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“Moderates” Redefined: How To Deal with Political Islam

EMILE NAKHLEH

Political Islam has been part of the modern Middle East landscape for several decades, but until recently the United States has rarely perceived a need to engage it. After the attacks against New York and Washington on September 11, 2001, the administration of George W. Bush painted political Islam in the Middle East, as in the rest of the Muslim world, with the broad brush of terrorism. The administration saw no meaningful differences between the minority of Islamic activists who support violence and terrorism and the majority of activists who reject the radical message of Osama bin Laden and his Al Qaeda organization.

Partly as a result, Muslims worldwide perceived Bush's global war on terror as a war on Islam, which they rejected outright. Middle East Islamic activists in particular viewed the invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan, along with Washington's continuing strong support for Israel, as amounting to an American attack on Muslim lands. Islamic activists and mainstream Islamic political parties and movements identified, as other examples of Washington's anti-Islamic posture, the tacit US support for Israel's Lebanon war in 2006 and Gaza war in 2008–9, the abuses of prisoners at Guantánamo Bay and Abu Ghraib, and the detention of thousands of Muslims in Iraq, Afghanistan, and elsewhere.

Islamic activists also viewed the cozy relationship between the United States and Arab authoritarian regimes, as well as Washington's refusal to

accept Hamas's electoral victory in Gaza in 2006, as indications of America's lack of commitment to democracy and human rights, and its lack of interest in reaching out to civil society institutions in the region.

Middle Eastern regimes, for their part, were suspicious of the Bush administration's call for democracy. Elites in the region—both Islamic and secular—viewed as hypocritical the contradiction between Washington's rhetoric of democracy and its continued coddling of dictatorial regimes. The United States was seen as uninterested in engaging Arab civil society to promote civil rights, political reform, and democratization. According to opinion polls, Arab publics perceived the United States from 2003 to 2008 as advocating regime change in any country whose policies contradicted American interests in the region. Washington's bellicose rhetoric against Iran and Syria following the fall of Saddam Hussein's regime in 2003, and its undermining of the freely elected Hamas government in the Palestinians' Gaza territory, were cited as reasons for low favorability ratings accorded the United States and Bush's policies in the region.

Some academics, think tanks, and intelligence analysts in recent years have urged US policy makers to engage credible civil society institutions in the Middle East—despite the objections of entrenched authoritarian regimes—in order to encourage political and educational reforms in these societies and spur governments to open up public space for mainstream groups to participate in the political process. They have pointed out that regimes' repressive measures to curtail civil rights and freedoms of speech, assembly, and political organization have created, in many countries, a political landscape featuring just two paradigms—the authoritarian paradigm imposed by

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the regimes, and a radical paradigm promulgated by Al Qaeda, bin Laden, and his deputy, Ayman al-Zawahiri.

Consequently, these experts have argued that, in order to achieve the strategic objective of political reform and democratization in the region, it is imperative for the United States to engage mainstream Islamic political parties that are committed to gradual change through the ballot box. Examples of such parties and movements include the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, the Islamic Action Front in Jordan, the Islamic Constitutional Movement in Kuwait, Al Wifaq in Bahrain, Hamas in Palestine, Hezbollah in Lebanon, and the Justice and Development Party in Morocco.

In opposition to this idea, other analysts have contended that engaging Islamic groups would undercut the stability of pro-US authoritarian regimes and would embolden Islamic movements to contest—and win—elections, thereby paving the way for potentially anti-American Islamic regimes to emerge. Furthermore, Islamic regimes might impose Islamic law (*sharia*), which would restrict civil rights and personal freedoms and undermine the ability of liberal, secular organizations to participate in the political process. According to this argument, the “resistance”

(*muqawama*) ideology of some of the Islamic parties would determine their behavior in government, thereby exacerbating conflicts and inviting more tension between regimes and societies.

The key belief underpinning opposition to engagement is that the United States should abandon the strategic policy goal of promoting democracy and continue to manage its bilateral relations with friendly Middle Eastern regimes based on the dictates of America’s traditional national interests in the region—economic, political, and strategic. But in fact, political and social realities on the ground raise serious doubts about the validity of this view. And, fortunately for US-Muslim relations in the Middle East and elsewhere, the Barack Obama administration has adopted a more nuanced, sensible, and pragmatic approach.

