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Source: *The National Interest*, No. 35 (Spring 1994), pp. 84-86

Published by: Center for the National Interest

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/42894935>

Accessed: 13-04-2017 12:52 UTC

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Islam's Intramural Struggle

Daniel Pipes

MANY WESTERNERS have speculated that a confrontation between Islam and the West is in the offing. For example, Samuel Huntington wrote in a recent, much noted article, that the centuries-old military interaction between these two civilizations "could become more violent" in the future.¹ But a civilization-to-civilization showdown is not truly likely, for the simple reason that Muslims (and probably Westerners) are too diverse to stand as a bloc.

Instead, the cultural fireworks ahead will more likely take place among Muslims themselves—between those eager to accept Western ways and those who reject them. On one side stand those Muslims confident to learn from outsiders, oriented toward democracy and ready to integrate into the world; on the other stand those who are fearful, who seek strong rule, and who hope to withdraw from the world. In a word, it's a battle between secularist and fundamentalist Muslims—to be more precise, a competition between two of the great countries of the Middle East, Turkey and Iran. It's likely to be a long, deep, and difficult fight.

Trouble is, the Turks don't yet realize that they are engaged in this battle.

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The Fundamentalist Threat

ISLAM ACQUIRED a new public role in February 1979, when Ayatollah Khomeini established the Islamic Republic of Iran. Never before had a government come to power so determined to impose its fundamentalist vision (meaning above all an intent to apply the Sacred Law of Islam, the *Shari'a*) in its own domain and to spread it through the Muslim world.

Khomeini and his associates achieved considerable success. By imposing radically new institutions and customs on Iranians, they managed in just fifteen years to alter the basic texture of daily life in Iran. A small but indicative example: the mullahs banned traditional wedding songs, so marriages are now celebrated with chants like "Salute to the martyrs," "Death of the opponents of the supreme jurist," and other slogans.

The mullahs also had a powerful impact outside Iran: their allies already rule in the Sudan, and others may win power in Tajikistan, Afghanistan, Lebanon, Egypt, and Algeria. Further, Tehran has acquired significant influence over developments in Iraq, Bahrain, the United Arab Emirates, and Bosnia.

How have the Khomeinists achieved so much? Not so much through money—mismanagement and war have left the country poorer than in the shah's time, with a dis-

¹Samuel Huntington, "The Clash of Civilizations?" *Foreign Affairs*, Summer 1993, p. 32.

contented citizenry demanding improvements in its standard of living—as through an extraordinary act of will. This takes two forms. First, the mullahs promote Ayatollah Khomeini's vision of society through an ambitious media campaign in Iran and abroad, in many languages and in many countries, utilizing every avenue from short-wave radio to scholarly books. Their efforts have established Khomeinism as a live option throughout the Muslim world. Second, they intimidate those who offer alternatives to the Khomeinist scheme—secularist Muslims, Western educators in the Middle East, Iranian dissidents in exile—by attacking and killing some of their leaders.

The hush now descending over Muslim intellectual life testifies to the success of this double-pronged offensive. Fundamentalists have nearly destroyed the American University of Beirut. Salman Rushdie has led a fugitive's life for five years, while his publishers in Japan, Italy, and Norway have been injured or killed. Prominent Egyptian secularists have been assaulted. Dozens of secularists in Algeria have been murdered in a systematic campaign of assassination. The silencing of secularist Muslims means that the modernist strain of thought is disappearing in Muslim cultures in favor of obscurantist doctrines. As fundamentalist ideas infiltrate the schools, children no longer have access to a modern outlook. Political leaders are scared, intellectuals keep their mouths shut. Should this trend continue, the Middle East's prospects look bleak. Whether fundamentalists win or lose ultimately depends not on Westerners but on Muslims. As the exiled Iranian journalist Amir Taheri rightly argues, intimidation and terror perpetrated by Muslims has "to be faced and fought, and must eventually be defeated by forces of life in the Muslim world."²

The Turkish Model

TURKEY HAS a special place in the fundamentalists' world view, for they correctly see it as their ultimate enemy. In

part, this reflects the Republic of Turkey's status as the great success story of the Muslim world. Whether one looks at political stability, economic growth, or cultural achievement, it has no match. Personal freedoms and human rights are greater than anywhere else. (Consider: however unhappy the fate of Kurds in Turkey may be, they flee from Iraq into Turkey, and not the other way around.) One can validly criticize this or that about Turkey, but its twentieth-century development represents the main alternative to the instability, violence, and repression coming out of so many Muslim countries.

