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Islam's Troubled Geography

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Secretary of State Hillary Clinton's recent visit to Pakistan and the Middle East, along with the shooting tragedy at Ft. Hood, has put radical Islam under the microscope again. Around the country, bloggers, journalists, military leaders, and the FBI are trying to make sense of, and explain, the Ft. Hood shooting.

However, there is a bigger issue for U.S. policy makers to consider that appears to be lost in the rhetoric about the shooting and potential links to radical Islam. Secretary Clinton addressed this issue indirectly both in Pakistan and in Jerusalem during her recent tour. Radical Islam has more to do with troubled geography than with religious ideology, and herein lies the problem.

A lack of understanding about Islam's geography continues to hinder any real progress in finding solutions to big problems like terrorism, authoritarianism, and miserable socio-economic conditions for millions of Muslims.

Islam's position at the geographic center of world trade from the 10th to the 16th centuries played an important role in its scientific, economic, and political influence.

Islam's diverse constituent societies mediated trade and communication between East and West, notwithstanding the threats to religious and territorial integrity from orthodox 'Ulama, the Crusades, the Mongols, and others. The rise of the Atlantic-centered economy from the 16th century onwards, spurred by European advances in shipping, weaponry, and New World resources, weakened the Islamic world, reduced its profits, and put significant pressure on its social structures.

Although Islam stretched from Mauritania and the Balkans to southeast Asia, Muslim Arab populations remained quite small, while in non-Arab regions, Islamic polities ruled significant numbers of non-Muslims. With the rise of imperial, industrial Western Europe in the 19th century, traditional Middle Eastern territories became increasingly marginalized, and attractive targets for European capital, political intrigue, and territorial ambitions.

Territory provided access to resources, which funded political and economic power. Power, in turn, facilitated the acquisition of, or influence over, more territory. Over the past century, Islam, and particularly the Middle Eastern countries, suffered from external political and economic strategies driven by a desire to control and influence territory, thus providing access to resources (like oil) and enhancing power. The best interests of the Western capitalist economies were met by supporting archaic, despotic, and absolutist monarchies and dictatorships that ensured stability and a territorial status quo.

The rising tide of regional nationalism remained severely constrained as potential democracies ran into the buzz saw of corrupt regimes that repressed and marginalized mainstream Islamists. Corruption and repression forced political extremists underground or to the territorial hinterlands (Sudan, Pakistan's Swat Valley, or rural Afghanistan), which contributed, in part, to the rise of anti-Americanism and global terrorism.

These days, a strong belief exists around the world that Islam is anti-democratic, anti-capitalist, and anti-West. Little doubt exists that distorted interpretations of Islamic religious texts have been used to justify the slaughter of innocents, but this does not mean that mainstream Islam and its constituent territories unanimously support this approach.

Just recently, the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group proclaimed a new Jihadi Code that denounced Al Qaeda's tactics and called for Islamic extremists to use peaceful means for their cause, arguing that violence against innocents is un-Islamic. Indeed, many Islamists support the argument that Islam needs significant political

and social reform if it is to cope with the challenges of a 21st century global society.

However, achieving a more peaceful Islamic world that is integrated into a democratic, capitalist global system requires a re-evaluation of its geographies and of its external and internal relationships. Territorial solutions to Palestinian desires for a national territory, to Kurdish demands for freedom, to Israeli security, or to a democratic Iraq and Afghanistan, and for a host of other political, economic, and social needs require Secretary Clinton and others to rethink how they “see” the Islamic world geographically.

Many of the challenges facing the U.S. vis-à-vis the Islamic world have much to do with the why of where. A greater understanding of the Islamic world’s myriad geographies is not the silver bullet for all that ails the realm! Yet it certainly would help politicians and policymakers to loosen the straightjacket around Islam and help its constituent societies achieve more creative, productive, and integrated lives.

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