

# September 11: A Decade Later

## Toward a Nonviolent, Pluralistic Middle East

by Amitai Etzioni

The 2001 attacks on the United States have intensified the debate that has existed since the dawn of Islam: How is the West to respond to the followers of Muhammad? Some—most famously Bernard Lewis and Samuel Huntington—held that the contest is between two rather monolithic civilizations that are bound to clash. In a 2007 award acceptance speech at the American Enterprise Institute, Lewis described a history of clashes between Islam and the West. He stated that at first Muslims sought to spread their nascent faith through conquest throughout the then-Christian world; then the Christians invaded the Muslim world (the Crusaders); then the Muslims pushed back into Europe (the Golden Age of Islam); then the West retaliated by colonizing the Muslim world; and now the Muslims are again rising against Christendom by terrorism and flooding Europe with immigrants.<sup>1</sup> Huntington argued that “Islam’s borders are bloody, and so are its innards. The fundamental problem for the West is not Islamic fundamentalism. It is Islam, a different civilization whose people are convinced of the superiority of their culture and are obsessed with the inferiority of their power.”<sup>2</sup> By contrast, President George W. Bush stated in the wake of the 9/11 attacks that “Islam is peace”<sup>3</sup> while British prime minister Tony Blair argued that the problem was not Islam but “extremists trying to hijack it for political purposes.”<sup>4</sup>

### ILLIBERAL BUT MODERATE AND NONVIOLENT

A careful reading of the Qur’an, Hadith (sayings and actions of Muhammad), and other texts and sermons finds that Islam, like other great religions and even major secular belief systems, can be read both as supporting violence and as re-

jecting it. Muslims seeking to justify the use of force quote verses in the Qur’an, such as: “Slay the idolaters wheresoever you find them.”<sup>5</sup> They can cite the Hadith stating, “I have been commanded to fight against people so long as they do not declare that there is no god but God.”<sup>6</sup> At the same time, champions of peace can quote the admittedly fewer verses of the Qur’an, such

---

**Amitai Etzioni** is a university professor and professor of international relations at The George Washington University, director of the Institute for Communitarian Policy Studies, and the author of *Security First: For a Muscular, Moral Foreign Policy* (Yale University Press, 2008).

---

1 Bernard Lewis, “Europe and Islam,” The American Enterprise Institute, Washington, D.C., Mar. 7, 2007.

2 Samuel Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations: The Remaking of World Order* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1998).

3 “‘Islam Is Peace,’ Says President,” The White House, Washington D.C., Sept. 17, 2001.

4 *The Telegraph* (London), Nov. 2, 2001.

5 Qur. 9:5.

6 Hadith, Sahih Muslim 1.9.30.

as, “There is no compulsion in matters of faith”<sup>7</sup> and “No human can force a change of heart over which God alone has control.”<sup>8</sup> For some, jihad is interpreted as a holy war to subdue the non-believers; for others—a spiritual struggle for moral self-improvement.

Hence, to the extent that the West makes the rejection of violence its criteria as to who can be a reliable Muslim partner in building a new Middle East (and more generally a stable world order), it can readily find major Muslim texts in support of such a position. It can find highly influential Muslim authorities who strongly reject terrorism and the use of force more generally but do not and will not support a liberal form of government. These can be considered “illiberal moderates.”

A key figure that fits this description is Iraq’s Ayatollah Ali Sistani, who supports a state whose laws are fully compatible with Islam while calling for an end to sectarian “hatred and violence.”<sup>9</sup> It could be noted further that he does not believe an Islamic state to be incompatible with elections

and various civil liberties.<sup>10</sup> A similar figure is Sheikh Isa Qassem, an influential cleric among Bahrain’s Shiite opposition, described in a cable released by WikiLeaks as the country’s top religious leader.<sup>11</sup> He has called for nonviolence and spoken out against sectarian conflict between Sunnis and Shiites.

He has, however, simultaneously called for Shari’a (Islamic law) rule in Bahrain<sup>12</sup> and endorsed Iran’s supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamene’i.<sup>13</sup>

**“Illiberal moderates” strongly reject terrorism and the use of force but do not support a liberal form of government.**

Another possible, though problematic example is Sheikh Yusuf al-Qaradawi. Widely regarded as one of the most influential Sunni leaders and the Muslim Brotherhood’s spiritual leader, he increased his popularity through hosting an Al-Jazeera television show viewed by tens of millions of Muslims. His Friday sermon in Cairo’s Tahrir Square on February 18, 2011, a few days after the fall of Egyptian president Hosni Mubarak, was attended by hundreds of thousands of ecstatic Egyptians.<sup>14</sup> He is highly illiberal, encouraging strict adherence to the Shari’a, favoring female genital mutilation<sup>15</sup> and the death penalty for homosexuals.<sup>16</sup> At the same time, Qaradawi condemned the 9/11 attacks<sup>17</sup> as well as the March 11, 2004 Madrid and July 7, 2005 London bombings.<sup>18</sup> He was even commended by the French foreign minister, Philippe Douste-Blazy, for helping to secure the release of French journalists in Iraq by vigorously condemning their abduction.<sup>19</sup> Still, he is a highly imperfect example as he endorses terrorism when it comes to Israel and what he terms occupied Muslim territories, including support for attacks against Americans in Iraq.<sup>20</sup>

