

A Short View of the Arab World

by

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The intent of this paper is to present a short view of the Arab world – to provide some understanding of why western civilization, especially the United States, oftentimes finds itself at odds with the Arab world and Islam.

(Arguably, the strategic target audience for the Operation Enduring Freedom information operations campaign is Islam, and the heart or core of Islam, lies within the Arab world.)

Currently, the United States finds itself in a war to root out and eradicate terrorism, the kind of appalling terrorism that was behind the events of 11 September 2001. Overwhelming consensus (and supporting evidence) has the Saudi Arabian born militant, Usama bin Ladin, as the mastermind behind the “9/11” atrocities. Usama bin Ladin and his terrorist organization, Al Qa’ida are the sponsors of numerous terrorist acts whose purported purpose is to unite all Muslims and establish pure Islamic governments in the style of the Taliban. Bin Ladin has proclaimed a holy war or *jihad* against the United States and he has gone so far as to call the Khobar Towers bombings, “praiseworthy terrorism,” and to remark, “if someone can kill an American soldier, it is better than wasting time on other matters.”¹

Why do Bin Ladin and Al Qa’ida want to destroy America? Why do they hate us so? To try and understand this deep-seated loathing, one must examine what one author has termed “the clash of civilizations.”² This conflict is the clash of West versus Islam. The ancient Chinese General Sun Tzu once said, “If you know the enemy and know yourself, you need not fear the results of a hundred battles.”³ To understand the clash of West versus Islam we must first try and understand Islam – we must know Islam.

Nearly one billion people comprise the civilization of Islam, making Muslims second only to the Chinese in numbers of people. Western civilization ranks fourth behind the Hindu population.⁴ Muslims then, make up a significant “target audience.”

Islam is one of the world’s great monotheistic religions and has relational links with both Judaism and Christianity. The root fundamental precept in Islam is the belief in one God, a God who was neither begotten nor begets. *Islam* is Arabic for submission, and the

¹ U.S. Government Factsheet on Usama Bin Ladin, 20 August 1998, <http://usembassy.state.gov/afghanistan/wwwhtr01.html>

² Samuel P. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*, (Touchstone, Simon and Schuster, New York, NY, 1996).

³ Sun Tzu, *The Art of War*, edited by James Clavell, (Delta Book, Bantam Doubleday Dell Publishing Group, New York, NY, 1983), p. 18.

⁴ Huntington, *Op. Cit.*, p.84.

Arabic word *Muslim* translates as submitter, therefore Muslims submit to the oneness of God and to the word of God as contained in the Qur'an.

The Prophet Muhammad and the Birth of Islam

Any understanding of Islam cannot be complete without some knowledge of the founder of Islam – Muhammad. Muhammad was born circa A.D. 570 in the town of Mecca in what is now the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. Muhammad's father died months before he was born and his mother died when he was six. Muhammad was raised, first by his Grandfather, and then when his Grandfather died, by his Uncle Abu Talib. Muhammad descended from the house or clan of Hashim⁵ a branch of the tribe of Quraysh.

When Muhammad was 25 years old, he married the prosperous merchant widow, Khadijah, who was some 15 years his senior. Khadijah bore Muhammad two sons and four daughters. His sons both died in infancy. Two of Muhammad's daughters married the second and fourth Caliphs of Islam, and his daughter Fatima married Mohammad's cousin Ali, the son of Abu Talib. It is Ali who formed the Shi'ite sect thus creating the schism in Islam.⁶

On the 17th Night of Ramadan, A.D. 610, Muhammad, on one of his regular spiritual retreats, in a cave on Mt. Hira, above Mecca, received a revelation. The archangel Gabriel (in Arabic *Jibril*) appeared next to him and commanded him to "Recite!"⁷ This recitation (the word *Qur'an* in Arabic means recitation) captured, according to Islam, the word of God as directly given to Muhammad. During the next few years, Muhammad received more revelations from the angel Gabriel and began his advocacy of *Islam* (submission) to the one God, Allah.

Muhammad's ministry conflicted with the Quraysh oligarchy in Mecca. The Quraysh were an aristocratic group of rich merchants who held power and essentially controlled the economy of Mecca. They had concluded pacts with other Arab tribes to secure the safety of pilgrims visiting the *Ka'bah* (Arabic for cube) – eventually making a substantial area of Mecca surrounding the *Ka'bah*, off limits to blood feuds and bloodshed. According to Arab legend Abraham and Ishmael (the son of Abraham by his concubine, Hagar) re-built the *Ka'bah* on the site where Adam had first built a structure, dedicating it to God (legend says that Adam's structure was subsequently destroyed by the great flood). Thus, the *Ka'bah* had been a site of Arab pilgrimage since before memory.

