



**RELIGION AND STATE RELATIONSHIPS:
A MIDDLE EAST, U.S. AND EU 'TRIALOGUE'**

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THE PROJECT ON MIDDLE EAST DEMOCRACY is a nonpartisan, nonprofit organization dedicated to examining the impact of American policy on political reform and democratization in the Middle East. Through dialogue, policy analysis, and advocacy, we aim to promote understanding of how genuine, authentic democracies can develop in the Middle East and how the U.S. can best support that process.

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I. Introduction

Since the terrorist attacks of 2001 the United States has undergone significant changes in attitudes towards the Middle East, Muslims both at home and abroad, and particularly the foreign and dynamic concept of political Islam. The American Constitution provides that the government shall not establish a religion, and that American citizens are free to worship in accordance with their beliefs. Europeans have vastly divergent systems, from strict secularism in France to an established religion in the United Kingdom. And in the Middle East, political Islamists and other political organizations contest the appropriate role of *shari'a*, Islamic law.

These conflicting value systems illustrate the diverse roles that religion can play in public life, even in advanced democracies. Discussions on the relationship between religion and state are common conversations to have. But fundamentally different perspectives may also create fear and misunderstanding on all sides, even as Americans, Europeans and Middle Easterners struggle internally to define a suitable relationship between religion and state.

Democracy in the Middle East will mean, at least in some countries, that Islamist political parties will come to power, as the AKP has recently done in Turkey. Islamists have a clear political message that appeals to a wide segment of society, strong organizational skills and resources, and candidates perceived as honest and qualified. As political reform unfolds in the Middle East, Middle Easterners will decide for themselves basic political questions – including the relationship between religion and state – through democratic means, as Americans and Europeans have done and continue to do. There is no single correct answer to such questions; the relationship between religion and state differs dramatically in established democracies across the world. As Middle Easterners confront these questions, and as Americans and Europeans engage with them about the process of reform, it bears remembering that all political parties committed exclusively to democratic means are legitimate players in the political game.

On Oct. 6, 2008, the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (FES) and the Project on Middle East Democracy (POMED) brought together four panelists from varying backgrounds to discuss the influences of faith on government. Geneive Abdo, a veteran Middle East journalist, Bob Edgar, an American Christian religious leader and former Congressman, Dietmar Nietan, a German foreign policy advisor to the Head of the Social Democratic Caucus in the European Parliament, and Ibrahim Houdaiby, a member of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood, each provided unique insights on the delicate balance between politics and religion in the American, European, and Middle East contexts. This paper will draw on the results of the panel discussion and expand upon some key points.

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II. The Value of Dialogue

“Dialogue with the Muslim Brotherhood is important, given the Brotherhood’s impact and political role in Egypt and the spread of the Brotherhood throughout the Arab world.”

One of the most prominent and powerful Islamist groups on the contemporary political scene is the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood. The Brotherhood was founded by Hasan al-Banna in 1928 to Islamicize society. Although the Brotherhood is banned by the Egyptian government, it participates relatively openly in politics. Eighty-eight members of the Egyptian parliament who have been elected as independents are affiliated with the Brotherhood, despite substantial state-sponsored violence in 2005 to prevent likely Brotherhood supporters from voting. Brotherhood leaders and activists are frequently arrested, harassed and tortured for their political activities. Despite this repression, the Brotherhood has rejected the use of violence for over 25 years, adopting only peaceful means to achieve its social and political goals.

The U.S. government remains deeply suspicious of the Muslim Brotherhood because of the Brotherhood’s alleged affiliations with violent Islamists, its position against Israel, its opposition to U.S. hegemony in the region, and the Egyptian government’s prohibition of it. Dialogue with the Muslim Brotherhood is important, however, given the Brotherhood’s impact and political role in Egypt and the spread of the Brotherhood throughout the Arab world.

The Brotherhood seeks to implement *shari’a* through democratic means. Nonetheless, any religious influence on governance is a threatening prospect for some Americans and Europeans accustomed to a more clear distinction between their faiths and their governments. It also causes concern among some Egyptians, among them secularists and Coptic Christians, Egypt’s largest religious minority.

