

## **American Foreign Policy Recommendations Concerning Islamic States**

by Timothy Aderman

The reach of America's foreign policy stretches across and affects nearly every country in today's geopolitical scene. Specifically, in a post-9/11 era, countries with high populations prescribing to the Islamic faith have been placed, whether voluntarily or involuntarily, into the spotlight of America's foreign policy. However, there are two specific factors lacking in this generalizing policy that are detrimental to both America and nations affected. When shaping policy, it is imperative to realize current demographic and religious factors unique to each country. Parallel to such realization, there must be consideration of historical attitudes and experiences that shape cultural differences. Without these correlating themes guiding American foreign policy, Islamic states are bound to react negatively. The end result of such negative reactions is to the detriment of foreign policy possibly resulting in violent blow-back, or negative and unforeseen consequences, against U.S. regional and international interests.

Before further consideration, the general population of Islam (excluding Indonesia and Bangladesh) must be placed in a geographical context. While the lay reader may not be familiar with the terms Mashriq and Maghreb, these terms are important when studying Islamic states as North Africa and the Middle East are traditionally composed of these two geographical regions. To the West lies Mauritania, Mali, Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, and Libya which compose the Maghreb. "In Arabic, the Maghreb means 'where and when the sun sets,'"<sup>1</sup> hence the western location. To the East lies the Mashriq.

Mashriq, geographic region extending from the western border of Egypt to the western border of Iran. It includes the modern states of Egypt, The Sudan, Saudi Arabia, Yemen, Oman, Kuwait, United Arab Emirates, Israel, Jordan, Lebanon, Syria, and Iraq...<sup>2</sup>

Within the last two years, several Islamic states have experienced highly fluid political situations during the "Arab Spring" that was triggered by the self-immolation of Mohamed Bouazizi in December of 2010.<sup>3</sup> February 11 of 2011 saw the removal of Hosni Mubarak of Egypt and in October of the same year, Muammar Gaddafi of Libya was disposed. Other states which have experienced internal turmoil include Yemen and Syria. This recent political activity has presented the perfect opportunity for America to reconsider her foreign policies towards Mashriq and Maghreb nations by generating renewed concern over the regional demographic makeup.

The two flaws of American foreign policy revolve around dramatic miscalculations that have wrongly considered Islamic states such as Egypt or Islamic-leaning states such as Turkey that rationalizes heedlessly charging forward without present cultural or historical contextual knowledge. Such miscalculations have resulted in disastrous consequences as events in both the Maghreb and Mashriq illustrate.<sup>4</sup> The 1983 bombing of a United States Marine Corps barracks in Beirut, Lebanon demonstrates

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<sup>1</sup> Layachi, Azzedine. (March 31, 2011). *Meanwhile in the Maghreb: Have Algeria and Morocco Avoided North Africa's Unrest?* Retrieved December 5, 2011 from Foreign Affairs.

<http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/67691/azzedine-layachi/meanwhile-in-the-maghreb>.

<sup>2</sup> Mashriq. (2011). In *Encyclopædia Britannica*. Retrieved December 5, 2011 from Encyclopedia Britannica.

<http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/367870/Mashriq>.

<sup>3</sup> The New York Times. (October 28, 2011). *Tunisia*. Retrieved December 5, 2010 from New York Times.

<http://topics.nytimes.com/top/news/international/countriesandterritories/tunisia/index.html>.

<sup>4</sup> Egypt allowed Iranian naval vessels safe passage through the Suez Canal. This was deemed as contradictory to U.S. Foreign Policy by possibly intimidating nuclear armed Israel. CNN Wire Staff. (February 18, 2011). *Egypt to let Iranian Ships through Suez Canal* Retrieved April 8, 2012 from [http://articles.cnn.com/2011-02-18/world/egypt.iran.warships\\_1\\_suez-canal-iranian-warships-egypt?\\_s=PM:WORLD](http://articles.cnn.com/2011-02-18/world/egypt.iran.warships_1_suez-canal-iranian-warships-egypt?_s=PM:WORLD).

a deep resentment to foreign troop presence, a presence that is essential to U.S. foreign policy.<sup>5</sup> Defining Maghreb and Mashriq nations as sovereign states in the traditional sense, that being a modern state as a nationalistic and singular entity usually participating and representing itself in international delegations, without recognizing tribal, ethnic, or religious differences has been a consistent and primary mistake. The resulting and readily disturbing anti-Americanism has become so prevalent that it is taken for granted by the general American populace. However, with great care, this prevailing trend can be reversed and in doing so, lessen external dangers.

