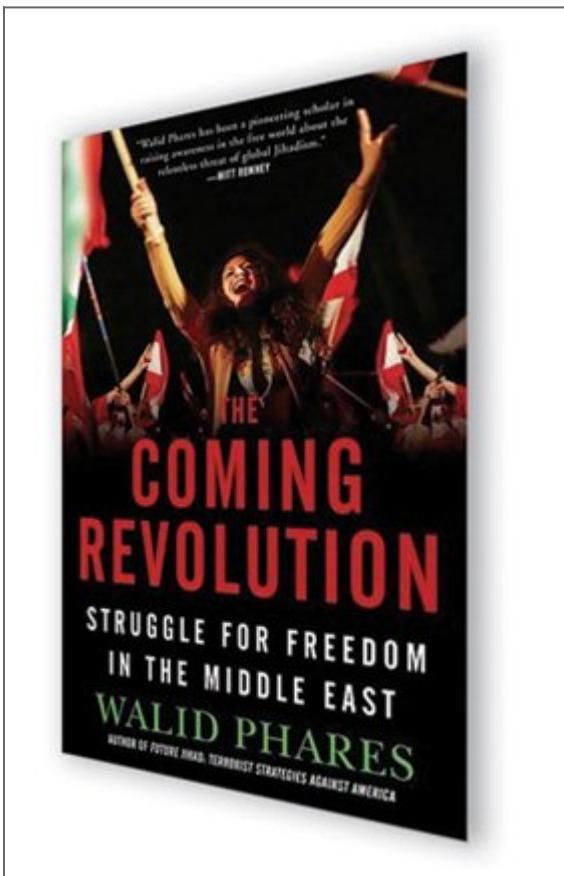


Middle East riots fueled by fissures between radicals and moderates

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WASHINGTON (RNS)—Anti-American riots that have spread to more than a dozen countries are a sign of fissures between radical and more moderate Islamists who are vying for power as their societies undergo change, Middle East experts say.

Whether U.S. foreign policy has helped create a political environment where radicals are struggling to remain relevant—or emboldened extremists to act out—remains a matter of disagreement.



President Obama's approach to the Arab Spring, to engage with the Islamists and not the secularists, "is seen by our foes as disengagement, while the radicals are not backing off," said [Walid Phares](#), an adviser to the anti-terrorism caucus in the U.S. House of Representatives and author of the 2010 book, *[The Coming Revolution: Struggle for Freedom in the Middle East](#)*. "When we withdraw, they advance."

[Tamara Witten](#), who served as deputy assistant secretary of state for Near Eastern Affairs until a few months ago, sees it differently.

The U.S. military withdrawal from Iraq removed "a massive source" of grievance for ultraconservative Muslims, called Salafis, who have been leading the charge in the recent protests and who are ideologically close to Islamic terrorists who have warred with the United States, Witten said. "Now they're left trying to gin up anti-American feelings over this campy movie. If Salafi groups are left having to troll the Internet for a pretext, I think we're in pretty good shape."

Demonstrators attacked U.S. embassies and fought government security forces, expressing their anger at a 14-minute YouTube trailer for a film produced in Los Angeles that portrays Islam's prophet, Muhammad, as a womanizer and a fraud.

The United States has become a convenient political football in a struggle for power in the Arab world set in motion by the democratic openness President Obama and former president George W. Bush have tried to usher into the region, Witten said.



Tamara Witten

With democratic governments now in Iraq, Egypt, Tunisia and Libya, and a new government in Yemen, "power has opened up, and there's an argument in these countries about what kind of society they're going to be," she said.

The Salafis want to compel people to live in a way that emulates the life of Muhammad and his followers and want to prevent an open society with a range of political views, Wittes said. "There are others competing on the other side."

Salafi leaders are using the opportunity to gain followers and influence at the expense of the more moderate Muslim Brotherhood, which until now has been the greatest political beneficiary of the uprisings that have shaken the Arab world during the past two years, Phares said.

The ultraconservative Salafis who have whipped up public sentiments over the video are sincerely angry, but the demonstrations also are "a way to stick a finger in the eye of the current government," Wittes said.

[Kori Schake](#), a senior fellow at the Hoover Institution who teaches at West Point, said the unrest is being promoted by radical Islamist leaders who have lost popularity across the Arab world since the 9/11 attacks and are trying to remain relevant.



Kori Schake

In the Arab world, the 9/11 attacks weakened radicals and violent extremists who had argued the political process could not solve their problems, and gave rise to more moderate Islamists in places like Turkey,

Jordan and Iraq, where the Sunni Awakening supplanted al-Qaida in Iraq, Schake said.

In Egypt, Islamists who won a collective landslide in the elections have since lost popularity as the economy continues to founder, she said.

Schake said Obama and other American leaders should be more visible in the Middle East and focus more on economic development and improving governance, which will help Arab nations address their citizens' political dissatisfaction.

"Help them create economic activities that we believe everywhere else in the world is the solution to problems that create instability," Schake said. "Democratic governance is the solution to these problems. It's rocky in the transition, but in the long run, it is the only way to secure what we are seeking— politically moderate societies that solve their own problems."