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Islamic Radicalism

Shifting Approaches to Power but Not to Islamic Goals

by Judith S. Yaphe

Conclusions

- Islamic activists, using religion to validate their political demands, are gaining political power in the Eastern Mediterranean region. Once known for their opposition to the state, Islamists in Turkey, Jordan, and Lebanon are competing for seats in parliament and power in government. Although they subscribe to a politics of inclusion now, it is not clear that these Islamists have given up on their basic principles of opposing what they see as unjust, un-Islamic political systems, or their demand for the elimination of foreign-especially U.S.-influence and interests from the region.
- Islamic activists have yet to make their mark on policy but U.S. interests and force presence could be affected by rising Islamist influence on government decisionmaking. In Turkey, this could spell difficulties for Ankara's support for Operation Northern Watch (formerly Operation Provide Comfort) and UN sanctions on Iraq and Iran. In Jordan, opposition to the Arab-Israeli peace process could raise tensions for King Hussein, whose government has been criticized by Islamist opponents for signing peace and trade agreements with Israel.
- Islamist activism in Lebanon, Israel, and the Palestine Authority retains its dark side. Lebanese militants of Hizballah, who once were involved in terrorism against U.S. interests, will continue to target Israeli and Jewish interests worldwide. Hamas, a militant Palestinian-Islamist organization operating in the West Bank and Gaza, has been responsible for terrorist attacks in Israel. The risk of more terrorism against the United States, Israel, and moderate Arab states supporting the peace process is high, especially if peace talks stall.

Background

Islamic radicalism in its most extreme and violent form has left its mark in the countries of the Eastern Mediterranean. It first erupted in Lebanon following the 1979 revolution in Iran and Israel's invasion of Lebanon in 1982. Terrorists backed by Iran and vowing to eliminate un-Islamic governments and pro-Western influences were responsible for a series of terrorist attacks in Lebanon, including the Marine Barracks bombing in October 1983 (241 Marines killed), and the taking of more than 20 Westerners hostage (including a dozen Americans). Most of the hostages were Americans who had lived in Lebanon for years; two of them-William Buckley and Richard Higgins-were killed because of their government and military service. Islamic militants portrayed the withdrawal of U.S. forces from Lebanon as a great victory for Islam. Islamist terrorists have operated in Turkey and Jordan, but there have been few incidents against Americans.

In the intervening years, as the region's Islamist organizations matured and developed infrastructure, roots, and sponsors, many of their members have moved away from confrontational and exclusionary tactics to espousing a politics of inclusion in the state. Government specialists and scholars debated the nature of this change and its potential impact on regional regimes and U.S. interests at INSS in May 1996. The scholars were more optimistic than the government specialists, believing that participation in "normal" political life transforms the attitudes and actions of once militant Islamists from confrontation to accommodation.

Islamists and Democracy: Is It One Man, One Vote, One Time?

Today-in Lebanon, Jordan, Turkey, and among the Palestinians-once militant Islamic activists are seeking a share in political power through democratic means. The activists are ambiguous on what they perceive "democracy" to be and how it should be applied. They tend to talk to Western audiences primarily about representative government, voting, and the legitimate transfer of power by elections. Radical Islamist leaders such as Shaykh Fadlallah and Hasan al-Nasrallah, Shiah clerics prominent in Lebanon's Hizballah movement, see democracy as man-made and therefore flawed, a means toward establishing an Islamic state. Nasrallah acknowledges Hizballah's acceptance of Lebanon's current style of government but says he can not conceive of living in a state that is not "Islamic."

While many Islamists advocate the use of Western-style democracy to come to power, they deny it is a suitable system to rule believers. Academic specialists are divided on the willingness of these activists to rule democratically once elected, to share power with non-Muslims, or to concede office if defeated in an election. Some scholars argue a politics of inclusion, which states that Islamists once elected will act like politicians everywhere, moderate their behavior, and make deals to achieve political gains. One scholar even claims Hizballah will be absorbed by the system as its representatives become more engaged in the political process and less committed to combating Israel in southern Lebanon. Others see Hizballah as being ultimately committed to more revolutionary-style politics despite its new status; as true believers, its members will still work toward the goal of an Islamic-not a secular-Lebanon, free of Western influence. And, they will still attack Israel and its surrogate Army of South Lebanon to force an Israeli withdrawal from Lebanon.

