

TOPIC STATEMENT FOUR: THE MIDDLE EAST

Kyle Gibson

INTRODUCTION

This topic statement covers Middle Eastern culture, economics, and politics. The goal is to describe the historical, ecological, and cultural influences that forged the modern Middle East.

GEOGRAPHY AND ECOLOGY

The Middle East runs east-west from Egypt to Iran and north-south from Turkey to the Arabian Peninsula. The area is, save certain parts of Turkey and Iran, quite dry and hot. Water is the limiting resource and only about 10 percent of land is suitable for farming (Bates and Rassam 1983). Nearly 10,000 years ago, inhabitants of the region overcame rainfall shortages with the invention of irrigation. Irrigation set the stage for the arrival of the first great civilizations of the world. Urban areas emerged throughout the Fertile Crescent along with centralized government and all that comes with it. Water is as precious today as it has ever been in the Middle East. The Nile, Tigris, and Euphrates rivers make life there possible today just as they have for millennia.

SUBSISTENCE

Three traditional modes of production are found in the Middle East. The first is the “Bedouin” system of pastoralism (Lindholm 1996). Bedouin nomads herd camels, goats, cattle, and sheep throughout the great deserts of the Middle East. They have been

romanticized, even revered, throughout history. Many political and religious leaders, including Mohammed himself, have lauded the independent and egalitarian nature of Bedouin culture. The second traditional mode of production is local herding. Unlike wide-ranging Bedouins, shepherds make a living grazing animals locally. They are relatively sedentary and generally live close to farms or urban areas (Lindholm 1996). The third mode of production is farming. The hot and dry climate of the Middle East does not readily lend itself to agriculture, but it is possible in some areas. The most notable of these are the Nile Valley in Egypt, between the Tigris and Euphrates in Iraq, and in the cooler mountainous regions of Turkey and Iran (Lindholm 1996). These three traditional means of subsistence are still practiced by many rural Middle Easterners, but wage-labor has replaced them for many in the region (Lindholm 1996).

IBN KHALDUN ON URBAN AND RURAL LIFE

The first great cities in history arose in the Middle East. Intricate systems of government arose to contend with the problem of ruling over diverse urban and rural populations (Lindholm 1996). Fourteenth century Tunisian scholar Ibn Khaldun described important differences between these rural and urban populations. He called the former “desert people” and the latter “town people.” According to him, civil unrest is caused by social and cultural differences between the two groups (Khaldun n.d.). Desert people are socially conservative and town people are liberal. Social upheaval cycles as tensions build between the two. Over time, town people can stray very far from the norms valued by desert people. Eventually, the differences reach a tipping point where the desert people overthrow the town people and reestablish their conservative values. Khaldun’s

contribution to social science was the idea that society is ever-changing and cyclical.

Whether rural or urban, Middle Easterners have everywhere lauded “egalitarian individualism” (Lindholm 1996). According to this idea, no person is inherently better than another and status can only be gained through pious, virtuous, and moral acts (Lindholm 1996). It follows that any claims to intrinsic authority are met with skepticism. This, according to Lindholm (1996), makes consolidating power difficult in the region. Of course, many have made intrinsic claims to power. Control has been assumed through kinship and caste. Some have claimed a “divine” right to the throne, or to be “protectors” of the people (Lindholm 1996). The role of “protector” was notably assumed by despots Momar Quadafi and Saddam Hussein.

PATRILINEALITY AND TRIBALISM

Sheep, goats, camels, and cattle eat grasses which are of little use to humans in their native state. However, these animals convert this vegetation into milk, blood, and meat which is useful to humans (Bates and Rassam 1983). The Holocene has seen the many groups who have adopted pastoralism to take advantage of novel ecological niches. In pastoral systems, the defense of grazing land and animal herds can be a matter of life and death. For this reason, patrilineality is commonly found among pastoralists because it keeps related men close by. In tribal groups, rights to water, defense, and land all follow the patriline; in non-tribal communities, economic help does too. Local tribal headmen hold a great deal of power, often superseding national government in social, political, and economic control at the local level (Bates and Rassam 1983; Lindholm 1996), and national leaders often rely on these headmen to govern tribal regions.

