

Islamic Fundamentalism: Threat or Bogeyman?

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The Search for Non-Traditional Threats

The changing world order has left America with more questions than answers. In addition to a host of challenging and complex domestic problems, the country faces momentous questions about the future course of national security strategy and foreign policy. This new challenge also has serious implications for defense planners and policymakers. "Maintaining global stability" and "making the world safe for democracy" are noble concepts, but they alone can no longer be cashed in for defense dollars in today's relatively benign international environment. Tomorrow's threats will be non-traditional ones, and determining where they will come from has become a major headache for planners and a nightmare for budgeteers.

In the absence of a superpower rivalry, defense advocates are left to focus on the potentially "armed and dangerous" elements around the globe and to sell the case for maintaining military force levels with the appropriate responsive capability. One such element that seems to recur in every public discussion or debate on future national security threats is Islamic fundamentalism. Warnings are constantly raised about the implications this phenomenon can have for our security in almost every discussion about developments in North Africa, the Middle East, and Central Asia. But does Islamic fundamentalism really pose a threat to our national interest or is it a bogeyman magnified for Congress and the public by various sources--pro-Israel interest groups, secular Middle Eastern regimes and others--to keep U. S. aid flowing in an

era of massive budget cuts?

Problems of Definition

The issue is clouded by a widespread lack of common understanding of what Islamic "fundamentalism" really is. While the term is casually tossed around in every conceivable forum, it can have many different connotations. Unfortunately, the term is widely used today in a strictly pejorative sense to describe almost any Islamic political movement in any of a variety of Muslim societies throughout the world. Fundamentalists are frequently accorded a notoriety equalling some of history's most despised organizations:

...the modern Islamic movement is authoritarian, anti-democratic, anti-secular and a protest movement of the economically deprived. Islamic fundamentalism is an aggressive revolutionary movement as militant and violent as the Bolshevik, Fascist and Nazi movements of the past.'

Less extreme observers see Muslim fundamentalism as at least a radical political movement that seeks the overthrow of modernizing or secular Muslim governments and their replacement with ones based on strict Islamic law. Either description prompts the average American to think back to scenes of radical Iranian assaults on the U. S. Embassy in Teheran, long hostage ordeals, terrorism, and calls for holy war against the West. Indeed, the average person today understands the term "Islamic fundamentalism" to mean a radical extremist movement along the lines of the Iranian Revolution of the late 1970's and the militant Hezbollah movement

in Lebanon today.

Not all Islamic movements are of this nature, however. It is essential to draw a distinction between fundamentalist movements of the extreme type just described and moderate Muslim "revivalist" movements emerging in many parts of the world. Equating fundamentalism with radical Islam in the model of Khomeini's Iran ignores an endless variety of religious interpretation and practice by the majority of Muslim cultures around the world. Equating it with anti-Americanism overlooks the fact that several strict Muslim states--notably Pakistan under Zia and Saudi Arabia today--have subscribed to strongly pro-West foreign policies. Many countries are experiencing various degrees of Islamic revivalism as a natural development. People from all cultures have historically resorted to religion as a shelter from repression, corruption, and economic deprivation--forces which are present even today in most Muslim countries. The emerging Muslim republics of Central Asia, for example, will almost certainly undergo some form of Islamic revival after more than half a century of control by Soviet communist regimes. Such a revival can be expected to affect both the social and political development there. Islam is, after all, not merely a religion, but a way of life that has application in every aspect of society and culture. To lump all of these movements together under a fundamentalist label is not only inaccurate, but is a dangerous approach to the question.

The Algerian Example

Events unfolding in Algeria illustrate the policy dilemma the United States now faces. Partially as a result of Western pressures to broaden representative government in the country, the Algerian government recently scheduled the first free elections since gaining independence from France fifty years ago. In the first round of open parliamentary elections in December of last year, Islamic fundamentalists of the Islamic Salvation Front (FIS) made an impressive showing, winning a majority of parliamentary seats outright and gaining a plurality in over sixty percent of those yet undecided. Significantly, these gains were facilitated by a tactical error by other political parties in boycotting the elections, leaving almost half of the electorate out of the voting process. Nonetheless, fearing that the fundamentalists would succeed in capturing a majority in the national parliament in the subsequent runoff elections, the country's president resigned. In a well-orchestrated move, the military took control of the government and, shortly thereafter, created a figurehead Council of State to rule the country. The runoff elections were canceled.

The reaction of the American government highlights the conflict between U. S. policy aims in such situations. Fearing that the FIS would indeed be successful in winning a parliamentary majority in Algeria and thereby possibly transform a budding democracy into a model Islamic state, the administration went on record supporting the constitutionality of the transfer of power to the ruling council. In an unusually rapid policy turnabout, prompted in part by severe criticism from our European allies, the

State Department issued a change within two days, stating that "we are not going to get into this constitutional debate at all."² The initial reaction by the administration, however, exposed our anti-Muslim predisposition--a fact lost on neither the FIS nor other Muslims in the region.

