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ISLAM: DOUBLE EDGED SWORD OF INSTABILITY
IN THE MIDDLE EAST

by

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Preface

There I stood, still partially in shock, as my search and recovery team made one last sweep through the building looking for remains. My mind was racing and my heart was sick. I wondered why. Islamic terrorism: brutal premeditated murder in the name of God. Could that be? I thought about twelve year olds being served up in waves to the enemy during the Iran-Iraq war and advances in weapons of mass destruction discovered after the Gulf war. All somehow related to a religion—a religion somehow related to my own. I had to know more. At first, my focus was on Islam as our next ideological adversary. Later, I came to recognize that much like my own faith, over time, Islam has evolved to mean many things to many people. It is an ideology preached, practiced, used and abused in a variety of ways. The violence that peaked my interest is as much a crime to most Muslims as it was to me. I learned that terms like *Islamic fundamentalism* are grossly misused or perhaps more importantly misunderstood. Still, I was intrigued. The result is an attempt to demystify Islam and its influence in a region of vital international interest. While I will now concede Islam itself may not be the enemy, my studies convinced me it is a unique and powerful force that must not be ignored in future US policy decisions concerning the Middle East.

My thanks to Thomas W. Lippman whose work answered most of my personal questions and to Professor Ira M. Lapidus whose article I discovered late in the process but validates what I have attempted to do here. A special thanks to His Royal Highness

Prince Bandar, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia's Ambassador to the United States, whose presentation to our class reaffirmed my confidence in the prospect for peaceful relations with nations of Islam. Thanks also to my advisor, Dr. Sorenson, my regional studies instructor, Dr. Dowdy, and to the staff of the Air University library for their help with this project. I am grateful to my Service for this special opportunity to pause and reflect on such issues.

My love and appreciation to Sandy, Amanda, Dmitri and Ivan for their understanding while Papa shut himself away in his office for days at a stretch. And, most importantly, my prayers for the millions who embrace Islam and the leaders of this world faced with the enormous challenge of peace on Earth.

Abstract

This paper examines the role of Islam in regional stability as both a religion and a political influence in the Middle East. It is based on historical research and selected theories of social and political relationships. It provides an overview of Islamic history describing its origin, rise, and decline. It explains the split between Shiite and Sunni sects. It describes internal and external divisions within Islam including the struggle between Iran and Saudi Arabia as keepers of the faith. It identifies other aspects of Islamic influence in the region such as fundamentalist movements and its role in government and international relations. It concludes with a brief look at current US security strategy from the Islamic perspective as a point of departure for future US policy and involvement in the region.

Chapter 1

Sword Of Instability

Know the enemy and know yourself; in a hundred battles you will never be in peril.

—Sun Tzu

Terrorism, the proliferation of nuclear, chemical, and biological weapons, the effect of regional instability on the world's access to oil, open and aggressive anti-western sentiment; these are threats to US national interests and important reasons to study the Middle East. It is a region of ancient religious, ethnic, and political conflict that continues today. At the heart of it all is Islam; a religion and a polity.¹ Like a great *sword*, it wields powerful influence over people, their governments, and international relations. How this ideology relates to stability in the region is just one of many important factors to consider in formulating US security policy. Consequently, a rudimentary understanding is useful to strategic thinking military leaders. This paper attempts to demystify Islam through an examination of its history and an analysis of its relationship to conflict. It highlights some related aspects contributing to regional instability and offers strategic considerations for future US involvement in the Middle East.

Historic Islam

And it is He who has sent Muhammad with guidance and the religion of truth. That it may spread over all other religions, in spite of the idol worshipers.

—Quran: S61v9

Today's Islam is as diverse as today's Christianity and misunderstood by many. Much like Christianity, Islam originates out of Hebrew monotheism and branches off Judaism with common roots back to the patriarch Abraham.² According to the Christian bible, God made a covenant with Abraham because of his devout faith. God told him, "Look up at the sky and count the stars if you can. Just so shall your descendants be."³ He was to become patriarch of the Jewish Nation. Abraham was very old and his wife, Sarah, was barren. When he told Sarah about God's promise, she gave her husband a slave girl, consistent with the practice of the times, to facilitate an heir. The slave girl, Hagar, had a son and named him Ishmael. A few years later, Sarah miraculously gave birth too. They named the child Isaac. Sarah was already jealous of Hagar and since Isaac was the "rightful heir," she banished Hagar and Ishmael to the wilderness.

These events disturbed Abraham and he prayed to God for advice. In response, God told Abraham the original promise would be fulfilled through Isaac. However, because of Abraham's concern for Ishmael, Hagar's son would also be blessed and become the father of a great nation.⁴ According to the Jewish, Christian, and Islamic bibles, Hagar and her son wandered in the wilderness of present day Saudi Arabia. The Christian bible tells a story of how God led Hagar to a spring in the desert and once again promised that Ishmael would father a great nation.⁵ Both the Christian and the Islamic bible say Abraham maintained contact with both of his sons. It was at Hagar's spring, known as

the well of Zam Zam, he and Ishmael later built a cubic sanctuary for prayer to God called the Kabah.⁶ Interestingly, some two thousand years later, this holy place would become Islam's holiest shrine. It was there, in this vast desert region, from Ishmael's descendants came the prophet Muhammad.⁷

Muhammad was born in Mecca; a town along the Red Sea caravan route. It was a bustling city of commerce with a diverse transient influence that transformed the native Bedouin residents to a more sophisticated, less nomadic people. Even though it was home to Abraham's Kabah, idolatry and polytheism became common in the mixed culture of the city. Muhammad, raised to believe solely in the one God, was troubled by this. Each year he went to a nearby cave for extensive prayer. There, in the year 611 AD, at the age of 41, Muhammad received his first message from God through the angel Gabriel. For approximately 10 years, he preached to the people of Mecca bringing a message of repentance and surrender to the one God. In Arabic the word Islam means to submit. It was about this time from Mecca, according to Islamic tradition, that Muhammad was taken by the angel Gabriel on a spiritual journey to Jerusalem.