In part, too, Turkey threatens fundamentalist Muslims because it has a uniquely well-formulated and widely accepted philosophy of secularism. The Kemalist doctrine of laicism has been tested in elections over four decades and enjoys proven support among the Turkish population. No other Muslim country has anything remotely like it. This becomes very evident when politicians in Egypt, Tunisia, and Algeria crack down on their fundamentalist violence; lacking secularist ideas with which to combat fundamentalists on the level of ideology, they treat visionaries as common criminals. This crude approach invariably alienates substantial elements of the population.

Fundamentalists necessarily feel insecure as long as Turkey remains a secularist society with a democratic government, a free market, civil liberties, and belongs to NATO. The Turkish model threatens to undermine the Khomeinist experiment much as the Western model ultimately undermined the Soviet experiment. For fundamentalism to survive, the mullahs need to have democracy in Turkey extinguished, to have its market restricted, civil liberties curtailed, the *Shari'a* applied, and the country out of NATO—in effect, an Islamic Republic of Turkey.

While not prepared to take Turkey on directly, the Iranians do already engage in a

²Amir Taheri, *Holy Terror: Inside the World of Islamic Terrorism* (Bethesda: Adler and Adler 1987), p. 232.

wide range of actions against Ankara, including both internal sabotage and internal aggression. They engage in terrorist activities on Turkish soil and seek to spread their vision among Turks, terrorizing those who resist their message. They (along with Saudi elements too) actively provide clandestine aid to groups—like the Süleymançıs and Cemalettin Kaplan's Milli Görüş which share their vision of overthrowing the government and replacing it with a Khomeinist order. In January 1993, they assassinated the prominent anti-fundamentalist journalist Uğur Mumcu; a few months later, they burned down a hotel in Sivas where leftist journalists were staying, killing thirty-seven.

If Turkey stands as the greatest challenge to the fundamentalist Muslims in Iran, they in turn pose one of the most formidable threats to Turkey's security. To stave off this threat, Turks need to call on the full range of economic, military, and diplomatic measures. But ideology is probably the most important weapon of all, for (as in the case of the U.S.-Soviet face-off) ultimately the two sides offer rival visions of life. Turks will need to emulate the mullahs and disseminate their own ideas to the Muslim world. They will find a ready audience, including students hungry for alternatives, politicians facing down fundamentalists, and intellectuals in need of moral support.

For Turks, exporting ideas has several implications, few of them welcome. First, it means paying more attention to the Middle East, a troubled region that Turks have happily ignored for decades and are generally reluctant to engage in now.

Second, it means translating works of the Kemalist legacy into Persian and Arabic, toning down their Turkish-oriented quality to render them more suitable to a non-Turkish audience, and adding up-to-date introductions to make them suitable to the 1990s.

Third, it will involve extending the domestic institutions for spreading the laic ideas of Kemalism to the outside world and subsidizing them heavily. Embassies will have to make these materials widely available, either

free or at minimal cost. Radios should broadcast them, conferences study them. Other initiatives (sponsoring writers with a Kemalist outlook, establishing film competitions) would further spread their impact.

Last, it will be necessary to accept the sacrifices in both treasury and blood that standing up to the fundamentalists will involve. The fundamentalists observe few rules, so their opponents should be prepared for vicious responses. Turkish reluctance to confront this radical movement is understandable—no one wants to butt heads with fanatics.

Turks seem not yet to realize what the mullahs know: that fundamentalist Islam will rise or fall depending on what Turks do, and that Iran and Turkey are therefore engaged in a mortal combat.

The West's Role

THOUGH THE West has only a limited role in the confrontation between Iran and Turkey, a primarily Muslim drama, it does still have a part to play. The U.S. government should use its moral weight, military might, economic strength, and its diplomacy to encourage the Turks to stand strong. Washington can pressure the European Union to accept Turkey as a full-fledged member, signal Moscow how seriously it takes Ankara's concerns in the Balkans, Caucuses, and Central Asia; coordinate Iraq policy more closely with the Turks; and, of course, let the Turks know, again and again, that we stand by them in their travails with Tehran.

Of course, close involvement with Turkey could make it more vulnerable to fundamentalist accusations that Ankara is an agent of the "Great Satan." That's always something to worry about and bear in mind, but when the Turks turn to us for support, we must not refuse them. Turkey is a model we hope other Muslim countries will emulate. In an era of quasi-isolationism, it will be hard to find much spirit in America for increasing links to Turkey. But the stakes are high and much hinges on the result. □