



## THE THREAT OF ISLAMISM IN SUB-SAHARAN AFRICA:

### The Case of Tanzania

By Harvey Glickman

*Harvey Glickman is Professor Emeritus of Political Science at Haverford College and Senior Fellow at the Foreign Policy Research Institute. He is currently researching Islamism throughout Sub-Saharan Africa.*

The states of Africa south of the Sahara, with their large Muslim populations, certainly are vulnerable to the popular unrest sweeping across North Africa and the Gulf region since January 2011. These states present a “backdoor” opening for radical jihadist Islam, which is already a strong presence in Algeria, Morocco, Egypt and, (if Qaddafi lasts) in Libya. With about 25 percent of the world’s Muslim population living in Africa, the overall restrictive economic and political conditions, and an expanding youth population, extrude Islamist ideology as a plausible alternative for self-styled repressed out-groups. Consequently, Sub-Saharan Africa merits more attention for signs of more radical, jihadist Islamism.

Islamism is a political ideology, not an offshoot religious cult. Its strategy ranges from violence as a prime tactic to political militancy, to competitive political parties that seek local or national representation in parliaments or local governments. Islamism may spawn violent *jihadi* groups that dream of recreating a global Islamic community (*umma*) or groups attempting to restore ultra-traditionalist, Salafist tenets of Islam, similar to what prevails in Wahabbist Saudi Arabia.

This essay examines both the extent and dynamics of Islamism and radical, violent Islamist groups in Tanzania, the location of the 1998 al Qaeda bombing. Additionally, the piece considers the appeal and spread of Islamist ideology, and the “state of play” today. Tanzania is examined here for the number of Muslims in the population—about a third of the total; for its proximity to the eastern African cockpit of Islamism—Somalia; and for the character of its internal politics, a one party-dominant political system—with the position of its Muslim population emerging as a divisive political issue.

Thus far, Tanzania harbors a low level of Islamist activity compared to, for example, Sudan, Somalia, and Egypt. It is representative of countries in Africa south of the Sahara with significant Muslim populations, whose cooperation is necessary if global *jihadist* terrorism is to be controlled and overcome. Not least is the problem of spillover of sporadic, small scale wars (Congo, Rwanda and Burundi are western neighbors). Secular nationalism, a lame parliamentary democracy, slow and uneven economic growth, and perceived unequal opportunity permit Muslim Africans, in Tanzania, as elsewhere, to subscribe to an alternative ideology of Islamism.

#### POLITICS AND RELIGION IN TANZANIA

Of a population of about 42 million today in Tanzania, it is estimated that about one-third are Muslim, about one-third are Christian and perhaps one-third are “animist.” Muslims in Tanzania live largely along the pre-colonial and colonial trade routes: coastal north-south, and east-west, in the past involving slaves, ivory, sisal, coffee and tea. Ninety-nine percent of the population of the Zanzibar islands, the hub of pre-colonial trade—about a million people—are Muslim. In the traditional centers of Swahili culture along the coast, Muslims adhere to Sunni Islam. From the ninth century, Arab traders married local women; the new culture that developed combined Persian and indigenous elements. As Islam expanded into the interior, so did syncretic practices combining Islam and traditional beliefs, some of which strayed far from the conventional. The Christian population lives primarily in the southwest and north-central areas of the country.

The Tanzanian state is officially secular and its constitution guarantees freedom of religion. The state also prohibits religious political parties. The ruling party, Chama Cha Mapinduzi (CCM), the direct descendant of the Tanganyika African National Union (TANU), has held power, by a large margin, since independence in 1962, changing its name in 1977.

TANU merged with Zanzibar’s Afro-Shirazi Party, the victorious party in 1963 after the Zanzibar revolution, which saw the overthrow of the Sultan and an Arabized elite. The CCM has dominated government on the mainland, but the Civic United

Front (CUF) has gained a substantial following in Pemba Island, near Zanzibar. The CUF was founded in 1992, with the advent of a multi-party system. Two movements merged: Kamahuru, a group advocating the democratization of Zanzibar, with the Civic Movement, a human rights organization based on the coastal mainland. The CCM gains much support in Unguja, the main Zanzibar Island, from its resident Africans, while the CUF is strong on Pemba, the small nearby island, part of the Zanzibar administrative entity. It is also strong among non-Africans, *i.e.*, those who identify as “Arab.” In 1995 the CUF refused to accept the results of the national elections, claiming that the vote had been rigged by the CCM. (The CUF repeated these allegations after the October-November 2000 elections and boycotted Zanzibar’s regional parliament, as well as Tanzania’s national legislature.)