Perhaps the most apt example comes from Indonesia where the country’s largest Muslim organization, Nahdlatul Ulama, which claims tens of millions of followers, has denounced terrorism. Paul Wolfowitz described its former leader Abdurrahman Wahid, who also served as Indonesia’s first democratically-elected president,

13 Jacques Neriah, “Could the Kingdom of Bahrain Become an Iranian Pearl Harbor?” The Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs, Feb. 20, 2011.

14 “Portrait of Sheikh Dr. Yusuf Abdallah al-Qaradawi, senior Sunni Muslim cleric, affiliated with the Muslim Brotherhood,” The Meir Amit Intelligence and Terrorism Information Center, Ramat Hasharon, Feb. 27, 2011.

15 George Readings, “Female genital mutilation cannot be defended as part of Islam,” *The Guardian* (London), Oct. 15, 2010.

16 “The Qaradawi Fatwas,” *The Middle East Quarterly*, Summer 2004, pp. 78-80.

17 “Aftermath of the 9-11 Terrorist Attack: Voices of Moderate Muslims,” ReligiousTolerance.org, Kingston, Ont., Oct. 12, 2001.

18 *The Guardian*, Sept. 25, 2009.

19 Olivier Guitta, “French foreign Minister officially thanked Sheikh Yusuf Qaradawi!” Counterterrorism Blog, Sept. 26, 2005.

20 “Sheik Yusuf al-Qaradawi: Theologian of Terror,” The Anti-Defamation League, Washington, D.C. Mar. 15, 2011.

7 Qur. 2:256.

8 Qur. 10:99-100.

9 *BBC News*, July 20, 2006.

10 Sharon Otterman, “Iraq: Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani,” Council on Foreign Relations, Washington, D.C., Sept. 1, 2004.

11 *The Telegraph*, July 8, 2008.

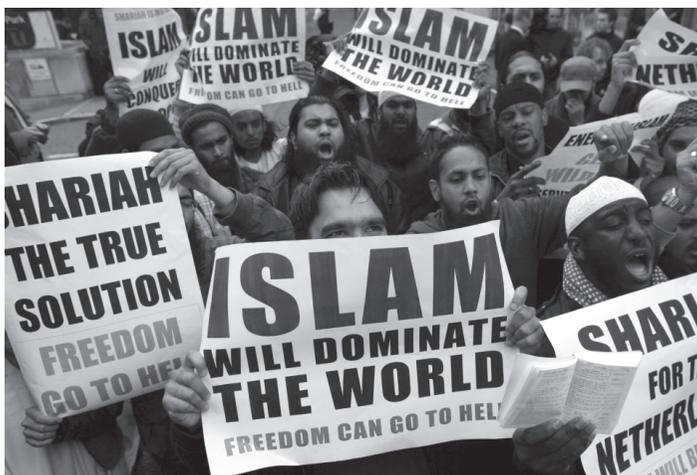
12 Barry Rubin, “Top Bahrain Opposition Cleric: We Want Sharia Law State,” *The Rubin Report*, Mar. 9, 2011.

as the “voice of moderate Islam.”<sup>21</sup> Another of its former leaders, Hasyim Muzadi, endorsed the country’s pluralism and pledged to take a leading role in combating terrorism in Indonesia.<sup>22</sup>

“Illiberal moderate” also pertains to several Islamist groups, associations, and political parties in the region, such as those parts of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt and Jordan that currently reject violence even as they seek to base governance on Shari‘a, as well as the newly formed Brotherhood-affiliated Freedom and Justice Party in Egypt. It also applies to Egypt’s new party of Sufi Muslims

that opposes secularism but also seeks peaceful coexistence<sup>23</sup> along with the recently legalized Islamist al-Nahda Party in Tunisia, which has renounced violence and waffled on the issue of whether its goal is to impose Shari‘a law.<sup>24</sup> In Morocco, both the legal Party of Justice and Development and the illegal Justice and Spirituality Movement, qualify as nonviolent; however, they are also illiberal on several key issues.<sup>25</sup>

One notes in passing that many of those Muslim public intellectuals and leaders whom Washington does fully embrace because they are liberals actually live in the West and have



*While substantial majorities—82-99 percent of Muslims in all countries polled—would like to see constitutional guarantees for freedom of speech, such notions may exist more in the abstract than in the real world. When the Danish newspaper, Jyllands-Posten, published a series of cartoons of Muhammad in September 2005, it ignited a furor throughout the Muslim world, which eventually left dozens dead while cartoonists and their publishers received death threats.*

much less of a following in the Middle East than is sometimes implied.

