



Critical Analysis of the RAND Report "The Muslim World after 9/11": Securitization, Bias, and the Erasure of Muslim Agency

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Abstract

This article provides a critical analysis of the RAND Corporation's 2004 report "The Muslim World After 9/11," examining its methodological frameworks, analytical biases, and policy recommendations through the lens of Islamic normative principles and post-colonial critique. The 564-page study, commissioned by the United States Air Force, represents one of the most ambitious attempts by a Western strategic institution to map the religious, political, and social terrain of global Islam. Through detailed analysis of the report's treatment of nine regional contexts—the Middle East, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Jordan and Palestine, Iraq and Syria, Turkey, Iran, Pakistan, India, Central Asia, Southeast Asia, West Africa, and Muslim diasporas—the article identifies systematic patterns of securitization, state-centric bias, secular normativity, and the instrumentalization of "moderate Islam." The article argues that the report's analytical framework reduces complex civilizational phenomena to security variables, privileges authoritarian allies over Islamist movements, assumes secular state structures as normative, and defines "moderate Islam" in terms of compatibility with Western policy interests rather than authentic Islamic theological criteria. Most significantly, the report systematically excludes self-reflection on Western policy—including the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the 2003 invasion of Iraq, support for authoritarian regimes, drone strikes, and colonial legacies—as drivers of radicalization. The article contrasts RAND's policy worldview with a Quranic framework grounded in Divine sovereignty, justice ('adl), consultation (shura), and accountability, arguing that a justice-centered approach offers a more ethical and effective alternative to securitized engagement with Muslim societies.

Keywords:

RAND Report, Securitization, Political Islam, Moderate Islam, Post-Colonial Critique, Quranic Framework, Justice, Counterterrorism, Muslim World.

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1. Introduction

The RAND Corporation's 2004 report *The Muslim World After 9/11*, a 564-page study commissioned by the United States Air Force, stands as one of the most ambitious attempts by a Western strategic institution to map the religious, political, and social terrain of global Islam in the aftermath of the September 11 attacks. Authored by Angel Rabasa and a team of seven analysts, the report aims to provide a comprehensive typology of Muslim ideological currents, identify fault lines within Muslim societies, and formulate policy recommendations to advance American national security interests. This document presents both a valuable primary source and a deeply problematic intervention that demands sustained methodological and epistemological critique.

From a purely empirical standpoint, the report offers considerable utility. Its regional coverage—spanning North Africa, the Middle East, Central Asia, South Asia, Southeast Asia, and Muslim diasporas in Europe and America—is unmatched in scope within the immediate post-9/11 policy literature. The authors compile a wealth of data on demographic trends, political movements, educational systems, and militant networks, organizing this material into a coherent if highly schematic framework. The report's effort to distinguish between fundamentalists, traditionalists, modernists, and secularists provides a heuristic device that, despite its limitations, has influenced subsequent academic and policy discussions. The report functions as an indispensable document precisely because of its influence on defense and foreign policy thinking during the Bush era and beyond.

However, the report's normative and instrumentalist orientation renders it deeply problematic as an objective account of Muslim societies. The study explicitly operates within a framework of United States national security, treating the Muslim world not as a complex civilization with its own internal logics, historical trajectories, and authentic reform movements, but as a risk environment to be managed, stabilized, and where necessary reshaped to serve American interests. This instrumentalism produces a consistent bias: theological positions and political movements are evaluated not on their own terms but according to their friendliness or hostility to American strategic objectives. Moderate Islam is valorized not because it represents a more authentic or historically grounded tradition, but because it can be enlisted as an ally against radicalism.

More troubling from an Islamic Studies perspective is the report's tendency toward neo-Orientalist framing. Despite its pretensions to empirical rigor and cultural sensitivity, the text often constructs Islam as a uniquely problematic civilization, one defined by inherent tensions between tradition and modernity, between an unreformed religious establishment and a violent radical fringe. Muslim societies are portrayed as passive objects awaiting external intervention, lacking the autonomous capacity for self-critique and democratic development. The report's policy recommendations explicitly advocate for exploiting existing cleavages, including Sunni-Shia divisions and Arab non-Arab ethnic tensions, as instruments of United States strategy. This approach not only violates basic ethical standards of social science research but also reveals a profound contempt for the dignity and agency of Muslim peoples.

