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SPECIAL REPORT

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American Foreign Policy and Islamic Renewal

Summary

- The United States still lacks an integrated and sustainable strategy to confront religious extremism in the Muslim world. Policymakers have failed to recognize that the challenge is not only a conflict with the West but also involves ideological shifts within the Muslim world. These shifts have precipitated a major battle for the future of Islam as a faith and a civilization.
- The single most important initiative the United States can take to combat Islamist extremism is to support "Islamic renewal," a diffuse but growing social, political, and intellectual movement whose goal is profound reform of Muslim societies and polities. The United States must engage moderate Islam because core aspects of the religion have an enormous moderating and modernizing potential that policymakers have overlooked.
- Previous efforts to address the challenges of the Muslim world have often contradicted one another and worked at cross-purposes. There is a visible misunderstanding of the region's political culture, particularly regarding the questions of terrorism, extremism, and political reform. Security cooperation with authoritarian regimes to deal with the terrorist threat has reinforced negative attitudes about the United States and its policies.
- Democracy promotion efforts are likely to empower fundamentalists in many Muslim states. Although desirable in principle, free elections may not be the best mechanisms to negotiate substantive political issues, and deep suspicion toward formal authority structures persists in Muslim societies.
- Islamic renewal seeks to reclaim the religion's heritage from extremist, traditionalist, and fundamentalist groups. Today's reformers have a long history and cultural tradition to draw upon. From the early period of Islam, when the Prophet Muhammad saw himself as a religious reformer, to the adoption of modern public and international law, Islam has shown great potential to adapt and modernize. Today the movement is on the ground and has the capacity to make coherent a scattered cluster of reformist ideas on social and political issues.

About the Report

This report is part of the Muslim World Initiative's "Islamic Renewal Project: Translating Islamic Reformist Ideas into Concrete Policies" of the United States Institute of Peace. The project's main objective is to "mobilize the moderates" in the Muslim world by broadening societal support for modernist Islam around a coherent vision and translating that vision into enduring pacts, viable institutions, and concrete policies. It includes the collection of a database on Islamic modernist networks across the globe and the organization of a series of regional workshops held in predominantly Muslim countries and countries where Muslims constitute significant minorities.

The major argument of this report is that the problem of "religious extremism" in the Muslim world is an ideological challenge best confronted by drawing on Islam's humanist and progressive traditions. The author would like to thank Daniel Brumberg, Michael Kofman, David Smock, Paul Stares, and Mona Yacoubian for comments on earlier drafts of this report. Any shortcomings are the author's sole responsibility.

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- American policy could tip the balance between extremist and modernist interpretations of Islam and seize a great opportunity for constructive engagement. The U.S. strategy should be to support the renewal movement, which could reform Islam and mobilize Muslim constituencies against religious extremism.
- Policy priorities should be to promote Muslim modernist works and ideas, engage the rising moderate Islamist parties on normative grounds, and put more emphasis on substantive social, educational, and religious reforms. As fault lines become apparent, U.S. agencies already are taking sides by supporting moderate Islamic leaders over others.

Introduction

Nearly five years after 9/11, the United States still lacks an integrated and sustainable strategy to confront religious extremism in the Muslim world. The challenges in Iraq and uncertainties in Afghanistan are raising doubts about the current thrust of the "global war on terrorism." The prospect of electoral victories by hard-line Islamists is dimming the hope that promoting democracy will produce moderate regimes and good relations with the United States. And attempts to win "hearts and minds" through public diplomacy have not yielded significant results. A June 2006 Pew Global Attitudes survey shows that unfavorable opinions of the United States are still widespread in five traditionally moderate Muslim countries (Indonesia, Jordan, Lebanon, Pakistan, and Turkey).

Missing from U.S. policies is the recognition that the challenge comes not only from conflict with western modernity but also ideological conflicts inside the Muslim world. A simmering, historically rooted battle within Islam pits modernists against radical Islamists. Following the 1979 Islamic revolution in Iran, conservative Sunni regimes unleashed their own brand of puritanical Islam to counter the growing ideological influence and political dynamism of the Shi'ite revolution. Saudi financial largesse and Wahabism, a doctrine that advocates a literal, legalistic, and purist interpretation of the Qur'an, have influenced the Sunni response to the Shi'ite challenge.

Sunni extremists have gained ground during the past three decades as a result of the poor social and economic performance and repressive nature of Muslim political regimes. The three Arab Human Development Reports published by the United Nations between 2002 and 2004 show the Arab part of the Muslim world lagging behind other regions in social opportunity, knowledge, and good governance.[1] Fragmentation of religious authority in Sunni Islam and official religious scholars' reluctance or failure to reinterpret Islamic laws also are serious problems. With no institutionalized authority comparable to the Catholic papacy and the Shi'ite *velayat-e faqih* (rule of the jurist), an independent legal scholar, a respected preacher, or even a fanatic can issue a *fatwa* (a religious edict or opinion). Although the vast majority of fatwas issued on any given day are about mundane matters and have nothing to do with politics or violence, they undermine the authority of official religious institutions, which in turn use the prevailing "anarchy of fatwas" to monopolize and limit the scope of *ijtihad*, or reasoned interpretation.