OBAMA EXTENDS A HAND

President Obama’s post-inauguration statements on political Islam, along with two major speeches—in April 2009 in Ankara, and in June in

Cairo—have resonated well in the Muslim world. The speeches reflected a willingness to move beyond the confrontational policy of the previous administration and toward a new era of “smart diplomacy.” The bounce from Obama’s conciliatory rhetoric among Arabs and Muslims will be long-lasting if it is followed by significant policy shifts—on human rights, political reform, democracy, war crimes, the closing of the Guantánamo prison—and by renewed efforts at the highest level to resolve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

The administration’s recent direct contacts with Iranian officials—despite Tehran’s heavy-handed silencing of dissent over the June presidential election—again signals Obama’s commitment to engaging the Muslim world and moving from confrontation to diplomacy. Efforts to decouple elements of the Afghan Taliban (many of whom are just fighting the presence of foreign troops in their country) from the more globally dangerous Al Qaeda and the Pakistani Taliban are another

affirmation by the Obama administration that it seeks simultaneously to fight terrorism and extend a peaceful hand to the wider Muslim world.

The bad news about Afghanistan is that the fire-fight is becoming much bloodier and the Taliban are

emboldened. Still, Obama’s historic Cairo speech, in which he detailed a vision of future relations with the Muslim world, helped put to rest the perception among many Muslims that the war on terror is a war on Islam. Also, in addressing “Muslim communities,” not Muslim regimes, the president in Cairo seemed to signal that engagement will be broad-based, will not be funneled only through regimes, and will focus on economic and educational opportunities that will help improve quality of life in these societies and provide youth with more hope for the future.

Obama’s approach to engaging the Muslim world seems to reflect several core themes. First, America is not at war with Islam. Second, all religions share certain “noble” ideas, including justice, tolerance, fairness, and a desire to make choices freely. Likewise, people worldwide aspire for dignity, respect, equality, economic opportunity, progress, and security. Third, people in different societies, regardless of race, religion, and color, should be able to select their governments freely, and these

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governments should be transparent, accountable, just, and committed to the rule of law.

Fourth, the United States is committed to engaging Muslim communities to help foster a tolerant and creative vision of Islam—but Muslims themselves, not America, must drive the debate. Fifth, the United States is committed to working with Muslim communities to settle regional conflicts on the basis of justice, fairness, and equity. And in the pursuit of these objectives, Washington will partner with American Muslims, who can act as a bridge between the United States and the Muslim world.

John Brennan, the assistant to the president for homeland security and counterterrorism, in an August 6, 2009, speech at the Center for Strategic and International Studies in Washington, elaborated further on the administration's approach. Brennan emphasized two points from the Cairo speech. One is that America's values and its commitment to justice, respect, fairness, and peace are the most effective weapons in its arsenal to fight the forces of radicalism and terrorism. The other is that bringing hope, educational promise, and economic opportunity to the youth in Muslim societies offers the best defense against the false promises and death and destruction promoted by Al Qaeda and its affiliates.

An engagement strategy can succeed in the long term only if it is accompanied by tangible policies that would reflect a change of direction in America's posture toward the Arab Muslim world. Examples of such policies include withdrawal from Iraq, ending the war in Afghanistan, and a serious push to halt expansion of Israeli settlements in the West Bank and to resolve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. One Muslim interlocutor in the region once told me, "You can't sell hot air—engagement without substance will not succeed."

It is equally critical, however, that engagement include a concerted effort to communicate with Muslim society and civil society organizations by promoting economic, educational, and women's rights initiatives—and by dealing directly with Islamic political groups. In this respect, the Obama administration continues to engage regimes bilaterally in the service of national interests, but it is also exploring avenues to engage Islamic politi-

cal parties and civil society religious groups. Key administration officials apparently believe that engaging these communities will help empower them to effect political reform from within.

And with good reason. An examination of the recent legislative record of mainstream Islamic groups, their support within their own communities, and their opposition to the rising neo-Salafi extremist trend, clearly shows that engaging these groups—sensibly, pragmatically, and openly—would make strategic sense for the West. It would also improve America's standing among Muslims worldwide, and help foster an atmosphere of mutual trust and respect between the United States and the Muslim world.

ENGAGING ARGUMENTS

Several trends in political Islam support the argument for a robust engagement policy. First, the Islamization of Middle East politics has changed qualitatively and quantitatively since 9/11, as we

have seen growing demands for economic, educational, political, and social justice in Muslim societies. Numerous Islamic political parties and movements have become more engaged in the political process through elections. Meanwhile, authoritarian

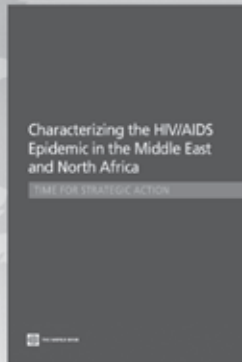
regimes have used the specter of terrorism to thwart efforts to democratize and to still all demands for political reform, regardless of whether these demands are voiced by secular opposition groups or by Islamic parties.

