

MUSLIM EXTREMISM AND IRAQ

The Titan II is based here in Tucson, AZ — in a Missile Museum. It was activated in 1963. In other words, those who do not recall — the U.S. had nuclear operational warheads as far back as 1963. So what's the big deal? Why can't Iraq have a couple of nuclear warheads or even hang onto the anthrax which was given by the U.S. in the '80's? At that time, the U.S. backed Iraq in order to fight the Muslim extremists regime of the Ayatollah Khomeini. Saddam's regime, which is basically a form of Arabic socialism, which was established in the '40's by a Christian, Michelle Michael Aflaq — still resists to this day Islamic fundamentalism. With the exception of Turkey and to a lesser degree Egypt, Tunisia and Morocco — the Ba'th Regime in Iraq is the most secular, anti-religious regime in the Middle East.

For example, Iraq is the only country where Sharia jurisprudence is not applied. Sharia is a religious legal system which derives in letter and spirit from the Koran. The implementation of Sharia or Islamic law is the essence of the ideology of Qa'eda that explains while the Taliban executed adulterous women and chopped off hands of thieves. This also happens in Saudi Arabia. But no one seems to mind.

Sadam Hussein has resisted the Islamicists' ideology successfully. He used excessive means — torture, imprisonment and execution. As in Egypt and other countries, the jails are full of the renown Muslim brotherhood. Yet the wave of Islamic Fundamentalists continues to flourish. In 1997 even Sadam Hussein had to compromise with that movement and he allowed the Iraqi flag to carry the religious slogan, "God is Great — Allhu Akhbar." In addition to this, he forbade women to wear pants in public but, he continues to oppose the veil. Under the regime of Sadam Hussein, women can become judges (which is banned by Islam), they are allowed to be air force pilots (which is unheard of in other Arab countries) and they occupy the highest political positions without discrimination in the Ba'th party.

When he added "Allau Akhbar" to the Iraqi flag, Sadam Hussein was trying to contain the Muslim fundamentalist wave in his own society. Moreover, in Iraq, prayer during working hours is still forbidden and Sadam Hussein continues to treat the half million Christians living in Iraq with the same equality as the Sunni Muslims.

I am not an apologist for Sadam Hussein but I find it ludicrous to hear the American media talk about liberating the Iraqi people. Iraqi women are people and they are liberated but we never hear that and the

opposition to Saddam Hussein fails to mention this. Who can guarantee that the new regime in Iraq will not be heavily Islamicist? I think what is rarely mentioned is the whole issue of Sharia. The Muslim Extremists want a Sharia state — this was their demand since 1928 when the Muslim Brotherhood was established in Egypt in protest against the British occupation of that country. Al-Qaeda is the militant offshoot of this popular religious movement (which started in Egypt) which no one could suppress.

In the '50's Gamal Abdel Nasser tried and failed. The movement spread all over North Africa and the Sudan, where it has made alliances with military regimes such as that in the Sudan, Syria, Egypt, Yemen and even Lebanon. These regimes contain the Islamicists but they allow them to penetrate the social fabric. For example, in Egypt, the Muslim Brotherhood has one seat in Parliament and the Islamicists (or Muslim Extremists) have taken over professional unions, the lawyers' syndicates, the student unions in the university and also have penetrated educational curriculae. The Koran is taught at all levels of grades and high school. Moreover, the Muslim Extremists have built thousands of private Mosques which provide health, education, and social services for symbolic amounts. No one can touch these Mosques, or the preaching that goes on in them. Sometimes when a preacher, through his sermons, rivals the popularity of the president himself, as was the case of Sheik Kisk (whom I interviewed in the '80's) is thrown into jail.

President Mubarek released some of the militant, political Muslim extremists who had won a stunning victory (from their point of view) by assassinating Sadat — he kept a few of them in jail. From these few emerged Dr. Ayman al Zawahri, who is known in the U.S. as the No. two man of Al-Qaeda.

All of this leads one to reflect on the possibility or feasibility of waging a war against Muslim Extremism. In my opinion, it's like fighting windmills in the air. The pattern, historically speaking, is predictable: the more they are persecuted, the stronger they become.

This Muslim ideology, and that is what is being fought here and not terrorism per se, is deeply rooted in the Koran,. I don't mean, militant or political Islam, but I mean the beliefs that underlie them — such as, the implementation of Sharia law to all aspects of the legal system and the creation of an Islamic state headed by a spiritual leader. These are their objectives, and for these ideas they are prepared to die.

The fundamentalist movement is global and it must take its course. In the '80's I came into contact and interviewed Zeinab al Ghazzali, who is one of the leaders of the Muslim Sisterhood in Egypt. She had been

jailed for seven years for her beliefs, most of them spent in solitary confinement. When I asked her if she wanted to send a message to America, she replied without hesitation, "Tell your president to read the Koran and convert to Islam." However, she did not say that if he didn't convert, he would be assassinated. The conversion to Islam from the point of view of Muslim extremists has to be done through persuasion and proselytizing, not through assassination. Even Osama Bin Laden doesn't want to convert Americans to Islam. He just wants to get them out of Saudi Arabia and Palestine, and for this he would use violence to the utmost degree.

The second tenet of this militant Islam is, of course, the issue of Jerusalem. To Islamic extremists, there will never be peace in Palestine until and unless Jerusalem is restored to Muslim sovereignty. Very simplistically, military Islam seems to revolve around matters of land. Palestinian land, Saudi land, all of this land has to be returned to the Arabs and Saudi Arabia has to be free of any American "temporary" occupation. So from the point of view of the Extremists, we're back to square one: fighting foreign occupation.

I am not an apologist for Muslim Extremism. I am a product of the U.S. In other words, I think like a Westerner. But, as someone who has lived in Muslim society all her life, I must ask the question: what about the other countries who have nuclear weapons, such as North Korea and Israel, or even the U.S.? After all, the Titan II is right here in Tucson.

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The writer of this article has published two books on the growth of Islamic Fundamentalism in Egypt, A Bridge Through Time, (Summit Books, N.Y. 1984), Middle East Journal, (Charles Scribner & Son, N.Y. 1990).