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Grand Mosque, Medina.

and the West

By JOHN L. ESPOSITO

At the dawn of the 21st century political Islam, or more commonly Islamic fundamentalism, remains a major presence in governments and oppositional politics from North Africa to Southeast Asia. New Islamic republics have emerged in Afghanistan, Iran, and Sudan. Islamists have been elected to parliaments, served in cabinets, and been presidents, prime ministers, and deputy prime ministers in

nations as diverse as Algeria, Egypt, Indonesia, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Malaysia, Pakistan, and Yemen. At the same time opposition movements and radical extremist groups have sought to destabilize regimes in Muslim countries and the West. Americans have witnessed attacks on their embassies from Kenya to Pakistan. Terrorism abroad has been accompanied by strikes on domestic targets such as the World Trade Center in New York. In recent years, Saudi millionaire Osama bin Laden has become emblematic of efforts to spread international violence.

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What is Political Islam?

The phenomenon known as political Islam is rooted in a contemporary religious resurgence in private and public life.¹ On one hand, many Muslims have become more observant with regard to the practice of their faith (prayer, fasting, dress, and family). On the other, Islam has reemerged as an alternative to the perceived failure of secular ideologies such as nationalism, capitalism, and socialism. Islamic symbols, rhetoric, actors, and organizations have become sources of legitimacy and mobilization, informing political and social activism. The governments of Afghanistan, Egypt, Iran, Libya, Malaysia, Morocco, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, and Sudan have made appeals to Islam in order to enhance their legitimacy and to mobilize popular support for programs and policies.

Islamic movements span the religious and political spectrum from moderate to extremist. Among the more prominent have been Muslim brotherhoods of Egypt, Sudan, and Jordan, Jamaat-i-Islami in South Asia, the Refah party in Turkey, the Islamic Salvation Front in Algeria, al Nahda in Tunisia,

modernization has been perceived as a form of neocolonialism, an evil that supplants religious and cultural identity

Hizbullah in Lebanon, Hamas and Islamic Jihad in Palestine, and Gamaa Islamiyya and Jihad in Egypt. The causes of resurgence have been religiocultural, political, and socioeconomic. Issues of faith, politics, and social justice—authoritarianism, repression, unemployment, housing, social services, distribution of wealth, and corruption—intertwine as catalysts.

A series of crises since the late 1960s has discredited many regimes and Western inspired modernization paradigms, triggering the politics of protest and a quest for greater authenticity. The resulting call for an Islamic alternative has been reflected in slogans such as “Islam is the solution” and “Neither West nor East.” Among



Israeli tanks in action, June 1967.

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the events that acted as catalysts for political Islam were:

- the Arab-Israeli war or Six Day War (1967) when Israel decisively defeated the combined Arab armies of Egypt, Jordan, and Syria and occupied East Jerusalem, Gaza, Sinai, and the West Bank, transforming the liberation of Jerusalem and Palestine into a transnational Islamic issue

- the Pakistan-Bangladesh civil war (1971–72) heralding the failure of Muslim nationalism

- the Lebanese civil war (1975–90), caused in part by inequitable distribution of political and economic power between Christians and Muslims, which led to emergence of major Shi'a groups, Amal, and the Iranian inspired and backed Hizbullah

- the Iranian revolution (1978–79), a pivotal event with global implications for the Muslim world and the West

- the Arab-Israeli conflict that spawned its own Islamist movements, among them Hamas and Islamic Jihad, which grew in strength during the Intifada in the 1980s.

Even though Iran offered the most visible and sustained critique of the West, embodying both moderate and more extremist or rejectionist views, the failures of the West (both its models of development and role as an ally) and the fear of its cultural penetration

have been popular themes of resurgence throughout the Greater Middle East. Many groups have blamed social ills on outside influences. Modernization—progressive westernization and secularization—has been perceived as a form of neocolonialism, an evil that supplants religious and cultural identity and values with alien ideas and models of development.

Evolution of an Idea

Political Islam has challenged governments, policymakers, and analysts both politically and intellectually over issues of leadership and ideology, modernization and development, pluralism, democratization, and foreign policy.

Against expectations, so-called modern or westernized Muslim societies (Algeria, Egypt, Iran, Lebanon, Tunisia, and Turkey) have emerged as centers of Islamic politics. Modernization has not been a matter of making simple choices between Mecca and mechanization, static tradition and dynamic change, and secular leaders or intellectuals and *ulama* (the traditional religious elite). Countries as dissimilar as Afghanistan, Egypt, the Gulf states, Iran, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey demonstrate the complexity and diverse nature of Muslim experience and experimentation, various patterns of

modernization, and differing interpretations and implementations of Islam.