THE FOUNDATIONS OF ISLAM

In the seventh century A.D., the advent of Islam brought drastic social, political, and religious change to the Middle East. Around the age of 40, Mohammad, a trusted resident of Mecca, began retreating to local caves to receive visions. He claimed the Archangel Gabriel repeatedly approached him to dictate the words of God. Initially, Mohammed revealed these meetings only to his wife and other close family members, but he later began preaching in public.

He was berated by the local ruling elite and fled with his followers to Medina. It was there that Islam transformed from a strictly religious entity into a political-religious one. Local tribes pledging allegiance to Mohammad were forbidden from fighting each other and reorganized for an eventual return to Mecca. It now became religion, not kinship, which defined political membership for those in the Arabian Peninsula (Lindholm 1996). This change would influence world politics up to the present day – a point I will later return to.

In 630 A.D., Mohammad returned to Mecca along with nearly 10,000 armed followers (Bates and Rassam 1983). Mecca was a thriving trade city ruled by an oligarchy and home to “the black stone,” a meteorite which was the object of worship to local tribal populations long before Islam claimed it (Lindholm 1996). They overtook the city and established it as the center of Islam. Mohammad died two years later.

SHRI'A LAW

Islamic, or “Shari'a,” law governs commerce, society, and religion. It is drawn and

interpreted from the *Koran*, the holy book of Islam. Muslims were told to follow one set of rules based on Shari'a law and to apply another set to those living under their rule. Because of this, traditional Islamic states were tolerant of religions other than Islam. Christians and Jews believed the Old and New Testaments were divinely-inspired, just as Muslims did. This afforded them special status within Muslim society (Lewis 2001). Even polytheistic Hindus were allowed to practice as they wished under Muslim rule. Lewis (2001) argues that until the 17th century, the Middle East was far more tolerant of other religions than Europe. There was, as he points out, no Islamic Inquisition. In Europe, however, the religious wars of the Middle Ages brought more tolerance to the region as people realized they could not fight over religious differences forever (Lewis 2001). This is not to say of course that Islam is, or has ever been, wholly peaceful. The religion was initially spread through force and the *Koran* permits violence against infidels (Lindholm 1996).

In addition to religious tolerance, Muslim leaders were cognizant of property rights. After conquering new territory, preexisting individual land ownership rights were usually left in-tact (Bates and Rassam 1983). The fact that even non-believers could practice business and religion relatively unimpeded hastened the spread of Islam.

SHIA AND SUNNI ISLAM

Schisms within Islam developed shortly after the religion itself. The major division separates Shia and Sunni Muslims. Following the death of Mohammad, some Muslims championed his cousin Ali as his heir. This was because he was a blood relative.

Supporters of Ali became known as Shia Muslims. Sunni Muslims thought a successor

should be chosen from Mohammed's inner circle of followers. To them, kinship was of less importance. A war between Shia and Sunni ensued and the Sunnis emerged victorious. Ironically, although Ali did not succeed Mohammad on his first attempt, he eventually became the fourth Caliph (*i.e.* "successor" or "representative") of Islam. In the 16th century, Iran (then Persia) declared itself the first Shia state and it remains the only one to this day. Shia Muslims are a religious minority in the Middle East; 11% of Muslims practice it (Lindholm 1996).

Organizational differences distinguish Shia from Sunni Islam. Shiism is more hierarchical, centrally organized, and considerate of religious rank than Sunniism. Shias continue to exalt the blood relatives of Mohammad. These descendants are called *Sayyids*. They are considered holy and thought to possess supernatural powers. They marry among themselves and hold a special place in Shia society (Bates and Rassam 1983).