In January 2001 violence broke out when police fired into a crowd of CUF protesters, who were flouting a ban on protesting, killing thirty-three. During the 2005 presidential and parliamentary elections the opposition claimed that the CCM used illegal and unethical means in their campaign. Opposition politicians and supporters also reported being beaten and tortured. In addition, the CUF claimed that the electoral commission was influenced by the ruling party.

Although bloody demonstrations occurred in 1995 and in 2000, the CUF has maintained that it does not use or condone violence as a means of gaining power, preferring to operate through legitimate, democratic means. Yet, it has not totally dismissed the use of violence as a means for establishing itself in Zanzibar, especially if political corruption and marginalization continue to occur there.

The CUF organized a cadre of young men, called the Blue Guards, to protect CUF party leaders, despite the law against alternative police forces. Members of the Blue Guards said their goal was to “release Tanzanian society from the dictatorship of Christianity”; the goal of CUF is to make Zanzibar an Islamic state.<sup>1</sup> The political struggle between the CUF and CCM in the past two decades has created new distinctions between Muslims and Christians. During the early years of one party socialist rule, President Julius Nyerere was adamant about creating a nation free of racial and religious divisions. The demise of *ujamaa* (“community”) socialism that had tried to create national unity, as well as the rise of the multi-party system, permitted region and religion to divide the population. In particular, “the contested nature of the Zanzibar state makes it very appealing to politicians to resort to the politicization of racial identity in order to claim legitimacy to rule.”<sup>2</sup> Ethnic differences and overlapping religion have become rallying points in the search for the “true” identity of Zanzibar, which have faint echoes on the mainland. Religion has become a salient issue, especially in Zanzibar, as has the future of the union of the mainland and the offshore islands. “[...] people at the grassroots level advance religious identities in pursuit of their interests in regard to spiritual, material, and political interests” all across Tanzania.<sup>3</sup>

## MUSLIM-CHRISTIAN RELATIONS

Religious tensions have risen in Tanzania. Since the end of socialist rule in the 1990s, people claiming Zanzibari Arab identity have alleged that the government of Zanzibar, directed by the ruling CCM party, discriminates against them, denying access to government jobs, housing, and business licenses. Similar dissatisfaction has spread to the mainland among the coastal Swahili and “Arab” population. Frustration with the state has manifested itself in attacks upon Christians. Muslims have always been able to hold key governmental positions, but many people perceive the governing elite as Christian. The presidency has unofficially rotated between a Christian and a Muslim. The rise in tension also parallels the rise in political visibility and assertiveness of the Muslim community in the past decade. This has also raised an issue historically undebated in Tanzania: the nature of the state—partly Arab or African, Muslim or Christian, Zanzibar vs. Tanzania. At risk is the unity of the manufactured state that stitched together the two independent former colonies, Tanganyika and Zanzibar.

There have been several instances in the past two decades that have fueled Muslim fears of marginalization. In 1992, the government announced that in order to reduce public spending, it would transfer the country’s health and education system to the country’s powerful Catholic Church. In December 2002, the Tanzanian government signed The Prevention of Terrorism Act into law, largely under pressure from the United States. Criticism of this act, especially from Muslims, asserted that the law specifically targeted them. Critics noted that this law borrowed heavily from the U.S. Patriot Act, the British Prevention of Terrorism Act and the Suppression of Terrorism Act of apartheid South Africa.<sup>4</sup> Additional dissatisfaction is leveled against the police. In Muslim areas the police are often Christians and they disregard local customs, alienating residents. The government-sponsored Islamic association, the Supreme Council of Muslims in Tanzania, attracts limited legitimacy.

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1. Barbara G. and Deo S. Mshigeni Brents, “Terrorism in Context: Race, Religion, Party, and Violent Conflict in Zanzibar,” *The American Sociologist*, Summer 2004, p. 62. [www.unlv.edu/faculty/brents/research/terrorZanzibar.pdf](http://www.unlv.edu/faculty/brents/research/terrorZanzibar.pdf) accessed July 25, 2010.

