

THE GLOBAL JIHADI THREAT

MODULE 1: ISLAM: BASIC PRINCIPLES, ORIGINS AND DIVISIONS

NADAV MORAG
CENTER FOR HOMELAND DEFENSE AND SECURITY
DEPT. OF NATIONAL SECURITY AFFAIRS
NAVAL POSTGRADUATE SCHOOL

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The Global Jihadi Threat

Module 1: Islam: Basic Principles, Origins and Divisions

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Introduction

In this module, we will focus on the basic principles and practices of the Islamic faith. This information will serve as a backdrop to our discussion of the multifaceted Jihadist threat in the next modules.

Islam is a faith of richness and complexity comparable to that of Judaism, Christianity, Hinduism and Buddhism and serves as the foundation for a myriad of cultures stretching from Morocco to Indonesia. There are an estimated one and a half billion Muslims globally and Islam is widely considered to be the fastest growing religion in the world.

Clearly, we will not be able to do justice to Islam's nuances and complexity in the context of this module and consequently our goal will be more modest: to gain familiarity with some of the central beliefs, practices, early history and schisms of the religion.

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Basic Principles of Islam

“Islam” means “submission” and, in taking upon himself or herself the religion, the believer is thus submitting to God's will.

Islam is a fiercely monotheistic faith based upon the principle of Tawheed (the unity of God). In fact, the Arabic word for God (Allah) is a contraction of Al-llah which means, “the only God.” From a doctrinal point of view, Muslims cannot abide any form of idolatry or polytheism. Associating God with a person, place or thing is considered to be one of the greatest sins in Islam. Those who do so are labeled “Mushrikun” (those who ascribe partners to God) and are, by definition, engaging in “Shirk” – blasphemy against Allah.

In fact, extremist Muslims, such as the followers of eighteenth century Arabian preacher Muhammad ibn abd al-Wahab (of which more will be said in a later module), upon their capture of the Islamic holy cities of Mecca and Medina went so far as to destroy the grave of the Prophet Muhammad and shrines to Islamic holy men on the grounds that Muslims visiting such sites were engaging in Shirk. They also killed many thousands of Muslim inhabitants of Mecca and Medina on the grounds that these Muslims had abandoned Islam and had become Mushrikun.

Muslims also abhor graven images, which are seen as a form of idolatry.

This is why the visitor to one of the many ornate and architecturally-impressive mosques of the Islamic world will find that they are decorated with geometric forms and phrases from the Koran written in beautiful Arabic calligraphy, but are devoid of the icons, statues, paintings and other representational forms that are so emblematic of the great medieval Orthodox and Catholic cathedrals and churches. This attitude towards physical representation partially explains the worldwide Muslim response to the caricatures of the Prophet Muhammad originally published by the Danish newspaper, Jyllands-Posten, on September 30, 2005.

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Basic Principles Continued

In addition to Islam’s total rejection of anything but the strictest form of monotheism, Muslims are not allowed to abandon their faith or adopt another faith. Apostasy is considered an unpardonable act in Islam. Devout Muslims consider their religion to be the one true religion, the religion of God. Abandoning Islam therefore means abandoning God.

Islam, at least in its original form, was also conceived of as an all-encompassing way of life and not simply a religion. Consequently, the Quran and other Islamic scriptures focus not only on humanity’s relationship to God, but also on social, political, legal and economic affairs.

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Five Pillars of Islam

All devout Muslims are required to adhere to the Five Pillars of Islam: Shahadatan, Salah, Zakat, Sawm and the Hajj.

The Shahadatan (two testimonies) must be continually affirmed by every believer and must be uttered in order to become a Muslim. The first Shahada (testimony) is the bearing of witness that there is no deity worthy of worship except Allah (Ashhadu an la illa ill'allah) and the second is the bearing of witness that Muhammad is the messenger of Allah (Ashhadu anna Muhammadar rasoolullah).

Salah (prayer) is required of every Muslim five times a day: at dawn, midday, afternoon, evening and night.

