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THE ISLAMIST CHALLENGE IN THE MIDDLE EAST AND NORTH AFRICA

by

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Contents

Page

DISCLAIMER ii

ABSTRACT iv

INTRODUCTION 1

POLITICAL ISLAM IN FOCUS 4
- Coming to Terms 4
- Islam 6
- Causes of Islamism 9
- Islamism's Target Audience 13
- Islamist Goals and Methods 15
- Summary 19

THE CASES OF ALGERIA AND EGYPT 22
- Algeria 22
  - Historical Context 22
  - Early National Development 23
  - Islamism's Rise to Prominence 25
  - The Future of Algeria 28
- Egypt 30
  - Historical Context 30
  - Rise of Modern Egypt 31
  - Rise of Egyptian Islamism 33
  - The Future of Egypt 37
- Summary 39

CHALLENGES FOR THE UNITED STATES 44
- Is Islamism a Threat? 45
- Should America React to Islamism? 48
- What Can the U.S. Do? 50
- What Must the U.S. Avoid? 53
- Summary 55

CONCLUSION 57

BIBLIOGRAPHY 58

Abstract

The Islamist movements in the Middle East and North Africa have caused a great deal of concern for many in the West, as they are seen as a monolithic, fundamental religious phenomenon run by fanatical terrorists. The fact is most Islamist movements develop along local or national lines in response to a variety of social, economic, and political problems. While Islamists do want to increase the importance of their religion in the secular sphere, it is not obvious their goals are antithetical to democracy, their own national interests, or those of the United States. Algeria and Egypt provide two interesting and different examples of the development of national Islamist movements and possible futures. Unfortunately, while it is in the United States' interest to help mediate the conflicts between Islamists and regional governments and alleviate the conditions which give rise to radical Islamism, there is actually very little that the West has the power or influence to do.

Chapter 1

Introduction

For the United States, one of the great national security challenges of the past few decades has been dealing with nations and political movements whose Islamic underpinnings make them difficult for Americans to understand. As a nation with relatively few immigrants from Islamic countries and a small percentage of Muslims, the U.S. has had neither the opportunity nor need to learn much about a religion practiced by over one billion people. Yet, as the world's only superpower, America in recent years has taken the lead in a variety of international concerns and crises which have had strong Islamic overtones. These have included the Arab-Israeli peace process, forcefully expelling Iraq from Kuwait, and trying to bring peace to warring factions in the former Yugoslavia. If the U.S. is to continue to operate on such an international scale, it can ill-afford to ignore the challenge of understanding Islam.

The resurgent, often revolutionary or radical, Islamic movement now affecting the Middle East could have grave implications for American interests in that region, including world access to oil, the security of Israel, and the on-going peace process. Additionally, the impact of any widespread Islamic movement could be farther-reaching than most realize. Though Americans generally equate Islam with Arabs, this ethnic group comprises only 25 percent of the world's Muslim population. Over 700 million Muslims live

outside the Arab world, in countries such as Turkey, Pakistan, India, and Indonesia, all of which present their own challenges to U.S. policies.

The purpose of this paper, as originally suggested by U.S. Central Command, was to look at the effect of the Islamic revolution in Algeria and its impact on Egypt. However, the focus of the paper has changed over the past few months for two reasons. First, it became clear that to even understand the crises in Algeria and Egypt, I needed a better general understanding of the causes of such Islamic movements. Second, it became clear that most experts do not see a connection between an "Islamic victory" in Algeria and the future of Egypt. One author seemed to write for most when he stated "one cannot—must not—be deluded that Algeria's experience is *directly* applicable to any other state...the events in Algeria will not determine the future of Tunisia, Morocco or (most certainly not) Egypt."[1] While Algeria's problems may have instructed Egyptian leaders, and though a revolutionary Islamic regime in Algeria might bolster the morale of their Egyptian brothers, the history and conditions of both nations are such that a connection between the two would be tenuous at best.

Consequently, the purpose of this paper is to examine in general terms the current Islamic movement, found primarily in the Middle East and North Africa, in order to better understand its causes, appeal, and goals. Then, because they were the original focus of this study and are very instructive in regards to the current Islamic movement, I will look at the specific cases of Algeria, where Islamists are waging a bloody war against the military government which kept them from assuming power democratically, and Egypt, where the Islamic movement potentially threatens one of America's most important allies

in the Arab world. Finally, I will look at the challenges and choices which face the U.S. in light of the Islamic movement.

Notes

[1] Michael Collins Dunn, "Algeria's Agony: The Drama So Far, the Prospects for Peace," *Middle East Policy* (Vol. III, 94), p. 156.

Chapter 2

Political Islam in Focus

Following the end of World War II, the free world quickly saw Communist ideology and activities as threats to peace and took actions to contain it. With the specter of Communism receding, however, many are now making that same application to Islam. Unfortunately, seeing Islamic movements which have combined religious concerns with secular, political issues in terms of a threat—primarily in the form of terrorism, radicalism or fundamentalism—has hampered our ability to understand these movements and negatively conditioned our response to them.[1] Though a paper of this size can not possibly deal in depth with the political Islamic movement, it is possible to look in general terms at this powerful phenomenon and gain a greater, if not perfect, understanding of some of the major issues and concerns.

Coming to Terms

One of the greatest difficulties in this study is simply sorting through the various labels and terms being used. For example, one of the most popular and commonly used terms, especially by those critical of the movement, is "fundamentalism." According to Jurgensmeyer, however, this is not the best choice of words for several reasons.[2] First, fundamentalism is a term which is clearly considered a pejorative, a term "less descriptive

than accusatory: it reflects our attitude toward other people more than it describes them." Second, it is a term to describe a Christian reform movement of the early 1900s whose emphasis was on adhering to certain fundamentals of the Christian faith which were being called into question by liberal theologians. However, this term does not exist in Islam and most Muslims would certainly resent the implication they did not hold to the fundamentals of Islamic faith. A final reason for avoiding this term is that it does not carry any political meaning, as it implies a person "is motivated solely by religious beliefs rather than by broad concerns about the nature of society and the world." Consequently, a more inclusive term should be found for individuals who have fused their religious zeal with concern for societal and political matters.

Others see the current Islamic resurgence as the latest of a number of Islamic revivals over the centuries,[3] hence the occasional use of the term "revivalist." One author takes this a step further and sees in the revivalists—that is, anyone who has contributed significantly to Islam's current revival—four types of individuals: traditionalists, modernists, fundamentalists, and pragmatists.[4] Consequently, rather than finding a more inclusive term, we have a proliferation of terms for various categories within the movements.

There are other terms which could be explored, but the point has been made: there are a number of terms being used to describe the current wave of political Islam. For the purpose of simplicity this paper will use "Islamist" as a general term for someone "seeking to increase Islam's role in society and politics, usually with the goal of an Islamic state."[5] This definition covers a wide range, but as French scholar Dr. Francois Burgat has observed, "Islamists are nothing more than people who connect Islam to political

dialogue; so they include the entire range from neo-fascists to ultra-liberals."[6] Some argue against the term Islamist for those in the various Islamic movements, asserting it unfairly allows them to claim "the Islamic adjective for themselves," as if those they oppose were not Islamic.[7] However, most scholars and authorities accept this designation, as do the individuals concerned; hence, that is what is used here.

Islam[8]

To better understand the religious underpinnings of the Islamist movement, it would be instructive to take a brief look at the origins of Islam and the doctrine and precepts which guide its adherents. Islam, the world's third major monotheistic religion (along with Judaism and Christianity), as well as the second largest (after Christianity) and fastest growing religion, has been a major factor shaping the social, economic and political life of the Middle East and North Africa for almost 1,400 years. Islam is based on the revelation of God supposed to have been given to Muhammad, an illiterate but honest caravan trader from the Arabian town of Mecca. These revelations, first received around 610 AD, continued for a period of 20 years and, as recorded by Muhammad's wife and friends, constitute the basis of the Koran (*Qur'an*, in Arabic, for "recitation"). Muhammad's denunciation of the pagan, polytheistic culture in Mecca and his growing popularity among much of the population were causing unrest in the city and threatened its enviable and lucrative position as a center of idolatry in the region. Consequently, in 622 Muhammad was forced to flee for Medina, the event referred to by Muslims as the *hegira*. In Medina, the "Prophet" found ready followers for his message, and after

securing this city as a base he succeeded in militarily subjugating Mecca in 630, overthrowing the *jahiliyya* (the "time of ignorance" of Arabs before Islam).

Islam spread rapidly in the following years, as its adherents fulfilled the call of *jihad*, a term often associated with "holy war" but which refers more generally to the struggle or striving of Muslims individually or collectively to do what is right and defend the *umma* ("brotherhood of believers" or Islamic community). The spread of Islam was unaffected by Muhammad's death in 632, though that event did lead to questions of succession which eventually produced a split resulting in the formation of the two major sects in Islam, *Sunni* and *Shia*. Within 100 years Islam had spread west through North Africa (even crossing the Straits of Gibraltar for a 700-year stay in Europe); north into Turkey and Central Asia; and east as far as India. During its first few centuries, while Europe was in its so-called "Dark Ages," Islam produced a rich, brilliant culture centered initially in Damascus, then in Baghdad. Even after the fall of these first dynasties and in spite of wars and empires which continually reshaped the region, Islam has remained a constant and unifying factor.

Islam, as it is now practiced, is a result of several doctrinal sources. The most important of these is the Koran, considered by Muslims to be the divine word of God. However, as the Koran does not cover all aspects of Islamic life, Muslims look to *Hadith* ("tradition") and *Sunna* ("the way of the Prophet"), as further guides. These are the compilation of sayings and decisions attributed to Muhammad and to the code of acceptable behavior for Muslims as modeled by him. Another source of Islamic doctrine is *ijma* ("consensus"), decisions by leading Islamic scholars about issues not specifically covered by the Koran or *Hadith-Sunna*. A final source of doctrine for Muslims is *qiyas*

("reasoning by analogy"), the process by which *ulama* (Islamic judges and scholars) devise a solution to a problem not previously covered based on principles inferred from the Koran, *Hadith-Sunna*, and *ijma*. Using these four sources of doctrine as a basis, Islamic jurists and theologians compiled the *Shari'a* ("the Way"), the body of sacred laws which should govern the life of the *umma* and individual believers. These doctrinal sources and the *Shari'a* are very important to the Islamists, as they form much of the religious basis for what they consider the "re-Islamization" of society.[9]

Two other aspects of Islam have played an important part in motivating individual involvement and participation in the Islamist movement. The first of these is the five pillars of Islam (*faraidh*—literally, "compulsory duties" or "obligations") which are enjoined on all Muslims, under promise of reward by Allah. These are the *shahadah* (proclamation of one's faith in Islam);[10] *salat* (prayers, done five times each day); *sawn* (fasting during Ramadan); *zakat* (alms to the poor); and *hajj* (pilgrimage to Mecca). However, many Islamists have added a "sixth pillar" to the faith they proclaim, that of the Muslims obligation to *jihad*, in this case the struggle to overthrow secular governments and establish a truly Islamic society.[11] Unfortunately, while this struggle can be a spiritual one, it clearly encourages a literal, violent battle.