Sunni Islam is more egalitarian than Shia. Sunnis do not recognize proscribed religious leaders, although especially learned individuals are deferred to when judgments are necessary. The egalitarian nature of Sunni Islam has sparked many revivalist movements within it. Since no central authority exists to consolidate religious knowledge or to dictate faith, sometimes small faction claim to know the "true" path to salvation. Sufism is one such movement. Sufists are to Sunni Muslims roughly what Pentecostals are to Protestants in Christianity (Lindholm 1996). They incorporate a mystical aspect into the religion and followers claim to have visions or to perform miracles (Lindholm 1996). Salafism is another revitalization movement within Sunniism. Salafists seek a return Islam to its 7th century state because they consider this time

enlightened and uncorrupt relative to the present (Lindholm 1996). Unsurprisingly, these movements have fueled religious zealotry. Islamist groups such as the Muslim Brotherhood and al Qaeda have philosophies rooted in Salafism and Sufism.

MARRIAGE AND THE HOUSEHOLD

Marriage in the Middle East is generally facilitated by families rather than individuals.

This forms tight alliances between families and tribes and keeps resources within families. There is an ideal preference for parallel cousin marriage following the paternal line (Holy 1989). This is known as FBD, or father's brother's daughter marriage.

Polygyny is permitted throughout the Middle East. In accordance with Shari'a law, men are allowed up to four wives. Men and their families pay brideprice for marriage rights.

Payment is symbolic in some places like Turkey, but substantial in others. Gifts include land, jewelry, and money (Bates and Rassam 1983). As is generally the case where

descent is traced patrilineally, postmarital residence is almost always patrilocal

(Pasternak, Ember, and Ember 1997). Extended households are ideal in the Middle East.

In these, a father, mother, their married sons, their families, and any unmarried children they have reside together (Bates and Rassam 1983). In urban areas, traditional patterns of marriage, descent, and postmarital residence are considered ideal. They are still adhered to when possible, but more variation exists than in rural areas (Bates 1983).

WOMEN IN THE MIDDLE EAST

The status of women in the Middle East varies greatly. Turkish women, for example, live much as they would in any European country. But until very recently the opposite was

the case in all of Afghanistan where the ultra-conservative Taliban government practiced a fundamentalist form of Wahhabi Islam. Even today, women in rural Afghanistan are afforded few legal or human rights and must cover themselves head to toe in traditional robes or *birqas*.

Much of Islamic dogma centers around what is “natural” and “unnatural.” Westerners often fall victim to the naturalistic fallacy (“that which is natural is good”), but in Islam the opposite holds. Nature is associated with ignorance, uncleanness, and stupidity. Women are considered part of this “natural” world. Their place is traditionally within the home where they are expected to maintain the household and bear children, preferably male.

According to Shari'a Law, women have no right to divorce, but men may divorce them by simply repeating “I divorce you” three times. If divorce does happen, women return to their father or closest male relative's group. They are allowed to take with them any dowry or bride price they brought to the marriage.

The *Koran* and Shari'a law detail proper behavior for Muslim women, but subsistence and ecology may influence how women are treated and expected to behave even more than religion (Lindholm 1996). This is because sexual fidelity is critically important for family survival in the Middle East, just as it is for patrilineal and patrilocal societies generally (Pasternak, Ember, and Ember 1997). Middle Eastern men control their wives and female kin because sexual improprieties reflect negatively on the whole family and because of the importance of maintaining alliances between and resources within kin groups (Bates and Rassam 1983).

Perhaps surprisingly, early Islam liberated women in a relative sense. Before

Islam, only the wives and female family members of wealthy or powerful men wore veils. As an egalitarian religion, Islam stipulated that *all* women were to wear veils outside the home. This was ostensibly meant to close the social divide between rich and poor, powerful and weak (Lindholm 1996). Islam also explicitly forbade female infanticide, a common practice in earlier times.

In the modern Middle East, women are often expected to work outside the home in addition to maintaining it. Neolocality has become more common and women often report feeling isolated in their dual roles as housewives and wage earners (Lindholm 1996).

POLITICS AND RECENT HISTORY: THE OTTOMAN EMPIRE

The rise of the Ottoman Empire began with a Turkish ruler named Osman who, in the 1300's, captured several Byzantine principalities. His son, Orhon, continued territorial expansion using the Islamic principle of ghazi which justified the takeover of non-Muslim territory in the name of god (Cleveland 2000). Those Osman and Orhon ruled over became known as Osmanis or Ottomans.

