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Beyond the Headlines: *Changing Perceptions of Islamic Movements*

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Despite the failures of political Islam in power in the Taliban's Afghanistan, Sudan, Pakistan and Iran and the attacks of 9/11, Islamic movements in the 21st century continue to be a significant force in mainstream Muslim politics, from Morocco to Indonesia.

The Sept. 11, 2001 attacks against New York's World Trade Center and the Pentagon in Washington, suicide bombers' slaughter of non-combatants in Israel/Palestine, bombings in Bali and the arrests of suspected terrorist cells in Europe and America reinforce fears of radical Islamic movements. Muslim rulers in Tunisia, Algeria, Egypt, Turkey, Indonesia, and the Central Asian Republics as well as the governments of Israel, India, China and the Philippines have exploited the danger of Islamic radicalism and global terrorism to deflect from the failures of their governments and their indiscriminate suppression of opposition movements, mainstream as well as extremists, and/or to attract American and European aid.

A War against global terrorism or against Islam?

Post 9/11, President George Walker Bush and many policymakers emphasized that America was waging a war against global terrorism not against Islam and underscored on a number of occasions the need to distinguish between the religion of Islam and the actions of terrorists. However, in the Muslim world, a contrasting perception and viewpoint has emerged. America's prosecution internationally and domestically of its broad-based war against terrorism, and the rhetoric and policies of the administration that have accompanied it, has made commonplace the belief in the Muslim world that the war is indeed a war against Islam and Muslims.

Several factors have reinforced this perception, contributing significantly to a widespread anger and anti-Americanism that cuts across Muslim societies (as well as Europe and other countries). America is increasingly seen as an "imperial" America whose overwhelming military and political power is used unilaterally, disproportionately and indiscriminately in a war not just against global terrorism and religious extremists but also against Islam and the Muslim world. The broadening of the American-led military campaign beyond Afghanistan, its "axis of evil" policy, and planned war against Saddam/Hussein/Iraq as well as the failure of the Bush administration to practice a parity of rhetoric and policies in Palestine-Israel, India-Kashmir, Russia-Chechnya, Iraq-North Korea feeds anti-

American sentiment among the mainstream as well as hatred of America among militant extremists. Across the political spectrum there are those who believe that a clash of civilizations is on the horizon, provoked by America as well as by al-Qaeda and other extremists. Osama Bin Laden grows in popularity among many of the younger generation as a culture hero. In countries and societies whose leaders and elites are often seen as authoritarian and corrupt, Bin Laden is seen as a “Robin Hood,” willing to give up a life of privilege to live simply and wage a jihad against injustice, from the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan to Saudi Arabia and U.S. hegemony in the Muslim world.

The Other Face of Islamic Movements:

While September 11 and post 9/11 reinforces the threat of the dark side of political Islam, its extremists with their theologies of hate and destruction, the continued importance and diversity of Islamic movements and the forces of democratization are witnessed in electoral politics. Elections in late 2001 in Pakistan, Turkey, Bahrain and Morocco reinforce the continued saliency of Islam in Muslim politics in the 21st century. Islamic candidates and Muslim parties increased their influence: in Morocco threefold and in Pakistan tenfold. In Turkey, the AK (Justice and Development Party) came to power, and in Bahrain Islamic candidates won 19 of 40 parliamentary seats.

The example of Islamic candidates and movements turning to ballots not bullets is not new. If much of the 1980s had been dominated by fears of Iran’s export of revolutionary Islam, in the late 1980s and early 1990s, Islamically oriented candidates or leaders were elected as mayors and parliamentarians in countries as diverse as Morocco, Egypt, Turkey, Lebanon, Kuwait, Bahrain, Pakistan, Malaysia and Indonesia. They served in cabinet level positions and as speakers of national assemblies, prime ministers (Turkey and Pakistan), deputy prime minister (Malaysia) and Indonesia’s first democratically elected president. The general response of many governments to this political power of Islam was to retreat from open elections, identifying their Islamic opposition as extremist and/or simply falling back on their “time honored tradition” of canceling or manipulating elections as in Tunisia, Algeria, Egypt, and Jordan.

The most remarkable demonstration of Islam’s prominence in mainstream politics was the victory of Turkey’s Justice and Development Party (commonly referred to as the AK Party), which won a parliamentary majority in a Muslim country that has long been seen as a symbol of secular Islam. The party’s victory followed similarly important performances by Islamic candidates in Morocco, Bahrain, and Pakistan and the persistent strength of religious currents in countries like Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, Kuwait, Malaysia and Indonesia, all key American allies.

