Countering Islamism in the Middle East

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Countering Islamism is one of the key strategic challenges facing the Trump administration. Certainly, the president in his campaign made it clear he would confront this threat and defeat it. He also criticized his predecessor for not being willing to use the term "Islamist" and label its adherents terrorists.

To be fair, the term itself needs definition. The Obama administration, and senior officials like H. R. McMaster in the Trump administration, legitimately feared that using the term "Islamism" could create an impression that we were fighting Islam. Islam is one of the world's great religious faiths. Nearly 1.5 billion people identify as Muslims. No strategy for countering those who spread a violent ideology and employ terror in its pursuit can be successful if it alienates those who believe in Islam.

So the starting point must be clarity on the terms that are used. Countering "violent extremism" is a formulation developed in the Obama administration that is also being used in the Trump presidency. But Islamism is a term that can be used provided it is explained, particularly as it relates to the Middle East. Islamism, unlike Islam, is not a religion, but an ideology. It does not seek to promote an ethical set of principles or values for living a just life. Just the opposite: it is an ideology of power and control based on applying a narrow interpretation of sharia law.

Those who seek to take the ideology of Islamism and translate it into political power are Islamists. They come in many different forms. Distinctions should be drawn between radical and pragmatic Islamists. Radical Islamists will accept nothing less than complete control over every aspect of governance. They are also bent on expansion. More pragmatic Islamists favor the application of sharia law to daily life and draw no distinctions between religion and politics—but may be more willing to accept others and participate with them politically. Examples include Ennahda in Tunisia and the National Congress Party in Jordan. The former was actually the dominant party in Tunisia, but worked and negotiated with secular parties. The latter left the Muslim Brotherhood in Jordan and operates within the country's political system and institutions.

If not all Islamists are the same, an effective strategy must take account of the differences. On the one hand, there can be little doubt that less extreme Islamists are part of the social fabric of a number of Arab countries and are difficult to simply dismiss or exclude politically. On the other hand, if such people reject secular law and insist that it cannot rule in place of sharia, is it really possible to integrate them into the political process? This, of course, may be one of the measures for determining whether Islamists should be allowed to participate politically—meaning that they must be willing to respect secular rule and laws.

Some argue that so long as Islamist parties reject the use of violence, they should be allowed to participate and be included in the political process. Otherwise, they argue, these groups will inevitably be radicalized. There is something to this argument. But if violence alone is the criterion, the danger is that Islamist groups will play by the rules until they are able to come to power through democratic means and then change the rules to exclude non-Islamists. The old slogan of Islamists favoring an election so long as it was "one person, one vote, one time" certainly seemed to apply to Mohamed Morsi and the Muslim Brotherhood (MB) in Egypt. Once Morsi was elected president, he included only members of the MB in government and declared at one point that he was not subject to judicial rulings.

The lesson here is that there should be no blanket rule. Rather, a case-by-case approach should be applied to see if an Islamist party is acting like a party and not a movement. Is it truly nonviolent? Is it inclusive? Does it respect the rules and accept pluralism? Ennahda certainly meets these tests in Tunisia and, most important, was willing to surrender power. Ironically, Ennahda no longer refers to itself as Islamist. The parties that split off from the MB in Jordan also seem to meet the test.

Olivier Roy, in a review of *Rethinking Political Islam*, offers a similar approach to differentiating among Islamists.[1] He suggests that the distinction should be between those he portrays as "mainstream" or "contextualist" Islamists as opposed to the "essentialists." The former group "holds that the policies and practices of Islamist movements are driven less by ideology than by events and sees such groups as reactive and adaptive." As such, they can be integrated. The latter are driven by their ideology and "any concessions they make to secularist principles or institutions are purely tactical." With them, there should be no accommodation.

In many of the discussions in *Rethinking Political Islam*, the main measure of Islamist pragmatism is opposition to violence—and the general conclusion is that those groups should be included politically.[2] As noted above, while I think there is something to

this argument, I find this criterion too narrow. After all, many Islamist groups may not advocate violence within their countries, but they almost never seem to oppose it being used elsewhere. (Before President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi replaced Morsi, the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt was a good example of a party that said it was against violence in Egypt but never seemed to oppose it outside of Egypt—especially against Israel. Now their remnants favor it against the al-Sisi regime.) In other words, opposition to violence everywhere might be a better measure for evaluating whether an Islamist group or party is genuinely committed to playing by the rules even when circumstances change or it assumes power.

Regardless, there should be no room for accommodating the radical Islamists. It is not just that they might fit Roy's definition of "essentialists." It is that their ideology not only drives them but that they are inherently violent, extolling its virtues and calling for it against nonbelievers—and their definition of believers includes only those who follow them. In essence, they embody an ideology of power, rejection, exclusion, and intolerance.

