

DEFENSE DOSSIER

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EXTREMISM

Ilan Berman



AMERICAN FOREIGN POLICY COUNCIL

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LETTER FROM THE EDITORS

Welcome to the August 2023 issue of AFPC's Defense Dossier. In this edition, we turn our attention to what has become a largely-forgotten fight. Within a new era of great power competition, the U.S. has shifted away from the "war on terror"—but it's a battle that is far from over.

We begin by focusing on Africa, a continent where the U.S. is pushing a progressive foreign policy agenda that is at significant odds with conservative local values—a state of affairs that Russia, China and assorted jihadists are deftly exploiting. From there, we travel to the Middle East, where China's value-free investment model is progressively wooing partners away from the United States. Then, in Central Asia, we learn how local governments have created a winning formula to stem religious radicalism, though their approach may be at odds with how the U.S. sees the issue. Then, further East, we grapple with the ramifications of America's withdrawal from Afghanistan and examine the implications of renewed Taliban rule. We close by focusing on the need for the United States to, at long last, shift its attention from the battlefields of Iraq and Afghanistan and focus in earnest on confronting Islamic extremism in the realm of ideas.

As always, we hope you find the pages that follow both thought-provoking and informative. Sincerely,

Ilan Berman
Chief Editor

Richard M. Harrison
Managing Editor



The Ideological Competition in—and over—Africa

Alberto M. Fernandez

Africa, that often-ignored continent that has been associated in the West with multiple calamities, is once again in the news as an arena for ideological competition between East and West. We have been here before. Nearly seventy years ago, in 1955, Egypt's nationalist leader, Gamal Abdel Nasser, dissatisfied with Western promises of support, switched sides and signed an arms deal with the Soviet Union. He also angered the U.S. by recognizing Communist China. And it was Russia that would help Egypt build the Aswan High Dam instead of the Americans and British, who initially had intended to subsidize it.

The 1960s and 1970s saw increased ideological competition on the continent, often played out on African battlefields, where national liberation and anti-colonial movements were often bankrolled by the Soviets and Chinese. Che Guevara tried to bring revolution to the Congo, while a decade later communists in Ethiopia would unleash a Red Terror after overthrowing that nation's ancient monarchy. In the 1980s, the Reagan Doctrine sought to erase Soviet gains by helping anti-communist insurgents in places like Angola and Mozambique. Politics made strange bedfellows those years, with Washington helping the anti-communist Muslim government in Khartoum against leftist, Christian and animist rebels in South Sudan who were, in turn, being supported by Ethiopia and Cuba.

Now, with Great Power Competition the new flavor of the day in Washington, the “war of ideas” is back on the menu in Africa – but with circumstances changed a great deal. The Biden administration's new strategy for Sub-Saharan Africa, unveiled in August 2022, sounds right, with calls to “listen to diverse local voices, and widen the circle of engagement to advance its strategic objectives to the benefit of both African and Americans.”¹ In line with its precepts, the tempo of visits

from senior U.S. officials to the continent has steadily increased. America's supposedly renewed commitment to the region was likewise underscored by the U.S.-Africa Leaders Summit in December 2022. The strategy speaks of reframing U.S. policy in Africa in pursuit of four main objectives: to foster openness and open societies, deliver democratic and security dividends, advance pandemic recovery and economic opportunity, and support conservation, climate adaptation and a just energy transition.² Those are worthy objectives. But the problem, as is always the case, is that the pursuit of seemingly noble objectives can be disconnected from realities on the ground. Perceptions matter as much as intentions.

POLICY AND PRINCIPLES

For example, despite recent calls of “listening to diverse voices” and delivering democracy, American officials working on Sudan have, since 2021, pursued a policy of working with sparring generals within the country who overthrew a transitional civilian government. When they did, the Biden administration refused to sanction the coup plotters, and instead marginalized the voices of “resistance committees” demonstrating on the streets for a return to civilian rule. It is no surprise, therefore, that the Sudanese were skeptical about American mediation when the struggle for dominance between the armed factions erupted into all-out war in April 2023.

Sudanese anger at the United States and other Western countries only increased when diplomats were spirited out of Khartoum while leaving thousands of dual-national American passport holders behind - and locking up the passports of Sudanese applying for visas in a now shuttered embassy for good measure.³ By contrast, the Chinese embassy in Khartoum, which did not evacuate, scored public diplomacy points by posting



a hand-written note outside their building providing information to desperate Sudanese regarding how they could get back their passports.

Indeed, despite the noble rhetoric of the new Africa strategy, much of the action on the ground is about power politics, not about some shared vision of development. It is geared not toward the progress of Africa itself, but rather reflects feverish attempts at to limit the scope of influence of near peer adversaries.

To some extent, this is entirely understandable. It is not in the interests of the United States for China to have more bases on the continent, or for Russia to erect an empire of local allies stretching from Mali to the Nile. But in this unfolding competition, it is the United States that is seen by Africans as more “ideological” than its adversaries. Corrupt, authoritarian Russia is actually more akin to the reality of politics and governance often prevalent on the African continent, seeking merely to sell arms, provide mercenaries and extract resources – the very same things that, for example, America’s

cially. Beijing does not actually promote its “socialism with a Chinese face” in Africa, but rather espouses an economic hegemony motivated by profit and market share that could eventually translate into greater geopolitical influence.

