

# INTRODUCTION

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**P**olitical violence in the Middle East and elsewhere symbolizes for many people the threat of "Islamic activism."<sup>1</sup> This perspective frequently assumes that the phenomenon—also known as "Islamic fundamentalism," "Islamism," or "political Islam"—represents a common and coordinated threat to the West. Others, however, reject this point of view, and argue that Islamic activists are neither unified nor necessarily hostile. What, then, is the nature of Islamic activism? Why is it perceived to be a threat to U.S. interests? Is there a reliable difference between Islamic extremists and moderates? If so, how should U.S. foreign policy respond to that difference?

These questions were addressed in a series of discussions held at the United States Institute of Peace between June 1994 and February 1996. Although there was no consensus—a fact that reflects a wide divergence of opinion among the participants—there were several recurring themes and topics.

The central topic of the Institute meetings was the dilemma faced by U.S. policymakers who must deal with the political violence of extremists in countries where political, economic, and social reforms are badly needed. Attempts to deal with one set of problems often work against efforts to deal with the other. Government actions to contain extremism are often at odds with the longer-term goals of democratization and market liberalization. Similarly, implementing needed political reforms may inadvertently strengthen, or even bring to power, groups who have no more commitment to human rights or democratic norms than the regimes they seek to replace.

The differing approaches to this basic dilemma, as articulated in the Institute meetings, divided over competing interpretations of Islamic activism and, specifically, whether or not a significant distinction exists between moderate

and extremist Islamic activists. The case studies indicate, on the surface at least, that Muslims committed to radical reform are not unified, particularly concerning the issues most important to Western policymakers, such as restraining violence and working out political compromise. Radical Islamic groups appear to vary from time to time and from place to place. What members do in Algeria or Pakistan is not what they do in Jordan or Iran. Some use violence (or condone its use) to achieve political ends, while others—apparently more pragmatic or moderate—choose to operate within existing political systems.

If there is in reality a significant and reliable difference between extremists and moderates among Islamic activists, that difference, together with their respective prospects, is something policymakers need to know about. What is an appropriate response to one group may not be an appropriate response to another.

But is this distinction valid? Again, the Institute working group participants split on whether all Islamic activists are inherently extremist or whether a meaningful distinction can be made between those who advocate a militant approach to change and those who shun violence in favor of religious piety and pragmatic social reform. Policy decisions in specific cases are determined largely by whether or not this distinction between moderates and extremists can be sustained. In the debate, two alternative policy approaches emerged.

One position, ardently represented in the Institute discussions and supported in certain scholarly circles,<sup>2</sup> rejects the significance of distinguishing between moderates and extremists, and rejects the argument that mainstream activists' movements have an underlying yearning for democracy. Whether activists work within the system or oppose it from outside, their ultimate objective, according to this line of argument, is the same—namely, to replace the existing order with an authoritarian Islamic state. This goal is said to reflect their fundamental convictions, which consistently deny pluralism, compromise, and genuine tolerance.<sup>3</sup> "While fundamentalist groups and ideologies differ from each other in many ways, all of them are inherently extremist and all despise our civilization. . . . They might, for tactical reasons, modify or suppress these aspirations but they do not abandon them. By definition, fundamentalists seek a way of life deeply incompatible with our own ideals."<sup>4</sup>

Proponents of this position reject out of hand the notion that accommodation with Islamic activists is possible or that those activists can be counted on as steadfast supporters of democracy. Iran and Sudan are cited as examples of what happens when Islamic activism takes power. According to this view,

Islamic activism is more akin to aggressive nationalism than religious revival, and the leaders "more like Zhirinovskiy than Havel."<sup>5</sup> A policy of confrontation and exclusion of all activists is then taken to be the best approach for dealing with this phenomenon.

The opposing position, also well represented in the Institute discussions, affirms the distinction between moderates and extremists. According to this view, so sprawling a phenomenon as Islamic activism covers a wide and shifting complex of ideals, objectives, interests, and members. Some parts of the movement are perceived to be susceptible to accommodation and even co-optation within a pluralist political system, given the appropriate combination of inducements and circumstances. Without such inducements, however, activists are likely to adopt more extreme, and often violent, measures in the name of advancing what they believe to be the cause of Islam.

According to this second account, Islamic activism is dynamic and diversified. It is not so much made up of fixed and stable constituencies, as it is animated by competing moderate and extremist *tendencies* that can be activated with varying degrees of appeal and intensity, depending on conditions.

When the conditions are propitious, a policy aimed at encouraging democratic participation can help consolidate moderation and discourage extremism. A policy of inclusion, it is argued, will provide activists with a stake in the system and motivate them to "play by the rules." Consequently, they will have to subject their programs to electoral tests and, in competing for power, will be compelled to form coalitions and practice compromise.<sup>6</sup> In addition, a policy of inclusion can have a moderating effect by overcoming the sense of marginalization and dispossession that breeds extremism. "By the very fact that they [are] illegal, unrecognized Islamist movements have no motivation to accommodate their opponents and embrace democracy and [they have] ample incentive to take as rejectionist a stance as possible."<sup>7</sup>

Finally, it is argued that "tarring" all Islamic activists with the same brush is self-defeating, and potentially detrimental to American interests.<sup>8</sup> Perceiving all activists as inherently extremist fosters indiscriminate repression and justifies Western support for regimes opposed to Islamic activism, no matter how undemocratic, repressive, or unpopular such regimes may be. Obsession with the "extremist peril," and the urgency of subduing it, can divert attention from the economic and political infirmities that appear to give rise to extremism, and from the need for responding with imaginative and progressive policies, instead of mere force and repression. "It is partly the case that . . . Islamists look like

they have the best chances . . . where the regimes are doing the worst jobs. It is not that Islamism is an unstoppable wave."<sup>9</sup>

In its broad outlines, current U.S. policy has sought to address the basic concerns from both of these perspectives. The Clinton administration has emphasized its ardent opposition to political violence and extremism—religious or secular—and also the need to address underlying causes of extremism. On May 17, 1994, National Security Adviser Anthony Lake described the perspective of the United States as follows:

In the Middle East as throughout the world, there is indeed a fundamental divide. But the fault line runs not between "civilizations" or religions. No, it runs instead between oppression and responsive government, between isolation and openness, between moderation and extremism. . . . Our foe is oppression and extremism, whether in religious or secular guise. We draw the line against those who seek to advance their agenda through terror, intolerance, or coercion . . . There should be no doubt [that] Islamic extremism poses a threat to our nation's interests. . . . [It flows] from common sources: disillusionment, a failure to secure basic needs, dashed hopes for political participation and social justice. Widespread disenchantment breeds an extremism of hatred and violence—an extremism by no means unique to the Middle East or the Muslim World.<sup>10</sup>

The question, remains, however, whether the distinction between moderates and extremists holds up, and whether it can be relied upon as a basis for making policy. The problem is important not only for deciding whether moderate activists can become steadfast allies of peaceful pluralism, but also whether it is possible, under some conditions, to make moderates out of extremists, and whether the cause of moderation can be advanced without losing the capacity to contain extremist violence and disorder.

