

foreign policy *in focus*



Interhemispheric Resource Center
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Islamists and U.S. Policy

U.S. policy sees Islam in terms of two ends of a spectrum. According to Assistant Secretary for Near Eastern affairs Robert H. Pelletreau, "One end is represented by the faith of Islam. At the other end of the spectrum are a cluster of extremist groups...that practice violence and terrorism." In practice, the faith side is ignored. Washington's definition of political Islam, or Islamism, tends to equate all of its manifestations with terrorism; central to the policy is the fear of the emergence of an Islamist regime in a major Arab country, similar to that in Iran.

The U.S. views terrorist activities and Islamist militancy in the Middle East as an emerging force. Islamism is

Key Points

- U.S. policy links Islamist movements and organizations with terrorism. Islamism is viewed as a force that undermines the Middle East peace process, threatens the flow of oil, and leads to the establishment of Iranian-style regimes in the region.
- To counter this perceived terrorist threat, the U.S. relies on the use of force by allied local regimes as the sole weapon against Islamists.
- The U.S. responds to political Islam as a threat to democracy and human rights in the region, particularly the rights of women and non-Muslims.
- U.S. policy, while exempting purely religious Islam, defines all political Islamic movements, as having the same anti-Western, antihumanitarian agenda.

viewed solely as a security threat to the peace process, to pro-U.S. regimes in the Middle East, to the flow of oil, and to the security of the state of Israel. The cornerstone of U.S. policy is to weaken the influence of Islamist forces in the region by offering a regional peace package, draining the Islamists' financial and political resources both at home and abroad, and erecting rigid military security measures.

Dual containment of Iran and Iraq is central to U.S. strategy in the Middle East. Iran (in regard to its links with militant organizations such as Hezbollah in Lebanon, Hamas in the occupied Palestinian territories, and the Armed Islamic Group/GIA in Algeria) is considered a threat to the U.S.-sponsored regional peace process and to the security of Israel. In a speech to the Jordanian parliament in 1994,

President Clinton described the contest in the Middle East as a struggle between "tyranny and freedom, terror and security, bigotry and tolerance, isolation and openness." By clear implication, he equated Islamic activism with the negative choices and Western-style secularism with the positive ones.

The U.S. also uniformly views Islamist activists uniformly as zealots who use Islam to suppress the rights of minorities and women, and as Pelletreau put it, "anti-western [elements who] aim not only to eradicate any Western influence in their societies [but] resist any form of cooperation with the West." The significance of Islamist organizations who use parliamentary or other legal forms of political mobilization is largely excluded from consideration.

The U.S. has placed counterterrorism at the top of its international and domestic agendas, and much of the political mobilization to win support for antiterrorism measures has been focused on the need to confront and overcome "Muslim fundamentalism" or "Islamic terror." Domestically, the U.S. government won support for sweeping new antiterrorism legislation through repeated references, both veiled and overt, to the threat posed by Islamic terrorists. In speeches before the United Nations General Assembly in both 1995 and 1996, Clinton urged greater international cooperation against terrorism.

The U.S. initiated a high-profile international conference on terrorism held in Sharm-el-Sheik, Egypt in response to the spate of suicide bombings in Israel in 1996, using the opportunity to call for the creation of a U.S.-led international campaign against any manifestation of terrorism. President Clinton promised that the CIA and other U.S. resources would be marshalled for the anti-terrorism campaign. Follow-up conferences continued the Sharm-el-Sheikh initiative in other places. The U.S. also signed new counterterrorism treaties with Israel.

In practice, U.S. makes no distinction between terrorism and Islamism as a legitimate political movement aimed at challenging Western, colonial, and sometimes modern influences in non-Western and traditional societies. Operationally, the U.S. views the Islamist movement as a military/security threat, and thus devises strategies to deal with it militarily: by gathering intelligence, by depleting its financial resources, by intimidating supportive popular environments, and by other covert counterterrorism operations.

