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THE ISLAMIC PARADOX

Shiite Clerics, Sunni Fundamentalists, and the Coming of Arab Democracy

By Reuel Marc Gerecht

Is there a possible end to violent, rabidly anti-American Islamic extremism? The wars on terrorism and in Iraq and Afghanistan could be futile if holy warriors endlessly regenerate themselves, drawing strength and new recruits from an ever-vibrant Muslim jihadist culture. Many Americans believe that moderate Muslims may be the solution to bin Ladenism. They could be the silent majority in the Islamic world, waiting to step forward when the Middle East's dictatorial regimes loosen their grip. Since 9/11, Americans have certainly come to hope that such Muslims believe in at least some of the central tenets of modern Western civilization—greater separation of church and state, the rule of law, representative government, and women's rights. But the best hope for the end to bin Ladenism may in fact lie with influential Iraqi clerics such as Grand Ayatollah Ali Sistani and Sunni fundamentalists from Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood, not the more obviously pro-Western secular moderates.

For many Americans, Iraq has become the great democratic experiment, where a secular, more-or-less liberal political system is supposed to serve as a beacon to the rest of the region. Neoconservatives advocated war against Saddam Hussein and supported Ahmad Chalabi, the head of the former exile group the Iraqi National Congress, in part because they believed the circumstances within Iraq (decades of hideous totalitarian rule) and Chalabi (a secular, liberal, but faithful Shiite) offered the possibility of a liberal democracy finally being born in a major Middle Eastern state. In *The Islamic Paradox: Shiite Clerics, Sunni Fundamentalists, and the Coming of Arab Democracy* (AEI Press, December 1, 2004), Reuel Marc Gerecht explains why Muslim "moderates" are probably not the key to a new, less-threatening Middle East. In this fresh take on how Arab democracy will come about, he reasons that moderate Muslims, if defined by their attachment to secular, Western culture or a certain affection for the United States, will likely lose ground as a democratic movement continues to develop in the region. They are not part of the Muslim mainstream, which is dominated by fundamentalists. Shiite Muslim clerics and Sunni fundamentalists—the intellectual fathers, if not the operational patrons, of modern Islamic terrorism—are the only ones who can get close enough to the root of the problem to effect change. The two together, and the United States, are the keys to spreading democracy throughout the greater Middle East, he concludes. Paradoxically, Shiite divines (Islamic legal scholars) and Sunni fundamentalists may be our salvation from future 9/11s.

The Bush administration does not yet see it that way. Neither do most Muslims. But, Gerecht asserts, it should not be hard to see why the coming of democracy to the Middle East is not just a dream. The United States and the two major branches of the Islamic faith, thanks to Osama bin Laden and Saddam Hussein, now have a common, if acrimonious, democratic destiny. 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.

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