

2nd hr. Sheets on last 2
pages of # 6, Rabbinic Jud.

read notes

lecture 11

next week
about terrorism

Divisions within Islam

Sunnis and shi'ah

The Muslims were not adequately prepared for Muhammad's death and when it came, it was a shock that almost destroyed the infant community.

Personal and tribal rivalries posed such obstacles to the choice of a successor that there was genuine threat of civil war.

only a desperate act of acclaiming one of the number of their number khalifah or successor to the Prophet on the part of his closest companions averted a disaster.

the man chosen was Abu Bakr, an intimate associate of Muhammad and one of the early prominent converts from Makkah.

He was already old and after a reign of two years, died, passing on his authority to the able and fiery khalifahs, Umar ibn al-khattab, the most brilliant of the rightly guided khalifahs, as the first successors to Muhammad are known.

Umar was murdered by an assassin in 644 and was succeeded by another.

Uthman, his successor, was murdered by a group of dissidents who accused him of corrupt rule, and his successor, the last of the rightly guided Khalifahs, Ali ibn Abi Talib, the cousin and son-in-law of Muhammad.

he was never firmly established in power and from the beginning his claims to rule were contested by a party who



suspected him of complicity in the murder of 'Uthman.

It is this Ali that the Shi'ahs look back to as the rightful ruler. more on that later.

Ali lost, after a protracted struggle, to Mu'awiyah who derived his support from Syrian tribesmen. because of this he set up his capital in Damascus rather than Madinah.

In spite of the violence and unrest that characterized the period, Muslims have always looked back to the pious caliphate as the time of Islam's greatest purity and glory.

The khalifahs themselves are among the most revered figures of Islamic history.

~~the~~ the accomplishments of the pious khalifahs were considerable.

first: of all they succeeded in maintaining the unity of the community in spite of break-away attempts by some Bedouin groups who considered thier loyalty to hav er been to Muhammad and to have been dissolved with his death.

second. they laid the foundations of a polity which kept the Arab armies intact in their camp cities and which provided means of governing the new territories.

third, and most important, were the great conquests themselves beginning under Bakr. In rapid succession the rich provinces of Syria, Iraq, Palestine and Egypt came under Muslim control. the great Sassanian Empire was brought down in 641 and the whole Iranian plateau was added to Muslim territories.

All the land which the muslims overran in their first great expansion, with the exception of Spain and portions of Central Asia has remained under Islamic Control to this day.

The assassination of Uthman and the ineffectual caliphate of Ali sparked the first sectarian split in Islam. Ali was considered to have been involved with the assassination of Uthman so his rival Mu'awiyah I, a member of Uthman's clan, wrested away the caliphate and established the Umayyad caliphate that lasted till 750 CE.

Despite his success, tribal and sectarian disputes erupted after his death and it took 20 years of military action to succeed in reestablishing the authority of the Umayyad capital of Damascus. with Abd al-Malik., who is remembered for building the Dome of the Rock mosque in Jerusalem.

In 750 the Abbasids, descendants of an uncle of Mohammed, rebelled and defeated the caliphate of the Umayyads. they appealed to the various pietistic, extremist or disgruntled groups and in particular to the Shi'ites, a major dissident party that held that the caliphate belonged by right to the descendants of Ali.

The Abbasids disappointed the expectations of the Shi'ites by taking the caliphate for themselves and left the Shi'ites to evolve into a sect, permanently hostile to the orthodox Sunni majority, that would periodically threaten the established government by revolt.

From this time on, there have been many claims to the caliphate with the Shi'ites always claiming a descendent of Mohammed.

In the 18th century, the concept of the caliphate took on new significance as an instrument of statecraft in the declining Ottoman empire. the Ottoman sultans had occasionally styled themselves as caliphs since the 14th century but then began to stress their claim to leadership in the Islamic community. This served both as a means of retaining some degree of legitimacy within the empire and influence over the Muslim populations in formerly Ottoman lands.

The Caliphate was abolished in 1924 following the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire and the rise of the Turkish Republic. In the 20th and 21st century the re-establishment of the caliphate is being invoked by Islamic extremists as a symbol of global Islamic unity. It is of no practical interest for mainstream Islamist groups such as the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt. However, it figures greatly in the rhetoric of the violent extremist groups of Al Qaeda and its offshoots, ISIL and others.

