

The Modern Muslim State

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Larry Bernstein:

Welcome to What Happens Next. My name is Larry Bernstein. What Happens Next is a podcast which covers economics, politics, and history.

Today's topic is The Modern Muslim State.

Our speaker is Malika Zeghal who is the Prince Alwaleed Bin Talal Professor in Contemporary Islamic Thought and Life at Harvard. She just published her book entitled The Making of the Modern Muslim State: Islam and Governance in the Middle East and North Africa.

I want to learn from Malika about why Muslim states like Morocco, Tunisia, and Egypt integrate Islam with the state and what that means for women's rights and religious minorities. In addition, I am interested in finding out why these nations are all authoritarian states and what that means for the future of tolerance and democracy in the region.

Buckle up.

Malika Zeghal:

My book examines the role of Islam in governance in Muslim majority countries of the modern Middle East. The conventional approach is to focus on organized Islamist movements and their opposition to the authoritarian secular states. My approach is broader. Studying the history of constitutional debates and state expenditures allows me to explain the political divides in contemporary Middle Eastern societies.

Let me highlight three main points. First, in Middle Eastern and Muslim majority countries there has been a broad agreement that the state should be the custodian of Islam, the preferred religion. This means that it should protect Islam, the Muslim community, and Islamic institutions. It implies that there is no separation between Islam and the state.

It does not mean that the state cannot also protect other religions, only that Islam is the preferred one. The political adversaries of Islamists are not secularists. I call them liberals and Islamist conservatives. What they disagree on is how the state custodianship of Islam, the preferred religion, should be carried out. Liberals want to reduce the role that Islam plays in governance, not eliminate it. They want to reduce the extent of state funded Islamic education and worship infrastructure.

Liberals sometimes want to separate religion and politics. For example, they might want to forbid Islamist parties or political activities in mosques. They might also reject the organization of political competition alongside sectarian lines to keep the political ambitions of religious minorities at bay.

Second, we find this broad agreement and disputes about its implementation in pre-modern and modern times. Since conventional wisdom tends to ignore this broad agreement as well as the longstanding nature of these debates, it tends to assume that contemporary Middle Eastern states are secular, and it tends to give too much credit and importance to colonization or to Islamist movements. These movements are simply one of the many protagonists in a longstanding political battle.

It also means that this project is not the result of political or socioeconomic dysfunctions, as is often argued. Islamist parties may feed on socioeconomic problems when they are in the opposition and may be hurt by them when they are in power. So it does not help much to think that they will fade away once these economic and social problems are addressed. From a policy point of view, it is important to keep this debate alive, preferably under democratic conditions, and not predict that either side will moderate its stances.

Third, one of the most salient aspects of the state custodianship of Islam is the financial support that the state provides to Islamic worship infrastructure and personnel, Islamic education, and Islamic courts. And there are disputes about the extent of the support between liberals and conservatives.

The striking feature is that in relation to GDP, the state financial support is not that large. In the countries I looked at: Morocco, Tunisia, Egypt, and Turkey, it represents less than 1% of GDP, which is significantly smaller than what is spent on religion in the U.S. about 2% of GDP. Another significant difference is that in these four countries, public religious provisions are mainly a state affair, whereas in the U.S., civil society is the main contributor. All those state religious expenditures have significantly decreased as a percentage of other public expenditures, a secularization that took place in the 19th century as the state started to grow, they nonetheless massively increased in per capita real terms adjusted for inflation. A significant driver has been the development of education and Islamic instruction, which today is mostly dispensed in modern schools rather than in madrasas. This means that the lifetime exposure of a typical child to Islamic instruction has vastly increased in the last century even though school curricula have secularized.

Let me conclude with this notion of choice. Having a state preferred religion is a choice and it can be undone. Unlike what we often hear. It's not that Islam is an inherently political religion or that it is more political than other religions. In fact, some Muslim majority politics do not have a

state preferred religion, and almost half the rest of the world does. Moreover, this is not correlated to socioeconomic development or to political rights. On the other hand, a statistically significant explanatory factor is the size of the religious majority.

Larry Bernstein:
Define a Muslim state.

