

Unit 6: Religion and Internal Middle East Politics

Objectives

At the end of this unit, you will

Be aware of the following

- Worldwide composition of Islam
- People of the book
- Spread of Islam in Southeast Asia/Indian sub-continent
- Muslim leadership practices and identification
- Sunni and Shia school of thought, makeup/differences
- Practice of Shia "Twelvers"
- Observance of Husayn's death by Shia Muslims
- Sufi practice within Islam
- Complexities of Islam when applied to society
- All encompassing nature of Sharia
- Care taken to determine accuracy of hadith
- Hanbalite Sharia school in Arabia
 - Three Islamic political responses to the West

Identify

- Bilal, fatwa, Hanbalite, deputyship
- Syncretism, Dar al-Islam
- Sharia, hadith
- Ulama, imam, kethib, muezzin, mufti
- Mujahidun, mullahs, ayatollah
- Caliph, marabout
- Sunni, Shia, Sufi, Twelver
 - Husayn, Karbala

Realize

- Syncretistic nature of SE Asia Muslim practice
- Differences of leadership by nation/group within Islam

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- Impact of ulama on Muslim history
- Percentages of Sunni/Shia practitioners
- Composition of Sharia
- Western misperceptions of Sharia
- Expedient uses of Islam

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"How are the domains of spiritual and political authority delineated in Islam? This question approaches one of the most fundamental, most searing, most debated, and as a result, most embroiled issues in Islamic thought."

-- Mohammad Arkoun, Rethinking Islam



'Islam is not a monolithic whole. It is as diverse as the countries that compose the Middle East itself...'

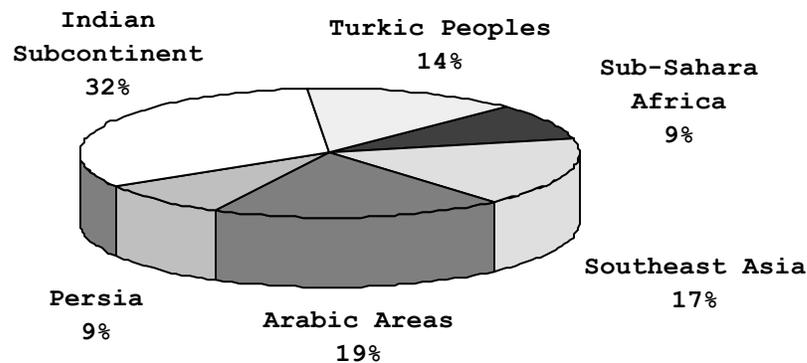
Islam is divided into various groups, each with its own interpretation of the Muslim holy book--the Qur'an--and the prophet Muhammad's sayings and deeds.'

--Lt.Col. David Kibble, Military Review, 1995, p. 40.

I. Islam Outside the Middle East

The presence of Islam amongst Arabic, Persian, and Turkic peoples seems commonly known. Less understood, but equally important, is the Muslim presence in the Indian subcontinent, sub-Saharan Africa and Southeast Asia. Also, Islamic influence in the West is increasingly felt.

World Muslim Population



1. Indian Subcontinent Islam comprises a majority presence in Bangladesh, with minorities in Sri Lanka, Nepal, and India. Mission oriented Sufi orders and Muslim traders brought Islam to these areas in the 12th and 13th centuries. Over 350 million Muslim adherents live in these areas.

2. Sub-Saharan Africa Since Muhammad's time, when Bilal, an African, called the Prophet to prayer, Islam has had an interest and presence in Africa. One hundred million followers of Muhammad practice Islam in this part of the African continent.

3. Southeast Asia In the 13th century, Sufi teachers, pious merchants, and members of the Prophet's family who married into Malay royalty spread Islam throughout Southeast Asia. The 180 million practitioners in Indonesia, Malaysia, South Philippines and minorities elsewhere often follow a more syncretistic (blended, including other beliefs or practices) strain of Islam.

II. People of the Book

Members of the Christian and Jewish faiths who live in the **Dar al-Islam** (dahr ul-is-lam, the Islamic world...those territories guided by Islamic law) receive special protection as "People of the Book." Islamic law (**Sharia**, sha-REE-ah) guarantees peoples of these faiths peace and protection.



For this safekeeping, Jewish and Christian adherents may experience constraint on their religious practice and are subject to unique taxation.

