

Islamic Blowback Part Two?

By Najum Mushtaq | August 7, 2006

A core component of America's foreign policy since September 11 has been educational reform in Muslim countries to check the influence of extremist ideologies and fundamentalism. International obligations under the UN Security Council's anti-extremism resolutions also require curricular reform. Pakistan, as the birthplace of the Taliban and home to many a militant Islamic movement, finds itself at the center of policy debates and projects on curbing extremism and promoting "moderate Islam" through education.

A growing pile of policy proposals in the United States, including a recent report from the U.S. Institute for Peace (USIP), urge continued funding and support for such religious and education reforms in Muslim countries. In Pakistan, as in most other targeted Muslim countries, this text-based approach translates into American funding, political support, and advocacy for curricula reform and government policies of "enlightened moderation." U.S. Agency for International Development (AID) and other American missions engage a corps of moderate clerics—with or without beards—who then set out to urge *ijtihad* (the re-interpretation of the Qur'an and Sunna) and rationalization of Islam. This thinking has percolated up to President Bush himself, who believes that the "extremists distort the idea of *jihad* into calls for terrorist murder" and quotes the Qur'an to counter the ideology of Islamic terrorism.

There is a preset belief among policymakers and think-tank intelligentsia that all the ills associated with the term "Islam"—extremism,

terrorism, fundamentalism—stem from a peculiar, literal, distorted, and static reading of the Qur'an, the sayings of the Prophet, and other sources of the Islamic faith and law. Religious texts and their interpretations are thus deemed to be at the root of the problem. So, the argument goes, give these texts new meanings; dig out the lost essence of the divine word; set off theological and juridical debates; scan the horizon for Islamic feminists and modernists; and rephrase what is popularly understood, gets published, or is taught in schools as "Islam."

This might all *sound* good. In practice, though, these U.S. policies have often come at the expense of democracy promotion. America's partners in this effort to reform Islam from within are medieval monarchies, military regimes, Islamic emirates, and controlled democracies. Whether supporting educational reform in Pakistan or engaging Islamist parties in Morocco, the United States may well be repeating the same errors of the Cold War era. The ideological attack on militant Islam resembled a previous generation's war on



communism, and the search for responsible partners in the Islamic world has led the United States, in the interests of expediency, to embrace some unsavory principles and characters.

Renewal or Reaction?

The U.S. emphasis on identifying and supporting moderate Islam—and thus fomenting an Islamic revival—finds its best expression in a recent USIP report by Abdeslam M. Maghraoui, “American Foreign Policy and Islamic Renewal.” From its opening sentence to its last suggestion, the report neatly divides the world into religious sub-worlds of states and societies, with the “Muslim world” problematic and significant enough to require urgent attention and intervention. The study is based on an analysis of the religious jargon of Islamic clergy and jurists. USIP’s arguments as well as policy recommendations are couched in Qur’anic terminology and substantiated by religious citations.

This text-based academic approach is inherently flawed, for it ignores the political and social contexts in which multi-ethnic, multilingual, and sect-ridden Muslim communities exist. The devil is in the context, not the text. As a result of this fundamental flaw, the report’s recommendation of supporting an Islamic revival—at the expense of democracy promotion—ends up causing more harm than good by aligning U.S. policy with a particular faith-based outlook rather than a secular vision with universal appeal.

Although the USIP study notes the diversity of the Muslim world, it limits the range of that diversity to ideological and theological categories such as Islamists, traditionalists, fundamentalists, modernists, radicals, reformers, renewers, moderates, terrorists, hardliners, etc. All of that diversity, according to the USIP report, is nonetheless rooted in and emanates from a single source and its various interpretations: the divine scriptures of Islam. Even the argument to support a scattered chain of movements for “Islamic renewal” across the Muslim world is substantiated by a saying of the Prophet that “explicitly calls upon Muslims to renew their faith at the beginning of each century.”

As such, the report takes theological jargon like *ijtihad* (re-interpretation of Islamic texts) as a useful, even essential tool of analysis and policy recommendations. Indeed the report reduces the entire political, economic, social, cultural, and historical evolution of so many disparate and different people to a “religious and ideological contest ... over the soul of Islam.” The outcome of this battle, says the report, “will be determined by the balance of power and influence between radical Islamists, bent on imposing a puritanical form of Islam through intimidation and violence, and moderate Muslims who aim to renew Islam from within.”