Another important dimension of policymaking, mentioned but not resolved in Lake's statement, is the broader question of "our nation's interests." The problem of balancing long-term goals with short-term strategic and economic interests is nowhere more perplexing than in the Islamic world. On the one hand, reforms pursued too quickly can be profoundly destabilizing, and may play into the hands of nondemocratic opposition groups. On the other hand, efforts to contain extremism may be accompanied by the excessive use of force that at once intensifies extremist hostility and discourages even moderate reform. Paradoxically, such action may have the long-term effect of undermining the very conditions of political and economic security that suppressing extremism was supposed to ensure.

## THE ORIGINS AND CHARACTER OF ISLAMIC ACTIVISM

### Background

The link between religious revival and political reform is a common theme in Islamic history. During periods of decline, reformers have often sought to reawaken religious devotion as a means of redeeming the political community. Loss of faith and subversion of the ideals of Islam were taken to be the cause of social ills, and the prescribed remedy was a "return to Islam,"<sup>11</sup> including renewed commitment to "the Qur'an, the life of the Prophet, and the early Islamic community."<sup>12</sup> The possibility of using force to attain these ends—while always controversial—was very much a part of the deliberations of the reformers.

The origins of contemporary Islamic activism are to be found in the Muslim reaction to European colonial rule in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. After several centuries of military and political preeminence, Islamic centers of civilization came under the control of the emerging European powers. This was a defining experience for many countries—particularly in North Africa and the Middle East—and constituted a profound spiritual as well as political crisis. The dominance of Western ideas, technology, and institutions forced many Muslims to reevaluate not only their political situation but also the deeper issues of religion and society.

Islamic reaction to Western domination took three forms. First, some Muslims, like the influential Egyptian theologian Muhammed Rashid Rida, advocated withdrawal into a defensive and conservative posture, rehearsing and taking comfort in the traditions and past accomplishments of Islam.

The main concern of most orthodox theologians and the great theological seminaries . . . was to safeguard and preserve the normative and institutional structures of tradition from the increasingly aggressive onslaught of Western ideas and institutions. In order to achieve this objective, the ulama [religious leadership] established a network of [traditional Islamic educational institutions] . . . in which they sought to preserve the purity of tradition. . . . [These] became the center for the reassertion of Sunni orthodoxy and a focus of conservative opposition to modern Western thought and institutions.<sup>13</sup>

A second group of Muslims, also affected by Western education, were more receptive to the Western way of life. These were the "modernists," who undertook to demonstrate the compatibility between Islam and the premises, methods, and ideals of Western civilization. Arab thinkers like Khalid Muhammed Khalid and Muslim reformers from the Indian subcontinent, such as Sayyid

Ahmad Kahn, Muhammad Iqbal, and Sayyid Amir Ali, all proposed what might be called a policy of "constructive engagement" with the West. Ali, for example,

sought to demolish the Western and Christian notions of their intellectual and religious superiority over Islam and defended his faith with the help of the intellectual apparatus he had acquired through English education. He challenged Western critics of Islam on such questions as the role and status of women in Islam, the institution of slavery, the treatment of non-Muslims under Islam, and the conflict between reason and revelation.<sup>14</sup>

The third and at present the most publicized form of response is Islamic activism. The Muslim Brothers of Egypt (founded in 1928) and the Jama'at-i-Islami in South Asia (founded in 1941) are the two groups that have most influenced and shaped this category. They mobilized Muslims around a message of "aggressive self-assertion,"<sup>15</sup> and established what would become a dominant pattern of activist thinking. In the process, they both absorbed and rejected certain elements from the conservative and modernist positions.

On the one hand, these groups honor the traditions and past glories of Islam, and what are considered to be the authentic fundamentals of the faith. They also tend to be familiar with Western ways and thinking, and a good number of their leaders are Western-trained, especially in technical fields such as engineering. They have little hesitancy in making use of Western techniques in communications, economics, and technological development.

On the other hand, both conservatives and modernists are believed to have fallen short of the Islamic ideal and are in part responsible for the deteriorating condition of Islam. By escaping into tradition, and perpetuating their sterile conventions, conservatives fail to exploit Islam's potential for shaping and influencing the modern world. According to the activists, modernists go too far in the opposite direction and simply capitulate to the West. Unfaithful to their own tradition, they are seen as disfiguring the clear message of Islam and recasting it in a Western image.

The two variations of modernism that had a particularly strong effect on Islamic activists—particularly in the Arab world—were Arab nationalism and Arab socialism. Arab nationalism sprang to life after World War I, partly in response to the collapse of the Ottoman Empire and to the ascendancy of the nation-state system. To strive for national self-determination was to be accepted as a respectable member of the international community. In keeping with Western ideals, the nationalism of this period was generally "secularist,

believing in a bond which could embrace people of different schools or faiths, and a policy based upon the interests of state and society." It was also "constitutionalist, holding that the will of the nation should be expressed by elected governments responsible to elected assemblies."<sup>16</sup>

It was not long before support for such Western ideals waned. Appeals for self-determination went unrequited, and nations like Egypt, Syria, and the Maghreb countries either continued under foreign rule or were newly subjected to it. In the face of what was regarded as blatant hypocrisy, Arab nationalism turned to virulent anticolonialism, spurning many Western liberal ideals, such as constitutional democracy and individual liberty, and raising doubts about the applicability to Islam of the idea of a secular public sphere. In some cases, the Arab independence movement even fell under the influence of European fascism, something that only strengthened the antipathy to Western liberalism.<sup>17</sup>

Arab socialism came into fashion after World War II, and was in many ways an extension of Arab nationalism. It strongly espoused certain modernist themes—economic and social improvement based on the development of new industry and technology, the expansion of education and medical services, and a concerted effort to reduce the role of religion in public life. These themes all bore the mark of Western influence.