2. Regional Analysis: Patterns of Securitization and Bias

2.1 The Middle East: The Cradle of the Muslim World

The report's treatment of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict exemplifies its analytical limitations. The report acknowledges the conflict as "a persistent and deeply influential factor shaping political sentiment across the Arab world" while stopping short of labeling it a catalytic event in the immediate post-9/11 context. It highlights how the "seeming intractability of the conflict

has been a source of frustration for all who desire to see a solution" and "has served in the larger Arab world as a catalyst for radicalism both Islamic and secular even before the founding of the State of Israel in 1948."

From an Islamic and post-colonial scholarly perspective, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is not a peripheral issue but a foundational trauma shaping modern Arab and Muslim political consciousness. Rather than being seen simply as a source of frustration or radicalism, many Muslim scholars view it as a symbol of prolonged injustice, dispossession, and the international system's failure to uphold its own legal and ethical standards. Within Islamic political thought, a clear distinction exists between indiscriminate extremism and legitimate resistance (*muqawamah*) against occupation and denial of rights; conflating these categories in some Western analyses can obscure indigenous political agency and ethical protest. In this framework, Palestine carries deep symbolic significance tied to justice (*'adl*), human dignity (*karamah*), and collective responsibility in the Muslim world, making continued anger and mobilization appear as a rational ethical response to prolonged injustice.

The report's discussion of sectarian divisions within Islam also reflects its reductionist approach. The authors outline the basic Sunni-Shia schism over prophetic succession, noting the demographic distribution of various Muslim communities across the region. While factually informative, the passage approaches religious identity through a typological lens that serves strategic analysis rather than theological depth, reducing complex historical and doctrinal differences to a schematic framework. From an Islamic scholarly perspective, the sectarian framing is incomplete and overly politicized. Muslim scholars argue that Shi'i traditions—Imami, Zaydi, and Ismaili—developed into comprehensive systems of theology, jurisprudence, ethics, and spiritual authority, not merely lineage-based differences. Islamic historiography shows that Sunni and Shi'a communities coexisted for long periods, sharing institutions and social life, which indicates that doctrinal differences did not automatically produce political conflict. Contemporary sectarian tensions are therefore often interpreted as outcomes of modern state politics, colonial legacies, and regional rivalries rather than inherent theological divisions.

2.2 Egypt: The Landscape of Islamism Under Authoritarianism

The report's examination of Egypt reveals its consistent bias toward authoritarian allies. The passage documents how the Egyptian regime used the war on terrorism and the impending Iraq war as pretexts to arrest opposition figures, including Muslim Brotherhood supporters during the 2002 legislative elections. The report also notes preemptive arrests in early 2003 to weaken protests against the US invasion of Iraq. While the passage documents state repression, it frames these tactics primarily as a response to security concerns rather than as part of a broader authoritarian pattern that Western governments have long tolerated in exchange for Egyptian cooperation with their regional policies.

From a comparative political Islam and Islamic scholarly perspective, the Egyptian state's repression of the Muslim Brotherhood and other Islamist movements reflects a structural failure of governance that violates fundamental Quranic principles of justice and consultation. The Quranic command that rulers must render trusts to those worthy of them and judge with fairness among all people establishes that legitimate governance requires the inclusion of diverse political voices, not their suppression. By systematically excluding the Muslim Brotherhood from political participation while simultaneously claiming Islamic legitimacy, the Egyptian state violated the prophetic teaching that the ruler who does not care for the welfare of his subjects will not enter Paradise. Evidence from Egypt's post-2011 experience demonstrates that the Mubarak regime's repression of Islamist political expression neither

eliminated Islamist movements nor produced stable governance. Rather, it drove radicalization underground, as seen in the rise of militant groups in the Sinai Peninsula and the eventual emergence of ISIS-affiliated networks.

