

On the Modernity, Historical Specificity, and International Context of Political Islam

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Let us begin with the matter of terminology. Why is this book entitled “Political Islam” and not “Islamic fundamentalism”? Certainly the phenomena and processes examined here can be and have been meaningfully compared to politically activist, socially conservative movements mobilized by revivalist Christian, Jewish, and Hindu identities.¹ Nonetheless, “fundamentalism” is a problematic comparative term. It is inescapably rooted in a specific Protestant experience whose principal theological premise is that the Bible is the true word of God and should be understood literally. In this regard, it makes no sense to speak of fundamentalist Islam because one of the core elements of the creed of all believing Muslims is that the Qur’an is the literal (hence absolutely true) word of God as revealed to his Prophet Muhammad through the intermediacy of the angel Gabriel. The Islamic tradition has been very concerned with how Muslims should understand the Qur’an—which passages can be understood literally and which are so complex that they require allegorical or other forms of interpretation. But the divine origin of the text has never been a topic of legitimate debate.

There is another, more important, sense in which the term “fundamentalism” is inappropriate. “Fundamentalism” suggests the restoration of a pure, unsullied, and authentic form of the religion, cleansed of historical accretions, distortions, and modernist deviations. This is indeed how many Islamist leaders and ideologues present their ideas and the movements they lead. But it is a substantial error to conceptualize these movements as restoring an “original” form of Islam. Rather, they seek to revitalize and re-Islamize modern Muslim societies.

We term the movements examined in this volume “political Islam” because we regard their core concerns as temporal and political. They use

the Qur'an, the *hadiths* (reports about the words and deeds of Muhammad and his companions), and other canonical religious texts to justify their stances and actions. And they do so in all sincerity. But as many contributors to this volume suggest (especially the chapters of Sami Zubaida and Gudrun Krämer), today's Islamist thinkers and activists are creatively deploying selected elements of the Islamic tradition, combined with ideas, techniques, institutions, and commodities of the present and recent past, to cope with specifically modern predicaments: political, social, economic, and cultural issues that emerged in the Middle East as a result of the expansion of the world capitalist market, the colonization of important areas of the region by England and France, the formation of new territorial nation-states, the rise and decline of secular nationalist movements, the frustrations and failures of economic development, the reformation of gender relations, and the hybridization of culture and identity in the course of the wide range of contacts and interactions among Europeans and their cultures and the peoples of the Middle East.

Concepts like "Islamic republic" (in Iran), or the belief that post-1952 Egypt is a society of pre-Islamic ignorance (*jahiliyya*), simultaneously critique and accept the institution of the modern national state. And as Karen Pfeifer makes clear, variant forms of Islamic economics do not oppose the technology of modern capitalism. Islamists do not uncritically reject modernity; they are trying to reformulate it and regulate it, using the discursive terms of the Islamic heritage.

Many of the solutions political Islam offers have no specific historical precedent in Islamic tradition. The organizational and mobilizational forms of political Islam—high-speed international communications using faxes, cassette tapes, and posters—rely on modern technology. Specific movements are often funded by businesspeople or regimes whose wealth depends on petroleum markets and other international circuits of capital. Women activists in Islamist movements respond and offer an alternative to an egalitarian model of gender relations perceived as specifically Western.

Islamist movements have posed sharp challenges to postcolonial, nationalist regimes—in Algeria (see the chapters of Meriem Vergès and Susan Slyomovics), Egypt (see the chapters of Alexander Flores and Carrie Rosefsky Wickham and the interviews with Tal 'at Fu 'ad Qasim and Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd), Tunisia (see François Burgat's interview with Hamid al-Nayfar), Sudan (see the chapters of Khalid Medani and Sondra Hale), Turkey (see the chapter of Ronnie Margulies and Ergin Yıldızoğlu), and Iran (see the chapter of Sami Zubaida). But by and large they accept the territorial and political framework of the existing states and their economic foundations, which have been shaped by the legacy of European interests in the Middle East.

THE SALAFIYYA ORIENTATION

The current upsurge of political Islam, which can be said to date from the early 1970s, is not the first Islamic movement to emerge in the modern era. Historians of the modern Middle East have established a widely known canon of leaders and influential texts.² This narrative, though misleadingly simple, usefully summarizes essential historical information, and we begin with it to lay the foundation for more complex alternatives.

In the Sunni tradition—the affiliation of the majority of Muslims who accept the legitimacy of the historical succession of the Caliphs who exercised political and military leadership of the Muslim community (*umma*) after the death of the Prophet Muhammad—the conventional genealogy of modern Islamic thought begins with Sayyid Jamal al-Din al-Afghani (1839–97). Sayyid Jamal al-Din was most likely a Shi‘a, but presented himself as a Sunni.³ His political career included activity in Egypt, Iran, and the Ottoman capital of Istanbul. The common theme linking his diverse activities was the need for all Muslims to unite to confront European, especially British, imperialism.

