

Islamists and US Foreign Policy

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As Islamist parties continue to rise in prominence across the globe, policymakers must learn to make distinctions and adopt differentiated policy approaches. This requires a deeper understanding of what motivates and informs Islamist parties and the support they receive, including the ways in which some US policies feed the more radical and extreme Islamist movements while weakening the appeal of the moderate organizations to Muslim populations. It also requires the political will to adopt approaches of engagement and dialogue. This is especially important where the roots of political Islam go deeper than simple anti-Americanism and where political Islam is manifested in non-violent and democratic ways. The stunning electoral victories of Hamas in Palestine and the Shia in Iraq, the Muslim Brotherhood's emergence as the leading parliamentary opposition in Egypt, and Israel's war against Hamas and Hizbullah go to the heart of issues of democracy, terrorism, and peace in the Middle East.

Global terrorism has also become the excuse for many Muslim autocratic rulers and Western policymakers to backslide or retreat from democratization. They warn that the promotion of a democratic process runs the risk of furthering Islamist inroads into centres of power and is counterproductive to Western interests, encouraging a more virulent anti-Westernism and increased instability. Thus, for example, despite Hamas' victory in free and democratic elections, the United States and Europe failed to give the party full recognition and support.

In relations between the West and the Muslim world, phrases, like a clash of civilizations or a clash of cultures, recur, as does the charge that Islam is incompatible with democracy, or that it is a particularly militant religion. But is the primary issue religion and culture, or is it politics? Is the primary cause of radicalism and anti-Westernism, especially anti-Americanism, extremist theology, or simply the policies of many Muslim and Western governments?

A new Gallup World Study overwhelmingly suggests the latter. The poll enables us to get beyond conflicting analyses of experts and selective voices from the "Arab street." It lets us listen to one billion Muslims from Morocco to Indonesia. And they tell us that US policies, not values, are behind the ire of the Arab/Muslim world.²

Political Islam: ballots or bullets?

History demonstrates that political Islam is both extremist and mainstream. On the one hand, Ayatollah Khomeini's Iran, the Taliban's Afghanistan, and Osama Bin Laden and al-Qaeda as well as terrorists from Morocco to Indonesia have espoused a revolutionary Islam that relies on violence and terror. On the other, many Islamist social and political movements across the Muslim world have worked within the political system.

Since the late twentieth century Islamically oriented candidates and political parties in Algeria, Tunisia, Morocco, Egypt, Lebanon, Turkey, Jordan, Kuwait, Bahrain, Pakistan, Malaysia, and Indonesia have opted for ballots, not bullets. They have successfully contested and won municipal and parliamentary seats, held cabinet positions, and served in senior positions such as prime minister of Turkey and Iraq and president of Indonesia.

Elections since late 2001 in Pakistan, Turkey, Bahrain, and Morocco as well as in Palestine, Iraq, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, and Egypt have reinforced the continued saliency of Islam in Muslim politics in the twenty first century. The more contentious aspect of political Islam has been

US foreign policy and political Islam today are deeply intertwined. Policymakers, particularly since 9/11, have demonstrated an inability and/or unwillingness to distinguish between radical and moderate Islamists. They have largely treated political Islam as a global threat similar to the way that Communism was perceived. However, even in the case of Communism, foreign policymakers eventually moved from an ill-informed, broad-brush, and paranoid approach personified by Senator Joseph McCarthy in the 1950s to more nuanced and pragmatic policies that led to the establishment of relations with China in the 1970s, even as tensions remained between the United States and the Soviet Union.¹

the extent to which militant groups like Hizbullah and Hamas have turned to the ballot box. Hizbullah transformed itself into a Lebanese political party that has proven effective in parliamentary elections. At the same time, it remained a militia, fighting and eventually forcing Israeli withdrawal in 2000 from its 18-year occupation of southern Lebanon. Hamas defeated the PLO in democratic elections.

In responding to mainstream and extremist political Islam, policymakers require a better understanding of how global Muslim majorities see the world and, in particular, how they regard the United States. The question "Why do

they hate us?" raised in the immediate aftermath of 9/11 looms large following continued terrorist attacks and the dramatic growth of anti-Americanism. A common answer provided by some politicians and experts has been, "They hate our way of life, our freedom, democracy, and success." Considering the broad based anti-Americanism, not only among extremists but also among a significant mainstream majority in the Muslim world (and indeed in many other parts of the world), this answer is not satisfactory. Although the Muslim world expresses many common grievances, do extremists and moderates differ in attitudes about the West?

