THE GLOBAL JIHADI THREAT

MODULE 3: ISLAMIC CIVILIZATION AND THE WESTERN CHALLENGE

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The Global Jihadi Threat

Module 3: Islamic Civilization and the Western Challenge

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Introduction

In this module, we will briefly explore the historical relationship between Islamic and Western civilizations and some of the ways in which the Islamic world has attempted to cope with the reality of Western power and influence as well as the pull of Modernization.

When Muslim armies broke out of the Arabian peninsula and went on to conquer the entire Middle East (from the Atlantic to the Indian Subcontinent) during the course of a little over a century following the death of Muhammad, Islamic civilization was strong and vital, particularly in contrast with a Europe that was just emerging from the chaos of the Dark Ages.

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Early Islamic Civilization

The historian Bernard Lewis described the position of the early Islamic world:

"Almost from the beginning, Islam was a world empire and a world civilization… Muslims had inherited the philosophy and science of Greece, which Europe did not discover for centuries to come; the wisdom and statecraft of Iran; and much even of the Eastern Christian and Byzantine heritage…. The world of Islam was in contact… with the rich and ancient civilizations of India and China. From the one, they imported positional, decimal notion of numbers; from the other, paper, with immense effect both on their sciences and on their humanities, as well as on government and business. The Islamic world enjoyed a

rich and diverse culture, vast lands and resources, and a complex and flourishing economy."[1]

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Early Christendom

Lewis contrasts this with the position of Christian Europe (i.e., the West):

"Compared with Islam, Christendom was indeed poor, small, backward, and monochromatic. Split into squabbling, petty kingdoms, its churches divided by schism and heresy, with constant quarrels between the churches of Rome and the East, it was disputed between two emperors and for a while even two popes….confined in effect to a small peninsula on the western edge of Asia… For a time – indeed, for a very long time – it seemed that nothing could prevent the ultimate triumph of Islam and the extension of the Islamic faith and Muslim power to Europe."[2]

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Muslim Expansion

Muslim advance into Western Europe was finally halted by the Franks in 732 at the Battle of Tours and Poitiers, but Muslims remained firmly entrenched in the Iberian peninsula (modern-day Spain and Portugal). In fact, it took the Europeans over seven centuries to finally drive the Muslims out of Western Europe. In Central and Southeastern Europe, the Muslim presence, in the form of the initially powerful and dynamic Ottoman Empire, would bring Muslim armies in 1529 and again in 1683 to the walls of Vienna and it would take until the beginning of the twentieth century, before the Ottoman presence in the Balkans would be reduced to the small enclave of European territory that, today, remains a part of the Turkish Republic. Finally, from the thirteenth to the fifteenth centuries, Russia and parts of Eastern Europe were dominated by the newly-Islamicized Mongol-Turkish Khanate of the Golden Horde (known to Europeans as Tatars after the name of one of the Mongol tribes).

There were, of course, episodes in which Europeans were able to successfully exploit the growing divisions in the Islamic world. From the late Eleventh Century to the late Thirteenth Century, a series of Crusades were launched from Europe that succeeded in capturing the Holy Land and creating a number of Crusaders kingdoms in the Eastern

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[1] Bernard Lewis, *Islam and the West* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 8.

[2] Ibid., 9.

Mediterranean. However, this did not change the fact that for almost a millennium, the West was under constant threat from a civilization that was often more technologically-advanced and politically, socially and economically progressive than it.

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The Rise of Europe

There were, however, strengths in European civilization and weaknesses in Islamic civilization that, over time, would tip the balance of power irrevocably in the direction of the West.   Some scholars have suggested that the geography of Europe, with its generally healthy and temperate climate, the fecundity of its soils and the broad range of domesticated crops, helped ensure that European civilization would become dominant.[3] Similarly, it has been argued that Europe's topography of islands, mountains, multiple peninsulas and isolated valleys contributed to the creation of multiple states and cultures whose ongoing competition in the military, economic and technological spheres made European societies resilient, aggressive and increasingly technologically advanced.[4] Additional theses that attempt to explain Europe's dominance focus on the weakening of religion and rise of science, the growth of Capitalism and other political, social and economic phenomena.

Regardless of the reason for Europe's rise, by the seventeenth century, European power was an indisputable reality and from that point on, Europe's strength and supremacy increased exponentially. Naturally, this posed a problem for the societies who followed the word of Allah and His Messenger.

