

MERIA

THE UNITED STATES GOVERNMENT: PATRON OF ISLAM?

By Daniel Pipes and Mimi Stillman*

The U.S. government has, almost without realizing it, developed a position toward the religion of Islam, not in theological terms but regarding such issues as Islamism and terrorism in the name of Islam. Whether Republican or Democrat, the leaders' statements defend Islam as a moderate and peaceful religion which extremists distort; more surprisingly, they also promote Islam in the United States.

Islam has dominated American public life on two occasions, once during the period of the Iranian hostage crisis from 1979 to 1981, and more recently since the attacks against the World Trade Center and the Pentagon on September 11, 2001. In both instances, Americans responded with outrage and puzzlement to the sight of ostensibly pious individuals (Ayatollah Khomeini then, Usama bin Ladin now) sponsoring unprovoked violence against American civilians. Each time, Islam became one of the most discussed topics in American public life.

But the U.S. government responded very differently to the Islamic dimension of these two episodes. In that first round, it stayed aloof from the debate, limiting itself to policy pronouncements on Iran. Islam was mentioned hardly, if ever, in keeping with the time-honored and acceptable practice of U.S. officials saying little about matters of faith. After all, these were politicians and diplomats, not scholars of religion. "Discoursing" on Islam was not exactly their specialization, and they were humble enough to know it.

But the reticence ran deeper: as spokespersons for the U.S. government, a constitutionally secular institution, they knew not to articulate views on the truth or falsehood of specific religions. In some

contexts, that tradition is still a strong one. When the "Real IRA" killed twenty-eight at a fair in Omagh, Ireland,(1) the U.S. president did not seize the opportunity to ruminate on the true nature of Catholicism. Baruch Goldstein's murderous rampage in Hebron spurred no commentary on Judaism by the secretary of state. The Bharatiya Janata Party, with its Hindu nationalist outlook, prompted no high-level analyses of Hinduism on its coming to power in India.

The same used to be the case with Islam. In theory, anyway, it still is. At a festive dinner she held for American Muslims in 2000, then-secretary of state Madeleine K. Albright informed her guests that, "Of course, the United States doesn't have a political policy towards Islam."(2) One of her staff confirmed this on the operational level: "Islam is not a factor in our policymaking."(3)

But this is simply not true anymore. Islam, the most political of religions, now enjoys a privileged place in Washington, just as it does in almost every capital around the world. The first Bush administration began the discussion of Islam in June 1992. On coming to office in 1993, the Clinton administration developed a fairly subtle policy toward Islam. Policy formulation accelerated in the present Bush administration. And since September 11, the

president and his team have devoted intensive efforts to explaining what role Islam did and did not play in the recent tragedy. "Islam" now trips off the tongues of American statesmen, politicians, and diplomats with an almost dizzying frequency.

While the intensity of the current debate is new, the substance of current U.S. government statements on Islam is not. The latest statements develop the themes and arguments of a policy articulated over the past decade. That policy has four main elements, each of which has become a policy mantra: There is no clash of civilizations. Terrorism is not Islamic. Islam is compatible with American ideals and adds to American life. Americans must learn to appreciate Islam.

CLASH OF CIVILIZATIONS

The first and most urgent task that government spokesmen tackle is contradicting the idea that the Cold War has been replaced by a "clash of civilizations." Samuel Huntington of Harvard first proposed the idea in 1993; in his catalog of possible conflicts, a "clash of civilizations" between Islam and the West loomed large.(4) Over and over again, officialdom asserts the falseness of this idea. President Clinton himself argued with Huntington, declaring it "terribly wrong" to believe in "an inevitable clash" between the West and Islam. To support his point, he called on the authority of U.S. Muslims, who "will tell you there is no inherent clash between Islam and America."(5) More disdainfully, Albright noted that "The United States has no interest in the 'clash' with Islam that some commentators have predicted."(6) To the contrary, there is "no inherent conflict between Islam and the United States."(7) Assistant to the President for National Security Affairs Samuel R. Berger echoed the theme: "There is no clash of civilizations."(8)