2.3 Saudi Arabia: The Wahhabi-Al-Saud Symbiosis

The report's analysis of Saudi Arabia contrasts the Arabian Gulf states with Egypt by noting that smaller states like Kuwait and Qatar allow multiple Islamist movements to operate openly, while Saudi Arabia officially sanctions only Wahhabism due to its two-and-a-half-century symbiotic relationship with the Al-Saud clan. The report observes that despite this official alliance, radical fundamentalists have periodically challenged the Saudi government, prompting repression often legitimated by the religious establishment alongside selective adoption of the radicals' agenda.

Critically, the analysis understates how the Saudi state itself has historically exported Wahhabi ideology through global funding networks, creating the very radical currents that later turned against it. From a critical Islamic and comparative political Islam perspective, Wahhabism represents one interpretive school within Sunni Islam, grounded in Hanbali jurisprudence and a literalist approach to tawhid, while other Sunni and Shia traditions coexist historically and continue to inform Saudi society. Treating Wahhabism as synonymous with "state Islam" risks erasing doctrinal pluralism and obscuring debates over fiqh, ethics, and governance.

The report's discussion of the 1979 Grand Mosque seizure and its aftermath is particularly revealing. The regime's response to Juhayman al-Utaybi and his followers was to adopt some of their demands in an effort to co-opt conservative elements, imposing stricter religious rules including banning women from television, restricting music, closing stores during prayers, and empowering the religious police. From an Islamic perspective, this co-optation strategy served the dual purpose of channeling popular piety away from political dissent while consolidating Al-Saud legitimacy through religious orthodoxy. The Quranic guidance that underscores obedience to rulers within the bounds of justice has been invoked by the Saudi state to legitimize its authority, while the parallel command to promote justice and ethical conduct provides the theological foundation for state efforts to regulate public morality. However, the institutionalization of ultra-conservative interpretations of Islam through the education system, judiciary, and religious police limited social freedoms, suppressed religious pluralism, and created an environment where dissent could only rarely be expressed within approved channels.

2.4 The Ba'ath Belt: Iraq and Syria Under Dictatorship

The report characterizes Iraq and Syria as the "Ba'ath Belt," where the harshest climate for indigenous Islamist movements exists, as both governments have violently repressed homegrown Islamists while supporting nonindigenous groups to undermine foreign adversaries. Critically, the analysis presents state repression as a given without adequately examining how Western powers maintained strategic relationships with both Baathist regimes for decades, prioritizing geopolitical stability over human rights or democratic governance.

From an Islamic and post-colonial perspective, the repression of indigenous Islamist groups in Iraq and Syria reflects state attempts to monopolize political authority and secularize social life, while underground operations demonstrate moral and political agency in a system that denied legitimate participation. The transnational relocation of these groups highlights the spread of ideology, scholarship, and networks beyond state borders, with movements like the Muslim Brotherhood maintaining cohesion, da'wah, social service, and community engagement as forms of sustained resistance.

The report's discussion of the 1991 Shi'ite intifada in Iraq is particularly significant. It notes that Iraqi Shi'ites fought alongside Saddam during the Iran-Iraq war due to nationalist loyalty, but after the 1991 Gulf War a Shi'ite intifada was brutally suppressed, after which Saddam empowered allied sheikhs as government agents in rural areas. The analysis fails to examine how American non-intervention in support of the uprising, as requested by the George H.W. Bush administration, directly contributed to the massacre of Shi'ite insurgents and the consolidation of Saddam's tribal strategy. From an Islamic perspective, Shi'ite participation in the Iran-Iraq War does not confer moral legitimacy on Saddam's regime, but reflects the distinction in Islamic law between defending territorial integrity and supporting an unjust ruler. Classical jurisprudence permits obedience in collective defense while maintaining the right to oppose oppression.

2.5 Turkey: "Recessed" Islamic Politics

The report presents Turkey's AKP as a movement of Muslim democrats akin to European Christian democrats, operating within a secular constitution that encourages recessed Islamic politics and supporting EU candidacy to secure space for non-secular movements. Critically, the analysis was written before Erdogan's authoritarian consolidation and abandonment of EU aspirations, revealing RAND's failure to foresee how democratic openings can be captured to entrench majoritarian religious rule.