The advent of an alternative Islamic activist elite reflects new realities in the Muslim world. The earlier division of many societies into modern secular versus more traditional religious elites, rooted in a bifurcated system, is complemented by an educated although more Islamically oriented sector. Islamic movements, both moderate and extremist, have proliferated and become agents of change. They establish modern political and social organizations and embrace advanced means to disseminate their message. Most function within civil society as social and political activists. They build schools and hospitals, open lending institutions, offer legal and social services, and provide leadership in politics and the professions. At the same time, a minority of extremists use violence to threaten the stability of many regimes and have extended their global reach by detonating bombs in Paris and New York and at American embassies in Nairobi and Dar es Salaam.

Islamic Threat or Clash of Civilizations?

In recent years some observers have spoken of a clash of civilizations—between Islam and modern secular (or Judeo-Christian) democratic values and culture, or between Islamic civilization and the West.² Early underestimation of religion as a source of identity as well as a political force (along with its failure as a predictive paradigm) has led to its overestimation today. New recognition of religion's significance in international affairs has reinforced an exaggerated belief in the impending clash of civilizations. The most provocative articulation of this position was advanced by Samuel Huntington, who declared that in the post Cold War period "The clash of civilizations will dominate global politics. The fault lines between civilizations will be the battle lines of the future. The next world war, if there is one, will be a war between civilizations."³ Huntington's position emphasizes religious



and cultural differences over similarities and equates political, economic, and cultural differences with confrontation. Areas of cooperation and the fact that most countries are primarily, although not solely, driven by national and regional interests are overlooked in his analysis.

The creation of an imagined monolithic Islam has resulted in a religious reductionism that views political conflicts in Azerbaijan, Bosnia, Chechnya, Indonesia, Kosovo, Lebanon, Nigeria, and Sudan as religious conflicts. Although communities in these areas may be broadly identified in religious or confessional terms, like the Catholic and Protestant communities in Northern Ireland or the Hindu (Tamil) and Buddhist communities in Sri Lanka, local disputes and civil wars have more to do with political, ethnic, and socioeconomic issues than religion.

The challenge in an increasingly interdependent world is recognition of both competing and common interests. American policy towards Japan or Saudi Arabia is not based on shared culture, religion, or civilization but on national or group interests. Cooperation can result from common religious

and ethnic backgrounds; however it often is derived from common national and strategic interests. Although a clash of civilizations might be used to justify aggression, future conflicts will be due less to a clash of civilizations and more to other interests.

Secular fundamentalism is implicit in many analyses of political Islam, an interpretation that regards mixing religion and politics as abnormal, irrational, dangerous, and extremist. Those who subscribe to this view are known as fundamentalists or religious fanatics. Thus when secular Westerners encounter Muslims who speak of Islam as a comprehensive way of life, they dub them retrogressive and resistant to change.

Assuming that mixing religion and politics inevitably leads to extremism has contributed to the attitude that all Islamic movements are extremist and incompatible with democracy. Failure to differentiate between Islamic movements is misleading. Few equate actions by Jewish or Christian extremists with Judaism and Christianity as a whole. Similarly, the United States does not object officially to mixing religion and politics in Israel, Eastern Europe, or Latin America. Comparable liberality is absent when dealing with Islam.

Many nations identify political Islam as a threat to their domestic and international security concerns. Bombings and murders in the Middle East, Europe, and North America bolster this argument. However, questions remain. Should social problems be blamed on fundamentalist fanatics? Are the activities of a radical minority being used as a convenient excuse for the failures of local governments to build equitable societies? Does this perceived threat support authoritarian military regimes whose nonelected rulers want first and foremost to perpetuate their own power? Analysis and strategic planning require movement beyond an imagined monolithic political Islam. Differences in state Islam as seen in Afghanistan, Iran, Libya, Morocco, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, and Sudan are also found in the varieties among Islamic movements. They range from moderates or pragmatists

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who work within the system to radical extremists who seek to overthrow regimes and impose their own brand of Islam. Muslim brotherhoods in Egypt and Jordan, Jamaat-i-Islami in Pakistan, the Refah Party in Turkey, al-Nahda in Tunisia, and Islamic Salvation Front in Algeria eschew violence and participate in electoral politics. At the same time, Gamaa Islamiyya in Egypt, Armed Islamic Group in Algeria, and Jihad organizations in many countries have engaged in acts of violence and terrorism.

