

# UNDERSTANDING ISLAM

## WHAT IS ISLAM

Islam is one of three great monotheistic faiths that sprung from the harsh land of the Middle East. It is the world's second-largest religion, accounting for one-sixth of the human race or approximately one billion people. Like Judaism and Christianity, the followers of Islam or Muslims, are taught to believe in a cosmos in which God rewards good, punishes evil and is merciful to human appeals.

Muslims are the dominant population in thirty-six countries from Morocco to Indonesia and they are divided into two branches: The largest is the Sunnis who constitute 85% to 90% and deem that the Caliphs (successors) who followed Muhammad were the rightful heirs. Then there are the Shias, mostly found in Iran and Iraq who trace their lineage to Ali and Fatima (the son-in-law and daughter of the Prophet) and their sons Hasan and Hussein, who believe that only a true descendent should be on the throne of a united Islamic Empire.

## THE BIRTH OF ISLAM

The Prophet Muhammad was born 570 CE in Mecca, Saudi Arabia, an important center of commerce on the Arabian Peninsula. His father **ABDULLAH**, a businessman of the Hashim clan of the Quraish tribe, died before he was born. Then when he was only six years old, his mother **AMINA** also died leaving him an orphan. As a result his grandfather, **ABD al-MUTTALIB**, a merchant, who taught him his trade, reared him.

Muhammad was spiritually curious, having learned a great deal about different religions on his travels, and he made frequent retreats to a cave above Mecca in search of enlightenment. It was there at the age of 42, that he had his initial visit from the archangel Gabriel, who told him he was to be the definitive prophet of Allah, the one true God.

Aghast and frightened by this experience Muhammad fled back to his wife, **KHADIJAH**, who reassured him and later became the first convert to Islam. After her death 619 CE, Muhammad married twelve times and all his wives were instrumental in spreading his teachings.

From this moment of calling, the Prophet had no further revelations for two years, during which time he went through a period of trial and testing. Then the messages began again and continued for the rest of his life, a period of twenty-three years from the first revelation to his death at the age of about 63.

It was also in 619 CE that Muhammad's uncle ABU TALIB an early convert, who had protected him from the worst persecution of the Arabian tribes, died. In this, **THE YEAR OF SORROW**, the grief-stricken Prophet left Mecca and tried to make a fresh start in the town of Taif, but he was rejected there also. About that time the Prophet experienced the second most important event of his life, **THE NIGHT OF ASCENT**. Although it is not clear whether he had a vision or dream, the Prophet woke from his sleep and he and archangel Gabriel were transported by a miraculous beast to Jerusalem; from the site of the old Jewish Temple on Mount Moriah, a way was opened for him through the heavens until he approached the throne of God. He also is said to have seen and spoken to other prophets from the past, including Abraham, Moses and Jesus.

During this night, the rules for Muslim prayer were revealed to him. They became the central part of the faith and have formed the keystone for Muslim life ever since.

### **MUSLIM BELIEFS**

Islam means submission in Arabic and a believer is one who submits to the will of Allah, The **QUR'AN** or **Koran**, which is the most memorized book on earth, is believed to be the word of God as told to Muhammad and recorded by scribes. There are five key practices or “pillars” that bind the Muslim community together: the first is the claim of monotheism or **SHAHADAH**, “There is no God but Allah and Muhammad is his messenger”. The others are **SALAH**, to pray five times daily, **ZAKAT**, the giving of charity to the poor, **SAWN**, daytime fasting during the month of Ramadan and **HAJJ**, the pilgrimage to Mecca that should be undertaken at least once in a lifetime. Obviously Islam has much in common with Judaism and Christianity, as all three faiths believe in a day of judgment and venerate the prophets. The Koran itself recounts stories from the Old Testament and tells of Christ’s birth to the Virgin Mary.

### **THE RISE OF ISLAM**

During the course of his life as Muhammad received his revelations they were recorded and then compiled into 114 surahs (chapters) which became The Koran. At the same time, the Prophet’s mission was still fraught with difficulty as the ruling Quraish tribes of Mecca who attacked his followers and offered him bribes to abandon his teachings demonized him. However the word of Islam spread rapidly, helped by armed religious envoys that were dispatched across the Arab countries.

Eventually with his life in jeopardy, the Prophet fled to Yathrib (the Hijra), where he was embarrassed by the warm welcome he received. Unable or unwilling to select among this surprising hospitality he followed his camel, which stopped at a place where dates were spread out to dry. His grateful followers gave him this land upon which to build his new home and the town took a new name – **MADINAT al-NABI**, “the town of the Prophet”, which later was shortened to **MEDINA**.

