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Jillian Schwedler

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## Faith in Moderation

### *Islamist Parties in Jordan and Yemen*

Does political inclusion produce ideological moderation? Jillian Schwedler argues that examining political behavior alone provides insufficient evidence of moderation because it leaves open the possibility that political actors might act as if they are moderate while harboring radical agendas. Through a comparative study of the Islamic Action Front (IAF) party in Jordan and the Islah party in Yemen, she argues that the IAF has become more moderate through participation in pluralist political processes, while the Islah party has not. The variation is explained in part by internal group organization and decision-making processes, but particularly by the ways in which the IAF has been able to justify its new pluralist practices on Islamic terms while the Islah party has not. Based on nearly four years of field research in Jordan and Yemen, Schwedler contributes both a new theory of ideological moderation and substantial new detail about the internal workings of these two powerful Islamist political parties.

Jillian Schwedler is Assistant Professor of Government and Politics at the University of Maryland and Chair of the Middle East Research and Information Project (MERIP), publishers of *Middle East Report*. She has received awards and fellowships from the National Science Foundation, the Social Science Research Council, and the Fulbright Scholars Program, among others. Dr. Schwedler's publications include three edited volumes: *Toward Civil Society in the Middle East?* (1995), *Islamist Parties in Jordan* (1997), and the award-winning *Understanding the Contemporary Middle East*, with Deborah J. Gerner (2004). Her articles have appeared in *Comparative Politics*, *Journal of Democracy*, *SAIS Review of International Affairs*, *Social Movement Studies*, and *Middle East Policy*, among other journals. She is currently working on a book project on protest and policing in Jordan and a collaborative project on the repression-dissent nexus in the Middle East.

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JILLIAN SCHWEDLER

*University of Maryland*



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*For Mom and Dad,  
Wish You Were Here*

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## Preface

Grappling with the question of the inclusion of Islamists in democratic processes has been personally challenging. As a progressive, I have frequently lent my voice to those who have argued against cultural explanations for why few Muslim societies are democratic. I am committed to encouraging democratization on a global scale, although I question whether positive change can be realized through external intervention. I believe that international standards of human rights should be applied throughout the Middle East and Muslim world (indeed, globally) and that the greatest obstacles to the realization of those norms and practices are the repressive and nondemocratic regimes that prevail in the region. It is a sad truth, as well, that many of these nondemocratic regimes came to power, have remained in power, or have been substantially strengthened by direct support from democratic nations. I am shamed and embarrassed by these ongoing practices.

An honest commitment to democratization in the Middle East and Muslim world requires recognition that Islamists are legitimate political actors with substantial constituencies. They cannot be excluded wholesale from the political arena on either normative or practical grounds. Yet I recognize that Islamist groups do not aspire to the same secular vision of freedom and equality that I embrace. They may, in fact, aspire to banish that vision from the political arena. The tension – sometimes, the open conflict – between these personal commitments is not easily resolved.

Nor, unfortunately, is it easily addressed. Most scholarship on the Middle East is haunted by what might be characterized as the Edward Said–Bernard Lewis divide: striving to understand Middle Eastern cultures and societies on their own terms (Said 1978, 1997) versus viewing Middle



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Eastern and particularly Islamic culture as partly or wholly responsible for the region's failure to follow global trends of democratization (Lewis 1994, 2001, 2003). The intellectual climate, particularly since September 11, 2001, but also previously, has virtually denied a full hearing to forthright discussion of the tensions between commitments to democratization and secular liberalism. The debates are so polarized that I sometimes find myself defending Islamists alongside apologists whose willingness to overlook the regressive dimensions of many Islamist agendas makes me extremely uncomfortable.

I have contended, along with others, that not all Islamists are radical, and I believe that to be true. I have written that Islamists are unlikely to win the majorities that would enable them to overturn new democratic processes, and I also believe that to be true. But among the hundreds of "moderate" Islamists I have interviewed, I have encountered tremendous anti-Semitism (not to be confused with anti-Zionism – a legitimate political position that should be decoupled from racism). I have close friends who have lost partners and family to acts of political violence perpetrated by extremist Islamists. I am nervous when Islamists ask about my husband, as I wonder whether they will recognize his name as Jewish. I doubt that as a white, red-haired American female, I could conduct my research as easily if certain Islamist groups were successful in implementing their agendas. Nor do I not want my friends in the region to be subjected to conservative and sometimes regressive social programs – even if a majority of the citizenry supports them. But because the political climate is so polarized and the stakes are so high, progressives seldom talk about these tensions, even among ourselves. We are all worse off for that silence.