~~India has remained under Islamic control to this day.~~

today the greatest number of Muslims live outside the regions taken in the earliest conquests.

one of the later waves of expansion brought the faith to India in a decisive way, and although muslims have never been the majority there, the establishment of the Sultanate of Delhi in 1192 until 1857 they were rulers of a vast Indian Empire.

at present there are over 160 million Muslims found in India and Pakistan.

a still later wave of growth introduced Islam to the Indonesian archipelago thru the agency of traders and wandering mystics by the 12th century.

in the 15th cent. the first important Muslim sultanate took form and today the majority of Indonesians, more than 100 million are muslims.

The Turks, who began to enter Islamic territories and the service of the rulers in large numbers in the 10th cent, subdued the vast region of Anatolia and Asia minor for Islam.

The Saljuq Turks were the first to establish themselves but eventually gave way to the Ottomans who at last overthrew Christian power in Constantinople in 1453 and drove their armies from Eastern Europe.

at the height of their strength the Ottomans dominated the Balkan countries and sent an army to the gates of Vienna as late as 1683.

thus was another important region added to the domain of

Islam, and the permanent influence of Islam on European soil established.

Sept 28

Shi'ah and Sunnis

in a tradition popularly ascribed to the Prophet, Muhammad is alleged to have said: "my community will divide into seventy-three sects of which only one is correct."

in fact, Islamic history has produced vastly more sectarian groupings than the traditional number of 73.

a catalogue of the whole number of sects is impossible to give but one schism is of such importance that it must be discussed.

The Islamic community falls into two great divisions, the Sunnis
(sometimes, and in possibly erroneously, called 'orthodox') and
the Shi'ah

Sunni muslims speak of themselves as 'the people of established custom and of the (genuine) community.

this terminology carries a connotation of positive judgement and amounts to a claim to be the living representatives and bearers of true Islam, of the practices, beliefs and expressions that have consistently characterized the majority of the community throughout its history.

another way of explaining the Sunnis is to say that they see themselves as the traditionalists of the community.

they claim to maintain the ways established by pious men of old. They do not see any necessity of having a direct descendent

of the prophet as a leader, rather a leader should be one who is pious and can lead the people with religious authority.

such a concept of community provides a means for expanding the guidance to meet changed needs and conditions without compromising the fundamental belief in revelation.

In both Sunni and Shi'ah divisions there is no separation of church and state. a political ruler is also a religious ruler.

The Shi'ah date their origins from, at latest, the death of Muhammad and perhaps even earlier.

The word Shi'ah means party and the group got its name from its partisanship for Ali, the cousin and son-in-law of Muhammad, in the early struggles for leadership in the community.

those who favored Ali believed that succession to Muhammad's role as ruler should remain within his family.

of all Muhammad's family, Ali was clearly the most qualified.

the Shi'ah justified their position by citing traditions from Muhammad and even the Qur'an verses where the Prophet is said to have designated 'Ali as his successor.

thus they opposed the election of the first three Khalifahs, whom to this day the Shi'ah consider usurpers; and after the short and unsettled reign of Ali, which was brought to an end by a Khawarij assassin in 661, they took up the cause of his sons, Hasan and hussayn, as legitimate claimants to the leadership.

in Arabic the word for leadership is imamah and the exclusive claim to the imamah for Muhammad's family has been a cardinal shi'i doctrine thru history.

tho there have been shi'i states in Islamic world, the descendants of 'Ali were never successful in establishing rule for any length of time until Komani, who is a 'black turben mullah and a direct descendent of Ali.

From the very beginning the political interests and calims of the Shi'ah were tinged by religious elements. even during Muhammad's lifetime there were individuals who paid a degree of respect to Ali that was nothing short of pious.

with time the religious concern of the Shi'ah strengthened and diversified, producing many sects and exhibiting great richness, particularly in theology and philosophy, but also in religious practice and piety.

gradually these more religious elements took the foremost place as the political ambitions of the Shi'ah were frustrated.

among the religious elements peculiar to the Shi'ah the most important are the passion motif and the doctrine of the imamah, which are closely interrelated.

The passion motif came into prominence arojnd the history of Ali's younger son, Husayn.

