the President to conclude that these regimes were not actually stable. I would make an exception here to some extent for the monarchies, which have varying degrees of legitimacy. Now, I think the President began to act on this. We could have done more, but there were pressures against doing so. Had we been pushing harder against these oppressive regimes, as a consistent U.S. foreign policy applied over generations, maybe there would have been greater political space for the Arab Spring.

To those who would bemoan the political passing of President Mubarak, it is important to note that the current situation is due in large part to Mubarak, who did not crush the Muslim Brotherhood. He played footsie with the Muslim Brotherhood. And he crushed the center. That is one of the reasons that the center is quite weak and only got 20 percent of the vote in the recent election.

WILLIAM INBODEN: Steve, what would be your assessment of the Obama administration’s record thus far on democracy, religious freedom, and the Arab Spring?

STEPHEN HADLEY: In the 2005 Egyptian elections, it looked as if Mubarak was on the way to reform. He went out to campaign, and after that election the Egyptian press was saying Egypt will never be the same. Then after the first round of parliamentary elections, the Muslim Brotherhood started to do well, because Mubarak had dismantled the center. When this happened Mubarak got scared, and in the second part of that parliamentary election, any reforms were erased. At that point, our effort to get Mubarak to preside over a transition ended. The administration kept talking about democracy and freedom but Mubarak would reply by saying that the United States does not understand the Egyptian people.

One of the challenges for the Obama administration concerns those regimes that have not had revolutions—the monarchies. They have legitimacy and are trying in their own way to reform. The challenge for the administration is to try to get these regimes that have some legitimacy to lead their people to a democratic future without having to go through the disruption of revolutionary change.

DENNIS ROSS: Mubarak very much did what Elliott was describing, and he was not alone in this. All of the so-called republics had no justification for why they were in power. They had no idea that explained what their reason for ruling was, unlike the monarchies that had dynastic legitimacy. Because they had no justification, they feared the creation of a narrative that could justify an alternative. So Mubarak focused on making sure that there could not be an alternative narrative, and therefore it had to be, in a sense, a binary situation. He sought to create a sense of fear about that alternative and he played upon what has been historically a sense within Egypt about the great value and virtue of stability. They outlawed the Muslim Brotherhood as a party, but by the same token they allowed the Islamists to take over all the professional syndicates, which became another ‘Muslim Brotherhood’ that came to dominate. This was okay from Mubarak’s standpoint because, in a sense, this was the way he lived and let live with the Muslim Brotherhood. He gave them a kind of outlet, and yet there was no tolerance for liberal reformers. The mosque became the one place where there was freedom of speech and space for the Brotherhood to organize.

The Brotherhood is seen as being authentic because first of all it is Islamic and that is, in a sense, indigenous. Secondly, it is seen as being credible because it actually stands up and says things. Thirdly, it is seen as being effective because it delivers some social welfare. Fourthly, it is seen as non-corrupt and embodying social justice, the antithesis of the regime. The secular liberal...
alternative is not there. First of all, liberals bear a stigma because they are secular and the regime is secular. Secondly, they are not allowed to organize. So when the time comes and the young generation is able to use social media and the Internet, they are not in a position where they have had the time to create an identity, an agenda, or a platform that can be presented to the public.

Now, there is one very interesting change in everything that has happened: This was a “subject” political culture and not a “participatory” political culture. The fact is people in this part of the world today increasingly see themselves as citizens, not as subjects. As citizens they should have rights, they can make demands, they have expectations, and they should be able to hold their governments accountable. Yet, they do not have the institutions that enable civic expression. It will take time to build those institutions, and to create standards of accountability.

Essentially, the administration has done a lot of this at different levels, and there have been sustained conversations with various parties. In the region, there is a sense of citizenship emerging, and that requires a response that will give people a sense that they have the means to participate in shaping their own future and their own destiny. This is a difficult task. Many leaders in the region understand this, but they do not quite know how to take the steps that will be responsive without unleashing unknown forces. There are not too many people in power who are going to take steps that they think will actually put them out of power.

WILLIAM INBODEN: What is the role of religious freedom in these ongoing transformations? When we hear “religious freedom,” is that a stocking horse for a greater role for Islamism, which in turn will be regressive, or is religious freedom potentially a key solution to pluralism and to creating these institutions and habits of citizenship especially for non-Islamist Muslims as well as minorities such as Christians and Jews?

ELLIOTT ABRAMS: These are countries in which there was a fair amount of religious freedom for the most part. The restrictions on religious freedom that do exist there are twofold. For example, in many of these countries there are laws against changing one’s religion from Islam to another religion. Then there were the restrictions that the state put on the Muslim Brother-

“The fact is people in this part of the world today increasingly see themselves as citizens, not as subjects. As citizens they should have rights, they can make demands, they have expectations, and they should be able to hold their governments accountable.”

Dennis Ross

hood and other expressions of Islamist belief.