In 1453, the Ottomans captured Constantinople. The city was strategically important because of its location on the Mediterranean Sea. From there, they built a navy that would become unrivaled. By 1574, they had taken Rhodes, Cyprus, Crete, Algiers, and Tunis to the west and Syria, Egypt, and the Arabian Peninsula to the East. They eventually controlled vast portions of the Middle East and northern Africa.

The Ottomans were able to rule over a diverse population by engaging local traditions and religious practices. This tolerance was characteristic of much of Islam

until the 17th century and contributed to the success of the religion as a whole (Lewis 2001). Christians and Jews were given what may be best described as separate and nearly equal status (Lewis 2001). Under the “millet system,” they were allowed to keep their own religious legal structures and educational systems, but were not allowed to serve in the military or join the ruling class (Cleveland 2000).

Ottoman society was highly stratified compared to the rest of the Middle East. Turkish kinship played a role in this. This system is patrilineal and relationships are reckoned by the distance from which people are related to the same patriarch. Unlike other patrilineal systems, in the Turkish system, birth order and generational distance (the rank of a generation relative to another in relation to a focal male) are also important (Lindholm 1996). This kinship hierarchy translated into strong social stratification and led to the evolution of a ruling class, something uncommon in the rest of the Middle East. Inclusion and succession within this class were based on birth order and generational distance.

Around 1700, The Ottoman Empire began experiencing economic difficulties. European goods began to gain favor over those produced locally. Rapid inflation ensued and the government began having difficulties supporting itself (Cleveland 2000). As the countries of Europe grew more powerful economically and militarily, they gained leverage over the Ottomans which hastened the fall of the empire (Cleveland 2000). The end of the empire coincided with the close of World War I. Palestine fell under international control at this time and Iraq was formed from three Ottoman provinces; Basra, Baghdad, and Mosul.

WESTERN INTERACTION WITH THE MIDDLE EAST

Middle Eastern countries have had contact with the Europe for thousands of years. For centuries, the Middle East was more scientifically and technologically advanced than Europe, although the gap eventually closed. According to Lewis (2001), there are three primary reasons for the social, economic, and technological rift that persists between the Middle East and the West. First, there are many Christian holy places in the Middle East yet there are no Muslim holy places in Europe. Second, Shari'a law states that it is inappropriate for Muslims to live under Christian rule. Europeans could engage spiritual and economic opportunities in the Middle East, but Muslims were not permitted to do the same in Europe. The third difference is political. In Western capitalist systems, political power is won using capital earned in the market. In the Middle East, wealth comes as a consequence of political power (Lewis 2001). This difference has caused many in the West to deem Middle Eastern leaders corrupt (Lewis 2001). These three factors in combination limited European interaction in the Middle Eastern politics until relatively recently.

The constitutions of many Western countries expressly dictate a separation of church and state (although the majority populations of most are Christian). This concept is foreign in much of the Middle East, where laws of commerce, economics, and ownership are devised, interpreted, and enforced differently than in the West (Lewis 2001). Individual nations institute various combinations of secular and Shari'a laws. Egypt, Syria and Turkey are relatively secular. Others, like Iran, Saudi Arabia and Afghanistan are very religious.

Starting in the 19th century, Britain, France, and other Western countries attempted to establish colonial states in the Middle East. None were “successful” as they were in Africa. Between World Wars, both the USSR and Britain demonstrated a lack of respect for Iran’s borders, crossing over them repeatedly. These actions set the stage for the nationalist movements yet to come in Iran. World War II significantly curtailed European colonialism in the Middle East. The British, however, tried to strengthen their presence in Iran as a means of securing local oil interests and to slow Soviet expansion. Rather than Westernizing the Middle East, European colonialism had the opposite effect of rallying those who championed a return to conservative Islamist rule. Conservative advocates called colonialism “punishment” for straying from the *Koran*. By the middle of the 20th Century, nearly all Islamic states were free from direct Western control.

