

US post-9/11 Strategy in the Muslim World: Promote Sunni, Shiite, Arab and non-Arab Divides

Rand Corporation Study Conducted on behalf of the US Air Force

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A new Rand Corporation study suggests that Sunni, Shiite and Arab, non-Arab divides should be exploited to promote the US policy objectives in the Muslim world.

The recently released Rand study – titled “The Muslim World After 9/11” – was conducted on behalf of the US Air Force. One of the primary objective of the study was to “identify the key cleavages and fault lines among sectarian, ethnic, regional, and national lines and to assess how these cleavages generate challenges and opportunities for the United States.”

The research brief was issued by the Rand Corporation under the title: [US strategy in the Muslim World after 9/11](#).

“The majority of the world’s Muslims are Sunni, but a significant minority, about 15 percent of the global Muslim population, are Shi’ites..... The expectations of Iraqi Shi’ites for a greater say in the governance of their country presents an opportunity for the United States to align its policy with Shi’ite aspirations for greater freedom of religious and political expression, in Iraq and elsewhere,” the study said.

The study pointed out that with the moves toward rapprochement between Tehran and Riyadh, there are reports that Saudi Arabia’s Shi’ites are now turning from Iran and placing their hopes on the United States.

“Their expectation is that any move toward democracy in Iraq would give the Shi’ite majority a greater say in the politics of that country and increase their ability to help their brethren in Saudi Arabia. Such expectations could present an opportunity for the United States to align its policy with Shi’ite aspirations for greater freedom of religious and political expression and a say in their own affairs in countries controlled by others.”

On the division between the Arab and the non-Arab worlds, the Rand Study pointed out: “Arabs constitute only about 20 percent of the world’s Muslims, yet interpretations of Islam, political and otherwise, are often filtered through an Arab lens. A great deal of the discourse on Muslim issues and grievances is actually discourse on Arab issues and grievances. For reasons that have more to do with historical and cultural development than religion, the Arab world exhibits a higher incidence of economic, social, and political disorders than other regions of the so-called developing world.”

“By contrast, the non-Arab parts of the Muslim world are politically more inclusive, boast the majority of the democratic or partially democratic governments, and are more secular in

outlook. Although the Arab Middle East has long been regarded (and certainly views itself) as the core of the Muslim world, the most innovative and sophisticated contemporary work in Islam is being done on the “periphery”—in countries such as Indonesia and in Muslim communities in the West, leading some scholars to ask whether Islam’s center of gravity is now shifting to more dynamic regions of the Muslim world.”

The Rand Report holds the post independence political and economic failures responsible for the current political environment of the Muslim world in general and the Arab world in particular. “Many of the ills and pathologies that afflict many countries in this part of the world and that generate much of the extremism we are concerned about derive from—and contribute to—economic and political failure.”

This situation, the study argued, leads to the concept of structural anti-Westernism (or anti-Americanism). “This concept holds that that Muslim anger has deep roots in the political and social structures of some Muslim countries and that opposition to certain U.S. policies merely provides the content and opportunity for the expression of this anger.”

According to the Rand study, “outside the Arab Middle East, Islamization has involved the importation of Arab-origin ideology and religious and social practices— a phenomenon that we refer to as *Arabization*.”

The Rand study said that a number of critical or catalytic events have altered the political environment in the Muslim world in fundamental ways. “Catalytic events include the Iranian revolution, the Afghan war, the Gulf War of 1991, the global war on terrorism that followed the September 11 terrorist attacks, and the Iraq war of 2003.”

The Palestinian-Israeli conflict and the Kashmir conflict, the study said, are not catalytic events per se but rather chronic conditions that have shaped political discourse in the Middle East and South Asia for over half a century, the study said.

The Palestinian-Israeli conflict and the Kashmir have retarded the political maturation of the Arab world and Pakistan by diverting scarce material, political, and psychic resources from pressing internal problems, the study added.

The Rand study called for madrassa and mosques reforms in the Muslim world and suggested that US should “support the efforts of governments and moderate Muslim organizations to ensure that mosques, and the social services affiliated with them, serve their communities and do not serve as platforms for the spread of radical ideologies.” In chapter on Islam & Politics in Pakistan, the Rand Study even suggested that there should be government appointed and paid professional imams in all mosques to promote “civil Islam”.

“While only Muslims themselves can effectively challenge the message of radical Islam, there is much the United States and like-minded countries can do to empower Muslim moderates in this ideological struggle,” said Angel Rabas, RAND senior policy analyst and lead author of the report. “The struggle in the Muslim world is essentially a war of ideas, the outcome of which will determine the future direction of the Muslim world and profoundly affect vital U.S. security interests,” he added.

The Rand Study also calls on the United States and its allies to support efforts in Muslim nations to:

- Create a strong and vocal network to unite the fractured voices of moderate Muslims. This can provide moderates with a platform for their message and provide alternatives to extremist movements. An external catalyst may be needed to give life to this goal.
- Support Muslim civil society groups that advocate moderation and modernity. The United States may have to assist in the development of civil society institutions where they do not currently exist.
- Disrupt radical networks. Engage Islamists to participate in the political process, and strengthen relations with the military in Muslim nations. In the war against terror, the U.S. should demonstrate that its efforts are meant to promote democratic change.
- Reform Islamic schools. Educational systems have long been a vital component of radical Islamic indoctrination and recruitment. The best way to counter this is to help Islamic schools ensure they are providing modern education and marketable skills for future generations.
- Create economic opportunities in Muslim nations, particularly for young people. Economic assistance programs will not guarantee an end to extremism or terrorism, but could reduce the perception that the U.S. relies solely on military instruments. Creating jobs and social services would also give young people an alternative to radical Islamic organizations.

In March 2004, the Rand Corporation released a report – titled “Civil Democratic Islam: Partners, Resources, and Strategies” – that called for supporting the modernists Muslims against “fundamentalists and traditionalists” and promoting Sufism to formulate a market economy version of Islam.

Angel Rabasa, RAND senior policy analyst, is the lead author of the 567-page new study. Other authors of the study include Cheryl Benard, author of “Civil Democratic Islam: Partners, Resources, and Strategies” and Christine Fair, formerly of RAND and now at the U.S. Institute of Peace heading by Daniel Pipes.

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