<sup>2</sup> Bernadetta Killian, “The State and Identity Politics in Zanzibar: Challenges to Democratic Consolidation in Tanzania,” *African Identities*, 6, 2, May 2008, p. 115.

<sup>3</sup> Roman Loimeier, “Perceptions of Marginalization: Muslims in Contemporary Tanzania,” in Rene Otayek and Benjamin F. Soares, eds., *Islam and Muslim Politics in Africa*, NY: Palgrave, 2007, p. 138.

<sup>4</sup> Andre LeSage, “Terrorism Threats and Vulnerabilities in Africa,” in Andre LeSage, ed., *African Counterterrorism Co-operation: Assessing Regional and Subregional Initiatives*. Washington, DC: National Defense University Press, 2007. p. 87.

Marginalized Muslims seek alternative associations, some of them extremist, as Islam can act as an ideology of protest.

## THE ISLAMIC REVIVAL AND ISLAMISM IN TANZANIA

Zanzibar Archipelago is the name that combines two Indian Ocean Islands (Unguja or Zanzibar and Pemba), as well as several smaller islands. Zanzibar became a British protectorate in 1890 after centuries of rule by Omani Arabs. As Zanzibar moved toward independence in the 1950s, two groups found themselves at odds; the “Arab” settler class, supporting the Zanzibar Nationalist Party (ZNP) and the “African” laboring class, supporting the Afro-Shirazi party (ASP). (Both classes crossed lines and inter-married, but neither could overcome a certain mutual hostility as a result of the Arab slave-holding past.) The indigenous peasantry was split between the two parties, with the pro-ZNP dominating Pemba. In the election immediately after independence in 1963, the ZNP coalition narrowly defeated the ASP. The Zanzibari revolution in 1964 represented an uprising of African laborers and ex-soldiers that mushroomed into an anti-Arab revolution, overthrowing the ZNP government and the Sultan, as well as the whole enterprise of constitutional monarchy. Abeid Karume, the ASP coalition leader, ruled by decree, warding off any group challenges to the new regime. Three months later, Karume and Tanganyikan President Nyerere united Zanzibar and Tanganyika. (The designation Tanzania came later as a result of a contest to name the new country.) The rapid pace and questionable constitutionality of these beginnings remains a background factor to the increasing demands for autonomy. In 1994, the CUF raised the issue of separation from the mainland, but the CCM condemned this claim and refused to act upon it.

On the Zanzibar islands, Muslim religious scholars are becoming more influential in setting rules for social behavior—such as enforcing a dress code and attempting to shut down establishments that serve alcohol. A Western-focused tourist industry is small and vulnerable. Since the 1980s, wealthy individuals from the Gulf States have funded mosques, *madrassahs*, health clinics, and secondary schools on Zanzibar. Saudi Arabia alone spends about \$1 million a year building mosques, *madrassahs*, and Islamic centers.<sup>5</sup> In addition, young Zanzibari men receive scholarships to study in Medina and Khartoum. Two of Zanzibar’s universities are Islamic, funded by Saudi Arabians and Kuwaitis. Teachers come from Pakistan, Sudan and other East African countries. Zanzibar University is funded by Darul Iman Charitable Association, registered as a charity in Canada. Chukwani College of Education offers classes in Islamic studies and Islamic education.

High levels of poverty on the islands continue to contribute to political discontent. Zanzibar has fallen behind the mainland in economic growth; economic liberalization in the 1990s seems to have hit Zanzibar particularly hard.

Three factors have helped an Islamic revival in Tanzania. First, the demise of the one party state allowed for alternative forms of association. Groups formerly prohibited have emerged to proselytize for a more purified Islam. Second, new Islamic organizations are opposing formerly state-sanctioned groups. This Muslim revival is part of “reconnecting” with the Muslim world after years of isolation. It parallels the availability of new Islamic satellite television channels in Tanzania. Third, the country still remains relatively poor. Muslim traditions are now presented as threatened by a secularist state, requiring a return to basics. The revival includes all age groups and socioeconomic classes. On the Zanzibar islands, the revival is directed toward Muslims who are *munaḥḥik*, “Muslims in name only,” and the Sufi brotherhoods, which grew strong in the nineteenth century. On the mainland it is directed toward Christians. Islamist ideas do not rest on their instant identical reproduction in different contexts, but instead on their ability to adapt to different contexts. While concerned with the “onslaught and failure” of Western values, the revival in Tanzania also concerns the lack of good government in the country, as well as a widespread dissatisfaction with government in the Muslim population. The revival groups offer an alternative to the older, state-sanctioned Muslim identity.

