

How to Deal with Islamist Movements in Post-Revolutionary Regimes?

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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Brief Analysis

Being less violent than al-Qaeda is not enough: Washington should demand that potential partners in post-despotic Middle Eastern states demonstrate acceptance of civil society, liberal values, and international agreements and borders.

Initially slow to react to the string of Jasmine revolutions rocking the Middle East and North Africa, the Obama administration is now proactively engaged in policy and analytical reassessments to determine how to respond to various contingencies arising from the new political horizon rising across the region. One such internal assessment, completed in mid-February, focused on differences between various types of Islamist movements that promote Islamic law in government. Such a review is timely, commendable, and appears to be asking some of the right questions. That, however, is no guarantee it will reach the right conclusions.

To be sure, significant ideological differences separate al-Qaeda from the likes of the Muslim Brotherhood, not the least of which is the sharp contrast between al-Qaeda's distaste for national boundaries in its quest for an Islamic Caliphate and the Muslim Brotherhood's ability to mold its Islamist ideology to the specific nationalist contexts of each country in which it is present. And yet, the Brotherhood's Islamist, illiberal ideology includes tenets that raise significant questions about its qualifications as a partner in the democratic process. The threshold for partnership cannot simply be that a group is not quite as extreme or violent as al-Qaeda.

The *Washington Post* quotes an anonymous "senior administration official" explaining the internal policy deliberation as saying "It's the behavior of political parties and governments that we will judge them on, not their relationship with Islam." But their behaviors leave much to be desired. The same article cites "signs that the uprisings could give way to more religious forces," and points to "an influential Yemeni cleric" who recently called for the government of President Ali Abdullah Saleh to be replaced by an Islamist government. What the article failed to note is that the cleric in question, Sheikh Abdul Majid al-Zindani, is a U.S. and U.N. designated terrorist described by the Treasury Department in 2004 as a "Bin Laden loyalist" who actively recruited for al-Qaeda training camps, procured weapons on behalf of al-Qaeda and other terrorists, and served as a contact for al-Qaeda affiliated terrorist groups, among other charges.

In Egypt, another extremist affiliated with the Muslim Brotherhood, Sheikh Yusuf Qaradawi, recently enjoyed a triumphant return from Qatar to Egypt where, speaking publicly in Egypt for the first time since 1981, he addressed an audience of hundreds of thousands. But while Qaradawi is often described as a moderate Sunni theologian, he has issued religious edicts justifying the use of suicide bombings in Israel and Iraq. He is the founder of the Union of Good, an umbrella organization created by Hamas leadership whose primary purpose, according to the Treasury Department press statement announcing the designation of the group as a terrorist entity, "is to strengthen Hamas' political and military position in the West Bank and Gaza." The constant theme throughout Qaradawi's 2003 book, *Fatawa Min Ajl Falastin (Fatwas on Palestine)* is that violent hatred of Israel and Jews is not just sanctioned but required under Islamic law. God, he makes clear, mandates the destruction of Israel:

[W]e believe that the battle between us and the Jews is coming.... Such a battle is not driven by nationalistic causes or patriotic belonging; it is rather driven by religious incentives. This battle is not going to happen between Arabs and Zionists, or between Jews and Palestinians, or between Jews and anybody else. It is between Muslims and Jews as is clearly stated in the hadith. This battle will occur between the collective body of Muslims and the collective body of Jews, i.e., all Muslims and all Jews.

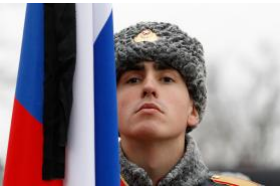
As the administration considers the differences between global jihadist terrorist groups and politically inclined Islamist groups, it would do well to reread British prime minister David Cameron's recent speech in Munich. Cameron cautioned that while Islam is not the problem, Islamist extremist ideology is. And as one moves along the spectrum of Islamist ideology, one will encounter both violent and nonviolent extremists. Both, Cameron stressed, are cause for concern. "As evidence emerges about the backgrounds of those convicted of terrorist offences," Cameron explained, "it is clear that many of them were initially influenced by what some have called 'nonviolent extremists' and then took those radical beliefs to the next level by embracing violence."

"If our policy can't distinguish between al-Qaeda and the Muslim Brotherhood," stated the same anonymous official cited by the *Post*, "we won't be able to adapt to this change" presented by the Jasmine revolutions. In fact, to adapt to these changes and be on the right side of history, what the administration really needs to do is consider what the appropriate threshold should be for partnering with the United States and participation in the democratic system. Failure to do just that has already led to governments led by Hamas in Gaza and Hizballah in Lebanon. Being less than al-Qaeda should not suffice. Tolerance, respect for women's rights, establishment of a strong civil society that promotes liberal values, and honoring international agreements and borders are more likely to produce the kind of truly free and democratic societies that promote long-term stability.

Matthew Levitt is director of The Washington Institute's *Stein Program on Counterterrorism and Intelligence* (<http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateI02.php?SID=11&newActiveSubNav=Stein%20Program%20on%20Counterterrorism%20and%20Intelligence&activeSubNavLink=templateI02.php%3FSID%3D11&newActiveNav=researchPr>)



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