Turkey, a key ally in NATO and in the confrontation with Iraq, elected AK, a party with Islamist roots (originating from the former Welfare and Virtue parties); AK is mainstream, not extremist. Islamist success in Turkey indicates the way mainstream Islamic parties approach politics. More often than not, voters vote on what their interests and concerns are. One should not necessarily conclude that AK exploited the situation just because they respond effectively to economic problems. AK simply responded as any political party would. Mainstream Islamist and Muslim parties have learned to adapt to the ways that modern politics are played. The AK-led Turkish government has indicated its willingness to work with Europe, the U.S. and the international community while retaining Turkey's independence. The example of Turkey's AK Party shows that experience and the realities of politics can lead to change. Though its roots were Islamist, the founders of AK chose to create a more broad based party much as Christian democrats had done in Europe.

Bahrain's monarchy attempted a top-down reformation, as part of a promised move towards democratization. In October 2002 elections in Bahrain, the first in 30 years, Islamic candidates, representing Sunni and Shiite Islamic parties, won 19 of 40 seats in Parliament. Bahrain's parliament has a total of 80 seats; half are elected and the other half is filled by members of a consultative council, appointed by the king, Sheikh Hamad bin Isa al-Khalifa. Moreover, Bahrain is the only Gulf country where women are allowed to vote in national elections and to run for office; however, no women were elected.

Democracy fared less well in Morocco's parliamentary elections in September. The Justice and Development Party (PJD) was a major gainer, jumping from 14 to 42 seats, tripling its vote and winning 10% of the seats in Parliament. The largest Islamist opposition group, the banned Al-Adl Wal Ihsan (Justice and Charity), boycotted the elections. Many observers believed that had it been authorized, the Party would have scored a sweeping victory among voters, observers say. However, despite the performance of the PJD, reformist King Mohamed VI refused to name an Islamist to any of 31 Cabinet posts. This failure reinforced critics who charge that though his rhetoric and style seem different, he is ultimately little different from his father. Morocco's last legislative elections were held in 1997, under King Hassan II, amid allegations of vote-rigging and rampant fraud.

Many observers were shocked in Pakistan when an Islamic bloc (The Joint Action Forum, Muttahida Majlis-e-Amal, (MMA) which included the more moderate Jamaat-I-Islami and hardline religious parties), placed third with 30 seats in the Oct. 10 elections. Running on a platform critical of President Pervez Musharraf, the MMA denounced his control of elections and failure to democratize and his backing of the American military campaign in Afghanistan and the continued American military presence in the region. In addition to Parliament, some of Pakistan's

Islamic parties now govern the North West Frontier Province and extended a helping hand to Afghan and Pakistani extremists. Some observers charge that the Pakistani army willingly played into their hands, rigging last October's general elections. Thus the surprising success of Islamic parties at the polls enabled Gen. Musharraf to claim greater need for U.S. support his government now "threatened by fundamentalists".

Islamic candidates and parties share some common issues but also reflect significant differences. All were critics of the status quo, their political and economic establishments. Most cast themselves as reformers and emphasized justice and development. Importantly, most of their supporters were not just the downtrodden but also the aspiring middle class. The leadership of most Islamic movements continues to be lay rather than clergy, graduates of modern educational systems rather than madrasa; trained in science, engineering, education rather than religious disciplines. Their attitudes towards the West vary considerably from Pakistan's Joint Action Forum's denunciation of American influence and presence to the Turkish AK's care to demonstrate that it was not anti-American or anti-European and its agreement to permit the placement and deployment (in a war against Iraq) of American-led military forces in Turkey.

The continued performance and relative success of Islamic movements in many countries reflect the failures of their governments and the extent to which mainstream Islamic movements are prepared to participate in the electoral process. At the same time, their performance is a reminder that Islam remains a potent force in mainstream Muslim politics. Policymakers have been challenged to refocus on the implications of the Bush administration's decision in 2002 to support the promotion of democratization. The Bush administration has spoken in far more ambitious terms than its predecessors about encouraging democracy in the Muslim world. Secretary of State Colin L. Powell in an interview went out of his way not to rule out U.S. support for Islamic parties. At the time of Turkey's election and the AK Party victory, Powell noted:

"The fact that the party has an Islamic base to it in and of itself does not mean that it will be anti-American in any way. In fact, the initial indication we get is that the new party, which forms the new government, understands the importance of a good relationship with the United States."