Muhammad ‘Abduh (1849–1905) was a young associate of Sayyid Jamal al-Din in Egypt during the 1870s and 1880s. They spoke out against the foreign economic and political domination of Egypt that culminated in the British invasion and occupation in 1882. Exiled in Paris, they published a pan-Islamic journal (*Al-‘Urwa al-Wuthqa*, The firmest link). When ‘Abduh returned to Egypt, he partially reconciled himself to the British occupation and, with the approval of the British Consul General, Lord Cromer, eventually became chief *mufti* (jurisconsult) of Egypt. ‘Abduh occupied himself with reforming the teaching of Arabic and the understanding of Islam, arguing that a proper understanding and implementation of the moral and ethical principles of Islam were compatible with the adoption of modern science and technology (noting, of course, that Muslims had inherited and developed Greek philosophy and science before transmitting it to the Western European Christians). ‘Abduh argued that the early Muslims, the *salaf* (ancestors), practiced a pure and more correct form of Islam unsullied by medieval accretions and superstitions perpetuated by ignorance and unconsidered imitation.

Rashid Rida (1865–1935), who came to Egypt from Tripoli, Lebanon, was Muhammad ‘Abduh’s most influential student. He wrote a biography of ‘Abduh, compiled the writings of his teacher, and publicized a conservative interpretation of ‘Abduh’s doctrine. Using the magazine *Al-Manar* (The lighthouse) as his mouthpiece, Rida promoted the *salafiyya* movement—a neotraditionalist orientation that restricted what was to be regarded as “correct” in Islam to the Qur’an and the *hadith* reports of the

period of Muhammad's life and the reign of the first four "rightly guided" Caliphs in the Sunni tradition: Abu Bakr, 'Umar, 'Uthman, and 'Ali.

The *salafiyya* movement influenced many '*ulama*' (Muslim scholars) in the Sunni Arab world. It was a factor in the formation of the Association of Algerian 'Ulama' in 1931, an Islamist current that was largely absorbed into the National Liberation Front (FLN) and later became a source of inspiration for the Islamist opposition to the Algerian regime in the 1980s (see the chapter of Meriem Vergès and the interview with Rabia Bekkar). *Salafiyya* ideas also influenced the thinking of 'Izz al-Din al-Qassam, a Muslim religious functionary in Haifa who organized a short-lived Palestinian guerrilla movement against the British and the Zionists in 1935. The military units of Hamas (Harakat al-Muqawama al-Islamiyya), the 'Izz al-Din al-Qassam Brigades, are named after him (see Graham Usher's chapter and interview with Bassam Jarrar).

Hasan al-Banna (1906–49), an Egyptian schoolteacher working in Isma'iliyya, the headquarters of the Suez Canal Company and a highly Europeanized site, was one of those influenced by Rashid Rida and *Al-Manar*. In 1928 he established the Society of Muslim Brothers (Jam'iyyat al-Ikhwan al-Muslimin), which became the largest and most influential Islamist organization in the Sunni Arab world. After emerging as an important factor in Egyptian politics in the late 1930s, the Muslim Brothers established branches in Syria, Palestine, Jordan, and Sudan. As Hamid al-Nayfar explains in his interview, the Muslim Brothers were also a negative example for the Islamic Tendency Movement in Tunisia.

Many of the radical Islamist movements of the 1970s are inspired by the thinking of Sayyid Qutb, a Muslim Brother leader executed for allegedly planning to overthrow the Egyptian government in 1966. Qutb had argued that the regime of Gamal 'Abd al-Nasir, since it had tortured and imprisoned pious Muslims, was not a Muslim state but a regime of pre-Islamic ignorance (*jahiliyya*). Hence, it was legitimate to launch a *jihad* against such a regime.⁴

The Shi'a tradition—the minority orientation which regards the Prophet's cousin, 'Ali, as the first legitimate Caliph and believes that succession to the leadership of the Muslim community should have been confined to members of Muhammad's family—has an entirely different genealogy. It is geographically centered in Iran and southern Iraq, where the Shi'a form the large majority of Muslims. An important political focus of much of modern Shi'i thought is the struggle of the '*ulama*' (or *mullahs* in Persian) to assert the primacy of their authority against the Qajar and Pahlavi monarchies of Iran.

ISLAM AND MODERN POLITICS

The conventional narrative of the origins of modern Islamic thought easily lends itself to the erroneous thesis that political Islam is the result of the

failure of modern Muslims to assimilate European liberal ideas such as the separation of church and state, the rule of positive law, citizenship, and secular nationalism.⁵ In discussing political Islam, we must move beyond the explication of texts and the biographies of intellectual figures to examine the local circumstances and historical particularities of each movement, which often turn out to be more substantial than a simple conception of “Islam” in opposition to secular politics.