## WHAT THE MASSES THINK

What about the masses? Several public opinion polls indicate that in numerous Muslim countries, only minorities hold violent beliefs. A 2006 Gallup poll of Muslims in ten predominantly Muslim countries, representing more than 80 percent of the global Muslim population, found that only 7 percent could be deemed “politically radicalized,” defined as those who both claimed the 9/11 attacks were justified and held unfavorable views of the United States.<sup>26</sup> A 2010 Pew

21 *The Wall Street Journal*, Jan. 6, 2010.

22 *The Jakarta Post*, Mar. 15, 2010.

23 *Al-Masry al-Youm* (Cairo), June 14, 2011.

24 Rajaa Basly, “The Future of al-Nahda in Tunisia,” *Arab Reform Bulletin*, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Washington, D.C., Apr. 20, 2011.

25 Bruce Maddy-Weitzman, “Islamism, Moroccan-Style: The Ideas of Sheikh Yassine,” *Middle East Quarterly*, Winter 2003, pp. 43-51.

26 Dalia Mogahed, “Islam and Democracy,” The Gallup Center for Muslim Studies, Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates, 2006. For data that run in a different direction and critiques, see Daniel Pipes, “How Many Islamists?” [www.DanielPipes.org](http://www.DanielPipes.org), Dec. 28, 2010.

poll in seven largely Muslim countries—including the most populated ones in the Middle East, Asia, and Africa—found that most people did not approve of suicide bombing and other acts of violence against civilian targets. No more than 15 percent of the population in any country viewed these acts as often justified, and only in

**Many Muslims favor human rights and democracy abstractly but oppose specific rights when they conflict with Shari'a.**

Lebanon and Nigeria did more than a third of those polled view them as at least sometimes justified. Moreover, eight in ten Muslims in Pakistan, more than three-quarters in Turkey, more than two-thirds in Indonesia, and a majority in Jordan held that such violent acts were never justified.<sup>27</sup>

Also, there has been a steady decline of support for these violent

acts when comparing the 2010 data to that from 2002. Double-digit declines in those agreeing that acts of violence were sometimes or often justified occurred in Jordan, Pakistan, Lebanon, Nigeria, and Indonesia. In addition, majorities in virtually all the countries rated al-Qaeda negatively, including more than nine in ten in Lebanon, and more than seven in ten in Turkey and Egypt. Only in Nigeria did almost half (49 percent) express positive views of al-Qaeda.

Although Saudi Arabia is the most prominent supporter of Wahhabism (an extreme interpretation of Islam) and the homeland of fifteen of the nineteen terrorists who attacked New York and the Pentagon on 9/11, a 2008 study by Terror Free Tomorrow found that less than one in ten Saudis had a favorable opinion of al-Qaeda, and almost nine in ten held that the Saudi military and police should pursue its fighters. Only 13 percent said suicide bombing was sometimes or often justified.<sup>28</sup>

There are exceptions to these nonviolent majorities. Support for suicide attacks on U.S. forces and its allies in Iraq was higher than that for other violent acts.<sup>29</sup> Another exception pertains to groups that target Israel.<sup>30</sup> Nonetheless, even in these cases, majorities in most countries were against violence.

While the Pew poll data show clearly that the vast majority of Muslims reject violence, support for democracy and human rights is much more complicated. It often seems that there is a considerable difference between what is favored in the abstract and what concrete measures are supported. This ought to be familiar to Americans though in a rather different context. Most Americans abstractly favor cutting the size of the government but oppose most, if not all, actual cuts in spending. Most are said to be philosophically conservative but operationally liberal. Similarly, many Muslims seem to favor human rights and democracy abstractly but oppose many specific rights especially when they conflict with Shari'a, tradition, and local culture. They also seek increased influence of religion and religious authorities in their public and political lives, a long way from separating religion and state.

Substantial majorities—82-99 percent of Muslims in all countries polled—said that if they were drafting a new constitution for their country, they would guarantee freedom of speech, defined as “allowing all citizens to express their opinions on political, social, and economic issues of the day.”<sup>31</sup> (Note that religious freedom is not included.) The 2007 Pew poll found that majorities in all Muslim countries held that courts should treat all equally; and majorities in most of the countries held that

27 “Muslim Publics Divided on Hamas and Hezbollah,” Pew Research Center, Global Attitudes Project, Washington, D.C., Dec. 2, 2010.

28 “Saudi Arabians Overwhelmingly Reject Bin Laden, Al Qaeda, Saudi Fighters in Iraq, and Terrorism; Also among Most Pro-American in Muslim World,” Terror Free Tomorrow, Center for Public Opinion, Washington, D.C., 2008, accessed June 22, 2011.

29 “Islamic Extremism: Common Concern for Muslim and Western Publics,” Pew Global Attitudes Survey, Pew Research Center, Washington, D.C., July 4, 2005.

30 “Muslim Publics Divided on Hamas and Hezbollah,” Dec. 2, 2010.