There, on the site where today stands the Dome of the Rock, it is said he was met by Abraham, Moses, Jesus, and others. They prayed together and Muhammad visited heaven where he received guidance from God concerning daily prayer.⁸ It is a holy site sacred to Jews, Christians, and Muslims for different but related reasons:

Here, according to Jewish tradition, Abraham bound his son Isaac, prepared to sacrifice him at God's command; Jacob dreamed of the ladder which reached to heaven; and from this spot God created Adam. This is the highest point of Mt. Moriah mentioned in Genesis as the place Abraham went with Isaac, and in 2 Chronicles as the site of the First Temple built by Solomon. In Muslim tradition, according to the Quran, this is the spot where Abraham was prepared to offer his first born son

Ishmael, not Isaac as the Torah states and they believe it to be the spot from which the prophet made his heavenly journey. Although disputed, many believe the rock is the foundation stone of the Holy Temple, where the Ark of the Covenant rested in the Holy of Holies.⁹

Soon after Mohammed's mystic journey, local opposition forced him to seek exile in present day Medina, Saudi Arabia. It was there his mission took on a more forceful persona and he established Islam as both a religion and a political body with the creation of a theocratic community called the Umma.¹⁰

Mohammed's Islam was not a new religion but an extension of the old through divine clarification. As he understood it, God's messages were the continuation of Jewish and Christian scriptures. The holy book of Islam, the Quran, represents the consolidation of the verses repeated by Muhammad following his visions. They were collected within 20 years after his death and never revised except as changed through translation to other languages.¹¹ The teachings of the book include versions of Jewish and Christian history including the stories of Noah and the flood, Moses and the wandering in the desert, and the Gospels of Jesus Christ. It stresses belief in the one God, prescribes right and wrong behaviors, and warns of judgment day much like the Bible.¹²

However, Mohammed's calling was to set the world straight:

The Quranic command to spread the Islamic message was the sole justification for establishing the empire. Just as the Romans felt they had a mission to civilize the world, the Muslims claimed a divine mandate to correct the scriptural misinterpretations of the other monotheists and to implement the final installment of the prophetic saga. The Jews had mistakenly assumed the prophetic message applied only to them and the Christians, having corrected that error, had fallen into their own. They had deified a prophet, thus compromising the very basis of monotheism.¹³

Within 10 years, he returned to Mecca. Two years later, by the time of his death, the prophet and his followers had converted the entire Arabian peninsula. In the span of just

over 100 years, Mohammed's Islam would stretch from Medina to the Pyrenees mountains of present day Spain in the west, to China in the east, and included all of the Middle East and most of North Africa.¹⁴ However, from the very beginning, politics began to take their toll on the movement.

Muhammad did not name a successor or establish how one should be selected.¹⁵ This became an important point of contention and would eventually divide Islam. Almost out of desperation, the inner circle of the prophet's family, friends, and community met and picked Abu Bakr to be the first Caliph (successor). He was an influential elder and father-in-law of Muhammad. It was a logical choice but a number of critics advocated the rightful heir was Ali, the prophet's cousin and husband of Muhammad's daughter, Fatima. The argument was: Islam could not be rightly guided except by divine inheritance. Abu Bakr died 2 years later and 2 more Caliphs were selected in the same manner. While the empire flourished, this issue festered. Finally, partly because the inner circle had begun to run out of choices, the partisans of Ali (Shiat Ali or Shia) would get their way temporarily. Ali became Caliph. Unfortunately, controversy surrounding the death of his predecessor, among other things, contributed to Ali's assassination and the outbreak of civil war. The victorious clan of the 2 previous Caliphs, the house of Umayya, installed themselves as the first in a series of Islamic dynasties and moved the capital from Arabia to Syria.¹⁶

For the Shia, these events compounded their grievances. They rejected the new Caliphate and, a few years later, civil war would erupt again. This time, Husayn, grandson-in-law of the prophet led the insurrection. In 680 AD, just 50 years after the prophet's death, Shiism was already a radical movement. Husayn's armies met the

Umayyads at Karbala in present day Iraq but were violently massacred. One story handed down from generation to generation tells of the sole survivor, young son of Husayn, who lived just long enough to tell the gruesome details. Another reports:

That day they fought from morning until their final breath, the Imam, the Hashemites and the companions were all martyred . . . The army of the enemy, after ending the war, plundered the harem of the Imam and burned his tents. They decapitated the bodies of the martyrs, denuded them, and threw them to the ground without burial.¹⁷

“The blood of the victims of Karbala transformed Shiism from a party to a sect, from a faction to a religion.”¹⁸ The majority of the Shiites settled in the Persia of present day Iran. Since that time, Shiism has evolved steadfastly in its claim as the true keeper of the faith and a major source of conflict within Islam.