Because of the protection provided by the Quraysh in and around the *Ka'bah*, many Arab tribes began to abandon their local shrines and place idols of their favorite deity within the *Ka'bah*. The *Ka'bah* became a place of idol worship and soon contained

⁵ This is the same tribe, *Hashimite*, to which the former King Hussein and his son, the current King Abdullah of Jordan are descended.

⁶ Caesar E. Farah, Ph.D., *Islam*, (Barron's Educational Series, Inc, Hauppauge, NY, 2000), p. 37.

⁷ Karen Armstrong, *Muhammad, A Biography of the Prophet*, (HarperCollins Publishers, Inc., New York, NY, 1992), p. 83

hundreds of Arab idols. Muhammad's teachings were not only hostile to idol worship, but were egalitarian, calling for standards of fairness and justice for everyone. Quraysh power was founded on a system of privilege, and the economy of Mecca was strongly tied to the idol worship at the Ka'bah. Therefore, Muhammad soon became a significant liability to the Quraysh.⁸

Before long, Muhammad began to gather a large group of followers, many from the lower classes. The Quraysh put the order out to quash the upstart Muhammad's preaching and disband his followers. Muhammad, however, was protected by his clan the Hashim, so the initial pressures were placed on Muhammad's converts. Persecution of Muhammad and his followers intensified and in A.D. 615, Muhammad advised his followers to seek refuge in the Christian Kingdom of Abyssinia (modern day Ethiopia).

In 619, both Muhammad's wife Khadijah and his Uncle Abu Talib died. The death of Abu Talib put additional pressures on Muhammad as his Uncle had exercised considerable influence with the Quraysh oligarchy and had provided protection for Muhammad.

A.D. 620 is the year of Muhammad's mystical, "night journey," where he is reputed to have flown on the winged horse *Buruq* to Jerusalem and thence upward with the angel Gabriel to heaven. As the story goes, Muhammad had fallen asleep near the Ka'bah, was woken by Gabriel, and was lifted on *Buruq* and flown to *al-masjid al-aqsa*, or the "Further Mosque" on the Temple Mount in Jerusalem. From a rock (Jewish tradition has it that Abraham offered Isaac up for sacrifice on this very rock) on the Temple Mount, Muhammad ascended to the seven heavens, and in each heaven met a prophet of old – Adam, Jesus, Joseph, Enoch, Aaron, Moses and finally in the seventh heaven, Abraham.⁹ Today the Mosque called the "Dome of the Rock," is built over the rock where Muhammad ascended to heaven. It is situated on the *Al-Haram al-Sharif*, or Noble Sanctuary, an area of approximately 35 acres also containing the *Al Aqsa* Mosque. The Noble Sanctuary is the Jewish, "Temple Mount." The Dome of the Rock is located where the Jewish sacred holy of holies was placed in the ancient Hebrew Temple of Solomon. Since its construction, the site of the Dome of the Rock has been a great source of contention between Islam and Judaism, as both claim the spot as a "holy site."

A.D. 622 is a landmark year in Islam. It is the year of the *Hijrah* (migration or flight) of Muhammad and his followers to Medina (then called Yathrib).¹⁰ The year 622 marks year one of the Muslim calendar – to the faithful, it is the start of the Islamic era and the end of the "Age of Ignorance" (*Jahiliyah*).¹¹

The persecution intensified to the level that Muhammad feared for his life and the lives of his followers. Upon the invitation of several tribes responsive to his message,

⁸ Farah, *Op. Cit.*, p. 43.

⁹ Armstrong, *Op. Cit.*, pp. 138-139.

¹⁰ After Muhammad's death the town became known as *Madinat al-Rasul*, the city of the messenger, or more popularly *Madinah*, Medina.

¹¹ Farah, *Op. Cit.*, p. 47.

Muhammad left Mecca and immigrated to Medina. The people of Medina were more receptive to his counsel and Muhammad's following grew.

In 624, the Quraysh, fearing the continued spread of Muhammad's ministry, sent an army from Mecca to Medina. The Muslims met the Meccans at the wells of Badr, and though outnumbered three to one, defeated the Meccans in what became known as the Battle of Badr. Muhammad's fortunes changed dramatically after this – besides being a great preacher and administrator, he was now seen as a great military commander. The following year (625), however, the Muslims were defeated at the battle of Uhud, but the Meccans failed to follow up on their victory and Islam was preserved.

Because of duplicity in cooperating with the Quraysh, the Muslims were determined to drive out the Jewish tribe of *al-Nadir*. In A.D. 626, Muhammad and his followers battled the *al-Nadir*, crushed them and expelled them from Medina.

In 627, in what became known as the “War of the Ditch,” the Meccans again tried to attack Medina. Muhammad and his warriors dug a trench around the city, and the Meccans' attack was foiled. Once more, in 627, angered by the perceived betrayal of the Jewish tribe *Banu Qurayzah*, the Muslims did battle and defeated the Jews.

