

Islam and the Use of Force:

The Views of Contemporary Muslim Clerics on Terrorism, Violence, and Conflict

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Brief Analysis

Recent events have highlighted the crisis in leadership in the Muslim world. Over the past 150 years, Muslim society has undergone a period of rapid transformation that has produced three groups of leaders: clerics, lineage-based traditional groups, and central authorities. Over the past two to three decades there has been a collapse of the latter two groups. In many countries of the Muslim world, the political structures -- be they dynasties, dictatorships, or democracies -- have become progressively weaker, leading to a grave imbalance between the three groups. As a result, the religious clerics, who used to act simply as religious functionaries, have become spokesmen and guiding lights. The distance between the Westernized elite of Muslim countries and the masses has only exacerbated the problem. Weak political leadership, combined with the Western media's treatment of Islam, has perpetuated the incorrect view that Islam is radical and extremist in its interpretations, that it locks women up, and prohibits freedom of expression.

The defeat of the Taliban does not solve this problem. The conditions that led to the formation of the Taliban remain not only in Afghanistan, but throughout the Muslim world. There are still insecure rulers who use Islam as a weapon and are both unwilling and unable to improve the lives of people who are afflicted by poverty, illiteracy, and political discontentment. Part of the problem is misallocated resources. The United States gives much aid to Pakistan, and some of this money could be used for the madrasas in order to improve the religious educational system itself. By opening up syllabi, bringing in teachers from urban areas, and beginning programs of study abroad, students in the religious institutions could be brought more into the mainstream. The conspiratorial thinking that denies Muslim involvement in the despicable acts of September 11 is a sad symptom of the poor existing conditions; this can be solved via education and greater dialogue.

On the religious front, the Muslim world can seek to emulate the work of Mohammad Ali Jinnah, the founder of modern Pakistan, who created the first independent Muslim nation. He was a humanist, not a mullah, and showed the world the complementary relationship between Islam and democracy. In contrast, Kemal Ataturk -- who transformed Turkey into a secular state -- was seen more as a brilliant military commander than a viable political model.

Another strategy that preserves the reform ideal but is different from the Jinnah model is that of the "Muslim reformers" such as Mohammad Abdu and Mohammad Rashid Rida, who sought to reconcile Islam with Western notions of nationalism and patriotism. Recent elections in Pakistan, however, have shown that Muslim reformers may not be the people's choice to lead Muslim societies. Every time there has been an open, democratic election, the religious parties have never received more than five or six seats in a parliament of 250-plus representatives. The people of Pakistan do not want to be led by religious reformers; they prefer to decide for themselves how to practice and interpret Islam.

Weak leadership worsens the already poor conditions of many Muslims throughout the world, and people see that

these weak leaders are supported by interest-driven Western regimes. This shifts hatred toward the West, perpetuating the "Why do they hate us?" view President Bush has relayed to the American people. Aggravating the problem is the Western media, which has consistently portrayed a one-sided view of Islam. Only via commitment to democracy and dialogue will we be able to change perceptions and improve conditions for Muslims worldwide.

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For many Muslim leaders, survival, as opposed to progress, appears to be the primary goal. They can be counted on to fight terrorism in their own lands, but only because they are interested in self-preservation. Their approach to leadership is authoritarian, and in many cases based on a military background. These authoritarian regimes have a deep fear that radical Islam -- a force they thought they had vanquished -- will come back. Because of a desire to maintain a strong hold on the people, these leaders are afraid of democracy; they also believe that the radical Islamists will be the ones who will benefit the most from it. These leaders view Westerners who see democracy as the path to progress as naive. Further hampering progress is the dismal economic performance of many Arab or Muslim countries, which are facing growing pressures on populations and resources.

An exception to these trends is Tunisia; it possesses a stellar record of political and economic progress over the past decade. This can be attributed to the growth of the middle class and their support of the regime. But like many other Muslim countries, it has a dismal human and civil rights record. Over time and through greater education, however, the middle class will begin to demand greater improvement and reform. As of yet, no Arab regime besides Tunisia has reached the level of socioeconomic development in which a middle class can make such demands. The progress, or lack thereof, in these nations can be linked to the leadership itself, the nature of governance, and the preeminent emphasis placed on survival.

As for the nature of extremist Islam, the Taliban has not had as large an impact on the Muslim world as many would imagine. Within the Muslim world, the Taliban is the "embarrassing cousin from the sticks"; it represents Islam's unsophisticated and long lost relative -- one who only causes his family shame. Its structure was not that of a state, but of a primitive tribe that subscribes to a premodern notion of Islam. As time passes, this specific brand of Islam will die out, and it will be considered a laughable disgrace. The Taliban is merely a speck on the large map of the Muslim world, and its disintegration cannot be considered a trigger that will lead to a reevaluation of radical Islamism.

The events of September 11 are evidence of a new Islamist movement emerging in modern days. The documents found in the hijackers' cars justify the attacks based on a superficial understanding of Islam. These documents quoted the Qur'an almost solely, showing that there is a new generation of resolute Muslims who are self-taught, do not stand in awe of the clerics or their texts, and completely disregard mainstream Islam. Sadly, this can only mean that this type of narrow, extremist interpretation of Islam will continue in the future. Even more frightening is that although the mainstream Islamic position abhors violence against innocents, very few of the prominent clerics have voiced this position since September 11, with the most notable exception being Sheikh Tantawi of Al-Azhar University. This illustrates a fear of reprisal in the religious establishment itself and is a very serious problem that must be addressed.

This Special Policy Forum Report was prepared by Seth Wikas.

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