The American diplomatic flip-flop has stirred renewed debate in this country, as well. On one side of the question, the argument is made that:

The world--and especially the West--has to come to terms with Islamic politics whether we like it or not, especially when it wins in democratic elections. Or is democracy great only as long as the people we like win? Is that the political message we want to send to Muslims about our Western political system?³

One counter offered to this argument is that the simple fact of free elections does not qualify a nation as democratic--and for that reason does not necessarily qualify for our support. Many adherents of this approach feel that:

...democracy without a concomitant belief in minority rights is worthless and antithetical to Western values. We do not have to approve of every outcome simply because it was produced by a democratic process.⁴

The United States has settled on a policy of waiting and watching the situation in Algeria while encouraging all parties to remain calm and work to find a peaceful solution. In the meantime, the new ruling council has banned the Islamic Salvation Front, declared a state of emergency, and arrested most Muslim leaders. Escalating violence and deaths on both sides underscore the rapid

deterioration of the situation.

Degrees of Danger

In spite of the West's widespread belief that radical fundamentalists abound throughout the world of Islam, they are a minority in most Muslim countries. Most of these governments and a majority of their populations oppose the kind of strict regimes for which the fundamentalists agitate. In spite of all of the publicity of the danger, Muslim extremists have been successful in replacing a modernizing regime in only one country--Iran. Most other Islamic societies have incorporated Western ideals into their nation building to one degree or another, either as a carryover from colonial days or as a modern economic imperative. Perhaps as important, unlike Shi'ite-dominated Iran, ninety percent of the world's Muslim population is Sunni. Since Sunni doctrine provides no means of self-support, priestly hierarchy, or political organization for its clergy, Sunni religious leaders are--with some notable exceptions--less inclined toward the kind of political activism displayed by the Shi'ite mullahs in Iran.⁵

Finally, our widespread concern over the potential for a violent holy war against Western interests and citizens, while frequently advertised in the news media, reflects only the most radical interpretation of the "jihad" (struggle) described in the Koran. Such is not the kind of struggle to which most of the Muslim world subscribes.

Credibility Problems

For a people whose country was built largely on fundamental Christian ideals and who are the world's most staunch supporters of yet another state built on Jewish fundamentalism, Americans must be careful about how their view toward the "problem" of Islamic movements is perceived. With 800 million Muslims in the world and at least seventy countries having either sizable or majority Muslim populations, we cannot afford to be mercurial in our treatment of Islamic movements. The mere fact itself that the Western leadership and media continually allude to the dangers of Islamic fundamentalism is perceived as an anti-Muslim bias in some areas of the world.

It is important to recognize that the United States will have a hard time projecting a neutral reputation in Muslim affairs. We have only a modicum of credibility in the Muslim world due to our checkered past in dealing with these issues. Our critical support for the insertion of a Jewish state into the Arab world and our complicity in bringing the Shah to power in Iran are events not easily forgotten. As one author states, "The overthrow of Mossadegh shattered the image of the United States in the Middle East as a supporter of democracy and national self-determination."⁶ Building our credibility in this policy minefield is difficult but crucial.

As Ambassador David Newton has pointed out, it is a curious thing that "we view nationalism and fundamentalism so negatively in other parts of the world when we value them so much in our own

country."7 This characteristic tendency, however, is based on the same inherent racial bias in American society that generates the anti-Japanese sentiments found throughout much of the country today. Where there is a combination of competing interests--strategic or economic--and a lack of understanding between cultures, friction will result. The fear of Islam that is used to obtain support for fighting the fundamentalist "danger" is easily sold to the broader public because Americans do not know or understand Muslim religion or culture. This ignorance is made worse by years of negative stereotyping and inaccurate media projections of the Muslim world in the West. Failure to break through these barriers has historically soured our relations with Islamic societies.

Emerging Central Asia

The emergence of the Muslim republics of Central Asia is also frequently cited as a potentially serious problem for United States policy in view of their economic collapse and regional and ethnic ties to some of their radical southern neighbors. Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, it appeared as if America might forego the opportunity to establish meaningful relationships with many of the newly independent Muslim republics. Early diplomatic maneuvers seemed instead to favor establishing strong ties with the more "European" and nuclear-capable states like Russia, Ukraine and Belarus. Subsequent initiatives by Secretary of State Baker to visit some of the Muslim republics to discuss American support have

helped dispel fears that we would allow those republics to be courted by radical Iranian elements unchallenged.

Hopefully, this reflects a change toward a better balance in the American approach to the question of the former Soviet republics. The administration has been widely criticized for failing to shift its thinking of the fifteen republics as separate entities, preferring to hold on to the idea that the commonwealth was simply a one-for-one replacement for the old Soviet monolith. Recent developments in our policy toward Central Asia may finally demonstrate our recognition of the diverse cultural differences, dynamics of nationalism, and the lessons of history that make up this part of the world.