31 Mogahed, “Islam and Democracy.”

people should be free to criticize the government; the media should be free from censorship, and honest multiparty elections should be undertaken in their country.<sup>32</sup>

At the same time, more than three-quarters of Egyptians and Pakistanis, a majority of Nigerians and Jordanians, and a sizable minority of Indonesians favored stoning adulterers, the death penalty for those who denounce the Islamic faith, and whipping or cutting off the hands of those who commit theft or robbery—all illiberal punishments based on a fundamentalist interpretation of Shari‘a.<sup>33</sup>

These positions were highlighted by the furor that spread throughout the Muslim world when the *fatwa* calling for killing the author of *The Satanic Verses*, Salman Rushdie, was issued in February 1989; when a Danish newspaper published a cartoon of Muhammad in September 2005; and when death threats emerged against Ayaan Hirsi Ali, a former member of the Dutch parliament who renounced her Islamic faith and whose writings are critical of the religion.<sup>34</sup> They are further illuminated by the call for the killing of any Muslim who converts to another religion or renounces the faith.

Illiberalism is particularly evident in all matters concerning gender and sexuality. The Gallup poll found that when asked what they least admire about the West, frequent replies by Muslims concerned personal freedoms involving sexuality, promiscuity, and gender mores. A plurality of Muslims in Jordan and Nigeria, and a majority in Egypt (54 percent) and Pakistan (85 percent), said they favored making gender segregation in the workplace the law in their country.<sup>35</sup> The 2007 Pew study found that in most of the predominantly Muslim countries in Asia and the Middle East, only minorities said a woman alone should have the right to choose her own

husband. Additionally, substantial majorities in all of those countries said that society should reject homosexuality.

In a 2007 Pew poll, majorities in the five predominantly Muslim Middle Eastern countries surveyed said they preferred democracy to a strong leader (the Palestinian territories were the outlier).<sup>36</sup> In the 2010 Pew poll, majorities in six of seven countries polled said that democracy was always preferable to any other kind of government. Pakistan was the outlier, but a plurality (41 percent) agreed with the statement.

At the same time, vast majorities see Islam’s political influence as positive, according to the 2010 Pew data, including more than nine in ten in Indonesia; more than three-quarters in Egypt, Nigeria, and Jordan; more than two-thirds in Pakistan; a majority in Lebanon, and a plurality in Turkey. Less than a third in Lebanon and Turkey, and only 2-14 percent in the five other surveyed countries held a negative view of Islam’s role in politics. In the 2006 Gallup poll, majorities in eight of nine countries in which the question was

**Illiberalism among Muslims is particularly evident in all matters concerning gender and sexuality.**

asked said that the Shari‘a should be at least a source of legislation in their country, and majorities in four said that it should be the only source (Turkey was the sole outlier). In a 2003 Pew poll, majorities in almost all of the predominantly Muslim countries polled held that religious leaders should play a larger role in politics, including more than nine in ten in Nigeria, and more than seven in ten in Jordan, Bangladesh, and Lebanon. Uzbekistan and Turkey were the outliers, though a sizable minority in both countries (40 percent) favored an even greater role for mullahs.<sup>37</sup>

The combination of support for both de-

32 “World Publics Welcome Global Trade—But Not Immigration,” Pew Research Center, Global Attitudes Project, Washington, D.C., Oct. 4, 2007.

33 “Muslim Publics Divided on Hamas and Hezbollah,” Dec. 2, 2010.

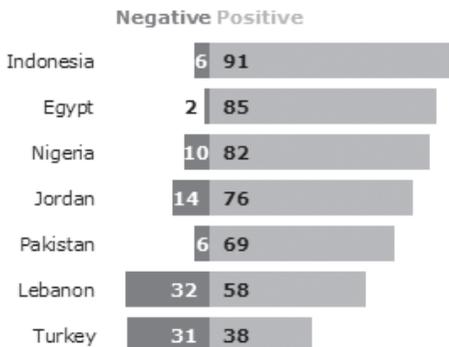
34 See “Ayaan Hirsi Ali: I Will Continue to Ask Uncomfortable Questions,” *Middle East Quarterly*, Fall 2006, pp. 67-70.

35 “Muslim Publics Divided on Hamas and Hezbollah,” Dec. 2, 2010.

36 “World Publics Welcome Global Trade—But Not Immigration,” Oct. 4, 2007.

37 “Views of a Changing World,” Pew Research Center, June 2003.