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Muslim Authority

When theirs was the dominant civilization and their empires, whether Arab, Turkish, Persian or Mongol, prevailed over non-Islamic peoples, the Muslims could have been forgiven for assuming that their belief in the "one, true religion of God" had made them the natural rulers of mankind to which others, particularly Christians and Jews (known as Ahl al-Dhimma, people of the pact or Ahl al-Khitab, people of the book), had to submit – either

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[3] Jared Diamond, *Guns, Germs, and Steel: The Fates of Human Societies* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1997), Chapter 10.

[4] Ibid., 412-416.

by adopting the faith or by accepting a "protected" but subservient status in which they had to pay a poll tax (Jiza) and otherwise submit to a status unequal to that of Muslims.

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Ascendancy and Innovation

Accordingly, the centuries-long Muslim ascendancy in the areas of scholarship, science, philosophy, the arts, not to mention their economic, political and military dominance, was viewed both as entirely natural and as the divinely-ordered way of things. This widely-held interpretation meant that most Muslims, like their contemporaries in that other brilliant, but declining civilization: China, felt that they had next to nothing to learn from other cultures and societies. Not surprisingly, the most conservative elements of Islamic society led by the religious scholars (Ulemma), rejected the adoption of Western practices and technologies (and the ideas that went along with them) as dangerous innovations that threatened to corrupt the purity of Islamic society.

In Islam, the concept of innovation (Bid'a) is viewed highly negatively. In the traditional Islamic way of viewing things, the Prophet and his Companions (Sahaba) as well as the those living under the first three Caliphs lived the most pure and perfect manner of human existence. Those who lived during the first three generations of Islam's existence are collectively known as "Salaf" –(righteous ancestors) and Muslims throughout subsequent generations were entreated to attempt to emulate that original, pristine form of Islamic life. Any form of subsequent change was consequently viewed with suspicion, particularly among the conservative social elements being, in their view, a threat to society, morality and religion.

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Origin of conservatism

It would be wholly inaccurate, of course, to suggest that the Islamic world remained, politically, socially and technologically at the level in which it existed at the time of the death of Muhammad or that Europeans universally welcomed political and social change and technological advancement in a consistent manner throughout the centuries. As noted earlier, Islamic civilization, for a great many centuries, was far more advanced than Western civilization, not only in terms of thought, scholarship, technology and the arts, but even in areas such as women's rights and civil rights. It is not clear at which point conservativism in Islamic societies became so entrenched that those societies stopped evolving. It may be linked to the gradual process, in Sunni Islam, of closing what is referred to as the "Gates of Ijtihad" sometime between the Eleventh and Fifteenth Centuries. Ijtihad,

the independent interpretation of the Quran and Sunnah by a legal scholar (Mujtahid) using independent reasoning, allowed Islam to be adapted to new developments in all spheres of life. The gradual elimination of this option may have led Islamic society to lose the flexibility of interpretation that made it possible for them to continue to keep pace with a rapidly evolving world. In fact, whenever the Islamic world attempted to react to Western advances, as during the reformist efforts of the Eighteenth Century, it did so in part through claiming the right to practice Ijtihad, though this claim had to be defended against conservatives who argued that Ijtihad was no longer acceptable.[5] Ultimately, the conservatives were able to win most of these battles with the result being that the Islamic world found itself increasingly lagging behind the West.

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European Colonialism

By the first decades of the Twentieth Century, most Islamic societies had come under European colonial rule. North Africa was controlled by the French, Italians and British, the Middle East by the British and French, Sub-Saharan Africa mainly by the French and British, the Indian Subcontinent by the British and Malaysia and Indonesia by the British and Dutch respectively. This period of European colonialism had also followed a long period of decline in which the Ottoman Empire (whose Sultans had taken the title of, and were also widely-recognized as, Caliph) was gradually dismembered by Britain, France and Russia.

Muslims, of course, were well aware of the growing power of the West and the obvious weakness of their leaders and societies in the face of European advance. For many Muslims, it was deeply humiliating to view the decline of the Islamic Ottoman Empire (or other Islamic sultanates in Asia and Africa) and then to come under "Infidel" rule since their belief system clearly called for them to be in the ascendant ruling over Infidels and not the other way around. Ultimately, this disaffection led to three broad approaches towards addressing what was viewed as the systemic weakness of Islamic society.

