



Know Your Friends, and Know Your Enemies Better

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Irving Kristol, the recognized father of neoconservatism, is said to have formulated an important rule of politics: "Know who your friends are." I would add to this advice that one should also know who one's serious enemies are. I have often repeated two other dicta I consider indispensable to modern intellectual activism: "The art of politics is that of making, not confusing distinctions," and, "Learn to anticipate, not react to, events." The latter two are paraphrased from Trotsky, which will doubtless bring sneers to the lips of neocon-baiters. But so be it.

I am reminded of these principles by recent events in the Muslim world as well as in the Washington policy circus, from which I have briefly absented myself. First, Egypt has held an election, and some gains have been registered by the "independent" candidates of the Muslim Brotherhood (MB), an organization

that shares much, but is not identical, with the ideology of the Wahhabi state religion in Saudi Arabia, the inspiration for al-Qaida. MB increased its delegation in a parliament the rules of which are so confusing that Egyptian electoral news is difficult to clearly report, which is one reason media in the West and Far East are already raving about an Islamist takeover and the fall of Hosni Mubarak.

A more important reason for such hysteria is that observers outside the global Islamic community have proved since September 11, 2001 that they have no context, standards, or other guide with which to judge the dangers represented by various Islamist groups. Some lump Turkish Muslim democrats, Bosnian Muslim moderate nationalists, Iraqi Shias, Iranian clerics, the MB, the Saudi Wahhabis, the Pakistani jihadist Jama'ati movements, and

even al-Qaida into a single category: "political Islam." Debate has begun in the West over whether some "political Islamists" may merit cooperation and even support by Western governments -- the most obvious example being that of Ayatollah Ali Sistani in Iraq, who happens to be Iranian by birth, Shia by tradition, an admirer of the philosophical work but not the political system associated with Khomeini -- and who is the best friend the U.S. has in Mesopotamia.

Other commentators compete to cast attention on various marginal extremist groups, which are inflated by experts into major threats. In Washington, we have seen this phenomenon involving two very minor phenomena: a Muslim preaching group called Tabligh-i-Jama'at (Appeal of the Faithful) and a minuscule, conspiratorial sectarian entity, Hizb-ut-Tahrir or HT (Liberation Party). To deal at length with Tabligh would require a great deal of explanation, most of it tedious, but HT is much easier to classify intelligently.

Hizb ut-Tahrir is a repellent ideological grouping that preaches hatred of Jews and America. But it does not kill people; indeed, as I observed in a recent visit to Indonesia, it organizes openly in the largest Muslim country in the world, where it is a small element of the Islamic mosaic, and nobody considers it a threat to public order.

Unfortunately, however, an [article](#) in the latest *Foreign Affairs* produces a litany of exaggerated rhetorical

tropes about HT. HT is described as "radical Sunni Islamism's ideological vanguard" -- a glib phrase that wipes out at a stroke the 250-year history of Wahhabism and the 70-year spread of the MB and Pakistani Jama'atism. HT is credited with creating "the growing feeling among Muslims that their primary identity stems from, and their primary loyalty is owed to, their religion, rather than their race, ethnicity, and nationality." This is another elision of history, in which a tiny movement is presented as having fostered a world-wide trend in Islamic thought going back decades if not centuries.

While it is stated in *Foreign Affairs* that HT is "not itself a terrorist organization," in the same paragraph it is labeled a "potent threat." But what would a "potent threat" be if it did not engage in violence? The *Foreign Affairs* article includes claims that HT has "up to tens of thousands of members" in Uzbekistan, among other countries. This is a provably false, disreputable bit of disinformation emanating from the bloody dictatorship of Islam Karimov in Tashkent. I have been to Uzbekistan twice and have interviewed Uzbek officials at length as well as an HT defector. If HT had tens of thousands of supporters, to say nothing of actual participants in Uzbekistan, it would no longer be a conspiracy, but a mass movement.

There is no evidence whatever that HT enjoys significant support in Uzbekistan, but the Uzbek regime, rather than presenting itself to the world as a bulwark of Islamic moderation, which would make it a re-

spectable and valued ally, prefers to be seen as a victim of permanent Islamist terror, teetering on the edge of chaos. This represents a continuation of the old Soviet strategy by which unpopular rulers maintained their hold over the people by manipulating the specter of enemies, foreign and domestic. In reality, radical Islam among Uzbeks was defeated when the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, which fought in Afghanistan, was bombed into nothing by the U.S.-led coalition after September 11.

