PREFACE

IN 1991, James Davison Hunter published *Culture Wars*, a popular investigation of public skirmishes in America over such hotly debated issues as abortion, gun control, censorship, individual privacy, separation of church and state, and prayer in the public schools. The subtitle of Hunter's book, *The Struggle to Define America*, reminded readers that something of vital importance was at stake in these debates.[1] But 1991 was also a watershed year in other political developments that would weigh in on the definition of America. The same year saw the collapse of the Communist Soviet Empire and the first Gulf War led by the United States and its allies against Iraq for its military occupation of Kuwait. Almost seamlessly these two events signaled the rise of another contentious issue that would begin to divide public attitudes in the West, namely, activist Muslim religious and political movements. According to many commentators, militant Islam would soon replace Soviet Communism as America's most worrisome imagined national threat.[2] Indeed, a decade earlier, the Iranian Revolution and the taking of American hostages invited public concern about religious fundamentalism.[3] Thus, already for two decades preceding September 11, 2001, militant expressions of political Islam, or what some call *Islamism*, had increasingly become a dominant concern in Western public discourse.

This book is about the struggle in American public spaces, especially since September 11, 2001, to define and understand the rise and role of Islamic religious politics on the world stage. One term and concept in particular dominates this discussion: Islamism. References to Islamism and Islamists abound in the news media, on Capitol Hill, in think tanks, and in the American

academy. Nonetheless, there seems to be little clarity, much less consensus, on the meaning or accuracy, of this widely deployed label. This glaring ambiguity has motivated the authors and editors of this volume to attempt to uncover the implications and clarify the parameters of the term Islamism in the format of a debate between scholars, activists, and policy makers.

Participants in this debate include Muslims, some of whom by nationality and self-identification are Americans. Also included are non-Muslims (and some Muslims) who regard Islamist groups and organizations as a serious threat to democracies and civil society. Indeed, among the sixteen scholars and intellectuals writing in this volume, no two advocate identical understandings of Islamism, although they tend to cluster around a number of general approaches. Philosopher John Rawls has famously argued that requisite for civil discourse are overlapping consensuses in the ideas articulated by those who join public debate. The reader must decide whether or not different groups of contributors to this volume have significant points of agreement that amount to at least a limited shared position. This, we propose, is the readers' share of responsibility in entering this debate; in other words, this volume does not seek to impose definitions of concepts such as Islamism, but rather invites readers to engage with the arguments presented in each essay. Indeed, it is the emphasis on debate that should serve as a warning to readers that they will not find easy answers or blanket generalizations in the essays and critical responses that follow. Readers are invited to grapple with the competing ideas expressed in the essays, to be challenged by them, and then perhaps to find voices that overlap with their own more focused thoughts, and thus establish a more informed and nuanced understanding of the debate about Islamism.

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