

ISLAM AND DEMOCRACY

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Religion, Politics, and Power in the Middle East

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in Peacemaking and Conflict Resolution

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Executive Summary

A wide range of recent events in the Middle East in which Islamist, or “fundamentalist,” political movements have challenged established regimes and agitated for greater popular participation in government raises a crucial theoretical and practical question: “How, and if and when, can pluralism and democratic institutions survive compatibly with the rising tide of Islamic ‘fundamentalism,’ as it is popularly denominated?”

To address this question, the United States Institute of Peace brought together a group of prominent scholars and experts for a one-day discussion, moving from general precepts to particular case studies. This volume summarizes the symposium proceedings in four chapters.

Chapter 1 puts the question in its **global comparative context**. Four important conclusions are reached.

- The admixture of religion and politics is by no means limited to the Muslim world, and religious political action is not always fundamentalist, antimodern, and antidemocratic. In fact, religious political action in the modern world has at times advanced democratic aims.
- *Fundamentalism* is a term that can be fruitfully used cross-culturally, but it generally refers only to a narrow range of religious political action. Not all politically active Islamic

- groups are fundamentalist, and the use of this term to describe current Islamic political activity creates confusion and misunderstanding in western and Muslim audiences.
- Democracy means different things to different people. Rather than refer to regimes in the developing world, including the Middle East, as “democratic” or “authoritarian,” one must consider a wide range of “hybrid” regimes that combine elements of the two.
 - The perception of an Islamic threat is predicated on a preference for the status quo, and when Islamist groups succeed in mobilizing the masses for democratic participation, they are seen as a threat to the established order and, thus, to western interests.

Chapter 2 considers the important question of **whether Islam and democracy are compatible**. Two distinct views emerge:

- A “liberal” view, which argues that the essential tenets of Islamist thought and practice—properly interpreted—are fully compatible with modern democratic notions and institutions, but which also argues that current Islamist interpretations are fundamentally incompatible with democracy and international standards of human rights.
- An “Islamist” interpretation that is not necessarily antithetical to democratic values and practices but that is essentially communitarian and that places priority on a religious foundation for the state. The Islamist interpretation seeks to establish a just social order based on the tenets of Islam and is less concerned with the specific institutional form such a social order takes.

The relationship of Islamist thinking to internationalized norms of human and political rights emerges as a crucial issue. Participants suggested that Islam is often invoked by regimes and movements to obscure other motives for violating human rights, but Islam in and of itself does not condone such violations. Indeed, properly understood, Islam condemns such practices.

Chapter 3 moves from the theoretical to the particular to examine specific **case studies** of the interaction between Islam and established regimes.

- In **Iran**, a decade of revolutionary Islamic rule has produced a paradox of a strong civil society but little democracy; politics continues to be the “politics of the elite,” and those in power are now having to wrestle with the difficulties of adapting traditional beliefs to modern political and economic realities.
- **Algeria’s** predicament contrasts with Iran’s in that an Islamist movement was attempting to gain power not with bullets but with ballots. The democratization process in Algeria, aborted through a constitutional coup d’état, leaves open the question of whether the Islamist movement there would have governed democratically. It also leaves an ongoing major confrontation between the popularly supported Islamic Salvation Front (FIS) and the military-backed government.
- **Egypt**, where Islam has historically been a salient force, has adopted a mixed response to the modern Islamist political challenge. Some Islamist groups such as the Muslim Brotherhood are tolerated and co-opted by the regime, whereas other more radically oriented groups are vigorously repressed.
- **Jordan’s** monarchical government has opted for the politics of inclusion. In its most recent elections, in 1989, Islamists won about 40 percent of the vote and now serve in the Jordanian parliament and accept the authority of the king and secular government. The next round of elections, scheduled for 1993, will likely test the strategy of inclusion.
- In the wake of the Gulf War, Islamist movements are now challenging the established regimes in the Persian Gulf, including the strictly Islamic regime of **Saudi Arabia**. Pressures for greater participation in the Gulf states will likely increase, and the monarchies in the Gulf have already begun to adopt Islamic forms of consultative institutions to try to diffuse these pressures.

