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Leveraging Islam

Amitai Etzioni

FOLLOWING THE implosion or removal of totalitarian regimes of the secular (communism, Saddam's state socialism) and religious (Taliban) varieties, we have witnessed an explosive growth in numerous forms of antisocial behavior. The resulting instability endangers the interests of the peoples involved, undermines their support for democratic regimes and harms U.S. foreign policy.

The champions of global democratization must recognize that when security is poor and antisocial behavior rampant, citizens tend to favor the introduction of strong-armed government, as seen in Russia, most former Soviet republics, Iraq and Afghanistan. And this is one key reason why people are supportive of strong (and non-democratic) governments in China and elsewhere.

Recruiting and training security forces helps combat antisocial behavior by laying the foundations for a stable state, which any democracy requires. However, building such forces is woefully insufficient; a moral culture is at least as important. A moral culture is a set of values and norms that defines what types of behavior are expected. It relies not on laws but on

traditional religious or secular precepts based on ethical notions, for instance, an expectation that differences should be resolved peacefully. Moral cultures work only as long as they are undergirded by informal social controls, in which "significant others"—family, friends, co-workers—frown and even chide those who ignore established norms and praise those who live by them. When a moral culture is intact, it serves to ensure voluntary compliance by most people most of the time with the dos and don'ts on which all stable regimes are based. The police cannot provide law and order if most people will not obey most laws without enforcement by the authorities. No state can field enough cops, detectives, border guards, customs inspectors and accountants to provide a reasonable level of order if most of the billions of transactions among a population must be surveyed and controlled. Moreover, the law enforcement agents themselves are likely to violate the law if they are not imbued with a sound moral culture. The American experience with Prohibition and the war against drugs has shown that when there is no widespread voluntary compliance with the law, based on a conviction that the law at hand ought to be observed, effective compliance cannot be sustained.

The second reason a viable moral culture is essential for a stable state is that there is a set of responsibilities that citizens must assume for their children,

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parents, community and nation that are not enumerated in any law and hence are supported only by moral precepts and informal social controls. For instance, the law does not require most of what parents in an orderly society do for their children. And most of what children do for their elderly parents is morally and socially driven, not legally mandated.

At stake is nothing less than our basic assumptions about human nature and the sources of social order. Many champions of liberty assume that once the yoke of a Taliban-like or communist government is lifted from people's shoulders, their self-interest will lead them to pro-social behavior. Many others assume that democratization merely requires a set of political institutions and processes, such as regular and fair elections, separation of powers, a free press and such. Others add the elements of a civil society, including a rich fabric of voluntary associations, a growing middle class and proper civic education. All these are of merit but far from sufficient. People have a darker side that must be curbed. Hence, as the totalitarian or authoritarian sources of order are removed, new ones must be fostered.

In free societies, most people "behave" most of the time because they have internalized a set of moral values and encourage one another to abide by them. In free societies, most people do not defecate on the sidewalks, abandon their children or toss garbage out the windows—because they believe it is wrong to do so, and because the people they care about would be scandalized if they did behave this way. This is exactly what is missing in most newly liberated states.

The explosive growth of antisocial behavior in former police states is rarely mentioned in deliberations about the future of these societies because it is implicitly assumed that these behaviors are merely transitional, that establishing proper policing will take care of them, or that a measure of such antisocial conduct

is the price one must pay for liberty. Such assumptions ignore the fact that antisocial behavior has been persistent after the fall of authoritarian regimes around the world, in some cases for 15 years.

