

Engaging Islamist Groups

How to Talk to the Elephant in the Room

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THE END OF THE BUSH PRESIDENCY brings a close to an era of U.S.-Islamic relations inextricably tied to Sept. 11, and the radical changes it brought to international relations. The stormiest in the history of U.S.-Islamic relations, this period was characterized by disputes over multiple points of contention between the two sides. After trying a range of policy options, the relationship failed to stabilize, regressing to its initial problems during the last year of the Bush presidency.

Several factors contributed to the Bush administration’s failure to establish clear policies on political Islam. Often shaped by standard policies guiding the administration’s interaction with Middle Eastern regimes, U.S. policy-making was also informed by internal factors precipitating a number of mistakes in the administration’s relations with Islamists. U.S. foreign policy in the Middle East, North Africa and the rest of the Islamic world has fallen hostage to the American stance on Islamist movements, both moderate and extremist. Handling Islamist movements in Middle Eastern countries is no longer a local issue; overarching policies are designed perhaps more in Washington than anywhere else. Healthy U.S.-Islamic relations have failed to crystallize as dynamics continually shifted courses during Bush’s two terms, leaving future relations without a model to build upon. This legacy will undoubtedly influence the policy choices of the next American administration.

This article attempts to analyze the probable repercussions of current policies for the next administration, whether Democrat or Republican, by first assessing the

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assumptions that shaped the Bush administration's policy towards Islamist movements in the Arab world, then examining the administration's overall performance in this regard, and analyzing current conditions to determine policy options for the incoming administration.

Determinants of the U.S.-Islamist Relationship: Bush's Legacy

The attacks of Sept. 11 precipitated a series of transformations in American interaction with Islamist movements and with the Arab world at large. Most importantly, the bold U.S. intervention in the Middle East signified an important shift from the long-held isolationist tendencies of American foreign policy. This shift was especially apparent in the American promotion of democracy.¹ This renewed assertiveness permeated U.S. rhetoric, particularly notable in President Bush's State of the Union addresses and his talk of an "Axis of Evil" comprising Iraq, Iran and North Korea. Revealing an interventionist, unilateral foreign policy, such rhetoric marks a radical change in American priorities. Still, protecting Israeli security, fighting terrorism, defending friendly regimes, promoting stability, guaranteeing the continuation of Arab oil exports and curbing the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction remain pillars of American policy in the Middle East. Yet the means through which they are achieved is changing.

Five determinants comprise the major elements of American policy towards Islamist movements under the Bush administration: an epistemological factor related to the evolving American understanding of Islamism; concerns over terrorism and democratization; ideological differences between Western and Islamic values, and the strategic U.S. friendship with Israel; geostrategic interests; and finally, local variables. These determinants are discussed below.

1) The Epistemological Factor: Understanding Islamists

The Clinton administration demonstrated an awareness of diversity within Islamist currents as well as a distinction between Islam and Islamists. This distinction became more pronounced during Bush's terms, as policy-makers and analysts paid closer

¹ Carothers, Thomas. *The Clinton Record on Democracy Promotion* (Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2000).

attention to the internal workings of Islamist movements. Three distinct opinions emerged, the first being the characterization of all Islamists as radicals, rejecting any differentiation between groups.² The second school merges Western ideology with political interests, as demonstrated by the Rand Corporation's well-known study of the post- Sept. 11, which distinguished between "radical fundamentalists" and "scriptural fundamentalists."³ The third camp, represented by writers such as John Esposito⁴ and Amr Hamzawy,⁵ clearly distinguishes between moderates and extremists, based on the renunciation of violence and democratic political participation. All three opinions remain active in American policy-making, resulting in substantial inconsistencies, in spite of positive adjustments in American scholars' recognition of variations within Islamic movements.

2) *The Politics of Security: To Spread Democracy or Fight Terror?*

Despite their flawed understanding of the region, the Bush administration argued that effectively tackling the root causes of terrorist ideology required the promotion of democracy in the Middle East. This was in contrast to the formula governing decades of American policy-making in the Middle East, which set the cost of regional stability above supporting nondemocratic regimes. The attacks on Sept. 11 exposed the flaws in this strategy and contributed to the growing belief that terrorism could not be defeated without approaching the fight from the angle of democratization. This sparked a debate among American neoconservative foreign policy-making circles as concerns over the rise of Islamist groups frayed the already tenuous link between democratization and fighting terrorism.

The Bush assumption about democratization was challenged by many scholars, including F. Gregory Gause. Gause argued that there was no empirical evidence that democracy promotion helps contain terrorism, or that a democratic Middle East would produce Islamist governments willing to cooperate with American interests.⁶ Thomas Carothers, director of the Democracy and Rule of Law Project at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, argued on the eve of the Iraq invasion that merging a campaign against terrorism with a push for democratization would be a complicated

2 Kramer, Martin S. *Ivory Towers on Sand: The Failure of Middle Eastern Studies in America* (Washington, D.C.: The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 1997), and "The Mismeasure of Political Islam" *The Islamism Debate*, Martin Kramer, ed., Dayan Center Papers 120 (Tel Aviv: The Moshe Dayan Center for Middle Eastern and African Studies, 1997): 161-73.

