



CENTER FOR GLOBAL POLICY

FIVE AMERICAN PERSPECTIVES  
ON ISLAM:  
AN ANALYTICAL GUIDE

SPECIAL REPORT 01

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# Five American Perspectives on Islam: An Analytical Guide

In this report, Dr. Muqtedar Khan examines what has remained constant and what has changed in the Middle East since the terrible attacks on the United States by al Qaeda terrorists on Sept. 11, 2001. He reviews and categorizes the enormous corpus of knowledge produced by American academic and policy institutions about U.S. relations with the Middle East and other Islamic actors in the international arena.

The report identifies the five leading epistemic communities – conservatives, neoconservatives, realists, liberals, and the left. It analyzes their discourses and recommendations, and traces their impact on U.S. policy.

Finally, Dr. Khan recommends a mixed-paradigm approach that will make the U.S. more effective in the Middle East, underscoring America's continuing relevance to the security and stability of the region and the global order.

## INTRODUCTION

The Middle East has experienced many significant events and political crises since the dramatic and dastardly attacks against the United States on Sept. 11, 2001. Yet many of the key elements that constituted the mini world system composed of the United States and the Middle East that were in place in 2001 continue to shape the region today.<sup>1</sup> The United States is furnishing a bigger than ever aid package for Israel,<sup>2</sup> and a bigger than ever arms sale to the Arabs.<sup>3</sup> There is no progress in the Arab-Israeli peace process, monarchs hold sway in the Gulf, and a military dictator rules over Egypt. Iraq and Iran remain of critical concern, and the Turks are worrying about coups, Kurds and Ankara's relations with Europe. The

West in general is worried about terrorist threats from a radical organization with global reach that uses distorted interpretations of Islam as its ideological umbrella. The sectarian tensions between the Shia and Sunnis continue to exacerbate the already uneasy geopolitics of the region, especially in Syria, Iraq, Lebanon, and Yemen.<sup>4</sup> Oil continues to play a major role in determining the Middle East's political economy, and global powers continue to meddle in the political realities of the region. All these challenges have intensified, becoming more dangerous, more dynamic, and more devastating than they were 16 years ago.<sup>5</sup>

The only new political trend that

## Summary

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## ABOUT CGP

The Center for Global Policy (CGP) is a 501(c)(3) non-profit organization. CGP is the first independent, non-partisan American think tank working exclusively on issues at the intersection of U.S. foreign policy and the geopolitics of Muslim-majority countries. We aim to enhance U.S. security and global stability by empowering our foreign policy decision-makers with pragmatic recommendations grounded in informed and nuanced analysis.

The views expressed in this report are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Center for Global Policy.

has emerged in the region is one of political fragmentation. Before Sept. 11, 2001, stability and continuity – albeit authoritarian – was the norm. There was little economic or social progress, and regimes and dictators ruled for decades. But after the U.S.-led war in Iraq, states like Iraq, Syria, Libya, and Yemen have become fragmented and embroiled in civil wars. Regional organizations such as the Gulf Cooperation Council and the Arab League have lost their effectiveness, and like many of the states in the region, have become both fragile and unable to function.

Much has happened in the past 16 years: An Islamist-leaning party has consolidated power in Turkey, and Islamists came to power in Egypt and Tunisia but lost their positions. The Arab world that desperately sought political change got its historical opportunity for comprehensive transformation and democratization in 2011-2013 but, like the Islamists, Arab democrats missed their moment (except possibly in Tunisia). Al Qaeda has lost its dominance as the radical alternative to status quo and has been replaced by a more vicious, more radical, more successful, and more multinational movement, the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS, sometimes also called Daesh).<sup>6</sup> The war the United States waged in Iraq was, in keeping with the regional trend, bigger and more brutal than the Gulf War and succeeded only in triggering a more virulent streak of anti-Americanism, more violence and more terrorism.

While one can argue that the Middle East remains the same – unstable, authoritarian, violent, colonized, war-torn, and troubled by terrorism and religious politics, except that these characteristics have become

more severe – there are three new aspects to the geopolitical reality of the region. These new conditions are more troubling, and potentially more debilitating, and do nothing to inspire hope for a better future in the short term. First is the growth in the number of countries that now qualify as failing states – Iraq, Syria, Libya, and Yemen – with many others like Egypt, Jordan, Tunisia, Sudan, and Lebanon remaining fragile. Second is the rise of civil wars that are tearing the region apart. Iraq, Syria, Libya, and Yemen are all embroiled in cruel wars that are destroying lives, history, heritage, infrastructure, and social fabric that will take decades to salvage and rebuild. Last is the large number of displaced populations escaping civil wars and rendering the states they flee to more fragile. Refugees from Syria and Iraq are making Turkey, Jordan, and Lebanon more precarious. Fifteen years ago, the only refugees in the Middle East whose presence had a geopolitical impact on the region were Palestinians, but they have been forgotten as Syrian and Iraqi refugees dominate the roster of the displaced.

The purpose of contrasting the Middle East's present with its past is to highlight how the singular biggest injection of political energy into the region – the U.S. response to the 9/11 attacks – has failed to have any positive impact on its geopolitics, security situation, economy, or relations with the United States. On the contrary, a strong case can be made that the U.S. response to the attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, has caused the Middle East more harm than good while failing to make the United States or the world safer. Moreover, the United States' recently – and slightly – improved

relations with Iran are in jeopardy, since the Trump administration seems determined to undermine the nuclear deal. And Washington's long-term traditional allies - Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and Turkey, three of the region's main powers - are either estranged or less trusting of U.S. intentions and policies in the region. Even U.S. relations with Israel are worse off than they were before. Washington's ties with its regional allies loosened considerably during President Barack Obama's second term.

The central element of the U.S. response to the 9/11 attacks, besides going after al Qaeda and the Taliban in Afghanistan, was the invasion of Iraq. The invasion was intended to bring democracy, stability, and security to the region, and to make the world and the United States safer from threats emanating from the region. It is safe to say that not only has the United States failed to achieve any of those goals, it has actually contributed to further instability, insecurity, the breakdown of the regional order, and the emergence of ISIS, which makes al Qaeda look docile in comparison.

