

THE FORGOTTEN SWAMP: NAVIGATING POLITICAL ISLAM

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We need to “drain the swamp.” This expression has recurred like a leitmotif in the comments of pundits and policy officials asked to justify Washington’s ever-expanding war on terrorism. But, alas, one critically important mud flat has received scant attention in the intense media coverage that has accompanied the war in Afghanistan and its extension to new settings: the swamp of analytical confusion surrounding the use of words such as “Islamic fundamentalists” or “Islamic radicals.” Terms have been thrown around lightly, often without a real understanding of their connotations and limitations. There has been little appreciation for the fact that they are artificial constructs, usually elaborated by outsiders, and that they sometimes may confuse more than they explain. For instance, do “Islamic fundamentalists” differ from “Islamic radicals,” or can the two terms be employed interchangeably? Are “Muslim fundamentalists” merely the expression, within the Islamic world, of a broader “fundamentalist” trend visible in other great religious traditions? Why do so many scholars prefer the term “Islamism” to “fundamentalism”? In what context did

the transnational radical Islam of Osama bin Laden develop, and how does it relate to earlier variants of radical Islam? Has the nature of Islamism itself changed significantly over the past 30 years? And where does the Taliban movement fit in the broader spectrum of Islamist phenomena?

Answering such basic questions would seem to be a prerequisite to any substantive discussion of Islam’s changing role and manifestations in Middle East politics. The task should be relatively easy considering that, since the 1970s, a substantial body of both academic and policy-oriented literature has developed on political Islam. By and large, however, the public debate thus far has tapped into only a fraction of that expertise. Yet, at this critical juncture – when more than ever we need to pause, reflect on and debate what our long-term strategy toward political Islam should be – it is imperative that the concepts used in that discussion be fully understood in their complexity and ramifications.

The central objective of this paper is to contribute to such a goal. Drawing on the existing literature, it aims to provide, in one place, a succinct presentation of key concepts and issues required to analyze political Islam, particularly in its more

radical manifestations. It is hoped that such an endeavor will benefit as broad an audience as possible, answering the question still on the lips of many, “Who are those people and what do they want?”

“MUSLIM” OR “ISLAMIC”?

The two terms are often used interchangeably. For instance, one may refer to “Islamic civilization” or to “Muslim civilization.” Yet of course a “Muslim scholar” (a scholar who is also a Muslim) is not the same as an “Islamic scholar” (a scholar, Muslim or not, who specializes in the study of Islam). But there are also more subtle differences in the usage of these two words as adjectives. For instance, one of the leading students of political Islam observes that he uses “Muslim” to refer to a fact, a cultural reality, while by “Islamic” he means to convey political intent.¹ According to that distinction, for instance, a “Muslim country” is merely “a country in which the majority of the population is Muslim.” By contrast, an “Islamic state” designates “a state that bases its legitimacy on Islam” – a state in which Islam presumably plays a central role in public life and in legitimizing the existing sociopolitical order, and in which the government is committed to upholding values and modes of behavior that it deems to be in conformity with Islam. Similarly, a “Muslim intellectual” is “an intellectual of Muslim origin and culture,” while the expression “Islamic intellectual” may be used to describe “an intellectual who consciously organizes his thought within the conceptual framework of Islam.”²

According to those standards, Iran and Saudi Arabia are both “Islamic states” (though very different ones at that!), while Egypt is a Muslim country, but not an

Islamic state. For the same reasons, a journalist in Beirut may think of herself as a Muslim professional (for reasons of birth and because she thinks Islam is an important component of her identity) but she may refute the label of “Islamic writer” (because her writing is not driven by Islamic referents).

ISLAMIC FUNDAMENTALISM

As a way of referring to the variety of movements and ideas that have become increasingly central to the public life and political scene of many countries in the Muslim world over the past 30 years, the expression “Islamic fundamentalism” is both useful and problematic. It is useful in that it draws attention to the fact that, like other forms of fundamentalism, what these movements and ideas have in common is a call for restoring the original purity and integrity of the faith through a literal reading of the founding religious texts. (In the case of Islam, these texts consist of the Quran, Islam’s holy book, and the Sunna or *hadith*, which is the reported collection of the words and deeds of Prophet Muhammad). The expression “Islamic fundamentalism” also implies that many Muslims’ advocacy of a return to the foundations of their faith is merely the Islamic variant of a broader “fundamentalist” trend found in all the major religious traditions. Seen in this light, the demands of Islamic fundamentalists echo similar ones emanating from many Christians, Hindus, Sikhs and Jews. Thus the expression has the merit of inviting a comparative approach to that phenomenon, the understanding of which presumably has much to gain from what has been learned about fundamentalist movements and ideologies in other cultures. Certainly, like other

manifestations of fundamentalism around the globe, Islamic fundamentalism can be seen as a reactive movement, driven by individuals who have come to feel that their faith faces a deadly threat to its survival, and that it can only be saved through a return to its original principles and values. Two prominent students of religious fundamentalism have noted that the concept applies to “beleaguered believers” who, when confronted with “the encroachment of outsiders who threaten to draw [them] into a syncretistic, areligious, or irreligious cultural milieu,” go back to their faith’s basic doctrines and practices in an effort to “preserve their distinctive identity as a people or group.”³

Still, some analysts believe that the expression “Islamic fundamentalism” is inadequate, since the word “fundamentalism” originated in a cultural context – American protestantism at the beginning of the twentieth century – very removed from Islam. Thus, the reasoning goes, the term comes with certain connotations that may be deeply misleading when applied to Islam. For instance, what was supposed to set Protestant fundamentalists apart from other Protestants was their conviction that the Bible was the true word of God and that it should be understood literally.⁴ All believing Muslims, however, are expected to regard the Quran as the literal, infallible Word of God; such a tenet lies at the very core of Islam. In that respect, therefore, all Muslims are “fundamentalists”: they hold their holy book to be a verbatim record of God’s revelations to Prophet Muhammad. And yet most Muslims are hardly “fundamentalists” in the sense of believing that their behavior should be guided exclusively by religious scriptures. Nor do they assume that these scriptures

should be understood literally or that they are open to only one interpretation. In these and other respects, the concept of “fundamentalism,” when applied to Islam, confuses more than it explains.

To argue that Islamic fundamentalists are Muslims who want to go back to “the fundamentals” of their faith is also deceptive in two respects. First, the vast majority of Muslims agree on the fundamental tenets of their faith (such as the belief in the unity and oneness of God, the sacred nature of the Quran, Muhammad’s role as God’s messenger and as a source of emulation, etc.). Second, many of those usually referred to as “Islamic fundamentalists” do not, in fact, go back to the “fundamentals” of Islam. Instead, they selectively emphasize some of those presumed fundamentals while downplaying or ignoring others. Furthermore, within their alleged “fundamentalist thought,” those elements that are selected from the sacred tradition are very often merged with ideas and practices that have no clear link with the Islamic past.

Problematic as well is the fact that fundamentalism suggests a monolithic movement, whereas one should really speak of “fundamentalisms” since fundamentalist thought is diverse and its modes of expression extremely varied – perhaps nowhere more so than in the Middle East and North Africa. Most important, to the extent that Islamic fundamentalists do not necessarily claim to have a political project and do not necessarily enter the political arena, the word “fundamentalism” is not well-suited to analyzing those movements that use Islamic referents to wage political battles. To describe this phenomenon, and to refer to hybrid ideologies that mix concepts borrowed from the Islamic

tradition and ideas that are more distinctly modern, scholars have come to use instead the expressions “Islamism” or “political Islam” (see below).

