Engaging Political Islam to Promote Democracy

by Shadi Hamid

Since the attacks of September 11, 2001, Americans have struggled to articulate an overarching, long-term strategy for fighting religious extremism and terror in the Middle East. Most experts on both the left and right agree that promoting democracy will help address the root causes of terrorism in the region, though they differ on to what degree. The reasoning is simple: If Arabs and Muslims lack legitimate, peaceful outlets with which to express their grievances, they are more likely to resort to violence. In one important 2003 study, Princeton University's Alan Krueger and Czech scholar Jitka Maleckova analyzed extensive data on terrorist attacks and concluded that "the only variable that was consistently associated with the number of terrorists was the Freedom House index of political rights and civil liberties. Countries with more freedom were less likely to be the birthplace of international terrorists."[1]

This is not to say that democracy is a magical solution for the Middle East's long list of problems and pathologies. It is, however, a first step, and a necessary one. Without substantive political reform, the region will continue to suffer under the same poisonous political environment that produced the Jihadist movement and gave us 9/11. In short, the status quo is untenable and threatens America's security.[2]

Anger and frustration are the prevailing sentiments in today's Middle East, and they must be channeled constructively. Arab autocracies, however, lack the willingness

Shadi Hamid is director of research at the Project on Middle East Democracy. He has written widely on political Islam and democratization in the Middle East, and has served as a program specialist on public diplomacy at the State Department as well as a legislative fellow at the Office of Senator Dianne Feinstein. Hamid is an associate of the Truman National Security Project. He can be reached at shadi.hamid@pomed.org.

and institutional capacity to absorb the growing participatory demands of their citizens. Related to this, Islamic extremism is also fueled by humiliation, or what Tom Friedman has called "the poverty of dignity." Arabs have lost their ability to chart their own course, to ask their own questions, to form their own governments. As I have noted elsewhere, Arabs can reclaim their dignity only through a democratic process which treats them as citizens with rights, rather than subjects whose sole obligation is to obey.[3]

But if democracy is part of the solution, many today see it as part of the problem. With the electoral rise of Islamist parties throughout the region, Americans are questioning the wisdom of a democracy promotion policy that elevates our adversaries to power. Rightly or wrongly, fear of political Islam remains the stumbling block for U.S. policymakers. The unexpected victory of Hamas in last year's Palestinian elections only served to highlight this reality. The embedded contradiction in American policy—between wanting democracy and fearing its outcomes—has prevented the Bush administration from adopting a more effective, coherent approach to supporting democracy abroad. Where only two years ago the ambitious "forward strategy for freedom" formed the centerpiece of the administration's Mid-east agenda, it has now been almost entirely abandoned.

This report calls for a new U.S. policy for the Middle East that unequivocally gives democratic reform priority over so-called "stability." To be credible, however, such a policy must recognize and engage mainstream Islamist parties, which often offer the most effective and organized opposition to the region's autocratic regimes. Whether we like it or not, such parties are often seen as more legitimate champions of popular aspirations than more secular and liberal groups. The United States, of course, should not engage Islamist groups that refuse to foreswear terrorism or whose commitment to democracy expires the moment they actually win power. But our government must become much more sophisticated in

its ability to distinguish mainstream and extremist varieties of political Islam, and in dealing with groups that have a genuine interest in democratic reform. To isolate extremists and cultivate democracy in the region, America must enter into dialogue with political Islam.

Understanding Political Islam

Much of the difficulty in formulating a coherent approach to Islamism stems from the inability of policymakers to make sense of what is an extremely complex and diverse movement. Political Islam is a unique phenomenon and one that appears to defy conventional political analysis. This mystification of Islamically-oriented parties is due, in part, to a natural suspicion of actors who defy the Western divide between religion and politics. More problematic, however, is the tendency to conflate Islamists who use violence with those who do not.

Al Qaeda, a clearly apocalyptic organization whose primary objective seems to be the slaughter of innocents, cannot in any serious sense be compared to political groupings like the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood (the region's oldest and most influential Islamist group), the Jordanian Islamic Action Front (IAF), Tunisia's Al-Nahda, and Morocco's Justice and Development Party (PJD), all of whom have explicitly renounced violence and committed themselves to peaceful participation in the democratic process. The divide, then, is between the extremists and terrorists who operate outside the political process, and the mainstream Islamists who operate within it. This is not an arbitrary divide fashioned by liberal academics or Islamic apologists; it is a divide that has gained currency on the ground, where it matters most, as the ideological gulf between radical and mainstream Islamism has grown precipitously in recent years.

