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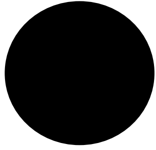

# The Lineaments of Islamic Democracy

*Ray Takeyh*

On September 11, fifteen hijackers crashed three passenger airplanes into symbols of American power. The greatest act of terror in U.S. history was soon attributed to archterrorist Osama bin Laden, who remained sheltered in Afghanistan by the radical Islamist regime of the Taliban. In the shantytowns of the West Bank and the impoverished urban centers of Pakistan, angry crowds celebrated the mayhem unleashed on the United States. Suicide bombers, fiery clerics exhorting the virtues of martyrdom, and theological schools inculcating an ideology of wrath are all now the prevailing media images of Islam. Harvard professor Samuel Huntington's prophecy of a coming "clash of civilizations" seems suddenly prescient, as pundits and politicians loudly wonder whether Islam is compatible with modernity.[1] Can an Islamic Middle East produce governments and populaces prepared to accept international norms of conduct? Can these states accommodate the necessary political reforms and foster representative institutions? Is the Middle East destined to retain its unenviable media status as a depository of despotic regimes and terrorist cells while democratic revolutions and accountable governance become increasingly the mainstay of world politics?

Western commentators have long identified Middle Eastern culture—specifically the pervasive influence of Islamic religious doctrine—as the main obstacle to democratization. No less an authority than Bernard Lewis, the American doyen of Middle East studies, has claimed that "Islam is incompatible with liberal democracy as the fundamentalists themselves would be first to say: they regard liberal democracy with contempt as a corrupt and corrupting form of government."[2] For Lewis, and indeed an entire generation of Western scholars, Islam's fusion of divine revelation and state power produces a political culture that can neither accommodate pluralism nor tolerate dissent.

Iran's Muslim revolutionaries reinforced this view after they seized power in 1979. With his glowering visage and antediluvian edicts, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini embodied the rejection of the democratic hopes of all those Iranians who coalesced under his leadership to topple the monarchy, and the Islamic Republic he established menaced both its citizenry and its neighbors. With the collapse of the Soviet Union, pundits and policymakers touted fundamentalism—the Islamic "Green Peril"—as the principal threat to the stability and prosperity of the Middle East, and the much anticipated "new world order" was ruptured by religious and cultural fault lines.

However, throughout the Middle East, a new generation of Islamic thinkers and parties are transcending such trite slogans and are seeking to harmonize imaginatively Islam's injunctions with democracy's imperatives. For leaders such as Iran's Mohammad Khatami and thinkers such as Tunisia's Rached Ghannouchi, a pragmatic interpretation of the sacred texts and reliance on Islam's democratic ideals is the most stable path for establishing durable representative institutions. While bin Laden and the Taliban may dominate media images, an Islamic *perestroika* has unexpectedly sprung from

the crumbling edifices of the various autocratic systems that persist across the Islamic world, manifesting itself through increasingly effective political movements that eschew the radicalism of their revolutionary co-religionists. Today, moderate Islamism—with its emphasis on democratic accountability and civil society—is on the upswing throughout the region.

### *Islamic Initiatives*

Rhetoric often means little, but at times it can herald a critical juncture in the development of social and political movements. Consider, for example, the effort expended by members of Algeria's Islamic Salvation Front (FIS) in preparation for the 1991 parliamentary elections. Selecting its campaign slogan after rejecting various Koranic verses and theological exhortations, the FIS settled on "God and the people," two of the most potent symbols of moderate Islamism. Indeed, throughout the Middle East a new brand of political Islam, determined to balance popular calls for political empowerment with the equally compelling demands for cultural authenticity, is coming to the fore. This ascendance of a moderate version of Islamism was not, however, a foregone conclusion. Rather it represents a maturation of Islamic thought and activism that extended over decades.

The idea of innovation and change is not new to Islam. Such towering intellectual figures of the nineteenth century as Jamal al-Afghani, who published the pan-Islamic journal, *Al-Urwa al-Wuthqa* (The Firmest Link), and Muhammad Abdu, who served as the chief mufti of Egypt, grappled with reconciling Islam to the scientific trends emanating from industrial Europe. A century later, political activists, clergy, and intellectuals once again turned to Islam in search of an organizing principle for the state in the post-independence period.