The problem is finding a limiting principle to balance the will of the majority with the existence of certain rights. I think there will be some competition among the freedoms that we want to see these countries adopt. For example, in election campaigns Islamists generally will argue against the secular parties. There is a complicated interplay and it is not a simple question of assuming that every kind of freedom should now advance at exactly the same pace, and will advance at the same pace because they are all inter-related. I do think that the United States has a role here. The American style of secularism is not the French style, and we should be trying to explain and to defend the American model because a lot of people in the Middle East are beginning to become familiar with it, and realize that it may be a much better model for them than the French model. Also, we do not believe in absolute majority rule. We believe in liberty under the law and a constitutional system. We need to say repeatedly and loudly that we do not view democracy as the ability of 51 percent to impose anything they like on everybody else.

STEPHEN HADLEY: Religious freedom is extremely important to us as a value. I think that the Bill of Rights begins with religious freedom because in some sense if you have that, the other parts of that Amendment follow as corollaries. However, if we force these regimes to deal first with the issue of religious freedom - an issue that has bedeviled our country for 200 years—their new democracy will be hobbled.

I think we should be doing something that will enable the resolution of those questions but that does not force the issue prematurely. This would be a focus on religious tolerance. The Middle East needs to develop a tradition of tolerance and pluralism. If the Middle East cannot solve the issue of tolerance, then political authoritarianism will be replaced by religious authoritarianism. That is the threat to democracy and freedom in the long term in the Middle East.

The United States needs to be pushing for religious tolerance, for an understanding that majority rule does not mean the imposition of values on everybody else, and for the idea that there has to be some space between the state and religion. Interestingly enough, Prime Minister Erdogan of Turkey helped in that regard in a speech he made in Cairo that angered a lot of Islamists. He basically said that the state should be equal distance from
all religions and no religions. The state ought to run a system where all religions have a place, but the premise of that is going to be tolerance. The key for long-term stability is tolerance as an element of democracy because sectarianism will only lead to widespread instability.

DENNIS ROSS: In addition to tolerance, I think the critical point to emphasize is respect for minority rights. Among the important political standards of accountability, it is critical to preserve a space for competition that entails respect for the views and rights of others. The rights of elected lawmakers must be respected, but there must also be respect for the rights of minorities.

Right now one can see the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood trying to define what the role of religion will be vis-à-vis the state. Regarding the role of Sharia in the state, there is a difference between those who would have an omnipresent role for Sharia, and those want a kind of separation. I agree that we, as the United States, have a role to play. I think we will be more effective if we can build what amounts to a large number of partners saying this internationally and repeating it so it becomes a mantra. If it becomes a mantra, the Muslim Brotherhood, in particular, will realize the world is watching. If the Brotherhood wants international help, they need to meet certain international standards, as well as the standards of the Egyptian public.

WILLIAM INBODEN: Given that the Iranian regime is almost defined by a particular brand of religious intolerance, do you think that religious freedom advocacy might be a way of promoting reform, moderation, and a better path forward in Iran especially given the religious minorities there as well as the many Iranian Muslims who do not share the regime’s interpretation?

ELLIOTT ABRAMS: I do because I think the people of Iran have now been inoculated against this form of political and religious organization by having the horrible experience of living under intolerance, repression, and corruption. I believe they would vote against it if there were ever a free election, which is why there will not be a constitutional referendum in Iran. I think there may be Iranians who believe that this is a corruption of Shia Islam. I think it is a great change from the way Shia Islam has been practiced at least for the last couple of centuries. Therefore, it is not surprising that some of the most important resistance to the regime comes from the clerical establishment. In fact, there were several prominent Shia leaders including some Grand Ayatollahs who refused to vote in the recent elections in protest of the corruption. They realize that in some of the Arab countries, such as Tunisia and Egypt, Islamist parties win in free elections, but in Iran the population is really disgusted with the kind of Islam that the state is forcing on them, and they realize what that means for the future of Shia Islam in Iran.

In the case of Iran, the push for religious freedom is very helpful overall in promoting a better future for Iran. However, I am troubled by one part of this picture, namely the status of the Baha’i faith. This regime has been really vicious when it comes to the Baha’i, who have had troubles in a lot of Islamic countries. I do not know whether the post-Islamic Republic in Iran will understand that all intolerance should be ended. One has to hope that the experience of the Iranian people teaches tolerance not only for Muslims, but for all religious groups.

STEPHEN HADLEY: If the watchword is free exercise of religion and free exercise of all religions, that requires a tolerance of all religions. If there is tolerance of all religions, then one cannot have a state founded on a religion because that is inconsistent with freedom of religion and the free exercise of religion by all groups. That really is the issue in Iran, where there is a theocratic regime.

The region is going to have to conclude that that has not worked to the benefit of the people, and that a government cannot be established on the basis of the slogan “Islam is the Answer.” Religious leaders must be self-limiting in power so that a clear line can be drawn between political questions and religious questions.

DENNIS ROSS: The Iranian regime has given religion a bad name, and in many respects it is probably discrediting it for the future. We have seen a militarization of the regime, and power is being taken away from the clerics. The dominant school of Shia Islam is actually the polar opposite of that which the regime represents. I think at some point in Iran there will be a change.
I see within Iran what looks to be an analogous situation to the Soviet Union in the early 1980s where ideology, in this case religion, has lost its relevance as being an idea to justify rule. You have a kind of corrosive reality, which will eat away at this regime over time. You can never know and predict how long such a process might take but I do think the impact on religion in Iran is going to be increasingly negative over time. There could be a reaction against religion.

