



“Is Political Islam Part of the Problem, or Part of the Solution?”
Seminar Summary

Alastair Crooke and Martin Kramer spoke at CSIS on September 19 about the wisdom of seeking to incorporate radical Islamist groups into mainstream politics. Crooke argued that the West has no alternative but to push for their integration, whereas Kramer held that Western—and specifically U.S. government—efforts to court such groups would prove disastrous.

Crooke’s comments were largely informed by a series of meetings that his group, Conflicts Forum, held with leaders of Hezbollah, Hamas, the Muslim Brotherhood and the Pakistani Jemaah Islamiyah, groups that he contends are the “pillars of political Islam.” He argued that these groups have come to share a broad set of goals with U.S. policymakers, including democratic and constitutional reform, open elections, good government and an enlarged sphere for political participation. They also seek good relations with the U.S. government.

As Crooke described it, the key ideological clash is not between Western and Muslim civilizations generally. Instead, it is a struggle within the broader Islamist movement. He argued that “Islamic revivalists,” such as those with whom his organization held meetings, are willing to work with the West to engender reform. They seek to mend and strengthen their societies, not completely remake them. Directly opposed to revival groups are revolutionary, jihadi groups, such as al-Qaeda. These groups seek to destroy the “neo-colonial” status quo, and they reject any Western influence in their political system. These groups are not only opposed to Western intervention, but also to those who cooperate with the West. They see Hezbollah’s participation in the Lebanese government as treasonous, and they label Hamas’s leaders as collaborators.

Crooke submitted that the West should engage “revivalist” groups partly because of shared policy objectives, but even more importantly because they are among the very few that enjoy both high credibility and legitimacy in their own communities. While it might be more desirable to work with moderate, liberal, secular groups, they are too marginalized to represent a real alternative to these mainstream Islamist parties; he suggested that efforts to create such groups are “doomed to failure.” He suggested that rather than see Islamist groups merely as a problem, the U.S. government should see them “potentially as part of the solution.”

Kramer rejected Crooke’s categorization and prescriptions. Pointing to tentative U.S. support for the Iranian opposition under the Shah, France’s support for Ayatollah Khomeini in the 1970s, U.S. backing for *mujahideen* in Afghanistan in the 80’s, and the UK’s tolerance for radical Islamists before the July 7, 2005 bombings, Kramer said that the historical record of Western efforts to moderate Islamists’ behavior was abysmal. He

also argued that government crackdowns have successfully turned back violent, religiously inspired groups in Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Algeria and elsewhere, and that the rise of such groups to power is not inevitable.

Recognizing, however, that there may be some benefit to limited participation with select Islamist groups, Kramer proposed his own typology: groups for whom entry into politics is a “step up,” and others for whom it is a “step down.” In the former category, he put the ruling AK Party in Turkey, SCIRI and Da’wa in Iraq, and perhaps Egypt’s Muslim Brotherhood. They are groups that have been excluded from the public sphere for decades, and could only gain from an increased political role. He argued that such groups have been “domesticated,” and they can be co-opted at relatively low cost.

Kramer argued that groups like Hamas and Hezbollah pose a much greater danger. Because of their wealth, weapons, and disciplined (and persistent) use of violence, these groups come to the table with a strong sense of entitlement. Indeed, they demand almost to be treated as a state within a state. As such, they threaten the very states that seek to integrate them. He argued that there should be no official engagement until these groups give up their weapons (although he did not object to unofficial contacts such as those that Crooke was pursuing).

Kramer stated that his typology is based on the history and actions of such groups, not their statements. He suggested that the U.S. should press democratization only in places in which the Islamists have been “domesticated,” since the desire of “undomesticated” groups was supremacy, not parity. He noted that in at least some places, governments may be overly restrictive of political participation. In response to a question, he suggested that countries such as Tunisia might re-examine whether they are being too exclusionary of religious parties in their efforts to protect the state.

Crooke said it was a mistake to focus only on outcomes, instead of processes. In his view, enveloping people and institutions in processes has the potential to change the groups, and with them the outcomes of those processes. He invoked Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas’s efforts to include Hamas in politics, suggesting that free and fair Palestinian legislative elections (now scheduled for January 2006) would “revalidate” the path to peace. He reminded the audience of Hamas statements that demilitarization would be part of a process of entering political activity, but could not be an *a priori* condition.

Despite Crooke and Kramer’s differences of opinion, there was some surprising common ground. Both agreed on utility of unofficial engagement with groups that seek it, and both agreed on the importance of demilitarization. They also agreed that there exists a spectrum of religiously inspired parties, although they disagreed on where specific parties fell on that spectrum. Their most basic difference was on democratization. Crooke argued that politics were opening up, and as such, they need to include broad swaths of political belief that are now excluded from orthodox politics. Kramer worried that reaching out to excluded groups planted the seeds of chaos and collapse, and suggested that the best path forward lay in states’ relying primarily on coercive tactics against those who seek to undermine those very states.