The Growing Reach of
RADICAL ISLAM

Egyptians with coalition forces in Saudi Arabia.

By W I L L I A M H. L E W I S

The United States faces complex challenges among those states which constitute the greater Middle East. From Morocco to Pakistan, much of the region is in the midst of an Islamic revival that reasserts religious values in contemporary politics. While Western scholars indicate that this does not necessarily portend a conflict between Islam and

Christianity, many fear that it could magnify the rift between Western ideals of parliamentary democracy and the authoritarian tenets of traditional Islam. This involves sensitive issues such as the role of religion in politics and the impact of American policies in areas where religious causes often justify political violence.

Compounding this challenge is the fact that Islamic revivalism does

not find active political expression everywhere. When it does, however, the exclusive goal is not to topple governments, though in some cases it is an effective means of opposing regimes with little tolerance for political expression. Egypt's long-established Islamic Brotherhood, for example, seeks participation in the electoral process as a legally constituted political party. Its strategy has been to provide health care and education in depressed areas of the country. More radical organizations,

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such as the Armed Islamic Group in Algeria and Jihad guerrilla group in Egypt, employ intimidation, subversion, and terrorism to achieve their political ends. While most states in the region are avowedly Islamic, only a handful of governments adhere to Islamic (Sharia) law.

It would be a mistake for policymakers to perceive Islamic militancy as a monolithic trend. Revivalism and militancy are diverse, and what is required is a grasp of the politico-religious level in the greater Middle East, the nature of the threats to existing institutions, and possible courses of action for the United States and those European nations which are most directly concerned.[1]

Differing Perceptions

The growing Islamic revival raises important questions. Is this resurgence a by-product of a search for spiritual

Islamic revivalism has been growing since well before the Iranian revolution

meaning by alienated publics, a desire to eliminate Western influence from the region; or is it meant to replace ineffectual, corrupt regimes with honest ones that provide access to power and solve economic and social problems? Will such movements tolerate secular influence or introduce grand ideologies and authoritarianism? Western observers are divided on these questions, with some seeing resurgent Islam as xenophobic and conflict as inevitable. That view is based on resurgent Islam in its extreme form which seeks to overthrow pro-Western regimes, endorses anti-Western strategies, and advocates religious over secular values.

Others perceive Islamic groups as not necessarily or primarily anti-Western but rather as largely critical of ineffectual local government. While the social praxis that many movements want to impose—such as restrictions on women's dress and harsh penalties for theft—are not congruent with

Western values, they do not threaten our security. Saudi Arabia, whose government enforces the strictest interpretation of Islamic law in the Middle East, has been a partner of the United States for more than half a century. On the other hand, it is criticized by some Islamic groups for that relationship and its refusal to allow popular political participation.

Within the greater Middle East, two divergent strategies have evolved to cope with Islamic movements. One, adopted by secular states with single party or military regimes (such as Tunisia, Algeria, Syria, and Iraq), makes little distinction between mainstream and militant groups and deals harshly with both. In essence, such governments forbid religious organizations from participating in politics. The other strategy is to open involvement in the political life of the country to mainstream groups but not to extremists. Such participation compels movements to be pragmatic and separates moderates from militants. It requires a good political atmosphere, feasible prospects for economic progress, and shrewd management.

Devising strategies to deal with Islamic political groups is chancy at best. Not infrequently, governmental decisions are dictated by excesses, including violence by radical movements, which may or may not be connected to mainstream groups. For purposes of analysis, several criteria can help to identify the more radical groups, namely, goals, means, opportunities, and consequences:

■ *Goals*—The ostensible objective of each group is to counter omnipresent, insidious neo-colonialist influence emanating from the West; the ultimate goal is to replace the secular authority of the state.
■ *Means*—Against an implacable regime of disputed legitimacy, any means of opposition is viewed as legitimate. Operationally, violence is an appropriate way of upsetting the existing order, if need be by tearing the political system up by its roots.

■ *Opportunities*—The failure of governments to deal with social and economic difficulties is fertile ground for activists. In gross terms this includes issues of a population growth rate that has approached 3 percent per annum (Morocco, Algeria, and Egypt), 15–25 percent unemployment among youth (Algeria), and adverse import and debt ratios (Syria, Egypt, Lebanon, and Algeria).
■ *Consequences*—Radical strategies and violence disrupt internal power distribution and lead to military rule or a breakdown of authority. Extremists have no effective reform programs and almost invariably become authoritarian. The result is eroding public support. The implications of the latter for the region or the West could be substantial.