Europe’s immigration challenges also have a religious dimension. European governments long failed to integrate Muslim immigrants. Germany’s Turkish, Muslim *Gastarbeiter* (guest workers) lived for generations in Germany before they were offered a path to citizenship. While Turkish Muslims in Germany still face challenges, including the shift of prejudice from their Turkish national origin to their religion, Germans are gradually becoming accustomed to them as a part of German society.

As Germany has done, other European governments have also begun to engage both their own sizeable Muslim communities and the Middle Eastern states on their southern border. The prevailing European view on relations with the Middle East is one of active engagement, according to Dietmar Nietan, foreign policy advisor to Member of the European Parliament Martin Schulz. Nietan argues that the nations of North Africa and the broader Middle East are Europe’s neighbors to be interacted with as equals, and that conversing with those who are willing to

reciprocate, regardless of their political ideologies, is a critical component in establishing common understanding. While this does not mean both sides necessarily share the same values, dialogue between Europe and its neighbors is nonetheless crucial. Nietan particularly emphasizes holding intensive talks with religious political leaders like those of the Muslim Brotherhood in order to facilitate “Euro-Islam” or a kind of “reformation” of Islam by Muslims within Europe that will break ideological barriers.

III. The Political Islamist Perspective

Ibrahim Houdaiby, a member of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood and board member of the movement’s online publication Ikhwanweb.com, is a progressive representative of a younger generation of Islamists dedicated to bridging the rifts of misunderstanding between Islam and the West. Houdaiby argues that his group’s interpretation of the faith-state overlap does not differ widely from Western models in that every government derives its laws and principles from a particular value system. To Houdaiby, the three monotheistic traditions share a similar ethical framework and respect for human values by which society should be governed. Only through a religious foundation, he believes, may protection of these standards be truly sustained.

Houdaiby argues that a complete fusion of political and religious institutions is not desirable. According to the 2007 draft of the Muslim Brotherhood’s political platform, neither is complete secularization. The Carnegie Endowment for International Peace produced an analysis of the document in which the Endowment’s experts argue that the platform “sends mixed signals about the movement’s political views and positions” because the new draft shifted its stance on the extent to which government should be modeled on the *shari’a*.¹ The authors suggest that “the [Brotherhood] had gradually shifted its stress from ‘implementation of the *Shari’a*’ to ‘*Shari’a* as an Islamic frame of reference’” in order to “reassure the broader public.”² The authors also note, however, that “the movement’s base was hardly pressing for any dilution of its commitment to the Islamic *Shari’a*.”³

If this assessment is accurate, is the Muslim Brotherhood united in its dedication to an Islamic state through democratic means? Or is it internally split on the interpretation of *shari’a* and the means to pursue it? Are the differences generational, ideological, or both? Whatever the outcome of these debates, public opinion polls

“The degree to which state policy should comport with Islam is an internal debate that has been present in the Middle East for centuries. Religious leaders have frequently clashed with governments about the proper balance.”

1 Nathan J. Brown and Amr Hamzawy, “The Draft Party Platform of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood: Foray into Political Integration or Retreat into Old Positions?” Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, January 2008, p. 1.

2 Id., p. 12.

3 Id., p. 14.

show that an overwhelming majority of Muslims desire some form of democracy for their governments.⁴

As Geneive Abdo, author of *No God But God: Egypt and the Triumph of Islam*, has noted, the degree to which state policy should comport with Islam is an internal debate that has been present in the Middle East for centuries. Religious leaders have frequently clashed with governments about the proper balance. Today, the influence of *shari'a* also varies widely among Muslim nations. Saudi Arabia's constitution is the Quran and other Islamic teachings by the prophet Mohammad. The Kingdom applies its interpretation of *shari'a*, including the harsh *hudud* punishments for theft, robbery, and drinking alcohol. In Iran, while political leaders are regularly elected in competitive contests, the Supreme Leader is declared in its constitution as the ultimate political and religious authority. Laws passed by parliament are reviewed by a council of religious scholars, the Council of Guardians, to determine whether they comply with *shari'a*. Other nations like Jordan and Morocco have vastly different systems; they use *shari'a* for personal status matters, such as inheritance and divorce, yet steer away from its application to other issues. The Turkish state continues to be staunchly secular, while its society becomes increasing Islamist.