At the same time, Arab socialism was resolutely anticolonial and expressed itself in the independence movements of the 1950s in Egypt, Syria, the Maghreb, and elsewhere. Moreover, the "socialist" emphasis on collectivization, state ownership, and central planning, partly influenced by Marxism and Maoism, represented an intention to disown the liberal, free market ideas of the West and to shape a distinctive and independent way of life based on the overarching unity of Arab peoples born of a common language and culture.<sup>18</sup> The success of this movement owed much to the leadership of Gamal Abdul Nasser of Egypt, as well as to a common opposition to the existence of Israel.

Although coming to power in Iraq, Egypt, Algeria, and Syria and significantly influencing the politics of the Arab and Islamic worlds, the socialist parties ultimately failed to maintain their popular support. This failure was due largely to their inability to resolve existing economic problems, the Arab defeat in the 1967 war with Israel, and the death of the charismatic Nasser in 1970. Their demise, however, was also attributed by some people to the socialists' weak commitment and, in some cases, outright hostility toward Islam,<sup>19</sup> something directly associated with the corrosive influence of Western "secularism."

Both of these twentieth-century movements were modernist in the sense that they borrowed heavily from the West in the process of reforming the social and political ideals of Muslim societies. At the same time, they were also a reaction against the West and the continued colonial influence of pro-Western Arab regimes. They therefore served to discredit Western ideas and institutions throughout the Muslim world and to generate a spirit of revolutionary fervor.

### **Islamic Activism**

Islamic activism succeeded Arab nationalism and socialism as the principal revolutionary threat to established regimes in a large number of Arab and other Muslim countries.<sup>20</sup> Activists have tapped into the same anti-Western sentiment associated with Arab nationalism, and have used a deep sense of humiliation and frustration among Muslim populations to advance their cause. Their rhetoric is laced with political and economic critiques of the status quo, and they argue forcefully for a return to Islam as the authentic, indigenous alternative to Western models of social organization and development. In short, Islamic activism has become a "potent ideology of popular dissent."<sup>21</sup>

Islam provide[s] an effective language of opposition: to Western power and influence, and those who could be accused of being subservient to them; to governments regarded as corrupt and ineffective, the instruments of private interests, or devoid of morality; and to a society which seemed to have lost its unity with its moral principles and direction.<sup>22</sup>

The overthrow of the Shah of Iran in 1979—seen by Muslims as a vindication of Islam against the corrupting influence of the West—was a watershed for Islamic activists. It demonstrated the vitality of Islamic political ideology as an independent force, and inspired like-minded activists throughout the Muslim world. The successes in Afghanistan against the Soviet forces further strengthened the idea of Islam as a viable political ideology. Consequently, Islamic activists came to understand the political utility of religion and the effectiveness of using the mosque as a center of protest in countries where opposition was otherwise banned.

Although Islamic activists differ over how best to achieve their goals, they do seek common ends. Above all, activists seek to transform society in accordance with their interpretation of Islamic principles.<sup>23</sup> They attribute the social ills that plague so many Muslim countries to the irreligious or secular nature of their governments and leaders. Since the absence of religion (or religious values) is perceived to be the problem, the solution offered is a return to Islam as

the organizing principle of society. This proposed alternative includes, among other things, establishing an Islamic state based on *shari'a* (Islamic law) and drawing religion directly into politics. According to this way of thinking, Islam is "a dynamic and activist political ideology which must acquire state power in order to implement its social, economic, and political agenda. . . . Unlike the conservatives] . . . and the modernists, [Islamic activism is] primarily [a] political rather than [a] religio-intellectual movement."<sup>24</sup>

The ability of Islamic activists to generate support is attributable to a number of factors.<sup>25</sup> First, the centrality of religion in the daily life of many Muslim countries allows activists and others to use popular religious and cultural sentiments to their own ends. Islam, like other religions, is an important element in shaping individual and collective identity. Consequently, professions of faith are an important source of political legitimacy. Even Egypt's Nasser relied upon appeals to Islam to support his more secular vision of society; "the realities of Egyptian and Arab society caused him to increasingly use or manipulate religion to legitimate his state socialism and broaden his popular support."<sup>26</sup> Whether the appeal to Islam is the result of a genuine desire for social justice or a cynical manipulation of religion for political gain, it remains a potent tool for mobilizing popular support.<sup>27</sup>

A second source of support is the widespread revulsion toward official corruption and the inequities of wealth and opportunity within many Islamic societies. This has been coupled with the proactive efforts by many activist groups to ameliorate the plight of the poor. Movements throughout the Islamic world have identified themselves with the dispossessed, the so-called *mustadhafin*. In Egypt, Gaza, and the West Bank, Islamic activists have gained significant support through their charitable activities. They provide health care, education, and other social services that are not provided by local authorities. "During recent earthquakes in Cairo, it was the [Islamic activists] who put up tents and provided direct assistance to thousands suddenly made homeless, . . . [not the government] which many regard as distant, insensitive, and corrupt."<sup>28</sup>

The concern with economic justice finds resonance in many Muslim societies. While "you cannot explain Islamic movements simply by enumerating economic and political dislocations,"<sup>29</sup> poor economic performance, poverty, and illiteracy are serious challenges for existing governments. Population growth throughout the Islamic world continues to outpace economic development, resulting in high unemployment and a widespread decline in per capita incomes.<sup>30</sup> Urbanization, which is particularly rapid in the Middle East, has

strained aging infrastructures, disrupted traditional ways of life, and stirred social discontent. In many countries, the urgent need for economic reform is stifled by bureaucratic inertia, corruption, the extreme concentration of wealth, and the continued dominance of public monopolies. "The economic gap between the 'haves' and the 'have-nots' of the Arab world remains wide."<sup>31</sup>

The preponderance of authoritarian regimes dating from the end of the colonial era has also contributed to the rise of Islamic activism. Widespread repression and the absence of elections have undermined the legitimacy of many regimes, and strengthened support for virtually any alternative to the status quo. Since formal opposition is banned in many countries, dissent has been forced outside the political system and has frequently found expression through religious organizations. The situation in Iran prior to the 1979 revolution is a good example of this phenomenon. While political opposition to the Shah could be contained, the mosques could not be shut down. Similarly, many Islamic movements, such as the Islamic Salvation Front (FIS) in Algeria, have linked their religious message with a demand for democratization and greater political participation.