For many analysts and scholars, the 9/11 attacks were not only the work of an extremist organization or ideology, but also a consequence of failed U.S. policy in the Middle East. I use the Sept. 11 attacks as a critical signpost, because since then much ink has been spilled explaining how the United States' failure to bring security and stability to the Middle East, along with Washington's support for monarchies and dictatorships, led to the growth of radical movements using Islam to both mobilize and justify their politics. But 16 years later, after the

United States has spent much blood and treasure - by some accounts, more than \$2 trillion, with 6,550 Americans killed and more than 50,500 wounded - we must concede that U.S. foreign policy has again made a mess of the Middle East and undermined Washington's security and interests.

Before the Sept. 11 attacks, one could have argued that the United States had a deficit of knowledge and understanding of the Middle East and that despite its good intentions, the United States failed in critical areas - most prominently the Arab-Israeli conflict and promoting democracy in the region. This excuse is no longer valid. In the aftermath of 9/11, knowledge production about the Middle East, Islam, Muslims, and U.S.-Muslim relations blossomed in the United States. In every medium - books, journal articles, newspaper stories, documentaries, movies, and interpersonal exchanges - the cognoscenti in the United States has been flooded with insights, information and analysis about Middle Eastern culture, history, and politics from a wide range of perspectives. And yet the United States shows no signs of learning, adapting, or rethinking its foreign policy toward one of the most critical regions in the world.

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In this report, I show how much knowledge of Islam and the region has been acquired since 9/11 and ask why the United States still gets its

policies wrong and fails to achieve its goals in the region even though policy makers have a better and deeper understanding of Islam and Muslims. While some may argue that the United States has limited options in the region, I submit that when one expands one's perspective and looks at the region through a different epistemological lens, one may find a wider range of policy options. It is therefore important to pay attention to policy critiques and alternate policy visions.

This report revisits how American intelligentsia tried to understand and explain the circumstances that led to the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks. It also reviews the range of policy options recommended by proponents of different philosophical and political orientations and reveals what knowledge American policymakers chose to act on and what they ignored. The report concludes with a discussion on which perspectives can best enlighten the new administration as it constructs its foreign policy toward the Middle East.

### THE RATIONALE OF REVIEW

The range of explanations for the 9/11 attacks is very wide. Clearly, very few analysts use a singular variable to explain the attacks, but beyond the obvious instrumental analysis - such as the failure of intelligence, airport security and/or immigration policy - most arguments that seek deeper answers tend to underscore the significance of one variable above all else. For example, Bernard Lewis, a prominent orientalist scholar of the Middle East, places the blame for the attacks on the nature of Islam, but John Esposito, a prominent authority on Islam, deems U.S. foreign policy as

the key problem.

While frugality in using explanatory variables brings elegance and utility to theory construction, it can be dangerous from a policy perspective. In issues where a failed policy can lead to the deaths of thousands of innocents through unchecked terrorism or misguided preemptive wars, comprehensiveness must be valued more than elegance. In this paper, I shall examine the key arguments and policy recommendations from different perspectives to map the reasoning behind the U.S. short-term and long-term responses to anti-Americanism, including anti-U.S. terrorism. I will focus on the analysis and recommendations of one key advocate from each perspective.

In my review of the literature on 9/11 and subsequent policy recommendations, I found that there are five distinct worldviews that inform how the United States views the Middle East and what policies are recommended. The profiles of the various perspectives that I draw are not etched in stone, and I am aware that other scholars can classify the literature in different ways, but I have found the classification I use of great analytical value. Furthermore, I recognize that while the social sciences are capable of producing analysis with high degrees of objectivity, the process of foreign policy making is essentially a political process and not a scientific exercise. Negotiating policy discourses necessitates identification and analysis of the lenses that analysts use.

Sometimes these analyses are more interesting than the substantive discussions themselves and can

provide insight into the politics and interests that shape policies. I have explored the relationship between policy and politics, interests and ideology in extensive detail in the past, and this research adds to that conversation.<sup>7</sup>

Based on an extensive review of the early literature about the Sept. 11 attacks, I have identified five prominent ideological and philosophical perspectives that attempted to understand and deal with the crisis. They are:

- Traditional American conservatives
- Neoconservatives
- Classical realists
- American liberals
- Progressives/traditional left

These perspectives range from blaming Islam for problems in the Middle East and the 9/11 attacks to putting the responsibility for the attacks on the West itself. For traditional conservatives, Islam is the problem; for neoconservatives, militant Islam and not Islam itself is the problem. For realists, the socio-political situation in the Arab world is of prime concern, while American liberals place the blame squarely on U.S. foreign policy.

### TRADITIONAL AMERICAN CONSERVATIVES: UNILATERALISM AND USE OF FORCE

Traditional conservatives tend to have a realistic and pragmatic approach to foreign policy. They seek to balance American national interests, which they feel are best served by American unilateral policies, with the advocacy of American values abroad that often takes the form of military interventions. Historically, they

have leaned toward isolationism, unilateralism, and use of force rather than multilateralism and diplomacy.<sup>8</sup> They prefer predominance of power or alliance formation to collective security arrangements. It is therefore natural that traditional conservatives lean more toward NATO than the United Nations as the primary international medium for U.S. policy when multilateralism becomes necessary. Their realism is frequently compromised by their conservative ideology and political commitments shaped by U.S. domestic politics. For decades,<sup>9</sup> conservatives have often used realpolitik and the dynamics of Cold War geopolitics to dictate American foreign policy toward the Middle East and the Muslim World.

The best exponent of this traditional conservative perspective was the foreign policy team of George H.W. Bush, the 41st president of the United States. His key advisers were Secretary of State James Baker and National Security Adviser Brent Scowcroft, who were both exemplary proponents of pragmatism and conservatism.<sup>10</sup> While President Trump's foreign policy initiatives may not conform to the traditional American conservative approach, the penchant for unilateralism latent in this school of thought has become dominant in Trump's policies so far.

