

What do we want in the Muslim Lands?

The multifarious geopolitical messes in the Middle East, the almost comical variety of resentments, hostilities, mutual denouncements, and hatreds in the Muslim lands that are presented to us each day on some news channel's platter, the confusion worse compounded that overcomes us when we look at any part or aspect of the Camp of Islam – all this beggars belief, but you'd better nonetheless believe it. You'd better believe, for example, that the Uber-Sunni Saudis, who gave rise to Al-Qaeda, who provided Al-Qaeda not just with Osama bin Laden but with a host of other members (including 11 of the 19 who went on that 9/11/2001 mission), are now dead-set on executing members of that same Al -Qaeda, and have just done so, and are also prepared to make war on the uberest-Sunnis of them all, the members of the Islamic State. And at the same time as those Saudi rulers execute, in the same galere, both those Al-Qaeda and Islamic State anti-Shi'a fanatics, they also can – and did – execute a leading Shi'a cleric in Saudi Arabia, one Nimr Al-Nimr. Those who like things kept simple, and not complicated, will be disappointed by the Muslim Middle East, where every (geopolitical) prospect teases, and only man is vile.

Let's see what we can do to improve our chances of seeing things steadily and whole, by standing a bit back from the radio, and limning the broad outlines of Islam.

Let's begin with the all-encompassing nature of this faith. Islam is a Total System, a Complete Regulation of Life, a Compleat Explanation of the Universe. The True Believers in Islam are consumed by their demands of their faith. There is no such thing as "wearing one's faith lightly" when that faith is Islam. Even those whom one might have suspected to be Islamic "moderates" turn out too often on closer inspection to

believe in the uncompromisable rightness of Islam, the ingratitude and perfidy of non-Muslims, the need or duty to engage in the Struggle or Jihad, using chiefly combat (*qitaal*) or terrorism, but not excluding the use of other instruments to promote the spread, and then the dominance, of Islam everywhere. And among those instruments are economic warfare (less of a threat now that the "oil weapon" has so obviously faltered, and oil producers are desperate for customers), propaganda and diplomatic warfare, and the latest instrument of Jihad, demographic conquest, through the large-scale movement of Muslims into non-Muslim lands, where through their mere presence they gain political power and inhibit the freedom to maneuver of political leaders and the freedom of speech of people who become too fearful to speak out about Islam: if they dare to do so, they are promptly attacked by all the bien-pensants.

But, as Muslims like to say, meaning something quite different, "Islam is not a monolith." By that phrase they attempt to inhibit non-Muslims from ever speaking about something called "Islam" because – since it is "not a monolith" – any such generalizing attempt would be false. Yet in the basic tenets and teachings, in the centrality of the Qur'an, in the agreement as to which are the most authoritative collections of Hadith, in the understanding of what constitute the Five Pillars of Islam, the faith called Islam is indeed a "monolith."

But that is not the end of the story. As Professor Bernard Lewis pointed out long ago, Muslims in the Middle East have "multiple identities." A man may be a Muslim "and an Arab" or a Muslim "and a Berber" or a Muslim and a "black African in the southern Sudan." A man may be a "Sunni Muslim" or "Shi'a Muslim" or – so as not to overlook a very small group found mainly Oman and in some Algerian oases – an "Ibadi Muslim." And some Muslim peoples possess the awareness of and tug from a particular national history – I am thinking of Egypt and

Iran especially, as those nations (along with Israel) have the strongest sense of national identity in the Middle East. An Egyptian is "Egyptian" or an Iranian an "Iranian" in a way that a Qatari is not a Qatari, nor an inhabitant of Abu Dhabi an Emirati.

Islam is a universalist faith. It is meant for everyone to accept. And those who among the Ahl al-Kitab, or People of the Book (that is, Christians and Jews), do not accept the full message of Islam – i.e., become Muslims – are required to pay a tax, or Jizyah, in conditions that bespeak humiliation, in order to be allowed to continue to practice their religion.

The universalism of Christianity does not admit of favoring of one group of Christians over another. In Islam, however, Arabs are privileged. If Muslims are "the best of peoples," then among Muslims, "Arabs are the best of peoples." Islam was revealed to a 7th-century Arab, in western Arabia, and written down in the Arabic language, the same language in which, ideally, the Qur'an ought to be read. Indeed, it was not until Atatürk in the 20th century ordered a Turkish translation of the Qur'an, and a Turkish-language commentary or *Tafsir*, that a non-Arabic version was available. Non-Arab converts to Islam are encouraged to, and often do, assume Arab names. Some even give themselves – this is particularly common in Pakistan – made-up genealogies that make them descendants of the Prophet, and therefore entitled to use the honorific "Sayid." Muslims are taught to dismiss their own non-Islamic or pre-Islamic histories (personal and collective), as being identified with what in Islam is called the Time of Ignorance, or Jahiliyya. These pre-Islamic pasts are to be regarded with contempt and dismissed, for they have nothing to do with Islam. Muslims should ideally dress like, and emulate the mores of, 7th century Arabs, of Mohammed and his Companions. And Muhammad, who for all Muslims, and for all time, remains the Perfect Man (*al-insan al-kamil*) and Model of Conduct (*uswa hasana*), was, of course, an Arab. No wonder that Islam itself is called "the

gift of the Arabs.”

While this privileging in Islam of the Arabs leads some non-Arabs to play the seditious ape, and to re-imagine themselves as Arabs – all those Pakistani “Sayeds” – at the same time other non-Arabs react differently, and come to resent their treatment at the hands of the overweening Arabs. Think of how the Arabs of the northern Sudan treated the non-Arab Muslims of Darfur (rape, pillage, sexual slavery); what they did to the non-Muslim black Africans was, of course, even worse.