Arrayed against the radical Islamists, according to the report, is a “formidable politico-conceptual apparatus to revise anachronistic rulings and legitimize modern, accountable governance.” The most important of the Islamic

concepts that support this apparatus, the report says, is *ijtihad*. But *ijtihad* itself is not a guarantee of ushering in moderate Islam, as Iran's example illustrates. It was, in fact, Ayatollah Khomeini's most significant and lasting contribution to Shia jurisprudence. Khomeini's *ijtihad* turned upside down the centuries-old established Shia principle of separation of spiritual power from political power. The theocracy in Iran is a direct result of Khomeini's *ijtihad*.

This theological confusion leads the author of the report—and the Bush administration more generally—into supporting the fusion of religion and state. Multicultural, multi-ethnic, and multi-religious states—as most Muslim states are—establish religion as a state policy at their own peril. Assigning political value to Islam and favoring one religion or sect over others leads to conflicts in society. The constitutional decree that no laws shall be made respecting an establishment of religion ought to apply to America's policies toward Islam and Islamic movements as well. The multitude of sects and sub-sects in Sunni Islam, with none yielding to any central spiritual or political authority, means that binding decrees of the kind of *ijtihad* the USIP envisions remains improbable even at the academic level. The Sunni clergy could never satisfactorily resolve the question of eligibility (who is competent to do *ijtihad*?) and legitimacy (why should a certain jurist's *ijtihad* be universally accepted?).

The suggestion to abandon democracy promotion and focus on education and funding “moderate” movements implies that somehow

politics in Muslim states is extraneous to other social processes. The essentially political questions of freedom of speech, right to education, women's rights, the status of religious minorities—all, says the report, can be depoliticized, adjusted, and justified according to the Islamic discursive conventions. The Islamic discourse of renewal—through which Muslim thinkers, philosophers, clerics, and jurists pored over the holy scriptures to find concepts of moderation and adapt them to modernity—would make the ethnic, sectarian, linguistic, socio-economic, cultural, and political distinctions irrelevant. Thus, the report implies, feminist Islamic movements, if funded and supported by the United States, can flourish and outdo clerics and extremists even if the state denies women (and indeed, men) the right to choose their leaders.

Primordial Approach

The basic assumption behind this approach of reformation by re-interpreting and rationalizing religious concepts is that extremist movements and organizations derive power from religious texts only, and are insular and impervious to local, national, and international contexts. In “Origins and Growth Patterns of Islamic Organizations in Pakistan” Mohammad Waseem discusses the two approaches to studying Islamic movements that have emerged in the post-September 11 debate on extremism: the primordial approach and the instrumentalist or circumstantialist approach.

According to the primordial approach, the inner state of mind of Muslim terrorists

inspired by *jihadi* teachings lies at the heart of the problem. The instrumentalist approach, on the other hand, considers Islamic ideology as a socio-political construct sponsored by the elite in pursuit of political objectives, says Waseem. “While the primordial approach stresses the innate mobilizing and inspiring strength of the appeal of Islamic values and norms, the circumstantialist approach focuses on state policies and organizational goals,” Waseem explains. “The latter approach has been an obvious casualty in the heat of debate during the war against terror.” The USIP report as well as policy declarations by President Bush are prime examples of the primordial approach to the problem of Islamic extremism.

This conceptual flaw of assigning a single identity to all people who call themselves Muslims is fatal for policies seeking to curb extremism. To collapse identity into one dimension—religion—is to deny a variety of other affiliations such as ethnicity, class, and politics. Such a single focus also ignores one of the driving forces in the Middle East: nationalism. As Oliver Miles, a former British ambassador to Libya, argues, “One can hardly accept an analysis of Middle Eastern politics that does not mention nationalism.” Not taking into account the question of Arab nationalism—as a whole as well as its individual, state-based, dialect-based, and tribal varieties—and focusing instead on the single category of Islam renders the primordialist approach incapable of describing the Middle East reality and prescribing effective policies.

Such simplistic classifications even nourish terrorism. “An Islamist instigator of violence against infidels may want Muslims to forget that they have any identity other than being Islamic,” according to Amartya Sen, the Indian economist and Nobel laureate. “What is surprising is that those who would like to quell that violence promote, in effect, the same intellectual disorientation by seeing Muslims primarily as members of an Islamic world.”