A second specific aspect of Islam which has strengthened Islamist movements is *ijtihad*.[12] This term refers to the practice of independent reasoning and interpretation on matters of Islamic law and was traditionally considered authoritative only when exercised by an Islamic jurist. However, many young Islamist leaders, few of whom are Islamic clerics or scholars, are claiming the right to *ijtihad* for themselves. Consequently, the Islamist leader is in a position to interpret matters involving Islamic society and

government and authoritatively pass it to his followers. The combination of personal interpretations of Islamic doctrine, combined with followers' zealous religiosity and willingness to aggressively confront secular authorities presents volatile possibilities.

Causes of Islamism

While it would be wonderful to trace an easy cause and effect which produced the various Islamist movements, as in most areas of social science this is not possible. This is especially true as a number of national movements exist, each with its own historical and ideological perspective. One scholar estimates there are over 300 Islamist groups in the Middle East and North Africa, few of which are identical in terms of origins, goals, activities, or methods.[13] Nonetheless, certain factors seem to be generally linked to the genesis of Islamist movements.

First, scholars who have studied the rise of Islamism in the Middle East consistently point to Arabic identity crisis as a major factor.[14] Following an age in which Islam and Arab culture combined to form a brilliant and advanced civilization, the Arab world fell into decline, suffering defeats at the hands of the Crusaders, centuries of rule by the Ottoman Turks, and finally, colonial rule by Western powers. Hence, even in the post-colonial period, there was a sense of loss and inferiority, especially in comparison to the rich and technically advanced West. Though a Pan-Arabist movement of the mid-1900s presented some opportunity to correct this situation, it ultimately fell short due to lack of Arab unity, failure of secularized governments, and Arab military losses to the tiny, but Westernized nation of Israel. The sense of military impotence created by the 1967 Six-Day War added to the burden of inferiority vis-à-vis the West.[15] Added to this was the

loss of the West Bank and the failure to favorably resolve the Palestinian refugee issue, which was further perceived to be an Arab failure.[16] Hence, looking into the past and seeing a "golden age" of Arab life under Islamic rule, whether true or not, gives Islamism a strong appeal in a world of failed governments, low national pride, and weakened Arabic identity.

A second factor contributing to the rise of Islamism is the perceived failure of secular ideologies, especially those linked to the West.[17] In the flush of post-colonial independence, many Middle Eastern and North African nations attempted superficially to imitate the evidently superior West or Soviet Union in their forms of government or economy, with generally dismal results, industrially, agriculturally, and economically. These highly secular and nationalistic regimes, some using a thin veneer of Islam to help legitimize their rule, often degenerated into authoritarian socialist regimes which also failed to provide for the people.[18] After decades of seeing the failure of irreligious Western ideologies, many Muslims believe there is little of value outside of science and technology to learn from the West. They see in Islam the foundation of a just and prosperous society, no doubt leading to the frequent Islamist campaign slogan, "Islam is the answer."

A third factor in the rise of Islamism has been the encroachment of the West in Islamic values and culture—what Dekmejian refers to as "modernization and culture clash."[19] In many areas of life, Muslim society indulged in mimicry of the West. No place was this more evident than in Iran under the Shah, where alcohol, nightclubs, and even gay bars became part of society and certainly helped contribute to his overthrow. For many, Islamism is very much a backlash against what is seen as Western-inspired

decadence and immorality and is an attempt to reverse the pollution of Islamic culture. This is not to say, however, that Islamists are against all Western imports. Most Islamists are very much in favor of Western technology and learning, as they are essentially value neutral. Islamists have no problem with modern technology and conveniences, as long as they are not used in a way contrary to Islam. Indeed, one author noted most Islamists would like to increase the number of television sets in society, but only after they had gained control of the broadcasts.[20]

Another factor in the Islamist movement's success has been the loss of legitimacy by governing elites and institutions.[21] Many, if not most of the countries experiencing an Islamist movement are states with a history of single party or individual rule. Acting from weak legitimacy bases, these governments have refused to open the political process to others, resulting in the need for more and more repressive measures when opposition arose. This has been especially true in those cases where the government has failed to successfully implement economic and social policies which address the needs of the people. Additionally, many of these governments are marked by official corruption and incompetence, which further undercuts their legitimacy with the people. Ironically, preventing or eliminating secular opposition movements has strengthened the Islamist appeal, as the only avenue left open for opposition is the mosque.[22] In some cases, governments have tried to co-opt Islam to reinforce their legitimacy, but with limited success. Though generally seeing Islam as a bar to progress, these regimes have attempted to control the Islamic discourse by claiming to govern by Islamic principles and *Shari'a*, providing for maintenance of mosques, and appointing and paying the *ulama*.[23]

Unfortunately, rather than confer legitimacy on the governments, such actions have simply tended to bring into question the legitimacy of the clerics and the "establishment" Islam.[24]

A final major factor behind the Islamist movement has been the social breakdown in a number of Middle Eastern and North African countries.[25] The failure of state socialism, precipitous drops in oil prices since the early 1980s, and failed agricultural and industrial policies have left many nations economic basket cases. Simultaneous with these economic problems, high birth rates and migration from rural areas to cities have swollen urban populations. Consequently, unemployment is rampant throughout the region, particularly in the ranks of the young—even the well educated—who form the majority of the population in most countries.[26] Additionally, with the governments failing to meet the rising expectations of the 1960s and 70s, the gap between the "haves" and "have-nots" has grown precipitously. So, while a few have prospered, often as a result of official connections or corruption, the masses in most countries face a bleak and uncertain future.[27]

When looking objectively at the social, psychological, and economic conditions facing the Middle East and North Africa, it is easier to understand the appeal of new ideologies. In the 1950s, 60s, and early 70s, the beneficiary of popular discontent was usually Arabist or Marxist movements.[28] However, with the virtual collapse of the pan-Arabist movement following the 1967 Arab-Israeli War and the growing recognition of the failure of Marxism, the torch was passed to the ideology of Islamism. Thus, while many have assumed the appeal of Islamism is essentially a religious one, this does not appear to be the case. The appeal of Islamism can be linked to its availability as a protest

ideology, the fulfillment of psycho-social needs in giving followers a sense of belonging and self worth, and the provision of social services as much as to its religious aspects.[29]

Islamism's Target Audience

Considering the number of causes underlying the rise of Islamism, as well as the variety of reasons for the appeal of such an ideology, it is not surprising to find Islamism is embraced by a wide spectrum of people. Though television images of a black-clad *ayatollah* leading anti-Western mobs may give the impression the Islamist movement is primarily led by the religious establishment, the contrary is generally true. In most countries of the Middle East and North Africa, Islam has been co-opted by the ruling regimes, either through their assumption of the Islamic mantle, as in Saudi Arabia; through state control of the mosques and appointment of religious leaders, as in Algeria; or by proclaiming the state to officially be "Islamic" and guided by Islamic principles and *Shari'a*, such as in Egypt. Since "establishment" Islam is closely identified with the state, "[t]he Islamist movement is not led by clerics (except in Iran), but by young secular intellectuals, who openly claim to be 'religious thinkers,' rivals or successors to a class of *ulamas* who have compromised themselves with respect to those in power."[30] The average Islamist leader is more likely to be a young college professor, lawyer, or engineer exercising his "right" to *ijtihad*, than a cleric. Indeed, though a few clerics are involved in the Islamist movement, most would be considered irrelevant at best to the Islamist. Roy notes:

> The Islamists reproach the *ulamas* for two things. One is their servility to the powers in place, which leads them to accept a secular government and laws that do not conform to the *Shari'a*. The other is their compromise with western modernity: the *ulamas* have accepted modernity where the

> Islamists reject it (acceptance of the separation of religion and politics, which necessarily leads to secularization) and maintained the tradition [sic] where the Islamists reject it (indifference to modern science, rigid and casuistic teachings, rejection of political and social action).[31]

In many cases, establishment clerics perceived to have compromised with secular regimes are considered traitors to Islam,[32] with several having been assassinated by radical Islamists.

Though Islamist leadership tends to be young professionals interested in combining both political and religious goals, they represent only a small, albeit important, part of these movements. The majority of those involved in Islamist causes come from other groups particularly susceptible to the appeal of Islamism. Though some variations exist throughout the region, it is possible to identify those who are likely to heed the Islamic revivalist call.[33] For example, one of the most fertile recruiting grounds is among the youth of the region. As previously noted, high birth rates and poor economic performance have left many nations with large populations of unemployed youth with few prospects for the future, even among the college-educated. Social inequities, identity crises, and the other problems facing Middle Eastern and North African nations seem to hit the youth especially hard. As a result, many Islamist organizations have a high percentage of youth as members.

A second source of Islamist strength is among the newly urbanized elements. Recent decades have seen a great migration from rural areas as a consequence of flawed government policies favoring industrialization and urbanization over agriculture and because of the appeal of a supposedly better life in the cities. Governmental inability to provide services, housing, and jobs to people already experiencing culture shock as a

result of leaving the countryside has left the field open to the Islamists promising a better life and social-spiritual security.

Islamism has also successfully appealed to a variety of political malcontents and those to whom Dekmejian refers as "nativist-traditional elements." Among the political malcontents one finds a variety of individuals and ideologies, such as leftists, Arabists, or nationalists, who have found Islamist movements to be the most effective means of voicing their protests. The nativist-traditionalist elements are composed primarily of the religious, middle classes of Islamic society who have seen their status and numbers shrinking as a result of governmental social and economic policies and who perceive their religion under attack from both Western culture and their own secularized governments.