The year 628 saw a treaty executed between the Quraysh and the Muslims, allowing the Muslims to conduct pilgrimage to Mecca without fear of reprisals or bloodshed. The same treaty allowed Muhammad to proselytize without interference.

In A.D. 630, the Quraysh broke their treaty and attacked a tribe allied to the Muslims. Muhammad became determined to march on Mecca and put an end to the Quraysh oligarchy. He formed an army and on 1 January 630 advanced on Mecca. Before reaching Mecca he was met by a delegation of the Quraysh who promised to submit to the new faith. The entire city converted and the Ka'bah was established as the religious center of Islam.

632 witnessed Muhammad's last pilgrimage to Mecca, and on 8 June of that year, Muhammad died and was buried in Medina. In his farewell sermon on his last pilgrimage to Mecca, Muhammad sealed the bonds between all Muslims when he said: “Know ye that all Muslims are brothers. Ye are all one brotherhood; and no man shall take ought from his brother unless it is freely given to him.”¹²

Foundations of Islam (Roots and Links to Judaism and Christianity)

The Qur'an is the heart of Islam. To Muslims, it is the literal word of God, handed down directly to the Prophet Muhammad. As previously mentioned the Arabic word *Qur'an*, means recitation or readings. As one author states: “This series of readings for which Muhammad was called upon by Gabriel to deliver to the Arabs, who hitherto had lacked a body of sacred text, was to be in Arabic, ‘the language of the angels,’ as verified

¹² Quoted in: Farah, *Ibid.*, p. 58.

by the Qur'an."¹³ *Surah* (Arabic for Chapter) 43 states: "We have revealed the Koran in the Arabic tongue that you may understand its meaning."¹⁴ Muslims insist that the Qur'an can only be understood, without error, in the original Arabic, the language in which Allah passed it to Muhammad. Both Christians and Jews will see familiar stories throughout the Qur'an. Christians and Jews will recognize references to Adam, the story of Cain and Able, reference to Noah and the flood, Joseph and his brothers, Jacob and the tribes, David and Solomon, as well as many references to the story of Moses' struggles with Pharaoh. As one noted Middle-East scholar points out:

"In the Muslim perception, Judaism and Christianity were predecessors of Islam, earlier stages in the sequence of prophetic revelations sent by God to mankind, and thus in a sense of Islam itself. The Muslim list of prophets includes Adam, Noah, Abraham, Ishmael, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Lot, Moses, Aaron, David, Solomon, Jesus, John the Baptist, and other Biblical figures. The scriptures given to the Jews and Christians are identified in the Qur'an as the *Tawrat*, that is the Pentateuch, brought by the prophet Moses; the Psalms brought by the prophet David; and the Gospels brought by the prophet Jesus. All these were superseded and rendered unnecessary by the final and perfect revelation brought by the Prophet Muhammad and contained in the Qur'an."¹⁵

Christians and Jews are both mentioned in the Qur'an as "People of the Book," because their respective ancient scriptures, passed down through the ages, provided the roots of monotheistic theology that culminated in the final word of God as revealed to Muhammad. As mentioned earlier, Arabic is the lone language of the Qur'an and the faithful regard all translations as false, "...particularly because it is a copy of the archetype preserved in heaven."¹⁶ That is why many of the Muslim faith who are not Arabic, quote, by rote memory, verses from the Qur'an in Arabic, sometimes without comprehension or understanding of what the verses mean.

The Qur'an was preserved first by "memorizers," – Muslims who committed the surahs to memory. Sometimes the faithful would write down a surah on parchment, palm leaves, or smooth stones.¹⁷ Abu Bakr, Muhammad's father-in-law and successor (also the first Caliph), was compelled to reconquer Arabia. During one of the battles, many of Muhammad's companions and memorizers, were killed. Umar¹⁸, another companion of Muhammad urged Abu Bakr to have the Qur'an codified. Abu Bakr tasked Zayd, a one-time aide to Muhammad to commit the Qur'an to writing. Zayd assembled all the various sources to include the memories of Muhammad's companions and compiled the first complete written text of the Qur'an. In 657 Zayd was again tasked to collect the various

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 79.

¹⁴ *The Koran*, translated with notes by N.J. Dawood, (Penguin Books, London, England, 5th Edition with revisions, 1993), p. 343.

¹⁵ Bernard Lewis, *The Multiple Identities of the Middle East*, (Schocken Books, New York, NY, 1998), pp. 118-119.

¹⁶ Farah, *Op. Cit.*, p. 100.

¹⁷ Muhammad was illiterate and could not read or write.