WILLIAM INBODEN: Let’s get some questions from the audience.

JILLIAN SCHWEDLER (University of Massachusetts, Amherst): Could you share some insights about other regimes in the region, and how conversations about reform may be on going with them?

ELLIOTT ABRAMS: In conversations with leaders from the region, one often hears both “You do not understand our situation” and “You are right and we are doing that.” There was a period when it looked as if President Saleh of Yemen was moving ahead with reforms. He had a reasonably free election and then he had a couple of good years. However, looking back one can see that he felt comfortable once he had gotten in power with the support of the West.

In Jordan, the biggest problem lies in the division between the East Bankers and Palestinians and the division in the government. Jordan has a system where, quite intelligently, the prime minister does not come from the Royal Family. He comes from the political circles because that means that when people get annoyed after eight months, they get a new prime minister. The problem, of course, is if you do that every six or eight months year after year, people will begin to doubt the effectiveness of such changes. The king has promised real reforms in the aftermath of the Arab Spring but I do not think such reforms have taken place. He is worried about whether his son will be King of Jordan. I think the fake reform will ultimately have to be jettisoned for real reform.

DENNIS ROSS: There were extensive conversations between the Obama administration and Saleh to try to get him to accept the transition. In this particular case, it was coordinated very closely with the Gulf Cooperation Council because the Council was key in providing him the means of staying in power. It grew with fits and starts: he would make certain commitments and then back away. He was pretty good at maneuvering both internally and externally. In the end, he did go along with the transition and obviously there are now some very positive signs with this transition.

However, there still are some open questions in terms the weight of his family within the military. In reaction to these elections, there was a genuine sense that something profound had now happened. The fact is Saleh did leave in the end. That came after an enormous effort of a lot of players, including the administration, with frequent discussions at high levels, involving even President Obama. Yemen faces real challenges, but the transition that is underway now shows some promise.

In these kinds of cases, a balance must be struck between what is done in public and what is said in private. In this part of the world, especially with leaders, if action is only taken in private, it will never be taken seriously. It is an art and with each leader it will be different. We were effective in pushing Saleh out because at different times we ratcheted up what we were saying in public. Even then, though, we coordinated that with others who had even greater leverage with him.

Regarding Jordan, I do think that the king is more conscious now of the need to try to carry out reforms that will be seen. The backbone of his regime is also the recipient of about 80 percent of the revenues of the government. If you are really going to create the kind of reforms that will allow Jordan to flourish over time, you are going to have to manage that. I do think that the king has thought a lot in the last year about ways not only to create reforms, but also to demonstrate that the reforms are real. He is looking at different models. The king of Morocco is an interesting example of someone who did look at what was happening and decided that he had to try to get out in front of it.

STEPHEN HADLEY: There is the issue of what constitutes secularism. The French have a view that the state has to make sure religion does not intrude into public life. I do not think that America accepts that kind of secularism. I think the best conception of secularism, what I would call the American mod-
el, is an equal distance from all religions, but a tolerance of all religions. I think the political and diplomatic establishment is somewhere between the American model and the French model. I think the American people are between the American model and even a more active place for religion. I think the government has been conscious of that. A government needs to provide a space for religious expression by the population. I think that is something Americans broadly agree on and the diplomatic community agrees on, and at various times I think that is the model that we have suggested to other countries.

DENNIS ROSS: I do not think that there is an impulse in the diplomatic community toward any kind of generalized view. I think most analysts will look at the circumstances country by country. Having negotiated for a long time on Arab-Israel issues, often times I actually wanted to have religious leaders support the premise of tolerance and co-existence and speak against non-violence, but I could never bring that to fruition. Recently I met with an interfaith group, which includes Israelis and Palestinians, and for the first time they said they would like to see if they could play a role in these negotiations.

MOHAMMED HAFEZ (Naval Postgraduate School): What is the Obama administration’s view or assessment of Libya moving forward? Is democracy going to take hold in Libya, or if not, what are the challenges that prevent that? Secondly, some have made the claim that the current administration is distorting the intelligence on Syria to prevent an intervention in Syria. What is your assessment of that?

DENNIS ROSS: I do not presume to speak for the administration, but I think there is a continuing hope that what can emerge in Libya would be a government that is largely representative and inclusive, not tribal or sectarian. The people who are in the interim administration in Libya right now are very much committed to trying to produce what would be a representative democracy. After Khadafi, and in the absence of any institutions, this is both easier and harder. In Libya they are trying to build something largely out of nothing. There is a potential because of that, but there are also many splits within the country. There is no doubt that the Islamists are trying to gain the upper hand, but when you talk to the people who are trying to manage the change themselves, they are incredibly impressive. They certainly are saying the right things. Whether they can deliver on it remains to be seen, but the administration is looking for ways to continue to bolster and move things in a certain direction.

On the issue of Syria, I think some of the intelligence briefings may reflect certain views within the intelligence community. It is not my understanding that they represent the views of the administration.

STANLEY COBER (Georgetown University alumna): In October 1789, George Washington wrote a letter to Gouverneur Morris in Paris on the subject of the French Revolution, in which he warned of the revolution moving from one extreme to another. How would you apply this kind of warning to the present situation in the Middle East?