What Is the Threat?

American embassies in Kenya and Tanzania were bombed on August 7, 1998, killing 263 people and injuring another 5,000, which again raised the specter of international terrorism. Once more the international community witnessed the extremist fringe of political Islam. On August 27, the United States attacked alleged terrorist militia training sites associated with Osama bin Laden in Sudan and Afghanistan. This response marked a new phase in the war against terrorism focused on non-state actors, in particular a specific individual accused of supporting terrorist groups.

Militias have played a significant role in Muslim politics. While some are associated with organizations that seek to topple governments through violence, others function in their societies. The Armed Islamic Group in Algeria and Gamaa Islamiyya and Islamic Jihad in Egypt are cases of violent revolutionaries. Both Hizballah in Lebanon and Hamas in Israel and Palestine function in mainstream society but also engage in armed struggle. The Taliban militia has fought its way into power in Afghanistan. The tactics

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and agendas of such groups, though religiously legitimized, are often products of political and economic factors as much as ideological and theological



Anti-American protest in Islamabad, Pakistan.

AP/Wide World Photos (B.K. Bangash)

precepts. Just as Hizballah was a response to Israel's invasion of Lebanon, supported by Khomeini's Iran, the Taliban of Afghanistan is a product of

global war waged by Islamic militants, particularly against American interests. Its symbol became Osama bin Laden, who is regarded as a freedom fighter by some observers and a supporter of international terrorism by others.

U.S.-supported resistance to the Soviets and subsequent tribal warfare. Hamas was a reaction to the Palestinian uprising against Israeli occupation.

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The violence encouraged by bin Laden resonates throughout the Arab and Muslim world. A sharp critic of U.S. foreign policy, he denounces its tilt towards Israel. He charges that America is responsible for the failure of the peace process and assails its refusal to condemn Israeli military action in Lebanon and insistence on continued sanctions against Iraq, which have resulted in the death of many civilians.

He is also critical of what he calls the new crusades in the Persian Gulf, particularly the U.S. military and economic presence in Saudi Arabia. To these complaints he adds other populist causes such as Bosnia, Chechnya, Kashmir, and Kosovo.

Focusing on bin Laden risks catapulting a single source of terror to center stage, distorting diverse international sources and the relevance of one man. Moreover, it risks damaging the stated goals of the United States—defense of democracy and the war against terrorism—by transforming him from a mastermind of terrorism into a cult hero.

The line between national liberation and terrorism is often blurred. What some see as a war of resistance and national liberation by Hamas in the West Bank and Gaza is perceived as a reign of terror by many Israelis. The complexity is compounded by an international tendency to view those in power as legitimate rulers, regardless of their origin or persuasion. Their police or militaries use legitimate force while the armed opposition is portrayed as extremist.

Democracy and Islam—Stability or Conflict?

Muslim positions on participation and democratization range widely.⁴ Secularists argue for a democracy that observes the separation of religion and state. Rejectionists hold that Islam has its own forms of governance that are incompatible with democracy. Moderate and militant Muslims hold the secularist position while accommodationists believe that traditional concepts—consultation (*shura*), consensus (*ijma*), and reinterpretation (*ijtihad*)—can develop Islamically acceptable forms of popular participation and democratization.

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, both economic failures and the euphoria accompanying the fall of the Soviet Union and liberation of Eastern Europe led to an opening of political systems. Islamist candidates in Egypt, Jordan, and Tunisia emerged as the opposition, and in Algeria, after sweeping municipal elections and the first round of parliamentary elections, the Islamic Salvation Front seemed



Iranian demonstrators at Tehran University.

AP/Wide World Photos (Kamran, Jabreil)

poised to come to power. Islamists subsequently won in Kuwait and Yemen, and most recently in Turkey, where they accounted for the prime minister, members of parliament, and mayors of Istanbul and Ankara.

Governments both in the Muslim world and the West were stunned by the Islamic upsurge. The 1980s saw widespread fears of exported Iranian revolution. Many believed Islamists were not representative and would be rejected in popular elections. Ironically, the nonviolent participation and apparent strength of Islamists in the mainstream led to governmental efforts to limit political liberalization in the 1990s, with a charge that Islamists aimed to hijack democracy and destabilize society. The Algerian military seized power, imprisoning Islamists and denying them an electoral victory. Egypt and Tunisia backed away from commitments to open elections, the former crushing Islamist participation and the latter curtailing it, leaving little space to distinguish moderates—those who operated above ground and within the system—from revolutionary extremists.

Canceling elections or repressing populist movements has contributed to polarization and radicalization.