The Prophet then set about creating a charter, which would enable all the disputing tribes and factions in Medina to accept him as head of state and abide by his decisions. He ruled that all the citizens should be free to practice their own religion in peaceful co-existence, without fear of intimidation or ill favor. He asked only that if there was any aggression or tyranny, they should join together and cooperate in the face of the enemy.

Although he was now ruler of a city-state and in receipt of increasing wealth and influence, **MUHAMMAD** lived a humble and charitable existence. In fact, his recorded deeds and sayings (**THE HADITH**) reveal him to be a man of great kindness, good humor, modesty and excellent common sense, who had a great love for all people, especially his family. Although by contemporary standards he married often, most of his spouses were mature widows who had suffered the loss of their original loved ones. In fact, among his wives two were Jewish and one was Christian.

The Prophet was a man of peace and reconciliation and would have remained so had he been left alone, but the opposition from the Quraish tribes continued and he was obliged to take part in warfare for the rest of his life.

Jihad was never to be a military activity for the sake of nationalism, conquest or conversion, but only for defensive purposes, and only until the enemy could be brought to peace. Actually, during the Prophet's battles many of his opposition switched to his side, impressed by Muslim chivalry, courage and faith in God.

In 627 CE, his enemy **ABU SUFYAN**, raised a force of 10,000 men and advanced on Medina, buoyed by support from a Jewish tribe that had decided to oust the Prophet. After a two-week siege, the opposition withdrew, giving the Prophet a moral victory, for he had shown that this vast army could not defeat him.

In the aftermath, the renegade Jewish tribe was dealt with severely. Ordinarily the Prophet had always counseled mercy but on this occasion it was a serious matter since the Jewish tribespeople were citizens of Medina who under his leadership had previously signed a pledge of loyalty.

Ultimately in 629CE after being provoked by a Meccan attack on one of the tribes allied with the Muslims, the Prophet marched on the city with a sizable army. After being offered a general amnesty, the Meccans submitted and Muhammad entered the city in triumph. Going straight for the **KA'ABA** he performed the ritual of circumambulation seven times and then destroyed all the idols.

It should be noted that the cube-shaped **KA'ABA** temple claimed a very ancient history; it was said to have been first built by Adam, God's first creation, and then rebuilt by Abraham the Prophet and his son Ishmail. Originally it was a shrine dedicated to the "One True God", but over the centuries the Baal cults had converted it to the worship of hundreds of minor deities and their replicas.

Once this most holy city had been taken over the Prophet asked his followers not to reclaim the property that they had abandoned years earlier when they fled to Medinah. Consequently, Muhammad and his followers returned to Medina where they were attacked by tribes that had been shocked by the desecration of their idols.

During March 632 CE the Prophet set out, accompanied by 120,000 men and women, for his one and only true pilgrimage to the Ka'aba shrine, known as **THE FINAL PILGRIMAGE**. During this journey the revelations about the rules of the **HAJJ** were given to him along with the edict that only Muslims would henceforth be permitted to enter the city. Two months later, after returning to Medina, he became ill and ultimately died at 63 years of age in the arms of his wife **AISHA**. He was buried on that very spot and his grave is now a shrine, which is part of the modern mosque complex in Medina.

### **THE GROWTH OF ISLAM**

After the death of Muhammad, his successor or Caliph was to be someone who had been with him in both Mecca and Medina, was qualified to pass on correct **HADITH** and whose life was similar to the Prophet's in that it epitomized his example (**THE SUNNAH**). Although there are some indications that Muhammad favored his cousin and son-in-law Ali as his heir he had asked **ABU BAKR** to lead the prayers when he was ill and this factor proved significant in his selection.

During the short reign of **ABU BAKR** and the three Caliphs that followed (The "**Rightly Guided Successors**"), the Arabs who were previously a squabbling, fractious, corrupt group of tribes used as pawns by outsiders, united around the ideas of Islam.

Hence, the religion spread from Arabia into the Middle East, followed by the Muslim Moors triumph in North Africa, the invasion and virtual conquest of Spain and a thrust into France that carried the crescent to almost the gates of Paris. It took five hundred years to finally expel the Muslims from Western Europe.