A final major group susceptible to Islamist ideology may be referred to as the "disinherited."[34] This mass includes urban poor (which will have some overlap with newly urbanized elements and youth), tribesmen, and peasants. As the most traditionalist sectors of society with respect to their Islamic heritage, and because of their low socio-economic status, this amorphous group is particularly receptive to the vision offered by Islamist ideology. According to Dekmejian, this group, along with the youth and the middle-class nativist elements are most likely to provide the "cannon fodder" for an Islamist seizure of power.

Islamist Goals and Methods

Having looked at the religious foundation and appeal of political Islam and the groups who are primarily involved in the various movements, it is important to examine

both the goals espoused by Islamists as well as the methods by which they hope to achieve these goals.

Despite the attempt by some to portray the Islamist movement primarily as a monolithic, fundamentalist religious movement, examination of the goals of the various Islamist groups gives lie to this claim. Though a few individuals speak of a supranational *umma*,[35] virtually all Islamist groups focus on national problems and have a national agenda.[36] These groups, though occasionally aided with training or money by Islamists in other countries,[37] have arisen in response to national or even local conditions and are aimed at dealing with issues at these levels. In general, Islamists are attempting to reverse what they see as a trend of dividing life into secular and spiritual, especially at the national level. Though the West has a well-established tradition of separating state and religion, this is not the case in much of the Muslim world. Islam is viewed as a comprehensive way of life for its adherents, affecting not only spiritual matters, but social, economic, and political life as well. The idea of separating faith and the nation is inconceivable to a pious Muslim.[38] The attempts by many Middle Eastern and North African governments to emulate the Western concept of "separation of church and state," especially in view of the economic and social failures of these regimes, have helped create a backlash of support for making Islam the foundation of society. The Islamist view is the various problems affecting their nations would be corrected under the implementation of a true Islamic regime.[39] Even such conservative Islamic states as Saudi Arabia have come under attack for being too close to the West and not being sufficiently Islamic.

Yet, even with the general goal of "re-Islamizing" society, there is no consistent view on how that is to be achieved. In some cases, the goal may be simply to increase the

influence of traditional Islam on the governments. For instance, some believe the mullahs who led the overthrow of the Shah of Iran in 1979 would have actually been content simply to regain the influence their predecessors possessed—essentially a consultative and veto role—at the turn of the century.[40] In some countries the goal is to do away with secular, Westernized laws and establish the *Shari'a* as the sole law of the land.[41] Others see an Islamist society which rejects the corruption of the current system and in which justice—economic, political, legal, and social—is founded on the Koran and is extended to all members of society. For others, the goal is to destroy modernism, the secularizing force they see attacking society's traditional Islamic roots and culture. Even democracy is frequently proclaimed as an Islamist goal.[42] Of course, it is not clear Islamists are as committed to democracy when they are in power as they apparently are when out of power,[43] nor is it clear what form democracy might take in an Islamist regime—there simply is no track record from which we can judge.[44]

One author probably reflects the view of many when he simply states the goal of Islamists is power, control of the state, and maintenance of power.[45] But, again, we have little upon which to base such a cynical view, and, even if true, this is the same goal of virtually every Muslim regime in the region. Ultimately, it may be the Islamists themselves do not always know what they want. Esposito notes that:

> Islamist movements...often tend to be more specific on what they are against than what they are for. While all may speak of an Islamic order or an Islamic state, implementation of the *Shari'a,* . . . a society grounded more firmly on Islamic values and mores, the details are often vague. After the electoral victory of Algeria's Islamic Salvation Front (FIS), when Abbasi Madani was pressed for his program he described it as broad. When pressed for its practical steps, he replied, "Our practical program is also broad."[46]

Yet, if the goals of Islamists are highly varied, the means they have available to achieve those goals are constrained. Despite the view that Islamists groups are violent by their very character, the facts indicate most would prefer to work within the system to create change and gain power and influence.[47] Many Islamist groups, such as Algeria's FIS and the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, have attempted to work from the bottom up, that is develop their support among the population as a whole then work within the political system as normal opposition groups. Unfortunately, this avenue generally has been closed off to the Islamists, as their popularity and success in political organization have made them viable alternatives to ruling regimes. Consequently, Islamist groups are often banned once a government perceives the "threat" they represent. Indeed, it is unlikely these groups would have ever been legal except for the fact that many governments, notably in Egypt, Jordan, and Syria, used Islamists to successfully counter the appeal of Marxism, Communism, and other ideologies in recent decades. Once these threats had receded, however, it was usually only a short time until the Islamists were again outlawed.

Once the possibility of successfully operating as an opposition party within the political system is closed to moderate Islamists, they essentially have two options. One is to retreat to the mosque and continue to surreptitiously recruit followers and agitate peacefully for change. The other option is to join the ranks of the more radical Islamist groups and resort to violence and terrorism. As noted previously, the idea of violence is not foreign to the Islamist, as the very concept of *jihad* implies the struggle of a good Muslim to protect the Islamic community.[48] Indeed, some of the more radical Islamist groups see in modern, secularized society the same state of *jahiliyya* which existed prior

to the coming of Islam and are thus enjoined to fight against it[49] and against the Muslim "apostates" who support this system.[50] Unfortunately, when governments outlaw or attempt to destroy Islamist organizations, the usual result is to radicalize their ranks, leading to the escalation of violence. Few governments have been completely successful in eliminating Islamist violence,[51] and many have made their situations worse by causing further radicalization. The fact is that violence—whether by the Irish Republican Army, Tamil rebels, or Islamists—gives power to a relatively small group of people and grants them influence well out of proportion to their numbers.[52] Islamist violence serves a variety of purposes (e.g., intimidation, economic warfare, destabilization) and will undoubtedly continue to be a problem as long as other means of expression are closed off.

Summary

Islamism is one of the key factors in the political landscape of the Middle East and North Africa. It is a diverse movement, composed of hundreds of groups which have arisen in response to local conditions and problems and which seek to solve them at the national level. They have a variety of goals, always with the idea of a state more in line with Islamic doctrine, laws, and values. Though not numerous, Islamists are drawn from all segments of society and are strongly committed, even to the point of violence, to their ideals. Though Islamism does not currently pose a serious threat in most countries—Algeria and Egypt being two notable exceptions—it is still a growing movement and is not likely to go away.

Notes

[1]John Esposito, "The Islamic Movement in North Africa," *Islamic Fundamentalism in Africa and Implications for U.S. Policy* (Washington, 1993), p. 27.

[2]Mark Jurgensmeyer, *The New Cold War* (Berkeley, 1993), pp. 4-6.

[3]See R. Hrair Dekmejian, *Islam in Revolution* (Syracuse, 1995), pp. 8-11, for a short history of Islamic revivals.

[4]Mir Zohair Husain, *Global Islamic Politics* (New York, 1995), pp. 11-12.

[5]Fred Halliday, "The Politics of Islam," *British Journal of Political Science* (July 1995), p. 399.

[6]Arthur L. Lowrie, "American Foreign Policy and the Campaign Against Islam," *Middle East Policy* (September 1995), p. 215.

[7]As'ad AbuKhalil, "The Incoherence of Islamic Fundamentalism," *The Middle East Journal* (Autumn 1994) p. 677.

[8]For an excellent summary of the history of Islam, see Daniel C. Diller, ed., "Fourteen Centuries of Islam," *The Middle East*, 8th Edition (Washington: Congressional Quarterly, Inc., 1994), pp. 169-189.

[9]Husain, op. cit., p. 43.

[10]"There is no God but Allah and Muhammad is His Prophet." Ibid., p. 297.

[11]Jurgensmeyer, op. cit., p. 60.

[12]Dekmejian, op. cit., p. 21.

[13]Ibid., p. 55.

[14]Husain, op. cit., pp. 164-166.

[15]Dekmejian, op. cit., p. 28.

[16]Hassan al-Turabi, statement before House Subcommittee on Africa, May 20, 1992, *Islamic Fundamentalism in Africa and Implications for U.S. Policy* (Washington, 1993), p. 8.

[17]Gilles Keppel, *The Revenge of God* (University Park, PA, 1994), p. 4.

[18]Turabi, op. cit., p. 3.

[19]Dekmejian, op. cit., p. 29.

[20]Francois Burgat and William Dowell, *The Islamic Movement in North Africa* (Austin, 1993), p. 19.

[21]Dekmejian, op. cit., p.27.

[22]Richard Augustus Norton, "The Challenge of Inclusion in the Middle East," *Current History* (Jan 95), p. 3.

[23]John P. Entelis, "Political Islam in Algeria: The Nonviolent Dimension," *Current History* (Jan 95), p. 14.

[24]AbuKhalil, op. cit., p. 677.

[25]Jurgensmeyer, op. cit., p. 194.

[26]Keppel, op. cit., p. 14.

[27]Mary-Jane Deeb, "Militant Islam and the Politics of Redemption," *Islamic Fundamentalism in Africa and Implications for U.S. Policy* (Washington, 1993), pp. 91-92.

[28]Keppel, op. cit., p. 15.

[29] Dekmejian, op. cit., pp. 49-50.

Notes

[30]Olivier Roy, *The Failure of Political Islam* (Cambridge, MA, 1994), p. 36.

[31]Ibid., p. 37.

[32]Jurgensmeyer, op. cit., p. 39.

[33]See Dekmejian, op. cit. pp. 46-49, for an excellent summary of the Islamist's target audiences.

[34]Esposito, op. cit., p. 32.

[35]Deeb, op. cit., p. 87.

[36]Jurgensmeyer, op. cit., p. 47.

[37]Iran in particular has been accused of aiding militant Islamist groups, most notably those operating in Lebanon and Israel.

[38]Dekmejian, op. cit., p. 41.

[39]Though the economic and societal failures of revolutionary Iran has given pause to some Islamists, its example can be glossed over by the largely *Sunni* Arab Islamists due to its nature as a non-Arab, predominately *Shia* nation.

[40]Jurgensmeyer, op. cit., p. 177.

[41]Deeb, op. cit., p. 98.

[42]Keppel, op. cit., pp. 146, 193-194.

[43]John Voll, statement before House Subcommittee on Africa, May 20, 1992, *Islamic Fundamentalism in Africa and Implications for U.S. Policy* (Washington, 1993), p. 65.

[44]Interestingly, Jurgensmeyer notes religion may be necessary for democracy to develop, "for without the legitimacy conferred by religion, the democratic process does not seem to work in some parts of the world." Op. cit., p. 202.