U.S. policymakers continue to use “Islamic terror” as the replacement for “the communist menace” or the “evil empire,” as the ideological enemy against which all U.S. policy should be aimed. The U.S. is still thinking in state-based, cold war terms—disregarding transnational economic, political, and technological changes.

Turkey, Israel, and corrupt Arab dictators exaggerate the threat of terrorism and Islamism to win massive U.S. aid and to get the U.S. on their side in their battles against local opposition. Accepting these exaggerated assessments as the basis of its involvement in Middle Eastern affairs, the U.S. has even supported violent Islamist organizations, most notably in Afghanistan.

By limiting its reactions to Islamist violence to strictly military/security responses, the U.S. ignores the underlying causes of the phenomenon with its complex economic, political, and social roots. Yet tactics such as signing counterterrorism treaties with Israel and Egypt, and promoting security conferences between states threatened by Islamist opposition have failed to stop the attacks. Instead, the most obvious outcome has been the rise in cooperation between the U.S. and Middle Eastern police states at the level of security. This increases the efficiency of the brutal methods of these regimes in handling internal dissent but does not enhance their success. Thus instead of promoting democracy in the region, the U.S. is buttressing dictatorships and their human rights abuses, which in turn fuel further Islamist and other violent responses. This does not serve any immediate or long-term U.S. interest.

Current U.S. policy fails to distinguish either between Islam as a religion and Islamic political activism (violent or not), or between Islamic political activities (violent or not) aimed at rectifying internal situations within countries and those aimed at the U.S. and its interests. The U.S. identifies all political activities that mobilize using Islamic symbols as “terrorism” aimed at undermining Washington’s grand strategy in the Middle East. Although on record the U.S. fervently asserts that it only oppose terrorism and has no quarrel with the religion of Islam, it is clear that vast Muslim populations in the Middle East and elsewhere, seeing no nonmilitary U.S. response to any assertion of Islamic identity, do not believe this to be the case. Their perception is confirmed by the U.S. list of terrorism sponsors, which is dominated by Muslim states: Libya, Iran, Sudan, Syria, and Iraq. It appears to Muslims that the U.S.

equates Islam with terrorism.

Current U.S. policy fails to consider either a long-term view of Islamism or a long-range view of U.S. interests in the region. Islam has always gone through historical cycles of ebbs and flows, rise and decline. In the past, when Muslim identity, culture, cosmology, and mode of life was disrupted by outside forces, such as European/Ottoman colonialism or Western Christian missionary activity, movements arose claiming the mantle of defending Islam arose. U.S. policymakers have failed to understand that the current rise of political Islam is in part a response to a perceived threat against Islamic values by Western popular culture and by American military and political domination of the region, and that solely military responses are unlikely to suppress this Islamic perception.

Another problem with current U.S. policy is its uncritical support of unpopular regimes in the Middle East. Washington is widely perceived in the region as the key supporter of regimes that practice mass arrest, torture, and other extralegal procedures. Attacks on U.S. bases and on U.S. personnel training the Saudi national guard, for example, are driven by the view that the U.S. is propping up a regime without respect for the human rights of its citizens. Thus any attempt by Washington to promote a human rights agenda is undermined by claims of double standards. The human rights deficiencies in some versions of political Islam are already under attack by Muslim feminists and liberal Islamic scholars. The U.S. should work to bolster the influence of these scholars as a better means of raising human rights concerns within the Islamist movement.

U.S. backing of an inequitable peace between Israel and the Palestinians, and between the rich and poor of the Arab world, has also given rise to attacks on Israeli and U.S. targets. Muslims are puzzled by the fact that the U.S. has greater potential interests in the Arab world but somehow chooses Israeli rights over Arabs rights and seems indifferent to human rights abuses inflicted on Arabs and Muslims.

Key Problems

- The U.S. is mistakenly trying to replace communism with Islamism as a parallel ideology and sequential enemy. By relying on cold war tactics, Washington weakens its thrust against Islamist movements.
- The U.S. fails to distinguish either between political/parliamentary forms of Islamism and those espousing violence, or between those that target U.S. interests and those mobilizing to change local problems. No alternatives to violent suppression are considered in responding to Islamist movements.
- The U.S. ignores the fact that violent political Islamism is a reaction both to U.S. support for such countries as Israel, Egypt, and Turkey (which abuse the human rights of Muslims), and to the despised pop culture that represents the U.S. in the Middle East.