Where Accommodation is Accepted

In exchange for muting their criticisms of the "system" (be it monarchical or parliamentary), Islamists in Turkey, Jordan, and Lebanon operate openly as political parties, run for election to national assemblies, and serve in the government. They accept the limitations, including not openly opposing the king or parliament. The Islamists' ability to act cohesively is also limited by the sectarian and ethnic diversity of the movements (Sunni and Shia, Arab and Turk and Kurd), the lack of a single leader to rally around (none has a Khomeini-like figure), and the lack of a common agenda.

Turkey. Turkey's Islamist party, the Refah (welfare) Party, is a broad-based coalition. At the time of the INSS roundtable (May 1996), parliamentary elections had not yet been held and the participants believed Turkey would "muddle through", accommodating the Islamists without giving them complete power. Refah's avowed goal was to elect a prime minister, not to replicate the Iranian revolution. It won more than 20 percent of the vote in elections earlier in 1996. Once in power its leader, Necmettin Erbakan, initiated outreach programs to several pariah Muslim states, including Iran, Sudan, and Libya, and signed an energy deal with Tehran. Erbakan has also held talks with Tehran regarding the status of anti-Turkish Kurds (PKK) in Iran and anti-Tehran dissidents in Turkey.

Refah's support for the constitutional arrangements of the state is ambiguous, its understanding of democracy limited to the rights of the majority. Unlike its predecessor governments, Refah apparently has little interest in allowing the country's many minority groups political rights or in maintaining Turkey as a secular state. These policies could bring the Party into confrontation with the military which, while allowing a grudging tolerance for Islamists in politics, still sees itself as the guardian of Ataturk's legacy of separation of religion and state.

The impact of Turkey's new Islamist politics on U.S. interests is not yet clear. Anti-westernism is a pillar of the Islamist movement as is Erbakan's turn eastward toward Islamist states for security and trade arrangements. He was not interested in assisting or allowing U.S. forces to operate against Iraq when Saddam entered northern Iraq and captured Irbil, albeit at the invitation of the Barzani-led Kurdish faction, in September 1996. He has been instrumental in organizing a group of seven other predominantly Muslim governments-Iran, Egypt, Nigeria, Indonesia, Malaysia, Pakistan, and Bangladesh-in what he calls a "Developing-8" economic and political alliance.

Jordan. Often described as the model for relations between government and Islamists, Jordan owes its "success" in large part to King Hussein's popularity and impeccable credentials-he traces his lineage to the Prophet Muhammad. The King allows the Islamists carefully defined political space-most belong to the Muslim Brotherhood and are represented by the Islamic Action Front (IAF). In 1989, the Islamist bloc won 34 of the 80 seats in the House of Representatives, making it the largest voting bloc. Introduction of one-person one-vote rules in 1993 cut the number of Islamist deputies to 22-the change was intended to cut the Islamist vote- but the IAF remains a powerful political force and the only legitimate alternative to the King.

Jordan's Islamists are reluctant to challenge the popular monarch and are, for the most part, willing to

abide by the rules of the game. No criticism of the King and political debate kept within the parliamentary limits he allows. The IAF broke this rule last year in criticizing the King's agreements with Israel and were probably uncomfortable with his anti-Saddam measures and support for U.S. deployments in Jordan. A less secure ruler might be more willing to mollify Islamist critics by reinstating full relations with Iraq, abrogating treaties with Israel, and withdrawing the invitation to the U.S. military to stage exercises in Jordan.