### Islam's Influence in Politics Is...\*



Pew Research Center Q52 and Q53

*While majorities in six of seven predominantly Muslim countries said that democracy was always preferable to any other kind of government when polled in 2010, vast majorities see Islam's political influence as positive. Most find that Shari'a should be at least a source of legislation in their country.*

mocracy and Islam is evident in a March/April 2011 poll of Egyptians. In this poll, 71 percent held that democracy was always preferable to any other kind of government. At the same time, almost nine in ten said they wanted law to be based on Islam with 62 percent saying law should strictly follow the Qur'an.<sup>38</sup>

In short, whether one focuses on leading Muslim texts, religious authorities, public intellectuals, leaders, or voters, one can find many more reliable partners in peace than partners in building liberal, democratic regimes. Another way to look at the same data is to view the illiberal moderates as the global swing vote. Those who favor liberal democracies are likely to support the United States in the first place. Those who hold violent Islamist beliefs are unlikely to line up with the U.S. agenda. Illiberal moderates are those who

might be the West's allies, however, only as long as they do not have to give up their illiberal beliefs. Hence, Washington would do well to ally itself with all those who refrain from the use of force and let them develop the kind of regimes their people support. Washington could continue to promote greater democracy and liberalism abroad through nonprofit organizations, broadcasts, cultural exchanges, and other persuasive means. However, it should not make acceptance of these principles a condition for diplomatic, economic, political support for either those in power or those challenging the power-holders.

Indeed, the very question of what makes a "good" Muslim is faulty because it leads to the quest for Muslims who are like the citizens of Western nations. The West should first and foremost look for peaceful Muslims, whatever their other persuasions. Pluralism abroad, like at home, means learning to live with people who have

different values, some who harbor strong religious beliefs (like the U.S. Christian Right), some who have political opinions that lean heavily to one extreme of the political spectrum (like the Tea Party and what remains of the radical Left), and so on, as long as they are committed to resolving differences in a nonviolent manner. One can aspire to win them over to what one considers the "good" regime; however, this is a second-stage goal. The Middle East is at best moving to stage one: to limit conflicts to the ballot box and political negotiation and away from massively oppressive and violent confrontations and upheavals.

## RESPONDING TO THE REGIONAL UPHEAVALS

The uprisings that roiled the Middle East as of the beginning of 2011 brought new intensity and concern to the question raised by the

38 "Egyptians Embrace Revolt Leaders, Religious Parties, and Military, As Well," Pew Research Center, Washington, D.C., Apr. 25, 2011.

2001 attacks on the United States, a question the West has faced for decades: Should it ally itself only with liberal, democratic, in effect secular groups and regimes? Should it also support illiberal but moderate ones? And what ought to be its position vis-à-vis the remaining Muslim autocracies?

*The Libyan Lesson.* As the U.S. military joined the fighting in Libya, a number of analysts indicated reluctance to interfere on the basis that officials did not know who the rebels were. In looking for an answer, two rather different criteria were employed and often conflated. One was whether the rebels belonged to the same Libyan groups that sent a disproportionately large number of foreign fighters to battle U.S. forces in Iraq and were members or supporters of the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group, a militant organization that was suspected of having an “increasingly cooperative relationship” with al-Qaeda. The second was whether these were forces likely to support democracy and human rights in a post-Qaddafi Libya. Leslie Gelb, president emeritus of the Council on Foreign Relations, among others, correctly complained about the lack of clarity regarding how the Obama administration viewed the rebels: “At times, his team seems to equate the rebels with democrats, then retreats to calling them protesters and revolutionaries.”<sup>39</sup>

The intervention was initially justified as an attempt to stop massive violence, and Secretary of State Hillary Clinton relied on that criterion to justify the ousting of Qaddafi: “When a leader’s only means of staying in power is to use mass violence against his own people, he has lost the legitimacy to rule,” she stated. “The Libyan people deserve a government that is responsive to their aspirations and that protects their universally recognized human rights.”<sup>40</sup>

Before long the goal of saving civilians from Qaddafi’s attacks morphed into an outright demand for regime change. Qaddafi’s calls for a ceasefire and negotiations were rejected, and

Washington increasingly made the demand that he and his family give up their rule as a condition for ending hostilities; military strikes even targeted command-and-control posts in which Qaddafi might have been found, killing his son and three of his grandchildren in one such attack.<sup>41</sup> This is especially pertinent because the quest for regime change may have extended the hostilities and the casualties on both sides. Moreover, given that the differences between the rebels and Qaddafi’s supporters reflect strong and long-standing tribal rivalries, it is rather unlikely that the overthrow of the regime will lead to a peaceful, stable, let alone liberal, democratic government.

It follows that the preferred course of action would have been to end the NATO armed intervention once Qaddafi indicated his willingness to stop military action against the rebels (as long as he lived up to this commitment) and to allow the two sides to work out the course for the future of Libya. The same applies to many other rising groups and standing regimes in the Middle East.

*A Nonviolent, Pluralistic Middle East.* The lesson of Libya can be generalized to serve as the basis for an approach for transforming the Middle East. For both prudential and normative reasons, the West should not make a commitment to shifting to a liberal, democratic government its litmus test for

deciding to support either autocrats or new, rising political groups. Instead, it should persuade, cajole, and pressure both to refrain from resorting to violence, but otherwise let each nation develop its own form of government. This means that the autocrats will be strongly encouraged (mainly, privately) to negotiate with new claimants rather than gunning them down—and that

**The West should not make commitment to a liberal, democratic government its litmus test for support.**

39 *The Daily Beast*, Mar. 8, 2011.

