

Radical Islam¹

The threat posed by international terrorism, and in particular from al Qaeda and related groups, continues to be the gravest we face. Testimony of FBI Director Robert S. Mueller, III before the Senate Committee on Intelligence, February 16, 2005 (Mueller, 2005)

Introduction

As articulated in the chapter on the history of terrorism, up until the 1980s, the majority of the Middle Eastern extremist groups that attracted the attention of the West, such as al Fatah or the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine, were political and secular in nature. Two watershed events occurred in 1979, however, that laid the groundwork for the rise of the religious Islamic terrorism that would burst full-bore in American consciousness on 9-11. One was the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. In due time, the most powerful land army on the planet was defeated by a rag-tag group of Muslim fighters who arrived from all regions of the world, united by their powerful Islamic faith (and supported by the CIA). The other was the overthrow of the Shah of Iran, a staunch US ally, and the installation of Ruhollah ibn Mustafa Musawi Khomeini Hindi, better known as Ayatollah Khomeini, as the leader of that country. If most Americans paid scant attention to the ascension of this Shii'a religious figure, they were riveted by the subsequent takeover of the U.S. embassy in Teheran and ensuing hostage crisis, in which approximately 70 Americans were held in captivity for 444 days. If that was bad enough, confidence in the Carter administration during this period was significantly eroded by a botched rescue attempt in 1980, in which eight American service members were killed when two aircraft collided during a sandstorm in the Iranian desert.

In spite of these events, prior to the terrorist attacks of 9-11, most Americans knew little about radical Islam and less about al Qaeda. While Osama bin Laden is today a household name,

¹Much of the material for this section is taken from White (2003) and Esposito (2002).

it's a good bet that the history of Islam, both the mainstream and radical versions, remains largely unknown to most westerners. In order to gain some understanding of today's threat environment, it would be helpful to understand how Islam has evolved into the world's second largest and fastest-growing religion.

The Origins of Islam

The word "Islam" comes from the Arabic word for "submission." A Muslim, therefore, is one who submits to the will of God. Like Judaism and Christianity, Islam is a monotheistic religion. In fact, the declaration that there is but one God and Mohammed was his messenger on earth is one of the five "pillars," or cornerstones, of Islam.

Again like Christians and Jews, Muslims trace their lineage to Abraham. According to the Koran (and the Bible as well), before Abraham and Sarah produced their own son, Isaac, Abraham produced another son, Ishmael, with his handmaiden Hagar.

While Christians and Jews view Abraham, Isaac, David and their progeny as ancestors, Muslims trace their roots through Ishmael. The Koran maintains that both Hagar and Ishmael were dismissed from Abraham's home. As they wandered through the desert, it became clear to Hagar that both would soon perish from thirst. Not being able to bear watching her son suffer, she abandoned him at a spot in the desert. God, however, intervened to produce an oasis so both mother and baby would survive.

Upon their survival, they lived in the city of Mecca, the birthplace of Mohammed. Upon the death of Hagar, Abraham, at the direction of God, constructed a large, black cube, called the **Ka'ba** (Arabic for "cube") at the center of Mecca. Originally conceived as a shrine to the one, true, God (and built as a replacement for a similar object that had existed during the time of Adam and Eve), over the years the function of the Ka'ba began to change.

Mecca was on an important trade route in between the more powerful Byzantine and Persian empires. As a result, many different individuals, with many different religious beliefs, regularly passed through the town. Gradually, the Ka'ba came to serve as a focal point for many very divergent religions, from different versions of monotheism to polytheism to paganism. Other religious shrines and statues sprung up. The Meccan leaders, probably sensing that playing to peoples' individual beliefs was good for business, encouraged the worship of whatever God(s) they chose. Eventually, Mecca became known as a city of multiple religions and played host to various important religious festivals.

The lack of a unifying religion also promoted tribalism – with no other manner in which to organize, one's family or clan became all important. This was the Mecca that Mohammed was born into: a somewhat rough and prosperous city, known for its encouragement of religion but whose values favored the clan and family over God.

The Life of Mohammed

As with Judaism or Christianity, there is nothing inherent in Islam that predisposes one to becoming a terrorist. Stereotypes to the contrary, most Muslims are peace-loving and would never consider engaging in activities like suicide bombings. As well, it is important to keep in mind that most of the world's religions have at one time or another been used to justify violence.

The history of Islam begins officially with Mohammed, who Muslims believe was God's final and most significant messenger on Earth. Mohammed was born in Mecca in 570 A.D. When he was very young, Mohammed's father died; after living with his grandfather for a time (who also died), Mohammed went to live with his uncle, abu Talib.

Unlike Jesus, nothing in Mohammed's early years indicated that he was destined to be a man of God. He and his uncle eked out a meager living tending herds or engaging in minor commerce.