The translation of the *Qur’an* into Swahili has ensured that the established Arabic-speaking scholars no longer have a monopoly on its interpretation. In addition, there is currently an abundance of Islamic literature, tapes, CDs, DVDs, in Arabic, English, and Swahili. These products are widely available in bookstores, streets, and outside Mosques, after Friday prayers, further aiding the individualization of Islam, allowing more freedom of interpretation of the religion through expanded access. Thus, the revival is not just directed at the state, but also toward those Muslims perceived as being a part of the state apparatus, mainly an older group of Muslims who worked within the state’s conception of a rather passive Muslim identity.

Whereas, in a country like Senegal, politics reflects a type of Muslim hegemony, and in a country, such as Nigeria, there is continuous strife invoking Muslim-Christian differences, in Tanzania religion has taken a subservient position to the unifying nationalist agenda of the dominant political party. As a response to transferring control of the nation’s education and health administration to the Catholic Church in 1992, a group called the Council for the Propagation of the *Qur’an* (commonly known as *Balukta*) accused the Tanzanian government’s National Muslim Organization (*Bakwata*) of corruption, temporarily seizing its headquarters. This was Tanzania’s first militant Islamist group, but its actions were short-lived. President Ali

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<sup>5</sup> Simon Turner, “‘These Young Men Show No Respect for Local Customs’ –Globalization and Islamic Revival in Zanzibar,” *Journal of Religion in Africa*, 39, 2009, p. 259.

Hassan Mwinyi expelled them from the *Bakwata* headquarters, and the group was banned in 1993.<sup>6</sup>

Tanzania's major simmering conflict is the political struggle between the Tanzanian mainland and Zanzibar, which reflects the "shotgun marriage" between two separate, former dependencies of Britain. Despite efforts to tie Zanzibar to the mainland, largely by granting considerable autonomy to the administration of Zanzibar, separatist sentiments never died in the offshore islands. Because many Zanzibaris identify culturally with their supposed Arab ancestry from across the Indian Ocean, rather than the African mainland, the question of Zanzibari sovereignty remains a political issue.

## ISLAMISM'S FUTURE IN TANZANIA

A history of cooperation in the name of nationalism has mitigated religious conflict in the country. Indeed, "while there are some ethnic identities and geographic areas that coincide with a certain religious tradition, often other identities, such as class divisions or support for political parties, are cross-cutting and do not reinforce these religious divisions." The legacy of the unifying mission of TANU in the drive toward independence, inter-religious cooperation, has, for the most part, endured. Yet, in the past decade circumstances have changed.

As mentioned earlier, Tanzania remains plagued by poverty. Despite mineral discoveries, its economy relies on agriculture, but only a small portion of its land is subject to sustainable cultivation. Comparatively paltry resources, combined with failed economic programs since independence, have translated into an \$800 per capita GDP, with 36 percent of the population below the poverty line.<sup>7</sup>

In recent years, expatriate Wahhabis from Saudi Arabia have been active in Muslim charitable organizations and in schools. Diplomats in East Africa say the Saudis' influence in the region is still minimal but growing. Fundamentalists have, on occasion, taken over 30 of the 487 mosques in Dar es Salaam and have begun bombing bars, as well as beating women who go out without being fully covered. According to a Western intelligence report, the Saudis are spending about \$1 million a year in Tanzania to build new mosques and buy influence with the ruling CCM. "We get our funds from Yemen and Saudi Arabia," says Mohammed Madi, an activist. "Officially the money is used to buy medicine, but in reality the money is given to us to support our work and buy guns."<sup>8</sup> Zanzibar also is home to an Islamist preacher, Sheikh Ponda Issa Ponda, leader of the Islamist organization *Simba wa Mungu* (God's Lion), which has forcibly taken over mosques in Dar es Salaam and violently targeted tourists. Ponda preaches *jihadi* Islamism and is reputed to have ties to al Qaeda officials.<sup>9</sup> Several Islamic groups, associated with a loosely organized movement, *Ansar al-Sunnah*, seek a purified Islam. Other revivalists are critical of *Ansar*, saying it is too closely linked to Salafism, Wahabism, and Hanbalism, conservative Muslim religious movements. *Ansar* has recently grown more visible, in small towns, as well as in larger cities in Tanzania. A second potentially Islamist movement is *Tablighi Jamaat*. Its main aim is to improve the morality of Muslim society by improving behavior as Muslims. Instead of pointing a finger at the West or Christians for the current ills that have befallen society, adherents believe that they should start with themselves, calling for living by the rules of *Shar'ia*.