[45]Halliday, op. cit., p. 402.

[46]Esposito, op. cit., p. 30.

[47]Keppel, op. cit., pp. 34, 46.

[48]Jurgensmeyer notes one Islamist concluded peaceful means for fighting apostasy are inadequate, so any means—including deceit and violence—are acceptable, and such actions are incumbent on all true Muslims. Op. cit., p. 60.

[49]Keppel, op. cit., p. 20.

[50]AbuKhalil, op. cit., p. 679.

[51]Syria is one notable exception, having quashed a violent Islamist challenge to the regime of President Assad. However, this "victory" was achieved by the virtual destruction of the town of Hama at the cost of thousands of innocent lives. Fortunately, few governments are prepared to go to these lengths as yet.

[52]Jurgensmeyer, op. cit., pp. 167-168.

Chapter 3

The Cases of Algeria and Egypt

If one looked for the countries where Islamist movements are making the greatest impact, all that would be necessary would be to turn on the television. For several years Egypt and Algeria have consistently made the news for bombings and assassinations by Islamist rebels and for brutal reprisals by government forces. Since both nations are located in North Africa and have many similarities, it would be easy to assume their situations were analogous. However, though there are many points of similarity between the Islamist movements in Algeria and Egypt, there are also significant differences. It would be instructive to look at these cases as representative of what is happening in the Middle East and North Africa.

Algeria

Historical Context[1]

The region comprising modern-day Algeria was originally inhabited by the Berbers, a people of unknown origin. However, because of the Berbers' nomadic lifestyle, the large size of the area, and the fact it is broken up by desert and mountain ranges, Algeria did not develop historically as a single nation or with a strong national identity. In the seventh century, the region was overrun, after a fierce Berber resistance, by the Arab

armies spreading Islam. As a result, the area of modern Algeria was not only Islamized, but strongly Arabized as well, with only a few regions retaining their Berber culture. In the sixteenth century, the foundation of the modern state was laid as the Regency of Algiers was established as an outpost of the Ottoman Empire, which it nominally served until its annexation by France in the early 1800s. As a department of France, Algeria drew numerous European settlers from not only France, but Spain, Portugal, and Italy as well. These settlers quickly came to dominate life in Algeria, not only holding most of the best land,[2] but also forming the core of the professional and political elite.

Despite their second-class status in their own country, many Algerians served in the World Wars, broadening their knowledge of the world around them. During this period, many were influenced by the realization of the rights withheld from them, as well as by the growing Arab nationalist movement. As a result, Algerians began a war of independence against France in 1954, led by the National Liberation Front (FLN, after its name in French), which lasted for eight years. The cost, both economic and political, of keeping 400,000 French troops in Algeria to control approximately 6,000 FLN guerrillas finally convinced President Charles de Gaulle to grant independence to Algeria in 1962. This placed Algeria in the enviable position of having been the only Arab nation to gain its independence from a Western power through military victory.

Early National Development

Following independence, Algeria faced great challenges as a nation. Thousands of European settlers or their descendants left for Europe, depriving the infant state of most of its managers, landowners, professional class, civil servants, and skilled workers. On the positive side, Algeria was a country of good natural resources, especially oil and

natural gas, and the victory over France gave both pride to the nation and unquestioned legitimacy to the initial FLN government. That the FLN was the single legal party was not a great concern, and it immediately consolidated national power with Ahmed Ben Bella as leader. Ben Bella started the *autogestion* (worker's self management) of farms, which became the forerunner of Algerian socialism, the basis for economic development for coming decades. Soon, however, Ben Bella's quest for personal power resulted in his overthrow by others within the FLN. He was replaced by Houari Boumedienne, who consolidated power under the military council and served as president, prime minister, and commander-in-chief of the armed forces until his death in 1978. A National Charter was approved in 1976 which formally established Algeria as a Socialist state, proclaimed Islam as the state religion, guaranteed basic rights for citizens, but legalized the FLN as the only political party. Despite its ostensibly Islamic foundation, however, the government of Algeria was highly secularized and nationalistic, leaving little room for Islamic values and law.[3] Additionally, notwithstanding its hard-won independence, Algeria continued to have a close economic, political and cultural relationship with France.

Despite the potential offered by its natural resources and close relations to France, Algeria struggled through the 1970s and 80s, with very few successes to show for its efforts. Oil and natural gas initially provided high revenues, allowing for relatively high levels of social spending and drawing many people from the countryside to the cities. However, falling prices in the 1980s resulted in heavy borrowing, large deficits, and subsequent cuts in social programs. Neglect of agriculture while attempting, and failing, to industrialize the nation also contributed to the growth of cities and high unemployment. High birth rates and inadequate schooling produced a mass of young people with little

faith in the ruling regime and little hope for the future. The result was severe riots in October 1988, when "[a] new generation of Algerians who had come to age long after the war for independence, took to the streets, protesting high prices, lack of jobs, inept leadership, a bloated bureaucracy, and other grievances."[4] At this point, with the FLN having lost its "historic legitimacy,"[5] failed economic and social policies based ostensibly on Western models, misrule and coercion by the ruling elite, and the clash of traditional Islamic values with growing Western cultural influence, the stage was set for the growth of an alternate ideology.

Islamism's Rise to Prominence

Following the riots of 1988, Chadli Bendjedid, who had succeeded Boumedienne in 1978, moved to open the political processes in Algeria. By doing so he hoped to ease the dissatisfaction which gripped much of the population, giving them a voice and a stake in running the country. Additionally, political openness was the price being paid to gain the support of those who would suffer the most because of budget cuts, as well as those who would be taxed more heavily to finance the government.[6] As part of this process, the Prime Minister and cabinet were made accountable to the National Assembly and political parties were legalized. Unfortunately, years of one-party rule and suppression of opposition made the formation of new parties a slow and laborious task. Islamists, however, had been present since independence, though they had not been a significant factor as a result of both repression and state co-optation of Islam.[7] Their existence as a well-organized and structured socio-religious group ensured the Islamic Salvation Front (FIS) was the only opposition party capable of organizing and establishing itself quickly when the opportunity presented itself.[8] Consequently, when municipal elections were

held in June 1990, the FIS won 55 percent of the municipalities, by far the largest share of any party. It is a measure of how much the government and leaders of the FLN, now operating as a true political party, had deluded themselves regarding their own popularity that they were surprised by the FIS success.[9]

Despite indications of discontent with both the government and its representative party, the FLN, Bendjedid pressed forward with plans for elections to the National Assembly. Though delayed several times, and in spite of governmental harassment of the Islamists, the first round of elections in December 1991 resulted in the FIS capturing 188 of 231 seats in the National Assembly. However, before the second round took place, which clearly would have cemented the Islamist hold on the government, the Army stepped in, canceled the elections, outlawed the FIS, and jailed its leaders. The ostensible reason for Army intervention was to protect the fledgling democracy from the authoritarian Islamists, putting the Army in the ironic position of "destroying democracy in order to save it." There is little concrete evidence, however, that an Islamist victory would have actually derailed democracy or limited personal freedoms in Algeria. The few excesses which took place following Islamist victories in municipal elections were quickly reversed, with Abassi Madani, the FIS leader, urging moderation and the winning of hearts and minds rather than the imposition of "Islamic" values.[10]

Following the military intervention, Bendjedid resigned as president in a move obviously intended to make way for a ruling military government, which supplanted the FLN in January 1992.[11] As a result, political life in Algeria was suspended and the military began waging a war on Islamist parties (particularly the FIS), unions, and organizations. Predictably, this repression radicalized the Islamist movement,[12] eventually

resulting in the formation of more violent groups, particularly the Armed Islamic Group (GIA), which began a war on the government and its supporters, foreign residents, and tourists. Since 1992, Algeria has experienced a virtual civil war resulting in an estimated 50,000 deaths.[13]

For the past two years, the president appointed by the military authorities, Liamine Zeroual, has been walking a tightrope between military and civil *eradicateurs* (those desiring the complete destruction of the Islamists) and the insurgents. A former military officer of great appeal and recognized integrity, Zeroual has tried hard to work with moderates on both sides of the issue, but has been limited by the strident military leadership which holds the keys to power and by the violence and uncompromising stance of the more radical Islamists.[14] Still, Zeroual has attempted to ease the restrictions on Islamists and establish a national dialogue. One hopeful sign was the January 1995 conference held in Rome sponsored by the Catholic Sant Egidio community. Though boycotted by the Algerian government and the most radical Islamist groups, the parties present—including representatives of most Islamist, human rights, and political organizations—produced a remarkably conciliatory document for establishing a *modus vivendi* in Algeria. Key points included a commitment to individual rights, a renunciation of violence as a means to gain or maintain power, and the acceptance of the principles of "political pluralism" and "alternation of power through universal suffrage."[15] Though not binding on Islamist groups and publicly rejected by the government, this document may establish a basis for discussions between the two sides.

Another hopeful sign was the popular election of President Zeroual in November 1995, in an election in which 75 percent of the population participated, despite Islamist

threats to disrupt polling and kill voters. Notably, Zeroual, with slightly over 61 percent of the vote, captured many of the voters who supported the Islamists in 1991, particularly women voters who feel especially threatened by recent radical Islamist attacks on working and unveiled women. Zeroual also has strong support among the minority Berbers who see an Islamist government as a threat to both their culture and language.[16] Many view Zeroual's strong showing in a remarkably free and fair election as both a mandate to pursue peace with Islamists and a repudiation of the Islamist insurgency.[17] Though some fear the military leadership read the results as approval of their war against the Islamists and support for the candidate they originally placed in power,[18] Zeroual's victory might convince the military leadership to give him the opportunity he needs to bring the country together.

The Future of Algeria

To all appearances, Algeria seemed an unlikely place for an Islamist insurgency. As one author notes

> The country's long association with France, its lack of historic Islamic identity as a nation, and 3 decades of single-party socialism militated against such a development. But the failure of successive Algerian governments to resolve severe economic problems, plus the lack of representative political institutions nurtured within the ruling FLN, brought about the rise of fundamentalism as a political force during the 1990's.[19]

Adding to the rise of the Islamist movement, of course, was the severe political and military repression which radicalized a relatively moderate political movement. In retrospect, it seems likely the Algerian government should have moved more slowly to implement political reforms after 1988 to allow sufficient time for opposition parties to form; the rapid political opening and subsequent elections played to the Islamists'

organizational strength. Nonetheless, many believe if the national elections had been allowed to proceed without military interference, democracy had a very real chance of taking hold in Algeria. The winners would have been moderate by current standards and it is unlikely the process of democratization would have been reversed.[20] This seems especially likely as the strong showing by the FIS probably reflected a protest vote against the FLN more than a pro-Islamist position by most Algerians.[21] If so, the Islamists' support would have quickly withered had they moved to impose a radical vision of Islamic values on society.