America stands in stark contrast. In June 2022, *Politico* magazine quoted U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken as saying that he presses the Saudis on LGBTQI issues “in every conversation.”⁴ In Uganda, Washington and its Western allies have pressed Kampala to reconsider a draconian “Anti-Homosexuality Bill,” which includes elements such as the death penalty for sex with someone while HIV positive.⁵

On these and other issues, Washington is pursuing an ideological agenda perfectly understandable within the context of an expansive (and constantly expanding) vision of rights held by Western liberal democracies. Many will heartily applaud such an agenda, which has been a hallmark of U.S. policy now for over a decade. But others, including non-Africans like Pope Francis,

would call it “ideological colonization” – a social and cultural set of norms pushed by Western progressives.

A BREWING BATTLE OF IDEAS

Africa today is also now ground zero for violent Salafi *jihadi*sm. The ferment that birthed the terrorist offensives that began in the tribal borderlands of Pakistan and Yemen and then migrated to the desert battlefields of Syria and Iraq has moved south and west. Both al-Qaeda and ISIS have found fertile soil in a broad border region across the Sahel and the continent’s eastern coast, from Mali to Mozambique. Spurred by local problems – ethnic violence, land scarcity, regime corruption and incompetence – *jihadists* have flourished, particularly where

they couch their campaigns in the call to religious war. Indeed, a pillar of the terrorist campaigns we now see in

As elsewhere, when it comes to counterterrorism, American support has focused mostly on strengthening local militaries and trying to improve governance. In Africa, when it comes to *jihadi*sm, the ideological struggle has been barely waged at all. The same weaknesses demonstrated by successive American administrations since 9/11 in messaging to Muslim audiences is being played out in Africa—albeit with one major difference. In the Middle East, eventually, America was able to count on anti-*jihadist* counterterrorism messaging by local regimes, who did not lack for resources to fund these campaigns.

European allies in Africa (France and the United Kingdom) did for decades. Mercantilist China, meanwhile, seeks to dominate the continent (and others) commer-



places like Nigeria, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, and Mozambique is the slaughter of Christians.

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With violent versions of political Islam in Africa becoming the language of revolt and revolution against the West, Western-oriented elites and corrupt regimes, an effective counter-revolutionary narrative suited to local conditions is still waiting to be fashioned. The fact that the West often focuses on issues – such as progressive Western societal norms – that are either irrelevant to local life or actually feed into *jihadist* narratives only makes the problem of communicating effectively more difficult.

AN OPPORTUNITY FOR AMERICA

Over the past few decades, the Russian and Chinese agendas on the continent have been remarkably stable.

With violent versions of political Islam in Africa becoming the language of revolt and revolution against the West, Western-oriented elites and corrupt regimes, an effective counter-revolutionary narrative suited to local conditions is still waiting to be fashioned. The fact that the West often focuses on issues—such as progressive Western societal norms—that are either irrelevant to local life or actually feed into *jihadist* narratives only makes the problem of communicating effectively more difficult.

They are exploitative, cynical and transactional. However, these characteristics are familiar to Africans, and that makes the behavior of Moscow and Beijing, if not laudable, then at least predictable and understandable. The United States, by contrast, represents something of a cypher to publics on the continent.

This is not to say that America is hated in Africa. Far from it. Historically, the United States has been quite popular there – much more so than in the Middle East or Latin America. A 2015 Pew Research poll, for instance, found the U.S. more popular in Africa than in any other region of the globe, including Western Europe.⁶ Many still admire America's wealth and freedoms, and many Africans continue to want to come to America in pursuit of a better life. Very few, by contrast, would conceive of migrating permanently to Russia or China. Nevertheless, America's image in Africa (and elsewhere) has undeniably taken a beating in the past few years.

In the ongoing ideological competition on the continent, policymakers in Washington will have to understand certain truths. There is no longer any division between the domestic political stage and the international one. Everything that plays out in America internally, from our own imperfections and contradictions, intemperate domestic rhetoric, to our bitter cultural wars, is playing out internationally in real time as well, amplified by social media. It is then no surprise,



therefore, that both Russia and China have repurposed the social critiques of both the American political Left and its political Right as public diplomacy tools against the U.S. as a whole.

This activity, and the parallel efforts of *ihadists* on the continent, bespeak a deep-seated truism: that it is easier to engage in ideological competition when you have a clear idea of self, and of what you stand for. Many Americans, to say nothing of foreign observers, would admit that it isn't quite clear what the United States stands for currently. This, in turn, has helped to diminish the appeal of the American brand in Africa and other locales, despite its numerous merits. By contrast, Russia, China and *ihadist* actors on the continent know precisely what they stand for – and what they stand against.

Altering this state of affairs requires the United States to not only have a better sense of self, but also to be more attuned to the characteristics, values and priorities of the audiences that it is trying to influence. And it needs to remain confident in the fact that freedom remains America's most powerful ideological weapon, so long as Americans still see themselves as free.

ENDNOTES

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China's Model Is Dangerous for The Middle East

Alex Hu and Eric Brown

Back in March, just five days after Beijing brokered a resumption of diplomatic relations between Saudi Arabia and revolutionary Iran, Xi Jinping announced the “Global Civilization Initiative,” the People’s Republic of China’s newest play to position itself as the world’s ascendant power and the go-to alternative to the United States, particularly in the “Global South.” In his keynote address at a PRC-organized event meant to rival the U.S. Summit for Democracy, Xi affirmed the “right and ability” of all countries to develop according to their unique “national realities.”¹ According to Gao Xiang, the head of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, Xi’s declaration was nothing short of a call for a new China-led order among nations—and a rejection of “Western civilization as the end point of human history.”²

In the Middle East, where the rapid expansion of Chinese activity and influence is now the stuff of regular news reports, Xi’s extensive list of regional “initiatives” has gained supportive audiences. Even America’s friends in the region tend to see China’s presence as a good thing, for practical reasons. The Middle East, after all, has been convulsed by wars and violent extremism for years; it will need help of all kinds to stabilize and rebuild, as well as to erect the structures needed to bring the region’s smoldering resentments and ideological grievances to heel.