There is, finally, another ground on which to question the notion that Islamic activism shares structural similarities or “family resemblances” with, for instance, Christian and Jewish fundamentalisms, and, therefore, that it can best be explained through the framework of “comparative fundamentalisms.”⁵ Such an argument fails to take into account the critical differences in the political contexts within which these trends have emerged. For one, most Christian and Jewish fundamentalist ideologies and movements have developed within democratic political environments, whereas one shared feature

of the political settings that have witnessed the rise of Islamist movements has been the lack of real prospects for a genuine, peaceful alternation of power. Furthermore, to establish parallels between Christian, Jewish and Muslim

“fundamentalisms” conceals the imbalance in power and resources between those environments within which Jewish and Christian fundamentalisms have grown (the “Judeo-Christian” North) and those where Islamic activism has appeared. It also fails to reflect that a critical driving force of Islamic activism has been the questioning of this basic imbalance of power, whereas neither Christian nor Jewish fundamentalisms have challenged explicitly the foundations of the existing

international political and economic order. For the same reason, those who have sought to account for the demise of the Oslo peace process by, among other things, highlighting the “joint” opposition to that process by Jewish and Muslim “fundamentalists,” insisting that these movements have been “mirror images” of each other, may confuse more than elucidate the situation on the ground. In particular, they fail to highlight that military occupation and the neocolonial exploitation of one side by the other have been key forces behind the rise of so-called “Muslim fundamentalism” in Palestine.⁶

SALAFISM (AL-SALAFIYYA)

Within the Islamic context, the tradition that comes the closest to the western

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concept of “fundamentalism” is what is known as Salafism (*al-Salafiyya* in Arabic), a current of thought which emerged during the second half of the nineteenth century. The word comes from *al-Salaf*, which refers to the com-

panions of the Prophet Muhammad, and is usually used as part of the expression *al-salaf al-salih*, i.e., the “virtuous forefathers.” Salafism urged believers to return to the pristine, pure, unadulterated form of Islam practiced by Muhammad and his companions. It rejected any practice (such as Sufi rituals), belief (such as the belief in saints) or behavior (for example those anchored in customary law) not directly supported by the Quran or for which there was no precedent in Muhammad’s acts

and sayings. Salafi thinkers also refused the idea that Muslims should accept blindly the interpretations of religious texts developed by theologians over the centuries. Instead, they insisted on the individual believer's right to interpret those texts for himself or herself through the practice of *ijtihad* (independent reasoning).⁷

Salafism did not develop as a monolithic movement but rather as a broad philosophy, a frame of mind. To this day, there is no single Salafi ideology or organization. Instead, since the late nineteenth century, Salafism has expressed itself in a multiplicity of movements and currents of thought that have reflected specific historical circumstances and local conditions. Most have been primarily intellectual-cultural undertakings that generally have eschewed the political arena. In the past two decades, however, one particular brand of Salafi ideology – the Saudi variant known as Wahhabism – has known particular success, and it is to that specific expression of Salafi thought which we now turn.

WAHHABISM

Wahhabism draws its name from an eighteenth-century religious reformer known as Muhammad Ibn Abd al-Wahhab (1703-91) who preached in central Arabia. Abd al-Wahhab was incensed by what he saw as the laxity and moral corruption of the society in which he lived. In his eyes, that society had turned its back on Islam, neglecting basic religious duties while tolerating practices and beliefs which he saw as unacceptable deviations from the basic tenets of the faith. Idolatry, superstitions, the cult of saints and even the veneration of trees and stones were indeed ascendant in Arabia at the time. Abd al-Wahhab was determined to fight such

heresies, and castigated his contemporaries for having reverted to a state of unbelief and ignorance of God's commandments. Consequently, he stressed the need to return to the monotheism that Islam had once introduced in that desert society. But he also went further than that, and strove to eradicate from Islam anything that was not consistent with a strict, literal interpretation of the Quran and the Sunna. What eventually emerged was a particularly puritanical, bland, ultra-orthodox and forbidding interpretation of Islam, concerned, if not obsessed, with notions of moral corruption and the need for purity. To this day, Wahhabism remains characterized by its intolerance toward any perceived deviation from the dogmatic interpretation of Islam that it preaches.

Wahhabism would likely have remained a marginal doctrine within Islamic thought had it not been for the alliance that Abd al-Wahhab struck with the House of Saud in 1745. From then on, the political fortunes of the Saud family and the potential audience for Abd al-Wahhab's ideas were closely tied to each other. Ultimately, when Abd al-Aziz Ibn Saud succeeded in unifying the tribes of Arabia under his control and into what became the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia in 1932, Wahhabism became the country's state-sanctioned ideology and code of behavior.

For some 40 years after that, however, the audience and appeal of Wahhabism remained for the most part confined to Saudi Arabia. That situation began to change following the 1973 oil boom. Blessed with new riches, the Saudi regime engaged in a major effort to spread Wahhabi ideology overseas – partly out of conviction, and partly to counter the appeal of ideologies that it perceived as a threat to

its national security. Saudi money was instrumental to the building and the operation of thousands of mosques, Islamic centers and madrasas (religious schools) from Lahore to London, and from Morocco to Malaysia. There, the Wahhabi message was presented to ever-expanding audiences. Following the Iranian revolution of 1979, the Saudi authorities also endeavored to promote Wahhabi ideas as a counterweight to the new Iranian regime's stated goal of exporting its Shiite revolution overseas. At the end of that same year, the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan provided new, unprecedented opportunities for Saudi Arabia to spread Wahhabi views, especially in Pakistan. The Taliban phenomenon, which owes so much to Saudi support, was born out of this process.

In the end, one is struck by the extent to which a unique configuration of geological circumstances and world events led to the unexpected, rapid expansion of a rather sectarian branch of Islam which historically had been on the fringes of Islamic civilization. The "accident" of oil wealth, the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, and America's blessing for (or complacent attitude toward) the Saudi regime's militant promotion of Wahhabism all combined to give this minority quasi-sect within Islam a level of influence entirely out of proportion to what it could have achieved on its own.

"ISLAMISM" OR "POLITICAL ISLAM"

Unlike "Salafism" and "fundamentalism," the label "Islamism" is relatively recent. It was coined during the 1970s to refer to the rise of movements and ideologies drawing on Islamic referents – terms, symbols and events taken from the Islamic tradition – in order to articulate a distinctly

political agenda (hence the expression "political Islam," which is usually seen as synonymous with Islamism).

Typically, the Islamist project provides a comprehensive critique of the existing order, challenges it and aims to change it. It addresses the social, political, economic and cultural challenges faced by contemporary Muslim societies and claims to provide solutions to them. It makes a more or less sustained and persuasive effort to reflect on what an "Islamic economy" or "Islamic society" might look like. Islamism, in short, is a form of instrumentalization of Islam by individuals, groups and organizations that pursue political objectives. It provides political responses to today's societal challenges by imagining a future, the foundations for which rest on reappropriated, reinvented concepts borrowed from the Islamic tradition.

Islamism and modernity

A defining characteristic of Islamist movements, organizations and ideologies is their two-sided relation to modernity and the West. On the one hand, at the very heart of Islamist ideology lies a powerful, comprehensive critique of the West and of what Islamists see as the corrupting political and cultural influence of the West on Middle Eastern societies. The Islamists' reliance on concepts drawn from the Islamic tradition also indicates a desire to break away from Western terminology. On the other hand, Islamism is a decidedly modern phenomenon in at least two critical respects: the profile of its leaders and its reliance on Western technology.

As far as the first of these two features is concerned, the cadres and ideologues of Islamist movements have been, overwhelmingly, products of the modern,

secular educational system. “Radical Islamists,” for instance, are not usually clerics but young, university-educated intellectuals who claim for themselves the right to interpret the true meaning of religion (their actual knowledge of Islam is typically sketchy). Most of them are graduates in engineering and the modern sciences, not in the humanities or theology. Some have studied in Western Europe or North America. For instance, two leading Islamist thinkers, the Iranian Ali Shariati (whose writings had the greatest influence on the young generation that participated in the Islamic revolution) and the Sudanese Hassan al-Turabi, received their doctorates from the Sorbonne in Paris. In their twenties and thirties, the cadres of radical Islamist movements typically belong to a “*lumpen intelligentsia*.” They are frustrated by the discrepancy between, on the one hand, their relatively high level of educational achievement, and, on the other, their low social status and dim prospects for upward mobility in countries characterized by poor economic performance and the disproportionate importance of social connections to professional success. And if the leadership of Islamist movements is a product of modernization, so are the foot soldiers, who often consist of recently urbanized masses, lower-class youth and the downwardly mobile middle classes. As for the cadres of more “moderate” or “mainstream” Islamist movements, they usually consist of

professionals and businesspersons employed in the modern sector of the economy – indeed often in the most technologically advanced and outward-oriented segments of that sector. Overall, therefore, what is noteworthy is the extent to which Islamist movements have drawn their main activists from the “new middle class” that scholars in the 1960s had expected to be a major source of secularization and Westernization in Middle Eastern societies.

