

The Philosophy, Economics, Politics, and Geography of Islam

Today, another suicide bomber detonated a bomb strapped to his chest killing five and injuring eight as he boarded a bus in downtown Tel Aviv. Thousands of Anti-American protesters sweep the streets of Baghdad, Islamabad, and Jakarta. Two planes hit the twin towers.

Muslims and Middle Easterners, who are they? What do they do? What do they believe in? Do they hate Americans? Do they hate anybody? Are they justified in hating those people?

Bernard Lewis once painted a picture of everyday life in the Middle East. Men were drinking coffee, watching TV, reading the newspaper, and playing chess. The same picture could be drawn in the East Village of New York City, Leicester Square in London, England, or Main St. Buffalo.

Coffeehouses, or teahouses, like in America and Europe, are a city staple. Some people come to the café to stay and relax, to take a brake from their day, like in the West. Others come in to grab a cup of coffee and go to work, wearing of all things a three-piece suit, like in the West. What I'm getting at is Middle Eastern day-to-day life strongly resembles and is strongly influenced by day-to-day Western like.

Let's look at the cloths currently worn in the Middle East: As mentioned before most Middle Eastern professionals wear three-piece suits. One person you should be familiar with donning slacks, shirt, and a tie is non-other than Saddam Hussein. This proclaimed hater of the West wears a Western style dress. Next time you watch news coverage from the area see how many people you can spot wearing t-shirt and jeans. While yes, the traditional garb is still worn by quit a few, modern, Western, apparel is becoming more and more apparent in Middle Eastern cities.

Muslims and Arabs have always been, contrary to belief, conforming people. When conquered by the Mongols, Muslims adopted Mongolian dress as well as their weaponry and organization. Through out the years as they have been conquered by several different groups including Western armies, Muslims viewed there conquerors dress "with a certain magic," viewing their appearance as one of success and duplicated them in hopes to mimic their success.

Besides dress, the other most eye-catching form of culture and way of life is the media. The Middle East holds several print and broadcast mediums, everything from the privately owned Al-Jazeera to the Iraq News Agency. Middle Eastern news agencies are on the radio, on TV and on the web. News coverage is broadcast in Arabic, English, French, and other languages. These outlets supply information on more than just braking news and political commentary nation has publications addressing topics like science and technology, history, economics, education, and in some countries, woman's issues.

So when Saudis, Jordanians, and the Lebanese are not watching the news, what are they watching? Maybe a translated American movie, or maybe an Egyptian movie, after all, Egypt has the third largest movie industry in the world. The film industry in Egypt is over a century old. Its hay-day was in the 50's and 60's, but as foreign investors and governmental agencies stepped in for "a piece of the action," the industry suffered. However, in 1997, the government acted to reverse the decline of 30 years. Ministers met film-makers and investors to work on a plan of action to kick-start the industry, adding cinemas to the list of government stock to be privatized

and offering tax incentives to potential investors in the industry. Today, the average big-budget Egyptian film can gross around 20-30 million Egyptian pounds.

Back to the coffee house, you sit down with a hot cup of Monsooned Molibar (that's a type of coffee from India) and pick up the nearest periodical. It could be the newspaper of that city or country you are in, like Lebanon's *Al Anwar*, or possibly *The Middle East Times*, an Egyptian based newspaper distributed through out the area. What ever it is it's a long way from the *Gazette Francaise de Constantinople*, the first newspaper ever printed in the region, created by what seemed to resemble a French embassy in Cairo.

While the press does enjoy profits and individuality, it is not a free press. For example, the Egyptian government censors *The Middle East Times*. Topics it censors include reports on the abuses of human rights, criticisms of the president, his family, or the military, and discussions of modern, unorthodox practices of Islam.

The Middle East does not enjoy the same rights and freedoms we enjoy hear in America and in the rest of the West. Western governments, especially in America, have a long tradition of separation of church and state. However, in Muslim countries, Islam is not only a religion, it is a political alliance.

In Christianity's early years, followers of the faith set up there own institutions due to constant threats of persecution from the state. These institutions became the church. In regard to Islam, the prophet Muhammad was his own leader. Muhammad's community in Medina became a state, were he was the leader.

According to Islam, God is Caesar. Allah is the head of the state, and Muhammad his prophet. As prophet, Muhammad could have no successor. So following his death, a number of caliphs took charge of the Muslim community. These caliphs where Muslim rulers that asserted religious authority to rule derived from that of Muhammad. Today, nations like Jordan, Saudi Arabia, and (one can argue) Iran, are still ruled by a "caliph" like person. In most other Islamic countries, Western ideas of democracy have found there way into the politics of Islamic governance. However, while republics are springing up all over the Middle East, the Qur'an is still enforced by the government. This ingrained belief that government is here to enforce and uphold the Qur'an constitutes the restriction of rights we presently see in Muslim states.