After 'Ali's murder, the Shi'ah looked to the elder son, Haasan, to take up his father's cause, but Hasan had no spirit for the struggle and resigned his claims to the caliphate.

thereupon Husayn, the younger brother, launched into a campaign against the Ummawis in which he was pitted against hopelessly superior forces.

ultimately he and his family were trapped by Ummawi troops and

killed in pitiable circumstances in southern Iraq.

This tragic event occurred on the tenth day of the month of Muharram in A.H. 61 (680 C.E) and the annual celebration of this tragedy is the most important festival of the year for Shi'ah muslims.

Husayn's martyrdom and the great role it has played in Shi'ah thought have introduced the elements of sorrow, suffering, of the just man unjustly killed, and of pious sacrifice into the Shi'i strain of religious expression.

during the Muharram celebrations each year the story of Husayn is repeated by preachers and storytellers and dramatized in passion plays.

the Shi'i march in processions where they exhibit symbols of the slain martyr wheel beating their breasts and wailing or engaging in self inflicted flagellation, cutting their heads, etc.

The occasion is one of great grief that purges the souls of the worshipers while at the same time it is cause for rejoicing in the salvation and guidance which Husayn's noble self-sacrifice has bestowed on the faithful.

this passion motif is not tied just to Husayn rather the Shi'ah believe that all of their imams and other members of the holy family, including the Prophet himself, have suffered martyrdom at the hands of unjust men.

In the passion plays, which often last for days, the history of these martyrdoms is traced.

according to the Shi'ah most of the imams have died by

poison, usually administered at the instigation of the khalifahs who usurped the imam's rightful place to rule.

an Imam means leader and can refer in Sunni circles to especially learned men as in the case of the founders of the four Sunni schools of law, or certain other distinguished individuals.

among the Shi'ah the word has a meaning far beyond the usual one.

upon Muhammad's death the Shiah believe that not only his function as ruler but also his role as religious guide devolved upon his descendants beginning with Ali.

~~the divine guidance did not stop with the death of the prophet but was to be shed in the world thru his family.~~

The series of visible imams, living openly in the world came to an end with the mysterious disappearance of the last imam.

for a time the imam retained contact with his followers thru representatives who had direct access to him, but soon even this was broken off.

~~the imam remains in the world but is hidden until he will come again at the end of time as the imam Mahdi to establish the kingdom of God.~~

learned men of the Shi'i community act as interpreters of the divine will for ~~the imam constitutes a living source of guidance in the world at all times.~~ the importance of the doctrine is shown in the saying: "He who dies without knowing the imam of the age dies in unbelief."

The precise nature of the imam is understood differently by the numerous shi'ite sects, but the belief in the immamah is common to them all and is their distinguishing characteristic.

for the more extreme Shi'i the imam is considered as virtually an incarnation of God.

there is a veritable indwelling of the divine spirit in the imam so that in knowing him one experiences the full reality of divine presence in the world.

should the imam ever be withdrawn, the entire order of reality would literally collapse because of the absence of its essential principle.

this view is almost precisely parallel to the Sufi understanding of the Qutb or great saint around whom the whole order of reality turns.

At the other extreme of Shi'ah opinion the imam is considered only to be inspired or divinely led, much as the Prophet himself was.

between the two extremes stand the great majority of Shi'ah who hold a kind of doctrine of metempsychosis with respect to the imams.

according to this understanding a spark of the eternal divine wisdom was implanted in Muhammad and upon his death was transplanted into Ali and from thence into the series of his descendents whom God had chosen.

thus tho there is an element of the divine in each of the imams, there is not a complete indwelling as the more extreme ghulat believe.

whichever is the case, the imam in Shi'i thinking has radical implications for the understanding of religious authority, for so long as the imam is accessible either personally or through his representatives in the form of a learned man, there is a living source of guidance always at hand.

There are some differences among the Shi'ah also about the number of imams and their identity.

there are those who accept a series of seven and those who accept a series of twelve.

they are called **seveners** or Isma'ilis (after the last imam they recognize) and **twelvers** or Ithna 'Ashariyah (Arabic for "Twelvers")

generally speaking, the seveners have been more radical in their views than the Twelvers.

for a great part of Islamic history the seveners existed as secret societies which, in the effort to spread their creed among Muslims, engaged in revolutionary activities against established rulers and states, often, as in the case of the famous Assassins, using terrorism as one of their methods.