The Qur'an refers to this practice over 50 times. For example, Sura 5:15 states, *"People of the Book! Our apostle has come to reveal to you much of what you have hidden of the Scriptures, and to forgive you much. A light has come to you from God and a glorious Book, with which God will guide to the paths of peace those that seek to please Him; He will lead them by His will from darkness to the light; He will guide them to a straight path."*

In Sura 17:19 we read, *"Let the People of the Book know that they have no control over the grace of God; that grace is in His hands alone, and that He vouchsafes it to whom He will. God's grace is infinite."*

This recognition of "People of the Book" established long periods of harmonious Jewish/Christian/Islamic relations in some European

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and Middle Eastern countries. Recognition of Sura
2:256

("There shall be no compulsion in religion") did much to promote such periods of harmony and peace.

III. Clergy/Leadership

Though Islam is a "religion of lay people without priesthood...a society in which all the members enjoy equal religious status" (Jacques Jomier, How to Understand Islam, p. 58), there are learned elites, community leaders, and public officials who promote and ensure good moral behavior in society.

1. Ulama (oo-la-mah). Leadership centers around the ulama. These learned men are responsible for interpreting divine law and administering Islamic society. Some of the ulama are experts in the study of sacred texts, the tradition associated with exegesis of the Qur'an, and the **hadith** (hah-DEETH, the tradition of what Muhammad and his companions said and did). Theology, law, and mysticism are also part of the curriculum for individuals desiring to become part of this select group.



Ulama personnel serve as teachers, preachers, market-inspectors, judges, notaries, and in various state positions--as scribes, secretaries, and royal counsels. Even in states where secular law is in effect, the cooperation of the ulama is necessary for successful government.

A wide variety of other titled men can make up the ulama. An **imam** (i-MAHM) leads prayers for the faithful. At times, imams also derive authority from their abilities in religious scholarship. A **muezzin** (moo-uh-TH-thin) is the crier who calls worshippers to prayer. **Muftis** (MUF-tees), scholars in Islamic law, present fatwa, formal decisions given on legal, moral, or doctrinal questions. Often the procedures for

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arriving at consensus are complex and intricate. Mujahidun (moo-ja-hid-OON) are present day activists who seek to revive Islamic society.

Mullahs (MUL-luhs) are local Shi'ite men of religion. An ayatollah (a-yat-ool-LAH) is a mullah who achieves the highest level of leadership in the Shia community through extensive academic study.

Islamic scholar, Dr. Fathi Osman describes alim or learned persons in the field of Islamic knowledge.

"Although Islam does not require an established clergy to carry out certain religious duties or to be in charge of them, a necessary devotion and specialization to the study of Islam has emerged... Gradually, the necessary devotion of time to the study of Islam, and to teaching it, in addition to the necessary establishment of an institution for carrying out such a task, led to the appearance of a separate profession which gathers and categorizes these learned persons who may work as imams (who lead the masses in their prayers and preach to them in the mosques), teachers and judges.



These ulama have gained the public respect for their Islamic knowledge and for being continually eager to represent the masses and defend the weak against the influential and the authorities.

Over the long Islamic history, many ulama have been the leaders of the masses in their struggle against internal despotism or external invasion and some have achieved the honor of martyrdom.

The Islamic state always regarded the views of the ulama highly, but it could never be labeled as a theocratic state since the ulama never claimed that

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they should monopolize authority: they were equal citizens who could never enjoy any theocratic or other privilege over others just because they were learned about Islam.

In modern times, the ulama have suffered from the deterioration of religious education and institutions and from the loss of independence by becoming government employees." ("Most Commonly Used Islamic Terms," NS 3300, Dr. Kamil Said, Supplementary Material, p. 42).

Historically, caliphs (KAY-lifs) provided religious and civil leadership to Muslim communities from A.D. 632 to the mid-thirteenth century. In practice, kings, sultans, and the ulama took over caliph powers from the ninth century onward.



"Friends of God" or popular saints are called wali or marabouts (MAHR-eh-boots). Locals often see these holy individuals as possessing spiritual/mystical powers and seek out their prayers and blessings. Though condemned in some orthodox Islamic circles, pilgrimages to these living saints or visits to the tombs of their dead still occur.

In the Muslim world, two major schools of thought, the Sunni (SOON-nee) and Shia (SHEE-uh) are present. The origin of these groups centers more on political viewpoints than dogma. Early responses to the question "Who leads at the death of Muhammad?" defined the differences in these two movements.

2. Sunni Sunni elders saw Muhammad's successor as chosen by the community of those who follow the **Sunnah** (SOON-nuh) or ethical/religious Muslim path...

Authority rests in the community, guided by ulama consensus and Islamic law.



