The Growing Reach of RADICAL ISLAM

By WILLIAM H. LEWIS

The United States faces complex challenges among those states which constitute the greater Middle East. From Morocco to Pakistan, much of the region is in the midst of an Islamic revival that re-asserts religious values in contemporary politics. While Western scholars indicate that this does not necessarily portend a conflict between Islam and Christianity, many fear that it could magnify the rift between Western ideals of parliamentary democracy and the authoritarian tenets of traditional Islam. This involves sensitive issues such as the role of religion in politics and the impact of American policies in areas where religious causes often justify political violence.

Compounding this challenge is the fact that Islamic revivalism does not find active political expression everywhere. When it does, however, the exclusive goal is not to topple governments, though in some cases it is an effective means of opposing regimes with little tolerance for political expression. Egypt’s long-established Islamic Brotherhood, for example, seeks participation in the electoral process as a legally constituted political party. Its strategy has been to provide health care and education in depressed areas of the country. More radical organizations,
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such as the Armed Islamic Group in Algeria and Jihad guerrilla group in Egypt, employ intimidation, subversion, and terrorism to achieve their political ends. While most states in the region are avowedly Islamic, only a handful of governments adhere to Islamic (Sharia) law.

It would be a mistake for policy-makers to perceive Islamic militancy as a monolithic trend. Revivalism and militancy are diverse, and what is required is a grasp of the politico-religious level in the greater Middle East, the nature of the threats to existing institutions, and possible courses of action for the United States and those European nations which are most directly concerned.1

Differing Perceptions

The growing Islamic revival raises important questions. Is this resurgence a by-product of a search for spiritual meaning by alienated publics, a desire to eliminate Western influence from the region, or is it meant to replace ineffective, corrupt regimes with honest ones that provide access to power and solve economic and social problems? Will such movements tolerate secular influence or introduce grand ideologues and authoritarianism? Western observers are divided on these questions, with some seeing resurgent Islam as xenophobic and conflict as inevitable. That view is based on resurgent Islam in its extreme form which seeks to overthrow pro-Western regimes, endorses anti-Western strategies, and advocates religious over secular values. Others perceive Islamic groups as not necessarily or primarily anti-Western but rather as largely critical of ineffective local government. While the social praxis that many movements want to impose—such as restrictions on women's dress and harsh penalties for theft—are not congruent with Western values, they do not threaten our security. Saudi Arabia, whose government enforces the strictest interpretation of Islamic law in the Middle East, has been a partner of the United States for more than half a century. On the other hand, it is criticized by some Islamic groups for that relationship and its refusal to allow political participation.

Within the greater Middle East, two divergent strategies have evolved to cope with Islamic movements. One, adopted by secular states with single party or military regimes (such as Tunisia, Algeria, Syria, and Iraq), makes little distinction between mainstream and militant groups and deals harshly with both. In essence, such governments forbid religious organizations from participating in politics. The other strategy is to open involvement in the political life of the country to mainstream groups but not to extremist. Such participation compels movements to be pragmatic and separates moderates from militants. It requires a good political atmosphere, feasible prospects for economic progress, and shrewd management. Devising strategies to deal with Islamic political groups is a high priority. For purposes of analysis, several criteria must be examined: Goals—The ostensible objective of each group is to counter omnipresent, insidious neo-colonialist influence emanating from the West; the ultimate goal is to replace the secular authority of the state. Means—Against an implacable regime of disputed legitimacy, any means of opposition is viewed as legitimate. Operationally, violence is an appropriate way of upsetting the existing order, if need be, by seizing the political system up by its roots.

Oppositions—The failure of governments to deal with social and economic difficulties is fertile ground for action. In gross terms this includes issues of a population growth rate that has approached 3 percent per annum (Morocco, Algeria, and Egypt), 15–25 percent unemployment among youth (Algeria), and adverse import and debt ratios (Syria, Egypt, Lebanon, and Algeria).

Consequences—Radical strategies and violence disrupt internal power distribution and lead to military rule or a breakdown of authority. Extremists have no effective reform programs and almost inevitably become authoritarian. The result is eroding public support. The implications of the latter for the region or the West could be substantial.

Country Profiles

Islamic revivalism has been a growing phenomenon in the greater Middle East since well before the Iranian revolution of 1979 which toppled the Pahlevi dynasty. Most specialists tend to mark its resurgence with the Israeli victory in the 1967 war. Out of defeat and Moscow's failure to interfere, disillusionment with Arab nationalism, Marxism, and Western materialism ineluctably led to a return by many Moslems to their traditions and values, including Islam. It produced a gulf between the politically active and their governments, with scenarios that conceptually fall into three identifiable stages:

- movement from single-party control during a period of economic and social crisis toward pluralism, including participation of Islamic political parties
- military intervention to establish order and terminate the participation of the latter
- internal violence by opposition groups threatening the military-controlled regime which can lead to a failed state situation

Algeria. Turkey, and Egypt bear special attention in this regard.

