Islam’s Way to Freedom

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The many strands of Islamist radicalism are a terrible threat to vital American interests. The dangers include transnational terrorism fueled by jihad and the growth of extreme Shari’a law in such key Muslim states as Iraq, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Egypt, and Saudi Arabia—all while the Iranian clerical regime supports Islamist extremists and seeks the capacity for nuclear weapons.

These threats are unlikely to be defeated by U.S. military power alone, even when that power is combined with good intelligence, efficient law enforcement, and creative diplomacy. What American foreign policy needs, as well, is a new religious realism.

Despite President Bush’s own strong religious beliefs, the “freedom agenda,” designed by his administration to drain the swamps of radicalism, was largely devoid of sound thinking about religion. If American diplomacy in the next administration is to be successful, it must no longer treat religion as peripheral to the activity of governing, especially democratic governing.

The strength of Islamist radicalism derives from certain claims inferred from Islam’s sacred texts. The central claim is that God wills the world to be subject to Islam—elaborated in such concepts as tawhid (the absolute oneness of God), jihad (the struggle to serve God’s purposes), and shari’a (the path to be followed in Muslim life). Radicals also exploit historical labels such as jahiliyya, the pre-Islamic era of ignorance and paganism, by applying them to contemporary Muslim rulers such as Egypt’s Hosni Mubarak and Saudi Arabia’s King Abdullah.

Even though most Muslims reject violence, the extremists’ use of sacred texts lends their actions authenticity and recruiting power. Young Muslims may have an array of reasons for becoming terrorists: among them oppression, rage, joblessness, and poverty. But social and economic pathologies are transformed into Islamist extremism by a powerful sense of religious obligation.

The radicals insist that their central claim—God’s desire for Islam’s triumph—requires no interpretation. According to them, true Muslims will pursue it by any means necessary, including dissimulation, civil coercion, and the killing of innocents. As one of the earliest extremists, Taqi al-Din ibn Taymiyya (1263–1328), put it, if in a defensive jihad the innocent are killed with the guilty, God will sort them out in the next life. Radicals believe God is pleased by their actions to defend Islam and extend its rule, actions that will win them his favor in this world and paradise in the next.

“Western nations” (a term increasingly reserved for the United States) are said to threaten Islam, not simply by military assault, but—far more insidiously—by the infiltration of democratic institutions that bring moral and spiritual decay. Radicals insist that America’s “freedom agenda” means the MTV agenda (with some justification: A head of the U.S. Broadcasting Board of Governors once opined that “Britney Spears represents the sound of freedom”). The democratic virtue of “religious freedom” is seen either as a front for Christian missionaries or as laïcité—the French system of marginalizing and controlling religion, employed by Turkey throughout the twentieth century. Either version of religious liberty, say the radicals, is a Trojan horse inserted by the Americans to destroy Islam. The United States’ decade-long policy of promoting religious freedom has done little to overcome these arguments.

Far from being detoxified by successful military attacks or even resounding military defeat, radical
Islamist convictions are more likely to intensify with perceptions of victimization and martyrdom. America’s current policies may succeed (indeed, have succeeded) in finding and removing radical Islamist leaders, and in disrupting the planning and communications of extremist cadres.

But these policies are insufficient. The difficult task of containing radical Islam requires altering the theological dynamic that sustains it, a task that can be accomplished only by Muslims themselves. External actors can have an influence on this process, but no agenda is likely to succeed if it ignores the theologies that drive political culture in the lands of Islam—theologies that already provide the poison that sustains radicalism, and must provide its antidote as well. In short, only liberal democratic political Islam can defeat radical Islam.

Unfortunately, policymakers in the United States remain tempted by the argument that radical ideas and movements can be suppressed by our authoritarian allies in the region. But when despots like Egypt’s Mubarak or Saudi Arabia’s Abdullah crack down on extremists, usually by arbitrary arrest, torture, and execution, they are in fact encouraging extremism, ensuring its survival and its export. Decades of American support for tyrants in the Middle East have helped retard the growth of moderate political Islam. History strongly suggests that political and religious repression, while not the root cause of Islamist extremism, blocks its most effective remedy—the development of liberal democratic political theologies.

Unlike many of his predecessors, President Bush at least understood that rooted, stable democracies are a path to moderation in the lands of Islam. But stable democracy requires more than the constitutions and political liberties we have managed to broker in Iraq and Afghanistan. Democracies typically require economic growth as well, and the embrace, in both law and culture, of human rights and civil liberties. And here’s what the Bush strategists never fully understood: In highly religious societies—which is to say, in most countries in the world—the linchpin of liberties is religious liberty. Without it, democracy withers or implodes.