For instance, the Muslim Brotherhood's unequivocal renunciation of violence prompted Ayman al-Zawahiri, Osama Bin Laden's deputy, to write a book entitled *The Muslim Brotherhood's Bitter Harvest in Sixty Years* in which he charged the group with betraying the integrity of the Islamic movement. Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi, one the world's most influential Jihadist thinkers, has declared that "democracy is obvious polytheism and thus just the kind of infidelity that Allah warns against."[4] In accepting democracy, the Brotherhood's crime is that it has, in effect if not in intent, reconciled itself with the underlying premise of secular politics, that sovereignty comes not from God but from an elected parliament. Extremists consider this to be a form of *kufr*, or disbelief.

Indeed, mainstream political Islam has shown little interest in the grand gestures of revolution. Adopting gradualism, Islamist groups are already an integral part of the political systems in their respective countries. The IAF controls a plurality of seats in the Jordanian parliament. In the 2005 Egyptian parliamentary elections, the Muslim Brotherhood, despite running fewer than 140 candidates, won 20 percent of the vote and ended up with 88 seats. And in Morocco, the PJD is expected to win this year's upcoming legislative elections.

Such participation cannot be dismissed as some cynical ploy. In their published electoral programs, these groups have affirmed their commitment to many of the fundamental aspects of democratic life, including alternation of power, popular sovereignty, equal rights for women and minorities, and an independent judiciary.[5]

There has been an evident shift in priorities. Writing on Egypt, Samer Shehata and Joshua Stacher note that in the current parliamentary session, the 88-member Brotherhood bloc "has not pursued an agenda focused on banning books and legislating the length of skirts. It has pursued an agenda of political reform" and has demonstrated "professionalism and action on issues of substance."[6]

In light of the growing schism between mainstream Islamists and their radical counterparts, the United States has an unprecedented opportunity to redefine the war on terror and articulate a bold, new policy—one that brings together the lessons of the past and the urgent needs of the present. As Kevin Croke points out in a recent PPI brief, "The first and most important rule is that the struggle for hearts and minds—or 'legitimacy'—is paramount. Insurgents must be separated from the base of support among the population."[7] In other words, to effectively fight the radicals, the United States must align itself with the aspirations of the broader population. Engaging with and, in some cases, supporting moderate Islamists is one way to do this, and the one most likely to produce results. So long as the groups in question meet certain preconditions—a renunciation of violence and a publicly stated commitment to the rules of the democratic game—then we should be open to dialogue with them (this would not include Hamas and Hezbollah as they have yet to disavow violence).

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Fighting Terror

In order to gather intelligence on extremist groups, the United States needs the cooperation of indigenous populations. With anti-American sentiment at an all-time high, such cooperation has been increasingly hard to come by. Our unwillingness to develop contacts with non-violent Islamists has further limited our ability to monitor the internal situation in Middle Eastern countries.

Beyond these more immediate intelligence concerns, mass-based Islamist groups represent the most effective counterweight to radical Islamists. As Robert Leiken and Steven Brooke note, "Critics speculate that the Brotherhood helps radicalize Muslims in both the Middle East and Europe. But in fact, it appears that the [Brotherhood] works to dissuade Muslims from violence, instead channeling them into politics and charitable activities."[8] In closed societies where forming political parties is nearly impossible and political participation generally dangerous, Islamist groups, with their vast organizational network of mosques, clinics, foundations, and social clubs, provide an outlet for disaffected youth—who would otherwise be susceptible to the lure of terrorists—to channel their frustrations peacefully. In this respect, political Islam, rather than being a source of conflict, may in fact represent an effective bulwark against political violence.

In Jordan, for instance, the IAF, which enjoys a working, if tense, relationship with the Hashemite monarchy, has regularly cooperated with security forces to ensure that protests and rallies remain peaceful. Where protests have led to the destruction of property and devolved into riots, IAF leaders have been quick to intervene and

calm the situation. Because of the street credibility, grassroots support, and religious legitimacy that groups like the IAF enjoy, they are able to persuade more militant members of society to respect the rule of law. On the other hand, Arab regimes—unelected, unaccountable, and sustained largely through the use of fear and force—have little sway with their own people.