While there has been some political and economic reform in Muslim countries, most notably in Jordan, experts are divided as to how effective such attempts have been. Some analysts argue that many efforts at political liberalization have continued to exclude large portions of society. They have been "designed not to inaugurate [an open or democratic system], but to solidify and broaden the base of the elite in power."<sup>32</sup> Other commentators, however, contend that sincere efforts have been made to address these issues, even if the results are not readily apparent. "While much more can be done, it is improper to dismiss what has been achieved."<sup>33</sup>

### **Theocratic Tendencies: How Representative?**

A central criticism of Islamic activism is the assertion that its underlying ideology is incompatible with constitutional democracy. Many activist thinkers argue that the concept of *tawhid* (the unity of God) contradicts the Western distinction between secular and sacred realms, and cannot be reconciled with the separation of church and state.<sup>34</sup> At issue is the inclination to fuse civil status and religious identity, and thereby run the risk of excluding or discriminating against minority populations and their beliefs. Such an outcome contradicts basic standards of democracy and tolerance, particularly when the dominant beliefs are translated into law and discrimination is institutionalized.

The situation in Sudan exemplifies the problem. In June 1989, a military coup brought to power a government closely allied with the National Islamic Front (NIF), an outgrowth of the Sudanese Muslim Brotherhood. Having suspended the constitution and disbanded the elected parliament, the regime implemented an extensive program of Islamization throughout the country. In keeping with that program, the military government appointed a new National Assembly composed of members sympathetic to the NIF, and replaced a large number of judges who were considered ideologically unsound. NIF supporters have since come to dominate in business, law, government, and academia. According to the U.S. State Department's *Country Reports on Human Rights for 1993*, "the NIF-dominated regime pursued religious, ethnic, and ideological discrimination in almost every aspect of society."<sup>35</sup>

The inspiration for this reconstruction of Sudanese society is rooted in a particular interpretation of the Qur'an, the traditions of the Prophet, and *shari'a*. These Islamic foundations, it is argued, provide the basis for a secure, unified, and successful society, capable of repelling the forces of disintegration and demoralization associated with the influence of Western secularism.<sup>36</sup>

Unfortunately, the Islamic foundation of the NIF-backed government has not provided a basis for peaceful national integration in a country with a significant Christian and animist population. The ideology of Islamic activism, as it has been implemented, appears instead to have mobilized a strong form of nationalism that is deeply antagonistic to the rights of free thought and fundamental belief for its minority populations. While the civil war in Sudan is complex, there is no doubt that the Islamic social vision, as formulated by the NIF, is a central element. According to Francis Deng, "an underlying cause of the war" is "the attempt by the north not only to define the identity [of Sudan] as Arab and Islamic, but [also] to structure and stratify the life and role of citizens along those lines."<sup>37</sup> In the more prosaic words of the U.S. State Department, "fear of the imposition of *Shari'a* remained a key issue in the rebellion."<sup>38</sup>

It is not clear, however, how dominant this exclusivist interpretation of Islamic thought really is. While all activists theoretically endorse the unification of religion and politics, many have, in practice, supported more pluralistic political systems. This is particularly true in Jordan and Turkey. Similarly, in Pakistan, the *Jama'at-i-Islami* explicitly endorsed a constitution modeled on British parliamentary democracy as consistent with its teachings. Although it fell far short of what the Islamic activists had sought, the constitution contained enough references to the Qur'an and Sunna to appease the leaders of the *Jama'at*.

The content of the constitution and the kind of state it aimed to create were strongly tilted in the direction of the modernist preferences. In accepting it [Mawlana] Mawdudi [the Jama'at leader], not only seemed to deny much of what he had previously insisted upon as characteristic of an Islamic state but, indeed, left intact very little that would distinguish him from the liberal constitutionalists he had previously so bitterly criticized for their un-Islamic ways.<sup>39</sup>

In a country such as Indonesia, the critique of an exclusivist, theocratic version of Islam comes not, strictly speaking, from other Islamic activists, but rather from a "neomodernist" group of Muslims. Abdurahman Wahid, the leader of Indonesia's largest Islamic organization and an opponent of the ruling regime, has been critical of what he sees as the "sectarian and exclusivist" tendencies of those who use religion for political purposes. An advocate of a pluralist interpretation of Islam and democratic politics, Wahid is involved in an effort within Indonesia to redevelop Islam from the inside, cultivating a tolerant alternative to the exclusivist ideas increasingly prevalent in the country. This neomodernist interpretation of Islam rejects dogmatism, recognizes that God alone possesses absolute truth, and believes that there is no single form of government that can be considered uniquely "Islamic."<sup>40</sup> Similar to Islamic activists, the neomodernists base their work on classical texts, the Qur'an, and the traditions of the Prophet. This interpretation is a very interesting Islamic alternative to extremism.

### **The Disputed Role of Violence**

A second major source of criticism of Islamic activism concerns the use of violence to gain political power. The ruthlessness and violence of some activists have weakened the claim that any activists would respect democratic norms or international standards of human rights should they gain political power.

From the very beginning, however, a debate has taken place among Islamic activists about the permissibility of and limitations on the use of violence in promoting Islamic ideals.<sup>41</sup> The Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood—the earliest of the activist organizations—became deeply divided over this issue. When it was established, the organization was distinctively and self-consciously nonviolent. Its founder, Hasan al-Banna, shunned the resort to arms and advocated working within the system. However, more extreme members, while sharing many of the same values and goals, eventually split off over the issue of violence, and thus opened the door to the proliferation of violence-prone activist organizations.

Founded in Egypt in 1928, the Muslim Brotherhood quickly attracted a large following, establishing branches in Jordan, Sudan, Syria, Iraq, and other countries. The Brotherhood advocated the establishment of an Islamic state and argued the need for social reform, particularly in the areas of social services and education. It also emphasized the need to protect Islamic culture from what was perceived to be the corrupting influences of Western and secular ideals. Although they were originally apolitical, the Muslim Brothers evolved into an active political organization, and in 1945 al-Banna himself ran for the Egyptian parliament.