To illustrate the lack of historical context that U.S. foreign policy inadvertently considers certain nations, one needs only to examine colonial era repercussions affecting Muslim populations. The black and white definition of a modern state fails to fully account for the unique demographic make-up of post-colonial Islamic states. Muslim states are composed of many sects and tribes with a historical depth much older than colonization. Take, for example, the Warfalla tribe residing in Libya with an estimated population of over a million people.

The Warfalla are unlikely to act under a unified leadership when the tribe is actually more a confederacy of around 50 sub-tribes spread across Libya, each with its own local leaders, local concerns and varying degrees of affiliation or loyalty to the old Qaddafi leadership.<sup>6</sup>

In total, Warfalla's population of one million accounts for one-sixth of Libya's overall population. This does not account for other historical tribes in Libya including the second largest tribe, Magariha, along with the Al Zintan tribe and Qathathfa tribe from which the late Muammar Gaddafi was a member. Multiple tribes compose Libya's population and it would be unfair to say that, before October 20, 2011<sup>7</sup> there were only two distinct groups, those supporting the late Muammar Gaddafi and those opposing his rule. To differentiate in such a way would be wholly unfair and in its simplicity, irrelevant. In truth, each tribe had much to gain and some to lose from the western-aided rebellion. The motivations that spurred fighting against Gaddafi's rule will dictate the future Libyan political scene for many years to come.

To understand the future for Libya, or any post-colonial Islamic state, one must consider history within the last two centuries. Libya's historical interactions with Italy are an ideal example but on a broader note, only reflect experiences of many de-colonized states. These experiences range from abject poverty, governmental corruption, and internal conflict. The mindset of late colonial and post-colonialism saw traditionally tribal countries as unified bodies, similar to the European states. As colonizer's turned the symbolic reigns over to the indigenous population, it was assumed the decolonized state would gravitate in terms of political structure to its colonizer. Here one finds the foundation of American foreign policy in its singular mindset. Designating a national flag, centralizing government, and employing other Western political mechanisms for the constituents does not necessarily prioritize patriotism or loyalty to the nation over the primary establishment, whether this be the tribe or religious sect. In summary, this post-colonial era attitude implements the colonizer's own political sentiments and structures on a post-colonized state that is foreign to such political cultural differences. For America to implement such a policy is archaic and intrinsically supercilious.

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<sup>5</sup> Tristam, Pierre. (date unknown). *The 1983 Attack on U.S. Marines in Lebanon*. Retrieved April 8, 2012 from <http://middleeast.about.com/od/usmideastpolicy/a/me081026d.htm>.

<sup>6</sup> Reuters. (September 1, 2011). *Warfalla, Libya's largest tribe*. Retrieved December 6, 2011 from Al Arabiya. <http://www.alarabiya.net/articles/2011/09/01/164993.html>.

<sup>7</sup> Malone, Berry. (October 20, 2011). *Gaddafi killed in hometown, Libya eyes future*. Retrieved December 24, 2011 from Reuters. <http://www.reuters.com/article/2011/10/20/us-libya-idUSTRE79F1FK20111020>.

Islamic states cannot be narrowly defined by the American definition of a state. To redefine Maghreb and Mashriq states outside of the traditional definition is not to advocate such states as being considered purely tribal or religiously segmented and thus outside the scope of international politics. To do so would be entirely impossible in the modern era. However, it is imperative to recognize tribal relations, ethnic differences, and religious sects within each respective state. Doing so respects the micro-societal level of which a state's constituency is made up of and vindicates previous tendencies obstructing such sensitivity.