Zakat (charity): is required of every Muslim and must consist of a levy of at least 2 ½ percent on income. The provision of financial aid and social support for the poor is central to Islam and Islamic history is replete with associations of various kinds that provide support to the poor. Many radical Islamic organizations also involve themselves in social, educational and economic activities as this is an important religious requirement as well as a useful tool for building support.

Sawm (fasting during the month of Ramadan) is expected of all Muslims during daylight hours.

Hajj (pilgrimage to Mecca). All Muslims are expected, if they are financially and physically able, to carry out the pilgrimage to Mecca, center of the Islamic faith, at least once in their lives.

Some interpretations of Islam consider Jihad to be a sixth pillar of the faith though other interpretations strongly reject this claim. The role of Jihad in Islam will be addressed in the next module.

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Orgin of Islam

Islam was founded by the Prophet Muhammad, who lived circa 570-632. According to the Islamic tradition, at the age of 40, Muhammad, who had made it a practice to meditate from time to time in the austere conditions of mountain caves near Mecca, began receiving revelations from God through the Angel Gabriel (Jibril). Over the course of the rest of his life, Muhammad was to continue to receive divine revelations and to communicate these to his growing circle of companions and followers – who, along with the first three generations of Muslims are known as the “Al-Salaf Al-Salih” (righteous predecessors). After his death, his followers vetted and compiled Muhammad’s oral accounts of the message of

God into a single scripture: the Quran (recitations). Devout Muslims consider the Quran to be the untainted word of God comprising the full, final and complete revelation of divine will to humanity. Muhammad is thus viewed as the “Seal of the Prophets,” the last in a great line of prophets beginning with Adam, Noah (Noh) and Abraham (Ibrahim) and including Moses (Musah), David (Daud) and Jesus (Issa). Note that Muslims revere Jesus as a prophet “beloved of God” and consider him to be the Messiah, and they even go so far as to accept the Christian doctrine of “immaculate conception.” However, they do not ascribe any sort of divine status to Jesus and they do not believe that he was crucified and resurrected. In the Muslim view, he is neither the son of God nor one of three manifestations of God. To a devout Muslim, such concepts border on polytheism.

Islam is therefore viewed by devout Muslims as the most complete and whole version of God’s intended religion for mankind. It represents the final and complete revelations and word of God and thus supersedes the other “revealed” religions, Judaism and Christianity. Devout Muslims do not consider the Quran to be the successor to the Old and New Testaments (in the way that Christians revere the Old Testament while viewing the New Testament to be its continuation). Rather, to devout Muslims, all that reflects divine revelation in the Torah and the Gospels has been incorporated into the Quran and that which has not been incorporated into the Quran does not represent God’s word and is therefore extraneous.

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Status of the Prophet

Devout Muslims consider Muhammad to be the most exemplary human being that ever lived. It should be noted however that this admiration for Muhammad in no way implies that he holds a divine or semi-divine status. Any attribution of divine status to Muhammad is considered an act of Shirk (blasphemy) because in their view, God, alone, is divine and has no partners or companions. Nevertheless, the fact that God chose Muhammad to be his messenger and servant clearly suggests that Muhammad was a very unique individual worthy of the tremendous honor and responsibility of conveying God’s final revelations to humanity.

Consequently, devout Muslims view Muhammad as a model to be emulated and Muhammad’s sayings and pronouncements (known as Ahadith) as well as stories about his actions on a wide range of matters have been collected in several volumes known as the Hadith. In addition, other biographical stories about Muhammad’s life, behavior and actions (known as the “Sunnah”) have been collected and, along with the Hadith, form the basis for the legal code of Islam – the “Shari’a” or “path.”

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Authority in Islam

Unlike Christianity, Islam began as an all-encompassing religion in which Muhammad played the role of prophet, general, legislator, judge and political leader of the Islamic community (Jama'at), later known as the community of believers (Umma). The Christian principle of "Reddite ergo quae Caesaris Caesari et quae sunt Dei Deo" – render unto Caesar what is Caesar's and unto God what is God's – in other words, the implicit distinction between temporal and spiritual power, is alien to Islam in its original manifestation. In Islam, temporal and spiritual power and authority were one and both were vested in the person of Muhammad and his immediate successors (Khulafa) insofar as they were acting in God's name. True authority in all spheres, according to Islam, belongs to God and God alone – though as the Umma (community of believers) expanded numerically and territorially after Muhammad's death, the complexities of rule over a rapidly expanding Islamic empire created new and unforeseen political and economic interests which eventually brought about changes in the Islamic conception of political rule.