Although not as prominent as the neoconservatives, traditional conservatives did play an important role in shaping U.S. policy in the aftermath of the Sept. 11 attacks. Bernard Lewis, the centenarian orientalist, emerged as the main thought leader for conservatives who shaped their understanding of the causes for the attacks and recommended principles for America's new foreign policy. Along

with Lewis, Samuel Huntington (d. 2008) and Fouad Ajami (d. 2014) were the principal shapers of conservative policies toward the Muslim world.<sup>11</sup> Except that Lewis delves much deeper into Islamic history and theology than Ajami or Huntington, their analysis and policy recommendations were nearly identical. All three of them saw Islam, the civilization itself, as a threat to the West, and so their policies were designed to treat and address the Islamic world as a monolithic, unified and antagonistic entity. Many evangelical Christians also believed and propagated the idea that Islam was the key motivator for anti-Americanism and the 9/11 attacks. While they lacked the analytical sophistication of the trinity - Huntington, Lewis and Ajami - fundamentalist Christians, such as Jerry Falwell and Pat Robertson, also recommended a policy that treated Islam itself as the enemy.<sup>12</sup> One can see some traces of this influence in the doggedness with which the Trump administration has pursued the so-called "Muslim ban."<sup>13</sup> Additionally, given the steadfast and consistent support President Trump has received from the Christian Right, he will be open to their influence on policy, especially in the Middle East.

Lewis argued that a global Islamic rebellion erupted, culminating in the 9/11 attacks, because of the decline of Islamic civilization. This downfall, he has argued, has caused frustration among powerless Muslims seeking to revive Islam and end Western domination of the Muslim world. In a series of articles published in conservative political magazines, Lewis placed the blame for the Sept. 11 attacks squarely on the Islamic civilization. He defended American foreign policy, including

its double standards, as reasonable and based on American national interests.<sup>14</sup> He argued that anti-Americanism in the Muslim world was not a consequence of American policies but a continuation of Muslim animosity toward Christendom since the days of the Crusades. Muslims resent the power and success of America because, according to Lewis, Muslims see America as the successor state to the legacy and heritage of the Christian West.<sup>15</sup>

Lewis' indictment of Islam includes a dogmatic assertion that Islam is incompatible with democracy, liberalism, secularism, and modernity, and since America is the epitome of these values, Muslims are anti-American.<sup>16</sup> Islam the civilization and Christendom were, according to him, the only religion-based civilizations that were historical enemies. Lewis argued that since the Islamic civilization has not modernized and exists in the historical context of the medieval ages, Muslims continue to see Christendom/the West/America as their ultimate enemy. Muslims, he thinks, ultimately seek to eliminate American influence in their world, and since they lack the military capability, the scientific development and the creative ingenuity of Western civilization, they have no choice but to resort to terrorism to achieve their anti-Western, anti-American goals.<sup>17</sup>

The policy implications of his analysis are clear, and Lewis does not hesitate to underscore them in his recommendations. Since all the problems are in the Muslim world, the Muslim world must change, Islam must be reformed and modernized, and Muslims must be forced to break away from history and accept the domination of Western culture,

Western values, and Western material realities. Some Muslims have attempted modernization in the past, but have failed miserably; therefore, the United States must first defeat and then modernize the Muslim world. The only alternative to this “reform by war” policy is complete isolationism, which Lewis considers unrealistic and unsafe because Muslims are determined to bring their jihad to America. According to Lewis, the West and its leader - America - have no choice but to get tough with Islam.<sup>18</sup>

Lewis and traditional conservatives advocate a policy that is militarily tough on the Islamic civilization and a political strategy that demands the reform of the Islamic faith itself. Some conservative extremists, on the other hand, advocated the conversion of Muslims to Christianity and not to secularism. Strident political writer and speaker Ann Coulter wrote, “We should invade their countries, kill their leaders and convert them to Christianity,”<sup>19</sup> and many evangelicals launched a campaign after the occupation of Iraq to convert Iraqis to Christianity.<sup>20</sup> Coulter has a reputation for being a media provocateur, but her style of rhetoric and her early support for Trump during his presidential campaign make her comments resonate with the base that Trump is so determined to please. She brings fringe ideas to the mainstream of conservative media and articulates clearly some of the unsavory ideas that scholars like Lewis only hint at, and therein lies her impact.

Lewis, along with Ajami and Huntington, identified the two pillars of the conservative response to the Sept. 11 attacks:

1. Use of force against the Islamic

world to suppress its rebellion against the West.

2. Transformation/modernization of Islam and the Muslim world.

“All three of them saw Islam, the civilization itself, as a threat to the West, and so their policies were designed to treat and address the Islamic world as a monolithic, unified and antagonistic entity.”

The war against the Taliban and al Qaeda in Afghanistan followed the first principle, and the war in Iraq - designed to spread democracy in the Middle East - was based on the second. Other conservatives may differ in their tactical approaches and their policy options, but Lewis’ formula remains the core of conservative policy. Just as Lewis’ intellectual shadow had shaped Huntington’s “clash of civilizations” thesis,<sup>21</sup> his legacy continues to exhort Americans to embrace the above principles as the dominant framework for U.S. policy toward the Islamic civilization.<sup>22</sup> I am convinced, and so is Harvard international affairs professor Stephen Walt, that much of Steve Bannon’s view of Islam is shaped by the “clash of civilizations” narrative.<sup>23</sup> It is no secret that the president’s view of Islam and perhaps much of the world is deeply influenced by Bannon’s nationalist ideology. Bannon has been not only Trump’s strategic adviser but also a key adviser on national security matters. He may not be on the National Security Council any longer, but his counsel allegedly continues to inform Trump’s views, as indicated by claims in the media that Bannon helped write Trump’s U.N. address even after the president’s adviser left the White House.<sup>24</sup>

## NEOCONSERVATIVES AND EMPIRE BUILDING

The shocking Sept. 11 attacks destabilized the United States' entrenched thought on foreign policy. The terrorist acts suddenly exposed the world's only self-conscious superpower to a terrible reality: At the peak of its strength and military might, the United States had become most vulnerable to devastating attacks. America suddenly realized that it had become the primary target of a foe that completely disregarded U.S. supremacy and operated outside the scope of U.S. military action. The enormity of the attack, its spectacular nature, and its psychological impact on the American people weakened long-held policy values, creating an opening for a new perspective to gain prominence and enable new and drastic changes in U.S. foreign policy.

sell to the Bush administration and the American people an imperial vision of America that they had always entertained.<sup>27</sup> While the traditional conservatives had been dominant in President George W. Bush's foreign policy team, the Sept. 11 attacks allowed the neocons to marginalize traditional conservatives and push their views and policies to the fore during the 43rd president's first term. But this honeymoon did not last long, and when the plan to democratize Iraq began to fail, they lost their influence.

