Power or Ideology: What the Islamists Choose Will Determine Their Future

Ariel Cohen

Question 1: Various commentators have frequently invoked the importance of moderate Muslims and the role that they can play in fighting extremism in the Muslim world. But it is not clear who is a moderate Muslim. The recent cancellation of Tariq Ramadan’s visa to the United States, the raids on several American Muslim organizations, and the near marginalization of mainstream American Muslims in North America pose the following question: If moderate Muslims are critical to an American victory in the war on terror, then why does the American government frequently take steps that undermine moderate Muslims? Perhaps there is a lack of clarity about who the moderate Muslims are. In your view, who are these moderate Muslims and what are their beliefs and politics?

AC: I would like to say from the outset that I am neither a Muslim nor a sociologist. Therefore, my remarks should be taken as those of an interested and sympathetic outsider.

I do not believe at all that the American government “undermines” moderate Muslims. The problem is more complicated. Many American officials abhor engagement in religion or the politics of religion. They believe that the American Constitution separates religion and state and does not allow them to make distinctions when it comes to different interpretations of Islam. For some of them, Salafiya Islam is as good as Sufi Islam. Others do not have a sufficient knowledge base to sort out the moderates from the radicals, identify the retrograde fundamentalists, or recognize modernizers who want political Islam to dominate. This is wrong. Radical ideologies have to do more with politics and warfare than religion, and in

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some extreme cases, should not enjoy the constitutional protections of freedom of religion or free speech. There is a difference between propagating a faith and disseminating hatred, violence, or murder. The latter is an abuse and exploitation of faith for political ends, and should be treated as such. For example, the racist Aryan Nation churches were prosecuted and bankrupted by American NGOs and the American government.

One of the problems is that the American government allows radical Muslims who support terrorism to operate with impunity in the United States and around the world, and does very little to support moderate Muslims, especially in the conflict zones. To me, moderate Muslims are those who do not view the “greater jihad” either as a pillar of faith or as a predominant dimension thereof. A moderate is one who is searching for a dialogue and a compromise with people who adhere to other interpretations of the Qur’an, and with those who are not Muslim. A moderate Sunni, for example, will not support terror attacks on Shi’ahs or Sufis, or on Christians, Jews, or Hindus.

Moderate Muslims respect the right of individuals to disagree, to worship Allah the way they chose, or not to worship – and even not to believe. A moderate Muslim is one who is willing to bring his or her brother or sister to faith by love and logic, not by mortal threats or force of arms. A moderate Muslim decries suicide bombings and terrorist “operations,” and abhors those clerics who indoctrinate toward, bless, and support such atrocities.

The list of moderate Muslims is too long to give all or even a part of it here. Shaykh Muhammad Hisham Kabbani (chairman of the Islamic Supreme Council of America) and Sheikh Abdul Hadi Palazzi (secretary-general of the Rome-based Italian Muslim Association) come to mind. Ayatollah Ali Sistani may be a moderate, but I need to read more of his teachings. As the Wahhabi attacks against the Shi’ah escalate, Shi’i clerics and leaders are beginning to speak up. Examples include Sheikh Agha Jafri, a Westchester-based Pakistani Shi’ah who heads an organization called the Society for Humanity and Islam in America, and Tashbih Sayyed, a California-based Pakistani who serves as president of the Council for Democracy and Tolerance.

I admire the bravery of Amina Wadud, a female professor of Islamic studies at Virginia Commonwealth University who led a mixed-gender Friday Islamic prayer service, according to Mona Eltahawy’s op-ed piece in The Washington Post on Friday, March 18, 2005 (“A Prayer Toward Equality”). Another brave woman is the co-founder of the Progressive Muslim Union of America, Sarah Eltantawi. And the whole world is proud
of the achievements of Judge Shirin Ebadi, the Iranian human rights lawyer who was awarded the Nobel peace prize in 2003.

