

# Politics in the Muslim World

What do we know?

by Hamid Lellou



Train him to be proactive without provocation and operationally relevant. (Photo by SSgt Luis R. Agostini.)

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In Arabic, Islam means peace. So why has Islam become associated with violence? How much do you know about those Muslims who choose to use violence as a means of expression? Do they represent the majority of Muslims? Or are there Muslims who wish to invoke changes peacefully? To answer these questions and assist Marines in comprehending differences and nuances among political Muslim ideologies, let us look at the political arena in the Muslim world.

In his response to Islam and the challenges of democracy, John L. Esposito says:

While much of the world has focused on the threat from extremist Islamic organization, mainstream Islamic candidates and parties have continued to participate in the political process, performing impressively in 2002 elections in Morocco, Bahrain, Pakistan, and Turkey, where the Justice and Development Party (AK) came to power.<sup>1</sup>

Regardless of differences between

Shi'a and Sunni, the four Sunni schools, and other sects, Muslims can be politically categorized in four distinct ways to assist Marines in comprehending the differences and nuances between political Muslim ideologies.

*The violent radicals.* Radical Islam is not a monolithic global ideology. Under the severe repression of Egyptian President Gamal Abdel Nasser in the 1960s, the Muslim Brotherhood, which had begun as a nonradical Islamic political movement, splintered, nurturing radical branches that helped seed global jihadism.

*The conservative purists.* The purists stand for firm and uncompromising action in defending, preserving, and transmitting Islamic identity. They view politics as a distraction and believe that Allah's words should not be debated in the political arena. They reject any ideas coming from outside Islam. The King of Saudi Arabia once said, "The democratic system prevalent in the world is not appropriate in this region."<sup>2</sup>

*The reformers.* The reformers affirm that Islam is timeless and complete. Therefore debating, practicing, and explaining Islam should meet the demands of the time. Reformers call for a democratic interpretation of religion as they want all Muslims to agree that Allah is unique and sovereign. The reformers argue that blind submission to monarchies and oligarchies is contrary to Islam.

*The secular Muslims.* In comparison with the purists, secular Muslims are the extreme opposite. Their identity is rooted in the West, embracing technology, adopting cultural values, and referring to themselves as modern or moderate Muslims. "Moderate Muslims are viewed by some

other Muslims as people who are unwilling to stand up for anything.”<sup>3</sup> Secular Muslims are perceived by Middle Easterners to be symbols of Western interference in the region, utilized to remodel the region to their wishes.

Secular Muslims can be divided in two categories—authoritarian secular regimes, as mentioned above, and civil society. Ironically, although several Middle Eastern regimes, from Algeria to Iraq are known as “secular” to outsiders, “there is actually no truly secular regime in the region.”<sup>4</sup> Those of the civil society can be scholars, educated, and noneducated Muslim citizens who may be a part of social organizations, grassroots organizations, or professional organizations but who do not politically espouse religious ideals.

### The Interrelationship Between Groups

Unlike the reformers who aspire to gradually change from within the sys-

tem, violent radicals believe they can use conflict, violence, and destruction to achieve their agenda. Not initially violent, these people once belonged to one of the three other groups. In the West, it is often assumed that disappointed and frustrated purists embrace violence, but violent radicals may, for various reasons, come from any of other categories mentioned above. However, one must remember that “Some

- Islamist authoritarian regimes, such as Saudi Arabia, Mauritania, and Sudan.
- Radical violent groups, such as al-Qaeda, Armed Islamic Group, and others.

These authoritarian regimes repress and imprison their people, while violent radical groups kill to eliminate the influence of reformers. According to Akbar Ahmad, even Hamas was

## Muslim reformers often find themselves trapped between negative forces. . . .

field studies showed that regardless of theological or political categorization, Islamic theology as such has little functional relationship with violence.”<sup>5</sup>

*Muslim reformers turned radicals.* Muslim reformers often find themselves trapped between negative forces:

- Secular authoritarian regimes, such as Egypt, Morocco, Syria, and Algeria.

threatened by al-Qaeda because they held elections:

Of the groups identified with an aggressive Islam that stands up for ordinary Muslims, the best known—certainly the most notorious in the West—are al-Qaeda (the base), Hezbollah (the party of God), and Hamas (HAMAS, the acronym for the Islamic Resistance Movement).

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Although these organizations are fused as one in the minds of Western commentators, who see them simply as terrorist organizations bent on abduction and murder, they are in fact different responses to different situations. Al-Qaeda, for example, has even publicly criticized Hamas for wishing to join a legitimate government or talk of a peace process.<sup>6</sup>

*Secular Muslims turned radicals.* It is very important to examine this category, which seems particularly susceptible, especially to young individuals.

Although secular liberals are very much in the minority, and we cannot invest our regional interests in them alone, they are the embodiment of the values that we wish to nurture. Even as we seek other allies, it would be moral and political folly to abandon them.<sup>7</sup>

Most secular Muslims challenge Islamist participation in politics and advocate for the separation of religion and state.

## Discussion and Recommendations

How can these definitions allow Marines to be proactive and operationally relevant? (The famous U.S. Marine question, “So what?”) What can Marines do or not do to avoid backlashes or unwanted second and third order effects? How can Marines recognize vulnerable individuals and prevent them from joining radicals? And, finally, how can one disrupt the enemy’s actions or reactions?