Russia provides an especially telling example. In the period immediately following the fall of the communist regime, from 1989 to 1993, the total crime rate in Russia increased by 72 percent, or an additional 1,180,000 reported incidents. Especially indicative of the breakdown in the social fabric was that a friend or relative of the victim committed 63 percent of reported physical assaults. Eleven years later the situation has shown no improvement; nearly 2.9 million crimes were registered in 2004. The number of drug addicts in Russia has also skyrocketed. Between 1991 and 1995 the number doubled and then over the next five years quadrupled. Dramatic increases have also been seen in alcohol consumption and suicide rates. The situation does not seem much better in many of the former Soviet republics. Even China, whose movement toward democratic reform has been even slower than that of Russia, has witnessed increases in antisocial behavior as the regime has liberalized its controls. The authoritarian regimes of Afghanistan and Iraq have been among the most recent to fall and, just as elsewhere, have been followed by sharp increases in antisocial behavior.

The low level of social order is one major reason there are strong anti-democratic tendencies in many of these nations. These tendencies are most evident in Russia. (My Russian colleagues suggest that the recent decline in support for Putin is not due to the fact that he is too anti-democratic, but that he has not fashioned a strong enough government.) The same is true about a large number of former Soviet republics. A weak social order is a major reason that tribal warlords continue to dominate most of Afghanistan and a major reason I predict that if the

Iraqi government stabilizes, it will be at least as authoritarian as Putin's regime. Gaza provides another case in point.

Building democracy has become the battle cry of U.S. foreign policy. If democracy is discredited by failing to provide even a safe life—as we have seen in the many nations that have held fairly free elections and then been labeled “democratic” by the ever-eager-for-victories White House—America's normative and political credibility will be undermined and support for its policies diminished.

Facing Up to Religion

ONE MAY well wonder—given the great difficulties involved in changing societies, especially from the outside—whether there is anything the United States can do to foster moral cultures and the informal social controls that nurture them in recently liberated countries?

First and foremost, the U.S. government and American policymakers have to recognize that religion is a major source of moral culture. This is true for the Catholic Church in Poland, for the Orthodox Church in Russia, for Islam in large parts of Iraq and Afghanistan, for Confucianism—and increasingly Christianity—in China. Continuing attempts to foist the establishment clause of the U.S. Constitution on other societies has hindered us from enlisting faith communities in our efforts to stabilize democracy.

We must recognize that our “separation of church and state” is not an essential element of a democratic system; most democracies have no such separation. A good start in taking this essential observation into account can be seen in that both the Afghan and Iraqi constitutions include, on the one hand, a commitment to human rights, pluralism and democracy (as promoted by U.S. emissaries) and, on the other, a commitment to Islam (as demanded by local leaders). In the Af-

ghan constitution, the first three articles are dedicated to establishing the nation as an “Islamic Republic” (Article 1), where Islam is the official state religion (Article 2), and where “no law can be contrary to the beliefs and provisions of the sacred religion of Islam” (Article 3). However, Article 2 also specifies, “Followers of other religions are free to exercise their faith and perform their religious rites within the limits of the provisions of law.” Articles 6 and 7 go on to declare the nation's commitment to democracy, human rights, international treaties and the UN charter. The text explicitly references the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. In the new Iraqi constitution, Article 2 declares that Islam is the official religion of the state and a fundamental source of legislation, while also declaring the nation's commitment to religious pluralism and democracy.

The combination of democratic and Islamic principles in the two documents may be an indication that Islam and democracy can co-exist. However, what is missing in both cases is any guidance as to *what version of Islam* these constitutions are to follow. The Iraqi document includes an apparent attempt to address this concern with the phrase “the established provisions of Islam”, but this provides very little if any guidance on the issue at hand. The references to Islam in both documents ignore the fundamental differences between extreme and moderate versions.

The United States has a great vested interest in which type of Islam prevails. Moderate Islam is not expansionist; it treats jihad as a personal spiritual journey rather than a campaign to vanquish the infidels; it is tolerant of other religions, especially Christianity and Judaism; and instead of giving mullahs the sole power to interpret the Quran and *sharia*, moderate Muslims draw on the concept of *shura*, or consultation with the community. Above all, moderate Islam embod-

ies the Quranic statement “let there be no compulsion in religion”, rather than the moral squads patrolling the streets, amputations, beheadings, stonings and honor killings.