There is a problem with the first question, however. It contains several assumptions that are debatable, to say the least, if not outright false. First, it assumes that Tariq Ramadan is a “moderate.” Nevertheless, there is a near-consensus that Ramadan, while calling for *ijtihad*, is a supporter of the Egyptian Ikhwan al-Muslimin [the Muslim Brotherhood] and comes from that tradition [he is the grandson of its founder, Hasan al-Banna]. He also expressed support for Yusuf al-Qaradawi (and all he stands for) on a BBC TV program, and is viewed as an anti-Semite. He also rationalizes the murder of children, though apparently that does not preclude the European Social Forum from inviting him to be a member. He and Hasan al-Turabi, the founder of the Islamic state in Sudan, have exchanged compliments. There are numerous reports in the media, quoting intelligence sources and ex-terrorists, that Ramadan associates with the most radical circles, including terrorists. In its decision to ban Ramadan, the United States Department of Homeland Security was guided by a number of issues, some of them reported in the media and others classified. This is sufficient for me to believe that Ramadan may be a security risk who, in the post-9/11 environment, could reasonably be banned from entering the United States.1

Second, the raids on “American Muslim organizations” are, in fact, a part of law enforcement operations. Some of these steps have had to do with investigations of terrorist activities, such as the alleged Libyan conspiracy to assassinate Crown Prince Abdullah of Saudi Arabia. Others focused on American Islamist organizations that were funding the terrorist activities of groups on the State Department’s terrorism watch list, such as Hamas. To say that these criminal investigations are targeting moderate Islam is like saying that investigating pedophile priests undermines freedom of religion in the United States.

Finally, American Muslims are hardly marginalized. They enjoy unencumbered religious life and support numerous non-governmental organizations that often take positions highly critical of domestic and foreign policy – something that is often not the case in their countries of origin. There is no job discrimination – some senior Bush Administration officials, such as Elias A. Zerhouni, head of the National Institutes of Health (NIH), are Muslims. American presidents have congratulated Muslims on religious holidays and often invite Muslim clergymen to important state functions, such as the funeral of former president Ronald Reagan.
Question 2: The Muslim world is experiencing a period of turmoil. At the heart of this turmoil is the debate over the role of Islam in Muslim society, particularly in its political sphere. At one extreme there is secular despotism, which seeks to dominate Muslim societies, and at the other extreme is the specter of Islamic totalitarianism. The hope in the middle is the possible role that moderate Muslims can play in establishing Islamic democracies. Until now, theorists in the West have visualized secular Turkey as a model for the Muslim world. Is it possible to imagine that the Turkish Islamists, now under the leadership of such visionaries such as Prime Minister Erdogan, are the harbingers of moderate Islam and Islamic democracy?

AC: The Turkish case is country- and society-specific. When the Turkish Islamic politicians talk to westerners, they call themselves “Turkish Christian Democrats” – culturally conservative, economically market-oriented, and open to the outside world. Internally, they promote agendas that raise eyebrows in the West and raise hackles among Turkish secularists, such as increased funding for secondary religious education, preferential treatment for the graduates of religious schools in college admissions, criminalizing adultery, and relaxing rules on the hijab.

The AK party’s core constituency is less than 20 percent of the Turkish electorate. The rest are opportunists who voted for the Islamic party because of non-religious issues, such as its promises of more effective and less corrupt governance. They may swing away from the AK party, as they have from other Turkish parties in the past. In other countries, the ratio of core voters and fellow travelers can be different, affecting the strength of Islamists in power.

Historically, Ottoman Islam was rather tolerant, especially during the centuries when the caliphate was in decline. The millet system, in which Christians and Jews were treated as autonomous communities, is a far cry from what is happening in many Muslim states today. In the Ottoman Empire, the relationship of Islam and the state had been evolving for centuries, until Atatürk made a harsh break and essentially introduced the separation of mosque and state. Although the evolutionary pendulum may now be swinging in the opposite direction, the Turkish state still works along the lines of a secular constitution. In other places where Islamists participate in politics, this may or may not be the case.