In the 1950s, venerable Islamic organizations, such as Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood and Algeria's Al Qyiam (Values), called for cultural rehabilitation and pluralism as a complement to national autonomy. However, the emerging generation of Middle Eastern leaders who had just cast off European imperial rule had very different ideas. They castigated traditional institutions as the very source of the social immobility and political decay that had facilitated the incursions of foreign powers. These new partisans of modernity dismissed their Islamic heritage, arguing that the creation of a vibrant and modern society necessitated a secular foundation. Centralization of power and the creation of strong bureaucracies, not to mention the denial of basic democratic freedoms, were all justified as necessary measures to propel the states of the Middle East forward into the modern age.

The colonial state gave way to a constellation of military juntas and one-party states whose leaders perceived competing centers of power not only as disloyal but as a threat to their progressive mission. Under the weight of state suppression, nascent Islamic parties largely abandoned political activism and concentrated on operating charitable institutions and inculcating Muslim values through education and other cultural activities.

Ironically, the secular regimes' obsession with modernization would soon emerge as their chief liability. Industrialization during the 1960s precipitated a massive exodus from the countryside to the city, where new urban migrants confronted a state with an impressive capacity to control their lives, without any corresponding opening for citizens to influence its dictates. As economic development failed to keep pace with demographics, the great seats of Islamic civilization—Cairo, Damascus, and Algiers—were engulfed by bread riots. And the region's proliferating universities were producing graduates with ideas and expectations that could not be met. The once bright promises of modernity soon faded, as financial dividends proved inadequate to an already politically disenfranchised populace.

In return for guaranteeing economic development and social modernization, the state had expected both individual citizens and the major actors in society—notably the religious establishment—to acquiesce in its rule. This social contract was coming apart. Having staked their existence on a secular vision of society, the discredited ideologies of Middle Eastern states began to give way to a new doctrine that was explicitly grounded in the region's religious and cultural heritage.

Thus, in the wake of growing disillusionment, the 1970s saw the rise of extremist wings within the Islamic movements of several countries. This newly radicalized Islamism offered a militant postulation that called for appropriation of state power and the creation of a rigid theocratic order. The foremost intellectual architects of this brand of Islamism were the Egyptian thinker Sayyid Qutb and Iran's dissident cleric Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini. Both Qutb and Khomeini chastised Muslim society as living in the state of apostasy, stressing that such a society could only be redeemed through its submission to God's will along the model of the Prophet Muhammad's original community of believers.

The greatest triumph of militant Islam came in Iran, when Khomeini displaced two millennia of dynastic rule and erected an Islamic Republic. But the Grand Ayatollah's autocratic order was itself soon bedeviled by corruption and economic stagnation. Indeed, Iran's current reform movement led by President Khatami is an implicit repudiation of Khomeini's vision of radical Islam, as it concedes that for the Islamic Republic to survive it has to meet the cultural and economic demands of a restive youth and a disillusioned middle class.

The failure of radical Islamists in power was matched by their intellectual poverty as opposition forces. While Iran's militant clerics struggled with the demands of governance, their radical counterparts elsewhere formed parties such as Egypt's Gamma al-Islamiyya and al-Jihad, Jordan's Hizb al-Tahrir, and Palestine's Islamic Jihad and Hamas, insisting that violence was an appropriate response to states that were inculcating Western values at the expense of Islamic ones. Despite their vehement rejection of the West, their methods and tactics proved eerily similar to those of the communist parties of the Eastern bloc in which a privileged elite plotted in secrecy in the name of an exalted principle. They dismissed the concept of democratic representation and pluralism on the grounds that sovereignty remained the sole province of God and was to be exercised on his behalf by a "Koranic generation." These were essentially totalitarian parties whose messianic mission mandated a violent overthrow of the political order.

The radical campaign of terror met the same fate as the militant enterprise of Iran's revolutionary clerics. Immured in the illogic of violence, its leaders failed to appreciate that their constituents sought political modernization and not a reconstruction of the idyllic seventh century. Radical Islam with its imagined utopias and simplistic solutions became just another tragic experiment in the long and tortuous history of the Middle East.

