

Political Violence and Jihad

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Wars of religion are not foreign to Western civilization. Before the development of national identities, Christendom and its internal divisions were the important fault lines upon which European history moved. The Crusades helped to stimulate Europe's escape from the Dark Ages. The exploration and settlement of the Americas was rooted in Christian providentialism and a sense of divine mission. The Western world that we inhabit is built upon a solid Judeo-Christian foundation which includes episodes of great violence and inhumanity.

Since the Enlightenment, the Western tradition has utterly forsaken religious war. The notion of foreign policy being governed by the clergy now seems ludicrous, and even those countries who claim a national religion have endorsed the private nature of faith and observance. So entrenched in our culture is the concept of a civil society that it is easy to forget how profoundly different other civilizations can be.

Although considered peripheral to North American concerns for much of the 20th century, the Moslem world has since its inception cast a shadow over Europe and Christendom. At various times Moslem incursions reached central France and the walls of Vienna. The Ottoman Empire absorbed the remains of the Roman Empire, and the Ummayid Caliphate established a Moslem-Arab reign in Spain which endured for seven centuries. In the strictly religious sense, Islam claims a monopoly on divine insight and righteousness. Within years of Mohammed's first revelation, the new religion shaped for itself a mandate to spread its universal truth. Subsequent Moslem leaders sought continual expansion of the territory under Islamic rule. Only in 1606 did a Moslem ruler formally accept a permanent treaty with Christian Europe, and this treaty did not prove durable. The roots of coexistence and pluralism are far shallower and more fragile in Islam than in the West.

In the early years of the 20th century, there was a resurgence in Moslem religious sentiment. As well, many Moslems of a more secular persuasion became enamoured of the ideologies that were to be found everywhere in Europe: nationalism, ethnocentrism (in this case pan-Arabism) and Marxism. In a context quite removed from their ancestral religion, these Moslems absorbed the paradigm of armed struggle and political violence in pursuit of their goals. The collision of these two strains of Islam yielded a new ideology: Islamism. Not to be confused with Islam, the religion, Islamism is a movement that seeks to impose fundamentalist Moslem law to all aspects of public and private life, and which ultimately respects no boundaries. While Islam is a religion, Islamism is a universalist ideology. Like Nazism or Marxist-Leninism, Islamism seeks not to compromise with other ideologies, or to coexist with them, but rather to subdue and replace them. Capitalism, liberalism, conservatism and Judeo-Christianity are equally unacceptable to the Islamist. While by no stretch of the imagination are all Moslems, or even most, Islamist, most of the organizations that act as spokesmen of Moslem immigrants in Europe or North America are openly or indirectly supportive of Islamism.

It is now clear that our understanding of the relationship between Islam and violence, and of the willingness of Islamists to act upon foreign soil, has failed us. Liberals and conservatives alike must concede that to grapple with Islamism and to preserve not only our physical security, but also our cultural and political integrity, we need to examine with new eyes the history and legacy of violence in Islam.

Violence in Moslem Theology and History

Most examinations of the attitudes of Islam toward a given issue begin and end with a look at the seminal writings, and a survey of clerical opinion. This is indispensable, but is simply the foundation upon which comprehension must be built. An analysis of theology is inevitably hampered by the divide between orthopraxy and demotic observance, and also by the inevitable disagreements and schisms between members of the clergy. A meaningful grasp of the role of political violence in Islam, then, must use theology as a complement to a study of history.

In general terms, Moslem attitudes to violence and war in the early centuries (7th to 11th centuries CE) are rooted in three things: the influence of the early religious writings and teachings; the culture, philosophy and technology acquired from external contact (chiefly the Roman and Sasanian Empires); and the beliefs and habits of the people who converted to Islam. Indeed it seems clear that all three of the factors played a role in shaping Moslem and especially Moslem-Arab attitudes to warfare and violence.

The founder of Islam himself traveled throughout the Middle East, encountering a great number of cultures and religious cults. Mohammed's driving ambition in the early years was the creation of a universal monotheism. He assumed that existing monotheists (Jews, Christians and to an extent Zoroastrians) would be eager to join his followers, and that this new religion would quickly supplant the many pagan cults of the Arabian peninsula. The earliest years of Islam, known as the Mecca years, reflect this orientation. Confident in the imminent triumph of Islam, Mohammed's teachings were concerned with matters of ritual and observance, and with the philosophical aspects of theology.