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Striking as well is the Islamists’ heavy reliance on Western technology (faxes, cassettes and, more recently, the internet and cellular phones) in order to achieve their goals. In

many ways, Islamists have harnessed modern technology and Western inventions to fight, or hold at bay, Western influences and the cultural and social evils they see as associated with modernity. Thus, with their choice of tools to disseminate their ideas and organize, radical Islamists have shown themselves quite capable of keeping up with advances in information and communication technologies. Consequently, the sophistication of the devices on which they have drawn has been characterized by a staggering improvement over the past quarter-century. Back in 1978, much was made of the critical contribution that cassettes containing Khomeini’s sermons made to the success of the Iranian revolution. Recorded in France, where the ayatollah had been granted political asylum,

these tapes were subsequently distributed throughout Iran, copied and played and replayed in thousands of homes and mosques. Similarly, in the mid-1990s, the main group in the Islamist opposition to the Saudi regime, the Committee for the Defense of Legitimate Rights in Saudi Arabia (CDLR), used its headquarters in London to disseminate its virulent attacks on the Saudi royal family through faxes, tapes and the internet. From the mid-1990s onward, numerous Islamist groups began to develop their own websites. Most dramatically, in the wake of the September 11 attacks on the Twin Towers and the Pentagon, U.S. intelligence worried about the use of encryption technology by members of Al Qaeda. Through their mastery of encryption tools, the latter may have been able to hide messages within apparently innocuous e-mails, music files and pictures sent instantaneously from one continent to another. They also may have been able to embed such messages in the graphics or images found on certain websites. Such a development underscores the technological sophistication of the tools now used by some radical Islamists to communicate with each other undetected. What is clear is that they are not behind the times technologically.

Islamism versus fundamentalism or Salafism

Though Islamism and fundamentalism or Salafism share certain traits, they also differ in several important respects. What they have in common is an idealized view of early Islamic history, a desire to restore the original purity of the faith, and the call for a return to a strict interpretation of the Quran and the Sunna. However, they clearly part ways on the following issues:

- Politics lies at the heart of Islamism, which ultimately has far more to do with power than with religion. To Islamists, Islam is more a political blueprint than a faith, and the Islamist discourse is to a large extent a political discourse in religious garb. Thus, while fundamentalists are typically concerned primarily with ideas and religious exegesis, Islamists are action-oriented; they are preoccupied first and foremost with changing their world. They believe, in particular, that political action is essential to the transformation of society into a truly Islamic one. They aim to exercise political power, and they are extremely critical of governments which they accuse of having turned their back on Islam. By contrast, politics does not feature prominently in Salafi thought. Unlike Islamists, fundamentalists do not claim to have a global, comprehensive political program. More interested in theology than politics, Salafists usually refrain from challenging governments and are generally reluctant to become involved in the political fray. They shy away from raising the issue of the political and religious legitimacy (or illegitimacy) of the powers-that-be, whereas that issue is perhaps the most prominent one on the Islamists' minds.
- Even though they constantly invoke concepts drawn from the Islamic past, Islamists are social and political activists intent on building a new type of society. In that respect, they are forward-looking, whereas fundamentalists tend to be fixated on an earlier, idealized era. Islamists usually aspire to reshape people's daily lives according to a more or less clearly defined political and cultural vision that harks back to a mostly mythical, invented Islamic past. While that vision draws on

Islamic terms, symbols and events, it infuses them with new meanings that are typically alien to the actual historical and current experiences of Muslims. Islamists are engaged in a process of intellectual, political and social engineering which, through the familiar language of Islam, aims to legitimize a thorough restructuring of society and polity along lines that have no precedent in history. Under the pretense of re-establishing an old order, what is intended is the making of a new one.

- Fundamentalists are primarily concerned with issues of morality and personal behavior, and/or with theological issues, while Islamists, through the capture of the state or the Islamization of society, aim to bring about a radical transformation of political, social and economic relations within modern society.

- Islamists and fundamentalists also differ in their attitudes toward the *sharia* (Islamic law) and women.⁸ Fundamentalists would like to see a strict implementation of the *sharia* and argue that all laws should be based exclusively on it. To them, applying Islamic law should be a priority since it is the most reliable way of making society more truly Islamic. And whenever political and social conditions are not “ripe” for an immediate application of the *sharia*, fundamentalists believe that working toward a gradual, incremental Islamization of laws and mores should be the driving force of their action. Islamists, too, favor an Islamization of laws, but to them full implementation of the *sharia* makes sense only after a genuinely Islamic order has been created (through the capture of political power). In short, the line dividing fundamentalists and Islamists on this issue revolves around the most effective way of making individuals more (Islamically)

“virtuous.” Is it, as Islamists advocate, through an Islamic revolution that will create an environment in which implementation of the *sharia* becomes inevitable because society itself has become more genuinely Islamic? Or is it, as fundamentalists are prone to believe, by pressuring individuals into abiding by certain moral and behavioral codes based on the *sharia*, which in turn ultimately and naturally will lead to the establishment of an Islamic state? Unlike fundamentalists, Islamists fear that trying to impose Islamic law on a society that has not yet become truly Islamic may be doomed to fail, and may even create new problems. In their eyes, it is likely to lead to the spread of hypocrisy, fake individual and collective displays of piety, and glaring discrepancies between public and private behavior – between who individuals profess to be and who they really are.

Similarly, whereas fundamentalists typically oppose the idea of women playing an active role in public life (arguing that it goes against Islamic teachings and that it will encourage moral corruption and laxity), Islamists overall are far more open on the issue. They usually support the education of women. Unlike fundamentalists, who tend to believe that the proper role of a woman is at home raising children, many Islamists have no problem with the idea of women playing an active part in the public and professional sphere, as long as the latter is sex-segregated. Islamist organizations often include women’s sections, and modern-educated women activists represent an important constituency for many Islamist groups.⁹ In Iran and elsewhere, women since the 1990s have been at the forefront of efforts to develop a form of “Islamic feminism” that blends Islam and

modernity, often in an effort to secure further gains for women in the public sphere. In those efforts, they usually have faced considerable resistance from organized Islamic fundamentalist interests and power groups.

- As a rule, fundamentalist ideas have a much greater chance of finding a receptive audience among men of religion (ulama) than is the case for Islamist views. After all, Islamists are far more likely to be engineers, physicians or agronomists than clerics. Unlike clerics, they did not go through formal religious training (and consequently know little about Islamic jurisprudence), and their roots lie in the modern society that produced them, not in the relatively insulated religious institution. Most important, the official citadels of fundamentalist thought and power are usually closely tied to the political authorities and consequently very ill-disposed toward the “subversive” ideas of Islamists. Thus, for instance, the religious establishment in both Saudi Arabia and Egypt has been used by these countries’ respective governments to rebut the arguments of the Islamists on religious grounds.

In several respects, the typical modern Islamist intellectual is even anti-clerical. Across the region, Islamists have criticized the subservience of the religious establishment to the political authorities. In a handful of cases, radical Islamist militants have targeted senior clerics they saw as puppets of the government. Even in Iran, where a small segment of the Shiite clergy played a leading role in the triumph of the Islamic revolution, radical clerics initially formed only one rather small component of a broad-based revolutionary coalition. The core activists within that coalition were university-educated lay Islamists, not products of the

country’s religious seminaries. Moreover, Iran’s revolutionary clerics, often former students of Khomeini, were themselves only a minority within the religious establishment. By contrast, the most senior and respected clerics (such as Ayatollah Shariatmadari) were decidedly opposed to Khomeini and his militant, radical interpretation of Islam. Ultimately, the clerics who, after the triumph of the revolution, rose to the top of the political pyramid and were given leadership positions within the religious institution itself were not those best known for their religious scholarly expertise, but those who had the best revolutionary credentials. Significantly, in a famous statement issued in 1989, Khomeini noted that in case of conflict between “the logic of the revolution” and strict respect for the sharia, the former should take precedence over the latter. That was his way of saying that, in his view, Iran’s revolution had been an Islamist phenomenon, not a fundamentalist one.

FROM ISLAMISM TO NEOFUNDAMENTALISM

The line dividing Islamists from fundamentalists should not be overdrawn. Some scholars have argued that from the mid-1980s onward, Islamism began to drift into “neofundamentalism” – a trend which, in the view of these analysts, became even more pronounced through the 1990s.¹⁰ Several critical features distinguish “neofundamentalists” from “Islamists”: their greater emphasis on mores, “virtue” and “purity”; their less exclusive focus on politics and different approach to political action; and their more rigid views on women and the sharia.