The report's framing of "recessed" Islamic politics as praiseworthy reflects its secular normative framework. From an Islamic perspective, reducing Islam to a "cultural backdrop" while accepting secular constitutional constraints is theologically problematic because the Quran defines Islam as a complete way of life governing all political, social, and economic affairs. The Quran's command to rule between people by what Allah has revealed establishes that Divine law, not secular legislation, is the ultimate source of authority. The Prophet's own model in Medina was not "recessed" but fully integrated: he served as both religious and political leader, implementing Divine law, and he indicated that political authority exists to implement Islamic teachings, not to relegate them to private cultural expression.

The AKP's EU-oriented reforms, while praised by the report for creating "a more secure environment for movements outside the secular mainstream," raise different questions from an Islamic perspective: security for whom and for what purpose? The Quranic ideal is not "recessed" Islam nor theocratic authoritarianism, but governance that implements Divine law through consultation (shura), accountability, and justice. Evidence from Turkey's post-AKP experience shows that while "Muslim democrat" rhetoric facilitated EU negotiations and economic growth, it did not prevent the erosion of democratic institutions, the centralization of executive power, or recurring tensions with secular military elites.

2.6 Pakistan: Islam and Politics

The report argues that Pakistan was ostensibly created with Islam as a unifying factor, yet after the loss of East Pakistan in 1971 and other ethnic conflicts, leaders increasingly turned to Islam to forge national cohesion, with the Kashmir dispute framed not as territorial but as a struggle over national identity as the homeland for South Asian Muslims. Critically, the analysis reduces Kashmir to a symbolic narrative while downplaying the material realities of military occupation, human rights violations, and the strategic utility of the dispute for Pakistan's military establishment in maintaining domestic political control.

From an Islamic perspective, Pakistan's instrumentalization of Islam for state cohesion fundamentally violates the Quranic principle that submission to Allah must be for His sake alone rather than for any political project, nationalist agenda, or state-building objective. The

Quran's command that all acts of worship, devotion, living, and dying are exclusively for Allah leaves no room for using religion as an instrument of state policy, nationalist mobilization, or regime legitimacy. The Prophet further warned against fighting or mobilizing under any banner of blind partisanship, ethnic chauvinism, or nationalist fervor, declaring that death under such conditions is a death of ignorance regardless of how Islamic the rhetoric may appear.

The report's discussion of Zia ul-Haq's exploitation of US willingness to invest in Pakistan's military and madrassas during the Soviet-Afghan war documents American and Saudi complicity in creating the militant infrastructure that would later become Al Qaeda and the Taliban. Yet it frames Zia as the primary agent who adeptly exploited US willingness, obscuring Washington's strategic agency and calculated decision to fund jihadist networks. From an Islamic perspective, Zia's exploitation of American and Saudi funding to Islamize Pakistan and mobilize mujahidin for Afghanistan fundamentally violated core Quranic principles of sincere intention and defensive warfare. The Prophet's warning that whoever fights for worldly gain or pride fights in the path of Satan directly condemns Zia's project, as the Afghan jihad was mobilized for multiple ulterior purposes: securing American aid, legitimizing a military dictatorship, neutralizing domestic opposition, and serving Cold War geopolitics.

2.7 India: Islam and Democracy

The report notes that India has the world's second largest Muslim population at 140 million, that Islam entered India in the eighth century with Sufism as a major tradition while the Deobandi movement represents orthodox Sunni practice, and that Islam and democracy have coexisted successfully in India since independence, suggesting a democratic Muslim majority state with minority rights is possible elsewhere. Critically, the passage overlooks the persistent reality of anti-Muslim violence in India, including the 2002 Gujarat massacres and systemic discrimination under the current Hindu nationalist regime.

The report correctly notes India's 140 million Muslims coexist under secular democracy, but from an Islamic perspective, this arrangement is a permissible adaptation for a minority rather than an ideal model for a Muslim-majority state. The Quran's command to rule between people by what Allah has revealed establishes Divine law as the ultimate source of political authority rather than majority rule, popular sovereignty, or secular constitutionalism. While Indian Muslims have survived culturally as a minority under secular democracy, they face systemic discrimination with government representation far below their population percentage and have suffered periodic communal violence such as the 2002 Gujarat massacres in which approximately 2,000 Muslims were killed with state complicity.