Some may say that although there are moderate Muslims, they are few and far between and are found mainly in Western nations. Far from it. Despite some radicalization in recent years, most of the 210 million Muslims in Indonesia, the 117 million in Bangladesh and those of North Africa are overwhelmingly moderate. The same is true of most of the 145 million Muslims in India and many Muslims in Turkey.

To now support largely secular forces vying with Islamic extremism is akin to supporting mainly conservative forces in the Cold War days rather than also reaching out to the non-communist socialists. One cannot gain traction or start a normative dialogue with devout Muslims by quoting Locke and Kant or the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. However, by pointing to less strict and rigid interpretations of Islamic texts and *sharia*, we can appeal to their basic values and normative concerns. Hence, the basic premise of U.S. foreign policy ought to be that we ally ourselves with those opposed to extreme versions of Islam, whether they be moderate Muslims or secular groups.

President Bush, for understandable reasons, has consistently argued that America’s war is not with Islam but with terrorism, stating: “Our enemy is not Islam, a good and peace-loving faith that brings direction and comfort to over one billion people, including millions of Americans.” This and many other such pronouncements send the unintended message that the United States draws no distinction between extremist and moderate Muslims. As a result it seems that moderation is neither recognized nor rewarded.

Moreover, the U.S. government has alienated moderate Muslims by embrac-

ing prominent public intellectuals who argue that the West is in a cultural war with Islam—rather than only with some version of it. For example, Samuel Huntington wrote: “The underlying problem for the West is not Islamic fundamentalism but Islam, a different civilization whose people are convinced of the superiority of their culture . . .” In the future, the president, other national leaders and spokespersons should cease to characterize all of Islam as either a religion of peace *or* the source of terrorism; and they should stress the difference between Muslims that are moderate and those that are extremist and violence prone.

It also means that the United States must become much more comfortable in dealing with religious themes and issues. For instance, U.S.-supported TV and radio programs should regularly broadcast sermons by moderate Muslim preachers and carry news reports about the religious leaders of millions of followers of moderate Islam; the United States should also help publish translations in many languages of moderate texts and so on.

A New “National Endowment”?

CONGRESS IS funding various endowments and other programs to promote democracy and, in general, American secular values overseas. These organizations dedicate a substantial amount of their resources to programs in the Muslim world. Their missions—the promotion of democracy, civil society and liberty—are all of much merit, but they also are essentially secular in nature and do not build moral cultures. A State Department official, working in the Office of International Religious Freedom, explained that promoting moderate religion, “is not part of the culture [at the State Department]; people are not on that wavelength; it is considered complicated.”

To the extent that religion is exported by these endowments and governmental bodies at all (and there are some minor efforts in this direction), the question in practically all cases is whether Islam can be compatible with democratization and whether we should work with Islamist groups (the position taken by Noah Feldman of NYU Law School) or avoid them (the position taken by Robert Satloff, executive director of the Washington Institute for Near East Policy).

Others have taken various intermediary positions (for example, working with Islamic groups might be possible, but we should be very cautious). The core concern in these discussions is whether the followers of Islam are willing to put the law of the land, which will be democratically formed and respectful of human rights, above the laws formulated by the prophet and the Quran.

My litmus test is a different one: Namely, can religion serve as a major source of the moral culture that newly liberated nations badly require? The answer is undoubtedly in the affirmative. However, not all religions are created equal from this viewpoint. To reiterate, only moderate Islam can serve as a main source for a moral culture based on persuasion rather than coercion, where individuals accept their responsibilities not because they fear cruel punishments and moral squads but because they find themselves morally bound. The almost exclusively secular messages of the U.S. governmental bodies working for democratization in the Muslim world had best be modified if the moral cultures there are to be shored up and firm social orders are to be established.