Unlike Islamists, neofundamentalists are less concerned with the immediate seizure of political power than with grass-

roots action aimed at the moral regeneration of the individual and the gradual transformation of society into a more “Islamic” one. It is not that neofundamentalists always eschew politics. On the contrary, they do enter the political arena, seeking representation and influence in institutions ranging from parliaments to professional syndicates. But they see the establishment of a truly Islamic society as a long-term goal that involves the slow, step-by-step return to strict Islamic practices by individuals, a goal which itself

necessitates constant efforts at education, persuasion, preaching, proselytizing and lobbying the authorities. To the Islamists of the 1970s, the capture of the state would open

the door automatically to the establishment of a truly Islamic order. By contrast, neofundamentalists have regarded political action primarily as one of several means toward moral and spiritual reform, both at the individual and the societal level.

Similarly, the imposition of the sharia occupies a central role in the program of neofundamentalists (and of Islamists-turned-neofundamentalists), whereas it was not that critical to the first generation of Islamists during the 1970s. Neofundamentalists are also more conservative on the issue of women’s role in society. Overall, they are more preoccupied than the Islamists with issues of morality, and with the need for cleansing souls and societies which they see as having been thoroughly corrupted by Western influence.

One may say that the primary target of the 1970s generation of Islamists was the “infidel ruler” who was denounced for having betrayed Islam, sold out to the West, and allowed society to retrogress to a pre-Islamic state of unbelief. In comparison, the main concerns of neofundamentalists are the decline in religious practice and the spread of un-Islamic mores and moral decay (drug addiction, alcohol consumption, popular forms of entertainment, sex outside marriage, etc.).

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Although neofundamentalists are distinct from fundamentalists, they share with Islamists some important socio-economic characteristics. Like Islamists, they often are products

of modern education and are far more likely to be involved in the professions than is the case of fundamentalists. Furthermore, unlike fundamentalists but like Islamists, neofundamentalists espouse political action. Unlike Islamists, however, their approach to politics places far more hope in grass-roots activism than in the prospect for an immediate capture of the state, and their program tends to revolve almost exclusively on the application of the sharia.

Saudi support for a broad range of neofundamentalist movements from Algeria to Pakistan sustained the trend toward a transformation of Islamism into neofundamentalism. In retrospect, the Saudi authorities were remarkably successful in redirecting some of the energies

originally harnessed by Islamism in the direction of a neofundamentalism that was much more consistent with the rigid Wahhabi ethos and the narrow interests of the Saud family than had been the case with the initial, revolutionary Islamist impulse of the 1970s. What some analysts refer to as “the failure of political Islam” was critical as well.¹¹ By the mid-to-late 1980s, indeed, Islamists had been unable to seize power in any single Arab country. Their earlier ambition of riding an Islamist wave that would sweep across the region had failed to materialize. More generally, Islamists had been unsuccessful in their bid to alter significantly the political landscape of Middle Eastern and North African societies. The Iranian revolution had been contained. Elsewhere, Islamists had been repressed, cowed or co-opted. Though they sometimes had proven to be a force to be reckoned with, Islamists had neither brought down regimes nor changed the basic logic of Arab politics. As for Islamist thought, it had shown itself to be relatively scant and bland, often unpersuasive and flawed to even sympathetic observers.

Failing to differentiate between the desirable and the possible, Islamism, it seemed, had promised more than it had delivered. It had not measured up to the great hopes which its supporters had originally placed in it when it had first emerged, filling the ideological vacuum created by the death of pan-Arab dreams on the battlefields of the 1967 war. According to proponents of the “failure of political Islam” thesis, once it became clear that the original Islamist project based on the revolutionary seizure of power in order to “Islamize” society from the top down had failed, a new generation of Islamist militants turned to a strategy aimed instead

at Islamizing society and politics from the bottom up. In the process, they became less “Islamist” and more “neofundamentalist.” The dream of an Islamic revolution and of a quick, relatively easy seizure of the state having been shattered, neofundamentalists refocused efforts on the conquest of society through grass-roots activism and the infiltration or takeover of the institutions of civil society.

The Taliban phenomenon does not fit easily into any of the categories discussed in this paper; it is really a product of the unique environment that gave rise to it in the early 1990s in Kandahar. But, with its emphasis on a literal interpretation of the Quran and its forced imposition of a particularly rigid moral order, the Taliban movement may be seen as an extreme manifestation of neofundamentalism. Indeed, this particularly obscurantist and exclusionary form might even be described as “neofundamentalism gone mad.” Such a label seems warranted by the movement’s oppression of women, its hostility to any form of entertainment and, more generally, its repressive rules and commandments. The latter, one should note, often had less to do with the sharia than with the Pashtun tribal code of behavior and were also shaped by the austere, parochial, largely illiterate and for the most part totally male environment from which so many Taliban leaders hailed.¹²

“RADICAL ISLAM” OR “RADICAL ISLAMISMS”?

The two separate meanings of the adjective “radical” – first, growing from a root and, second, being politically extreme – define the essence of “radical Islam.”¹³ Consequently, radical Islamic groups can

be described as politico-religious movements which, through extreme methods, strive to bring about drastic sociopolitical changes based on a revolutionary reinterpretation of Islamic doctrine that claims to go back to the fundamental meaning and message of the faith. In this context, violence is legitimized as a way of bringing down a social and political order deemed un-Islamic, and of replacing it with one that will restore Islam's original purity.

Understood in this fashion, the expression "radical Islam" sheds light on what motivates adherents of movements said to fall under that label. Yet one also must remain aware of the limitations of such an expression. Just as we have come to appreciate the enormous diversity of phenomena grouped under the label of "Islamic resurgence," it is perhaps more accurate to speak of "radical Islams" than of "radical Islam." For instance, one might fruitfully distinguish between radical Sunni and radical Shiite movements. They have their own separate political and intellectual histories, distinct trajectories over the past two decades, and different "founding fathers" (the Egyptian Sayyid Qutb and the Pakistani Mawdudi in the case of Sunnis, Ayatollah Khomeini and to some extent Shaikh Fadlallah in Lebanon in the case of Shiite Islam). Similarly, the forces that fuel radical Islamic groups and the reasons that prompt individuals (usually young men) to join them vary greatly from one country to the other. Those who have drifted into these movements primarily because of their aversion to Western forms of modernity may have little in common with Palestinians driven into Hamas cells because of their hatred of Israel, the occupation of Palestinian land, and the accumulated feelings of anger and humilia-

tion created by Israeli policies in the West Bank and Gaza. And in their outlook and motives, both types of militants differ in turn from those involved in the most violent groups of Algeria's Islamic insurgency, which emerged out of the specific context created by a bankrupt post-colonial state and a botched democratization experiment.

It is also critical to distinguish between the vast majority of radical Islamic groups, which have had a primarily nationalist and country-specific agenda (as has been the case of Hizballah in Lebanon, Hamas in Palestine and the Gamaa Islamiyya in Egypt), and the more recent transnational type of radical Islamic network embodied in Al Qaeda. The former type's struggles have been for the most part contained within a particular territory, and their goals have been limited to it. By contrast, the latter type has been transnational in its goals, recruitment patterns and modes of operation. It has aimed to wage *jihad* on a global scale, not merely within a given country (though Bin Laden himself appears to have been driven primarily by objectives having to do with Saudi Arabia: ridding the kingdom of American military forces, and more generally of American influence, as well as overthrowing the ruling family). It has recruited most of its cadres among a transnational, uprooted intelligentsia of young Arabs studying in the West, while its foot soldiers also have been drawn from a multiplicity of Arab countries. Its intended audience is not primarily the population of a single country, but the entire *umma* (community of believers). And, ultimately, its target is not just one government, not even that of the United States. While it has identified America as its main enemy, it tends to portray its actions not merely as a war against a well-defined, narrowly

circumscribed opponent, but rather as a cosmic struggle against evil forces bent on Islam's destruction. The United States is singled out to a large extent because it is the source of so many of these forces, and because American power has been the main instrument through which they are exercised (as is the case, for instance, of globalization).