Second, religious-nationalist ideology is driving Islamic politics at the state level in most Muslim states, but particularly in the greater Middle East. In fact, religion has become an ideological force motivating action by, and defining the interests of, both states and non-state actors. Because of regime corruption and repression—along with the bankruptcy and marginalization of traditional secular elites, largely due to their association with regimes—Islamic political parties have gained legitimacy as agents of reform and as advocates of transparent, accountable government and of the rule of law.

Third, the relationship between religion and politics is changing, largely because of demographic and economic stresses, globalization, the communications revolution, entrenched authori-

Policy makers have tended to bestow the "moderate" moniker on pro-Western governments while grouping Islamic activists generically into the "radical" category.

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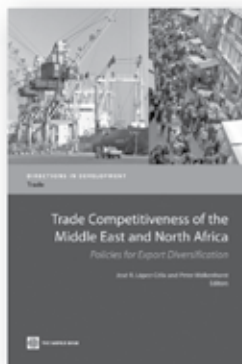
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tarianism in many Muslim countries, a weak identification with the state, and the general failure of secular nationalist ideologies. Religions and religious affiliation have become drivers of the political process across the globe—from Russia to India, from Ankara to Kuala Lumpur.

Fourth, because of regimes' diminishing legitimacy and the weakening of public identification with the state, Islam has become an identity anchor for millions of Muslims. Religious programs broadcast on global satellite television networks are able to carry the "sacred word" from Mecca and other centers of Islam to the remotest villages in West Africa, Central Asia, the Indus Valley, and western China—and of course throughout the Middle East.

Fifth, Islamic political activism in the Middle East, as in the rest of the Muslim world, has become more diverse and complex. Such diversity—cultural, economic, historical, political, religious, and demographic—dictates that, before Washington engages these groups, US policy makers must understand the varied historical narratives to which different Islamic groups cling, the reasons why entrenched authoritarian regimes oppose political participation by Islamic activists, the indigenous and country-specific agendas of Islamic groups, and their legislative behavior in national assemblies.

AN ENERGIZED DEBATE

Sixth, political ideology has become embedded in an energized debate among Muslim activists on Islamic blogs and in the media, both print and electronic. The debate has focused on at least three themes. One is the future vision of Islam that Muslims should pursue, and whether such a vision should be limited to the moral dictates of the faith or should expand to the political and social realms. Another topic is whether Islamic political parties should continue to participate in the political process through elections even under regimes that actively undermine the democratic process, or whether they should instead reject politics and return to their core mission of proselytization (*da'wa*). Still another issue is whether Islamic political parties, which have traditionally been committed to the implementation of sharia, can equally maintain a long-term commitment to democracy and pluralism as these terms are understood in the West.

Seventh, Middle Eastern Islamic political parties remain territorially focused and committed to

indigenous agendas. They do not share the global jihadist ideology of Al Qaeda and its affiliates. The strategic goal of these parties' struggles and activism is to liberate their territories from occupation and safeguard the political, economic, and security status of their people. In fact, Al Qaeda's second-in-command, Zawahiri, in 2006 severely criticized Islamic political parties in the region—including the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood, the Palestinian Hamas, and the Moroccan Justice and Development Party—for participating in national elections. The parties in turn openly and forcefully rejected Al Qaeda's criticism.

Eighth, Islamic parties' disagreements with the United States and other Western powers in recent years have been driven by specific policies, not by disputes over governance issues. Public opinion polls—administered by organizations including Pew, Gallup, the BBC, and Zogby—have clearly shown that majorities of Muslims, including in the Middle East, endorse fair and free elections, transparent and accountable government, a free press, an independent judiciary, and the rule of law. Their disagreements with the United States, according to these polls, have been driven by specific policies, such as the Iraq War and US support for Israeli actions, which they consider aggressive, a threat to world peace, and anti-Islamic.

Ninth, mainstream Islamic political parties have fought the rise of the new Salafi ideology because of its conservative, intolerant, and exclusivist bent. The Salafi ideology, which in some cases has been supported by regimes as an antidote to mainstream Islamic activism, is grounded in a narrow reading of religious texts. It preaches an extremist version of Wahhabi Islam (which insists on a return to an original, purer form of the faith). It calls for the establishment of a strict version of Islamic law that imposes a rigid moral code on society, separates the sexes, and restricts women's participation in education, culture, and business.