Still, what China has on offer may only make what ails the region worse. Across the Middle East, Beijing has been telling cultural-political elites, who fear open societies, that they needn’t bother with incremental steps to improve rule of law, cultural pluralism, transparency, and accountability—the very things their societies need to curb political dysfunction and rein in violent ideological factionalism. Instead, China has presented its own development model as a superior alternative, one which combines state-led economic growth and hi-tech population surveillance and control. The effect of this has been to scramble Middle Eastern developmental and

political trajectories, including the region’s ideological struggle to put itself on a more secure footing.

THE CONNECTION BETWEEN THE ASIAS

Beijing’s principal ambition is to push the United States out of the Indo-Pacific. It is primarily to achieve this objective, as well as to secure access to energy resources, to Israeli technology innovations, to export markets, and to a Muslim vote-bank in the United Nations, that it has attempted to establish itself as the key power broker in a post-American Middle East.

In the eight centuries since the Mongol empire first connected them, East and West Asia have developed largely in isolation. The Chinese Ming Dynasty (1368–1644) established tributary ties with West and Central Asia over land and by sea. But these cross-Asian linkages were deeply segmented between littoral kingdoms and oases—hubs which fought fiercely to monopolize transit routes. Even after the sixteenth century, when European seafarers began to transform global commerce, trans-Asian trade was mostly in luxury goods—nothing of strategic value.

All this changed in the last century, however, when West Asian energy became essential to East Asia’s industrial takeoff. The reliance of Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan on foreign energy wove the fates of the two regions together.

These days, East Asia is even more dependent on the Middle East. This is true for America’s closest allies in Asia, the youthful dynamos of Southeast Asia, as well as for China, which now ranks as the world’s biggest energy importer. By enlarging its position in the Middle East, China stands to exert greater coercive influence throughout the Indo-Pacific. The PRC’s power play, moreover, is also involving it ever more deeply in the intra-Middle Eastern struggle of ideas.



A CHINESE OPPORTUNITY?

In the Middle East, China has been offering an alternative model of governance and political reform. After years of erratic U.S. policymaking, the PRC has been pushing on a lot of open doors. Beijing has presented itself as an easier partner than the U.S. to work with; one that is willing to share its “wisdom” in generating breakneck economic growth and urbanization, without America’s high standards or pesky concerns about inclusive governance and human rights. The PRC has also been eager to sell its security and population control technologies to enhance the resilience and repressive capacity of ruling regimes. Two of the U.S.’s traditional partners in the region, the UAE and Saudi Arabia, have purchased Huawei’s AI-enabled “smart city” surveillance systems, in addition to many patrol drones.³

China has correctly assessed that the region is desperate for quick fixes. However, these PRC-enabled security states may not fare well against looming governance, demographic and environmental crises. These stresses will only be magnified by coming shifts in global energy production and consumption which will, again, diminish the Middle East’s strategic importance. The region’s attentive political leaders are aware of all this. Do they really think a less-than-dynamic Chinese economy will be of help to them when it matters?

SHIFTING CURRENTS

How are the PRC’s gambits in the wider Middle East likely to fare? When it comes to the recent PRC-engineered détente between Iran and Saudi Arabia, the question, really, is how long it can possibly hold up. Riyadh may be hedging against real or perceived U.S.

unreliability, while Tehran gains from any reduction in America’s position and influence. In addition to their still-smoldering strategic-sectarian rivalry, the Kingdom and the Islamic Republic are also economic rivals, sharing oil as their principal export commodity. Peace is good for customers, but it may not suit the ambitions of a near-nuclear-armed Iran—particularly if it goes one step further. The regime in Tehran, which was, not long ago, isolated and on the ropes, has been calling in nothing but lifelines from the PRC. Any bet that Beijing will act to constrain Iran’s revolutionary ambitions, or stem a Middle Eastern nuclear cascade, is unwise.

Beijing is also imposing new obligations on its clients, even as it appeals to the “civilizational” or cultural exceptionalism of both conservative and radical Muslim leaders. In Afghanistan, the Taliban had once ordered the destruction of the Bamiyan Buddhas as un-Islamic idols. Today, Chinese cultural preservation teams are on the ground securing Buddhist relics with Taliban protection.⁴ This is only happening because the Taliban wants Chinese cooperation in extracting Afghanistan’s immense mineral resources. If and when the Taliban faces backlash for making concessions to China, will the PRC shore its regime up?

So far, Beijing has also been successful at coopting Middle Eastern ruling regimes and suppressing awareness and criticism of the PRC’s brutal subjugation of Turkic Muslim Uighurs in their own homeland of Xinjiang. As much as Beijing would like to keep the affairs of its internal empire apart from its external gambits, the *jihadist* movement has begun to home in on China’s anti-Muslim policies.⁵ Chinese civilians around the world have also increasingly become targets of terror attacks. The running question remains how the PRC might shore up its far-flung positions globally, if at all.

Will it employ Wagner Group-style mercenaries, or seek out foreign basing for PLA forces?

China’s engagements farther afield are likewise exacerbating divides and creating new haves and have-nots. In Pakistan, the disparate impact of China’s overland corridor from Xinjiang to Gwadar has already deepened the country’s ethno-sectarian divides—and dimmed Pakistani hopes for federal stabilization. Urban-rural divides

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worldwide (but particularly in the Middle East) also appear set to worsen. As cities sprint ahead, those in the hinterland will live in depressed, isolated, environmentally degraded, and likely primarily aerially-policed territories. With China as the economic and governance pacesetter, the Middle East's future may increasingly come to resemble its pre-modern past: a region of relatively well-off urban enclaves led by the few, surrounded by difficult to govern territories ripe for recruitment by radicals.