Leaders do not take on the mantle of Muhammad. Rather, they protect and defend Islam, seeking to apply God's law to society. Most Sunnis believe the Sharia (religious law of Islam) was codified and closed by the 10th century. Approximately 85 percent of the Muslim world follows the Sunni branch.

3. Shia Shia followers believe Muhammad specified that his cousin and son-in-law Ali would be his successor...



The charisma of Muhammad passed on in direct blood lineage through a family dynasty. Religious and political authority rests in imams alone.

The Sharia is always open, subject to fresh reformulations of Sunna, hadith, (traditions of what Muhammad and his companions said and did) and Qur'an interpretations. Found in Iran, south Iraq, parts of Lebanon and elsewhere, the Shia branch makes up roughly 15 percent of the Muslim community.

Twelvers, also known as the Imamiyya (Ithna Ashari Shia), are the largest group within Shia Islam. They believe that twelve imams existed on earth. The twelfth imam, al-Mahdi, went into hiding in 874 A.D. Shia scholars--mujtahids or ayatollahs--now serve as the hidden imam's spokespersons. (See HarperCollins Dictionary of Religion, pp. 541-542.)



4. Sufi

Within both Sunni and Shia circles there are branches of mystical/spiritual intensity. The Sufi school of thought defines this mystic orientation.

Like the heart of the body of Islam--invisible from the outside but giving nourishment to the whole organism, Sufi pietism exerts a major influence. Recalling the austere life of early Mecca and Medina, Sufis often practice ascetic ways.



Their living in the presence of God, being absorbed into God, is often experienced through intense renderings of scripture, poetry or music. Ecstatic, mystical states often result.

IV. Political Life

The relation between Islam and political life is complex. There is no compartmentalized secular/spiritual dichotomy within Islam. The entire world is a spiritual reality, permeated by religion.

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God is all powerful over human affairs. The Prophethood and Sharia are the basis for political life. Deputyship, an expression of the dominion humankind demonstrates over this world, is fulfilled through the religious leaders--the ulama.

The following questions address some of the religio-political tensions currently raised within many Middle Eastern countries.



- After experiencing some form of colonial rule for most of the 20th century, how can Muslim dominated countries now oversee their own affairs, implementing some degree of Islamic government?
- How does an Islamic society react to or integrate the sweeping results of industrialization?
- In what ways do aggressively militant religionists fit in with more conciliatory fellow believers?
- Can authentic religious and cultural integrity be maintained through perceptions of loss-- whether in status, dignity, belief, or lifestyle?
- What degree of tolerance is allowed for misbelievers when they rule over true believers?

V. Sharia/Hadith

Dr. Kamil Said, Naval Postgraduate School instructor in Islamic affairs, gives the following description of the Sharia (Islamic Law).

1. *"The Sharia prescribes directives for the regulation for the individual as well as collective life. These directives touch every aspect of life as religious rituals, personal character, habits, morals, family life, social and economic affairs, administration, rights and duties of citizens, judicial system, laws of war and peace and international relations.*



These directives reveal what is good and bad, and what is beneficial and useful and what is injurious and harmful.

The Sharia is a complete system of life and an all-embracing social order.

The Muslim thought of a good society is that where Sharia law would be enforced by the state.

2. *Sources of the Sharia.*

a. *The Qur'an.*

b. *Traditions consisting of Sunna (Prophet Muhammad's practice and way of life), and hadith (reports of what Muhammad did or said).*

c. *Analogical [explanations which compare point by point with something similar] deduction.*

d. *Consensus opinion.*

e. *Ijtihad: Independent judgment in a legal or theological question, based on the interpretation of the above four Usul (sources).*

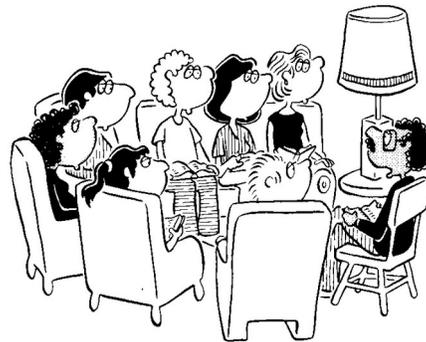
3. *The most authoritative books of hadith are the following two:*

a. *The Sahih of Bukhari (d. 870).*

b. *The Sahih of Muslim (d. 875), the work of Bukhari being the superior of the two in its method of classification...*

None of the above books of hadith was commissioned by any authoritative body, as no such body exists in Islam.