Meanwhile, those who considered the first four successors the rightly guided caliphs and accepted the authority of the Umayyad Empire became known as Sunni or followers of the prophet’s path.¹⁹ The Sunnites interpreted certain provisions of the Quran to say that Muslims should be led by consensus; a representative chosen according to democratic principles.²⁰ Under the Umayyads, Islam began to develop a pattern for a secular state including, to a degree, centralized government and military service, social classes, and a system of taxation.²¹ While these developments contributed to unity and growth, they met with grass-roots resistance highlighting a traditional incompatibility between the religion and secular government.

As occurred from the time of the prophet, critics and opponents used an “Islamic yardstick” to judge or condemn the Umayyads and legitimate their own actions and aspirations. Political, social, economic, and religious grievances were viewed through the prism of an Islamic ideal relevant to all areas of life. Thus, Umayyad practice incurred an opposition that ranged from Kharijites, Shia, and disgruntled non-Arab Muslims to early legal scholars and mystics of Islam.²²

Despite such movements, Sunni Islam continued to expand taking in the Turks, the Persians, and more. The complexity of the ethnic mix gave rise to a number of independent dynasties but they continued to respect the supreme rule of the single Caliph. However, near the end of the 10th century, the empire began to unravel. To the west, local dynasties of present day Spain, North Africa, and Egypt split away; to the east, the Mongols came. Politically, the great empire was divided and in decline for more than 500 years. The ruling families were corrupt and power changed hands many times, often as a result of violence. The capital moved from Damascus to Baghdad, to Cairo, and then to Istanbul.²³

For some believers, an interesting story surrounding the move to Istanbul, formerly Constantinople, foretells a rebirth of the empire. Muhammad reportedly had a Divine revelation and described how the territories of the Islamic empire would be many including Constantinople and Rome. As the story has been passed from holy man to holy man, when asked which of the two cities would open first, Muhammad said, “The city of Hercules (meaning Constantinople) will be opened first.”²⁴ And so it was. However, since Rome was not captured, the prophet’s vision remains unfinished.

It was under Ottoman rule that the Empire ultimately crumbled. At first, the Turks successfully expanded Islamic influence into north Africa, southern Europe, and India but they were oppressive and greedy.²⁵ Much like Christianity, Islam experienced the erosion of original intent and practice due to the mixing of cultures, human weaknesses, and a variety of approaches to government. It was during this period a reformist scholar named Abd al-Wahhab, educated in the most rigorous of Sunni schools, led a fundamentalist movement:

Seeking to strip Islam of the beliefs and practices that hung upon it in ossifying layers over the course of a thousand years, he preached what was a back to the basics form of Islam: man, God, Muhammad, and the Quran, and nothing else.²⁶

He and his followers formed an alliance with the Saudi family; a fierce tribe of desert warriors from the Arabian Peninsula. With their help, the Wahhabis took control of Mecca and Medina (Islam's most sacred shrines), sacked the tomb of the Shiite martyrs at Karbala, and marched on Baghdad, then Istanbul. The Ottomans responded with a 7 year campaign ultimately executing the Wahhabi leader and pushing the movement back to the Saud homeland. Turkish racism, the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, and European colonialism following World War I gave rise to Arab nationalism and the birth of several modern states.²⁷

Meanwhile, the Whabbi movement continued in the heartland of Sunni Islam. In 1902, a daring young Prince, Abdul-Aziz, would rekindle the movement. By 1926, Aziz had united the entire Arabian peninsula and established a Sunni monarchy know as Saudi Arabia based on Wahhabi fundamentalism.²⁸ Self-proclaimed keeper of the faith and protector of the holy cities, the Kingdom is today one of more than 20 countries where Islam is the main religion.²⁹ Colonialism and the rise of the modern nation-state solidified the fragmentation of what was once a vast empire but the unique ideology of Islam continued to flourish. Some followers long for a return to the glorious past:

The Islamic State is not a dream, nor is it a figment of the imagination, for it had dominated and influenced history for more than thirteen hundred years. It was indeed a reality, a civilization that provided the most successful systems for society—political, economic, social, judicial, etc. A society that included Muslims and non-Muslims, living in harmony, until its destruction in 1924 by the hands of the West and its treacherous agents within the State. Today the Muslim Ummah, many decades on, is eager for its revival, eager for the return of Islamic glory.³⁰

Much like Christianity, Islam's history has a divine providence. Through the Prophet, God gave the people of the wilderness their own scripture. The Umma united the feuding nomadic tribes of the desert. The message of Islam sparked rapid civilization of major portions of the world and the growth of a unique powerful culture. From this historical perspective it is useful to examine how this religion might influence conflict within or between modern states.

Islam's Role In Conflict

Nations do not think, they only feel. They get their feelings at second hand through their temperaments, not their brains. A nation can be brought—by force of circumstances, not argument—to reconcile itself to any kind of government or religion that can be devised; in time it will fit itself to the required conditions; later it will prefer them and will fiercely fight for them.