Radical Islamists reject "the other" and demonize those who don't accept their ideology and its demands literally. They can be Sunni or Shia. True, radical Sunni and Shia fight each other. But their ideologies have much in common.

- They are authoritarian, brook no dissent, and reject pluralism.

- They reject the legitimacy of states and their governing authority. (Radical Sunnis don't recognize borders but neither do the radical Shias who are active in a number of Arab states and consistently seek either to undermine or to gain leverage over the governmental authorities there.)

- For both, terror is a fundamental instrument of policy.

- In the Middle East, both seek the end of any vestige of American presence or influence.

- Similarly, both reject Israel's existence and peace with it.

Of course, the Iranians and their associated Shia militias, on the one hand, and radical Sunnis like al-Qaeda and the Islamic State, on the other, differ in their tactics and public postures. Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State are quick to label others apostates—which for them justifies the penalty of death. The Iranian style is certainly different. And the Islamic Republic deals with other countries. Still, for all their differences, the

Quds Force of Iran's Revolutionary Guard actively seeks to subvert many of the very governments it deals with in the Middle East, much as the Soviet Union historically employed the KGB or the Comintern to work against the governments it formally dealt with. The point is that we need a strategy that deals with both.

A strategy for countering radical Sunni and Shia Islamists must employ and integrate all the tools of statecraft. Against groups like the Islamic State and al-Qaeda, the beginning point is defeating them militarily. In the case of the Islamic State, it must be seen as losing. So much of its initial appeal was not just the appearance of success but its apparent ability to win against all odds. How could one thousand members of the Islamic State take on thirty thousand Iraqi soldiers in Mosul and win? (In truth, it is not hard to win when the other side chooses not to fight. In this case, the Iraqi military simply chose not to fight—especially for a corrupt regime and officer corps from which it was largely alienated.) But the perception was that for the Islamic State fighters to succeed so easily, they must have had mystical powers—something that lent credence to the claim of Islamic State leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi that the caliphate's soldiers had a divine mandate and were divine messengers. Moreover, with his declaration of the caliphate, he seemed to fulfill the prophecy of the Prophet Muhammad.

All this created an image of great success. Like any charismatic movement, it fed on its success. Losing, however, by definition chipped away at its basic claim of divine backing. Al-Baghdadi at one point tried to anticipate defeats and the inevitable erosion of the Islamic State's appeal by rationalizing setbacks, explaining they were to be expected because Allah always tests the faith of his followers. Nonetheless, it was the image of success that fostered its emergence and its following. The loss of territory, and especially the loss of Mosul and Raqqa—the two greatest symbols of its success—will take a toll on the Islamic State's appeal. Practically speaking, the loss of territory also denies the Islamic State the ability and the sanctuary to operate, plan, and organize attacks both in the Middle East and outside it.

Military defeat alone, however, cannot discredit the Islamic State's ideology. The basic idea underpinning its ideology must be discredited. By definition, non-Muslims cannot do that. Muslims can—and they should use social media much the way the Islamic State has as a platform to spread its message and appeal. There are many ways this can be done. Consider, for example, the imagery of Islamic State soldiers surrendering— and many have surrendered to the Kurdish-led YPG (People's Protection Units) in Syria. There must be pictures of them surrendering with their hands up, waving white flags. The Islamic State narrative is that these soldiers have a divine mission. What sort

of divine messengers surrender? Showing these images and having them go viral will do more to undermine the Islamic State "idea" than counter-messaging. Indeed, let these images speak for themselves.

Similarly, put defectors from the Islamic State or those who lived under its brutal, arbitrary rule on social media and let them tell their stories and what they experienced. Let them expose the Islamic State and its abuse of power, corruption, and extreme brutality. Their stories will carry far greater weight than outsiders decrying claims of perfecting Islam and fostering justice.

Of course, there also needs to be a counter-narrative to challenge the ideology not just of the Islamic State, but of al-Qaeda and other radical Sunni Islamists. And, obviously, Sunni Muslims must do this. They must emphasize the themes of tolerance, coexistence, and respect for the other as fundamental tenets of Islam. In Cairo, Al-Azhar University, the most prestigious center for Islamic learning in the world, trains Sunni imams and has certainly condemned the Islamic State and al-Qaeda, declaring that they are distorting Islam and its teachings. In Saudi Arabia today, there seems to be a more activist approach to countering this ideology. Etidal, the Global Center for Combating Extremist Ideology, in Saudi Arabia has as its mission not only monitoring and tracking extremist messaging on social media but also presenting a countervailing story—one that emphasizes that Islam is a faith of tolerance and peace. The aim is to present the true meaning of Islam and not the radical Islamist perversion of the faith.