The neoconservative foreign policy response to Sept. 11 was driven by the ideal of a strong and imperial America. The neocons' ultimate objective was to revive the United States' military, economic, and cultural domination. In other words, like the current administration, they wanted to make America great again. They were convinced that American military and American morality, when applied simultaneously with purpose and clarity, would benefit the United States and the rest of the world. Zbigniew Brzezinski's *Power and Principle* was the key philosophical underpinning of the neoconservative vision. In a curious sense, the neocons combined the liberal penchant for morality in foreign policy and the realist emphasis on power. Unlike the realists, they did not see power and principle at odds. Thus, they firmly believed that a militarily strong United States could keep America safe from terrorism by promoting democracy and regime change in states that were hostile to the United States and U.S. interests in the Middle East.<sup>28</sup>

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The need for change was obvious to all. The suddenly vulnerable United States faced a completely new, ruthless and committed enemy who was willing to die to hurt America. These conditions gave a group of policy entrepreneurs<sup>25</sup> the opportunity to assert their vision of the United States - one that promised safety to a frightened nation, justice to a wronged people, and the restoration of the sense of security and the glory of American life that was so astonishingly shattered on 9/11. This group of Americans, now widely recognized as the "cabal of neocons,"<sup>26</sup> immediately saw the opportunity to

For the neoconservatives, the key to global stability and security is a preponderance of power and

the globalization of democracy. They believed that a militarily overwhelming United States, backed by a strong and dominant economy and culture, could easily defeat the challenge of anti-Americanism in the Muslim world and forcibly produce a series of regime changes to plant democracy in the region. This would make the world once again safe for the United States. The use of American power unilaterally and unconstrained by international law and international institutions, they hoped, would essentially create an American empire. The neocons aspired to build this empire and were willing to pay the price in terms of dollars and lives.<sup>29</sup> The neocons saw Sept. 11 as an opportunity to align the American people behind their quest for security through imperial expansion and the democratization of the Muslim world.

Philip Zelkow, a neoconservative thinker, was involved in shaping the Bush Doctrine of preemptive strikes and unilateralism during the brief period when the neocons had complete sway over the 43rd president's U.S. foreign policy. Zelkow argued that the new U.S. policy fundamentally redefined the idea of national interest by liberating it from Westphalian territoriality, marrying power and principles, and rethinking the nature of security and the utility of multilateralism.<sup>30</sup>

In reviewing the neoconservative analysis of what caused Sept. 11 and how the United States should respond, I have chosen to focus on the work of Daniel Pipes.<sup>31</sup> Pipes is not the most prominent or most influential neoconservative, but he is easily the most consistent and the most forthcoming of all. For a brief period, he enjoyed his moment in

the limelight and had some influence on George W. Bush's foreign policy. He was, for a time, an adviser to Bush and was rewarded with a recess appointment to the board of the United States Institute of Peace.

Pipes argued that Sept. 11 occurred not because of Islam's centuries-old enmity with the West or because of Islam's incompatibility with modernity, as claimed by traditional conservatives such as Bernard Lewis. He claims that a specific *modern* manifestation of Islam - *militant Islam*, now widely described as *radical Islam*, with its totalitarian, violent, anti-moderate, anti-Western, anti-American, and anti-Israeli ideology - was responsible for the attacks.<sup>32</sup>

Unlike the traditional conservatives, neocons like Pipes do not claim that Islam is incompatible with either modernity or democracy.<sup>33</sup> The neocons also do not subscribe to the "clash of civilizations" thesis. Pipes explicitly rejects the thesis as a sweeping statement that does not recognize the fact that Islamists also perpetrate violence against ordinary Muslims.<sup>34</sup> Pipes is convinced that Muslims can establish democracies; his favorite example used to be Turkey. Neocons also believe that nothing within Islam could preclude reform or modernization. Therefore, they are more optimistic about the prospects of reform, modernization, and democratization of the Muslim world once militant Islam is crushed militarily, eliminating the terrorist threat to America and Israel, and wholesale regime changes are precipitated in the Middle East, starting with Iraq.

The neoconservative policy recommendation immediately

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after Sept. 11 was that the United States must take the war on terror to radical Islamists wherever they were and crush them. Since radical Islam sought nothing short of the destruction of America and Israel, there was no room for negotiation or any kind of settlement. Neoconservatives use the term *radical Islam* very loosely and do not distinguish between Islamists who have chosen violence as their method of change and those who do not advocate violence. Pipes argues that all Islamists, who in his opinion at one time constituted about 10-15 percent of the Muslim population, must be treated as “as potential killers.”<sup>35</sup> It must be noted that Pipes’ views of Islamists have moderated since,<sup>36</sup> but the impact of his more moderate thoughts on the Trump administration is much less than the impact he had on the Bush administration.

Pipes recommended a six-point strategy for dealing with radical Islam, with the overarching goal of keeping Islamists from seizing power. In principle, he said, the United States should:<sup>37</sup> not engage Islamists, not appease Islamists, not help Islamists, contain Islamic states, support those who oppose Islamists, and support gradual democratization.

Regarding Islam, the neocons in general are convinced that they can reform the Muslim world and “drain the swamp” that breeds militant Islam. Pipes is one of the few

neoconservatives who is singularly obsessed with the Islamic resurgence and sees the entire phenomenon as a dire threat to the West. Other, more influential, neocons such as Paul Wolfowitz are willing to adopt a more tolerant approach. Their willingness to work with Islamists in the post-Iraq reconstruction process is indicative of the diversity within the neoconservative establishment. Nonetheless, all of them believe in the unilateral use of force to suppress radical Islam globally and precipitate change through military domination.