ZIONISM, ISRAEL, AND PALESTINE

In the late 1800’s the work of two authors brought Zionism, with its goal of establishing an independent Jewish state, to the masses. Pinsker’s 1882 pamphlet *Autoemancipation* argued that Jews could not wait for the world to become tolerant of them because intolerance of outsiders was a central part of human nature. He said, "The Jews are not a living nation; they are everywhere aliens; therefore they are despised" (Pinsker 1882). Rather than live as second-class citizens with no representation of any kind, Pinsker called on Jews to establish their own state. Palestine and southern Syria were ideal choices for settlement, but Pinsker also suggested areas in North America and Turkey.

Herzl’s *The Jewish State* provided a unifying ideology for Zionism. The last line of his pamphlet reads, “Whole branches of Judaism may wither and fall, but the trunk

will remain” (Herzl 1892). Like Pinsker, he considered the need for an independent Jewish state both a social and religious issue. The combined work of Pinsker and Herzl rallied Jews around the idea that they, for the first time in millennia, could have a country to call their own.

Early Zionists proposed that Jews from around the world settle in Palestine. The more Jews who lived there, the more justified a Jewish state would eventually be. Between 1900 and 1936, hundreds of thousands of Jews from around the world settled in Palestine. As they came, they bought fertile land from wealthy Arabs and established farms. Resentment grew among the Arab peasantry who were well-aware that Jews were populating the area with hopes of establishing a state. Arab peasants were losing both their land and their livelihood to Jewish settlers as Arab landowners sold land to them. The British-controlled government addressed some peasant grievances, but little real change came until 1939, when Jewish immigration and land transactions were limited (Cleveland 2000).

Western support for an independent Jewish state grew as World War II wound down and the horrors of the Holocaust came to light. Many viewed Palestine as a permanent refugee camp for European Jews (Cleveland 2000). Keeping with their 1939 policy, however, the British turned away many refugees. This caused resentment among Jews and calls for a new nation independent of British oversight. By 1947, the British were losing their handle on events within Palestine and turned the problem over to the United Nations. The Zionist goals of Herzl, Pinsker, and others became a reality in 1948 when Israel was founded.

Initially, Israel was partitioned by the United Nations into Jewish (Israeli) and

Arab (Palestinian) areas. However, the early borders did not last long. The first Arab-Israeli war began May 15, 1948, just one day after Israel became a state. Israel won this war and claimed much of the territory that was initially controlled by Palestinians. Israel grew into its current borders following the 1967 Six Day War. The war began when Israel perceived a threat from Egypt, which had begun amassing troops on the Sinai Peninsula. After talks failed to resolve the situation, Israel attacked the Egyptian forces defeating them in two days. Jordan and Syria then declared war on Israel and were handily defeated in turn. As a result of the war, Israel took the Gaza Strip, West Bank, and Golan Heights.

Until 1972, Israel handled tension in the region using traditional democratic means such as economic and political wrangling. Things became more draconian after the 1972 Olympics where eleven Israeli athletes were taken hostage and executed by the members of the Palestinian group “Black September” (Bloom 2005). Following the Olympic massacre, the Israeli adopted a policy of targeted assassination. To this day, agents of the Israeli secret police, or *Mossad*, use a variety of tactics such as remote car bombing, sniping, and hit-man style executions to eliminate enemies of the state. Critics of this policy believe it causes more harm than good because it continually renews a cycle of violence, they suggest a more diplomatic approach would be more effective.

THE IRANIAN REVOLUTION

The 1979 revolution which brought the Ayatollah Khomeini to power was preceded by years of increasingly authoritarian governance by the shah. Several factors caused resentment of the shah and his regime by the Iranian populace. He was viewed as a

handmaiden to the West because he spent money on himself rampantly. He also mismanaged the Iranian economy; inflation was on the rise and the middle class was faltering and he often hired Westerners to jobs which could be done by locals. Last, he had little tolerance for political dissent and captured and tortured many who spoke out against him (Cleveland 2000).

In 1961, an opposition movement called the Freedom Movement began to organize opposition to the shah. Several factions existed within the organization – some secular, some Islamist, but all revolutionary. One Islamist wing was led by the Ayatollah Khomeini who called for the creation of an Islamist state (Cleveland 2000). He was forced into exile by the shah only to continue to condemn him from abroad.

