



SMALL WARS JOURNAL

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Discussions on the Complexity of Diverse Sunni Islamic Interpretations:

History and Islamic Argumentation al-Qaida Chooses to Neglect

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Foreword by Dr. Steve Randolph, Associate Dean of Academic Affairs, Industrial College of the Armed Forces Washington D.C.

The United States faces a myriad of challenges. None is more urgent than that posed by Violent Islamist Groups. As I write these lines, Al-Qaida in the Arabian Peninsula has issued a special edition of their recruitment magazine Inspire, detailing what they call Operation Hemorrhage, the plot to bring down UPS and Federal Express cargo planes using toner cartridges filled with the explosive PETN.

At the Industrial College of the Armed Forces, students spend time pondering the psychology, ideology, and rationalization of terrorist groups. Commander Aboul-Enein has been a welcome addition to the faculty, bringing a nuanced understanding on the narratives of Militant Islamists, Islamist political groups, and disaggregating those two from Islam. He has also introduced students to the nuances and differences inherent in 1.57 billion adherents of Islam. This essay reflects the level of discussion and debate Commander Aboul-Enein brings to the classroom, arming our future military leaders and diplomats with a more comprehensive understanding of the region, the religion, and the culture. Students begin to appreciate that when a group calls for the establishment of an Islamic state or social order, the next question is whose interpretation of Islam will be imposed upon other Muslims? I look forward to the debate and discussion that this thought piece will generate.

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Introduction

In combating militant Islamist narrative, it is vital that America's policy-makers and leaders understand the history and evolution of the region better than the adversary. This is a war of narratives and counter-narratives designed to slowly marginalize al-Qaida as a lifestyle, its leaders, and its goals. The United States is blessed with a diverse population that is able to synthesize and find language to counter the transnational narrative propagated by militant Islamists.

The best antidote to marginalize al-Qaida's narratives is the use of Islam and Islamic history, particularly identifying what are Bin Laden's and Zawahiri's delusions that are given a veneer of legitimacy using fragments of Islam. Al-Qaida is proficient in creating and spinning narratives in order to justify its worldview, operations, and narrow theology. It is not enough to say al-Qaida hijacked Islam; Muslims in particular, and non-Muslims when possible, must

explain how al-Qaida has done so through the narrowness and selectivity of its interpretations of Islam.

For example, the Taliban as a movement needs to be reframed as the Islamization of warlordism. After the withdrawal of Soviet forces from Afghanistan, warlords digressed into slaughtering one another. Each warlord justified this slaughter by declaring the other an apostate, and using Islam to perpetuate the most negative and primitive aspects of tribalism.

In that same way, Osama Bin Laden would lead the Afghans to demoralization and destruction. It was not enough for Bin Laden to be an ideologue--he had to try his hand as a military commander. The counter-narrative needs to highlight that Bin Laden was a dismal commander who placed his men in danger as necessary to ensure he had a way of escape.

In this war of narratives, it is essential to understand why militant Islamist fantasies and alternate histories based on fragments of Islam have appeal. Islam has within it an emphasis to moderation, which must be contrasted against militant Islamist interpretations regarding violence, extremism, defeats, and a plea for patience to await a notion of victory. It is a narrative that can be rendered unacceptable to most Muslims and non-Muslims. To accomplish this we must synthesize militant Islamist narratives and deduce which fragments of Islam they emphasize while discarding whole swaths of Islamic theology. This militant Islamist synthesis is then made part of an ideology that is typically based on the cult of an individual(s), this is how al-Qaida in the end should be viewed by future generations. Bin Laden and Zawahiri will eventually die. The challenge is to discredit and marginalize their legacy using Islamic argumentation.

Structure and Development of Islamic Governance

Sunni Islamic jurisprudence has been historically divided among four main schools: Maliki, Shafei, Hanbali, and Hanafi. Each school was named after its founder, who had disciples, and evolved a corpus of interpretations of Islamic seminal documents such as the Quran (Muslim book of divine revelation) and the *Hadith* (Prophet Muhammad's sayings and attributions), as applied to daily life. Over time, each school congealed into regional sections of the Islamic world, with some based on the applicability of the school to local cultures, and others on the school of the Muslim conqueror, which took precedence over the Muslim conquered. The last example was the imposition of the Wahhabism, a fundamentalist derivative of the Hanbali school, onto the peoples of the Hijaz region (the Red Sea Coastal area of Arabia, where the Muslim holy cities of Mecca and Medina are located) which contained all four schools.