ELLIOTT ABRAMS: We know from experience, in Indonesia and Malaysia, that Islamists tend to do very well in the first election because they have the opportunity to organize and because, in the eyes of many people in the country, they stand for integrity. However, after they get elected, they cannot produce. In many cases Islam is not the answer because it does not tell you, for example, how to properly manage and grow an economy. Thus, in a second or third election, there is a rebalancing. I think the major point right now that is we do not know how these situations will unfold.

STEPHEN HADLEY: After the initial violent days of the Egyptian Revolution, it has been a remarkably peaceful revolution, and the country did conduct the freest and fairest election probably in its entire history. I think you have to give the Egyptian people some credit for what they have done so far, and we ought to give them such help as we can because it matters how this situation is resolved.

DENNIS ROSS: This is only the beginning of a multi-faceted situation. The United States is not in control, but we have a huge stake in what happens there. It is very difficult to tell what will happen, but I do not think that the people who suddenly found their voice are going to lose it. Furthermore, I think we have a huge stake in figuring out a way to create political and economic standards of accountability. In Egypt and Tunisia, there are those in politics who are showing signs that they understand they have to deliver. The
THOMAS FARR: Several themes have emerged from our conversation thus far. The first is a proposition that we heard in our first panel, namely that data seem to show that the content of particular religions does not have a significant impact on violent religious extremism, including Islamist extremism. It is an interesting proposition but one that, as one of our questioners said, seems a bit counterintuitive. In this context we explored the notion that the main causes of religious extremism are exogenous to the religions themselves, and that socio-political structures and institutions have more effect on the rise of extremism than do religious doctrines.

In the extraordinary policy conversation that followed, Steve Hadley said—and I think he is right—that if you try to impose religious freedom all at once on Middle Eastern nations, you will empower religious extremists. What we need is religious tolerance as a kind of “halfway house” toward religious freedom, by which he perhaps meant the full participation of all religious groups within a society on the basis of equality, working toward the end of complete religious freedom.

Dennis Ross made the point that every country, including every Muslim majority country, is different, when it comes to religion and certainly to religious freedom. So when we think about the so-called “Muslim World,” which is a term that is not used too much anymore and I think properly so, we need to think in terms of Muslim worlds, or different countries in which Islam is reflected and expressed in different ways. Elliott Abrams made the point that religious freedom, like democracy, needs a “limiting principle” to prevent majoritarian tyranny. Here he is inviting us to reason about the limits to democracy and to religious freedom. “Religious freedom” does not mean everything goes. Like every other freedom in civil and political society, it is properly subject to certain broad and equally applied limits.

All of our panelists ended up agreeing that the “Book of Democracy” in Egypt is now being written, and that we should contribute as we can and as we are invited to do so in helping them succeed in gaining democracy, religious tolerance and then religious freedom. Finally, I have to point out that Elliott Abrams said he preferred the American model to the French model of religious freedom, although Steve Hadley said that he thinks the American political and diplomatic establishment is closer to the French model. I fear he is right about that.

Let’s now turn to our third and final panel. We have asked our panelists to consider a number of different themes: whether a free and fair democratic system that makes room for all religious actors, including Islamists, is best for Egypt and the other Arab Spring countries in the long run; whether a regime of robust religious freedom is an essential component of religious democracy; whether robust religious freedom is likely to moderate the illiberal radicalism of certain religious actors, or whether it is more likely to unleash illiberal radicalism; and finally, how can U.S.
foreign policy, including our policy of advancing religious freedom, best foster both robust democracy and religious freedom, or religious tolerance, in Egypt and the other countries affected by the Arab Spring?

Our panelists are Samer Shehata, Assistant Professor in the Center for Contemporary Arab Studies at Georgetown University, Jillian Schwedler, Associate Professor of Political Science at the University of Massachusetts Amherst, and Sam Tadros, who is a Research Fellow at the Hudson Institute.

SALER SHEHATA: To the question of whether a fully inclusive, free, and fair democratic system is best for Egypt and other Arab Spring countries in the long run, I think the answer is clearly yes. In fact, any attempt to limit the participation of Islamist groups that seek to participate in the political process by peaceful means is detestable and undemocratic, even if such groups hold views that might be considered illiberal. Anything other than that really represents a step backwards, a failed logic of the past, a logic in which we supported Mubarak because we thought the alternative was worse. I reject that, not only on the basis of religious freedom issues but also on the basis of my commitment to democracy.

Would a regime of liberal democracy, which included the principles of religious freedom, moderate or unleash illiberal radicalism? I would hope that inclusion in the political system would force some groups, if not to moderate, to at least behave like political parties, interested in gaining votes, interested in winning seats, and interested in influencing policy. If such groups are interested in participating in the political process then one would think that they would present their message according to the median voter theory; in a way that would attract the largest number of voters. This would promote the building of coalitions involving compromise and negotiation with other political forces, including ones with which they disagree. I think we have seen that with regard to the Muslim Brotherhood from the 1980s, forging alliances on specific issues. We have also surprisingly seen that in a very elementary sense with some of the Salafi parties in Egypt.

