

# Civil Democratic Islam

Partners, Resources,  
and Strategies

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There is no question that contemporary Islam is in a volatile state, engaged in an internal and external struggle over its values, its identity, and its place in the world. Rival versions are contending for spiritual and political dominance. This conflict has serious costs and economic, social, political, and security implications for the rest of the world. Consequently, the West is making an increased effort to come to terms with, to understand, and to influence the outcome of this struggle.

Clearly, the United States, the modern industrialized world, and indeed the international community as a whole would prefer an Islamic world that is compatible with the rest of the system: democratic, economically viable, politically stable, socially progressive, and follows the rules and norms of international conduct. They also want to prevent a “clash of civilizations” in all of its possible variants—from increased domestic unrest caused by conflicts between Muslim minorities and “native” populations in the West to increased militancy across the Muslim world and its consequences, instability and terrorism.

It therefore seems judicious to encourage the elements within the Islamic mix that are most compatible with global peace and the international community and that are friendly to democracy and modernity. However, correctly identifying these elements and finding the most suitable way to cooperate with them is not always easy.

Islam’s current crisis has two main components: a failure to thrive and a loss of connection to the global mainstream. The Islamic world has been marked by a long period of backwardness and comparative powerlessness; many different solutions, such as nationalism, pan-Arabism, Arab socialism, and Islamic revolution, have been attempted without success, and this has led to frustration and anger. At the same time, the Islamic world has fallen out of step with contemporary global culture, an uncomfortable situation for both sides.

Muslims disagree on what to do about this, and they disagree on what their society ultimately should look like. We can distinguish four essential positions:

- **Fundamentalists** reject democratic values and contemporary Western culture. They want an authoritarian, puritanical state that will implement their extreme view of Islamic law and morality. They are willing to use innovation and modern technology to achieve that goal.
- **Traditionalists** want a conservative society. They are suspicious of modernity, innovation, and change.
- **Modernists** want the Islamic world to become part of global modernity. They want to modernize and reform Islam to bring it into line with the age.
- **Secularists** want the Islamic world to accept a division of church and state in the manner of Western industrial democracies, with religion relegated to the private sphere.

These groups hold distinctly different positions on essential issues that have become contentious in the Islamic world today, including political and individual freedom, education, the status of women, criminal justice, the legitimacy of reform and change, and attitudes toward the West.

The **fundamentalists** are hostile to the West and to the United States in particular and are intent, to varying degrees, on damaging and destroying democratic modernity. Supporting them is not an option, except for transitory tactical considerations. The **traditionalists** generally hold more moderate views, but there are significant differences between different groups of traditionalists. Some are close to the fundamentalists. None wholeheartedly embraces modern democracy and the culture and values of modernity and, at best, can only make an uneasy peace with them.

The **modernists** and **secularists** are closest to the West in terms of values and policies. However, they are generally in a weaker position than the other groups, lacking powerful backing, financial resources, an effective infrastructure, and a public platform. The **secularists**, besides sometimes being unacceptable as allies on the basis of their broader ideological affiliation, also have trouble addressing the traditional sector of an Islamic audience.

Traditional orthodox Islam contains democratic elements that can be used to counter the repressive, authoritarian Islam of the fundamentalists, but it is not suited to be the primary vehicle of democratic Islam. That role falls to the Islamic modernists, whose effectiveness, however, has been limited by a number of constraints, which this report will explore.

To encourage positive change in the Islamic world toward greater democracy, modernity, and compatibility with the contemporary international world order, the United States and the West need to consider very carefully which elements, trends, and forces within Islam they intend to strengthen; what the goals and

values of their various potential allies and protégés really are; and what the broader consequences of advancing their respective agendas are likely to be. A mixed approach composed of the following elements is likely to be the most effective:

- **Support the modernists first:**
  - Publish and distribute their works at subsidized cost.
  - Encourage them to write for mass audiences and for youth.
  - Introduce their views into the curriculum of Islamic education.
  - Give them a public platform.
  - Make their opinions and judgments on fundamental questions of religious interpretation available to a mass audience in competition with those of the fundamentalists and traditionalists, who have Web sites, publishing houses, schools, institutes, and many other vehicles for disseminating their views.
  - Position secularism and modernism as a “counterculture” option for disaffected Islamic youth.
  - Facilitate and encourage an awareness of their pre- and non-Islamic history and culture, in the media and the curricula of relevant countries.
  - Assist in the development of independent civic organizations, to promote civic culture and provide a space for ordinary citizens to educate themselves about the political process and to articulate their views.
- **Support the traditionalists against the fundamentalists:**
  - Publicize traditionalist criticism of fundamentalist violence and extremism; encourage disagreements between traditionalists and fundamentalists.
  - Discourage alliances between traditionalists and fundamentalists.
  - Encourage cooperation between modernists and the traditionalists who are closer to the modernist end of the spectrum.
  - Where appropriate, educate the traditionalists to equip them better for debates against fundamentalists. Fundamentalists are often rhetorically superior, while traditionalists practice a politically inarticulate “folk Islam.” In such places as Central Asia, they may need to be educated and trained in orthodox Islam to be able to stand their ground.
  - Increase the presence and profile of modernists in traditionalist institutions.

- Discriminate between different sectors of traditionalism. Encourage those with a greater affinity to modernism, such as the Hanafi law school, versus others. Encourage them to issue religious opinions and popularize these to weaken the authority of backward Wahhabi-inspired religious rulings. This relates to funding: Wahhabi money goes to the support of the conservative Hanbali school. It also relates to knowledge: More-backward parts of the Muslim world are not aware of advances in the application and interpretation of Islamic law.
- Encourage the popularity and acceptance of Sufism.
- **Confront and oppose the fundamentalists:**
  - Challenge their interpretation of Islam and expose inaccuracies.
  - Reveal their linkages to illegal groups and activities.
  - Publicize the consequences of their violent acts.
  - Demonstrate their inability to rule, to achieve positive development of their countries and communities.
  - Address these messages especially to young people, to pious traditionalist populations, to Muslim minorities in the West, and to women.
  - Avoid showing respect or admiration for the violent feats of fundamentalist extremists and terrorists. Cast them as disturbed and cowardly, not as evil heroes.
  - Encourage journalists to investigate issues of corruption, hypocrisy, and immorality in fundamentalist and terrorist circles.
  - Encourage divisions among fundamentalists.
- **Selectively support secularists:**
  - Encourage recognition of fundamentalism as a shared enemy, discourage secularist alliance with anti-U.S. forces on such grounds as nationalism and leftist ideology.
  - Support the idea that religion and the state can be separate in Islam too and that this does not endanger the faith but, in fact, may strengthen it.

Whichever approach or mix of approaches is chosen, we recommend that it be done with careful deliberation, in knowledge of the symbolic weight of certain issues; the meaning likely to be assigned to the alignment of U.S. policymakers with particular positions on these issues; the consequences of these alignments for other Islamic actors, including the risk of endangering or discrediting the very groups and people we are seeking to help; and the opportunity costs and possible unintended consequences of affiliations and postures that may seem appropriate in the short term.