Focusing on the attitudes of those with radical views and comparing them with the moderate majority results in surprising findings. When asked what they admired most about the West, both extremists and moderates had the identical top three spontaneous responses: (1) technology; (2) the West's value system, hard work, self-responsibility, rule of law, and cooperation; and (3) its fair political systems, democracy, respect for human rights, freedom of speech, and gender equality. A significantly higher percent of potential extremists than moderates (50 percent versus 35 percent) believe that "moving towards greater governmental democracy" will foster progress in the Arab/Muslim world. Potential extremists believe even more strongly than moderates (58 percent versus 45 percent) that Arab/Muslim nations are eager to have better relations with the West. Finally, no significant difference exists between the percentage of potential extremists and moderates who said "better relations with the West concerns me a lot."

While many believe anti-Americanism is tied to a basic hatred of the West and deep West-East religious and cultural differences, the data above contradicts these views. In addition, Muslim assessments of individual Western countries demonstrate that Muslim views do not paint all Western countries with the same brush. Unfavourable opinions of the United States or the United Kingdom do not preclude favourable attitudes towards other Western countries like France or Germany. Data shows that while moderates have very unfavourable opinions of the United States (42 percent) and Great Britain (34 percent), unfavourable opinions of France (15 percent) and Germany (13 percent) were far less and in fact comparable to the percent of Muslims who viewed Pakistan or Turkey unfavourably (both at 12 percent).

Democratic exceptionalism?

What creates unfavourable attitudes towards the United States? One crucial factor is what is perceived as the United States' "double standard" in promoting democracy. Key factors of this perception include a long track record of supporting authoritarian regimes in the Arab and Muslim world while not promoting democracy there as it did elsewhere after the fall of the Soviet Union. Then, when weapons of mass destruc-

tion were not to be found in Iraq, the Bush administration boldly declared that the US-led invasion and the toppling of Saddam Hussein were intended to bring democracy to Iraq as part of a broader policy of promoting democracy in the Middle East. In a major policy address, Ambassador Richard Haass, a senior State Department official in the George W. Bush administration, acknowledged that both Democratic and Republican administrations had practised what he termed “Democratic Exceptionalism” in the Muslim world: subordinating democracy to other US interests such as accessing oil, containing the Soviet Union, and grappling with the Arab-Israeli conflict.

While the spread of democracy has been the stated goal of the United States, majorities in every nation surveyed by Gallup do not believe that the United States was serious about the establishment of democratic systems in the region. For example, only 24 percent in Egypt and Jordan and only 16 percent in Turkey agree that the United States was serious about establishing democratic systems. The largest groups in agreement are in Lebanon and Indonesia at 38 percent; but even there, 58 percent of Lebanese and 52 percent of Indonesians disagree with the statement.

Yet, while saying that the United States is not serious about self-determination and democracy in the Muslim world, many respondents say the thing they admire most about the West is political liberty and freedom of speech. Large percentages also associate a fair judicial system and “citizens enjoying many liberties” with Western societies while critiquing their own societies. Lack of political freedom was what they admired least about the Islamic/Arab world.

The United States after Gaza and Lebanon

Muslim perceptions of the US role and response to the Israeli wars in Gaza and Lebanon must also be seen within the broad context of the Arab and Muslim world. From North Africa to Southeast Asia, the Gallup World Poll indicates an overwhelming majority of people (91-95 percent), do not believe that the United States is trustworthy, friendly, or treats other countries respectfully, nor that it cares about human rights in other countries (80 percent). Outside of Iraq, over 90 percent of Muslims agreed that the invasion of Iraq has done more harm than good. The Bush administration recognized that the war on global terrorism has come to be equated in the minds of many Muslims (and others) with a war against Islam and the Muslim world and reemphasized the importance of public diplomacy. The administration appointed a senior Bush confidante, Karen Hughes, as Under Secretary for Public Diplomacy, and spoke of a war of ideas. However, public diplomacy is more than public relations. It is about acting consistently with the words one speaks.

