Freedom and Security: Necessary Conditions for Moderation

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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?

GEF: Who is a moderate Muslim? That depends on whom you ask and what that person’s (or government’s) agenda is. Moderate is also a quite relative term, understood differently by different people. For our purposes here, let’s examine two basically different approaches to this question: an American view and a Middle Eastern view of what characterizes a moderate Muslim.

Most non-Muslims would probably define a moderate Muslim as anyone who believes in democracy, tolerance, a non-violent approach to politics, and equitable treatment of women at the legal and social levels. Today, the American government functionally adds several more criteria: A moderate Muslim is one who does not oppose the country’s strategic and geopolitical ambitions in the world, who accepts American interests and
preferences within the world order, who believes that Islam has no role in politics, and who avoids any confrontation – even political – with Israel.

There are deep internal contradictions and warring priorities within the American approach to the Muslim world. While democratization and “freedom” is the Bush administration’s self-proclaimed global ideological goal, the reality is that American demands for security and the war against terror take priority over the democratization agenda every time. Democratization becomes a punishment visited upon American enemies rather than a gift bestowed upon friends. Friendly tyrants take priority over those less cooperative moderate and democratic Muslims who do not acquiesce to the American agenda in the Muslim world.

Within the United States itself, the immense domestic power of hard-line pro-Likud lobbies and the Israel-firsters set the agenda on virtually all discourse concerning the Muslim world and Israel. This group has generally succeeded in excluding from the public dialogue most Muslim (or even non-Muslim) voices that are at all critical of Israel’s policies. This de facto litmus test raises dramatically the threshold for those who might represent an acceptable moderate Muslim interlocutor. The reality is that there is hardly a single prominent figure in the Muslim world who has not at some point voiced anger at Israeli policies against the Palestinians and who has not expressed ambivalence toward armed resistance against the Israeli occupation of Palestinian lands. Thus, few Muslim leaders enjoying public legitimacy in the Muslim world can meet this criterion these days in order to gain entry to the United States to participate in policy discussions.

In short, moderate Muslim is subject to an unrealistic litmus test regarding views on Israel that functionally excludes the great majority of serious voices representative of genuine Muslim thinkers in the Middle East who are potential interlocutors. There is no reason to believe that this political framework will change in the United States anytime soon.

In my view, a moderate Muslim is one who is open to the idea of evolutionary change through history in the understanding and practice of Islam, one who shuns literalism and selectivism in the understanding of sacred texts. A moderate would reject the idea that any one group or individual has a monopoly on defining Islam and would seek to emphasize common ground with other faiths, rather than accentuate the differences. A moderate would try to seek within Islam the roots of those political and social values that are broadly consonant with most of the general values of the rest of the contemporary world. A moderate Muslim would not reject the validity of other faiths.
Against the realities of the contemporary Middle East, a moderate Muslim would broadly eschew violence as a means of settling political issues, but still might not condemn all aspects of political violence against state authorities who occupy Muslim lands by force – such as Russia in Chechnya, the Israeli state in the Palestine, or even American occupation forces in Iraq. Yet even here, in principle, a moderate must reject attacks against civilians, women, and children in any struggle for national liberation. Moderates would be open to cooperation with the West and the United States, but not at the expense of their own independence and sovereignty.

**Question 2:** The Muslim world is experiencing a period of turmoil. At the heart of the turmoil is the debate over the role of Islam in the Muslim society and particularly in its political sphere. On one extreme there is secular despotism that seeks to dominate Muslim societies and at the other extreme there is the specter of Islamic totalitarianism. The hope in the middle is the possible role that moderate Muslims can play in realizing Islamic democracies. Until now theorists in the West had visualized secular Turkey as a model for the Muslim world. Is it possible to imagine the Turkish Islamists under the leadership of visionaries such as Prime Minister Erdogan as the harbingers of moderate Islam and Islamic democracy?

**GEF:** Prime Minister Tayyip Erdogan of Turkey’s Justice and Progress (JP) Party is, without question, a central and vital figure in the global evolution of political Islam. The JP’s experience has great relevance to other Muslim states, despite the differing conditions in every country.

Actually, the West has not correctly understood the Turkish “secular” experience in its totality, assuming that the Kemalist approach to the total suppression of Islam in the public space and complete state domination over religion is the model for the whole Muslim world. While Mustafa Kemal Atatürk was the savior of his country and a brilliant reformer by any standard, his party’s long-time suppression of Islamic political and social forces led to some schizophrenia within the body politic that only now is beginning to be corrected. This correction is leading to social reconciliation and healing, as well as the organic integration of Turkey’s Islamists into the political order and governance.