The most vocal of the shah's early protesters were students and bazaar workers who were upset with a forced change from the Islamic calendar to one devised by the shah (Cleveland 2000). They were soon joined by a middle class upset by a disastrous economic policy where the shah intentionally started a recession in order to curb inflation (Cleveland 2000). The shah responded to protests by sending in troops who killed unarmed demonstrators on several occasions. These deaths led to more discontent and more protests. Eventually the military disbanded and joined the demonstrations (Cleveland 2000). On January 16, 1979, the shah left Iran for Egypt where he lived in exile until his death in 1980.

Khomeini returned on February 1, 1979 to claim control of the country. Following the retreat of the shah, the disparate factions of the Freedom Movement were left to decide the form their new government should take. A group of Khomeini sympathizers formed the Islamic Republic Party (IRP) to recruit popular support for his

idea of an Islamic state and to renounce the more secular members of the Freedom Movement (Cleveland 2000). This public relations campaign was successful and eventually a constitution based on Islamic law was enacted and Khomeini retained rule over the country.

SYRIA AND IRAQ

The Syrian Baath Party attracted members with a promise of Pan-Arab unity. The party espoused relatively secular goals that did not sit well with many religious leaders in the Middle East but were supported by many citizens (Cleveland 2000). In 1966, Baathist Hafez al-Assad and several top military commanders took over Syria in a *coup d'état*. Al-Assad became president in 1970. Keeping with Baathist policy, his regime was socialist at its core. He dedicated much effort to improving conditions in rural areas.

An Alawite Muslim, al-Assad did away with the constitutional requirement that the Syrian president be Muslim. Although this seems progressive, Alawites are considered infidels by some conservative practitioners, so the move may have been made more from self-interest than for the greater good (Cleveland 2000). Some of al-Assad's deeds were clearly undertaken with more democratic motivations. For example, he appointed a female minister of culture in 1976 (Cleveland 2000).

Syria had lost the Golan Heights to Israel in 1967. In 1973 al-Assad prepared his military and, along with Egypt, went to war with Israel. The action ended in 1979 with Syria not gaining an inch of territory.

After World War II, the rulers of Iraq were pro-Western politically and socially. Saddam Hussein gained power throughout the 1970's and by 1979 led the country as the

result of a bloodless coup. Iraq was the world's second largest oil producer at this time. Hussein was quick to go to war with his neighbors. The 1979 Iranian Revolution had brought militant Shiites to power there. Hussein feared his regime would be the next to fall to radical Islamists and laid claim to the Shatt al-Arab River which ran the border between Iraq and Iran (Kamrava 2005). He also thought a war against Iran would consolidate his power at home. He invaded Iran expecting a three week battle...it continued for eight years. Adding insult to injury, the Iran-Iraq War did not weaken the Ayatollah Khomeini's regime as Hussein had hoped. Instead, it strengthened nationalist sentiments and support for Khomeini as Iranians united against Iraq (Kamrava 2005).

The Iran-Iraq War ended in 1988 with a truce brokered by the United Nations. Neither side benefited strategically or economically from the war. An estimated 262,000 Iranians and 105,000 Iraqis died (Cleveland 2000). Iraq was also in serious debt to Kuwait. Rather than repay, Hussein demanded Kuwait forgive this debt and issued a thinly veiled threat suggesting he might invade if they did not (Cleveland 2000). On August 2, 1990 he kept his promise.

Many Iraqis considered Kuwait a remnant of a bygone colonial era and therefore felt little empathy for the country (Kamrava 2005). But several countries in the region felt otherwise. The Arab League voted twelve to three to support Operation Desert Shield (Kamrava 2005). The massive U.S.-led air campaign that followed decimated the Iraqi army and clearly demonstrated the futility of Hussein's attempt to hold Kuwait. In a ploy to gain support from other Middle Eastern countries, Hussein ordered SCUD missile deployments against Israel (Kamrava 2005). His plan did not win any converts. On February 24, 1991, a ground war led by the US liberated Kuwait in less than 100 hours

(Cleveland 2000). For the people of Iraq, however, the violence was not over. Uprisings began occurring throughout the country. Baathist buildings were burned and party members were executed by a public which had endured the cruelty of the regime for over a decade (Cleveland 2000). In the north of the country, Kurdish rebels took several cities. In the south, Shias also began to rebel. Fearing on overthrow from within, Hussein ordered a massive offensive against the rebels. An estimated 100,000 Kurds were killed and 2 million displaced (Cleveland 2000; Kamrava 2005).