Standard economic and political reform policies, often touted as the solution to the Muslim world's problems, are necessary but no longer sufficient to address a crisis of this magnitude. Perhaps a freer political environment and social and economic incentives could have reinforced ideological moderation if they had been implemented decades ago.

Today, however, the major battle is over the soul of Islam and will require substantive, normative, and institutional reforms. The outcome of this religious and ideological contest will be determined by the balance of power and influence between radical Islamists, bent on imposing a puritanical form of Islam through intimidation and violence, and moderate Muslims who aim to renew Islam from within.

The single most important step the United States can take to combat Islamist extremism is to support "Islamic renewal," a recent, diffuse but growing social, political, and

intellectual movement that aims to cultivate modern norms and address modern needs by drawing on Islamic traditions. Its objective is profound reform of Muslim societies and polities. Although they do not comprise an ideologically homogenous and uniformly committed movement, various actors with similar agendas and significant social backing are involved. The movement may include women's groups such as the Sisters in Islam networks in Indonesia and Malaysia, AISHA Arab Women Forum, Karamah: Muslim Women Lawyers for Human Rights, or the anonymous group of progressive Muslim women that published "Claiming our Rights: A Manual for Women's Human Rights Education in Muslim Societies." It includes moderate Islamist parties, such as Egypt and Jordan's *wasat* parties, which call for "self-reform," and Turkey's and Morocco's Justice and Development parties, which define themselves as modern political actors taking progressive Islamic positions. And it includes hundreds of active democracy networks (such as the Philippine Council for Islam Democracy, the U.S.-based Center for the Study of Islam and Democracy, or the International Center for Islam and Pluralism in Indonesia), and lively Web sites that foster international communication and transmission of progressive Islamic ideas (Liberal Islam Network, Liberal Islam.net, IslamOnline.net, ProgressiveIslam.org).

The single most important initiative the United States can take to combat Islamist extremism is to support "Islamic renewal."

In general, the Islamic renewal movement comprises four broad groups. Proponents of "civic Islam" include civil society organizations that advocate women's equality, human rights, social responsibility, environmental protection, and similar social issues but make no overt claim to political power. Referring to the progressive teachings of Islam, they call on regimes to enact reforms and respect basic rights. Proponents of "Islam and democracy" include parties and movements that see no incompatibility between Islamic values and teachings and modern democratic principles. This group advocates participation in the political process with the goal of achieving power and applying political reforms on the basis of Islamic principles. Proponents of "reforms within Islam" include leading religious figures, scholars, and academic institutions that call for reinterpretation of Islamic laws, a historical reading of Islam and the Qur'an, and the modernization of Islamic knowledge. "Culturally modern Islam" developed mainly among Muslim communities living in the West. These diaspora groups and organizations, which try to articulate a "western Islamic identity," see no tension between being a Muslim and a citizen of a western democracy. Tying these diverse actors together is their commitment to modernize Islamic institutions, traditions, and practices.

Today, the major battle is over the soul of Islam and will require substantive, normative, and institutional reforms.

In some instances the Islamic renewal movement also includes governments. In Malaysia, for example, Prime Minister Abdullah Badawi uses his country's broad and entrenched tradition of democratic Islam as a model to call for religious moderation throughout the Muslim world. In Morocco, the monarchy applied progressive interpretations of specific clauses in Islamic law to reform the family code and grant women equal civil rights in 2004. In a parallel effort, the government opened one of Morocco's most prestigious seminaries to women, and some fifty women imams and preachers (*murshidat*) graduated in 2006; sixty more enrolled that year. This is a first in Islamic history and a major breakthrough for a conservative society in which women have been excluded from the public sphere. Thanks to the education ministry's revision of school curricula and textbooks, Moroccan children learn about religious freedom and tolerance, universal principles of human rights, minority rights, and gender equality. The revisions draw on both international agreements and Islamic principles. To carry out these reforms, the monarchy carefully chose the language to explain the changes and involved civil society, religious scholars, political parties, the government, and the parliament.

The word "moderate" accurately describes the vast majority of Muslims.