### *Kinder, Gentler Islamists*

Moderate Islamism is not an abstraction confined to seminars and seminaries, but a movement conditioned by the evolving realities of the Middle East. Hoping to forestall social or political unrest, rulers across the region launched their own versions of liberalization. The secular rulers of Egypt, Algeria, Jordan, Syria, and even Libya increasingly began to utilize the language of market economics and talk about "openness" and transparency. However, these haphazard liberalization policies not only led to further unemployment, greater inflation, and even greater disparities of wealth, but also subverted the state's raison d'être. After all, if the state was prepared to acknowledge the

inadequacy of its command economy, why not rescind its political monopoly as well?

The popular clamor for a democratic polity consistent with traditional values was answered by a new generation of Islamic activists who, since the 1980s, have called for broadening political rights in the context of cultural continuity. They have consciously eschewed the model of *revolutionary* takeover for an *evolutionary* approach—one of gradual surrender of the secular state to an Islamicized society. By assuming control over civic associations, engaging in social welfare projects, and pressing for democratic reforms in Algeria, Egypt, Tunisia, Libya, and Jordan, they have established themselves as the most plausible successors to the current crop of reigning autocrats. They are visibly demonstrating that Islamic solutions offer more viable and successful options for addressing social concerns—from economic considerations to political recognition—than the secular state.

The importance of the new movement is its attempt to use Islamic texts and traditions to legitimize pluralistic concepts. Under these progressive interpretations, Islam's emphasis on equality and justice empowers the individual to disobey a tyrannical ruler; and the Koranic designation of human beings as God's agents, responsible for the management of His domain, obligates individual liberty. Abdel al-Maadi, one of the leaders of Egypt's Center Party, denotes this point by arguing, "[The] Koran has principles not laws. The laws are people and people make laws. Through that they will determine what is acceptable to the people and not what should be imposed upon them."[3] Only if human beings are granted freedom of conscience and expression can they effectively discharge their divine obligations as God's delegates. The interplay of faith and reason and reliance on Islam's democratic ideals are used pragmatically to authenticate representative institutions.

In a similar vein, traditional Islamic doctrines are being interpreted to reflect a democratic perspective. The notion of *shura* (consultation) is seen as mandating popular participation in public affairs and establishes the foundation for an accountable government. Sadek Jawad Suliman, a leading Omani activist, argues that "as concept and as principle, *shura* in Islam does not differ from democracy. Both *shura* and democracy arise from the central consideration that collective deliberation is more likely to lead to a fair and sound result for social good than individual preference."[4] The concept of *ijma* (consensus) has been reinterpreted to serve as the basis for majority rule. A society whose dictates rest on a larger consensus is bound to produce a more just and equitable polity. Through these progressive reevaluations of Islamic doctrines and symbols, Islamists have suggested that popular participation is the only legitimate basis of governance and representative institutions as the best means of mediating between the ruler and the ruled. For many Muslims, particularly the younger generation of clerics and believers, democratic principles are not only compatible with Islam but represent its ultimate objective: the conception of an ideal Islamic society can only be achieved through democratic institutions and accountable rulers.

These theological musings are not merely an abstract exercise conducted in religious centers but form the basis for a movement that is actively giving expression to popular demands. Throughout the Middle East, progressive Islamists are seeking to reshape democratic principles in an Islamic context, with an emphasis on pluralism and civil society. For instance, despite a conservative clerical backlash in Iran, the reformers have used their repeated electoral triumphs not only to buttress the democratic experience but to decentralize power. Since 1998, the number of elected officials in the Islamic Republic has increased from 400 to 200,000, with many key decisions taking place at the local and provincial levels. Beyond the political arena, the reformers have

sought to strengthen civil society by giving greater license to cultural outlets, theatrical productions, and publications of books and newspapers. Iran's progressive clerics are using a pragmatic interpretation of the religious texts to fend off the hard-line clerics and construct durable representative institutions.

