

Engaging Islamists in the West

By Peter Mandaville

IN RECENT YEARS, U.S. national security policy orthodoxy has deemed it too far “out of the box” to suggest that Islamist groups might have a role to play in countering terrorist threats. According to this reasoning, even if movements such as the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood or its affiliates in other countries have renounced violence or are not actively involved in fostering militancy, they still at some level share common ideological foundations with groups such as al-Qa`ida. For others, the historical ties between the Muslim Brotherhood movement and Hamas are enough to rule out any possibility of engaging the former given the latter’s use of violence in Israel and Palestine. Leaving aside the colossal error inherent in treating Hamas and al-Qa`ida as terrorist equivalents—unfortunately a persistent theme in U.S. national security discourse in the aftermath of 9/11—the default assumption still appears to be that Islamism of any kind is more likely to be part of the problem rather than a potential component of counter-terrorism solutions. It is precisely this dogma that is in serious need of reexamination.

What is needed is not necessarily an active partnership between Islamists and counter-terrorism authorities; instead, national security and counter-terrorism policy must become more comfortable with shades of gray in how it approaches a Muslim world too often defined in terms of black and white categories.¹

The Fallacy of Focusing on Sufis

In searching for interlocutors and partners in the Muslim world, Western governments—and the United States in particular—have expressed a preference for doing business with what they call “moderate Muslims.” This has spawned something of a cottage industry, with various think-tanks rushing to find suitable candidates in the Muslim world and millions of dollars in public

and private funds mobilized to develop related outreach activities. The groups identified as potential partners by these efforts are telling in their own right. The RAND Corporation’s 2007 study *Building Moderate Muslim Networks*, for example, recommends that the United States engage secular, liberal and neo-traditional Sufi Muslims.² Looking more specifically at what this advice entails in the European context, one finds in the RAND study an “approved list” of individual scholars without any grassroots following and a set of mostly marginal organizations espousing highly progressive interpretations of Islam that similarly lack any legitimacy within Muslim communities. Another complication lies in the fact that some of these groups, such as the United Kingdom’s Sufi Muslim Council, were established with the blessing (and sometimes the financial support) of European governments, which in the current climate renders them immediately suspect in the eyes of many Muslims.

Although there is nothing intrinsically wrong with the views and positions of these groups—indeed, many of them are intellectually sophisticated and highly courageous, having expressed opinions that make them targets of criticism (and sometimes even threats) from ultra-conservative and radical Muslim groups—the problem lies in their lack of transformative capacity. There are at least three aspects to consider in this last regard: 1. the groups designated as acceptable partners tend to be either so new or so at odds with prevailing sentiments within the community as to possess neither a critical mass of followers nor any hope of developing one in the near future; 2. the individuals or groups in question often advocate secularism and liberalism in an uncritical manner that leaves little room to raise legitimate questions about how these norms and values are actually put into practice in the societies in which they live, particularly today vis-à-vis questions of civil liberties and foreign policy; 3. with particular reference to Sufi groups, the brotherhoods (*truruq*) in question, while often apolitical and primarily focused on inward, spiritual

concerns, are hardly advocates of pluralism and democracy in the Muslim-majority countries in which they operate; indeed, with regard to their own internal governance practices, Sufi brotherhoods are often among the more authoritarian social structures to be found in Islam.

Counter-Terrorism Role for Mainstream Islamist Groups?

If Sufis and secular-liberal Muslims are not the answer, could mainstream Islamists play this role? The idea is, of course, not wholly new in and of itself. The renunciation of violence in the late 1990s by imprisoned ideologues of al-Jama`a al-Islamiyya (itself a radical splinter from the main body of the Muslim Brotherhood movement) has been a consistent reference point and resource in the Egyptian government’s own recent counter-terrorism strategy. Similarly, the Saudi government has been relying on Wahhabi clerics, some of whom in the 1990s were either active members in, or had strong ties to, dissident Islamist groups in the kingdom, as a mainstay of its recent efforts to deradicalize Salafi-jihadi detainees. The governments in question claim enormous success in these endeavors and there is anecdotal evidence to suggest that some measure of impact has been felt. Yet there is also good reason to question the efficacy and sustainability of such an approach. These are state-sponsored campaigns mounted by two of the pro-Western governments most consistently cited in the complaints of Usama bin Ladin and al-Qa`ida. The timing of the Islamists’ “conversion” from violence and the careful management of their current activities by the state leaves them open to the criticism of having been co-opted by the government. Any Islamists involved in counter-terrorism efforts would therefore have to be thoroughly and credibly independent and that means looking toward groups affiliated with the broad and diverse Muslim Brotherhood movement.