Malika Zeghal:
A Muslim state is a state that has Islam as the preferred religion. It means that it protects the religion, the Muslim community, and the Muslim institutions, and it protects that religion more than the others. There is a hierarchy that puts Islam on top.

Larry Bernstein:
At the time of Tunisia's independence in 1956, there were 250,000 French and Italian Christians and nearly 100,000 Jews living there. Today Tunisia is 99% Muslim. The Tunisian constitution states that its government is based on equality and tolerance for religious minorities. It does not seem like the minority residents believed it because they moved out. What happened?

Malika Zeghal:
Minorities left because their conditions of life were not ideal that full equality was not realized. There were also economic problems. There were not great opportunities. The minorities were not the only ones to leave. A lot of Tunisian Muslims also left because there were little opportunities from the economic point of view.

Larry Bernstein:
Why did Tunisia integrate Islam with the state?

Malika Zeghal:
Spain has a separation of church and state right now. We do not see separation of religion and state in those Muslim majority countries that I study in the book. The issue might not be why did Muslim majority countries in the Middle East not separate religion and state? I think the real question is why did it happen in Europe? Why did it happen in the United States? The natural historical situation is that of a very tight relationship between church and state. The real puzzle is why does it happen in the West rather than why it did not happen in Muslim majority Middle Eastern countries.

Larry Bernstein:
Why does this seemingly liberal Muslim state of Tunisia have authoritarianism?

Malika Zeghal:

When the Arab Springs started in 2010 in Tunisia, I thought I would not be asked that question anymore. And here we are again. Tunisia had an experiment of a decade of democratic rule. It ended recently around 2021. In Egypt, it lasted not even two years. Why? The durability of authoritarianism in the Middle East is a difficult question. I do not have an answer for you. For 10 years Tunisians were able to have free and fair elections. They had a peaceful alternation to power but unfortunately it ended.

Larry Bernstein:

In 2019, the Arab Spring revolution began in Tunisia with a fruit merchant fighting over a ticket. What happened?

Malika Zeghal:

It started with Mohamed Bouazizi and the story has become a myth. It has been repeated with different details and enriched little by little by people in Tunisia. But the main idea was that he needed a permit to be able to sell his groceries on his cart. He was a high school dropout not very prosperous obviously, but to get a permit you need to pay a bribe. And he didn't have the means to pay a bribe and he was harassed by the police because he didn't have the permit. And in the end, out of despair, he self-immolated. It's important to know that self-immolations happened regularly not just in Tunisia and North Africa more generally.

When I heard about the self-immolation, I thought that this was another very unfortunate case, and I never thought it would begin the Arab Spring. It happens that this led to spontaneous demonstrations in the poorest area of Tunisia. And there are economic inequalities between the interior and the coast. And demonstrations started from there.

They were also very well organized by the local trade union in Tunisia and by some democrats who used that spontaneous movement to mobilize people. And it went fast until Ben Ali left the country to go to Saudi Arabia on the 14th of January 2011.

And this was the beginning and led to the drafting of the 2014 democratic constitution. It did not happen initially to ask for democracy. It happened because of economic problems that were illustrated by what Mohamed Bouazizi did in protest of the corruption and that the state did not listen. The state was the culprit here.

It is important to know that before the global financial crisis of 2008, the Tunisian economy grew at an annual rate of 5%, which made it an economic miracle in the eyes of the IMF. But after 2008, there is a contraction of the global economy, especially in Europe, which is the main export market for Tunisia and growth weakened. And this made the economic situation fragile. Just to give you a few figures, between 2007-10, Tunisia's GDP annual growth rate decreased

from 6% to 3.5%. So, there is an exogenous shock here. And we can look at this moment also as the product of that shock.

Larry Bernstein:

Why was the democratic transition in Tunisia so short?