In the rest of the Middle East, where electoral results are still predetermined, the moderate Islamists are constructing an alternative social welfare network that exposes the inadequacy of the ruling regimes. Moderate Islamist parties such as Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood and Center Party, Jordan's Islamic Action Front, Turkey's Contentment Party, Algeria's Hamas and its Islamic Salvation Front have emerged as the most potent forces of opposition pressing for political liberalization and offering to participate constructively in national coalitions. Mosques, universities, professional associations, labor unions, and writers' guilds constitute critical components of these networks of Islamic mobilization. The "new" Islamist thinkers and parties understand that in order for them to remain relevant they cannot take refuge in stale dogmas and the contrived glories of the past but must accommodate the emerging sentiments of the populace.

*Contrasting Democratic Orders*

In the coming decades, moderate Islamists are likely to be among the contenders for political power in the Middle East. The most important question for the theoreticians of Islamic reform concerns their conduct once at the helm of state. Can "Islamic democracy" meet the institutional standards of democracy: unfettered elections, free press, and competitive political parties? Can it tolerate diversity of thought and intellectual pluralism, and protect the status of women and minorities? From what the moderates say and how they behave when committed to the exercise of power, it is possible to make some educated guesses about what this prospective Islamic democracy will look like.

In contrast to the democratic order that evolved in the West, Islamic democracy would recognize the binding and normative nature of divine law and revelation as a guide to public policy. In the Middle East, the "managers of the sacred" will engage the politicians in defining the parameters of temporal order. However, despite such holistic pretensions, Islamic democracy will feature regular elections, the rule of law, and the separation of powers. Iran's Islamic republic is one of the few places in the Middle East where there are competitive elections for both national and local offices. Iran's reformist clerics—like their regional counterparts—are struggling to expand representative rights. Unlike their radical predecessors, today's moderate Islamists appreciate that a rigid definition of religion could undermine their influence and marginalize their popular appeal. The global trend toward democracy has had a pronounced impact on their thinking, and they recognize that they cannot remain indifferent to the mass demands for the modernization of political institutions. As such, in an Islamic democracy, the public will have an important role in shaping the direction and the agenda of the state.

A viable democratic order must also extend into such areas as civil society, press freedoms, and gender rights. Moderate Islamists are well qualified to respond to this challenge, as a functioning civil society is the cornerstone of their contemplated democratic polity. Again, the case of Iran is noteworthy, as President Khatami and his reformist cohorts have sought to strengthen civil society as a means of buttressing the democratic process. In Egypt, Algeria, Tunisia, Jordan, and Turkey, where Islamists are excluded from participation in government, they dominate professional syndicates, trade unions, lawyers' and doctors' associations, and merchants' and writers' guilds. Their participation in civic organizations

has taught them how to engage in electoral politics, devise inclusive platforms, and build consensus among competing visions.

However, Islamic democracy would have certain limits. Given the centrality of religion to a prospective Islamic democracy, religious strictures would inevitably temper the vibrancy of civil society. The publication of books and press accounts contradicting the validity of Islamic tenets or denying Muhammad's prophecy would not be permitted. Islamic modernists might not call for Salman Rushdie's assassination, but they would not allow the dissemination of his ideas. The nature of Islamic traditions reinforced by the sensibilities of an essentially conservative populace might circumscribe popular discourse.

Islamic moderates make no secret that, under Islamic democracy, the people would want religion to be present in the public domain as well. Therefore, unlike in the West, the public arena would be governed and regulated by laws inspired by religious tenets, or laws that were at least not in contravention of or in conflict with Islam. This does not mean that an Islamic democracy would be a static theocracy. After all, the boundary between private and public domains would still need to be determined by custom, social norms, and tradition. The existence of a vibrant civil society would guarantee debate. Laws and regulations would be likely to change as a result. Islamist moderates insist that, under such a system, political leaders would have no right to impose their own particular reading of Islam on the community, or to subvert religious unity into religious simplemindedness. In the end, while some Western liberals might find Islamic democracy to be too limiting, it would still be a radical improvement over the current state of affairs in the Middle East.