This single-dimensional categorization of citizens, an integral part of primordialist thinking, is also evident in Pakistan’s recently announced curriculum reform.

Renewal in Pakistan

Influenced by think tanks like the USIP and pushed by the United States after September 11, Pakistan’s military government of General Pervez Musharraf has pledged to moderate Islam. The Musharraf administration is undertaking reforms at two levels: regulation and modernization of sect-based religious seminaries, or *madrasas*, and curricular reform in the government-run school system. On both counts Pakistan has received funds and policy input from a range of sources, particularly USAID. On both counts, however, Pakistan’s progress has been marred by political expediencies, a deference to the Islamic lobby of clerics, and the state’s self-proclaimed, constitutional agenda of Islamization.

The U.S. policy of supporting “Islamic renewal” has legitimated the further fusion of state

and religion, also at the expense of political democratization.

On July 24, Pakistan's Education Minister Javed Ashraf Qazi introduced a new curriculum of Islamic studies, or *Islamiyat*, a compulsory course throughout school and college education. Qazi, a retired general who once headed the military's Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI), emphasized the point that *jihad*, as an Islamic precept, would not be deleted from the new curriculum because "it is an integral part of Islamic teachings and Muslim beliefs."

In defense of his assertion, the minister made use of pedantic debates on what *jihad* means. "*Jihad* has many dimensions which also include self-negation (*jihad bin nafas*). We will teach students the full concept of *Jihad*," Qazi said, much in line with the USIP proposals of re-interpreting and modernizing the traditional concepts. The new curriculum for primary to higher secondary students, the minister said, would still include the eighth chapter of the Qur'an, *Al-Anfal* (Spoils of War; booty) and other chapters over which certain western countries had reservations because of their *jihad*-related content.

The rationale behind this course of studies is to present a moderate and peaceful version of Islamic principles by renewing and rephrasing the true meanings of the original divine message. Students will be required to memorize verses of the Qur'an, read the full book by the end of the middle grades, study Islamic concepts such as prophethood and faith in angels, and absorb the life of the Prophet Muhammad,

including the battles the Prophet led to "show his exemplary leadership and tolerance toward his enemies." This attempt by Pakistan's military regime to reform religious doctrines is in line with the policy prescriptions being made by think-tanks like the USIP.

This educational reform is also based on a homogenous idea of religion in Pakistan. The government paints a picture of religious homogeneity to justify adopting Islam as the official religion and to blur ethnic identities. However, it is generally believed that Pakistanis, of whom 96% are Muslim, break down into 15-20% Shia and 77% Sunni. This binary Sunni-Shia division is inadequate to describe the multitude of religious traditions, denominations, and cultures found in most Muslim states. In Pakistan, for instance, the Sunni are further divided into four broad, mutually exclusive categories: the Deobandis, the Barevliis, the Ahle Hadith, and modern revivalist socio-political movements like the Jamaat-e-Islami.

For U.S. proponents of "Islamic revival," this last party, the Jamaat-e-Islami, may be critically important, for it dominates most educational campuses in the country, including the Islamic University of Islamabad, a sister institution of Malaysia's Islamic University which the USIP has identified as a potential partner. The Islamic academia and intelligentsia in the country are bywords for Jamaat-e-Islami sympathizers. The party is organized along modern lines and has subsidiaries and affiliated unions in every walk of life: teachers, journalists, doctors, engineers, railway worker, airlines workers,

farmers, trade unions, students, etc. An International Crisis Group report describes the Jamaat-e-Islami as a party “which claims a supra-sectarian stance, [but] has evolved into a separate Sunni group around the cult of its founder Abul A’la Maududi (1903-1979). The rest of the Sunni family is critical of Maududi for his modernism and lack of adherence to any of the four Sunni schools.” Despite pretensions of modernity and moderation, however, the Jamaat is the chief proponent of Kashmiri *jihad* and the Afghan *jihad* before that. It also has sponsored armed militant wings of Mujahideen.

More tellingly, the Jamaat-e-Islami and the rest of the Islamic parties combined have never outscored the mainstream political parties in elections. From the first election in Pakistan in 1970 to the latest in 2002 the overwhelmingly Muslim people of Pakistan have opted for more secular, less Islamic, more inclusive political parties or ethnic movements. Extremists have gained prominence not because of democracy. Indeed, it is because of the lack of democracy that they punch above their democratic weight and achieve prominence.