2.8 Muslim Diasporas: Networks and Radicalization

The report distinguishes between Muslim as religious reality and Islamic as political intent, notes over 10 million Muslims in EU states face incomplete integration and alienation, and identifies strange coalitions between fundamentalists and neo-Nazis as the most troubling development. Critically, the report offers no structural analysis of European racism or failed integration policies that produce Muslim marginalization, and the claim of fundamentalist-neo-Nazi alliances is presented without concrete evidence, functioning more as security anxiety than documented trend.

From an Islamic perspective, the fragmentation and radicalization of European Muslim diasporas reflect a failure to uphold core Quranic commands for unity, justice, and peaceful coexistence. The Quran's command to hold firmly to the rope of Allah all together and not become divided establishes that Muslim unity is not merely a political or strategic preference

but a divine obligation. Regarding alliances with neo-Nazi movements that espouse racial supremacy and anti-Semitism, the Quran's warning against taking Jews and Christians as allies does not permit alliances with those who promote hatred and violence against any group, as the Prophet explicitly declared that harming a non-Muslim citizen under Muslim protection harms him personally and angers Allah.

3. The Instrumentalization of "Moderate Islam"

The most consistent and troubling feature of RAND's analytical framework is its instrumentalization of "moderate Islam." Throughout the report, "moderate Muslims" are defined not by their adherence to Islamic principles but by their compatibility with Western policy interests: acceptance of secular state structures, cooperation with counterterrorism efforts, rejection of shari'ah as state law, and quietism regarding Western foreign policy. This instrumental definition serves a strategic purpose: it allows Western governments to identify and fund Muslim partners who will not challenge Western hegemony, while marginalizing Muslims who are authentically committed to Islamic principles but reject violence.

From an Islamic perspective, this instrumentalization is deeply problematic. The Quranic concept of moderation (*wasatiyyah*) is defined differently: "And thus we have made you a moderate (*wasat*) community that you will be witnesses over the people" (Quran 2:143). Moderation in Islam means balance between extremes—between neglect of the world and abandonment of the Hereafter, between excessive legalism and spiritual laxity, between isolation from non-Muslims and assimilation into non-Muslim societies. It does not mean accommodation of secularism or quietism regarding injustice.

By redefining "moderate Islam" in policy terms, the report effectively excludes the vast majority of sincere Muslims who believe in shari'ah as a divine ideal but reject violence. This exclusion has real-world consequences: it alienates potential partners, confirms extremist narratives that the West is at war with Islam, and undermines authentic Islamic counter-extremism discourses. Muslim scholars and community leaders who condemn violence on Islamic grounds find their credibility undermined when they are perceived as Western proxies. The report's instrumentalization of "moderate Islam" has made it difficult for Muslims to develop independent counter-extremism discourses that are neither Western-funded nor extremist.

4. Absence of Self-Reflection on Western Policy

Perhaps the most significant omission in RAND's analysis is the absence of sustained self-reflection on Western policy itself as a driver of radicalization. The report acknowledges, in passing, that the Iraq War (2003) "would create even more believers in radical Islam" and that the Palestine issue fuels anti-Americanism. However, it does not systematically analyze how U.S. support for Israeli occupation, military interventions in Muslim countries, drone strikes, torture at Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo, or alliances with corrupt and repressive regimes contribute to the very radicalization the report seeks to understand.

This omission is not accidental; it reflects RAND's institutional position as a contractor to U.S. defense and intelligence agencies. The report cannot bite the hand that feeds it. From an Islamic perspective, this absence is a fatal flaw. The Quran commands justice even toward enemies: "O you who have believed, be persistently standing firm for Allah, witnesses in justice, and do not let the hatred of a people prevent you from being just" (5:8). A genuine analysis of radicalization would apply the same standards of justice to Western policy as to Islamist violence. It would ask: How do drone strikes that kill civilians compare to terrorist bombings

that kill civilians? How does indefinite detention without trial compare to hostage-taking? How does support for dictators who torture their citizens compare to the violence of non-state actors?

