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McJihad: Islam in the U.S. Global Order

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McJihad:

Islam in the U.S. Global Order

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On 3 February 1997, a delegation of the Taliban government of Afghanistan visited Washington, D.C. Ten days earlier Taliban forces had won control of the countryside around Kabul, and with the south and east of the country already in their hands they were now making preparations to conquer the north. In Washington the Taliban delegation met with State Department officials and discussed the plans of the California oil company Unocal to build a pipeline from Central Asia through Afghanistan. A senior U.S. diplomat explained his government's thinking: "The Taliban will probably develop like the Saudis did. There will be Aramco, pipelines, an emir, no parliament and lots of Sharia law. We can live with that." ¹

U.S. support for the Taliban, who received arms and financial assistance from Pakistan and Saudi Arabia with the agreement of the United States, ended within a year. But the diplomat's reference to Aramco—the American oil company that had financed, sixty years earlier, the creation of Saudi Arabia—was a reminder that the United States was accustomed to working with emirs whose power depended upon strict interpretations of Islamic law. By the end of 1997, Washington was describing the Taliban government as "despicable," but this negative view was not typical of U.S. relations with governments that claimed to rule in the name of a puritanical Islam. In fact, the normal relationship was quite different.

As a rule, the most secular regimes in the Middle East have been those most independent of the United States. The more closely a government is allied with Washington, the more Islamic its politics. Egypt under Nasser, republican Iraq, the Palestine national movement, postindependence Algeria, the Republic of South Yemen, and Ba'thist Syria all charted courses independent of the United States. None of them declared themselves an Islamic state, and many of them repressed local Islamic movements. In contrast, those governments dependent on the United States typically claimed an Islamic authority, whether ruled by a monarch who claimed descent from the Prophet, as in Jordan, North Yemen, and Morocco, or asserting a special role as protector of the faith, as in the case of Saudi Arabia. When other governments moved closer to the United States—Egypt under Anwar Sadat in the 1970s, Pakistan under Zia ul-Haq in the 1980s—their political rhetoric and modes of legitimation became avowedly more Islamic. **[End Page 1]**

Iran might seem an exception to this pattern. Under the pro-American government of the shah it was a secular state; after the 1979 revolution it became an Islamic republic, opposed to America's ambitions. In fact, however, the shah mobilized conservative religious forces in his support, drawing on a CIA-funded clerical leadership to help overthrow a nationalist government in 1953 and losing power only when the leading clerics in the country turned against him. And many scholars of Iran would argue that the Islamic Republic, the Middle Eastern country most independent of the United States, is one in which appeals to religion are increasingly unable to legitimate the exercise of power. Especially among its youth, the Islamic Republic has created one of the most secular societies in the region.

This pattern, once it has been noticed, lends itself to a straightforward, but unsatisfactory, explanation. The United States depends on the support of conservative political regimes, it is often pointed out, and these have tended to rely on religion to justify their power. In contrast, many of the populist or nationalist regimes carried out postindependence programs of land reform, the advancement of women's rights, industrialization, and the provision of free education and health care, and achieved whatever legitimacy they gained through these popular social reforms rather than the authority of religion.

This explanation is unsatisfactory because the conservative political morality offered by certain forms of Islam is not some enduring feature of the religion that rulers adopt at their own convenience. Its usefulness reflects the fact that religious conservatism expresses the views...

**Timothy
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