The neoconservative position, though based on the traditional conservative values – Bernard Lewis is the main source for understanding Islam to both the traditions – constitutes a subtle critique of traditional conservatism. It rejects the idea that Islam is itself a threat to or problem for Western civilization. Neoconservatives also reject the geopolitical challenges of modern times as a continuation of politics of the medieval age. They see the current threat coming from a modern interpretation of Islam – radical or militant Islam – that, while constituting a tiny fraction of the Muslim population, nevertheless includes millions who hate the West and are committed to destroying it. The neocons’ position, especially as expressed in Pipes’ ideas, allows room for the argument that not all Muslims should be banned or deemed as enemies, and many if not most of them are potential allies against the radicals who also threaten Muslims and are against the essential values of Islam. The foreign policy statements coming out of the Trump administration presently do not show a clear preference for a singular perspective. While President

Trump himself sometimes speaks like a neoconservative calling for action against radical Islam, some of his more trusted sources - particularly Bannon - have sounded more like Bernard Lewis-style conservatives who see Islam as an existential threat to the West.

### REALISTS AND THE CHALLENGE OF ANTI-AMERICANISM

Realists are perceived as neither weaklings nor potential abusers of America's enormous military power. Realism, therefore, has always had the potential to give American foreign policy credibility and garner worldwide respect. Henry Kissinger and George Kennan are good examples of this tradition of American foreign policy. Samuel Huntington, too, belonged in this category until he came up with the "clash of civilizations" theory motivated by the fear that unless something radical was done, the West would weaken or even collapse as other civilizations, particularly the Confucian and the Islamic civilizations, rose.

One major difference between traditional conservatives and realists is that, unlike the former, the realists do not allow American nationalism to subvert their assessment of geopolitical realities. Realists are less polemical than either the conservatives or neocons about Islam and the Muslim world, and their analysis is more grounded in the empirical and historical realities of the region than the conservative groups' thinking is. Realists do not view either Islam or any one of its manifestations as being solely responsible for the Sept. 11 attacks. They argue instead that the socio-political conditions of the Muslim world in general - economic failure,

political underdevelopment, and failure of modernization - have created conditions conducive to anti-Americanism and terrorism.

Like all the conservatives, the realists maintain that the United States' position as the world's preeminent state makes it the most important target for Islamist radicals who seek change. While being critical of American foreign policy for its failures, the realists do not blame past American actions for Sept. 11. They do, however, argue that a more thoughtful policy in the past could have anticipated and maybe preempted anti-Americanism. Prominent advocates of this group include former Secretary of State James Baker, former Secretary of State Colin Powell and the prominent commentator turned broadcast journalist Fareed Zakaria.<sup>38</sup> I shall essentially rely on the work of Zakaria to represent the realist position. Even though Zakaria is a prominent journalist, his credentials as a proponent of realist thinking are less well known. Additionally, given that Zakaria is himself a Muslim and has insights into the community, I thought using him as the representative for realists in this review would bring a richer context to realist analysis.

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In his book *The Future of Freedom*, which is a mix of political theory and international political analysis, Zakaria makes the argument that

Islam is not the issue. He suggests that religious texts are sufficiently ambiguous to become tools for liberal as well as fundamentalist interpretations. And Islam, like any other religion, is neither democratic nor authoritarian. He concludes by showing how much of the Muslim world, particularly the five most populous countries with Muslim populations - Indonesia, Pakistan, India, Bangladesh, and Turkey - are neither anti-modernity nor undemocratic. Zakaria argues that neither Islam nor the Muslim world in general is problematic. The problems are in the Middle East. Authoritarianism, terrorism, and anti-Americanism originate and fester in Iran and the Arab countries. Therefore, for Zakaria, the reform of Islam is a non-issue. He seeks reform in the Middle East, particularly the Arab world.<sup>39</sup>

Zakaria explains that the raging anti-Americanism in the Muslim world is a consequence of two developments. First, the culture of the Middle East lacks a sense of self-criticism and seeks to place blame for failure on others (p. 129) and second, the failure of states and governance in the Arab World. He claims that because Arab societies have failed economically and politically, their regimes use state-sponsored media to foster anti-Americanism and anti-Semitism to divert attention from their own inadequacies. While Zakaria does fault American policy for not adopting a more nuanced approach toward the Middle East, he does not see any connection between U.S. actions in the Muslim world and anti-U.S. terrorism. The sense that America is innocent is an important theme in all conservative and realist analysis.<sup>40</sup>

Zakaria's policy recommendations follow the conservative paradigm of force and change. He agrees that military victory against "radical Islam" is a necessary first step toward the goal of reforming and transforming the Arab world. Unlike the traditional conservatives who seek the reform of Islam and the neocons who wish to establish instant democracy, Zakaria postulates change in phases. He accepts that the United States has no option but to become an agent of change in the Arab world. However, he envisions change in three stages: economic reform and development, constitutional reform and political liberalization, and the institutionalization of electoral democracy.

There are some significant differences between Zakaria's policy recommendations and the preferences of conservative thinkers, especially the neocons. For instance, Zakaria is not an advocate of unrestrained unilateralism. He recognizes that the United States must lead when necessary but must also seek to work with the United Nations, European Union, and the international community. He recognizes the importance of legitimacy that comes with multilateralism and compliance with international law and norms.<sup>41</sup>

### AMERICAN LIBERALS AND THE CRITIQUE OF AMERICAN FOREIGN POLICY

American liberals traditionally have focused on advancing a more inclusive version of the United States' goals and have always been concerned with reducing the potential for conflict that comes from a naked assertion of power and ruthless pursuit of national

interest. Unlike the realists, who are more interested in advancing national interests and national security, liberals have often sought to use American power to construct an international order based on international law, norms, and regimes.<sup>42</sup> They hope that American global leadership could create a sustainable network of international organizations and institutions that, coupled with the growing economic interdependence of nations, would allow a truly international society based on shared interests, values, and norms to emerge and reduce the possibility of war and conflict to the minimum. For liberals, American foreign policy has always been an instrument to be employed for positive change and not one to be used merely to maintain status quo.<sup>44</sup>