Or think of how the Arabs of Algeria for many years attempted to prevent the Berbers, about 30% of the population, from speaking the Berber tongue, or from observing Berber ways, even forbidding the public reading by a Berber poet back in 1980, a suppression that led to riots in Tizi Ouzou, in the Berber-inhabited Kabyle. And in Morocco, where half the population may be Berber, the Berber movement takes on an anti-monarchical aspect. The Moroccan Arabs, like the Algerian Arabs, have been conducting, in slow motion, a forced arabisation to which not all Berbers wish to succumb.

And in the immediate Middle East, think of the Kurds, a non-Arab Muslim people treated by the Arab Saddam Hussein with great ferocity. His Arab troops killed 182,000 Kurds, employing chemical warfare at Halabja, and he moved hundreds of thousands of Arabs into the Kurdish areas to “arabise” the Kurds.

And outside the Middle East, the cultural imperialism of the Arabs has caused resentment among the local Muslims, all the way to Bangladesh and to Indonesia, especially in Java.

Ideally, non-Muslims should be working to increase the fissures within Islam. They should seize the language, and control the debate. And the central thesis, which they should be repeating again and again, can be expressed thus: Islam Is A Vehicle For Arab Supremacism. And they can fill the

airwaves, and the Internet, with the supporting evidence. Is it not true that Muslims pray five times a day Mecca-wards, that they emulate the mores of 7th-century Arabs, that upon conversion they assume Arab names, that they – ideally – read the Qur'an only in Arabic, and with an Arabic *Tafsir* (Commentary)? All this is so very different from those Christian missionaries who translated the Bible into every tongue they could, including some that had never before been reduced to writing. Is it not true that the Arabs, through Islam, have discouraged any local interest in pre- or non-Islamic histories, but have encouraged interest, among so many isnon-Arab Muslims, in Arab and Muslim history? Our aim should be to always and everywhere seek to find existing or potential fissures within the Camp of Islam, and to steadily widen them merely by adducing the truth.

But there is another great divide in that Camp of Islam even more obvious and of more immediate significance than the ethnic fissures: it is that between Sunni and Shi'a. Bob Woodward has reported on President George W. Bush as having plaintively asked a member of his staff to fill him in, after being told the Iraqis were divided into "Shi'a and Sunnis," which information confused him because he, President Bush, thought "they were all Muslim." We have come some way from that early exclamation of ignorance. Everybody and his brother now knowingly refers to the "Shi'a and the Sunnis," but without any suggestion of knowing when the schism occurred, and what it was about, and why it matters.

In a sense, it doesn't matter to us, the Infidels, when and where and why the Sunni-Shi'a split arose. What matters is our attitude toward that split: whether we deplore it or welcome it.

So far, American policymakers have made enormous efforts to minimize that split. They use that all-purpose word "destabilizing." Anything that "destabilizes" in the Muslim Middle East is bad. And especially in Iraq, where the Shi'a

inherited the power that had been stripped from the Sunni Arabs when the Americans invaded, the vast American effort was dedicated to keeping Iraq a single and prosperous country, where Shi'a and Sunni (and Arab and Kurd) could take part in a joint adventure to rebuild the country. Did this make sense, from an Infidel point of view? Why would one not wish Iraq to be subject to centripetal forces, and to break apart, possibly *in partes tres*, with a Kurdish part corresponding roughly to the old Ottoman vilayet of Mosul, the Sunni part to the old Ottoman vilayet of Baghdad, or possibly only Anbar Province (given that so many Sunnis have been pushed out of Baghdad by the Shi'a), and a Shi'a Arab part corresponding to the old Ottoman vilayet of Basra?

Again and again over more than a decade, we heard how important it was not to allow Iraq to split into Sunni and Shi'a regions. But no one explained why keeping Iraq in one piece was in the American, or general Infidel, interest. And if the Sunnis in Lebanon, perhaps with their numbers increased by Sunni refugees from Lebanon, attack the Shi'a, that is, attack Hizballah, the military and terrorist organization that claims to represent the Lebanese Shi'a, why is that a bad thing?

And if the Saudi incursion into Yemen, on the side of Yemen's Sunni tribes fighting the Iran-backed Houthi (Shi'a) rebels, why is that something to deplore? At the very least, this conflict might use up Saudi money and materiel and keep the Saudis occupied, and less able to cause mischief elsewhere; ideally, neither side will win, but both sides will continue to go at it, losing men, money, materiel, destroying infrastructure, and in general creating a mess in one more Muslim country. And in one more such country, mistrust and hatred between Sunni and Shi'a in Yemen can only deepen. Again, why would that be – from our point of view – a bad thing?

And this brings us to the news of the week: the execution by

the Saudis of a leading Shi'a cleric, Nimr Al-Nimr, and the severing of all diplomatic ties between Iran and Saudi Arabia, and then between Iran and Iraq, Iran and Bahrain, Iran and Qatar, Iran and Oman, Iran and Kuwait, and the downgrading of relations between Iran and the U.A.E. All the stories in the Western press are full of dire warnings, of worry and despair expressed at this state of affairs, and fears as to "what will happen next."

I can't understand this worry, this fear. Which was the Roman who laid down the law: *Divide et impera*? I am perfectly open to being persuaded that the deepening of the Iran-Saudi Arabia rift is a terrible thing for us. I am equally eager to be persuaded that whipping up the resentment of non-Arab Muslims for Arab Muslims is a Bad Thing. But I just can't figure out why.

Perhaps, among this post's readers, someone will enlighten me, and explain why ethnic and sectarian fissures in the Camp of Islam are a terrible thing for us, the Infidels. I'll stay right here, ready to listen. I'm all ears.

First published in