¹⁸ Umar succeeded Abu Bakr and became the second *Caliph* or leader of Islam.

codifications being used and to compile the “authoritative” version. It is essentially this version of the Qur’an that survives to this day.¹⁹

Fundamentals of Islam

The Five Pillars of Islam

As noted earlier, Islam is founded on the principle that there is only one God, *Allah*, and the belief in *Allah’s* word as given to Muhammad in the Qur’an. To a Muslim there are two fundamental conceptions, *iman* (the expression of faith), and *ihsan* (right-doing).²⁰ In Islam deeds are of greater importance than doctrine, and the “five pillars” are practices that demonstrate faithfulness and fulfillment of Allah’s will. The five pillars represent a framework for Muslims to follow in leading a true Islamic life. The five pillars are:

1. *Shahada*. The one prerequisite for becoming a Muslim is to profess the *shahada* (open testimony), that there is no God but God, and Muhammad is the messenger of God. This declaration of faith asserts the belief in the one God and that the purpose of life is to obey God’s laws as given to Muhammad in the Qur’an.
2. *Salah* (prayer). Muslims are required to pray five times a day. The Muslim ritual of prayer involves the confession of faith, the *shahada*, and reciting verses from the Qur’an. All Muslim worshipers, when praying, face the direction of Mecca and the *Ka’bah*.
3. *Zakah* (almsgiving). In Islam everything belongs to *Allah* and the living only hold wealth in trust. It is a religious requirement to give to the needy and an annual giving of 2.5 percent of one’s wealth is the requirement.
4. *Sawm* (fasting). Fasting is to be done during the Muslim month of Ramadan, the month that the Qur’an was revealed to Muhammad.
5. *Hajj* (pilgrimage). The pilgrimage to the sacred monuments (*Ka’bah*) at Mecca is a once-in-a-lifetime obligation for every Muslim who is physically able and can afford to do so.

Other Islamic Teachings/Precepts

Muslims believe in obedience to God and the Qur’an, respect for parents and elders, kindness, consideration for others (orphans, the poor), honesty and courage. These and other attributes are to be strived for by the faithful Muslim. The Muslim believes in a concept of Heaven and Hell, and there is a Satan (*Shaytan*). Elements of worship in Islam involve belief in angels, *jinn* (spirits – of two types, evil and helpful), the messengers or prophets, pre-destiny, and the Day of Judgment. In one respect, *Jinn* are

¹⁹ Farah, *Op. Cit.*, pp. 96-97.

²⁰ *Ibid.* p. 102.

seen as guardian angels, watching over man and keeping a record for the Day of Judgment.

Muslims believe in pre-destiny – *Allah* has pre-ordained and pre-determined all that takes place or will take place. To many Muslims everything that takes place, everything that happens, is the will of *Allah*, and to try and change what *Allah* has willed only makes things worse – hence the oft-repeated saying “*Inshallah* (God willing).” In *Surah* 18 of the Qur’an we find the remonstrance: “Do not say of anything: ‘I will do it tomorrow,’ without adding: ‘If God wills.’”²¹ This reminds the Muslim that there will only be a tomorrow if God wills it.

Muslims also believe in the concept of “free will.” According to one Islamic scholar, “The one important principle held by all, however, is that Allah in His divine justice allows man the freedom of those actions upon which he will be judged.”²²

Muslims value the family as the foundation of Islamic society. The family, the clan, and the tribe are basic to Muslim loyalties and the Qur’an reinforces this strong allegiance. The Muslim view of loyalty can be viewed through concentric circles. The smaller circle is the family, the next encompassing circle the clan, leading to the larger circle of the tribe. It wasn’t until the early 20th Century that Muslims began to form any concept of a nation-state.

Umma

Closely related to the concept of family is the concept of *Umma*, (community). In the broadest sense of the term, Umma is the community of Muslims. The Umma of Islam goes back to Muhammad’s farewell speech, in which he proclaimed that all Muslims are brothers. Viewing the concentric circles of family, clan and tribe, it is the Umma and Islam that link them all together. Islam and the Umma are the threads that bind all the circles together.

Jihad

Jihad in its literal Arabic translation means “struggle.” It is a striving or struggle to do the will of God. There are two connotations of Jihad, the Greater Jihad or personal struggle to do what is right, and the Lesser Jihad, or the struggle to defend Islam – and the defense of Islam includes military defense or “holy war.” Allied to the concept of Jihad are the terms, *Dar al-Islam* (House of Islam), and *Dar al-harb* (House of War). Bernard Lewis, Professor Emeritus of Near Eastern Studies at Princeton University, states:

“The world is divided into the House of Islam and the House of War, the *Dar al-Islam* and the *Dar al-harb*. The *Dar al-Islam* is all those lands in which a Muslim government rules and the Holy Law of Islam prevails. Non-Muslims may live there

²¹ *The Koran, Op. Cit.*, p. 207.