Pioneering work by such social scientists as Brian Grim of the Pew Forum and Daniel Philpott of the University of Notre Dame has helped clarify the point. The evidence suggests that democracies mature when they possess a “bundled commodity” of core rights, such as freedom of speech and assembly, equality under the law, and religious freedom. The absence of religious liberty can yield democracy-killing religious conflict, religious persecution, and religious extremism. The presence of religious freedom is highly correlated with political, social, and economic goods. As Grim puts it, “Most advanced statistical tests suggest there is indeed a critical independent contribution that religious freedom is making.”

Among other things, such findings tell us that if we want democracy to grow in Muslim lands—especially as a means for draining the swamps of the pathologies that nurture extremism—we must figure out how to advance religious freedom. We must encourage nascent liberal Islamic political and social movements to put religious freedom at the core of their political theologies.

This is a tall order. So daunting, in fact, that few outsiders would even consider it. The only good reason for America to do so is that the stakes are too high for it to stay on the sidelines.

There are explanations for our longstanding reluctance to tackle this problem, some reasonable, some not. Many conservatives despair of Muslims ever achieving “liberal Islamic democracy,” let alone the United States brokering one. Daniel Mahoney, for instance, has written sagely of neconservative overreach in assuming that ordered liberty is the default human condition. But prudence need not yield indecision, isolationism, or paralysis.

One of our problems is that many Western thinkers, conservative and liberal alike, have equated Islamist extremism with any form of political Islam. They believe the solution to extremism is to encourage Muslim governments to remove their religion from the public square. Of course, some of these thinkers want to solve the problem of Christianity the same way—viewing any political theology as an infection to be cured by secularist antibiotics, with the state-enforced removal of religion from politics.

This was the approach taken by Turkey’s Kemal Ataturk. Throughout the twentieth century, Kemalist and post-Kemalist governments built a secularist legal system, backed by a secularist bureaucracy and a powerful military establishment committed to keeping Islam out of public view. As Mustafa Akayol has noted, however, a Turkish public square devoid of Islam has attracted the ersatz religion of secular Ataturkism. Today we are seeing a clash between Turkey’s secularist culture and its ruling AKP, an Islamic political party that is capable of liberalism.

American policy should encourage that development, but America’s foreign-policy establishment is leery of alienating the United States’ Kemalist allies. But even if those scruples were set aside, our diplomats have neither the policy direction nor the expertise to engage an Islamic party on the relation between
religion and state in a stable democracy. This is particularly unfortunate: While the AKP is making headway in embracing many of the fundamental freedoms, it is lagging in the most important—religious freedom.

The United States’ democracy programs currently possess no strategy to engage Islam as a driver of political culture or to convince Muslims that religious liberty is necessary if Islam and democracy are to flourish. The official American policy of “advancing international religious freedom” (the result of the 1998 International Religious Freedom Act) has played almost no role in the implementation of the Bush doctrine—as though American history gives us little reason to believe that religion is important to human dignity or the common good, or that religious liberty is vital to democracy. Our policymakers and diplomats seem to believe that the old secularization theory—the debunked idea that religion will always move to the margins as modernity advances—is somehow still operative.

One can sympathize with this view of American diplomacy. It is comforting to suppose that time will reduce the salience of religion in political authority, law, and social norms—and if one can believe that, then there is no need to waste much effort on Islamic religious beliefs and how those beliefs affect political behavior. From this perspective, it makes sense to avoid any serious interaction with such groups as Egypt’s Muslim Brotherhood. It becomes easier to heed the warnings of Richard Pipes and others: The Brothers are clever dissimulators seeking our destruction. If we engage them, we will be like the frog who was boiled so slowly that he never realized he was being killed.

The truth, however, is that Islam is unlikely to be privatized any time soon. To assume that the religion of 1.3 billion people can be separated from politics, or that American diplomacy can afford not to engage political Islam, is the opposite of realism. The interests of the United States, especially its national security, demand that policymakers and diplomats put political Islam on the policy table and learn how to discern the qualities of its agents. Who are the dissimulators, and who are the earnest? Which Islamists see religious freedom and human dignity embedded in the Qur’an and hadith, and which ones are searching in that direction?

Consider the trajectory of events in Turkey and Indonesia. Both suggest that Islamic political and civil society are competing in the democratic public square, and that, by bargaining on the basis of their interests, they can reduce the appeal of extremism and encourage internal reformist thinking. Democratic bargaining, in other words, can combine with religious reform to deprive extremism of its power.

