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Religion and Social Order

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Religion And Social Order

By AMITAI ETZIONI

WHAT DO RUSSIA, China, Afghanistan, and Iraq have in common? In nations where an authoritarian regime has collapsed, liberation is typically followed by explosive increases in anti-social behavior. This fact, which holds irrespective of whether the regime was militantly secular or theocratic; communist or Islamic, is rarely discussed in the Western media or during political give and take on “regime change” and related subjects. Some presume that these destructive behaviors will go away on their own, that the disturbed condition of society following liberation will correct itself. Others dismiss these pains of transformation as simply a price a society must pay for gaining liberty.

Explosive increases in anti-social behavior (details follow) do not naturally subside by themselves. Such behavior has been at a high level for years in many liberated and failing states (e.g., more than 15 years in Russia). After surveying some statistics and trends in several newly liberated societies, I confront the question of how such conduct can be curbed. Enhanced law

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enforcement may do so initially, but, in the longer run, a rather different kind of authority must become the major source of social order if it is to be considered legitimate, which, in turn, is essential for sustained stability. Religion (in its moderate, nonviolent expressions), I will show, is a major source of such authority. Several assumptions found in both political as well as popular discourse obstruct the recognition of this basic but crucial fact: the extensive focus on extremist expressions of religion; the tendency to view religions monolithically; and a tendency to treat the need to export the separation of state and religion as an equal priority with establishing peace and security. The recognition of religion's role as a major source for stability points the way towards a new approach to U.S. policy in newly liberated societies.

Newly liberated, newly anti-social

RUSSIA PROVIDES AN especially important and troubling example of the social consequences of liberation. In the period immediately following the fall of the communist regime (from 1989 to 1993), the murder rate rose by 116 percent and assaults rose by 81 percent. Especially indicative of the breakdown in the social fabric was that 63 percent of reported physical assaults were committed by a friend or relative of the victim. Twelve years later the situation showed no improvement; nearly 3.5 million crimes were registered in 2005, compared with 2.8 million in 1993. In 2005 Russia's prosecutor general, Vladimir Ustinov, estimated that the true number of crimes committed was closer to 9 million. Russia is rife with organized crime and corruption has infiltrated business, municipal government, police forces, and the judiciary. Murders often remain unsolved because the police are bought off, and judges are intimidated into delivering the "correct" verdicts.

Since the fall of the Soviet Union, the number of drug addicts in Russia has skyrocketed. Between 1991 and 1995 their numbers doubled; over the next five years they quadrupled. By 2005, the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime reported that there were between 1.5 and 4 million drug abusers in Russia. Dramatic increases have also been seen in rates of alcohol consumption and suicide, although these were already comparatively high in earlier periods. The WHO estimated that about 62,000 people died of alcohol poisoning in 2004 alone. In addition, the suicide rate increased from 26 per 100,000 people in 1990 to 40 per 100,000 people in 2000 (three times the world average), and has only just begun to decrease to 35 per 100,000 as of 2004.

It is true, the impact of such increases in anti-social behavior and criminality pales in comparison to the crimes systematically committed by the state during the communist era, when victims numbered in the many millions. Liberation has largely eliminated this form of crime. Yet, from the

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viewpoint of a functioning, stable civil society, the kinds of anti-social behavior that exploded following liberation merit serious concern and must be greatly curtailed.

Many of the same anti-social behaviors are also on the rise in contemporary China, where increasing economic openness has coincided with decreasing control of the Communist Party bureaucracy for the past several decades. Crime has become rampant throughout the country; there have been considerable increases in the number of youths joining street gangs. Official statistics indicate that between 1978 and 2001, there was a 300 percent increase in crime. Between 1990 and 2000, the total number of crimes reported by Chinese police rose from 2.2 million to 3.6 million. In that same period, the number of recorded assaults doubled and recorded robberies tripled. And between 1995 and 2000, the Chinese police recorded a five-fold increase in the number of burglaries. Drug abuse has also sharply escalated; in 2006, for example, Chinese officials put the number of *registered* drug addicts at 1.16 million, about double what it was in 1995 (some analysts believe the actual number is closer to 15 million). A majority of registered addicts are heroin users, which has led to an alarming rise in the rate of HIV infection.

