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Hudson Institute
Center on Islam, Democracy, and the Future of the Muslim World
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How Islamists are Ruining Islam

By Mustafa Akyol

“If religion does not remain in the sublime domain of eternal truths, and if it descends into interference with worldly affairs, it becomes a destroyer of all, as well as of its own self.” —Ottoman statesman Mustafa Fazil Pasha, 1867

DURING HIS WEEKLY ADDRESS AT THE NATIONAL PARLIAMENT, ON April 10, 2018, Turkey’s powerful President Tayyip Erdogan had a brief conversation with his education minister at the time, Ismet Yilmaz, portions of which were inadvertently broadcast on television despite a muted microphone.1

It was an interesting scene: In the middle of his address, Erdogan invited Minister Yilmaz to the podium, and asked him about “the report on deism” that his key political ally, Devlet Bahceli, had mentioned in another speech just hours before. When the minister, with utmost respect, tried to explain to his president the findings of this report, Erdogan was heard saying, “No. No such thing can happen.”

The report in question had been prepared a few weeks before by a local branch Turkey’s Ministry of Education, and it warned the Erdogan government about the alarming “spread of deism among the youth.” The official study found that even in state-sponsored religious schools—i.e. the Imam Hatip high schools whose enrollment levels have skyrocketed in the Erdogan era thanks to government incentives and recruitment—a high number of students were losing faith in Islam.
“Instead of going all the way to atheism,” the report concluded, “most of these youngsters (that lose their faith) are choosing deism.” That means, despite the Erdogan government’s sweeping efforts to cultivate a new “pious generation,” a significant portion of Turkey’s youth are choosing belief in a vaguely defined God while parting ways with the Islamic faith.

This social trend has been observed in recent years by many other Turks as well, and it has become the talk of the day in the nation. Hundreds of articles in the print media and dozens of discussions on TV have probed the question, “Why is our youth sliding into deism?” In April 2018, Ali Erbas, the head of the Directorate of Religious Affairs (Diyanet), first refuted reports on the spread of deist belief entirely, denying the possibility that “any member of our nation can be interested in such a perverse notion [as deism].” But then, five months later, Erbas’s directorate “declared war” on deism.

Turkey’s “Deism Plague”:
Why Now?

WHAT IS THE DRIVING FORCE BEHIND THIS “DEISM PLAGUE,” AS TURKEY’S religious conservatives call it? Some pro-Erdogan pundits have found the answer in what has become the cornerstone of their worldview: Western conspiracy. According to the popular Muslim televangelist Nihat Hatipoglu, for example, deism was “injected” into the glorious Turkish nation by “imperialists” who want to weaken Turkey when it is finally becoming great and Muslim again. According to Ali Erbas, the top government cleric, the real force behind the Turkish youth’s slide into deism is Western “missionaries,” who are supposedly conniving to attract youngsters to deism “to pull them away from Islam” and then to make them Christians later on.

For other Turks, however, the entire deism controversy presents not a grand conspiracy but a grand irony: In Turkey, a nation which has often taken pride in being “99 percent Muslim,” this unprecedented flight from Islam is taking place at a time when those who champion Islam—the Islamists, including President Erdogan and his loyalists in the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP)—are more politically powerful than ever.

In fact, one could argue, this is not even an irony, but rather an understandable
causality: there is a flight from Islam because Islamists are in power. As the AKP’s rule has proven unmistakably authoritarian, corrupt and cruel, some of those who are repulsed by its power and agenda have also come to feel repulsed by Islam.

Many are already making this case in Turkey. One of them is Temel Karamollaoglu, the leader of the small Felicity Party, which, like the AKP, is itself rooted in Islamism, but which nevertheless has joined forces with the secular main opposition against the Erdogan regime. “There is an empire of fear, a dictatorship in Turkey by those who claim to represent religion,” Karamollaoglu said in June 2019. “And that is pushing people away from the religion.” (Karamollaoglu’s small party represents a growing minority of religious conservatives who are fed up with the Erdogan regime. These Turkish voters also have new platforms in two new political parties headed by former key figures in the AKP who have broken with Erdogan: the “Future Party” led by former prime minister Ahmet Davutoglu, and the “Remedy Party” led by the former economy czar Ali Babacan.)

Another critic is the U.S.-based Turkish sociologist Mucahit Bilici—a devout Muslim himself—who defines the rush to deism as a part of “the crisis of religiosity in Turkish Islamism.” After finally defeating the century-old Kemalist secularist system, he observes, “Turkey’s religiosity has begun to breathe free.” Yet, as a result, “Turkish religiosity has been put to the test, and while it has succeeded politically, it has failed spiritually.” The rise of deism, Bilici adds, is an outcome of this dramatic failure. He adds that:

This process, it should be emphasized, has little to do with Kemalist laïcité, the state-led secularization project of founding statesman Mustafa Kemal Ataturk. Rather, it is an organic secularization, entirely civic and happening not at the behest of, but in spite of, the state. It is the consequence of a local, indigenous enlightenment, a flowering of post-Islamist sentiment. Disillusioned by their parents’ religious claims, which they perceive as hypocritical, the younger generation is choosing the path of individualized spirituality and a silent rejection of tradition.
WHAT HAS HAPPENED IN TURKEY IN THE PAST DECADE IS ONLY A Milder FORM OF what has happened in the Islamic Republic of Iran over the past four decades. There, too, the more avowedly Islamic section of society, which had been marginalized for about a century under a secular regime, took back power with a revolutionary zeal. In Iran, the Islamic Revolution, which began in 1979, has been more explicit, sudden and bloody. The revolution that has been ongoing during the AKP’s tenure in Turkey, by contrast, has been more implicit, gradual, democratic, and relatively peaceful. Yet still, in both countries, it is fair to say that Islam came to political power with a vengeance—but only to produce the most unintended consequences.

That is the case, because in Iran, the 1979 revolution’s ambition to re-Islamize Iranian society has instead succeeded, at least in part, at achieving the opposite: the de-Islamization of Iran. Foreign visitors to Tehran often observe these consequences in daily life. One such visitor was Nicolas Pelham, the Middle East correspondent of *The Economist*. He was detained by Iranian intelligence for weeks in the summer of 2019 before being able to report these observations:

Despite Iran’s pious reputation, Tehran may well be the least religious capital in the Middle East. Clerics dominate the news headlines and play the communal elders in soap operas, but I never saw them on the street, except on billboards. Unlike most Muslim countries, the call to prayer is almost inaudible. There has been a rampant campaign to build new mosques, yet more people flock to art galleries on Fridays than religious services... Alcohol is banned but home delivery is faster for wine than for pizza...

In the safety of their homes, women often removed their head coverings when chatting over the internet. Darkened cinema halls offered respite from the morality police who enforce discipline. In cafés women let their scarves fall languorously. The more brazen simply walked uncovered in the streets, risking ten years in prison... Iran called itself a theocracy, yet religion felt frustratingly hard to locate and the truly religious seemed sidelined, like a minority.8
This pervasive lack of piety is only one aspect of the failure of the Iranian revolution’s zeal for re-Islamization. The more severe aspect is outright apostasy from Islam—the very outrage that the Islamic Republic wants to avert by punishing it with the death penalty. As I wrote elsewhere, Iran seems to be the number one Muslim-majority country in terms of producing defectors from the faith. Many of these ex-Muslims adopt Christianity, making the Iranian church “the fastest growing” in the world. According to one study, the number of estimated Iranian converts from Islam to Christianity from 1960 to 2010 is about 100,000. A more recent study estimates the number as between 250,000 and 500,000. Some of these converts secretly practice their new faith in Iran; others run abroad to save their lives.

Still other Iranian apostates turn not to Christianity, but become instead defiantly “godless.” One of them is Azam Kamguian, a feminist activist who barely survived the Iranian Revolution, moved abroad, and wrote several books including, *Godlessness, Freedom from Religion & Human Happiness*. In another volume, she writes passionately about how, in post-1979 Iran, “Islam ruined the lives, dreams, hopes and aspirations of three consecutive generations.” Of course, the force that really did these things was not Islam itself, but the Islamic Republic. Apparently, however, it is easy to conflate the two in post-revolutionary Iran.

A Secular Wave in the Arab World

What about the Arab world? That is of course a big and diverse scene, harboring twenty-two separate countries with different political histories and systems, along with distinct sectarian, ethnic or tribal compositions. However, across the Arabic-speaking world as well, it is possible to see the signs of a new secular wave.

Some of these signs were recently captured by Arab Barometer, a research network based at Princeton University and the University of Michigan. In polls held in six Arab countries—Algeria, Egypt, Tunisia, Jordan, Iraq and Libya—its researchers found that “Arabs are losing faith in religious parties and leaders.” Accordingly, in a span of five years, the share of Iraqis who say they do not trust Islam-based parties had risen from 51 to 78 percent, and “trust in Islamist parties” in the above-mentioned countries had fallen from 35 percent in 2013 to 20 percent in 2018. Mosque attendance had also declined more than 10 points on
average, and the share of those Arabs describing themselves as “not religious” had gone up from 8 percent in 2013 to 13 percent.

Why is this happening? One answer is that too many terrible things have recently happened in the Arab world in the name of Islam. These include the sectarian civil wars in Syria, Iraq and Yemen, where most of the belligerents have fought in the name of God, often with appalling brutality. The millions of victims and bystanders of these wars have experienced shock and disillusionment with religious politics, and more than a few began asking deeper questions.

One of those who asked those hard questions and found the answer in losing his religion is Abu Sami, a 52-year-old painter in Baghdad, who spoke to NBC News in April 2019 as one of “Iraq’s closet atheists.”16 “We used to hear that Islam is the religion of peace,” he reportedly said, “but ISIS behaved like monsters, barbarians and even worse.” And from that, he inferred a broader verdict: “Is this a peaceful religion? It is not at all, and I do not want to be part of such a religion.”

Another Iraqi citizen, Islamist intellectual and researcher Ghalib al-Shahbandar, also sees this dynamic and, as a believer, worries about it. “A wave of atheism will overwhelm Iraq because of the wrong practices of Islamic parties,” he warns.17 “They are what has forced people to avoid Islam and other religions.”

In neighboring Syria, torn by the brutality of ISIS and its ilk, as well as the cruel regime of Bashar al-Assad, there is a similar trend: “Rising Apostasy Among Syrian Youths.”18 In the midst of all the violence and chaos, Syrian writer Sham al-Ali observes that, “criticism of religion has become bolder, and that many young Syrians, especially in Europe, are abandoning the religious lifestyles they had previously upheld at home.” He also adds: “Beyond the individual scope, Arab social media is chock-full of anti-religious critics and their content, which fervently calls for the re-thinking of religious myths or ridicules them altogether.”19

In Sudan, another bitter experiment with Islamism has taken place. From 1989 to 2019, the predominantly Muslim African nation lived under the autocratic rule of the colonel-turned-president Omar al-Bashir. The public protests in early 2019—or the “Sudanese Revolution”—pushed al-Bashir out of power, while also revealing his staggering corruption: in his residence alone, security forces found over $350 million dollars in cash. It was a public lesson that “a man who had always whipped up sentiments by talking about his humble beginnings” was only hiding his “gluttonous attempt to rip off generations.”20 And the public really learned that lesson. In the words of Abdelwahab El-Affendi, a prominent Muslim academic based in Qatar, in post-revolutionary Sudan, “Islamism came to signify corruption, hypocrisy, cruelty and bad faith. Sudan is perhaps the first genuinely anti-Islamist country in popular terms.”21
But What Really is Islamism?

IT MAY BE HELPFUL, AT THIS POINT, TO NOTE THAT WE ARE SPEAKING ABOUT connected but distinct trends here. Disillusionment with Islamism—in Turkey, Iran, Sudan, and elsewhere—may lead to disillusionment with Islam itself. This may lead all the way to atheism, or to deism, or to Christianity. Or it may merely lead to yearning for a less politicized faith. The latter is certainly present in all “post-Islamist” contexts as well, and ultimately it may prove to be a more substantial trend than full-scale abandonment of Islam.

However, it is not that easy to neatly separate Islamism from mainstream Sunni or Shia Islam. Islamists—parties such as the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt—may be further politicizing the religion, and terrorist groups are adding a perverse element of wanton violence.

However, what they are all championing is none other than the Sharia, the legal tradition of Islam, whose mainstream interpretations are full of commandments that are hard to accept from a modern point of view. Examples would include the execution of apostates and blasphemers, stoning of adulterers, amputating the hands of thieves, public lashings for all kinds of sins, dress codes imposed on females, supremacy of men over women, supremacy of Muslims over non-Muslims, and the overall idea of a closed society that is not just inspired by religion but also policed by it.

The late Muhammad Shahrur (d. 2019), the Syrian public intellectual whose reformist views on Islam have been widely discussed in the Arab world, had stressed this point: that the problem is coming from not just the Islamists, who may have a specific political program to implement the Sharia, but also from the mainstream traditional scholars—the ulama—who uphold all the archaic interpretations of the Sharia. In one of his writings where he invited Muslims to “critical reason,” Shahrur wrote:

Initially, we thought that Islamism would be explained as a deviation from the ulama’s sound scholarly tradition, and we expected the scholars to refute the Islamists and their aggressive ambitions to politicize Islam and to Islamize the whole world. How surprised were we when we heard not a word of condemnation from our honorable scholars but instead legal explanations that basically condoned the concoctions of the Islamists. We then realized that
the ulama’s interpretations of apostasy, [jihad], and [war] were in fact not too different from the Islamists’ positions.22

From this perspective, the contemporary disillusionment with Islam is not only because of Islamists (whether defined as political movements akin to the Muslim Brotherhood, or the more radical terrorists) but also because of the conservative clergy—Sunni, Salafi, or Shiite—who uphold religious views that defy the modern notions of freedom, equality, and human rights.

Take the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, for example, which has lately wrathfully opposed the Muslim Brotherhood type of Islamists, but which also imposes the strictest form of Sharia at home. Saudi authorities also criminalize, on par with terrorism, “calling for atheist thought in any form, or calling into question the fundamentals of the Islamic religion.”23 Yet, as observed by journalist Hakim Khatib, “many citizens in the kingdom are turning their backs on Islam,” and some of them are making it clear in websites such as “Saudis without religion.”24 And one of their motivations seem to be the very crudity of the kind of Islam imposed on them, along with the modern-day opportunities to get a sense of the alternative world out there. In the words of Khatib:

Among other things, perhaps what is primarily driving Saudis to abandon their religion is the country’s strict and dehumanising codex of Islamic law coupled with easy access to information and mass communication.25

The actual size of this flight from faith is hard to know—as there are no polls, and most people are discreet—but it seems serious enough, not just in Saudi Arabia but also neighboring Arab monarchies, to lead to media concern on a “growing tendency among youth in our [Persian] Gulf societies to become atheists.”26

The Internet, and especially social media, plays a key role here as often pointed out—but not merely as carriers of “godless thought” from outside, as conservatives typically believe, but rather free spaces where frustrations within can be finally expressed and shared, as Abdullah Hamidaddin demonstrates in his 2019 book, Tweeted Heresies: Saudi Islam in Transformation.27 There is a loss of faith in the young generation, Hamidaddin also shows by personal experience, not only because of the questions they ask, but also because of “doubt and frustration with answers readily given by religious scholars holding traditional authority.”28

Similar stories come from Morocco, where politics and laws are relatively mild, but a conflict between traditional Islam and modern values are still present. One
of those who took that conflict as a reason to give up on Islam is the ex-Muslim Muhammad who spoke to a Western academic. What made him an atheist, apparently, was the self-righteousness of his fellow Muslims:

The main trigger for his loss of faith was the fact of seeing Muslim believers who regarded themselves “as the only possessors of the one and authentic truth.” The latter included the belief that “Muslims, and Muslims alone, have the right to enter paradise.”

“And the rest of the world?,” Muhammad asked himself, “I had a schoolmate whose mother was of Jewish descent. I couldn’t think of that lovely woman in hell.” He similarly felt repulsed by hadiths—sayings attributed to the Prophet Muhammad—which looked “as anything but moral about women, unbelievers, wars etc.”

Other Moroccan atheists report similar reasons for their loss of faith. For Abdul-lah, another ex-Muslim, the key reason was the hatred of gays which he encountered in Islamic circles. “How can God condemn homosexuals because of their sins,” he asked, “if God himself created them?” For another ex-Muslim, the deal breaker was “puzzlement inducted by moral issues such as gender inequality.”

All that is precisely why, across the ummah from North Africa to South East Asia, Islamists and conservative clerics are warning Muslims against modern values such individual freedom, freedom of speech or gender equality. In Malaysia, sermons were given in mosques against “liberalism and pluralism,” while its former prime minister condemned “human rights-ism.” In Saudi Arabia, the Education Ministry runs a government program in schools, to build “immunity” against “liberalism,” “secularism” and “Westernization.” And in Turkey, intellectuals who support the Erdogan regime are celebrating what they describe as the “crisis of liberal democracy.”

Islam at a Crisis

ALL OF THE ANECDOTES, OBSERVATIONS, REPORTS AND STATISTICS I HAVE mentioned so far are snippets from a much larger story: That the great Islamic civilization is in a great crisis. This may sound like too broad of a statement to
some Western ears, but in fact it could be taken as a fair verdict by most contemporary Muslims, including the Islamists and conservatives I have criticized so far. They would just disagree with me simply on what kind of a crisis this is.

For many, but especially Islamists, the crisis is primarily a political one: Since the abolition of the caliphate, Muslims don’t have strong states or leaderships that are able to mobilize and unify them in order to overcome their internal conflicts, defeat their external enemies (typically the West and Israel) and achieve worldly success. Muslim societies are also swamped by devious “un-Islamic” ideas—if not also the paid agents and fifth columns—of the imperialists, while they themselves continue “sleeping.” To awaken, the Islamists also typically add, Muslims need a vanguard movement (which is often themselves), or a “new Saladin” (which is often their own charismatic leader), that will restore Muslim unity and revive our old glory.

Conservatives would agree with the spirit of this argument, but they would typically add that the current crisis has an underlying moral component as well—if only in the sense that we Muslims aren’t pious enough. Unlike the earliest Muslims, conservatives argue, we modern-day Muslims have indulged in earthly gains and pleasures instead of heavenly ones. Consequently, we lost the blessings of God, and the spiritual power of our religion.

In other words, both Islamists and conservatives would argue that the theory we have at hand—the Islamic tradition—is perfect, while we only fail in its practice. And after every failed practice, they can easily say, “But this is not true Islam,” hoping that the next practice will work. The bitter truth, however, is that we Muslims have a problem with the theory itself. And especially at the very level that Islamists and conservatives see the Islamic tradition as impeccable: values.

Here is what I mean. Until a few centuries ago, hardly anybody in the world would criticize the Islamic civilization for its values. For other parts of the world, including Europe, had nothing much better to offer. When Catholics and Protestants were slaughtering each other during the Thirty Years’ War (1618–48), for example, the multi-religious Ottoman Empire looked like a beacon of tolerance. Similarly, when Jews were persecuted in Catholic Spain in the mid-15th century, many of them fled to the Islamic civilization to find safety and freedom.

However, with the rise of liberal modernity, the world has changed dramatically—arguably for the better, at least in terms of it values. “Human rights” has become a “universal” value, accepted by a great portion of humanity (if not by their unaccountable ruling regimes). It thus has become an intuitive truth that nobody should be forced to believe in a religion, and that all individuals should be able to live their lives as they see fit, as long as they don’t harm anyone else.
Similarly, equality of all people before the law, regardless of their religion, race or gender, has created a new sense of justice and conscience.

Traditional religions, all of which were born long before the modern era, had to adapt—and most of them did. Protestants gave up persecuting “heretics” and “witches” by burning them at the stake or by some other terrible means. Catholics, whose long history includes grim episodes such as the Crusades and the Inquisition, resisted modern ideas such as political secularism or religious freedom well into the 20th century. But the Church finally took a big step forward with the Second Vatican Council of 1960s and its liberal declaration, *Dignitatis Humanae*. Judaism, which almost never had the political power to persecute anyone, yet still had a strict communitarianism, went through the *Haskalah*, or Jewish Enlightenment, which helped Jews integrate into modern society—and even to help pioneer it.

In Islam, however, we have not yet really taken that big liberal step. Mainstream authorities in many Muslim-majority countries still uphold a pre-modern worldview and jurisprudence whose conflict with modern values is impossible to hide. It just doesn’t look convincing to say, “Islam is a religion of peace,” while adding, “but we kill anyone who apostatizes from it.” Similarly, it doesn’t make much sense to insist, “Islam shows great respect to women,” while we have authoritative texts on how to beat your wife in appropriate ways.

The Way Forward:
Islamic Modernism

So, the great crisis of the great Islamic civilization is generated by the conflict between those Muslims who want to uphold this pre-modern worldview and jurisprudence (and, far worse, impose it on everyone else), and other Muslims who have accepted modern liberal values. Some among the latter, especially those who live in the West without feeling the pressure of Islamists and conservatives, may be evading the problem—but only to face it when they look into traditional teachings more carefully. Ebrahim Moosa, professor of Islamic Studies at the University of Notre Dame, describes how such “religiously literate contemporary Muslims,” can be taken aback:
When these modern, observing Muslims hear sermons and teachings delivered at mosques or read fatwas issued by the ulama, their sensibility and common sense is often shaken and offence is taken. But what they are hearing is genuine Sunnism.35

Moosa himself is a thoughtful proponent of the current called “Islamic modernism,” or “Islamic progressivism,” which is the effort to re-read Islam’s fundamental sources—the Qur’an and the Sunna, or the practice of the Prophet—by placing them in their historical context, and then reinterpreting them, non-literally, in the light of the modern context. This current was born in the 19th century, with political reformists such as the Young Ottomans or religious reformists such as the Egyptian Muhammad Abduh or the Indian Syed Ahmad Khan, who all built the intellectual basis of what historian Christopher de Bellaigue has rightly dubbed The Islamic Enlightenment.36

In the 20th century, Islamic modernism was squeezed by the vicious cycle of conflict between secular and Islamist authoritarians (and it sometimes got co-opted by one of these powerful sides), but it was further articulated by intellectuals such as Fazlur Rahman Malik, who offered a new hermeneutic interpretation of the Qur’an and a critical analytical study of the Sunna.37

Islamic modernism is similar to what Christians and Jews did while embracing liberal modernity: it is loyal to its religious roots, while appreciating the achievements of reason. Daniel Philpott draws that analogy wisely in his 2019 book, Religious Freedom in Islam, where he shows how Catholicism’s path to Dignitatis Humanae can be an example for Islam to grow its own “seeds of freedom,” which are indeed present in the Qur’an and the Sunna.38

As a Muslim myself who has been wrestling with these issues, I believe that this path—Islamic modernism—is indeed the safest way forward for the ummah. It is the path of remaining loyal to the foundations of Islam, while not only embracing modern values rooted in contemporary human conscience, but also harmonizing them with our faith. It is a vision akin to the experience of the Anglo-Saxon world, where religion, freedom and modern progress often went hand in hand, instead of being bitter rivals.39

However, if Islamic modernism remains marginalized, the ummah will be only more torn between two extremes: The conservatives and Islamists who want to preserve and even revive a bygone age, and the modern-minded Muslims who will be further pushed into “deism,” atheism, and various kinds of militant secularism. It will be an experience akin to what France has experienced, where religion and freedom came out as conflicting forces, plunging society into bitter culture wars.
So far, some of that has already happened in the Islamic civilization. But far more bitter, if not bloody, culture wars may come, especially if conservatives and Islamists preserve their illiberal, intolerant and supremacist ways. The former’s rigid attachment to tradition, and the latter’s authoritarian attempts to impose it, have already crippled societies and ruined many individuals. Unless they change course, there may be only more ruins.

NOTES

https://www.academia.edu/16338087/Believers_in_Christ_from_a_Muslim_Background_A_Global_Census.


13. https://centerforinquiry.org/blog/authors/azam-kamguian/.


17. Ibid.


19. Ibid.


25. Ibid.


30. Ibid. p. 34.

31. Ibid. p. 145.


The Evolution of East African Salafi-Jihadism

By James Barnett

In the early hours of January 5, 2020, roughly a dozen militants from al-Qaeda’s East African affiliate, the Somalia-based al-Shabaab, sneaked onto a discreet U.S. airfield nestled among the mangrove forests of eastern Kenya. The ensuing firefight at the base in Manda Bay lasted for hours, killing three Americans and destroying a U.S. surveillance plane.1 The assault was overshadowed in international media by the killing of Iranian General Qassem Soleimani in Iraq two days prior, but it marked a significant inflection in al-Shabaab’s long efforts to expel “infidel” forces from East Africa as a means of establishing an Islamist state.