The Crusades were just one episode in the continuing struggle as the Christians attempted to regain the “occupied territories” of the Holy Land. As it happened, this endeavor fatally weakened the Greek Orthodox Byzantine Empire, the main barrier to the spread of Islam into southeast and central Europe. Thus with the fall of Constantinople to the Ottoman Sultans, Islam was extended from the Balkans and the Crimea in southeastern Europe to the heart of the Middle East: the Holy Land, the cities of Mecca and Medina, and the Nile Basin. Ottoman armies plunged deep into the heart of Europe threatening to take Vienna until they were finally repulsed.

Unlike the West, which was shaped in its development by the Renaissance, Enlightenment and Industrial Revolution these pivotal events barely penetrated the land of Islam. Moreover, unlike Christianity that since the Reformation has continually updated itself and adapted to changing conditions, Islam remained a religion of the Dark Ages. For the most part, the 7<sup>th</sup> century Koran was still taught as immutable, since it is the Word of Allah exactly as the Prophet received it. In this sense it is different from any of the world’s other holy books that were created by human authors many years after the deaths of the prophets involved and then were edited, revised and added to by disciples.

Today, Islam’s struggle with the West is primarily demographic. Muslims from North Africa and the Balkans are surging over established frontiers on a huge scale. Since most of them are illegals, their number settling in Europe cannot be accurately

calculated. But they are arriving in Italy, France and Spain in such numbers and considering their high birthrate; these traditionally Catholic countries may well have majority Muslim populations in this century.

### **ISLAM'S RELATIONSHIP TO JEWS AND CHRISTIANS**

During the early years, Muhammad related well to the Jews of Arabia and their religious practices and ideas deeply influenced him. In fact, he himself emphasized that the concept of the belief in one God, the creator of the Universe, the God of justice and mercy, before whom everyone high and low bears personal responsibility, came to him from Israel.

Jewish law also deeply influenced Muhammad. In the early days of Islam, Muslims prayed in the direction of the Jews' holy city, Jerusalem and observed the most solemn Jewish holiday, Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement. Only later, when Muhammad reluctantly concluded that the Jews would not embrace him as the Seal or Final Prophet and convert to Islam, did he substitute Mecca for Jerusalem and the fast of Ramadan for Yom Kippur. Similarly, the Muslim dietary restrictions are based upon Judaism's law of Kashrut and their five daily prayers are likewise modeled on the thrice-daily service of Orthodox Jews.

Believing himself to be the final and greatest Prophet of Mosaic monotheism, and having adopted so much of Jewish thought and practice, Muhammad appealed to the Jews of Arabia to recognize his role and to adopt Islam as the culmination of Judaism. But the Jews rejected him, believing that his message may have served as a religious advance for the pagans, but for them it was merely another offshoot of their own religion.

One major factor that rendered Muhammad's prophetic claims untenable for them was his ignorance of Biblical details. In large part because he had never read it, but only heard Bible stories, many of his references were often erroneous. In Sura 28:38 for instance, he has Pharaoh ( the Book of Exodus) ask Haman (the Book of Esther) to erect the Tower of Babel (the Book of Genesis).

Another obstacle to his acceptance by the Jews and the Christians as well, was the moral quality of some of his teachings. They were not deemed to be equal to, let alone better than, the prophetic teachings of Moses and Jesus. In Sura 33:50 for example, Muhammad exempts himself from Allah's law limiting a man to four wives and in **Sura** 4:34 he instructs men to beat disobedient wives.

So, when the followers of the two other monotheistic religions at the time, rejected the Prophet it constituted a living refutation and provocation, at least in the eyes of his followers. Thereafter when Islam expanded on the Arabian Peninsula and beyond, virtually all the pre-Islamic Christian communities were converted (the Copts of Egypt constituting the most notable exception) but the Jews remained steadfast.

Living under Muslim rule after the death of the Prophet both the Jewish and the remaining Christian communities did not fare well. Under the yoke of Islamic persecution the "dhimmis" (non-Muslim monotheists) were allowed to exist but in a subservient or degraded status. Much worse off were the non-monotheists who were given the choice of conversion to Islam or death.

The Muslim legal code which prescribed the treatment of Jews and Christians, or "dhimmis"" as they both are referred to in Islam, was the Pact of Umar, attributed to Mohammad's second successor, dated from about 720 CE. It's key characteristic was the

requirement that “dhimmis” always acknowledge their inferior position to Muslims. Jews and Christians had to pledge, for example, “We shall not manifest our religion publicly nor convert anyone to it. We shall not prevent any of our kin from entering Islam if they wish it”.

Another law designed to humiliate “dhimmis” required them to wear different clothing. The purposes of this law, which was resurrected by the Taliban, were to enable Muslims to recognize non-believers at all times and to make them appear foolish.