The authoritarian regimes of Afghanistan and Iraq have fallen more recently than the ones mentioned so far, but their collapse was also quickly followed by sharp increases in anti-social behavior (even taken aside from the activities of local insurrectionists and foreign fighters). For example, since the defeat of the Taliban at the end of 2001, widespread pedophilia has resurfaced especially among the Pashtuns in southern Afghanistan. Kidnapping for ransom, drug abuse, and violent crime have all increased since the fall of the Taliban regime. Opium production has also increased, reaching unprecedented levels. According to the UN, opium production in Afghanistan doubled between 2002 and 2006, and currently 92 percent of the world's heroin comes from poppies grown there. General James Jones, formerly NATO's top commander in Europe, warned that Afghanistan is turning into a "narco-state."

In Iraq, violence associated with the insurgency is often difficult to distinguish from ordinary violent crime and interpersonal score-settling. There is, though, considerable evidence of a sharp increase in the number of unnatural deaths *with no connection to the insurgency*. In addition, "regular" families earn money by opening up rooms in their homes as holding facilities for kidnapping victims. In several parts of Iraq, women and children are still forced to remain indoors at least after dark for fear of kidnapping, rape, and murder.

I present all of this here not to advocate for a return to the "good old days" of the Taliban or Saddam (any more than I would urge a return to the

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tender mercies of “Uncle” Joe or Chairman Mao), but rather to suggest that there is a *need for new sources of social order in these newly liberated societies*.

Because of widespread incompetence and rampant corruption, police forces are not of much help in curbing violence in these failing states. Judges are routinely bribed to overturn verdicts. In Afghanistan, a considerable number of husbands force their wives into prostitution (especially their second and third wives), and many of those who complain to the authorities are jailed for committing adultery.

The role of values in security

THE QUESTION MUST be addressed: What can be done — above and beyond training and arming police forces (a very grueling and slow process) — to help newly liberated states maintain a reasonable level of social order?

Security is not self-sustaining. It must either be undergirded by a police state (at unacceptably high human costs) or by a firm social fabric that entails a shared moral culture — supported largely by *informal* social controls and pressures — and which encourages people to “behave” most of the time. On this latter model, law enforcement authorities serve mainly as a backup and as a last resort. To put it differently, if police are widely used, this by itself is a very telling sign of social failure.

Nurturing a moral culture is also called for because the regimes that are being replaced, such as the command-and-control systems of communist societies and Taliban-like theocracies, were based on beliefs that are incompatible with a free and stable society. To promote liberty requires much more than free speech, free and fair elections, and the other typical features of liberal democracy; it also requires that the citizenry share a core of basic values, a broad toleration for a variety of different political and religious opinions, an opposition to unwarranted discrimination, and a strong moral rejection of resorting to violence to settle interpersonal and group differences.

To be sure, recruiting and retraining police and establishing border control are both significant ways to begin laying the foundations for security where it is lacking. However, building such forces alone is woefully insufficient. No state can field the number of law enforcement personnel needed to provide even basic security if most of the billions of interactions within the population must be surveyed and controlled. And, if they are not imbued with a sound moral culture, the law enforcement agents themselves are likely to abuse their power and violate the law.

The American experience with Prohibition shows that when there is no widespread, voluntary compliance with the law based on the conviction that the law ought to be observed, effective compliance cannot be engineered. In

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contrast, it has been demonstrated that the principal reason the American tax system works relatively well — unlike, for example, the Italian one — is because most Americans believe that they should pay what is due to their government, whereas many Italians consider being taxed as being cheated of their birthright. The same holds for speed limits, bans on smoking in public, and so on. In *The Psychology of Taxation*, Alan Lewis reviews numerous studies showing that if people believe that the burden of taxation is fairly proportioned and that the revenues collected are spent for worthy purposes and in an efficient manner, they will pay most of what they owe. Paul Stern shows in *Improving Energy Demand Analysis* that the number one reason people conserve energy is because they believe it is their civic duty. In short, if the laws are to be effective in a free society, *law enforcement must be the last resort of the moral culture; not the first or even second line of defense.*

The second reason a viable moral culture is essential for a free society is that there is a set of responsibilities that citizens must assume for their children, parents, community, and nation, not specifically enumerated by any law, and undergirded only by moral precepts and informal social controls. Most of what parents do for their children is not legally required. Similarly, most of what grown children do for their elderly parents reflects their moral sense. The same holds for charitable giving.

At stake is nothing less than our basic assumptions about human nature and the sources of political and social order. Some champions of liberty presume that once the yoke of a Taliban-like or communist government is lifted from people's shoulders, their self-interest will naturally lead them to pro-social behavior; a new social order, based on consent, will quickly arise. Others assume that democratization merely requires a certain set of political institutions such as elections, separation of powers, and so on. Others add the elements of a civil society, including a rich fabric of voluntary associations, a growing middle class, and educational institutions.

