

THE ISLAMIC SHIELD

Arab Resistance to Democratic and Religious Reforms

Elie Elhadj

*BrownWalker Press
Boca Raton, Florida*

*The Islamic Shield:
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BrownWalker Press
Boca Raton , Florida
USA • 2008

Revised edition October 20, 2008

ISBN-10: 1-59942-411-8 (*paper*)
ISBN-13: 978-1-59942-411-8 (*paper*)

ISBN-10: 1-59942-412-6 (*ebook*)
ISBN-13: 978-1-59942-412-5 (*ebook*)

www.brownwalker.com

To my friends in the East and the West

Acknowledgments

After a thirty-year career in the financial and banking fields in New York, Philadelphia, London, and Riyadh, I returned to academia as a student, to seek answers to questions that had preoccupied my attention for several decades regarding the cultures, politics, and development prospects of Arab countries. I had the good fortune to join the History Department of London University's School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) as a student between 1998 and 2001, and for three additional years, to engage in doctoral research titled *Experiments in Achieving Water and Food Self-Sufficiency in the Middle East*, published in 2006.

My years at SOAS were intellectually stimulating and fascinating. It was a privilege to benefit from a focused regional scholarship at SOAS. I owe special gratitude to Professor Tony Allan, my doctoral dissertation supervisor. I shall forever remember the many hours of engaging discussion that I had the pleasure of exchanging with Professor Allan. He truly is an intellectual giant, a dedicated scholar, and a very fine human being.

The Islamic Shield is the product of my professional career and the SOAS experience. The cataclysmic events on September 11, 2001 in New York and Washington D.C. prompted the writing of *The Islamic Shield*.

I must accord special recognition to my wife, Peggy, whose understanding and encouragement throughout the project were critical. Also, to my young daughter Sarah, who was always delightfully interested to know whether my teachers were happy with my work.

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Introduction

“Americans are asking, ‘Why do they hate us?’” proclaimed the president of the United States in his address to a Joint Session of Congress and the American people on September 20, 2001. His answer was, “They hate what we see right here in this chamber—a democratically elected government. Their leaders are self-appointed. They hate our freedoms—our freedom of religion, our freedom of speech, our freedom to vote and assemble and disagree with each other.”

Since the atrocities of September 11, 2001, there has been a growing acceptance, mainly in the United States, among certain policymakers and academics that because the Arab world suffers from “freedom deficit,” democratizing Arab countries could reduce the terrorism of jihadists (fighters in the way of Islam) against US and Western interests. The so-called “War on Terror” uses the ideal of democratizing the Arab world as one of its primary justification and weapon.

Although terrorism has become a major worldwide concern, there is no international agreement on a definition yet. The word terrorism evokes ideological and political controversies. In this book, terrorism is defined as acts of violence committed by individuals, groups, or governments that deliberately and indiscriminately target civilians.

The Islamic Shield attempts to answer the president’s question, “Why do they hate us?” by focusing on the interaction between political Islam and US policies in the Middle East. The book examines what might be driving young, sometimes affluent, and educated men and women to self-annihilation and the killing of innocent people in the name God. In addition to “freedom deficit,” the book identifies religious and cultural causes, as well as domestic and foreign political factors that combine to set off the jihadists. The book recommends solutions and assesses the likelihood of their successful implementation. The book stresses that political expediencies will not end Jihadism.

Focusing on the Muslim Arabs, two ideologically and economically different Arab countries—Saudi Arabia, an Islamist monarchy, and Syria, a quasi-secular republic—are examined. They share in common undemocratic, non-representative, and non-participatory dictatorships mired in cronyism and corruption. The two countries may serve as prototypes of other Arab monarchies and republics. Lebanon is excluded, due to its unique circumstances.

PART I

Obedience to Dictatorial Authority

Islamic Culture in Shaping Arab Governance

Except for a minority of Islamist activists, the majority of the Arab masses are politically quietist under Muslim rulers. As for the minority of Western-influenced and relatively affluent professionals, this segment of Arab society is generally powerless and distrusted by the masses.

The masses are plagued by poverty and illiteracy. They fear the security forces. They are steeped in a culture of obedience to authority, constantly directed by the *ulama* class (Islamic scholars or clergy) to God's orders in 4:59 of the Quran: "Obey God and obey the apostle and obey those of authority among you," a verse repeated in the Quran dozens of times.

The *ulama* also remind the masses of the Sunna traditions (the habitual behavior and words of the Prophet Muhammad as recorded in the Hadith, or sayings-traditions): "Hear and obey the emir, even if your back is whipped and your property is taken; hear and obey," an injunction repeated in these or similar words many times in the canonical Hadith collections of Al-Bukhari (d. 870), Muslim (d. 875), Ibn Maja (d. 886) and Abi Dawood (d. 888).¹ The *ulama*, acting on behalf of their rulers/ benefactors cement these injunctions. They preach that obedience to Muslim hierarchical authority, particularly the authority of the Muslim ruler (*waliy al-amr*), is synonymous with piety. The *ulama* use Islam as a shield to fend off democratic and religious reforms.