The group had attacked Kenya numerous times and had killed two American Soldiers in separate firefights in Somalia.2 But never before had al-Shabaab succeeded in breaching a U.S. military installation. The January 2020 attack further underscored the ease with which al-Shabaab operates across the border in Kenya. A U.S. strategic partner, and generally seen in the West as one of Africa’s more stable and prosperous states, Kenya was clearly vulnerable despite years of counter-terrorism efforts and hundreds of millions of dollars in U.S. security assistance.3
U.S. security officials had already grown increasingly concerned about al-Shabaab’s improving capabilities prior to the attack. In March 2020, those officials revealed to *The New York Times* that al-Shabaab operatives had attempted to take commercial flying lessons within the past year and were also seeking to acquire shoulder-fired anti-aircraft missiles. A failed strike on an American base in Somalia in October 2019 received praise from both al-Qaeda Central and al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula and a subsequent pledge from the group’s reclusive emir, Ahmad Umar aka Abu Ubaidah, to wage more attacks against Americans. This also had been cause for some alarm. The view that al-Shabaab is uniquely dangerous among Africa’s Salafi-jihadi groups is one this author has heard repeatedly from U.S. defense officials; it is also reflected in the high volume of U.S. airstrikes in Somalia in recent years.

We can only speculate about whether and how al-Shabaab might next strike against U.S. interests, presumably in East Africa but potentially further afield. We can be more confident in asserting that al-Shabaab is poised to grow stronger in the coming years if current conditions persist. Within Somalia, the group is mired in a bloody stalemate with African Union peacekeepers and Somali forces. Yet this stalemate is set to turn in al-Shabaab’s favor as AU peacekeepers are expected to draw down fully by December 2021, leaving security in the hands of an ineffectual Somali state. At the same time, conditions in Somalia’s larger neighbors in East Africa are such that al-Shabaab—and potentially its smaller rival, the Islamic State in Somalia—may be able to expand its influence there.

For example, Ethiopia, with a Muslim population of more than 30 million, faces mounting instability that may prove a vector for al-Shabaab or Islamic State expansion. In Kenya, al-Shabaab has begun expanding its recruitment net in innovative ways, targeting regions and ethnic groups outside traditional Islamist networks, and even recruiting youths from Christian-majority communities. These trends are worrisome in their own right given the potential to further destabilize a volatile region. Such trends also offer important lessons for the wider analytical community, as they demonstrate the adaptability and resilience of Salafi-jihadi groups. Indeed, for precisely these reasons, the history of how Salafi-jihadism gained a foothold in East Africa over the past several decades is one that merits close examination.
Bin Laden’s Khartoum Years

SUDAN OF THE 1990S WAS THE EPICENTER OF A NEW TYPE OF REVIVALIST ISLAMISM in East Africa. As in the Middle East, leftist and nationalist ideologies had initially held more sway over East Africa’s Muslim elites in the post-WWII period, while in Sudan, Islamist politics was dominated by traditional Sufi sects. But this began to change in 1989, when Col. Omar al-Bashir seized power in Sudan with the support of Hassan al Turabi’s National Islamic Front (NIF). The NIF helped Bashir reimagine Sudan as a more strictly Islamist society with a constitution influenced by the works of Islamist revivalists like Abul Ala Mawdudi and Sayyid Qutb. In the early 1990s, pro-Bashir clerics sanctified a counterinsurgency effort in the country’s south as a jihad.

Then came Turabi’s most consequential decision—to invite Islamist dissidents and militants from around the world to Sudan, most famously Osama Bin Laden, who settled in Khartoum in 1992 after being declared persona non grata in Saudi Arabia. As the son of a construction magnate, Bin Laden helped finance and organize various infrastructure projects in Sudan, ingratiating himself with the Bashir regime. The Sudanese government eventually bowed to U.S. and Saudi pressure and begrudgingly expelled Bin Laden in 1996, insisting that the Saudi had merely been a charitable businessman.

In fact, the Sudan years were formative for al-Qaeda. Bin Laden’s organization opened camps in Sudan and began laying the groundwork for its first major attack against American interests: the 1998 twin bombings of the U.S. embassies in Nairobi and Dar es Salaam. The attacks killed 224 people in total, primarily Kenyans (the blast in Dar being less deadly).

Bin Laden’s East African cells, collectively known as al-Qaeda in East Africa (AQEA), conducted the attacks with support from al-Qaeda operatives based across the Middle East and Central and South Asia. In 2002, AQEA would strike again in Kenya, this time in the port city of Mombasa. The Mombasa-born Saleh Ali Saleh Nabhan oversaw two attacks on November 28 of that year: the bombing of an Israeli-owned beach resort and an unsuccessful attempt to down an Israeli charter plane with a shoulder-fired missile. After the attacks, Nabhan fled Kenya for Somalia, a refuge for AQEA operatives and a land that al-Qaeda leadership had once hoped would become a launching pad for their global project.
The Roots of Somali Jihad

Somalia slid into civil war in the late 1980s as various clan-based rebel movements took up arms against longtime strongman Mohamed Siad Barre, who was eventually toppled in 1991. One group that stood out from the alphabet soup of rebel factions was al-Ittihad al-Islamiya (AIAI), a Salafi organization formed in the 1980s that publicly disavowed clannism. Somalia’s Salafi community had mobilized in opposition to Barre’s project of “scientific socialism” in the 1970s and ‘80s, a time when increasing numbers of Somalis were gaining exposure to various pan-Islamist and Salafi ideas through scholarships, madrassas, and NGOs funded by Gulf petrodollars. In the late ‘80s and early ‘90s, some AIAI members trained in Afghanistan with al-Qaeda or at other “Afghan Arab” camps. Al-Qaeda in turn sought to support the nascent Somali movement from its offices in Khartoum.

Somalia’s appeal for jihadists was clear: the collapse of Siad Barre’s state provided an opportunity for a Muslim polity to reorganize itself around Sharia law. Furthermore, since 1992 U.S. forces had been present in Somalia to support a United Nations peacekeeping and humanitarian relief mission. Bin Laden had been unable to evict the Kuffar militaries from his own Arabian homeland, but he felt that the Somalis might be more successful with help from his mujahideen. With this in mind, in December 1992 al-Qaeda conducted its first “external” attack—a hotel bombing in Yemen (albeit an unsuccessful one) targeting U.S. forces en route to Somalia. Several months later, some al-Qaeda trainers entered Somalia via Kenya. Al-Qaeda-trained fighters may have taken part in the infamous Black Hawk Down incident in October 1993, a battle which shaped al-Qaeda’s worldview: the subsequent withdrawal of U.S. forces from Somalia reinforced Bin Laden’s conviction that the “Far Enemy” would withdraw from the Muslim world rather than see its own blood spilled (19 American servicemen died in the battle along with several hundred Somalis).

But Bin Laden’s hopes for a Salafi-jihadi proto-state in Somalia were premature. Al-Qaeda’s Arab operatives were frustrated by the warlordism of the ‘90s, in which militias mobilized around seemingly inscrutable clan grievances rather than a higher religious calling. Somalia was also difficult to operate in from a logistical standpoint. When he was expelled from Khartoum, Bin Laden opted for a base of operations in Taliban-controlled Afghanistan, which had some of the infrastructure lacking in Somalia. The U.N. and U.S. designated AIAI in the
immediate aftermath of 9/11 for its ties with al-Qaeda, but the group was already
defunct by then.23

As warlord factions increasingly fractured in the late 1990s, clan elders began
forming grassroots Sharia courts in Mogadishu to fill the governance void. The
courts proved quite popular for the semblance of law and order they offered: Businessmen could transport their products across town and women could walk the streets again.24 In an effort to expand their reach, a number of these courts
developed militias and eventually banded together to form the Islamic Courts
Union (ICU) in 2000.25 By late 2006, the ICU had taken over much of southern
Somalia, though it remained an incoherent if not factional organization.

Unsurprisingly, many AIAI members found a new home in the ICU. The jihad-
ist presence in Somalia and the suspected role of the ICU in sheltering AQEA
members thus drew the attention of U.S. intelligence officials to Somalia after
9/11. Throughout the early and mid-2000s, the CIA funded Somali warlords to
hunt down suspected jihadists, though the program had limited success.26

The Rise of al-Shabaab

HARAKAT AL-SHABAAB AL-MUIJAHIDEEN (“THE MOVEMENT OF YOUTH MUIJAHIDEEN”)
emerged as one radical armed wing of the ICU in the early 2000s, with many
former AIAI members in its ranks.27 The group’s identity began to crystallize after
December 2006, when Ethiopian forces backed with U.S. air support invaded
Somalia to dislodge the ICU from Mogadishu and install the exiled, U.N.-recog-
nized Transitional Federal Government (TFG).28 The invasion fractured the ICU
but also allowed the nascent al-Shabaab to capitalize on an upsurge of nationalism.

Somalis harbor deep historical grievances against Ethiopia, historically an ex-
pansionist and Christian kingdom, that fuels irredentism to this day.29 From the
outset of the 2006 invasion, Ethiopian forces were met with suspicion if not
outright hostility from many Somalis. The Ethiopians’ heavy-handed, Soviet-in-
fluenced military doctrine did little to help it to win hearts and minds.30 However,
al-Shabaab’s narrative was not simply, or even primarily, anti-Ethiopian. It stressed
the U.S. support for the invasion against the backdrop of the war in Afghanistan
and troop surges in Iraq. To al-Shabaab, the invasion was the latest incarnation of
“Zionist-Crusader aggression” against Muslim lands.31 To this day, al-Shabaab
propaganda addresses Somali nationalist grievances in a Salafi-jihadi framework
that links the plight of Somalis to that of other East African Muslims and, more broadly, the Umma.\footnote{32}

As part of an exit strategy for Ethiopian forces, the U.N. authorized the African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM) in February 2007.\footnote{33} When the first Ugandan AMISOM forces entered Somalia, the TFG was based in a town near the Ethiopian border and held a mere sliver of conflict-torn Mogadishu.\footnote{34} AMISOM forces faced four years of block-to-block urban warfare, something akin to a 21st century Stalingrad, until al-Shabaab withdrew from the city in August 2011.\footnote{35}

Since then, AMISOM has been fighting a grueling counterinsurgency, belying its label as a “peacekeeping mission.” AMISOM expanded to a peak force of more than 22,000 men from six nations in 2014.\footnote{36} Kenyan forces invaded southern Somalia in October 2011, ostensibly to stop cross-border raids by Somali militants.\footnote{37} Kenya formally joined AMISOM six months later, followed by Ethiopia in 2014.\footnote{38} Participating in AMISOM, which is funded by Western donors, was a logical way for Nairobi and Addis Ababa to underwrite a military presence they would have likely maintained unilaterally in any event (to this day, Ethiopia maintains additional forces in Somalia separate from its AMISOM contingent). However, the Kenyan and Ethiopian presence has proven controversial, playing into al-Shabaab’s narrative that AMISOM is another colonial tool meant to dismember Somalia.

Since al-Shabaab’s early days, its leadership had sought a formal merger with al-Qaeda. The cautious Bin Laden had urged against such a move, seeking to maintain a degree of plausible deniability between the organizations. Bin Laden feared that a formal merger would draw international counterterrorism efforts to the Horn of Africa, citing affiliates in Algeria and Iraq that faced increased pressure after announcing bay’ah. Additionally, Bin Laden hoped to convince Gulf businessmen to support development projects in Somalia and worried that a formal al-Qaeda link to Somalia’s insurgents would dissuade donors from pursuing such philanthropy.\footnote{39} However, Bin Laden’s successor, Ayman al Zawahiri, proved less apprehensive.\footnote{40} On February 9, 2012, al-Shabaab’s leadership publicly announced its bay’ah to Zawahiri, cementing al-Shabaab’s role in the al-Qaeda network.\footnote{41}

Al-Shabaab began conducting external operations in the 2010s aimed primarily at compelling AMISOM troop-contributing countries to withdraw their forces from Somalia. In July 2010, al-Shabaab militants bombed a World Cup watch party in Kampala, Uganda, killing 76 people. The attack backfired insofar as it prompted Uganda to go on the offensive within Somalia.\footnote{42} In 2014, two al-Shabaab suicide bombers attacked a restaurant in Djibouti, killing a Turkish
national and wounding several European soldiers. Then in 2016, an al-Shabaab militant detonated a laptop bomb on a Djibouti-bound flight from Mogadishu, blowing a hole in the plane’s side but failing to bring it down.

In terms of international coverage, the most noteworthy al-Shabaab attacks have struck neighboring Kenya. The group rose to global prominence in September 2013 when four militants stormed the upscale Westgate Mall in Nairobi, killing 67 people, including multiple Europeans. Al-Shabaab live-tweeted details of the attack to a global audience, embarrassing Kenyan authorities who were trying to hide details of their delayed and ineffective response. In April 2015, al-Shabaab killed 148 people in a gruesome hours-long siege of Garissa University in eastern Kenya. Then in January 2019, al-Shabaab militants again struck a high-profile target in Nairobi, killing 21 people in a siege of the Dusit D2 hotel complex.

Al-Shabaab Today: Stalemate, Resilience, and the Islamic State Challenge

Between 2009 and 2015 al-Shabaab lost most of the cities and towns under its control to AMISOM-led offensives. These offensives have largely ceased in recent years, producing a bloody stalemate. AMISOM forces are overextended and have begun repositioning and drawing down ahead of their mandate’s expiration in December 2021. Thus al-Shabaab operates freely throughout much of the Somali countryside and still holds several sizeable towns, notably in the fertile Jubba River Valley, which acts as the group’s primary base of operations. AMISOM has long promised a “final offensive” against these strongholds, but we are unlikely to see one before 2021. Even if the U.N. votes to again extend AMISOM’s mandate, it is doubtful the force will have the resources or willpower for such campaigns. Kenya may intend to maintain a troop buffer near the Jubba River Valley in the event AMISOM concludes its mission, but such a posture would likely be defensive.

U.S. military engagement in Somalia, which increased under Presidents Obama and Trump, can do little more than disrupt al-Shabaab’s operations. The U.S. launched 25 airstrikes in the first two months of 2020 alone, nearly as many as
it conducted in Iraq and Syria in the same period.\textsuperscript{51} Between 500 and 800 American troops, primarily special operations forces, operate in Somalia with another 350 or so in Kenya.\textsuperscript{52} U.S. military officials have modest expectations for this mission: their approach of “tailored engagement” is meant to buy time and space for Somali partners to develop the capacity to independently combat al-Shabaab.\textsuperscript{53}

Unfortunately, the Somali state in its present form cannot effectively backfill AMISOM. The successor to the TFG, the Federal Government of Somalia (FGS), lacks the capacity to wage sustained offensive operations against al-Shabaab. The most effective units, American-trained \textit{Danab} special forces, rely on U.S. airlift and are not ideally suited for the type of clear-hold-build operations of a counterinsurgency. Regular Somali forces frequently lack basic supplies, which has led to mutinies and rampant desertion.\textsuperscript{54} The FGS is failing in governance as well. Somalia is possibly the most corrupt country on earth and it is crippled by perennial political infighting.\textsuperscript{55} The FGS’s relations with Somalia’s five semi-autonomous Federal Member States (FMS) have soured considerably of late.\textsuperscript{56} Cooperation between FGS and FMS security forces is limited, while clashes between the two are not unheard of. Friction within AMISOM has exacerbated FGS-FMS tension, particularly in Jubbaland State in southern Somalia where Kenya and Ethiopia are engaged in a proxy competition.\textsuperscript{57}

Al-Shabaab’s enduring presence owes both to the failings of the Somali state as well as the group’s own resilience, adaptability, and internal discipline. Its ideological rigidity is largely a product of its late \textit{emir}, Ahmed Abdi Godane, who purged several officials with more nationalistic outlooks in 2013. Godane perished in a U.S. airstrike the following year, but his imprint on the organization remains.\textsuperscript{58}

Al-Shabaab deftly navigates (and manipulates) inter-clan and intra-clan tension to maintain a degree of popular support.\textsuperscript{59} It also frequently provides better governance than the Somali state. Somali civilians willingly turn to al-Shabaab’s courts for arbitration.\textsuperscript{60} Merchants have reported that it is easier to transport goods through al-Shabaab-controlled checkpoints, where militants, for example, will honor a receipt from a previous checkpoint, than through those controlled by state security forces where shakedowns are routine.\textsuperscript{61} Al-Shabaab also distributes humanitarian assistance and runs public health campaigns.\textsuperscript{62}

This is not to say that the group is widely popular among Somali society. Al-Shabaab’s bombings have killed countless civilians, particularly in Mogadishu, and have sparked popular backlash.\textsuperscript{63} But in the absence of a functional state, many Somalis have little option but to cooperate with al-Shabaab. Even in FGS-controlled Mogadishu, Somali merchants are subject to al-Shabaab extortion. The city is racked with near-daily assassinations, many of which are likely linked to criminal rackets.\textsuperscript{64}
Al-Shabaab’s cohesion was put to the test with the meteoric rise of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria. In early 2015, Somali Islamic State members in Syria began a public push for the group to drop its bay’ah to Zawahiri and re-pledge to Abu Bakr al Baghdadi.\(^\text{65}\) Such a pivot did not seem unlikely at the time given how Islamic State affiliates had popped up across Africa over the previous 12 months. But Godane’s successor, Ahmad Umar aka Abu Ubaidah, instead doubled down on his allegiance to al-Qaeda. In September 2015, Al-Shabaab’s internal security services, the Amniyat, began purging Islamic State sympathizers. It is conceivable that the purge had more to do with Abu Ubaidah’s need to assert authority as a new emir than with any strong ideological opposition to the Islamic State. In fact, contemporaneous media reports suggested that Abu Ubaidah had flirted with joining the Islamic State as late as July 2015.\(^\text{66}\)

Those sympathizers who escaped the purge coalesced around former al-Shabaab cleric Abdulqadir Mumin. In late 2015 they established a base of operations in rural Puntland in northern Somalia, far from al-Shabaab’s stronghold in the south. Official Islamic State media recognized this group as a wilayat (a province of the caliphate) in December 2017.\(^\text{67}\) Al-Shabaab has made two concerted efforts to date to eradicate the group in Puntland; both have failed.

The Islamic State in Somalia is small—fielding roughly 250–300 men to al-Shabaab’s 5,000–9,000—and its operations are limited to Puntland and the occasional crude attack in Mogadishu or central Somalia.\(^\text{68}\) Yet the group has proven resilient in the face of attacks from al-Shabaab and Puntland security forces as well as U.S. airstrikes.\(^\text{69}\) This resilience owes in large part to Mumin’s clan connections in Puntland, as well as to the group’s successful extortion of businesses in Puntland’s Bossaso port.\(^\text{70}\)

Both the Islamic State and al-Shabaab have accused the other of deviating from Islam, indicating an ideological element to the rivalry that is present in the larger dispute between al-Qaeda and the Islamic State. However, practical considerations are also likely at play, such as control over smuggling routes and overlapping extortion rackets. Al-Shabaab may also feel that its legitimacy rests on its monopoly on jihadist violence in Somalia, while aggrieved Puntland clans may see the Islamic State as a means of protecting and advancing their interests.
Kenya’s Perplexing Salafi-Jihadi Problem

AFTER SOMALIA, KENYA HAS BORNE THE BRUNT OF AL-SHABAAB’S INSURGENCY. Kenyan citizens are estimated to comprise the largest number of non-Somali fighters in al-Shabaab, a product of the historical overlap between Kenya and Somalia’s Salafi circles.71

Kenya’s Islamist organizations grew active in the 1990s during a period of moderate political liberalization. Islamism found some adherents along the Swahili coast, where the population had been Muslim for hundreds of years, prior to European colonialism, and also felt marginalized in post-independence politics.72 Additionally, members of Kenya’s long-repressed ethnic Somali population were historically active in Kenya’s Islamist circles.73 Given the porosity of Kenya’s borders, it was no surprise that some Kenyans trained in AIAI—and later ICU-linked camps in Somalia in the 1990s and early 2000s.74

Al-Shabaab began recruiting Kenyans in the late 2000s through the Muslim Youth Centre (MYC), a Kenyan Salafi group, later renamed “al-Hijra” and incorporated into al-Shabaab. The MYC was established in 2008 at the Pumwani Riyadha mosque in the Majengo slums of Nairobi, a community of predominantly coastal emigres. The MYC network was strongest along the coast, drawing on the support of hardline Mombasa clerics like Aboud Rogo and Abubakar Shariff “Makaburi” (both of whom had been close to Mombasa’s most famous hometown terrorist, Saleh Nabhan).75 The MYC funneled funds and fighters to al-Shabaab while disseminating al-Qaeda propaganda, yet it operated relatively openly in its early days. Many Kenyan Muslims overlooked or were ignorant of the group’s radical views—which included urging Muslims to boycott national politics on the grounds that the Kenyan state represented a colonial occupation of Muslim lands—and supported its work in keeping youths off the street.76

The MYC became more visibly militant after the Kenyan incursion into Somalia in October 2011. MYC members along the coast as well as al-Shabaab-linked networks in Eastleigh—the “little Mogadishu” neighborhood of Nairobi—responded to the invasion with a campaign of crude shootings and grenade attacks against security forces, businesses, and public transportation.77

In January 2012, the MYC declared Kenya “a war zone” and al-Shabaab named MYC founder Ahmad Iman Ali its leader for Kenya.78 Kenyan security forces re-
sponded with a brutal crackdown which accelerated after the September 2013 Westgate attack that led to scores of extra-judicial killings. Leading radical clerics such as Rogo and Makaburi were killed—many suspect by police. The killings sparked riots in 2014 and the temporary closure of two MYC-linked mosques in Mombasa, Masjid Musa and Masjid Sakina.

The crackdown forced the MYC network to go underground. Many fled to neighboring Tanzania, where law enforcement was less focused on counterterrorism. Al-Shabaab shifted to conducting cross-border raids from southern Somalia, a trend that continues to this day. These raids mostly strike Kenya’s Somali-majority border counties Mandera, Wajir, and Garissa—and coastal Lamu County, where Manda Bay is located. Some of the raids are conducted by a special unit of predominantly Kenyan and Tanzanian fighters called “Jaysh Ayman,” which is based in southern Somalia and maintains camps in Lamu’s Boni Forest.

In late 2019, al-Shabaab attempted a dramatic return to Mombasa. Kenyan security forces foiled a plot in late September that would have seen attacks on landmarks around the city and possibly in neighboring counties. The plot appears to have been more ambitious than anything al-Shabaab had previously attempted in Mombasa, likely involving coordination between multiple cells. Further evidence of renewed al-Shabaab activity along the coast came in October, when Kenyan authorities released a list of 10 terrorist suspects believed to be operating around Mombasa; all had Swahili or Digo names.

The January 2019 Dusit D2 attack marked an even more dangerous evolution in al-Shabaab’s Kenyan operations, underscoring the group’s ability to leverage an increasingly diverse pool of fighters to strike at the heart of Kenya. In its statement following the attack, al-Shabaab labeled the operation “Jerusalem Will Never Be Judaized.” The group claimed that it had conducted the attack in accordance with Zawahiri’s call to target worldwide “Western and Zionist interests,” following the Trump administration’s decision to move its embassy to Jerusalem. This was likely an ex post facto justification for an already planned attack, but it underscores how al-Shabaab sees itself as part of a global Salafi-jihadi community and how its operations serve to advance al-Qaeda’s interests—the expulsion of foreign forces from Muslim lands. The attack also carried symbolic importance for Kenyan jihadists, occurring on the third anniversary of al-Shabaab’s most successful operation against Kenyan security forces: a 2016 raid on the Kenyan AMISOM base in El Adde, Somalia that killed upwards of 140 soldiers and kicked off a political firestorm in Nairobi. As a further homage to Kenya’s jihadist community, al-Shabaab claimed that the Dusit operation had been carried out by the
“Martyr Saleh Nabhan Brigade,” which had also been credited with the El Adde attack.88

The most alarming element of the Dusit attack is the ethnic makeup of the five-man assault team. The cell leader, Ali Salim Gichunge, was the son of a Kenya Defense Forces soldier, a relatively typical middle-class Kenyan by all accounts, and an ethnic Meru—a Christian-majority ethnic group from central Kenya. The cell’s suicide bomber, Mahir Riziki, had been part of the Mombasa MYC network and had fled to Tanzania amid the crackdown on Masjid Musa. A third suspect named by police, Eric Kinyanjui, was Kikuyu—another Christian-majority ethnic group from central Kenya.89 This diversity marked a departure from al-Shabaab’s previous high-profile attacks, which were almost always led and executed by Somalis.90

Following the revelations of the “local” role in the attacks, officials in central and western Kenya came forward with more evidence of al-Shabaab recruitment among Christian-majority communities in their counties.91 These data points seem to confirm earlier reporting that after the intense Kenyan crackdown of 2012–2014, some elements of the MYC network had eschewed “hijra” (migration) to Somalia or exile. Instead, they had dispersed into communities in Kenya’s interior that had historically been peripheral to the country’s Islamist networks. This was likely a deliberate strategy on the part of al-Shabaab, both a means of avoiding detection and of expanding its recruitment. Recruiters in those communities even reportedly urged their new acolytes to retain their Christian names whenever applicable in order to avoid suspicion.92

The question of how al-Shabaab is recruiting so well in central and western Kenya, including winning Christian converts, merits further investigation. Kenyan authorities have suggested that these recruits are driven by financial incentives, which tracks with reports that most of the recruiting occurs in slums.93 But the economic angle is rarely a sufficient explanation for so broad a phenomenon as radicalization—and also a convenient one for Nairobi to push as it seeks more aid and a trade agreement with the United States. Some civil society actors have suggested that these recruits’ ignorance of Islam makes them susceptible to al-Shabaab’s radical religious teachings.94 This seems likely, but may only reflect part of the equation. Given al-Shabaab’s record of successfully exploiting social and political grievances elsewhere, we should consider that the group may be crafting more comprehensive socio-political-economic messaging tailored to diverse Kenyan communities, Christian ones included.
Somalia’s Jihadists Eye Ethiopia

ETHIOPIA HAS SO FAR AVOIDED THE AL-SHABAAB ATTACKS THAT HAVE PLAGUED Kenya. This, despite Ethiopia’s porous borders, its longstanding status as an arch-enemy of the Somali Salafi-jihadi movement, and the presence of Ethiopian fighters in al-Shabaab. The group came closest to striking Ethiopia in October 2013, when several operatives accidentally blew themselves up in an Addis Ababa safehouse prior to a planned attack on a soccer match. That same month, Godane reportedly ordered the creation of a special unit of Ethiopian fighters, Jaysh al Usra, to conduct operations in the country, although it is unclear if the unit has staged any attacks to date. Ethiopian authorities thwarted another plot in Addis Ababa, this by al-Shabaab’s Amniyat branch, in the fall of 2014.