The issue of gender rights is an excellent example of the strengths and limits of Islamic democracy. In the last few decades, the proliferation of women's organizations in the Middle East has left a deep imprint on the region and its female population. Today's Muslim women see themselves as part of a global movement seeking to emancipate and empower women everywhere. The moderate Islamists who rely on women's votes and participation in the economy cannot ignore this phenomenon. Increasingly, the voices of Islamic reform suggest that the cause of women's backwardness is not religion but custom. President Khatami has sought to draw a distinction between the tenets of Islam and the traditions of a patriarchal society: "The question of women rights demands a new approach at all levels of society. Discrimination which exist in our culture, our laws and our political structures must end."[5] Iran's bureaucracy and universities are populated with women, as are lists of candidates for Islamist opposition parties in Egypt, Jordan, and Turkey. The reality of the modern Middle East is that women are actively asserting their interests and shaping national institutions.

Despite such progressive tendencies, on such issues as inheritance, divorce, and child custody, Islamic democracy will still draw its injunctions from a religious law that favors males. In the long run, the emerging bloc of women voters and parliamentary members might be able to advance legislation that relaxes such impositions. An entire class of "Islamic feminists" is beginning to demand redress of discriminatory practices by locating their rights within the scriptures. But Islamic democracy's approach toward women will be drawn from a complex matrix of tradition, theology, and the demands of modern society.

The question of religious minorities would also confront an Islamic democratic regime with the challenge of balancing individual rights with the proclivities of a religious society. The well-delineated Islamic principles calling for toleration of "people of the book" would allow the practice of established religions. Iran's Islamic government accepts the practice of Christianity and Ju-

daism and apportions a number of parliamentary seats for representatives of these faiths. For its part, Egypt's Center Party accepts Christian Copts, while Algeria's Islamic Salvation Front explicitly commits itself to "fundamental liberties, individual and collective, regardless of sex, confession and language." But schismatic deviations from the accepted Koranic sects—such as Iran's Bahai—would likely find even a modern religious democracy a profoundly inhospitable environment. An Islamic system would extend considerable leeway to minorities in terms of freedom of worship, voting rights, and representation in professional and commercial classes, but it would not concede the presidency or the leadership of critical state organs to non-Muslims. However, such exclusionary practices are not an Islamist innovation but long-standing policies of all of the region's governments—secular or religious, monarchial or republican. An Islamic polity dedicated to upholding communitarian values would be unlikely to amend the existing norms and boldly extend democratic rights as the privilege of citizenship.

The international implications of the emergence of Islamic democracies are potentially constructive. Unlike the communist parties of the past or militant Islamists, the new activists do not denounce the prevailing international system as inherently illegitimate, but call for the Middle East to use its advantages to emerge as an equal pillar in an evolving global order. As such, moderate Islam can serve as the basis of wider intercivilizational dialogues. Islamic modernism, after all, is a regional variant of the global trend toward democratization. The coming to power of moderate Islamists throughout the Middle East might therefore lead to a lessening of tensions between the Middle East and the West because governments enjoying a popular mandate and the support of the people might well forgo the use of violence as a means of legitimization. Islamic democracies would be more open societies, with a greater emphasis upon accountability. The freedom with which dictatorial regimes engage in support of terrorism or focus on building their militaries, without regard for the societal costs, would be circumscribed within a more democratic system.

While, as I have noted, Islamic democracy would subordinate temporal demands to religious injunctions, Western regimes also circumscribe the freedom of their citizens. Scandinavian states routinely impose restrictions on property rights, while the German constitution excludes extremist ideologies from the marketplace of ideas. And in the recent presidential election, the peculiarities of the U.S. electoral system awarded victory to George W. Bush, who lost the popular vote by a considerable margin. All this is not to rationalize Islamists' undemocratic lapses, but to suggest that the struggle to advance individual rights in different political cultures may diverge from Western prescriptions. Any democratic system—secular or religious, Christian or Islamic—in giving expression to the popular will, may place limits on minority rights. All democratic orders contain paradoxes and contradictions as they seek to reconcile democratic principles with collective consensus.