The United States is well positioned to support this movement and engage "moderate" Islam. Contrary to common perceptions in the West, the word "moderate" accurately describes the vast majority of Muslims, who reject violence, yearn for justice and accountable governance, and value Muslim traditions of family, knowledge, and prosperity. An oft-cited saying of the Prophet Muhammad honors any Muslim who bequeaths "good offspring, useful knowledge, or honestly earned wealth." Emphasizing these aspects of Islam will discredit the extremists' message of hate, despair, and destruction. Moreover,

these aspects of Islam have an enormous potential for religious moderation that the United States is better placed to understand and appreciate than secular Europe, communist China, nationalist Russia, or the region's repressive governments. Among all liberal democracies, the United States shows the broadest social and political support for religious compassion, religious figures and institutions, religiously based charities, and even virtuous politics. Yet many U.S. policymakers and strategists have overlooked Islam's ethical appeal.[2]

The United States can support reforms in the Muslim world by refocusing its existing U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) programs, its democratization projects, and its public diplomacy initiatives to pay more attention to ongoing ideological conflicts. These reforms are more likely than forced regime change, democratic elections, or skilled marketing of U.S. foreign policies to build open and peaceful Muslim societies and good U.S.–Muslim relations.

This report discusses the inadequacy of current policies toward the Muslim world in light of its internal ideological conflict. We then develop the idea of "Islamic renewal." The third section outlines specific recommendations for the U.S. government and other international actors.

A definitional note: "Islamist" political parties and movements seek to legitimate or overturn a political order on the basis of their interpretation of Islamic principles. "Extremist" groups eschew nonviolence in the name of the principles of the pious ancestors (*al-salaf al-salih*) and literal interpretation of the Qur'an. "Moderate" parties and movements accept and apply human reason to Islamic principles, law, or precedents. They see no incompatibility between participation in the modern political process and Islamic values. Within these camps, theological variations and differing degrees of "extremism" and "moderation" are the products of local power relations.

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Current U.S. Policies

Since September 11, 2001, there has been no lack of ideas and initiatives to confront challenges from the Muslim world. Three efforts have received special attention from the Bush administration and in public discourse: the global war on terrorism, the Middle East Partnership Initiative (MEPI) to promote democratic reform, and the public diplomacy campaign to improve America's image in the Muslim world.

The components and declared objectives of these efforts often conflict with one another. For example, the global war on terrorism requires the cooperation of security services that form the backbone of authoritarian regimes in Muslim countries. Such cooperation undermines both democratic ambitions and the effort to change negative attitudes about the United States in the Muslim world. This initiative conflicts with one of MEPI's major objectives: to push for political reforms and free elections. But free elections in some states are likely to bring to power Islamic fundamentalists. Such an outcome seems to conflict with the anti-terrorism strategy that conflates various Islamist groups into a monolithic threat, regardless of political, ideological, or strategic motivations. Furthermore, one of the major tasks of public diplomacy is to discredit the extremists' message by promoting credible moderate voices. Yet these come from moderate Islamist parties or organizations that are often under the scrutiny of local governments and may never be granted a U.S. visa or entry into the United States.

Anti-terrorism strategy conflates various Islamist groups into a monolithic threat, regardless of political, ideological, or strategic motivations.

The U.S. strategy toward the Muslim world also shows misunderstanding of its political cultures. The war on terrorism is a primary example. Because the ideological and political differences among Islamic groups are still misunderstood or too subtle to warrant attention, the tendency has been to use terms such as "jihadists," "Salafists," or "extremists," regardless of context. Yet empirical evidence from various countries points to a discernable pattern of ideological radicalization and a parallel shift to violence every time Islamist parties with a reformist agenda are weakened. Being aware of these patterns and shifts is important to understanding ideological extremism and combating terrorism.

For example, the first violent radical group in the twentieth-century Muslim world emerged as the result of a split among Egypt's Muslim Brothers in the 1970s. Members of *al-Takfir wal-Hijra* (Excommunication and Exodus) broke with the Muslim Brotherhood after successive Egyptian governments rejected its reformist agenda and killed its leaders or sent them to jail. In addition to fighting the regime, the group's objective was to "cleanse" Egyptian society through *takfir,* or excommunication, a violent doctrine that targets alleged Muslim apostates. This major ideological break with traditional Islamist reformist movements paved the way for a potent alliance with the Salafists and their global agenda. The Egyptians Ayman al-Zawahiri, al-Qaeda's second in command, and Sheikh Omar Abdel Rahman, the blind cleric convicted of planning the World Trade Center bombing in 1993, emerged from this ideological rupture. They led *al-Jihad al-Islami* and *Jama'at al-Jihad*, which also split from the Muslim Brotherhood in the 1970s.

The pattern of political exclusion, ideological radicalization, and ensuing links between groups fighting local "infidels" and Salafists fighting external "infidels" can be seen in other situations. The banning of the Islamic Salvation Front in Algeria after it won local and national elections in 1990 and 1991 led to the emergence of two violent organizations, the Armed Islamic Groups and the Salafist Preaching and Combat Group. Both embraced a *takfiri* ideology that was behind many of the killings of civilians during the 1990s. At least one of these groups has been linked to international terrorist networks.