We can only speculate as to why there appear to have been relatively few al-Shabaab plots in Ethiopia. One possibility is that Ethiopian authorities have foiled numerous attacks since 2014 but have kept mum. This is conceivable given the opaque nature of Ethiopia’s security state, which has only recently—and haltingly—begun to open up under the country’s new reformist Prime Minister, Abiy Ahmed. It is equally plausible, however, that after the failure of the 2013 and 2014 plots, the group decided to pause operations in Ethiopia and focus resources on Kenya, which—perhaps for reasons of geography, human networks, or international press coverage—offered a more attractive target.

It was a surprise, then, when Ethiopian authorities announced in September 2019 that they had rounded up dozens of al-Shabaab and Islamic State operatives across Addis Ababa, Ethiopia’s Somali region, and Oromia state (home to the Muslim-majority Oromo, Ethiopia’s largest ethnic group). The counterterrorism operation was supported by U.S. and European intelligence agencies as well as by authorities in neighboring Djibouti and Somaliland, through which some of the cells had entered or planned to enter Ethiopia. Authorities stated that one of the al-Shabaab cells was scouting locations in Addis Ababa and acknowledged that the Islamic State had “recruited, trained, and armed some Ethiopians.” However, given the animosity between al-Shabaab and the Islamic State in Somalia, it is unlikely that the two groups were cooperating within Ethiopia.

Prior to the arrests, both al-Shabaab and the Islamic State had made new efforts to recruit inside Ethiopia. Al-Shabaab produced its first Oromo propaganda video in 2017. In July 2019, an Islamic State-linked Telegram channel announced that it would begin releasing material in Amharic, the official language...
of Ethiopia. Subsequently, in February 2020, the Islamic State in Somalia released a video in Amharic and Swahili. These media efforts and the recent arrests suggest that both groups believe Ethiopia is susceptible to Salafi-jihadi expansion.

Unfortunately, they may be right. Al-Qaeda and Islamic State-linked groups across Africa have, time and again, found ways to insert themselves into or otherwise capitalize on inter-ethnic strife. Ethiopia faces such strife on a staggering scale. The country is presently one of the world’s leaders in internally displaced people as a result of ethnic conflict—conflict that stems in large part from the country’s turbulent transition under Abiy.

Political divisions in Ethiopia, with a population that is roughly a third Muslim, have traditionally fallen along ethnic rather than religious lines (several ethnic groups have sizeable Muslim and Christian populations alike). But that could change. There are indicators that the violence is already taking on more confessional implications in certain areas, with a rise in reported arson attacks against churches and mosques since 2018. In a country with such a large, disaffected youth population and growing ethnic tension, more Ethiopian Muslims may see in Salafi-jihadi groups a path towards security, the restoration of family and individual honor, material gain, and adventure.

Even if Salafi-jihadism only appeals to a small minority of Ethiopian Muslims, it will pose an additional challenge to the Ethiopian state at a time when it can ill afford it. Significantly, it is not clear that Abiy Ahmed’s government exercises full control over Ethiopia’s security sector, as evidenced by the behavior of regional police forces, a mutiny, and an apparent coup attempt since 2018. In the worst case, Ethiopia is at risk of a larger state breakdown, perhaps fueled in part by regional geopolitical competition and the economic and political fallout of COVID-19 (the pandemic has forced Ethiopia to delay its elections, which risks throwing Abiy’s government into constitutional limbo come autumn). Such a scenario would likely be a boon for East Africa’s Salafi-jihadi groups

**Conclusion**

STATE FRAGILITY AND SOCIAL UPHEAVAL ACROSS MUCH OF EAST AFRICA OFFERS fertile ground for the expansion of Salafi-jihadi groups. In addition to the countries discussed, Sudan faces the prospect of a greater Salafi-jihadi presence as it
navigates a rocky and uncertain political transition. In southeastern Africa, a Salafi-jihadi insurgency has erupted in northern Mozambique that appears to be drawing in fighters from throughout Central and East Africa, and particularly Tanzania, which also has a long history of al-Shabaab recruitment. This insurgency operates under the banner of the Islamic State’s newest wilayat, the Central Africa Province, which also claims attacks by a pre-existing Islamist group in eastern Democratic Republic of Congo. Much about these insurgents and their ties to the Islamic State remain unknown.

The U.S. and its partners are engaged in a many-faceted struggle against Salafi-jihadism in East Africa. This is not simply a “War on Terror”—which is itself a misnomer, terrorism being a tactic employed by diverse groups. Rather, the struggle is ideological and political as much as it is a military fight. It is clear, moreover, that the problem will not go away on its own. Across the globe, Salafi-jihadi groups are today far more numerous and deadlier than they were at the turn of the century. East Africa has already witnessed at least three generations of Salafi-jihadis: those who partook in the anti-Soviet jihad; the likes of Saleh Nabhan, who oversaw attacks on his hometown, Mombasa, at the age of 23; and the young foot soldiers of today’s al-Shabaab. Given current trends, we may expect the next generation to be larger and more diverse than any that preceded it.

NOTES


8. Ibid., 85–86.

9. Ibid., 72–73.


14. The U.S. federal indictment issued following the attacks implicated an extensive multinational network in the plot, including Egyptian members of Ayman al Zawahiri’s al Jihad organization, several of whom were based in Azerbaijan; Arab al-Qaeda operatives spread out across the Middle East, Afghanistan, Pakistan, the Balkans, Sudan, and Kenya; and multiple AQEA members of Kenyan, Tanzanian, and Sudanese nationality. The al-Qaeda operative most commonly referred to as the “mastermind” of the attacks, Fazul Abdullah Mohammed, had joint Kenyan-Comorian citizenship. All the bomb-makers were Arabs, with the exception of one Tanzanian, Ahmed Khalfan “Ghailani.” See (2000) UNITED STATES v. USAMA BIN LADEN : INDICTMENT, United States District Court, Southern District of New York. S (9) 98 Cr. 1023 (LBS), https://web.archive.org/web/20120906010435/http://cns.miis.edu/reports/pdfs/bin-laden/indict.pdf.


20. Watts et al., “Al-Qaida’s (Mis)adventures,” 5–6; also UNITED STATES v. USAMA BIN LADEN; Maruf and Joseph, Inside Al-Shabaab, 21–22.

21. The extent to which al-Qaeda-trained fighters or al-Qaeda operatives themselves were involved in the Black Hawk Down incident remains a matter of dispute. Al-Qaeda likely exaggerated the extent of its involvement in the battle in subsequent claims, though it is very probable that some Somali jihadists who had received training from the al-Qaeda team in-country took part in the battle. Nevertheless, the majority of Somali forces involved in the battle were members of a non-Islamist clan militia led by Mohammed Farah Aidid. The 1998 indictment against Bin Laden dropped any charges related to the killing of U.S. soldiers in Somalia, indicating that federal prosecutors did not have sufficient evidence to implicate al-Qaeda operatives in the fighting itself. See The 9/11 Commission Report: Final Report of the National Commission on Terrorist Attacks upon the United States, (United States: Published and distributed by SOHO Books, as released by the U.S. Government, 2010), 60; UNITED STATES v. USAMA BIN LADEN; also Shinn, “Al-Qaeda in East Africa and the Horn.” For examples of Bin Laden’s statements regarding the U.S. withdrawal from Somalia, see the Foreign Information Broadcast Service’s 2004 compilation of Bin Laden’s speeches, particularly Bin Laden’s 1996 fatwa declaring war on the U.S. as well as subsequent interviews such as “Pakistan Interviews Usama Bin Laden” and “Esquire Interview With Bin Laden.” Compilation of Usama Bin Laden Statements 1994–January 2004.” Foreign Broadcast Information Service, January 2004, https://fas.org/irp/world/para/ubl-fbis.pdf.

22. For more details on the political, social, and logistical challenges al-Qaeda faced in building a sustained presence in Somalia in the 1990s, see Chapter 3 of Watts et al., “Al-Qaida’s (Mis)adventures.”


29. Conflict between Ethiopians and Somalis dates back centuries. Much of the present-day antagonism has its roots in the late 19th century, when Ethiopian Emperor Menelik II conquered large swathes of ethnic Somali land that to this day remain part of Ethiopia. The European colonial powers’ carving up of other Somali lands around this time—and the inability of Somalis to reclaim these lands from what became Kenya and Djibouti after decolonization—produced irredentist sentiment among Somalis that persists to this day. Siad Barre waged a disastrous military campaign in the late 1970s, known as the Ogaden War, in a failed effort to reclaim Ethiopia’s Somali territories. AIAI was similarly fixated on Ethiopia in the 1990s. The group established camps in Ethiopia’s
Somali region and claimed a string of attacks in Addis Ababa and the eastern city of Dire Dawa, which in turn prompted a series of Ethiopian raids into Somalia that significantly weakened the group. For more on AIAI’s operations in Ethiopia, see “Mapping Militants,” Center for International Security and Cooperation; also De Waal, *Islamism and Its Enemies*, 138.


44. The attack had originally been intended for a Turkish Airlines flight that was cancelled at the last minute (Turkey has close ties with Somalia’s federal government), Mohamed, Hamza, “Al Shabab claims Somalia plane bomb attack,” Al Jazeera, February 13, 2016, https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2016/02/al-shabab-claims-somalia-bomb-plane-attack-160213130832329.html.


54. “East Africa and North and West Africa Counterterrorism Operations: Lead Inspector General Report to the United States Congress,” Department of Defense, Department of

55. For example, a dispute between the FGS Speaker of Parliament and FGS President in April 2018 nearly led to a shootout in Parliament. That same month, rival units within the Somali National Army clashed in Mogadishu.


62. Some examples of al-Shabaab public service campaigns include malaria prevention programs, Quranic recitation competitions for children, and large Eid celebrations in which zakat is distributed in the form of cash or livestock, “SHABAAB CONTINUES PROMOTING ITS WINNING HEARTS AND MINDS OF SOMALI CIVILIANS IN VIDEO SERIES ON CHARITABLE GIVING,” SITE Intelligence Group, December 20, 2019, https://ent.siteintelgroup.com/Statements/shabaab-


64. U.S. officials have also suggested to the author that some of these killings are not part of a top-down extortion strategy but rather the work of individual al-Shabaab assassins hired by local businessmen to eliminate competitors. See the 2018 UN monitoring group report for more details on al-Shabaab’s extensive revenue collection systems. See also Faruk, Omar and Max Bearak, “If I don’t pay, they kill me’: Al-Shabab tightens grip on Somalia with growing extortion racket,” The Washington Post, August 30, 2019, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/africa/if-i-dont-pay-they-kill-me-al-shabab-tightens-its-grip-on-somalia-with-growing-tax-racket/2019/08/30/81472b38-beac-11e9-a8b0-7ed8a0d5dc5d_story.html.


70. “The Islamic State in East Africa,” Hiraal Institute and The Global Strategy Network, 

71. “Al-Shabaab as a Transnational Security Threat,” IGAD Security Sector Program (ISSP) 
and Sahal Foundation, Intergovernmental Authority on Development, March 2016: 21.

72. The Islamic Party of Kenya (IPK) was founded around 1992 after authoritarian President Daniel Arap Moi introduced a degree of multiparty politics to the country. The 
IPK, and other Islamist groups that followed, were particularly keen to play on ethnic 
tension along the coast. Indigenous coastal populations such as the Swahili, Digo, and 
Bajuni have felt marginalized by Christian-majority ethnic groups from the interior, 
particularly the Kikuyu, that have been dominant in post-independence politics and have 
settled along the coast in greater numbers since the 1960s, Hansen, Horn, Sahel and Rift, 146–148; Warah, Rasna, “SQUATTERS ON THEIR OWN LAND: Why calls for 
secession are likely to intensify in the coast region,” The Elephant, November 9, 2017, 
https://www.theelephant.info/features/2017/11/09/squatters-on-their-own-land-why-calls-for-secession-are-likely-to-intensify-in-the-coast-region/. For more on tension be-
tween coastal and central Kenya, see also, Branch, Daniel, “Kenya: Between Hope and 

73. Parts of Kenya’s Somali population sought to secede in the immediate aftermath of 
Kenyan independence, prompting a brutal conflict known as the Shifta War. Kenyan of-
ficials remained fearful of Somali irredentism in the following decades, prompting a se-
ries of massacres against ethnic Somalis in the 1970s and 80s. For more, see “Report 
of the Truth, Justice, and Reconciliation Commission: Volume IV,” Truth Justice and 
Reconciliation Committee (TJRC) Kenya, 2013, https://www.knchr.org/Portals/0/Trans-
itional%20Justice/TJRC%20Downloads/TJRC_report_Volume_4.pdf?ver=2018-06-
18-174714-950.


Bryden, Matt and Premdeep Bahra, “East Africa’s Terrorist Triple Helix: The Dusit 
Hotel Attack and the Historical Evolution of the Jihadi Threat,” CTC Sentinel, Com-
batting Terrorism Center at West Point, 12 (6) (2019), https://ctc.usma.edu/east-africa-
terrorist-triple-helix-dusit-hotel-attack-historical-evolution-jihadi-threat/; also Hansen, 
Horn, Sahel and Rift, 148-151.

76. Hansen, Horn, Sahel and Rift, 151-153.


82. Ibid., 26, 30.


84. While details of the plot are scant, it seems to have been intended to target citywide celebrations for a national holiday in which President Uhuru Kenyatta was set to take part as well as several key elements of the city’s infrastructure, such as the international airport and main train station. Kenyan authorities suspected that al-Shabaab intended to use police or UN vehicles that the group had stolen in northern Kenya, indicating a logistics network spanning the country. Ocharo, Brian, “Detectives say terror suspects planned attack on Mashujaa Day,” *Daily Nation*, October 22, 2019, https://www.nation.co.ke/counts/mombasa/How-detectives-foiled-Mashujaa-Day-terror-attack/1954178-5320468-yi9761z/index.html; Muoki, Moses, “Pomp and Colour as Mashujaa Fete is Held in Mombasa,” *Capital News*, October 20, 2019,


87. Bryden and Bahra, “East Africa’s Terrorist Triple Helix.”


90. Bryden and Bahra, “East Africa’s Terrorist Triple Helix.”
92. “Al-Shabaab Five Years After Westgate.”
93. Miriri, “Spreading the net.”
97. Ibid., 37-44.


Observations on the Islamic State in Iran

By Mehdi Khalaji

“Say, ‘Shall I inform you who are the greatest losers in respect to their deeds? Those whose efforts go astray in the life of this world, while they reckon that they are virtuous in their works.’” QURAN (Cave, 103–4)

“The failure of the revolution is the revolution itself. Revolution and its failure are one and the same thing.” Maurice Merleau-Ponty, ADVENTURES IN DIALECTIC

Why has the Islamic State that controls Iran endured for so long? And why, moreover, has the Iranian regime managed to hold on to power in the face of one debilitating and potentially fatal crisis after another? Today, the regime faces a rolling crisis of legitimacy and loss of public trust rooted in its structural governing deficiencies, incurable mismanagement, and massive official corruption. All of this has been made worse by international isolation and crippling sanctions, as well as the coronavirus pandemic. These many challenges, taken together, might be devastating enough to bring down any unpopular government.

And yet, for over four decades, the Iranian regime has survived on the basis of revolutionary Islamism, with its delusions of religious superiority, narcissistic
cravings for grandiosity, and imperialist ambitions to lead the whole of Islam. The institutionalization of revolutionary Islamism in the Iranian state and law has rendered the regime incapable of finding any effective resolution to its core flaws or of changing its predicament. Thus, at a time when so many Iranians, both secular and religious, have grown desperate for a change in how they are governed, the regime has resisted opening the doors to meaningful reform because to do so would risk ending the Islamic Revolution for which the regime stands. If anything, the regime leadership believes that overcoming its mounting difficulties requires it to keep moving forward with its revolution. In practice, the regime has become ever more militant and totalitarian, relying on violence and new surveillance and control mechanisms to oppress its subjects, paralyze civil society, and terrorize its opponents at home and in its external empire.

This paper attempts to explain the legacy of the 1979 revolution and its current crisis. It will examine the evolution of the Islamic State in Iran and its core Islamist ideology as manifested in Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini’s teaching on Islamic revolution and Velayet-e Faghih, the “guardianship of the jurist.” For the last forty-one years, this doctrine of Islamic Government has been practiced and implemented in such a way that makes it a near impossibility that the controlling regime in Iran will pursue reform of its own volition. This, of course, is not to rule out the possibility of other pathways of political change in Iran. But it does underscore the fact that a change to a post-Islamic Republic future does not, at present, look particularly likely.

**Was It Really a Revolution? If So, What Is Left?**

*Any response to these questions depends on how one understands the “revolution.” In the Iranian regime’s official view, the revolution of 1979 was an emphatically Islamic event that was and remains truly exceptional due to its divine motivation and ends. Its only historical precedent was the foundational event in Islam, that is, the Prophet Mohammad’s rise to the political summit of two cities in Bedouin society, Medina and Mecca. Indeed, recurrent claims about the divine nature of the 1979 revolution can be found in the official rhetoric of the Islamic Republic’s two Supreme Leaders. Both Ayatollah Khomeini, the father of*
the revolution, and Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, the current Supreme Leader, have, in fact, described Iran’s revolutionary generation as superior to the newly-converted Muslim Bedouin community who supported the Prophet Mohammed in his time. Khomeini’s views on the absolute superiority of the Islamic Revolution as compared to other transformative events—whether in ancient or modern history—were made clear in his political testament released soon after his death. There, he argues:

I doubtlessly claim that the Iranian Nation and the mass of its millions [of members] in the current time are better than the Hejaz’s people in the time of God’s Prophet, and also the people of Kofa and Iraq in the period of Ali and Hossein Ibn Ali [Shiism’s first and third Imams]. Those Hejazi Muslims in the time of God’s Prophet refused to comply with his orders and were only seeking pretext for going to the war fronts…. But we see today the extent to which the [members of the] Iranian Nation…passionately sacrifice themselves on war fronts and behind them the epic scenes they create.¹

In Khomeini’s view, a Muslim’s allegiance to the Islamic Revolution and its leadership was a religious obligation, and religiously the same as loyalty to the Prophet Mohammad himself, or to one of the infallible imams of Shiite tradition. Since, in his view, the Iranian people predominantly devoted themselves to the Supreme Leader in 1979 and remained loyal to him through the process of replacing the monarchy and consolidating the power of the new Islamic Government, then the Iranian Nation achieved what even the Prophet Mohammad had failed to bring about because the majority of early Muslims in the Hejaz were not fully faithful or loyal to the prophet and his mission. Furthermore, Khomeini evidently suggests that Iran’s revolution made the “utopian” dream of Islam’s founding prophet come true, centuries after his unfortunate defeat.

Likewise, the religious nature of Iran’s revolution has been a key theme in Khamenei’s pronouncements since his elevation to Supreme Leader in 1989. Khamenei believes the ultimate goal of the Islamic Revolution was not to form a government, but, beyond that, to transform the world by establishing a “new Islamic civilization.” As such, the revolutionary process continues to this day, just as Iran’s Islamic State exists to carry the revolution forward across the earth.² Indeed, the state media now refers to Khamenei as “The Leader of the Revolution,” and, in important ways, the “Islamic Revolution” has come to operate as a sub-
stitute term for the Iranian regime itself. This widespread use of “revolution” in the Islamic Republic is, of course, a common feature in other modern dictatorships, particularly Marxist-Leninist ones. As Hannah Arendt had observed, “the emphatic stress on novelty” and a profound urge for “beginning anew” are salient characteristics of all modern revolutions. In this Arendtian schema, a revolution is realized in two phases: “liberation” and “freedom”—that is, liberation from fear of tyranny as a prelude to the freedom to live a political life guided by the constitution of a new political order. By this definition, what happened in 1979 in Iran cannot be called a “revolution” in the modern sense of the term. That is because the central demand of Iran’s revolutionaries—or, at least, the demand of those Islamist clerical factions that came to dominate and control the new Islamic Government—was to be liberated from the Pahlavi monarchy without any characteristically modern aspiration for a new political order.

Instead, what motivated the clerical revolutionaries—besides their own self-serving desire to “reclaim” their uppermost social and political status—was a nostalgic and utopian longing for the “renewal” of Islam as it was originally revealed and practiced. In Islamist ideology, as it came to be defined by both Sunni and Shiite ideologues in the twentieth century, the overthrow of an illegitimate “un-Islamic” government was to be followed by the recovery of an “authentic” Islamic Government that emulates the Prophet’s rule in the early period of Islam. But this utopian ideal—the Salaf Past—was and is an empty concept. The “retro-utopia” envisioned by Iran’s revolutionaries had never been grounded in any real understanding of history, or any realistic perception of the novel and incessantly changing demands of the present, let alone any practical idea of the complexities of running a modern government.

Thus, after the overthrow of the Pahlavi monarchy, Iran’s revolutionary leadership experienced many of the same challenges that revolutionaries elsewhere such as Vladimir Lenin had faced once they had seized power. Lenin’s Marxism and Khomeini’s Islamism provided the emotional fuel needed to mobilize the people in their collective act of subversion. But these ideological movements did not supply a blueprint or practical agenda for setting up a new political order. In Iran’s case, the lack of any practical plan for governance was a result of both the clergy’s ignorance of political things as well as their own utopian convictions.

In much the same way that Marxists believe self-destructive capitalist society is doomed to disappear and be transcended by socialism, Khomeini and the “followers of the Imam Khomeini line” believed modern civilization was destined to destroy itself and be superseded by Islam. The goal of the Islamic Revolution was to hasten this along, including by establishing an Islamic Government. How-
ever, a revolutionary reading of Shiite Islam had never been tried before. For Shiite revolutionaries, the legitimacy of their new Islamic State was mainly grounded in its absolute commitment to replace modern culture and secular legal systems with Islamic law. The “sovereignty of God” is the unique and sole authority, and sharia law, thanks to its sources in divine revelation, is believed to be unquestionably superior to any modern legal or political order based on “popular sovereignty.” The Shiite clergy therefore readily perceived themselves as the sole authority, able to run state institutions in accordance with Islamic law. But they soon discovered the profound abyss between the prescriptions of the sharia canons and the reality of a society that was, at least in part, irreversibly modernized. To deal with this, Khomeini stipulated that sharia can only benefit the umma (Muslim Nation) and respond to its worldly and spiritual needs if it is implemented under the leadership of the most learned Ayatollah. This theory of the guardianship of the jurist, in turn, hardwired the new Islamic State to be an autocracy, and to rely on terror and the ideology of permanent revolution to sustain itself.

What Was the Islamic Republic?

“ISLAMIC REPUBLIC—NO LESS NO MORE.” This was what Ayatollah Khomeini vigorously insisted on in his March 8, 1979 public speech during the national referendum on the character of the post-revolutionary government. Initially, this strange and ambiguous syntax of “Islamic republicanism” was meant to seduce and gain acceptance from many segments of Iranian society—the traditional and religious, as well as the modernist or forward-looking elites who aspired to replace the monarchical system with a modern government based on Rule of Law. While he was in exile in France, Khomeini misled many by claiming that his theory of Islamic Government was totally compatible with these democratic principles. Many “modernized revolutionaries” in Iran came to see Khomeini as a Shiite version of the Indian anti-imperialist leader Gandhi. Once the monarchy fell, many still believed Khomeini would return to Qom and hand power over to lay politicians.

