



U.S. Strategy in the Muslim World After 9/11

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The tectonic events of the past three years—including September 11 and the war on terrorism in Afghanistan, Iraq, and beyond—have dramatically affected the Muslim world and attitudes toward the United States. However, some of the dynamics that are influencing the environment in Muslim countries are also the product of trends that have been at work for many decades. The continuation of these trends will make management of the security environment in the Islamic world more difficult in years to come and could increase the demands on U.S. political and military resources. Consequently, it is important to develop a shaping strategy toward the Muslim world that will help to ameliorate the conditions that produce religious and political extremism and anti-U.S. attitudes.

The U.S. Air Force asked RAND Project AIR FORCE (PAF) to study the trends that are most likely to affect U.S. interests and security in the Muslim world. Researchers developed an analytic framework to identify the major ideological orientations within Islam, to examine critical cleavages between Muslim groups, and to trace the long-term and immediate causes of Islamic radicalism. This framework will help U.S. policymakers understand the political and military strategies available to respond to changing conditions in this critical part of the world.

Attitudes Toward Democracy and Nonviolence Are Key Markers

The Muslim world encompasses a band of countries stretching from Western Africa to the Southern Philippines as well as diaspora communities throughout the globe. Researchers developed a typology to differentiate Muslim religious and political currents according to their overarching ideologies, political and legal orientations, preferred forms of government, attitudes toward human rights, social agendas, links to terrorism, and propensity for violence. Based on these markers, Mus-

Abstract

In light of 9/11 and the war on terrorism, it is important for U.S. leaders to develop a shaping strategy toward the Muslim world. This study describes a framework to identify major ideological orientations within Islam, examines critical cleavages between Muslim groups, and traces the long-term and immediate causes of Islamic radicalism. It also outlines political and military strategies available to help ameliorate conditions that produce extremism.

lim groups fall within a spectrum from those that uphold democratic values and reject violence to those that oppose democracy and embrace violence. This typology can help U.S. policymakers identify potential partners in the Muslim world who may cooperate in promoting democracy and stability and countering the influence of extremist and violent groups.

Cleavages Within the Muslim World Pose Challenges and Opportunities

In addition to the ideological differences noted above, certain divisions cut across the Muslim world and have implications for U.S. interests and strategy:

- **Sunnis and Shi'ites.** The majority of Muslims are Sunni. Shi'ites, who number about 15 percent of the world's Muslims, are dominant in Iran and are politically excluded majorities in Bahrain and the eastern province of Saudi Arabia, as they were in Iraq prior to the removal of Saddam. The United States may have an opportunity to align its policy with Shi'ite groups, who aspire to have more participation in government and greater freedoms of political and religious expression. If this alignment can be brought about, it could erect a barrier against

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radical Islamic movements and may create a foundation for a stable U.S. position in the Middle East.

- **Arab and non-Arab Muslims.** Arabs constitute about 20 percent of the world's Muslims. The Arab world exhibits a higher incidence of economic, social, and political disorders than other regions of the so-called developing world. By contrast, non-Arab sectors of the Muslim world are more politically inclusive, boast the majority of democratic or partially democratic governments, and are more secular in outlook. Although the Middle East has traditionally been regarded as the "core" of the Muslim world, it appears that the center of gravity may be shifting to non-Arab sectors. The most innovative and sophisticated thinking about Islam is taking place in areas outside the Arab world such as Southeast Asia and in the diaspora communities of the West. The United States should pay attention to these progressive developments because they can counter the more extreme interpretations of Islam held in some parts of the Arab world.
- **Ethnic communities, tribes, and clans.** The failure to understand tribal politics was one of the underlying causes of the catastrophic U.S. involvement in Somalia. Ten years later, the U.S. government still knows very little about Muslim tribal dynamics in areas where U.S. forces are or may be operating. As the United States pursues an activist policy in disturbed areas of the world, it will be critical to understand and learn to manage subnational and tribal issues.

Conditions, Processes, and Catalytic Events Fuel Islamic Radicalism

Researchers identify both ongoing and immediate causes for the spread of Islamic radicalism over the past several decades. More or less permanent *conditions* in the Muslim world, such as the failure of political and economic models in many Arab countries, have fueled anger at the West, as disenfranchised Muslims have blamed U.S. policies for their own countries' failures. This "structural" anti-Americanism is not amenable to amelioration through political or diplomatic means. Moreover, the decentralization of religious authority in Sunni Islam has opened the door for extremists with scant religious credentials to manipulate the religion for their own ends.

Several *processes* have developed over time to aggravate Islamic radicalism. The Islamic resurgence in the Middle East over the past 30 years and the exportation of Arab ideology and religious practices to the non-Arab Muslim world have increased support for fundamentalism. Radical Islamic ideology has spread to tribal societies that lack strong central political authority (e.g., Pashtun areas of Pakistan and Afghanistan), producing a mix that some observers believe "leads to bin Laden." Moreover, radical Islamists have succeeded in forming networks that support fundamentalist and even terrorist activities through funding and recruitment. Many of these networks provide social services to Muslim communities, making them difficult to detect and disrupt. Finally, the emergence of satellite regional media such as Al-Jazeera has provided a powerful means to reinforce anti-American stereotypes and narratives of Arab victimization that play into radicals' agendas.