WHICH WAY FORWARD?

Islamism developed in response to Western power and political dysfunction in the Middle East. As those political ills persisted, the movement became more radical, violent, and a driver of even greater dysfunction. How will Islamism in its next phase react to rapidly growing Chinese involvement in the Middle East?

The multi-faceted U.S.-PRC competition has become deeply enmeshed with the intra-Middle Eastern struggle of ideas and its search for a better future. As the global energy transition accelerates amid the Russian invasion of Ukraine, America's allies in Asia are working more aggressively to diversify their energy imports away from PRC-dominated corridors. The U.S. can take steps to allay their insecurities by integrating them into North American-based energy markets. Over the longer-term, however, advancing allied cooperation in energy innovation must be a top priority.

The U.S. is no longer operating in a strategy-free world. Our national focus must be on maintaining peace in Asia and restoring it to Europe. Thus, some pragmatically ask: if a rising China must go somewhere, why not the Middle East? Why worry? The problem is that the PRC's bid to exploit Middle Eastern governance challenges, as well as the region's deep-seated grievances and frustrations, for its own geopolitical gain will not help stabilize the region, much less prepare it to deal with the shocks coming its way. With this in mind, the U.S. should step up its support for Muslim reformers and democrats, and take care not to alienate religiously conservative leaders who do not put themselves above the wellbeing of the people they rule.

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Balancing religion and state in Central Asia

Svante Cornell

The countries of Central Asia and Azerbaijan are clear outliers in the Muslim world. Whereas most others have moved toward a greater mingling of religion and politics, these nations have clearly chosen a secular mode of government in their respective development paths. Moreover, in the past decade, even as many of their neighbors have succumbed to the furies of political Islam, these states have chosen to double down on this approach, reaping great benefits in the process.

FORWARD FROM THE SOVIET LEGACY

This approach—dividing religion from state, and allowing the latter to circumscribe the former—could easily be dismissed simply as some form of post-Soviet leftover with little intrinsic value. That, however, would be a mistake. Central Asia and Azerbaijan are home to a deep-seated religious tradition that, in the distant past, proved to be compatible with world-class scientific advances and with a moderate and tolerant approach to religious affairs.¹ This Hanafi-Maturidi tradition, coupled with an influential role for the esoteric practice of Sufism, differs greatly from that which prevails in the core Middle East, which has been under the influence of much more orthodox and intolerant theology in recent times.

Indeed, as recently as a century ago, a school of modernist renewers, the *jadids*, sought to bring religion into compatibility with modern science and learning in what is now Central Asia and Azerbaijan. This exciting experiment, however, was brought to an end by Soviet rule. What followed were some seven decades of stagnation, in which the embedded religious traditions, and innovation, that made up Muslim culture in the USSR's constituent republics were subordinated to formally atheist rule.

The collapse of the Soviet Union, and the emergence of the majority-Muslim republics of Azerbaijan, Ka-

zakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan as independent nation-states, reignited the debate over Islam's place in both politics and society. Following their independence, these new nations faced multiple challenges. While they needed to build new, functioning states out of the rubble left by the USSR, their southern neighborhood was torn apart by violent extremists in Afghanistan, who also played a key role in the destruction of Tajikistan. This, combined with the threat of Iranian-sponsored radicalism, was a formative experience that helped guide the approach of these young states to religious affairs. Everywhere, the hollow atheism promoted by Communist ideology was replaced by a secular form of government that borrowed heavily from the Turkish Kemalist model.

In practice, this meant that the states in question enshrined secularism into their constitutions and legal codes, thus ensuring that laws, courts and education systems were shielded from religious influence. Simply put, they all took a skeptical approach to religion. In this sense, they followed the French understanding of secularism, aimed at safeguarding state and society from the oppression of a dominant religious institution, rather than the American concept of secularism that focuses on the promotion of individual religious freedom. They therefore took a hard line toward any manifestation of Islamist ideology. They also remained highly skeptical toward any novel religious influence that appeared to depart from the indigenous traditions of the region. While they championed harmonious relations among their traditional Muslim, Christian and Jewish populations, their governments made sure that challengers to these traditions were made to feel decidedly unwelcome.

IDEOLOGICAL CONVERGENCE

There have been, of course, differences in approach. Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan took a very hard line from



the beginning, while Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan saw less of a danger emanating from religious activism, and therefore tolerated the arrival of proselytizers of various faiths. But over time, the approaches of regional states have become increasingly similar. Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan have imposed growing restrictions on religion, while Uzbekistan has begun to liberalize its approaches.

A remarkable element of the Central Asian approach to religion is the active championing of the region's indigenous religious tradition, with the state assisting in rebuilding the institutions that undergird it. In the last decade, the Central Asian states have all explicitly come to support the Hanafi-Maturidi school of thought. Azerbaijan, which stands out because of its mixed Shi'a and Sunni population, has similarly supported its indigenous religious traditions and sought to make its Shi'a clergy less dependent on their Iranian counterparts.

This might appear to contradict the simultaneous emphasis on secularism. How can the state be secular if it also explicitly supports a particular religious tradition? This notion seems to run entirely counter to secularism as understood by the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution. But it is less extraordinary from the vantage point of majority-Catholic countries that have sought to separate religion from state and regulate relations between state and church. On the basis of France's *Concordat* of 1801, many countries have maintained the secular character of their government, laws and education while regulating their relationship with the country's dominant religious tradition—a process that often includes a recognition of its particular role in society. The difference in Central Asia and Azerbaijan is that the state is not just regulating its relationship with traditional religion but actively assisting in the restoration of that tradition from the ravages of communist rule.