JIHADIST SALAFISM

"Jihadist Salafi" is a label that is sometimes applied to a nebula of "second generation" radical Islamist movements that emerged during the 1980s and rose in influence during the 1990s. The war in Afghanistan (1980-89) served as the incubator for this explosive mixture of Salafi outlook and call to violence. "Jihadist Salafis" embrace a strict, literal interpretation of Islam, but combine it with an emphasis on jihad, understood here as holy war. To them, jihad becomes the prime instrument through which the "Salafi" desire to "return" to the original message of Islam will be turned into reality.¹⁴

The prime targets of jihadist-Salafi organizations vary according to the country and the organization involved. Some concentrate their attacks on the "infidel regimes" at the helm of the country in which they operate. Such regimes are denounced as Muslim in name only and for having become completely subservient to the West. Jihadist Salafis also may engage in random violence against an entire society seen as having reverted to a state of pre-Islamic ignorance (of God's commandments), and rejected for failing to side with "true Muslims" in their struggle against the regime (a rationale invoked by some radical Islamic groups in Algeria to

justify their massacres of civilians). But for most jihadist-Salafi organizations (most prominently the transnational Al Qaeda), the main enemy is the United States. It is singled out because of its support for Israel (and therefore Israeli control over the al-Aqsa mosque in Jerusalem), because of its alleged "crimes" against Muslims (including the sanctions on Iraq), because of its support for Middle Eastern regimes and leaders that have betrayed Islam and oppress Muslims, and (the decisive factor insofar as Bin Laden is concerned) because of its military presence in Saudi Arabia near the holy mosques.

The increasing success of jihadist-Salafi ideology during the 1980s and, especially, the 1990s stemmed from the merging of two trends. One was the spread throughout the region of Salafi-neofundamentalist worldviews, which themselves owed much of their growing audience to the financial support of Gulf regimes, especially Saudi Arabia, and Gulf-based Salafi organizations. The second critical factor was the war in Afghanistan, which radicalized many Arab Salafis and indeed had the effect of converting to the cause of jihad an entire segment of the transnational Salafi movement. To be sure, many groups involved in the loose "Salafi international" continued to refrain from direct involvement in politics. Others, while politically active, relied on legal and peaceful means to achieve their goals. They avoided direct criticism of existing regimes and rejected the resort to violence and terrorism. However, galvanized by the success of the Afghan *mujahideen*, more Arab Salafis came to believe in the need for jihad. Al Qaeda, created in 1988, emerged and developed within that context.

By the time the last Soviet soldier left

Afghanistan in February 1989, Arab militants who had made the trip to Afghanistan to join the jihad against the Soviet Union had convinced themselves that they had been the primary reason behind the Soviet defeat. Emboldened, they felt that the experience of the Afghan jihad could now be duplicated successfully elsewhere. Besides, in the wake of the Soviet withdrawal, these “Arab Afghans” were in search of a new cause – or, rather, of new horizons to which the cause of the jihad could be brought. Thousands of these battle-hardened fighters began to return home, where, as in Algeria and Egypt, they were to play a key role in the radical Islamist insurgencies that broke out in 1992. And when those insurgencies reached a dead end in 1997-98, Al Qaeda was there to redirect the energies of many radical Islamists toward the global struggle against the United States.

As the preceding account makes clear, several features separate “jihadist Salafis” from traditional Salafis, from the radical Islamists who preceded them, and from the Taliban. Unlike traditional Salafis, jihadist Salafis embrace violence and the cause of jihad. Jihadist Salafis are also distinct from the earlier generation of Islamist radicals in two respects. First, their Salafi worldview implies adherence to an orthodox, literalist interpretation of Islam, as well as an implicit or explicit belief in the need for a degree of societal coercion in order to ensure that individuals abide by strict “Islamic rules.” Such a fundamentalist

outlook, as noted earlier, was not found among the original Islamist militants of the 1970s, who were more modernist and future-oriented. Second, the violence of the earlier generation of radical Islamists was targeted almost exclusively at the “unbelieving” ruler, government and senior officials (including, occasionally, senior members of the religious establishment) of the countries in which these groups operated. That is no longer the case with jihadist Salafis, who have sought to export jihad to new settings, identified new

enemies, and tend to see jihad as a global struggle that knows no borders.

The emphasis on a literal interpretation of the Quran, combined with the embrace of jihad, are features shared by the Taliban

movement and the jihadist-Salafi international. Both phenomena coalesced around the same time, in the same Pakistano-Afghan region. Both, though in different ways, were a legacy of the Soviet-Afghan war. They stemmed from the unresolved tensions, internal disorder, devastation and continued regional competition left by that conflict. These common characteristics, however, should not obscure critical differences. For instance, unlike jihadist Salafis, the Taliban were exclusively a product of the madrasa system, and they were heavily influenced by the *deobandi* tradition (an Islamic revivalist movement born among the Muslims of India in the latter third of the nineteenth century). In addition, when their movement emerged in 1994, the Taliban had very circumscribed

In short, unlike so many jihadist Salafis, the Taliban had no global agenda and no real interest in international politics and the world beyond Afghanistan.

goals: restoring peace, order and security within Afghanistan and creating a new order consistent with the sharia. They had no inclination to engage in a sustained effort to spread their version of Islam beyond that country.¹⁵ In short, unlike so many jihadist Salafis, they had no global agenda and no real interest in international politics and the world beyond Afghanistan.

Furthermore, the “typical” Taliban – a poor, largely uneducated Pashtun of peasant origin, born in a Pakistani refugee camp and with extremely limited horizons – was strikingly different from the “typical” jihadist-Salafi Arab: rather cosmopolitan, well-traveled and often well-educated. For that matter, Mullah Omar and Osama bin Laden were strange bedfellows. The marriage of convenience that they struck in 1996-97, which would prove to be the undoing of the Taliban regime, was certainly not a natural pairing. It was a coalition of interests and circumstances that could not have been anticipated. Omar, born into a family of poor, landless peasants, was a village mullah who did not know anything about the world and was not interested in it, even as he founded his Taliban movement. Bin Laden, the privileged child of one of the richest Saudi self-made men, grew up in a Westernized environment and even had spent time during his childhood in such countries as Sweden and Great Britain. By the mid-1990s, he was at the head of a multinational terrorist network with a global reach, one that aimed at striking at the very centers of America’s international power. By comparison, at that time, Mullah Omar’s goal was still limited to overthrowing the corrupt government in Kabul. It would take at least two more years before the village cleric would be converted to the

internationalist agenda of his benefactor. Even then, the two men could not have remained more different. The reclusive Omar was ill at ease in public and avoided all contact with foreign journalists. By contrast, his Saudi “guest,” a master at manipulating symbols and poses, was relentless in his use of modern means of communication to disseminate his message.

“RADICAL ISLAMISTS” VERSUS “MODERATE ISLAMISTS”

The category “radical Islam” usually presupposes the existence of another type of Islamist movements, variously referred to as “moderate,” “mainstream” or “pragmatic.” Indeed, students of Islamism have stressed the importance of differentiating between the “radical fringe,” which represents only a minority of Islamists and operates underground, and the broader Islamist mainstream, which has a much larger constituency and is often allowed or tolerated by the authorities. The differences between “radical Islamists” and “moderate Islamists” are said to boil down to the following.

- Radicals advocate and legitimize the use of violence for political ends, while moderates condemn it.
- The radicals’ project is a revolutionary one aiming at the seizure of power in order to establish a new Islamic order. By contrast, the moderates are said to favor a legalist, incremental approach that relies on personal conversion, compromise and the force of example. Moderates seek not to overthrow the system, but to transform it from within through a pragmatic, step-by-step process that focuses on persuasion of the population and lobbying the authorities.
- Because moderates aim to change the

system progressively from below, they rely heavily on social and charitable activities. Grass-roots activism, therefore, is critical to their strategy. It is designed to bring about a gradual Islamization of society from below, and to convince the population that “Islam is the way,” that there can be concrete “Islamic” solutions to the social and economic ills faced by Middle Eastern societies. This is not to say that moderates eschew the political arena. On the contrary, whenever they are given the chance, they actively participate in electoral contests. But their approach is less exclusively concerned with political power than that of the radicals. To moderates, winning hearts and souls is at least as important as gaining representation in state institutions. By contrast, the radicals typically place far more emphasis on politics, specifically on the capture of the state. They do not agree to play by the rules of regimes and societies that they denounce for having turned their backs on Islam. Unlike moderates, who believe that society and the individual can be reformed gradually, radicals argue that society can be purified only if power is seized. In several respects, their strategy follows a Leninist approach. It envisions the creation of a small, well-organized “vanguard” party led by committed, professional Islamist revolutionaries who will overthrow existing governments and then use state power to restructure society from above, along “Islamic” lines.