The (largely) unspoken obstacle to such frank debate is that those of us who study the Middle East recognize that our scholarship may "add evidence" to one position or the other in a public discourse full of caricatures and half-truths. Fearful of contributing to lines of reasoning that obscure complex processes and/or support undesirable policies, we sometimes frame our arguments in ways that ultimately weaken both progressive politics and our intellectual contributions. The problem is not that we hold normative commitments, but that we routinely fail to comment on these and other factors that influence the direction and shape of our scholarship.

I recognize that a great deal is at stake in the deployment of categories, such as moderate and radical, and in the characterization of Islamist participation in democratic political practices. In particular, the question of moderation in the Middle East is charged because it tends to imply that

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Islamists may uniquely threaten the prospects for democratization. In this regard, encouraging moderation is often shorthand for the project of turning Islamists into democrats, if not liberals. My intention is not to limit the discussion of moderation to Islamists nor to frame the overall theoretical debate around promoting democratization per se. Rather, I hope to pose a more normatively neutral question about how groups move from a relatively closed ideology to one that is more open, tolerant, and pluralist. I take seriously the concern that we can never know what any Islamist – or any person, for that matter – believes or intends. My claims are modest and primarily theoretical, though I believe they are also highly relevant to practical debates about democratization. I hope that my transparency regarding my normative commitments will better inform readers as to my intellectual motivations and that, in turn, readers will be generous in judging the success of this effort on its own terms.

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## Acknowledgments

Book acknowledgments typically begin with formal thanks to institutions and granting agencies and move to more personal expressions of gratitude to friends (with veiled references to heavy drinking), family, and partner. I must start with the most personal, however, as this project spanned the loss of several lives and the introduction of several new ones. My father died as I entered graduate school and my mother died as I completed my dissertation. My dad was endlessly supportive, though I suspect he worried when his little girl decided to run off to study the Middle East. My mom saw me through most of this project and was overjoyed by the possibilities I faced compared to her own difficult and often unhappy life. They were incredible parents, and my world will never be quite right without them. My best friend from graduate school died tragically days before my first job interview, and the loss paralyzed me for months. A dear friend in Jordan who shared my commitment to progressive politics lost a devastating struggle with cancer. During those black periods, my husband and my truest love kept me alive, though I watched helplessly as he suffered when his mother died a year before my own. For twenty-one years, he has given me his undying love, steadfast support, and countless laughs. For this and more, I adore him endlessly. We started our own family, as many do, with a dog, a beautiful stray pit bull with grateful brown eyes. As I finish this manuscript, two new little people, my twin sons, happily disrupt my work with their squeals of laughter. I hope that they find life as joyous as I have, notwithstanding the pain of losing loved ones. These precious lives, lost and found, have made life wonderful: Marvin Schwedler, Diana Schwedler, Janet Sherman, Aida Dabbas, John

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List of Abbreviations

AAIA	Aden-Abyan Islamic Army, Yemen
GID	General Intelligence Department ( <i>mukhabarat</i> ), Jordan
GPC	General Popular Congress party, Yemen
HAMAS	Islamic Resistance Movement, Palestine
IAF	Islamic Action Front party, Jordan
IJM	Islamic Jihad Movement, Yemen
IMF	International Monetary Fund
NCC	National Consultative Council, Jordan
NDF	National Democratic Front, South Yemen
NGO	nongovernmental organization
NSP	National Socialist Party, Jordan
PDRY	People’s Democratic Republic of Yemen (South Yemen)
PELP	Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine
PKK	Kurdish Workers Party
PLO	Palestinian Liberation Organization
ROY	Republic of Yemen (united Yemen)
SCCO	Supreme Coordination Council of the Opposition, Yemen
USAID	U.S. Agency for International Development
YAR	Yemen Arab Republic (North Yemen)
YCCSS	Yemeni Center for Cultural and Strategic Studies
YSP	Yemeni Socialist Party

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## Note on Transliterations and Translations

In an effort to make this work of political ethnography accessible to a non-Arabic-speaking audience, I have adopted a modified transliteration system that represents only the medial ‘ayn, ‘ghayn, and hamza, except in rendering proper names. Arabic terms appear in italics, often parenthetically following the English use: Council of Deputies (*majlis al-nuwab*). Because Arabic plurals take many forms, I have noted where I give the Arabic term in the singular: Islamic religious opinions (sing. *fatwa*). I have avoided pluralizing Arabic words by adding *s*. Words and names common in the English language take the familiar form (thus, “Amman” and not “‘Amman”) and when an individual has a preferred spelling of his name in English (thus, “Saad Eddin Ibrahim” and not “Sa‘ad al-Din Ibrahim”). I have reviewed my translations and transliterations for accuracy and consistency, but if a careful Arabic reader finds fault with some of my renderings I hope he or she forgives me for erring on the side of accessibility. Unless noted, all translations are my own.

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