

**B422. "Gemäßigten Islam im Irak unterstützen." (Support Moderated Islam in Iraq)  
Süddeutsche Zeitung Nr. 120 (May 26, 2003).**

Original English version of Article in Süddeutsche Zeitung

---

The United States in Iraq should cease promoting a secular civil society as the only alternative to a Taliban-like Shia theocracy. We cannot quell the religious yearnings of millions of Iraqis (and many others elsewhere) merely by fostering democracy and capitalism. The most effective way to counter a theocracy is to promote a religious moderate, liberal religious institutions.

The First Amendment's disestablishment clause is not a foreign policy tool, but a peculiar American conception. Just because the American government is banned from promoting religion within the United States – in which religion is thriving – does not mean that the State Department and the Pentagon cannot promote religious elements as part of the civil society we are helping to develop in Iraq, Afghanistan, and elsewhere.

I know a bit about how receptive Shiites are to a non-Wahhabi, moderate Islam because they laid out their position during a three-day meeting in Iran, which I attended a year ago. Although the meeting in Iran was organized by the reformers, headed by Seyyed Ataollah Mohajerani, several hardliners also participated. The main point, repeatedly stressed during the meeting, was that both Shia camps – the hardliners and the reformers – want to live in an Islamic society. The main difference between them is that the prevailing hardliners are committed to enforcing the religious code by the use of moral squads, secret police, and jails, while the reformers favor encouraging people to be devout, rather than making them abide by the Prophet's dictates. The line I heard repeated most often was that "if you do not force people to come, they will want to come."

Liberal Islam differs from the Wahhabi version in that it draws on the members of the community for consultations (shura) for interpretations of the text rather than on rulings by the Mullahs. It acknowledges that the Koran acquires different meanings as the times change. (In their words, needs to be "retranslated.") Liberal Islam is supportive rather than condemning. It is spiritual and social rather than political. Indeed it differs from the rigid authoritarian version, by several more orders of magnitude, but along the same dimensions as liberal Protestants differ from Southern Baptists, and Reform Jews from Ultra-Orthodox ones.

Specifically, instead of demanding that the current Madrassas be replaced by secular schools, as Senator Biden suggested, we may favor the inclusion of religious electives in public schools (as long as the teachers are qualified and hence not fundamentalist). We should welcome the continuation of some provisions of social services by religious bodies, as long as the funds are used for social and not political or religious purposes (call them faith-based institutions). And we should allow the state to pay the salaries of clergy and for the maintenance of places of worship as most democracies (other than the United States and France) do.

One may ask, "what about Christians and those who do not wish to adhere to any religion?" Such a question ignores the essential difference between a state and a society, between a government enforcing adherence to a religious code and promoting it as one alternative available to those who freely seek to embrace it. Lest this sound too abstract, one should note that despite our insistence on the separation of state and church, we too allow various

religious authorities to conduct marriages that are recognized by the state as well as enable people to be married in a civil ceremony without any religious trappings.

The trouble is that so far we have been approaching Iraq as if we favor only secular institutions. For instance, the 13 points released by the U.S. Central Command headquarters in Qatar in mid-April state that Iraq must be a democracy, that the rule of law must be paramount, and that the role of women must be respected – all of which are fine, all speak to the secular elements of the future Iraq.

To favor liberal Islam as an antidote to fundamentalist Islam is not to be confused with a related but different question, whether Islam can be compatible with a democratic regime. This question concerns whether Islam can live with free elections, tolerate a free press, and so on. I take it for granted that Iraq should have a democratic form of government. However, it should be one that does not treat religion as a threat per se but, potentially, as a mainstay of the civil society, and hence should be promoted, in its moderate forms.

The current U.S. position reflects, whether deliberately or unwittingly, the "end of history" conception that all ideologies are on their last leg, as the world embraces the American ideals of democracy, human rights, and the free market. This idea, in turn, is but an extension of the Enlightenment conceit that modernity is based on rational thinking, which religion is not, and hence it is history, while secularism (reason, science) will govern the future. However, as we are learning, all over the world, people have spiritual needs that cannot be addressed, let alone satisfied, by Enlightenment ideals. Hence, we have seen an explosive growth of Christianity in East Asia and Africa; a resurgence of religion in Russia and other former communist nations in Eastern Europe, and a rise in Islam not only in countries that were never modernized, but even in those that had extensive secular, modern periods, most tellingly, in Turkey. People are seeking answers to questions such as why we are cast into this world; why we are born to die; what is the purpose of life; and what we owe our children, what they owe elderly parents, and what is due to our friends and community. Neither democracy nor capitalism speaks to these issues. Hence for the many millions of people who acutely feel a need to respond to these transcendental and moral questions, there are main two options: a variety of hardliners and moderate religious answers. Which one we should favor is clear, as long as we get off our Enlightenment horses.

Amitai Etzioni is a University Professor at George Washington University and the author of the just released *My Brother's Keeper: A Memoir and a Message*.