When it became clear that neither polytheists nor monotheists were quick to embrace his creed, and the Arabs of Mecca became openly hostile to it, Mohammed fled to Medina. His teachings shifted dramatically in tone, and the writings that emerged from this period spoke harshly of unbelievers and began to speak of the duty to convert them. Warfare became a part of life for these first Moslems as they were attacked by Meccans. Initially confining their military activities to immediate self-defence, the Moslems soon developed pre-emptive strikes and ended with the outright raiding of Meccan trade caravans. As Mohammed became aware that his new faith would not enjoy victory by acclamation, he placed increasing emphasis on the proselytizing imperative.

In the centuries immediately after Mohammed's death, Islam spread exponentially, often by force. Whether the caliphs who directed the conquest of the Empire were motivated by faith or more temporal matters cannot be determined. What is clear, though, is that the ensuing generations accepted military expansion as a legitimate tool of Islam.

Morally, the problem faced by all religions that wage war is the reconciliation of the act of killing with the sanctity of life. Islam resolved this question during the Medina years. Mohammed's desire to eradicate idolatry and paganism was initially expressed by seeking converts who came to Islam willingly. Soon enough, he came to see forcible conversion as necessary for the sake of the pagans and of his religion. While more reluctant to kill "People of the Book," war against Jews, Christians and Zoroastrians was theologically justified if doing so would further the goals of Islam. With regard to infidels, though, the options to be offered them were clear: death or Islam. While monotheists could, by paying a head tax and acknowledging the superiority of Islam, live in moderate freedom, polytheists and idolaters were shown no such lenience.

Under the above theology, a neighbouring monotheist people who were somewhat respectful of Islam were not to be attacked. The killing of infidels was not much of an issue for the developing Moslem theology. People of the Book by contrast were to be immune from attack unless they posed a threat to Islam. Practically speaking, though, this prohibition was easily evaded: the caliphs and imams soon defined the concept of self-defence to include action against perceived threats, against people ungrateful to Allah, or against people who were unfriendly to Islam. Any people considered a part of the Domain of War, which essentially means a people not ruled by Moslems, could be the target of a "defensive" holy war.

So powerful was this idea that it led to two further changes in theology. First, while an offensive war was by Islamic law a collective responsibility, defensive war was an individual duty. This meant that in a jihad, the struggle against the infidel was a duty to be borne by every Moslem. Second, during a defensive holy war, even the prohibition on killing Moslems was relaxed. Should Moslems residing in the Domain of War be accidentally killed, their deaths were to be mourned, but were legally permissible. It must be emphasized that the invocation of defensive war in an Islamic context does not correspond to the

traditional Western concept of self defense, that is, as a struggle against an immediate threat to physical security or existence. Rather, the laws of defensive jihad applied to a war of conquest undertaken in the cause of Islam. In other words, simply by existing, non-Moslems could qualify as a threat meriting jihad.

The theology of violence in early Islam, then, is clear. While Islam was conceived in the belief that it would enjoy universal acceptance, it was soon obvious to Mohammed and his following that this would not be the case. Initially the Moslem use of warfare was confined to defense against Meccan attacks, but soon violence became attractive as a means of strengthening both the ranks of the faith, through conquest, and its coffers, through raiding. Although Islam has religious prohibitions against the taking of life, these prohibitions quickly came to be suspended when dealing with idolaters, or monotheists who were insufficiently submissive, or indeed even with regard to Moslems living in enemy territory.

The influence of neighbouring civilizations and of the tribesmen who became Moslem is also important. Mohammed was in contact with the two largest empires of his day, Rome and Persia, before he founded his new faith. When Islam expanded politically and geographically, its first non-Arab contacts were with them. While neither played a large role in shaping Islam, in two respects the Roman and Persian cultures and religions left their mark.

Byzantium and the Sasanians shared a triumphalist view of matters military and political. At the simplest level, this meant that a military victory and its attending wealth were not considered the results of superior technology or morale, or of favourable weather or geography, but rather the proof of divine approval. This was quickly integrated into the Moslem approach to wars of conquest. They undertook to spread the faith throughout the world, and were met for centuries with success beyond imagination. What better demonstration of righteousness could there be?

Much of the culture of the time, in Asia Minor and North Africa, was apocalyptic. Prophets and oracles indicated that the Day of Judgement was near, and painted it as a fiery time of trial. The Roman Empire anticipated the end of days in a biblical and classical context, while the Persians had a persistent strain of apocalyptic thought in their dualist faith. Even in Christian Ethiopia, popular culture and theology were greatly concerned with the coming Apocalypse. Both the Koran and early Moslem texts reveal very similar eschatology. The perceived imminence of the end of days lent an urgency to Mohammed's mission. It was crucial not only for Islam but for the idolaters themselves that the true faith be spread. Impiety was to be forcibly eradicated.

