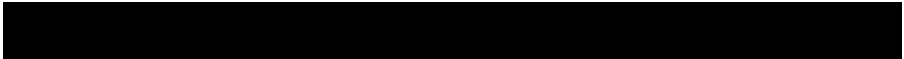# Strategy for an Ideological Campaign:
Assessment of Islamist Strengths and Weaknesses

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Introduction

- Purpose of project: develop a strategy for countering a hostile ideology
    - Previous such ideologies included fascism and communism
    - Currently, Islamism
- Content of this briefing:
    - Preliminary considerations: The relationship between ideology and national strategy
    - Discussion of Islamism's strengths and weaknesses
    - Global vs local focus
- ████████████████████████████

Preliminary Considerations: Ideology and National Strategy

National Security Strategy and Ideology: An Odd Couple

- "Strategy" often used as synonym for "plan"
  - Target can have a "strategy" for dealing with Walmart
  - A government "strategy" is often just a list of proposed actions
- By contrast, "national security strategy" denotes a comprehensive approach for dealing with a nation's security challenges and achieving its goals
  - This implies an – implicit or explicit – view about how the world works, what factors affect international relations, etc.
  - Our default theory of international relations is realism

Realism

- Realism as the predominant school of thought: From Thucydides via Machiavelli to Kissinger
    - States inevitably seek self-aggrandizement in terms of military, political and economic power
    - Ideological justifications for behavior are rationalizations
- Exception: "revolutionary" powers may be driven by "ideology" to behave "irrationally." But, the ideological impulse --
    - Is abandoned in face of a major challenge
    - Wears off over time in any case
- Thus, any ideological component in a strategy to counter the revolutionary power will likely be an afterthought.

Realism's Insufficiency

- Failed prediction: West didn't fracture after collapse of the Soviet Union – something else is holding us together
  - No Japanese or German nuclear weapons program
- Realism implies a clear-cut division between domestic and international politics
  - It admits that ideological factors affect domestic politics, but claims international politics is not affected
  - This goes against the notion of "globalized" world in which the boundary between domestic and foreign is eroded
  - In particular, this can't deal with a transnational movement – such as Islamism – whose "glue" is common set of beliefs

Is there an alternative to realism?

The Alternative to Realism

- The "liberal" tradition: Kant and followers.
    - Military power requires prosperity, which in turn requires free markets and respect for property.
        - Economic interdependency will trump power politics.
    - Political result will be spread of democracy.
        - Democratic countries will not fight each other ("democratic peace").
- Contemporary Western Europe as the paradigm.
    - Singer and Wildavsky: "Zone of Peace/Zone of Turmoil"
- In aftermath of Soviet collapse, "liberalism" seems to have been vindicated for the moment: China as the key test case?

*If liberalism is such a great theory,
why have we been at war for ten years?*

"Liberalism" and Its Discontents

- **From its beginning, "liberalism" has been dogged by "counter-ideologies": Romanticism, nationalism, fascism, communism**
  - Liberalism has defeated them, but sometimes at a high price.
- **Islamism is another in this series --**
  - Its core is a rejection of "liberalism" in the name of a political system defined by Islam:
    - The Qur'an as constitution
  - It appeals to Muslim sensibility and identity, but is not identical with Islam
  - It sees the liberal West as inevitably threatening to it

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Islamism as a Political Ideology

- Seen as the solution to political, economic and social problems
  - Claims to be the authentic interpretation of the religion of Islam, but differs from traditional Islam in many ways
- Reaction to weakness of the Muslim world; attributes this weakness to:
  - Falling away from the "authentic" Islam of the Prophet and his Companions.
  - Hostility of the West to Islam.
- Eventual victory guaranteed by:
  - God's favor; spiritual superiority of Islam
  - The West's softness and moral laxity

Islamist Ideology as Terrorism's "Center of Gravity"

- Terrorist groups can't conscript or tax
  - Also true of revolutionary groups and insurgencies (at least initially)
- Depend on attractiveness of an idea for support
  - Social and psychological factors help determine which individuals become fighters or supporters.
  - But the ideology (or "narrative") determines nature of actions, targets, etc.
  - Ideology serves as the glue of a "transnational movement."