So far these trends, *Ansar* and *Tablighi*, are largely ripples on the surface of theology and social life across the whole country. Sufi Islam and Islamic traditions remain mixed with local tribal customs, creating a formidable barrier to reformists, whose ideas of purification of Islam would undercut Sufi influences.

## RADICAL ISLAMISM IN TANZANIA

The bombing of the U.S. embassy in Dar es Salaam in 1998, which killed eleven people and injured eighty-five, revealed the existence of a cell of *jihadi* terrorists. The bombing was not a plot planned by Tanzanian Muslims, although two Zanzibari were implicated. The attack was orchestrated by a few Somalis: al Qaeda operatives and sleepers, with regional links to cells in Tanzania and Kenya, and planned outside. These extremists, based in Nairobi, began in 1993 to use the trade in diamonds, tanzanite, and rubies to render the al Qaeda cells in Tanzania self-sufficient. The Saudi charity, al-Haramain Islamic Foundation in Tanzania, now shut down, supplied funds.<sup>10</sup>

Uamsho, an NGO, began by offering public lectures on Islam in the 1990s. It later became interested in Muslim rights. It employs the language of human rights and good governance in its critique of the government, which is unique for an Islamic group. Supporters accuse the government of intervening in religious affairs, which would go against Article 19 of the Constitution. They also claim that government corruption has led to the moral decline of the country. Finally, they claim that

<sup>6</sup> Jeffrey Haynes, "Islamic Militancy in East Africa," *Third World Quarterly*, 26, 8, 2005, p. 1330.

<sup>7</sup> Central Intelligence Agency, "Tanzania," *World Fact Book*, online, accessed July 24, p. 2010.

<sup>8</sup> Lisa Beyer "Inside the Kingdom," *Time Magazine*, September 15, 2003, [www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,1005663-8,00.html](http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,1005663-8,00.html), accessed July 26, 2010.

<sup>9</sup> Peter Kagwanja, "Counter-terrorism in the Horn of Africa: New Security Frontiers, Old Strategies," *African Security Review*, 15, 3, 2006, p. 77.

<sup>10</sup> David H. Shinn, "Al-Qaeda in East Africa and the Horn," *Journal of Conflict Studies*, Summer 2007, p. 37.

there are laws in Tanzania regulating dress codes and alcohol, but the corrupt government does not enforce them. The government of Zanzibar has claimed that this group has fundamentalist views. In addition, various Western groups and think tanks have accused this group of contemplating terrorist attacks against the tourist industry in Zanzibar. Yet an inquiry by the British, American, and Danish embassies found it to be non-violent.<sup>11</sup>

Overall, Tanzania remains vulnerable to radical Islamists. Tanzania has a low capacity government, in a large territorial expanse (the size of France and Germany combined). Thirty six percent of the population is below the poverty line. With rudimentary border controls, a wide open coastline and troubled neighbors, such as Somalia, Tanzania's large coastal trade and much smuggling provide excellent logistical cover for extremists. (The neighboring countries of Kenya and Uganda have each suffered violent jihadi attacks.) Small arms and other weapons are readily available on the black market in East Africa. The police are unable, and sometimes unwilling, to provide even the most basic public safety services, as major crimes often go unsolved. The Tanzanian National Security Service is more capable than the police force, but it is better suited to spying on political opponents, since that has been their training. These security weaknesses make Tanzania a relatively soft target. Currently, the Muslim population, taken as a whole, has not succumbed to extremist rhetoric. The small and weak Islamists, and radical elements within them, concentrate on bringing their co-religionists in Tanzania more in line with fundamentalist Islamic practices. Tanzania faces the dilemma of post-authoritarian states in Africa: a tropism toward official blandishments or outright control of associations once prohibited under one party rule. Ironically, the more moderate groups, who offer no structural challenge to the system, are more likely to be candidates for co-optation. Radicals, even at the level of ideas, are forced to work outside the system. Thus, the government risks pushing Islamist believers in more radical directions by sheer clumsiness—such as election rigging in Zanzibar.