A major test for U.S. policy on democracy will be Iran, where a majority of the population, especially students and women, has twice voted overwhelmingly for reform by backing President Mohammad Khatami. Opposition voices and student protests have sent a clear message to hardline clerics. However, President Bush's axis-of-evil policy set back democratic reformers in Iran and continued pressure from neo-conservatives to "get tough" with Iran and the statement by U.S. Undersecretary of State John Bolton that after America attacks

Iraq, it will deal with threats from Iran (as well as Syria and North Korea) plays into the hands of Ayatollah Khamenei and the hardliners.¹

A more open attitude toward mainstream opposition (Islamic and non-Islamic) parties and other policies that support broader political participation and democratization could improve America's image abroad, and strengthen democratic institutions and civil society in countries where decades of authoritarian rule have all but extinguished them.

The Christian Right & Its Theology of Hate

Western perceptions of Islam and of Islamic movements remain a sensitive and explosive issue in Muslim countries. Christian Right denunciations of Islam as an evil religion, Muhammad as a terrorist and pedophile, and statements by American televangelists like Pat Robertson, Jerry Falwell and Franklin Graham (who gave the prayer at President Bush's inauguration) have reinforced the beliefs that despite the President's public statements, George Bush is swayed by a Christian Right. The association of the President and other members of the Bush administration and of Congress with the Christian Right strengthens the conviction that American foreign policy is anti-Islamic.

The unholy alliance between the Christian Right and many Republican neo-conservatives, who espouse a theological/ideological right wing U.S. agenda: support for hardline Israeli policies and an "axis of evil" policy, a military attack against Iraq and regime change in other Muslim countries seemingly confirms advocates of a widespread "conspiracy" against Islam.

The war against global terrorism has also been taken as a green light for authoritarian regimes in the Muslim world, from North Africa to Southeast Asia, to further limit the rule of law and civil society and to repress opposition (both secular and Islamic). To excuse their authoritarianism they use the label Wahhabi" or "terrorist" for all Islamic movements, mainstream (whom they characterize as wolves in sheep's clothing) as well as extremist. As a result, many Western governments have overtly or quietly pursued a "double standard" in their promotion of democratization and human rights, fearing that Islamic candidates' participation in elections would necessarily lead to the hijacking of elections. These fears often obscure the fact that many, if not most, rulers (secular as well as religious) in the Muslim world themselves have non-democratic, authoritarian track records.

The continued tendency post 9/11 of many to see Islam, Islamic movements and events in the Muslim world through explosive headline events hinders the ability to distinguish between the religion of Islam and the actions of extremists who hijack Islamic discourse and belief to justify their acts of terrorism.

¹ U.S. OFFICIAL SAYS SYRIA, IRAN WILL BE DEALT WITH AFTER IRAQ WAR
Ha'aretz, 2/18/03

It reinforces the tendency to equate all Islamic movements (political and social, mainstream and extremists, non-violent and violent) with terrorism.

Yet, a deadly radical minority continues to exist. Osama Bin Laden, al-Qaeda and other extremist groups are a threat to Muslim societies and to the West. Appealing to real as well as imagined injustices, they prey on the oppressed, alienated, and marginalized sectors of society. Thus, the short-term military response to bring the terrorists to justice must also be balanced by long-term policy that focuses on the core political, economic and educational issues that contribute to conditions that breed radicalism and extremism.

The American-led war in Iraq has increased anti-Americanism exponentially in the Muslim world as well as Europe and elsewhere. In the Arab and Muslim world, it is seen as part of a new American empire's war against Islam and the Muslim world, an attempt to redraw the map of the Middle East. The rage and alienation of a minority towards America coupled with the authoritarianism, repression and corruption of regimes and failed economies of many Muslim regimes will produce new Bin Ladens and new al-Qaeda like movements.

The occupation of Iraq and establishment of a client state with a strong military presence coupled with stated goals to deal with Syria and Iran and reform allies like Egypt and Saudi Arabia plays directly into the hands of militant extremists. However much many Arabs and Muslims want reform and democratization, they do not want Western imposed reform and control in order to implement a New American Century.

In the 21st century, given the political and socio-economic realities of the Muslim world, religion will continue to be an important presence and force. Islamic movements, mainstream and extremist, will be pivotal players. Relations between the Muslim world and the West will require a cooperative effort to eradicate or contain global terrorism while at the same time supporting mainstream Muslim efforts to democratize their societies. The process will entail constructive engagement, dialogue, self-criticism and change on both sides. The extremists aside, the bulk of criticism of Western, and particularly American foreign policy, from mainstream Islamic movements and Muslim populations in general comes from a majority that judges the West by whether its policies and actions reflect principles and values that are admired: self-determination, political participation, freedom and human rights, the sanctity of life, a desire for economic prosperity, social justice, peace and security. The ability to accept and work with mainstream Islamic movements will prove a challenge both to Muslim and Western governments.