Al-Afghani’s activities, for instance, contributed to the nationalist movements in both Shi’i Iran and Sunni Egypt. Muhammad ‘Abduh was a religious reformer, a friend of Lord Cromer, and also the intellectual inspiration of many of the secular liberal Egyptian nationalists of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. His circle included the leading secularist, Ahmad Lutfi al-Sayyid, the future leader of the Wafd, Sa’d Zaghlul, and the early proponent of women’s rights, Qasim Amin. ‘Abduh may actually have written part of Amin’s widely discussed book, *The Liberation of Women*.⁶ Rashid Rida’s arguments for dismantling the Ottoman Empire—a regime headed by a sultan who also claimed to be the Sunni Caliph—on the grounds that it was despotic, contributed to the development of Arab nationalism.

The Muslim Brothers were among the first political groups to popularize the cause of Arab Palestine in Egypt, collecting financial contributions for the 1936–39 Arab Revolt and sending volunteers to fight in 1948. The Brothers also participated in the guerrilla attacks against the British base on the Suez Canal in 1951–52, an important component of the upsurge of the nationalist movement that ended the Egyptian monarchy. They were an early ally of Gamal ‘Abd al-Nasir and the Free Officers, who came to power on July 23, 1952, but they later fell out with the new military regime. Many varieties of Arab nationalism in the 1956–67 era—Nasirism, the Ba’th, the Algerian FLN—easily appropriated Islamic themes and symbols into a predominantly secular ideological orientation.

There are certainly links among the various components of the Islamist movement. The Iranian religious opposition to the Pahlavi regime and the revolution of 1979 inspired and promoted a network of Shi’a activism, including Amal and Hizb Allah in Lebanon (see the chapters of Salim Nasr and Assaf Kfoury), elements of the Iraqi opposition to the Ba’thist regime, and movements among the Shi’a minorities in the Persian-Arab Gulf states. The success of the Iranian revolution inspired other political Islamist tendencies, including many Sunni groups. As noted earlier, the Muslim Brothers and the several Islamic groups (Gama’at Islamiyya) that emerged as their radical opposition in Egypt are organizationally and intellectually linked to movements in Algeria, Palestine (see Graham Usher’s chapter), and Syria. Hamas was not only the Gaza branch of the Muslim Brothers; it was also promoted by Israel as an alternative to the PLO, which it subsequently

emerged to challenge (see the chapters of Rema Hammami and Graham Usher and the interview with Bassam Jarrar).

All these movements draw strength from the widespread deficiencies of the postcolonial states in the Middle East: massive corruption, overreliance on coercion, and the failure of Arab socialism in Egypt, Syria, Iraq, and Algeria—and a comparable form of state-led development in Turkey—to produce sustained economic development (see Karen Pfeifer's chapter on Islamic economics). These failures have coincided with the collapse of various secularist, nationalist, and leftist political projects, leaving the field of opposition politics more or less open to Islamists.

PETRO-ISLAM?

The Islamist movement since the 1970s has been the object of investigation by many analysts who view it as either a politico-military-strategic threat or a civilizational conflict (see Yahya Sadowski's chapter). The interpretation offered in this book rejects the thesis of "petro-Islam"—a comprehensive explanation for the movement advanced by the neoconservative, pro-Israel "policy intellectual" Daniel Pipes in the US media and by the Egyptian progressive secularist Fu'ad Zakariyya in the Arab world, among many others.⁷ According to this thesis, the defeat of secular Arab nationalism (Ba'athism in Syria and Nasirism in Egypt) in the Arab-Israeli war of 1967 strengthened the cultural and political weight of Saudi Arabia in the Middle East, especially after the sharp rise in oil prices following the 1973 Arab-Israeli war. The Saudis and/or Egyptians working in Saudi Arabia used their financial resources to fund the Muslim Brothers and other Islamist groups, who emerged as opponents of the regime of Anwar al-Sadat in Egypt: the first site of an important political opposition to a secular nationalist state and its ideology in the name of Islam in the post-1967 Arab world, followed shortly by Iran.

While superficially attractive in accounting for a certain historical conjuncture, this explanation is flawed because of the very partial set of factors it includes in its account. The Egyptian version of Fu'ad Zakariyya suggests that the source of a "backward" form of Islam is the culturally underdeveloped but materially rich Arabian Peninsula, which has been able to impose its values on "civilized" but materially poor Egypt. This approach ignores the prior history of political Islam in Egypt, where the Muslim Brothers clashed violently with the regime in 1948–49 and again in 1954, when they attempted to assassinate Gamal 'Abd al-Nasir.