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Approaches to Islamic Society

The first approach, that of the Islamic Fundamentalists, advocated a return to the earliest form of Islam on the grounds that the dilution of Islam through the introduction of Western

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[5] John O. Voll, *Islam: Continuity and Change in the Modern World* (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 1982), 38.

and other innovations (Bid'a) had caused Muslims to fall out of favor with God. Only a return to that true and pristine form of the faith, argued the Fundamentalists, would guarantee the return of Divine favor and the re-establishment of Islamic power and authority. The fundamentalists will be the topic of the next module.

The second approach, that of the Westernizers, advocated the adoption, virtually lock, stock and barrel, of Western technology, organization and even morals and modes of behavior. The most famous advocate, and implementer, of this approach, was Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, who virtually single-handedly transformed the successor-state to the Ottoman Empire, the Republic of Turkey, into a Western-based state and society where religion was allowed a very limited role in public life.

The third approach, that of the Reformists (also known as the "Islamic Modernists"), tried to create a hybrid Islamic-Western approach that would modernize Islamic society without necessarily overtly Westernizing it. Advocates of this approach included the Nineteenth Century Iranian thinker, Jamal al-Din al-Afghani, who believed that not only was Islam compatible with reason and modernity, but that it in fact required them. His contemporary and fellow Reformist, the Egyptian alim (religious scholar) Muhammad Abduh, claimed that the true understanding of Islam required weighting religious knowledge "in the scale of human reason, which God has created in order to prevent excess or adulteration in religion, so that God's wisdom may be fulfilled and the order of the human world preserved; and to prove that, seen in this light, religion must be accounted a friend to science, pushing man to investigate the secrets of existence, summoning him to respect established truths and to depend on them in his moral life and conduct."[6]

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Modernization vs Westernization

As both the Westernizing and Reformist approaches focused on the concepts of Modernization and Westernization (the former in order to incorporate both into its worldview and the latter in order to distinguish between each and filter out most of the Westernization), it would be instructive, at this point, to try and distinguish between these two complex, and somewhat interrelated, concepts.

As multiple volumes can be (and in fact have been) written on Modernization and Westernization and time constraints do not allow us to fully explore the depth and nuances

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[6] Rashid Rida, *Tarikh al-Ustadh al-Imam al-Shaykh Muhammad 'Abduh*, vol. I (Cairo, 1931), p. II quoted in Albert Hourani, *A History of the Arab Peoples* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1991), 308.

of these processes, we will consequently focus on some of the distinctions between the two rather than trying to create all-encompassing and authoritative definitions.

The realities of Modernization, as they are largely understood today, encompass things such as industrialization, urbanization, the rise of science and advance of technology, the ordering of time and space, the growth of education and literacy, the rise of a Middle Class and the creation of mass-markets and the diffusion of information and growth of mass-communication.

These processes largely began in Europe before they began anywhere else and therefore not surprisingly, Europe became the template for Modernization everywhere else. In practical terms, this meant that it was not always possible to differentiate between modernization and the adoption of Western modes and values (also known as Westernization). The rapid development of technology and the ensuing industrial revolution in Europe came about, in part at least, due to Western cultural, economic and political modes of thinking. The industrial revolution and other elements of modernization, in turn, contributed to the further evolution of Western thinking and culture. Consequently, the process of Modernization was initially intertwined with Western culture. Of course, the contemporary example of China suggests that there may be partially non-Westernized routes to modernization (I use the term, partially non-Westernized, because one must remember that the foundational ideology of the current Chinese state, Marxism, is a wholly-Western concept even though the Maoist variant is also strongly Chinese).

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Elements of Westernization

As the previous discussion shows, extricating the concepts of Westernization from Modernization is a difficult, and perhaps impossible, exercise. Nevertheless, one can point to some elements of Western thinking and culture that seem to stand somewhat independently of the phenomenon of Modernization (though they may certainly have contributed to the development of Modernization). Three elements of Western thinking and culture stand out as particularly important: secularism, democracy and individualism.