A truly realistic American foreign policy will alter its approach to religion and democracy. It will learn how to encourage religious actors who can lead their communities toward democratic norms by making arguments embedded within Islam. Within the American foreign-policy establishment, this will require structural and intellectual shifts. In the Muslim world, it will require both political-constitutional changes and internal theological development. The United States needs to realign its policies to support the emergence of democratic political theologies within the lands of Islam.

So how can a new strategy of religious freedom lend consistency to U.S. foreign policy while advancing U.S. security interests in the Muslim world and elsewhere?

First, by adopting an overarching principle: Religion is normative, not epiphenomenal, in human affairs. Policymakers should approach it much as they do economics and politics—as something that drives the behavior of people and governments in important ways. Like political and economic motives, religion can act as a multiplier of both destructive and constructive behaviors, often with more-intense results. When faith is associated with social identity, ethnicity, or nationality, it is all the more important as an object of foreign policy.

The problem is most urgent in the greater Middle East. At least five states in that region—Iraq, Iran, Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, and Egypt—are of critical importance to the United States’ security, since each is a major source of Islamist extremism. The consolidation of democracy in any one of them would provide a boost to reform in nearby countries, but each presents distinct, formidable obstacles. Current American religious-freedom policy is seen by the majority of religious communities and reformers in these countries as unilateral and cultural imperialism. A refurbished policy could help overcome such fears, encourage religious actors to embrace democratic institutions, and lead to religious freedom and durable democracy.

Iraq has a quasi-liberal constitution and has held free elections. Both have demonstrated that Iraqi political culture is driven by religion. It is now clear that the United States did not pay sufficient attention to this factor in its planning.

A lasting solution will require theological sanction by Iraqi religious actors who can speak from the heart of their respective communities. American diplomacy, accordingly, should work to empower such religious leaders as the influential Shiite cleric Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani and his Sunni counterparts. Sistani’s brand of Shiism, which is open to democratic and, to
some extent, liberal norms, represents a critical step toward consolidating Iraqi democracy. It can provide a theological warrant for tolerance and, over time, religious freedom. It could also play a positive role in Iran, where Sistani was born and educated, and where he now has many followers.

Iran has substantial democratic potential. A little-studied path to Iranian democratic reform lies with Iranian jurists who might be diverted from the Khomeini model of clerical despotism. For the time being, Supreme Leader Khamenei and President Ahmadinejad, despite popular dissatisfaction with the current government, have succeeded in connecting dissent with treason. But American policymakers should still find ways to work with religious scholars in Qom and elsewhere.

Among other things this means the United States should communicate that it is interested in, and open to, Shiite reformers. For example, the Catholic University of America’s Interdisciplinary Program in Law and Religion has held substantive exchanges with Iranian jurists on topics from family law to weapons of mass destruction. By judicious support for such efforts, the United States can encourage internal reform that rejects both theocracy and terrorism as inimical to Shiism.

Saudi Arabia is the most difficult of the Muslim states to envision as a democracy, notwithstanding mild reformist tendencies shown by King Abdullah. The Wahhabi establishment and its pernicious political theology remain deeply rooted, and no political or social institution has been effective in countering its influence. American diplomacy should be working to change this dynamic—pressing Abdullah, for example, to permit the development of national-level Islamic political parties, both Sunni and Shiite, that are open to democracy. Washington should urge the disbandment of the religion-and-morals police called the mutawwiyin (currently under unusual scrutiny for its usual extremist activities), and Washington should support a non-Wahhabi Islamic polity that is capable of developing liberal norms. This could take several forms, including a constitutional monarchy.

Pakistan’s capability for nuclear weapons and its status as a safe haven for Islamist extremists make it an exceptionally important case. Pakistan’s military, like that of Turkey, has played a critical role in the development of political culture. Unlike the Turkish military, however, Pakistani generals (including former general Pervez Musharraf) have supported extremist Islamist parties as a means of retaining power. But radical Islamists have not achieved electoral success on their own in Pakistan. Historically, their popularity has increased with authoritarianism and decreased with democracy. The United States should adopt a broader antiradical agenda in Pakistan. It should certainly encourage the moderate political center and more-effective action against Islamist extremists. It should also support religious actors capable of undermining extremism by developing a more liberal political theology, sustaining madrassa reform, and conducting a public debate over Islam and democracy.