Moreover, one would think that, in elections, the voting public or electorate would make future decisions based on performance, on whether these groups have delivered on jobs, educational systems, healthcare, and economic progress, as opposed to the idea that Islam or Sharia is the answer to such issues. There does seem to be an assumption that the type of government in a place like Egypt or Tunisia or elsewhere should somehow look very much like the government that we have here in the United States. I think that is a false assumption. In these places we should expect forms of politics and political discourse to look quite different from ours. The key is whether these political systems, constitutions, and institutions are robust enough to guarantee rights, including rights of religious freedom. The issue is not whether they adopt our model of the ostensible separation of church and state.

“I think that religious freedom needs to be front and center. I would even broaden that to freedom of belief, so as to include the freedom not to believe in religion. These freedoms need to take priority in any kind of inclusive system. What is important about religion is not that it is confessional, per se, but that it offers a worldview and an ethical, moral understanding of what the world is, how it functions, and how it should function.”

Jillian Schwedler

The third question posed was how the United States can best foster both robust democracy and inclusive religious freedom in Egypt and other countries affected by the Arab Spring. It is important to understand that the legacy of U.S. involvement in Egypt and other states in the region is not a very good one, and it makes it extremely difficult for the United States to be seen as credibly interested in promoting democracy, freedom, and human rights, even religious freedom. When most Egyptians look at the United States, they see decades of support for the Mubarak regime, politically, militarily, and economically. They see little sustained criticism of the regime, with the consequences of systematic human rights abuses, consistent electoral violations, and repression. Interestingly enough, the United States did sometimes focus on some liberal activists when they were the victims of the regime’s wrath.

You might remember that on January 25, the first day of the revolution, Secretary Clinton said that the Egyptian government was stable, and that it was looking for ways “to respond to the legitimate needs and interests of the Egyptian people.” The following day, she called on all parties, meaning the protestors and the regime, to exercise restraint, setting up some kind of a moral
equivalency between the protestors and the regime’s repressive apparatus. The following day, Vice President Biden said that Mr. Mubarak was not a dictator. If we want to go even deeper with this, we can speculate that the message that Ambassador Frank Wisner gave to Mr. Mubarak on his visit there on February 5 was not the message that the administration was presenting, “immediate change now,” but rather the message that, in order for an “orderly transition” to take place, Mr. Mubarak would need to stay in power to oversee that transition until September. There is a dilemma for the United States right now. The United States now has decreased influence, not only in Egypt, but across the region. In authoritarian states, which are allied with the United States and heavily dependent on U.S. foreign political and diplomatic support, the United States has much greater influence than in polities which have popular sovereignty and in which governments are supposedly based on the will of the people.

The discourse of religious freedom has been seen and received in Egypt as a kind of colonial discourse, as a kind of discourse that was insincere and that championed one group, Egyptian Christians, at the expense of everyone else. I will be the first person to say that Egyptian Christians have suffered, and continue to suffer discrimination and deteriorated status. Nevertheless, because that discourse was viewed as such, it generated a tremendous backlash among Egyptians. In fact, it might even be counterproductive to continue to pursue a discourse that focuses explicitly on religious freedom, as opposed to a more general discourse focused on democracy and equal citizenship rights, including within that, religious freedom.

JILLIAN SCHWEDLER: I see the theme of this conference in the two related theses that inclusion will lead to moderation and exclusion will lead to radicalism. Connected with that is the question of religious freedom, and whether religious freedom in general produces a kind of moderation. I think it is very important to separate the arguments, or hypotheses, that repression leads to extremism and inclusion leads to moderation. There is no simple slide along a continuum where reduced repression is going to automatically lead to moderation.

There are different mechanisms that could be at work in each case. For example, a system may become much more inclusive, with a large number of parties moving to a more moderate direction, and still there may be those extremists who escalate their activities. Overall you still may see more violence. The literature on repression, which Professor Birnir referenced, leads us to expect a curvilinear relationship. When extreme repressions loosen slightly, there can be an explosion of overall violence. Severe repression forces groups to go underground and to work together against the regime. The logic of an inclusive system is to take away that unifying point of overthrowing a regime, or overthrowing a system entirely.

In a more inclusive system, one may not actually see extremists becoming moderate. Moderates will pull away and their voices and agendas will become more prominent. That does not mean extremists might not necessarily also moderate. My book, Faith in Moderation, examines Islamists in Jordan and Yemen as they enter the political system. Neither of these Islamist groups had sought to overthrow the regime or had ever perpetrated violence on the regime. In fact, in both cases, they had been allied with the regime, as a kind of friendly opposition at times. To hold those as cases of successful moderation misses the point that they were never extremists in the first place. What happens in a more inclusive system is the elimination of
the need for moderates to ally with extremists.

The logic of alliances among political elites is important in this discussion. I think a more inclusive system changes the logic of such interactions. It is also important to consider the constituencies of those groups. In a more repressive system, when groups that are organizing do not have many options, very often the broader population will look for the group that is making the most extreme statements against the regime, and that group might have a larger support base. Not only does an inclusive system take away the impetus for moderates to ally with extremists against a repressive system, it also introduces more possibilities for the general public at large. A public that wants to see something other than the incumbent regime now has a whole range of things to choose from. A more inclusive system takes away the support base for extremists. It will not eliminate them entirely, but it isolates them.

