

The State(s) of Ideology in the Middle East: Introduction

by [Jacob Olidort \(/experts/jacob-olidort\)](/experts/jacob-olidort)

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Jacob Olidort \(/experts/jacob-olidort\)](/experts/jacob-olidort)

Jacob Olidort, a 2016-2017 Soref fellow at The Washington Institute, focuses on the history and ideology of Salafi movements and Islamist groups in the Middle East.



Brief Analysis

Western policy must be precise and consistent in its use of terms, objectives, and methods in order to account for differing local perceptions.

In January 2016, The Washington Institute sponsored a daylong workshop on the challenges to U.S. policy in the Middle East posed by new trends in political ideology. This PolicyWatch is the first in a [series of written contributions by participants. \(/policy-analysis/view/27683\)](/policy-analysis/view/27683)

Last month, the fifth anniversary of the beginning of the Arab Spring, Washington Institute experts sat down with invited members from government and the academy to discuss how U.S. engagement with the Middle East has changed with respect to the new resonance of political ideology. This is the first workshop in a series, held under the Chatham House Rule, that highlights emerging regional trends and their policy implications. The next meeting, to convene in the summer, will examine the subject of sectarianism. Below are key insights from the meeting that are especially pertinent to U.S. foreign policy in the Middle East today. In keeping with the Chatham House Rule, these insights are unattributed and, furthermore, reflect only an interpretation of the points raised. Any inaccuracies or errors are therefore the author's alone.

Resonance of Islamic Political Ideologies

A central insight was that a number of the most violent groups, especially the Islamic State (IS), neither desire broad popularity nor have it across the Middle East. At the same time, analysts struggle to understand how groups perceive the relationship between religion and politics. Specifically, while income and social services are generally more important to local communities than ideology, many do see religion as relevant to their lives, although perhaps in different ways. An example of this is the popularity of sharia, Islamic law, in some countries, which may not necessarily conflict with democratic forms of government and may be only personal and not political

in nature.

IS stands out in a number of ways regarding its appeal and intentions -- especially its lack of interest in attracting the Arab public (and, instead, only those who share its worldview) and its lack of interest in taking over existing states (and, rather, taking over territory). Ironically, whereas IS has low appeal among many communities in the Middle East, its message does resonate for some groups in Europe. While it has more resources and capabilities than al-Qaeda, the group's self-isolating qualities are also its weaknesses.

Because of the differing view of ideology between local populations and violent groups, U.S. policy must be precise and consistent in terminology. Especially important is that the nature of regional conflicts goes deeper than mere Sunni-Shiite rivalry and that, while Westerners use the term "violent extremism" to describe IS, none of its recruits believe they are joining a "violent extremist" enterprise. Moreover, beyond the fight against U.S. enemies, Washington needs to be equally precise in its terminology when reaching out to friends -- especially to domestic and regional Muslim partners.

The success of the U.S. battlefield fight against IS depends on how both that threat and the U.S. relationship to it are perceived by regional partners. Concerning the former, for all such partners, stopping the Islamic State is a second priority, whereas for the United States it is a first. Concerning the latter, the lack of a U.S. strategy in Syria, partnered with the Iran nuclear deal, perpetuates the image of a U.S. alliance with Iran and its proxies.

Islamist Groups in New Political Spaces

As for Islamist groups operating within existing political spaces -- in particular in Egypt, Tunisia, and Turkey -- their methods and message, once responsible for their ascent, today have either marginalized them or forced them to rethink their strategies. The Muslim Brotherhood's failures in Egypt happened in part because the group was too focused on sharia as a slogan rather than a substantive intervention. By contrast, it is the Salafists who have spent the preceding decades defining their substantive intervention on sharia but who lacked political slogans -- allowing them to navigate today's hostile environment toward Islamist groups in Egypt.

By contrast, in Tunisia and Turkey Islamists have muted their emphasis on applying sharia, but -- because of the regional and local contexts -- for different reasons and to different effects. In Tunisia, the Ennahda Party has opted for a more populist approach to politics, while the more conservative Salafists, for whom popular support hovers at 15 percent, have increasingly moved toward local jihadist groups. In Turkey, for its part, Islamists have not called for implementing sharia because it is illegal to do so, based on Mustafa Kemal Ataturk's ban on religious expressions in the political sphere. Nevertheless, Turkish society remains religious and, according to Pew Research Center polls, 30 to 40 percent of Turks see themselves as Middle Eastern and Muslim first. Indeed, efforts exist to rewrite the constitution.

In Turkey's case, a major question also centers on whether President Recep Tayyip Erdogan himself is interested in taking the country in a more Islamist direction, and thus far it is unclear whether and to what extent his statements have any real-world implications. Most famously, he has likened democracy to a bus that you may get off once you reach your destination. While Erdogan first ran for prime minister in 2002 on a platform of economic governance and not on implementing sharia, his tenure has seen the empowerment of center-right parties and the sidelining of moderate political voices.

Differences such as those separating Egypt, Tunisia, and Turkey affect party dynamics and their relationships to voters and the political system. While in Egypt the Muslim Brotherhood had gained discipline before the Arab Spring in part because it had been excluded from power, in Tunisia and Turkey, where Islamist parties were incorporated into the electoral system, Ennahda and Erdogan's Justice and Development Party (AKP) developed real platforms of social and economic reform and drew votes from non-Islamist cross-sections of society.

States and Their New Uses of Ideology

In Iran, power politics are very much alive, and their potential has been equally influenced by Sunni extremist thinkers like Sayyed Qutb (d. 1966) as by the politicization of Shiite principles like the imamate. To a greater extent than in the Sunni experience, Iranian political ideology has been nearly synonymous with theology, although government actions are compelled by more than ideology alone. Furthermore, even if the political ideology wanes in influence, it is important to remember that Iranian society remains religious, even as the current generation is much less trusting of official religious institutions than the previous one was. Moreover, the clergy's relationship with the government has been particularly complicated since the revolution, with clergy becoming more financially independent -- many have started their own businesses -- but more politically dependent.

Iranian foreign policy is guided by alignments that are anti-Western, and its decisionmaking -- on both domestic and foreign issues -- results as much from its unique political institutions as from the personalities involved. That said, it will be very difficult to eventually replace the almost seventy-year-old Supreme Leader with a figure who can centralize power as he has. Moreover, today's big organizations and the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) are no longer beholden to the government, as they largely were thirty years ago. These political differences between now and then suggest that any government shakedown will present a leadership crisis, especially given that the current government structure was established in response to the monarchy. One likely outcome is that a feebler ayatollah may be selected to hold nominal authority and that political decisions will be driven by the country's big organizations.

Jacob Olidort is a Soref Fellow at The Washington Institute. ❖

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