Some men paying patronage to the coffeehouse come in with fire in their eye and distain on their face. Why are these men angry? The source of there rage could come from a number of sources for a number of reasons. Usually when you're angry, you're angry with someone, or something, or someone and something. Sometimes when you're angry someone and/or something coxes you. This anger man entering the coffee shop has all these characteristics, and the angry man next to him has the same set of characteristics only with loath toward different objects.

Take the first man; he hates America! He hates looking in his backyard and seeing the U.S. flag hanging high over a Boeing fighter jet. He hates the financial support and economic ties the U.S. has with Israel. He hates the infidels, and wants them to die. Now the other man on the other hand hates America as well. But his hatred steams from his own failure. He goes home with visions of Beverly Hills 90210 and later sleeps buy his children who had nothing to eat that night. Then there's the other man that just walked in, and he's infuriated. He just got word Israeli troops shoot down his brother and nephew. And then finally, the man that came in, grabbed a cup of coffee, and went home. These four men exist in the Middle East. And here's there story.

Let us look at the first man. This man's mind has been influenced by over 50 years of direct American involvement. He views the American desire to "spread democracy" as a farce. He recalls the 1953 overthrow of the Iranian democratic government sponsored by the CIA and the overthrow of the Islamic Party in Algeria, which led to violence, riots, and massacres.

He looks at the current American "war" in Afghanistan. America is looking for a man harbored by one of the most cruel and oppressive regimes in the history of mankind, the Taliban. And if you have been watching the news lately, you would have noticed we made short work of the skullduggeries band of rascals and hooligans. But one thing you will not hear President George W. Bush shouting from the rooftops is who helped put the Taliban in power, the United States. This man knows this. And doesn't like it.

While these justifications are nestled in the forefront of the first man's mind, they are mere details to the second man. This Middle Easterner who hates America and the West views them (America especially) as "the great Satan." The Ayatollah Khomeini once said, "the US is the great Satan, Satan is not an imperialist, he is a tempter. He does not conquer, he seduces."

What did the Ayatollah mean by this? He meant the United States is not going to come in, blow up your house, rape your wife, and collect your taxes like the Ottomans and the British did (let's leave the British raping your wife thing on the back burner for now). The Americans will seduce by being your largest market and in a sense controlling your economy. Americans seduce by having naval and air force bases around your country ready and waiting to attack you. Americans seduce by demonstrating a secular and capitalistic life in a religious society. However, this man also has a problem with himself. He knows his country will never be as successful as America, at least not in his lifetime. He is envious of the success of America. America to the Middle East is like the New York Yankees in every other baseball city (and even in New York). Nobody likes a winner. And the US is a winner.

The stagnation of the Middle East is due to a number of reasons. Exploitation by the ((spMercantile)) system of economics prevalent in European imperialism is one reason. The poor business practices historically found in Islam are another. In the past, Islamic law mandated a nullification of a business deal when one of the people involved in the deal passed away. This created an environment where only small deals would happen to decrease the odds of the loss of an investor.

Europe had similar laws, but inheritance clauses allowed for the continuation of the business agreement. Inheritance in Islamic tradition gave all sorts of members of the deceased's family a "piece of the pie." Making it impossible for one person to take the role his predecessor left behind. This inherent flaw in the Islamic economy put them at an extreme disadvantage in today's open market.

Compared to the third man in the coffeehouse, the first two are few in number. Resentment of Israel is far greater than resentment towards the United States. The Syrian constitution calls for the elimination of the state of Israel, during the Gulf War Iraq continually bombed Israel, and Palestinians battle with Israeli soldiers on a daily basis. It is true the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is the root of most of the rage in the Middle East. How did this begin and where is it going?

We can begin by going as far back as the Diaspora, the 70 AD dispersion of Jews from Israel after the Roman destruction of the Second Temple. After the fact, the Jewish people were scattered all over Europe and Asia, never again establishing a political state there until 1948. When the United Nations proposed a plan to partition the former British administration of Palestine into the state of Israel and other Arab nations. None of these nations, however, included the nation of Palestine.

Arab-Israeli tension existed long before present day Israel was established. The tension peaked with the Zionist movement. The Zionist movement materialized in the late nineteenth century in order to, according to Zionist thinkers, solve the problem of extermination and assimilation facing the Jewish people. Zionism stemmed mostly, however, from the surging nineteenth century nationalism movement than from any other fear of assimilation.

Zionists came across a problem early in their planning, people already lived in Israel, or should we say, Palestine. Some Zionists rationalized this by thinking nobody lived there. That Palestine was “a land without people waiting for a people without a land.” Other realists viewed the situation more aggressively. As early as 1880, Palestinians were being evicted from their land being sold to Jewish immigrants.