But Khomeini had never intended on sharing power with the people, nor did he want his Islamic Government to be a “republic” in any conventional sense of the term—i.e., a constitutional polity of self-governing citizens. Three months prior to the revolution, Khomeini gave a famous interview in Al-Nakhar, a Lebanese newspaper. In response to the newspaper’s question about his “ideal republic and its
features,” Khomeini, revealingly explained: “The nature of the Islamic Republic is that the government will be constituted based on what Islam sets as requirements and will implement Islamic law.”

On this basis, Khomeini and his followers rejected the name “The Republic of Iran,” which had been suggested by some secular organizations, as well as “The Democratic Republic of Iran,” as proposed by the provisional prime minister, Mehdi Bazargan, and his Muslim-nationalist faction. Post-1979 Iran, Khomeini insisted, was to be called an “Islamic Republic—not a word more, not a word less.” For revolutionary Shiism, both the monarchy and “modernity” were existential threats to Islam, and they were joined in undermining the Shiite clergy’s privileged social and economic status. The “Islamic Republic” they so desired was meant to counteract these twin threats, rather than to define and construct a new order. For them, a “republic” meant the refusal or rejection of monarchy, whereas “Islam” meant the wholesale rejection of modern culture, including its political concepts and institutions.

Popular discontent among the Shiite clergy and lay activists had originally emerged as a broad-based reaction to the authoritarianism, corruption, and rapid modernization of the Pahlavi monarchy. Following the constitutional movement of 1905–1911, the monarchy had increasingly adopted an anti-clerical agenda. The Pahlavi dynasty modernizers had also tried to reinvent Iranian national identity based on the glorified era of Persian civilization, which had come to an end shortly after the advent of Islam. Thus, under the monarchical order, the Shiite clergy was increasingly excluded from national life, demoted from their formerly distinguished social status, banned from having religious endowments and other financial resources, and all together baffled by the shock of modernity and its devastating power in discrediting their intellectual honor and spiritual authority. The Shiite clergy felt bitterly wounded by these humiliations. And yet, while clerical opposition to the Pahlavi order may have obstructed or distorted the modernization process, the clerics were unable to stop its overall momentum.

The Shiite clergy was intellectually ill-prepared to cope with the strains of rapid modernization and their declining social status. In the early twentieth century, the constitutional movement had initially enjoyed some clerical support. But those clerics failed to fully grasp the European sense and usage of modern political concepts and ideas. Understanding these concepts was all the more difficult for the more traditional clerics who were committed to fighting the constitutionalists on religious grounds. All in all, clerical involvement in rational debate on modern ideas and sciences remained strictly superficial and constrained.

In Europe a few centuries earlier, Christian theologians had enjoyed a slower
pace of modernization. They were also in a far more useful and agreeable intellectual state of mind to communicate with their cultural and political adversaries. By contrast, Iran’s Shiite clergy had been introduced to modernity as late as the nineteenth century. Their limited exposure to modern ideas came from publications produced in neighboring countries. Their books on modern concerns had been filtered by non-modern mediators and suffered from a poor quality of translation. The clergy thus really had no way of learning about modern culture or constructively engaging with it. To them, modernity came abruptly as an invasive and utterly alien force that was imposed on them by the monarchy. The Shiite ulama thus became subjected to modernization in spite of themselves.

Ironically, the modernization of that same clerical elite, who simultaneously maintained their troubling anti-modern tendencies, also marked the beginning of a totally new era in Iranian religious history. For instance, the pluralist character of Shiite religious authority had been well-established for centuries. But one effect of the spread of modern connectivity and communication technology like the telegraph was to undermine the authority of Shiism’s local religious men, i.e., the marjas and faghihs. It also enabled the emergence of Shiite authorities with far greater “trans-local” and even “transnational” reach and influence. These religious leaders, in turn, refashioned the traditionally pluralist Shiite community and identity, including through the codification of sharia into law.

Moreover, modern technology actually helped the clerical establishment to achieve unprecedented financial enrichment, to reorganize its internal bureaucracy and external network on the basis of previously unknown and more centralized models, and to increasingly occupy greater space in society than its cultural rivals, the modernizing elites. This experience only proved to those clerics that science and particularly technology was a “common tool” that was able to be used in the service of Islam just as the infidels had used it. Shiite authorities saw that science and technology could be used to advance and empower their agendas without accepting modern ideas and concepts.

The emergence of this instrumentalist approach in the early history of modernity in Iran brought to a definite end any earnest engagement between past and present. In the process, “modernity” increasingly came to be seen by traditionalists as a “problem.” Since the constitutional movement especially, the fundamental “problem”—which continues to set the framework for cultural and political debates today—has revolved around a pivotal issue: modern Rule of Law, based on the concept that all law should apply to everyone equally. By contrast, the sharia canons, as a body of religious law, were shaped by Islamic theological premises and pre-modern anthropological perceptions in which the notion of justice has
nothing to do with “equality.” Instead, religious justice as understood in traditional Islamic theology is based on recognizing the moral, spiritual, social, political and various other hierarchies and differences between human beings. To traditionalist clergy, the “European” values and ways of life of Iran’s modernized elites were seen as utterly impossible for a religious Muslim to adopt, and modernity itself came to be seen as something that needed to be counteracted by Islamic law.

While the Shiite clergy confronted and sought to legally proscribe the modern “cultural invasion,” more and more they began to conclude that the modernizing Pahlavi dynasty had lost its qualification to rule Muslim society because it failed to protect the interests of its religious leaders. To remedy this great humiliation, many outraged Shiites looked to modern political ideology and organizational models. After World War One, the influence of Leftism—from Bolshevism to Marxism and Leninism—grew dramatically in Iranian society. This was the direct result of the 1917 Russian Revolution and related developments in Europe, which impacted the modernized elites in Iran. It was also indirectly the result of the growing influence of Egypt’s Muslim Brotherhood on the Iranian clergy. The Pan-Islamist ideology of the Brotherhood and other revivalist trends in Islam allowed for and even required Muslim cooperation with “infidels” who shared the same enemy. The Shiite clergy and lay political activists, both in Qom and Najaf, discovered that Leftism had enormous appeal among the wider public. They also came to see Leftism, of all the modern ideologies, as most compatible with their own religious-cultural agendas.

Shiite ideologues started to be widely known in Iran as “Left-Islamists” or “Marxist Islamists.” Of course, this would become one of the most important contradictions in revolutionary Shiism. No modern political ideologies were as fundamentally anti-religious as those of the Left. At the same time, intensified interaction and rivalry between Leftism and emergent Islamism in Iran also led to considerable cross-pollination and borrowing between them. Both ideological movements shared apocalyptic readings of history and similar utopian visions—the “classless society” for Marxists, and “tawhidi society” for Islamists. Both ideological movements also shared unconditional faith in science and a desire to acquire modern technology insofar as it served their political power and agendas. Meantime, Shiite Islamism further embraced Leftism’s dictatorial and authoritarian political models as the most effective means by which an intellectual vanguard—i.e., the revolutionary clergy—could seize power and bend society to their will. Yet, despite the profound theoretical and organizational influence of Marxism on Shiite Islamism, Iran’s revolutionaries obsessively denied their debt to it, and insisted on their own Islamic “purity” and ideological “authenticity.”
Islamo-Leninism

Shortly after the April 1, 1979 National Referendum that established the Islamic Government, Ayatollah Khomeini declared the referendum marked “the first day of God’s rule... in which the sovereignty of [the] devil disappeared forever and the government of the oppressed, which is the government of God, replaced it.”

By embedding the principle of Velayet-e Faghih in the new constitution, Khomeini ensured the new state would take the form, at least initially, of a theocracy. This had no precedent in Iranian history. Before the growth of modern Islamism, no one had questioned the eligibility of the sultan to rule on Islamic grounds, or the de facto separation of political authority and religious authority. Under Khomeini’s doctrine of Islamic Government, implementing religious law was the main purpose of the state and all its political institutions, including the judiciary and legislative. This scheme vested paramount authority over all three branches of government to those best versed in sharia. Thus, political power came to be concentrated in the clergy, and in particular in the hands of the most learned of all jurists, i.e., the Supreme Leader.

Not long after 1979, the revolutionary clergy discovered their duty to implement religious law was fundamentally at odds with the demands of actually governing. This led to considerable debate and conflict over the legality of fatwas and the religious legitimacy of legislation and, in the course of this, a disturbing question arose. Revolutionary ideology asserted the Islamic Government was superior to all other forms of government. But, if the Islamic Government could not commit itself to the full implementation of sharia (and the absolute rejection of Western/un-Islamic systems, institutions and ideals), then what would define the Islamic spirit of the Islamic Republic and make it exceptional?

For Khomeini, what made the Islamic Government exceptional was that it was ruled not by Islamic law per se but by the faghih—the jurist. The Supreme Leader subsequently amended or elaborated on his doctrine of Velayet-e Faghih. He took the notion of public interest, or maslahat, from traditional religious jurisprudence and twisted it to meet his ends. “Islamic law exists for the Muslims’ interest, for Islam’s interest. If we saw Islam in danger, we all have to sacrifice to save it,” Khomeini argued. The survival and success of the Islamic Government was the ultimate goal of the revolution (and thus of Islamic revelation itself), he claimed, one that stands above everything else, including even the tradition of Islamic Law.
Therefore, in the event of any conflict between the interests of the revolutionary regime and the requirements of Islamic Law (as well as the country’s civic law), the ruling jurist is religiously and constitutionally authorized, even obligated, to override sharia.

This notion of the “expediency of the regime,” in effect, granted the Supreme Leader the power to (re)define all law in service of the Islamic Government and the revolution. In a famous early example of this, when the regime directed Iranians to spy on each other to root out its political opponents and safeguard the Islamic Government, it was criticized by some who said the directive ran counter to the Quran. Khomeini rebuked this criticism, and unequivocally stated to the nation,

All of you are charged to save Islam by espionage... Saving Islam is above the Muslim’s life... espionage is a religious mandate for preserving Islam and Muslims’ life, and lying is a religious mandate, and drinking wine is a religious mandate.11

In his many letters and pronouncements, Khomeini reiterated his religious calls about the duty of a Muslim to serve, sacrifice, and even to destroy themselves for the sake of Islam, that is, the Islamic Government. For him, a Muslim’s religious obligations were one and the same with their duties to the ruling jurist, i.e., the Supreme Leader. In a telling example, on January 6, 1988, Khomeini issued an open letter to then-president Khamenei in reaction to the president’s speech in which he said the ruling jurist (faghih) only implemented the sharia and that his authority was constrained by fiqh (jurisprudence). Khomeini rejected this, saying it is the ruling jurist—and not fiqh—who enjoys divine authority. The Supreme Leader candidly stated that his authority is equal to the Prophet and the infallible imams of Shiism, and that he could ignore or suspend all of sharia and “even beyond” if Islamic Law is deemed harmful to Islamic Government.

One direct consequence of this was the rollback of any semblance of constitutionalism in Iran and any functioning notion of rule of law, whether civil or religious, modern or ancient. Iran’s legal system was dramatically changed, and all laws were considered effective only up until the Supreme Leader announces that they were suspended. Thus, the Islamic Republic approaches Shiite jurisprudence as an instrument just as it does technology; law is not perceived as the essential protector of citizens’ rights or freedoms (as it is in liberal democratic societies), but as a tool which serves the revolutionary regime and its interests. This is an example of legalizing illegality and irregularity, so that neither practice nor policy can be held accountable nor expected to be predictable. As but one example, the
Iranian majlis (parliament) adopted a law according to which all regime institutions (including the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps, State TV and radio, the Imam Reza Shrine, one of the richest financial entities in the Middle East, the IRGC, etc.) are exempt from any accountability before the majlis.

Today, the effects of this on Iran are apparent everywhere. Once this principle of expediency was established, the theocratic implementation of Islam as the defining principle of Islamic Government quickly became irrelevant. There had been disagreement among the clergy who jockeyed with one another for position and influence, but the ultimate authority was the Supreme Leader and all that mattered was what he determined was most expedient to the survival and advance of Islamic Revolution.

As the Supreme Leader’s power grew, the traditional institutions of jurisprudence (fiqh), ulama, and clerical hierarchy were emptied of all their authority and meaning until the sole role of other ayatollahs was reduced to complying with the diktats of the Supreme Leader. Meanwhile, the revolutionary elites that replaced those of the Pahlavi era and enjoyed the Supreme Leader’s favor have had new opportunities—and effective official sanction—to prey on the people. Members of the clergy, the IRGC, and other elements of the regime have since built up a mafia-like economic empire. Meantime, with every decision informed by the need to preserve the Islamic Government and extend its power, the Supreme Leader came to rule as if in a perpetual state of emergency, securitizing all aspects of domestic life and militarizing Iran’s external relations and conduct. Thus, the theocracy was transformed into a militant-Islamist autocracy.

The Theology of Jihad

THE IRANIAN REGIME IS FOUNDED ON AN ISLAMIST POLITICAL THEOLOGY THAT presupposes a fundamental division in the world between good and evil, or between Islam and un-Islam. The regime, as the leader of Islam and the revolution, is in an inexorable conflict with evil—especially the West and particularly America, “the Great Satan”—a conflict that must be waged and won before the end of world and the coming of the Shiite messiah, Imam Mahdi. From this emphasis on a particular type of jihad as its sole purpose flow many of the regime’s defining characteristics—its implacable hostility toward the U.S. and Israel; its securitization of all aspects of statecraft; and, most important, its intransigence
and inability to moderate. When the world is a battlefield and decisive victory is guaranteed by divine providence, there can be no “Thermidor”—that is, a period of ideological and political mellowing and reform that so many have hoped for—only a new “Reign of Terror.”

The Islamist regime’s worldview was captured by Khomeini’s frequent invocation of the mostaz’afin—meaning the “oppressed,” the deprived and powerless strata of society, the Islamic equivalent of the Marxist “proletariat.” Historically considered a key part of Islamic and particularly Shiite ideology, the regime also used this idea of the oppressed in the constitution and other political and legal canonical documents. The purpose of this rhetoric was to cast the revolution as a struggle of the mostaz’afin against the mostakberin—that is, the “arrogant ones,” or the worldly powers—aimed at replacing them and ruling the globe. Unconditionally defending the world’s oppressed by all means is central to the Islamic Republic’s ideological mission and identity.

This confrontation with an imagined enemy justified the regime’s perpetual “state of emergency.” It also sheds light on one of the key developments of the revolutionary era, the 1979 seizure of the U.S. Embassy in Tehran by Khomeinist hardliners and the subsequent hostage crisis. In a regime defined by its antagonism to “arrogant” and “oppressive” world powers, being blindly and absolutely anti-American and anti-Israeli was seen as necessary to prove one’s revolutionary and “Islamic” bona fides.

Since being elevated to Supreme Leader in 1989, Khamenei has sought relentlessly to transform the traditional Islamic concept of jihad and to establish it as the central issue in the Islamist regime’s ideology. Neither Khamenei’s idea of jihad nor his objectives are all that original if we recall Sayed Qutb, Abul A’la Maududi, and the other architects of modern Islamism. Each one of these ideologists and their offspring, from Osama bin Laden and al-Qaeda to ISIS, have sought to elevate jihad as the central characteristic and duty that defines being a Muslim. As the Supreme Leader, Khamenei’s novel contribution has been to develop a systematic juristic framework—an entire “political fiqh”—on the subject of jihad which aims to respond to the regime’s practical and policy needs and to positively define the duties of Muslims to the regime and the unfinished work of Islamic Revolution.

Like other Islamists, Khamenei understands jihad as politics, and politics as jihad. Through his political fiqh, Khamenei offers a Shiite Islamist version of the political theology of the Nazi jurist Carl Schmitt in which the state is founded upon, and defined by, a fundamental friend-enemy opposition. In redefining jihad, Khamenei makes jihad the grounding of the entire ideological system of the
Islamic Republic and the sole basis of the Iranian regime’s statecraft. “Without jihadi action and revolutionary work, we cannot set the country in order,” he says. What he means by jihad can be distilled in a short statement:

The absolute necessity of faithful and full implementation of the Supreme Leader’s orders or living blindly in compliance with his will and intentions, which legitimizes every effort, avoids all kinds of impediments by disregarding legal constraints and bureaucratic restraints.12

Khamenei’s views and reconceptualization of jihad is disturbing because of their opaque formulation and legally fluid content. In effect, the rulings on jihad provide him, the Supreme Leader, with the absolute authority to make any kind of decision at any given time, according to what he regards as expedient. This allows Khamenei to extend his ideological concept of jihad to new fields and coin new terms, such as “scientific jihad,” “economic jihad,” “cultural jihad,” “political jihad,” “managerial jihad,” “jihadi discourse,” and “jihadi enlightenment.”

In traditional Islamic jurisprudence, jihad was divided into lesser and greater conflicts. The first jihad is every Muslim’s never-ending battle against his own moral vices, and the latter is his duty to go to war with the enemy under the commandship of the ruler of Muslim umma. But Khamenei introduces a new type of “great jihad,” and justifies it with a Quranic verse. He defines “great jihad...based on its Quranic and Islamic logic,” as “resistance, having a disobedient attitude, and refusal to follow infidels and pagans.” According to him, “great jihad” has many “military, political, economic, cultural and social aspects,” including the “resistance economy” and “cultural war” against the West.

“Great jihad” expands the notion of “evil” and “enemy” so much that it applies not only to foreigners and infidels, or domestic opponents and skeptics toward the regime, but also to those who served the regime but have lost their faith in its leader. Following Qutb and Maududi, Khamenei believes that any version of Islam other than “revolutionary Islam based on the total loyalty to the ruling faqih” is a heretical, inauthentic, American and corrupt. It must, therefore, be eliminated and fought as any other obvious type of kofr and sherk (paganism).

Once anyone, regardless of status or background, refuses to prove his commitment to the Supreme Leader becomes the “enemy,” state-sanctioned political violence becomes not just possible, but required. Thus, in 2018 a speech, Khamenei authorized the security forces to “fire at will” to protect the regime’s interests. “Sometimes key think tanks and cultural and political institutions fall into disar-
ray and stagnation, and when that happens, commanders of the soft war should recognize their duty, make decisions and act in a fire-at-will manner,” he said in 2016. In this way, Khamenei fabricated a religious justification for what the government had already decided to do.

Complete obedience to the revolutionary regime, however, is not just a political necessity for Khamenei, but a world historical one. In 2019, on the important fortieth anniversary of 1979 revolution, Khamenei issued a carefully drafted statement, entitled “The Second Phase of Revolution: A Statement Addressed to the Nation.” He described the “Islamic revolution as the beginning of the world’s new time”—a time in which communism has collapsed and its historical rival, capitalism (America), is about to disappear. He insisted that the establishment of the Islamic Government in 1979 did not end the revolution, or a Muslim’s ideological duty to remain revolutionary. “The Islamic Revolution does not find revolutionary passion and politico-social order at odds, but rather it defends the theory of the revolutionary regime until the end of time.”

The “new time” that the Islamic Revolution is meant to create, according to Khamenei, involves the revival and global domination of “Islamic Civilization,” as described by Qutb in his book The Future Belongs to Islam (which Khamenei translated into Persian before the revolution). The revival and spread of Islamic Civilization is a divine promise that needed the Revolution and the Islamic Republic to make real in the world. In turn, building an Islamic Civilization, by unifying the umma and ruling the world, is the ultimate revolutionary goal of the Islamic Republic. “Islamic civilization: this is the objective of Islamic Republic of Iran,” he writes. “Achieving such civilization will be possible only after the final jihad.”

Prophesying the arrival of this ultimate battle of good and evil, Khamenei, in a recent message to the Association of Muslim Students in Europe, promised that “everything indicates the imminent rise of a unique phenomenon.”

The culmination of this logic is, as I have previously written, Khamenei’s unorthodox fatwa and thought on the legitimacy of “offensive war” (Jihad-e ebtedaii). In his book of fatwas (in print and online) and in his courses on jihad, Khamenei bluntly states that “offensive jihad is not limited to the time of Prophet and infallible Imam, and a qualified jurist who rules Muslims can declare offensive jihad, if he sees it expedient [for the regime].” The objective of offensive jihad, as Khamenei explains, is

... to remove the obstacles before calling [mankind] to [convert to] Islam. [Offensive jihad is] the one that Islam's army, without facing any attack by enemy, wages to destroy the impediments before
The Totalitarian Civilization

"Iranian leaders should be audacious enough to declare that the existing government is neither a republic nor Islamic." Grand Ayatollah Hossein Ali Montazeri, August 27, 2009

The totalitarian character of the Islamic state that controls Iran is captured by Khamenei’s concept of “managerial jihad.” The concept also captures the Supreme Leader’s approach to the mounting difficulties his regime faces...
today. In his rhetoric, “revolution” and “jihad” are one and the same. Unlike “jihad,” however, “revolution” is a modern idea that is absent in traditional Islamic discourse. By using the two terms interchangeably, the Supreme Leader means to show the religious “authenticity” and “purity” of his policies and the continued superiority and necessity of the Islamic Revolution. In any case, Khamenei’s “jihadi model” of regime preservation has aimed to deal with its troubles by driving the revolution forward. The regime has aimed through ideological engineering and force to remind people of their religious duties to it, and to imbue society with a new zeal for revolutionary struggle (jihad). In popular rhetoric, the regime says “everything is possible” on the principle of “we can.” Moreover, as the regime’s actions have made clear, there neither will nor can be any constitutional, legal, or administrative/bureaucratic restraint on what the regime wants. The Islamic State exists to make the Islamic Revolution, and the Supreme Leader is authorized and obligated to pursue that agenda by all means necessary.

The consequences of these dynamics can be seen on Iran’s streets. In the last two years, on two major occasions, widespread protests erupted which were quite distinct from the unrest in the Islamic Republic over the last forty years. They occurred in new places, and featured new participants and demands. The protesters predominantly belonged to the lower class and they were reacting to very specific concrete “economic” problems related to the regime’s endemic corruption: from the rise of gasoline prices, to a long delay in salary payments to factory laborers, and to the school teachers’ low pensions. The riots took place in small towns, peripheral areas, and neighborhoods throughout Iran. For the first time in its history, the Islamic Government found itself faced with a new type of internal opposition, one which came from the very strata of society that the regime and beneficiaries of the 1979 revolution had always portrayed as the backbone of the revolution: the mostaz’afin, or oppressed.

To address this shocking turn of events, Khamenei, who started out as a Left-Islamist champion of the oppressed, redefined the mostaz’afin protestors. In his meeting with the Basij militia (officially called “The Basij Resistance Force of Mostaz’afin”), he contradicted the regime’s official rhetoric, revolutionary literature, and Islamic ideological legacy. Khamenei declared,

Who are ‘Mostaz’afin’? ‘Mostaz’afin’ is misdefined... as economically vulnerable people... Quran defines it otherwise... ‘Mostaz’afin’ means potential leaders and rulers of mankind’s world, that said, future heirs of earth and its entire possessions; ‘Mostaz’af’ [singular form of the word] refers to the one who is potentially the heir of
world, the potential regent of god on earth, the potential Imam and leader of humankind’s world.¹⁹

In reaction to the October 2019 protests, Hossein Nejat, the cultural deputy of the IRGC commander-in-chief, revealed the regime’s concern about the lower class by accusing Western powers of supporting and using “the lower class, illiterate and peripheral” to advance their anti-Islamic Republic agenda.²⁰ This redefinition of the regime’s former constituency as enemies has obligated the regime to ignore the facts and use more violence to demand acquiescence to its rule. Using Sheldon Wolin’s expression, the regime’s reckless use of violence in recent crackdowns demonstrates that the “totalitarian dynamic” has visibly intensified in the Islamic Republic. “The totalitarian dynamic is the exact opposite of revolutionary dynamics: historically the latter has attacked the powerful and privileged. Totalitarian theory turns revolutionary theory on its head: the enemy are the pitifully weak and vulnerable.”²¹ This is the crucial point of the regime’s command that turned its forces against the people: to “close your hearts to pity.”

