

Preface

The politics of Islam has been one of the most controversial and tumultuous issues in the Middle East. Islamist movements have established regimes in Iran and Sudan, become the principal opposition groups in every other country of the region, and created revolutionary upheavals in Algeria and Egypt. Yet unable in most cases to gain power, these movements now face a serious debate over strategy and tactics that is likely to lead either to their relative decline or dramatic transformation.

This book looks at the Islamist movements seeking power today, analyzing both groups involved in armed struggle and those trying to gain power by operating within existing systems. At the heart of this situation stands a paradox: Islamist organizations cannot muster enough support or power to gain power through revolutionary means, but are also blocked by governments from transforming their societies through elections or persuasion. Even Iran's Islamist government faces a divisive conflict over alternative visions, a mirror image of this very same debate.

Consequently, these movements face difficult choices. Certainly, they can continue failed strategies of violence or frustrated electoral efforts. Violence is always psychologically appealing to some activists and government repression may justify such a stance or even forbid any other option. Remaining an opposition party brings certain advantages ranging from power for its leaders to the freedom to maintain a network of institutions. In each case, the movement professes to transform the whole society while in practice creating a small model of that ideal goal.

An alternative, still in the process of full formulation, is a rethinking of Islamist politics to function as a pressure group to make their societies more Islamic, to reinforce the walls of semiseparate internal communities, and to reinterpret Islam in more liberal ways. This process could also require, however, a credible renunciation of any goal of fully transforming society.

To draw a rough parallel to European history, radical Islamism has been in a 'Communist party' phase, whether employing armed struggle or seeking power through elections and agitation. It could enter a 'Social Democratic' phase that could bring broader appeal, more effective lobbying for change, and perhaps

eventual entrance into government. In Iran, the course proposed by President Muhammad Khatami and his supporters represents the same basic concept in reverse, paralleling recent debates in the Soviet Union and China. Rather than a 'totally Islamic' polity, the goal would be some form of Islamic-oriented society.

Again, though, it should be stressed that such a transition will not inevitably be accepted by the movements themselves, nor would it necessarily be acceptable to the incumbent rulers of these states. By examining the Islamist movements in opposition, the roots of their struggle, and their internal debates, this book tries to clarify how they approach these problems and alternative options, as well as whether such different routes are within the realm of possibility or can succeed.

The emergence of a movement around Usama bin Ladin was not a result of the radical interpretation's success in winning over the masses; rather it was a desperate reaction to its failure. Having lost in every other way, bin Ladin and his followers tried to play the anti-American card, downgrading his opposition to the Arab regimes to the point where they might tolerate him and his movement as an asset or at least not as a threat. On September 11, 2001, though, they were too successful in attacking the United States. At first, this made them very popular in the Arab street and regimes rushed, each in its own way, to profit indirectly from the event. But America was too angry for Arab states or even Iran to risk its wrath by explicitly endorsing or protecting al-Qa'ida groups. Yet, as the debate continued, and whatever his own movement's fate, bin Ladin had struck a powerful doctrinal blow for a further radicalization of Islamist thought.

Bin Ladin's great innovation was to open up a new front against Americans and to give this strategy a justification. All the basic ideas he needed, however, had already been expressed by a range of radical Islamist thinkers, from the Egyptian Sayyid Qutb in the 1950s to Khomayni in the 1970s, and a score of Islamist thinkers thereafter. Killing Americans in east Africa (the 1998 attack on U.S. embassies in Kenya and Tanzania), Yemen (the bombing of the USS Cole), and most spectacularly on America itself (September 11, 2001) was very popular in the Arab world.¹ Even those who claimed to mourn the victims cheered the gestures.

Bin Ladin had invented a new type of populist terrorism. Such activities brought Islamists not one inch closer to successfully making revolutions and seizing state power, but did make them feel and appear to be more powerful and successful. Most important of all, this type of action appealed to tens of thousands of Muslims who would never dream of becoming personally involved in violence.

The facts about Islamist politics have been clouded by Western ignorance and Islamist apologetics. It is necessary to apply the same kind of political analysis here that is used to study political movements and ideologies in other parts of the world.

Islamism has clearly become a leading factor shaping the Middle East and the main source for revolutionary, terrorist, and reformist groups alike that

challenge current policies and structures. Of central importance is the fact that Islamist interpretations of Islam's political philosophy vary widely from state to state and also among different groups. The fundamentalist readings of Islam are certainly innovative and often arguably heretical in light of traditional views and practices. Thus, in this book we use the word *Islam* to indicate the religion and its theological aspect, and *Islamist* to designate political movements and philosophies that provide specific interpretations of that religion.