Mohammed's fortunes changed, however, when he turned 25 -- at that time, he came into the employ of a wealthy 40 year-old widow named Khadijah. Although an age difference of 15 years separated them, Khadijah and Mohammed eventually married, providing Mohammed with a comfortable lifestyle for the first time in his life.

For the next several years, Mohammed oversaw his and Khadijah's businesses. However, during this time, Mohammed also began to grow spiritually and would often spend hours in solitary contemplation. When he was 40, Mohammed received his first divine revelation -- during one of his periods of meditation, the angel Gabriel suddenly appeared and informed Mohammed that it was his calling to deliver God's word to the world.

At first, Mohammed was a reluctant prophet. Fearing ridicule and persecution, he did not share his visions with anyone beyond Khadijah and some close friends. Eventually, however, she persuaded him that it was his duty to reveal to others what God had revealed to him. From that time until his death in 632 A.D., Mohammed continued to receive God's word via visitations from Gabriel. Because he could neither read nor write, Mohammed dictated the content of his visitations to a scribe (usually a family member). These transcriptions, which Muslims believe to be the holy, inspired word of God, became the Koran.

The New Testament of the Bible contains many miracles attributed to Jesus, such as feeding the multitudes or raising the dead. Mohammed performed no such miracles in his life -- instead, Muslims believe the Koran to be God's sole miracle delivered through Mohammed. They believe that the beauty and wisdom in the Koran is such that no one but God could possibly be its author.

As he predicted, Mohammed's revelations were not warmly embraced at the outset. At least part of this was financial -- every year, Mecca hosted a festival in which several hundred religions were represented. Running the gamut from Christianity to Judaism, but primarily pagan and

polytheist, believers of all stripes prayed to idols and celebrated around the Ka'bah, a large, square, monolithic-like structure in the center of Mecca whose murky past made it ideal for the celebration of all types of religion. Meccans profited handsomely from this festival and were reluctant to allow an upstart religion to promote itself as possessing the one, true God.

Mohammed's popularity grew, primarily among the peasant and lower classes. At some point, he became a threat to wealthy, secular Meccans. Eventually, sensing that he and his followers were threatened, Mohammed began to send them north to the town of Yathrib, subsequently named Medina.

By 622 A.D., the threats against Mohammed had become intolerable. He left Mecca and settled in Medina, where he was welcomed. This journey, termed the "Hegira," is a significant event in Islamic history; it is considered the beginning of Islam and is the point at which the Muslim calendar begins.

In 624 A.D., Mohammed embarked upon a series of battles with the Meccans. At first, surprising victory was followed by defeat, which included the wounding of Mohammed in battle. Ultimately, Mohammed and his followers prevailed. In 629 A.D., they returned triumphantly to Mecca; as one of their first acts, they purged the Ka'ba of idolaters and reclaimed it as a monument to a monotheistic God.

By this time, Khadijah had died. Mohammed married four more wives; in all, he bore two sons (both of whom died in childhood) and four daughters. He continued to preach in Mecca until his death in 632 A.D. He named no successor prior to his death.

Significance of Mohammed

Unlike the Christian view of Jesus, Mohammed is not considered by Muslims to be the son of God. Rather, he is thought to be the final prophet in a long list of prophets. Other Islamic prophets

include Moses, Jesus, and Abraham. To that end, Islam is not a “new” religion in the sense that it totally contradicts Judaism and Christianity; instead, it is a refinement of the monotheistic traditions of both, with “corrections” made to “misinterpreted” portions of each (e.g., that Jesus is the son of God).²

Mohammed was successful in a variety of roles – husband, man of God, merchant, warrior. For a man of his time, he was surprisingly tolerant, especially with regard to women, constantly preaching against female infanticide and promoting equality. Although a fierce warrior, in victory he railed against slavery and encouraged peaceful co-existence with those who followed other religions.

Islam After Mohammed

Mohammed was believed to be the final prophet. As a result, whoever succeeded him would serve more as a steward of what he had set up than as an innovator. Unfortunately, he had neither named a successor nor set up a process for succession. So began the first schism in Islam.

Sunni and Shi'a

There was considerable disagreement as to who should rule the Muslim nation upon Mohammed's death. Some thought the successor should be elected; others opted for the appointment of Mohammed's closest male heir (reasoning that greatness passed genetically). Two candidates emerged, reflecting these two schools of thought. The consensus candidate was abu Bakr, Mohammed's father-in-law, and a well-respected, pious member of the community. The male heir camp selected Ali, Mohammed's cousin and son-in-law. The consensus camp ultimately held sway

²One of the most significant events in Islamic history is Mohammed's night journey from Mecca during the Hegira, in which, awakened from sleep, he traveled with the angel Gabriel to the al Aqsa mosque in Jerusalem. Upon arrival there, he ascended into Heaven, passing other prophets including Abraham, Moses, John, Joseph, and Jesus. As a result of this journey, Muslims consider Jerusalem to be the third most important Islamic holy site, behind Mecca and Medina.

and abu Bakr became the first **caliph**, or political leader, after Mohammed.

