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RECEIVED 25 August 2024

ACCEPTED 14 January 2025

PUBLISHED 04 February 2025

## CITATION

Murtazashvili JB (2025) The problem of  
governance.  
*Front. Polit. Sci.* 7:1486299.  
doi: 10.3389/fpos.2025.1486299

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# The problem of governance

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Shadi Hamid's *The Problem of Democracy* makes a compelling case for focusing on government over governance. Hamid's offers a view of a restrained American foreign policy in the Middle East that avoids falling into the trap of a crass isolationism or an overbearing imposition of liberalism. For all its insight, this essay makes a case that governance remains especially significant to promote peace and prosperity in fragile states. It also argues that minimalist democracy, where attempted, has not necessarily lived up to the promise Hamid sees for it.

## KEYWORDS

governance, democracy, fragile states, Middle East & North Africa (MENA), Central Asia

## Introduction

Many books have been written about America's foreign policy in the Middle East. There is also a longstanding debate in international relations about the virtues of intervention, with the perpetual struggle among realists and idealists. It goes without saying that democracy is a significant topic of consideration. That Hamid's (2022) *The Problem of Democracy* stands out in such a crowded arena of ideas makes this accomplishment even more impressive. Hamid offers a unique perspective on America's democracy promotion abroad, as well as sharp insights into the challenges of establishing democracy in the Middle East.

This is also a book that engages with people who know about democracy in the Middle East. Hamid's book is informed by hundreds of hours of interviews and informal conversations with activists, leaders, and politicians in Egypt, Jordan, Tunisia, and Turkey, as well as more than 25 senior officials in the White House, State Department, and Defense Department, including veterans of the George W. Bush, Clinton, and George H.W. Bush administrations. Hamid also spoke to the foreign policy advisors of several U.S. senators, as well as leverages years of experience living in the Middle East.

That aspect is significant because it addresses the concern of outsiders writing from afar on topics that are loosely, if at all, based on the accounts of the people who have the most knowledge about the subject. Beyond the empirical approach based on those in the know, there is much to like about the book. Hamid offers something of a blueprint for U.S. foreign policy, as well as a perspective on cultures of democracy and liberalism. It is a blueprint in the sense of a clear plan, but Hamid's blueprint eschews micromanaging the process of democracy promotion. Rather than pushing for too much, it suggests a virtue in pushing for less. This less ambitious, and more realistic, approach is organized around the concept of democratic minimalism. The book also offers an arguably needed reflection on the limitations of realist foreign policy. The heart of the book is also optimistic, with a hope that U.S. foreign policy can be a source of good in the world.

In what follows, I consider some of these ideas critically. After reviewing the argument for democratic minimalism, I suggest that the case where this has been attempted—or as close to an attempt—might be Afghanistan. Hamid's emphasis is on the democratic movements in Algeria, Jordan, and Egypt. Afghanistan is not always considered part of MENA, though the argument about democratic minimalism is a general one for American foreign policy. For this reason, the Afghan experience is relevant.

In my view, the Afghan experience offers insight into some of the challenges with cultural arguments, but also suggests that democratic minimalism might not be what contributes to effective states. The reason is that Afghanistan had minimal democracy. What was missing was broader reform to governance, as well as recognition of a role for self-governance.

What might be missing? My suggestion is that it is governance. Hamid's issues with liberalism are valid, but the analysis presented only focuses on liberalism as a component of governance. What is left out is that governance does not only include liberalism, but also includes public sector governance reform. As economics Nobel Laureate Williamson (2005) puts it, governance is about the study of good order and working relationships. Fukuyama (2013) goes further in explaining that governance is about getting things done—capacity and autonomy to implement policies. That consideration of governance, beyond the liberalism that Hamid rightly criticizes, is something that can be an arguably more fundamental explanation for political order. My suggestion is that governance reform can and should be a part of American foreign policy to promote improvements in well-being abroad.