This peculiar approach is unique to the region, and a result of a highly pragmatic view of religious affairs. Central Asian leaders viewed the indigenous religious tradition as part of their national identity, and concluded that it is natural for religion to once again reclaim its role in society and in the lives of individuals. However, they saw an ability—indeed, a need—to influence what religious tradition emerges in society. Following independence, they were faced with an onslaught of well-funded and confident religious proselytizers from

abroad. Indigenous traditional religious forces, decimated by Soviet rule and lacking funds, confidence and religious knowledge, were at a significant disadvantage against these foreign challengers.

If governments had maintained a strict neutrality in religious affairs, this could have led to a rapid displacement of their weakened indigenous religious tradition with imported and highly politicized schools of religious thought from the Middle East and South Asia. Seeing the destabilizing effect on society of such novel religious forces, governments chose to take an active role and put

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their collective finger on the scale. They restricted the ability of foreign religious influences to spread in society and instead sought to champion—and control—the indigenous religious institutions and facilitate their reconstruction. As a result, the region's states today exhibit a curious combination of features: they are at once skeptical of institutional religion, while also championing its restoration.

A CENTRAL ASIAN “MODEL”

The policies adopted by the six states discussed here have significant similarities. Their respective constitutions define secularism of the state in remarkably similar ways. Many also establish the secularism of the education system in the constitution itself; other common themes include the prohibition of political parties based on religion, and of clergy engaging in political activities. They also impose very similar restrictions on religious activity within their borders, requiring religious organizations



to register with state agencies that supervise religious affairs, and imposing registration requirements that by design are difficult to meet. Additionally, they impose restrictions on religious activities by unregistered groups, and seek to impede proselytism—with some banning it outright, while others prohibit the promotion of one religion over another. As well, they supervise and restrict the importation and publication of religious literature, frequently by requiring all such materials to be vetted by state agencies. And everywhere, security services play a key role in the state approach to religion, directly supervising, infiltrating, and prosecuting religious activism that falls outside the boundaries determined by the state.

Accepting that the region's model is imperfect, however, does not mean it is beyond repair. Quite to the contrary, the ambition of Central Asian states is a worthy one that deserves support, even though all methods they employ to implement it might not. Unfortunately, U.S. policy toward Central Asia has tended to question not just the methods but the aims of state policies toward religion.

This approach stands out in the Muslim world. The most considerable overlap is with the Kemalist secularism that once prevailed in Turkey, but with some differences: the region's states have taken an even more interventionist role in controlling religious proselytism and religious literature. Compared to present-day Turkey, the differences are even more profound, given Turkey's current domination by an Islamist party, as a result of which references to religion in politics and the education system have become ubiquitous.

Central Asia's differences with other moderate Muslim states are even more obvious. The region shares an official commitment to secularism with former French colonies in West Africa. But Central Asian states have considerably more powerful state institutions, and West African states have failed to fully secularize their legislation (for instance, in many places, family law remains

adjudicated by customary institutions or Islamic principles). Liberal Arab states such as Tunisia, Jordan and Morocco, meanwhile, also seek to combine moderate Islam with modernity and progress. But even the most progressive Arab states pay lip service to Islamic law, and recognize Islam as the religion of the state. Indonesia champions several different religious traditions and prides itself on the harmony between them, as do Central Asians, but it is a state that actively promotes a religious foundation to education and law, undermining any notion of secular governance.

The differences are meaningful in practice. In Central Asia and Azerbaijan, a young woman can go through a fully secular education system, in an environment where religious issues remain a private choice rather than something the state seeks to impose on her. When she reaches adulthood, she enjoys rights that, on paper, are the same as a man's, including in the realm of inheritance and divorce. Elements of these rights exist in several other areas of the Muslim world; but only in Central Asia and Azerbaijan are they all present. Of course, the implementation of these rights continues to leave much to be desired. And while there is a long way to go before everyone in the region enjoys all these rights, the fact that they even exist cannot be taken for granted anywhere else, and is a strong foundation for the region to build on.

Of course, the region's approach suffers from a penchant toward restrictive and often repressive measures, to say nothing of the governments' tolerance of abuses by many of their employees. This is in part a legacy of the Soviet era, as the region's states have continued to accord state security services (and the mentality they represent) a prominent role in many walks of life, including but not limited to religious affairs. Only very recently have some states begun to curb the role of these services—most dramatically in Uzbekistan—but others have yet to begin that task, and no state is close to completing it.

WORKING WITH THE "MODEL"

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American officials have advocated for full religious freedom, only rarely voicing their understanding of, let alone their support for, the local ambition to maintain secular governments. From the perspective of Central Asian governments, the U.S. has urged them to stop requiring state registration for foreign religious groups, to stop banning Islamist political activity, to stop censoring imported religious literature, and to stop banning Islamic dress in schools. Paradoxically, many Americans have confidently argued that if Central Asians fail to heed this advice, their problem with violent extremism would get much worse. But these dire predictions, which Washington has voiced since the late 1990s, have failed to materialize. Instead, Central Asian states have found themselves able to control the rise of Islamic radicalism, and have therefore come to view American advice in religious affairs as naïve at best, and outright dangerous at worst.

Looking ahead, a better approach would be for the U.S. and its Western partners to gain a better understanding of, and consequently appreciation for, the goals set by Central Asians. Doing so, the U.S. and its allies would be better positioned to support gradual reforms that would, over time, make regional approaches toward religion less reliant on restrictive measures and more focused on constructive and positive measures. In recent years, the prospect of an improved dialogue on these matters has increased, as a result of a renewed urgency for reform visible in the largest three countries of the region—Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan and Azerbaijan. But the region's states will only be willing to internalize American advice if their U.S. partners make a serious effort to understand their perspective on religious matters, and respect their long-term strategic goals.