The report does not ask these questions because the answers would be uncomfortable. But avoiding them does not make the questions disappear; it merely ensures that the analysis is incomplete and the policy recommendations flawed. By locating the sources of Muslim extremism almost exclusively within internal theological dysfunction, failed educational systems, and resistant cultural attitudes, the report systematically excludes the geopolitical context that many Muslims themselves identify as central to their political awakening. This inversion of cause and effect is structural to the report's security framework. To acknowledge that American policies might themselves generate anti-American sentiment would undermine the report's entire premise that the problem resides within Islam rather than in the encounter between Islam and Western power.

5. Quranic Worldview vs. RAND's Policy Worldview

The contrast between RAND's implicit worldview and the normative worldview derived from the Quran and authentic Hadith reveals fundamental differences in how governance, justice, and the role of religion in public life are understood.

Sovereignty and Legitimacy: RAND's worldview assumes that the state is the legitimate locus of political authority and that international law, constitutional frameworks, and democratic procedures are the proper sources of legitimacy. The Quranic worldview, by contrast, asserts that "Indeed, the decision is only for Allah" (6:57) and that legitimate authority derives from implementing Divine law. This is not a call for theocracy in the Iranian sense (where clerics rule), but for governance that submits to revealed guidance—a standard that applies equally to rulers and ruled.

Justice vs. Stability: RAND's primary metric for evaluating regimes is stability defined as the absence of conflict, predictability of behavior, and cooperation with U.S. interests. The Quranic metric is justice (*adl*). The two are not identical; indeed, the most stable regimes are often the most unjust, as they suppress dissent effectively. The Quran commands believers to be persistently standing firm for Allah, witnesses in justice, and not to let hatred of a people prevent them from being just (5:8). The Prophet said, "The just ruler will be on a pulpit of light on the Day of Resurrection." RAND's report praises Morocco's monarchy for providing stability and co-opting Islam, but from a Quranic perspective, a hereditary monarchy with limited accountability is not just because it is stable.

Consultation (Shura) vs. Secular Democracy: RAND advocates secular democracy as the preferred political model, with free elections as the primary mechanism of accountability. The Quran commands consultation (*shura*): "And those who have responded to their Lord and established prayer and whose affair is determined by consultation among themselves" (42:38). The Prophet consistently consulted his Companions on matters of governance, even when he had the authority to decide alone. RAND's advocacy for secular democracy is not neutral; it promotes a worldview that explicitly excludes Divine law from governance. Muslims may participate in democratic systems as a practical accommodation, but they cannot accept secularism as an Islamic ideal.

6. Conclusion

The RAND Corporation's 2004 report "The Muslim World After 9/11" represents a foundational document in post-9/11 American strategic thought, yet its analysis is fundamentally compromised by its instrumentalist orientation, securitizing frame, and

systematic exclusion of Muslim self-understandings. Across every region examined, the report imposes a rigid typology that categorizes Muslims as traditionalists, fundamentalists, modernists, or secularists based not on internal Islamic criteria but on their perceived compatibility with American policy interests. This reductionist framework treats the Muslim world as a risk environment to be managed rather than as a complex civilization with its own internal logics, historical trajectories, and authentic reform movements.

The report's consistent bias toward state-centric analysis privileges authoritarian allies while framing Islamist movements primarily as security threats rather than legitimate political actors with grassroots support and moral legitimacy. Most significantly, the report remains remarkably silent on the very factors that shape contemporary Muslim political consciousness: the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the 2003 invasion and occupation of Iraq, Western support for authoritarian regimes, drone strikes, torture at Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo, and the historical grievances arising from colonialism and Cold War interventions. By locating the sources of Muslim extremism almost exclusively within internal theological dysfunction, the report presents a fundamentally incomplete and self-serving analysis that has had lasting negative consequences for Western-Muslim relations.

The Quranic worldview, grounded in Divine sovereignty, justice (adl), consultation (shura), and accountability, offers an alternative normative framework that rejects both Western secularism and violent extremism. A just and effective approach to Western-Muslim relations must move beyond securitization, apply justice standards consistently to allies and adversaries alike, address root causes of radicalization including occupation, economic marginalization, and political exclusion, and recognize that authentic dialogue requires treating Muslims as partners in a shared moral project rather than as objects of strategic manipulation.

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