*Q: What should Marines do or not do to avoid backlashes or unwanted second and third order effects?*

*A: Have a good understanding of Islam and its role in society.*

Dealing with politics under counterinsurgency (COIN) conditions is different from dealing with them under normal circumstances. COIN can be successful if we concentrate our efforts on four pillars—security, good governance, economy, and development. These four pillars are population centered. Marine areas of operation are currently in Muslim countries (Afghanistan, Iraq, Yemen, Pakistan, “Iran,”

Bahrain, and perhaps others) where the populations’ daily lives are heavily influenced by their religion and culture.

It is important for Marines to understand that, unlike the Korean campaign where the intent was to fight communism and war was considered regular, the war on terrorism is irregular, and the enemy is different. In irregular warfare the local population

## ***... the war on terrorism is irregular, and the enemy is different.***

is the center of gravity where both insurgents and terrorists are involved. Marines’ attitudes toward Muslim symbols, such as Mosques or female search at checkpoints, will influence the local population’s reactions and perceptions of the U.S. mission in their country. By understanding religious nuances and how deeply they are anchored in the Muslim society, Marines will know how to navigate in unfamiliar territory.

*Q: How can Marines recognize vulnerable individuals and prevent them*

*from joining the radicals’ side?*

*A: Understand the different groups and the reasons they switch loyalties.*

Looking at the categories above, we must remember not to generalize. All radicals (purists) are not violent, and alienating all of them will further radicalize their supporters. Attacking Islam knowingly or unknowingly will radicalize even the most tolerant secular Muslims. This is why it is crucial for us not only to understand the true Islam but also to empower Islamic purists, reformers, and secular Muslims who are willing to work together to help each other in eradicating this virus (the violence).

During Nasser’s regime, many Brotherhood members were driven underground, and thousands were jailed. Ikhwan writings show that the level of its persecution under Nasser was greater than what they endured during the monarchy. Qutb influenced by al-Bannav, wrote guideposts during Nasser’s reign and formulated his idea for militant Islam in the jail cells of Nasser’s Egypt. Another side effect of Nasser’s crack-down of the Ikhwan involved the dispersal of [Muslim brotherhood] members to neighboring Arab countries like Saudi Arabia.



***They are not born violent.*** (Photo by LCpl Tommy Bellegarde.)

It was during this time that the strict Wahabi strain of Islam was infused into Ikhwan ideology.<sup>8</sup>

Individuals who become violent are not always religious radicals. Some of them have switched sides, going from secular individuals, open and tolerant, to becoming radically violent because they have been alienated, frustrated, feel hopeless, and believe that the only way to make change in society is to

matter what we wanted to do, we had a problem with culture.”<sup>10</sup> Prevention and anticipation should occur, whether in a permissive or a nonpermissive environment. Through prevention and anticipation Marines can undermine their enemy’s propaganda and their justification for their actions (which are based on Marine cultural gaffes, such as touching the Qur’an, the Muslim holy book, instead of letting your local coun-

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fight the system. Most of these individuals are usually emotionally driven or looking for their identity and, therefore, seek a group where they can belong. “People are looking at radical leaders because they think they are the ones who are going to bring change.”<sup>9</sup> Some known individual examples of this are:

- Sayyid Qutb, public school teacher and moderate Islamist, co-founder of the Muslim Brotherhood.
- The Nigerian terrorist Abdul Mutalib who was born and raised in a secular wealthy family and lived in both Lagos (Nigeria) and London.
- Osama bin Laden attended a half secular/religious school in Jeddah.
- Anwar Al-Zawahri (al-Qaeda’s second in command) once aspired to a career in public health.
- Faisal Shahzad (the Pakistani American who attempted the May 2010 New York Times Square car bombing) was once well integrated in the United States.

*Q: How can the Marines disrupt the enemy’s actions or reactions?*

*A: Prevention and anticipation, because most of the time the enemy’s targets are innocent civilians.*

To summarize, effectively interacting with other people requires a deep understanding of their culture and customs, which will allow you to figure out all nuances and subtleties. “No

terpart do it). Knowing and applying these tips will help one not only prevent upheavals but also gain the local populace’s sympathy and collaboration.

### Conclusion

One should be aware of the differences between Islam and political Islam and avoid confusion that could have serious consequences and alienate Muslims, including the most modern and moderate ones. As Mr. Abaza and Mr. Cagaptay report in their article:

If Western intellectuals do not get rid of this confusion now, we are headed down a dangerous path. Common people in the West will start to bundle all Muslims with Islamists, picking a potentially losing battle with one quarter of humanity. This clash of civilizations is what Al Qaeda wanted to trigger with the attacks on September 11. The West and its intellectuals should be smarter than Al Qaeda.<sup>11</sup>

The issue often lies in a disconnect between knowledge and implementation. The Center for Advanced Operational Culture Learning strives to help Marines interpret and transform this intellectual knowledge into operationally practical applications and ensure that Marines have the most regionally focused, effective information for navigating cultural complexities.

### Notes

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5. Kilcullen, David, *The Accidental Guerrilla*, Oxford University Press, New York, 2009, p. 250.
6. Akbar, p. 168.
7. Muravchik, Joshua, “In Search of Moderate Muslims,” American Enterprise Institute, Washington, DC, 1 February 2008, on the web, 18 October 2010.
8. Al-Muslimeen, Al-khwan, “The Muslim Brotherhood,” *Military Review*, July/Aug 2003.
9. Akbar, p. 167.
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11. Abaza, Hayri, and Soner Cagaptay, “Is It Islamic or Islamist?,” *Newsweek*, 22 October 2010.