²² Farah, *Op. Cit.*, p. 117.

on Muslim sufferance. The outside world, which has not yet been subjugated, is called the “House of War,” and strictly speaking a perpetual state of *jihad*, of holy war, is imposed by the law.”²³

The more radical sense of *jihad*, the holy war, is the one frequently adopted by Islamic militants, but most Muslims tend to think in terms of a struggle to defend Islam and the Umma by keeping alive the principles of Islam.

Shari’ah

The *Shari’ah* is the fundamental law of Islam as derived from the Qur’an, the *Sunna* and *Hadith*. *Sunna* and *Hadith* are nearly synonymous terms dealing with Muhammad and his example. The *sunna* are Muhammad’s habitual behavior, how the prophet was supposed to have acted, the *hadith* are the recorded traditions of Muhammad. Thousands of *hadith* have been recorded and subjected to a rigorous process of verification by tracing the source of the tradition “...back through a chain of witnesses to the Prophet or a Companion.”²⁴ As one author makes clear: “The *Shari’ah* is Islam’s constitution. The function of evolving effectual legal principles from the *Shari’ah* gave rise to the *Fiqh* (jurisprudence), *without differentiation between the spiritual and the secular* (emphasis supplied). The process of evolving the *Fiqh* started when Muhammad first began to adjudicate for the nascent Muslim community in Medina.”²⁵ It cannot be stressed enough that there is no difference in Islam between the spiritual and secular – there is no separation between church and state.

The Islamic Schism (Sunni and Shi’ite)

Today Islam is divided into two primary sects, the *Sunni* sect and the *Shi’ite* sect. The overwhelming majority, or over 90 percent of Muslims are Sunni – the largest minority sect in Islam is the Shi’ite sect (nearly all of Iran and about 50 percent of Iraq are Shi’ite Muslims). The term Shi’ite derives from the first civil war in Islam when a disagreement arose as to who the legitimate Caliph of Islam should be, a relative of Muhammad, or a Caliph chosen by the Umma. Followers of Ali (cousin of Muhammad who married Fatima the daughter of Muhammad) called themselves *Shi’at ‘Ali* (the party of Ali), and argued that only the direct descendants of Muhammad should be Caliph. Shi’ites concluded that the legitimate heir to the Caliphate or leadership of Islam should be descendants of Muhammad or *imams*. Sunni Muslims tend to be traditional or orthodox in their views of Islam. They tend to not be activist like the Shi’ite sect. To the Shi’ite, religious clerics, their *imams*, are central to the Shi’ite beliefs – in Sunni Islam, clerics are only peripheral to Islam. “Thus in lieu of caliph, who was imbued with no spiritual authority by the Sunnis other than to set an example for piety, the Shi’ahs recognized an

²³ Lewis, *The Multiple Identities of the Middle East*, *Op. Cit.*, pp. 121-122.

²⁴ Albert Hourani, *A History of the Arab Peoples*, (Warner Books, New York, NY, 1991) p. 70.

²⁵ Farah, *Op. Cit.*, p. 156.

Imam who, until his disappearance, was regarded as an infallible teacher and the only source of religious instruction and guidance.”²⁶

Insights into the Arab Mind (Some reasons on why they hate us)

In what has become a frequently quoted article, Bernard Lewis, writing in the September 1990 issue of *The Atlantic Monthly*, described Muslim animosity towards the West thus:

“The Muslim has suffered successive stages of defeat. The first was his loss of domination in the world, to the advancing power of Russia and the West. The second was the undermining of his authority in his own country, through an invasion of foreign ideas and laws and ways of life and sometimes even foreign rulers or settlers, and the enfranchisement of native non-Muslim elements. The third – the last straw – was the challenge to his mastery in his own house, from emancipated women and rebellious children. It was too much to endure, and the outbreak of rage against these alien, infidel, and incomprehensible forces that had subverted his dominance, disrupted his society, and finally violated the sanctuary of his home was inevitable.”²⁷

History’s Insights

The roots of Muslim rage are deep and they are old. Some of those resentments have their beginnings in Islam’s history, especially as that history relates to the clash of Islam and the West. Muslims take great pride in their history and Islam’s accomplishments.

While Europe was cloaked in the ignorance of the “dark ages,” early Islamic civilization had reached a zenith, making great advances in medicine, architecture, engineering and mathematics, as well as expanding its empire. By A.D. 750, a little over 100 years after the death of Muhammad, Islam had conquered over half the known world. The Islamic empire burst out of the Arabian Peninsula, swept over the desert sands of Egypt and North Africa, reached deep into the medieval kingdoms of Spain, and conquered the lands and magnificent cities that were once the great Persian Empire. The Ottoman Empire spread Islam even further with an Ottoman army at one time reaching the gates of Vienna.