The same split explains the emergence and links of two Moroccan groups, the Straight Path and the Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat, to global terrorism; their members were convicted in the Madrid and Casablanca terrorist attacks. When the reformist *al-Adl wal-Ihssan* and the Justice and Development Party made no headway during the monarchy's guided political opening of the 1990s, various *takfiri* groups emerged in Fez, Sale, Tangiers, and Casablanca. In 2002, for example, extremists assassinated more than 166 civilians during illegally organized "apostasy trials" in Morocco. These examples show that to understand religious extremism in the Muslim world, it is critical to take ideological shifts and conflicts into account. However, because the global war on terrorism is not sharply focused, analysts could reinforce the dominance of the Salafi jihadist camp by lumping together diverse groups under the same rubric.

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Democracy promotion policies in the region also reflect a lack of understanding. The equation of democratic reforms with free parliamentary elections assumes the intrinsic legitimacy of formal political institutions as an arena in which national actors can negotiate interests and resolve conflicts facing the community. Yet every survey conducted in Muslim societies, including Arab, non-Arab, African, and Asian countries, suggests that they harbor deep and widespread suspicion of formal political authority.[3] This suspicion is unlikely to disappear with the democratization of the political process. Throughout Islamic history, political leaders have not enjoyed the esteem granted to religious scholars, tribal chiefs, or mystics who kept a distance from state power.

Muslim societies, including Arab, non-Arab, African, and Asian countries, harbor deep and widespread suspicion of formal political authority.

One lesson to be drawn from Iraq, for example, is that the formal political process, which privileges majority rule over traditional consensus, might not be the best mechanism for negotiating divisive substantive issues. Religious councils, tribal chiefs, charismatic leaders, local assemblies, and similar informal bodies can be more effective in reinforcing political legitimacy through popular consultation, negotiation, and concessions.

Finally, efforts to improve America's image in the Muslim world must go beyond influencing Muslim public opinion through better communication. We cannot assume that Muslims would change their attitudes if the United States simply changed the packaging of its policies and values.

There is a need for a new vision and a grand strategy to serve the mutual interests of the United States and the Muslim world. At the core of that vision and strategy should be the idea of *tajdid*, or renewal of Islam by modernist Muslim scholars and thinkers for the benefit of Muslim societies. This is not a zero-sum game; the United States can help itself by helping the Muslim world.

What is *Tajdid* or Islamic Renewal?

The term "Islamic renewal" describes the systematic reconsideration and rationalization of Islamic doctrines, institutions, beliefs, and practices. Many individuals and institutions are involved. Although not formally connected, their efforts coalesce around research centers, individual scholars, modernist religious figures, moderate religious organizations, political parties, and activist Web sites scattered throughout the Muslim world and the Muslim diaspora in the West. While geographically diffuse and lacking a coherent agenda, these efforts have two overarching purposes. The first is to reclaim the Islamic heritage from traditional clerics (associated with autocratic states), extremist Islamist groups (bent on waging holy war against the West and their own "adulterated" societies), and fundamentalist movements (whose goal is to apply strict *Sharia* law once they gain power through democratic elections or through informal *da'wa*—a religious call to fellow Muslims to abide by Islamic principles). The major fault lines between modernist Muslim reformers and radical Islamists include the sources of law in the country, the role of religion in public life, gender equality, the foundations of government, the balance between individual and collective rights, and relations with other religions.

The reformists' second goal is to adapt Islamic principles, values, and institutions to the modern world while recognizing the importance of Islam as a cultural frame of reference.

In the western context, the idea of "Islamic renewal" recalls the Christian Reformation. This frequently used analogy requires a word of caution, however. First, Islam does not have a church to be reformed and separated from the state, and it does not have a single religious leader such as the pope from whom religious scholars can dissent. Furthermore, the history of the Christian Reformation is not linear and coherent, as is conventionally assumed. Any analogy would have to specify the geographical location, historical context, and sociological strand of various Christian Reformations at different times and places. Finally, although the Christian Reformation analogy might render intelligible what the Muslim world is going through, it could create false political expectations and posit erroneous evolutionary stages.[4]

Although moderate Islamic parties are forward-looking and do not advocate strict application of Sharia, their main objective is still to achieve political power.