Indeed, the Iranian regime today lacks moral and political constraints in using violence and surveillance against the Iranian people, just as it demonstrates intolerance toward anti-regime and reformist elements within the ruling elite. One effect of the complete instrumentalization of religion and law has been the destruction of both. Shiism inside Iran has become devoid of substantial theoretical or conceptual content. Consequently, the cognitive value or intellectual aspect of religion is increasingly irrelevant, and gives way to rituals and the merely social functions of religion. Indeed, the ideological overuse by the regime of Shiite mythology, signs, symbols, and senses has led to the exhaustion of Shiism’s spiritual capital. This religious hyperinflation has also led to declining appeal of Islamic ideology, the idea of Velayet-e-Faghih, and the Shiite clergy in general.²²

If we believe in Edmund Burke’s statement that “a state without the means of some change is without the means of its conservation,”²³ then we might conclude from all this that political change, in one form or another, is inevitable and probably imminent in Iran. Yet, the Islamic State of Iran is hardly a spent force. “The aim of totalitarian education has never been to instill convictions but to destroy the capacity to form any,” said Hannah Arendt. If we take this as a criterion to evaluate the success of a totalitarian system, one needs to use caution in judging Iranian totalitarianism as a failure, or in predicting its downfall. The clergy has been deprived of its traditional exclusive position in “managing the sacred affairs”²⁴ and in leading the community, including its role in protecting the people from abuse. The regime, thus, is unlikely to face much dissent or resistance from
Shiite leaders, who are not just unwilling but incapable of playing much of a role in protecting the people or in reforming the regime for the better.

Given this, there might be other pathways of political change that preserve, rather than undo, the Islamic State in Iran. The quiet takeover of power by the IRGC and the security apparatus, specifically after the death of Khamenei, is the likeliest scenario. In other words, the Islamic Republic may survive in the foreseeable future but go through a fundamental transformation from personal religious leadership to a military-security corporate state, while keeping the constitution untouched and the institution of the ruling jurist as ceremonial.

But, in this scenario, what will happen to Shiite Islamism and to the “Islamic Revolution?” As religion’s conceptual content becomes irrelevant, the theoretical grounds for Islamist ideology may also lose salience. Among other things, the coronavirus pandemic might also give the IRGC and its allies an opportunity to provide elements of Iranian society the security and stability they want, without a serious need for a philosophical basis for their legitimacy. Furthermore, growing political resentments against the regime may also be, to a large extent, contained and neutralized. Over time, the principle of expediency and the regime’s formidable tools of repression, surveillance and control, and ideological engineering provide it with considerable tactical flexibility and capacity to suppress the opposition. Both Khomeini and Khamenei repeatedly identified the obedience to state law and the Supreme Leader’s will with obedience to the divine law and the will of God. If the regime can replace the seduction of revolutionary Islamism with the charm of cynical reason, it may well find fertile cultural and social ground for evolving a new form of tyranny that retains its imperialistic ambitions.

NOTES

3. In his article, “Revolution—Beautiful Sickness,” Leszek Kolakowski explains why “in many Third-World countries, the rulers like to talk of revolution as their own stable system of government,” while “This is empty rhetoric: it is partly connected with the positive aura
which surrounds the word revolution in the jargon of various ideologies; it serves mainly, however, to legitimate a system of domination which is more or less autocratic. If the word revolution is to keep the sense given to it by historical experience, there is no such thing as a “revolutionary system of government.” Revolution is the destruction of institutionalized forms of power: all new forms created by this process of disintegration are the ending of that process, not its continuation. The renewed stabilization of forms of authority, that is, the system which brings the revolution to an end, cannot by the nature of things be “revolutionary:” if it calls itself that, it is generally in order to justify oppressive forms of government and the absence of social control over the authorities. All power systems emerging from revolutionary upheavals are, in the exact sense, counter-revolutionary, for each tries to stabilize its own forms of government and to tame the spontaneous processes that brought it into existence. Revolutionary government simply means a despotic government after a revolution; revolutionary justice and revolutionary legality are simply the absence of justice and legality; when a particular organ of the authorities proclaims that it applies “revolutionary justice,” this means simply that it is subject to no law and kills, tortures, imprisons, and robs at its discretion all those whom it suspects, justly or unjustly, of disobedience. Revolutionary courts are nothing other than lynch law sanctioned by a government which owes its continuation to the fact that no law impedes it.” Leszek Kolakoswki, *Modernity on Endless Trial*.


5. Ibid.


8. Traditionally, each member of the Shiite community could either become a faqih (a scholar on sharia who is obligated to practice religion in accord with his circumstances and personal understanding) or choose to emulate other religious authorities who met the necessary requirements for leadership. Shiism also accepted that fatwa could be different from one faqih to another, and, moreover, that a faqih is authorized and even obliged to modify his fatwa if he reaches a different understanding of the texts or faces new circumstances.

9. Before modern times, the idea of government’s duty to implement sharia was utterly unknown to Muslim communities, whether under sultan or caliph. The legitimacy of king or caliph was justified by Islam as long as they were successful in protecting the umma and the “land of Islam” (dar al-Islam) against infidels. In general, the authority and class
of ulama, the religious leaders and scholars, was separated from the political institution and power—the government—especially after the death of Islam’s fourth caliph, Ali Ibn Abi Taleb. But the religious legitimacy of the ruler was not defined based on his commitment to practice sharia or his government’s competence in enforcing it. The spirit of rulers’ legitimacy was rather related to the central notion of umma—the community. The Islamic political ideal could be realized only when “umma,” “land” and “rule”—all three are united. On the notion of umma and its pivotal role in defining an Islamic government one can find one most illuminating account in the works of Ridwan Al-Sayyed, an intellectual historian of sharia, especially in his two following books: _Al-Umma va Al-Jama’a va Al-Sulta: Sultat al-Idiologia fi Al-Majal Al-Siasi Al-Arabi Al-Islami_ [Umma, Community and Power: The Dominance of Ideology Over the Arabic and Islamic Political Sphere,] Beirut, Dar Al-Kitab Al-Arabi, 2007; _Al-Jama’a va Al-Mojtama va Al-Dowla: Derasat fi Al-Fikr Al-Siasi Al-Arabi Al-Islami_ [Community, Society and State: Studies in Arabic-Islamic Political Thought], Beirut, Jadavel, 2011.

10. To manage the daily affairs of a polity, historical Muslim governments relied on the bureaucracy and totally secular regulations. These governments operated parallel to the religious courts run by local clergy in different areas. This explains why it is so rare to find a Muslim ruler in the history of Islam enforcing sharia penal law (as in the stoning of adulterers, for example) as is done in some contemporary Islamic states, such as Iran and Saudi Arabia.

11. In his address on August 10, 1981, Ayatollah Khomeini stated that “It is all the nation’s religious duty to watch houses around his residence and see what is going on... if they saw anything suspicious ... they have to immediately inform police and IRGC... this would end [opposition groups’ activities] shortly.” Mehdi Bazargan, the general secretary of the Movement of Freedom, and the provisional prime minister after the revolution, sent Khomeini a private letter, criticizing him by reminding that spying people is against the explicit command of Quran. A week later, in another address, on August 18, 1981, Khomeini rebuked him, referring to him as “poor guy” with “stupid words,” and firmly stating that preserving Islam is a religious obligation so one should lie, and drink wine to preserve Islam. _Sahtfeh-ye Noor_, vol. 15, p. 116.


18. Ibid.


24. See Mehdi Khalaji, “Islamism, Secularism and the decline of Marjaiya.”
How the Iranian Revolution Inspired Turkish Islamism

By Svante E. Cornell and M. K. Kaya

The Iranian Islamic Revolution of 1979 had important implications throughout the Islamic world, and Turkey has been no exception. The two countries’ long-standing rivalry dates back to the sixteenth century, and Iran and Turkey have long had a profound impact on one another, not only geopolitically but ideologically. The historical consolidation of a Sunni identity in Turkey and a Shi’a identity in Iran had very much to do with their rivalry. And it played out between two Turkic dynasties, the Ottomans and the Safavids.

In the early twentieth century, the Pahlavi dynasty was heavily inspired by the modernization and westernization process in Turkey launched by Kemal Atatürk. The 1979 Islamic Revolution, however, turned the tables. Influence began to flow in the opposite direction, as Iranian Islamists became pacesetters and examples for Turkish Islamists.
Closer than Appearances Suggest

THE SECTARIAN DIVIDE BETWEEN SUNNIS AND SHI’AS IS VERY REAL. BUT IT HAS tended to avert attention from the commonalities between political Islamists in the Sunni world and in Iran, and the mutual inspiration they have drawn from each other. The theological differences between the Shi’a and Sunni are deep. These have been accentuated at times when political or religious authorities have sought to promote or apply particular interpretations of Islamic law. This has inevitably been sectarian in nature, and has led to social friction and conflict.

For example, when Pakistan’s Sunni-dominated government implemented Sharia law during its “Islamization” reforms of the 1980s, the country’s minority Shi’a population was increasingly marginalized, which led to large-scale unrest. The inverse has been the case in the Islamic Republic of Iran, where Sunni minorities like Kurds and Baloch have been marginalized, along with ethnic minorities that are Shi’a, like the Azerbijanis.

That being said, Sunni-Shia theological disputes have not prevented many of the Islamist political movements that emerged within modern Sunni and Shia Islam from striving to cooperate. Among other things, these movements have tried to reduce religious differences by emphasizing pan-Islamic political unity. They have also opportunistically defined outsiders—mainly Western nations—as the enemy of all Muslims. In doing so, they have sought to build a united world of Islam as a geopolitical counterweight to the “infidel” West.

The ideological ties between the Sunni Muslim Brotherhood movement and Iranian Shiite Islamism has been stronger than is often acknowledged. In fact, the Brotherhood and its leading thinkers like Sayyid Qutb had a significant impact on the Iranian radicals who shaped the revolutionary project led by Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomenei. So, also, did South Asian Islamist Abu Ala Mawdudi. As Mehdi Khalaji has noted, the Brotherhood played an important role in “directly stimulating the emergence of a unique form of Shiite Islamism in Iran in the 1950s.” The founder of Iran’s extremist Fada’iyan e Islam movement, Navvab Safavi, played a key role in this as he traveled to Egypt to meet Qutb in 1954. Safavi is credited with introducing Qutb’s seminal ideas about Islamic government to Khomeini. Subsequently, Ali Khamene’i, Iran’s current Supreme Leader and Khomeini’s successor, translated several of Qutb’s works into Persian.

Similarly, the Brotherhood-inspired Jamaat-e-Islami in South Asia, led by Mawdudi, was in close touch with the Iranian revolutionaries. Mawdudi met Khomeini...
in 1963, and the Jamaat’s overt criticism of the Shah landed it in trouble in Pakistan. Mawdudi backed the Iranian revolutionary movement early, in 1978, and sent a delegation to Tehran to congratulate Ayatollah Khomeini after the revolution. Khomeini likewise expressed his admiration for Mawdudi, whom he termed a religious leader “not just for Pakistan but for the world.”

Thus the Brotherhood’s ideology played a significant role in the development of the Shi’a clerical rule’s unorthodox political doctrine (velayat al-faqih), which Khomeini famously outlined in his treatise on Islamic government. Both the Brotherhood and the Khomeinist movement emphasized political matters, and specifically the institution of an Islamic state. This helped to suppress the theological-legal differences between them that lay under the surface. Similarly, the Brotherhood’s strongly anti-Western and anti-Semitic program deeply influenced the revolutionary Islamist movement in Iran. Traditionally, most Iranians had not been particularly hostile to or even interested in Israel; they considered the Jewish State and the Israel-Palestinian conflict as an “Arab” matter. But this changed demonstrably after the founding of the Islamic Republic in 1979.

The Islamic Revolution in Iran had, in turn, a far-reaching impact on Sunni Islamism and its subsequent development. Whereas Sunni Islamist movements in the Arabic-speaking world had tended to see the Shi’a and Iranians as inferior, and in many ways schismatic, the success of the Khomeinist Revolution transformed these perceptions. In fact, many Sunni Islamists were inspired by and in awe of what Khomeini had achieved. This did not mean they sought to replicate either the Iranian revolution or the form of clerical government that the Khomeinists created. But the revolution did inspire many Sunni Islamists to believe that they, too, could seize power and establish an Islamic state of their own.

Of course, the revolution did not end the differences between the Brotherhood and Iran. They had many disagreements, including in Syria. This was already the case in 1982, when Tehran supported the Damascus regime’s brutal crackdown on the Brotherhood-led revolt in Hama. In fact, Turkish Islamists strongly counseled the Brotherhood against the revolt. This would also be the case after 2003, as Brotherhood networks throughout the Middle East came to support their Sunni brethren in Iraq; likewise in Syria against Iranian-backed regimes and militias.

Still, it is noteworthy that the Sunni-Shi’a division is not the only factor shaping ideological and geopolitical relations in the Middle East. In fact, there is today a triangular rivalry involving three main contenders. The first is Iran and its aligned Shi’a militias and regimes. The second is a Sunni conservative group led by Saudi Arabia and the UAE including, with various levels of enthusiasm, countries like Kuwait, Egypt, and Jordan. The third is a Sunni Islamist group, which comprises
the ruling regimes of Turkey and Qatar as well as Muslim Brotherhood networks, including those in Europe. (This group is, in turn, in the process of developing closer ties with politically ascendant Sunni Islamists in Malaysia and Pakistan.)

While the animosity between Iran and Saudi Arabia is well-known, the Sunni Islamist grouping now helmed by Turkey’s ruling Justice and Development Party is far more ambivalent toward Iran. Instead, it sees the conservative Sunni bloc led by Saudi Arabia as its chief enemy and rival. In other words, the intra-Sunni divide between conservative or “status quo” powers and political Islamists is, at times, far more consequential than the Sunni-Shi’a split. This dynamic is key to understanding today’s Middle East, including the relations between Turkish Islamism and revolutionary Iran.

Turkish-Islamists-and-Iran

The roots of pan-Islamic thinking in Turkey go back to the Ottoman era. At the time, pan-Islamic identity was seen as a tool to keep the Muslim parts of the empire together following the independence of its European and mainly Christian possessions. However, the politicization of Islam took place with the spread of the Naqshbandi-Khalidi Sufi Order. Its Istanbul-based Iskender Paşa lodge engineered the creation of the country’s first Islamist political party in the late 1960s. At the time, Turkish Islamism was largely focused on adherence to traditional Sunni Islamic customs, along with opposition to modernity and emphasis on spiritual and moral issues. In the course of the Cold War, Turkish Islamists were increasingly influenced by the Islamist revivalist ideology of the Brotherhood, while they remained ambivalent toward the idea of a revolution. Turkish Islamists, furthermore, were closely connected to state institutions in the Ottoman era and, contrary to general belief, also in the republican era. Although Mustafa Kemal Atatürk closed the Dervish orders and lodges, as well as madrasas, a significant portion of the clergy found a home in the newly established Directorate
of Religious Affairs, the Diyanet. There they became employees of the central
government and provincial muftis or imams in mosques.

As a result, there was a powerful incentive for the Islamist movement to work
inside the system rather than outside, as a revolutionary force. This state of affairs
particularly crystallized after 1946, when the Soviet threat led the Turkish state—even under the leadership of Atatürk’s Republican People’s Party—to liberalize its
regulations on religion. From 1950 onward, center-right parties dominated polit-
cal life, and they presided over a gradual resurgence of religion, both in state and
society. This culminated in the so-called Turkish-Islamic synthesis ushered in
by the military junta ruling from 1980–1983, which elevated Sunni Islam to a
key position in Turkish national identity.

In the eyes of Turkish Islamists, the revolution in Iran strengthened the idea
that the creation of a new “Islamic” order in Turkey was possible. Aside from some
small sectarian Sunni groups, this notion was met with enthusiasm by Turkish
Islamists who followed Iran’s post-1979 political evolution closely. Prominent
Turkish supporters of the Iranian revolution—including Ali Bulaç, Ercüment
Özkan, Kenan Çamurcu, Nurettin Şirin, and Atasoy Müftüoğlu—expressed and
debated their views in various publishing outlets. These ideologists contributed to
the spread of Khomeini’s ideas and to interpreting the Iranian regime’s policies for
a Turkish audience. But, contrary to popular opinion, most were not agents of the
Iranian regime, but rather organic Turkish sympathizers who embraced the view
that an Islamic revolution could take place in Turkey as well.

During Khomeini’s lifetime in particular, Tehran’s efforts to export the revolu-
tion had a wide-ranging impact on Turkish Islamism. Although traditional Turk-
ish Islamic milieux typically viewed the Iranian Shi’a as deviant and schismatic,
Islamist thinkers countered this. They emphasized and repeated the Khomeini
regime’s pan-Islamist rhetoric. Khomeini preached the political importance of
Ummah—the worldwide community of Muslims irrespective of sect—and Tawhid
—the doctrine of the sovereignty of God as the sole source of authority. This con-
trasted with modern notions of popular sovereignty and the primacy of man-made
law. Both beliefs demand unity among Muslims in order to impose divine will
on the world. Khomeini’s message was consistent with the ideas of Said Qutb,
Mawdudi, and other Sunni revivalist thinkers of the time. And given the Brother-
hood’s aforementioned connections with the Milli Görüş, in Turkey it found
fertile ground in which to grow.

After Khomeini’s death in 1989, the pro-Iranian movement within Turkish
Islamism lost its ideological unity, but it had already begun to raise a new genera-
tion of Islamist youth. As a result, when Necmettin Erbakan’s Welfare Party grew
to prominence in the 1990s, a large number of its cadres had been profoundly influenced by the ideological defenders of the Iranian revolution. By 2001, when the AKP was formed as the successor to the Welfare Party, pro-Islamic Revolution leaders were of an age that allowed them to exercise greater political and ideological influence over Turkish Islamist and Islamic thought as a whole.

Hostility to the United States

ONE MAJOR EFFECT OF THE IRANIAN REVOLUTION ON TURKISH ISLAMISM WAS TO accelerate a shift in Turkish perceptions of the United States. Traditionally, Turkish political Islamists had been motivated primarily by anti-communism, which led them—along with Turkish nationalists—to support Turkey’s alliance with the U.S. In fact, Islamists and nationalists were united in the National Turkish Student Association, which came out on the streets in 1969 to oppose leftist demonstrations against the U.S. Sixth Fleet’s visit to Istanbul. But Khomeini indicated that world politics were not binary: opposition to Soviet communism did not have to mean a pro-American stance.

Like Qutb, Khomeini had set his sight on the United States as the “Great Devil.” He infused a powerful anti-imperialist, anti-Zionist and anti-American rhetoric with clearly identifiable left-wing origins into his revolutionary Islamist program. He also embraced anti-American regimes in the developing world regardless of their religious identity. The 154th article of the Islamic Republic of Iran’s constitution emphasizes that it “supports the struggles of the dispossessed for their rights against the oppressors anywhere in the world.” Thus, in practice, Tehran has pursued close relations with anti-American regimes, including in Venezuela, Cuba and Brazil.

The Islamic Republic’s anti-Americanism, and its affinity for other ruling regimes that resisted “American hegemony,” began to take hold among Turkish Islamist groups in the 1980s, gripping their imagination. Later, the end of the Cold War removed the geopolitical rationale for the Islamist’s tactical embrace of the United States all together. Hostility to America rapidly became mainstream within most of the Islamist movement.

This was clearly visible in 1996–97, during the brief premiership of Necmettin Erbakan, Turkey’s legendary Islamist leader. Erbakan ruled in a coalition government with a secular center-right party, and did not control the foreign ministry.
But he did develop his own separate “pro-Islamic”—and anti-Western—foreign policy agenda. Notably, this included making Tehran the destination of his first foreign trip. Along similar lines, Erbakan’s most important international initiative was to launch the Developing Eight (D-8) group of Muslim countries in opposition to the western-dominated G-7. He envisioned the D-8 as the embryo of a future union of Muslim countries in which Turkey would be the natural leader. He also believed that Turkey should pursue this initiative instead of its quest for membership in the European Union. Symptomatic of Turkish Islamists’ approach, Erbakan took Turkish leadership in the D8 for granted, and appeared to assume Iran and other states would enthusiastically support the initiative.

During the Cold War, Turkey’s secular republican establishment had tacitly supported rising Islamist activism and Islamic societal consciousness against the political Left. However, with the ascent of Erbakan, it suddenly came to fear that it would lose control of political Islam and that a revolutionary scenario à la Iran in 1979 was also possible in Turkey. Erbakan’s public embrace of Iran, following his first foreign visit to Tehran, raised these concerns to alarming levels. In fact, Erbakan’s downfall was strongly tied to Iran.

In late December 1996, the Welfare Party-controlled township of Sincan outside Ankara held a commemoration known as “Jerusalem Night,” which included overtly pro-Hezbollah propaganda. The event included an incendiary speech by the Iranian Ambassador to Turkey, Muhammad Reza Bagheri, in which he supported the introduction of Sharia law in Turkey. Iran’s consul general in Istanbul went further, warning that the spread of Islam could not be stopped. While the consul spoke only about “Islam” in generic terms, there is little doubt he meant the growth of political Islam.

This, along with popular counter-demonstrations by secularists, triggered the establishment’s move against Erbakan. Following the military-controlled National Security Council’s imposition of a far-reaching set of reforms on the government in February 1997, Erbakan’s parliamentary majority eroded. He was forced to resign in June 1997. The Welfare Party was subsequently closed down by the Constitutional Court and Erbakan was banned from politics. These developments led to a sharp deterioration of relations between Ankara and Tehran, and the two governments went on to spar over Turkey’s relations with Israel, Iran’s ties to the PKK, and broader geopolitical differences.

The resumption of Turkish-Iranian enmity had three major implications for Turkish Islamism. The first was a distinct shift in the relationship between the Islamist movement and the state. Before 1997, Islamists had sought to work in symbiosis with the state to secure power and advance their agenda. After 1997, they cultivated
a sense of having been victimized by the secularist establishment that strengthened their determination to stage, essentially, a hostile takeover of the state.

Second, enmity with Iran deepened the split in the Islamist movement between a traditionalist, pro-Erbakan wing and a reformist wing led by Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and Abdullah Gül. This wing no longer opposed EU membership or the market economy. It based its argument for change on a rhetoric of human rights rather than Islamic principles. This division was embodied by Erdoğan and Gül’s creation, in 2001, of the Justice and Development Party (AKP) as an alternative to the Welfare Party. This enabled the Islamist movement to broaden its constituency and attract wider groups of voters, who were keen on supporting new political forces untainted by corruption and mismanagement, but also fearful of Erbakan’s ideological radicalism.

Third was a change in tactics to go along with the shift in Islamists’ objectives. It led to the formation of a tactical alliance between Erdoğan’s political movement and Fethullah Gülen’s network, which had strong representation within state institutions. That alliance fell apart in 2011. Five years later, the Gülen movement was credibly implicated in the abortive 2016 military coup against Erdoğan’s government.

Amid the newer generation of Turkish Islamists, the sum effect of these shifts in objective, style, and partnership was the rise of a new strategy. Erbakan’s generation was focused on the long-term process of advancing the Islamist cause both at home and abroad. Erdoğan, by contrast, has been much more impatient in pursuit of these goals, and thus far more willing to take risks with large implications. This determination and impetuosity is not symptomatic of the movement as a whole: other leaders like Abdullah Gül, in particular, have been considerably more cautious than Erdoğan, but not necessarily because they disagree with his end goal. Instead, they may see his rashness as unnecessarily generating opposition to the movement.

Islamist writer Ali Bulaç recalled in 2015 how Erbakan, during the 1997 military intervention, kept his cool throughout the process and urged calm among his many followers. Some came to him and said they were “about to explode.” Erbakan told them to “go scream in the forest,” adding that their movement’s setbacks were minor impediments in their historical mission. Bulaç credits Erbakan with having prevented a civil conflict that could have turned Turkey into an Algeria or a Syria. Erdoğan takes a different approach. Based no doubt on Erbakan’s fate—being persecuted by state prosecutors and barred from politics for life—at each instance Erdoğan has fought back hard against the secularist establishment, also known as the “deep state.”
In foreign policy, Erbakan also took a cautious approach. The scholar Behlül Özkan details how Erbakan strongly counseled the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood against an uprising in 1982, warning that they would only cause a massacre to transpire. Bulaç, likewise, recalls Erbakan’s position on tyrannical rulers that oppressed Muslims: “They are surely tyrants, but if we confront them, they will oppress Muslims even more. Whatever we do, we must do with these rulers.”19 This approach conforms to the traditional Hanafi Sunni doctrine, which prohibits rebellion against Muslim rulers even if they are considered unjust.20

Erdoğan, of course, has taken a different approach, choosing to promote Islamism at a hurried pace against established rulers, even when this entails great risk. This helps to explain Ankara’s adventurist policies since 2011, which have contributed to the exacerbation of the wars in Syria and Libya. Erdoğan has also adopted policies toward anti-American states—Venezuela, Cuba, and Brazil among them—that are eerily similar to Iran’s. While the Iranian revolution was not the sole cause of the differences between Erbakan-era Islamism and the trend that is shaping the Erdoğan regime today, the impact of its radicalism is certainly a contributing factor. Ironically, it is Erdoğan’s embrace of the Iranian revolution’s radical nature, and the impatient policies that have followed, that have pushed Turkish-Iranian relations to a new breaking point.