The terms of the United Nations cease-fire called for Iraq to open itself to cease production of and research into chemical, biological, and nuclear weapons. U.N. inspectors were to regularly evaluate the country's compliance and trade sanctions would be lifted as Iraq complied (Cleveland 2000). Of course, after a decade, this had not occurred and tensions between the U.S. and Iraq continued to build culminating with the beginning of the second Gulf War, or the Iraq War, on March 20, 2003.

MODERN ISLAMIC FUNDAMENTLISM

The last quarter of the 20th Century saw oil money pour into the Middle East. This money was used to establish a series of entitlement programs in Iran, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and elsewhere. Because they were based on oil revenues, these programs were dependent on world markets. In the 1980's oil prices fell and these programs began to falter and disappear, upsetting local populations. As had often happened before, the leaders of these countries blamed the West for their problems, fueling hatred of the U.S. and Europe (Kean and Hamilton 2004). At the same time, anti-Western sentiments were exacerbated by high birth rates and growing unemployment, which left a large population

of young jobless men in the region. Fundamentalists drew many followers from this pool (Kean and Hamilton 2004).

Fundamentalism is nothing new to Islam. Earlier, I discussed the Salafist and Sufist movements of the 19th century. The movement currently most relevant to the Middle East is Wahhabism. Wahhabism is a conservative fork of Sunni Islam founded in the 18th century. Early Wahhabists sought to rid Islam of the lazy and impious practices it had picked over time. To them, the 7th century was the golden age of Islam and materialism and immorality were their main targets. Between World Wars I and II, the “Arab Unity” or “pan-Arab” movement arose with its roots planted firmly in Wahhabist principles. Wahhabism is most common in Saudi Arabia and oil money has fueled its spread there. Ironically, oil revenues have also brought dramatic social change to the region, much of which does not sit well with traditional Islamic values.

Wahhabism is a revitalization movement as defined by Wallace (1956). According to him, revitalization movements are responses to individual stress and cultural distortion. There are three types of revitalization movements. The first espouses the greatness of the past and seeks to recapture it. The second suggests borrowing cultural traditions from others in order to improve one's own. The third proposes the establishment of an altogether new culture. Wahhabism, and radical Islam generally, is of the first kind.

A successful revitalization movement must adapt to local cultural circumstances (Wallace 1956). Radical Islam has been able to do this because of the fundamental organization of the Muslim religious hierarchy. Relative to Christianity and Judaism, Islam is decentralized and egalitarian. Islamic doctrine is issued by scholars, or *imams*, who

interpret and pass down rulings, or *fatwa*, based on Shari'a law. Decisions can thus be made very quickly and radicals can find religious justification for their actions by consulting sympathetic *imams*.

In his influential call to arms, *Milestones*, Egyptian writer Sayyid Qutb lambasted the West for its materialism and immorality (Qutb 1964). Born in 1906 in northern Egypt, Qutb spent six months visiting Greeley, Colorado, where he became disgusted with American life. He found Americans' infatuation with lawn care deplorable and was appalled by the dress and behavior he witnessed at a local dance. He returned to Egypt and put pen to paper, describing his experiences with American sexual permissiveness, racism, and materialism. He grew ever more radical and joined the Islamist Muslim Brotherhood 1951 (Algar 2002). Qutb was the mouthpiece of the organization and suggested the time was right for the world adopt a new social and moral order which could only be found through Islam. His take on the world was markedly black and white – he saw no middle ground between Islam and *jahiliyya* (“unbelief”). According to him, it was the duty of all Muslims to fight against non-believers. Failing to do so was an action worthy of execution (Kean and Hamilton 2004, Qutb 1964).