3 Rabasa, Angela M., et al. *The Muslim World After 9/11* (Santa Monica: Rand Corporation, 2004).

4 Esposito, J. L. *Unholy War: Terror in the Name of Islam* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).

5 Hamzawy, Amr. "The Key to Arab Reform: Moderate Islamists." (Washington, D.C.: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, August 2005).

6 Gause, F. Gregory. "Can Democracy Stop Terrorism?" *Foreign Affairs* (January-February 2003).

undertaking. Carothers, however, acknowledged that nurturing effective democracy requires Arab political incorporation of moderate Islamist forces.⁷

The emphasis on the importance of moderate Islamists' role in democratic transformation was an idea widely accepted in influential American neoconservative foreign policy-making circles. Reul Marc Gerecht uses the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood as a model to illustrate this idea. In a study for the American Enterprise Institute, Gerecht argued that the sway of moderate Islamic political forces cannot be ignored. He warned American policy-makers against repetition of mistakes in Algeria in 1991, when the United States tacitly supported the Algerian army's decision to cancel the election results and crack down on the Islamist parties.

Gerecht's study revealed the inaccuracy of America's policy toward the Middle East, which relied upon unpopular political groups, like Arab liberals. A means of political coexistence with the moderate Islamist movements became imperative. In Iraq, following America's misplaced bet on Ahmed Chalabi and his supporters, it became apparent that the real powerbrokers were Iraqi Islamists, both Shiite and Sunni. Their exclusion from the post-Saddam Hussein Iraqi political equation was impractical; this revelation triggered a sharp division between the pro-Israel lobby and others within neoconservative American politics over how to deal with Islamist factions.

Though this dispute was widely understood in neoconservative political circles and think tanks, it was only publicly revealed in a debate between Gerecht and Washington Institute for Near East Policy executive director Robert Satloff in April 2005.⁸ Part of the neoconservative faction, represented by Gerecht, argued that support for moderates was necessary in order to isolate extremism, and that liberal progressive forces in the region lacked the strength and popularity to act as reliable political partners. He also said U.S. endorsement of moderate Islamist movements would erode the momentum and ideological appeal of radical factions, like Al-Qaeda. Satloff and the opposing group argued for a U.S.-led coalition to balance against political Islamism, as they believe Islamic movements in general pose today's most daunting challenge to American security, and moderate representation could facilitate extremist gains. Similarly, Cheryl Benard's distinction between textual and radical fundamentalists proposed integration of the former into the American political strategy via democratization.⁹

7 Carothers, Thomas. "Promoting Democracy and Fighting Terror" *Foreign Affairs* (January-February 2003).

8 "The Democracy Dilemma in the Middle East: Are Islamists the Answer?" featuring Reul Marc Gerecht and Robert Satloff, *Policy Watch*, 990. <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateC05.php?CID=2307>

9 Benard, Cheryl. "Democracy and Islam: The Struggle in the Islamic World – A Strategy for the United States" in David L. Aaron, *Three Years After: Next Steps in the War on Terror* (Rand Corporation), 15-20.

3) *The Ideological Determinant: Western and Islamic Values*

Ideological factors constituted the most important elements guiding previous administrations' policies towards Islamist movements. This reasoning lost ground, however, as the evolving U.S. occupation of Iraq spurred Islamist groups blatantly opposed to Western values.

Jeremy M. Sharp wrote that Western identity and cultural background are determining factors that shape American policy toward Islamist movements. This is especially true as the United States finds itself embroiled in a debate on Islam's role in politics, encompassing the rights of women and minorities, cultural and religious freedom,¹⁰ and more specific issues mentioned by Benard, including polygamy, domestic violence, punishments meted out under Sharia and women's clothing.¹¹ These questions reignited a conflict originating with the 1979 Iranian revolution that was already renewed after the second Gulf war and the events in Algeria in 1991. Samuel Huntington's "Clash of Civilizations" emphasizes the opposition between Islamic and Western values as a primary driver of international conflict. With this debate again at the forefront of public attention, American policy-making toward Islamism became subject to ideological considerations, while circumstantial variations in policy lost credibility.

Marina Ottaway, Nathan J. Brown, and Amr Hamzawy co-authored a Carnegie study identifying elements differentiating the two sides.¹² This paper focused specifically on "gray zones" in moderate Islamism's compatibility with democracy, including Shariah law, political pluralism, the use of violence, civil and political rights, and the rights of women and religious minorities. Exposing distinct differences between Islamist currents, as well as overall progress in reconciling differences with democratic values, the paper was widely read in Washington and serves as a model for advancing efforts to understand Islamism.