Cold War Solutions

Supporting curriculum reform in Pakistan and specific Islamic factions would not be an unprecedented mistake for U.S. foreign policy professionals. The recent history of America’s engagement with Muslim states and societies suggests that rather than being overlooked—as the USIP report argues—modern Islamic movements have received much political,

financial, and in many cases, military support from American policymakers.

Throughout the Cold War, the United States augmented modern Islamic movements to counter the threat of socialism and communism. As people of faith, they were preferable as allies against godless communists. Since President Bush now likens Islamic terrorism to communism, the search for solutions to this problem is also taking the United States on the familiar path of funding selected, pliable segments of Islamic movements. During the Cold War, the United States poured money into *jihad* against communism. Today, the United States is pouring money into *ijtihad* against Islamic extremism. The language might be different, but the results are likely to be the same.

The classical and well-documented example is that of the Afghan Islamic movements who overthrew the Soviet forces after a *jihad* inspired and orchestrated by Pakistan’s Islamic-minded, U.S.-sponsored military dictator, Ziaul Haq. Special textbooks were published in local Afghan languages, designed by the Center for Afghanistan Studies at the University of Nebraska-Omaha under a USAID grant in the early 1980s. Written by American Afghanistan experts and anti-Soviet Afghan educators, they aimed at promoting *jihadi* values and militant training among Afghans. USAID paid the University of Nebraska \$51 million from 1984 to 1994 to develop and design these textbooks, which were mostly printed in Pakistan. Over 13 million were distributed at Afghan refugee camps and Pakistani *madrasas* (religious

seminaries where Muslim priests are educated and trained) where students learned basic math by counting dead Russians and Kalashnikov rifles. After the war ended, these textbooks were still used in Afghan schools. Even the Taliban found them suitable.

Similarly, Palestinian and Egyptian Islamic movements were once beholden to Washington as counterweights to the socialist, secular Arab nationalism of Yasser Arafat and Gemal Abdul Nasir. The fundamentalist Wahhabi Saudi kingdom, the single largest source of support and succor to movements of “Islamic renewal” (including many of the institutions identified by the USIP report as “America’s most obvious allies and potential partners”) remains a close American ally even today. If anything, the unruly movements of *jihad* and Sharia implementation are a direct product of America’s policy of containing and countering communism, which in the process squeezed out the liberal, democratic, and secular discourse from Muslim societies.

So, the United States is breaking no new ground as it adopts the policy of funding religious textbook reform, strengthening “moderate” Islamic movements, and other charitable, literary, and educational institutions identified by the USIP as capable of and eager to reclaim the Islamic heritage from the extremists.

Since these “renewal movements,” however, are not popular with the electorate, the natural conclusion for the USIP and others is to abandon democracy in practice (while maintaining its desirability in theory). As in the Cold War,

democracy has again become the favorite target of modern Islamic movements and their supporters. The argument now, like then, is that free elections would likely bring to power the anti-American movements—fundamentalists now, socialists then. The result of employing religion as an instrument of politics, a Cold War policy that America continues to pursue in its war on terrorism, will be as counterproductive as this history suggests.

Fears of extremists coming to power after free elections do not apply to Pakistan, at least. Victories of Islamic extremists elsewhere can be better explained with reference to the local and national context of those Muslims, whether Hamas in Palestine or the Islamic Front for Salvation in Algeria. Given the persistent and historical lack of democracy in most Muslim states, it might as well be safe to argue that the present prominence of extremists is due to too little or no democracy, rather than because of democracy.

The United States should not be pouring money into an attempt to reform Islam from within. It should not be supporting faith-based, mutually exclusive sectarian education of the various kinds of Islam. Instead, the United States should support secular education, particularly science education. It should promote tolerance not in and through the texts of Islam but through state laws and their implementation.

The fusion of the state and Islam has discouraged democracy and encouraged militancy. The United States should be working to decouple

the two. Otherwise, the ghosts of the Cold War will come back to haunt America. Supporting *jihad* in the 1980s eventually created the blowback of al-Qaida. Supporting Islamic reform now, however appealing it might seem on paper, will inevitably produce a new cycle of blowback as the United States continues to confront undemocratic, militarized Islamic governments in the future.

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