A second critical observation concerns the question of culture. The presumed decline of democratic culture is an important theme of the book, which attempts to clarify why culture matters and how cultural arguments contrast with explanations based on “interests.” While the idea that culture matters is not controversial, cultural arguments are often imprecise and implemented in ways that ultimately undermine prospects for effective foreign policy. My suggestion in this regard is that if culture is going to be invoked, more is necessary to explain what features of culture matter. Moreover, we must consider what we might want to do is take culture as a given and focus on what we can better understand, and presumably, what is more amendable to change in countries contemplating democracy.

My contribution to the review symposium is organized as follows. It begins by considering the case for democratic minimalism. The next section suggests that Afghanistan was a case of democratic minimalism and that it did not work well. I then consider some of the challenges with cultural arguments. The essay concludes by suggesting that governance reform might be a more significant way to improve prospects for political order in the Middle East, and improve the situation in the U.S., than minimalist democracy.

## From liberalism to democratic minimalism

Beyond clarifying what “governance” means, another of Fukuyama's (2007) insights was to distinguish “liberalism” from “state building.” For Fukuyama, the latter ought to be the focus of efforts to reconstruct fragile states. It is relevant here because the concept of democratic minimalism extends these ideas by moving from liberalism to democracy, specifically to democratic minimalism.

Hamid's contention is that there is an essence to democracy beyond its liberal features. He puts it this way: “At their core, democracies offer one essential advantage: they allow for the peaceful alternation of power and the regulation of existential conflict” (p. 44). The emphasis is a return to past notions, such as the emphasis on elite view provided by Joseph Schumpeter, who emphasized this changing of power. But alas, “the Schumpeterian approach fell out of favor. It was ethically neutral and nakedly instrumentalist” (p. 46). The elite view gave way to populism.

Democratic minimalism moves back in the direction of the neutral and instrumentalist view of democracy, though it does not abandon ethics entirely, since there is a moral obligation to promote the minimal features of democracy. And these minimal features are that people are willing to accept what is produced by majorities even if they do not like it, and to accept the process. In a sense, this is a book about trusting the process, or more precisely, about doing what we can to establish and maintain trust in the democratic process.

One of the chapters is entitled, “Are Democracies More Effective?” Hamid's view is that they are effective, but they should not promise too much. They are imperfect. The book references *Democracy for Realists*, by Christopher Achen and Larry Bartels, which sees the challenge for democracy as not promising too much. Hence, what Hamid offer is “Reconceptualizing democracy as a system and means of governing and rotating power with no prejudice to substantive ideological outcomes allows us to move away from a preoccupation with democratic instrumentalism” (p. 55, italics in text).

Though it is not the emphasis of the book, the sentiments above exemplify the perspective of modus vivendi pluralism, a political theory exemplified by live and let live perspective. Modus vivendi pluralism recognizes a key challenge for successful governance is figuring out how to coexist in societies and communities characterized by deep ideological, social, and ethical disagreements. One of its central premises is that the ideological differences that exist are okay. In this regard, democratic minimalism is a modus vivendi perspective. Its agnostic view about policies, and its emphasis on accepting that there are deep differences in how we think about democracy, is a proposed way to address the challenge of deep divides. To each majority their own, so to speak.

Substantively, the new approach to democracy accepts that there will be illiberal parties even in a democracy. As Hamid explains, “In the three decades since, most scholars of the Middle East and many policymakers have come around to the necessity—or at least inevitability—of Islamist participation. That earlier note of skepticism remains, however, if not necessarily in theory then in practice. And that skepticism continues to shape—and distort—America's approach to the Middle East” (p. 112).

Democratic minimalism is an attempt to overcome these distortions. What it requires is to acknowledge “Arab democracy is simply impossible without the inclusion of Islamist parties. I hesitate to state this as if it might be controversial when it is one of the few notions in Middle East politics that is close to self-evident” (p. 113).