Whenever the topic came up, the lesser ranks dutifully lined up behind their superiors. Deputy Assistant Secretary of State Ronald Neumann found "no inherent conflict between Islam and the West. We do not see any 'clash of civilizations.'"(9) Special Advisor to the Secretary of State John Beyrle found that "it makes no sense to see America as a nation 'in conflict' with Islam."(10) According to a State Department fact sheet, "Islam and the West are not in confrontation."(11) Even the Department of Defense, not usually concerned with such matters, had an opinion: according to Deputy Assistant Secretary Bruce Riedel, "The Pentagon rejects the argument that a clash of civilizations is imminent between Islam and the West."(12)

As a corollary, officialdom argued against the idea that Islam had been promoted to the status of enemy. "We should not accept the notion," said R. James Woolsey, former director of the Central Intelligence Agency, that "the 'Red Menace' that dominated our lives for nearly a half a century is now being replaced by a 'Green Menace' sweeping throughout the Arab world."(13) Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern Affairs Edward Djerejian asserted that the U.S. government "does not view Islam as the next 'ism' confronting the West or threatening world peace."(14) Martin Indyk, at the time serving on the National Security Council staff, broadened the point: "We do not regard Islam as a threat."(15) The only crack in the façade was provided after September 11, when Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz implied that Samuel Huntington did not create the problem, he only diagnosed it: "These criminals ... want to inflame a war of the cultures, and we should avoid that."(16)

TERRORISM IS NOT ISLAMIC

The second task the U.S. government has taken upon itself is severing the common

association Americans make between Islam and terrorism. Officialdom does not deny that devout-seeming Muslims are constantly trying to kill Americans, but it vociferously denies their connection to Islam.

President Clinton complained about “so many people” unfairly identifying “the forces of radicalism and terrorism” with Islam.(17) As he acknowledged, “we have had problems with terrorism coming out of the Middle East” but he then insisted that this “is not inherently related to Islam, not to the religion, not to the culture.”(18) A Department of State fact sheet echoed the president: “Terrorism is not a principle of any major religion, including Islam.”(19) And the department’s coordinator for counter-terrorism, Philip Wilcox, Jr., went still further: “Islam, like Christianity and Judaism, preaches peace and non-violence.”(20)

Some Muslims may preach non-violence. But how do politicians and diplomats account for the stubborn fact that Muslim radicals have attacked Americans in such diverse locales as Lebanon, Yemen, Kenya, the Philippines, New York, and Washington? By deeming such attacks contrary to Islam. In 1994, Clinton criticized “the forces of terror and extremism, who cloak themselves in the rhetoric of religion and nationalism but behave in ways that contradict the very teachings of their faith and mock their patriotism.”(21) He returned to this topic in 1998, accusing Usama bin Ladin and his associates of engaging in “a horrible distortion of their religion to justify the murder of innocents.” He dismissed them as “fanatics and killers who wrap murder in the cloak of righteousness, and in so doing, profane the great religion in whose name they claim to act.”(22)

The president’s men dutifully followed suit. National Security Advisor Anthony Lake denounced “militants who distort Islamic doctrines and seek to expand their influence by force.”(23) A violent Islamic

group in Algeria was acting against “the principles of Islam,” according to Robert Pelletreau, who also moonlighted as assistant secretary of state.(24) R. James Woolsey, the former director of the Central Intelligence Agency, considered it “a major mistake” to blame Islam for the state of affairs in Iran today, and specifically for the choice of its leaders to rely heavily on terror. Woolsey argued that “a few men” who had broken with Islamic traditions alone were responsible for the situation in Iran.(25) Michael A. Sheehan, the State Department’s coordinator for counter-terrorism, called terrorism “a perversion of the teachings of Islam.”(26) Beyrle checked his copy of the Qur’an and concluded “that extremism is not truly Islamic.”(27) “Terrorists who claim to speak for Islam,” averred Wilcox, “are abusing their faith.”(28)

The events of September 11 brought this issue to center stage. Interestingly, while all government officials agreed that the four hijackings could not be ascribed to Islam, they differed among themselves on the question of whether it was simply, as Wolfowitz put it, “not an Islamic act”(29) or something done in actual contravention of Islam.

