

## Policy Watch: Transnational revolution

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MARK N. KATZ

Transnational revolutionary movements seek to promote their brand of revolution not just in one country, but in a group of countries or even the entire world. Nationalist revolutionaries, by contrast, seek to promote revolution just in one country.

Marxist-Leninist, Arab nationalist and Islamic fundamentalist are three transnational movements that have been particularly active in recent decades.

Transnational and national revolutionary movements may be motivated by similar concerns: the desire to rid their country of authoritarian rule and/or foreign domination; and the desire to change existing patterns of income distribution.

The attraction of transnational revolutionary movements for many is that they link these concerns that exist in many different countries into an overarching narrative, pointing to a common cause for their grievances, a common solution to them, and a common set of allies to help them bring about this solution.

The transnational narratives of Marxist-Leninists, Arab nationalists and Islamic fundamentalists either had or have a strong appeal for many people in many countries. However, the existence of these narratives, or revolutionary ideologies, alone will not guarantee the success of transnational revolutionary movements. The ideologies of Marxism-Leninism, Arab nationalism and Islamic fundamentalism developed long before any of these movements were able to seize power anywhere.

One ingredient that appears necessary to make them politically powerful is a charismatic transnational revolutionary leader who not only achieves some extraordinary success (whether actual or illusory), but who is able to project a sense of more success to come. For the Marxist-Leninists, such leaders have included Vladimir Lenin, Mao Tse-tung, Ho Chi Minh, Fidel Castro, Che Guevara and perhaps even Hugo Chavez.

Gamal Abdul Nasser was the principal charismatic transnational revolutionary leader for the Arab nationalists. Both Moammar Gadhafi and Saddam Hussein also tried to take on this role. For Shiite Islamic fundamentalists, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini was such a leader. For the Sunni, Osama bin Laden is one now.

Transnational revolutionary movements offer certain advantages over nationalist ones. First, they can appeal across national lines to larger identities -- class, pan-nationalism, religion. This is especially important when there are ethnic or other rivalries inside a country's artificially drawn borders resulting in no strong unifying sense of nationalism that can be appealed to. Second, belonging to a transnational revolutionary movement offers the prospect of receiving support from fellow revolutionaries in other countries. Third, belonging to a transnational revolutionary movement also offers the prospect not just of transforming a nation internally, but of increasing its importance on the world stage through making it part of a large, powerful bloc.

On the other hand, the obstacles faced by transnational revolutionary movements are often greater than those faced by nationalist ones. For nationalist revolutionaries, their mission is

usually accomplished once they have come to power. Provided they do not try to export revolution, they can then easily fit into the existing pattern of international relations.

Transnational revolutionary movements, by contrast, seek to export their revolution to other countries and thereby transform the existing system of international relations in much of the world, or even all of it. Thus, after their initial success in coming to power in one country, their efforts to spread revolution elsewhere quickly results in a concerted attempt by the status quo powers either to roll back their revolution, or to contain it.

Another problem faced by transnational revolutionary movements is that their victory in one country may limit their appeal in neighboring ones that are its traditional rivals.

A third problem is that schisms often arise inside transnational revolutionary movements that result in conflict within them. The Sino-Soviet split plagued the Marxist-Leninist revolutionary movement from the late 1950s until the collapse of communism in Eastern Europe in 1989. The heyday of Arab nationalism (from the mid-1950s to the mid-1960s) was marked by feuding amongst Egypt, Syria and Iraq. Sunni and Shiite Islamic fundamentalists in Iraq seem to be spending as much or more time fighting each other than fighting the U.S.-led coalition forces.

A fourth problem is that while transnational revolutionary movements promise great things before coming to power, the regimes they create afterward usually cannot keep them. Sooner or later, they become discredited both because they are authoritarian and because they do not deliver prosperity -- even though their country may possess oil or other wealth.

As both the Marxist-Leninist and the Arab nationalist experiences have shown, transnational revolutionary movements can eventually evolve into regimes paying lip service to revolutionary ideology but actually becoming nationalist and status quo oriented. Or they can simply collapse.

Can or will this happen to the Islamic fundamentalist movement? The discrediting process cannot really get started in any particular country, of course, unless and until an Islamic fundamentalist regime comes to power that does not deliver on the promises it makes. There are important signs that this process has reached an advanced stage in Iran. But this is a time-consuming process that is highly costly in terms of human lives.

Am I recommending that the United States allow Islamic fundamentalist revolutionaries to come to power in order that they might eventually become discredited? No. On the other hand, I believe that America's inability to foster democracy either in Iraq or elsewhere in the Muslim world will sooner or later result in additional Islamic fundamentalist regimes coming to power. Once they do, the disputes among them that are likely to consume the Islamic fundamentalists will eventually result in some of them seeing America as less of a threat than their fellow revolutionaries in other countries.

The bad news is that this could take a long time. The good news, though, is that no matter how badly Washington messes up in Iraq and elsewhere in the Muslim world, America will have a second chance to contain Islamic fundamentalists if and when they turn against each other like the Marxist-Leninists and the Arab nationalists did before them.

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(Mark N. Katz is a professor of government and politics at George Mason University.)