



**Profile: Amaney Jamal**  
**Avid Interpreter of Islam and Democracy**

After the tragic events of 9/11, people around the world began to suspect the average Muslim Arab of endorsing more such attacks on the United States. “Exacerbating this misrepresentation has been the absence of Arab democratic institutions to vouch for the democratic and civil nature of Arab polities,” says Dr. Amaney A. Jamal, assistant professor of politics at Princeton University and a term member of the Council on Foreign Relations. “Under these circumstances, it is vital to understand the ways in which the world of Islam and politics figures into the ordinary lives of Arab Muslim citizens.”

The relationship between democracy and Islam has often been analyzed by scholars who focus on the institutions of the state, democratic processes such as voting, or the more abstract concepts of rule of law. Dr. Jamal, on the other hand, seeks to know how ordinary citizens in the Middle East make sense of their own political environment. According to Christopher L. Eisgruber, Princeton’s provost, her highly original approach “helps us understand the political beliefs of the men and women on whom any successful democratic experiment in the Middle East must ultimately rest—namely, the general public.”

In a letter nominating her for a Carnegie Scholar fellowship, Dr. Eisgruber expressed confidence that Dr. Jamal would be able to connect and communicate with Arab Muslims in a way that many scholars would be hard pressed to do. “She is a native speaker of Arabic, a Muslim, and someone who has already taken the pulse of Arab populations in both the United States and the Middle East,” he wrote. “With the support of Carnegie Corporation, she will be able to advance the efforts of scholars and policymakers to resolve the ‘conundrum of democratization’ in the Arab world, wherein popular support for democracy

is very high but democratic movements are few and far between.”

After being nominated for the fellowship by Dr. Eisgruber, Dr. Jamal was selected as a Carnegie Scholar in 2005. With Carnegie Corporation support she has been able to research her topic of choice, “Citizenship, Political Agency and Democracy in the Arab World: The Mediating Effects of Islam” in Jordan and Kuwait. Dr. Jamal employed her extensive contacts in both countries to interview hundreds of average citizens face to face. “I spent hours on end listening and talking to people,” she recalls. Looking back on the interviews, which often took 90 minutes or even longer, Dr. Jamal remembers the sessions as being mutually respectful and deeply informative.

“They invited me for coffee. They invited me for tea. They saw that I cared about their point of view, and they took the opportunity to go on the record. It was really refreshing for them to be able to communicate their opinions,” she says. “They saw that their opinions *mattered*.”

Dr. Jamal asked such thought provoking questions as, “Do you think Islam and democracy are compatible?” and “Do you think the voices of the people are heard in your country?” As her interviewees expressed appreciation for aspects of both democracy and shari’a, or Islamic law, Dr. Jamal remembers thinking, “How interesting! They see justice as part of democracy *and* they see justice as part of Islam. People in the West see democracy and Islam as being diametrically opposed. But the people I interviewed see justice as part of *both*.”

Dr. Jamal says the interviews helped her to understand “the trajectory between citizens and the state from the ground up—how citizens see themselves as agents of the system.” And as her interview subjects talked about their own political agency, how influential or powerless they felt as citizens, “I saw them become comfortable as political beings.”

Dr. Jamal’s network of contacts in the region, including her close working relationships with local scholars there, is among her many strengths, says Patricia Rosenfield, director of Carnegie Corporation’s Scholars Program. “She is a first-class analytical scholar with a deep grasp of theory, history and politics as well as on-the-ground knowledge.”

Members of the Corporation’s selection committee who reviewed Dr. Jamal’s proposal predicted significant results from her project. “Dr. Jamal is uniquely suited to conduct this straightforward and compelling project, and she is well-positioned to bring the findings to influential audiences,” said one. “Her proposal suggests she is unwilling to accept the conventional explanations for the democratic deficit in the Islamic world and is looking for religious and social phenomena that will help to explain it,” said another. “This is an emerging young scholar who is comfortable with quantitative methods and the Middle East. It is

a good proposal that should add to our knowledge of how Muslims are engaged—or not engaged—in politics,” a third reviewer pointed out. And finally, a fourth reviewer wrote that her research “could prove very helpful in advancing debate on what form of democracy is best suited to Arab countries at this stage of their cultural and political development.”

Eager to advance the debate regarding Islam and democracy, Dr. Jamal says she was “very much invested” in researching the topic. She applied for a “competitive, challenging, prestigious” Carnegie Scholars fellowship. “Carnegie Corporation is committed to gaining empirical knowledge,” she notes. “And when I come together with the other scholars at Corporation network meetings, I know I am meeting the most prominent scholars in their fields, sharing the most up-to-date empirical findings. I’m experiencing the best of the best!”

Dr. Jamal’s commitment to growing and sharing her knowledge of the Middle East, Muslim Arabs and Muslim Americans stems from her family background as well as experiences during her childhood. Her parents were Palestinians who came to this country for its many opportunities. She was born in the San Francisco Bay area but the family also lived in central and southern California during her early years. Her father, Ahmad (Jimmy) Jamal, who died in 1991, was a clothing store owner. He worked hard and his business prospered, according to Dr. Jamal. The family was assimilating right on cue, their American dream apparently on track.