END NOTES

¹ See generally S. Frederick Starr, *Lost Enlightenment: Central Asia's Golden Age from the Arab Conquest to Tamerlane* (Princeton University Press, 2015).



Reckoning with the Taliban's Return

Kamran Bokhari

The 2021 re-establishment of the Taliban *emirate* on the ashes of the internationally-backed Afghan state has perhaps had the most profound impact on global Islamism since the 1979 revolution in Iran. Though it represented a Shi'a variant of Islamism that emerged in the wake of a popular civil uprising, the founding of the current clerical regime in Tehran inspired many Sunni actors to follow in its footsteps. Nearly a half a century later, the Taliban victory is emboldening Islamists and even many conservative and traditional Muslims on a much broader scale. At the same time, however, the experience of the Iranian regime and the challenges of governance that the Taliban are facing can serve as a means of countering violent extremism.

THE LESSONS OF EMIRATE 1.0

Jihadist actors have been trying to topple Muslim regimes ever since the decline of Arab nationalism in the aftermath of the 1967 Arab-Israeli war. Yet none has ever mounted a successful armed insurrection against an established Muslim nation-state. The 1996 founding of the Taliban's "Emirate 1.0" does not count, because it emerged in a context where the Afghan state had been rendered non-existent after nearly 20 years of civil war. Nevertheless, Emirate 1.0 became a model for *jihadists*, who learned that established states in the Muslim world—despite their relative weakness—were still strong enough to withstand Islamist insurgencies.

Algeria's decade-long insurgency during the 1990s was a case in point. Even the Afghan communist regime survived the Islamist insurgency of the 1980s, despite the fact that the Afghan rebels and allied foreign fighters enjoyed the support of the United States, Saudi Arabia and Pakistan. Had the Soviet Union not imploded in 1991, it is quite likely that the Afghan communist

regime would have endured as well. Nor did its 1992 collapse lead to the empowerment of Islamists, because the domestic situation devolved into civil war as the Islamist insurgency descended into factional fighting—shredding any semblance of a residual state in the process.

The Taliban movement was born in 1994 amid this anarchy, and its ability to impose its ultraconservative Deobandi Islamism for two years (with help from the Pakistanis and Gulf Arab states) taught many Islamists that anarchy was a necessary pre-requisite to gaining power. Otherwise, they were no match for established secular political systems tethered to the U.S.-led international order. The war against the Soviets, however, gave them the confidence that rag-tag militias could successfully confront a superpower. More importantly, it led them to believe that they needed to provoke foreign interventions by a superpower that would create a crisis in Muslim countries, thereby leading to the upending of the existing regimes.

Al-Qaeda adopted this strategy in service of its brand of transnational *jihadism*. The attacks of September 11, 2001 were based on the assumption that they would trigger a massive American response and a rupture with Arab/Muslim governments. The thinking was that the attacks would produce anarchy in the Middle East and beyond on a grand scale, causing Muslim states to crumble and creating the conditions for *jihadists* to seize power. Al-Qaeda did succeed in triggering U.S.-*jihadist* wars in Afghanistan, Iraq and elsewhere, but it did not produce the desired end result.

That said, during the 2003-06 period the group that would later emerge as ISIS, under its founder Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, pursued a sectarian targeting strategy that was designed to produce chaos in the broader Middle East. Zarqawi and his associates sought

Kamran Bokhari, PhD is the Senior Director of the Eurasian Security and Prosperity portfolio at the New Lines Institute. Dr. Bokhari is also a national security and foreign policy specialist at the University of Ottawa's Professional Development Institute. Bokhari has also served as the Central Asia Studies Course Coordinator at U.S. Department of State's Foreign Service Institute.



to draw both the Americans and the Iranians deeper into Iraq to create the conditions to eventually establish a regional *caliphate*, something they succeeded in doing in 2014. A generation later, though the ISIS *caliphate* in Iraq and Syria has long been dismantled, transnational *jihadi*sm continues to evolve—with ISIS having supplanted al-Qaeda as its vanguard.

Over the past decade, a combination of geopolitical factors—from U.S. military campaigns to Israeli national security imperatives to Saudi and Emirati regional planning—helped ensure that Islamists were not able to take advantage of the Arab spring uprisings. While Islamists were able to make quick gains as a result of the “Arab Spring” uprisings, especially in Egypt, by the middle of the last decade they experienced major reversals in Libya, Tunisia, Egypt, Syria. And by 2018, with the defeat of ISIS, Islamism was in steep decline.

THE IMPLICATIONS OF “EMIRATE 2.0”

However, the Trump administration’s subsequent decision to open negotiations with the Taliban that year would pave the way for the movement’s return to power less than three years later. The U.S. assumption at the time was that the Afghan state that Washington and its allied and partner nations had helped build for a generation would, despite its many flaws, be able to hold its own. Of course, given the growing potency of the Taliban insurgency, it was understood that *jihadi*sts would be in control of significant chunks of the country, especially in their traditional southern and eastern areas. But the expectation was that this balance of power would help steer the two sides to a negotiated power-sharing settlement.

