

Islam, Islamists, and U.S. Foreign Policy

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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Gilles Kepel is a professor at Sciences Po in Paris and one of Europe's leading experts on Islamism and the Middle East.



Brief Analysis

During the Cold War, Washington reached out to some Islamists in order to counter the Soviet threat. Some claim that engaging so-called "moderate" Islamists would serve U.S. interests today. But in any U.S.-Islamist dialogue, the Islamists are certain to demand concessions from the United States, including visas, freedom to raise money for their organizations, U.S. support for their participation in the politics of their home countries, and a reassessment of U.S. policy in the Middle East, including support for Israel. In return, Islamists would propose to condemn terrorist attacks against the United States, and discourage new attacks on American soil.

Unfortunately, past Islamist condemnations of terrorism have been equivocal. Additionally, the difficulty of clearly distinguishing between "moderate" Islamists and jihadists might open the door to the latter. And since no Islamists are clearly on the road to power in any country, no practical purpose would be served by a dialogue which would only anger and alienate Muslim anti-Islamists. U.S. policies of containing and isolating Islamists have helped to prevent a terrorist attack on American soil since September 11, 2001, and should be continued.

The large number of Muslims residing in Europe has lead European countries to choose engagement with the Islamists. Yet this has not prevented attacks on European soil or on Europeans in the Middle East. The French in particular have reached out to Islamists and have seen repeated attacks on their interests over the past twenty years. Islamists are now making even more far-ranging demands from European host countries. Some Islamists, as Gilles Kepel notes in his book, have even declared Europe to be part of dar al-Islam -- i.e., part of the Islamic world -- and demand the application of Islamic law for Muslims living there.

Europe may have no choice but to indulge Islamists by hair-splitting efforts to sort them from one another. One effect of this weakness has been to mortgage Europe's policies toward the Middle East. But the United States has an advantage over Europe: it can successfully monitor and exclude Islamists, giving it the leeway to follow Middle East

policies that accord with its national interests.

Kepel's new book *The War for Muslim Minds* is a must read. But his analysis of Washington policy-making echoes the far-out myths about neoconservatives that flourish on the political fringe. The vision of today's neoconservatives -- a belief in a democratic future for the Middle East and the development of a civil society -- is shared by liberal opinion, and has long reflected an American consensus. The neocons and liberals have differed not in their goals, but in their assessment of which Middle Eastern people was most prepared for democracy. The peace processors and the liberal left believed that the Palestinians could be the prime movers, while the neoconservatives fixed precisely the same hopes on the Iraqi people. It is not clear whether Palestinians or Iraqis have the potential ascribed to them. Only time will tell. But Islamists cannot be the lever of democracy in the Middle East, and engaging them would court disaster.

GILLES KEPEL

Policies aimed at changing hearts and minds should be aimed at fostering a non-Islamist Muslim civil society. As the majority of Muslims in Europe are secular, it is likely that such a broad-based Muslim civil society would indirectly moderate the Islamists who view Europe as enemy territory rather than as an attractive model for their own countries. The time is ripe for the development of a secularized Muslim civil society and many European Muslims have already demonstrated their refusal to be influenced by the Islamists.

The radicals themselves realize their lack of success as demonstrated in Ayman al-Zawahari's December 2001 piece, "Knights Under the Prophet's Banner," which describes the failure of the jihad movement to mobilize the Muslim faithful during the 1990s. Just recently, the radicals demonstrated their inability to garner mass support for their actions when Iraqi kidnappers insisted France end its ban on headscarves in schools as a condition for the release of two French hostages; this demand was widely rejected by French Muslims, who reacted by suspending their campaign against the headscarf ban. In Turkey, the civil society pressures the government to follow the example of their North European neighbors rather than to adopt an Islamist agenda.

The French, unlike the British, never believed that a welcoming policy for Islamists would result in protection from future attacks. The French believed the ties to the North African activists could become dangerous and never were willing to allow the Islamists much space for action.

U.S. policy in the Middle East has two contradictory goals. The first is to maintain the supply of oil and the second is to ensure Israel's security. The first President Bush used his success in the 1991 Gulf War to benefit Israel in a manner that eventually led to the Oslo accords and the U.S.-promoted final status negotiations. Some neoconservatives, however, believed that Oslo was detrimental to Israel and to the U.S. position in the Middle East. This had an undeniable effect on the reorientation of U.S. policy that produced the Iraq war.

The "war on terror" represents a completely new approach to fulfilling Washington's continuing regional priorities. The invasion of Iraq was intended to benefit both of America's regional interests: it would eliminate a major enemy of Israel while also reincorporating Iraqi oil into the world market. However, complications in Iraq and the perception of American inaction about the Arab-Israeli conflict have brought U.S. standing in Middle Eastern eyes to its lowest point ever. The best way to begin improving America's standing is to take a much more assertive approach to Arab-Israeli issues, reining in Washington's Likud friends and lending real support to the idea of a Palestinian state. As for democratic change in the region, the United States is not a credible champion of democracy for most Arabs, and its efforts have if anything undercut the image of democracy in the eyes of the peoples of the region.

This Special Policy Forum Report was prepared by Minda Lee Arrow. ❖

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