At the same time, the idea of "Islamic renewal" may evoke in western popular understanding the specter of Islamic fundamentalism wrapped in legal garb. So we must distinguish the renewal movement from both the conservative Islamist parties that seek to establish Sharia through democratic elections and the more moderate Islamist parties that advocate a modern social and political agenda. Conservative Islamist parties use the modern political process as a peaceful means to establish and legitimate the Islamic state, economy, and society. Although moderate Islamic parties are forward-looking and do not advocate strict application of Sharia, their main objective is still to achieve political power. That may involve building alliances with religious conservatives and curtailing basic democratic rights if necessary. Hence, without a broad modernist worldview, even moderates may fall back on conservative, populist ideologies to harness votes during severe domestic or external crises (such as Bangladesh in 1991, Indonesia in 2004, Malaysia in 1999, Pakistan in 1990 and 1993, and Turkey in 1995 and 1999).

"Islamic renewal" can bring coherence to a significant but scattered cluster of Muslim reformist ideas and tie them to a social and political agenda.

As a strategy, "Islamic renewal" can bring coherence to a significant but scattered cluster of Muslim reformist ideas and tie them to a social and political agenda that includes reform of family codes to give women equal rights; revisions of textbooks to teach human rights and religious pluralism; and modernization of Islamic charities, schools, and consultative traditions. The movement is already a fact on the ground. Various influential Arab and Muslim reformists, including secular human rights and women's groups, consider modernist Islamic values as a means to advocate broad-based social and political change.[5] This is a promising development that also holds great potential for U.S. engagement in the region.

A Culturally Viable Movement

Reformers in the Muslim world always have drawn on Islamic traditions. The concepts of renewal (*tajdid*), reform (*islah*), and renaissance (*nahda*) are firmly rooted in Islamic history. Efforts to renew and reform Islam thus continue a long tradition. The modernizing movement can draw on many historical precedents.

In the early period of Islam, the Prophet Muhammad saw himself primarily as a religious reformer with an egalitarian social agenda. Muhammad's attention to the need for reform and renewal is recorded in a prophetic saying (*hadith*) that explicitly calls upon Muslims to renew their faith at the beginning of each century.

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During the medieval period, the expansion of Islam from seventh-century Arabia to twelfth-century Asia, Europe, and Africa brought Muslims into contact with diverse peoples and cultures. The Islamic expansions unleashed a profound, and in many ways continuing, debate about the Muslim capacity to adapt to changing needs, cultures, and societies. An important legacy of this process is ijtihad, the reinterpretation of the Qur'an and the Sunna (the two main canons of Islam). The existence of four Sunni schools of jurisprudence (*Hanafi, Hanbali, Maliki,* and *Shafi'i*), alongside the *Shi'i Jafari* school and various mystical orders, attests to the fluidity of Islam and its historic adaptability to worldly considerations and diverse spiritual needs.

In the modern period, Muslims have had to revise or bypass Islamic law to adapt their states and societies to changing realities. The collapse of the Ottoman Empire and the rise of modern nation-states following European colonization forced Muslim religious scholars and jurists to rethink the classical Islamic theory of international relations (*siyar*) and adapt it to secular international law.[6] Although many states in the Muslim world still considered themselves part of the *umma* (Muslim community) and formed various Islamic intergovernmental organizations, they fully embraced the notion of national sovereignty and interacted with one another on the basis of international law and norms, even when these contradicted international Islamic legal arguments.[7]

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Another significant precedent is the adaptation of Muslim legal traditions to modern public law. With the exception of Saudi Arabia, most Muslim states borrow from modern European penal codes. The aspect of Islamic law that has resisted change is the body of laws regulating personal issues such as marriage, divorce, inheritance, and custody of children. But even here, significant departures from the Sharia have taken place in countries like Tunisia, Morocco, Turkey, and Indonesia.[8]

A third area where Islamic law and institutions have adapted to international standards is human rights. Numerous studies have shown that lack of tangible progress in this area has more to do more with politics than theology.[9] In the end, for the Islamic renewal project to succeed, Muslim modernist thinkers from different countries need to share their experiences and strategies. Equally important is "cross-topical" fertilization, through which methods to accommodate secular international law and national sovereignty can be applied to women's rights, freedom of belief, and human rights.

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A Strong Philosophical Legacy

The Islamic renewal movement can also draw on a progressive Muslim political philosophy. Many important social concepts in Islam, such as *maslaha `amma* (common good), *masali'h al-`ibad* (the welfare of the people), *`adl* (social justice), *rahma* (compassion in social interactions), *ahl al-dhima* (religious minority rights), and *fard `ayn* (human beings' capacity to act responsibly), are clearly applicable to modern society. Notions of *ijma'* (consensus), *shura* (consultation), *`aqd* (contract), *haqq* (right), *naskh* (change or abrogation of existing laws or Qur'anic injunctions), *talfiq* (invention), *kiyas* (reasoning by analogy beyond scriptural evidence), and ijtihad provide a formidable politico-conceptual apparatus to revise anachronistic rulings and legitimize modern, accountable governance.