Beyond these long-term factors, certain *catalytic events* have shifted the political environment in the Muslim world toward radicalism. Major events include the Iranian revolution, the Afghan war with the Soviets, the Gulf War of 1991, and the global war on terrorism after September 11. The Iraq war and the removal of Saddam Hussein have surely had an effect on the Muslim world, but the long-term implications remain to be seen. A stable, pluralistic, and democratic Iraq would challenge anti-Western views in the Middle East and would undermine extremist arguments. On the other hand, if Iraq reverts to authoritarianism or fragments into ethnic enclaves, then U.S. credibility would diminish and radical groups would have greater opportunities to take hold.

The United States and Its Friends and Allies Can Help to Ameliorate Negative Trends in the Muslim World

How can the United States respond to the challenges and opportunities that current conditions in the Muslim world pose to U.S. interests? Researchers suggest a variety of social, political, and military options:

- **Promote the creation of moderate networks to counter radical messages.** Liberal and moderate Muslims have not formed the effective networks that radicals have. Creation of an international moderate Muslim network is critical to transmitting moderate messages throughout the Muslim world and to provide protection for moderate groups. The United States may need to assist moderates who lack the resources to create such networks themselves.
- **Disrupt radical networks.** It is important to understand the characteristics of radical networks and their support communities, how they communicate and recruit, and any weaknesses they have. A strategy of "nodal disruption" would target these critical areas, breaking up radical groups and empowering Muslim moderates to take control.
- **Foster madrassa and mosque reform.** There is an urgent need for the United States and the international community to support reform efforts to ensure that madrassas provide a broad, modern education and marketable skills. One course of action is to help establish or strengthen higher education accreditation boards that monitor and review curricula in state and private schools. Although outsiders may be reluctant to involve themselves in ostensibly religious affairs, ways may be found to support the efforts of governments and moderate Muslim organizations to ensure that mosques do not serve as platforms for radical ideologies.
- **Expand economic opportunities.** The ability of some radical organizations to address entrenched social and economic problems has created a growing base of support for their politics. Provision of alternative social services in many places might help to indirectly undercut the appeal of the extremists. In particular, the United States and its allies should focus on initiatives that improve the economic prospects of the young. Programs that promote economic expansion and self-sufficiency can help reduce the opportunities for extremists to exploit economic hardship and

the perception that the United States has only military interests in the Muslim world.

- **Support “civil Islam.”** Support of “civil Islam”—Muslim civil society groups that advocate moderation and modernity—is an essential component of an effective U.S. policy toward the Muslim World. Assistance in efforts to develop education and cultural activities by secular or moderate Muslim organizations should be a priority. The United States and its allies may also have to assist in the development of democratic and civil society institutions.
- **Deny resources to extremists.** A complementary element of the strategy of supporting secular or moderate Muslim organizations is to deny resources to extremists. This effort needs to be undertaken at both ends of the radical funding cycle, in countries where funds either originate (e.g., Saudi Arabia) or are channeled (e.g., Pakistan) to support extremist groups.
- **Balance the requirements of the war on terrorism with the need to promote stability in moderate Muslim countries.** The United States should ensure that the actions it takes do not play into the hands of radicals, who depict such moves as a war against Islam. The United States should demonstrate that its efforts are not meant to strengthen authoritarian or oppressive regimes, but to promote democratic change.
- **Seek to engage Islamists in normal politics.** A difficult issue is whether developing Muslim democracies should allow Islamist parties that may not have fully credible democratic credentials to participate in politics. While there is always a danger that an Islamist party, once in power, may move against democratic freedoms, the inclusion of such groups in open democratic institutions may encourage moderation in the long run. An unequivocal commitment to nonviolence and democratic processes should be a prerequisite for inclusion.
- **Engage Muslim diasporas.** Diaspora communities are a gateway to networks and may be helpful in advancing U.S. values and interests. The United States, for instance, can work with Muslim nongovernment organizations in responding to humanitarian crises.
- **Rebuild close military-to-military relations with key countries.** Military establishments will continue to be influential political actors across the Muslim world. Therefore, military-to-military relations will be of particular importance to any U.S. shaping strategy in the Muslim world. Rebuilding a core of U.S.-trained officers in key Muslim countries is a critical need. Programs such as International Military Education and Training (IMET) not only ensure that future military leaders are exposed to American military values and practices but can also translate into increased U.S. influence and access.
- **Build appropriate military capabilities.** The United States faces a need to reduce the more obvious aspects of its military presence in sensitive areas of the Muslim world, while working to increase different types of presence (e.g., intelligence, psychological operations, and civil affairs such as medical assistance). The U.S. military should improve its cultural intelligence through more Arab, Persian, and African regional and language specialists. ■

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