In short, in Turkey we are witnessing a normalization of the Turkish political order through a process of democratization that is moving toward the expression of the full spectrum of political and ideological thinking within Turkey. This process demonstrates the productive evolution of the Islamists as they gain in realism and understanding of the realities of polit-
ical life within a pluralist and diverse society with strong secular leanings, especially among the elite.

The JP, furthermore, rigorously maintains that it is not, in fact, an “Islamist” party, despite its deep roots in that tradition. It states that it is a “conservative democratic party” that honors and values Turkey’s past values — including its Islamic traditions, role in Islamic history, the social values and mores of Muslim believers, and the place of religious education within the country, even while seeking modernity through intensified democratization, the spread of civil liberties, a reduced role for the military in Turkish political life, and membership in the European Union (EU).

While some in and around the Bush administration are beginning to express some concern and dismay that the Erdogan government is drifting away from Turkey’s formerly staunch support for American policies in the area, the fact is that Turkey is coming of age politically. As its prospects for entry into the EU improve, Turkey is more freely expressing a new independence of geopolitical thinking in the region that no longer automatically prioritizes American interests. A more mature and diverse Turkish foreign policy is emerging, one that is no longer simply Eurocentric, as it has been since the establishment of the Turkish republic, but one that acknowledges the country’s Balkan, Caucasian, and Middle Eastern and Muslim character as well as its European and Mediterranean vocation.

Even more importantly, Turkey’s newfound independence from predictable conformity with American interests — a shift supported by a great majority of its population — has gained the attention of Turkey’s neighbors and the Arab world. These states had long since written off the “old” Turkey as having turned its back on its Islamic and Ottoman heritages in favor of a constant quest and longing for acceptance within the West. The “new” Turkey, more independent in its foreign policy yet reemphasizing its traditional Muslim culture, is now a source of intense interest among many Arab leaders and may well be able to play an independent role in bringing evolution and moderation to the Islamist politics of the Arab and Muslim worlds.

**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?
GEF: The Muslim world cannot evolve, develop, and prosper through the wholesale adoption of American, western, or other models of governance. Muslim governance must emerge from the history and traditions of each country. Given the importance of the Islamic tradition, this important segment of culture, tradition, and thought cannot be ignored in future political and social evolution.

The salience of Islamist parties as the single most powerful force in opposition to the authoritarian status quo across so much of the Muslim world is due to public respect for the values and reform goals that these movements represent. But these movements cannot ride forever on evocation of the past and repetition of slogans about the superiority of Islam as “the way” in politics. Islamists must demonstrate that once they gain some political responsibility, they can deliver what they promise through wise and effective policies. If they do not deliver, they will fail as political movements and be supplanted by yet newer forces seeking reformist goals, change, and progress – most probably this time from the left.

But for Islamist parties to get there, the reform of Islamic thinking is required. Too much contemporary Islamic “thinking” is mired in literalism, narrowness of vision, and intolerance. As such key Muslim reformers as Fazlur Rahman have stated, in looking at the Qur’an and the Hadith, Muslims must look not just at the text, but at the context of text: What are the broader principles and values underlying the language of the Qur’an on specific issues or the decisions and actions taken by the Prophet? How would those values be understood in a contemporary setting? In this sense, Islam must be a vital and living tradition of complete relevance to life in the contemporary world, and not a tradition based on earlier commentaries and legislations of a different millennium. But such fresh thinking about Islam requires the necessary political and intellectual freedom to explore new avenues of thought without censorship or censure.

Sadly, there are at least two great hindrances blocking renewal and creativity in Islamic thinking today. The first is the absence of intellectual, political, and social freedom within most Islamic societies, except in the West. The second hindrance is the violent and sweeping nature of the American “global war on terror” with its high dependency upon military action, accompanied by an avowedly hegemonistic American geopolitical strategy. This strategy is rejected by most of the world, but with particular vehemence and emotion in the Muslim world. The Muslim world, feeling itself under siege and with its sensitivities heightened by its witness of the struggle of Muslims right across the global ummah, is not currently operat-
ing in an environment conducive to either intellectual openness or liberal and reformist thought. The Muslim world is simply hunkered down in a defensive and survivalist mode. Indeed, the forces of terrorism in the Muslim world must be brought to heel. But this will not happen unless we see a change in hegemonistic American policies, the explicit American embrace of Israeli right-wing policies in the occupied West Bank, and its linkage with American fundamentalist Christian attitudes.