A full understanding of determinants guiding Bush policy, along with an examination of previously tested options, would open the door to formulate a more coherent policy toward Islamist movements within the next administration.

4) *The Strategic Determinant: Israel and Oil*

The strategic element of the Bush administration's policy toward Islamist movements encompasses traditional elements framing American foreign policy, including

10 Jeremy M. Sharp. "U.S. Democracy Promotion Policy in the Middle East: The Islamist Dilemma," CRS Report for Congress (Washington, D.C.: Library of Congress, 2006): 2.

11 Benard, Cheryl. *Civil Democratic Islam: Partners, Resources, and Strategies* (Santa Monica: Rand Corporation, 2003).

12 Brown, Nathan J., Amr Hamzawy, and Marina Ottaway. "Islamist Movements and the Democratic Process in the Arab World: Exploring the Gray Zones," *Carnegie Papers* 67 (Washington, D.C.: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2006).

economic and security interests relating to oil, as well as safeguarding markets, protecting maritime traffic and preserving American strategic influence in the Middle East. Consequently, this implies a special emphasis on preventing the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction and of course, defending Israel's security, which has become tantamount to a sacred tenet of American foreign policy over the years.

Following the Sept. 11 tragedy, the Middle East became the main focus of the Bush administration's foreign policy, at the expense of attention to other regions including China and East Asia. Augmented by the occupation of Iraq and the Iranian nuclear threat, this emphasis has been exacerbated by the advancement of political Islam. Islamist electoral victories create friction with American strategic interests, transferring policy-making with regard to Islamist movements from local-level Middle Eastern politics to the international level.

5) Local Factors

Local determinants dependent on circumstances specific to certain Islamic movements became increasingly pertinent during the Bush administration. Most importantly: (1) the nature of the political regime; (2) political diversity and its influence on the Islamist movements' reach, as demonstrated by the success of the Justice and Development Party in Morocco; (3) the legal status of the movement and implications

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for the movement's freedom of action, exemplified by a number of Islamic parties in Algeria; (4) the movement's place in maintaining a local balance of power, demonstrated by factions in Iraq; (5) the movement's possession of a military wing. The last factor's importance is inversely related to its significance in preserving local balance of power, as states are more prone to turn a blind eye to an armed militia

if it is coupled with an influential political wing, a principle which also holds true in Iraq; and the additional external factor of (6) geographic proximity to Israel. In distant regions like Yemen or North Africa, Islamist movements' rejectionist attitudes toward Israel are relatively innocuous, yet they hold critical importance in frontline states like Jordan and Egypt.

The war on terror transcended security, military and intelligence struggles focused on clandestine groups, becoming part of a battle for "hearts and minds." Among its targets were the Islamist movements. Arab-Israeli peace negotiations became directly linked to the evolution of democracy in Lebanon and Palestine, as

Hezbollah and Hamas gained political prominence through the ballot box. Regional proliferation of stable democracy regimes also became increasingly connected to the ability of regimes to politically incorporate moderate Islamists, particularly in Egypt, Jordan and the Gulf states. In Iraq, Islamist parties with armed militias won popular support over secular parties. As a result, the United States found itself backed into a political corner, endorsing a policy dangerously close to that which it openly rejected in Lebanon and Palestine. Meanwhile, the Islamist resurgence in the Gulf spurred fears that new political and social limitations could inhibit military action and enforcement of sanctions against an increasingly hostile Iran. These evolving factors guided several years of inconsistent Washington policy-making, yielding increasingly frustrating results.

The five determinants' influence over the Bush administration's policies prevented the pursuit of a coherent, effective policy towards the Islamist movements, yet reliance on these determinants in the post-Sept. 11 environment helped assess the development of individual policies by trial and error, affording the next administration a key opportunity to learn from these experiments. A full understanding of determinants guiding American policy, along with an examination of previously tested options, would open the door for the upcoming administration to formulate a more coherent policy toward Islamist movements.

Present and Future: Policy Options for the Next Administration

Policies implemented under the Bush administration ranged from dismissal, containment or incorporation of the moderate Islamists to direct military confrontation of extremist groups. Two models for dealing with Islamist movements emerged within the Washington policy-making scene, both broadly interventionist in nature, but distinctly different in practice.

The first, based on the call for a "civil, democratic Islam," altogether ignores movements within political Islam, both moderate and extremist. Cheryl Benard's study illustrates this model. It showed a distinction between textual and radical fundamentalists, and proposed integration of the former into the American political strategy via democratization. This approach also supports Sufism and other forms of religious modernism and traditionalism to build a coalition against Islamic fundamentalism. Disregarding differences within Islamist movements, this model builds on the pro-Israel lobby's argument, embodied in the writings of Robert Satloff¹³ and Martin

13 Satloff, Robert. *The Battle of Ideas in the War on Terror: Essays on U.S. Public Diplomacy in the Middle East* (Washington: The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 2004).