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Succession to Muhammad

As Muhammad had founded not only a religion, but also a political, social and economic system and was, in fact, the ruler of most of the Arabian Peninsula at his death, the question of his successor was a critical one. As long as the Prophet was alive, it was clear that he, being chosen by God to be His messenger and servant, had to be the undisputed leader of all believers. Yet it was not clear as to who would be able to step into this role upon the death of the Prophet as he had left no male heirs. Muhammad himself had not formally designated a successor.

The Prophet had asked his father-in-law, Abdullah ibn Abi Quhafa of Mecca, more commonly known as Abu Bakr, the father of his youngest and favorite wife, Aisha, to act as imam (prayer leader) during his illness. This seemed to imply that he viewed Abu Bakr as his natural successor. At the same time, he asked his cousin Ali ibn Abi Talib (a fellow member of the Banu Hashim – Hashemites – a clan within the larger Quraish tribe who was also his son-in-law, being married to Muhammad's favorite daughter, Fatima) to wash his body before burial, an act of supreme honor which also suggested that Muhammad viewed Ali as his legitimate successor.

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Succession Continued

After the Prophet's death in 632, a council in Medina met to choose a successor and Abu Bakr was able to make a convincing case for his candidacy. Accordingly Abu Bakr was chosen Khalifa or Caliph (successor). Abu Bakr died two years later and the Caliphate passed to another Meccan notable, Umar ibn al-Khattab (another of the Prophet's father-in-laws). Ali, who believed that he was the Prophet's rightful heir, continued to bide his time. Umar proved to be a successful military leader leading the Muslims in their lightning conquests of Syria, Mesopotamia, part of Persia and Egypt, but he was increasingly criticized at home by Ali as being an unjust ruler. Umar was assassinated in 644 and was succeeded by another Meccan and a son-in-law of the Prophet, Uthman ibn Affan. Under Uthman, the Caliphate was dominated by the powerful Meccan family, the Umayyads. The Umayyads had originally been idol-worshippers and enemies of Muhammad and only embraced Islam after Muhammad's defeat of Meccan forces at the battle of Badr in 624. They were accordingly seen by many of the original companions of the Prophet, many of whom were more inclined to support Ali's candidacy, as usurpers who were only interested in self-aggrandizement. An argument was also made by Ali's supporters that Caliphs should only be chosen if they were direct descendants of Muhammad on the grounds that some small bit of the Prophet's greatness would be transmitted to those in his bloodline. In 656, Uthman was assassinated and the supporters of Ali (who came to be known as Shi'at Ali, the partisans of Ali, otherwise known as Shi'a or Shi'ites) finally had the opportunity to gain possession of the Caliphate as Ali became the fourth Caliph.

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Succession Continued

The Umayyad clan, however, had no intention of allowing the Caliphate to fall into the hands of the Hashemites and the Umayyad governor of Syria, Mu'awiya bin Abi Sufyan, along with the Prophet's last surviving wife, Aisha, demanded revenge for Uthman's murder and refused to accept Ali's succession.

Fighting broke out between the sides proved inconclusive, but in 661, Ali was assassinated by rebels (known as Kharajis – outsiders) who claimed that any Muslim had the right to be Caliph. Ali was succeeded by his son, Hassan. However, by now the Umayyads had succeeded in shoring up their power to the degree that Hassan was forced to abdicate and turn the Caliphate over to Mu'awiya on the understanding that power would revert to the Hashemite clan upon Mu'awiya's death. The Umayyads however, had Hassan poisoned in 669 and Mu'awiya appointed his son, Yazid, as successor.

