

U.S. Politicians as Radical Islamists

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Brief Analysis

No, this is not the revelation of some hidden conspiracy through which Islamism has penetrated political life in the United States. It is instead a reflection on the unintended consequences of political positions that ought to be better thought out. A recurrent theme in the assessment expressed by a number of U.S. politicians of all stripes is that Islam is not merely a religion, but also a political system. Further elaborations on the theme underline that as such, Islam ought not be shielded from the criticism directed at political ideologies. It is accordingly no infringement on anyone's religious freedoms to attempt to curtail the ascent of Islam as it tries to impose itself on U.S. public life.

This narrative has gained widespread popular support, but it features a basic confusion between Islam and Islamism. Islam is the vast designation of the religious and cultural experiences of a multitude of individuals and communities across time and place. It is plural by definition, and is a reflection of these parties' dynamic understanding of the defining experience of the Prophet in 7th century Arabia. Islamism is but one expression of a such modern understanding by some Muslims. Islamism views Islam as a political system, of variable level of detail and implications. Islamism is contains multiple facets, ranging from the referential—formulations that locate the fundamental principles of political, ethical and spiritual life in the Islamic legacy—to the radical, which rejects any qualifications of the Islamic framework, and postulates its completeness and self-sufficiency.

It should be evident to any non-casual observer of the Islamic intellectual scene that there is no consensus on any delineation of the faith, its practice, or its implications for political life. Moreover, there is no agreed upon orthodoxy. There are certainly many hard pronouncements, but they are invariably part of a contest to shape the opinion of the intended audience, often on the basis of sincere convictions of their validity, but sometimes as deliberate manipulations aimed at mobilization. Much of the world of Islamism consist of individuals and groups genuinely seeking a world of justice and harmony on the basis of the moral and spiritual principles of their religious legacy, however flawed or unlikely that may appear to non-Islamist eyes. At the margin of this world lie formulations of segregation, separation, and isolation. And further to the extreme reside conceptions of enmity and hostility against the "others." These "others" are primarily Muslims not sharing the convictions, who rank well ahead of non-Muslims in concern towards them. The most extreme forms of such pronouncements are those advocated by radical militant factions that seek global warfare, framed as an existential or apocalyptic fight. These factions are on a constant quest for recruits.

The typical profile of such recruits targeted by radicalization and indoctrination does not match the image of the pious Muslim steeped in his or her faith. Many elements of push and pull are at play, from feelings of marginalization to the desire of sanguine satisfaction. Undoubtedly, Islamic religious and cultural identity provides a baseline for recruitment. Potential recruits attracted by the content of the recruitment message, while not stemming from a Muslim background, have to undergo conversion. It is not, however, a conversion to “Islam”, in any of its multiple manifestations, but one straight to the cult of murder and death that is cloaked with an Islamic garb.

The “Islamic State,” Jihadism, and Islamism are all minority manifestations of Islam, albeit ones that derive much of their structural and cultural elements from the widespread experience of totalitarianism, violence, and militancy of the 20th century. It is no more incumbent on individual Muslims to denounce these expressions or be held accountable for their existence than it is on any other individual. It is, however, the responsibility of custodians of the legacy and the faith, scholars (Muslims and otherwise) and Islamic clerics to generate knowledge substance to reduce the susceptibility of those vulnerable to the reductionist yet apparently attractive message of empowerment offered by the radical cult of death.

One such required tool is clearly presented information that emphasizes that the claim of Islamism as unique normative Islam is advocacy, not absolute truth. When U.S. opinion-makers opine about the exceptionalism of Islam as a political system fused with a religion, they are unwittingly engaged in the promotion of a contested proposition. Their utterances are often recycled into sound-bites in militant video releases and glossy magazines to promote the cause of radical Islamism as true Islam.

The Obama Administration, as well as many liberals and progressives, may have erred on the side of political correctness in refusing to label the terrorism of the Islamic State and other radical factions as Islamic. It is indeed Islamic, albeit several standard deviations away from the Islamic median. It is Islamist, and also well away from the Islamist median. On the other hand, US politicians eager to label these movements as “radical Islam” or “Islamic terrorism” often seem to accept the unstated premise of a war of religions or a clash of civilizations, with the qualifier “radical” included merely for decorum. Such a view is certainly their prerogative, even if woefully simplistic and flawed. It is, however, a view laden with consequences.

The self-declared Islamic Caliphate has implemented measures of expulsion and compulsory pledges of allegiance for Christian Syrians and Iraqis with the misfortune of living under its control. As some U.S. politicians contemplate motions of a similar heft against Muslims, and as they engage in truncated assessments that bear little resemblance to the cultural and religious complexity of Islam, these politicians, and the presumed experts that provide them with the basis for their positions, are entitled to the full appreciation of the one group in the world of Islam that shares their convictions: radical Islamists.

As thoroughly revealed by anecdotal and systematic assessments, radical Islamists have failed to break into the mainstream of Islamic culture worldwide. This is also true in the United States. However, with many US politicians espousing and promoting the radical Islamist position, a break in their favor has almost occurred. It may not be a hidden conspiracy, but its effect in polarizing US culture and alienating Muslim Americans is all the same. ❖

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