U.S. policymakers should evenhandedly condemn Israel, Turkey, and allied Arab governments, including U.S. Islamic regimes, whenever they abuse human rights. U.S. aid to all Middle Eastern states

show an understanding of and respect for the cultures of the Middle East and for Arab and Muslim contributions to human civilization. Washington should also encourage Middle Eastern access to serious (not only popular and commercial) U.S. culture. This could be done through the Fulbright Commission, U.S. Information Agency, and the cultural offices at U.S. embassies.

Key Recommendations

- The U.S. needs to display more sensitivity in distinguishing between Islam and terrorism, acknowledging that violence against civilians violates Islamic teaching.
- The U.S. should condemn human rights violations by friendly governments with the same rigor with which it condemns Islamists' violence. Aid to Middle Eastern states should be conditioned on progress in democratization and human rights.
- Washington should highlight aspects of American culture that coincide with Islamic values.
- The U.S. should open a direct dialogue with Muslim theologians and activists and enlist the support of American Muslims in reinforcing a more tolerant and democratic version of Islam.
- The U.S. must deal with terrorism not only militarily but also by attacking its root causes—pressuring Israel, Turkey, and the Arab regimes to comply with international law and human rights standards, and directly aiding low-income Arabs by funding literacy programs, hospitals, etc.

should be conditioned on progress in democratization and human rights. The U.S. also should restructure this aid to suit post-cold war needs; that is, allocate more aid to education and the building of civil society and less to armaments and militarization.

If Washington is interested in promoting a liberal and tolerant version of popular Islam in the Middle East, it must respond to the conditions that make people turn to sectarian religious identities as a last refuge. It is important to support and work with civil society organizations, including Islamist groups, to promote sociopolitical progress without imposing "modernism," which is viewed in the region as a set of non-Muslim values (e.g. secularism, consumerism, materialism, and disrespect for local mores and ethics).

The U.S. should divert funds currently spent on military aid and covert "counterterrorism" (aimed at Islamic violence) to

nongovernmental organizations and other institutions targeting the root causes of desperation in Muslim countries—poverty, government corruption, and the lack of political participation for the majority of citizens.

Washington should initiate direct dialogue with Muslim intellectuals. This would reveal a great deal to policymakers about actual Islamist beliefs and intentions and would be more reliable than third-party accounts. U.S. relations with the Middle East should include a cultural component designed to

The U.S. should recognize that the Iranian model of governance is not the only regional model for Islamic empowerment. Islamists in places such as Jordan, Turkey, Yemen, and Egypt have participated in parliaments and coalition governments and have shown a great deal of moderation and tolerance. Washington should support and encourage those Islamist currents that seek nonviolent political involvement.

The U.S. should be wary of local regimes that attempt to justify U.S. aid by claiming they are defending U.S. interests against fundamentalism. This short-sighted policy of supporting whomever claims to oppose Islamism is destructive to U.S. interests in the long run. Washington should be willing to work with all governments, gauging the depth of its relationship on shared values of democracy, tolerance, and economic and political justice.

The U.S. should maximize the involvement of U.S. Muslims as a bulwark against Islamic fundamentalism. U.S. Muslims have both the experience of living as a minority in a secular democracy and the knowledge of Islamic theology and history with which to argue for a more tolerant version of Islam. The pluralistic American experience could help inform a theology of moderation in the Islamic world.

To prevent the alienation of U.S. Muslims from mainstream U.S. society, Washington needs to be far more vigorous both in denouncing hate crimes against U.S. Muslims and Arab-Americans and in bringing the perpetrators of hate crimes to justice. In particular, during times of tension between the U.S. and countries in the Middle East, it is important that Washington take the lead in mobilizing against the scapegoating of U.S. Muslims.

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