I think that religious freedom needs to be front and center. I would even broaden that to freedom of belief, so as to include the freedom not to believe in religion. These freedoms need to take priority in any kind of inclusive system. What is important about religion is not that it is confessional, per se, but that it offers a worldview and an ethical, moral understanding of what the world is, how it functions, and how it should function.

The virtue of an inclusive system is that it allows one to find symmetry in certain components of that moral vision, without having to be the same. The logic of trying to give the moderate voices more opportunities to express themselves is to allow more places to find those symmetries, and to isolate secular and religious worldviews that find no room for any alternative at all. A more inclusive system creates the space where those kinds of symmetries can happen, and in that sense, different religions and secular groups will find all kinds of common ground about moral issues. That is a significant virtue of inclusive political systems. I think confessionalism, per se, is almost epiphenomenal to the other sort of effects of an inclusive and exclusive system. It is that kind of space that inclusive systems can foster that will then reduce extremism by allowing for the creation of space where that symmetry can be explored, where groups can talk to each other and have open debates and discussions.

I found this in Jordan and Yemen. In the case of Jordan, I found much more moderation with the Islamist Party, in part because Islamists found a lot of common ground with secularists, communists, and liberals on a number of issues. In the summer of 1993, for the very first time, all of these groups, Islamists, communists, and secularists, had a joint press conference, which was quite spectacular.

Moderation is not a single position on a continuum. A group does not necessarily become moderate in all aspects of everything it does. Very often, an inclusive system leads to the logic of political moderation. But we should not make the mistake to say that a single act will make a group uniformly more moderate across all issues. I think you need to unpack the different issues and examine where the group is becoming more moderate.

Regarding foreign policy, the United States has such a negative reputation in the region that anything that the United States is promoting will automatically be subject to suspicion. Any group that the United States stands behind is automatically going to have a problem. I think the United States can speak loudest by being hands off on particular mechanics, but very supportive of processes in general. That means not channeling vast amounts of money to the Supreme Council of Armed Forces (SCAF) in Egypt and very little money to other kinds of things. The United States should adopt a more open posture that seeks to offer support to moderates and modernizers.

Finally, I completely disagree with the idea that nobody predicted the Arab Spring. In fact, everyone predicted the Arab Spring, over and over and over. Various writings in the literature called for this by pointing out how unsustainable the status quo was. The problem is that we did not pick the exact moment. Anyone who had been working in the region knew of vast pockets of dissent, just desperate for that moment. We did not predict the moment, so I am not saying that we got it right, but it is false to say that everybody saw these as equilibrium states that would not change. I think the reality was somewhere in the middle.
SAM TADROS: The first question is carefully composed. It is quite hard to argue that a fully inclusive, free, and fair democratic system that makes room for everyone is not good in the long run. The formation of the question takes into consideration, perhaps, all those criticisms that have been put forward regarding democracy promotion under the Bush administration or by the United States in general. That such a system be inclusive, free, and fair shows that this issue extends beyond the ballot box to the larger concept of a free society. It highlights that in such a system, there is room for all voices, whether Islamic voices or the voices of religious minorities, indicating that no one will be sidelined in this process. It is also important to recognize the timeframe involved, which acknowledges that problems may surface in the beginning of transition, but in the long run, democracy will be a positive force.

To the question of whether a regime of liberal democracy, including adherence to principles of religious freedom, might serve to moderate or unleash illiberal radicalism, there are a couple of assumptions in this statement that deserve some consideration. Firstly, the statement indicates some form of qualification. Only some of the voices will either be moderated or become more radical. Secondly, there is an underlying assumption that there is some form of relationship between religious freedom, or the lack thereof, and religious radicalization, and that this relationship is one of negative correlation: more religious freedom produces less radicalization. That assumption, however, needs to be tested with the reality of the situation. As Edmund Burke indicated in the opening pages of his Reflections on the Revolution in France, it is circumstances, and not abstract principles, that determine whether any political or civil policy is beneficial or toxic to human beings. In that light, the question of whether there was a correlation in the past between the emergence of Islamism as a clear discourse and the existence or lack of religious freedom or liberal democracy.

Examining the establishment of the Salafi movement and the Muslim Brotherhood, it is unclear what role religious freedom had in the formation of modern Islamism. We find in the writings of those founders of Islamism a lack of emphasis on religious freedom as a factor. They did have many complaints regarding colonialism and Western interference but not regarding religious freedom or the lack of democracy.

The statement also sees Islamism to be an authentic representation and interpretation of Islam. That Islamism claims to be so is something that is obvious to anyone. That that claim is correct or that we should consider it as true is something that we need to think about a bit more. Certainly, Islamism is a modern phenomenon. Its roots might not be traced, necessarily, into Islamic jurisprudence. Perhaps the Salafis have a much more authentic claim to some forms of Islam than the Muslim Brotherhood, but in the case of the Muslim Brotherhood, those roots are hardly there.

Why should we care about religious freedom then? Am I arguing that religious freedom is only a nice concept? Certainly not. There is a value in religious freedom in this debate. By religious freedom, I refer to the ability of people to bring religion to the public square and make religious based arguments in that open public square. However, there is an interesting concept that is missing that is perhaps taken for granted in the United States, and that is “diverse” religious views.