Although this approach is one which acknowledges deep differences, it is not value neutral, and it is not relativistic. The following passage, which I quote at length, nicely captures how Hamid maintains morals and which rationalizes his emphasis on doing something:

They are traditionalist in their preoccupation with stability at all costs, which in turn makes them risk-averse, weary of ‘values’ talk, and skeptical of ambition and adventure abroad, especially when it might involve interfering in another country's domestic politics. They hold to a clear hierarchy of concerns and objectives. Even if they wish to distance themselves from him, the patron saint of realists is Henry Kissinger, who exemplified the hard-headed elevation of narrowly defined national security interests. In Kissinger's view, democracy might be nice, particularly at home, but it was always a luxury, particularly abroad. In this reading, America should unapologetically pursue its interests, even if that

meant undermining other countries' democracies. Ideals and interests are not intertwined (Hamid, p. 114).

Democratic minimalism, then, is about giving up on the liberal aspects of democracy. It is about doing the bare minimum, but it is also about trying to promote democracy. It's not a realist perspective in the sense that realists sometimes devolves into relativism. It's interventionist, but in the least arrogant and most respectful way possible.

## Democratic minimalism in practice

Hamid's approach is prospective, suggesting a new approach to American foreign policy. A central feature of this alternative is that it would do better for the U.S. in achieving American interests, but also be good for the people in the Middle East who have so long pushed for democracy.

But would it work? Though democracy has been a key component of democratic state-building, establishing democracy through foreign invasion has been subject to much criticism. As [Trantidis \(2022\)](#) explains, foreign imposition of democracy suffers from two key flaws: an oversimplified view of how institutional changes translate into improvements on socioeconomic conditions and outcomes, as well as troubling assumptions about how previous historical experiences with democracy and prosperity can be transplanted to new contexts.

Both of these flaws are present when one considers the failure of democratic state-building in Afghanistan (which "failed" in the sense that after two decades of democracy, the autocratic Taliban returned to power in 2021). The approach of democratic minimalism was, to an extent, attempted in Afghanistan, if we take democratic minimalism as a preoccupation with elections. The brief history of contemporary Afghanistan is that in 2001, American and Northern Alliance forces overthrew the Taliban government that had been in power since 1996. What commenced was perhaps the largest and costliest state-building effort in history.

But this was always focused on elections above anything else. The constitution-making did more than elections, but democracy was what was emphasized ([Maley, 2018](#)). The most significant aspect of the reform process was to ensure free and fair elections in Afghanistan. Despite substantial challenges, there were three successful rounds of presidential and parliament elections. However, there were ongoing threats to democracy, and there was never full stability ([Coburn and Larson, 2014](#)).

Was minimalist democracy the right objective in Afghanistan? As I have argued elsewhere, minimalist democracy may have contributed to the failure of state-building in Afghanistan ([Murtazashvili, 2022](#)). The reason is that many people I spoke with in Afghanistan cared more about improvements in governance than about the minimalist democracy that was pushed by Afghan government and many donors. They seemed to care more about improvements in the quality of public services than in elections.

This would seem to suggest that promoting a minimalist democracy may not be what people want. Hamid to an extent rejects this emphasis on governance. As he puts it, we should focus on the government, and on democracy. But in my view, public administration reform is the key. At a minimum, it should be considered alongside democracy, though there is also a case to be made that public administration reform without minimalist democracy may be what

people want in fragile states. Considering that possibility would have strengthened an impressive book.

The chapter on Islamists (Chapter 8, "Islamists in Government") gets at some of these ideas. Hamid notes "Islamists, like everyone else, were products of this burgeoning bureaucratic state. Even as it failed to meet basic expectations, the state was everywhere. Even when it was absent, which was often enough, its absence was felt. And so Islamists came to see the state as both the source of and solution to their problems" (p. 208).

This could be the focus, rather than democracy. Islamists are in a loop where they are relying too much on the state. Afghans were overwhelmed by the desire for a centralized government. In both instances, what may make more sense is to think about improvements in governance.