For the most part in the history of Islam, the existence of Jews could be tolerated as long as they were subordinate or degraded. The creation of a Jewish state in 1948 amidst Arabdom was incompatible with the view of Jews as humiliated or wretched. Hence when Islamic militants call for a Palestinian Arab state in place of Israel it’s for a state in which once again “Islam dominates and is not dominated”.

Obviously, only through an understanding of the deep theological and historical roots of fundamentalist Muslim attitudes can some of their present day hatred be understood. Only then does one recognize how false the claims are of Israel’s enemies that prior to Zionism, Jews and Muslims lived in harmony. In reality, once the Jews decided to reject their inferior status, to become sovereign after centuries of servitude, and worst of all, to now govern some Muslims where they had so long been governed, the Jews existence was no longer tolerable. Accordingly, some radical Muslims call not for an adjustment of Israel’s geography but for its annihilation. For them it is the Jewish nations existence that so arouses their hatred that it needs to be ended. Consequently when radical Islamic groups viscerally reacted to the Egyptian-Israeli Peace Treaty of

1979 it was because they objected to the Jewish state's existence, not its policies, the treatment of Palestinians nor even its borders.

### **ISLAM'S PARADISE**

Passages from the Koran and the Hadith describe a paradise filled with rivers, trees and cool breezes. In short, perfect for a religion originating in the desert. Only Arabic is spoken and those admitted will consume one hundred times more food (fruits, dates and pomegranates) and non-intoxicating wine than while on earth.

Unlike the Christian heaven, in Islam's afterlife a person retains his human body and can have all the carnal delights he wants. In particular, a Muslim Martyr is given 70 black-eyed, buxom virgins (houris) who do not sleep, get pregnant, menstruate, spit, blow their noses or even defecate. In addition, if he so chooses his earthly wives can join him and also vouch for 70 of his family members to be admitted to paradise.

The KORAN, which prohibits suicide, states that paradise automatically, awaits a **MARTYR**, who is someone that dies in Jihad or the struggle to defend Islam.

### **WAHHABISM**

As we enter a war whose contours are yet unknown, we must try to take the measure of our opponent. Our enemy inhabits a well-defined sect within Islam. This movement can be described in theological terms as evolving in part out of Wahhabism.

The Wahhabi sect was founded in the 18<sup>th</sup> century by **Muhammad ibn Abd al Wahhab** (1703-1787), who preached a particularly austere and conservative brand of Islam. His followers were banned from enjoying any music except the drum; drinking

and sexual transgressions were punishable by death; mosques were stripped of all decoration and tombstones were toppled on the grounds that they inspired idolatry. Throughout the sect's history, the Wahhabis have fiercely opposed anything they viewed as "bida", an Arabic word usually muttered as a curse for any change or modernization that deviates from the literal teachings of the Koran.

Driven from Medina where his teachings were viewed as extreme and puritanical, Wahhab went to the northeast Nejd region where he converted the Saudi tribe. For more than a century, Saudi sheiks had waged a bloody religious and territorial war against their Muslim neighbors, until the establishment of Saudi Arabia in 1932. These battles and the ultimate victory which installed Abdul Aziz as King, was done with the support of Wahhabi fighters and since then there has been considerable intermarriage between the descendents of these groups.

Since that time the Saudi royal family have used the Wahhabis to give them a basis for legitimacy. The Wahhabis believe that Islam is a total system with an answer to all life's questions. Of course, they have all the answers. For example, in 1925, with the help of **Ibn Saud**, founder of the Saudi dynasty they engaged in the wholesale destruction of the sacred tombs, graveyards and mosques in Mecca and Medina. This included the graves of Muhammad's early associates, followers and even Caliph Abu Bakr. In addition, they demolished the cemetery in Mecca where the Prophet's mother and father and first wife, **Khadijah** were buried. Only the tomb of Muhammad in Medina was spared after an outcry from traditional Muslims.

Wahhabi Islam in its ascetic form is the religion currently practiced in Saudi Arabia – a joyless interpretation of the faith. This means no public holidays, only religious holidays and not even the Prophet Muhammad’s birthday is celebrated.

Originally, the telephone, radio, and public education for women were condemned as innovations wrought by the Devil and were the cause of riots. Today in Saudi Arabia there are no public movie theaters, women are banned from driving and the musical tune played, when a cellular phone rings, is outlawed.

