

Islam is faith with many faces

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By David R. Sands
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Islam is monotheistic, but as a religion it never has been monolithic.

President Bush and British Prime Minister Tony Blair repeatedly stress that the military campaign to bring to justice those behind the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks is not a "war on Islam."

But military planners and policy-makers freely acknowledge that understanding Islam's internal dynamics — the ideas that unite and the controversies that divide the world's 1.2 billion Muslims — will be critical to the war in Afghanistan and to the diplomacy needed to solidify a coalition to contain and defeat global terrorism.

"There are core things that every Muslim believes, but beyond those things you can find an exception to virtually every generalization you hear," says Ali Reza Abootalebi, a professor at the University of Wisconsin at Eau Claire who specializes in social development in the Middle East.

No short survey can do justice to the vast diversity of modern Islam, a 1,400-year-old faith that stretches today from sub-Saharan Africa to Indonesia.

Muslim culture claims figures as diverse as Saudi militant Osama bin Laden and Indian-born novelist Salman Rushdie, U.S. boxing great Muhammad Ali and Libyan strongman Moammar Gadhafi. An estimated 6 million followers of Islam reside in the United States.

To theological disputes nearly as old as the faith itself can be added ethnic divisions, historical variations and accommodations to local political realities.

Despite the identification of Islam with its Middle Eastern roots, less than a quarter of the world's Muslims are Arabs.

India, among the most vocal critics of extremist Islamic militancy, boasts the world's second-largest Muslim population, trailing only Indonesia. Yet Muslims

make up just 14 percent of India's population.

"Islam is by no means a monolith," Thomas Lippman, author of "Understanding Islam," recently told an audience packed into the local bookstore Politics & Prose for a discussion of Islam. "The differences in social practices, political thought, the feel of everyday life can be vast. Fly from Tripoli, Libya, to Dubai in the United Arab Emirates — two prominent Muslim capitals — and you get a totally different impression."

But Islamic scholars say a grasp of the basic divisions within the faith will remain critical to an understanding of the larger challenge facing the Muslim world and the United States in the months and years ahead.

It matters, they say, that Shi'ite Muslims are vastly outnumbered by Sunni Muslims, but that Shi'ites are the dominant faith in Iran, Iraq, Lebanon and among some of the rebels fighting Afghanistan's ruling Taliban militia.

It matters that Saudi Arabia, a longtime U.S. ally and home to Islam's two most sacred cities, Mecca and Medina, practices a strict offshoot of the Sunni faith — Wahhabism — that strongly influenced Osama bin Laden, suspected mastermind of the Sept. 11 attacks, and his followers in Afghanistan and Pakistan.

It matters that Central Asian states such as Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, potentially critical allies in the military strikes against neighboring Afghanistan, are themselves moderate Islamic regimes confronting the same kind of radical Islamic elements that dominate the Taliban.

Complicating matters for a westerner trying to understand Islam's various strains, Mr. Lippman says, is the fact that "Islam has no Vatican."

While all Muslims read the Koran, "there's no one central authority Muslims can look to," he says. "There are theologians, but no sacraments and, strictly speaking, no clergy."

The most basic division in the Islamic world is between the Sunni majority and the Shia minority, a split as profound and enduring as the schisms among the Roman Catholics, Protestants and Eastern Orthodox faiths in Christianity.

The Sunni majority

Sunni — "traditionalist" — Muslims make up the vast majority of the world's Islamic faithful, with estimates as high as 90 percent.

With important exceptions, most nations in the Muslim world feature a majority Sunni population and a significant Shi'ite minority. (In the United States, Sunnis make up more than 72 percent of the Muslim population, and Shi'ites account for 11 percent, with the remainder from other branches.)

Sunnis trace their faith to the tradition established by the very first successors to Mohammed after his death in 632, in particular the line of caliphs beginning with Mohammed's father-in-law Abu Bakr and ending with the fourth caliph, Ali. Sunni adherents see their faith as a straightforward continuation of the revelations given by Allah to Mohammed, based on established traditions of Islamic practice.

As much an umbrella identity as a centrally organized faith, Sunni Islam embraces four broad schools of belief and religious law, ranging from the Hanabalites, considered the strictest, to the Shafiites, seen as the most liberal.

While broadly seen as the "establishment" religion in most Muslim-majority countries, Sunni Islam also contains fundamentalist elements that resist Western cultural and economic models and seek a return to a purer understanding of Islam and its holy book, the Koran.

Notable among these strains is the Wahhabi movement that was born in and still dominates heavily Sunni Saudi Arabia. Bin Laden himself was raised in the Wahhabi tradition.

Based on the teachings of 18th century Islamic scholar Mohammed ibn Abd Wahhab, the movement was born in reaction to what its founder considered polytheistic corruptions of Muslim theology and lax observance of Islamic law.

Allied to the powerful southern Arabian Saud clan, Wahhabism eventually became the reigning theology and political philosophy of modern Saudi Arabia, whose constitution includes the Koran. Wahhabism inspired similar reform

movements from India to Sudan, and, crucially, it dominates the Saudi-funded religious schools in Pakistan where many of Afghanistan's Taliban rulers were educated.

The Taliban's destruction of ancient Buddhist statues earlier this year, a move that brought global condemnation on the regime, was a direct historical echo of the idol-smashing early days of Wahhabism, when ancient shrines, tombs and minarets deemed incompatible with Islam were razed.