What might this look like? In Afghanistan and the Middle East, consider that the state has either had too much of a role, or that the leaders have aspired to more of a role. This suggests not democracy but limiting government is a significant aspect of policy; or to get the government (whether there are elections or not) to do better in governing—that is, providing public goods. What we know is that people tend to believe in the state when it provides public goods and services. Acknowledging that aspect of governance could complement the focus on democracy.

## The problem with cultural arguments

In 2007, Robert Kaplan published an article in *The Atlantic* entitled, "It's the Tribes, Stupid!" The idea was about tribes, but also about culture and context. In order to understand the challenges of foreign policy in places like Afghanistan, Pakistan, and the Middle East, it is necessary to consider tribes, but more generally, to understand something about culture ([Kaplan, 2007](#)).

These ideas about culture are significant. When the Soviet Union collapsed, there were a lot of questions about why some places were better able to transition to markets more quickly. "Culture" became something that was thought to influence these things ([Pejovich, 2003](#)). Markets depend on a supportive culture ([Storr, 2013](#)). This is an argument that goes back to [Putnam et al's \(1994\)](#) thesis about civic traditions in Italy, and why the North is richer than the South, but also was a feature of Max Weber's analysis of Protestant ethics and the rise of capitalism.

This is also an argument that has been used to explain why democracy seems not to work in places like Afghanistan. For reasons that I explain below, it's not an especially convincing argument. But first, it is necessary to consider the arguments about culture in Shadi Hamid's book.

One of Hamid's contentions is that the fundamental aspect of democracy—that people accept outcomes they do not like—is increasingly absent in the U.S. Hamid sees a growing number of Americans are unwilling to respect democratic processes that give outcomes that do not align with their beliefs. In Hamid's view, this reflects a broader crisis of democratic culture. Without a supportive culture, democracy is in danger.

But what is democratic culture? In the U.S., the clearest statement in the book is that democratic culture refers to the idea that "Americans believe (or believed) in 'small d' democracy" (p. 3). Later, Hamid acknowledges that "culture" is challenging to define and measure. As he explains, "'Culture'—a big, weighty word—is intangible, which complicates any effort to measure how much it

matters. Often, individuals themselves may not be aware that cultural constraints and incentives are shaping their behavior. And they may insist that they are being calculating and coldly rational” (p. 142).

Hamid expands on these ideas in Chapter 6, aptly titled “Culture versus Interests.” Culture, as Hamid explains, is “intangible, which complicates any effort to measure how much it matters. Often, individuals themselves may not be aware that cultural constraints and incentives are shaping their behavior. And they may insist that they are being calculating and coldly rational” (p. 142).

All of this is sensible. Culture—the norms and beliefs that shape how we see the world, or our lens through which we interpret it—is important to just about everything we do. It also makes much sense to spend time on the great debate of culture versus interests. Hamid’s discussion of the culture-versus-interests debate aims to recognize a way out of the “Islamist dilemma,” which is that there is a demand for democracy, but not Islamist parties. Hamid’s conclusion is reasonable. He argues that culture has to change so that what people believe about democracy includes Islamist parties (for those in the West), while those Islamist parties believe—truly believe—that they have to respect outcomes of elections even if they truly dislike the outcomes in democracy, and the policies pursued by democratically elected opponents. Though it is not possible to forecast whether culture will change along these lines, Hamid’s normative argument that culture should shift, and his argument for how it should shift, is well-argued and persuasive.

Praise aside, there are a few issues with cultural arguments in general, and so this is not a critique of *The Problem of Democracy* as much as it is of the use (and perhaps abuse) of the concept of culture. The first issue is that it is exceptionally challenging to offer a compelling account of a nation’s culture. The above passages from the book recognizes that culture is challenging to measure, but the usual follow-up is to provide some sense of what it is, or a measure of it. The book does not resolve this. Rather, it describes some features of democracy in the U.S. and the Middle East, without offering much in the way of measuring culture. What we have is that there may be some declining belief in democracy, but it’s not clear that the book explains something critical about American culture, or the cultures of the countries in the Middle East considered, including Algeria, Jordan, and Egypt.