Egypt arguably has the greatest potential for lasting democratic reform. It is the largest of the Arab states and the traditional center of Sunni jurisprudence. Despite a half century of authoritarian regimes, it has some experience of constitutional rule, some civil society, a professional and an entrepreneurial class, a fairly independent judiciary, and a Christian Copt community that accounts for 10 to 15 percent of the population. Over the years the United States has paid Cairo more than $50 billion to buy stability and to keep the lid on radical Islam.

According to the Mubarak government, the investment has paid off. Should it gain power, the Muslim Brotherhood, the Islamist opposition movement, would revoke the Camp David Accords, precipitate war with Israel, and work to restore a caliphate.

In truth, however, American aid has prevented neither the growing appeal of radical Islam in Egypt nor its continued export—both of which are increased by Mubarak’s policies. If free elections were held, the Muslim Brotherhood would very probably win. Despite indications that some Brothers are adopting liberal norms, the United States refuses to talk to them officially and rejects opportunities to influence their evolution.

This is the logic that gave us the September 11 attacks. The United States cannot kill Islamist radicalism by unconditional support for authoritarian regimes. Even in Iraq, if we assume the continued success of the military surge, extremism and terrorism will ultimately be defeated, or not, by Muslims speaking from the heart of Islam. And the only means of affording them the opportunity is durable democracy grounded in religious freedom for all—especially for Muslims.

In Egypt, the United States should adopt a policy of engaging all religious and political communities, including the Muslim Brotherhood. It must find out precisely what the Brothers are and whether they are capable of political-theological evolution. The United States must not repeat the mistakes it made in Iran during the late 1970s, waking up one morning to face an Islamist group in power without any secure understanding of its vocabulary, let alone its goals.
The objective should be to encourage the Brotherhood to explain what Islamic democracy would mean in Egypt. Handled correctly, this would force the organization to clarify its understanding of religious freedom and, necessarily, of pluralist democracy. Does it include, for example, the right to debate Islamic teachings in public, to demand full equality under the law for women and religious minorities, to change religions? It is by no means inevitable, but certainly possible, that nascent liberals will be empowered by such a discourse. At the least, it will increase understanding of what the Brotherhood in power would portend.

This strategy of discovery could include several elements adaptable to a global policy. American diplomats must speak not only the Brotherhood’s Arabic language but know their religious vocabulary as well. Training at the Foreign Service Institute should be revamped. The self-defeating instruction to U.S. diplomats in the 2007 Public Diplomacy strategy—“avoid using religious language”—should be reversed. Washington should support the development of Islamist feminism, a potentially fruitful skirmish in the Muslim war of ideas. A privately funded Islamic Institute of American Studies on U.S. soil could bring the best jurists and religious leaders from across the Muslim world to study United States history, society, politics, and—most important—religion.

The United States’ system of religious freedom is far from perfect, but it remains vigorous and adaptive. In the 1660s, colonial Congregationalists hanged Quakers on Boston Commons. Just over a century later, Americans embraced a system of religious liberty that was and remains unprecedented. It did not result from the Enlightenment alone, or the separation of religion from politics, but from the tandem development of theology and politics.

Surely that system has contributed to the fact that American Muslims, subject to Wahhabi influences for decades, have not been radicalized in the way that many of Europe’s Muslims have. The Economist recently noted the irony: “The strange thing is that when America has tried to tackle religious politics abroad—especially jihadist violence—it has drawn no lessons from its domestic success. Why has a country so rooted in pluralism made so little of religious freedom?”

This must change. If we are to defeat Islamist radicalism, we must supplement sound military strategy, good intelligence, vigorous law enforcement, and state-to-state diplomacy with what has, until now, been the missing link. Ordered liberty demands realism about human nature. If democracies are to succeed in highly religious societies, they must be grounded in religious freedom.

Caravel

My worn sails are lowered, flaked, and stowed below; this prow may lift no more to the green wave’s rocking. Though the wind blows fresh at daybreak and the beckoning horizon draws taut my stays, I may not go.

Survivor of a hundred storms, brought home in tow, moored to the outermost buoy, denied dry docking, I lie condemned by a salvage agent’s ruthless reckoning to be hauled on shore and broken up. But even so,

my Master yet may come for me, regird my timbering, recruit a crew of hands, renew my planks and caulking, reglobe my running lamps, set blazoned sails to my spars;

then shall I ride again on evening’s tide, remembering how the gale’s song goes, on deck my Master walking, Commander of the ocean seas, the winds, the stars.

—Wiley Clements