This did not sit well with those who backed Ali. While they did not openly rebel, they nevertheless did not give up in their quest to see Ali ultimately named caliph. They got their wish in 656 A.D., when Ali became the fourth caliph. However, his rule lasted only five years and ended with his assassination. Ali's son Hussein attempted to regain the caliphate. He and many of his followers were massacred in 680 A.D. in the battle of Karbala.

This early Islamic history set the stage for many centuries to come – those who followed the consensus line of reasoning and supported abu Bakr and his followers became known as **Sunnis** (from the Arabic word meaning “example”). Those who believed that Ali and his successors should run things were called **Shii'a** (literally, “followers of Ali”). These two branches of Islam represent the vast majority of Muslim's today. Approximately 85% of the world's Muslims consider themselves Sunnis. The other 15% are Shii'a and, to a far lesser extent, other branches of Islam.

Most Shii'a today are found in Iran and Iraq. The Ayatollah Khomeini and his followers were/are Shii'a while Saddam Hussein ruled Iraq as a very secular Sunni (even though 60% of the population of Iraq is Shii'a). Perhaps today's best known Shii'a terrorist group is Hizbollah, supported by Iran but primarily active in Lebanon. In the west, Hizbollah is best known for its suicide attack on the U.S. Marine barracks in 1983 in which 241 Americans were killed. Al Qaeda, on the other hand, is a Sunni group as is HAMAS, which operates mainly in the Gaza Strip and is dedicated to the eradication of Israel.

A Very Brief History of Islam

Islam spread very rapidly following Mohammed's death. The first four caliphs were considered “rightly guided” and Muslims today look at their reign as one of particular enlightenment. They were replaced in 661 A.D. by the first of several significant dynasties, in this

case the **Umayyads**, who held power for approximately 100 years. During their reign, Muslim holdings stretched from China to southern Europe.

Thus began a series of expansions and contractions of Islamic power and influence. At its zenith, Muslim culture was unrivaled. At a time when Europe was mired in the Dark Ages, Islamic scholars were making contributions in all field of endeavor, including mathematics, philosophy, science, medicine, and law. It is said by some that their contributions speeded up the onset of the Enlightenment.

In order to appreciate Islam's relationship with the west, at least two significant historical events must be understood – the Crusades and European colonialism. In order to gain perspective on the significance of these two events, Islamic expert John Esposito relates the following anecdote:

I was at a national professional conference on the modern Muslim world. We were running late. The panel chair, to assure that there would be enough time for this nervous young professor to participate, asked his colleagues to skip the first part of their papers denouncing the Crusades and European colonialism for their long-lasting negative legacy. At the time, it seemed merely humorous. Today, some twenty-five years later, it has proven enduringly revealing (Esposito, 2002: 74).

*The Crusades*³

In 1095 A.D., Pope Urban II delivered a sermon during the Council of Claremont that was interpreted by his Christian followers as a call to arms: Jerusalem and the Holy lands were to be liberated from their Muslim “occupiers.” Thus began a series of military campaigns popularly known as the Crusades, which roughly extended from 1097 A.D. - 1291 A.D.

In all, there were six Crusades. When they were first begun, internecine warfare between various Muslim factions prevented a united front from forming against the invading European armies. As a result, the Crusaders were able to acquire a great deal of territory. Eventually, however,

³Much of the material in this section was taken from Martin (?????), pages 163-167.

Muslim forces successfully repelled each incursion.

For most non-Muslims, the Crusades hold a minor place in history, belonging to a long bygone era. In the Muslim world, however, the opposite is true. Scholars and lay people alike still praise the brave deeds of heroes such as Saladin, who successfully ousted Crusading armies from the territories they had conquered. And perhaps most important, many Muslims cite the Crusades as an early and significant example of the West's enmity toward Islam. They demonstrate, the claim goes, long-standing Christian and Jewish⁴ desires, still in play today, to occupy the Middle East and destroy Islam. Accordingly, when U.S. President George Bush used the word "crusade" shortly after the 9-11 attacks to describe the global war on terrorism, it was interpreted by many in the Muslim world to be nothing more than a declaration of war against Islam.

*Colonialism*⁵

If the Crusades serve in the minds of some as an ancient symbol of the West's nefarious designs on Islam, European Colonialism provides a much more recent, and in many ways, a much more significant, example.

The exact beginnings of colonialism are murky. Most scholars note that in the 15th century, Europeans started to travel extensively throughout the world, with the twin goals of obtaining resources and converting the masses to Christianity. Over the years, many former European colonies were able to successfully oust the colonizers and gain their independence prior to modern times (e.g., America). Other lands were not so fortunate.