As it stands now, what the moderate Islamists wanted 5 years ago and what the radicalized Islamists want now are quite different. In many respects, it is unfortunate the Islamists were not allowed to win in 1992, as the world would have been given an example of what happens when an Islamist movement comes to power through the ballot box.[22] As such, it could have served as a warning or as an example for others. Unfortunately, few observers hold out hope that Algeria's crisis can be settled peacefully, if at all. On a hopeful note, Hugh Roberts points out there is a huge middle ground between the extremists on both sides in Algeria.[23] Yet, if this large group of moderates is not able to reach an accommodation soon, we are likely to witness a situation in which neither military nor rebels will prevail, resulting in a Lebanon-style disintegration of Algeria.[24]

Egypt

Historical Context[25]

Unlike the relatively recent national emergence of Algeria, Egyptian history and national identity extend back thousands of years. People settled along the Nile River as early as 6,000 BC, slowly developing into small villages. These villages were eventually organized into a system of government, with the lack of forests and mountains making them easily governable. The subsequent rise of the Egyptian nation over several thousand years produced one of the greatest civilizations of the ancient world. By the time of Christ, even though past its glory, Egypt was still a center of Greek and Roman learning and culture. In subsequent years, Egypt also became a center of Christianity as the birthplace of the Coptic Christian faith. When the Islamic armies from Arabia overran Egypt, both the Coptic and Jewish communities welcomed the Muslims, as they were accorded higher status than under the former "pagan" culture and were not forced to convert to Islam. Over the centuries they were generally tolerated by Islamic governments and, though clearly inferior in status to Muslims, proved to be useful in Islamic society due to their skills and education.[26]

The arrival of Islam and Arabs was a major formative influence of modern Egypt.[27] Islamic armies were soon followed by nomadic Arabs who settled the Nile Valley and eventually became the majority population. The *fellahin*, native Egyptians who converted to Islam, were not only consigned to being a minority, they were and continue to be considered the social inferiors of the Arabic Muslims. In the sixteenth century, Egypt became part of the Ottoman empire, though remaining a fairly independent entity. Egypt

was ruled at this time by the Mamluks (former Ottoman soldiers and slaves who had converted to Islam), whose military prowess and occasional tribute to the Ottoman rulers allowed them a free hand in the affairs of the nation. This independence came to an end with the invasion of French armies under Napoleon Bonaparte in 1798. With the help of the British, Ottoman forces expelled the French, but in the struggle which followed the Albanian-born Muslim, Muhammad Ali, came to power as the Ottoman governor of Egypt. Despite its Muslim ruler, however, Egypt's future was now linked directly with the West.

Under Muhammad Ali, the modernizing of Egypt began in earnest with the importation of Western ideas and technology. The majority of Egyptians prospered as the Mamluks were suppressed, peasants received land through redistribution and had their taxes eased, and irrigation and agricultural systems were improved. One of Ali's descendants, the Khedive (Viceroy) Ismail, continued the quest for modernization by building the Suez Canal, which opened in 1869, with European assistance and money. Unfortunately for Egypt, Ismail used up public funds on a number of ambitious projects and was eventually forced to sell the Egyptian shares in the Canal to Britain, and his successors were forced to accept British control over Egyptian finances. Following a revolt of army officers in 1882, Britain made Egypt a de facto protectorate, keeping the khedive in office to prevent conflict with the Ottomans.

Rise of Modern Egypt

In the early 1900s, an Egyptian nationalist movement started under the influence of Western-educated officials and Islamic religious leaders. This movement was further strengthened when Egyptians fought on the British side in World War I with British

assurances of post-war independence. Consequently, following the fall of the Ottomans, Britain formally abolished the protectorate and established a constitutional monarchy under King Faud. However, Egyptian independence was ephemeral as the British kept control of foreign policy, communications, and defense, causing great resentment among the Egyptians. During the late 1920s and early 1930s, one of the seminal Islamist groups, the Muslim Brotherhood, gained considerable influence in Egypt—despite suppression by the government—agitating for an Islamist state independent of all foreign control.

With the start of World War II and the consequent German and Italian threat to North Africa and the Mediterranean, Britain reinstated its Egyptian protectorate. However, the Allies' use of Egypt as a base of operations during the war and the continued influence of Britain on Egypt's affairs helped plant the seeds of revolt. The continued British presence after 1945 and the humiliating loss to Israel in the 1948 war, led to the formation of the Free Officers, a secret, highly nationalistic organization. With the backing of the army, the Free Officers "persuaded" Faud's son, King Farouk, to abdicate in July 1952 and go into exile. The monarchy was subsequently abolished in 1954 and one of the Free Officers, Gamel Abdel Nasser, was established as president, prime minister, and head of the Revolutionary Command Council. Nasser's goals were to restore Egyptian status and dignity, eliminate foreign control, and make Egypt the leader of the Arab world.[28] To accomplish these goals, Nasser established a secular nationalist government, but tolerated the Muslim Brotherhood as a counter to the governments enemies. Within 2 years, however, "Nasser felt secure enough to turn on his erstwhile allies—now his only remaining political opponents—and liquidate them."[29]

To Nasser's great disappointment, he was never able to unify the Arab world under his leadership, and the Israeli defeat of the combined Arab armies in 1967's Six-Day War effectively finished the Pan-Arabist movement which Nasser represented. Additionally, under almost two decades of Nasser's rule, life in Egypt had deteriorated significantly for the majority of the population. Falling agricultural production, uncontrolled population growth and urbanization, failing industrialization, and rampant poverty plagued the country. The lack of legal political opposition to the government, a national identity crisis, and a culture clash between Islamic tradition and the secular world set the stage for an Islamist challenge to the regime. Only Nasser's brutal repression of the Islamists and personal popularity with the masses kept the situation in check. After Nasser's death in 1970, his successor would face a greater and growing challenge.

Rise of Egyptian Islamism

As vice president of Egypt, the little-known Anwar al-Sadat became president following Nasser's greatly-mourned death. Though not previously a highly-regarded individual, Sadat set out quickly and aggressively to make his mark on Egypt. In order to correct the "errors" of his predecessor, including overreliance on the Soviets, excessive government interference in the economy, and failure to achieve a satisfactory Arab policy towards Israel, Sadat introduced a "revolution of rectification."[30] In 1972, he ordered 15,000 Soviet advisors out of Egypt, correctly assuming the United States would eventually reward this sign of independence. In 1973, Sadat became the "Hero of the Crossing" when Egyptian forces crossed the Suez Canal, drove back Israeli forces, and inflicted heavy losses on that previously invincible army. Though the Israelis had regained the upper hand by the time the war ended, those initial successes enhanced Sadat's stature

and reinvigorated Egyptian national pride and confidence. Sadat's greatest success internationally came several years later, when he traveled to Israel to address the Knesset, followed in 1979 by the Camp David Peace Accords and a Nobel Peace Prize. Unfortunately, though the rest of the world applauded Sadat, the Arab world shunned Egypt, and both Nasserist and Islamist elements within Egypt resented Sadat's accommodation with Israel.

Sadat's greatest failure, however, was with his own domestic policies. As part of his "rectification," he instituted his *infitah* ("opening up") program in 1974. Designed to do away with Nasser's socialist system and encourage foreign investment, technological improvements, and industrialization, *infitah* was supposed to bring an economic boom to Egypt. Instead of bringing economic prosperity, however, this program simply made fortunes for a few, often corrupt elite, particularly those well connected to Sadat (including his own family), while leaving the masses behind in the economic dust. Additionally, correcting what Sadat saw as Nasser's failures proved more dangerous than imagined, as Nasser had established that the prices of food, electricity, public transportation, and housing would be subsidized by the government as part of his "social contract" with the Egyptian people.[31] Thus, when Sadat reduced food subsidies in 1977 under pressure from international creditors, he touched off weeks of rioting. Though Sadat canceled the price increases, he had further distanced himself from his people.

Sadat's opening of the political processes were ultimately little more successful than his economic program. In 1973 he had released members of the Muslim Brotherhood from jail, and in 1975 appeared to allow a limited amount of political opposition through the formation of an Islamic party and a leftist party. In fact, however, Sadat's own Arab

Socialist Union (renamed the National Democratic Party in 1978) kept firm reins on national power, with the ideological nature of each of the opposition parties simply serving to balance the other. As one author notes, "For all practical purposes, Egypt under Sadat was even more of a single-party state under an authoritarian leader than it had been in Nasser's time."[32]

By the end of the 1970's, conditions in Egypt were practically ideal for supporting an Islamist movement. Though Sadat was highly regarded in the Western world,

> [t]he view that more and more Egyptians held of their world-famous leader was less flattering. Religious leaders and conservative Muslims objected to Sadat's luxurious style of living. The poor resented having to pay more for basic necessities. The educated classes were angry about Sadat's claim that the political system had become more open and democratic when . . . it had not.[33]

The government had lost legitimacy, in great part due to failed social and economic programs, misrule, and official corruption. Unemployment, especially among the urban masses and youth, was skyrocketing, while the gap between rich and poor grew ever greater. Islamist groups—stepping in to provide basic necessities, social services, a voice of opposition, and hope—prospered. Sadat's downfall came in September 1981 when in response to religious unrest and agitation against his peace with Israel he jailed hundreds of political opponents, many of whom—though by no means all—were Islamists. Sadat was assassinated one month later by Islamist militants who regarded him as "a traitor to Egypt, to the Arab world, and Islam."[34]

Sadat's successor, Hosni Mubarek, has continued to faced a growing Islamist threat since coming to power. Not having the appeal of either Nasser or Sadat—Mubarek was once described as "a civil servant with the rank of president"[35]—his legitimacy has rested

more on his managerial ability and his integrity.[36] Unfortunately for Mubarek, the system which developed in Egypt under his two predecessors appears to be impervious to change, no matter how good the management. Simply put, the current system profits those who are well connected, hence, there is no motivation for change among the elite.[37] The majority of Egyptians continue to see their own standard of living sink, while being aware of corruption and luxurious living at high levels. Additionally, Mubarek's integrity has been called into question because of allegations of corruption among those close to him and because he broke his pledge to serve only two terms as president.[38]

The government's sinking legitimacy, however, is just one example of the many problems facing Egypt. Others include a growing economic recession and deprivation among the people; inappropriate government responses to economic problems; unsuccessful political reform; growing insecurity due to an armed insurgency; fracturing of military and security services, due to internal disputes, corruption, and even Islamist penetration; and the preoccupation of Egypt's primary sponsor, the United States, with the Arab-Israeli peace process.[39] Consequently, the Islamist challenge to the regime has continued to grow, abated only by severe state repression.