The seveners gained support with the rise of the Fatimi dynasty of Egypt (969-1174) whose rulers reckoned themselves in the line of descent from Muhammad ibn Isma'il, the last imam of the seveners.

it was one of the most brilliant eras of Islamic history with the founding of modern Cairo, the establishment of the famous al-Azhar univ. and many other feats.

there are numerous sub groups that continue to flourish at the present time, among which are included the Druze (who live in the hills of Lebanon) and the Nusayris of Syria. most famous is the followers of the Agha Khan, the majority of whom are found in India and the areas around the Indian Ocean.

these follow an esoteric teaching which one must be initiated in to understand. this is an elaborate philosophy influenced by Neo-platonism and Gnosticism.

~~These sevens are influenced by Neo-Platonic ideas and Gnosticism.~~

they believe that everything in the external world represents on a small scale the realities of a spiritual and invisible world.

penetration beyond the external to knowledge of the spiritual realities is the aim of the teaching.

~~The Twelver Shi'ah are much more numerous than the sevens.~~

they are spread over a great area with the majority concentrated in Iraq, where they are more than half the population, and Iran and in the Indian subcontinent.

Twelver Shi'ism had a great boost when in the 16th cent. the Safawi dynasty in Iran chose to make it the official religion of the state.

it has continued this favored status and Iran is now the stronghold of the group.

altho the principle Shi'i shrines are located at Najaf and Karbala in Iraq (the burial places of Ali and Husayn), Iran also

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to p. 13

has holy places and centers of pilgrimage in Mashhad and Qum where greaat theological schools maintain the tradition f Shi'i learning and teaching.

The Shi'ah are distinguished from the Sunni in other ways than just the doctrine of the imam.

There is a sepearte and distinct Shi'i fiqh which recognized completely different authorities from those of the four "orthodox" Sunni schools.

the rules of law differentiating Shi'ah and Sunni are small being limited for the most part to minor details.

The greatest variation arises in jurisprudential theory bvecause of the preponderating role of the imam in Shi'i thinking and the continued Shi'i expousal of Ijtihad.

The shi'ah also have thier own distinctive collections of traditions such as the book entitled Al-Kafi (the Sufficient One) by al-Kulayni (d. 939) and others.

~~the authorities the Shi'ah recognize are not the same as the Sunnis.~~

another important difference is in the area of theology.

On the whole the Shi'ah have inclined in a far more rationalistic diection than has Sunni Islam.

Much of the doctreine of the Mu'tazilah was survived among the Shi'ah, and in their theological method they show a preference for rational argument above traditionalist views.

This inclination to rationalism accounts in large part for the great richness in philosophy, theology and speculative science

generally among the Shi'ah.

at various times in Islamic history there has been sharp conflict between Shi'ah and Sunni over both political and religious issues.

this can happen especially at the time of the Muharram celebrations when Shi'i fervor is at it highest.

there has, however, been a determined effort to play down the differences and divisive effect of religious differences in light of the outside pressures of the west and of other ideologies.

and go to next page →
~~show that~~

Fundamentalist Islam

first a disclaimer. The Muslims don't even know the word fundamentalist and don't think of themselves that way.

In Cairo Egypt this group is known as Jihad which means holy war.

these believe that they will eventually take over the world for Islam.

by the 11th century Cairo was the center for art and learning.

the crusaders ended that but the tide is turned again.

Egypt under Nasser and Sedat tried to become a modern state with separation of religion and secular interests.

the Jihad wants to see Egypt as an Islamic state without any separation and where all laws are Islamic.

Jihad converts tend to be well educated, young and from lower middle classes--rural background, and high achievers who are dis-satisfied and easily converted to this view.

The teachings of Islam are ambiguous about violence. Like all religions, Islam occasionally allows for force while stressing that the main spiritual goal is one of nonviolence and peace. The Qur'an has a rule much like the commandment "thou shalt not kill." The very word Islam is cognate to *Salam* the word for peace and implies a vision of social harmony and spiritual repose.

Sheik Omar Abdul Rahman in an interview shortly after the 1993 WTC bombing said a Muslim can "never call for violence only for love, forgiveness and tolerance" but he added that "if our land is usurped, we must call for hitting the attacker and the aggressor to put an end to the aggression"

Iran's Ayatollah Khomeini said he knew of no command "more binding to the Muslim than the command to sacrifice life and property to defend and bolster Islam."

