



## U.S. Policy Toward Political Islam

By Stephen Zunes, University of San Francisco

The perceived growth of radical Islamic movements throughout the Middle East and beyond has not only caused major political upheaval in the countries directly affected but has placed political Islam at the forefront of concerns voiced by U.S. policymakers. One unfortunate aspect of this newfound attention has been the way it has strengthened ugly stereotypes of Muslims already prevalent in the West. This occurs despite the existence

of moderate Islamic segments and secular movements that are at least as influential as radicals in the political life of Islamic countries.

Even though the vast majority of the world's Muslims oppose terrorism, religious intolerance, and the oppression of women, these remain the most prevalent images of the Muslim faith throughout the Western world. Such popular misconceptions about Islam and Islamic movements—often exacerbated by the media, popular culture, and government officials—have made it particularly difficult to challenge U.S. policy.

To be able to respond effectively to Islamic militancy, the

U.S. must clearly understand the reasons why a small but dangerous minority of Muslims have embraced extremist ideologies and violent tactics. These movements are often rooted in legitimate grievances voiced by underrepresented and oppressed segments of the population, particularly the poor. And the U.S. is increasingly identified with the political, social, and economic forces that are responsible for their misery. Many Muslims in the Middle East and elsewhere are exposed not to the positive aspects of U.S. society—such as individual liberty, the rule of law, and economic prosperity—but to the worst traits of American culture, including materialism, militarism, and racism.

Although scientific and other advances from the Muslim world helped Europe emerge from the Dark Ages, the West has generally viewed Islamic peoples with hostility. From the time of the Crusades through the European colonial era to the ongoing bombing and sanctions against Iraq, Western Christians have killed far more Muslims than the reverse. Given this strong sense of history among Muslims, Washington's use and threat

of military force, its imposition of punitive sanctions, and its support of oppressive governments result in a popular reaction that often takes the form of religious extremism.

When a people have lost their identity—whether it be due to foreign occupation, war-induced relocation, the collapse of traditional economies, or other reasons—there is a great pull to embrace something that can provide the structure, worldview, and purpose through which to rebuild their lives. The mosque is one of the few constants in Muslim countries undergoing great social disruption. Islam is a faith that offers a clear sense of social justice, a feeling of empowerment, and an obligation by individuals to challenge those who cause the injustice. Although there has been a decidedly reactionary orientation to some Islamic movements, other currents within Islam have been clearly progressive.

Washington has used the threat of Islamic fundamentalism as a justification for keeping a high military, economic, and political profile in the Middle East. Yet it has often supported Muslim hard-liners when they were perceived to enhance U.S. interests, as they did in Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Saudi Arabia.

Often, extremist Islamic movements arise in direct response to U.S. policies. The 1953 overthrow by the CIA of the moderate constitutional government of Mohammed Mossadegh in Iran, followed by years of support for the brutal regime of the shah, led directly to the rise of the Islamic revolution in that country. U.S. support for the regime of Jafaar Nimeiry during most of his repressive 16-year rule of Sudan led to the destruction of much of that country's civil society, resulting in the 1989 coup by hard-line Islamist military officers who overthrew that country's brief democratic experiment. During the 1970s and 1980s, the destruction of moderate Muslim-led factions in Lebanon by U.S.-backed invasions and occupations from Syria and Israel—and later military intervention by the U.S. itself—led to a vacuum filled by more sectarian groups such as Hezbollah, even as most of the other militias that once carved up the rest of the country were disarmed by a revived central government and its Syrian backers.

The roots of Islamic radicalism stem from economic inequality, military occupation, and authoritarianism. Given that U.S. policy in the Middle East and elsewhere has often perpetuated such injustices, responsibility for the rise of radical Islamic movements can often be traced to the U.S. itself.

### Key Points

- U.S. policy toward the Islamic world is skewed by negative stereotypes of Islam that fail to recognize its diversity.
- Radical Islamic movements often arise out of the legitimate needs and grievances of oppressed sectors of the population who see the U.S. as partly responsible for their suffering.
- Washington has encouraged the rise of extremist Islamic politics both through shortsighted support for such movements or governments and through its support of repressive regimes, which often trigger extremist backlash responses.

# Problems with Current U.S. Policy

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Ironically, the U.S. has at times been a supporter of hard-line Islamic movements and governments. For example, Washington armed extremist Islamic groups in Afghanistan during the 1980s during the popular uprising against that country's communist regime backed by Soviet occupation forces. Some of the most notorious Islamic terrorists today—including many followers of Osama Bin Laden—originally received their training from the CIA during that period.