All this is of merit but insufficient. The evidence of common human experience shows that people have a darker, unruly side which must be disciplined and restrained. As the totalitarian or authoritarian sources of order are removed, new and legitimate sources of order must be put in their place. In short, *security and, more generally, social order, are paramount, but these rest only in part on law enforcement; they must have the backing of moral culture.*

Religion and setting new priorities

ONE MAY WELL wonder, given the great difficulties involved in changing societies, especially from the outside, whether there is anything that the United States or other Western powers could do to foster moral cultures and the informal social controls that nurture them in recently liberated countries and failing states.

The discussion here focuses on Islam and especially on the situations in Afghanistan and Iraq for three principal reasons: first, the problems of social order contained in these situations are currently even more acute than they are in the formerly communist nations; second, the United States and the West in general have more leverage in these two societies, and third, communism has largely lost its appeal, which can hardly be said about radical Islamism.

The way to proceed is suggested by the way that the United States confronted communism. After all, that struggle, too, contained a major “cultural” element: a fundamental disagreement over what makes a good society. Just as all too many now cannot see important differences among Muslims,

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during the Cold War many refused to recognize important differences between, for example, communists and social democrats. Gradually, though, it became evident that one of the best ways to counter the influence of communism was not to only support the conservative parties in the countries involved, but also the various social democratic parties, labor unions, and youth movements.

Along these same lines, to support largely secular forces in order to challenge Islamic radicalism is woefully insufficient. One cannot generally start a dialogue with a pious Muslim by quoting Locke, Kant, and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. However, by pointing to interpretations of Islamic texts and the *shari'ah* that oppose the use of violence (which are plentiful), one can appeal to basic beliefs of those the West is trying to win over. This approach can work only as long as the West seeks as its clear first priority a peaceful world, rather than one in which all regimes follow the exact model of democracy largely found in the United States and France, or in which all regimes separate state and religion. To build on this premise, the United States needs to accept fully that *the establishment clause of the First Amendment should not be foisted on the peoples of other nations*. Religion is one source, in many cases a main source, and in some cases the major or exclusive source, of moral culture. This is true for the Roman Catholic Church in Poland; for the Eastern Orthodox Church in Russia; for Islam in Afghanistan and the Shi'a sections of Iraq; and for Confucianism in China (as well as Christianity, currently on the rise in China).

Given that religion has so often been the source of oppression, for example under the Taliban in Afghanistan, and that Islam is considered by many to be the “civilization” most threatening to the West, how could the United States justly support religion in general, and mullahs and imams in particular? The answer to this question lies in what may be obvious to some, but is surely not widely agreed upon and is certainly not (yet) a cornerstone of U.S. foreign policy: *The U.S. should actively support moderate religious teachings*

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(as well as secular sources of moral culture), and oppose only those that promote violence and persecution. This position stands in sharp contrast to the practice of lumping together all religious leaders, factions, and parties, as if they were basically of one kind, opposed to modernity and enlightenment, and above all, prone to violence. Reza Aslan, for example, criticizes many in the West for interpreting Iranian politics as a struggle between “Islamic theocracy” on the one hand and “Western secular democracy” on the other.

What is to be done?

I AM NOT SUGGESTING that the idea of actively supporting moderate Muslims while opposing violent Islamic beliefs has never occurred to U.S. policymakers. Yet, U.S. policy on this matter has been inconsistent and halfhearted at best. What follows are a series of policy recommendations that arise from a recognition of the thesis laid out in this paper.

Change public diplomacy. Some in the West treat all Islam as if it was a single, monolithic entity (and a violent one at that). Others claim that Islam is a religion of peace that has been hijacked by terrorists — a claim that is hard to sustain. A position that recognizes that many Islamic texts contain passages that legitimate the use of force *as well as* passages that extol nonviolent acts is a much more accurate reading of these texts. (For example, there are those who view jihad as a war to banish all nonbelievers and those who see it as a spiritual journey of self-improvement). Recognizing this *internal* differentiation or fault-line within Islam can play a key role in explaining to one and all how the United States and its allies can have no trouble with “Muslims” per se but only with the violent kind (those who favor terrorism and aggressive expansionism).

If public diplomacy is to take into account the key thesis here outlined, it will include religious programming of the moderate kind: regular sermons preached by moderate Muslim preachers; news reports about the leaders and millions of followers of moderate Islamic religious figures; translations of moderate Islamic texts into many languages, and so on. Such religious programming should not replace, but significantly add to, the secular messages that currently dominate public diplomacy.