The Shi'a, however, refused to accept Mu'awiya as Caliph and, upon the succession of Yazid, they supported Hussein, Ali's oldest son, when he declared that he was the rightful Caliph. Yazid responded to this challenge by sending a force of some 4,000 men to surround Hussein's small band of 80 supporters at the town of Karbala in what is today southern Iraq. There, on October 10, 680, Hussein and his supporters were massacred by Yazid's force. The Battle of Karbala proved to be a watershed event in Islamic history leading to the first and greatest schism in Islam between the Shi'a, who were now left powerless and relegated to minority status, and the ahl al-sunnah wa'l-jama'ah (people of tradition and consensus, otherwise known as Sunnis), who supported Yazid and would continue to support his successors thus creating the mainstream form of Islam followed by some 85 percent of the Muslim world.

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Shi'a Principles

Subsequent generations of Shi'a down to the present memorialized the martyrdom of Hussein at Karbala during the Ashura (a pre-existing Islamic holiday which Shi'a use to commemorate Hussein). The Shi'a believe that Ali's line produced five, seven or twelve subsequent Imams (depending on whether one is a Zaydi, Ismaili or "Twelver" Shi'a – also known as Intha Ashari) who were the rightful leaders of the umma, but were denied leadership by the Sunnis. The more numerous "Twelver" Shi'a believe that the twelfth Imam, Muhammad al-Muntazar, who is said to have disappeared as an infant, is in fact in a state of occultation and will return as a kind of messianic figure under the title of the Mahdi (Guide), once the Shi'a have regained control of Karbala. When the Mahdi returns, Sunnis will embrace the "true" Islam (i.e., Shi'ism) and the Mahdi will lead a great force against the enemies of Islam which will lead to the global victory of Islam. Shi'a consider the sayings, writings and deeds of the Imams to be authoritative and, after the Quran and Hadith, consider these to be of central importance to the development of the faith.

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Shi'a Principles Continued

Accordingly, the Shi'a viewed all subsequent Sunni rulers as illegitimate, claiming that only descendents of the Prophet are entitled to rule. In the absence of such descendents, Shi'a believe that the umma should only be led by powerful religious leaders with a unique, divinely-inspired, insight into the inner meaning of the religious texts and of God's will. In other words, the Shi'a religious scholars (ulemma) should serve as the guardians of the Shi'a community as well as its leaders. This principle, which in Persian is known as velayat-

e faqih (guardianship of the jurisconsult), constitutes the principle underpinning the existence of the Islamic Republic of Iran and the clerical rule which is so central to that regime.

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Sunni Principles

This focus on leadership underscores the fact that the split between Sunnis and Shi'a is more than just an argument over succession, but also represents a fundamental difference in approach to the role of religious law and religious leadership, and, consequently, to the very nature of Islam.

Under the leadership of the Umayyads and their successors, the Abbasids, the caliphs were nominally religious leaders, but in practice deferred to a growing body of religious scholars (the Ulemma) in religious matters, as they preferred to concentrate on matters of state as the Islamic Empire became a major world power.

Sunni Islam thus developed a view of leadership in which the Caliph was not seen as someone who enjoyed a special relationship with God (after all, Muhammad was the “seal of the prophets”) but rather one who governed by the consensus of the community with the goal of protecting and fostering the umma. Similarly, the scholars (ulemma), judges (qadis) and other Islamic officials were not seen as having a monopoly over the divine message and the consensus within the Sunni world was that all believers could understand the message of God and that there was no need for religious intermediaries between human beings and God. This doctrine ultimately prevented any type of significant clergy from developing in Sunni Islam and contributed to the high degree of decentralization that is so characteristic of Sunnism (as well as of extremist Sunni groups such as those within the Al-Qaeda community). In Sunni Islam, the Imam is usually little more than a prayer leader and virtually anyone with some Islamic education, can declare themselves a Sheikh (religious leader) and issue fatawi (religious injunctions). In principle, any Muslim can lead prayers or officiate at a wedding or other religious ceremony. The fact that Sunni Islam, unlike, for example, Catholicism, lacks universally-accepted, institutionalized theological leadership has been an important factor in the rise of a broad range of mainstream as well as extremist interpretations of the faith since there is no single accepted authority that can issue interpretations that must be accepted by all. This means, for example, that even if moderate and highly-respected Sunni religious scholars issue fatawi pointing to the Quranic injunctions against harming innocents in the course of Jihad, these need not be accepted by extremist clerics or self-styled Sheikhs and such rulings are thus of limited value in reigning in the extremists.