Turkey and Iran in the Erdoğan Era

DURING THE AKP’S YEARS IN POWER, ITS LEADERSHIP HAS SHOWN CONSIDERABLE deference to Iran, and, at times, has actively worked to court Tehran. Initially, in its first term, the AKP set about to gradually improve ties with Tehran. Then, from 2007 to 2011—after the party consolidated power but before the Arab upheavals—it significantly enlarged these efforts.

Erdoğan’s political ability to move Turkey into closer relations to Iran was unintentionally abetted by America’s war in Iraq. This, in turn, led to a sharp deterioration of U.S.-Turkish relations. In 2003, Washington was frustrated when the Turkish parliament failed to approve U.S. use of Turkish territory to open a second, northern front in the war. Meanwhile, Ankara grew alarmed when the U.S. invasion created conditions that permitted the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK) to resume its operations against Turkey from within Iraq, violating a 1999 ceasefire.
For Turkey, it became clear that halting PKK activities was not on Washington’s list of priorities. Worse, this provided powerful ammunition to conspiracy-minded forces in Turkey that have long-suspected the United States of having ulterior motives, including efforts to divide Turkey along the lines of the 1920 Treaty of Sèvres, which provided for separate Armenian and Kurdish entities.

Such conspiratorial thinking about the U.S.’s motives runs deep in Turkey; it has shaped the worldview of Erdoğan and many of his Islamist allies, as well as left-wing secularists that have long opposed America. Erdoğan has fully capitalized on this paranoia in recent years. He has spoken with increasing frequency against modern-day “Lawrences of Arabia” and “Sykes-Picot Agreements,” while he and AKP officials have obstructed or opposed U.S. interests, arguing that Middle Eastern affairs should be left entirely to Muslim powers, not to foreigners. This rhetoric indicates how the worldview of Turkey’s rulers has become increasingly aligned with Iran’s Islamist rulers.

In any case, Iran has seen this as an opportunity to step forward and ingratiate itself to Turkey by intensifying its intelligence cooperation with Ankara and stepping up its own armed struggle against the PKK’s Iranian affiliate, PJAK. This, in turn, led Turks of all stripes to see Iran as a better partner against Kurdish terrorist threats than the United States. This, despite past Iranian covert support for the PKK against Turkey in the 1990s, and regardless of consistent American support for Turkey in its anti-terror struggle. By the mid-2000s, more than 50 percent of Turks viewed Iran favorably, while percentages of those who held positive views of the U.S. were in the single digits.

These shifts gave Erdoğan a freer hand to take the relationship with Iran to another level, while he gradually dismantled Turkey’s historically close relationship with Israel. Remarkably, in this period Turkey became a defender of Iran’s nuclear program as well as an apologist for the Iran regime’s brutal suppression of the 2009 “Green Revolution.”

In 2008, Ankara first offered to mediate between Iran and the international community on the Iranian nuclear issue. However, Erdoğan and his foreign minister, Ahmet Davutoğlu, soon became increasingly outspoken defenders of Iran’s nuclear program rather than go-betweens. Erdoğan urged world powers possessing nuclear weapons to abolish their own arsenals before meddling with Iran. In October 2009, Erdogan declared, “those who ... want these arrogant sanctions, need to first give these [weapons] up. We shared this opinion with our Iranian friends, our brothers.” He thus lent legitimacy to the Iranian regime and its nuclear ambitions.

AKP leaders have frequently castigated Western powers for focusing on Iran’s
alleged nuclear weapons program while ignoring Israel’s assumed possession of nuclear weapons. Following a 2012 nuclear summit, for example, Erdoğan noted that “nobody asks Israel to account for its nuclear weapons. The West should do this. Otherwise it does not appear honest.”24 As Gareth Jenkins has observed, “Erdoğan appeared sincerely convinced that Iran was solely interested in acquiring nuclear energy and had no weapons ambitions.”25

Another possibility is that Erdoğan saw the Iranian nuclear program as a precedent that would allow Turkey to develop such weapons as well. In mid-2010, Erdoğan and Brazilian President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva appeared in Tehran on the eve of a U.N. Security Council vote on a new round of sanctions. They were photographed holding hands with Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad while announcing an alternative diplomatic proposal to forestall sanctions.26 Ankara had become Tehran’s most valuable international supporter.

Earlier, in June 2009, Turkey had endorsed Ahmadinejad’s highly suspicious re-election.27 Both Gül and Erdoğan called to congratulate Ahmadinejad within days of his reelection, making them among the first, and few, world leaders to do so.28 Turkish leaders maintained their support even after the contested election turned into bloody suppression of peaceful protests against electoral fraud. In an interview with Der Spiegel, Davutoğlu called the Iranian political process “very healthy,” and suggested that an “intervention from the outside” would be unacceptable.29 According to Erdoğan, any criticism of Iran would imply “interference” in Iran’s internal affairs.30

Turkey’s direct endorsement of Ahmadinejad, of course, stands in sharp contrast to its approach to the Arab upheavals two years later. Ankara’s swift calls for Egyptian president Hosni Mubarak to step down, for example, suggest that Turkish Islamists’ concerns about interfering in other countries’ affairs were highly selective. When protesters targeted Islamist rulers, Turkey spoke of non-interference; when they targeted secularist leaders, Turkey egged them on. They did so both out of ideological conviction and out of a desire to advance Turkey’s regional influence.

This approach is best explained by the ideological baggage that leading Turkish Islamists like Erdoğan and Davutoğlu carry. While their foreign policy has often been termed “Neo-Ottoman,” this is a misnomer. It’s true that Turkish Islamists have a modicum of Ottoman nostalgia. But far from harking back to the tolerant and pragmatic ways of the Ottoman Empire, their policy from the 2011 Arab upheavals onward is best understood as pan-Islamist.31

Davutoğlu’s long academic record provides ample evidence of this. His early work is colored by a deep conviction that the “conflicts and contrasts between
Western and Islamic political thought originate mainly from their philosophical, methodological and theoretical background rather than from mere institutional and historical differences.” For Davutoğlu, this means Turkey’s long-standing effort to become part of Europe or the “West” is both undesirable and impossible. Indeed, he terms making Turkish society western a “utopian” project. Davutoğlu further concludes that Turkey and other Muslim societies should work instead for Islamic unity: “The core issue for [the] Islamic polity seems to be to reinterpret its political tradition and theory as an alternative world-system rather than merely as a program for the Islamization of nation-states.”

Davutoğlu’s writings matter. He is, as Behlül Özkan puts it, “the first intellectual to devise a rationalistic and pragmatic Islamist foreign policy.” He did so through hundreds of articles in Islamist publications, which Özkan has painstakingly assembled and analyzed. Subsequently, of course, Davutoğlu was highly influential in implementing foreign policy, first as an advisor to Erdoğan and then later as Foreign Minister. And even following his 2016 resignation, Erdoğan’s foreign policy has continued along the same lines, as Turkey’s growing interventions in Syria and Libya suggest.

It is the AKP’s approach to Iran, crucially, that reveals its pan-Islamist rather than Ottomanist character. Rather than perceive Iran as an adversary or rival (as it was during Ottoman times), Erdoğan and Davutoğlu viewed Iran as a partner that should be brought on board with Turkey’s efforts to build Islamic solidarity and reshape the Middle East. Going further, it is difficult not to conclude that Erdoğan and Davutoğlu approached Iran with romantic notions of Islamic solidarity. This must have startled their Iranian counterparts. Indeed, before falling out with Syria’s Assad in 2011, Ankara sought to cultivate the Assad regime and effectively replace Iran’s role as Assad’s chief external supporter. In doing so, they seemed oblivious to the possibility that this would irk Tehran and challenge its geopolitical interests.

The expectation that Turkey could build a partnership with Tehran while usurping its position in Syria makes little sense unless one considers that the Turkish leadership believed much of its own pan-Islamic propaganda. Similarly, when Turkey’s relations with Israel deteriorated in 2009, none other than Bashar al-Assad publicly announced that Turkey needed to have good relations with Israel to serve as an effective mediator. This indicated Arab leaderships’ surprise that Erdoğan’s anti-Israeli rhetoric was genuine and not just for public consumption. Iran’s rulers, in turn, certainly welcomed this Turkish approach and saw it as an opportunity to single-mindedly build its Shi’a crescent reaching from Yemen to the Mediterranean.
Although Davutoğlu is now in opposition to Erdoğan, he is not the only influential figure in Turkey to harbor such ideas. For example, retired General Adnan Tanrıverdi founded the Justice Defenders Strategic Studies Center (ASSAM) and is presently the Chairman of the Turkish military contractor SADAT. A close advisor to Erdoğan, Tanrıverdi has hosted several large-scale conferences dedicated to advancing the vision of an Islamic superstate based on Sharia law consisting of over 60 countries, with Istanbul as its capital. Speaking at one such event, Tanrıverdi stated that “the Mahdi will come and we should prepare for this,” indicating a millenarianism rivaling that of the Iranian revolutionaries. Tanrıverdi was forced to resign from his position as presidential adviser following these comments, but he still wields considerable influence; his company continues to be a key instrument for Turkish proxy warfare in Syria and Libya.

Of course, more material considerations have also been at play. Turkish-Iranian commercial relations have roots that stretch deeply into the Turkish Islamist movement, including senior figures who are close to Erdoğan. While hard evidence is not generally publicly available, it is well-known in Turkey that senior figures in Erdoğan’s entourage have large investments in Iran. One example is Ihsan and Mücahit Arslan, a father-son pair that have both served as AKP parliamentarians and presidential advisers, and who have significant interests in the Razi Petrokimya fertilizer plant in Iran.

The reach of Iran’s tentacles into Turkey are evident in the major Iran-Turkey oil-for-gold scandal involving Iranian gold trader Reza Zarrab. An indictment in the United States District Court for the Second District of New York alleges that Iranian efforts to circumvent and violate U.S. sanctions, spearheaded by Zarrab, involved multi-million dollar bribes to several key members of Erdoğan’s cabinet and extended to influential officials in Turkish state-owned banks. Given the nature of the Turkish political system, and particularly the president’s personal involvement in all matters of importance, it is inconceivable that this scheme would have been possible without Erdoğan’s knowledge.

Given Erdoğan’s earlier rejection of “arrogant” U.S. sanctions against Tehran, it is not surprising that Turkish Islamists would be comfortable helping Iran evade those sanctions. Where they diverge may be in their view of whether it is appropriate for high Turkish officials to grease their pockets in the process. On one side is a group loyal to Erdoğan. These seem to have accepted and partaken in the clientelist business practices that have come to dominate the Turkish economy. On the other side is a group, to which Davutoğlu and Gül (to their credit) belong, that appear to have found these practices utterly immoral.
Syria, Turkey and Disillusionment with Iran

DESPITE ERDOGAN’S OUTREACH TO TEHRAN, THE GROWING SECTARIAN VIOLENCE in the Middle East from 2011 onwards dealt a significant blow to the Turkish Islamist movement’s view of Iran. The AKP’s pan-Islamic approach to regional politics—built on seeking consensus among Muslims against western influence and “colonialism”—was confronted with Iran’s resolute, uncompromising and Shi’a sectarian approach. An underlying problem is the rivaling leadership ambitions between Ankara and Tehran. Because of Turkey’s Ottoman history and Sunni identity, Turkish leaders appear to take it for granted that the Muslim world, which is overwhelmingly Sunni, will never accept Iranian leadership but will fall in line behind Turkey. Unsurprisingly, Tehran begs to differ.

This tension was already on display during the sectarian conflict in Iraq following the 2003 U.S. invasion. At that time, Iran moved to assert its influence over Iraq through Shi’a militias and political parties. From the Turkish point of view, however, Iran’s ambitions were overshadowed by Ankara’s troubled and increasingly confrontational relations with the United States, alongside the resurgence of a Kurdish uprising.

Turkey’s reckoning with Iran would, instead, unfold in Syria. The Turkish leadership committed a series of serious errors in the Syrian conflict’s early phases, for which it has paid a high price. This relates to confusion over Turkish goals, which initially involved securing influence over the government of Syria. That ambition rapidly shifted to the more limited goal of countering Kurdish autonomy on its southern border—a problem Turkish leaders appeared not to have seen coming.

Before 2011, Erdoğan had famously courted Bashir al-Assad, seeking to build a strong partnership with the Syrian regime that he envisioned as Turkey’s gateway to the Middle East. In the initial phases of the uprising, therefore, they sought to impose upon al-Assad the need to institute reforms, and in particular to legalize the Muslim Brotherhood and share political power with it. Because Syria is majority Sunni, Turkish leaders after 2011 saw the Sunni majority’s rise to power (represented by the Brotherhood) as both unavoidable and desirable, and focused on getting al-Assad to accept this development. The problem, of course, was that Iran provided the regime with another option: full-scale repression.
When Assad chose to follow Iranian rather than Turkish advice, Turkey committed its second mistake: breaking with Assad and openly endorsing the Sunni opposition to the regime. To make matters worse, Turkish efforts to sponsor the Brotherhood faction within the Syrian opposition led to serious friction with Hillary Clinton’s State Department, which was working for a more broad-based opposition alternative. More importantly, Assad retaliated by simply withdrawing from large areas of northern Syria, which the regime left to the YPG—the Syrian wing of the PKK. Meanwhile, Iran not only endorsed but participated in the Syrian regime’s brutal repression, leading to the flight of several million Syrians to Turkey. This had profoundly adverse implications for Turkey’s economic and social balances—and, by 2015, for Europe’s security, too.

The Iranian regime and its client militias have since established a corridor linking Tehran to the Mediterranean Sea. Meanwhile, Turkish-supported Brotherhood-led forces proved incompetent on the battlefield, forcing Ankara to rely increasingly on radical militias, including Al Qaeda-aligned groups like Jabhat al-Nusra. And, for a time, Turkey paid little attention to Islamic State fighters’ use of its territory to access their caliphate in Syria and Iraq. The rise of ISIS, in turn, shifted Western perceptions of the conflict, and led most Western powers to grudgingly accept the survival of the Assad regime as a lesser evil.

Turkey was thus effectively isolated. But, beginning in 2018, Ankara doubled down on its involvements in Syria by inserting its own troops into the country’s north. This further deepened its relationship with radical Islamist militias, which now function as Turkish proxies. Since 2019, Turkey has become increasingly involved in fighting against the Assad regime. As a result, the Turkish Islamist government has, in practice, found itself in a proxy war against Iran’s Islamist government.

Still, Erdoğan and the AKP leadership have yet to speak up in a serious manner against Tehran, while their criticism of Moscow's actions has remained measured. Caught in a confrontation with the West, Turkish Islamists appear unwilling to escalate tensions with neighboring Iran, which they seem to see as a lesser threat than the status-quo Sunni powers. This ignores the fact that Iranian policies have been tremendously detrimental to Turkish security, far more than America’s limited relationship with Syrian Kurds in combating the Islamic State. But Erdoğan and his associates seem to see Iran as a balance against Israel, Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Egypt—an alignment that Ankara views as both an extended arm of the United States, and as a direct threat to its own ambitions. Indeed, an overview of Turkish reactions to recent crises in the region is suggestive.

In July 2013, Turkey went into alarm mode after the ouster of Muhammad
Morsi in Egypt. Erdoğan and his advisors linked this event to the Gezi Park protests two months earlier, and saw both as part and parcel of an American or Jewish plan to unseat his government. Turkish officials have similarly pointed fingers at America for the failed 2016 coup against Erdoğan, and pulled out all stops to support its ally Qatar when a Saudi-led coalition (which Ankara saw as boosted by Washington) sought to bring the small Emirate to heel in 2017. Turkish Islamists also viewed Saudi Arabia’s announcement of social reforms and “return to moderate Islam” with great alarm—a mouthpiece for the Turkish government interpreted these reforms as an American plan to “defeat the Muslim world” by “targeting Mecca and Medina.”

Erdoğan then went so far as to state that the 2019 coup in Sudan was “against Turkey.” Senior advisors were happy to explain to reporters that Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Egypt, under Israeli and American direction, had triggered the coup because of growing military cooperation between Turkey and Sudan. In sum, Erdoğan and his entourage appear to see their greatest geopolitical threat in a perceived alignment between Sunni Arab powers, Israel, and the United States. In this worldview, Iran becomes a partner and potential ally rather than an adversary. Thus, Turkey’s political leadership is silent even where Iran is countering Turkish interests in Syria. Still, there is little doubt that the rank and file of the Turkish Islamist movement has experienced serious disillusionment with Iran. Open supporters of the Iranian regime, who proliferated just a few years ago, have gone almost completely silent in Turkey.

Conclusion

Iran’s 1979 revolution had an profound impact on Turkey’s Islamists, which continues to affect Turkish politics today. The revolution generated a seemingly bottomless pit of goodwill on their part, representing an entire generation that viewed Iran as an example to emulate. This allowed Tehran’s pan-Islamic pronouncements to outweigh the clear evidence of Iran’s pursuit of narrow sectarian interests, often at Turkey’s expense.

Now, Turkish Islamists are realizing that their appreciation of the Islamic Republic might be unrequited. The confrontation over Syria, and Tehran’s uncompromising embrace of the Assad regime, appears to have seriously dented Iran’s positive image among the broader rank and file of the Turkish Islamist movement.
It is unclear how long this might last. A similar Turkish disillusionment occurred in 1982, when Damascus bloodily suppressed a Muslim Brotherhood revolt. The question today is whether Turkish Islamists will allow their ideological blinders to once again block their sight to evidence of Iran’s actions in Syria, or whether a deeper reappraisal of Iran’s role will take place. However, because Turkish Islamists see themselves as part of an epic battle between the Muslim world and a Western or “Zionist-American” alliance, it is plausible that Turkish concerns over revolutionary Iran and its ambitions will continue to be relegated to the background.

The Turkish regime, meanwhile, is preoccupied elsewhere. It is busy fueling its confrontation with the West and with conservative Sunni regimes from Riyadh to Cairo. It is picking battles that it is unlikely to win. And all the while it is ignoring the fact that its own decisions have allowed Tehran’s regional influence to grow precipitously at Turkey’s own expense.

NOTES

9. Jonathan Spyer, “Turkey, Pakistan, Malaysia and Qatar form Troubling Alliance,”


12. The main exception was the Fethullah Gülen movement, which continued to remain hostile to Iran and firmly in the U.S. orbit. While the Gülen movement was initially hostile to the Milli Görüs, it joined forces with Erdoğan in 2002. From 2011 onward, it then fell out with Erdoğan, and has been credibly implicated in the July 2016 attempted military coup, and declared a terrorist organization by the Turkish government.


19. Ibid.


30. “Iran is Our Friend,’ Says Turkish PM Recep Tayyip Erdogan,” The Guardian, October 26, 2009.


34. Özkân, “Turkey, Davutoğlu and the Idea of Pan-Islamism,” p. 120.


36. “Assad: To help Syria, Turkey must have good relations with Israel,” Jerusalem Post, November 8, 2009.

37. Middle East Media Research Center, “Erdoğan’s Chief Advisor And Former General Tanrıverdi Presents Vision—Reflected In Turkey’s Policy—Of A United Islamic Superpower Based On Shari’a Comprising 61 Countries And With Istanbul As Capital,” Special Dispatch no. 8493, January 14, 2020.
41. Edelman et. al., The Roots of Turkish Conduct, p 42.
Qassem Soleimani’s Fall and the Battle to Come in Iraq

By Ranj Alaaldin

The U.S.’s assassination of Qassem Soleimani on January 3, 2020 sent shockwaves throughout the Middle East. Some have averred that the notorious Iranian general’s demise (along with the U.S.’s inadvertent killing of Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, Soleimani’s right-hand man in Iraq) has not only “re-established deterrence” against the Tehran regime but potentially and gravely stunted its revolutionary expansionism. If this, in fact, proves to be the case, then the end of Soleimani may be one of the most strategically consequential events for Iraqis and others under unwanted Iranian pressure since the 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq. However, it will be a while before the full implications of Soleimani’s downfall are known. The Middle East is still in a state of upheaval, and the regional contestation for power and influence is still unfolding. At the same time, the proxy network that Soleimani oversaw is now undergoing a process of reflection and revision. Thus, years may pass before we can fully appraise the extent to which Soleimani’s network will recover from the loss of its towering patron.

Revolutionary Iran has achieved scores of victories in recent years in multiple
conflict arenas—notably in Syria, where Iran's proxies have secured the survival of the Bashar al-Assad regime. In fact, during the past two decades, Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) has managed to exploit Middle Eastern upheaval and dramatically expand its power for a particular reason: It has spent the years since the 1979 Islamic Revolution systematically nurturing and dedicating resources to armed groups that enhance the regime's influence in the region while weakening its rivals. That amounts to four decades of experience, trial and error, and the perfecting of asymmetric warfare capabilities which Iran's rivals are still struggling to match. And General Soleimani, as the leader of the IRGC's Quds Force, had played a central if not indispensable role in making all this happen.

Lebanon's Hezbollah was established in the 1980s and constitutes a formidable sub-state force in Lebanon—one which devised the playbook for surrogate warfare and self-governance. That playbook has been instrumental for other proxies in the Arab and Islamic world, and this is especially so in Iraq. There, Iranian proxies subvert, dominate and influence state institutions and had done so with the guiding hand and oversight of Soleimani. At the same time, tens of thousands of fighters fall under the direct command of Iranian proxies within the Popular Mobilization Force (PMF). The PMF, a 100,000-strong umbrella militia organization, was formed in 2014 to fill the vacuum left by the collapse of the Iraqi army after ISIS seized Mosul. Certainly, Iran's widespread production of proxies has exponentially grown since the onset of the war on ISIS and the Syrian civil war. Soleimani had provided these disparate groups and fighters with both a sense of purpose and sense of direction amid a highly fractious political environment and highly volatile region.

Iraq could be the first and most immediate arena in which the revolutionary regime in Tehran will be forced to deal with the consequences of Soleimani's loss. Since the 2003 American invasion of Iraq, Iraq has been the main locus of Iranian proxy outreach and warfare. In recent years, one inadvertent effect of the Trump administration's maximum pressure campaign against Iran has been to further bolster the significance of Iraq to Iran's regional strategy. Today, Iraq and its institutions, together with its informal economy, generates hundreds of millions of dollars for the Tehran regime's coffers every month. Iran's subversion of Baghdad's formal and informal economic structures has effectively made Iraq the "lung" through which revolutionary Iran "breathes" even in the midst of unprecedented domestic political and economic crises.

In other words, Iraq may well be the battleground on which the fate of the Islamic Republic and its revolution will be determined. In this respect, the assassination of Soleimani warrants close examination to determine if and how it may
upend the expansive Shiite militia network Iran has cultivated in Iraq and elsewhere over the past fifteen years. This network includes combatants, socio-cultural actors, and institutions that form a landscape built on the Shiite faith, including the notion of Shiite supremacism and anti-U.S. sentiments.

**Iraq’s Shiite Militias**

**Iran’s Proxies in Iraq Are the Product of Both History and Sheer Luck.** Its country-wide network of combatants is comprised largely of impoverished Shiites—a demographic that has been on the margins of Iraqi society for centuries. These fighters gained increased prominence when Iraq emerged bankrupt and in ruins from two disastrous and costly wars. Saddam Hussein turned to religious leaders and tribes to maintain his rule over the country after the First Gulf War in 1990. That conflict followed Iraq’s devastating eight-year war with Iran, launched in 1980.

Bruised but not defeated, in 1991 Saddam faced a major uprising in the country, at one point losing control of at least fourteen of Iraq’s eighteen provinces. Under the protection of the internationally enforced no-fly zone, the Kurdish provinces of Erbil, Sulaymaniah and Dohuk ultimately emerged from this uprising to become self-administered by the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG).

As it fought to maintain power over Baghdad and the predominantly Shiite south, the Sunni-dominated Baath regime essentially outsourced security and order to communal actors like tribes and clerics. Saddam’s most consequential decision was to promote Mohammad Mohammad Sadeq al-Sadr as a marja’—that is, a source to be followed by the Shia faithful—and to make him the head of the Shiite religious establishment in Najaf. This flew in the face of the consensus’ choice of Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, who is today recognized as the marja’ and Grand Ayatollah of the Hawza in Najaf. Sadeq al-Sadr was a useful candidate for the Baathist regime because of his strained ties with the Iraqi Shiite opposition and clerical establishment. His elevation by Saddam fractured the already weakened Shiite opposition, which was struggling to recover and regroup following its losses during the uprising.

Sadeq al-Sadr became an important leader and source of respite for millions of Shiites who were mired in destitution and repression. The cleric galvanised and oversaw an expansive network that provided social services throughout Baghdad.
and the Shiite south. This was particularly important in the hinterlands where
disease was rampant and medical care was sparse. Sadeq al-Sadr’s mobilization
of Iraq’s destitute Shiites, a community that had long been disparaged as an
underclass, paved the way for their transformation into a powerful constituency and
political force. This came to be known as the Sadrist movement.

