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**ABSTRACT**

“Conceptualizing the Rest: Political Islam and  
Historical Precedents for Minority/Majority Relations”

By: Sumaiya Hamdani, Ph.D.  
(George Mason University, Fairfax, VA):

This paper will examine the role of historical precedents for minority/majority relations in Islam, an issue that has gained importance in light of the rise of Islamist political parties in the aftermath of the Arab Spring. To the degree that the Arab Spring has provided political Islam an opportunity, it has also raised the question about how it will affect those who reject its commitment to the implementation of *Sharia*, either as fellow Muslims or non-Muslims. At the root of the question lies political Islam’s understanding of the Muslim community as one, of the *Sharia* as necessarily, therefore, binding. This understanding has found its expression in the concepts of *dar al-Islam*, and *dhimmi*, the former creating a clear opposition to non-Muslim communities or *dar al-harb*, and the latter defining a relationship of subordination of non-Muslims (*dhimmis*) under *dar al-Islam*. History, however, indicates alternatives to this understanding of Muslim/non-Muslim relations. Most Shia Muslims for example, understood their communal identity as personal and private; hence the obligation to practice *taqiyya* or dissimulation when in the minority. Among them the Ismaili Shii community devised yet another approach to communal identity, one that was based on its acceptance as a minority even if ruling tendency within Islam. The establishment of the Ismaili Shii Fatimid Empire (from 909-1171) realized power but not majority status even within its domains, and so Ismaili Shii law evolved an understanding of the Ismaili Shia in relation to other Muslims as a group within a larger group, within the yet larger non-Muslim world. This conceptualization of Islam as a series of concentric circles of varying degrees of inclusion, enabled the Ismaili Shia to have a *modus vivendi* with others around them, and serves as an interesting and arguably relevant precedent for minority/majority relations in Islam today. In reviewing the legal literature of the Ismaili Shia, especially as developed in al-Qadi al-Nu`man’s (d. 973) *Da`im al-Islam*, this paper will suggest that alternative precedents exist to the totalizing and hierarchical conceptualizations of Islam’s relationship with its others today.