Islamist Challenge Goes Beyond Terrorism

- Potential weakening of allied democracies with large Muslim immigrant populations.
  - Islamist influence can hinder adoption of democratic values and integration into the host society.
- Islamism may influence policies of Muslim-majority countries in a manner hostile to U.S. interests.
  - E.g., possible evolution of Egyptian policy under influence of Muslim Brotherhood
- Islamist governments will likely be hostile to U.S. despite their "national" interests.

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Islamism:
Strengths and Weaknesses

First Steps in Formulating a Strategy

- Objective: Weaken Islamism's appeal
  - In Muslim countries
  - To Muslims in non-Muslim countries
- What are the alternative ideologies?
  - Many alternatives that would be preferable from our point of view.
  - Our strategy need not promote any particular one.
    - The invigoration of debate within the Muslim world is itself beneficial.
- Some ideologies may be more attractive to some Muslim populations than to others
  - E.g., Specific nationalisms
  - Possibility of a "European" Islam?

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Remainder of Briefing: Two Tasks

- Assessing strengths and weaknesses of Islamism and the alternatives

- Taking into account specific characteristics of the various Muslim populations

Formulating a Strategy: Assessing Strengths and Weaknesses

- Determine strengths and weaknesses of adversary and oneself
    - Hard enough to do when dealing with military or politico-military matters
    - Much harder to do with respect to ideology; not aware of any attempts to do this
- Assess strengths and weaknesses in terms of:
    - *Attractiveness* of the ideology to the relevant audiences
    - *Effectiveness* of methods for propagating it to audiences
    - *Not* in terms of truth value

Islamism: Strengths -- I

- Provides an explanation for Muslim weakness that maintains dignity and pride …
    - Self-critical, but in a manner that glorifies rather than criticizes Islam itself
        - Thus, pride in one's identity is maintained.
    - Notion of inherent Western hostility takes away responsibility for one's own bad situation
- … and promises a deservedly glorious future
    - God will reward the return to authentic religion
    - By contrast, West's materialism and lack of spirituality will cause it to lose out eventually

Islamism: Strengths -- II

- Provides a religion-based identity for those subject to "deculturation" through "globalization"
  - E.g., 2nd and 3rd generation Muslim immigrants in Europe, who have lost the original national/ethnic identity but don't feel accepted by country of residence
    - An "acceptable" means of rebelling against authority?
  - Also those living in Muslim countries, but buffeted by "globalization" and modernization
    - In particular, young men threatened with devaluation of the traditional male role in family life
  - Promotes sense of dignity via membership in *umma*
- Provides strict moral code in a "corrupt" world
  - Appeal to those seeking "structure", "direction"

Islamism: Strengths -- III

- Explains intra-Muslim violence as caused by the West: One side can be seen as "lackeys" of the West and hence not true Muslims

  - E.g., Once U.S. troops were deployed to defend Saudi Arabia, Desert Storm could be regarded as a conflict between Islam and the West rather that between two groups of Muslims.

- Preserves the notion of a united *Umma* under attack by the West

Islamism: Weaknesses -- I

- **Islamist rule has been unsuccessful where tried**
  - Rapid collapse of Taliban rule in Afghanistan demonstrated Taliban's inability to develop a social base
  - Sudan: Islamist rule led to break-up of country
  - Hamas in Gaza (bad situation even as compared to West Bank)
  - Iran has been most successful instance of Islamist rule; but strains are showing

- **Absence of a clear political program**
  - Unlike fascism and communism, Islamism has little specific to say about how society and the state should be organized

Challenge of the Arab Spring:
Will Islamism undergo a "rendezvous with reality"
in Tunisia and Egypt?

Islamism: Weaknesses -- II

- **Indiscriminate violence causes resentment, revulsion**
  - Iraqi Sunni "Awakening" movement as a reaction to AQI
    - E.g., Zawahiri's letter to Zarqawi
  - Descent of the Algerian revolt into indiscriminate violence
- **Harshness of rule**
  - Intrusiveness in everyday life (dress, hairstyle, etc.)
  - Prohibition of innocent pleasures (E.g., Taliban banned music, kite flying)
  - Prohibition of forms of popular worship (E.g., attendance at shrines)
  - Occasional outrages (E.g., Saudi religious police forced unveiled girls back into burning school)
  - Strictness – however attractive to some at some times – goes "against the grain": difficult to maintain high pitch of dedication over time

Islamism: Weaknesses -- III

- **Resistance by traditional social authorities**
  - Islamists as competitors of tribal sheikhs, traditional clerics, etc.
  - Threat to parental authority

- **Suppression of women.**
  - Increased educational, professional opportunities for women in most countries
  - Does this put many women on a collision course with Islamism?
    - Role of female Islamists

- **Does Islamism depend on success?**
  - Does political-military defeat undermine the basic premise God ensures that the faithful will be victorious?
  - Does the "cult of martyrdom" make defeat acceptable?