Furthermore, predestination is at the heart of the Islamic creed; thus, in the eyes of many, the Muslim ruler has been ordained by the will of God. These injunctions are reinforced through teaching that the Prophet Muhammad condemned innovation and change. "Every innovation is heresy, every heresy is error, and every error leads to hell," the Prophet is quoted as saying in the Hadith collections of Al-Bukhari, Ibn Maja, and Abi Dawood.²

Culture, religion, economics, the environment, and recent domestic and foreign political frustrations have helped the spread of Islamism, jihadism, and terrorism among a minority of Arabs. The Arab religious and cultural heritage promotes a culture of obedience to dictatorial authority³—in the Arab home, under a dictatorial father; at school, under a dictatorial teacher; in the work place, under a dictatorial manager; and in the country at large, under non-representative, self-appointed, tyrannical kings or presidents. Such obedience, it is important to note, does not extend to the authority of non-Muslims. Islamic liberation movements led from the mosque in the twentieth century freed Arab countries from British rule (Egypt, Iraq, Sudan), French rule (Algeria, Tunisia, Syria, Lebanon), and Italian rule (Libya). Even within Islam, Shi'ite Muslims have been active politically for centuries against what they regard as the injustices wreaked upon them by their Sunni coreligionists. Thus, political quietism manifests in the obedience of the majority of the followers of a particular sect to the authority of the rulers of the specific sect.

A Classification of Arab Rule

A measure of the effectiveness of Arab governance is the manner in which a country enacts and enforces its laws. Many regard lawmaking and law enforcement as the highest manifestation of a state's sovereignty and authority, because lawmaking and enforcement reflect the material and cultural attainments of the society.

Four standards serve to categorize the extant forms of governance. Democratic governance is characterized by free and contested elections for a legislative assembly, held at regular intervals. Under democratic governance, no single party dominates the legislature and the rule of law is enforced vigorously and justly. The second, authoritarian governance, has the same characteristics as democratic governance except that a single political party dominates the parliament. The third is benevolent dictatorship, in which laws are enacted by an undemocratically constituted parliament under the control of an absolute ruler who pursues participatory governance, ensures integrity in government, fights corruption, and respects the rule of law. Finally, dictatorial governance, is a non-representative and non-participatory governance in which the government, along with the rest of the ruling group, violates the law with impunity. Under dictatorial governance, nepotism, corruption, and abuse of power are rife. Tyranny is the ultimate form of dictatorial misrule, repression, and violence.

In which classification does Arab rule fall? To answer this question, a broad description of Arab rule will be helpful. Arab kings and presidents are non-representative rulers. The presidents have seized power through military coups d'état. European powers, primarily Britain, created the monarchies around the time the First World War. Arab rulers manage to govern for life, unless forced out of power or killed. They exercise absolute powers, banning independent political parties, controlling the media, and dealing cruelly with dissent. Arab rule is non-participatory and non-meritorious mired in tribalism, nepotism, and favoritism. Ruling families surrounded by a narrow coalition of supporters comprise the ruling groups, which violate the law with impunity. Corruption is a natural consequence of such systems—the glue that keeps the ruling group together. Arab parliaments, where they exist, are not constituted democratically. They act as rubber-stamp assemblies. Therefore, Arab rule falls into the dictatorial/tyrannical category.

Among the ninety countries designated by Freedom House as free in 2007 (out of 193 countries), none was in the Arab world.⁴ In the economic sphere, in 1970 Arab GDP per capita was half that in East Asia. By the early part of the twenty-first century, it had dropped to less than one-seventh of GDP per capita of the eastern region of the Asian continent, according to the Arab Human Development Report (AHDR).⁵

Table 1.1 shows the scores that seven countries earned in 2005 in areas related to governance—citizens' voice, accountability, political stability, government effectiveness, regulatory quality, respect for the rule of law, and corruption control.⁶ The scores in the four Arab countries—Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Syria, and Yemen—underscore the poor state of Arab governance as compared with Austria, Canada, and the United Kingdom.

Table 1.1 Scores of seven countries achieved in 2005 in six areas related to governance.

	Austria	Canada	Egypt	Saudi Arabia	Syria	UK	Yemen
Voice/ Accountability	1.24	1.32	(1.15)	(1.72)	(1.67)	1.30	(1.07)
Political Stability	0.98	0.91	(0.90)	(0.70)	(0.91)	0.34	(1.61)
Govt. Effectiveness	1.60	1.92	(0.35)	(0.38)	(1.23)	1.70	(0.94)
Regulatory Quality	1.52	1.57	(0.47)	(0.01)	(1.22)	1.53	(0.83)
Rule of Law	1.87	1.81	0.02	0.2	(0.42)	1.69	(1.10)
Corruption Control	1.99	1.92	(0.42)	(0.23)	(0.59)	1.94	(0.63)

Source: The World Bank Institute Governance & Anti-Corruption, Worldwide Governance Indicators. 2006.

The Politically Quietist Persona

Notwithstanding their tyranny, corruption, and poor performance, Arab rulers almost invariably stay in office until death, be it natural or resulting from a military coup. No Arab king or president spares an opportunity to display the loyalty of his subjects. While the presidents conduct stage-managed referendums in which they consistently manage to achieve near 100% approval, the monarchs draw mile-long queues of happy-looking men on every national and religious occasion, out to demonstrate their allegiance.

Are such shows indicative of true approval, or devoid of genuine support? Regardless of the contrived appearance of these demonstrations, a degree of real support for Arab rulers does exist.