—Mark Twain

Historically, the use of force to expand its sphere of influence and violence between various sects is not new to Islam. However, in the context of modern times, how does a religion influence a state or, more importantly, how does it contribute to armed conflict between states? If war is the continuation of policy by force as suggested by Clausewitz,³¹ then it is religion's effect on policy that merits consideration. In modern times, for much of the western world, there is a separation between church and state that limits religion's influence. For example, the very first amendment to the US Constitution says, "Congress shall make no laws respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof."³² Here no single religion is state-sponsored or participates in government. The law respects an individual's freedom to practice any religion however they choose, as long as it does not infringe upon the rights of others. Religious tolerance

is a societal norm. Policy is not directly affected by religion and when indirectly affected by religion in any way, it must conform to a spectrum of ideologies to accommodate the majority. This paradigm does not apply to the Islamic Middle East:

There is technically no distinction between church and state in Islam. Islam holds itself out not just as a religion but as the source of law, guide to statecraft, and arbiter of social behavior for its adherents. Muslims believe that every human endeavor is within the purview of the faith, because the only purpose of any activity is to do God's will.³³

There, policy is directly affected by religion. Islamic clerics are part of or have direct influence on government in both secular and theocratic states. For the most part, public law is based on religious principles covering domestic, criminal, and political affairs.³⁴

Accordingly, Islam is unique in its relationship to national interests and related policy. In his classic analysis of political theory, *Man, the State, and War*, Kenneth Waltz developed three "images" to describe where the causes of war are found. These are human behavior, the internal structure of states, and the system of international anarchy.³⁵ He examines how these images are interrelated and concludes:

Each state pursues its own interests, however defined, in ways it judges best. Force is a means of achieving the external ends of states because there exists no consistent, reliable process of reconciling the conflicts of interest that inevitably arise among similar units in a condition of anarchy. A foreign policy based on this image of international relations is neither moral or immoral, but embodies merely a reasoned response to the world about us. The third image describes the framework of world politics, but without the first and second images there can be no knowledge of the forces that determine policy; the first and second images describe the forces in world politics, but without the third image it is impossible to assess their importance or predict their results.³⁶

Islam is pervasive in the first and second of Waltz's images. As a religion, it influences individual behavior by establishing a system of beliefs about the purpose of life and what constitutes right and wrong. Its influence within the internal structure of the

state enforces the law according to these beliefs and influences how the state accommodates this purpose. Today, a variety of Islamic movements from students and grass-roots popular activists to the ruling elite of theocratic regimes and authoritarian governments, practice and seek to enhance this relationship. It is common in today's literature to carefully differentiate between radical fundamentalist movements that use terrorism to advance their cause and the back-to-the-basics kind of fundamentalist movements in Islam.³⁷ The former are a type of criminal enterprise while the latter represent Muslims from all walks of life. Some authors suggest such movements are better classified by the group's motive:

We need to be careful of that emotive label, fundamentalism, and distinguish, as Muslims do, between revivalists, who choose to take the practice of their religion most devoutly, and the fanatics or extremists who use this devotion for political ends.³⁸

However, as one student of Islam notes, these attempts to classify the types of fundamentalist movements into categories miss the point. The point is the power of these religion-based movements to inspire the masses and effect change.³⁹

A couple of examples show how religion influences individuals and groups in this society. Recent terrorist activity in Saudi Arabia to protest western presence there is, at least partially, attributable to the teachings of a well-respected Saudi cleric. Reportedly, "the gap between the Kingdom's rulers and its people seems to be growing and a generation of Saudis radicalized by militant Islamic teachings may have the will and capacity to carry out more violence in the future."⁴⁰ On the other end of the spectrum of violence, just one of many student home pages on the Internet shows how the concept of an Islamic state is part religion and deeply ingrained in the culture:

The first part of the hadith was fulfilled with the conquest of Constantinople in 1453 but the second part remains. This means that Rome (hence, European territory) will be part of the Khilafah in the future. And this will not be achieved without the Muslims first establishing the Islamic State, becoming self-sufficient, economically and technologically, establishing strong armed forces and eventually unifying the Muslim lands. This is the only way to become a super power and only then will we be able to challenge the Kufr European nations. Allah has promised to us the final victory, so we must strive hard to achieve this goal.⁴¹

While the behavior of the terrorist is fanatical, the student may or may not be. However, both are influenced by their belief in Islam. According to Jeff Haynes in a recent book, *Religion in Third World Politics*, the potential of those wanting social or political change through constitutional or unconstitutional means should not be underestimated. An extremely large number of Muslims associate themselves with the ideas of radical Islam whether they fully agree with the concept of an Islamic State or not.⁴² As suggested by Waltz, a state's vital interests and thus potential for conflict might be determined by such influences. In his book, *War and Change in World Politics*, Robert Gilpin generally agrees with this framework but contends that it is actually the state's dominant members and ruling elite that determine national objectives and foreign policy.⁴³ Here, it is important to remember that Islam's dominant members and ruling elite often come from the ranks of clerics or ruling families with ancestral or tribal ties to religious leadership. It is a society, regardless of state affiliation, dominated by an ideology that is uniquely God-centered. It prescribes personal behavior and community responsibilities. So, in states struggling with artificially imposed modernity and a spectrum of social issues, it is conceivable that the average person on the street can be led to support policy decisions in the name of their faith that might lead to conflict. This is exacerbated by the Islamic concept of martyrdom, prominent especially in Shiism.

Muslim doctrine does not teach that violence be shunned. On the contrary, it prescribes violence in defense of the faith and teaches that those who join the struggle are more likely to be admitted to Paradise than those who do not.⁴⁴

Some Muslims are willing to kill or be killed in support of Islam. Professor Gilpin goes on to list the vital interests nations will go to war over, beyond that of their own territorial defense, as primarily the conquest of new territory, influence over other states, and, in modern times, global economic influence.⁴⁵ As the historical perspective shows, even if the Islamic movement was truly based solely on divine providence, its leadership conquered continents, subjugated long-standing political entities, and got rich doing it. Its followers apparently got what they needed out of the relationship too since today Islam is a way of life for millions.