Shi'a Variant (Rule of the Jurisprudent): Strengths

- Similar to other Islamism: explanation for weakness, etc.
- Release from frustrations of the quietist posture (waiting for divine aid to improve one's political situation)
- Iran as most successful Islamist effort in terms of governing
  - Successful defiance of West
  - Maintenance of popular support (at least until 2009)
  - National achievements (science, culture)

Shi'a Variant (Rule of the Jurisprudent): Weaknesses

- Clerical resistance against deviation from Shi'a quietist tradition:
    - Opposition of Ayatollah Sistani, other major clerics, even in Qom
- Subordinating Shi'a clerics to central control (of Supreme Leader) may weakens their direct connection with the faithful
    - Individual ayatollahs no longer control the charitable contributions of their followers
- Close association of religion and politics risks harming religion's prestige

Methods of Propagation

- **Strengths**
  - Propagate within Muslim institutions, especially mosques and schools.
    - In authoritarian Muslim states, these institutions may be only places where anti-regime views can be expressed
    - In Western Europe and elsewhere, can target young males who aren't integrated into the society
  - Use of internet (enables small communities of interest to stay in touch easily – absence of "gatekeepers")
  - Generous financing from Gulf
  - Propaganda of the deed – a simple action (e.g., attempt to blow up a car bomb in Times Square) receives a huge amount of publicity
- **Weaknesses**
  - Possible confusion of messages – no authoritative source.
  - Communication via internet makes determination of authenticity difficult

Alternatives to Islamism

- Our strategy need not be tied to the promotion of any particular ideological alternative.
  - The invigoration of debate within the Muslim world is itself beneficial.
- Liberal democracy
  - Western notions of equality and liberty, religious belief as a private matter.
  - Wouldn't necessarily see the West as an enemy since Western secularism wouldn't be a threat to it.
- "Traditional" non-political Islam.
  - Emphasis on the devotional as opposed to the political aspects of the religion
    - Could imply Islam as a state religion
  - Attitude toward West would reflect state policy rather than ideology

- Reform or "modernized" Islam.
  - Development of a "modern" Islam compatible with liberal democracy
  - Wouldn't see liberal democracy as threatening

Liberal Democracy: Strengths

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- Identification with the political, economic and military successes of the West.
    - Plays on desire to participate in these successes, e.g., desire to migrate to the West.
- Personal freedoms (religious and otherwise)
- Greater opportunities for women
    - Increasing number of educated women in Muslim world

Liberal Democracy: Weaknesses

- Seen as "foreign," hence vulnerable to the charge of "selling out" one's identity and dignity
    - For Muslim immigrants in the West, may involve loss of sense of community
    - Liberal democracy blamed for disappointments and difficulties of the immigrant experience
- Revulsion at Western moral laxness, excesses of popular culture, etc.
    - Seen as threat to traditional order, to male-dominated family life.
- Sustained intellectual attack on liberal democracy and the "bourgeoisie" from within the West
    - "Multiculturalism" interpreted as Western loss of confidence?

Liberal Democracy: Propagation

- ## Strengths
  - Propagation by "globalized media"
    - Especially entertainment media
  - Increased travel to West; education in the West
  - Contact with Muslims living in West
    - Can be a two-edged sword
- ## Weaknesses
  - Opposition of many clerics, upholders of traditional morality
    - Western media emphasize vices, unattractive qualities
  - Arguments from West can be easily dismissed
    - In fact, not many are making the argument on a principled basis.