He was correct as there are some Islamic tenets that condone struggle and the use of force. Maintaining the purity of religious existence is thought to be a matter of *Jihad*, a word that literally means "striving" and is often translated as "holy war"

Islamic law does not allow Jihad to be used arbitrarily, for personal gain, or to justify forcible conversion to the faith: The only conversions that are regarded as valid are those that are not coerced, but thru rational persuasion and change of heart.

The idea that JIHAD can be expanded to include struggles against political and social injustice is a relatively new one. Perhaps no writer had had greater influence in extending this concept and reinterpreting the traditional Muslim idea of Jihad, or struggle than the Egyptian writer **Abd al-Salam Faraj** who gave a remarkably cogent argument for waging war against political enemies of Islam in pamphlet called "The neglected duty".

MODERN ISLAMIC JUSTIFICATIONS FOR VIOLENCE

It was published in Cairo in the early 1980's and grounded the activities of modern Islamic terrorists firmly in Islamic tradition of the Quran and especially the Hadith of the Prophet.

Faraj argued that the Qur'an and Hadith were fundamentally about warfare. the idea of JIHAD was meant to be taken literally, not allegorically. According to Faraj, the duty that has been "neglected" is that of Jihad and it calls for "fighting, which meant confrontation and blood."

Moreover, Faraj regarded anyone who deviates from the moral and social requirements of Islamic law to be targets for *jihad*; these targets include apostates within the Muslim community as well as expected enemies from without.

The most chilling aspect of Faraj's thought is his conclusion that peaceful and legal means for fighting apostasy are inadequate. The true soldier of Islam is allowed to use virtually any means available to achieve a just goal. Deceit, trickery, and violence are specifically mentioned as options available to the desperate soldier.

Faraj set some moral limits to the tactics--for example, innocent bystanders and women are to be avoided, whenever possible in assassination attempts but the duty to engage in such actions when necessary is incumbent on all true Muslims. The reward is nothing less than a place in paradise. Faraj presumably earned that himself in 1982 after he was tried and executed for his part in the assassination of Anwar Sadat.

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Islamic Movements and Extremism

Salafiyya

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Originating in medieval religious texts, the concept of salafiyya has come to refer to a wide variety of things over the years. The Arabic word derives from the terms "*al-salaf al-salih*," which mean "the venerable ancestors" or "the venerable predecessors." In the religious sense this is supposed to mean the generation of Muslims which came immediately around and after the death of Muhammad and who, presumably, led a life in exact accordance with True Islam.

The dominant tradition in *salafiyya* has to do with "getting back to the roots" of Islam and restoring traditional beliefs and practices. Sometimes, this effort is moderate and can even incorporate modernist influences, ~~as with the case of al-Afghani (a salafiyyan reformer from the 1800's who tried to reconcile modernism and Islam).~~ Usually, however, the movement is much more conservative and strict, and that is where it is currently.

Salafiyya thrives on the economic hardships endured by most Muslims in the Middle East. Religious leaders tell them that the earliest Muslims knew no such hardships because they faithfully applied the principle of zakat, or alms for the poor. Because of this, even the richest and powerful Muslims had to donate to ensure that the poorest were sustained.

But today in the Middle East, the richest Muslims are among the wealthiest people in the world, having amassed staggering amounts of money because of the large oil deposits beneath their countries. Most Muslims, however, see little of this wealth, and the divide between rich and poor only grows. Thus *salafiyya*, which commands a return to original practices, finds widespread appeal.

Almost all later reform movements, including those discussed here, can be included as forms of *salafiyya*. They all share the basic premise that the societies in which Muslims now live no longer apply Islamic principles as they were originally used. Society has, instead, become corrupted and degenerate. True justice and peace are attainable; but only if Islamic law is fully and rigidly implemented. 12

Wahhabism and Wahhabi Islam: How Wahhabi Islam Differs from Sunni, Shia Islam

Critics of Islam & Islamic Extremism Must Understand Wahhabi Extremist Beliefs

By Austin Cline

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Too many critics of Islam, including atheists, fail to appreciate just how diverse and varied Islam can be. There are things you can say that apply to all or most Muslims, as is the case with Christianity, but there are many more things which only apply to some or a few Muslims. This is especially true when it comes to Muslim extremism because Wahhabi Islam, the primary religious movement behind extremist Islam, includes beliefs and doctrines not found elsewhere.