Sunni Islam also spawned competing schools of jurisprudence (fiqh) and, myriad interpretations associated with different schools. Sunni Islam focuses on the primary Islamic scriptures, the Quran, Hadith and Sunna, commentaries on these documents (known as Tafsir) and a body of rulings made by Islamic jurists (known as Ijm'a) and does

not ascribe any sort of “divinely-inspired” role to Islamic leaders. While there have been charismatic “holy men” who have led specific Sunni communities in the past (as well as in the present), Sunni Islam, as a whole, is largely legalistic in nature with Muftis (specialists in Islamic law) tasked with the role of issue legal rulings (fatawi, or, in the singular form, fatwa).

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Shi’a Leadership

In Shi’ism, on the other hand, the doctrine of the Imam (the term in this context refers to the descendents of Ali) as divinely-inspired and the centrality of the personal sacrifice of Hussein at Karbala led to a much more leader-centric form of Islam which holds that the Islamic leader must play a profound religious, as well as political, role as the interpreter of God’s will.

Accordingly, virtually everything in Shi’a Islam is imbued with the focus on the individual leader. Shi’as regularly use iconic imagery (considered blasphemous by Sunnis) of the Imams Ali and Hussein and focus on the Ashura (with its almost Christian-like focus on Hussein’s personal sacrifice in the interests of the broader humanity). The colors of the Shi’a are black (indicating sorrow over Ali’s fate), red (commemorating Hussein’s martyrdom) and green (representing the bloodline of the Prophet).

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Shi’a Leadership Continued

As the Imams no longer exist (or are in occultation as in the case of the twelfth Imam), the umma must be led by religious leaders of great learning and insight. As mentioned previously, this principle is known as velayat-e faqih (guardianship of the jurisconsult). Shi’a Islam thus puts significant emphasis on the role of the religious leader, as both spiritual and temporal leader and on that leader’s ability to interpret God’s will (thus, de facto, de-emphasizing the importance of texts in comparison to Sunni Islam). Despite the emphasis on leadership, with the exception of Grand Ayatollah Muhammad Hussein Boroujerdi (who died in 1965), there has never been one sole Ayatollah (the term means: “sign of God”) with authority over all Shi’as, not even Ayatollah Ruhollah Masavi Khomeini

of Iran. Though Khomeini was seen by most Shi'a as their effective political leader, not all Shi'as accepted his religious interpretations.¹

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Divisions in Islam

By the eleventh century, many Sunni jurists had condemned the Shi'a as heretics. Fourteenth century Sunni jurist Ibn Taymiya declared the Shi'a to be corruptors of Islam and approved of Jihad against them. In the modern historical period, Shi'a Islam became increasingly identified with the premier Shi'a state, Iran and consequently, at least in the Middle East, Sunni Arab hatred and fear of Shi'ism became intermixed with their loathing and fear of non-Arab Iran.

Many Shi'a jurists and mullahs, for their part, continue to reject the authenticity of Sunni Islam as well as the regimes that espouse it.

While the Shi'a constitute no more than ten to fifteen percent of Muslims worldwide, some eighty percent of the population of the strategically-critical Persian Gulf are Shi'a (among both Arabs and Iranians) and in the geographic region stretching from the Levant to the Indian subcontinent, there are roughly equal numbers of Shi'a and Sunnis.²

In conclusion, the Islamic world continues to be effected by this great seventh century schism, with events in Iraq in the wake of the 2003 US-led invasion underlining the depth of the ongoing distrust and sometimes outright hatred that exists between the two great Islamic traditions.

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References

1.) Vali Nasr, *The Shi'a Revival: How Conflicts Within Islam Will Shape the Future* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 2006), 71-72.

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Closing Credits/Music

¹ Vali Nasr, *The Shi'a Revival: How Conflicts Within Islam Will Shape the Future* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 2006), 71-72.

² Ibid., 34.