In the 1930s, however, a group of dissenters opposed al-Banna's commitment to nonviolent reform, and broke away to establish their own, more militant faction of the Brotherhood. "A debate [then] commenced . . . which continues in Egypt [today] regarding whether or not it is obligatory to engage in holy war to purify society."<sup>42</sup> The militant wing was strengthened during World War II, and in 1952 it found a common cause with a group of young military officers, including Nasser, who took control of Egypt at that time. In two years, however, the militant wing lost faith in Nasser and allegedly attempted to assassinate him. In retaliation, Nasser outlawed the Muslim Brotherhood, and several of its members were imprisoned and executed, including the well-known Sayyid Qutb.

Nasser's crackdown on the Muslim Brothers emboldened militants in Egypt, giving rise to new radical groups, all committed to violent confrontation with the state. While such groups are distinctive in that they advocate the use of lethal force in seeking activist objectives, even they do not defend the unlimited or unrestricted use of force. From among traditional Islamic warrants for using force, militants typically single out appeals to emergency or "states of exception" as a reason for suspending the ordinary restrictions on armed combat.

One such appeal, *The Neglected Duty*, was printed by Islamic Jihad, the militant group responsible for the assassination of Anwar Sadat in 1981, to justify "holy combat to overthrow the unbelieving state."<sup>43</sup> According to this account, all Muslims are victims of oppression and their territory is illicitly dominated by apostates,<sup>44</sup> or "innovators," who are believed to violate the Qur'an and the record of Mohammed's words and actions. Because by their aggressive acts these apostates imperil the very existence of Islam and all it stands for, their rule has no legitimacy and does not need to be respected.<sup>45</sup>

According to *The Neglected Duty*, those persons legitimately engaged in a jihad of survival against illicit rulers are permitted to employ unconventional

tactics, like deception, stealth, and spying, both because of the superior might of the government and because the enemy is in a state of apostasy. At the same time, some standard restrictions covering the use of force apparently apply to those conducting a jihad. They are supposed, for example, to try to avoid harming noncombatants or initiating direct attacks against them, although, like anyone operating under the laws of war, they may not be held responsible for the "indirect killing" of such people if it is warranted by military necessity.<sup>46</sup>

This inclination of militants to disregard the ordinary restrictions on using force when there are exceptional circumstances probably accounts for the fact that the charter of Hamas, the militant Palestinian organization, gives no sustained attention to questions of tactics and their limits. Such groups contend, in effect, that the conditions of necessity in which they find themselves require that traditional moral limits "must be stretched."<sup>47</sup> The same interpretation probably also applies to armed insurgents such as the Armed Islamic Group (GIA) in Algeria, giving them an excuse for their direct attacks on women who work as professionals, attend school, or do not wear veils.

The real problem, however, is not that militants fail in practice to honor consistently the restrictions they espouse. Conventional police and military forces do not always scrupulously observe prescribed limits either. The essential difficulty is that Islamic activists who favor violence are inclined to consider themselves exempt from normal restrictions governing the use of force because they perceive their struggle as sacred and their societies as being in a state of emergency. To describe the enemy as an apostate—an enemy of God—is to have an especially significant reason to disregard or minimize the restrictions ordinarily expected under conditions of armed conflict.<sup>48</sup>

This permissive view toward the use of violence, however, continues to be opposed within the ranks of Islamic activism. Some moderate activists explicitly reject the use of violence as incompatible with their vision of an Islamic society, and, if nothing else, as a tactical mistake.<sup>49</sup> Militants seek to impose change upon a society from the top down; however, others (particularly the quietist *da'wah* element) see social change as flowing naturally from the religious conversion of individuals within society. In this view, the creation of an Islamic society depends on the reform of individual hearts and minds, and the use of force is counterproductive toward these ends.

Violence can do nothing more than distort *da'wah* to the path of Allah (SWT). *Da'wah* seeks to penetrate the innermost recesses of man to transform him into a Godly person in his conceptions, emotions, and behavior by altering his thoughts,

feelings, and will as well as the whole of his being. . . . It also shakes up the structure of the society and alters its inherited beliefs, well-established traditions, moral conventions and prevailing systems. This cannot be achieved without wisdom and amicability.<sup>50</sup>

Furthermore, some activist scholars argue that extremism is a misunderstanding of Islam, and that people who advocate violence wrongly interpret the scriptures: "error is committed by the misguided thinking on the legitimacy of the Holy War."<sup>51</sup> For example, a leading member of the Muslim Brotherhood has argued that extremists who brand other Muslims as *kaḥīr* or apostates—such as rulers who have not applied *shari'a* or those who follow them—are often mistaken on theological grounds. "Shari'a teaches that those who embrace Islam with certainty of mind can only be expelled from its fold by proven and substantiated evidence. . . . All the obscure and vague evidence on which the extremists base their accusations are refuted by fundamental and categorical texts in both the Quran and Sunnah."<sup>52</sup>

Similarly, nonactivist religious figures have been very critical of extremism. A leading Egyptian cleric, the Shaykh al-Azhar,<sup>53</sup> expressed his strong opposition to the use of violence in a public rebuttal of *The Neglected Duty*.<sup>54</sup> Although sympathetic to their goals, the Shaykh lamented Islamic Jihad's indifference to the indiscriminate suffering and death that result from their tactics. "If all Muslims who have cooperated in the building of modern Egypt—a state . . . *The Neglected Duty* describes as 'not Islamic'—are potentially apostates and deserve to die, where will the killing stop?"<sup>55</sup> It is better, he says, that reformers show restraint. "In the long run, the formation of an Islamic society is better served by patience and persuasion than by the use of force. A group like Islamic Jihad that acts on the argument of *The Neglected Duty* may even find itself charged with injustice, should its activities bring harm to people regarded by ordinary Muslims as innocent."<sup>56</sup>

### **Islamic Activism and Politics: Three Patterns**

The case studies examined in the Institute discussion series illustrate three ways in which Islamic activists have managed or responded to political order.<sup>57</sup> The first is to achieve or to come near to achieving *revolutionary ascendancy*. Of the cases considered, Iran is the clearest example of this; although Sudan was not included in the series, it is partially comparable. In these two instances, Islamic activists—followers of the Shi'i tradition in Iran and the Sunni tradition in Sudan—have been able, by revolutionary means, either to monopolize

political and legal control, as in the case of Iran, or to mount a convincing effort in that direction, as in the case of Sudan (where the attempt to gain complete control of the government is still being contested in an ongoing civil war). The emphasis in this approach is on *revolutionary* ascendancy, which implies the attainment of power by nondemocratic means, typically involving the use of force.