- The tension between secularist and religious strands of the **Palestinian national movement** has been present since the movement's inception. In recent years, as the Middle East peace process seemed stalled and as frustration has built among Palestinians, the Islamist strand has been growing in relation to secular, nationalist orientations.

Chapter 4 assesses the relationship between Islam and political power and suggests three alternative **scenarios for the future** of Islamist movements. Concerning political power, the appeal of Islamist groups and their ability to mobilize large sectors of the previously “underpowered” sectors of society lie in the inherent legitimacy Islam has among the people. Most incumbent regimes currently lack such acceptance, standing accused of authoritarianism, corruption, and neglect or abuse of human rights. Islam's legitimacy is used widely by both opposition movements and regimes to gain and/or keep political power. Resurgent Islam is quickly replacing moribund ideologies such as Arab nationalism or socialism. As to the future of Islamist political action, three possible scenarios emerge:

- A “**new synthesis**”: the clash of opinions on the relationship between Islam and democracy could yield a new synthesis view in which Islamic notions enhance and give new meaning to democratic concepts beyond their current western-dominated usages.
- **Abandonment**: Islamists and their ideological orientation may be a passing phenomenon as the difficulties of inner contradictions and the clash with modernity lead to an abandonment of fundamentalism.
- **Continued compromise and confrontation**: the diversity and conflicting interpretations of the relationship between Islam and democracy may continue without a near- or long-term resolution. In some instances there will be further compromises on both Islamist and secularist principles—the movements will compromise on fundamentalist tenets,

and regimes will compromise and engage in co-optation to avert the Islamist threat. In other instances, there will be political as well as theoretical confrontation, with opposition movements using Islam to strengthen their challenge to secular regimes, and the latter reacting to the opposition threat with repression rather than compromise. In both situations, this implies an unresolved confrontation between Islamist and secularist orientations.

One clear conclusion is that the language of political debate in the Middle East has shifted from nationalist and socialist rhetoric to Islamic terms. Whichever interpretation of Islam emerges as dominant—and whether it is compatible with democracy or not—those who ultimately prevail will be persuasive in Islamic, not western, terms.

Preface

Following Iraq's invasion of Kuwait in August 1990 and the successful multilateral effort that reversed this aggression, the United States Institute of Peace launched a Special Program on Middle East Peacemaking and Conflict Resolution to explore some of the basic issues that affect the potential for achieving a more peaceful and durable order in this, perhaps the world's most volatile, region. This initiative builds upon previous Institute support for research and education projects concerning peace and conflict issues in the Middle East. It reflects the Institute's statutory mandate to strengthen the nation's capacity to promote peaceful resolution of international conflicts. The Special Middle East Program staff coordinates a variety of Institute activities relating to this region and carried out with grants, fellowships, and in-house research projects.

One of the aftereffects of the Gulf War and the ripples it sent around the region is renewed pressure for increased popular participation in the affairs of government. Another, more long-term, trend has been an acceleration of the revival of Islam as a politically potent, mobilizing ideology. Reactions in the West to the specter of resurgent fundamentalism have been fanned by journalistic excess into menacing shadows stretching across much of the Islamic world. The rising tide of Islamist groups and their relationship to

democratization and democracy calls for more objective analysis, both in terms of the theoretical issues raised and their practical implications.

To this end, the Institute's Special Middle East Program assembled a group of scholars, analysts, and diplomatic practitioners for a one-day public symposium on May 15, 1992, on the subject of "Islam and Democracy." The symposium benefited from the participation of several of the Institute's Jennings Randolph fellows with extensive expertise in this area. Several Institute grantees and a number of other nationally recognized scholars, analysts, and journalists were also invited to take part.

The symposium's proceedings are synthesized in this report, written by one of the Institute's Special Middle East Program staff. The report adds contextual information and analysis of the views presented in the symposium, but attempts to provide an objective summary of the discussion and the issues.

With this report, the Institute seeks to provide valuable insights into the long-range significance of recent trends and to demystify some of the ramifications of the growth of Islamic political activism for the future political development of the Arab world as well as for future prospects for peace and conflict in the Middle East.

Samuel W. Lewis, President
United States Institute of Peace