A bloody conflict in August 2009 between Hamas and the Salafi Jund Ansar Allah group in Gaza, which featured an attack on a mosque in Rafah and the killing of the Salafi leader Shaykh Abu Mousa, illustrates the threat that mainstream Islamic parties across the Middle East are facing from the Salafi trend. Engaging mainstream Islamic political parties could help empower them to fight the Salafi movement in Middle Eastern societies, including Palestine, Egypt, Lebanon, Yemen, Morocco, Sudan, and Kuwait.

ISLAM AND POTHoles

Debate about Islamic political parties' participation in politics has focused on the question of whether their commitment to the electoral process is a tactical maneuver to get them into power, or whether they have made a strategic decision to pursue gradual political change through politics. One could ask: If these parties have espoused sharia as the basis for their existence, how strong or sustainable can their commitment to democracy and pluralism be? In fact, interviews with many Muslim activists over the years, and an examination of the electoral campaign platforms and legislative agendas of some Islamic political parties, reveal that their commitment to nationalist causes or social justice often supersedes their commitment to Islamic law.

Islamic parties in general have undergone a transformation in their religious ideology. They have moved away from their original "charters"—which usually espouse a strong commitment to sharia—and now focus instead on social, economic, and political practices.

Once in a legislature, they have worked with other political parties to pass legislation dealing with roads, public utilities, and other bread-and-butter issues.

Hamas's charter, for example, which was written in the 1980s before the group's leaders even decided to form a political party, embodied the movement's religious commitment, its vision of Palestinian society and territory, and its opposition to participating in the political process. Although Lebanon's Hezbollah was launched with significant Iranian support, it has built an impressive political constituency in a community marked by impoverishment, deprivation, and dispossession.

A review of the political programs of Hamas and Hezbollah, two of the Middle East's most active political parties, shows that, although both parties initially scorned electoral politics, they subsequently became avid players in the political game and participated successfully in national elections. Hamas won Legislative Council elections in 2006, and Hezbollah has successfully competed in Lebanese parliamentary elections since 1992, including the spring 2009 elections.

The national political programs of Hamas and Hezbollah share two characteristics: a deep commitment to social justice and community

development; and the embodiment of "resistance." The religious identity that each espouses is wedded to conceptions of resistance through community service and armed opposition to occupation. While they strongly draw on their Sunni (Hamas) and Shiite (Hezbollah) religious cultural heritages, neither group has made the imposition of sharia or the creation of an Islamic state its dominant objective. Hamas has not advocated reestablishment of the "caliphate." While Hezbollah officially advocates the *Vilayet-e Faqih*, or rule of Islamic judges, for many years it has accepted that the creation of such a system in religiously mixed Lebanon is infeasible and very unlikely.

Hezbollah and Hamas have been able to face down Israeli military assaults—a feat that conventional Arab armies have failed to accomplish since the creation of the state of Israel. As a result, both groups at times have enjoyed widespread popularity in the Arab world, even in more secular segments of society. According to

public opinion polls, Hamas and Hezbollah symbolize for many Arabs a successful Islamic engagement in politics, a strong commitment to social justice, and a rejection of corruption and authoritarianism. Not

surprisingly, Arab regimes, including the corruption-ridden Palestinian Authority in Ramallah under Mahmoud Abbas, have become wary of the success of Hamas and Hezbollah and have often opposed their rise, influence, and activities, and even turned a blind eye to Israel's recent military attempts to defeat them.

Thus Islamic parties—even beyond Hamas and Hezbollah—have over time changed their political ideologies and tempered their commitment to sharia in the face of the practical demands of electoral and legislative politics. In the early 1990s, some of these parties refused to participate in the electoral process because of the "un-Islamic" behavior of regimes; by the late 1990s, most had decided to take part in national elections and play the game of politics regardless of the nature of the government.

While Islamic parties still evince a commitment to Islamic law, sharia is so diverse and multifaceted that dedication to it need not imply a conservative Wahhabi-like or retrograde Taliban-like agenda. Political pragmatism, rather than purist religious

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ideology, has become the guiding principle of the Islamization of politics in Muslim-majority countries, including in the Middle East.

THE RADICAL ELEMENT

Terrorists both in the Middle East and globally generally follow the radical paradigm of bin Laden and Al Qaeda, which claims that Islam—faith and territory—is under attack and that the “enemy” consists of the Christian Crusaders headed by the United States, the Zionists represented by Israel, and pro-Western Arab and Muslim regimes. Bin Laden further maintains that in the face of this attack, jihad by whatever means is a duty for all Muslims, and that the killing of innocent civilians and the use of weapons of mass destruction are justified.