Perhaps, as the epigraph suggests, over time, there is a kind of momentum that forms in support of an ideology giving it a power base. Today, if Muslims, their dominant members or ruling elite, believe taking or reclaiming territory, influencing another state, or influencing the global economy is in their best interest, they might be willing to “gamble on a strategy of war.”⁴⁶ And, if they do so, they tend to do it under a banner of the will of God. The Iranian revolution, the Iran-Iraq war, and Iraq’s invasion of Kuwait are specific examples. Professor Gilpin warns:

The modern revival of Islam and the revolt of other non-western cultures against western values may point to an even greater schism ahead. Emergent power centers with cultural and diplomatic traditions vastly different from the dominant west may presage a return to civilizational conflicts reminiscent of the premodern era. In short, one should not confuse the physical unity of the globe with the moral unity; the human species remains deeply divided by race, religion and wealth.⁴⁷

It is important to think about the implications of Islamic history, the singularity of its message, the momentum of its culture, and its paradoxical relationship to dominant

western beliefs—not from the paradigm of a separation between church and state, religious and other social freedoms, or generations of relative affluence, but from the harsh reality of Islam’s influence over people, their government, and their state’s vital interests.

Summary

The power of this ideological force should not be underestimated because of its history and its unique relationship to factors that potentially influence conflict between nations. Much like the followers of the religions that dominate most of the western world today, Muslims believe their faith has a divine purpose and they are equally motivated to set the world straight. A thousand years of conflict has yet to resolve questions of how true keepers of this faith should govern or how tolerant they should be of other cultures and religions. Such issues still fuel the fire of conflict within the region and potentially beyond.

Notes

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Chapter 2

The Double Edge

There is nothing in our book, the Koran, that teaches us to suffer peacefully. Our religion teaches us to be intelligent. Be peaceful, be courteous, obey the law, respect everyone; but if someone puts his hand on you, send him to the cemetery. That's a good religion.

—Malcolm X

The *sword* of Islam, discussed in the first chapter, has a *double edge*. In some ways it cuts at regional and/or global stability in two directions at once. Internally, it is divided by competing religious sects, the struggle for regional dominance, subversion including acts of terrorism, and controversy over social issues in the name of religious reform. Externally, in a region of the world with significant global economic influence, modern Islamic states still struggle to find the right form of government to succeed in the international environment. Because of their ideology, some seek to segregate and condemn western influence out of fear of corruption in the name of religious self-righteousness. Others seek to reclaim or expand Islamic territory and export religious and political Islam. The Middle East remains a region of instability in part because it is dominated by a religion that does not abhor violence and a political ideology still very much in transition.

Internal Division

A house divided against itself can not stand.

—Abraham Lincoln

Islam is internally a house divided by two keepers of the faith. On one hand, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia; largest remnant of the Arab empire, defender of the holy cities, and 95% Sunni. On the other, Iran; largest remnant of the Persian empire, the self-professed “rightfully guided” theocracy, and 95% Shiite. They are the giants of the middle east straddling the vital Persian Gulf. Together, they control nearly 33% of the world’s oil supply and are each strategically in position to influence access to considerably more.¹ They have opposing views on government and proper relationships with Western, non-Muslim cultures.² They are both modernizing their military forces with advanced technology spending about 14% of their annual budget despite significant domestic concerns.³ Each grooms other state actors for political, military, and economic support and seeks to be the dominant influence in the region.⁴ They are competing state actors greatly influenced by competing sects of the same religion.

The Shiite sect holds the more radical views.⁵ Although it represents only 15% of Islam, its primary state actor has the potential to occupy a disproportionate leadership role in the region. Today, Iran continues to sponsor insurrection and terrorist activities outside its borders, is building an arsenal of weapons of mass destruction, and openly portrays armed conflict with the West as “inevitable.”⁶ Western influence and presence in Sunni Islam exacerbates their separatism. Saudi Arabia is dealing with acts of terrorism, the transition of power within the royal family due to the King’s ill health, and

fundamentalist movements sparked by the success of the Iranian revolution.⁷ The environment is ripe for conflict.

Besides the potential for such a conflict, Iran and others use the Shiite fundamentalist movement to increase their power base throughout the region and beyond by exporting radical factions to participate in or hinder political consensus in unstable places like Afghanistan and the emerging new states of the former Soviet Union.⁸ The powerful Shiites in Lebanon, Hezbollah, continue to threaten prospects for peace in Israel while Shiites in Iraq and Saudi Arabia are both persecuted and feared.⁹ It is the predominantly Shiite vision of an Islamic State that is the foremost source of support and inspiration for Islamic extremist activities. In his insightful survey of the Islamic world, Professor Ira M. Lapidus characterized this phenomenon as follows:

The Islamists believe that Islam provides a total system of beliefs and a model for a holy society and government. They see Islam as a comprehensive alternative to capitalism, communism, democracy, and other western ideological systems, and to the existing regimes in Muslim countries. They oppose the political elite, narrowly based military and family cliques, landlord coteries, oil-based economic elite in cahoots with local political leaders and western capitalists, and a decadent western culture steeped in sexual license and materialism. They believe that corrupt regimes and foreign influences breed injustice in their societies, undermine the natural order of the relations of men and women, and thus subvert the family and promote immorality. They have both a political and a religious solution to the problems of their societies: overthrow corrupt governments, expel foreign influences, and educate and elevate their own people through religious commitment.¹⁰

It is important to recognize that not all Islamists agree on just how to foster these changes. Unfortunately, a recent report on terrorism in 1995 shows Islamic groups represent nearly half of all known terrorist organizations.¹¹ However, even moderates who advocate peaceful evolutionary change are divided.