The Islamic revival thus far has not instigated a wave of Islamist radicalism. Most revivalists have been critical of anti-government fundamentalists. But the Islamic revival has opened new sources of information on Islam, beyond the leading clerics inside the country. The way is open for simplistic and politicized interpretations to capitalize on local grievances, such as the integrity of the federation of the mainland and Zanzibar, and interpret that as a Muslim-Christian matter or a matter of the relative weight of Zanzibari opinion within the overall politics of the union.

## LOOKING AHEAD

Tanzania's so-far successful pattern of political co-optation was reflected in the conduct of its fourth multi-party general elections on October 31, 2010. The ruling CCM party faced its most serious competition in the multi-party era, but President Kikwete was re-elected with 61 percent of the vote, reduced from 80 percent in 2005. The Chadema party—the perennial territorial opposition since the end of one party rule—for the first time received the most opposition votes. Chadema's presidential candidate, Willibrod Slaa, took 27 percent, while CUF's Ibrahim Lipumba received 8 percent. This marked a decline in CUF's salience in national politics, for the first time in decades. Voter turnout, at 42 percent, was, however the lowest in Tanzanian history; previously, at least 70 percent of registered voters had cast ballots. Although the elections were conducted without major disturbances or irregularities, Chadema officials complained about voting and tabulation procedures, as well as the constitutional prohibition on challenging presidential election results after their formal announcement.

As expected, CCM retained its absolute majority in Parliament, with nearly 80 percent of the seats. With a total of 47 seats—24 elected and 23 “special seats” for women—Chadema displaced CUF as the official territorial opposition and selected its Chairman, Freeman Mbowe, as opposition leader. The new Parliament selected Anne Makinda as Tanzania's first woman Speaker of Parliament.

Self-governing Zanzibar (3 percent of Tanzania's population) displayed relative calm. Serious irregularities and sporadic violence had marred every election in Zanzibar since 1964. However, after years of abortive negotiations, the CUF and the ruling party reached a power-sharing agreement. The outcome of the July 31, 2010 referendum set the stage for peaceful general elections on October 31 in Zanzibar. The deal eliminated the winner-take-all system for Zanzibar, giving the losing side one of two vice president slots and ministerial positions in proportion to the seats it holds in the Zanzibar House of Representatives. On October 31, Zanzibar CCM presidential candidate Ali Mohamed Shein won with 50.1 percent of the vote, while runner-up Civic United Front (CUF) presidential candidate Seif Sharif Hamad received 49.1 percent. Shein selected Hamad as his First Vice President and Seif Ali, the former Union Deputy Foreign Minister, as his Second Vice President.<sup>12</sup>

Despite major opposition in confederated Zanzibar, Tanzania provides a degree of comparative calm in East Africa, a region facing increasing spillover possibilities from Somali pirates, Islamist propaganda, and systemic instability sweeping over North Africa and the Middle East. The United States is well-advised to cultivate official Tanzanian friendship and “bank”

<sup>11</sup> Turner, *Op. Cit.*, 242.

<sup>12</sup> B. James and B. Lugongo, “Tanzania: Is Democracy, Political Competition Under Threat?” [allafrica.com/stories/201008310556.html](http://allafrica.com/stories/201008310556.html); also U.S. Department of State, Bureau of African Affairs, *Background Note: Tanzania*. [www.state.gov/r/pa/ei/bgn/2843.htm](http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ei/bgn/2843.htm), Dec. 13, 2010;> accessed March 22, 2011.

**good relations in the face of a regional future of uncertainty.**

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**FPRI, 1528 Walnut Street, Suite 610, Philadelphia, PA 19102-3684**

**For more information, contact Alan Luxenberg at 215-732-3774, ext. 105, email [fpri@fpri.org](mailto:fpri@fpri.org), or visit us at [www.fpri.org](http://www.fpri.org).**