Liberals have been critical of U.S. policy toward the Muslim world for a long time. They have consistently argued that America was allowing short-term thinking and special interests to jeopardize relations with the Muslim world. They have also been critical of the tendency among political figures to treat Islam as the next enemy after the collapse of the Soviet Union. After the Sept. 11 attacks, many liberals claimed that U.S. policy in the Arab and Muslim world has failed to address the “root causes” of anti-Americanism and terrorism. They argued that U.S. policy further aggravated the already terrible conditions in the Middle East and, in many ways, was responsible for the radicalization of Islamic movements which otherwise were an authentic voice for democracy, cultural revival, self-determination, and modernization. Liberals have been very critical of U.S. opposition to popular Islamic movements, such as the Muslim Brotherhood,

and of Washington’s support for brutal despots. They saw several American foreign policy adventures, especially support for dictators, as a betrayal of American values and as counterproductive for the people of the region and for U.S. relations with the Muslim world.<sup>45</sup> Sixteen years later, we find the liberals making the same argument as the Trump administration mulls whether or not<sup>46</sup> to ban the Muslim Brotherhood and label it as a terrorist organization.

“Authoritarianism, terrorism and anti-Americanism originate and fester in Iran and the Arab countries. Therefore, for Zakaria, the reform of Islam is a non-issue. He seeks reform in the Middle East, particularly the Arab world.”

Even though he is not known as a foreign policy expert, Georgetown University Distinguished Professor John Esposito has for a long time been a leading voice on how the United States should deal with the Muslim world and how it should respond to the Islamic resurgence.<sup>47</sup> Esposito has consistently maintained that American policymakers have misunderstood the challenge of political Islam and that their misconceived policies toward the Muslim world have contributed to repression, radicalization, the rise of terrorism, and the absence of democracy. He argues that Islam has become the dominant, if not the sole, idiom of contemporary Muslim thought and political action. Islam is well on the way to becoming a global force, and it is time to recognize this reality and accommodate it because it is authentic and speaks to the legitimate aspirations of its followers.

Islam was galvanizing the Muslim world and could have

become a force for development, modernization, and self-determination, Esposito believes. However, American support for authoritarian regimes and opposition to Islamic movements was shortsighted and counterproductive and contributed to the radicalization of these movements.<sup>48</sup>

Esposito argued that Sept. 11 ultimately was caused by economic conditions, political underdevelopment, the shadow of the Israeli occupation of Palestine, and the continued repression by U.S.-supported authoritarian regimes in the Arab world that had spawned a deep-seated resentment and anger toward the United States. The antecedents to the emergence of Osama bin Laden and al Qaeda as a global anti-American force lie in the long history of misguided U.S. policies in the Middle East. He raises the issue of “root causes” and makes no bones about stating that unless Muslim grievances are addressed wisely and the economic and political conditions that engender terrorism are ameliorated, terrorism will continue to plague the West and authoritarian Muslim regimes. However, he stops short of making any specific policy recommendations on how the United States should deal with al Qaeda or other extremist groups. He sees his role as providing an understanding of the context – political and historical – that motivates terrorism and how these so-called Islamic warriors implicate Islam in their dastardly tactics.<sup>49</sup>

Nevertheless, there is a grand strategy behind Esposito’s criticism of U.S. policy.<sup>50</sup> He advises America to be fair in its judgment of Islam. Prejudice or strategic perspectives often lead to gross misunderstanding

of the faith, creating problems with believers. Esposito believes that there are definite root causes that must be addressed through a reformulation of Western and American foreign policy. The United States must adopt a more balanced approach toward the Israel-Palestine conflict. The United States also must recognize that Islam and democracy are compatible and promote democracy in the Muslim world. Moreover, Esposito sees Islamists as not only compatible with democracy but also as the main hope for democracy in the Middle East. His policy principles can be summarized as follows:

1. Recognize the importance of Islam and accommodate legitimate Islamic aspirations.
2. Muslims have several grievances against the United States, and unless they are addressed through a reform of Western and U.S. policy, terrorists will continue to target the United States and its interests.
3. Islam and democracy are compatible, and the West must promote democracy in the Muslim world even if it brings Islamists to power.
4. Use of force has proven counterproductive in the past; therefore, U.S. policy should err on the side of restraint rather than on the side of force.

Unlike conservatives who consistently advocate, to varying degrees, the use of force, liberals are skeptical of the utility of the military option. Liberals recognize that terrorists must be dealt with forcefully, but they believe change in the Muslim world cannot be forced.

## PROGRESSIVES AND THE TRADITIONAL LEFT: A GLOBAL VIEW

Since the Reagan presidency, America has been steadily moving to the right. Even the tenures of presidents Bill Clinton and Barack Obama have failed to arrest this trend, and the left and their allies have been systematically marginalized from policy discussions. They remain active, but their influence is limited to academia. The candidacy of Sen. Bernie Sanders during the 2016 presidential campaign did bring some promise of relevance, but it has since dwindled. The left is excluded from all serious policy debates; its function is now reduced to strident polemics and occasionally thoughtful and critical commentary on the state of politics in general.

The left has only itself to blame for this state of affairs. The internationalism of the left is at some levels incompatible with the nation-state. The left is committed to economic and political egalitarianism at the global level, and its global concerns are often, if not always, at odds with American national interests. This global perspective of the left determines the nature of its contribution to policy debates. The left can only offer a moral and principled critique of U.S. policy. It cannot offer policy options since it is opposed to America's economic and political preeminence, which they perceive as subversive of global social justice. The left has always been opposed to an American military buildup and vehemently against U.S. uses of force. At a time when Americans were feeling very vulnerable, threatened and even afraid of the prospects of

more Sept. 11-like attacks - or even worse, attacks with weapons of mass destruction - the left's internationalism was perceived as unpatriotic and even dangerous.