The article also advances the spurious argument that the perpetrators of the London atrocities of July 7 were "members of an HT splinter group." Asked and answered, as courtroom parlance has it: the British media, after 7/7, raised a hue and cry over HT and a tiny competing group, al-Muhajiroun (Refugees of Faith). While it is true that al-Muhajiroun, a negligible Arab extremist movement, includes people that once supported HT, it is not true that the London bombers, whose ethnic origin was Pakistani and Caribbean, had anything to do with HT or al-Muhajiroun except for having read their literature.

HT and al-Muhajiroun both focus on Arab Muslims in Britain, not Pakistanis, and Pakistani Sunni communities in Britain are so completely saturated with Islamist radicalism from Pakistan itself as to make any Arab importation unnecessary. But the British media do not want to admit this fact, because political correctness makes them afraid that to identify Pakistani Sunnis in the UK

as captives of Islamic extremism would be racist stereotyping. So British journalists made a great noise about the Arab-oriented HT and al-Muhajiroun, neither of which (particularly the latter) is taken seriously as a factor in jihadism. Al-Muhajiroun is practically nonexistent today.

The *Foreign Affairs* commentary also included the sinister claim that "There is some evidence of an underground HT presence in the United States.") This sort of slippery language is not to be recommended: HT operates quite openly in the U.S. There is no need to "improve" on the facts in the interest of sowing alarm.

The same article argues that although HT is not terrorist, it "can usefully be thought of as a conveyor belt for terrorists." While it may be thought of that way, it is not useful to do so; it is a meaningless cliché of a kind that should have disappeared years ago, during the Cold War. There have always been nutty ultra-conservatives who claimed that labor unions are a gateway to socialism and therefore Communist revolution; Jew-baiting pseudo-intellectuals try to paint the Trotskyist movement of the 1930s as a pathway to neoconservatism. These arguments are infantile if not dangerous. Jihadism does not need any "conveyor belts;" the extremist preaching of Wahhabi clerics in Saudi Arabia or jama'atists in Pakistani communities is candid, loud, and extensive. Jihadists are not "seduced" or "eased in" to participation in murderous activities.

Finally, readers of *Foreign Affairs* are treated to the proposition that HT, with its tiny ranks, has brought credibility to the concept of a revived caliphate, or global religious authority for Sunni Muslims. This also is an extremely complex notion that does not lend itself to sound-bites or condensed written opinion. The abolition of the Ottoman caliphate in the 1920s was a devastating cause of instability in the Muslim world; the reestablishment of a moderate Sunni caliphate might dampen, rather than encourage, radicalism. HT uses "caliphate vocabulary" in the former Soviet states of Central Asia to project the idea that an Islamic state can replace the all-embracing social networks of Communism: permanent employment, pensions, health care, etc. But talk about a new caliphate is a minor item in jihadist agitation worldwide.

There are many moving parts to the Global War on Terror, as well as finite resources on the side of the democracies, so establishing priorities is critical; to repeat, it is necessary to clarify, not obscure distinctions in the ranks of the enemy. Saudi-Wahhabi clerics recruit Sunnis to go north of the Saudi-Iraq border to kill Shia Muslims and coalition troops; Saudi-Wahhabi financiers, who created al-Qaida, continue to walk the streets of the kingdom unmolested. Pakistani Sunni

radicals dominate mosques in Britain, which, along with the U.S., is one of only two countries in the world where jihadism almost completely rules Islam. Every other Muslim country sees a debate, and sometimes armed conflict, between moderates and radicals. Even Saudi Arabia has begun a transition away from the Wahhabi ideological dictatorship, and the idiotic antics of the new Iranian president, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad -- including his purges of diplomats and other public servants as well as his genocidal remarks about Israel -- contribute to the weakening of Shia extremism.

Know your friends, but know your enemies better. The main problem for the world today -- Muslims and non-Muslims alike -- remains in Saudi Arabia and is represented by Wahhabism. Yet Saudi King Abdullah has called a conference of Muslim clerics from around the world that may begin the process of dismantling Wahhabi totalitarian control over Mecca and Medina and could undermine the appeal of terrorists in Iraq. Baghdad, where HT has no presence, is the frontline now, followed by Pakistan, where HT is a trivial affair. It is not prudent to advocate distracting the U.S. from the places and targets on which its concerns should be concentrated.