Malika Zeghal:

Opportunities were few. The privatized enterprises were distributed to cronies. I have this metaphor of the house that is crumbling where the dictator is fired and he leaves and the new people in the house come in, they party for 10 years. They have great discussions about constitution making, religion, politics, law, and be fully democratic, but they completely forget to look at the house and that the walls are crumbling. And at the end, the Tunisian population is not much better off economically and inflation starts after Covid. And a new president is elected at the end of this decade who decides to shut down parliament and a return to authoritarianism. So, for 10 years you had a whole society that was enthusiastic about becoming democratic, but in the end, no one wanted to reform the economy, perhaps to preserve the rents that had been distributed, perhaps to participate in this crony capitalism. But when return to authoritarianism happens, there is a certain apathy and people are tired after a decade. And unfortunately, this is where we are today.

Larry Bernstein:

I want to talk about Algeria next. These Muslim states do not act independently of each other. There was a civil war in Algeria and the other countries in the region saw that and wanted to prevent something similar happening at home.

Here is a little background about Algeria. In 1870 France lost the Franco-Prussian war and Alsace became part of Prussia. The French sent its Alsatian refugees to colonize Algeria. Hundreds of thousands of so-called Pied Noirs moved to Algeria creating a little France in the major Algerian cities. They built beautiful boulevards, vineyards, and industry. Algeria became literally a part of France. The local French Algerians got proportional seats in the French parliament. They were French citizens. After World War II, the Algerian Muslims were promised political rights, but they did not get them fast enough. A civil war broke out in Algeria, hundreds of thousands of French troops were sent to put down the unrest. And then there was a referendum and Algerians voted for independence.

Malika Zeghal:

Algeria was occupied by France between 1830 and 1962. There was a very violent war of liberation, war of independence, and the French who lived in Algeria, 1 million French people left after 1962. They didn't feel that they could stay over there. And this was a political decision.

They didn't feel that they could participate in a society where you had had a war of independence between the Algerians and France.

Larry Bernstein:

Algerian independence did not end the violence. A civil war broke out in Algeria between the conservative Islamists and the more liberal secular Muslim population. It was even dangerous for foreign investors who were at risk of being kidnapped. I worked in Salomon Brothers proprietary emerging markets business, and in 1997 I bought an Algerian government debt claim. When I asked the head of the Algerian Ministry of Finance for a meeting, he offered me the choice of the Algiers airport lounge because the risk of abduction would be less than a meeting in his office, or several months later at the IMF in Washington. I decided that US seemed like the better option. Tell us about the civil war in Algeria and what it meant for the region.

Malika Zeghal:

Why does the Civil War start in Algeria in the 1980s, the price of oil decreases and the Algerian government is weakened. There are some riots at the end of the 1980s and the regime organizes elections. But it happens that the Islamists win the first round of elections, and the whole democratic process is stopped by the military who choose to go back to authoritarianism, hence a civil war between the radicals on the Islamist side and the military. This is called the black decade. There are a lot of observers who understand the first Arab Spring happened in Algeria with those elections in 1991 and when the Arab Spring happened in Tunisia warning that this would happen again if we opened the democratic arena.

All those countries look at each other. When the Arab Spring happened was not just the Algerian scenario. Everybody feared an Iranian scenario. And they are justification to keep authoritarianism in place. You are right to underline that all these countries look at each other and try to avoid the worst scenarios possible.

Larry Bernstein:

Your book is about the rise of the Muslim state. Over the past 70 years, these Muslim states became independent and were no longer European colonies. But these populations lived under European rule for a hundred years and they observed European standards for individual rights and religious liberty. How did living under Europeans affect these Muslim states views on liberty?

Malika Zeghal:

Let me give you an example. Polygamy has been either criminalized like in Tunisia or restricted, and it was never something that was very frequent. And are easy to let go and others that are not. For instance, today in Tunisia, there is a hot debate about inheritance law. Inheritance law follows Islamic law.

Larry Bernstein:

Daughters can only receive half of what sons inherit.

Malika Zeghal:

As you can imagine, women are very well educated in Tunisia, and they are not happy about this. It does not matter in the end if we are going to keep it or remove it, but we will continue to say that Islam is the religion of Tunisia.

But if you choose to remain a state that is the custodian of Islam as a preferred religion, it does not seem to constrain other choices such as economic policy, democracy, or authoritarianism. And this is what the Arab Spring helped me understand because the Arab Spring was a moment of interminable discussions about religion and state.