The historic struggle in the Middle East has centered on the challenge of nurturing a political order that harmonizes the popular quest for authenticity with the equally intense desire for democratic participation. The accusation that Islam is incompatible with Western democratic concepts overlooks the extent to which local identities and affinities are frequently transformed through a dialogue between civilizations. Although civilizations have always interacted with one another, the scope of interaction has grown dramatically in the era of globalization, as the exchange of information reinforces linkages fostered by commerce. No movement can afford to shield itself from this dynamic dialogue and immure its beliefs in the prison of dogma and orthodoxy. The burgeoning demand for freedom and political

representation in the Middle East echoes the global democratic revolutions of the last decade. Moderate Islamists are offering a path to this worldwide march. The new disciples of God neither uncritically embrace the West, nor categorically reject it, but appreciate the universality of its democratic legacy. A democratic order that relies on Islamic precepts and is articulated within an Islamic framework has the greatest chance of success in the Middle East. Instead of blindly emulating Western models and idioms, the Islamists have sought a complex interaction of two systems of thought, thus allowing the Middle East to join the global democratic society on its own terms.

*What Should the United States Do?*

For too long, successive U.S. administrations have viewed all Islamist movements, even moderate ones, through the prism of the "Green Peril" and approached this phenomenon as if it were a security concern to be contained, and ultimately defeated. A clear differentiation between the strands of Islamism would produce a more nuanced policy that, while resisting radical Islamists, engages Washington in dialogue and discussion with the more moderate elements.

In doing so, the United States could better honor its democratic rhetoric and press for a genuine democratization of Middle Eastern politics. For too long, whenever Arab regimes were charged with human rights abuses, they easily won American support by citing the Islamist threat. The nadir of such a policy came in 1991 when the United States and Europe acquiesced in the undermining of Algeria's electoral process that threatened to bring the Islamic Salvation Front to power. This led to a protracted civil war that has thus far claimed over 150,000 lives and brutalized an entire generation. Regional stability is undermined by continued support for repressive regimes that rely on force to combat change. The United States should link its aid and economic relations with Arab regimes to their respect for human rights and a genuine commitment to democratic reform.

Washington's options for helping to foster more open and representative societies in the Middle East are limited but not inconsequential. There are important lessons to be learned from the third wave of democratization that took place over the last decade. Of critical importance is building a relationship between the United States and key actors in emerging civil societies, including so-called "informal" organizations, universities, and religious groups. Civil society has historically been relatively anemic in communally oriented Islamic society, and yet we have seen the emergence of a vibrant associational life even in states like the Islamic Republic of Iran. Throughout the region, there are many professional and community organizations calling for judicial and political reforms, promotion of women's rights and family welfare, and environmental protection. Sustained Western support for such associations would not only increase the efficacy of civil society in the region but also preclude its cooption by extremists. Along these lines, the United States should encourage alternative sources of information; many newspapers and magazines already flourish and defy the censorship of the ruling authorities. The phenomenon of Qatar's al Jazeera television network is a notable example of how a single station can revolutionize the region's media culture. Many Middle Easterners now turn to the Gulf station, with its frank reporting and provocative discussions, for news and information.

All this requires bringing U.S. pressure on states that have traditionally received a free pass on their domestic behavior because of their geostrategic value. The reality is that Arab regimes rely on U.S. assistance as an important element in securing their power base. Such influence affords Washington important leverage in pressing for more equitable societies.

More fundamentally, Washington needs to reconsider the much maligned concept of

nation building. First eschewed as a vestige of imperialism and more recently rejected as an overextension of military capabilities, "nation building" remains an opprobrious term even after September 11. This aversion overlooks the successful cases of nation building that occurred following the Second World War, in the reconstruction of Germany and Japan, and the massive amounts of economic aid directed to Western Europe under the Marshall Plan.

In the end, a global war against poverty will be the most effective means of combating terrorism and extremist ideologies. Through a commitment to massive economic assistance and effective use of American expertise in areas such as public health and education, the United States can not only disable the terror infrastructure of radical Islam but also drain the swamp in which such ideologies flourish. ●

## Notes

1. See Samuel P. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of the World Order* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996).

2. Bernard Lewis, "Islam and Liberal Democracy: A Historical Overview," *Journal of Democracy*, vol. 7 (April 1996), p. 54.

3. Quoted in Anthony Shadid, *Legacy of the Prophet* (Boulder, Col.: Westview Press, 2001), pp. 268–69.

4. Sadek Jawad Suliman, "Democracy and Shura," available at www.alhewar.com/Sadekdemandshura.htm.

5. Agence France Press, June 27, 2001.