Country Profiles

Islamic revivalism has been a growing phenomenon in the greater Middle East since well before the Iranian revolution of 1979 which toppled the Pahlevi dynasty. Most specialists tend to mark its resurgence with the Israeli victory in the 1967 war. Out of defeat and Moscow's failure to intervene, disillusionment with Arab nationalism, Marxism, and Western materialism ineluctably led to a return by many Moslems to their traditions and values, including Islam. It produced a gulf between the politically active and their governments, with scenarios that conceptually fall into three identifiable stages:

■ movement from single-party control during a period of economic and social crisis toward pluralism, including participation of Islamic political parties
■ military intervention to establish order and terminate the participation of the latter
■ internal violence by opposition groups threatening the military-controlled regime which can lead to a failed state situation.

Algeria, Turkey, and Egypt bear special attention in this regard.

Algeria. The deterioration of state and society is readily apparent in Algeria where the crisis stems from a variety of factors. A sharp drop in oil prices, Algeria's principal export, occurred in the mid-1980s. In consequence, social-economic progress slowed as the population grew rapidly. The younger generation was alienated by pervasive

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Coalition soldiers at prayer during Desert Storm.

U.S. Air Force (Dean M. Fox)

corruption, incompetence, and self-centered actions of a single-party government. They protested in 1988, leading to more than 400 deaths at the hands of security forces. Single-party rule ended one year later and local and national elections were scheduled. To

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the dismay of the ruling oligarchy, dominated by the military, the Islamic Salvation Front (FIS) emerged as a well organized political movement. It virtually swept out the oligarchy and threatened the military. Finally, in 1992 the military declared a state of emergency, outlawed FIS, and jailed 8,000 of its members. Since then there has been a growing, bloody insurgency with reprisals by government forces and the threat not only of a failed regime but a failed state.

Turkey. The potential difficulties facing Turkey are a product of its political heritage. After an initial period of gestation, Turkey turned to Europe and NATO as lodestars for future growth and military modernization. But neither Brussels nor the country's political parties have developed a strategy for securing these goals. There is reluctance with regard to Ankara's application for full European Union membership. Turkey's secular political

formations have been weak in leadership and racked by corruption. Military modernization goals have not been fully met. The government has sought to ease concerns over political and human rights. But the steps it has taken are unlikely to fully assuage many unhappy Turks and skeptical European Union members.

Sectarian anger has been increasing, reflected in March street riots in Istanbul and Ankara and a dramatic surge in the membership of the Welfare Party. The fragmented nature of Turkey's political culture, reflected by the electorate, could make this Islamic party the largest within parliament should they win one-third of the vote in national elections anticipated for 1996.

Egypt. Few secular Arab regimes have been as subtle as Egypt's in handling the Moslem Brotherhood. On coming to power in the wake of Anwar Sadat's assassination, Hosni Mubarak adopted a strategy of "gentle containment" of the Brotherhood while showing no mercy to Islamic Jihad and other bands seeking to overthrow the regime. Efforts by the government to redress these problems have had only limited success. Islamic groups continue to enjoy popular support for their socio-economic programs. Rather than neutralize all Islamic political and professional groups through police repression, a more productive strategy might involve some opening up of political processes, much as King Hussein

has done in Jordan, thereby creating a constructive dialogue with mainstream Islamist politicians.

Current indications are that President Mubarak will not open the existing political system to any appreciable degree. In prospect is a continued lethargy by a regime populated by technocrats with limited capacity to reform the political system. The government prefers to focus on seditious activities of Islamic activists, pointing to the material and diplomatic support from Iran and Sudan. Both have been charged by the United States as prime actors in the area of state terrorism. Sudan has provided training facilities for Egyptian and Algerian insurgents while Iran has gained notoriety for military and financial aid to Hizballah and Hamas, two organizations dedicated to failure of the current Arab-Israeli peace negotiations.

Neither Iran nor Sudan are paragons of a successful Islamic revolution. Both are pariah states which have failed to establish a positive record in resolving domestic political and economic difficulties. Under Hassan al-Turabi, Sudan has not managed to bring a wasteful, decades-old war with southerners to a successful conclusion and is trying to impose Islam by force. The Sudanese economy is virtually in receivership, barely able to stagger from debt crisis to chapter XI status. The opposition, however, is too weak to pose a credible threat. Iran is deeply embroiled in trouble with many of the country's senior mullahs who are distancing themselves from self-inflicted social and economic difficulties and from those in positions of power who are enriching themselves much like the Shah's clique. Iran is also in the throes of double-digit inflation, falling productivity, and mounting debt. In 1995 it experienced a number of industrial work stoppages and anti-government demonstrations. Sixteen years after its revolution, Iran faces a perilous time with the middle class, intellectuals, and bazaar merchants, who are skeptical of the government's policies and leadership. However, there is no sign of any organized opposition that could threaten to topple the regime.