Today, the AK party’s version of the relationship between mosque and state is considerably more flexible than some of the modern interpretations in Iran (velayat al-faqih), Pakistan (the Jamaat-i Islamiya), Saudi Arabia (the
Salafists), or the Maghreb (the Islamic Salvation Front [FIS]). Moreover, if Turkey engages in the process of integrating into the European Union, a lot of issues between mosque and state will be influenced and regulated by the documents defining accession, the so-called *acquis communautaire*. The separation of mosque and state, just as the separation of church and state, will be a part of such a regulation. There also will be limits placed upon the political, governmental, and social agendas promoted by Islamists.

The political participation of Islamic parties in democratic societies is quite feasible and is happening beyond Turkey. This has been demonstrated in Bangladesh, Indonesia, Malaysia, Pakistan, Tajikistan, and elsewhere. Each country and each society has its own history and political constellation. If constitutions are adhered to, and if they stipulate essentially non-Shari`ah-based state architectures, Islamic parties will be capable of playing in the political field without breaking the constitutional sandbox.

**Question 3:** Moderate Muslims are often associated with their advocacy of *ijtihad* and the subsequent reform of Muslim practice and interpretation of Islam through its much wider and systematic revival and application. Do you think that this faith in the promise of *ijtihad* is justified? Where is reform necessary? What do you understand by the term *Islamic reform*? Can Muslims develop modern, democratic, and prosperous societies without abandoning the wisdom and blessings of revelation?

**AC:** My understanding is that *ijtihad* is recognized by the Shi`ah and frowned upon by mainstream scholars in the four principal Sunni *madhhabs*. However, the world is changing, and the way we deal with it needs to keep up with the times. This is the essence of social evolution and reform. The lack of ability to evolve leads to dead ends as regards faith, politics, and economics. I do not wish this fate for anyone, including my Muslim friends. However, abandoning values, ethics, and religion makes the modern technologically driven world soulless and dangerous. The challenge is to find the golden mean. Every religion, every culture finds a different answer.

The modern world is more interconnected. Business knows no national borders, and large corporations are global. Many new technological breakthroughs need to be adjusted to our lives. Otherwise, we need to adjust to new technologies. The notion of modernization needs to be reconciled with faith. There is a place for innovation in religion, which makes societies more modern and their members happier. If Muslims feel that their religion is too oppressive, many will leave it in disappointment.
They key to innovation is the ability to interpret the sacred text in such a way that it lives in harmony with our times. The text may require reinter-pretation to accomplish that. Bringing women to equality is a huge challenge in Islam. Treating non-Muslims as equals and with respect, both within the Land of Islam and outside, is another critical challenge. Different branches of any religion may emphasize different parts of the sacred texts, thereby developing diverging narratives. After all, the Qur’an and the hadith were written for a time and place very different from today. For example, the marriage age was quite different – none but the strictest of literal fundamentalists would agree with marrying off 9-year-old girls nowadays, even if that was the age of the Prophet’s youngest wife. Women did not drive because cars did not exist. They did not go to college because there were no colleges. Maybe the ancient societies could afford not to have women in the work force or to keep them segregated, but this is too high a price to pay in today’s world, and that price is impoverishing the Land of Islam, by its own reports.2

Many ancient Middle Eastern societies were tribal, monoethnic, and religiously intolerant. Conquering and assimilating “the other” was the norm. This was quite different from today’s megacities of the planet. However, religious intolerance, rejection of others, as well as their values and even their right to exist, are quickly becoming a defining feature of the more intolerant wings in the Muslim world. This is where the reform is urgent – and probably overdue.

The sacred texts must remain spiritually relevant, but may mean different things to different people in different periods of time. *Ijtihad* does not take the wisdom and beauty of the revelation away. I am sure that the Old and New Testaments meant different things in the ancient Middle East, when these books were given – or written – and in medieval Europe. Modern interpretations are viewed through a new prism yet again. This is the reason why divergent commentaries and interpretations, from Thomas Aquinas (d. 1274) to Maimonides (d. 1204), to Ibn Rushd (d. 1198), to Reinhold Niebuhr (d. 1971), have proliferated. The three monotheistic religions influenced each other, including the inspiration of Sufi Islam to some of the mystical teachings of both Judaism and Christianity. Why not explore lessons from the evolution of these two religions in a quest toward developing more tolerant interpretations that embrace modernity?