In some cases, colonialism was primarily economic (e.g., the establishment of East India

⁴Why many consider the Crusades to demonstrate a Jewish desire to take over Muslim lands is unclear, insofar as they were unquestionably a Christian venture.

⁵Much of the material in this section was taken from Malik (?????), pages 152-155.

companies and the like), while in others it was both economic and political. By the mid-18th century, nearly all Middle Eastern countries were financially dependent on Europe. By the early part of the 20th century, this economic dependence had evolved into direct, political control as well.

Certainly, colonial rule proved quite difficult for the native population. The colonizers and those they favored occupied positions of dominance and wealth while others were forced into subservient roles, often in deplorable conditions. In order for the minority outsiders to control the population, harsh measures were occasionally employed. As well, social and tribal structures that had been in place for years were replaced with those designed to benefit the colonizers rather than the colonized.

The move toward independence in the Muslim lands began in earnest after World War I and was spurred on by World War II. As the colonizers departed the Middle East, they left behind poorly integrated societies and countries where boundaries had in many cases been artificially constructed. They also left behind an angry population that blamed economic and social problems almost exclusively on European occupation. If the Crusades planted the idea of a western war on Islam, the colonial period solidified it. Even today, modern terrorists like Osama bin Laden refer to American troops in Iraq as “Crusaders” and justify their use of terrorism as a legitimate response to infidel “attacks” on Islam.

The Practice of Islam

The Five Pillars

As noted previously, there are five “pillars,” or core beliefs, with regard to Islam. The first of these, the declaration that there is but one God and that Mohammed was his messenger on Earth, is seen as the core concept of Islam. Indeed, the Arabic version of this phrase (in Arabic the **Shahadah**) is repeated often by Muslims and one need only recite it a single time with sincerity to

convert to Islam.

The second pillar of Islam is the prayer, performed five times per day in Arabic (**Salah**). Today, Muslims face the city of Mecca when they pray. In order to establish purity, Muslims generally kneel on prayer rugs and clean themselves before they begin

The third pillar is the charity tax or **Zakat**. Mohammed was clear in his belief that Muslims were obligated to assist the poor and needy. Muslims can give as much or as little as they please, but they are encouraged to do so in secrecy.

The fourth pillar of Islam is the **Sawm** or the fast during the daylight hours of the month of Ramadan. Ramadan is a very special time for Muslims. It is the ninth month of the year in the Muslim calendar and celebrates both God's first revelation to Mohammed through the angel Gabriel and the first defeat of the Meccans by a vastly outnumbered group of Medinans, who were led by Mohammed. The fast begins at daybreak and ends at sundown. The end of Ramadan is celebrated with a huge feast, called **al Fitr**, and an exchange of gifts.

The final of the five pillars of Islam is the **Haj**, or the journey to Mecca that a Muslim is expected to do at least once in his lifetime if he is physically able. The Haj is often the spiritual highpoint in the life of a Muslim, and includes ritualistic circling of the Ka'ba as well as many other standardized activities.

Islamic Texts

The most significant text in Islam is the **Koran**, which Muslims believe to be the holy, inspired word of God delivered to Mohammed through the angel Gabriel. The importance and significance of the Koran cannot be overstated. In fact, it is considered to be the central miracle of Islam, written with such truth, wisdom, and beauty that no mortal could possibly be its author. Indeed, many devout Muslims memorize the Koran in its entirety, even those who don't speak the

Saudi version of Arabic, in which the Koran is written and recited. Unlike the Bible or other religious tracts, the Koran is not written chronologically and does not follow narrative form. Instead, it is written as poetry, and is designed for recitation. Because Mohammed was believed to have been illiterate, it is theorized that he dictated the Koran to a family member or close associate.

The second major body of Islamic literature is the **Hadith**, or the traditions of the Prophet.

.if the Saudi those for whom the Saudi dialect of the Koran . Because it is written and recited in the Saudi dialect of Arabic, those Muslims who ar

It is said that

The Road to Radicalism

References

Esposito, John L. (2002) Unholy war. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Martin, Richard C. (???) Encyclopedia of Islam and the Muslim World, Volume 1. New York: Thomson-Gale.

Malik, Jamal (????). Colonialism. In Martin, Richard C. (ed.) Encyclopedia of Islam and the Muslim World, Volume 1. New York: Thomson-Gale.

Mueller, III, Robert S. (2005) "Testimony of Robert S. Mueller, III, Director, Federal Bureau of Investigation, Before the Senate Committee on Intelligence of the United States Senate, February 16, 2005." at URL <http://www.fbi.gov/congress/congress05/mueller021605.htm> accessed 06/27/2005.

White, Jonathan R. (2003) Terrorism (4th edition) Belmont, CA: Wadsworth/Thomson Learning.