• Radicals reject democracy. They do not believe in sovereignty of the people, but in the sovereignty of God (*hakimiyya*), and cannot accept that the latter would take a back seat to the former. In their view, the sharia – which they see as God’s will regarding how human society ought to be

organized and how it should manage its affairs – must take precedence over the will of the majority. It also should determine what is the “rightful” place of women and minorities in an Islamic society (which, to democrats, means the legitimation of state-sanctioned discrimination against minorities and women). By contrast, moderates are said to believe in the compatibility of Islam and democracy. They often claim to find precedents for democratic principles in such Islamic concepts as *shura* (consultation) and *ijma* (consensus). Most important, they assert (with varying degrees of emphasis and credibility) that if they were to come to power they would respect democratic rules, abide by the will of the majority as reflected in elections, and protect human rights and civil liberties as well as the pluralistic nature of society.

How valid is the distinction between “moderates” and “radicals”?

Differentiating between “extremist” and “mainstream” Islamists has the merit of drawing attention to the enormous diversity of organizations that seek to change their society by using vocabulary and ideals drawn from the Islamic tradition. It underscores that Islamism is not a monolithic movement, but a complex, multifaceted phenomenon that expresses itself through groups that differ considerably in their strategies and objectives.¹⁶ Those who stress the importance of distinguishing between “moderates” and “radicals” are usually intimately familiar with the societies they study and with the “Islamic resurgence” in particular.

Some analysts, however, have questioned the validity of differentiating between moderates and radicals. They note

that (1) actual Islamist groups do not necessarily fall neatly into either of these ideal-type categories; (2) the line between both categories is actually less clearly drawn than is sometimes suggested; and (3) movements frequently change their identity over time, becoming radicalized or more “mainstream” as a result of the evolving sets of incentives, rewards and deterrents with which their environments present them. More specifically, one may summarize as follows the arguments of those who caution against placing too much faith in the radicals-versus-moderates mode of analysis.¹⁷

- In the end, no matter how divided they are over strategies, tactics and methods, both extremists and moderates share the goal of establishing a state governed by the sharia, one in which religious law will be the law of the land.

When one focuses on their fundamental convictions, their most cherished values, and the kind of society and political order they aspire to create, moderates have far more in common with radicals than they do with Western-style democrats.

- One should not take the moderates’ rhetoric at face value. On issues such as the use of violence, the legitimacy of a democratic order, human rights and pluralism, the moderates’ real positions may be at significant variance with their public statements. Moderates may be merely more patient than the radicals, more willing

to bide their time. They may share the radicals’ basic agenda, while being more pragmatic and realistic regarding their ability to advance such an agenda given the powerful forces they confront.

- What if the moderates succeed in their strategy of Islamizing society from below? Will they then not have paved the way for the establishment of an Islamic state, which is the radicals’ goal? And if such a state is established, will there be space for dissenters, secularists, women’s-rights activists and pluralism? Some analysts even go so far as to claim that the moderates pose a more insidious threat, and therefore a greater one, than the radicals. Through their community-oriented activities and because of the freedom of maneuver that they sometimes are granted by the authorities, they are progressively subverting, from within, the nominally secular

systems in which they operate. Ultimately, the argument goes, they will be able to take over that system without a fight.

- A related argument is that the gradual Islamization of public discourse and society produced by the moderates, or by the courting of “Islamist moderates” by the authorities, may over

Many analysts have argued that the rise of radical Islam under President Sadat (1970-81) was fueled in part by the Egyptian president’s efforts to use religion as a counterweight to Nasserist and leftist influence.

time create an environment in which extremism can flourish. Pakistan illustrates this scenario. Beginning with the administration of General Zia ul-Haq (1977-88), the state strove to appease and co-opt religious parties, Muslim clerics and Islamist intellectuals. It Islamized law and

infused its discourse with Islamic vocabulary and symbols. It turned a blind eye, indeed even encouraged, connections between Islamist groups and the military-intelligence apparatus. It granted “mainstream Islamist parties” and “religious intellectuals” unprecedented freedom of operation, while encouraging the proliferation of religious schools and organizations. It brought Islamists into the inner circles of power, at the higher echelons of the civil service and the military and intelligence agencies. And it used extremist Islamist groups as instruments of its foreign policy, both in Afghanistan and in Indian-controlled Kashmir.

That policy now has come back to haunt President Musharraf, who himself has longstanding connections to some Islamists and seized power in October 1999 with the blessing of many of them. After all, the 1999 coup that brought down the elected civilian government of Nawaz Sharif was orchestrated and carried out by the military high command, in which pro-Islamist elements were dominant, and it received the enthusiastic support of the country’s Islamist parties. Musharraf’s recent policy U-turn has been an implicit admission of the bankruptcy and unsustainability of previous policies. Certainly, his recent crackdown on violent Islamist groups was prompted by the war in Afghanistan, direct U.S. pressure and mounting tensions with India (especially in the wake of the attack on the Indian Parliament in mid-December 2001). But these events may merely have precipitated the day of reckoning for Pakistan’s ruler. It already had become clear that complacency toward Islamism had bred religious extremism at all levels of society, that it had resulted in rising and increasingly

bloody sectarian clashes between the country’s Shiite and Sunni populations, and, more generally, that it had contributed to the spread of a culture of violence throughout the country and indeed in the entire region. The state’s handling of political Islam had seriously damaged Pakistan’s international image while dangerously building up tensions with India. It also raised the prospect of a religious takeover of the state by militant religious elements – one that presumably would be facilitated by the well-known and increasingly visible connections between the military-security apparatus and extremist religious groups, and between the latter and the criminal underworld.

Pakistan’s case is certainly not unique. Many analysts have argued that the rise of radical Islam under President Sadat (1970-81) was fueled in part by the Egyptian president’s efforts to use religion as a counterweight to Nasserist and leftist influence, and by his release from jail of members of the “mainstream Muslim Brotherhood” in the early 1970s. More recently, the Egyptian government’s efforts to co-opt Islamic rhetoric, and the tolerance the Mubarak regime has shown toward the spread of fundamentalist views throughout society, are widely seen as having contributed to rising anti-Coptic violence and religious intolerance. Likewise, in Indonesia, the Islamization of political discourse during the rule of President Suharto (1966-98) has been blamed for having contributed to growing communal tensions and the development of radical Islamist movements over the past several years.

- Specific Islamist movements labelled as either “moderate” or “radical” may in fact exhibit characteristics that do not lend

themselves to such easy classifications. Often that is because within a single Islamist movement, “moderate” and “radical” wings coexist (more or less easily). Consider the Islamic Salvation Front (FIS), which won the December 1991 parliamentary elections in Algeria, before the military cancelled the results of the elections on January 11, 1992, and put an end to the democratic process. The FIS was frequently described at the time as a “moderate Islamist party.” Its leader, Abbasi Madani, spoke the language of pluralism, democracy, and respect for the constitution and legality. His core support was among Algeria’s religiously oriented middle classes. But the FIS also featured an influential radical wing headed by Madani’s second-in-command, Ali Belhaj. Belhaj, who enjoyed a significant following among Algeria’s poor and disenfranchised, spoke a far more radical language. He was explicitly hostile to democracy, which he had denounced repeatedly as an alien concept, a western evil and a heresy. Similar tensions can be found among many other Islamist groups. Hamas’s leadership, for instance, has long been torn between “insiders” (based in the West Bank and Gaza) and “outsiders” (exiled leaders). On the two key issues of confrontation with Israel and attitude toward the Palestinian Authority, insiders were always far more moderate than outsiders, more aware of the constraints on Hamas and the limits of its power, and more prone to engage in conciliation and compromise (at least until the recent radicalization produced by the general deterioration of the situation in Palestine).

- Describing a specific Islamist movement as either “radical” or “moderate” may also be misleading because, in practice, the

frontier between “radical” and “moderate” Islamism is often elusive or porous.

(1) Most Islamist movements are divided into competing tendencies that are themselves located at different points along a radical-to-moderate axis. Therefore, where the movement as a whole stands on the continuum depends largely on the changing balance of power between “moderate” and “radical” tendencies within it, as well as by the shifting political environment that often determines the evolution of that balance.