Curbing moderate Islamic groups can lead to political confrontation and a spread of regime violence and movement counterviolence, furthering the contention that Islamic movements are inherently violent, antidemocratic, and a threat to stability.

State repression and Islamist counterviolence in Algeria contrasts with policies of inclusion, cooption, or control in Jordan, Malaysia, Pakistan, and Turkey, where there has been nonviolent Islamist participation in electoral politics. The record of Islamic movements in tolerating diversity once in power raises serious questions as seen in Afghanistan, Iran, Pakistan, and Sudan. Islamic revivalism has been attended by attempts to silence political and religious opposition.

The issue of political participation and democratization in Muslim societies is not primarily one of religion but of political culture and education. Failure to strengthen civil society and support the culture of political participation encourages both religious and secular authoritarianism.

The Western Response

Many Muslim governments use the danger of radicalism as justification to suppress Islamic movements, much as anticommunism was used as an excuse for authoritarian rule and

leverage for foreign assistance during the Cold War. In the face of a purported global, monolithic, violent, and fundamentalist threat, attempts to crush movements are legitimized as is the continued substantial preferential aid to Israel and Egypt. No longer bastions against communism, authoritarian rulers are now touted as critical players in blocking the spread of radical fundamentalism and its threat to the twin pillars of U.S. foreign policy in the Middle East, access to Arab oil and the peace process.

Although some argue that Islamist movements are inherently militant, others distinguish between a moderate majority and an extremist minority. They question whether Islamic responses are driven by ideological considerations or failed government policy and repressive action. Those who regard political Islam as a monolithic threat are countered by others who warn that this view creates a new communism which supports authoritarian rulers and ignores deep seated political and socioeconomic problems. Furthermore, it favors the selective promotion of democratization and human rights and support for entrenched

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regimes. At issue is whether a short term strategy emphasizing stability and access to oil should be balanced with a long-term strategy that addresses self determination and strengthening of civil society.

The power of Islamic organizations, which often represent only a minority, is in large part due to their role as the viable means of opposing relatively closed political systems. Their electoral strength comes from being the most credible alternative. They solicit support from both those who vote for an Islamic agenda and those who simply oppose the government.



Indian Muslims
in New Delhi.

AP/Wide World Photos

Opening the political system challenges Islamic monopoly of opposition voters. They must compete for votes and, when in power, rule amid diverse interests as well as move beyond slogans to real solutions. Islamic parties, like secular parties, must broaden their ideology and programs in response to domestic realities and diverse constituencies. Democratization is an

experiment whose short-term risks must be balanced against long-term consequences. Issues

of political legitimacy, popular participation, national identity, and socioeconomic justice cannot continue to be prescribed from above without exacting a price in terms of political development and regional stability.

Looking Ahead

It is important to understand that containing Islamism has long meant containing Shi'ism. At the outset the Islamic threat was Shi'a. Iran once posed the greatest danger to the

United States and is singled out by Israel for its support of Hizballah and Hamas. Prime Minister Peres of Israel called Tehran the capital of terrorism when the group responsible for bombings in Tel Aviv had an office in Damascus. Similarly, Hizballah compelled the United States and Israel to withdraw from Lebanon and now poses as the only effective Arab force actively fighting against Israel.

Shi'ism has been viewed as the most revolutionary and militant force in Islam, contributing to the lack of American support for the Shi'as in Iraq after the Gulf War. As the Republican Guard moved to crush the Shi'a uprising in southern Iraq in 1991, the United States remained unaffected by Shi'a pleas for help. Policymakers in Washington appeared to be captured by what some media reports called historical Shi'a opposition to the United States. Western silence on the repression of Shi'a opposition in Bahrain—in government as well as the media—seems motivated by the same perspective.

Sunni Islamism has been considered a lesser evil. Absent the hegemonic ambitions of Iran, Islamism was

frequently preoccupied with internal matters. Its course appeared to be controlled by Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, and Malaysia. Even in the worst case, it was no match for the *mukhabarat* (security) states of the Arab world. This was evident first in Syria when Hafiz al-Asad leveled the city of Hama in 1982—killing over 100,000 people to quell a Muslim Brotherhood uprising—and then in Tunisia, Algeria, and Egypt. In fact, there has not been a problem with Sunni Islamism as much as a misperception among Muslims who charge that America practices a double standard in promoting democracy. While the United States fosters democratization in Africa, Latin America, Eastern Europe, and Russia, it has often been seen as ambivalent if not silent elsewhere, especially with regard to the *mukhabarat* states that suppress advocates of democracy in the name of checking radical Islamism.