But something was amiss. Multiculturalism and pride in one’s immigrant heritage were not particularly encouraged in this country during the 1960s and 1970s, Dr. Jamal observes. At age 10, she spoke English, not Arabic, and had much to learn about her religion, which was Islam.

What happened next was life changing. As Dr. Jamal remembers it, her father more or less woke up one day and realized his children knew nothing about their own roots. His solution was a dramatic one. He moved the family to Ramallah, a cosmopolitan Palestinian city near Jerusalem.

Looking back on her father’s pivotal decision, Dr. Jamal says she continues to admire him for it. And the decision did change the course of her scholarly life. “My upbringing in Palestine sparked my political consciousness,” she says. “I became very devoted to issues pertaining to justice and human rights for both Palestinians and Israelis. As a teenager, I remember being proud of myself for always thinking about global events. My friends and I believed we were cool because we understood that we knew more than average teenagers elsewhere.”

The decision to move to Ramallah was transformative in other ways. She met her

future husband, now an emergency-room physician, in Palestine. And life there appears to have shaped the way she lives her life as a modern Muslim-American woman today. She speaks fluent Arabic, wears a *hejab*, or head covering, prays five times daily, worships at a mosque and sends her own three children to Islamic day school. (Her fourth child is currently attending Princeton.) She is her father's daughter.

Ahmad Jamal's decision to move his family back to Palestine did have some worrisome consequences for young Amaney, however. "I was a senior in high school when the first Palestinian Intifada commenced in 1988-1989," she recalls. Intifada, the Arabic word for "shaking off," is the familiar name for Palestine's uprising against the Israeli occupation. "During that year the Israeli military closed down all educational institutions from kindergartens to universities."

"Determined to continue my education," Jamal says, "I began sneaking around Ramallah and Jerusalem, taking courses in different houses or civic associations, where our teachers were volunteering their time to help us graduate. I graduated as the valedictorian of my high school that year," she says. "I knew then that nothing would stop me from accomplishing my educational pursuits."

Those pursuits brought her to this country, the next stop on her scholarly journey. "I came back to the U.S. that summer with a high school diploma in hand and began my undergraduate education at Cal-Poly, Pomona and then the University of California-Los Angeles," Dr. Jamal recalls. Her return coincided with the end of the Cold War. Much of the world was transfixed by new prospects of the spread of democracy. But that trend was not necessarily taking root in the Middle East, she knew from living there. What *were* the prospects for democracy in the Middle East? She decided to study political science because she saw it as her gateway to acquiring the skills she needed to pursue her quest. She graduated *cum laude* from UCLA in 1993.

That summer she worked as a translator at the Women's Research Center in Jerusalem, another step in her budding career as a scholar of Islam, and then returned to this country to begin graduate studies at the University of Michigan at Ann Arbor, known for the rigor of its public-opinion research. "Amaney is a gem," says Dr. Mark Tessler, the Samuel J. Eldersveld College Professor in the Department of Political Science and the University of Michigan's vice provost for International Affairs, as well as Carnegie Scholar 2009. He remembers working with her and six other colleagues on a groundbreaking study of Muslim Americans in Dearborn, Michigan in the wake of 9/11. "There were all these stereotypes about Arabs and Muslims. The country needed this information. We wanted the community

to speak for itself. We tried very hard to connect with them in a meaningful way.”

The study’s research team needed to possess a range of skills including intellectual grounding, training in quantitative methods, knowledge of the Arab-American community, language ability, collegiality and professionalism. “All of this comes together in a person like Amaney,” Dr. Tessler says appreciatively.

Dr. Tessler subsequently teamed up with Dr. Jamal again when they were co-principal investigators of the Arab Barometer Project, the first systematic cross-national survey gauging democratic attitudes and behaviors in the Arab world. It was funded by the Middle East Partnership Initiative, with survey data collected in seven Arab states. The results were released in 2006. Dr. Tessler says he and Dr. Jamal are committed to updating the Arab Barometer Project every two to three years.

The superb training that equipped Dr. Jamal to research these and other studies came from the University of Michigan’s Inter-University Consortium for Political and Social Research (ICPSR). There she learned how to integrate methodological strategies with the sorts of theoretical and practical concerns that may arise while researching substantive social issues. She now uses her considerable research skills to discover “with a certain degree of precision why people feel as they do. It’s inspiring to be in the field learning and analyzing the political ramifications of what people believe.”

Another source of inspiration is the classroom—“I really enjoy teaching”—where she says she is often the first Muslim whom many students meet in person. Her teaching experiences began during her graduate school days at the University of Michigan, where she designed the curriculum for a course on the Arab-Israeli conflict and taught an introductory course in comparative politics. She won the Outstanding Graduate Student Instructor award in 1998 and completed her Ph.D. there in 2003.

