

The Washington Post

A conservative split over the Middle East

By [Fareed Zakaria](#), Published: October 10

[Mitt Romney's speech](#) on foreign affairs this week was surprisingly moderate. Rhetorically it was [full of sound and fury](#) but, on closer examination, it signified no major change of policy. Romney affirmed the timetable for withdrawal from Afghanistan; he did not propose sending troops back into Iraq and did not advocate military strikes on Iran. He pledged to work toward a two-state solution in the Middle East. He even left out the belligerence toward China that had been a staple of his speeches in recent months.

Romney proposed one policy shift, toward [Syria](#). But even there — in a carefully worded, passive construction — he did not announce that as president, he would arm the Syrian opposition, merely that he would “ensure they obtain the arms they need.” The “they” is “those members of the opposition who share our values.” So, Romney’s sole divergence from current policy is that we should try harder to find non-Islamists among the Syrian rebels and encourage [Turkey](#), Saudi Arabia and Qatar to give them more arms.

Romney’s moderation is partly a continuation of his [pivot to the center](#). But it also reflects the lack of consensus among conservatives on what to do about the turmoil in the Middle East. Romney’s most spirited rhetorical attack was against President Obama’s policies in the wake of the Arab Spring. Referring to the [murder](#) of [U.S. Ambassador Chris Stevens](#) in Benghazi, Romney asserted that “the attacks on America last month should not be seen as random acts. They are expressions of a larger struggle that is playing out across the broader Middle East.” The problem is, conservatives are deeply divided about this struggle.

Recently, Intelligence Squared, a feisty forum in New York, held a debate on the proposition “[Better Elected Islamists Than Dictators](#),” referring to the choices the United States confronts in the Middle East. The lead speaker for the proposition was a prominent conservative intellectual, Reuel Marc Gerecht. The lead speaker against was . . . a prominent conservative intellectual, Daniel Pipes. That’s a reflection of the state of conservative thought on the issue.

On the one hand, we see commentators such as Romney adviser [John Bolton](#) and TV anchor Sean Hannity, who believe that the Obama administration should have tried to keep Hosni Mubarak in power in Egypt. Last month Hannity described the emerging democratic system in Egypt as “[the rise of violence, hate, Islamic extremism, madness and death](#).” On the other hand, we see Paul Wolfowitz and others celebrate the fall of Arab tyrannies, wishing only that Obama had been quicker to support the transition to elections.

This debate is important. Over the next few decades, the Middle East could become home to the rise of “illiberal democracy” — countries with many elections but few individual rights — or to a gradual evolution toward pluralism and the rule of law. But as Hannity’s comments suggest,

this discussion is being superseded on the right by a visceral reaction to Islam and Islamism that is neither accurate nor helpful in understanding what is happening in the region.

The heart of the problem in the Arab world is that the old order was highly unstable. Repressive regimes such as Egypt's had, over decades, created extreme opposition movements. That opposition often became violent and attacked the United States for supporting those dictatorships. In other words, U.S. support for Mubarak, the Saudi monarchy and other such regimes fueled the terrorist groups that attacked us on Sept. 11, 2001.

Al-Qaeda understands that if the Arab world democratizes, it loses the core of its ideological appeal — which is why al-Qaeda's leader, Ayman Zawahiri, wrote a book condemning the Muslim Brotherhood's decision to support and participate in Egypt's democratic process.

We might despair over a particular statement or policy from the new Egyptian president. But the larger reality is that the Arab world now has elected leaders with real legitimacy — and many of them have denounced al-Qaeda and other jihadist groups and are trying to reconcile Islam and democracy. Should we oppose them? That's why Romney, in the end, proposes that we work with elected governments of Libya and Egypt and try to push them in the right direction.

There is one place where a resolutely secular dictatorship is in trouble — from an opposition movement that has within it radical Islamic forces. So, those who truly believe that it is better to back secular dictators than to gamble on the prospects of political Islam should be supporting the regime of Bashar al-Assad in Syria.

comments@fareedzakaria.com