40 *USA Today*, Feb. 27, 2011.

41 *The Washington Post*, Apr. 20, 2011.

Washington will work with all new political groups that refrain from violence, such as those that ended the authoritarian governments in Tunisia and Egypt. These may include groups that favor a religious regime, such as moderate parts of the Muslim Brotherhood, or some kind of a moderate monarchy (say in Morocco, Jordan, Oman, Kuwait, or Qatar), or a civilian-military joint rule, as existed in South Korea, Chile, Turkey, and Indonesia before they became more democratic.

**A nonviolent pluralism approach does not deny Washington the right to encourage greater liberalism and democracy.**

Washington and its allies can surely continue to welcome nations that liberalize their governments, introduce parliamentary democracies, and respect human rights. However, they should neither demand nor expect such a transformation, instead making abstention from violence the first litmus test

as to who can qualify as a partner in the Middle East. That is, Washington would favor what might be called a nonviolent pluralism for the region (and for each country), in which it supports and cooperates with a variety of regimes and new political groups as long as they vie with each other within the rules of nonviolent engagement.

## CONSISTENCY

One major merit of the nonviolent pluralism doctrine is that it can be consistently applied to all regimes in the Middle East by providing a clear principle for identifying those groups that meet the elementary condition for partnering with Washington in the changing region. This cannot be said of ad hoc U.S. policy on the matter, which is tailor-made to each case. Throughout the Cold War, Washington positioned itself as the champion of freedom yet supported military dictatorships in South America, Asia, and elsewhere. During the recent uprisings in the Middle East, the U.S. administration fought to oust

Qaddafi, urged Mubarak to step down in Egypt, and cheered the departure of Ben Ali in Tunisia while making few, delayed, and muted pleas for Saleh to step down in Yemen,<sup>42</sup> waffling on Syria and the Green Movement in Iran, and in effect, supporting the autocrats of Saudi Arabia and Bahrain. Even as Bahrain was violently suppressing protests, and just before Riyadh sent its troops to help, Secretary Clinton commended King Hamad for engaging in “meaningful outreach and efforts to try to bring about the change that will be in line with the needs of the people.”<sup>43</sup>

U.S. leaders tried to explain away these gross inconsistencies. Most notably, Clinton, in a speech asserting Washington’s commitment to “sustained democracies” in the region, argued that diverse approaches were called for given such a “fluid” situation and that “a one-size-fits-all approach doesn’t make sense.”<sup>44</sup> Moreover, President Barack Obama, in his speech at the National Defense University justifying the Libyan intervention, took pains to emphasize that it was geared only to saving civilians rather than representing a broader doctrine.<sup>45</sup>

These arguments, however, do little to persuade critics abroad and at home, for good reason. Nations provide rationales for their policies, interventions overseas included, because acting legitimately—that is, in line with established values and norms—helps them to advance their goals. True, as Obama stated in his speech on Libya, “I have made it clear that I will never hesitate to use our military swiftly, decisively, and unilaterally when necessary to defend our people, our homeland, our allies, and our core interests”—implicitly disregarding whether or not other people consider the act legitimate. However, Washington—like other

42 See Howard LaFranchi, “Why Obama isn’t pushing for Yemen president to go: Al Qaeda,” *The Christian Science Monitor* (Boston), Mar. 22, 2011.

43 “Secretary Clinton on Libya,” Andrews Air Force Base, U.S. Department of State, Feb. 27, 2011.

44 “Secretary Clinton’s Remarks at the U.S. Islamic World Forum,” Washington, D.C., Apr. 12, 2011.

45 “Remarks by the President in Address to the Nation on Libya,” The White House, Mar. 28, 2011.

governments—seeks most times to justify its actions in terms that speak both to the American people and the citizens of others nations. Indeed, in an age of mass communication, higher levels of education, increased attention to public affairs, and growing involvement of the masses in politics, what various people consider normatively appropriate has real consequences.

Legitimacy, in turn, thrives on consistency. Both laws and norms are expected to apply equally to one and all,

without exceptions for one's allies or friends. It is on this test that current policy fails so often, in very visible ways, which evoke the ire of U.S. critics, embarrass its friends, and provide a propaganda windfall to its adversaries. The claim that Washington is hypocritical when it lectures Russia and China about human rights and then provides equipment and training to the police and secret services of Saudi Arabia and Mubarak's Egypt—and previously to the dictators of Argentina, Chile, and Indonesia, among others—is one of the numerous observations that show that inconsistent liberalism is harming the U.S. cause.

Washington can consistently employ military forces to stop genocides but not to change regimes; morally and financially support peaceful uprisings but not groups that use terror to advance their agenda. Consistency does not require relying only on one criterion. As President Obama correctly pointed out, if U.S. vital interests are directly affected—say, a foreign power is blocking the shipment of oil through the Strait of Hormuz—Washington will act based on interest considerations and not necessarily on what other nations consider the right foreign policy. However, at the end of the



*As the Arab world continues to be embroiled in conflict, should U.S. policymakers work with “illiberal moderates” like Iraq’s Ayatollah Ali Sistani (left) or Bahrain’s Sheikh Isa Qassem (right)? Both men publicly eschew violence, endorse some democratic institutions, and yet seek a state governed in accordance with Shari‘a.*

day, under most conditions, a government does best if it can follow clearly-stated principles that are endorsed by others in the international community.