Why support tyranny? Is it the fear of confronting security forces? Not entirely. Most military dictatorships in Latin America, the former Soviet Union, and its Eastern European and Asian allies fell during the 1980s and 1990s. In the Middle East, an elaborate and brutal security machine did not prevent the overthrow of the shah of Iran in 1979.

Is it Arab countries' low per capita income? Again, not entirely. Many relatively low-income countries enjoy democratic rule, and have multi-party systems and gender equality. India (\$2,700 per capita income in terms of purchasing power parity in 2007)⁷ and Sri Lanka (\$4,100 per capita income in terms of purchasing power parity in 2007) are democratic, while Arab countries are not. Furthermore, India and Sri Lanka have each had a female president and a female prime minister.

Is it Arabs' relatively short experience with democracy? This may be a contributing factor, but falls short of being a full explanation. Many younger states in Africa, Asia, and Eastern Europe are democratic. Indeed, Bangladesh, a relatively poor (\$1,400 per capita income in terms of purchasing power parity in 2007) and young nation (established in 1971) that is Muslim but not Arab, is democratic, and has had more than one female prime minister. Likewise, Indonesia, a relatively poor Muslim country (\$3,400 per capita income in terms of purchasing power parity in 2007), is democratic and has had a woman as president. Pakistan, relatively poor (\$2,600 per capita income in terms of purchasing power parity in 2007) and young (established in 1947), has had periods of democratic governments, respect for the rule of law, and a female prime minister more than once. These three poor, non-Arab Muslim countries represent almost one-half of the world's Muslim population. If we add Turkey and Malaysia, the ratio becomes higher.

Reasons for the Politically Quietist Arab Persona

Fear of the ruler's security forces, the obedient Arab personality that bows to hierarchical authority, and the fear that change might be for the worse—that a new ruler might be worse than the old—are contributory factors that help explain the political quietism of the Arab masses. While these combine to shape the Arab political personality, it is impossible to assign relative weighting because events could change their relative effect quickly. They may also differ from one community to another in a given period.

The Security Forces

Lackluster performance of Arab military forces in confrontations with outside threats over the past few decades suggests that the military exists mainly to protect the regimes of Arab kings and presidents from internal dissent. Brute military force is an important factor behind the long reign of Arab rulers. The afflictions that the Arab masses suffer—poverty, illiteracy, ill health, and belief in predestination, angels, and *djinn*, together with religious injunctions that demand blind obedience to authority—make the security forces effective. Such constituencies have little strength to risk their meager resources in a losing confrontation with the soldiers. For the masses, mere survival is an achievement.

To placate the poorest strata in society, Arab rulers ensure them a subsistence level existence through financial subsidies to basic food items and through large-scale employment in government bureaucracies. It is estimated that more than one-third of the population of Saudi Arabia and Syria, according to government data of the two countries, the subjects of the two case studies undertaken here, is dependent on salaries and pensions from employment in government agencies.

Uncontested Referendums by Arab Military Regimes

Arab military presidents periodically produce uncontested referendums to renew their terms in office. Approvals in excess of 90% are the norm. In October 2004, the president of Tunisia, Zein Alabidin Bin Ali, managed to win about 95% of the votes, slightly less than his previous record in 1999 of 99.4%. The late Iraqi President Saddam Hussein managed in October 2002 not only a 100% approval, but a 100% turnout as well. His previous record was 99% in October 1995. In July 2000, the young president of Syria, Bashar Al-Asad, succeeded with 97.3%, a result consistent with that of his father, Hafiz, in the previous four referendums. In the May 27, 2007 referendum, Bashar Al-Asad achieved 97.62% of the votes cast. Egyptian President Husni Mubarak received 94% of the votes in October 1999, and the president of Yemen, Ali Abdullah Saleh, attained 96.3% in September 1999.

While it is risky to rely on such stage-managed performances to measure genuine support, these referendums do reflect, nonetheless, a degree of voter approval. This conclusion is based on the belief that it is difficult, if not physically impossible, to falsify every ballot. If the voter wishes to cast a "no" vote, the referendum provides a secret ballot opportunity to say so.

Indeed, on September 7, 2005 when President Husni Mubarak of Egypt allowed a semblance of contested presidential elections for the first time, he won a fifth six-year term with 88.6% of the vote, not significantly less than the 90% and higher approval ratings the 77-year-old president managed to achieve in the four previous uncontested referendums. Similarly, on September 20, 2006, after twenty-eight years of rule, the president of Yemen, Ali Abdullah Saleh, allowed freely contested presidential elections that European observers

declared to have been open and genuine;⁸ the Yemeni electorate selected Ali Abdullah Saleh by a resounding 77% majority.