Moreover, King Salman of Saudi Arabia has taken an additional step to expunge extremist texts that are used by radical Islamists and which the king believes contradict the Koran. To fulfill this mission, the Saudi ministry of culture and information announced in October 2017 that a body of elite scholars based in Medina would have the responsibility of authenticating the hadith—the sayings, actions, and pronouncements of the Prophet Muhammad. According to the ministry, the scholars will study the hadith "with the purpose of eliminating fake and extremist texts and any texts that contradict the teachings of Islam and justify the committing of crimes, murders, and terrorist acts which have no place in Islam, the religion of peace."[3]

Military defeat and discrediting of the ideology are necessary parts of the strategy, but they are not sufficient. There can be no denying that the alienation of many Arab publics and their profound despair that life will ever change for the better have created an ideal setting for the appeal of an ideology that promises to restore justice and produce a perfect society. In other words, terrible governance, extensive corruption,

gross inequalities, failure to provide basic services, and the absence of any hope for the future have combined to provide a fertile breeding ground for those who claim they have a simple way to fix all this abuse and restore justice. The Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt and Hezbollah in Lebanon built their followings by providing extensive social services, including food and clinics, that the Egyptian or Lebanese governments could not deliver.

So developing good governance is an essential element of any strategy for countering the radical Islamists. To be sure, good governance must be developed from within and not simply imported from outside. One unmistakable reality of the Arab Middle East is that among the larger states in the region, there has never been a successful model of development. That created a vacuum that secular nationalists like Gamal Abdel Nasser and Saddam Hussein first sought to fill. Later, Islamist groups like the Muslim Brotherhood and, more recently, the Islamic State claimed they had the answer or the solution. All claimed that they would deliver progress, answer the longing for justice, and restore greatness to a region that once led the world and now so badly lags behind. All have failed.

That is why I believe we have such a large stake in the success of the Saudi National Transformation Plan. As one Saudi minister said to me when I visited the kingdom, "Welcome to our revolution disguised as economic reform." Saudi Vision 2030 is about remaking the kingdom. It is not just about diversifying the sources of revenue away from exclusive reliance on oil, but about overhauling the nation's educational system, reducing the power of the religious establishment, recognizing the role women must play in modernizing the state, and creating opportunities for young people to reshape the economy. With nearly 70 percent of the population under age thirty, the potential for change—not to mention its need—clearly exists. If the Saudi effort succeeds—and there are big ifs, particularly given the difficulty of transforming the political and social culture within and coping with Iranian-driven threats from outside—its implications will be felt not just in Saudi Arabia. They will be felt throughout the region, with the existence of a model that might be applied more widely.

Where Americans, Europeans, or others can offer technical advice and promote investment in Saudi Arabia, they should do so. In addition, the Trump administration should create a senior policy channel for quiet consultations on sensitive decisions regarding common security challenges before they are taken. This would have helped the Saudis with both Qatar and Lebanon before they took decisions whose aims America shares, but whose execution neither altered Qatar's support for Islamists on the outside nor kept Lebanese Prime Minister Saad Hariri from continuing to give

a veneer of legitimacy to Hezbollah's hold over Lebanon. Similarly, it would have helped the Trump administration to manage its plan for an Israeli-Palestinian peace proposal with less disruption if there had been some brainstorming together on how to prepare for the president's decision to declare Jerusalem to be Israel's capital. Had the administration prepared the ground with the Saudis and discussed different formulations, it still could have declared Jerusalem Israel's capital but also preserved the political space needed by Saudi and other Arab leaders to be able to embrace a Trump peace plan publicly. We will see if that remains true.

As for what might be done with Egypt, the Arab world's most populous state and one which faces an ongoing violent struggle with an affiliate of the Islamic State, governance and economic performance need to improve measurably—and not only in macro terms. President al-Sisi has taken some tough steps on economic reform, reducing key subsidies on bread and oil. Egypt's broad economic metrics in terms of reserves have improved as a result, but not in a way that seems to reach those who most need help. Nor is delivery of services showing much sign of improvement. While further social and economic reforms are needed, so is a smart, coherent plan for developing infrastructure and inviting foreign investment. The Egyptian government also needs to create an environment in which nongovernmental organizations can fill some of the gaps in Egypt's delivery of services. All this is a tall task, and taking advice from the outside does not seem to be something that Egypt's leaders do very easily. Rather than insisting on Egypt taking certain steps, perhaps the United States could work with the Saudis, Emiratis, Kuwaitis, and some Europeans and lay out an assistance/investment plan beyond what the International Monetary Fund is providing that would include a set of incentives for increasing the amounts based on the steps the Egyptian government takes. (This might also include monies for development plans in the Sinai so that the Egyptian government does better in the struggle for hearts and minds with the tribes that have mostly been ignored by Cairo.)