As Richard P. Mitchell's classic study established,⁸ the Brothers had a substantial popular base in the 1940s and 1950s. Their activists were largely educated, urban effendis—the same social stratum that provided the main body of organizers and activists for all the political movements of twentieth-

century Egypt. The Nasir regime put an end to formal political democracy and sharply constricted the space of civil society by incorporating trade unions and professional associations into the apparatus of the state, heavily regulating other voluntary organizations, and banning all political parties except that of the regime. This was accompanied by a significant degree of repression directed primarily against the Marxists, but also against the regime's former allies, the Muslim Brothers.

In 1966, when Sayyid Qutb was "martyred" (in the terminology of the Islamist movement), Egypt was facing an economic crisis because of inability to increase simultaneously both investment (hence, long-term industrial and social development) and consumption (an important source of the regime's popular legitimacy). The 1967 war with Israel and its effects intensified the economic crisis and the repressive measures of the regime. It also created an opportunity for Islamist activists to argue that "the Jews" had won the war because they combined their religion and politics in the form of the State of Israel, whereas the Muslims had lost because of the secularism of 'Abd al-Nasir and the Ba'th. 'Abd al-Nasir died before he had to face the full consequences of the limits of his regime. His successor, Anwar al-Sadat, quickly moved to dismantle major elements of the Nasirist system and recruited Muslim Brothers and student Islamist activists in the battle against the remaining Nasirists and leftists who opposed him. Only after al-Sadat's autocratic tendencies were clearly manifested, the promises of economic prosperity failed to materialize, and the peace treaty with Israel was signed did the Islamist movement break with the Egyptian regime.

Khalid Medani's chapter on Sudan underlines the importance of specific trajectories of capital to the growth of that country's Islamic movement and the Islamist regime installed there in June 1989. Islamic movements in Algeria, Egypt, and Iran have also been associated with local mercantile and financial interests that have avoided the control of the state and established their own links to international capital. The Egyptian and Jordanian movements have benefited from the remittances of workers employed in the oil-producing states. These funding links certainly played a role in the regional success of political Islam.

Yet Islamic movements have demonstrated a high level of autonomy from their original patrons. Following the debt crisis of the 1980s, the decline of the price of oil, and the IMF-imposed economic restructuring projects that limited state expenditures, the efficacy of states has tended to become restricted to urban middle-class areas. States are unable to provide previously established levels of services or to insure adequate supplies of commodities to all sectors of their territory and population. The political and moral vacuum thus created has been occupied by the Islamists, who have established a social base by offering services that the various states have failed to provide (see the chapters of Carrie Rosefsky Wickham, Ronnie

Margulies and Ergin Yıldızoğlu, and Meriem Vergès). The mass support for political Islam throughout the Middle East is more substantial and sustained than would be possible if it had simply been bought by oil money. And it gained strength as a result of the combined failure and repression of liberal and left secular alternatives.

The case for “petro-Islam” in Iran is even weaker. Political activism of the Shi‘a *mullahs* has been an integral part of modern Iranian politics since the Tobacco Protest of 1890–92 and the Constitutional movement of 1906–11. Despite this history of activism, the political positions of the *mullahs* have not been unified: some supported, and others opposed, adopting a constitution based on positive law, for example. Some of the Shi‘a clerical hierarchy resisted the removal of the nationalist Mossadeq government and the restoration of Muhammad Reza Shah by a CIA-sponsored coup in 1953; others accepted funds from the United States to mobilize opposition to Mossadeq.⁹ The regime of the Shah, a major regional ally of the United States with important links to Israel, benefited enormously from the explosion of oil prices in 1973–77. Widespread popular perceptions of governmental corruption, economic discontent resulting from oil boom-caused inflation, and a perceived relaxation of the regime’s repressive apparatus after US President Jimmy Carter announced he would pursue a foreign policy of promoting “human rights” created an opening for the political activity that grew into a revolutionary movement.

The early stages of this movement were initiated by secular liberals, with the participation of Marxists and feminists. Only after January 1978 did Ayatollah Khomeini, who established a reputation of militant resistance to the Pahlavi regime as early as 1963, emerge as the titular leader of the revolutionary movement. After Khomeini returned to Iran in February 1979, pro-Khomeini clericalists fought a complex battle against secular political forces and religious forces with a different orientation. The local issues that generated support for the revolutionary movement may have had little to do with Islam, although Shi‘i ritual provided an important symbolic language and public space for staging the opposition to the Shah. And as Sami Zubaida suggests, the contest over what constitutes an “Islamic state” in Iran has produced some surprising outcomes.

POLITICAL ISLAM AND UNITED STATES POLICY

The most visible and prominent Islamist movements today are insurgent movements that represent challenges to existing regimes and to a political order that by and large has served Western interests well. This insurgent character, not their Islamic demeanor, underlies the generally adversarial relations between the United States and these movements. In one case, that of Iran, such a movement has seized and consolidated state power. Iran’s

revolution in 1979 marks the beginning of widespread American perceptions of an "Islamic threat." Subsequent developments elsewhere, most potently the kidnappings of Westerners in Lebanon in the mid-1980s, the targeting of Western tourists in Egypt in the early 1990s, and the rise of Palestinian Islamist groups resisting Israeli occupation in the 1990s, have sustained and amplified these perceptions of threat.