Apart from the Muslim advance into Spain, the next major clash of Islam and the West took place during a period of history referred to as the Crusades (1095 – 1291). During this time Christian armies from Europe marched into the Middle East in an attempt to rid Jerusalem and the Holy Land of the Muslim infidel. Pope Urban II, at the Council of Clermont in 1095, exhorted Christendom to a “holy war” against the Muslims, promising the remission of sins to all who took part.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 174.

²⁷ Bernard Lewis, “The Roots of Muslim Rage,” *The Atlantic Monthly*, September 1990.

In 1099 a Crusader army sacked Jerusalem, and according to contemporary accounts, every man, woman, and child, both of Islamic and Jewish faith, were slaughtered. The eyewitness account of Raymund of Aguiles tells of the massacre:

“Wonderful sights were to be seen. Some of our men (and this was more merciful) cut off the heads of their enemies; others shot them with arrows, so that they fell from the towers; others tortured them longer by casting them into the flames. Piles of heads, hands and feet were to be seen in the streets of the city. It was necessary to pick one’s way over the bodies of men and horses. But these were small matters compared to what happened at the Temple of Solomon, a place where religious services are normally chanted. What happened there? If I tell the truth it will exceed your powers of belief. So let it suffice to say this much, at least, that in the Temple and porch of Solomon, men rode in blood up to their knees and bridle reins. Indeed it was a just and splendid judgment of God that this place should be filled with the blood of unbelievers since it had suffered so long from their blasphemies.”²⁸

When some in the West think of Crusades, they think of chivalrous knights conducting a holy war with the blessing of God. When Muslims think of the Crusades they think of the terrible slaughter that took place in the name of a false God. As one author points out, “The idea of the Crusades quietly permeates many aspects of modern life in the Arab and wider Islamic world. For some, the concept of the Crusades is seen as a manifestation of the continuing struggle between Islam and Christianity...Others see the Crusades as the first stage of European colonialism...”²⁹

Muslims view the West as the source of many tragedies. In 1798, Napoleon conquered Egypt and occupied Cairo. The French subjugated Algeria in 1830. In 1839, the British took Aden as a coaling station for British ships. In the 1870s British and French interests assumed control of the Suez Canal allowing the Khedive of Egypt to borrow exorbitant amounts of money with canal shares as collateral, thus plunging Egypt deeply into debt. In 1882, feeling the surge of nationalism and suffering the burden of foreign creditors and British taxation, an Egyptian army officer, Ahmad Urabi, led a revolt against the British and was crushed by a British expeditionary force. Thereafter, Britain pulled the strings on the Egyptian puppet government.

After the First World War, Britain and France carved up the carcass of the Ottoman Empire into French and British colonies. The British Mandate in Palestine lasted until 1948, ending with the formation of the new state of Israel. In 1956, after Egyptian President Nasser had nationalized the Suez Canal, the French and British colluded with Israel in a secret agreement to attack Egypt and overturn the rule of Nasser (the Israelis, French, and British were forced to withdraw because of strong pressures applied by the US and the Soviet Union). One can begin to see why the Muslim psyche has a deep-seated resentment over the past wounds of Western colonialism.

²⁸ Quoted in: Karen Armstrong, *Holy War. The Crusades and Their Impact on Today’s World*, (Anchor Books, New York, 2001), pp. 178-179.

²⁹ Carole Hillenbrand, *The Crusades. Islamic Perspectives*, (Routledge, New York, NY, 2000), p.590.

The Impact of Harsh Realities

Much of the Arab world is poor, and the sting of poverty burns in humiliation and bitterness. As one Muslim scholar observes: “The Islamic world – including the some 40 nations in which Muslims constitute the majority of the population – is a rich assortment of peoples and cultures. It is united, in fact, only by the prevalence of poverty. Beyond the borders of the desert oil kingdoms, Muslim societies are poor, and developing, confined by their lack of political, economic, and military resources.”³⁰

Besides being poor, Middle East Muslim populations are young. One source has the average age of the population as sixteen.³¹ Samuel P. Huntington provides additional stark figures, declaring that the proportion of youth (fifteen to twenty-four) now exceeds over 20 percent of the total population in the Middle East.³² To be young and poor is a volatile combination – ready tinder for the match of Islamic radicalism. As Huntington says, “...young people are the protagonists of protest, instability, reform, and revolution.”³³