As if the Egyptian government did not have enough of a problem with Islamists, the situation has been exacerbated by its growing regional overtones. While the threat during Nasser's and Sadat's regimes was primarily from the "traditional" national Islamist groups, such as the Muslim Brotherhood, a regional threat has been growing in recent years in southern (Upper) Egypt. There, the *fellahin*, long treated as second-class citizens, have turned increasingly to Islamism as their means for righting societal wrongs.[40] These native Egyptians have felt the double impact of the North being favored

over the South in spending, social programs, etc., and domination by Arabs in local society. As they trailed in every other measure of influence, the *fellahin* turned to the mosque, the one area in which they could dominate. Hence, *al-Jama'a al-Islamiyya* (Islamic Group), the main Islamist organization in Upper Egypt, is a political, social, and economic movement using Islam to enhance the *fellahin's* status and protect their traditions. As *al-Jama'a* is composed of younger, less educated, and more radicalized members of society than Egypt's other large Islamist organizations, it is correspondingly more violent in its methods. Consequently, most of the Islamist violence in Egypt in recent years has been carried out by this regional group as it attacked high visibility targets, especially security forces and tourists, in order to undermine the government.

The Future of Egypt

In assessing what the future may hold for Egypt, one is struck by the proverbial "good news, bad news." The good news is that the Islamist movement seems to have been checked, at least for the near future.[41] Additionally, according to Ajami, Egypt has a remarkable record of stability, and we must be careful not to overestimate the theocratic challenge Egypt faced, nor the defection of the middle classes.[42] The threat simply may not be as great as many may have believed. A two-track approach of tough police work and a notable governmental retreat from the secularization of politics and culture has also taken the wind out of the Islamist sails.[43] The government also took tentative steps toward a national dialogue in 1994, though the exclusion of Islamists groups limited the potential of such a forum.

Yet, if the good news if that Islamism has been at least temporarily checked in Egypt, the bad news is that it has been at a high cost. First, in their war against the Islamists,

police and security services have been guilty of the most egregious human rights violations," ranging from detention without charge or trial, to torture, the killing of suspects under interrogation, and the brutalization of entire villages and urban quarters."[44] A second problem is the negative impact of the war against Islamism on democratization in Egypt. As Islamists represent the most potent political threat to the regime, it has been convenient for the government to blur the distinction between the radical, violent groups and the more moderate Islamists, thereby justifying the exclusion on Islamist political participation.[45] The Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood, arguably one of the more moderate organizations, continues to be banned as a political party and many of its members running for parliament in the November 1995 elections were jailed in the weeks prior to the election. Additionally, many of those who might oppose the current regime—including secularists, religious minorities, and non-Islamist Muslim—have been co-opted into active or *de facto* support for fear that criticism of the government could encourage violence or help bring about an Islamist state which would threaten them.[46] For many such non-Islamists, the current government is seen as preferable to an Islamist one. While this may be good for the government, it bodes poorly for democratization.

A third concern for the future of Egypt is that while Islamism may have been checked, Islamization of society has gained ground and will continue to do so. The regime has given more cultural space to the moderate Islamists, as long as they do not intrude on the government's private domain: police power, defense issues, and foreign affairs.[47] Consequently, Islamists—while being careful not to overstep the bounds acceptable to the Mubarek regime—have been made more free to hound Copts, advocate the establishment of an Islamist state through legitimate means, attack popular figures in

Egyptian life as heretics or apostates, and proclaim greater Islamic leeway over social and educational life. One of the most telling aspects of this situation is the confusion in Egyptian courts over the application of secular legal codes or *Shari'a* and the arbitrary nature of when these differing codes are used.[48] Hence, while Islamism itself may not pose the threat of several years ago, part of the cost may be "that the modernizing imperative that has dominated and driven Egypt since the early 1800s after its encounter with Europe is being reversed."[49]

Summary

In looking at the cases of Algeria and Egypt, one sees many similarities which would make it easy to assume Islamism, regardless of the country involved, is fueled by the same imperatives and functions in the same way. Both Algeria and Egypt have had high population growth rates, migration to urban areas, and large populations of youth, all contributing to high unemployment rates and failure of social services. Both nations have suffered economic setbacks, often as a result of official corruption, misrule, and faulty government economic, industrial, and agricultural policies. The secularized governments of both nations were negatively identified with Western cultures and ideologies, while failing to provide any voice or means for political opposition. Under such circumstances, the rise of a popular Islamist movement should not be surprising.

Yet, if the similarities between Algeria and Egypt are striking, so too are the differences. In Algeria, the government moved quickly to open the political system in response to economic downturn and riots in the late 1980s, while the Egyptian system has never truly opened up. Consequently, Algeria—but for military intervention—almost

became the only nation to have a democratically established Islamist regime, while Egypt has never allowed anything close to democracy to take place. Additionally, Algeria, in its short history, actually seems to have had a chance for economic success, especially in light of its vast oil and gas reserves, while Egypt has never held out similar promise. As a result, Algeria's economic downturn seems to have caused much more discontent than Egypt's dismal performance. The failure in Algeria of both the democratic political process and the hoped-for economic boom may have given the Algerians more of a sense of loss than the Egyptians suffered during their continuing struggles.

Other distinct differences are the relatively short national existence of Algeria, compared with the long-standing national identity of Egypt. This may directly impact the Egyptians' tendency to accept the central authority of the government, as opposed to the attempts by many Algerians to overthrow their government. In Algeria, the middle class strongly supported the Islamist cause, while in Egypt this important group remained generally loyal to the government. Also, Egypt has a long history, both intellectually and practically, of Islamist movements, while Algeria's movement developed rapidly and may have been fueled by anti-FLN sentiments as much as by religious fervor. Most noticeably, Algeria's situation quickly resulted in a social breakdown and virtual civil war which has claimed as many as 50,000 lives, while Egypt has faced more of an insurgency which has resulted in "only" several thousand dead.

Ultimately, despite the similarities, the differences make the Islamist challenges in Algeria and Egypt quite different. It is difficult, if not impossible, to compare the two situations. One author recites the problems facing Algeria, then cautions "Comparisons elsewhere are pointless."[50] Ajami specifically warns against:

> . . . project[ing] Algeria's descent into hell onto Egypt. Look at Algeria with its terror and counterterror: armed Islamic groups campaigning against all perceived Francophiles, secularists, and emancipated women, reprisals by the state and its "eradicationists" who pass off their violence as the defense of modernity itself, state-sponsored killer squads, the ninjas with their ski masks. This politics of zeal and cruelty, so reminiscent of Argentina and Chile in the 1970s, is alien to the temperament of Egypt. The chasm between the Francophiles and the Arabo-Islamicists at the root of the terror in Algeria has no parallel in the experience and the life of Egypt. Contempt for the government there is aplenty in Egypt today, but the political and cultural continuity of the place has not ruptured.[51]

Consequently, there appears to be a consensus among most experts that Egypt will most likely not "succumb to a reign of theocratic zeal."[52] Few feel similarly about Algeria, with most hoping for an accommodation between the current government and moderate Islamists. Nonetheless, one author reflected the feeling of most when he wrote "The future of Algeria is Islamist and most people now realize this."[53]

Notes

[1]For a concise history of Algeria, see its country report in William Spencer, ed., *Global Studies: The Middle East* (Guilford, CT, 1994), pp. 32-39. Much of this historical information comes from this source.

[2]Approximately 80 percent of Algeria is uncultivable, and only 12 percent is arable without irrigation.

[3]Dunn, op. cit., p. 148.

[4]Spencer, op. cit., p. 36.

[5]Voll, op. cit., p. 66.

[6]Lisa Anderson, "North Africa: The Limits of Liberalization," *Current History* (Apr 95), p. 168.

[7]Entelis, op. cit., p. 14. Islam had been officially incorporated into the Algerian state in the form of the Ministry of Religious Affairs, which controlled public expressions of Islam and officially certified the clerical class.

[8]Dunn, op. cit., p. 148.

[9]Anderson, op. cit., p. 168.

[10]John P. Entelis, "Islamism, Democracy, and the State in the Maghreb: The Case of Algeria," *Islamic Fundamentalism in Africa and Implications for U.S. Policy* (Washington, 1992), p. 80.

[11]Dunn, op. cit., p. 149.

[12]Entelis, op. cit., p. 76.

[13]Roddy Scott, "A War Without Mercy," *The Middle East* (Dec 95), p. 11.

Notes

[14]"Populist Zeroual," *The Economist* (October 28, 1995), p. 50.

[15]Hugh Roberts, "The Algerian Crisis," *International Affairs* (April 1995), pp. 259-261.

[16]Dunn, op. cit., p. 155.

[17]Roddy Scott, "Peace Remains Uncertain," *The Middle East* (January 1996), pp. 6-7. Though the FIS and other Islamists were not allowed to participate in the election, some see strong voter turnout as an indication the Islamist groups have been marginalized as a result their campaign of violence.

[18]George Joffe, "The Way Ahead for Zeroual," *Middle East International* (December 1, 1995), p. 16.

[19]Spencer, op. cit., p. 38.

[20]Entelis, "Islamism, Democracy, and the State in the Maghreb," op. cit., p. 78.

[21]Ibid., pp. 78-79.

[22]Dunn, op. cit., pp. 155-156.

[23]Roberts, op. cit., pp. 251-255.

[24]Dunn, op. cit., p. 156.

[25]For excellent, concise histories of Egypt, see Spencer, op. cit., pp. 45-51 or Diller, op. cit., pp. 193-210. Most of the following historical information comes from these two sources.