## WHY NOT CONSISTENT LIBERALISM?

At this point, one might ask: Why not follow a policy of consistent liberalism, as advocated by numerous human rights nongovernmental organizations and analysts at respected think tanks? One reason is that Washington is much more likely to be on the side of whoever leads the change movements and the future regimes in the region if it does not limit its support only to liberal, democratic groups—which are often the weakest of the new claimants because they tend to fare less well under autocratic regimes than more radical groups—and if it supports all who refrain from the use of force. Another reason is that Islamist groups, such as the Muslim Brotherhood, have developed a grassroots following through networks of charitable works and social services.

Several observers have referred to the 2011

**Obama's position toward the Arab uprisings has been applied inconsistently, which undermines its legitimacy.**

wave of Middle Eastern uprisings as an “Arab Spring,” a metaphor that should not be taken too seriously; one notes that springs in the Middle East are short and followed by long hot

summers and then—the fall. Joe Nocera of *The New York Times* argues that the “Arab Spring” proves that millions of Muslims yearn for “freedom and democracy,”<sup>46</sup> and Secretary Clinton finds “a time of great movements toward freedom and democracy, at a time when the people across the Middle East and North Africa are re-

jecting the extremist narratives and charting a path of peaceful progress based on universal rights and aspirations.”<sup>47</sup>

Actually, uprisings against a regime are often driven by tribal loyalties, religious or ideological stirrings, or merely by people who seek to throw off the yoke of oppression or to achieve economic betterment. Even when those involved mouth democratic slogans, tearing down a regime cannot be equated with building one, let alone a democratic one. If one stops looking at the shouting masses on television through romantic lenses, one often sees the mobs that greatly worried the Founding Fathers. They can pave the way—but who knows to where?

Indeed, one of the few predictions one can make with a considerable degree of assurance about the developments in the Middle East in the foreseeable future is that there will not be a grand transition from autocracies to shining, liberal democracies or even dimly lit ones. Instead, there are likely to be numerous and different kinds of upheavals and attempts to form new regimes that will fail, leading to still new attempts. Even if relatively democratic or moderate groups take control after a revolution, they may lose out to more

radical ones over time. This is what happened after the French and Russian revolutions.

Also, a nonviolent pluralism approach will prevent Washington from becoming involved in still more wars in the Muslim world, which support for liberal democratic forces would call for, and has a much lower risk of jeopardizing relations with the more benevolent authoritarian regimes and essential allies. The autocrats surely would rather face a U.S. administration that urges them not to turn their guns on the new claimants and holds that peaceful give-and-take is in their mutual interests than face demands that they must transform their regimes or wonder if they will be next on the list of heads of state that Washington argues must leave to make room for change.

Two clarifications are called for at this point. First, it is arguable that all the Middle East's authoritarian regimes use some level of coercion against their own people, and that amongst those rising against their governments there are often violent elements. However, there is a world of difference between those who arrest a few protesters and even kill a few—and those who bomb cities, kill hundreds if not thousands, or rape and torture to crush an uprising. The harsh realities of social life, even in Western countries, have entailed occasional bursts of violence, for instance the shooting of students at Kent State University by the Ohio National Guard and periodic violent riots in Paris and recently in Greece. But it is best to tolerate violence in only very limited and rare situations.

Second, the nonviolent pluralism approach does not deny Washington the right to raise its moral voice to encourage greater liberalism and democracy in various countries. The U.S. administration can continue to laud democratic ideals in other countries through Voice of America broadcasts and to promote them in student and other cultural exchanges. Nor does it suggest that Washington should refrain from funding a host of organizations that promote these causes, such as Freedom House and the National Endowment for Democracy. However, encouraging peaceful evolution within countries is profoundly different from forced regime change.

One might ask how this approach differs from

46 Joe Nocera, “Four Questions He Leaves Behind,” *The New York Times*, May 3, 2011.

47 *NPR News*, May 3, 2011.

the position Washington took when urging Yemen and Bahrain to “show restraint” and “pursue peaceful and meaningful dialogue with the opposition rather than resorting to the use of force”;<sup>48</sup> when President Obama said of Syria’s crackdowns, “This outrageous use of violence to quell protests must come to an end now”;<sup>49</sup> and Secretary Clinton urged the Syrian government to “stop the arbitrary arrest, detention, and torture of prisoners.”<sup>50</sup> Indeed, Obama articulated this position exceptionally well in his January 2009 inaugural speech that was introduced as his major opening to the Muslim world. He stated, “To those who cling to power through corruption and deceit and the silencing of dissent, know that you are on the wrong side of history, but that we will extend a hand if you are willing to unclench your fist.”