America’s inability to militarily weaken the Taliban had been apparent for several years. And the ability of Afghan insurgents to resist the most powerful nation in the world had long helped shape perceptions in the global Islamist ecosystem. Now, President Trump’s Special Envoy, Zalmay Khalilzad, sitting face-to-face across the table from senior Taliban leader Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar and negotiating the withdrawal of U.S. forces served as a massive shot-in-the-arm for Islamists and their supporters across the world. However, no one

was prepared for the rapidity with the internationally backed Afghan state led by former President Ashraf Ghani collapsed once a U.S. withdrawal was finally announced. And that deterioration was widely hailed in Islamist networks across the globe.

That provinces in the country’s west and north, which were traditional bastions of the anti-Taliban factions dominated by Afghanistan’s ethnic Tajik, Uzbek, Hazara and other minorities, fell to Taliban forces (in many cases, without a fight) underscored the failure of the U.S.-led occupation to build a robust state, despite the considerable development that had occurred over a 20-year period. The Taliban’s second coming also reinforced the perception among Islamists that armed insurrection was the only way to gain power. After a decade of Sunni Islamist failures, the Taliban regaining control over Afghanistan has the potential to motivate Islamists in other Muslim-majority nations. Even though the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan has not been formally recognized by the international community, the fact that its leaders get to travel to foreign capitals to meet with counterparts and senior officials visit them in Kabul demonstrates to Islamists elsewhere that if they stay the course, the world will eventually accept them.

The Taliban’s second coming also reinforced the perception among Islamists that armed insurrection was the only way to gain power. After a decade of Sunni Islamist failures, the Taliban regaining control over Afghanistan has the potential to motivate Islamists in other Muslim-majority nations.

The immediate threat of this emboldening effect is to neighboring Pakistan, which—due to an unprecedented political and economic meltdown now underway there—is highly vulnerable to its own Taliban rebels, as well as a host of other Islamist forces. In fact, for two years, the Taliban now ruling Afghanistan has been providing sanctuary to the Pakistani branch of the



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movement, known as the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), which in turn has been steadily increasing its attacks in the country.

This collusion is logical. The Afghan Taliban realize that they cannot hope to sustain their *emirate* while Pakistan's Islamic republic offers a competing model of a religious-based polity next door. As for the TTP, which mounted a ferocious insurgency for the better part of a decade between 2006 and 2016, claiming as many as 80,000 lives before being defeated, there is no time like the present to stage a comeback and establish a sister *emirate* on the Pakistani side of the Durand Line.

To varying degrees, each of the three Central Asian states that border Afghanistan—Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan—are also susceptible to the effects of the *emirate*. Because of cross-border ethnic influences, Tajikistan will likely be the first state to experience a spillover effect. Dushanbe represents a very weak state that is heavily dependent upon Russia, which in the light of the Ukraine war has been weakened to where its ability to provide security to Central Asia is now questionable. Over time, the Taliban *emirate* will influence Islamists in other countries as well, particularly the Middle East, which is also in the throes of significant political change in countries like Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and Sudan.

INTERNAL CONTRADICTIONS

The one silver lining of the current situation is that the Afghan Taliban are not without their own problems. In many ways, their victory represents a case of catastrophic success. The group is now facing the challenge of governance. In order to create a viable domestic economy, they need to do business with the outside world, which necessitates a certain level of

pragmatism and compromise.

Not surprisingly, the Taliban are finding it hard to balance between the needs of governance and maintaining their ideological zeal. Fissures between hardline and more pragmatic factions have already emerged. Many within the Taliban leadership realize that they cannot impose a harsh medieval order on the country at a time when the theocratic regime in neighboring Iran, with over forty years of experience and far more resources at its disposal, is failing. They also realize the risks of compromising on the group's Islamist ideology—something which the ISIS branch in country is trying to leverage to draw away support from the Taliban and toward its own ranks.

The Taliban's reconstituted *emirate* in Afghanistan, in other words, is now mired in a great deal of uncertainty. What is clear, however, is that *jihadism* of one form or another is now hardwired in the country. What is also apparent is that this dynamic threatens the stability of the broader southwest Asian region.



America and the “War of Ideas” Against Islamic Extremism

Ilan Berman

Does anyone still remember the “Global War on Terror”? For roughly two decades following the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, the struggle against al-Qaeda and other Islamic militants was a fixture of U.S. foreign and security policy. Of late, though, this focus has receded, replaced by an emphasis on “great power competition” with China, as well as Russia. This attention has only been reinforced by Russia’s current war of aggression against neighboring Ukraine—a conflict that has succeeded in galvanizing a unified Western response to Russian neo-imperialism.

This shift has had concrete effects. It has altered military budgets, as the U.S. defense bureaucracy has de-emphasized special operations and low intensity conflict in favor of planning for conventional force-on-force competition with near-peer adversaries.¹ Just as profoundly, it has marked the end of counterterrorism as a significant orienting principle in U.S. policy planning. The Biden administration’s October 2022 National Security Strategy, for instance, relegates the fight against militant Islam and extremist actors to what is, at best, a second-tier priority.²

But if the fight against militant Islam has become less urgent for the United States, America’s allies in the Muslim World are still very much embroiled in it—as well as the struggle for hearts and minds that serves as its central front.

AN ENDURING CHALLENGE

When it comes to contemporary threats, the gravest is nearly a quarter-century after the terrorist attacks on the Pentagon and World Trade Center propelled the U.S. into a broad, open-ended war on Islamic extremism, that mission remains unfulfilled. While Washington and its allies have racked up some notable victories over the past two decades (among them the killing of

al-Qaeda head Osama Bin Laden, as well as the defeat of the Islamic State and dismantlement of its self-declared *caliphate* in Iraq and Syria), the broader challenge from militant Islam has endured. Today, this corrosive ideology remains potent and resilient, capable of mobilizing radicalized Muslims and motivating them to carry out violence in its name.