The second approach of Islamic activists is *revolutionary resistance* to a given regime. Of the cases studied, the disruptive and frequently violent actions of Islamic activists such as those associated with the GIA in Algeria or with Hamas in the territory controlled by the Palestinian Authority (PA) (and, by extension, in Israel) offer obvious examples of this approach. The antigovernment behavior of extremist groups in Egypt might also be mentioned. In contrast to revolutionary ascendancy, the crucial variable here is the existence of an entrenched regime that is perceived as opposing inalterably the ideals and objectives of Islamic activism. Precisely because the regime is considered to be so antagonistic and so entrenched, it is concluded that extreme (nondemocratic and usually violent) measures are unavoidable.

The third response of Islamic activists to political order is *accommodation*. There are obvious illustrations of this approach in the cases of Jordan, Pakistan, Indonesia, and Turkey, although there may also be a similar tendency on the part of breakaway members of Hamas in the Palestinian territory, a portion of the Islamic Salvation Front (FIS) in Algeria, and the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt.

The most salient index of accommodation is the willingness to accept and abide by established political rules and procedures, even though such rules deviate from the ideal standards associated with what is perceived to be the proper interpretation of Islam. In the cases of Jordan, Pakistan, and Turkey, the established system to which accommodation is made is relatively democratic. In the case of Indonesia, the system is best described as a minimally democratic form of authoritarianism.

Two additional considerations for policymakers must be noted in regard to this typology. First, a question crosscutting all three categories is whether a given expression of Islamic activism is internationally oriented or primarily local or domestic in character. In the ascendancy category, both Iran and Sudan engage in a certain degree of "international outreach." Similarly, the Palestinian group Hamas, which is an example of revolutionary resistance, has clear links to supporters in the West and elsewhere. The Jama'at-i-Islami in Pakistan—an

instance of accommodationism—has sister parties in India, Bangladesh, and Kashmir, although the connections are not uniformly close. By most accounts, the Muslim Brothers in Jordan and the FIS in Algeria are essentially of domestic origin, even if they receive some funding or are otherwise influenced from outside the country.

The second consideration is that these three categories are simply reference points for analyzing the different forms of response to political order by Islamic activists. There is nothing fixed about a group's position in regard to the categories. Given constituencies may move from one category to another depending on the circumstances; equally, as the section on Jordan and the Palestinians illustrates, the orientation of particular groups may shift as the demographics change and a different generation of activists with different ideas of political action takes control. Similarly, the international orientation of the groups within these categories is fluid.

Consequently, the fact that at a given time and place a particular group of Islamic activists appears to be in one category or another does not of itself resolve the controversy between those who believe Islamic activism is essentially antidemocratic, and those who think of it as being much more adaptable. Proper analysis requires more than categorization. It also requires in-depth diagnosis and careful prognostication, which involve inspecting and assessing the intentions, capabilities, and opportunities of a given group under particular conditions. If members of the FIS of Algeria currently talk like accommodationists, can they be trusted? Are they in fact becoming more moderate? Is the group unified and disciplined in accord with a given set of intentions and objectives, or is it made up of conflicting factions pulling in different directions? Is it possible that moderation might give way to extremism, or that extremists may become moderate? Under what conditions would such changes likely occur? In short, the categories serve a purpose, but they by no means obviate the need for astute analysis and projection based on an examination of specific circumstances.

## **POLICY IMPLICATIONS**

### **U.S. Foreign Policy**

In practice, both the Bush and the Clinton administrations have sought to distinguish between moderate political opposition and militant extremism. U.S. policy is committed both to containing extremism and to addressing its causes.

In that way, policymakers seek to balance concern about economic and political reform with the needs of local and regional stability. Put simply, U.S. policy seeks to "actively contain those states and organizations which promote or support religious or secular extremism; and help form a community of like-minded Middle Eastern states which share our goals of free markets [and] democratic enlargement."<sup>58</sup>

Both administrations have repeatedly stated their commitment to open political systems, human rights, and economic development as key features of their policies in the Islamic world. Increasing political participation is considered to be the best means of ensuring civil liberties and political accountability. The Clinton administration, in particular, has preferred "constructive engagement" to confrontation, and negotiation to military solutions. High priority has been given to economic policy—ending the Arab boycott against Israel and opening trade throughout the Islamic world—as a means of addressing widespread poverty. "It is in large part the lack of economic, educational, and political opportunities that gives extremists of any sort their constituency. The viable, long-term means to defeat extremism is to address the conditions on which it thrives."<sup>59</sup>

Simultaneously, the Clinton administration has actively sought to contain militant extremism. This includes the imposition of a trade and investment embargo against Iran in response to that country's support of terrorism in the Middle East and elsewhere. In North Africa, "the United States is seeking to build a regional bulwark against Algeria's radical Islamic insurgency."<sup>60</sup> The United States also remains a significant partner in long-standing bilateral and multilateral security arrangements in the Islamic world, particularly in the Gulf region, where the United States maintains a large naval presence and where it intervened on behalf of Kuwait in the 1991 Gulf War. Collective security arrangements and arms sales to U.S. allies are designed to minimize the challenge of militant groups to existing regimes. Support for the Middle East peace process is meant to further isolate extremists by providing incentives for moderation.

Critics of the Clinton administration policy claim that while the rhetoric is good, the implementation has been inconsistent.<sup>61</sup> It is asserted that the tendency to overlook human rights abuses and harassment of political opposition by U.S. allies such as Saudi Arabia and Egypt is not in accord with the positions articulated by policymakers.<sup>62</sup> Similarly, the Bush administration's failure to condemn the Algerian military for interceding in the December 1991 elections raised questions about American impartiality and its commitment to demo-

cratic norms.<sup>63</sup> U.S. policy in Turkey, Pakistan, Indonesia, and other countries is similarly confronted by criticisms of inconsistency in regard to human rights norms.