US policy spokespersons have recently taken great pains to stress that the United States has no inherent differences with Islam, or even with regimes that identify themselves as Islamic.¹⁰ This is to a large extent true. US policy toward Islamists has been basically instrumentalist. The professedly Islamic regimes of Saudi Arabia and Pakistan have been key strategic allies of the United States in the Middle East, and Sudan's Islamist military regime moved decisively into the adversary column only after shifting from the Saudi to the Iranian orbit. Some American policy makers assert, in fact, that the United States does not oppose Islamists, only extremists.

From 1980 to 1989 in Afghanistan, though, the largest CIA covert aid program in US history financed and armed the most extreme of the *mu-jahidin* groups fighting the Afghan communist regime in Kabul and the Soviet interventionary force that tried to save it. This US support has been a factor of major importance in the growth and military capabilities of militant Islamist forces in Egypt and elsewhere¹¹ (see the interview with Tal'at Fu'ad Qasim).

Saudi funding for Islamist groups and institutions going back to the mid-1960s was benignly observed from Washington because such assistance worked against radical nationalism—the Ba'th in Syria and 'Abd al-Nasir in Egypt—and supported conservative figures like King Husayn in Jordan. Similarly, there was no hint of any US reproach in the 1970s when the Egyptian government of Anwar al-Sadat, then on its way to becoming the second largest recipient (after Israel) of US economic and military aid, encouraged the Muslim Brothers and its radical offshoots to organize against nationalists and leftists. French scholar Olivier Roy writes, with only a little exaggeration, that "[t]he notion of a radical opposition between fundamentalism and the West is typically French. . . . Americans have never seen Islamism as an ideological enemy. They have favored neoconservative fundamentalism . . . in order to take the wind out of the radicals' sails."¹²

The Iranian revolution marked the end of a phase of "benign neglect" on the part of the United States and its allies in the region. But even US hostility toward Islamist Iran has been tempered by instrumentalism, particularly in the service of the American *jihad* against Soviet communism. The multibillion dollar campaign in support of militant Islam in Afghanistan was more of a pattern than an exception. In 1983, for instance, the CIA passed to the Khomeini regime an extensive list of Iranian communists and leftists working in the Iranian government. As the official Tower Com-

mission inquiry into the Iran-contra scandal dispassionately observed, "Using this information, the Khomeini government took measures, including mass executions, that virtually eliminated the pro-Soviet infrastructure in Iran."¹³ Two years later, backing Iraq in its war against Iran but fearing that a collapse of the Iranian regime might benefit the Soviet Union, the Reagan administration teamed up with Israel to initiate the arms shipments that became the Iran-contra affair.

Iran's revolution marked a watershed in the evolution of American attitudes and policy toward political Islam for several reasons. First, it demolished the main US regional ally and military surrogate in the Persian Gulf. Coming only four years after the US defeat in Indochina, and after a series of apparently successful revolutions and national liberation struggles in Ethiopia, Angola, Mozambique, and elsewhere, Iran's revolution seemed to mark a decisive decline of American power. The US role in restoring the Shah to power in 1953 and sustaining his regime, moreover, infused the revolution from the beginning with a fiercely anti-American character. A polarization of popular as well as elite attitudes in both countries occurred with the November 1979 takeover of the US embassy (following Washington's decision to allow the Shah to enter the United States). President Jimmy Carter's public dismissal of the events of 1953 as "ancient history" captured this polarization on the American side.¹⁴

Second, events in Iran were followed by several deeply disturbing indications, from an American elite point of view, that Iran's revolution might not be contained within its borders. One was the November 1979 takeover of the grand mosque in Mecca by a group of radical Islamist opponents of the Saudi regime; that rebellion had to be put down with the help of Jordanian and French military advisors. The second was the Soviet military intervention in Afghanistan beginning in December 1979, which exacerbated an American and Western sense of vulnerability in the Persian Gulf region. A third development was the October 1981 assassination of Anwar al-Sadat by Islamist Egyptian army officers.

The third complex reason relates to overlapping perceptions of Cold War vulnerability and rivalry. Although the disruption of oil markets caused by the Iranian revolution was relatively brief, it was popularly associated with the oil embargo triggered by the October 1973 Arab-Israeli war and the enormous increase in oil prices that accompanied the embargo. That Iran was not an Arab country mattered little: it was a Muslim Middle Eastern country that had visibly profited from the increase in oil revenues. These perceptions were further complicated by the campaign of conservative American political forces to scuttle detente with the Soviet Union and increase US military spending. Part of this campaign involved portraying the United States and its one reliable ally in the region, Israel, as beset by an Arab-Soviet axis, the Arab component threatening Israel and gouging the

wallets of ordinary Americans while the Soviet Union exploited detente to expand its global power.¹⁵

Iran's revolution unfolded within this perceptual framework. Seeing Iran in Cold War terms suited the agenda of the American right. The Islamic Revolution inserted a Muslim dimension into this familiar adversarial paradigm. This Muslim aspect, of course, came encumbered with its own perceptual freight: the European history of Christian-Muslim rivalry; the profile of American Black Muslim militancy in US race relations; and the very present and well-nurtured image of Muslim Arab hostility to Israel. All these elements were poured into the reductionist fray of American domestic politics and media representations.

