

Combating the Ideology of Radical Islam

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Nowadays, Americans are likely to hear one of three replies to the question, "Who is the enemy?" The first reply -- "terrorists" -- is the Bush administration's response, which insists that there is no connection between Islam and terrorism. According to this view, Islam is a religion of peace, and violence in its name is a perversion of the true religion.

The second reply -- "Muslims" -- holds that the enemy is Islam itself. This view, once barely articulated, has gained ground since September 11, with prominent spokesmen and book-length arguments. It is especially strong among Evangelical Christians.

A third and better reply is that the enemy is Islamism, a terroristic version of Islam. Islamism is the totalitarian root of the problem; terrorism is only a symptom, an instrument of war used by Islamists to achieve their objectives. Once these facts are understood, it becomes clear that the struggle is ultimately one of ideas and armies, not of law enforcement or religion. As in World War II or the Cold War, the ideological enemy has to be defeated, followed by a rebuilding of the societies in which the ideology took hold.

If militant Islam is the problem; moderate Islam is the solution. The world is facing not a clash of civilizations, but rather a struggle between Muslim moderates and militants. Muslims need to reinterpret such basic issues as the concept of jihad, the position of women, and the place of non-Muslim minorities. The United States can promote a modern, moderate, good-neighborly version of Islam, but it cannot on its own ensure the ascendancy of such a version. Only Muslims can do this.

There is no such thing as a moderate Islamist, for all Islamists share the same long-term goals; they differ only over means. For example, the Justice and Development Party in Turkey is very different from the Taliban in its means, but not so different in its ends. If the party gained full control over Turkey, it could be as dangerous as the Taliban were in Afghanistan.

The U.S. government's biggest mistake in the Middle East has been to accept the rule of tyrants, out of a fear that the alternative would be worse: Islamists, Ba'athists, or other hostile forces. The time has come for Washington to encourage democratic development, but in small, gradual steps. This means building civil societies in which the rule of law operates, freedom of speech and assembly develop, local elections take place, and so forth. National elections would be the capstone to these changes. Reversing this order -- that is, moving abruptly from rigid authoritarianism to national elections without first building civil society -- runs the risk that elections will be hijacked by Islamist forces, as happened in Algeria.

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Islamism is an ideology with a much broader reach than radical terrorists have. An Islamist is anyone who believes, and actively attempts to implement, the notion that the Qur'an and the tradition of the Hadith should be used to help guide the way societies and governments are run. This definition includes a large spectrum of Muslims, from Justice and Development Party (AK) supporters to Osama bin Laden. The Islamist movement is growing and diversifying rapidly, embracing more and more people with vastly different views of what Islam should be.

Islamism is not analogous to fascism or communism. Rather, it is a religious, political, and cultural framework that addresses the concerns of Muslims, serving as a more attractive alternative to past Arab ideological movements that failed to deliver what ordinary Muslims need. Islamism has no centralized leader or central text. It does not take a fixed stance regarding the role of government or how to run an economy. It is not a fixed dogma; there are profound disagreements among Islamists about how to spread Islam or what an Islamic state should be like. Although the idea of implementing shari'a (Islamic law) is very popular, there are many different formulations regarding how that should be done, some very narrow and dangerous, but others much broader and more tolerant. After all, shari'a discusses only a very narrow range of human activities and does not deal with most state functions.

The Islamist phenomenon is a result of global trends toward modernization, a response to the problems and aspirations of the modern world. Islamism is part of the universal struggle to make sense of a troubling world, in this case using religion. It is also part of a drive to restore the identity and dignity of the Muslim world. The tensions between the West and the Muslim world are not a result of a clash of religions; they are rather a symptom of deep-rooted clashes of interest.

The United States must be careful not to create more bin Ladens in its attempt to root out bin Laden himself. This is the most likely scenario if Washington continues its current policy of supporting states that crush Islamists. Such a policy is likely to backfire. The solution is to support moderate Islamists even if they do not explicitly renounce violence as a political tool.

Democracy is the best option for the Muslim world, an end to rule by unpopular leaders would be in the best interests of the United States. These leaders constantly direct hostility at the United States rather than take action against such sentiment. As a result, they are easy targets for Islamists, who contrast the impotence of such leaders with their own actions, casting themselves as the only people who seem to be able to do something about Western imperialism. Democratization will be a long process, which is why Washington should start working on it now rather than some time down the road. Muslim populations have been penned in for years, and when the gates open, it will be a rough ride. Islamists will win the first elections, but will they win the second? If Islamists do not deliver once in power, they will fail; one need only look at Iran to see evidence of this fact.

This Special Policy Forum Report was prepared by Shoshanah Haberman.