"Traditional" Islam: Strengths

- Traditional sources of authority (where they exist)
    - Official *ulema* (body of Islamic scholars)
    - Tribal leaders
- Often tied in to other forms of identity (e.g., ethnic)
- Greater spirituality than politicized Islam (esp. Sufism)

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"Traditional" Islam: Weaknesses

- "Traditional" Islam's social and ethnic context may be already weakened or destroyed

- "Traditional" Islam may seem "old-fashioned" to many youth
  - Doesn't address directly the political issues, esp. the resentment of the West.
  - Hence, can be portrayed as a form of "collaborationism."

- Traditional clerics typically financed by the state;
  - Hence can be seen as corrupt, as lackeys of authoritarian rulers, etc.

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"Traditional" Islam: Propagation

- **Strengths**
  - Traditional cultural influences:
    - Traditional clerics, where they still exist and have influence
    - Parents and grandparents
- **Weaknesses**
  - Spokesmen may be discredited by:
    - Ties to authoritarian regimes
    - Ignorance of new communications methods
    - Inability to make traditional teachings seem relevant to young people

"Modernized" Islam: Strengths

- Could accommodate desire for more personal freedom, across many dimensions

- Could promise access to Western prosperity while not giving up faith or identity
    - Might result from existence of large Muslim populations in Western countries

"Modernized" Islam: Weaknesses

- Doctrine currently does not exist – would have to be developed intellectually
  - Serious obstacles to be overcome
- Record of "secular" regimes in the Muslim world is not good
  - Led to corrupt, unsuccessful regimes
- Seen as "inauthentic", as imitative of the West and hence non-Islamic

"Modernized" Islam: Propagation

- **Strengths**
  - No specific strengths
  - May be seen as compatible with actual living situation of successful Muslims in non-Muslim countries

- **Weaknesses**
  - Dependent on small number of intellectuals who lack influence with Muslim populations

Formulating a Strategy: Global vs Local Considerations

- Islamism is a trans-national ideology

- Muslim populations, however, differ in terms of ethnicity, culture, language, history, etc.

- A strategy for countering Islamism has to deal with both aspects of the problem:

    - Weakening Islamism as a global phenomenon, while…

    - Taking into account the peculiarities of a given Muslim population.

- Islamism and the alternatives to it may appeal differently to different populations

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Three Sample Cases

- Impossible to choose "representative" cases – the variation among Muslim populations is too wide

- Brief look at three cases demonstrates this diversity:
  - Egypt
  - Western Europe
  - Iran

- For each case, we look at
  - Its importance
  - The way in which its particularities affect the various ideologies' strengths and weaknesses

Egypt -- Importance

- Largest Arab country – traditional political, cultural and intellectual center

    - Birthplace of the Muslim Brotherhood

- Strongest military force on Israel's border

    - Peace treaty with Israel has been region's greatest force for stability

- Overthrow of Mubarak marks end of 60 years of the military-authoritarian regime

- Non-Muslim minority (Coptic Christian) comprises about 10% of total population

Egypt – Effects on Ideologies' Strengths and Weaknesses

- Islamism has been a major force since the 1930s
  - Egypt has experienced the failure of alternatives – liberalism, pan-Arab nationalism, socialism
  - Current strength of the Muslim Brotherhood (MB)
- In aftermath of revolution, MB committed to competing in a democratic framework
  - If democratic structure endures, MB will be forced to take some responsibility for governing, for achieving practical results
  - This may weaken its popularity

Western Europe -- Importance

- **Potential effect on politics in Western Europe:**
  - Rise of right-wing anti-immigrant parties
  - Effect on foreign policy as Muslims become a significant part of the electorate
- **Large Muslim population in a unique situation –** *voluntarily* **resident in countries not ruled by Muslims**
  - Leading to a jurisprudence for Muslim minority populations
- **A moderate, pragmatic "minority jurisprudence" could be a major influence on Muslims globally**
  - Conversely, failure to normalize the situation of Muslim populations could exacerbate sense of Western hostility

Western Europe -- Effects on Ideologies' Strengths and Weaknesses

- Greater attractiveness of the Islamist "identity" given marginalized social situation

- Greater familiarity with life in a liberal democracy:
  - "Silent" influence on behavior, beliefs
  - Strong reaction by some, leading to involvement in terrorism

- Potentially greater openness to a "modernized" Islam that emphasizes private belief, spirituality