(2) Islamist movements generally described as radical may also be capable of engaging in the give-and-take of democratic politics, as Hizballah deputies have done in Lebanon’s parliament since 1992. Armed resistance to occupation does not preclude pragmatic, legalistic action in other arenas. Similarly, since its founding in 1988, Hamas has behaved in a manner that contrasts sharply with the widespread but misleading image of it as a dogmatic, ideologically-driven movement that is not amenable to the kind of cost-benefit calculations associated with pluralistic politics. In reality, Hamas has shown far more flexibility than it is usually given credit for. It has responded in a very pragmatic manner to changing political circumstances and adjusted its rhetoric and behavior accordingly. It has not let itself become a prisoner of its past rhetoric. In its attitude toward Israel, the peace process and the Palestinian Authority, it has shown itself capable of taking into account new opportunities and constraints as they have arisen.¹⁸

(3) Islamist movements are not frozen in time as either radical or moderate. Radical Islamist movements can moderate their attitude over time, while mainstream

Islamists can be radicalized. Such evolutions largely reflect changing political conditions and the shifting sets of opportunities and constraints that they create for Islamist movements, as well as the evolving balance of power between “radicals” and “moderates” within these movements. For instance, Algeria’s FIS experienced a sharp radicalization following the military coup of January 1992, which discredited moderates within it while appearing to vindicate those radicals who had denounced the democratic process as a sham and warned that the military would never allow Islamists to win a free and fair election. Conversely, during the 1990s, Lebanon’s Hizballah was able to change its image from terrorist, revolutionary organization to mainstream political party. It publicly dropped its goal of creating an Islamic republic and instead accepted Lebanon’s multiconfessional system. In the Chamber of Deputies, its representatives showed themselves to be pragmatic, savvy politicians. By behaving responsibly and following the rules of legislative politics, they contributed to a marked improvement in the general perception of Hizballah, both within and outside of Lebanon. Israel’s withdrawal from south Lebanon in May 2000 created new incentives for Hizballah to complete its transformation from guerrilla organization to political machine. Having lost a major trump card (its role as a vanguard of the Lebanese resistance to Israeli occupation) but also basking in the glow of its victory over Israel, Hizballah was expected to redirect its energies inward, focusing on broadening its political base by addressing the practical concerns of an electorate weary of war and politics-as-usual. The reality has been more nuanced: while Hizballah has redoubled its effort to gain

political ground through savvy media campaigns and skillful positioning, it has not abandoned armed activities against Israel. In so doing, the organization has shown that pragmatic, mainstream behavior on domestic issues can go hand in hand with more aggressive, militant stances on foreign-policy questions, especially those seen as threats to national security and sovereignty, or as matters of pan-Arab solidarity.

Though less clearly drawn than Hizballah’s, the cases of Egypt’s and Algeria’s radical Islamist groups are also revealing. In Egypt, following a failed Islamist insurgency that lasted from 1992 until 1997, key members of the Gamaa Islamiyya called, from jail, for a unilateral cessation of violence against the state and subsequently asked permission to establish a political party (a request that was turned down by the authorities). Though exiled political leaders condemned this new policy, and while many observers saw it as more a tactical decision than a genuine and sincere change of strategy and approach, other analysts concluded that the new attitude of former Gamaa activists represented a fundamental shift in their ideology. In Algeria, too, leaders of the Islamic rebellion concluded in 1997 that the policies followed by radical Islamists had been self-defeating and had alienated society. Consequently, they called for a unilateral ceasefire. Unlike in Egypt, however, a large segment of the Islamist tendency was allowed to take part in the political process, and several of its key leaders even endorsed the candidacy of Abdelaziz Bouteflika, elected president in April 1999.

(4) The fluid nature of the frontier between extremist and moderate Islamist groups is also evident when supposedly “mainstream” Islamists refuse to disavow

unambiguously the violence of radical groups, or disavow it publicly while privately adopting a more ambivalent stance. Similarly, there may be close personal relationships and ideological affinities between radical Islamists and those affiliated with more moderate tendencies. While moderates may disagree with the methods of the extremists, they may share some of the same ultimate objectives, including the establishment of a state based on the sharia. After all, the social and political order that “jihadist Salafis” seek to establish is not significantly different from that espoused by more quietist Salafis. Such shared outlooks can generate solidarities that transcend disagreements over particular tactics and strategies. Significantly, throughout the 1980s and 1990s, jihadist Salafis received generous financial support from wealthy, reform-oriented Salafi contributors in the Gulf.

(5) Radical Islamist ideologies often trace their roots to mainstream Islamist worldviews, and extremist Islamist movements often have developed out of moderate ones. Consider for instance the forebear of all Islamist groups in the Middle East, the Muslim Brotherhood (MB), created in Egypt in 1928 by a schoolteacher named Hassan al-Banna. The MB is usually described as a “mainstream organization.” Originally, it was intended merely as a movement for spiritual and moral reform, and its emphasis was less on politics than on charitable activities and religious education. Yet, as it expanded during the 1930s, and as it became active on the Egyptian political scene, the MB also became host to a variety of more militant tendencies. Some broke off from the MB and created their own organizations. But within the MB

itself, a secret paramilitary wing was formed in the late 1930s called the “secret apparatus” (*al-jihaz al-sirri*). That group carried out attacks against the British, the monarchy and senior officials. In 1948-49, shortly after the MB played a key role in mobilizing and sending volunteers to fight in the war in Palestine, its conflict with the monarchy reached its climax. Concerned with the increasing assertiveness and popularity of the MB, as well as with rumors that it was plotting a coup d’état, Prime Minister Nuqrashi Pasha disbanded it on December 8, 1948. Less than three weeks later, the MB retaliated by assassinating the prime minister. That in turn prompted the murder of al-Banna, presumably by a government agent, on February 12, 1949. In 1954, the MB was blamed for allegedly having tried to assassinate Gamal Abdel Nasser. That event resulted in a crackdown on the movement, the execution of its top leadership, and the jailing of thousands of its active members.

This brief history illustrates how easily “mainstream” Islamist movements can be radicalized, and how quickly the ensuing conflict with the authorities can spin out of control. A focus on the MB also reveals that radical groups often emerge from more “moderate” ones. The core members of radical Islamist groups in Egypt during the 1970s were often former MB activists who had languished (and been radicalized) in Nasser’s jails. Similarly, the Palestinian Hamas emerged in 1988 out of an internal coup within the Muslim Brotherhood, when a younger, more activist generation of modest social origins broke off from the MB, which at the time was dominated by an “old guard” of well-to-do merchants reluctant to confront Israel and openly resist the occupation.¹⁹

• Finally, the notion that radical Islamist groups give priority to violent political action, while moderate ones are more apt to rely on grass-roots charitable and educational activities also distorts a more complex reality. In fact, social work has been critical to the appeal and success of groups such as Hizballah and Hamas, which are usually labelled “radical.” Hamas’s deep roots in Palestinian society have much to do with the services it provides to the community through the hospitals, clinics, welfare organizations, schools, libraries, kindergartens and clubs attached to it. Similarly, in Lebanon, Hizballah has benefited considerably from the many years it has spent delivering relief, health and educational services. This activism has fed its appeal among the more impoverished segments of the population. Back in 1988, after intra-Christian clashes in East Beirut had left the residents of Beirut’s southern suburbs without potable water and electricity, Hizballah provided generators and ensured a daily replenishment of local reservoirs by using trucks to bring water to affected areas. Three years later, during the harsh 1991-92 winter that hit the Bekaa Valley particularly hard, Hizballah stepped into the vacuum left by the government and organized teams of relief workers who cleared roads blocked by snow and distributed blankets and food to the poor. More recently, in the wake of Israel’s devastating April 1996 Operation Grapes of Wrath, Hizballah helped repair or rebuild an estimated 5,000 homes as well as many bridges and roads destroyed or damaged by Israeli shelling.

