

The Democracy Dilemma in the Middle East:

Are Islamists the Answer?

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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Brief Analysis

On April 19, 2005, Reuel Marc Gerecht and Robert Satloff held a policy debate at The Washington Institute's Special Policy Forum. Mr. Gerecht is a resident fellow at the American Enterprise Institute and author of *The Islamic Paradox: Shiite Clerics, Sunni Fundamentalists, and the Coming of Arab Democracy* (2004). Dr. Satloff is executive director of The Washington Institute and author, most recently, of the Institute monograph [**The Battle of Ideas in the War on Terror: Essays on U.S. Public Diplomacy in the Middle East \(templateC04.php?CID=65\)**](#) (2004). The following is a rapporteur's summary of their remarks.

REUEL MARC GERECHE

It is time for Washington to adopt a policy of accepting Islamist political parties as legitimate actors and even potential partners in the Middle East. Such parties offer an alternative to the violent radicalism of Osama bin Laden. Indeed, Shiite clerics and nonviolent Sunni fundamentalists are the key to isolating the more extreme fundamentalists and defeating them politically. Although the U.S. government should not assertively seek to "dialogue" with fundamentalists, it is not America's place to impose a litmus test on foreign governments as they consider whether to allow Islamist parties into the political process. The region's progressives and liberals, who are so popular in the West, are not the answer to "Bin Ladenism." They are weak, unpopular, and out of the mainstream in their home countries, and directing U.S. support to them would be a wasted effort.

Before the September 11 attacks, democracy was not high on the U.S. Middle East policy agenda. Some liberals believed that the only real path to democracy in the region was enlightened dictatorship, the route pursued by Kemal Ataturk in Turkey. After September 11, however, the conventional wisdom changed; the status quo clearly posed a danger to U.S. interests, with the marriage of autocracy and Islamic activism giving birth to Bin Ladenism. Only the spread of real, substantive democracy can break the nexus between tyranny and Islamic extremism. And democracy can never truly take root in the region unless Islamic fundamentalists are part of the process.

Currently, the chief philosophical debate in the Shiite world concerns the role of the clergy in public life. In this regard, Ayatollah Ali Hussein al-Sistani of Iraq has played a major positive role in countering the novelty of Khomeinism, which preached the rule of the clerics. Even though al-Sistani and many other Shiite clerics hold some

views that are abhorrent to Western ears and counter to U.S. policy, they also support democracy. U.S. officials need to recognize the enormous benefits to be derived from working with such figures on the task of anchoring democracy in Iraq, even if Iraqi democrats then advocate views that run counter to Washington's.

Similar efforts could be undertaken in the Sunni world. The rise to power of Sunni fundamentalists would force them to provide answers for the daily problems of their people and erode the appeal of the motto "Islam is the solution." Their success would also undermine the attraction of violent Sunni radicals. This process is the best antidote to Bin Ladenism and should be recognized as such by the U.S. government.

ROBERT SATLOFF

Islamism -- the effort to order society and create government based on Islamic law -- is the greatest ideological challenge facing the United States today. The goal of U.S. policy should be to undermine and defeat Islamists by identifying, nurturing, and supporting a wide coalition of non- and anti-Islamists.

Most observers tend to view violence as the litmus test of legitimacy -- if a group is nonviolent, it passes the test; if it advocates violence, it fails. This is a necessary but not sufficient criterion. After all, Islamists view violence as a tactic, not a strategy. Those Islamist groups that have renounced violence have done so only under pressure and when denied other alternatives. As such, there is no reason to believe that their commitment to peaceful participation in political life is anything other than instrumental and tactical.

The idea that moderate Islamists are the key to tempering radical Islamists is pure hypothesis. Although al-Sistani deserves praise for his restraint, betting on the clerics -- rather than on liberal democrats -- is still akin to throwing the dice. Indeed, the only examples of Islamists moderating when in power have occurred in countries with a "supreme national arbiter" (e.g., the king in Jordan; the army in Turkey) that can step in and enforce the rules of political life.

The standard of acceptability for participation in electoral politics should be set much higher than the mere cessation of violence. In order to gain inclusion in political dialogue with the United States, Islamist parties must pass two tests. The first is time. Turkey has been democratic for eighty years, and the army is still a central arbiter. The other test involves assessing the full scope of a particular group's policies in action, not just its verbal renunciation of violence. For example, if the Hamas charter were expunged of all references to the use of violence but retained its various xenophobic, conspiratorial, hysterically racist, and anti-Semitic elements, that would not be enough to gain U.S. support; Hamas would have to show in practice that its aims have shifted.

Although the United States does not have a say in whether Islamist parties are permitted to participate in political life in their own countries, Washington should have as little contact with such groups as possible -- preferably none. If the United States spends its money and political capital in the wrong place, it will not only aid its adversaries, but also undermine its natural allies: local democrats and reformers. Washington cannot have it both ways; the United States cannot support reformers and Islamists at the same time. Instead, it should advocate for individuals and institutions that share the universal values of rule of law, minority rights, tolerance, and so forth. In practical terms, this means a more assertive policy of investing in real-life democrats, not just democracy in the abstract.

This Special Policy Forum Report was prepared by Brooke Neuman. ❖

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