These criticisms reflect attempts by policymakers to strike a balance between the often-competing goals of long-term democratic development, on the one hand, and short-term regional stability, on the other. Political and economic reform can be destabilizing, and open elections may bring to power Islamic activists who have no more commitment to democracy and human rights than the regimes they seek to replace.<sup>64</sup> Western support for democratization is therefore complicated by "those who would use the democratic process to come to power, only to destroy that process in order to retain power and political dominance."<sup>65</sup>

Short-term economic and strategic interests are similarly at odds with the longer-term goals of democratization. Particularly in the Gulf and the Middle East, U.S. national security interests are dominated by access to the region's energy resources and by U.S. commitments to Israeli security. Regional stability and a Middle East peace settlement are integrally linked to these two overarching interests. Efforts to secure such short-term interests, however, often come at the expense of the long-term goals of political and economic security. Political repression by U.S. allies in the region, while ensuring stability and containing opposition to the peace process, erodes the foundations upon which future democratic societies can be built. The question, then, is should Western policymakers push for "more democratic, open regimes, even if they are likely to bring instability or even adversarial Islamic regimes? Or should they be silent in the face of increasingly authoritarian regimes that fail to address underlying issues but which nonetheless assure an enforced stability?"<sup>66</sup>

A dramatic example of this dilemma is Egypt. One of America's key allies in the region, Egypt has played a major role in facilitating the Middle East peace process and normalizing relations between Israel and many of its neighbors. At the same time, Egypt is plagued by serious social and economic problems, and the current government of President Hosni Mubarak has been challenged by militant activists operating within Egypt's borders. They have killed police, civilians, and foreign tourists, and have posed a serious threat to the state. In the past several years, President Mubarak has retaliated with an aggressive and highly controversial campaign involving irregular enforcement measures, military courts, and emergency legislation. While the crackdown is justified in the name of combating extremism, opposition forces of all sorts have been targeted,

including accommodationist elements among the Muslim Brothers and labor leaders identified with the movement.

Commentators differ on the lesson to be learned from this example. Some analysts see a clear, positive lesson for U.S. policy in Mubarak's achievement: "[W]hile there have been strains between the United States and Cairo . . . , it's crucial to get the U.S.-Egyptian relationship back on track and to support Mubarak fully in his campaign against domestic terror. Egypt's future turns on Mubarak's ability to keep terrorism under control. Only then will it be possible to focus on Egypt's economy."<sup>67</sup>

Others, however, have cast Mubarak's policy toward Islamic activism in a less positive light. If militants have been subdued, "the cost has been high in terms of abuses such as torture, extra-judicial killings, imprisonment without trial and mass arrests in villages suspected of harboring militants."<sup>68</sup> Since the social and economic situation in Egypt continues to pose a serious challenge to the Egyptian leadership, the question remains whether the long-term prospects for Egypt are better than before the crackdowns. The manifestation of discontent may have been curtailed, but the underlying causes remain, and, consequently, Egypt remains susceptible to extremist agitation.

The situation in Egypt also typifies the dilemmas inherent within examples of revolutionary resistance, such as Algeria. There, as in Egypt, it appears that the ruling regime's hard-line response has contained the Islamist challenge, yet the underlying problems on which extremists have capitalized remain. In both of these cases, the Clinton administration has dealt with this dilemma by supporting a policy of quiet dialogue. The administration has pressed for gradual political and economic reform without showing much public displeasure about the use of emergency policies. In each instance, more immediate foreign policy concerns<sup>69</sup> have taken priority over longer-term goals. The question remains, however, whether short-term repression is at all compatible with long-term liberalization.

In examples of revolutionary ascendancy, such as Iran, U.S. policy faces a different set of dilemmas. American efforts to isolate Iran have been hindered by the European and Japanese policy of "constructive engagement." Fundamentally, the United States, Europeans, and Japanese differ in their interpretations of the Iranian leadership; these differences in turn produce conflicting policies. The U.S. policy of "containment"—which includes economic embargoes and political pressure—is based on a perception of Iran as a renegade state dominated by extremists. European and Japanese policies, however,

seek to cultivate what they see as pragmatic elements within the Iranian leadership through strengthened trade relations. Precisely because the Iranian leadership does appear to have both pragmatic and extremist elements, neither the U.S., European, nor Japanese approaches is perceived as entirely effective. The U.S. policy of containment is argued to be overly punitive and, ultimately, counterproductive. Constructive engagement, however, is said to be too permissive, and does not hold Iran accountable for nuclear proliferation or for its direct support of militant groups, among other issues.

Accommodationist forms of Islamic activism are not without their policy dilemmas either. In the case of Pakistan, the fact that an activist organization like the Jama'at-i-Islami has been permitted to participate in the political system has, it appears, been successful in deterring extremism. The inclusion of the Jama'at in the political process has both mitigated its ideological demands and shaped its largely accommodationist methods. Dedicated Islamic reformists, who might otherwise have turned to revolutionary means, have adjusted themselves to the rules of peaceful compromise and coalition building. "It is really quite incredible the degree to which Jama'at-i-Islami has not only become part of the system but has been co-opted and used by various regimes."<sup>70</sup>

At the same time, it is not clear that Jama'at's participation has invariably contributed to the advance of democracy and tolerance in Pakistan, or that political experience has helped to liberalize its ideals. At the behest of the Jama'at, controversial Islamic laws were passed during the administration of President Zia-ul-Haq that manifest little regard for the rights of minorities or religious dissenters.<sup>71</sup> Likewise, in Indonesia, President Suharto's policy of accommodating, if not co-opting, Islam has led to the Islamization or "greening" of political discourse. Although this has allowed a flowering of Islamic modernist thought, there is serious concern that the politicization of religion is increasing communal tensions, eroding the country's tradition of tolerance, and moving it in an extremist direction. It is not clear, then, whether policies of accommodation necessarily produce democracy. In some cases, they may actually hinder it.