They were collected on the initiative of the Compilers. Each one of [the hadith] had to be critically examined and accepted by the community before being recognized as an authoritative work." (pp. 20-21, Syllabus, Islamic Civilization, NS 4300.)



VI. The Four Major Schools of the Sharia

1. Hanafite (HA-nuh-fit). These followers of Imam Abu Hanifa (d. 767) are found in Pakistan, India, Afghanistan, Turkey, Iraq, Syria, China, North Africa, Egypt, and in the Malay Archipelago. Broad-minded without being lax, this school appeals to reason (personal judgment) and a quest for the better. It is generally tolerant and the largest movement within Islam.

2. Malikite (MA-li-kit) Following the tradition of Imam Malik (d. 795), this school appeals to "common utility...the idea of the common good." Arabia, North and West Africa, Upper Egypt and the Sudan is the location.

3. Shafiite (sha-FI-it) Al Shafii's (d. 855) thought influenced Indonesia, Southern Arabia, Lower Egypt, parts of Syria, Palestine, Eastern Africa, India and South Africa. Tradition, the consensus of the Muslim community and reasoning by analogy are characteristics of this school.

4. Hanbalite (HAHN-buh-leyet) Imam Hanbal (d. 855), from Baghdad, followed a strict interpretation of the Shariah. Strong in present day Arabia, especially Saudi Arabia, Hanbal thought influenced the revivalist ibn Abd al-Wahhab.



VII. Western Misperceptions

The Prince of Wales, in a speech entitled "Islam and the West," addressed the Oxford Center for Islamic Studies, 27 Oct 1993. Prince Charles said the following concerning Western perspectives on Sharia.

"[P]eople...frequently argue that the sharia law of the Islamic world is cruel, barbaric and unjust. Our newspapers, above all, love to peddle those unthinking prejudices. The truth is, of course, different and always more complex. My own understanding is that extremes are rarely practiced. The guiding principles and spirit of Islamic law, taken straight from the Qur'an, are those of equity and compassion. We need to study its actual application before we make judgments..."

We must distinguish between systems of justice administered with integrity, and systems of justice as we may see them practiced which have been deformed for political reasons into something no longer Islamic. We must bear in mind the sharp debate taking place in the Islamic world itself about the degree to which the application of that law is continually changing and evolving." (NS 3300), pp. 60,61.

VIII. Islamic Responses to the West

George Gawrych, art of war in the Middle East instructor at the U.S. Army Command and General Staff College, Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, identifies three broad responses within Islam to Western challenges: secularism, fundamentalism, and modernism.

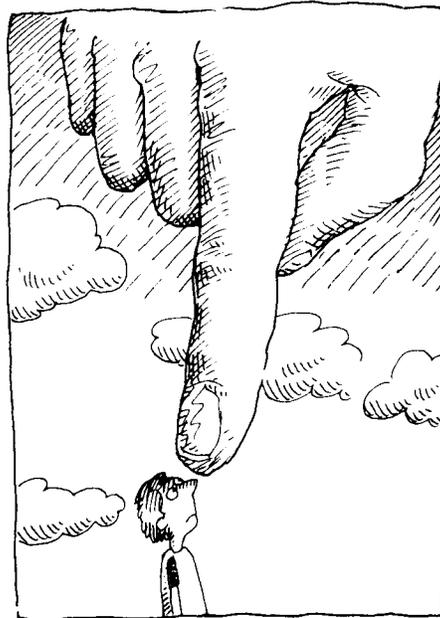
1. Secularism These countries seek to keep Islam separate from politics. Nationalism/secularism is the primary force in modern history. The state imposes no Islamic practice upon society. Religion becomes a matter of private conscience. *"Secularists argue that Islam only suffers when rulers or religious institutions use the faith for political ends. Religious leaders should concern themselves with 'saving souls' and upholding society's moral order."* (Military Review, Sep 95, p. 35.) Turkey and Iraq are two modern secular states.

2. Fundamentalism These followers believe in absolute religious and political unity. *"Everything must be under Islamic Law's rule, as it was in Muhammad's time in Medina."*



All state institutions must be clearly and unequivocally Islamic, including the armed forces. Wars must be conducted for ideological and cultural, not national, ends." (MR, p. 35). Saudi Arabia and Iran could be classified in this movement.

3. Modernism This is the middle ground between the above extremes. While not following a rigid separation of religion and politics, modernists also do not fuse them together. The legal system balances Islamic and natural law. *"Patriotism and nationalism sometimes appear to hold greater sway than Islamic ideology. Egypt and Jordan are modernist states."* (MR, p. 36.)



"Vow to do your best."