Lebanon. Academic specialists on Lebanon's Islamic radicals describe a dramatic transformation in the movements since the mid 1980s, when terrorism was their hallmark. One scholar traces this change from Iran's decision after the death of Ayatollah Khomeini to cut back on support for Hizballah and encourage instead its participation in local politics. Lebanon's Shiah won 32 of the 128 seats in the National Assembly in 1992; of these, Shiah radicals controlled 12 seats. In elections held four years later, they retained 9 seats. Another scholar noted a shift in middle class Shiah support from the more passive Amal organization, whose leader Nabih Barri is Speaker of the National Assembly, to the more militant Hizballah because Hizballah offered greater opportunities and a willingness to actively oppose Israel's presence in southern Lebanon. Still, only a minority of Lebanon's Shiah community belong to a radical Islamist faction. Most are a local, third force in Lebanese politics, active in local party politics and civil society organizations. This undefined mass-which exists among the Sunni community as well-will become increasingly important in the country's governance, especially if Israel withdraws from the southern security zone and Hizballah and the militias are disarmed, both unlikely prospects at least for the next few years.

Islamic Activism and the Peace Process

Islamist opposition to the peace process takes many forms. Militants advocating terrorism used their zeal in defense of religion to justify bus bombings and other acts of violence in Israel last year. Their goal was to stop the peace process, and in this they nearly succeeded. The Islamists' position on the peace process is simple-there can be no settlement which allows Jews to retain any Muslim territory that was part of the Islamic ummah (community) and waqf (territory or wealth). Jerusalem holds particular significance because it is the third most sacred site in Islam.

The largest Islamist organization responsible for implementing a political program in Gaza and the West Bank is Hamas, originally formed to be the military arm of the Muslim Brotherhood in the Occupied Territories. Like Hizballah and the Muslim Brotherhood, Hamas includes members who are extremist and choose violence as the only means to achieve their goals, and members who are more pragmatic, who reject the peace process but want to cooperate with Yasir Arafat. Hamas lacks a centralized leadership, its most prominent shaykh (religious guide) is imprisoned in Israel, and its remaining leaders are scattered in Jordan and Egypt. Several scholars of the Hamas movement describe its real dilemma as being more a struggle against Yasir Arafat than one against Israel. Some Hamas leaders, assuming Arafat will continue his war on Palestinians opposed to peace with Israel, talk of joining the Authority. They do not want to give Arafat a pretext to move against them. They also perceive Arafat as weak in the face of Israeli and American pressure and see this as their source of strength.

Other Islamist movements include a small faction in Israel, which appears to shun overt political activity, and the Palestine Islamic Jihad, a small Sunni terrorist group supported by Iran. None of the Palestinian Islamist groups has targeted U.S. interests directly, although their criticism highlights U.S. influence.

Recommendations

- There would seem to be few good policy options for the United States at this critical juncture. Extremist Islamist elements want to end the peace process and U.S. influence in the region—goals inimical to the United States.
- The United States should consider opening a dialogue with Islamist parties, especially those participating in electoral politics—Refah in Turkey, the IAF in Jordan, even Hizballah in Lebanon (the most difficult of all). Dialogue could open ways to wean Hizballah away from Iran and, more importantly, devalue Lebanon for Tehran.
- The United States should encourage friendly governments to tolerate some opposition elements as part of each country's constitutional and historical tradition. Jordan is a model for Jordan. Its restricted democracy will not necessarily work region-wide. What works in Jordan reflects the King's popularity, indisputable authority, and the Islamists' reluctance to risk all to confront him. These factors are not in play elsewhere.
- There is a danger that Islamic activists will tire of their passive role in domestic politics, especially if they remain small, fringe parties with little or no say in decisionmaking. The United States should encourage processes that provide opportunities for Islamists and other oppositionists to obtain greater exposure to government and to the world outside Lebanon, Turkey, or Jordan. This would provide both a safety valve for governments and a way of familiarizing anti-Western regime critics with Western political institutions and processes. Frustration with accommodationist politics could mount if rank-and-file see little gains from the politics of inclusion.

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