But our focus cannot be only on the radical Sunni Islamists. We must have a plan for countering the Iranians and their use of Shia proxy militias. To date, the Trump administration has toughened its rhetorical posture toward Iran and emphasized the need to counter its "malign activities." However, its practical policies involve primarily designations that effectively sanction the entities or groups that the Treasury department has singled out for their involvement in terrorism or proliferation. While the designations of these groups and front organizations are obviously useful, it is basically a continuation of Obama administration policies. That is probably not a posture that President Trump believes he has adopted, but it reflects the reality of the steps the administration has taken in its first year in office.

What is needed is some demonstration that the United States will actually contain Iran's expansion in the region—indeed, that we will, in fact, raise the costs to Iran of its adventurist behavior in the area. Because Syria is where Iran's expansion is most clearly evident, that is also where we must show that we are containing the spread of the military presence and infrastructure of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps and the Shia militias. One option would, of course, be to provide weaponry and material to those Syrian resistance groups that have fought Bashar al-Assad's regime and its Iranian/Shia protectors. However, the Trump administration cancelled such support. Alternatively, the White House could work with the Russians to contain the Iranians, which seems to be the administration's preference. Unfortunately, to date the Russians have abetted Iranian power in Syria, not sought to limit it. Moreover, the Russians have yet to live up to any of the agreements they have made with us in Syria, with the possible exception of the de-escalation zone in southern Syria. I say "possible exception" because, while the Russians have fulfilled that part of the agreement, the arrangement was supposed to involve all four escalation zones as a way of reducing the level of violence in Syria and making it possible for refugees to return. In the other de-escalation zones, the Russians have joined the Syrians and Iranians/militias in inflicting even greater punishment, leading UN Emergency Relief Coordinator Mark Lowcock to refer to these as escalation zones and pleading for the carnage to stop, allowing the provision of humanitarian relief—a plea that remains unheeded. It is as if the Russians used our agreement to free the regime and militia forces to expand their presence elsewhere.

If we want Russian President Vladimir Putin to play a role in containing the Iranians, he must see that if the Russians won't do so, we will. Russia has a fraction of the air power we have in the region and yet it used it to secure the al-Assad regime and change the balance of forces on the ground. President Trump could convey to Putin that while we will not seek to roll the Iranian/Shia militia presence back in Syria, we will not allow any further expansion, particularly because it is clear that to do so will risk a wider war between Israel and the Iranians. Putin has no interest in having American power suddenly appear as the arbiter of events in Syria. Not only might our readiness to contain the Iranians begin a serious effort at reducing the level of violence in Syria—and pave the way for a genuine political process for the first time—but should we succeed in stopping the further advance of the Iranians, we could use that to work with the Saudis and Emiratis to do their part to reduce sectarian conflicts in the region.

So long as Iran seems to be expanding its military presence and troublemaking capability throughout the Middle East, the Saudis and others will look for options,

including sectarian options, to counter them. Hence, containment of the Iranians is an essential step if we want to defuse sectarian conflicts.

The irony is that wherever there is conflict in the region, the Iranians are keen to involve themselves, at least through the deployment of Shia militias. It is time to raise the cost to them. It is time to develop better options for doing so. It is time to try involving the Europeans more in the effort to counter the Iranians in the region—a step that argues for putting more focus on Iran's regional behavior and less on the Iranian nuclear deal (the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action).

If President Trump wants to be seen as effectively taking on the radical Islamists, his administration must defeat the Islamic State and counter Iran. It is a tall order and cannot be done unilaterally by the United States. But the Islamic State is losing. The United States needs allies if it is to ensure through reconstruction, governance, security, and political inclusion that the Iranians cannot fill the vacuum after the defeat of the Islamic State. And, at the same time, it needs those allies if it is to raise the costs to the Iranians of extending their reach in the region. Effectively containing Iran in Syria is the starting point.

NOTES

1 Olivier Roy, "Political Islam after the Arab Spring," *Foreign Affairs*, November/December 2017, accessed March 14, 2018, https://www.foreignaffairs.com/reviews/review-essay/2017-10-16/political-islam-after-arab -spring.

2 Shadi Hamid and William McCants, eds., *Rethinking Political Islam* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017).

3 Harriet Sherwood, "Saudi Scholars to Vet Teaching of Prophet Muhammad to Curb Extremism," *Guardian*, October 18, 2017, accessed March 14, 2018, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/oct/18 /saudi-scholars-to-vet-teaching-of-prophet-muhammad-to-curb-extremism.

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The Working Group on Islamism and the International Order

The Herbert and Jane Dwight Working Group on Islamism and the International Order seeks to engage in the task of reversing Islamic radicalism through reforming and strengthening the legitimate role of the state across the entire Muslim world. Efforts draw on the intellectual resources of an array of scholars and practitioners from within the United States and abroad, to foster the pursuit of modernity, human flourishing, and the rule of law and reason in Islamic lands—developments that are critical to the very order of the international system. The working group is chaired by Hoover fellows Russell Berman and Charles Hill.

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