President Bush’s speech to Congress pointed to the first interpretation:

The terrorists practice a fringe form of Islamic extremism that has been rejected by Muslim scholars and the vast majority of Muslim clerics; a fringe movement that perverts the peaceful teachings of Islam ... [Islam’s] teachings are good and peaceful, and those who commit evil in the name of Allah blaspheme the name of Allah ...The terrorists are traitors to their own faith, trying, in effect, to hijack Islam itself.(30)

But the second interpretation surfaced in President Bush’s speech to a Muslim

audience during his visit to the Islamic Center in Washington: “These acts of violence against innocents violate the fundamental tenets of the Islamic faith. ... The face of terror is not the true face of Islam. That’s not what Islam is all about. Islam is peace.”(31) White House Press Secretary Ari Fleischer went further, calling the attacks “a perversion of Islam.”(32) Secretary of State Colin Powell made the same point even more emphatically, casting the hijackers not only out of Islam but even out of Arabdom; their acts, he argued, “should not be seen as something done by Arabs or Islamics; it is something that was done by terrorists.”(33)

This distinction between Islam and terrorism, however it is made, has a profound implication for the post-September 11 concept of the enemy: the United States is fighting a war “on terror,” not on militant Islam or any type of Muslims. President Bush told Congressional leaders “we don’t view this as a war of religion, in any way, shape or form.”(34) According to Powell, “this is not a conflict against Arabs or Muslims or those who believe in one particular religion.”(35) Terrorism “is a threat not only to our civilization but to theirs as well,” explained Department of State spokesman Richard Boucher. “We don’t see this as an effort against Arabs; we don’t see this as an effort against Muslims.”(36) More succinctly, Deputy Secretary Wolfowitz declared that “our enemy is terrorism, not Islam.”(37)

Even the judicial branch now has views about terrorism not being Islamic. At the sentencing of Ramzi Yusuf, the mastermind of the 1993 World Trade Center bombing, Judge Kevin Duffy berated the defendant: “Ramzi Yusuf, you are not fit to uphold Islam. Your God is death. Your God is not Allah. ... What you do you do not do for Allah; you do it only to satisfy your own twisted sense of ego.”(38)

To sum up, in the words of John Beyrle: “Some believe that ... the Cold War has been replaced by a clash of civilizations. Others, including some in my own country, believe that terrorism is somehow related to Islam. They are both wrong.”(39) Discussion closed.

ISLAM, A POSITIVE FORCE

Islam, then, is not an enemy or a source of terrorism. But officials do not leave it at that. They even postulate two positive features of the religion: its compatibility with American ideals and its potential benefits for the United States.

There is nothing in the religion of U.S. Muslims, Bill Clinton averred, “that would divide us, that would promote terrorism, that would be destructive of our values.”(40) He and other officials then specified where exactly Islam complemented American values: “Devotion to family and to society, to faith and good works—are in harmony with the best of Western ideals.”(41) John Beyrle of the State Department found no conflict between Islam and “such Western ideals as personal freedom or individual choice.”(42) A Department of State fact sheet announced that “most Americans and most Muslims share fundamental values such as peace, justice, economic security, and good governance.”(43) The most colorful and specific formulation came from Deputy Secretary of Defense John Hamre:

[Quoting from the Preamble to the U.S. Constitution] “We, the people of the United States, in order to form a more perfect union, establish justice, ensure domestic tranquility, provide for the common defense, promote the general welfare and secure the blessings of liberty to ourselves and our posterity”— There isn’t a word here that a good Muslim wouldn’t fight for.(44)

Better yet, Islam is declared to be a force for good in the United States. Some officials content themselves with vague encomia. Djerejian called Islam “a historic civilizing force among the many that have influenced and enriched our culture.”(45) Likewise, his successor Pelletreau deemed Islam “a great civilizing movement.”(46)

But on occasion, officials got specific. “We welcome Islam in America,” said President Clinton, attributing to it three virtues: “It enriches our country with Islam’s teachings of self-discipline, compassion, and commitment to family.”(47) In another statement, he reiterated two of these virtues and changed the third one: “America is made stronger by the core values of Islam—commitment to family, compassion for the disadvantaged, and respect for difference.”(48) Albright ascribed a quite different triad of virtues to Islam, “a faith that honors consultation, cherishes peace, and has as one of its fundamental principles the inherent equality of all who embrace it.”(49) Hillary Clinton found yet other reasons to praise Islam: for its “universal values—love of family and community, mutual respect, education, and the deepest yearning of all—to live in peace ... values that can strengthen us as a people and strengthen the United States as a nation.”(50)

Deputy Secretary of Defense John J. Hamre dispensed with the laundry list of virtues and instead zeroed in on one in particular when he addressed a military group as it broke the Ramadan fast: “In an America that sometimes is too busy worrying about the latest fad in clothes, or the newest model of car or other material things, it is good to be with people who think in a broader way, who think about their relationship to God, who think about charity, alms giving, as one of the central mandates of life. This is a great thing. You’re a great people to be with.”(51)

AMERICANS: APPRECIATE ISLAM!