Last, religiously prescribed values, such as the protection of human life, personal property, moral and intellectual integrity, and the natural environment, provide ample means for molding a modern ethical outlook.

Implications for U.S. Foreign Policy

The fundamental question is whether the U.S. government can play a role without compromising the nascent renewal movement.

The importance of supporting "Islamic renewal" to counter religious extremism and enhance relations between the Muslim world and the West cannot be overstated. The fundamental question is whether the U.S. government can play a role without compromising the nascent renewal movement. Skeptics point to two major problems: Faith-based initiatives are unlikely to muster American political support because they raise thorny constitutional issues. The other challenge is that the U.S. government is not trusted in the region. Any overt American role could undermine the modernists' agenda and position. These are valid concerns.

However, the United States is already implicitly involved in reforms with religious connotations. USAID and State Department programs that aim to revise textbooks, upgrade primary and secondary education, empower women, engage with moderate Islamists, modernize the legal systems, or encourage interfaith dialogue already involve normative issues and taking sides in religious conflicts.

As for the U.S. standing in the region, Islamic renewal provides a great healing opportunity, perhaps the only realistic one. Calling on Muslims to reform their societies on the basis of their own humanistic traditions and cultural heritage is surely less controversial for the United States than supporting regime change, cooperating with local security agencies, or pushing for reforms in the name of an abstract, secular notion of western democracy.

Current efforts by various government programs involving implicit religious reforms are insufficient and do not have a major impact because they lack clarity of purpose and coordination. They do not adequately involve independent American institutions, international agencies, and transnational civil society. They lack an explicit commitment and a concerted effort to engage with broad Muslim constituencies through trusted local charities, civic groups, and moderate religious movements. The involvement of the Islamic renewal movement would reinforce U.S. engagement, international backing, and Muslim support for meaningful, forward-looking reforms in Muslim countries. Outside the Islamic framework, there is no real chance for substantive, progressive, and sustainable reform in the Muslim world.

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Democratic reforms in Muslim countries during the coming decade are likely to bring to power Islamist political parties. "Islamic politics" has emerged as the most likely choice among a constituency of hundreds of millions of people stretching from the Atlantic Ocean to Southeast Asia. Religious values and beliefs continue to inform social interactions at the community level; influential social groups throughout the Muslim world, including social, political, and economic elites, adhere to such a vision; and the formal political process has been shifting to accommodate "Islamic politics." Religion in politics is a reality in the Muslim world.

But what brand of "Islamic politics" will triumph? The radical, extremist version certainly has gained ground during the past decade, but a modernist, humanistic form of Islam should not be dismissed. U.S. policies could help tip the balance.

Before us is a historic opportunity for positive change in the Muslim world and for constructive American engagement. The most realistic and sustainable strategy for the United States today is to support a broad-based Islamic renewal movement by modernist Muslim thinkers for the explicit benefit of Muslim societies. Only a modern, reformed Islam can provide the normative appeal to mobilize broad Muslim constituencies against religious extremism, for modern accountable governance, and for better understanding with the West. The development of such movements in the Muslim world is the terrorists'

biggest fear and vulnerability. A renewal movement that addresses the Muslim world's major problems, using familiar language, historical references, and religious values, and providing a hopeful alternative to al-Qaeda's message of violence and self-destruction, will discredit not only bin Laden and his associates but the Salafi jihadist ideology as a whole.

America's most obvious allies in this effort are independent, moderate Muslim thinkers, scholars, and community leaders who may question the moral superiority of "secular reason" but are willing to confront violence, oppression, and intolerance in the name of Islam. Moderate Islamist parties throughout the region, charitable groups with a social agenda in Morocco, Egypt, or Indonesia, international Islamic feminist networks, religious literary circles in Turkey, or prominent Islamic universities such as Malaysia's are all potential partners. The other religious actors are either ideologically opposed to a modernist project or do not have the political will to carry it out. The Salafists, who seek a society patterned exclusively on the Qur'an and Sunna, radically oppose modernity—which for them includes Islam's ninth-century, classical, golden age. Salafists include violent groups like al-Qaeda and its affiliates and nonviolent groups associated with schools, sects, and doctrines that reject ijtihad and call for a return to an unmediated, original Islam.

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Proponents of traditional Islam, including official religious scholars, state-run religious institutions, and chief muftis of prominent religious universities such as al-Azhar, are generally not hostile to the West. But they often are too closed-minded or dependent on authoritarian governments to provide a credible alternative to the Salafi onslaught. And radical Islamist parties—which compete for votes with the moderate Islamists—can be tempted by ideological extremism if they participate in the political process.

