



**An Interview with Reuel Marc Gerecht, author of
*The Islamic Paradox: Shiite Clerics, Sunni Fundamentalists,
and the Coming of Arab Democracy***

Q: *Do you really think the Middle East can become democratic?*

A: Definitely. When you look at the Arabic press since President Bush declared his intention to end the appeal of bin Ladenism through the democratic transformation of the Middle East, it is striking to see how the discussion of democracy now dominates. This doesn't mean that democracy is going to arrive overnight—far from it. It certainly doesn't mean that there are millions of would-be liberal democrats out there in the sands waiting to take power. But it does clearly show that democratic ideas are building momentum.

The Westernization of the Muslim Middle East has been profound—and it is not just a recent phenomenon. Western ideas, good and bad, have been pouring into the Middle East—first via the Ottomans, and then more forcefully via the French and English—for over two hundred years. It's fair to say that since 1900—especially since the end of World War II—the Middle East has been experimenting with Western ideas and political models. Nationalism, socialism, communism, and fascism have all been tried and, in some countries, they are still being tried. Over the course of this experimentation, Western ideals have merged with—and, in some cases, obliterated—traditional Islamic values and political thought. Even the religious classes and associations—often among the most absorptive sectors of Muslim society—have adopted Western ideals.

The Arab world has not yet tried democracy, but Muslims are beginning to see the appeal of a political system where the people may periodically check the power of an abusive state. For instance, the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt—motherhood of Sunni fundamentalism and

hardly a repository of liberal thought—has thrown its support behind greater popular participation in Egyptian government.

Shiite clerics, in both Iran and Iraq, have had a steady diet of Western thought since the 1905–1911 Constitutional Revolution in Iran. In Iran today, within the clergy and without, there is a vigorous tug of war between those who want more democratic government and those who don't. Although the hard-core clergy now have the political upper hand, it's quite clear that the Iranian people and much of the clergy see political legitimacy now tied exclusively to the ballot box. Grand Ayatollah Ali Sistani, Iraq's preeminent Shiite cleric, has made it crystal clear that sovereignty rests with the people of Iraq through democratic elections—not with the Holy Law, him, or a consensus of religious scholars. His statements are powerfully at odds with the theocratic thought and practice of Iran's Ayatollah Khomeini and his successors. If Iraq is able to develop a democratic system, the effect in the Sunni Arab world or in neighboring Shiite Iran—where democratic undercurrents are developing—will likely be significant.

The critical players in this democratic transformation of the Middle East will be Shiite clerics and Sunni fundamentalists, along with the Americans.

Q: *How can Shiite clerics and Sunni fundamentalists be our allies in the democratization of the Middle East? Don't they hate us?*

A: I think it's fair to say that Sunni fundamentalists always hate us. Shiite clerics are a bit more complicated—in both Iran and Iraq, it's a classic love/hate relationship. But this is beside the point because there is no contradiction between

being anti-American and pro-democratic, at least not in the modern Middle East. Think of Latin America, where democratic forces have often had a strongly anti-American edge to them. Think of France since de Gaulle.

Q: *Even so, wouldn't we be better off working with pro-American, pro-democratic Muslim moderates?*

A: No. Bin Ladenism grew from contemporary Islamic fundamentalism, and only the fundamentalists can defeat bin Ladenism. Muslim “moderates” can't defeat bin Ladenism since they don't speak to the same audience with the same language and passions. Pro-American dictators also cannot defeat bin Ladenism since they have been an important part of the equation that gave us bin Ladenism. Many American liberals and neoconservatives think that you somehow get to have Thomas Jefferson in the Middle East without first having Martin Luther. The fundamentalists—not the “moderates” who are already too evolved—will produce the Muslim Martin Luther. The “moderates” are essentially like us, which is to say they are more or less irrelevant. They are not part of the Muslim mainstream. They are not competitive in most Middle Eastern intellectual circles, which are increasingly dominated by fundamentalists.

Q: *How do we get to the Muslim Martin Luther—don't the fundamentalists just want to take over the government and establish their own religious dictatorship?*

A: They may want that. It's impossible to know for sure until you have elections. But it's imperative to remember that hard-core Islamic militants have usually preferred to take a state by coup d'état, as Khomeini did, not through elections. Elections introduce the idea of popular sovereignty and make it competitive with, if not superior to, the Holy Law.

Elections thereby force fundamentalists—who are hardly a monolithic bloc—to compete against each other and against others of a more liberal and secular stripe. Intellectually, the age of dictatorship is dead in the Muslim Middle East.

Q: *Don't you fear the anti-Americanism of the fundamentalists?*

A: No. Paradoxically, it's essential to the process of defeating bin Ladenism. Anti-Americanism will rise substantially in the Middle East as democracy develops. Fundamentalists will surely lead the anti-American charge, playing on grievances—real and imagined, ancient and modern—and eventually it will backfire. Twenty-five years of clerical government in Iran has destroyed the appeal of “Islamic government” in Iran and made that country the most pro-American Muslim country in the Middle East. Fundamentalists' competition for votes and the responsibilities that come with governance is likely to shake profoundly the entire mental landscape in the Middle East. At the end of this process, you might actually see the Muslim Middle East become less anti-American.

The expansion of democracy is the key to the process of defeating bin Ladenism since the evolution of fundamentalist thought can only go forward when fundamentalists have the chance to compete for power. There really is no other escape from future 9/11s. You have to attack the roots of the problem—and only Muslim fundamentalists can get close enough. Jihadism is already dead in Iran, which was once the most anti-American and holy-warrior country in the Middle East. It will die in the greater Arab world when Muslims see that “rightly guided” Muslims don't have all the answers. Once democracy starts to roll, the evolution of fundamentalist thought could happen quite quickly.