After the 2003 invasion of Iraq, the movement came to be led by Muqtada
al-Sadr, Sadeq al-Sadr’s son, and it established its own armed wing known as the
Mahdi Army. The Mahdi Army played a central role in fuelling Iraq’s devastating
sectarian conflict, battling the U.S.-led coalition and Iraq’s conventional forces
like the military and police, and engaging in criminal activities. The Sadrists were
thus responsible for scores of atrocities against Iraqi civilians and hundreds of
U.S. and British military fatalities and casualties.

The Sadrist organization itself was vast. It drew much of its operational capac-
ity from localized and communal structures, making it difficult for Iraq’s central
government to establish any control over it and difficult for the central leadership
to maintain their grip on the movement’s array of commanders and fighters. This
was especially true when conflict in Iraq reached its peak after the 2006 civil war.
The Mahdi Army consequently spawned some of the militia groups that currently
feature prominently in the Iraqi political and security landscape. This included
Asaib Ahl al-Haq, which was established after 2006 as a splinter of the Sadrist
movement, thanks to personal and organizational disputes between its leader,
Qais al-Khazali, and Muqtada al-Sadr. Many of the Mahdi Army’s commanders
have since transitioned to other militia groups that currently operate as part of
larger organisations. This includes Asaib Ahl al-Haq and rag-tag localized criminal
groups that simultaneously operate today as part of the Popular Mobilization
Forces alongside Iraqi state forces.

It is precisely this fragmented and disorderly environment that has produced—and
reproduced—indigenous militia groups in Iraq that enjoy local legitimacy—and that Iran has managed to control and influence for its own gain. Iran has
cultivated many of these Iraqi militias into semi-professional, disciplined and
resource-rich fighters. This is not to suggest that Iran’s influence and control over
the militias is impervious, or that the relationship between patron and proxy is
entirely coherent or institutionalized. But Iranian influence among Iraqi Shiite
militias has been helped by a common ideological outlook, premised on Shiite
supremacism and revolutionary opposition to Western “imperialism.” It is under-
scored by the history and sense of injustice and victimhood among Shiite com-
munities both in Iraq and the region. The existential threat presented by jihadi
groups like ISIS has reinforced the socio-cultural, political and ideological nexus
that enables precisely the sort of infrastructure that Iran depends on to cultivate its ties with Shiite militia groups, while exploiting and playing on the fears and destitution within the broader Shiite community.

Iran’s development of proxies in Iraq was also helped by its foremost and pre-eminent partner, the Badr Brigade, to which it outsourced responsibility for managing its fractious proxy network. The Badr Brigade constitutes the frontline of Iran’s proxy network in Iraq and served as a stepping-stone for the Islamic Republic’s efforts to establish and enable the ascendancy of other powerful militias. These include *Ketaib Hezbollah*, formed after 2003; its leader was a commander in the Badr Brigade in the 1980s. Likewise, *Sayyid al-Shuhada* was formed in 2013 by Iran for combat operations in Iraq and Syria and was led by former members of the Badr Brigade.

The Badr Brigade is arguably Iraq’s most powerful militia because it has more active frontline fighters than any other militia. Formed as the armed wing of a political movement established in the 1980s, the organisation has been heavily integrated into state security forces over the past decade. Its head, Hadi al-Ameri, has held ministerial posts, as have other senior members of the Badr leadership. Despite its inclusion in the post-2003 political order, the Badr Brigade has retained its capacity to function autonomously. This flexibility exemplifies the multiple identities and complexities that define Iraq’s Shiite militia groups. The Badr Brigade, for instance, engages with international actors and it has cooperated militarily with the U.S., but it also exhibits strong ties to Iran.

Shiite militias have been contained and suppressed. They once had their backs to the wall in Iraq, especially after the U.S. troop surge in 2006. American forces, alongside the U.S.-trained Iraqi army, inflicted heavy casualties on Shiite militia insurgents across the country, particularly in Basra, where the 2008 Charge of the Knights operation resulted in their biggest military defeat, forcing many militia commanders into exile in Iran. Meanwhile, the sizeable U.S. troop presence in Iraq had strained the resources available to many militias and suppressed their capacity to contest for political power. The U.S.’s political allies in government and throughout the country relied on the U.S. to help keep the militias on the margins of power and politics. The U.S. presence had also provided critical protection that insulated the Shiite and other Iraqi civic groups that opposed malign Iranian influence and which Iran had sought to weaken or eliminate.

However, after the 2011 U.S. withdrawal from Iraq, this situation was upended. Hundreds of battle-hardened commanders returned to Iraq from Iran and remobilised their fighters and supporters to contest the void left by the withdrawal. Moreover, the exit of U.S. forces removed the single most important political
leverage America had in Iraq. And, with the U.S. gone, resurgent militias like Asaib ahl al-Haq were increasingly empowered to act with relative impunity, while Iran and men like Soleimani gained a freer hand.

One further political consequence of this was to diminish the incentives for Iraqis to strive for inclusive governance. Iraq’s former prime minister, Nouri al-Maliki, brazenly suppressed his Arab Sunni rivals while expanding the government’s indiscriminate detention of Arab Sunni citizens. In 2010, a predominantly Arab Sunni coalition, Iraqiyah, won the parliamentary elections but was then side-lined by Maliki’s State of Law coalition. This faction was able to muster support from other like-minded groups to form a coalition government, even though it finished second.

While the new government led by Maliki included Iraqiyah politicians, promises to them were not kept. They were not afforded opportunities to serve in powerful positions such as Minister of Defence or the presidency. They were also excluded from a proposed national security council that would be led by an Arab Sunni, but which never materialized. Maliki and his coalition dealt a devastating blow to sectarian relations in Iraq. It effectively confirmed Arab Sunni perceptions of marginalization; meanwhile, it emboldened those segments of the Arab Sunni community that advocated the use of violence and even insurgency. Most notably, Maliki’s decisions and mismanagement of the country paved the way for the social and political conditions that enabled the rise of Islamic State in 2014.

The heavy combat presence of militias after the 2011 U.S. withdrawal further incentivized members of Iraq’s political class to seek to co-opt these groups. They noted the muscle and localized popular support the groups enjoyed and saw it as an opportunity to reinforce their own political standing. In turn, Maliki, provided them with state resources, including funding, fleets of Land Cruisers and permits that allowed them to roam Baghdad, including in its heavily guarded green-zone, virtually unimpeded. Ultimately, Maliki’s sectarian rule and mismanagement resulted in arguably the country’s biggest calamity in its history. In June 2014, the Iraqi army collapsed after ISIS seized Mosul and declared its so-called caliphate. The opportunity that this then presented to Iran’s proxies was arguably beyond the imagination of even the most audacious and ambitious of Shiite militia groups. Their moment had arrived.

When the Iraqi army collapsed, tens of thousands of fighters and volunteers mobilized in response to Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani’s fatwa on June 13, 2014, appealing to all able-bodied Iraqis to defend their country. The umbrella militia organization known as the Hashd al-Shaabi, or Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF), was established in response. While Ayatollah Sistani’s fatwa was a call to
arms issued to the country at-large, it was inevitable that operationally active and expansive Shiite militia groups would fill the PMF with their own fighters. This presented Iran and its proxies with a further opening to penetrate Iraq’s national and local governing structures. Soleimani duly seized on this opportunity.

The PMF, on the surface, is a state-sanctioned organization that was eventually institutionalised toward the end of 2016 by former prime minister, Haidar al-Abadi, of the Islamic Dawa Party. It was also meant to be folded into the Iraqi security services. But, in reality, the PMF came to be led and dominated by Iran-aligned militia groups. These fighters owned both battlefield experience and organizational discipline, making them capable of commanding the tens of thousands of the volunteers that had heeded Sistani’s call to arms.

Buoyed by the popular support they gained during the war on ISIS, the PMF moved to contest for political power in Iraq’s 2018 parliamentary elections. The so-called PMF list, also known as the Fatih (Conquest) alliance, was led by the same Iran-aligned groups that lead the PMF. Taken together, these actors reported to Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, the head of the Ketaib Hezbollah, and, in many ways, the de facto head of the PMF organization. The PMF list won 48 of 329 seats, an impressive second place for their electoral debut. That political success added to the impressive array of formal and informal political and economic resources that have fallen to the PMF’s control. This includes access to the Iraqi national budget, which has allocated to the PMF organization more than $2 billion since 2016.

Soleimani’s Importance

THE SHIITE MILITIA NETWORK IN IRAQ IS IMPRESSIVE. IT IS UNDERPINNED BY AN array of informal socio-political, cultural and security structures which emerged in the post-2003 chaos. The relationships between the main factions and their leaders—including men like Soleimani and Muhandis—have been historically tied through links of friendship, kinship and revolutionary camaraderie. Soleimani had been at the forefront of Iran’s effort to build and expand a proxy network, in part because he was head of the Quds Force since the 1990s but in large part because of the personal relationships he had fostered with Arab commanders and political leaders who, like him, have been on the frontlines of the Iranian “export of revolution” since 1979.

Indeed, Soleimani did not and could not have managed Iran’s Shiite militia
network in Iraq alone. Muhandis has been described as Soleimani’s right-hand man and a formidable political operator. He was more operationally integrated into the IRGC than any of Iran’s other partners and proxies in Iraq. As head of the PMF and the powerful militia group Kataib Hezbollah, Muhandis played a critical role in enhancing Iran’s influence over the Iraqi political system. In other words, as it has done with Hezbollah in different conflict terrains such as Lebanon and Syria, Iran also outsourced some of its local security requirements to Muhandis, just as it had done with Hadi al-Ameri, the leader of the Badr organisation.

Iran has tens of thousands of fighters under its command in Iraq. The sheer size of this network and the relative nascency of the PMF requires leadership combining strong personality traits and operational experience. Equally important is leveraging such military prowess in the political arena. Muhandis will be missed because he possessed such skills.

Whereas Soleimani was responsible for managing and maintaining Iran’s vast network of militias in the region at-large, Muhandis was a key Iraqi pillar in this network. As head of the PMF and Kataib Hezbollah, Muhandis was critical to harnessing the organization’s military superiority along with its widespread popular following. This was essential to the protection and enhancement of Iran’s influence over the Iraqi political system.

But, like any organization that is defined and shaped by multiple, powerful personalities, these internal relations are in regular need of management and maintenance. This is especially true in an environment as volatile and unpredictable as Iraq’s. And this has become ever more the case in the midst of the constraints and intensifying political tumult that has resulted from the U.S.’s “maximum pressure campaign” against the Iranian regime. The higher the stakes, the more the internal relationships within the network are strained. Soleimani and Muhandis were in effect unifying figures and ensured Iran’s proxies kept their eyes on the horizon and longer-term strategic objectives, as opposed to distracting day-to-day politics. However, if such a network is underpinned and underscored by a clique of personalities who effectively constitute the network’s lynchpin, then the elimination of these individuals throws the network into disarray. This should not come as a surprise. This vulnerability, inherent in Shiite militia politics, is essentially the backdrop against which many of Iran’s most powerful proxies have emerged. So it was that the core group—the lynchpin of this network—took a second serious hit when Muhandis was also inadvertently killed alongside Qassem Soleimani.

In this sense, the Shiite militia network’s strengths have also become its weaknesses. Rather than being governed institutionally, the network has functioned more flexibly in accordance with highly personalized internal politics and the leadership
of key personnel like Soleimani and Muhandis. A series of marked splits have emerged since their deaths. The succession process within Ketaib Hezbollah has been particularly dismal and counterproductive. Abdul Aziz al-Mohammedawi was announced as Muhandis’ successor, to serve as both head of Ketaib Hezbollah and head of the PMF. That decision has not received unanimous support within the organization. Some groups are in disagreement with him and with other prominent figures over the allocation of resources, disputing whether they should go toward political or military activities.

Meanwhile, Ketaib Hezbollah and the Badr organization are now in direct competition to fill the vacuum left by Muhandis. They are seeking to position themselves with sufficient influence to shape the post-Muhandis and post-Soleimani militia landscape. This comes in the midst of a political crisis precipitated by Iraq’s protests and a steep decline in oil prices, which have plunged Iraq into its worst crisis since ISIS seized Mosul in 2014 and constrained the resources these groups would otherwise exploit.

In mid-March 2020, a number of PMF factions aligned with Ayatollah Sistani and who have traditionally resisted Iran’s influence—but were compelled to operate within the ambit of the Iran-dominated PMF in the midst of the threat from ISIS—withdraw from the PMF organization and moved to place themselves under the authority of the Iraqi armed forces. This move was significant; the PMF and the blessing it had initially received from Sistani had provided Iran-backed proxies with a cover of Iraqi nationalism and patriotism as well as religious legitimacy. Iran’s proxies had exploited this to expand their support bases and political tentacles. But the withdrawal of the Sistani-aligned factions from the PMF has left the Iran-backed proxies with limited religious cover and it may have diminished their political reach. The PMF organization itself is on its way to becoming an IRGC outlet in all but name, and Iraqi public opinion has begun to turn against it as a result of the complicity of Iran’s proxies in the brutal suppression of protestors in recent months. This reality, in time, may compel other low-ranking fighters and cadres in the PMF to withdraw from the organization, which would reduce the ranks of the PMF and diminish the ability of its Iran-aligned leadership to demand a substantial portion of the Iraqi national budget.

Indeed, the task of maintaining and directing large and complicated network of proxies and influencers is evidently difficult enough for Iran, and this was made all the more challenging as a result of Muhandis’s assassination. The political space in Iraq is highly congested, difficult to navigate and particularly problematic to manage. This was exemplified by Soleimani’s constant shuttling between Baghdad and Tehran in the weeks before his demise—the result of the political crisis precipitated

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by anti-government—and anti-Iranian—reform protests. This fractious environment will not be helped over the coming months by the fact that Soleimani’s successor, Esmail Ghaani, remains untested, lacks the same long-standing ties to the PMF leadership, and does not have a strong command of Arabic.

These are also perilous times for Iraq’s Shiite militias. For the first time in many years, Tehran and its proxies can no longer bank on the predictability of U.S. policy. That uncertainty has resulted in considerable discomfort within and between Iraq’s rival Shiite political factions, who are all armed to the teeth and have a history of violent conflict against one another. Iraq’s Shiite militias have been moving toward the precipice of a major confrontation for a while. The threat perception among these groups is embodied in a palpable fear of becoming displaced or weakened by rivals, who seek to exploit the fallout over Soleimani’s death.

Still Iran’s to Lose

SOLEIMANI’S IMPORTANCE AND HIS IMPRESSIVE RECORD OF OVERSEEING IRAN’S proxy network was not rooted solely in the combat capabilities of these forces. More remarkably, he managed to keep them functional as a proxy network despite immense internal fragmentation, tensions and disputes. Iraqi officials speak of his impeccable capacity to use a combination of charm, charisma and coercion to achieve IRGC objectives. But equally useful in his toolkit was his skill to settle disputes between and among factions. These personal characteristics were especially crucial for the IRGC. And today, the vast majority of the fighters that are deployed by Iran in the region do not possess the same history of friendship and camaraderie that Soleimani and other IRGC personnel shared with a very select group of commanders in the Arab world.

That said, while this network may have been bruised and bloodied, it has not been defeated and remains largely Iran’s to lose. It will be a while until Esmail Ghaani’s true credentials and capabilities become evident, and the IRGC’s Quds Force still retains a number of comparatively distinct advantages. Unlike the rotating cast of American officials and military leaders, Soleimani enjoyed the authority that only a long-term presence can win. He also had substantial autonomy and was not required to answer to politicians and bureaucrats back home. Moreover, the military dimension of Iranian influence in countries like Iraq contributes to its strategic depth. Iran has operated on the basis of a one (weak) state but two systems
formula. This has proved conducive to establishing alternative governing structures that only Iran can form, shape and ultimately utilize to determine national policy in its neighboring countries.

It will be particularly difficult to either dislodge or eliminate Iran’s proxy network in Iraq because of the diverse range of power centers that underpin it. Iran’s influence in places like Iraq is shaped by the Shiite faith. Iran builds social and religious networks centered on Shiism and support for Iran’s theocracy—or, at least, on the widely held view that revolutionary Iran stands for liberating or empowering Iraq’s marginalized and oppressed Shiite groupings. This is not to suggest that there is a blind loyalty to Iran based on Shiite Islam or Shiite Islamism. But, along with its proxies, Iran plays on and exploits the fears of the region’s Shiite communities through sophisticated propaganda. Many of these communities believe their faith and very existence are threatened by hostile countries that want to keep them down as well as by Sunni jihadi groups that consider them to be heretics.

Ideology, however, is only one part of the equation. Iran does not simply opportunistically back or deploy proxies as other states do. Like its rivals, Iran discards militias or cancels its support of them as it deems necessary. But, unlike its rivals, Tehran has excelled at inventing and re-inventing proxies. Iran has a demonstrated ability to exploit divisions among movements that challenge its interests. And its shrewd and honed capacities for picking winners has been evident in the formation of some of its most preeminent proxies.

Iran cultivated a powerful militia network in the region that was personally overseen by Soleimani. And the loss of an exceptional combatant and political operator constituted a huge loss for a network that depends on personalized politics and symbolism as much as operational acumen. Nonetheless, it was also the case that the tide of conflict had already overwhelmingly shifted in Iran’s favor at the time of the assassination.

In Syria, the Bashar al-Assad regime was empowered and reinforced by Iran’s proxies as early as 2012. At that time, Hezbollah entered the fray and subsequently secured vital strategic victories for the Damascus regime, alongside regime forces and tens of thousands of other Iranian proxies deployed from Iraq, Afghanistan and Pakistan. Since the regime’s 2016 victory in Aleppo, Iran has moved to consolidate Assad’s dominance in other parts of the country. Today, together with Russia, Assad may be on his way to achieving a full-fledged victory.

In Iraq, by the time Soleimani was assassinated, Iran had already secured unparalleled influence and control over key decision-making structures. It had cultivated a plethora of Iraqi proxy groups that, under the watchful eye of the U.S., had evolved into major political actors that control and dominate ministries. They
hold seats in parliament and have access to budgets and local economies worth hundreds of millions of dollars every month. Iraqis will tell you that Soleimani was more than just a commander. He was also a mediator, friend and executioner rolled into one. And in Iraq, Soleimani and his deputies honed their carrots-and-sticks approach to managing, directing and cultivating militia groups. This effectively created the infrastructure that has been so crucial to Iran’s deployments elsewhere in the Arab world, in places like Syria and Yemen.

While this network may have been bruised and bloodied by Soleimani’s demise, it has not been defeated and remains Iran’s to lose. The regime is indeed under pressure, but it is resilient, and its regional expansionism shows no signs of being in decline. Countries like Iraq—and soon, Syria—constitute the leading edge of Iran’s proxy infrastructure, including critical conduits through which the regime can circumvent sanctions or mitigate their impact. As a result, Iran will double-down on its efforts to consolidate influence in these countries. It will also combine its strong political presence with coercion and intimidation. However, Tehran will also be careful to not overplay its hand, exercising the strategic patience that has secured its considerable gains in recent years. This comes about amid a series of American miscalculations, U.S. paralysis in Syria and Iraq, and the possibility of a new administration after November.

Meanwhile, Iran’s proxy network is in actuality a diverse range of power centers that underpin it. This makes it particularly difficult, even implausible, that a country like Iraq will either dislodge or eliminate it anytime soon. The Tehran regime has strongly positioned itself to mitigate the vulnerabilities to its de facto empire. For Iran, the loss of Soleimani meant the loss of personalized relationships he had built over decades, and it may be many years before Iran can truly replace him. But it is also true that the key centers of power, and the modalities that shape Iran’s proxy network, are able to function and operate with deadly impact even without Soleimani or direct Iranian patronage.

Iran has expended vast resources empowering community leaders (who, like military commanders, can shape and influence militia groups) and investing in Iraq’s bottom-up politics. Rather than simply directing its resources toward winning influence in national politics, Iran has a palpable presence within Shiite communal networks that are comprised of powerful charitable institutions that receive funds through religious donations from around the world. These religious networks are worth hundreds of millions of dollars.

A fundamental aspect of Shiite political mobilization is the role of religion. Shiite activism in Iraq has historically been wedded to the Shiite clerical establishment. Shiite militias depend on the clerics for legitimacy, and have strived to
align their discourse and intellectual output with those of the seminaries. Religious sermons facilitate the dissemination of political and social goals. Hence, Iran is equally focused on dominating the socio-religious space within the seminaries of Najaf and Karbala to influence Shiite doctrinal thought and to secure its hold on one of the central pillars of Shiite mobilization.

That is particularly important amid the pushback Iran has received from Najaf and Grand Ayatollah Sistani, who has historically been averse to Iranian encroachment in Iraq. Many do worry that the eventual passing of Ayatollah Sistani, who is now 89 years old, could pave the way for an expanded attempt by Iran to shape the Shiite socio-religious landscape in Najaf and Karbala. In all likelihood, however, unwanted Iranian influence will continue to face significant resistance from Shiite religious and political figures in Iraq for years to come. At the same time, Iran’s proxies in Iraq have the potential to outgrow their sponsors. In the case of Hezbollah in Lebanon, this has to some extent already taken place. In conflict theatres across the region—Syria and Iraq in particular—Hezbollah has developed the operational capacity to command the conflict landscape. This has made Hezbollah indispensable to Tehran, rather than the other way around. Likewise, it is plausible that malign Shiite militias will continue to emerge in Iraq quite independent of a now diminished Iran, and that these groups will nonetheless give Iran new opportunities to expand its influence in Iraq.

The conventional American approach has focused on rebuilding Iraqi national governing and security institutions to countering Iran and suppressing the space in which malign militia groups operate. In this, it is an inconvenient reality that the U.S. risks state-building for and on behalf of Iran—not for Iraqis—since Tehran’s proxies have far-reaching political influence and their tentacles are firmly entrenched in local decision-making and governing institutions.

Instead, the United States should make every effort to understand Iraq as it actually is and aim to build local political allies while strengthening existing ones. This will open new pathways for the systematic and long-term reduction of malign Iranian influence. And, in doing so, political and civic groups in Iraq that are also friendly to the U.S. and its interests will be better positioned to contest local governing structures, while expanding their hold on the very state institutions that Iran’s proxies are seeking to bring under their influence and control. In other words, when it comes to countering Iran in Iraq, the United States should stop putting the cart before the horse.
Europe Frets, America Yawns: The Trans-Atlantic Gap on Domestic Islamism

By Lorenzo Vidino

In April 2019, in a landmark speech, French President Emmanuel Macron sought to soothe the societal tensions laid bare by the gilets jaunes movement’s violent protests. After speaking at length about the economic malaise plaguing France, Macron introduced another issue: communitarianism. “We are talking,” he explained, “about the communitarianism that has taken hold in certain quarters of the Republic. We are talking about people who, in the name of a religion, are pursuing a political project—that of a political Islam that wants to secede from our Republic. And on that, I asked the government to be intractable.” Macron reinforced this point in a second speech almost a year later in which he detailed a set of initiatives to counter the domestic appeal of Islamism in France. “We must never accept that the laws of religion can be superior to those of
the Republic,” he stated. “Islamist separatism is incompatible with freedom and equality, incompatible with the indivisibility of the Republic and the necessary unity of the nation.”

Macron is a staunch foe of populism but, at the same time, a good reader of his nation’s undercurrents. That he chose to highlight the negative impact of Islamism on French society is not surprising to observers of European politics. The French president, in fact, simply articulated concerns that are increasingly expressed by mainstream policymakers in countries throughout the continent. Indeed, if over the last few years much of the attention of European authorities was understandably centered on jihadism, concerns have more recently expanded to non-violent manifestations of Islamism.

Europeans, in fact, increasingly discuss the impact of Islamist groups on their societies. While operating within the law, such groups spread views and behaviors that are highly controversial and at odds with Western values and democratic institutions. Such concerns are not new among Europeans. But it is noteworthy that they are no longer expressed almost exclusively by those on the right of the political spectrum. Today, and much more frequently than in the past, worries about non-violent Islamists are expressed by politicians and commentators of all political persuasions.

This development, which is visible in varying degrees of intensity throughout Europe, is in stark contrast with concerns in the United States. American discussions pay significant attention to the Islamic State, al-Qaeda and jihadism in general, but seldom focus on the many non-violent manifestations of Islamism. When they do, they mostly look at the issue through the lens of U.S. foreign policy, concentrating on how to deal with political Islamist movements in Muslim-majority countries, such as Egypt’s Muslim Brotherhood. Meanwhile, whatever little discourse exists about domestic Islamism in the U.S. is largely driven by a small group of activists, who tend to be excessive and unsophisticated in their efforts and are therefore often far removed from the mainstream. America arguably does not face a challenge from domestic Islamism or “communitarianism” of the same magnitude that many European nations do. However, the near absence of attention paid to the complex issue of political Islamism by American policymakers is short-sighted, with detrimental consequences for U.S. policy and security.
Europe’s Concerns with Islamism

Europeans have long witnessed the demonstrable impact of political Islamism on their societies. In 1988, various British Islamist organizations agitated local Muslim communities against Salman Rushdie’s book *Satanic Verses*. A mobilization followed, epitomized by the public burning of copies of the book in Bradford. As a result, the organizations that coordinated the mobilization as well as the British establishment came to understand that Islamism was a force to be reckoned with in Britain and would be so for years to come.