Larry Bernstein:

Muslims in these countries are not allowed to convert or become an atheist. That would be seen as blasphemous and potentially criminal. Has there been any liberalization on this?

Malika Zeghal:

If people convert to another religion, they will certainly not announce it publicly. Usually women cannot marry non-Muslims, and so very often the husband converts, and I have seen examples of couples in which the husband has converted to Islam, but it's still object of discrimination and problems from the administration. The fact that women must marry Muslim men is quite problematic.

Larry Bernstein:

I want to expand on the daughter's inheritance issue. In 1789, there was the French Revolution. France had been a Catholic country, and during the revolution, there was a wave of anti-Catholicism and a desire to expand women's rights. They gave women the right to divorce and hold property and there was a liberalization of inheritance laws.

That is 1789. Tunisia was a French protectorate for nearly a century. These ideas of equal rights for women are not novel. It was embedded in the French colonial period. Tunisian society could not hide from these ideas. You mentioned that Tunisian women are very well educated. What about women's rights in Tunisia? What about divorce, women's education, rights of property? Where are women's rights in the countries you studied? What does it mean that it is a Muslim state as it relates to women's rights?

Malika Zeghal:

That is a great question because you have tensions with women's rights. After independence in 1956, Habib Bourguiba the President of Tunisia published a new family code in which polygamy and unilateral divorce is forbidden. One thing that remains is inheritance law. The unilateral divorce reputation infuriates the conservatives, and the liberals want to remove the Islamic inheritance law.

This creates a debate to this day. And during the transition, these questions come back and there are some radical Islamists who want to say, well, let us reinstate polygamy. Let's reinstate unilateral divorce. And the liberal saying, are you out of your mind? We are in the 21st century. The debate continues to this day. It's unfortunate that authoritarian rulers foreclose the debate, and it becomes impossible to progress.

Larry Bernstein:

What role do women play in politics in these Muslim states?

Malika Zeghal:

You have strong professional women in the public sphere. Tunisia had a female prime minister recently, and women are strong and speak their minds. You have female politicians on both sides of the cleavage. You have Islamist women in parliaments in Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, Egypt, and they are quite active.

Larry Bernstein:

Next topic is Egypt which had a substantial Christian Copt population. The Copts are well educated and had lots of jobs in the government administration. The Muslim governments have not been friendly towards its Copt minority despite their constitutional promises of equality and tolerance.

Malika Zeghal:

The same contradiction. The same fear that the minority will take over, which can seem counterintuitive and illogical because how can a minority take over if they are a minority? But there is fear to be governed by a minority that is not the majority religion. So, to keep this preponderance of Islam requires then to discriminate which creates this tension and contradiction.

Larry Bernstein:

I end each episode with a note of optimism. What are you optimistic about in the modern Middle East?

Malika Zeghal:

I'm not very optimistic for the moment because authoritarianism has come back. But hopefully a democratic future and the cleavages I talk about in the book can be reopened and discussed under democratic conditions.

Larry Bernstein:

Thanks to Malika for joining us today.

If you missed last week's podcast, check it out. The topic was Walking the World.

Our speaker was Chris Arnade. The two of us worked together in the Emerging Markets Department at Salomon Brothers in the mid-1990s. Chris currently spends his time walking the world with his camera sending dispatches from global cities. We discussed why he walks and what he has learned in places like Seoul, Hanoi, Tokyo, and Dakar.

Chris publishes his writing and photographs on Substack where you can find his weekly commentary.

I would like to make a plug for next week's podcast with Ernie Freeberg who is a Professor of American History at the University of Tennessee. The topic is what happens when the US presidential candidate is running from prison. Ernie wrote a book entitled Democracy's Prisoner: Eugene Debs, the Great War, and the Right to Dissent, which describes how Debs ran as the socialist candidate during the 1920 US Presidential Election from a Federal prison in Atlanta.

You can find our previous episodes and transcripts on our website whathappensnextin6minutes.com. Please subscribe to our weekly emails and follow us on Apple Podcasts or Spotify.

Thank you for joining us today, good-bye.

Check out our previous episode, Walking the World, [here](#).