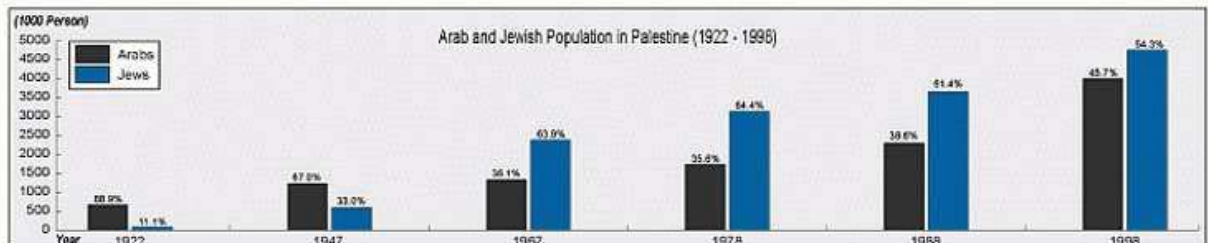
In 1922, the League of Nations issued a mandate giving control of Palestine to Britain. Britain being sympathetic toward the Zionist movement paved the way for a massive influx of Jewish immigration. The map on the next page shows the shift of demographics under this Mandate. Britain’s Lord Balfour had this to say about the affairs in Palestine:

“...in Palestine we do not propose even to go through the form of consulting the wishes of the present inhabitants of the country, though the American Commission has been going through the form of asking what they are. The Four Great Powers are committed to Zionism. And Zionism, be it right or wrong, good or bad, is rooted in age-long traditions, in present needs, in future hopes, of far profounder import than the desires and prejudices of the 700,000 Arabs who now inhabit that ancient land.”

Jews migrated to Palestine in huge numbers. Even a small British attempt to curb Zionist immigration didn’t stop them. In 1940-1945, 25,000 Jews entered the country illegally. Within this time frame the now overwhelming Jewish population started military and terrorist offensives on Palestinian people. As early as 1937 the Irgun, a Jewish terrorist network, committed acts of terror on Palestinian civilians. From April to August 1938, the Irgun killed 119 Palestinians in bombings. The Stern Gang, another Jewish terrorist network, murdered British resident minister of state, Lord Moyne, in Cairo. The Haganah, the Zionist illegal underground military organization founded in March 1921, and the Irgun, in early 1948, attacked villages and settlements of the coastal plain of Tel Aviv starting off their “coastal clearing operations” and committed the Balad al-Shaykh massacre killing more than 60 civilians.

I could extrapolate about Israelis mass murdering Palestinians and other non-Muslims, but I believe I got the message across. Arabs and Muslims, before and after the establishment of Israel, have faced serious repression and persecution. Today, Israeli F-16 bombers launch attack on Palestinian cities regularly. New Jewish settlements are springing up in lands that were set-aside for Palestinians. And more recently, Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon is sending troops from city to city rounding up Palestinians, placing curfews, and killing civilians. Israel IS the enemy of the Arabs of the Middle East.

I believe Arab discontent for Israel is justified. They invaded the land of Palestine after being vanquished from the land thousands of years ago. If their claim that they have a historic right to the land were true, wouldn’t Muslims also have a claim to southern Spain. After all, they did set up a great civilization there and were also unjustly vanquished. The reason Jews were able to basically take over the land was that there were more Jews in rich and wealth nations than there were Palestinians. In fact, the only place there were Palestinians was Palestine. Jews from all over the world donated money to the Zionist movement, a large portion of those



donations came from American Jews. If we learned anything throughout our lives we have learned that a nation and people in shambles are no match for the American dollar.

In regards to Israel's terrorist accusations of the Palestinian Authority, Israelis did the same exact thing the Palestinians are doing now when they were in their position. There is a difference between terrorism and freedom fighting. I firmly believe this extremely thin line can be drawn here.

Now for the final man in the coffee shop. The man that goes about his business, goes to work, comes home, and goes to bed. Odds are this man is a professional. He is educated, possibly in the Middle East, possibly in Europe, possibly in America. He except the capitalism of the West and still believes in and worships Allah. This man is the future of the Middle East. He will one day trump the vocal minority that feeds of the despair and confusion of the masses and channels it toward the West.

The evolution and modernization of the Middle East is coming. But before it can flourish in a supportive environment, three things must happen: First, Palestine must become a state. I'm not saying the state of Israel must be destroyed. That would contradict my argument that expelling or cleansing a people is wrong. I'm saying the two people must have separate states and one state must not be able to control the internal affairs of the other.

Second, the United States must change its policy toward the Middle East. US involvement and power in the region has grown far greater and more influential than a nation thousands of miles should be. Notice that the Middle Eastern governments holding America in high regard are the same nations producing the vast amount of terrorists, Egypt and Saudi Arabia, while governments at odds with America contain people that hold America in high regard, Iran. Proof of this was the grievous demonstrations held in Tehran, Iran after the September 11th attacks.

The third and final reform that must happen before the Middle East can experience a true renaissance is a quelling of extremist religious attitudes and a respect for the current capitalist free market global economy. I'm not saying a cultural reform, although some minor cultural items will have to be revised. I'm saying a respect for business and education and freedom of expression must work its way into the Middle Eastern mind before their lives can truly improve.