Focus on leaders and opinion-makers. Public diplomacy needs to focus on moderate Islamic and secular leaders and opinion-makers as opposed to the masses themselves. One of the most important findings of sociology is that it is very difficult to reach the masses directly — persuasion flows in two steps: first to leaders and then to their followers. These leaders may include elected officials, heads of civil society bodies from universities or foundations, community leaders, religious functionaries, and (arguably) celebrities. American policymakers, however, are often informed by the Madison Avenue approach, in which commercials sell items directly to the people. But

Madison Avenue sells products to which people are already accustomed, and to which there is little passionate or ideological resistance. The same methods cannot be used to “sell” attitude changes, say, to reduce anti-Americanism, ethnic tensions, or fanaticism. To the extent that such attitudes can be influenced, one must first reach out to those people who are already held in high regard and trust, who already lead, who already are established as opinion-makers. Public diplomacy must identify moderate mullahs and imams in a given nation as well as import them from other countries where moderate Islam is dominant, to form and spread messages that support the development of a new, pro-social moral culture.

Just as not all of Islam is of one kind, so it is a grave mistake to treat all Islamic religious figures as if they were of one kind. Failure to do this was all too apparent in the ways U.S. officials tried for years to marginalize Iraq’s Grand Ayatollah Sayyid Ali Husaini Sistani. Al-Sistani has played a major role in opposing Shi’a extremists like Muqtada al-Sadr, has openly denounced the insurgency, and even professed his belief in the separation of mosque and state.

The U.S. should actively oppose only those religious teachings that promote violence and persecution.

There are numerous Muslim leaders like Mohammad Khan, a village cleric in Afghanistan, who supports allowing women to work and girls to attend school, so long as they cover themselves. The United States should embrace such clerics rather than deriding the *hijab* universally as a sign of bigotry and a gross violation of human rights.

The United States must accept that moderate Muslim clerics will be just that, moderate and religious. Even if they reject — at least initially — several parts of the liberal-democratic program, they can still promote a moral culture that is opposed to violence, the essential starting point for rebuilding newly liberated societies.

Religious exchanges centered overseas. Various exchange programs, such as the Fulbright Scholarship and the International Visitors Program, should be expanded to include moderate religious figures. In the past most of these programs included almost exclusively secular leaders, professionals, business people, and students.

The dominant model of foreign exchange programs is to bring people from target nations to America and to send Americans to these nations, on the assumption that if foreigners experienced life in the United States or came to know Americans, they would be won over. Bringing religious figures from Afghanistan to a typical American suburb is unlikely to have the desired effect. It would be much more effective if such clergy were sent to cultural and religious centers in nations where moderate Islam is dominant, for instance in Indonesia and Bangladesh. For the same reasons, it would serve to facilitate extended visits by moderate Islamic clerics from the said

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nations to Iraq and Afghanistan.

Schooling. Next to families, the most important place to promote a new moral culture is in schools. Hence the proper concern about what new textbooks should include, and what the new curricula should encompass. Americans' instinctive response is that public schools should not teach values, that such matters should be left up to families and private places such as churches. However, in nations that are bereft of social order — which, as we have seen, is typical of newly liberated nations — and in places where families themselves need help in finding new normative sources, schools must play a role. In effect, public schools are much more reachable than families, given that schools depend on the state for funding, and given that their educational content is publicly set. Indeed, the deliberations and dialogues around the question of which new values should be fostered in schools following the collapse of a tyranny or theocracy are of service not just for the pupils but also for the adult generation. Setting normative agendas for schools can thus serve as a catalyst for forming new shared moral understandings within the communities whose children these schools serve.

Support moderate Muslim parties. In Turkey, the now ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP), is made up of the kind of Muslims the West should support as an antidote to the extremists. Stephen Kinzer, a former Istanbul correspondent for the *New York Times*, put it well when he said that the “so-called ‘Islamist’” AKP is “extremely moderate by worldwide standards,” and its members would be “ostracized as infidels” were they transplanted to Afghanistan or Iran. As more and more Turks favor a moderate Islamic society and are no longer enamored with a dominantly secular one (after all, secularism was imposed on Turkey in the first place by a fierce autocrat and the military), the West should embrace this development and give support to these moderate religious elements. Moreover, the same change of strategy can be applied to other parts of the Muslim world. Large segments of it are not satisfied with secular government. There are sizable moderate Muslim parties and various other kinds of groupings in Indonesia, Morocco, Bangladesh, and Malaysia.

In sum, newly liberated nations need new sources of social order, especially a moral culture to legitimate the new order. Religion, in its moderate, anti-violent versions, is a major source of such a culture. There can be no question that the development of such cultures will be gradual, but outside powers can facilitate and foster the desired outcome through the measures discussed here.