Qutb was executed in 1966 by the Egyptian government. His work would go on to inspire generations of jihadists, including Osama bin Laden. Some even argue al Qaeda should be called a “Qutbi” organization rather than a “Wahhabi” one (Kean and Hamilton 2004).

OSAMA BIN LADEN AND AL QAIDA

Osama bin Laden, a Saudi national, joined the Afghani Mujahedeen in 1980. The rebel

group was fighting to stave off Soviet occupation of the region. The U.S. provided economic and military support for the Mujahedeen, but they did not directly fund bin Laden (Kearns and Hamilton 2004). His funds came via a “Golden Chain” of wealthy Arabs who believed, as the Koran states, no Muslim should live under the rule of infidels.

In the early 1990’s bin Laden began piecing together organization that would become al Qaeda (“The Base”). Ostensibly, the group was a response to the prolonged presence of Western forces in the Middle East following the first Gulf War (Kearns and Hamilton 2004). Bin Laden took specific issue with the stationing of non-Muslim American and European soldiers in Saudi Arabia, home of the holiest places in Islam. His stated goal was to expel foreign troops from this and all Muslim soil (bin Laden 1996).

In the mid-1990’s, bin Laden cast a web of operatives throughout Europe, Asia, and Africa. He also set up front businesses in Cypress, Sudan, and throughout the Middle East (Kearns and Hamilton 2004). Al Qaeda’s first order of business was to route U.S. forces from Somalia. Al Qaeda operatives supported local militias and played a role in the eventual American withdraw (Kearns and Hamilton 2004).

As the result of his Somali actions, bin Laden became one of the most wanted men in the world. From his base in Sudan, he fled to Afghanistan in 1996. As the result of mounting American pressure, his Saudi citizenship was revoked and much of his personal wealth was seized. He arrived in Afghanistan significantly weakened.

The political and social climate of Afghanistan in the 1990’s was perfectly suited for bin Laden’s arrival. The Taliban, ultra-conservative Sunni Muslims, were in power and sympathetic to his views. The 9/11 Commission Report describes Afghanistan at the

time as, "...not so much a state sponsor of terrorism as it is a state sponsored by terrorists" (Kean and Hamilton 2004). It was in Afghanistan that bin Laden found a sympathetic government willing to let him develop his organization unimpeded.

In 1996, the US established a special intelligence unit to track bin Laden. Soon after, they realized that bin Laden's role in global terrorism was more vast than they had initially anticipated (Kean and Hamilton 2004). Rather than simply funding terrorist actions, bin Laden was the architect of a new type of terrorism which set itself apart because of its wide geographic range, long duration, and large scale attacks.

Bin Laden was officially indicted in June of 1998. Shortly afterward, the Central Intelligence Agency developed a plan to capture him at his compound in Afghanistan. The plan was abandoned at the last moment for being "too risky" and bin Laden lived on unimpeded (Kean and Hamilton 2004). On August 7, 1998 the US embassies in Kenya and Tanzania were bombed by al Qaeda operatives. The US responded with a series of cruise missile attacks on al Qaeda installations in Afghanistan but failed to kill bin Laden.

In the fall of 1998, the CIA uncovered evidence suggesting al Qaeda was planning attacks within the US that involved airplanes. This of course was the framework for the September 11, 2001 attacks on the World Trade Center and Pentagon. In 1998 however, no one foresaw the magnitude of the attacks and from 1999 to 2001 only passing attempts were made to eliminate bin Laden (Kean and Hamilton 2004). This has changed in the years since 9/11, but bin Laden continues to pull the strings of al Qaeda, likely from the border regions between Afghanistan and Pakistan.

CONCLUSION

The Middle East is a diverse and complex region yet common threads of kinship, subsistence and religion span populations there arguably more so anywhere else. Islam is a political, religious, and legal force that has unified disparate tribal groups the region. Western interaction with the Middle East has met resistance time and again because of the vast cultural and religious gulf between the two. Middle Eastern leaders often use the West as a scapegoat for failed political, social, and economic programs. To win favor in the region, the US and Europe must carefully examine the ramifications of any current dealings with an eye trained well into the future.

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