Providing a religious justification for terrorism has been an effective recruiting strategy, especially among alienated youth with limited education and poor economic prospects. In justifying terrorism, bin Laden has presented violent jihad as a struggle between good and evil. The struggle, he argues, will continue until the “final days.”

On this last point there is a disagreement between Al Qaeda, as an advocate of global jihad, and country-specific Islamist organizations such as Hamas and Hezbollah, which aspire to achieve territorial autonomy or independence. These parties do not share Al Qaeda’s millenarian ideology and focus instead on their own objectives.

Although in the past decade the vast majority of Muslims worldwide has not renounced terrorism forcefully and openly, more and more Muslims in the last three years have been speaking out against terrorism and the wanton killing of innocent civilians. Moderate Muslim thinkers have argued that relations between Muslims and non-Muslims need not be full of conflict, as bin Laden has postulated. They also suggest that the Koran, revealed to the prophet Muhammad in seventh-century Arabia, must be transformed to fit Muslim life in a twenty-first-century globalized world.

Muslim thinkers in both Western and Muslim countries have argued that certain aspects of Western political culture, including parliamentary democracy, political and social pluralism, women’s rights, civil society, and human rights, are compatible with Islamic scripture and traditions. As noted, according to many public opinion polls, most Muslims believe in these values. Mainstream Islamic political parties in the Middle East also endorse this view of democracy.

Thus, the radical paradigm promulgated by Al Qaeda appears to be on the wane today precisely because of its opposition to the ideas of tolerance, inclusion, and political participation that the mainstream Islamic parties are promoting. More and more Muslims are denouncing the killing of innocent civilians—Muslim and non-Muslim—and are beginning to question openly and publicly the logic of violence. More and more Islamic activists are choosing local and national causes over global jihad. And despite Al Qaeda’s strong and persistent opposition to “man-made” democracy and elections, more and more Islamic political parties are participating in national elections and in the mundane activities of electoral politics and pragmatic governance. It is no coincidence that the radical political paradigm is declining at a time when Islamic parties have increasingly entered the political fray.

A FRAUGHT TASK

Regardless of Al Qaeda’s fortunes, religious extremism and political radicalism will persist in the Middle East for years to come. This is the case because of factors having little or nothing to do with Islamic ideology—factors such as entrenched authoritarianism, weak state legitimacy, continuing disregard for civil and human rights, the rise of non-state actors and sub-state loyalties, systemic state corruption, economic stagnation, and the failure so far to find a solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Several Arab regimes have used the fight against terrorism as an excuse to deny their peoples the right to participate in the political process freely, openly, and without harassment. Yet the record of Islamic political parties’ participation in electoral politics, over several national elections, does not support the regimes’ argument that such participation destabilizes society or undermines national security.

Indeed, it may be time for senior policy makers in Western countries to revisit their use of the term “moderate” when dealing with the Middle East. Policy makers have tended to bestow the “moderate” moniker on pro-Western governments despite their autocratic nature, while grouping Islamic activists generically into the “radical” category. But equating authoritarian regimes with “moderation” has resulted in a perception of hypocrisy and has helped drive the very radicalization that the West has sought to counter. Meanwhile, the effort to counter

radicalization, when paired with a refusal to deal with Islamic groups, has yielded poor results. It might be more prudent, as well as honest, to describe such regimes as “friendly” or “pro-US” rather than “moderate.”

Reaching out to the vast majority of Muslims will require a long-term commitment in time, resources, and personnel. It will require a thorough knowledge of the cultures involved, sophisticated influence operations, strategically developed public diplomacy campaigns, a coherent and carefully crafted message, and utilization of credible indigenous Muslim voices.

Engaging Islamic political parties is likewise a process fraught with challenges, especially since most “friendly” regimes in the Middle East are opposed to such engagement. Some Islamic parties will pose particularly thorny dilemmas for the United States. Hamas and Hezbollah, for example, are considered terrorist organizations under US law. Some Iraqi Islamic parties are closely aligned

with Iran. And a few Shiite movements in Iraq and Bahrain advocate sectarian autonomy.

As the Obama administration proceeds with implementing principles that the president enunciated in his Cairo speech, policy makers will have to find ways to convince regimes that engaging civil society institutions and non-state actors in their societies will not necessarily undermine those regimes. Policy makers must continually point out that, if the people in a particular country have the right to choose their government freely, they will be more invested in social peace and political stability, which in the long run will minimize tensions between state and society.

This amounts to a daunting task, to be sure. But in the final analysis, engagement with Muslim societies must include the Islamic parties and movements in those societies. To believe otherwise is damaging both to regional stability and to America’s strategic interests and standing in the Muslim world. ■