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## The Myth of Moderate Islam

By Steven A. Cook

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**Supporting moderation in all things Islamic may seem like a no-brainer, but woe betide the policymaker who tries to turn a plausible idea into a workable strategy.**

**O**f all the cures commonly proposed for the many ailments afflicting the Middle East, there is one tonic nearly everyone seems to agree on: boosting moderate Islam.

It sounds eminently reasonable. If Islamic extremism is the problem, moderate Islam must be the solution. It follows that Western governments should therefore find ways to make the moderates more powerful and encourage the extremists to become more moderate. Allow Islamists to compete and accumulate power, the argument goes, and they will have little incentive to radicalize. Furthermore, assuming the mundane tasks of day-to-day governance will compel even the most extreme groups to focus more on filling potholes than on destroying the Great Satan.

But this belief is dead wrong. Not only is it impossible to agree on a working definition of the word "moderate," but there is scant evidence that extremists really do moderate once they assume power.

Consider, for example, Hezbollah. The Shiite organization provides state-like services such as education and healthcare for the people of south Beirut and southern Lebanon. The organization, which has had representatives in the Lebanese Parliament since 1992, has often demonstrated a surprising degree of pragmatism. It took part in a May 2005 electoral alliance with several of its adversaries in order to maximize electoral returns in crucial districts. Just a few months earlier, during Lebanon's "independence uprising," which pushed Hezbollah's ally, Syria, out of Lebanon, the organization struck a tone of national unity.

But this spring, Hezbollah revealed the extent to which it remains a militant group. Its cadres took over west Beirut in a powerful display of force intended to show that it has no intention of giving up its guns. Much of Hezbollah's political power is based on the potent idea of "national resistance" to Israeli aggression. If Hezbollah disarmed, it would be no



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**Categorize this:** Sheikh Yusuf al-Qaradawi wants Egyptians to pray less, but he also supports suicide bombings against Israelis.

different from Lebanon's myriad political factions jockeying for advantage. It is precisely the organization's militancy that provides Hezbollah with a significant political advantage over its rivals. Why give that up?

The same can be said of Hamas. Two years after its electoral victory, a year after its forcible takeover of Gaza, and despite reported strains and splits within the organization, there are few signs that the Palestinian Islamist group has moderated. The clearest sign that Hamas had altered its worldview would be to accept the international community's conditions. But why would it? If Hamas were to accept Israel's right to exist, renounce armed struggle, and honor previously signed agreements between Israel and the Palestinian Authority, it would cease being Hamas and effectively become a shadow of its rival, Fatah. The Islamists have not only beaten Fatah on the battlefield, but have also, and more importantly, sold a winning narrative about the ineffectiveness of dialogue with Israel. In Palestinian politics, bowing to international demands is hardly rational.

The other common, but misleading argument about moderate Islam asserts that if only the voices of moderation were given broader exposure, the extremist ideologies of al Qaeda and other groups would find fewer adherents. Although this seems sensible, good luck trying to define "moderate Islam."

Take Sheikh Yusuf al-Qaradawi, an influential TV star in the Arab world. His weekly Al Jazeera show, *Sharia and Life*, attracts millions of viewers. Qaradawi holds progressive positions on family law, the status of women, and political reform. He recently told Egyptian government employees to "pray less" to improve their productivity. Many Arabs regard him as staunchly moderate. Yet the sheikh has also placed his theological imprimatur on suicide bombings against Israelis, arguing that since all Israelis serve in the military at one time or another, they are all legitimate targets. For those analysts who call for support of moderate Islam, it is hard to believe Qaradawi is whom they have in mind.

Or take Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani. Inside the Beltway, many Middle East hands are quietly rooting for the ayatollah and former president to win the next Iranian presidential election. Sure, he seems like a moderate in comparison to the incumbent, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, but Rafsanjani is the guy who once implored Iranians to kill Westerners wherever they could find them, declaring, "It is not difficult to kill Americans or Frenchmen. It is a bit difficult to kill [Israelis]. But there are so many [Americans and Frenchmen] everywhere in the world."

If there was ever a problem in defining moderate Islam, however, Turkey's Justice and Development Party (AKP) epitomizes it. The party seems to be the paragon of moderate Islamism, undertaking a wide range of reforms and staking its political legacy on Ankara's entry into the European Union. Yet, Turkey's archsecularists and a fair number of analysts in the West regard the party with deep suspicion. Citing the AKP's recent effort to lift the ban on women wearing head scarves at publicly funded universities as only the most egregious example, they argue that the party's real agenda is to Islamize Turkish society. Whose side should the United States take here?

Given the wildly different criteria for what constitutes "a moderate," policymakers will run in circles trying to determine who is a moderate and worthy of support, and who is not. One person's moderate is another person's radical, and another person's moderate is little more than a patsy of the West. A policy built on support for moderate Islam is only asking for trouble.

A smarter position is to avoid theological discussions altogether. As with all faiths, there will be heated debates between competing groups within Islam over the proper interpretation of sacred texts and the relationship between religion and politics. Yet because these arguments are so opaque to outsiders, policymakers should resist the urge to jump in. Given that moderation is in the eye of the beholder, Washington should not have an ideological litmus test for whom it wishes to engage. Rather, policymakers should focus on identifying those who can contribute pragmatic solutions to the many problems we confront in the region, "moderate" or not.

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