Accordingly, as long as we ally ourselves with the small ruling cliques of the region, then we will have little influence with Arab masses, and even less insight into their anger and aspirations. In rejecting contacts with Islamist parties, we lose an opportunity to tap into the Middle East's largest and most mobilized constituencies. Where liberal-secular groups are weak and often have membership rolls in the mere thousands, Islamist parties can command millions of members and supporters. Engaging with Islamists would thus give the United States a much-needed window into Arab public opinion. That window, however, is now closed.

The Threat of Violence

In recent years, Islamist parties, despite efforts to restrict their participation, have done remarkably well in elections. They have come to power in Iraq, Turkey, and the Palestinian territories and, later this year, Morocco may become the newest addition to the list. In Egypt and Jordan, the Muslim Brotherhood and the IAF represent the largest opposition blocs in their respective parliaments and look poised to make more gains. Fearing this growing threat to their power, Arab governments have suspended political reform, closed democratic openings, and begun to systematically clamp down on the Islamist opposition.

Where they were on the defensive as recently as late 2005, the region's autocrats have regrouped and reasserted themselves. With the Bush administration's diminishing interest in Arab reform, they have sensed an opportunity.

More than anywhere else, Egypt is a flashpoint for the deterioration of relations between regime and opposition. In a dangerous escalation, President Hosni Mubarak has unleashed an unprecedented wave of repression against the Muslim Brotherhood. Since January, hundreds have been arrested, while government charges against 40 Brotherhood leaders have been transferred to military courts. The Egyptian attorney general, meanwhile, has frozen the assets of 29 of the group's leading financiers. As a more long-term measure, the regime is changing the constitution to ban any group with a "religious reference point" (*marja'iya*) from participating in political life. For now, the Brotherhood still has its perch in the parliament, but even here there is speculation that Mubarak will dissolve parliament and call for new elections.

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In the face of this crackdown, the United States has largely stayed silent, offering only the most tepid criticism. Bogged down in Iraq, the Bush administration has thought little about the long-term implications of its continued and increasingly unabashed support for dictators. Consumed by a Middle East beyond its control, the administration has given up even the pretense of caring about Arab democracy—a striking reversal from the aggressive stance it took in 2003-2005,

when it had put increasing pressure on close allies like Saudi Arabia and Egypt. Arab regimes have essentially been given the green light to do as they please domestically as long as they defer to the United States on its strategic priorities in Iraq, Iran, and the Palestinian territories. The Faustian bargains of the pre-9/11 era have returned and, just as before, the risks of realist realignment are many.

Islamist parties have made a strategic choice to participate in the democratic process. While some of this comes from a principled commitment, some of it is also no doubt a product of self-interested calculation—they stand to gain more from operating within the system than outside of it. Up until now, this has been the case:

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the existing political systems, while far from democratic, have afforded just enough openings to Islamists to justify their participation. But as regimes shut down opposition activity and strengthen their grip on power, the rational calculus is altered. The younger, more militant members of these groups may begin to question the utility of participation if the end result is simply more repression and a denial of their very existence as political actors. As grassroots activists lose faith in the democratic process, they are more likely to leave the fold of mainstream political Islam and explore violent alternatives.

Thus, reversing course on democracy promotion betrays not only our ideals but also our strategic interests. As repression increases, the opposition will be driven underground, making an explosion of political violence almost inevitable. In countries plagued by high levels of unemployment, low levels of growth, and swelling populations, such an outcome may be more likely than observers imagine. In Egypt, there have been reports of protestors chanting, "He, who bans demonstrations, will join Sadat soon,"[9] a not-so-implicit threat and one that should be taken seriously.

Toward a U.S.-Islamist Dialogue

Mainstream Islamist parties, while paragons of moderation relative to their more extreme counterparts, are far from ideal. They are socially and morally conservative in a way that most Americans would find uncomfortable. At the end of the day, they *are* Islamists, and this means that they have a distinct religious identity which guides their thinking. While they may be committed to democracy, Islamists are not—and have no intention of becoming— liberals. Their burnishing of simplistic slogans like "Islam is the solution" belies a willingness to use religion as a political cudgel. If they come to power, they likely would, among other things, encourage sex segregation in public schools, limit alcohol consumption, and restrict "blasphemous" speech.

