

Islamists Are Not Our Friends

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Despite tensions stemming from their domestic policies, non-Islamist actors such as Egypt and the Gulf monarchies are America's natural partners in the region because they favor stability and the free flow of oil and gas while opposing terrorism.

A new fault line has emerged in Middle Eastern politics, one that will have profound implications for America's foreign policy in the region. This rift is not defined by those who support or oppose the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS), or by conflict between Sunnis and Shiites and the proxy war between Saudi Arabia and Iran. It is characterized by a fundamental division between Islamists and non-Islamists.

On one side are the Islamists -- both Sunni and Shiite. ISIS and the Muslim Brotherhood represent the Sunni end of the spectrum, while the Islamic Republic of Iran and its militias, including Hezbollah (in Lebanon and Syria) and Asaib Ahl al-Haq (in Iraq), constitute the other. Many of these Islamists are at war with one other, but they are also engaged in a bitter struggle with non-Islamists to define the fundamental identity of the region and its states. What the Islamists all have in common is that they subordinate national identities to an Islamic identity.

To be sure, not all are as extreme as ISIS, which seeks to obliterate sovereign nations under the aegis of a caliphate. But the Muslim Brotherhood is committed to the Umma, the larger Muslim community. One reason behind the popular revolt against its rule in Egypt was that the Brotherhood violated a basic principle of national identity: It was Islamist before it was Egyptian.

Now, President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi sees his country engaged in an existential conflict with the Muslim Brotherhood. He is backed financially by Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and Kuwait. Mr. Sisi also collaborates closely with Algeria, and has support from Morocco and Jordan.

During the recent conflict in the Gaza Strip, there were demonstrations against Israel in Europe -- but not in the Arab

states. Unlike Turkey and Qatar, which support the Muslim Brotherhood, the other Sunni states in the region wanted to weaken Hamas, the Brotherhood's Palestinian wing. Those states were alienated when Washington turned to Qatar and Turkey as possible mediators of a cease-fire in the recent conflict.

The Arab Awakening of 2011 did not usher in an era of democracy, nor could it. The institutions of civil society were too weak; the political culture of winner-take-all too strong; sectarian differences too powerful; and a belief in pluralism too inchoate. Instead, the awakening produced political vacuums and a struggle over identity.

President Obama is right to note the old order's disappearance in the region and the time it's taking for a new one to emerge. The administration is struggling to define an effective strategy -- but the Islamist vs. non-Islamist divide creates an opening.

The non-Islamists include the traditional monarchies, authoritarian governments in Egypt and Algeria, and secular reformers who may be small in number but have not disappeared. They do not include Bashar al-Assad's regime in Syria; he is completely dependent on Iran and Hezbollah and cannot make decisions without them.

Today, the non-Islamists want to know that the United States supports them. For America, that means not partnering with Iran against ISIS, though both countries may avoid interfering with each other's operations against the insurgents in Iraq.

It means actively competing with Iran in the rest of the region, independently of whether an acceptable nuclear deal can be reached with Tehran. It means recognizing that Egypt is an essential part of the anti-Islamist coalition, and that American military aid should not be withheld because of differences over Egypt's domestic behavior.

America should also coordinate with Egypt and the U.A.E. when they bomb Islamist targets in Libya, or elsewhere. Coordination will make their military operations more effective, as well as provide America with greater ability to influence their actions. (And Washington would want to be able to head off military acts that it sees as ill-advised.)

The Obama administration worries about the consequences of excluding all Islamists. It worries, too, about appearing to give a blank check to authoritarian regimes, when it believes there need to be limits and that these regimes are likely to prove unstable over time. But as Egypt and the U.A.E. showed with the airstrikes on Islamists in Libya, some of America's traditional partners are ready to act without us, convinced that the administration does not see all Islamists as a threat -- and that America sees its interests as different from theirs. That is a problem.

These non-Islamists are America's natural partners in the region. They favor stability, the free flow of oil and gas, and they oppose terrorism. The forces that threaten us also threaten them. The Obama administration needs to follow three principles in these partnerships.

First, focus on security and stability. Nothing, including tolerant, pluralist societies, is possible without it.

Second, do not reach out to Islamists; their creed is not compatible with pluralism or democracy. In Tunisia, the Ennahda party surrendered power only when it realized its policies had produced such a backlash that the party's very survival was threatened. Islamists, even apparent moderates like those of Ennahda, must be left with no choice but coexistence.

Turkey is a special case because it is a NATO ally. There is much we can do with Turkey when it comes to fighting ISIS, but the Turkish president, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, should understand that his support for the Muslim Brotherhood limits what we will do with him and necessarily isolates Turkey from its neighbors.

Third, America's support for non-Islamist partners does not require surrendering our voice or supporting every domestic policy. We should press them on pluralism, minority rights and the rule of law.

The new fault line in the Middle East is a real opportunity for America. Yes, the United States will face challenges and

have to manage tensions between our values and our interests. No strategy is free of risk, but joining with our natural partners offers the best way forward.

Dennis Ross is the counselor and William Davidson Distinguished Fellow at The Washington Institute. ❖

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