Despite growing efforts and networks, the prospects for an Islamic renewal across countries and regions remains slim, unless these scattered efforts and networks coalesce in a coherent movement that can articulate a common modernist vision and propose concrete reforms to achieve it.

Conclusion

Current U.S. efforts to fight terrorism, promote democratic change, and improve America's image in Muslim countries are insufficient because they do not pay attention to the religious debate in the Muslim world. The United States could address these challenges by using the enormous, yet neglected, normative capital of Islamic reformist traditions in partnership with viable and credible Muslim partners. Obviously, the mechanisms, specific policies, and programmatic priorities of these concepts must be developed, refined, and synchronized to maximize impact and ensure cumulative success.

Policymakers should take into consideration differences among Muslim states and societies, as well as the varying degrees of religious sensitivity. For example, it would be ill-advised to make Saudi Arabia the test case of religious reforms in the Muslim world or to assert the human origin of the Qur'an as the starting point of the Islamic renewal project. Nonetheless, the principles of reforms outlined in this essay are realistic and grounded in historical precedents. U.S. policymakers are beginning to see the importance of engaging not just states and opposition groups, but Islam itself. Indeed, as the ideological fault lines become more apparent, several U.S. government agencies already are implicitly taking sides by supporting "moderate" Islamic leaders, groups, or parties. In this situation, American detachment is not a realistic option.

Policymakers should take into consideration differences among Muslim states and societies, as well as the varying degrees of religious sensitivity.

Recommendations

The United States should support the establishment of a "Muslim World Foundation."

1. **The United States should support the establishment of a "Muslim World Foundation" to foster the development of peaceful, prosperous, and open Muslim societies and polities.** Modeled after the Asia Foundation and funded by an act of Congress, such a body would focus on the major crosscutting challenges, including religious reforms, facing Muslim societies. But a Muslim World Foundation need not be an exclusively U.S. body. The United States could adopt a centuries-old Islamic endowment tradition called *wakf*, used by leaders, states, and wealthy individuals to provide for charities, schools, and universities. The Muslim World Foundation would draw on local and international experts, donors, and partners. And it would collaborate with government and nongovernmental associates across the Muslim world to pursue its agenda. As a nonprofit and independent organization, the Muslim World Foundation would retain its intellectual credibility and ability to act as a convener and peacemaker, regardless of international tensions or U.S. policies.

It is essential to establish regional forums where Muslim modernist thinkers meet regularly.

2. **The United States should provide special grants to American universities to promote Muslim modernist works and ideas and translate them into concrete policies.** Muslim modernist thinkers are scattered throughout the world, and when they meet—on rare occasions—their debates and conference proceedings are not translated into practical reform policies. It is essential to establish regional forums where Muslim modernist thinkers meet regularly to sort out political, philosophical, and ideological differences and identify common denominators and goals. It is not sufficient to mobilize modernists to express themselves. It is also important to identify specific reform policies to be addressed to people and governments in the Muslim world, as well as to the international community—including western powers, the United Nations, the Organization of the Islamic Conference, the International Court of Justice, and the World Bank.

   The Arab Human Development Reports provide a very useful model. A similar series, exposing in stark terms the decay of Islamic cultures and civilizations and written by respected, diverse, and sympathetic Muslim scholars, would get the Muslim world's attention.

3. **The United States should engage Islamist parties on normative grounds.** Throughout the region, Islamist parties have emerged as major actors and likely winners when allowed to compete without constraint. Some of these parties run on conservative agendas and promise to apply strict Sharia; others are more liberal and advocate a modern social agenda. Yet most are pragmatic and willing to compromise on how much of Islamic law should be applied. This raises the issue of how to integrate Islamists into the democratic process without compromising the spirit of democracy or the rules and procedures that sustain it.

   In other words, the rationale of organizing free elections to promote democracy is questionable if the likely winners might subvert democratic norms and procedures. Yet too many procedural constraints and prenegotiated arrangements could delegitimize the democratic process. When incentives are offered to moderate Islamists, the conservative rank-and-file and constituencies may rebel. Hence, institutional constraints to limit the power of Islamists, or incentives that look like cooptation measures, may actually backfire.

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   Instead of coercion and cooptation, "normative engagement" is a more constructive strategy. That is, debate with Islamists must take place about substantive issues such as civil liberties, freedom of worship, individual autonomy, women's rights, the rights of minorities, political pluralism, limitations on the powers of the state, and similar issues. For example: How would verbal commitment to the full range of civil and political rights play out in the real world? If Islamist leaders qualify the relevance of "divine sovereignty" and emphasize the role of elected rulers, that does not guar-

antee they will respect modern democratic rights. Anti-democratic norms and restrictions can be imposed in the name of a conservative majority that believes ultimate sovereignty rests with God. Islamist leaders are not clear about whom they represent. Some Islamic principles may well be compatible with modern democratic norms, but the challenge is how Muslims choose to apply them. The possibility exists that different, even contradictory, interpretations of Islamic principles can arise and, in the absence of institutionalized religious authority accepted by all, lead to the subversion of democratic norms.