Nonetheless, many left-leaning scholars, activists, and groups have had a noticeable impact on the interpretation of events relating to 9/11. It was the left that took the lead in exposing the role and foreign policy agenda of the neoconservatives.<sup>51</sup> Individuals such as the late Edward Said, Noam Chomsky, Arundhati Roy, Tariq Ali, and Immanuel Wallerstein have all provided insights into the reasons behind the attacks on the United States and have provided often polemical but occasionally thoughtful criticism of U.S. policies.<sup>52</sup>

The left has argued that the United States is basically an imperial power that consistently violates the spirit of democracy and human rights in its foreign policy. Leftists believe that corporations and other minority interests control the U.S. government and use U.S. power to undermine the freedom and steal the resources of developing countries that are unable to resist U.S. military strength or propaganda. In the Middle East, the left maintains that the pursuit of domination of natural resources, oil, land, and water has made the United States and Israel joint imperialists. Both America and Israel undermine freedom and democracy in the region and are the sources of military instability in the region. Therefore, Sept. 11 was just the blowback from U.S. policy in the Middle East. Leftists lay the blame for terrorism squarely at the feet of imperialism - the combination of US foreign policy and capitalism. Terrorism, they say,

is a tactic of the weak fighting for economic, political, and social justice while resisting U.S. imperialism.

For decades, Said (d. 2003) provided intellectual leadership for those on the left dealing with the U.S. role in the Middle East. His groundbreaking work launched a new discipline - postcolonial theory - that struggles to deal with identity issues because of the continuing indirect neocolonialism and imperialism of Western powers in their former colonies and developing nations. In his widely circulated columns, Said consistently argued after the Sept. 11 attacks that one could not deal with terrorism without fully understanding America's role overseas. Just five days after the tragedy he lamented, "What is most depressing, however, is how little time is spent trying to understand America's role in the world."<sup>53</sup> He also argued that American policy is based on ignorance of and prejudice toward Islam and Arabs. He consistently argued that U.S. policy led by the neoconservatives has been hijacked in the service of Israel. But like many on the left, he offered very little concrete advice on what the United States should do. He did make this prediction about U.S. policy: "We are in for many more years of turmoil and misery in the Middle East, where one of the main problems is, to put it as plainly as possible, U.S. power. What the U.S. refuses to see clearly it can hardly hope to remedy."<sup>55</sup>

to remain on the margins of the policy debates in the United States. They are ideologically as well as epistemologically handicapped when it comes to advancing policy solutions. Their general suggestion - that America must stop using its power to advance its own interests worldwide and become an international social service agency fighting for the rights of other nations and peoples overseas - is neither tenable nor reasonable. Nation-states exist to advance national interests. One of Trump's main campaign slogans was precisely about this: America is for Americans.<sup>56</sup>

The following table summarizes the analysis and policy recommendations made by the five perspectives identified in the review. They range from blaming Islam alone for impeding better relations between the West and the Muslim world to blaming the West alone for the same impediments.

### CONCLUSION: LOOKING AT THE SPECTRUM

This review of America's intellectual and analytical response to the Sept. 11 attacks highlights the diversity of perspectives that try to both explain why it happened and recommend how the United States should have responded to it. President George W. Bush's foreign policy in the Middle East during his first term was dominated entirely by the neoconservative perspective (and led by prominent neoconservatives themselves). That approach led to the war in Iraq, whose repercussions and ripple effects continue to undermine the region, spawn terrorism, and contribute to violence in the region and in Europe to this day. Bush's second term, more

"The left has argued that the United States is basically an imperial power that consistently violates the spirit of democracy and human rights in its foreign policy."

While leftists will continue to remind us of the injustices inherent in self-regarding policies, they will continue

## FIVE AMERICAN PERSPECTIVES ON ISLAM: AN ANALYTICAL GUIDE

POLITICAL PERSPECTIVE	A MAJOR EXPONENT OF THIS VIEW	CENTRAL ARGUMENT	POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS
TRADITIONAL CONSERVATIVES	<b>Bernard Lewis</b> A very prominent orientalist and for decades he was the dominant interpreter of Islam for Western policy makers. Professor Emeritus at Princeton University.	Islam is the problem. It is incompatible with modernity and democracy. Islamists resent Western domination and seek its destruction. We are witnessing a global Muslim rebellion.	Muslims must be forced to either reform Islam itself or Islamism must be crushed. The West must see the war on terrorism as a "clash of civilizations."
NEOCONSERVATIVES	<b>Daniel Pipes</b> A prominent pro-Israel policy entrepreneur and the founder of Middle East Forum in Philadelphia.	It is not Islam but a modern offshoot of Islam - militant or radical Islam - that is anti-American, anti-democracy and anti-Israel. Militant Islam seeks to undermine and Islamize the West and destroy the state of Israel.	There is only a military solution against militant Islam. The problem is ideological. Neither reform nor development will have any change. Militant Islam must be destroyed.
REALISTS	<b>Fareed Zakaria</b> Prominent commentator, broadcast journalist and a realist scholar of U.S. foreign policy.	Terrorism and anti-Americanism are a consequence of the failures of the Arab state and society to modernize and essentially satisfy the aspirations of their people.	There must be fundamental regime changes in the Arab world. The Arab world must be liberalized and rescued from religious zealots and secular despots. Focus must shift to economic development and civil liberties.
AMERICAN LIBERALS	<b>John L. Esposito</b> Easily the most prominent post-orientalist Western commentator on Islam, respected by both Muslims and Non-Muslims. Distinguished Professor at Georgetown University.	The key problem has been American foreign policy that supports Israel and autocrats in the Muslim world unconditionally. It is misguided in its opposition to Islamists and has not lived up to its own democratic values in the region.	Unless Muslim grievances - root causes - are addressed, Islamic activism and Muslim unrest will continue. The West must allow democracy to thrive in the Muslim world even if it means that Islamists will come to power.
THE AMERICAN LEFT	<b>Edward Said</b> Prominent pro-Palestine, left-oriented political commentator, a distinguished scholar and prominent voice in postcolonial studies at Columbia University.	American imperialism and Western capitalism (globalization) has created conditions in the world in general and in the Muslim world that are causing an anti-American revolt on global scale.	The West must give up its neo-colonial and neo-imperial policies. Capitalism must be tamed and Western progressives should be more aggressive and successful in their challenge of neoliberal economics and rising religious conservatism.

informed by the realist perspective, was marked by more restraint and struggled to cope with the fallout of the failed neoconservative foreign policy of the first term. Even though there was course correction in his second term, the Bush legacy is eternally tainted by the dominance of the neoconservative perspective in his first term.<sup>57</sup>

2016 on the back of big promises without many details, policy principles, or a grand strategy. During his campaign, he promised to destroy ISIS, wipe out “radical Islamic terrorism,” end the nuclear deal with Iran, ban Muslims from coming to America, and move America’s embassy in Israel to Jerusalem. From his various statements, one could deduce that Trump’s foreign policy was informed to some extent by neoconservative views about Islam and the Middle East. This conclusion was strengthened by his selection of a prominent neoconservative, Walid Fares, as his Middle East policy adviser.<sup>59</sup> But candidate Trump himself explained his foreign policy as one that would place “America First,” and his attacks on growing Chinese economic influence suggested that perhaps neomercantilism - economic realism - was his guiding philosophy.