Popularity Displays by Arab Absolute Monarchs

In Arab monarchies, not even those presidential charades exist. Nor is there any other kind of a reliable approval indicator. Instead, Arab royals are content to generate an abundance of messages of support from their subjects. They organize festive turn outs of well-wishing and delighted-looking men (women not being allowed) to display their allegiance (*bay'a*) whenever a new monarch accedes to the throne, during religious and national festivals, or at the dedication of a new factory, hospital, clinic, school, road, or public utility project. The government-controlled media cover the festivities extensively for days. Typically, on such occasions, wealthy citizens, tribal leaders, and other notables place full-page newspaper advertisements to show their “undying” affection to their “beloved” monarch, congratulating him on his devotion to Islam, cheering his endless triumphs, and applauding his infinite wisdom, unflinching courage, and unstinting generosity. The attendees take part in these performances to ingratiate themselves with the ruler and his entourage so they remain networked with the centers of power to get jobs they do not qualify for, to gain contracts they do not merit, or just to be seen at the right place and time to enhance their image among neighbors and friends. They fear being labeled as insufficiently loyal if they do not participate. Peer pressure to appear is enormous. In patriarchal Arab societies, political and social networking is as important for success as financial capital. *Tell me who your friends are, I'll tell you who you are*, goes the Arabic saying.

While insincerity is common, these shows, nonetheless, do reflect a certain degree of approval of the monarch. However, it is impossible to quantify such approval with accuracy.

Obedience to Authority

The second cause behind the generally quietist Arab political persona is ingrained obedience to hierarchical authority, which pervades the Arab home, school, and workplace. This characteristic has developed under a combination of three influences: religion, poverty, and the challenging conditions of the searing desert.

Religious Influences

The word Islam means submission to the will of the one and only God. Islam demands the belief in the inimitability and the uniqueness of God, in the truthfulness of the Prophet Muhammad's mission, in the divinity of the Quran, and in the final Day of Judgment. To profess the faith, a Muslim must perform the five daily prayers (at sunrise, noon, afternoon, sunset, and night), fast during the month of Ramadan from sunrise to sunset, give alms (*zakat*), and make the pilgrimage to Mecca once in a lifetime, if possible. The faithful are also enjoined in many Quranic verses and Prophetic traditions to engage in holy war (jihad) in the service of Islam, sometimes in a jihad against personal sinful temptations. Islam prohibits usury, gambling, and to Sunni Muslims, image representations. It also prohibits eating pork and drinking wine, although the Quran promises wine in Paradise:

In 47:15: “The parable of the Paradise which the pious and the devout are promised is that of a garden wherein there are ... rivers of wine delectable to those who drink it ...”

Islamic law regulates personal affairs including marriage, divorce, and inheritance, and its moral and ethical codes demand chastity, honesty, charity, justice, and societal peace. Shi'ites and Sunnis differ on certain aspects of the Islamic Creed. Such differences will be discussed later in this chapter and in Chapter Four.

To Muslims, Islam is the perfect religion, and Islam is the perfect way of life. Muslims are taught that God declared in 5:3 of the Quran: "This day, I have perfected your religion for you, completed my favor upon you, and have chosen for you Islam as your religion." Referring to the Quran, God declares in 6:38: "Nothing have we omitted from the Book." And in 16:89: "We have sent down to thee the Book explaining all things."

Islam evolved during the first three centuries following the death of the Prophet, in the year 632, into a complete way of life, regulating a Muslim's every waking minute, including personal hygiene, diet, healthy living, good manners, and family affairs. It rules the theological, ritual, judicial, political, ethical, and business realms of society. Islam distinctively amalgamates the spiritual and the temporal into an inseparable unit. *Dini wadinyawi*, meaning the religious and the worldly, describes the role of Islam in the lives of Muslims. The extent to which the Prophetic Sunna [sayings (Hadith) and acts (Sira) of the Prophet Muhammad] regulate the tiniest details of a Muslim's daily life may be appreciated from the extensive coverage of the Sunna collection of Al-Bukhari (810-870), considered by Sunni scholars as the most authoritative among the six Sunni canonical collections. Al-Bukhari quoted some 7,500 Prophetic sayings and acts that deal with how the Prophet reportedly reacted to the myriad circumstances that he encountered day and night during his mission.⁹ Five other collectors add to the intensity of the coverage. A close second in importance is Muslim Bin Al-Hajjaj (d. 875) whose collection contains 7,563 traditions. The remaining four collectors are: Ibn Majah (d. 886); with 4,341 traditions, Abi Dawood (d. 888); with 5,274 traditions, Al-Tirmithi (d. 892); with 3,956 traditions, and Al-Nasai (d. 915); with 5,761 traditions.

As followers of the perfect religion, Muslims feel they are perfect, too. "Ablution and prayer absolve all previous sins," the Prophet was reported as saying.¹⁰ Likewise, the Prophet reportedly said, "Fasting the month of Ramadan absolves all previous sins."¹¹ Thus, Muslims who pray and fast Ramadan can act as if they commit no sin.

To Muslims, the Prophet is a human messenger of God, without divinity. He is the greatest of all prophets, the last, and the final prophet. To Muslims, the Prophet is the most venerated, loved, and honored human being. The tiniest details of every known moment in the life of the Prophet evolved into an ideal standard to be emulated faithfully. For example, Ignaz Goldziher wrote that the sole criterion used to determine whether a Muslim can properly wear a gold signet ring was to find out if the Prophet had worn one.¹² The Sunna even dictated the form of greetings and good wishes. If a person wanted to know the correct words to say to a person who sneezes, he would find a rule to cover the situation in the Sunna. A good Muslim must not make his own unguided determination, or worse, follow a foreign custom.¹³ Ahmad Bin Hanbal (d. 855), founder of the orthodox Hanbalite school of jurisprudence, is reported to have never eaten watermelon because he had not been able to find any Prophetic precedent on the subject.¹⁴ In casual conversations, whenever the Prophet's name is mentioned, a Muslim will hasten to say, "Peace be upon Him," or, "Prayer of the Lord be upon him." Before making a statement of any kind, Muslims generally start by reciting: "In the name of God, the most merciful, the most compassionate. Prayer and peace be upon the most honored among the Prophets and

Divine Messengers, our master, the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) and upon all of his clan and companions.”