That said, the leaders of Islamist groups, having gotten used to the compromise and cross-ideological cooperation inherent in political competition, tend to be more moderate in both rhetoric and practice than their activist base. Jillian Schwedler recounts a revealing conversation with former IAF Secretary-General Hamzeh Mansour:

"[Mansour] acknowledged to me in June 2003 that the party's support base is largely disinterested in, if not opposed to, the party's commitment to democratic processes. Its constituency is more moved, he argued, by its advocacy for conservative social programs, Islamic education reforms, and criticism of official foreign-policy positions."[10]

This leadership-base gap presents an opportunity for American policymakers. A priority of any U.S.-Islamist dialogue would be a discussion of how Islamist leaders can use their extensive social and educational programming to instill and promote democratic values throughout all levels of their organizational network. Although they are not yet, Islamist groups have the potential to become incubators of democratic learning. At the level of decision-making, some Islamist parties are already moving in this direction. As Nathan Brown notes in a recent Carnegie Endowment policy brief:

"The IAF may be the most democratic party in the region in terms of is internal operations ... [It] has built an impressive set of democratic structures internally. Party leaders are elected by the membership, and there is a regular turnover in top positions. At key points it has polled its members for guidance on important decisions."[11]

Western observers have long wondered why the Arab world appears to lack strong, pro-democracy movements that enjoy mass support. Instead of putting all our hopes in weak, nearly nonexistent liberal parties, it would be more realistic to tap into what is already the Arab world's largest political constituency—the millions of Islamist supporters and sympathizers. Through engagement and dialogue, the United States and other Western powers can encourage pro-democracy trends within Islamist parties and provide clear incentives for further moderation.

Islamists are aware of the constructive role that American involvement can play. As Abdel Menem Abul Futouh, a leading Muslim Brotherhood moderate, told me last year, referring to the Bush administration's past pressure on the Egyptian regime: "We benefited, everyone benefited, the Egyptian people benefited."[12] The Brotherhood understands that democratization in Egypt can be aided by a more credible, consistent American approach. In February, after the arrest of deputy general guide Khairat al-Shater, the group appealed to the United States on its official English-language website:

"It is time now for President Bush to decide either to go with freedom and democracy as a principle claimed by his administration and lectured to the Egyptians by Mrs. Rice, his Secretary of State, or to continue supporting despotic regimes by turning a blind eye to their oppressive actions. In either case the consequences are expected to go beyond Egypt leaving ample room for all extremists to reinforce their claims against democratic reformers who renounce violence like the Muslim Brotherhood."[13]

Any U.S.-Islamist dialogue would necessarily include an implicit (and sometimes explicit) give-and-take. In exchange for putting increased pressure on Arab regimes to respect the rights of Islamist

parties, the United States would expect certain things in return, such as guarantees regarding cooperation on anti-terrorist activities and, in the case of Egypt and Jordan, honoring peace agreements with Israel. The latter consideration is important, particularly in a climate where Israel's enemies, including Iran and Hezbollah, have grown increasingly influential. The more we engage with and, if circumstances require it, assist Islamist groups, the more leverage we will have with them if and when they come to power. Considering the likelihood of Islamists winning if there actually were free and fair elections, this would be a prudent strategic calculation. This leverage can then be used to push Islamist parties to respect vital U.S. interests, among them a stable Iraq, a secure Israel, and a non-nuclear Iran.

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Framing the Current Struggle

A new strategy of Islamist engagement would constitute a crucial component of the war on terror. By overemphasizing the military aspects of fighting terrorism, neo-conservatives misunderstood profoundly the nature of the threat at hand. The current struggle demands an approach which emphasizes the importance of engaging with indigenous populations, understanding their needs and circumstances, and exploring areas of potential cooperation through sustained dialogue. Instead of simply giving lip-service to "winning hearts and minds," the United States must go further, and realize that mass-based Islamist groups can provide an important window into a significant subsection of the Arab populations that we have thus far ignored. This requires a paradigm shift of looking at Islamist movements not as obstacles to democracy but rather, as movements that are—and will continue to be—a vital feature of the region's ongoing political evolution.

In framing this new strategic vision, there are parallels to the Cold War, although not the ones people normally think of. To compare radical Islamism to Communism makes little sense, as it bears no coherent political philosophy, nor does it present a conventional military threat to Western democracies. Its strength is not in its ideological appeal, but rather in its ruthless ability to use violence to terrorize target populations.