In ancient times, Judaism and Christianity were far more intolerant religions than they are now. But they evolved. Those who reject modernity, including some aspects of technology, like the ultra-Orthodox Jews and the Amish in the United States, are marginalized. They have become sects of
their own respective faiths. Muslims who reject technology, modernity, and progress, like the Taliban, are probably turning into blind alleys of human development. Furthermore, as the world is a more crowded place with evolving norms of behavior, the “old ways,” which often resulted in warfare, may need to be reexamined and adjusted. As people invent weapons that may end civilization as we know it, some previous pronouncements regarding the killing of infidels may need to be reviewed and revised.

As the world recognizes human equality, including gender equality, and the rights of ethnic and religious minorities as central elements of today’s existence, religions need to come to grips with this. Other faiths already have: the Christian Reformation in the late Middle Ages, the Vatican II reforms of the 1960s, the emergence of Haskala (Education/Enlightenment) in eighteenth-century Orthodox Judaism and of the non-Orthodox (Conservative, Reform, and Reconstructionist) branches of Judaism in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Jewish Modern Orthodoxy emerged in the last century. These reforms in the two other great religions of the People of the Book addressed specific needs and enriched the fabric of these faiths without destroying their divine origins. The need to adjust may affect most interpretations of Islam – otherwise, serious contradictions within Islamic societies, such as the rights of women or the desire to be and feel a part of the outside world, will continue to expand. Is there a better tool to deal with conflicts and contradictions than *ijtihad*?

However, the Iranian example demonstrates that *ijtihad*, by itself, may not be sufficient. Too often, religion is used in conjunction with politics or for political ends. Thus, *ijtihad* may need to be explored in parallel with clear notions of the separation of religion and state, moving the faith into the realm of the spiritual and personal, and away from politics and the temptations of state. Then and only then can Muslims have the opportunity to create prosperous, modern, and democratic societies.

**Question 4:** What is the future of political Islam? Does the emergence of such radical groups as al-Qaeda and others undermine the legitimacy of Islamic movements in the Muslim world, or does it enhance their appeal? Will we witness a resurgence in the relevance and influence of such groups as the Jamaat-i Islami and the Ikhwan al-Muslimin, or will they slowly lose ground and appeal to more moderate movements? Will political Islamic movements radicalize or democratize?

**AC:** The Jewish sages said that after the destruction of the [Jerusalem] Temple, the gift of prophecy is given to fools. So, I would rather not proph-
esize. The future of political Islam is what it makes of itself. If it pursues the road of violence, it will be met with violence, possibly with overwhelming force, including from within the Muslim world. In the short run, an escalation in fighting may bring new proponents to its ranks. But in the long run, radical, violent Islam will be hounded, denied sources of funding, and isolated, just like the Kharijites were.

Moreover, the three state-size experiments of political Islam, namely, Iran, Afghanistan, and Sudan, are seen as unappealing at best and as hellish failures at worst – not only by the outside world, but also by the majority of Muslims. People vote with their feet. More people want to live in the United States and Western Europe than in Afghanistan, Iran, and Sudan under their respective Islamic regimes. Similarly, more people wanted to live in West Germany, Taiwan, and South Korea than in East Germany, China, and North Korea. You cannot fool all of the people all of the time, and it is not accidental that films and books concerning Afghanistan under the Taliban produced by Afghans themselves depict a nightmare world of oppression and cruelty.

Finally, a lot will depend on mass support for political Islam. How determined and committed will it be? How effective will the West, moderate Muslims, and governments throughout the Greater Middle East be in demonstrating the political and moral bankruptcy of violent movements and their leaders? For example, what about the hundreds of millions of dollars that radical Muslim leaders either received from the Saudi royal family, whom they now decry, or “earned” through drug sales and diamond trafficking? Or, why do Islamists leaders, so quick to rationalize acts of martyrdom, not send their own children to commit murder-suicide bombings – or just go push the buttons themselves?