The Radical Network

Following the overthrow of the Iranian regime in 1978–79, most area specialists anticipated a wave of religiously based political upheavals. The only successful effort occurred ten years later in Sudan. In most instances, radicals have only played spoiler roles. In recent years, however, support networks have emerged in the form of thousands of militants from the Moslem world who fought alongside the Afghan mujahedeen and who have returned to Algeria, Sudan, and Lebanon. Recruits find access to training in Sudan and Lebanon, while Iran and some Saudi nationals offer financial aid. But this network does not amount to what can be called an Islamic "Comintern."

Iran is the principal supporter of efforts to reduce Western influence in the region, as well as to unseat governments closely tied to the West. Iranian involvement is also predicated on rejection of the legitimacy of the state of Israel, and therefore on public opposition to the Arab-Israel peace negotiations in progress since October 1991— a "flawed process" forced on Arab governments by the United States in collaboration with Israel. As a result, Tehran has maintained varying levels of support for Islamist groups such as Hizballah, Islamic Jihad, and Hamas.

The Islamic Republic of Iran has turned its proselytizing toward the small Arab states in the Gulf where substantial Shia populations form a potentially dissident underclass that seeks a greater political voice. Should Iranian-backed elements come to power in Bahrain, U.S. military access to facilities would probably be terminated—a boon to Tehran, which views the substantial presence in the Gulf area by the "great Satan" with considerable perturbation.

The crude though spreading network of radical Islamic groups in France, Spain, and Italy is of mounting concern to local governments. The nucleus of their recruits emanates from Algeria, Tunisia, and Morocco, all former French dependencies. Recent bombings of the Paris Metro have provoked further worry. Western security services have been placed on a heightened state of alert because of these acts. Even the United States is not immune as the World Trade Center bombing in 1993 and recent airport terrorist alerts attest.

The United States has declared that it regards the Islamic revival as a natural outgrowth of economic and cultural reorientation, particularly in the wake of the Cold War.[2] Hence, the Clinton administration does not see Islam as the next "ism" which will confront the West or as a threat to international order. In the words of one senior American official:

In countries throughout the Middle East and North Africa, we . . . see groups seeking to reform their societies in keeping with Islamic ideals. There is considerable diversity in how these ideals are expressed. We detect no monolithic or coordinated international effort behind these movements. What we do see are believers living in different countries placing renewed emphasis on Islamic principles and governments according to Islamist political activity to varying degrees and in different ways.

It is also apparent that America opposes those who substitute religious and political confrontation for constructive engagement with the rest of the world.

Several questions emerge from the Algerian case. Was the Algerian government originally not aggressive enough in dealing with FIS or can political reform forestall extremism? Will Algeria be seen as the first of a series of potential dominoes in the region?

In the near term the Western allies will be limited in their ability to influence political forces in the Middle East. Events in Bosnia and elsewhere in the Balkans, the Arab-Israeli peace talks, and the Algerian civil war may shape the political landscape for years to come. But transformation of the region at the hands of radical Islamic groups is unlikely. At present, such movements are not ascendant. Few, if any, will come to power through constitutional means. The election route is barred to them in Morocco, Tunisia, and Egypt, which forbid political parties based on religion, region, or language. Saudi Arabia bans parties completely and, although political ferment has been evident in recent years, the royal family will continue to exercise control so long as a majority of the princes remain united and supported by tribal groups.

The Islamic threat runs in cycles, however; and a critical factor will be the performance of existing ruling groups, the extent to which they tolerate political dissent, and how resolutely they tackle myriad economic and social ills. If they remain autocratic, morally bankrupt, and oblivious to the demands of the middle class and "lumpen proletariat," they will be vulnerable to challenges from ever present dissidents. The latter, disillusioned by Marxist theories and secular nationalism, have been compelled to turn to religion and its attendant traditions. But the primary inspiration for political action is the overthrow of power centers. Under duress, as recently seen, intervention by local security forces becomes ineluctable.

The task for the West is to develop strategies and contingency plans that deal not with the threat of Islam but rather with the problem of regime collapse and failed states. **JFQ**

NOTES

[1] "Living with Islam," *The Economist,* vol. 334, no. 7906 (March 18, 1995), p. 13.

[2] Innumerable studies on the Islamic revival are available, although few evaluate the goals, organization, et al. of radical groups across the "greater Middle East." One analytical milestone is Oliver Roy, *The Failure of Political Islam* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1994). Other contributions include works by John Esposito, *The Islamic Threat: Myth or Reality?* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992); James Piscatori, *Islam in a World of Nation-States* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1986); Richard P. Mitchell, *The Society of the Moslem Brothers* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1969).