Domestic stability is a growing concern. Economic and resource related issues abound. From population growth to unemployment, the trends are not favorable.¹² Professor Lapidus paints a bleak picture of how the states created in the Middle East since World War II have developed their societies:

Extreme poverty, or at best a grossly unbalanced distribution of income, and a lack of educational and occupational opportunities have embittered large numbers of people. The breakdown of village, religious and family institutions under the press of urbanization has intensified popular malaise. In so far as many of these states have at one time or another called themselves socialist, all forms of leftist have been discredited as ideological alternatives. In so far as many have received external support from the west, the disadvantaged are hostile to foreign influence. So, in societies where neither the rhetoric of democracy nor of class competition nor of human rights belongs to the traditional vocabulary, the only way to appeal to a higher morality is in the name of Islam.¹³

The dilemma is adapting traditional beliefs to the modern problems. Several approaches to social issues are struggling. On the extreme end of the spectrum is the Iranian revolution where after nearly 17 years, the economy suffers from high external debt, low productivity, and high unemployment. Popular disillusionment with the theocracy is prevalent.¹⁴ On the other is Turkey, the first democratically elected Islamic state who is also dealing with domestic problems including allegations of corrupt government, high inflation, and widespread poverty.¹⁵ The issues that divide Islam internally; from dogma to process, contribute to instability within and among the Islamic states. Externally, it faces similar challenges aggressiveness that spares no one.

External Division

Pervading nationalism imposes its dominion on man today in many different forms and with an aggressiveness that spares no one. The challenge that is already with us is the temptation to accept as true freedom what in reality is only a new form of slavery

—Pope John Paul II

The Islam's house is further divided by factors that influence international relations. These are issues less doctrinal in nature but interrelated with the political institutions and culture of Islam. They include modern geopolitical issues of government, resources, and relationships. For the purpose of this examination, the key state actors of the Middle East are Saudi Arabia, Iran, Iraq, Turkey, Syria, Egypt, Jordan, and Israel. The smaller states of the Gulf Cooperative Council and the other lessor developed and less influential states are included where appropriate. Many of the challenges these countries face are due to their relative newness in the international community and the nature of their origin.

After World War I, the colonial powers dominated the region. While there is much debate over the pros and cons of the imperial relationships, the end result was modern nationalist movements and artificial lines drawn in the sand as state boundaries. As one author describes it, ". . . this all happened more or less in the first fifty years of this century and the past fifty have been spent by various leaders and regimes trying to make the resulting national states work."¹⁶ Islamic people; communities, tribes, ethnic groups, religious sects, fragments of the historic empire, thrown together and left to manage the "clash between modernity and various forms of tradition."¹⁷ In many cases it was like forcing a square peg into a round hole. This has contributed to considerable resentment toward further outside influence.

Partly as a result of this resentment, one of the foremost issues dividing Islamic countries of the Middle East is the proper relationship with non-Islamic states and the perception of western influence in the region. This is a difficult concept to quantify as diplomatic and trade relations, economic assistance, and even military to military relationships do not tell the whole story. Over time, relationships change. They depend a great deal on national interests in any given situation. Israel, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and Egypt are generally pro-western countries. US relations with the others range from outright hostile with Iraq, not much better with Iran, cautiously reconciled with Jordan, and very tentative with Syria.¹⁸ Islamists use these relationships against each other or in defense of their movements because even in the pro-western countries, Islam considers much of what is commonly acceptable behavior in the west immoral or at best decadent. According to one analyst, “Arab states with close ties to Washington are derided as having sold-out to the western cultural onslaught.”¹⁹ In his book, *Desert Warrior*, Prince Khalid of Saudi Arabia described in detail the related trials and tribulations of King Fahd as he went about the historic decision of inviting foreigners in to do battle against fellow Muslims in the coalition against Iraq.²⁰ He makes it readily apparent how other countries in the region perceive an Islamic state’s relationship to the west and the degree to which it adheres to Islamic traditions and values as important factors affecting political power and prestige.

A related but separate schism between Islamic states is their form of government. Muhammad established the Umma; a theocratic community on the basis that there is no difference between religion and government but did not clearly explain for the generations to follow how Islam should be governed. Instead, he left his revelations to be

recorded as the Quran and his words and deeds to be documented by his closest followers into the Sunna. The precepts of these are the Sharia. It is the closest thing to a universal code of law for Islam. However, while its sources were relatively unfiltered, over time, the Sharia has evolved with history. Further complicated by the fragmentation of the empire and establishment of modern states, the Sharia remains the accepted source of Islamic law but modern states do not all agree on its interpretation.²¹

The existence of Sharia as an integral part of the Islamic faith does not mean that most Muslims in the contemporary world are governed by it. Most, in fact, are not, in the sense that the constitutions and laws of most modern post-colonial countries are derived from or mingled with European legal traditions. But Sharia is not a dead letter or abstraction. It provides a measuring stick by which the faithful judge the performance of their rulers. Islamic concepts of morality and justice are rooted in Sharia, so that even when Sharia is not formally incorporated into a state's legal system, the state must coexist with it. Political appeals in the name of Sharia are difficult to ignore because Sharia by definition represents justice and it is politically risky for the ruler of a Muslim society to act in violation of what his people understand Sharia to require.²²

Consequently a variety of governments have formed to support a society that lives and works according to a singular ideology. Of the seven key Islamic states in the region, three are a form of socialist democracy, two are a form of monarchy, one is a theocratic authoritarian regime, and one is a military dictatorship²³ each professing Islamic jurisprudence as its basis. This diversity is a potential source of instability that can spill over into regional and global relationships through activist movements or desperate acts by failing states.