Finally, there is in Islam a residue of tribal Arab culture. The term *harb* predates Islam by centuries, and denotes both the state and activity of *harb* or war. Amongst the peninsular tribes, a state of war with all other tribes was presumed in the absence of an alliance or treaty. Warfare and battle were, to judge by the folklore and literature, very prominent. Much pre-Islamic Arab poetry is devoted to the celebration of battle, beautiful women, and good food. At a minimum, the first converts to Islam were not averse to battle.

Perhaps because of this heritage, Islam failed to condemn warfare as did the Romans and Persians. The Strategikon, a manual of strategy written for Byzantine emperors by their generals, refers to war as the worst of all evils, and advocates diplomacy over force whenever possible. By the 5th century, the Persians were no longer oriented toward conquest, and used their armies only when faced with incursions into their territory.

Another factor in the markedly different Moslem attitude to war is found in its emergence and initial growth, which were marked by great success and prosperity. Unlike Judaism and Christianity, Islam suffered neither centuries of persecution nor existence as a minority. The very founder of the religion became in his own lifetime a sovereign ruler. As Jewish and Christian attitudes to war were blunted by bitter experience, so were Moslem views of conquest honed by incredible success.

In fact, the first time the Moslem world endured heavy losses and disorder was during internal conflict and civil war. The more pacifist writings of the early centuries, therefore, concern themselves chiefly with civil conflict and the prohibition of intra-Moslem war. This was legally forbidden, and the taking of Moslem life in war was, as discussed earlier, strictly controlled. It seems logical that since early Moslems suffered far more from internal strife than from war with others, the clergy and scholars of the day were more preoccupied with domestic restraint and harmony than with pacifism.

By the end of the 7th century, Islam was the dominant force in the Middle East. Moslems did not seek to live as a religious community among foreigners; in Islamic thought government, clergy, culture and politics were all seen as interdependent components of the faith, and were totally subject to Moslem code. When neighbouring peoples converted, their land became part of the Arab Empire. Equally, when neighbouring lands were conquered, their people were usually quickly converted and absorbed. The exceptions were Jews and Christians, who were for the time being accepted, albeit as second class citizens.

Islam was not merely a religion, a culture or a nation, but a new civilization. The first members of this new Moslem civilization were the descendants of undeveloped tribes for whom raiding and combat were a way of life. Moslem theology prohibited murder, but the laws concerning war and unbelievers were interpreted to permit and often encourage conquest. Contact between the Moslems and their most powerful neighbours added the dynamic of triumphalism, and infused Islam with apocalyptic zeal. It was this energetic, potent force, free from reluctance to make war, that began in the 8th century its first assault on Europe. This marks the first opportunity to study theology turned into practice regarding conquest.

Islam swept across North Africa as easily as it conquered Persia. During this expansion, the Arab Conquest, Islam came to incorporate non-Arabs, especially Persians and Moors. With the exception of Zoroastrians, these peoples were pagan and polytheist. Absent a deep commitment to another religion, they were easily persuaded either by the merits of Islam or the threat of death. The Byzantine Empire lost much of its land beyond Anatolia and the Balkans, due chiefly to internal weakness. Even worse for Constantinople, the Caliphate was often welcomed by Christian sects considered heretic who dwelt on the eastern edge of the Empire. These groups preferred grudging acceptance by the Moslems to persecution by the Romans.

After losing Egypt, Judah and Syria to the Moslem settlement, Byzantium held Anatolia for several centuries. Very slow to develop maritime abilities, the Moslem Empire could not access Europe except through Iberia or Asia Minor. Accordingly Islamic expansion into Europe was across the Pillars of Hercules, later named Gibraltar for the conquering Arab general, where civilization had lapsed into the Dark Ages and local lords fought each other, rather than across the Bosphorus, where a thriving army and navy defended a sophisticated state.

The first invasion of Europe by Islam was in Iberia in 711. Upon reaching the northwestern edge of Africa, Moslems were not at all reluctant to continue their conquest. By 733 the caliphate extended its grasp to the Pyrenees and beyond. Only after the defeat of the Moslems by Charles Martel and the loss of all Moslem fortifications north of the Pyrenees, did they recede. The developing Spanish Reconquista prevented a renewed assault into Frankish lands. Until 1492, a Moslem empire imposed Islamic law and Arab culture upon all the inhabitants of the peninsula under its sway.