**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?

**GEF:** As long as conditions in the Muslim world remain radicalized – by terrorism, the sweeping American military response, dictatorship across the region, and a sense of Islam being under siege – only radical groups will flourish. Moderation and liberalization can only flourish in a quieter and freer environment where radical voices find a limited response. Over time, however, it may be that the violence on both sides and the radicalism of extreme groups will actually serve to broaden the spectrum of choice before the broader Muslim public over the longer run. Intolerant proclamations in the name of Islam are actually forcing Muslims to come to terms with the problem: What do they really want and how do they understand Islam and its interrelationship with the world’s non-Muslim forces? This process is now slowly under way, not just at the elite level, but at the popular level as well by Muslims whose lives are directly impacted by the violence around them.

Such traditional Islamist movements as the Jama’at-e-Islami and the Ikhwan al-Muslimin, may gain greater relevance as the virtues of a less violent and more moderate political vision become evident. But they will also have to “deliver,” or else the public will abandon them. Ironically, liberalizing the Muslim world polity can threaten traditional Islamist groups, because they will lose their “privileged” position as a politically repressed group with a limited voice in government; they will gain a position of influence and the ability to bring about change as they play a new role in politics. At that point, they will have no excuse for not “delivering” and will be held accountable in ways that they cannot be held accountable for today.
There is little doubt in my mind that Islamist organizations will be required to move toward greater moderation and pragmatism as they enter the political order – or else they will fail. But such a trend toward moderation and liberalization is not in the cards over the short term, given the entrenchment of authoritarianism and the hot breath of war and bloodshed that dominates the region today.

**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?

**GEF:** It is absurd to speak of a general “threat” from Muslim minorities to the West. The West is too old, established, culturally experienced and enriched to be threatened by Islam or any other culture. On the contrary, as the West gradually absorbs and integrates its Muslims, that community will contribute to the richness of western culture via the influx of Islamic ideas and culture, just as other immigrant cultures have contributed in the past.

Two circumstances, however, must be mentioned in this context. First, obviously terrorist acts by Muslims carried out in the West do threaten all who live in western societies. These must be contained through intelligence and police action, and with the support of Muslim communities, which are even more threatened by such acts. This problem is distinctly manageable.

Second, while such “immigrant” societies as the United States, Canada, and Australia cannot, almost by definition, be seriously threatened culturally by any kind of immigration, countries that are traditional “homelands” to specific ethnic groups, traditions, and cultures, can be “threatened,” that is, diluted and weakened by immigration. For example, the Netherlands represents a richly developed and relatively homogeneous Dutch culture maintained by a small population whose traditional character can, in fact, be threatened by any large immigrant influx – Muslim or otherwise. Such societies will have to cope with the serious challenges that globalization presents to so many countries of the world.

In a similar vein, Islamic culture should not be “threatened” through its presence in the West. Islam itself is an incredibly rich historical culture that has a long history of absorbing those elements of other cultures and civi-
lizations across the globe that have helped to make Islam what it is today. To the extent that Islam remains a living and resilient culture, it can only profit from interaction with the positive elements of western culture. (Ironically, such interaction may bolster the social and moral critique of the more problematic elements of western culture.)

Of course, Muslims in the West, just like other immigrants, will lose the particularities of the homeland cultures, including their traditional expression of Islam. But the broader spirit of Islam that exists above local cultural expression – its more universal features – will survive and evolve. However, to the extent that Islamic culture does not retain its spirit of resilience, innovation, and creativity, it might indeed be eroded by its presence in the dynamic West. Once the violent, confrontational phase of Muslim relations with the West – fueled by Osama bin Ladin and the American neoconservative response – has passed, Muslims should cease to represent any “special” element within western society, apart from the routine immigration problems that every new wave of immigration generates.

There is a significant danger, however, that individuals who are intellectually lazy and prejudiced in both the Muslim world and in the United States may be in the process of accepting the facile “clash of civilizations” concept as the default explanation for what is a complex, many-tiered, and multi-dimensional phenomenon of the historical confrontation and coexistence between the Muslim world and the West. Under these conditions, we may find ourselves living a self-fulfilling prophecy. Hopefully, the realities of the world will overcome such simplistic thinking – but not while the blood is running.