With poverty impacting so much of the youth of Islam there is bound to be a growing anger with what they see in the rich and decadent West. The labor markets are overflowing with youth and it is not unusual to see university graduates and those with post-graduate degrees, driving taxicabs. The coffeehouses of the Middle East are packed with unemployed young men, who sit amidst clouds of cigarette smoke and engage in debate about the ills of the Middle East. Note that I did not say the ills of Islam, because to them Islam is infallible – it is the ills of their particular country that they discuss, and inevitably the conversation turns to the perceived cause of those ills – the West and western, immoral society. As a professor of Middle East studies sums up: “...young people everywhere are impatient with authority and in search of meaning for their lives – hence the magnetism of ideologies that explain and solve everything. When two-thirds of the population is less than twenty-five, the search for meaning and alienation from the stifling established order inevitably become a defining element of the whole society.”³⁴

The Bedouin Culture

To the Arab, the values and life of the Bedouin is the ideal. However romantic it may appear, the Arab mind is strongly influenced by the ethos of the Bedouin. Bedouin courage and bravery, Bedouin hospitality and generosity, Bedouin honor and dignity, the Bedouin aversion to work that gets the hands dirty, the Bedouin tendency to want to “save face” at all costs and to avoid shame – all these traits, to the Arab, are the epitome

³⁰ Mahnaz Ispahani, “Varieties of Muslim Experience,” *The Wilson Quarterly*, Autumn 1989, p. 63.

³¹ R. Stephen Humphreys, *Between Memory and Desire. The Middle East in a Troubled Age*, (University of California Press, Berkeley, 1999), p. 4.

³² Samuel P. Huntington, *Op. Cit.*, p. 118.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 117.

³⁴ Humphreys, *Op. Cit.*, p. 4.

of right living, the embodiment of perfection. It is these Bedouin characteristics that often cause conflict with western culture.³⁵

The many defeats that the Arabs have experienced from Israel assail the Arab at the very core of his culture. His traits of bravery and courage are confronted by defeat, and his honor and dignity challenged. The loss to the infidel upstart Jewish state, caused the Arab to “lose face,” and caused a significant drop in the self-respect of the Arab psyche. The Arab sense of honor comes into conflict with the West in other ways as well.

The achievements of the Arabs in the Middle Ages, and the days when the Islamic Empire occupied half the known world are a great source of pride for the Arab. For the Arab to now see the “tables turned,” and the West in the seat of power and influence – is cause for much jealousy, acrimony and a deep insult to Arab honor. In referring to the current Arab sense of “cultural inferiority,” one prominent Arabist states: “His extremely keen sense of honor is yet another factor creating in him a suspicion, of which he cannot rid himself, that by imitating the West he might be debasing himself; and since he cannot stop imitating the West, he hates it for luring him into a dishonorable posture.”³⁶

The Problems of Palestine

The continuing Israeli-Palestinian conflict is a festering, open sore on the Arab consciousness. The current *Intifada*, with its daily television images of the young Palestinian “Davids,” hurling stones at the tanks of the Israeli “Goliath,” sear deep the pangs of loathing into an already bleeding sense of Arab pride and honor.

With no end in sight to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the Arab mind sees the United States as umbilically linked to Israel. In a greater sense they see America as the manifestation of the Great Satan, the overpowering, neo-colonial hegemonic demon that supplants Islam with Western “pop-culture,” “Big Macs,” pornography, and a hedonistic, insatiable greed for the fruits of the Middle East – oil.

The Palestinian problem exacerbates all the resentments and animosities that have built up for generations, and will continue to be the dominant issue for Islam in the Twenty First Century. A chilling article recently appeared in *The Palestine Times*, an Internet version of the printed publication. In the article the author, a Palestinian, describes why he hates America:

“America is the tormentor of my people. It is to me, as a Palestinian, what Nazi Germany was to the Jews. America is the all-powerful devil that spreads oppression and death in my neighbourhood. How can I not hate this “great Satan,” the evil empire? Does anyone expect people to love their tormentor? ...America treats me and my people as “children of a lesser God.” In fact, in the final analysis, America offers me one of two choices: Either I submissively accept personal enslavement and

³⁵ For a discussion of the Bedouin influence on Arab thought, see: Raphael Patai, *The Arab Mind*, (Charles Scribner’s Sons, New York, 1983), Chapters V, VI, & VII.

³⁶ Raphael Patai, *The Arab Mind*, (Charles Scribner’s Sons, New York, 1983), p. 300.

oppression...or become an Osama bin Laden. Honestly, there is not a third choice; if there is one, let us see it. I'm not exaggerating at all, as I know that the distance between being tormented by America's oppressive hegemony and being converted or mesmerized into bin-Ladenism is shorter and smaller than many would think, including the so-called experts in Washington. ...All we want is to be left alone and allowed to live a normal life and exercise our God-given rights and freedoms...like other human beings. Is this asking too much? Please, America, don't make me an Osama bin Laden."³⁷

Obviously, the above article was written to influence and to cause a sensation, but there are numerous articles of a similar nature filling the pages of Arab newspapers, weeklies, and magazines. In an article in *Al-Ahram* (the weekly Internet online version), an Egyptian journalist answered in print the question "Why do Arabs Hate America," "...Why do the Arabs hate America? It has never occurred to them that we strongly object to US foreign policy in our region. Indeed, recent US foreign policy makes no sense to most people, in the Arab world or elsewhere."³⁸

Unfortunately, until a real peace takes place between Israel and the Palestinian people, the U.S. will be closely linked to Israel, and we will continue to be viewed through the poor, jealous, resentful eyes of the Arab people.