Since its renunciation of violence in the 1970s, the Muslim Brotherhood has evolved in ways that position it well to harvest, organize and redeploy oppositional political sentiments. Indeed, it is now conventional wisdom among analysts of political reform in the Middle East that the Islamists

¹ See, for example, Mahmood Mamdani, *Good Muslim, Bad Muslim: America, the Cold War, and the Roots of Terror* (New York: Doubleday, 2005).

² Angel Rabasa, Cheryl Benard, Lowell H. Schwartz and Peter Sickle, *Building Moderate Muslim Networks* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 2007).

represent the only organized alternative to most ruling regimes in the region. Their comparative advantage as potential agents of social change lies in the fact that: 1. they are independent of existing authoritarian governments and consistently critical of the corruption, lack of accountability and failure to bring about meaningful democratic reform that characterize these regimes; 2. they are able to draw on deep repositories of social capital residing in a vast array of voluntary and charitable networks and organizations at the local and national levels; and 3. their reputational power as consistent critics of government injustice from within an Islamic framework is unrivaled, stretching back some 80 years.

It is precisely the issue of how Islam and, more specifically, the question of where Shari`a and the need for an Islamic state fit into the Brotherhood's political vision that have been chief sticking points for critics of the movement. The ideological current of the Muslim Brotherhood and its manifestation in the political activities of affiliated parties and groups throughout the Middle East (including the central body in Egypt) have undergone significant transformations in recent years. While a full accounting of this evolution is beyond the scope of this article, most scholars of political reform in the Middle East (along with many policy analysts) now take it as written that the Brotherhood movement has made a strategic commitment to democratic principles.³ While Islam is still central to their political discourse, it serves primarily as a reference point for governing principles and legislation rather than as a separate and exclusivist model of government.

Even if it is recognized that mainstream, independent Islamists are likely to feature prominently in any sustainable political reform scenario, could there be a role for groups such as the Muslim Brotherhood in counter-terrorism

and national security efforts? Aside from a number of abiding ambiguities surrounding the Brotherhood's embrace of pluralism and democracy, several key challenges relating more directly to security also need to be addressed. Many prominent Islamists such as Shaykh Yusuf al-Qaradawi, undoubtedly the leading intellectual figure within the contemporary Brotherhood movement, will continue to support Hamas and

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argue that what they take to be the group's armed resistance against Israeli occupation is justified, even as they simultaneously condemn the jihadist movement and work to put al-Qa`ida out of business. Furthermore, given the extremely broad and diverse nature of the Muslim Brotherhood as an ideological movement, there is little doubt that among their affiliates and sympathizers there are still figures who act as fundraisers and financiers to groups currently classified as terrorist entities. Such individuals, who should be pursued and treated as the criminals they are, represent a fringe minority within a movement whose core agenda has been undergoing significant transformation. To define the Brotherhood exclusively or primarily in terms of their activities would therefore be akin to throwing out an enormous baby with very little bathwater.⁴

Yet, what role could mainstream Islamists such as the Muslim Brotherhood and related groups actually play in the realm of counter-terrorism? In an important article in *Foreign Affairs*, Robert Leiken and Steven Brooke make the case that the Brotherhood is essentially moderate in its orientation

and that its strategic agenda is today broadly in line with Western interests.⁵ Islamist groups in the Brotherhood mold already participate in democracy promotion and political party capacity-building activities in the Middle East and Southeast Asia funded through agencies such as the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) and the National Endowment for Democracy (NED). That does not mean, however, that the United States and its allies should engage the Muslim Brotherhood because when it comes to cooperation on security issues, it is not entirely clear what a “partnership” would entail. What is envisaged, however, is a far more selective engagement with groups and figures with strong ties to Islamism but who, unlike the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, are less directly subject to political pressures from authoritarian regimes.

