

Washington's Alliance with "Moderate Islam": Containing Rebellion, Defending Empire

By [Prof. James Petras](#)

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The dynamic of democratic, nationalist and class struggles throughout the Muslim world has set in motion a new constellation of alliances between the imperial West (US and European Union) and Islamist parties, leaders and regimes, dubbed "moderate" by US officials, propagandists and academics.

This essay analyzes the changing contemporary context of imperial domination, especially the demise of longstanding client regimes. It then examines the previous significant ties between western imperial powers and Islamist movements and regimes and the basis of 'historical collaboration'.

The third part of the paper will outline the political circumstances in which the imperial powers embrace "moderate" Islamists in government and utilize "armed fundamentalists" in opposition to secular regimes. We will critically analyze how "moderate" Islam is defined by the Western imperialist powers. Is this a tactical or strategic alliance? What are the political "trade-offs"? What do imperialism's neo-liberal clients and their new 'moderate' Muslim allies have in common and how do they differ?

In conclusion we will evaluate the viability of this alliance and its capacity to contain and deflect the popular democratic movements and repress the burgeoning class and national struggles, especially in regard to the 'obstacles' posed by the Israel-US-Zionist ties and the continued IMF policies which promise to worsen the crises in the Muslim countries.

The Transition from Neo-Liberal Client Rulers to Power-Sharing with Moderate Islamists

The key motivation in Washington's and the European imperial troika's (England, France and Germany) embrace of what their press and officialdom hail as "moderate" Islamist parties has been the collapse or weakening of their long-term client rulers. Faced with the ouster of Mubarak, in Egypt, Ali in Tunisia and Saleh in Yemen, mass protests in Morocco and Algeria, the US-EU turned to conservative Muslim leaders who were willing to work within the existing state institutional framework (including the army and state police), uphold the capitalist order and align with the empire against anti-imperial movements and states. In Egypt, the Freedom and Justice Party (FJP) (the political arm of the Muslim Brotherhood), in Tunisia the Renaissance Party, in Morocco the Justice and Development Party have all indicated their willingness to serve as reliable partners in blocking the pro-democracy movements that challenge the socio-economic status quo and the long-standing military-imperial linkages.

The Islamist collaborators are called "moderate and respectable" because they agree to

participate in elections within the boundaries of the established political and economic order; they have dropped any criticism of imperial and colonial treaties and trade agreements signed by the previous client regions – including ones which collaborate with Israel’s colonization of Palestine.

Equally important “moderate” means supporting imperial wars against nationalist and secular Arab republics, such as Syria and Libya , and isolating and/or repressing class based trade unions and secular-left parties.

“Moderate” Islamists have become the Empire’s ‘contraceptive of choice’ against any chance the massive Arab peoples’ revolt might give birth to substantive egalitarian social changes and bring those brutal pro- western officials, responsible for so many crimes against humanity, to justice .

The West and their client officials in the military and police have agreed to a kind of “power-sharing’ with the moderate/respectable (read ‘reactionary’) Islamist parties. The Islamists would be responsible for imposing orthodox economic policies and re-establishing ‘order’ (i.e. bolstering the existing one) in partnership with pro-multinational bank economists and pro US-EU generals and security officials. In exchange the Islamists could take certain ministries, appoint their members, finance electoral clientele among the poor and push their ‘moderate’ religious, social and cultural agenda. Basically, the elected Islamists would replace the old corrupt dictatorial regimes in running the state and signing off on more free trade agreements with the EU. Their role would keep the leftists, nationalists and populists out of power and from gaining mass support. Their job would substitute spiritual solace and “inner worth” via Islam in place of redistributing land, income and power from the elite, including the foreign multi-nationals to the peasants, workers, unemployed and exploited low-paid employees.

Why the Empire Arms Fundamentalist Anti-Secular Muslims.