The reason why religious freedom would be extremely important in Egypt and in other countries in the region would be because of the ability of individuals to think differently and then to collectively form an alternative to basic assumptions. If various people are not allowed to present different interpretations of the Islamic tradition, then only the Islamist narrative will be presented to the general public. Being Muslim would only be defined by how the Islamists define Islam. For this reason, it is important to defend religious freedom and to work on promoting religious freedom as an integral part of building liberal democracy in the region.

“Any attempt to limit the participation of Islamist groups that seek to participate in the political process by peaceful means is detestable and undemocratic, even if such groups hold views that might be considered illiberal. Anything other than that really represents a step backwards, a failed logic of the past, a logic in which we supported Mubarak because we thought the alternative was worse. I reject that, not only on the basis of religious freedom issues but also on the basis of my commitment to democracy.”

Samer Shehata
Let me now move to the situation of religious freedom in Egypt, which is hardly a happy story. Certainly it is not Saudi Arabia or Iran, but the situation of religious freedom in Egypt has been shaped by the dynamic interrelationship between the religious establishment, the state, the Islamists, and the general public. Each of these has played a different role in the lack of religious freedom in the country, but it is how they operate together that creates this vacuum of freedom wherein religious minorities, intellectuals, and others are not free to think differently. That situation has perhaps worsened much more after the revolution. We have seen a dramatic increase in the number of attacks against the Copts, but more importantly than the increase in attacks is nature of such attacks. Increasingly, we see that the general public has participated in those attacks. The participation of the general public in such attacks is perhaps the most worrisome feature of the future of religious freedom in Egypt.

Concerning the Islamists and their role, I would make two points. The first is how the Muslim Brotherhood has written very clearly about its view of the Coptic Church. Their program discusses taking control of the Church’s endowments. They reason that religious endowments should serve all Egyptians regardless of religion. I would say that that is nicely put. Even more interesting is how they define the role of the Church. They see the Church, along with other state institutions and Egyptian civil society to correct current deviant paths. That statement reminds one of a national church model. It will be interesting to watch the attempt by the ruling regime to control the official religious establishment and thus use it as a way to control religious minorities.

The second interesting dynamic to watch is the relationship between the Muslim Brotherhood and the Salafis, especially how the Brotherhood will deal with the fact that they are being challenged from the right. How will they deal with the question of the possibility of losing their base to the more radical Salafis? This relationship between the Muslim Brotherhood and the Salafis will not only tell us a lot about the future of politics of Egypt but it will also be extremely important for the fate of religious minorities and religious freedom in general.

THOMAS FARR: Let us consider religious freedom as defined by Sam, namely, the right to bring one’s religion into the public square. That can mean a lot of things. It can mean proselytism, religion in politics, or even making religious arguments for economic, domestic, and foreign policies. Does Egypt need religious freedom, defined as such, to succeed as a lasting democracy? In my view, this not only means freedom for Coptic Christians to enter the public square and make Christian arguments within Egypt, but also for Muslims to criticize the Muslim Brotherhood, or to criticize openly, without fear of retribution, an understanding of Islam that they may consider to be simply false. In short, this not only concerns minorities, but also disfavored members of the majority community.

SAMER SHEHATA: This idea of religious freedom is not as simple as one might think because, as you have shown, there are separate dimensions of it. Right now, I think ideas of equality under the law without regard to religion are critical. That is obviously not exactly religious freedom, but I think that kind of discourse has a better chance of succeeding and creating the kind of society and state that we hope for in Egypt.
While this includes the right of religious actors to bring their religious views into the public square, I do not necessarily think that that is the way to create the type of society that we want in Egypt. One of the problems with this approach is it views individuals, not as such, but as members of religious groups. I think that providing rights on that basis does more harm than good in terms of creating a kind of liberal, democratic society. In Egypt, for example, there needs to be a unified building law with regard to erecting churches and mosques and other places of worship.

The issue of proselytism is particularly sensitive for many. Here, framing the discussion in terms of religious tolerance might result in a greater likelihood of success, at least in the short term.

THOMAS FARR: It is an interesting question to consider how far a democracy, even a Muslim majority democracy, can go without grappling successfully with the issue of proselytism.

JILLIAN SCHWEDLER: It is important to note that the Arab Spring is not limited to Egypt. Consider Yemen, where President Ali Abdullah Saleh recently stepped down. Yemen is one of these extraordinary transitioning countries, and it has tremendous amount of religious diversity.

In this case, I think it would be a mistake to put the question of religious freedom front and center in the transition, because there are many other issues related to the power struggle from the unification.

One would hope to get there eventually, but for now it is important to pull that back to let other kinds of questions come to the fore. I think that Yemen should probably have something like a federated state, rather than a sort of unified centralized state, specifically so as to address a lot of these issues. When there are certain areas with a very strong association with a particular religious sect and they want to preserve that, being open to other voices and proselytizing in the public square is going to be very contentious and problematic. Ultimately, I would like to see all worldviews tolerated and accepted and open to debate. However, in certain transitions, putting those issues front and center will be more problematic, while in other transitions it might be a place to build bridges as a starting point.