Engaging Islamist Groups Operating in the West

This is where Islamist-linked groups in Europe and North America begin to enter the picture in interesting ways, particularly in today's climate of heightened concerns about “homegrown” terrorism. Yet how might Islamists be able to make a difference where other groups cannot? First, unlike many of the neophyte Muslim groups that have sprung out of the “war on terrorism,” Muslim Brotherhood and Jamaat-i-Islami linked groups in the West (such as the UK Islamic Mission, the Islamic Forum Europe, the Muslim Association of Britain, and, in the United States, the Muslim American Society), while relatively small in terms of their active membership, have a stronger base of legitimacy and more experience than most Muslim groups when it comes to acting in the public sphere. Second, given the aversion within the younger generation of Western Muslims to joining groups in favor of independent voices and individualized approaches to religion, the idea is not to regard Islamists as providing an alternative mass movement to jihadism. Rather, the division of labor that falls to Islamist-linked groups within Muslim public space in the West has more to do with framing issues and organizing events

3 See, for example, Amr Hamzawy, *The Key to Arab Reform: Moderate Islamists* (Washington, D.C.: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2005); Carrie Wickham, *Mobilizing Islam* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002); Jillian Schwedler, *Faith in Moderation: Islamist Parties in Jordan and Yemen* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006); and Ray Baker, *Islam Without Fear: Egypt and the New Islamists* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006).

4 This is precisely the error committed by journalists Mark Hosenball and Mike Isikoff in their profile of the Muslim Brotherhood for the 2007 PBS series, *America at a Crossroads*.

5 Robert S. Leiken and Steven Brooke, “The Moderate Muslim Brotherhood,” *Foreign Affairs* 86:2 (2007): pp. 107-121.

where these concerns are discussed and debated.

These are certainly not—nor should they be—forums designed to promote Western security goals, to encourage Muslims to passively assimilate, or to refrain from mobilizing politically around Islam. Indeed, much of the energy at such events is devoted to harsh criticism of Western foreign policy and counter-terrorism efforts; however, violence and subversive activity are not among the offered solutions. Rather, Islamist activists create a public sphere in which the compatibility between Islam and prevailing Western norms is not simply affirmed (as with secular-liberal Muslims) or rejected (as with radicals and extremists)—both of which are actually depoliticizing moves—but instead deliberated, contested and agonistically negotiated. For their part, however, Islamist groups in the West need to emphasize unequivocally—and most already do—that the politics of confrontation must occur within the parameters of the law. Finally, Islamist activists in the West generally have a much deeper and nuanced understanding of the “ecology”—both ideationally and in terms of social relations—in which radical and violent movements operate. In this regard, they are important interlocutors and sources of information for those in government and civil society trying to understand the multiple and complex layers of Islamic radicalization. Some, such as the Centre for the Study of Terrorism in London, set up by long-time Muslim Brotherhood stalwart Kamal Helbawy, have begun to formulate their own approaches to counter-terrorism.

Conclusion

Although an active partnership between Islamists and counter-terrorism authorities is not necessary, it is important for counter-terrorism policy to recognize the nuances within the Muslim world. It is also important to understand that the very act of defining Muslim communities primarily in relation to security and terrorism hampers communication and contributes to tensions—meaning that it must be asked whether and when counter-terrorism is the proper framework for outreach and engagement. In turn, Islamists need to resist the temptation today to turn inward in the name of

defending the community. When it comes to concerns about civil liberties around anti-terrorism legislation, the war in Iraq, environmental degradation, inequalities stemming from globalization and the rights of religious minorities, Muslims have the opportunity to forge relationships of solidarity with countless groups beyond the boundaries of their own community. Looking at each other with greater nuance and overcoming past mutual suspicions and the fact that they will continue to disagree on a range of issues, Islamists and counter-terrorism practitioners are likely to find a more common alignment of interests than perhaps either of them anticipated.

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