But there is a fly in the ointment: the American “street” views Islam less enthusiastically than do official spokesmen, and the discrepancy is an embarrassment to the officials. Sometimes they simply ignore it. President Clinton reported variously that “Americans respect and honor Islam”(52) and “the United States has great respect for Islam,”(53) statements that he and his staff often repeated almost word-for-word. In a rare example of greater specificity, William Milam, the U.S. ambassador to Pakistan, wished to “lay to rest the myth that the United States is hostile to Islam and Islamic peoples”(54) and reported that “most of the American people” understand that there is no connection between terrorism and Islam.(55)

But the penitential confession, to the effect that Americans are biased against Islam, gets about equal time. Albright spoke of Americans’ “appalling degree of ignorance” about Islam.(56) Hillary Clinton wrote that “we, as a society, too often mischaracterize Islam and those who adhere to its teachings.”(57) Ambassador Seiple spoke about modern Islam being “so terribly misconstrued.”(58) Jeremy Gunn of the Office of International Religious Freedom was especially candid: “The religion of Islam has been the victim of unfortunate stereotypes in the United States.”(59)

The picture is confusing. Is there “respect and honor” for Islam or is the religion “so terribly misconstrued”? The solution: blame the media for blocking the positive image of Islam purveyed by the officials. A Department of State fact sheet rues the “sometimes-distorted portrayal of Islam in Western media” while promising that “the United States continues to address” this problem.(60) The “United States” here, of course, means the U.S. government, which is the source of truth and light, while the media is the source of the problem. It comes in for special criticism. Hillary Clinton fretted that

“news stories about Muslims often focus on extremists like those responsible for the World Trade Center bombing and other acts of terrorism.”(61) Albright waxed indignant about stereotypes applied “to a quarter of the globe’s people.” These figured “every day in the press, in public discussions, and even among those who consider themselves knowledgeable and fair-minded.”(62) In short, there is a battle over U.S. opinion, and officialdom has the duty of enlightening a benighted populace.

Samuel R. Berger, Clinton’s assistant for National Security Affairs, alluded to this when he explained why his boss spoke so often on this subject: because “many Americans are naive about Islam.” The president, he said, “made a conscious effort to dispel the old stereotypes of Islam ... as a hotbed of fanaticism and terrorism ... to overcome such prejudices and forge common cause for the things we all care about in the future: peace, self-respect, and cooperation.”(63)

U.S. officials are at pains to distance themselves from the great unwashed, those everyday people who watch the news and associate Islam with violence. According to Milam, “there are unfortunately some ill-informed ... Americans who fear Islam ... [who] confuse Islam with terrorism. I can tell you, without fear of contradiction, that the U.S. government does not share this confusion.”(64) As a State Department fact sheet candidly reveals, “Whatever distortions exist, President Clinton, our diplomats, and others responsible for our official dealings with the Islamic world generally have a clear understanding and deep respect for Islam.”(65)

This attitude explains why the State Department sees the education of Americans about Islam as part of its mission. “We should encourage Americans to learn more about Islam,” wrote Albright.(66) Her staff advanced several proposals on how to achieve this. Ambassador Seiple deemed it

“important to make sure that the State Department provides a point of learning and dialogue and exchange.”(67) Gunn said the U.S. government needs “to do what it can to promote understanding, dialogue and communication on issues.”(68) A Department of State fact sheet sees the remedy “through education, people-to-people exchanges, and by encouraging responsible reporting in the mass media and accurate portrayal in the movie industry.”(69)

Fortunately, officialdom hints, another party can help educate Americans about Islam: U.S. Muslims, whose presence, Bill Clinton said, has the virtue of deepening “America’s respect for Muslims here at home and around the world.”(70) Addressing an audience of Muslims, George W. Bush said roughly the same: “By educating others about your religious traditions, you enrich the lives of others in your local communities.”(71) The Department of State fact sheet is less coy: “As the number of American Muslims continues to increase, and as that community develops its domestic political visibility—through gaining elective office and founding effective political action committees—we will no doubt begin to see more consistently objective portrayals of Muslims in our media.”(72)

CONTINUING A TRADITION

What is the objective of these officials? Why go to such lengths to pronounce Islam a faith completely unblemished by the violence of some of its practitioners? Why hold up Islam as an exemplar of American values?