On a day-to-day basis, Hizballah runs community centers and provides subsidized services and goods. It manages supermar-

kets and cooperatives that sell food at discounted prices. It cares for orphans, elderly persons and the families of those killed or wounded in attacks against Israel. Its schools provide a low-cost education which is often of higher quality than that of state-run schools. It awards scholarships and offers interest-free loans to the needy. It manages dispensaries, clinics and four hospitals. Even those services and goods for which Hizballah usually charges a fee are provided free to impoverished families, including medicine and hospitalization in Hizballah’s hospitals and clinics, education in the schools run by Hizballah staff, and food packages in Hizballah-run supermarkets.²⁰

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

Distinguishing between moderate and radical Islamists has clear policy implications, both for host governments and for the United States. While fleshing out those implications and looking at the empirical bases for them goes beyond the scope of this paper, I will summarize the essence of the debate.²¹

Those who stress the need to differentiate between “mainstream” and “extremist” forms of political Islam usually suggest that the main drift of government policy should be to isolate, delegitimize and marginalize the extremists, while providing the moderates with the incentives and rewards to play a constructive political and social role. Implicit or explicit in this reasoning are several interrelated assumptions or claims:

- a. When “mainstream” Islamist movements are given an opportunity to express themselves relatively freely and are allowed to pursue their objectives within the confines of the legal political

system, they typically refrain from violence and can play the role of a loyal opposition. Consequently, the argument goes, the more open the political system, the stronger moderate Islamists are likely to be relative to their more radical counterparts, the more likely it becomes that moderate Islamists will show a propensity to engage in the give-and-take of democratic politics, and the more religious radicalism will be held in check. Even when the participation of moderate Islamists in the system appears to be driven by opportunism and tactical considerations, that situation may change over time. With the proper incentives and rewards, moderate Islamists may develop a stake in the existing sociopolitical order and therefore a more genuine attachment to it.

b. By contrast, regimes whose response to Islamism revolves primarily or exclusively around an undifferentiated repression of Islamist movements will play into the hands of the violent fringe. Across-the-board repression will discredit the moderates, give credence to the positions embraced by the radicals, and drive many of the former into the arms of the latter. Instead, government policy should seek to multiply opportunities for moderate Islamists to play a constructive political role and use them as safety valves against radical tendencies. It should involve a carefully considered mix of carrots and sticks, cracking down on violent organizations while seeking to bring moderate groups into the political process. Such a two-track policy will serve to demonstrate that violence will not be tolerated, whereas moderation pays off and results in tangible benefits.

The reasoning that has just been articulated is not devoid of merits, but it

also leaves some important questions unanswered. For one, what happens if and when “moderate” Islamists, benefiting from a relatively open political process, come to power and then change their position regarding their earlier-stated desire to preserve a pluralistic, democratic order? What if their previous embrace of the “one person, one vote” principle turns into a position that can be summarized as “one person, one vote, one time”? What if moderate Islamists use the democratic process to come to power and then abolish that process?²² An academic observer may have the luxury of saying that the only way to determine whether moderate Islamists are truly committed to democracy, and/or whether they are capable of controlling more radical factions, is to “test” them. Allow them to take part in a relatively open political process and see how democratically they behave if and when they rise to power. That, however, is a position with which policy makers – or those likely to suffer under a repressive government that discriminates against minorities, women and secular-oriented individuals – are likely to feel uncomfortable. For the United States, the problem is compounded by the possibility that “moderate Islamists” may be “moderate” insofar as their domestic-policy orientations are concerned, but that their positions on regional issues, such as relations between Israel and the Arab world, may be in sharp contrast to Washington’s.

Finally, to the extent that a given Islamist movement is often composed of several wings that hold different if not contradictory views regarding democracy, human rights and relations with the outside world, how can a coherent policy toward such a movement be developed? Even if

“moderates” appear to constitute the dominant trend within that movement, how can government policy toward it reflect the possibility that the extremists might use the moderates as a front or that under some circumstances the former might displace the latter? How can policy reduce the likelihood that moderates will be outflanked by more radical factions? After all, between 1989 and 1991 in Algeria, the FIS was widely viewed by experts as a “mainstream” Islamist movement, but moderates in its ranks were very quickly bypassed and neutralized by extremists after January 1992. Besides, historically, when movements split between moderates and radicals have come to power, more often than not it is (at least in the early stages) the radicals who have been able to displace the moderates, not the other way around (in the region, the Iranian revolution may be seen as the latest manifestation of that phenomenon).

These and other considerations lead some analysts to question the appropriateness, for policy purposes, of drawing a distinction between moderate and radical Islamists. Such analysts believe that Islamists cannot truly be accommodated within a democratic system. In their view, Islamists may profess a commitment to democracy but only for tactical reasons, when they stand to benefit from greater political space. At heart, they never espouse wholeheartedly democracy and its values. The kind of society and political order that they envision is irreconcilable with a liberal, competitive political system that does not discriminate against certain groups and constituencies. Moreover, they

contend, there is no strong evidence that policies of accommodation prompt Islamist parties and leaders to moderate their views and become more genuinely tolerant of, and open to, alternative viewpoints and ideas. In fact, quite the opposite may take place, as Islamists become emboldened by their increasing influence.

In fact, according to those same analysts, efforts to appease, co-opt or integrate Islamist movements into the political process are likely to backfire, creating a context within which political radicalism and/or or social intolerance ultimately may prevail. Islamists may make inroads into centers of power, and their norms and outlook may spread to ever-wider segments of society. According to this view, accommodation of political Islam is therefore a dangerous and self-defeating behavior. A desire to placate or appeal to moderate Islamists may prompt regimes to adopt policies that slowly change, for the worse, the face and social fabric of their countries, undermining a tradition of tolerance, threatening peaceful coexistence with religious minorities, making societies more rigid, and progressively creating an environment in which extremist views may flourish.

Ultimately, the validity of such claims must be tested against the weight of the empirical evidence. A close examination of this record, followed by a broad-based debate on its significance, is more than ever necessary if the United States is to make informed policy choices regarding one of the most difficult challenges it has ever confronted.

¹ Olivier Roy, *The Failure of Political Islam* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994), p. viii.

² Ibid.

³ Martin E. Marty and R. Scott Appleby, “Foreword,” *Islamic Fundamentalisms and the Gulf Crisis*, James

Piscatori, ed., (Chicago: The American Academy of Arts and Sciences, 1991), p. xii.

⁴ See for instance Joel Beinin and Joe Stork, "On Modernity, Historical Specificity, and International Context of Political Islam," *Political Islam* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1997), pp. 3-4.

⁵ That argument is developed in Marty and Appleby, op. cit., pp. x-xi.

⁶ François Burgat, *L'islamisme en face* (Paris: La Découverte, 2002), pp. 275-276.

⁷ Roy, op. cit., p. 33.

⁸ See Ibid., pp. 38-39 and p. 197.

⁹ See Chapter 11, "L'islamisme et les femmes," Burgat, op. cit.

¹⁰ That argument was first advanced in Roy, op. cit., especially Chapter 5 and Conclusion.

¹¹ Roy, op. cit., was the first to develop that thesis, which at the time went against the conventional wisdom. More recently, see Gilles Kepel, *Jihad: expansion et déclin de l'islamisme* (Paris: Gallimard, 2000).

¹² See Ahmed Rashid, *Taliban: Militant Islam, Oil & Fundamentalism in Central Asia* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000).

¹³ See for instance Bruno Etienne, *L'Islamisme radical* (Paris: Hachette, 1987).

¹⁴ On jihadist Salafism, see Kepel, op. cit., especially pp. 223-238, and Quintan Wiktorowicz, "The New Global Threat: Transnational Salafis and Jihad," *Middle East Policy*, Vol. VIII, No. 4, December 2001, pp. 18-38.

¹⁵ Kepel, op. cit., p. 228.

¹⁶ One of the most effective and comprehensive presentations of this feature can still be found in John L. Esposito, *The Islamic Threat: Myth or Reality?* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999).

¹⁷ Many of these arguments can be found in Scott W. Hibbard and David Little, *Islamic Activism and U.S. Foreign Policy* (Washington, DC: United States Institute of Peace Press, 1997). See also Fawaz A. Gerges, *America and Political Islam: Clash of Cultures or Clash of Interests?* (Cambridge University Press, 1999), as well as the debate between Mumtaz Ahmad and I. William Zartman, "Political Islam: Can it Become a Loyal Opposition?" *Middle East Policy*, Vol. V, No. 1, January 1997, pp. 68-84.

¹⁸ See the excellent analysis conducted by two Israeli scholars in Shaul Mishal and Avraham Sela, *The Palestinian Hamas: Vision, Violence, and Coexistence* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000).

¹⁹ Glenn E. Robinson, *Building a Palestinian State: The Incomplete Revolution* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997), Chapter 6.

²⁰ A brief analysis of Hizballah from the perspective of this paper can be found in Augustus Richard Norton, "Hizballah: From Radicalism to Pragmatism?" *Middle East Policy*, Vol. V, No. 4, January 1998, pp. 147-158.

²¹ See Hibbard and Little, op. cit., and Esposito, op. cit., pp. 273-275.

²² Robert Pelletreau, assistant secretary of state for Near Eastern Affairs during the Clinton administration, as well as his predecessor, Edward Djerejian, repeatedly voiced such concerns publicly.