Some Islamic principles may well be compatible with modern democratic norms, but the challenge is how Muslims choose to apply them.

4. **The United States should put more emphasis on substantive social, educational, and religious reforms.** National elections are essential to democratic legislative and executive authority. But if abstracted from substantive issues, the exercise will result in a superficial formal process manipulated by semi-authoritarian rulers and radical Islamists. Concern with normative, substantive issues does not preclude other crucial institutional reforms. The development of a robust civil society, an independent judiciary, a transparent government, a depoliticized military, and accountable security forces is just as important for creating hospitable conditions for democratic representation. Moreover, combining limited elections with serious institutional reforms to enhance the state's performance and accountability can easily be justified according to Islamic discursive conventions. Equally important, however, is the need for the U.S. government to encourage religious reforms to modernize Islamic principles, teachings, institutions, practices, and jurisprudence. The cornerstone of these reforms is the effort to expand the conceptual boundaries and foundations of Sharia beyond the Qur'an and Sunna, or what Muslims consider the fundamental basis of Islam. In other words, it is important to establish publicly that ijtihad has been a major source in the formulation of Islamic law. This point is important in justifying modern advances in women's rights, civil rights, human rights, and the accommodation of cultural and religious differences on Islamic grounds.

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5. **The United States should refocus and coordinate public diplomacy, democracy promotion, and aid programs to reinforce Islamic religious reforms and renewal.** Public diplomacy should link American values and Islam's humanist traditions. Muslims are proud of a golden-age heritage they associate with openness, tolerance, and scientific achievements. Islamic traditions are entirely compatible with American values such as tolerance and entrepreneurship. Emphasizing these aspects of Islam and similar American values will help discredit Islamic extremists.

   Democracy initiatives should include religious reform. If permissible, organizations such as the National Democratic Institute and the National Endowment for Democracy should expand their programs beyond elections, political parties, and parliaments. Nothing in their mandate would prevent them from supporting the modern training of religious scholars, judges, and imams; providing special scholarships to women studying religious topics; and reprinting and disseminating writings by modernist Muslim scholars. The United States should support local groups at the forefront of these reforms.

6. **The United States should consider supporting religious charities.** Because many Muslim governments' social safety nets are weak or nonexistent, religious organizations provide many services to the needy, including clinics, child care, and disaster relief. Concerns that these networks are linked to terrorism are often misplaced. Extremists with a global jihadist agenda do not open local "soup kitchens" to build electoral support. They pursue different strategies. USAID should work with Islamic social networks and give impetus to moderate Islam by funding small charities and training programs for youth and women.

An online edition of this and related reports can be found on our Web site (www.usip.org), together with additional information on the subject.

Notes

1. Arab Human Development Report 2002, *Creating Opportunities for Future Generations*; 2003, *Building a Knowledge Society*; 2004, *Freedom and Good Governance* (New York: United Nations Development Program).
2. Roxanne Euben, *The Enemy in the Mirror: Islamic Fundamentalism and the Limits of Western Rationalism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999).
3. Ronald Inglehart, "The World Views of Islamic Publics in Global Perspective," *World Values Survey Research Papers* 06-02, May 20, 2006 (Center for the Study of Democracy, http://repositories.cdlib.org/csd/wvsrp/06-02).
4. The example of Reform Judaism is particularly relevant to Muslim diasporas in Europe and America. See, for example, Dana Evan Kaplan, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to American Judaism* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005).
5. See Mona Yacoubian, *Promoting Middle East Democracy II: Arab Initiatives*, USIP Special Report, May 2005.
6. See, for example, Abd al-Hamid Abu Sulayman, *The Islamic Theory of International Relations: New Directions for Islamic Methodology and Thought* (Herndon, VA: International Institute of Islamic Thought, 1987).
7. Abdeslam Maghraoui, "Ambiguities of Sovereignty: Morocco, The Hague and the Western Sahara Dispute," *Mediterranean Politics* 8, no. 1 (Spring 2003), 113-26.
8. Mahnaz Afkhami and Erika Friedl, *Muslim Women and the Politics of Participation: Implementing the Beijing Platform* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1997).
9. Abdullahi An-Naim, *Toward an Islamic Reformation: Civil Liberties, Human Rights, and International Law* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1990).

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A number of other publications from the United States Institute of Peace examine issues related to Islam.

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- *Islam and Democracy*, by David Smock (Peaceworks, September 2002).
- *Islamic Perspectives on Peace and Violence*, by David Smock (Peaceworks, January 2002).
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