It would be a mistake and unethical to criticize all of Islam on the basis of doctrines particular to Wahhabi Muslims. Modern Islamic extremism and terrorism simply cannot be explained or understood without looking at the history and influence of Wahhabi Islam. This means that it's important from an ethical and an academic perspective to understand what Wahhabi Islam teaches, what's so dangerous about it, and why those teachings differ from other branches of Islam.

Origins of Wahhabi Islam

Name: Wahhabism, Wahhabi Islam

Founder: Muhammad Ibn Abd al-Wahhab

Muhammad Ibn Abd al-Wahhab (d. 1792) was the first modern Islamic fundamentalist and extremists. Wahhab made the central point of his reform movement the principle that absolutely every idea added to Islam after the third century of the Muslim era (about 950 CE) was false and should be eliminated. Muslims, in order to be true Muslims, must adhere solely and strictly to the original beliefs set forth by Muhammad.

The reason for this extremist stance, and the focus of Wahhab's reform efforts, was a number of popular practices which he believed represented a regression to pre-Islamic polytheism. These included praying to saints, making pilgrimages to tombs and special mosques, venerating trees, caves, and stones, and using votive and sacrificial offerings.

These are all practices commonly and traditionally associated with religions, but they were unacceptable to Wahhab. Contemporary secular behaviors are even more anathema to Wahhab's successors. It is against modernity, secularism, and the Enlightenment which current Wahhabists do battle — and it is this anti-secularism, anti-modernism which helps drive their extremism, even to the point of violence.

Wahhabi Doctrines

In contrast to popular superstitions, Wahhab emphasized the unity of God (*tawhid*). This focus on absolute monotheism led to him and his followers being referred to as *muwahiddun*, or "unitarians." Everything else he denounced as heretical innovation, or *bida*. Wahhab was further dismayed at the widespread laxity in adhering to traditional Islamic laws: questionable practices like the ones above were allowed to continue, whereas the religious devotions which Islam did require were being ignored.

This created indifference to the plight of widows and orphans, adultery, lack of attention to obligatory prayers, and failure to allocate shares of inheritance fairly to women. Wahhab characterized all this as being typical of *jahiliyya*, an important term in Islam which refers to the barbarism and state of ignorance which existed prior to the coming of Islam. Wahhab thus identified himself with the Prophet Muhammad and at the same time connected his society with what Muhammad worked to overthrow.

Because so many Muslims lived (so he claimed) in *jahiliyya*, al-Wahhab accused them of not being true Muslims after all. Only those who followed the strict teachings of al-Wahhab were truly Muslims because only they still followed the path laid out by Allah. Accusing someone of not being a true Muslim is significant because it is forbidden for one Muslim to kill another; but if someone is not a true Muslim then killing them (in war or in an act of terrorism) becomes licit. It would be hard to underestimate the importance of this principle to modern terrorists and extremists.

Obviously, Wahhabi religious leaders reject any reinterpretation of the Qur'an when it comes to issues settled by the earliest Muslims. Wahhabists thus oppose the 19th and 20th century Muslim reform movements which reinterpreted aspects of Islamic law in order to bring it closer to standards set by the West, particularly with regards to topics like gender relations, family law, personal autonomy, and participatory democracy. *Wah* . 1

Wahhabi Islam & Extremist Islam Today

Today, Wahhabism is the dominant Islamic tradition on the Arabian peninsula, though its influence is minor in the rest of the Middle East. Because Osama bin Laden comes from Saudi Arabia and is Wahhabi himself, Wahhabi extremism and radical ideas of purity have obviously influenced him considerably. Adherents of Wahhabi Islam do not regard it as simply one school of thought out of many; rather it is the **only** path of **true** Islam — nothing else counts.

Even though Wahhabism is a minority position overall in the Muslim world, it has nevertheless been influential for other extremist movements throughout the Middle East. This can be seen with a couple of factors, first of which is al-Wahhab's use of the term *jahiliyya* to vilify a society which he does not consider pure enough, whether they call themselves Muslim or not. Even today, Islamists use the term when referring to the West and at times even to their own societies. With it, they can justify overthrowing what many might regard as an Islamic state by essentially denying that it is truly Islamic at all.

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1979 Seizure of the Grand Mosque in Mecca

The Attack and the Siege That Inspired Osama bin Laden



By Pierre Tristam

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The seizure of the Grand Mosque in Mecca in 1979 is a seminal event in the evolution of Islamist terrorism. Yet the seizure is mostly a footnote in contemporary history. It shouldn't be.

