

## Islamic Militancy

**H**enry Munson's article ("Lifting the Veil: Understanding the Roots of Islamic Militancy," Winter 2004) makes a valuable contribution in the study of the development of Islamic militancy. He argues convincingly that US policies in the Arab world are key to understanding the widespread and growing hostility toward the United States. Munson rightly chides US leaders who play to ignorance and fear by declaring simplistically that Muslim extremists "hate our freedoms."

I agree that a resolution or, at least, substantial progress toward a more hopeful future for everyone in Israel and Palestine, should be a top priority in the long-term struggle in what is dubbed the "war on terror." Munson's plea that "defeating terror entails diluting the humiliation, despair, and rage that fuels it" is compelling.

Substantial movement forward on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is essential for regional and global stability. It is not, however, a panacea. Much of the anger and frustration fueling militant Islamist movements is connected to specific circumstances in distinct settings. Understanding the roots of Islamic militancy requires hard work in the dense thicket of the particulars. Iraq is not Indonesia; Afghanistan is not Algeria; Lebanon is not Libya.

Contextual analyses in particular settings reveal both distinctive histories and some common themes. Munson illustrates the point by explaining Osama bin Laden in the context of his experience in Saudi Arabia. Additionally, extensive media attention has now exposed specific elements present in Iraq, including the brutal political repression and a despicable record on human rights under Saddam Hussein, internal conflicts among and between Sunnis, Shi'as, and Kurds, and the impact of many years of economic exploitation. Egypt, too, has had a distinctive history of militant movements; to topple the regime, Islamist extremists assassinated Anwar Sadat in 1981 and under the leadership of a blind cleric, Sheik Umar abd al Rahman, 12 Egyptians tried to blow up the World Trade Center in 1993. Egyptian terrorists also attacked Japanese and German tourists in 1997, and Ayman az Zawahiri, the number-two man in Al Qaeda, is a 54-year-old medical doctor from Egypt, and Muham-

mad Atta, the apparent leader of the September 11, 2001, hijackers was also from Egypt. Understanding the roots of Islamic militancy across the Arab world therefore requires thoughtful contextual and historical analysis.

At the same time, we can discern several themes that connect movements across national borders. There are more than 50 countries with Muslim majorities today. In many of these lands, one senses widespread frustration over the failure of existing political, economic, and social systems. Annual country reports on human rights violations document injustice and widespread indignities. Economic disparity is another source of anger. Resentment runs deep in lands where a small percentage of the population controls almost all the resources. Revolutionary Islamist groups are gaining strength in countries where dictators, kings, or military leaders are not elected and where most avenues for political change and economic opportunities appear blocked.

Why should people around the world assume that humanitarian concerns rather than oil dominated the decision to go to war in Iraq? While the United States has pursued many constructive policies, different administrations have supported too often authoritarian regimes in the service of perceived US interests. Everything we know today about Saddam Hussein we knew during the 1980s while he was being supported by the United States, ostensibly as the bulwark against the spread of the Iranian revolution. In addition, most people in the United States do not know that their government condoned the cancellation of free elections in 1991 and the jailing of popular Islamist leaders in 1992 in Algeria. In contrast, children in Pakistani *madrassas* know about the recent history in Algeria. Former US Army General Norman Schwarzkopf has repeatedly said that the policies of the United States helped train Osama bin Laden to fight the Soviets in Afghanistan.

Munson's article makes it clear that there are no simple solutions. In addition to confronting short-term threats, the long-term hope in the "war on terror" involves identifying and diluting the sources fueling widespread anger and frustration. A major part of a solution lies in principled, consistent leadership by the United States. Whatever the motives for pursuing war in Iraq, the ramifications from what happens next will be felt for many years to come. It is imperative that the United States find more effective ways to work in the community of nations in order to put substance behind US President George W. Bush's oft-repeated words: "The United States is there to liberate, not occupy Iraq. The oil in Iraq belongs to the people of Iraq. The Iraqi people are capable of governing themselves."

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