Despite horrific reports from Afghanistan about the Taliban government's totalitarian theocracy, which has far surpassed the brutality of the communist regime of the 1980s, the U.S. voiced little opposition to the regime until it refused to extradite Bin Laden for trial on terrorism charges.

Currently, the U.S. maintains close strategic cooperation—including massive arms transfers, training and logistics, and a permanent military presence—with Saudi Arabia, one of the most extreme states in the Muslim world considering its strict interpretation of Islamic codes, repression of women, and political orientation. The Saudis have used their vast oil wealth to encourage like-minded movements throughout the Islamic world. Some of the Islamic-identified governments and movements the U.S. has found most troubling—the Hamas of Palestine, the Taliban of Afghanistan, the FIS of Algeria, and the military government of Sudan—all had backing from the Saudis at some point in their development.

Perhaps the most serious problem with U.S. policy has been Washington's support for repressive allied governments that suppress even moderate Islamic opposition groups. This often leads to a backlash against any U.S. presence by Islamists reacting to American support of what they perceive as an illegitimate government. The U.S. has rationalized its support for several regimes engaging in patterns of gross and systematic human rights violations as a regrettable but necessary means of suppressing an Islamic opposition that Washington fears would be even worse if it came to power. In many respects, this policy closely parallels the decades of support during the cold war of repressive right-wing governments in the name of anticommunism. The result is similar: the lack of open political expression encourages suppressed sectors to ally with an underground—and often violent and authoritarian—opposition movement.

In some cases—such as in Tajikistan and other former Soviet republics—the U.S. has even allied with old-line Communist Party bosses as a means of countering the growth of Islamic movements. This occurs despite the fact that the Islamic movements in much of Central Asia are actually quite progressive and moderate (in part because of the strong Sufi influence) when compared with some of their Middle Eastern and North African counterparts.

Another factor fueling radical Islamic movements has been the perceived U.S. culpability in the deaths of Muslim civilians. From Washington's initial failure to respond to the Serbian slaughter of Bosnian Muslims to the sanctions against Iraq to the support of Israeli repression against Palestinian and Lebanese civilians,

U.S. foreign policy has laid itself open to this accusation.

Extremist Islamic political forces have also arisen in areas where there has been large-scale dislocation due to war. U.S. support for Israel's ongoing occupation and repression in the West Bank and Gaza Strip has contributed to the rise of Hamas and other radical Islamic movements, despite the fact that Palestinians historically had been more pluralistic and tolerant than many of their Arab neighbors. Islamic extremists were never much of a factor in Lebanese politics until after the U.S.-backed 1982 Israeli invasion and Israel's 22-year occupation of southern Lebanon.

Social dislocation can also result from uneven economic development, as has been encouraged by the U.S. insistence on globalization according to a neoliberal economic model. Largely unregulated Western economic penetration in Egypt, Tunisia, the Philippines, and elsewhere has exacerbated gross wealth inequalities and triggered disruptive internal migration, giving rise to these countries' Islamic extremists.

It would certainly be simplistic to blame the U.S. exclusively for the rise of violent and extremist Islamic political movements. Autocratic and misguided socialist policies in Algeria—which has had very little U.S. influence—also resulted in an Islamic reaction similar to movements triggered by autocratic and misguided capitalist policies elsewhere. And in other countries, the colonial legacies of the French and British along with certain domestic factors have spawned extremist Islamic groups. Yet U.S. policies have unquestionably fueled the development of this dangerous political trend.

Military solutions—apparently preferred by the U.S. and many of its allies—will not succeed in countering the rise of militant Islamic movements. Nevertheless, Washington has successfully encouraged the NATO alliance, in a desperate attempt to justify its existence at the end of the cold war, to place challenging Islamic movements among its top strategic priorities. NATO has already begun a dialogue with some North African regimes regarding mutual security arrangements against a perceived Islamic threat.

Over the past two decades, the U.S. has bombed Lebanon, Iran, Sudan, and Afghanistan in an effort to challenge Islamic movements and governments viewed as antithetical to U.S. interests. Such air strikes have not only been contrary to international law but have also resulted in fueling anti-American hatred, particularly when they have caused civilian casualties.

Trying to impose military solutions to what are essentially political, economic, and social problems is doomed to fail.