LEBANON, ISRAEL, AND THE PLO

The perception of political Islam as militantly hostile to the United States (the West, Israel, etc.) intensified in the cauldron of the civil war which erupted in Lebanon in 1975. The conflict was commonly represented as pitting leftist Muslims, backed by the PLO, against rightist Christians, backed by Israel, though the reality was far more complex. The shifting alliances and complex regional ramifications of the civil war allowed the Iranian revolution to extend its influence into Lebanon. This was not because Shi'ism has an innate proclivity for political opposition, martyrdom, or terrorism, as many facile Western analyses proposed.¹⁶ It was the result of the historic underrepresentation and marginalization of the Lebanese Shi'a (the largest single religious community in the country by the 1970s), the effects of the alliance between Israel and the Maronite Phalange in opposition to the PLO on the heavily Shi'i areas of south Lebanon, US support for Israel's invasion of Lebanon in 1982 and, subsequently, US military intervention as a party in the civil war.

The Iranian revolution further invigorated the already growing political mobilization of Lebanon's Shi'a community (see Salim Nasr's chapter). Simultaneously, Israel escalated its military efforts to eliminate the PLO as a political force. This climaxed with a full-scale invasion in June 1982, transparently backed by the Reagan administration, and a protracted military siege of Beirut over that summer.

When the Israeli siege of Beirut ended, US troops were brought in as part of a larger Western peacekeeping deployment. Over the following months, though, US forces became increasingly and openly engaged in supporting efforts of the Israeli-installed and Maronite-dominated government headed by Amin Gemayel to extend its power beyond the walls of the presidential palace. In April 1983, a suicide truck bomb attack by a Lebanese Shi'i group, Islamic Jihad, destroyed the US embassy, killing top CIA officials among many others. In August and September 1983, in support of the

Maronite-dominated Lebanese army, US battleships shelled positions of Druze and other opposition militias. In late October, another suicide truck bomb destroyed the US Marine Corps barracks, killing 241 US troops. By February 1984, the Reagan administration acknowledged that its military and political position in Lebanon was untenable and withdrew remaining US forces.

Following the US intervention in Lebanon, several Shi'i militias kidnapped and held hostage Americans and other Western civilians working in Beirut. Only at the beginning of the 1990s was the last of these hostages finally released. In the same period, largely Shi'a resistance forces launched many effective suicide attacks against Israeli troops in occupied south Lebanon.

The sequence of the Iranian revolution and the Lebanese Shi'i campaign against the United States and the Israeli presence in Lebanon, as filtered through Western media, generated images and attitudes that unproblematically equated Islamism with irrational, anti-Western, and anti-Israeli terrorism. (Sporadic attacks and counterattacks between the United States and Libya under Mua'mmar Qadhafi also fed this imagery, though Qadhafi's regime, in fact, opposed most Islamist currents.) The subsequent emergence of armed Islamist forces in Egypt, Algeria, and occupied Palestine, their military skills honed in the US- and Saudi-funded Afghanistan campaign, solidified and enlarged these images and attitudes.

POLITICAL ISLAM AND US POLICY AFTER THE COLD WAR

The mutually reinforcing relationship between these images and attitudes and US policy formation is complex. Perceptions of Iran and Lebanon altered Washington's historically largely instrumentalist approach to political Islam. The demise of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War further eroded the earlier pragmatism.

Over the past several years, as indicated above, the executive branch—the State Department, the National Security Council, and the Pentagon—has promoted a fairly consistent line, most prominently articulated by Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern Affairs, Robert Pelletreau, and his predecessor, Edward Djerejian. This approach rhetorically acknowledges the variety of Islamist political formations and distinguishes between those that, in Pelletreau's words, “choose to participate in their countries' electoral processes, hoping to affect change within existing political structures,” and those that “have opted for the use of violence against existing governments, indigenous minorities, and foreigners.”¹⁷

But US policy formulation is more than the words of high-level diplomats. Scanning the post-Cold War policy landscape, we find that the former focus of the instrumentalist approach, the Soviet Union, which served as a policy

compass or gyroscope for three-quarters of a century, is no more. An instrumentalist orientation now must take its bearings from the impact of Islamist politics in particular societies and the consequences for US interests in those countries. This is especially the case where Islamist political forces have, as in Algeria, become components of a popular oppositional consensus.