SAM TADROS: Does Egypt need this form of religion in the public square? I would say yes, in the sense of we have historically had a problem with religion in Egypt. Religion, Islam specifically, has been viewed with high suspicion by the intelligencia that has formed the modern Egyptian state. Many will claim that they take issue with Islamism, and the kind of views that it holds. But in many cases, the root of the problem is they do not like Islam because they have never found a way to deal with the idea of this religion and how it works with the modern world. This is partly due to the huge influence of French secularism on Egypt. Egyptians never read Burke. They read Voltaire and Rousseau and this has formed the foundation of Egyptian secularism. Among other factors, any hope for a long term, stable democracy in Egypt will depend on accommodating Islam in the public square, such that people are allowed to make religious-based arguments against political and economic decisions.

Returning to the general political situation, I agree that we are in a transition period and nothing is entirely perfect in a transition period. I do not think it is a transition to democracy. Policymakers are beginning to realize that the situation is less than ideal. This is not a beauty contest. We are essentially facing a least ugly girl contest, choosing between less than perfect options.

STEVE McFARLAND (World Vision): How long must Egypt stay in this “halfway house” of religious tolerance? If religious tolerance is not going to permit individuals of a minority faith to share their faith or proselytize, is this a viable solution long
term? I believe that the essence of religious freedom lies in the ability to share one's faith, to disagree with a majority faith, and to try to persuade someone of the truth of your beliefs.

SAMER SHEHATA: If you look at where Egypt is right now and where it has been, we will be fortunate to achieve religious tolerance and equality before the law, regardless of one's faith. Article 2 of the Egyptian Constitution states that Islam is the religion of state, Arabic is its language, and the principles of Sharia are the primary source of legislation. The most liberal and realistic goal one can have is to preserve the article as-is. The Salafis want to change the article to increase the importance of Islam and Sharia. I think that if we achieve religious tolerance, meaning equality before the law for all and the right to practice one's faith, that will be a significant achievement.

THOMAS FARR: The question is whether the standard of equality before the law is met if one cannot share one's religious beliefs publicly. Given this reality, is democracy over the long term possible unless the issue of proselytism is resolved, or at least grappled with honestly?

SAMER SHEHATA: The problem is that allowing proselytism would result in a kind of arms race. I think that would radically or fundamentally impede the ability of a liberal democracy to be established in Egypt and it would be an especially bad situation for religious minorities.

JILLIAN SCHWEDLER: I think that the right to share one's faith should be there but I do not think it needs to be immediately at the forefront. When there are other kinds of security and confidence that come from functioning institutions, I think that more freedom of expression would gradually emerge.

SAM TADROS: Consider a recent example from Egypt: A Christian teacher and a Salafi teacher were having a conversation on religion. The Salafi claimed that the Christian insulted the Prophet Mohammed. This automatically resulted in rioting in the area and the arrest of the Christian teacher. The court sentenced him to a couple of years in prison. The Salafis did not think this was enough; they wanted a death sentence. Due to pressure from human rights organizations, the case got another hearing but the defendant could not get a lawyer because there were 300 other lawyers prohibiting any lawyer representing him from entering the courtroom. That is a problem.

You will not have democracy unless you deal with such issues, which cannot be glossed over by talk of equality. Integral to any democratic transition will be the working out of such laws and legal procedures that ensure that such episodes do not occur. Herein we see the relationship between religious freedom and other legal protections, such as the right to an attorney.

HERA HASHMI (Becket Fund for Religious Liberty): Regarding the role that religion will play in constitutional development, looking at the countries of the Arab Spring and Tunisia in particular, do you think Islam will be recognized outright as a state religion and how do you think this will affect religious liberties and the protection of minority religions?

JILLIAN SCHWEDLER: Having recently traveled to Tunisia, I can tell you that nothing has changed there after a year. The Ennahda Party is in power and thus is the target of the negative sentiment among the population. There are tensions between Ennahda and the Salafis. It is interesting that many in the Ennahda party will say that the status quo is not what they wanted. They wanted a secular state. But many high officials in the party are unwilling to take a strong stand against Salafi inroads and that is seen as very troubling by secularists in the country. Sometimes the lack of doing something speaks incredibly loud. In Tunisia everyone is holding their breath and there is a nervousness about what the next few years may hold.

RICHARD HYDE (Religion Consulting Group): Could you discuss how the differences between the various ethnic and national groups in the region contribute to these questions of democratization and religious freedom?

SAMER SHEHATA: There are unlimited differences as well as overlapping identities. For example, the Arabic that a Tunisian speaks is not the Arabic that I speak. There are differences in history, colonial influence, and politics, to name a few.

JILLIAN SCHWEDLER: One area of difference is the tension within certain regimes over the ruling party. For example, in Bahrain, the ruling regime is Sunni and the majority Shia are excluded. Regarding some of the internal tensions and identities, even ones that are about religion sometimes are not about the content of those religious differences so much as about historical sectarian differences, political differences, and economic differences. These things can be exposed and expressed in terms of religious differences. Sometimes they are about religious differences, but sometimes they are not about religious differences at all, but rather about other issues that map onto those different identities. I think paying attention to that is crucial.
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