This is visible in the Africa, where regional instability and privation have provided fertile soil for the Islamic State and other extremists to put down roots, resulting in a continental surge of instability.³ It is apparent in Syria, where, despite the end of the country’s long-running civil war, a new generation of extremists is being incubated as part of the after-effects of the conflict.⁴ And in Afghanistan, thanks in no small measure to the Biden administration’s abrupt, ill-advised departure from the country, Islamist governance has gotten a new lease on life with the return of the Taliban—with ripple effects throughout the region.⁵

The resonance of the extremist message, meanwhile, has been greatly aided by the changed nature of the 21st media environment. As long ago as 2007, Osama Bin Laden’s al-Qaeda had already identified the media as one of the “strongest methods” to recruit adherents to its cause.⁶ And the meteoric rise to power of al-Qaeda’s successor (and ideological rival), the Islamic State, was made possible in no small measure because of the group’s adroit use of social media, messaging apps and digital platforms.⁷ These early advances set the stage for more recent ones. Today, groups like Hamas, Hezbollah and an array of other extremist actors are increasingly leaning into the media space to disseminate their radical messages and carry out both recruitment and indoctrination.⁸

What accounts for this dynamism and resiliency? A good part of the answer lies in the choice of battlefields.



Washington and its partners have charted significant successes to date in military operations against Islamic militants, as well as in domestic policing designed to defuse the threat they pose at home. But the most decisive front in the struggle with Islamic extremism isn't geographic, or military. Rather, it is intellectual in nature.

That domain is, sadly, one that has been largely ignored by the West, at least so far. For all their fighting prowess, the United States and its coalition partners have failed to develop, or to nurture, effective intellectual responses to confront, challenge and debunk the intolerant ideas of Islamic extremists.

This does not mean such work is not being done. Many of the answers to the intellectual challenge of militant Islam can be found in the Muslim World. There, assorted governments have developed sophisticated responses to extreme interpretations of the faith. They have done so out of necessity; for majority-Muslim nations, the challenge of Islamic extremism is not simply one of security, but of legitimacy and authenticity as well. These governments have figured out what the West still has not: that, to provide a lasting answer to the threat of Islamic extremism, it is necessary to develop a cogent, compelling counternarrative that debunks its worldview and offers its adherents an alternative path. The end result is a surprisingly complex and sophisticated web of intellectual models stretching across the Muslim World.

A DISTRIBUTED FIGHT

Today, in country after country from Africa to Southeast Asia, local governments are grappling with the intellectual challenge posed by Islamic militancy. They are doing so in different ways.

- Under the auspices of Al-Azhar University, its preeminent seat of religious education, Egypt is spearheading an effort to track radical websites and statements, and mobilizing respected scholars to weave a counternarrative to the radical interpretation of the Islamic faith propounded by groups such as the Muslim Brotherhood.
- The United Arab Emirates has engaged in a variety of domestic efforts, from developing

legislation designed to safeguard national diversity to formulating best practices for dealing with returning militants—and increasingly begun to share that expertise with its allies.

- Bahrain has adopted a two-track approach focused on fostering religious tolerance through civic activities and interfaith programming, while simultaneously raising awareness among younger citizens regarding societal threats, including extremist ideology.
- For its part, Indonesia's government has harnessed the legitimacy and authority of the country's mass Muslim movements to serve as moderate counterweights to more radical elements in the national body politics.
- In Central Asian nations like Uzbekistan, meanwhile, an often heavy handed "security first" approach to Islamic radicalism has given way to a more sophisticated strategy aimed at recapturing the narrative surrounding the Muslim faith through education and historical teaching.

Other examples exist as well. This is the case in Jordan, where early efforts to articulate a framework for tolerant Islam⁹ paved the way for the work of others in the region. It is also true in Morocco, which has formulated an intricate national approach to promulgating moderate Islam at home—and to exporting its teachings throughout Africa and beyond.¹⁰

The list goes on, but the commonalities are striking. Across the Muslim World, governments are waging a "war of ideas" against intolerant strains of Islam in various ways, animated by a shared understanding of the need to engage local populations and promote counterweights to extremist ideology.

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AMERICA'S ROLE

In the United States, the scope and importance of this intellectual struggle remains poorly understood. Over the past two decades, America has devoted little energy to grasping the ideological dimension of the competition of ideas taking place in the Muslim World, and even less to helping shape it. Yet the mission remains an urgent one—and the United States has a crucial role to play in it. But joining the fight requires thinking differently about the nature of the problem, and what America's most potent contribution might be.

Over the years, by dint of its military prowess, the United States has led the global counterterrorism fight against extremist actors. By contrast, America is not nearly as well positioned to spearhead the intellectual response to Islamic extremism. A predominantly Judeo-Christian nation, it inherently lacks standing or legitimacy in discussions about Islamic texts and their interpretation. Nor is the U.S. bureaucratically structured to direct such a “war of ideas,” focused as it has been historically on hard security responses to radicalism.

Rather, the most important role that the U.S. can play in this unfolding contest is that of legitimator and supporter, identifying credible partners (whether nation-states or organizations) working to advance moderate Islamic ideas, and then buttressing their authority and legitimacy. In this way, Washington can use its standing on the world stage to amplify authentic, moderate Muslim voices capable of contesting—and counteracting—the Islamist narrative.

For the moment, official Washington is preoccupied with the challenge of an increasingly assertive, belligerent China, and by the need to prevent Russia from realizing its deeply-held imperial ambitions. Those are unquestionably urgent priorities. But so, too, is the need to play a more constructive role in what ranks as one of the most pressing struggles confronting American allies in Africa, the Middle East and Asia. To a very large degree, America's future standing in those places will depend on whether it does.

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