As for Egypt, the state officially moved toward a more religious system when it amended the constitution in 1980 to formally make *shari'a* Egypt's principal source of legislation. In practice, however, little changed. And in 2007, the Egyptian constitution was amended to prohibit political parties founded or operated with "any religious frame of reference or on any religious basis."⁵ These examples illustrate Egypt's long internal struggle to resolve its own relationship between religion and state.

IV. America's Religion-State Relationship

"The U.S. government's suspicious attitude towards American Muslim communities has made political engagement and activism more problematic for Muslims in the U.S."

This search to find the proper balance between faith and state is not unique to Islam and the Middle East. From its inception the United States has battled with church-state separation regarding evolution, school prayer, and the display of religious messages on government property, such as the Ten Commandments in courts and Christmas trees at City Halls. If the people, through democratic elec-

4 See the data collected in David M. DeBartolo, *Perceptions of U.S. Democracy Promotion, Part One: Middle Eastern Views*. Project on Middle East Democracy & Heinrich Boll Stiftung, May 2008, available at <http://pomed.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2008/05/pomed-perceptions-i-middle-east.pdf>.

5 Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, "Egypt's Controversial Constitutional Amendments," March 23, 2007, p. 11 (amendments translated by Dina Bishara).

tions, vote for intelligent design to be included in the education curriculum, should it be taught?

Many Americans believe that there is and ought to be a wall of separation between religion and state in the U.S. Such a perspective, however, does not answer whether a particular state policy is religiously influenced, nor does it determine the extent to which generally applicable laws may infringe on free religious practice. And as Bob Edgar, President of Common Cause and former General Secretary of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the USA, has pointed out, the separation between church and state does not necessarily imply that people of faith should be distanced from the government. Faith can play a considerable part in influencing policymakers' decisions. A representative from a district with a large Baptist population may vote more in line with the values of his or her constituency. A Muslim-American political action committee may lobby Congress on a piece of legislation that affects Islamic practices at home or American policy abroad. All citizens may cast a vote to determine who will represent them, write letters to their senators, and participate directly by advocating values and policies.

As Genevieve Abdo notes, the U.S. government's suspicious attitude towards American Muslim communities has made political engagement and activism more problematic for Muslims in the U.S. In the wake of Sept. 11, 2001, as the government interviewed thousands of immigrants from predominantly Muslim countries, seeds of suspicion were sown between these communities and the government. Since then U.S. foreign policies have evoked resentment among many Muslim Americans. As a result, some Muslim leaders in the U.S. have felt the need to distance themselves from the government rather than work directly with it to change policy.

Another defining characteristic of a pluralistic society is not only the inclusion and tolerance of those with religion, but also those without religion. Edgar, a former six-term Congressman from Pennsylvania, argues that voices supporting this freedom from religion are lacking in the United States. He states that he is frustrated by the absence of strong moderates: the middle-church, middle-synagogue, and middle-mosque leaders who consider religious pluralism to include atheism or agnosticism. The inclusion of the phrase "under God" in the Pledge of Allegiance splits Americans, both those of faith and non-faith alike. The United States still struggles, as do other nations grappling with the role of faith in democracy, on seemingly small yet symbolically significant matters.

As one such matter, former German parliamentarian Dietmar Nietan has cited the example of the American holiday of Thanksgiving to illustrate the nation's openness to all beliefs: "[Thanksgiving] is embedded in an American faith that, while making use of religious thought and speech patterns of Christian origin, nonetheless makes room for all religions and beliefs, even explicitly including those who

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don't believe in God."⁶ Religious tolerance is an ingrained American trait instilled by its founders, yet the boundaries of faith's ability to mold government is constantly being redefined.

V. European Engagement

"Europeans, because of the diversity of religion-state relationships in the European Union, well appreciate the different ways that religion can coexist and interact with democracy. Democracy can mean a strictly secular state, an established religion, or religious institutions supported by the state bureaucracy."

