ISLAM AND THE MODERN WORLD

“Islamic fundamentalism” has often been regarded as a major threat to the regional stability of the Middle East and to Western interest in the broader Muslim world. The Iranian Revolution, attacks on embassies, hijackings and hostage taking, and other violent acts have reinforced images of an expansive and potentially explosive Islam in global politics. These events represent only one small facet of the efforts by many in the modern Middle East to reevaluate and redefine their society in ways that bring modernization into greater harmony with ideals inherited from Islamic tradition.

The term “fundamentalism” is largely a Western one, with understanding and perceptions of fundamentalism heavily influenced by American Protestantism. For many mainline or liberal Christians, “fundamentalism” is pejorative or derogatory, a term equated with extremism, even though the vast majority of Middle Eastern “fundamentalist” groups work within the established order. “Fundamentalism” is laden with Christian presuppositions and Western stereotypes and also implies a monolithic movement that in reality does not exist. More fitting terms are “Islamic revivalism” or “Islamic activism.” Historically, Islam possesses a long tradition of revival (tajdid) and reform (islah).

In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the push for modernization in the Middle East equated development with progressive Westernization and the secularization of society. While a minority accepted and implemented a Western secular worldview, the majority of most Muslim populations did not internalize secular outlooks and values. Many found modern, secular nationalism wanting.

The modern world has brought great disillusionment to many in the Middle East. The disparity between rich and poor is striking in urban areas, and it is even more pronounced between Arab oil states and poor, densely populated countries like Egypt and Syria. Capitalism is regarded by many as the system of special interests. Many dismiss Marxism as a godless alternative. In many Middle Eastern countries today, idealism, study, and hard work are rewarded by unemployment or underemployment. Socially, culturally, and psychologically, modernization often seems to be a legacy of European colonialism perpetuated by Western-oriented elites who impose the twin processes of Westernization and secularization. Loss of village, family, and traditional values have accompanied the shock of modern life and its Westernized cultures and mores.

The 1970s saw the popularization of an idealized perception of early Islam, the Islamic paradigm found in the time of the Prophet Muhammad, the Golden Age of Islam. While Westernization and secularization of society are condemned, modernization as such is not. Science and technology are accepted, but the pace, direction, and extent of change are to be subordinated to Islamic belief and values in order to guard against the penetration of Western values and excessive dependence on them. Islamic movements may at times be anti-foreign, but they are seldom anti-modern.
After each group has completed its research, reassemble the class and compile a master chart which will enable students to compare and contrast the different groups. A summary discussion should lead students to the conclusion that although these groups share similar ideals, there are tremendous differences in their strategies, leadership, organization, and goals.

How does this compliment former Secretary Schlesinger's point? Ask students to speculate as to what changes need to take place in the ways in which U.S. policymakers view these groups.