The collapse of the Soviet Union as a policy touchstone has created a vacuum of sorts, a phenomenon abhorred by "policy intellectuals" and geostrategists as much as by nature. There seem to be few contenders for a replacement; issues like hunger and social equity will not sustain outsized military budgets. One nominee is "the unknown," an intrinsically unreliable policy guide.¹⁸

A somewhat more serviceable contender is "Islamic fundamentalism." The sophisticated pronouncements of the Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern Affairs notwithstanding, "Islamic fundamentalism" does resonate with popular perceptions of the encounters of the United States with Iran and Lebanon over a decade and a half and, more recently, with the fierce hostility to US policies that apparently lies behind events like the bombing of the World Trade Center in New York. Equally important, Washington has opted for a policy of confrontation with Iran in the Persian Gulf region. This is not primarily because Iran is "Islamic" or "fundamentalist," but because Iranian nationalism, and the experience of Iran's mass political mobilization, represent the strongest challenge to the present configuration of Western interests and client regimes there.

That this Iranian radical model is clothed in a supranational Islamist ideology is pertinent but secondary. The core problem for American policy is Iran, not Islam. Islamist ideology and discourse, though, extend beyond Iran to include Palestinians, Lebanese, Egyptians, Sudanese, Tunisians, Algerians, and others. Most Western representations stress the similarities—including a vociferous anti-imperialism and anti-Americanism—rather than the differences and rivalries among these different movements. Undeniably, factional struggles in Iran have resulted in provocative and sometimes murderous behavior by the Iranian government or its agents. This facilitates and encourages a displacement, both intentional and otherwise, of the policy problem: Iran is a threat because it is "fundamentalist"—with all the attributes of irrationality and fanaticism that this notion has acquired.

Does Iran have legitimate interests in the Persian Gulf region which US policy might better accommodate than deny? Is a conflict between Iranian and American interests intrinsic and unavoidable? These questions lie beyond the scope of this essay; our point here is that Iran's posture facilitates a policy of containment and confrontation that is only incidentally related to that country's Islamic character. One way to explore how this policy has

emerged is to consider the differential impact of that confrontation/containment approach on policy elsewhere in the Middle East.

FROM TEHRAN TO ALGIERS

US rhetoric and policies with regard to Algeria, Tunisia, Egypt, Palestine, and Iran reveal some interesting contrasts and variations. The further away from the Persian Gulf and the Israeli-Palestinian arena—away, in other words, from core US economic and strategic concerns—the more nuanced and situationally specific are the articulations of policy.

In the case of Algeria, Assistant Secretary of State Pelletreau in November 1994 asserted that a solution to that country's political crisis "lies not in a strategy of repression, but one of inclusion and reconciliation," and expressed concern over "the growing influence of hardliners in the military leadership who reject compromise with the opposition and intend to step up efforts to crush the armed insurgency by force." The US government, he claimed, has "repeatedly stressed to Algerian leaders at the highest levels the need for concrete steps to establish dialogue with opposition elements—secular and Islamist—willing to work towards a non-violent solution."¹⁹ Reports from Algiers and Paris as well as Washington suggest that these remarks fairly characterize Washington's current approach, though US policy has not gone so far as to oppose financial support for the regime via the International Monetary Fund, for instance.

And when the Algerian military intervened in January 1992 to cancel elections that almost surely would have brought the Islamic Salvation Front (FIS) to power, Washington's protests were lax. Former Secretary of State James Baker recently acknowledged that "[w]hen I was at the State Department, we pursued a policy of excluding the radical fundamentalists in Algeria, even though we recognized that this was somewhat at odds with our support of democracy."²⁰ It appears that Washington's current tack is largely a result of the failure of the earlier approach to stem the growing power of the Islamist forces.

The former US policy in Algeria is similar to the present policy toward other regimes where the balance of power between the state and the Islamist opponents has not shifted quite so dramatically. Speaking of Tunisia—where the regime of Zayn al-'Abidin Ben 'Ali has, for the moment, successfully repressed all Islamist and secular manifestations of political opposition—Pelletreau praised its participation in the Arab-Israeli "peace process" and its "GDP growth in excess of 5 percent per year for the past five years," with only the faintest plea for "a corresponding openness in the political system together with greater emphasis on human rights."²¹

Political Islam in Tunisia became a substantial factor under circumstances comparable to the Egyptian case. President Ben 'Ali has acknowl-

edged that “to some extent fundamentalism was of our own making, and was at one time encouraged in order to combat the threat of communism. Such groups were fostered in the universities and elsewhere at that time in order to offset the communists and to strike a balance.” He added, “My background in the military and security has provided me with a rich experience in understanding the problem.”²²