### **The Civil Society Option**

Some analysts contend that the best way to coordinate the urgent imperative of deterring extremism with the ideals of equity and moderation is to cultivate something known as "civil society." Civil society is broadly understood as that sector of social life that lies beyond direct governmental administration and forms the basis of a pluralist and open society. The institutions of civil society

typically include nongovernmental organizations such as trade unions, professional associations, civic groups, religious organizations, private educational institutions, and an independent media. Although autonomous, civil society is governed by the rule of law; it is also characterized by civility, tolerance of dissenting views, and accountable government, all of which serve as a buffer against both the oppression of authoritarian rule and the intolerance of extremist ideologies.

Judith Miller of the *New York Times*, among others, has supported the idea of civil society as an alternative for U.S. policymakers. She argues that the United States needs to avoid equating democracy with elections and should instead press more strongly for adherence by all sides to international standards of human rights and greater public participation within society. In regard to the situation in Algeria, she notes the following:

The Bush Administration should have said that America would promote elections tomorrow and civil society today—increased participation in public life by a growing number of individuals, groups, and associations who genuinely crave liberal democracy—so that the concepts and traditions upon which democracy depends have time to take root, and so that countries that have known little else but one-party authoritarian rule will stand a better chance of developing truly democratic governments. . . . [The Bush administration] should have stressed . . . modest goals: increased political participation in government and the need for a freer press and freer public debate in all countries in the region.<sup>72</sup>

Fostering civil society is, according to Miller, a more realistic way of advancing U.S. ideals and interests than is advocating wholesale political and legal renovation. Reform is gradual and piecemeal, rather than abrupt and systemic. Freedom of the press is developed over time, and professional and social welfare organizations are promoted, all of which work cumulatively to strengthen the moderate center and to isolate extremism.

Moreover, it is argued that the idea of civil society is adaptable. However Western its roots, civil society is not a matter of replicating Western institutions; rather, this approach would, ideally, allow for indigenous forms of responsive government and public participation. John Esposito of Georgetown University notes that "Islamist movements have themselves done a great deal to promote the evolution of civil society. The Egyptian professional syndicates, especially those dominated by the Muslim Brotherhood, such as the Lawyers' Syndicate, . . . have been among the most democratic and pluralist institutions within that society."<sup>73</sup>

Turkey is cited as an example of a country where a vibrant civil society has formed the basis of a functioning democracy. Turkey's independent judiciary, moderately free press, and opposition political parties (including the Islamic Refah party) all provide legitimate outlets for dissent. The Turkish military, essentially controlled by the civilian government, also serves to remind the politicians that policies must remain within certain bounds. These institutions serve as "shock absorbers" that protect the country from extreme political swings and provide the mediating institutions that mitigate extremism. If there is a danger in Turkey, it is not the Islamic activists per se, but, rather, the current economic and political problems that threaten the country's continued development.

Although some observers contend that the features of civil society "do not fully apply in Arab culture as they do in the West,"<sup>74</sup> the notions of political representation and accountability are quite consistent with the Islamic concepts of consensus (*ijma*) and consultation (*shura*). Similarly, the Islamic emphasis on justice and law would appear to demand government accountability and greater respect for the rule of law, which are both key components of civil society. Finally, nonstate associations and private commerce are not alien to the Islamic tradition, nor are the ideals of tolerance and civility, even if their appearance in political discourse is often lacking.

There are some difficulties, however, with this concept. Hamas, for example, qualifies as a member of civil society because of its nongovernmental status and its voluntary commitment to improving the welfare of the people. It remains unclear, however, whether the group's ideology and objectives work to encourage the degree of diversity, tolerance, and freedom of expression upon which civil society—wherever it occurs—would appear to depend. There are similar uncertainties about other expressions of Islamic activism.

The real issue is not whether civil society is consistent with Islam but, rather, whether Islamic activists and other Muslims can find ways to interpret their tradition in ways that affirm the essentials of civil society, specifically the conditions of political and religious tolerance. Tolerance is not about uniformity of opinion; it is about forbearance in the face of disagreement. At a minimum, tolerance is the capacity "to respond to beliefs and practices regarded as deviant or objectionable without forcible interference." It seems that the absence of this capacity, when confronted with opposition and dissent, is a major cause of political repression and polarization. An important step toward overcoming social conflict would therefore appear to be developing a political culture that

does not equate dissent with either treason or heresy. "Civil society is more than an admixture of various forms of association, it also refers to a quality—civility—without which the [political] milieu [of society] consists of feuding factions, cliques and cabals. . . . [I]t is . . . a cast of mind, a willingness to live and let live."<sup>75</sup>

## CONCLUSION

The task of making policy in regard to Islamic activism varies, it seems, from place to place and case to case. There was little criticism in the Institute discussion series of the official statements of general policy of either the Bush or the Clinton administrations. The problems therefore arise not in stating goals, but in putting them into practice in concrete circumstances.

Although stated policy—and the cases examined by the Institute working group—affirms the division among activists between moderates and extremists, the implications are not entirely clear. Although it does appear to be the case that incentives for moderation do work toward accomplishing the limited goal of deterring extremism, it remains uncertain whether a policy of accommodation necessarily leads to greater stability and democracy. It is difficult to gauge the depth of commitment to moderation among those activists who at any given time are ready to accommodate to existing regimes. Conversely, efforts by allied regimes to "eradicate" Islamic extremists often go too far and justify the repression of all political opposition, whether religious or secular, moderate or militant. Such policies neither resolve the underlying issues that fuel extremism nor ensure the stability and long-term security that is so desperately sought.

One alternative approach to these issues, the so-called civil society option, seeks to achieve the stated goals of U.S. policy by encouraging a process of gradual economic and political reform within individual countries. According to this recommendation, room must be made for free expression and for the expansion of nongovernmental, civilly committed organizations. This demands, first, that opposition political groups willing to play by the rules be tolerated, regardless of whether they are Islamic or secular. Second, it requires that these same groups forsake the use of violence, accept the rule of law, and tolerate—by their actions and words—existing regimes.<sup>76</sup>

For U.S. policymakers, this type of approach—pressing for economic and political reform in a gradual manner—may be the answer to the central dilemma of balancing long-term goals with short-term interests. Although specific reforms must be developed internally, there is a role for U.S. policymakers to en-

courage and facilitate the necessary reforms. Because of the diversity of the Islamic world, translating these ideas and policies into operational terms and finding that balance where reform can be pursued without endangering the ultimate goal will have to be done on a case-by-case basis. The remainder of this report examines specific cases within the context of these ideas and themes.