[26]Albert Hourani, *A History of the Arab Peoples* (Cambridge, MA: 1991), pp. 47, 96-97.

[27]Spencer, op. cit., p. 46.

[28]Spencer, op. cit., p. 47.

[29]Keppel, op. cit., p. 18.

[30]Spencer, op. cit., p. 48.

[31]Diller, op. cit., p. 201.

[32]Spencer, op. cit., p. 49.

[33]Ibid.

[34]Diller, op. cit., p. 201.

[35]Fouad Ajami, "The Sorrows of Egypt," *Foreign Affairs* (September/October 1995), p. 85.

[36]"Cassandra," "The Impending Crisis in Egypt," *Middle East Journal* (Winter 1995), p. 19.

[37]Carlyle Murphy, "The Business of Political Change in Egypt," *Current History* (January 1995), p. 19.

[38]"Cassandra," op. cit., pp. 18-19.

[39]Ibid., pp. 9-10.

[40]See Mamoun Fandy, "Egypt's Islamic Group: Regional Revenge?" *Middle East Journal* (Autumn 1994) for an excellent discussion of the regional/social origins of Upper Egypt's al-Jama'a al-Islamiyya.

[41]During a recent Air War College visit to Egypt, U.S. Embassy officials expressed confidence that Islamist terrorism had been effectively dealt with by Egyptian security forces and was not currently a major threat.

Notes

[42]Ajami, op. cit., p. 75.

[43]Ibid., p. 77.

[44]"Cassandra," op. cit., p. 17.

[45]"Vote of Fight," *The Economist* (Dec 2, 1995), p. 41.

[46]Mona Makram-Ebeid, "Democratization in Egypt: The 'Algeria Complex'," *Middle East Policy* (Vol III, 1994), p. 124.

[47]Ajami, op. cit., p. 77.

[48]See Karim el-Gawhary, "Shari'a or Civil Code? Egypt's Parallel Legal System," *Middle East Report* (November-December 1995), pp. 25-27 for an interview with Ahmad Sayf al-Islam, who discusses the difficulties now facing the courts.

[49]Ajami presents this as a warning from Egyptian commentator Karim Alrawi. Op. cit., p. 80.

[50]Dunn, op. cit., p. 155.

[51]Ajami, op. cit., p. 76.

[52]Ibid., p. 88.

[53]Arun Kapil, "Algeria's Crisis Intensifies: The Search for a Civil Pact," *Middle East Report* (January-February 1995), p. 7.

Chapter 4

Challenges for the United States

In reading a recent publication from the Department of Defense, one finds an interesting paragraph under the section titled "Terrorism and Radical Islam." It states

> The United States does not presume to instruct Middle Easterners or anyoneelse on their religious beliefs. Rather, we try to work with our friends in the region to address the causes of extremism and channel potentially destructive impulses toward more peaceful, productive ends. At the same time, we must be prepared to counter, by force if necessary, violent manifestations of radicalism that endanger our interests.[1]

Though this paragraph is speaking in general terms and is necessarily vague, it brings up some interesting points. It wisely points out that the U.S. should not get involved in others' religious problems. But, then it states the U.S. will work with its "friends" in the region, which is, of course, another way of saying "friendly governments." Further, the statement commits the U.S. to using military force to counter "violent manifestations of radicalism" if they should threaten our "interests" (a vague term, whether intentional or not). The implication is clear: the United States intends to maintain secular, non-democratic governments in place, as long as they support American interests in the region, and protect them from the obvious (to Americans) threat of a violent Islamist takeover. However, judging by the hornets nest stirred up with the American public when troops were committed to Bosnia to support U.S. "vital national interests," it is reasonable to assume commitment of U.S. assets or military forces to battle Islamists or

prop up Middle Eastern regimes will cause similar concerns. Consequently, it would be wise to ask about America's responsibilities and capabilities in the region, if any, and best course of action in light of the Islamist challenge.

Is Islamism a Threat?

Clearly this question can only be answered by adding the phrase "and to whom?" or "and to what?" Islamism, as defined here, is a political movement which seeks to increase Islam's role in society and politics, usually with the goal of an Islamic state. As noted previously in this paper, this definition covers a wide range of movements and ideologies, from relatively moderate to extremely radical. For the sake of argument, we will assume a "worst case;" that is a radical, violence-prone, anti-Western Islamist movement which is fighting for control of its nation.

First, does such an Islamist movement threaten the U.S.? The answer has to be a categorical "no." Currently, there is no country or combination of countries in the Middle East or North Africa which represent a physical threat to the United States even under the most radical Islamist control. This is quite different from Russia, for example, where a rise to power of a radical nationalist or neo-fascist government and the continuing presence of nuclear weapons could represent a valid threat. Obviously, continuing regional programs for development of weapons of mass destruction represent a potential threat in the years to come; even so, it will be a long time before an Islamist regime is truly able to threaten America. This is not to underplay the dangers of terrorism presented by an anti-West or anti-American Islamist state. But terrorism, no matter how unsettling or deadly, will not represent a major threat to the United States.

If Islamism does not represent a threat to the United States, does it represent a threat to American interests? The answer to this question is, at strongest, "maybe." Vital U.S. interests in the Middle East and North Africa can probably be limited to just a few. The two most important are access to Middle Eastern oil, for the U.S. and the rest of the world, and the security of Israel.[2] If oil is the concern, however, the U.S. should not be too worried, as no matter who is running a country, they will continue to sell their oil. As noted by one author, even a totalitarian government with a powerful army is constrained by international economics. "Fundamentalists the Iranians may be, but they want to sell oil to the West as desperately as any Saudi prince. . . ."[3] Considering the amount of oil on the world market and the difficulties the Oil Producing and Exporting Countries have in enforcing quotas, it seems unlikely an Islamist regime would present a threat to the availability of Middle Eastern oil.

An Islamist threat to Israel's security is more likely, though still doubtful. Though some Islamist groups do use anti-Israeli rhetoric, it is not clear how much is posturing or if words would translate into action if such Islamists came to power. Additionally, during a recent audience with a high-ranking Israeli official, an Air War College class was told Israel felt confident it possessed the ability to defeat any regional nation or combination of nations, and to all appearances he was speaking very realistically. It is likely an Islamist regime in Egypt, Jordan, or Syria would derail the tenuous peace process, but that in itself would not represent a threat to Israel. The primary threat to Israel continues to be potential weapons of mass destruction in the hands of an unfriendly regime, with Iraq or Iran being the most probable candidates.

Two other important interests in the region might be stability and the promotion of democracy. National stability, however, can be achieved under Islamist regimes as easily as under authoritarian governments, many of which have experienced quite a bit of instability over the years. Admittedly, regional stability might be threatened if Islamist regimes exported trouble to neighboring states, as Iran and Sudan are currently accused of doing. Yet, secular governments in the region have histories of stirring up trouble for their neighbors, and it is not obvious an Islamist government would represent a particularly odious threat.

Neither is it clear Islamists represent a threat to democracy in the region, considering one can count the current number of democracies on no hands (excluding non-Islamic Israel). Indeed, several abortive attempts at democracy in Sudan contributed greatly to the instability which finally resulted in its current Islamist regime, thus making democracy appear less than desirable.[4] While Islamists may or may not be committed to democracy, it is not clear anyone else in the region is either. The fact that many who professed democratic ideals actually supported the military intervention which kept the FIS from assuming power in Algeria might cause the Islamist to question who is really committed to democracy.[5] Consequently, this should be a major concern for the U.S. only if we take the position that current regimes are authoritarian and may move over time towards democracy, while a radical Islamist regime would be totalitarian and would not become more democratic. Of course, this may not be an untenable position; even now, opposition groups are being elected to the Jordanian parliament and Saudi Arabia has established a *majlis al-shura* ("consultative council") to "advise" the King.

If Islamism represents a true threat, however, it does so more to the people under its rule than anyone else.[6] Unquestionably, the more radical elements of Islamism advocate ideas with which the West and many Muslims would disagree. Most of these relate to the status of women in society, the rights of ethnic and religious minorities, and the implementation of *Shari'a* as the sole source of law. The abuses which have been witnessed in Iran and Sudan should give anyone pause. However, this may simply argue for the importance of opening dialogue with the more moderate Islamic groups, as the more radicalized the movement becomes, the more of a threat any subsequent regime would be.

Should America React to Islamism?

The easiest thing, and for many the most tempting, would be to simply assume that one authoritarian government in the Middle East is as good as another and we have no business involving ourselves in their internal problems. Certainly, the U.S. has sat back and watched tragedies unfold in other parts of the world—Cambodia in the 1970s and Rwanda in 1994 come to mind—without taking action. Why should the various Islamist movements throughout the Middle East necessitate U.S. interest and activity? There are at least three general reasons for America to stay involved.

First, the U.S. has some moral responsibility in the region because American foreign aid, economic and military, has contributed at least in part to the internal struggle between governments and Islamists. In some cases, such as Egypt, U.S. aid has helped the governments avoid having to make adjustments in their economic systems which might have helped alleviate conditions supporting Islamist movements.[7] Also, military aid

strengthens a regime in the face of an Islamist challenge, whether intended to do so or not. Finally, a large number of the Islamist fighters in the Middle East were actually trained by the U.S. or its proxies to fight with the *mujahideen* against the Soviet Union in Afghanistan.[8] So, while the American contribution to the conflict has been limited, it exists and provides moral grounds for at least trying to help resolve the situation.

The second reason for U.S. involvement is a practical one: a radical Islamist takeover in one nation is likely to have negative effects for its neighbors, which could ultimately draw the U.S. into the problem. Iran is a major sponsor of unrest in the Middle East and terrorism throughout the world. Sudan's military Islamist government is similarly accused of exporting Islamist ideology and terrorism, especially toward Egypt. A radical Islamist takeover in Algeria would likely send hundreds of thousands of refugees fleeing into Tunisia, Morocco, Spain, and France, causing major problems for those countries. If American involvement can help ameliorate the conditions furthering Islamist radicalism or could help regimes and Islamists resolve their differences peaceably, that would clearly be a case where an ounce of prevention would beat a pound of cure.

The final and most basic reason for American involvement in the region is to protect, to the extent necessary, U.S. national interests. The U.S. has made it clear for a number of years that the security of Israel and world access to Middle Eastern oil are vital national interests. Though it is not clear Islamist gains would threaten those interests, being involved early and peacefully might help assure they were protected. Other interests in the region might include stability, promotion of democracy, preventing an unfriendly nation from establishing hegemony, or simply maintaining the status quo. As discussed above, while Islamist regimes—even the most radical—would not automatically threaten U.S.

interests, it only makes sense to remain engaged with the nations and organizations of the region.