Each of these concepts, of course, is highly complex and open to multiple interpretations. For our purposes, we can make do with simple definitions. Secularism may be defined as the relegation of religious dogma and creeds to the private sphere as well as the development of critical thinking and scientific thought. Democracy may be defined as the concept of popular (as opposed to Divine or royal) sovereignty, civil rights and equality, the rule of law and the acceptance of pluralism. Finally, Individualism may be defined as a shift in the focus from the needs of the collective to the needs of the individual, in other words,

the focus on individual independence, self-reliance and liberty free from the interference of society and the state and free from societal rules that inhibit full and free self-expression and self-aggrandizement. Among detractors of Westernization in the Muslim world, the West is also associated with selfishness, hedonism, immorality and atheism.

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Attempts at Moderization

By the early Nineteenth Century, Muslims in the Middle East and elsewhere were fully cognizant of the superiority of Western arms, technology and economies. The Westernizers, as noted earlier, sought to largely adopt Modern practices even though it meant introducing Western ideas and culture. This group, however, then as today, consisted of a very small group of intellectuals with little influence and powerful enemies in the form of the ulemma and most existing political leaders of the time.

The Reformists, on the other hand, were comparatively more successful, though they too faced stiff conservative resistance to change, because they attempted to distill Modernization from Westernization and to only adopt the former.

Consequently, throughout the course of the Nineteenth Century, Muslim leaders such as Muhammad Ali of Egypt (ruled 1805-1848) and the Ottoman Sultans Mahmud II and Abdulmecid, who instituted a period of reform in the Empire between 1839 and 1876 (known as the Tanzimat), attempted to adopt scientific, military, legalistic and political ideas and methods from the West while at the same time preserving the fundamental characteristics of Islamic society. And as a whole, Islamic society was not sympathetic to either secularism, individualism, or democracy (insofar as sovereignty was seen as belonging to God and there were strong Islamic traditions militating against disloyalty to existing leaders) and looked askance at Western morality and modes of behavior.

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Failure of Moderization

Most of the reforms initiated in the Nineteenth Century ended in failure, in part due to the fact that many of the modernizing leaders believed that it was enough to have a modern military in order to be modern and thus compete with the West and in part due to conservative resistance and fears that Modernization would bring Westernization (which it usually did). Consequently, efforts at Modernization were limited to certain spheres of life (and thus incomplete) and were often abandoned in the face of resistance. The general suspicion towards Modernization and rejection of Westernization reflected not only

problems that Islam had with Western ideas and values, but also an acute sense of wounded pride.

Pride is a powerful motivating factor in Islamic societies, particularly among the founders of Islam, the Arabs. In traditional desert Arab (Bedouin) culture, personal honor is considered far more important than life itself because a life without honor is not worth living. The gradual rise of the West and weakening of the Islamic world thus represented a blow to the people of the "one true religion, the religion of God." How could it be, asked Islamic thinkers of the age, that the West has surpassed the umma (community of believers) when God had clearly indicated that the believers were superior and when the Muslims had enjoyed century upon century in which their power, learning and influence far surpassed anything that Europe could produce?[7]

The obvious weakness of the Islamic world in the face of the West was thus a blow to the personal honor of each and every Muslim. As the Turkish poet Mehmed Akif wrote in 1912:

"Look at Morocco, Tunisia, Algeria –
They are all gone!
Iran – they are dividing it too!
This is most natural, the field is the runner's
The right to live was given to the strong by God.
Muslims! A nation afflicted with factional dissent,
Will civilized Europe not eat them in three bites?

O community, if only for God's sake, awake![8]

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The Rise of Fundamentalism

Accepting the reality of weakness, as the Westernizers and Reformists deemed necessary by their very willingness to question whether the umma could cope with contemporary challenges, thus suggested that in many ways, Muslims were following the wrong track. This very suggestion was intolerable to many Muslims because if one is wrong, then one is humiliated, and avoidance of humiliation is a central component of the maintenance of honor.

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[7] David Pryce-Jones, *The Closed Circle: An Interpretation of the Arabs* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 2002), Chapter 3.

[8] Quoted in Pryce-Jones, *The Closed Circle*, 90.

This powerful social reality helps explain why many Muslims looked askance at the Reformists (with their insistence that Islamic practice had to be modified to adjust to modernity) and positively excoriated the Westernizers (who seemed to be adamant that Muslims admit that their entire social and moral code was wrong and had to be abandoned).

This profound predicament in which Muslims needed to maintain honor whilst increasingly having to cope with the reality of Muslim weakness and impotence in the face of the West would, in the Twentieth Century, lead to an increasingly-attractive option of Islamic Fundamentalism in its various manifestations.

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