Furthermore, it is erroneous to consider a non-Western state in terms of how it might best contribute to the voraciously materialistic appetite of the Western world as current American foreign policy discreetly admits. Such a blanket policy whose very essence is indeed neo-imperialistic is both dangerous and detrimental to America. Failure to recognize important tribal, ethnic, and religious perspectives by painting countries with a broad brush is culturally insensitive and therefore incomplete in understanding. American foreign policies toward states with high numbers of Muslim constituents exemplify this simplistic tendency.

While consideration for Muslim constituents is heavily advocated, this is not to say that American foreign policy stemming from the Department of State need prioritize foreign constituents or governments above the interests of American citizens. However, foreign policy must be tailored to the unique state and region that it is applied to at both the micro and macro-societal levels of interaction if it seeks to cultivate a relationship that is not ephemeral. While placing each respective state within its historical context is essential, the most important factors to cognitively recognize are tribal interactions and religious interactions pertaining to the population. A proper historical-cultural context and the recognition of tribal-religious interaction work symbiotically. Upon such recognition and presentation of knowledge, a void would be filled within U.S. foreign policy. This cooperative promotion accounts for the Muslim constituent's general interactions both within and outside the state. Failing to act upon such knowledge leaves little room for healthy relations between America and the respective Islamic state to proceed.

Further examples of dominant-expressed, oversimplified foreign policy can be found between America and Pakistan within recent years. American-Pakistan relations are shaky and at times, only a semblance of healthy relations remain. An example of America erroneously considering Pakistan as a singular state has been seen in the War on Terror in the Afghanistan-Pakistan border region. The Peshawar region is part of Northern Pakistan. Tribal land overlaps this region into Afghanistan. That is to say, an internationally recognized border runs through tribal land. U.S. military troops have been hampered in their fight in Afghanistan because of the inability to follow tribal fighters across the international border into Pakistan. These fighters cross the Afghanistan-Pakistan border to strike U.S. forces in Afghanistan then return to safety on the Pakistan side like a base in tag. Pakistan greatly contributed to the War in Afghanistan as it provided a port for resupply in Karachi among other military support functions and logistics. Therefore, this inability to find equilibrium between international policy and regional politics could be argued to have contributed to deadly operations by hostile forces.

Regional policy differs in it pertaining to micro-societal levels of interaction. Pakistan is not simply Pakistan as much as it is a collection of tribes and ethnicities loosely bound by Islam. The extent of ethnic diversity within modern Pakistan is reflected in its very name.

It is well known that the term "Pakistan," an acronym, was originally thought up in England by a group of Muslim intellectuals. P for the Punjabis, A for the Afghans, K for the Kashmiris, S for Sind, and the "tan," they say, for Baluchistan.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Rushdie, Salman. (1984). *Shame*. New York: Adventura/Vintage.

This lack of cohesion leaves Pakistan politically unstable with a government attempting to balance many priorities. Since the terrorist attacks on September 11 of 2001, American foreign policy towards Pakistan has grossly misplaced trust by failing to realize Pakistani government priorities. U.S. military drone strikes that have occurred inside Pakistan have been met with harsh Pakistani condemnation.<sup>9</sup> This Pakistani condemnation directed towards America is entirely misunderstood. Pakistan's unenthusiastic response to the War in Afghanistan is not an attempt to bolster Taliban credibility, show solidarity with a Muslim state, or snub U.S. regional interests. The threat of Pakistan's arch rival India is of highest priority over U.S. interests in Afghanistan. This priority is something not recognized by U.S. foreign policy. India's participation in Afghanistan is Pakistan's primary concern.