The Message of Usama bin Laden (Why it resonates in the Arab world)

Usama bin Laden's message is steeped in a puritanical form of Sunni extremism. His idea is that if Muslims can regain their disciplined faith, they can and will defeat the great empires of the world, as did the early Muslims. He preaches an ideology that says Islam is pure and infallible, and that Islam has not been overtaken by a brighter, more advanced enemy (the West), rather Muslims themselves have strayed from the pure path. By returning to pure, disciplined Islam, Muslims can resume enjoying God's full blessings. No Muslim need feel dishonored at being overcome by God, rather than man. To the grass-roots Muslim his message is simple – Islam is better than the false West, and those who take up the sword of Islam, those who unfurl Islam's banners and strike at the great Satan, will be rewarded by God.

Usama's message rings loud to that poor, unemployed Arab youth in that smoky coffeehouse. He brings back honor, pride, and a sense of purpose by promising an end to the lies and torments of the West, as well as rich rewards by doing God's will – and that will is *Jihad* against the *Dar al-harb* .

In a letter Usama purportedly sent to Muslims in Pakistan calling on them to stand up for Islam and fight against the U.S., he said: "The world has been divided into two camps: One under the banner of the cross, as Bush, the head of infidelity, said, and

³⁷ Khalid Amayreh, "Why I Hate America," *The Palestine Times*, www.ptimes.com November 2001.

³⁸ Mustafa Kamel El-Sayed, "To an American Friend," *Al-Ahram Weekly Online*, 22-28 November 2001, Issue No. 561, <http://www.ahram.org.eg/weekly/2001/651/op10.htm>

another under the banner of Islam.”³⁹ By his statement, Usama confirms Huntington’s clash of civilizations, the clash of West versus Islam.

Conclusion

Religion, history, economics, Arab honor and pride, and the thorny Palestinian problem all mix together in the whirling mass of the Arab psyche. Understanding why the Arabs harbor the resentments they do will hopefully take us a long way in coming up with some tangible solutions to a very explosive problem. The current environment in the Middle East is abundantly fertile for growing the type of terrorist that Usama bin Laden wants to produce. A teeming population of unemployed youth, with little prospects for jobs or a real future sit in coffeehouses and wait for just such a charismatic promiser as bin Laden, to come and promise them a better future in a radical Islamic nation where *Jihad* is the perpetual state and those not of the *Dar al-Islam* (House of Islam), but of the *Dar al-harb* (House of War) will always be seen as the inveterate enemy – the enemy that all Muslims are required to fight to the death.

At one time the Arab world admired and respected the United States. Our democratic values and gritty determination were admirable traits. America’s stock reached its high point, during the Suez Crisis, when President Eisenhower bluntly told Britain, France, and Israel, “hands-off” Egypt. Sadly those times have passed and as Professor Bernard Lewis, discussing the loss of our esteemed status, states:

“In our own time this mood of admiration and emulation has, among many Muslims, given way to one of hostility and rejection. In part this mood is surely due to a feeling of humiliation – a growing awareness, among the heirs on an old, proud, and long dominant civilization, of having been overtaken, overborne, and overwhelmed by those whom they regarded as their inferiors.”⁴⁰

If we are to win this war of terrorism, we must attack the problems at the very root. We must begin to understand Islam and understand that Islam can be a religion of peace. We must understand Muslim sensitivities to history and emphasize the positive aspects and achievements that Muslim culture contributed to the greater World culture. There doesn’t have to be a “clash of civilizations.”

Somehow, some-way, we must begin to help Arab nations with the problems of poverty and the “youth bulge”⁴¹ in the Middle East. And somehow, somehow, there has to be a solution somewhere to the Palestinian problem, or there will always be ten Usama bin Ladens waiting in the wings to replace the one we are trying to capture in Afghanistan.

³⁹ BBC News Online, 1 November, 2001, http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/english/world/monitoring/media_reports/newsid_1633000/1633204.stm

⁴⁰ Bernard Lewis, “The Roots of Muslim Rage, *The Atlantic Monthly*, September 1990.

⁴¹ Huntington uses the term “youth bulge” for a disproportionate young population: Huntington, *Op. Cit.*, pp. 117-118.