Nowhere is the reluctance to support moderate Islam, and not merely secularism, more evident than in the ways the United States treats aid for education in Muslim countries. Schools play a key role in fostering a moral culture; they provide the best opportunity to launch

the introduction of new values. Hence, it is a grave mistake to merely remove fundamentalist Islamic texts from liberated schools and replace them with texts that deal only with normatively neutral subjects—which is what the United States is primarily doing in Iraq and Afghanistan. Including character education in the curriculum (and relevant teacher retraining) is essential.

Some American legal experts argue that it is a violation of the First Amendment to use taxpayers' money to fund religious education in other nations, just as it is in the United States. Charles Haynes, a senior scholar at the First Amendment Center of the Freedom Forum, holds that it is a violation of the Constitution to use federal money to print religious textbooks in Afghanistan. Indeed, the most germane court case, *Lamont v. Woods* (1991), reaches the same conclusion. This is also the position of USAID, which will generally fund only neutral, apolitical and non-religious educational materials. And although USAID claims, with regard to Iraq, that all education initiatives must be Iraqi-led, it also states that “guidelines exist not to fund school materials that violate the first amendment of the U.S. Constitution, which prohibits using government funds to promote religion.”

The chief of the USAID education program in Baghdad, Jessica Jordan, has stated, “Before we use taxpayer money to print textbooks we need to ensure that we are not infringing on [the] separation of church and state and the First Amendment.” Granted, like many other such legal rulings and guidelines, these, too, are not always closely followed in the field. There are some reports of aid operatives in the field who look the other way when religious texts are left in schoolbooks, but this merely further highlights the confused and inconsistent approach to the matter followed by the United States.

The issue was somewhat mitigated in 2004 by an in-house USAID rule entitled

“Participation by Religious Organizations in USAID.” Although the regulations specifically stipulate that any USAID support for faith-based organizations overseas cannot be used for “inherently religious activities”, section 7 “permits the Secretary of State to waive all or any part of the rule, on a case-by-case basis, where the Secretary determines that such waiver is necessary to further the national security or foreign policy interests of the United States.” Indeed, USAID now provides very modest funds to radio programs on Islamic tolerance in Indonesia, the construction of Islamic elementary schools in Uganda, the preservation of mosques and Islamic manuscripts in numerous Muslim countries, and many other “inherently religious activities.” And finally, while lower courts have judged against the use of government funds for religious activities abroad, the Supreme Court has yet to rule on the matter.

Although some Iraqi parents, especially in the larger cities, would send their children to secular, public schools that would provide education following the American model, in large parts of Iraq and most of Afghanistan—in which almost everyone is still religiously devout—such education can hardly serve to shore up the moral culture. It follows, therefore, that if the goal is to reach most of the population—and especially those now hostile to modern economic and political developments, and inclined to religious extremism—religious schooling (of the moderate kind) must be provided. The best system for regimes where many do not approve of secular education may be for all children in public schools to attend the same classes in most subjects,

while also allowing for “electives” that are either secular (say additional classes in history and literature) or religious. Educational authorities would choose the teachers providing religious education, thereby ensuring that the teachers are moderates and use appropriate texts. Parents would be able to choose which tracks their children would follow.

Beyond schooling, in dealing with the community at large the State Department’s practice of bringing leaders from the Muslim world to experience life in American suburbia has not produced the types of changes we would want. To promote moderate Islam in Iraq and Afghanistan, the United States would be better off inviting moderate mullahs from nations such as Indonesia, Bangladesh and other largely Muslim nations in which such mullahs (and other Islamic scholars) are found in large numbers.

In short, for democracy to take root and survive in the Greater Middle East and elsewhere, the United States must recognize the importance of moderate Islam as the keystone for constructing a moral culture that can sustain free institutions; merely advancing secular values (such as human rights and democracy) will not suffice. Major changes must be introduced in the ways the United States conducts public diplomacy, foreign aid and other elements of foreign policy to favor moderate religious values while rejecting only extremist ones. These changes are essential if the moral culture of newly liberated nations is going to be shored up in ways that persuade people to abide by democratic tenets rather than relying mainly on security forces and secular values. □