Human nature also plays a part, in that self-interest caused some Muslims to research which of the four schools would offer the judgment they found most advantageous, and claim that school to adjudicate an issue. This adherence to a school lasts only long enough to adjudicate the issue; the Muslim would then resume his daily practice with his Sunni school.

To add a layer of complexity, the founder of each school ruled on the same issue differently depending on where they practiced their Islamic adjudication. Most notably, Imam Abu Abdallah al-Shafei (767-820 AD), had differing opinions of the same subject during his Baghdad period compared to his time in Cairo. Finally, during the Ottoman Caliphate, the Hanafi School, which was prevalent among the Turks, was used to resolve impasses among the four schools and within three of the four schools of Sunni Islam. As an example, Egypt was predominately Shafei, and as one goes past Libya, the predominating school is Maliki, but

Ottoman officials would impose Hanafi rules when an impasse existed within the other schools of Islam. This caused resentment among Libyan Maliki Sunnis and Egyptian Shafei Sunnis.

As the Muslim world came into the 20th century, western civil and legal codes introduced further legal complexity as they were adopted in varying degrees by Arab countries. Two groupings of intelligentsia exist throughout the Middle East: those who graduated from civil colleges, and those who graduated from religious institutions. Of course, Islamists, who politically espouse a version of Islam, and Militant Islamists, who violently impose this version of Islam, each graduate from both civil and religious institutions. The Ottoman Empire began the process of bureaucratizing the religious establishment, but it was Egyptian leader Gamal Abdel-Nasser (hereafter Nasser) who erased every trace of independence of the religious establishment, and completely subsumed the clergy as state employees. This deprived the Egyptian populace of the main vehicle through which it could voice its grievances of injustice committed by the state or state officials. It was in the religious institution of al-Azhar that Egyptians organized resistance to Napoleon's occupation of the country in 1798. That was also the origin of Colonel Ahmed Urabi's rebellion against the British and the Turkish ruling elite in 1879.



Gamal Abdel-Nasser (1918-1970) bureaucratized Egypt's Islamic institutions making clergy employees of the state. This enabled a reduction in political dissent among the clerics.

Islamic courts focus on what is forbidden and what is permissible, while legislature focuses on passing laws for the collective good or for the protection of minority rights. The blending of legislative and judicial in the Middle East elicits problems, especially when clergy members serve in parliaments and attempt to legislate individual morality and fail to consider the collective feelings of the entire citizenry with their differing Islamic practices. Tribalism and religious or ethnic minorities, of course, complicate this governance model still further.

Diverse and Contradictory Views of the Ottoman Caliphate among Muslims

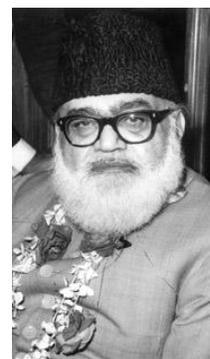
Rifaa Tahtawi (1801-1873), an Islamic scholar, attempted to infuse a sense of Egyptianness or civic sense among Egyptians. Tahtawi made Egyptians proud of their ancient Egyptian heritage and rejected the condemnation of pharaoh among the Abrahamic faiths that blinded the appreciation of an ancient and advanced civilization along the Nile. Tahtawi celebrated the unique blend of cultures and races intersecting from three continents into Egypt, particularly Roman, Arab, Turkish, Nubian, Greek, Persian, and others. Tahtawi's slogan included, "*hub al-Watan min al-Imaan*," which translated as "Love of Nation is part of religious devotion."

He was opposed by Abdul-Aziz al-Jaweesh who said, “*Laa Muawatana fee al-Islam,*” which translated as “there is no nationalism in Islam.” Al-Jaweesh also said that if the caliphate collapses, then Islamic identity goes with it, and that the path of Egypt was to facilitate Muslim unity by supporting the (Ottoman) caliphate. This debate is significant because it did not focus on the caliphate, but rather what it meant to be Muslim, Arab, Egyptian, and much more in the industrial age. The oppression of the Ottoman ruling elite and the caliphate was another related subject of debate.