For similar reasons, the United States turned a blind eye to significant investment in Sunni militancy by Saudi Arabia which was designed to create a wall around Iran from Central Asia to the Persian Gulf. As the Iranian revolution has started to show signs of exhaustion, and that country is taking measured steps to normalize its domestic and international affairs, the fruits of investing in Sunni militants over decades can pick up where Iran leaves off. Taliban, Harakatul Mujahedin in Kashmir, the Osama bin Laden and Ahmed Ramzi Yusuf network, and other militants represent a new phase of highly sectarian militancy. It is often rooted in a Sunni militancy that is anti-Shi'a and is gradually turning its attention toward the West. In Pakistan, for instance, Sunni forces that until recently have focused on domestic issues have directly threatened American interests should bin Laden be pursued in Afghanistan. This new brand of Sunni militancy, which the United States and its regional allies had a hand in creating, is rapidly replacing Shi'ism in shaping radical Islamist politics. Yet it is in the interest of America to look beyond the Islamic threat to broader regional implications. As Sunni militancy grows in Afghanistan, Central Asia, Chechnya, India, Pakistan, and the Persian Gulf, the United States and

its allies may face a new dynamic—a conflict between Shi'as and Sunnis (the opening phase having occurred with the massacre of Shi'as in Mazar Sharif and Bamiyam by the Taliban and the military standoff on the Iran-Afghanistan border).

The complexity of this issue is reflected in the influence of Sunni militancy on the regional and domestic affairs of Pakistan. In 1999 the Pakistani military used Sunni militants as a cover for an incursion into the Kargil area of Kashmir. This precipitated a standoff between nuclear powers and damaged a year of diplomatic initiatives by India and Pakistan. The role of Sunni militants in Indo-Pakistani relations will no doubt complicate negotiations. The same militant forces involved in Kargil were used by General Parvez Musharraf, who masterminded that operation, to precipitate a law and order crisis in Pakistan to undermine a democratically elected government. In the days leading to the military coup of October 1999, some 45 Shi'a religious and communal leaders were assassinated across Pakistan by Sunni sectarian gangs including fighters from Kashmir. Political change in Pakistan is important for the United States. The underlying issues cannot be adequately addressed by applying an Islam versus secularism model. It requires a nuanced approach that is cognizant of the many dimensions of Islam in regional and domestic politics.

Muslim politics at the dawn of the 21st century will continue to reveal the significance and impact of political Islam. At the same time, it will challenge the ability of senior policymakers and defense analysts to appreciate and revise strategies in response to changing realities. **JFQ**

NOTES

¹ For more on the Islamic resurgence, see Yvonne Y. Haddad, John O. Voll, and John L. Esposito, *The Contemporary Islamic Revival: A Critical Survey and Bibliography* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1991); John L. Esposito, *Islam and Politics*, 3rd ed. (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1991); John L. Esposito, editor, *Islam in Asia: Religion, Politics and Society* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987); James P. Piscatori (ed.), *Islam in the Political Process* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1983); and Nazih Ayubi, *Political Islam: Religion and Politics in the Arab World* (New York: Routledge, 1991).

² Samuel P. Huntington, "The Clash of Civilizations," *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 72, no. 3 (Summer 1993), pp. 222–49; John L. Esposito, *The Islamic Threat: Myth or Reality?* 2nd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995).

³ Huntington, "The Clash of Civilizations," pp. 22, 39; Huntington, "Fundamentalist Muslims," *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 64, no. 5 (Summer 1986), pp. 939–59; Bernard Lewis, "Islam and Liberal Democracy," *The Atlantic Monthly*, vol. 271, no. 2 (February 1993), pp. 87–98.

⁴ See John L. Esposito and John O. Voll, *Islam and Democracy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996); Martin Kramer, "Islam vs. Democracy," *Commentary*, vol. 94, no. 6 (January 1993), pp. 35–42; John O. Voll and John L. Esposito, "Islam's Democratic Essence," *Middle East Quarterly*, vol. 1, no. 3 (September 1994), pp. 3–11, with ripostes, pp. 12–19, and the authors' reply, *Middle East Quarterly*, vol. 1, no. 4 (December 1994), pp. 71–72; Robin Wright, "Islam, Democracy, and the West," *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 71, no. 3 (Summer 1992), pp. 131–45; John L. Esposito and James P. Piscatori, "Democratization and Islam," *The Middle East Journal*, vol. 45, no. 3 (Summer 1991), pp. 427–40.