This is not to say that Islamic extremism is not a grave threat. It most certainly is, which is precisely why we must seek allies with which to fight and defeat it. It is here that mainstream political Islam, with its strong grassroots following and widespread legitimacy, can do what no amount of American military strength or cynical public diplomacy posturing can. Groups like the Muslim Brotherhood are essentially states-within-states with hundreds of affiliated and interlocking organizations and institutions. Millions of Arabs depend on these extensive networks for access to welfare, jobs, and health care. And, just as importantly, this parallel sociopolitical structure provides an outlet for those who would otherwise be driven to self-destruction and violence. It is no surprise, then, that organizations like Al Qaeda have directed so much of their vitriol toward the

Muslim Brotherhood. As long as the latter can attract young, Islamically-oriented members, it will mean that the pool of prospective terrorists remains small.

Along these lines, Kevin Croke argues that "it should be U.S. policy to seek out groups and clerics who can play the buffer role that Western European social democratic parties played in channeling the aspirations of the democratic left during the Cold War."[14] The comparison is apt. If we are to win the coming struggle, we will need allies—allies who, while supporting democracy and opposing terrorism, have influence and credibility with the large and growing portion of the Arab world which, now, after six years of the Bush administration, sees us not as friends but as enemies. The comparison is also appropriate in that, like European socialists before them, Islamists initially entered the political process skeptical of multi-party democracy. They would, however, evolve and adapt over time, eventually embracing the democratic process on its own terms.

Conclusion

Fear of political Islam—much of it based on mistaken assumptions—has paralyzed not only our democracy-promotion policy, but also the broader effort to combat Muslim extremism and terrorism. At such a critical phase, this strategic miscalculation is something the United States can no longer afford.

The United States gains nothing by ignoring mainstream Islamist groups. On the other hand, there is much to gain by speaking to them, by listening to their concerns, and sharing our own. Unless American policymakers are under the impression that autocracy can be made permanent, the reality is that Islamists will eventually rise to power through the ballot box. As such, articulating a policy of engagement before they come to power—and not afterward when it is too late to exert any influence—makes a good deal of sense.

It is true that Arab regimes will react angrily to any American attempt to reach out to Islamists. But beyond this, it is unlikely that there would be any serious consequences to U.S. strategic interests in the region. Let us take as an example Egypt, a purportedly useful ally. It is true that the Mubarak regime has helped the United States in Gaza (in policing the

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Rafah border and mediating between Palestinian factions), provided logistical support for American troops in Iraq, and supported the U.N. peacekeeping mission in Darfur. There is no reason, however, to think that it would stop doing these things if we were to establish a dialogue with the Muslim Brotherhood.

After all, there is the simple fact that the Egyptian regime, as unpopular as ever, is dependent on U.S. financial and political support for its very survival (Egypt is the second-largest recipient of American foreign aid in the world). They need us much more than we need them. It is also worth noting that dialogue with Islamists is not without precedent. For a brief period in the early 1990s, the Clinton administration had established official contacts with the Brotherhood,

the IAF, and Algeria's Islamic Salvation Front (FIS).[15]

In any case, a choice must be made. If we are not willing to take the preliminary step of talking to the largest opposition groups in the Middle East, then we should say so clearly and, for the sake of consistency, give up the crumbling façade of caring about Arab democracy. It is a contradiction in terms to support Arab democracy but to, simultaneously somehow, be against the inclusion of the region's largest democratic groups. Reconciling American interests and ideals in the Middle East—up until now placed in opposition to each other—requires a bold, new approach that takes into account the diverse nature of Islamist organizations. Once we do this, we may realize to our surprise that political Islam, too long seen as something to be resisted, may actually provide the key to a more productive U.S. relationship with the Middle East.

Endnotes

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[5] See for example *Na'am wa ila al-abad al-Islam hoa al-hal: Al-Barnamaj al-Intakhabi li-Murashi Hizb al-Jabha al-'Amal al-Islami*, 2003-2007 (*Yes and Forever, Islam is the Solution: The Election Program of the Islamic Action Front Candidates*), p. 5-7; and *Mubadira al-Ikhwan al-Muslimun houl Mabadi' al-Islah fi Misr* (The Initiative of the Muslim Brotherhood regarding Principles of Reform in Egypt), March 2004.

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[12] Interview by author with Abdel Menem Abul Futouh, July 2006.

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[15] For more on the Clinton administration's policy toward political Islam, see Fawaz Gerges, *America and Political Islam: Clash of Cultures or Clash of Interests?* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

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