The only justification for change is usually with the argument that it would help propagate the Koran. But above all, the WAHHABI’s believe that their faith must spread, not giving ground in any place previously occupied by Muslims (i.e., Afghanistan, Kashmir and Israel). Moreover, Wahhabi fighters have even gone to Bosnia, Chechnya and the Philippines to extend their sect. Thus to the WAHHABIS the Taliban State was a proper extension of true Islam.

So in trying to balance American demands to join the coalition against terrorism and the demand of the Wahhabis (who covertly support Osama bin Laden) the Saudis are walking a tightrope. After all they were instrumental in creating the Saudi monarchy and presumably if sufficiently alienated, could tear it down.

### **THE ISLAMIC RADICALS**

In this first war of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, our nation can no longer afford the naïve illusions that have given many Americans comfort in peacetime. Chief among them is the notion, presented all too often by our leaders and the media, that Islam means peace. Clearly this statement is an over-simplification.

A key to understanding Islam is knowing that it operates one way in countries that recognize a separation of church and state but in another fashion where mosque and state are one. While there are over 1200 mosques in the United States there are no churches in Saudi Arabia or the Gulf States.

In countries where the culture is an expression of Islam, religion and society have merged. For another religion to exist in a strict Islamic society or for someone to change his or her religion is considered apostasy, an abandonment of one's heritage. Thus in classical Islamic law (the 9<sup>th</sup> century **SHARIAH**) the apostate loses all his civil liberties, his children are taken away and his marriage is dissolved. There is a saying in the Hadith, "Any person that changes his religion, kill him".

Of all contemporary cultural systems, the Islamic world has the fewest democracies (only Turkey might qualify). Moreover, the Islamic world contains no countries that have made the transition from third to first world status in the manner of South Korea and Singapore. Ergo, if Islam is the Seal or monotheism perfected then some fundamentalist hatred may be born out of Western success and Muslim failure.

Many Arabs and Muslims deem that they had ten centuries of great cultural achievement that ended with European colonialism. Now they feel impotent. The West they assume looks at them as backward and is only interested in their oil. So if Islam is religion perfected and its kingdom in retreat, it must be that its present practitioners have strayed from the fundamentals of the faith. Iran's Khomeini appealed to them because he promised a new world which would re-establish continuity with the glorious past.

However, the Sunni Wahhabis are far more dangerous than the Ayatollah. With funding from the Saudi government they have established at least 8,000 Madrassas in Pakistan which are “throwbacks” to the feudal age. In these boys schools what is produced is a fear and loathing of modernity, a stoking of historic rage against the West and its primary cultural engine – America, and an ancient puritanical mindset. All this converges into a turbo-charged potential revolutionary force.

Likewise, while disclaiming any responsibility for terrorism, the Wahhabi-Saudi establishment seeks to control Muslim religious institutions and activities around the world. In 1999 they were on the scene in Kosovo within a month of the NATO intervention, spending money on Wahhabi religious indoctrination. They were so aggressive and extreme that the Kosovo Liberation Army and the Kosovar Albanian Muslims asked them to desist. Closer to home, Wahhabi Imans in American mosques until recently received salaries of between \$2,000-\$4,000 a month from the Gulf States. It’s no wonder the Muslim critics of their activities in the United States have often been intimidated into silence by the threat of withdrawing religious funding, removing subsidies for the HAJJ or even the fear of violence.

Although Islam is incredibly diverse and complex and Muhammad is said to have declared the, “the scholars are the heirs of the prophets”, it’s not surprising that sacralization not secularization is the current worldwide. Riding this wave are the Muslim religious leaders who are in most cases the anti-western, anti-liberal theorists or ideologues of today’s militant Islamic movements.

How can we defeat these Islamic radicals - an insurgency within another civilization? We can and must defeat it on the battlefield, of course. The enemy

measures its strength in battle and, indeed, finds in battle personal apotheosis. We must rob them of this realization.

More difficult still will be the task of draining its religious authority. Supporting or ignoring the behavior of weak and corrupt regimes (called “moderates” or “coalition partners”) that by word or deed aid, maintain and even encourage these Islamic militants is certainly not in our own interest – not if we want to win this protracted struggle.

If as President Bush said, “the war on terrorism will be fought on many fronts”, then one of them should be sustained political pressure on our so-called allies to change their ways. For in reality the roots of international terrorism may not be in Islam or even the clash of civilizations, but in our association with dysfunctional Arab regimes who have spawned violent internal opposition. Instead of dealing with this resentment and rage themselves, they have conveniently deflected this frustration and fury against the United States.