This marks a very important milestone in Moslem history, and represents a profound deviation from the philosophy developed by earlier theologians. The vast majority of Iberians were Christians and Jews, and therefore were owed a measure of tolerance by Moslem law. Further, they persisted in maintaining their faith, and did not readily accept Islam. A very disorganized society, the inhabitants of the peninsula were no threat to Moorish or Arab safety. Moslem history had no connection at all to Western Europe, and no specific need that could only be satisfied by conquering Iberia. Prior to the Conquest no Moslems lived in the peninsula, so irridentism was not a factor. No reason existed for the Moslem colonization of Spain and penetration of France except for naked aggression and greed.

The persistent attacks on the Balkans and beyond can be characterized in a similar manner. Where the Reconquista ended the Moslem occupation of Spain in 1492, and Gibraltar then served as a natural and defensible boundary, peace was never achieved in Eastern Europe between Islam and Christendom until 1606. Even then, perpetual border skirmishes continued for a century and a half. Then, as now, peace with the West was described amongst Moslem leadership in terms invoking "the peace of Saladin": not a true peace, but a recess to permit preparations for a newer, better planned assault. Clerics were quick to support this strategy by issuing rulings to the effect that oaths taken to non-Moslems were not in any case binding.

The past three centuries have largely been characterized by a tense but reliable peace between Europe and Islam. With the rise of nationalism and competing ideologies in the West, the European states had higher priorities than the reclamation of the Balkans or Asia Minor. For its part, the Moslem world was occupied with internal division and eastward expansion. This extended stalemate is often interpreted as the beginning of mutual tolerance, if not acceptance. On behalf of the West, this assessment was perhaps accurate; while it rankled that Moslems controlled Constantinople and the remnants of the Roman Empire, Russia and France contented themselves with the right to build churches in the holy city, and no further attempts were made to reconquer Byzantium. No similar acceptance, however grudging, was to be found in Istanbul.

A millennium of Moslem history reveals four crucial points concerning the relationship between Islam and warfare. The first is that at its inception, Islam was a synthesis of tribalism, universalism and apocalyptic theology. In practical terms, this led to a new culture with a heritage that glorified battle, driven by a theological imperative to spread the faith. The sense of urgency caused by the popular apocalyptic beliefs led to an emphasis upon forcible expansion.

The second point is that the first centuries of Islam were characterized by extraordinarily successful conquests. Whether or not the initial expansions stemmed from misconstrued theology or from more pragmatic sources, the clergy embraced military conquest as a legitimate means of expanding the Domain of Islam. Further, the complex laws concerning when and against whom violence was permissible were defined to permit violent conquest and expansion.

Third, violence for political ends was at best poorly constrained by theology. While ennobled by scriptures eloquent in their appeals for peace and universal brotherhood, Moslem leaders nonetheless conquered and occupied lands inhabited solely by People of the Book. A study of Islamic philosophy reveals a deep desire for tolerance and peace amongst monotheists. A study of Islamic history proves that Christians and Jews are in no way safe from Moslem holy war.

Finally, Islam considers itself universal in a manner not fully understood by Europeans or Americans. In terms of both history and ideology, Islam is not limited by geography or ancestry. Moslems do not see themselves as adherents of a Middle Eastern, Arab or North African religion; in fact, by virtue of both their past accomplishments and their drive to win converts, Islamists see Western civilization as their ultimate frontier.

History excels at contextualizing current problems. As such, it provides the intellectual framework upon which a solution can perhaps be built. History is often less helpful in suggesting solutions. Nonetheless, there are encouraging examples which provide a basis for hope. Islam is not the only religion to have claimed universal truth; it is not the only culture to have permitted or encouraged the slaughter of unbelievers. As Martin Luther risked his life to reject what he saw as the corruption of his faith, so will many Moslems surely rise to the challenge of separating their religion from political violence. The Iranian, Abdul Karim Soroosh, is a strictly religious intellectual who proclaims that true religious observance can never be compelled. Even more encouraging than his teachings is the attention which is given to him by Moslem scholars.

There is room for a cautious optimism about the future of Islam. There is no fundamental incompatibility between the religion and pluralism, true ecumenism, and tolerance, if not warm acceptance, for other cultures and religions. However hopeful the future may be, though, the past provides little precedent for these virtues. To ignore this past, or to underrate its significance, is to fail the challenge presented to academics by the new awareness of this peril.