Similarly, the Islamic states of the region face significant resource related issues. Indeed, territorial disputes are at the heart of each of the modern wars and current tensions in the region. The predominant conflict in the Middle East remains the long-

standing dispute over the establishment of a Jewish state. While it is basically a territorial dispute, its origin and history are deeply rooted in religion on both sides. So much so for Islam, that in 1981 the leaders from several Muslim states met and formally called for Jihad against Israel. While this term is used differently among various sects and forms of Islamic government, its meaning ranges from “Holy War” to “a struggle for what is required of one in obedience to God”²⁴ Whatever the definition, the message is clear: this dispute is about more than just land. It also involves the holy promises God made to Abraham and sacred sites of religious significance such as Temple Mount and the Dome of the Rock.

Other resource related disputes have less religious significance but contribute to a great potential for conflict in the region. They include border issues that linger from colonial bungling of international boundaries, access to the Persian Gulf, ownership of some strategically located islands, and perhaps most importantly, water.²⁵ Water is a precious commodity in the desert and a growing long-term concern. Persian Gulf states use more than one third of their renewable water supply annually. Combined with population growth and increased internal food production the demand is increasing. States like Syria, Iraq, and Egypt who depend on key rivers for their supply are at the mercy of other states like Turkey and Sudan with hydroelectric developments on the drawing board.²⁶ Here the role of religion is certainly less obvious. Much like the other external factors affecting regional stability, these kinds of problems tend to compete Islamic states in a culture where tensions run high between various ethnic groups, ancient grudges are passed from generation to generation, violence is an acceptable way to settle disputes and it is even encouraged if it can be attributed to the will of God.

Summary

The internal and external divisions highlighted here should not be underestimated because of their potential impact on stability in the region and beyond. Radical Islamic movements, especially the Shiite sect and its powerful state actor, aggressively seek regional dominance and export influence through peaceful subversion and violent acts of terrorism. Relatively new governments struggle with domestic unrest and significant resource issues affecting an entire culture that is not bound solely by artificial lines in the sand. These are modern states with significant economic potential. Yet, their relationships with each other and the rest of the world are in some ways dominated by draconian tradition. Today's Islam is on a collision course with the 21st century and the point of impact lies in a region of great concern to the rest of the world.

Notes

¹ *The Middle East, Eighth Edition*, edited by Daniel C. Diller, (Congressional Quarterly, Inc. 1994), pp.138.

² Hamid Algar, *Islam and Revolution, Writings and Declarations of Imam Khomeini*, (Mizan Press, Berkeley 1981), pp. 55-59.

³ *Forecast International*, (DMS Market Intelligence Report, 1996), pp. 4.

⁴ Philip L. Ritcheson, "Iranian Military Resurgence: Scope, Motivations, and Implications for Regional Security," *Armed Forces and Society; New Brunswick*, Vol. 21, (Summer 1995), pp. 573.

⁵ Hamid Algar, *Islam and Revolution*, pp. 27-173.

⁶ Gregory F. Giles, *Strategic Personality Country Case Study: Iran*, (SAIC, McClean, Va 1996), pp. 1-7.

⁷ Sciolino, "Saudi Kingdom. . .," *New York Times*, pp. 1-1.

⁸ United States Central Command, *1996 Posture Statement*, pp. 42-52.

⁹ Geoffrey Kemp and Janice Gross Stein, *Powder Keg in the Middle East: The Struggle for Gulf Security*, (Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, Inc., AAAS, 1995), pp. 27.

¹⁰ Ira M. Lapidus, "Beyond the Unipolar Moment a Sober Survey of the Islamic World," *Orbis*, Vol. 40, No.3, Summer 1996, pp. 393.

¹¹ United States Department of State, *Patterns of Global Terrorism 1995*, pp. 41-67.

¹² Kemp and Stein, *Powder Keg*, pp. 9-15.

Notes

¹³ Lapidus, "Beyond the Unipolar.," *Orbis*, pp. 394.

¹⁴ Robin Wright, "Dateline Tehran: A Revolution Implodes," *Foreign Policy*, Summer 1996, pp.163-165.

¹⁵ Lapidus, "Beyond the Unipolar.," *Orbis*, pp. 395.

¹⁶ William B. Quandt, "The Middle East on the Brink: Prospects for Change in the 21st Century," *Middle East Journal*, Vol. 50, No 1, winter 1996, pp. 9.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 10.

¹⁸ Forecast International/DMS Market Intelligence Reports, 1996 (based on analysis data for each country).

¹⁹ Giles, *Strategic Personality. . . Iran*, pp. 1-7.

²⁰ Patrick Seal for HRH General Khalid Bin Sultan, *Desert Warrior, a Personal View of the Gulf War by the Joint Force Commander*, (Harper Collins Publisher, New York 1995) pp. 17-23.

²¹ Lippman, *Understanding Islam*, pp. 71-72.

²² Said Ramadan, *Islamic Law*, 2nd ed. privately printed, 1970.

²³ *The World Factbook, 1995*, (Central Intelligence Agency, Wash DC 1995) pp. (each country).

²⁴ Lippman, *Understanding Islam*, pp. 113.

²⁵ Kemp and Stein, *Powder Keg.*, pp. 126-129.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 123-125.

Chapter 3

From Sword To Plowshare

They shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks: nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war anymore.