Kramer. It offers no practical solution for handling complexities of problematic areas like Iraq, Lebanon, Palestine and Egypt, but is rather a mindless mimicry of American Cold War policy toward the Soviet Union. This approach has achieved little success on the ground, as it rejects the vast and quite relevant differences between Islam and communism.

The second model, based on acknowledgement of moderate Islamists as feasible partners, is more hopeful. Proving that the United States views its current struggle

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as a war on terror rather than a war against Islam, this tactic lends greater credibility to democratization rhetoric (although this model calls the relationship between democratization and combating terrorism into question). Writings by Marina Ottaway and Thomas Carothers perfectly exemplify this school of thought.¹⁴ This model's strength is in refuting the belief that Islamists and democracy

are inherently incompatible. Instead, incorporation of political Islam is essential to achieving democracy in the Arab world. Although it has gained repute among both policy-makers and academics, this model's inconsistency with other priorities in the foreign policy agenda, along with the fragility of allied Middle Eastern regimes, and the crises in Iraq and Iran, followed by Lebanon, the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, helped eclipse this model beginning in the summer of 2006. Its practical viability has been proven only by its implementation in Morocco. Especially since Hamas' victory in the Palestinian elections, analysts increasingly argue that supporting democracy and moderate Islamists is too risky and would only work against U.S. interests in the region. Also it would impair American mobility to take action against Iran, weaken friendly regimes, forfeit control over oil prices and hurt Israeli security.

Policy-makers no longer agree on a coherent model. Fears over the growing power of Hamas led to increasingly splintered opinions within Congress, meaning the quandary of the next administration will extend far beyond the question of whether to be conciliatory or confrontational. Ignoring the problem, however, will only extend it. The best option appears to be an acknowledgment of the place of moderate Islamist movements within the course of political and economic reform, which will develop positive interactions within the framework of set determinants.

14 Ottaway, Marina, and Thomas Carothers. "Middle East Democracy," *Foreign Policy* (November-December 2004): 14-19.

Successful implementation will require the following steps from the next administration:

1. A strategic assessment of previous policies' outcomes, coupled with a re-examination of key determinants in U.S.-Islamist relations, paving the way for a comprehensive review of current policy and subsequent formulation of future policy.¹⁵
2. Implementation of a coherent U.S. policy toward Islamist movements, free from the ideology-based foreign policy legacy of the Bush administration. Sharp ideological contradictions in U.S.-Islamist relations can be eased if the new American administration avoids entanglement in endeavors to remodel Islam to suit American interests, instead pursuing a policy of peaceful coexistence based on common ground.
3. Rebuilding American credibility in the Arab world through bold, decisive steps, particularly in hotspots like Iraq and Palestine. Islamists' negative attitude toward democratization is a reaction to what they perceive as part of a broader American agenda systematically biased against Arab and Islamic interests, not a reflection of inherent opposition to democratic principles; American support for Israel, the war on terrorism and the occupation of Iraq provoked suspicion among Islamists that motives behind democratization were more complex than Americans were willing to admit.¹⁶ Islamists feared that democratization's greater goal was to strengthen pro-American factions, while weakening popular opposition groups resistant to American policy in the Middle East. For this reason, American credibility in the region must be restored before positive developments can occur. Resolution of lingering grievances over past policies should begin with a U.S. withdrawal from Iraq, an end to the siege of the Palestinian people, and an initiation of genuine political and social dialogue between the United States and key countries of the Middle East.
4. Surpassing the pragmatic logic that precipitated regional instability, fostered international uncertainty over U.S. policies, and impeded Islamist movements'

15 Heydemann, Steven. "The Challenge of Political Islam: Understanding the US Debate" in Muriel Asseburg and Daniel Burmberg, *The Challenge of Islamists for EU and U.S. Policies: Conflict, Stability, and Reform* (Washington, D.C.: SWP and USIP, 2007), 15-22.

16 Wickham, Carrie. "The Problem With Coercive Democratization: The Islamist Response to the U.S. Democracy Reform Initiative" in *Muslim World Journal of Human Rights* 1, no. 1 (2004). <http://www.bepress.com/mwjhr/vol1/iss1/art6>

ability to deal with the policies in place. The precepts guiding American policy varied across the region, even changing several times within a single state, inhibiting the development of a constant set of criteria through which stable relations could develop.

Conclusion

The transformation of U.S. policy aimed at moderate Islamist movements will be no easy task for the new American administration. Yet, accumulated mistakes under the recently implemented policies may establish the preconditions necessary for change. ■