Among the broader questions discussed in this book are:

- How interpretations of Islam lend themselves to radical and moderate movements.
- Why radical movements have not gained more support, in part because of their unusual and unfamiliar interpretations of Islam.
- How different movements have chosen their strategy and whether they have been able to alter it in the face of changing conditions.
- Prospects for radical or reformist movements seizing power and transforming their societies.
- Strategies of governments to co-opt or repress Islamist movements.

To discuss these and other issues, the book's chapters cover the countries where Islamist movements have been most important. The book begins with case studies of revolutionary and reformist groups, followed by chapters discussing future alternatives for Islamist politics, presenting advocates and critics of a potential liberal, reformist, interest-group Islamism.

The failure of revolutionary Islamist movements to seize power is one of the most important factors in modern Middle East politics. The factors and reasons for this outcome are presented by Emmanuel Sivan. Following are four case studies of radical Islamist groups engaged in armed struggles. David Zeidan describes the doctrine, disputes, and failures of Egypt's militant Islamist organizations. A key point here is how their ideology broke with normative Islamic views. Among Palestinians, Islamist appeals have blended opposition to Israel with calls to transform society. Especially interesting is how Islamist movements have often been so appealing to those most exposed to Western thought and university training. Reuven Paz discusses the movement's origins and how it broke with the dominant nationalist movement.

In Turkey, Islamists who advocated armed struggle remained relatively marginal and dependent on Iranian sponsorship. This movement is analyzed by Ely Karmon.

Algeria and Lebanon are particularly interesting countries to examine, since they are arguably the two places where militant Islamist ideologies have won the highest proportional base of support. The Islamic Salvation Front in Algeria moved reluctantly from reformist to revolutionary tactics when the military regime there

rejected its electoral victory in 1992. This situation, and its interesting contrasts to the evolution of Islamist movements in Morocco and Algeria, are described by Bruce Maddy-Weitzman and Meir Litvak.

In Lebanon, Islamism became very intermixed with ethnic-national conflicts. Thus, Hizballah was simultaneously involved in struggles to gain hegemony within the Shi'ite community, to take over Lebanon, and to lead a struggle against Israel. Following the Israeli withdrawal from southern Lebanon, Hizballah faced a difficult choice on what priority to put on these various functions. It had the opportunity to transform itself further into a political party seeking power within Lebanon, a challenge described by Eyal Zisser.

The book then presents two case studies of movements that have successfully established themselves in the context of electoral politics. In Kuwait, Islamist parties have become a regular part of the political scene, exercising influence on legislation and social life, as documented by Shafeeq N. Ghabra. Turkey is the only country where an Islamist party gained power as the result of electoral success, but the armed forces forced that government's resignation in 1997. This story is analyzed by Nilufer Narli. Turkey is also the home for one of the most coherent and advanced efforts to build a liberal, reformist Islamist philosophy, the movement of Fethullah Gulen, as described by Bulent Aras and Omer Caha.

Next, the book provides essays on three aspects of the potential development for a more liberal, reformist Islamism. Ali Abootalebi discusses the relationship between Islamist movements and democracy. George Irani suggests how traditional Islamic mediation techniques can be applied in politics. Charles Kurzman surveys the main developers and advocates of an alternative Islamist philosophy.

Finally, there are two concluding chapters that evaluate the state of Islamist movements. Dale Eickelman looks at the developmental changes that affect Islamic theory and practice, which may be underpinning a transition. Barry Rubin analyzes the status of Islamist politics across the Middle East, highlighting the paradox created in the failures of both revolutionary and reformist strategies. These factors will determine the direction of Islamist politics and, by extension, of the Middle East's future.

This book is a project of the *Middle East Review of International Affairs* (MERIA), which is part of the Global Research in International Affairs (GLORIA) Center of the Interdisciplinary Center. MERIA is a quarterly journal and monthly magazine on Middle East politics and research published and distributed through the Internet. Many of the chapters in this book originated as articles in MERIA Journal, and the authors were brought together through the project's activities. Additional books will be developed through MERIA in the future, bringing together the best scholarship from around the globe in the study of Middle East issues.

The article by Emmanuel Sivan is reprinted with the permission of the *Middle East Quarterly*. Thanks to Cameron Brown, Ozgul Erdemli, Elisheva Rosman-Stollman and Linda Sharaby for their help in preparing the manuscript.

NOTE

1. Cameron Brown, "The Shot Heard Round the World: The Middle East Reacts to September 11," *MERLA Journal*, Vol. 5, No. 4 (December 2001), pp. 69–89, <<http://meria.idc.ac.il>>; and Barry Rubin and Judy Colp Rubin, *Anti-American Terror and the Middle East* (NY: Oxford University Press, 2002).