She went on to become the principal investigator of a study of Muslims in Brooklyn, New York, funded by the Muslims in New York Project, at Columbia University in 2003. That same year she left Columbia and joined the faculty at Princeton, where she has a reputation for leading evenhanded classroom discussions regarding even such heated topics as the Israeli-Palestinian peace process. “Amaney has the quality of mind and temperament to lead students, colleagues and readers across borders of all sorts,” says Dr. Nancy Bermeo, Nuffield Professor of Comparative Politics at the University of Oxford in England. Dr. Bermeo, who overlapped with Dr. Jamal for several years at Princeton before accepting her current position, was acting chair of the department of politics there and speaks of Dr. Jamal as a great asset to the Princeton community at large.

Since joining the Princeton community, Dr. Jamal has continued doing significant research studies. In addition to her work with Dr. Tessler on the Arab Barometer Project, she became the senior project advisor of a national survey on religion in public life among Muslim-Americans in the U.S., conducted by the Pew Research Center in 2006. She has been a prolific contributor to *The Journal of Democracy*, *Comparative Political Studies*, *Journal of Politics*, and other scholarly publications, as well as producing several research driven books.

One of those books, *Barriers to Democracy: The Other Side of Social Capital in Palestine and the Arab World*, was published by the Princeton University Press in 2008, and won the Best Book Award from the American Political Science Association that year. “The committee was impressed with the force and import of Jamal’s arguments and the truly impressive empirical data and research she brought to bear on her analysis,” committee members wrote. “The study represents comparative politics at its best.”

Another of her books, *Citizenship and Crisis: Arab Detroit after 9/11*, published by the Russell Sage Foundation in 2009, reported on the important studies of Muslim-Americans by the University of Michigan team including Drs. Jamal and Tessler. And her current book manuscript, *Of Empires and Citizens: Authoritarian Durability in the Arab World*, is based on her research as a Carnegie Scholar in Jordan and Kuwait, with additional survey data from the Arab Barometer project.

Even before its publication, *Of Empires and Citizens* is already attracting much attention, according to Dr. Jamal. She has been asked to share her findings with audiences at the United States Institute of Peace, University of California at Berkeley, University of Illinois at Urbana Champaign, Columbia University, Harvard University and Oxford University. “In conversations with ordinary citizens across the region, I found significant pockets of support for existing authoritarian regimes, even among citizens who were most disaffected by such dictatorial rule,” she tells her audiences. “Despite greater appreciation for democracy and advancements in human and economic development, the Arab world remains one of the last bastions of authoritarian rule across the globe.” She calls this state of affairs, “one of the more pervasive puzzles of Arab politics.”

How does Dr. Jamal approach this puzzle? “Any examination of the reasons behind citizens’ continued support of existing leaderships in the Arab world must take into account the way citizens assess the *strategic utility* of existing authority in relation to a country’s position in the international system,” she explains. Arab countries are highly dependent on the United States for security and, in the cases of Jordan, Morocco, Egypt

and Palestine, for aid. And even while they simultaneously resent the United States, citizens across the region “understand the necessity of their regime’s relationship with the United States for longevity and stability.” Thus, citizens leverage their support toward existing authoritarian rule according to their assessment of the *strategic utility* of existing leadership in maintaining the status quo with the United States. As a result of her Carnegie Corporation-supported research, Dr. Jamal says, “I can talk about what creates conducive conditions for promoting democracy.”

Oxford’s Dr. Bermeo was among those in attendance when Dr. Jamal discussed the research findings that underlie her latest book. “I witnessed her lecture to a tough minded group of Oxford University faculty. She mesmerized the lecture hall,” Dr. Bermeo reports. “She is as effective with senior scholars from around the world as with 18-year-old United States undergraduates.”

Her speaking abilities have won Dr. Jamal invitations to address a wide range of audiences. She has answered the question “Who Are the Democrats in the Arab World?” for the American Political Science Association; participated in Harvard University’s Islam in America conference; and discussed “Palestinian Women and the Intifada” at the request of the Association of Muslim Social Scientists, among many such appearances.

Her sophisticated analysis of empirical data has also attracted many requests for media appearances. Her list of interviews includes the Associated Press; Al-Jazeera English; CNN *Nightly News* and *The Washington Post*. “Being a Carnegie Scholar,” says Dr. Jamal, “enhances my credibility as a public scholar.”

Dr. Jamal expects to continue her public scholarship by giving talks and presenting her findings in academic settings and policy circles. She continues on, as well, as an advisor to the Council on Foreign Relations, to whose Religious Advisory Committee she was named in 2006. “It takes a whole day to travel to D.C.,” she says of the effort involved in being a public scholar, “but I’m needed there.”

The fierce intelligence she brings to studying misunderstood and understudied groups is needed as well, and will continue to distinguish Dr. Jamal as a scholar among scholars. “In both the classroom and in her scholarly work,” says Oxford’s Dr. Bermeo, “she joins literatures and ideas in innovative ways, challenging hard-held ideas about both separation and superiority.”