—Isaiah2:4

If there is to be peace in this region, the *Doubled Edged Sword* of Islam must be understood and assimilated into the modern world. It shares a divine relationship with Judaism and Christianity. Much like the followers of these religions, Muslims believe they are the chosen people following the righteous path to judgment day. More than religion and polity, it is also a culture with a different concept of the relationship between church and state, and under certain circumstances, the value of human life. Its dominant members and ruling elite have unique influence in everything from daily life to international relations. Yet, Islam is fragmented; internally by religious reform, externally by religious self-righteousness. Some state actors struggle with the dilemma of solving modern problems while adhering to ancient traditions and attempting to meet the expectations of a society that is increasingly more aware of the world around them. Islam is and will continue to be a critical component to any relationship in the Middle East. Future US strategies must be increasingly more understanding and supportive of the Islamic perspective.

Strategy Considerations

I hope our wisdom will grow with our power, and teach us, that the less we use our power the greater it will be.

—Thomas Jefferson

Drawing from this examination of Islam’s history, its unique influence on state policy and related factors affecting international stability, it may be useful to review current US security strategy with a critical eye.

We believe that our goals of enhancing our security, bolstering our economic prosperity and promoting democracy are mutually supportive. Secure nations are more likely to support free trade and maintain democratic structures. Free market nations with growing economies and strong open trade ties are more likely to feel secure and work towards freedom. And democratic states are less likely to threaten our interests and more likely to cooperate with the United States to meet security threats and promote free trade and sustainable development. These goals are supported by ensuring America remains *engaged* in the world and by *enlarging* the community of secure, free market, and democratic nations.¹

Perhaps, from an Islamic perspective, future US involvement in the region should consider:

Engagement By Invitation Only

The *engagement* component of US national strategy infers leadership and involvement in the affairs of others when the outcome affects the security or economic prosperity of US citizens, allies, and other peaceful nations. To Muslims of the Middle East, this might be perceived as arrogant intervention and subject to arbitrary criteria. Current strategy places heavy emphasis on US economic well-being and from the perspective of struggling Muslim nations it may be perceived selfish and materialistic.

More Progressive Enlargement

The *enlargement* component implies US intent to promote and protect only those existing states that are peaceful, have open markets, and practice a democratic form of government. To Muslims of the Middle East, it may be considered presumptuous and unjust for the US to arbitrarily accept the sovereignty and boundaries of certain states solely because they have open markets to US trade and practice a particular form of Government. US policy should be open-minded and generous in stimulating economic development despite tensions and on-going issues in the region.

Unobtrusive Leadership In Regional Issues

Another aspect of current US strategy addresses the role of a superpower and its obligation to intervene in some circumstances with or without international consensus.

The United States recognizes that we have a special responsibility that goes along with being a great power and, at times, our global interests and ideals lead us to oppose those who would endanger the survival or well-being of their peaceful neighbors. . . All nations should be able to expect their borders and sovereignty will always be secure; however, it does not mean we or the international community must tolerate gross violations of human rights within those borders. . . When our national security interests are threatened, we will, as America always has, use diplomacy when we can, but force if we must. We will act with others when we can, but alone when we must.²

Here subtle differences in how the cultures define “survival,” “well-being,” and “human rights” need to be considered. Muslims of the Middle East are likely to perceive US unilateral involvement as less than altruistic. The component of “acting alone if we must,” unless US interests are directly threatened, may generate resentment and foster distrust in the region.

Combating Terrorism According To International Law

While international terrorism is a crime and must be dealt with accordingly, current US strategy sends mixed signals to sovereign states:

Our policy in countering international terrorists is to make no concessions to terrorists, continue to pressure state sponsors of terrorism, fully exploit all available legal mechanisms to punish international terrorists and help other governments improve their capabilities to combat terrorism. From time to time, we might also find it necessary to strike terrorists at their bases abroad or to attack assets valued by the governments that support them.³ Unilateral action might be perceived as a violation of sovereignty. Action should be taken considering the Islamic context and long-term relationships in the region.

Ensuring Balanced Non-Proliferation

Current US strategy to contain the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction in the region appears unbalanced. While it specifically addresses Islamic states suspected of having such weapon programs, it does not address all such countries in the region.⁴

Reassessing Regional Priorities

From an Islamic perspective, current US strategy concerning the Middle East peace process appears unbalanced in favor of Israel.⁵ Perhaps greater emphasis is needed on the plight of the Palestinian people.

While these considerations are not all inclusive or at all comprehensive, they suggest possible points of concern from the Islamic perspective. Perhaps by fashioning such implements of influence the end-state of “plowshares” might be more readily achieved.

Conclusion

Islam; it is a religion, a polity, and a culture with the momentum of a proud heritage and a divine promise. As such, it wields considerable influence affecting Middle Eastern society, government, and international affairs. Today, fragmented and struggling with modernity, it faces a variety of challenges including potentially violent movements with international implications. As one author concludes:

To cope with these movements we cannot merely deplore, hate, or fear them. We must understand what they are trying to say and the conditions that give rise to them. While the strengths and dangers of these movements can easily be overestimated, and frequently are, their seriousness and unsettling long-term potential cannot be ignored.⁶

This historical perspective and analysis of Islam's relationship to stability in the Middle East provides a useful backdrop for developing just such an appreciation and serves as a point of departure for future US strategy and involvement in the region.

Notes

¹ "A National Security Strategy of Engagement and Enlargement," (The White House, 1996) pp. ii.

² Ibid., pp. iii..

³ Ibid., pp. 15.

⁴ Ibid., pp. 20.

⁵ Ibid., pp. 42-43.

⁶ Lapidus, *Beyond the Unipolar*, pp. 404.

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