The Prophet symbolizes the very essence of the Muslim self. There cannot be a greater injury to a Muslim than disrespecting the Prophet. Muslims’ strong identification with the Prophet explains the furor that gripped the Arab and Muslim worlds in reaction to the publication in January 2006 of cartoon drawings by the Danish newspaper *Jyllands-Posten* depicting the Prophet. Muslims were incensed at the depiction of the Prophet wearing a turban shaped as a bomb. An August/September 2006 poll found that Egyptians see Denmark as their second worst enemy, after Israel.¹⁵ Sunni Muslims prohibit human imaging for fear of falling into polytheism (Shi’ites do not share this prohibition, but do share with the Sunnis their adoration of the Prophet). Such prohibition explains why Islamic art has, over the centuries, been mainly focused on calligraphy and geometrical shapes. Muslims were also enraged at Pope Benedict XVI’s speech at Regensburg University on September 12, 2006 in which he quoted the fourteenth century Byzantine emperor Manuel II Paleologos, saying, “Show me just what Mohammed brought that was new, and there you will find things only evil and inhuman.”¹⁶ Protests erupted in the Islamic world. Pakistan, among others, summoned the Vatican’s ambassador to express regret over the remarks, as Parliament passed a resolution condemning the comments. The head of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt said the remarks aroused the anger of the whole Islamic world. Salih Kapusuz, deputy leader of Turkey’s ruling AK party, likened the pontiff to Hitler and Mussolini. The fifty-seven-nation Organization of the Islamic Conference said it regretted the pope’s remarks.¹⁷ The protests forced the Vatican to quickly issue an apology on the pope’s behalf that some passages of his speech may have offended the sensibilities of Muslim believers.¹⁸

In the seventh century, Islam united the disparate tribes roaming the Arabian Desert. Within a few decades after the death of the Prophet, poor desert Bedouins made Damascus the capital of Islam’s first empire, the Umayyad caliphate (661-750). Arab Muslims became the masters of an empire more extensive than that of Rome at its zenith, extending from the Bay of Biscay to the Indus River and the borders of China and from the Aral Sea to the southern cataracts of the Nile.¹⁹

Many Islamic sects and doctrines came into existence and subsequently disappeared. Today, at least 85% of the estimated 1.25 billion Muslims in the world are Sunnis. Shi’ite Muslims number around 200 million, living mainly in Iran (about 65 million out of a population of 75 million), Pakistan (about 25 million out of 160 million), and Iraq (about 15 million out of 25 million). There are Shi’ites in the Gulf region and in Yemen, Syria, and Lebanon. In addition, there are minorities of Shi’ites in Afghanistan, India, Russia, and Turkey. As will be discussed later in this chapter, the majority of Shi’ites are Twelvers.

Four Sunni schools of jurisprudence survive today. They are named after their founders: Abu Hanifa (d. 767), with followings in West and Central Asia and in the Indian subcontinent; Malik (d. 795), in North and West Africa; and Shafei (d. 820), in East Africa, South Arabia and the Malay Archipelago. Ninety-eight percent of the more than one billion Sunnis belong to these three schools. Ahmad Bin Hanbal (d. 855) established the fourth Sunni school. The Hanbali School is the most austere and orthodox among the Sunni schools of jurisprudence. Historically, due to its extremism, Hanbalism has never had much following. However, its fortunes improved with the founding of Saudi Arabia in 1932 and the imposition of Wahhabism.

Wahhabi beliefs are heavily influenced by Ahmad Bin Hanbal's thought. Since the quadrupling of crude oil prices in 1973, Wahhabi preachers, propagandists, mosques, schools, books, pamphlets, and money have been spreading the extremist Wahhabi message energetically. Nonetheless, adherents to the Hanbali/ Wahhabi creed remain a tiny minority of around 2% of world's Sunnis, concentrated mainly in Saudi Arabia and among the Taliban in Afghanistan.

Arabs' Strong Attachment to Islam

Several religious factors combine to make the Muslim Arabs feel as God's supreme race. The first of these is the pride that Arabs take in the fact that God's word in the Quran was revealed in Arabic, the language of paradise. There are many verses to this effect. Here are some:

In 12:2: "We have sent it down as an Arabic Quran so that you may learn wisdom."

In 13:37: "We revealed it as an Arabian judgment ..."

In 41:3: "A book, whereof the verses are explained in detail; a Quran in Arabic, for people who understand ..."

In 43:3: "We have made it a Quran in Arabic ..."

In 46:12: "And this book confirms it in the Arabic tongue ..."

To Muslims, the Quran is God's miracle. In 17:88: "If the whole of mankind and djinn were to gather together to produce the like of this Quran they could not produce its like, even though they might assist one another."