Since his days on the campaign trail, Trump has had a love-hate relationship with the neoconservatives. At times, he advocated their policies, and on other occasions, he repudiated them and incurred their ire as many neocons became the so-called “Never Trumpers.” Now that he is in office, Trump seems to enjoy the neoconservatives’ plaudits on some occasions (when he launched missiles on Syria) and ignite their anger on other occasions (as when he failed to appoint prominent neoconservative Elliot Abrams as the No. 2 in the State Department).<sup>60</sup>

At the time of this writing, the new administration is drifting from issue to issue in search of quick and easy policy wins. The administration feels under siege because of the multiple investigations into allegations that

“The Trump administration is learning the complexities and dangers of policy making in the Middle East on the job. Why not learn from the mistakes of the past policies and drink from the deep trough of knowledge accumulated after 9/11?”

President Obama’s first term was clearly influenced by American liberals. He reached out to the Middle East, including Iran, and tried to build bridges with Muslim nations abroad and Muslim communities at home. I characterize his two terms as an effort to balance diplomacy against use of force, and idealism against realism, and to favor multilateralism rather than unilateralism. But with the continued increase in terrorism, particularly with the rise of ISIS as a direct consequence of the previous administration’s failed policies in Iraq, he often had to use force, especially in the Iraqi and Afghan-Pakistani theaters. But eventually his second term became more realist and isolationist and less liberal. His reluctant leadership, along with his abandonment of liberal idealism during the Arab Spring and after, essentially diminished American stature and influence in the region. His only significant success in the region was the nuclear deal with Iran; his biggest failures are the growth of ISIS and the collapse of Syria.<sup>58</sup>

Trump was elected in November

the Trump campaign colluded with Russians meddling in U.S. elections. While no major policy initiative has been undertaken in the Middle East, many of Trump's key campaign promises, such as the cancellation of the Iran nuclear deal and the U.S. embassy's relocation to Jerusalem, have been placed on hold. The Trump administration is learning the complexities and dangers of policy making in the Middle East on the job. Why not learn from the mistakes of the past policies and drink from the deep trough of knowledge accumulated after 9/11?

I have identified five distinct American epistemic and ideological perspectives on Islam and the Middle East and the policies they recommend. There are many more perspectives now, including feminist and postcolonial studies of the U.S. role in the Middle East, but they have yet to gain policy level influence.

I suggest that the current administration draw on the wealth of knowledge, analysis, and policy recommendations produced by all these perspectives, become aware of the analyses and policies that have led to failure, reject those that have already failed, and work with those that could serve both U.S. and regional interests. It is important that the Trump administration develop a grand strategy for the region with clearly articulated principles and goals and try to bring some predictability and consistency to its actions. For too long, U.S. foreign policy in the Middle East has demonstrated an inability to learn, despite the growing body of knowledge produced by scholars and experts. The consequences of this failure for both the United States and the region are becoming

unsustainable.

### POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

I shall abstain from making specific policy recommendations to the Trump administration. The idea of this report is not to guide specific policies but provide a knowledge base so that the Trump administration can develop a grand strategy to deal with the Middle East. There are many views on how the United States should deal with the region. Some have been tested, like the perspectives of the conservatives, the neoconservatives and, to an extent, the outlooks of liberals and realists. President George W. Bush applied conservative and neoconservative ideas and policies, and rather than improve the situation in the Middle East, they exacerbated the crisis. President Obama tried a combination of American liberal and realist policies, with limited success. The recommendations of the left have found favor with none. It is important that the Trump administration keep these experiences in mind while soliciting input on policy making.

My recommendation to the Trump administration is to look at the analysis and recommendations of American liberals and the realists. Liberals generally provide an excellent explanation of why U.S. policies repeatedly fail to bring security or stability to the region. Their perspective, however, is too generous to the Islamists and their faults and does not take into account the Muslim Brotherhood's role in exacerbating regional instability, contributing to religious intolerance and constantly fueling resentment against the West. Liberals also do not dwell much on the corruption, the sectarianism, and the Muslim-

on-Muslim, Arab-on-Arab violence in the region. But their essential point about the need to support and bolster democracy in the Arab world as an antidote to terrorism and instability is, in my view, still valid if democracy is not promoted through use of force.

Realists address precisely the issues that liberals gloss over. Their explanation of the failure of Arab states is critical to understanding what role the United States can and should play in the region. Realists overemphasize the role of states and state power and undervalue the role of non-state actors and the importance of identity to the region's geopolitics, but their

perspective is necessary to shed light on the liberals' blind spots. The disintegration of states in the region also handicaps the realist perspective, since it is so state centered, and the importance that liberals attach to non-state actors can in turn illuminate realists' blind spots. Additionally, we must recognize that the United States is restrained by steadily diminishing influence and capacity to make an impact in the region. This also makes the need for a well-informed and prudent foreign policy even more pressing. It is the fond hope of this author that this primer on U.S. policy in the Middle East will help make America effective in the region again.

"We must recognize that the United States is restrained by steadily diminishing influence and capacity to make an impact in the region."

NOTES

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In this report, Dr. Muqtedar Khan offers a comprehensive assessment of U.S. foreign policy toward the Middle East, examining what has remained constant and what has changed since Sept. 11, 2001. He identifies the five leading epistemic communities - conservatives, neoconservatives, realists, liberals, and the left - tracing their discourses and analyzing their impact on American policy. Finally, Dr. Khan recommends a mixed-paradigmatic approach to make the United States more effective in the Middle East, underscoring its relevance to the security and stability of the region and the global order.