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Iran -- Importance

- **Major center of Shi'ism**
  - Influence in Lebanon, Iraq
- **Heir to traditional (pre-Islamic) Persian culture**
- **Most successful example of Islamist governance – although fraying:**
  - Widespread popular dissatisfaction due to constraints on personal freedom, economic difficulties, corruption
  - Split within the elite between Supreme Leader and Ahmadinejad on political role of the clerics
    - Ahmadinejad's appeal to Iranian nationalism

Iran -- Effects on Ideologies' Strengths and Weaknesses

- **Economic problems weaken appeal of Islamism**
  - Corruption; monopolization of economic life by clerics, IRGC
  - Use of resources to promote Islamist agenda internationally
- **Greater appeal of democratic freedoms and openness to the West**
- **Resentment of suppression of pre-Islamic Iranian heritage and culture**
  - Greater appeal of nationalism as alternative to Islamism
  - ██████████████████████████████████

Next Steps -- Development of strategy

- **Basic approach: influence the debate within Muslim world**
  - Weaken Islamist voices
  - Amplify/support other voices
- **Role of US Government in affecting the debate**
  - How much can the government do?
  - How can the government marshal non-governmental resources?
  - International cooperation

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Next Steps -- Development of strategy (Continued)

- Global and regional strategies
- Interplay between words and deeds
  - Effect of forceful U.S. actions
    - Use of force breeds resentment
    - Strong horse vs weak horse
- Coordination of USG actions and words

Back Up Slides

Islamism – Definition

- "Islamism" as a political ideology, the solution to all political, economic and social problems.

- Reaction to weakness of the Muslim world vis-à-vis the West, and the failure of other solutions (liberalism, nationalism, socialism).

- Weakness of the Muslim world attributed to:
  - Falling away from the "authentic" Islam of the Prophet and his Companions.
  - Hostility of the West to Islam.

- Eventual victory guaranteed by:
  - God's favor; essential superiority of Islam
  - The West's softness and moral laxity.

Islamism – A Political Ideology

- "Islamism" as a political ideology, claiming to be the authentic interpretation of the religion of Islam.
  - Emphasis on Islam as the solution to political, economic and social problems *vice* as a personal faith, means to salvation
  - Differs from traditional Islam:
    - Claims to "purify" traditional Islam by returning to the sources (Qu'ran and hadith) and the example of the Prophet
    - Rejects the distinction between political and religious leaders, which arose relatively early in Muslim history
    - Rejects almost all traditional Islamic jurisprudence and scholarship.
- In the tradition of other political ideologies which reject the modern "liberal" order (e.g., fascism and communism.)
  - *"…the illusion held by the Islamic radicals is that they represent tradition, when in fact they express a negative form of westernization."* -- Olivier Roy

Islamism – Origins

- Earliest theorists – latter part of 19th century.
- Reaction to weakness of the Muslim world vis-à-vis the West:
  - End of Mughal Rule in India and retreat of the Ottoman Empire in Europe
  - European colonialism in North Africa and Egypt
- Exacerbated by results of World War I
  - End of the Ottoman Empire
  - Western rule of most of Arab world
  - Abolition of the Caliphate in 1924
  - More recently: military defeat by Israel
- Failure of other solutions: liberalism, nationalism, socialism

Islamism – "Islam is the Solution"

- Falling away from "pure" or "authentic" Islam seen as cause of weakness
  - Islam as an all-inclusive order containing solutions to all political, social and economic problems.
- "Authentic" Islam: as practiced by the Prophet and his Companions and immediate successors
  - Therefore, return to "authentic" Islam will produce similar political-military success
  - In principle, would require a Caliph, ruling entire Ummah
- Shi'a variant: Khomeini'ism
  - "Rule of the Jurisprudent" pending return of the 12th Imam.

Islamism – Hostility to the West

- Inevitable hostility of the West toward Islam
  - Desire to keep Islam from succeeding
  - Continuation of the old rivalry between Christendom and Islam
    - Islamist "Brezhnev doctrine"
- Islam is essentially superior to the "decadent" West
  - West is ahead technologically, but inferior spiritually
  - West as "Satan," i.e., tempter

Islamism -- Differing Views

- Differences depending on view of the "original" or "authentic" Islam

- Several versions:
  - Late 19th century "reformers": application of the essence of Islam to new conditions
  - Salafis: precise imitation of the Prophet and his Companions
  - Muslim Brotherhood: focus on organizational and political factors