A second issue with culture is that it is often used to criticize why democracy promotion fails, without offering a specific explanation why it failed. This was a feature of many narratives about Afghanistan, the largest and most extensive state-building effort in history, as well as one of the most significant efforts to promote democracy.

The cultural arguments in Afghanistan differ, but they share the idea that Afghanistan’s culture was not ready for democracy. Afghans, it would seem, were not ready for democracy. The problem, which I wrote about extensively based on interviews with hundreds of people in rural parts of Afghanistan, is that they have few problems with democracy, and have a “culture” of participatory governance (Murtazashvili, 2016). They may not have had elections in rural Afghanistan, but they have participatory councils (shuras and jirgas), and people who represent their village to the outside world.

Thus, the problem was that the cultural mismatch theory does not offer much insight into Afghanistan’s culture, and they do not offer much insight into why democracy promotion failed. Nor would it make much sense, in my view, to refer to an “Afghan culture.” This entire idea is dangerous when considering Afghanistan is a deeply pluralistic society, with many different ethnicities and social identities. Culture becomes something that might explain these challenges, but it is never defined, and not really tested.

That same criticism could be levelled against Hamid’s book. Culture is invoked, and it might explain something, but there is not much in the way to explain what constitutes American, Algerian, Jordanian, or Egyptian culture. Maybe culture matters more than interests, but it’s not clear why or how culture matters because culture is used as a sort of catch-all for beliefs about democracy, liberty, political parties, and so on.

Perhaps the argument about democratic minimalism does not need culture. One could explain that there is declining support for democracy, which is a system of government, without making it about one’s culture. It also seems too challenging to separate culture from interests in such contexts. If one does not accept democracy because of its outcomes, which is the question that motivates the book, that is a question of interests: people reject the rules, rationally, because its is not giving them what they want.

There is, of course, a long and distinguished legacy of considering culture. The political culture turn, with its emphasis on questions about support for democracy, is significant, as is the more recent analysis of world values. All of that may be useful, though the book does not provide enough of a deep dive into culture that would satisfy the ethnographer, and there is not much emphasis on hard data to evaluate the claims. Thus, one is left with a question about culture—not so much a concern that it does not matter, but wanting to know about how it matters, and what exactly it is.

## Governance over government

There is some cause to be concerned about overreaching American foreign policy, including concern about exporting American values. The critique is that liberalism is often too much. The approach in Hamid’s *The Problem of Democracy* offers what seems like sound advice. What ought foreign policy emphasize? There are two agendas. First, “make repressive regimes less repressive. This is what might be called anti-despotism. The second is to proactively promote democracy” (p. 165).

This perspective differs from realists who see no American interests in democracy. It is realistic in that it accepts democracy for those who might not be liberal, as Americans often think about it. But it is not an acceptance of the tragedy of human affairs, or a turn from morality. Rather, the “guiding principle is to not accept “reality” as a given and to instead write about what can and should happen” (p. 203).

There are also some challenges to such a perspective. Hamid’s book offers a very specific recommendation, which is to promote minimalist democracy. There are some reasons to question this recommendation. One is that just having elections is not necessarily going to make a country a stable and secure democracy. The lesson from Afghanistan is that there can be elections but a failure to accomplish the goals of state-building.

Yet, there is also something missing. Liberalism may be a question of governance, but governance is a more extensive question than liberalism. There can be improvements in governance that are far from liberal. Indeed, one of Francis Fukuyama’s insights was that countries that are decidedly illiberal, such as China, can be well-governed.

The notion of illiberal regimes that are adept at governing, but may not be democratic, is something of a puzzle for the book. It is about democracy and why it’s good. But one could also make an argument that quality of governance is the key, and that if the quality of governance is good, then that ought to be preserved.