Algeria. The deterioration of state and society is readily apparent in Algeria where the crisis stems from a variety of factors. A sharp drop in oil prices, Algeria's principal export, occurred in the mid-1980s. In consequence, social-economic progress slowed as the population grew rapidly. The younger generation was alienated by pervasive
corruption, incompetence, and self-centered actions of a single-party government. They protested in 1988, leading to more than 400 deaths at the hands of security forces. Single-party rule ended one year later and local and national elections were scheduled. To

Iran is the principal supporter of efforts to unseat governments tied to the West

the dismay of the ruling oligarchy, dominated by the military, the Islamic Salvation Front (FIS) emerged as a well-organized political movement. It virtually swept out the oligarchy and threatened the military. Finally, in 1992 the military declared a state of emergency, disbanding the membership of the Welfare Party. The fragmented nature of Turkey's political culture, reflected by the electorate, could make this Islamic party the largest within parliament should they win one-third of the vote in national elections anticipated for 1996.

Q. Few secular Arab regimes have been as stable as Egypt's in handling the Moslem Brotherhood. On coming to power in the wake of Anwar Sadat's assassination, Hosni Mubarak adopted a strategy of "gentle containment" of the Brotherhood while showing no mercy to Islamic Jihad and other bands seeking to overthrow the regime. Efforts by the government to redress these problems have had only limited success. Islamic groups continue to enjoy popular support for their socio-economic programs. Rather than neutralize all Islamic political and professional groups through police repression, a more productive strategy might involve some opening up of political processes, much as King Hussein has done in Jordan, thereby creating a constructive dialogue with mainstream Islamist politicians.

Current indications are that President Mubarak will not open the existing political system to any appreciable degree. In prospect is a continued lethargy by a regime populated by technocrats with limited capacity to reform the political system. The government prefers to focus on sedentary activities of Islamic activists, pointing to the material and diplomatic support from Iran and Sudan. Both have been charged by the United States as prime actors in the area of state terrorism. Sudan has provided training facilities for Egyptian and Algerian insurgents while Iran has gained notoriety for military and financial aid to Hezullah and Hamas, two organizations dedicated to failure of the current Arab-Israeli peace negotiations.

Neither Iran nor Sudan are paragons of a successful Islamic revolution. Both are pariah states which have failed to establish a positive record in resolving domestic political and economic difficulties. Under Hassan al-Turabi, Sudan has not managed to bring a wasteful, decades-old war with southerners to a successful conclusion and is trying to impose Islam by force. The Sudanese economy is virtually in receivership, barely able to stagger from debt crisis to chapter XI status. The opposition, however, is too weak to pose a credible threat. Iran is deeply embroiled in trouble with many of the country's senior mullahs who are distancing themselves from self-inflicted social and economic difficulties and from those in positions of power who are enriching themselves much like the Shah's clique. Iran is also in the throes of double-digit inflation, failing productivity, and mounting debt. In 1995 it experienced a number of industrial work stoppages and anti-government demonstrations. Sixteen years after its revolution, Iran faces a perilous time with the middle class, intellectuals, and bazaar merchants, who are skeptical of the government's policies and leadership. However, there is no sign of any organized opposition that could threaten to topple the regime.

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The Radical Network

Following the overthrow of the Iranian regime in 1978-79, most area specialists anticipated a wave of religiously based political upheavals. The only successful effort occurred ten years later in Sudan. In most instances, radicals have only played spoiler roles. In recent years, however, support networks have emerged in the form of thousands of migrants from the Maghreb world who fought alongside the Afghan mujahedeen and who have returned to Algeria, Sudan, and Lebanon. Recruits find access to training in Sudan and Lebanon, while Iran and some Saudi nationals offer financial aid. But this network does not amount to what can be called an Islamic “Comintern.”

Iran is the principal supporter of efforts to reduce Western influence in the region, as well as to use state-sponsored terrorism to exert pressure on oil-rich Gulf states. Iran’s goal is to erode the influence of the United States in the Gulf region. It is also apparent that America opposes those who substitute Islamic values for Western values. The United States has declared Iran a state sponsor of terrorism.

Several questions emerge from the Islamic threat. It is not clear how these movements will come to power. Are we dealing with a “Third Wave” of Islamic fundamentalism? Is it realistic for the West to develop strategies and contingency plans that can forestall the threat of terrorism? Will new political movements be able to provide a viable political alternative to governments in decline? Will these movements achieve a greater political voice? How will the United States respond to the challenge of Islamic terrorism?

In countries throughout the Middle East and North Africa, we see groups seeking to reform their societies in keeping with Islamic ideals. There is considerable diversity in how these ideals are interpreted. Western and Arab governments are not free from blame. The issue of Islamic extremism is not limited to the Middle East. It is also evident in the Western world.

The task for the West is to develop strategies and contingency plans that deal not with the threat of Islamic fundamentalism but rather with the problem of regime collapse and failed states.

NOTES


2 Innumerable studies on the Islamic revival are available, although few evaluate the goals, organization, et al. of radical groups across the “greater Middle East.”