Similarly, in the late 1980s and early 1990s, a similar agitation was stirred up in France related to various bans against wearing the hijab in schools and public places. This caused the French state and public alike to acknowledge that politically-charged Islam was active in the Republic and thus a challenge to some of its norms.

Since these early flashpoints, most European countries have steadily debated how to deal with Islamism. The Islamism Europeans have encountered is diverse and confusing. There seems to be little disagreement that jihadists, who represent the most violent manifestation of Islamist ideology, are a threat—although there remains little consensus as to what factors cause young European Muslims to join their ranks. But the diagnosis becomes significantly more challenging when dealing with Islamist groups that do not advocate violence.

Various currents of the Salafist movement are active throughout the continent. For some of them, the border with violence is a thin one. But most, while remaining peaceful, reject democracy, condemn Western society as immoral, and advocate that believers isolate themselves from it. Similarly diffuse throughout Europe are networks with organizational and ideological ties to the Muslim Brotherhood. Unlike Salafists, they publicly advocate integration and actively seek to engage in politics and society. However, critics argue, their acceptance of democracy is not sincere but tactical; it is simply aimed at obtaining influence to advance their agenda. Meanwhile, many of their beliefs on such issues as religious freedom, women’s rights and homosexuality are both troubling and incompatible with Western norms.

What to do with these groups? Statistically, they represent a fairly small yet very vocal cross-section of any European country’s Muslim community, and an appropriate response to them has been the source of endless discussion. For the most part, the activities of such groups fall within the law; in a democratic society, their
right to advocate and work for “Islamic causes” or even for an Islamic order is constitutionally sanctioned. On the other hand, many in Europe have long argued that tolerating the spread of Islamist views among European Muslim communities—even if they do not manifest themselves in violent ways—is a short-sighted approach.

Two particular concerns are generally expressed. First, critics argue that non-violent Islamist groups, while largely operating within the boundaries of the law, propagate an interpretation of Islam that drives a wedge between Muslims and non-Muslims. This contributes to polarization and harms integration. Europeans are concerned about the growing sway of Islamist groups. Through preaching and various forms of social pressure, intimidation and, occasionally, violence, these groups inspire members of local Muslim communities to detach from mainstream society and resort to alternative legal, educational and social systems.

Tellingly, intelligence and law enforcement agencies in various European countries have set up units that specifically focus on the formation of “parallel societies” in which the inhabitants utilize legal and arbitration systems other than the state’s. This phenomenon, to be sure, is not limited to heavily immigrant communities from Muslim countries. But the formation of parallel societies is of particular concern to European authorities when they are not simply the result of cultural traditions but tied to a political project, i.e., to Islamism.

Secondly, critics warn about the potential impact of non-violent Islamists on violent radicalization. They argue that Salafists and Muslim Brothers spread ideas that, taken to their logical conclusion, justify violence—whether in foreign lands, or in Europe—and inspire angry young men to embrace the views of jihadist groups. In the British debate it used to be said that non-violent Islamists “provide the mood music to which suicide bombers dance.” Many are critical of this position and the thorny question of whether non-violent Islamism constitutes a “conveyor belt” or a “firewall” against violent radicalization. Indeed, such disagreements have shaped the Western counterterrorism conversation over the last twenty years. The debate on the issue began in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks on the U.S., but it has significantly increased during the last decade, as some 5,000 European Muslims joined the Islamic State and some 70 attacks directed or inspired by the caliphate movement, such as the November 2014 Paris attacks against the Bataclan and other targets, the March 2015 Brussels airport and metro suicide bombings, or the July 2015 truck-ramming in Nice, bloodied the streets of the continent.¹

For obvious reasons, the ongoing debate about non-violent Islamism often takes a back seat to the ideology’s violent manifestations. Terrorist attacks, particularly
when as frequent and dramatic as those suffered throughout Europe in recent years, capture the attention of policymakers, security services and the media. Meanwhile, the activities of non-violent Islamists tend to be attention-repellant: they are mostly legal; they rarely flare up in dramatic incidents like the Bradford book burning. And they often bring (sometimes justified, sometimes not) charges of racism and Islamophobia to those who highlight them.

Yet, over the last few years, the significance of non-violent Islamism seems to have gained more traction in several European countries. Macron’s reference to communitarianism is hardly an isolated case. Since entering the doors of the Élysée, Macron has tapped various advisors to come up with a grand strategy to weaken Islamist communitarianism in all its manifestations in France. Macron’s plan, at least in theory, seeks to challenge Islamism through a muscular cultural battle led by the state. On one hand, he seems to have shed the strong assimilationist approach that has conventionally characterized France’s relationship to its newcomers, supporting a growing public recognition of Islam and even encouraging the state’s support for the construction of large mosques. This is not a small feat for a country that sees the concept of laïcité as one of its pillars. At the same time, the Macron government has enacted various policies aimed at cracking down on Islamism, from deporting radical preachers to closing down problematic mosques.

At the same time, serious concerns over non-violent Islamism also have been at the center of political discussions in the United Kingdom, a country that has traditionally adopted an integration model diametrically opposed to France’s. Debates about whether British multiculturalism have led to the growth of parallel societies and created a perfect environment for Islamists—both violent and non-violent—to thrive have periodically surfaced since the Rushdie affair. These British debates over their multiculturalist model (or rather, as some would argue, its excessive or twisted implementations) have only intensified since the 2005 London terrorist attacks.

The UK’s policy changes aimed at diminishing the influence of non-violent Islamists began under Tony Blair, albeit in a somewhat haphazard way. While parts of the British establishment saw the Muslim Brotherhood and Jamaat-e-Islami organizations as useful gatekeepers to the Muslim community and partners in preventing violent radicalization, other Labour leaders began to think otherwise. Hazel Blears, Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government in the Blair government was weary of the negative social impact of empowering Islamists. In 2009, she warned that:
The left, in particular, must be vigilant. The liberal-left is historically concerned for the underdog, for oppressed peoples, for taking a stand against racism and imperialism. It is part of our political DNA. The problem today is that these valid concerns can be mutated into support for causes and organisations that are fiercely anti-liberal and populated by people whose hearts are filled with misogyny, homophobia and Jew-hatred. Liberals’ pathological fear of being branded “racist” or “Islamophobic” can lead to ideological contortions: condoning or even forming alliances with groups that are socially conservative, homophobic, antisemitic and violent towards women.

The British government’s revision in attitudes towards non-violent Islamists dramatically accelerated in 2010, when Conservatives were elected to power. In a landmark speech delivered a few months after becoming prime minister, David Cameron clearly outlined his views on the subject:

Governments must also be shrewder in dealing with those that, while not violent, are in some cases part of the problem. We need to think much harder about who it’s in the public interest to work with. Some organisations that seek to present themselves as a gateway to the Muslim community are showered with public money despite doing little to combat extremism. As others have observed, this is like turning to a right-wing fascist party to fight a violent white supremacist movement. So we should properly judge these organisations: do they believe in universal human rights—including for women and people of other faiths? Do they believe in equality of all before the law? Do they believe in democracy and the right of people to elect their own government? Do they encourage integration or separation? These are the sorts of questions we need to ask.

Cameron’s government stopped all funding of Islamist organizations and deplatformed them, removing them from most governmental outreach efforts towards the Muslim community. The government’s concerns were further solidified in 2013, by the emergence of an alleged conspiracy by various activists in the Birmingham area to occupy leadership positions in local schools and to introduce Islamist-leaning classes and ethos. In 2014, Cameron ordered a high-profile government-wide review of “the philosophy, activities, impact and influence on UK national interests,
at home and abroad, of the Muslim Brotherhood and of government policy towards
the organisation.” This was the first such action in any Western nation.

The process went on for months, not without controversies and difficulties, and
a two hundred-page report was presented to the prime minister. While the full
report has not been released (because it is based on classified evidence), in Decem-
ber 2015 the British government published an executive summary of its findings.
The document provides, overall, a very negative assessment of the Brotherhood,
arguing that “aspects of Muslim Brotherhood ideology and tactics, in this coun-
try and overseas, are contrary to our values and have been contrary to our national
interests and our national security.”

The UK review’s assessment of the Brotherhood and, more broadly of non-vio-
lent Islamism, is shared by virtually all intelligence agencies throughout West-
ern Europe. For example, in a case weighing whether or not to grant asylum to a
member of the Brotherhood, Austrian intelligence argued in the negative. They
stated that the group’s ideology “in its core contradicts the Western democratic
understanding of coexistence, equality of men and women, the political order,
and the fundamental principles of the Constitution of the Republic of Austria.”

Dutch intelligence has similarly warned that organizations linked to the
Brotherhood are “apparently cooperative and moderate in their attitude to West-
ern society...but the ultimate aim—although never stated openly—is to create, then
implant and expand, an ultra-orthodox Muslim bloc inside Western Europe.”

Arguably the most “pessimistic” point of view in this debate is the one adopted
by German security services, both at the federal and state level. Because of its
history, Germany has granted its security agencies an extremely broad mandate
in focus on all political entities that can disrupt the country’s democratic life. “The
Nazis seized power democratically,” German officials will routinely say when
explaining this dynamic. And, tellingly, all German security services have units
specifically devoted to monitoring non-violent Islamism. They are, invariably,
highly critical of its impact on German society.

A 2005 report from the Office for the Protection of the Constitution—Germany’s
federal domestic intelligence agency—perfectly condenses these concerns about
“legalistic Islamist groups,” a term German authorities use to refer to Islamist
groups whose activities are mostly legal. The report argues that these groups
“represent an especial threat to the internal cohesion of our society.” “Among other
things,” the report continues, “their wide range of Islamist-oriented educational
and support activities, especially for children and adolescents from immigrant
families, are used to promote the creation and proliferation of an Islamist milieu
in Germany. These endeavors run counter to the efforts undertaken by the federal
administration and the Länder [states] to integrate immigrants. There is the risk that such milieus could also form the breeding ground for further radicalization.”

A 2018 report by the security services of North Rhine-Westphalia, Germany’s most populous state, goes even further. “In the long run,” it argues, “the threat posed by legalistic Islamism to the liberal democratic system is greater than that of jihadism, which will always outnumber numerically. They aspire to an Islamist order, but are prepared to allow certain democratic elements within that framework. For this reason, their extremism is often barely recognizable at first glance.”

America the Silent

NEGATIVE OPINIONS ABOUT NON-VIOLENT ISLAMISTS HELD BY EUROPEAN INTELLIGENCE agencies influence, but do not fully shape, governmental policies. Lawmakers and bureaucrats at all levels—not to mention civil society and media organizations—are not bound by these assessments and often, in fact, espouse different ideas. While negative views of “legalistic Islamism” are increasingly predominant, no European country has adopted a cohesive approach to identify, assess and position itself towards Islamist organizations, either at home or abroad.

This situation leads to huge inconsistencies in policies, not only from one country to another but also inside each country, where positions diverge from institution to institution and even from office to office within the same body. It is not uncommon, for example, for the investigative unit of a law enforcement agency to aggressively look into an Islamist organization while the very same agency’s civil affairs division engages it as a reliable partner.

While there are continent-wide commonalities, each European country’s debate has its own dynamics and degree of intensity. But virtually all European nations are discussing Islamism and its impact on their societies. This is in stark contrast with the United States, where concern about domestic Islamism is virtually nonexistent, at least when it comes to the mainstream. Violent Islamism has been at the center of attention also in America since 9/11 and, with a renewed energy, since the arrival of the Islamic State. Yet, with few exceptions, there seems to be little to no interest among policy, law enforcement and media circles to examine the varieties and activities of non-violent Islamist networks on American soil.

America, to be sure, does debate Islamism, but the focus is almost entirely beyond its shores. The peak of this debate took place during the first years of the
Arab Spring, when the Obama administration and the Washington punditry were confronted with the sudden rise to power of Islamist forces in Egypt, Tunisia and other Arab countries. But this debate seldom acknowledged the existence of Islamist networks in the United States.

Moreover, American concerns about Islamism tend to be framed through the security lens. It is telling that in the United States, from 2014 to 2017, five separate bills seeking to designate the Muslim Brotherhood as a terrorist organization were introduced in Congress. These bills were supported almost exclusively by Republicans, and none progressed very far legislatively. Similarly, in May 2019, the Trump administration announced it was exploring a possible designation of the Brotherhood, but there seems to have been little follow through.

In Europe, on the other hand, even though potential security-related angles of non-violent Islamism are not ignored, no country has designated or even concretely discussed the idea of designating the Brotherhood and similar groups as terrorists. The general understanding among Europeans is that these groups, while at times flirting with violence, do not pose a direct security threat to the West. Nonetheless, at the same time, they do constitute a political and social challenge to its societies.

In America, on the other hand, concerns on the social impact of Islamism are largely relegated to two groups. The first is represented by a fairly small cadre of think tanks and activists who have made it their mission to expose Islamist activities in America. Critics have accused this informal network of being bigoted and Islamophobic. They argue that the activists involved seek to unfairly politically undermine active Muslim voices in order to advance a right-wing and pro-Israel agenda. In some cases, the charge of Islamophobia—that is, of unfairly criticizing Muslims and Islam as a whole—is fair. The more extreme voices of this milieu have, for example, accused virtually every prominent U.S. activist or government official of Muslim background of being a closet Islamist. Some even extended the accusation to President Obama.

In other cases, the criticism is unfair. In fact, accusations of Islamophobia serve to silence legitimate concerns about the undeniable Islamist origins and leanings of some prominent U.S. Muslim activists and organizations. Irrespective of where the truth lies, it is apparent that the voices of these critics seldom get any traction in the mainstream policy and media debate. And, even though a handful of them have managed to obtain positions in the Trump administration, their impact has remained negligible.

The second group that frets about Islamism is constituted by fairly large cross sections of the American Muslim population itself. Many staunchly patriotic or
secular American Muslims, including conservative Sunnis as well as minority Muslim groups (such as Sufis and Ahmadiyyah), are deeply concerned about the influence of Islamist networks on American Islam. It is not so much a fear of jihadist radicalization that concerns them. Their fear, rather, is the substantial influence of non-violent Islamist networks in social and religious activities at the grassroots level, as well as the position of Islamists as the self-appointed “communal” representatives of other American Muslims. But these critical American Muslim voices remain marginal as they tend to be disorganized and lack the mobilization capabilities and resources of groups that have been dominated by Islamists.

There is indeed a Trans-Atlantic gap regarding Islamism. With limited exceptions, America does not worry or speak about Islamism with comparable energy to the Europeans. And this can be explained by various, overlapping factors. The first is the size of the problem. Both historically and until today, America has not faced the same challenge from domestic Islamism, in both its violent and non-violent forms, that most of its European counterparts have. Yet neither has it been absent from the American landscape.

Individuals and networks adopting violent Islamist ideology have been active in the United States since the heyday of jihadism in the West, from the handful of Americans who joined the mujaheddin fighting the Soviets in Afghanistan in the 1980s to the New Jersey/Brooklyn-based cluster revolving around the “Blind Sheik” Omar Abdel-Rahman that planned attacks in New York in the early 1990s. The phenomenon only increased with time and has surged over the last decade, as the FBI arrested some 200 individuals for Islamic State-related activities and saw a similar number depart to fight with the group in Syria and Iraq. While this number pales when compared to the levels of radicalization and mobilization in some parts of Europe, it is nonetheless deeply concerning. Jihadism may, at present, be a much smaller phenomenon in America, but it does exist.

While arrests and the number of foreign fighters provide good metrics of the jihadist challenge, it is more difficult to empirically quantify the presence of non-violent Islamist actors. Unbeknownst to many, America has historically been home to relatively large numbers of Islamist movements. Various strands of Salafism, in fact, have long enjoyed a foothold in the country. The Houston-based al-Maghrib Institute, for example, has attracted some of the most prominent names of global Salafism—mostly in its quietist and political currents—and reportedly has graduated more than 80,000 students.

Similarly, it is noteworthy that, arguably, the leading contemporary ideologue of the jihadist current of Salafism in the English-speaking world, Anwar Awlaki, was born in New Mexico and preached for years between California and Virginia.
Awlaki, who was killed in a 2011 U.S. drone strike in Yemen, where he had become one of the top leaders of the local al-Qaeda affiliate, served as imam in one of America’s most prominent mosques, with close links to the Muslim Brotherhood.

Equally, if not more important is the historical presence of networks linked to various national branches of the Brotherhood. For example, Egyptian president Mohammed Mursi joined the Muslim Brotherhood in the 1980s while studying in California. And Bashir al-Kebti, who was elected head of the Libyan Muslim Brotherhood shortly after the 2011 revolution, had worked as an accountant in the United States for more than thirty years. Indeed, the Islamist presence has been well-established in the U.S. for years.

Some of these Brotherhood networks are mostly focused on their countries of origin, using America as a convenient base of operation and fundraising platform. An example of this dynamic is Hamas, which created a nationwide network in the 1980s, when its now senior leader, Musa Abu Marzook, went to graduate school in Colorado and Louisiana. Other members of the Brotherhood arrived in the United States as early as the 1960s and were pioneers of the movement. Prominent U.S.-based Brothers Jamal Barzinji, Ahmed Totonji, and Hisham al Talib, played a key role in establishing global Islamist organizations like the Saudi-based World Assembly of Muslim Youth as well as some of the first American Muslim organizations such as the Muslim Students Association and the International Institute of Islamic Thought. It is difficult to gauge whether the presence of non-violent Islamist networks in America is as prevalent as it is in Europe, but there is no doubt about its existence.

One important factor to note is that America never had a defining moment, an episode that made its collective psyche confront the existence of domestic Islamism the way Britain did with the Rushdie affaire or Denmark did with the 2006 Jyllands-Posten cartoon controversy. Islamism, despite extensive evidence to the contrary, is still seen by most Americans as a predominantly “foreign” and thus distant threat that only occasionally manages to enter or threaten American soil.

Americans often reassure themselves by arguing that some of the dynamics seen in Europe, whether linked to violent or non-violent Islamism, cannot take place stateside. This is because American Muslims are a success story, a well-integrated community that enjoys a high standard of living and does not suffer the kind of discrimination their European counterparts are subjected to. Part of this argument is correct. It is undeniably true that, whatever benchmark one uses to gauge integration, American Muslims on the whole fare much better than European Muslims. For reasons that range from economic to cultural, America has done a better job at integrating immigrants in general and Muslims in particular.
But is good integration Islamism’s kryptonite? Are people who enjoy good economic conditions less prone to embracing various forms of Islamist ideology? This question has been endlessly debated by scholars, without a consensus. It is undeniable that areas with high unemployment and a widespread sense of marginalization—such as the almost mythicized French banlieues or Brussels’ Molenbeek neighborhood—are conducive environments for radical players and views. At the same time, it is incorrect to see all Islamists as disenfranchised individuals motivated by social rage. Whether in the Middle East or in the West, it is hardly uncommon for Islamists to have a good educational level, to live a comfortable life, and to be fully engaged in the very society they want to radically alter. In fact, when it comes to the Muslim Brotherhood, a relatively high social status is the norm for its members. Therefore, it should come as no surprise that some individuals from affluent and well-integrated communities, including American Muslims, also embrace various forms of Islamism.

A different cultural approach to integration also helps explain America’s lack of interest in domestic Islamism. While most European societies have traditionally been fairly homogenous and have had little experience in (and, some would argue, patience for) diversity, America has a long history of tolerating all sorts of views, beliefs and lifestyles. Communities living in self-isolation are not uncommon in America, from the Amish to some Christian and ultra-orthodox Jewish sects. Similarly, the latitudes of speech protection granted by the First Amendment shock most Europeans but are sacrosanct for Americans. Unlike Europe, America is more tolerant of behaviors and words that diverge from the mainstream and, at times, directly challenge it.

Finally, another explanation for the lack of American concern with non-violent Islamism is the country’s lack of a domestic intelligence agency. In Europe, the alarm on Islamism is often raised or supported by the analysis of security services that have a mandate allowing them to look beyond direct threats to national security, and also to monitor more oblique forms of subversion that might threaten the democratic order. In the U.S. there is no equivalent. The FBI is a formidable law enforcement agency with substantial powers to investigative individuals and organizations suspected of engaging in criminal behaviors. But monitoring activities that are within the law, in which most of those of non-violent Islamists engage, falls outside its remit. Reminiscent of its own excesses during the McCarthy era and later, the FBI stays clear of systematically monitoring non-violent Islamists, save for the rare occasions in which they overlap with terrorism investigations or engage in other criminal activities.

All these elements represent an obstacle to the development of much-needed,
robust American discussions on Islamism. Yet, even though a gulf between Europe and America had always existed on the matter, it was not this broad in the past. In the years following the September 11, 2001 attacks, the U.S. policy debate paid closer attention to the role of ideology and non-violent Islamism, albeit often not in a very cogent way. Moreover, for the better part of the 2000s, U.S. federal authorities conducted extremely aggressive counter-terrorism operations against a variety of Muslim Brotherhood and Hamas affiliated charities, entities and individuals. This changed significantly during the Obama administration. Initially, during the early years of the Arab Spring, the Obama administration’s foreign policy took a cautiously sympathetic approach toward the Muslim Brotherhood parties that came to power, while at home government investigations of domestic Islamist networks came virtually to a complete halt. Moreover, while in the previous decade mainstream media devoted important and mostly balanced coverage to domestic Islamism, the 2010 decade saw the issue slide increasingly to the dark corners of the Internet—where the hyperbole and conspiracy theories of the anti-Islamic fringe have flourished—and away from the eyes of most decisionmakers and legislators. This overall trend in the U.S. policy discussion has changed little since President Trump was elected. During his campaign, candidate Trump spoke about his desire to establish “a Commission on Radical Islam,” an endeavor he never fully defined but that, some had hoped, might resemble the UK’s Muslim Brotherhood review. However, nothing resembling a commission on radical Islam, or any effort to better understand and craft policy towards the varieties of domestic Islamism and its challenges, have materialized. Instead, the Trump administration has been characterized by a mix of problematic outbursts of rhetoric on Islam and a puzzling lack of coherence and inaction on domestic Islamism. While the president and some in his administration have often used crude and divisive language when speaking about Islam, the White House has hardly taken any concrete political action to counter Islamism domestically. Even at the tactical level no move has been made to, for example, order the FBI and the Department of Justice to aggressively investigate domestic Islamist networks. Rather, quite surprisingly, there are indications that federal funding for American Islamist organizations has actually increased under the Trump administration.⁹ These dynamics highlight how the American debate on Islamism has increasingly become a function of party politics, driven on both sides by politically-charged rhetoric. On one hand are the foaming-at-the-mouth anti-Islamist (and, often, anti-Islam) activists. On the other are those who seem willfully blind, dismissing any accusation against Islamists—or even the charge that they actually exist—as preposterous fabrications motivated by Islamophobia. One important effect of this
has been to drown out any sensible middle-ground and policy debate that is in-
formed by analysis of the varieties of Islamism and its challenges to the American
Republic. It has also contributed to the growing Trans-Atlantic divide over Islamism
and how to deal with it. While it might be true that the internal Islamist challenge
to the United States is smaller or of a different character than the one that parts of
Europe are facing, this may not always be the case. It would be wise for U.S. policy-
makers at the federal and state levels to learn from the European experience, and
to initiate a debate and domestic policy changes that incorporate a healthy deplat-
formed skepticism toward political Islamism without degenerating into paranoia.

NOTES

1. The calculation is based on a database of attacks kept by the author and Francesco
Marone. See Lorenzo Vidino, Francesco Marone, and Eva Entenmann, Fear Thy Neigh-
bror: Radicalization and Jihadist Attacks in the West, report by the Program on Extremism
at the George Washington University and the International Centre for Counter Terror-
ism (ICCT, The Hague), June 2017. The database has been regularly updated.
2. Landesverwaltungsgericht Steiermark, cases LVwG 70.8-3597/2015-34, LVwG 41.8-
3. The Radical Dawa in Transition: The Rise of Islamic Neoradicalism in the Netherlands, AIVD,
5. Annual report of the North Rhine-Westphalia Office for the Protection of the Constitu-
6. For historical overviews of jihadism in America, see J.M. Berger, “Jihad Joe: Americans
Who Go to War in the Name of Islam” (Washington DC: Potomac Books, 2011), and
Lorenzo Vidino, “Homegrown Jihadist Terrorism in the United States: A New and Oc-
7. See Lorenzo Vidino and Seamus Hughes, ISIS in America: From Retweets to Raqqa, Pro-
9. Sam Westrop, “American Islamism Flourishes Under Trump,” Middle East Quarterly,
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