

U.S. Policy toward Islamists:

Engagement versus Isolation

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In-Depth Reports

On September 24, 2005, Robert Malley and Robert Satloff addressed The Washington Institute's Weinberg Founders Conference. Mr. Malley is director of the Middle East and North Africa Program at the International Crisis Group. Previously, he served in the Clinton administration as special assistant to the president for Arab-Israeli affairs, and on the National Security Council staff as director for democracy, human rights, and humanitarian affairs. Dr. Satloff is executive director of the Institute and author of its 2004 monograph *The Battle of Ideas in the War on Terror: Essays on U.S. Public Diplomacy in the Middle East*. The following is a rapporteur's summary of their remarks.

Robert Malley

In dealing with political actors in the Middle East, the United States should engage certain types of Islamists but not others. Historically, Washington has followed this policy appropriately by engaging Islamists within the Saudi regime, the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI), and the Islamic Dawa Party in Iraq. The United States should continue its policy of not engaging organizations that close allies have banned or that appear on its own terrorism lists, such as Hizballah, Hamas, and the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt.

In order to distinguish between Islamists, one must first define their views. Islamist movements are those that actively support and promote beliefs, prescriptions, laws, and policies that they deem to be Islamic in character. Islam is a religion of law and public policy -- naturally, then, some view it as a set of prescriptions on how the polity should be organized. Arab regimes have often attempted to suppress Islamist movements, but this pressure has only spurred more people to gravitate toward such movements. Islamists now represent the most vibrant form of opposition politics in the Arab world, and it is impossible to discuss democracy without coming to terms with them. Indeed, the most significant debates in the Arab world occur not between jihadi Islamism and secular, pro-Western politics, but rather within the Islamist movements themselves.

One can distinguish between three types of Islamists. Political Islamists -- including the current ruling party in Turkey and the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, Jordan, and Syria -- aim to achieve political power through elections. Missionary Islamists -- such as the Salafists -- pursue social influence in order to purify the system and Islamicize

individuals and social mores. Finally, jihadi Islamists engage directly in violent struggle, whether locally (against impious regimes or foreign occupation) or as part of the global jihad against Western domination.

U.S. policy is currently fixated on political Islam, but the apolitical forms of Islamism are far more dangerous. While missionary Islamists and jihadis gravitate toward violence, political Islamists are the most competent in understanding democracy. Indeed, many political Islamists have recently come to respect the concepts of constitutionalism, rule of law, and judicial independence. Although this apparent shift may be tactical -- an acknowledgment of the advantages to be gained from forming coalitions with liberals and secularists -- political Islamists have nevertheless been brought closer to the values of many international human-rights organizations, which typically do not distinguish between secular and religious political detainees in their advocacy.

U.S. strategy in the Arab and Muslim worlds should not limit itself to supporting a select few secularists and liberals while excluding other figures. Instead, Washington should advocate structural reform (e.g., separation between military and civilian power; independent judiciaries; empowered parliaments) that would benefit all parties, not just one. If the United States attempts to support Arab secularists and liberals alone, its efforts are unlikely to help these groups. Alternatively, Washington could promote the cause of political Islamists within the wider Islamist camp.

Moreover, the United States should not attempt to impede local regimes from legitimizing Islamist movements. With regard to Hamas, Washington must set clear conditions for engagement with the group. Forestalling any possibility of such engagement and actively preventing the group's inclusion would be a mistake. Palestinian president Mahmoud Abbas's strategy entails incorporating Hamas in order to sustain the ceasefire, and the United States should not second-guess that policy. Similarly, Washington should not pick and choose human-rights violations with which to take issue. In particular, the U.S. habit of advocating on behalf of secularists but not defending religionists against violations undermines American policy in the region. Local perceptions of U.S. policies have a major impact on the ground.

Robert Satloff

The discussion of U.S. engagement of Islamists must be divided into a theoretical and a policy question. The theoretical question concerns whether Islamist parties are part of the solution to the Middle East's democracy deficit or part of the problem. The policy question concerns what sort of relations Washington should have with these parties.

Regarding the theoretical question, Islamism is the greatest ideological challenge America faces in the world today. Islamism and democracy are, by their very definition, antithetical. Islamists are those who advocate the creation of states based on the imposition of a certain interpretation of Muslim law, sharia, in place of manmade law. For some Islamists, gaining power is a step toward two key goals: erasing the boundaries between Muslim states in order to recreate the caliphate, and reversing modern notions of citizenship in order to establish the umma as the preeminent actor in international affairs.

To illustrate these points, consider the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood's views on democracy, as expressed on the group's website (www.ikhwanonline.com): "If democracy means that people decide who leads them, then [we] accept it; if it means that people can change the laws of Allah and follow what they wish to follow, then it is not acceptable."

Recently, much has been made of the differences between violent and nonviolent Islamist groups. The implication is that, by renouncing violence, a group essentially punches its entry ticket into the democratic game. Yet, one must keep in mind three important facts. First, Islamists view violence as a tactic, not a strategy. The Islamist strategy is unchanging: the transformation of existing regimes into sharia-based states. Some groups use revolutionary means (i.e., violence) to achieve this revolutionary end, while others use evolutionary means (i.e., elections). The end is always the same, though -- and always antidemocratic.

Second, no Islamist group has ever suspended violence except when pressured by a regime. In Algeria, Turkey, Jordan, Egypt, and elsewhere, Islamists eschew violence only when they have exhausted or been denied all alternatives to doing so. They have shown no evidence of a deep and long-lasting commitment to democratic politics.

Third, nonviolence is not the only commonly used test for inclusion in democratic politics; racism and ethnic incitement are widely used as well. For example, racist parties are banned in many European countries, and the literature and rhetoric of Islamist parties is often no less racist than that of these proscribed groups.

With regard to the policy question, the United States has no clear approach toward Islamists. Washington does not engage politically with terrorist groups and often recognizes other governments' bans on parties not deemed terrorist (such as the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt). At the same time, it does engage with Islamists who are legal in certain countries (e.g., the Justice and Development Party in Morocco). Washington has now begun to hint that it will support -- or at least acquiesce without protest to -- the political participation of Hamas in the upcoming Palestinian elections. White House press secretary Scott McClellan has stated that candidates running under the Hamas banner are "business professionals" concerned with quality-of-life issues and not engaged in terrorism. Although the Hamas platform does indeed call for greater government efficiency, the group has not renounced terrorism or the imposition of an Islamist state and thus cannot contribute to Palestinian democracy.

The United States should first seek to help its friends in the Middle East rather than engage its adversaries. This is particularly true when Washington has a choice. America does not owe Islamist groups the opportunity to achieve political power and demonstrate either their or our democratic credentials. After all, once in power, Islamists tend to moderate only where there is a national arbiter whose presence effectively forces them to do so (e.g., the army in Turkey; the king in Jordan and Morocco).

In essence, then, the U.S. government should promote democrats, not just democracy. Nonviolent Islamist parties, such as they are, have earned about as much claim for attention and affection as neo-Nazi parties in Europe or Jean-Marie Le Pen's National Front in France. We should not encourage political engagement with Islamists. Instead of moderating the radicals, let us commit ourselves to the project of empowering the moderates. We can do that only if we are more discriminate in how we promote democracy in the Middle East. ❖

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