Pelletreau’s comments regarding Egypt were similarly discreet. Algeria’s “armed Islamist insurgency,” he acknowledged, arose from “political exclusion, economic misery, and social injustice.” The same list—rampant corruption might have been added—applies equally to Egypt. In November 1994, ‘Abd al-Rahim Shihata, the governor of Giza province, which includes much of greater Cairo, said the violent clashes in the poor quarter of Imbaba were “the least that should have happened, given the living conditions we found there. Actually, there probably should have been more violence.”²³

The Clinton administration reportedly told Egyptian officials in private that, as one US official put it, “you can’t repress your way out of this.”²⁴ President Mubarak, for his part, has rebuked the US embassy for maintaining contacts with the Muslim Brothers.²⁵ But Washington’s stake in the Mubarak regime’s survival, and the apparent US assessment that the Islamist groups do not pose an immediate threat to the regime’s hold on the levers of power, has led Pelletreau and others to confine themselves in public to platitudes about political pluralism and human rights. There are no signs that the Clinton administration has considered conditioning US military and economic aid to Egypt on respect for basic human and political rights.

In Algeria, Washington preaches conciliation and inclusion, but in Palestine-Israel the United States has unreservedly supported an Israeli policy of eradication. The US has never acknowledged the Israeli government’s role in promoting the Palestinian Islamist forces as a counterweight to the secularist PLO (see Graham Usher’s chapter), a cynical policy that has created something of a Frankenstein. Washington has not restrained, even rhetorically, Israel’s subsequent efforts to wipe out those same Islamist forces. The label of terrorist, once reserved for the PLO, is now deployed against Hamas and Hizb Allah, even when they target not civilians but troops and armored patrols. In the protracted Israeli-PLO negotiations following the September 1993 Declaration of Principles between the two sides, Washington unreservedly backed Israel’s insistence that the priority task of Yasir ‘Arafat’s new Palestinian National Authority in Gaza and Jericho was to suppress Hamas.

Israeli strategists, in search of a rationale for a post-Soviet “strategic relationship,” have been quick to cast their repression of Hamas as part of the battle for Western civilization. In December 1992, days after Israel expelled some 415 alleged Hamas activists across the Lebanese border, Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin told the Knesset that Israel was “stand[ing]

first today in the line of fire against extremist Islam.”²⁶ In the weeks and months that followed, Israeli and pro-Israeli US “terrorism experts” peppered US media with provocative but typically unverifiable sketches of Hamas funding networks and “command centers” in the United States, inferring that Israel’s policies of expulsion, mass arrests, house demolitions, and extrajudicial killings were also defending America.²⁷

Palestinian Islamists alone hardly warrant the over \$3 billion in military and “economic security” aid Israel receives from the United States each year. In any event, between the “Oslo II” agreement of September 1995 and January 1996, Israel changed tack and facilitated negotiations between ‘Arafat and Hamas over participation in upcoming elections and ending armed attacks against Israeli targets. Iran’s nasty reputation as an enemy of the “peace process” still rests largely on its support for Hamas, though in fact most of Hamas’s outside funding has come from US allies Saudi Arabia and Kuwait. Israel has actively promoted the notion of the Iranian threat. In early December 1992 Thomas Dine, then executive director of AIPAC (American-Israel Public Affairs Committee, the premier pro-Israel lobby organization), declared that his “most pressing” priority would be “moving Iran to the top of the US Mideast agenda,” and predicted that the many reports of an Iranian military buildup—not a few of which originated with Israeli “experts”—would make Iran “one of the top five” foreign policy concerns of the incoming Clinton administration.²⁸ Israeli Prime Minister Rabin, embarking on his first visit to the Clinton White House, told an Israeli reporter that Iran was on a “megalomaniacal” quest “to be a Middle East empire, by using all the varieties of fundamentalist Islam to shake Arab regimes.”²⁹ Immediately after Rabin’s visit, a spate of unattributed “terrorism expert” stories appeared in the *Washington Post*, *New York Times*, and *Los Angeles Times* warning, as the *New York Times* headline put it, “Iran-Backed Terrorists Are Growing More Aggressive.”³⁰

In fact, the Clinton administration seems to have paid little heed to the claims of the Egyptian and Algerian governments that the Islamist insurgencies they confront are inspired and sustained by Iran.³¹ But this reasonable position is not public policy. More typical is Secretary of State Christopher’s insistence, on his March 1995 visit to Tel Aviv, that “[w]herever you look, you will find the evil hand of Iran in this region.”³²

While Israel and its US partisans have loudly promoted the view that Iran is US enemy number one, this mutually self-serving and self-reinforcing exercise in threat construction finds many influential proponents in US policy circles as well. The February 1993 Joint Chiefs of Staff report on “Roles, Missions and Functions of the Armed Forces of the US,” for instance, observes that “[i]n the Middle East and Southwest Asia radical political Islam and a politically and militarily resurgent Iran threaten regional stability and directly challenge a number of US interests, including