However, this position has been applied inconsistently, which undermines its legitimacy as has been evident in the different treatments of Qaddafi’s Libya, on the one hand, of Syria, Bahrain, and Saudi Arabia, on the other, and of Egypt, as well as in sporadic demands to usher in liberal democratic regimes by Obama and especially Clinton. Thus, for example, the secretary of state stated in a June 2011 speech to the African Union: “[The Middle Eastern upheavals] message is clear to us all: The status quo is broken; the old ways of governing are no longer acceptable; it is time for leaders to lead with accountability, treat their people with dignity, respect their rights, and deliver economic opportunity. And if they will not, then it is time for them to go.”<sup>51</sup>

## CONCLUSION

Aside from various pragmatic reasons to make nonviolence the first litmus test for U.S.

policy toward Middle Eastern regimes, there are several strong normative reasons to favor the same basic position. The right to be free from violence—from being killed, maimed, or tortured—in short, the right of life, has a special standing because all other rights, from free speech to religious freedoms, are conditioned on it, but it, in turn, is not conditioned on these rights being observed. (Dead people lose their other rights while those who live may fight for and see the day their other rights will be realized.) The special normative standing of the right of life is further revealed insofar as the criminal codes of numerous nations place a higher penalty on taking a life than on violating other rights.

For all these reasons, if Washington limits its approval and support to the Middle East’s liberal, democratic groups, it will often be left out in the cold. U.S. interests and those of people of the region are better served if Washington does not merely tolerate a variety of groups and

rulers but also holds that although it hopes in the longer run they all will find their way to a liberal life, for now, moving away from oppression at home, ceasing support for terrorism, halting the building of weapons of mass destruction, and ceasing to threaten other nations and peoples—all

matters concerning the use of force—suffices for becoming a reliable ally.

Indeed, Washington may be moving in this direction. On June 30, 2011, Secretary of State Clinton announced that the Obama administration will resume limited contact with the Muslim Brotherhood, allowing U.S. officials to deal directly with members of the Islamist group. The previous policy restricted contact to Brotherhood members in parliament on matters of state business. Now that the group looks to be a major force in the upcoming elections, Clinton told reporters, it is in U.S. interests to engage with the nonviolent organization—while emphasizing “the importance of and support for democratic principles. ... We believe, given the

**If Washington limits its approval and support to liberal, democratic groups, it will often be left out in the cold.**

48 “Statement from the press secretary on violence in Yemen and Bahrain,” The White House, Mar. 13, 2011.

49 “Statement by the President on Syria,” The White House, Apr. 22, 2011.

50 Reuters, Apr. 20, 2011.

51 “Secretary Clinton Remarks at African Union,” Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, U.S. Department of State, June 13, 2011.

changing political landscape in Egypt, that it is in the interests of the United States to engage with all parties that are peaceful, and committed to nonviolence, that intend to compete for the parliament and the presidency.”<sup>52</sup>

A critic may argue that rather than engaging radical, Islamist groups, notably the Muslim Brotherhood, the West should endeavor to restrict and, if possible, exclude them from the political arena for the simple reason that their values and goals are mutually exclusive to ours.

These groups seek nothing short of world domination, regardless of whether they are presently using “peaceable” means for tactical reasons.

However, even if it turns out that the Muslim Brotherhood and its like must be spurned, for this author, the basic question remains: Do we assume a priori that all Islamist groups, however moderate, say, in Morocco and Indonesia, are suspect on the face of it, or can we cooperate with some of them? And if the answer is in the affirmative, how should we determine which qualify?

---

52 Reuters, June 30, 2011.



## Who “Likes” Suicide Attacks the Most?

A recent survey, conducted by the Pew Research Center’s Global Attitudes Project, highlights the extent to which extremism is rejected in Muslim nations although there are notable levels of support for radical Islamist groups and suicide terrorism in some countries. Al-Qaeda is rated negatively by majorities in all countries, but more than a quarter express a positive opinion of the terrorist groups in the Palestinian territories. There is no country in which a majority rates the radical Palestinian organization Hamas positively—still, it receives considerable support in Jordan and Egypt. Among the Palestinians themselves, Hamas is less popular than Fatah, its more secular rival.

In recent years, Pew Global Attitudes surveys have documented a decline in support for suicide bombing in a number of countries, and today the percentage of Muslims who say this type of violence is often or sometimes justifiable stands at 10 percent or less in Indonesia, Turkey, and Pakistan. Support for these acts is somewhat more common in Arab nations although there have been steep declines over the last decade in Lebanon and Jordan.

Palestinian Muslims, however, remain an outlier on this question: 68 percent say suicide attacks in defense of Islam can often or sometimes be justified, a level of support essentially unchanged from 2007. And in Egypt, support for suicide bombing is actually on the rise—currently, 28 percent believe it can be justified, up from 8 percent in 2007.

Pew Global Attitudes Project, May 17, 2011