The knowledge of Arabic determines the extent that a person understands the Islamic creed. The Quran, the Hadith and Sira traditions (Prophetic sayings and actions), and the writings of the early Islamic scholars and jurists were in Arabic. Imam Shafei (767-820), the founder of the Shafei school of Sunni jurisprudence, advocated that every Muslim learn Arabic, at least to the point of reciting the Quran.²⁰ Most non-Arab Muslims do not understand Arabic. They may read the Quran, but they often do not comprehend it. Non-Arab Islamic ulama, who must speak, read, and write Arabic, explain Shari'a rules to their congregations.

Such intermediation introduces the local customs, cultures, political leanings, and personal interests of the translators into the interpretation of the Islamic creed. Indeed, capturing the precise meaning of the Quran in translation from Arabic is exceedingly difficult, often leading to differing conclusions.

The second factor is Arabs' pride in the belief that God described them in verse 3:110 as "The best of peoples evolved for mankind."

The third factor is Arabs' feeling of honor that the Prophet Muhammad was an Arab from the Meccan tribe of *Quraish*. To Arabs' pride, every Companion of the Prophet who reported his sayings (Hadith) and actions (Sira) as well as the founders of the four Sunni schools of jurisprudence that survive today were all Arabs; though, Abu Hanifa was the grandson of a Persian slave.²¹ Indeed, all fifty-five caliphs (Islamic rulers) since the death of the Prophet until the Mongols destroyed the Arab Empire in 1258 were Arabs from the

Quraish tribe. The famous scholar Al-Mawardi (991-1031) stipulated that the caliph should belong to the Quraish tribe.²²

The fourth factor in Arabs' pride is that Islam's holiest shrines are located on Arab lands— in Mecca, Medina, and Jerusalem.

The ethno-linguistic connection makes Islam an Arabic religion. The Arab people are proud of this distinction. Since Islam's early days, the non-Arab Muslims rebelled against their Arab masters for religious equality. As early as 685, armed revolts against Arab domination took place. Al-Mukhtar led the first such rebellion. When he revolted in Kufa, Iraq, against the Umayyad caliph in Damascus, Al-Mukhtar's propaganda claimed that he was acting in the interest of the 'weak' and the *Mawali* (early non-Arab Muslims).²³

It is difficult to prove Islam's dominance in Arab life quantitatively. However, an international survey of 50,000 people in sixty-eight states conducted by Gallup International for the BBC World Service program, *Who Runs Your World*, provides evidence. The survey, rare in Arab countries, validates the contention that, at least in Egypt, the Arab world's most populous country of 80 million inhabitants, most Muslims have genuine affinity for, and a very strong attachment to Islam. Questioning 500 Egyptians, the survey found that Muslims in Egypt are the most likely to define themselves by religion of any in the world. 87% of Egyptians said their religion was their most important defining characteristic, giving Egypt the most robust religious identity of any country surveyed.²⁴

Further evidence is the high percentage of pilgrims who travel from Arab countries to Mecca and Medina annually, during Eid Al-Adha. Pilgrimage to Mecca is one of the five duties in Islam. While Arab Muslims represent around 20% of the world's Muslim population, estimates in recent years indicate that almost 60% of these pilgrims come from Arab countries.

Islam in Arab Culture and Way of Life

Islam's influence in shaping the Arab way of life is complex. Quranic verses appeal in different ways to different audiences, and the choice to focus on certain verses and on particular interpretations is a political factor used to encourage the recently growing attachment of some Arabs to radical political Islam.

Degrees of Attachment to Islam

Notwithstanding the inherent difficulties in categorization, for the purpose of this analysis, it will be useful to recognize three levels of attachment to Islam: moderate, Islamist, and jihadist. Within each category, there are shades in any individual's degree of commitment.

Moderate Muslims are those who are tolerant of other beliefs and ways of life. They accommodate modern thought and values. Moderates represent the majority of the Arab people.

Islamists aspire to live in an Islamist state. In an Islamist state, Shari'a (Islamic law) is the sole source of legislation, ideology, and way of life. Except in Wahhabi Saudi Arabia, where the Islamists represent the majority of Saudis, in other Arab countries the Islamists are minorities.

Jihadists are a miniscule violent minority scattered everywhere. They see only the violent and the intolerant in the Quran and the Sunna. They ignore the peaceful and the tolerant.

They adopt extreme interpretations of the Islamic creed. Jihadists welcome martyrdom as a means to inherit paradise. They regard the Muslim who does not follow their ways as *kafir*—a heretic, an apostate; thus, they are called *takfiris*. Apostasy in Islam is punishable by death.

Jihadists are zealous, despairing, and vengeful. Charismatic leaders exploit jihadists' zeal, despair, and readiness for self-annihilation. Jihadists can be found resisting foreign occupation, or fighting Muslim rulers they regard as apostates. Since Islam is perfection, jihadists believe they are perfect, too. Terrorizing the innocent is justified. Prayer absolves all sins. Jihadists feel no remorse.

Quranic Readings for the Moderate, the Islamist, and the Jihadist

Muslims of different persuasions find different inspirations in the Quran, often on the same subject. The moderate chooses the peaceful and the tolerant verses to the exclusion of the violent and the intolerant. The Islamist focuses on the intolerant verses. The jihadist concentrates not only on the intolerant verses but also on the verses that urge fighting in the way of God.