What Can the U.S. Do?

The short answer, unfortunately, is "Not much." Virtually all writers on the subject of the Islamist movement in the Middle East have to acknowledge the U.S. has very little influence with the regional governments and virtually none with the Islamists. While the U.S. has done little to affect the Islamists directly, America is seen as the leader of the West which has offended Islamists by its modern culture, its colonial past, and failed ideologies. Additionally, Islamists believe that if Americans are not actually hostile to Islam, they are distrustful of it. Consequently, Islamists have little interest or confidence in what the U.S. thinks. In the case of the governments, the U.S. generally does not have the historical ties or interests in the countries to have gained much sway. Additionally, America seems unwilling to put pressure on threatened regimes for fear of encouraging their Islamist opponents, or due to the very real likelihood of being ignored.[9] Nonetheless, there are a few things the U.S. can do.

Recognize the diversity of the Islamist movement.[10] There are literally hundreds of Islamist movements in the Middle East alone, different in size, goals, methods, etc. The U.S. cannot simply lump them all together as "fundamentalists" or "radicals" and treat them as if they were a monolithic threat. Many of these groups serve useful societal functions, give voice to the unrepresented masses, and should be considered relatively moderate. The conditions which have provoked the Islamist revival are not going to

disappear any time soon, and it is important to realize some of the Islamist organizations can be dealt with in a reasonable way.

Recognize Islamism is produced by factors other than theocratic zeal, then work to alleviate those conditions. As noted earlier, there are a variety of factors which work together to help produce Islamist movements. Once the U.S. has acknowledged those factors, we can help as much as possible to ameliorate them. For example, while the U.S. could never provide enough aid to correct economic difficulties in so many countries, we could encourage positive trade and industrial policies, help in agricultural development, and provide expertise in appropriate areas. Just as there are a variety of contributing causes, there are undoubtedly a variety of possible solutions.

Encourage governments to open political system to both moderate Islamists and secular political opposition.[11] This is a tough one simply because most governments probably prefer the status quo—they have power and they are not interested in sharing it. Obviously, if a regime chooses to be repressive enough, it can greatly lessen an Islamist threat—Syria and Libya are good examples. Yet, it is unlikely opposition to authoritarian, single-party states will go away in the near future, and the Islamists will continue to be the beneficiaries of this opposition. It would be better to convince governments to co-opt and integrate these elements before they become radicalized and more violent. Many regimes may fear opening the political process too quickly, seeing what transpired in Algeria after 1988. They could, however, learn from that experience and open the political process more slowly than did the Algerian government (allowing multiple parties to develop) and make pre-election agreements limiting the initial victories by the new parties.[12] While this would not be full democracy, it would clearly be a step in

the right direction. Governments could also learn from the example of Jordan, where Islamists are active in politics and have been elected to that country's parliament. Giving opponents a stake in the system is infinitely preferable to repressing and possibly radicalizing them.

Expect some volatility and instability when authoritarian governments open their political systems. As Entelis noted regarding the process of Algerian democratization in the late 1980s,

> Whatever else was happening in the weeks and months prior to the apparent FIS electoral victory, Algerian politics was bursting with vital energy, political discourse and competition, exchanges of ideas, and points of view, and, not surprisingly, strikes, demonstrations, and street rallies. In virtually all democracies, especially emerging ones with little history of legitimate contestation, the first experience with freedom and liberty is always volatile if not violent.[13]

If that is the case, we should expect it, not be unduly scared of such activity, and encourage moderation when liberalizing systems experience some initial upheaval.

Offer to mediate or establish a forum for mediation. While many Islamists may not entirely trust the U.S., most would undoubtedly deal with us if it worked in favor of them having at least the chance of sharing power. Consequently, if a government was willing to work with the Islamist (and/or other) opposition, the U.S. could offer to help, much as it has done with Israel and Egypt, Syria, and the Palestinians. If participants preferred not to have direct U.S. participation, America could still work with other nations to establish a forum for talks to take place.

Continue to work to prevent proliferation of weapons of mass destruction. One of America's greatest international priorities is to stop the spread of nuclear weapons and other weapons of mass destruction. It is not obvious an Islamist government with such a

weapon would be any more dangerous than any other. Nonetheless, if a Middle Eastern or North African nation had weapons of mass destruction and seemed to be threatened by an Islamist insurgency, it would clearly worry neighboring states, Israel, and the U.S., possibly provoking some sort of intervention. Preventing the development of weapons of mass destruction might keep a troublesome situation from becoming a disaster.

Distinguish between Islamist rhetoric and reality.[14] Despite what Islamists often say to garner support and encourage their followers, they tend to be fairly pragmatic once in power. Islamist movements are, above all, political movements, so the U.S. should be as careful taking what Islamists say at face value as it would any secular politician. Entelis wants Islamist leaders and groups judged "by the same criteria as any other potential leaders or opposition party . . . [Most Islamist governments] will generally operate on the basis of national interests and demonstrate a flexibility that reflects acceptance of the realities of a globally interdependent world."[15]

What Must the U.S. Avoid?

Just as there are things the U.S. can do to help with regards to the Islamist challenge facing the Middle East and North Africa, some things should be avoided.

Avoid compromising moderate Islamists. At least one author cogently argues that if moderate Islamists exist, the worst thing the U.S. could do would be to talk with them and, consequently, compromise them in the eyes of their constituents or more radical colleagues.[16] While this view seems extreme, it does point out the U.S., as the leader of the West, is not completely trusted in much of the region. Very likely, one of the worst things we could do to a government or opposition group would be to dote on them too

much. If we engage moderate Islamists, we should carefully demonstrate they have kept their independence from the U.S. in fact and appearance.

Do not get involved in someone else's insurgency. Any time the U.S. helps a regime fight against its internal opposition, we are going to anger someone, and that someone might just wind up in power. We would be far better off to try to mediate disputes than get involved in them. If a truly friendly or valuable government was about to fall to Islamist insurgents, perhaps we could justify getting directly involved. Even that, however, could backfire, as putting U.S. forces on Middle Eastern soil, could cause a further backlash against the inviting government. Even after Iraq invaded Kuwait, there were a number of Muslims who resented the Saudi Arabian decision to allow U.S. and other Western forces in their country. The politics and religion of the region would dictate the U.S. get involved only in the most critical of circumstances.

Do not fall for simplistic arguments. During a recent trip to the Middle East, the author heard top officials in Syria, Jordan, and Israel state the Islamist threat was directed by forces external to their countries, and it seems likely most governments in the region would make similar claims. Though undoubtedly containing a grain of truth in some cases, such a statement also sounds much better than admitting your internal policies and problems have generated an Islamist opposition. Claiming an external threat, such as Iran, is also a better way of garnering American support in most cases, just as a country claiming an insurgency was Communist received more American attention during the Cold War. Even non-Islamic government are not immune to broad, simplistic arguments. For example, until recently France said of Algeria that no moderate Islamists existed, no middle ground existed between the government and the Islamists, and no compromise was

possible, all points which were patently untrue.[17] The U.S. must be careful about accepting such statements at face value.

Do not give friendly governments a free ride. A number of the governments the U.S. supports in the region are guilty of human rights abuses and violations as serious as those committed by Islamist groups, yet the American government says little, at least publicly. While the U.S. is properly concerned about human rights and freedoms under an Islamist regime, we do not seem to hold authoritarian governments to the same standard. Such attitudes simply reinforce the Islamists' beliefs that they have little hope of competing legitimately for power.

Summary

Ultimately, there may be very little the U.S. can do with regards to the Islamist movement in the Middle East and North Africa. Though it is not clear Islamist groups pose a serious threat beyond that to the ruling regimes in their respective countries, the potential for problems is there. The U.S. has limited influence in the region, but what exists can be put to good use, if done with care.

Notes

[1]*United States Security Strategy for the Middle East*, Office of the Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Affairs (Middle East and African Affairs) (Washington: 1995), p. 17.

[2]Ibid., pp. 6-7.

[3]Zachary Karabell, "The Wrong Threat: The United States and Islamic Fundamentalism," *World Policy Journal* (Summer 1995), p. 42.

[4]Voll, op. cit., pp. 69-71.

[5]Kapil, op. cit., p. 7.

[6]Halliday, op. cit., p. 406.

[7]Norton, op. cit., p. 3.

[8]Entelis, "Political Islam in Algeria," op. cit., p. 17.

Notes

[9]For instance, when President Zeroual publicly snubbed the French government, his government's primary sponsor, he had a tremendous popularity boost among the Algerian people. "Populist Zeroual," op. cit., p. 46.

[10]Lawrence Tal, "Dealing with Radical Islam: The Case of Jordan," *Survival* (Autumn 95), p. 149.

[11]Deeb, op. cit., p. 88.

[12]Tal, op. cit., p. 150.

[13]Entelis, "Islamism, Democracy, and the State in the Maghreb," op. cit., p. 82.

[14]Tal, op. cit., p. 150.

[15]Esposito, op. cit., p. 40.

[16]Edward G. Shirley (Pseudonym), "Is Iran's Present Algeria's Future?" *Foreign Affairs* (May/June 1995), pp. 30-31.

[17]Roberts, op. cit., pp. 248-249.

Chapter 5

Conclusion

Islamism is a challenge which is not going to go away. French political philosopher, Olivier Roy, has argued persuasively in his book *The Failure of Political Islam* that Islamist movements will fulfill neither the goals of its leaders nor the hopes of its followers. Wherever Islamist governments come to power in the Middle East or North Africa, according to Roy, the nations will remain mired in the turmoil and debilitating conditions which currently plague them. Even if this assessment proves correct, the conditions which have helped propel Islamic revivalism into prominence cannot be corrected quickly, even if the various regimes seriously attempted to do so—and many of them will not. Consequently, with a dearth of competing ideologies or opportunities for legal political opposition, Islamism will continue to attract support from the masses.

The challenge to the United States will be to use what little influence we have in the Middle East and North Africa—with both the governments and the opposition—to help build prosperous nations which respect political pluralism and human rights. The alternative, in many cases, will be to sit back, watch the disintegration, then help pick up the pieces.

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