While the US and EU have backed respectable “moderate Islam” in heading off a popular upheaval of the young and unemployed, in other contexts they have enlisted violent, fundamentalist Islamic terrorists to overthrow secular independent anti-imperialists regimes – like Libya, Syria – just as they had done earlier in Afghanistan and Yugoslavia. The US, Qatar and the European troika financed and armed Libyan fundamentalist militias and then engaged in a murderous eight months air and sea assault to ensure their client’s ‘victory’ over the secular Gaddafi regime. Fresh from NATO’s success, the US, the European ‘Troika’ and Turkey, with the backing of the League of Arab collaborator princes and emirs, have financed a violent Muslim Brotherhood insurrection in Syria, intent on destroying the nationalist economy and modern secular state.

The US and EU have openly unleashed their fundamentalists allies in order to destroy independent adversaries in the name of “democracy” and ‘humanitarian intervention’, a laughable claim in light of decade long colonial wars of occupation in Iraq and Afghanistan. All target regimes have one crime in common: Using their national resources to develop modern secular states – independent of imperial dictates.

NATO implements its campaigns through conservative ‘moderate’ or armed fundamentalist Islamist movements depending on the specific needs, circumstances and range of options in any given target nation. With the fall of pro-Empire ‘secular dictatorships’ in Egypt and Tunisia , pliable conservative Islamist leaders are the fall back “lesser evil”. When the

opportunity to overthrow an independent secular or nationalist regime arises, armed and violent fundamentalist mercenaries become the political vehicle of choice.

As with European empires in the past, the modern Western imperial countries have relied on retrograde religious parties and leaders to collaborate and serve their economic and military interests and to provide mercenaries for imperial armies to savage any anti-imperialist social revolutionaries. In that sense US and European rulers are neither 'pro nor anti' Islam, it all depends on their national and class position. Islamists who collaborate with Empire are "moderate" allies and if they attack an anti-imperialist regime, they become 'freedom fighters'. On the other hand, they become "terrorists" or "fundamentalists" when they oppose imperial occupation, pillage or colonial settlements.

Contemporary History of Islamist-Imperial Collaboration

The historical record of western imperial expansion reveals many instances of collaboration and cooptation as well as conflict with Islamist regimes, movements and parties. In the early 1960's the CIA backed a brutal military coup against the secular Indonesian nationalist regime of Sukarno, and encouraged their puppet dictator General Suharto to unleash Muslim militia in a veritable "holy war" exterminating nearly one million leftist trade unionists, school teachers, students, farmers, communists or suspected sympathizers and their family members. The horrific 'Jakarta Option' became a model for CIA operations elsewhere. In Yugoslavia the US and Europe promoted and financed fundamentalist Muslims in Bosnia, importing mujahedeen who would later form part of Al Qaida, and then backed the Kosovo Liberation Army, a known terrorist organization, in order to completely break-up and ethnically 'cleanse' a modern secular multi-national state - going so far as to have Americans and NATO bomb Belgrade for the first time since the Nazis in the Second World War.

During President Carter's administration, the CIA joined with Saudi Arabia's ruling royalty, providing billions of dollars in arms and military supplies to Afghan Muslim fundamentalists in their brutal but successful Jihad overthrowing a modern, secular nationalist regime backed by the USSR. The murderous fate of school teachers and educated women in the aftermath was quickly covered up.

Needless to say, wherever US imperialism faces leftists or secular, modernizing anti-imperialist regimes, Washington turns to retrograde Islamic leaders willing and able to destroy the progressive regime in return for imperialist support. Such coalitions are built mainly around fundamentalist and moderate Islamist opposition to secular, class-based politics allied with the Empire's hostility to any anti-imperialist challenge to its domination..

The same 'coalition' of Islamists and the Empire has been glaringly obvious during the NATO assault on Libya and continues against Syria : The Muslims provide the shock troops on the ground; NATO provides the aerial bombing, funds, arms, sanctions, embargoes and propaganda.

These Islamist-Imperialist coalitions are usually temporary, based on a common secular or nationalist enemy and not on any common strategic interest. After the defeat of a secular anti-imperialist regime, militant Muslims may find themselves attacked by the colonial neo-liberal regime most favored by the imperial west. This happened in Afghanistan and elsewhere after the overseas Islamist fighters (Afghan Arabs) returned to their own neo-

colonized, collaborating home countries, like Saudi Arabia , Algeria and Egypt and elsewhere.