"There is a great affinity between the Taliban and Wahhabism," says the University of Wisconsin's Mr. Abootalebi. "They supported the Taliban ideologically and financially."

The connection is of vital importance to many of the Central Asian front-line states considered critical to the U.S.-led military campaign now under way against Afghanistan. With heavily Muslim populations, leaders in states such as Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan are anxious to keep the stricter Taliban interpretation of Islam from undermining their rule.

In a selection from a new collection of essays on Central Asian security, published before the Sept. 11 attacks, Alexei Malashenko, a scholar at the Institute of Oriental Studies in Moscow, noted that both Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan deported Iranian and Saudi Muslim clerics in the mid-1990s.

"The growing influence of Islamic views from abroad is causing concern both to the local elites and to the clergy in Central Asia," Mr. Malashenko noted.

The Shi'ites

Shi'ites constitute the second-largest branch of Islam, making up an estimated 10 percent to 15 percent of the world's Muslims. The name comes from the Arabic "shiat Ali" — the party of Ali — and points to the key doctrinal difference between Sunni and Shia Islam.

Accepting the authority of Mohammed and the Koran, Shi'ites reject the legitimacy of the first three caliphs in the line after the prophet. They place primary authority instead in a line of spiritual leaders — "imams" — who followed

Ali, the fourth caliph and husband of Mohammed's only surviving daughter, Fatima.

Shi'ites have their own interpretation of Koranic law and their own books and texts explaining Koranic tradition. Imams as spiritual leaders tend to have more power and authority in Shi'ite communities than their Sunni equivalents, although the focus on a single leader has produced some bitter divisions and power struggles within the Shia tradition throughout history.

The central political fact of modern Shi'ite Islam is its dominance in Persian Iran and the tensions that has created with neighboring Arab, majority-Sunni states.

This theological divide played directly into the crisis following the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks in New York and Washington.

Iran's Shi'ite leadership had bitter disputes with the Wahhabi-influenced Taliban long before the terrorist attacks, culminating in the 1998 murder of 10 Iranian diplomats in the provincial Afghan city of Mazar-e-Sharif.

Reflexively hostile to the United States since the 1979 revolution, Tehran has been internally divided by its distaste for both Washington and the regime in Kabul. The result is a diplomatic straddle in which Iran has loudly criticized the military campaign against the Taliban but has stopped far short of actively working to prevent it from going ahead.

Fundamentalism

As in other religious traditions, Islamic fundamentalism covers a broad, even mutually incompatible range of movements and ideas that claim to be returning the faith to its original, uncorrupted form.

Bin Laden, the suspected mastermind behind the Sept. 11 attacks, sees the strictly Sunni regime in Saudi Arabia as a betrayal of the true faith. His biggest complaint is that the government allows "infidel" U.S. troops to be stationed in what he considers inviolable Muslim holy lands.

In postwar times, the first eruption of Islamic fundamentalism originated in

Shia Iran with Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini's successful drive to overthrow the U.S.-allied shah of Iran in the late 1970s.

Iranian-sponsored Middle Eastern terror groups, including Hezbollah in Lebanon and Hamas on the West Bank, strengthened the image, both in the West and in the region, of the dangers of Shi'ite fundamentalism.

But several scholars, including Georgetown Asia Islam specialist John Esposito, say the Taliban-bin Laden nexus could mean the next phase of Islam militancy will come out of the majority Sunni tradition. Afghanistan serves as the logistical base and political symbol for Sunni fundamentalism worldwide.

Still, Islam experts caution that religion can't be used to explain everything, even a faith as all-embracing as Islam.

Mr. Abootalebi notes the regime of Wahhabi-dominated Saudi Arabia has been a source of political stability in the region, while the secular regime of Saddam Hussein's Iraq has warred continually with fellow Muslim states and with the West.

Iran's tense relations with the Taliban have as much to do with Afghanistan's booming drug trade, the press of Afghan refugees and the fear of rising influence by regional rival Pakistan as with theological disputes.

In Malaysia, President Mahathir Mohammed is seen as a big political winner because of the terrorist attacks. He has made political gains at the expense of the opposition Islamic Party of Malaysia by linking his rivals to international Islamic extremist elements.

Islam and the West

Many Muslims say they are frustrated that fundamentalists — Sunni or Shia — have become the public face of their religion in the West. But the lack of political diversity and freedom of expression in leading Islamic states only has compounded the problem.

"Between the more accommodating and modern Islam and the more fundamentalist Islam, I would say the recent gains have tended to be made by

the fundamentalists," Ng Kam Weng, a religion expert at a think tank in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, told the Associated Press.

Are the gains permanent? "I think the jury is still out," he replied.

One unifying force across the Muslim world is an attempt to come to terms with the cultural, material and political achievements of the secular, non-Muslim West, embodied, perhaps, in the World Trade Center and the Pentagon.

With powerful memories of a medieval Islam civilization that far surpassed Europe in arts and learning, Muslims virtually since the Industrial Revolution have struggled to understand how they became, in the blunt words of Middle East scholar Milton Viorst, "something of an underclass among the civilizations of the world."

"For whatever reason, we benefited from the Golden Age of Islam and Muslims by and large have failed to do so," Mr. Viorst says. "It is that frustration that the bin Ladens tap into."

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