As for legitimacy, a lot depends on the West as well. Failure delegitimizes. A failure in the self-professed service of God (Allah) delegitimizes completely. With no military wins, al-Qaeda and its allies may suffer a loss of popular support. The Jama’at-i Islami and the Ikhwan al-Muslimin are more complicated cases, because their success depends on the failure of secular dictatorial opponents. If the government of Egypt, for example, opens the political space for reforms and voters see results, the Ikhwan may lose support. On the other hand, the Ikhwan al-Muslimin, Hamas, and Hizballah show a lot of tactical flexibility by reaching out to individuals and circles traditionally not in their camp in order to broaden their support.

The test for some of these movements is what do they value more: power or ideology. If it is power, they may compromise and liberalize in the
democratic context, or they may try for a violent solution, such as a coup – and if they do, they are likely to fail. If ideology is more important, they will remain rigid and may decline like the western European communists did.

**Question 5:** The growing presence of Islam in the West has clearly reached strategic proportions. Transatlantic relations are being mediated by the strength of Muslim minorities in Europe. There is a growing and influential Muslim community in North America. Some scholars and experts see Islam in the West as a threat to the West, while others see it as a potential bridge between the West and the Muslim world. What impact will Islam have on the West and Islamic-Western relations? Is the future of Islam and Muslims in the West in danger?

**AC:** One cannot talk about the Muslim “community” as a whole. There are different communities with divergent agendas. Some want to be westerners of Islamic faith, enjoying economic opportunities and an essentially western lifestyle. Others are Muslims who happen to live in the West and view the United States, and especially Europe, as simply additional places that must be “Islamized.” Some of the Saudi-funded curricula in western Muslim schools speak for themselves when they preach hatred of the “infidels.”

European positions on the Middle East have evolved as the Muslim minorities there have grown. This may explain, in part, the French opposition to the Iraq war. However, the murder of individual activists, as has happened in Holland with the public slaughter of filmmaker Theo van Gogh in 2004, or sustained support for terrorism may bring on a backlash against Muslims in Europe.

Those who view Muslims as a threat point to their low rate of integration in European societies. European racism and cultural rigidity probably are partially to blame for this. But some practices of Islam in Europe give ample reason for Europeans to be nervous. Many Europeans view radical Muslims’ social norms of women’s inequality, polygamy, and religious intolerance as threatening the core values of European secularist culture. The phenomenon of “weekend imams” who fly in from the Middle East to preach and leave after spending a weekend in the “land of infidels” worries not just European governments, but local moderate Muslims as well. Human rights norms and laws designed for more peaceful times prevent police departments in Europe from actively pursuing those who plan attacks on government buildings and civilian targets in Great Britain, France, Spain, and elsewhere. However, this is slowly changing.
Americans are more tolerant of people of different faiths and races than their European cousins. In the past, the United States successfully absorbed immigrants from Asia, Eastern Europe, and the Middle East. With that, the domination of Wahhabi preachers in the majority of American mosques and support of terrorist organizations could undermine tolerance of the American masses and body politic for the peaceful life of Muslims in this country. If another massive terror attack happens in the United States, one cannot vouch for the reaction of the public and the state. But even then, most probably such self-defense would be exercised within the confines of the Constitution and according to the rule of law.

Moderate Islam, which cleanses itself from extremism, may be a bridge to integration and a form of faith that promotes tolerance and allows Islam to thrive in western societies. For that to happen, Islam at large, including those influential ulama (scholars) with access to massive petro-dollar financial support, needs to make adjustments. For example, those ulama need to start isolating and decrying radicals and terrorists, as well as actively pursuing genuine peaceful political solutions for conflicts in the Greater Middle East, including Israel and her neighbors and Iraq. Such solutions would recognize the rights of all of the region’s states, minority groups, and inhabitants to a peaceful life with dignity and security.

Finally, to survive and succeed in the West and throughout the Muslim world, Islamic leaders and elites need to revisit and reexamine their social agendas. They need to recognize and secure women’s rights; face the changing nature of gender relations; acknowledge the necessity to promote secular education, including among women and girls; and work to promote family planning and limit high birth rates, which only breed poverty and social failure. When progress is achieved on these diverse and complex agendas, the future of Islam will be more secure.

Endnotes