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## Key Problems

- The U.S. has supported hard-line Islamic movements and governments, such as the Saudi Arabia regime, which have encouraged extremist movements elsewhere.
  - U.S. support for repressive governments makes democratic and nonviolent options for the Islamic opposition extremely difficult.
  - Neoliberal economic development strategies—vigorously encouraged by the U.S.—have resulted in widespread economic dislocation, which has in turn encouraged the growth of radical Islamic movements.
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# Toward a New Foreign Policy

To effectively challenge the threat from radical Islamic movements, the U.S. must shift its focus from trying to crush such movements to pursuing policies that discourage their emergence. Similarly, the U.S. must recognize that not all Islamic movements are contrary to the development of political pluralism or good relations with the United States.

From Afghanistan to Algeria and beyond, radical Islamic movements have grown to prominence where there has been great social dislocation in the population, whether it be

from war or misguided economic policies. Policies designed to minimize such traumatic events will be far more successful than military threats in encouraging moderation in Islamic countries.

The U.S. must cease its support for autocratic regimes and encourage greater political pluralism. In countries like Jordan, Turkey, and Yemen, where Islamic parties have been allowed to compete in a relatively open political process, they have generally played a responsible—if somewhat conservative—role in the political system. The more radical elements observable in many Islamic movements are usually a reflection of the denial of their right to participate in political discourse. Many radical Islamic movements, such as those in

Egypt, Palestine, and Algeria, include diverse elements. Were they no longer under siege and instead allowed to function in an open democratic system they would likely divide into competing political parties ranging across the ideological spectrum.

It is noteworthy that the FIS in Algeria competed fairly and nonviolently during that country's brief political opening in the early 1990s, only to have its anticipated election victory stolen in a military coup. In the aftermath, the radical GAM emerged to launch its campaign of terror against foreigners and broad segments of Algerian society.

Indeed, no extremist Islamic movements have ever evolved in democratic societies. Supporting democracy would therefore be a major step in the direction of moderating political Islam. The U.S. must stop considering Islam to be the enemy and instead encourage Islamic movements by working for justice and economic equality.

Washington must support the Palestinians' right to statehood in the West Bank and Gaza, including a shared

Jerusalem that would serve as the capital of both Israel and Palestine. Both Congress and the executive branch should rescind resolutions and past statements that imply support for Israel's unilateral annexation of Arab East Jerusalem and surrounding Palestinian lands. Washington must instead recognize the city's importance to all three monotheistic faiths. Not only would such a policy shift bring the U.S. in line with international law, UN Security Council resolutions, and virtually the entire international community, but it would also remove a highly emotional and volatile issue from the arsenal of Islamic extremists, who exploit the widespread anger about U.S. support for the illegal Israeli occupation of a city that Muslims also see as holy.

The U.S. should stop pushing for radical economic liberalization in Islamic countries, since such policies increase inequality and result in rising materialism and conspicuous consumption for elites at the expense of basic needs of the poor majority. Instead, the U.S. must support sustainable economic development, so that the benefits of foreign investment and globalization can be more fairly distributed with minimal social disruption. Although some Islamic traditions have proven to be relatively tolerant of autocratic governance, the presence of corruption and a lack of concern about social injustice by a country's leadership are generally seen by Muslims as a violation of a social contract and must be resisted.

In many respects, political Islam has filled a vacuum that resulted from the failure of Arab nationalism, Marxism, and other ideologies to free Islamic countries both from unjust political, social, and economic systems and from Western imperialism. Just because radical Islamic movements have embraced tactics and ideologies reprehensible to most Westerners does not mean that the concerns giving rise to such movements are without merit.

Only by addressing the legitimate grievances of these movements will there be any hope of stopping their often illegitimate methods and questionable ideologies. Otherwise, the U.S. may find itself dealing with a series of conflicts that could eclipse the bloody surrogate cold war battles that ravaged the third world in previous decades.

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## Key Recommendations

- The U.S. must shift from supporting repressive governments to encouraging greater democracy and pluralism in the Islamic world.
- The U.S. must demand an end to Israel's illegal occupation of Arab East Jerusalem and other Palestinian territories and promote a peace agreement that recognizes the city's importance to all three monotheistic faiths.
- The U.S. should support sustainable economic development in the Islamic world, so that the benefits of foreign investment and globalization can be more fairly distributed with minimal social disruption.

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## Sources for More Information

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