The Grand Mosque in Mecca is a massive, 7-acre

compound that can accommodate some 1 million worshipers at any one time, especially during the annual hajj, the pilgrimage to Mecca centered on circling the sacred Kaaba in the heart of the Grand Mosque.

The marbled mosque in its current shape is the result of a 20-year, \$18 billion renovation project began in 1953 by the House of Saud, the ruling monarchy in Saudi Arabia, which considers itself the guardian and custodian of the Arab Peninsula's holiest sites, the Grand Mosque topmost among them. The monarchy's contractor of choice was the Saudi Bin Laden Group, led by the man who in 1957, became the father of Osama bin Laden. The Grand Mosque, however, first came to wide Western attention on November 20, 1979.

Ads

Coffins as Weapons Cache: Seizure of the Grand Mosque

At 5 that morning, the final day of the hajj, Sheikh Mohammed al-Subayil, imam of the Grand Mosque, was preparing to address 50,000 worshipers through a microphone inside the mosque. Among the worshipers, what looked like mourners bearing coffins on their shoulders and wearing headbands made their way through the crowd. It wasn't an unusual sight. Mourners often brought their dead for a blessing at the mosque. But they had no mourning in mind.

Sheikh Mohammed al-Subayil was shoved aside by men who took machine guns from

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beneath their robes, fired them in the air and at a few policemen nearby, and yelled to the crowd that "The Mahdi has

appeared!" Mahdi is the Arabic word for messiah. The "mourners" set their coffins down, opened them up, and produced an arsenal of weaponry that they then brandished and fired at the crowd. That was only part of their arsenal.

An Attempted Overthrow By a Would-Be Messiah

The attack was led by Juhayman al-Oteibi, a fundamentalist preacher and former member of the Saudi National Guard, and Mohammed Abdullah al-Qahtani, who claimed to be the mahdi. The two men openly called for a revolt against the Saudi monarchy, accusing it of having betrayed Islamic principles and sold out to western countries. The militants, who numbered close to 500, were well armed, their weapons, in addition to their coffin arsenal, having been stashed gradually in the days and weeks before the assault in small chambers beneath the Mosque. They were prepared to lay siege to the mosque for a long time.

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Shocking once daily formula has
doctors amazed at fast results

The siege lasted two weeks, though it did not end before a bloodbath in underground chambers where militants had retreated with hundreds of hostages--and bloody repercussions in Pakistan and Iran. In Pakistan, a mob of Islamist students enraged by a false report that the United States was behind the mosque seizure, attacked the American embassy in Islamabad and killed two Americans. Iran's Ayatollah Khomeini called the

attack and the murders a "great joy," and also blamed the seizure on the United States and Israel.

In Mecca, Saudi authorities considered attacking the hold-outs without regard for the hostages. Instead, Prince Turki, the youngest son of King Faisal and the man in charge of reclaiming the Grand Mosque, summoned a French secret service officer, Count Claude Alexandre de Marenches, who recommended that the hold-outs be gassed unconscious.

Indiscriminate Killing

As Lawrence Wright describes it in The Looming Tower: Al-Qaeda and the Road to 9/11,

A team of three French commandos from the Groupe d'Intervention de la Gendarmerie Nationale (GIGN) arrived in Mecca. Because of the prohibition against non-Muslims entering the holy city, they converted to Islam in a brief, formal ceremony. The commandos pumped gas into the underground chambers, but perhaps because the rooms were so bafflingly interconnected, the gas failed and the resistance continued.

With casualties climbing, Saudi forces drilled holes into the courtyard and dropped grenades into the rooms below, indiscriminately killing many hostages but driving the remaining rebels into more open areas where they could be picked off by sharpshooters. More than two weeks after the assault began, the surviving rebels finally surrendered.

At dawn on Jan. 9, 1980, in the public squares of eight Saudi cities, including Mecca, 63 Grand Mosque militants were beheaded by sword on orders of the king. Among the condemned, 41 are Saudi, 10 from Egypt, 7 from Yemen (6 of them from what was then South Yemen), 3 from Kuwait, 1 from Iraq and 1 from the Sudan. Saudi authorities report that 117 militants died as a result of the siege, 87 during the