Below are examples of verses that appeal to moderate Muslims:

In 2:62: "Those who believe, and those who follow the Jewish [scriptures], and the Christians and the Sabians—any who believe in Allah and the Last Day, and work righteousness, shall have their reward with their Lord; on them shall be no fear, nor shall they grieve."

In 2:136: "Say: we believe in God, and the revelation given to us, and to Abraham, Ismail, Isaac, Jacob and their progeny, and that which was given to Moses and Jesus, and to all the prophets by their Lord. We make no distinction among them and we submit to God in Islam."

In 2:256: "Let there be no compulsion in religion."

In 29:46: "Do not argue with the People of the Book unless in a fair way, apart from those who act wrongly, and say to them: we believe in the revelation which has come down to us and in that which came down to you; our God and your God is one; and it is to him we bow." The "People of the Book" are the Christians and the Jews.

The moderate Muslim would also focus on a segment of verse 5:82 that praises Christians and their priests:

"You will find ... nearest ... in love to the believers are the people who say: 'we are Christians' because amongst them there are priests and monks and they are not arrogant."

Indeed, Islam recognizes and reveres all Christian and Jewish prophets and messengers. The Quran dedicates Chapter 14 with its fifty-two verses to Abraham, and Chapter 12 with its 111 verses to Joseph. To Mary, the mother of Jesus, the Quran dedicates Chapter 19 with its ninety-eight verses. Muslims believe that God revealed Islam in order to restore the religion of Abraham to its original tenets, after Christian priests and Jewish rabbis had corrupted its true message. To Muslims, Islam represents the original, unadulterated religion of Abraham. The Quran refers to Islam in 2:135 as the Religion of Abraham.

The second type of Quranic verse attracts the Islamists. The Islamists choose to concentrate on the intolerant verses instead of the peaceful and the tolerant verses. An Islamist would

focus, for example, on the remaining segment of verse 5:82, which condemns the Jews: "You will find the Jews and the idolaters strongest in enmity to the believers." The Islamists concentrate also on those verses that condemn Christians and Jews, along with their priests and rabbis. For example:

In 2:65: "You are well aware of those among you who profaned the Sabbath, and to whom We said, 'Be as apes despicable.'"

In 2:120: "Never will the Jews or the Christians be satisfied with you unless you follow their form of religion."

In 5:14: "From those who say we are Christians, We have accepted a solemn pledge but they too forgot what they had been told to remember. So, we caused enmity and hatred among them, to last until the day of resurrection."

In 5:51: "Take not the Jews and the Christians for your friends and protectors: they are but friends and protectors to each other. And he amongst you that turns to them is of them."

In 5:59, addressing the People of the Book, the Christians and Jews: "O people of the book, what reason have you for disliking us other than that we believe in God."

And in the immediately following verse 5:60, in a clear reference to Christians and Jews: "Say: 'shall I tell you who will receive the worst retribution from God? They whom God has rejected and whom He has condemned, and whom He has turned into apes and swine.'"

In 5:78: "Curses were pronounced on those among the children of Israel who rejected faith, by the tongue of David and of Jesus, the son of Mary, because they disobeyed."

The moderate and the Islamist would relate to the intolerant verses differently. While an Islamist uses such verses to justify hostility to today's Christians and Jews, a moderate would see the intolerance as being directed, not against today's Christians and Jews, but against those Christians and Jews who had purportedly conspired against the Prophet and his followers fourteen centuries ago.

The third type of Quranic verse urges Muslims to fight occupation and oppression until justice prevails. Such verses appeal to the jihadists. There are scores of Quranic verses urging the believers to fight oppression and injustice. For example:

In 2:191: "And slay them wherever you find them, and drive them out of the places whence they drove you out, for persecution is worse than slaughter."

In 2:193: "And fight them on until there is no more tumult or oppression, and there prevail justice and faith in Allah."

In 2:216: "Fighting is prescribed for you, and you dislike it. But it is possible that you dislike a thing which is good for you, and that you love a thing that is bad for you."

In 2:217: "Nor will they cease fighting you until they turn you back from your faith."

In 8:60: "Against them make ready your strength to the utmost, that you may strike terror into the enemies of God and your enemies."

In 9:5: “Fight and slay the idolaters wherever you find them, and take them captive and besiege them and lie in wait for them in every likely place; but if they repent, and fulfill their devotional prayers and pay the Zakat tax charity, then let them go their way.”

In 9:29: “Fight those who believe not in God nor the Last Day, nor hold that forbidden which has been forbidden by God and his Messenger, nor acknowledge the religion of truth, even if they are of the People of the Book, until they pay the protective tax (*jizya*) with willing submission, and feel themselves subdued.”²⁵

In the Quran, God’s description of the great delights that await the faithful in paradise makes a jihadist’s career worthwhile. The Quran tantalizingly describes in more than one hundred verses the eternal bliss that awaits good Muslims in paradise. For example:

In 2:82: “Those who are faithful and do righteous deeds—they are destined for paradise.”

In 18:31: “For them will be gardens of Eden; beneath them rivers will flow; they will be adorned with bracelets of gold, and they will wear green garments of fine silk and heavy brocade, they will recline on raised thrones.”