This exercise has a patently practical objective: it is designed to lessen Muslim hostility to the United States. The chain of reasoning goes as follows: (1) Many Muslims crave Western respect for Islam and recognition of its virtues. (2) The U.S. government in turn yearns for acceptance by

Muslims. (3) Therefore, Washington gives Muslims the acknowledgment they seek. (4) Grateful Muslims diminish their hostility to the United States. (5) Washington can realistically demand that those same Muslims come to the defense of the United States against the more radical Muslims who still oppose it. (In addition, some of this rhetoric serves domestic purposes, to assuage the U.S. Muslim population.)

Seen in this diplomatic context, the origins in 1992 of this official U.S. tradition of vocal support for Islam make sense, for it was in the aftermath of the Kuwait war that radical groups such as Usama bin Ladin's began to make more headway in the Middle East and throughout the Muslim world.

Will it work? For perspective, it helps to look at two prior efforts along similar lines. "People of Egypt," Napoleon proclaimed upon his entry to Alexandria in 1798, "You will be told that I have come to destroy your religion; do not believe it! Reply that I have come to restore your rights, to punish the usurpers, and that more than the Mamluks, I respect God, his Prophet, and the Qur'an." (73) One of his generals, Jacques Ménéou, even converted to Islam.

The history of Europe is replete with such statements. After Britain secured its rule over India, its officials made repeated professions of respect for Islam, so as to diminish Muslim hostility to their rule. During the First World War, the Germans, who were allied with the Ottomans, proclaimed themselves the one European power sympathetic to Islam. A particularly bizarre instance dates to 1937, when the Italian dictator Benito Mussolini arranged for Muslim notables from Italian-ruled Libya to gird him with the "sword of Islam" during a visit to Tripoli. "Muslims may rest assured," Mussolini intoned on that occasion, "that Italy will always be the friend and protector of Islam throughout the world." His foreign minister declared Muslim values perfectly compatible with

fascism: "The Islamic world, in accordance with its traditions, loves in the Duce the wisdom of the statesman united to the action of the warrior." (74)

The analogies are admittedly not perfect, as none of the joint chiefs of staff has yet converted to Islam; nor has President Bush girded himself with any swords. But he did visit a mosque, accept a Qur'an as a gift, and convene a diwan (assembly) of Muslim representatives at the White House. More deeply, U.S. objectives are nearly identical with those of Napoleon and Mussolini—to curry favor with a basically hostile population.

CONCLUSION

The earlier Western efforts to pander to Muslim sentiments came up short, as the Muslim leaders of Egypt fought Napoleon with all they had, while Mussolini failed to find the widespread Muslim support he had hoped to win. So too, the American effort will no doubt end in failure. It is nearly inconceivable that moderate Muslims will have any influence over their more radical coreligionists.

Practicalities aside, American officials would do well to ask whether their statements on Islam do not conflict with their government's basic principles. The United States has a message for the world, and that message is not Islam. The message, it hardly needs pointing out, is one of individualism, freedom, secularism, rule of law, democracy, and private property.

Finally, federal officials may not realize the implications of their scolding of Americans who are apprehensive about Islam, and their noisy espousal of that religion's virtues. Here, then, it is spelled out for them: In adopting a determinedly apologetic stance, they have made themselves an adjunct of the country's Islamic organizations. By dismissing any connection between Islam and terrorism, complaining about media distortions, and

claiming that America needs Islam, they have turned the U.S. government into a discreet missionary for the faith.

Without anyone quite realizing it, the resources of the federal government have been deployed to help Muslims spread their message, and, in effect, their faith. If the "war on terror" is to have any larger purpose, it must be to free people from the yoke of politicized Islam. There can be no better place to begin than right at home.

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NOTES

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