Europeans, because of the diversity of religion-state relationships in the European Union, well appreciate the different ways that religion can coexist and interact with democracy. In France, for example, democracy means a strictly secular state. France's interpretation of secularism extends to the exercise of religious practices in public areas, to the extent that children can be punished for wearing a religious headscarf in public school. In the United Kingdom, on the other hand, the Church of England is established by the state and participates in various state functions, though it receives no funding from the government. In Germany there is no established religion, but some recognized religious communities are permitted to give instruction in public schools and have levies collected by the government from members of the denomination. So far, however, Muslims in Germany do not have access to these benefits that other religious communities enjoy. Thus, on the one hand, the German state is far more institutionally linked to the church than is the case in some other democracies. On the other hand, religion plays less of an explicit role in politics in Germany than it does in countries like the U.S., where political leaders often speak of religious justifications for social policy preferences. As a result, Germany's church-state relationship poses unique challenges to both Germany and the EU as a whole regarding the integration of Muslims into European society.

Challenges to the EU about integration of its current Muslim minority are greatly amplified by the ongoing debate about whether the Muslim nation of Turkey should be invited to join the EU. As an associate member of the European Community, Turkey continues to wait for full admittance to the EU while it faces significant obstacles from many within the EU who fear its membership. Some suggest that the country should not be allowed to join for a host of economic, political, geographic, and human rights reasons. While some of these concerns merit serious discussion, such issues are often used to mask deeper cultural fears about inviting a Muslim-majority country to join the EU.

All EU member states must eventually take a position on whether Turkey should be invited to join the union. If the answer is no, how will this affect Euro-Islamic

6 Dietmar Nietan, "Shared Values: A Free Market of Religion in the United State of America - A Blessing and a Curse," Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, October 2008.

relations? If the answer is yes, can Europe shift from its Judeo-Christian tradition to genuinely include and accommodate those with a different interpretation of the religion-state relationship?

VI. Beyond Trialogue

The dialogue about the very different relationships between religion and state in the U.S., the European Union, and the Middle East illustrates that this conversation is normal and unexceptional, both in established democracies and in emerging ones. Simply engaging in dialogue does not mean that everyone necessarily agrees with each other, but it serves as a means to find common understanding.

Some have explored the idea of a Muslim "reformation" that may fully integrate with the European model of government. How flexible might Europe's Muslims be to reinterpreting some aspects of *shari'a*? How would each European government, with its own definitions of the relationship between religion and state, adapt to this new voting bloc? How might European Muslim populations adjust?

In the Middle East, the Muslim Brotherhood has witnessed internal changes as well; the interpretation of *shari'a* has become more flexible and its role in the state has become more contested. Younger Brotherhood members are challenging and reshaping the old order. The Brotherhood professes that it is committed solely to democratic means of governance, as evidenced by its refusal to resort to violence even in the face of immense repression from the Egyptian state. While the Brotherhood's commitment to democracy if it wins control of the government has not yet been tested, the Brotherhood's professed commitment appears far more credible than does the Mubarak government's hollow rhetoric about democracy and reform.

The Muslim community in the United States adds yet another dimension to this Transatlantic debate. Is America doing everything it can to invite Muslim Americans to participate in pluralist government, or is the U.S. further isolating Muslim Americans? Can the U.S. learn from Europe's challenges in integrating Muslim religious minorities? Will American public opinion drift away from what Geneive Abdo describes as a conflating or lumping of American Muslims with Arab Muslims?

The questions are numerous and the answers all but certain. In this era of global commerce, education, and environmental protection, the way in which we run our governments will undoubtedly spark disagreement among nations and peoples. Some posit that values are possessed by the individual, who in a democratic system participates in government to protect and advance his or her values. Oth-

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ers believe that values come from a divine source which all others should obey. While citizens of some Middle Eastern countries, as well as some in the U.S. and in Europe, believe that religious foundations are the only means for a civil structure, many others starkly oppose that notion. Such differences will inevitably persist. Dialogue about religion and state is valuable and unavoidable, and the Middle East, the United States and Europe must seek to continue mutually respectful and informed discussions of the various ways faith influences democracy and government.



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