Contemporary History of Islamist-Imperial Conflict

The relation between Islamist regimes and imperialism is complex, changing and full of examples of bloody conflict.

The US backed the “modernizing” free market dictatorship of the Shah in Iran , overthrowing the nationalist Mosaddegh regime. They provided arms and intelligence for the Savak, the Shah’s monstrous secret police as it hunted down and murdered tens of thousands of nationalist-Islamists and leftist resistance fighters and critics in Iran and abroad. The rise to power of the fundamentalist-anti-imperialist Khomeini regime fueled US armed attacks and provoked retaliatory moves: Iran backed and financed anti-colonial Islamist groups in Lebanon (Hezbollah), Palestine (Hamas) and Iraq (the Shia parties).

Subsequent to 9/11 the US invaded and overthrew the Islamist Taliban regime, re-colonized the country, establishing a puppet regime under US-European auspices. The Taliban and allied Islamist and nationalist resistance fighters organized and established a mass guerrilla army which has engaged in a decade long war with armed support from Pakistani Islamist forces responding to US military incursions.

In Palestine , Washington , under the overweening control of Israel ’s Zionist fifth column, has armed and financed Israel ’s war against the popularly elected Palestinian Islamist Hamas government in Gaza . Washington’s total commitment to the Jewish state and its colonial expansion and usurpation of Palestinian (Muslim and Christian) lands and property in Jerusalem and elsewhere reflects the profound and pervasive influence of the Zionist power configuration throughout the US political system .They secure 90% votes in Congress, pledges of allegiance from the White House, and senior appointments in Treasury, State Department and the Pentagon.

What determines whether the US Empire will have a collaborative or conflict-ridden relation with Islam depends on the specific political context. The US allies with Islamists when faced with nationalist, leftist and secular democratic regimes and movements, especially where their optimal choice, a military-neo-liberal alternative is relatively weak. However, faced with a nationalist, anti-colonial Islamist regime (as is the case of the Islamic Republic of Iran), Washington will side with pro-western liberals, dissident Muslim clerics, pliable tribal chiefs, separatist ethnic minorities and pro-Western generals.

The key to US-Islamist relations from the White House perspective is based on the Islamists’ attitude toward empire, class politics, NATO and the “free market” (private foreign investment).

Today’s ‘moderate’ Islamist parties in Tunisia , Egypt , Turkey , Morocco (and elsewhere), which have offered their support to NATO and its wars against Libya and Syria , uphold ‘private property’ (i.e. foreign and imperialist client control of key industries) and repress independent working class and anti-imperialist parties: They are the Empire’s “new partners” in the pillage of the resource-rich Middle East and North Africa.

The US-brokered counter-revolutionary alliance among moderate Islamists, the previous military rulers and Washington is fraught with tensions. The military demands total impunity

and a continuation of its economic privileges; this includes a veto on any legislation addressing the previous regime's brutal crimes against its own people. On the other hand, the Islamist parties uphold their electoral victories and demand majority rule. Washington insists the alliance adhere to its policy toward Israel and abandon their support for the Palestinian national struggle. As these tensions and conflicts deepen, the alliance could collapse ushering in a new phase of conflict and instability.

Emblematic of "moderate Islamiist" collaboration with US-EU imperialism is the role of Qatar, home to the 'respectable' Arabic media giant, Al-Jazeera, and the demagogic Qatari "spiritual guide" Sheik Youssef al-Qaradawi. Sheik Youssef quotes the Koran and Islamic moral principles in defense of NATO's 8-month aerial bombing of Libya, which killed over 50,000 pro-regime Libyans (themselves Muslims). He calls for armed imperial intervention in Syria to overthrow the secular Assad regime, a position he shares comfortably with the state of Israel. He urges the "moderate Islamists" in Egypt and Tunisia to cease any criticism of the existing economic order, (see "Spiritual guide steers Arabs to moderation", Financial Times, December 9, 2011 - p5). In a word, this respectable Muslim cleric is NATO's perfect Koran-quoting "moderate Islamist" partner - a dream come true.