In 61:12: “Gardens with rivers flowing by and excellent mansions.” Also, “In the midst of gardens and springs (44:52) ... Dressed in fine silk and in rich brocade (44:53) ... We shall join them to companions with beautiful, big, and lustrous eyes” (44:54).

In the hands of jihadist leaders, these Quranic verses transformed political frustrations into religious crusades and the jihadists into walking bombs.

Muslim’s Peaceful Treatment of Christians and Jews

Notwithstanding the intolerant verses of the Quran and the stories about the harsh treatment of the Jewish tribes in Medina (See Chapter Four), the majority of Muslims have generally been, over the centuries, moderate and tolerant of other faiths. Tolerance can be seen through the mostly peaceful treatment that the People of the Book—Christians and Jews (called *dhimmis*)—received in Muslim lands. Except for relatively short periods, primarily during the reigns of four Arab caliphs, out of a total of ninety-one Muslim rulers—fifty-five Arab caliphs (632-1258) and thirty-six Ottoman sultans (1280-1924)—Christians and Jews were generally treated decently. Discrimination, when it happened, included the display of distinctive markings on their homes and clothes, exclusion from public office, and demolition of places of worship. The four caliphs were the Umayyad, Omar II in Damascus (717-720), the Abbasids, Haroun Al-Rasheed (786-809) and Al-Mutawakkil (847-861) in Baghdad, and the Fatimid, Al-Hakim in Cairo (996-1021). Another period of discrimination followed the final expulsion of the Crusaders from Syria. In the early 1300s, two Mamluk sultans, Qalawoon and Al-Nasir, discriminated against not only Christians and Jews, but also against Muslim sects that helped the European Christian Crusades during the eleventh and twelfth centuries, including the Ismailis, and the Nusayris (today’s Alawites).

During the Umayyad dynasty (661-750), *dhimmis* enjoyed considerable toleration upon the payment of land and capitation taxes.²⁶ During the Abbasid dynasty (750-1258), Christian and Jews filled important financial, clerical, and professional positions.²⁷ In spite of several unfavorable references in the Quran, the Jews, as a protected people, got along

better than the other protected people, the Christians.²⁸ Hitti describes how the Jews fared under Muslim rulers:

In 985 Al-Maqdisi found most of the money changers and bankers in Syria to be Jews ... Under several caliphs, particularly Al-Mu'tadid (892-902), we read of more than one Jew in the capital and the provinces assuming responsible state positions. In Baghdad itself, the Jews maintained a good-sized colony, which continued to flourish until the fall of the city [1258]. [Rabbi] Benjamin of Tudela, who visited the colony about 1169, found it in possession of ten rabbinical schools and twenty-three synagogues; the principal one, adorned with variegated marble, was richly ornamented with gold and silver. Benjamin depicts in glowing colors the high esteem in which the head of the Babylonian Jews was held as a descendant of David and head of the community.²⁹

In 1492, the Ottoman sultan, Bayezid-II (1481-1512) allowed many Jews driven out from Spain and Portugal to settle in the Ottoman territories, where they were able to rebuild their lives after being expelled from Iberia.³⁰ In Mesopotamia, Spain, North Africa, Egypt, and Ottoman Turkey, Jews lived peacefully under Ottoman rule.³¹ Religious moderation is also demonstrated in the ability of Muslim men to marry Christian and Jewish women, "Women of the Book," without their needing to convert to Islam, though their children are to be raised Muslims. Indeed, many Muslim men today, mostly students in European and American universities, do marry Christian women. They also marry Jewish women, although the numbers are much smaller, given the conflict between Arabs and Israelis.

One might speculate that, had the Ottomans forced the conversion of the conquered Balkan Christians to Islam during the five centuries of Ottoman rule, the religious cleansing atrocities of the 1990s committed by Christian Serbs against Bosnia-Herzegovina and Kosovo might not have occurred. Similarly, the existence of 15 million Christians belonging to the various Eastern and Western church denominations throughout the Arab world today suggests a generally suitable living atmosphere for Christians under Muslim rule. Most Arab Christians could migrate to Western countries if they wanted to, but they do not feel inclined to do so. Likewise, around the middle of the twentieth century, more than 850,000 Jews had been living in Arab countries for centuries.³² This issue will be discussed briefly later in this chapter and in some detail in Chapter Six.

The Religious Profile of the Arab World

The majority of the Arab people today are moderates. Moderate Muslims live mainly in Arab republics under military presidents, and in the monarchies of Jordan and Morocco. Generally, Arab military presidents adopt Arab nationalism and socialism as their legitimating ideologies, not Islam. The generals are quasi-secular. Nonetheless, they maintain the veneer of the good Muslim, in order to benefit from Islam's demand of blind obedience to Muslim rulers.

The proportion of the Muslim moderates to the total population differs from one country to another. In Syria, for example, the proportion is high; in Saudi Arabia, it is scant. Of the estimated 300 million Arab people, around 85%, or 250 million, are Sunni Muslims. About 30 million, or 10%, are Shi'ite Muslims. Shi'ites are in the majority in two Arab countries — Iraq, where they represent around 60% of the country's 25 million, and Bahrain, where they represent 60% of that island's 700,000 people, if not more. There are minorities of Shi'ites in other Arab countries; around five million adherents to various Shi'ite sects