The end point would essentially be the same. Democratic minimalism provides a role and rationale for Islamic parties. So, too,



would a focus on governance, one which rejects the liberalism of state-building in favor of emphasis on capacity to get things done.

What might this look like? In the Middle East, perhaps there should be less of a focus on democracy than on improving the ability to provide public goods and services. It might also recognize that democracy, minimalist or otherwise, is less of a question than on solving other issues. Hamid's book spends a good deal of time on the "linkage theory," which is the idea that there must be peace before talking about democracy when considering Israel and its neighbors. Hamid questions this, suggesting that it makes sense to promote democracy.

The case for a sequence seems to make more sense in the context of the Israel-Hamas War, which Hamas started with its massacre of over 1,200 Israeli citizens and soldiers and kidnapping of over 250 people on October 7, 2023. What seems to be needed to think about democracy in Palestine or elsewhere is defeating the infrastructure of terrorist organizations such as Hamas, which runs much of Gaza. There's also the inconvenient fact that democratic minimalism might lead to elections of a group like Hamas. Minimalist democracy can return not only those who you do not like, but those who massacre a 1,000 innocent civilians, including Jews, Arabs, and others.

What is needed is probably more of a focus on security, and on governing, and on ability to provide public goods and services. That will, of course, be a focus in Palestine when this war ends, and when post-conflict reconstruction begins, which it will.

What about the U.S.? The same ideas about governance over government are relevant to the current situation of polarized national politics. There is much emphasis on national elections. But what is happening with the quality of governance? That is what matters most for people. To the extent there are concerns, it is not necessarily about culture, but about whether people believe government is successful in governing. It's about what happens between the elections. Shifting the focus to governing, and conceptualizing governing as beyond liberalism, might be a way to move beyond the current corrosive and divisive politics and in the process increase support for democracy.

There are unfortunately several places in need of reform. What ought to be done with the Taliban? With Hamas in Gaza? What if they have elections? Should people accept these outcomes? Would elections put these places on a path to peace and prosperity? Or is something else needed in the interim, a sort of perquisite to thinking about promoting democracy, in even in minimal form?

Can we integrate government with governance more explicitly? This essay contrasts minimalist democracy (government) with governance. One might consider both. [Trantidis and Cowen \(2024\)](#) provide just such a perspective in conceptualizing of democracy broadly to include inclusion and individual freedom of expression and judge governance outcomes based on economic prosperity and respect for human rights. In doing so, they recognize that democracy can and should be viewed as instrumental to both material well-being and human dignity, thus addressing one of the potential criticisms of the minimalist democracy view as not doing enough to emphasize its

consequences. Trantidis and Cowen's approach also recognizes that the key metric for governance is not necessarily public goods provision, as emphasized here and in much of development economics, thereby expanding the stakes of governance to include recognition of human rights. It is, channeling Amartya Sen's (1999) concept of development as freedom, a way of thinking about public administration reform as freedom.

Each of the questions above illustrate that Hamid's *The Problem of Democracy* is a significant work that also invites much subsequent dialogue and discussion. Hamid's book also leaves one with some optimism and makes a powerful case for restraint in foreign policy without falling into a crass isolationism. In that sense, it is an invaluable guide for policymakers. It offers an insightful vision of self-governance on a global scale. At its core, it sees wisdom in the view that there are a plurality of ideas about what governance system is best, and how to live one's life. This is not entirely new. What is new is applying this revisionist idea to some of the most pressing challenges for democracy and its supporters in the Middle East. Its emphasis on humility is critical advice for anyone making foreign policy. Hopefully, policymakers will take note.

## Author contributions

JM: Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing.

## Funding

The author(s) declare that financial support was received for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article. This publication was made possible through the support of Grant 62701 from the John Templeton Foundation. The opinions expressed in this publication are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the views of the John Templeton Foundation.

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