The US administration’s responses in Gaza and in Lebanon undercut both the president’s credibility and the war on terrorism. America’s unconditional support of Israel cast it in the eyes of many as a partner, not simply in military action against Hamas or Hizbullah militants, but in a war against the democratically elected Palestinian government in Gaza and the government of Lebanon, a long-time US ally. The primary victims in Gaza and Lebanon were hundreds of thousands of innocent civilians, not terrorists. In Lebanon, more than 500 were killed, 2,000 wounded, and 800,000 displaced. Israeli’s military destroyed the civilian infrastructures of both Gaza and Lebanon. International organizations like the United Nations, Amnesty International, and Human Rights Watch have criticized Israel for violating international law. Amnesty and Human Rights Watch has specifically cited the “use of collective punishment and war crimes.” The regional blowback from the approach that the United States has taken will be enormous and enduring.

The Bush administration’s promotion of democracy and the Middle East Peace Process are in critical condition. The United States remains mired in Iraq and Afghanistan with no clear “success” stories in sight. The situation has been compounded by the US and European failure to respect the democratic choice of Palestinians, whatever its reservations, done little to ease the humanitarian crisis in Gaza, and then their passive and active compliance with Israel’s wars in Gaza and Lebanon. Hamas and Hizbullah have become symbols of resistance, enjoying a level of support that would have been unimagined in the past throughout much of the Muslim world. European countries have enjoyed a great deal of credibility in the Middle East. However, if this trend continues, Europe’s ability to positively affect developments in the Middle East will be eroded. Many US and European allies in the Arab/Muslim world increasingly use the threat of extreme Islamists and the war against terrorism as excuses for increased authoritarianism and repression,



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trading their support for United States backing down on its democratic agenda. The unintended consequences of uncritical US and European support for Israel’s extended war have played right into the hands of the Bin Ladens of the world.

A critical challenge today is to distinguish between mainstream and extremists groups and to work with democratically elected Islamists. US administrations and many European governments have often said that they distinguish between mainstream and extremist groups. However, more often that not, they have looked the other way when autocratic rulers in Algeria, Tunisia, Egypt, and elsewhere have intimidated and suppressed mainstream Islamist groups or attempted to reverse their successes in elections in the past several decades. The challenge has been particularly complex in connection to resistance movements like Hamas and Hizbullah. Both are elected political parties with a popular base. At the same time, they are resistance movements whose militias have fought Israeli occupation and whom Israel, the United States, and Europe have labelled as terrorist organizations. There are established precedents for dealing with such groups, such as the ANC in South Africa and Sinn Fein, the political wing of the IRA in Ireland, groups with which we’ve had to come to terms. The United States and Europe need to deal with the democratically elected officials, while also strongly condemn any acts of terrorism by their militias. European countries like France, Germany, and Norway have both a long presence and credibility in the Middle East, are not associated as are the U.S. and Britain with the Iraq invasion and occupation, and seen as more independent in their relations with the Bush administration. This enables them to play an important and constructive role. Diplomacy, economic incentives, and sanctions should be emphasized, with military action taken only as a last resort. However, overuse of economic sanctions by the Clinton and Bush administrations has reduced US negotiating leverage with countries like Iran and Sudan.

Equally difficult, the United States and Europe, while affirming their support for Israel’s existence and security, must clearly demonstrate that this support has clear limits. They must be prepared to condemn Israel’s disproportionate use of force, collective punishment, and other violations of international law. Finally, most fundamental and important is the recognition that widespread anti-Americanism among mainstream Muslims and Islamists results from what the United States in particular does—its policies and actions—not its way of life, culture, or religion.

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Posters of US President George W. Bush on his visit to Pakistan, Rawalpindi, 3 March 2006

Notes

1. This article is based on “It’s the Policy, Stupid: Political Islam and US Foreign Policy,” *Harvard International Review*, <http://hir.harvard.edu/articles/1453/>.
2. The Gallup Organization, in association with Gallup Senior Scientist John L. Esposito, is producing a large, in-depth study of Muslim opinion. The preliminary findings of the Gallup study reflect the voices and opinions of 800 million Muslims from Morocco to Indonesia. Samples include at least 1,000 adults surveyed in each of the poll’s 10-targeted preliminary countries.