...tensions (between India and Pakistan) have risen recently over India's efforts to increase its participation in Afghanistan's economy, including spending more than \$1 billion in aid to improve infrastructure and a recent agreement to train Afghan security forces.<sup>10</sup>

The placement of Indian forces and infrastructure in Afghanistan encircles Pakistan. This is, for Pakistan, an unacceptable geopolitical position. U.S. foreign policy, when considering Pakistan, has failed to take into account the consequences of this geographical location, that being an ever-present Indian-Pakistani abrasive relationship. To accentuate the weight of this possible confrontation, India was first in arms imports while Pakistan came in third.<sup>11</sup> To further complicate matters, Pakistan must worry about ethnic Tajiks who reside in Afghanistan but are friendly to India<sup>12</sup> along with the rebellious province of Balochistan. Balochistan Republican Party's Rehman Arif states "This region of Balochistan, which has seen civilisation for thousands of years, is being oppressed by Pakistan. We're ready to accept assistance from anyone in our fight. We appeal to India for help."<sup>13</sup>

The U.S.' desire to maintain equal relations with both India and Pakistan when considering the War in Afghanistan is foolhardy. This desire is a balancing act that cannot stand the test of time and only demonstrates a lack of appropriate present sense perception within U.S. foreign policy. While Pakistan seeks to maintain a single conflict zone in the Kashmir region, India seeks to maintain its present investment in Afghanistan of over \$2 billion.<sup>14</sup> The fact that these separate agendas are incompatible is conveniently overlooked by an American foreign policy that prioritizes the abstract War on Terror over other nation's interests. Again, this presents a blatant example of prioritizing U.S. foreign policy over the historical context of other nations in that it utilizes a glaringly inept strategy.

At prima facie, it could be reasonably argued that for the preservation of U.S. interests, Islamic states interests must be superseded. Instead, Islamic states interests must be fully recognized for the preservation of U.S. interests and sustainment of global security if that be the priority. The current state

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<sup>9</sup> Daily Mail Reporter. (December 5, 2011). *Obama maintains NATO drone strike that killed 24 Pakistani soldiers was not deliberate... but stops short of offering apology*. Retrieved December 6, 2011 from Mail Online. <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2070067/Obama-maintains-NATO-drone-strike-killed-24-Pakistani-soldiers-deliberate.html?ito=feeds-newsxml>.

<sup>10</sup> Wright, Tom. (November 3, 2011). *Pakistan to Boost Trade With India*. Retrieved December 7, 2011 from Wall Street Journal. <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052970203804204577013641982204650.html>.

<sup>11</sup> Deen, Thalif. (March 20, 2012). *Asian states are world's largest arms buyers*. Retrieved April 23, 2012 from Al Jazeera English. <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/2012/03/201232073910325335.html>.

<sup>12</sup> Economist, The. (May 19, 2011). *A rivalry that threatens the world*. Retrieved December 24, 2011 from The Economist. <http://www.economist.com/node/18712274>.

<sup>13</sup> Maqbool, Aleem. (January 7, 2010). *Balochistan reaches boiling point*. Retrieved December 24, 2011 from BBC. [http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/south\\_asia/8444354.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/south_asia/8444354.stm).

<sup>14</sup> Press Trust Of India. (May 13, 2011). *Indian commitment to Afghanistan touches USD 2 billion: PM*. Retrieved December 24, 2011 from Hindustan Times. <http://www.hindustantimes.com/world-news/Afghanistan/Indian-commitment-to-Afghanistan-touches-USD-2-billion-PM/Article1-697007.aspx>.

of world affairs demands a visionary U.S. foreign policy that must find an equilibrium between the constituency's of America and Islamic states. Such a foreign policy considers ethnic, tribal, and religious variations outside of the narrow lens of current American foreign policy. It has been established that overlooking such factors is detrimental to all sides involved. Violent attacks against U.S. interests and U.S. allies are the unfortunate consequences of such oversight. If U.S. foreign policy seeks to actively engage Islamic states in a healthier manner, there must be better understanding from both sides. While this responsibility is not placed entirely on U.S. foreign policy, there is a degree of responsibility in that the U.S. must do her part for the betterment of American/Near-Eastern state relations.

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