The Strategic Utility of "Moderate" Islamist Parties

Islamist parties are approached by the Empire's policy elites only when they have a mass following and can therefore weaken any popular, nationalist insurgency. Mass-based Islamist parties serve the empire by providing "legitimacy", by winning elections and by giving a veneer of respectability to the pro-imperial military and police apparatus retained in place from the overthrown client state dictatorships.

The Islamist parties compete at the "grass roots" with the leftists. They build up a clientele of supporters among the poor in the countryside and urban slums through organized charity and basic social services administered at the mosques and humanitarian religious foundations. Because they reject class struggle and are intensely hostile to the left (with its secular, pro-feminist and working-class agenda), they have been 'half-tolerated' by the dictatorship, while the leftist activists are routinely murdered. Subsequently, with the overthrow of the dictatorship, the Islamists emerge intact with the strongest national organizational network as the country's 'natural leaders' from the religious-bazaar merchant political elite. Their leaders offer to serve the empire and its traditional native military collaborators in exchange for a 'slice of power', especially over morality, culture, religion and households (women), in other words, the "micro-society".

For their part, they offer to marginalize and undermine the left, anti-imperialist secular democrats in the streets. In the face of mass popular rebellion calling into question the imperial order, a 'moderate' Islamist-imperial partnership is a 'heavenly deal' praised in Washington, Paris or London (as well as Riyadh and Tel Aviv).

Conclusion: How Viable is the Imperial-Islamic Coalition?

Those who thought that the spontaneous pro-democracy movements spelled the end of the imperial order left out the role of organized "moderate" Islamist electoral parties as able collaborators of Empire. The brutally repressed mass mobilization of unemployed youth was no match for the well-funded grass roots community organization of the moderate Islamists. This is especially true when politics shifted from the street to the ballot box, a process that the Islamist parties facilitated. In the absence of a mass revolutionary party, seeking state

power, the existing military-police state was able to work around the mass protesters and put together a power sharing agreement at least in the short-run.

In the November 2011 elections, the radical Egyptian Islamist party, Nour, gathered one-quarter of the vote in Cairo and Alexandria . Their showing was even higher among the urban poor districts, which promises even greater support among poor rural constituencies in the coming elections. Essentially a Salafist Islamist party, Nour, unlike the Muslim Brotherhood, combined denunciations of class abuses and elite corruption with mass appeals to a return to a mythic harmonious life. They used effective grass roots organizing around basic services in order to gain a greater proportion of the working class vote than all the leftist parties combined. Nour’s message of “class retribution against the ...abuses of Egypt ’s elite fueled Nour’s new found popularity”, (Financial Times December 10, 2011 p6).

Despite the successes of the Islamist-Imperial partnership, the world economic crises and especially the growing unemployment and misery in the Arab countries will make it difficult for the ‘respectable moderate’ Islamists to stabilize their societies. They are inextricably constrained by their alliances to function within the confines of the ‘orthodox neo-liberal framework’ imposed by the Empire. For that reason, the “moderate” Islamists will try to co-opt some secular liberals, social democrats and even a few leftists as ‘minority partners’, so that they won’t be held solely responsible for dashing the expectations of the poor in their countries.

The fact of the matter is that the pro-imperial Islamist parties have absolutely no answer to the current crises: Charities delivered from the mosque during the dictatorship won them mass support; now more austerity programs imposed from their ministerial posts will certainly alienate and infuriate their mass base. What will follow depends on who is best organized: Liberals are limited to media campaigns and tied to economic orthodoxy; the leftists have to advance from protest movements in the downtown squares to organized political units operating in popular neighborhoods, workplaces, markets, villages and slums. Otherwise radical fundamentalist, like the Salafists, will exploit the people’s outrage with moderate Islamist betrayals and promote their own version of a closed clerical society, opposing the West while repressing the Left.

The US and EU may have ‘temporarily’ avoided revolution by accommodating electoral reforms and adapting to alliances with “moderate” Islamists, but their ongoing military interventions and their own growing economic crisis will simply postpone a more decisive conflict in the near future.

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