This debate and history are relevant, as al-Qaida deputy Ayman al-Zawahiri wishes to restore the caliphate, and is partial to the Ottoman caliphate. Unfortunately, many Muslims today are unaware of the origins of this political tradition, and think that the concept of a caliphate was religiously ordained. Omar ibn al-Khattab—Muhammad’s companion, father-in-law, and second caliph—once told Prophet Muhammad’s uncle Ibn Abbas, “Your family hates the idea of combining prophecy and the caliphate.” Omar was concerned about the sanctity of Muhammad as Messenger of God, being soiled by his descendants who assume governorship. He wanted to separate the religious integrity of Muhammad’s mission from the mire of tribal politics. Evidence of this can be found in Ibn Abi Hadeed’s *Sharh Nahj al-Balagha* (explanations of the sermons of Ali, Prophet Muhammad’s cousin, son-in-law, and fourth caliph). This kind of detail troubles Islamists and militant Islamists who thrive on quick sound bites.



Hassan al-Banna (1906-1949): Founder of the Muslim Brotherhood, the first Islamist Political Party



Abu al-Ala al-Mawdudi (1903-1975), important Pakistani Islamist Ideologue, whose theories inspired Egyptian Militant Islamist theorist Sayyid Qutb

Twenty-first century ignorance of Islamic history induced militant Shiite Muslims in Iraq to massacre any Iraqi with the name of Omar in retaliation for the second caliph being perceived as denying Prophet Muhammad’s cousin Ali the succession. The reality of succession after Muhammad’s death was much more complex, even aside from the political aspects; clerics after the Prophet’s death debated the relationship of *wahy* (divine revelation), the death of Muhammad, and true Islamic governance. With the death of Muhammad in 632 AD, divine revelation ceased, and the issue of governance descended into earthly concerns subject to human error and interpretation. The caliphate became a political concept for which Muslims would kill one another and label one another apostate. The caliphs were transformed and the institution evolved into periods of oppression. One argument claims that Prophet Muhammad represented the only true Islamic governance; all others after him are mere interpretations.

Islamic Scholars Disagree with Islamist Ideologues on the Caliphate and Imamate



Ottoman Sultan Selim I who conquered Egypt and Arabia in 1517

Hassan al-Banna (1906-1949), the founder of the Muslim Brotherhood, claimed in his book, “*Rasa’il*,” (page 27) that the caliphate was established to inherit the prophecy of Muhammad. Abu al-Ala al-Mawdudi (1903-1979) wrote in his book, “*Nazariya al-Islam wal Huda*,” (page 71) that no one can govern without God’s authority. The problem with al-Banna’s sound bite, which is popular in radical Islamist discourse, is that since God alone designated Muhammad as His Messenger. Declaring that a person is inheriting Muhammad’s prophecy is blasphemy and subsumes God’s prerogative of designating Messengers. In al-Mawdudi’s statement, there are no explanations on how a person derives God’s authority to govern.

Then there are Islamic counter-arguments, such as Imam Sharistani (1086-1153 AD) who declared that the political institution of the Imamate is not from Islamic *usul* (roots of religion). Muhammad al-Ghazali (1058-1111 AD) who is quoted by Zawahiri, also said that the Imamate is not from the roots of the religion. Islamists like to use fragments of the Quran that references *hukm*, *tahakum*, in *al-Nisaa* verse 105, or *Maryam* verse 12, giving these terms a modernist translation meaning to govern. However, *hukm* and *tahakum*, according to the exegesis of Qurtubi and Baidawi, means to adjudicate.

When Ottoman Sultan Selim I conquered Egypt in 1517, he enslaved and killed fellow Muslims, and the claim of the Ottoman caliphate was built upon weak moral foundations. In Egypt, Muhammad Ali Pasha, the nominal ruler since 1803, criticized his son Ibrahim Pasha (Ottoman Turkish honorific title, equivalent to a Lord) for promoting an Egyptian soldier for battlefield valor to the rank of officer, due in part to the Ottoman class structure of discrimination that always undermined Turkish attempts to rule in the name of Islam. The Arab Revolt led by the Sherief of Mecca Hussein ibn Ali was a manifestation of the loathing Arab Muslims had for this class structure, and also helped shape Egyptian Colonel Ahmed Urabi’s view that the Ottomans were as much an adversary as the British.

Conclusion

Militant Islam is based on a misrepresentation of the history and development of Islam, and of its traditions. In the long run, the conflict now underway is a conflict



Colonel Ahmed Urabi (1841-1911), Egypt’s first expression of nationalism and a break from Ottoman and European Domination. His revolt would lead to direct British intervention in Egypt that lasted from 1882 to 1952.

over the nature and future of Islam, and of its relationship with other communities. Understanding the history and the outlines of the conflict within Islam is necessary in this battle of narratives. More broadly, that understanding is also necessary to help our national leadership and our society at large understand the specific nature of the adversary, and of the conflict in which we are now engaged.

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