While there is a great deal of uncertainty about what course any of the fifteen new republics may ultimately take, certain aspects of the Muslim cultures in the predominantly Islamic republics--Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, Azerbaijan, Kirgizstan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan--may make short-term predictions possible. Decades of Soviet rule over these regions served largely to blur the distinction between Sunni and Shi'ite sects^a and the nature of Soviet Islam over the past half century has been more conservative and less modernist than other Muslim societies. As a rule, because of the controlling influence of the Soviet regime, extensive knowledge of other Muslim societies has been restricted primarily to the Muslim elites. The large mass of normal Muslim citizens are only now becoming more aware of the outside world. Organizing large numbers of them to agitate for change--radical or

moderate--would take a great deal of time and work.

The likelihood of the former Soviet Muslim republics turning to radical Iranian-style politics in the foreseeable future is small for other reasons, as well. First, these new republics will be more involved in searching for their own self-identities after more than half a century of life under Soviet communism. Second, the issue is likely to be less about religious fundamentalism than about money. As the rest of the former Soviet republics go their own way in seeking economic stability, the Central Asian republics must take care of themselves in much the same manner. Whether each of the republics turns to the theocratic Iranian model, adopts Turkish-style secularism, or attempts the creation of an Islamic Central Asian federation will depend more on economics than anything else.

Recent pledges by the United States and Turkey to expand aid to the former Soviet Central Asian and Transcaucasian republics are an effort to limit Iranian influence in the region and strengthen Turkish influence. The sincerity and consistency of these efforts will be critical in the progress we make there. The importance of the Turkish role in this process cannot be overstated, as it carries the crucial ingredient of ethnic and religious ties to the region that Western diplomacy cannot.

Conclusion

Islamic fundamentalism in its most radical, militant context can create a danger to American interests, but it does not merit

the label of a "national security threat" at present. Whether this status quo can survive over the long term depends largely on the success of American foreign policy strategy in the Muslim regions of the world. Our historically uneven treatment of Muslim societies must stop. Our racially biased and negative portrayal of Muslim cultures to the American public must be tempered. We must avoid the typical American practice of lumping Muslim societies together and start now to deal with the specific nature and dynamics of each as an individual entity. We must be cautious and deliberate in our approach to providing new and often alien ideas into proud cultures. In the words of one critic of our past policy, "Americans who believe the Gulf War has ended mistake force and coercion for power and influence. We must learn to project ideas as effectively as military force."

There are other policies that will also help to keep this potential danger from becoming a larger threat. We must make it clear that America recognizes that Islam can be a positive force in government. We should continue to cooperate with and actively support the moderate and secular Muslim governments to undermine the growth of radical anti-Western movements. We should encourage and aid Turkey's efforts in Central Asia, not only to encourage moderation, but to help strengthen the economies of the region. Stable governments and growing economies will discourage the growth of extremist movements.

Current administration policy toward the Muslim world has incorporated many of these ideas and is starting to show signs of

enlightenment. Its recent decision not to underwrite Israeli settlements in occupied territories shows a stronger attempt at even-handedness in the Middle East than has often been the case. However, we have to clearly avoid trying to "Americanize" the world--Muslim or otherwise--in any attempt to engineer the new world order. America should not set down such stringent guidelines for our support or recognition that cultures would have to give up their identities to qualify. We should try to abandon our propensity to demand rapid change and learn to be satisfied with incremental progress in developing nations. Finally, we cannot allow Western-style democratization to rank at the top of our stated foreign policy goals. Rather, our policy must first emphasize the protection of human rights and the rule of law in the context of existing political structures, which need time to evolve.

By subscribing to these guidelines, the United States can help manage the challenges that the changing world will present in the Muslim regions of the globe. Such policies will prevent the growth of radical Islamic fundamentalism from what is now only a potentially dangerous political force into a real threat to our interests.

Endnotes

1. Amos Perlmutter, "Wishful Thinking About Islamic Fundamentalism," The Washington Post 19 January 1992: C7.
2. John M. Goshko, "U. S. Modifies Statement on Algerian Move," The Washington Post 15 January 1992: A19.
3. Graham E. Fuller, "Islamic Fundamentalism: No Long Term Threat," The Washington Post 13 January 1992: A17.
4. Richard Cohen, "Phony Democracies," The Washington Post 21 January 1992: A19.
5. Daniel C. Diller, Ed., The Middle East (Seventh Edition) (Washington, D. C.: Congressional Quarterly Press, 1991) 135.
6. Eickelman, Dale F. and Kamran Pasha. "Muslim Societies and Politics: Soviet and U. S. Approaches--A Conference Report." The Middle East Journal Autumn 1991, Vol. 45, No. 4: 633.
7. Newton, David. "Religion in the Middle East." National War College Lecture. Washington, D. C. 12 February 1992. Cited with speaker's permission.
8. Alexandre Bennigsen, "Soviet Muslims and the World of Islam," Problems of Communism March-April 1980: 50.
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